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LAPD changes its game to combat sex trade

Officers are targeting johns and pimps more often and with harsher penalties

By Kelly Goff
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LOS ANGELES — A white Ford F-150 cruises into the parking lot of a nondescript strip mall across from the train tracks on San Fernando Road in Pacoima. The driver, a heavysset guy — built like a linebacker, clad in a Michael Vick jersey and jeans — lumbers out and then pauses.

A brunette in tight jeans and high heels standing on the corner has caught his eye. He takes a good long moment to look her up and down, then ducks into the convenience store.

After his purchase, he backs up his truck and pulls up alongside the woman. The two chat, a deal is struck, and he heads out of the parking lot to meet her on a dimly lit side street.

It's a scene that happens all-too-often in certain parts of Los Angeles, police and community members say. A handful of main drags in the city are plagued by prostitutes walking the streets at all hours, and men cruising for them with little regard for the legality or impact on the community.

On this particular night in March, the script takes a different twist.

From seemingly out of nowhere sirens scream and lights flash as two uniformed police officers on motorcycles roll up behind the man's truck.

The woman is an undercover cop, part of a periodic police task force designed to send a message to the streets. With a furtive gesture, the brunette in tight jeans had signaled other officers that the man had solicited her for prostitution.

But being arrested may not have been the worst thing to happen to him this evening. As officers order the man out of his truck and pat him down, an older woman charges down the street toward the scene yelling, followed by a second, younger woman and a little boy and girl.

"Why are you taking my daddy?" the little boy cries, as the women — apparently his mother and wife — yell at the officers, not yet realizing why the man is being hauled off in cuffs.

He'd allegedly tried to pay for sex on the same block as his own family home.

That hardly fazes Sgt. Scott Murray, who oversees the vice division at the Los Angeles Police Department's Foothill Division. He's seen plenty of brazen solicitations: would-be johns with their babies strapped into child seats in the back of the car. City and county employees in their taxpayer-owned vehicles.

"These guys are so focused, they don't see anything around them," Murray said as the two women on San Fernando Road continued screaming.

And the story, once caught, is almost always the same: "I didn't know she was a prostitute."

New Approach To An Old Problem

That's one of the oldest excuses for the world's oldest profession. And in some parts of the city, it's being heard a lot more often these days.

Los Angeles police and prosecutors are cracking down on prostitution. But this time they have a new mindset. They are targeting johns and pimps more often and with harsher penalties, but aiming to treat the women as victims of sex trafficking who need counseling and a way off the streets more than a night in jail.

"No one chooses to be a prostitute. No little girl wakes up and says 'This is what I want to do with my life'," Deputy Chief Jorge Villegas, who oversees operations in the San Fernando Valley, said. "We can focus on helping the girls most by getting the men who are taking advantage of them off the streets."

There are plenty of would-be johns to be caught. In one three-hour sting in mid-March along two known tracks for prostitution in Sun Valley, vice officers arrested 10 men. Every time an undercover officer went out to the corner, it was mere minutes before a customer pulled up, made an arrangement, and then either drove down a darkly lit street off San Fernando Road or pulled into the driveway of the shabby Corona Motel just off Lankershim Boulevard. Each one was all too eager to book a hotel room for the \$18 hourly rate and pick up a condom for \$1 at the front desk. Safety first, after all.

A similar sting in Van Nuys the same month netted 18 arrests of men for solicitation.

The stings focused on the demand side of the ongoing prostitution problem plaguing 17 tracks across the city of Los Angeles — areas where pimps direct women under their control to work and where johns know they can find prostitutes willing to take money for sexual acts.

Not too many years ago, officials acknowledge, the fight against prostitution was mostly focused on street-level vice cops arresting women off the streets, jailing them for a night and adding another misdemeanor to their record. Counseling was minimal. Johns sometimes were caught and embarrassed, but little happened to them in the way of actual penalties.

And pimps were rarely, if ever, caught or prosecuted, and side-stepped most of the shaming left for the women and johns, despite their explicit role in perpetuating the violent trade in human flesh.