

# **Expert Take: Questions to Ask About Human Trafficking 'Facts' & Statistics**

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Human trafficking is a popular and controversial topic. We are currently experiencing a sensationalized moral panic over human trafficking in Canada. This can be especially damaging when human trafficking is conflated with sex work and migration.

It's important to be critical and ask the right questions.

**In this resource, hear from two qualified experts about some of the critical questions you, as a journalist, should be exploring with your sources about human trafficking 'facts' & statistics.**



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Dr. Millar is an associate professor in the [School of Criminology at the University of the Fraser Valley](#), as well as a senior associate of the International Centre for Criminal Law Reform and Criminal Justice Policy. Her research expertise has focused on the convergence of Canadian anti-trafficking with commercial sex work laws, alongside the legal/human rights implications of the racialized/gendered and sensationalized enforcement of these laws.



# 1. How does the source you're interviewing define 'human trafficking'?

- Is the source using a **legal** definition, such as the Canadian immigration, Criminal Code or international (Palermo Protocol) definition?
- Are they using a **non-legal** definition?
- Is there an **unspecified** definition?



Sources will adopt slightly different definitions or parts of the definition for human trafficking to best suit their **interests or opinions**. Oftentimes, commercial sex work and/or interpersonal violence is **conflated** with human trafficking. It is important to clearly understand how they are defining human trafficking and what it **does and does not include**.

## 2. Does the source take a narrow focus on sex trafficking to the exclusion of all else?



Because of **political and ideological agendas** that have prioritized the criminalization and policing of commercial sex work, we know very little about **labour trafficking** or sexual exploitation within other labour contexts.



The legal (immigration and criminal) regulation of human trafficking in Canada is overwhelmingly focused on **cisgender and gender-binary** sex trafficking.



Despite stereotypical representation, there is **no verifiable or singular profile** of who the alleged perpetrators are in human trafficking.



Because of the sensationalism and moral panic associated with sex trafficking, many other forms of exploitation and abuse are overlooked, as are the diversity, agency and human rights of people who are impacted.

### 3. Where is the source getting their data?

- Does the source identify the origin and rationale for any of the facts or statistics they are asserting?
- How **reliable and valid** is their data?
  - Was the process for data collection empirically-based (relying on evidence using the [scientific method](#))? Or is it anecdotally driven by select personal stories?
  - What is actually being measured? Convictions? Charges? Investigations?
  - Is language such as ‘trafficking-related’ used? This can mean the numbers are inflated by additional non-trafficking charges.

#### *Reliability* —

Would someone else get the same results again by following the same steps?

#### *Validity* —

Is the data accurate? Does it measure what it is supposed to measure?

The reliability and validity of the data should affect how much consideration statistics are given. It is important to verify statistics before reusing them. [Statistics are easily manipulated](#) to look like something they aren't. It's also important to keep in mind that even Stats Canada data is not always verifiable and may be politicized in various ways.

## 4. What demands are being made by the source? What solutions are they offering?

- Human trafficking is **deeply politicized**. Demands/solutions often align with particular ideological agendas, funding needs and/or other outside pressures.

- E.g., the USA Department of Justice, **in a self-appointed role**, applies political pressure by annually monitoring Canada's anti-trafficking efforts.

- Demands/solutions should be **logically consistent** with the data (or lack thereof) — governments shouldn't overreact and implement needless or redundant solutions.

- E.g., Canada has created human trafficking offences that overlap with sex work, resulting in **duplicated charges** that may be thrown out in court, **wasting time and resources and violating principles of fundamental justice**.

- Demands/solutions should be **empirically evaluated** for **efficacy** and **impacts** — are we helping those who we want to help without harming others?

- E.g., Demands/solutions that aren't backed by empirical evidence can lead to harmful (and unhelpful) impacts, like [increasing the vulnerability of sex workers and im/migrants](#) to violence and abuse.

# 5. Further considerations in anti-trafficking reporting...

- ◆ Racialized/marginalized/stigmatized persons — does the source rely on **stereotypes** or **dehumanize** an already vulnerable group? Will your reporting make this worse? Is all information **trauma-informed**, ethical and nuanced?
- ◆ Sensationalism (including via [photos/other imagery](#)) — does the source **sensationalize** human trafficking, contributing to a **moral panic** in society?
- ◆ "Experts" — does your source rely on "experts"? What are their qualifications? Their vested interests?
  - ◆ The current 'popularity' and government backing of anti-trafficking work means advocates and organizations are [\(re\)branding as anti-trafficking experts](#) and applying for the **generous funding opportunities**.
- ◆ Recognize people's agency and self-determination — beware of a patriarchal, gendered and racialized "**raid and rescue**" protectionist approach that paints people as docile and easily-tricked victims that need to be saved. More appropriate approaches would include human and labour rights considerations.



# In conclusion...

When reporting on anti-trafficking, journalists should be mindful of the many ways that politics, money, and moral/ideological agendas drive the narrative and influence the interpretation of statistics (that are often based on bad or completely nonexistent data).

Anti-trafficking misinformation has many implications for racialized/marginalized/stigmatized groups in Canada, often perpetuating systemic racism, colonial violence, xenophobia and other barriers to accessing human rights.

**Request raw data, push for freedom of information policies, look for hidden agendas/financial motives and be wary of simple solutions presented for exceptionally complex problems.**

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