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An Overview of “Letters” for Sex Buyers in the United States

Summary Based Upon Research from the
Study, “A National Assessment of Prostitution
and Sex Trafficking Demand Reduction
Efforts”



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An Overview of Letters for Sex Buyers in the United States

A tactic that has been employed in close to 100 U.S. cities and counties involves sending letters or other messages to the homes of known or suspected buyers of commercial sex. Most versions of these letters, known colloquially as “Dear John Letters,” provide information about the risks and harms of prostitution, including health and crime victimization risks for both sex buyers and those exploited as commodities in the sex trade. They also explain why the letter has been sent to the recipient, usually stating that the person or their registered vehicle was seen in an area known for prostitution behaving in a way consistent with the actions of seeking commercial sex. The letters also contain assurances about the presumption of innocence, and that the message does not constitute an allegation or criminal charge.

For example, in September, 2019, the [San Jose](#) and [Oakland](#), CA, Police Departments launched the “Report John Program” designed to reduce human trafficking and prostitution by reducing consumer-level demand. Community members are invited to participate by reporting “Johns” they suspect of soliciting providers of commercial sex or trafficking victims. Reporting is facilitated by a simple website form used on phone, tablets, or desktop computers that crowdsource feedback from the community. Residents can upload a photo and provide vehicle and other identifying information on a potential sex buyer. The Department’s Human Trafficking Unit then evaluates the information and determines if further investigation is warranted. If appropriate, a Public Safety Announcement (PSA) letter is sent to the registered owner’s address, alerting the registered owner that his or her vehicle was seen in an area known for high levels of prostitution. This letter also serves to educate the registered owner about the dangers of prostitution and related illicit activities. The Report John Program was later implemented in [Vallejo](#), CA, in 2022.

Law enforcement representatives we interviewed for both the 2012 and 2022 National Assessment surveys said that the primary reasons for using this tactic are: (1) to alert partners and others close to sex buyers about the possibility of the subject engaging in high risk behavior, (2) to deprive buyers of the secrecy and anonymity that most desire in their pursuit of paid sex, and (3) to elicit the “extra-legal sanction” of social censure from those closest to sex buyers, to help discourage them from that criminal activity.

The use of Dear John Letters has prompted objections similar to those about publicly disclosing the identities of sex buyers. The messages can be argued to violate due process protections if they are assumed to constitute punishment, especially if that punishment is applied prior to conviction. To date, we know of no instances of any court upholding such objections and ruling against the use of notifications sent to the homes of arrested sex buyers, or to the owners of vehicles exhibiting suspicious behavior. The letters and other messages we have encountered were carefully crafted to address concerns about due process, but the objections would be valid if the letters are not properly constructed and processed.

Types of Letters

We found two main variants of this approach. The **first** was sending letters to the registered owners of cars seen “cruising” areas known for commercial sex for the apparent purpose of soliciting sex from prostituted persons. This tactic required that police acquire the license plate number of the car that is being used in a way consistent with soliciting prostitution. An example of suspicious behavior would be when a car circles a block repeatedly and then stops so the driver can talk with individuals (primarily women) who appear to be engaged in street prostitution, and/or have been familiar to police due to prior prostitution arrests. Police have also observed individuals with known histories of prostitution repeatedly entering cars that pull up to the curb, returning minutes later, repeatedly. While the purpose of those interactions is apparent on a commonsense level, in most jurisdictions, those observations provide insufficient evidence to arrest the suspected sex buyer for soliciting, since there is no hard evidence that sex occurred, and if it had, whether it was transactional. In such circumstances, police or other members of the community have, in some jurisdictions, recorded the license number of the vehicle, and then letters were sent to registered owners of the vehicles.

Table 1: Sites with Earliest Known Use of “Dear John” Letters		
Year	City or County	State
1982	Aberdeen	MD
1975	Boston	MA
1982	Baltimore	MD
1982	Evansville	IN
1985	Portland	OR
1988	Allentown	PA
1988	Newark	NJ
1991	Gordon Heights	NY
1991	Wyandanch	NY
1993	South Bend	IN
1995	Brooklyn Park	MD
1997	Hollywood	FL
2000	High Point	NC
2005	Charlotte	NC
2006	Reading	PA

Some jurisdictions have employed electronic messages used in the same way as mailed letters: e.g., in 2014, Santa Rosa, CA, detectives traced phone calls and texts that had responded to their decoy online ad for a web-based reverse sting and sent the suspected sex buyer letters or messages to the identified accounts and addresses. In 2018, the Brown County, WN, Sheriff’s Office used a similar electronic variation of the letter tactic: during a week-long web-based reverse sting, wherein over 400 individuals who had contacted with police online (but did not incriminate themselves enough to warrant charges) were sent written warning messages by police. Often, these letters or electronic messages included warnings about health risks and the harm of prostitution to sex buyers, the communities in which it occurs, and to those exploited as commodities in the sex trade.

Sometimes the observations of sex buying behavior were made not by the police, but rather by members of the community who observed this kind of activity, recorded license plate numbers, and made reports to police departments. For example, police in Minneapolis, MN, Des Moines, IA, and Oakland, CA,¹ have had residents record license plate numbers and descriptions of known or suspected sex buyers and their vehicles and forward the information to their respective police department so police can send letters to the alleged offenders (or the registered owners of vehicles appearing to be used by sex buyers). Some police departments had forms for recording the information, which asked members of the community to record the location of the event, the time, the make, model, and color of the vehicle, and most importantly, the license plate number.

Once the police had been given this information, they followed the same procedure use when officers make the observations themselves. For example, in September 2019, the San Jose Police Department (San Jose, CA) launched the “Report John Program” designed to combat sex trafficking and prostitution by reducing consumer-level demand. Community members were invited to participate by reporting suspected sex buyers and/or sex traffickers. Reporting was facilitated by an online form, accessible to community members via their smart phones, tablets, or desktop computers that crowdsource community feedback. Residents could upload a photo and provide vehicle and other identifying information on a potential sex buyer.

¹ CBS Bay Area, “Oakland Residents Hope ‘Dear John’ Letters Help Curb Prostitution,” *CBS News*, June 22, 2011, <https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/oakland-residents-hope-dear-john-letters-help-curb-prostitution>; Samantha Masunaga, “Dear John: Oakland Residents are Sending Your License Plate Number to the Cops,” *Oakland North*, October 11, 2012, <https://oaklandnorth.net/2012/10/11/dear-john-oakland-residents-are-sending-your-license-plate-number-to-the-cops>.

The SJPDP's Human Trafficking Unit then evaluated the information and determined if further investigation was warranted. If appropriate, a Public Safety Announcement (PSA) letter was sent to the registered owner's address, alerting the registered owner that his or her vehicle was seen in an area known for high levels of commercial sex activity. This letter also served to educate the registered owner about the dangers of prostitution and related illicit activities. The letters typically strived to make it clear that police do not assume that the registered owner of the vehicle was necessarily driving the car when the suspected sex buying behavior was observed. The letter also did not constitute being charged with a crime. Some of the letters explicitly addressed the fact that the suspicious behavior may have occurred while someone other than the registered owner was driving. The tone was even friendly, suggesting that the registered owner's vehicle was being used improperly, and that they should take care not to allow others to use their vehicle for such purposes.

The **second** type of application of this tactic is sending letters to the homes of arrestees. Such letters do not say that sex buying occurred, but instead confirm that the suspected was arrested for soliciting prostitution. Again, the letters contain assurances about due process and the presumption of innocence. Communities that were "early adopters" of this tactic are presented in Table 1. A sample letter used by the Escambia County Sheriff's Office (Escambia County, FL) is presented in Figure 1, and examples of English and Spanish versions of similar letters from Raleigh, NC, are presented in the Demand Forum website's "[Letters](#)" tactic page.

Most applications of this tactic have used paper letters mailed to residential addresses of known or suspected sex buyers. Some jurisdictions have employed electronic messages used in the same way as mailed letters. For example, in 2018, the [Brown County](#), WI, Sheriff's Office conducted a week-long, web-based reverse sting, during which over 400 individuals had responded to online advertisements for prostitution, making inquiries to undercover police, but not incriminating themselves sufficiently to warrant arrest. Police would send text messages containing notifications and warnings about the risks and harms of prostitution. In 2020, the [Sonoma County](#), CA Sheriff's Office began tracing the phone calls and texts made to the number in their decoy online ad used for reverse stings. Detectives identified the addresses linked to those phone numbers, and 200 "Dear John" letters were then sent out informing the owners that those numbers have been linked to the solicitation of commercial sex, and explaining why they should be concerned about the potential connection between prostitution and human trafficking.²

Evidence of Effectiveness

While there is no "gold standard" formal evaluation that effectiveness of Dear John Letters, that kind of evidence is rarely available when assessing the value of criminal justice interventions for any type of crime. Compared to other ways of combating prostitution and sex trafficking (e.g., victim rescues, trafficker arrest and prosecution, legalization or decriminalization of prostitution), there is an unusually strong case for Dear John Letters being an evidence-based tactic. Three distinct kinds of evidence all reflect favorably on the approach:

1. Surveys of hundreds of admitted sex buyers (sex buyers, or "clients" of prostitution) asked what would deter them from buying in the future, and presented them with a list of options. Over **75% said that letters sent to their homes or to their families would deter them.**³

² Mary Callahan, "Sonoma County sting shows a changing approach to prostitution," *The Press Democrat*, February 9, 2014, <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/sonoma-county-sting-shows-a-changing-approach-to-prostitution/>

³ Anna E. Kosloski and Bridget Diamond-Welch, "The Men and Women Who Purchase Sex in the United States: Understanding Motives, Practices, and Preferences," *Women & Criminal Justice* 32, no. 3 (2022): 306-324, doi: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'* (Berlin: Prostitution Research & Education, November 2022), 46-47, <https://prostitutionresearch.com>; Rachel Durchslag and Samir Goswami, *Deconstructing The Demand for Prostitution: Preliminary Insights From Interviews With Chicago Men Who Purchase Sex* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, May 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* (London: Eaves and Prostitution Research & Education, December 2009), 1-32, <https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/lsidocs/Mensex.pdf>.

2. The survey data is aligned with extensive anecdotal evidence⁴ from the field of law enforcement vice operations and investigations, which consistently finds that **the greatest concern expressed by sex buyers at the moment of their arrest** is not jail or fines, but is instead about their **being found out by their families and partners** (as well as by friends, employers, and other in their communities).
3. The survey findings and anecdotal evidence provided by law enforcement is further corroborated by a vast body of criminological research on deterrence that finds that **“extra-legal sanctions”** (such as social censure) **have a deterrent effect on re-offending equal to, or greater than, legal sanctions** (such as incarceration or probation).⁵

For more information about this approach, see the examples of letters and templates provided below. Some of the materials are provided in both English and Spanish.

Sample Letters from Police Departments

- [Arlington, TX, “Dear John” Postcard](#) (2007)
- [Raleigh, NC, “Dear John Letter” Templates](#) (2006)
- [Escambia County CA Sheriff’s Office “Dear John” Letter](#) (2009)
- [Oakland, CA, Police Department “Dear John” Letter](#) (2016)
- [Orange County, CA, Prostitution Letter](#) (2016)
- [Sanford, FL, Sample Community Safety Letter](#) (2011)
- [Sarasota, FL, Sample “Advisory Letter” from Sarasota Police Department](#) (2014)

News Reports and Press Releases About “Dear John” Letters

- **Baltimore, MD:**
 - [Fighting prostitution one john at a time](#) (2009)
- **Boston, MA:**
 - [Hoo-boy! Just wait 'til the mail comes](#) (1975)
 - [Boston police find effective deterrent to prostitution](#) (1975)
 - [Boston police want to send prostitution customers to “John school”](#) (2016)
- **Brown County, WI:**
 - [Cops sending warning to would-be Johns](#) (2018)
 - [Johns Suppression Initiative Leads Brown County Officials to Arrest 19+](#) (2018)
- **Chillicothe, OH:**
 - [Prostitution sting nets 13 arrests](#) (2017)
- **Covington, KY:**
 - [“John” Letters Target Prostitution](#) (2004)
- **Dayton, OH**
 - [Dear Johns - Dayton police warn suspected prostitution customers](#) (2017)
 - [Suspected prostitution draws 18 warning letters from Dayton police](#) (2017)
 - [Ohio City Fights Prostitution with Letters to Vehicle Owners](#) (2017)
- **Hollywood, FL:**
 - [Solicit a Prostitute, Get an Unwelcome Letter](#) (1997)
 - [Cops put a sting in prostitution crackdown](#) (1997)

⁴ Charlot Alter, “Catching Johns: Inside the National Push to Arrest Men who Buy Sex,” *Time*, n.d., <https://time.com/sex-buyers-why-cops-across-the-u-s-target-men-who-buy-prostitutes> (accessed March 3, 2023); Nicholas Kristof, “Targeting the Johns in the Sex Trade,” *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/>.


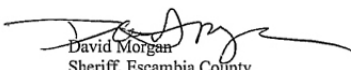
⁵ Thomas A. Loughran et al., “Deterrence,” in *The Handbook of Criminological Theory*, ed. Alex Piquero (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 50-74, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781118512449.ch4>; Raymond Paternoster, “Perceptual Deterrence Theory,” in *Deterrence, Choice, and Crime, Volume 23*, eds. Daniel S. Nagin, Francis T. Cullen, and Cheryl Lero Jonson (New York: Routledge, 2018), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781351112710-3/perceptual-deterrence-theory-raymond-paternoster>.

- [Hollywood sends ‘Dear John’ letters](#) (1997)
 - [‘Dear John’ letter warns of AIDS dangers](#) (1997)
- **Milwaukee, WI:**
 - [“Operation Dear John” Initiative Launched to Crack Down on Prostitution: “The People on this Street Need Relief”](#) (2017)
- **Norristown, PA:**
 - [Dear john: Best to avoid red-light district](#) (1995)
 - [Crackdown nets prostitutes and Johns](#) (1995)
 - [Sending Deterrent to Males Via Mail: Norristown Sent Letters to Men Seen Talking to Prostitutes](#) (1998)
 - [A correspondence course](#) (1998)
- **Oakland, CA:**
 - [Can a letter make a street safer? Oakland's Dear John campaign will find out](#) (2013)
- **San Jose, CA:**
 - [SJPD Launches The Report John Program to Reduce Human Trafficking and Prostitution](#) (2019)
 - [Report Suspected Prostitution and Human Trafficking Activity](#) (2019)
 - [San Jose Police Announce ‘Report John Program’ To Combat Prostitution, Human Trafficking](#) (2019)
- **Sanford, FL:**
 - [Police to use letters in prostitution crackdown](#) (2013)
 - [Dear John: Think Twice Before Picking Up That Prostitute in Sanford](#) (2013)
- **Sarasota, FL:**
 - [Sarasota Police Send Warning Letters to End Solicitation of Prostitution](#) (2014)
 - [Sarasota PD Sends Out Prostitution Warnings to Residents](#) (2014)
 - [Sarasota Sends Prostitution Warning Letters to Vehicle Owners](#) (2014)
- **St. Louis, MO:**
 - [Dear John Letters from St. Louis Police Aim to Curb Prostitution](#) (2014)
- **Worcester, MA:**
 - [You’ve got mail: Unusual letter campaign may curb prostitution](#) (2006)
 - [‘Dear John’ Letter Fights Prostitution](#) (2006)
 - [Dear John - Can you teach men who pick up prostitutes not to buy sex?](#) (2009)

References

To access information about specific cases and the U.S. cities and counties in which sex buyer arrests have occurred, you may go to www.demand-forum.org, open the “[Browse Locations](#)” window, and then select “Letters” from the “Tactics” list. Similarly, the U.S. locations in which other sex buyer arrests have occurred may be [mapped](#) on Demand Forum by choosing “Letters” from the list.

Figure 1: Sample “Dear John” Letter, Escambia County Sheriff’s Office

	
Sheriff	DAVID MORGAN
<hr/>	
John Doe 276 Main Street Pensacola, FL 32509	Vehicle: 1990 Toyota Location of arrest: Arlington Ave & W Street Date and Time of arrest: 2:15 am 7/1/09
Dear John ,	
<p>The vehicle registered in your name was involved in an arrest for violation(s) of Florida’s laws prohibiting prostitution. Attached is a copy of the Florida Statute for your review. The individual arrested from your vehicle is _____. As vehicle owner, you should be aware of the Florida Contraband Forfeiture Act wherein motor vehicles can be seized if they are used in violation of this act. The Escambia County Sheriff’s Office is notifying you so that you can consider these factors in deciding whether to allow others to drive your automobiles.</p> <p>It is important for you to realize that the above named person and his/her significant other may have been exposed to a Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD). Certain STDs, like HIV, are incurable and may not be noticeable for a long time. It is possible to be exposed to an STD even if your partner was with a prostitute only once. Getting tested is important to your health and may impact your future ability to have children. Confidential STD testing is available through your private doctor or the Escambia County Health Department (850-595-6532). Fees may be involved.</p> <p>It is a common myth that prostitution is a “victimless crime” or that it is “an act between two consenting adults.” Prostitution is a crime which is linked to drugs (use and sale), acts of violence toward prostitutes and their customers and in the worst cases, human trafficking in juveniles for the sex trade. In addition to STD’s, other viruses can spread through intimate contact with random individuals whom you may not know. Hepatitis, HIC and HPV can all be unknowingly transmitted and can lead to serious, and fatal, illness.</p> <p>Prostitution, soliciting for prostitution and the other activities described in the attached statute (F.S.S. 796.07) will not be tolerated in Escambia County. If you think you may have been exposed to any communicable diseases after reading the contents of this letter, please contact your health care provider or the Escambia County Health Department for evaluation before having intimate contact with other people to help prevent the spreading of serious conditions.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p> <div style="text-align: center;"> David Morgan Sheriff, Escambia County</div> <p>ESCAMBIA COUNTY SHERIFF’S OFFICE Telephone (850) 436-9512 • www.escambiaso.com • P.O. Box 18770 • Pensacola, Florida 32523</p>	