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# An Overview of Surveillance Cameras and Video Evidence 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 Cameras and Video Evidence Targeting Sex Buyers in the United States

Surveillance cameras and other video technology can be used to discourage sex buyers or to provide evidence against them. Openly used cameras serve as a deterrent, and those used covertly help to gather evidence for police and prosecutors. In some instances, members of communities have used video cameras and have posted footage of sex buyer activity on websites or forwarded the evidence to police. Cameras have been used in these ways in more than **260** U.S. cities and counties. A few examples of the use of surveillance cameras are included below, followed by more detailed examples and sources:

### [Tacoma, WA](#)

Conspicuous surveillance cameras have been placed in active prostitution areas with signs saying, “Smile johns, you’re on camera.” A YouTube channel called StopCrimeOnTacomaAve has posted videos of suspected prostitution transactions and drug deals.

### [Rochester, NY](#)

Surveillance cameras have been used covertly in areas with street prostitution to acquire evidence that can make cases against arrested sex buyers.

### [Lodi, CA](#)

Police conducting reverse stings have supplemented hidden microphones on police decoys with video recordings of interactions between suspected sex buyers and undercover policewomen, and the video evidence is used to support prosecutions for soliciting prostitution.

**Table 1: Sites with Earliest Known Use of Cameras for Sex Buyer Deterrence and Prosecution**

Year	City or County	State
1983	Indianapolis	IN
1989	Horry County	SC
1990	Harrisburg	PA
1991	Tallahassee	FL
1993	Gordon Heights	NY
1994	Monroe	NC
1994	Tacoma	WA
1997	Everett	WA
1999	El Cajon	CA
1999	Lafayette	LA
2000	Erie County	NY
2000	Woonsocket	RI
2002	Lodi	CA
2003	Brockton	MA
2003	Kissimmee	FL
2005	Athens	GA
2005	Dodge County	MN
2005	Kingsport	TN

## Circumstances of Cameras Used to Deter or Sanction Sex Buyers

This category of tactic is best illustrated with actual examples. To convey the range of applications of cameras and video recordings to demand reduction, we provide a few examples of each of the major ways in which they are used. These examples demonstrate the variability of situations and methods that are used to either deter sex buyers, or to bolster evidence supporting arrest and prosecution. They also show the geographic breadth and prevalence of the use of this type of tactic.

### *Houston, Texas*

In 2021, the state of Texas unanimously passed HB1540, which was signed into law in June and went into effect on September 1.<sup>1</sup> The law was the first in the nation to declare prostitution or solicitation of prostitution a felony offense. In [Houston](#) along Bissonnet Street in a section called The Track, which is well-known for the commercial sex trade, billboards were installed that read: “*Solicitation of prostitution is a felony. Punishable up to two years in jail. Cameras are recording. Violators will be prosecuted.*”<sup>2</sup> This is an example of cameras being used both as a deterrent and to help gather evidence that may be used to support arrest and prosecution.

### *Vancouver, WA*

In March, 2021, a 32 year old man was arrested for allegedly soliciting two teenage girls, one of whom was a minor, for sex in the parking lot of a shopping mall near the city of [Vancouver](#), WA. According to the affidavit, the pair of friends were sitting in the younger girls car when the man reportedly entered the car without permission. He pulled out a stack of cash with his signature on it and asked the teenage girls to go back to a hotel room to engage in sex with him in exchange for money. When the teenagers declined, he became upset and left. An investigation occurred after the teenagers reported the incident to police. Video surveillance from the mall captured the offender entering the victim’s car. Police found the suspected sex buyer at a local hotel and arrested him for suspicion of commercial sex abuse of a minor, fourth-degree assault, second-degree vehicle prowling, and “patronizing a prostitute.”<sup>3</sup>

### *Wichita, KS*

In January, 2021, a truck driver was arrested and faced homicide charges after allegedly murdering a prostituted woman in a [Wichita](#) motel room.<sup>4</sup> The man allegedly parked his truck in a motel lot and negotiated with the victim for a \$40 sexual encounter along with his friend. The men arrived at the motel room to complete the transaction. The first man alleged that he’d been robbed by three unknown males and that he’d been attacked with mace. Motel video footage shows the prostituted woman and the men speaking outside, and then showed the first man and the woman entering the motel room. Footage then show the man running barefoot from the room 20 minutes later, carrying his pants on his right arm. The woman’s body was discovered inside of the room by the motel owner the next morning. Her body showed signs of being beaten and choked, and authorities

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<sup>1</sup> Safia Samee Ali, “Texas is the First State to Make Buying Sex a Felony. Will this Help Trafficking Victims?” *NBC News*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/texas-first-state-make-buying-sex-felony-will-help-trafficking-n1276617>.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Akaeze, “As Texas Becomes First State to Make Prostitution a Felony, Houston Officials Crack Down on a Notorious Roadway Known as The Track,” *Baptist News Global*, September 27, 2021, <https://baptistnews.com/article/as-texas-becomes-first-state-to-make-prostitution-a-felony-houston-officials-crack-down-on-a-notorious-roadway-known-as-the-track/#.Y1FkX-zMJNv>; Gabrielle Banks, “New Bright-Orange Signs up along Bissonnet Track in Latest Attempt to Combat Houston’s Sex Trade Hub,” *Houston Chronicle*, August 23, 2021, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/New-signage-up-on-Bissonnet-in-ongoing-attempt-to-16405737.php>.

<sup>3</sup> Jessica Prokop, “Man, 32, Accused of Approaching Teens at Vancouver Mall, Offering Cash for Sex,” *The Columbian*, March 12, 2021, <https://www.columbian.com/news/2021/mar/12/man-32-accused-of-approaching-teens-at-vancouver-mall-offering-cash-for-sex/>.

<sup>4</sup> Wimberly Patton, “Truck Driver Charged with Murder of Prostitute after Leaving Shoes Beneath Motel Bed,” *CDL Life*, January 13, 2021, <https://cdllife.com/2021/truck-driver-charged-with-murder-of-prostitute-after-leaving-shoes-beneath-motel-bed/>.

discovered a blood-covered glass candle holder on the floor. The video recording allowed police to subsequently identify and apprehend the suspect.

### ***Palm Beach County, FL***

In 2016, a former Boynton Beach, FL police officer was arrested during a reverse sting conducted by the [Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office](#). The BBPD received video evidence of the former officer soliciting an undercover Palm Beach County Sheriff's Deputy for commercial sex during the sting operation. The sex buyer was initially placed on paid administrative leave, was suspended for 80 hours, and was required to complete a public corruption course. The former officer was officially fired by the BBPD three months later and was determined to have violated two department policies: conduct unbecoming a police officer and conformance to the law.

### ***Hobart, Indiana***

The [Hobart](#) Police Department conducted a reverse sting in 2011 in response to tips and complaints of alleged prostitution activity in a local home. After monitoring the home, police apprehended a man as he left, and he quickly admitted to paying for sex. Upon questioning, the woman in the home told police she had been in prostitution for several years. The woman agreed to serve as a decoy in a reverse sting and continued arranging appointments with sex buyers. Police placed hidden cameras and audio recorders in the house. Five men, in addition to the initial man apprehended by police, were arrested when they appeared at the home and attempted to buy sex.<sup>5</sup> The video recordings served to bolster evidence against the arrested sex buyers.

### ***Gordon Heights, New York***

[Gordon Heights](#) lies within Suffolk County on Long Island, New York. In response to widespread concerns about prostitution in the community, a Gordon Heights Community Watch group started writing letters in 1991 to the wives and mothers of men arrested for soliciting prostituted women. In 1993, local reports indicated that prostitution had “invaded” residential streets and schoolyards, and members of the neighborhood watch group began patrolling their streets with video cameras as part of a community policing program.<sup>6</sup> Two family members in Gordon Heights said they had been video recording prostituted women and sex buyers for two and half years, using the threat of the videos to scare sex buyers out of the neighborhood. The video recording by community volunteers was done with the approval and guidance of police. Twelve volunteers patrolled the neighborhood in teams of two, and were required to call police before going out to record so cruisers could be in the area. The volunteers were mostly parents of school-aged children. As they patrolled, one volunteer wrote down license plate numbers and car descriptions while the other recorded situations appearing to be prostitution transactions. The teams were instructed by police to leave the area after witnessing these situations to avoid confrontations.

## **Evidence of Effectiveness**

There have been no evaluations of the effectiveness of using surveillance and video evidence to deter, apprehend, or convict sex buyers, and thus reduce demand for prostitution or sex trafficking, but that kind of evidence is very rarely available in assessing the value of criminal justice interventions of any kind. Compared to other ways of combating prostitution and sex trafficking (e.g., victim rescues, trafficker arrest and prosecution, legalization or decriminalization of prostitution), a solid case can be made for the effectiveness of using cameras and video recordings, with three distinct kinds of evidence all reflecting favorably on the approach:

1. Surveys of hundreds of admitted sex buyers have asked what would deter them from that behavior in the future, and were presented with a list of options. The things most commonly listed as likely to deter them are having their behavior become known to others (including families, partners, friends, and employers) and other consequences following arrest, such as jail time, and being listed on a sex offender registry. Such responses were made by more than **80% of surveyed sex buyers**.<sup>7</sup> Although not specified in the

<sup>5</sup> “Hobart, IN,” Demand Forum, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://demand-forum.org/site/hobart-in>.

<sup>6</sup> New York Times Archive, “Town Puts Prostitutes on Videotape,” *The New York Times*, March 21, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/21/us/town-puts-prostitutes-on-videotape.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Anna E. Kosloski and Bridget Diamond-Welch, “The Men and Women Who Purchase Sex in the United States:

surveys, it is reasonable to assume that video evidence strengthening cases against sex buyers (increasing the likelihood of identification, arrest, and successful prosecution) would increase the likelihood of triggering negative consequences that sex buyers say would serve to deter them.

2. The survey data is aligned with extensive anecdotal evidence<sup>8</sup> from the field of law enforcement vice operations and investigations, which consistently finds that once arrested, sex buyers express great **concern about the consequences of that arrest** – especially that their behavior will be exposed to their families, partners, friends, employers, and others in their communities. Video evidence can be compelling, making it harder to deny involvement and increasing the probability of law enforcement actions leading to public disclosure of their offenses - something sex buyers clearly seek to avoid.
3. The survey findings and anecdotal evidence provided by law enforcement are further corroborated by a vast body of criminological research on deterrence that finds that both **“legal sanctions”** (such as incarceration or probation, which require a prior arrest and prosecution) and **“extra-legal sanctions”** (such as negative consequences for relationships and employment, which also are usually triggered by arrest) **have a deterrent effect on re-offending.**<sup>9</sup> To the extent that video evidence supports allegations of sex buying behavior, and promoting the identification, apprehension, and prosecution of buyers, it would contribute to both legal and extra-legal sanctions, and thus advance deterrence.

## References

To access information about specific cases and the U.S. cities and counties in which cameras have been used for demand reduction purposes, you may go to [www.demand-forum.org](http://www.demand-forum.org), open the **“Browse Locations”** window, and then select **“Cameras”** from the **“Tactics”** list. In addition, the U.S. locations in which other sex buyer arrests have occurred may be [mapped](#) on Demand Forum by clicking on the **“Choose a Tactic”** box and choosing **“Cameras”** from the list.

### *Additional Reports on Use of Cameras for Demand Reduction Purposes*

- **Buffalo, NY:**
  - [Workable Solutions to Prostitution](#) (2000)
- **Jupiter, FL:**
  - Badcock (2019); [“How Jupiter Detectives Gathered Evidence in Prostitution Sting”](#)<sup>10</sup>

Understanding Motives, Practices, and Preferences,” *Women & Criminal Justice* 32, no. 3 (2022): 306-324, [doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2021.1993424](https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2021.1993424); Melissa Farley et al., “Men Who Pay for Sex in Germany and What They Teach us about the Failure of Legal Prostitution: A 6-Country Report on the Sex Trade from the Perspective of the Socially Invisible ‘Freiers,’” *Prostitution Research & Education*, (2022), <https://prostitutionresearch.com>; Rachel Durchslag and Samir Goswami, “Deconstructing The Demand for Prostitution: Preliminary Insights From Interviews With Chicago Men Who Purchase Sex,” *Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation*, (2008), 1-34, <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/Deconstructing-the-Demand-for-Prostitution%20-%20CAASE.pdf>; Melissa Farley, Julie Bindel, and Jacqueline M. Golding, “Men Who Buy Sex: Who They Buy and What They Know,” *Eaves and Prostitution Research & Education*, (2009), 1-32, <https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/lisidocs/Mensex.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Alter, “Catching Johns: Inside the National Push to Arrest Men Who Buy Sex,” *TIME USA, LLC.*, n.d., <https://time.com/sex-buyers-why-cops-across-the-u-s-target-men-who-buy-prostitutes/>; Nicholas Kristof, “Targeting the Johns in Sex Trade,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/opinion/kristof-targeting-the-johns-in-sex-trade.html>; Kristin Pisarcik, “Miami Vice: Inside ‘John Stings’ and Escort Stings,” *ABC News*, March 21, 2008, <https://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=4488667&page=1>; The Associated Press, “Prostitute Customers Posterized,” *The Gainesville Sun*, October 13, 2012, <https://www.gainesville.com/story/news/2012/10/14/prostitute-customers-posterized/31836219007/>.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas A. Loughran, Ray Paternoster, and Douglas B. Weiss, “Chapter 4: Deterrence,” in *The Handbook of Criminological Theory*, ed. Alex R. Piquero (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016), 50-74, [doi.org/10.1002/9781118512449.ch4](https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118512449.ch4); Raymond Paternoster, “Chapter 3: Perceptual Deterrence Theory,” in *Deterrence, Choice, and Crime, Volume 23*, eds. Daniel S. Nagin, Francis T. Cullen, and Cheryl Lero Jonson, (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2018), 81-106, [doi.org/10.4324/978135112710](https://doi.org/10.4324/978135112710); Robert Apel and Daniel S. Nagin, “Chapter 7: Perceptual Deterrence,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Offender Decision Making*, eds. Wim Bernasco, Jean-Louis van Gelder, and Henk Elffers, 6 (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 121-140.

<sup>10</sup> Merris Badcock, “How Jupiter Detectives Gathered Evidence in Prostitution Sting,” *WPTV.com*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.wptv.com/news/region-n-palm-beach-county/jupiter/how-jupiter-detectives-gathered-evidence-in-prostitution-sting>.

- **Sanford, FL:**
  - Flacy (2013); [“Florida Police Use License Plate Cameras to Curtail Prostitution”](#)
- **Tacoma, WA:**
  - Mulick (2007) [“Crackdown on Pacific Avenue: Extra patrols, community activism make a dent in prostitution”](#)
  - Fontaine (2007) [“Neighbors plan crime control”](#)
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  - Vallejo KCBS (2011); [“Success Fighting Prostitution Prompts Vallejo To Deploy More Cameras”](#)<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> CBS Bay Area, “Success Fighting Prostitution Prompts Vallejo to Deploy More Cameras,” *CBSnews.com*, October 13, 2011, <https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/success-fighting-prostitution-prompts-vallejo-to-deploy-more-cameras/>.