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CENTER ON
SEXUAL
EXPLOITATION

1201 F St NW #200,
Washington, DC 20004
www.endsexualexploitation.org
(202) 393 - 7245

An Overview of Web-Based Stings Targeting Sex Buyers in the United States

Summary Based Upon Research from the
National Assessments of Prostitution and Sex
Trafficking Demand Reduction Efforts



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Office of Justice Programs,
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810 Seventh Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20531

Prepared by:
National Center on Sexual
Exploitation

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Since the late 1990s, the Internet has been used with increasing frequency to transact commercial sex and facilitate sex trafficking. Ads are posted on websites devoted to commercial sex (e.g., eroticreview.com, worldsexguide.com, myredbook.com) or on advertising websites and message boards serving as a venue for a broader spectrum of transactions, such as Craigslist and the now defunct Backpage.com, and local weekly entertainment-oriented periodicals and websites. Many police departments throughout the U.S. have used online ads for commercial sex to their advantage. The majority of police departments known to have conducted street-level reverse stings have also conducted operations focused on interrupting the online solicitation of prostitution.

Web-based versions of reverse stings involve an online advertisement or message to engage those seeking to exchange money for sex, and then arranging to meet in person to meet to complete the transaction. Once buyers have been engaged and have solidified plans to meet, a sting is set up that typically involves placing an undercover decoy in a hotel room, a support team in an adjacent room, and making arrests when the buyers arrive as planned and demonstrate an intent to complete the exchange of money for sex.

Web based reverse stings evolved to keep pace with the market, which increasingly has moved online. These operations have advantages beyond simply keeping up with market shifts. They have also opened up the possibility of targeting those seeking to pay to sexually abuse minors. Street-based reverse stings are limited by the fact that the undercover decoy is an adult woman, even if they are stating or implying that they are younger. It is difficult to prosecute charges against a person for seeking to buy a minor for sexual abuse when the person they solicited was an adult; such charges can be easily defended in court. Any sting operation what begins with solicitation in a face-to-face encounter between adults is virtually always confined to yielding lower-level charges for soliciting prostitution. Conversely, undercover online solicitations allow law enforcement personnel to pose as minors, and responding suspects who explicitly state that they wish to pay for sexual access to them, and then appear as planned demonstrating the intent to follow through, can be successfully prosecuted for soliciting sex with a minor, or equivalent felony-level prostitution or sex trafficking charges.

Web-based stings typically begin with an ad that strongly suggests that the person is young, using terms that are known among sex to indicate that the person being sold is a teen or younger, such as “barely legal,” “fresh,” or “new.” Such terminology is necessary due to legal restriction on explicitly stating in an online ad that a minor is being sold for sex. In many internet-based reverse stings, decoy ads imply the sexually exploited person is a minor, and when buyers communicate with undercover officers, the officers can then clearly state in text messages or phone conversations that the person to be purchased is underaged (typically between the ages of 14 and 16, but sometimes far younger).

Web-based reverse stings have been conducted in approximately **1,600** U.S. cities and counties, and the first began doing so in 1995, if not earlier. A list of “early adopter” communities and the year in which they first conducted web-based reverse stings is presented in Table 1.

Online reverse stings are relatively easy for police to initiate. The typical operation begins with police posting their decoy ad, and when potential sex buyers respond with a phone call, text message, or email, the officers pose as prostituted persons or sex traffickers/pimps and arrange for a meeting. Men who arrive and confirm their intention to buy sex may be arrested and charged with soliciting prostitution. Often, evidence from the messages or phone calls between the decoy police and the suspected buyers may be used to corroborate the suspect’s intention to engage in commercial sex. For example, a specific price is usually negotiated, and police may ask the buyer to send pictures in advance of the meeting, or to arrive at the meeting with specific drugs, foods, or personal items. When buyers arrive with the agreed upon amount of cash, drugs, and other items mentioned in text messages or voice recordings, it provides compelling evidence that the person who arrived is the one who made the arrangements, and that the man was not merely chatting or amusing themselves but intended to act upon the stated intention to purchase sex. In addition, when in the presence of the sex buyer, police will often call or

text the number that had been used during negotiations; when the phone rings they will ask to see it, and usually find that the texts or calls between the sex buyer's phone match those on the phone used by the police decoy.

Variation on the Basic Web-Based Reverse Sting Model

In web-based reverse stings, the basic model involves police posting a bogus advertisement on websites used to transact prostitution and placing an undercover female officer and support team in a hotel room or apartment for appointments with sex buyers. This requires substantial planning, such as obtaining a phone for police to use that is not detectable as a police phone, and constructing a realistic ad. It can pose challenges in acquiring hotel or apartment space, due to the expense of renting and getting hotel or apartment management to cooperate with a police operation that may disrupt their business.

A variation on the basic model that is designed to solve some of these challenges begins with police searching real web ads for commercial sex, rather than placing their own "decoy" ads. Police respond to the real ads with undercover male officers posing as sex buyers. They remove the woman or girl involved in prostitution or who is being trafficked and install a police decoy who continues making appointments with buyers on the survivor's phone. Typically, a support team is stationed in an adjoining room. Another variation involves female police decoys responding to online ads placed by sex buyers seeking prostituted persons, but this tactic is less frequently used.

Table 1: Sites with Earliest Known Use of Web-Based Reverse Stings		
Year	City or County	State
1995	Everett	WA
1998	Kissimmee	FL
1999	Lexington	KY
2000	Charlotte	NC
2000	Horry County	SC
2000	Kansas City	KS
2000	Oklahoma City	OK
2000	Roanoke	VA
2000	Travis County	TX
2000	Tucson	AZ
2001	Blue Ash	OH
2001	Orange County	CA
2001	San Jose	CA
2002	Lenexa	KS
2002	Portland	OR

Events occurring early in 2018 led to some publicly accessible online advertising websites being dismantled or changing how they operated, making open-source advertising sites less readily available for use by law enforcement to conduct reverse stings as they had been previously. In February 2018, a federal bill entitled "Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act of 2017," or "FOSTA," was signed by both the House and Senate.¹ Known in a previous form as SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act), FOSTA amends Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which has been widely interpreted as providing tech companies and social media platforms immunity from most liability for publishing third-party content. Within days, Craigslist (at the time, a widely used platform for commercial sex advertising) announced it would drop all personal and "erotic services" ads. In April 2018, the U.S. Department of Justice seized the Backpage.com

¹ "H.R.1865 - Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act of 2017," U.S. Congress, last modified April 11, 2018, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1865>.

website (at the time, the most popular site for prostitution ads) and raided the home of its co-founder.² All indications suggest³ the commercial sex market shifted from the defunct Backpage to other open-source advertising websites and to restricted access venues and social media platforms requiring membership fees, or where sex buyers must be invited and registered by prostituted persons. History shows that when consumer demand remains strong, the market for anything – including commercial sex – will adapt by finding other means of advertising and arranging transactions. When Craigslist had eliminated its “Erotic Services” section in 2009, the market quickly adapted by migrating from Craigslist to Backpage and other websites. If those kinds of generic advertising websites stop carrying listings that facilitate prostitution and sex trafficking, other options that may be pursued by prostituted persons and sex traffickers/pimps include focusing on developing “client lists,” closed networks of “customers,” “pop-up brothels” announced to closed client and predator networks, and using texts, emails, social media apps (e.g., Facebook, Instagram), the dark web, or the communication facilities of gaming systems to market and arrange commercial sex transactions.

Well web-based reverse stings are typically proactive operations intended to draw in any individual seeking to buy sex, using online advertisements as decoys, there are other modes of sting operation that use electronic communication to arrest those seeking to purchase minors for sexual abuse, but are more narrowly targeted. They are extensions of investigations into allegations against specific individuals, and a sting is used to gather evidence and provide the context for an arrest. For example, in March, 2023, the Canadian County (OK) Sheriff’s Office announced that their personnel had arrested an Oklahoma City-based attorney after he allegedly drove to a [Mustang](#), OK residence with the intent of paying to sexually assault a five-year-old girl.⁴ Investigators confirmed that they were contacted by a confidential informant (CI) who reported that the man had contacted her and [requested](#) “to arrange a meet for sex with an underaged child.” The CI worked with Sheriff’s investigators and assisted in carrying out a sting operation. Officials said the man communicated in detail with the CI via text messages and phone calls about wanting to sexually abuse an underage girl. The negotiations led to the man arriving to meet at a home in Mustang. Investigators installed hidden cameras and deputies were staged inside of the home. The man was taken into custody after he allegedly gave the informant \$400.00 to be allowed to sexually assault a five-year old child. Investigators were able to obtain and execute a search warrant for the man’s residence, where they seized a number of electronic devices, including an Ipad, laptop computers and his personal cell phone. The suspect was arrested for “Lewd Acts with a Child Under 12” and “Soliciting Child Prostitution.” He was transported to the Canadian County Detention Facility, and his bond was set at \$200k. Investigators continued their investigation to determine whether there were more victims.

Another variation on the basic web-based reverse sting model includes using social media platforms such as Facebook to place ads and facilitate communications, instead of basic online advertising sites or local

² Sarah N. Lynch and Lisa Lamber, “Sex ads website Backpage shut down by U.S. authorities,” *Reuters*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-backpage-justice/sex-ads-website-backpage-shut-down-by-u-s-authorities-idUSKCN1HD2QP>; Tom Porter and Reuters, “Backpage Website Shut Down, Founder Charged With 93 Counts By FBI In Sealed Indictment,” *Newsweek*, April 7, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/sex-ads-website-backpagecom-co-founder-charged-after-fbi-raid-876333>.

³ Zeng, Helen Shuxuan, Brett Danaher, and Michael D. Smith. “Internet Governance Through Site Shutdowns: The Impact of Shutting Down Two Major Commercial Sex Advertising Sites.” *Management Science* 68, no. 11 (2022): 8234-8248, doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2022.4498; Wiesner, Lucy. “Good Intentions and Unintended Consequences: SESTA/FOSTA’s First Two Years,” *Temple Law Review* 93, (2020): 151-180, [https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/temple93&div=9&id=&page=](https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/temple93&div=9&id=&page=;); Mike Tobias, “How the Backpage shutdown impacted the commercial sex industry and trafficking,” *Nebraska Public Media*, August 21, 2018, <https://nebraskapublicmedia.org/en/news/news-articles/how-the-backpage-shutdown-impacted-the-commercial-sex-industry-and-trafficking/>.

⁴ Terre Gables, “Metro Attorney arrested for offering to pay \$400 for sex with child,” *KFOR*, March 3, 2023, <https://kfor.com/news/local/metro-attorney-arrested-for-offering-to-pay-400-for-sex-with-child/>; News9, “Okla. Attorney arrested after operation to catch him attempting to meet with 5-year-old,” *News9*, March 3, 2023, <https://www.news9.com/story/640286ae10e61e759ec09243/okla-attorney-arrested-after-operation-to-catch-him-attempting-to-meet-with-5yearold>.

entertainment magazines. In another example of a more narrowly targeted sting operation, a 15-year-old girl called the [Charleroi](#), PA Regional Police in April 2014 to report that a man with whom she had been communicating through Facebook offered her \$500 for sex. The girl showed police numerous texts and Facebook messages allegedly sent to her by the man, and in response surveillance was established at the location of the arranged meeting. He was arrested when he arrived and took steps toward completing the crime. In a similar case, [Putnam County](#), FL Sheriff's Deputies arrested a man in March 2018, who had solicited sex from an undercover detective via Facebook Messenger.

Evidence of Effectiveness

In addition to the direct evidence of reverse stings having positive outcomes, there are three additional kinds of evidence all reflecting favourably on the tactic:

1. Surveys of hundreds of admitted sex buyers have asked what would deter them from that behavior in the future, and were presented with a list of options. The things most commonly listed as likely to deter them are consequences following arrest, such as jail time, being listed on a sex offender registry, and the public disclosure of their arrest. Such responses were made more than **80% of surveyed sex buyers**.⁵
2. The survey data is aligned with extensive anecdotal evidence⁶ from the field of law enforcement vice operations and investigations, which consistently finds that once arrested, sex buyers express great **concern about the consequences of that arrest** – especially that their behavior will be exposed to their families, partners, friends, employers, and others in their communities, which is something sex buyers clearly seek to avoid.
3. The survey findings and anecdotal evidence provided by law enforcement about sex buyer statements is further corroborated by a vast body of criminological research on general and specific deterrence that finds that both “**legal sanctions**” (such as incarceration or probation, which require a prior arrest and prosecution) and “**extra-legal sanctions**” (such as negative consequences for relationships and employment, which also are usually triggered by arrest) **have a deterrent effect on re-offending**.⁷

⁵ Anna E. Kosloski and Bridget Diamond-Welch, “The Men and Women Who Purchase Sex in the United States: Understanding Motives, Practices, and Preferences,” *Women & Criminal Justice* 32, no. 3 (2022): 306-324, doi:10.1080/08974454.2021.1993424; Melissa Farley et al., *Men Who Pay for Sex in Germany and What They Teach us about the Failure of Legal Prostitution: A 6-Country Report on the Sex Trade from the Perspective of the Socially Invisible ‘Freiers’* (Berlin: Prostitution Research & Education, November 2022), 46-47, <https://prostitutionresearch.com>; Rachel Durchslag and Samir Goswami, *Deconstructing The Demand for Prostitution: Preliminary Insights From Interviews With Chicago Men Who Purchase Sex* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, May 2008), 1-34, <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/Deconstructing-the-Demand-for-Prostitution%20-%20CAASE.pdf>; Melissa Farley, Julie Bindel, and Jacqueline M. Golding, *Men Who Buy Sex: Who They Buy and What They Know* (London: Eaves and Prostitution Research & Education, December 2009), 1-32, <https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/Isidocs/Mensex.pdf>.

⁶ Charlot Alter, “Catching Johns: Inside the National Push to Arrest Men who Buy Sex,” *Time*, <https://time.com/sex-buyers-why-cops-across-the-u-s-target-men-who-buy-prostitutes/> (accessed February 28, 2023); Nicholas Kristof, “Targeting the Johns in the Sex Trade,” *New York Times*, February 26, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/opinion/kristof-targeting-the-johns-in-sex-trade.html>; Kristin Pisarcik “Miami Vice: Inside 'John Stings' and Escort Stings,” *ABC News*, March 21, 2008, <https://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=4488667&page=1>; The Associated Press, “Prostitute customers posterized,” *The Gainesville Sun*, October 13, 2012, <https://www.gainesville.com/story/news/2012/10/14/prostitute-customers-posterized/31836219007/>.

⁷ Thomas A. Loughran, Ray Paternoster, and Douglas B. Weiss, “Chapter 4: Deterrence,” in *The Handbook of Criminological Theory*, ed. Alex R. Piquero (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016), 50-74, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118512449.ch4> (accessed March 2, 2023); Raymond Paternoster, “Chapter 3: Perceptual Deterrence Theory,” in *Deterrence, Choice, and Crime, Volume 23*, eds. Daniel S. Nagin, Francis T. Cullen, and Cheryl Lero Jonson, (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2018), 81-106, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351112710>, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781351112710-3/perceptual-deterrence-theory-raymond-paternoster> (accessed March 2, 2023); Robert Apel and Daniel S. Nagin, “Chapter 7: Perceptual Deterrence,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Offender Decision Making*, eds. Wim Bernasco, Jean-Louis van Gelder, and Henk Elffers, 6 (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 121-140.

Collectively, the evidence is strong that arresting and sanctioning sex buyers is likely to deter reoffending, and to also advance “general deterrence” in which awareness of the risk of sanctions can deter crime in the general population – and not just among those who have been arrested and punished.⁸

Additional Examples, References

To access information about specific cases and the U.S. cities and counties in which reverse stings have occurred, you may go to www.demand-forum.org, open the “[Browse Locations](#)” window, and then select “Web Stings” from the “Tactics” list. The U.S. locations in which these operations have occurred may be [mapped](#) on Demand Forum by clicking on the “Choose a Tactic” box and choosing “Web Stings” from the list.

News Reports on Examples of Web-Based Reverse Stings

- [Bellevue](#), WA
 - [Busted: How police brought down a tech-savvy prostitution network in Bellevue](#) (2017)
 - [110 arrested in Bellevue prostitution sting set up ‘to fill void’ after Asian brothels shut down](#) (2017)
- [Blount County](#), TN
 - [TBI: Four arrested in East Tennessee after human trafficking investigation](#) (2019)
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 - [“Flagstaff prostitution sting nabs 8, one from Prescott Valley.” *The Daily Courier*, March 15, 2018.](#)
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⁸ Robert Apel and Daniel S. Nagin, “General Deterrence: A Review of Recent Evidence,” in *Crime and Public Policy*, eds. James Q. Wilson and Joan Petersilia (2011), 411-436; Braga, Anthony A., and David L. Weisburd, “The effects of focused deterrence strategies on crime: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the empirical evidence,” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 49, no. 3 (2012): 323-358, doi:10.1177/0022427811419368.

- [Arrests made in McLennan County human trafficking sting](#) (2022)
- **Odessa and Midland, TX**
 - [Prostitution operation results in 62 arrests Midland, Odessa](#) (2018)
 - [Prostitution operation results in 62 arrests Midland, Odessa, *Houston Chronicle*](#) (2018)
 - [62 arrested in Midland and Odessa in "Operation Gauntlet"](#) (2018)
- **Oklahoma City, OK**
 - [Man arrested in sex case](#) (2000)
 - [OKC prostitution Sting Nabs Some Notable Names](#) (2013)
 - [Oklahoma City sting nets 17 arrests related to prostitution](#) (2022)
- **Polk County, FL**
 - [Doctors and cops among 277 arrested in human trafficking, online prostitution sting](#) (2017)
 - [Polk County Sheriff arrests 213 suspects in human trafficking investigation](#) (2023)
- **Provo, UT**
 - [Nine Utah men cited in Provo prostitution sting](#) (2009)
- **St. George, UT**
 - [8 people busted in prostitution sting in St. George](#) (2019)
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 - [‘Operation B-Sting’ leads to 32 prostitution arrests](#) (2012)
- **Seattle, WA**
 - [“More Arrests Made of Men Seeking Underage Girls for Sex,” *Seattle Times*, July 21 2015.](#)
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