

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF MINORS—REPORT SUMMARY

The Committee tabled its unanimous report in the National Assembly today. The report contains 58 recommendations urging both the authorities and the public to act forcefully in the fight against the sexual exploitation of minors. Above all, this fight must become a national priority.

Turning the spotlight on an unfamiliar reality

Certain aspects of the phenomenon of sexual exploitation of minors are known: the factors making the victims vulnerable, the disastrous consequences for the victims and the strategies used by those exploiting them. However, due to the clandestine nature of this phenomenon, comprehensive, reliable statistics regarding certain aspects, such as the scope of the problem, are lacking.

Only a fraction of these crimes is disclosed and exposed by police authorities. Nevertheless, the data available confirms the importance of addressing this situation. For the Committee, the sale and purchase of children's and adolescents' sexual services inevitably result from a dynamic of exploitation. Victims are often coerced, misled or trying to survive. This context precludes the possibility of valid consent. As a result, Committee members have chosen the term "client abuser" to designate those who purchase the sexual services of minors.

Additional knowledge is required to improve the practices for fighting this social ill. Research must be promoted to gather and increase expertise on the sexual exploitation of minors.

Communication and awareness-raising: the need to acknowledge the situation

It is easy to blame the clients for their actions, but we must ask ourselves how we, as a society, got here.

Going to see strippers to celebrate an 18th birthday

Hiring an escort for a bachelor party

Watching on-line pornography that features young women

These are all socially acceptable behaviours. [...] How is it that we, as a society, have come to trivialize a number of things that have allowed the number of clients to grow. There is no point in protecting our daughters if we, as a society, do not think about the clients.

Catherine Proulx, director, and Karine Dubois, producer and researcher, for the podcast "Trafic : À la recherche du client" – Excerpt from brief, p. 8 [Translation]

Many of the individuals and organizations who testified pointed out that it is crucial to change the attitude of the population as a whole. In the same way as society has addressed other problems, such as drinking and driving, a far-reaching, society-wide awareness campaign is needed to avoid trivializing the sexual exploitation of minors. The education system also has a role to play. Recently reinstated, sexuality education classes provide an opportunity to broach the subject of sexual exploitation directly. Similarly, teaching children from an early age on about concepts like self-esteem and the importance of a healthy, egalitarian view of romantic relationships, friendships and intimate relations enables young people to protect themselves from ill-intentioned individuals.

As people spend more and more time online, it is important to educate both young and old about how to surf the Web safely. Procurers use social apps and social media as recruitment tools. Young people and their parents must be able to detect these dangers and avoid behaviour putting them in a vulnerable position.

Prevention and training: weaving the safety net

Prevention efforts must target persons at risk of being involved in the dynamics of sexual exploitation. Identifying vulnerabilities and intervening effectively are key. Unfortunately, some young people experience difficult situations making them vulnerable. This is often the case for young people living in youth centres, who constitute a significant portion of those recruited for sexual exploitation.

Racism, discrimination, marginalization and precarity are further risk factors. For people suffering the negative consequences of these factors, accessing resources is difficult. Testimonies in the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls speak eloquently on this unacceptable reality. Frontline workers do not always have the appropriate training to intervene in a manner adapted to the victims' realities.

Many people in a broad range of fields work tirelessly to prevent sexual exploitation and to help the victims and their families. However, it is difficult to get an overall picture based on these piecemeal initiatives. This is why the Committee proposes extending, and adapting to local realities, initiatives designed to promote joint efforts, develop expertise and share information. To achieve this goal, stable funding and support are essential to allow organizations in the field to continue their mission.

Moreover, the responsibility for preventing the sexual exploitation of minors does not end with health and social service workers or the education sector. Businesses play an indirect role in this phenomenon, especially those working in tourist accommodation and major events. They must become actively involved in prevention.

Law enforcement: the victim at the centre of our actions

To stop exploitation, punitive, deterrent measures must target client abusers and procurers. The Criminal Code makes it illegal to purchase the sexual services of minors. Convictions for this crime result in mandatory prison sentences. Despite these provisions, the Committee notes that too few arrests are made. It would like to see additional resources allocated to fighting the sexual exploitation of minors in order to support police forces. Other complementary avenues must be explored to curb procurers' activities, including municipal by-laws and civil litigation. However, legal proceedings can prove difficult for the victims. Their best interests and well-being must be central to these approaches.

Committee members stress the need to relentlessly address the demand for minors' sexual services. Police operations targeting client abusers and implementation of an intervention and awareness program geared toward offenders and intended to reduce the demand for the sale of sexual services are very promising tools.

Reconstruction and rehabilitation: breaking the cycle of exploitation

The hardest part is rebuilding your life. You have no résumé, no prospects and zero self-esteem. It probably takes a whole lifetime to recover. This experience will always be a part of me.

From the testimony of a sexual exploitation survivor – Excerpt from the August 24, 2020 hearing in Québec City, private deliberative meeting [Translation]

Sexual exploitation has physical, psychological and social consequences. Victims need a continuum of services adapted to their reality to successfully rebuild their lives. The limited availability of housing resources that meet all the needs of minor and adult victims is a blatant problem.

The sexual exploitation of children leaves deep wounds and rebuilding their lives can take many years. Sporadic victim support alone is not enough. Precarious economic situations considerably slow down the rebuilding process. The rules for compensating victims and for last-resort financial assistance programs, primarily social assistance, are not adapted to their situation. They are not even recognized as victims under the Crime Victims Compensation Act. The Committee concludes changes are needed. Furthermore, these situations also represent a major challenge for the children's families, who often have few resources. They feel powerless and left to fend for themselves in these difficult circumstances.

The sexual exploitation of minors is based on individual and collective factors. We must act at the level of victims, potential procurers and exploiters and establish conditions to prevent others from getting caught in this vicious circle. This is a complex phenomenon requiring a global response and ongoing action to be eradicated. The Committee urges Québec parliamentarians and citizens to join this fight.

Reminder of the Select Committee's mandate

On June 14, 2019, the Members of the National Assembly unanimously adopted a motion establishing the Select Committee on the Sexual Exploitation of Minors, mandated to create a portrait of the sexual exploitation of minors in Québec, including the consequences on the transition to adulthood.

Committee work

The Select Committee began by meeting with experts over the course of four training sessions. A [consultation document](#) was then produced, summarizing the goals and avenues for reflection, to guide the participation of the individuals and organizations invited to testify at the public hearings and private sessions.

Special consultations and public hearings constituted the lion's share of the Committee's work. These were held in Québec City on November 4–7, 2019, in Montréal on January 20–21, 2020 and in Val-d'Or on January 23, 2020. This second series of hearings was held to hear groups and reach out to representatives of Indigenous communities.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the Committee continued its work by videoconference. A day of hearings was held in Québec City on August 24, 2020, in keeping with the health measures in effect. A total of 67 testimonies were heard in the public hearings and 63 briefs were submitted.

Select Committee and Steering Committee composition

The Steering Committee is composed of Lucie Lecours (Les Plaines), Chair; Christine St-Pierre (Acadie), Vice-Chair; Alexandre Leduc (Hochelaga-Maisonneuve) and Méganne Perry Mélançon (Gaspé). Ian Lafrenière (Vachon) was Committee Chair from the time the Committee was created until his appointment to the Cabinet on October 9, 2020.

The Select Committee's nine other members are: Frantz Benjamin (Viau), Émilie Foster (Charlevoix-Côte-de-Beaupré), Nancy Guillemette (Roberval), Denis Lamothe (Ungava), Isabelle Lecours (Lotbinière-Frontenac), Marilyne Picard (Soulanges), Jean Rousselle (Vimont), Christopher Skeete (Sainte-Rose) and Kathleen Weil (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce).