

**WINNING THE PROSTITUTION  
CLEAN-UP CAMPAIGN  
TEAMWORK, ROUTINE, AND DANGER**

**The World of the Vice/Prostitution Unit  
in Oakland**

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**Presented to the  
Citizen's Police Academy Alumni Association  
January 5, 1999**

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### **Introduction**

The mission of the Vice/Prostitution Unit, which is part of the larger Vice/Narcotics Section, is cleaning up prostitution in Oakland by identifying the areas of highest prostitution activity and eliminating this activity as possible. To this end, the Prostitution Unit, along with the rest of the Vice/Narcotics Section, is housed in a small suite of offices in the basement of the Police Department, located in downtown Oakland on 7<sup>th</sup> and Broadway. The two units are combined, since there is a close connection between drugs and prostitution. About 90% of the prostitutes are drug addicts, according to police estimates, although most prostitutes do not sell drugs themselves.

- **A Brief Historical Overview**

At one time, there was far more prostitution in Oakland. Back in the mid-1980s, perhaps 6 or 7 attractive, stylishly dressed girls might hang out on a corner in the neighbors where prostitution was concentrated. There was an active circuit, in which girls traveled from British Columbia and Portland, Oregon to Oakland and Los Angeles, and many of the local girls worked for pimps.

However, this high level of prostitution activity was very upsetting to people in the neighborhood. The women were continually on the streets, and they attracted other criminal activity, including drugs, leading to a community outcry against prostitution, as well as drugs. In response, the Oakland PD began a stepped-up campaign against prostitution. There were increased arrests and the police began keeping a list with the names of arrested prostitutes, while the city and county courts upped the penalties for engaging in prostitution. For a 1<sup>st</sup> offense, the prostitute would typically pay a \$100 fine, go on 2 years of court probation, view an AIDS film, and submit to "stay out of areas of prostitution" or SOAP conditions. Then, should the prostitute be found in these areas and arrested for a second offense, she was looking at 10-20 days in jail, along with 2 years of probation. Plus she faced the potential of 6 months of county jail time if arrested again, though this was suspended if she completed her probation successfully. For the 3<sup>rd</sup> arrest, the jail time went up to 45 days, along with 2 years of probation and 6 months suspended jail time. Then, for the 4<sup>th</sup> arrest, the jail time increased to 90 days, followed by probation and another 6 months of potential but suspended jail time.

The result of this crackdown was that most of the pimps, circuit girls, and other well-dressed prostitutes fled the scene, leaving mainly the neighborhood girls who were commonly drug addicts. Most were on General Assistance or welfare and unable to

hold jobs, so they worked the streets to get money to support their heroin or crack addiction or simply to survive from day to day. And typically, they didn't dress in the alluring way of the more professional prostitutes. Instead, they generally dressed in everyday levis or sweats, so they looked much like any other girls in the neighborhood. But they gave off signs to let the men driving by recognize them as hookers. They would walk in dark areas, look over their shoulders or walk backwards as they walk, wave at the men driving by, and if a man slowed down, they would nod to show they were "playing".

Over the years, the cops have gotten good at recognizing these signs of prostitution, which they use in their trolling operations to identify and arrest prostitutes, and in their decoy operations to attract and arrest johns.

- **The Prostitution Unit Today**

Now the focus of the Prostitution Unit is eliminating the last remnants of prostitution. Currently, the Unit has two regularly assigned officers, Roger Smith<sup>1</sup>, in charge of the Unit, and his assistant, Nancy Brown. They are generally free to plan and schedule activities, since Smith has gained the trust of his superior officers to take on this responsibility. At the same time, these plans are subject to department policies, procedures, and training guidelines for how to conduct operations, most of these written down in detail, as well as to the department priorities for fighting crime. Also, the Unit's activities are subject to the supervision of the sergeant in charge of the entire Vice/Narcotics Section, Sgt. Ken Olson<sup>2</sup>, and the Section's commanding officer, Lt. Rick Hart. Since the Unit is limited in what it can do with only two full-time officers -- in part because the Vice/Narcotics Section's resources are currently focused on a crackdown on drugs in Oakland, the Unit is assisted by other police officers and personnel when it organizes its field operations. These officers and other staffers typically work on an overtime basis, after signing up for a scheduled operation and being selected to participate. While some of these participants work in narcotics, others are patrol officers, sergeants from other divisions, and police technicians. In some cases, assisting participants even include officers from other agencies, such as from the ATF (Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms).

Besides conducting these operations, the two Vice Unit officers do some investigative and community service activities on their own, such as responding to community complaints about prostitutes working in the neighborhood and checking if these complaints are valid. Then, they use this information to decide where to target the Unit's field operations, which are devoted to arresting prostitutes or johns to get them off the streets and discourage others from engaging in prostitution in the area.

To achieve this goal, the Prostitution Unit coordinates three types of operations:

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<sup>1</sup> All the names of the officers I observed and interviewed in the operations are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> This is also a pseudonym, since he was one of the officers I observed and interviewed.

- Trolling, which involves looking for and arresting street prostitutes;
- Decoy operations, which involve having female officers or civilians pose as prostitutes in order to arrest the Johns who try to pick them up;
- Stings, usually in hotel rooms, where a team of officers arrest prostitutes or escort service workers, who come to their room to engage in prostitution, after an officer responds to their ads.

Most of the operations involve trolling and using decoys. Generally, the Vice Unit conducts one or two operations a week, typically one for trolling and one with decoys, in the areas of Oakland most known for prostitution. These are primarily in the flatlands of West Oakland along the San Pablo and MacArthur corridors and in East Oakland along International Boulevard (formerly East 14<sup>th</sup> Street) from 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue to the San Leandro border. The day and times vary, so the prostitutes and their customers will be more likely to be caught, because they are unaware of the police activity, although many operations are from 5-11 p.m., and often on a Saturday night, since this is when much of the prostitution occurs.

Although there is general knowledge on the street that the police are conducting these activities, the prostitutes, johns, and community residents don't know where and when. And that's the way the Vice Team likes it. If the prostitutes and johns are generally aware that the police are conducting these operations, maybe they will stay away. But if they don't know exactly when these operations will occur and try to engage in prostitution anyway, they will be more likely to be caught.

Typically, though the day and time change, these two major operations - trolling and using decoys -- are organized like clockwork, with the same basic team structure and game plan for the 5 or 6 hours over which each operation occurs. In fact, both of these operations are organized very much like a game, in which the cops play together as a team to find and arrest the prostitutes and johns, who are, though not very successfully, trying to evade them. Of course, this operation is not something the cops themselves consider as a game, because they are dedicated to responding to the concerns of the community to get rid of prostitution. Also, there are real potential dangers for the women when they work as prostitutes as well as for the cops in carrying out these operations. And the women themselves are often acting as prostitutes because of their very desperate conditions due to their addiction and/or lack of economic skills and other means of support. But the process of finding and arresting these prostitutes and johns does take on the characteristics of a game, with rules of play, objectives, teamwork, and other qualities game play. In fact, many types of games and game simulations are used by corporations, the military, educational institutions, and other organizations for teaching and training purposes.

As they play this game, the police are very careful to follow the department policies and procedures about what they can do, so they will make a valid arrest that will hold up in court, should any defense attorney try to challenge them. The game, in turn, is not only effective, but it keeps what is a relatively routine operation -- though there is a slight possibility of danger -- interesting. Likewise, good teamwork enables the cops

to play the game well, as well as adds interest to an ordinarily routine activity.

In the trolling operation, there are two undercover officers in unmarked cars who go looking to pick up prostitutes, two arrest teams with two officers in each car -- either a patrol car or a regular unmarked car, and two ordinary-looking cars, vans or trucks with observers. As the undercover officers drive around, the observers drive nearby to help them spot prostitutes, follow their cars when they pick one up, and let the arrest teams know by radio when it's time to move in and make an arrest. This occurs after the prostitute has made an offer to exchange sex for money, which are the elements of the crime, and the undercover officer lets the other officers know she has done so. In short order, the arrest team drives up, the undercover officer stops, and the arresting officers put the prostitute in handcuffs and lead her to their car.

In the decoy operation, there is usually a single decoy -- a woman dressed to look like a prostitute, though sometimes two -- plus two arrest cars, each with two officers, and two observer cars, vans, or trucks. In this case, the decoy, wearing a wire, goes out and lounges on a corner, typically under a street light, while the two observer cars are positioned about a 1/2 block or block away to keep her in sight, while the arrest cars wait nearby. After a prospective john driving by stops and she starts talking to him, the arrest teams is alerted. Then, if the john wants to make a deal to pay money for sex, the decoy invites him to park in a particular place or walk with her to a selected motel. Once he does either, one of the arrest teams swoops in to make the arrest. The officers snap the handcuffs on the john, put him in the squad car, and while one officer drives the john to jail, the other drives his car to the police tow unit.

In both operations, the police paddy wagon is waiting nearby, and the arrested prostitutes or johns are put inside, while the van fills up. When it is full or has at least three or four arrestees in back, the wagon officer takes them to jail and returns about 30 minutes later, ready for the next series of arrests. In general, the trolling operation nets about 20 women in a shift of 5 to 6 hours, while the decoy operation nets about 14 johns in the same time period.

I had an opportunity to be an observer in two of these operations -- a trolling operation on a Saturday night in late August (August 28, 1999); and a decoy operation on a Saturday night in mid-November (November 20, 1999).

## **Purpose of the Research and Methodology**

The research was designed to look at the way members of the Vice Unit work together as a team and the major issues or themes that affect them in carrying out their operations. To conduct the research, besides being an observer on two operations, I interviewed four participants. These include the Vice Unit's lead operations officer, Roger Smith; his assistant, Nancy Brown; the sergeant in charge of the Vice/Narcotics Section, Sgt. Ken Olson; and an assisting officer from another police division, Sgt. Tim Howard, who I rode with on the decoy operation.

I chose to research the Vice Unit, because I have long had an interest in the criminal justice system and have developed many contacts with police officers. I developed these contacts as a result of studying the Administration of Justice for two years at Merritt College, getting a Certificate in this subject, attending the Citizen's Police Academy, and becoming active in the Citizen's Police Academy Alumni Association (CPAAA). I have been both a member and its Vice President and PR/Community Liaison Chair for the past two years. Also, I wrote an extensive research report about homicide patterns and investigative techniques in the Oakland Homicide Department: Investigating Homicide in Oakland: An Analysis of Homicide Patterns and Investigative Approaches in 1997, which was published by the Oakland Police Department and publicized locally.

I selected the Vice Unit because this is a small group that was conducive to a small-scale study, and I felt it would be reasonably safe to observe a few operations, since prostitution involves little violence. Additionally, I found the members of the Unit were quickly amenable to my participation. I also felt the study results could be used in a community presentation on how the Vice Unit is helping to clean up prostitution in Oakland, since there is a great emphasis now in reducing all types of crime to make Oakland a more attractive city for business and technology. In fact, the first such presentation will be at a meeting of the CPAAA in January 2000, and the officer heading up the Vice Unit will be giving this presentation with me. I also hope to do presentations on this subject to criminal justice professionals and other groups interested in developments in Oakland.

My position in approaching the subject is as a supporter of police activities both in general and as a CPAAA member and officer. I have found cops generally have a strong interest in protecting and serving the community -- a key principle of the police mission "to protect and serve", and I like their straightforward, down-to-earth approach to life. I admire their sense of discipline and like the way they tend to be honest, respectful, and aware of rules and structure. I have also found that cops tend to be very helpful when they feel you are supportive, although they can be suspicious and defensive, when they aren't sure whether they can trust someone.

Additionally, in light of this analysis, it might be relevant that at one time I was a game designer and published about two dozen games with major national companies, including Hasbro Industries. Many of these were social interaction, simulation games, and games on social themes, including GLASNOST: THE GAME OF SOVIET-AMERICAN PEACE AND DIPLOMACY, which was published internationally in four languages and won a 1989 Clio Award for package design. I also organized game events for large groups, in which a half-dozen to 50 players would take on different roles, such as in You, the Jury, a simulation of a courtroom trial, and in Get a Job!, a simulation of the process of getting a job.

Once I began the project, I found the members of the Vice Unit quite willing to talk to me and share their information, which has helped in conducting research. I

quickly got the approval of the lieutenant in charge of the Vice/Narcotics Unit -- Lt. Rick Hart, once I described my background in studying criminal justice, participating in the CPAAA, and writing the homicide report. He invited me to join an operation the next night -- August 28<sup>th</sup>, and thus the research project began. I went along as an observer on a trolling operation, and later observed a decoy operation, and conducted interviews with four of the officers involved in these operations.

## **Cleaning Up the Community through Prostitution Operations**

When the Vice Unit conducts their major operations against prostitution -- trolling and using decoys -- they are responding to the concerns of the community to clean up the streets of drugs and vice and reduce crime. Although some people are critical of these operations, saying "it's just prostitution -- why bother with making these arrests", as Officer Smith, the head of the Vice Unit told me, in fact, most community members complain about prostitutes working in their neighborhood. They want the prostitutes out, feeling they contribute to crime in the neighborhood by attracting drugs and the criminal element. In addition, the government in Oakland -- including the mayor and city council -- views prostitution as contributing to other crime generally and is strongly behind a prostitution clean up. As Officer Nancy Brown of the Vice Unit explained:

"People have many different opinions about what to do about prostitution. Everyone will believe that violent crimes should be punished, and the robber is a bad person. But prostitution is not like this. Some feel it's just prostitution, that the woman is only a prostitute, while others feel she is part of the criminal element which is doing drugs.

"And that's really the case. Prostitution is endangering the neighborhood. It brings in the criminal element, and violent crimes are related to this. In addition, she's in a dangerous situation herself...Plus the people with kids are upset when they or their kids see prostitutes having sex, say in a car down the street, or they find dirty condoms on the sidewalk."

Her attitude is widely shared by the police, who see prostitution as a blight on the neighborhood that brings in other crimes. Besides being aligned with the attitude of most members and city government, this view reflects the "broken windows" theory, currently popular among many sociologists, urban planners, and police departments, that not paying attention to everyday neighborhood problems, like graffiti and broken windows, contributes to an atmosphere of disrepair that brings in other crimes. Prostitution is akin to these "broken windows".

Plus "the bottom line is it's illegal," Officer Brown added, expressing a common police view that it is their role and responsibility to enforce the law, and if anyone doesn't like the law, they should work towards changing it. Then, the police will enforce that. However, in this case, the police themselves generally support the law that makes prostitution illegal, along with the community clean-up

effort, because of their view that prostitution brings other crimes, plus brings down property values. As Sgt. Howard observed, while we sat parked observing the decoy:

"Prostitution affects the quality of life in a neighborhood. As soon as you see prostitutes working in a neighborhood, the value of the property there goes down. And then, when you see crack houses or prostitutes involved with drugs or dealers, the value goes down even more.

"It undermines the pride people feel in their community.... Image is important. But prostitution undermines that, so people might take less care of their community and their homes. That's another reason why it's important to get rid of it."

Later, Officer Brown pointed out that the Unit typically averaged 5 or 6 calls a week from community members upset by prostitution in their neighborhood. "They want the police to come there to make arrests to get rid of the girls," she said.

Thus, the cops in the Vice Unit or participating in its operations, like the police generally, viewed prostitution as a detriment to the community, as well as being illegal, so it was their job to help get rid of it.

And what about getting rid of prostitution for reasons of morality? When I asked the Vice Unit officers about it, they didn't think about prostitution in these terms at all. The head of operations, Officer Smith was even surprised by my question. "No one has ever asked me that," he said; while Officer Brown emphasized: "I just see prostitution as a crime. I don't think of it in that way."

Yet, while their job was cleaning the prostitutes out of the community, their big frustration was that the prostitutes and the johns kept coming back, although their operations were successful in making arrests and the number of prostitutes on the streets was down. They knew the prostitutes and johns were back again, because they sometimes recognized a prostitute they had arrested before, and occasionally arrested a repeat john. Also, they had the names of repeat offenders on their Stay Out of Prostitution -- or SOAP lists -- for both prostitutes and johns. These lists contained the names of thousands of women and johns, though some names were duplicates due to misspellings and phony names, and often, when they made an arrest, they would find the prostitute or john on the list.

A key frustration was that the prostitutes and johns would simply move on to another area, after a crackdown in one neighborhood. So they were still in the city, just in another part of the major thoroughfares that were the center of prostitution, because that's where most of the traffic was. As Officer Smith told me, as we drove around trolling for prostitutes:

"It's a never-ending battle. Once we start getting rid of the prostitutes and the drugs, that helps people feel safer. They come out, and they take back the streets. But then, after we clean up one area, the

prostitutes will move to another, and later they might return to the original area again. When we're working a certain area, they can easily move, and then they can return after we're finished with the operation."

So getting rid of prostitutes sounded very much like a cat and mouse game, with the mice scattering when the cat was around, and coming back when he was gone.

But while the Vice Unit officers -- like the police generally -- felt frustrated about this problem, they didn't have any particular solution to deal with it. They recognized that many factors contributed to the prostitutes being out there, which the four officers I interviewed noted. The women needed money. They didn't have the skills or training to get a decent job. They were addicted to drugs. They found prostitution a way to earn more money than they could otherwise, with little skill to do anything else. And the men sought out prostitutes for the thrill and variety. But the officers didn't feel they could do anything themselves to deal with these more complex underlying social problems. It was their job to enforce the law, and it was up to the legislators, social workers, educators, and others, to find these more complex solutions. For example, in thinking about this issue, Officer Brown observed:

"Most of the women don't have a normal job; they don't have a legitimate legal job...a lot of them are drug addicts, alcoholics. They can't work. Many are on GA (general assistance).

"I don't know the solution. Drug rehabilitation doesn't work for most of them. Many don't want jobs and job training doesn't work for many of them either. So it's a bigger issue than just prostitution. There's no easy fix-it-all solution. I just don't know what to do."

Thus, while the Vice Unit officers viewed prostitution being caused by many factors, they felt limited in what they could do beyond what they were already doing -- enforcing the laws against prostitution because it was against the law. But, even so, they felt some satisfaction that they were at least contributing to the community clean-up by cleaning up the streets for a time, as the members of the community and government of Oakland wanted them to do.

### **Playing the Prostitution Clean-Up Game**

While the concerns of the community and the mission of cleaning up the area give the Vice Unit participants a sense of purpose and commitment to doing a good job, carrying out these operations like a game with a goal (make as many arrests as possible), a team, and rules for play help keep the operation interesting and effective. Though the officers don't think of their activities as a "game" in the way the term is often used to characterize a recreational or sporting activity, their activities have the characteristics of a game, when the term is applied more broadly to any activity involving goals, teamwork, and rules for participation. The approach promotes

teamwork, a spirit of camaraderie, and adds a sense of fun and excitement to what might otherwise become a fairly routine operation, performed again and again with a high level of clockwork precision, despite the slight possibility of danger.

I experienced this sense of the prostitution clean-up operation as a kind of game when I first arrived for the line-up for the trolling operation for that night. Soon after Sgt. Olson gave me a quick overview of prostitution in Oakland and the activities of the Vice Unit, the Unit's two regular officers, Roger Smith and Nancy Brown, plus a half-dozen other participants for the operation assembled. As usual, there would be two officers in observer cars -- Officer Smith and Sgt. Olson, two undercover officers -- Ken and Mike - - in unmarked cars, four officers in the two 2-man arrest teams, and two officers, including Officer Brown, in the Paddy Wagon. Once everyone was there for the line-up, like a football-team coach, Sgt. Olson announced everyone's position for the night and stated where we would be going, and who would be doing what. He read aloud the car numbers and assignments using code numbers and letters to identify each car -- such as 14L72 for his own Chevy van - and the name of the individual or individuals in each car. Then, he announced the private radio channel everyone would use to communicate with each other that night -- Vice Channel 1, and explained the locations we would target that night. The plan was to start in downtown West Oakland and work our way north along San Pablo to MacArthur, and then head to East Oakland and cruise along the International Boulevard Corridor. Two months later, when I attended the line-up for the decoy operation given by Officer Smith, it proceeded in much the same way, though the team set up was a little different. This time instead of the two undercover officers in unmarked cars looking for prostitutes, there would be a single female decoy posing as a prostitute to attract the johns. But otherwise, there were two observer cars, two 2-man arrest teams, and two officers in the paddy wagon, as in the trolling operation.

A little time at each line-up was also devoted to reviewing any changes in policies and procedures to better carry out the operations, much like a coach might go over the best plays with a sports team. For example, at this first trolling line-up, Sgt. Olson told the undercover officers they would now write up their own reports, so they could have better documentation to support their arrests, if the case went to court and a defense attorney challenged them. Plus he announced new procedures for taking photos of the johns when they were arrested. This way, he explained, "the john can't claim I wasn't driving the car or wasn't there."

Then, each line-up ended with an announcement of the time everyone should be ready to leave -- in about 15 minutes, after which everyone stood up and headed to the cars with a burst of enthusiasm, that reminded me of the way a team of football players head out to the field ready to "go get 'em".

So now the game of "find and arrest the prostitutes or johns" was on for the night. It began in earnest once everyone was in place at the starting location, indicated they were ready, and the operations officer gave the instructions to begin. For example, in the trolling operation, when Officer Smith pulled into his initial observer position on San

Pablo, he called out over the radio to see if everyone was ready. Soon their responses came back one by one: "Yes...Affirmative...We're in position." Then, once everyone was ready, he gave the signal for where to start the search for prostitutes: "All right, if you guys are all ready, let's start at the triangle." A moment later, the undercover cars -- a Ford and a Toyota -- sped on ahead, and we followed behind them, while Sgt. Olson followed in his Chevy. The two arrest cars drove along, too, about a block or two away, ready to respond when called on to make an arrest.

- **Trolling for Prostitutes**

I found this game-like quality in both operations, though especially in trolling. Even the term "trolling" expressed this, as we drove around looking for prostitutes. As soon as either of the undercover officers, Ken or Mike, spotted a prostitute or Sgt. Olson or Officer Smith advised them where they saw one, the officer would pull up by her and start up a conversation. Either he might start it with some opening remark like: "How are you doing?" "How's it going?" "Do you need a ride?" or "Are you dating tonight?" Or the prostitute might start off the process, say by waving at the officer, thinking he was a john, and inviting him to stop and talk.

Then, the cop and prostitute engaged in a brief game-like in trying to make the deal. They used euphemisms like: "Sure, I'd like to riding tonight? Would you?", which were the usual street language for setting up a prostitution deal. The undercover officers used it to sound like a customer, just like the decoys did in their operations to sound like a real prostitute. Even this language exchange involved a kind of game, which the prostitutes and johns played with each other, using euphemisms to check each other out. The prostitute wanted to make sure the john was not dangerous and not a cop, before getting into his car, while the john wanted to check that the decoy was really a prostitute before getting out of his.

After engaging in this initial repartee, to establish the elements of the crime to make an arrest, the undercover officer had to get the prostitute to make a clear offer to exchange sex for money, just like the decoy had to establish such an exchange with the john. In the trolling operation, the prostitute had to say or agree to words making this intention very clear, such as "So do you want to fuck?" or "How much do you want for a blow job?," while in the decoy operation, the john had to park where directed or walk with the decoy after agreeing to pay for sex. Then, the police had the needed elements of the crime of soliciting for prostitution, a misdemeanor, and the arrest team could move in.

Part of the game was getting the prostitute or the john to this point. What surprised me was how quickly the police were able to do this. In the trolling operation, the typical opening exchange lasted only about a minute. Then the prostitute would get in the car, and if she hadn't already agreed to swap sex for money, she would quickly agree within a few seconds or minutes. I was amazed at the speed, but Officer Smith explained this was common. "She'll quickly assess the man in the car to see if it feels right -- that he doesn't seem to be dangerous or appear to be a cop."

But the women weren't obviously very good at making these assessments. Why? There were a number of reasons, which the cops recognized. One was because they were so strongly driven by the desire to get money, some because they were addicted to drugs. Another was their misconception that the police have to admit they are cops if asked. As Smith explained: "One of the first things they ask before they get in the car is: 'Are you a cop?' because they think a cop has to say he is. But that's not true. A cop can say 'No.'" Later, when I participated in a decoy operation, I learned that many johns may ask the same question of the decoy, because they have the same misconception about the decoy. But she can lie, too, and does.

In any event, getting the prostitute to get in the car and agree to make a deal -- or getting the john to park his car or take a walk with the decoy -- seemed very much like scoring a point in a game. And the officers seemed very adept at quickly scoring. Then, once they did, that was the signal for the arrest team to come in to make the arrest.

In the trolling operation, the undercover officer gave some kind of sign to let the observation cars or arrest cars know to come in (though Officer Smith asked me not to give away how this information was communicated). He had to let them know in this way, since he had turned off his radio when he started talking to the prostitute, so she wouldn't hear it and figure out he was a cop. By contrast, in the decoy operation, the operations officer could hear the exchange over the decoy's wire, so he could tell the arrest team once the deal was struck and the man was parking his car or walking.

Then, once the prostitute or john had been caught in the net by offering to make a deal, the arrest occurred within minutes. The nearest arrest team drove in to make the arrest, or the teams alternated, and the officer quickly had the prostitute or john in handcuffs and in the back of the arrest car on the way to the paddy wagon. Typically, the prostitutes or johns went along very quietly. The arrest car drove up, pulled the surprised or angry prostitute out of the car, snapped on the handcuffs, and led her to the arrest car; or in the case of the john, the arrest team simply went up to him on the street. Then, after the arrest team took the latest arrestee to the paddy wagon a few blocks away, the search went on for the next prostitute or john, unless there was a brief break, when the Wagon filled up and had to go to the jail to drop off its prisoners.

In a few cases, where a prostitute or john was especially upset, they were usually quickly calmed, sometimes by the other arrestees who had been through this process before. Mostly though, the prostitutes knew the score -- they had been through the process before or knew others who had. However, some of the johns were especially worried, wondering what to tell their wife, girlfriend, or boss. But the others in the van generally offered their reassuring support, explaining he would soon be out, could quickly bail out his car, and could come up with some excuse to explain his delay in getting home.

And so, after each arrest was concluded, we got ready to look for more

prostitutes or johns. In the trolling operation, the interest and enthusiasm of everyone seemed much higher, since there was the excitement of the chase, which included driving around searching for prostitutes. By contrast, the decoy operation was a long stake-out punctuated by a few minutes of activity, when a john drove into the trap and got snared by his own actions.

Part of the excitement of the chase included finding the prostitutes, a little like birders with binoculars looking for birds. Additionally, each observer car had to keep the undercover car it was following in sight, while not being seen to avoid alerting the prostitute or others on the street about the operation in progress. As Officer Smith commented as we drove along in the beginning of the operation:

"We have to be ready to follow once the prostitute gets in the car and it pulls away. And we have to stay far enough away to avoid being seen, so she doesn't suspect she's with a cop."

Once the prostitute got in the undercover car, the next phase of the game involved waiting for the communication sign she had offered sex for money, followed by a rush of excitement when it occurred. Then, like a sports announcer, the officer following the car -- either Officer Smith or Olson - would describe where it was, like an announcer at a horse race might announce where the horses were now. In some cases, if the car drove for several blocks while the officer tried to get the prostitute to say the words to make the deal, one observer car would peel away and the other take over, so it wouldn't look like she was being followed.

For example, one play by play announcement about the undercover car's progress went like this, when Officer Smith observed Ken's car pull over by a likely prostitute about a half-block in front of us:

"Okay, he's got one he's talking to...Now she's in the car."

As Ken's car drove on for several blocks and we followed, Officer Smith continued.

"I'm following on San Pablo...Northbound...Crossing 49<sup>th</sup> in the number 2 lane...Crossing 38<sup>th</sup>...Crossing 37<sup>th</sup>..."<sup>3</sup>

Several blocks later, when the car finally gave its flashing signal and turned onto a side street -- which is where the prostitutes normally direct their customers for quick car sex in a quiet out of the way place, Smith's rising excitement was visible.

"Okay. We've got a signal...The car's at San Pablo and 32<sup>nd</sup> going westbound."

His words were a signal for the nearest arrest team to swing into action, locate the car, and make the arrest. As the arrest team moved into position, Officer Smith

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<sup>3</sup> I have changed references to the specific street numbers and names, except for the main streets, to protect the actual locations used by the police in conducting these operations.

gave a running account of where the car was as it went through or turned at each intersection.

"Now it's crossing 33<sup>rd</sup>...Now it's making a turn on Grand."

Then, the patrol car roared past us with its light flashing and pulled Ken's car over. A moment later, the arresting officers were taking the prostitute out of the car, handcuffing her, and putting her in the back of the squad car to take her to the paddy wagon, as we observed from the van now parked about half-way down the block. Once the arrest was quickly concluded, as most were, Officer Smith announced this to Officer Brown and the assisting officer in the wagon.

"Okay. We've got another live one coming to you. How many bodies do you have there now?"

His words after the arrest were like those of a team captain keeping score and preparing for the next play -- here to start search and capture operations again.

Even the search took on the quality of a game, as Smith, Olson, or the undercover cops looked for prostitutes and spotted them, like hunters looking for prey. Their words crackled over the radio describing what they observed:

"(Ken) On the 3800 block of San Pablo...Now crossing Grand...There's a girl waiting at the bus stop...I'm going to make contact..."

(Smith) Okay, there's one now at the fire hydrant...(a little later) There's one walking by the van right now...(still later)...Okay...West Grand and San Pablo...A woman in a black jacket...Do we have an arrest team ready?...There's a female black at 42<sup>nd</sup> and West..."

(Ken) Okay, I'll go look for her."

At times when members of the team weren't ready, Smith simply halted play briefly by telling the undercover cars to hold off until the arrest cars were ready to go again. "We have no arrest teams now," he said, "so shut it down."

At other times, the exchange reflected the difficulty of making a play, because the woman, for whatever reason, didn't want to play. For example, after one woman walked away from Mike's car, Smith announced it was time to move on to go looking for prostitutes in another area, stating:

"No go! She's kind of spooked right now. So let's head north, unless there's another one around the corner."

But since there wasn't anyone there, after Mike and Smith circled the block, we headed north to the second location for the night.

Even the interplay with some of the people we passed in the neighborhoods seemed game-like, such as occurred just before we passed the woman who was spooked. As we passed a liquor store, one of two men crossing the street to the store looked right at the van. "Hey' it's the police," he exclaimed to the other man. Then, he waved to us, laughing and making fun of us with a sly grin. "Hey, right here!" he called

out. Knowing some people on the street were already on to us contributed to Smith's decision that it was time to move on, after the woman who was spooked turned us down.

Certainly, cleaning up prostitution in Oakland is a serious business in response to community concerns for a clean-up neighborhood with less crime. Yet the process of doing it seemed very much like a sport, as the team went around searching for prostitutes and arresting them. Plus, they kept score, comparing how well they were doing to their usual total for an evening. "Usually we average around 15 to 20 on a good night," Smith told me. "And now we're up to three." Through the evening, he kept count as the team made one arrest after another.

I commented on this game-like quality of the operation as the arrest team swooped in for its fourth arrest of the night. I observed that the process of finding and picking up prostitutes was "a little like fishing". And Officer Smith quickly agreed. "Fishing! Yeah, I like that. Like fishing," he said.

- **The Hunt for Johns with a Decoy**

The decoy operation also had some of the same game-like qualities, such as in the way the group went out as a team to find and arrest johns, though it didn't have the same kind of search and hunt excitement as trolling. Instead, it was more like hiding and lurking, since once we parked in our designated spots, all the officers waited for a john to come by, while the decoy stood in a likely spot to attract him. She was like a gazelle standing by a waterhole, while hunters waited with guns to bag a tiger, who might be attracted by the comely gazelle.

Thus, the decoy operation was much more routine than trolling, even dull after the initial set up, since there was so much waiting for a john to arrive and take the bait. After he did, the arrest took about a minute, and the team was back in place to wait for the next eager john. The effective teamwork contributed to this quick processing, but there was no denying the fact that after an hour or two the repetition, routine, and long wait for something to happen made the operation dull -- in contrast to the video-game-like quality of searching for prostitutes in trolling.

Each cycle was much the same. For most of the evening -- from about 6:45 p.m. to 10 p.m., we parked near one corner in one location on East 14<sup>th</sup> Avenue, then briefly went to a second location at another part of East 14<sup>th</sup>. Marianne -- the decoy -- a thin blonde crime technician in her 30s, dressed in a dark blue windbreaker and tan levis to look like a typically dressed prostitute -- positioned herself under the light on a quiet corner by a closed grocery on East 14<sup>th</sup>. Meanwhile, the observer van I was in with Sgt. Howard was positioned about 1 1/2 blocks away, a location he selected so we could be out of view of any passing johns, yet still see Marianne. At the same time, Officer Smith was parked in a battered pick-up truck about a half a block away from Marianne on a

side street, while the two arrest cars waited nearby to make the arrest. The Paddy Wagon was parked a few blocks away.

As in the trolling operations, Smith coordinated the team over the radio. Once everyone was in position, it was time for the next cycle to start. After Smith heard their responses that everyone was ready: "Yes, we're ready...All set to go," moments later Marianne headed out from his truck to her assigned corner. Each time she did so, Smith announced that she was going to her location, so we would watch for her. His announcement soon became familiar: "Okay, Marianne is out now... All right, Marianne is out again...Okay, she's going back out." Then, a few seconds later, Marianne would appear and walk to the light. At first it was hard to see her, since she looked like a small fuzzy dot a block and a half away, but gradually my eyes adjusted to the darkness and distance, so I could see her clearly, as could Sgt. Howard.

I found the process of waiting and watching like observing a tiny stage in the distance where nothing much happens for a long period of time. We were like actors waiting for our cue to come on stage and make a brief appearance. Even the officer in my van, Sgt. Howard, remarked on the routineness, commenting:

"This can be very interesting the first time. But after awhile it gets to you. Any officer on a stakeout, will say it's very mundane."

Later, after we had been observing for a couple of hours, he noted:  
"Yeah, it does get boring."

Still, there was always the potential for danger, and even more so than in the trolling operations, which made it crucial to stay alert. In trolling, the undercover officers were relatively safe, since they were driving, were wearing guns, and the prostitute who got in the car with them was generally vulnerable, though there was some risk, though unlikely, that she might have a gun on her. Plus, there was always some possible danger to anyone in the operation from being in a high crime area, which was quite clear the night of my trolling ride-along, when a chase from a robbery ended nearby. Officer Smith leapt out of our van with his gun drawn to assist with the arrest, as the robbery suspect was pulled out of the car and handcuffed on the ground. Though he struggled briefly, he soon gave in as a half-dozen officers, including Smith, surrounded him with their guns out.

Yet, while such dangers from trolling were normally unlikely, in the decoy operation, the potential for danger was far more real, especially for the decoy, who was out on the street without any weapon. Still, the officers referred to this in almost a joking way, as if to feel more comfortable dealing with this possibility. For example, at the line-up, one of the arrest team officers from the ATF commented with a touch of irony in his voice: "Oh, is this going to be dangerous?", and after Marianne learned that tonight's operation would be in East Oakland, she remarked with a touch of humor, too: "Hey, is this dangerous? I know the neighborhood." Then, after everyone laughed, Officer Smith said it was time to go and get into position, and we all headed out. So the reality

of danger was treated lightly, acknowledged and then brushed away.

However, later, as Sgt. Howard and I watched Marianne walk into position, he explained the real potential for danger and why everyone had to be ready in case this occurred. In fact, he noted, the first time Marianne had worked as a decoy, she and a few other team members were actually involved in a shoot-out from an attempted robbery, which occurred when two men involved in drug-dealing tried to rob one of the observer vans. The shots flew as the cop in the van pointed a gun at the would-be robbers and the two men tried to run away, one shooting as they ran, before the two arrest teams drove in and arrested them. Another time, a customer pulled a gun on her, when he saw the cops arriving to arrest him, because he didn't want to go to jail.

Thus, though the decoy operation might seem much less exciting and routine than the trolling operation, it had more potential for danger -- particularly since the johns were in cars and might have their own guns in them. Then, too, though the decoy was never supposed to get in a car with a john, he might try to grab her and pull her in. It was a distinct possibility when a car with five men pulled up, and the driver offered Marianne \$150 to come to Concord with them and have sex with each of them. They hovered nearby for about a minute, as Marianne repeatedly declined as she walked away from their car. Additionally, there was always the chance of a hostile encounter with someone on the street. For instance, around 8:30 p.m. Marianne had one such encounter when a drunk came over to her and tried to grab her as he waved his hands around drunkenly, while she pushed him away, until he finally staggered on down the street. And two other men approached her with offers to sell her some rock cocaine, one suggesting an exchange of sex for coke if she would go party with him. Though Marianne quickly turned both down and they moved on down the street -- after which the arrest team stopped them to check if they really did have cocaine to arrest them if they did, though neither did -- there was always the potential the encounter could turn hostile. Thus, both the decoy and observers had to be constantly alert, despite the usual routineness, for that possibility. As Sgt. Howard observed:

"She's out there alone. And you never know what's going to happen. So you always have to be ready."

And so we were. As the hours dragged on, we kept watching, and from time to time, there was a burst of excitement when Officer Smith, still parked a half-block from Marianne, reported that a john was stopping or circling about, deciding whether to stop or not. Some of his comments over the radio reporting these developments went like this:

"Okay, she's talking to a guy now...She's telling him to park... Okay, he's out of the car now... She's walking with him..."

"Okay, the guy in the Mustang has gone to park...Now he's parking just across from me...So get ready guys...Come out and get him..."

"Now the guy in the Ford pick-up is parking...He's getting out...It looks like they're going to walk together...No, wait. Marianne's still working the deal...Still working...Okay, the deal's done. Go on in."

Once the deal was made and was time to go make the arrest, there was a brief flurry of excitement. About 30 seconds later, the arrest team arrived. The two officers quickly went over to the john, grabbed his arms, handcuffed his hands behind his back, and put him in the squad car. Meanwhile, as one officer went to the man's car to drive it away, Marianne walked back to the pick-up truck with Officer Smith to write up her report of what had just happened.

By contrast, when the john seemed wary and pulled away after a brief stop or decided not to park and drove away, there was a sense of disappointment, like a prospective player had decided not to participate in the game. Officer's Smith comments on the radio about several of these johns who left expressed this disappointment:

"Well, looks like he's not going to park...This one's circling...No, he's driving away...No, no deal...The blue van's back again. He's pulling over. She's going over to him. But now, it looks like he's changing his mind. He's pulling away. So there's no deal...Marianne's going back to the corner."

Once a deal was made and Marianne finished her report or a prospective john left the area, the cycle of waiting and watching for something to happen started again. Meanwhile, as we waited, Officer Smith kept a running total of the number of arrests and announced them, like posting the score in a game to let everyone on the team know how we were doing.

As with the trolling operations, I was surprised by how quickly the Vice Unit was able to locate and arrest the johns. Even though there was a limited amount of Saturday traffic, particularly after about 9 p.m., the team was able to average about 1 arrest every half-hour -- typical for an evening, and the team felt they were doing quite well in spite of the cold weather and looming rainstorm. Also, most of the time when a car stopped for Marianne, within a minute or two, she was able to make a deal and the arrest soon followed.

So why did the operations work so well? If the prostitutes and johns were already on the alert that there were occasional but regular prostitution sweeps in Oakland, why did it seem so easy to snare the johns, as well as the prostitutes? Even though there were now fewer prostitutes and johns on the street than a few months before due to the success of past sweeps, why did the Team have such a good success record with those who were still there? Why were the johns, like the prostitutes, so ready, willing, and gullible to strike a deal? Why weren't they more suspicious? Why were they so ready to take the risk? Why was the team so good? Why?

Part of the Unit's success was due to varying the time, days, and locations of the sweeps, so the prostitutes and johns were never sure where they would be, as Officer Smith explained at the end of the evening. He motioned to the calendar behind him as he spoke:

"We always switch it around. We just pick the dates randomly and vary the operations, so no one will know when they're going to be. And

we keep changing our cars as well."

Another reasons, beyond the random scheduling, is the cops had simply become very good at taking on the role of the johns and or the prostitute, so they looked the part. Plus many of the men were out-of-towners or drawn by the thrill to be less cautious, while many prostitutes were overly eager to strike a deal because the lure of making money for drugs or just to survive was so strong. As Sgt. Howard commented, as we observed still another arrest:

"Why do they respond so easily? A large percentage of the men are out-of-towners from other cities, especially on weekdays. They're looking for thrills, they see a woman standing there, and they take the opportunity. And many are under the impression that if they ask, "Are you a cop?" and you are, you have to say so. So they may ask the decoy that and try to test her. They don't realize that cops can lie. So they get caught..."

"As for the women, I think their need for money or drugs is so great, they'll take the chance."

## **Conclusion**

Thus, while the Vice Unit was engaged in a serious operation to clean up prostitution in Oakland, and this mission gave all the operation participants a sense of contributing to the community and the betterment of Oakland, the way they carried out the clean-up process was much like a game. They were a team, working together like a sports squad of players, and to achieve their goal -- identifying and arresting prostitutes and johns, they had to work together and use various skills to outwit the prostitutes and the johns.

In looking for prostitutes, they were like fishermen trolling the waters to catch a fish; in finding johns, they were like stealthy hunters waiting in a duck blind for an incautious duck that came too close. But in both cases, the undercover officers or the decoy were able to convincingly play their role and blend into the environment, so they could convince the prostitute or john they were really other than they were and who they pretended to be. And most of the time, this strategy seemed to work, though there was general knowledge in the community about the cops doing these prostitution operations. The strategy worked because the cops were very good or the prostitutes and johns were overly eager or very inept at identifying the cops before they made the deal.

As a result, these operations proved to be very successful, despite a limited budget and resources requiring the Team to recruit other members of the police department to participate in these operations on an overtime basis. And a key reason for this success is the way the Unit used teamwork and treated the clean-up process as a kind of game of capture the prostitutes and johns. Doing so helped make the process more interesting, even though these operations, especially the decoy operations, became very routine after awhile. In turn, keeping interest up made the team more alert

and effective, so they could be even more effective in cleaning up prostitution in the community, and thereby achieving the operation's overall mission and goal. Plus this teamwork made everyone better able to respond to the occasional risk of danger, if it should occur.