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Human Trafficking Public Awareness Study – Exploratory Focus Groups with Indigenous Youth and Parents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Prepared for Public Safety Canada by Environics Research

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Executive Summary

Background and objectives

Following the Government of Canada's 2019 budget announcement and formal evaluation of Canada's National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking (HT), the federal government introduced a new *National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking* that set out a comprehensive way forward to address this complex issue. The strategy brought together all federal efforts aimed at addressing human trafficking in Canada and abroad under one plan, framing all federal activities under the internationally recognized pillars of "prevention," "protection," "prosecution," and "partnerships," and adding a new pillar of "empowerment" to ensure a more victim-centred approach. In-depth consultations conducted by Public Safety Canada identified the vital need for increased public awareness and knowledge, aimed to help communities and stakeholders better recognize the early signs of human trafficking, reduce the stigmatization of victims, and improve proactive response to incidents.

In addition to the tracking and evaluation of current Human Trafficking campaign performance via the concurrent online survey, research objectives include the following:

- The tracking and evaluation of current HT campaign performance in accordance with the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada.
- Gathering behavioural insights from Indigenous audiences on current knowledge levels, attitudes and opinions related to HT.

Results from the exploratory focus groups will inform campaign messaging and help shape specific resources and tactics developed specifically for Indigenous audiences.

Methodology

This qualitative research was specifically aimed at exploring attitudes of Indigenous youth and parents of youth toward human trafficking. This consisted of two separate phases:

Phase One: Environics conducted a pre-consultation with subject matter experts across First Nations, Métis and Inuit Indigenous organizations to gain an understanding of the issues landscape. Following a collaborative Public Safety and Environics Research recruitment effort, interviews were conducted with senior members of the First Nations Chiefs of Police Association (FNCPA), Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak, Tsuut'ina Nation Police Service, Tsuut'ina Nation Police Youth Services Section, and a national Inuit organization.

Phase Two: Following the pre-consultation, Environics Research conducted a series of eight (8) online focus groups with Indigenous youth aged 16 to 24, as well as parents of Indigenous youth.

- These exploratory focus group sessions were grouped by community type (rural/remote or urban), as well as by Indigenous self-identification (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit). Apart from groups held with Inuit participants, parents and youth were separated into different sessions. Métis groups were balanced with both urban and remote participants.
- Topics discussed during the focus groups included
 - general awareness of human trafficking and its impact on Indigenous youth and their communities,
 - how human trafficking is being addressed within Indigenous communities, and

- what types of resources and support would benefit Indigenous youth.
- The groups took place between January 10 and March 3, 2024.

Statement of Limitations: Qualitative research provides insight into the range of opinions held within a population, rather than the weights of the opinions held, as would be measured in a quantitative study. The results of this type of research should be viewed as indicative, rather than projectable to the population.

More information about the methodology for research is included in Appendix A of the report.

Contract Value

The contract value was \$259,120.30 (HST included).



Key Findings

I. General Awareness

Indigenous youth and parents possess ample awareness of human trafficking and its various forms, predominantly sex trafficking. They perceive it as a distressing, alarming, and exploitative problem that predominantly impacts women, but generally also affects individuals who are financially insecure or reliant on substances, such as drugs or alcohol.

- Though human trafficking was evidently recognized as a grave concern within their communities, it remained obscure to most. It was predominantly perceived to happen to others who are more vulnerable, not themselves—a phenomenon existing at a distance rather than a tangible threat within their immediate spheres.
- While a few parents and guardians recounted local stories, other parents and most youth had not encountered anything relevant to their own experiences, or the experiences of those close to them. Youth who had personal anecdotes to share—whether their own or from someone close to them—were often unaware that these experiences could be classified as human trafficking.
- Indigenous parents and guardians, in contrast to their youth counterparts, were more inclined to view women/girls as particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, and identified cell phones as potential avenues for exploitation. Both Indigenous youth and parents, however, cited factors such as financial insecurity, substance dependencies, and educational disparities as contributing factors to vulnerability in an individual.
- Participants showed awareness of some potential behavioral, emotional, and physical indicators or warning signs that may indicate someone is a victim of human trafficking. However, they showed less familiarity with how to address the issue or seek assistance effectively.
- Participants expressed the belief that perpetrators could emerge from various spheres, ranging from strangers attempting to infiltrate their family or target their children; to individuals who are within their inner circles, including family members or acquaintances of those close to them. Indigenous parents and guardians were more inclined than youth to point out that a potential perpetrator often exhibits a "creepy" demeanour, prompting them to advise their youth to steer clear of such individuals.

II. Support and Resources

Participants were likely to say there aren't enough resources available in their community to support victims and survivors of human trafficking. This was evident across groups, regardless of community size or Indigenous identity. A lack in support was evident, even more so, after participants were asked how they might react once suspecting somebody needed help.

- Participants pointed to schools, specifically teachers, as being trusted avenues for Indigenous community members to turn to for support. Parents or guardians also often emerged as reliable support systems. Overall, most participants stressed that fostering a close-knit community was crucial for discussing and preventing such issues.

- When asked about potential obstacles to prevent intervening when signs of someone being a victim of human trafficking are present, participants identified several barriers. These included concerns about inadvertently worsening the situation for the individual, or fearing retaliation from those controlling the individual. Additional barriers included distrust of law enforcement, and apprehensions about betraying the potential victim's family. Another obstacle mentioned was uncertainty about whether the situation truly constitutes as trafficking, leading to hesitancy to intervene and a reluctance to overstep boundaries.

III. Trust in Police and Legal Considerations

It was evident that a lack of trust in local law enforcement was a barrier to addressing many social issues in the communities of many Indigenous participants. While a few were inclined to say it was important to trust the police, most had been moved at some point in the opposite direction. Distrust was mostly due to concerning anecdotes they had heard both locally, nationally, and internationally; an observation of victim-blaming practices; and recollections of corrupt police officers who may be involved in human trafficking themselves.

Participants exhibited very low awareness of legal protections (such as laws and regulations) designed to safeguard victims of human trafficking. However, they expressed trust and optimism that there must be consequences for perpetrators, although they were unclear on specifics.

IV. Grooming and Intersectional Factors

When it came to discussing *grooming* as being linked to human trafficking, it was clear that there was awareness of it being at play in interpersonal relationships. This awareness was underscored during discussions about potential indicators of trafficking, where participants highlighted the presence of controlling or manipulative individuals.

- During the Inuit sessions, the concept of a "trusted" family member was discussed, highlighting how individuals in such roles could abuse their familial position to groom victims and keep them silent.
- There was a shared understanding that grooming represents a significant issue warranting dedicated attention, rather than being grouped under the umbrella term 'human trafficking.' This understanding underscored the importance of addressing grooming as a distinct and urgent concern, with targeted efforts and resources to prevent and combat its detrimental effects on Indigenous individuals and communities.
- Participants identified other social, economic, or related issues they perceived as contributing to the risk of human trafficking. Those included:
 - The **disenfranchisement of Indigenous communities** and failure to enact the right policies has led to decades of inter-generational trauma and systemic issues affecting Indigenous people disproportionately.
 - **Lack of resources** in schools and community centres, and with local law enforcement and social services leads to an inability to protect children and other vulnerable people from threats and predators.

- **Online predators** becoming more common due to increased cell phone and social media use in general is making youth more vulnerable.
- **Cultural differences** may play a part in how Indigenous people can get taken advantage of in these situations. An Inuit participant provided the example that in her culture, people are less likely to say no, seeming more agreeable. Additionally, Indigenous people who have been separated from their culture at a young age are more likely to feel isolated from their community, making them an 'ideal' potential victim of human trafficking. This was also mentioned more often in Inuit groups.

V. Communicating with Indigenous Youth and Parents in Communications Campaigns

While awareness of human trafficking was evident among Indigenous participants, it was also clear that the topic was faraway for many. Participants considered the issue to be serious, but not necessarily one that directly impacts their immediate circles.

- When communicating with Indigenous youth and their parents, it became evident that messaging needed to dismantle some of the mystery behind the term 'human trafficking.' While indicative of the broader issue, the term was understood as remote and unapproachable, burdened with stigmas that do not invite an open discussion.
- To mitigate this, participants suggested engaging Indigenous youth by sharing relatable stories, community-specific statistics, and incorporating interactive methods such as involving them and their parents in designing materials or facilitating community discussion groups. Furthermore, it was recommended to embed such lessons into school curriculums that meet youth at each stage of their education.

Political neutrality statement and contact information

I hereby certify as senior officer of Environics that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada, and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

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