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# Human trafficking, the hidden trade

Catherine Solyom, The Gazette : Friday, July 20, 2012 12:45 PM

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Adult entertainment club Supersexe located on Saint Catherine street in Montreal;Quebec.

Photo Credit: Lee Brown , The Canadian Press Images

MONTREAL - No one knows how many girls and women are brought from city to city, province to province, to work at strip clubs, escort agencies and massage parlours around the country.

Theirs is a hidden trade and since most victims are too afraid to come forward, it will remain hidden.

Among the few cases in Montreal to be prosecuted since human trafficking became a crime in 2004 was that of Jacques Leonard-St. Vil, who in January 2007 brought a 17-year-old girl with him from Montreal to Mississauga, ostensibly to host promotional parties.

A month later, and under constant threat of violence, she was being sold for sex in clubs around the city six days a week.

Then, there was Michael Lennox Mark, who in 2008 pleaded guilty to trafficking a 17-year-old he had sold into street prostitution in Toronto. He also pleaded guilty to procuring three other girls.

But police, who are waking up to the reality of "domestic" human trafficking, say that what they are seeing is just the tip of the iceberg.

Sexual exploitation is hard to prove when the victim is working down the street, or openly sold on the Internet, they say.

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But when both the victim and the perpetrator are moving targets, it's even harder.

"Sometimes they're willing to go, but then the reality comes out and they're in Vancouver and they can't get home," says Montreal police Commander Antonio Iannantuoni, who heads a task force on sexual exploitation in Montreal.

"When a girl is missing, we do exchanges (with other police forces) and send flyers with photos of the girls. But it's hard. They dye their hair, go by another name, use fake identity papers. Girls from Saguenay or Drummondville get forced into prostitution but they don't want to tell their parents."

Inspector Uday Jaswal of the Ottawa Police Service says the force is currently working on cases with ties to Gatineau, Montreal and Toronto.

As in Montreal, Ottawa police are being trained to spot the signs of human trafficking and to be aware that young women are not necessarily prostituting themselves, but rather may be being trafficked by someone else, either within Ottawa or to and from other cities.

"Now that we've started looking, we've seen the number of cases growing, but we're still developing our response," said Jaswal.

"Is it getting worse? Perhaps (human trafficking) has always been there, but we're just now becoming aware of it."

Bringing a girl to another city is one way of isolating her from her friends and family, Jaswal said, but it's by no means the only way to control her.

Jaswal says he's seen girls branded with tattoos of their pimps' names.

"What's incredible is how good these individuals are at manipulating and how they are able to key in on their vulnerabilities."

That involves everything from taking away personal documents, issuing threats against women and their families or branding them as property.

Trafficking girls and women from one city to another adds a level of complexity for investigators.

Since the Paul Bernardo case, which betrayed a lack of communication and co-operation between police forces looking for a serial rapist in Scarborough, and a schoolgirl killer in St. Catharines, Ontario police must inform the major case manager of homicides, non-familial sexual assaults or abductions, criminal harassment where the offender is not known to the victim, missing persons and found human remains where foul play is suspected.

But this doesn't apply to human trafficking, Jaswal says.

So investigators in Ottawa must fan out to other jurisdictions to conduct interviews and gather evidence to build their case, all while managing the victim's needs, physical and emotional, which are usually substantial.

The timing can be crucial. In one case, a girl's mother called Ottawa police to say her daughter was dancing at a strip club and was about to be taken to the U.S.

Using her photo, police were able to find her, but the girl was uncooperative at first.

Weeks later, however, she called police looking for help getting out of the sex trade.

Police like Iannantuoni and Jaswal must also contend with the lack of understanding from fellow police officers, prosecutors and judges who don't always understand why a victim, left alone in a hotel room, doesn't simply leave.

"It's difficult to understand unless you've had exposure to the nature of trafficking and the psychology behind it."



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As a result, penalties for trafficking people are often less than penalties for trafficking guns or drugs.

Jacques Leonard-St. Vil, who had earned \$20,000 over three months exploiting a girl from Montreal in Mississauga, was sentenced to three years in jail for human trafficking.

But because the time he spent in custody before his trial counted as double, he walked away after sentencing.

Michael Lennox Mark, for his part, got two years for trafficking, and two years for procuring – to be served concurrently – but because of time served, had one week left in jail upon sentencing.

There have been improvements on the legislative front. In June 2010, Bill C-268, a private members' bill introduced by MP Joy Smith, became law, establishing a 5-year minimum sentence for child trafficking in Canada.

That would have applied to both Leonard-St. Vil and Lennox Mark.






In April, 2012, Bill C-310 – also introduced by Smith – became law, making it possible to prosecute Canadians or permanent residents engaging in human trafficking outside the country.

It also broadened the definition of exploitation, to include being coerced through force, deception or abusing a position of power or trust.

But recent Ontario court decisions that struck down laws prohibiting brothels will make it harder to prosecute pimps, Jaswal said.

If someone can legally work at a brothel, including supposedly as a driver or providing security, prosecutions of human traffickers will increasingly rely on victims speaking out.

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