Combating Trafficking in Persons Program Management Office

Northern Border – Sex and Labor Trafficking

- **August 8, 2025.** 44 Haitians in U Haul Truck found trying to cross the border into the U.S. minutes north of Vermont. Working off a tip, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Sûreté du Québec intercepted the box truck just south of Stanstead, Québec, minutes north of the Vermont border station at Derby Line, Sunday at 2:20 a.m. The truck was carrying 44 foreign nationals — including a 4-year-old child and a pregnant woman — packed in dangerously hot and cramped conditions in a suspected case of human trafficking. https://vtdigger.org/2025/08/08/canada-intercepts-u-haul-truck-carrying-44-migrants-in-case-of-suspected-human-trafficking/

- **May 2, 2025**: Four Mexican nationals in the United States illegally were charged for their roles in an international human smuggling conspiracy that brought hundreds of illegal aliens across the Canadian border into the United States for profit. The smuggling organization had been operating for two years and smuggled hundreds of aliens per week through Canada. Although the aliens or their family members paid thousands of dollars to be smuggled into the United States, law enforcement officials *believe that they were actually being trafficked into commercial sex and forced labor.* (DHS announcement)

- **July 8, 2025 (East Coast)**: Defendants allegedly owned, operated or partnered with a network of interconnected grow houses in Massachusetts and Maine to cultivate and distribute kilogram-sized quantities of marijuana in bulk. For five years, the enterprise operated grow houses in Braintree, Melrose, and Greenfield, MA., among other East Coast locations. The grow house operators contacted each other through a list of marijuana cultivators and distributors with ties to China called the "East Coast Contact List." Data from the defendant's cell phone revealed that they smuggled Chinese nationals into the United States across the Northern border and put them to work at one of the grow houses he controlled *while keeping possession of their passports until they repaid him for the cost associated with smuggling them into the country. In the houses in Maine, it is alleged that victims were forced to work "24/7."*

- **July 28, 2025**: Reports of human trafficking have also involved Indigenous women from Canada being taken to US cities. In 2025, Thomson Reuters reported on the connection between "sex ad ecosystems" in Canada and the United States, which indicates that trafficking occurs across the border. The "Missing and Stolen" analysis collected 3,485 "sex ads" posted in Canada that claim to feature an Indigenous woman or girl between 2016-Present: 57% of sex ads were posted in Ontario, 21% of sex ads were posted in British Columbia, 18% of sex ads were posted in Albert and the remaining provinces accounted for the last 4% of ads put together. The Report noted, "Cities like Edmonton and Ottawa show significant connections to the US sex ad ecosystem, where contact information on Canadian ads matches those in U.S. ads, highlighting the fact that trafficking is a borderless crime."

- **January 30, 2025 (Vermont)**. U.S. Border Patrol in Vermont received a report that several people were spotted by a local resident moving along a dirt road roughly two kilometers south of the border and east of Lake Memphremagog. According to court records, Guatemalan and Mexican nationals were instructed to cross on foot into the U.S. where they were then picked up in cars by other "runners." The runners were paid a fee per person by traffickers. Screenshots of WhatsApp messages included, "Lla cruzaron," which translates from Spanish as, "They crossed." *They were allegedly being taken to Vermont dairy farms and factories which have been the focus of Department of Labor investigations for labor trafficking-related cases.*

- **January 4, 2025 (Vermont).** A Mexican man has been sentenced to 18 months in prison for smuggling over 100 migrants into the United States from Canada. In a statement Friday, U.S. law-enforcement officials said Luis Fernando Barragan-Palacios made $500,000 through his role in a cross-border smuggling ring in less than five months in late 2023 and early 2024. He was arrested following a car chase near the Canadian border in a Vermont community. He told authorities he made over 30 trips, shuttling illegal aliens from the Canadian border into Vermont, and from there to the New York City area between August 2023 and January 2024. He was arrested in Richford, Vermont, a border town 90-minutes southeast of Montreal. Around 6 a.m. a U.S. border guards his saw a Ford F-150 pulled over on the side of U.S. Route 105, with its hazards blinking, near a network of hiking trails and snowmobile paths. Border guards found six people hiding in the bed of the truck. Four of the migrants said they came from Mexico, and two said they came from Guatemala. "They are going to hurt me if they find out," Mr. Barragan-Palacios said upon his arrest. He said he worked for "bad people" that he "tried to get away from." *The affidavit also said victims claimed they were told they would have to work to pay off their debts but they weren't told what exactly what that work would be.*

- **May 2024. Eastport Seafood Business (Maine):** An investigation revealed that an sardine cannery in Eastport, originally intended to be a seafood export hub, had devolved into an illicit marijuana trafficking operation with ties to Hong Kong. The site was used as an unlicensed cannabis grow. *Law enforcement found mattresses side by side covering the floors of the factories and alleged sex and labor trafficking were taking place.* (Rep. Mike Soboleski, Maine)

- **July 4, 2024** Two dozen men and women, most from Mexico, were smuggled in from Canada to North Dakota. They were flown into Canada from Mexico and then crossed the border by car from a lake and campground at the border near Metigoshe State Park. Several others were found near Bottineau, North Dakota. They were allegedly being trafficked into road construction work in Chicago, Illinois. Each paid $3,400 to be taken across the Northern border. The total for the one run would have been over $80,000. Federal data shows over 12,000 illegal Northern border crossings from U.S. into Canada from October 3032 to July 2024. https://kstp.com/kstp-news/top-news/border-patrol-arrests-16-suspected-in-human-smuggling-attempts-from-canada-into-north-dakota/

- **January 2022. (Minnesota)**. In a major breakthrough, Canadian authorities arrested the mastermind behind the fatal human smuggling operation that led to the tragic deaths of a family of four who froze to death 12 meters from the United States border near Emerson Manitoba. Patel was detained following a US extradition request as part of a joint international probe into a cross-border human trafficking network stretching from India to Canada and the US. A high-stakes international manhunt ended when Canadian authorities arrested Fenil Patel, the alleged kingpin of a cross-border human trafficking racket. Patel rented a vehicle on 17 January 2022, driving from Toronto to Winnipeg, the last stop before the ill-fated border crossing. The investigation found that about 25,000 students were referred by one entity, with over 10,000 students referred by another entity outside India every year. The entity advertised in local papers and online, recruiting Indian nationals to come to the U.S. They were flown to Canada to remote areas to cross the border. HIS says the entities advertised that it would cost $5,000 - $20,000 ostensibly to get into colleges in United States from Canada. *It is alleged that Patel ran a wide-ranging trafficking organization in which Indian nationals ended up being trafficked into restaurants, hotels, and tech industries.*

- **October 2022**. **(Swanton Sector)**: Multiple organized crime groups are involved in the lucrative market of alien smuggling and human trafficking across the U.S. Canadian border. U.S. border authority numbers show a substantial rise over the past year in the number of people smuggled from Canada primarily through a stretch of forested and rural borderlands, where eastern Ontario and Quebec meet the U.S. This area is known as the Swanton Sector. Between October 2022 and September 2023, U.S. Border Patrol agents working in the Swanton Sector recorded 6,925 apprehensions of people from 79 countries, all crossing irregularly from Canada — a 550 per cent year-over-year increase, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection data. Nearly half of all apprehensions involve Mexican nationals, with Indian nationals comprising about 14 per cent of the total.

- **November 22, 2023**. U.S. court records associated with the investigation of a New Jersey-based human smuggling and trafficking organization using the Northern Border showed how much money is made by runs south over the Canadian border. The United States Attorney's Office for the District of Vermont indicted members of across border organization grossing $24,000 per trip brining in dozens of illegal aliens per trip. Within the network, money from each smuggling run was often divided — in varying amounts — between the Canadian and U.S. organizers and drivers. A search of the cell phone of one of the traffickers showed that he was in communication with Joaquin Guzman-Loera, also known as "El Chapo," the now-jailed narco kingpin of the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico and "JGL Mochomo" which was the nickname of Alfredo Beltran Leyva, a top narco leader of the Beltran Leyva clan who was once allied with "El Chapo." Beltran Leyva was extradited to the U.S. and sentenced to life in prison in 2017.

- **February 2018**. Noting that the U.S National Strategy in relation to borders [focuses on the U.S. Southern Border] while the Northern borders are included only tangentially in the National Strategy document and the North is not explicitly mentioned. The National Strategy primarily focuses on human trafficking across the U.S.-Mexico border and includes an action plan intended

to expand the work of to counter human trafficking "at the border" using the collaborative Anti-Trafficking Coordination Team ("ACTeam"). The ACTeam is primarily comprised of law enforcement agencies, including the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). ACTeams "receive intensive advanced training, enhanced operational support, and strategic guidance from . ICE. Noting that the trafficking of Chinese nationals from Canada into the U.S. grew, nearly doubling from 6,700 in fiscal year 2022 to 12,400 for 2024, the locations of ACTeams were expanded in 2015 to include Seattle and Washington, and East Coast border states. Cited in https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2665&context=cuslj

- **Canadian Border, 2014**. An Inuit man was apprehended transporting a 16-year-old Inuk girl across the border to New Jersey for prostitution. Based on a 2013-2014 report on human trafficking in Nunavut conducted for the Canadian Department of Justice, researcher Helen Roos identified Inuit women and girls lured by traffickers, which sometimes involves transporting them across borders. The research indicated that some girls were provided flights to southern cities, where they were then trafficked across the border and forced into prostitution. Some cases involving drugs or money exchanged with families for them to leave. Reported in https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2665&context=cuslj

- **August 23, 2013**. First Nations and other Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people were trafficked on ships along Lake Superior were sold using force, fraud, or coercion, to men freighters docked in the ports of Thunder Bay, Ontario, and Duluth, Minnesota. Large cargo freighters on Lake Superior have been documented as sites where trafficking occurs. The mobility of these vessels and the crossing of international borders between Duluth, Minnesota and Canadian ports like Thunder Bay can make tracking and intervention difficult for authorities. Native women and children were targeted. Factors such as poverty, homelessness, and the lack of social safety nets were exploited by traffickers to gain control over victims. Research indicated the involvement of organized criminal elements that coordinate the transport and exploitation of Native women, sometimes involving foreign crews docked in the harbor. Reported in Stark, Christine, "The Garden of Truth: Prostitution and Trafficking of Native Women in Minnesota, 2011; see also, Dave Dean, First Nations Women Are Being Sold into the Sex Trade On Ships Along Lake Superior, VICE NEWS, Aug. 23, 2013, https://www.vice.com/en/article/first-nations-women-are-being-sold-into-the-sex-trade-on-ships-along-lake-superior/

- **2009.** According to a 2009 US State Department Human Rights Report:[1] NGOs estimated that 2,000 persons were trafficked into the country annually, while the RCMP estimated 600 to 800 persons, with an additional 1,500 to 2,200 persons trafficked through the country into the United States. Many victims were Asians and Eastern Europeans, but a significant number also came from Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Women and children were trafficked for sexual exploitation; on a lesser scale, men, women, and children were trafficked for forced labor. The Report noted that Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto served as hubs for organized crime groups trafficking in persons, including for prostitution. East Asian crime groups targeted the country, Vancouver in particular, to exploit immigration laws, benefits available to immigrants, and the proximity to the U.S. border.

- **August 16, 2006**. 31 individuals were arrested yesterday and charged in a wide-ranging human trafficking ring operating throughout the northeastern United States. The trafficking routes began in Korea where women were recruited with promises of jobs in the United States to make money to support their families. The recruiters would then arrange for the transportation of the women to the U.S. via Canada. The women were taken to handlers in Canada then smuggled into the United States by the Northern border. By the time the women arrived in the United States, they had incurred large financial debts, usually in the tens of thousands of dollars, to recruiters in Korea and other members of the defendants' organization. They were placed in one of the network's numerous brothels. In many cases, the brothels purported to be legal enterprises, such as massage parlors, health spas, and acupuncture clinics, but in fact they were illegal places of prostitution. The women were threatened if they wanted to leave that they would be turned over to United States law enforcement or immigration authorities and go to jail, or that their families in Korea would be harmed. The intercepted telephone conversations revealed that the women were routinely traded and exchanged between and among the various brothel owners and managers, sometimes as often as several times per month, until they worked off their original debts to the defendants. https://www.justice.gov/archive/usao/nye/pr/2006/2006Aug16.html

- **July 22, 2005**. A carefully constructed underground tunnel that spanned the U.S. Canadian border between British Columbia and Washington State was uncovered by drug enforcement officials. The tunnel ostensibly was being used to smuggle marijuana, but officials noted that it could also have been used to traffic people, explosives, and terrorists. Drug Agents Discover U.S.-Canadian Border Tunnel https://www.npr.org/2005/07/22/4765951/drug-agents-discover-u-s-canadian-border-tunnel

- **2005 TIP Report**: Reports of large numbers of South Korean women trafficked through Canada to the United States [continue to be reported]. The lack of a visa requirement to enter Canada, lack of prosecutions, and an inability to determine the scope of the problem has made Canada, particularly British Columbia, an attractive trafficking hub for East Asian traffickers. Airline passenger analysis shows that the number of Koreans returning to Korea on flights from Vancouver Canada is 25 percent less than the number arriving on flights from Korea, but the ties to trafficking are not known. Observers believe that several hundred South Koreans have been trafficked through Canada to the U.S. since 2000,but they state that this estimate is modest.

- **2003 – present, Akwesasne Mohawk reservation:** This area at the border near the St. Lawrence River is a significant crossing point. Traffickers and smugglers use high-powered boats in the summer and snowmobiles in the winter to move people and contraband. One First Nation woman tells of being trafficked from the reservation to Texas when she was 14 years old. https://ici.radio-canada.ca/rci/en/news/1959315/trafficked-woman-hopes-sharing-her-story-will-help-girls-back-home-in-akwesasne

- **June, 2001**. International sex trafficking ring of more than 40 traffickers involved the sale of hundreds of Asian women. The women were recruited in Malaysia and Thailand, taken to Canda, and sold into prostitution. They were told that they had debts of about $30,000 that they had to pay off and then were continually circulated from brothel to brothel first in Canada (Vancouver and Toronto) and then to U.S. cities via the Northern border. http://www.cfdp.ca/crint01.htm#:~:text=kidnapping%2C%20violating%20anti%2Dgang%20legislation,migrants%2C%20to%20enter%20the%20country. And see U.S. Calls for Clamp on People Trade from Canada," Straits Times June 23, 2001

- **2000.** A group of traffickers calling themselves the West Coast Players were involved in trafficking Canadian teenagers from British Columbia to the U.S. (Los Angeles) The group appeared to have links with Asian organized crime in British Columbia.[1]

- **2000**.Preexisting networks of organized crime facilitate the trafficking of women and children into Canada and then to the U.S. In the past, organized crime groups took advantage of Canda's visa waiver for Koreans to bring Korean women thought Canada to the U.S.[2]

- **September, 1994**, the owner of an Indian restaurant and 11 others in Seattle were arrested for smuggling 900 people, charging each $10,000 to $14,000 per person, or an estimated $13 million since 1985. The smugglers brought Indian and Pakistani nationals to the United States via Canada and Mexico. Most were taken to Panama, moved by land to Mexico, and then walked across the Mexican-US. border. Another 100 entered the US from Vancouver via Seattle taxi drivers, many of whom are also from India and Pakistan.

- **1998 – 1999**. According to U.S. investigations, illegal migrants were transported by boat from China where they were offloaded in British Columbia, then subsequently smuggled into the U.S. by land. Later interviews revealed that migrants had agreed to pay up to $50,000 for the journey and since most did not have money to pay upfront, many agreed to repay the debt through anticipated employment after they arrive. U.S investigations confirmed that some of these individuals ended up working in prostitution and illegal labor. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2011/grc-rcmp/PS64-78-2010-eng.pdf

[1] Amy O'Neill Richard, International Trafficking in Women to the United States: A Contemporary Manifestation of Slavery, U.S. Department of State, April 2000)
[2] Bronskill, Jim, "Sex Trade Capitals? Yes, Two Are Canada: CIA," Gazette Aril 14, 2000.

- **June, 2024**. Though uncommon for trafficking, illegal crossings do occur on the border between Alaska and Yukon. In June 2024, four Canadian citizens were arrested in Alaska on drug and human smuggling charges after illegally crossing the border by boat. Indigenous women, girls, and youth are disproportionately targeted by traffickers throughout the circumpolar region, including across the Canadian-Alaska border. In Alaska, traffickers approach vulnerable Indigenous youth from rural villages within days of them arriving in cities like Anchorage or Fairbanks.