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Trauma-informed police resources for human trafficking cases

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Abstract

As part of the National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking (2019-2024), this report provides an update on the most current strategies used by investigators in the field and is intended to improve the overall responses of law enforcement agencies to this national priority. This report also aims to identify promising practices that have arisen in working with victims of sexual exploitation-related human trafficking in Canada. The project consists of a literature review and semi-structured interviews with 31 law enforcement agents and specialists from across Canada. The first portion of this report discusses the literature on the relationship between perpetrator and victim, the psychological effects of trauma, building rapport with victims, de-escalation techniques, and policing in a diverse society. The second portion focuses on the results of the semi-structured interviews that focussed on investigative techniques, the differences between human trafficking investigations and other types of criminal investigations, response protocols and emerging trends.

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction.....	5
Complexity of the perpetrator–victim relationship	6
Trauma-coerced attachment.....	7
Psychological effects of trauma and police response	7
De-escalation techniques	9
Building rapport with victims	10
Interview techniques	11
Policing in a diverse society.....	12
Indigenous people.....	12
Racialized and LGBTQ2S communities	13
Interviews with human trafficking investigators and support workers	13
Final discussion.....	16
References.....	20
Appendix A: Human trafficking interview questions and themes.....	24
Appendix B: Glossary	27
Appendix C: Human trafficking: Field resource for police officers.....	28

Introduction

Under the umbrella of the National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking (2019-2024), this study sought to (a) identify and provide up-to-date trauma- and violence-informed research, resources, and tools currently used by law enforcement in Canada to assist investigations of human trafficking cases and to (b) identify good or promising practices that have arisen in working with victims of human trafficking in Canada.

This report is the product of broad-based expertise gathered through a literature review and a series of meetings with police officers and experts who are practitioners in the field of human trafficking. It is intended to better equip criminal justice officials to address the challenges of human trafficking in reference to sexual exploitation. The practices and insights offered reveal the complexities of the subject matter and better enable practitioners to assist human-trafficking victims.

Human trafficking is a new name for an age-old problem. In its modern-day form, it is frequently linked to slavery, human smuggling, the sex trade, and a host of related illicit activities. As the long-term physical, mental, social, and economic consequences of human trafficking are better understood, perceptions about this crime and how law enforcement officers need to respond are evolving. The duty to assist victims, often facing additional disadvantages in life conditions, choices, and opportunity, has never been greater.

Statistics Canada's 2022 report on human trafficking found that between 2010 and 2020 Canadian police services reported 2,977 incidents of human trafficking (the actual numbers may be much higher due to underreporting and difficulty tracking). Ninety-six percent of the victims were female and 25% of victims were under the age of 18 (Statistics Canada, 2022).

Public Safety Canada (2019) states that individuals at greatest risk of human trafficking are women, girls, as well as Indigenous women, LGBTQ2 individuals, and at-risk youth. Officials understand the number and range of support services required in human trafficking cases can be unlike any other type of investigation. Those who have been trafficked may also be in conflict with the law because they sometimes commit other criminal activities for their traffickers, including selling drugs, committing fraud, and trafficking others. This can leave people unwilling to turn to law enforcement. Trafficking is frequently linked to many other serious offences and to psychological trauma. The multiple approaches required to combat it suggest that traditional criminal justice responses—such as uniformly questioning victims in the same way—can be outdated, inappropriate, or even counterproductive.

Police are normally considered a source of protection but can be seen very differently by those who have been trafficked or marginalized by society. Experienced officers report that trafficking victims may not behave like other crime victims. Their impaired psychological health as a result of being victimized combined with misleading information provided by their traffickers can condition them to see law enforcement as “the enemy.” Language and cultural differences can also be an obstacle to effective communication (Beune et al., 2009; Hope et al., 2021). Standard institutional practices, such as videotaped KGB police interviews, may be harmful to a victim's emotional and physical well-being.

The added presence of trauma, a potentially devastating and often misunderstood variable, makes this crime even more complex. Just as intimate partner violence, radicalization, and “Stockholm Syndrome” have become recognized models for explaining otherwise criminal human behavior, trafficked victims can exhibit similar unpredictable behaviour and perceptions. Hostility, inappropriate humour, or aggression toward authorities is not uncommon. Victims may reject overwhelming evidence that they have been deceived or manipulated by

those in positions of trust. Their statements may be contradictory. Officials are increasingly learning how those who have been trafficked have unique psychological needs.

With law enforcement investing significant resources into these investigations, there are high expectations on police to navigate the layered problems faced by those who have been trafficked. Yet police commonly lack the training, tools, and experience necessary to identify and effectively address this problem (Farrell et al., 2015).

When a trauma-informed lens and victim-centered approach are applied to human trafficking, the need for progressive, layered investigative strategies becomes evident (Milam et al., 2017). Unfortunately, a victim-centered approach does not pair well with a crime control model. When dealing with suspected victims of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking, it may be useful for police to think differently. Trafficking victims are unlikely to accept assistance in leaving a trafficker until multiple outreach efforts have occurred, and even the most well-intentioned officer can drive a victim further underground. Making every reasonable effort for the safety of a victim may necessitate prioritizing safety ahead of criminal charges. Officers in human-trafficking cases may find themselves following their own version of the physician's Hippocratic Oath—"First, do no harm"—where they conclude that victims' needs might be more important than laying charges.

Minimizing the negative psychological impact of investigations while improving investigative approaches to human trafficking are among the goals of the National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking (2019-2024). We suggest that advancing awareness about human trafficking, improving responses tailored to victims in survival mode, providing useful investigative strategies, and improving the overall responses of law enforcement agencies to this national priority have become realistic goals to reduce human trafficking. The first part of this report discusses what we have already learned about the relationship between perpetrator and victim, the psychological effects of trauma, how to build rapport with victims, de-escalation techniques, and policing in a diverse society. The second part focuses on insights from the semi-structured interviews with experienced officers that can be used to show what and how practices are used in an applied real life setting.

Complexity of the perpetrator–victim relationship

The challenges faced by victims who find themselves in a trafficking situation are exemplified in the 2018 Ontario Superior Court case of *R v Lopez*, 2018 ONSC 4749. In this exemplar, the sex trafficking victim was a 19-years-old female (the complainant). Lopez (the offender) became her boyfriend and soon after she suggested that she engage in the sex trade and have Lopez act as her manager. They agreed on a profit sharing split and she firmly believed that this business arrangement would strengthen their overall relationship and that her boyfriend would appreciate the money. At the time the complainant was emotionally attached to him and she thought the money would keep him around. Within weeks the profit sharing soured, and Lopez kept the \$1,000 - \$2,000 of weekly earnings and provided the complainant with only bare essentials. Within months the relationship spiraled down further. The victim now had to work until Lopez deemed she had earned enough. If the complainant did not want to work he would tell her there would be violence. He was increasingly slapping, threatening and punishing her at this point. Lopez was even charged with assault with a weapon but the complainant still loved him and was especially distraught anytime he had relationships or traveled with other women. When Lopez went on vacation to the Dominican Republic with another woman the complainant felt hurt, upset, and betrayed. She finally decided she was done with him but was concerned she would be unable to get rid of Lopez and went to the police.

The complainant's victim impact statement revealed she was in love with Lopez but he had taken all she had emotionally and financially. She felt she would always be scared and looking over her shoulder and that she would never be able to forge a normal relationship again because she would be unable to trust anyone.

There are many ways in which a victim can become involved in a trafficking situation. Traffickers employ different strategies to entrap victims: Perpetrators may use aversive tactics such as blackmail, violence, abduction, and forcing or tricking a victim into using drugs (Baird & Connolly, 2021). Other methods may resemble what occurred in the *R v Lopez* case in which the complainant outlined a dynamic with the accused that consisted of a combination of emotional and romantic involvement, as well as coercion and physical abuse. Extensive interviews by Kennedy and colleagues (2007) involving former sexual-service providers, VICE officers, social workers, parents of sexual-service providers, and women actively involved in the sex trade revealed that traffickers who use a combination of abuse and affection are able to manipulate victims far better than simply using violence alone. Violence is found to evoke little loyalty from victims, whereas intermittent affection and attention can sustain a perceived relationship.

Trauma-coerced attachment

Trauma-coerced attachment, often referred to as trauma bonding, appears to capture the emotional and push-pull of the relationship in *R v. Lopez*. Though the operational definition of trauma-coerced attachment is often debated, most definitions account for the dynamic relationship between coercive control tactics, intermittent reward and punishment, and the exploitation of the power imbalance between the victim and the perpetrator (Doychak & Raghavan, 2018). Victims who experience this traumatic bond suffer emotional, physical, and mental exploitation, which can impact their safety and well-being (Casassa et al., 2021).

Trauma-coerced attachment (TCA) is a powerful and abusive emotional relationship that is dynamic and constantly changing, and the attachment can persist long after the relationship ends (Doychak & Raghavan, 2018). TCA compels the victim to submit to continued exploitation and to protect the perpetrator despite having every reason to do the opposite (Casassa et al., 2021). As well, victims who experience TCA are more likely to return to the perpetrator or to the sex-trafficking environment (Chambers et al., 2022), which makes it difficult for police officers to help victims exit or to see a case through to its conclusion in court. Medical advances in brain mapping, understanding of neurobiological responses to stress, and ongoing advancements in psychology provide insights into why victims sometimes behave and perceive their situation the way they do.

Psychological effects of trauma and police response

About one third of people exposed to traumatic incidents experience posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Tortella-Feliu et al., 2019). For those who develop PTSD, previous traumatic experiences and a variety of other risk factors (e.g., history of psychiatric disorder, physical disease, sociodemographic factors) can exacerbate future maladaptive psychological responses to trauma (Tortella-Feliu et al., 2019). To be diagnosed with PTSD, individuals must have experienced or witnessed a major traumatic event where they responded with fear, helplessness, or horror (Yehuda, 2002; Bryant, 2019). PTSD symptoms fit into three categories: (i) re-experiencing of the event (e.g., intrusive distressing memories or dreams, dissociative reactions like flashbacks, intense or prolonged psychological distress from reminders of the trauma); (ii) active avoidance of internal (e.g., thoughts, memories) and external (e.g., conversations) reminders of the traumatic event; and (iii) changes in cognition and mood (Yehuda, 2002; Bryant, 2019). In addition, victims experience alterations in cognition and mood that can affect their ability to remember important aspects of an event (Bryant, 2019), which in the

context of victims of human trafficking victims or sexual assault experiencing PTSD may lead police officers to conclude a victim is being deceptive.

Human trafficking often consists of repeated exposures to traumatic events over a long time versus a one-time incident like a personal robbery. Repeated and cumulative exposure to trauma stress, which often includes coercive control, is referred to as complex trauma (Courtois, 2008) and manifests as complex PTSD (C-PTSD).

C-PTSD typically presents in individuals who have experienced multiple adversities in childhood (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018) and is also a predictor of human-trafficking victimization (Oram et al., 2015) because these individuals are often more vulnerable.¹ This double exposure to trauma can negatively affect memory processing because victims often have learned dysfunctional ways of processing their previous traumatic memories (Abas et al., 2013). Symptoms of C-PTSD can include dysregulation, dissociation, changes in memory, somatic distress, changes in self-perception, and impulse control problems (Courtois, 2008; Loewenstein et al., 2014).

Child abuse can also increase the risk of C-PTSD (Abas et al., 2013).² Semi-structured clinical interviews with 131 trafficking victims in the United States (65 victims of labour trafficking and 66 victims of sex trafficking) found that victims who had previously experienced childhood physical and sexual abuse were particularly vulnerable to C-PTSD symptoms (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018). In addition, 60% of the victims interviewed met the criteria for PTSD. In the same study, the majority of victims interviewed had at least one C-PTSD symptom, and two thirds met criteria for multiple categories of C-PTSD symptoms. Sex-trafficking victims were more likely to have comorbid symptoms of PTSD and depression than labour-trafficking victims (59% versus 40% of labour trafficking victims), and labour-trafficking victims were more likely to experience symptoms of depression (32% versus 11% of sex trafficking victims; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018).

Traumatic incidents can manifest in depression, anxiety, self-injury, substance abuse, and eating disorders (Wemmers, 2013). Trafficked individuals may develop feelings of helplessness and lack of control of their lives. Their sense of safety is threatened, they may feel like they have been treated like an object, and they may develop self-esteem problems. Feelings of entrapment may persist long after they have escaped from their trafficker (Hopper, 2017).

In the context of victims of sexual assault, it is important to consider how police officers respond to disclosures of sex offences because the way they respond can influence the self-perceptions and emotional responses of victims (Bhuptani et al., 2019). Researchers have found that negative reactions to accounts of sexual assault that appear inconsistent with the “typical rape scenario” can increase the likelihood of victims experiencing PTSD symptoms and, ultimately, affect their recovery (Dumont et al., 2021).

In addition, officers need to be mindful not to blame or humiliate the victim, which can lead to their withdrawal and isolation when victims do report to police (Rich, 2019). The empathy police officers provide to victims is negatively correlated with victim shame, self-blame, victim perception, PTSD severity, and it is positively correlated with intention to go to court (Maddox et al., 2011).

A supportive environment during disclosure is essential (Bhuptani et al., 2019). Victims face many unknowns, and they use the perceived fairness of procedures as a way to determine whether to trust authorities to act in their interest. Victims may seek validation and support from authorities, and when they do not find reassurance,

¹ Additional risk factors are poverty, young age, limited education, little family support, mental health, and residing in vulnerable locations (Salvation Army, 2006).

² According to the Statistics Canada 2019 General Social Survey, 22% of Canadian children under the age of 15 experienced physical abuse and six percent of Canadian children experienced sexual abuse.

their stress remains high and can be further elevated. If victims are unable to have confidence in the police, they are less likely to rely on authorities in the event they are the victim of another crime (Wemmers, 2013).

Victims who are traumatized may suffer neuropsychiatric symptoms due to violence and maltreatment. This can also interfere with cognition and memory. Memories of traumatic experiences often involve less contextual information (i.e., when, where), are frequently fragmented, and richer in sensorial characteristics, such as the emotional state associated with the trauma, images, olfactory information, and other sensations (Manzanero et al., 2020; Saadi et al., 2021). Fragments and memory lapses may be interpreted by investigators and court officials as dishonesty, which can threaten the victim's credibility (Saadi et al., 2021) and the criminal court proceedings. The court process is routinely associated with revictimization and the loss of confidence in the entire criminal justice system (Wemmers, 2013). In the context of human trafficking, conducting an assessment to determine whether the human-trafficking experience caused trauma allows for a better understanding of the psychological state of the victim (Hopper, 2017). Officials may want to include this information in any proceedings.

Human trafficking can be inherently complicated due to the criminal nature of the sex trade and the overlap with other crimes.³ When victims do come forward, they need to be assured that they will not be investigated for engaging in the sex trade and that the police are there to help them. In other cases, some victims become involved in criminal acts themselves and may end up in police custody. In this circumstance, it is important that police officers recognize that arrest procedures can be deeply triggering for victims who previously experienced abuse and trauma. Speaking down to victims, taking them to the station only partially clothed, restraining them, and using condescending behaviour can be very provoking. Routine booking procedures, such as asking personal questions, confiscating clothing, and isolating prisoners, can also bring on traumatic memories (Ostad-Hashemi, 2017).

To help reduce ambiguity and fear in processing, it is recommended that officers explain what they are doing and why and not leave anything to the imagination. It is easy to overwhelm these victims; thus, care must be taken to explain each step of the process to reduce ambiguity. For example, officers should explain the process of providing a statement when a victim attends the police station, when they meet with justice officials, and when they attend court to testify. Using victim and community services and other support for victims of human trafficking is becoming increasingly common for assisting victims.

De-escalation techniques

When an officer recognizes that a victim is frightened or feeling overwhelmed, the officer can take steps to bring the individual back to the present moment using grounding techniques (Ostad-Hashemi, 2017). Grounding techniques are best used for dissociative reactions and can include allowing the victim to go for a walk (e.g., in the police station lobby or outside), letting them engage in tactile exercises like rolling a ball or pen between their fingers, or setting a timer during the interview to help reorient the victim and disrupt dissociative symptoms (Koucky et al., 2012).

³ Canada's existing legal framework for the sex trade, enacted in 2014, reflects a Nordic Model. This model was first implemented in Sweden in 2014 and then subsequently in other countries, including France and Ireland. This approach criminalizes purchasing sexual services, receiving a material benefit from others' sexual services, procuring others to provide sexual services and advertising others' sexual services, while ensuring that sexual service providers are not held criminally liable for the role they play in any of these offences with respect to the sale of their own sexual services.

Breathing exercises can also be used to reduce stress and anxiety by disrupting the body's stress response. Acute symptoms of anxiety and panic have a biological link to the body's stress response. Symptoms of anxiety and panic result in an increase in the catecholamines that lead to hyperventilation. When a person hyperventilates, they exhale an excessive amount of carbon dioxide. This results in acute respiratory alkalosis and a drop in arterial partial pressure of carbon dioxide and elevation in pH (Derrick et al., 2019).

A modified version of a simple exercise protocol described by Sürücü et al. (2021) is an easy technique officers can use to help victims feel at ease or calm a victim who begins to hyperventilate. First, have the victim lie or sit down in a quiet room and ask them not to move or speak. Then for about 15 minutes instruct the victim to complete 10-second cycles of inhaling for five seconds and exhaling for five seconds using diaphragmatic breathing (i.e., belly breathing).

Another calming breathing exercise is to have the victim sit or lie down in a distraction-free environment and while breathing from the abdomen, inhale slowly through the nose to a count of five, hold their breath for a count of five, and then exhale for a count of five. The victim should then take two breaths with normal rhythm, and then repeat the entire cycle for three to five minutes. Both breathing techniques are effective at halting a panic reaction and preventing hyperventilation (Bourne, 2015).

Calming music is also a very effective tool to increase relaxation but is rarely used in the policing environment. A number of studies, including meta-analyses, have demonstrated music's effectiveness in helping people settle and let go of stress and anxiety. A review of 22 quantitative studies by Pelletier (2004) found that music alone significantly decreased arousal levels. A systematic review of 18 studies with a total of 1,301 participants by Fu et al. (2019) found that the use of music around the time of surgery reduced the neuroendocrine cortisol stress response to surgery. Further, a meta-analysis by Harney et al. (2022) included 21 controlled studies that demonstrated that listening to music was an effective technique to reduce anxiety in a variety of participants (e.g., prisoners, pregnant women, elderly, high school students, and stroke patients). Considering the simplicity and cost effectiveness of this approach, calming music could be used in police station lobbies, hallways, interview rooms, and potentially on calls to ensure that at least one anxiety reduction technique is available to ease traumatized victims.

Building rapport with victims

There is little debate that rapport-building is an effective way to improve the quality of an interview. It can also increase the amount of information recalled by the victim. Witness memories are fragile, and unique personal recollections of an event can require intense concentration and cognitive effort to process (Nahouli et al, 2021). One of the key benefits of rapport-building is that it relieves some of the social demands of the interview and can improve cognitive processes, such as episodic memory (i.e., memory of everyday events). Comfortable witnesses will be more cooperative and better able to recall events, thereby increasing the accuracy of the interview (Nahouli et al., 2021).

There are many frameworks for rapport-building, including the Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal model, which can be used to develop and maintain rapport during police interviews. This model focuses on three essential ingredients: (1) mutual attention, (2) positivity, and (3) coordination. Individuals who have a high degree of rapport develop cohesiveness through expressions of mutual attention and involvement with each other—there is a mutual interest in each other's words or stories. Mutual attentiveness creates the cohesive interaction between two individuals (Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990). To develop mutual attention, officers can use back-channel responses, such as "Mmm," acknowledgements like "Okay," paraphrasing the interviewee (e.g.,

repeating back what the victim said), or identifying emotions by saying something like “I see that you are upset” (Collins & Carthy, 2018).

Positivity is the second component, where individuals involved in the interaction feel mutual friendliness and caring (Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990). To develop positivity, officers can use empathy (e.g., “I can understand why you might feel angry”). Above all, officers should be polite and friendly. They should use the victim’s name and provide reassurance when needed. If the situation calls for it, humour may also be helpful to create positivity (Collins & Carthy, 2018).

The third component, coordination, seeks harmony with the victim, an equilibrium within the relationship, regularity, and predictability (Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990). Agreement is important for this stage. Sentences like “Yes, exactly” create coordination. Credibility is also essential to creating coordination. For example, officers can explain they have 10 years of investigative experience and five in human trafficking. It is also important to explain procedures and processes in order to develop coordination. Should the victim wish to pursue charges against their exploiter,⁴ it is important to explain the process in simple detail. For example, “You will be audio and video recorded... my partner will be writing notes while I speak... you can stop the interview at any time.” Lastly, familiarization with the interview room is important. An officer can describe the cameras in the room, for example, where they point, and where the washroom is.

Interview techniques

The cognitive interview (CI) is the gold standard, the recommended approach for gathering the most accurate information from victims. Empirical research has demonstrated that it dramatically improves the accuracy of details recalled, with only a small increase in incorrect detail (Memon et al., 2010); however, it is important to note that research on the use of CI and traumatic events is still sparse.

The cognitive interview can be used under a range of circumstances. A study by Dodier et al. (2021) looked at the relevance of the CI technique for recall in highway collisions. Fifty-six individuals involved in a collision were interviewed with the CI technique or a control interview technique. The study confirmed the subjects who received the cognitive interview recalled more detail than the subjects who were administered the control interview. A study by Crossland and colleagues (2020) comparing individuals in various states of intoxication found the cognitive interview improved recall accuracy and completeness in all three drinking conditions. A study by Wyman (2019) sought to assess methods to improve the credibility of child eyewitness. Wyman examined the efficacy of the cognitive interview with typical and atypical child populations (i.e., children with and without intellectual disabilities). Wyman found that children who were administered the cognitive interview provided more words, transgression details, and disclosures than children who were administered the standard interview. A recent study by Goldfarb et al. (2022), which examined the cognitive interview on adults ($N = 115$) who experienced childhood maltreatment, demonstrated that the CI improved memory reports.

The CI consists of four main memory retrieval and communication techniques. The first is context reinstatement where the victim is asked to reconstruct the physical and personal context at the time of the events. The second is to encourage the victim to report everything they can remember, regardless of whether their memory is complete. Third, different retrieval cues are used to access different aspects of the incident; for example, they

⁴ In Canada, it is not up to the victim whether or not to pursue charges. It is up to the police, and in BC, NB and QB, the decision to lay *Criminal Code* charges must be first approved by a provincial prosecutor.

may be asked to recall the event from their perspective or a perspective of someone else. For the fourth technique, victims are asked to recall the incident in different temporal orders: from the beginning, from the end working back, or from the middle (Memon et al., 2010).

An alternative interview technique that is gaining attention is known as the forensic experiential trauma interview (FETI). The FETI strategies were developed while keeping neurobiology and cognitive functioning of assault victims in mind, and agencies must pay a licensing fee to use it.

The purpose of the FETI is to gather more accurate information in a less stressful environment, and the suggested protocol begins with acknowledging the victim's traumatic experience. Investigators are also advised to examine trauma victimization by asking questions like "Is there anything you can't forget?" or "What was the most difficult experience for you?" (Preston, 2016). However, the FETI is not universally endorsed as an interview protocol due to a lack of empirical evidence supporting its effectiveness,⁵ its unproven status in a court of law, and its proprietary nature. A U.S. Air Force report to the House and Senate Armed Services Committee involving an exhaustive research and consultation with multiple reputable subject matter experts overwhelmingly recommended the cognitive interview over the FETI. The report confirmed the cognitive interview is an empirically validated interview method supported by scientific research (Ray, 2015).

Policing in a diverse society

As knowledge about victimization, trauma, and social values advance, police officers must be prepared to define and interact with victims differently. Knowing where other people are coming from, what their needs are and what their fears are, will help guide police in the unique role they occupy. Human trafficking victims can be any ethnicity, race, gender, or affiliation, but most have experienced one or more forms of marginalization and/or trauma.

Indigenous people

The effects of colonial values, laws, policies, and systems which have not been fully dismantled on Indigenous people are profound and have led to racism and economic and social marginalization. Prior to the European explorers arriving in Canada, Indigenous people were already well established here, having inhabited North America for thousands of years. The first European colony in North America, L'Anse aux Meadows, marked the beginning of radical changes for Indigenous people. In the sixteenth century, Europeans saw North America as having a wealth of resources for exploitation. Large scale settlement occurred in the seventeenth century, and Indigenous people had to rapidly adapt to new forms of commerce to obtain a variety of sought-after goods. Significant conflict over the fur trade led to the first of various treaties being signed in the early eighteenth century. By the 1830s more and more land was being surrendered by Indigenous people and—because settlers considered British society and culture superior—plans to assimilate Indigenous people commenced. In 1857, the British administration introduced the *Gradual Civilization Act* where 50 acres of land and money were provided to Indigenous people who were literate and debt-free and who abandoned their traditional lifestyle (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2013).

In 1883, Indian Affairs policy focused on assimilating Indigenous people through residential schools. One hundred and thirty-two residential schools were established across Canada (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2013), and 150,000 children were forcibly removed from their homes to attend these

⁵ A Google Scholar search May 31st, 2022 by the authors yielded zero peer reviewed studies supporting its effectiveness.

schools between 1870 and 1996 (Thorne & Moss, 2022). In 2021, unmarked graves of 215 Indigenous children were found near the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia (Thorne & Moss, 2022). Many more graves have been found since.

The impacts of colonization—the lack of economic opportunities, generational trauma, displacement of children into child welfare, and breakdown of community ties—persist in today’s society and continue to leave Indigenous people in Canada marginalized and vulnerable (Hodgins et al., 2022).

An extensive review of the scholarly literature on sex trafficking of women and girls in Canada identified three pathways to sex trafficking, all of which centered on systemic inequalities. The pathways identified were (a) impacts of colonization (b) the exploitation of immigrants, and (c) involvement with the child welfare system

Due to the marginalization and intergenerational trauma, Indigenous women are more likely to be exposed to intimate partner violence, drug addiction, and violence (Cui, 2021). In British Columbia, Indigenous women are overrepresented in missing person cases where investigators were not able to rule out foul play (Cohen et al., 2009). Victimization is also believed to be under-reported in these communities (Cui, 2021), and sexual service providers are at risk of becoming targets for serial killers due to the stigma surrounding the sex trade (Cohen et al., 2009).

When the time is appropriate to interview Indigenous people, researchers who study Indigenous sexual assault victims suggest emphasizing the human element—specifically, making Indigenous victims feel safer and more comfortable. Police officers are advised to be timely in responding to calls for help, to develop rapport, to sit down (versus standing up), to show interest in what victims disclose, and to explain the process in detail (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022).

Racialized and LGBTQ2S communities

Human-trafficking victims are not exclusive to one group. Learning how to best serve the needs of victims and communities—particularly those who identify as racialized, Indigenous, LGBTQ2S—demands an open mind and a desire for positive change.

Since the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement around 2010, tensions between racialized communities and the police have focused on white privilege, racism, and violence (Montolio, 2018). The recent practice of banning police officers from marching in uniform in Pride parades across the country (i.e., Vancouver, Ottawa, Toronto, Halifax, Calgary, and Edmonton) raised concerns of ostracism, harassment and outing by police, and fear of arrests (Holmes, 2021). In general, cultural awareness and sensitivity training with LGBTQ2S and non-white community members would be beneficial for all new officers (Dwyer, 2019). For human-trafficking investigators, this can require a great deal of listening, unlearning, and reflection. An open mind and appreciation of the lived experiences of those who have been victimized by offenders, and even by the system meant to protect them, is a prerequisite for meaningful conversations and, ultimately, for convicting offenders.

Interviews with human trafficking investigators and support workers

Consistent with the National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking (2019-2024), and to enhance Chapter 3 from the 2015 *Handbook for Criminal Justice Practitioners on Trafficking in Persons*, the principal investigator conducted interviews with 31 law enforcement agents and specialists from across Canada. All participants had extensive hands-on experience with human-trafficking cases and investigations. Both in-person and virtual interviews occurred between April and July 2022, and three participants were re-contacted to clarify or expand

on discussion points. None of the participants are identified in this report to protect privacy. Police and associated personnel from the following services shared their perspectives: Calgary Police Service, Hamilton-Wentworth Police Service, Windsor Police Service, Ottawa Police Service, Belleville Police Service, Halifax Regional Police Service, Ontario Provincial Police, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, York Regional Police Service, Nova Scotia Police Service, Service de Police de la Ville de Montréal, Vancouver Police, and Durham Regional Police Service. Some interviews led to follow-up conversations with external experts recommended by interviewees, such as with a human-trafficking detective in Idaho, a trauma counsellor in Ottawa, and a private open-source security agency in Toronto.

The interview format was semi-structured, and focused on five key themes: (a) general insight and experience, (b) investigative techniques, (c) trauma-informed approaches, (d) response protocols, and (e) emerging trends (see Appendix A for the full list of interview questions).

When we asked Canada's leading investigators, they were clear: "Today everyone wants to work on human trafficking, until it is time to do human trafficking things." They felt this job is not for everyone. Overwhelmingly the job involves exploited women in the sex trade, and human trafficking is demanding to investigate because public perceptions and police mandates have evolved drastically over the past decade. Police officers reported that they must increasingly try to fix the problem and not just assign the blame. In this context, fixing the problem involves addressing the needs of the victim as opposed to using the law on the books to assign blame.

The traditional crime control model operated on the premise that officials can accurately identify the current state of both the criminal law and social values. When a gap between the two was observed, laws were adjusted to conform to the desired state. Unfortunately, this ignores how challenging it is to agree on standards or the most suitable method for closing any perceived gaps (e.g., gun laws, drug legalization, mandatory sentencing). In this crime control model, the rights of victims and offenders were frequently ignored in favour of calculated processes. After the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, there has been a shift toward models that consider the best interest of individuals and not just processes (Shiner, 2009).

Participants maintained that having a successful human-trafficking unit starts with the meticulous selection of police officers with the necessary soft skills (e.g., empathy, ability to engage in conversation), sheepdog instincts, as well as a solid foundation in investigation. The sheepdog or protector role comes naturally to most officers, but the investigative function has pivoted from a time when success was measured by a courtroom scorecard to a modern focus on harm reduction and disruption. Empathy is the final key characteristic, and this is difficult to teach. If officers are preconditioned to see victims as criminals and lack exceptional rapport-building skills, they may not be suitable for this role. The victims that need help have experienced considerable trauma, and some have endured nightmarish experiences at the hands of traffickers. These victims, however, do have refined survival skills—their lives depend on it—and participants have found that an investigator who is not perceived as completely sincere is likely to be perceived as manipulative.

The trauma-informed approach is a new way for investigators to approach their cases, and this often means being victim-centered. According to participants, traditional criminal justice responses—the very same approach one might currently use for processing a drug case—are now considered outdated, inappropriate, or even counterproductive to a trafficked victim's emotional and physical well-being.

All participants had received some form of specialized trauma training, and all considered it critical when it came to accepting the scientific effects of trauma: muddled statements, fragmented recall, apparent contradictions, and so forth. All the participants recognized that a victim's neurochemistry can be altered by trauma, that such

alterations can cause the mind to behave differently, and that standard investigative approaches run the risk of inflicting additional harm.

Participants were asked which interview technique they started with when meeting a client for the first time, and they overwhelmingly gave the same answer: “None.” Participants stated that few victims self-identify, so the first human-trafficking contact may be in the form of a wellness check. All participants believed that “getting a victim out” after one interaction is as likely as to seeing a unicorn. A win for most investigators is simply having a conversation. Participants recommend that officers approach victims in a matter-of-fact yet supportive manner, avoiding either being overly nurturing or authoritarian while letting them know they are not alone, that their team has helped other victims, and that there is a better future for them. Participants suggested that if police investigators are very good at building rapport and trust, this might lead to further conversations and perhaps to the victim being receptive to assistance and support services, though they cautioned that this might take years. According to participants, a small percentage of victims will also want an opportunity to seek justice through the courts, and whether charges are laid is their decision, but none of this is possible without a foundation of trust.

Participants recommended that officers do their homework before they meet victims by “knowing the players,” being aware of who has gone missing, etc. When officers do make contact, participants recommended that investigators make it clear that helping the victim takes priority over prosecuting the perpetrator. Investigators were advised to provide wrap-around service and give victims control. Officers should conduct a brief preliminary interview to establish whether the victim is alone, whether there is a crime scene, whether anyone’s safety is in jeopardy, and whether a suspect is still in the vicinity. Most participants and their colleagues dress very casually, share their food to build rapport, stay clear of police buildings, and use translation apps on their cellular telephones to overcome basic language issues.

At an appropriate time, officers may try to take a statement, and most participants loosely base this on the cognitive interview technique. Participants recommend not being distracted by gaps and apparent contradictions in victims’ stories or fragmented memories. This may be the result of trauma or other variables. Participants try to fill the gaps by cross-checking and corroborating evidence from other victims as well as traditional and digital forensic information. Participants suggest avoiding posing standard peripheral questions that might make a trafficked victim feel guilty about not remembering or risk triggering an emotional reaction. Participants suggest never confronting a victim with statements such as “You’re absolutely wrong!” Instead, try to clarify apparent contradictions during a subsequent wellness check. One participant recommended giving these clients very simple options, with the best option presented last because stress and trauma may allow them to only process the last option. Three participants commented that after an officer has adapted their approach to dealing with trauma, it can be humbling to go back to old cases and review previous responses and investigations.

Cellular telephone numbers (and, increasingly, facial identification) can be harvested to provide an abundance of intelligence. The collection and sorting of evidence-based data is specialized work that is ideally tackled by crime analysts and open-source specialists who can identify red flags on social media and even discern an exploited individual from an independent sexual-service provider. Crime analysts can geo-code, create data points on victims/traffickers, and show patterns with the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada. Analytics are more reliable than hunches and data is key. Digital evidence-based investigations also generate the type of information politicians and decision-makers need to validate resources and bring social exposure to this problem.

Participants strongly suggested that traditional investigative approaches will produce fewer desirable results. Generally, trafficked victims do not trust the police. The psychological bond trauma creates is powerful and the factors that pushed a victim out of one lifestyle and into another are not easily resolved. Gender, culture, language, the COVID-19 pandemic, highly publicized police misconduct cases (e.g., the murder of George Floyd or elements of the Colten Boushie shooting investigation), and the fact that traffickers have no intention of losing their “assets”—some of whom they brand—all conspire to make it difficult for police officers to disrupt human trafficking and support victims.

Participants agreed traffickers do not respect arbitrary geographic borders and that partnerships are key. Police working on their own will not have the same impact as a team of different types of professionals working together. Participants believed an effective human-trafficking team is one that engages local resources, such as victim services, shelters, specially funded community projects, Canada Border Services Agency, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, and other law enforcement agencies to compound their ability to disrupt trafficking. Each agency brings specialized knowledge and databases to bear to address the problem. Police need partners who are reliable and available outside of business hours. Investigators need to be prepared to navigate and connect a victim to the right resources. One participant summed up the situation with the adage “it takes a village.” Participants advised being strategic in choosing partners and warned that some agencies have ulterior motives and may even inflate problems to justify funding or their existence.

An unconventional but promising practice that some of the participants discussed was embedding a former human-trafficking victim with an outreach team. These are victims who were trafficked and now share their wisdom with exploited victims. The connection can be profound. During the June 2022 Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (CACP) Conference on Human Trafficking in Toronto, Ontario, some delegates argued that embedded victims allow current victims the chance to speak with someone who has been in the same situation. This approach must be weighed against the risk of inflicting new harm or adding stress to these unique counsellors (for instance, recovered drug users have been known to return to addiction when volunteering at safe injection sites in Canada). Participants were nonetheless confident that embedded victims have thus far proven effective at helping young female victims who are being groomed or who have been already exploited to grasp the dangers and consider other options.

Embedded victims can connect at a different level, whether by training officers or in one-on-one sessions with overwhelmed victims, by reducing some of the stigma associated with police and better managing cultural and language barriers. Participants advised that embedded victims must be seen as just one piece of a larger community-based team and that relationship-building should go beyond community service groups and police services to include passive relationships with Uber drivers, taxi companies, schoolteachers, and hotel workers, who are not asked to report crimes, but only “What is different?” Participants recommended officers know the areas they police: A good investigator may see connections others have missed. At the same time, a good human-trafficking team can accomplish far more.

The stakes are very high. Internationally, human trafficking is comparable in terms of profits only to the trade in illegal drugs and weapons. The recipe for a good investigator starts with getting the right people, those who will begin with compassion and end in conducting a robust investigation.

Final discussion

This project sought to provide up-to-date trauma- and violence-informed research and tools currently in use to assist Canadian police agencies with investigations of human trafficking. It also aimed to identify promising

practices that have arisen in working with victims of human trafficking in Canada. The project consisted of a literature review and semi-structured interviews with police investigators across Canada. The literature review showed that each victim has their own route into human trafficking. The relationship between perpetrator and victim can be a dynamic one, consisting of a combination of emotional and romantic involvement as well as coercion and physical abuse, sometimes referred to as trauma-coerced attachment. Victims that experience this traumatic bond suffer emotional, physical, and mental harm, which often impacts their safety and well-being. Victims with this bond are more likely to return to the perpetrator or sex-trafficking environment, making it difficult for police officers to see a case through to the ideal conclusion.

It is important to consider how police officers respond to disclosures of trafficking-related crimes because the way they respond can easily influence the victim's self-perceptions and emotional responses. A supportive environment during disclosures is essential, and victims will use cues such as fairness to determine whether they trust authorities to act in their best interest. When victims do not receive support, validation, and reassurances, their stress will remain elevated. Confidence in the police will also improve the odds that victims will return for help if they are re-victimized.

Many leaders in the field of human trafficking urge investigators new to human trafficking investigations to avoid treating victims in the same way they would treat other types of victims. They advocate patience, listening, and investing up-front time to build rapport and appreciate how human-trafficking victims are qualitatively different. It is far too easy to have well-intentioned officers robotically investigate human trafficking incidents, only to do more harm than good. Following process is not the same as building rapport. Just as not all officers have the mindset or attributes to work in a specialized units (e.g., tactical, computer crime, or forensic identification), not all officers are the right fit for human-trafficking investigations.

Victims who are highly traumatized may suffer neuropsychiatric symptoms, which can interfere with cognition and memory. To the untrained, fragments and memory lapses can easily be interpreted as dishonesty. Officials who do not understand the effects of trauma can revictimize the victim and erode their confidence in the entire criminal justice system.

When officers recognize that a victim is anxious, they can take steps to bring the person back to the present moment using grounding techniques. Breathing exercises and calming music can also be used to reduce stress and anxiety.

Prior to interviewing victims, officers are advised to learn as much as possible about the victim's circumstances. Building rapport helps relieve some of the social demands of the interview, and it can improve the victim's cognitive processing (e.g., reduce cognitive load). Officers who have difficulty building rapport can use the Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal model, which focuses on three essential ingredients: (1) mutual attention, (2) positivity, and (3) coordination. When (and only when) the time to conduct a formal interview presents itself, the cognitive interview technique is the gold standard.

Interviews of police agents actively engaged in human-trafficking investigations examined five key themes (i.e., insight and experience, investigative techniques, trauma-informed perspective, response protocols, and emerging trends). Interviewees were clear that successful human-trafficking units start with the selection of investigators with the necessary soft skills (i.e., empathy and sincerity). Traditional criminal justice responses are considered outdated and often counterproductive in policing human-trafficking cases.

Once human-trafficking victims see an officer as a person, instead of a uniform, other preconceptions can be dismantled. It is important to look beyond differences that often divide (i.e., race, ethnicity, culture,

socioeconomic status) and to treat human-trafficking clients like human beings. Start with a conversation, participants advised; adhering to a protocol or checklist typically comes across as insincere. Interpersonal skills, empathy, and a deep appreciation for what is at stake for victims are fundamental to successful human-trafficking investigations, and they are notoriously hard to script.

There is no one interview technique that can be used for meeting a client for the first time. Rapport-building and laying a foundation for trust are more important than processing a file. When a statement is to be taken, however, most investigators use a modified version of the cognitive interview technique. Gaps and contradictions in victim stories are then corroborated by other means (e.g., speaking with other victims, data from crime analysts).

Recognizing the impact of trauma, the very real danger exploited individuals face, and the risk that traditional investigative approaches can unintentionally inflict more harm, investigators prioritize helping victims exit the trafficking situation over catching criminals. Disrupting trafficking is a longer-term goal, but respondents felt that without a robust team, investigators will only be able to provide safety and security for victims and not in-depth investigations leading to *Criminal Code* convictions.

Enlisting previous victims to communicate with current victims is a recent promising strategy, albeit unconventional. It is important to note that an embedded victim in a human-trafficking team should not be considered as a replacement to building and relying on strategic partnerships with other partners. Developing connections with non-profit organizations that serve people in the sex trade is important because they often have mentoring services with previous victims as volunteers or paid workers. They also provide wrap-around services such as housing, child-care, substance abuse support, counselling, life-skills training, income support, employment and education support, and more.⁶

Investigators stated it was unrealistic to get victims out of their situation after a single interaction with even a highly functional human-trafficking team. Typically, a win was perceived as simply having a conversation with a victim. Investigators were advised to build credibility and trust by telling victims they are not alone and sharing other stories of success. Patience is critical, and it could take months or much longer to build relationships. Empowering the victim to make decisions that are best for their healing, without discouraging their involvement or assuming to know what is best for them, all starts with a conversation. Without a conversation, participants warned, police officers cannot build the trust necessary to help victims or disrupt this industry in a meaningful way.

Investigators are also advised to dress to blend in and to remain away from police buildings. Partnerships are important, but they need to be selected strategically, and then services need to be carefully provided to the victim.

Lastly, despite the resilience and strength of many communities within Canada, generational trauma, systemic barriers, racism, and sexism present ongoing and evolving challenges. One underlying concern is that although police may not intend to be offensive or counterproductive, the traditional approach they follow to investigate human-trafficking incidents may have that effect. Police have the responsibility to understand how practices and beliefs from years ago still impact perceptions and reality today. The lived experiences of those who have been

⁶ Example wrap around agencies: RESET (Calgary) - <https://resetcalgary.ca/> ; Voice Found (Ottawa) - <https://www.voicefound.ca/the-hope-found-project>; Wish Shelter (Vancouver) - <https://wish-vancouver.net/program/wish-shelter/>

trafficked is especially challenging to navigate. Human-trafficking victims are not exclusive to one group and include individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds (e.g., cultural, socio-economic, race, and gender).

It is broadly recognized that human trafficking is a serious problem in Canadian communities that has long-term physical, mental, social, and economic consequences for victims, their families, and the community. The addition of trauma can necessitate non-traditional flexible investigative strategies. As part of the National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking (2019-2024), this report provides an update on the most current strategies used by investigators in the field and is intended to improve the overall responses of law enforcement agencies to this national priority.

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Appendix A: Human trafficking interview questions and themes

This document is designed to capture relevant information on the topic of human trafficking investigations. It is divided into five key themes:

Theme A - Insight & Experience

Theme B - Investigative Techniques

Theme C - Trauma-Informed

Theme D - Response Protocols

Theme E - Emerging Trends

Figure 1: Human trafficking investigations themes wheel



Interviews will also collect information on whether a respondent's organization has a dedicated human trafficking unit/officer and the average number of human trafficking cases that are brought forward each year.

Theme A

What is the most important thing you have learned from working on human trafficking cases?

Probe and clarification areas:

1. What is unique about human trafficking investigations?
2. What is one piece of advice you would tell a new officer assigned to investigate human trafficking?
3. If you had one thing to share about human trafficking cases to officers in the field, what would it be?

Theme B

How does human trafficking investigations with a trauma informed approach differ from other traditional crime investigations?

Probe and clarification areas:

1. In comparison to more traditional crimes, how do race, language, gender and culture affect the investigation and police response for human trafficking cases?
2. Is the form of human trafficking (e.g. prostitution-related vs. smuggling-related) more likely to affect your criminal investigation and/or rapport building?
3. Are there any practices or procedures outside of standard operating policy that you follow specifically for human trafficking cases?
4. Do intertwined offences (e.g., extortion, prostitution, robbery) affect human trafficking investigations more than general investigations?
5. Do you prioritize a victim centered approach over an expedited process due to large volumes of cases in your human trafficking investigation or a hybrid form?

Theme C

Victims of human trafficking can be exposed to an acute traumatic event, repeated or prolonged exposure (such as domestic violence), or possibly involve multiple traumatic events that can be invasive and complex. Traumatic exposure(s) may condition a victim, trigger problem behaviour (such as substance abuse) and affect decision making.

Probe and clarification areas:

1. How do you probe for, detect, or recognize trauma?
2. How does evidence of trauma affect your investigation?
3. What form(s) of trauma do you most frequently encounter with human trafficking cases?
4. What training do you receive to recognize the effect of trauma on how victims present themselves to law enforcement personnel, court officials, and other individuals in positions of authority?
5. How do you explain how trauma adversely affects individuals to victims, families, court officials, and peers?

Theme D

What identification and response practices do you find innovative and/or effective at producing results?

Probe and clarification areas:

1. What investigative model do you follow for interviewing victims of human trafficking? For instance: Free flow, cognitive, vulnerable witness interview techniques, etc.
2. Where do you typically conduct your interviews? Why?
3. What do other police services have that you want? What resources would be beneficial?
4. What are the primary social services you find human trafficking victims need?
5. What resources do you rely upon to assist victims?
 - Addiction counsellors
 - Food, medical assistance
 - Short/long term hotel/housing accommodation
 - Victim assistance (internal, external)

- Witness protection
- Legal resources
- Pamphlets
- Peace bond assistance
- Help groups, counselling groups
- Taxis, bus pass
- Specific websites
- Expedite travel documents
- Trauma informed peer support
- Access to alarms
- Clothing
- Interpreter
- Job training
- Protection/safety
- Life skills
- Outreach
- Child care
- Education, Info/Referral
- Repatriation
- Employment
- Crisis intervention

Specialized tools

- Associated training on related offences (e.g. smuggling, prostitution)
- Assessment tools
- Access to expert interviewers
- Interview training
- Video equipment for interviews, soft rooms
- List of applicable charges, Criminal Code offences, case law available for officers
- Legal jurisprudence: examples of actus rea (e.g., recruiting, transporting) and mens rea (e.g., coercion, abduction, fraud, deception)
- Separate interview locations for victims and accused
- Memorandum of understandings with partner agencies

Theme E

Are emerging trends affecting your investigations?

Probe and clarification areas:

1. Has technology changed the crime of human trafficking or how it is investigated?
2. How has social media and the digital age affected human trafficking investigations and trauma informed responses?
3. What effect has Covid had on human trafficking victim reporting and investigative practices?
4. In reference to the above emerging trends, how have you adapted?

Closing

Is there anything you would like to expand upon or were hoping to discuss?

Appendix B: Glossary

CACP – Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police

CI – cognitive interview

C-PTSD – Complex posttraumatic stress disorder

Dissociative reaction – Disconnection between a person’s sensory experience, thoughts, sense of self, and personal history.

Forensic experiential trauma interview – A proposed interview technique for traumatized individuals.

LGBTQ2S – Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and two-spirit.

PTSD – Posttraumatic stress disorder

Sheepdog – The sheepdog analogy is popular among police. Regular citizens are considered the sheep. There are wolves out there that harm the sheep. Sheepdogs are the guardians and like the wolf they have a capacity for violence but they also have the capacity for love.

Stockholm Syndrome – A psychological bond a hostage has for her captor and is believed to be a coping mechanism for the current situation.

Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal Model – A model of rapport building.

Trauma bonding – Emotional attachment that develops out of a circle of violence and positive reinforcement.

Trauma-coerced attachment (TCA) – Similar as trauma bonding where a powerful emotional bond develops for the perpetrator.

Wrap-around service – A team-based collaborative comprehensive service that includes support and programming for human trafficking victims.

Appendix C: Human trafficking: Field resource for police officers

Human trafficking

Field resource for police officers

Human trafficking and trauma

Human trafficking often consists of repeated exposures to traumatic events over longer periods of time versus a one-time incident like a personal robbery. Repeated and cumulative exposure to trauma stress, that often includes coercive control, can lead to complex symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Signs of trauma

Trauma can manifest into symptoms such as depression, anxiety, self-injury, substance abuse, changes in memory, impulse problems, and other alterations in cognition and mood.

Creating a safe place

Officers can take steps to avoid imposing additional stress on victims: build rapport, show empathy, take breaks, encourage breathing exercises, maintain an open mindset, and show interest.



Human trafficking

According to Statistics Canada's 2022 report on human trafficking between 2010 and 2020, Canadian police services recorded 2,977 incidents of human trafficking. Ninety-six percent of the victims were female and 25% of victims were under the age of 18.

Individuals at greatest risk of human trafficking and exploitation are women, girls and members of marginalized groups (i.e., Indigenous women, LGBTQ2 individuals, at-risk youth).

The dynamic between victim and perpetrator is complex and building trust and providing support for victims should be the primary focus in the majority of police investigations.





Incidents of human trafficking may be reported or revealed during regular patrol duties. Depending on the resources available, the officer that responds may process the investigation from start to finish.

The first step in any investigation is initial contact with the victim. This is the best opportunity to begin building rapport which can be especially challenging as human trafficking victims are often conditioned to fear police and/or trauma could be affecting their mental state. The psychological bond trauma creates is powerful and the factors that pushed a victim out of one lifestyle and into another are not easily resolved.

Officers want to express interest in what the victim is saying. For example, make statements that acknowledge their thoughts and feelings (e.g., “Mmm”, “Okay”, “I hear you”), and show empathy by saying something like, “I can understand why you might feel that way”. To build rapport, officers can also try connecting with the victim about mutual interests (e.g., music, food, shows).

It is essential to remain neutral and not challenge what the victim says. If a victim feels they are not believed this may discourage them from speaking further. It is also important to be sensitive to the fact that human trafficking victims are not exclusive to one group. Learning about how to best serve the needs of victims and communities – particularly those who identify as racialized, Indigenous, LGBTQ2S demands an open mind and an appreciation of the lived experiences of those who have been victimized.

If a victim wishes to provide a statement this should be conducted in a comfortable and safe place. Many police stations have rooms geared towards victims (e.g., couches, soft chairs). However, a video or audio recorded statement can be conducted anywhere depending on the needs of the victim (e.g., a hospital or at the victim’s residence).

Whether or not the victim agrees to file a report it is critical to be nonjudgmental and to provide reliable and available referrals. For example, victims may be interested in receiving assistance for housing, employment, employment skills training, childcare, or counselling.

In the event their perpetrator is arrested, the victim should be updated and provided the status of the accused (i.e., released with conditions or held in custody) and provided additional supports as needed.

The victim may require different supports and reassurances if they are required to testify in court. Be patient. Explain the process in simple terms. Help determine what the victim may need. For example, they may want a support person to remain with them while they are at court.

Regardless of the outcome, victims often need ongoing support, check-ins by police and wrap around services to ensure they remain safe.



Figure 2: Key themes to combat human trafficking



As part of the National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking, we spoke with leading police specialists from across Canada and key themes that emerged are shown in the figure above. Respondents emphasized that human trafficking is fundamentally different from other crimes. Success starts with making a connection with the exploited victim, who are overwhelmingly young females in the sex trade. Officers need to possess a variety of soft skills for this role. They must genuinely care about their clients but also recognize it is easy to over protect or be too authoritarian and make the situation worse. Small steps with immediate positive feedback can create change in the right direction.

Expect inconsistencies in victim stories and realize that just having a conversation is a positive step. Working with teams of professionals will exponentially improve a police officer's ability to provide quality care and aid victims building a healthier lifestyle. Police have a sworn duty to both disrupt this industry and assist victims. Experts agree it all starts with a conversation.