

# Five girls in the care of the B.C. children's ministry have been selling sex on Craigslist, police say.

By Ethan Baron

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Police said the girls, aged 16 and 17, have been offering their services on the U.S.-based advertising website's "erotic-services" section for the Greater Vancouver area.

"They're purporting themselves to be 18, 19, 20 years old," said Det. Lindsey Houghton of the Vancouver police youth-services unit. "All of them are in care of the ministry to some degree."

Responsibility for prostitution by girls in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development falls "very clearly on the ministry," said Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, the provincial Representative for Children and Youth.

"The outcomes are terrible for these young women. The most positive outcome might be a jail sentence. The most negative outcome they could face would be death.

"The sex trade is very risky."

Vancouver police have identified girls as young as 15 advertising sex on Craigslist.

Child prostitution in Vancouver has largely shifted from the streets to the Internet, Houghton said.

"It's moved successfully inside for these kids, because it's a lot harder to police. They seem to be befriended and groomed by . . . the classic pimp . . . or older kids who seem to be able to convince them and manipulate them."

Houghton believes there are more underage prostitutes advertised on Craigslist than police know about.

When police and social workers become aware of child prostitutes, they try to get them out of the business, said Houghton, who works closely with the ministry.

"The last resort that we want is to charge them criminally."

In Alberta, authorities can seize and treat children involved in the sex trade, but political will is lacking for such a measure in B.C., Houghton said.

"It seems like there's an acceptance that some of these kids are going to die," Houghton said.

Investigating child prostitution on Craigslist is difficult, because the communication takes place privately over the Internet.

"We don't know what that e-mail conversation is," Houghton said.

"It's impossible for us unless the guy keeps some sort of record or the girl decides she wants to testify against him in court, which is very rare."

Turpel-Lafond wants police to shut down Internet child-sex ads by developing new methods as they have with online child pornography.

"This is the modern era," Turpel-Lafond said. "Cyberspace is very important for us to monitor very closely if it's being used for sexual exploitation."

B.C. authorities have "a terrible track record" in pursuing men who use child prostitutes, said Annabel Webb, founder of Vancouver-based Justice for Girls. "It's tolerated. The police need to focus their attention on the men who are doing the buying."

Craigslist itself could face criminal charges for aiding in communication for the purpose of child prostitution, said University of B.C. associate law Prof. Janine Benedet.

"There's an argument that they're really sort of pimping," she said.

The fact that Craigslist doesn't profit directly from the free sex ads would complicate a prosecution, she added.

The for-profit company makes money by selling job ads in 10 cities and apartment listings in New York.

The Canadian Criminal Code prohibits paying for sex with a person under 18, and communicating for that purpose.

The children's ministry and Craigslist did not provide interviews requested by The Province.