

THE DRIVERS OF **DEMAND**

Tracking Ohio's Sex Buyers
and Their Criminal Consequences



DAVE YOST
OHIO ATTORNEY GENERAL





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Dear Colleagues,

Hundreds of Ohioans are victimized by human traffickers each year.

For far too long, victims were blamed.

This flawed perspective distracted us from those who should bear the blame for fueling trafficking: “johns,” or sex buyers.

My office sought to change that.

In 2021, we led an effort to reform Ohio law to create a specific criminal charge for sex buyers, allowing the justice system to better distinguish offenders from victims and to institute tougher penalties for those who drive the demand for sex buying.

This law had another critical component to it. Those convicted of this “engaging in prostitution” charge are required to attend sex-buyer educational programming – or “john school” – as part of their sentencing. (See our online guide for local jurisdictions, “John School: Guidelines for Sex Buyer Education Programs.”)

The need for an honest assessment of the effectiveness of these changes has become increasingly clear. The result is this report, led by our Human Trafficking Initiative team.

This analysis takes a comprehensive look at the sex buyers we arrested during my tenure as Ohio’s Attorney General: where and how they were arrested; whether they were repeat offenders; whether they were required to attend educational programming; and, if so, whether they did attend.

Facts yield patterns, and in patterns there are solutions.

It is our hope that the insights gleaned from this research will help advance efforts to end the scourge of human trafficking. Only by targeting the demand side of this illicit market can this be accomplished.

With your assistance, we can end the practice of buying sex in Ohio.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dave Yost".

Dave Yost
Ohio Attorney General

Abstract

Since taking office in 2019, Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost has made reducing the demand for commercial sex a core priority. This report examines individuals arrested on charges of buying sex in Ohio from 2019 through 2025. It analyzes county-level trends, convictions, sentencing outcomes, attendance at sex-buyer educational (SBE) programs, repeat offenses and status of current cases.

The goal was to evaluate the outcomes of state statutory changes and provide a current snapshot of the consequences for sex buyers in Ohio.

The research revealed clear trends:

- Sentencing for sex buyers in Ohio has increased over time, but jail time served and fines remain minimal. Recently, the average fine for sex-buying offenses has decreased.
- Sex-buyer education programs are widely used, but attendance is not consistently enforced or tracked.

These findings can inform future statewide demand-reduction strategies and help strengthen accountability for sex buyers.

Terminology

- **Human trafficking:** Ohio’s legal definition of human trafficking (“trafficking in persons”) states: “No person shall knowingly recruit, lure, entice, isolate, harbor, transport, provide, obtain, or maintain ... another person knowing that the person will be subjected to involuntary servitude or be compelled to engage in sexual activity.”¹ This definition encompasses two broad subtypes: sex trafficking and labor trafficking.
- **Commercial sex:** A sex act in exchange for something of value (e.g., money, housing, substances, clothing, food, etc.)
- **Demand:** The desire and actions of individuals who purchase, or benefit from, commercial sex or exploitative labor or services
- **John/sex buyer/consumer/solicitor:** An individual who purchases commercial sex
- **John school/sex-buyer educational program/solicitor educational program:** Interchangeable terms used to describe courses aimed at educating sex buyers on the complexities of commercial sex and human trafficking. Generally, these programs seek to deter sex buyers from future offenses and to reduce the societal demand for commercial sex.

¹ Section 2905.32: Trafficking in persons. Section 2905.32 - Ohio Revised Code | Ohio Laws. (n.d.). <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-2905.32>

Data Sources and Interpretation Considerations

The data used for this report was compiled from a variety of sources, including Ohio Law Enforcement Gateway (OHLEG), human trafficking task forces formed under the Ohio Organized Crime Investigations Commission (OOCIC), public records, press releases from the Ohio Attorney General's Office (AGO) and the Columbus Solicitor Education Program (SEP).

The analysis encompassed data spanning 2019 through 2025 in the following categories: county of arrest, charges, convictions, sentencing requirements, SBE program attendance, repeat offenses and current case status.

Although the report provides a summary of the status of sex buyers in Ohio, there are limitations to consider:

Data Availability

- Each county manages public records differently. Not all counties were able to provide information on whether a sex buyer charged with engaging in prostitution attended the mandatory educational program.
- In some cases, categorical data (on county of arrest, charges, convictions, etc.) was not available, leaving some gaps.
- Given the variety of data sources, significant efforts were made to reduce duplication and verify the accuracy of the information.

Legal/Procedural Limitations

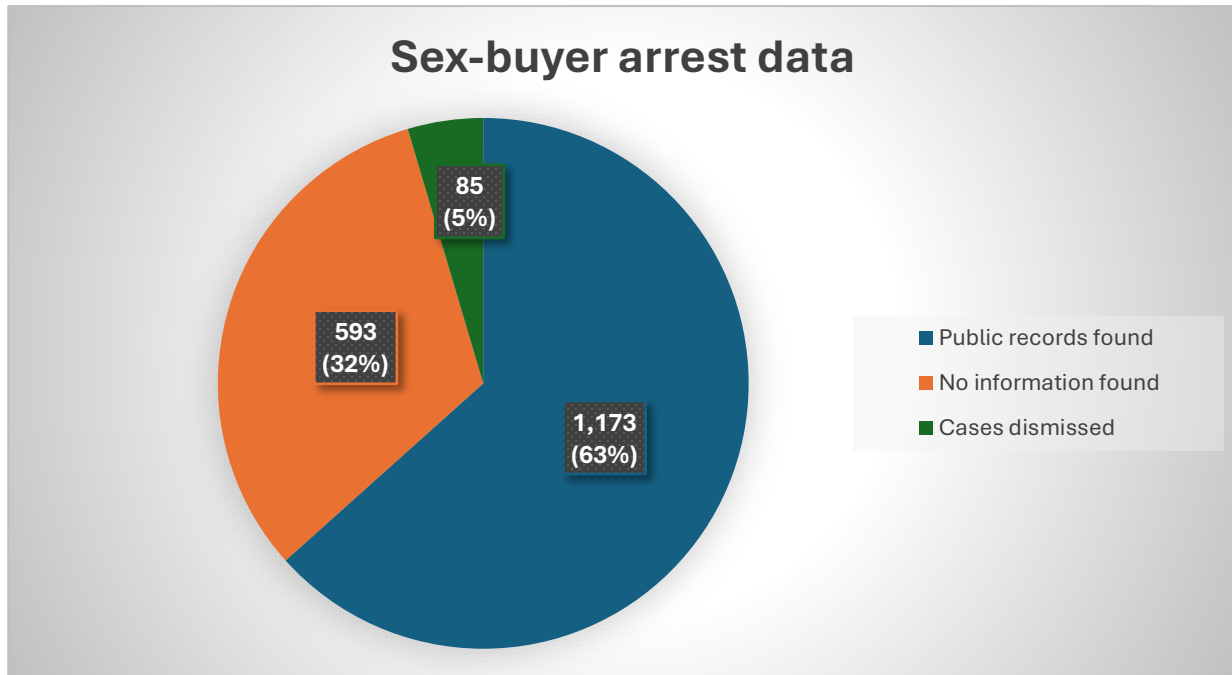
- This report captures data on sex buyers charged only with soliciting and/or engaging in prostitution, not sex buyers otherwise charged in Ohio between 2019 and 2025.
- Depending on the offense, some sex buyers might have been eligible for record sealing or expungement. Criminal justice information is not available for sex buyers who pursued these options.²
- Sex buyers charged as juveniles are not included in this report due to the confidential nature of juvenile criminal offenses.
- Prior to 2021, sex buyers were commonly charged under ORC 2907.24 – Soliciting. Individuals selling commercial sex could also be criminally charged under “soliciting,” making it challenging to distinguish buyers from sellers in the data. For this report, any soliciting offense committed by a female was excluded from the data analysis due to the low percentage of female sex buyers and typically low identification of males as commercial sex sellers.
- Data from 2020 may not reflect typical conditions due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

² Ohio Justice & Policy Center. (2025, March). Record Sealing and Expungement in Ohio. Cincinnati, Ohio.

Interpretation Considerations

Given the limitations outlined above, it is best not to use this report to draw broad conclusions about sex buyers in Ohio. Rather, the report provides a snapshot of the status of sex buyers arrested in Ohio and the resulting criminal consequences. It also may reveal patterns that can better inform Ohio's response to demand reduction.

Aggregate Findings (2019 – 2025)



Arrest data was gleaned from OHLEG, OOCIC records and AGO press releases. Publicly accessible criminal records existed for only 63% of those arrested. For 32%, no information was found, potentially due to sealed or expunged records, incomplete data entry or cases in which arrests did not result in filed charges. Only 5% of cases resulted in a dismissal, some due to the completion of an SBE program. This variability creates a gap in the big picture of case outcomes and sex-buyer patterns.

Counties of Arrest

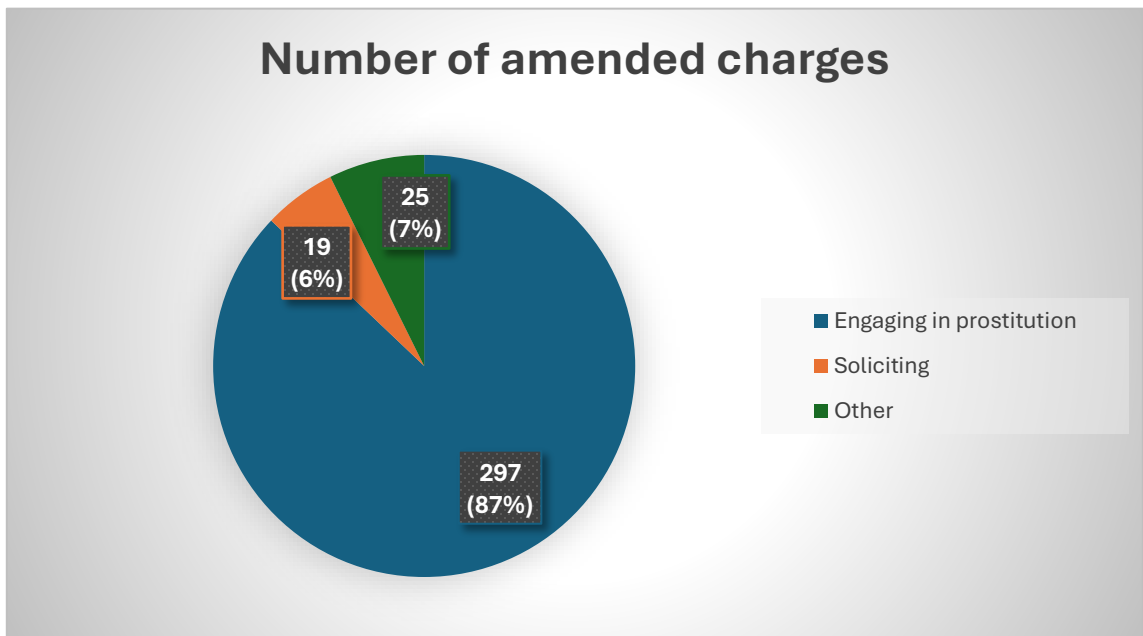
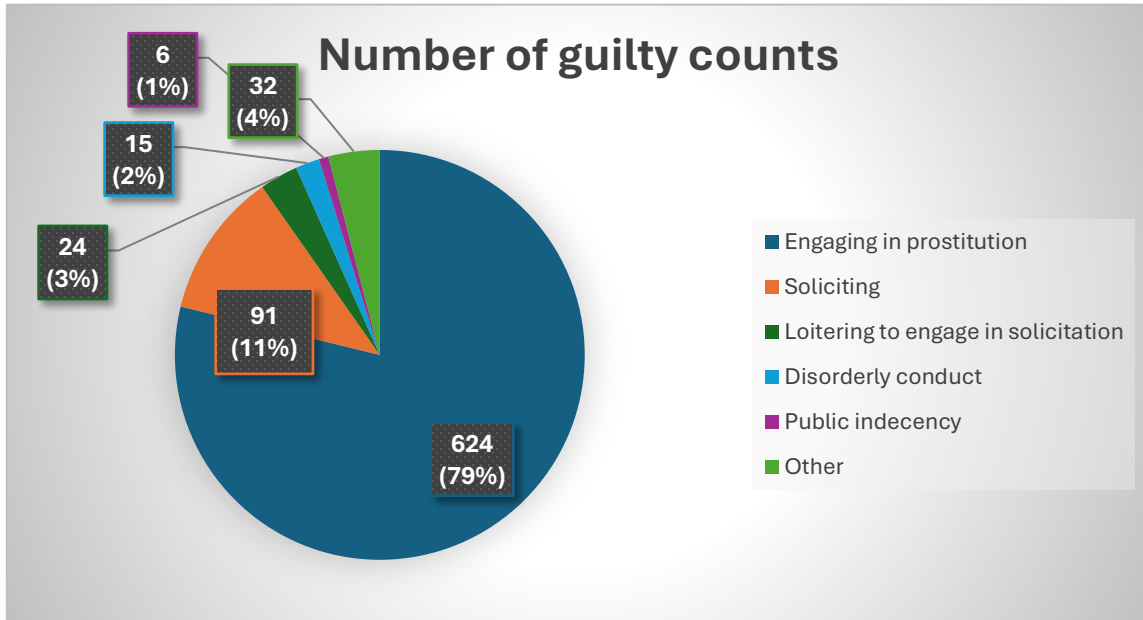
COUNTY	NUMBER OF ARRESTS
Columbiana	710
Franklin	383
Cuyahoga	121
Fairfield	96
Montgomery	67
Mahoning	41
Hamilton	39
Summit	26
Portage	23
Stark	23
Trumbull	21
Jefferson	18
Washington	18
Erie	17
Lake	13
Medina	12
Ashland	9
Lorain	9
Richland	8
Gallia	5
Hocking	5
Lucas	5
Greene	4
Morgan	4
Allen	3
Ashtabula	3
Henry	3
Scioto	3
Wayne	3

COUNTY	NUMBER OF ARRESTS
Butler	2
Holmes	2
Miami	2
Noble	2
Shelby	2
Warren	2
Adams	1
Auglaize	1
Belmont	1
Crawford	1
Defiance	1
Fayette	1
Geauga	1
Guernsey	1
Marion	1
Muskingum	1
Pickaway	1
Ross	1
Sandusky	1
Seneca	1
Williams	1
Wood	1
Unknown	131

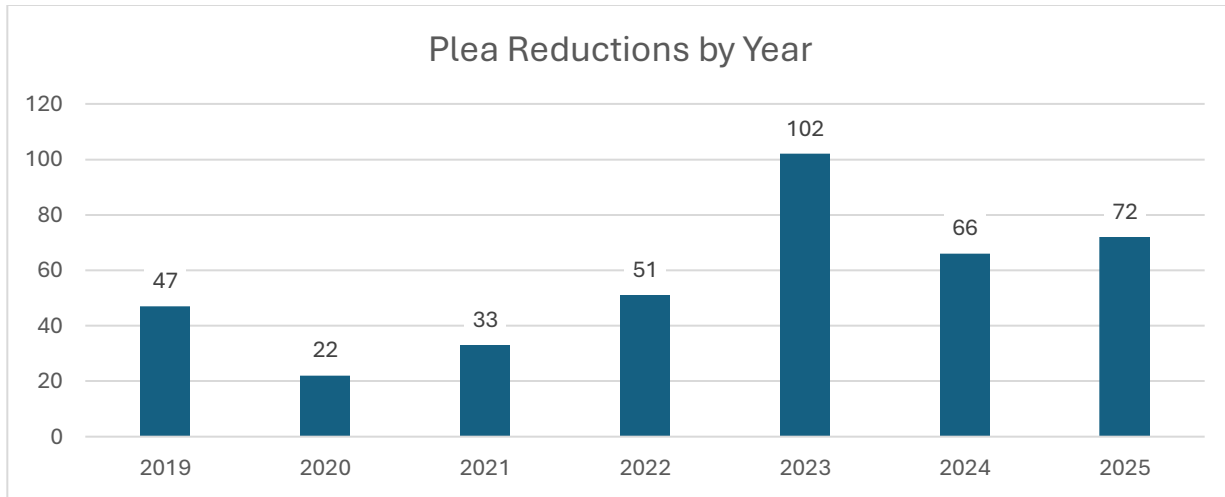
Arrest data is disproportionate in Ohio, both across and within Ohio's 88 counties. Columbiana County alone accounted for 710 arrests (34% of the statewide total), followed by Franklin County (383) and Cuyahoga County (121). These concentrations reflect where human trafficking task forces operate, rather than the actual prevalence of sex buyers in a county. The data reveals a pattern: Human trafficking task forces are an effective tool for identifying and apprehending sex buyers.

Thirty-seven counties reported no arrests and 32 counties reported from one to five arrests, suggesting either limited enforcement, reduced investigative capacity, fewer proactive operations or a combination of these factors. Additionally, 131 arrests lacked county information, underscoring the need for improved reporting mechanisms.

Charges & Convictions

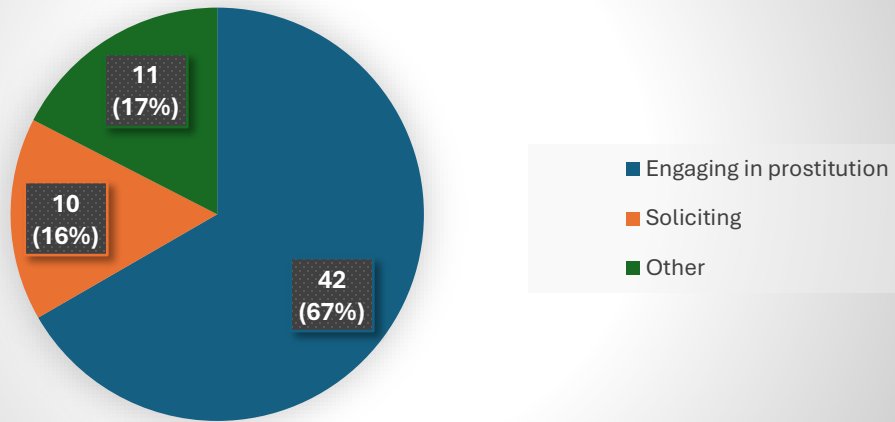


PLEA REDUCTIONS FROM 2019-2025		
COUNTY	NUMBER OF ARRESTS	PLEA REDUCTIONS
Franklin	383	218
Columbiana	710	45
Cuyahoga	121	22
Montgomery	67	22
Trumbull	21	12
Hamilton	39	11
Portage	23	10
Erie	17	10
Summit	26	9
Mahoning	41	7



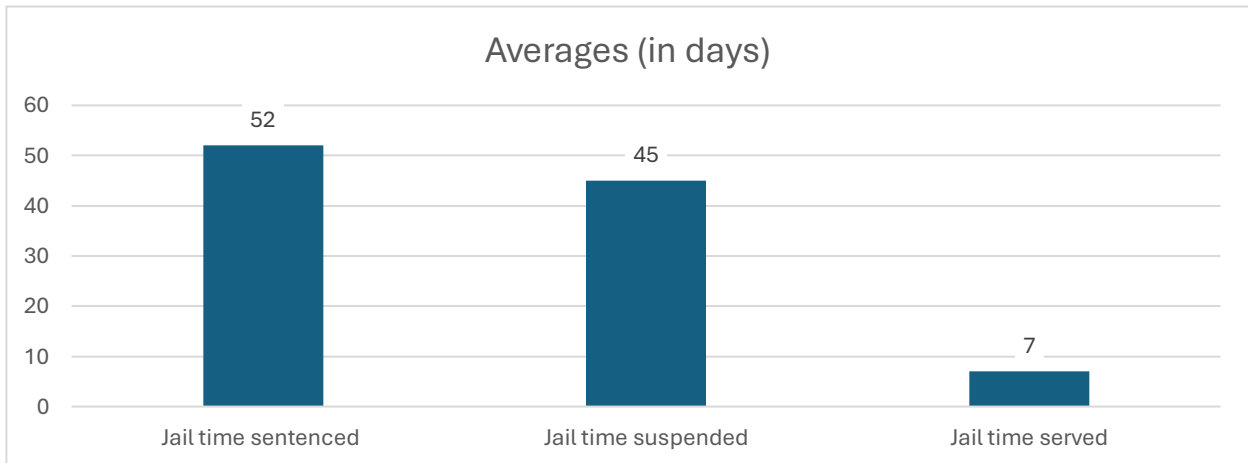
Amended or reduced charges occur frequently, typically due to plea negotiations, prosecutorial strategies or SBE participation in lieu of conviction. This pattern suggests a system that prioritizes case resolution over pursuit of maximum penalties for sex buyers.

Number of dismissed charges



Less than 5% of cases end in dismissal. Dismissals may stem from evidentiary weaknesses, plea negotiations, differing prosecutorial philosophies and/or completion of an SBE program.

Sentencing Outcomes



Sentencing patterns reflect minimal jail time. For sex buyers in Ohio, incarceration is rare or typically brief, often seven days or fewer. Fines are modest, with the average being \$350. These patterns suggest that jail is used symbolically rather than as a primary consequence for sex-buying offenses.

Also, in many cases, jail time was deferred on the condition of SBE program completion. However, little information was available on whether the penalty was imposed or the program completed. This indicates a potential gap in enforcement and in data-sharing between courts and probation officers.

Participation in Sex-Buyer Education Programs

A total of 629 individuals were ordered to attend an SBE program. How many actually attended a program, however, is unknown. The Columbus SEP confirmed the attendance of 583 individuals between 2021 and 2025. Of that number, 14 attended twice.

Notably, 64% of these former SEP attendees have no publicly available criminal records, indicating that some courts may operate through diversion or noncriminal pathways, or that records were sealed, expunged, or never filed. SBE programs have become a major intervention point for sex buyers in Ohio.

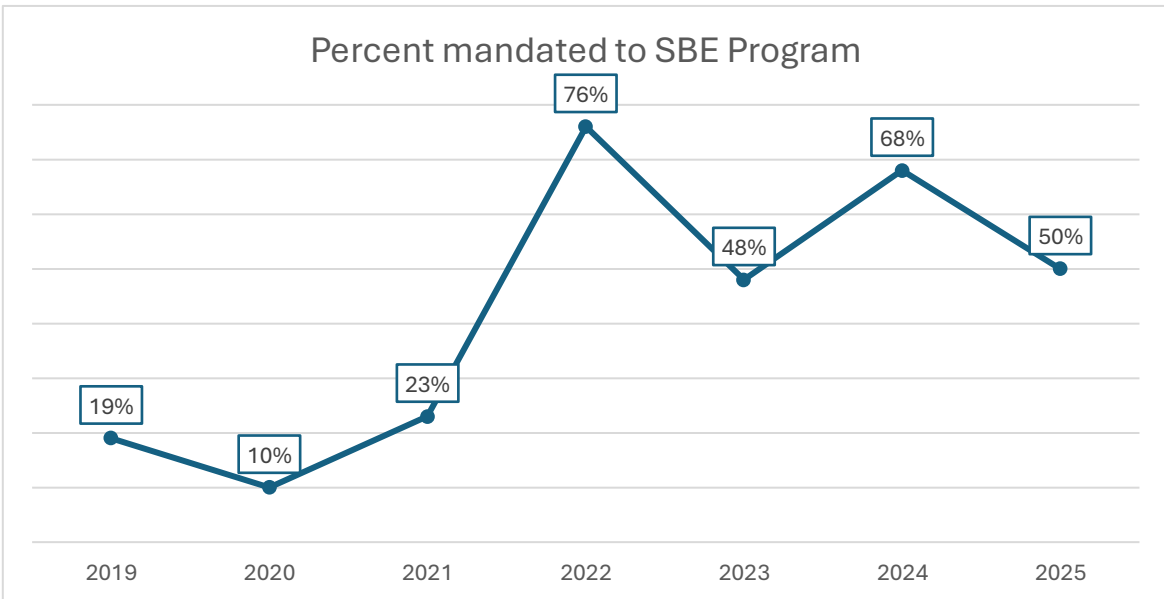
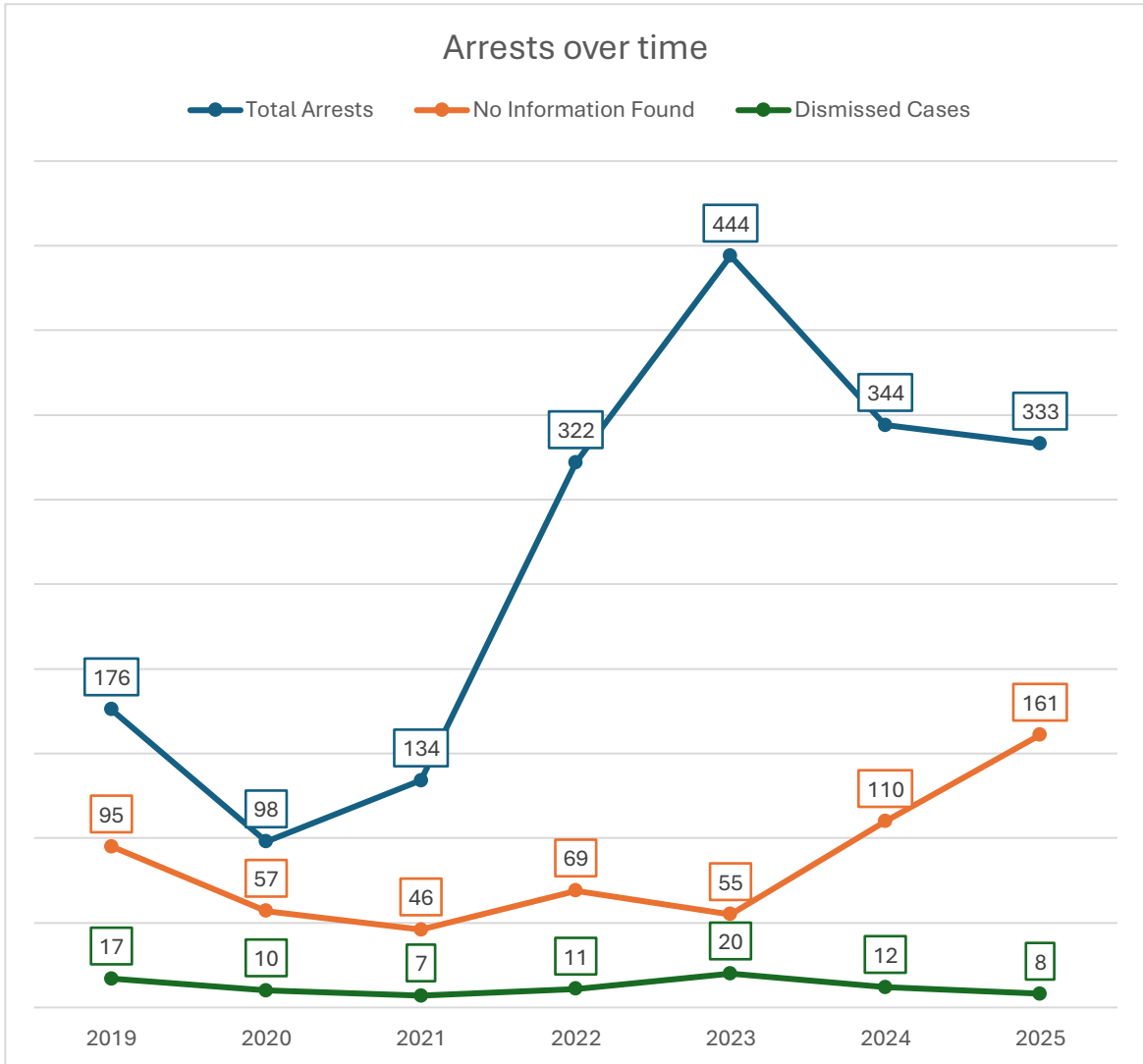
Current Status

- Open cases related to sex buying: 286 (24% of those with public records found)
- Closed cases: 1,136
- Active warrants: 103
- Repeat offenders: 48

Known instances of repeat offending appear somewhat limited, although detection may be inconsistent. The research identified several cases in which repeat sex buyers were arrested in different counties, but their prior arrests did not appear to be factored into sentencing. This may suggest a greater need for data-sharing among counties.

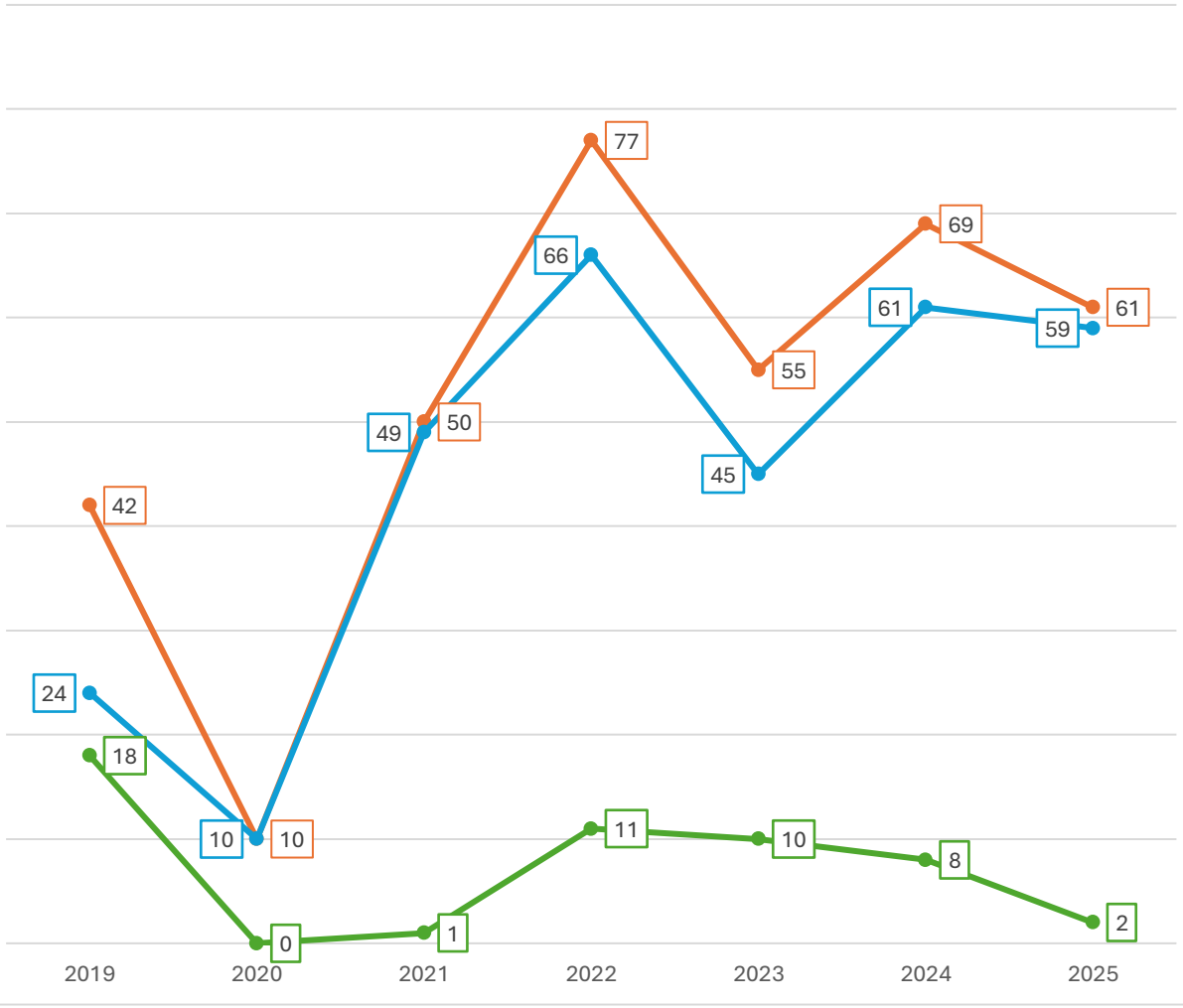
Low recidivism rates may also reflect the effectiveness of SBE programs and sanctions, or they may indicate that the repeated behavior goes unidentified.

Findings by Year



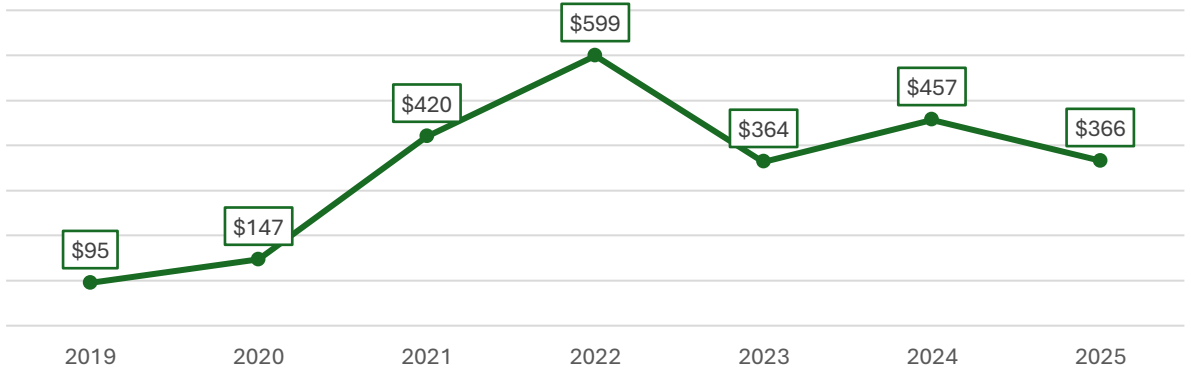
Sentencing outcomes over time (Days)

● Average Sentenced Jail Time
 ● Average Suspended Jail Time
 ● Average Jail Time Served



Sentencing outcomes over time (Dollars)

● Average Fine



Profile of a Sex Buyer

Snapshot

- More likely to be male, white, employed, educated and unmarried.
- Age varies widely (from teens to 70+), as does profession.
- For a majority (70%), online platforms provide primary access.
- High-frequency buyers make up most transactions (about 75%).
- One of every two has tried to stop the behavior.
- Demand is primarily driven by relational or situational factors.

Summary

Who buys sex in Ohio? Although the typical sex buyer is difficult to profile precisely, current data indicates that sex buyers in Ohio are more likely to be male, white, employed, educated, and unmarried.

Generally speaking, sex buyers can be organized into two categories: high-frequency buyers and low-frequency buyers.

High-frequency buyers account for most transactions — nearly 75%. They not only purchase more often (weekly or monthly) but also are more likely to have an income exceeding \$100,000 and are willing to pay higher prices. They also are more likely to have begun buying sex at a younger age, perhaps even as a minor.

Low-frequency buyers purchase sex one to five times a year.³

Although demographics yielded from data can be informative, some of the best insights come from sex buyers themselves.

The Columbus SEP shared a report with our office analyzing 1,307 sex buyers who had participated in its programming from 2013 to 2025. SEP's analysis appeared consistent with findings from similar analyses: Most sex buyers were middle-aged, with nearly half of those in committed relationships. Although the sex buyers revealed a range of motivators, one theme prevailed: More than a third identified relational or situational factors — loneliness, lack of intimacy, avoidance of relationship responsibility, boredom, curiosity and convenience — as their motivator.

Childhood sexual abuse, physical abuse, and frequent pornography use were reported as shared experiences among these respondents.⁴

³ Who Buys Sex? November 2018 Report. Demand Abolition. (2018, November). <https://www.demandabolition.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Demand-Buyer-Report-July-2019.pdf>

⁴ (N.d.). A Multi-Phase Analysis of Solicitor Education Programming in Columbus, Ohio: Behavioral Patterns, Demographic Characteristics, and Programmatic Impact Across 1,307 Participants since 2013.

SEP reported similar findings from its most recent sex-buyer educational session (in May 2026): Nearly half of the attendees reported a range of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) – namely, family disruption, emotional abuse and/or emotional neglect.

The respondents identified their top motivators for buying sex as loneliness, curiosity, ease of access, thrill or excitement and stress. Half of the attendees reported failed past attempts to stop their behavior.

Notably, SEP attendees from both the long-term study and this most recent session indicated a strong recognition of harm that results from buying sex. At the program’s end, most attendees characterized themselves as “very unlikely” to reoffend.

Demographics

According to the AGO’s Human Trafficking Annual Reports for the six years from 2019 through 2024,⁵ the suspected sex buyers reported by law enforcement agencies statewide during that time were:

- Overwhelmingly male.
 - 99% were reported as male.
 - Less than 1% were unidentified.
- Mostly white.
 - 87% were reported as white.
 - 6% were reported as Asian or Pacific Islander.
 - 2% were reported as Black.
 - Less than 1% total were reported as Hispanic or “Other.”
 - 4% were reported as unknown race.
- Of varying ages.
 - 37% were 30 to 40 years old.
 - 32% were 41 to 59.
 - 25% were 21 to 29.
 - Less than 2% were 60 or older.
 - Less than 1% were 18 to 20.
 - None were identified under the age of 18
 - The ages of 4% were unknown.

⁵ Ohio Attorney General’s Human Trafficking Annual Reports. Human Trafficking Commission Annual Reports - Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost. (n.d.). <https://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Files/Reports/Human-Trafficking-Commission-Annual-Reports>

Overview of Human Trafficking

To understand the significance of Ohio's efforts to combat the purchase of commercial sex, it's important to know how human traffickers operate.

Human trafficking is a multibillion-dollar criminal industry that exploits people in vulnerable circumstances worldwide, including communities across Ohio.

Human trafficking involves the use of compulsion, force, fraud or coercion to compel an individual to engage in commercial sex or provide labor or services. Although federal law emphasizes force, fraud and coercion,⁶ Ohio law centers on the concept of compulsion, defining human trafficking broadly to include threats, intimidation, manipulation of substance use and other tactics that overcome a victim's will. Additionally, if a person engaged in commercial sex is under 18 or has a developmental disability, Ohio law considers that person a victim of sex trafficking.

Despite its prevalence, human trafficking is often misunderstood. Common myths often hinder identification, service provision, and accountability for perpetrators:⁷

- **Myth: Human trafficking always involves kidnapping or physical force.** Human trafficking can involve physical force, but it does not always. Most traffickers trick, trap, manipulate or threaten their victims into engaging in commercial sex or labor. Trafficking situations most often involve relationships in which a level of trust exists, including familial relationships and intimate-partner relationships.
- **Myth: Victims could leave their situation if they really wanted to.** Multiple barriers often deter trafficked individuals from leaving their situations, including a lack of finances, a lack of housing, extreme fear, the threat or presence of violence, blackmail, trauma bonding and more.
- **Myth: Individuals engaged in commercial sex work are there by choice, and they can stop or leave at any time.** Many individuals engaged in commercial sex work are not participating voluntarily. The purchase of commercial sex is not a victimless crime.

The demand for commercial sex as well as cheap goods and services fuel both sex trafficking and labor trafficking.

⁶ 22 USC 7101 - Trafficking Victims Protection Act. 22 USC 7101: Purposes and findings. (n.d.). <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=granuleid%3AUSC-2000-title22-section7101&num=0&edition=2000>

⁷ Myths, Facts, and Statistics. Polaris. (2026, April 1). <https://polarisproject.org/myths-facts-and-statistics/>

Ohio Attorney General's Demand-Reduction Efforts

The Ohio Attorney General's Office has led statewide demand-reduction efforts by advancing legislative reforms, strengthening enforcement, and expanding access to sex-buyer educational programs.

- In 2019, AG Yost supported the introduction of House Bill 431, which would differentiate the penalties for those who buy and sell sex. Additionally, he proposed that a public registry of sex buyers and traffickers be published.
- In 2021, HB 431 became law, establishing the charge of engaging in prostitution, increasing the penalty for sex buyers and requiring them to complete sex-buyer education. This law made it easier to distinguish sex buyers from individuals selling commercial sex – and potentially being victimized.
- The Attorney General's Office directly invested in sex-buyer educational programs by supplying \$10,000 grants to organizations statewide and creating a curriculum rooted in best practices: "[Guidelines for Sex Buyer Education Programs](#)."⁸

Human trafficking task forces organized under the OOCIC have facilitated annual statewide operations focused on identifying potential victims and apprehending sex buyers and traffickers. These started in 2019 as small-scale operations but in the ensuing years transformed into statewide blitzes leveraging the resources of more than 100 law enforcement agencies.

The eight operations carried out through May 2026 yielded 1,065 arrests and provided hundreds of survivors with access to social services.

⁸ John School: Guidelines for Sex Buyer Education Programs. Ohio Attorney General's Human Trafficking Initiative. (n.d.). <https://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Files/Publications-Files/Publications-for-Victims/John-School-Guidelines-for-SBE-Programs>

Conclusion

Since 2019, notable trends have emerged in Ohio with regard to sex buyers in Ohio.

Arrests rose sharply after 2021 and peaked in 2023–24. Penalties increased slightly, but jail time served and fines are still minimal. Recently, the average fine for sex-buying offenses decreased.

The state saw an increase in SBE assignment rates (peaking at 76% in 2022). Sex-buyer educational programs are widely used, although attendance is inconsistently enforced and tracked.

These statistical shifts may correlate with the passage of HB 431 in 2021 – when Ohio instituted the separate charge for sex buyers and strengthened the penalties for buying sex – as well as the expansion of task forces, and increased awareness of demand reduction and human trafficking.

Ohio is positioned to continue improving its demand-reduction strategies. Sustained investment in task forces, improved data-collection systems and more consistent tracking of SBE participation and buyer recidivism rates are essential for measuring the true impact of current interventions. Counties with low sex-buyer arrest rates may benefit from increased training, resources and support for operations.

Additionally, addressing gaps in public record availability and standardizing reporting practices could significantly enhance statewide coordination. Data-tracking inconsistencies limit accurate evaluation.

As Ohio moves forward, the state has an opportunity to build a more integrated, data-driven approach to curbing sex buying, one that not only disrupts the drivers of demand but also improves transparency, supports best practices and enhances accountability for sex buyers statewide.

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