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An Overview of Reverse Stings Targeting Sex Buyers in the United States

Summary Based Upon Research from the
National Assessments of Prostitution and Sex
Trafficking Demand Reduction Efforts



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An Overview of Reverse Stings in the United States

The most-commonly used tactic for reducing demand for commercial sex is typically referred to as the “reverse sting.” These police operations feature one or more women officers serving as a decoy, posing as a prostituted person to await being approached by those attempting to purchase sex (e.g., Dodge et al., 2005; Jetmore, 2008). Men who offer or agree to exchange money for sex can be arrested or cited for soliciting. In many internet-based reverse stings, decoy ads imply the sexually exploited person is a minor, and when buyers communicate with undercover officers, the officers clearly state that the person to be purchased is underaged (typically between the ages of 14 and 16, but sometimes far younger).

The term “reverse sting” is an artifact of the historic gender inequity in the enforcement of prostitution. Until recently, most of the police attention devoted to prostitution was focused on arresting providers of commercial sex. The most common police tactic to combat commercial sex has been using plainclothes male officers use to elicit offers of commercial sex from prostituted persons. These operations were known as “stings.” Beginning in the 1960s, but not becoming widespread until well into the late 1980s, were operations focusing on buyers rather than providers of commercial sex. To distinguish those operations from the more traditional stings, the term “reverse stings” evolved into common usage and implies those operations that are something other than the typical or default tactic. The term is somewhat controversial, particularly for advocates of approaches in which most of the police attention is focused on buyers rather than those who are used to provide paid sex. It has been a by many that the movement to eradicate sexual exploitation should promote the use of the term “sting” rather than “reverse sting” for operations aimed at sex buyers, and not to conduct provider-focused stings or arrest those who are sexually exploited at all.

The past decade was characterized by increased discontentment with law enforcement actions aimed at the arrest of those who sell sex, and growing concern about trafficking victims, including children, that are hidden among this population of arrestees¹. Reverse stings remain an active part of law enforcement actions. In a recent county-level analysis² examining structural determinants of human trafficking arrests in 67 Florida counties between 2013 and 2017, it was found that most counties had at least one active demand reduction strategy, with reverse stings as the one most noted across the state. Since this report may address broad audiences and the term “reverse sting” is still the most common usage, we will continue to use it.

¹ Kylie McGivern, “Kids sold for sex and arrested for prostitution in Florida,” *abcactionnews*, (2020): January 2021. From: <https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/local-news/i-team-investigates/kids-sold-for-sex-and-arrested-for-prostitution-in-florida>

² Madelyn Diaz, Lin Huff-Corzine, and Jay Corzine, “Demanding Reduction: A County-level Analysis Examining Structural Determinants of Human Trafficking Arrests in Florida,” *Crime & Delinquency*, 2020: 1-24. doi.org/10.1177/0011128720962710

"The only and best way to try to get involved to identify the victims is doing an operation like this ... I believe the only way we are going to combat human trafficking is by targeting the desire [demand]. By reducing the desire [demand]."

Sheriff Chad Chronister, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, Fla, 2019³

"Many victims – primarily women – suffer violence and abuse, and my office is committed to offering them the assistance they need while making it very costly for those who seek to purchase sex."

Sheriff Tom Dart, Cook County, Chicago, 2021⁴

Street-Level Reverse Stings

In our observations of reverse stings, and in descriptions gathered from interviews with police and reviews of the literature,⁵ we found the following to be typical. Areas of the city known to be active for street prostitution are selected, and a tactical plan is either discussed or written and submitted for a supervisor's approval. Usually, five or more officers are used in a street reverse sting. In addition to the female officer or officers, there are usually several additional undercover police in supporting roles. The operations often consist of one or two male plainclothes officers on foot, posing as pedestrians, at least one unmarked car carrying plainclothes officers, and at least one police patrol car with officers that may be in uniform. There are usually other officers who support the operations by processing arrestees and their vehicles. In some cases, police use a van serving as a mobile booking or screening station, and in other instances processing occurs in nearby police stations or substations. In the latter circumstance, the operations require more on-site officers so that there is less "down time" between arrests. At least two officers are usually required to transport each arrestee away from the site of the arrest: at least one escorting the arrestee, and another driving the arrestee's vehicle (when applicable). In our research we found that at least five police officers are usually deployed for each decoy used in a reverse sting.

A supervising Sergeant is usually in charge of the reverse stings. Decoys are escorted to drop-off locations near where the operations will occur. An unmarked police van serving as a mobile screening or booking station is usually parked nearby, but out of sight of the street operation. In some locations, police stations or substations are nearby, so a mobile unit is not necessary. The decoy officer usually has a hidden recording device and a cell phone (the first to collect evidence, the latter for safety, in case she is abducted). Some police departments digitally record the reverse stings surreptitiously from an unmarked police car.

The decoy always tries to remain in visual contact with the other officers. When potential "clients" speak with the decoy, the supporting officers track her until she makes a pre-arranged signal indicating a "good case," which is when the man has made an offer of money in exchange for sex and has committed an "act in furtherance" of that offer. An act in furtherance is any overt behavior that can be construed reasonably as progress toward consummating the act of prostitution discussed. Such acts, in

³ <https://www.abccactionnews.com/news/region-hillsborough/hillsborough-co-human-trafficking-sting-leads-to-more-than-80-arrests>

⁴ <https://www.fox32chicago.com/news/22-men-arrested-in-cook-county-sting-targeting-sex-buyers>

⁵ Jetmore, 2008; Newman, 2007; Nolan, 2001; Scott, 1999; Spruill, 2009

addition to the verbal exchange, complete the legal requirements for making an arrest. Acts in furtherance can include reaching for a wallet, pointing to money on a bed or a car seat, driving around the block to the area where the sex act was arranged to take place, or opening a car or hotel door so that the decoy can enter.

When the signal for a “good case” is given, the officers on foot or in unmarked cars converge and make the arrest. At this point, the decoy officer enters the police car as quickly as possible and leaves the scene, while the man is arrested and driven to a point where he will be processed. Sometimes he is driven in his own car by a plainclothes officer, and other times they are driven in a police car while another officer drives the offender’s car. Arrestees who are on foot are driven to the van or police station in a patrol car.

The license plate number of the car and the man’s driver’s license number and other identifiers are radioed or sent via computer to a dispatcher, and the determination is made whether to issue a citation and notice to appear in court, or to book the arrestee and take him into custody. If they have identification and no outstanding warrants, they are usually issued a citation and allowed to leave. If these conditions do not apply or if there are concurrent offenses (e.g., possession of drugs or illegal weapons), the sex buyers can be taken into custody.

“We usually have male officers out getting women to proposition them, but that really wasn’t getting at the root of the problem. The men have been just as guilty as the women all along and yet they never get arrested.”

Captain Bob Marshall, vice unit, Knoxville, Tennessee Police Department, 1976⁶

As we’ve discussed elsewhere, reverse stings are the entry point for most of the kinds of interventions that have been developed to focus on male buyers of illegal commercial sex. In order for “john school” education programs, community service programs, geographic exclusion zones, and several other tactics to be applied, the sex buyers first must be arrested. The means by which the vast majority of sex buyers are arrested is through reverse stings, which have been established as the primary way to produce the evidence necessary to satisfy criminal justice requirements for prosecution or diversion options.

After the decision to cite or arrest is made, offenders in jurisdictions with criminal justice diversion programs for sex buyers are issued a citation and informed of their responsibility to call the prosecutor’s office for processing (either a city attorney’s office when sex buyers are cited for violating municipal ordinances, or the district attorney’s office when they are arrested for committing a penal code violation).

In the time it takes the officers to process the arrestee, the decoy officer usually remains in an unmarked car writing notes for her report and (if applicable) checking to ensure that the quality of the digital recording of the transaction is acceptable. If an older analog tape recorder is used, the officer removes and marks the tape and inserts a blank in the recorder. She stays out of sight of the arrestee and away from the location where the arrest was made, until it is time to reset the operation. When reverse stings

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<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=IhEQAAAAIBAJ&sjid=0IwDAAAAIBAJ&pg=6887,7621071&dq=prostitution+men+arrest+sollicit&hl=en>

use multiple decoys, it is possible to keep the street operations going continuously: if one or two of the decoys have made a good case and the men are being processed, there can still be one or more decoys active, provided that there are enough support officers for a safe operation.

Figure 1: Cities and Counties that have Conducted Reverse Stings in the Contiguous United States

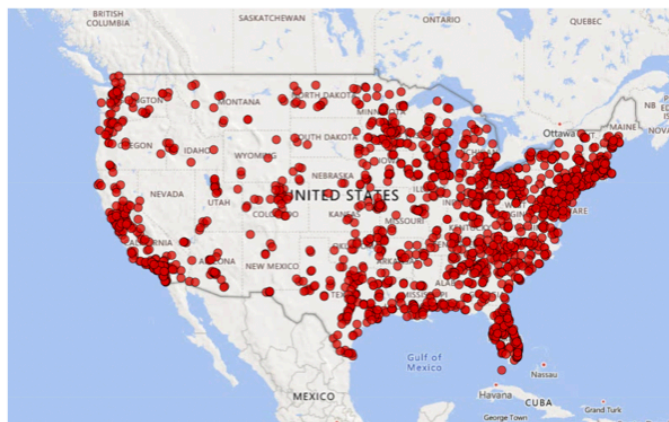


Table 1 presents the years in which 15 cities were known to have first used the reverse sting tactic to address prostitution. As can be seen here, at least four cities had conducted reverse stings in the 1960s, and 11 other cities had done so by 1974. These early operations will be discussed in descriptions of each city on the site pages of the “DemandForum.org” website. A common theme in the news reports covering these new kinds of tactics were that arresting men was necessary either (a) because of the inequity of only arresting women for prostitution when two parties are involved, or (b) because arresting women “providers” had been ineffective and police leaders felt that addressing demand may be more promising, and (c) complaints from the community’s residents and businesses drive police to take action against prostitution. This theme from the 1960s and 1970s has continued to the present, in news reports as well as what we learned in our interviews conducted with police in 2009-2011.

Table 1: U.S. Cities and Counties with Earliest Known Use of Reverse Stings		
Year	City or County	State
1964	Nashville	TN
1967	Grand Rapids	MI
1968	Salt Lake City	UT
1969	Louisville	KY
1970	Detroit	MI
1970	Washington	DC
1971	Dallas	TX
1972	New York	NY
1973	Chicago	IL
1973	Los Angeles	CA
1973	Miami	FL
1974	Baltimore	MD
1974	Columbus	OH
1974	Fresno	CA
1974	New Haven	CT

One of the more compelling findings of the study is that several cities in the U.S. had begun to shift their emphasis away from arresting prostituted women and girls, and instead focusing their enforcement efforts on arresting men. Six of these cities had adopted this approach in the 1970s. Table 2 presents the cities and the number and percentage of prostitution arrests of men versus women. At least 16 different communities have, for certain periods of time, focused more on combating demand than supply through their arrest practices. Some were balanced, with male sex buyers arrests accounting for 50 to 60 percent of all prostitution arrests. Others were far more aggressive about demand, devoting the great majority of their enforcement effort on arresting buyers.

Identifying these sites demonstrates that the idea and implementation of applying more punitive measures to buyers rather than sellers of sex are not new, and that some cities in the U.S. had arrived at the conclusion over 30 years ago that the most effective model for combating prostitution is to focus enforcement on men and to take a less punitive approach to survivors of prostitution. We do not intend this to suggest that the model is widespread, that cities using this approach in the 1970s and 1980s did not revert to prior methods, or to overstate that this may be a trend that is here to stay. What this demonstrates is that the approach has been in use in the United States for over 40 years, even if only on a localized and perhaps temporary basis.

Frequency, Duration, Staffing, and Arrest Yield of Reverse Stings

We gathered information about *how frequently cities and counties conduct reverse stings*. We were able to obtain counts or estimates of how many times per month reverse stings were conducted in 166 cities and counties. The mean frequency was over nine per month, but that was positively skewed by a few larger cities (e.g., Los Angeles, San Francisco, Brooklyn, Las Vegas, Knoxville) that routinely conducting reverse stings, and arrest hundreds of men (or more) per year. The mode (the most frequently occurring number) was two reverse stings per month, and that provides a more accurate representation of the average level of activity. Also, it is important to note that in most cities the level of reverse sting activity varies substantially over time. For example, at its peak in the late 1990s, San Francisco conducted at least 15 reversals per month, or approximately one every two days. Ten years later, they cut back to one-third of that rate. Other cities may concentrate high levels of activity in one location for a period of time in response to complaints or for other reasons, and then stop or slow down substantially as other priorities emerge.

In addition to frequency, we gathered information about the length of time and the number of officers used in the use operations. We were able to obtain the *number of hours* committed to over 400 separate reverse sting operations. The mean was approximately five hours, and the distribution was not skewed substantially. We also gathered information about the *number of decoys* used in each operation, and learned that the mean was approximately 1.5 and the mode was one. The mean number of decoys was skewed by a small number of reverse things that were very large in scale: about 25 of the 400+ reverse stings used between eight and 30 decoys in large, citywide crackdowns with several teams deployed in multiple locations.

We also gathered information about the *number of officers used in support of each female decoy* posing as a person engaged in prostitution. We were able to obtain the average number of support officers used in reverse things at 50 sites. We also tied the number of support officers to the number of decoys to provide a sense of the staffing requirements for a reverse sting team. The mean number of officers used to support each decoy was 6.7, and the mode was five.

Table 2 Sample of Cities Arresting More Male Sex Buyers than Women and Girls in Prostitution

City	Timeframe	Number of Arrests: Women & Girls in Prostitution	Number of Arrests: Male Buyers	Total	Buyers as Percent of Prostitution Arrests
Los Angeles, CA	1973	404	444	848	52
Spokane, WA	1975	191	293	484	61
Spokane, WA	1976	106	296	402	74
Spokane, WA	1982	95	200	295	68
St. Petersburg, FL	1975-1976	92	118	210	56
Inglewood, CA	1976	28	70	98	71
Hawthorne, CA	1978	47	79	126	63
Chicago, IL	1978	41	592	633	94
Chicago, IL	1981	175	876	1051	83
New London, CT	1983	12	23	35	67
Trenton, NJ	1985	70	101	171	59
Trenton, NJ	1986	154	247	401	62
Akron, OH	1986	77	126	203	62
Akron, OH	1987	44	83	127	65
St. Louis, MO	1991	128	200	328	62
South Bend, IN	1991-1993	100	230	330	70
Kansas City, MO	1996-1997	250	666	916	73
Haverhill, MA	2007-2010	10	64	74	86
Taunton, MA	2007-2008	27	29	56	52
Escondido, CA	2008-2010	31	32	63	51
North Charleston, SC	2010	90	178	268	66
Totals		2172	4947	7099	70 %

We were interested in learning about the yield not only for each reverse sting operation, but more importantly, the *number of arrests for each decoy/team for each hour that the team is deployed*. The number of arrests without these other considerations (number of decoys and number of hours) is not as meaningful, since arrests will be affected by whether there are multiple versus single decoys, and by the length of time of the operation. We found that across several hundred reverse stings, the mean yield was approximately 1.5 arrests per decoy/hour, and the mode was one.

"I've been approached on the street right by my house by johns who thought I was a prostitute. I'll get in their face and yell at them, 'No, I'm not a prostitute. Go home to your wife!' Lately, if I walk around at night I try to wear my boyfriend's clothes and put a hoodie on so I'm not mistaken."

Teresa Miller, 30-year-old student and resident of Vallejo, California, 2011⁷

⁷ <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2060969,00.html>

Declining Number of Arrestees Per Reverse Sting

There appears to be a trend toward smaller numbers of arrests for each reverse sting. The number of arrestees is primarily a function of (a) the level of resources the police department commits to reverse sting operations, and (b) the extent to which men are soliciting street prostitutes in areas where those police operations occur. Personnel from several police department provided the following explanations for the declining number of arrestees:

- **Crime Displacement.** Obtaining a lower yield of arrests per operation, with fewer men soliciting sex on the streets and more using websites to arrange contact with prostituted women.
- **Declining Police Resources for Reverse Stings.** Police department have devoted fewer resources to reverse stings, due to reductions in staff and to discretionary decisions to devote more of their resources to other problems, such as enforcing drug and gambling laws.
- **Improved Ability of Sex Buyers to Avoid Arrest.** A general increase in offenders' knowledge of police undercover techniques has made it possible for a significant number of men to continue soliciting sex locally while avoiding arrest.

Multiple strategies are employed by sex buyers to evade law enforcement when soliciting street-based persons in prostitution. These include careful monitoring of both the geographical area and potential women in prostitution for indicators suggestive of law enforcement presence in an area. Obeying traffic laws to reduce visibility while soliciting are considered, as well as taking precautions to avoid informal threats from pimps, assaults, and theft⁸.

"These guys, they don't do this just once. They know what to watch for and they come into the area looking for cops. It's all normal to them."

Sgt. Justin Cramer, Hilliard Police Department, OH, 2021⁹

Fluctuations in the level of law enforcement resources devoted to any particular problem is common. Police have finite resources and are responsible for enforcing a wide array of laws and pursuing other civic order and quality of life issues. Police managers have discretion in establishing priorities, and these priorities can change in response to changing crime trends, pressure from the media and the public, and changes in political and organizational leadership. In our transferability assessment (described in Chapter 6), we have learned that several john school programs were suspended or have had their flow of offenders substantially reduced because police shifted their focus away from prostitution and toward other issues. For example, staff at the Tampa, FL john school program were told by police in 2006 that the agency was reducing or suspending its prostitution sting operations indefinitely to devote more time to combating drunk driving. Staff associated with john school programs in Ypsilanti, MI, and Buffalo, NY reported that police resource constraints made it difficult to field as many reverse stings as they

⁸ Thomas J. Holt, Kristie R. Blevins, and Joseph B. Kuhns, "Examining Diffusion and Arrest Avoidance Practices Among Johns," *Crime & Delinquency* 60, no 2 (2014): 261-283. doi: 10.1177/001128709347087

⁹ <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/crime/2021/04/16/ohio-attorney-general-columbus-suburban-police-tackle-human-trafficking-prostitution/7203508002/>

would like, and as a result they had to reduce the number of john school sessions conducted. In addition to changing crime trends and police budgets, the personal values of police command staff about what crimes deserve the greatest attention from law enforcement can also affect how police are deployed. These discretionary decisions can be made independent of any objective reality concerning local crime problems.

Over the past decade, police departments nationwide have noticed a sharp increase in the use of the Internet for soliciting prostitution (e.g., Booth, 2007; Hughes, 2003; LaPeter, 2005; Roane, 1998; Ross, 2005; Sanders, 2008). It is unknown whether this has expanded the sex market, or simply caused a shift from one segment (street) to another (online). In San Francisco, vice unit officers argue that there has been a shift in prostitution from the street and toward the web, which has resulted in fewer solicitations made through contact on the street. What is apparent, is that sex buyers' perceptions of risk and "provider quality" appear to inform their movement between physical (i.e., street based) and Internet-based prostitution market (Holt et al, 2014)¹⁰. If it is true that the local commercial sex market is shifting online (and is not simply adding online soliciting to steady levels of street prostitution), the SFPD is likely to continue seeing declining yields of FOPP participants if their focus remains on street-level reverse stings.

In addition to providing an avenue for solicitation, the web is also used by consumers of commercial sex to communicate with one another (e.g., Albert, 2001; Sanders, 2008, Stalans & Finn, 2016). Websites catering to customers of the sex trade (e.g., bigdoggie.net; usasexguide.info; nvbrothels.net; see Shaffer, 2008), including posting tips on how to avoid arrest and sharing information about police decoy operations (e.g., Holt et al., 2007). Sophistication and craftiness on the part of sex buyers and their political economies can also be gleaned from conversations and threads from the Legal Corner of TheEroticReview.com (TER). The website hosting TER is based in the Netherlands. It focuses primarily on the United States in its regional boards and includes a dedicated forum containing specialized discussions focused on legal issues arising from participation in the illegal sex trade. Strategies to reduce the likelihood of arrest or conviction are part of the online deliberations.

"The forum chair generally has a law degree, and some participants identified themselves as law students or members of the legal profession"¹¹

(Stalans & Finn, 2016: 645)

SFPD vice officers at the police station have monitored commercial sex websites while reverse stings are occurring, and have seen buyers post warnings describing the undercover officers and the location of the operation. Sometimes these alerts about reverse stings are posted within an hour of the start of an operation. SFPD officers have learned that sex buyers can identify the unmarked van. The FOPP has received a great deal of publicity since it was implemented in 1995, and many men are aware of how and where the SFPD conducts reverse stings in San Francisco.

¹⁰ Thomas J. Holt, Kristie R. Blevins, and Joseph B. Kuhns, "Examining Diffusion and Arrest Avoidance Practices Among Johns," *Crime & Delinquency* 60, no 2 (2014): 261-283. doi: 10.1177/0011128709347087

¹¹ Loretta J. Stalans and Mary A. Finn, "Consulting Legal Experts in the Real and Virtual World: Pimps' and Johns' Cultural Schemas about Strategies to Avoid Arrest and Conviction," *Deviant Behavior* 37, no 6 (2016): 644-664. doi: 10.1080/01639625.2015.1060810

Community Complaints Drive Reverse Stings

One of the issues that frequently arises in debates about whether prostitution should be legalized, decriminalized, or remain prohibited is the contention that it is victimless. The argument against prohibition is the essentially libertarian idea that government should not intervene in commercial sex if it is between consenting adults. The argument for prohibition is that commercial is inherently (or at least usually) harmful to the people directly involved, and also to others who are indirectly affected.

“We just go out when we receive enough complaints from the neighborhood. Always in prostitution, you’ll have areas where prostitution will pop up near crack houses, and for us putting female [officers] out, we’re trying to get the males to stop from coming into that area.”

Chief Ken Swindle, Tuscaloosa, Florida Police Department,
2006¹²

“The kids who get out of school around 82nd (Avenue) are propositioned. [Prostitutes and johns] have sex in parking lots; we find condoms and needles; pimps fight against each other. When you think of how 82nd Avenue’s been associated with these crimes, we want to get away from that.”

JR Ujifusa, Multnomah County, Oregon Deputy District
Attorney, 2010¹³

“The people who are actually with the girls, they think they can come into our neighborhood. They think they can do this and get by with it. I think they’re starting to figure out they’re not going to get by anymore...”

Joyce Jones – Business owner, Kansas City, Mo., 2019¹⁴

While our intent is not to settle that debate, we were able to gather information that is relevant in the discussion. During our initial interviews we were struck by how frequently - that is, virtually always - we were told by police officers and other respondents that community complaints are frequently or mostly responsible for when and where police conduct operations intended to combat prostitution. Once sensitized, we began asking routinely, and for those sites in which we conducted at least one interview and asked about community complaints, virtually every site said that community members such as residents and businesses complain about prostitution. In general, these complaints are not simply expressions of moral outrage (although that can certainly be involved) but instead are driven by (or at least accompanied by) complaints of tangible disturbance or harm. Frequently heard were claims that street prostitution was accompanied by verbal and physical fighting and accompanying noise; sex occurring in public areas such as doorways, alleys, and cars parked on the street; condoms and surrenders on streets or on private property. In addition, in areas where there is street prostitution there are frequent complaints of women and girls not involved in that activity who are solicited by male sex buyers¹⁵, and men who live or work in those areas who do not welcome offers from those selling sex. A less frequent but serious problem mentioned in several communities (e.g., San Diego, California; Worcester, Massachusetts) was from women whose ethnic or cultural heritage was such that they would

¹² <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20060130/NEWS/601300345?Title=Prostitution-sting-nets-arrests>

¹³ http://www.portlandtribune.com/news/print_story.php?story_id=128035454437234300

¹⁴ <https://fox4kc.com/news/kcpd-makes-six-arrests-in-prostitution-sting-on-independence-ave/>

¹⁵ <http://www.enterpriseneews.com/answerbook/brockton/x181547306/Brockton-women-protest-prostitution-in-neighborhood>

face serious repercussions if they were seen to have been solicited by a sex buyer, even if a woman or girl did nothing to provoke it, did not welcome it, and did not respond to it.

“She comes home, she walks in the door every day crying because some guy followed her home or harassed her (saying) ‘You want to make some money?’”

Brockton, Massachusetts mother discussing her 16 year old daughter being harassed by sex buyers¹⁶

In response to the information gathered through interviews, we returned to the research literature and news archives to examine how frequently complaints were reported as a reason for the police operations on prostitution. We found that complaints from residents or businesses were cited as a reason for reverse sting or sting operations in over 65 percent of the cities and counties studied. We also noted whether our interview respondents said community complaints drove whether police engaged in reverse stings (95% said “yes”). From the news reports and interviews together, ***we found that complaints led to reverse stings in at least 71% of the communities studied.*** This figure probably underestimates the overall percentage. News reports make choices about what to report regarding any specific reverse sting operation, and for space or other reasons can choose not to report that reverse stings were in response to complaints from the community. Our finding that over two-thirds of the news reports mentioned complaints, but virtually all of our interviews said they received complaints, suggests that 71% is probably a low estimate and that the portion of reverse stings driven by community complaints may be higher.

Police Units, Agencies, and Multijurisdictional Task Forces Conducting Reverse Stings

A range of law enforcement agencies, and units and departments within agencies, are trained and deployed to conduct reverse stings. Some of the departments or units focus on crimes on the lower end of the crime seriousness scale (measured by the felony/misdemeanor distinction), such as nuisance abatement or neighborhood safety units. Others focus on felonies and higher end crimes, such as multijurisdictional drug task forces that focus on organized crime, felony level drug trafficking, and violent crime. Others fall in between, including regular patrol units. Many police departments, even in large cities, are relatively small (e.g., seven officers for San Francisco) and others have severely downsized or eliminated their vice units (e.g. Tucson, Arizona, and very recently, San Francisco, California), so other divisions or units (such as nuisance abatement or special investigations units) fill the void. In addition to cross-unit collaboration within departments, there are cross-agency and cross-jurisdictional collaborations. In a June 2021 example, multiple law enforcement agencies, collaborated with the Human Trafficking Rescue Alliance in a proactive prostitution operation targeting sex buyers in Fort Bend County, Texas. Agencies that participated included Fort Bend County Sheriff’s Office, Missouri City Police Department, Houston Police Department, TABC, Harris County Sheriff’s Office, Montgomery County Sheriff’s Office, Fort Bend County District Attorney’s Office, Rosenberg Police Department, and the YMCA International Services¹⁷.

¹⁶ <http://www.enterpriseneews.com/answerbook/brockton/x181547306/Brockton-women-protest-prostitution-in-neighborhood>

¹⁷ <https://www.fox26houston.com/news/17-suspects-arrested-following-prostitution-operation>

A wide array of state, local, and federal agencies, and multijurisdictional task forces collaborate on reverse stings. Among the configurations of law enforcement collaboration that conduct reverse stings are:

- Cross-unit collaborations within a police agency (e.g., patrol and community nuisance abatement)
- Federal agencies (particularly Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE)
- Multijurisdictional task forces
- Multiple municipal police departments
- Municipal police departments and county sheriff's departments
- State agencies that focus on alcohol enforcement
- State police agencies
- State probation/parole agencies

Table 3 presents examples that portray the range of agencies, units, and levels of government that collaborate on reverse stings. As can be seen here, there are many configurations. Of the 16 cities and counties listed here as an illustration, no two had identical sets of partnerships. Of course, these were selected to represent variety, so the point is not to suggest that there are no modalities across sites. The most common scenario is for one city or county law enforcement agency (a city Police Department or a county Sheriff's Department) to conduct an operation within their jurisdiction. However, it is also common to see multi-agency collaborations within cities or counties, as well as multijurisdictional teams. There are roads and areas in which street prostitution becomes institutionalized, and these areas sometimes cross jurisdictions. For example, Mannheim Boulevard stretches across Chicago and several suburban cities and unincorporated towns in Cook County. It is common for County Sheriff's Departments or State Police to collaborate with cities and towns that share areas in which prostitution occurs. As Table 3 shows, reverse stings can involve many different kinds of units within an agency, and can involve partnerships among agencies and across all levels of government (city, county, state, and federal).

Variations and Innovations in Reverse Stings

Several variations on basic models have been developed to meet particular challenges or to take advantage of opportunities. Several examples are described in more detail below.

- **Replacing prostituted women with police decoys.** In street operations, police may go to “strips” or “strolls,” arrest women engaged in prostitution, and replace them with police decoys (e.g., Cleveland, OH; Fountain Valley, CA). A similar concept is sometimes used to arrest the customers of *brothels*. Brothel raids typically focus on investigating whether prostitution occurs and then, if the necessary evidence is gathered, to arresting the women selling sex and the brothel's pimps or traffickers. Usually, the buyers are either ignored entirely, or those that are present during the raid or “take-down” may be arrested but no further effort is expended in attempting to arrest additional customers beyond those that happened to be present. However, in some communities police have taken advantage of the opportunity to identify and arrest additional customers. In storefront brothels such as nail salons or massage businesses, the staff and survivors are removed and replaced with police officers who continue to make appointments and arrest sex buyers until the news circulates that the brothel is controlled by undercover police.

A recent example¹⁸ is the May 2021 operation when 47 men were arrested by the Phoenix Police Department. Detectives posed as massage workers and posted ads on websites known for prostitution.

- ***Borrowing decoys from other police agencies.*** Many police departments, particularly smaller ones, have had trouble staffing reverse stings due to a shortage of women police officers willing to serve as decoys, or because the decoys become too well-known to potential buyers to be effective. A solution to this problem used by some police agencies has been to borrow staff from other departments. For example, the small cities of Bluefield and Princeton, WV have borrowed or exchanged decoys and sometimes other members of reverse sting teams. Similarly, Wilkes-Barre, PA and communities in the region (such as Reading and Allentown) have borrowed or exchanged staff. The Pennsylvania State Police have developed the capacity to assist any community in the state in conducting reverse stings by contributing decoys and support officers.

References

References for the materials cited in this summary can be found in the bibliography of the National Assessment final report, and in each site's webpage at DemandForum.net.

¹⁸ <https://www.newsnationnow.com/us-news/southwest/phoenix-police-arrest-47-in-undercover-prostitution-sting/>

Table 3: Examples of Law Enforcement Agencies, Units, and Task Forces Collaborating to Conduct Reverse Stings

City or County	Law Enforcement Departments, Units, Task Forces	Types
Albany, GA	Albany Dougherty Drug Unit	Multijurisdictional drug task force
Albany, NY	Albany Police Department Community Response Unit, Strategic Deployment Unit	Two units of a city PD, neither a vice unit
Alexandria, LA	Alexandria Police Department's Narcotics Division	City PD, narcotics unit
Anderson County, SC	CATCH (Criminal Apprehension Through Community Help)	Sheriff's Department's community collaboration unit
Anniston, AL	Calhoun/Cleburne County Drug and Violent Crime Task Force; Alabama Beverage Control Board; Anniston Police Department	Multijurisdictional drugs and violence task force, state agency, city PD
Anne Arundel County, MD	Anne Arundel County Police Department Special Enforcement Division	Sheriff's Department, special operations unit
Atlantic City, NJ	Atlantic City Police Department Vice Unit	City PD vice unit
Auburn, MA	Worcester County Regional Drug and Counter Crime Task Force	Multijurisdictional drug and crime task force
Baldwin County, AL	Baldwin County Sheriff's Office; Baldwin County Drug Task Force; Foley Police Department; Gulf Shores Police Department	Sheriff's Department, two city PDs, one county task force
Barstow, CA	San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department; Barstow Police Department; California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control	Sheriff's Department, one city PD, one state agency
Buena Park, CA	Buena Park Police Department; Fullerton Police Department	Two city PDs
Cedar City, UT	Cedar City Police Department; Iron/Garfield Counties Narcotics Task Force, Beaver/Iron Counties Major Crimes Task Force, Iron County Sheriff's Office, Utah Adult Probation and Parole (Utah Department of Corrections)	City PD, two multijurisdictional drug and crime task forces, sheriff's department, state probation and parole agency
Federal Way, WA	Federal Way Police Department; Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)	City PD and Federal agency
Harlan, KY	Harlan Police Department; Kentucky State Police	City PD, State Police
Providence, RI	ICE, Rhode Island State Police; Providence Utah Adult Probation and Parole	Federal agency, state police, city police
Ypsilanti, MI	Ypsilanti Police Department; Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office	City PD, County Sheriff's Department
York, PA	York City Police Department Nuisance Abatement and Patrol Divisions, East-End Neighborhood Unit, & Southwest Neighborhood Unit; York County District Attorney's Office; Springettsbury Township Police Department; Pennsylvania State Police.	Three units of city PD, another city PD, county District Attorney, state police