
Human trafficking

Field resource for police officers¹

Human trafficking and trauma

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

Signs of trauma

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

Creating a safe place

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



Human trafficking

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

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

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

A red banner with the word "EXPLOITATION" written in white, slanted text.

¹ By Dr. Patrick McCaffery and Dr. Lindsay Richardson (September 2022). The views expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Justice Canada.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Figure 1: Key themes to combat human trafficking



1

- The characteristics of successful human trafficking investigators are empathy, patience, and exceptional people skills.
- It is very rare to completely remove a victim from a human trafficking environment.
- A conversation with a victim is a positive first step to building rapport and trust.

2

- Victims have been exploited and conditioned to fear police officers.
- The psychological bond that trauma creates is powerful.
- Training officers on how the brain responds to trauma is crucial.
- Don't be distracted by gaps, apparent contradictions or fragmented memories. It is a normal response to trauma.

3

- It takes a complementary team to help a victim.
- Barriers arising from variables such as gender, culture, language, COVID-19, are better addressed by multi-service teams (NGOs, cross border agreements, local resources, shelters, victim services, etc.).
- Partners must be reliable and available outside business hours.

4

- Rapport building, building trust, and helping victims feel safe lay the foundation for interviews and further interactions with victims.
- Information gaps provided by victims can be later corroborated.
- Be victim oriented. This is not the standard police file.

5

- The priority is the victim's needs not the success of the prosecution.
- Traditional investigative approaches may be counter-productive.

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

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