

Breaking Barriers

Understanding the Needs of Victims/Survivors to Empower Access to Community Supports

2021–2026

Ontario Provincial Police
Victim-Centred Approach Team (VCAT)
Crime Prevention and Community Support Bureau

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And

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- London Abused Women's Centre
- Ontario Native Women's Association
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- Treaty Three Police Service
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Abbreviations

ACE: Adverse Childhood Experiences

AHTU: Anti-Human Trafficking Unit

CNA: Community Needs Assessment

CPCSOC: Contribution Program to Combat Serious and Organized Crime

CSF: Community Support Fund

CYACSM: Child & Youth Advocacy Centre Simcoe Muskoka

EIP: OPP Enhanced Investigative Practice: Connection and Communication

GTA: Greater Toronto Area

ILIF: Indigenous-Led Initiatives Fund

IOM: International Organization for Migration

IWG-TP: Intergovernmental Working Group on Trafficking of Persons

LEA: Law Enforcement Agency

MAWG: Mult-agency Working Group

NGO: Non-governmental Organization

NRM: National Referral Mechanisms

ONWA: Ontario Native Women's Association

OPP: Ontario Provincial Police

OPP TIP VNA: OPP Trafficking in Persons Victim Needs Assessment

OPP VCAT: OPP Victim-Centred Approach Team

OPP VNA: OPP Victim Needs Assessment

OPP VSP: OPP Victim Services Program

OPP VSU: OPP Victim Services Unit

OSCE: Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

PPA: Provincial Police Academy

RCMP: Royal Canadian Mounted Police

SEHT: Sexually Exploitative Human Trafficking

TIP: trafficking in persons

UK: United Kingdom

UN: United Nations

UNODC: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

VCAT: Victim-Centred Approach Team

VNA: Victim Needs Assessment

VSE: Victim Support Europe

Executive Summary

In 2021, the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) launched the Breaking Barriers project with funding from the Government of Canada's Public Safety Canada through the Contribution Program to Combat Serious and Organized Crime (CPCSOC)¹. The initiative aimed to strengthen the identification, support, and referral of victims of trafficking in persons (TIP) by embedding victim-centred and trauma-informed practices within policing responses across Ontario.

Trafficking in persons remains a significant and complex form of serious and organized crime in Canada². Although police-reported incidents represent only a small proportion of the crime's true scale, available data indicates that Ontario accounts for the majority of reported cases nationally³. Victims often experience coercion, violence, and psychological manipulation and may face substantial barriers to reporting or accessing assistance⁴. These barriers can include fear of retaliation, trauma, cultural and language barriers, and limited awareness of available services⁵. As a result, frontline law enforcement officers frequently play a critical role in recognizing indicators of trafficking and facilitating access to support services during initial contact with victims.

The Breaking Barriers project sought to address these challenges by strengthening collaboration between law enforcement and community service providers while enhancing officers' capacity to respond to trafficking situations in a trauma-informed and victim-centred manner. The project was led by the OPP Victim-Centred Approach Team (VCAT) and implemented in partnership with community organizations, subject-matter experts, and the international victim support organization Victim Support Europe.

The initiative was structured around four primary activities:

1. **Identification of international best practices** for victim identification, needs assessment, and referral mechanisms in trafficking cases.
2. **Community Needs Assessment and service mapping** to identify available supports for trafficking victims across multiple regions of Ontario and assess barriers to access.
3. **Establishment of Multi-Agency Working Groups (MAWGs)** to strengthen coordination between law enforcement and community-based service providers.
4. **Development and delivery of specialized training** to enhance trauma-informed investigative practices and improve officers' ability to recognize and respond to trafficking indicators.

Together, these activities were designed to strengthen both operational responses to trafficking and the broader systems supporting victims.

Research conducted during the project's initial phase examined national and international practices related to victim identification and support. The review identified a critical operational gap: the absence of practical tools designed specifically to assist frontline officers in identifying victims of trafficking and assessing their immediate needs during initial contact. This finding informed subsequent project activities, including the review of the OPP Victim Needs Assessment (VNA) and the development of training resources focused on trauma-informed engagement and effective communication.

A Community Needs Assessment and service-mapping exercise was also conducted to better understand the availability and accessibility of support services for trafficking victims. The assessment identified a number of systemic challenges affecting service delivery, including limited supports for younger victims, geographic disparities in service availability, language barriers, and gaps in culturally responsive programming. These findings highlighted the importance of strengthening coordination between law enforcement and community organizations to ensure victims can access timely and appropriate assistance.

To support improved collaboration, the project established Multi-Agency Working Groups in several OPP regions. These forums brought together representatives from law enforcement, victim service organizations, Indigenous organizations, healthcare providers, and other community stakeholders. Through structured discussions and consultations, participants identified service gaps, barriers to referral pathways, and opportunities to strengthen regional partnerships supporting victims of trafficking.

Training and capacity building were also central components of the initiative. In collaboration with Victim Support Europe, the project developed a specialized training program titled Enhanced Communication Practice: Supporting Human Trafficking Investigations. The program focused on trauma-informed engagement, recognition of trafficking indicators, victim-centred investigative practices, and effective communication with individuals experiencing trauma. As part of the training initiative, a Train-the-Trainer model was implemented to support regional delivery across OPP detachments. By the end of the project, 144 OPP members had completed the training program, exceeding the project's initial targets.

A key feature of the project was the integration of lived-experience perspectives. Through collaboration with trusted community partners, individuals with lived experience of trafficking contributed insights regarding victims' needs, barriers to accessing services, and opportunities to improve system responses. These perspectives helped inform project activities while ensuring that engagement processes prioritized safety and minimized the risk of re-traumatization.

Overall, the Breaking Barriers initiative strengthened collaboration between law enforcement and community organizations, enhanced officers' awareness of trauma-informed practices, and improved understanding of the barriers faced by victims of trafficking in accessing support services. The project also generated valuable evidence regarding service gaps and coordination challenges that may affect victim identification and referral processes.

Although implementation was affected by operational challenges, including staffing transitions within some regions, the initiative produced several important lessons. These include the

importance of strong partnerships with community service providers, the value of trauma-informed training for frontline officers, and the need for continued investment in coordinated support systems for victims of trafficking.

The findings presented in this report contribute to broader federal and provincial efforts to combat trafficking in persons and strengthen victim-centred responses to serious and organized crime⁶. By combining research, community engagement, training, and operational improvements, the Breaking Barriers project provides a model for enhancing collaboration between law enforcement and community organizations while supporting victims in accessing the services necessary for safety, recovery, and long-term stability.

Breaking Barriers Project Timeline



Figure 1. Timeline of key activities implemented through the *Breaking Barriers* project from 2021 to 2026.

Terminology Note

In keeping with the Ontario Provincial Police values of respect, compassion, and fairness, it is recognized that individuals may use different terminology to describe their experiences following a criminal event or investigative process. While some individuals prefer the term survivor, others identify with the term victim.

The OPP Victim Specialist Program acknowledges an individual's right to self-identify. For the purposes of this report, the term 'victim' is used for consistency and to align with legislative and policing terminology; however, it is intended to include individuals who may identify as survivors.

1. Trafficking in Persons in Canada

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) defines trafficking in persons as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of individuals through force, fraud, deception, or other forms of coercion for the purpose of exploitation. This exploitation may include sexual exploitation, forced labour, servitude, or other forms of abuse. Trafficking in persons affects individuals of all ages and backgrounds and occurs in every region of the world⁷.

In Canada, trafficking in persons involves the recruitment, transportation, harbouring, or control of a person for the purpose of exploitation, most commonly through sexual exploitation or forced labour. Organized criminal networks as well as individual offenders may operate both domestically and internationally⁸.

Trafficking in persons represents a serious violation of human rights⁹. Victims may experience physical and psychological abuse, coercion, threats, and isolation. Traffickers often maintain control through a range of tactics, including manipulation, intimidation, confiscation of identity documents, financial control, and social or emotional dependency¹⁰.

The clandestine nature of the offence presents significant challenges for detection and enforcement. Trafficking in persons is often characterized as a “low-risk, high-profit” activity¹¹ for offenders, as victims may be reluctant or unable to report their experiences due to fear, trauma, coercion, or mistrust of authorities. As a result, prosecution rates remain relatively low compared to the estimated scale of the offence.

Accurately estimating the number of individuals experiencing trafficking in persons in Canada is difficult. Available data is limited due to several factors, including underreporting, inconsistent identification practices, and the hidden nature of the crime. Victims may also move frequently between locations, further complicating detection and data collection¹².

Between 2013 and 2023, Canadian police services reported just over 4,500 incidents of trafficking in persons¹³. These incidents accounted for approximately 0.02% of all police-reported crime during that period and represented an average annual rate of approximately 1.1 incidents per 100,000 population. However, experts widely acknowledge that these figures likely represent only a small proportion of actual cases.

Ontario consistently reports the highest number of police-reported trafficking incidents in Canada, accounting for approximately 66 percent of national cases between 2013 and 2023¹⁴. At the same time, research suggests that many victims do not report their experiences to law enforcement. Data from Statistics Canada’s General Social Survey on Victimization (2020) indicates that approximately 90 percent of criminal incidents are not reported to police, with victims citing fear of retaliation, mistrust of authorities, trauma, and coercion as key barriers to reporting¹⁵.

Service providers working with victims of trafficking frequently observe that individuals are more likely to first seek assistance from community-based organizations rather than law

enforcement agencies. Organizations such as the Ontario Native Women's Association, Covenant House Toronto, the Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking, and other community partners often play a critical role in supporting victims and facilitating access to services.

Underlying challenges may further complicate efforts to identify and support victims. Many individuals experiencing trafficking relocate frequently due to safety concerns or the mobility imposed by traffickers. Migrant and racialized communities may face additional barriers related to language, immigration status, or mistrust of authorities. In rural and smaller jurisdictions, limited training and awareness among frontline personnel may also affect the identification of trafficking indicators.¹⁶

2. Profile and Vulnerabilities of Victims

Research on trafficking in persons in Canada indicates that vulnerability to exploitation is often linked to a range of social, economic, and personal factors. Individuals who experience poverty, unstable housing, family violence, or limited access to education and employment opportunities may face heightened risks of exploitation¹⁷.

Many victims report histories of abuse, neglect, or trauma during childhood and adolescence. Experiences such as domestic violence, family disruption, and involvement in child welfare systems may contribute to social isolation and reduced access to supportive networks. These circumstances can increase vulnerability to individuals who seek to manipulate or exploit relationships for financial gain.

Traffickers frequently rely on psychological manipulation and coercion to establish and maintain control over victims. One commonly documented recruitment method is the termed "boyfriend" approach, in which traffickers establish an intimate or romantic relationship with a potential victim to build trust and emotional dependency before exploiting them¹⁸. Through manipulation, gift-giving, and promises of stability or protection, traffickers may gradually isolate victims and exert increasing control over their activities and finances.

Victims may not immediately recognize that they are being exploited, particularly where emotional manipulation or coercion is involved. In some cases, victims may remain connected to their traffickers due to fear, dependency, or a belief that the relationship provides protection or support. These dynamics can make exiting situations of exploitation particularly difficult and may also affect victims' willingness or ability to participate in criminal proceedings¹⁹.

Certain populations may experience disproportionate risks of trafficking due to historical, social, and systemic factors. In Canada, Indigenous women and girls are significantly overrepresented among victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking. Research has linked this vulnerability to the long-term impacts of colonization, systemic discrimination, and intergenerational trauma²⁰.

Colonial policies, including the residential school system established in the nineteenth century, disrupted Indigenous families, communities, and cultural continuity. Many survivors of these

institutions experienced abuse, neglect, and forced separation from their families and communities²¹. The lasting effects of these experiences continue to influence social and economic outcomes for many Indigenous individuals and communities.

These historical and structural factors have contributed to ongoing disparities in areas such as housing stability, access to education, employment opportunities, and exposure to violence. As a result, Indigenous women and girls may face heightened risks of exploitation and trafficking.

Understanding these intersecting vulnerabilities is critical for developing effective responses to trafficking in persons. Victim-centred and trauma-informed approaches must recognize the broader social and historical contexts that shape individuals' experiences and influence their access to support services.

3. Trafficking in Persons Legislation in Canada

Prior to 2005, Canada did not have specific Criminal Code provisions addressing trafficking in persons. While individuals could be charged under related offences—such as kidnapping, assault, sexual exploitation, or organized crime provisions—there was no dedicated legislative framework that directly addressed the unique nature of human trafficking²².

In November 2005, the Government of Canada introduced Bill C-49, An Act to Amend the Criminal Code (Trafficking in Persons)²³. The legislation established specific offences related to trafficking in persons and expanded Canada's legal framework to better address both domestic and transnational trafficking. The amendments created three key criminal prohibitions:

1. **Trafficking in persons**, defined as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, receipt, harbouring, or concealment of a person, or the exercise of control, direction, or influence over the movements of a person, for the purpose of exploitation”²⁴.
2. **Material benefit from trafficking**, which prohibits individuals from knowingly receiving a financial or other material benefit resulting from trafficking in persons.
3. **Withholding or destroying identity or travel documents**, which criminalizes the act of confiscating, concealing, or destroying identity, immigration, or travel documents for the purpose of facilitating trafficking.

The legislation also expanded the ability of courts to order restitution for victims who experience physical or psychological harm because of trafficking offences.

4. Federal Policy Responses to Trafficking

In 2012, the Government of Canada introduced its first National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking²⁵, representing a significant step toward a more coordinated national response to trafficking in persons. The plan aimed to strengthen prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnerships by bringing together federal departments and agencies under a coordinated framework led by the Human Trafficking Taskforce.

This initiative built upon earlier efforts led by the Interdepartmental Working Group on Trafficking in Persons (IWG-TP), which had supported coordination among federal partners but did not establish a comprehensive national strategy²⁶. The 2012 National Action Plan sought to address this gap by promoting collaboration across government and strengthening engagement with provinces, territories, and community organizations²⁷.

A federal evaluation conducted in 2017 identified several areas of progress, including increased awareness of trafficking in persons within federal institutions and enhanced coordination among partner organizations. However, the evaluation also highlighted ongoing challenges in implementation. These included difficulties in consistently identifying victims of trafficking, barriers affecting relationships between law enforcement and vulnerable populations, and the need for stronger collaboration between law enforcement agencies and community-based service providers²⁸.

Law enforcement agencies also faced evolving operational challenges, including adapting to emerging technologies and responding to increasingly complex criminal networks involved in trafficking and other forms of organized crime. These challenges underscored the need for continued innovation, training, and partnership-building across sectors²⁹.

In 2019, the Government of Canada launched the National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking (2019–2024)³⁰, supported by a federal investment of 75 million dollars. The strategy adopted a comprehensive approach centred on five key pillars:

- **Prevention**
- **Protection**
- **Prosecution**
- **Partnerships**
- **Empowerment**

A key component of this strategy was the establishment of a Survivor Advisory Committee³¹, which ensured that individuals with lived experience of trafficking could contribute directly to the development of policies, programs, and services. The strategy also emphasized the importance of addressing the root causes of trafficking and strengthening support systems to assist victims in rebuilding their lives.

The strategy recognizes the disproportionate impact of trafficking on Indigenous peoples and prioritizes partnerships with Indigenous organizations and communities. It also promotes culturally responsive and gender-informed approaches that place victims' needs, safety, and recovery at the centre of Canada's response to trafficking in persons.

5. Ontario's Anti-Human Trafficking Strategy

In Ontario, provincial strategies have also played an important role in addressing trafficking in persons and strengthening support systems for victims.

Ontario's 2020–2025 Anti-Human Trafficking Strategy³² introduced a coordinated approach to prevention, victim support, and law enforcement response. A review of the strategy, based on sector consultations, program assessments, and performance data, identified several areas of progress while also highlighting ongoing challenges in addressing trafficking in persons.

Key challenges identified through these assessments include:

Detection and Reporting Challenges

Trafficking in persons remains a highly underreported crime due to its hidden nature and the barriers victims face when seeking assistance. Although approximately 4,500 incidents were reported by Canadian police services between 2013 and 2023, these figures are widely understood to represent only a portion of actual cases. Victims may be reluctant to report their experiences due to fear of retaliation, trauma, coercion, or mistrust of authorities.

Case Complexity

Cases involving trafficking in persons are often complex and resource-intensive. Court data indicates that trafficking cases take significantly longer to process than many other criminal offences. The complexity of these investigations often results in multiple charges and extended legal proceedings.

Victim Identification

The identification of victims remains an ongoing challenge. Fluctuations in the number of identified victims from year to year suggest inconsistencies in recognition, reporting practices, and available support services.

Coordination Across Systems

Effective responses to trafficking require collaboration across multiple sectors, including law enforcement, social services, health care providers, and community organizations. Strengthening coordination across these systems remains an ongoing priority.

Data and Knowledge Gaps

The evolving nature of trafficking in persons makes it difficult to accurately assess the scale and characteristics of the crime. Improved data collection and information sharing are necessary to support more effective prevention and response strategies.

Building on these findings, Ontario's 2025–2030 Anti-Human Trafficking Strategy³³ seeks to further strengthen coordinated responses across government and community partners. The strategy focuses on increasing awareness of trafficking in persons, improving early intervention and prevention, enhancing supports for victims, and strengthening the capacity of the justice system to investigate and prosecute offenders.

The strategy also includes targeted initiatives aimed at supporting children and youth, as well as culturally responsive programming designed to meet the needs of Indigenous communities.

Recognizing the importance of community-based services in supporting victims, Ontario has increased investments in initiatives such as the Community Supports Fund and the Indigenous-Led Initiatives Fund. These programs support culturally appropriate, trauma-informed services that assist victims in accessing housing, counselling, mental health supports, and other essential services.

As awareness of trafficking in persons continues to increase, improvements in identification and reporting may lead to higher numbers of police-reported incidents. Such increases may reflect improved detection and reporting mechanisms rather than an increase in the underlying prevalence of trafficking.

6. Project Aims, Groups, and Stakeholders

The Breaking Barriers project focuses on strengthening the identification and support of victims of trafficking in persons by improving collaboration between law enforcement and community partners.

Victims of trafficking may not recognize that they are being exploited or may face significant barriers in disclosing their experiences. Factors such as trauma, fear, coercion, language barriers, and cultural considerations may prevent individuals from self-identifying as victims or seeking assistance from authorities. As a result, frontline police officers play a critical role in recognizing potential indicators of trafficking during initial interactions.

How officers listen, respond, and engage with individuals during these first points of contact can significantly influence whether trafficking is identified and whether victims are connected with appropriate supports.

The Breaking Barriers project seeks to strengthen this initial response by providing officers with the knowledge, tools, and partnerships required to support trauma-informed and victim-centred approaches to policing. By improving identification and referral processes, the project

contributes to broader efforts to combat serious and organized crime while supporting the safety and recovery of victims.

The project pursued four primary objectives:

First, to better understand the needs and lived experiences of victims of trafficking while ensuring that engagement activities minimized the risk of re-traumatization. Established relationships with community partners were leveraged to ensure that victims' perspectives could be incorporated safely and meaningfully into the project.

Second, to engage with community stakeholders, including service providers, victim support organizations, healthcare professionals, legal advocates, and Indigenous leaders, to map available services and identify gaps in support systems. Structured consultations supported the development of a comprehensive overview of local resources and barriers to service access.

Third, to strengthen organizational capacity within the OPP by delivering training focused on trauma-informed and victim-centred approaches. Training initiatives addressed key areas including:

- trauma-informed investigative practices
- victim-centred case management
- recognition of trafficking indicators
- crisis intervention and de-escalation strategies

Fourth, to generate evidence-informed insights that could support policy development and decision-making at both provincial and federal levels. Findings from the project are intended to contribute to ongoing legislative and policy discussions and support coordinated responses to trafficking in persons.

The project also intentionally considered the diverse needs of victims, including children and youth, persons with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, and racialized communities. Engagement with international partners and the integration of global best practices supported the identification of approaches that could better address the needs of individuals experiencing cross-border trafficking or other complex forms of exploitation.

7. Project Partnerships

The Breaking Barriers project was implemented through collaboration with a range of community organizations and subject-matter experts who contributed to research, consultation, and the development of project tools and resources.

Key partners included:

Kenora Sexual Assault Centre, Kenora Coalition to End Human Trafficking, Treaty Three Police Service, and Kenora Chiefs Advisory, which participated in the Kenora and Northwest

Regions' Multi-Agency Working Group and provided input on the development of the Victim Needs Assessment and the mapping of community services.

Lanark County Interval House and Community Support, which supported the mapping of local services and provided feedback during the development of the victim needs assessment tools.

Child and Youth Advocacy Centre Simcoe Muskoka, which coordinated the Central Region Multi-Agency Working Group's community asset mapping initiative and supported engagement with local service providers.

Ontario Native Women's Association, which provided support to multiple regional working groups and contributed expertise in identifying culturally appropriate services for Indigenous victims.

Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime, which provided subject-matter expertise and reviewed project materials.

Victim Support Europe, which served as the project's international partner and contributed research on international best practices, as well as the development of assessment tools and referral mechanisms.

In addition, guidance and cultural insight were provided by **Indigenous community members**, including an **Elder**, to help ensure that project activities and materials reflected culturally relevant perspectives and approaches.

Through these partnerships, the OPP strengthened relationships with community organizations and built a foundation for ongoing collaboration with Indigenous communities, service providers, and other stakeholders working to address trafficking in persons.

8. Identifying International Best Practices

Overview

The initial phase of the Breaking Barriers project focused on identifying international best practices for supporting and empowering victims of trafficking in persons (TIP). This work aimed to inform the development of practical tools and approaches that could strengthen Ontario's response to trafficking and improve outcomes for victims interacting with law enforcement.

Early research revealed a critical gap within Ontario's response framework: the absence of specialized tools to assist frontline officers in identifying victims and assessing their immediate needs during the first point of contact. This finding directly informed subsequent project activities, including the development of victim needs assessment tools, training resources, and enhanced referral processes.

Methodology

Between January and April 2022, the project conducted a review of national and international practices related to victim identification, needs assessment, and access to services for victims of trafficking in persons.

The objective was to identify effective models used in other jurisdictions and determine how these approaches could be adapted to Ontario's policing and service environment. This ensured that project activities were grounded in evidence and aligned with recognized international standards.

Research included:

- Desk-based reviews of national and international literature
- Comparative analysis of victim needs assessment tools
- Consultations with subject matter experts
- Review of operational guidance used by law enforcement and victim service organizations

Victim needs assessment tools used across Canada, Europe, and other jurisdictions were examined, with particular attention to tools designed for frontline law enforcement. Where TIP-specific tools were unavailable, frameworks used in related contexts, such as domestic violence and hate crime, were also reviewed to determine whether elements could be adapted for trafficking cases.

The review was conducted collaboratively by the OPP Victim Specialist Team and Victim Support Europe (VSE). The OPP led research on Canadian approaches, while VSE conducted analysis of international and European practices. Experts from law enforcement, international organizations, and victim service providers were also consulted to validate findings and provide operational insights.

Frameworks for Identifying and Supporting Victims

A key component of the research involved examining broader frameworks used internationally to identify and support victims of trafficking. Understanding how systems structure their response, from the initial encounter through to longer-term support, provided important context for determining the role of frontline officers and priorities during first contact.

Across jurisdictions, victim identification and engagement typically follow three stages:

1. Initial Contact

Officers identify potential indicators of trafficking, address immediate needs, and assess urgent safety risks. Once the individual is stabilized, they can be referred to specialized units or community services.

2. Initial Interview

Conducted by trained investigators or specialized units to confirm whether the individual is a victim of trafficking and to assess longer-term needs.

3. Formal Interview

At this stage, investigative cooperation and formal statements may be discussed.

Research consistently emphasized that the initial contact should prioritize safety, stabilization, and trust-building rather than extensive questioning. Victims of trafficking often experience trauma that can affect memory, communication, and decision-making, making detailed interviews during early interactions inappropriate.

Consultations with Canadian practitioners reinforced this approach. Many experts indicated that frontline officers should focus on identifying indicators of trafficking and addressing immediate needs, while comprehensive needs assessments should be conducted by specialized investigators or trained victim support professionals.

International Examples of Coordinated Response Frameworks

National Referral Mechanisms (Europe)

Many European countries operate National Referral Mechanisms³⁴ (NRMs)—formal coordination frameworks that organize the identification, referral, and support of trafficking victims. Developed under the guidance of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe³⁵ (OSCE), NRMs establish clear roles for government agencies, law enforcement, and civil society organizations. These systems facilitate coordinated responses and ensure that victims are referred to appropriate support services.

Under these frameworks, frontline responders, including police and immigration authorities, are responsible for recognizing trafficking indicators, collecting basic information, and referring potential victims to competent authorities responsible for formal identification and support.

Sweden's Three-Stage Risk Assessment Model³⁶

The research also examined Sweden's structured risk assessment model used by law enforcement.

In Sweden, risk assessments are conducted through three stages:

1. Initial Assessment conducted during first contact to determine whether immediate protection measures are required.
2. Structured Assessment undertaken by specialized officers to evaluate longer-term safety risks.
3. Extended Assessment used in complex cases requiring more detailed analysis.

Although applied across multiple crime types, this model helps ensure that high-risk victims are identified quickly and referred to appropriate services.

Key Findings

The research identified several consistent themes across international practices.

First, initial contact should prioritize immediate safety and stabilization, including access to medical care, shelter, and other urgent supports.

Second, victim identification and needs assessment often occur simultaneously, particularly during early interactions when indicators of trafficking may emerge through observation and limited questioning.

Third, frontline officers require practical tools to identify urgent needs, rather than extensive questionnaires designed for detailed investigative interviews.

Despite reviewing numerous international resources, researchers were unable to identify a needs assessment tool specifically designed for frontline officers to identify and respond to the immediate needs of trafficking victims during initial contact.

Most existing tools consisted of comprehensive screening questionnaires intended for formal interviews conducted by trained specialists. Other risk or needs assessment tools were generally designed for later stages of victim engagement.

This gap highlighted the need to develop a simplified tool capable of assisting officers in identifying potential victims and addressing immediate needs before referral to specialized services.

Additional research was therefore undertaken to explore best practices in trauma-informed victim engagement, needs assessment, and communication strategies. These findings informed the further development of the OPP Victim Needs Assessment (VNA) and related training modules.

9. Mapping Community Support Services

Overview

A second major component of the project involved identifying and mapping community-based services available to victims of trafficking in Ontario. Effective victim support requires access to a coordinated network of services capable of addressing victims' complex and intersecting needs.

Understanding the availability, accessibility, and capacity of these services was essential to developing effective referral pathways for victims identified by law enforcement.

This work was undertaken through a Community Needs Assessment (CNA) and service-mapping exercise.

Community Needs Assessment

Community Needs Assessments are widely used strategic tools for identifying service gaps and supporting evidence-informed planning³⁷.

Within the Breaking Barriers project, the CNA aimed to:

- Identify community services supporting victims of trafficking;
- Examine referral processes and service delivery models;
- Identify service gaps and barriers to access; and
- Strengthen coordination between law enforcement and community organizations.

Methodology:

Service mapping was conducted in collaboration with regional partners. Under the supervision of the Ontario Provincial Police, the Child and Youth Advocacy Centre Simcoe Muskoka (CYACSM) led the collection and analysis of service data. Activities included identifying organizations that support trafficking victims or vulnerable youth, reviewing publicly available information about services, and analyzing accessibility from the perspective of victims seeking assistance. Initial mapping began in Central Region and expanded to Northwest Region before being extended to additional communities impacted by trafficking.

Regional Findings:

The service-mapping exercise identified several common challenges across regions:

- **Limited services for younger victims**
Across multiple regions, services specifically designed for children under 16 were limited, leaving younger victims with fewer specialized supports.
- **Gender-specific service gap**
Many programs primarily served female victims, resulting in limited specialized services for male-identifying victims.
- **Geographic barriers**
Service availability was concentrated in larger urban areas, particularly within the Greater Toronto Area. Victims in rural or northern regions often faced significant travel distances to access support.
- **Cultural and Indigenous services**
Although some organizations offered culturally responsive programs, access to Indigenous-specific services and traditional healing supports remained limited in several regions.

- **Language barriers**
Most services were available only in English, limiting accessibility for victims whose primary language was not English.
- **Access and referral challenges**
Some services required police involvement or formal referrals before victims could access programs, creating barriers for individuals reluctant to engage with law enforcement.
- **Transparency and service information**
Reviews of service provider websites frequently identified outdated information, unclear eligibility criteria, and limited details regarding wait times or program availability.
- **Staffing and training transparency**
Publicly available information often did not clearly identify the qualifications or training of staff delivering services, raising concerns about organizational capacity to support victims with complex trauma needs.



Figure 2.

This figure illustrates key regional challenges that affect the accessibility, equity, and effectiveness of support across different geographic areas (Central, Northwest, East, and Northeast regions).

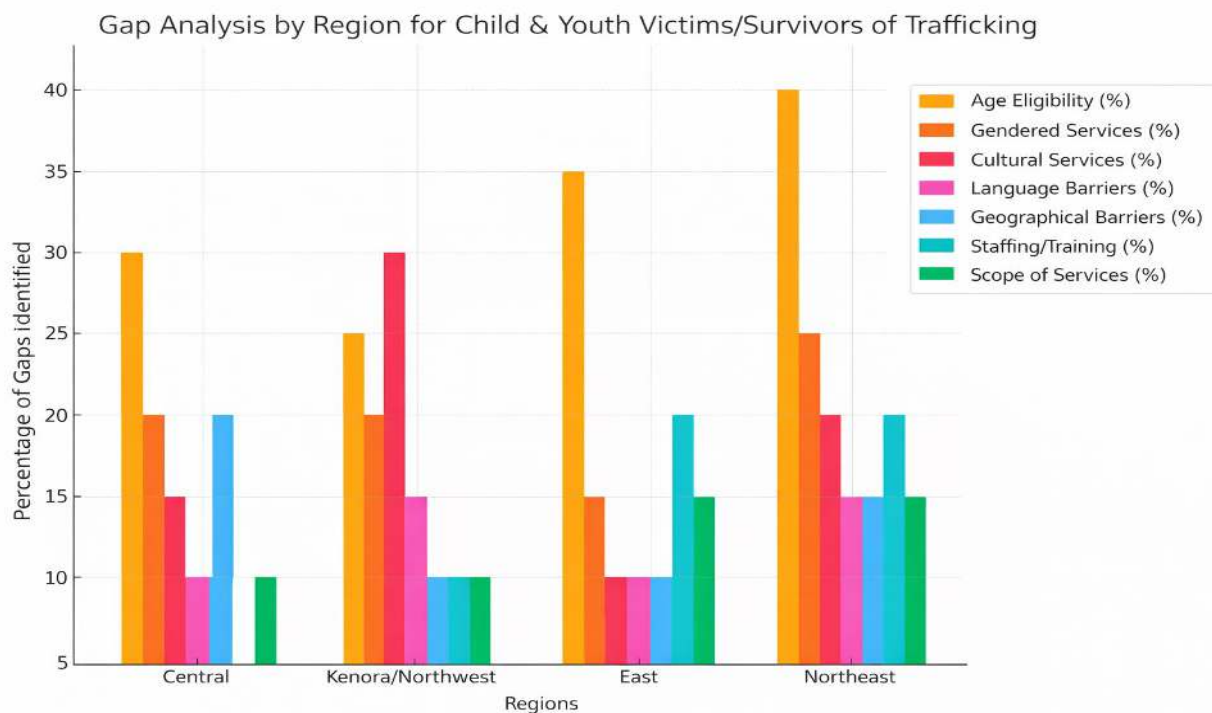


Figure 3. Gap analysis by region for child and youth victims/survivors of trafficking.

This figure illustrates the percentage of service gaps identified across key support domains for child and youth victims/survivors of trafficking in four regions: Central, Kenora/Northwest, East, and Northeast. Age eligibility criteria were identified as the most significant gap across all regions, with the highest proportion reported in Northeast (40%), followed by East (35%), Central (30%), and Kenora/Northwest (25%).

Cultural service gaps were particularly pronounced in the Kenora/Northwest region (30%), while gender-specific service gaps were most notable in Northeast (25%) and Central (20%). Language barriers and geographical barriers were reported at moderate levels across regions, with higher geographical barriers observed in Central (20%) and Northeast (15%). Staffing and training gaps were most frequently identified in the East and Northeast regions (20% each), indicating potential capacity challenges in service delivery. Scope-of-service limitations were reported consistently across regions at lower levels (10–15%). Overall, the figure highlights regional variation in service system pressures and underscores the need for targeted, region-specific responses to improve access to appropriate supports for trafficked children and youth.

Implications

The service-mapping exercise highlighted several structural barriers that may prevent victims of trafficking from accessing timely and appropriate support.

These findings reinforce the importance of improving coordination between law enforcement and community organizations, strengthening referral pathways, and increasing awareness of available services among frontline officers.

The data generated through this process also provides valuable evidence to support future funding applications and inform policy development aimed at strengthening coordinated responses to trafficking in persons.

10. Multi-Agency Working Groups

Multi-Agency Working Groups (MAWGs) were established as collaborative forums bringing together representatives from law enforcement, social services, healthcare, and community organizations to address the complex needs of victims of trafficking in persons (TIP). Through coordinated engagement, these groups support improved information sharing, identify service gaps, and promote trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches to victim support.

Within the Breaking Barriers project, MAWGs were designed to strengthen stakeholder capacity to identify and respond to the needs of TIP victims, including Indigenous victims affected by sexual exploitation in Northwestern Ontario and victims of labour trafficking in Central Ontario. Particular attention was given to improving support for child victims and individuals with disabilities.

The MAWGs aimed to strengthen regional coordination by identifying existing services, highlighting gaps in support, and developing collaborative approaches to victim referrals and assistance. Building on the earlier community mapping exercise, pilot MAWGs were established across several OPP regions with the participation of community partners working directly with victims of trafficking.

Through structured discussions and regional consultations, participating organizations identified challenges in accessing services, barriers to culturally appropriate supports, and opportunities to strengthen local collaboration. Findings from these consultations informed a report examining the alignment between victims' needs and available services.

Implementation

The first MAWGs were established in October 2021. Each working group represented a geographic region and included community organizations with expertise in victim support.

Participating organizations included:

Northwest Region (Kenora)

Kenora Sexual Assault Centre

Treaty 3 Police Service

Kenora Chiefs Advisory
Ontario Native Women's Association

West Region (London)

Addiction Services of Thames Valley
London Abused Women's Centre
Atlohsa Family Healing Services

Central Region (Orillia)

Ontario Native Women's Association
Child and Youth Advocacy Centre Simcoe Muskoka

Northeast Region (Thunder Bay)

Ontario Native Women's Association
Beendigen
Indige-Spheres to Empowerment

To support regional discussions, surveys were distributed to participating organizations focusing on two primary areas: sexual exploitation and labour trafficking. Questions examined the prevalence of trafficking within communities, awareness of available resources, service gaps, and effective local responses.

Regional Engagement

Northwest Region (Kenora)

Between December 2021 and July 2023, five MAWG meetings were held. Discussions focused on service gaps, community responses to trafficking, and the development of victim needs assessment tools. Researcher Dr. Anita Olsen Harper, a member of Lac Seul First Nation and subject matter expert on Indigenous experiences of trafficking, participated in several meetings and provided valuable insights.

West Region (London)

Three meetings were held following the project's launch. Engagement in this region was limited due to personnel transitions within both the Victim Specialist Program and partner organizations. However, service mapping activities continued.

Central Region (Orillia)

Two meetings were held in early 2022. Participants recommended expanding consultation to additional organizations supporting trafficking victims, including agencies not directly receiving project funding.

Northeast Region (Thunder Bay)

Engagement in this region was limited due to personnel transitions within both the Victim Specialist Program and partner organizations. However, service mapping activities continued.

East Region

Due to aforementioned operational challenges, no ongoing engagement was established before this final report was due to be published.

Outcomes

Despite operational challenges, the MAWGs increased awareness of regional services strengthened relationships between the OPP and community organizations, and improved understanding of referral processes. Participants reported enhanced knowledge of available supports and improved inter-agency collaboration.

Although the formal MAWG structure concluded at the end of the pilot phase, the partnerships developed through the initiative continue to support coordination between law enforcement and community-based service providers. The pilot also informed an operational model in which local victim services organizations provide immediate support to victims, while OPP Victim Specialists conduct more detailed assessments and referrals where required.

MAWG discussions also generated practical recommendations for victim engagement, including meeting victims in neutral locations and adopting communication approaches that prioritize safety, trust, and victim autonomy.

11. Victim Needs Assessment

A central objective of the project was to enhance frontline officers' ability to identify victims of trafficking and connect them with appropriate supports during initial contact. This required assessing whether the existing OPP Victim Needs Assessment (VNA) tool adequately addressed the specific needs of TIP victims.

The project explored the development of a trafficking-specific VNA designed to support officers in identifying victims, understanding their needs, and facilitating access to services. The proposed tool was intended to support trauma-informed interactions while improving referral pathways to community supports.

Research and Development

Research conducted during 2022 examined international best practices in victim needs assessments and trauma-informed engagement. This work included literature reviews, consultations with subject matter experts, and collaboration with Victim Support Europe (VSE).

The research explored how the needs of trafficking victims differ from those of other victims of crime, particularly during the first interaction with law enforcement. Cultural considerations, including the experiences of Indigenous victims, were also examined to ensure the assessment process reflected diverse victim needs.

Following analysis of the research findings and consultation results, recommendations were developed regarding the structure and content of a trafficking-specific VNA.

Implementation

Subsequent consultations between VSE and the OPP determined that creating a new tool was unnecessary. Instead, the existing OPP VNA could be adapted to better reflect the needs of trafficking victims.

Although operational changes within the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit limited opportunities for direct field testing, consultations with the assigned Victim Specialist confirmed that the existing VNA is capable of identifying victim needs and supporting appropriate referrals.

While additional testing using operational scenarios was planned, restructuring within the Victim Specialist Program prevented this phase from being completed during the project timeline. Nevertheless, the research confirmed that the existing VNA aligns with identified best practices and remains suitable for use with TIP victims.

12. Training for Frontline Officers

Training was a core component of the Breaking Barriers initiative. As frontline officers are often the first point of contact for victims of trafficking, equipping officers with trauma-informed communication skills is essential to improving victim outcomes.

The OPP Victim Specialist Program and Victim Support Europe's Training Academy developed the training program collaboratively. Initially titled Empathy and Effective Communication, the program was later renamed Enhanced Communication Practices (ECP) to better reflect its operational focus.

The training program consisted of two main components:

1. Enhanced Communication Practices (ECP)
Focused on trauma-informed engagement, victim-centred investigative practices, and communication techniques.
2. Exit Strategy Training
Focused on transition planning, victim referrals, and officer well-being.

The program emphasized understanding trauma, recognizing trafficking indicators, and developing effective communication strategies when working with victims.

Training Delivery

A Train-the-Trainer session was delivered in January 2022 to 15 participants representing all OPP regions. The training included five Victim Specialists and ten uniform members who were later responsible for delivering regional training sessions.

Following pilot sessions and feedback from participants, training materials were refined and expanded. A refresher session was delivered in early 2024 to update trainers and prepare for broader regional delivery.

Between 2024 and 2025, regional training sessions were conducted across multiple detachments. By project's end, 144 OPP members had completed the training program, exceeding the initial project targets.

Exit Strategy Training

The Exit Strategy module emphasized transition planning and the importance of preparing victims for long-term support beyond the investigative process. It also addressed challenges officers may face when ending their professional involvement with victims.

This component focused on managing professional boundaries, recognizing compassion fatigue, and ensuring victims are connected to appropriate services during and after investigations.

Training materials were developed by VSE expert Dr. Sigal Haimov and presented to OPP trainers in 2024. Feedback from participants indicated strong support for incorporating this component into ongoing officer training.

Sustainability

To support long-term delivery, a centralized SharePoint platform was created to house training materials, evaluation tools, and scheduling resources. The platform enables trainers to access course materials, coordinate sessions, and collect feedback to support continuous improvement.

Training delivery has been primarily led by the Victim Specialist Team in partnership with uniformed members and has focused on OPP membership. In recognizing the transferable knowledge the training provides, opportunities have also been extended to officers from other police services and correctional institutions.

Grant funding supported training activities through March 2026. Following the conclusion of the grant, the OPP plans to explore options for sustaining the training program through internal funding.

13. Evaluation and Dissemination

Each project activity was evaluated to determine whether its objectives were achieved and to identify lessons for future initiatives. Upon completion of the final report, project findings will be shared through partner organizations.

Activity Outcomes

International Best Practices Research

This research provided a strong evidence base for the project, highlighting the absence of tools designed specifically to support frontline officers during initial contact with trafficking victims.

Community Service Mapping

The Community Needs Assessment identified several service gaps, including limited supports

for younger victims, insufficient culturally specific services, language barriers, and uneven service availability across regions.

Multi-Agency Working Groups

MAWGs improved awareness of available services and strengthened partnerships between law enforcement and community organizations.

Victim Needs Assessment

Research confirmed that the existing OPP VNA can be adapted to support the needs of trafficking victims.

Training Program

The EIP training program significantly enhanced officers' awareness of trauma-informed practices and victim-centred engagement.

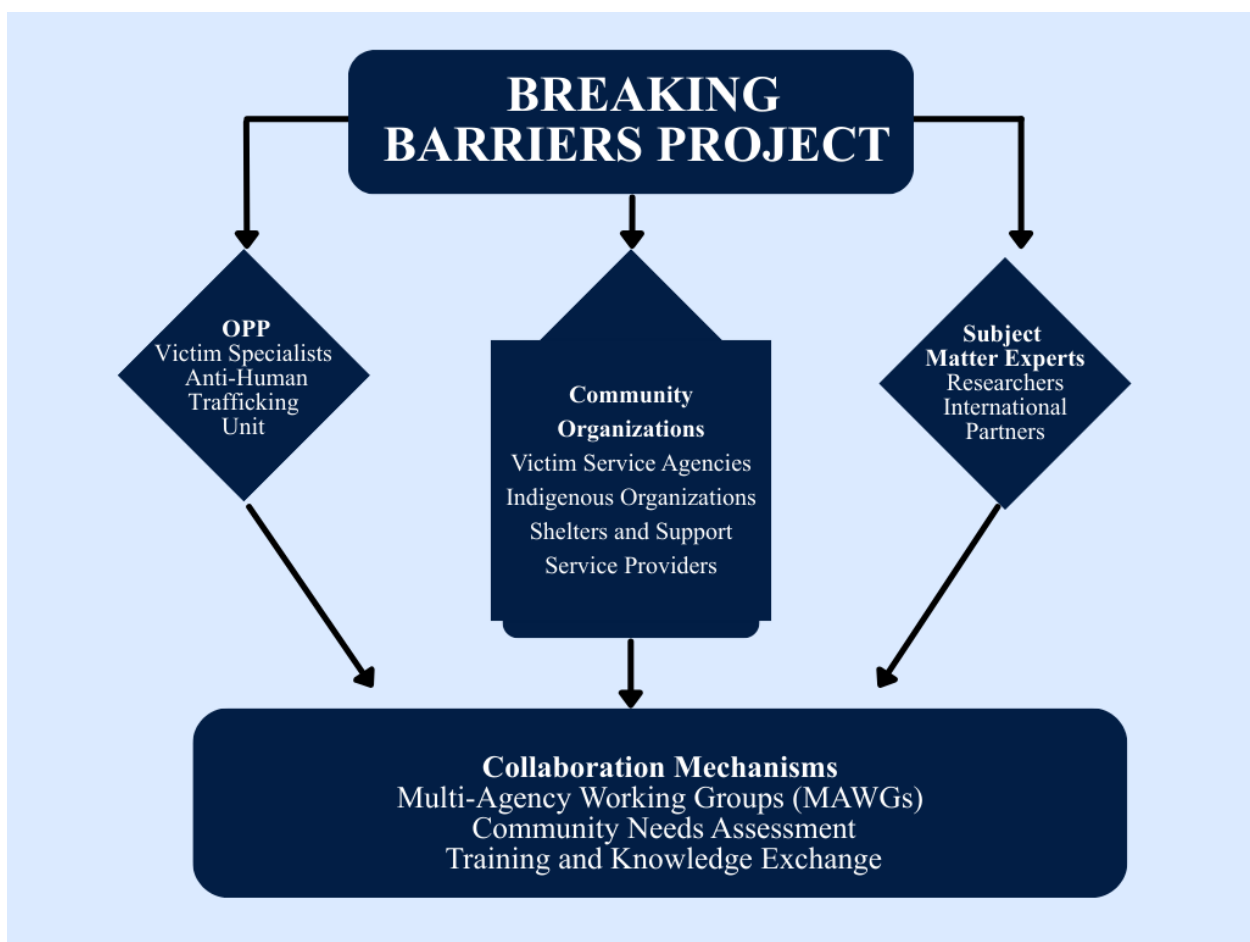


Figure 4. Stakeholder engagement framework, illustrating collaboration between law enforcement, community organizations, and subject-matter experts throughout the *Breaking Barriers* project.

14. Conclusions

The Breaking Barriers project has strengthened the capacity of the Ontario Provincial Police to respond to trafficking in persons through a more trauma-informed and victim-centred approach.

By integrating research, community collaboration, training, and operational tools, the initiative has improved understanding of victims' needs while strengthening partnerships between law enforcement and community service providers.

The project also highlighted the importance of regional approaches to victim support, recognizing that trafficking manifests differently across communities. By engaging local organizations and incorporating lived-experience perspectives, the initiative has helped identify practical strategies to improve victim identification, referrals, and access to services.

Although challenges such as staffing transitions and regional service gaps affected implementation in some areas, the project produced valuable insights that will inform future policy and operational improvements.

Ultimately, the Breaking Barriers initiative demonstrates that effective responses to trafficking require both strong law enforcement action and a compassionate, victim-centred approach that prioritizes safety, dignity, and recovery.

15. Recommendations

The following recommendations aim to strengthen and sustain the Ontario Provincial Police's "Breaking Barriers" initiative, with a continued focus on supporting victims while building lasting institutional capacity.

The recommendations below also align with those resulting from Dr. Olsen Harper's Civil Remedies Grant funded research to develop a typology of sexually exploitative human trafficking (SEHT) among Indigenous populations in the northwest region of Ontario³⁸.

While Dr. Olsen Harper's recommendations were not mandatory project outcomes, the project organically satisfied many of the report's key directives for cultural competency and victim support. The convergence between the project outcomes and Dr. Olsen Harper's recommendations, while not deliberately engineered, demonstrates the effectiveness of the OPP's comprehensive approach to addressing sexually exploitative TIP issues in Indigenous communities.

The recommendations emphasize systemic improvements while maintaining survivors' needs as the central focus. Success will depend on sustaining momentum in effective initiatives while building organizational resilience to handle inevitable staffing changes. By implementing these

recommendations, the "Breaking Barriers" initiative can continue to evolve and strengthen its impact on TIP prevention and survivor support across Ontario.

To build on the outcomes of the Breaking Barriers initiative, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Research and Evaluation

- Continue collecting training feedback and evaluating program outcomes.
- Expand service mapping across remaining regions.
- Maintain research partnerships to support evidence-informed policy development.

2. Victim Support Services

- Complete mapping of community support services across Ontario.
- Expand culturally responsive services, particularly for Indigenous victims.
- Continue refining the Victim Needs Assessment based on operational feedback.

3. Community Partnerships

- Sustain collaboration between law enforcement and community organizations through regional partnerships and anti-trafficking coalitions.

4. Training and Capacity Building

- Expand trauma-informed training opportunities for frontline officers.
- Integrate key training elements into broader OPP training programs.

5. Organizational Resilience

- Strengthen knowledge-transfer processes to mitigate the impact of personnel transitions.
- Maintain documentation of partnerships, tools, and operational practices to support long-term sustainability.

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- ²⁴ Canada, *Criminal Code*, R.S.C. 1985, c. C-46, s. 279.01.
- ²⁵ Public Safety Canada. *National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking: 2012–2016*.
- ²⁶ Canada, *Interdepartmental Working Group on Trafficking in Persons*, Canada's National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking (Ottawa: Public Safety Canada, 2012).
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- ³² Government of Ontario. *Ontario Anti-Human Trafficking Strategy 2020–2025*.
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