

Public Safety for Vulnerable Women and Girls

On December 11, 2020, the Surrey Vulnerable Women and Girls Working Group held an online forum, which focused on public safety for vulnerable women and girls in Surrey. Over 80 representatives from non-profit and government organizations which serve vulnerable women and girls attended the Forum and provided input. This briefing document provides an overview of the input that we received. It focuses on safety challenges in Surrey, positive impact policing practices, and ensuring the Surrey police transition benefits vulnerable women and girls.

Safety Challenges in Surrey

The following have been identified as local issues which are detrimental to the safety of vulnerable women and girls:

Transience and Invisibility: To stay as safe as possible while living and/or working on the streets, vulnerable women and girls often try to attract as little attention as possible. Unfortunately, this lack of visibility leads to a lower awareness of their needs in the community and limited understanding of the risks that the women face. Younger women are often transient as well, moving across the Lower Mainland to meet their needs. They can get lost between jurisdictions and various service providers. Transience and invisibility mean that women’s needs for services, housing and safety do not get met effectively and even the societal awareness of the challenges they face is limited leading to inadequate policies and resources for this population.

Mental Illness: Vulnerable women and girls often struggle to get the mental health supports they need, especially when they present concurrently with substance use. This can be due to lack of information, limited resources, or inadequate access. Regular appointment-based mental health services may not be appropriate for many vulnerable women and girls. Relationship-based outreach services may provide more effective access to these services. Without access to the right mental health supports vulnerable

The SVWG Working Group was founded in 2014 by service providers and government representatives in Surrey to coordinate programming and to ensure that vulnerable women and girls receive the support they need.

The SVWG Working Group defines vulnerable women and girls as females currently experiencing or who have experienced a combination of the following:

- Homelessness
- Survival sex work
- Mental illness and /or untreated trauma
- Substance use
- Poverty
- Fleeing violence
- Involvement with the Corrections system
- Physical and cognitive disabilities

women and girls become even more marginalized and vulnerable to exploitation.

Precarious Housing and Homelessness: women who are experiencing homelessness or housing precarity are at risk of being exploited because of their needs. The lack of affordable housing and specialized housing (including transition houses and second stage for women fleeing violence, gender-specific, secure for youth, supportive for people with addictions/mental health) in Surrey is creating more challenges for this population. As the observed rate of violence against women and girls increases, service providers say the women and girls they serve have fewer housing options to escape the violent situations. Immediate access to housing is needed to improve the safety of women and girls.

Child/Youth Vulnerability and Gang Involvement: Service providers report that girls are being recruited into gangs and sexual exploitation at increasingly younger ages. If girls become disconnected from their families (due to family crisis and breakdown or cultural clashes) they can become susceptible to gang involvement and exploitation. Once young girls are recruited into gangs, service providers report it can be difficult to get them out. In addition, at the age of 19, these youth suddenly have far less support as they transition to adult services. Early intervention and prevention are central to an effective response.

Sexual Exploitation: Forum participants report that Surrey is a hub for sexual exploitation. They cite the predators and pimps they know who are active in the community, saying, unfortunately they have been around for years. The legal process can move slowly, so it can take a significant amount of time to secure charges against a predator. In the meantime, they continue their work in multiple cities in the province. Cooperation between police forces and service providers needs to improve in this area. As well, the police need to develop skills for recognizing exploitation and collaborate with service providers to bring the pimps and predators to justice before they damage more lives.

Intimate Partner Violence: There is not enough transition housing and emergency housing for women fleeing violence in Surrey. There is also limited access to community resources. As a result, women do not feel they have adequate options when deciding whether to leave violent and dangerous situations. There are those who decide to stay. Additional service and housing options, especially those that are culturally/linguistically appropriate, or low barrier access are desperately needed in the community.

Lack of Support for Sex Workers: Vulnerable women often end up in survival sex work; working in high-risk situations alone, at night with little or no support. The SMART Van and Bad Date Reporting is helping but more is needed, especially during COVID when sex workers are taking on increased risk to get clients. Higher levels of violence are also being reported against sex workers.

Lack of Accessible Services: Vulnerable women and girls need gender specific services where they can seek what they need separately from men. These services also need to be offered in the languages commonly spoken in Surrey and reflect the cultures of the population served. Situation tables, outreach and intensive support have all proven effective.

Lack of Trust in Policing: Service providers report that they do not see vulnerable women in Surrey trusting the police. They say it is because the police often “drop the ball” with these vulnerable people when they are passed between departments and police agencies following an incident. When these women get bounced around like this, relationship building, and trust is not possible. They need a support system to approach and work with the police more effectively.

Positive Impact Policing Practices

Forum participants from the social service sector (non-profit and government) provided input on the policing practices which they believe have a positive impact on vulnerable women and girls:

Build Relationships “Beyond the Badge”: This is a form of early intervention. When the Police are people that vulnerable women and girls know through friendly interactions in non-threatening situations such as community and cultural activities it can help change the narrative. The police are not to be feared but can be viewed as people who can support their safety. Vulnerable women and girls will then be more likely to view the Police as potentially safe and helpful when they are in crisis. In addition, developing relationships with cultural groups can also build understanding and change perceptions. Service providers say that the police need to initiate this work and respond positively to opportunities to build relationships.

Connect with Youth: Vulnerable young people can get lost within social service systems because they can be transient, and they may not have the ability to self-advocate. Police need to build relationships across jurisdictions, organizations, and municipal boundaries to ensure that youth remain connected to those who can help them. Police need to be in contact with neighbouring police forces and across BC and the country so that young people do not fall through the cracks.

Collaborate with Service Providers: Whenever possible the Police should pivot to social services to ensure downstream outcomes for vulnerable populations. When Police attend follow up with wrap around services, they can move the situation from a place of acute crisis to intervention and case management. Where possible and effective, the police should continue to embed service providers in police units such as the Special Victims Unit, Car 67 and Yankee Teams.

Provide Ongoing and Consistent Communication with Victims: For young women in serious situations in first contact with the police it is important to follow up within a few days and see what their needs are. It is essential to keep victims informed about what is happening in their case, so they do not lose heart and disappear. Collaboration with service providers can help with this ongoing communication.

Trauma Informed Practice: Police need to be trauma informed so they can effectively understand the backstory of a presenting situation. Police should build their knowledge of trauma informed practice with training and then build it into their systems with policy.

Implement Specialized Training for Police: these areas have been identified as essential for Police who work with vulnerable populations.

- Active listening
- Understanding the impact of head injuries, brain-based disorders, and mental health concerns
- Knowledge about substance-use and recognizing the distinction between substance use and mental health episodes
- Understanding the principles of harm reduction
- Immigration, cultural sensitivity and addressing language barriers; diversity; understanding newcomer perspectives about police
- Knowledge of existing services in the community that support women and girls and understanding why vulnerable women may choose to disengage from community supports
- Training in the areas of sexual assault and intimate partner violence
- Knowledge about the health services available to all victims (Police officers may be the only point of contact to be able to offer access to these services so they must be able to describe them accurately).

Build specialization within the Police Force: Develop specialized units for youth, Indigenous people, victims, mental health, and intimate partner violence. The officers in these units will be expected to have further training, schooling, and trauma informed practices.

Address Intimate Partner Violence: The police service should consider a policy for pursuing charges for breaches of no contact conditions and Family Protection Orders in cases of intimate partner violence, so they are required to investigate fully and follow through on forwarding charges to Crown. It is important that this issue is addressed through policy and not just through training which still relies on appealing to individual discretion. The reticence of officers to pursue charges for breaches of these orders emboldens offenders and puts women and children at risk. The police service needs to ensure that its internal policies are aligned with Provincial Violence Against Women in Relationships (VAWIR) policy. Especially ensuring that primary aggressor assessments are done properly and appropriately in cases of intimate partner violence.

Avoid Stigmatizing Sex Workers: Police need to ensure sex workers stay safe and receive the services they need. Stigma coming from police at any level creates a significant barrier to accessing safety for vulnerable women involved in sex work. Anti-stigma training for all officers should be required.

Offer Victim Services: At the time of a police response the victims may not want to interact with the officer. Police should implement a standard operating procedure that necessitates follow up. This will help connect victims to needed services. Police should also be familiar with the services so that they can effectively offer them to the victim. It may be that this is the only opportunity to broker a connection to service for this individual. Police must be comfortable in this role.

Address Sexual Exploitation: Service providers report that vulnerable women and girls do not often feel that the police are perceived as a source of safety when a crisis is unfolding. Police officers need to develop a better understanding of the needs of vulnerable young girls and women, especially when they are in crisis. They also need to understand sexual exploitation.

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BC is not currently a leader in understanding the issues of sexual exploitation of vulnerable women and girls. There needs to be ongoing work in this area. Sexual exploitation can be invisible; victims can fall through the cracks due to the justice system processes and court delays. Often service providers are not sure where to report pimps who they see actively destroying lives. The pimps move from one jurisdiction to another. Her Time is a program about organized crime and the impacts on women and girls. The Her Time presentation from the VPD echoes issues Surrey is facing and is a good resource. They are going to implement a 1-800-line province-wide soon.

Change the Practice of Wellness Checks: The practice of wellness checks should be closely examined in Surrey as we have seen wellness checks linked to the deaths of Black and Indigenous women in Canada at the hands of police (Chantel Moore for example). There is an opportunity with the upcoming transition to change the practice of wellness checks so that police officers are never sent alone to carry them out but are always accompanied by mental health professionals or community support workers.

Ensure the Transition Benefits Vulnerable Women and Girls

At the Forum, participants discussed the upcoming police transition in Surrey and the following considerations were identified:

Maintain the Police Mental Health Outreach Unit: The Police Mental Health Outreach Unit is effective, and it is championed by service providers because the police in the Unit use a social service rather than a punitive approach. Forum participants encourage the integration of the Police Mental Health Outreach Unit into the Surrey Police Force.

Continue Car 67 and Yankee 30: These collaborative approaches to policing which incorporate social and medical services into policing responses are viewed as very supportive for vulnerable populations involved in crisis situations.

Maintain Existing Partnerships with Service Providers and Community Organizations (Surrey Women's Centre, Youth Centres, Sophie's Place, Surrey Schools): Several service providers have existing relationships and initiatives underway with the RCMP in Surrey. They are viewed as highly effective best practices. Forum participants encourage the Surrey police to continue these collaborative relationships. Police engagement in Surrey schools, through school liaison officers, also helps to build positive relationships with children and youth in the education environment.

Continue Police Involvement in CHART (Children and Youth at Risk Table) & SMART (Surrey Mobilization and Resiliency Table): These situation tables are highly effective for identifying vulnerable people in crisis and providing emergency support. Police are a central participant at these tables.

The following graphic was created at the Forum by combining the participant responses to the question “How can we create safety for vulnerable women and girls in Surrey? The relative size of each word is based on the number of responses; the more a word is selected the larger it becomes. As you can see collaboration, trauma-informed practice, empathy, relationships, trust and partnerships were the top choices.

