

Executive Summary



Report Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global event that led to restrictions across all parts of society in an effort to curtail the virus and reduce the impact on health care systems. The restrictions, which continued to evolve over the course of over two years, impacted movement and gatherings, as well as limited or totally stopped businesses and organizations from operating in-person. The pandemic and resulting restrictions, led to a striking increase in mental health related crises, and the limited access to services exacerbated its impact on all aspects of people's lives.

Vulnerable communities, including victims and survivors of sex trafficking, were put at an increased risk due to limitations in services to protect and support them during this time. This report seeks to share the experiences that survivors of sex trafficking had in accessing support during the pandemic, and the impact it had on their recovery. Through interviews with adult, female-identified survivors in Ontario, the report includes recommendations for how to move on from the pandemic in a supportive way, addressing the ongoing impacts the pandemic has had. It also includes recommendations in the event of another pandemic or other scenario resulting in similar closures, so that services can be better prepared and avoid potential pause or regression of many survivors in their recovery, or triggering them through a lack of, or inadequate, supports.

SURVIVOR EXPERIENCES

GAINING ACCESS TO SERVICES

With many services being closed entirely or operating on limited capacity, survivors were faced with long waits or complete inability to access services they needed for their recovery, with some feeling their lifeline had been lost.

COMFORT LEVELS AND REMOTE SERVICES

Participants had mixed experiences with comfort levels around accessing remote services, with some benefitting greatly from the accessibility it provided and others not feeling safe, supported or comfortable using digital tools as a way of accessing the support they needed, with some not having access to adequate technology or feeling a lack of digital fluency

INEXPERIENCED WORKERS

Many survivors found that caseworkers they had were either totally inexperienced, or too general in their training and didn't have the knowledge or experience in how to specifically support survivors of exploitation, instead treating them with the same formula as victims of domestic violence

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON PERSONAL RECOVERY

Participant survivors had a mix of responses as to the impact the pandemic had on their personal recovery from sex trafficking, with some feeling it really delayed their progress, and others experiencing a surge in ability to access different tools they had not had the time, or wherewithal to access previously

POST-COVID

01

GOVERNMENT FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Financial support from the government specifically for moving on from pandemic-related issues, especially for survivors of human trafficking and other vulnerable communities

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EMERGENCY PLANNING

Planning emergency response measures specific to each service, including different modalities, platforms, and approaches, to have a plan in place to be able to continue to provide essential services even under varying degrees of restrictions, is essential to preventing the kinds of issues that arose during the pandemic, as well as the backlogs that were created.

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ADDRESSING BACKLOGS

Addressing service backlogs as a priority, by hiring on more staff, including part-time or temporary staff, extending business hours, offering better salaries, benefits, tax reductions, or incentives of other kinds, to frontline workers or staff in high-risk settings or settings with high rates of burnout.

04

INCLUDING SURVIVORS IN THE CONVERSATION

Including survivors in planning delivery models, approaches, policies, is a step towards empowerment, and trust-building, as those with lived experience are best placed to

05

COVID SPECIFIC MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Mental health crises were exacerbated by the pandemic and related restrictions, with survivors at an increased risk due to their vulnerability. Focusing on providing post-pandemic specific mental health support, on top of regular mental health services, is essential to helping to address the backlog and increase in mental health related needs.

POST-COVID

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SURVIVOR-SPECIFIC SUPPORTS

Creating a space specifically to give survivors of sex trafficking, a community, such as an online portal for survivors, aimed at supporting them with various aspects of recovery.

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HYBRID MODELS

Learning from some of the benefits of remote access, support organizations can continue to offer some virtual services to give clients the option on how to access particular supports they may need, which may be more accessible to them online or over the phone than in person.

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FOCUS ON BEING TRAUMA-INFORMED

Organizations of all kinds, but especially those that support survivors of human trafficking, should use a trauma-informed approach. Mandating training and re-training of all staff regularly to ensure that their care continues to be trauma informed, even after many years, to stay up-to-date on evolving approaches to care, as well as avoiding desensitization of care workers.

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INTERSECTIONALITY

All types of services, but especially anti-trafficking, mental health and physical health care, should look at their policies and practices to ensure their service providers are religiously and culturally sensitive, representative of the people they serve. Prioritizing hiring staff with lived experience, that are diverse is also helpful for clients to trust the decisions that are made on their behalf, at those services.

IN CASE OF A FUTURE SHUTDOWN

01

COMMUNICATION

Some survivors expressed concern that services they accessed did not communicate the restrictions, or the reason behind them, options for accessing services during that time, and other communications concerns. Services should work on a thorough communications plan and not assume that all clients understand the restrictions that may be in place, especially as they continue to evolve.

02

TRIAGING CLIENTS

Triaging clients, especially for mental health care, could help to ensure that the most vulnerable are able to get the crisis support they need, during an emergency.

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DEDICATED RESTRICTIONS FOR THE VULNERABLE

In planning for restrictions, the government should recognize different needs of different communities, and respond accordingly to ensure that people who are considered vulnerable or high-risk, can access supports they need during a time of emergency.

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DIGITAL ACCESS AND FLUENCY

While reliance on technology has become more common, services should recognize that not everyone has access to their own devices nor does everyone know how to use technology adequately or have their own access to safe, reliable internet, to receive support remotely. Developing a plan to provide digital access and fluency while running remote services should be included in case planning during a shut down.

05

INCREASE STAFF NUMBERS

While restrictions are in place, increasing staff numbers will help ease the burden if there is an outbreak and some staff need to self-isolate. Creating additional positions, including on-call or relief roles, to avoid further increases in backlogs of clients needing care.

06

COLLABORATIVE SUPPORT

Including clients as collaborators in their own care, especially during times of crisis, is another way of empowering them and creating reliable, trustworthy support, which could help lessen the burden of other restrictions that may hinder their progress in recovery.