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## Hidden in plain sight: Human Trafficking and the B.C. connection

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*Warning: This story may be disturbing to some readers.*

You may not see it or even know it's happening in your community.

But it is an evil shrouded in the dark shadows of society, and even experts do not know its full scope.

What they do know, is that the crime of sex trafficking is vast. And it is growing.

"It's a huge problem and it's in every community and people just don't know," explained Mia Golden, a Youth and Family counsellor with Mobile Youth Services Team in Victoria.

Her words are echoed by many others who are also trying to help those entrapped in the trafficking of humans.

"It quite literally is in every community. It doesn't matter if you're in a rural centre, or urban centre, or in Northern B.C. This is something that does happen in communities right across the province," said Janet Campbell, CEO of the Joy Smith Foundation.

"It's...really a very heinous crime," she added.

And it's a crime that targets those who are most vulnerable, like a survivor we are only identifying as "Jade".

A few years ago, at the age of 15, she was in government care, but said she was living on the streets in the Fraser Valley.

She met a man who was seven years her senior.

The teen, who has Indigenous heritage, thought the older man had become her boyfriend and protector.

But in reality, he was her trafficker.

“I just freak out sometimes. It’s flashbacks and I’m back in those moments, in those disgusting situations,” recalled the young B.C. woman who we are only identifying as “Jade”.

She said he sold her at homeless encampments in the Lower Mainland.

He traded her for drugs, or a place to sleep at night.

When there was cash involved, he always kept it.

“It never went to me. I never saw a penny of it,” Jade explained.

“Looking back, I would definitely call it manipulative,” said Jade who is now clean and sober and living in Northern B.C.

She wonders why more isn’t being done to protect young people from traffickers.

“We learn about gangs in school. Why can’t we learn about human trafficking?” she asked.

Jade’s age and circumstances make her one of those most often targeted by traffickers.

“Children in care are by far the most vulnerable and disproportionate population of children who are trafficked for a variety of reasons,” said Sue Brown, a lawyer with Justice for Girls.

Brown told CTV News that sex trafficking is a growing crisis in B.C.

“I would say in the past year we’ve engaged on at least 50 trafficking cases involving teenage girls,” she said.

“I think what we’re seeing in the communities that we’re in, is just the tip of the iceberg,” Brown added.

Some girls being groomed are as young as 11, she said.

All of the victims suffer trauma that is deep and long lasting.

“The girls we’re talking about have experienced unspeakable violence at the hands of their traffickers and people who have exploited them,” Brown said.

Traffickers are sometimes relatives, sometimes gangsters.

But always master manipulators.

“Those that perpetrate this crime, it is about money and power and control,” said Campbell.

When it comes to trafficking, we know some victims come to Canada from overseas, but according to the Joy Smith Foundation, the vast majority are Canadian-born.

“What we generally see are women moving from place to place with the offender and hitting different locations on a cross-country tour,” said Sgt. Matt King, with the Victoria Police Department's Special Victims Unit.

Campbell agrees many victims are moved across the country, but adds that, “we’ve actually had quite a number of cases where the victims have continued to live at home, these are young victims.”

According to Statistics Canada, about a quarter of police reported human trafficking cases nationwide involve children.

But Brown said many cases go unreported.

“There’s not a single survivor that I know that’s going to come forward in the current context because they don’t trust that anybody’s going to keep them safe. And I do not blame them,” she explained.

And that, she said, has got to change.

So victims, like Jade, can find justice.