

# Guelph is one of Ontario's biggest hubs for human trafficking



[Taylor Pace](#)

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*Panelists Vicki Olatundun, Krystal Snider, Mandira Arnab Aich and Cindy McMann | Taylor Pace / GuelphToday*

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You might not know it, but Guelph is one of the biggest hubs in Ontario for human trafficking. It happens in malls, schools, hotels and motels – just about anywhere.

“One of the reasons for this is that Guelph is along the 401 corridor, which is the biggest way victims of human trafficking and sex trafficking are moved across Ontario,” said Aidan Harris, chair of the Eradicating Human Trafficking Committee.

Guelph is also located between a number of “big cities,” he said.

“So when you think about it, it ends up, in a really dark way, being a perfect location for traffickers to move (victims) around.”

The committee, which is run by three local Rotary Clubs, held a panel Monday to discuss root causes of human trafficking and how to support survivors transitioning back into the community.

Panelists included Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis public educator Cindy McMann, Vicki Olatundun, a criminal law attorney turned social justice advocate and the executive director of SEEDS (Supporting Every Eve’s Daughter Safely), and Mandira Arnab Aich and Krystal Snider from WomenAtTheCentre, a non-profit aimed at eradicating gender-based violence.

Human trafficking offences involve the recruitment, transportation or harbouring of a person, and includes controlling and influencing movements with the goal of exploiting or facilitating the exploitation of a person, Harris said.

It can take many forms, but in Guelph it mostly takes the form of sex trafficking.

“Human trafficking is the complete erasure of a person and everything inside of them,” Snider said.

The majority of victims are women and girls. In her first year, a 13-year-old girl can earn her trafficker \$280,000, said Olatundun.

“Supposing it’s \$100 or \$200 per situation. How many times does that young child have to be degraded and destroyed to come up with that kind of cash?”

It’s not like what you see on TV; people are rarely abruptly abducted by a stranger and forced into the sex trade.

People are more commonly trafficked by people they know; it’s a long con, said McMann.

“This really is about somebody building trust in a relationship. Traffickers invest in that relationship, invest in this con, and get somebody to the point where they can exploit them,” she said.

It could be a family member or a significant other.

Elements driving human trafficking range from colonialism to income inequality, silence and isolation.

Indigenous women, girls, two-spirit, trans and gender-diverse people are deeply overrepresented among survivors of sex trafficking, McMann said.

“Indigenous women make up about four per cent of the population in Canada and about 50 per cent of the folks who are trafficked.”

It happens, she said, because people have a tendency to look the other way when Indigenous women and girls go missing.

“Traffickers know that there are some people they can exploit with impunity, and as long as there are people they can exploit with impunity, they are not going to stop.”

Likewise, Olatundun said housing is a big element: “homelessness is a key point when it comes to sex trafficking,” she said.

“I remember attending a seminar, and a young lady said (she) had two choices: she said I was either going to be hungry and homeless or have somebody on top of me.”

Those choices have only grown with rising inflation and housing costs. Olatundun said someone could work at a coffee shop all week and still not have enough money to pay their rent or afford food, but could pay rent in two nights of sex trafficking.

“Affordable housing is something we have to address as a community. Otherwise, our children are homeless. And when they’re homeless, they’re vulnerable,” she said.

Aich said it’s important to talk about trafficking, that pretending it doesn’t exist in our community won’t make it go away, and in fact sustains it.

“The moment we start thinking that this is not happening with (our) people, we miss being the person for that one person who’s looking for connection, for community.”

The signs of trafficking are hard to see unless you know the person – things like new items, new people in their lives, a change in baseline behaviour.

Building community and connecting with one another, then, is one of the most crucial ways to fight human trafficking.

“One of the best interventions and prevention for human trafficking is to be connected. It’s hard to traffic somebody who’s connected,” Snider said. “That’s something you have power over.”

The needs of survivors are diverse and intense, so it's important to meet them where they are and ask what they need, panelists said.

"When folks come through our doors because they've been trafficked around Guelph and Wellington County, the top two things they need are snacks and electrolytes because they're so badly dehydrated," McMann said.

They need safety, shelter, maybe a bus ticket to leave, maybe addiction support or legal or medical help, she said.

The most difficult element is trust, she said, because in many cases the person who survivors trusted most became the person who hurt them most.

With that in mind, Olatundun said listening to listen, rather than listening to speak, is crucial.

"If as a community we decide we will not shut up, that it's important and we will keep talking until someone does something, then we will have power," Olatundun said.

Worried you or someone you love could be a victim of human trafficking? GWWIC has a [crisis line and anti-human trafficking program to provide support.](#)

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