

Town Puts Prostitutes on Videotape

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As a prostitute picked up a customer walking along the main thoroughfare here, Linda Soucy, a 36-year-old mother of four, followed closely in her tan minivan and told her partner to start videotaping.

Fed up with the streetwalkers who have invaded residential streets and schoolyards, Mrs. Soucy and members of her neighborhood watch group are patrolling their streets with video cameras as part of community policing program.

In many cities across the nation, individuals have used video cameras to document car thefts, prostitution and drug deals. On Long Island, two family members in Gordon Heights say they have been videotaping prostitutes for two and half years, using the taping to scare customers out of the neighborhood.

"Ever since the Rodney King incident, anyone who has a camcorder is using them," said Gerald Arenberg, executive director of the National Association of Chiefs of Police. Trend May Be Starting

But the effort here in this mill town of 40,000, may mark the first time an organized crime watch has adopted the tactic, said Matt Peskin, director of a national not-for-profit group that promotes community policing programs.

Mr. Peskin said Methuen's videotaping could signal a trend.

"It's a tool that's readily available," he said, noting that video cameras can be bought for as little as \$600. Mr. Peskin and police officials agree that volunteer videotaping could help reduce crime as long it is done under the guidance of the local police department.

Since the program was started here earlier this month in conjunction with a group in the neighboring city of Lawrence, street solicitations by prostitutes have decreased from about three or four an hour to one or two every other hour, Mrs. Soucy said. While the program seems to be

decreasing prostitution over all by intimidating the streetwalkers and their customers. But some prostitutes have simply moved their business off the commercial strip and deeper into Mrs. Soucy's Methuen neighborhood of two- and three-family houses and boarded up tenements. 'They Start Running'

"Usually when they see my van, they start running," she said proudly. "Some of them have even jumped over snow banks and cars."

On a recent afternoon, when a prostitute noticed she was being followed by the van with a bright yellow sign of posterboard warning in hand lettering "Videotaping in Progress," she motioned the client into a dead-end street. She was betting that Mrs. Soucy and her partner would not follow them.

And they did not. Adhering to the orders of the Methuen police, Mrs. Soucy said, she never leaves her car.

She and 11 others who patrol the neighborhood in teams of 2 are required to call the police before going out to videotape, so cruisers can be in the area. The volunteers are mostly mothers and fathers of school-age children. As they patrol in teams of two, one volunteer takes down license plate numbers and car descriptions while the other tapes what is happening. The teams leave the area after witnessing pickups to avoid confrontations.

Most teams go out several hours a week, though Mrs. Soucy and her partner, Harold Magoon, a 27-year-old salesman, are on patrol at least twice a day for a couple of hours at a time.

"You run home. You make supper. You go back. You run home and do a load of laundry and run back out," she said, adding that she will keep videotaping until these people leave her neighborhood. "If we miss a day, they'll come back," she said. A Major Change

In the last five years, prostitution in the mill town has grown from nothing to a small problem to a very big problem. Chief Bruce MacDougall attributes the growth to drug addiction. "Evidently the idea of a disease spreading is not enough of a threat," he said. "Maybe the fear that they might be caught on videotape will be enough to scare them away."

Until now, streetwalkers have been able to elude the police by staying close to the town's border with Lawrence and jumping back and forth between the two jurisdictions, he said. The video patrols do not have that problem because they can follow them. But Chief MacDougall said, "We're looking at this for its potential to scare away customers rather than from a law enforcement perspective."

John Roberts, executive director of the Massachusetts Civil Liberties Union, said he believed that videotaping clients to intimidate them was a questionable activity but not illegal, as long as the taping took place in public areas.

"There's nothing wrong with neighbors trying to protect their property as long as it doesn't lead to vigilantism," he said.

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