

D.I.S.C.

A Shared Solution:

**The positive effects of police agencies
and communities working in partnership to
solve the problems inflicted by the sex-trade.**



VICE UNIT V.P.D.

Developed and Implemented by:

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DiS.C.

A Sha^ped Solution

SUMMARY

Many communities struggle with the ramifications of prostitution in their neighborhoods. These ramifications include crime, health, safety, and security concerns as well as fears of children being recruited into the sex trade. Unfortunately, until recently, police have had little success in dealing with these issues. Officers lacked the necessary information to identify, track and interdict active participants in the sex trade. Pimps, consumers, and sex trade workers moved between jurisdictions, taking advantage of the fact that police departments rarely shared information. There was no method by which to coordinate investigative efforts and information on sex trade consumers. As a result, more often than not, rather than the problem being solved, it was just pushed into other neighborhoods.

A few years ago this all changed. In 1998 DISC (Deter and Identify Sex Trade Consumers) was developed by two officers, Detective Constables Oscar Ramos and Raymond Payette, in response to these various recognized community and law enforcement needs. A database focusing exclusively on the sex-trade and its participants,

DISC provides police with a tool that addresses the sex trade concerns of these communities, with particular emphasis on the protection of children and youth.

DISC was initially approved for a three-month pilot project commencing 98-01-06, to be run through the Vancouver Vice Unit with Det. Cst. Ramos and Det. Cst. Payette as coordinators. By the end of the three months the program had met with overwhelming success in dealing with all those involved in the sex trade and DISC was permanently adopted. Four years later, DISC has contributed not only to a significant drop in sex trade activity in these communities and the problems that accompany it but also to countless police investigations, and is directly responsible *for* solving six separate homicides in the past eighteen months. Since the development of the program, DISC has continued to expand throughout British Columbia, and is also now used by thirty-six police agencies from various jurisdictions across Canada and the U.S. with international interest also being expressed.

SCANNING

For decades, the Grandview-Woodlands area in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada had been a focal point for police due to its notorious prostitution stroll and the issues that came with it. In 1997 we were stationed as beat officers in this area and we quickly realized that the prostitution problem was not only getting worse but also that the community was getting more and more frustrated with the situation and with the inability of the police to effectively deal with it.

A big part of the problem was that police information was not being shared between jurisdictions and there was no database focusing exclusively on the sex trade; there was no means of tracking those who participated in it. This meant that anyone stopped by police in one area could be stopped again in another area without police knowing about it, resulting in offenders just moving from jurisdiction to jurisdiction to avoid apprehension. Pertinent information was being documented but there was no real way to observe trends or the behaviors and movements of certain individuals.

As beat officers we attended countless community meetings in which residents expressed their frustrations, which we could understand. Often street sex trade activities impact more sensitive public domains, taking place near, or in, school grounds, playgrounds, or parks. The fear of a child picking up a used condom or needle was very real. Female residents felt uncomfortable walking in their neighborhood for fear of being propositioned by johns cruising by. Sexual activity between prostitutes and their clients

was happening right outside childrens' bedroom windows. Parents were worried that their daughters could be recruited. Prostitution attracted not only johns to the area but a whole range of other people including drug dealers, drug addicts, and vandals. At night, vehicle traffic increased significantly. Not only do these circumstances give rise to obvious and immediate health and order concerns, but the long-term effects must also be considered. Sex trade activities in a neighborhood likely contribute to the decay of that neighborhood and its social structures.

As we looked closer at the issues, we noticed some disturbing trends:

- a marked increase in the number of juvenile prostitutes working the streets
- a proliferation of juvenile pimps arriving on the scene, recruiting young girls from school grounds, teen drop-in centers and shopping malls
- pimps moving their girls to different jurisdictions to avoid detection and apprehension
- an increase in calls from desperate parents who had their young daughters or sons recruited into prostitution and didn't know where to turn
- pimps taking away identification after the young girls were recruited into prostitution, and coaching them to give false names and ages to police

ANALYSIS

Both interviews with members of the community and first-hand observations led us to the conclusion that a new method of dealing with the problems of prostitution was

needed. We attended countless Parent Advisory Council (PAC), Block Watch, and Neighborhood Police meetings and discussed the issues with concerned citizens. While prostitution had always been a problem in this area, probably due to it being a lower socio-economic neighborhood, residents felt it was getting worse and wanted something done about it.

Our own experiences and observations frustrated us as well. When trying to conduct an investigation, searching any of the police databases was almost hopeless since it wasn't specific to the sex trade. We also knew that pimps and johns were evading our detection by moving from one neighborhood to the next. Finally, we had no way of passing on potentially important information to other jurisdictions and vice versa.

Our methods of dealing with the problem were ineffective. Running stings on the prostitutes and then placing "No-Go's"/area restrictions on them only led to the above mentioned moving into different neighborhoods. We were therefore doing little more than shuffling the problem from place to place.

We decided that we needed a way of tracking not only pimps but also johns and prostitutes. In order to be effective, this tracking system would need to be used by, and receive information from, as many jurisdictions as possible. As well, it would need to be specific to the prostitution and its related activities. Lastly, information being entered needed to be reliable and detailed in order to become an asset in investigations. Therefore, there would need to be some quality control on the types of data being inputted.

Our solution was DISC: Deter and Identify Sex Trade Consumers; a sex trade specific database.

RESPONSE

The DISC system has a number of core functions. These include:

- identifying and tracking pimps/recruiters, consumers, workers and others of special interest (for instance, an individual filming children in a park, or an individual being found with a "rape kit")
- protecting at-risk youth from sex-trade recruitment
- having all database entries be a result of direct police officer contact
- having all database entries capture the details of the contact and any unique characteristics
- having the entire database available to all DISC enabled police jurisdictions
- allowing any police jurisdiction on the DISC system to enter and query information
- providing an effective, efficient, and low cost method by which to address community concerns.

In particular, DISC focuses on three primary groups: johns, pimps, and at-risk youth, especially 14-16 year olds.

JOHNS

The primary purpose of DISC is to focus police attention on the sex-trade consumer (the john). We look at the trade from a supply-and-demand perspective, with

the belief that if johns lose their anonymity, they are less likely to re-offend and that this, by decreasing the demand, would decrease the supply (and the recruiting activity of pimps) and at the same time decrease the accompanying problems. DISC provides a proactive approach by identifying the consumer and establishing a database on him and his activities. Every john who gets entered in DISC is informed that he is now permanently in this police database. As the majority of johns do not have criminal records and see themselves as law-abiding citizens, this is generally quite disconcerting and acts as a very effective deterrent. In addition, DISC captures incident details of the police contact and any unique characteristics of both the john and his vehicle, such as a distinct accent, a bumper sticker in his rear window, etc., which could be crucial in an investigation.

PIMPS

Another key aspect of the DISC system is that it allows police departments to more effectively identify and track sex-trade recruiters. This is crucial in fighting the recruitment of our youth. As mentioned above, many pimps move their girls from jurisdiction to jurisdiction in order to avoid police detection and apprehension. As the critical aspect of "pimp" files is often records of victims' and suspects' travel from area to area, without DISC's centralized tracking system valuable information could not be exchanged and would therefore be useless.

Once an individual is identified, that person can be tracked irrespective of jurisdiction. Further, a history of a particular recruiter's previous recruitment strategies, police contacts, and other related police reports is now available to investigators.

AT-RISK YOUTH

Trying to prevent our at-risk youth from being recruited into the sex trade is our biggest priority. The average age of recruitment into the sex trade is 14 to 16 years of age. Unfortunately, the number of young females working the streets had been on the rise, with girls as young as 11 years old being recruited. This is an issue for every community as the majority of young recruits come from mid- to high-income neighborhoods and well-to-do families.

DISC provides clear information that assists police in developing effective strategies that protect our at-risk youth. DISC also provides excellent police intelligence information that can be used to locate "runaway" youth that have been lured into the sex trade and affords police the opportunity to enter into partnerships with families, youth, and social agencies to better protect and support the youth of our communities.

DISPLACEMENT

One of the major goals of DISC is to address the historical issue of the geographical displacement of the sex trade. Within North America there are specific "prostitution circuits" where a tremendous amount of sex trade activity takes place. These circuits can be mirrored in the DISC Information Management System as agencies using DISC can track individuals across boundaries and jurisdictions. This also means that moving from jurisdiction to jurisdiction doesn't afford offenders any protection. As

well, it provides a powerful investigative tool for the potential identification of suspects involved in criminal activities ranging from sexual assaults to pimping and homicides.

ASSESSMENT

By the end of the initial three-month pilot period we already began to see a drop in the numbers of both johns and sex trade workers working in the Grandview-Woodlands area. We also were getting positive feedback from the community who had also noticed the drop. As a result, DISC was adopted permanently. Since that time DISC has garnered some impressive results that include the following:

Traffic Study

- + After studying two high traffic sex trade intersections in Vancouver, a reduction of 35-42% in sex trade related vehicle traffic was achieved. This statistic results from comparing traffic counts in January of 1997 to traffic counts in June of 1999, which is particularly impressive considering that the summer months are typically busier than any others.

Investigations

- + Numerous pimps have been both identified and charged as a direct result of DISC information including Troy Sedlar, arrested on a Canada-wide warrant who at the time was pimping juvenile sex trade workers, and Shahrads Jahanian, who was arrested and charged with procuring and living off the avails of a juvenile sex trade worker.

- DISC has played a crucial role in the solving of six homicides in the past eighteen months. For example, in a recent homicide the suspect was identified and charged because of a DISC/prostitution stop in Vancouver. The suspect was stopped and identified and his information was placed on DISC at an earlier date. Subsequently, another police agency was able to lay charges and their only lead was the DISC stop in Vancouver. Therefore the information sharing was critical in this case.
- Acting exclusively on DISC information received from Calgary, Alberta, a neighboring province, a successful apprehension of two recently recruited juvenile females was made.
- In one case, additional information received led Vancouver DISC to locations in outlying areas that resulted in four arrests, five apprehensions, and the identification of three pimps.
- A recent investigation led to the rescue of an 11-year-old child being sexually exploited who was abducted and forcibly brought from Portland, Oregon across international borders to Vancouver. DISC played the pivotal role in the follow-up investigation that led to federal charges being laid against the three suspects.

Youth

- Hundreds of sexually exploited youth recruited into prostitution have been and are being identified through DISC and subsequently connected with support services and reunited with their families.

Johns

- . There is a very low recidivism rate among all Johns entered on DISC (below 1%).

Persons of Special Interest

- . During the past year DISC has identified twenty-five persons of special interest to police. These are persons whose activities have been brought to police attention by DISC. For example, Richmond RCMP contacted DISC in regards to two attempted child abductions. DISC was able to identify the suspect through DISC information in which the male was stopped by police after identifying himself as a police officer to sex trade workers

Community

- Strong support from community agencies and neighborhood organizations
- A substantial reduction in the number of sex trade workers
- A meaningful decrease in the number of juveniles forced to work the sex trade
- . Resources for the community to access and achieve direct police contact to address issues

Similar positive results have been achieved in ALL other DISC jurisdictions (although only Vancouver has completed a traffic study).

CONCLUSION

Prostitution' has always been an issue, both for police and the communities in which the transactions take place. DISC's goal is to bring a multi-faceted approach to resolving these issues. DISC provides police departments with critical information on sex trade participants where none has previously existed. This greatly benefits police officers in conducting various investigations, including homicides, sexual assaults, and other serious offenses. In addition, DISC focuses on the worst elements of the sex trade: the pimps, the recruiters of our youth. Further, DISC removes the veil of anonymity from sex-trade consumers. Anonymity is an important aspect of the sex trade and its removal has impacted the sex trade activities in our neighborhoods.

DISC's targeting of street level prostitution and all those involved has met with success on all levels, including addressing the affected communities' real concerns about the disintegration of their neighborhoods because of the health, traffic, and lifestyle impediments that the sex trade brings to an area. DISC provides a vehicle for police departments to help resolve and liase with concerned citizens of the community with particular emphasis on the protection of our children and youth.

Hopefully DISC will continue to expand to other jurisdictions across the continent. Simply put, the more police jurisdictions on the DISC system, the greater the amount of information on the database. This, in turn, enhances the usefulness of DISC as an investigative and enforcement tool, and provides a means by which to analyze patterns

and trends of individuals or the sex trade as a whole. To provide DISC access to all police jurisdictions will positively alter the dynamics of the investigative and enforcement relationship between police members and sex trade participants.

AGENCY AND OFFICER INFORMATION

The initiative, DISC, was proposed and implemented as a pilot project by us as a result of working with a community afflicted by prostitution. Past initiatives and models were examined and found to be lacking a comprehensive approach and we were seconded to work on this project. After meeting with the stakeholders (the residents of these communities) we developed a problem-oriented model to address these issues. Because of its immediate results, after three months DISC was implemented department wide. A year later it was adopted by other jurisdictions in western Canada and the United States.

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