

# New alliance to combat human trafficking launches in York Region

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know that human trafficking happens in York Region.

"When we talk about human trafficking, it's a bit freaky. It's something that happens in China, in India; it's something that happens 'over there,'" said Amanda Stassen, on the executive leadership team of the newly formed Community Partner Alliance to Stop Trafficking-York Region.

Stassen told the gathering at 360Kids Home Base that when she heard trafficking was happening in York Region, "I went into a bit of a paralytic shock. How is that possible? And I have two kids!"

"But hope happens when we start the conversation...stop hiding in fear," she added. "It's about breaking through the darkness and shedding light, telling everyone what is going on so they can be empowered to change."

And what is going on would likely surprise you.

YRP Detective Doug James, from the organized crime bureau and human trafficking team, said many York Region

girls "enter the game" at 14 to 16 years of age. Almost all victims have experienced sexual abuse, often by a family member or family friend, at an early age, although "we have had girls who are university-educated, come from wealthy families, brought up in great social circles, popular with their friends. You wouldn't think that person would have any vulnerabilities, they seem like they've got it all together, but it happens."

There are also boys being trafficked, although YRP deals primarily with girls.

"I'm sure there are guys out there being trafficked, but I'll be honest with you, we haven't come across them. There are probably reasons for that - maybe we're not focusing on them or maybe we have a narrow scope of what we're looking at."

James said there are two types of pimps: the Romeo, and the Gorilla.

The former acts like a boyfriend and pushes his girl to work so they can save money for a wonderful life together - a fabricated story.

The Gorilla "is straight up violence right off the bat; some of it is atrocious."

Pimps find their girls primarily online - social websites, Facebook, Instagram, instant messaging through dating websites like Plenty of Fish - but also make connections by hanging out at group homes, shopping malls and shelters.

Most victims struggle with depression, low self-esteem and suicidal thoughts. Drug and alcohol addiction, is common, he said.

"A lot of girls will take drugs to numb their brain from what they're having to do. This is their way to cope."

The girls don't "work the corners" in York Region, he said.

"Nowadays it's all pushed online... We still see massage parlours and strip clubs. We're starting to see a lot more spas, in Markham in particular."

But hotels are the biggest venue, he said. "It's happening in every hotel in York Region."

'Johns,' the customers, are from every walk of life -paying \$80 to \$120 per half-hour, \$180 to \$240 an hour.

"Most girls say they've been told by their pimps they must make at least \$1,000 a day. If they don't, the pimp decreases their rates, offer 'specials' so the girls must service more people to reach their quota."

Generally the pimp takes all the profit and throws a few dollars or gifts to the girls, he said.

If it weren't for the customers, human trafficking wouldn't exist, said Kevin Vowles, community engagement manager for White Ribbon, a Canadian organization promoting healthy relationships and new visions of masculinity.

Men and boys have a responsibility to fight the 'toxic masculinity' and 'locker-room talk' that makes it acceptable, Vowles said, adding White Ribbon's program [itstartswithyou.ca](http://itstartswithyou.ca) can help.

Debbie Pond, a director with U-R Home, a nonprofit organization planning the first safe house for human trafficking victims in York Region, agreed.

"You can start a conversation with your family, with your boys when they are five, six and seven. Nobody is born a pimp, a

trafficker, a buyer of sex.

"It starts with you, as parents, grandparents... it can't all be on law enforcement, front line workers, teachers. It has to start at home."

For more, email York.cpast@gmail.com or Michelle.stemer@360kids.ca

## Is your child a sex trade worker? Telltale signs:

- New boyfriend that you never see or are introduced to
- Stays out late or doesn't come home at all over the weekend
- Introduction to drug or alcohol abuse
- Leaves with an overnight bag on the weekends
- Hotel key cards or receipts
- Bruises or injuries that can't be explained, or nursing a minor injury that you can't see
- New tattoos - names, sayings, logos (showing they are property of particular pimp)
- Diminished social interaction with friends and family (pimps take away their phones and social media access, try to isolate them)
- Expensive clothes, purses, phones that they normally could not afford.



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