

Why Canada has failed to deal with human trafficking

We need to look below surface to find sex-trade victims

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Only 31 victims of human trafficking -- including four children -- have been identified in Canada in the past two years. The top source countries are Romania, the Philippines, Moldova and China.

There is so little information sharing, interest or effort put into breaking up this slave trade that the only reason Canadians -- including the RCMP -- even know that number is because of a freedom of information request filed to Immigration Canada by Benjamin Perrin, an assistant professor of law at the University of British Columbia.

Perrin, who is in the midst of a three-year research project, says those cases represent only the teeniest fraction of the problem.

They don't, for example, include the middle-class, 19-year-old Surrey girl, who Perrin knows of, who lived at home with her parents while working Vancouver's high-end prostitution stroll under the control of a street-gang pimp or the thousands of Canadians on the low-rent strolls across the country.

Until Perrin told the RCMP, no one at Canada's national police force knew that it was responsible for 61 per cent of the trafficking cases referred to Immigration Canada with recommendations that the victims be granted temporary residence permits.

(The TRPs allow the victims to remain for up to 180 days, during which time Immigration Canada can determine whether they qualify to stay for up to three years. With TRPs, victims have access to medical treatment and counselling and they can apply for work permits.)

Until now, no one -- save CIC -- knew that nearly a quarter of those victims were refused temporary permits. Among those sent back was a child from China. Another child from China, however, was allowed to stay and has even had the TRP renewed for a year.

Only one victim -- a child sold to slave traders by parents -- came forward voluntarily. Fear, threats and coercion probably kept some away.

But, Perrin says, in most provinces, especially Ontario and Quebec, it's almost impossible to find any help.

But since the solicitor-general's office to combat human trafficking was set up two years ago, there hasn't been a single victim rescued or charge laid.

During the two years that Canada identified 31 trafficking victims, the United States found 17,000.

Under Canadian law, human trafficking is a criminal offence punishable by up to life in prison. It's defined as recruiting, transporting or harbouring anyone for the purpose of exploitation. It includes parents who offer their children on Craigslist or dial-a-date services to strangers, even if their children never leave the house.

It's not that Canada is clean; the Americans have identified it as both a source and destination country for the victims of slave traders.

It's more likely because Canada has no national strategy for finding traffickers, no national plan for identifying and helping victims and little understanding of who the victims are.

Canada is obviously doing many things wrong.

High-profile police raids on massage parlours, escort agencies or brothels haven't yielded a single victim. It could be because during most of those raids, including the one in Metro Vancouver in December 2006, potential victims have been handcuffed and taken into police custody.

"People are still out looking for cargo ships and they're ignoring the 19-year-old girl on the street corner because she's just a hooker," says Perrin. "We need to look below the surface."

Of the estimated 12.3 million people enslaved in forced or bonded labour and prostitution worldwide, Canada has rescued two dozen.

Without a comprehensive, coordinated national plan that gets the message out that Canada will not tolerate human slavery's buyers, sellers and exploiters, things can only get worse -- especially with an expected boost in demand for prostitutes during the 2010 Winter Olympics.

Perrin and others have been recommending such a plan for years.

So, why is it taking so long? Simple, he says.

"We've always thought that Canadians are too nice to treat people as property."

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