

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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A Reflection on Human Trafficking for Catholic Education by Jan Murphy, Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario, with Cheryl Perera, TCDSB Alumni and Founder of OneChild Organization

“Human trafficking is violence! The violence suffered by every woman and every girl is an open wound in the body of Christ, in the body of all humanity, it is a deep wound that also affects each one of us.” - Pope Francis¹

Introduction

In recent years, ‘human trafficking’ has been and continues to be at the forefront of the news and social media. **PPM 166: Keeping Students Safe Policy**, published July 6th, 2021, “is a policy document which is the first of its kind for an education sector in Canada and sets a strong foundation for Ontario school boards to build upon to create local anti-sex trafficking protocols.² This new policy ensures every school board has a plan with core components in place to protect students and empower school communities to play a key role in fighting sex trafficking and keeping children and youth safe from sexual exploitation.” As participants in the work of Catholic Education, we aim to highlight this issue in affirming the dignity of victims and aid them in their recovery and ensure preventative tactics remain in place for vulnerable persons who are at-risk for victimization.

“Human trafficking is one of the fastest growing and most lucrative crimes worldwide. It is predatory and devastatingly damaging to victims, survivors, their families, and communities.” (PPM 166)³

What do I need to know about Human Trafficking?

Human Trafficking (HT) robs its victims of their most basic human rights and is an affront to their dignity. It is occurring nationally, provincially and in our local communities. HT is a vastly underreported crime. Globally, it is estimated that it is amongst the most lucrative of criminal activities, rivalled only by drug trafficking, and generating billions of dollars for criminal organizations.

Traffickers can be anyone and have varying relationships with their victims including friendships, peer relationships, and even familial relationships. Sadly, some victims do not or did not realize that they were being trafficked. Recruiters can quickly identify and groom their targets or next victim either online, in classrooms, at malls, or at social or family gatherings.

Traffickers take advantage of technology. Many of the ever-evolving cell phone apps are designed to be undiscoverable allowing the user to remain unidentified, hard to track, and the crime to go unreported. Any app that youths interact on can potentially be a platform used for exploitation. Unfortunately, many perpetrators of this crime were once and can even continue to be victims themselves.

Human Trafficking (HT) “involves recruiting, moving, or holding victims to exploit them for profit, usually for sexual reasons or forced labour. Traffickers can control and pressure victims by force or through threats, including mental and emotional abuse and manipulation.”

Sex Trafficking: The most common form of HT in Ontario is sex trafficking. “As a form of sexual exploitation, sex trafficking refers to the forced, coercive, fraudulent or deceptive exchange of sex for something of value (for example, money, food, drugs, alcohol, transportation, shelter, emotional support, etc). This can also involve sexual exploitation online, including social media platforms, through sexual imagery or video.”

Online Child Sexual Exploitation: Generally, in the Canadian legal context, the crime of online child sexual exploitation and abuse includes: self-generated content, sextortion, grooming and luring, live child sexual abuse streaming, made-to-order content, and sexting. These materials are often distributed without consent.

“When the individual is not recognized and loved in the person’s dignity as the living image of God (cf. Gen 1:26), the human being is exposed to[...]degrading forms of ‘manipulation’”- Saint John Paul II⁴

What are the tactics of exploitation and trafficking?

Luring: During the luring phase traffickers assess their potential victims by making personal contact with them either online or directly in person. They direct their efforts towards forming a romantic relationship with them, possibly offering false employment, recruiting, and interviewing.

Grooming: This phase is marked by the victim feeling a strong emotional attachment to the trafficker and may even believe they are in love. The trafficker may spoil the victim with gifts and physical intimacy and will escalate rapidly while illicit drugs may be introduced.

Coercion & Manipulation: During this phase the trafficker begins to attack the victim’s vulnerabilities. The victim then adopts a ‘win them back’ attitude, desperate to regain their trafficker’s affections, who has now introduced sexual favours as a price for their love.

Exploitation: At this stage the trafficker often falsifies economic hardship and sex is pushed onto the victim as a means to remedy money or drug problems. The victim feels obliged to help and emotional, mental, and physical abuse occur as the trafficker employs intimidation tactics such as blackmail and the threatening of loved ones. The victim becomes isolated from their family and friends and confined by their trafficker.⁵

A Sad Reality

Ontario accounts for approximately two-thirds of police-reported cases of Human Trafficking in Canada. This crime occurs everywhere: rural/urban areas, towns/cities, hotels/motels, schools/homes, athletic buildings/sports fields and online.

- The average entrance age of recruitment into Human Trafficking is 13 years old.
- 91% of victims of HT knew their trafficker beforehand.
- In most cases, those who traffic minors are often minors themselves.
- Over 75% of victims in police-reported cases are younger than 25.

Most cases, unfortunately, go unreported as many trafficking victims do not want police involvement for fear of retaliation. Both our country and province have [action plans](#) and strategies to combat Human Trafficking, including Canada’s [National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking](#) and Ontario’s [Anti-human Trafficking Strategy 2020-2025](#).⁶

How Catholic Social Teaching Informs the Issue

Our Catholic Social Teachings have a lot to say to us about our human dignity and the world we desire to build. Human Trafficking is a crime which violates and undermines these principles.

1. **Life and Dignity of the Human Person:** God created us in His image and likeness, and it is morally unacceptable that anyone should purchase the body of another person for their own sexual gratification.
2. **The Rights and Responsibilities of the Human Person:** Trafficked persons are denied basic needs, and their freedoms are being restricted and their safety threatened.
3. **The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers:** Human Trafficking treats the human person as a commodity that can be bought and sold like material objects rather than the precious and irreplaceable beings that God created us to be.
4. **The Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable:** The poor and vulnerable include those most at risk for Human Trafficking because of limited resources, options and support.
5. **Call to Family, Community, and Participation:** We are called to be beacons of light in our communities who speak out against Human Trafficking and keep a keen eye out to recognize red flags and situations where Human Trafficking may be taking place.

See the CCCB document *For Freedom Christ Has Set Us Free: Pastoral Letter on Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation in Canada.*⁷

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Who is at Risk

For many people, the prevalence and reality of sex trafficking in communities across Canada is difficult to comprehend. Despite this, it remains one of the fastest growing crimes in Canada. Cases have been found in every area of the country - rural, suburban, and urban settings alike, and within the school system. Although every child is at risk, there are some individuals who are more at risk than others. Some of those groups/individuals include:

- Women and Girls in general and Indigenous Women and Girls
- Racialized communities, particularly Black/Afro Canadians
- Persons from the 2SLGBTQIA community
- Runaway Youth and people experiencing homelessness
- Those in Protections of Foster Care
- New Immigrants and Refugees and children of migrant workers
- Youth who have dropped out of School
- Persons with disabilities

No school and no Catholic school community is immune. School grounds and campuses have been used as places for recruiting children into the sex trade, and children have been known to attend school while experiencing trafficking.⁸

Red Flags and Warning Signs to Look For

Youth may exhibit a variety of behaviours that should be causes for concern, especially in relationship to Human Trafficking. Some of these behaviors may include:

- Having a new relationship they wish to keep secret from friends, family, and any authoritative figure in their lives.
- Receiving excessive gifts or cash for no apparent reason.
- Intimate online materials being shared.
- Being controlled by others by being driven to and from locations and escorted at all times.
- Having hotel keys.

- Being in a relationship which has taken a negative turn.
- Having someone speak for them in public.
- Having an unstable living situation.
- Having preciously experiences forms of violence such as sexual or domestic abuse.
- Having drugs/alcohol issues.⁹

Our Response

The Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association has said,

“OCSTA believes our boards are in a unique position to offer comprehensive training and support to all teachers and other education staff, volunteers, parents and students regarding sex trafficking. We also believe it is important for boards to collaborate with community partners with expertise in this area such as child welfare agencies, law enforcement, advocacy and support groups, in an effort to develop comprehensive education resources, policies and programs to combat sex trafficking.” [Pat Daly, Past President, July 2021]

Teaching and leading are vocations of love and service to children and their families. Jesus taught that whoever welcomes a child, welcomes Him. The Catholic community is committed and engaged to combat child sexual exploitation and support the safety of all children. As Catholic educators and leaders, we all have a role to play so that the health and wellness of children is nurtured:

Senior Leaders

- Ensure that the strategic directions for curriculum, teaching and learning embrace the responsibilities of Catholic education to implement awareness about sex trafficking.
- Monitor the manner in which our Catholic schools adhere to the protocols and governance in The Education Act and Policy Program Memorandum 166: Keeping Students Safe: Policy Framework for School Board Anti-Sex Trafficking.
- Educate yourself and staff further about the causes of child sexual exploitation and human trafficking, highlighting what is particular in your community's context.

- Partner with external organizations and experts to support the professional learning of staff members.
- Ensure that the policies and procedures of the school district for sexual exploitation and human trafficking are reviewed and current and reflect a pastoral approach.
- Encourage regular prayer for victims of sexual exploitation and human trafficking, modelling a fulsome and faith-filled response to this evil.

School Principal or Vice-Principal

- Educate yourself and your staff further about the causes of child sexual exploitation and Human Trafficking, identifying signs and dangers within your school community.
- Lead and facilitate school-wide education efforts and foster age-appropriate student awareness.
- Review and implement your school board's anti-trafficking policy.
- Create conditions that permit students opportunities for safe disclosure of self or others as victims and/or perpetrators.
- Promote awareness around current best practice with respect to online safety.
- Invite board-approved agencies or personnel who can educate students, parents, and school staff about the dangers of child sexual exploitation.
- Promote a Catholic perspective on healthy relationships.
- Approach disclosures with pastoral care, compassion and focused response.

Chaplaincy Leader

- Be familiar with your school board's anti-trafficking policy.
- Continue to deepen your own knowledge of child sexual exploitation and Human Trafficking and its root causes.
- Be familiar with Church resources on this topic including the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops website along with many local diocese offices (some Religious communities such as the School Sisters of Notre Dame also have excellent resources).

- Use opportunities at staff meetings to build understanding and prayerfully remember the victims of HT.
- Be a champion for promoting human dignity and Catholic Social Teachings.
- Empower your students to be active agents in their own protection and act in their schools and communities to combat these crimes.
- Leverage approved board resources and personnel to in-service students and parents. Assist with access to those supports, guest speakers and presentations.

Classroom teacher

- Follow your school board's anti-trafficking policy.
- Look for opportunities in the curriculum to have age-appropriate conversations on HT, guided through a Catholic lens.
- Teach social-emotional skills and consent in light of Catholic Social Teachings or similar, living skills at age-appropriate levels.
- Invite board-approved agencies or personnel who can educate students, parents, and school staff about HT.
- Reach out to parishes and Catholic agencies for support and resources on Human Trafficking and be familiar with what the Church is saying.
- Explore these topics in-depth in classrooms from a child rights perspective.
- Promote mental health in the classroom, and trauma-informed and safe learning environments.
- Encourage prayer for victims of all forms of oppression, manipulation and abuse.

As a Catholic Education community, inspired by our faith, we continue to work together with families for the safety of students.

February 8th the Feast of St. Josephine Bakhita, is now known as the World Day of Prayer, Reflection and Action Against Trafficking in Persons.[i]

In honour of St. Josephine Bakhita, we invite you to pray:

O God, you always hear the cry of your people and have compassion for the oppressed and the enslaved.

May they experience the liberation of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus.

We pray to you for those suffering the torment of human trafficking.

Transform us by the power of your Spirit, to be sensitive to the pain of these, our sisters and brothers.

Committed to overcoming this evil, give us the courage to stand up and work for the rights of our sisters and brothers who live in slavery and exploitation.

We ask this with the intercession of St. Josephine in Christ our Lord.

Amen.

— Prayer by Peter McKenna, SCJ



My Reflection

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