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New study shining a light on human trafficking in Sarnia-Lambton

Tyler Kula

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Brooke Metcalfe speaks at city hall in Sarnia during the annual Stand Up Against Poverty in 2016. Metcalfe is one of 12 survivors of human trafficking interviewed for a Lambton College and Sexual Assault Survivors' Centre study. (Tyler Kula/Sarnia Observer)

It took a long time for Brooke Metcalfe to realize she had been trafficked.

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The 24-year-old from Corunna was living in a youth shelter in Regina eight years ago, addicted to cocaine and opiates, with cratered self-esteem from a childhood she said was full of neglect.



“That was when I was first introduced to Mr. A,” she said, using the pseudonym she’s devised for the man she said would supply her with drugs, food and a place to stay – the man she said raped her and kept her feeling she had nowhere to turn until a probation worker introduced her to an undercover RCMP officer who explained how she was being exploited.

It took until 2017, she said, for her abuser to be found guilty of sexual assault of a minor, exploitation and possession of child pornography.

“While I was going through all of that and the judge was telling me the charges and everything that was going on, I had no idea that I had been trafficked,” Metcalfe said.

“Even at that point in my life, I didn’t get it.”

What opened her eyes was the help from her coaches in Lambton County’s Circles program.

“They were like hearing my story and ‘No – exploitation. That’s human trafficking. That’s somebody taking advantage of you for the benefit of themselves.’”

Metcalfe made her trip west at 16 to live with her stepfather to escape a home life she said had led her to drugs and mental anguish, but a physical altercation with her stepfather led to her leaving home and living in shelters, she said. She is one of 12 survivors interviewed in a recent Lambton College and Sexual Assault Survivors’ Centre report on human trafficking, identifying its prevalence in Sarnia-Lambton and the gaps that exist in addressing it.

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Eight survivors didn't know they were being trafficked at the time they were, the study authors say.

In most cases, they thought they were in a relationship, enticed by promises to help them break into careers like modelling or real estate, said Ruth Geurts, principal investigator on the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada-funded study that involved interviews with community service providers, three First Nation communities in Sarnia-Lambton, college students and the survivors.

“And the reasons the girls go along with it, it's a very coercive way of doing it because they make them dependent on them for money” for housing, for food and for drugs, she said.

“All of the girls we interviewed had an addiction.”

Three-quarters of local service providers interviewed believe they're working with victims of human trafficking, yet Sarnia police and Lambton OPP charged just five individuals with human trafficking in 2018 and two in 2019.

Trafficking – for sex and labour – is one of the most difficult charges to prove in Canada because it relies heavily on testimony from victims, who feel dependent on their abusers and whose families and well-being are often threatened by their traffickers to keep them feeling trapped, Geurts said.

One OPP detective constable quoted in her report compared the largely hidden crime to “chasing ghosts.”

Changing laws and allowing victims to not have to testify in court after they've provided their statements to police could improve things, Geurts said.

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But the biggest focus needs to be more public education and awareness, she added.

“Most people are saying ‘It’s in Sarnia? Really?’ “Yes, sadly it is here,” she said. “Just like all social problems, we’re not immune to human trafficking.”

Along with awareness, people need to report when they see suspicious behaviour, she said.

Warning signs range from low self-esteem, mental-health concerns and little or no money to signs of psychological abuse, dependency issues, and alcohol and drug abuse.

Some have been tattooed as a form of branding, Geurts said.

“Education to the hotel and entertainment industry is another huge area,” she said.

Families also need to be aware of the potential for recruiting of children as young as 10 online through social media and video games, she said, noting exploitation via live sex show websites has grown amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

People who purchase sex need to be aware workers may not be acting voluntarily, she said, and may not see much or any of the money spent.

“Children and youth need to be educated and we need to include it in schools,” she said.

More safe housing, counselling services and addiction supports are also needed, the report authors say.

The average age of the survivors interviewed when they were trafficked was 22 years old, the report says.

Metcalf, now a personal support worker at a Sarnia nursing home, said she’s been sober more than seven years, has a son and a good life, but triggers remain.

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“I know that when I am home alone and I shower I double check to make sure all the doors are locked, including the bathroom,” she said, recalling the shower was one of the places she was raped.

She said she lives in fear of her abuser getting out of prison and finding her, but shares her story willingly to help bring awareness and strengthen others trapped like she was, she said.

Her hope is the research project – A Co-ordinated Response to Assess Human Trafficking in Terms of the Problem, Prevention, and Empowerment – and her story help inspire more conversation about human trafficking, she said.

“It’s happening so much more than people know.”

The full report is available at sexualassaultsarnia.ca .

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