Canadian Centre to
End Human Trafficking

Human Trafficking in Canada

A media reference guide

Contents

Official Spokesperson

Julia Drydyk has been the Centre's executive director since 2020, combining her expertise in research, policy, and advocacy to address human trafficking.

She began at the Centre as manager of research and policy, studying trafficking trends and risk factors. Before that, she was a senior policy advisor to Ontario's minister of community and social services and led research at the United Way of Toronto and York Region.

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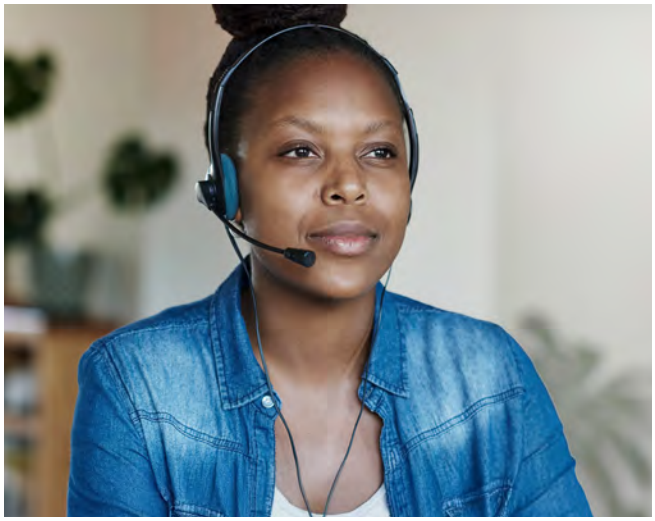
Background

Human trafficking is a complex and pervasive issue that touches every community across Canada, large and small — often remaining hidden in plain sight. Unfortunately, enduring myths and misconceptions about human trafficking hinder the ability of the public to recognize human trafficking in their communities. They can also prevent survivors from recognizing their own experiences as exploitative and from reaching out for help.

Accurate, informed, and nuanced reporting is essential — not only to help connect victims with the resources they need to begin their journey out of trafficking, but also to build public awareness of how trafficking happens in communities across Canada.

This guide is designed to support journalists as they tackle this complex subject with the depth, accuracy, and sensitivity it requires.

Our goal is to encourage media coverage that not only informs but also makes a significant contribution to the anti-human trafficking movement.



About the Centre

The Centre is a national charity established in 2016, dedicated to ending all types of human trafficking in Canada. As a national backbone organization, we focus on four priority areas: public education and awareness, research and data collection, convening and knowledge transfer, and policy development and advocacy. We work with like-minded stakeholders and organizations, including nonprofits, corporations, governments and people with lived experience of human trafficking, to advance best practices, eliminate duplicate efforts across Canada, and enable cross-sectoral coordination.

About the hotline

The Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline (1-833-900-1010) is a confidential, multilingual, 24/7 service that connects victims and survivors with emergency, transitional, and long-term supports across the country. It follows a survivor-centred approach, involving law enforcement only when requested by the caller. The hotline also receives tips from the public and offers referrals to a wide network of social services.

While supported and operated by the Centre, the hotline is not a government, immigration, investigative, or law enforcement agency.

Sex trafficking

Sex trafficking is when someone is controlled, coerced or manipulated into exchanging sexual services for money, and where the person controlling them profits from their exploitation. Traffickers often target a person, gain their trust and then exploit their physical or emotional needs or insecurities to pressure them into the commercial sex industry.

Traffickers can be anyone — a peer, friend, partner, or even a parent. They often target people with particular risk factors, such as problems at home, low self-esteem, conflicts with friends, poverty, homelessness, substance use and mental-health disorders. They typically pose as caring and loving figures to their target, offering them whatever they need most as a way of cementing deep psychological bonds and material dependency.

Traffickers then quickly leverage this newly created bond against their target, often pushing their sexual boundaries to groom them into the commercial sex industry. What feels like consent at first quickly turns into control. Threats, violence and manipulation are used to keep targets in the commercial sex industry, with profits swiftly funnelled back to the trafficker.

Myth

People who are being sex trafficked have been kidnapped or are trapped against their will.

Reality

In most cases, traffickers don't kidnap or trap people. Instead, they use a combination of psychological and emotional abuse, physical violence, threats and shaming to get them to do what they want. Sadly, it usually starts with someone the victim knows, loves and trusts.

Labour trafficking

Labour trafficking involves the control and exploitation of people for their labour through coercion, threats, and deception, commonly referred to as forced labour. While this can occur in any industry, it is most prevalent in low-wage sectors like agriculture, hospitality, construction, personal services, and in-home care.

Typically, victims, including migrant workers and foreign nationals, enter legally into Canada but fall victim to trafficking through various means such as violence, threats, deceit and debt bondage, which force them to work against their will.

Myth

Labour trafficking only happens to undocumented people.

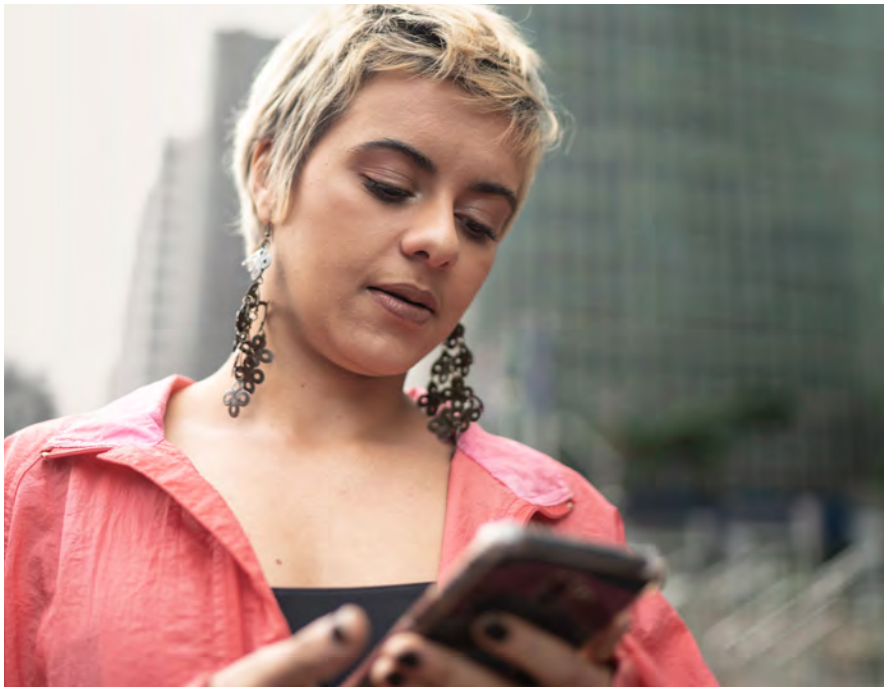
Reality

Undocumented residents and people with precarious immigration status are at higher risk, but many labour trafficked people in Canada arrived here legally.

Human Trafficking in Canada

Human trafficking is a serious and growing issue in Canada, affecting communities across the country. While trafficking is often perceived as an issue confined to large cities, it happens in both urban centres and small rural communities. A significant trafficking corridor runs from Halifax through Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto extending westward to London and Windsor. This corridor reflects the systematic nature of trafficking, with victims being transported between provinces and cities for exploitation (CCTEHT, 2021).

Victims of sex trafficking in Canada are predominantly Canadian citizens, not foreign nationals, and traffickers often target people from historically marginalized communities, including Indigenous women and girls, 2SLGBTQ+ youth, Black Canadians and migrants. Trafficking is typically hidden in plain sight, occurring in private homes, hotels, short-term rentals, and businesses. The exploitation is primarily psychological and financial in nature; rarely does it involve physical confinement, making it harder to detect and address. Understanding these patterns is essential for effective intervention and public awareness.



By the Numbers

Human trafficking remains a significant issue across Canada, with both urban and rural areas affected. Since its launch in 2019, the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline has received over 19,799 contacts and identified over 2,035 cases of trafficking, recognizing over 3,196 victims and survivors.

While these numbers help illustrate the scope of trafficking, they present an incomplete picture. Data reflects only what has been reported or identified by people that have called the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline; many victims remain unseen. Factors such as public awareness, the amount of funding available to prevent and respond to human trafficking in any given community, and victims' willingness to seek help all influence reported numbers.

Common myths and misconceptions

Myth: Human trafficking is a border issue

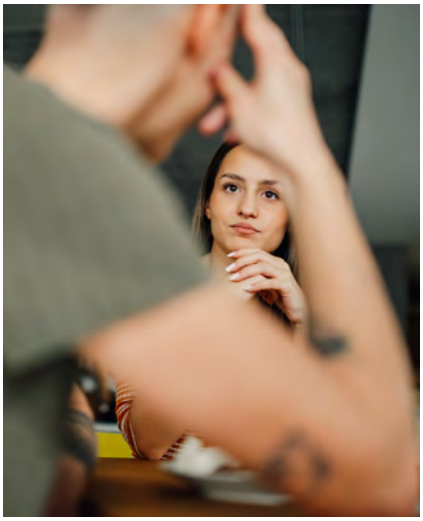
Human trafficking is increasingly being conflated with human smuggling, yet these are two distinct issues. Misusing the term 'human trafficking' to describe human smuggling undermines the anti-trafficking movement by perpetuating the false notion that trafficking occurs only at borders. In reality, trafficking happens within communities across Canada.

HUMAN SMUGGLING

In most cases, people consent to assistance in crossing international borders as irregular migrants. Once across, they are no longer beholden to the smuggler and are free to go their own way. Human smuggling is a an offense under the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (s. 117).

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Traffickers control and exploit victims for sex or labour. The key elements are the lack of genuine consent and ongoing exploitation for someone else's profit — not movement. It is often challenging for victims to exit trafficking situations because of threats and manipulation. Trafficking is an indictable offense, under the *Criminal Code of Canada* (s. 279), where the defining element is exploitation.



Myth: Human trafficking starts with an abduction

Contrary to popular belief, human trafficking seldom begins with dramatic abductions. Instead, it evolves over time, often through manipulation within relationships for sex trafficking, or deceptive job offers for labour trafficking.

The idea of victims being forcibly whisked away in unmarked vans is largely a cinematic myth. If Canadians focus only on these sensationalized scenarios, they risk missing the more subtle, yet far more common indicators of trafficking. Recognizing the reality of how trafficking actually occurs is crucial in effectively identifying and combating it.

Myth: Victims are kept locked up

The pervasive myth that trafficking victims are physically restrained with chains and shackles is often perpetuated by problematic imagery in media stories. Such depictions create a misleading picture of how human trafficking typically operates. In reality, the bonds that keep victims tied to their traffickers are more often psychological. Tactics like grooming, manipulation, threats, and intimidation are the primary tools traffickers use to maintain control. This misconception is particularly damaging as it hinders the public's ability to recognize the more subtle signs of trafficking, which are crucial for timely and effective intervention.

Myth: Trafficking only happens to women and girls

While women and girls make up the majority of reported cases, trafficking also affects men, boys, and people of all gender identities, including Two-Spirit, non-binary, and gender-diverse people. 2SLGBTQ+ youth — particularly boys and gender-diverse youth — face heightened vulnerability to trafficking.

Trans, Two-Spirit, non-binary, and gender nonconforming people make up 2% of all victims and survivors — even though they represent less than 0.5% of the general population. (CCTEHT, 2021)

Laws in Canada

The Government of Canada officially made human trafficking a criminal code offence in 2005; however, deep flaws within the criminal justice system are resulting in lengthy court cases and incredibly low prosecution rates.

A 2023 Statistics Canada report found that approximately 11 per cent of human trafficking cases resulted in a guilty decision (Heidinger, 2023). Many charges are stayed, withdrawn, or dismissed entirely. By comparison, guilty verdicts were much more frequent in cases involving sex trade charges (30%) and other violent offences (46%), respectively.

The data also shows that human trafficking cases also take longer to prosecute. The 2023 StatsCan report found that "human trafficking cases took a median of 398 days to complete, more than twice as long as sex trade cases (170 days) or other violent offence cases (187 days).

Human trafficking cases often rely heavily on survivor testimony to prove coercion and exploitation. The over-reliance on testimonial evidence raises significant ethical and practical challenges. Survivors may be reluctant to testify, have difficulty remembering details in a linear sequence due to trauma, or fear facing their traffickers in open court. For these reasons, many survivors struggle to participate in court proceedings.

Other challenges include inadequate legal supports and a lack of trauma-informed training for judges and juries, and the limited uptake of civil legal options such as suing traffickers for damages.

To address these issues, the Centre is calling on all levels of government to enact legislation requiring an anti-human trafficking strategy, to be reviewed and renewed every five years. A dedicated human trafficking strategy would:

- Focus government attention on anti-trafficking efforts
- Coordinate action across jurisdictions
- Identify and address policy shortcomings
- Secure dedicated funding to support survivors and hold traffickers to account

Best practices

Use care when choosing imagery

Selecting appropriate images and b-roll for stories about human trafficking is crucial. Unfortunately, sensationalized visuals are still widely used — including images of people cowering, chained, duct-taped, handcuffed, or shackled, as well as sexualized depictions of street-based sex work. These portrayals are not only inaccurate, they reinforce harmful myths, stigmatize survivors, and undermine public understanding of how trafficking actually occurs. By suggesting trafficking always looks dramatic or overtly criminal, they distract from the more common, more nuanced realities.

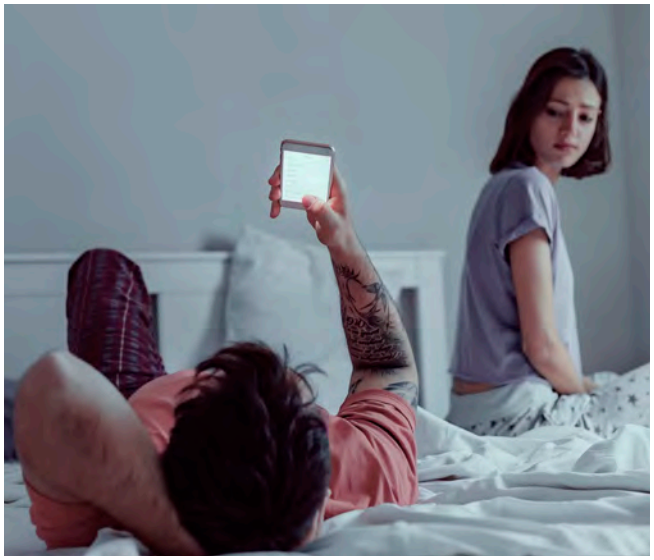
It's important to understand that trafficking often takes place in less conspicuous locations like private homes, hotels, and short-term rentals. The signs are rarely overt. By focusing on extreme and sensational images, media coverage can lead the public to expect dramatic scenes, such as someone visibly restrained or visibly distressed. This expectation can cause them to miss more common but subtle signs of trafficking, making it harder for the public to recognize and respond to human trafficking in their community.

Traffickers primarily use psychological methods to control their victims, not physical restraints. Images that imply physical restraint or are triggering, like outstretched hands or tape over mouths, not only misrepresent the majority of trafficking cases but also risk retraumatizing survivors of intimate partner violence. The choice of imagery should therefore carefully reflect the psychological subtleties of trafficking to enhance public understanding and support for survivors.

INAPPROPRIATE IMAGERY

APPROPRIATE NUANCED IMAGERY

With careful selection, images can highlight the more subtle, everyday realities of exploitation. Trafficking often resembles intimate partner violence or labour exploitation in ordinary settings — not chains, cages, or dramatic rescues. Choosing images that capture emotional nuance, isolation, or control without sensationalism helps audiences better understand the issue and supports factual, trauma-informed coverage.



Top tip: Searching for *human trafficking* on stock images sites will inevitably return inappropriate and problematic images. Instead, try searching for terms like *'unhappy couple,' 'relationship discord,'* etc. In our experience, human trafficking in Canada is more likely to resemble intimate partner violence.

Best practices

Including resources

News articles on human trafficking are increasingly featuring content warnings and links to community resources, reflecting a positive shift in media practices. Given the sensitive nature of trafficking, these articles can profoundly impact readers, some of whom may recognize their own experiences or those of loved ones through such stories. Content warnings help prepare readers for potentially distressing material, while links to resources are crucial for providing immediate help and support.

SAMPLE CONTENT WARNING

Trigger warning: This article discusses topics of human trafficking and abuse which may be distressing for some readers. If you or someone you know is experiencing human trafficking, you can call the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-833-900-1010.

SAMPLE RESOURCE INFORMATION

If you or someone you know is experiencing human trafficking or exploitation, you can call the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-833-900-1010 — available 24/7/365 and in over 200 languages.

Victims of human trafficking may not always recognize their circumstances due to how deeply they've been manipulated. Therefore, it's vital that journalists include clear, accessible support options to assist readers who need help. While content warnings might be challenging to implement universally due to varying editorial policies, providing resource information should become a standard practice.

Best practices

Prioritize dignity and accuracy in language choice

The words journalists choose can shape public understanding of human trafficking and affect how survivors are perceived. Here are some best practices for language in sex trafficking coverage.

Preferred Language in Reporting on Sex Trafficking

Preferred language	Avoid this language	Why it matters
human trafficking	"modern slavery", "modern-day slavery"	*Modern slavery* is a misleading, sensational term. Equating human trafficking with slavery can minimize the distinct historical context of slavery and cause confusion.
sex trafficking (or commercial sexual exploitation)	"prostitution" (when referring to coerced sex)	Referring to forced commercial sex as *prostitution* obscures the coercion at the core of trafficking. Terms like prostitution carry stigma and imply a consensual act, whereas *sex trafficking* correctly highlights exploitation and the lack of consent.
survivor (or person with lived experience; or "victim" in a legal context)	"sex slave"	*Survivor* emphasizes resilience, agency, and recovery, aligning with trauma-informed reporting. While *victim* may be used in legal contexts, using it as a catch-all can imply helplessness. Terms like *sex slave* are needlessly sensational and dehumanizing.
trafficker	"pimp"	*Trafficker* accurately denotes someone who exploits people through force, fraud, or coercion, making the criminal nature explicit. In contrast, *pimp* is slang that can glamorize or trivialize exploitation, undermining the seriousness of the crime.
sex buyer	"John"	*John* is a euphemism that minimizes the seriousness of buying sex and obscures the buyer's accountability. Using *sex buyer* explicitly identifies the person's role in the exploitation.

Preferred Language in Reporting on Sex Trafficking (continued)

Preferred language	Avoid this language	Why it matters
sex industry (or commercial sex industry)	"sex trade" (when discussing trafficking)	Terms like *sex industry* provide a neutral, factual description of the commercial sex sector. Phrases such as *sex trade* suggest a mutual, consensual exchange, which is not the case in trafficking situations.
child sexual exploitation (or child sex trafficking)	"child prostitute"	Children cannot consent to sex, whether commercial in nature or otherwise. Describing an exploited child as a *child prostitute* is inaccurate and stigmatizing, implying a choice where none exists.
human trafficking situation (or experience of trafficking)	"human trafficking lifestyle"	Referring to trafficking as a "lifestyle" implies choice and agency, which contradicts the coercion and manipulation at the core of trafficking. This framing is harmful because it suggests victims are complicit in their exploitation.

Preferred Language in Reporting on Labour Trafficking

Preferred language	Avoid this language	Why it matters
migrant worker	*"foreign worker", "unskilled labourer", "imported labour"*	*Migrant worker* recognizes a person's humanity and contribution without reducing them to their origin or skill level. Adjectives such as *foreign* or *labourer* cast workers as outsiders or commodities, which is dehumanizing.
undocumented migrant, (or undocumented person, person with precarious immigration status)	"illegal immigrant", "illegal alien"	Describing someone as *undocumented* or having an *irregular status* focuses on their situation without criminalizing their existence. By contrast, calling a person *illegal* is stigmatizing and implies criminality, which fuels negative stereotypes. Most victims of labour trafficking come to Canada legally as temporary foreign workers.
domestic worker (or caregiver)	"maid", "nanny", "domestic servant"	*Domestic worker* and *caregiver* acknowledge the professionalism and dignity of people in household work. Terms like *maid* or *servant* can be dismissive or stereotype workers, undervaluing their labour and contributions.

Engaging with survivors

Journalists should approach survivors with care and empathy, taking steps to avoid retraumatization. Some survivors may feel comfortable sharing their experience, while others may not. Do not push or probe for details about their trafficking experience. Respect their boundaries at all times.

Even after leaving a trafficking situation, survivors may still fear retaliation from their traffickers. Protecting their safety may involve using pseudonyms or omitting identifying details that could put them at risk.

Avoid any language or framing that implies victim-blaming. Victims of trafficking are manipulated, abused, and coerced into these situations. In some cases, survivors may have been forced to recruit others into trafficking — a complex trauma that should be handled with sensitivity and without judgment.

Many survivors are open to speaking to the media to raise awareness and prevent others from becoming victims. However, their willingness to engage should not be mistaken for comfort with all types of questions or coverage. Respect their boundaries and let them control how their story is told.

Importantly, survivors are more than their trafficking experience. Many go on to make significant contributions to their communities, including in anti-trafficking work. Where appropriate, consider highlighting the organizations they've founded, the initiatives they lead, or the businesses they run — always with their full consent.

"Can you tell me about the worst thing that happened to you?

Survivors have told us they are still regularly asked invasive, distressing questions like this.

These kinds of questions are harmful and unnecessary. They do not contribute to ethical storytelling — and they risk retraumatizing the person being interviewed. Survivor accounts should be guided by the survivor, not driven by a need for shock value.

Instead, focus on asking open-ended, respectful questions.

Engaging with survivors

Be mindful of how you ask questions

Pointed questions like “Where were your parents when you were being trafficked?” or “Can you tell us about a time you lost hope?” can be triggering. Broader, open-ended questions give survivors control over the direction of the conversation and allow them to share at their own pace. Additionally, many survivors struggle to recount their experience in a linear way. Journalists should be prepared for non-linear storytelling and respond with patience and understanding.

Avoid asking for excessive detail or anything graphic. The goal is not to sensationalize trauma but to provide an ethical, dignified account of a survivor’s experience. Where possible, aim to end the piece with a sense of hope, resilience, or a call to action that supports broader awareness and change.

Create a safe space

Survivors should be told they are in control of the conversation and can take a break at any time. Setting this tone of safety and respect helps empower survivors and ensures the interview process remains trauma-informed. Allowing a support person to accompany them, or conducting the interview in a location of their choosing, can further help create a sense of safety and control.

For more on trauma-informed approaches to interviewing, including how to build trust and share stories ethically, see the Best Practices for Trauma-Informed Journalism from the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute and the Guidelines on Gender-Based Violence in the Media by Aura Freedom.

Additional resources

Human Trafficking Corridors in Canada

Human Trafficking Corridors in Canada — the first national study to examine how traffickers use transportation routes — found that traffickers rely on major highways and transit corridors to move victims across provinces. These routes allow them to avoid detection, increase profits in commercial sex markets, and reinforce victims' dependency.

It Happens Here: Labour Exploitation Among Migrant Workers During the Pandemic

Our research shows that employer discrimination, unsafe working conditions and gaps in government policy put migrant workers at risk of being exploited once they arrive in Canada.

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