

Human Trafficking of Indigenous Girls and Women in Canada

Elizabeth C. Ibarra Reina

Introduction

Human trafficking remains one of the most urgent and complex issues in Canada, with Indigenous girls and women being disproportionately impacted. Although legislative frameworks and initiatives such as the National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking 2019–2024 (NSTCHT) exist, their effectiveness is limited by systemic inequalities, colonial legacies, and growing digital exploitation (Roudometkina and Wakeford, 2018).

My research aimed to critically analyze gaps in the current strategy, focusing on policy shortcomings and the necessity of culturally relevant, community-led solutions. Through this process, I came to understand that addressing trafficking requires correcting deeply embedded historical injustices (Bourgeois, 2015).

Background

The Indigenous population of Canada comprises only 5% of the total population, yet Indigenous girls and women comprise more than 50% of those trafficked for sex (Bourgeois, 2015). This vulnerability is a result of colonial policies such as the Indian Act and residential schools that have led to trauma, displacement and economic deprivation (Baird and Connolly, 2021).

In addition, poverty and social isolation make the victims easy prey for traffickers who use fake Facebook and Instagram profiles to deceive them (Louie, 2017). The exploitation is further reinforced by gangs that use coercion and violence (Roudometkina and Wakeford, 2018).

Methods

This research includes qualitative policy analysis, focusing on government strategy documents, peer-reviewed academic literature, and statistical data from the last 15 years. Data was selected based on authority, recency, and relevance, emphasizing studies that incorporate Indigenous voices (Baird and Connolly, 2021); however, limitations include the exclusion of non-Canadian and pre-2010 sources and the lack of primary data collection due to time and resource constraints.

Results/Findings

Social media platforms facilitate recruitment with tactics like love bombing and false promises (Louie, 2017). The foster care system fails to provide culturally appropriate support, leaving youth vulnerable. The NSTCHT lacks Indigenous leadership, does not mandate trauma-informed law enforcement training, and overlooks digital monitoring. Survivors also face trauma bonding, fear, and stigma, which hinder help-seeking (Baird and Connolly, 2021).

Furthermore, the findings emphasize that systemic neglect, economic marginalization, and historical trauma are not only drivers of trafficking but also barriers to recovery. Indigenous-led community programs, though successful, are chronically underfunded and lack long-term governmental commitment. Without structural policy changes that include Indigenous leadership in decision-making and resource allocation, these gaps will persist. The urgency for integrating digital safety, targeted support for youth leaving foster care, and continuous collaboration with Indigenous communities is evident if Canada is to make meaningful progress in combating trafficking (Roudometkina and Wakeford, 2018).

Percentage of Indigenous women and girls identified as being victims of human trafficking

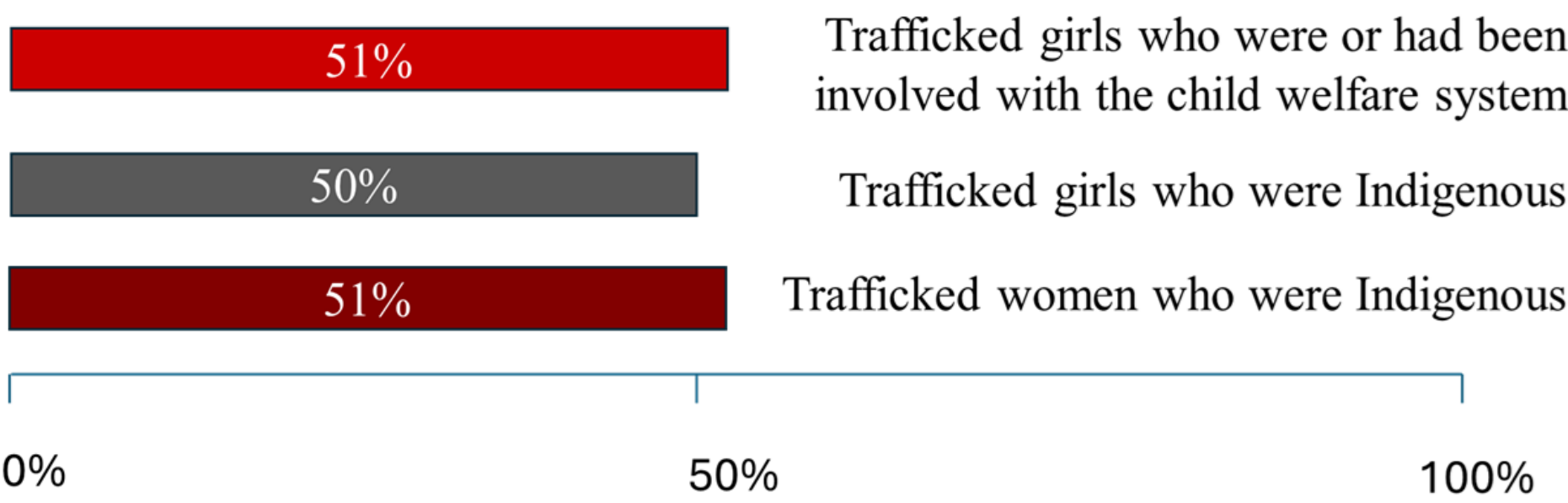


Image 1: Data from 2014 National Task Force on Sex Trafficking of Women and Girls in Canada, <https://www.canadiancentretoendhumantrafficking.ca/human-trafficking-needs-to-be-addressed-through-a-decolonial-lens/>

Discussion

One of the key strengths of this research was its use of peer-reviewed academic literature, government strategy documents, and recent statistical data, which ensured that the findings were evidence-based and credible. The prioritization of Indigenous-authored and community-informed sources helped center the voices of those most affected. However, the inability to conduct primary research, such as interviews with survivors or Indigenous advocates, was a limitation, meaning that the study lacked direct, lived-experience narratives.

Data selection worked well in identifying scholarly and governmental gaps in anti-trafficking efforts, particularly in relation to digital recruitment. Sources from the last 15 years ensured the relevance of technological and policy developments. What did not work was the absence of Indigenous-specific trafficking data, which posed challenges in accurately assessing the scope and impact of the issue (Roudometkina & Wakeford, 2018). Next time, I would include mixed-methods research, combining policy analysis with interviews or participatory methods involving Indigenous organizations.

Conclusions or Recommendations

The NSTCHT must urgently shift toward Indigenous-led, survivor-centred strategies that directly address the systemic roots of trafficking (Bourgeois, 2015). This includes providing sustained, long-term funding for Indigenous organizations to develop culturally grounded prevention, mentorship, and recovery services (Baird and Connolly, 2021). Strong digital regulations and mandatory AI-based monitoring systems are essential to disrupt online recruitment and grooming tactics that disproportionately target Indigenous youth (Louie, 2017).

Foster care reform should prioritize trauma-informed mentorship and transitional support to prevent traffickers from preying on vulnerable Indigenous girls. Additionally, law enforcement and frontline workers must undergo mandatory cultural competency and anti-racism training to serve Indigenous survivors better (Roudometkina and Wakeford, 2018). Finally, annual Indigenous-led national summits on trafficking should be institutionalized to ensure continuous policy assessment, collaboration, and accountability, creating a responsive framework that evolves with community needs.

References

- Baird, K., & Connolly, J. (2021). Recruitment and entrapment pathways of minors into sex trafficking in Canada and the United States: A systematic review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 24(1), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838021102524>
- Bourgeois, R. (2015). *Colonial exploitation: The Canadian state and the trafficking of Indigenous women and girls in Canada*. <https://www.uclalawreview.org/wp>
- Louie, D. W. (2017). Social media and the sexual exploitation of Indigenous girls. *Girlhood Studies*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2017.100208>
- Roudometkina, A., & Wakeford, K. (2018). *Trafficking of Indigenous women and girls in Canada submission to the standing committee on justice and human rights*. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/>.



Image 2: 26th Annual Vancouver Women's Memorial March, February 14, 2016, Union of B.C Indian Chiefs, <https://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/magazine/entry/moving-more-than-oil/##>