

3. Developing More Effective Strategies for Curbing Prostitution

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The process by which a red light district in North London was transformed into a tranquil residential area in less than two years is described in this case study, first published as a Security Journal article (Matthews, 1990). The measures taken against street prostitution and associated problems of cruising consisted of intensive policing against prostitutes and pimps and a road closure scheme which severely restricted the opportunities for cruising. Not only were these measures highly successful, but they also produced some other benefits, in terms of reductions in auto theft and burglary, presumably because fewer offenders were being attracted to the district. Perhaps the most unexpected result concerned the apparent lack of displacement. The surrounding streets were unaffected and there was little evidence that the prostitutes had moved to nearby red light districts. It appears from interviews with the women involved, that many of them, especially the "away-day" girls who travelled to London each day by rail, may have simply desisted from an occupation to which they were only marginally committed (Matthews, 1986). The most frequent reason for involvement in prostitution given by 68 percent of the 70 women interviewed was: "Because you can earn better money than elsewhere." However, they seemed not to be so dependent on these earnings as the prostitutes studied by Lowman (1992) in downtown Vancouver, who were frequently supporting drug habits. Consequently, a scheme

to discourage cruising johns, similar to the one described here, merely resulted in displacement of the prostitutes to nearby locations. Other more recent schemes to discourage street prostitution in England reported by Matthews (1993), did achieve similar results to those in North London, though in each case the combination of measures varied because of local circumstances. Matthews (1993: 33) concludes: "... it is not enough to simply combine certain elements...What is critical is how such measures are combined and implemented...if (interventions) are to produce the maximum benefits, then they have to be implemented in a particular sequence with a great deal of thought, care and commitment." In other words, effective situational prevention is rarely a matter of using off-the-peg solutions; instead, it nearly always has to be carefully tailored to the specific problem and its setting.

THE PROBLEMS associated with curb-crawling (i.e. cruising or seeking prostitutes) and prostitution have become a major concern among a wide range of communities in a number of countries in recent years (Cassels, 1985; Levine, 1988; Lowman, 1986; Shaver, 1985). In each of these countries, the problem may display different characteristics, but usually involves a number of predictable attributes. Primarily, it tends to heighten the level of harassment and intimidation on the street, particularly for the female population living in the area. Relatedly, this harassment is often compounded by other forms of nuisance and disturbance associated with a continuous stream of traffic throughout the day and night. The combined effect of these pressures is to heighten the general sense of insecurity, to fragment community networks, and to limit personal mobility and restrict freedom of movement. In London, it was found that many residents living in the inner city refrain from going out because of the fear of crime (Jones *et al.*, 1986). Among women, this results in what amounts to an informal curfew. In "red-light" districts, these problems and restrictions tend to be compounded. In poorer neighborhoods characterized by high levels of incivilities, the result is often, as Wilson and Kelling (1982) have suggested, a spiral of decline in which the message is transmitted that the area is a legitimate target for a variety of crimes.

It is not only that curb-crawling and prostitution are simply the causes of decline, but it may well be that they are attracted to areas where decline and social disorganization are already taking place. The important point is that, once curb-crawling and prostitution become established in an area, the rate of decline is almost invariably accelerated. Even though the problem tends to have a relatively low priority nationally, it can become the major concern in the specific areas in which it occurs (Pease, 1988; Jones *et al.*, 1986).

It is significant that the degree of concern that residents in "red-light" areas have expressed in relation to this problem has increased significantly in recent years. This is not simply a matter of the objective problem itself becoming more pronounced. Changing attitudes appear to involve changing levels of public tolerance, growing demands for greater freedom of movement, as well as changing conceptions of the division between public and private space. Therefore, not surprisingly, the demands to do something about these problems have come, as it were, from "below." Often, however, residents have found that their demands have been dismissed and law enforcement and other agencies have chosen to concentrate on various other, more "serious" problems.

When the police have responded to the problem, they have normally organized their

intervention through vice squads, which have focused predominantly on the street prostitutes, arresting them for soliciting and related offenses. This form of policing, which is currently in operation in many urban centers in England, has, however, been shown to have limited effectiveness.

Traditional Policing Methods

The traditional method of policing street prostitution in English towns and cities is to conduct a series of sweeps through the area. Most of the policing is done by car, and girls are followed, cautioned, or arrested, taken to the station, and prosecuted, and normally within a few days, they appear in court, pay a fine, and then are back on the streets working "overtime" to pay it off. Some prefer to opt for short prison sentences if they are unable or unwilling to pay the fine.

Curb-crawlers (male clients) pose a slightly different problem. Because the current legislation places the onus on the police to prove "persistence," it means that the police feel obliged to follow suspected curb-crawlers for a considerable period of time before stopping them and questioning them. Most at this stage receive a warning, and very few are prosecuted. Thus, the police find that dealing with curb-crawlers is a very time-consuming and unrewarding task.

In periods of heightened pressure, the police tend to "crack down" and swamp the area by throwing all available manpower into repeated sweeps. The effect of such a strategy normally is to provide a temporary reduction while police resources remain available. Inevitably, however, the police presence diminishes and the problem reemerges. This cycle can be maintained for many years. It is an extremely limited, time-consuming, and expensive operation. The end result is the creation of a "manageable" level of prostitution and curb-crawling in which the problem is continuously recycled rather than removed.

This recycling process tends to be reinforced through the informal relations that are built-up between the police and the prostitutes over a period of time. The police and prostitutes may soon be on a first-name basis, and a "working relation" is established. The police are, therefore, able to give the impression, both to their superiors and local residents, that they are doing something by showing lengthy arrest sheets, while maintaining both their own position and that of the more persistent prostitutes by organizing the rates and distribution of arrests for soliciting.

Changes in public attitudes have, however, meant that the traditional style of policing is becoming widely viewed as inadequate. Local residents have increased the pressure on the police to work out a more effective and enduring solution. It was these pressures that surfaced in the Finsbury Park area of North London between 1980 and 1986 and that underpinned what was to prove one of the most effective attempts to combat the problems associated with prostitution and curb-crawling in England. It involved a multi-agency approach, in which the police worked closely with the local residents and the local authority to develop a response that involved new styles of intensive policing, combined with a traffic-management scheme that was designed to remove, or at least significantly reduce, the incidence of curb-crawling and soliciting in the area.

Multi-agency Policing

It became increasingly apparent during the 1980s that the police operating in isolation were likely to have only a limited effectiveness (Burrows and Tarling, 1985). The

employment of more police or more comprehensive forms of policing would be only of a marginal benefit if the targets of crime were left unprotected. On the other hand, the adoption of locks and bolts and other security devices was seen to have limited effectiveness if not supplemented by other interventions (Safe Neighbourhood Unit, 1985; Forrester *et al.*, 1988; Lea *et al.*, 1988). The necessity of developing a more comprehensive approach to crime reduction was clearly recognized by Sir Kenneth Newman, who wrote that

My strategy continues to reflect the fact that the force cannot provide tidy solutions to the many problems that confront Londoners and impair their quality of life. Indeed, it would be a monstrous deceit for anyone to attempt to sustain such a fiction. The major resources of crime reduction are to be found in the community itself and in other public and voluntary agencies (Newman, 1986:7).

The former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police clearly saw that if police effectiveness was to be noticeably improved, it would need to develop relations with the community organizations and with a range of relevant agencies. As Kinsey *et al.*, (1986) have argued, a multi-agency approach involves two things: first, a shift from reactive to proactive policing, and second, a sharing of the responsibility for crime prevention and control with other agencies.

Fortuitously, the growing interest in multi-agency initiatives in London coincided with the growing demands in the Finsbury Park area of North London for an effective police response to the problem. The police attended meetings set up by the Finsbury Park Action Group (FPAG), which facilitated better links between the police and the public.

Residents had also approached the local authority and asked them to restrict access into the area in order to deter curb-crawlers. Again, by good fortune (rather than good will), the local authority was planning a traffic management scheme for the area and was able to incorporate the suggestions of the FPAG in a way that rationalized its own proposals.

Within a relatively short period of time, agreement was reached through a series of regular meetings among the police, the local authority, and the local residents. It was decided that a combined offensive, involving more intensive forms of policing on one hand, should be combined with a traffic management scheme on the other.

Intensive Policing

In the period prior to the implementation of a road-closure scheme, the police implemented a diverse range of interventions directed not only at the prostitutes and the clients, but also at the pimps and the local landlords, who made short-term accommodation readily available for purposes of prostitution.

During 1982, the number of women charged with soliciting was 181, and in the year prior to the implementation of the road-closure scheme (1983), it rose to 666. During this period, a number of women were repeatedly arrested. Prostitutes on the streets were a relatively easy target for the police. But during this period the police also began to turn their attention to the curb-crawlers. In this period, which preceded the passing of the Street Offences Act (1985), which made curb-crawling an offense, the police gave a mixture of formal and informal cautions to suspected curb-crawlers. In the vast majority of cases, this level of intervention appeared to be very effective in deterring the clients. According to police records, very few reappeared in the area after having received a caution.

During 1984, 12 pimps were arrested, together with five brothel keepers. Although the

numbers involved were relatively small, these prosecutions were to prove significant, since they involved the closing of various houses on which the prostitution trade was dependent.

A critical factor during this period of intensive policing was the vastly improved flow of information from the public to the police. This created greater efficiency and the more effective deployment of police resources. This relationship was sustained and developed before and after the road-closure scheme was implemented.

Designing out Curb-crawling

By the time that the road-closure scheme came into effect, the 16-strong vice squad had effected a considerable reduction in the problem and brought it down to manageable proportions. Intensive policing, however, was sustained for a period following the implementation of the road-closure scheme.

The volume of traffic — both during the day and throughout the night — had been extremely high for a residential area. Heavy traffic was often accompanied by horn blowing and by drivers leaning out of car windows and calling to or shouting at women on the streets. Occasionally bitter interchanges between curb-crawlers and local residents took place.

Although the vast majority of the residents in the immediate area supported the road-closure scheme, there were objections from some residents — particularly from those who lived in the surrounding streets. The nature of the objections to the scheme was two-fold. On one hand, local residents were concerned that a road-closure scheme may act to design “in” rather than design “out” the problem — that is, by placing physical barriers around the area, the enclosed area might become a home for a range of criminal activities and attract a number of “undesirables” who might see the enclosed area as affording them some degree of protection from the police who would have difficulty pursuing them in police cars.

The second major concern particularly evident among the residents in the surrounding streets was the fear of displacement. Prostitution, after all, it was argued, was the “oldest profession” and was therefore unlikely to disappear. Also, although it may well be the case that certain “opportunistic” crimes may be reduced through environmental changes, prostitution was unlikely to be significantly reduced by such a method. Such attitudes are widespread, and as Ronald Clarke has pointed out:

The dispositional bias of criminological theory has tended to reinforce popular beliefs in the inevitability of displacement (“bad will out”). People find it hard to accept that the occurrence of actions with often momentous consequences for both the victim and the offender can turn on apparently trivial situational contingencies of opportunities or risks (Clarke, 1983:245).

The expectation held by many was that prostitution would be displaced in some form to neighboring areas or that the clients and the prostitutes would find alternative, and possibly even more, undesirable methods of “doing business.”

Despite these objections, the scheme eventually came into operation early in 1985, and within a relatively short period of time, a remarkable transformation occurred. Soliciting and curb-crawling virtually disappeared, and the area was transformed from a noisy and hazardous “red-light” district into a relatively tranquil residential area. Not only that, but many of the fears and anxieties about the possible negative effects of this strategy did not occur. Instead, the overall result appeared extremely positive and superseded even the most optimistic expectancies. The significant benefits that resulted from this multi-agency

initiative included the following:

(a) *An increased sense of security.* This was particularly evident among the female residents of the area. But it was not only the women, for whom harassment and intimidation had almost become a normal part of life, who benefited from this intervention. Many of the male members of the community of all ages undoubtedly felt less constrained and more secure.

(b) *A reduction in the volume of traffic.* The volume of traffic circulating in the area — particularly late at night — declined considerably. This, in turn, reduced the level of noise and congestion and made the streets safer for all members of the community.

(c) *A reduction in the number of crimes reported.* Table 1 shows that in the 6-month period prior to the implementation of the road-closure scheme, the number of crimes reported to the police in the area was 475, of which 110 were motor vehicle crimes, 121 involved burglary, and the rest involved a range of serious crimes. In the corresponding 6-month period after the scheme was implemented, the total number of reported crimes decreased to 275, with the number of serious crimes going down by almost 50%. These figures are extremely significant, since the expectation would be that improved police-public relations would result in a *higher* level of crime being reported to the police.

TABLE 1
RECORDED INCIDENCE OF CRIME IN FINSBURY PARK 1984/5 - 1985/6

Type of Crime	Sept/Feb 1984/5	Sept/Feb 1985/6
Motor Vehicle Crime	110	74
Major Crime	76	40
Burglary	121	97
Total Crime	475	275

Source: Matthews (1986)

(d) *An improved relationship among the police, the public, and the local authority.* As a result of the links that were developed among the police, the public, and the local authority during the implementation of this successful strategy, more meetings were set up to devise coordinated ways to deal with other problems in the area. Prior to this initiative, the public's confidence in the police was extremely low. However, as a result of taking the residents' concerns seriously, police-public relations improved considerably.

(e) *The anticipated level of displacement did not occur.* The expectation that prostitutes and their clients would move to surrounding areas was not borne out. The surrounding streets remained unaffected, and the evidence gathered from a nearby "red-light" district indicated that few of the women who had been operating in Finsbury Park had moved to new locations.

The apparent lack of displacement, more than any of the other positive effects of this initiative, is probably most remarkable. The belief in the inevitability of displacement, however, seems to be bound up with a conception of motivation of the prostitutes and the clients that may be unrealistic. An examination of the prostitutes and the clients provided some indication of why the anticipated level of displacement did not occur.

The Prostitutes and their Clients

The prostitutes who worked in Finsbury were not a homogeneous group. They expressed a variable commitment to "the game" and operated under different levels of pressure and incentives. Taken very broadly, the large number of women who worked in the Finsbury Park area between 1983 and 1986 can be divided into three groups. The first group comprised a "hard core" of about 30 women who lived fairly locally, had a long-term commitment to prostitution, and had been in the game for a number of years. The second group involved women and girls who came to London principally for the purpose of practicing prostitution. This group, often referred to as "away-day" girls, came to London, and Finsbury Park in particular, either because they had heard that it was a good area to work or they had a contact address. The ready availability of cheap accommodation that was let out to prostitutes by local landlords undoubtedly provided an attraction to women who were thinking of working as prostitutes in London. It is estimated that there were about 200-300 "away-day" girls engaged in prostitution in Finsbury Park over this period. The third category involved a number of women who engaged in prostitution on a much more sporadic and temporary basis. Many of these women drifted in and out of prostitution and were on average much younger than the other two groups. The very fact that they drifted in and out of prostitution and were sometimes involved for only very short periods makes any estimation of their numbers extremely difficult, but they almost certainly constituted the largest group.

Research carried out in 1983 by Valerie Dunn involved interviews with seventy prostitutes working in Finsbury Park. Most of this sample were drawn from category two and a few from the third category. The vast majority were between 20 and 35 and most of them had been on "the game" for 2-3 years. Table 2 shows answers to the question: Why do you do prostitution?

TABLE 2
ANSWERS BY 70 PROSTITUTES IN FINSBURY PARK TO THE QUESTION:
"WHY DO YOU DO PROSTITUTION?"

a. Because you can earn better money than elsewhere	68%
b. You like meeting different men	54%
c. You like the independence	49%
d. To supplement social security	45%
e. There is no employment available	40%
f. To get your own back on men	35%
g. Because it fits with your family commitments	31%
h. To pay for addiction	18%
i. Because somebody forced you	12%

Source: Dunn (1984)

These alternative replies obviously were not exclusive and many of the women expressed mixed and sometimes conflicting reasons for why they had taken up prostitution. This complex mixture of responses is, however, probably not very dissimilar to the type of responses which most people would give for explaining their occupational choices.

It was evident that the intensive policing in the area prior to the implementation of the road-closure scheme had deterred many of those women whose commitment to the game was sporadic. The "away-day" girls, on the other hand, were, over this period, subject to systematic surveillance and arrest, which made soliciting increasingly difficult to pursue. As the level of fines were also increased during this period, the activities of the local courts provided a further disincentive. It would seem that over a period of about 1 year, most of the girls gave up prostitution or moved back home or elsewhere. For many, their normal period of involvement in prostitution may have been 3 or 4 years, and, therefore, the effect of intensive policing was to shorten that period by a year or two in most cases. Most importantly, the message was undoubtedly transmitted to other potential "away-day" girls that working in Finsbury Park was becoming extremely difficult. There did remain a "hard core" of about 20 women operating in the area, but most of these found it more congenial to work from home via advertisements or from the local public house (The Finsbury Park Tavern).

As for the clients, their level of motivation was also much lower than was generally assumed. Most of them seemed to be deterred by a police caution. The profile that emerged of the average "punter" (John) was that he was between 35 and 45 years of age, married, and living in surrounding suburban areas. The vast majority were, according to police classifications, "white Europeans" or of "Mediterranean appearance." The occupational distribution of the 79 curb-crawlers for whom formal cautions were issued was that 15 were unemployed, 14 were manual workers, five were from service occupations, 10 were salesmen, 23 were tradesmen (many of whom worked in the building industry), and 12 were from the managerial and professional classes.

Thus, it transpired that the motivation of both the prostitutes and their clients was highly differentiated, and, in many cases, they exhibited a much lower level of commitment than was expected. Through a combination of interventions that embodied proactive, attritional, and deterrent elements, the problem was reduced with an apparently low level of displacement.

Conclusions

There can be little doubt that the problems associated with prostitution and curb-crawling could have been effectively overcome only through a multi-agency initiative. A comprehensive resolution to the problem required not only a diverse police initiative aimed simultaneously at soliciting and curb-crawling as well as pimps and brothel keepers, but also required environmental changes. It is also essential to have an organized residents association able to initiate, coordinate, and monitor the various processes. The interventions of the police and the council proved to be mutually reinforcing. It became apparent after a year or so that the police on their own may well have been able to maintain the problem within reasonable limits, but the situation required a more permanent disincentive if it was to achieve a satisfactory long-term solution. By the same token, the road-closure scheme on its own, without any organized police presence, may have created a more entrenched and contained "red-light" district. Thus, the sequence of intervention is crucially important, since it seems necessary to establish a police presence in the area *before* the environmental changes take place. If the initiatives occur in the reverse order, prostitution could take forms that might aggravate and intensify the problems.

Clearly, implementing such a multi-agency offensive does not guarantee automatic

and inevitable results. The context in which the strategy is implemented may well affect the manner of intervention and the possibilities of obtaining a positive outcome. Therefore, if this type of approach is to be replicated, there are a number of questions that require more detailed examination. First, we need to find out how this strategy needs to be adapted in order for it to be effective in different situations. Second, the issue of displacement requires further investigation. Displacement is clearly the Achilles' heel of crime prevention initiatives. It is therefore important that more extensive measures of displacement be developed and employed in future studies of this type. Third, we also need to know more about the commitment to prostitution and curb-crawling of the men and women involved. The indication is that it is a great deal less than most people believe. Any comprehensive theory of crime prevention must incorporate an assessment of the motivation of offenders and examine the relationship between victims and offenders in more detail. The evidence from Finsbury Park certainly indicates that curb-crawling and prostitution may be far more "opportunistic" crimes than is generally imagined. It appears to be not so much the outcome of a fixed biological need meeting an ineluctable economic force as that of a relatively contingent and flexible arrangement that is certainly reducible and may well be removable. If we are to respond constructively to growing community pressures to deal with this problem, then it seems we need to develop and refine the type of multi-agency approach that proved so successful in North London.