Despite crackdown, prostitution problems linger in central city

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A prostitution problem continues to plague a roughly nine-square-block area of central Topeka despite police sting operations in recent years, says the commander of the Topeka Police Department's criminal investigation division.

Maj. Ed White said he was concerned prostitution meant increased crime and public health problems for the area, which police wouldn't identify publicly because they didn't want to encourage other potential customers to go there.

"We have enough traffic through there as it is," said Lt. John Sams.

Sams said Topeka police since 1997 have arrested 53 different women in connection with prostitution, with most arrests coming in the same part of central Topeka.

A number of prostitutes arrested have been repeat offenders, White said.

"There's action there all hours of the day and night, all week long," he said.

White voiced concern that a man was robbed at knife-point late one night earlier this year, apparently by a prostitute he picked up in the area. White thinks others have been robbed but were afraid to tell police.

Officers also are concerned about the possibility of attacks on the prostitutes themselves.

Many prostitutes in the area are crack cocaine addicts who sell sex acts to pay for their drug habit, White said. Many carry condoms in their purses for intercourse, though the prostitutes' main offering appears to be oral sex, he said.

White said many have regular customers who meet them at certain times of the day or week.

On Thursday, a Topeka Capital-Journal reporter accompanied White as he drove around the area in an unmarked police car. At one point, a man who appeared to be in his 60s was seen circling a block in a vehicle five times.

White said customers of prostitution, known as johns, often circle a block looking to be propositioned.

White stopped to talk to a young woman walking in the area who drew his attention with her behavior and dress.

Without being asked, the woman immediately denied being a prostitute. She said she figured White suspected her of prostitution because "I know what goes on around here."

White learned the woman was wanted on outstanding misdemeanor warrants. She was arrested.

Police say most arrests for solicitation of prostitution take place during sting operations in which prostitutes solicit plainclothes officers, or prospective customers solicit female plainclothes officers.

Investigators plan future stings in the area targeting prostitutes and their customers and plan to release the names of those arrested, White said.

He voiced frustration at city ordinances he perceives to be too easy on prostitution. He said prostitutes or customers often are out of jail before police finish the paperwork on their cases.

Topeka Municipal Court Judge Neil Roach noted Thursday that state law defines factors he must consider when setting bond for a Shawnee County Jail inmate.

"Most prostitutes aren't a flight risk; most haven't hurt anyone, so it's very difficult for me to justify a very high bond," Roach said.

He said he formerly set bond for prostitution suspects at $50 but since has raised that to $150.

"That's normally the fine on the first offense," Roach said.

Prostitution is punishable under city ordinance by a fine of up to $499 and/or up to six months in jail.

Roach said he sometimes imposes jail time on convicted prostitutes and regularly orders them to attend classes at the Topeka AIDS Project as part of probation.

He said the classes educate them about venereal diseases and AIDS, "which is as far as I'm concerned the most serious ramification of that particular crime. It could get them killed, or they could kill somebody else, and they need to know that."

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