

Hearing Them

Exploring the vulnerability
and risk factors for
commercial sexual
exploitation of children and
youth in Nova Scotia

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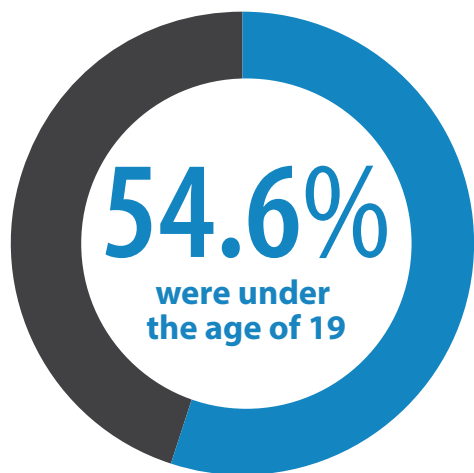




Key Points:

Nova Scotia has the highest provincial rate of police-reported human trafficking in Canada,¹ including one of the highest provincial rates of trafficking of victims aged 12-17.²

Over half of *Hearing Them* participants in Nova Scotia report they were youth when they first experienced commercial sexual exploitation



31% of *Hearing Them* participants were 16 years old or younger when they first experienced commercial sexual exploitation

Most participants had experienced childhood abuse and/or exposure to violence

Experienced Physical Violence

84%

Sexual Abuse

61.4%

Witnessed Physical or Emotional Abuse in their Home

82.6%

Many participants were involved with the child welfare and youth justice systems

Had Contact with the Child Welfare System as a Child

41.4%

Lived in a Group Home or Residential Facility

8.3%

Had Been in Foster Care

13.1%

Had Been Incarcerated at a Youth Detention Centre

20%



Introduction:

Nova Scotia, a small province on the east coast of Canada, currently has the highest provincial rate of police-reported human trafficking in Canada,³ including one of the highest provincial rates of trafficking of victims aged 12-17.⁴

Human trafficking “involves recruiting, transporting, transferring, receiving, holding, concealing or harbouring a person, or exercising control, direction or influence over the movements of a person, for the purpose of exploiting them or facilitating their exploitation” (*Canadian Criminal Code*).⁵

While the sex industry operates on a continuum, it is trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth that are deeply concerning, as these experiences can have harmful life-long implications

and contribute to poor health outcomes.⁶ Exploring why Nova Scotia has the highest trafficking rate and high levels of commercial sexual exploitation requires exploring the root causes and risk factors that increase the vulnerability of Nova Scotia’s children and youth.

In 2021, the YWCA Halifax, the Association of Black Social Workers, and the Nova Scotia Native Women’s Association conducted a wide scale consultation, titled *Hearing Them*, involving 149 adult individuals with either past or present lived experience in the sex industry. The sex industry can be described as an exchange of sexual acts for money, substances, or other material items.⁷ Interactions with the sex industry can be varied and complex. It is important to delineate between involvement in the sex industry as an adult versus involvement as a child or youth. The interaction that children and youth have with the sex industry is often “*manipulated, coerced and forced.*”⁸

In Nova Scotia, a child is anyone under the age of 19.⁹ However, it is important to note that across Canada, children, and youth under the age of 16 are unable to provide legal consent for sexual activity and consent for selling sex can only be given by those older than age 18.¹⁰ While there are “close in age exceptions” in place for consent there is an age differential cap and there must be no relationship of trust, authority, dependency,

or exploitation of the young person. The data collected from *Hearing Them* consultations, identified that over half of the participants were youth at the time they first became involved in the sex industry.

Stories shared in the *Hearing Them* consultations, validate risk factors, circumstances, and life experiences consistent with broader literature findings and many stories also met the definition for commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth. In this report, reviews of the participants self-identified risk factors and the literature on risks for commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth have been layered with statistical data from Nova Scotia. While this information may not be fully representative of the literature or experiences, it does provide insights as to why Nova Scotia has the highest reported rates of human trafficking.¹¹

This paper is part one of a five-part paper series and describes the findings from these consultations related to understanding, addressing, and preventing risk factors for the involvement of children and youth in the sex industry in Nova Scotia. The other papers written by experts in these communities include papers specific to the Black/African Nova Scotian Community, the Indigenous Community, the justice system, and stigma.



Participants:

This paper is based on the results from the 2021 Hearing Them consultation, which involved 149 people from across Nova Scotia who identified as being currently or formerly involved in the sex trade, along all points of the choice spectrum at different parts of their lives. Each person responded retrospectively to the survey questions related to their age, location, experience, and risk factors at the time they first became involved in the sex industry. Given ethics considerations for research involving children and youth along with duty to report implications there was a limitation on who was able to participate in the survey consultations. However, within this survey,

Participants shared that they first became involved in the sex industry as children or youth. When people younger than age 18 become involved in the sex industry, it is not an individual choice, it is exploitation.

Participants were recruited from partnering agencies within the Trafficking and Exploitation Services System (TESS) Network, and through word of mouth with people not connected with any agency. Participants were paid \$80 for an hour of their time to go through the questions. Service providers verified participant identities. Participant identities were not recorded to protect their anonymity. Participants were not required to answer any questions they chose not to for any reason. Verbal consent was attained from participants to share the information collected in these reports and with partners and stakeholders and advocate for change for them.

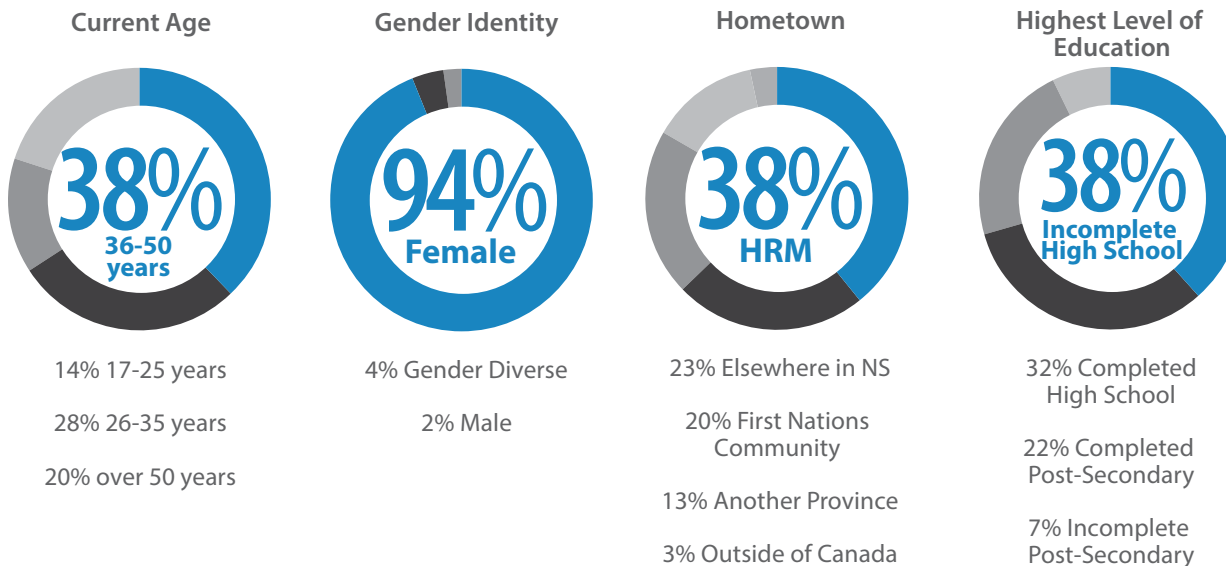
The following is a snapshot of participant demographics:

Racial Identity

48% White
34% Indigenous
14% Black/African Nova Scotian
4% Indigenous & ANS

Sexual Orientation

30% Identified as 2SLGBTQ+





Sex Trade Versus Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Youth in Nova Scotia:

Sex trade involvement is defined as “a spectrum of choice and economic opportunity which affects an individual’s participation.”¹² The concern of this paper is focused on those who do not have choice and are trafficked or commercially sexually exploited, particularly children and youth. A challenge in identifying who is trafficked stems from a lack of reporting, and limitations of data collection. Human trafficking offences in Canada include all labour trafficking and are not specific to only those in the sex industry.¹³ In 2020, a total of 61 offences were reported to police, 41 of which were under the Criminal Code and the remainder under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA).¹⁴ This lack of specificity can cause confusion and provides data that is hard to compare and analyze. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the rest of Canada saw a slight decline in human trafficking reports, yet Nova Scotia experienced an increase from the 2019 rate of 5.25 incidents per 100,000 people to the highest rate of 6.2.^{15 16} While these statistics represent only the number of incidents that were reported to police, it

is noteworthy that there are several limitations with police-reported data. Limitations include regional variations in training, enforcement and reporting policies and practices that influence which cases are brought forward to or detected by police.¹⁷ Given the complexity, sensitivity and global evidence around human trafficking and sexual exploitation, it can be assumed that the real numbers of cases are significantly higher than those reported – both in and beyond Nova Scotia. The Trafficking and Exploitation Service System (TESS), a Nova Scotia based multi-sector, interagency partnership is working to increase awareness through service provider education and training and improve reporting/system responses.¹⁸

Human trafficking, involving sex industry labour is just one type of commercial sexual exploitation as it involves a third party, who profits from the trafficking transaction (pimping).

While the true rates of CSEC are unknown, the *Hearing Them* report provides important insights and valuable personal stories describing the conditions and the context of being involved or exploited in the sex industry in Nova Scotia. Caution is needed in generalizing these findings as these experiences and stories are not representative of all of those who are involved in the sex industry nor have all participants from the survey experienced commercial sexual exploitation as a child or youth.

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Youth (CSEC) is broader and more pervasive term to describe the issues as it extends beyond the trafficking (pimping) context. CSEC is defined as any action which treats children or youth under the age of 18 as a commercial sexual object, and any adult who paid or collected money or exchanged something of value (i.e. food, substances, housing, transportation) for sexual services of a child or youth under the age of 18 is a perpetrator of CSEC.¹⁹



Sex Industry Involvement Across Nova Scotia:

The sex industry operates across the province of Nova Scotia, and while the highest concentrations of sex industry involvement occur in urban settings, the issue of rurality is an important consideration. Rurality presents increased risks specific to social isolation, the lack of economic opportunities, access to services, and access to transportation. As 43% of Nova Scotians live in rural communities it is unsurprising that the sex industry spans the full range of communities.²⁰ While 37.6% of participants from the *Hearing Them* consultations identified their original hometown within the more urban Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), 40.2% identified their hometown as outside of HRM, within a rural community or a First Nations Community and 22.3% identified their hometown as being outside of Nova Scotia.

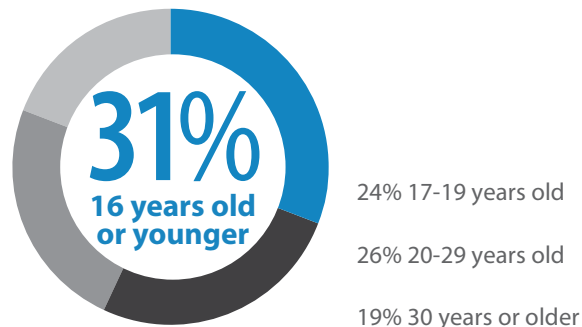
With the rise of urban migration, 66.2% of the participants identified that their current home location was within HRM (59.5% of which specifically identified living within the Halifax/Dartmouth area), 15.5% in Cape Breton, 11.6% in Truro/East Hants, Windsor/West Hants, South Shore and Tri-Counties and 5.4% in First Nations communities. While individuals from the *Hearing Them*

consultations originated from different hometown locations, Nova Scotia was the province where most participants lived when they first became involved in the sex industry.

86.9% lived in Nova Scotia when they first became involved in the sex industry

That number grows to 91% of participants when the geographic location is expanded to Atlantic Canada as location for first involvement in the sex industry.

Age of First Involvement



The participants also shared insights about their age at first involvement in the sex industry.

Overall, almost 80% of participants involved in the *Hearing Them* consultations became involved in the sex industry by the time they had reached 30 years of age.

Participants shared different experiences about becoming involved in the sex industry, saying they were manipulated, coerced, or forced. One participant shared their involvement started because,

“I was hanging out with people who were doing it and they sold the dream of making money and we were poor.”

Another person spoke of their parents’ addiction and their family’s need for income,

“My mother was addicted to cocaine and used to sell me.”

These stories touch on the precarious conditions that these individuals were living through and their experience of sex industry introduction and exploitation.



The consultations also indicate that for some, interaction with the sex industry was linked to a generalized perception that participation in the industry was normal. One participant articulated this in her comment,

“Media and music: Only Fans is a thing now. It’s becoming more popular/acceptable; Cardi-B used to turn tricks.”

Beyond the generalized societal culture, interaction with the sex industry has also become normalized within the family setting for many young people. For example, one participant shared the intergenerational nature of sex work involvement in their household,

“I saw my mom doing it forever. I knew she did it to keep us fed at first, then to pay rent and then to feed her own shit [addiction]. Thought of doing it as is but was scared. My mom told me not to until I was older but whatever, she was doing it, so she set me up with some guy to help me do ads and then it was done.”

For others, there is a perception that sex work is an accessible way to make money quickly to meet financial needs. One participant stated,

“I have two kids at home, no child support, or assistance. Had a 6-week quick fix. I had to pay rent and feed kids, it was winter, and they needed winter wear. I knew sex sold and was good money.”

These stories reflect individual risk factors including surrounding conditions that increased vulnerability for sex industry interaction. This lack of supportive conditions prevents children and youth from having their mental, physical, social, and developmental needs met.²¹ Involvement in the sex industry can be driven by a variety of needs: immediate survival needs such as access to food, secure housing, basic income; or being safe, secure, supported, or for an emotional connection, attachment or a sense of belonging derived from connection with family, community, and society.²² When children and youth’s needs are not able to be met within their existing living circumstances there is an increased vulnerability for poor outcomes.²³ To further understand how and why the *Hearing Them* participants and others experienced risk factors,

it is imperative to analyze the broader context of the indicators and conditions within which Nova Scotia children and youth are currently growing, learning, living, and playing.



What contributes to vulnerability?

Vulnerability can be vast and vary within the context of culture, communities, and geographical locations. Vulnerability in the context of commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth refers to the inherent, environmental, or contextual factors that increase the susceptibility of an individual or group to being trafficked or exploited.²⁴ These contributing risk factors are the result of policies and practices that impact entire groups of people and make them particularly vulnerable to being trafficked or exploited.²⁵ Discrimination, systemic racism and colonization have exacerbated vulnerabilities for many people. The impact of historical and intergenerational trauma and inequitable social conditions derived from systemic racism and colonialism will be further explored within the context of Nova Scotia to understand the unique risk factors and vulnerabilities that Black/African Nova Scotian and Indigenous communities face. Reports that provide a more in-depth analysis of Black/African Nova Scotian and Indigenous communities will be written by experts from each of those communities.

It is essential to note that no one is excluded from the vulnerability of being trafficked or exploited; however, due to a complicated variety of sociocultural and economic factors, some individuals, families, or communities have greater protective factors that may help to reduce risks and vulnerability.



Risk Factors:

The understanding of how adversity in childhood increases risk and vulnerability has been researched and discussed at length, most notably due to the work of Felitti who created the Adverse Childhood Experiences study (ACEs).²⁶ A few of the ACEs studied include physical or emotional neglect, physical or sexual abuse, and household violence and disfunction.²⁷ When multiple ACEs are experienced by a child or youth in the absence of a protective and supportive adult, “toxic stress” is endured which can impact them emotionally, psychologically, developmentally, and physically. The trauma of ACEs and toxic stress can have lasting and profound impacts on brain development, well-being, health outcomes and behaviours.^{28 29 30}

When examining the risk factors for commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth, the literature consistently points to living in poverty, child abuse (including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse), running away from home or being kicked out, substance use, peer influence, witnessing family violence, difficulty in school, conflict with parents, poor mental health or view of self, involvement in child protective services, involvement in juvenile detention, and prior rape or adolescent sexual victimization.^{31 32}

CSEC risk factors overlap with ACEs – demonstrating the need for collaborative efforts that effectively address and prevent child and youth exploitation both with specific focus on the underlying determinants of health through an evidence informed public health approach that is based on the principles of social justice, attention to child rights, and equity.³³

The *Hearing Them* survey captured risk factors participants spoke of in the sharing of their stories. When asked which if any risk factors they felt might have increased their risk when they first became involved in the sex industry, only 1 person out of the 149 participants responded, “I don’t know”, strongly suggesting that individuals are incredibly aware of the risks that lead to their involvement.

Forty-seven percent of participants identified 1-2 risk factors for themselves, while 37.5% indicated

that they had 5 risk factors. This illustrates that the number of risk factors does not solely dictate youth involvement in the sex industry but perhaps increases the vulnerability to being exploited or trafficked. The specific risk factors identified in the *Hearing Them* consultations related to poverty, violence/abuse, involvement in child welfare and justice systems, belonging, race, a normalized culture of violence, gender inequality and objectification.

Economic Factors

64%

Unstable Family Dynamic

61%

Substance Use

60%

Social/Cultural Factors

49%

Homeless

35%

School & Community Factors

30%



Poverty

A major contributing factor for involvement in the sex industry is an effort to meet material needs to live (shelter, food, clothing etc.). When these basic life necessities are not met, children and youth are more vulnerable to being exploited for means of survival. As of 2021, Nova Scotia had the highest poverty rate in Atlantic Canada with almost 1 in 4 children living in poverty.³⁴ Poverty is a tremendous risk factor as people do what they can within the conditions and circumstances that surround them. One participant noted,

“My daughter’s father wouldn’t help me out and that forced me to start making money.”

Fifty-five percent of participants also identified that they traded sexual services for things besides money. Participants from the *Hearing Them* survey identified that the seven most common commodities/items they traded sexual services for.

Substances



Rent/a Place to Stay



Food



Cigarettes



Clothing



Transportation



One participant stated,

“I started by trading services for drugs – did this for 4 years then on the brink of homelessness I started working hotels and maintained a job at the same time.”

Another participant shared,

“My first place and I didn’t have any money for rent and stuff like that so that pressured.”



Violence & Abuse

People who have been commercially sexually exploited and trafficked often have backgrounds of familial instability and disorganization; many times, they also have a history of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Although only a portion of individuals with a history of childhood sexual abuse become children and youth who are sexually exploited, their likelihood for being exploited is significantly increased. Research suggests that for many children and youth who have been sexually abused, their understanding of appropriate boundaries becomes skewed, and some may feel as though their bodies are no longer their own; they may connect repeated sexual abuse with signs of love or be unfazed when an exploiter makes them have sex with others.³⁵

Hearing Them consultations found that participants often experienced abuse and exposure to violence in childhood. Eighty-three percent of participants reported witnessing physical or emotional abuse as a child, and 61.4% disclosed they had been sexually abused as a child. For context, these rates are significantly higher than the estimates among the Canadian population of childhood exposure to intimate partner violence (7.9%), childhood physical abuse (26.1%) and childhood sexual abuse (10.1%).³⁶ One participant shared that their risk for involvement in the sex industry was due to unsafe living conditions.

“It was an unsafe place that I lived, visiting mom who I had been removed from, mom’s house where I experienced physical and emotional abuse.”

For many of the participants, their situations of violence or abuse had been repeated by multiple people, in multiple different scenarios throughout different periods of their lives, creating continued exposure.

Lifelong Experiences of Violence

Violence from Partner



Violence in Family Home



Violence from a Customer



Violence from Police



Violence from a Pimp



The *Hearing Them* consultations also found participants had high rates of involvement with child protection and youth justice systems.

42% of participants had been involved in either Mi’kmaq Family Services or the Child Welfare System as a child or youth; 20% were incarcerated at a youth detention centre.

From the literature, little is known to what degree this risk for involvement in commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth stems from factors within the welfare or justice systems themselves versus how much of the risk stems from initial or on-going exposure to the preexisting life circumstance and conditions which led to contact with protective or detention services.³⁷ It is evident that more research is needed to determine the risks and vulnerability of being involved with the child protection services and justice systems.



Lack of Belonging and Social Inclusion

As human beings, belonging is a fundamental need that is achieved by participating in stable, positive, lasting, interpersonal relationships.³⁸ Belonging reinforces one's belief that they are valued and cared for by others, across time, and even during periods of conflict.³⁹

A child's working model of self, the world, and the close relationships they form as adults is shaped by their early relationships and attachments with caregivers. The degree of connection a young person feels to other important figures or relationships in their lives directly impacts their overall well-being.⁴⁰ This fundamental need is understood and used by prospective exploiters to look for the children and youth that are vulnerable and appear lost, alone, and with little self-confidence.⁴² By providing them with a sense of belonging, and affection combined with basic needs, perpetrators often fill a void in these individual's lives. Many of the participants from the *Hearing Them* consultations referred to disconnected relationships at the family level, and some identified that a loss of connection (death of a grandparent, death of a parent, removal of children) was one factor they attributed their increased risk was at the time they first became involved in the sex industry. One participant stated that

"After dad died, I went into a depressive spiral."

Several other participants spoke to a desire to appease a partner or seek out love and belonging. One participant mentioned,

"I was disconnected from family, where this was a relationship, I wanted to feel loved, I was at university at the time."

Regardless of socio-economic status, age, race, religion – the fundamental need to belong is human and efforts or actions to meet that need, can increase vulnerability.

One participant summed up their own risk for involvement as,

"I think it was more like the opportunity was there. Perhaps I didn't have much self-esteem. In my young not fully developed mind, which was stunted by alcohol and drugs. I didn't have respect for myself. I hadn't valued my body like I ought to have. I had so much promiscuity from adults and people around me when I was growing up that it was not much of a thought to do. So, lack of self-respect or self-confidence, people pleaser, wanting to fit in or be liked."



Substance Use

Aside from needing money to survive, substance use was ranked second highest by participants in the *Hearing Them* consultations as a self-perceived risk factor for involvement in the sex industry. Sixty-one percent of participants shared they felt their use of substances was a factor that increased their risk when they first became involved, and almost half of the participants (48.3%) identified that when they first became involved, they traded sex for substances. Many participants shared anecdotal stories of growing up with parental substance use in their homes, having relationships with people who used or trafficked substances, and/or referred to their own substance needs.

Online Risks

As the children and youth of Nova Scotia increasingly engage and interact with a virtual world, particular focus needs to be directed to understanding the risks of children and youth being online and the threat of online luring, grooming and exploitation. This is especially important given the public health measures of physical isolation due to COVID-19, which required increased online use for both education and socialization. The virtual world, and specifically social media and networking platforms, provide many precarious circumstances that can increase the risk of exploitation for children and youth.

The internet is a place where children and youth gather unsupervised and communicate with known friends and/or strangers. The interactions can include, but are not limited to meeting strangers online, publicly sharing personal life details, and exchanging personal intimate

photos and videos. Perpetrators seek out and engage with children and youth on social media platforms who are often posting revealing details of their lives online and can be easily targeted. It may be an “innocent” TikTok dance, a vent about problems at home or school, or as they are experimenting with their sexuality by posting “sexy” photos.”⁴² Perpetrators are typically adults who seek out popular social media platforms and target vulnerable children and youth with the intent to groom.⁴³

Online grooming is a phase for building trust and a relationship to gain access to a child or youth for the purposes of sexual activity.⁴⁴ Online grooming may include encouraging them to engage in sexual activity or to send the perpetrator sexually explicit material. This interaction can lead the perpetrator to meeting the victim in person or getting them to share more increasingly intimate videos or photos by threatening to expose and send previously shared images to the youth’s friends or family.⁴⁵ These tactics can be incredibly harmful and debilitating to youth.

Several very public media stories have described the trauma and harm caused by the exploitation that children and youth experience in Canada.^{46 47}

“The overall rate of police-reported incidents of online child sexual exploitation and abuse in Canada has been on an upward trend, increasing from 50 incidents per 100,000 population in 2014, when cybercrime data were first collected nationally, to 131 per 100,000 in 2020.”⁴⁸

“Police-reported data show that child pornography and non-consensual distribution of intimate images (involving child victims) are also often committed online.”⁴⁹

In a time where children and youth access an online world for education, connection, and socialization, there is great need to understand and address the harms that exist within the environment where children and youth play, learn and grow. Collaboration among governments, social media industry and others is needed to implement regulations and policies that effectively protect children and youth in the online environment. It is anticipated that the online environment will be identified as a more prominent risk factor and a growing concern in subsequent surveys and further research.



Groups like WePROTECT Global Alliance is working with various levels of governments around the world to strengthen a collaborative response to countering online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Organized Trafficking Networks

Like all provinces in Canada, Nova Scotia is home to organized trafficking networks. The assumptions that human trafficking only happens overseas and involves crossing international borders is incorrect. A lesser discussed topic is the intentional recruitment of youth for sexual exploitation through organized trafficking networks. Nova Scotia human trafficking can include being “largely domestic and can involve girls and women from rural and urban areas being transported across provincial borders. Nova Scotia is known as being the source location for young girls working in the sex trade across the country, particularly in New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, and Alberta.”⁵⁰

One participant shared their experience of entry point into the sex industry, as it connected to a broader organized network,

“I was looking for new work and I answered an ad on Kijiji – a construction job out west – someone met me at the airport, and it was a pimp’s friend and took me to the pimp, locked me in a room.”

A 2021 study on Human Trafficking Corridors in Canada confirmed that “within Atlantic Canada, the stretch of the Trans-Canada Highway between Halifax and Moncton was the most frequently mentioned by interviewees and was a well-known human trafficking corridor. Traffickers go to Moncton not only to connect to the online commercial sex market, but also to access the commercial markets in strip clubs. Strip clubs operate in New Brunswick but are not legally permitted in Nova Scotia.”⁵¹

According to the Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking, data is collected by police services but it is usually kept within their jurisdictions and may not be collected in a way that allows for comparison.⁵² Data to monitor organized networks in Nova Scotia is scarce and to effectively address and prevent the intentional recruitment, more robust reporting and data collection

systems are needed. Beyond the familiar recruitment tactics used by traffickers, more attention needs to be spent on understanding the ways these networks coordinate, collaborate, and operate to drive the supply of commercially sexually exploited children and youth from Nova Scotia.



Gender Inequality and Sexual Objectification

In addition to individual level risk factors, it is important to consider the contextual risk factors at a broad societal level. Risk factors including gender inequality and early-age objectification of females, which influence societal messages and behavioural expectations. This places children and youth in vulnerable positions as they may perceive that they are primarily sexual objects and thus become prime targets for exploitation in the commercial sex industry.⁵³ From the *Hearing Them* consultations some participants identified that their increased risk of sex industry involvement was fueled by this objectification,

One participant said,

“I felt it was all I had to offer.”

and another participant stated,

“I wanted to fit in and have guys like me more or less.”

Sexual exploitation and human trafficking are understood to be gendered issues. Research indicates that perpetrators are most commonly male adults, both as purchasers and suppliers,⁵⁴ while victims include females, males, and transgender youth.⁵⁵ Statistics Canada reported that between 2010-2020,

96% of police-reported human trafficking victims were female.⁵⁶ Being female significantly increases the risk for exploitation and human trafficking.⁵⁷

In the *Hearing Them* consultations, an overwhelming majority of 93.9% identified as female, 2% as male and 4.1% as two-spirited/non-binary/gender fluid. However, a significant over-representation of participants (29.7%) or just under one third who indicated their sexual orientation as 2SLGBTQI+, compared to about 4.8% of the general population of Nova Scotia.⁵⁸

2SLGBTQI+ individuals are at higher risk of experiencing systemic discrimination which leads to poor health outcomes connected to issues with housing, income, employment, and access to appropriate healthcare.^{59,60} According to the most recent Canadian-based Trans Health survey, more than 1 in 4 trans youth aged 14-18 reported they had run away from home in the past year, and this was much more likely among those who had reported a history of physical or sexual abuse. The numbers were higher in Atlantic Canada.⁶¹

Attention is needed to specifically address how the social and cultural norms of gender inequality and objectification of females influence societal values and create harmful environments for children and youth. The systemic reasons for discrimination and inequity are deeply embedded in culture, economy, and politics.⁶²

These risks compound to increase a child or youths' vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation. To address these risk factors of discrimination based on gender and sexuality, an approach that prioritizes health and wellbeing is needed that provides specific attention and action to improve equity, gender equality, and eliminate discrimination.



Nova Scotia Risk Factors - what is happening for children and youth in Nova Scotia that makes them more vulnerable to being trafficked and exploited?

Vulnerability for commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth should not be evaluated from an individual basis. Rather, it should be analyzed from the context of the surroundings. When looking at this context for Nova Scotia, the province underperforms on several important health and wellbeing indicators compared to the rest of Canada. This increases vulnerability for children and youth.

A glimpse of poverty in Nova Scotia: Access to basic needs is a major driving force for involvement in the sex industry; this is widely illustrated in the literature as well as within the *Hearing Them* consultations. When considering poverty and lack of access to basic needs, Nova Scotia has the highest rate of child poverty in Atlantic Canada and the third-highest provincial child poverty rate in Canada with 41, 230 children (about 1 in 4) living in poverty in

2019.⁶³ Furthermore, almost 11% of households were deemed food insecure in 2017-18 in Nova Scotia; this is higher than the national average of 8.8%.⁶⁴ During this same period nearly 1 in 5 children in Nova Scotia lived in a household that was deemed food insecure.⁶⁵ Households with lone-parent families were the most vulnerable type of household to be food insecure.⁶⁶ Nova Scotia also has the second highest number of single parent families in Canada (18.5%) and single parents earn less (under \$40,000) than the national average.⁶⁷ Housing is a critical factor for health and wellbeing. The evidence indicates a direct link between housing and mental health of adults⁶⁸ and a critical factor for physical, social, and mental health for children and youth.⁶⁹ While housing conditions tend to have their largest impact on health in these early stages of life, the negative impacts related to unstable housing can follow a child into adulthood.^{70,71} In 2021, it was noted that women comprise almost 70% of public housing tenants and 60% of the rent supplement clients in Nova Scotia. There is currently a housing crisis, with a significant shortage of adequate, affordable housing to meet the needs of Nova Scotians, disproportionately affecting those from communities that have been marginalized due to race or income and individuals living on low-income.

A snapshot of child abuse and violence in Nova Scotia: In Nova Scotia, there are higher levels of violence, sexual child abuse and intimate partner violence compared to the rest of the country. Twenty-two percent of youth in Nova Scotia reported intimate partner violence during

dating compared to 17% for the rest of Canada.⁷² Between 2015-2019, there were over 70,000 referrals to the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services for various concerns ranging from neglect, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.⁷³ On average, 4,139 cases per year were substantiated and required protection as specified in the legislation.⁷⁴ For the calendar year 2019, the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services reported to a total of 927 children and youth in care.⁷⁵ Looking specifically at rates of children and youth victims of police-reported violence (including physical and sexual assault) by a family member in Nova Scotia, the 2018-2019 data provides a rate of 343 per 100,000 people, which is higher than the Canadian rate of 308 per 100,000.⁷⁶ For this same year, police-reported non-family violence against children and youth was also higher in Nova Scotia at 839 per 100,000 children and youth versus 655 per 100,000 across Canada.⁷⁷ Given what is known about significant underreporting of physical and sexual violence against children and youth, it is estimated that only 1 in 10 cases are reported to authorities.⁷⁸

A crosstabulation of data from the *Hearing Them* consultations highlights that people from Black/African Nova Scotian, and Indigenous communities are disproportionately involved with the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services (such as foster care and child protection etc.). Collaboration with communities most impacted by systemic racism, intergenerational violence, and colonialism is urgently needed to address these issues.



A look at connection, belonging and wellbeing among children and youth in Nova Scotia:

There is great need for children and youth to have meaningful connection and experience a sense of belonging. How children and youth are supported and connected deeply impacts their overall well-being and ability to thrive. The 2018-2019 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey reported the percentage of students in grades 6-10 in Nova Scotia who felt they had high family support was similar to that of other Canadian youth (38.3% and 37.3% respectively). This indicates that 61.7% of students do not feel they have high family support. Family support is an important factor in several health and social outcomes; for example, research indicates that youth experiencing homelessness reported their inability to connect with their parents as a significant reason for why they left home.⁷⁹

While the sense of belonging can be a difficult factor to measure, an indicator of social exclusion and being targeted by peers can be measured by the percentage of children and youth experiencing bullying. For Nova Scotia these percentages are 31.2% for grades 7-9, and 27.1% for grade 10-12. Statistics for bullying in Nova Scotia are higher than national percentages which are 23.6% and 19.9% respectively. The impact of bullying can be devastating to one's self-esteem and feelings of worthiness and can greatly affect mood. The percentage of students who felt sad or hopeless every day for two weeks or more, to the point where they withdrew from usual activities was 33.8%

in 2018-2019.⁸⁰ Again higher than the national percentage of 30.3%. Reports of feeling low or depressed more than one week was 30.5%, compared to the national percentage of 27.4%. Rates of suicide in Nova Scotia further speak to the need for an immediate and preventative response: the youth suicide mortality rate was 11.7,⁸¹ higher than Canada's rate of 8.1.⁸²

Substance use and related harms among children and youth:

The participants in the *Hearing Them* survey identified substance use as a risk factor and a means for surviving. The most recent Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey shows substance use among Nova Scotian youth in grades 7-12 is rising and, in some cases, is concerningly higher than national levels.⁸³ High-risk drinking in Nova Scotia was notably higher than the national rate. In 2018-2019, the average age of initiation (age of first drink) among grade 7 to 12 students was 13.4 years, unchanged from the previous survey year. Both cannabis use and heavy drinking have been shown to negatively impact youth brain development, with higher frequency and heavier use being associated with increased risk of harm.⁸⁴ The heavy use of alcohol is strongly associated with family conflict, intimate partner violence, child abuse and neglect, and violent crimes, including sexual assault.⁸⁵ The younger the youth is when they start using substances and the heavier or more frequent their use, the higher the risk for problematic substance use and harms later in life.⁸⁶

“There is not one single cause of problematic substance use among youth. It involves a complex interplay of factors such as the marketing of psychoactive substances, their availability, family and peer relationships, experiences of abuse and trauma, and social factors such as stable housing and family income that can lead one towards – or protect one from – the problematic use of substances.”⁸⁷ Prevention efforts that address delaying youth onset of substance use can have a significant impact on reducing substance use harms and long-term negative health impacts.

The *Hearing Them* consultations identified that substance use was a major determining risk factor for involvement in the sex industry, as sex was traded for access to substances and was also a factor in keeping people involved in the sex industry.

Risk factors for being vulnerable to CSEC: Health and well-being indicators in Nova Scotia and Canada

Dimension	Indicator/Description	Nova Scotia	Across Canada	Year & Source
Poverty/Basic Needs Measures				
Poverty - Family Low Income Measures	After-tax census family low-income measure 2019	24.3%	17.7%	2019 Statistics Canada Canadian Income Survey
Housing	Children or youth living with housing need	12.6%	12.6%	2016 Statistics Canada
Food Insecurity	Household members having issues with the quality or quantity of food consumed or having experienced reduced food intake or disrupted eating pattern.	11%	8.8%	2017-2018 Statistics Canada
Violence & Abuse & Involvement in Child Protection Services				
Police Reported Children and Youth Victims of Violence	Children and youth victims of police reported violence by a family member	343 per 100,000	308 per 100,000	2018-2019 Statistics Canada
	Police-reported non-family violence against children and youth	839 per 100,000	655 per 100,000	
Victims of Violence During Dating Relationship	Percentage of students in grades 9 and 10 that report teen dating violence in the last 12 months	21.9%	17%	2018/2019 Health Behavior in School Aged Children
Witnessing Family Violence	One in 10 Canadians (10%) stated that before age 15 they had witnessed violence by a parent or guardian against another adult in the home	unknown	10% of Canadians before the age of 15	2015 – Profile of Canadian Adults who experienced childhood maltreatment
Involvement in Child Protection Services	Substantiated cases of abuse or neglect that required child protective services from the Department of Community Services	3,686 cases	N/A	Nova Scotia Department of Community Services, 2019
Children and Youth in Care	Children and youth from birth to 24 years of age in the care of the Department of Community Services	927	N/A	Nova Scotia Department of Community Services, Jan. 1st-Dec. 31st, 2019
Connection, Belonging & Well-being				
Connection	The percentage of students who feel they have high family support	38.3%	37.3%	2018/2019 Health Behavior in School Aged Children
Social Exclusion	Incidence of being bullied in grades 7-9	31.2%	23.6%	2018-2019 Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol, and Drug Survey
	Incidence of being bullied in grades 10-12	27.1%	19.9%	
Decreased Well-Being	Percentage of students reported feeling sad or hopeless every day for two weeks or more that they stopped doing their usual activities	33.8%	30.3%	2018/2019 Health Behavior in School Aged Children
	Percentage of students that reported feeling low or depressed for a week or more	30.5%	27.4%	
Suicide	One year suicide mortality rate	11.7%	8.1%	Statistics Canada and Nova Scotia Medical Examiner Open Data
Substance Use				
Alcohol	Percentage of students in grades 7 -12 engaging in high-risk alcohol consumption in the past year	24.8%	23.4%	2018-2019 Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol, and Drug Survey
	Average age of first alcohol drink	N/A	13.4 years	
Cannabis	Percentage of students in grades 7 – 12 reported cannabis use in past month	23.4%	18.1 %	2018-2019 Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol, and Drug Survey
	Average age of initial cannabis use	N/A	14.3 years	
Online Environment				
Luring stats	The rate for the criminal charges for luring a child online ⁸⁸	6.75%	5.05%	2021 Statistics Canada
Child Pornography & Non-Consensual Distribution of Intimate Images (involving children)	The rate of adults charged per 100,000 population aged 18 years and older	0.61%	0.25%	2022 Incident-based crime statistics, Census Metropolitan Areas, and Canadian Forces Military Police
Online Sexual Offences Against children	Average number of incidents of online sexual offences against children in police-reported online child sexual exploitation and abuse, by province or territory, Canada, 2018 to 2020	43%	27	Statistics Canada police-reported online child sexual exploitation and abuse in Canada 2018-2020



What can be done to prevent risk and reduce vulnerability?

The Nova Scotia conditions in which children and youth live, learn, grow, and play increase risks and create vulnerability for being commercially sexually exploited. There is a clear correlation between the perpetual underperformance of wellbeing indicators for children and youth and Nova Scotia's high levels of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Canada is a signatory⁸⁹ – children have a fundamental right to be protected from violence, abuse, neglect, exploitation, and discrimination. Canada has an obligation to ensure prevention of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth.

To effectively address and prevent commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth, a public health approach is required that fundamentally addresses the root causes of vulnerability to being trafficked or sexually exploited. This approach must be evidence informed, comprehensive and multi-faceted and rooted in the principles of social

justice, human rights, and health equity. It must also implement evidence-informed policies and practices and address the underlying determinants of health, including the impacts of systemic racism, discrimination, and colonialism.

To effectively address and prevent commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth, – approaches are needed that go beyond the criminal justice approach and aim to eliminate risk factors that make individuals and communities vulnerable to being trafficked or exploited. These approaches must effectively reduce risk factors such as poverty, abuse, and violence and improves protective factors fostering belonging and social inclusion. The rights and needs of children and youth in Nova Scotia must be prioritized. Children and youth need to live, learn, grow, and play in conditions that allow them to be safe, loved, and cared for so they can thrive.

To support Nova Scotian children and youth in reducing risk factors and preventing commercial sexual exploitation of children the following evidence-informed preventative measures are recommended:



Recommendations:

1 Public Health Approach:

a. Broaden the approach for addressing commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth from a justice response to a public health approach. “Public health is an approach to maintaining and improving the health of populations that is based on the principles of social justice, attention to human rights and equity, and evidence-informed policy and practice, and addresses the underlying determinants of health.”⁹⁰

b. Issue a call for health care practitioners and agencies across the province to join and become active in the TESS partnership.

c. Incorporation of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation screening tools and reporting processes into health care settings.

2 Poverty Reduction:

a. To support the recommendations in the One Chance to be a Child Report, Nova Scotia needs to reduce and eventually eliminate poverty experienced by children and youth in all its forms. One Chance to be a Child | Nova Scotia (onechancens.ca).

b. Increase the number of affordable housing units through the public and community (non-profit and co-operative) housing sectors, introduce permanent rent control for all units (not tied to tenants), and implement a plan with targets to eliminate homelessness and core housing needs.⁹¹

c. Removal of eligibility barriers/increase access to Employment Support and Income Assistance

(ESIA)⁹² for youth 16-18 years old by working with community groups to remove or broaden the criteria conditions around living with a parent or in the parental home, as well as standardizing an approach for case workers to assess life skills and maturity.

d. Ongoing advocacy for guaranteed income benefit and livable wages.

3 Child Abuse Prevention Strategy:

a. Nova Scotia needs a current and effective strategy to address and prevent child abuse that is built on listening to children and youth, considering their rights, and focusing on their best interests.

b. Investment in therapy and restorative approaches to addressing perpetrators of commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth.

4 Systemic Racism and Discrimination

Elimination:

a. Effective change is required across systems and services to address the systemic racism and discrimination that has greatly impacted Nova Scotians and perpetuated poor health outcomes. Nova Scotia needs to take a broad approach to prioritize the elimination of systemic racism and discrimination and should lean on the recommendations in the One Chance to be a Child report. One Chance to be a Child | Nova Scotia (onechancens.ca).

b. Marginalized and Equity deserving communities need to be empowered and centered within an anti-trafficking approach that is rooted in their needs and addresses the risk factors specific to

their communities. Nova Scotia must support the development of and investment in anti-trafficking strategies coming from within the Indigenous, Black/African Nova Scotian, and 2SLGBTQI+ communities.

5 Protective Online Environments:

a. Enhance safer measures and enforcement for online environment by having the Nova Scotia Government join the Federal Government in endorsing, adopting, adapting, and strongly advocating for the implementation of the WePROTECT Global Alliance principles to combat online child and youth sexual exploitation and abuse. Voluntary Principles to Counter Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (publicsafety.gc.ca).

6 Prevention of Youth Substance Use

Related Harm:

a. To effectively protect children and youth from the harms and risks of substance use, Nova Scotia requires a collaborative public health and harm reduction approach for youth substance use. In 2018, the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada Dr. Theresa Tam called upon provinces to collaborate across all sectors to improve public health policies that can protect children and youth from the harms and risks of using substances and delay the age of onset.⁹³

b. Adopt the Children’s Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) to strengthen public health policy that will center the rights of children and youth and reduce harms (including violence, abuse, injury) from substance use and will delay early onset of substance use among youth.



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