

# Puttin' on the sting: women police officers' perspectives on reverse prostitution assignments

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prostitutes, are becoming a common method in some United States cities for controlling the problem of solicitation for prostitution. The role of policewomen as decoys has received scant attention by scholars, though critics and traditional feminists view the practice as further evidence of the subjection and degradation of women in law enforcement. This article presents participant field observations of how reverse prostitution operations are conducted in Aurora, Colorado Springs, and Denver, Colorado and qualitative interview data from 25 female police officers who discuss their experiences as prostitution decoys. The findings indicate that female officers view the decoy role as an exciting opportunity for undercover work, despite the negative connotations of acting like a whore. According to the officers who work as decoys, it adds excitement and variety and offers potential for other opportunities for advancement within the police department in contrast to the rather mundane duties often associated with patrol.

## INTRODUCTION

The role of women in policing in the United States has changed dramatically since Alice Stebbins Wells became the first female to join the Los Angeles Police

## ABSTRACT

Reverse police prostitution stings, which target men by using female police officers as decoy

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Department in 1910 (Parsons & Jesilow, 2001; Schulz, 1995). Women in law enforcement have evolved from assignments as secretaries and social workers to commissioned police officers, detectives and commanders, despite a history of documented inequities and discriminatory treatment. Differences in deployment and assignment between genders are slowly diminishing as an increasing number of women have infiltrated the masculine culture of policing and progressed through the ranks (Heidensohn, 1992; Schulz). Women now occupy top positions in many law enforcement agencies and, although still low in number, represent about 14 per cent of sworn law enforcement officers nationwide. Despite the substantial inroads that have been made by policewomen in recent decades, participation in certain assignments remains limited and marginalisation based on stereotypes continues to be problematic (Balkin, 1988; Brown, 1997, 2000; Dene, 1992; Heidensohn; Martin, 1990; Young, 1991).

The role of decoy in reverse prostitution stings represents the rare case in which undercover police work necessitates a female officer. This article examines the nature of this unique police work, based on information provided by women who have worked as decoys in undercover prostitution stings. Similar to previous research on women in policing, the exploration of the role of women officers in the current study is presented through personal narratives of women who have faced the challenges and complexities of working in a predominately male domain (eg, Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Gold, 1999; Martin, 1994; Parsons & Jesilow, 2001).

Reverse prostitution sting operations have created a distinctive role for female officers. Some commentators speculate that a male police officer who puts himself in the position of a 'john' or a female officer who acts as a prostitute in sting operations is bound to feel degraded and humiliated

(Kenner, 1998; Sagatun, 1988). Similarly, Nolan (2001) argues that women police officers who act as decoy prostitutes are objectified and marginalised by the sexist propensities of male colleagues and further notes that decoy stings regulate women officers to a position of powerlessness and subjugation. Any conclusions reached about the role of women officers as decoys, however, remain speculative since research that explores how they view the assignment is lacking from the literature. This research specifically examines the experiences based on the voices of women who have worked in decoy assignments.

### **REFOCUSING ENFORCEMENT EFFORTS: FROM PROSTITUTES TO JOHNS**

Historically, in order to eradicate prostitution law enforcement agencies have focused almost exclusively on the individual women who sell sex. In the past 10 years the continued demand of sex-for-money and the problems associated with streetwalking women have prompted many police departments to alter their tactics from arresting prostitutes to apprehending their customers, known in the vernacular as 'johns'. Prostitution research in the United States rarely focuses on the men who purchase sex, unlike 'kerb-crawling johns', who have received a great deal of attention in England and Wales (eg, Benson & Matthews, 2000; Brooks-Gordon & Gelsthorpe, 2003; Matthews, 1992; McLeod, 1982).

Many police departments, under public and political pressure, have found that attempts to reduce the supply of streetwalkers fail to make an impact on prostitution. These same departments instead have chosen to direct scarce resources to the demand side of illegal sex acts, by arresting, shaming and hopefully deterring the customers (Almodovar, 1999). In fact, some scholars maintain that the only redress to

prostitution is to eliminate the customer base by holding men who solicit women responsible for their misdeeds (Sagatun, 1988; Scambler & Scambler, 1997).

In many parts of the United States, current law enforcement endeavours involve the use of innovative techniques that are designed to target, deter and humiliate johns, although arresting prostitutes generally remains the primary focus. Numerous cities have implemented special approaches to discourage prostitution customers, including driver's licence revocation, john television, vehicle seizure and warning billboards. In one city, officials posted a billboard on the outskirts of town that warned prostitution customers to stay away, while other cities have posted billboards that list the names of convicted johns (Hubacher, 1998; Pearl, 1987). 'John TV' in Denver, Colorado (<http://www.denvergov.org/johnstv>) shows mug shots of men convicted of solicitation of a prostitute on the local television channel and on the city's website. Nationwide, 'John Schools' have been initiated, serving as a deterrent where men convicted of solicitation learn about the horrors of illicit sex through graphic presentations about sexually transmitted diseases and candid narratives from former prostitutes (Harris & Durkin, 2003; Meier & Geis, 1997; Weitzer, 2000).

Several cities have also focused on the property involved and used to further the acts of solicitation and prostitution. When male customers are arrested, their cars are impounded and returned only after a substantial fine has been paid (Lefler, 1999). In Portland, 124 cars were seized in one year, 64 of which were forfeited and in New York, under 'Operation Losing Proposition', 90 cars were confiscated in a two-year period (Reynolds, 1986; Weitzer, 2000). In Denver, Colorado in 1999 the Public Nuisance Abatement Unit of the Denver Police Department towed 36 vehicles for prostitution; in 2000 the same unit towed 93; and

in 2001, 2002, and 2003, a total of 300, 296 and 176 vehicles respectively were towed, for investigation of civil charges involving prostitution under the Denver City Public Nuisance Abatement Ordinance (Starr-Gimeno, 2004). More extreme measures have had little success. Washington, DC police seized and sold cars belonging to johns under federal drug forfeiture laws until the courts found the practice unconstitutional, based on the proportionality of the action. The city also abandoned a no-right-turn policy that discouraged men in cars from cruising around blocks frequented by streetwalkers (Reynolds).

Reverse prostitution stings, sometimes referred to as operations, crackdowns, John stings and roundups, have been conducted in many urban areas. In Savannah, Georgia a task force headed by Prostitution Czar, Juliette Tolbert began using female decoys and within one week 22 men had been arrested (Pilkington, 1997). The city touted a conviction rate of 95 per cent for men apprehended in these stings. Johns found guilty of soliciting were then required to pay a \$400 fine and their names were released to the news media.

In 1994, Aurora, Colorado received national attention after the city council passed an ordinance that allows the police department to purchase advertising space for Crime-Watch in the local newspaper and publish the pictures of arrested johns. A mandatory \$1,000 fine paid by each one of the convicted johns funds the purchase of newspaper space. The city claims that the number of men arrested for prostitution has dropped dramatically, though no official data have been collected to support this conclusion. In July 1994, the typical undercover john sting would result in 20 or more arrests compared with six arrests in a similar operation in June 1995 (Robey, 1995a). In 2001, stings in Aurora resulted in the arrest of anywhere between eight to fifteen johns.

The Aurora city ordinance has not gone unchallenged. Dominic Petrocco, a 56-year-old farmer, requested a temporary restraining order to prevent the *Aurora Sun Sentinel* from publishing his photograph. He claimed that the prostitution solicitation advertisement violated his eighth amendment due process rights, because he stood accused of soliciting a prostitute and had not yet been convicted. In essence, he argued that the publication was punishment without a trial (Robey, 1995b). An Arapahoe District Court Judge denied the request, but blocked picture publication while Petrocco appealed the ruling. The Colorado Supreme Court reviewed the plaintiff's petition but refused to hear the case (Hubacher, 1998).

The city of Aurora has received a fair amount of opposition to the 'Crime-Watch' advertisements. Major area newspapers, including the *Denver Post* and *Rocky Mountain News*, refused to publish the john pictures and satirical editorials warned 'hapless johns' of the stings:

[I]f you have the sense God gave a chipmunk, you won't get caught anywhere near East Colfax Avenue or a hooker again. Aurora will doubtless continue to amuse itself by chasing 'johns' around. But it might try to understand that sometimes those arrested are, gasp, flat out innocent (Spencer, 1994, p. D1).

Other newspaper articles described the stings as 'operations in which undercover cops seek to entice randy gentlemen into breaking the law, for the sheer joy of busting them' and characterised the johns as 'horny suburbanites whose unrequited carnal desires have been reduced to a pathetic financial transaction' (Simpson, 1994a, 1994b, p. B1).

Police agencies were quick to defend the special operations as 'bread-and-butter' procedures that are 'based on what people tell

us is wrong' (O'Keeffe, 1997). Many officers believe that arresting prostitutes and johns will reduce drug abuse, sexual assault, robberies, and homicide. Hubacher (1998) argues that prostitution attracts drugs, violent crime, vagrancy, and quality of life elements that destroy and further decay neighbourhoods. Weidner's (2001) extensive study of prostitution in New York City notes that law enforcement policy should be focused on prostitutes under the 'broken windows' theory (ie, physically deteriorating neighbourhoods attract crime) and that, in addition to the visual pollution, prostitution is a 'potential harbinger of more serious types of crime'. Residents and businesses complain that prostitutes create noise, litter condoms and drug paraphernalia, and lower property values. During a community meeting in Denver, Colorado one enraged citizen spoke up: 'suburban areas don't give a crap about when I bring my 8-year-old son home from school and he was witness to a prostitute servicing her latest customer in front of our house' (Starr-Gimeno, personal communication, June 2001).

Overall, research illustrates a gender bias in the number of female prostitutes arrested compared with male customers. Weidner (2001) observes that in the United States only 10 per cent of the prostitution arrests are male customers. In California a woman's conviction for prostitution was appealed on the grounds of sexual discrimination by the police department. The lawsuit claimed that the more common use of male decoys compared with female decoys in police stings resulted in biased arrests (*People v. Superior Court*, 1971). This case revealed that in 1973 and 1974, 1,160 women were arrested for solicitation by male undercover officers. By comparison, 57 men were arrested in reverse sting operations (Kay, 1982). Lefler (1999) noted that in 1990 Boston courts arraigned 263 women on charges of prostitution, but no prostitution customers or johns had been brought to court. Lefler also

found that police were more likely to arrest female prostitutes through the use of male decoys who pose as potential customers, than arresting males with a female decoy.

The California Supreme Court denied the appeal and set forth three reasons in favour of concentrating decoy operations on female prostitutes rather than male customers. First, according to the court, a working prostitute averages more customers per night than customers visit the average prostitute per year. Second, the arrests of prostitutes have a better deterrent effect on other prostitutes than on customers who are unknown to each other. Third, the use of female decoys is twice as expensive as using males because an additional officer is required to ensure the female's safety (Sagatun, 1988). This ruling also reflects an inherent gender bias toward women police officers. The court implies that a male officer can easily and safely pick up a prostitute, yet a policewoman requires additional back-up when working undercover as a prostitute decoy.

Reverse prostitution stings are common in urban areas in Colorado. In 1995, the cities of Aurora, Denver and Lakewood conducted simultaneous stings along Colfax Avenue. This street is the longest running thoroughfare in Colorado and is well known for streetwalkers, drug dealers and crime. This coordinated sting effort resulted in the arrest of 44 men in Denver, 10 men in Aurora, and three men in Lakewood ('Three-city prostitution sting', 1995). A Denver police department sergeant commented: 'We've had five or six cars line up to talk to a female undercover officer. We call them vultures, the way they circle the block to get back to the girls, like vultures circling a carcass' (Robey & Robinson, 1995). The combined operation, in addition to garnering positive publicity, was an effort to avoid displacement of prostitutes among the three neighbouring cities.

The stings, though touted to be effective by police departments and news media, probably had little impact on the johns. In fact, an unnamed police officer commented: 'We could do it again this weekend and still get dozens of men' (Denver Post, 1995). Persons (1996) argues that 'Nothing — not AIDS, car confiscation, fines, or humiliation, will stop johns from seeking a prostitute'. Until 1999, Denver, Colorado utilised reverse prostitution stings merely to capture men soliciting an undercover police woman, issued a ticket and then released the suspect with an order-in to court. Currently, decoy stings in Colorado Springs continue to ticket and release johns captured in decoy stings.

Police sting operations are no secret among customers. A World Sex Guide chat room warns other johns to beware of offering money for sex to a girl who is on the street leaning into the windows of cars, because undercover officers refuse to enter vehicles for safety reasons. The chat room also includes advice on locating the 'policetittutes' (the protection team that surrounds the undercover policewoman) and warns that if a sting is in progress the honest hookers will vanish. A single, good-looking girl is a sure sign of police presence, according to knowledgeable customers on this website. In the Denver area, soon after police start making arrests, local residents will shout warnings to unsuspecting johns.

## METHOD

This study was undertaken as an exploratory attempt to gain insight into john operations and the perspectives of female police officers who pose as prostitutes in undercover reverse stings. The majority of interviewees were selected using a convenience sampling; in addition, some snow-ball sampling occurred as officers referred the researchers to co-workers. Semi-structured interviews included 25 female officers who

had participated in reverse prostitution stings as decoys from Aurora, Colorado Springs and Denver, Colorado. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions that were designed to examine experiences as a decoy, difficulties associated with the role and assignment, personal views on prostitution, and the dynamics surrounding the interactions with johns on the street. The questions allowed the respondent to elaborate on their responses and reflect on the events as they experienced them (Hamel, 1993). The interviews were conducted at respondents' homes, coffee shops, and offices and lasted about 60 minutes. Each interview was taped with the subject's consent and then transcribed verbatim for qualitative data analysis. Major themes were extracted and grouped into conceptual domains based on generalised statement content (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). The officers who had assumed decoy roles ranged in age from 30 to 41 with 4 to 16 years of policing experience. This sample of women police officers had participated in 5 to 20 decoy stings with an average of 10 stings per officer.

General information on reverse prostitution stings was also obtained through field observations and log notes taken during five such operations in the three cities. Reverse stings are handled differently among departments, but all involve complicated procedures and numerous officers (as many as 30 officers may participate). Stings are conducted in busy prostitution areas well known to police departments as active sex for sale markets. In general, the locations represent business districts with high levels of deviant activities and an abundance of squalid motels that offer hourly room rental rates. Most operations wire the decoys and use video cameras to tape sex for money exchanges. The street deals are consummated when the suspect in his vehicle

approaches the undercover officer. Conversation between the potential customer and the undercover decoy will ensure that the deal is made with the john requesting sexual services for a specified amount, then with the decoy agreeing and requesting that the john pull around the corner to meet her. At that time, the decoy gives a prearranged signal to alert a back-up team that stops the suspect in his vehicle and effects the arrest.

Motel deals involve back-up from officers who are waiting in an adjoining room or hiding in closets and bathrooms. A typical sting will have only one female officer 'working' the street at any given time, but one observed jurisdiction ran stings with three or four decoys making deals simultaneously. The use of multiple decoys raises safety concerns for participating undercover decoy officers because other male officers who serve as spotters are limited. There were also instances when the female decoy had to engage the john in further conversation to permit the arrest teams to take the previously arrested man out of the motel room. The number of john arrests varied among the cities from 10 to 38 and was dependent on a variety of situational elements (eg, weather, day of the week, time of day, pay days, unrelated police activity in the area). There were no instances where the undercover female decoy was allowed to enter a vehicle with the suspect, unlike male undercover officers who routinely have prostitutes ride in an undercover vehicle without video or audio back-up to make a prostitution deal.

## **Interview findings**

### *The decoys*

The women officers communicated dichotomous views regarding issues related to their attitudes about assuming the role of a prostitute. The majority expressed their feelings as being disgusted with the

role-playing persona and the clientele, while simultaneously experiencing excitement about the opportunity to work undercover. One officer, who had participated in reverse prostitution stings at least once a month from 1993 until 1998, said: 'Being a decoy does feel kind of slimy, but it's an ego trip to get the johns because they're the scum of the earth'. Another officer, with 10 years' experience, commented: 'At first I thought: "What am I doing?". You get out there and you don't want to fail. Its pride . . . what if I get out there and nobody picks me up?'. One woman offered a different, though not uncommon, viewpoint on her concerns about the role:

My biggest fear is that people would see me on Colfax and then run into me at the store when I'm with my kids and think that I'm a prostitute. Not the people who pick you up but the ones that see you out there. One time, this guy saw me and tried to tell my sergeant that I was out moonlighting.

One woman officer who had participated in 10 stings emphasised the need to avoid personalising the prostitution experience, although she believed that some women officers internalise what might be viewed as rejection by johns: 'I don't know that it's really a compliment that you go out there and you look so much like a whore that you get picked up.' Yet she elaborated that male officers will tease the decoys if they fail to be approached.

Many of the officers described feelings of apprehension over their first decoy assignment. One woman described her naivety: 'The first time I did it, I was really nervous. What I thought a prostitute looked like was from TV — before I came into law enforcement — walking down the street with the big heels, with really tight spandex.' Another officer reinforced this position:

'I'm just a nice girl and I've been very sheltered in my life. It's exciting, but there's a part of you saying "I can't believe people do this".' The officers generally agree the undercover work is 'fun, very exciting, a good time because when you are not out on the streets you are in the [motel] room with the other girls and some of the guys joking around. It's a good time.' Another commented in a similar fashion: 'It's kind of like a game, so I was real excited about the stings.'

The officers agree that not all women in their departments are right for the role of decoy. 'You need to have a strong personality,' one said, 'or you'll have a hard time making the arrests and some female cops are teased a lot.' In one incident, a nude man, except for the banana peel on his penis, in a rented U-Haul truck cruised the block several times and then approached the decoy. This incident resulted in a great deal of heckling for the undercover woman police officer and she decided not to participate as a decoy in future stings. Officers often commented: 'You need to have very thick skin.' Other officers take the more bizarre cases in their stride, as portrayed by this account:

Me being the lucky one, I walked out and the guy was in a truck. I leaned in his car — you never lean all the way in — but I was close enough and paying attention to his hands and I noticed he had a newspaper on his lap. I was talking to him about what he wanted to do and he put one hand down. He had a hole in his jeans and I said: 'Oh, you have it out and ready for me.' What everybody thought was clever was that I never missed a beat. They had a good laugh about that for a while.

The majority of officers view the work as a valuable learning experience that will further advance their careers and, if normally

assigned to patrol, offer a break from routine duties. One female officer commented: 'I like to do them [stings] it is a nice change of pace. I like to do undercover work. Unfortunately, for the female officers that's just the majority of what they get to do.' All the officers interviewed agreed that the work was a unique opportunity to escape routine duty as reflected in the following statement:

It's a blast, I love it, and I have a great time. It's like acting. I get to forget that I'm a cop. You know that you're still a cop and you're looking at things and thinking about crime, but it's fun. You get to play with people and I get to be a little bit foul mouthed. I have a great time playing 'ho'.

The decoys and officers involved often add a competitive edge to the operation. Several officers explained that they 'make it a contest to see who would get the most arrests, the most drugs, the most money, or the quickest pick-up'. In some respects the contests may put additional, unwanted pressure on the decoy: 'The guys [male officers] will say "I got money on my girl. She's going to rack them up today!" and then you're thinking "I'm not going to get any of them".' One officer commented that she held the record in the department for dealing with men who had their penises exposed. 'It seemed like the guys I contacted had their penis out already in their hand. Those were the first two guys I made deals with. The third guy there was no deal, but I made sure that I said into the wire that his hands were empty.'

### *Cops: too pretty to prostitute*

Embracing the appearance, mannerisms, and language of a prostitute is a difficult aspect of decoy assignments. According to the officers involved in the stings, the majority of streetwalkers in the sting areas

are 'crack whores', who want fast money and are 'dirty, dressed in jeans, shorts, and T-shirts and sometimes toothless'. Attractive women officers scare johns away. A female officer stated: 'We tease some officers and say — "Isn't a bitch when you're too pretty".' One officer, who had the most experiences as a decoy, commented:

I have the walk down and I can walk like I have nowhere to go, that's easy, but I have too much pride. It's very difficult to have that much pride and go out and if you don't get one [a john] then you take it personally and you can never take it personally. It's just part of the gig. These guys are looking for girls that are dirty and unkempt and don't look like they are police officers or somebody's wife, mother, or daughter. It's still very hard for me.

Decoys need to learn quickly how to look, what to wear and how to posture themselves. One officer explained:

They [the prostitutes] wear everyday clothes, a pair of shorts, and a pair of jeans. It's their body language and what they're doing that tells you she is a working girl. She'll stay in that area doesn't do anything; just walk back and forth with nowhere to go.

In order to be effective prostitute decoys, the female officers are required to disregard what has become second nature from their police training to play the prostitute role: 'You don't want to stand the way you're trained as a police officer. You step outside yourself. You're not supposed to talk like a cop. You need to talk like a "ho".'

The physical appearance of the decoys can mean the success or failure of the operation. For example, one African-American officer compared her appearance to several other officers she had worked with:

For me it was a lot easier . . . the area was predominately black at the time. I blended in pretty good, so it wasn't as hard for me. A lot of guys look for what they call "fresh". I'm a person [as a decoy] who is just now starting to smoke crack, not really bad, I'd be a little fresh. So the johns weren't suspecting.

This officer additionally explained that some johns would be hesitant to pick up a police decoy that was white and looked too healthy. Potential customers, however, never suspected another decoy who was overweight, according to several officers. Some sergeants gave instructions to women that were coming out to participate in a reverse prostitution sting for the first time, 'roll out of bed, don't shower, work out at the gym, mow the lawn, don't change your clothes, and then come to work'. An officer elaborated on the issues:

We look too clean. You don't need to wear make-up, you wear ratty clothes and fit right in. They actually prefer we don't wash our hair, but the girls don't like that. Some girls have gone as far as to get fake teeth like those that you wear for Halloween. It's not high dollar like Las Vegas. It's low-class, looking for drugs or offering drugs for sex.

Many of the officers find that learning the vernacular and sounding like a streetwalker represents a novel challenge. Even the smallest detail in self-presentation can make a difference: 'eye contact, the way you chew gum, the way you suck your lollipop, play with your gum — it's your posture'. A decoy once went out with no shoes and said that she had three or four johns lined up for sex, although she remains unsure why her bare feet were such an attraction. According to the women, when talking to johns, 'you're thinking about how you present yourself, what you're saying to them, how they will react toward you'.

### *Negotiating the deal*

Decoys must have an extensive knowledge of street language and be able to 'talk dirty'. If a john wants the decoy to get in his car, she can respond by saying: 'I'm on area restriction'. This means that she has been cited by the police and is no longer allowed in certain geographical areas of the city. There are several undercover police women who have perfected the answer to these types of questions by indicating to the potential customer that they should meet nearby or acting like the police are watching.

Most johns make straightforward requests for 'blow jobs, straight sex, or a fuck', but street terms may include some unfamiliar phrases related to sex like 'half-an-half', 'around the world' or 'Greek'. In one instance, a decoy encountered a john who wanted to know how much for 'Greek'. She replied '\$20' — unaware that the term was slang for anal intercourse — and lost the prostitution deal, but quickly learned from fellow officers that this request required a higher price. Street level prostitution is usually the cheapest of sexual service. Typically men will offer \$10 to \$20 for sexual service or acts. Bartering is very much in play when negotiating for street sex. In some encounters decoys have been solicited for \$2 or \$3, a joint, a rock of crack, a six-pack of beer, and even a broken compact disc player. An officer gave the following illustration: 'You just adopt slang. Someone had to teach us that it was okay to say cock or dick. Still when we explain it to the new girls, it sounds funny'.

All the officers agreed that entrapment rarely is an issue in sting operations. The decoys simply ask the men: 'Looking for a date?'. An officer said: 'You can offer a menu and they tell you what they want. You want the john to say as much as possible. They often ask if you're a cop and we just ask back: "No, are you a cop?"'. One

undercover police woman had a novel approach to this question, when asked if she was a police officer, she would reach into her ample cleavage and pull out a large gold, foil-wrapped condom. She would then spout to the john, 'Oh yea honey, I'm a cop, and this here is my badge!'

### *Johns of all types*

The men arrested in the majority of stings in Colorado are mostly of Hispanic origin, primarily because of the neighbourhood demographics, but undercover officers see men of every ethnicity and age range. 'We get johns from 16 to 80 years old and of every race.' An officer described the men:

We get all kinds of johns. The guy who has been married for 15 to 20 years and single guys who bring their brothers or visiting cousins from out town — lots of Hispanics and people who are affluent. They come by in nice trucks and cars. We get all ages — and always at least one juvenile — handicapped guys, older white males.

Female police officers expressed similar views of the johns' despicable character. One woman had a visceral reaction when she thought of the men they had arrested: 'I think they are disgusting, no matter what social class they're in. I just think they're disgusting.' Decoys often commented on the duplicity and insincerity of the johns; for example:

These are gross people. One guy was stopping off for a blow job on his way to see his wife at the hospital. He was a minister and told the church he was arrested for loud music and convinced the district attorney to charge him with disturbing the peace. He also claimed that it was entrapment. After he was stopped by the patrol officers he cried and prayed, not because he was sorry, but because he was busted.

Sympathy for some men was expressed by a few women, despite their overall dislike for the johns. 'You meet some you feel bad for', one officer said. 'The majority of them I don't feel real sorry for them, but what's a guy to do?' In a few cases, an almost empathetic view was expressed: 'A lot of the men are old and they just want sex without any emotional attachment.' Although the decoys are instructed to 'show no mercy' during a sting operation, one officer recounted an experience in which she tried to convince the john to leave:

There was one guy that I tried to help. He had just dropped off his wife at work and his daughter was in the back seat. He pulled up and wanted me to get in the car and go with him. I said: 'No, I don't do guys with their kids.' He said: 'Come on, we can go to my house.' I didn't want to get him arrested with the little girl in the back seat. She was about three years old and she could understand a little about what was going on. He insisted on me coming home with him and his daughter. He got arrested and I felt really bad. I don't know why I felt bad.

The decoys also acknowledge that for some men soliciting a prostitute may be their only option:

I had one guy who was a diabetic. He had just got back from dialysis and he was in poor health. He made the offer and I told him to pull around the corner. When I went in to do the paperwork, you see this guy and you know that the only time he's going to get lucky is when he pays for it. He was real gray, he looked horrible, and he had sores all over him. He was very unappealing. Sometimes you really feel bad for the guys like that.

### *Safety concerns*

The safety of the decoys is a top priority during a reverse prostitution sting. In some agencies, only one wired decoy is on the street at any given time. In others, three or four unwired girls will be making deals on the street at the same time. Some of the women believe that using more than one decoy at a time presents a higher risk, though these operations result in more arrests. The use of multiple decoys in one city resulted in 38 prostitution arrests within four hours.

When asked about safety issues one officer immediately stated: 'You don't have your gun with you.' Life-threatening incidents are rare, but one decoy, unarmed and without identification, was pulled into a john's car. She managed to escape unharmed after the on-duty sergeant rammed the perpetrator's vehicle. Additional security measures were implemented after the incident and the women are encouraged to take a self-defence class offered by the department. In another case, after a motel-room deal was made, the john jumped the decoy as she headed toward the bathroom. The Direct Action Response Team (DART) arrived within seconds from the next room. Later, she learned that this man had raped and assaulted several prostitutes.

The surveillance on the reverse prostitution stings is extensive, usually involving 15 to 20 officers. The female undercover decoys rely on exceptional teamwork from their colleagues. The women unanimously agreed that they felt safe on the street, despite the several threatening incidents experienced by a few decoys:

Just the knowledge that there are so many officers around you at all times; they drive around constantly in cars, hanging around on the sidewalk as bums, patrol cars all over the area. The safety concern issue goes out the window and

the longest time you would wait for back-up is 30 seconds. Everyone is always watching the decoy.

### *Who's the victim?*

The women officers all agree that prostitution results in a wide range of victimisation, and causes problems for neighbourhoods, businesses and homeowners. Women who have little choice but to sell their bodies for money to buy drugs or pay the rent have often been viewed as victims of society's larger social ills. One officer explained:

The other crime that surrounds prostitution (theft, rape, and drugs) is what causes the problems and prostitutes themselves can be horrific victims of other crimes that happen while they are working. It's not just that they're out there having sex, they get beaten up, they get attacked, they get killed, they get their money stolen — they are victims too.

Many of the officers expressed concerns about the consequences for the johns' family members: 'I won't say that I feel sorry for the johns, but I feel sorry for the family that he's putting in this position.' One officer related the story of the worst john that she had encountered; a wealthy, successful businessman on his way home to take his wife out for her birthday dinner. He decided to stop along the way for some paid 'French' (oral sex) and was arrested. When the wife arrived to take the property out of his vehicle because it was too expensive to be placed in the impound lot, she had no babysitter on short notice and was forced to bring her two small children. A male officer commented, 'That guy's crazy, did you see how beautiful his wife is?'. Another officer commented:

You have girls who are all demoralised and desensitised to their own needs and

you have johns who are abusive. You have the victim on their side and then you have the family members of the johns, wives, children at home — who knows what kind of diseases some of these girls carry because they don't do their health order-ins and get checked. Take that home to your wife and then she becomes a victim, the kids become victims, too.

#### *Effectiveness from a decoy's perspective*

The majority of the policewomen prostitute decoys expressed doubts about the effectiveness of reverse prostitution stings, but supported the effort as one more part of their job requiring arrest as mandated by city and state legislation. One officer emphatically stated:

The operations are not effective. There are an incredible amount of men looking for prostitutes and we don't even make a dent. It's frustrating. Their wives believe that it's the first time, but really it's just the first time they've been caught. I had a couple of guys that I personally arrested twice. It may serve as more of a deterrent for law-abiding people.

Officers, however, noted that the stings are productive in terms of the increased awareness by the johns of the potential for arrest but, ironically, men who still continue to solicit prostitutes just become more cautious. A somewhat pragmatic view was expressed by one officer: 'I think they are effective because I know when I returned to do another sting there are always guys saying: "Oh, are you a cop?". I always respond: "Why, are you? I'm not a cop. I'm just out here working".' Similarly, an officer said: 'I think the guys, once they've been busted, learn. It's really hard to get the recidivist; because once they've been caught they learn that undercover police officers won't get into the car.' Some undercover police decoys believe that if the johns

bother asking if the girl is a cop then they must know the act is wrong: 'I think it's effective to focus on johns. When they ask, "are you a cop?" they know it's wrong and either they've been busted before or a certain few get that humiliation from it and that's all they need.'

The specific deterrent effect of shaming linked to the initial arrest and, in Aurora and Denver, the publication of john pictures, health order-ins to public hospitals, and the seizure of personal vehicles are nearly impossible to hide from friends and family and are new twists in the war on prostitution. These factors have never been studied or documented, although one officer commented that the 'amount of embarrassment they go through is so much that they are going to think twice about doing it again'.

## **DISCUSSION**

Undercover work for women officers is a world apart from the social worker image of women who first entered law enforcement (Brown & Heidensohn, 2000). During the 1960s, females became more active in typical police field work and since then have worked in a variety of roles (Muraskin, 2000). Undercover prostitution details, on the one hand, may serve to link officers in the 'female cop culture' (Brown & Heidensohn). On the other hand, the ridicule from male officers may undermine the authority and confidence of women who act as decoys. This research suggests that joking among officers is used as a coping mechanism and assists in establishing bonds between male and female officers as women become essential members of the policing team. This joking and camaraderie also helps to form quick bonds between officers who sometimes do not know each other and are pulled from various bureaux. The women officers interviewed for this research enjoyed the excitement and variety

of the assignment. With limited opportunities, the role of a prostitute decoy in a reverse prostitution sting may represent the best avenue for gaining valuable undercover experience in order to move to other coveted positions within the department.

The prevalence of prostitution and the ongoing frustration with unsuccessful attempts to eliminate or reduce the supply has established a new set of challenges for law enforcement agencies (Pearl, 1987). The emphasis on arresting johns will continue to increase as more women officers are available to act as decoys. The actual deterrent effect of targeting johns remains unknown, but the continued demand for streetwalkers suggests that prostitution is unlikely to be eradicated through such measures. Additionally, opponents of the crackdowns argue that the penalties are out of proportion to the original offence, the tactics are too harsh on johns and serve to humiliate their families (Lefler, 1999). This point was made by women officers who expressed sympathy toward the families that are harmed. Cohen (1980) argues that policies associated with police efforts appear to represent discretionary practices that are ineffective or counterproductive. Contrary to these published accounts, several neighbourhood and citizen groups have been created to tackle the issues of street prostitution and the neighbourhood blight that it brings to urban residential areas. Whether or not the stings reduce solicitation, they serve to enhance perceptions among residents that the police are earnestly working on the problem and impacting crime in the neighbourhood.

Police control tactics are bolstered by arguments that customers are more easily deterred than prostitutes. Researchers have argued that prostitutes rarely consider arrest stigmatising, while arrested johns may be 'upstanding members of society' with 'stakes in conformity' (Sherman & Smith, 1992; Weidner, 2001), though this view

seems less likely to hold true for patrons seeking the services of streetwalkers. In the past, the arrest of a john for prostitution was easily kept quiet. Many jurisdictions simply released offenders with an order-in to court, bolstering the arguments made by Sherman and Smith, and Weider. Now several jurisdictions have mandatory arrest, seizure of vehicles, health checks, and force the johns to bail out of jail. These new procedures now in place are making it harder for johns to hide their illegal activities from their friends and family.

Only additional research on reverse prostitution arrest rates and recidivism will help to determine if arresting and shaming johns is effective. A limited number of studies show a reduction in recidivism for arrested johns and graduates of San Francisco's John School (eg, Weitzer, 2000). Eliminating a historically long and entrenched sex service that includes a wide client base is a huge problem. While it may be unlikely that reverse prostitution stings will diminish the supply and demand of prostitution, gender neutral enforcement may impact the dynamics of this briskly traded commodity.

Future research should focus on the effectiveness of reverse prostitution stings. Such measurement should focus on the following questions. Is the goal of reduced recidivism being achieved, particularly given the expense and safety concerns of women police decoys? Do reverse prostitution stings have a lasting and measurable effect on the quality of life in neighbourhoods? Are the shaming and blaming methods that are currently used on males who are arrested in reverse prostitution stings working? What current methods are the 'best practices' across the country and internationally? Has seizure or closure of vehicles when they are involved in prostitution helped to eliminate the problem, or is this practice further punishment to the innocent family members?

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**NOTE**

- (1) *People v Superior Court of Alameda County*, 19 Cal. 3rd, 338, (1997).

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