

TRAFFICKING IN CANADA: BRIEF OVERVIEW

In Canada, the majority of reported trafficking cases involve the sexual exploitation of women and girls (OWJN 2018). From 2009 to 2016, 95% of recorded trafficking victims were women, 70% of which were under the age of 25, while 80% of traffickers are men between 18 and 34 years old (Ibrahim 2018).

Human trafficking became a crime under Canada's Criminal Code in 2005 (OWJN 2018), however, human trafficking is very difficult to prove in court and traffickers are often charged for related crimes such as exploitation (OWJN 2018). As a result, the majority of trafficking charges made against perpetrators are eventually stayed or withdrawn (Ibrahim 2018).

Traffickers can be individuals or members of organized crime networks, and trafficking occurs within communities, across regions, and in some cases across borders (CISC 2004). Trafficking has evolved over time from "individuals involved in street-level pimping [...] to well-organized networks" that operate across many environments, including strip clubs, massage parlours, and private homes (CISC 2004: 2). These networks are loosely organized, cell-based structures where individual traffickers control groups of women (CISC 2004).

In 2004, the majority of Canada's human trafficking networks were located in the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick (CISC 2004). In 2018, the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls also noted organized networks operating in "city triangles" in the Prairies, including networks between Saskatoon, Regina and Winnipeg, and between Calgary, Edmonton, and Saskatoon (NIMMIWG 2019: 565).

Unlike other organized crime networks, traffickers "display low levels of sophistication" and tend to "spend profits on a luxury lifestyle" (CISC 2004: 3). Individuals in these networks are also often engaged in drug trafficking and may trade and sell trafficking victims or force them to participate in other criminal activities, such as drug trafficking (CISC 2004: 4).

Indigenous women and girls, new immigrants, youth experiencing homelessness, and children in care are targeted by trafficking because they are "socially and economically disadvantaged" (Government of Canada 2012: 6). In a process called 'grooming', young women and girls are targeted and lured through strategic manipulation and false promises.

In Canada, it is estimated that 50% of trafficked women, and 51% of trafficked girls are Indigenous (CWF 2014: 32). In Manitoba, it is estimated that 70% of visibly sexually exploited people are Indigenous and 80% are female (Tracia's Trust 2019).

The trafficking of Indigenous women and girls is not new to Canada. Historically, Indigenous women and girls were bought and sold as slaves and in the 1880s, it was known that the North West Mounted Police were participating in the trafficking of Indigenous women (NIMMIWG 2019).

Anti-trafficking advocates have been calling for more awareness about trafficking so that it can be identified earlier. Sethi notes that "traffickers often know someone in the community who informs them about the plans of the girls moving to the city" so that when girls arrive traffickers are there to "lure the girls under the pretext of providing a place to stay or access to resources" (NIMMIWG 2019: 565).

Jennisha Wilson notes that anti-trafficking information can also be distributed by airlines and transportation agencies (NIMMIWG 2019). The National Inquiry also noted that traffickers "go so far as to station themselves outside group homes or places where they know these potential victims might be" (NIMMIWG 2019: 661). Anti-trafficking efforts can target these same sites.

Once women and girls are trafficked, it takes "an average of three years and seven attempts" to successfully exit trafficking (Tracia's Trust 2019: 21). Because of negative experiences with police services, Indigenous women are often unwilling to report trafficking to the police (NIMMIWG 2019: 629). It is important that Indigenous women and girls are recognized as victims and are not blamed for the violence perpetrated against them.

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