

## **Traveling Sales Crews – What We Know So Far**

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Parent Watch/Free A Child/Polaris Project

*The following information about the traveling sales crews has been compiled from a number of sources, including: the outreach work done by Sarabeth Donovan of Free A Child in the Denver area, direct first-hand testimonies obtained from [www.magcrew.com](http://www.magcrew.com), additional information from [www.parentwatch.org](http://www.parentwatch.org), service provider reports from various areas of the country, and additional contributions from Polaris Project's Washington, DC office, Polaris Project Colorado, and the Metropolitan Denver Homeless Initiative. This document should be viewed as only a preliminary attempt to describe the national operations of magazine crews based on limited available information. It is hoped that the document will evolve and grow stronger and more detailed over time as more information is obtained. In addition, this document presents general information and does not account for subtle nuances within various crews. We recognize that conditions in crews may vary, and the sales crews are probably a heterogeneous network of experiences. For more information, please contact Earlene Williams of Parent Watch at 212-666-4221, Sarabeth Donovan of Free A Child in Denver, CO at 720-317-7009, or Bradley Myles of Polaris Project in Washington, DC at 202-302-9160.*

### **Type of Potential Trafficking**

- U.S. citizens
- Labor trafficking
- Multi-state traveling sales crews of U.S. citizens

### **History of Traveling Sales Crews in the United States**

- Traveling sales crews are known to have existed in the United States dating back to the Great Depression. After World War II, war veterans were known to work in traveling sales because they may have had difficulty finding other employment. In recent years, the industry of traveling sales crews has shifted focus to include a salesforce of primarily youth and young adults.
- Since the inception of these crews, conditions have been known to be unusually harsh and brutal, including physical abuse and beatings.
- According to first-hand reports from individuals previously in the crews, the operating procedures and current conditions in the crews has not changed much over the past 30 years. Recruitment and control techniques appear remarkably consistent over time.

### **National Scope of Traveling Sales Crews**

- ParentWatch.org estimates that at any given time, thousands of United States' youth and young adults are involved in traveling sales crews.
- It is estimated that traveling sales crews have operated and conducted business in all 50 States.
- Sales crews are known to sell an array of products including magazines, soap, cleaning products, vacuums, books, household products, and other items. Magazines are purported to be the most frequent sales item.

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- Although the number of crews nationwide is unknown, some estimates indicate upwards of hundreds or even thousands of crews operating across the nation.
- Local outreach workers in the Denver area alone estimate that up to 9-10 different crews arrive in Denver throughout a given summer. This group of outreach workers reports interactions with a combined total of hundreds of youth in the Denver area over the past few years that previously had experiences in traveling sales crews.
- First-hand reports and testimonies of experiences in the crews have been made by youth and youth adults in cities nationwide.
- Outreach workers, hotlines, and service agencies for runaway and homeless youth also share similar reports of youth and youth adults nationwide who have sought services after leaving a bad experience in the crews.
- It is assumed that there are varying experiences in the sales crews, and conditions may vary.

### **Size of a Typical Single Crew**

- First-hand reports suggest an average size of 30-40 youth and young adults per crew.
- However, some crews may have upwards of 60 to 100 youth and young adults who are pressured to sell items (typically magazines, but occasionally soap, candy, and other goods).

### **Common Characteristics of Victims**

- Victims' ages typically range from 16-28.
- Youth and young adults selling products are rarely older than 23, and some are minors under the age of 18.
- Both males and females are accepted into the crews.
- Victims come from all ethnicities.
- Victims are typically individuals with low levels of formal education and low income levels.
- Some victims are from populations displaced by Hurricane Katrina.
- Many victims have a history of or are vulnerable to homelessness. These victims may feel low levels of attachment to any given area, or feel they have "nothing to lose." They also may have dropped out of school.
- Many victims may have a history of being part of multiple distinct crews.
- If individuals do not have ID or age verification, crew operators are known to take their word for their age or may accept fake IDs. Crew managers and operators may make verbal claims about not accepting minors, but because there is no document verification process for minors, minors are known to be prevalent in the crews. If minors are in the crew, they are expected to act like everyone else.
- The common thread across all victim populations – vulnerability to exploitation.

### **Common Characteristics of Operators and Controllers**

- Crews are typically operated by white, middle-aged, middle class men and women.
- It is suspected that most of the operators are “lifers” or people with few other skills who have existed their entire working life by operating these underground crews.
- Initial reports indicate a highly structured hierarchy of control among those operating and controlling the crews.
- Roles of operators may include:
  - Managers – Operate and lead the crew
  - Jr. Managers – Crew members who have gained respect from managers
  - Trainers – Higher Order Crew Members responsible for training and enforcing rules amongst other members
  - Car/Van Handlers – Higher Order Crew Members responsible for driving the van while still responsible for selling items
- Initial reports also indicate that certain umbrella companies or businesses are the back-end owners and controllers of many different individual crews. One umbrella company may have upwards of 10-30 crews that are part of it.
- Company and crew names are typically generic sales names such as:
  - Integrity Sales Group
  - Circulations Incorporated
  - Interstate Subscription Services Incorporated
  - Strictly Business Incorporated
- Due to the mobile, fraudulent, and underground nature of the crews, it is suspected that the crews also attract operators who have tendencies towards antisocial and other violent behaviors, making them an added risk factor for youth, given the sense of impunity and ability to evade law enforcement.

### **Language Use and Unique Cultures of the Crews**

- Initial reports indicate that the crews have a specific language or “lingo” of accepted terms that are norms within the crews.
- An attempted glossary of different identified terms is included below:
  - “Drops” – Van drop-offs in different neighborhoods
  - “Blanked” or “Coming up Blank” – Not selling any magazines in a day
  - “Team Bitches” – Highest selling female on crew
  - “Team Cocks” – Highest selling male on crew
  - “Lifers” – Crew operators who have been in the crews for years
  - “On Territory” – On location on a person’s property when doing a sale
  - “Ad Runners” – The people who are paid to answer the phones from calls from interested youth and hire people
  - “Jumps” – A period of time in a specific location
  - “Hopping” – Moving from place to place
  - “Wab” – Weak Ass Bastard
  - “Folding” - Quitting

### **Mechanisms of Initial Recruitment and Advertisement**

- The traveling sales crews recruit throughout the country through a wide variety of avenues, including alluring advertisements in newspapers and magazines, direct in-person solicitation, and word of mouth.
- Typical “too good to be true” advertisements offer a range of false promises. Examples of these promises include:
  - Earning lots of quick money
  - Earning money for college
  - “Fun, Money, Travel!”
  - Opportunities to travel across the United States
  - Opportunities for international travel and trips to fun vacation destinations
  - Opportunities to stay in nice hotels
  - Opportunities to make new friends and meet peers
  - Award schemes, contests, and competitions for youth based on who can sell the most
- Each advertisement has a number for youth to call to join, which typically seem to be 1-800, 1-866, or 1-877 numbers. These numbers are routed to cell phones to contact prospective youth with the crew operators.
- Recruiters typically target homeless youth and young adult populations. Recruiters have been sighted on the streets where high volumes of homeless individuals spend time, such as homeless youth shelters and service centers, as well as parties and popular hang-outs.
- Recruiters promise homeless youth and young adults that they will only work minimal days per week and manageable hours per day

### **First 24-48 Hours with the Crew – Swift Departure and a Seasoning “Honeymoon” Period**

- Upon signing up to be in a crew, answering an ad in the paper, or agreeing to join after a friend’s offer, it seems that the sales crews are able to respond extremely swiftly and seize the opportunity to pick up the youth or young adult. Vans full of youth are known to respond within an hour after a youth calls the business number and agrees to join the crew. For situations where no local van is available, the crews often arrange for the youth to receive a bus ticket so they can be bussed to the nearest location where the crew exists.
- Immediately, the crew transports the individual to a distant location that is far removed from their original location, or to a local hotel room where the youth can be interviewed. Very little up-front information is given in the initial interview about the experiences in the crews, and they do not know what they will be selling.
- Because of the swift departure, youth and young adults often do not even have time to pack a bag or tell their parents where they are going. (Initial phone calls to parents from the new city are only reluctantly allowed, delayed, forbidden, or monitored). The process of such swift departure often causes extreme anxiety for parents when they feel like their child has “gone missing.” In some crews, when the youth initially asks to call their parents, the crew attempts to dissuade from them the call by appealing to the desire to

appear “cool” and saying, “You’re an adult now, aren’t you too old to have to call your parents?”

- The crews are known to engage in an abnormally casual hiring process where hiring occurs sometimes over the phone, “hired on the spot,” without references, and without background checks.
- The first hours with the crew are presented as a “happy” time during which youth and young adults seem to be treated well. What the youth doesn’t realize is that crew leaders are known to train, coerce, and pressure other existing crew members to “act positive” each time a new member joins. No crew member is allowed to give a negative impression during the initial hours.
- In addition, after first joining a crew, new “rookie” recruits are encouraged to spend the majority of their time with a “trainer” to limit interaction with other peers.

### **“Training” Youth and Young Adults on Sales Tactics and Operational Protocols**

- After the initial honeymoon period, youth and young adults newly recruited into the crews are often “trained” by another more senior crew member on what the crews are all about, what they do, how they work, and how they operate.
- During these “training” sessions, youth are informed of the rules that will govern their lives, including what they are allowed to say and not to say to outsiders.

### **Common Characteristics of a Typical Day or Lifestyle in the Crews:**

- **Eating**
  - Members of the crews typically eat fast food and live on a very unhealthy and unpredictable diet, typically eating one fast food meal in the morning and another later at night. During the day, individuals are expected to find their own food, but if they do not have cash on them, they do not eat.
  - Youth and young adults in the crews are not given food and water during the day while they are expected to be soliciting sales.
- **Sleeping**
  - The crews are known to sleep in local motels and hotels.
  - Hotel lodging is paid up front by crew operators, which is then used as a means of debt and financial control over youth and young adults in the crew (i.e., if the youth or young adult is not making enough in sales, the debt may be held against them).
  - Motel and hotel rooms are shared among individuals in the crews, where there may be as few as 2 to a room, and as many as 10 to a room.
  - Many crew members sleep on the floor.
  - Allegedly, “who gets to sleep in a bed” may be determined by a system of rewards and punishments based on daily sales.
  - Victims may not know the names of the hotels where they are staying and may only identify hotels based on distinguishing landmarks

- **Clothing and Personal Belongings**
  - Youth and young adults in the crews are not provided adequate clothing to wear (e.g., no rain jackets in the rain, no winter coats in the cold, t-shirts in the cold).
  - Personal belongings are left during the day at the hotel room.
- **Hours Expected to Work**
  - Youth and young adults in the sales crews are expected to work considerably long hours each day. Typical shifts are 12 hours a day, 7 days a week.
  - Each day typically starts around 7:00am and is then followed by a morning crew meeting before the day of sales.
  - Hours of sales are expected to range from as early as 8:00am to as late as 10:00pm or 11:00pm.
  - Youth and young adults are returned to the hotel immediately after being picked up from a day of sales.
- **Conditions of Work**
  - Youth and young adults are dropped off in unfamiliar neighborhoods or college campuses and told to sell magazines or other products (e.g., cleaning products, candy) throughout the day. Each youth is given a different area of the location to cover.
  - Youth and young adults are expected to work regardless of illness or weather conditions. One youth states, “We worked in all types of weather – rain, snow, floods, and heat waves.”
  - Members of each crew are not given any free time, and “time off” is only given while the crew is traveling to a different city.
  - Crew members are not told of their whereabouts or city locations.
  - In general, crew leadership exhibits a very low regard for the personal care of the youth and young adults in their crew.
- **Interactions with Other Community Members**
  - Youth and young adults are instructed not to talk to anyone about their situation. They are also instructed not to talk to anyone about jobs, referrals for services, or assistance with travel or shelter.
- **Interactions with Law Enforcement**
  - If youth and young adults in the crews encounter law enforcement and receive a “soliciting without a permit” ticket, the crew then moves to a different city and does not address the ticket.
- **Driving Trips**
  - Due to the high frequency of travel, the crews have protocols around driving between various locations, often driving throughout the night. It is understood that crew operators often make youth do the driving for extreme distances and periods of time. Various deaths and car accidents occur when youth fall asleep at the wheel after being forced to drive for unreasonable amounts of time.

### **Network Operations**

- The crews migrate from city to city at regular intervals of time and rarely stay in one city for too long of a period of time. Crews may stay longer in bigger cities (up to 1-2 months), but shorter periods of time in smaller cities and towns (2 weeks – 1 month). It is assumed that frequent movement prevents law enforcement detection or suspicion of community members.
- Very little to no information is given to the youth and young adults about the city they are in, their location in the city, or contact information should they be hurt or lost while canvassing. For example, one individual contacted homeless services in Denver by wandering to an elementary school in a neighborhood he was canvassing, and upon talking with outreach workers, admitted that he had no idea what city he was in or how to get back to his hotel – only that he was somewhere near Denver.
- The crew operators are known to use nicknames and do not allow the victims to know their real identities.
- Crews are known to operate most heavily in the Spring and Summer months when the weather is warm.
- Sundays seem to be the day when most inter-city and inter-state traveling occurs.

### **The Sales Scheme – How the Business Works:**

- The sales crews operate as a business model and front as a legitimate business.
- Crew operators have brochures and other business pamphlets to provide to potential customers.
- Sales are made for a variety of types of magazines and other products.
- When making sales, youth and young adults are trained to tell a number of “sales pitches” or common angles that increase the likelihood of sales or play on common sympathies of prospective customers. Although youth are trained to try any sales angle that they can think of, common angles may include:
  - “I’m raising money for college.”
  - “Donate a magazine subscription to military families overseas.”
  - “Donate a magazine to a local hospital.”
  - “The subscription is tax-deductible if donated to a non-profit.”
  - “I’m trying to work my way out of the ghetto.”
  - “I’m trying to win a college scholarship.”
  - “I’m in a contest and trying to win a trip.”
  - “I’m in a college communications contest to earn expenses and book money.”
  - “I’m trying to win a savings bond for college.”

### **Methods of Control, Coercion, and Exploitation Used by Operators:**

- **False Promises**
  - False promises and fraudulent statements are made to lure the youth and young adults into the crews.
- **Isolation and Removal from Familiar Surroundings**
  - Youth and young adults are kept isolated from their social support structure of friends and family and quickly removed from familiar surroundings

- **Frequent Transportation**
  - High mobility and moving from city-to-city ensures that the youth and young adults in the crews stay constantly disoriented and are prevented from establishing trusted and repeated contacts with local community members.
- **Document Confiscation and Confiscation of Other Possessions**
  - Some crews are alleged to confiscate the identification documents of the youth and young adults in the crews, so that they do not have ID in their possession.
  - Other crews may confiscate items such as wallets, critical medical prescriptions, eyeglasses, and other products to gain control over the youth.
- **Daily Individual Quotas of Sales**
  - Youth and young adults are expected to make a certain quota of sales per day. Failure to meet the quota results in a number of punishments and negative reinforcements.
  - For example, if an individual does not make their quota for a day, they may not be allowed to eat that night.
- **Daily “Van Quotas” for Collective Sales**
  - Not only is each youth responsible for a daily quota of sales, some crews are also known to create collective quotas for all the youth in each van. If the van did not make their van quota, the individuals who made the least amount of sales that day were harassed by other van members.
  - First-hand reports even indicate direct physical beatings from other van members based on being responsible for falling short of a van quota.
- **Financial Control, Manipulation of Payment, and Debt**
  - Youth and young adults in some crews are given a daily allowance of approximately \$5 dollars to cover incidental expenses throughout the day.
  - Failure to meet a daily quota results in a number of financial penalties and controls.
  - Crew operators pay each youth or young adult a “commission” at the end of each day in cash only if the quota was met and if no other debt was present. Daily expenses for food and hotel costs are subtracted from the daily commission, and/or youth are expected to pay for their own food with cash from their commission. In some crews, youth are paid \$1 per magazine sold.
  - If the youth exceeds their daily commission, some crews claim to hold all the extra money made in an “account” for each youth, although access to this account is often restricted and controlled and many youth report never seeing any money from this account.
  - Youth and young adults are instructed not to accept any personal tips from customers.
  - Operators coerce victims into believing that they owe money to the operator and crew and that they cannot leave until the debt is worked off.
  - Moreover, sales bonuses are promised for any crew member that recruits other youth into the crew. This practice creates a “peer-to-peer” recruiting network where certain youth may be more likely to trust another youth their age who vouches for the organization and opportunity.

- Other prizes and financial incentives are built into the sales scheme, including things like “a pack of cigarettes” for the person who sold the most in one day.
- **Emotional and Verbal Abuse**
  - Crew operators create a hostile climate of fear and compliance through yelling, insults, degrading behavior, and other forms of emotional and verbal abuse.
- **Threats**
  - Crew operators make a number of threats to the youth and young adults in the crews based on “what might happen if...” certain actions are not performed or completed.
- **Fear**
  - Crew operators instill a sense of fear among youth and young adults in the crews so that they fear reporting to others, service providers, or to law enforcement.
- **Facilitated Access to Addictive Substances**
  - There is a heavy presence of drugs within the crews, and crew operators often manipulate access to drugs as a system of rewards and punishments. Binge drinking may lead to drunk driving and other unsafe behavior.
- **Direct Violence, Physical Beatings, and Physical Assault**
  - First-hand reports indicate that there is a high degree of many forms of physical violence in the crews.
  - Forms of violence include slapping, beating, gang beatings, and beatings with objects (e.g., baseball bats).
  - Survivors also report instances of operators hiring certain crew members to beat up other crew members who were non-compliant.
  - Actions that may warrant physical violence may include: talking back, being disrespectful towards crew operators, not meeting daily quotas, not making van quotas, or leaving the hotel alone.
- **Sexual Harassment, Sexual Assault, and Rape**
  - Survivor testimonies document accounts of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape within the crews as a form of control of female youth.
- **Forced or Coerced Abortions**
  - It is reported that male crew operators in positions of power and authority have propositioned female crew members for sex within the crews, and there are instances where females become pregnant. In these instances, in certain crews, the male crew operator has made threats of abandonment from the crew unless she gets an abortion.
- **Abandonment for Non-Compliance**
  - If a youth or young adult is non-compliant or failing to make daily sales quotas, they risk being left behind by the crew in an unfamiliar city when the crew migrates to a new location.
  - Abandonment is known to be frequent among the crews, and it serves as a powerful form of modeling and control for other crew members who remain with the crew.

- **Crew-to-Crew Gang Warfare**
  - Different sales crews are known to engage in rival “gang-like” territorial behavior against each other, which includes threats, verbal altercations, and physical gang fights. A recent gang fight among two crews in Denver led to six youth being taken to the hospital for serious injuries.
- **Selling Crew Members to Other Crews**
  - Survivors from the crews have provided eyewitness accounts of people being bought and sold within the crews.
- **Other Rewards and Punishments**
  - There is an elaborate system of rewards and punishments within the crew to control behavior, including opportunities for “promotion” for good behavior and sales. Moreover, the promotion chain seems to be linked to levels of “protection” within the crew from violence and reprisals (described above).

### **What Happens if Victims Try to Leave?**

- In the eyes of the youth and young adults in the crews, many feel that they cannot leave or stop selling magazines or other products.
- At the prospect of leaving, youth and young adults in the crews are threatened by crew operators with reprisals of various forms (physical, emotional, abandonment), resulting in fear. Threats to prevent youth from leaving include:
  - If you leave, you’ll go to prison
  - If you leave, law enforcement will catch you
- In some identified instances, youth in the crews are told that they cannot leave because they have “debts to pay.”
- One youth stated that everyone in his crew hated it there and wanted to leave but felt that they couldn’t because of significant fear and debt.
- Misbehavior or inadequate sales may result in the crew abandoning the individual alone in the city (e.g., the individual returns to the hotel room after a day’s work to find the room empty and the entire crew gone. This leaves the individual alone in the city with no money, no clothes, no identification, and no knowledge of the local area).

### **Means of Escaping or Getting Out of the Crews**

- Leaving the sales crews is suspected to be one of the primary short-term causes of runaway and youth homelessness in the U.S. today.
- Youth and young adults escape or leave or get out of the crews in a number of ways:
  - 1) Running and hiding from the pick-up van and avoiding being picked up after a day of sales
  - 2) Encountering runaway and homeless outreach workers and deciding to go with them to a shelter or safe place
  - 3) Out-crying for help to a community member and receiving help from a potential customer
  - 4) Being abandoned in a city by a crew and seeking

### **Selected Direct Quotes from Survivor Testimonials**

- “They tear you down, and build you up to their standards.”
- “They really teach you how to manipulate.”
- “The magazine crews want the young and the hopeless; if you have hope, they will make sure that it is gone.”
- “You eat, breathe, and drink magazines.”
- “He thought it was like slavery.”
- “Really think hard before you say yes to anyone on a crew, cuz once you do, your life is theirs.”

### **The Community and Legal Response Thus Far**

- Despite their prevalence, to date, the human trafficking movement has not invested significant resources in investigating and prosecuting traveling sales crews as potential operations with elements of human trafficking.
- Moreover, the labor movement has also not thoroughly embraced the sales crews, and the practice remains largely unregulated.
- In fact, these crews seem to fly beneath the national radar and get very little attention from media, politicians, community leaders, community groups, and law enforcement.
- [www.parentwatch.org](http://www.parentwatch.org) is a New York-based non-profit that has been worked on the issue of sales crews for upwards of 20 years.
- [www.magcrew.com](http://www.magcrew.com) is another Web site devoted to imparting information about the crews.

### **Less Exploitative Crews**

- Despite the prevalence of crews with high degrees of exploitation and control, there also seem to be certain examples of more legitimate companies that offer better working conditions.
- It is important to further explore the heterogeneity of the network.

### **Current Unknowns that Remain**

- Number of crews nationwide
- Number or name of U.S. cities and States in which these crews operate
- The extent to which minors are involved
- Profits and revenues of the crews
- Operating expenses of the crews
- Support structure of other businesses involved with the crews
- Levels of knowledge of hotels that rent rooms to the crews
- Occurrence of any sex trafficking or induced commercial sex acts
- Whether crews operate independently and are decentralized or if there is a “Mr. Big” coordinating a central national operation