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False trust, hidden control: recognizing the warning signs of human trafficking in Manitoba

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It might start with new clothes, jewelry or gifts without having extra money to purchase these items. It might start with a special interest in a new friend, or a man or woman who is older than the regular circle of friends. There might be more sleepovers at a friend's house with little information. There might be sudden changes in clothing style or make-up. There could be a change in attitude towards school, friends, family, favorite sports activities or past interests.

These are just some of the signs of human trafficking where our young people are being targeted and groomed for nefarious purposes. It is subtle. It is sneaky. It is illegal.

Human trafficking is one of the most profitable and fastest-growing crimes in Canada. It is driven by traffickers who use calculated manipulation — both online and in everyday interactions — to target people they perceive as vulnerable - often youth as young as 9 years old.

These crimes are unfolding daily across Canada's cities and rural communities alike, yet they often remain hidden, because victims are first drawn in through false trust and then stripped of their independence through coercion, threats, and psychological control.

Education and awareness remain the strongest tools Canadians have to recognize the warning signs and intervene before exploitation takes hold. Many believe

human trafficking takes place only in the big cities, and yet it is a crime that knows no boundaries.

What it is

Human trafficking is the forced participation in the sex trade or labour market where manipulation is used to exploit individuals and take away their choices. It is one of the most heinous violations of human rights and it's happening more than we realize in Manitoba, both in the urban setting and in our rural communities.

Human trafficking exists in two main forms in Canada - and right here in Manitoba.

Sex trafficking is where girls or boys, young women or young men, are forced to provide paid sexual services through prostitution, massage parlor services and strip clubs.

Forced labor is when individuals are forced to work long hours for little money, as nannies, live-in caregivers, agricultural or construction workers. These individuals are forced to comply with poor working conditions through manipulation or threat of deportation.

The Issue



Canada's leading authority on human trafficking

[The Joy Smith Foundation](#) is Canada's leading authority on human trafficking. Through their programs and funding, they provide support for survivors. This is a responsibility they take seriously. The organization was launched in 2012 in Toronto, Ontario.

"The Joy Smith Foundation is dedicated to combating human trafficking right here in our country," shares Foundation President and CEO Janet Campbell. "Human trafficking is an egregious crime that is taking place in communities right across our

country and it affects individuals from all different backgrounds and walks of life - in particular our youth are vulnerable."

"And so we dedicate our life's work to combating this issue so that we can prevent it from happening to anyone's child," adds Campbell, "and we also want to make sure that Canada is able to strengthen its response when this type of thing does happen so that survivors get the care and support they need, and that also perpetrators can be brought to justice."

Campbell is the oldest daughter of Joy Smith, founder of the Joy Smith Foundation.

How the Foundation began

The issue of human trafficking has touched the Smith family for decades. Joy Smith's first direct exposure came many years ago while she was working as a teacher in Manitoba. In 1994 she presented a seminar on "*How to Protect Your Child from Internet Predators*" to generate awareness.

To her surprise, young victims came forward with stories that moved Smith to act further. More specifically one of her Grade 9 students was being trafficked and that set the wheels in motion for action.

It was then that Smith realized no Canadian laws existed to protect victims or to bring perpetrators to justice. In 1999 Smith won a seat in the Manitoba Legislature, continuing the work of helping to rescue and rehabilitate survivors.

"And it was that particular experience that set a path where she ended up serving as a provincial member of the legislature, and then she went on to be a member of parliament in Ottawa," Campbell explains of her mother's journey. "And she was there and served for many years with her work centering on the human trafficking issue because at that time, when she went to Parliament, somebody could buy and sell a child in our country, and there was nothing in the Criminal Code that law enforcement had to use."

MLA Smith changes Canadian law

In 2004 Joy Smith was elected as a Member of Parliament to give a voice to the vulnerable young victims by building awareness of the issue among colleagues and contacts in the highest levels of government. During her time in Parliament, Smith

made Canadian history when she passed two private members bills that are embedded in the Criminal Code of Canada today, and they are used by law enforcement agencies across our country on a daily basis.

In 2010, [Bill C-268](#) passed, enshrining mandatory minimum sentencing for traffickers of children 18 years and younger in Canada's Criminal Code. Also, in 2010 Smith developed Canada's [National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking](#) so that law enforcement and social agencies work toward better enforcement of the new laws.

In 2012, [Bill C-310](#) passed, with unanimous consent, to reach the long arm of Canadian law into other countries where Canadian citizens or permanent residents traffic or exploit others abroad.

Smith made history as the first sitting MP to amend the Criminal Code twice to better protect victims of human trafficking.

"So, when you see a headline about somebody being arrested and charged with human trafficking, that is the Criminal Code Section 279, where those particular matters are addressed," adds Campbell.

Knowledge is our greatest protection

Human trafficking is the modern-day slave trade, says Campbell. The more we know and understand about human trafficking, the more we can do to prevent it.

Education empowers communities against human trafficking. By [knowing the signs](#), we can prevent youth and adults from being lured into trafficking.

Every day, vulnerable people are lured into human trafficking across Canada. It happens in large and small communities. Education is our greatest weapon. Over 7,000 lives have been supported by The Joy Smith Foundation's survivor-focused programs. The statistics are astounding. But what's more sobering is this is a crime that is drastically under-reported.

- 93% of sex trafficking victims in Canada were born in Canada.
- The average age of entry into sex trafficking is just 13 years old.

Stats Canada reports the following in their 2024 report on human trafficking:

- **93% of identified victims were women and girls**

“From 2014 to 2024, the vast majority (93%) of identified victims of police-reported human trafficking were women and girls.” [\[www150.statcan.gc.ca\]](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca)

- **63% of victims were under age 25**

“Two-thirds of victims (63%) were younger than 25.” [\[www150.statcan.gc.ca\]](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca)

- **82% of accused persons were men and boys**

“From 2014 to 2024, most (82%) persons accused of human trafficking were men and boys.” [\[www150.statcan.gc.ca\]](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca)

- **Most victims were trafficked by someone they knew**, with gender-based differences:

“Women and girls were most often trafficked by an intimate partner (36%), while men and boys were most often trafficked by someone with whom they shared a business relationship (46%).” [\[www150.statcan.gc.ca\]](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca)

These findings are **national**, but Statistics Canada explicitly notes that **provincial patterns (including Manitoba)** reflect the same demographic trends, even when total incident counts are lower, because only a fraction of incidents is reported.

Joy in Action raises awareness and funding to fight human trafficking



Joy in Action is a nationwide run, walk, and cycle fundraising challenge in support of [The Joy Smith Foundation's](http://www.joysmithfoundation.ca) fight against human trafficking. Fundraising is at the heart of [Joy In Action](http://www.joysinaction.ca). Every dollar raised helps deliver trauma-informed care, prevention workshops, and life-changing support for survivors of human trafficking.

"Joy in Action is a fundraiser that helps to support the education that we bring to the community on this, as well as support survivors that we work with as they look to heal and restore their lives," shares Campbell. "So, it does help us. We can do the work we do, thanks to private donations that we raise. And so, Joy in Action is a big aspect of that in raising funds for those programs."

"But one of the things I love so much about Joy in Action is it can engage absolutely everybody in the community. And in doing so, you start to raise awareness about the fact that this issue exists and what it looks like," she adds.

The [Joy in Action](#) fundraiser has traditionally taken place in Steinbach and Selkirk, but now for the first time it will also be held in Brandon on Saturday, August 8th at the Riverbank Discovery Centre. Registration is open and fundraising has already begun for the Brandon event to support the Westman Region.

"When we decided to have an event in Brandon, it was to engage the community there, but also to raise resources and awareness for that community because of the support that is needed there," explains Campbell. "That is something that is dear to us that the funds go to the communities that are engaged in raising the funds. Your fundraising fuels trauma-informed care, prevention workshops, and survivor support," adds Campbell.

For more information, visit the [Joy Smith Foundation website](#).

To make an anonymous tip of a suspected incident of human trafficking call [Manitoba Crime Stoppers](#) at 1-800-222-8477.