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## [Rachel Durchslag](#)

Executive director, Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE)

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# Changing the Conversation About Prostitution and Sex Trafficking

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When I speak about prostitution and sex trafficking in Chicago, people often ask the same questions. They want to know the scope of the problem in our city, which neighborhoods have the most activity and how to identify trafficking victims. These are normal questions, of course, but it's rare that people ask the questions that drive my work: "Who is profiting from the sex trade, and who are the men buying sex?"

Sexual exploitation is caused by exploiters. This isn't a revolutionary idea, but it's one that our culture buries in favor of other messages, especially when it comes to the sex trade. Just think about the last time you saw a news article about prostitution. Undoubtedly, it was accompanied by stock images of women wearing high heels, or mug shots of women who were arrested and charged criminally. What most articles do not explore is that many of these women are victims of sex trafficking, which happens when someone uses force, fraud or coercion to recruit or keep that woman in the sex trade.

Most johns (men who buy sex) know that they cause harm when they support the sex trade, but they continue to buy sex because they face very few consequences. I know this because I [conducted a study](#) that interviewed 113 johns in Chicago, and

only 7 percent of those interviewed had ever been arrested for buying sex. When men are targeted by law enforcement it's called a "reverse sting." Why is it a reversal to arrest purchasers?

It's a reversal for our culture because purchasers are men, and as a society we have always blamed women for prostitution. This needs to change. If there were no demand, there would be no prostitution.

I'm very proud of how much progress we've made in Chicago and Illinois to address demand, but there's much more to be done. My organization, the [Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation](#), leads a campaign called [End Demand Illinois](#). We've had two state laws passed in two years to help survivors of trafficking and to hold perpetrators accountable.

One Chicago study revealed that, on average, women [entered prostitution](#) at the age of 16. Girls are often recruited by someone they have come to trust, even by a boyfriend or family member. Until our [Illinois Safe Children Act](#) passed in 2010, minors in prostitution were treated as criminals. Now, no minors in Illinois can be prosecuted for prostitution, the term "juvenile prostitute" has been removed from the books, and there are increased penalties in Illinois for pimps and johns.

Our law enforcement partners are also stepping up. Just this summer, we saw a [huge bust](#) in Cook County that brought down nine traffickers who were selling women and girls. Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez and Sheriff Tom Dart said that new wiretapping capabilities from the Illinois Safe Children Act were crucial to building the case. It wasn't largely publicized as part of the sting, but more than 27 johns were also arrested.

So what's next? Don't doubt that there's more reform that needs to happen in Illinois. We are in the midst of planning our next legislative initiative, and I hope to use this column to raise awareness about efforts to curb demand and to highlight local successes. Learn more at [www.enddemandillinois.org](http://www.enddemandillinois.org) and sign up to receive action alerts so you can be a part of the solution to ending sexual exploitation.

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