

The first session of *Uprooting Trafficking* focused on raising awareness and challenging persistent myths about human trafficking in Canada. Facilitator **Tamara Doerksen** opened by emphasizing that participation itself is part of prevention: “Being here is the first best step.” The session brought together experts working across research, advocacy, and survivor support to unpack the realities behind a crime that is often misunderstood.

Shae Invidiata, founder of **Free-Them**, began by addressing misconceptions that human trafficking only happens overseas or in large cities. She clarified that *80% of known victims in Canada are Canadian citizens*, and that trafficking “happens in every province, in every community — across the street, not across the ocean.” Shae explained how traffickers often groom their victims through manipulation and trust, not abduction, and noted warning signs such as sudden isolation, secrecy, or unexplained changes in behavior. She urged parents and community members to engage in open, age-appropriate conversations about consent, online safety, and relationships.

Julia Drydyk, Executive Director of the **Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking**, shared findings from the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline, which has received over 23,000 signals in the form of phone calls, web chats, emails, and web forms since 2019, leading to 2,300 confirmed cases and identifying over 3,300 victims. About 70% of these cases involved sex trafficking, with the remainder involving labor exploitation and other forms of coercion. Julia highlighted that the majority of victims are exploited by someone they know — often a romantic partner, family member, or employer. She emphasized the need to increase public understanding of how grooming and dependency make victims feel unable to leave, saying, “Behind every statistic is a person who was searching for belonging.”

Jovana Blagovcanin, Anti-Human Trafficking Manager, **FCJ Refugee Centre**, explored the intersection of immigration and trafficking. She explained that traffickers often prey on migrants’ hopes for work permits or permanent residency, creating dependency through false promises. Many victims without legal status are reluctant to seek help due to fear of deportation or criminalization. While Canada offers some temporary immigration remedies for victims, Jovana noted that these programs lack a clear pathway to long-term stability: “If you don’t have status, you don’t have safety.” She called for reforms that center human rights rather than enforcement.

Cheryl Hotchkiss, Acting CEO and Vice President, Advancement and Strategy, **International Justice Mission (IJM) Canada** discussed system-level approaches that have been effective internationally. She outlined IJM’s “theory of change,” which focuses on strengthening justice systems through training police, reforming court processes, and ensuring survivor-centered care. Cheryl cited measurable success in the Philippines (72% reduction) and Cambodia (73% reduction) in child trafficking after implementing coordinated interventions between government, law enforcement, and NGOs. She emphasized that similar partnerships are vital within Canada to build accountability and deterrence.

In closing, **Julia Drydyk** outlined cross-border trafficking patterns observed by the Centre, including crisis-driven trafficking, economic coercion, cultural and systemic exploitation, and digital recruitment — showing how technology now enables control across borders. The panel collectively underscored that trafficking cannot be solved by one sector alone.