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Human trafficking rates in Halifax above national average

Josh Healey (jrjhealey@hotmail.com)

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New stats highlight the scale of human trafficking in Nova Scotia.

According to Statistics Canada, which compiled police-reported incidents of human trafficking between 2009 and 2016, Halifax is beating cities like Toronto and Vancouver for all the wrong reasons.

Kossi Djani, who speaks for the stats agency, said that taking into account population and reported human trafficking incidents, Halifax and Ottawa had the highest number of incidents in the country per 100,000 people.

In 2016, Halifax had 4.7 incidents per 100,000 people; the rate of incidents across Canada is 0.94.

Another area where Nova Scotia ranks poorly is conviction rates.

Roughly 30 per cent of adult human trafficking cases in Canada resulted in a guilty verdict. The report collected data from both types of trafficking offences in Canada; human trafficking is an offence under the Criminal Code and the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

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However, numbers provided by Nova Scotia's Public Prosecution Service illustrate a much lower conviction rate than the national average.

Between 2012 and 2017, 105 human trafficking charges were laid in Nova Scotia under the Criminal Code. As the 2017 conviction numbers are currently not available, this article will not include them in the conviction rates.

Only five of 55 human trafficking cases in the province resulted in convictions — a nine per cent conviction rate.

A spokeswoman for the Public Prosecution Service noted that each province collects information differently but she was unable to add further comment on the numbers.

Thomas Singleton, a Halifax defence lawyer, said each criminal case is unique and context is important.

"Statistics from here and other parts of Canada may also involve people charged with human trafficking in other contexts," said Singleton, adding that the province may have better conviction rates for human trafficking charges laid under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

"That's much easier to prove," he said.

Most of the human trafficking cases he's heard about in Nova Scotia have centred on pimping and moving victims to cities including Toronto and Montreal — charges that fall under the Criminal Code.

While Statistics Canada doesn't provide a breakdown of court decisions for cases by area or type of offence, Djani said in an email that the agency's research suggests that prosecutors will often proceed with other charges when they don't believe human trafficking charges will stick.

"For example, prosecutors will often proceed with sex-related charges," he said.

This would explain, Djani said, why many cases result in stays or withdrawals.

His agency's new report highlighted that roughly 60 per cent of all adult human trafficking cases result in being stayed or withdrawn.

Pleading guilty to a lesser charge is a strategy often advised by defence lawyers, Singleton said.

"If you can plead out and get a deal for something that has less in way of consequences, that would be something that most criminal lawyers would want to have a discussion with their client about," he said. "In fact, it would be negligent not to."

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