

# Backpage.com Cut Off From Credit Card System Over Sex Trafficking Claims

The Sheriff of Cook County, Illinois, asked Visa and MasterCard to cut ties with the site, alleging its service contributes to “increasing the enslavement of prostituted individuals, including children.”

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Via [backpage.com](http://backpage.com)

Both MasterCard and Visa have stopped processing payments for the adult personals site Backpage.com, cutting the site’s access to the world’s two dominant payment networks.

Visa said in a statement that it had “taken action to stop processing payments for backpage.com,” and that the company’s rules “prohibit our network from being used for illegal activity. Visa has a long history of

working with law enforcement to safeguard the integrity of the payment system.”

Seth Eisen, a MasterCard spokesperson, told BuzzFeed News that the company “has rules that prohibit our cards from being used for illegal or brand-damaging activities.”

American Express has also voluntarily cut off its support for Backpage, a spokesperson confirmed.

Backpage’s local classifieds sites include sections advertising escorts, body rubs, strippers and “adult jobs.” The site, which was spun off from Village Voice Media Holdings in 2012, [has long been accused by politicians and activists](#) of facilitating human trafficking, especially of children.

The Sheriff of Cook County, Thomas Dart, sent letters to Visa and MasterCard requesting the cut off on Monday (both letters are published below). The letter addressed to Visa chief executive Charlie Scharf said Backpage was “objectively found to promote prostitution and facilitate online sex trafficking,” and that “the unfettered proliferation of websites like Backpage.com has provided this violent industry with a mask of normalcy, driving demand ever higher and increasing the enslavement of prostituted individuals, including children.”

Backpage could not be reached for comment.



Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart *M. Spencer Green / AP*

Sheriff Dart, whose county is the second-largest in the United States by population and covers Chicago and surrounding areas, has taken an aggressive stance against sex trafficking, leading a [“National Day of Johns Arrests”](#) earlier this year.

“I was stunned at how quickly Visa and MasterCard moved to say they weren’t going to be involved in that anymore, they were incredible corporate citizens,” Dart told BuzzFeed News.

While Dart celebrated his success in isolating the site from the financial system, some said it extended a troubling precedent of government figures using the financial system, instead of the legal process, to crack down on businesses or individuals. Most famously, Wikileaks was cut off from the Visa and MasterCard networks after publishing confidential government documents, although the organization and its leaders were not charged with any crimes over the publication.

“We shouldn’t have informal pressure from public officials forcing financial service companies into deciding which types of speech should and shouldn’t be allowed,” Rainey Reitman, activism director at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, told *USA Today* in response to the Backpage news.

“MasterCard and Visa are not supposed to be the arbiters of free speech on the Internet.”

Dart’s letters said there are 20,000 ads posted on Backpage in the Chicago area each month and that each of the 800 times Dart’s office has responded to them, “we have made an arrest for crimes ranging from prostitution to child trafficking.”

“I don’t want to say we exhausted all the other strategies, but we tried the lawsuit angle and that did not work, we tried ongoing negotiation with Backpage about making this a responsible site that was not facilitating crimes that got us absolutely nowhere,” Dart said.

Dart [sued Craigslist in 2009](#) over its own adult services page, which was ultimately unsuccessful. While Craigslist shut down its adult services page [voluntarily in 2010](#), legal efforts to go after Backpage have been unsuccessful because the Communications Decency Act, a 1996 law, has

generally protected web services that host outside content posted by third parties.

Sex workers and those posting adult ads on Backpage will no longer be able to pay for the ads with credit cards. "It will make the average trafficker or pimp's life much more difficult, which was my goal," Dart said.