

POVERTY AND THE ALTERNATIVE USES OF SHOPPING CARTS

Last summer, Gabrielle Giroday wrote an article for the Winnipeg Free Press called “Stores can’t stop carts vanishing: Shoppers wheeling thousands away.” This article raised concerns about shopping carts being removed from store property to be used for other purposes. Giroday’s article inspired me to look more closely at the way shopping carts are used in my community as a way for low-income people to accomplish daily tasks.

In my North End neighbourhood, shopping carts are often used as moving trucks. This is true in many neighbourhoods where low-cost housing is becoming increasingly scarce, forcing families to move more often. Poor families on the move cannot afford the price of a moving truck and often they do not have family or friends with vehicles.

Another example of alternative uses of shopping carts is their use as means to transport laundry to the laundromat. While most of us take our access to on-site laundry facilities for granted, there are many low-income families who are forced to regularly lug garbage bags full of laundry, often with kids in tow, to facilities far from home. Using a shopping cart to make this daunting task somewhat more manageable is not unreasonable.

Another way I’ve seen shopping carts used in my neighbourhood is as a wheelchair or as a walker. Elderly people and those with physical disabilities are transported via shopping cart. Transportation is an ongoing issue for many people trying to survive on low incomes. Bus fare can be prohibitive to

some and walking a long way is difficult, but often necessary. Handi-Transit is an option for some but users must book in advance, making it impossible to utilize for emergencies or spontaneous outings.

The shopping cart as emergency transportation to hospital is also not uncommon. The cost of an ambulance is approximately \$300 per use. For many without specific coverage, this cost is not affordable. In desperation, a shopping cart is a good option.

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Using a shopping cart to collect recyclable items is also not an unusual sight. In my back alley there is a whole network of recycling that operates outside of the city’s services. My neighbours and I know that if we are getting rid of something useful, we can put it next to the garbage bin and it will often be



gone within hours (I've found much of my furniture this way). People with shopping carts do regular routes around our alleys looking for useful items for personal use or to sell. Metal items are particularly valued as they can be traded for cash at the scrap yard.

John Graham, Safeway spokesperson, says that the majority of carts go missing from high pedestrian areas with large senior populations. Grant Park Shopping Centre's Safeway is the site where the most carts go missing each year. In this case, seniors are using the carts to transport groceries to their apartments along Grant Avenue. For seniors who are often on a fixed income, and others who do not have vehicles, shopping carts enable them to save money. They avoid the cost of delivery charges or of having to take a taxi. Use of a shopping cart can allow low-income shoppers to purchase larger quantities, something that is difficult to do without transportation. This can be an important cost saving strategy for people on fixed incomes.

While some of the issues often raised about shopping cart use may be true, some grocery stores acknowledge that many carts are being taken by paying customers who return to contribute to the business from which they 'borrow.'

For others, their creative use of carts shows us how resourceful people can be in the face of major challenges. People living on low-incomes are sometimes forced to be resourceful in ways that might not be considered socially acceptable; 'it is, after all, illegal.' But our desire to vilify those breaking the law, no matter what the reason, can serve as a front for a deeper sense of discomfort at the evidence of our society's failure to allow access to all. The reasons for breaking the law, when it comes to alternative shopping cart use, are all very rational. People are just trying to survive where there are few other alternatives. In my neighbourhood, there is one grocery store (many high-priced convenience stores, but only one grocery store) between McPhillips Street and Main Street. This is not an issue for those with vehicles, but the walk between stores is at least 45 minutes for a young, healthy, able-bodied individual who is unencumbered with groceries. Overall, services necessary for survival in inner-city neighbourhoods, where mobility and transportation are often the biggest issues, are few and far between.

Understanding why people use shopping carts for purposes other than what is intended, might prevent us from vilifying and seeking to punish everyone who takes a cart off the

premises of a grocery store. For example, the shopping cart as a storage facility used by street-involved individuals is the stereotypical image that often comes to mind when we think about the 'misuse' of shopping carts. These individuals, often suffering from mental illness, shuffle along with a cart full of every possession they own. They are a reminder of how society is failing to adequately respond to those in dire need.

Deeper understanding of issues can only lead to more effective solutions in the long term. We need solutions that go beyond fines, (which, given the reason people take carts, would only serve to compound the problem) and appreciate the innovation of the citizens of Winnipeg who are working hard to survive with very little income.

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