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## **The Socio-Economic Impacts of Amazon.com on San Bernardino County**

### **Section I – Introduction:**

Amazon has created more than 400,000 jobs across the US and invested more than \$270 billion domestically. In San Bernardino County alone, Amazon employs more than 15,000 full-time workers, maintains eight fulfillment centers, and operates one sorting center, with the first warehouse opening in 2012 (Semuels); a testament to San Bernardino's position as the most concentrated center of Amazon warehouses in the world (Medina). Despite these impressive statistics, commentators ranging from local news outlets to national media such as *The Atlantic* heavily criticize Amazon's impact on local communities both socially and fiscally.

Utilizing sociological work, empirical economic data, and locally documented news, this paper will address whether or not such criticisms are valid over the course of six major sections – the first of which being this Introduction. Section II will discuss why Amazon warehousing found a home in San Bernardino county, Sections III and IV explore the social and economic impacts of warehousing on the county, and Section V briefly touches on San Bernardino's future as the Amazon warehouse capital of the US. Finally, Section VI will claim which components of warehousing benefit, and which disadvantage, San Bernardino County as a whole.

### **Section II – Why San Bernardino County?**

Since the first Amazon fulfillment center opened in 2012, eight more sprawling complexes that bear the familiar smiley-arrow have rapidly cropped up at the foot of the San Bernardino Mountains. These complexes have brought with them a host of social and economic impacts that this paper will discuss at length. However, before jumping into those issues, I will discuss why these warehouses exist here and now. As previously mentioned, the San Bernardino Valley hosts the highest concentration of Amazon warehouses and distribution centers globally. I believe there are three key reasons for this rapid development. This section will detail how San Bernardino's geography, recent economic history, and taxation practices attracted the world's largest online retailer within its county lines.

The geography of San Bernardino has directly influenced the warehousing and transportation industry's heavy presence within the county. San Bernardino is situated close to major urban areas such as Los Angeles, San Diego, Orange, and Inland Empire cities such as Riverside. In addition to close proximity to much of Southern California's populous, LA, San Diego, and Orange counties are already majorly developed (Husing). John Husing, Chief Economist at Inland Empire Economics and Politics, Inc. explains, "Why is this [warehousing and transportation industry] all in the Inland Empire? The answer is, there's nowhere else to put it. If you run a major online retailer, you have to be here" (Calma). The combination of cheap, available land and proximity to high-population Southern California areas combined to make San

Bernardino County a perfect choice for Amazon warehouses and distribution centers.

Like most communities around the US, San Bernardino was not immune to the 2010 Recession. By some measures, unemployment in the area spiked to upwards of 15% (Semuels). This spike, combined with the housing market crash, steadily drove land prices down. This blend of unfortunate economic events created a perfect scenario for Amazon; with high local demand for jobs of any sort and the cheap, available land described above, San Bernardino County became a prime location for Amazon. Economic conditions helped generate a largely untapped workforce alongside lowering the initial infrastructure investment required to break ground on warehouses. Thus, the poor economic conditions of the early 2010's indeed incentivized Amazon to establish a presence in San Bernardino county.

It is no secret that Amazon is not a fan of taxation. In 2016, regardless of their \$11.2 billion in federally taxable income, the company received a tax refund of \$129 million even though they paid in \$0 during that year (Huddleston). According to a study conducted by the California League of Cities, Amazon has taken advantage of a statewide tax loophole that allows cities to return corporations a significant percentage of their taxed income. The study also revealed that San Bernardino offered this "refund" of sorts to Amazon as an incentive for their presence within the county (Roosevelt). Alongside this statewide tax loophole, cities within San Bernardino County, such as Ontario, have pushed the construction of more than ten tax-break incentivized warehousing complexes over the past decade. Unsurprisingly, a large portion of these warehouses belong to Amazon.com (Roosevelt). Since legislation that compels transparency of these deals between corporations and cities has only recently been enacted (more on this later), details of incentivized warehousing projects are few and far between.

San Bernardino's geography and land availability, historic economic condition, and willingness to incentivize warehouse construction through taxation practices have combined to make the county a prime home for Amazon's Southern California distribution network. With more than ten major warehouses or distribution centers in the Inland Empire, Amazon has become a huge social and economic influence on the region. Now, with a clear understanding of the factors involved in Amazon's choice of San Bernardino County, we will proceed to interpret the impacts of the company's presence on the county.

### **Section III – The Social Impacts**

Amazon's increased presence in San Bernardino County over the past decade has affected not only its employees, but also the residents of one of the largest communities in California. Increased demand for trucking and air freight has increased pollution in the region. Amazon warehouses encroach on residential areas day by day. Amazon provides new jobs in an area that demands them, but these jobs are oftentimes competitive and short-term. The San Bernardino unemployment rate has fallen, yet the poverty rate has risen. Amazon warehousing has influenced each of these social issues in one way or another, and this section will detail the company's most prominent social effects on San Bernardino County.

Industry has characterized San Bernardino since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as it became a major railway center. This industrial history has led to a severe pollution problem, and San

Bernardino County now stands as one of the most polluted counties in the nation (Medina). Unfortunately, the increased demand for trucking and air freight resulting from increased warehousing from Amazon, alongside UPS and FedEx, certainly does not ease this problem. Local infrastructure such as freeways and airports cannot handle this rising throughput, and as a result, become jammed with idling diesel trucks or taxied jet engines (Husing). In 2016, county Supervisor Kevin Jeffries stated, “Nobody wants to talk about the impact that the tractor trailer rigs are having on health and the immediate residents around it. Nobody wants to talk about it and it’s a conversation that’s long overdue” (Esquivel). In addition to roadways, areas surrounding warehouses have become pockets of intense air pollution due to the constant presence of trucks and equipment.

This increasing pollution has been directly linked to rising cancer and birth defect rates in San Bernardino County (Calma), and due to increasing demand for online retail, it shows no signs of slowing. While this alone should be alarming, the close proximity of Amazon warehouses to residential areas amplifies these effects. Over the past ten years, San Bernardino warehousing floor space has increased by over 100 million square feet, and much of this new development happens within or near residential communities (Esquivel). Since there are very few rules in San Bernardino County regarding residence and warehousing zoning, these vastly different subdivisions are now meshed. In her article “The Town that Shopping Built,” San Bernardino local Justine Calma demonstrates their overlay: “Across the street from the main entrance to one of the country’s busiest distribution complexes sits a soccer field, a community center... Over the span of five minutes on a recent Thursday afternoon, more than two dozen big rigs streamed in and out of the complex (Calma). Oftentimes in San Bernardino, the line dividing industrial centers and community is no wider than one hundred feet (Esquivel), leading to dangerous health and safety implications for residents due to pollution.

The close proximity of Amazon warehouses to residential areas and the pollution stemming from them affects all citizens in the area. Digging into these social issues is undeniably important for understanding how Amazon warehousing has impacted San Bernardino County. However, now we will delve into the community Amazon most directly impacts: its workforce. Amazon’s presence in the county has positively impacted employment (refer to Section IV), yet this employment does not usually compensate well and is not stable. Historically, working industrial jobs from the Kaiser Steel Mill or the Santa Fe Railyard in San Bernardino offered benefits and allowed unionization (Semuels). In stark contrast, Amazon warehousing opportunities deny unionization and rarely include benefits. Thus, family work culture within the county has shifted from an individual with one stable, unionized, benefits-including job to multiple jobs that pay minimum wage without benefits (Semuels).

Working conditions within Amazon warehouses, while not as horrific as sensational media might suggest, are far from perfect. Amazon digitally tracks a worker’s location within a warehouse and strictly monitors timing for everything from job responsibilities to bathroom breaks. (Semuels) Strikingly, Amazon has gamified labor within its warehouses to boost efficiency while simultaneously pitting workers against each other. For example, when a worker is assigned a “stowing” task (moving merchandise around a warehouse), a handheld scanner records the time taken to complete the task. This time is pitted against warehouse averages, and every worker is expected to make or beat the average time. Thus, the average time slowly but routinely falls. In San

Bernardino's ONT2 warehouse, workers reported that the expected stowing time fell from six minutes to less than four and a half overnight (Semuels). Amazon offers team members who routinely beat average times a cookie. They terminate those who routinely miss the mark. John Burgett, a San Bernardino Amazon employee, stated, "It's very physically and emotionally grueling. They're walking a fine line in the community—everybody knows someone who's worked there, and no one says it's a good place to work" (Semuels).

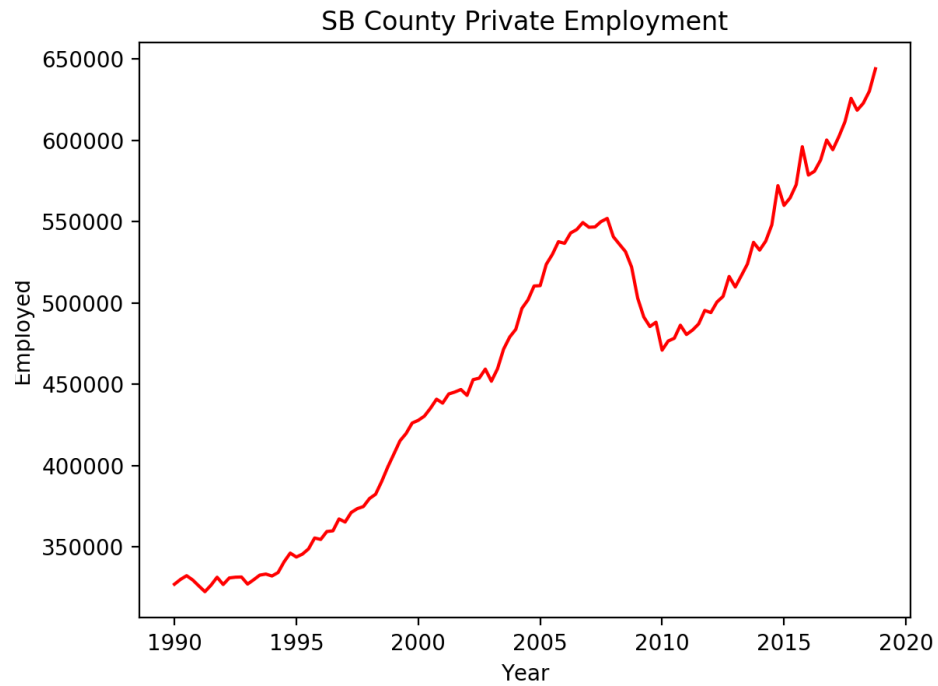
Clearly, Amazon warehousing's social influence on San Bernardino County is far-reaching and impactful for both the workforce and the broader community. In terms of social impacts on San Bernardino County, Amazon yields a mixed bag of good and bad. The infrastructure that propels a warehouse – the trucks, machinery, planes, etc., – spew polluting substances across the neighborhoods and homes they are entrenched within. The health risks associated with these practices are unacceptable, and these practices are a flat-out detriment to San Bernardino County. As for employment, even though some jobs are relatively unstable and lack benefits, San Bernardino now has 15 thousand more full-time, benefit-including jobs as a direct result of Amazon's presence in the county (Medina). As Pat Morris, former mayor of San Bernardino, explains, while Amazon's employment practices are far from perfect, they do measurably benefit the county. "It's a step back from where we were [before the recession], but it's a lot better than where we would otherwise be" (Semuels). This perhaps best epitomizes Amazon warehouses' social impact on the county; people hope to see improvement in pollution levels and worker treatment, but Amazon has still provided some prosperity that was previously unachievable.

## **Section IV – The Economic Impacts**

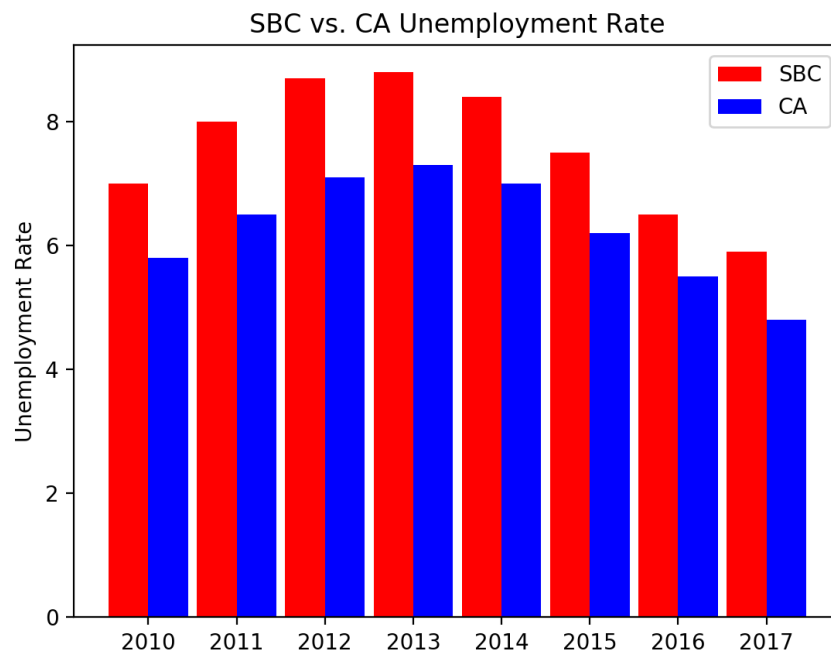
The sheer scale of Amazon warehousing in San Bernardino County necessitates a substantial economic impact. This section will utilize data collected from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau to determine how Amazon's presence has broadly impacted employment and wages. I will then narrow my focus towards Amazon's impact on the retail sector. The nature of Amazon's influence on retail as an e-commerce giant is hotly debated; some argue that the two industries exist independently of one another. Others argue that Amazon and its warehouses not only impact the retail sector, but that they do so in a negative manner. By this section's conclusion, we will determine whether or not Amazon's presence in San Bernardino County has positively or negatively impacted these key economic indicators.

Since Amazon warehousing's arrival in San Bernardino County, employment has recovered from dangerously low levels in the immediate aftermath of the Recession. In fact, some researchers accredit Amazon's swiftly increasing presence in the region as the major force lifting the county out of economic depression. Within the space of ten years, Amazon transitioned from a prospective industrial tenant to the leading employer in the entire county (Roosevelt). Below, *Figure 1*, depicts overall private-sector employment in San Bernardino County (SB County) since 1990 whereas *Figure 2*, graphs California's state unemployment rate against San Bernardino County's rate over the past ten years.

*Figure 1.*  
*San Bernardino County Employment from 1990 to Q2 2019*  
*(Data: Bureau of Labor Statistics)*



*Figure 2.*  
*San Bernardino County vs. California Unemployment rate 2009-2018*  
*(Data: Census Bureau)*

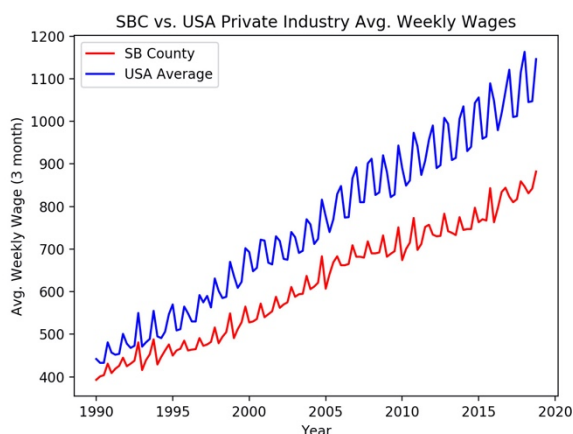


*Figure 1* shows the steady rise of private sector employment in San Bernardino County in the 1990's and 2000's leading up to the Recession, which then dropped employment by nearly 10 thousand jobs. Around 2012, the completion of the first Amazon warehouse, the graph clearly depicts a rapid and continuing rise in total employment through to the present day. As discussed in Section III, we see increased evidence of seasonal employment practices from 2013 onwards. These spikes in employment are far more intense than pre-2010 seasonal "wobble," indicating warehousing's substantial impact on employment. *Figure 2* reinforces the notion that employment has recovered in the county since the Recession. Moreover, it depicts San Bernardino closing its historical unemployment rate disparity with the state of California as the height difference between red and blue bars decreases. Overall, even with seasonal peaks and troughs, employment has not only recovered, but improved on 2005 levels. Additionally, this increasing employment is actively narrowing the unemployment rate gap with California since the introduction of Amazon warehousing in San Bernardino County.

Even though employment data paints an entirely positive outlook on Amazon's effects on San Bernardino County's economy, wage data is more perplexing. Researchers such as the chair of UCR's labor-studies program, Ellen Reese, or local activists such as Randy Korgan have criticized Amazon warehousing's wage rate of 10% lower than similar jobs in the Inland Empire (Semuels). Reese explains, "I think often, local policymakers are really eager to get companies in, they want employment, but they don't necessarily give a lot of stipulations about how many of these workers are temps, how many are paid a living wage," (Semuels). Along a similar vein, Korgan details, "The logistics industry has depressed wages and created a highly contingent and transitional workforce," (Roosevelt). Reese and Korgan clearly voice their concerns with the seasonal, or "transitional," nature of warehousing employment as depicted in *Figure 1*. We will utilize *Figure 3* and *Figure 4* below to assess the validity of their claims.

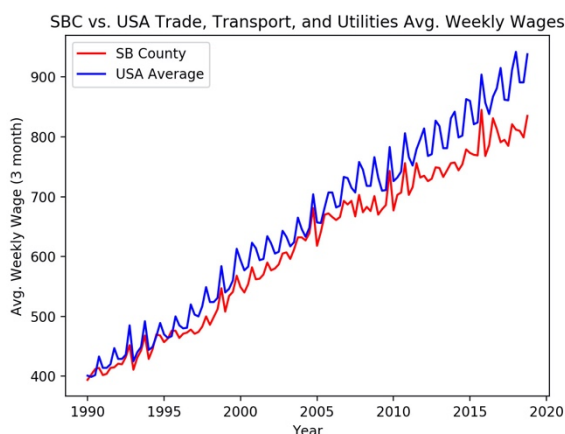
*Figure 3.*

*SB County vs. USA Private Sector Weekly Wage Avg.*  
Data: Bureau of Labor Statistics



*Figure 4.*

*SB County vs. USA Trade, Transport, and Utilities Weekly Wage Avg.*  
Data: Bureau of Labor Statistics



In both *Figure 3* And *Figure 4*, we see a seasonal pattern of wage spikes and dips. Wages for both the entire private sector and the warehousing industry follow this up-and-down pattern, indicating that transitional labor may simply be a characteristic of the US

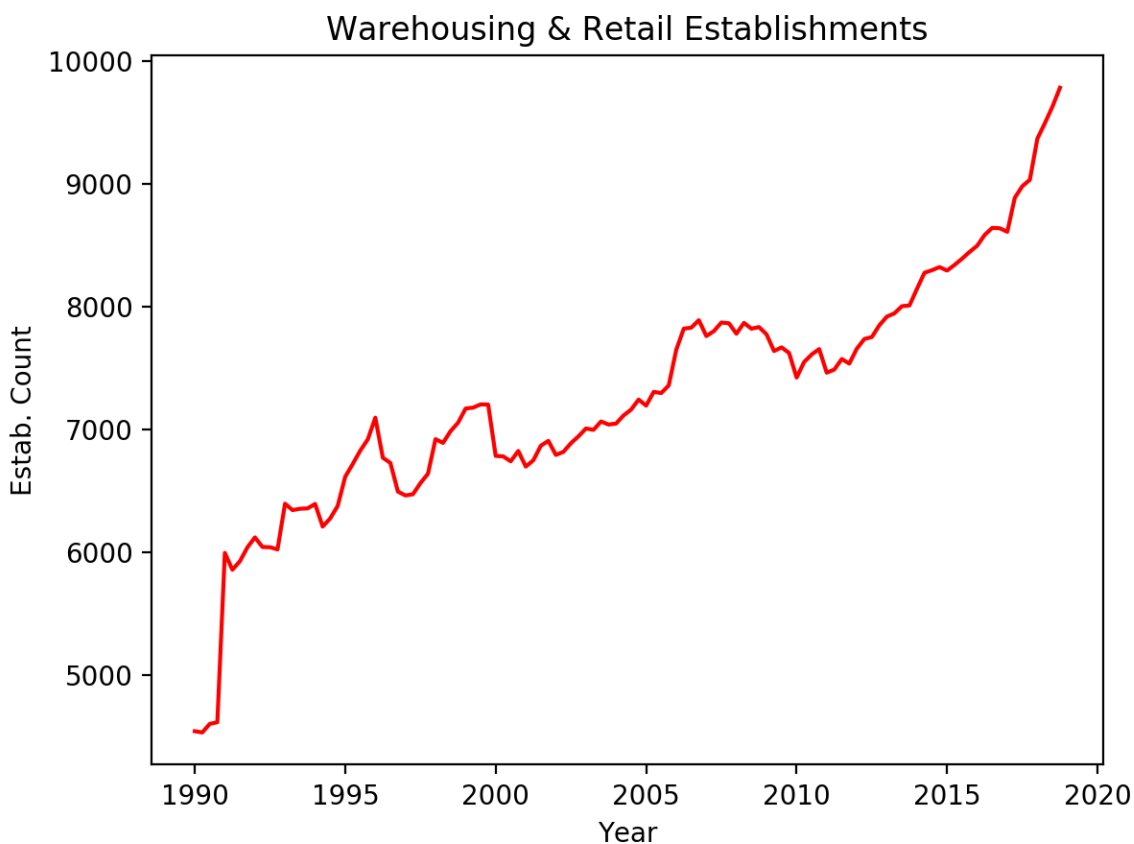
economy rather than a unique component of warehouse labor. Additionally, we observe in both figures that San Bernardino County average weekly wages historically fall below national averages for both private industry totals and warehousing/distribution center wages. This indicates that Amazon warehousing alone is not responsible for low wages in the county; rather, it suggests that sub-average wages are a systematic problem across economic sectors for San Bernardino.

Interestingly, we see in *Figure 4* that warehousing wages, while admittedly lower than the national average, are far closer to on-par than San Bernardino's private sector wages. So, even if warehousing wages consistently lie approximately 10% below the national average, the industry is in relatively better health than weekly wages across the rest of San Bernardino's economy (*Figure 3*). Even though warehousing wages are not as far below average as total industry averages, we do observe a depression in private sector wages (*Figure 3*) beginning around 2010 as Korgan suggested, which could indicate Amazon's presence deflating wages across sectors in the county.

As stated before, San Bernardino's weekly wage data is perplexing. Figures 3 and 4 suggest that economic forces greater than Amazon's warehouses dictate the county's transitional labor and lower-than-average wage tendencies. Surprisingly, San Bernardino's warehousing and distribution sector wages are closer to national levels than the total private sector average. However, the data depicts evidence that Amazon has certainly not helped alleviate the county's historically lower wages. Even as an employment powerhouse in the county, Amazon's presence has widened rather than shrunk the wage disparity between San Bernardino and the national average. With the historical data presented above, I conclude that even though Amazon warehousing has not positively affected wages in San Bernardino County, there is not enough evidence to pin the county's recently depressed wage levels on the e-commerce giant's presence.

Finally, we will approach Amazon's impact on San Bernardino County's retail sector. We will jump into the data headfirst with *Figure 5* below.

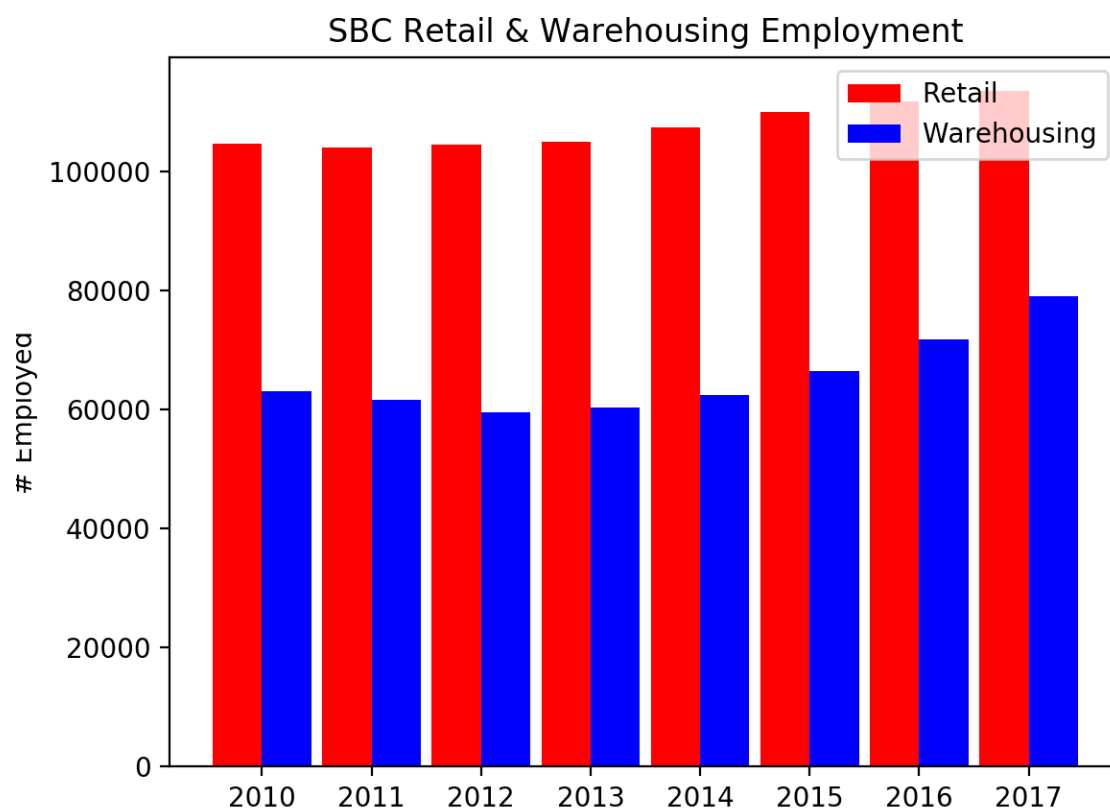
*Figure 5.*  
*San Bernardino County Warehousing & Retail Establishments*  
*Data: Bureau of Labor Statistics*



The Bureau of Labor Statistics dataset used to create *Figure 5* combined warehousing and retail establishment counts into one statistic, but we can still utilize the data to understand the health of San Bernardino's retail sector. There are fewer than 3,000 warehouses in the entirety of San Bernardino county (Semuels) yet, according to *Figure 5*, warehousing and retail establishments grew by approximately 3,500 since 2010 alone. Thus, individual retail spaces are increasing in San Bernardino alongside Amazon's growing presence. This trend supports San Bernardino's own report of absorbing more than 97,000 square feet of retail space while decreasing the vacancy rate last year alone (San Bernardino County).



*Figure 6.*  
*San Bernardino County Retail and Warehousing Employment*  
*Data: Census Bureau*



*Figure 6* depicts the number of individuals employed within San Bernardino County in both the retail and warehousing industries. This figure shows that both retail and warehousing employment is steadily rising after the Recession, albeit with warehousing employment accelerating faster than retail employment. So, we have seen that both *Figure 5* and *Figure 6* support the notion of a prospering retail sector within San Bernardino County.

These findings directly contradict Alena Semuels of *The Atlantic* and push against the general sentiment of Amazon warehousing's effects on counties across the nation. Semuels states, "These places [cities with increased warehousing], often located in the outskirts of major cities, have lost retail jobs and, in many cases, are still recovering from the recession and desperate to attract economic activity" (Semuels). At least in the case of San Bernardino County, according to the data in *Figure 5* and *Figure 6* Semuels is flat-out wrong. Both number of retail establishments and individuals employed in the retail sector have risen over the past decade; indicating that Amazon warehousing has not detrimentally impacted San Bernardino County's retail sector from these economic perspectives.

## Section V – Social Pushback and Future Development

San Bernardino County citizens, organizations, and legal authorities alike have reacted in varying ways to the social and economic impacts of Amazon warehousing discussed above. This section will briefly outline the results of this pushback and its development into community organization, state law, or acts of protest. We will begin with an instance of community organization.

Currently, San Bernardino International Airport plans to greenlight a significant extension, the Eastgate Air Cargo Logistics Center, which will more than double the airport's air freight throughput. While this extension would alleviate pressure from other components of San Bernardino infrastructure, it is well-known that the company hired to oversee the project, Hillwood Enterprises, has historically skirted environmental regulations in pursuit of cheap construction (Esquivel). Additionally, the increased air traffic will negatively impact already high pollution levels within the county (Medina). Amazon.com is expected to be the sole renter of this new airport space.

In direct response to the approval of the project, local citizens organized the San Bernardino Airport Communities Coalition (SBACC). These advocates are skipping over local government and directly asking Jeff Bezos, Amazon's CEO, to finance and/or support the following measures (Medina):

- Soundproof/Air Filter schools and residences
- Zero emissions trucks
- Develop transit and green spaces
- Limits on truck idling
- Provide access to livable wages for SBC members

These demands highlight citizens' concern over the environmental impact of Amazon logistics on San Bernardino County. Despite the concerns, Bezos's sole response has been the project's estimated 3,800 full-time jobs added to the county's economy (Husing). Amazon and San Bernardino also insist that the extension will relieve immense truck traffic from the I-10, thus net lowering emissions in the county.

In Section II, I mentioned recently enacted California legislature that compels city governments to disclose tax-incentivized development projects. This bill, enacted in 2019 and inspired by Amazon's presence in San Bernardino County, is entitled AB 485. It mandates annual public hearings and reports on incentive deals, projected tax revenue, and progress in meeting job commitments from incentivized development deals struck between cities and corporations (Roosevelt). AB 485 will de-incentivize tax breaks between cities and corporations by forcing counties to disclose the details of tax "sweetheart" deals. This potentially lowers the attractiveness of California counties for Amazon, among other large corporations, since citizens will likely oppose egregious tax breaks.

Even though the broader California community supports AB 485, the bill has faced quite vocal opposition. John Husing, chief economist at the Inland Empire Economic Partnership

(IIEP) sees the bill as, “An attempt by a liberal democrat to stop or slow down the project[s],” in San Bernardino County (Roosevelt). Similarly, the San Bernardino Chamber of Commerce explains, “Public disclosure of this sensitive information would put businesses which choose to operate in California at a competitive disadvantage” (Roosevelt). Even ex-California Governor Jerry Brown argues that AB 485 is overreaching and will dampen the competitiveness of California cities for large-scale economic development (Markle). Regardless of public and industry support or opposition, AB 485 certainly will impact future incentivized developments from corporations such as Amazon in San Bernardino County. The bill stands as legal evidence that citizens felt as if incentivized deals between San Bernardino County and large corporations were not in their best interest.

Other instances of pushback include San Bernardino’s “Good Neighbor Policy” legislation and local anti-Amazon protests. Initially, the GNP legislation mainly aimed to prevent warehousing and distribution centers from being established fewer than 1,000 feet from residential communities, thus reducing pollution exposure. The Good Neighbor Policy was enacted earlier this year; however, the restrictions now only call for a 300-foot gap between houses and warehousing developments among other cuts to the bill (Esquivel). As for public demonstration, around the county this Black Friday (November 29, 2019), protestors blocked trucks and shipping equipment at Amazon warehouses and distributions centers in an effort to protest the emissions caused by the concentrated warehousing. These demonstrations did little to disrupt Amazon’s logistics network, and regardless of civilian pushback and protests, sentiment on social media surrounding Amazon remained 95% positive out of 90,000 mentions across Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit (Bloomberg).

After a decade of involvement in the socio-economic fabric of San Bernardino County, Amazon warehouses have garnered the attention of concerned citizens and lawmakers alike. Reactions to Amazon warehousing in the county has taken the form of community organization, legal codes, and even traditional protest. Each of the examples discussed in this section reflect a particular group’s sentiment towards Amazon warehousing in the county, and each will have their own effects on Amazon, large or small, extending into the future. With this glimpse into how the San Bernardino County community responded to Amazon’s dominant presence in the county, we will now move on to conclude our findings.

## **Section VI - Conclusion**

This paper has maneuvered the most powerful social and economic impacts of Amazon warehousing on San Bernardino County while also addressing local and statewide pushback on their rapidly increasing presence. We have explored both Amazon’s hand in increasing pollution levels while simultaneously observing how the company offered a lifeline to recession-stricken families. We analyzed and concluded that Amazon alone has not deflated county wage levels, and additionally, we disproved the common sentiment that the e-commerce giant does not cannibalize the local retail sector. Finally, we examined both community and legal pushback against Amazon as the largest singular economic force in the county. With these findings, I conclude that even though Amazon warehousing has positively impacted San Bernardino County’s economy through multiple channels, this economic stimulus has come at the undeniable expense of social impacts such as increased

pollution, encroachment on residential communities, and an upward-trending yet volatile job market.

As a lifetime resident of Southern California, understanding the impacts of corporate behemoths such as Amazon in the place I live pushed me to conduct this research. I personally know both those who enjoy a steady career and stable life as a result of Amazon warehousing and those who despise how the company is actively transforming and polluting local communities. This paper's findings reinforce the notion that a presence as complex and resounding as Amazon's in a concentrated area cannot be simply categorized as "good" or "bad." We cannot demand an immediate ban of Amazon's practices without collapsing the valley's economy. Similarly, we cannot expect a zero-pollution logistics network to develop overnight. Rather, as a community, we must critically analyze individual social and economic impacts induced by Amazon warehousing and push for steady, universal prosperity through community organizing such as the SBACC or legislation such as AB 485. If we, the residents of San Bernardino, approach Amazon's presence in this manner, I believe we will observe overall positive impacts on our home county.

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