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An Overview of S.O.A.P. Orders for 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 Stay Away from Areas of Prostitution (SOAP) Orders for Arrested Sex Buyers in the United States

SOAP orders have been used as a restriction imposed upon arrested sex buyers in at least **140** U.S. cities and counties. This tactic involves prohibiting or restricting arrested buyers from visiting areas with known prostitution activity, and/or the vicinity of their arrest. The general approach—called geographic “exclusion zones” or “restraining orders” when applied to other kinds of offenders—are often identified as “Stay Out of Areas with Prostitution” or “SOAP” orders when applied to sex buyers (as well as to prostituted women). For example, in 1995 a “prostitution-free zone” was established in [Portland](#), OR along a corridor long known have the city’s highest concentration of street prostitution activity. The exclusion zone specifications were described in the city ordinance establishing the zone, presented in the “[SOAP Orders](#)” page of the [Demand Forum](#) website. Essentially, this ordinance allowed judges to order those arrested for prostitution offenses (including sex buyers) not to enter the restricted area. The ordinance allowed for several consequences to be meted out against those who violated the order. Although it was widely regarded as successful, budget cuts rendered the Portland Police Department unable to enforce the zone properly, and the City Council allowed the ordinance to expire in 2007. Area residents and businesses reportedly soon observed an increase in visible prostitution and related activity, and in 2011 the mayor proposed reviving the prostitution-free zone.¹

Table 1: Sites with Earliest Known Use of SOAP Orders for Sex Buyers

Year	City or County	State
1975	Beaver Falls	PA
1980	Washington	DC
1985	Newport News	VA
1990	SeaTac	WA
1990	Santa Monica	CA
1991	Tulsa	OK
1991	Miami	FL
1991	Tallahassee	FL
1992	Pierce County	WA
1993	Portland	OR
1993	Everett	WA
1994	Tacoma	WA
1995	Oakland	CA
1995	Wichita	KS
1995	Anchorage	AK

Arrested sex buyers can be ordered to stay out of specified areas as a condition of a sentence, or as an element of a diversion program. SOAP orders are imposed mostly for misdemeanor-level charges of soliciting prostitution, involving adult victims or police decoys. They may be combined with other sanctions such as fines, fees, vehicle seizures, probation, and/or completion of “john school” education or treatment programs. For those arrested for paying to sexually abuse minors, the charges are far more serious felony-level offenses resulting in felony convictions and prison terms, and SOAP orders are not offered as a diversion option or a requirement of a sentence (except as part of a post-incarceration condition of community supervision).

Geographic exclusion zones are sometimes resisted as needlessly and inappropriately restricting the free movement of individuals.² However, SOAP orders are seldom successfully challenged, provided that the restrictions are applied only to convicted offenders, or are agreed to voluntarily as a condition of a diversion program.

¹ David A. Graham, “A No-Go Area for Those Arrested?” *The Atlantic*, October 15, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/charlotte-exclusion-zones-prostitution/410635>.

² Ibid.

Evidence of Effectiveness

While there is substantial research on SOAP orders and similar geographical restrictions for offenders,³ studies have focused in a wide range of crime types and outcomes. There have been no focused evaluations whose methodology allows for isolating the impact of SOAP orders on demand reduction (such as reducing sex buyer recidivism, or specific deterrence) or on solid measures of prostitution or sex trafficking in communities where they have been issued. But hard evidence of impact from formal evaluations is rarely available in assessing the value of criminal justice interventions of any kind. Compared to other ways of combating prostitution and sex trafficking (e.g., victim rescues, trafficker arrest and prosecution, legalization or decriminalization of prostitution), a solid case can be made for beneficial effects of SOAP orders for sex buyers, with three distinct kinds of evidence all reflecting favourably on the approach:

1. Surveys of hundreds of admitted sex buyers have asked what would deter them from that behavior in the future, and were presented with a list of options. The things most commonly listed as likely to deter them are having their behavior become known to others (including families, partners, friends, and employers) and other consequences following arrest, such as jail time being listed on a sex offender registry. Such responses were made more than **80% of surveyed sex buyers**.⁴ It is reasonable to assume that having to adhere to SOAP orders would increase the likelihood that others close to sex buyers would learn of sex buyer's behavior, and their arrest for it, which is clearly something they wish to avoid.
2. The survey data is aligned with extensive anecdotal evidence⁵ from the field of law enforcement vice operations and investigations, which consistently finds that once arrested, sex buyers express great **concern about the consequences of that arrest** – including legal sanctions, and having their behavior will be exposed to their families, partners, friends, employers, and others in their communities.
3. The survey findings and anecdotal evidence provided by law enforcement is further corroborated by a vast body of criminological research on deterrence that finds that 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**.⁶ To the extent that SOAP Orders may increase the risk

³ Beckett, Katherine, and Steve Herbert. "Penal boundaries: Banishment and the expansion of punishment," *Law & Social Inquiry* 35, no. 1 (2010): 1-38, doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-4469.2009.01176.x; Herbert, Steve, and Katherine Beckett.

"Banishment and the post-industrial city: Lessons from Seattle," *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 23 (2017): 27-40, doi.org/10.1007/s10610-016-9316-z; Struening, Karen. "Rounding Up the Undesirables," *Social Justice* 47, no. 1/2, 159/160 (2020): 39-62, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27094573>.

⁴ 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>.

⁵ 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/> (accessed March 5, 2023); Nicholas Kristof, "Targeting the Johns in the Sex Trade," *New York Times*, February 26, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/opinion/kristof-targeting-the-johns-in-sex-trade.html>; Kristin Pisarcik "Miami Vice: Inside 'John Stings' and Escort Stings," *ABC News*, March 21, 2008, <https://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=4488667&page=1>; The Associated Press, "Prostitute customers posterized," *The Gainesville Sun*, October 13, 2012, <https://www.gainesville.com/story/news/2012/10/14/prostitute-customers-posterized/31836219007/>.

⁶ 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,

of their behavior being disclosed, or negatively impact their ability to get to work or move about the community, it would contribute to deterrence.

References, Additional Examples

To access information about specific community service approaches used in U.S. cities and counties for demand reduction purposes, you may go to www.demand-forum.org, open the “Browse Locations” window, and then select “SOAP Orders” from the “Tactics” list. Doing so will return lists of cities and counties that have used community service for arrested sex buyers. In addition, U.S. locations in which community service programs have been used may be [mapped](#) on Demand Forum by clicking on the “Choose a Tactic” box and choosing “SOAP Orders” from the list.

Example 1: Houston, TX

For years, the City of [Houston](#) has implemented multiple tactics in its efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex along the Bissonnet Track, Houston’s most notorious area for prostitution and sex trafficking. In 2018, Harris County courts implemented a civil injunction against 86 individuals, 50 prostituted persons, 23 sex buyers, and 13 pimps/sex traffickers who were frequently arrested for prostitution-related offenses along Bissonnet Track.⁷ If named individuals were found in violation of the injunction, they could face fines from \$1,000 to \$10,000 and up to 30 days in jail. Additionally, the injunction deemed the area an “Anti-Prostitution Zone,” with the intention of banning named individuals from engaging in certain “prostitution-related activities.” The Bissonnet Anti-Prostitution Zone occupies a small triangle in the city, less than a half mile across, bound by the intersection of two major highways and its main through street, Bissonnet Street. Local business owners had openly expressed concerns for the safety of their lives and their businesses as public instances of violence, gang-related activities, drugs, and prostitution plague the community. According to the Houston Police Department, between 2016 and 2018 approximately 4,000 instances of crime were reported along Bissonnet Track and 25% of reports were for prostitution-related offenses.

Example 2: Portland, OR

Like most greater metro regions, [Portland](#) contains a street with a long history of being a focal point for prostitution and sex trafficking, with high concentrations of sexually oriented businesses, storefront brothels, and motels catering to (or tolerating) prostitution. In Portland and beyond, this is 82nd Avenue, and is akin to strips such as the Miracle Mile in Tucson, AZ and Mannheim Boulevard in Cook County, IL. In 1995, the city passed an ordinance (Portland City Code Sec. 14B.30) and police began enforcing the “Prostitution Free Zone” that focused on 82nd Avenue and an area surrounding it. The geographic exclusion zone was broadly written and enforced to include both sex buyers and sellers, and a larger number of orders were applied to prostituted women than to male buyers. However, it was a tool that was used to punish and discourage arrested sex buyers. In simplest terms, those arrested for prostitution offenses could be ordered to stay out of the defined zone, and violations of this restriction could result in enhanced penalties. Portland’s ordinance and other reference materials about the Prostitution Free Zone can be found on the site page for Portland on Demand Forum.⁸

The Prostitution Free Zone was challenged as an inappropriate restriction on individual freedoms and for being unevenly applied across races, and for incurred costs in its enforcement. Due to budget cuts to law enforcement

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.

⁷ Roxanna Asgarian, “Houston tries to banish sex workers,” *Slate*, November 11, 2019, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/11/houston-banish-sex-workers.html#:~:text=The%20county%20filed%20a%20civil%20lawsuit%20against%2050%20alleged%20sex%20workers%2C%2023%20alleged%20buyers%2C%20and%2013%20alleged%20pimps.>

⁸ “Portland, OR,” Demand Forum, accessed November 4, 2022, <https://demand-forum.org/site/portland-or>.

agencies and other concerns, the Zone was allowed to expire or “sunset” in September 2007.⁹ Reportedly, soon after the Zone expired residents, businesses, and those traveling through the area observed a rapid and substantial increase in prostitution in the area and in problems associated with it (e.g., a rise in street crime rates, harassment of residents and business patrons by sex buyers, prostituted persons, and pimps, and calls for service to police from the area). Police attempted to compensate for the loss of the zone by increased patrols and enforcement efforts. Community groups mobilized and formed a Prostitution Advisory Council, which wrote a report and in late 2009 presented to city officials recommendations for reinstatement of the Zone and other measures such as re-establishing a john school (which was not active at that time).

Example 3: Wichita, KS

The creation of SOAP orders via city ordinance was described in a report by the [Wichita](#) Police Department regarding the city’s anti-prostitution effort in the early and mid-1990s.¹⁰ In response to longstanding problems associated with prostitution that were concentrated in certain areas of Wichita, a collaborative effort was launched involving WPD community policing officers, the Municipal Court, the City Manager, and the city’s Law Department. Old city ordinances were modified, and new ones drafted and then enacted.¹¹ One of the key ordinances was a modification that allowed the arrest of men for loitering when their intent was to solicit a prostituted person. Before this time, women could be arrested for loitering with the intent to commit an act of prostitution, but men who were loitering with the intent to buy sex from a woman engaged in prostitution could not be arrested. In addition to the modified ordinance, two new ones were created. The first ordinance created an “Anti-Prostitution Emphasis Zone,” which increased fines and jail time for anyone who was arrested within specified blocks of the city. Prostitution arrest data were used as the basis for setting the boundaries of the zone. The standard fine and jail time was applied to those arrested outside the zone. Drug offenders were given alternative sentences if they agreed to enter drug treatment and perform community service. A second conviction in the area would result in a jail term of no less than 30 days. The second ordinance was more controversial. A “mapping area” was established inside the Anti-Prostitution Emphasis Zone, which covered the area where the heaviest concentration of prostitution offenses occurred. The ordinance made it illegal for a convicted offender who was arrested in the “mapping area” to return to the area.

Example 4: Tacoma, WA

For decades, the city of [Tacoma](#), WA has had a great deal of community involvement in its efforts to address prostitution and sex trafficking. The “Make Tacoma Safe, Clean, and Attractive” initiative was a collaboration between community organizations (e.g., the Chamber of Commerce, neighborhood groups such as Citizens Against Prostitution) and government agencies at the city, county, and state levels (e.g., Tacoma Police Department, Pierce County jail, the Washington State Department of Corrections). The Make Tacoma Safe, Clean, and Attractive (MTSCA) team targeted street-level prostitution and related crime within Stay Out of Areas of Prostitution (SOAP) zones. Community involvement and the facilitation of a new state vehicle impound law were regarded as critical components in this effort. The MTSCA team researched best practices with a goal to create more disincentives for prostituted women and sex buyers to operate in Tacoma.¹²

The initiative hoped to impact positive changes in the realm of enforcement as well as prevention. The team worked on forging connections with key stakeholders in the community, like the Pacific Avenue Business District. They also worked on gathering data on the correlation between prostitution and the spread of disease,

⁹ Lee Perlman, “Crime-Free Zone Renewal Abolished,” *The Mid-County Memo*, October 2007, https://midcountymemo.com/oct07_crimefreezone.html.

¹⁰ Wichita Police Department, *South Central Prostitution Project* (Wichita, KS: Wichita Police Department, 1996), 1-6, [https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/default/files/library/awards/goldstein/1996/96-59\(F\).pdf](https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/default/files/library/awards/goldstein/1996/96-59(F).pdf).

¹¹ “Code of Ordinances Supplement 28,” Wichita, KS, last modified July 28, 2022, <http://library.municode.com/index.aspx?clientId=14166>.

¹² *Make Tacoma Safe & Clean* (Tacoma: Tacoma City Council, 2009), <https://demand-forum.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Round-2-Safe-and-Clean-Effort-Fact-Sheet.pdf>; “Neighborhood and Community Services,” City of Tacoma, Washington, accessed November 4, 2022, https://www.cityoftacoma.org/government/city_departments/neighborhood_and_community_services.

best practices from other municipalities on what it took to make prostitution less profitable, and current prostitution data for bench-marking purposes.

Example 5: Tampa, FL

In February 2012, [Tampa](#) established an exclusion zone that applied to sex buyers as well as those providing commercial sex. The Prostitution Enforcement Zone covered the area from Fowler Avenue to the north, Seventh Avenue to the south, North 15th Street to the east, and Florida Avenue to the west. The zone applied to people who had been charged for the third time (or more) with a prostitution offense. Upon a third arrest, the misdemeanor prostitution charge could be upgraded to a felony and the State Attorney's Office could ask judges to put offenders on probation and ban them from the area. Exceptions would be limited to activities like visiting a doctor or buying groceries.

Example 6: Yakima, WA

In April 2013, [Yakima](#) announced a new municipal ordinance establishing SOAP orders. The new law worked by banning convicted sex buyers (as well as prostituted persons) from areas of the city known for commercial sex sales. People caught violating a SOAP order could be arrested on the spot for a misdemeanor and jailed for up to 90 days and/or be forced to pay a fine of up to \$1,000.

Example 7: Elk Grove, CA

In a reverse sting in 2018, [Elk Grove](#) police arrested three men who showed up at a local hotel to solicit a prostituted person. The article reporting on their arrests stated that if convicted, these men could face up to 180 days in jail and could be ordered by a judge to stay away from areas where they were arrested.¹³

Example 8: Milwaukee County, WI

In April 2019, [Milwaukee County](#) proposed a measure to increase fines for anyone caught attempting to solicit prostituted persons. The measure proposed increasing penalties for sex buyers from the previous range of \$500 to \$5,000 to a range of \$5,000 to \$10,000. These fines would target anyone caught soliciting prostitution as well as those loitering in a “known area of prostitution” or a public place where people had been convicted for soliciting in the last five years. The measure was passed unanimously by the Public Safety and Health Committee.¹⁴ The ordinance was passed in the Common Council, increasing fines for solicitation to a range of \$2,500 to \$5,000.¹⁵

¹³ Cameron Macdonald, “Three Suspects Arrested in Local Prostitution Sting: EGPD Joins Regional Sweep,” *Elk Grove Citizen*, September 5, 2018, http://www.egcitizen.com/news/three-suspects-arrested-in-local-prostitution-sting/article_c627859e-b139-11e8-baec-1fb25c0b9734.html.

¹⁴ Mary Spicuzza, “‘We’re Holding the Johns Accountable’: Milwaukee Common Council Set to Increase Penalties for Those Who Solicit Prostitutes,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 16, 2019, <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2019/04/05/sex-trafficking-milwaukee-may-raise-fines-soliciting-prostitutes/3375156002>.

¹⁵ Evan Casey, “Common Council Unanimously Approves 500 Percent Increase in Prostitution Fines,” *Shepherd Express*, April 17, 2019, <https://shepherdexpress.com/news/features/common-council-unanimously-approves-500-percent-increase/#/questions>.