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**INTEGRATED PARTNERSHIPS AND COORDINATED WRAPAROUND  
SUPPORT: MOVING THE NEEDLE TOWARDS EFFECTIVE RESPONSES FOR  
ADOLESCENT VICTIMS OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND TRAFFICKING IN  
CANADIAN URBAN SETTINGS**

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**ABSTRACT**

The sexual exploitation and trafficking of youth (aged 12-24) have become highly politicized in Canada and many other countries. Existing research suggests that this type of crime has been growing at an alarming rate over the past few decades. Increased awareness, evidence-informed research, and the personal accounts of adolescent sexual exploitation and trafficking survivors have cumulatively led to increased government focus on the need for coordinated and collaborative responses to this issue. Data from various police-based counter-exploitation initiatives across Canada and community-based organizations provide prevention, intervention, and aftercare supports. Yet, despite the sexual exploitation and trafficking of youth having a long history, most government and community prevention, intervention, and aftercare approaches have continually been fragmented and siloed in their response. This article identifies integrated, collaborative, and cross-sector practices that successfully address the needs of sexually exploited and trafficked youth in Canadian urban settings. The findings indicate that best practices include multi-sector response coalitions that involve a multi-disciplinary approach based on several vital partnerships and arrangements. The article concludes with several recommendations of how other urban settings can more effectively respond to the unique and complex needs of adolescent sexual exploitation and trafficking victims.

**Keywords:** Integrated partnerships, wraparound, sexual exploitation, urban settings

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## Introduction

*Let us not forget that 'the litmus test of justice or injustice in any society is how it treats its poor and powerless' - O'Kane 2002: 698.*

Trafficking in persons or human trafficking (HT), as it is commonly referred to, is a grievous human rights crime that violates international human rights law and is a crime under international criminal law (see Human Rights..., 2014). It is also a global public health problem (Greenbaum & Bodrick, 2017). HT is a crime that knows no borders; it can be domestic or transnational. According to the recent release of the Global Organized Crime Index (2021), HT is the most pervasive criminal economy in the world. Also, according to Ochab (2017) and various reports by the United Nations, HT is also among the fastest-growing crimes. Yet, since the signing of the UN Palermo Protocol (hereafter referred to as the Palermo Protocol) in 2001, which was a supplement to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, there has been no shortage of effort to combat this blight on humanity.

Specific to this article, efforts to combat human trafficking evolve around three main goals: 1) Why does sexual exploitation of children and youth human trafficking occur in urban areas? 2) What are the consequences of the sexual exploitation of children and youth trafficking in urban areas? 3) What measures might be taken in response to the sexual exploitation of children and youth in urban locales?

In 2016 the United Nations estimated that around 56 percent of the world's population now lives in areas. About 2007 was the first time more people lived in urban areas than in rural areas, and the trend continues towards greater urbanization (Ritchie & Roser, 2019). While there are many benefits to living in urban areas (e.g., access to a wide range of services, job opportunities, transportation services usually better developed, generally more entertainment and amenities easier to access), it can also be risky for some children and young persons. Some of the risks include alienation, isolation, and vulnerabilities. In addition, urban settings are usually more expensive to live in; housing can be compact, have a higher level of pollution (air & noise), etc. (Advantages and disadvantages..., 2021). Regarding vulnerability, specific individuals or groups being at risk of being recruited into human trafficking, research has shown that urban areas can be risky for children and adolescents (Cole & Sprang, 2015). Furthermore, while urban areas are more likely to have infrastructures to support victims/survivors of trafficking, they are not always readily available or accessible (Dottridge, Ninkovic, Sax, & Vujovic, 2021; An Introduction..., 2008).

We will begin with an overview of the sexual exploitation and trafficking of children and youth. Next, we will examine the issues as it exists within the Canadian context, focusing on the situation within an urban context - especially since nearly 82 percent of Canadians live in urban areas (Trading Economics, 2021). Then drawing of the evidence gathered from a recent research project conducted for British Columbia, we will present a summary of the findings and conclude with some specific and general observations.

## Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking of Children and Youth trends

*Anyone who hates children and dogs can't be all bad. - WC Fields*

As a former well-known American comedian, Mr. Fields (1880-1946) might not have been disappointed with the way children and young persons are treated in North America. Despite our overt expressions of love and affection for children, children and adolescents occupy a peculiarly indecisive position in a world controlled by adults. Because of their lack of autonomy and decision-making capacity to consent to interpersonal matters ethically and legally, young people represent one of the more (if not most) vulnerable age groups in any society. They are treated as subservient, alienated, powerless, and prone to physical and economic manipulation (see Krisberg & Austin, 1978). Given that we now live in a global community that is largely a market-driven world, the economic-based system is ripe for (sexually) exploiting young people to not only support the profit-driven markets but also being exploited in other ways (see Schaffmeister, 2015). Children and young people can be and are exploited for the purpose of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. Still, the true extent of the problem is unknown because, as Farah (2018) points out, commercially sexually exploited children and adolescents is a hidden - even kept secret (see Rush, 1980), complicated, and oppressive issue affecting them on a transnational basis level. However, Luscombe (2014) estimates that the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a domestic and international problem that generates some \$99 US billion globally each year.<sup>2</sup>

Since the Protocol first came into effect on May 31, 2001, as of 2021, almost 180 parties have signed the Protocol. In 2017, Fiji and Japan were among the most recent countries to ratify the Protocol. By contrast, Canada ratified the Protocol in 2002. Yet, despite the number of countries which have signed the Protocol, sexual exploitation of children and youth continues to increase. The 2020 Global Report on Trafficking in Person (generally referred to as the TIP Report) analysis of the data over the last 15 years shows that women and girls account for around 70% of the identified trafficked victims. Ever since the first TIP Report, in 2001, was prepared under the leadership of Laura Lederer,<sup>3</sup> the annual reports show that children and youth represent approximately 30 percent of trafficked victims each year, with girls being more likely to be sexually exploited and trafficked than are boys. However, as the UNODC recently reported, the share of children among trafficking victims has increased dramatically since COVID. Among boys, the reported incident rate has increased five-fold (Share of children..., 2021).

Furthermore, the report notes that the profile of child and adolescent victims shows that girls are more likely (over 80%) to be trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation. In contrast, young males and male children (approx., 82%) are exploited for the purpose of forced labour. Yet, two major forms of trafficking suggested 83 percent of victims of sexual exploitation were identified as female, and 10 percent of victims were males. In the profile of victims of forced labour, 82 percent were identified as males, and 13 percent were identified as female globally. The profile of children victims was categorized into different trafficking avenues, with boys mainly identified in forced labour. Still, many were also detected in sexual exploitation and other forms of exploitation like forced criminal activities and forced begging.

Girls being more prone to sexually exploited than boys would appear to have some historical roots that date back hundreds of years. In her 1980 book "The best-kept secret: Sexual abuse

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<sup>2</sup> This is an estimate as there is no reliable way of knowing how much CSEC generates since it is a clandestine crime (Combating..., 2017).

<sup>3</sup> From 2001 to 2009, she served as Senior Advisor on Trafficking in Persons in the U.S. Department of State.

of children,” Florence Rush points out that child rape was not separated from church law until the 13th Century in England. Child rape became a simple misdemeanour for a man who sexually assaulted a girl under the age of 12. In a case that dates to 1571, Rush notes that according to official records, even though the girl was only seven years old and eyewitnesses came forward, the offender was acquitted because the jurists didn’t believe that a child that young could be raped!

Rush (1980) further highlighted the normative nature of abusing and exploiting underage girls in a Paris-based study from the late 1800s. At the time, prostitution flourished, and throughout the study, over 2,500 women were arrested for prostitution, of which 1,500 (approx. 60%) were minors (Rush, 1980).

Around the same time as the Paris study, the renowned neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) claimed that many of his ‘hysterical’ patients had suffered sexual trauma of varying sorts during their childhood and formative years. Although he abandoned the ‘seduction theory’ after many of his colleagues challenged the credibility of such an assertion, he started to use the concept of ‘seduction fantasy’ - the notion that women and children imaged they had been sexually abused during their formative years. For several decades after, other therapists held similar beliefs, thereby ignoring and denying the existence of such acts (Wells & Giannetti, 1999).

The plight of sexually abused and exploited minors received another blow when the esteemed American legal scholar John Henry Wigmore (1863-1943) legally reinforced the notion that women and girls tend to fabricate stories of abuse. In 1934, Wigmore wrote a decision declaring that such accusations are fabrications. Should a woman or girl make such an accusation, they should be psychiatrically examined before allowing them to testify (Wells & Giannetti, 1999). It is not known how many psychiatrists supported the claims of abuse presented to them by the women and girls referred to them.

### **The Canadian context of sexual exploitation and trafficking (CSEC) of children and youth**

Despite increased awareness and attention, the definition of human trafficking, ironically, has no universal definition (Winterdyk, 2019). In Canada, most regional, provincial, and national governments and agencies use the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (UN Protocol), which defines human trafficking in the following way:

*Trafficking in Persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons, by means of the use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction or fraud, of deceptions, of the abuse of power of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payment or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over other persons, for the purpose of exploitation.*

The Palermo Protocol was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2000 and ratified by Canada in 2002. However, the Palermo Protocol did not give legal effect to the definition, which meant countries were required to adopt legislation and other measures to establish their own human trafficking-related criminal offences. In Canada, the ratification of the UN Protocol led to legislation being passed by Parliament in 2005; Bill C-49 would ultimately amend the Criminal Code by creating three new additional indictable offences that could be used by law enforcement to address human trafficking.

Furthermore, exploitation is not defined explicitly in the Protocol but stipulated to include, at a minimum: the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery, or practices like slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs (UNODC, 2015). The definition further clarifies in Article 3(b) that consent of the victim to the intended exploitation is irrelevant when any of these ‘means’ have been used. All three elements (i.e., act, means and purpose) must be present to constitute ‘trafficking in persons’ in the Trafficking in Persons Protocol. The only exception is that the ‘means’ element is not part of the definition when the victim is a child.

As a result, there are significant differences in international legislative approaches to the ‘purpose’ element of the definition of trafficking in persons, specifically the exploitation component. Of note, Canada is the only country to provide a stand-alone definition of exploitation in its legislation (UNODC, 2015). Under section 279.04 (Trafficking in Persons) the Criminal Code of Canada, exploitation means “causing a person to provide their labour or service by engaging in conduct that, in all the circumstances, could reasonably be expected to cause that person to believe their safety, or the safety of someone they know, would be threatened if they failed to provide their labour or services.”

In determining whether an accused has exploited another person, the court may consider, among other factors, whether the accused:

- used or threatened to use force or another form of coercion;
- used deception; or
- abused a position of trust, power, or authority.

Additional definitions of human trafficking have been developed in response to the sexual exploitation and trafficking of child and youth victims. The 1996 Declaration and the Agenda for the Action of the World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children provide the following definition of the practice in general: “The commercial sexual exploitation of children is a fundamental violation of children’s rights. It comprises sexual abuse by the adult and remuneration in cash or kind to the child or a third person, or persons. The child is treated as a sexual object and as a commercial object. The commercial sexual exploitation of children constitutes a form of coercion and violence against children and amounts to forced labour and a contemporary form of slavery. According to Estes and Weiner (2005), every case of commercial sexual exploitation of children “involves maximum benefits to the exploiter and an abrogation of the basic rights, dignity, autonomy, physical and mental well-being of the children involved” (p. 95).

To align with the language used by the United Nations protocols and Canadian legislation, this article uses the term ‘commercial sexual exploitation of children’ when referring to children and youth aged 12-18 who are victims of sexual exploitation and or human trafficking.

### **Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)**

As a result of increased attention on the sexual exploitation of children and youth, understanding this issue has undergone considerable changes in the last 40 years. Before the 1980s, CSEC among youth was primarily viewed as part of the spectrum of delinquency among runaways and street youth (Flowers, 2001; Gray, 2005; Kreston, 2005). In Canada, it was not until the late 1970s that officials began to recognize that changes to the prevalent attitudes and

practices towards youth involved in the sex trade were needed. However, no actions were taken until the early 1980s when the Federal government established a special committee to examine the issue and make recommendations. The 1984 “Report of the Committee on Sexual Offences Against Children and Youth” (also more commonly referred to as the Badgley Report), in which “juvenile prostitutes” were interviewed, found that 50% of females and 33% of males had been victims of sexual abuse in childhood. Nearly all perpetrators were males, and, in most cases, neither the victim nor their families sought support or assistance from authorities. The ground-breaking Badgley Report has since been regarded as central to a significant paradigm shift. It firmly established that ‘delinquent’ minors involved in prostitution should be treated as victims of sexual abuse.

Since around 2010, increasing attention has been paid to the issue of child sexual exploitation and trafficking of children and youth in Canada (Hay, 2004, Estel, 2017; Child sexual..., 2021). Although most formal reports indicate that this issue is a rapidly growing problem, a lack of reliable and accurate data has prevented governments, researchers, frontline agencies, and other stakeholders from understanding its true prevalence in urban or rural areas. Identifying urban victims of child sexual exploitation and trafficking is often difficult due to a general lack of public awareness about this issue and the reluctance of many exploited children and youth to identify themselves as victims. Commercial sexual exploitation includes prostitution, child pornography, trafficking for sexual purposes, child sex tourism, and early marriage. Yet, it is estimated that 10 percent to 12 percent of individuals involved in prostitution are younger than 18 years of age (Hay, 2004; Family members..., n.d.). In addition, the clandestine nature of the offence and the extreme measures taken by exploiters to hide their crimes also conflates the plight of such victims.

In Canada, most CSEC victims are lured or recruited at or around thirteen years of age (Tracia’s Trust, 2019). Many are vulnerable due to adverse childhood experiences, including previous sexual abuse and neglect, family violence, poverty, and child protection involvement. These traumatic experiences often lead to mental health issues, substance use, and chronic running away, all of which increase the likelihood of sexual exploitation and trafficking (see, e.g., Baird & Connolly, 2021; Baird, McDonald, & Connolly, 2020). Young Indigenous females are overrepresented among these victims, and it is estimated that they make up 70-80% of all commercial sexual exploitation of children victims (Tracia’s Trust, 2019).

After being lured (i.e., recruited) by promises of love, security, protection, and belonging, victims frequently experience physical, sexual, and emotional abuse at the hands of exploiters and traffickers (Baird & Connolly, 2021; Conradi, 2013). In addition to violence, victims are often controlled through food and sleep deprivation, isolation, provision of drugs and alcohol, withholding of identification and money, and denial of medical treatment (Child sexual..., 2021). Consequently, the combined impact of pre-existing vulnerability and the methods used to force, coerce, and manipulate children and youth into being sexually exploited can lead to profound enduring psychological and physical effects.

Increased awareness (i.e., prevention) of this issue has led the Canadian government, law enforcement agencies, child protection systems, and community organizations to allocate more significant resources to address this problem (see below). Professionals and communities, primarily in urban settings, have recognized that children and youth who have experienced abuse through sex trafficking require evidence-based interventions and aftercare services

(Winterdyk & Hincks, 2021). The benefits include and range from preventing further harm, helping them heal from their trauma, and supporting them in creating and sustaining a life away from sexual exploitation and trafficking (see generally, Hemmings, Jakowitz, Abar, et al., 2016).

In Canada, it was not until the late 1970s (just over 50-years ago) that officials began to recognize that a severe problem concerning the sexual abuse of children and youth existed. However, it was not until the early 1980s that the government established a special committee to examine the issue and make recommendations. The “Report of the Committee on Sexual Offences Against Children and Youth” (also more commonly referred to as the Badgley Report – discussed in further detail below)<sup>4</sup> confirmed what frontline workers had suspected for years. And while the Committee called for the criminalization of such behaviour and those support systems were needed for rehabilitation purposes, change was slow to evolve. For example, as discussed later in this literature review, two Canadian and former healthcare workers have been championing the call for specific legal reforms for what they refer to as ‘non-state torture’ (see Sarson & MacDonald, 2019).<sup>5</sup>

Even though human trafficking is ultimately a humanitarian (i.e., human rights) issue,<sup>6</sup> it has become a highly politicized topic in Canada and other countries worldwide (Cha, 2018; Jahic & Finkenauer, 2005). Ochab (2018) describes human trafficking as a pandemic of the 21st Century. To this point, Millar-Perrin and Wurtele (2017) point out that: “these claims—that sex trafficking is a prolific and growing problem in Canada is linked to transnational organized crime (see Lee, 2010) and domestic criminal gangs (see Carpenter & Gates, 2016), and that certain groups (i.e., Asian women, Indigenous women and youth) are at significant risk— “are repeated by government representatives, advocates, and even some academics despite a lack of empirical evidence to substantiate the claims” (p. 8). There is, however, a lack of empirical evidence (see Abedi, 2019; Okech, Choi, Elkins, & Burns, 2017) on the actual extent of HT and sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in Canada (see below). However, regional, provincial, and federal governments have responded to this issue with funding for research, initiatives, and task forces to combat this problem. Yet with a lack of empirical analyses of intervention outcomes (Crawford & Kaufman, 2008; Tsutsumi et al., 2008). An absence of objective data risks informing policy that is not evidence-informed.

Yet, there is no shortage of interest, vested research, or scholarly discourse regarding HT and how we might best respond to HT. In fact, since the early 2000s, human trafficking has become

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<sup>4</sup> The Report found that one in two females and one in three boys have been victims of unwanted sexual acts. In approximately 80% of these cases, the violation took place during the victims’ childhood or early adolescence. Nearly all assailants were males and, in most cases, neither the victim or their families sought support or assistance from authorities. In 1988, the government moved to implement the recommendations. Just over 30-years have passed since this landmark Report and while much has changed for the better, the problem of sexual abuse and CSEC still prevails. An online version of the Report can be found at [https://library.law.utoronto.ca/whrr/Badgley\\_Report](https://library.law.utoronto.ca/whrr/Badgley_Report)

<sup>5</sup> Drawing on case studies and personal accounts, Sarson and McDonald (2021) argue that non-state torture must not be conflated with domestic violence or abuse because its nature and characteristics are distinctly different.

<sup>6</sup> Former (from January 1997 to December 2006) Secretary-General of the United Nations. Kofi Annan commented in 2013 that: “Slavery was, in a very real sense, the first international human rights issue to come to the fore. It led to the adoption of the first human rights laws and to the creation of the first human rights non-governmental organization. And yet despite the efforts of the international community to combat this abhorrent practice, it is still widely prevalent in all its insidious forms, old and new.”

a hot topic as rallies to "Save our Children" (started up in 1977 by the American singer Anita Bryant), the UK-based program "Hope for Justice" (started in 2008 and whose response model focuses on prevention, rescuing, restoring, & reforming), the UN 'Blue Heart' campaign (established in 1997 but not launched until 2009), to "Stop the Traffik" (founded in 2006), which can be found in many parts of the world. However, as is increasingly being documented, some of the information these organizations use has been misleading or distorted. This unintentional distortion of 'facts' can, and often do, compromise our efforts to combat the issue effectively (see, for example, Wiener & Hala, 2008, and the American-based National Human Trafficking Hotline website <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/what-human-trafficking/myths-misconceptions> ).

Concerning Canada, several urban-based organizations have emerged in recent years to combat human trafficking. Although not an exhaustive list, they include, among others: Not in My City<sup>7</sup> and ACT<sup>8</sup> (Action Coalition against Human Trafficking – both Calgary-based organizations; NASHI- Our Children based in Saskatchewan;<sup>9</sup> Dream Catchers Program – Klinik Community Health Centre<sup>10</sup> and Transition, Education, Resources for Females (TERF),<sup>11</sup> both based in Manitoba; PACT in Ottawa, Ontario, and the New Brunswick Working Group on Human Trafficking in New Brunswick.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that virtually all the programs and services are based in urban settings, and they all tend to work independently of one another. The fact that most intervention and prevention programs in Canada are urban-based reduces their potential effectiveness to partner and collectively combat CSEC (see, generally, Winterdyk & Hincks, 2021).

In addition to the efforts of a wide range of interest groups, most countries, including Canada, have also introduced specific legislation to address and combat HT. Canada's bases its legislation and its National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking – 2019-2024.<sup>13</sup> The national strategy evolves around the 4 Ps (i.e., prosecution, protection, prevention, & partnership) as defined by the United Nations Protocol. However, although beyond the scope of this article, the emphasis of which P or Ps each jurisdiction and organization use vary across the country's urban service providers (Winterdyk & Hincks, 2021).

While it is estimated that the illicit profit made from those involved in HT exceeds \$150 billion US dollars annually (Government of Canada, 2021), there are no reliable statistics on how much money is being spent globally to combat HT. However, by way of example, in 2020, Ontario (a province in central Canada) recently allocated over \$202 (CDN) million to combat HT over the next five years (Stone & Dixon, 2020). Meanwhile, in 2019, the Canadian federal government earmarked some \$75 million Canadian to combat HT over the next several years. The amount is a considerable sum of money when it is estimated that between 2009 and 2019, there were less than 2500 reported incidents of HT. Of those incidents, numerous fewer were

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://notinmycity.ca/>

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.actalberta.org/>

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.nashi.ca/>

<sup>10</sup> See <https://mb.211.ca/program-at-site/dream-catchers-at-klinik-on-portage/>

<sup>11</sup> See <https://newdirections.mb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/TERF-BROchure.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> For a more complete listing see <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/victims-of-crime/human-trafficking/human-trafficking-training/resources/national-organizations>

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed look of the National Strategy see <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/2019-ntnl-strtg-hmnn-trffc/index-en.aspx>



substantiated (Ibrahim, 2019). By contrast, the Office of Trafficking in Person in the United States reports that in 2011, approximately \$9.7 US million was spent on domestic and foreign initiatives. By 2019 the total was nearly \$27 million – virtually a 300 percent increase in expenditures to combat human trafficking (Human Trafficking Corridors in Canada, 2020).

To understand and provide a response model to address the plight and risk of CSEC in western Canada that could be urban-based, between 2020 and 2021, the authors conducted a study for the provincial government of British Columbia (BC). The project involved three goals:

1. Review the current statistics on CSES in Canada through the collection of data from law enforcement agencies, child protection ministries, and child and youth advocacy centres;
2. Provide a review of existing CSEC response models to identify best and promising practices; and
3. Use the project findings to develop a CSEC response framework to inform efforts to combat the issue in BC, within an urban context as over 62% of its residents live in urban areas (Sustainability, 2018).

## Methodology

Through funding provided by the *British Columbia Office of Crime Reduction and Gang Outreach* (OCR-GO), the researchers undertook an 18-month research project. The project evolved around two goals; first, the researchers sought to gather aggregate CSEC data from law enforcement, child protection agencies, and child and youth advocacy centres across Canada. Data indicators to be collected included: (1) information on the number of children and youth chronically running away<sup>14</sup> from home, kinship arrangements, foster care, or other child protection placements, and (2) the number of annual reports from 2017-2020 of both suspected and confirmed cases of CSEC made to law enforcement and/or child protection agencies. Second, the researchers reviewed promising and best practices in North America for responding to CSEC in urban settings.

### *Phase One Methodology: Data collection Across Canadian Provinces and Territories*

To collect data for Phase I, a research assistant contacted all ten provincial and three territorial child protection Ministries via email. The email outlined the background and goals of the project and provided an overview of the data being requested. A template form with space to provide the data in aggregate form was attached to the email, and a request was made to respondents to complete it and return it to the research assistant. In cases where emails were not responded to, the research assistant called the Ministries to request the data.

The researchers also contacted various sex crimes, child abuse, and counter-exploitation units in seven urban law enforcement agencies across Canada by telephone to request data on the number of at-risk and known victims of CSEC. Known victims were identified based on agency-specific sexual exploitation and trafficking codes within the individual databases of police agencies contacted. At-risk victims were identified using any reports made to law

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<sup>14</sup> Chronic running away is defined as running away a minimum of four times over a 12-month period.

enforcement about the risk of exploitation to a child or youth, regardless of whether the report was substantiated or not. Other indicators used to operationalize the 'at-risk' classification included reports to police that involve youth who: (1) have been reported missing or are chronically running away, (2) have experienced previous abuse and/or neglect, (3) are engaged in high-risk behaviours both on and offline, (4) have severe substance use concerns, (5) come from homes that are violent or chaotic, (6) have severe mental health issues, and (7) have repeated contact with the justice system. These indicators were selected based on the risk factors for CSEC that have been identified in much of the existing literature on this issue. Once contacted, respondents from the contacted sex crimes, child abuse, and counter-exploitation units were asked to provide both known cases of CSEC using official report data and estimates of case numbers (using the at-risk indicators).

### ***Phase Two Methodology: Review of Promising and Best Practices***

In Phase II, the researchers conducted virtual qualitative interviews with twenty representatives from government (n = 1), law enforcement (n = 7), child protection (n = 3), and community-based agencies (n = 9). Interview questions were developed in alignment with the internationally-accepted '4Ps' anti-human trafficking framework that focuses on the pillars of prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership.<sup>15</sup>

### **Findings**

In Phase II of the project, professionals, experts, practitioners, and survivors shared their insights on CSEC's best practices for responses. From the data collected, themes were identified and used to form the best practices for emerging and established CSEC frameworks. These best practices were grouped in themes under the prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership pillars.

Of note, there is repeated reference to the 'continuum of care' for victims of CSEC. The definition of this term varies greatly among anti-human trafficking organizations, initiatives, task forces, and coalitions. It broadly refers to the stepwise spectrum of interventions, services, and supports for victims of CSEC. Given that it takes victims of CSEC an average of three years and seven attempts to leave an exploitive situation (Tracia's Trust, 2019), many victims move back and forth along the continuum before finally achieving full reintegration into a life free from exploitation and trafficking.

### **Prevention**

Participants agreed that it is critical to understand the risk factors that make the youth in urban areas vulnerable to sex traffickers to prevent them from being recruited and then becoming further entrenched in a life of sexual exploitation and trafficking. Identity factors such as age, ethnicity, disability, gender identity, and sexual orientation are often intertwined with early childhood adversity, including neglect, sexual abuse, parental substance abuse, parental mental health, and family violence in the home. Risk is also further exacerbated for throwaway and

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<sup>15</sup> See the UN's *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*.

runaway youth. The combination of these risk factors is directly related to how youth in urban areas and elsewhere are recruited into exploitive situations and the extent of their entrenchment over time. Prevention activities are intended to mitigate these risks through awareness, education, advocacy, and training.

#### *Guiding principles for prevention*

*Education-based prevention.* Participants asserted that educational prevention activities need to be offered to children, youth, and families using a variety of delivery formats to ensure reach and accessibility in both urban and rural areas. The identity and risk factors among vulnerable children, youth, families, and communities create barriers to accessing preventative programming. Prevention activities should, therefore, include a variety of formats. The formats should have classroom-based education and awareness for children and youth; interactive online education and awareness for children, youth, and families; face-to-face outreach support to vulnerable youth and families; peer-to-peer programming for youth; and group-based social services programming for children, youth, and families.

*Sector-specific and cross-sector training.* Respondents felt that all employees in the law enforcement, child protection, education, health, and community service sectors should receive education and training relevant to their profession. They also felt that the lack of cross-sector training is a critical gap in efforts to effectively combat youth sexual exploitation and trafficking. Sector-specific training can equip participants with the skills needed to appropriately identify at-risk and sexually exploited youth and effectively intervene according to the mandates of their agency.

Other sectors, including hospitality and transportation, are impacted by child sexual exploitation and play an essential role in prevention. These sectors require targeted education on recognizing and responding to situations that may involve at-risk children or are actively being sexually exploited and/or trafficked.

Finally, it was also deemed vital that employees from various sectors receive cross-sector training when available. Cross-sector training promotes the sharing of resources and increases capacity across each sector involved. It facilitates new partnerships and ways of working together. For example, joint training for law enforcement and child protection agencies on effective engagement and intervention strategies with at-risk youth leads to a better understanding of each other's responses.

*Youth empowerment.* Participants reported that programs that respect the autonomy of at-risk and exploited youth are the most successful. These youth empowerments (or victim-centered) models recognize that at-risk and vulnerable youth have the essential knowledge about their experiences, goals, and lives. Therefore, this knowledge should be used to support youth in taking a leadership role in the programming they are involved in.

*Risk assessments and screening tools.* Participants suggested that standardized risk assessments and screening tools should be utilized to identify the risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking among vulnerable children and youth. Given the complexity of CSEC, individual risk factors may not be enough on their own for families or professionals to recognize that a child or youth is at-risk of victimization. However, an evidence-informed risk assessment or screening tool can and should be used in rural and urban areas to demonstrate how the combination of individual risk factors present in a child or youth's life makes them vulnerable to exploitation.

## PROTECTION

Protection efforts are intended to ensure assistance and support measures for victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking. Protection is first achieved by responding to victims' medical, psychological, and material needs. Protection is also achieved through legislation and protocols that promote victims' rights, dignity, and well-being. Protecting victims of CSEC in Canada requires enacting effective provincial child protection legislation combined with the provision of a full continuum of aftercare services.

### *What we heard about protection*

*Child protection legislation.* As the legislation is in place to protect all children from abuse, neglect, and harm, provincial child protection ministries regularly review and amend their responses to CSEC trends. Several provinces have not amended their child protection legislation in one or more decades. Furthermore, most jurisdictional legislation has not been modified to reflect current knowledge about sexual exploitation and trafficking of young persons. This has provided exploiters with loopholes that they use when exploiting youth. For example, the child protection legislation of many provinces allows youth aged 16-18 (or 16-19 in some regions) to refuse protection. Exploiters know this and often increase their exploitive activities of youth in this age group knowing that child protection workers are limited in their response options.

Participants also argued that Canada's provinces and territories should adopt specific child protection legislation similar to Alberta's *Protection of Sexually Exploited Children Act* (PSECA). Child protection legislation outlines voluntary service provision guidelines like most other provinces and territories. However, PSECA also has a unique section that allows case managers to apprehend and confine a sexually exploited or trafficked youth to secure residential services for up to 47 days. Some critics argue that arresting and detaining a traumatized exploited or trafficked youth in a confinement program 'for their own safety' can be viewed as punishment under the guise of protection. Critics further suggest that the risk of confinement pushes CSEC further underground and reduces a victim's likelihood of engaging with service providers. When asked about their perceptions of Alberta's PSECA legislation, most participants felt that similar legislation should be enacted in all provinces and territories. In response to the criticisms above, most participants noted that most CSEC victims are vulnerable, traumatized, and cannot understand the implications of their actions or make informed decisions for themselves. Some participants also suggested that confinement periods should extend beyond 47 days, given the extent of the trauma victims have experienced and the amount of time it takes them to acknowledge their victimization, process their trauma and begin healing.

*Individual, family, and community demographics.* Participants reported that these dynamics are an essential factor in identifying and responding to the needs of CSEC victims. Individually tailored service provision is more aligned with the victim-centered approach than centralized 'one size fits all' models. This does not suggest that programs that offer various services (housing, education, employment skills training, counselling, etc.) are ineffective; participants clarified that what works in one city or region does not work in another. Therefore, service models need to consider the unique needs of sexually exploited children and youth in the area they serve to provide appropriate support.

Many participants lamented the persistent lack of protection for marginalized populations of sexually exploited and trafficked youth, including males, LGBTQ2IA, racialized, and disabled

individuals. The extent to which these populations are victimized is unknown because few research and intervention efforts have targeted them or assessed their needs. However, participants emphasized the need to address these gaps and increase the availability of diverse interventions and supports so that all at-risk and exploited youth receive equitable protection.

Lastly, participants acknowledged a need for increased partnerships with Indigenous communities when developing response models for sexually exploited and trafficked children and youth. Significant research indicates that Indigenous children and youth are exploited and trafficked at higher rates than their non-Indigenous counterparts. However, few examples of protection measures successfully support this population. Participants noted that more work needs to be done to engage Indigenous communities to develop and implement Indigenous-led, culturally appropriate responses both on and off reserves.

*Parental involvement.* Participants insisted that parents of at-risk and sexually exploited youth should be included in research, practice, and the development and implementation of response models. The findings revealed that those parents cannot or should not be part of the conversation around how to address this issue. There are assumptions that because many at-risk and sexually exploited youth come from families that contributed to the risk factors in the first place (i.e., previous abuse, parent mental health, family violence, poverty, etc.). Yet, despite facing their challenges, most parents of at-risk and sexually exploited and trafficked youth seek help, engage with service providers, and know what interventions would benefit their child. However, parents that are active in their efforts to prevent or address the exploitation of their children are hindered by systemic barriers such as marginalization, poverty, and limited access to services.

## PROSECUTION

Researchers and anti-trafficking advocates have described human trafficking as a low-risk, high reward crime, making it highly lucrative to perpetrators. To shift the balance of risk-reward, legislators, law enforcement and courts, need to develop coordinated strategies to improve the identification and prosecution of perpetrators.

### *What we heard about prosecution*

*Training and education.* One hundred percent of participants stated that training and education on sexual exploitation and human trafficking is urgently needed for law enforcement, prosecutors, defence lawyers, and judges. While training for law enforcement on recognizing and responding to sexual exploitation and trafficking has increased in recent years, limited and strained resources within most police agencies have hindered efforts to provide comprehensive, agency-wide training that promotes a victim-centered, trauma-informed approach reports of CSEC.

Law enforcement participants discussed how CSEC challenges the traditional practices of law enforcement. They noted that most police officers and detectives are not used to 'chasing their victims' or working hard to build a trusting relationship to elicit a statement or report. However, law enforcement units that have successfully combat CSEC noted that street-level officers have bought into victim-centered engagement strategies and have experienced positive outcomes through education and training.

Participants also suggested that education on the impact of CSEC on victims is needed for prosecutors and judges. The court process is often re-traumatizing for victims as they face their exploiters, re-tell painful stories of their abuse, and undergo aggressive questioning from defence lawyers trying to discredit them. Participants who work to support CSEC victims through the justice system process observed that prosecutors and judges need to understand how these factors, coupled with existing vulnerabilities and trauma, can impact a victim's testimony and behaviour. As has become increasingly common practice in other judicial proceedings, the involvement of expert witnesses in CSEC cases can also assist judges and prosecutors in understanding the different behaviours that victims exhibit throughout their contact with the justice system.

*Multi-disciplinary task forces, coalitions, and response teams.* There was consensus among participants that cooperation, information sharing, and resource pooling among key stakeholders from across various sectors can increase the likelihood of convictions in CSEC cases. Law enforcement and social service agency participants felt it is critical to bring together representatives from multiple sectors (e.g., law enforcement, child protection, health, education, social services, etc.). The respondents also expressed the need to develop coordinated, wraparound response models that simultaneously provide victim-centered support to victims and provide law enforcement agencies with needed intelligence for their investigations.

Participants with experience in leading or working alongside response teams comprised of law enforcement and either a social worker or child protection worker reported that they have successfully identified victims, engaged them in investigations, and connected them to the appropriate aftercare services.

*Deterrence and sanctions.* Participants voiced their frustration about the need for child abuse and human trafficking laws to deter perpetrators and provide proportionate sanctions adequately. Many participants lamented that CSEC perpetrators are rarely charged, convicted, and sentenced for their crimes. As a result, there is little evidence that the current legal provisions deter offenders from reoffending. Nearly all the project participants felt Canada needs more robust laws to hold perpetrators accountable. Participants were particularly frustrated that many perpetrators can make plea deals in which human trafficking charges – which have a mandatory minimum sentence of four years – are dropped in exchange for pleading guilty to lesser charges. This invalidates victims' experiences and diminishes their trust in the justice system. In many cases, it also allows exploiters to avoid incarceration and resume recruiting, exploiting, and trafficking other victims.

*Robust and reliable data.* All the participants felt that capturing data on the prevalence and extent of this issue is central to advancing leading practice and needs to be prioritized. Participants noted that it has been difficult to resource anti-trafficking activities and investigations in urban and rural settings because current data suggests the issue is not widespread.

## **PARTNERSHIP**

Effective responses to CSEC require the collaboration, coordination, and cooperation of multiple sectors. By developing solid partnerships, government systems, community

organizations, survivors, Indigenous communities, and other stakeholders can leverage their knowledge and expertise to close gaps in services and create systemic change.

### *What we heard about partnership*

*Multi-sectoral response models.* Participants who work as part of a task force, coalition, or multi-sectoral response model reported better ability to support victims of CSEC than participants who work in a siloed agency. Participants noted that it is essential for agencies to move beyond simply working alongside one another and towards true collaboration that includes formal partnership agreements with information sharing and service delivery protocols. They discussed how collaboration among agencies could effectively streamline referral pathways, enhance the coordination of services, improve access to shared training opportunities, and increase education and awareness across all sectors.

*Looking beyond crisis.* Participants emphasized the need for collaborative service delivery models. The models should include services beyond crisis intervention and stabilization since many victims return to their exploiters because of a lack of transition and long-term supports. Collaborative models should consist of strategic partnerships with various agencies that span the entire continuum of care (see, for example, Enhanced Collaborative Model, 2020; Kim, Park et al., 2018). Participants stated that victims of CSEC have unique, diverse, and complex needs and require access to multiple services such as health care, substance use treatment, mental health supports, shelter, housing, etc. They acknowledged that no single agency could adequately address these needs, so it is critical to developing collaborative partnerships among agencies that can provide a range of services and supports to achieve better outcomes for victims.

*Disruption of trafficking networks.* Participants believe that partnerships can effectively disrupt individuals and networks' exploitive and trafficking activities. Specifically, law enforcement participants noted that trust with victims is challenging to build. As a result, many victims will not disclose information about their exploiters or their experiences to the police. However, victims do often share this information with community service providers. When working as part of a coalition or multi-sectoral response model, service providers can share the information provided by CSEC victims with law enforcement, who can then work to identify and investigate exploiters and trafficking networks. Participants also reported that initiatives that integrate victim support workers into investigative policing units could help to build trust between law enforcement and victims, which increases the likelihood that a victim will provide a report or statement to the police and participate in an investigation.

*Inclusion of survivors.* All participants felt that survivors of sexual exploitation and trafficking should be included in leadership roles in anti-trafficking partnerships, coalitions, and task forces. Survivors are experts on child sexual exploitation and can provide first-hand insights on perpetrators, trauma bonds, techniques to build trust with victims, and necessary aftercare services and support. Participants suggested that survivors should inform public policy, lead or advise organizations and programs, and provide mentorship to victims. Survivors who participated in the study felt it was not enough to include them on the periphery of CSEC initiatives. Instead, they should be at the forefront of this work as true experts.

## **Discussion**

### Prevention

A major finding on prevention in this study was the need for multi-sectoral education and training for law enforcement, child protection, health, and community-based agencies on identifying and responding to CSEC. Discussions on this issue highlighted the irony that many organizations that provide services and support for at-risk and sexually exploited youth, primarily located in urban areas, do not understand this issue or support victims effectively. This is consistent with other studies that point out how many child protection agencies are trained to identify social problems such as child abuse, mental illness, and substance abuse, yet are not provided with training to identify indicators of CSEC (McMahon-Howard & Reimers, 2013; Dottridge et al., 2021). Addressing this gap requires targeted education and training for professionals that prioritize awareness on various CSEC factors, including vulnerability among youth, manifestations of complex trauma, exploiter tactics, effective interventions, and CSEC's short and long-term impact on victims.

Following the improvement of awareness and training among organizations and frontline service providers, prevention programming for children and youth should be coordinated and delivered across sectors and service providers (i.e., capacity building). It is well-documented that CSEC prevention programs are most successful when school-based (Harper et al., 2019). The present study builds upon this approach and suggests that age-appropriate prevention education programming for children and youth in Grades 6-12 should be provided in various settings, including schools, group homes, youth correctional centres, residential mental health and substance use facilities, and community organizations. Programming should use relatable language and images, discuss vulnerabilities using an intersectional lens, describe the types of traffickers and their recruitment techniques, and include survivor stories (see also Williams, 2018). A recent article by Zhu, Crenshaw, and Scott (2020) also calls for education modules on human trafficking in urban schools. The Ontario government is also exploring this option to create greater awareness (Ontario Acts..., 2021).

Finally, standardized screening and assessment tools are critical to preventing CSEC. Adopting a single assessment tool by many youth-serving organizations in urban settings can dramatically improve prevention efforts by appropriately and consistently identifying levels of risk among youth, providing a score along a continuum of concern, and guiding responses based on these scores. The WestCoast Children's Clinic's Commercial Sexual Exploitation Identification Tool 2.0 (CSE-IT, pronounced 'See-It') is a well-known, evidence-based tool that uses 46 question items that are grouped into the domains of "housing and caregiving," "prior abuse or trauma," "physical health and appearance," "environment and exposure," "relationships and personal belongings," "signs of current trauma," "coercion," and "exploitation" (Basson et al., 2016). While only three participants in this study were familiar with the CSE-IT screener, other participants indicated an interest in further exploring the tool and its potential for implementation within their organizations.

### Protection

The protection of at-risk and sexually exploited youth is primarily the responsibility of government systems. Specifically, law enforcement agencies and child protection ministries have the shared accountability to remove children from harm, and/or remove the harm (in the case of CSEC, offenders/exploiters) from children. The preferred and most advocated mechanism to mitigate harm and protect vulnerable and sexually exploited children and youth is the enactment of clear, current, and actionable child protection legislation. Most provinces



have outdated legislation in Canada that does not include sections or directives specific to CSEC. This has played a detrimental part in the delayed and piecemeal response to this issue both nationally and provincially (see, generally, Winterdyk & Hincks, 2021).

To further promote shared accountability between law enforcement and child protection, there has been increased support for the emergence of specialized multi-disciplinary CSEC teams of police officers and child protection workers (see Farrell, Wills, & Nicolas, 2020). These teams integrate their investigative protocols to identify at-risk children and youth. The teams also locate and assist missing, runaway, and throwaway children and youth; develop coordinated case management plans for victims of CSEC; identify and investigate perpetrators, and provide the appropriate interventions needed to protect the child or youth from further harm.

Protection can also be provided for at-risk and sexually exploited youth by closing the gaps in services for diverse and underserved populations, including male, LGBTQ2IA, Indigenous, immigrant, and disabled children and youth. There is a dearth of research and policy dedicated to these marginalized youth's unique and complex needs (Saewyc et al., 2008). Yet, in the present study, anecdotal observation provided by participants has established a critical need to better understand the vulnerabilities within these populations if they are to be sufficiently protected from CSEC victimization. Furthermore, shelters, transitional and long-term housing programs, mental health and substance use treatment facilities, and group homes should be supported in identifying ways to reduce barriers to service for these underserved populations. Providing such support will help ensure that there is "no wrong door" when they require protection.

#### Prosecution

Human traffickers and exploiters generally enjoy many personal and financial benefits with relatively no legal repercussions for the enormous impact on CSEC victims, their families, the community, and society (see, generally, Prosecute human trafficking..., 2020). Statistics indicate that in comparison to the number of victims served by frontline agencies, human trafficking charges are rarely laid, and even fewer convictions are successful (Cotter, 2020). The imbalance of risk and reward for CSEC perpetrators can only be tipped in favour of those impacted through broad improvements to the justice system.

As observed in the study, of utmost priority is the need for increased awareness and education for law enforcement, prosecutors, defence lawyers, and judges on CSEC victims' pre-existing and conditioned vulnerabilities. Expertise on mental health, trauma, early childhood development, and brain architecture rarely extends beyond the purview of academics and practitioners in these fields. Justice system professionals, therefore, find themselves disadvantaged when trying to understand how these intersecting factors play a role in CSEC victims' testimony, credibility, and behaviour during investigations and trials. Nearly all CSEC service providers in major urban centres have the necessary resources to provide comprehensive education for justice system professionals on the nuances of victim vulnerability, trauma bonds, and exploiter tactics. As pointed out by participants in this study, the challenge appears to be engaging members of the judiciary and justice system and getting them to the table.

To effectively improve investigative outcomes in CSEC cases at the street level, law enforcement agencies in several urban settings have partnered with child protection workers or

social workers to form CSEC response teams that work collaboratively to identify and support high-risk victims, locate, and recover missing and runaway youth, and train other stakeholders on recognizing and responding to at-risk and victimized youth. This model has emerged as the best practice for improving CSEC outcomes under the prosecution pillar in the last several years. Based on the findings from Phase I of the study, successful urban-based models worth reviewing include StreetReach in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and the Dallas County Child Sex Trafficking (CST) Care Coordination Response unit in Dallas, Texas.

### Partnership

Victims of CSEC have intersecting and complex multisystem needs, and no single system or organization can meet these needs independently. In response, strategic partnerships between government (i.e., law enforcement, child protection, health, and education) and non-governmental organizations are integral to providing a multi-disciplinary and cross-sector approach to CSEC. Because government and community-based CSEC service providers are primarily clustered in urban centres where at-risk and sexually exploited youth are often located (Bancroft, 2012; Bartlett et al., 2016), these organizations have numerous opportunities to form partnerships to increase their collective impact. The focus of urban partnerships should be on delivering coordinated, wraparound services for victims, building trust between government and community organizations, increasing capacity and resources across all service providers, and eliminating siloed and fragmented services.

Partnerships must include individuals with lived experience who can use their knowledge and expertise to develop and implement responses across the 4Ps. Consistent with other studies in which survivors have repeatedly lamented the frequency with which policies and programs are prescriptive and underpinned by saviourism (Corbett, 2018), survivor-participants in this study highlighted the need for increased survivor involvement in the areas of policy, research, preventative programming, and frontline service delivery.

### Conclusion

Several prominent themes on how to best prevent CSEC, protect victims, prosecute perpetrators, and coordinate urban service delivery through partnership were identified in this study. The participants had a lot to say about what needs to be done to provide CSEC's coordinated, collaborative response. The researchers recognize that at first glance, participants seem to have identified an overwhelming number of areas where anti-trafficking efforts and resources fall short. As a result, governments, service providers, and other stakeholders may be tempted to view the path forward as overwhelming and, quite simply, daunting. However, optimism can be encouraged among youth-serving and anti-trafficking organizations in urban settings as their proximity, shared community, and ability to form collaborative partnerships can make the development and implementation of effective and efficient strategies under each of the 4Ps achievable.

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