

Evidence for Impact: Insights from the Human Trafficking Research Initiative

Introduction

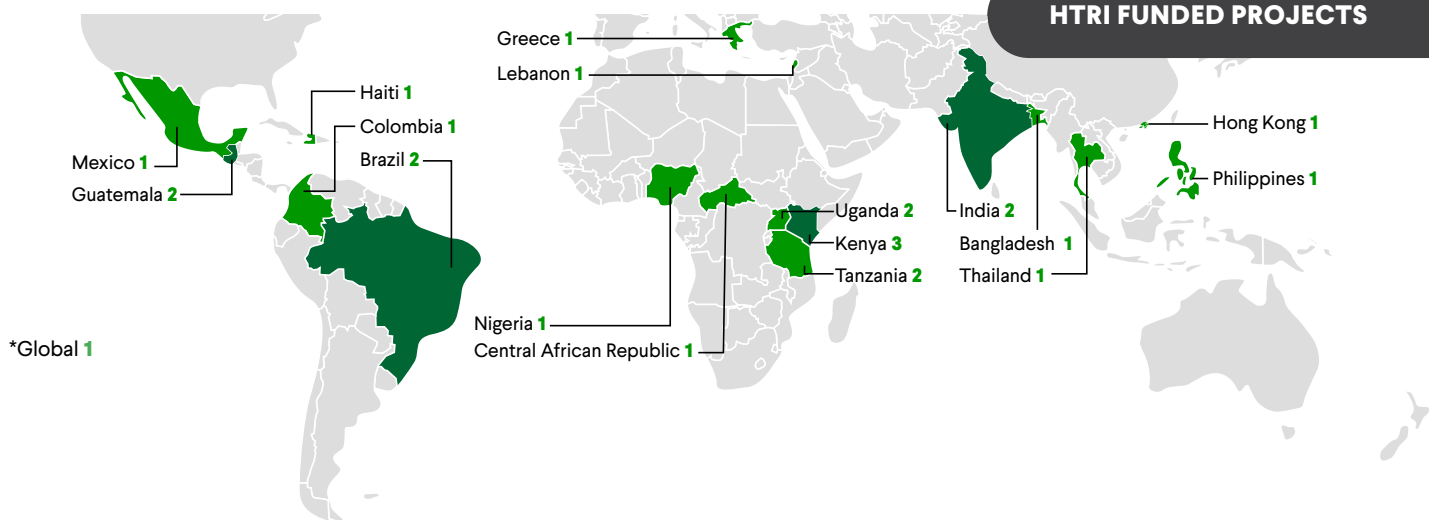
The Human Trafficking Research Initiative (HTRI), funded by the U.S. Department of State's Program to End Modern Slavery (PEMS), was launched in 2020 to address a critical gap in global anti-trafficking efforts: the lack of rigorous evidence on which programmatic approaches drive meaningful change. With insufficient evidence on which kinds of programs make a measurable difference in reducing trafficking and improving the lives of survivors, decision-makers have lacked the reliable guidance they need to act most effectively. Over the past five years, HTRI has funded and supported researchers and implementing partners to design and test interventions that are effective, ethical, and policy relevant. The initiative's goal is to build a robust evidence base that can guide investments toward anti-trafficking approaches that deliver results—and away from approaches that fall short.

Through five competitive calls for proposals, HTRI supports a range of studies—from exploratory and pilot projects to full-scale impact evaluations—designed to fill priority evidence gaps identified in its [Research and Learning Agenda](#). **This living document outlines key research questions across the 4Ps of human trafficking: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnership.** To generate credible and actionable findings, HTRI prioritizes randomized evaluations, which are widely regarded as the gold standard for assessing program impact to determine what works and what doesn't. Most HTRI-funded studies also incorporate qualitative research, such as key informant interviews or

focus groups, to help explore how and why interventions succeed or fall short and to deepen the insights generated by quantitative data.

To date, HTRI has funded 25 projects—including 10 exploratory seed studies, 7 pilot evaluations, and 8 full-scale randomized evaluations—across 17 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. These studies span a wide range of topics and contexts, including bonded and forced labor in South Asia, trafficking among individuals seeking asylum in Greece, the effectiveness of survivor services in Uganda and the Philippines, and unethical recruitment practices in the Asia-Pacific region.

HTRI demonstrates that rigorous anti-trafficking research can be ethical and feasible, even in environments with crime and political instability. HTRI tests innovative methods, adapting to complex field realities, and surfaces lessons on how to reach hidden populations, uphold and promote ethical standards, and generate policy- and programmatic relevant insights. By building counter-trafficking actors' ability to produce and use high-quality evidence, HTRI is filling critical knowledge gaps and helping set a new standard of evidence to inform the global fight against trafficking. Notably, 14 of our 25 funded projects have included local researchers as part of the research team, reinforcing our commitment to contextually grounded evidence generation and local capacity building.



Thematic findings

Prevention

Prevention interventions are among the most widely implemented and well-funded counter-trafficking strategies globally—particularly those focused on raising awareness and reducing vulnerability to human trafficking among high-risk populations

PROMISING PREVENTION INTERVENTIONS:

Prevention programs can contribute to effective prevention of trafficking, but only under the right conditions. For example, awareness campaigns (e.g. large-scale public campaigns to raise awareness of human trafficking risks) and legal education programs aimed at reducing exploitation risks often improved participants' knowledge. However, HTRI projects found that these efforts rarely led to behavior change on their own; information provision is insufficient without the availability of viable alternatives, such as economic or job opportunities or stronger legal protections ([Pinson and Reardon](#); [Scacco et al.](#); Pocock et al; [Fabbri et al.](#)). Moreover, certain private sector–focused interventions aimed at reducing exploitative practices—such as targeted loans for micro-contractors who provided oversight and management of laborers, or productivity-enhancing manufacturing programs—showed limited effectiveness. This suggests that financial incentives for employers alone may be insufficient to shift behavior, particularly in contexts with entrenched exploitation and weak regulatory enforcement ([Miller et al., 2024](#); [Sharma, Shah, and Łuczywek, 2024](#)).

CONDITIONS THAT SHAPE EFFECTIVENESS:

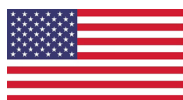
HTRI studies find that program effectiveness depends not only on what was delivered, but also on how it is delivered, and for whom. Programs were more impactful when messages aligned with participants' lived experience; were delivered through trusted local partners; offered interactive, personalized formats that supported individual agency and engagement (e.g. personalized, WhatsApp-based legal information instead of generic, website-based information); and reached participants with targeted information exactly when they needed it. In contrast, program impact was limited when structural barriers, such as lack of identification documents needed to access services or employment; limited access to reliable internet; no viable alternatives for jobs or education; or urgent unmet needs related to food, shelter, or safety persisted. To move beyond awareness and achieve lasting change in knowledge and behaviors, prevention efforts must be personalized, relevant, targeted, and address the structural realities of their circumstances that prevent them from translating awareness into behavior change or sustained action.

An HTRI-funded randomized evaluation in Greece found that personalized legal information—especially via WhatsApp—can improve refugees' understanding of trafficking risks, but behavior change is limited without access to safe migration alternatives.

In partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Greece, a randomized evaluation by Hangartner et al. assessed how legal information affected trafficking risk among 3,000 individuals listed as refugees and asylum seekers within the UNHCR's databases. Both website-based and WhatsApp-based formats improved participants' knowledge of exploitative situations and confidence in responding to violence. However, while website-based information reached a wider audience, personalized support produced stronger effects—and even then, behavior change remained limited without access to services. These findings highlight that trusted, personalized messaging can strengthen prevention efforts, but only when paired with concrete and accessible alternatives to unsafe migration.

An HTRI-funded randomized evaluation in Nigeria found that while returnee testimonials and in-person messaging raised awareness about migration risks, they had limited impact on behavior unless paired with credible local livelihood opportunities.

A randomized study in Nigeria by Scacco et al. examined whether providing accurate information about migration risks and local opportunities could shift attitudes and reduce trafficking vulnerability in a particularly dangerous migration corridor (over land to the Mediterranean coast). Returnee testimonials and in-person messaging increased awareness of potential migrants, but the impact on unsafe migration practices was limited unless participants perceived local economic alternatives as viable. The findings emphasize that information must be grounded in local realities and paired with credible livelihood options to drive meaningful change.



Protection

Protection interventions encompass a broad range of efforts to identify, assist, and support individuals who have been trafficked—spanning from immediate response to long-term recovery.

PROMISING PROTECTION INTERVENTIONS:

HTRI-funded studies suggest that specific forms of trauma-informed, survivor-centered programming can play a meaningful role in supporting recovery and reducing the risk of re-exploitation. For example, culturally-responsive, low-technology mind-body interventions showed measurable improvements in anxiety, depression, PTSD, and emotional regulation, and were highly cost-effective (Cordisco-Tsai et al. 2025). However, evidence from early-stage support interventions suggests that while survivors can benefit from mental health interventions throughout their recovery, intensive mental health or psychosocial interventions are most effective after the emergency response stage, once basic needs like food, shelter, and documentation are met and survivors have the stability and bandwidth to engage more fully in their healing. On a different note, survivor-led peer counseling proved popular among survivors, who turned to it for support with immediate, practical needs, and it showed promise in building trust and continuity when integrated into broader support systems. Conversely, case management models that offered survivors choice and flexibility in prioritizing different aspects of their care were well received but did not yield measurable improvements in wellbeing. This suggests that flexibility alone may be insufficient to support mental health outcomes, particularly if individuals feel overwhelmed or lack the bandwidth to assess and prioritize their own needs. These findings underscore the importance of the timing and staging of care and ensuring survivors are stabilized before introducing mental health care interventions. They also highlight the urgent need for standardized tools to measure well-being and mental health among trafficking survivors that are context-sensitive, adaptable, and validated for use in the specific countries where interventions are being implemented.

CONDITIONS THAT SHAPE EFFECTIVENESS:

As with prevention, the success of interventions depended heavily on context, coordination, and delivery. Stronger outcomes were observed when programs 1) addressed survivors' basic needs—including food, housing, and safety—before introducing intensive mental health support programs and 2) proactively mitigated barriers to care and support, such as lack of documentation and limited internet connectivity. Well-functioning referral networks and adequate frontline capacity, along with partnerships with trusted community-based organizations, were also essential for participant identification and engagement

and program impact. These insights reinforce that protection interventions must be grounded in survivors' lived realities and embedded within systems capable of offering holistic, sustained support.

An HTRI-funded pilot evaluation in the Philippines found that a community-based, somatic mental health intervention significantly reduced symptoms of depression, PTSD, and anxiety among trafficking survivors, highlighting the promise of low-cost, trauma-informed care when embedded in trusted local systems.

A pilot study in the Philippines led by Dr. Cordisco-Tsai tested a group-based, somatic mental health intervention (HaRT Cebu) for adult trafficking survivors. A pre-post study showed that depression (PHQ-9) rates for individuals that participated in the intervention dropped from 61% at baseline to 11% at the 1-month follow-up, PTSD from 56% to 17%, and anxiety from 44% to 6%. Participants also reported better emotional regulation, stress relief, and boundary-setting. Delivered by non-specialist facilitators in a trusted community setting, the intervention proved both feasible and acceptable, underscoring the potential of low-cost, trauma-informed mental health support when survivors' basic needs are met and care is embedded within local systems. While this pilot study did not include a comparison group, these pilot findings are very promising and indicate the value of a future randomized study, which HTRI is now funding.



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Prosecution

Protection interventions encompass a broad range of efforts to identify, assist, and support individuals who have been trafficked—spanning from immediate response to long-term recovery.

PROMISING PROSECUTION INTERVENTIONS:

Few studies to date have rigorously examined justice systems responses to trafficking or how reforms affect outcomes for victims and offenders, largely due to the challenges of evaluating such interventions. Early-stage research highlights both the urgency and complexity of working with law enforcement, especially in low-capacity or low-trust contexts. Given the stakes for deterrence and survivor protection, addressing this evidence gap is critical. HTRI's next round of studies will specifically examine prosecution programs (including innovative enforcement models, legal empowerment, and institutional reforms), with findings expected to generate key insights in the years ahead.

CONDITIONS THAT SHAPE EFFECTIVENESS:

Preliminary lessons from related studies suggest that targeted, prosecution-focused interventions can lead to meaningful improvements for trafficking survivors. Maximizing the effectiveness of these interventions often depends on the broader ecosystem in which they operate. Victim-centered approaches, such as trauma-informed interviewing and legal support, benefit from strong cross-agency collaboration, reliable referral mechanisms, and adequate frontline capacity. Community trust is also essential: when trust is low, survivors may be less likely to come forward or participate in legal proceedings.

Partnership

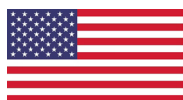
Multi-sector partnerships, particularly those involving technology providers, the private sector, civil society, and governments, are a promising but underexplored area in counter-trafficking research.

PROMISING PARTNERSHIP INTERVENTIONS:

While few HTRI-funded studies have focused explicitly on partnerships, several exploratory and pilot projects offer valuable insights. Efforts such as digital outreach to migrants, mapping migration route risks, and engaging users via social media platforms showed that technology can support prevention and protection—particularly when messaging is timely, tailored to user needs, and delivered by trusted local actors. Other studies examined whether private sector engagement—such as offering targeted loans—could reduce vulnerability to exploitation. Initial results highlighted the importance of ensuring that financial products and implementation models are viable and well-tested before broader evaluation.

CONDITIONS THAT SHAPE EFFECTIVENESS:

Partnership-based interventions—especially those relying on digital platforms—are most effective when grounded in the lived experience of target populations, delivered in ways that build trust and safeguard participants, and designed to be simple and easy to use. Some studies found that challenges like high mobility, limited internet access, and platform restrictions made it hard for participants to stay engaged over time. In a few cases, participation was lower than expected, which limited the impact of the program. Other studies pointed to the need for flexible, user-centered design that encourages continued use over time. These findings reinforce that partnerships need to be carefully planned, with the right infrastructure, ethical safeguards, and clear roles and responsibilities to make them effective.



Conclusion

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. HTRI's experience demonstrates that randomized controlled trials in human trafficking research are feasible and essential for generating high quality, policy relevant-insights when designed and implemented with careful attention to ethical, contextual, and logistical considerations. Key lessons from HTRI's portfolio include:

- **RCTs can be achievable in challenging environments.** Low-trust, high-risk settings require careful partnership-building and design adaptations, but rigorous evaluations can be successfully implemented where they are needed most.
- **Ethical considerations require thoughtful design and oversight.** Sensitive research demands careful design and proactive oversight. Approaches like stepped-wedge trials, waitlist controls, or enhanced control groups offering alternative support can promote fairness and reduce risk. Ethical protocols should also include robust referral systems, continuous monitoring for harm, and iterative informed consent processes. Early and collaborative engagement with IRBs is critical—particularly when navigating complex issues like exploitation or trauma. Involving survivor advisors or ethics committees can further strengthen ethical integrity and accountability.
- **Survivor welfare must remain central.** Beyond technical safeguards, ethical research requires meaningful investment in the dignity, safety, and agency of participants. This includes building trust, minimizing harm, and ensuring that consent is not just obtained, but truly understood. These considerations are especially vital when working with hidden or highly vulnerable populations, where power dynamics and fear of exposure may limit disclosure or participation.
- **Adaptability drives success.** Effective research requires designs flexible enough to accommodate implementation realities: irregular program delivery, shifting political contexts, safety risks, and the unpredictable nature of crisis environments.
- **Implementation quality matters.** Without strong fidelity and systems for monitoring delivery, even the most rigorous evaluations can yield misleading results. Investments in implementation support and measurement are essential to produce research with meaningful results.
- **Pairing RCTs with qualitative research improves learning.** Adding qualitative components can help reveal how and why interventions succeed or fall short by providing insights into contextual factors, participant experiences, and unintended consequences that quantitative data alone cannot always explain.

HTRI-funded research generates actionable evidence that is directly shaping the way human trafficking is addressed.

Our findings are informing program design, influencing policy conversations, and guiding future research priorities. Beyond the research itself, our work is strengthening service delivery, supporting partners to adapt in real time, and contributing to a more effective and coordinated counter-trafficking ecosystem. Published and forthcoming academic papers, policy briefs, and practitioner toolkits will ensure these insights are translated into lasting improvements across the field.

Findings from the **exploratory** study led by Dr. Baseler et al with HAART Kenya are already informing the design of a full-scale randomized evaluation of pre- and post-departure services for migrants to the Gulf. The research team, in partnership with IPA, is seeking funding to assess whether improved access to information and support services can reduce the risk of abuse.

The Eleison Foundation has integrated findings from its **pilot** of the HaRT Cebu mental health program in the Philippines, led by Dr. Cordisco-Tsai, into ongoing survivor services and adapted the model for new target populations. While a full-scale evaluation in the Philippines was not feasible, the study laid critical groundwork for a randomized evaluation of the same program in Uganda, now underway with HTRI funding. The research is also shaping national policy debates by presenting a low-cost, scalable, community-based mental health model that aligns with the Philippine Mental Health Act, while addressing workforce limitations by not relying on licensed psychologists.

Dr. Hangartner et al.'s **randomized evaluation** on access to legal information for refugees and asylum seekers in Greece has directly shaped program adaptations by UNHCR, IRC, and Mobile Info Team. The study's findings are also shaping global advocacy and fundraising efforts, and have been shared with U.S. and Greek government representatives and other key stakeholders to inform broader policy discussions.





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While HTRI has made important strides in generating rigorous, actionable evidence on what works to counter human trafficking and inform programming and policy, substantial gaps remain. As HTRI expands its portfolio, future research will fill these gaps—building a clear, evidence-based roadmap to guide governments, funders, and practitioners toward solutions that are ethical, effective, and responsive to the needs of trafficking-affected communities.

In **prevention**, more research is needed to understand how to shift social norms, reduce demand for exploitative labor, and reach individuals at risk before harm occurs—particularly through community-based and private sector-driven approaches.

In **protection**, key questions persist around how to support survivors beyond the point of crisis, including how to deliver sustained, trauma-informed services, build effective, coordinated referral systems, and strengthen reintegration support at scale.

Research on **partnership** models—especially those involving technology providers, private sector actors, and local governments—remains nascent, with opportunities to better understand how digital tools and supply chain regulations can be leveraged to identify and disrupt trafficking.

Finally, **prosecution** is one of the most under-studied, yet potentially impactful, areas in the field. More evidence is needed on how to improve investigation quality, strengthen legal case-building, and ensure that justice processes center on victim safety and voice.

Continued investment in rigorous human trafficking research is important to ensure that policies and programs are grounded in evidence rather than assumptions. High-quality, adaptable research helps identify effective strategies, avoid unintended harm, and direct limited resources toward approaches that genuinely improve outcomes for survivors and reduce exploitation. As the field evolves, sustained support for rigorous, context-sensitive research on programming models will be critical to building more accountable, impactful, and survivor-centered responses to trafficking across the world.

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Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) is a research and policy nonprofit that discovers and advances what works to improve the lives of people living in poverty. IPA brings together researchers and decision-makers to design, rigorously evaluate, and refine these solutions and their applications, ensuring that the evidence created is used to improve the lives of people living in poverty.

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