

Missing women cases probed: Vancouver police will review 40 unsolved cases dating from 1971, but they doubt a serial killer was involved in any disappearances.

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Vancouver city police have set up a team of officers to review 40 unsolved missing women cases dating back to 1971.

Police say the missing women come from all walks of life and areas of Vancouver. But a significant number -- 16 since 1995 -- are women who were involved in drugs and the sex trade on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

Inspector Gary Greer, officer in charge of that district, said the team was created to address rumours and concerns in the community.

"They're concerned about what they believe is a great number of missing women who may have been murdered," he said. "So our step is to put together what we would consider a real list."

Greer is calling the team a "working group" because it is simply trying to get a handle on the numbers, he said.

"We're in no way saying there is a serial murderer out there. We're in no way saying that all these people missing are dead. We're not saying any of that.

"We are merely, from a community-based policing perspective, trying to respond to a community's concerns with some facts."

Media liaison Constable Anne Drennan said the team will meet to review the existing list, determine if any of the files are linked, or if any of the women have been found in other jurisdictions.

The team will include investigators from the missing persons, sex offence, and homicide sections, as well as Greer and geographic profiler, Detective Inspector Kim Rossmo.

Rossmo uses a computer program to predict the area where an offender is most likely to live or work, based on where the crimes

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were committed.

In addition, there are two missing-persons detectives and a civilian member working on the files.

Families of some of the missing women said Thursday they welcome any step that focuses more attention on the cases.

"I think it's a very good thing that they're starting to put more people on to it and to try to find connections and to identify all of those cases," said Maggie deVries, whose sister, Sarah, is among the missing.

"Maybe that will help them to figure out what's actually going on. It starts to seem more and more as if there's something happening. There's a pattern to this."

Inspector Fred Biddlecombe, who oversees the homicide, sex offence and missing persons sections, is not ruling out the possibility of a serial killer, but he said there is no evidence to suggest that at this point.

There hasn't been one vehicle or one suspect spotted with more than one of the women.

Biddlecombe said there are a number of possible reasons for the unsolved cases.

"They could have wanted to change their names for any number of reasons," he said. "They could have gone to another town with a new identity. They could have gone to the States. They could have married and they don't want anyone to know what's going on."

Homicide Sergeant Geramy Field said it's also possible the women overdosed on drugs in another city, and are listed as an unidentified female.

"There are strong suspicions in some [cases] of suicide, because you find a piece of clothing and a wallet on a bridge," Biddlecombe said. "Your suspicion is obviously that it may be a suicide, but you don't have a body. So it still is an open missing-persons file."

In one recent case, a woman's name was removed from the list after she was discovered living in Vancouver. Detectives determined that she had been reported missing in 1996 after she fled town with a man wanted on a warrant.

He died in a car crash in Winnipeg and she returned to Vancouver, and police were never notified.

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