

Understanding the Sexual Exploitation of Youth: An Introduction

by Sarah Kay Granke, MSW, RSW

Specialist, Sexual Violence Prevention & Supports, Nova Scotia Department of Community Service

The sexual exploitation/trafficking of children/youth in Nova Scotia is not new, but it has been gaining more media attention in the past few years. For many, sex trafficking brings up images of young girls being smuggled over borders, kept in cages with their wrists bound and mouths taped. While this can happen, sex trafficking

Child sexual exploitation occurs when children/youth (under the age of 19 in NS) are coerced, lured or recruited into trading sexual acts, whether the child/youth has given consent or not, in exchange for resources such as food, money, shelter, drugs, protection, transportation, and/or to fulfill emotional needs. A third-party (pimp, boyfriend, trafficker) is often involved and derives benefit from the trade/sale of sexual acts by the child/youth.

takes many forms. It does **not** have to involve physically moving anyone anywhere. While some youth are transported out of province, many are not. Traffickers try to isolate their victims—often by removing them from their communities and supports. This can involve moving from one town to another, across provincial or national borders, and/or by creating psychological barriers between victims and their family or friends.

The amount of sexual exploitation in Nova Scotia is difficult to measure because of the hidden nature of the crime, the movement of people from place to place and a lack of reporting. From speaking with people who have lived through it,

we know that sexual exploitation happens far more often than statistics suggest. We also know that youth are being recruited at school and on school grounds. Educators play a vital role in helping to identify and intervene early.

Sexual exploitation can happen to anybody of any age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, income, or neighbourhood. The majority of people who are sexually exploited are girls and women, but we do know that boys, men, two-spirit, non-binary, and transgender people are also sexually exploited. We also know that youth who face oppression and discrimination (racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, etc.) are more likely to be targeted by traffickers.

While we can't always be sure what is happening in someone's life, the following signs might indicate someone is being sexually exploited. Think of these signs as clues to check out, not as proof of anything.

- Possessions that do not seem to match income, and regularly having new things (e.g., expensive items when there is little or no income)
- Having more than one phone

- No personal identification documents
- Signs of physical violence (e.g., bruises, cuts)
- Being branded or tattooed
- Withdrawal from or dramatic change in friends/peer group
- Long term “boyfriend” that friends or family have never met, or hints of unequal power in romantic relationship
- Use of slang/ terminology related to the sex trade
- Less engaged at school and/or an increase in skipping altogether
- Frequency and timing of “meetings” or “appointments” (e.g., before school, at lunch time)

Continued on page 2



continued from page 1

Nova Scotia recently launched a new online module, [*Understanding the Sexual Exploitation of Youth: An Introduction*](#). The information in this module helps learners recognize the signs of sexual exploitation and human trafficking and how to offer support. This is the eighth module released as part of the course Supporting Survivors of Sexual Violence: A Nova Scotia Resource. The course includes information on ways to offer support and options for people, without judgment.

The free training is for service providers, friends, parents, family members, neighbours, teachers, first responders, counsellors and anyone who is acting as a support person or is concerned about sexual violence.

The sexual exploitation and trafficking of children and youth is a serious health, social, and public safety issue in Nova Scotia that affects all of us. Everyone deserves to live safely; we all have a role in ending sexual violence and supporting survivors.

For more information please reach out to Sarah Kay Granke, at Sarah.Granke@novascotia.ca or 902-424-6841.