

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Sex Trafficking of Women and Girls in a Southern Ontario Region: Police File Review Exploring Victim Characteristics, Trafficking Experiences, and the Intersection With Child Welfare

“Risk and vulnerability cannot be erased from a young person’s narrative, however prevention and intervention initiatives for sex trafficking should also focus on fostering youths’ resiliency by providing programs and services aimed at meeting their needs for love, belonging, and connection” (p. 16).

1. What is the research about?

This research examines the increased domestic sex trafficking of women and girls in Southern Ontario, and how this intersects with children and youth in care. Moreover, this research seeks to uncover why youth who are involved in child welfare have a higher representation in sex-trafficking cases when compared to youth who have no child welfare involvement.

Although there is limited research on this topic, evidence implies continued growth in the number of youth in care being exploited through sex trafficking. Understanding this issue is important for creating interventions, policies, and preventative strategies needed to train Children’s Aid Services (CAS) workers, law enforcement, youth workers, and other stakeholders in combating and preventing sex trafficking – as well as to highlight the gaps in a system that results in the ongoing abuse and neglect of youth.

2. Where did the research take place?

Data was collected from York Region Police and York Region Children’s Aid Society. York Region (part of the Greater Toronto Area, or GTA) is considered to be one of Canada’s fastest-growing suburban municipalities. Research shows that over 75% of sex trafficking cases occur within the GTA (p. 8), causing a growing concern locally, provincially, and federally.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about girls under the age of 18 who have been in care and are victims of sex trafficking.

4. How was the research done?

Qualitative research was conducted through secondary data collection – an analysis of data collected by others, in this case police (cases of sex trafficking) and child welfare (files on those who had been identified as victims of sex trafficking).

A template was provided to the police containing variables of interest to be taken from case files, including age of recruitment, age when the trafficking investigation was initiated, country of origin, exposure to child maltreatment, substance use, criminal behaviour, and trafficking experience; for example, where the victim resided while being trafficked, the various types of recruitment methods used (e.g. Facebook, romantic relationship, strip club), and the methods of entrapment (e.g. grooming and aversive methods, including threats and physical violence).

The sample group of 223 cases was broken down between girls involved in child welfare (52) and those not involved in child welfare (102). Similarities and differences were determined by comparing data extracted from the case files. Specifically, researchers looked at socio-demographic characteristics, childhood maltreatment, substance use, and recruitment methods and entrapment strategies.

5. What are the key findings?

Researchers revealed **seven key characteristics** of youth in care victimized by sex trafficking:

- a) They live in **group or foster home settings**.
- b) They are **recruited as minors** (under the age of 18).
- c) They **draw the attention of law enforcement earlier** than youth not in care (for example, when youth in care leave their residence and don't return within 24 hours, the police have to be notified and a missing person's report is initiated).
- d) They **experience child maltreatment** (for example, neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse) at a higher rate compared to youth not in care.
- e) They report **using alcohol, cocaine, and crystal meth** at a higher rate when compared to youth not in care.
- f) They are more likely to be **recruited by strangers in public places** than youth not in care.
- g) They are more likely to experience **grooming strategies** – like gifts, drugs, money, or housing – than youth not in care.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

These findings highlight the ways in which **youth in care are more vulnerable to sex trafficking** – and the importance of improving the quality of care for these youth by child welfare agencies, youth workers, police, and other service providers who are working with youth. For example, practitioners should focus efforts and resources on **prevention initiatives, additional supports and protection** for child welfare placements, and **service to survivors** of sex trafficking.

Service providers must take time to develop and adopt a **trauma-informed therapeutic framework** for use by frontline workers. This framework should be designed to aid staff and service providers in identifying youth who may be at the most significant risk of recruitment, or who are presently victims of sex trafficking. Some promising evidence-based interventions for supporting this population include **safety planning** and **cross-sector collaboration**, as well as the **use of trauma-based, victim-centered, and gender-sensitive frameworks**.



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