

Hate group formation associated with big-box stores

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The presence of big-box retailers, such as Wal-Mart, K-Mart and Target, may alter a community's social and economic fabric enough to promote the creation of hate groups, according to economists.

The number of Wal-Mart stores in a county is significantly correlated with the number of hate groups in the area, said Stephan Goetz, professor of agricultural economics and regional economics, Penn State, and director of the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development.

"Wal-Mart has clearly done good things in these communities, especially in terms of lowering prices," said Goetz. "But there may be indirect costs that are not as obvious as other effects."

The number of Wal-Mart stores was second only to the designation of a county as a Metropolitan Statistical Area in statistical significance for predicting the number of hate groups in a county, according to the study.

The researchers, who reported their findings in the online version of [Social Science Quarterly](#), said that the number of Wal-Mart stores in a county was more significant statistically than factors commonly regarded as important to hate group participation, such as the unemployment rate, high crime rates and low education.

The researchers suggested several theories for the correlation between the number of large retail stores and hate groups in an area.

Goetz, who worked with Anil Rupasingha, adjunct professor of agricultural economics and agricultural business, New Mexico State University, and Scott Loveridge, professor and director of the Northcentral Regional Center for Rural Development, Michigan State University, said that local merchants may find it difficult to compete against large retailers and be forced out of business.

Local business owners are typically members of community and civic groups, such as the Kiwanis and Rotary clubs. Losing members of these groups, which help establish programs that promote civic engagement and foster community values, may cause a drop in community cohesion, according to Goetz.

"While we like to think of American society as being largely classless, merchants and bankers are part of what we could call a leadership class in a community," Goetz said.

The large, anonymous nature of big-box retailers may also play a role in fraying social bonds, which are strongest when individuals feel that their actions are being more closely watched. For example, people may be less likely to shoplift at a local hardware store if they know the owner personally, Goetz said.

Religious priming -- using certain words or phrases to promote a range of attitudes and behaviors -- may also play a role, according to the researchers. In one study of religious priming, after participants reviewed a list of Christian words, such as Bible, gospel and Messiah, they also tended to support racist attitudes against blacks.

The researchers said that because Wal-Mart promotes typical Protestant values, such as savings and thrift, the cues may lead customers to adopt other beliefs, including intolerant attitudes, according to the researchers.

The researchers used data collected by the Southern Poverty Law Center, a group that monitors the activities of hate groups, on hate groups in each U.S. county in 2007. They used the number and location of Wal-Mart stores from 1998. Goetz said the lag time between the data sets provided time for the possible influence of a store to affect a community.

Goetz said that the researchers chose Wal-Mart for the study because of the availability of data on the stores. He added that the presence of Wal-Mart in an area generally indicates the establishment of other types of big-box retailers, such as Home Depot and Target.

"We're not trying to pick on Wal-Mart," said Goetz. "In this study, Wal-Mart is really serving as a proxy for any type of large retailer."

The store chain could use this study to find ways to play a role in supporting local groups that can foster stronger social and economic ties in a community.

"We doubt strongly that Wal-Mart intends to create such effects or that it specifically seeks to locate in places where hate groups form," the researchers said.

More information: Paper online: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... 012.00854.x/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002.00854.x/abstract)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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