

## THE MANITOBA ADVOCATE'S STATEMENT OF CONCERN ON CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

In recognition of *Stop Child Sexual Exploitation Awareness Week*, taking place March 13 to 17, 2023, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (MACY) is calling attention to the ongoing violence perpetuated against children and youth through sexual exploitation, and the work which remains to be done to address and prevent these harms across our province. The Manitoba government (Manitoba) has defined child sexual exploitation as, “the act of coercing, luring or engaging a child, under the age of 18, into a sexual act and involvement in the sex trade or pornography, with or without the child’s consent, in exchange for money, drugs, shelter, food, protection or other necessities.”<sup>1</sup> Child sexual exploitation of an individual under the age of 18 is clearly defined and interpreted as child abuse.

As acknowledged and documented by the province in its 2019 report titled *Collaboration and Best Practices to End Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking in Manitoba*, the sexual exploitation of children and youth continues to be a significant problem in Manitoba, with young people being victimized daily. While the scope of this issue is difficult to accurately measure given its hidden and underground nature, MACY continues to be made aware of young people who are at immense risk of harm or death on a daily basis, and who are without sufficient supports and protections to mitigate these risks. Estimates suggest every year approximately 400 children and youth fall victim to the visible sex trade in Manitoba. This is particularly disturbing as it is estimated the visible sex trade represents only 10 percent of cases, while 90 percent of cases occur in the invisible sex trade, including behind closed doors or online.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, front-line service providers report that risk has increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic when so much of the world moved online and services became less accessible.<sup>3</sup>

Prevention is crucial to addressing the complex issue of child sexual exploitation, which intersects with many other systemic issues in Manitoba. These co-occurring systemic issues include: the ongoing mental health and addiction crises; high rates of apprehension and child welfare system involvement; high rates of missing children and youth, high rates of incarceration and justice system involvement, as well as Manitoba having the highest rate of child and family poverty among the provinces.<sup>4</sup> These issues are disproportionately experienced by Indigenous children and families, a result of the legacy of colonization and ongoing systematic racism and discrimination. This was made clear by the *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (National Inquiry), which was launched in 2016 with a vision to support Indigenous women and girls to “reclaim their power and place.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tracia’s Trust: Manitoba’s Strategy to Prevent Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking. Manitoba Government, 2019. Retrieved from <https://gov.mb.ca/fs/traciustrust/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> New Statistics Canada Crime Data Shows Victimization of Children Intensified During the Pandemic. Cybertip.ca, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.cybertip.ca/en/campaigns-and-media/news-releases/2021/stats-canada-crime-data-pandemic/>

<sup>4</sup> Poverty, The Pandemic and the Province: Manitoba Child and Family Poverty. Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 2023. Retrieved from <https://spcw.mb.ca/poverty/>

<sup>5</sup> Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/>

MACY fully supports the findings of the National Inquiry, including the four root causes that maintain colonial violence: unresolved multigenerational and intergenerational trauma, economic and social marginalization; a lack of political will and maintaining the status quo; and the denial of the agency and expertise of Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQQIA. This points to the need for robust and coordinated action by Manitoba in collaboration with stakeholders. As research demonstrates, the four 'P's – Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnerships – are essential to addressing trafficking and sexual exploitation. MACY emphasizes that Manitoba would be best served to adopt this international best practice standard.

The importance of approaching this work in partnership with Indigenous leadership and Elders, guided by experiential voices and the voices of children and youth themselves, cannot be overstated. Drawing upon the notable contributions of family members and people with lived experience of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking, it is critical that the National Inquiry's 231 Calls for Justice be prioritized by Manitoba, guiding evidence-informed policies and an updated province-wide strategy to counter sexual exploitation. MACY recognizes the work of families and allies who have been unrelenting in their advocacy to ensure the experiences of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people are not forgotten. The work to understand and repair is ongoing for all Manitobans.

To mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Tracia's Trust*, Canada's first provincial strategy to end sexual exploitation and sex trafficking, MACY released a statement in December 2022 to acknowledge the lives lost as a result of sexual exploitation and violence against women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people, calling for immediate enhanced action on this strategy. While MACY is aware of an evaluation of StreetReach, one initiative under the strategy, *Tracia's Trust* as a whole is overdue for an evaluation and increased resources to reflect current best practices in addressing sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. This includes funds to better address mental health and substance use among youth in Manitoba, prioritizing specialized placements for youth who are not able to remain in their family homes, and enhancing supports for young people at risk of sexual exploitation who are aging out of publicly-funded services, including the child welfare system.

For youth who are sexually exploited or at risk of being sexually exploited, investments in prevention, early detection, and intervention are critical. Unfortunately, considerable gaps remain in these areas. Specifically, there is currently a delay of approximately two years between when exploitation occurs and is detected.<sup>6</sup> It is crucial that sexual exploitation is detected sooner, that more youth voices are centred, and that a full continuum of culturally appropriate mental health and addiction resources are available for sexually exploited youth.

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<sup>6</sup> *Tracia's Trust: Manitoba's Strategy to Prevent Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking*. Manitoba Government, 2019. Retrieved from <https://gov.mb.ca/fs/traciastrust/index.html>

As a result of these gaps, every year in Manitoba, hundreds of children and youth fall through the cracks of our society's safety net, and are sexually exploited. Moving forward, it is imperative that funding for initiatives under *Tracia's Trust* is thoughtful and strategic in order to prevent this form of child abuse in Manitoba. Moreover, a whole of government approach is needed to ensure accountability, positive outcomes, and outputs. For instance, curriculum and increased education are needed for children, youth, young adults, and their families about risk factors, indicators, and grooming. Additionally, there is an urgent need for increased collaboration across government departments.

Tracia Owen, Tina Fontaine, and Angel were three children whose lives were lost tragically; where risk of sexual exploitation was increased as a result of uninformed, under-resourced, and uncoordinated systems. The stories of Tina ([\*A Place Where It Feels Like Home: The Story of Tina Fontaine\*](#)) and Angel ([\*In Need of Protection: Angel's Story\*](#)) were captured in two special reports completed by MACY. They resulted in recommendations to improve the lives of young people and prevent additional harms or death. We share their stories to remember these children with the hope that these reports will inspire necessary changes. MACY is encouraged by the fact that several recommendations issued in these reports have been deemed fully compliant, including one issued to Manitoba Families related to educating the public about the sexual exploitation of children and youth. Others have showed significant progress in recent years. Still, some recommendations remain incomplete, including an evaluation of *Tracia's Trust*. We will continue to monitor and publicly report on all outstanding recommendations and government responses.

The protection of children is a fundamental value in our society, and this is a responsibility we all share. Children have the right to live free from harm, and it is the duty of adults to nurture and protect them. For too many children in Manitoba, this is not their experience, as they live with abuse and its ongoing impacts. This propels the work of our office, mandated by *The Advocate for Children and Youth Act* (ACYA) and guided by the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), to protect and promote the rights of children so they may be safe from harm and supported to grow to their fullest potential. The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) is also particularly relevant, as the rights of Indigenous women and girls have been and continue to be significantly violated. The sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of children and youth is a grave violation of children's rights, undermining the safety and well-being of our most vulnerable citizens, which threatens our collective future.

A central responsibility of MACY is to educate the public, especially young people, on children's rights. It is also the responsibility of our office to ensure that governments act in ways which comply with these rights, as is their legal obligation. MACY will continue to be vocal on these issues by publicly urging a stronger commitment from the provincial government; one which is informed by evidence and best practices to end child sexual exploitation in Manitoba. As such, MACY reiterates its call to Manitoba to evaluate and update the *Tracia's Trust* strategy to end sexual exploitation and sex trafficking in our province. It is urgent that it reflect current realities and include more robust prevention and intervention initiatives across Manitoba. Our children and youth deserve this.



To learn more about MACY's reports, including recommendations and government responses to them, please visit: <https://manitobaadvocate.ca/adult/reports-publications/>

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sherry Gott", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Sherry Gott

Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth

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The Manitoba Advocate is available to speak to media. Requests or other media inquiries can be directed to Allen Mankewich at [amankewich@manitobaadvocate.ca](mailto:amankewich@manitobaadvocate.ca).