Strolling the Strip: Prostitution in a North American City

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Streetwalkers are no longer confined to “red-light districts” or to other specially designated zones in cities. Today women are free to choose their own solicitation sites. However, the determination of where to solicit is not random. There are still many social and spatial constraints upon the location of prostitution within cities.

As found in other geographic research on crime, the spatial distribution of visible prostitution (streetwalkers) is dynamic and is moving away from the downtown areas as a result of central city change (Jeffery 1977; Newman 1973). Other studies note the movement of criminal activities to the suburbs (Rengert and Wasilichick 1985; Reppetto 1974). For visible prostitution, many streetwalkers are relocating along major transportation arteries or suburban commercial strips. This paper focuses on the changing geography of visible prostitution and the role that modern transportation networks play in its distribution.

Prostitution is not ubiquitous throughout cities. Rather, it is usually found close to potential customers. Since many residents perceive prostitution to be a negative indicator of community status and associate its presence with other forms of crime, it is not tolerated in certain communities. This is particularly true of visible prostitution, the most ambulatory and obtrusive form of soliciting (Stopp 1978).

The persistency of prostitution in cities reflects the role of women in our society and gender inequalities (Rasheed 1985). Thus, a large disparity exists between the number of streetwalker arrests and the number of male patron arrests (San Diego Police Arrest Records 1986-1987). Most experts relate the existence of prostitution to poverty (Addams 1972; Sanger 1898). Yet, according to Symanski (1981), the social and economic inequalities of women in a system controlled by men are the primary reasons for prostitution’s existence. Prostitution, he says, is “deemed immoral by men who make it illegal but nevertheless patronize prostitutes” (Symanski 1981, 1).

Transportation and Visible Prostitution

Streetwalkers tend to work in three types of urban communities: old downtown areas, low-income minority neighborhoods, and commercial strips. These community types are considered de facto zones of prostitution, with women working and residing within (or close to) them (San Diego Police Arrest Records). But, these “zones” are not separate and distinct, rather they are linked by transportation arteries, enabling streetwalkers and customers to travel conveniently between “zones.”

Streetwalkers use their mobility as a defense against arrests. As officials conduct “sweeps” or attempt to “clean-up” one part of the city, the women temporarily migrate to other areas. Multiple “zones” allow prostitutes to effectively time traffic flows in each neighborhood to maximize their visibility to patrons. Thus, due to the elusive and flexible distribution of streetwalkers, visible prostitution has spread throughout cities and is difficult to eradicate.

The automobile has also changed the way streetwalkers solicit in North American cities. In the past, prostitutes were called streetwalkers because they were pedestrians. Today they still solicit on the streets, but to customers in cars. Much of the soliciting occurs along commercial strips. The strip offers prostitutes a variety of advantages over other types of urban en-
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Environments. It provides slow-moving, stop-and-go traffic and an ample supply of potential customers.

The commercial strip was designed to provide maximum accessibility and maneuverability for drivers. Many commercial strips were the main roads in and out of town before freeway development, and hosted small roadside motels. Some of these old motels still dot the landscape of commercial strips and help facilitate visible prostitution. Furthermore, the types of strip businesses and lack of residential land uses creates an anonymous landscape that invites deviant and criminal behavior (Ley and Cybriwsky 1974; Newman 1973).

Visible Prostitution in San Diego

Some North American cities are more attractive to streetwalkers than others. For instance, San Diego, with its strong military presence, and year-round tourists attracted by its Mediterranean climate, offers an ideal market for prostitution. In 1987, more than 350 women were arrested for soliciting, an increase over previous years (San Diego Police Arrest Records). Arrest records show three areas used by streetwalkers: downtown (the old "red-light district"), southeast San Diego (a low-income minority neighborhood), and El Cajon Boulevard (a commercial strip). Arrest records indicate a linear pattern that follows transportation routes connecting these three nodes (Figure 1).

In downtown San Diego, there were over 90 arrests in 1987, most clustered around Market Street, a four-lane thoroughfare of old apartment complexes, rundown hotels, and thrift shops. This street runs from east to west and is home to transient workers, street people, and runaways. The majority of solicitations occurred in an area of downtown San Diego close to the former red-light district, the Stingaree. However, as urban revitalization changes the face of downtown San Diego, prostitution in the city is displaced.

This part of downtown is becoming the center for new investments and urban housing. Old waterfront establishments, such as topless bars and massage parlors, are being demolished and replaced with sleek office towers, new condominiums, and jazz clubs. Yet some of the old hotels and "adult" bookstores off Market Street remain despite nearby renovation. Eventually, as the economic effects from a recently opened convention center are felt, the traditional clientele of streetwalkers will move out of downtown and the streetwalkers will follow. Pushed out of the core, many streetwalkers migrate east, into Southeast San Diego. Most of the arrests in Southeast San Diego occurred on 32nd Street in a low-income minority community or along Main Street near the Naval Station (Figure 1). The arrests near 32nd Street and Imperial Avenue are unusual because they are in a residential neighborhood. Many of the women working in this part of the city are not full-time, professional prostitutes, rather they are "part-timers"—a local woman who occasionally solicits to supplement her income.

The professional streetwalkers arrested in this part of the city work south of 32nd Street on Main Street. Along Main Street are warehouses, auto-related businesses, and industrial complexes. More important to streetwalkers are the male employees at the National Steel and Shipping Yards, and the 32nd Street Naval Station. Together, Main Street and the minority neighborhood near 32nd and Imperial Avenue accounted for 63 arrests. Obviously, the majority of professional streetwalkers in San Diego spend most of their time working elsewhere.

More women (over 220) are arrested for prostitution along El Cajon Boulevard than anywhere else in San Diego. El Cajon Boulevard is a major traffic artery, extending 3.7 kilometers (6 miles) from downtown to the eastern suburbs. Many arrests occur along a few small sections of this strip. These "hot spots" along the boulevard are near streetwalkers' residences or landscape characteristics favorable for business (Riccio 1989; San Diego Police Arrest Records 1986-1987).

Like most commercial strips, El Cajon Boulevard has a drab commercial milieu, including bars, auto-shops, car stereo stores, pizza parlors, and old motels. The boulevard has elements that make it a potentially useful workplace for streetwalkers and their patrons: short blocks and numerous alleys for easy turns, left-hand turning lanes, and a wide straight street for

Figure 1. The distribution of arrests in San Diego, 1987. Source: San Diego Police Arrest Records.
unobstructed views of the sidewalk. Landscape features, such as empty lots, bus stops, and gas-stations, provide dual functions for streetwalkers. Customers can pull-over and pick-up prostitutes without interrupting the flow of traffic. Plus, the vacant lots associated with car washes and auto-stores are sometimes an alternative to motel rooms since some women prefer to work out of cars rather than rent motel rooms (Traitel 1986).

Conclusion

Central-city revitalization, the physical layout of transportation routes, and automobiles are major components in the changing distribution of visible prostitution in North American cities. As city residents move to the suburbs, prostitution follows. As urban cores become more expensive and fashionable, streetwalkers solicit elsewhere. The commercial strip is quickly replacing downtown as the focus of visible prostitution in cities. San Diego's El Cajon Boulevard is similar to commercial strips elsewhere in North American cities. Most show signs of deterioration as cities expand or revitalize (Kent and Dingemans 1977; McNee 1984). In Los Angeles, Hollywood Boulevard is a strip renowned for its illicit activities. Other examples are found in Phoenix, Las Vegas, New York City, and Denver.

Transportation corridors and automobiles connect the areas worked by streetwalkers, enabling them to easily relocate and migrate between neighborhoods. While in the past, prostitution was contained in one neighborhood, today streetwalkers may work in several communities throughout the city depending on the police enforcement patterns or the time of the day. Thus, prostitutes are better able to resist police efforts and to persist in North American cities.

References


