



An Overview of Neighborhood Action Against Sex Buyers in the United States

**Summary Based Upon
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“A National Assessment
of Prostitution and Sex
Trafficking Demand
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Throughout the United States there has been a wide array of tactics employed that focus on the buyers of commercial sex that feature residents, businesses, or organized community groups either taking their own action, or engaging in partnerships with law enforcement. We have identified over 115 cities and counties that have engaged in some kind of neighborhood action directed at demand. For this type of anti-demand tactic, it does not make sense to distinguish a basic model and then to review variations on that model, since the initiatives are highly variable and are customized extensively to suit local needs and resources.

Some of the ways that neighborhoods become involved with efforts to curb prostitution are indirect and non-programmatic – at least initially. Often, community complaints and pressure results in police employing whatever traditional tactics they feel are appropriate to address prostitution and sex trafficking. For example, in Anaheim, CA a persistent set of problems led residents and business leaders to call the police department with hundreds of complaints and tips about prostitution and related crime, such as open drug dealing and abuse. Persistent community input led police to meet with members of the public to develop collaborative solutions, and to discuss potential strategies and tactics that may be pursued, and the resources available to do so¹. In some communities, neighborhood organizations proceed independently and focus on combating demand. In other instances, they coordinate their efforts with police.

The key objection to community-led initiatives is the potential for them to evolve into vigilante efforts that impose on the rights of people who may not be engaged in trying to buy sex. Untrained and unarmed citizens can also place themselves at risk if they confront or are discovered by johns, such as being seen filming a man in a car with a person engaged in prostitution. It is also possible for community action to interfere with police operations or investigations, or to produce information that cannot be used by investigators.

Examples of neighborhood action include the following:

- **Chattanooga**, TN has a neighborhood led effort to shame johns (in addition to pimps and prostituted persons), asking for submissions of photos to be posted on an independent website: www.trick.the.johns.com.
- **Baltimore**, MD has the “Baltimore John Watch” program, which encourages residents to record license numbers of cars and to submit descriptions of the make, model, and license numbers of vehicles and descriptions of the drivers. Photos and descriptions are then posted on www.baltimorejohnwatch.blogspot.com. Pigtown John Watch has a similar focus (<http://pigtownjohnwatch.blogspot.com/>) Pigtown John Watch is a “watchdog” blog that maintains reports of prostitution incidents and johns sightings submitted by blog

¹ Campbell, E. (2012). Residents sick of drugs, prostitution. *The OC Register*, July 24. <http://www.ocregister.com/news/police-365129-residents-help.html>

participants. There is not much activity on this website, but it is referenced here as an illustration of a neighborhood-led effort to focus on demand.

- **Houston, TX** contains neighborhoods in which residents have placed “no prostitution” signs on their lawns. This kind of activity could also be considered a public awareness program, but is also listed as a neighborhood action since it was driven by the community and not by any agency or official organization.
- **San Antonio, TX** has a neighborhood-initiated campaign involving residents taking photos of johns in cars, recording license plate numbers, and sending the photos and information to police.
- **Lansing, MI** police developed the “hot spot card program” involving distributing cards that encourage residents to record information about known or suspected vice crimes and provide that information to police.
- **Stockton, CA** residents are asked by police to report the date, time, and the license plate numbers of vehicles involved in prostitution, using the Special Prostitution Enforcement Reporting System (SPERS). Police then send letters to the registered owners telling the recipient the vehicle was seen in an area known for prostitution, but not accusing them of committing a crime.
- **Cleveland, OH** has seen a range of community led initiatives including demand for commercial sex. For example, the ." The Montgomery County's Neighbors Against Drugs (NAD) Program has organized groups of citizens patrols on city streets (especially one area known for prostitution), with individuals carrying posters saying "Dear Johns, Your plate number is being recorded. Yours truly, The Neighbors." The Cleveland Public Theatre has put on performances of "Without Words...Moving Against the Sex Trade."
- **Oakland, CA** neighborhoods have mobilized to launch the “Dear John letter campaign,” a community initiative supported by the City of Oakland, the Oakland Police Department (OPD) and a variety of community organizations.² The initiative aims to combat demand using a number tactics. Residents are trained to identify and report the license plate numbers and to provide vehicle and driver. The information is then sent anonymously to the OPD, whether directly to the police or via collaborating community groups such as the East Bay Asian Youth Center or Oakland Community Organizations (a coalition of churches, schools, and neighborhood groups). After checking that the car’s license plate matches the reported make and model, the OPD next sends a form letter to the owner of the vehicle, informing the recipient that they were seen in an area of high prostitution and that such activity is illegal, dangerous, and unacceptable to local residents.

Neighborhood-led initiatives targeting demand were found to have occurred as early as 1975, and at least 15 cities and counties had implemented some form of community-led activity by 1985.

² <http://oaklandnorth.net/2012/10/11/dear-john-oakland-residents-are-sending-your-license-plate-number-to-the-cops/>

Table 1: Sites with Earliest Known Use of Neighborhood Action Targeting Johns		
Year	City or County	State
1975	Knoxville	TN
1975	Jackson	TN
1975	Miami	FL
1980	Atlantic Beach	FL
1980	Vallejo	CA
1980	Rochester	NY
1981	Horry County	SC
1982	Evansville	IN
1984	Milwaukee	WI
1985	Erie County	NY
1985	Chattanooga	TN
1985	Newport News	VA
1985	Tampa	FL
1985	Phoenix	AZ
1985	El Paso	TX

Example from Gordon Heights, NY, 1991-1993: Citizen Patrols and Videotape

Gordon Heights is an area in Suffolk County on Long Island, New York. In 1991, news outlets reported that a Gordon Heights Community Watch group started writing letters to the wives and mothers of those arrested for soliciting prostituted women. In 1993, reports indicated that prostitution had "invaded" residential streets and schoolyards, and members of a neighborhood watch group began patrolling their streets with video cameras as part of community policing program. In this Long Island city, two family members in Gordon Heights said they had been videotaping prostituted women and their customers for two and half years, using the taping to scare sex buyers out of the neighborhood. The videotaping by community volunteers was done with the approval and guidance of police. Twelve volunteers patrolled the neighborhood in teams of two, and were required to call police before going out to videotape, so cruisers could be in the area. The volunteers were mostly parents of school-age children. As they patrolled, one volunteer wrote down license plate numbers and car descriptions while the other taped situations appearing to be prostitution transactions. The teams were instructed by police to leave the area after witnessing these situations to avoid confrontations.³

Example from Mt. Clemens, Michigan: Neighborhood Watch, Signs

In 2005 North Gratiot Neighborhood Watch members spent two days posing as prostituted women in an area north of the Mount Clemens downtown section known for its street crime. When potential

³ Newsday - Long Island, NY, June 13, 1991. Dear John letters battling prostitution by writing to wives of men arrested.
<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/21/us/town-puts-prostitutes-on-videotape.html>

johns pulled over, the activists handed out a flier that said, *"If you're soliciting sex and/or drugs in this neighborhood, you are being videotaped. Stay tuned for the 11 (o'clock) news. Zero tolerance."* Any videos taken by the group were turned over to the Tacoma Police Department.

One Mount Clemens neighborhood chose to fight prostitution by erecting signs warning potential customers that they are being watched by area residents. In 2005 a sign was put up by the Gratiot Corridor Watch, a group of local activists who have hosted a number of anti-crime demonstrations. The group recently erected a sign with reflectors that read: "Prostitution Zone - If you are looking, we are watching," in front of a vacant house on Euclid, near Gratiot. Some residents opposed the signs, believing they sent a negative message about the neighborhood. A grandmother who lives near the vacant structure tore the sign down, contending that the sign accidentally served as an advertisement for street-level prostitution in the neighborhood.

Example from Tacoma, Washington: The "Make Tacoma Safe, Clean, and Attractive" Initiative.

Tacoma has had a great deal of community involvement in its efforts to address prostitution and sex trafficking. This initiative is 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 targets street level prostitution and related crime within Stay Out of Areas of Prostitution (SOAP) zones. Community involvement and the facilitation of the new state vehicle impound law are regarded as critical components in their effort. The team has researched best practices with a goal to create more disincentives for prostituted women and their customers to operate in Tacoma. The team has put up a Web site shell. It is indexed within the main MTSCA landing page and can be found at: <http://www.cityoftacoma.org/Page.aspx?cid=12845>

The initiative hopes to impact positive changes in the realm of enforcement as well as prevention, and they are aware that the program and any positive changes it produces must be sustainable within the community. The team is working on forging connections with key stakeholders in the community, like the Pacific Avenue Business District. It is also working on gathering data on the correlation between prostitution and the spread of disease, best practices from other municipalities on what it takes to make prostitution less profitable, and gathering current prostitution data for bench-marking purposes. While researching what other municipalities around the country are doing to combat street prostitution, the team has observed what Kent, Washington was doing regarding enforcement of the new state law, HB 1362.

MTSCA leaders made a presentation to Tacoma's Public Safety Committee on the new state vehicle impound law related to prostitution activity. As a part of the preparation for the unveiling of the anti-prostitution community signs, team members made presentations on TV Tacoma's "CityLine," at a Tacoma Police Department staff meeting, and at a meeting of the Tacoma City Council Subcommittee on Public Safety. These presentations were credited with motivated City officials to focus resources on the problems associated with street prostitution. The team has examined the possibility of having public service announcements on local radio stations warning of increased

prostitution enforcement on the streets of the city. It would also announce enforcement of the newer state law involving impounding vehicles used by johns and the \$500 fee that must be paid for their recovery.

Example from New Haven, Connecticut, 1992: The “John of the Week” Campaign

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

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

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

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

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

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/20/nyregion/new-haven-journal-curbing-prostitution-on-demand-side.html>

References

References for the materials cited in this summary can be found in the bibliography of the National Assessment final report, and in each site's webpage at DemandForum.net.