



An Overview of Web-based Reverse Stings in the United States

**Summary Based Upon
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of Prostitution and Sex
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The Internet has been used with increasing frequency to transact commercial sex. Ads are posted on websites devoted to commercial sex (eroticreview.com, worldsexguide.com, myredbook.com) or on websites serving as a venue for a broader spectrum of transactions, such as Backpage.com, Yellow Pages, Craigslist.com, and weekly entertainment-oriented periodicals such as the Phoenix New Times or SF Weekly. It is widely observed that a substantial portion of the commercial sex market has shifted from the streets to online solicitation. For example, in San Francisco the average yield of arrests per street-level reverse sting fell by half between 2004 and 2007 (Shively et al., 2008), and the police department's vice unit personnel believed that much of the declining yield was because of the rise of online solicitation - particularly the use of Craigslist through 2009, and Backpage since then. Other factors cited in the decline in street prostitution are the effectiveness of the city's john school program, and the persistence of police in conducting hundreds of reverse stings over the years. Craigslist has eliminated its adult or "erotic services" section that had been a central source of transacting commercial sex (although it is still used for commercial sex, through as posing as massage or other services),¹ but it has been largely replaced by Backpage.com since 2010.

Many police departments throughout the U.S. have used online ads for commercial sex to their advantage. About one third of the 300 police departments known to have conducted street-level reverse stings have implemented web-based reverse stings since 1995. A list of "early adopter" communities and the year they first conducted reverse stings is presented in Table 1.

Online reverse stings are easy for police to initiate. The typical procedure is to post a decoy ad, and when potential johns respond with a phone call or other response, the officers pose as prostituted persons or pimps and arrange for a meeting - usually at a hotel that has been prepared for a reverse sting. At the hotel, a female officer poses as a prostituted person, and once the john is face-to-face with the officer, the operation is essentially the same as that used in conventional reverse stings.

"There are clear signs that some revenue and listings are migrating to Backpage and to other sites that specialize in prostitution advertising."

Mark A. Whittaker, AIM Group, 2010²

"Backpage is widely used by local prostitutes and has been for years, and that's no secret. We get prostitutes that will work the street, and the services they would normally get \$40 for in the back of the car or whatever now jumps up to \$150 or up."

Lt. Terry Pasko, Akron, Ohio Police Department vice squad, 2011³

¹ http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2010/09/06/Sex-ads-still-appearing-on-Craigslist/UPI-49661283790775/

<http://www.salon.com/life/broadsheet/2010/09/06/craigslist/>

<http://www.10news.com/news/24902665/detail.html>

² <http://aimgroup.com/blog/2010/10/19/backpage-replaces-craigslist-as-prostitution-ad-leader/>

³ <http://www.ohio.com/news/local/online-prostitution-ads-popular-in-akron-1.252768>

Variation on the 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 a female police decoy and support team in a hotel room or apartment for appointments with johns. 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 prostitution, rather than placing their own “decoy” ads. Police respond to the real ads with undercover male officers posing as johns. They remove the woman or girl involved in prostitution or who is being trafficked, and install a police decoy who continues making appointments with johns on the survivor’s phone. Typically, a support team is stationed in an adjoining room.

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

References

References for the materials cited in this summary can be found in the bibliography of the National Assessment final report, and in each site’s webpage at DemandForum.net.