

# Police News Releases About Human Trafficking



Police across Canada are presenting cases as human trafficking in their news releases, when it's often just a crackdown on sex workers and their clients. In some cases, police framed child exploitation, drug trafficking, property crimes and firearms offences as human trafficking.

This police public relations tactic diverts journalists away from sex work advocates who would talk about the harms of raids on indoor venues, the effects of criminalization, labour protections and harm reduction. Law enforcement is also masking its activities by framing undercover operations where they pose as clients as rescue missions that save victims.

These misleading news releases result in stories that uncritically parrot police talking points, spread moral panic and position law enforcement as the sole source and expert on what appears to be a human trafficking investigation.

## CLUES IN MISLEADING NEWS RELEASES

**No human trafficking charges:** This seems obvious, but many newsrooms don't catch it. News releases announce the results of a "human trafficking investigation" or say a human trafficking unit is investigating but trafficking charges have not been laid. In cases of trafficking, you'll often see a charge of:

- trafficking in persons (279.01)
- or trafficking in persons under 18 (279.011)

**Prostitution charges:** The Criminal Code has prostitution laws under the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act that are distinct from anti-trafficking laws. Offences including obtaining sexual services, advertising sexual services and procuring sexual services are not trafficking charges. However, police have described these charges as "trafficking-related"<sup>1</sup> in news releases, even when no trafficking charges were laid.



<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada includes a "trafficking-related" category in police-reported data on human trafficking, which can include crimes such as assault, theft, fraud, prostitution-related offences or any other conduct deemed to related to a trafficking case. Some police communications does not follow this criteria and the term "trafficking-related" has been used despite no trafficking charges being laid. Anti Trafficking Review. (2017). A Formidable Task: Reflections on obtaining legal empirical evidence on human trafficking in Canada.

**Alleged victims:** Phrases including “suspected victims,” and “potential victims” may appear, or police may state they’re still looking for victims. News releases may say officers gave victims resources or referred them to social services, but giving someone harm reduction supplies or information does not mean they are victims. Many police forces assume all sex workers are victims.

**Canada Border Services Agency:** CBSA involvement likely means officers were called to enforce the immigration ban on sex work, which prohibits temporary residents from working in the industry under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations.

**Burying the lede:** Read past the flashy, back-to-back quotes about police and official’s commitments to stopping traffickers and you’ll find the so-called human trafficking operation was actually a \$600,000 drug bust<sup>1</sup> or that police posted fake online ads<sup>2</sup> to arrest clients trying to buy sexual services. In both these cases, these details were included near the end of news releases.

**Child exploitation or other crimes:** Police departments may also present child exploitation as trafficking. There are specific trafficking charges that can be applied when a trafficking victim is a minor:

- trafficking of a person under the age of eighteen years (S.279.011)
- material benefit — trafficking of person under 18 years (279.02(2))
- withholding or destroying documents — trafficking of person under 18 years (279.03(2)).

These crimes are distinct from child exploitation crimes. Police news releases have also presented drug trafficking, firearms offences, property crime and other activities as human trafficking, simply because sex workers were present at some point during their investigation.



# Case Review #1

A 48-year-old woman was arrested after the Alberta Law Enforcement Response Team (ALERT), working with the Calgary Police Services (CPS), RCMP and others, shut down several massage parlours in Calgary. The [news release](#)<sup>3</sup> claimed the businesses and their owner were linked to human trafficking. ALERT noted that a woman was charged with advertising sexual services and “drug offences and firearms offences.” Police say they identified “four suspected victims” who were given resources by ALERT staff. A police officer is quoted in the news release saying “we believe that these were immigrants being exploited into the sex trade. This has been a common trend that takes advantage of their unfamiliarity and vulnerability.” The Canada Border Services Agency was also involved in the investigation.

## HOW MANY CLUES CAN YOU SPOT?

**The Pitch:** SWAN pitched follow-up stories to reporters, noting it regularly supports women in Calgary and SWAN staff recently visited two of the locations that were raided. SWAN has also done years of critical anti-trafficking work and offered an expert spokesperson for an interview. The pitch also noted that two local organizations (one that supports sex workers and one that helps trafficking victims) did not have anyone referred to their support services from these raids. Journalists did not respond to SWAN’s pitch and headlines including “Three Calgary massage parlours closed, tied to human trafficking” remain. Newsrooms did not clarify that the accused was not charged with trafficking offences and never asked police why those charges weren’t laid.

Alberta Courts later confirmed with SWAN that the woman was charged with the following offences:

- three counts of possession of a controlled substance
- careless use/storage of a firearm
- advertising sexual services

**Analysis:** This case does not include any trafficking charges, nor does it include any significant or newsworthy charges. What’s newsworthy is police cracking down on sex work, shutting down a safer place to work, cutting off an income source for im/migrant women and calling the CBSA to likely use the IRPR to deport them. However, coverage of the story mimicked the police news release and relied on ALERT as the sole expert and authority.

# Case Review #2

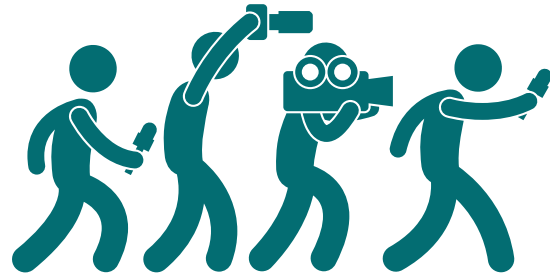
Waterloo Regional Police (WRP) charged two people in Cambridge, Ontario, "in connection to a human trafficking investigation," according to a [news release](#).<sup>4</sup>

**A 45-year-old woman was charged with:**

- communicating for the purpose of sexual services
- obtaining material benefit from sexual services
- two counts of procurement
- uttering forged documents
- possession of property obtained by crime over \$5,000.

**A 58-year-old Cambridge man was charged with:**

- obtaining material benefit from sexual services



The WRP news releases said a spa was shut down after a year-long human trafficking investigation and police were still looking for victims.

## HOW MANY CLUES CAN YOU SPOT?

News coverage was based on the police news release and interviews with an officer who said victims were employees who had been offered support services. In response, SWAP Hamilton Executive Director, Jelena Vermilion, spoke out on X, (formerly Twitter). She challenged the police story and explained that her friend was working at the spa but is now out of a job after officers shut down the business. She offered media interviews by tagging them in posts. Vermilion regularly provides [story pitches](#) and [expert commentary](#) to newsrooms and has appeared on CBC's prime time news program [Canada Tonight](#), for a live interview about the Ontario Supreme Court's dismissal of a [constitutional challenge](#) of Canada's prostitution laws. With a large following and influence on X, this is one of the few ways she connects with journalists. Vermilion was ignored.

**Analysis:** This alleged human trafficking case did not result in human trafficking charges and police made contradicting claims about whether they've identified victims. One news story noted that two people "face numerous charges" while others do not explain that prostitution charges are not human trafficking charges. A TV station interviewed an anti-trafficking advocate who incorrectly interpreted prostitution laws and, instead of providing a labour rights perspective, painted sex workers as vulnerable women. The organization did not indicate if it supported or had been in contact with spa employees. Vermilion aired her frustrations about the coverage, saying reporters weren't interested in talking. She accused the media of being complicit in spreading a false narrative about human trafficking "when literally, it's just sex workers working." Other journalists continue to request Vermilion for interviews as an expert and advocate for sex worker rights.

# Recommendations

- ▶▶▶ Question police news releases claiming human trafficking is occurring, when there are no actual human trafficking charges.
- ▶▶▶ Ask police what charges were laid or confirm what charges were laid using the court system. Do the actual charges match the police story?
- ▶▶▶ Ask police why they're presenting cases as human trafficking. What's their motive? Why don't they have the evidence to lay human trafficking charges when they're so confident it's occurring?
- ▶▶▶ Learn about Canada's trafficking laws and prostitution laws.
- ▶▶▶ Speak with a sex work advocate or support organization about the police news release. Ask if they know any workers impacted by raids and discuss sex worker rights, safety and criminalization.
- ▶▶▶ Ask police about victims. If there are no human trafficking charges, have police explain exactly how these individuals were victimized and if that's reflected in the charges.
- ▶▶▶ And finally, decide if this story is really about human trafficking and if it's worth mentioning at all. If there are no human trafficking charges, will your story still mention "human trafficking investigations," "links to human trafficking," human trafficking units and "human trafficking-related" charges?

## **Special acknowledgement:**

Thank you to Jelena Vermilion for sharing your experience and perspective on pitching media regarding the Cambridge spa charges. Vermilion is the Executive Director of Sex Workers Action Program Hamilton (SWAP Hamilton), an organization that provides education, outreach, advocacy and harm reduction to support sex workers and advance their rights.

# Appendix

## DURHAM REGIONAL POLICE NEWS RELEASE (1)

9/3/24, 1:04 PM 'Project Martini' Results in 92 Arrests and 113 Criminal Charges - Durham Regional Police Service

Translate Emergency? Call 911 Non-Emergency? Call 1-888-579-1520, Press 0

CRIME STOPPERS  
If you have info related to an incident, you can call 1-800-222-TIPS or visit <https://durhamregionalcristoppers.ca/>

50  
Online Services - Community Safety and Support - Newsroom - Join @DRPS - About Us

## 'Project Martini' Results in 92 Arrests and 113 Criminal Charges

17 June 2024

Police have concluded a five-week investigation into drug trafficking and human trafficking in Durham Region. This investigation was named Project Martini and resulted in 92 people being arrested, 113 criminal charges laid and 11 search warrants executed.

In May 2024 the Durham Regional Police (DRPS) concluded Project Martini, a project which was launched in response to concerns raised by business owners and residents in areas throughout the Region of Durham in relation human trafficking and drug trafficking. Project Martini used overdose data to drive enforcement and direct support efforts to the areas that would have the greatest impact on community and victim safety. The project was led by Divisional Community Response Teams supported by DRPS' Drug Enforcement Unit and Human Trafficking Unit.

While enforcement efforts were predominantly in the Oshawa area, there was also focus on Clarington, Whitby and Ajax that led to the execution of 11 search warrants, 92 arrests and 113 criminal charges. Charges laid were related to drug trafficking, property crime, violent crime and obtaining sexual services. Recognizing that enforcement efforts alone can't solve these issues, team members also referred 62 people to public health support programs and another 38 to support programs for sex-trade workers.

In total, officers seized more than three kilograms of methamphetamine, over one kilogram of cocaine, close to one kilogram of fentanyl and \$30,000 in currency. The total street value of the drugs seized was more than \$600,000.

Anyone with information about this incident is asked to contact Sgt. Green of the Central East Division Community Response Team at 1-888-579-1520 ext. 1747.

Anonymous information can be sent to Durham Regional Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-TIPS (8477) or online at [www.durhamregionalcristoppers.ca](http://www.durhamregionalcristoppers.ca) and tipsters may be eligible for a \$2,000 cash reward.

-30-

Share

<https://www.drps.ca/news/project-martini-results-in-92-arrests-and-113-criminal-charges/#~:text=Police have concluded a five, and 11 search warrants executed.> 1/2



# ATTORNEY GENERAL ROB BONTA NEWS RELEASE (2)

9/3/24, 2:49 PM Attorney General Rob Bonta, San Diego Human Trafficking Task Force Target Human Traffickers at Comic Convention in San Diego | State of California

 **Subscribe to Our Newsletter**

 **ROB BONTA**  
Attorney General

## Attorney General Rob Bonta, San Diego Human Trafficking Task Force Target Human Traffickers at Comic Convention in San Diego

Press Release / Attorney General Rob Bonta, San Diego Human Trafficking Task...

Tuesday, July 30, 2024  
Contact: (916) 210-6000, [agpresso@doj.ca.gov](mailto:agpresso@doj.ca.gov)

**SAN DIEGO** – As part of a joint investigation through the San Diego Human Trafficking Task Force (SDHTTF), California Attorney General Rob Bonta today announced the results of a human trafficking sting, aimed at recovering victims of sex trafficking and targeting sex buyers using the San Diego Comic-Con Convention to seek out potential victims. From July 25 to 27, 2024, the California Department of Justice's (DOJ) San Diego Human Trafficking Task Force (SDHTTF) conducted an anti-human trafficking operation coinciding with the Comic-Con Convention that resulted in 14 arrests and 10 victims recovered and offered services. Comic-Con International is a comic book and pop culture event drawing over 100,000 fans to San Diego each year.

<https://ag.ca.gov/newsroom/attorney-general-rob-bonta-san-diego-human-trafficking-task-force-target-human> 1/4

9/3/24, 2:49 PM Attorney General Rob Bonta, San Diego Human Trafficking Task Force Target Human Traffickers at Comic Convention in San Diego | State of California

"Unfortunately, sex traffickers capitalize on large scale events such as Comic-Con to exploit their victims for profit," said **Attorney General Rob Bonta**. "These arrests send a clear message to potential offenders that their criminal behavior will not be tolerated. We are grateful to all our dedicated partners involved in the San Diego Human Trafficking Task Force, whose collaboration has been invaluable. We take great pride in our office's commitment to uplifting vulnerable Californians by offering them assistance and guidance when they need it most."

"There is no more insidious crime than human trafficking," said **San Diego Sheriff Kelly Martinez**. "The coercion and violence which enslaves people for profit and places them into forced labor or sex is criminal. As the Sheriff I support the efforts of all our justice partners in holding perpetrators accountable. I appreciate the focus that was placed on the recent convention to identify and rescue victims of human trafficking."

"The San Diego Police Department is a proud member of the San Diego Human Trafficking Task Force," said **San Diego Police Chief Wahl**. "Working together, teams identified and arrested more than a dozen individuals participating in these illegal acts in our City over the weekend. This successful operation recovered 10 victims of human trafficking, including a girl of just 16 years old. These results show our collective dedication to combatting human trafficking and holding criminals accountable are working."

"San Diego proudly hosts special events like Comic-Con – highly attended events like these allow us to showcase our growing and beautiful city," said **Christopher Davis, acting special agent in charge for HSI San Diego**. "However, when people use these events as an opportunity to prey upon minors, HSI and our law enforcement partners will find you and bring you before a court of law to face criminal charges. There is no place for alleged predators to operate in our city and HSI is committed to helping the victims of these crimes."

<https://ag.ca.gov/newsroom/attorney-general-rob-bonta-san-diego-human-trafficking-task-force-target-human> 2/4

9/3/24, 2:49 PM Attorney General Rob Bonta, San Diego Human Trafficking Task Force Target Human Traffickers at Comic Convention in San Diego | State of California

"Human trafficking is a grave violation of human rights and a crime that requires a concerted and unified response," said **Special Agent in Charge Nicholas Carter, NCIS Southwest Field Office**. "Our participation in this joint task force underscores NCIS's unwavering commitment to our service members, their families and the broader community from exploitation and abuse."


The anti-human trafficking operation targeted sex buyers, and focused on recovering potential victims of sex trafficking, and arresting traffickers. Law enforcement personnel worked undercover as sex buyers to identify and contact potential victims of trafficking and arrest their traffickers. As part of the operation, undercover law enforcement personnel also posted undercover advertisements soliciting sex to arrest sex buyers. As a result of the three-day operation, 14 sex buyers were arrested, nine adult potential victims of sex trafficking were recovered and offered services, and one 16-year-old juvenile was recovered. Child Welfare Services and adult and juvenile support service advocates were on scene to provide support as needed.

The SDHTTF is a cooperative effort involving the DOJ, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, California Highway Patrol, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Homeland Security Investigations, National City Police Department, San Diego City Attorney's Office, San Diego County District Attorney's Office, San Diego County Probation Department, San Diego County Sheriff's Department, San Diego Police Department, Southwest Border High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of California. The Naval Criminal Investigative Service also assisted in the operation.

###

<https://ag.ca.gov/newsroom/attorney-general-rob-bonta-san-diego-human-trafficking-task-force-target-human> 3/4

# ALBERTA LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE TEAM NEWS RELEASE (3)



**ALERT**  
ALBERTA LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE TEAM

APRIL 30, 2024


## THREE CALGARY MESSAGE PARLOURS LINKED TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING INVESTIGATION

**Calgary**

Calgary... ALERT's Human Trafficking unit has searched and closed three Calgary massage parlours. A year-long investigation has linked the businesses and its owner to suspected human trafficking.

ALERT arrested **Hai (Anna) Yan Ye** on April 16, 2024 and charged the 48-year-old with advertising sexual services, drug offences and firearms offences. The investigation remains ongoing and further charges are being contemplated.

Ye was linked to three commercial properties and two homes that were allegedly being used for illegal sexual activities and services. The massage parlours were closed following search warrant executions carried out by ALERT, the Calgary Police Service, and the RCMP:



**ALERT**  
ALBERTA LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE TEAM

- Seagull Massage at 1034 8 Avenue SW;
- 128 Massage at 1935 37 Street SW; and
- The One Massage Centre at 1919 31 Street SE.
- 11100-block of Hidden Valley Drive; and
- 3100-block of 12 Avenue SW.


As result of the search warrants, ALERT also seized:

- \$15,000 in suspected proceeds of crime;
- Shotgun with ammunition; and
- Various amounts of drugs.

*"We believe that these were immigrants being exploited into the sex trade. This has been a common trend that takes advantage of their unfamiliarity and vulnerability," said Staff Sergeant Gord MacDonald, ALERT Human Trafficking.*

Four suspected victims were identified and provided resources by ALERT's Safety Network Coordinators.

ALERT's investigation dates back to February 2023 when a tip was received about suspicious activity taking place at the since-closed Moonlight Massage. That location was closed during the investigation, in December 2023, when the landlord identified illegal suites on the premises.



**ALERT**  
ALBERTA LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE TEAM

The investigation involved the close cooperation with City of Calgary Emergency Management and Community Safety, Alberta's Safer Communities and Neighbourhoods (SCAN) team, Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), and the RCMP.

Ye was released from custody on a number of court-imposed conditions.


Anyone with information about this investigation, or any case involving suspected human trafficking offences, is asked to call Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-TIPS (8477) or the Calgary Police Service non-emergency line at 403-266-1234.

ALERT was established and is funded by the Alberta Government and is a compilation of the province's most sophisticated law enforcement resources committed to tackling serious and organized crime.



# WATERLOO REGIONAL POLICE NEWS RELEASE (4)

9/3/24, 3:04 PM Waterloo Regional Police Charge Two in Connection to Human Trafficking Investigation in Cambridge - Waterloo Regional Police Service



Contact Us [Main menu](#)

- Emergency: **911**
- Non-Emergency: **519-570-9777**
- [Online Reporting](#)


Report Online [How Do I...](#)

---

## Waterloo Regional Police Charge Two in Connection to Human Trafficking Investigation in Cambridge

---

[Show More](#)  
Posted on April 11, 2024



**Waterloo Region, Ontario** – Waterloo Regional Police have charged two individuals and seized proceeds of crime in connection to a human trafficking investigation in Cambridge.

In March 2023, police began an investigation after receiving a report that a business operating as a spa in the area of Industrial Road and McGovern Drive was offering sexual services.

Through investigation, police determined that the business and its owners were profiting from sexual services offered by the business and that women had been procured for employment providing sexual services.

<https://www.wrps.on.ca/en/news/waterloo-regional-police-charge-two-in-connection-to-human-trafficking-investigation-in-cambridge.aspx> 1/8

9/3/24, 3:04 PM Waterloo Regional Police Charge Two in Connection to Human Trafficking Investigation in Cambridge - Waterloo Regional Police Service

On April 11, 2024, as a result of an ongoing joint investigation by members of WRPS' Human Trafficking Team, Intelligence Services Branch, and the Provincial Asset Forfeiture Unit, police conducted a search warrant at the business and a residence in Cambridge. Proceeds of crime, including the unit the business was operating out of, the corporate bank account, and a luxury SUV have been seized/restrained.

A 45-year-old Cambridge female has been charged with several criminal offences, including:

- Communication for the purpose of sexual services
- Obtain material benefit from sexual services
- Procurement (two counts)
- Uttering forged documents
- Possession of property obtained by crime over \$5,000

A 58-year-old Cambridge male was also charged with obtaining material benefit from sexual services.

The accused parties were held in police custody for a bail hearing.

Human Trafficking investigators believe there may be more victims. If you or someone you know feels they have been the victim of sexual exploitation or crimes of sexual violence while working at this business, please contact WRPS' Human Trafficking Team at [intel.ht@wrps.on.ca](mailto:intel.ht@wrps.on.ca) or the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-833-900-1010 or [www.canadianhumantraffickinghotline.ca](http://www.canadianhumantraffickinghotline.ca) (<http://www.canadianhumantraffickinghotline.ca/>).

WA23057983 (985)

**Media Inquiries:**  
Waterloo Regional Police Service  
Public Information Unit  
519-570-9777 (WRPS) ext. 8188  
[publicinfo@wrps.on.ca](mailto:publicinfo@wrps.on.ca) (<mailto:publicinfo@wrps.on.ca>)

To receive our Media Releases, subscribe here: <https://www.wrps.on.ca/subscribe>  
(<https://can01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.wrps.on.ca%2Fsubscribe&data=04%7C01%7CASHLEV.DIEBTRICH%40WRPS.ON.CA%7C86E5D60561D44A3572660825F0F18A%7CC90D6FB275441B91865AFAA1924966%7C0%7C0%7C637582539032838487%7CUKNOVW%7CTWFB6GZ6p3d8eyWjjoMCAwJAAMQAILCJQjsoIVZuMzIIC8BTJl6lk1haWw6C7XVCl6Ho0%3D%7C1000&data=1584%2BXX1orCIDY1RC8ohSQf6bzEIDpZmcGBLQMSBDs%3D&reserved=0>).

For updated information and crime prevention tips, visit our [Website](#)  
(<https://can01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.wrps.on.ca%2F&data=04%7C01%7CASHLEV.DIEBTRICH%40WRPS.ON.CA%7C86E5D60561D44A3572660825F0F18A%7CC90D6FB275441B91865AFAA1924966%7C0%7C0%7C637582539032838487%7CUKNOVW%7CTWFB6GZ6p3d8eyWjjoMCAwJAAMQAILCJQjsoIVZuMzIIC8BTJl6lk1haWw6C7XVCl6Ho0%3D%7C1000&data=1584%2BXX1orCIDY1RC8ohSQf6bzEIDpZmcGBLQMSBDs%3D&reserved=0>).

<https://www.wrps.on.ca/en/news/waterloo-regional-police-charge-two-in-connection-to-human-trafficking-investigation-in-cambridge.aspx> 2/8