

# Combating Human Trafficking Through the Bus Industry

by Annie Sovcik, Program Director for Busing on the Lookout

**M**otor coaches carry an estimated 86 million passengers a year in Canada, while yellow school buses provide daily transportation to an estimated 2.5 million students – more than half of Canada’s school children.<sup>1</sup> The bus drivers, terminal workers, maintenance staff, dispatch operators, etc. who keep Canada’s tourism, public transit and student transportation moving every day are uniquely positioned to provide an extra set of eyes and ears for law enforcement in combatting the human trafficking taking place in Canada.

Busing on the Lookout (BOTL), a program recently launched by Truckers Against Trafficking, is designed to empower members of the bus industry with information and equip them with the tools they need to recognize and report this heinous crime.

Human trafficking – or modern-day slavery – is the exploitation of human beings through force, fraud or coercion for the purposes of commercial sex or forced labor and affects an estimated 40 million victims globally. A common myth is that human trafficking is a crime that occurs only in less developed countries, but that’s simply not true. In fact, thousands of children are enslaved every year in the United States and Canada. The government of Canada has reported that more than 90 percent of human trafficking cases in Canada involve domestic victims.<sup>2</sup>

While all children are vulnerable to the manipulative and forceful methods traffickers use, children in foster care, the homeless, LGBTQ or those who come from abusive homes are particularly susceptible. For example, in 2017, a study of homeless youth in the United States and Canada revealed that 19 percent were identified as victims of human trafficking, while 91 percent had been approached by someone who was offering them lucrative work opportunities that turned out to be fraudulent, scams or sex trafficking.<sup>3</sup>

There are many points of intersection between buses and human trafficking. Traffickers recruit victims out of bus terminals and utilize buses in transporting them. When victims are able to get out, a bus or bus terminal may be the first place they’ll go to find safety or escape. Many tourism sites where tour and charter buses take passengers – such as hotels, motels and casinos – are places where trafficking is known to occur.

Motor coach, public transit drivers and terminal workers should be on the lookout for signs of control, such as passengers who are not allowed to speak for themselves or



carry their own tickets or identification documents. They should pay extra attention to passengers who have never met the person who purchased their ticket for them or minors who are traveling without adult supervision. Victims may have markings or tattoos that could be a trafficker’s branding, and a driver or terminal worker could overhear comments about having a pimp or needing to make a quota.

The sad reality is that traffickers also recruit victims out of schools, sometimes by compelling another one of their teenage victims to recruit his or her peers. For example, in January 2017, CBC News ran a story about Canadian high school girls being lured into the sex trade.<sup>4</sup> In these situations, some victims will continue attending school during the day – and riding the school bus – even while they are being trafficked or groomed at night.

School bus drivers see students almost every day as they transport them between home and school. They are often keenly aware of changes in students’ behavior, moods or physical appearance; they take note of frequent absences and are uniquely positioned to see if new or different people are waiting to pick up a student at the bus stop or at school and may even observe signs of controlling or manipulative behavior. All school personnel should be trained on how to detect signs of human trafficking – not just school bus drivers – but the driver is in places that the principal, teachers, and counselors are not.

Traffickers take their victims wherever they can make money, and they are counting on people not paying attention or writing off the person being sold as “just a prostitute.” If all drivers and station employees were trained and knew what to



look for and then immediately reported it, how many victims would be recovered and how many traffickers arrested?

The BOTL training materials primarily consist of a 30-minute training video and a wallet card. The wallet card is a handy reminder of the information contained in the training video that drivers and terminal employees can keep with them for a quick reference and reminder if they see something suspicious. BOTL provides these materials to bus companies, public transit systems, school districts and others free of charge.

For more information or to request BOTL training materials, please visit [www.busingonthelookout.org](http://www.busingonthelookout.org) or contact [tat.truckers@gmail.com](mailto:tat.truckers@gmail.com).

## References

- 1 Motor Coach Canada, "About the Industry," available at [http://www.motorcoachcanada.com/future\\_members/industry.html](http://www.motorcoachcanada.com/future_members/industry.html); School Transportation News, "School Transportation in Canada," available at <http://www.stnonline.com/school-transportation-in-canada>.
- 2 Public Safety Canada, "National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking," available at <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/ntnl-ctn-pln-cmbt/index-en.aspx>.
- 3 Loyola University New Orleans, "The Modern Slavery Research Project at Loyola University New Orleans Publishes Groundbreaking Report on Sex and Labor Trafficking among Homeless Youth in the United States and Canada," available at <http://www.loyno.edu/news/story/2017/4/19/3918>.
- 4 CBC News, "Anyone can be a victim: Canadian high school girls being lured into sex trade," available at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/human-sex-trafficking-domestic-1.3956214>.

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