



## **The Centre**

Canadian Centre to  
End Human Trafficking.

# **Ontario policymakers must act to address human trafficking**

Written submission for the study on Intimate Partner Violence  
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## **ABOUT THE CANADIAN CENTRE TO END HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

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The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking is a national charity dedicated to ending all forms of human trafficking in Canada. We work to mobilize system change by collaborating and working with various stakeholders, including leaders with lived experience, all levels of government, private sector businesses, and frontline service providers, to advance best practices and eliminate duplicate efforts across Canada.

On May 29, 2019, The Centre launched the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline, providing a confidential multilingual service, operating 24/7 to connect victims/survivors, Canada-wide, with social services and/or law enforcement if they so choose. Each day, our trained staff help vulnerable individuals avoid harm, exit their trafficking situations, and gain access to the support they depend on for their recovery. This work gives us a unique perspective into where we are collectively making progress. It also allows us to see where additional work is needed in our shared fight to end human trafficking in our country.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

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Human trafficking is often invisible to those not directly impacted by it. A 2021 Angus Reid survey commissioned by The Centre found that 57% of respondents either don't believe or are unaware that human trafficking is happening in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, more than three quarters of respondents indicated they weren't able to recognize the signs of trafficking.<sup>2</sup>

Education is essential to ending human trafficking in our country. This means addressing misconceptions about how it is perpetrated. Unlike sensationalized stories depicted in movies like *Taken*, human trafficking is covert and usually perpetrated by someone the victim/survivor knows, loves, and trusts. For this reason, trafficking can often present as intimate partner violence (IPV), although the two are distinct forms of gender-based violence.

Data collected through the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline (“Hotline”) between May 2019 and December 2022<sup>3</sup> indicates three broad trends related to human trafficking in the country:

### **1. Human trafficking remains a significant challenge in Canada.**

In its first three years of operation, the Hotline identified 1,500 cases of human trafficking and recognized 2,170 victims/survivors.

### **2. Human trafficking happens in every region and community in Canada.**

Approximately 87% of incidents reported to the Hotline occurred in large urban centres with populations over 100,000.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, a sizeable proportion (13%) occurred in mid-sized cities, small towns, and rural communities.<sup>5</sup> Ontario recorded 67% of all trafficking incidents identified by the Hotline, followed by Alberta (10%), British Columbia (9%), and Quebec (7%), respectively.<sup>i</sup>

### **3. Victims/survivors depend on social services to heal from human trafficking and other traumas.**

Hotline staff provided 1,416 program and service referrals between 2019 and 2022. The services in greatest demand were shelter and housing (30%), case management (19%), and supportive counselling (19%), respectively. Accessing appropriate support continues to be a challenge for survivors. Despite provincial investments, significant gaps persist when trying to

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<sup>i</sup> This data is based on geographic information that callers voluntarily disclose to the Hotline. For more information on the data, and its nuances, please see the *Human Trafficking Trends in Canada (2019-2022)* report.

connect victims/survivors with appropriate programming. Many providers are often unable to meet the increasing demand for services across Ontario.

## CURRENT REALITY

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Human trafficking, specifically sex trafficking, operates within the spectrum of IPV. Intimate partner violence is a broad concept that includes behaviour that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in a relationship.<sup>6</sup> Sex trafficking regularly includes the same behaviours but also involves the exploitation of individuals within the commercial sex industry through force, fraud, and coercion. Traffickers, specifically those who pose as boyfriends,<sup>ii</sup> initiate a consensual relationship before applying psychological and/or physical abuse to coerce victims/survivors into performing sexual acts they otherwise would not do.<sup>7</sup>

This exploitation places sex trafficking on the extreme end of the IPV spectrum. It also creates experiences that are prevalent among trafficking victims/survivors, including:

- **Stigma and shame associated with the commercial sex industry<sup>iii</sup>**

Individuals who have engaged in the commercial sex industry,<sup>8</sup> either consensually or by force, continue to be highly stigmatized in Canada.<sup>9</sup> Traffickers leverage this stigma and the associated shame to deter victims/survivors from reaching out for help or support.

- **Prevalence of complex psychological trauma**

Victims/survivors experience severe psychological impacts, such as complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and trauma-coerced attachment (i.e. trauma bonding).<sup>10</sup> For trafficking survivors, these mental health challenges can lead to substance dependence, eating disorders, and emotional detachment.<sup>11, 12</sup> Recent studies suggest that comorbid conditions like PTSD are more common in trafficking survivors than in those who have experienced war trauma.<sup>13</sup> These psychological impacts can be exacerbated by state-run processes, such as involvement in criminal proceedings and immigration and asylum processes.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> The 'boyfriend trafficker' was identified as the most prevalent type of perpetrator by service providers and law enforcement in research conducted by The Centre. Individuals involved in organized crime and family members were the next most common types of traffickers.

<sup>iii</sup> Sex work is consensual sex between adults, can take many forms, and varies between and within countries and communities. Sex work may vary in the degree to which it is "formal" or organized. Exploitation and coercion are not the deciding factor for participation in consensual sex work.

## CHALLENGES AND CONSEQUENCES OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

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Inequity enables exploitation. Individuals who live in poverty,<sup>15</sup> have interacted with the child welfare system<sup>16</sup> or have experienced discrimination<sup>17</sup> are disproportionately more likely to be victims of human trafficking and intimate partner violence.

Canada's social safety net is intended to address these disparities and support the most vulnerable among us. Unfortunately, social programs do not always consider the specific needs of those experiencing human trafficking and other forms of gender-based violence. Further, services are often fragmented across government departments and non-profit organizations. The Centre has witnessed how a lack of coordination can create gaps in services that are acutely felt by human trafficking victims/survivors.

In 2020, the Government of Ontario introduced its *Anti-Human Trafficking Strategy 2020-2025*,<sup>18</sup> which recognizes the need for a coordinated multi-stakeholder approach to address human trafficking. This includes preventative measures and activities that support victims/survivors and hold perpetrators to account. While these initiatives are positioning Ontario as a leader in the anti-trafficking space, more work is needed. Five broad challenges persist that require policymakers' attention and resources:

### 1. Gaps in Ontario's social safety net

Traffickers, especially 'boyfriend' traffickers, control their victims in stages:<sup>19</sup>

- 1) targeting and luring
- 2) grooming and gaming
- 3) coercion and manipulation
- 4) exploitation and control.<sup>iv</sup>

Traffickers often target individuals who are impacted by systemic and structural inequalities. This includes those who struggle with homelessness, poverty, substance dependence, and discrimination. Traffickers exploit this instability to groom, manipulate, and control their victims.

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<sup>iv</sup> 1) Targeting and luring: traffickers seek out potential victims who are vulnerable to control and manipulation. 2) Grooming and gaming: traffickers will offer potential victims anything to make them feel loved, appreciated, safe, and accepted (e.g. buying gifts, spending money, asking about dreams and goals), and use that to put a wedge between them and their support network, isolating them and increasing their dependence on the trafficker. 3) Coercion and manipulation: traffickers start sending mixed messages by withholding things they previously provided (e.g. affection, intimacy, money, gifts) to manipulate an individual to act in a certain way. 4) Exploitation and control: trafficker will have complete control over ID, phones, movements, and money of individuals they are exploiting.

To illustrate this point, consider that growing evidence demonstrates strong linkages between homelessness, housing precarity, and human trafficking.<sup>v</sup> Lack of access to secure housing creates significant emotional, financial, and physical vulnerabilities traffickers will exploit. They may promise a safe place to live or a well-paying job in return for sexual acts victims/survivors would not otherwise perform. This creates a situation in which someone's housing is tied to their trafficker.

Ontario is experiencing significant increases in the cost of rent<sup>20</sup> as well as long wait lists<sup>vi</sup> for subsidized housing.<sup>21, 22</sup> This housing precarity creates the conditions for vulnerability that can lead to human trafficking. It also makes it difficult for victims to leave their trafficking situation – Hotline staff have interacted with victims who have been left no other choice than to remain with their trafficker due to the lack of alternative housing arrangements.

Beyond housing, the province's two income assistance programs – Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) – have not kept pace with the cost of living. Minimal increases in monthly rates have not resulted in lifting people out of poverty. The benefit for a single person in receipt of OW is \$733 and \$1,368 for ODSP, respectively.<sup>23</sup> These allocations are insufficient in helping people meet basic needs and creates vulnerabilities that can be exploited.

## **2. Uncoordinated provincial efforts**

Victims/survivors often require support from across the public service to heal from their experiences. This may include accessing programs in housing, education, healthcare, mental health and addictions, immigration, employment, social assistance, law enforcement, and the criminal justice system.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, government strategies in these policy areas rarely include an anti-trafficking perspective. This means that they can overlook the experiences of victims/survivors. However, placing an IPV and/or human trafficking lens on social policy could help to ensure services are responsive and that government does not create additional harm.

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<sup>v</sup> The Centre has conducted consultations with various stakeholders on the issue of housing and human trafficking in various jurisdictions in Canada, including Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, and at the federal level. Our findings and recommendations, in the form of policy briefs submitted to these various governments, can be found on our [Policy Recommendations](#) page.

<sup>vi</sup> In 2017, Ontario's Auditor General conducted a value-for-money audit of the province's social and affordable housing. The report found that "Ontario has one of the largest social housing wait lists in the country—wait times are lengthy and growing even longer. There are more people on wait lists for social housing than are currently receiving social housing benefits." In a follow up report in 2019, the Auditor General concluded that not enough progress had been made to address these long waiting lists.

### **3. Lack of specialized services and programs**

Human trafficking victims/survivors have unique needs that often cannot be met by standard social programs or those designed to address other forms of gender-based violence. Counselling, health, addictions, legal, and housing services that do not take into consideration the impact of trafficking run the risk of unintentionally harming those they seek to help.<sup>25</sup> The current housing and shelter system is an example of this. When human trafficking-specific options are not offered, victims/survivors undoubtedly seek out homeless and domestic violence shelters. However, shelter policies – such as curfews, scheduled closures during the day, limitations on accessing phones, the internet or social media, restrictions on substance use, and requirements to do chores – may mimic trafficking experiences and unintentionally harm survivors in their recovery.<sup>26</sup> There are also elevated risks to safety that exist for victims/survivors which may not be met by many housing and shelter options. In some situations, increased and robust security protocols in domestic violence shelters are not always enough to deter traffickers from looking for survivors who have escaped or from recruiting new victims/survivors within the shelter system, including through peer recruitment.<sup>27, 28</sup>

### **4. Barriers to accessing existing services and supports**

Eligibility parameters, municipal administrative procedures, and operational policies often create barriers to accessing these supports. For example, The Centre has been informed that some municipalities restrict out-of-region clients from accessing housing services. This makes it challenging for victims/survivors to leave the community in which they were trafficked. A survivor's ability to leave the area where they were exploited can be essential to their physical and psychological safety. Rules that arbitrarily restrict these needs represent a significant barrier for victims/survivors in their recovery.

### **5. Lack of capacity in existing services and supports**

Service providers often do not have the training to respond to the needs of victims/survivors. This means victims/survivors may feel unheard, judged, and misunderstood, leading them to opt out of programming.<sup>29</sup>

Service providers can also feel unequipped to properly support victims/survivors, which can create stress for themselves and their clients.<sup>30</sup>

## IDEAL SITUATION

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The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking envisions a country free from human trafficking. Achieving this long-term goal will require that policymakers address the underlying socio-economic conditions that enable human trafficking. Change needs to go beyond superficial fixes. Instead, the root causes and structural barriers described in this submission must be addressed.

This means investing in a robust, coordinated, and flexible social safety net to reduce Ontarians' vulnerability to trafficking. Dedicated programs for human trafficking victims/survivors must be a priority. These specialized programs should span ministries responsible for shelters and short-term housing options, case management programs, health, mental health, and counselling services to name just a few. At their heart, specialized programs must be coordinated, trauma-informed, based on lived experiences, and culturally relevant. Policymakers must also build capacity in existing, non-specialized services so human trafficking is better understood, clearly identified, and survivors receive comprehensive and appropriate care.

Finally, policies and programs must be reviewed from a human trafficking lens or IPV lens to address barriers that prevent victims/survivors from accessing vital services.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking calls on the Government of Ontario to:

**1) Address the social conditions that make human trafficking possible by strengthening the province's social safety net.**

The province should seek to make it easier for all Ontarians to access housing, food, safety, and financial stability. Increased investments in non-market housing and income support programs, for example, are crucial to ensuring that those most vulnerable and marginalized have access to these fundamental human needs. More specifically, the province should:

- Rapidly increase Ontario's non-market housing stock to make safe, secure, and affordable housing more accessible to everyone.
- Address the barriers human trafficking survivors continue to face when applying for Special Priority Policy (SPP) status for social and affordable housing (e.g., eliminating the three-month timeframe to apply for SPP and simplifying the verification process).<sup>31</sup>



- Increase social assistance rates for OW and ODSP to better reflect the rising cost of living and to reduce vulnerability.

## **2) Conduct a systems-level review of how victims/survivors access and receive services.**

Policymakers need to better understand the structural barriers that prevent trafficking victims/survivors from accessing services in a timely manner. To do so, the province should:

- Conduct an audit of eligibility requirements and operational policies to identify where obstacles to service exist. The government should focus on social programs in greatest demand to trafficking victims/survivors, including housing, income support, legal, health, mental health and addictions. This review should be conducted using a trauma-informed, person-centered, and culturally relevant framework and engage those with lived experience.

## **3) Apply an anti-trafficking lens on all public policy issues.**

The government should develop a standard approach for assessing strategies, policies and programs from an anti-trafficking or IPV lens. This approach should be developed in consultation with individuals with lived experience and service providers with experience serving victims/survivors. Developing and applying an anti-trafficking lens would allow governments to assess whether and how their activities impact victims/survivors. More specifically, the province should:

- Require an anti-trafficking lens be applied in all cabinet submissions, similar to the stakeholder, environmental, and gender-based analyses that are conducted. This will ensure that ministry and elected officials are giving due consideration to how government initiatives may impact victims/survivors.
- Apply an anti-trafficking lens to all government strategies to make it easier for bureaucrats to identify potential barriers that victims/survivors may experience when interacting with new policies and programs.

**4) Build on the success of the previous anti-human trafficking strategy through new awareness, training, and program opportunities.**

Ontario is a leader in funding anti-human trafficking programming. As the government continues to update its anti-trafficking strategy for 2025, it should build upon the coordinated and collaborative approach of the original strategy. More specifically, Ontario should:

- Develop broad public education campaigns that raise awareness of human trafficking, how family and friends can support victims/survivors, and how to access support.
- Mandate and fund anti-human trafficking training for Service Managers and other social service providers to help identify the signs of trafficking, support survivors, and prevent human trafficking.
- Adequately fund the operation of specialized services for human trafficking victims/survivors in all sectors (i.e. housing, healthcare, mental health and addictions, etc.). This funding should be sustainable rather than project-based.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking. (2023). [Human Trafficking Trends in Canada \(2019-2022\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> World Health Organization. (2012). [Understanding and addressing violence against women](#). WHO/RHR/12.36.
- <sup>7</sup> The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking. (2021). [Human Trafficking Corridors in Canada](#), p. 23.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 51.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 41.
- <sup>10</sup> Chambers, R., Gibson, M., Chaffin, S., Takagi, T., Nguyen, N., & Mears-Clark, T. (2022). [Trauma-coerced Attachment and Complex PTSD: Informed Care for Survivors of Human Trafficking](#), *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 10(1), 41-50.
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- <sup>17</sup> Standing Committee on the Status of Women. (February 2024). [Act Now: Preventing Human Trafficking of Women, Girls and Gender Diverse People in Canada](#). 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, 1<sup>st</sup> Session.

- <sup>18</sup> Government of Ontario. (2020). [Ontario's anti-human trafficking strategy 2020-2025](#). Retrieved September 10, 2024.
- <sup>19</sup> The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking. (2021). [Human Trafficking Corridors in Canada](#), pp. 25-27.
- <sup>20</sup> Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation. (2023). [Rental Market Survey Data for Ontario](#). Retrieved August 30, 2024.
- <sup>21</sup> Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. (2017). [Social and Affordable Housing. 2017 Annual Report Volume 1, Chapter 3, Section 3.14](#), p. 698.
- <sup>22</sup> Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. (2019). [Social and Affordable Housing. 2019 Annual Report Volume 4: Follow-Up Reports on Audit Recommendations, Chapter 1, Section 1.14](#).
- <sup>23</sup> Government of Ontario. (n.d.). [Ontario Works](#) and [Income support from ODSP](#). Retrieved September 4, 2024.
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