

Ontario is home to the largest number of sex-trafficking cases in Canada, yet it has no plan and little funding to help survivors



MELISSA RENWICK/TORONTO STAR

Phoenix feared for her life after escaping her pimp. The safe house where she stayed has closed because of a lack of funding.

‘HOW ARE WE NOT CLOSING THESE GAPS?’

OLIVIA CARVILLE AND ROB FERGUSON
STAFF REPORTERS

Five teenagers rescued from the dangerous world of sex trafficking by Toronto police were flown out to British Columbia in the past year because there were no local resources to treat them.

Ontario is home to the largest number of domestic sex trafficking cases in Canada, but an ongoing Star investigation has found the funding it puts forward to combat this issue seriously lags behind smaller jurisdictions.

Monday, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne conceded that “this is an area that has not had enough attention.”

“How are we not closing these gaps? How are these young women falling through the cracks and getting caught in a system that is just so horrific?”

The province’s sole safe house for trafficked victims reluctantly closed its doors in August because it lacked funding.

The last time Ontario made a direct investment toward human trafficking victim services was in 2011 when it committed \$1.95 million over three years, a government official has confirmed.

During that same year, Manitoba, a province with a population a tenth of the size of Ontario’s, invested \$8 million in its anti-trafficking programs.

Over the past two months, the Star has been investigating “The Game” — domestic sex trafficking in Ontario — and found it is not only one of the province’s biggest secrets, but also one of its fastest-growing crimes. Seasoned detectives estimate the number of victims to be in the thousands.

Human sex trafficking is the manipulation and coercion of girls, many in their mid-teens and some as young as 12, into prostitution by pimps who act as boyfriends, isolate them from their families, move them from city to city and rob them of their earnings.



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TRAFFICKING continued on A8

Ontario lacks an action plan to help out survivors

TRAFFICKING from A1

Karlee Sapoznik, co-founder of the Alliance Against Modern Slavery, said Ontario "urgently" needs to fund shelters and develop a province-wide action plan to combat human trafficking.

"It's the largest province with the largest population and the largest number of cases, yet Alberta, Manitoba and B.C. all have provincial action plans and Ontario does not," Sapoznik said.

An all-party legislative committee that has probed the issue in Ontario said a more concerted effort to fight human trafficking should be modelled on the guns-and-gangs task force established after the tragic shooting of Jane Creba on Boxing Day 2005.

"Police are barely scratching the surface with the resources they've got," said Progressive Conservative MPP Laurie Scott (Haliburton-Kawartha Lakes-Brock), vice-chair of the committee.

Policy-makers at all levels need to come up with solutions, said Wynne. "There is a drastic need for co-ordination of information and we need to look at this."

In August, Timea Nagy, a trafficked survivor herself, was forced to close down Walk With Me, a victim services organization she founded that ran the only safe house in the province.

During the past few months, the Star spoke to two victims of trafficking who were housed at

Walk With Me after escaping The Game.

One of those victims was Phoenix, a 26-year-old woman who was trafficked for four years and feared for her life after running from her pimp.

Phoenix (her real name is being withheld because she has concerns for her safety) is just one of 450 Ontario trafficking cases that Walk With Me was involved in over the past five years.

Nagy said she pleaded for provincial funding to keep the service open, but four months ago she gave up.

At the time, Walk With Me had 11 ongoing cases, dozens of victims that needed support through the courts and 39 police agencies counting on them.

For Michele Anderson, sex-trafficking specialist at Toronto's Covenant House, the reason for this lack of action is "plain and simple."

"It has not been a priority here," said Anderson, whose agency is set to open a safe house for victims of trafficking in late spring 2016. It will hold up to seven residents, ages 16 to 24.

"We've got to begin somewhere and this is at least a start," Anderson said.

Insp. Joanna Beaven-Desjardins, commander of Toronto police's sex crimes unit, said that without social welfare agencies "the police human trafficking department would be shut down completely."

In the past year, Toronto police had no choice but to move five teenagers ages 15 to 17, all facing "extreme circumstances," out to a long-term safe house in B.C.

"There are lots of different agencies that can help here, but nothing long-term like in B.C.," Beaven-Desjardins said.

The Star's investigation heard from trafficked victims who said when they got out of The Game they were malnourished, couldn't sleep, were afraid of men, addicted to drugs and could not make any independent decisions.

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everything goes quiet — every
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LARISSA MAXWELL

DEBORAH'S GATE SPOKESWOMAN

Deborah's Gate is a high-security residential safe house and rehabilitation program for survivors of human trafficking in B.C.

When victims arrive at the centre, they usually have severe mental trauma and some stay for up to two years, spokeswoman Larissa Maxwell said.

They suffer from nightmares and flashbacks and ask staff for permission to eat or go to the bathroom.

"Away from the chaos, everything goes quiet — every pain, every memory, every moment of violence comes up. The road to rehabilitation is a very difficult one," Maxwell said.

"Survivors of trafficking are different. They can't be looked at like other victims because they have been

robbed of every part of their humanity."

A number of Toronto-based social workers the Star spoke to mirrored Maxwell's concern, and said victims of sex trafficking cannot be placed in shelters for homeless people or victims of domestic violence.

Some of these girls have been severely beaten, starved, injected with heroin, confined in rooms and forced to have sex all through the night.

"This is a different trauma to domestic violence and those shelters don't work," Anderson said.

"There's a very negative stereotype against trafficked victims that she's a prostitute and if she feels stigmatized, she will run."

Katarina MacLeod, founder of the Rising Angels advocacy and awareness organization for sex trade workers, said it's better to leave a young girl under the control of her pimp than encourage her to escape and leave her stranded.

"If you don't have a plan for them, don't bother trying. You're going to give them hope and then they'll have nothing and go back and get the s--- beaten out of them," she said.

When MacLeod first started rescuing these victims, she was so frustrated at the lack of resources that she brought them into her own home, with her own children.

"These are somebody's daughters. I taught them how to cook, clean, dress and talk without slang. They call me 'Mumma Kat.' They were so broken. It's like retraining a child," she said.