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An Overview of Neighborhood Action 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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Throughout the United States, there have been a wide array of tactics that focus on deterring men seeking commercial sex that feature residents, businesses, or organized community groups either taking their own action or engaging in partnerships with law enforcement. We have identified more than **265** U.S. cities and counties that have engaged in some kind of neighborhood action directed at deterring demand for prostitution. Such approaches are highly variable and customized extensively to suite local needs and resources, therefore there we cannot distinguish a “basic” model.

Ways that neighborhoods become involved with efforts to curb prostitution can be indirect and non-programmatic. Often, community complaints and pressure result in police employing whatever traditional tactics they feel are appropriate to address prostitution and sex trafficking. For example, [in Anaheim, CA](#), a persistent set of problems led residents and business leaders to call the police department with hundreds of complaints and tips about prostitution and related crime, such as open drug dealing and abuse. Persistent community input led police to meet with members of the public to develop collaborative solutions and to discuss potential strategies and tactics that might be pursued, and the resources available to do so.

In other cases, neighborhood organizations develop independently and focus on creating strategies for combating prostitution-related problems—including demand—and subsequently coordinate their efforts with police. Such was the case with the West Side Neighborhood Congress, [Buffalo, New York](#), which formed a Prostitution Task Force in 1995 which developed objectives for addressing prostitution in their community, including that of establishing linkages with key stakeholders, including law enforcement. This led to the launch of “Operation Johnny,” in which Buffalo’s Police Narcotics and Vice Unit began a concerted campaign to combat street prostitution.

Table 1: Sites with Earliest Known Use of Neighborhood Action Targeting Sex Buyers

| Year | City or County | State |
|------|----------------|-------|
| 1975 | Knoxville | TN |
| 1975 | Jackson | TN |
| 1975 | Miami | FL |
| 1980 | Atlantic Beach | FL |
| 1980 | Vallejo | CA |
| 1980 | Rochester | NY |
| 1981 | Horry County | SC |
| 1982 | Evansville | IN |
| 1984 | Milwaukee | WI |
| 1985 | Erie County | NY |
| 1985 | Chattanooga | TN |
| 1985 | Newport News | VA |
| 1985 | Tampa | FL |
| 1985 | Phoenix | AZ |
| 1985 | El Paso | TX |

The key objection to community-led initiatives is the potential for them to evolve into vigilante efforts that impose on the rights of people who may not be engaged in trying to buy sex. Untrained and unarmed citizens can also place themselves at risk if they confront or are discovered by sex buyers, such as being seen filming by a sex buyer engaged in prostitution. It is also possible for community action to interfere with police operations or investigations, or to produce information that cannot be used by investigators. Sometimes vigilante efforts are not part of a formal community-led action, but are the result of lone citizens act independently to deter prostitution. A well-known instance of this involves a man in Oklahoma City, OK, dubbed the “Video Vigilante,”

who for decades has made video recordings (in recent years with the assistance of drones) of prostitution interactions and uploaded them on his “John TV website.”¹

Two examples from the early 1990s and one currently used example illustrate many of the elements that have been incorporated in earlier neighborhood actions targeting the demand for prostitution and remain in use.

New Haven, CT, 1992: The “John of the Week” Campaign

A neighborhood-led identity disclosure campaign in [New Haven](#), CT illustrates some of the objections to community-led action. In 1992, a neighborhood negatively affected by street prostitution mobilized to put pressure on buyers as a deterrent. Residents obtained information about arrested buyers from police. They also conducted amateur surveillance on vehicles, recording license plate numbers and obtaining names and addresses of registered owners from the Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles. They would use this information to mail letters to the vehicle owners, saying they had seen the car being used by someone soliciting a prostituted person. They also placed posters on telephone poles and trees, each naming the area’s new “John of the Week.” The posters stated the name and address of a man arrested for soliciting a prostituted woman in their neighborhood and warned, “*Johns! Stay out of our neighborhood or your name will be here next week.*” There were other people in the community who objected to the posters, and routinely ripped them down soon after they went up. Association members would replace them the next day.²

Of the first five men named on posters, two planned to sue, saying their lives had been ruined. Police said they saw a decline in the level of prostitution activity in the area but were not “in full agreement with the tactic of John of the Week.” A local civil rights lawyer representing the men who had planned to sue the Edgewood Neighborhood Association said that the phone number of the first sex buyer was listed on the posters, leading to the man’s wife and children receiving “dozens” of harassing phone calls. In both cases, the community was putting up posters before the men were arraigned. Based on the objections of sex buyers, the group stopped including the men’s phone numbers on the posters.³

Residents argued that such measures were necessary, as they feared for their children’s safety and for the safety of women living in the neighborhood who frequently had men pulling up to solicit them for sex. Members of the association said they had exhausted other options, such as unsuccessfully asking the New Haven Register (a local newspaper) to print the names of men caught soliciting prostituted persons, before they finally opted to start “outing” buyers with the posters.⁴ In defense of their “John of the Week” campaign, one of the activists involved said,

“I think it’s a horrible situation to have a husband and father arrested for soliciting a prostitute and having his name publicized. It is a tragedy. It’s also tragic for little schoolgirls to have to wait for the school bus next to hookers. It’s a tragedy to find used condoms in the sandbox and in the grass where the kids play outside. These are I.V. drug users, and the highest risk category for AIDS.”⁵

The community group, which represented about 300 families living in the Edgewood Avenue area of New Haven, retained their own lawyer. The attorney threatened a countersuit if the buyers filed a suit against the campaign, contending that the campaign was simply re-conveying public information, having obtained names from court dockets of men arrested for soliciting prostitution.

¹ Andrew Knittle, “Oklahoma City’s ‘Video Vigilante’ Now Using Drones to Catch Hookers, Johns in Action,” *The Oklahoman*, August 30, 2015, <https://www.oklahoman.com/story/news/local/oklahoma-city/2015/08/30/oklahoma-citys-video-vigilante-now-using-drones-to-catch-hookers-johns-in-action/60726506007/>.

² New York Times Archives, “NEW HAVEN JOURNAL; Curbing Prostitution on Demand Side,” *The New York Times*, April 20, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/20/nyregion/new-haven-journal-curbing-prostitution-on-demand-side.html>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Gordon Heights, NY, 1991-1993: Citizen Patrols and Video Recording

[Gordon Heights](#) occupies an area in Suffolk County, on Long Island, New York. In 1991, [a news outlet reported](#) that a Gordon Heights Community Watch group started writing letters to the wives and mothers of those arrested for soliciting prostituted women. In 1993, [a report](#) indicated that prostitution had “invaded” residential streets and schoolyards, and members of a neighborhood watch group began patrolling their streets with video cameras as part of a community policing program. In this Long Island city, two family members in Gordon Heights said they had been videotaping prostituted women and sex buyers for two and half years, using the taping to scare sex buyers out of the neighborhood. The videotaping 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 videotape 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 taped situations appearing to be prostitution transactions. The teams were instructed by police to leave the area after witnessing these situations to avoid confrontations.⁶

San Jose, CA, 2019-2023: Report John Program

In September 2019, the [San Jose](#) Police Department 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. 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, suggesting that the vehicle was being used improperly, and that the owner should take care not to allow others to use their vehicle for such purposes.

Evidence of Effectiveness

There have been no formal evaluations demonstrating that neighborhood initiatives produce reductions in sex trade activity or reduce offending – or reoffending - among sex buyers, but that kind of evidence is rarely available when assessing the value of any type 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 a case to be made for neighborhood actions being a types of 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 80% said that having their identities disclosed to others or to be arrested and then sanctioned would deter them.**⁷

⁶ “Dear John Letters Battling Prostitution by Writing to Wives of Men Arrested,” *Newsday*, June 13, 1991.

⁷ 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->

Many of the neighborhood actions would increase the likelihood of an arrest or to have sex buyer households become aware of that crime, something that they clearly prefer to avoid.

2. The survey data is aligned with extensive anecdotal evidence⁸ 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 being found out by their families and partners** (as well as by friends, employers, and other in their communities). To the extent that neighborhood actions and their collaborations with police increases the likelihood of an arrest or of having offender households become aware of that crime, this type of tactic would advance deterrence.
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 both legal and “extra-legal sanctions” (such as social censure) **have a deterrent effect on re-offending**.⁹

References, Additional Examples

To access information about specific cases and the U.S. cities and counties in which sex buyer arrests have occurred, you may go to Demand Forum, open the “Browse Locations” window, and then select “Neighborhood Action” from the “Tactics” list. Similarly, the U.S. locations in which this tactic has been used may be mapped on Demand Forum by choosing “Neighborhood Action” from the list.

Below are brief descriptions of additional cases that we are providing to further illustrate the range of variation in the elements used in this basic approach.

Baltimore, MD:

The “[Baltimore John Watch](#)” program encouraged residents to record license plate numbers of vehicles and to submit descriptions of the make, model, and license numbers of vehicles and descriptions of the drivers. Photos and descriptions were then posted on a website. “Pigtown John Watch” had a similar focus (<http://pigtownjohnwatch.blogspot.com>). “Pigtown John Watch” was a “watchdog” blog that maintained reports of prostitution incidents and sightings of sex buyers submitted by blog participants. There is no longer activity on this website, but it is referenced here as an illustration of a neighborhood-led effort to focus on demand.

Chattanooga, TN:

A neighborhood-led effort in [Chattanooga](#), TN publicized the identities of sex buyers (in addition to pimps and prostituted persons), based on public submissions of photos to be posted on an independent website: www.trick.the.johns.com (which is no longer active). The website was started after a local resident became angered after his wife was propositioned by a sex buyer who was circling their home in his vehicle.

Cleveland, OH:

[%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/Isidocs/Mensex.pdf>.

⁸ 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/>.

⁹ 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>.

A variety of community led initiatives that have addressed the demand for commercial sex in [Cleveland](#), OH. For example, the “The Montgomery County’s Neighbors Against Drugs” (NAD) Program organized groups of citizens’ patrols on city streets (especially one area known for prostitution), with individuals carrying posters saying “*Dear Johns, your plate number is being recorded. Yours truly, The Neighbors.*”

Lansing, MI:

Residents of neighborhoods within [Lansing](#), MI developed the “[hot spot card program](#)” which involved the distribution of cards that encourage residents to record information about known or suspected vice crimes (including the activities of sex buyer) and provide that information to police without fear of reprisal.

Los Angeles, CA:

Residents of the Adams neighborhood in [Los Angeles](#) have [organized protests against prostitution](#) in their community. One protest occurred while stakeholders and residents gathered nearby to discuss new initiatives to reduce prostitution in the area. These initiatives included creating publicity and communications, tree trimming, surveillance, city services, church outreach, and sex buyer letter writing committees within the community to increase vigilance and create a safer community.

Mt Clemens, MI:

[Mt. Clemens](#) was home of the “North Gratiot Neighborhood Watch” program in which members of the community spent two days posing as prostituted women in an area north of the Mount Clemens downtown section known for its street crime. When potential buyers pulled over, the activists handed out a flier that said, “*If you’re soliciting sex and/or drugs in this neighborhood, you are being videotaped. Stay tuned for the 11 (o’clock) news. Zero tolerance.* Any videos taken by the group were turned over to the police. One Mount Clemens neighborhood chose to fight prostitution by erecting signs warning potential buyers that they were being watched by area residents. In 2005 a sign was put up by the Gratiot Corridor Watch, a group of local activists who have hosted a number of anti-crime demonstrations. The group erected a sign with reflectors that read: “Prostitution Zone – If you are looking, we are watching,” in front of a vacant house on Euclid, near Gratiot. Some residents opposed the signs, believing they sent a negative message about the neighborhood. A grandmother who lived near the vacant structure tore the sign down, contending that the sign accidentally served as an advertisement for street-level prostitution in the neighborhood.”¹⁰

Oakland, CA:

In 2012, neighborhoods mobilized to launch the “[Dear John letter campaign](#),” a community initiative supported by the City of [Oakland](#), the Oakland Police Department (OPD), and a variety of community organizations. The initiative aimed to combat demand using a number of tactics. Residents were trained to identify and report the license plate numbers and state of origin of vehicles driven by people believed to be soliciting for prostitution. That information was then sent anonymously to the OPD, whether directly to the police or via collaborating community groups such as the East Bay Asian Youth Center or Oakland Community Organizations (a coalition of churches, schools, and neighborhood groups). After checking that the car’s license plate matched the reported make and model, the OPD sent a form letter to the owner of the vehicle, informing the recipient that they were seen in an area of high prostitution and that such activity was illegal, dangerous, and unacceptable to local residents.

¹⁰ Mitch Hotts, “Anti-prostitute Sign Gets Mixed Response,” *Macomb Daily*, February 10, 2005, <https://freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1340334/posts>.

Richmond, CA:

[Residents of the 23rd Street commercial corridor](#) in [Richmond](#), CA have banded together to reduce prostitution in their area by bettering their community. Community meetings organized workshops to combat the problem of prostitution by training residents on how to spot human trafficking and when to contact the police. In addition, nonprofit groups like Calle 23 and Project Xochitl worked with residents to clean up an alleyway frequented by prostituted women and sex buyers beginning in 2016. These efforts included adding streetlights, picking up trash, and paving the alleyway so it was more useable for residents.

San Antonio, TX:

Certain area of [San Antonio](#), TX have had neighborhood-initiated campaigns involving residents taking photos of sex buyers in vehicles, recording license plate numbers, and sending the photos and information to police for further action.

San Jose, CA:

In an organized effort to combat the presence and harms of the local sex trade, [San Jose](#) residents have gathered to hold monthly walks around the [Guadalupe-Washington neighborhood](#) of [San Jose](#), CA. Having a large group of residents walking the street was intended to both build community relationships and drive out sex buyers, pimps, and sex traffickers who sexually exploit women and children. As a result of the walks, the number of prostitution-related incidents dropped from 144 reported incidents in 2015 to 43 reported incidents in 2016.

Tacoma, WA:

For decades, there has been substantial community involvement in combating prostitution and sex trafficking in [Tacoma](#), WA. One initiative was a collaboration between community organizations (e.g., the Chamber of Commerce, neighborhood groups such as Citizens Against Prostitution) and government agencies at the city, county, and state levels (e.g., Tacoma Police Department, Pierce County Jail, the Washington State Department of Corrections). The Make [Tacoma Safe, Clean](#), and Attractive (MTSCA) team targeted street-level prostitution and related crime within [Stay Out of Areas of Prostitution](#) (SOAP) zones. Community involvement and the facilitation of the new state vehicle impound law were regarded as critical components in their effort. The team researched best practices with a goal to create more disincentives for prostituted persons and sex buyers to operate in Tacoma.

The initiative was intended to impact positive changes in the realms of enforcement as well as prevention, and they were aware that the program and any positive changes it produced must be sustainable within the community. The team worked on forging connections with key stakeholders in the community, like the Pacific Avenue Business District. It also worked on gathering data on the correlation between prostitution and the spread of disease, best practices from other municipalities on what it takes to make prostitution less profitable, and current prostitution data for bench-marking purposes.

While researching what other municipalities around the country did to combat street prostitution, the team observed what [Kent](#), WA, was doing regarding enforcement of the new state law, HB1362. MTSCA leaders made a presentation to Tacoma's Public Safety Committee on the new state vehicle impound law related to prostitution activity. As a part of the preparation for the unveiling of the anti-prostitution community signs, team members made presentations on TV Tacoma's "CityLine," at a Tacoma Police Department staff meeting, and at a meeting of the Tacoma City Council Subcommittee on Public Safety. These presentations were credited with motivating City officials to focus resources on the problems associated with street prostitution. The team examined the possibility of having public service announcements on local radio stations warning of increased prostitution enforcement on the streets of the city, but it is unclear if that occurred. The PSAs would have also

announced enforcement of the newer state law involving impounding vehicles used by sex buyers and the \$500 fee that must be paid for their recovery.

To learn more about these types of community-led interventions, please access the additional resources provided below.

Neighborhood Action Information and Resources

Community Feedback from Town Hall Meeting

Portland, OR:

- [Compilation of Community Complaints about Prostitution, Portland, OR: 82nd Ave Summary of Feedback on Prostitution Problems](#)

Letter to Mayor From Neighborhood Organization

Madison, WI:

- [Prostitution Letter from Mount Royal Improvement Association](#) (2002)

Materials from Neighborhood Group

Rochester, NY:

- [Form for Residents to Provide Johns' License Plates and Tips to Police: Lyell 230 Tip Sheet](#)
- [Press Release about Rochester's "Dear John" Campaign: Lyell Press Release](#) (July 6, 2009)
- [Print Image for Rochester's "Dear John" Campaign: Lyell 230 Sign 8.5x14](#)

Neighborhood-Led Task Force Reports on Prostitution & Demand

Buffalo, NY:

- [Buffalo Prostitution Task Force Report: Workable Solutions](#) (1999)

Vallejo, CA:

- [Vallejo Prostitution Task Force Report to City Council](#) (2011)

Prostitution and Drug Complaint Form

Reading, PA:

- <http://www.readingpa.gov/content/drug-and-prostitution-complaint-form>

Additional News Reports on Neighborhood Action

New Haven, CT

- New York Times Archives, "NEW HAVEN JOURNAL; Curbing Prostitution on Demand Side," *The New York Times*, April 20, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/20/nyregion/new-haven-journal-curbing-prostitution-on-demand-side.html>.

Oakland, CA:

- Samantha Masunaga, "Dear John: Oakland Residents are Sending Your License Plate Number to the Cops," *Oakland North*, October, 11, 2012, <http://oaklandnorth.net/2012/10/11/dear-john-oakland-residents-are-sending-your-license-plate-number-to-the-cops/>

Richmond, CA:

- Ande Richards, "Richmond Improvement Projects Stalled," *Richmond Confidential*, November 27, 2020, <https://richmondconfidential.org/2020/11/27/richmond-improvement-projects-stalled/> (2020)

San Jose, CA:

- Jason Green, "San Jose Neighborhood Bands together to Push out Prostitution," *East Bay Times*, June 30, 2017, <https://www.eastbaytimes.com/2017/06/30/san-jose-neighborhood-bands-together-to-push-out-prostitution/>

Vallejo, CA:

- Kevin Fagan, "Vallejo Public, Police Team To Reduce Prostitution," *The Daily*, September 25, 2011, <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Vallejo-public-police-team-to-reduce-prostitution-2308704.php>
- Alison Vekshin, "Prostitutes Flood Vallejo after Bankrupt City Slashes Police 33%" *Bloomberg*, Augst 22, 2011, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-08-22/prostitutes-flood-vallejo-after-bankrupt-city-slashes-police-33-#xj4y7vzkg>

- Jessica A. York, “Vallejo Task Force Studies Ways to Deter Crime, Help Prostitutes in Need,” *Times-Herald*, January 3, 2011, <https://www.timesheraldonline.com/2011/01/03/vallejo-task-force-studies-ways-to-deter-crime-help-prostitutes-in-need/>