

Desperation street

Where sex trade thrives, its victims are everywhere

By MEREDITH MANDELL
STAFF WRITER

For Blaneice Benjamin, life is this: Get up, get high on heroin. Meet up with friends at the bus stop and find out who's got a bag. Shoot up in the back yard of an abandoned house.

And then she joins the dozens of women selling their bodies to the men who come to Van Houten Street. Dressed in tight jeans and a tank top, she charges \$35 a service and says she can get three or four "tricks" a night.

Thirty-five and homeless, Blaneice is one face of Paterson's sex trade. Bob, from Clifton, is another. A self-described family man who talks with pride about his long years of marriage, he's one of the johns who come from elsewhere — often quiet suburban communities like Glen Rock, Little Falls and Paramus — to cruise Van Houten and ogle the merchandise from their Toyota Camrys, BMWs and Land Rovers.

Bob sees what he does as a victimless crime. But in a city already staggering under the weight of the full array of urban problems, there's plenty of evidence to the contrary.

Already burdened emergency rooms often end up the destination for Blaneice and others who overdose and, at times, get beaten up by johns.

Quality of life suffers along Van Houten Street and the other neighborhoods where prostitutes, many of them junkies, stand outside at all hours of the day while people walk their dogs and children head to school. Van Houten residents speak of finding used condoms in their alleyways.

At the very least, there is the wasted potential — the sad downward turn of lives that once held promise.

More ominously, there is violence — and murder, several in 2001 involving a serial killer. Six months ago, the strangled body of Arianne Berry was found dumped on Hemlock Street and an alleged customer of the Clifton woman has been charged with her murder. Detective Sgt. Thomas Trommelen, who organizes occasional prostitution busts by the Paterson police, wishes he could show schoolchildren the before and after pictures of some of the women.

"I saw the pictures of the last girl [Arianne Berry]. I saw Robin Sisco, who was dumped on Hudson Street. Another girl from Pequannock was dumped on the railroad tracks; another girl, in an abandoned house. You almost wish you could show the pictures of

when they were little girls and then the pictures from the homicide scenes to wake them up a bit. I'd like to ask the kids: 'Is this what you want?'"

Heroin holds allure

With the intensity of a scientist conducting an experiment, Blaneice sticks a syringe in a little plastic cup and fills it with liquid heroin.

She wraps a blue band around her right arm and pokes the needle near the crease of her elbow, allowing two minutes for the drug to ooze in. It's hard to find a spot that isn't ravaged from sticking needles into her flesh. When she's finished, she leaves the syringe dangling, still stuck in her arm.

Blaneice has been shooting up for six years. She started snorting heroin when she was 18. She says a boyfriend introduced her to the drug.

"The first time I did it, I was sick for two days," she says. Then, "I fell in love with it."

There are no pimps on Van Houten. The addicts don't need them. They have heroin. Cheap and powerful, its grip is so intense that they stay on the streets to afford the next bag, the next hit, ignoring the dangers.

"When you're in the moment, all you see is the money," Blaneice says. "You don't think about catching a disease or if this person is going to kill you."

Blaneice is painfully aware of the toll taken by her substance abuse.

"Do you wanna stop?"

"Yes."

"What's stopping you?"

"Me."

'Eat, sleep and get high'

Blaneice is high and walking the street, wobbling along, leaned over in an L-shape. She holds a syringe in her back pocket. Her pupils are dilated. Her eyes are tearing. Sweat rolls down her face. After a hit, she gets dreamy, almost whimsical.

She'll break into a dance or belt out 50 Cent's "I Get Money."

It can take hours to get a customer. She paces back and forth on the corner of Van Houten and Carroll, holding a can of Keystone, taking occasional sips of the cheap brew.

"I'm tired," she says. But she needs to find a client, a trick, she says, if "I wanna eat, sleep and get high."

Blaneice gets high on at least six or seven bags of heroin a day. The heroin comes in a tablet the size of a nickel, wrapped in wax paper; it costs about \$6 to \$8 a packet.

She returns to the street day after day even though she's been beaten up, sodomized and raped. Once, she says, a guy tied her up on the train tracks.

"He was telling me how he hates prostitutes and he wasn't gonna let me live if I had a baby and stuff like that," she says.

She acted like she had to go to the bathroom and he untied her. She ran until she got back to a "safety zone" — a place with a lot of people.

She has not reported most of the rapes to the police — she doesn't think it would come to anything.

And still, she walks the streets — despite the dangers and even though she's been to jail more than a dozen times between drug and prostitution arrests. Police records show she has two drug felony convictions.

Hospital offers help

Like many of the prostitutes who work on Van Houten, Blaneice is in and out of the hospital for medical problems that would be entirely avoidable if she weren't an addict.

She's gotten hepatitis from shooting. Her arm is chronically puffy, red and bumpy, infected from injections.

"I got to go on Friday to get it lanced," she says. Blaneice, who also suffers from lupus, gets charity care at St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center.

In July, Blaneice says, she spent two weeks at St. Joe's with an arm turned gangrenous from injections.

And a week later, she overdosed. She recalls only a tumble down stairs in an abandoned building. She hit her head and blacked out — and made another trip to the emergency room.

Charity care is the only real assistance she gets. Her convictions on drug-dealing charges, in 2000 and 2006, make her ineligible for welfare benefits. When she got out of prison the last time, she says, she applied for jobs at Checkers and McDonald's without success.

"People don't hire you because you got a criminal [record], and because you got a record, now you can't even get assistance because of the charges. It's like being f***** across the board."

The federal and state laws that make her ineligible for welfare also apply to food stamps, although that ban can be lifted for those who enter rehab.

Some women working the streets say that the lack of assistance is one of the reasons they need to sell themselves.

Mark Schiffer, director of the Passaic County Board of Social Services, says the intent of the law is to punish drug dealers, but it actually punishes addicts like Blaneice.

“The way the law was written, it captures everybody as a drug dealer,” Schiffer says. “A lot of the drug dealers became drug dealers to support their habit.”

Sex without guilt

The emergency room trips, the stints in jail, the upheaval in the lives of many of these women elude — and don't seem to interest — the johns who cruise Van Houten.

Bob, the family man from Clifton, circles the block in his old compact car a dozen times, checking out the prostitutes standing on the corners, before he zeroes in on his choice — a petite blonde, his preferred type.

He rolls down his window and asks: “Why don't you get in the car and we'll go for a ride?”

He is direct about what he wants: “Sex.”

Bob, who agreed to talk with a reporter as long as his last name was not published, truly believes what he is doing is victimless. The retiree explains that he is not cheating on his wife, nor is he doing something that is terribly wrong legally.

His wife, he explains, lost interest in sex after going through “the change of life.” He says she told him to “do whatever you wanna do — just don't embarrass the family.” That, he says, was a green light of sorts for going to the street for fulfillment. He's actually saving his marriage, he explains, by filling the physical void with prostitutes.

“What am I gonna do?” asks Bob. “I'm not gonna divorce her, because I had a lot of good years with her.”

He says he buys only oral sex, for about \$20 each time. He figures that it's safer because it's less likely to pass on HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

“Anything more is like playing Russian roulette,” he says.

Bob argues that prostitution is good for society; he says it averts sex crimes by otherwise frustrated men.

Fair Lawn-based sex therapist Carol Pasahow, who has counseled both prostitutes and johns, says that many men who solicit sex have “an addictive personality disorder.”

“It’s also power; they are addicted to the thrill, the risk, the attention. Very often these men feel oppressed in their own marriages and, you know, money is power. Here they can ask their ladies to do anything and nothing is a no,” Pasahow says.

There is risk of disease, of course — for not only the johns and unsuspecting spouses back home, but to the prostitutes themselves.

Many of the sex workers get tested each month for HIV/AIDS but the johns are probably ill-informed and more reckless, says Catherine Correa, director of a federally funded city program to curb the spread of AIDS. Oral sex may be less risky than intercourse, but it’s not safe, she says.

“They are the ones likely living with HIV because of their promiscuous habit of buying sex,” she says.

Prostitutes admit that they will not insist on the use of condoms if it threatens to lose them a customer. Even some who are HIV-positive say they have had sex without condoms because their clients, although informed of their condition, did not want to.

For the men and women, the driving force often is instant gratification.

There’s no romance; the encounter is purely transactional, Bob says: “I come here. I get my business done, and I go home.”

Troubled teenager

Blaneice never had the family life that Bob proudly describes. But she spins visions of a past of promise, though laced with memories that others dispute.

“I was really a nerd,” she says.

To hear her tell it, at Passaic County Technical Institute, she was supposed to be the valedictorian in 1992. She was a cheerleader. She played the clarinet. She never drank or smoked cigarettes.

Her transcripts and school officials tell a different story. In her three years at Passaic Tech, she earned just 16.25 credits of the 125 needed to graduate. Frequently truant, she transferred to Eastside High School and dropped out in 12th grade.

Blaneice concedes shortcomings and bad decisions. A few weeks before graduation, she got into a fight and badly injured a classmate’s eye. She says that got her expelled.

At 21, she became pregnant. She also started smoking crack, hoping, she says, it would result in a miscarriage.

“I figured the crack would kill her, because I didn’t want a baby,” Blaneice says.

But the child survived the ordeal, and then another came along. They’re 15 and 11 now, she says, one living in Virginia and the other in the care of relatives in Paterson.

“I just want them to know I really love them and I really miss them,” she says, crying.

And then, as if she wanted to explain it to them directly she says: “Addiction is so powerful. No matter how much I love them, the drugs got more control.”

‘Very happy, playful’ girl

Blaneice may never have been valedictorian, but Gwen DeLeon, her mother’s first cousin, knew her when there was no sign that she’d descend into the life she lives today.

DeLeon, an instructional aide at Paterson’s School 6, just a few blocks from where Blaneice picks up her clients, recalls a “very happy, playful, silly girl.” She knew a Blaneice who was an A-B student, who was vocal and opinionated — destined, DeLeon thought, to be a lawyer.

“She always had that drive: ‘I’m gonna do this; I’m gonna be this.’”

“I was surprised when her life turned around the way it did,” DeLeon says.

Then again, DeLeon says, Blaneice shouldered a lot of responsibility as a kid. Her father died when she was a toddler and her mother was an alcoholic. Blaneice and her two siblings ended up with their maternal grandmother. As the oldest girl, Blaneice cared for her younger sister. Meanwhile, her older brother got into trouble.

DeLeon believes that amid the maelstrom at home, Blaneice felt ignored.

“When you’re the one doing well, you want to be acknowledged,” DeLeon says. “But, when you see the ones with so many problems are the ones getting attention, it kind of leads you to look for the attention wherever you can get it.”

Blaneice’s first boyfriend, DeLeon says, brought attention. He also brought trouble.

She began staying out for days at a time; nobody in her family knew where she was. She moved out at 18.

DeLeon doesn’t know much about what Blaneice’s life has been like since then, other than her brief stint in rehab.

Blaneice knows she is loved — by DeLeon, whom she calls “Auntie,” by her younger sister, and by her children. She says she loves them, too. But she stays away, mostly because she doesn’t want to hurt them.

On the street, DeLeon sometimes runs into Blaneice. She'll pull her aside and say things like, "I was so proud of you when you were in the program. You know that you deserve better than this."

One time, DeLeon thought her counsel actually worked. The conversation ended with a tearful hug.

"OK, Auntie. Watch, I'm gonna do it," Blaneice told her.

Fleeting stability

After a long stretch of homelessness — including four months in a 4-by-4-foot alcove in the Auburn Arms apartments — Blaneice briefly had a place to call home.

In early August, she moved in with Robert Mack in his one-room apartment on Hamilton Avenue. Fifty-five and disabled, Mack said he loved Blaneice. He described her as smart, sensitive and compassionate — someone willing to help anybody.

"She needs to be loved," Mack said. "She loves to be loved, and she's got an enormous heart."

The slice of stability ended just a few weeks later. Mack and Blaneice got into a vicious argument. She moved out and he did not want her back.

Despite the darkness of her troubled life, Blaneice envisions a better future.

"Where do you see yourself in 10 years?"

Blaneice considers: She wants a career in criminal justice. "A lot of people are ignorant to their rights," she points out.

Or maybe, forensics. She loves TV shows like "CSI-Miami" and "Law & Order," which she watches at friends' homes.

"Oooh, I love Horatio — David Caruso is my husband," she coos.

"In 10 years, I see myself being clean, getting a career, getting my family back, maybe move out of Jersey," she says. "You know — maybe a life that I should have been living."

Staff writer Elizabeth Llorente contributed to this story.

Losing proposition

A city struggles against sex trade, but resources are few

By MEREDITH MANDELL
STAFF WRITER

The people who live along the stretch of Van Houten Street where the prostitutes hang out have variously and wryly dubbed the thoroughfare “Ho Stroll,” “Hooker Street” and “Tricker Street.”

During the day, it’s quiet, tree-lined, dotted with single-family homes and host to three churches.

At night, when the lights in the houses go dim and the children are tucked into bed, the prostitutes emerge, standing in the shadows of the churchspires, desperately looking for someone to pick them up. They negotiate deals with prospective clients – sometimes as low as \$10 to \$15 for sex. Then they either go to a driveway or find a dark alleyway, behind a church or next to a home.

Prostitution’s impact, though, lingers long after the encounters between hooker and john, with repercussions that strain police resources, hospital emergency rooms, social service agencies and neighborhoods.

For Linda Perez, 47, it’s personal. She sweeps her driveway once a week in the hope that her 5-year-old daughter doesn’t discover a remnant of the street’s nighttime activities.

“It gets annoying picking up used condoms in the alleyways next to your home,” says Perez, sitting in her driveway one Friday night, sipping a beer.

Last month, police Capt. Troy Oswald says, dozens of residents came out of their homes to cheer and clap as the officers grabbed johns and prostitutes in one of the year’s street raids.

“It was like a parade,” he says.

“The importance of getting the prostitutes and johns off the street and the open-air prostitution market off the street is paramount, especially for the people who live here,” says Oswald as he supervises another street sweep in the Market Street area, near the defunct Alexander Hamilton Housing Development.

Sitting in an unmarked SUV near Market Street, hidden in an industri-

al parking lot, awaiting the next signal to move on an arrest, Oswald says: “Just think about how you’d feel if it was happening in front of your house.”

Police rank prostitution among the most serious quality-of-life issues the city faces.

The women who sell themselves are often junkies who stand outside at all hours of the day, bringing down property values and angering the neighbors, like Perez.

But because of budgetary constraints, there’s no vice squad in Paterson that’s charged with taking on prostitution. The department has had to pull narcotics officers off their beats for this operation.

The police say that even though they’ve been able to do the raids only five or six times a year, they make a difference.

Detective Sgt. Thomas Trommelen says he’s received fewer complaints from residents. The fact that municipal judges have started to sentence prostitutes to jail instead of simply fining them has deterred the sale of sex, he says. And since the closing in 2008 of the Alexander Hamilton houses, where many destitute offenders once lived, fewer have frequented the area.

Prostitution, combined with drug addiction and other crimes that come with it, is a much larger problem than the resources available to combat it. And the lack of resources goes beyond law enforcement.

Help for sex workers

Do you know how you get HIV? The four bodily fluids? Do you exchange sex for money? Why do you have unprotected sex? Because he didn’t have a condom or he didn’t want to? OK, so why are you exposing yourself?

Lala earnestly listens to the outreach worker’s routine interrogation – then watches the worker stretch a latex condom on a plastic model as she awaits the results of her HIV test.

She tested negative but the HIV might not have shown up in the tests yet. She might still be at risk because she's had unprotected sex in the past two months.

Lala has come to the Hyacinth AIDS Foundation trailer, knowing that she's taken a few chances.

As a prostitute and intravenous heroin user, she's at high risk for the disease. She's trying to get into a methadone clinic to get clean but there's a waiting list and she needs to get a referral. It's a vicious cycle: Without the methadone, she needs to keep selling her body for the heroin, putting her at risk.

In Paterson, Hyacinth is one of the few non-profits that still do street outreach on a twice-weekly basis.

But it's limited: From a trailer, they offer an HIV test, the lecture, condoms and referrals if someone tests positive.

"There's no haven for them," says Hyacinth outreach worker Norberto Colon. "There's no groups; there's really nowhere for them to go but the streets."

Funds sharply cut

The federal Ryan White program – named for a teenager who contracted HIV from a blood transfusion and died at age 18 – in recent years shifted its mission priorities away from outreach programs.

That's meant a sharp decrease in funds distributed for the outreach work done by Hyacinth and other groups, such as St. Paul's Community Development Corp.

With its headquarters on Van Houten, St. Paul's used to run a program specifically tailored to prostitutes – offering group and substance abuse counseling sessions as well as case management for women who worked the streets.

St. Paul's saw substantial results. In its final year, 2006-07, of the 670 participating in all the non-profit's government-funded outreach programs, two people tested positive for HIV.

Over the course of a decade, fewer women were getting strick

en with HIV and more were getting into counseling and eventually getting off the streets.

But in 2007, its Ryan White grant was cut to \$45,000 from the \$180,000 they had received in previous years, and the church was forced to shut down the program.

These days, St. Paul's still does street outreach, but hardly ever at night, when they are most likely to encounter prostitutes. St. Paul's executive director, Monique Baptiste, says it is too dangerous for the caseworkers to go out alone at night, and that she doesn't have enough staffers to send out teams of two.

And while the street outreach provides resources and referrals for treatment, there isn't much consistency or follow-up – something the counseling sessions once provided.

"It [counseling] really provided a supportive environment for the women we identified that frequented this corridor," Baptiste says. "You need to get them off the streets and into a safe environment."

Too many addicts

It's relatively cheap to treat an addict – roughly \$60 a day, compared with all the costs that rack up when someone is not in treatment – repeated emergency-room visits for assault or drug overdoses, the loss of productivity and the cost when someone gets hurt or killed.

And yet, across the state there are long waiting lists to get into treatment programs, including the one run by Straight & Narrow, the largest community-based substance abuse treatment program in New Jersey.

"As the demand grows we are not keeping pace with the need," says Raquel Jeffers, director of New Jersey's Division of Addiction Services.

Jeffers said that more than 40 percent of the state's substance-abuse treatment admissions are heroin-related.

"It is very unusual for a state to have heroin as the primary drug of choice," she says.

In Paterson, and across the country, society is no better able to respond to drug addicts' needs than it was 30 years ago, says David J. Mactas, Straight & Narrow's executive director.

"We have more than we can handle – that's our tragedy here – the problem in society is that we have an unconscionable level of substance abuse," says Mactas, who under President Bill Clinton headed the agency that divvied up grant money to states for treatment.

In 2006, 23.6 million people age 12 or older needed treatment for a drug or alcohol abuse problem, but only a fraction of them, 2.5 million, got the help they needed, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

“When that window of opportunity is presented to you, it’s a gift and you need to seize on that gift, and when you don’t that’s a tragedy,” Mactas said.

“The tragedy of the waiting list is more than just keeping people waiting. An addict on a waiting list is at high risk for death, arrest, emergency room visits and violence – especially prostitutes,” he says.

Cost for taxpayers

To treat an abscess on the arm from shooting heroin with dirty needles – like the one Blaneice Benjamin gets taken care of periodically – also is relatively cheap. It costs at most \$100 for the dressing, scalpel and manpower, and takes only 15 to 20 minutes, says Dr. Mark Rosenberg, emergency room chief at St. Joseph’s Regional Medical Center in Paterson.

But an abscess can lead to such problems as endocarditis, a blood infection that can destroy the heart valves. And if an addict gets AIDS or destroys her liver by long-term heroin use, it can mean multiple, high-cost hospitalizations and expensive medications over the long term.

“It’s a lifelong problem,” says Rosenberg. In virtually all the emergency rooms he’s managed, he’s seen a common denominator: Drug addicts and alcoholics go to the emergency room for their health care.

“The problem is the overall cost to society for people who don’t manage their health: All of society is [bearing] that cost,” Rosenberg says. “If somebody chooses to shoot heroin and gets HIV/hepatitis Ö that person has access to the emergency room. That’s a taxpayer cost. That’s a burden on society.”

The only free substance-abuse treatment program in town is the one offered through the mobile methadone clinic run by the Paterson Counseling Center. The program is limited to 150 clients, and like Straight & Narrow’s, is constantly full, says Karen Walker, director of HIV services for the Paterson Counseling Center.

Well of Hope is a city non-profit that provides addicts with clean needles while also providing the homeless case management, hot showers and meals. Jerome King, its director, says many of his agency’s clients are prostitutes.

There is a dearth of support services for drug-addicted women in Paterson, he says. There is only one women’s shelter in Paterson, operated by Eva’s Village.

“If you don’t get into Eva’s, where do you go?” says King. The answer: the streets.

“When people have to survive,” he says, “they are going to do whatever they have to do.”

Taking risk for cash

Inside the Hyacinth trailer, Lala says she knows there’s no excuse not to get condoms. They’re free from non-profits like Hyacinth.

Lala thanks the counselor for her results and asks for a referral to an addiction program. Then she walks out.

On the street again, she concedes that when push comes to shove, and a client offers her \$50 to have sex without a condom, she’ll give in.

“Sometimes I’m put in a situation when I really need money. You never know what my answer might be during that situation,” she says, standing on the corner alone, where the counselor could not hear her.

Staff writer Elizabeth Llorente contributed to this story.

Track stars and grandmothers

By MEREDITH MANDELL
STAFF WRITER

At nighttime, the prostitutes on Van Houten Street make a broad range of ages and backgrounds – from grandmothers to former office workers to hard-nosed entrepreneurs. Many, but not all, of the prostitutes are addicts. And one small group professes to stand alone.

In her tight spandex cat suit, Jasiyah struts and mingles, her 5-foot-8-inch frame casting an elongated shadow across the sidewalk.

She doesn't get high, she says. Her addiction is fashion.

"I always shop very expensive," she says, toting a black Chanel purse.

She's a transsexual, one among a minority on Van Houten. They have their own code of conduct and keep their distance from the addicts.

On the street people hoot and tell her she looks "sexy!" She says she charges \$200 and up per service. Most her clients – "nice white guys" – hail from the suburbs or New York or Philadelphia.

There are risks involved in going with men she doesn't know, but she comes prepared with Mace and other implements of defense. Besides, she says, "I'm Leo. I love excitement."

Not giving discounts

Has the economy affected tricking?

Kitten – once a John F. Kennedy High School track star, now a crack addict – says some johns ask her for a down-economy discount. They've got kids to feed and bills to pay, they tell her, but she doesn't go for recession specials.

"Gas went up; [sex] went up," she said. "If everything else can go up, why can't we go up?"

She negotiates high – \$100 or so – then asks for tax and a tip at the end of the date. She thinks she's made less money this year than last.

"They come lesser than what they usually do," she says. "It kind of breaks even when you know how to get your hustle on and your game."

A proud grandmother

Yolanda stands in the shadows of an abandoned home, smoking a Virginia Slims, recalling how she made \$400 a few days ago in just one date by agreeing to a client's request to do something truly gross.

She intersperses sordid stories like this with ladylike pleasantries.

"I just became a grandmother two months ago," she proudly declares. She smiles. Most of her teeth are gone from years of using heroin.

Every woman for herself

The prostitutes operate on their own. They're competitive and don't trust one another.

"Everybody's a phony out here," says Keisha, 36, sitting outside St. Paul's Church one night with her toddler daughter, Naema.

A white bandage holds in Keisha's broken ribs. A year ago, a client refused to pay her after a date. When she protested, he got angry and body-slammed her against the ground. He fled when two boys approached.

She stopped tricking for a few weeks but wound up going back. It's fast money.

"I don't want to steal. Ö I don't want to do anything that can get me in trouble," she says.

Naema, who had been staying with her mother's friend, has just returned to live with Keisha again. She says she's going to quit tricking altogether.

Novelty among prostitutes

"I can't believe how much money is out here tonight," says Lisa, as a man driving an SUV honks.

She once worked for Pfizer, she says, making \$24 an hour, but she prefers this career.

She can wear a T-shirt and jeans on the job, like tonight, and nobody will blink.

"I don't have to get up and answer to anybody," she says.

Lisa is in high demand because she's white, a novelty among Paterson prostitutes. She has little time to talk as she's getting in and out of cars.

A date pulls up. "Just a minute, honey," she says to him. She has to go.

The guy's in the back of a taxi cab; it should be good money.

Blocking it out

Sweaty and thin, Anita Rogers, 40, aches without heroin, which she's used more than half her life. As she talks, she glides her hands up and down her arms.

Anita has four children, two grandchildren. She wants to get clean for them, and she reaches for help to city non-profits occasionally. But heroin's hold persists.

When she tricks, she blocks out the world.

"I don't really remember everything I do. I just do it and get out of the car and go get high," she says.

A few weeks ago, a guy beat her up because he thought she had cheated him. "But I didn't," she said. He threw her to the ground and kicked her. She didn't report it. What could the police do?

"The cops are cool, man. They do what they can for us," Anita says. "But we got to remember, we put ourselves in that situation. Nobody deserves to get hurt or raped, but it happens. It comes with the territory."

Staff writer Elizabeth Llorente contributed to this story.

Johns come from all walks of life, cops say

By MEREDITH MANDELL
STAFF WRITER

When Paterson Detective Al Bermudez arrested Enrique Acosta Jr. for allegedly soliciting sex from an undercover police officer posing as a prostitute, he was not shocked that the man's 18-month-old son was in the back seat.

He'd seen babies in the back seat before.

Nothing, really, surprises the city police when it comes to prostitution busts. The men they catch buying sex cut across racial, ethnic and socioeconomic lines. Just last month, police say, they locked up a Palestinian and, shortly after, a Hasidic Jewish man. They spent three hours sitting handcuffed in a group of other suspected offenders in a police van, what's known as the "wagon."

Johns stop for sex while running errands, while on their jobs making deliveries, when the urge and opportunity simultaneously present themselves. The look on their faces when they get caught is one of sheepish surprise. Sometimes it's mixed with a sort of macho, "Yeah, I'm the man" attitude.

Acosta, 29, offered an undercover officer \$30 for oral sex, police said. He pleaded with the officers not to tell his wife.

"Give me one more chance. I'm not going to do it again," he implored the officers as they handcuffed him.

The car Acosta drove had a yellow "Baby on Board" sign in the rear window. The child strapped into a child seat when the car was stopped was returned to his mother by police.

Acosta was charged with endangering the welfare of a child, an indictable offense that carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison. He also was charged with solicitation of an undercover officer.

Acosta is scheduled for an Oct. 15 conference hearing on the charges.

He was one of five men and three women arrested in the police operation Sept. 18 near Market Street in the area of the Alexander Hamilton public housing complex, another of the city's major prostitution venues, aside from Van Houten Street. The other defendants are to appear in municipal court Oct. 21.

Prostitution is a disorderly persons offense both for johns and prostitutes – a minor charge much like public unruliness or citations for multiple traffic tickets. Johns usually pay fines of as much as \$1,000.

Paterson Chief Municipal Prosecutor Robert Brigliadoro said most johns are first-time offenders, so their charges get downgraded.

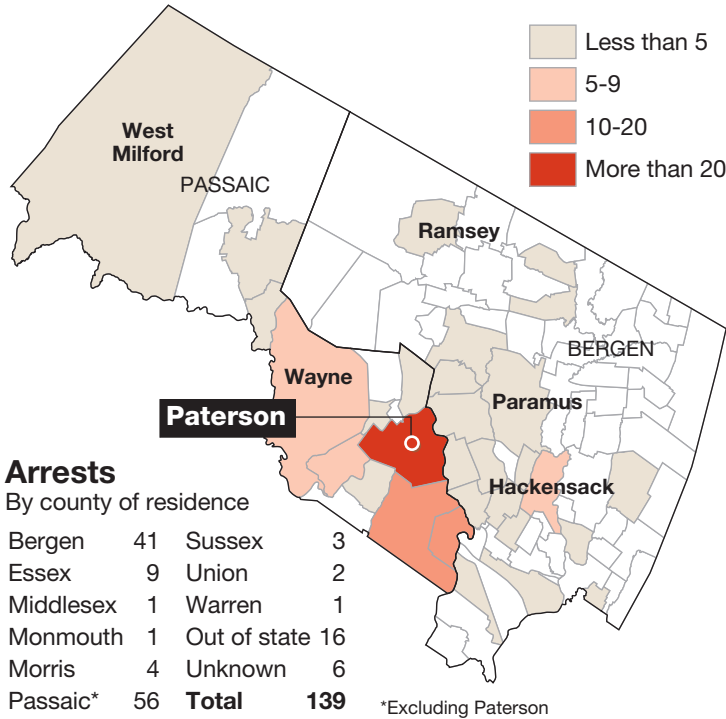
"We usually don't get too many repeat offenders," he said.

Prostitutes, however, often wind up serving jail time for repeat offenses.

Staff writer Elizabeth Llorente contributed to this story.

Where they come from...

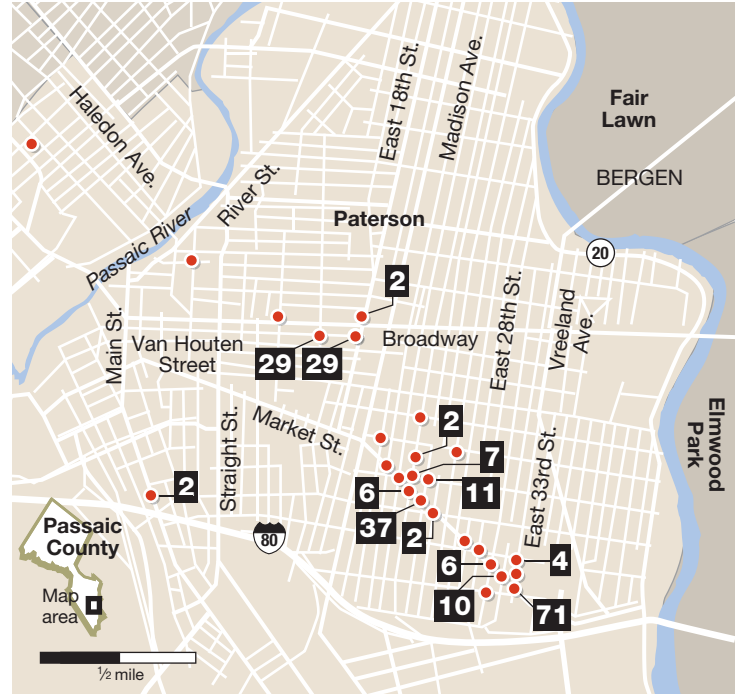
Arrest records kept by the Paterson police show that the customers of prostitutes in the city come from hometowns across the region. About 90 of those arrested for soliciting a prostitute since 2006 came from within Paterson; 139 lived elsewhere.



Source: Paterson Police Department

... and where they go

Most arrests of those charged with soliciting prostitutes have taken place in two sections of the city: along Van Houten and Market streets. The numbers below show the arrests that have taken place at specific locations since 2006; dots without numbers indicate a single arrest.

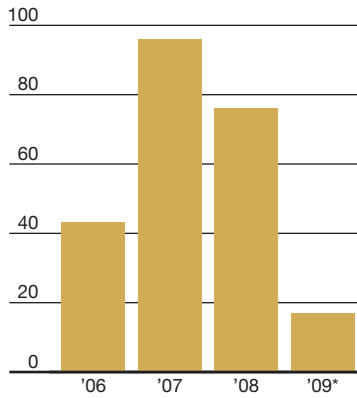


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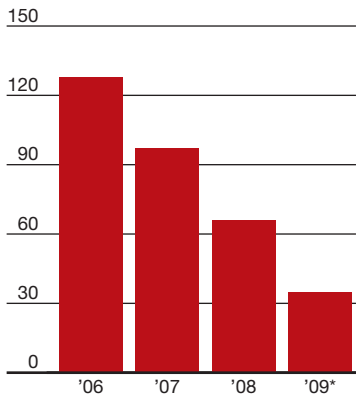
Arrests

Paterson police do periodic undercover prostitution sweeps, like one last month near Market Street. A sampling of arrest records shows that prostitutes are more likely to face jail time, as repeat offenders. The punishment for johns is usually a fine, as much as \$1000; they are unlikely to be arrested again, police say. A breakdown of arrests since 2006:

Johns



Prostitutes



*Through August

Source: Paterson Police Department

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