

WHO ARE MOST
DISADVANTAGED'

MISSING AND MURDERED

THE TRAFFICKED



Indigenous women and girls are being exploited by gangs and other predators with little being done to stop it. The Globe investigates

BY TAVIA GRANT

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PART ONE:

A PIECE OF PROPERTY

Natalie just wanted to belong. Her home life was troubled – parents who drank too much, an abusive boyfriend and a sense she didn’t fit in. So,

although just 14, she moved in with members of a street gang.

They were her family, her protectors, at least in the beginning. She began to sell crack for them. Then she started using as well, which cost money that she didn't have.

Suddenly her protectors took control of her life – where she could go, whom she could talk to, at times even fighting over her, as if she were a piece of property.

And there was only one way to pay the debt: sell herself. Along with crack, they trafficked her.

Now living in Winnipeg, Natalie has escaped the gang, but has asked that her name be changed; as much as she wants to tell her story, she lives in fear of reprisals.

“It's almost like, the longer you've known them, the more abusive they become,” she says. Now 25, she was in “the life” until she was 18, but still looks young. And nervous, occasionally twisting her hair as she makes her story public for the first time.

To most Canadians, human trafficking evokes images of women smuggled from far-off lands or over the border.

In reality, it needn't involve physically moving anyone anywhere – the legal definition is recruiting, harbouring, transporting or controlling the movement of a person for the purpose of exploitation. Most of it is [sex trafficking](#), and it overwhelmingly takes place within Canada's borders. Of the 330 cases the RCMP has identified, 311 – 94 per cent – are domestic.

It is also something in which indigenous women – and girls – are vastly overrepresented. Aboriginal people make up just 4 per cent of the population, but a study in 2014 found they account for about half the victims of trafficking – Public Safety Canada calls them the country’s “population most vulnerable to exploitation.”



Wallace-Littlechief, Alaya McIvor and Bridget Perrier: Indigenous women account for just one in every 25 Canadians, but one 2014 study estimates that they are the population most vulnerable to trafficking (Truong for The Globe and Mail)

Natalie, like every survivor The Globe and Mail encountered during three months of research – which included more than 60 interviews with trafficked women, their families, police, researchers, advocates and front-line service providers here and in the U.S. – firmly believes that she nearly wound up among the more than 1,200 aboriginal women who have gone missing or been murdered in Canada since 1980. “They’re scary,” she says of the gang. “You see what they’re capable of.”

The situation is an open secret.

In fact, Canada has been subject to international rebuke for failing to address it. In 2012, Stephen Harper’s Conservative government unveiled a four-year action plan to prevent human trafficking, prosecute the perpetrators and aid the victims. It is set to expire in March, and Public Safety Canada, responsible for coordinating the federal response, could not provide a breakdown of how the \$25-million earmarked for the plan (money the departments involved had to find within their existing budgets) has been allocated.

But the Globe investigation has found that more than 90 per cent of what has been spent appears to have gone to law enforcement and to addressing international trafficking. Less than 10 per cent – up to \$500,000 a year administered by the Justice Department – has been devoted to victim support, and even that hasn’t been entirely put to use.

ING BREAKS DOWN:

ment said it was too early to provide an overview of how the National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking is. Queries to the key departments involved give a picture of how the money was spent.

our years (in millions of dollars)

19.2

Example: \$1.9-million per year on a dedicated enforcement team.

Example: \$421,000 in 2015 on strengthening institutions to combat human trafficking in Costa Rica.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Agency

Expenditures for human trafficking specifically as combating human trafficking and regular operational activities.”

The original action plan said CBSA would be investing \$445,000 per year on service officer training/awareness.

Example: \$300,000 from 2012 to 2014 on a campaign to increase awareness of human trafficking among aboriginal people.

Example: Up to \$500,000 per year since 2013 on a victims' fund that is used to capacity.

International Development Canada

Example: \$140,000 annually on Canada's temporary foreign worker program activities related to human trafficking.

Other departments were not part of the allocations in the action plan, but still spent some funds on human trafficking-related projects. Status of Women Canada



MISSING AND MURDERED
THE TRAFFICKED

It is impossible to gauge the full extent of sex trafficking in Canada – the crime is underreported, and many victims don't realize that is what has happened to them. But the cost – to society and each victim – is significant. Depending on the length and severity of the case, it can range from \$1.1-million to \$1.6-million, according to a 2013 study by Nicole Barrett, a human-trafficking expert at the University of British Columbia's Allard School of Law.

The total includes the victim's pain and suffering, loss of education, earnings and work experience as well as health-care and justice-system costs.

But far worse, human trafficking “is costing aboriginal people their lives,” says Rose Henry, a First Nations educator in Victoria. “This should be raising alarm bells. But people are choosing not to be aware because it also brings cultural shame – on everybody, not just on the indigenous people.”

And, as Natalie contends: “It's been put on the backburner, so guys are getting away with it more and more because they're thinking no one cares about these aboriginal girls – no one's going to do anything about it anyway.”

PART TWO:

CANADA CRITICIZED INTERNATIONALLY

Human trafficking is not a new problem in Canada, but its classification as a crime is: The legislation was introduced in 2005. As of last August, the RCMP says, charges under the act have led to just 34 convictions specifically for human trafficking (another 56 were for related crimes).

Of the 531 victims in these cases, about 30 per cent were under 18 at the time of the alleged offence.

Unlike the United States, Canada has neither a broad national co-ordinating body on the issue, nor any detailed annual report on trafficking. There is no central data-collection mechanism, and the information that is gathered rarely includes the victim's ethnicity – partly for the sake of privacy. But the RCMP is well aware of the problem: Domestic trafficking for sexual exploitation “exists and is widespread,” notes a 2013 study by the force that makes special mention of the higher proportion of indigenous women.

OVER THE PAST DECADE, MORE THAN 20 REPORTS, TESTIMONIALS AND STUDIES SHOW THAT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE ARE OVER-REPRESENTED IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING CASES – AND MANY URGE THAT SOMETHING BE DONE ABOUT IT.

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The Mounties aren't the only ones to notice: Canada has been criticized internationally for the situation. A U.S. State Department analysis released last year describes it as a source, transit corridor and destination country for sex trafficking, and calls women from aboriginal communities "especially vulnerable."

In Toronto, less than 1 per cent of the population is aboriginal versus, The Globe has found, an estimated 20 per cent of the trafficking victims city police have seen in the past two years.

In Vancouver, Canada's first high-security safe house for trafficking victims says 45 per cent of its residents are aboriginal, as are 40 per cent of the survivors seen by Edmonton's Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation (CEASE) and a remarkable 70 per cent of those in Winnipeg's street sex trade, according to the Transition, Education and Resources for Females program.

In a scathing report last March, a United Nations committee declared that the overrepresentation of indigenous women in Canada stems from their economic and social marginalization and puts them at a "disproportionately high risk for disappearance and murder." The committee added that "insufficient efforts have been made" to address their vulnerability.

There is "no question Canada lags well behind other nations on this extreme human-rights abuse," says Barbara Gosse, who was senior research director for a 2014 national task force on the issue sponsored by the Canadian Women's Foundation.

Sweden, she notes, spends on average \$1.27 per person a year on ending human trafficking. Canada's commitment? About 19 cents.

PART THREE:

OTTAWA UNDECIDED ON NEXT STEP

Although the federal action plan expires next month, the new Liberal government has yet to say whether it will make the battle against trafficking a priority. Public Safety Canada, now led by veteran minister Ralph Goodale, declined an interview request and said the new government is currently determining its “next steps” based on experience gained from the action plan about to expire.

Still, the issue has already surfaced in consultations to prepare for a national inquiry on the more than 1,200 missing or murdered indigenous women.

The majority of those women – 88 per cent, according to the RCMP – were not involved in the sex trade. But Dawn Lavell-Harvard, president of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), feels that human trafficking “can't help but become part of the inquiry,” if it is to be a comprehensive one.

Anyone who is sexually exploited faces a much higher risk of social isolation and, she says, is “much more likely to end up being murdered and to experience extreme violence.”

Beatrice Wallace-Littlechief is one such victim. Her mother and grandparents went to residential schools, and she was placed in foster care when very young, then adopted at 5 into a white middle-class home in Regina.

Beatrice Wallace-Littlechief says she was forced into the sex trade at 13. 'Somewhere along the line,' she came to believe 'it was okay to get beat by men.' (May Truong for The Globe and Mail)

Pain still evident in her voice, Ms. Wallace-Littlechief says she suffered “all kinds of abuse,” was called “a dirty squaw” and “an ugly Indian” – both in her adoptive home and at school. Shame set in.

Tired of being beaten, she fought back, and for doing so, was sent to a group home when she was about 13. Several weeks later, she and another girl ran away from the home, and wound up in a house with two men who “saw fresh meat.” She was introduced to injection drugs – and raped. “They were prepping me for the streets,” she says.

Found by the authorities, she was returned to a group home, only to run away again and fall into the hands of pimps. They broke into a house where she was living, beat her and forced her to work the streets – and hand over everything she earned.

venue where Beatrice Wallace-Littlechief was once trafficked, and now works as a co-ordinator with an AIDS program. (May Truong for The C

“They threatened me with my life,” she says. “I was terrified of them.” The threat of violence was constant, she says, whether from a pimp, a bad date or a boyfriend.

Now, at 43, she also looks younger, but still bears the marks of having been on the streets: “I have scars on both my eyes, from being punched shut. My nose has

been broken twice. My mouth is scarred up, inside and out. My nose was ripped off, and took seven stitches to close. I was stabbed and I have a scar on my hand from a different knife incident.”

One mark cannot be seen: “The very first time is ingrained in my head. It’s as if someone took all my dignity... Right then I realized I was nothing.”

By 16, she was not only pregnant but, “somewhere along the line, I thought it was okay to get beat by men.”

PART FOUR:

‘PRODUCT OF COLONIZATION’

For many indigenous women, trafficking is part of a continuum of violence that has deep roots and has left them with far higher rates of abuse and exploitation.

“Just by being born aboriginal in this country, you are at risk – you don’t even need to engage in a high-risk lifestyle,” says Yvonne Boyer, who co-wrote the 2014 report for Public Safety Canada and holds the Canada Research Chair in

Aboriginal Health and Wellness at Brandon University.

She calls the problem “part of a Canadian crisis,” and says it is “all the product of colonization and what we have left over in this country.”

Many factors increase the vulnerability of aboriginal women to trafficking. Studies have shown that most victims have already been abused, while many have been taken into care. Indigenous girls and women are far more likely to have experienced both.

Other contributing factors include the intergenerational trauma that resulted from the residential-school system, systemic racism and grinding poverty, along with poor housing, limited educational opportunities, high rates of violence more broadly, and a lack of culturally relevant support services.

“I WAS HUNGRY, AND SO I DID WHAT I DID SO I COULD EAT. IT WAS A MEANS OF SURVIVAL.”

– JUANITA MURPHY, A SURVIVOR OF SEX TRAFFICKING WHO WORKS WITH SEXUALLY VICTIMIZED YOUTH AT CEASE IN EDMONTON

In a landmark ruling last month, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal found that the federal government has discriminated against aboriginal people by its chronic under-funding of child-welfare services on reserves. (Government documents have pegged the gap for welfare on reserves at 22 to 34 per cent.)

Eight of the nine sex-trafficking survivors who spoke to The Globe and Mail

were abused as children. Six spent time in group homes or foster care. Seven have parents or close relatives who went through Canada's residential schools (the remaining two couldn't say for sure).

Edmonton's Juanita Murphy also had to grapple with fallout from the residential-school experience. She says her Cree mother "did the best she could" but was so traumatized by her upbringing that she fell prey to addiction and, eventually, took her own life.

In care from the time she was an infant, Ms. Murphy lived in a series of foster and group homes, and so was "raised around exploitation."

One man offered \$20 if she would pull up her shirt. She was 9.

At 10, she was "sold to a pedophile," she says. He used threats and beatings to abuse her on a regular basis for years, at times handcuffing her to a bed and injecting her with drugs. Spiralling into addiction, she spent years on the streets.

"I was hungry, and so I did what I did so I could eat," she explains. "It was a means of survival."

PART FIVE:

THE FOSTER-CARE

CONNECTION

The link with foster care is difficult to ignore – in fact, it’s “a direct connection” says Dawn Lavell-Harvard of NWAC.

“The fact that we have more kids in the care system now than at the height of the residential-school system shows just how many of our young people are at risk.” Nearly half – 48 per cent – of kids under 14 in foster care in Canada are aboriginal children.

Bridget Perrier was 12 and living in a group home in Thunder Bay, Ont., when another girl convinced her to run away – into the “nightmare.”

Bridget Perrier ran away at 12, and says she nearly wound up among the missing and murdered: 'I've had many close calls ... they would pulverize us.' (May Truong for The Globe and Mail)

More than 25 years later, she vividly recalls turning her first trick: paid to masturbate an old man who so preferred young girls that he'd pay an extra \$400 "for the newbie experience." It was January; she was cold, broke and alone, with few options.

Before long, a madam put her to work, arranging stints in Halifax, Ottawa, Winnipeg and Toronto. By 14, she'd met a "kiddy pimp," been recruited and was still travelling from city to city.

All the girls she worked with, she says, had a history of sexual abuse, and neglect. Many were in care – "kids that no one wanted" – and many, like her, were indigenous.

The pimp, she recalls, "was every underage girl's worst nightmare ... this guy specifically liked young girls, because he could overpower and manipulate them."

At times, he would come across like a boyfriend, but then would withhold affection – from someone who had nowhere else to find it. "He knew exactly what types of girls to pick," she says.

There were threats, such as sending explicit videotapes to a girl's parents. Or he would "flip out," she says, and resort to beatings, in some instances, using a "pimp stick" – a coat hanger, unraveled and heated.

Several friends in her circle back then have been killed, and she says she was

nearly one of the missing and murdered because of bad dates. “I’ve had many close calls ... they would pulverize us.”

She was once among a group of girls (some of them intoxicated and just taken from a Thunder Bay bar) who spent several days servicing the crew aboard a freighter on Lake Superior. Not only was one man, nicknamed Captain Jack, “rough,” she says, the girls were warned that anyone who acted out would be thrown over the side.

There was a time when she would have described herself as being in the trade by choice. But on reflection, she now feels there was no choice. In part because she was recruited so young, “it was never work,” she says, vehemently. “It was abuse.”

PART SIX:

THE MAKING OF A TARGET

Indigenous girls are more likely to suffer from inadequate social support, on reserve or off.

For example, infrequent or costly bus service to remote communities leaves some with little choice but to hitchhike for school, services, social visits or shopping, putting them alone, and vulnerable, with adult strangers.

The 2014 study by Public Safety Canada, meanwhile, identified a “clear link” between sex trafficking and a lack of safe, affordable housing, which can lead to overcrowding and couch surfing that sees children seeking shelter with distant relatives and others they barely know.

Another major factor is limited access to education. Because many remote northern communities don't have high schools, indigenous students often have to leave home when barely in their teens and head to larger centres, where they are billeted or stay with acquaintances.

“They don't get to go home at the end of the day or on weekends,” says Michele Anderson, a specialist in human trafficking at Toronto-based Covenant House, the largest agency in Canada for homeless youth. “For many, they are being exposed to places like malls for the first time. They are young and impressionable and homesick.”

This can make them easy targets for those offering emotional support and a better life, but whose true motives are much darker.

The hunt for that better life leads many young people to go farther south. “It's surprising the number of cases we have of girls who have been lured from small communities in the north,” says Ms. Anderson.

“It's a problem. The traffickers know they are vulnerable, and it's easy for them to sell the dream, offering them ... the great, bright lights in the city.”

She says the sales pitch can begin right at the bus depot. “They wait in the stations as the girls come in from North Bay or Sault Ste. Marie or Thunder Bay.”

Young women from the Far North run much the same risk when they leave home in search of schooling or health care, often in the nation’s capital or Montreal, where police confirm that Inuit girls have been trafficked. But Ms. Anderson says Covenant House has also had Inuit cases in Toronto.

“THE TRAFFICKERS KNOW THEY ARE VULNERABLE, AND IT’S EASY FOR THEM TO SELL THE DREAM, OFFERING THEM ... THE GREAT BRIGHT LIGHTS IN THE CITY.”

— MICHELE ANDERSON, A SPECIALIST IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING AT TORONTO-BASED COVENANT HOUSE

Although trafficking occurs across the country, in small towns as well as big cities, experts say there are some well-travelled corridors.

One runs between Thunder Bay and Winnipeg, where Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata operates a safe house for trafficked minors, as well as a healing lodge north of the city.

A second corridor runs west from Winnipeg, says Diane Redsky, executive director of the centre (whose Ojibway name translates as “we all work together to help one another”). She says recruiters are so bold that they have lured girls right from the safe house and taken them to Saskatoon, where they were

“attempted to be sold for \$5,000 each.”

But Ontario is home to the most official cases. Of the 90 cases of human trafficking that had gone through the courts as of August, 39 were from Toronto and another eight from the rest of the Golden Horseshoe, the RCMP says. Of the 180 cases then before courts, more than 90 per cent were from Ontario and Quebec.

Toronto’s Covenant House is opening a new transitional facility for trafficked youth this year, after the number of cases it saw more than doubled, to 46, last year. It says about a quarter of them involved indigenous girls and young women.

It’s unclear exactly how indicative of trafficking patterns these numbers are, however. The level of enforcement varies across the country, as does data collection.

It’s not like “traffickers have a road map,” says Detective Sergeant Thai Truong, who oversees vice and human trafficking in York Region, north of Toronto. They go where the demand is, stay as long as they’re making money and then move on. All the while, they keep the girls isolated, both to avoid detection and because “fresh” ones tend to attract more clients.

Because traffickers follow the money, Alberta has been a favoured destination in recent years, with Calgary and Edmonton long-time hot spots. Secondary routes lead to resource towns, such as Fort McMurray, where young men with cash in hand are far from home.

“The issue has been raised with us ... the luring of aboriginal girls and women

from reserves, from areas that are very close to these resource-based industries or camps,” says Rosalind Currie, director of the B.C. Office to Combat Trafficking in Persons.

The payoff can vary greatly. Ms. Murphy says that girls in Edmonton are typically given a quota of about \$1,000 to \$2,000 a night. Those who bring along a friend may have to take in only half that, so “girls wind up recruiting girls” – as a means to protect themselves.

What it takes to meet her quota depends on what a girl has to do. Some johns will pay hundreds – \$250 to \$350 in Edmonton, says Ms. Murphy. Others may pay as little as \$20, and police say women trafficked in Toronto can be forced to service as many as 15 men a day.

PART SEVEN:

CARE THAT PACKS A PUNCH

A way from the bustle, noise and bright lights of the emergency ward at Surrey Memorial Hospital, there is a room with soft yellow walls, plants and a painting of beach grass. With controlled access, it is secure and feels like a

quiet sanctuary. This is where patients who show signs they may be trafficked are brought for care.

It's a new approach being taken in British Columbia's second biggest city by forensic nurses at the hospital. They have been trained both how best to treat people who have been subjected to violence and how to give testimony in court.

They also have developed Canada's first online tool kit to help emergency workers detect and assist victims. Front-line health-care providers are often the first point of contact with victims of trafficking. The list of what they see is lengthy: evidence of sexual violence, burns, bite marks and bruises (all usually hidden by clothing), as well as tattoos used as branding, sexually transmitted infections, miscarriages, unwanted pregnancies, pneumonia, overdoses, post-traumatic stress syndrome, suicidal tendencies, anxiety, addiction. (They've also witnessed how traffickers track girls by their cellphones and, at least in one case, an ankle bracelet equipped with GPS.)

But even if there is no physical evidence, illness and violence are so pervasive that, eventually, "trafficking will produce a health consequence," says Tara Wilkie of the Surrey Memorial forensic team.

Patients are provided with support after leaving the hospital, but Ms. Wilkie says the after-effects of trafficking can leave someone with lifelong physical and mental-health issues.

Bridget Perrier seems to be living proof of this. As she sits on the couch of her Toronto home, phone buzzing, two dogs scampering around, pictures of her children on the wall, her old life seems like the distant past. Yet, she says, a decade of sexual exploitation "damaged me to a point where ... I have panic

attacks. I have PTSD. I can't have a baby naturally because my cervix is just shot. I sleep with the lights on. I'm hypervigilant."

mpion' in Toronto, Bridget Perrier is still haunted by her former life: 'I can't be on an elevator with a Caucasian man.' (May Truong for The Gl

And there are flashbacks. "Sometimes a smell will set me off, gagging." Pine-Sol, used to disinfect the rooms, "triggers it." As do "certain male colognes,

certain deodorants.”

Also damaged: her relationship with others. She says her clientele was so predominantly white that, even today “I can’t be on an elevator with a Caucasian man.”

Such psychological signs of trafficking can be quite unsettling.

“We see a lot of very subservient behaviour,” says Larissa Maxwell, manager of anti-trafficking programs at Deborah’s Gate, the Vancouver safe house that is Canada’s first high-security sanctuary for trafficking survivors.

She says residents ask permission to do the simplest things, such as going to the bathroom or just sitting down.

Run by the Salvation Army, Deborah’s Gate works with up to 150 victims a year, almost half of whom are aboriginal, providing both residential and outreach programs, along with such services as therapy and job training.

PART EIGHT:

SERIOUS ABOUT 'SERVE AND PROTECT'

On the morning of March 31, 2015, Toronto police called a news conference to announce charges against two men and a woman for trafficking a 14-year-old girl at a local Marriott hotel. A second girl, 16, had come forward, and investigators suspected there may be more.

After the police had finished speaking, Dawn Lavell-Harvard took the podium: The force had invited the president of NWAC to take part because it was concerned the victims might be aboriginal, and too scared to come forward. She pulled no punches.

**“SOMEHOW, WE HAVE RECRUITERS ...
TAKING OUR GIRLS RIGHT OUT FROM
UNDER OUR NOSES.”**

— DAWN LAVELL-HARVARD, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIVE WOMEN’S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

“We have many remote First Nations where the only way in is with an airplane – we don’t have roads in our communities. In many homes, we have no hydro, no water, no schools in some of our communities – and somehow, we have recruiters ... taking our girls right out from under our noses,” Dr. Lavell-Harvard said, drawing a straight line between such girls and the missing and murdered.

Her emotional appearance that day was the sign of a sea change. Some branches of law enforcement are forging partnerships with social agencies and nonprofit groups as they intensify their efforts against traffickers, and take a new view of their victims.

They are being more proactive, which often means “knock and talks” – combing through personal ads, such as those on Backpage.com, a U.S.-based classified website whose listings are so associated with sex trafficking that Visa, MasterCard and American Express have stopped servicing it. When girls look underage or coerced, the police send them a text, posing as clients, then show up at the door to remove those who are under 18 and offer assistance to those who are not.

The relationship between police and girls on the streets “has come a long way,” says Kari Thomason, co-ordinator at Métis Child and Family Services in Edmonton. “It’s changed for the better.”

Vancouver police also have shifted gears. They say that sex work involving consenting adults is no longer an enforcement priority. Rather, they are targeting higher-risk cases, such as those involving traffickers.

Yet victims are still afraid to come forward: Many have been conditioned to mistrust the police, or have had bad experiences with them. Also, cases drag on, and can take a year, if not two, to reach court.

Lack of information is a handicap the RCMP readily acknowledges. “We definitely are trying to improve our methods of data collection,” says Inspector Suzanne Black, who is in charge of the RCMP’s Federal Co-ordination Centre in Ottawa.

Better data is also a major goal of a new national co-ordination centre officially opening this spring. Co-founded by Ms. Gosse and Ms. Redsky of Ma Mawi, it will have its headquarters in Toronto and plans to team with the Polaris Project, a U.S. anti-trafficking organization. The goal is to expand a national hotline for

people being trafficked and exploited, and to let the public report suspected trafficking situations. Ms. Gosse estimates the U.S. “is about 10 years or so ahead of us on this matter ... so we don’t need to invent the wheel.”

The centre has no government financing but, thanks to two donors, has enough operating money for its first two years. To assemble better information, it will build on existing relationships with law enforcement, analyze trends based on its hotline response (like Polaris) and track down other publicly available stats.

PART NINE:

THE VOICES OF EXPERIENCE

Alaya McIvor is convinced the struggle is a matter of life and death. “I’ve experienced a lot of my sisters go missing or being found murdered ... who were exploited or trafficked,” she says, holding an eagle feather, a gift from an elder. “It goes hand in hand.”

Alaya McIvor says that, at 12, she was put on a Greyhound to Winnipeg, alone with a one-way ticket and no one waiting at the other end. (May Truong for The Globe and Mail)

Ms. McIvor, 32, is Ojibway, lives in Winnipeg and has grappled with a triple stigma as a transgender woman who is aboriginal and working the streets. She does not see herself as a victim, but as a survivor – of poverty, child abuse, sexual exploitation, trafficking in Manitoba and B.C., rapes, beatings and police brutality.

She was 12, and had been taken into care, when she was given two options: stay in her northern Manitoba community where she didn't feel safe or relocate to Winnipeg. She chose the latter, and says she was put on a Greyhound, alone with a one-way ticket and no one waiting at the other end.

“I got onto that bus, I was happy to leave my community and got to Winnipeg an hour later and there was an Italian man ... he lured me and I got into his vehicle.”

Audio: Ms. McIvor describes the chain of events that led to her being lured into a stranger's vehicle upon arrival in Winnipeg.

When she arrived, she soon fell into the wrong hands.

Over the years, she says, she has “lost count” of friends and relatives who have gone missing or been murdered. In 2013, she walked from Nova Scotia to B.C.

to raise awareness of the issue – something she now does as an advocate with a strong sense of what is most urgently needed: Around-the-clock outreach services for those being exploited and trying to escape. Safe homes that are open 24 hours a day, and more transitional programs with detox centres, housing and counselling, to help women rebuild their lives.

“Housing is a big issue,” she says. “The majority of the girls, boys, men and women who are exploited don’t have proper rental history, and the landlords stereotype them and cast judgment upon them.”

She is not alone in her activism. Many survivors have dedicated their lives to fighting the problem and helping others recover, even as they continue to wrestle with the after-effects.

Perhaps as well as anyone, they understand why the U.S. State Department analysis last year deemed Ottawa’s funding for special services for trafficking victims “inadequate,” and called co-ordinated efforts “uneven across the provinces and territories.”

“They’re the PhDs in sexual exploitation – and they need to be listened to,” says Yvonne Boyer, who feels policy makers should make a greater effort to involve those with experience.

Now 39, Bridget Perrier is a social worker and “survivor champion.” She lives with three children in Toronto, but speaking out about the problem and her past has taken her across Canada as well as to Britain and the United States.

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She had a "really good" childhood until she began experiencing sexual abuse at age eight. She shares her thoughts on being trafficked at age 12. "I didn't choose prostitution, prostitution chose me," says Perrier, 39.

She wants to see more tuition support, so girls can go back to school, better housing options and commitments from employers who are willing to give survivors a fresh start. She'd also like to see Canada emulate a recent U.S. effort to establish a council made up of survivors to advise on government policy.

“I never want another little girl to endure what I endured,” she says.

Juanita Murphy, now 48, works with sexually victimized youth at CEASE in Edmonton.

“What kills me,” she says, “is what happened to me 20 years ago, being exploited, is still happening today. Kids are falling through the same cracks.

“I have girls phoning me saying, ‘I want to get off the streets, can you help me? My pimp won't let me go. He's been my pimp since I was 12 years old.’ ”

Ms. Murphy says indigenous communities need more resources – for prevention, counselling, peer support and youth awareness – and to put aside taboos and encourage more open discussion about sexual exploitation and trafficking. Young people, she says, need more male role models willing to fight violence against women.

And rather than taking kids away and putting them into foster care, she says, more work should be done to strengthen families.

Indigenous girls are targeted, she says, because “we are the ones who are most disadvantaged ... who are forced to live in foster homes and group homes, or end up going to jail.”

Then she adds, nearly in tears, “it is residential school all over again.”

PART TEN:

IN CLASS AND IN COURT

Education and the justice system are major battlegrounds in the campaign to protect young people from human trafficking and rescue those it has claimed.

Dr. Lavell-Harvard, who studied aboriginal academic achievement for her PhD at the University of Western Ontario, says indigenous young people should have more support when moving to some place new for school or to look for work.

In many cases, she says, traffickers “are preying on our best and brightest who want a better life.”

She would like to see services similar to those provided to refugees: help to navigate banking, health care and services. “People don’t realize that, if you’re coming from a remote, isolated First Nation, you might as well be coming from a foreign country.”

One preventive measure perhaps worthy of wider use currently reaches about

27,000 students in B.C. every year. Coquitlam-based Children of the Street Society, created to fight sexual exploitation and human trafficking, visits schools to conduct workshops called Taking Care of Ourselves, Taking Care of Others for students beginning in Grade 5.

If prevention fails, however, reforms to the justice system could reduce the impact of trafficking by improving tense relationships, both with the police and with courts not well equipped to deal with it.

A key element is helping trafficked women come forward and providing them with better support when they do.

The 2014 national task force recommends changing the Criminal Code so that the offence rests more on what a perpetrator has actually done than on a victim's ability to perform on the witness stand.

"I SOMETIMES THINK THE PEOPLE WHO ARE EXPLOITING THESE YOUTH ... SHOULD HAVE, LIKE THEY HAVE FOR PEDOPHILES, A LIST TO PUBLICLY SHAME THEM."

— NATALIE, A SURVIVOR OF SEX TRAFFICKING

Getting a woman to testify about forced sex work "is terribly daunting," says Staff Sergeant James Clover, former head of the Edmonton Police Services vice section.

“It’s almost unfair. Ultimately, what does she get out of it? She’s more scared. She might not even be eligible for victim assistance because she [may have] a criminal record.”

Also, according to frontline workers, judges urgently need to be briefed. Currently, they receive little or no special training, either on the complex nature of the crime, the severe, long-lasting impact it can have or on the great need for sensitivity. A federal court judge in Alberta, for example, now faces an inquiry over remarks he made during a sexual-assault trial. “Why,” he asked the victim at one point, “couldn’t you just keep your knees together?”

Natalie, in Winnipeg, says attitudes also must change on the demand side. “I sometimes think the people who are exploiting these youth ... should have a list to publicly shame them,” she says.

“There are people who are professionals who are doing this ... and they really care about their reputation.”

PART ELEVEN:

**‘WE ALL DESERVE
A CHANCE’**

Beatrice Wallace-Littlechief still has trouble sleeping. She spent about 15 years on and off the streets of Edmonton and Vancouver, hustling and selling drugs, turning tricks only as a last resort.

She wound up addicted to drugs but got out (and cleaned up) more than a decade ago for the sake of her eight kids – she didn't want them to be “another generation of lost souls.”

Now that the family is back together (the children had all been taken by social services), she has opened up about her past life: “This is my reality and the only reason I'm talking about it is because it has to stop.”

ng grandson in her bedroom, which is her refuge – a safe space when she is feeling down. (May Truong for The Globe and Mail)

And yet a smell, a face, a voice or even the weather can act as a trigger. “The memories are always coming back. It’s gotten better. But it doesn’t go away.”

She now works as a program co-ordinator at an AIDS organization and is a member of the advisory team with Defend Dignity, an anti-exploitation group.

“People trust me because of my past experience... because I know the pain that it causes and the trauma that 30 years later I’m still living with.”

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Audio: Ms. Wallace-Littlechief talks about how she can identify the signs of trafficking and how she works to prevent others from getting pulled into that world.

Her dream is to open a ranch some day for girls who want to leave the trade – a safe place for them to recover and rebuild their lives, under the open Prairie skies.

“I will never completely understand why I had to experience what I did, but I thank God that I got out, and now I spend my days offering hope to those who cross my path,” she says.

“I will always be an open ear. We all deserve a chance at living life to the best of our ability.”

[Tavia Grant](#) is a Globe and Mail reporter. With additional reporting by [Kathryn Blaze Baum](#).

Follow The Globe's project on missing and murdered indigenous women [on our Facebook page](#) and let us know what you think.



WHERE TO FIND HELP:

[Chrysalis hotline: 1 866 528 7109](#)

[Polaris National Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline: 1\(888\) 373-7888](#)

[Polaris BeFree Textline: Text "BeFree" \(233733\)](#)

OTHER RESOURCES:

[Recognize the signs of human trafficking](#)

[Human Trafficking Resource List](#)

[Course for health workers on identifying potential victims of human trafficking](#)

[Online training course on how to recognize, protect, and assist a person who may have been trafficked in Canada.](#)

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS:

[Parent toolkit](#)

[RCMP parent help sheet](#)

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