



VANCOUVER POLICE DEPARTMENT

SEX WORK ENFORCEMENT GUIDELINES

Updated: 2025

PREPARED BY:

Author: Inspector Kelly Risebrough

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Background

In January 2013, VPD introduced the Sex Work Enforcement Guidelines in consultation with various community groups. The goal was to reflect the Vancouver Police Department's philosophy regarding violence against sex workers and the enforcement of sex work-related laws. It is also intended to provide police officers and the public with the rationale for VPD's guidelines for sex work enforcement. The response strategies outlined were consistent with the VPD's overall strategic goals, and ensured a consistent, respectful message when VPD officers interact with anyone involved in the sex industry.

As a police agency, the VPD is obligated to enforce the laws of Canada, although police also have considerable discretion in deciding when enforcement and recommending criminal charges is in the public interest¹. The guidelines were intended to be a living document that would be amended as the courts issued rulings on constitutional challenges to the sex industry.

R vs Bedford 2013

In December 2013, the Supreme Court of Canada (*Attorney General v. Bedford*) found three sections of the *Criminal Code* relating to sex work related offences to be unconstitutional. The Supreme Court of Canada decision acknowledges the following:

1. The negative impact of the bawdy-house prohibition (s 210) on the applicant's security of the person is grossly disproportionate to its objective of preventing public nuisance;
2. The living on the avails of prostitution prohibition in s 212 is overbroad; and,
3. The purpose of the communicating prohibition in s. 213(1)(c) The provision's negative impact on the safety and lives of street prostitutes, who are prevented by the communicating prohibition from screening potential clients for intoxication and propensity to violence, is a grossly disproportionate response to the possibility of nuisance caused by street prostitution.

Bill C-36

In response to this decision, in 2014, Parliament enacted Bill C-36 – *The Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act*. Bill C-36 treats "prostitution" as a form of sexual exploitation that disproportionately impacts women and girls. Its overall objectives are to:

1. Protect those who sell their own sexual services;
2. Protect communities, and especially children, from the harms caused by prostitution; and,
3. Reduce the demand for prostitution and its incidence.

Bill C-36 – *The Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act* provides police with the legislative tools required to investigate human trafficking and violent offences against sex workers.

General Philosophy

¹ See, for example, the Supreme Court of Canada's discussion of police discretion in the 2007 case of *R v. Beaudry*. <http://scc.lexum.org/en/2007/2007scc5.html>.

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The VPD seeks to assertively promote the safety, dignity and well-being of those involved in the sex industry. In addition, in line with our stated goal of supporting partnerships and relationships with all members of our community, the VPD will continue to build trust, respect and promote evidence-based decision making to reduce violence, exploitation and abuse.

The VPD values building relationships with those involved in the sex industry in order to increase the safety of sex workers, reduce victimization and violence, target offenders who prey on youth or who traffic people including sex workers, and assist with exit strategies for those who have indicated to police that they want to leave sex work.

The VPD responds to reports from the community and will examine the need for enforcement action which is consistent and proportional to the risk presented to the community and/or the sex worker(s). Police action is intended to be the least intrusive in order to keep the sex worker(s) safe and respond to the needs of the community we proudly serve. Often, sex work involves consenting adults who may never come to the attention of others in the community or the police. Sex work involving consenting adults is not an enforcement priority for the VPD. Instead, police enforcement is focused on situations that present the highest level of risk.

High Risk Situations

The VPD is cognizant of the dangers faced by those in sex work and endeavours to reduce these threats. In particular, the VPD views situations involving violence, exploitation, human trafficking, youth, or other criminal associations (e.g. organized crime or gang affiliations) as high risk and, as a result, are a priority for intervention to ensure the safety of the sex worker(s) and the community.

The VPD recognizes that high risk situations often involve vulnerable persons who face significant barriers to accessing services and support; this includes women, racialized people and members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Rationale

Relationships

The VPD recognizes that sex workers have often been hesitant to contact the police due to a fear of being arrested, investigated or discriminated against by police. In recognition of these systemic barriers, the VPD strives to build positive relationships with community members engaged in sex work as well as the community agencies that support sex workers. Programs such as SisterWatch and the work done by the VPD Sex Industry Liaison Officer breakdown barriers and increases communication between the VPD and the community. In addition, the VPD works collaboratively with the City of Vancouver's Sex Worker Safety Committee to identify concerns, respond to issues and take a multi-agency approach to ensuring sex worker safety.

Cultural Considerations

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The VPD recognizes that Indigenous women are over-represented among street based sex workers. The higher population of Indigenous women in the sex trade is likely due to systemic issues resulting from colonization, racism and the Residential School system. The combined effects of poverty, discrimination and cultural loss profoundly affect Indigenous peoples and are significant contributing factors to inequities faced by Indigenous persons, including Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQ+ persons.

The VPD understands that these systemic challenges require the police to take an educated, trauma informed and survivor-centred approach. As written in the Vancouver Police Department 2022-2026 Strategic Plan, the VPD is committed to "strengthening our relationships and trust with Vancouver's diverse groups". This includes working with the community in order to proactively foster respect, recognition and trust among all stakeholders who work towards ending the exploitation and abuse of sex workers. The VPD is also committed to addressing cultural needs in the development of training associated to these guidelines.

BCACP SEX WORK ENFORCEMENT GUIDELINES & PRINCIPLES

In January 2018, the BC Association of Chiefs of Police (BCACP) published a consolidated report titled Sex Work Enforcement Guidelines & Principles in response to the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry recommendation 5.8 which states "that all police forces in British Columbia consider developing and implementing guidelines on the model of the Vancouver Police Department's Sex Work Enforcement Guidelines in consultation with women engaged in the sex trade in their jurisdiction". The BCACP Sex Work Enforcement Guidelines reflects the themes from the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, namely that:

1. The safety of persons involved in sex work is a key consideration;
2. Persons involved in sex work are to be treated with dignity and respect;
3. Enforcement priorities should be based on risks and safety considerations;
4. Building relationships is key to improve reporting and safety; and
5. Enforcement decisions should be based on risks and safety considerations.

THE VPD'S UPDATED SEX WORK ENFORCEMENT GUIDELINES - 2025

The 2025 Sex Work Enforcement Guidelines are informed by the BC Provincial Policing Standards Subject 6.1.1 Promoting Unbiased Policing and where relevant, the BC Provincial Policing Standards Subject 5.4 Sexual Assault Investigations.

1. All cases of violence or abuse of sex workers are treated as serious criminal matters.
2. The VPD will investigate and enforce all relevant federal, provincial and municipal laws against those who abuse, exploit or sexually exploit children and youth.
3. The VPD will use all enforcement options available to ensure the removal of youth from unsafe circumstances. The VPD will work closely with the Family Services of Greater Vancouver (FSGV) embedded support worker to provide support, resources and assistance to all victims of exploitation, especially youth.

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4. The VPD will target those who engage in exploitive practices, such as human trafficking (often involving organized crime).
5. The VPD will continue to identify, monitor and track persons who are violent and/or exploit sex workers.
6. The VPD will continue to utilize the VPD Sex Industry Liaison Officer to reduce barriers and maximize communication with sex workers, sex industry community organizations, service providers and government agencies.
7. When a sex-work related call for service is received by the VPD, it is expected that:
 - a. Responding officers will use a trauma informed approach, to show respect, dignity and build rapport with sex workers by offering assistance, providing referrals to community-based organizations and taking an evidence-based approach for any investigation;
 - b. Where sex workers are the subject of complaints, officers can engage additional resources including the Sex Industry Liaison Officer, a Neighbourhood Police Officer, and/or an appropriate community outreach service to ensure a balanced approach is taken that considers both the needs of the sex worker(s) and those of the broader community;
 - b. Where there are nuisance related complaints against sex workers, alternative measures and assistance will be considered before any enforcement action is utilized;
 - c. Where enforcement action is deemed necessary, all reasonable steps will be taken to show respect and consideration for those parties involved; and,
 - d. Officers will consistently use their professional judgement and discretion in determining the proportional and least intrusive response necessary.
 - e. Incidents involving youth will be reviewed by the Human Trafficking Unit and the Youth Services Section, who will collaborate to determine what investigative action is required.

Conclusion

Citizens of Vancouver involved in sex work are entitled to safety and protection under the law. The VPD believes it is important to act in a manner that is proportional to the risk presented to the public and to the sex worker(s) and use the least intrusive method possible. However, the VPD expects that officers will escalate their response in high-risk situations outlined above, or where previous attempts with less intrusive tactics have failed.

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