



**International Centre for Criminal Law
Reform and Criminal Justice Policy**

Support and Assistance to Survivors of Human Trafficking in Alberta

**John Winterdyk
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March 2023



This study was conducted with the financial support of
The Office of Crime Reduction and Gang Outreach, Ministry of Public Safety and
Solicitor General, Province of British Columbia

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Support and Assistance to Survivors of Human Trafficking in Alberta

Survey Analysis of Service providers for Survivors of Human Trafficking and Interview with Survivors¹

John Winterdyk & Crystal Hincks²

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¹ This study was conducted with the financial support of The Office of Crime Reduction and Gang Outreach, Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, Province of British Columbia

² John Winterdyk was the principal investigator and Crystal Hincks was a research associate in the project. We would like to acknowledge the research assistance of Danika DeCarlo-Slobodnik.

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INTRODUCTION

This project was supported by the International Centre for Criminal Law Reform (ICCLR) to undertake a “qualitative analysis of services/supports for human trafficking survivors.” A British Columbia-led team completed the project for their province, and the research team completed it in Alberta. Although the two Teams collaborated on the methodology, the studies were completed independently. This report represents the findings of the survey and interviews conducted in Alberta.

The report will be divided into two parts. The first will cover the survey results, and Part II will cover the interview with survivors.

For Part I of the project, a survey titled Assistance and Support Services for Survivors of Human Trafficking was distributed to 54 service providers across Alberta and selected providers in several other provinces. The survey, which consisted of 23 questions, was intended to identify: (1) the types of services and supports that are (most) needed by survivors of labour and sex trafficking, (2) the profile and characteristics of survivors who are provided with or seek services and support, and (3) current (prospective) gaps in services.

PART I: Survey Analysis of Service Providers for Survivors of Human Trafficking

Methodology

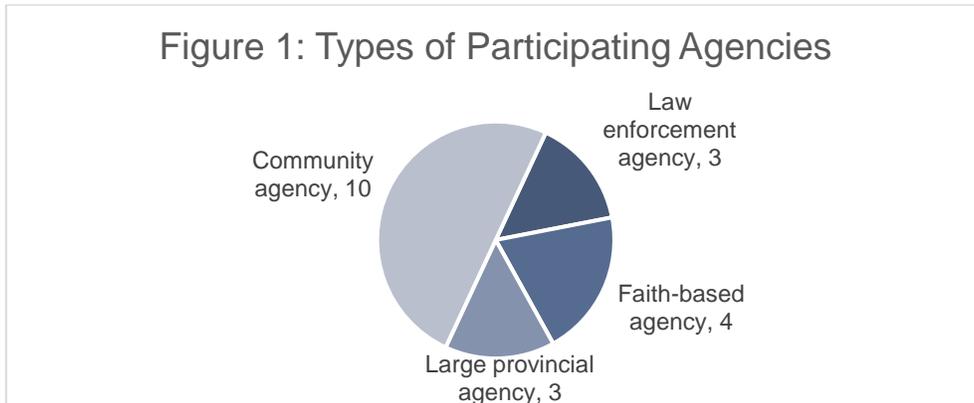
The research team compiled a 23-question survey (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was then vetted with a couple of agencies in Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario to ensure the appropriateness of the questions and comprehensiveness. Then, relying on open-source search engines and an existing network of contacts in Alberta, a list of service providers was compiled by a research assistant. Using their respective email contact, the survey was distributed to the attention of any of the senior administrators for the agency or organization. After approximately two weeks, a follow-up email was sent to those who had not returned the survey. Then, after 7-10 days, the research team followed up with phone calls to ensure they had received the survey and to inquire if they could complete the survey within a week or two. The follow-up emails and or calls only marginally increased the response rate.

In addition to the emailed surveys, the Alberta team attended the SETA (Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking Awareness Conference) in Calgary (Sept. 19-20/22) and spoke informally with several attending agencies about the survey. No additional follow-ups were conducted.

Findings from the Survey of Service Providers

Fifty-four agencies/services in Alberta were identified and contacted. Of those, 20 responses were received, with a response rate of 37%. The researchers were hoping to achieve a higher response rate, and despite repeated (up to three) follow-ups (via email and telephone calls) with recipients, few additional surveys were received. Although disappointing, this is not inconsistent with survey-type research (Liebermann, 2021). During the follow-up phone calls, some recipients cited the overwhelming volume of human trafficking-related surveys they receive monthly as the reason they did not complete them. This over-exposure to the survey process - a phenomenon known as ‘survey fatigue’ (see Field, 2020) - often reduces an individual’s interest or enthusiasm to participate in or complete surveys (O’Reilly-Shah, 2017).³ Given the exponential increase in human trafficking research over the past decade (see, e.g., Sweileh, 2018), it is understandable that service providers have perhaps lost interest in participating in current and future studies.

The types of agencies that participated in the survey varied in terms of their sector, which illustrates the broad spectrum of organizations working to address the issue of human trafficking (see Figure 1).⁴ Three respondents were representatives of law enforcement agencies (i.e., victim services and a dedicated Human Trafficking Unit in Alert). Four respondents represented faith-based organizations, three represented larger provincial/backbone agencies, and ten represented various community organizations.



³ This comment was also shared by various service providers during the Calgary SETA Conference in Sept. 2022.

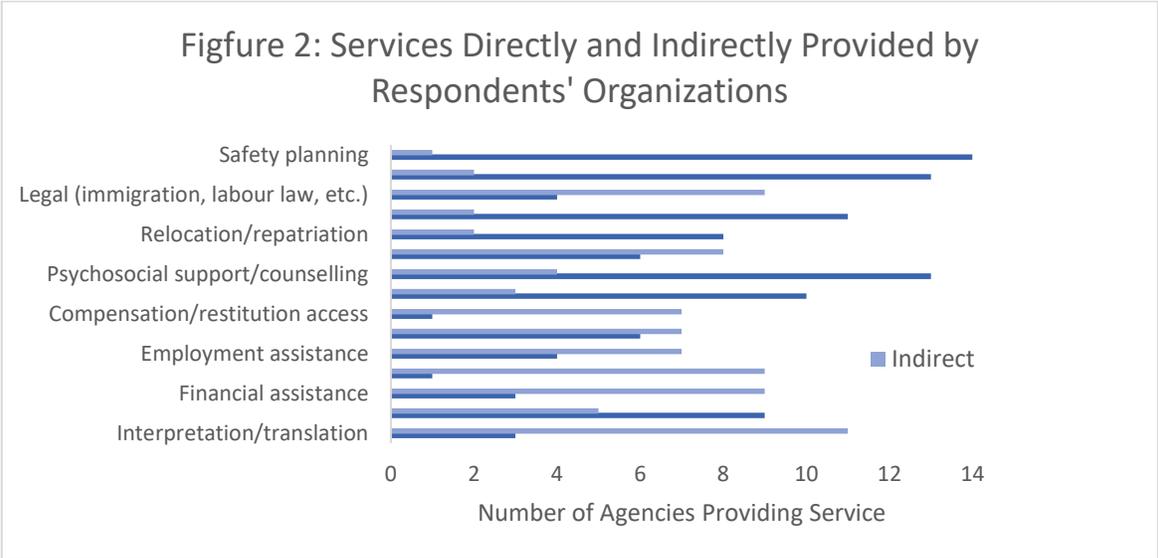
⁴ In October 2022 the Alberta government awarded the Alberta Anti-human trafficking task force (Chaired by the country-western singer Paul Brandt) \$20.8 million to create an Office to Combat Trafficking in Persons and will help fund the development of “Indigenous-led and culturally appropriate services for trafficked victims,” and create more positions for agencies such as ALERT (Alberta Law Enforcement Response Team) “to support victims and complaints during investigations” (Wakefield, 2022).

Service Provision

Despite the lower-than-anticipated response rate, the participants who completed the survey offered valuable insight into services available for survivors of sexual exploitation and/or forced labour trafficking. Regarding organizational mandates, most respondents indicated that their organization primarily ‘provides services to victims and survivors of human trafficking’ (65%, n=13). Other services provided by respondents included ‘providing broad-based/comprehensive community services’ (30%, n=6), ‘providing broad-based/comprehensive specialized victim services’ (30%, n=6), and ‘providing broad-based/comprehensive victim services’ (25%, n=5). Other services provided by respondents included: conducting investigations into human trafficking (10%, n=2), providing backbone support to agencies through coordination and collaboration (15%, n=3), and raising awareness of this issue (5%, n=1).

When asked about direct and indirect service delivery, responses varied across the types of support offered. The most common forms of direct service support were safety planning (n=14), psycho-social treatment/counselling (n=13), victim support during the investigation or court processes (n=13), facilitating communication with relatives (n=11), and lodging (including emergency shelter) (n=10). The least common types of direct service support were for assistance with immigration matters (n=1), access to restitution or compensation (n=1), and legal assistance/representation (n=1) (see Figure 2).

Responses were more evenly distributed for indirect service delivery, and many agencies provide a blend of both direct and indirect service support. Agencies reported that they indirectly assist with translation services (n=11), emergency financial support (n=9), legal assistance/representation (n=9), immigration matters (n=9), and medical care (n=8).

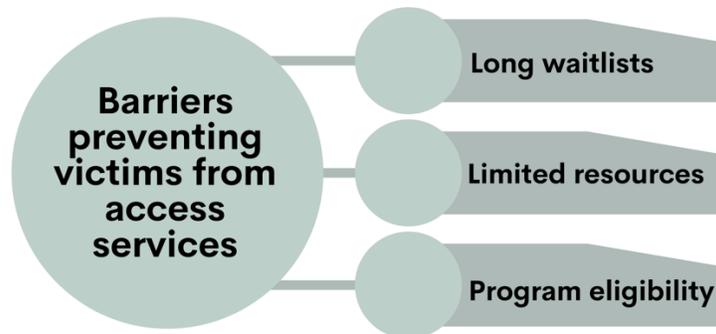


To assess the needs of victims, 72% (n=13) of respondents indicated that their agency uses a 'basic intake form'. Other agencies provide victims with options such as phone or in-person screenings (15%, n=3). During the intake process, individuals reporting victimization are screened to ensure they meet the eligibility criteria of the service provider. Seventy-eight percent of service providers (n=14) reported that they have eligibility criteria to access support, while 22% of service providers do not. Eligibility was often based on age (few agencies serve both adults and youth) and gender (especially concerning emergency shelters and housing programs).

Although most respondents reported that their agencies have eligibility criteria to access services and support, the respondents provided varied answers when asked. For example, some responses included: "To what extent do you feel the services provided by your organization are a good fit for the needs of the victims/survivors of sexual exploitation and/or forced labour trafficking?" Less than half (42%) of respondents answered, 'a very good fit', while 26% answered 'a good fit'. The remaining respondents reported that their services were only 'somewhat of a fit' (16%), and 16% of agencies felt that 'other organizations would be a better fit'.

An open-ended follow-up question was asked about what barriers, if any, may prevent victims from finding and/or accessing services. Many responses touched on the long waitlists for programs and services, a lack of sufficient resources, and how program eligibility criteria disqualify individuals from receiving help. Other barriers identified included fear and/or a lack of trust, awareness of where to turn, geographic isolation, and language and/or cultural barriers (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Barriers preventing victims from accessing services



Operations and Organization

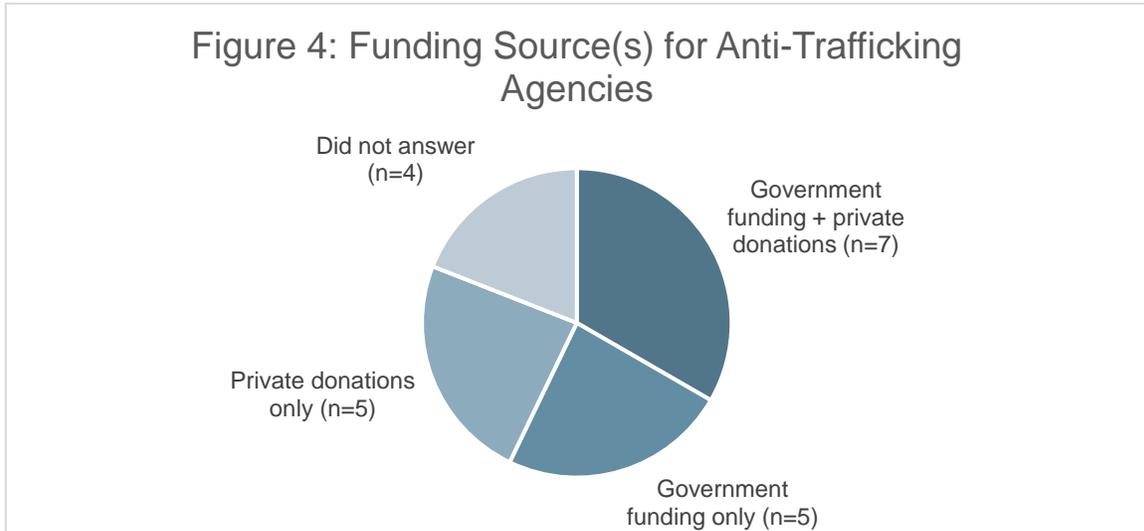
The geographical reach of the respondents' organizations for direct and indirect service delivery was also explored in the survey. Participants could select the number of applicable respondents, so a proportion (25%, n=5) reported that they provided services at more than one level. However, most agencies provide services at the local level (70%, n=14), and eight (40%) provide services at the regional level. Only six (30%) agencies reported providing services at the national (15%, n=3), and international (15%, n=3) levels.⁵

Respondents were asked how the victims and survivors of human trafficking they serve are first connected/referred to their agencies. The majority of connections were made either through a professional agency or government system (e.g., justice, health, child protection, & education) referral (95%, n=19) or via self-referral by the victim/survivor (90%, n=18). The next most prevalent forms of connection were made through friends and/or family members (68%, n=13 respectively) and police incidents or investigations (60%, n=12).

Eleven agencies were able to provide accurate counts (or at least estimates/ranges) of how many new clients they will see, with many of them adding a caveat that they were 'guessing'. Participants were also asked about how many new referrals they receive each year. Only 15 respondents answered, "How many NEW victims, and survivors of sexual exploitation and/or forced labour trafficking do you assist every year?" The responses ranged from 1-2, to 6 to "I would guess 10-15". The remaining four respondents answered "I don't know" to the question and the other 5 survey participants that did not answer this question likely did not have the requested data. This illustrates the ongoing challenges for anti-trafficking researchers and service providers to fully understand the extent of this issue. Without accurate or estimated data, it is difficult for governments, funders, and service providers to determine the most needed resources and supports.

When it comes to funding for the anti-human trafficking organizations that completed the survey, most rely on both government and private dollars (n=7). Five organizations reported they are funded solely through government agreements and grants. Only five agencies reported they are funded solely through private donations. Although no specific question asked who their funders were, several respondents indicated that their primary funders include Alberta Justice (provincial government) and Public Safety Canada (federal) (see Figure 4).

⁵ Based on informal discussions with two of the agencies surveyed while attending the SETA conference in September 2022, the international service involved survivors who has been trafficking outside of Canada – two in the United States and one in the United States and Europe.



Funding and program capacity were identified as the most significant challenges to respondents' organizations in providing timely, coordinated, and comprehensive support to victims of sexual and labour exploitation and trafficking. For example, one respondent stated that their agency has a waitlist of 50+ "NEW victims" waiting for services. However, the respondent did not specify whether the cases had been substantiated or confirmed as trafficking cases. Another respondent noted that their program estimates (n= 45/52) include combining two of their programs "that work with trafficked persons" and that "40% of those victims were trafficked and the others were assaulted." Several of the comments provided by the respondents when asked about barriers to providing support and resources that victims require:

"Lack of funding for transportation for individuals who have been trafficked to this area to return 'home'. If the individual would like to stay in the area, there is a lack of sustainable financial support because living costs are very expensive here, and financial support won't cover all costs".

"Survivors are mistreated by the system by not being believed or pathologized".

"Not enough programs/beds for emergency placement for these victims".

"The victims are often poly-addicted, and ALL suffer from some form of PTSD, so many layers to finally get to the HT information...it would be good to have a consistent program for these victims".

"No proper detox facility, lack of funding, lack of support services and programming available, programs and/or shelters are ALWAYS full".

It is evident from these responses that those agencies who completed the survey the survey are discouraged by the lack of resources for victims of exploitation and trafficking. However, the Government of Canada has allocated nearly \$75 million in federal funding (over 5 years) to support community-led anti-trafficking efforts across the country (Minister Monsef..., 2019). Additionally, provincial governments provide support regionally, and private donations also contribute to tackling the issue of exploitation and trafficking. For example, in October 2022, the Alberta government provided “\$20.8 million over the next four years to implement recommendations from a star-led task force on human trafficking” (Drinkwater, 2022). However, more must be done to address victims' and survivors' unique and complex needs (see Sanders, 2023).⁶

Victims

Some basic demographic information on victims was requested to understand the clients who the respondents' agencies are serving. Five agencies reported that 100% of their clients are exclusively females, while another five reported that 75-99% are females. Concerning child/youth victims, only one agency reported that approximately 50% of their clients are minors. Eight other agencies reported that they do serve children and youth. However, their reported percentages were all less than 25%. These findings are consistent with the official police-reported statistics on individuals who are over-represented in sex trafficking – women and girls (see: Roudometkina & Wakeford, 2018; Conroy, 2022). However, a UNODC report notes that “men and boys are” (more frequently) “trafficked into exploitive labour, including working in the mining sector, as porters, soldiers, and slaves” (Sustainable Development Goals, 2016). Eight respondents reported serving men, although most reported that men make up less than 5% of their clientele (n=6). However, two agencies indicated that 35% and 32% of their clients are male.

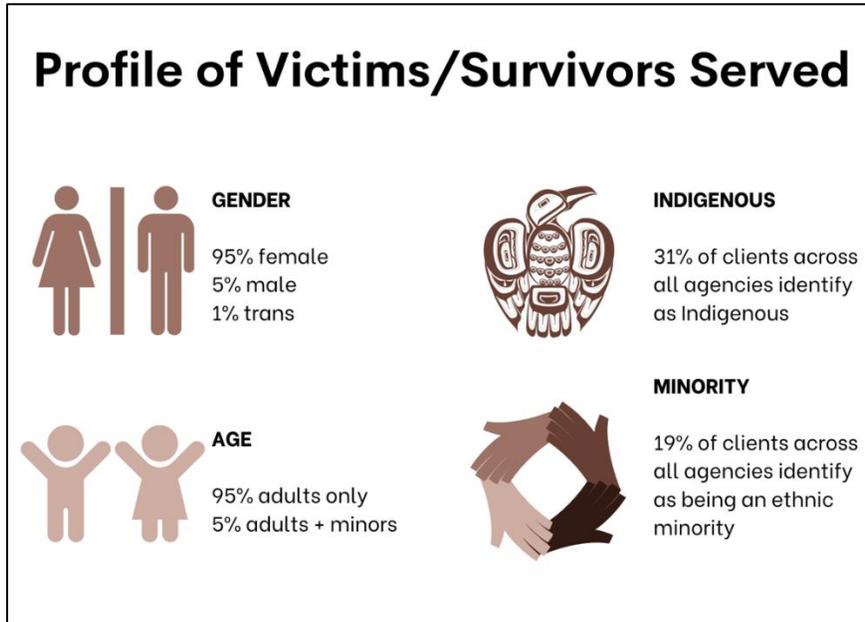
Trends in much of the Canadian human trafficking literature indicate that Indigenous individuals are overrepresented among sexual exploitation and trafficking victims (see, for example, Roudometkina and Wakeford, 2018). Across all agencies represented in the survey, an average of 31% of their clientele identify as Indigenous. Two agencies reported that 70% and 90% of their clients (respectively) identify as Indigenous, and six agencies' Indigenous clientele make up 20-35% of their total clients served. Three agencies reported that less than 10% of their clients identify as Indigenous.

In addition to Indigenous individuals, anti-trafficking agencies often serve ethnic minority victims and survivors. One agency reported that 59% of their clients identify as being from an ethnic minority group, and four agencies reported a smaller range of 15-35%. Three agencies reported serving fewer clients from ethnic minority groups (3-5%). Figure 5

⁶ Alexander Stevenson, a Canadian survivor of human trafficking, described the Kingston Protocol as “the spark of light helping victims to identify the truth of what is happening to them, and to regain control over their lives” (Tekema, 2023).

provides a breakdown of the victims and survivors who sought and or accepted some of the services offered. However, as several researchers and NGOs have directly and indirectly noted, given the ‘dark figure’ of trafficking victims/survivors, caution should be exercised in assuming that the profile is necessarily representative of human trafficking victims in general (see, for example, Conroy & Sutton, 2022).

Figure 5: Profile of Victim and Survivor Served



Sexual exploitation and human trafficking victims identifying as LGBTQ2S+ are frequently under-identified and under-served by law enforcement, child protection agencies, health service providers, and community-based anti-trafficking service providers (see, for example, Martinez & Kelle, 2013). Nine respondents provided statistics on the number of LGBTQ2S+ clients they serve; except for one agency that indicated 17% of its clients identify as LGBTQ2S+, the remaining respondents’ agencies all indicated that less than 10% of their total clients (an average of 4.7%) identify as LGBTQ2S+.

Victims of sexual exploitation and human trafficking are often victimized in a myriad of physical, sexual, psychological, emotional ways, and financial ways. Eighty-nine percent of victims experienced violence, 74% were threatened, 68% were coerced and/or deceived, and 63% were financially exploited. When asked “In what ways have the survivors you assist been victimized?”, sexual exploitation was the most frequent form of victimization (94.7%). Less

frequent forms of victimization included labour exploitation (26%), forced organ removal (5%),⁷ and being forced into other criminal activity (5%).

Despite the high levels of trauma that sexual exploitation and human trafficking victims experience, few individuals report their victimization to the police. On its website, the Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking lists several reasons. They include misconceptions about human trafficking, concern for personal safety, fear of reprimand for associated crimes, perception of law enforcement, etc. (see *Why victims....*, 2022). The fact that few victims report their victimization to the police presents a problem for two reasons. First, much of the human-trafficking data is police-reported, even though victims do not often report to law enforcement. As one of the respondents noted “they (the survivors) are programmed to fear police, so yes this continues to be an issue. Only 7% of HT crimes are reported to police” while another organization wrote “trust is a big factor. Feeling like no one will believe them when they tell their story, feeling uneasy about reporting to police...” And secondly, although many service providers are working to emancipate victims from exploitative situations, law enforcement cannot effectively investigate and charge exploiters and traffickers without reports. However, in recent years, a growing body of work has attempted to help bridge this gap in service (see, for example, *How local police....*, 2020). Respondents provided a wide range of estimates. At the higher end, two participants indicated that 60% and 75% of their agency’s clients (respectively) had filed police reports. Other participants (n=5) reported that less than 10% of victims they assisted had reported their victimization to law enforcement. Although many agencies reported low percentages of police reports made by victims, these numbers and some of the written comments suggest significant challenges for organizations in providing services to victims/survivors of human trafficking – be it sexual exploitation or labour trafficking. A summary of the comments ranged from: “victims we encounter DO NOT identify as victims of HT...takes years to realize it”, “not enough programs/beds for emergency placement...”, “victims are often poly addicted and ALL suffer from some form of PTSD”. “funding is a challenge”, “extremely long wait time through the court system”, and “building trust to tell us what they need.” Arguably, one of the commonly written comments evolved around the need for more resources and training support. Ironically, what was not mentioned but has been earmarked by other experts who have examined the status of human trafficking service provider programs is a general lack of cooperation between and among the various providers. For example, it was only in 2022 that the Alberta government provided funding to support the creation of a centralized office to combat human trafficking (Wakefield, 2022). How this will be operationalized is, at the time of preparing this report, not clear.

⁷ The incidents of organ removal happened while being trafficked outside of Canada.

Summary

In response to the 9-point Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking, which was informed by an Alberta Task Force spearheaded by the Not in My City (see footnote #2 above), the province introduced the Protecting Survivors of Human Trafficking Act (Bill 8) on April 7, 2020. The Act includes provisions to address all nine action plan points with the overarching objective to protect “vulnerable Albertans at-risk of being trafficked and strengthen a survivor’s ability to get away from physically, emotionally and financially damaging abuse.”⁸

And although the website shows that two of the nine action plan points have been completed, the other seven are listed as “work underway”. To date, there are no indicators of the status of the action items or any (tentative) measures of relative impact, let alone clearly stated goals for when the Office and action items would be fully implanted or addressed. This would appear to be reflected in the survey results. For example, the protection of survivors was not identified as a priority. Furthermore, there was no indication that an office was being established or that agencies and organizations were moving towards a model of collaboration and cooperation.

Concerning the survey, much of what was heard from the survey respondents closely parallels the findings in the existing human trafficking discourse (see, for example, Kellison & Torres, 2019; Martin et al., 2019). Even though the respondents acknowledged a couple of reported forced labour cases, there were no qualitative written responses to any of the questions. But unsurprisingly, there is little official data on forced labour because human trafficking, and in particular sex trafficking, is a “a politicized phenomenon wherein knowledge production (and interest/attention) is not always based on an analysis of phenomenology” (Sarkar, 2020, p. ix). Therefore, the summary comments are limited to victims of sex trafficking. The sex trafficking victims/survivors are predominantly young, female, and vulnerable, with complex histories of abuse and trauma. The services needed most to support these victims and survivors of human trafficking include (emergency) shelter, financial resources, mental health and addiction treatment, shorter wait times before appearing in court, and long-term support. However, the resources available to provide such services are limited, thus creating a cycle of challenges and frustrations for both victims and agencies. Even though supports for survivors/victims of sex trafficking are available across various agencies via direct and indirect service provision, it is evident from the comments of respondents that there are still significant gaps in crisis, short-term, and long-term services for victims of human trafficking. Unfortunately, there was no evidence of any similar support for survivors/victims of labour trafficking even though the Task Force report and new Act acknowledge that “human trafficking is a serious crime taking 3 forms: sexual exploitation, forced labour trafficking, and trafficking in human organs and tissues.” It

⁸ For further details about the action plan and the Act visit <https://www.alberta.ca/protecting-survivors-of-human-trafficking.aspx>. The Task Force consulted with over 100 stakeholders from across the country, and the Task Force included seven panel members from Alberta.

may be that the impact of COVID-19, the relative recency of the Act, and some political shifts within the provincial government may be impacting the actualization of the Act. Counter-exploitation and trafficking efforts involve complex systems of governance and addressing the service gaps for survivors/victims of human trafficking is a challenge faced by Alberta and the global community.

PART II: Interview with Survivors

Methodology

It is important to learn about human trafficking and the services/support they need from those who know best – the victims/survivors. Also, to properly understand how to prevent and address the needs of survivors/victims of human trafficking, it is essential to hear from these individuals (see, e.g., Jackson, 2022; Freidman, 2022). The researchers conducted a total of eleven interviews with victims/survivors to learn (1) how to support and help victims and survivors of human trafficking, (2) what needs to be done to improve existing services for victims and survivors of human trafficking, and (3) understand the experience victims/survivors undergo when/if seeking service and or support.

In an effort to standardize the interviews, an interview schedule was prepared (see Appendix A). The 23 questions were compiled based on prior research by the lead investigators and a review of the extant literature. With the assistance of a research assistant, the research team compiled a list of 54 service providers across the province.

Once the research teams agreed on the list of questions, the research team vetted the interview template with a survivor of human trafficking who is now also working in the anti-human trafficking sphere. In addition, the research team shared the interview schedule with the former director of the Winnipeg John's school for his feedback and input. Based on feedback from both agencies/individuals, several edits were made to ensure that the questions were not too sensitive, and resources were included for the participants should they ask for or need support. A final review of the interview questions was reviewed by the Ontario-based organization Defend Dignity. The organization also provided some constructive feedback which was incorporated into the interview template.

In an effort to recruit survivors of human trafficking who might be willing to be interviewed, in the survey of service providers, we asked whether the organization would be able and

willing to assist in referring possible survivors/victims who might be willing to consent to an interview.

Despite having a high response rate to offer assistance, the number of referrals was notably small. Subsequently, we attempted to contact (i.e., by phone and/or email) several of the larger organizations and ask them directly if they could assist us with some possible referral. In addition, we reached out to those survivors who agreed to participate and asked if they knew of any other survivors in their network who might be willing to be interviewed by us. Despite expressed efforts to support the project, this snowball sampling approach only resulted in one additional interviewee. And despite our efforts to identify and recruit survivors of labour trafficking, the Alberta research team was only able to interview one victims of trafficking for forced labour. Arguably, since the official count of trafficking for forced labour cases in Alberta is likely lower than that for victims/survivors of sex trafficking⁹ and most service/support agencies focus primarily on victims of sexual exploitation, the likelihood of interviewing victims/survivors of trafficking for forced labour was minimal, at best.¹⁰ This is even though, as early as 2010, the RCMP in Alberta “singled out Alberta as being at the forefront of a rising number of complaints about labour trafficking across the country” (Tettensor, 2019).¹¹

Once contacted, all the interviewees were offered the opportunity to see the interview question before being interviewed. No one declined to be interviewed. Once the interviewee agreed to be interviewed, a mutually agreeable time and day were identified.

Also, before conducting the interviews, the researchers provided participants with information on consent, confidentiality, and the ability to withdraw from participating at any time. Participants were asked which pronouns they preferred to be identified by and their preference for being referred to as a ‘victim’, ‘survivor’ or another term of their choice. Upon completing the interview (in whole or in part), the participants were provided with a stipend in the form of a \$50 CDN Amazon gift card in appreciation of their time and insight.

⁹ There is no official data available. The statement is based on the Statistics Canada data (see Conroy, 2022).

¹⁰ Although one of the organizations surveyed noted that labour trafficking cases make up about half their caseload. Yet, because trafficking for forced labour, in Alberta, has only recently (2020) been officially acknowledged as a form of human trafficking, it be contributing to the lack of awareness and attention to the crime. Conroy (2020) reported that “Of the 930 multi-charge human trafficking cases completed since 2010/2011, just over three-quarters (77%) included a sex trade offence.”

¹¹ However, the article also noted that “reliable statistics don’t exist — there’s no national database, and many victims never come forward.” But with the relatively new Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline – 1-833-900-1010, and ACT’s (Alberta Coalition Against Human Trafficking) new support services number 587-585-5236, not only may the quality of data improve, but more survivors/victims may come forward to seek assistance.

The interviews lasted, on average, just over one hour. But a couple lasted over two hours with the consent/request of the interviewee.

All the responses were recorded by pen and paper and then transcribed onto the interview schedule without personal identifiers. The interviews were not recorded to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. All the interview results were then kept in a secure folder and password protected.

The process for collecting the interviews took approximately five weeks. Once completed, a qualitative analysis was conducted. The following section addresses the main findings related to the questions asked.

About the Participants

The participants' age is important as most (approx. 45%) police-reported cases of human trafficking in Canada involve young females under the age of 25 (Ibrahim, 2021; Conroy, 2022). Ten of the eleven participants identify as female and are between 36 and 58 (mean age = 42). Only one of the participants was a male (aged 49). The fact that the survivors interviewed for the project were all over the age of 35 is anecdotal and speculative evidence that it likely takes years of recovery before victims are comfortable speaking about their experiences (see, generally, Powell, 2018; Muller, 2020).¹²

Of those who were interviewed, most identified as being full residents of Alberta (n=9), Ontario (n=1), and British Columbia (n=1). Four participants listed more than one province as their residence (AB/ON: n = 3; AB/BC: n = 1). Ten of the participants identified as Canadian citizens. One participant identified as a dual American/Canadian citizen.

All the participants indicated that their exploitation was sexual, and one also experienced labour trafficking. Nine participants stated they were trafficked only in Canada, and two stated they were trafficked in Canada and other countries (one in the U.S. and one in "foreign countries"). This is consistent with official statistics, which show that only 30 per cent of police-reported human trafficking cases in Canada are cases involving international trafficking (Conroy & Sutton, 2022 - Infographic). However, given the clandestine nature of human trafficking (Ibrahim, 2021), and the limitations and prospective biases of police-

¹² The fact also speaks to the extent and challenges of the trauma (many) victims of human trafficking endure.

reported human trafficking cases (see Farrell et al., 2019), such statistics must be viewed with a degree of caution.

Participants' Trafficking Experiences

Participants were asked how they were lured or recruited into human trafficking. Two respondents were first sexually abused as children and later exploited during adolescence by family members. While still attending high school, several fellow students recruited five participants to be trafficked. The male participant was groomed and recruited by a coach and lawyer through the sports organization he competed with. Four other participants were exploited by their partners and or boyfriends. For example, one of the interviewees noted that her boyfriend supplied her with drugs which she was using to mask the pain of having been sexually assaulted by someone she thought she could trust. As she got more addicted to the drugs, he co-opted her into sex trafficking. Not until after she sought help for domestic violence did she realize/learn that she was being trafficked. Consistent with the existing literature, the survivors interviewed experienced deception of false love or attention, a bogus opportunity for something (e.g., a job) better, or simply a more stable life (see next paragraph).

All the participants reported they had experienced sexual, physical, emotional, and/or psychological abuse before or while being exploited. Most participants recounted horrific abuse, including having body parts broken or amputated, being kept in cages, being drugged, and being beaten almost daily. All the participants reported experiencing manipulation, coercion, and abuse during their ordeals. Again, the literature is replete with such evidence (see the Canadian work by (Sarson & MacDonald, 2021).

Participants were also asked about when they first realized they had been exploited or trafficked.¹³ None of the respondents could offer definitive timelines, but they all indicated it was 'several years' before they realized they were being trafficked. Seven participants stated it was approximately ten years after escaping their respective exploiters that they realized they were being trafficked. One participant stated that she was attending a presentation about abuse five years ago, and when the topic of human trafficking came up, she then realized that she had herself been a victim of sexual exploitation and trafficking. Another participant Simply said, "not for a long time after. I never knew I was being

¹³ As reported on the United States-based organization Polaris (2023): "Every trafficking situation is unique and self-identification as a trafficking victim or survivor happens along a continuum. Fear, isolation, guilt, shame, misplaced loyalty, and expert manipulation are among the many factors that may keep a person from seeking help or identifying as a victim even if they are, in fact, being actively trafficked."

trafficking... I thought I was a slut.” Then while attending college she read a couple books about human trafficking and realized “I was the person in these books.” Two participants stated that it wasn’t until they were in a “safe place” receiving support that they realized they had been trafficked. However, they did not indicate how long after they were trafficked that they were in these safe places.

Reporting Exploitation and Trafficking to the Authorities

Participants were asked if they had ever reported their victimization to the police, border services, social services agencies, hospital staff, or other professionals. All but one of the participants responded that they had reported their experiences to the police. However, seven of these participants provided further details indicating their negative reporting experiences. For example, one respondent stated the “police would listen to me but didn’t believe what I was saying.” Other comments included: “I can’t count how many times I went in person to the police (...) with no follow through”; “it has been impossible for me to report b/c several of my ‘clients’ were police officers”, and “she (the attending police officer) didn’t want to hear the whole story. My memories were dismissed! And they asked brutal questions!”¹⁴ One participant stated that several of the Johns who frequently purchased sexual services from her were police officers, and another stated a police officer had sexually assaulted her. As a result, there was a lack of trust in reporting to police. Most participants stated that when they reported their experiences to police, the police did not believe them or take their complaints seriously. The seven participants who had reported to the police also spoke about being revictimized by investigators through victim-blaming statements such as “why didn’t you leave?” or “you’re hookers, we’re not putting resources into this.” One participant stated that her mother was exploiting her, and when she reported it to the police and provided them with evidence, they told her, “Moms don’t do this to their kids” and so refused to press charges. The participant stated police attended the home and warned her mother “not to do it again”. Despite this, the survivor successfully sued her mother in civil court and was awarded a settlement.

Eight participants reported their abuse to other trusted adults – such as church pastors, family members, and child protection workers – but they were not believed (see Farrell et al., 2019). The one participant who reported to the church pastor stated that she was sexually assaulted later by him after he spent several weeks building a trusting relationship with her.

¹⁴ As troubling as these and other comments were, this general observation is also acknowledged on the website for the Canadian Centre to end Human Trafficking (see The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking).

One participant even tried to ask a customer for help in a hotel room one night because he was sympathetic toward her, but he refused to assist her.

Participants who reported their experiences to the police were asked if the exploiters/traffickers were charged and/or convicted. Only two of the participants were able to say that charges were laid. However, none of the charges were for human trafficking or sexual exploitation. In one case, charges were laid against a parent for child abuse, but the charges were later dropped. In the other case, the perpetrator was charged with one count of forcible confinement, two other violent charges, and one breach charge unrelated to the participant. The perpetrator was found guilty of the breach but not the other more serious offences. Once he was released, he found the participant in less than 10 days and began attempting to exploit her again.

Only two participants said yes when asked if they felt safe from their exploiters today. Three participants responded that they felt relatively safe only because “no one knows where I live but she still worries that someone might recognize her on the internet...” Two participants said they still feel unsafe as their exploiters are free in the community and have seen them out in public. For example, one participant noted that she did not feel safe because her current situation is “not ideal because of my history and I won’t feel safe unless I get funding to buy what I need.” Another interviewee commented that I “will always look over my shoulder, wondering is someone will recognize me...always afraid I will be recognized by someone from those years”. Again, these observations are supported widely in the literature (see, for example, Powell, 2018).

Services and Supports

Next, participants were asked several questions about the types of services and support they have received in the past or are currently receiving. When asked if they felt they needed help and support, all seven participants stated they ‘needed’ support, specifically for mental health, shelter, protection, and legal assistance. All the participants specifically discussed the issue of shelters and housing programs. Unanimously, they all commented on the lack of safety and long-term support available through these programs. For example, several participants talked about how ‘dirty’ and ‘gross’ the shelters are, with many of them having bed bugs, dirty water, dirty bedding, etc. As a result, most of them felt unsafe or uncomfortable going to a shelter. Although several agencies were identified as having been helpful in meeting the survivors’ needs. One interviewee commented, “they were

amazing...they were the first to support, hear and believe me.” Another noted that a certain service agency worker “validated me” but noted “accessing organizations was difficult.”

Another issue frequently discussed regarding shelters was the lack of long-term or transitional support. One participant pointed out that most shelters will only allow someone to stay for a maximum of 24 days and that this is not enough for the individual to get themselves organized when they are traumatized, mentally ill, addicted to substances, without identification, and without financial supports. Another participant stated that a sizable number of those involved in exploitation and substance use are in and out of shelters, so the environment is not conducive to escaping a negative situation. As she pointed out, “Victims and survivors cannot stay where they are exploited and be expected to heal there. It is NOT possible.”

In addition, all the participants noted that accessing services was difficult due to various barriers. The most common complaint was about the long waitlists for services. When victims were finally ready to seek help, they were often turned away and told that they would be contacted for an intake in several weeks or months. They described feeling hopeless and said they would often return to their exploiters because at least some of their essential needs were met. For example, one respondent said the services she sought were “prohibitive because of cost, timing/delays, and the difficulty of accessing other supports when the sessions ran out”. Three participants pointed out that when they finally got access to services, the duration of support was not nearly enough to help. For example, one participant stated: “There were waitlists, and when you got help you got one or two sessions for free and then had to pay, which I couldn’t afford”. She also stated there was no continuity of care and that “they refer you to other practitioners for another two free sessions, but you have to repeat yourself and retell your story. You also have to get there, take several busses, make the time...it’s not accessible”.

Finally, eight participants also discussed the lack of trauma-informed and human trafficking-specific services available to victims. They discussed how most agencies they went to did not appear to understand how to identify, engage, and support a victim of sexual exploitation and trafficking. As a result, the connections made with resources were limited, and most participants stopped attending appointments or programs with the agencies. One survivor stated, “There is no ‘one method’ of assistance or support because all individuals are different and need different things. But [there] must be common sense rules and very personalized to each individual’s needs.”

The four participants that did report receiving valuable support were assisted through the Action Coalition on Human Trafficking Alberta (ACT), through the Salvation Army, and the women's shelter. These participants stated that they were able to successfully engage with these services because they felt listened to, believed, and given time to heal at their own pace. They also reported that these services provided hands-on navigation of the various systems and service providers to get what they needed instead of offering a pamphlet and telling the individual to contact the agency independently. In large part, this made the survivors feel supported and helped them connect to the services they required to escape human trafficking. But one of these participants noted that "no one saw my situation as having been trafficked."

Survivor Opinions

After the interviews, participants were asked a series of opinion questions to assist us in understanding and learning more about how to assist victims and survivors of sexual exploitation and human trafficking. The first question asked was, "*What do you think people need to know when they are trying to help and support victims of trafficking?*" All the participants commented on the need for family members, police, and other professionals to listen to victims when they finally talk about what has happened to them. One participant said, "People need to really listen. They need to make the victim/survivor feel safe and protected because fear makes it impossible...fear makes people feel uncared for." Another participant echoed this and stated, "They (victims) are not a number, they are humans. People need to know it's ok and safe to report. Parents need to hear and believe. Police need to initially believe a situation." Another participant pointed out that they now regularly speak out against human trafficking. The participant noted, "[People] don't have to be brilliant or an expert but must listen, care, and believe. Be supportive." Finally, another interviewee said "people need to know it's (HT) is not a big scary word, and that it happens elsewhere...it doesn't just happen to weak-minded people. All people have vulnerabilities..."

Most participants also discussed the need to address the demand side of sex purchasing and human trafficking. One participant pointed out that, "Sex is not a human right. Sex is a want, not a need. If men weren't purchasing, women wouldn't be sold." This was a theme throughout the interviews as participants frequently referred to the expectations and behaviour of sex purchasers. Although exploiters and traffickers are predominantly abusive towards the victims, participants also talked about the violence, degradation, and humiliation they experienced at the hands of clients who felt they could do what they wanted

with the victim because they were paying for it. This is a well-documented observation among other researchers (see, for example, Freidman, 2022).

The final question of the interview schedule asked for suggestions on how to make it safer for victims and survivors to come forward and seek assistance. One participant suggested that exploiters and traffickers need to be charged, convicted, and incarcerated to keep victims safe. She stated that traffickers could too easily track down victims in shelters and safe houses and lure or force them back into exploitative situations. Another participant insisted, "Victims are more likely to be believed if not facing retribution from the offenders." Another participant said "let survivors speak." And another participant called for a large investment in funding to prosecute traffickers and referred to an organized crime group in Halifax that has been operating and exploiting women and girls for many years without being 'shut down' or dismantled. The participant stated that with organized crime groups operating like this, avoiding one exploiter does not lead to safety, as other family or crime organization members can still victimize the victim. Until traffickers are locked behind bars for significant amounts of time, victims will never feel safe, making it challenging to encourage them to report the offence(s). Although not discussed with the interviewees, they did not appear to know the prosecution of the rate of human traffickers has been and remains an abysmal statistic (for a Canadian overview, see Ibrahim, 2021).

Participants noted that in addition to prosecuting exploiters, protection must be a priority if victims will come forward. This means increasing the availability and accessibility of safe houses. One participant spoke at length about the need for safe houses or secure shelters to house and protect victims of human trafficking for a minimum of six months in order to help them feel safe, build trust, and begin to benefit from services. She pointed out that ideally victims would be "removed from the province and given a new life and new identification, not just 30 days in a safe house and then back to their life. Consistency must be paramount. Most programs are eight weeks long, and then it's on to the next program. Eight weeks is not enough time because the women's trauma is severe. More time is needed to build trust that is needed."

Lastly, participants stated that systems – particularly the legal system – need better mechanisms to support victims during reporting, investigations, and court processes. All participants that reported their experiences to the police spoke about one or more negative interactions regarding being believed, being made to feel heard and being protected following a disclosure. And for those participants that participated in investigations and went to court to have their traffickers convicted, they all reported feeling that they had been

revictimized by lawyers, judges, and even some victim support workers. Three participants spoke about the need for judges and lawyers (both prosecutors and defense lawyers) to receive further education and training on human trafficking to implement a more trauma-informed court process to protect and support victims. Another participant called for “better training for health care workers and law enforcers, trafficking education at schools is critical....” And finally, one interviewee commented “don’t force people to give statements at police stations. Don’t go to detention centres, you’re treated as a robot that needs to assimilate.”

Summary

The valuable feedback provided by human trafficking survivors for this study phase echoes much of the existing research on victim-centered service provision. The report addressed three main themes: how to support and help victims/survivors of human trafficking, what needs to be done (if anything) to improve existing services, and interviewing victims/survivors to understand the experiences they undergo when/if seeking service and support. Overall, as mentioned, the results did reveal anything that has already not been documented in some manner or another. Therefore, this then begs the question: if research consistently shows the need for improved service availability and delivery for victims of human trafficking, that the majority of victims/survivors express varying degrees of frustration and dissatisfaction with some of the services they receive, and that despite the resources and growing number of service providers/supports (e.g., there are over 50 service providers in Alberta alone - see Report I above), why do governments continue to conduct further research on this topic rather than invest funding in tangible, long-term responses to human trafficking that survivors are calling for? Although several survivors who participated in this study are arguably thriving today, they all reported struggling with ongoing trauma, fear, physical and mental health conditions, and difficulties maintaining relationships, educational pursuits, and employment. Based on the feedback and responses from the survivors/victims, there is an urgent need for cooperation and coordination between service providers. The fact that it took several years before those interviewed could speak about their experiences reinforces the assertion that their needs are complex and require more specialized and or nuanced services and support. This demonstrates the lifelong impacts of human trafficking for victims and the need for funding for prevention, early intervention, and long-term recovery supports. As one participant said, “A survivor is never healed 100%.” Finally, there is a continued need for evidence-informed research to help address some of the gaps that still exist. As one of the respondents said “It is important to hear our voices and

to respect our trauma...it is not the past...your body and brain remember, and it impacts you daily” to which another respondent noted programs and the justice system need to evolve if they are going to help not only us but to ‘end’ human trafficking (paraphrased).

CONCLUSION

Although there are a significant number of services for victims and survivors of sexual exploitation and human trafficking in Alberta, it is clear from the feedback provided by stakeholders that more can be done to streamline service provisions across the continuum of care (e.g., identification, intervention, and aftercare). Service providers lamented that a significant and ever-widening gap is the inability to fully meet the unique and complex needs of human trafficking victims due to a perpetual lack of adequate funding and resources. However, stakeholders pointed out that most programs and initiatives lack the funding to provide service long enough for most victims to truly heal. The trauma inflicted upon victims of human trafficking before, during, and after their exploitation requires years of specialized recovery support. This lack of funding, coupled with barriers in the form of program eligibility and lengthy waitlists, continues to frustrate service providers who work to meet the needs of victims and survivors of human trafficking.

Survivors who participated in this study echoed similar sentiments and pointed out that victims face additional challenges once they engage with services. Several survivors stated that, more often than not, they did not truly feel ‘heard’ by professionals trying to provide assistance and therefore, many of the services and supports available to survivors appear to be prescriptive rather than victim-centred. The findings suggest a lack of (specialized) training on trauma-informed, victim-centred approaches across service providers and a lack of standardized guidance on appropriately and effectively working with victims and survivors of human trafficking – both those being trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation and trafficking for the purpose of forced labour exploitation. Survivors also pointed to a lack of collaboration among service providers as a barrier to developing a continuum of care that has streamlined referral pathways.

Overall, this research project reiterates what several other similar studies have concluded: governments, advocacy groups, and community agencies need to work collaboratively to close ongoing gaps in service provision, share resources to increase capacity across all sectors, further develop and implement trauma-informed and survivor-informed service approaches among client-facing workers, and work towards the shared vision of helping victims and survivors of human trafficking lead healthy lives free from exploitation.

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Appendix A



International Centre for Criminal Law Reform
<https://icclr.org>

Assistance and Support Services for Survivors of Human Trafficking

Service Provider Questionnaire

The International Centre for Criminal Law Reform (ICCLR), a United Nations-affiliated research institute, is studying the assistance and support services available to survivors of exploitation and/or human trafficking in British Columbia and Alberta. The study is supported by a grant from the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General of British Columbia. The study will map out existing services in these two provinces and identify the types of services and supports that are (most) needed by survivors of labour and sex trafficking, as well as gaps in services. One component of the study consists of a survey of existing service providers.

Based on our initial search, we understand that your organization may help and support survivors of labour and/or sex trafficking and/or sexual exploitation. We hope that we can count on your assistance to present a complete picture of the services available to victims and that you will agree to complete this questionnaire and return it to us. If possible, please return the survey by July 30, 2022. We are most grateful for your cooperation. The questionnaire will only take 15-20 minutes to complete.

If you have any questions concerning this project, feel free to contact us at: yvon.dandurand@ufv.ca (Yvon Dandurand), or in Alberta: jwinterdyk@mtroyal.ca (Professor John Winterdyk).

Please return the completed questionnaire to jwinterdyk@mtroyal.ca

1. Name of your organization:
2. Address:
3. Name of a specific program (if applicable):
4. Name of contact person:
5. Email address of contact person:
6. Where are your services offered? Please check the applicable response, or answer "Other":
 Alberta
 British Columbia
 Both
Other: _____

7. Can you first tell us what best describes the work of your organization? Please check all that apply.

- Providing broad based/comprehensive community services
- Providing broad based/comprehensive victim services
- Providing broad based/comprehensive specialized victim services
- Providing assistance to victims and survivors of human trafficking
- Other (please specify): _____

8. One of the things we are looking at in our study is just what services are available to victims and survivors of exploitation and/or human trafficking (i.e., sex trafficking and/or labour trafficking). Are you able you tell us what kinds of services are provided by your organization and whether each service is provided directly, or indirectly by arranging to have the services provided by another organization (using the options below, or by providing more information in the section provided “Other”)? Please check ALL that might apply.

Type of Services	Check if provided Directly	Check if only provided Indirectly
Translation services		
Physical protection/access to safety		
Emergency financial assistance		
Assistance with regularizing the victim’s immigration status		
Employment assistance		
Access to government services		
Access to compensation/restitution (e.g., unpaid wages)		
Lodging (including emergency shelter)		
Psycho-social support/counselling		
Access to medical and mental health care		
Relocation – repatriation – transportation		
Facilitating communication with family and relatives		
Legal information (including immigration, labour law)		
Legal assistance and representation		
Safety Planning		
Support during police investigation and court proceedings		
Unsure or other (please specify):		

9. What is the primary source of funding for the services you offer to survivors of sexual exploitation and/or forced labour trafficking?

10. How do the victims and survivors of sexual exploitation and/or forced labour trafficking you serve come to your attention? Again, please check ALL that apply.

- Self-referral by victim/survivor
- Referred by family member
- Referred by friend
- Referred by another agency
- Referred by police
- Other (please specify): _____

10. How many **new** victims and survivors of sexual exploitation and/or forced labour trafficking do you assist every year?

11. What is the primary geographic reach of your organization? Please check all that apply:

- Local
- Regional
- National
- International

12. Approximately what percentage of victims and survivors of sexual exploitation and/or forced labour trafficking that you assist belong to the following groups? Please answer with an approximate percentage, DK if you don't know, or NA if not applicable:

- Women
- Children/Youth (under 18 years old)
- Men
- Aboriginal
- Another ethnic minority
- LGBTQ2S+
- Foreign national
- Immigrant / Refugee

13. In what ways have the survivors you assist been victimized? Please check ALL that apply.

- Use of deception
 - Threats
 - Violence
 - Sexual exploitation
 - Labour exploitation
 - Financial exploitation
- Other (please specify): _____

14. What percentage of the survivors of sexual exploitation and/or forced labour trafficking whom you assisted during the last year reported their victimization to the police?

% _____ (this can be an estimate)

15. How does your organization assess the needs of the victims that it assists? Please check all that apply.

- Basic intake form
- Assessment checklist screening at intake
- Follow-up checklist assessments
- Exit interview/assessment
- Post exit follow-up assessment
- Other (please specify): _____

16. Do the victims have to meet any specific eligibility (e.g., age, gender, situational factors, etc.) criteria to qualify for the services offered by your organization?

- No
- Yes (please answer 16b)

16b. (If YES please specify)

17. Is there a process within your organization for program evaluation?

Yes (if answered Yes, please move to question 17b)

No (if answered No, please move to question 18a)

17b. Was your program evaluated internally or externally?

internally

externally

18a. To what extent do you feel the services provided by your organization are a good fit for the needs of the victims/survivors of sexual exploitation and/or forced labour trafficking? Please check the response that best describes the fit.

A very good fit

A good fit

Somewhat of a fit

Other organizations would be a better fit (please proceed to question 18b)

18b. If you answered, "other organizations would be a better fit", briefly clarify your answer.

19. What would you say are the most significant challenges your organization encounters in terms of providing services to victims/survivors of sexual exploitation and/or forced labour trafficking? Please list your top THREE challenges.

20. What barriers may exist which could prevent victims/survivors from finding and/or utilizing your services?

21. Is there anything you might like to add about the work that you do and concerning the purpose of this project that you might like to share with us?

22. Do you have any suggestions as to how we might contact victims/survivors of sexual exploitation and/or forced labour trafficking in Alberta or British Columbia for the study? **Would you, for example, be willing to facilitate such contacts?** Please specify.