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An Overview of Reverse Stings 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 Reverse Stings in the United States

The most-commonly used tactic for reducing demand for commercial sex is typically referred to as the “reverse sting.” We have documented the use of reverse stings in more than 2,190 U.S. cities and counties. These police operations typically feature one or more women officers serving as a decoy,¹ posing as a prostituted person to await being approached by those seeking to purchase sex.² The web-based version of reverse stings involve an online advertisement or message to engage those seeking to exchange money for sex, and arrange to meet to complete the transaction. Once buyers have been engaged and solidified plans to meet, a sting is set up that typically involves placing an undercover decoy in a hotel room, a support team in an adjacent room, and making arrests when the buyers arrive as planned and demonstrate an intent to complete the criminal transaction. While street based reverse stings are almost exclusively focused on arresting buyers seeking prostitution with an adult, reverse stings have opened up the option of targeting those seeking to pay for access to sexually abuse minors. In many internet-based reverse stings, decoy ads imply the sexually exploited person is a minor, and when buyers communicate with undercover officers, the officers clearly state that the person to be purchased is underaged (typically between the ages of 14 and 16, but sometimes far younger). More details about web-based reverse stings are provided in a separate [summary](#); the remainder of this document on “reverse stings” will occasionally be inclusive, covering any kind of sting targeting sex buyers, but is primarily focused on street-based or other in-person engagements with police decoys, which focus on prostitution among adults.

The term “reverse sting” is an artifact of the historic gender inequity in the enforcement of prostitution law in the United States. Until recently, most of the police attention devoted to prostitution enforcement was focused on arresting people in the commercial sex trade. For decades, the most common police tactic to combat prostitution had been using plainclothes, undercover male officers to elicit offers of commercial sex from prostituted women. These operations became known as prostitution “stings.” Beginning in the 1960s, but not becoming widespread until well into the 1980s, were operations focusing on arresting buyers rather than people exploited as commodities in the commercial sex trade. To distinguish those operations from the traditional stings targeting prostituted women for arrest, the term “reverse stings” evolved into common usage for operations targeting male sex buyers, and that term implies that the latter operations are something other than the typical or default tactic. The term is somewhat controversial, particularly for advocates of approaches such as the Nordic³ or Equality⁴ Model in which the default target for prostitution arrests is the sex buyer, and those being sold for sexual exploitation are not arrested at all. Many in the movement to eradicate sexual exploitation have promoted the use of the term “sting” rather than “reverse sting” for operations aimed at buyers and have discouraged any operations that arrest prostituted people. Since Demand Forum materials and these summary documents are used by broad

¹ In extremely rare instances, male officers have posed as prostituted persons to draw the attention of sex buyers. Out of more than 7,000 reverse stings we have documented in more than 2,000 U.S. jurisdictions, we are aware of less than 10 agencies that have ever used male officers as prostitution decoys.

² Mary Dodge, Donna Starr-Gimeno, and Thomas Williams, “Puttin’ on the Sting: Women Police Officers’ Perspectives on Reverse Prostitution Assignments,” *International Journal of Police Science and Management* 7 (2005), doi:10.1350/ijps.7.2.71.65778; Larry Jetmore, “The Oldest Profession: Investigating Street-Level Prostitution,” *Law Officer Magazine* 4, no. 10 (2008); Lynda Baker, “The Information Needs of Female Police Officers Involved in Undercover Prostitution Work,” *Information Research* 10, no. 1 (2004), <http://informationr.net/ir/10-1/paper209.html>; Bruce Hay, “Sting Operations, Undercover Agents, and Entrapment,” *Missouri Law Review* 70, no. 2 (2005): 387-431, <https://scholarship.law.missouri.edu/mlr/vol70/iss2/2>; Gerry Long, “How to Plan a ‘John’ Sting,” *Women in Law Enforcement, Police Magazine*, April 18, 2012, <https://www.policemag.com/374063/how-to-plan-a-john-sting>; Gerry Long, “How to Stay Safe During a John Sting,” *Women in Law Enforcement, Police Magazine*, July 2, 2012, <https://www.policemag.com/374107/how-to-stay-safe-during-a-john-sting>; Graeme R. Newman and Kelly Socia, *Sting Operations, Problem-Oriented Guides for Police, Response Guides Series No. 6* (U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, October 2007), <https://cops.usdoj.gov/ric/Publications/cops-pl34-pub.pdf>.

³ Nordic Model Now, “What is the Nordic Model?” Nordic Model Now, <https://nordicmodelnow.org/what-is-the-nordic-model/>, (accessed March 6, 2023).

⁴ Equal Not Exploited, “What is the Equality Model?” Equal Not Exploited, <https://www.equalitymodelus.org/why-the-equality-model/>, (accessed March 6, 2023).

audiences and the term “reverse sting” is still the most common usage (particularly among those in law enforcement) for operations targeting sex buyers, we will continue to use it.

The past two decades have been characterized by increased discontentment with law enforcement actions aimed at the arrest of those in prostitution and growing concern about trafficking victims, including children, that are hidden among this population of arrestees.⁵ Reverse stings remain an active type of law enforcement operation. In a relatively recent county-level analysis⁶ examining structural determinants of human trafficking arrests in 67 Florida counties between 2013 and 2017, it was found that most counties had at least one active demand reduction strategy, with reverse stings as the one most noted across the state. Into 2023, we continue to see press releases and news reports of reverse sting operations on a nearly daily basis in the U.S.⁷

“The only and best way to try to get involved to identify the victims is doing an operation like this . . . I believe the only way we are going to combat human trafficking is by targeting the desire [demand]. By reducing the desire [demand].”

Sheriff Chad Chronister, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, Fla, 2019⁸

“Many victims – primarily women – suffer violence and abuse, and my office is committed to offering them the assistance they need while making it very costly for those who seek to purchase sex.”

Sheriff Tom Dart, Cook County, Chicago, 2021⁹

Street-Level Reverse Stings

In our observations of reverse stings and in descriptions gathered from interviews with police, reviews of the literature, and daily scans of news reports and police press releases,¹⁰ we found the following to be typical. Areas

⁵ Kylie McGivern, “Kids Sold for Sex and Arrested for Prostitution in Florida,” *ABC Action News*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/local-news/i-team-investigates/kids-sold-for-sex-and-arrested-for-prostitution-in-florida>.

⁶ Madelyn Diaz, Lin Huff-Corzine, and Jay Corzine, “Demanding Reduction: A County-Level Analysis Examining Structural Determinants of Human Trafficking Arrests in Florida,” *Crime & Delinquency* 68, no. 1 (2020): 28-51, doi:10.1177/0011128720962710.

⁷ Caitlyn Rooney, “Lubbock Police arrest 17 people in ‘Operation March Madness,’” *Everything Lubbock*, March 2, 2023, <https://www.everythinglubbock.com/news/local-news/lubbock-police-arrest-17-people-in-operation-march-madness/>; Fontana Herald News, “Fontana man is one of 19 suspects arrested by Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force,” *Fontana Herald News*, March 2, 2023, https://www.fontanaheraldnews.com/news/fontana-man-is-one-of-19-suspects-arrested-by-anti-human-trafficking-task-force/article_b561c8f0-b936-11ed-a135-0b44e062dea9.html; TownHubAdmin, “MCTX Sheriff Completes Operation Happy Valentines Day,” *Kingwood.com*, January 31, 2023, https://www.kingwood.com/msg/news.php?news_id=4665759; Chuck Morris and Carley Gordon, “4 arrested in Sumner Co. after multi-agency operation targeting human trafficking,” *WSMV4*, February 21, 2023, <https://www.wsmv.com/2023/02/22/4-arrested-sumner-co-after-multi-agency-operation-targeting-human-trafficking/>

⁸ Isabel Rosales and WFTS Digital Staff, “Hillsborough Co. Human Trafficking Sting Leads to 85 Arrests,” *ABC Action News*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/region-hillsborough/hillsborough-co-human-trafficking-sting-leads-to-more-than-80-arrests>.

⁹ FOX 32 Digital Staff, “22 Men Arrested in Cook County Sting Targeting Sex Buyers,” *FOX 32 Chicago*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.fox32chicago.com/news/22-men-arrested-in-cook-county-sting-targeting-sex-buyers>.

¹⁰ Larry Jetmore, “The Oldest Profession: Investigating Street-Level Prostitution,” *Law Officer Magazine* 4, no. 10 (2008); Graeme R. Newman and Kelly Socia, *Sting Operations*, Problem-Oriented Guides for Police, Response Guides Series No. 6 (U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, October 2007), <https://cops.usdoj.gov/ric/Publications/cops-p134-pub.pdf>; Thomas W. Nolan, “Commentary: Galateas in Blue: Women Police as Decoy Sex Workers,” *Criminal Justice Ethics* 20, no. 2 (2001): 63-67, doi.org/10.1080/0731129X.2001.9992104; Scott, G.G., “Winning the Prostitution Clean-up Campaign: Teamwork, Routine, and Danger,” in *Field Study on the Vice/Prostitution Unit in Oakland* (presentation, Citizen’s Police Academy

of the city known to be active for street prostitution are selected and a tactical plan is either discussed or written and submitted for a supervisor's approval. Usually, five or more officers are used in a street reverse sting. In addition to the female officer or officers, there are usually several additional undercover officers in supporting roles. The operations often consist of one or two male plainclothes officers on foot, posing as pedestrians, at least one unmarked car carrying plainclothes officers, and at least one police patrol car with officers that may be in uniform. There are usually other officers who support the operations by processing arrestees and their vehicles. In some cases, police use a van serving as a mobile booking or screening station, and in other instances processing occurs in nearby police stations or substations. In the latter circumstance, the operations require more on-site officers so that there is less "down time" between arrests. At least two officers are usually required to transport each arrestee away from the site of the arrest: at least one escorting the arrestee and another driving the arrestee's vehicle (when applicable). In our research we found that at least five police officers are usually deployed for each decoy used in a reverse sting.

A supervising Sergeant is usually in charge of the reverse stings. Decoys are escorted to drop-off locations near where the operations will occur. An unmarked police van serving as a mobile screening or booking station is usually parked nearby, but out of sight of the street operation. In some locations, police stations or substations are nearby, so a mobile unit is not necessary. The decoy officer usually has a hidden recording device and a cell phone (the first to collect evidence, the latter for safety in case she is abducted). Some police departments digitally record the reverse stings surreptitiously from an unmarked police car.

The decoy always tries to remain in visual contact with the other officers. When potential buyers speak with the decoy, the supporting officers track her until she makes a pre-arranged signal indicating a "good case," which is when the man has made an offer of money in exchange for sex and has committed an "*act in furtherance*" of that offer. An act in furtherance is any overt behavior that can be construed reasonably as progress toward consummating the act of prostitution discussed. Such acts, in addition to the verbal exchange, complete the legal requirements for making an arrest. Acts in furtherance can include reaching for a wallet, pointing to money on a bed or a car seat, driving around the block to the area where the sex act was arranged to take place, or opening a car or hotel door so that the decoy can enter.

When the signal for a "good case" is given, the officers on foot or in unmarked cars converge and make the arrest. At this point, the decoy officer enters the police car as quickly as possible and leaves the scene, while the man is arrested and driven to a point where he will be processed. Sometimes he is driven in his own car by a plainclothes officer, and other times they are driven in a police car while another officer drives the offender's car. Arrestees who are on foot are driven to the van or police station in a patrol car.

The license plate number of the car and the man's driver's license number and other identifiers are radioed or sent via computer to a dispatcher, and the determination is made whether to issue a citation and notice to appear in court or to book the arrestee and take him into custody. If they have identification and no outstanding warrants, they are usually issued a citation and allowed to leave. If these conditions do not apply or if there are concurrent offenses (e.g., possession of drugs or illegal weapons), the sex buyers can be taken into custody.

"We usually have male officers out getting women to proposition them, but that really wasn't getting at the root of the problem. The men have been just as guilty as the women all along and yet they never get arrested."

Captain Bob Marshall, vice unit, Knoxville, Tennessee Police Department, 1976¹¹

Alumni Association, Behavior Research Associates, 1999); Spruill, R., "Undercover Operation: Deputy Poses as Prostitute," *Independent Mail*, 2009.

¹¹ Boca Raton News, "Tables Turned on Men Soliciting on Streets," *Boca Raton News*, April 19, 1976, <https://news.google.com/newspapers=prostitution+men+arrest+solicit&hl=en>.

As we’ve discussed elsewhere, reverse stings are the entry point for most of the kinds of interventions that have been developed to focus on male buyers of illegal commercial sex. In order for “john school” education programs, community service programs, geographic exclusion zones, and several other tactics to be applied, the sex buyers first must be arrested. The means by which the vast majority of sex buyers are arrested is through reverse stings, which have been established as the primary way to produce the evidence necessary to satisfy criminal justice requirements for prosecution or diversion options.

After the decision to cite or arrest is made, offenders in jurisdictions with criminal justice diversion programs for sex buyers are issued a citation and informed of their responsibility to call the prosecutor's office for processing (either a city attorney's office when sex buyers are cited for violating municipal ordinances, or the district attorney's office when they are arrested for committing a penal code violation).

In the time it takes the officers to process the arrestee, the decoy officer usually remains in an unmarked car writing notes for her report and (if applicable) checking to ensure that the quality of the digital recording of the transaction is acceptable. If an older analog tape recorder is used, the officer removes and marks the tape and inserts a blank in the recorder. She stays out of sight of the arrestee and away from the location where the arrest was made, until it is time to reset the operation. When reverse stings use multiple decoys, it is possible to keep the street operations going continuously: if one or two of the decoys have made a good case and the men are being processed, there can still be one or more decoys active, provided that there are enough support officers for a safe operation.

Figure 1: Cities and Counties that have Conducted Reverse Stings in the Contiguous United States

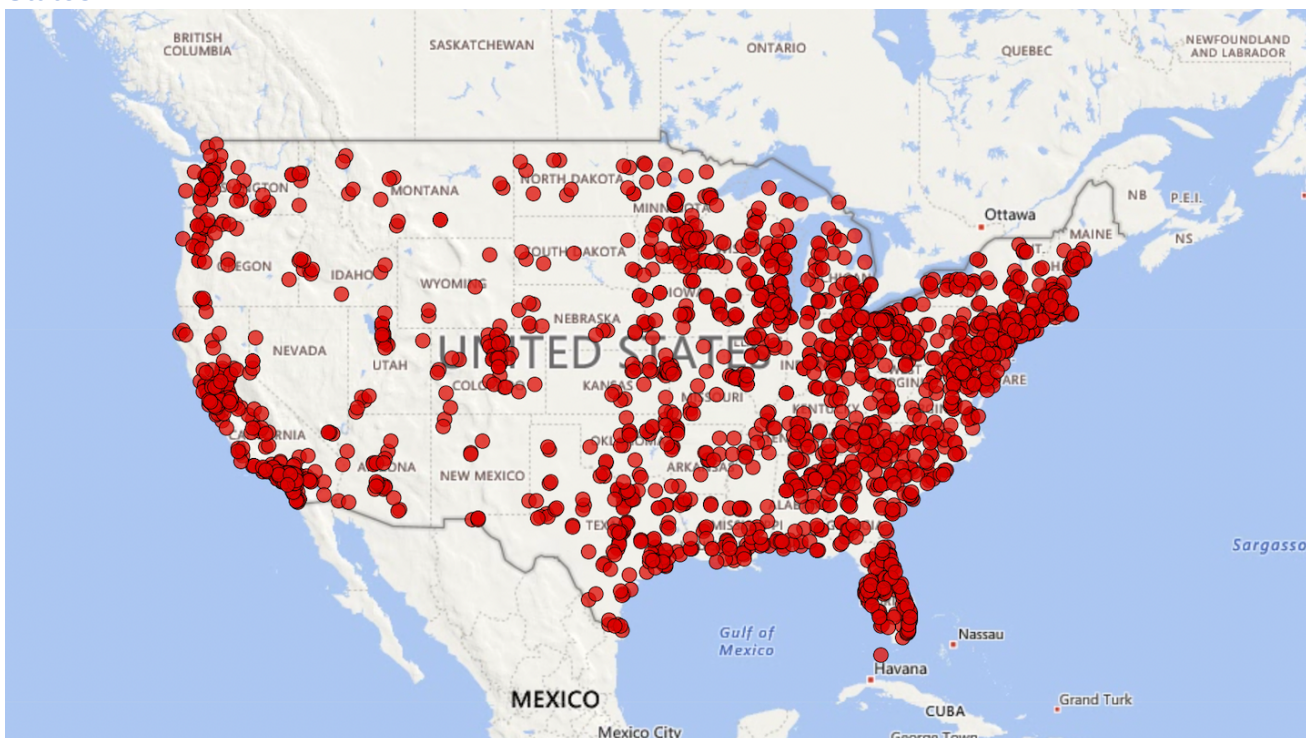


Table 1 presents the cities with the first known use of the reverse sting tactic to address the consumers of prostitution and sex trafficking. As can be seen here, at least four cities had conducted reverse stings in the 1960s and 11 other cities had done so by 1974. These early operations are discussed in descriptions of each city on the site pages of <https://demand-forum.org>. Common themes in the news reports covering these new kinds of tactics include reasoning that arresting men was necessary either (a) because of the inequity of only arresting women for prostitution when two parties are involved, (b) because arresting women in prostitution had been ineffective and police leaders felt that addressing demand may be more promising, and (c) complaints from the community’s

residents and businesses drive police to take action against prostitution. These themes from the 1960s and 1970s have continued to the present, in news reports as well as what we learned in our interviews conducted with police in 2009-2023.

Table 1: U.S. Cities and Counties with Earliest Known Use of Reverse Stings		
Year	City or County	State
1964	Nashville	TN
1967	Grand Rapids	MI
1968	Salt Lake City	UT
1969	Louisville	KY
1970	Detroit	MI
1970	Washington	DC
1971	Dallas	TX
1972	New York	NY
1973	Chicago	IL
1973	Los Angeles	CA
1973	Miami	FL
1974	Baltimore	MD
1974	Columbus	OH
1974	Fresno	CA
1974	New Haven	CT

One of the more compelling findings of our research is how long ago that many U.S. jurisdictions began shifting away from arresting only prostituted women and girls, and to instead focus their enforcement efforts predominantly on arresting men. Six of these “early adopter” cities were taking this approach in the 1970s. Table 2 presents the cities and the number and percentage of prostitution arrests of men versus women. Through 2010, at least 16 different communities had - for certain periods of time - focused more on combating demand than arresting those engaged in prostitution through their arrest practices. Some were relatively balanced, with male sex buyer arrests accounting for 50 to 60 percent of all prostitution arrests. Others were far more aggressive about demand, devoting the great majority of their enforcement efforts to arresting buyers.

Identifying these sites demonstrates that the idea and implementation of applying more punitive measures to buyers rather than prostituted persons are not new, and that more nearly 50 years, some cities in the U.S. had arrived at the conclusion that the most effective model for combating prostitution is to focus enforcement on men and to take a less punitive approach to survivors of prostitution. We do not intend this to suggest that the model is widespread, that cities using this approach in the 1970s and 1980s did not revert to prior methods, or to overstate that this may be a trend that is here to stay. What this demonstrates is that the approach has been in use in the United States for over 40 years, even if only on a localized and perhaps temporary basis.

Frequency, Duration, Staffing, and Arrest Yield of Reverse Stings

Key elements in the success or impact of any criminal justice intervention meant to solve problems and prevent crimes are the scale and frequency of the operations. the metaphor that is often used to illustrate the concept is “dosage” in the field of medicine. A medication may be clearly demonstrated to be effective but will not produce its benefits unless it is taken often enough and in sufficient quantities. Aspirin is an effective pain reliever, but one pill will not control pain for an entire year. The concept applies to law enforcement. The fear of arrest is a well established, evidence-based deterrent, but arrests must occur with enough frequency so that potential offenders learn that there is a significant likelihood they may be arrested if they commit a crime.¹² Reverse sting

¹² Bun, Maurice JG, Richard Kelaher, Vasilis Sarafidis, and Don Weatherburn. "Crime, deterrence and punishment revisited," *Empirical economics* 59, (2020): 2303-2333, doi.org/10.1007/s00181-019-01758-6; Mourtgos, Scott M.,

operations (and all other law enforcement operations) are unlikely to produce crime control and prevention benefits if they are of insufficient scale and frequency. Where there has been substantial investment in conducting and publicizing the arrest of sex buyers, there have been demonstrated reductions in sex buyer recidivism, in observed prostitution activity, and in calls to police from the community to complain about local prostitution.

We gathered information about *how frequently cities and counties conduct reverse stings*. We were able to obtain counts or estimates of how many times per month reverse stings were conducted in 166 cities and counties. The mean frequency was over nine per month, but that was positively skewed by a few larger cities (e.g., [Los Angeles](#), [San Francisco](#), [Brooklyn](#), [Las Vegas](#), [Knoxville](#)) that routinely conduct reverse stings and arrest hundreds of men (or more) per year. The mode (the most frequently occurring number) was two reverse stings per month, and that provides a more accurate representation of the average level of activity. Also, it is important to note that in most cities the level of reverse sting activity varies substantially over time. For example, at its peak in the late 1990s, San Francisco conducted at least 15 reversals per month, or approximately one every two days. Ten years later, they cut back to one-third of that rate. Other cities may concentrate high levels of activity in one location for a period of time in response to complaints or for other reasons and then stop or slow down substantially as other priorities emerge.

In addition to frequency, we gathered information about the length of time and the number of officers used in these operations. We were able to obtain the *number of hours* committed to over 400 separate reverse sting operations. The mean was approximately five hours, and the distribution was not skewed substantially. We also gathered information about the *number of decoys* used in each operation and learned that the mean was approximately 1.5 and the mode was one. The mean number of decoys was skewed by a small number of reverse stings that were very large in scale: about 25 of the 400+ reverse stings used between eight and 30 decoys in large, citywide crackdowns with several teams deployed in multiple locations.

We also gathered information about the *number of officers used in support of each female decoy* posing as a person engaged in prostitution. We were able to obtain the average number of support officers used in reverse stings at 50 sites. We also tied the number of support officers to the number of decoys to provide a sense of the staffing requirements for a reverse sting team. The mean number of officers used to support each decoy was 6.7 and the mode was five.

Table 2: Sample of “Early Adopter” Cities Arresting More Male Sex Buyers than Prostituted Women

City	Timeframe	Number of Arrests: Women & Girls in Prostitution	Number of Arrests: Male Buyers	Total	Buyers as Percent of Prostitution Arrests
Los Angeles, CA	1973	404	444	848	52
Spokane, WA	1975	191	293	484	61
Spokane, WA	1976	106	296	402	74
Spokane, WA	1982	95	200	295	68
St. Petersburg, FL	1975-1976	92	118	210	56
Inglewood, CA	1976	28	70	98	71
Hawthorne, CA	1978	47	79	126	63
Chicago, IL	1978	41	592	633	94
Chicago, IL	1981	175	876	1051	83
New London, CT	1983	12	23	35	67
Trenton, NJ	1985	70	101	171	59
Trenton, NJ	1986	154	247	401	62
Akron, OH	1986	77	126	203	62

Richard A. Wise, and Thomas Petros. "The consequences of restricting police arrest authority: Less deterrence and more crime," *Policing: An International Journal* 41, no. 2 (2018): 233-246, doi10.1108/PIJPSM-11-2016-0165; Pickett, Justin T., "Using behavioral economics to advance deterrence research and improve crime policy: Some illustrative experiments." *Crime & Delinquency* 64, no. 12 (2018): 1636-1659, doi.org/10.1177/0011128718763136.

Akron, OH	1987	44	83	127	65
St. Louis, MO	1991	128	200	328	62
South Bend, IN	1991-1993	100	230	330	70
Kansas City, MO	1996-1997	250	666	916	73
Haverhill, MA	2007-2010	10	64	74	86
Taunton, MA	2007-2008	27	29	56	52
Escondido, CA	2008-2010	31	32	63	51
North Charleston, SC	2010	90	178	268	66
Totals		2172	4947	7099	70 %

We were interested in learning about the yield not only for each reverse sting operation, but more importantly, the *number of arrests for each decoy/team for each hour that the team is deployed*. The number of arrests without these other considerations (number of decoys and number of hours) is not as meaningful since arrests will be affected by whether there are multiple versus single decoys and by the length of time of the operation. We found that across several hundred reverse stings, the mean yield was approximately 1.5 arrests per decoy/hour, and the mode was one.

“I’ve been approached on the street right by my house by johns who thought I was a prostitute. I’ll get in their face and yell at them, ‘No, I’m not a prostitute. Go home to your wife!’ Lately, if I walk around at night I try to wear my boyfriend’s clothes and put a hoodie on so I’m not mistaken.”

Teresa Miller, 30-year-old student and resident of Vallejo, California, 2011¹³

Declining Number of Arrestees Per Reverse Sting

There appears to be a trend toward smaller numbers of arrests for each street-level reverse sting. The number of arrestees is primarily a function of (a) the level of resources the police department commits to reverse sting operations and (b) the extent to which men are soliciting street prostitution in areas where those police operations occur. Personnel from several police department provided the following explanations for the declining number of arrestees:

- **Crime Displacement.** Obtaining a lower yield of arrests per operation, with fewer men soliciting sex on the streets and more using websites to arrange contact with prostituted women.
- **Declining Police Resources for Reverse Stings.** Police department have devoted fewer resources to reverse stings, due to reductions in staff and to discretionary decisions to devote more of their resources to other problems, such as enforcing drug and gambling laws.
- **Improved Ability of Sex Buyers to Avoid Arrest.** A general increase in offenders’ knowledge of police undercover techniques has made it possible for a significant number of men to continue soliciting sex locally while avoiding arrest.

Multiple strategies are employed by sex buyers to evade law enforcement when soliciting street-based persons in prostitution. These include careful monitoring of both the geographical area and potential women in prostitution for indicators suggestive of law enforcement presence in an area. Obeying traffic laws to reduce visibility while soliciting are considered, as well as taking precautions to avoid informal threats from pimps, assaults, and theft.¹⁴

¹³ Tom McNichol, “One City Takes On a Plague of Prostitution,” *Time*, March 29, 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2060969,00.html>.

¹⁴ Thomas J. Holt, Kristie R. Blevins, and Joseph B. Kuhns, “Examining Diffusion and Arrest Avoidance Practices Among Johns,” *Crime & Delinquency* 60, no. 2 (2014): 261-283, doi:10.1177/0011128709347087.

“These guys, they don’t do this just once. They know what to watch for and they come into the area looking for cops. It’s all normal to them.”

Sgt. Justin Cramer, Hilliard Police Department, OH, 2021¹⁵

Fluctuations in the level of law enforcement resources devoted to any particular problem is common. Police have finite resources and are responsible for enforcing a wide array of laws and pursuing other civic order and quality of life issues. Police managers have discretion in establishing priorities, and these priorities can change in response to changing crime trends, pressure from the media and the public, and changes in political and organizational leadership. In our research, we learned that several john school programs were suspended or have had their flow of offenders substantially reduced because police shifted their focus away from prostitution and toward other issues. For example, staff at the [Tampa](#), FL, john school program were told by police in 2006 that the agency was reducing or suspending its prostitution sting operations indefinitely to devote more time to combating drunk driving. Staff associated with john school programs in [Ypsilanti](#), MI, and [Buffalo](#), NY, reported that police resource constraints made it difficult to field as many reverse stings as they would like, and as a result they had to reduce the number of john school sessions conducted. In addition to changing crime trends and police budgets, the personal values of police command staff about what crimes deserve the greatest attention from law enforcement can also affect how police are deployed. These discretionary decisions can be made independent of any objective reality concerning local crime problems.

Over the past two decades, police departments nationwide have noticed a sharp increase in the use of the Internet for soliciting prostitution.¹⁶ It is uncertain how this may represent an expanded commercial sex market, or simply caused a shift from one segment (street) to another (online). In [San Francisco](#), vice unit officers argued that there was a shift in prostitution from the street and toward the web during the 2000s, which resulted in fewer solicitations made through contact on the street. What is apparent is that sex buyers’ perceptions of risk and “provider quality” appear to inform their movement between physical (i.e., street-based) and Internet-based prostitution markets.¹⁷

¹⁵ Holly Zachariah, “Central Ohio Law Enforcement Arrest 93 as Johns Targeted in Human Trafficking Stings at Hotels,” *The Columbus Dispatch*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/crime/2021/04/16/ohio-attorney-general-columbus-suburban-police-tackle-human-trafficking-prostitution/7203508002>.

¹⁶ Michael Shively et al., *Final Report on the Evaluation of the First Offender Prostitution Program* (Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates Inc., March 7, 2008), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/221894.pdf>; Sudhir Venkatesh, “How Tech Tools Transformed New York’s Sex Trade,” *Wired*, January 31, 2011, https://transmarcations.constantvzw.org/texts/Peggy_sexworkers.pdf; Michael Booth, “Craigslist Develops a Dark Side,” *The Denver Post*, December 3, 2007, <https://www.denverpost.com/2007/12/03/craigslist-develops-a-dark-side>; Donna M. Hughes, “Prostitution Online,” in *Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress*, ed. Melissa Farley (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Maltreatment & Trauma Press, Inc., 2003), 115-131; Leonora LaPeter Anton, “‘Escorts’ Leave the Streets to Get on the Superhighway,” *Tampa Bay Times*, July 6, 2006, <https://www.tampabay.com/archive/2006/07/02/escorts-leave-the-streets-to-get-on-the-superhighway>; Kit R. Roane, “Prostitutes on Wane in New York Streets but Take to Internet,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/02/23/nyregion/prostitutes-on-wane-in-new-york-streets-but-take-to-internet.html>; M. Ross, “How the Internet is Bringing the World’s Oldest Profession to a Neighborhood Near You,” *Diablo Magazine*, June 2005; Jacob Quinn Sanders, “Prostitution Hits Web in State,” *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, February 10, 2008, <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2008/feb/10/prostitution-hits-web-state-20080210>.

¹⁷ Holt, Blevins, and Kuhns, *ibid*.

In addition to providing an avenue for solicitation, the web is also used by buyers to communicate with one another.¹⁸ Websites catering to sex buyers (e.g., bigdoggie.net; usasexguide.info; nvbrothels.net)¹⁹ include forums for posting tips on how to avoid arrest and sharing information about police decoy operations.²⁰ Sophistication and craftiness on the part of sex buyers and their political economies can also be gleaned from conversations and threads from the “Legal Corner” of TheEroticReview.com (TER). The website hosting TER is based in the Netherlands. It focuses primarily on the United States in its regional boards and includes a dedicated forum containing specialized discussions focused on legal issues arising from participation in the illegal sex trade. Strategies to reduce the likelihood of arrest or conviction are part of the online deliberations.

“The forum chair generally has a law degree, and some participants identified themselves as law students or members of the legal profession”²¹

SFPD vice officers at the police station have monitored commercial sex websites while reverse stings are occurring, and have seen buyers post warnings describing the undercover officers and the location of the operation. Sometimes these alerts about reverse stings are posted within an hour of the start of an operation. SFPD officers have learned that sex buyers can identify the unmarked van. The First Offender Prostitution Program (FOPP) had received a great deal of publicity since it was implemented in 1995, and for 20 years many men were aware of how and where the SFPD conducted reverse stings in San Francisco.

It is also clear that sex buyers know when police have been told by the courts to “stand down” and stop making arrests for prostitution. In 2022, California took a step toward decriminalization when the Governor signed [Senate Bill 375](#) bill to repeal its prostitution loitering law, over police objections that the law was one of the key weapons at their disposal for apprehending pimps and traffickers, and provided the foundation for probable cause to start investigations that lead to identifying and supporting victims. Although the bill went into effect in 2023, the message that was sent to police throughout the state to stop the enforcement of prostitution law, a message not lost on those profiting from the sex trade and those seeking to buy sex. As prostitution and its inevitable collateral violence have rapidly increased on prostitution tracks throughout the state, the Mayor of [National City](#), CA²² directly linked the relaxation of prohibitions to the escalating problems the city experienced.

Community Complaints Drive Many Reverse Stings

One of the issues that frequently arises in debates about whether prostitution should be legalized, decriminalized, or remain prohibited is the contention that it is victimless. The argument against prohibition is the essentially libertarian idea that government should not intervene in prostitution if it is between consenting adults. The

¹⁸ Alexa Albert, *Brothel: Mustang Ranch and its Women* (New York: Random House, 2001); Teela Sanders, *Paying for Pleasure: Men Who Buy Sex* (London: Willan Publishing, 2008); Loretta J. Stalans and Mary A. Finn, “Consulting Legal Experts in the Real and Virtual World: Pimps’ and Johns’ Cultural Schemas about Strategies to Avoid Arrest and Conviction,” *Deviant Behavior* 37, no. 6 (2016): 644-664, doi:10.1080/01639625.2015.1060810.

¹⁹ J. Shaffer, “Internet’s Anonymity Fuels Surge in Sex Traffic,” *Scripps News*, accessed March 3, 2008, <http://www.scrippsnews.com/node/31183>; Rob Spectre, *Beyond Backpage: Buying and Selling Sex in the United States One Year Later* (ChildSafe.ai, 2019), <https://childsafe.ai/beyond-backpage-buying-and-selling-sex-in-the-united-states-one-year-later>; Lara Janson et al., “Our Great Hobby”: *An Analysis of Online Networks for Buyers of Sex in Illinois* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, January 2013), 1-112, <https://www.caase.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/OurGreatHobby.pdf>.

²⁰ Thomas J. Holt and Kristie R. Blevins, “Examining Sex Work from the Client’s Perspective: Assessing Johns Using Online Data,” *Deviant Behavior* 28, no. 4 (2007): 333-354, doi:10.1080/01639620701233282.

²¹ Stalans and Finn, *ibid*, 645.

²² Keristen Holmes, “Sex workers are now emboldened | National City prostitution out of control,” *CBS8.com*, October 5, 2022, <https://www.cbs8.com/article/news/local/sex-workers-now-emboldened-says-national-city-mayor/509-68cd3a25-d059-46b0-8341-47f97e3c70fd>.

argument for prohibition is that prostitution is inherently (or at least usually) harmful to the people directly involved, and also to others who are indirectly affected.

“We just go out when we receive enough complaints from the neighborhood. Always in prostitution, you’ll have areas where prostitution will pop up near crack houses, and for us putting female [officers] out, we’re trying to get the males to stop from coming into that area.”

Chief Ken Swindle, [Tuscaloosa](#), FL Police Department, 2006²³

“The kids who get out of school around 82nd (Avenue) are propositioned. [Prostitutes and johns] have sex in parking lots; we find condoms and needles; pimps fight against each other. When you think of how 82nd Avenue’s been associated with these crimes, we want to get away from that.”

JR Ujifusa, [Multnomah County](#), Oregon Deputy District Attorney, 2010²⁴

“The people who are actually with the girls, they think they can come into our neighborhood. They think they can do this and get by with it. I think they’re starting to figure out they’re not going to get by anymore...”

Joyce Jones – Business owner, [Kansas City](#), Mo., 2019²⁵

While our intent is not to settle that debate, we were able to gather information that is relevant in the discussion. During our initial interviews we were struck by how frequently—that is, virtually always—we were told by police officers and other respondents that community complaints are frequently or mostly responsible for when and where police conduct operations intended to combat prostitution. Once sensitized, we began asking routinely, and for those sites in which we conducted at least one interview and asked about community complaints, virtually every site said that community members such as residents and businesses complain about prostitution. In general, these complaints are not simply expressions of moral outrage (although that can certainly be involved) but instead are driven by (or at least accompanied by) complaints of tangible disturbance or harm. Frequently heard were claims that street prostitution was accompanied by verbal and physical fighting and accompanying noise; sex occurring in public areas such as doorways, alleys, and cars parked on the street; and condoms and syringes on streets or on private property. In addition, in areas where there is street prostitution there are frequent complaints of women and girls not involved in that activity who are solicited by male sex buyers,²⁶ and men who live or work in those areas who do not welcome offers from those selling sex. A less frequent but serious problem mentioned in several communities (e.g., San Diego, CA; [Worcester](#), MA) was from women whose ethnic or cultural heritage was such that they would face serious repercussions if they were seen to have been solicited by a sex buyer, even if a woman or girl did nothing to provoke it, did not welcome it, and did not respond to it.

²³ Ellie Oleson, “Auburn Nursing Agency Director to Retire,” *Tuscaloosa News*, January 30, 2006, <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20060130/NEWS/601300345?Title=Prostitution-sting-nets-arrests>.

²⁴ Jennifer Anderson, “Prostitutes Customers to be Sent Off to School,” *Portland Tribune*, July 28, 2010, <https://pamplinmedia.com/component/content/article?id=33386>.

²⁵ Jessica Eley, “KCPD Makes Six Arrests in Prostitution Sting on Independence Avenue,” *FOX 4*, June 19, 2019, <https://fox4kc.com/news/kcpd-makes-six-arrests-in-prostitution-sting-on-independence-ave>.

²⁶ Maria Papadopoulos, “Brockton Women Protest Prostitution in Neighborhood,” *The Enterprise*, August 2, 2012, <https://www.enterpriseneews.com/story/news/crime/2012/08/02/brockton-women-protest-prostitution-in/40060602007>.

“She comes home, she walks in the door every day crying because some guy followed her home or harassed her (saying) ‘You want to make some money?’”

Brockton, Massachusetts mother discussing her 16 year old daughter being harassed by sex buyers²⁷

In response to the information gathered through interviews, we returned to the research literature and news archives to examine how frequently complaints were reported as a reason for the police operations on prostitution. We found that complaints from residents or businesses were cited as a reason for reverse sting or sting operations in over 80 percent of the cities and counties studied. This figure probably underestimates the overall percentage. News reports make choices about what to report regarding any specific reverse sting operation, and for space or other reasons can choose not to report that reverse stings were in response to complaints from the community, or that there was a history of complaints in a particular area. Also, when discussing any specific operation, police do not always announce or mention to reporters every reason for conducting that operation – including whether there had been local complaints leading to the decision to move forward with a reverse sting.

Police Units, Agencies, and Multijurisdictional Task Forces Conducting Reverse Stings

A range of law enforcement agencies, and units and departments within agencies, are trained and deployed to conduct reverse stings. Some of the departments or units focus on crimes on the lower end of the crime seriousness scale (measured by the felony/misdemeanor distinction), such as nuisance abatement or neighborhood safety units. Others focus on felonies and higher end crimes, such as multijurisdictional drug task forces that focus on organized crime, felony level drug trafficking, and violent crime. Others fall in between, including regular patrol units. Although accurate staffing of specific organizational departments and subdivisions is not often publicly accessible, from the available information it is apparent that vice units, even in large city police department, are relatively small. For example, just seven of more than 1,800 San Francisco Police Department offices in the late 2000s were assigned to the vice unit, during the era when the city was still conducting multiple reverse stings every month. The SFPD vice unit was later disbanded entirely. The small staffs or absence of dedicated vice units requires that most prostitution details and enforcement operations are collaborative, borrowing from other departments.

In addition to cross-unit collaboration within departments, there are cross-agency and cross-jurisdictional collaborations. In a June 2021 example, multiple law enforcement agencies collaborated with the Human Trafficking Rescue Alliance in a proactive prostitution operation targeting sex buyers in Fort Bend County, Texas. Agencies that participated included the Fort Bend County Sheriff’s Office, Missouri City Police Department, Houston Police Department, TABC, Harris County Sheriff’s Office, Montgomery County Sheriff’s Office, Fort Bend County District Attorney’s Office, Rosenberg Police Department, and the YMCA International Services.²⁸

A wide array of state, local, and federal agencies and multijurisdictional task forces collaborate on reverse stings. Among the configurations of law enforcement collaboration that conduct reverse stings are:

- cross-unit collaborations within a police agency (e.g., patrol and community nuisance abatement)
- federal agencies (particularly Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE)
- multijurisdictional task forces

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ FOX 26 Staff, “17 Suspects Arrested Following Prostitution Operation,” *FOX 26 Houston*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.fox26houston.com/news/17-suspects-arrested-following-prostitution-operation>.

- multiple municipal police departments
- municipal police departments and county sheriff's departments
- state agencies that focus on alcohol enforcement
- state police agencies
- state probation/parole agencies

Table 3 presents examples that portray the range of agencies, units, and levels of government that collaborate on reverse stings. As can be seen here, there are many configurations. Of the 16 cities and counties listed here as an illustration, no two had identical sets of partnerships. Of course, these were selected to represent variety, so the point is not to suggest that there are no modalities across sites. The most common scenario is for one city or county law enforcement agency (a city Police Department or a county Sheriff's Department) to conduct an operation within their jurisdiction. However, it is also common to see multi-agency collaborations within cities or counties, as well as multijurisdictional teams. There are roads and areas in which street prostitution becomes institutionalized and these areas sometimes cross jurisdictions. For example, Mannheim Boulevard stretches across Chicago and several suburban cities and unincorporated towns in Cook County. It is common for County Sheriff's Departments or State Police to collaborate with cities and towns that share areas in which prostitution occurs. As Table 3 shows, reverse stings can involve many different kinds of units within an agency, and can involve partnerships among agencies and across all levels of government (city, county, state, and federal).

Variations and Innovations in Reverse Stings

Several variations on basic models have been developed to meet particular challenges or to take advantage of opportunities. Several examples are described in more detail below.

- ***Replacing prostituted women with police decoys.*** In street operations, police may go to “strips” or “strolls,” arrest women engaged in prostitution, and replace them with police decoys (e.g., Cleveland, OH; Fountain Valley, CA). A similar concept is sometimes used to arrest the customers of *brothels*. Brothel raids typically focus on investigating whether prostitution occurs and then, if the necessary evidence is gathered, to arresting the women selling sex and the brothel's pimps or traffickers. Usually, the buyers are either ignored entirely, or those that are present during the raid or “take-down” may be arrested but no further effort is expended in attempting to arrest additional buyers beyond those that happened to be present. However, in some communities, police have taken advantage of the opportunity to identify and arrest additional customers. In storefront brothels such as nail salons or massage businesses, the staff and survivors are removed and replaced with police officers who continue to make appointments and arrest sex buyers until the news circulates that the brothel is controlled by undercover police. A recent example²⁹ is the May 2021 operation when 47 men were arrested by the Phoenix Police Department. Detectives posed as massage workers and posted ads on websites known for prostitution.
- ***Borrowing decoys from other police agencies.*** Many police departments, particularly smaller ones, have had trouble staffing reverse stings due to a shortage of women police officers willing to serve as decoys, or because the decoys become too well-known to potential buyers to be effective. A solution to this problem used by some police agencies has been to borrow staff from other departments. For example, the small cities of Bluefield and Princeton, WV, have borrowed or exchanged decoys and sometimes other members of reverse sting teams. Similarly, Wilkes-Barre, PA, and communities in the region (such as Reading and Allentown) have borrowed or exchanged staff. The Pennsylvania State Police have developed the capacity to assist any community in the state in conducting reverse stings by contributing decoys and support officers.

²⁹ Molly Jirasek, “Phoenix Police Arrest 47 in Undercover Prostitution Sting,” *NewsNation Now*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.newsnationnow.com/us-news/southwest/phoenix-police-arrest-47-in-undercover-prostitution-sting>.

Evidence of Effectiveness

When compared to evidence of the effectiveness of interventions addressing supply and distribution in curtailing commercial sex markets, evidence supporting the impact of demand-reduction initiatives is relatively strong. There is very little in the way of an empirical case for supply- or distribution-focused interventions produce more than temporary suppressions or displacement. Evidence that anti-demand tactics (or comprehensive approaches that include addressing demand) can effectively suppress commercial sex markets is slowly accumulating and is robust in relation to evidence of the effectiveness of other approaches. However, formal evaluations are still confined to evaluations of a few anti-demand approaches implemented in a few locations.

The emerging evidence based model for demand reduction features sex buyer arrests, most often made during reverse sting operations.

Results from Formal Evaluations:

- ***In San Francisco, arresting and educating sex buyers reduced recidivism by over 40%.*** In an NIJ-sponsored evaluation of the FOPP, it was found that the annual one-year recidivism rate for arrested johns fell from 8.8 percent to 4.5 percent after the program began operating (Shively et al., 2008). The shift was immediate and was sustained for the subsequent decade. The impact could not be attributed to the effect of arrest, since all those in the “treatment” and statewide “comparison” groups were arrested. The impact could not be attributed to displacement to other cities, since the data allowed the research team to detect subsequent arrests anywhere in the state. The impact was also not attributable to a larger trend, since no substantial trend was observed in the statewide rearrest data. Finally, the impact is unlikely to be attributable to sex buyers moving their activities online. While it is true that commercial sex solicitation has been shifting from the streets to online venues, the shift to online solicitation has been gradual rather than abruptly occurring in one year, and has been widespread rather than occurring only in San Francisco in 1995.
- ***A comprehensive approach including reverse stings reduced prostitution by 75% in controlled experiment in Jersey City, NJ:*** In a rigorous field study, Weisburd and colleagues (2006) found a 75% reduction in observed and reported prostitution from a comprehensive approach that included combating demand through reverse stings. The evaluation design tested for displacement effects, and the researchers concluded that the reductions were not attributable to simply pushing the problem to other areas of the city. However, the comprehensive nature of the intervention prevents attributing the positive effects to the demand piece or any other single component of the program.
- ***Comprehensive effort including “kerb crawler” arrests and education reduced prostitution in Ipswich, England by 40% to 80%.*** A study by Poland and colleagues (2008) concluded that a large reduction in street prostitution in Ipswich, England resulted from an intensive and multifaceted intervention. The program featured enforcement and education aimed at demand (arresting “kerb crawlers” and having them attend the “Change Course,” or john school), and a social service/therapeutic (rather than punitive) approach for providers of commercial sex. The study found 40% to 80% reductions in calls for police service and the number of persons involved in prostitution (Kendall, 2008; Poland et al., 2008).
- ***Enactment of Swedish law that focused on demand reduction reduced street prostitution by 50% to 75%.*** In 1999 Sweden passed national legislation decriminalizing the sale of sex while simultaneously criminalizing the purchase of sex. The innovation of the “Swedish Model” law was in place in the entire legal burden for prostitution on the buyer rather than the provider. An evaluation of the impact of the law found a 50% to 70% reduction in street prostitution through focusing on demand (Swedish Government Report SOU 2010:49, 2010).

Police Research and Case Studies:

- ***In St. Petersburg, FL, a comprehensive approach emphasizing arresting and disclosing the identities of arrested sex buyers was associated with a 24% reduction in calls for police service.*** Concluding that arresting women involved in prostitution was ineffective in reducing the illicit business and the crime and disorder surrounding it, the city focused on a multifaceted effort that featured tactics aimed at demand. Reverse stings were conducted in 1993, and a letter that included information about sexually

transmitted diseases was sent to the home address of all arrested sex buyers. Prostitution-related calls for service from police decreased 24 percent between 1993 and 1994 (Minor, 1997).

- ***In Raleigh, NC, a comprehensive approach emphasizing arresting and shaming johns was associated with a 38% reduction in calls for police service.*** In response to persistent prostitution-related problems in the city, a study of prostitution was conducted, which concluded that police and other agencies city should prioritize arresting customers and addressing the service needs of providers (Weisel, 2004). An initiative - Operation Dragnet - featuring those elements was launched. Among other outcomes, over 85% of the citizens surveyed were aware of the anti-prostitution effort, and citizen-initiated calls for service initially increased due to increased awareness, and then declined steadily by 38% compared to the pre-intervention baseline.
- ***Reduced street prostitution in Salt Lake City, UT in 1971 and 1976 was attributed by police to reverse stings.*** A three-month effort in 1971 to combat prostitution through concentrating on male buyers led police to conclude that nearly all of the 75 known street prostitutes appeared to have left town.³⁰ In the crackdown on demand, 139 men were arrested during reverse stings. Subsequent reports stated that through 1976 the reverse sting program had arrested 1,129 male sex buyers, and that prostitution in the city had declined by approximately 50% soon afterward.³¹
- ***In Buffalo, NY, a 60% drop in 911 calls for service was associated with a comprehensive approach emphasizing arresting and educating sex buyers.*** From 1996 to 1997, the city increased sex buyer arrests 85 percent. Arrested men were sent to a john school program modeled after the one in San Francisco. Arrested women involved in prostitution were referred to an organization for support and treatment. To assess the impact of the initiative, 911 calls and arrest data were analyzed, and interviews were conducted with community members. They found that 911 calls fell 60% from 1996 to 1997, police observed fewer women engaging in street prostitution, and community members interviewed reported less prostitution activity.
- ***Reverse stings and shaming reportedly removed Wilkes-Barre, PA from a domestic sex trafficking circuit, and reduced the number of women engaged in street prostitution locally by 75%.*** In interviews conducted for the 2012 National Assessment, police department staff said that Wilkes-Barre had been a stop on a domestic sex trafficking circuit operating in upstate New York and central Pennsylvania. Through the mid-1980s, traditional interventions had been tried and found ineffective: arresting prostituted women accomplished little (trafficked women soon left for the next stop on the circuit, and local women simply returned to the streets), and prosecution of pimps had been attempted, but never successfully. In 1986, Wilkes-Barre police tried a new approach, conducting large-scale reverse stings coupled with publicizing the identities of arrestees. In each of the first several operations, they arrested from 50 to 100 men who were issued citations and ordered to pay fines. Arrestee identities were included in press releases which ran in the local Sunday newspaper. After two years of these efforts, police concluded that Wilkes-Barre had been taken off the “pimp circuit.” The number of women known to engage in street prostitution fell from 20 to five, with the rotating circuit survivors gone and the remaining five being local women suffering from severe substance addictions. The existence of the domestic trafficking circuit and the level of police reverse sting activity in the 1980s and 1990s were corroborated by news archives and interviews with police from other cities on the circuit. However, the stated impact on the number of street-level survivors could not be confirmed due to a lack of data from the time period (e.g., arrest data were not kept by the police department beyond seven years).

Prostitution Escalates When Enforcement and Arrests Decline

While it is evident from the research and the historical record summarized above that arresting sex buyers (especially when followed by education and sanctions) appears to reduce reoffending and decrease prostitution activity, the empirical case for sex buyer arrest as a deterrent is strengthened by observing what happens when prostitution laws are not enforced. For example, prostitution “Tolerance Zones” have been tried, and have failed every time to reduce harm or make communities or prostituted persons safer. For example, Boston, Massachusetts sought to manage its rampant prostitution problems in the 1960s and 1970s by allowing it within

³⁰ The Deseret News, Page B-1, September 20, 1971.

³¹ Miami News, June 17, 1976.

a few square blocks. The area quickly became known as the “[Combat Zone](#)” and became one of the most dangerous areas in the state, abuses against sex trade survivors flourished. This same basic story is being repeated in current times. Since 2020, prosecutors in several U.S. cities declared policies of de facto decriminalization by refusing to prosecute prostitution, along with other select crimes. The results have been, predictably, negative. In San Francisco, prostitution and other crime increased dramatically, and in 2022 the District Attorney who declared “de facto” decriminalization by announcing his office would not prosecute prostitution was removed from office in a recall vote.³² In Baltimore, prostitution and other crime flourished after the prosecutor who declared in 2020 she would not prosecute prostitution cases. The community protested rampant crime, and she was voted out of office in 2022.³³ As of March, 2023, similar patterns were evident [Philadelphia](#)³⁴ and [Los Angeles](#),³⁵ as well as abroad. Several suburbs of London, England had been experimenting with tolerance zones since 2020, again to negative effect, and the voices of residents in these areas echoed the ‘war zone’ language used to describe Boston 50 years earlier.³⁶

Corroborating Evidence

In addition to the direct evidence of reverse stings having positive outcomes, there are three additional kinds of evidence all reflecting favorably on the tactic:

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 consequences following arrest, such as jail time, being listed on a sex offender registry, and the public disclosure of their arrest. Such responses were made more than **80% of surveyed sex buyers**.³⁷
2. The survey data is aligned with extensive anecdotal evidence³⁸ from the field of law enforcement vice operations and investigations, which consistently finds that once arrested, sex buyers express great

³² Janie Har, “San Francisco recalls progressive prosecutor Chesa Boudin,” *PBS News Hour*, June 8, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/san-francisco-recalls-progressive-prosecutor-chesa-boudin>.

³³ Brian Witte, “Baltimore prosecutor Marilyn Mosby defeated in primary,” *Associated Press*, July 22, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-covid-health-general-marilyn-mosby-1742b1a284798e76a89f974cd8c5e497>.

³⁴ The Editorial Board, “Impeaching Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/impeaching-larry-krasner-philadelphia-progressive-district-attorney-pennsylvania-state-house-crime-11666822018>.

³⁵ Joseph Pimentel, “George Gascon recall supporters get major lift after SF voters oust DA Chesa Boudin,” *Spectrum News 1*, June 8, 2022, <https://spectrumnews1.com/ca/la-west/politics/2022/06/08/george-gascon-recall-supporters-get-major-lift>.

³⁶ Stephanie Balloo and Ewan Gleadow, “UK city's 'red light district' where used condoms litter floor and business starts at 8am,” *Daily Star*, October 4, 2022, <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/uk-citys-red-light-district-28148390>.

³⁷ 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>.

³⁸ Charlot Alter, “Catching Johns: Inside the National Push to Arrest Men who Buy Sex,” *Time*, <https://time.com/sex-buyers-why-cops-across-the-u-s-target-men-who-buy-prostitutes/>; 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/>.

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, which is something sex buyers clearly seek to avoid.

3. The survey findings and anecdotal evidence provided by law enforcement about sex buyer statements is further corroborated by a vast body of criminological research on general and specific 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**.³⁹

Collectively, the evidence is strong that arresting and sanctioning sex buyers is likely to deter reoffending, and to also advance “general deterrence” in which awareness of the risk of sanctions can deter crime in the general population – and not just among those who have been arrested and punished.⁴⁰

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, open the “[Browse Locations](#)” window, and then select “Reverse Stings” 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 “Reverse Stings” from the list.

³⁹ 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>; Robert Apel and Daniel S. Nagin, “Perceptual Deterrence,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Offender Decision Making*, eds. Wim Bernasco, Jean-Louis van Gelder, and Henk Elffers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 121-140.

⁴⁰ Robert Apel and Daniel S. Nagin, “General Deterrence: A Review of Recent Evidence,” in *Crime and Public Policy*, eds. James Q. Wilson and Joan Petersilia (2011), 411-436; Braga, Anthony A., and David L. Weisburd, “The effects of focused deterrence strategies on crime: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the empirical evidence,” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 49, no. 3 (2012): 323-358, doi:10.1177/0022427811419368.

Table 3: Examples of Law Enforcement Agencies, Units, and Task Forces Collaborating to Conduct Reverse Stings

City or County	Law Enforcement Departments, Units, Task Forces	Types
Albany, GA	Albany Dougherty Drug Unit	Multijurisdictional drug task force
Albany, NY	Albany Police Department Community Response Unit, Strategic Deployment Unit	Two units of a city PD, neither a vice unit
Alexandria, LA	Alexandria Police Department's Narcotics Division	City PD, narcotics unit
Anderson County, SC	CATCH (Criminal Apprehension Through Community Help)	Sheriff's Department's community collaboration unit
Anniston, AL	Calhoun/Cleburne County Drug and Violent Crime Task Force; Alabama Beverage Control Board; Anniston Police Department	Multijurisdictional drugs and violence task force, state agency, city PD
Anne Arundel County, MD	Anne Arundel County Police Department Special Enforcement Division	Sheriff's Department, special operations unit
Atlantic City, NJ	Atlantic City Police Department Vice Unit	City PD vice unit
Auburn, MA	Worcester County Regional Drug and Counter Crime Task Force	Multijurisdictional drug and crime task force
Baldwin County, AL	Baldwin County Sheriff's Office; Baldwin County Drug Task Force; Foley Police Department; Gulf Shores Police Department	Sheriff's Department, two city PDs, one county task force
Barstow, CA	San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department; Barstow Police Department; California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control	Sheriff's Department, one city PD, one state agency
Buena Park, CA	Buena Park Police Department; Fullerton Police Department	Two city PDs
Cedar City, UT	Cedar City Police Department; Iron/Garfield Counties Narcotics Task Force, Beaver/Iron Counties Major Crimes Task Force, Iron County Sheriff's Office, Utah Adult Probation and Parole (Utah Department of Corrections)	City PD, two multijurisdictional drug and crime task forces, sheriff's department, state probation and parole agency
Federal Way, WA	Federal Way Police Department; Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)	City PD and Federal agency
Harlan, KY	Harlan Police Department; Kentucky State Police	City PD, State Police
Providence, RI	ICE, Rhode Island State Police; Providence Utah Adult Probation and Parole	Federal agency, state police, city police
Ypsilanti, MI	Ypsilanti Police Department; Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office	City PD, County Sheriff's Department
York, PA	York City Police Department Nuisance Abatement and Patrol Divisions, East-End Neighborhood Unit, & Southwest Neighborhood Unit; York County District Attorney's Office; Springettsbury Township Police Department; Pennsylvania State Police.	Three units of city PD, another city PD, county District Attorney, state police