

Changing laws on trafficking

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

September 2, 2011

The faces in the photographs on the front page of the newspaper startled me. They were laid out in rows. The first photo in the series was invariably of a young girl, maybe with a mischievous smile or a rebellious glare, but with a decided look of innocence. By the end of the series, that same face was battered, bloated and bruised. The women looked into the camera with haunting emptiness.

The photographs were collected by a detective in the vice squad unit of the Denver Police Department in a volume he called "The Book," a simple black binder he kept on his desk to combat the idea that prostitution is a victimless crime. He carefully assembled photographs of women from the time of their first arrest to the time of their most recent arrest, usually a span of several years. The photos, some of which were published several years ago in *The Denver Post*, document the ravages, the victimization of a life on the street written on the faces of women repeatedly arrested for prostitution.

As a crime, prostitution necessitates a more complex understanding of the relationship between victim and perpetrator than our current criminal justice system allows. Women involved in prostitution are frequently punished as criminals, but they are also victims of extortion, assault, sexual abuse and violence. Now, a few states are moving forward with new laws--not to de-criminalize prostitution, but to reinterpret it.

Illinois is on the front line of these states. This month, Governor Pat Quinn signed the Justice for Victims of Sex Trafficking Crimes Act, a legislative move in the right direction.

The very name of this act signifies an important shift in understanding. Instead of

designating an act--prostitution--the law points to a more complicated set of transactions: trafficking. In trafficking, we can see a little more clearly the dynamics that create the current explosion of prostitution.

The point is not to suggest that prostitutes are always powerless innocents, but instead to turn our attention to the economies that lead women and men--typically at a very young age--into lives of drugs and crimes over which they exert little control. Other states are also beginning to target sex-crime rings rather than individual women.

We

have a long way to go in understanding, in legal terms, what the detective's collection of photographs makes so vividly obvious. But these new laws can make a significant difference.