



MELISSA RENWICK/TORONTO STAR

The Mississauga Gates Inn, a motel nestled off Hwy. 427, has been named by police and victims as a hot spot for human trafficking.

OLIVIA CARVILLE
STAFF REPORTER

"Come play with Chantelle. Less hassle than a girlfriend, cheaper than a wife. Screw Naughty or Nice, I'll be extra sweet with a hint of spice."

"Diamond at your service. I always make sure U leave satisfied."

"My name is Nataly. I am curvy, blond, open-minded and playful."

"Kylie F--- DOLL. An extraordinary 10/10, beyond interesting, yummy sex doll."

"Hi, my name is Cherry. I am ready to bring your wildest fantasies to life."

Women calling themselves Diamond, Nataly, Kylie, Cherry and Chantelle are selling themselves for sex in Toronto on a website called Backpage.com.

Of the 359 sex trafficking cases Toronto police have investigated since 2013, every single girl was advertised on Backpage, sex crimes Det. David Correa told the Star.

Social workers have seen the same trend with the victims they support, and reported that parents have started to reach out to advocacy groups after discovering photos of their daughters on the site.

The girls, who police from three major forces in the GTA say are frequently under 16, are advertised with sexually suggestive pictures and biographies outlining their body type and the "extra" services they are willing to provide for more money, such as the "real girlfriend experience," anal and unprotected sex or fetishes.

The ads include a cellphone number and usually ask customers to text, rather than call. Police say this is mainly because pimps are controlling and managing the girls' phones, booking their appointments and negotiating their prices or what "extras" they are willing to provide.

Every morning, police officers who work in sex crimes units across the

THE WEBSITE

Backpage.com: Domain of the traffickers

Of the 359 sex trafficking occurrences Toronto police have investigated since 2013, every girl was featured on this site, which has become the most dominant online sex advertiser

GTA search Backpage and trawl through the new ads posted in their regions overnight.

Sometimes police carry out "knock and talks" to reach out to girls advertised on the site and ask if they need help.

Here's how it happens: Police contact the numbers linked to advertisements on Backpage and pretend to be a client. Pimps respond over text and direct them to a specific area, often a downtown intersection.



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A man enters a motel room at the Mississauga Gate Inn, five minutes after another man exited the room.

Once police arrive, they are then told via text to walk into a hotel car park and sometimes a pimp will be "waiting in the shadows to lay eyes on the customer" before he sends through the room number. Over the past two weeks, the Star sent messages to 10 cellphone numbers advertising young women for sex on Backpage. Those ads cost a minimum of \$3 to post and there are hundreds of new notices uploaded daily.

In every case, the Star received a text reply within 10 minutes; some responses came through in under a minute. The Star was told the rates, the "extra" services the girls would provide and their location. Some sent kissy-face emojis or XOX's.

Backpage doesn't just sell escorts — it offers everything from child care, accommodation and job advertisements. But after Craigslist axed its escort ads almost five years ago because of concerns about underage trafficking, the site became the dominant online sex advertiser in North America.

Over the past year in the United States, mounting public pressure against sex trafficking has seen major credit card companies, including American Express, Visa and MasterCard, cut ties with Backpage's adult section. Customers can no longer use these credit cards to purchase escort ads. Instead they have to use bitcoin, a digital payment system.

This stemmed from lawsuits against the site and four U.S. senators calling for the immediate shutdown of Backpage because, they claimed, "its victims — often children — are repeatedly purchased and raped by customers."

Three minors who were advertised for sex on Backpage in Washington state filed a lawsuit against the company, alleging it aided in them being "bought and sold" as prostitutes. Two of the girls were in seventh grade and one claims she was raped multiple times by men who responded to her online ads, according to court documents. Backpage filed a motion to dismiss the lawsuit, arguing that it wasn't liable because it does nothing more than host content posted by others, but in September the Supreme Court of Washington state ruled in favour of the victims, giving them the right to sue. The trial is set for October 2016.

Late last year, Dallas-based Backpage was sold from Village Voice Media to a Dutch holding company. The Star made numerous attempts to contact the owners of the company, but emails and phone calls were not returned.

The Internet has changed what players call "The Game" by shifting it completely out of sight, Dave Perry, a Toronto police detective turned private investigator, told the Star.

Back in the 1980s, when Perry was working with victims of child prostitution, he said girls were selling themselves on street corners, in clear view of police.

"Pimps have become more sophisticated and started using technology to their advantage," he said.

Traffickers are now using not only Backpage to sell the girls, but social media sites like Facebook and Instagram to start communicating with them, according to police, social workers and court documents.

Michele Anderson, who works with trafficked victims at Toronto's Covenant House, said she's also starting to see a new trend where girls are now being recruited through online dating sites such as Plenty of Fish and Tinder.

In one recent case, a high school student in a small town met a man for coffee through an online dating site. He offered to drive her home, but as soon as she got into his car he locked the doors, drove her to his apartment in Toronto, sexually assaulted her and forced her into the sex trade.

Det. Martin Dick of the Halton police vice unit said prostitutes no longer "walk the track" in his neighbourhood.

"Everything that happens here is behind closed doors," he said. "It's the hidden track or the digital track now."

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