

Young girls run away with net predators

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11 Sep, 2011 12:00 AM

SYDNEY parents are paying private investigators as much as \$5000 to track down their teenage daughters who have run off with unsuitable men.

Private investigators have told The Sun-Herald that such cases are becoming increasingly common, as technology makes it easier for young people to connect and for older men to prey on vulnerable adolescents. Social commentators suggest the availability of porn on the internet is leading teenagers to adopt adult behaviours earlier.



Surveillance ... investigators, such as Warren Mallard, are being hired to track teenagers.

Lyonswood Investigations managing director, Warren Mallard, said he now handled 80 cases a year of teenagers disappearing with older men they met through work, friends or over the internet.

"I'm sure that's just the tip of the iceberg," he said. "It's really accelerated in the last decade ... since technology and since communications has increased, both parents being in the workplace.

"It's a very promiscuous society and there are no secrets any more."

Luke Athens, who runs Heartbreakers which specialises in "teenage activities surveillance", agrees. "It's more common now because of the internet," he said. "Every kid has got a mobile phone connected to the internet, they're on Facebook, they're on Twitter. What normally happens is an older guy manipulates a younger girl to do certain things."

According to NSW Police, 65 per cent of the 11,595 people reported missing last year were under 18. Ninety-eight per cent were found safe and well.

Police will confirm missing teenagers are alive by checking if bank accounts have been accessed and mobile phones used. But parents desperate to know their daughter's whereabouts are increasingly turning to private investigators to find out more. Investigators say police are too under-resourced to chase down every runaway teen.

"Police don't go out physically looking and find people," David King, managing director of Integral Investigations, said. "They'll take a report, they might get access to phone bills and bank accounts. They'll ask the girl, 'Do you want to be found?' She says no. The police are quite lenient once they hit 15."

A police spokesman said: "It is not an offence to go missing."

Investigators charge about \$5000 to find a missing teenager. Their clients are usually wealthy families, whose children have the financial means to survive away from home, or strict religious families.

Investigators will tail the girl's friends, or go undercover to befriend their friends, hoping they will lead them to their target.

Many cases used to be solved with clues found on Facebook, but this has become more difficult since Facebook enhanced its privacy settings. Some investigators now set up fake Facebook pages to make contact with the missing girl.

Cyber Safe Kids founder, Robyn Treyvaud, said this was "totally duplicitous".

"These kids don't trust adults in the first place," she said. "To be enticed to connect with a fake Facebook person does nothing to develop trust."

Investigators and teen advocates agree that most runaways are already having problems at home.

Mr Mallard said most teenage girls returned home within three or four days.

"In most of these cases the kids come back of their own accord."