

FOSTER CARE AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING



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INTRODUCTION

The Report of the National Task Force on Sex Trafficking of Women and Girls in Canada says- “**The defining factor in trafficking is not travel. It is coercion and control**”. (1) This statement is supported by facts like this one from the Global Slavery Index. Their 2018 report says- **93 percent of people who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation are Canadian citizens, not foreign citizens.** (13)

The highest number of human trafficking violations was found to be in Ontario (65.8%), Quebec (13.6%) and Alberta (8.2%),

followed by Nova Scotia (5.7%). Metropolitan areas like Toronto showed a high percentage of human trafficking violations at 24.7%. (2)

Here we focus on the nexus between foster care and human trafficking. Data provided by organizations like the National Foster Youth Institute shows that almost 60% of children who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation have at one point been in foster care. (8)

In Canada, statistics show that “**Seventy-two percent of trafficked persons in Canada are under the age of 25, and 51 percent of trafficked girls have been involved in the child welfare system.**” 3 (1,14)

WHY DO TRAFFICKERS TARGET YOUTH IN CARE?

Traffickers are adept at preying on a child's insecurity. Youth in care often come from vulnerable backgrounds (i.e. situations of abuse and neglect) which may be what put them in foster care in the first place. These children may also leave their foster care placement at some point in time for various reasons. Children in foster care could be confronted with the following issues:

- Neglect and abuse
- Lack of connection
- Interpersonal conflict
- Being used for financial gain

1. Neglect and abuse

Children in foster care come from various difficult backgrounds, making them vulnerable to a trafficker's manipulative tactics. There is a harmful perception that children in foster care are a burden, with some foster parents making it clear that a child is not wanted. In addition, sexual, physical and emotional abuse may happen within the foster home. At times these children may have already experienced neglect, physical and sexual abuse prior to entering/ within a foster care set up. A trafficker uses subtle advances to lure children, through various means such as showering them with 'love', gifts and attention. Youth in care may be targeted

by a trafficker because of their desire for love and affection. A trafficker may manipulate this need through posing as a romantic partner or trusted friend. Traffickers use psychological manipulation and coercion to force children into exploitative situations. Often, these individuals are asked to pay back for gifts, drugs, alcohol, material possession and other items provided by the trafficker through sexual services.

According to research, when a child is mistreated (which includes neglect and abuse), this makes them vulnerable to sexual exploitation. If a child has experienced sexual abuse, they may continue on to develop psychologically and emotionally in a way that could make them vulnerable to the advances of traffickers. They may also engage in risky behavior that could include running away and use of alcohol or drugs. Neglect and abuse is a component/ contributes to traumatic negative development, this could weaken resiliency and increase a child's vulnerability to being sexually exploited. (19)

2. Lack of connection

When children who ran away from their foster parents/ group homes were interviewed, they cited a lack of connection as a reason for wanting to leave. Separation from family (biological parents) and friends was a challenge. In some cases, a foster child had run away, not to escape abuse etc, but because they felt they were lonely and felt isolated from those that were familiar to them (20). Take for example Chris Tait. He was put into foster care from the time he was one year old. His parents could not take care of him and his 5 siblings. He was fortunate that he grew up with his siblings in the same foster home.

Tait believes in permanency and feels safe when he has the backing of permanent connections and a team (which includes advocates and supporters). He says, **“It’s about identifying which people will stick by you. It’s someone who is supportive and who sees you from day one to the gold medal, or whatever it is you’re striving for. For me, I think that youth in care who are successful are people who have permanent connections or even a team behind them.”**

Problems arose, when Tait’s foster parents decided to permanently adopt him and his siblings. Though he was supportive of the idea, his elder sisters weren’t. This caused a rift in the family and his foster parents went through a divorce. The next few years were traumatic for Tait, he changed almost 30 foster homes. Sadly, these were far from his old elementary school and he began to miss his friends.

He is now a strong advocate for youth and is attending Vancouver Community College, since his ultimate goal is to attend film school. Close connections matter to him, as he says- “What, ultimately, I wanted to do was to keep growing and seeing myself in different lights. For me, personally, connecting with new people and building bigger connections is a big deal. “With the work I do, I’m able to do that, so that’s why I’ve worked with so many different organizations that highlight the things that I am passionate about.” (21)

Caseworkers often check a foster home/ group home and exchange a few brief words with the foster parents during their visits. This does not always give a clear picture of what goes on beneath the

surface. These children want the system to work better, and it is important to note that the reasons why a youth in care may leave their placement are complex.

One of the biggest risk factors for being trafficked is wanting to be loved. So, if a child or youth feels lonely and isolated, a trafficker may manipulate that emotional need for the purposes of exploitation.

3. Interpersonal Conflict

Issues within a foster care set-up can be unsettling for a child. Fights between parents, lack of adequate care or other disturbances like being bullied by other children could be other reasons why a child may choose to run away. A child who is homeless is vulnerable and susceptible to manipulation. Such children are targeted by traffickers. They may coerce a foster child experiencing homelessness into an exploitative situation, saying that this will provide them with food to eat while away from their foster care homes.

Nadon et.al., found that juveniles who were sexually exploited also reported things like- “lower family cohesion, greater parental alcohol abuse, and more inter parental conflict.” (22)



4. Being used for financial gain

To a child growing up in foster care, it may seem that they are only being taken care of because the government sends their foster parents a cheque to do so. In this way, foster care inadvertently can become a pipeline to sexual exploitation. Growing up in foster care can lead to a mindset that a child is only worth a pay check and they do not have any other value apart from this. This 'pay check' mentality may make youth in care believe that their primary worth comes from bringing in income. Traffickers can prey on this mindset, and through manipulation lure them into sex trafficking. (3)

Funding (though done with good intentions on the part of both foster parents and social workers) tends to create other problems. ***Jane Kovarikova is an advocate who spent 10 years in the foster care system. She says that funding tends to commodify a child—and it can compound the emotional complexity of living in foster care.*** “When academics look at youth in care, what stands out is the homelessness and jail rates, those hard numbers..... When you ask youth about their experience in care, what often stands out is the loneliness. You always have to ask: Would they still be doing this if the pay dried up?” (23)

Due to financial vulnerability, a trafficker may prey on this need to provide a youth with basic needs such as housing and substances, and then demand repayment in the form of sexual exploitation.

5. Aging Out Youth

Aging out youth are those who leave the foster care system at the legal age of 18. They are often in a vulnerable position and they may experience homelessness and unemployment.

A report by the Globe and Mail titled- “19 and cut off: B.C. foster youth plead for change to system”, stresses the need to have a more robust system in place for aging out foster care children. While some provinces in Canada extend their support (provide monthly living allowance) to foster children until they are 21, in others, once a foster child turns 19, they are cut off from any support the system provides. This makes an aging out child vulnerable to homelessness and being sexually exploited. The stories that the report quotes highlight these challenges.

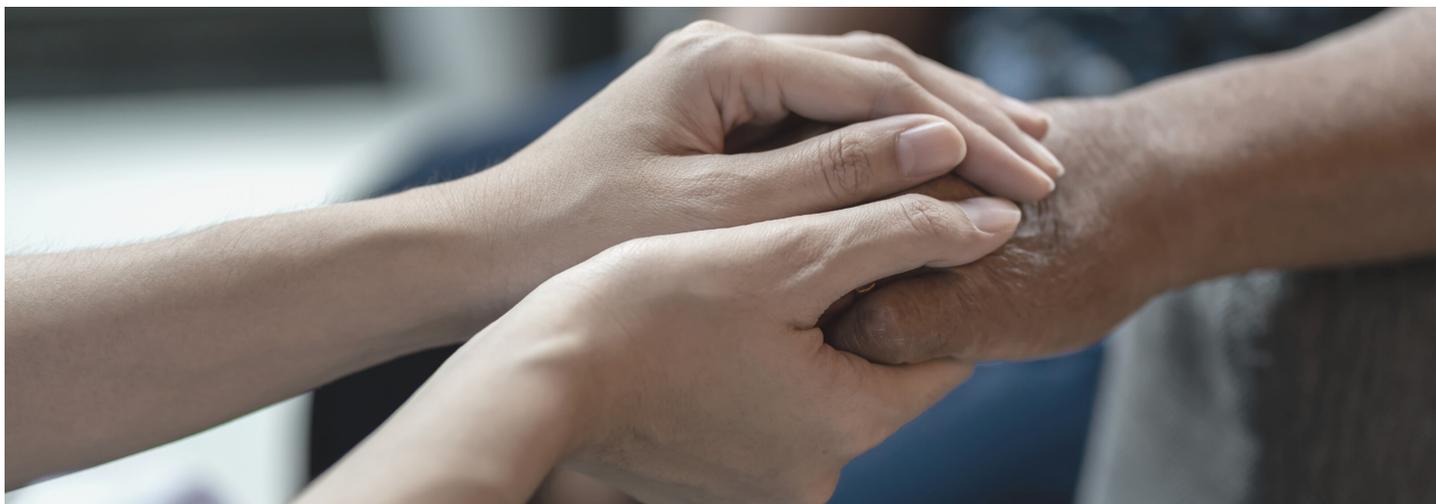
A young woman (former foster child) confronted a distracted MLA attending the B.C Legislature saying that she needed to have sex to eat. She went on to explain about her deplorable living conditions. Going on, she pointed out that by cutting support once a child turns 19, the system is putting young lives at stake. (24)

Extending foster care to the age of 21 years reduces homelessness and young parenthood. It also has positive outcomes such as better employment and higher education. These are critical to help an aging out youth stand on their own feet. (25)

They may also lack the necessary education and skills to help get jobs. Deborah Rutman co-author of *Fostering Success: Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in/from Care* states- "We know that in B.C. the graduation rate for kids in the general population is about 84 per cent, whereas for former youth in care, foster youth, that is 47 per cent." What could be the reason for this disparity? According to the report, it could be because foster kids are shuffled between cities, communities and schools. She feels that "there's also a lack of communication or coordination between the foster-care system or welfare system and the education system." (26)

In the case of Jane Kovarikova, a high school dropout who left foster care at the age of 16, she scripted her own success story. Despite challenging times, she saved enough money for college, earning a Master's degree from the London School of Economics. She is now a doctoral candidate at Western University. She stresses on the importance of continued education for foster care children, as a means to prevent early parenthood in young women and conflicts with the law for young men. On the other hand, the harsh reality is that- "... less than half of youth in foster care graduate from high school and barely 20 percent of those ever enroll in post-secondary." (27). The Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (MCHP) has pioneered the way in educational outcomes of children in foster care. The findings suggest that kids in care may be dealing with issues such as: developmental disabilities, trauma background (neglect, violence), poor performance in certain subjects etc. They state- "By kindergarten, twice as many children in care are considered "not ready" or vulnerable in one or more areas of child development compared with the general population." "As children get older, the gap in education outcomes between those in care and the general population widens. For example, over 66 percent of kids who spend time in care do not graduate from high school within six or more years of entering" (28)

At this point, these youth may not be entitled to any state funding or support. With these fractured safety nets and limited alternatives, an aging out youth might find themselves experiencing homeless, and without employment; which makes them vulnerable to exploitation as a result of their socio-economic condition and lack of education.





OFFERING SUPPORT

- **Keep communication open:** Encourage open conversations about the dangers of sex trafficking. Be open to narratives a child may tell you about; patience and persistence go a long way. Discuss the need for family and close connections: This helps the child talk about the need to feel accepted. The National Runaway Switchboard (Pergamit & Ernst, 2011) in their interview with teenaged foster youth came up with some interesting findings. The youth in the study wanted to improve their foster care experiences. Despite being in care, they still wanted to bond with their families and friends. These were known people who they felt would listen to them and help them push past their difficulties. They didn't feel comfortable discussing everything with their foster parents. Caseworkers were also encouraged to spend more time with the youth and actually listen to what they have to say. They also suggested that caseworkers visit more frequently. (17)
- **Monitor:** Internet usage should be monitored from all devices (phone/ tablets). Often, computers or desktops are easier to monitor if they are kept in a common area (living room). Parents can download software that helps monitor their child's online activities, in addition, check the browser history regularly. Software like SocialShield or Safety Web sends out an alert if it finds explicit content in messages or if anyone suspicious tries getting in touch with your child. Check out our resources available at fight4freedom.ca/onlinesafety
- **Ask indirect questions:** Is there anything that you are worrying about? Is there a situation you are in, that you can't get out of and you would like to, but you are scared? Do you feel scared/ vulnerable/ threatened?
- **Communicate messages of hope:** Build trust and be patient. Be open and non-judgmental.
- **Reach out:** Get in touch with your social worker and law enforcement, if you feel your child is vulnerable to being trafficked/ already trafficked. Most importantly, trust your intuition. Professional help is important since traffickers are potentially violent.

DETECT

GROOMING

Does the child suddenly seem to have lots of money/ expensive phone/ clothes that you didn't buy them?

Traffickers often lure individuals by preying on their insecurities and showering them with their time, attention and expensive gifts. This tactic creates a sense of belonging and helps the traffickers manipulate and exploit vulnerabilities. Traffickers often build a bond of trust with the individual they are targeting. Sometimes, traffickers use a debt bondage system, where they expect the individuals to pay back these expensive gifts through sexual services.

More than one cell phone

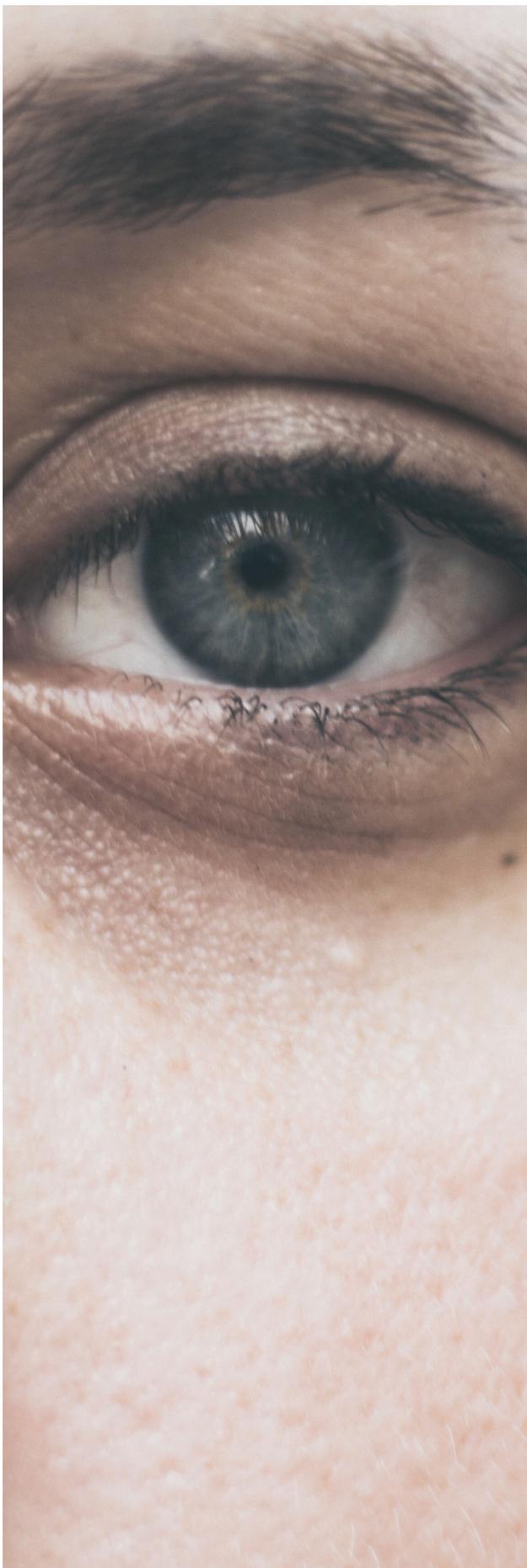
Traffickers sometimes give individuals a second cell phone. Often an extra phone goes undetected and isn't monitored. This is a method of technological control. The traffickers use this as an easy way of communication to get in touch with the trafficked individuals. Potential purchasers of sex also get in touch with the person being trafficked using these phones. The phones also enable the traffickers to monitor the individual's whereabouts through GPS (Global Positioning Satellite).

Taking on a 'job' (evenings/ night)

Note any sudden developments like taking on work or a job that involves working evenings or late nights. This could be a warning sign that the child is being trafficked and is expected to turn up at these odd hours. Your child may appear overly tired (because of the long/ unusual hours that do not have any breaks) or seem withdrawn, anxious, nervous/ paranoid or depressed. (18,29).

Posting of sexually explicit content on their social media

Trafficking techniques can often fall under the radar. Sometimes youth can be trafficked right from their own homes. Recruiting and advertising are often done through the internet. Trafficker's befriend children online and take time to get to know the person. Social networking sites also provide a platform where traffickers can send out friend requests to vulnerable youth. They try to show up on mutual friends lists making the connection seem genuine. After these youths have been groomed by a trafficker, they may be coerced into 'advertising' themselves by posting sexually explicit content on social media (SnapChat/ Instagram/ TikTok) or to take sexually provocative pictures of themselves and post them online. After an image is posted or shared online, a trafficker may use this to threaten or blackmail the individual they are exploiting.



UNDERSTANDING THE MODUS OPERANDI OF SEX TRAFFICKERS

Group homes: Adolescents who enter foster care may be placed in group homes, rather than with a foster family. Traffickers are known to send girls into these group homes to lure girls outside with the promise of a better life (31). Individuals who then leave their placement are vulnerable to sexual exploitation to meet their basic needs like food and shelter. (8)

Boyfriend technique: This is a subtle technique traffickers use through posing as a romantic partner. Traffickers often promise the individuals they are targeting that they will build a better life together as a couple. Overtime, once the trafficker gains the person's trust, they may force them into situations of commercial sexual exploitation.

Gorilla Technique: A Gorilla Pimp uses minimal grooming tactics. Instead, they choose to make individuals comply to their demands by brute force (physical abuse, sexual assault, threats, violence, kidnapping).

Threats/ Blackmail: To control the individuals being exploited, traffickers' resort to threats to harm them or their families. They often threaten to expose sexual images or videos the trafficker has obtained by sharing with the exploited person's friends, families or relatives.

INDICATORS OF SEX TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION

It's important to note that one of these indicators or a combination doesn't necessarily mean that someone is being trafficked. These are signs to help identify situations where abuse and control may be taking place.

Branding/ signs of physical assault

Scarring or tattooing is often done by traffickers to the individuals they are exploiting. This could be a barcode, a name or a symbol. In addition, sometimes individuals are physically assaulted as a way to assert the trafficker's control over them. Other signs to watch out for include: burn marks from cigarette butts, injuries that a person tries to cover up (by wearing long-sleeved clothes/ using makeup etc.)

New set of friends- controlling and manipulative (especially older friends) leading to isolation

Note the way they refer to their friends/ social group. Look out for terms like 'daddy', 'madam', 'the ' life', 'the game' etc., that they use while talking about their acquaintances. A potential indicator could be if an individual has a romantic partner that is much older. Individuals who are being trafficked are often controlled by coercion, fear, intimidation and threats.

Substance Use

Traffickers may target individuals with substance use issues or control the individual they are trafficking through developing a dependency on a drug. Traffickers may draw these individuals into other illegal activities (like drug dealing) and then threaten to report them to law enforcement. (30)

Mental Health

Sex trafficking is a traumatic experience as individuals are manipulated, abused, and exploited. The abuse (mental and physical) can cause mental health conditions, like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, self-harm, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts.

Not allowed to speak for themselves

People who are being trafficked are often not given the chance to speak for themselves. They are also known to give scripted answers with vague details when asked questions. Their activities are also controlled by the traffickers. A trafficked person may be uneasy and may avoid making eye contact. In addition, sometimes their identification and documents (like passports) are controlled by the trafficker.

Other Signs

- Other signs to look out for include:
- Poor treatment, being underpaid or not paid at all for long hours of work.
 - A person may be moved around frequently and are unfamiliar with their surroundings
 - Person may have been reported as a missing person (32)

CONCLUSION

The child welfare system and sex trafficking are interlinked. There is an urgent need to address underlying factors of this issue such as childhood trauma, fractured safety nets of aging out children, and gaps in the child welfare system. Stakeholders, organizations and policy makers should work together, alongside children in care, to reduce vulnerabilities, end stigma and build resiliency.

The exploitation of youth in care can be minimized by being aware, proactive, open to change and to listening to the children placed in our systems of care. Through collaboration and active participation, the development of robust prevention strategies and identifying trauma-informed support systems can help increase the safety and well-being of children in our communities.

APPENDIX

Resources for parents:

1. <https://www.canadiancentretoendhumantrafficking.ca/for-parents/>
2. <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/cntrng-crm/hmn-trffckng/index-en.aspx>
3. <https://crcvc.ca/en/links/>
4. <https://www.canadiancentretoendhumantrafficking.ca/nationalhotline/>

Staying safe from online-predators:

1. <https://www.bark.us/blog/protect-child-online-predators/>
2. <https://edu.gcfglobal.org/en/internetsafetyforkids/staying-safe-from-online-predators/1/>
3. <http://www.techaddiction.ca/protect-children-from-online-predators.html>
4. Video Link: <https://www.pressconnects.com/story/news/public-safety/2018/12/03/online-predators-internet-sexual-enticement-children-cyber-crime-protect/1820834002/>
5. Video Link: <https://7news.com.au/the-daily-edition/what-every-parent-needs-to-know-about-protecting-kids-from-online-predators-c-355616>

Resources for foster kids:

1. <https://voices.mb.ca/about/>
2. <https://www.adoption.ca/youth-speak-out>
3. <https://www.sffa.sk.ca/events-details/youth-speaks-out-speak-out-for-permanency-in-foster-care>
4. <https://agedout.com/about>

Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-833-900-1010

Apps Traffickers Use- Video:

1. <https://www.fox4now.com/news/local-news/video-game-app-used-to-lure-human-trafficking-victims>
2. <https://www.wkbw.com/news/national/sex-traffickers-lure-teens-using-social-media-apps>

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