



Human Trafficking
Research and
Learning Agenda





Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank HTRI co-scientific advisors, Dr. Cecilia Hyunjung Mo and Dr. Guy Grossman, for their invaluable support, input, and guidance on the continuing development of this document. Thank you also to the Program to End Modern Slavery at the U.S. Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Persons for their comments and suggestions to this document and for making the Human Trafficking Research Initiative a reality. Thank you to IPA staff Ellen Bates-Jefferys for providing substantial research support in the first draft; Valentina Farinelli for her significant efforts updating the research review and ethical standards section; Ana Tamayo and Michael Podesta for editing support; and Michelle Read and Cara Vu for design support. Thank you to Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman for his expert contributions and grounding survivor feedback and recommendations. Finally, thank you to all of the counter-trafficking implementing organizations, researchers, donors, government stakeholders, and people with lived experience of human trafficking who shared their knowledge and ideas for improving the future of human trafficking research with IPA.

Disclaimer

Funding for this publication is made possible by the United States Department of State under terms of Cooperative Agreement No. SSJTIP20CA0026, through the Human Trafficking Research Initiative, managed by Innovations for Poverty Action. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.

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Photos

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Last update: July 2024



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I. Introduction

WHAT IS THE HUMAN TRAFFICKING RESEARCH INITIATIVE (HTRI)?

The Human Trafficking Research Initiative (HTRI) was initiated in 2020 as a collaboration between Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) and the Program to End Modern Slavery (PEMS) of the U.S. Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (TIP Office). This initiative aims to strengthen the evidence around what works to reduce human trafficking, examine the main drivers of human trafficking, and identify the most effective methods to combat it. HTRI utilizes and builds on IPA's expertise in designing and running randomized evaluations to measure the effectiveness of programs and policies, which allows researchers to isolate the effects of a program from other factors.

The initiative provides research funding for pilot research projects, data analysis, exploratory studies, and randomized control trials (RCTs¹ that focus on combating human trafficking). "Trafficking in persons," "human trafficking," and "modern slavery" are umbrella terms – often used interchangeably – to refer to a crime whereby traffickers compel someone to provide labor or services or to engage in commercial sex, or prostitution, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion, or abduction, deception, or the abuse of power or a position of vulnerability, or when a trafficker causes a child to engage in commercial sex (whether or not force, fraud, or coercion are used).

HTRI has focused efforts to build the capacity of young researchers and established researchers new to the counter-trafficking field through seed, pilot, travel, and exploratory small grants. Further, HTRI engages in other dissemination, training, and policy support activities to exchange information about the evidence surrounding effective counter-trafficking interventions as well as generate contextual knowledge about how, why, and when anti-trafficking efforts are effective.



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WHAT IS THE HTRI RESEARCH AND LEARNING AGENDA?

The HTRI Research and Learning Agenda is the Initiative's guiding document that outlines priority research gaps and questions to be addressed through funding and implementing new and promising research. This agenda is intended to guide the project's research and policy efforts by:

- Identifying critical evidence gaps hindering the success of international anti-human trafficking initiatives;
- Providing information and evidence to guide the prioritization and selection of grants funded under HTRI's Competitive Research Fund; and
- Shaping donor and policymakers' funding priorities and policy agendas through new evidence and data gathered from HTRI-funded research.

To set the agenda, the HTRI team conducted a literature review and a consultation process with more than 50 leading policy makers, practitioners, and researchers. The objective was to identify inefficiencies and critical evidence gaps that hinder the success of international anti-trafficking initiatives. The result is five priority research questions organized around the "4Ps" framework for combating human trafficking: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnership. Answering these questions has the potential to help develop interventions to either prevent human trafficking, support victims of human trafficking, or prosecute the crime. For each of the five questions, HTRI identified several sub-questions of interest, and proposed research and learning activities—as well as research methods—for each sub-question. The HTRI team updates the literature review and priority questions and sub-questions annually to reflect new developments in counter-trafficking research and interventions.

WHAT IS THE HTRI COMPETITIVE RESEARCH FUND?

HTRI's Competitive Research Fund provides funding for two categories of research: (1) seed funding for early-stage activities to develop partnerships, carry out exploratory research, and demonstrate the feasibility of larger-scale studies (pilot research, data analysis, and travel/exploratory studies); and (2) partial and full funding for randomized evaluations and quasi-experimental studies that focus on combating contemporary forms of slavery. To generate a more expansive pool of high-quality research proposals focused on human trafficking, HTRI finances projects that are aligned with the priority research questions and working analytical framework presented in this document. HTRI-funded research primarily takes place in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), but in some cases occur in high-income countries. HTRI pays special attention to anti-trafficking interventions that benefits the people of countries where PEMS has current and future investments.²

Competitive fund applications are regularly solicited through HTRI's website and considered by a selection committee comprised of a rotating panel of human trafficking and impact evaluation experts (academics, policymakers, and practitioners) and people with lived experience of trafficking. Applications are selected for funding based on their responsiveness to the evaluation criteria, including relevance to HTRI priorities, project viability, academic contribution, research design, policy relevance, value for money, and relevant experience of the research team. Lessons from research findings will be disseminated to key policymakers as well as practitioners at all levels to promote improved practices among a wide variety of anti-trafficking initiatives.

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HOW WILL RESEARCH PROJECTS FUNDED BY HTRI CONTRIBUTE TO THE HUMAN TRAFFICKING EVIDENCE BASE?

As research findings emerge, HTRI engages in communities of practice, webinars, conferences, and other information platforms and venues to share new information and evidence, as well as build contextual knowledge of how HTRI-funded research efforts worked (or did not work) and why. Specific opportunities for engaging the human trafficking community include:

- Convening and leading conferences and meetings with projects and groups working under a similar evidence-based, research-focused mandate
- Participating and presenting at quarterly meetings of the Monitoring and Evaluation of Trafficking in Persons (METIP) Community of Practice
- Participating in quarterly meetings with PEMS implementing organizations, under the leadership of the Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, and other relevant U.S. Government (USG) efforts, as appropriate
- Participating and presenting at targeted human-trafficking focused conferences and forums as well as events where human trafficking research is relevant, such as economics, political science, criminology, poverty, or public health-focused conferences and forums
- Providing input into USG anti-trafficking products and initiatives
- Participating in academic and global efforts to improve evidence-based practices in combating human trafficking
- Promoting survivor-led and -informed research projects and evaluation practices
- Developing podcasts, white papers, blogs, briefing papers, and/or short, targeted presentations for policymakers, implementing organizations, and researchers both within and outside of the human trafficking field highlighting relevant evidence from human trafficking-adjacent fields, to inform the development of new human trafficking-focused projects and evaluation methods
- Informing and referring donors, policymakers, and implementing organizations to external organizations and internal teams at Innovations for Poverty Action

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II. Background

Worldwide, there are an estimated 27.6 million victims of human trafficking (ILO, Walk Free Foundation, and IOM 2022). This pervasive violation of basic human rights has led to a widespread movement of governments pledging to end modern slavery as one of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and to adopt the United Nations (UN) Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (known widely as the Palermo Protocol).

Despite the gravity and prevalence of human trafficking, there is a notable lack of evidence on which kinds of programs and interventions are most effective in reducing trafficking and supporting victims. Due to its often illicit and clandestine nature and other factors, human trafficking is a difficult topic to study, and counter-trafficking interventions are particularly challenging to evaluate given the complex nature of the interventions. Furthermore, victims and perpetrators are not easily identified. Often, trafficking victims do not identify as having been trafficked, and perpetrators of trafficking do not necessarily see themselves as traffickers given definitional confusion, lack of familiarity with the term human trafficking, fear of retribution, stigma, and a variety of other factors. Public misconceptions regarding human trafficking also abound. Moreover, measuring the prevalence of human trafficking, vulnerability to human trafficking, and the antecedents of human trafficking are not straightforward given the sensitive and varied nature of the crime.

Due, in part, to the inherent difficulties in studying the topic, developing large-scale studies that strengthen the evidence base on counter-trafficking have been particularly challenging.

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THESE CHALLENGES INCLUDE:

- Variations and disagreements in measurement of trafficking activities, including assessing how to accurately determine whether someone is a victim or perpetrator in an ethical, trauma-informed, and cost-effective manner
- Challenges related to surveying and sampling to find trafficking victims, who often constitute a rare, mobile, and/or hidden population
- Tensions between prevailing local cultural and social norms (for example, with respect to child labor) and the international community's definition of trafficking in persons (TIP), which can reduce local cooperation in both implementation and data collection
- A large body of gray literature that provides interesting context on various interventions and – in some cases – has rich monitoring and evaluation data but lacks peer-reviewed, rigorous studies to assess intervention effectiveness, and may promote misinformation and practices that are not survivor- and/or trauma-informed
- Tendency to implement small-scale programs (e.g., capacity building of anti-trafficking units within the justice sector, shelter service provision for small numbers of trafficking survivors) that, while important, do not lend themselves easily to rigorous impact assessment due to their small sample size
- Proclivity of new entrants in the anti-trafficking space to fund lower-cost/low-barrier but unproven interventions (e.g., awareness campaigns with untested messages)
- Interventions that do not lend themselves well to a large-scale evaluation that is both rigorous and ethical, such as complex interventions that include multiple components and partner organizations; interventions implemented in high-risk environments; and concerns with withholding or delaying the intervention for the purposes of carrying out an RCT
- Limited monitoring and evaluation/research funding built into large donor-funded anti-trafficking programs, and the comparatively high cost of programs that include an impact evaluation component vs. those that do not
- Widespread external validity concerns among countries and type of exploitation (i.e., challenges with applicability of promising interventions found in one context in other disparate contexts)
- Insufficient survivor engagement in research and evaluation (survivors have largely been accepted into victim service provision but lack representation in researching and evaluating best practices and are rarely engaged in the development of—or funding decisions around—priority research questions)

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III. Trajectory of Human Trafficking Research

Research on human trafficking began in earnest in the 1990s with a focus on sex trafficking of women and girls, especially from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union. The adoption of the 2000 Palermo Protocol (UN General Assembly, Resolution 55/25 2000) established the first global definition of human trafficking. While counter-trafficking interventions and research continued to focus on sex trafficking into the 2000s, the Palermo Protocol notes exploitation should not be limited to “the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation” and makes no mention of gender.

This focus began shifting in the late 2000s, with the concept of human tracking growing to encompass a broader picture of subversion that was more neutral with respect to gender and type of exploitation (Bonilla and Mo 2019). Counter-trafficking actors began to increasingly acknowledge the large scale of trafficking and abuse of migrant workers (both male and female), especially in and from South and Southeast Asia, while the number of organizations working on human trafficking began to increase. Human trafficking research also began to grow, with an initial focus on crossover research from public health.

In the 2010s, research focused on human trafficking moved towards analyzing counter-trafficking programming for labor trafficking and migrant workers with the development and implementation of large programs funded by a variety of governmental donors, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Department of State, Australian Agency for International Development (AusAid), and the Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO/UKaid), as well as international organizations such as United Nations Actions for Cooperation Against Human Trafficking (UN-ACT), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), International Organization for Migration (IOM), International Labour Organization (ILO), and others. The number of both small and large organizations focusing their work explicitly on human trafficking also grew significantly in the 2010s.

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In the latter part of the decade, the body of research on human trafficking shifted again as donor governments began to pass major legislation on modern slavery and human trafficking and placed a stronger emphasis on monitoring and evaluation and research of human trafficking interventions. Donors also began to incorporate a focus on systemic approaches that engaged the private sector and demanded more robust research around intervention effectiveness and prevalence estimates. In the U.S., this effort was most notable in the Congressional authorization and funding of the 2017 Program to End Modern Slavery (PEMS), which is unique in its focus on measuring the reduction of the prevalence of human trafficking as part of its program funding. This increased emphasis on research, measurement, and public-private funding was also reflected in the establishment of two new international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the Freedom Fund (founded in 2013 by Humanity United, the Legatum Foundation, and the Walk Free Foundation) and the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS) (founded in 2015). In the academic sphere, the *Anti-Trafficking Review*—a biannual open access, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the issue of human trafficking—was established by the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW) in 2011, while the first issue of the quarterly *Journal of Human Trafficking* was published in 2015.

In the 2020s, implementing organizations and policymakers started to have access to a larger body of (mostly qualitative) research to reference when designing programs to combat human trafficking. The U.S. government is currently funding more than 100 international trafficking-focused projects—implemented primarily by international/UN agencies, national and international NGOs, and, increasingly, academic institutions—with varying degrees of monitoring, evaluation, and research data and analysis available to researchers and practitioners. USAID’s Center of Excellence for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) has funded a variety of research efforts on TIP, including RCTs and vulnerability mapping in Asia, datasets of minors trafficked into the U.S. from Latin America, and desk studies in Colombia, Libya, Mali, and South Africa. PEMS has also bolstered scholarship in this space, with funding provided to GFEMS, the Freedom Fund, the Warnath Group, the University of Georgia, New York University, University of Massachusetts Lowell, Johns Hopkins University, and others to conduct prevalence and vulnerability studies in a variety of contexts, including, but not limited to, domestic servitude in Ethiopia; labor

trafficking of Vietnamese, Ugandan, and Kenyan migrant workers; forced labor within the construction sector in India; commercial sexual exploitation of children in Kenya and Uganda; bonded labor in Pakistan; child domestic workers in Morocco; and the trafficking of overseas Filipino workers.

Global counter-trafficking programs are also increasingly incorporating technological interventions (e.g., worker voice apps, satellite technology to identify forced labor camps and mines, remote connectivity on fishing vessels) to compile and analyze data that will be used to combat abuse and trafficking of both domestic and migrant workers (see **Box 1**). While causal research on the effectiveness of these types of interventions is still nascent, the National Science Foundation is funding a series of research projects under the Disrupting Operations of Illicit Supply Networks (D-ISN) to improve understanding of the operations of illicit supply networks and strengthen the ability to detect, disrupt, and dismantle them.

In recent years, donor calls for experimental, rigorous data on human trafficking interventions have increased, though the added demand for experimental and quantitative work has not always been accompanied by higher levels of funding needed for this work. As a result, most human trafficking research continues to focus on descriptive and ethnographic studies that, while important and valuable, may suffer from limited generalizability and ability to establish causal relations. Despite large-scale collaborative efforts by IOM and others, the field also continues to be challenged by a lack of comprehensive, publicly available, high-quality datasets that can be used to measure the scope of trafficking as well as interventions designed to combat trafficking.

Recent progress has been made in applying global standards to case management and administrative data on human trafficking. In 2022, IOM and GFEMS released the Human Trafficking Case Data Standard (**HTCDS**), a global format and set of standards that will enable organizations around the world to collect and potentially share information related to human trafficking cases in a consistent way. If successful, the establishment and adoption of these standards will facilitate the gathering and production of high-quality administrative data that can be aggregated for sharing and reporting at the national and international levels.

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BOX 1: TECHNOLOGY PARTNERSHIPS, RESEARCH, AND INTERVENTIONS TO COMBAT HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Governments, civil society groups, and universities have increasingly partnered with private sector actors to harness technological interventions to combat trafficking. Some examples of civil society and for-profit organizations working in this space include Verité, which uses online platforms to map labor supply chains, screen companies for forced labor risks, and facilitate ethical recruiting practices; Ulula, which offers digital tools, including grievance mechanism, surveys, case management and analytics dashboard to hold companies accountable for the human rights and environmental impacts of their business operations; LRQA, which in 2022 acquired ELEVATEELEVATE and its end-to-end Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) service ecosystem, including supply chain traceability tools; BanQu, which uses financial technology to identify and prosecute traffickers; Migrasia, which leverages machine learning in social media to connect vulnerable individuals to resources; Marinus Analytics, whose Traffic Jam Artificial Intelligence tool aids in human trafficking law enforcement investigations; and Issara Institute, whose website, workvoices.org, connects migrant communities to generate and disseminate online ethical recruitment feedback.

There are also several promising consortiums emerging around technology. GFEMS, ELEVATE, Diginex Solutions, and Winrock International piloted a cell phone app in Bangladesh called SafeStep that uses mobile and other forms of technology to provide up-to-date and interactive information, services, and content to prospective migrants, while MarsPetcare partnered with Diginex and Winrock to pilot a platform called Doc2Work that creates effective pathways for migrant fishers to legally stay and work in Thailand. On a larger scale, the [Global Business Coalition Against Trafficking](#) (GBCAT) acquired Tech Against Trafficking in 2023 to bolster its work bringing companies together across sectors to combat human trafficking in company operations and supply chains. This includes Tech Against Trafficking's Accelerator Program, which works with civil society, academia, technologists, and survivors to identify and scale promising uses of technology in the anti-trafficking.

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PHOTO: THOMAS CHUPEIN

IV. HTRI Research Review

In the first half of 2021, HTRI conducted a rapid review of existing research to examine the state of empirical literature using a range of methods and identify promising areas of human trafficking programming for potential RCTs (see Annex 1). HTRI's search parameters prioritized identifying human trafficking-focused research with experimental elements, followed by strong descriptive research and research on interventions likely to impact trafficking. HTRI searched relevant open source and academic databases and consulted with global experts to ensure that relevant publications—particularly those with a focus on rigorous quantitative research methods—were not omitted from the review. HTRI conducted additional reviews in 2022, 2023, and 2024 to identify additional RCTs and quasi-experimental research focused on human trafficking. These searches were restricted to English-language publications. An overview of the search terms and the search locations is provided in [Annex 2](#).

These reviews of the academic literature and trusted sources for causal research revealed a lack of randomized control trials and impact evaluations with counterfactual components. This is true for both the global north and the global south. Below we describe the main types of research outputs, their main contributions, and their limitations.

EVIDENCE REVIEWS

Several comprehensive and rigorous literature reviews (and one systematic review) of human trafficking have been published in the past ten years. In line with HTRI's mission, all of these reports conclude that there continues to be a dearth of rigorous research in this field.³ Three of these reviews particularly stand out: “Combatting Human Trafficking Since Palermo” (Bryant and Landman 2020) is excellent at parsing out the practical value of different types of research; the Body of Knowledge compiled by the Winrock-implemented Attaining Lasting Change for Better Enforcement of Labor and Criminal Law to Address Child Labor, Forced Labor and Human Trafficking (ATLAS) project (Winrock International 2020a) provides a comprehensive review of law enforcement and civil

society coordination efforts focused on human trafficking, forced labor, and child labor; and “Helping Survivors of Human Trafficking” (Dell et al. 2017) sifts through a mountain of programmatic publications to bring forward scant—but promising—data around the effects of mental health programs on commercially sexually exploited children and young adults. The Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham also compiled a review of the evidence on policy and interventions to combat modern slavery (human trafficking, forced labor, and child labor) specifically in the context of markets (economic policy, trade policy, financial policy, development policy, and supply chains) (Lerigo-Stephens et al. 2021).

Organizations have also put together various “evidence maps” of existing information in human trafficking, typically with a focus on theory- or operations-based best practices. For example, in 2018, the Institute of Development Studies published “Modern Slavery Prevention and Responses in South Asia: An Evidence Map,” which addresses gaps in evidence specifically in the South Asian countries of India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan, including interventions and outcomes for specific target populations (e.g., survivors, employers, landlords, services providers, criminal justice officials) and at different levels (e.g., individual, community, state) (Oosterhoff et al. 2018). ILO and IOM (2022a) also released global evidence gap maps (EGMs) and policy tools in 2021 and 2023 that identify existing studies on forced labor, child labor, and human trafficking broken out by factors and outcomes, and map out the areas where more research is needed.⁴

DESCRIPTIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The evidence reviews noted above focus primarily on a large body of descriptive literature on human trafficking. This literature spans a wide variety of subfields (anthropology, criminology, economics, law, political science, public health, social work, and sociology) and provides in-depth information on specific forms of trafficking in a range of country, state, and community-level contexts. This qualitative work is vital to contributing

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PHOTO: ANA GARCIA HERNANDEZ

to our understanding of human trafficking on several fronts; for example, ethnographic studies on human trafficking have provided rich information describing the lived experience of victims. The findings from research related to specific contexts and types of trafficking can be very instructive for organizations working to combat trafficking in those same conditions and contexts, but the small scale and localized focus can make it difficult to apply and replicate the findings of the research to other contexts. In addition, much of the research to date has been conducted in high-income countries, but most of the donor-funded programming to combat trafficking is in LMICs, exposing a gap between research and practice. Further work can be undertaken to improve accessibility of research funding opportunities for both LMIC researchers and people with lived experience (see [Box 2](#)), such as by considering the various unconventional funding models of LMIC research institutions and providing training and

technical assistance around rigorous research methods. Moving forward, more efforts are needed to link the existing body of descriptive and qualitative research to the design of impact evaluations and other quantitative research study designs.

GUIDES FOR HUMAN TRAFFICKING PRACTITIONERS AND RESEARCHERS

Several useful guides, toolkits, and manuals have been developed in recent years to guide practitioners and researchers through standard operating procedures and ethical practices in researching and serving survivors of trafficking. These include IOM's 2019 "Handbook on Protection and Assistance for Migrants Vulnerable to Violence, Exploitation and Abuse" and associated guidance documents on referral mechanisms and response planning; NEXUS Institute's 2020 Practitioner Guide Series on Victim Protection for frontline/implementing organizations; Stanford University's Center for Human Rights and International Justice's series on Getting to Good Human Trafficking Data (Brunner 2018) and the Winrock International-implemented USAID Asia Counter Trafficking in Persons program (USAID Asia CTIP) Indikit platform (Winrock International, n.d.), both of which aim to improve human trafficking data collection and M&E practices; International Justice Mission's (n.d.) Assessment of Survivor Outcomes Validation Study (ASO Tool) to measure survivor outcomes; and HEAL Trafficking (2017) and Hope for Justice's "Protocol Toolkit for Developing a Response to Victims of Human Trafficking in Health Care Settings." More recently, the ILO released two new publications, one focused on ethical guidelines for research on forced labour and the other focused on ethical guidelines for research on child labour (ILO, 2023a and 2023b). The Modern Slavery & Human Rights Policy & Evidence Center (MS PEC) is also funding a project exploring the key ethical issues involved in conducting high-quality modern slavery research, with the publication of the findings and guidelines anticipated in 2024. To date, however, the impact of these guidelines and resources on outcomes for survivors and trafficking prevalence (and on the operations of counter-trafficking organizations) has yet to be assessed in peer-reviewed publications or other research platforms.



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BOX 2: SURVIVOR LEADERSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT IN TRAFFICKING RESEARCH

In recent years, counter-trafficking actors have increasingly recognized that interventions and research that do not incorporate the knowledge and perspective of people with lived experience of trafficking are necessarily incomplete and can inadvertently cause harm to the same people they intend to help. Engaging research teams that include people with lived experience of human trafficking—and using data that are directly informed by survivors’ trafficking and recovery experiences—are essential in strengthening the efficacy and impact of programs to support people who have experienced trafficking.

In the United States, the 2022 TIP report (U.S. Department of State 2022b) highlighted survivor engagement in the counter-trafficking field, including principles for engaging survivors in research projects such as ethical storytelling (avoiding sensationalism and re-traumatization) and including survivors in decision-making, leadership, and employment opportunities. These recommendations draw from the work of several advisory boards and organizations, including the U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking, which was established in 2015 to provide a formal platform for trafficking survivors to advise and make recommendations on federal anti-trafficking policies, and Survivor Alliance, a nonprofit organization that works to put survivors at the center of research and programs intended to address human trafficking.

In the last two years, great strides have been made in focusing the development and leadership of counter-trafficking programs with survivor leaders. In 2023, an “Equity in Evidence” report was published outlining the findings from a summer 2023 conference that brought together 93 anti-trafficking experts from around the world to address gaps and discuss actionable solutions to fuse lived experience and community knowledge into research to end human trafficking. In 2024, Survivor Alliance released a series of trainings, resources, and self-directed workshops for non-survivors to act as allies, learning how to work alongside and with survivor leaders in the anti-trafficking and anti-slavery sector. MS PEC, one of the conference organizers, also published “Towards Principles for Equitable Engagement”, a research summary of projects that the organization engaged to offer a rich mix of distinctive perspectives on how ethical and equitable involvement of lived experience can improve policy and practice in efforts to address modern slavery and human trafficking (MS PEC 2023).

PREVALENCE MEASUREMENT

PEMS is actively working to address the gap in funding for research on trafficking prevalence with funding provided to the Prevalence Reduction Innovation Forum (PRIF) and prevalence measurement incorporated into the rest of its \$175 million total programming to test innovative methods of study and develop standardized measures of human trafficking (TIP Office et al. 2020; U.S. Department of State 2022a).⁵ Additionally, in the global north, the RAFT (Rapid Appraisal for Trafficking) (Chisolm-Straker et al. 2020) project has a team of psychometricians examining how

to measure trafficking in the healthcare context, while RTI International has produced a review of promising methods for estimating human trafficking prevalence in the U.S. and is field-testing at least two methods of prevalence estimation within one U.S. industry and one U.S. geographic location (an effort funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and in collaboration with PRIF) (Barrick and Pfeffer 2021). The findings from all seven prevalence studies funded under the PRIF were shared at a conference in late

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2023, with the detailed findings from each study being shared through a learning series that extends into 2024.⁶ The TIP Office is also funding the STATIP (Standard Tools for Analysis of Trafficking in Persons) project, conducted by the ILO, UNODC, and IOM to create a statistical framework to define trafficking in persons for prevalence surveys, with submission to the UN Statistical Commission expected in 2026.⁷ HTRI welcomes this development, as better measurement of prevalence is a first order concern for measuring the efficacy of anti-trafficking programs.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING-ADJACENT RESEARCH

While there are limited causal studies focused explicitly on human trafficking, there is a wealth of “trafficking-adjacent” impact evaluations that human trafficking practitioners, researchers, and policymakers can use to identify evidence-based practices. Some promising examples of relevant research include studies focused on minimizing unsafe migration (Barham and Kuhn 2014; Tjaden and Gningon 2022), improving the mental health outcomes of conflict-affected youth (Betancourt et al. 2014; O’Callaghan et al. 2013; Bolton et al. 2007), modifying the curriculum at schools for adolescent girls to engender stronger life skills (Edmonds, Feigenberg and Leight 2021), combining cash transfers with transfers of productive assets through the ultra-poor Graduation Approach (Banerjee et al. 2015), understanding the impacts of sanctions on the illicit mining sector (Parker, Foltz and Elsea 2016), promoting mobile bank account savings to reduce shock-coping transactional sex (Jones and Gong 2021), and understanding the role that large-scale private sector involvement can play on rural livelihoods (Munongo 2012).

The experimental data around child labor are particularly robust, with many findings suggesting promising solutions (Dammert et al. 2018). However, literature on social protection and child labor specifically shows mixed results. Many cash transfer programs (particularly in Latin America) have been found to reduce child labor, often due to parents’ increased investment in children’s schooling (Bastagli et al. 2016, de Hoop and Furio 2014; Cardoso and Portela Souza 2004), but others have been found to have no impact (especially in Sub-Saharan Africa) or increase

child labor slightly (de Hoop et al. 2019). Livelihoods support programs that are conditional on school enrollment or combined with education components show promise in reducing child labor, particularly in the agricultural sector (Kazianga, de Walque and Alderman 2012; Chiodi and Escudero 2020). Microfinance interventions that seek to increase credit clients’ access to health insurance have also been shown to reduce child labor by lowering households’ vulnerability to shocks (Landmann and Frolich 2015).

This human trafficking-adjacent research includes encouraging solutions and interventions that have already been tested, but because they are not labeled as human trafficking or modern slavery interventions, they are largely unknown to the human trafficking implementation and research community. HTRI will highlight evidence-based practices that intersect with interventions common in human trafficking-focused programs (e.g., women’s empowerment initiatives, referral mechanisms, economic development, financial inclusion, and social protection programs) throughout the initiative. In 2023, HTRI contributed to **IPA’s Best Bets** initiative and report, which focuses on new interventions that have the potential to be transformative but require additional investment to advance along the path to scalability; including some “Emerging Innovations” that are relevant to counter-trafficking work, such as edutainment, to challenge attitudes, and behaviors, and Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescents to promote girls’ agency and health. HTRI and its scientific co-advisors also drafted three human trafficking-focused “Exploratory Innovations” (included in the report’s annex) that seem particularly promising for future investment and research: Targeted Awareness and Behavior Change Interventions; Social Protection Programs for Human Trafficking Survivors and At-Risk Populations; and Law Enforcement and Judicial Capacity Building (IPA 2023).

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During HTRI's research review, a total of twenty-six RCT- and quasi-experimental-level counter-trafficking studies were identified (see [Annex 1](#); also bolded and highlighted in green throughout this section). Of these, most studies have focused on safe migration and fair labor practices, law enforcement training, psychotherapy interventions for former child soldiers, content and targeting of counter-trafficking messaging, and effectiveness of large-scale awareness campaigns. The findings from these studies, as well as emerging themes and trends and remaining evidence gaps identified during the rapid research review, yielded a set of learning questions and sub-questions organized around the Department of State's "4P" framework for human trafficking programs: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnership.

The highlighted learning questions and sub-questions are not comprehensive; rather, they are intended to identify gaps and suggest promising avenues for research by academics, human trafficking researchers, policy-makers, and other key stakeholders. The learning questions and related evidence will be updated annually by HTRI through the end of its award period.

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HTRI Priority Research Question 1: How can counter-trafficking actors disrupt behaviors and social norms that normalize or promote human trafficking and related forms of exploitation? (Prevention)

Prevention interventions are among the most popular and well-funded anti-trafficking interventions globally, particularly the use of public awareness campaigns to identify victims of human trafficking and warn migrants and other vulnerable populations of human trafficking risks. HTRI identified the following areas around which prevention research should focus: vulnerabilities of at-risk populations; labor conditions and exploitation of labor migrants; targeting and effectiveness of awareness-raising and behavior-change interventions; and safe migration and exploitation by labor recruiters/brokers (formal and informal).

? Question 1.1: Are current models, tools, and methods to identify and assist populations vulnerable to trafficking effective at reducing trafficking risk in both the short and long term?

SUB-QUESTIONS:

- **1.1.1** What kinds of social protection programs (or program packages) best meet minimum standards of care and protect against trafficking risks for potential victims?
- **1.1.2** How can poverty alleviation, humanitarian assistance, gender-based violence, and development programs be adapted to better identify trafficking victims and reduce human trafficking risks?
- **1.1.3** Are programs that use community-based (e.g., Community Vigilance Committees, Village Parent Groups) and/or survivor-led or participatory approaches more effective at identifying and supporting victims of trafficking?
- **1.1.4** How effective are current models and training programs that seek to assist first responders (including law enforcement officials) in identifying and supporting victims of trafficking in a manner that is victim centered and trauma informed?

STATE OF THE EVIDENCE AND PROGRAM/ KNOWLEDGE GAPS:

- Assumptions about which geographic areas and groups are most vulnerable to trafficking (e.g., comparative poverty rates, proximity to national borders, internal migration rates) do not always equate to high trafficking source areas.⁸
- There is an assumption that improved social programs/safety nets promote individual resilience and reduce risks for labor and sex trafficking, but more evidence is needed to directly link the effectiveness of social protection programs on protecting individuals from being trafficked. For example, one quasi-experimental study in a region of India with high levels of forced labor in agriculture, brick kilns, and the carpet industry found that a community empowerment model (where groups identify their own key priorities) was able to reduce indebtedness, improve food security, and increase use of government services (Gausman et al. 2016). However, a study of agricultural income shocks in Indonesia showed that increased skills and livelihoods for individuals can lead to increases in migration (Bazzi 2017), which could also result in increased trafficking incidence.
- An RCT in Nigeria found an assertive school counseling program (based on classical conditioning techniques to help students assert their rights and report if a situation makes them feel uncomfortable) to be effective in reducing the degree of children's' vulnerability to trafficking (Uwah and Udom 2016).

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PROPOSED RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND METHODS:

- Improved government administrative data practices and use of global indicators on human trafficking (including adoption of the recently released **Human Trafficking Case Data Standard**) forthcoming from IOM/UNODC) to track trafficking stocks and flows
- Human trafficking prevalence measurements combined with **RCTs or quasi-experimental methods** to measure the effect and impact of social protection, livelihoods support, humanitarian assistance, and human trafficking-focused prevention programs (e.g., if governments or programs have threshold scores for eligibility, those can be leveraged to conduct high quality quasi-experimental studies)
- White paper/synthesis of evidence outlining current and recent research in trafficking-adjacent fields relevant to prevention, targeted to policymakers and implementing organizations that are developing new/adjusting existing prevention interventions
- Evidence review of existing frameworks and methods to measure trafficking risk reduction
- Formal validation and dissemination of existing guidelines, protocols, data collection systems, and standard operating procedures (SOPs) for victim identification and referrals; this should include substantive input from people with lived experience of human trafficking

? Question 1.2: What kinds of private sector-focused interventions can disrupt trafficking and reduce exploitation?

SUB-QUESTIONS:

- **1.2.1** Are worker voice apps and platforms effective (and are NGO-led worker voice platforms different in their effectiveness from company-led or government-led platforms)?
- **1.2.2** Are training, audits, and certification programs effective at preventing trafficking in sectors known to have high incidence of trafficking and forced labor (e.g., agriculture, hospitality sector)?
- **1.2.3** Can programs that seek to link youth with vocational training and jobs reduce forced criminality, recruitment into gangs, and other forms of human trafficking?

STATE OF THE EVIDENCE AND PROGRAM/ KNOWLEDGE GAPS:

- There are some emerging studies on labor voice applications conducted by relevant actors (Ulula, BanQu, LaborLinks/ELEVATE/LRQA) that should be tracked (FHI 360 2019), though more work is needed in this area (Berg, Farbenblum and Kintominas 2020).
- When services offering labor rights protection are available, awareness of violations increases among workers, but low take-up of these services suggests the need for more aggressive outreach strategies (Borelli, Zapata, and Paredes 2016).
- A quasi-experimental evaluation of a transparency program designed to make compliance assessments publicly available in Jordan's garment exporting industry reflected an increase in employers' compliance with labor laws in 28 critical areas (Robertson 2019).
- A 2019 study posited that due diligence-oriented (top-down) mobile phone-based technologies helped control the risk of exploitation in supply chains located in modern slavery hot spots, but workers lacked trust in the reporting process, and businesses were hesitant to expose or address cases of modern slavery. Conversely, empowerment-oriented worker feedback tools (bottom-up) were found to regularly identify instances of modern slavery, forced labor,

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and human trafficking, and to assist exploited workers, but these remediation-focused mechanisms did not have clear linkages to businesses or the ability to inform the due diligence or remediation actions needed when exploitative labor and recruitment conditions were found (Taylor and Shih 2019).

PROPOSED RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND METHODS:

- **RCTs** to measure the effect and impact of different models of labor voice programs (including behavior change based on information provision, ability to report abuse, and ability to access restitution)
- Rigorous quantitative and qualitative research on the impact of training, audits, and certification programs on forced labor in industry-specific supply chains
- Systematic review of private sector-focused prevention interventions to examine how effective interventions can be adapted and scaled in a cost-effective way to avoid duplication and waste

❓ Question 1.3: How effective are awareness-raising and social and behavior change communication in improving the identification of victims, reducing vulnerability to human trafficking and exploitation by employers, and decreasing consumers' use of products and services that involve forced labor and human trafficking?

SUB-QUESTIONS:

1.3.1 What discrete prevention approaches and/or information should be provided to migrants who seek to migrate for work (especially those affected by climate change, emergencies, and conflict)? At what point(s) in their decision-making and migration journey is safe migration information most effective?

1.3.2 How can migrant communities in destination countries be leveraged and engaged to increase identification of victims and reporting on suspected cases of human trafficking?

1.3.3 How can existing evidence from behavior change interventions be adapted to reduce human trafficking (for example, do perceptions of relative deprivation alter risk-taking in migration decision-making) and improve identification of victims? How can behavior-change interventions be designed to avoid placing blame on victims (rather than on the traumatic events or systemic issues that enable human trafficking)?

1.3.4 Which kinds of awareness-raising and social and behavior change communication efforts are most effective at reducing different types of trafficking (e.g., trafficking of children for forced begging, trafficking of adult women for domestic work)?

1.3.5 What kind of activities (e.g., livelihoods support, cash transfers) most effectively pair with awareness-raising or behavior change campaigns to improve the results of trafficking prevention programs?

1.3.6 What kind of awareness-raising efforts have been shown to be effective in helping individuals make better consumer choices that do not support labor exploitation or human trafficking?

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STATE OF THE EVIDENCE AND PROGRAM/ KNOWLEDGE GAPS:

- Studies on both awareness-raising and safe migration point to the importance of the design stage in setting up a successful intervention (e.g., targeting communities with high out-migration rates; assessing baseline levels of awareness and previous exposure to awareness-raising activities prior to designing campaigns; ensuring the involvement of the target populations in the creation of the content). They also note that while information campaigns and safe migration programs can increase individual and community awareness, they are not a substitute for addressing the structural conditions that underpin the economic, legal, and political conditions that enable labor exploitation. Thus, a multi-faceted approach is required, which makes isolating the effect of awareness activities even more challenging. Moreover, information campaign interventions are often not evaluated rigorously enough to produce generalizable results (Tjaden, Morgenstern and Laczko 2018).
- A 2021 study using a realist evaluation model shows null results on trafficking incidence from safe migration interventions (e.g., pre-decision training, pre-departure training, smart phone apps, info cards, awareness campaigns in destination countries) for women in South Asia (Zimmerman et al. 2021). Similarly, a recent RCT in the Philippines found that pre-departure orientation seminars for migrants to the U.S. had no effect on employment, settlement, and subjective wellbeing, and led to a decrease in social network connections (Barsbai et al. 2021). In contrast, counseling, outreach, and pre-departure sessions provided by migrant resource centers (MRCs) in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, and Pakistan led to large and significant reductions in self-reported likelihood of migrating irregularly and increased awareness of safe options and contact points (Dennison 2023). Prospective migrants could ask questions confidentially, while those already planning to emigrate received tailored information on travel procedures, safety, and legal matters for their destination country.
- Assessing baseline knowledge levels is important before launching an awareness-raising campaign. A lab-in-the-field experiment in rural Gambia found that providing accurate information on the mortality risk and the likelihood of gaining legal residence in Europe can change the migration intentions of potential irregular migrants, increasing or decreasing them based on whether the odds were more or less favorable than they initially believed (Bah and Batista 2020). One-year follow-up data shows that reported migration intentions align with actual migration decisions, a correlation also found in other studies (Dennison 2023; Docquier et al. 2014; Tjaden, Auer and Laczko 2019). Early analysis of the results of a recently-completed study in Nigeria also found that prospective migrants were already well-informed about the risks and working conditions of their destination countries (though they were relatively poorly informed about features of the journey) (Beber and Scacco, forthcoming; IPA 2020a).
- Awareness-raising should not simply target vulnerable populations. For example, campaigns targeting migrant domestic workers' (MDWs) employers can improve MDWs' work conditions and reduce exploitation. An RCT of an awareness campaign concerning MDW labor rights in Hong Kong showed that, while the campaign had little impact on MDWs due to their already high baseline levels of rights awareness, it increased knowledge among the general public and as well as employers (Boittin et al. 2020). Similarly, an RCT of an intervention in Hong Kong and Saudi Arabia that encouraged Filipino MDWs to show their employer a photo of themselves with their family to highlight their humanity and personal backgrounds increased workers' satisfaction with their employers in both countries and significantly reduced mistreatment in Hong Kong (Barsbai et al. 2022).
- An RCT of a peer-to-peer information intervention implemented by IOM in Senegal called Migrants as Messenger found that the intervention, featuring a movie screening with returnee migrant testimonials followed by peer-to-peer discussions, increased awareness of migration risks and opportunities and reduced the intention to migrate irregularly but had no effect on factual migration knowledge (Tjaden and Dunsch 2021). A quasi-experimental evaluation of a similar IOM campaign in Guinea with a short movie screening yielded comparable results (Bia-Zafinikamia et al. 2020). A second phase of IOM's Migrants as Messenger intervention in the Gambia, Guinea, and Senegal, which targeted young prospective migrants with a wider range of peer-to-peer-messaging activities, had no effect on participants' intention to migrate irregularly and mixed effects on knowledge about safe migration (Hebie, Sessou, and Tjaden 2023).

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- An RCT of a school-based information campaign in Nigeria using a combination of oral and visual mediums improved knowledge and perceived risk outcomes associated with human trafficking and irregular migration, reduced intention to migrate irregularly and increased decisions to pursue safe alternatives (Obi et al. 2019). A recently completed RCT in Nigeria is examining whether providing information to households about trafficking risks and economic opportunities at home affects the likelihood of irregular migration attempts (Beber and Scacco, forthcoming; IPA 2020a).
- An RCT in the Gambia testing different approaches to reducing unsafe migration found that providing information about the risks of the journey was insufficient to reduce longer-term migration intentions on its own, and was far more effective when combined with vocational training or facilitating migration to an alternative destination (Bah et al. 2022).
- Studies on individual decision-making, aspirations, and risk-taking show that aspirations have a strong role in people's ability to escape poverty traps (Dalton, Ghosal and Mani 2016), and that perceptions of relative deprivation induce more risk-seeking behavior. This points to the interaction between inequality and risk tolerance, and how economic and social forces that alter perceived relative deprivation can increase vulnerability to exploitation (i.e., when an aspirations window is open, an exploitation window for egregious human rights violations like human trafficking also opens) (Mo 2018).
- Study results are mixed on the impact of awareness campaigns on trafficking incidence. For example, an RCT evaluating an awareness documentary in Indonesia showed that while there are short-term effects on a range of attitudinal and knowledge measures, few of these effects are durable (USC 2014). Similarly, an RCT found that a community awareness campaign in Nepal increased knowledge and short-term urgency and concern around the issue and ability to identify trafficking, but most impacts did not persist in the long term (Archer, Boittin and Mo 2016). This points to the need for social and behavior change communication interventions to consider the diverse range of risk and protective factors related to trafficking, and to identify and target attitudes and behaviors that are actually modifiable.
- Because prevention research to date has primarily focused on adult migration, there is a lack of studies on the effectiveness of prevention in contexts that do not involve migration - either internal or international. This includes programs that examine the effectiveness of behavior change programs working with religious leaders to eliminate the practice of sending children to cities to work in extended family/strangers' households (*talibe* system) or familial trafficking for child domestic work, forced begging, prostitution, and other abusive practices. Emerging research on modifiable determinants of behavior around child trafficking in residential institutions, for domestic work as *restavek*, and cross-border trafficking in Haiti suggests that behavior change campaigns are most effective when they include information on alternatives to orphanages (showcasing successful foster placements), accessing support for families to stay together, safe and decent working conditions for children, and the risks of irregular cross-border migration (Pocock, Stemp and St-Louis, forthcoming).

PROPOSED RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND METHODS:

- RCTs to examine the effect and impact of safe migration programs on migrant behavior (e.g., risk-taking) and outcomes
- Improved intervention development research (IDR) as well as monitoring and evaluation support for organizations to improve their program design, data collection and analysis systems, and theories of change for safe migration interventions
- Rigorous qualitative and quantitative research on the role of decision-making, aspirations, community norms, and risk preferences in making migration decisions to inform intervention design
- Rigorous qualitative and quantitative research on the role of family and religious institutions in recruitment and trafficking of children for begging, domestic work, and sex to inform intervention design

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❓ Question 1.4: What are the impacts of migration policies and programs that aim to reduce trafficking and exploitation and/or manage migration flows on migrant workers, refugees, and asylum seekers?

SUB-QUESTIONS:

- **1.4.1** What policies and programs have improved ethical practices by labor recruiting agencies in trafficking source and/or destination countries? Have no-fee migration policies (such as the Employer Pays Principle) impacted migration flows and trafficking incidence?
- **1.4.2** Do programs that increase resources, skills, and support to government actors (e.g., labor attaches, consular officers) measurably reduce exploitation and improve conditions for migrants?
- **1.4.3** How can migration-focused projects successfully provide information across migration corridors and link migrants to support services and networks in transit and destination communities?

STATE OF THE EVIDENCE AND PROGRAM/ KNOWLEDGE GAPS:

- Governments that restrict migrant workers' ability to organize and/or have policies that allow limited due process for identified undocumented migrant workers tend to have worse outcomes for exploited workers.⁹
- A quasi-experimental analysis of a fair recruitment pilot in the Nepal-Jordan migration corridor that focused on eliminating recruitment fees, informing prospective migrants about all aspects of their job, and better matching of workers with employers showed positive impacts to worker wellbeing and productivity and improved contract understanding/reduced contract deception (Babbitt et al. 2019). Further exploration of the effectiveness of efforts under ILO's Fair Recruitment Initiative could potentially use data collected by the ILO (2020a)'s global study on recruitment fees and related costs to fill this evidence gap.
- Some overviews of the impacts of national recruitment policies on worker exploitation and trafficking have been published (ICCR 2017; Parsi et al. 2021), but more research is needed about country uptake, the incidence of continued worker abuse in migration corridors with no-fee policies, and best practices in sustainable, ethical recruitment processes for migrant workers.
- Programs that use social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp) to promote safe migration messaging and connect migrants with support/migrant communities need to be studied further for their effectiveness (see Haarman, Tjaden and Lopez (2020) for a pilot study of a Facebook post campaign targeting potential migrants in West Africa).
- An RCT in the Philippines found that migration facilitation policies designed to overcome information constraints at the source country level do not substantially expand access to international migration, suggesting information constraints are not a key barrier (Beam, McKenzie, and Yang 2016). While assistance with documentation and matching with recruiters increased job-search efforts and the likelihood of securing an interview, these interventions did not result in increased migration. The effect of jointly improving migration policies and programs at both the source and destination country levels should be investigated further.
- More research is needed on the impacts of asylum and refugee policies for people fleeing untenable situations; earning potential in refugee camps and host countries; and the use of smugglers/opportunities for traffickers in refugee camps.

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PROPOSED RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND METHODS:

- **RCTs** to examine the effect and impact (as well as the cost effectiveness) of fair and no-fee recruitment programs on migrant behavior and outcomes
- Rigorous qualitative and quantitative research, possibly using quasi-experimental methods and realist evaluation, on the rollout of national no-fee recruitment policies and their impact on workers, governments, and businesses
- White paper/synthesis of evidence outlining current and recent research in related areas, specifically on interventions examining their impacts on refugees' ability to earn an income and become productive members of their host communities

HTRI Priority Research Question 2: How can counter-trafficking actors most effectively support trafficking victims and improve short- and long-term outcomes for trafficking survivors? (Protection)

Protection encompasses a vast array of comprehensive efforts to identify, assist, and support those who have been trafficked. HTRI identified two areas around which protection research should focus: identification and provision of services that are trauma- and survivor-informed, and improved survivor support and reintegration.

? Question 2.1: What are effective practices in supporting victims of trafficking and referring them to survivor- and trauma-informed services?

SUB-QUESTIONS:

2.1.1 What are effective methods for assisting victims of trafficking as they engage in services and work through their healing process? How can programs support individuals who do not want to be identified or referred to human trafficking support services, as well as those who initially engage but fall out of care?

2.1.2 What are effective practices used by frontline workers to support victims of trafficking, including child soldiers (e.g., training and partnerships with physical and mental health care providers, identification guidelines/trainings/standards of care for immigration officials)?

2.1.3 How effective are national referral mechanisms and other efforts that seek to implement minimum standards of care (such as the SPHERE Guidelines for Prevention and Response to Gender Based Violence in Humanitarian Settings) in improving referrals and services for victims of trafficking and improving survivors' long-term outcomes?

2.1.4 How can evidence-based mental health interventions developed for conflict and post-conflict settings be adapted for use among human trafficking victims?

2.1.5 What services or combinations of services lead to stronger long term outcomes for survivors, considering differences among groups as well as trafficking types and assessing holistic outcome areas (such as mental health, physical health, safety/security, education, and vocation)

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- For one subset of trafficking victims – former child soldiers – a variety of psychotherapy interventions have been shown to reduce post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and improve other mental health outcomes. Among them, trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) is considered the only well-established treatment for children exposed to traumatic events (Silverman et al. 2008). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), TF-CBT was shown to reduce PTSD and overall psychosocial distress, depression or anxiety-like symptoms and behavioral problems, as well as increase prosocial behavior for former male child soldiers and other war-affected boys (McMullen et al. 2013). In Haiti, a spiritually-oriented TF-CBT program was found to significantly reduce post-traumatic stress symptoms in child survivors of *restavek*, a modern form of indentured servitude (Wang et al. 2016). Former child soldiers who had experienced violence required targeted psychosocial services resulting from time away from school and work, along with higher levels of psychological distress (Blattman and Annan 2010).
- Narrative exposure therapy (NET) is another trauma-focused treatment that creates a chronological narrative of the patients' life as part of the therapy process. Among former Ugandan child soldiers, NET significantly reduced PTSD symptoms as well as other outcomes not primarily targeted, such as depression, suicidal ideation, and feelings of guilt, and it had positive impacts on readjustment (Ertl et al. 2011). An adaptation of NET for forensic offender rehabilitation (FORNET) was developed to treat PTSD and appetitive aggression among former combatants. In the DRC, FORNET reduced PTSD symptoms but had no effect on appetitive aggression for male former child soldiers (Hermenau et al. 2013); conversely, among female former child soldiers, it reduced both mental health problems and appetitive aggression (Robjant et al. 2019).
- The use of NET to treat trafficking survivors suffering from PTSD is also being evaluated in the United Kingdom. An RCT showed promising results in reducing PTSD severity and general distress among adult survivors (Brady et al. 2021).
- In India, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) and art-based group therapy were delivered to male survivors of child trafficking but had no impacts on PTSD symptoms, dysfunctional trauma-related cognition, or depression. Meta-analytic studies suggest that while EMDR therapy reduces PTSD in adults and adolescents, it may not adequately address the complexity and severity of trauma in this population (Khubsing et al. 2020).
- A systematic review of social service interventions for female sex trafficking survivors – addressing their physical health, mental health, and personal development – identified occupational therapy, standardized mental health therapy, and wrap-around services as the most effective intervention types for this group (Schroeder et al. 2024).
- Given the limited and heterogeneous evidence to date, further research is needed to develop and test mental health interventions for trafficking survivors, including conditions beyond PTSD (Wright et al. 2021), as well as interventions addressing other health issues, such as physical and sexual health problems experienced by survivors (Ottisova et al. 2016).
- There is anecdotal evidence that conducting outreach in victims' peer communities (e.g., religious organizations, Asia Pacific Islander groups) can encourage victim self-identification, but there is a lack of rigorous evidence about the effectiveness of these efforts to support victims' self-identification.
- There is a solid evidence base around behavior change communication (BCC) and behavioral economics that can be used to inform efforts to change community social norms that enable trafficking and reduce stigma for survivors (UNIAP and ADB 2011). For example, a pilot project in Uganda is examining interventions to reduce stigma, including negative beliefs and behaviors, towards South Sudanese refugees in northwestern Uganda (IPA 2022a).
- Healthcare providers are in a unique position to recognize, engage and support trafficking victims. An evaluation among emergency department providers in California found that an educational presentation increased recognition of victims and knowledge of resources, such as who to call if they encounter a potential victim (Grace et al. 2014), though that randomization was done at the hospital level with a relatively small sample size. Similarly, a quasi-experimental study found that a brief survivor-informed educational program for pediatric residents increased victim identification and referral knowledge, thereby increasing residents' confidence in caring for trafficking victims (Garg et al. 2021). A systematic review of both rigorous and non-rigorous evaluations of human trafficking educational interventions for healthcare providers found increased awareness, knowledge, and confidence in providers' skills across all studies (Fraley et al. 2019).
- Likewise, social service workers, such as Child Protective Services (CPS), play a vital role in identifying and supporting victims of child exploitation and trafficking. A 90-minute training on commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) for

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CPS significantly improved employees' ability to identify risk factors, knowledge of laws and services, and willingness to refer victims and at-risk children (McMahon-Howard and Reimers et al. 2013).

- A number of toolkits to improve identification and referrals have been developed in the U.S. and internationally (e.g., HEAL Trafficking and Hope for Justice's Protocol Toolkit for Developing a Response to Victims of Human Trafficking in Health Care Settings (2017), U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Office of Trafficking in Persons' Adult Human Trafficking Screening Tool (2018) IOM Guidance on Referral Mechanisms for the Protection and Assistance of Migrants Vulnerable to Violence, Exploitation and Abuse and Victims of Trafficking (2019), but evaluations of their effectiveness have not yet taken place.

PROPOSED RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND METHODS:

- **RCTs** (or added arms of existing research studies) to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions that aim to increase rates of victim self-identification
- White paper/synthesis of evidence outlining current and recent research in BCC interventions as well as refugee and humanitarian sector interventions to reduce stigma towards outgroups such as human trafficking victims, refugees, and others
- Pilot research to evaluate the effectiveness of training (including curricula, tools/guidelines, etc.) and engaging frontline workers, including those employed in public health, education, and other related fields in victim identification and support (leading to full RCTs)
- Establish validated victim identification, screening (e.g., mental health screening tools), and referral tools where necessary and appropriate
- White paper/synthesis of evidence outlining current and recent research on intimate partner violence/domestic violence to examine the potential use of screening tools (e.g., danger and lethality assessments from the domestic violence high risk team model (Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center, n.d.)) to identify those most at risk of human trafficking
- Development and testing the rollout of a global minimum standard of care for human trafficking victims, including guidelines for country-level adaptation

? Question 2.2: How can survivor support and reintegration interventions be survivor- and trauma-informed and designed with the needs of vulnerable groups in mind?

SUB-QUESTIONS:

2.2.1 What are the best approaches to support effective short-term and long-term trauma- and survivor-informed reintegration and support programs?

2.2.2 What are effective approaches for reintegration and support programs that are both survivor-informed and survivor led?

2.2.3 What are appropriate approaches to the provision of shelter and out-of-shelter services for non-female trafficking victims and individuals that identify as LGBTQIA+?

2.2.4 What are some proven models for engaging survivors of trafficking to facilitate entry/re-entry into local job markets in a sustainable way?

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STATE OF THE EVIDENCE AND PROGRAM/ KNOWLEDGE GAPS:

- Evidence on the effectiveness of savings groups, microcredit, cash transfers, graduation programs, vocational training, soft skills training, and other interventions is very robust; however, counter-trafficking implementing organizations often develop service programs for human trafficking survivors without knowing about this evidence base or using pertinent information to inform program design. While these small-scale survivor-focused programs can be helpful to some survivors in the short term, they are often not sustainable in the long term and can sometimes have adverse impacts (e.g., promoting training in “traditional” skills such as piecework and embroidery that do not always enable women survivors of trafficking to escape poverty). Additional guidance and research are needed on incorporating survivors into larger, existing labor markets, rather than creating localized markets that may keep vulnerable individuals in poverty.
- Qualitative research on trafficking shelters shows that very few shelter spaces are offered to male clients, leaving a large gap in available services for boys and male victims. For example, a recent study on child trafficking in Uganda found that boys were equally as likely as girls to be trafficked but less likely to be able to access services (ICF Macro, Inc. 2021). Anecdotally, trafficking stigma can be even greater for men and boys, and they may be less likely to seek services even when they know they are available.
- Reports on shelter use also suggest that both male and female trafficking victims avoid shelters, though for different reasons: government-run shelters can limit or prohibit individuals’ ability to work, and clients sometimes fear swift deportation if they do not meet the national definition of a trafficking victim, while NGO-run shelters can drastically limit clients’ movement and recreate the prison-like environments that some victims have just escaped. More research is needed to examine the impacts of shelter and out-of-shelter support for female-identifying, male-identifying, and non-binary survivors (adults and minors as well as LGBTQI+ individuals).
- Evidence from an intervention targeting low-income, vulnerable youth in the Dominican Republic shows that soft-skills training can be transformative for women, although less so for men. While the effects on employment are only perceived in the short term, skills learned persist over time (Acevedo et al. 2018). An RCT in Bangladesh found that a program that offered skills training for girls, access to trusted mentors, and engagement with the community to raise awareness about building adolescents’ skills reduced the risk of child marriage (Amin, Saha, and Ahmed 2018).
- The use of different types of psychosocial interventions and trauma-informed care are also areas that have been rigorously studied (van der Kolk 2015) and can be applied to protection programs (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, n.d.). However, there are few studies to date examining the effectiveness of trauma-informed care for survivors of trafficking, particularly in resource-poor environments where there are few qualified social workers or other certified health professionals. One study from Ghana does suggest that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can be successfully delivered by non-specialist providers in low-income countries, with strong impacts on mental and physical health and bandwidth (Barker et al. 2021). Another study conducted a clinical assessment of the psychosocial and mental health needs of bonded laborers in south-eastern Nepal and provided recommendations for psychosocial interventions in an area with scarce counselling or mental health services; however, no interventions or evaluations have been conducted to date (Freedom Fund 2017).
- A psychological intervention to mitigate the effects of internalized stigma among individuals engaged in commercial sex in India was found to be successful in reshaping self-perception and reducing suboptimal savings and health choices (Ghosal et al. 2022).

PROPOSED RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND METHODS:

- White paper/synthesis of evidence outlining current and recent research focused on social protection and poverty alleviation programs (including programs focused on individuals who have experienced traumatic life events),¹⁰ targeted to policymakers and implementing organizations that are developing new/adjusting existing livelihoods support, job and entrepreneurship training, and other economic support interventions
- White paper/synthesis of evidence outlining current and recent research in the refugee and humanitarian sector to

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provide healing and reconciliation interventions for populations in post-conflict (or active conflict) areas that have faced extreme trauma

- Support and training for non-quantitative researchers and practitioners to implement **RCTs** evaluating the effectiveness of mental health and wellness interventions to address the needs of survivors of trafficking, potentially using the ASO tool (IJM, n.d.) to measure survivors' progress toward restoration and reintegration
- Engage donors/implementers that are conducting pilot programs that provide survivors of trafficking with counseling and training to move into open jobs in existing markets¹¹ and discuss options for **RCT** development for future project phases
- Pilot research to evaluate the effectiveness of shelter vs. out-of-shelter service provision with randomized control and treatment groups (leading to full **RCT**)
- Pilot research on effective methods to provide services to male-identifying victims (both adults and minors) and LGBTQI+ victims

HTRI Priority Research Question 3: How can criminal justice systems be engaged to effectively disrupt and prosecute trafficking-related crimes and provide trauma-informed, victim-centered legal support to victims of trafficking?

Effective enforcement, investigation, and prosecution of the crime of human trafficking is vital to deter those who profit from it. In its annual Trafficking in Persons Report, the U.S. Department of State (2024) tracks the efficacy of criminal justice responses across governments and makes recommendations for specific prosecution-focused actions that would improve country rankings in the report. However, rigorous experimental research on what actually works to ensure an effective criminal justice response to trafficking is limited, and there are several challenges involved in conducting experimental research with criminal justice system actors. More work is needed to engage stakeholders and actors in criminal justice systems to systematically analyze the types of interventions they use to overcome the obstacles that hinder criminal justice responses to human trafficking and build successful human trafficking cases. HTRI has identified three areas around which prosecution research should focus: supporting law enforcement and other actors in justice systems to enforce laws against trafficking; empowering all facets of the justice system pipeline (identification and referrals, investigation, prosecution, adjudication, and legal support) to respond to trafficking crimes and support victims of trafficking effectively; and improving multi-stakeholder coordination and community trust in law enforcement. HTRI believes that the use of trauma-informed, victim-centered practices and approaches to engage victims of trafficking should be a throughline for all three of these sub-areas of research.

❓ Question 3.1: How can police, border guards, labor investigators, and other enforcement actors in the justice system effectively disrupt traffickers and enforce laws against trafficking in persons?

SUB-QUESTIONS:

3.1.1 How can training and mentoring programs for law enforcement be designed and implemented to improve their knowledge of trafficking laws, attitudes towards victims, and ability to identify and arrest traffickers?

3.1.2 Which law enforcement and criminal justice system actions are most effective in deterring individuals from engaging in sex and labor trafficking, preventing trafficking-related criminal acts, and reducing recidivism among offenders?

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3.1.3 How can law enforcement, immigration officials, and other enforcement actors build trauma-informed, victim-centered practices in their work and improve the cooperation and trust of victims of trafficking?

3.1.4 What kind of law enforcement actions and approaches are effective at disrupting local, national, and international criminal networks (e.g., the role of recruiting agencies in overseas labor recruiting, the role of families in engaging or promoting online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) in their own households)?

3.1.5 Does increased trafficking enforcement and criminal deterrence measurably reduce the prevalence of trafficking and what are the factors necessary for sustainable reduction?

STATE OF THE EVIDENCE AND PROGRAM/ KNOWLEDGE GAPS:

- While law enforcement officials around the world have taken part in counter-trafficking capacity-building and training programs for nearly two decades, the impact of these training and capacity-building efforts is not yet established. There is some evidence that conducting follow-up activities to provide additional support and/or training helps ensure that long-term behavioral change is occurring (Winrock International 2020a), but more research is needed.
- An RCT in Nepal showed that it is easier for police trainings to increase knowledge on penalties of trafficking than procedural knowledge (e.g., how to handle suspects and how to recognize human trafficking), and that the trainings led to a greater appreciation of male victimhood and the risk of trafficking occurring locally. However, they also found that as misperceptions about the trafficking process were addressed (e.g., clarifying that the trafficking process often started with deception, not kidnapping), there was some evidence of increased beliefs that victims were to blame because they were naïve (Boittin et al. 2019). Further research is needed to determine what types of training or interventions change police behaviors (not just knowledge) and influence case outcomes without increasing stigma against survivors of trafficking.
- Few programs have addressed demand reduction strategies for sex trafficking; those that have (e.g., so-called “John Schools”, which targeted convicted clients of sex workers) were widely replicated but were later shown to have resulted in attitude change but not behavior change (Lovell and Jordan 2012). Crime deterrence strategies using CBT (Blattman, Jamison and Sheridan 2017; Heller et al. 2017) and preemptive engagement by police officers with offenders (Ariel, Englefield and Denley 2019) have been proven to be successful in trafficking-adjacent fields. However, several studies (Lussier and Cale 2013; Aronowitz 2009) have described that it is extremely difficult to deter preferential offenders when their crimes are linked to deviant behaviors (e.g., OSEC), but traffickers – people or businesses that are motivated by money to offend – can be curtailed or stopped by increasing the likelihood of arrest or increasing the costs that traffickers have to incur to remain in business (e.g., security, inability to operate openly). Understanding how potential traffickers assess the risks and benefits of engaging in trafficking could help counter-trafficking actors identify the levers to minimize or prevent entry into the field and facilitate legitimate forms of work for prospective traffickers.
- Several reviews and guidelines have been published that describe the use of online platforms, apps, and other tools that contribute to the recruitment of child victims for online sexual exploitation and propose measures to enforce laws against OSEC perpetrators and identify victims in urgent need of interventions (IJM 2021; ICMEC 2017; ICMEC and UNICEF 2016), but the effectiveness of these efforts has not yet been tested or evaluated.

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PROPOSED RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND METHODS:

- RCTs to evaluate the effectiveness of law enforcement training and capacity-building programs in changing knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors/skills of these actors in the medium and long-term; these should examine the trainings themselves as well as support provided to participants post-training (e.g., mentoring, supportive supervision, affinity groups).
- Qualitative research examining barriers and opportunities to institutionalize law enforcement training on human trafficking at a systems level.
- Pilot research to evaluate the effectiveness of different investigative approaches, such as prosecution-led versus law enforcement-led investigations, in identifying and prosecuting traffickers engaged in OSEC, with the goal of informing the design of a future RCT.
- White paper/synthesis of evidence outlining promising themes from economic theory regarding methods to increase the risk and difficulty of perpetrating human trafficking and reduce profitability (e.g., ensuring there are more profitable routes of commerce/employment available than trafficking; reducing the ease of corrupt practices in business, such as targeting the areas that require corruption and making them more difficult to manage; disrupting the capacity for networks to form or for networks to engage in trafficking).
- Rapid literature review of current counter-trafficking demand reduction interventions and their impacts.
- Pilot research to examine promising demand reduction strategies or crime deterrence strategies (within the context of deterring trafficking offenses or recidivism), including approaches to rehabilitation that may reduce recidivism among perpetrators and address underlying factors, such as prior trauma or adverse experiences.

? **Question 3.2: How can all facets of the justice system pipeline – from identification and referrals to investigations, prosecutions, adjudication, and legal aid – be supported to effectively respond to trafficking-related crimes and ensure high-quality legal support for victims of trafficking?**

SUB-QUESTIONS:

3.2.1 What are the most effective methods for improving the efficiency and success rate of trafficking cases along the justice system pipeline – from case origination to investigation, charging, initial and preliminary hearings, discovery and pre-trial motions, trial, and appeals?

3.2.2 What are the most promising interventions that are currently being used to improve the quality of investigations and prosecution (e.g., gathering digital evidence, conducting online investigations)?

3.2.3 How can trauma-informed practices be effectively integrated across all stages of the criminal justice pipeline to improve survivor and case outcomes for trafficking survivors and build long-term trust in the justice system?

3.2.4 Which trauma-informed and victim-centered interventions currently show the most promise in improving prosecution outcomes and reducing negative experiences for survivors (e.g., conducting interviews in an effective and victim-centered manner, recorded interviews, remote testimony capabilities, providing victim advocates, providing monetary and in-kind support to victims such as transportation, relying on other forms of evidence to reduce requirements for victim testimony)? How does the use of trauma informed/victim centered practices in the prosecution process impact survivor outcomes in the short and long term?

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3.2.5 How can justice-focused counter-trafficking programs and policies promote ethical practices by labor recruiting agencies in both trafficking source and destination countries?

3.2.6 What justice system approaches can be used to improve or enhance restitution measures available for victims of exploitation and trafficking?

STATE OF THE EVIDENCE AND PROGRAM/ KNOWLEDGE GAPS:

- Various models are being tested to speed up and prioritize human trafficking-related trials (e.g., special tribunals, trafficking-focused task forces, multi-disciplinary teams, the use of plea bargains in trafficking prosecutions). Still, there is a lack of rigorous research examining their effectiveness. Preliminary evidence suggests that the use of victim-centered principles and MDTs can be impactful. Still, many countries struggle to both put the intensive investigation and care models into place and fully fund them so they can succeed.
- Most research to date has focused on trends, challenges, and gaps in the investigation and prosecution stages of the criminal justice response. Still, few of the best practices that have been brought forward to date have been experimentally tested. Preliminary findings from qualitative research suggest that similar obstacles hinder successful criminal justice responses to trafficking, including: definitional and legal uncertainties around human trafficking that make it difficult for law enforcement to identify what constitutes trafficking crimes and make it challenging to pursue trafficking cases successfully in court; a lack of specialized training on investigating human trafficking cases, trauma and victimization experiences, proactive identification strategies, and trauma-informed interviewing techniques; and stereotypes about trafficking that result in unequal treatment and access to justice only for certain victims.
- A 2020 evidence review (Winrock International 2020a) notes that programs that provide support for implementing labor and trafficking laws at both the national and subnational levels—and clearly defining human trafficking, forced labor, and child labor—have stronger prosecution-related outcomes than those focusing only on implementing national laws.
- Counter-trafficking donors and implementing organizations have increasingly focused on the use of alternative dispute mechanisms and other restitution measures as a better option for victims, because the restorative justice process is often faster, and the burden of proof is lower. However, prosecution actors point out that reducing the crime to civil cases and payment of fees allows traffickers to keep operating unabated and perpetrating the crime with other victims.

PROPOSED RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND METHODS:

- RCTs to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions that are currently being used to improve the quality of human trafficking investigations (e.g., gathering digital evidence, conducting online investigations).
- Pilot research to examine the effectiveness of prosecution-focused interventions designed to reduce trauma or negative experiences for survivors (e.g., conducting interviews in an effective and victim-centered manner, recorded interviews, remote testimony capabilities, providing victim advocates, providing monetary and in-kind support to victims (such as transportation), relying on other forms of evidence to reduce requirements for victim testimony).
- Pilot research to examine the effectiveness of tailored models (e.g., plea bargaining, inter-agency partnerships) or specialized human trafficking units (multidisciplinary teams, task forces, courts, tribunals) to prosecute human trafficking cases more rapidly, with higher quality, and with higher conviction rates.
- RCTs or pilot research to compare victim outcomes across three distinct approaches: (1) no engagement with the justice system, (2) engagement in trafficking-focused criminal or civil processes, and (3) alternative dispute resolution or community-based conflict resolution processes. Examine how these approaches impact short- and long-term restitution measures, as well as other survivor outcomes, to determine which leads to the most favorable outcomes for survivors.
- White paper/synthesis of evidence outlining interventions in related fields (e.g., narcotics, weapons, sexual violence, and wildlife trafficking) using predictive programs and big data to assist with prosecution efforts.

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❓ Question 3.3: How can criminal justice actors build community trust in the rule of law and support the provision of coordinated, victim-centered responses to trafficking crimes?

SUB-QUESTIONS:

3.3.1 What kinds of interventions are most effective for increasing the ability, knowledge, and willingness of communities to refer potential trafficking cases to law enforcement and/or formal justice systems?

3.3.2 Do multi-disciplinary TIP response teams (MDTs) lead to more investigations/prosecutions and better results for survivors? How can agencies be supported to identify and coordinate trauma-informed practices for victims of human trafficking?

3.3.3 How can restitution and restorative justice measures be used to support victims effectively?

3.3.4 How can law enforcement, civil society, and the private sector (e.g., industry actors, electronic service providers) work together effectively to combat the profitability of online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC)?

STATE OF THE EVIDENCE AND PROGRAM/ KNOWLEDGE GAPS:

- A quasi-experimental study in India found that coordinated actions that addressed child-related offenses (demand-side policies) with policies removing children from the streets (supply-side policies) were more effective at reducing child sex trafficking and providing a safer environment for children than policies implemented in the origin or destination countries only ([Chemin and Mbiekop 2015](#)).
- Anecdotal evidence from the Manodhairya scheme in India (originally for victims of sexual assault in acid attacks) has shown promising indications of success in addressing commercial sexual exploitation (CSE). The strategy facilitated legal processes in a way that kept victims informed, engaged, and able to participate in justice processes without fear, anxiety, or intimidation. Additionally, the strategy promoted sustainability through the convergence and continued coordination of stakeholders, with compensation provided to victims of trafficking four times, at an average of \$3100 per person (Kolhapur et al. 2022).
- Experimental research in Australia and the United States shows that a single, positive encounter with police can be enough to improve citizens' perceptions of police legitimacy (Mazerolle, Antrobus, Bennett and Tyler 2013; Crowl 2017).

PROPOSED RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND METHODS:

- White paper/synthesis of evidence outlining how existing evaluations of community policing models can create opportunities for counter-trafficking activities that promote positive, mutually respectful interactions between civilians and the police by allowing officers to respond more proactively to the needs of citizens and communities, providing mechanisms to report acts of corruption and abuse, and encouraging citizens to rely on state security and justice sector institutions when crimes are committed or violence occurs (IPA 2020b; EGAP 2021).
- RCTs and quasi-experimental evaluations to evaluate the effectiveness of community policing, rule of law support, anti-corruption, and other community-based trafficking support or community-law enforcement partnership engagement interventions.
- White paper/synthesis of evidence outlining the use of MDT models with gender-based violence (GBV) victims and potential application for counter-trafficking program models.
- Pilot research to examine the impact and cost-effectiveness of the MDT model in supporting victims of trafficking who are engaged in or have completed a trafficking prosecution case.

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HTRI Priority Research Question 4: How can the private sector strengthen its actions and accountability to eliminate human trafficking in global supply chains? (Partnership)

Private sector efforts to combat trafficking fall within and complement broader protection and prosecution work in partnership with governments, NGOs, and policymakers, especially along supply chains. HTRI recommends that research surrounding partnerships with private sector organizations focus on supply chain regulation and transparency.

? Question 4.1: What is the role that private sector supply chain regulation can have in changing employer behavior and deterring trafficking practices?

SUB-QUESTIONS:

- 4.1.1 How effective are private sector efforts to institute supply-chain transparency?
- 4.1.2 How effective are external mandates and enforcement on individual companies in-country?
- 4.1.3 How effective are cross-border trade regulations that seek to ban products produced by forced labor/trafficking and reducing trafficking incentives (e.g., Withhold Release Orders (WROs), Brazil's Dirty List, U.S. DOL's List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor)?
- 4.1.4 What are effective measures for engaging private sector companies in improving their efforts to combat labor trafficking in their supply chains?

STATE OF THE EVIDENCE AND PROGRAM/ KNOWLEDGE GAPS:

- Know the Chain, the Ethical Trading Initiative, and others have a comparatively large—if potentially incomplete—collection of data. In addition, over the past two years, the retail sector has reported several updates to their processes and procedures to address trafficking in supply chains; there is the potential to leverage this administrative data to assess impact in addition to their current reporting.
- Examinations of industry certification programs (chocolate, coffee, palm oil) have shown mixed results. These and other partnerships between governments, NGOs, and private sector to eliminate elements of forced labor and trafficking in supply chains (e.g., government to government agreements, crowdsourcing apps, watchdog groups) need to be rigorously assessed.
- A promising area of study is the effectiveness of WROs (e.g., under the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which prohibits selected imports from Xinjiang) and California Transparency in Supply Chains Act (impacts on goods originating from LMICs).

PROPOSED RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND METHODS:

- White paper/synthesis of evidence outlining supply chain interventions and their impact on labor, changing employer behavior, and influencing the behavior of consumers
- RCT to evaluate impact of supply chain transparency and certification programs

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- Rigorous quantitative and qualitative research on connections between migration policies, private sector actions, and consumer behavior (including impacts of Withhold Release Orders (WROs) for products coming from countries that implicitly or explicitly allow the use of forced labor in their supply chains)

HTRI Priority Research Question 5: How can counter-trafficking actors leverage technological advancements to combat trafficking? (Partnership)

Emerging technology partnerships between governments, civil societies and universities and private sector actors have more recently worked to support, enhance, and improve prevention, protection, and prosecution efforts. HTRI recommends that research on technology partnerships focus on using technology to identify victims and reduce vulnerabilities to human trafficking.

? Question 5.1: What role can technology (e.g., AI, big data, machine learning) have in promoting improved identification of victims or disruption of trafficking-related activities?

SUB-QUESTIONS:

- **5.1.1** Are the use of social media platforms and other technological interventions effective at reaching prospective and active migrants providing migrants in precarious situations with assistance (e.g., connecting them with aid), and reducing trafficking rates?
- **5.1.2** How are machine learning, AI, and other technology-focused strategies effective at improving the identification of trafficking-affected communities and targeting key populations of interest?
- **5.1.3** How can technology (including AI and other emerging and existing technologies) be used to identify and disrupt trafficking-related activity on the internet?

STATE OF THE EVIDENCE AND PROGRAM/ KNOWLEDGE GAPS:

- Predictive analytics are being used to successfully identify patterns to predict the likelihood of financial fraud (IPA 2022b), migration (UNHCR, n.d.; Centre for Humanitarian Data, n.d.), and other events. Some social media companies such as Meta/Facebook also have teams in place to monitor posts for indicators of trafficking. Pilot efforts examining these approaches are underway, and some are expected to be assessed using RCTs in the immediate future (e.g., Stanford University's creation of a decision-support tool that the labor sector and prosecutors can use to detect and catch traffickers (Duff-Brown 2021)).
- Several counter-trafficking actors are also testing the impact of smartphone apps for jobseekers and migrant workers that provide migration information as well as ratings and reviews on employers, recruiters, and service providers. Several of the apps and websites have undergone process evaluations but have not yet been evaluated through RCTs or other rigorous research methods.
- The use of WhatsApp and other social media applications have shown some promise in their ability to engage vulnerable and highly mobile populations in research (IPA 2020c). RCTs in Senegal and Guinea have found that WhatsApp-based surveys have higher completion rates and lower selection bias compared to other tools

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(Ndashimye, Hebie, and Tjaden 2022). Human trafficking researchers should consider integrating these methods into their research.

- There is some emerging literature around analysis of trafficking activities on the dark web and using data mining to uncover and disrupt human trafficking networks (Reid and Fox 2020) but criminal justice strategies in this area are not yet well-established.

PROPOSED RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND METHODS

- Engage implementing organizations, universities, and electronic service providers that are conducting pilot technology and machine learning programs and discuss options for RCT development for future phases
- Establish and test research models examining the effectiveness of social media posts and engagement to track behavior change, migration patterns, and migration outcomes for at-risk migrants and people who have experienced labor trafficking



PHOTO: SUGAT BAJRACHARYA

❓ Question 5.2: Are no-fee migration policies, blockchain, and other cloud-based documentation and remittance payment/contract tracking approaches effective at reducing migrants' vulnerability to trafficking?

STATE OF THE EVIDENCE AND PROGRAM/ KNOWLEDGE GAPS:

- Several human trafficking “hackathons” and other tech-focused interventions have been conducted in the past decade, leading to widespread interest in and excitement about the role that technology can play in combating trafficking. However, the effectiveness of the apps and other interventions produced as part of these efforts is unknown and needs to be rigorously studied.

PROPOSED RESEARCH AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND METHODS:

- RCT to evaluate the effectiveness of blockchain, cloud-based documentation, and payment/ contract tracking approaches using various apps and platforms
- White paper summarizing the main technology interventions to date, including an overview of the various methods used to engage private sector actors and professionals (accelerator programs, hackathons, and other tech-based activities) and assessment of the existing evidence around the impact of these interventions to identify victims, increase awareness, and/or enhance the use of information to prosecute human trafficking crimes

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To guide research projects funded under HTRI, the initiative has developed guidance on ethical standards and requirements for research projects below, adapted from the WHO, UNIAP, Issara Institute, and others (see [Box 3](#), Ethical Standards in Research with Trafficked Persons – Resources and Further Reading).

RESPECT FOR PERSONS, BENEFICENCE, AND JUSTICE

The principles of ethical research, as outlined in the Belmont Report, address ethical issues arising from the conduct of research with human subjects, including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The principle of respect for persons dictates that researchers must work to protect research participants' autonomy while also ensuring full disclosure of factors surrounding the study, including potential harms and benefits.

Beneficence is centered around the principle that researchers should have the welfare of participants as a goal of any research study. Human trafficking can be incredibly destructive to its victims. Accumulating evidence to effectively stop trafficking and mitigate its harm is clearly valuable. However, this means the targeting for research questions and resources has a higher burden of justification, both to avoid “waste” and design that incorporates respondents' inherent risks. The ethical principle of nonmaleficence (do no harm) is applicable here, in that it promotes participants' right to freedom from harm and discomfort as well as their right to protection from exploitation. Researchers must definitively demonstrate that the research will benefit the respondents, specifically those who are trafficked.

All human trafficking-focused research projects involving human subjects should be reviewed by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the researchers' home institutions as well as an IRB in the country where the research is taking place. An institutional review board might also be called an ethical review board (ERB), independent ethics committee (IEC), or a research ethics board (REB). IRBs review research involving human subjects to ensure that the rights and welfare of research participants are protected. IRBs examine the burdens and risks of the research;

assess privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent from respondents; and weigh the general benefits of the research against individual costs. IRBs also examine the need for special protections for vulnerable groups, which include (but are not limited to) children, individuals with physical and/or mental disabilities or cognitive impairments, economically or socially disadvantaged groups, and racial or ethnic minorities. IRBs provide approval only if all the concerns and potential risks are satisfactorily addressed by the research team.

Research teams can also consider including an Ethics Community Research Committee (ECRC) in their research project. ECRCs focus on the broader impact of a study on the community; function as an external ethics advisory board to supplement IRBs; and are iterative and consultative. ECRCs can be incredibly beneficial to research projects, especially those focused on sensitive populations; however, ECRCs do require additional resources and are not appropriate for all research projects.

CONTEXT-SPECIFIC INFORMED CONSENT

Before any personal information is collected, the enumerator must obtain voluntary informed consent. The consent needs to be specific to the types of risks the respondent is facing and specific to the type of trafficking being researched. When possible, consent forms should be scrutinized and stripped of superfluous or confusing language and should explicitly note that some questions may concern violence or other topics that are personal and can be difficult to talk about. Enumerators should follow up in subsequent survey rounds to make sure informed consent is maintained, including reminders of the risks and benefits of participation and participants' right to ask questions and discontinue their participation, if needed.

If there are any situations in which the respondent's personal information will be shared—such as if they disclose that they are engaged in any type of illegal activity—this must be shared in the consent process. While not always feasible, enumerators should be trained to pause any interview and remind the respondent about this clause if the enumerator believes the respondent may be about to trigger a mandatory reporting law (for example, a

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BOX 3. ETHICAL STANDARDS IN RESEARCH WITH TRAFFICKED PERSONS – RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

- International Labour Office (2023). **Ethical guidelines for research on child labour** and **Ethical guidelines for research on forced labour**.
- Modern Slavery & Human Trafficking Policy & Evidence Centre (2023). **Knowledge for Change? Lessons from co-developing a research agenda on survivor engagement**
- World Health Organization (2003): **WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Women**.
- UNIAP (2008): **Ethical Standards for Counter-Trafficking Research and Programming**
- Issara Institute (2018): **Updated Guide to Ethics and Human Rights in Anti-Human Trafficking**
- Cathy Zimmerman – child-specific guidelines
- National Roundtable on Human Trafficking and Slavery (2008): **Guidelines for NGOs Working With Trafficked People**, Third Edition.
- NEXUS Institute (2013): **Ethical Principles for the Re/Integration of Trafficked Persons: Experiences from the Balkans**.
- UNICEF (2021): **UNICEF Procedure on Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis**
- British Academy (forthcoming): **Research Ethics and Safeguarding Approaches with Youth in Risk Situations**
- Children Online: Research and Evidence (n.d.). **What are key ethical considerations in online research with children?**

requirement to share the respondent's personal information with a social worker) or similar forced disclosure of respondent information. Respondents should also be informed that their participation (or lack thereof) will not impact their ability to obtain/maintain services.

INTERVENTION DEVELOPMENT AND PILOTING

Intervention development and small-scale survey pilots are a helpful first step before carrying out a full research study. Intervention development research (IDR) is one model that includes a robust research and development (R&D) phase, followed by pilot testing, prior to scale-up and/or adaptation. This R&D and piloting approach provides researchers the chance to test out their research questions, with heavy involvement and feedback from key stakeholders (including individuals most impacted by human trafficking) and adjust the research design.

Pilot testing should be followed by a critical reflection period, where research staff and enumerators discuss how the surveys are going, how respondents are reacting to the sensitive questions, and any adverse events that the team did not anticipate. Teams should use the R&D and pilot phase to examine the potential influence of perceived social hierarchies and standards of behavior or appearance that can reduce social

differences (e.g., enumerator modes of transportation, similarity of enumerator socio-demographic background to the study population) and make necessary adjustments. Pilots that rely on identification of trafficked persons should also test out questions that seek to determine whether a person has experienced human trafficking multiple times in the survey in different ways, without asking directly whether someone is a victim of human trafficking. Most importantly, piloting should include a discussion about whether the team continue with the survey as-is. Stopping the study based on feedback from the community (via the research field team) should always be an option on the table.

COMMUNITY-LEVEL RISK ASSESSMENT

A research study is often accompanied by risk, and researchers will be asked to think about the impact, whether direct or indirect, that their research may have on the communities they examine, and how such risks will be minimized. In addition to considering the impact of the study on participants, researchers will be asked to think about how their work might impact people who are invited to participate in their study but choose not to; people who are eligible to participate in their study but are not invited to participate; friends, family members, co-workers or neighbors of their study participants; and research staff hired from the communities in which the study takes place.

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Researchers will be asked to consider what might change in the community from which participants were selected if study results supporting or countering their hypotheses are published in a high-profile academic journal (Immigration Policy Lab, Working Concept Note).

Finally, researchers will be asked to consider knowledge mobilization in their assessment and implementation plan to ensure that information from the research is fed back to the impacted communities on a regular basis and changes are made to interventions (if relevant) on a timely basis.

TRAUMA-, SURVIVOR-, AND COMMUNITY-INFORMED DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION, AND EVALUATION

Researchers designing projects that will survey vulnerable populations, including survivors, should assume all respondents are impacted by trauma. Survey tools should be examined by psychologists or other qualified experts to minimize re-traumatization potential of surveys and to ensure that the surveys ask only what is relevant to the research. Research teams should blind staff/social workers who are providing intervention components, by placing the most sensitive interview questions at the end of interview, in written format.

Enumerators should be trained in trauma-informed researcher-interviewee relationships (including power dynamics, transparency about the purpose of the research, confidentiality, and privacy considerations) and trauma- and survivor-informed principles (see **Box 4**, Selecting and Preparing the Field Team). When possible, research teams should seek to train and engage survivors as enumerators. This provides people with lived experience of trafficking an opportunity to take a lead role in the production of knowledge and evidence and inform research with a first-person understanding of survivor needs.

Enumerators should be prepared to recognize distress and how to respond if participants appear to be experiencing discomfort or negative reactions to the questions. If the respondent indicates they want to end the survey or take a break, or if they appear to be suffering from a physical or mental emergency, the enumerator should have a referral pathway and protocols in place for linking respondents with services in a safe and sensitive manner. Enumerators may need to be “un-trained” about their own beliefs or social

norms around human trafficking and coached to respond empathetically, but without judgement.

Finally, efforts should be made to familiarize enumerators on secondary trauma (also known as vicarious trauma) and provided with resources and tools to mitigate and address secondary/vicarious trauma, as well as referrals to services as needed.

REFERRALS FOR ALL RESPONDENTS

Each project must prepare a referral pathway as part of the research design process, well ahead of survey piloting and implementation. The research team should identify organizations in the target geographic area(s) and develop an informal or formal cooperation agreement/MOU. Researchers should speak with the service organizations about the range of situations that might arise and what services they have available for victims of trafficking (e.g., medical facilities, psychosocial support, shelters/housing, emergency support and safety plans, legal aid) and for other vulnerable populations that may be identified over the course of the study (e.g., victims of intimate partner violence or abused children). Questions that researchers ask of these service providers should include the availability of resources (e.g., available case workers, number of shelter beds) and how long support is typically provided (i.e., emergency vs. transitional vs. long-term support). Research projects operating for more than six months should periodically revisit the referral organizations to ensure their services are still available.

Referral information provided to respondents should include the name of a specific person in the organization as well as detailed information about how to access services. Researchers should offer assisted or escorted referrals, especially in settings where transport is a challenge, and/or when respondent safety is at risk (e.g., when their suspected trafficker is present or nearby during the interview). In highly sensitive situations – such as where the trafficker may be nearby or still actively present in the respondent’s life – this information can be provided in a discrete manner, such as with victim outreach cards (small wallet- or shoe-sized cards with indicators of trafficking and contact information for services), or under the auspices of another type of service, such as maternal or child health care. Researchers should avoid disclosure of the survivor’s participation in the research study during or after the referral process.

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BOX 4. SELECTING AND PREPARING THE FIELD TEAM

- Selecting interviewers and interpreters to lead or assist with interviews or to process confidential information is a key factor in the interview process. Interpreters and interviewers who speak the same language may make the respondent feel more at ease, and thus help to build trust. However, it can also have the opposite effect; the respondent may feel ashamed speaking in front of someone from their community or same cultural background about behaviors that are discouraged or prohibited in their culture. Use discretion and due diligence when assessing interviewers' and interpreters' backgrounds and engage survivors whenever possible to advise on the most appropriate fit.
- Provide response guidelines and role play scenarios where respondents appear to be distressed or angry. Train interviewers to recognize signs of distress and provide support the respondent (or terminate the interview).
- Prepare interviewers to be patient. People under distress may be unable to focus, appear confused, struggle to understand questions or recall their experience. Enumerators may have to repeat or rephrase questions to ensure that the respondent understands.
- Provide specific guidance to surveyors on seating arrangements and body language and parameters to ensure respondent confidentiality and safety (for example, not allowing children in the room that are over the age of two).
- Establish eye contact and other signals between team members to ensure that multiple interviewers and interpreters maintain an optimal interpretation and questioning pace. Take care to ensure interviewers and interpreters stay neutral, keep each other on topic, and do not overtalk.
- Establish safe methods and times for respondents to receive follow-up contact; identify alternative trusted contacts; agree on code words, if needed, and identify safe contacts in case of participant's non-response.
- Prepare the participant to respond to questions from others regarding where they are going or why they are going there so often (due to their participation in the study).
- Walk through potentially difficult scenarios and obstacles and ensure that enumerators have safety measures in place and have memorized a contingency plan for quick escape if they are threatened or find themselves in an unstable or potentially violent situation. Require enumerators to travel in pairs, always carry their phones, and keep supervisors informed of their whereabouts.

In cases where referral services that are specific to the needs of human trafficking victims are not readily available, researchers will need to seek out alternate referral pathways that address the needs of similar populations (e.g., victims of intimate partner violence, refugees, victims of war crimes) and think through a variety of potential scenarios and requests, such as survivor requests to be put in touch with their family; help returning home; food, clothing, money, and lodging assistance; places/opportunities to practice their religion; requests to have their belongings/children retrieved; or reporting a violation/abuse from the authorities. Mandatory reporting laws for human trafficking exist in many nations. All researchers must identify if there are laws relevant to their research and consult social services to construct the most care-centric pathway for any respondent who triggers a mandatory report. For example, if all instances of sex trafficking must be reported to officials, researchers

should work to identify a partner in law enforcement (preferably from a designated human trafficking, sexual violence, or other relevant unit) and identify any additional advocates who can assist the respondent in navigating the system.

RECOGNIZE THE PARTICULAR NEEDS OF CHILDREN

Due to the vulnerabilities of children and the harm that they may suffer, trafficked children may require additional, specialized support. The best interest of the child should be the main consideration in all decisions or actions that affect the child. NGOs should be aware of mandatory report requirements in the country of study, noting that children have the right to privacy and there is an obligation to protect the child from the arbitrary and unlawful interference with that right.

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Annex 2: Impact Evaluation Search Terms and Locations

SEARCH TERMS USED:

Combine the keywords related to human trafficking **(1)**, and the keywords related to the desired study type (e.g., “RCT”) **(2)**. Note that keywords related to human trafficking are largely based on those used in Winrock International (2020a).

(1)

Modern slavery
 Slave*
 Traffick*
 Human trafficking
 THB - “Trafficking in Human Beings”
 Trafficking in persons
 Sex trafficking
 Sex work*
 Exploitation
 Sex* exploit*
 Labor exploit* / labour exploit*
 Forced labor / forced labour
 Migrant work
 Child labor/labour AND agriculture
 Labor abuse / labour abuse
 Fair recruitment
 Child* soldier*

(2)

Interven*
 Program*
 Evaluat*
 Randomized / randomised
 Impact
 RCT
 Quasi-experimental
 Experiment*
 Assess*
 Pilot
 Difference-in-difference*
 Discontinuit*
 Instrumental

*Use full words if needed: intervention, evaluation, assessment

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DATABASES, JOURNALS, AND REGISTRIES SEARCHED:

- Delta8.7 Public Databases of Evidence: Crisis, Justice, Markets
- AEA RCT Registry
- EGAP Registry
- RIDIE Registry (3ie)
- 3ie Impact Evaluation Repository
- RTA Evidence Gap Map – forced labor and forced child labor
- RTA General Bibliography Database
- Journal of Human Trafficking, Enslavement and Conflict
- ILAB Monitoring & Evaluation
- DOL Current and Completed Studies
- J-PAL Evaluation Database
- International Organization for Migration (IOM) Publications
- World Bank Research and Publications
- USAID Development Experience Clearinghouse
- Walk Free Foundation Promising Practices Database
- PAIS International
- RePEc or Econpapers
- OSF Registries
- Web of Science

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Annex 3: Definitions of Terms

HTRI USES THE FOLLOWING DEFINITION OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING FROM THE TRAFFICKING VICTIMS PROTECTION ACT (AS AMENDED):

- **Sex Trafficking:** When a trafficker uses force, fraud, or coercion to compel a person to engage in a commercial sex act or when a trafficker causes a child who has not attained 18 years of age to engage in a commercial sex act.
- **Forced Labor:** When a trafficker recruits, harbors, transports, provides, or obtains a person for labor or services by using force, fraud, or coercion.
- **Trafficking in Persons:** “Trafficking in persons” and “human trafficking” are interchangeable umbrella terms that refer to a crime whereby traffickers exploit and profit at the expense of adults or children by compelling them to perform labor or engage in commercial sex. The United States recognizes two primary forms of trafficking in persons: forced labor and sex trafficking.
- **Child Sex Trafficking:** When a person younger than 18 is used to perform a commercial sex act, it is considered sex trafficking regardless of whether there is any force, fraud, or coercion. Children (under the age of 18) can never consent to a commercial sex act; therefore, any child engaged in commercial sex is a victim of child sex trafficking.

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Endnotes

1. See IPA (2015) for a brief explanation of RCTs.
2. For a current list of PEMS-focus countries, see U.S. Department of State (2022a).
3. For example, as defined by the Maryland Scientific Methods scale (What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth, n.d.).
4. SDG Target 8.7: “Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms” (UN, n.d.).
5. For a full list of PEMS-funded programs focused on prevalence measurement, please see U.S. Department of State (2022a).
6. The *Prevalence Reduction Innovation Forum: Results from the Field* conference recording can be found [here](#). More information about CenHTRO’s Prevalence Reduction Innovation Forum Learning Series can be found [here](#).
7. More information about the STATIP (Standard Tools for Analysis of Trafficking in Persons) project can be found [here](#).
8. For example, despite being at the very southern end of Nigeria, Edo state sends the largest percentage of asylum-seekers (by far) to Europe because of a combination of cultural practices (such as juju and history of pre-colonial practices) and legacy of late twentieth century migrants (primarily into Italy in the 1980’s/90’s); see Olfufade (2019) and Vermeulen (2019).
9. For example, in Thailand (Winrock International 2020b) and several countries in Africa (ITUC 2019).
10. For example, an IPA-implemented study in Colombia that is looking at motivation and internal barriers to learning and decision-making, which may be particularly relevant for victims of conflict (IPA 2019).
11. For example, see Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation’s Ashshash program in Bangladesh (Winrock International 2022).

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