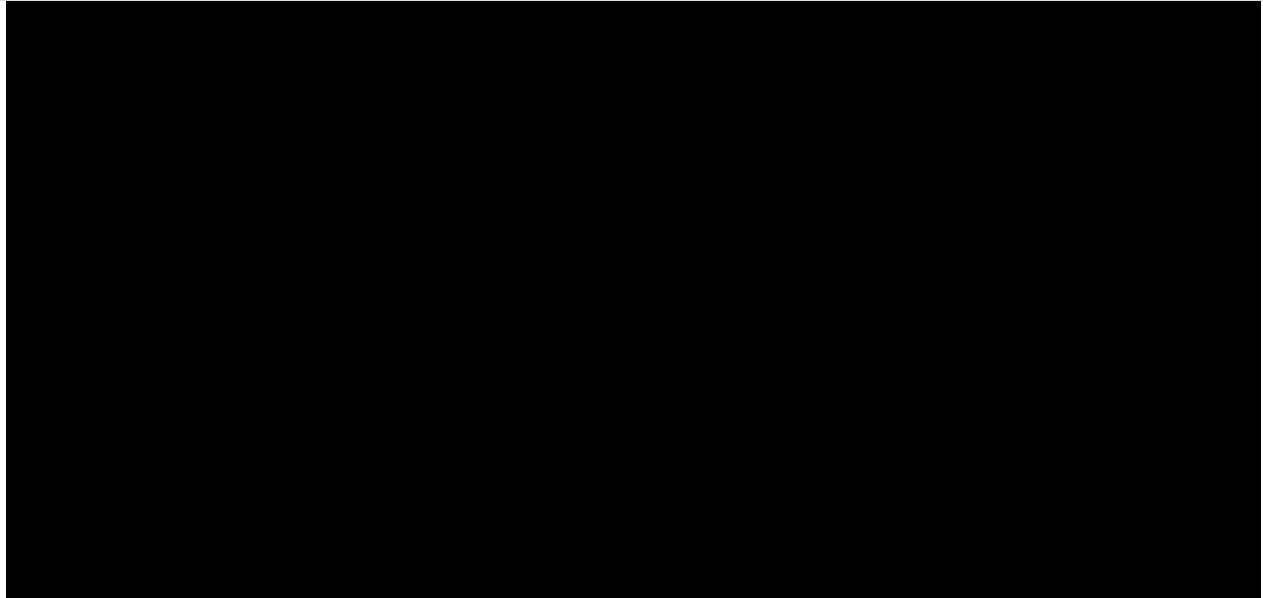


After trying to help 12-year-old on Downtown Eastside, man questions B.C.'s child welfare system

By [Ben Mijjure](#)

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The owner of a Downtown Eastside restaurant is speaking out after he tried helping a vulnerable 12-year-old girl who was alone in the notoriously rough area.

The notorious streets of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside are no place for an unsupervised 12-year-old.

When PiDGiN Restaurant owner Brandon Grossutti noticed an unaccompanied child spending time near his Carral Street business over a number of days in early July, he became concerned.

After speaking with the girl one day, he says he suspected she might be high on drugs.

"She had talked about being in the neighbourhood, and it was obvious she was under the influence of things," Grossutti said.

"And then there were other people in the neighbourhood that anecdotally talked about some of the interactions that had happened."

In an interview with CTV News, Grossutti said he heard rumours in the neighbourhood that the girl had been sexually assaulted twice while on the streets this summer.

"I'm trying to stay calm, but at the same time I'm like, I need to protect this girl and get her out of here right away," he said, becoming emotional and wiping away tears.

Grossutti first tried contacting the Ministry of Children and Family Development, but fearing that would take too long, he decided to call the police.

Within a few minutes officers arrived and began speaking with the girl – and then one of them made a call on his cellphone.

Grossutti said after that, the police let the unaccompanied child walk away alone on Carral Street, before she made a left back onto East Hastings Street.

In an email, the Vancouver Police Department confirmed the encounter with the child that day – but said officers were powerless to do more than they did because the Child and Family Community Service Act lays out very specific criteria for police to apprehend a child.

That includes if the child's safety or well-being is at immediate risk, if a social worker requests the child be apprehended, if there is a court order, or if the child has run away or gone missing from foster care or a group home.

"While our officers have, in the past, taken charge of this youth and apprehended her under the Child and Family Community Services Act due to immediate concerns for her safety and well-being, on this specific occasion she did not meet the legislative requirements for apprehension," Sgt. Steve Addison wrote in an email.

"She had not committed a crime, was located on a major pedestrian thoroughfare linking Gastown to Chinatown, and had permission to be there by her guardians, who were not concerned for her safety."

Addison went on to say officers at the scene contacted the girl's group home and staff said they were aware of her location and were in regular contact with her.

The B.C. Ministry of Children and Family Development told CTV News when a child in care is absent, staff work to locate them immediately, establish ongoing communication and reduce the risk of actual or potential harm.

"When a child in care is absent from the home environment, caregivers and social workers are tasked with working in the best interest of the child, which often involves continuous risk assessment, difficult decision-making, and navigating complex factors related to the child's life circumstances," the ministry said in a statement.

Grossutti told CTV News the standard of care for vulnerable children needs to be more robust.

"We've seen bad things down here, and bad things happen all the time, but this one was just a little bit different than most," he said.


"You know, when we have someone as vulnerable as a 12-year-old in the neighbourhood and we're throwing our hands up, this is broken. And we need to really look at how we're approaching the situation holistically."

Police said officers encouraged the girl to go home and stay away from the Downtown Eastside.

According to police, she did eventually return to her group home, and Grossutti said he has not seen her in the area around his restaurant in the weeks since he tried to help.

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