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# An Overview of Demand Reduction Public Education Programs in the United States

Summary Based Upon Research from the  
National Assessments of Prostitution and Sex  
Trafficking Demand Reduction Efforts



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This approach involves educating people to encourage them not to contribute to sexual exploitation by purchasing sex, or by tolerating or supporting that criminal behavior in others. Some of the education efforts are broadcast widely to broad cross-sections of the public, while others more narrowly target active sex buyers, or boys in an effort to prevent them from becoming men who buy sex. More than **200** cities and counties in the U.S. have launched some form of public education initiative focused on reducing demand for commercial sex.

For the purpose of gathering information about public education and awareness programs addressing demand for commercial sex, we have defined the terms broadly. We have counted as an awareness program any broadly targeted attempt to focus attention on the role of sex buyers in contributing to problems associated with prostitution and/or sex trafficking. In some communities, such efforts involve posting signs or billboards informing sex buyers about police activity or penalties for buying sex. For example, [Rochester, NY](#), placed billboards in the city which read, “*Dear John, your relationship with our neighborhood is over.*” In [Cleveland, OH](#), there was a neighborhood-initiated campaign targeting sex buyers in which residents took turns carrying signs in troubled neighborhoods stating, “*Dear Johns, your plate number is being recorded. Yours truly, the neighbors.*” 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 kind of approach is designed to deter buyers, and secondarily, to send a general message to the public about police action to address the problem, rather than to educate about demand in real depth.

Another approach aims awareness efforts at the general public, rather than to actual or potential sex buyers. This usually involves placing signs or posters for the public to see, or brief presentations about demand at meetings of community groups. We have considered an education program to be a more intensive and sustained effort to convey a larger amount of information. An example would be a curriculum developed to teach high school students or employees of a company about how buying sex drives prostitution and sex trafficking and the negative consequences of commercial sex.

While most experts agree that public education and awareness are critical to combating prostitution and sex trafficking, there are relatively few examples of programs designed specifically to address demand for prostitution when compared to the number of programs addressing those on the “supply” side of commercial sex and trafficking (e.g., pimps, sex traffickers, facilitators, victims). The earliest known demand reduction education efforts - which were demand “awareness” programs rather than more intensive, focused education programs - occurred in the 1980s (Table 1).

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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,” *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>. For more background on “The Track” see also: Gabrielle Banks, “The Track. Open-air Sex Trade Permeates Daily Life on Houston’s Outskirts,” *Houston Chronicle*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Houston-prostitution-human-trafficking-Bissonnet-13780542.php>.

**Figure 1: Signs Posted Along “The Track” in Houston Warning Sex Buyers of Patronizing Prostitution as a Texas State Jail Felony Offense**



The primary means of raising awareness and providing education include:

- posters
- billboards
- brief presentations at community meetings
- interviews appearing in print and electronic media
- education programs, involving a curriculum and a sustained presentation to target audiences that conveys substantial amounts of information

The best-known and most ambitious public awareness campaign focused on demand was the “Dear John” campaign implemented in the greater [Atlanta](#) area and discussed in more detail below. Most other communities have engaged in less extensive campaigns and have used simpler methods, such as the aforementioned use of billboards and signs in [Rochester](#), NY, [Cleveland](#), OH, and [Houston](#), TX.

Year	City or County	State
1980	Roanoke	VA
1982	Portland	OR
1985	Tampa	FL
1988	Pawtucket	RI
1988	Miami	FL
1995	San Francisco	CA
1995	Oklahoma City	OK
1996	Wichita	KS
1997	Tucson	AZ
1998	Kissimmee	FL
1998	Athens	GA
1999	Orlando	FL
2000	Baltimore	MD
2000	Fitchburg	MA
2000	Travis County	TX

Of the cities and counties that we know have engaged in some form of education or awareness intervention targeting demand, the vast majority are designed to raise awareness. There are very few efforts that would meet the more rigorous standard of programs with substantial educational content. A set of curricula or “toolkits” developed by the [Chicago](#) Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE) and a program developed by the U.S. Department of Defense are among the few true education programs we have found. Examples of such programs are discussed below.

### Example 1: Atlanta’s “Dear John” Public Awareness Program

The best-known and most ambitious public awareness campaign addressing demand was the “Dear John” campaign implemented in the greater [Atlanta](#) area. This involved a series of professionally produced public service announcements and print media images that were circulated via the web, television, print media, and signs posted in public areas (such as buses) in Atlanta.

The “Dear John” campaign was initiated by the Mayor’s Office of the City of Atlanta and was designed to provide a platform to raise public awareness on the issue of commercial sexual exploitation (of children in particular, but also more broadly). The objective was to generate public and political pressure to spur state and local agencies, as well as nongovernmental organizations, such as faith-based organizations and nonprofits, into concrete action against prostitution and sex trafficking. The substantive focus of the campaign was on sex buyers and reducing demand.

The idea for a public education and awareness campaign focusing on demand was built into recommendations of a study of prostitution and sex trafficking in Atlanta.<sup>3</sup> After the study’s release in 2005, the Mayor’s Office reached out to a public relations firm (Edelman), which agreed to assist the city in developing the “Dear John” campaign pro bono. The Edelman firm and the Mayor’s Office developed themes and text for print media messages and a nonprofit organization, Atlanta Women in Film, produced three 30-second public service announcements (PSAs) pro bono. The campaign products were released to the public in 2006. A PSA featuring the mayor was taken to local television stations that ran it for free during slow media times, and it was also available on the city’s website. “Dear John” print ads were placed without charge in several local publications. Links to the PSAs are provided in this footnote,<sup>4</sup> and print messages used for paper ads, billboards, and elsewhere are presented in Figures 2 and 3.

The national press discovered and featured the campaign, and the “buzz” helped the city to secure \$100,000 from a private foundation to extend the reach of “Dear John” to paid advertising in the city’s major publications. In 2007, one of the public service announcements won an Emmy award for “Best PSA,” which allowed the city to leverage another summer of free airtime with public service directors at the three major networks in Atlanta. In 2007, Atlanta was awarded the top prize from the World Leaders Forum in the Law-and-Order category for the “Dear John” campaign.

The main push of the campaign occurred in 2006 to 2008. Most of the initial activity and investment occurred in the first year, when materials were developed, and placements were made in electronic and print media outlets. The national attention and awards received by the campaign extended the program’s peak activity into 2007 and 2008 by having the materials publicized and circulated by the media and referenced by other organizations fighting prostitution and sex trafficking. The campaign did not have a formal end date and could be regarded as still under way since the educational materials remain available online.

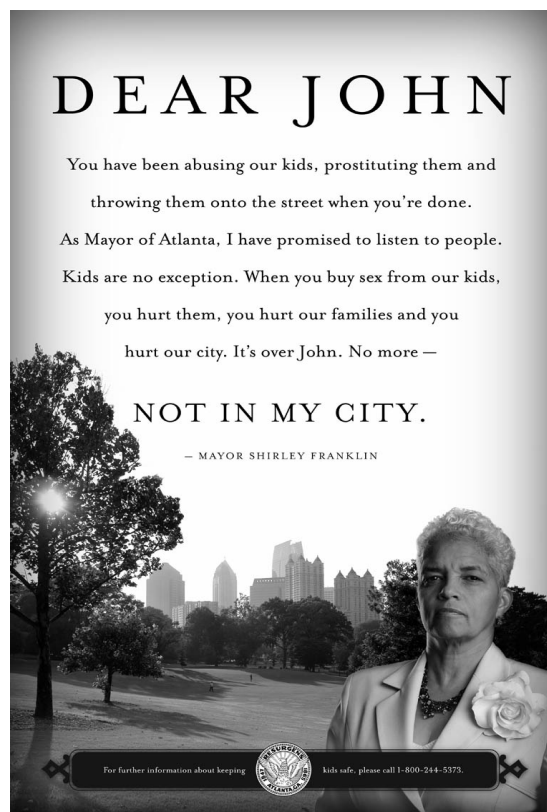
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<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Priebe and Cristen Suhr, *Hidden in Plain View: The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Girls in Atlanta* (Atlanta, GA: Atlanta Women’s Agenda, September 2005), 1-67, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56ef391b1d07c029e7237fcc/t/582770e9ff7c50654829aae5/1478979826181/Hidden+in+Plain+View+-+Child+Prostitution.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> WIFTAtlanta, “Dear John Campaign: John,” YouTube, April 5, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5O9erzIB1W4>; WIFTAtlanta, “Dear John Campaign: Mayor Shirley Franklin,” YouTube, April 5, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRsb06g21hU>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TzUyySQPlk>.



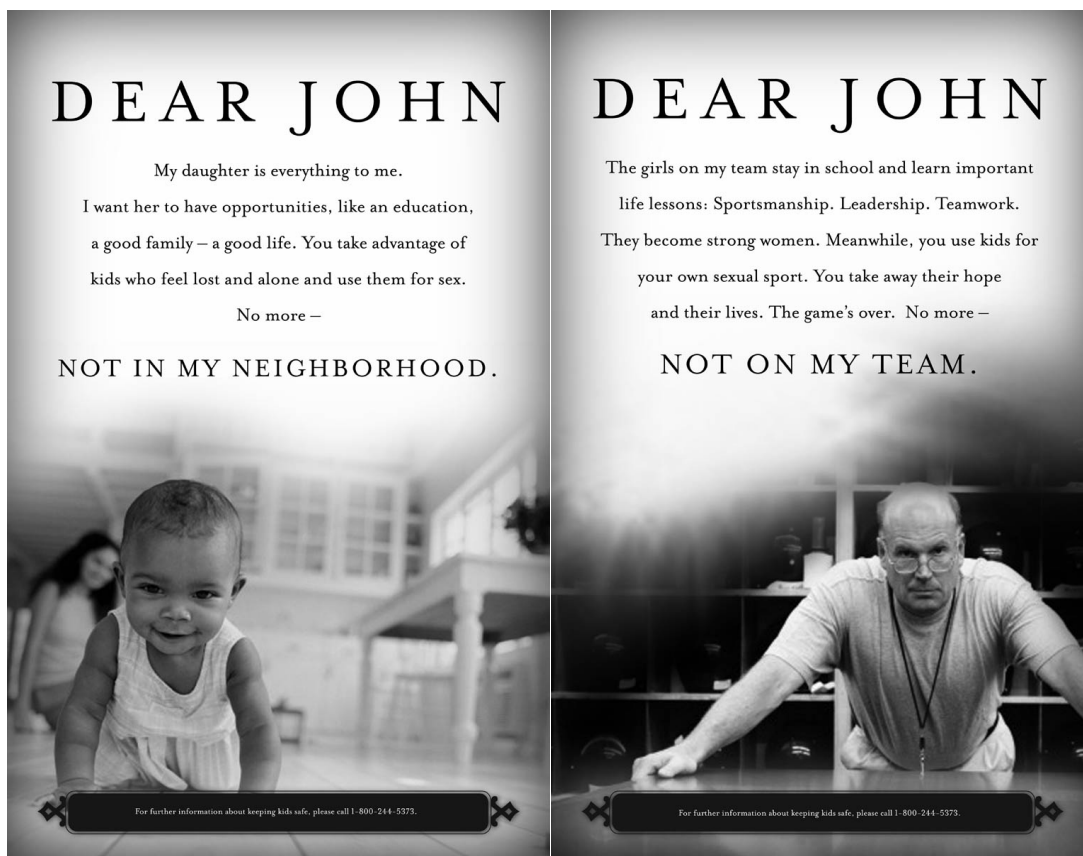
Figure 2: Main Print Media Message for Atlanta’s “Dear John” Public Education and Awareness Campaign



The “Dear John” campaign was not formally evaluated, so its impact on the demand for prostitution or on sex trafficking in Atlanta is unknown. The main stated goal of the project was not to directly impact the behavior of actual or potential sex buyers, although it was hoped that the messages would resonate with them. Instead, the key goal was to inspire action among those in government and nongovernmental organizations who could do something to combat demand for prostitution. The level of activity in planning and implementing demand-focused interventions in the city increased after the campaign began. Of course, without an evaluation it is difficult to determine whether the activities would have occurred without the campaign, and at this point there is no way to make such a determination. Those who were interviewed in Atlanta for the National Assessment study in 2012 pointed to the “Dear John” campaign being an important element in overcoming inaction or resistance on the part of key players in the city, who later became partners in planning and implementing initiatives focusing on demand. For example, after the campaign was launched many meetings took place and initiatives began making progress that had not previously occurred. Among the initiatives that were launched during the main two-year campaign were the development of a john school, reforming state criminal codes regarding soliciting prostitution, and conducting a study of male buyers of sex.

City government support for anti-demand efforts appeared to wane after Mayor Franklin left office in 2008. However, activity by NGOs has continued. Studies of sex buyers have continued without government support, through the funding of an NGO “A Future Not A Past” (AFNAP) and executed by The Schapiro Group. In 2012, a campaign was announced to revive the pursuit of many of the goals of the original “Dear John” campaign in Atlanta. The campaign focused on deterring men who buy access to sexually abuse underage girls and called its media campaign “Take a Stand to End Demand.”

**Figure 3: Additional Print Media Messages for Atlanta’s “Dear John” Public Education and Awareness Campaign**



### **Example 2: Education and Awareness Programs in Chicago and Cook County**

Arguably, one of the areas with the highest levels of activity focused on combating demand for commercial sex is the [Cook County](#) and [Chicago](#) area of Illinois. An “umbrella” organization or coalition called End Demand Illinois (EDI) is comprised of over a dozen partner organizations that have launched a wide range of initiatives targeting demand. Some of these organizations were initiatives in place before EDI existed and some have been collective action organized or facilitated by EDI. For illustrative purposes we will discuss some initiatives of a few of the key partners of EDI. More information about EDI’s composition, activity, and key partners is available through the links in this footnote.<sup>5</sup>

EDI has engaged in a number of education and awareness activities. For example, a collaboration of the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE), Women of Power Alumni Association (WoPAA), Polaris Project, Voices and Faces Project (Voices), Schiller DuCanto and Fleck Family Law Center of DePaul University College of Law (Schiller), and the Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault launched a new website and coordinated events in the Fall of 2009. An EDI volunteer (Katie Feifer, also affiliated with the Voices and Faces Project) of San Francisco-based research group KGF Insights conducted 31 interviews with a group of Illinois residents to gather feedback about statistics, beliefs, slogan statements, and the philosophy and messaging employed by EDI’s public education efforts. The conclusions and recommendations from the study served as the basis of campaign outreach materials. At the same time, Larissa Malarek, a volunteer documentarian, conducted 23 on-camera interviews with policymakers, law enforcement officials, service providers, and survivors

<sup>5</sup> The website for EDI is: <https://www.caase.org/end-demand-illinois>. Key partners have included the Women’s Services Department of the Cook County Sheriff’s Office and the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE): <https://nicic.gov/responding-women-offenders-department-womens-justice-services-cook-county-illinois>; <https://www.caase.org>.

throughout the state about prostitution, sex trafficking, and demand in Illinois. These interviews were conducted to form the basis of the production of short documentary vignettes used for EDI public education initiatives. An initial clip of the documentary was released at EDI's launch event in September 2009.

CAASE, a Chicago-based nonprofit organization that is a member of EDI, is one of the few organizations in the United States with demand reduction as a primary focus. Many of the organization's activities are designed to prevent prostitution and sex trafficking by increasing public awareness and knowledge about the risks and negative consequences inherent in commercial sex. CAASE has created educational curricula designed to encourage boys and men not to participate in, and to work against, sexual exploitation. The organization has also developed toolkits for nonprofits, faith-based groups, schools, businesses, and other communities and organizations to provide methods people can use to prevent sexual exploitation. Their descriptions of some of these awareness and education tools are presented in Figure 4.

### Example 3: U.S. Military Program to Combat Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking

There is a long history of the military contributing to prostitution and sex trafficking.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has taken substantial action designed to reduce or eliminate the historic contributions (whether government agencies, large corporations, or others) of military personnel to prostitution and sex trafficking. Their approach was multifaceted and featured a focus on combating demand for commercial sex. While the scale of the military and the level of control over personnel are atypical of most organizations, the objectives and basic steps taken can prove instructive to other large organizations or agencies.

Figure 4: CAASE Descriptions of their Education Resources

#### For Parents and Guardians:

"Engaging High-School-Age Sons to Stop Sexual Harm" is a resource for families, role models, and any other person involved in the lives of young men. It provides background information on issues surrounding sexual exploitation, tips on initiating conversations about the issues, and other resources for parents and guardians.

#### For High School Coaches:

Coaches often play a key role in helping shape the behaviors and attitudes of the young men they work with throughout the sports season. Understanding the significance of the coach/student relationship, CAASE and Coach for America created five short lesson plans that coaches can use with their athletes. Each plan is ten minutes long with an optional writing assignment.

#### For High School Teachers:

This toolkit offers activities and resources for educators of high school students. These activities focus on the pressures your students may face to engage in sexually exploitive acts or sexual activities that make them feel uncomfortable. The three main topics are gender roles, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking. The goal of this activity guide is to provide assignments, ideas, and classroom discussions to help educators facilitate interactive, informative, and moving interpersonal and peer-group discovery about the difficult issues their students may be facing.

The military code of justice and policies have been strengthened, clarifying the language and imposing substantial penalties on any military personnel (including civilian staff and contractors) engaging in commercial sex. The Law Enforcement Policy and Support office of the DoD established the Trafficking in Persons Program, which developed a series of trainings for military staff. A key component of their effort was training about commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking, and a key message in the training materials addressed demand.

<sup>6</sup> Kathryn Bolkovac and Cari Lynn, *The Whistleblower: Sex Trafficking, Military Contractors, and One Woman's Fight for Justice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Victor Malarek, *The Johns: Sex for Sale and the Men Who Buy It* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2009).

Most of the following was taken directly from the DoD training materials, available online.<sup>7</sup> One of the training presentations required of all service members before deployment began with survivor anecdotes, photos, and an overview of how human trafficking is a large, global criminal enterprise. It said that the “bad guys” are “not just the people who operate the trafficking enterprise – they are also their customers,” who can be contractors, government civilians, or military personnel. They stressed the message that there was “zero tolerance” in the Armed Forces for contributing to commercial sexual exploitation or trafficking, and that involvement in trafficking would jeopardize their careers:

- In 2002, the President signed a [National Security Presidential Directive](#) mandating a “zero tolerance” policy toward trafficking among members of the U.S. armed services, civilian employees, and civilian contractors.
- In 2004, the Deputy Secretary of Defense expressly [forbade involvement](#) with trafficked people by U.S. troops, government civilians, and defense contractors, and called for commanders at all levels to ensure their units were trained to understand and recognize indicators of this serious crime.

The training materials contain definitions and several messages about the nature of human trafficking and include a focus on anti-demand messages, such as: “Don’t assist the perpetrators: You aid and encourage trafficking in persons without engaging in it directly by:”

- “hiring prostitutes”
- “attending nightclubs or strip clubs”
- “patronizing businesses that are heavily guarded”
- “not reporting cases of suspected trafficking”
- “patronizing establishments that use forced labor”

Military personnel are informed of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) Military Personnel Legal Prohibition on Prostitution. Trainees are also told that DoD Contractors are subject to the Defense Federal Acquisition Regulation (DFAR) TIP rule. Contractors have a trafficking clause in their employment contracts which stipulates they are responsible for following UCMJ prohibitions on buying sex, and that this responsibility applies to any and all subcontractors of a given company working for the DoD.

We have included this brief discussion (and additional detail in Appendix D of the [2012 National Assessment](#) report) about the DoD training for a number of reasons. First, the change in the DoD’s approach was a sign that organizations that have historically tolerated (and sometimes encouraged) men buying sex can adopt an aggressive, proactive approach to education designed to combat demand. This suggests that there is little reason to believe that change cannot also occur in corporations, universities, other government agencies, and elsewhere.

Second, the DoD training was an example of an educational intervention that was not simply a generic “awareness” exercise, reciting the horrors of human trafficking and urging unspecified action. The DoD training specifically focused on the root cause of sex trafficking – consumer-level demand for commercial sex – and urged very concrete action: not buying sex or tolerating others doing so.

Third, the general outline of the content could serve as a model for corporations or organizations wishing to develop a training program. Obviously, non-military organizations would not train about the military code of justice, etc., but the basic outline is probably transferable. The training starts with general issues and definitions, then quickly focuses on actions that individuals can and must take, and why. It makes the general appeals that

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<sup>7</sup> “CTIP Awareness Training Program,” Combating Trafficking in Persons, U.S. Department of Defense, <https://ctip.defense.gov/Training> (accessed November 3, 2022).



are made in virtually all “john school” programs: (a) an appeal to self-interest, discussing the consequences for them personally if they are caught engaging in prostitution, and (b) an appeal to altruism, discussing the harms to those in the commercial sex industry in hopes that empathy will serve as a deterrent.

One of the reasons for communities to be interested in implementing public education and awareness programs is that they are among the few types of interventions that are designed to be truly preventive, rather than to react to known offenders. As can be seen in the typology we have presented about tactics used to combat demand, most are directed toward arresting men attempting to buy sex and then applying post-arrest interventions such as community service or “john schools.” Such tactics are necessary and can be considered efficient because they expend energy only on those known to be involved in commercial sex. However, in the words of many people interviewed during the 2012 National Assessment, there is a need to intervene “further upstream,” before men become sex buyers. That is where broadly targeted education and public service announcements come into play.

## Evidence of Effectiveness

While there is no “gold standard” formal evaluation that statistically demonstrates the effectiveness of public education programs in reducing deterring sex buyers or suppression prostitution and trafficking activity, 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 a strong case for public education being an evidence-based tactic. For example, there is a robust literature from more than 50 years of research on public education and “social marketing” interventions finds that, when properly targeted and well-executed, produce significant impacts in achieving their intended changes in behavior.<sup>8</sup> There is no reason to believe that sex buying behavior is immune from being influenced by accurate and persuasive information about its negative consequences. Findings of sex buyer education significantly reducing recidivism suggests that support for this particular type of crime in broader audiences can be reduced with well-designed and executed messages.<sup>9</sup>

## Additional Examples, References

To access information about specific cases and the U.S. cities and counties in which reverse stings have occurred, you may go to [www.demand-forum.org](http://www.demand-forum.org), open the “[Browse Locations](#)” window, and then select “Public Education” from the “Tactics” list. The U.S. locations in which these operations have occurred may be [mapped](#) on Demand Forum by clicking on the “Choose a Tactic” box and choosing “Public Education” from the list.

### Public Education Efforts Resources: City Led

#### Atlanta’s “Dear John” Campaign

- News Reports
  - [Mayor: Website enables child sex](#) (2007)
- Video (2005-2008)
  - [YouTube: Dear John Campaign :: John](#)
  - [YouTube: Dear John Campaign :: Mayor Shirley Franklin](#)

<sup>8</sup> Butts, Jeffrey A., Caterina Gouvis Roman, Lindsay Bostwick, and Jeremy R. Porter, “Cure violence: a public health model to reduce gun violence,” *Annual review of public health* 36, (2015): 39-53, <https://issuelab.org/resources/22700/22700.pdf>; Homel, Peter, and Tom Carroll, “Moving knowledge into action: applying social marketing principles to crime prevention,” *Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, no. 381 (2009): 1-6; Akbar, M. Bilal, Liz Foote, Clidna Soraghan, Rachael Millard, and Fiona Spotswood, “What causes social marketing programs to fail? A qualitative study,” *Social Marketing Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (2021): 99-116, [doi.org/10.1177/15245004211010202](https://doi.org/10.1177/15245004211010202); Smith, William A., “Social marketing: an overview of approach and effects,” *Injury prevention* 12, no. 1 (2006): i38-i43, [doi.org/10.1136/ip.2006.012864](https://doi.org/10.1136/ip.2006.012864).

<sup>9</sup> Shively, Michael, Sarah Kuck Jalbert, Ryan Kling, William Rhodes, R. Finn, C. Flyage, Laura Tierney et al., *Final report on the evaluation of the First Offender Prostitution Program*. Abt Associates Incorporated, 2008, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/221894.pdf>.

- [YouTube: Dear John Campaign :: Girl](#)
- **Print Images (2005-2008)**
  - [The Juvenile Justice Fund asked for help.](#)
  - [Youth Spark](#)
- **Research Articles:**
  - [Sending a Dear John Letter: Public Information Campaigns and the Movement to “End Demand” for Prostitution in Atlanta, GA](#) (2017)

#### **Miami’s “Dear John” Campaign**

- News Reports
  - [‘Dear John’ campaign aims to protect kids](#) (JPG, 769 KB)

#### **Public Education Efforts Resources: Other**

##### **Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE) Toolkits for Training and Education**

- [Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation \(CAASE\) Toolkits for Training and Education](#) (2010)

##### **End Demand, Illinois**

- [End Demand, IL \(EDI\)](#)

##### **Hunt Alternatives: Demand Abolition**

- [Hunt Alternatives Fund](#)
- [Demand Abolition](#)
- [Who Buys Sex? Understanding and Disrupting Illicit Market Demand](#) (2018)

##### **Indiana Attorney General’s Office**

- [“Don’t Buy the Lie: Human Trafficking, a Demand Problem”](#) (2012)
- [“Not a John”: Wallet Size Card](#)

##### **U.S. Department of Defense TIP Training**

- [Trafficking in Persons: U.S. Department of Defense Awareness Initiative](#)

##### **Veronica’s Voice “Stop Demand” Speaking Points**

- [Veronica’s Voice](#)
- [Veronica’s Voice “Stop Demand” Presentations – Speaking Points](#)