

Human Trafficking a growing problem in Canada, B.C. expert says

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At least 31 foreigners were flagged to immigration officials as human trafficking victims since the department began taking note, but it's likely just the tip of the iceberg, a British Columbia researcher says.

Benjamin Perrin said the statistics gathered through Access to Information requests are the first numbers to be made public since the federal government began recording cases of human trafficking victims in 2006.

The RCMP have previously estimated that up to 800 foreign trafficking victims are brought to Canada each year. Police are currently working to recalculate that estimate, Perrin said.

"Human trafficking remains hidden in plain sight in many ways in Canada," said Perrin, an assistant professor at the University of British Columbia's faculty of law.

"These human trafficking victims come from various regions across the country, not just the big Canadian cities. They are a hidden population."

Romania, the Philippines, Moldova and China were the top four countries of origin for the human trafficking victims, according to Perrin's research. Of the 31 foreign nationals flagged to immigration officials as potential human trafficking victims between May 2006 and 2008, four were minors.

Twelve of them were granted temporary residence permits, seven were refused and one victim's permit was cancelled. One of the victims went missing, and the 10 remaining people have their cases pending or obtained another form of immigration status.

Perrin said these cases likely represent only a small number of the actual cases of human trafficking since many victims won't come forward due to threats, violence and coercion. Also, the statistics don't include trafficking cases involving Canadian women and children.

Of concern, Perrin said, was a seeming disconnect between the RCMP and immigration officials, who rejected six cases referred to them by the national police force for assistance. He cited an example of a Chinese minor who the RCMP believed was a victim of human trafficking, but was ultimately denied a temporary residence permit that would allow the child to stay in Canada.

"There needs to be some work between law enforcement and the CIC [Citizenship and Immigration Canada] to get a handle on the different conclusions they are reaching on these cases," Perrin said.

He also said non-governmental organizations working with trafficking victims lack faith that immigration officials will deal with their cases fairly.

"When NGOs do not trust the process for referring trafficking victims, they stop referring them."

CIC began flagging such cases in a database in May 2006 after introducing new measures to protect people forced into labour or the illegal sex trade.

Under new legislation, victims of human trafficking can apply for temporary residency permits, giving them up to 120 days in the country to recover from the crime plus some access to health care, instead of facing immediate deportation.

In late 2005, new laws were passed to make it a crime to traffic in persons, with penalties of life imprisonment and up to \$1 million in fines if convicted.

But Perrin said Canada's first human trafficking conviction this summer did not involve a foreigner, but rather a 13-year-old in the Greater Toronto Area who was bought and sold by Canadian men on the popular online classified advertisement website Craigslist.

In May, former Toronto man Imani Nakpamgi admitted in court that he made more than \$400,000 selling two underage girls for sex, according to the Toronto Star. Both girls had been reported missing, either by their family or child welfare officials.

Perrin notes that the RCMP has appointed human trafficking co-ordinators in every region of the country who have been training police and working with non-governmental organizations and provincial agencies, but there is no national strategy to combat the problem.

"The RCMP is starting to have some success in identifying foreign victims," says Perrin. "However, none of their traffickers has been brought to justice. These transnational criminals continue to operate with impunity."

The assistant law professor gave high marks to British Columbia and Alberta for spending money on victim services, but said Ontario and Quebec have done very little to help human trafficking victims.

He faulted the federal government, however, for failing to create a national action plan to deal with the problem in Canada — despite the efforts of a federal working group that has long promised such a strategy, Perrin said.

Perrin has been studying the issue of human trafficking for the past eight years, and plans to present his latest findings at a conference in Vancouver later this week.