

As prostitution arrests rise, Metro puts more johns on Web

Civil libertarians complain, but police hope it's a deterrent

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The Tennessean

Published: Thursday, 06/22/06

With one click, you can find their mug shots, addresses, license plate numbers and, sometimes, how much they agreed to pay for what sex act. Since last July, the pictures of people cited in police stings on charges of patronizing prostitution have been displayed on a Metro police Web site under a disclaimer that all those pictured are presumed innocent until proven guilty in hopes that prospective johns will think twice about trying to buy sex. But almost a year after the Web site's launch, arrests for the offense are up 56 percent and police officials say it's impossible to measure whether the effort is working.

Civil libertarians complain that, without a clear public safety benefit, the site is a waste of police resources and unnecessarily ruins the lives of people arrested for a relative minor crime. "The question needs to be, 'is this information protecting the community at large?' I doubt it is," said Hedy Weinberg, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Tennessee.

As of last week, Metro officers had cited 282 people on charges of soliciting prostitution since the site's creation in July, up from 160 during the previous 12-month period. Police officials say the increase in arrests might be the result of stepped-up enforcement and that statistics alone can't adequately speak to the Web site's value. "If we've prevented one person from bringing a sexually transmitted disease home, getting robbed or hurt, it's worthwhile," Metro police spokesman Don Aaron said.

The Metro site, which is similar to those operated by several other police agencies nationwide, keeps the images of those arrested during prostitution stings for 60 days. During its first year, the site has averaged about 3,500 hits per month, according to Metro figures. Anyone caught soliciting prostitution in Davidson

County is typically issued a misdemeanor citation and given a court date. Convictions carry a fine and a jail term of up to six months. The penalties can be stiffer if the person is caught within 100 feet of a church or a mile and a half of a school.

One Midstate man arrested during a Metro sting operation this month said he expected the damage from having his picture posted on the Web site to be worse than the criminal penalties. "Technically, this just ruined my life for nothing," said Terry Walker of Clarksville. "I'm going to lose my kids, my job. How does one react to that?" [So, he is not responsible for his actions. The city has ruined his life, not his own actions. - Donna]

Walker, 43, was cited on a charge of soliciting prostitution at Cedar Hill Park in Madison. He was fingerprinted and photographed at a makeshift booking station inside a Metro Parks Department workshop, in view of several officers and members of the media who were invited to the sting. Walker, dressed in a pinstripe dress shirt, tie and wedding ring, said he had been reading the newspaper in his parked car when he was offered oral sex for \$15. He said he made a mistake when he got out of his car and followed the woman into the woods. The woman turned out to be an undercover Park Police officer. "I didn't actually do anything," Walker said. "I can see doing this for child molesters, indecent exposure, something that would be considered deviant." [He thinks that buying sex is just normal. Well, batterers used to think that having a fight with your wife and hitting her was just normal too. - Donna]

Prostitution offenses are not the only local crimes searchable on the Internet. The state's Web site offers a similar page on which registered sex offenders are listed by county. Pending and closed cases in Davidson County can be searched by name and birth date on the Criminal Court Web site. Weinberg says the prostitution Web site lacks the public-service value that the other databases offer, and that it violates due-process rights because the individuals posted on the site have not been convicted. "What is the rationale? Is this rehabilitation so they will not commit the act again, or humiliation and shame? To me, it appears the focus is on humiliating and shaming."

Police officials said they would be willing to remove a photo from the site earlier if it can be shown that the person has been cleared of the criminal charges in court. None of the suspects have made such a request during the site's history, Aaron said. Some Nashvillians said they welcome anything that might help reduce prevalence of prostitution. On Murfreesboro Pike in south Nashville, a known problem area for prostitution, employees at a Taco Bell said crime in the area had grown out of control. Prostitutes hang out in front of the business and often come into the restaurant's restrooms to wash up, district manager Nuri Bulut said. Any time of day, he said, he can look out and see a woman approach a car that's creeping slowly by. After 8 p.m., Bulut locks one of the store's two entrances so that employees can monitor who is coming and going. "It's gotten to the point where I won't bring my own family to the store," Bulut said. "I don't want them to see that picture."

Rose Covington of east Nashville said she had to take matters into her own hands to reduce the impact of prostitution on her nine grandchildren. When cars pull into the alley near her Meridian Street home to pick up a prostitute, she walks up with her phone in hand and knocks on the window. "I tell them I'm going to call the police and turn in their tag number if they don't leave," she said. Police have increased patrols on her street, but they can't be there 24 hours a day, she said. "I don't need my grandkids to see this and think it's normal," Covington said. Limiting the negative impact of prostitution on communities is a key aim of the prostitution Web site, police officials said.

"Critics (of the Web site) don't live in the neighborhoods complaining to the Police Department... where children may have to walk home from school and pass a prostitute talking about a sex act," Aaron said. "And just maybe, to a small extent, (the site) is helping improve the quality of life in the neighborhoods where prostitution occurs." The threat of public humiliation might serve as an effective deterrent, even for prostitution customers who are sex addicts, said Helen Fisher, an anthropologist at Rutgers University who studies sexuality and romantic love. "Humiliation and social exposure were mankind's original form of social control, and that's exactly what the Police Department is doing. You can be quite anonymous in our modern culture, but when you break that down, you've tapped into a very strong social force."