EDITED BY
ELLA COCKBAIN, AIDEN SIDEBOTTOM
AND SHELDON X. ZHANG

EVALUATING ANTI-TRAFFICKING INTERVENTIONS

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

UCLPRESS

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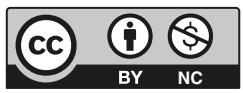

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1
Introduction: when anti-trafficking meets evaluation

Ella Cockbain, Aiden Sidebottom and Sheldon X. Zhang

Introduction

Human trafficking turns heads. Evaluation does not. This is a book about what happens when they get together. We believe it is high time to stop throwing money at anti-trafficking measures that have produced no measurable impact or, worse yet, cause harms to those they intend to benefit. It's a call to pause, take stock and invest more time, money and effort in figuring out what has been effective, what hasn't and what might be in future. It's about reflecting on the art of the possible, learning from experiences, and identifying gaps and tensions.

The case for evaluation should be self-evident. Evaluation research, in all its many forms and functions, is ultimately about generating evidence to help inform decision-making. It is about providing necessary feedback to make corrections to and refinements in efforts to combat human trafficking and reduce associated harms. To this end, this book is our attempt to help expand and improve the evidence base for anti-trafficking efforts. Evaluation evidence lies at the heart of evidence-based policy and practice. Particularly in such a complex and contested domain, rigorous evaluation is vital to weed out false assumptions and provide justifications for either defunding or continuing to support specific interventions.

There is no shortage of good intentions in trafficking research, policy and operational activity, but good intentions don't necessarily make for good investments, or good outcomes. In this book we've deliberately not shied away from discussing the problems in

anti-trafficking, as they have implications for evaluation research. But whether you think anti-trafficking is a good or bad thing, it's unlikely to disappear any time soon. That means even modest, incremental gains in the ethicalness and effectiveness of interventions designed to tackle human trafficking is surely a worthwhile goal. We think a book dedicated to the evaluation of anti-trafficking programmes can help achieve this goal.

The idea behind this book came from a place of both frustration and hope. Frustration at the huge and skewed spending on anti-trafficking interventions without sufficient regard for careful intervention design, possible backfire effects and impact evaluation. Frustration at years of having witnessed the experiences, views and suggestions of affected communities being ignored and disregarded. Frustration at predictable harms being downplayed or repackaged as 'unintended consequences'. Frustration at the low priority given to evaluation in policy conversations, despite the abysmal ethical and economic sense in treating it as an optional extra. But also hope – that by bringing together a variety of experts as contributing authors, we could help lay some groundwork for long-overdue course corrections. Hope because it looks like the needle is already beginning to shift towards recognising the importance of evaluation in anti-trafficking. Hope that we can sensitise the anti-trafficking community to the challenges and promises of different evaluation methods, and at least some evaluation experts to the complexities and pitfalls of the trafficking domain. And ultimately, hope that better evaluation evidence could help decision-makers move away from adopting ineffective and harmful programmes towards the use of more effective and ethical measures to prevent exploitation and serve affected populations.

This chapter serves as an introduction for what is to follow. It is formed of four sections. First, we set out the book's aims. Second, we discuss the state of play around evaluation in anti-trafficking and how, we believe, things are slowly changing for the better. Third, we set out some of the idiosyncrasies of the anti-trafficking domain for the purposes of evaluation. Fourth, we clarify the book's scope and structure, finishing with brief summaries of the coming chapters.

Aims

Our overarching aim with this book is to enable more evidence-based and ethical approaches to trafficking in its many and varied forms and

contexts, by supporting more and better evaluation research. To do that, we've tried within this book to:

- make a clear case as to why evaluation matters for anti-trafficking policy and practice;
- highlight challenges particular to evaluating anti-trafficking interventions;
- give an accessible introduction to the principles and practices of evaluation science, tailored to the trafficking domain;
- introduce a range of approaches to evaluation, including both well-established and innovative methods;
- provide illustrative case studies with reflections from evaluation projects.

In this book we've included a range of perspectives and approaches, rather than insisting on a single, 'right' way of doing evaluations. Indeed, we adopt a broad conception of 'evaluation', covering various designs and methods which share a common goal of, in our case, generating evidence to help tackle human trafficking more effectively and efficiently. To our knowledge, this is the first book dedicated to evaluation and human trafficking.

In compiling this book, we're not trying to substitute or replicate the extensive methods literature on evaluation science: that would be pointless and unachievable in a single book. Instead, we want to bring evaluation to life in the context of anti-trafficking. Too often academic books are hidden behind huge paywalls. We've deliberately made this book available for free online because we wanted to reach as many people interested in the topic as possible. We hope you find it useful.

The neglect of evaluation in anti-trafficking – is the tide finally turning?

Despite the high profile of and major investment in anti-trafficking efforts, there is still 'astonishingly limited evidence on "what works"' in terms of prevention and responses to harms caused (Zimmerman et al., 2021, p. 1). The field's relative newness might have been an excuse for a while, but by now there is scant justification for the continued neglect of evaluation of anti-trafficking interventions. Indeed, we see both a moral imperative to evaluate, given the concern for human rights ostensibly motivating anti-trafficking, and an economic imperative, given

the wastefulness and opportunity costs of spending without regard for interventions' (in)effectiveness (Gallagher & Surtees, 2012; Kiss & Zimmerman, 2019). Evaluation is, thus, vital for anti-trafficking: it is 'an essential means of preventing misdevelopment', and a powerful 'incentive to avoid pouring good money after bad' (Konrad, cited in Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW), 2010, p. 3).

From the early 2000s onwards, attention and investment around anti-trafficking increased dramatically. Interventions have long been framed predominantly around the '3Ps' framework:[1] protecting victims, prosecuting offenders and preventing trafficking (Davy, 2016; Gallagher & Surtees, 2012). According to Gallagher and Surtees (2012, p. 11), 'Initial waves of intervention took place in a performance evaluation vacuum'. As spending ramped up, the United States Government Accountability Office criticised the lack of clearly articulated goals and performance indicators underpinning investments in anti-trafficking programming abroad (United States Government Accountability Office, 2006). Although evaluations of anti-trafficking are slowly on the rise, they are regrettably too often 'still seen as optional' (Bryant & Landman, 2020, p. 128).

Nowadays, hundreds of millions of US dollars are spent on anti-trafficking interventions each year by governments, intergovernmental organisations and, increasingly, private philanthropic foundations (Davy, 2016; Dottridge, 2014; Gleason & Cockayne, 2018; Sharapov et al., 2024). It is challenging to establish a grand total for this expenditure, given the fragmentation, complexities and opacities of the funding landscape. Spending is distributed across many different donors, recipients and activities. There can be a reluctance to disclose sums and the boundaries around what constitutes an anti-trafficking intervention are porous (Dottridge, 2014; Sharapov et al., 2024). Nevertheless, we can pull out a few examples that provide some instructive insights on the scale and sums of investments in anti-trafficking. For example, in the United States (US), federal funding for anti-trafficking concentrates in the Office for Victims of Crime, which had USD 350 million in live funding spread across over 500 trafficking-related grants as of October 2022 (Senior Policy Operating Group Grantmaking Committee, 2023). In the United Kingdom (UK), the Home Office spent more than £40.4 million (>USD 51 million[2]) on anti-trafficking interventions abroad through the Modern Slavery Fund 2016–2023 (Home Affairs Committee, 2024). A global analysis of Official Development Assistance (ODA) commitments around human trafficking and related issues identified that over USD 4 billion had

allocated between 2000 and 2013 (Gleason & Cockayne, 2018). Over the same period, the annual total expenditure increased nearly threefold: from USD 150 million in 2001 to USD 434 million in 2013. Although 30 different countries contributed, the largest donor (the US) was responsible for around 60% of all funds, giving nearly 10 times as much as the second largest donor (Canada). Private foundations and their collaborative funds (for example, Walk Free Foundation/Minderoo Foundation, Humanity United, Freedom Fund) are also increasingly influential in shaping anti-trafficking agendas (Chuang, 2014; Sharapov et al., 2024). The disproportionate investments of the US and the growing role of philanthrocapitalism raise important questions about soft power and accountability brought about by such concentrated funding sources (Dottridge, 2014). That has implications in shaping what types of programmes are funded and evaluated, and whether evaluations are then made public.

Many richer countries such as the US, UK and various European Union (EU) nations spend considerable amounts on anti-trafficking efforts at home, including both specific programmes – such as the UK's £8.5 million (USD 10.8 million) investment in the Modern Slavery Police Transformation Programme (NPCC, 2019) – and activity funded as part of 'business as usual'. Less economically advanced countries also often spend on domestic anti-trafficking efforts: not least to avoid reputational and economic harms associated with low rankings in the US Government's annual Trafficking in Persons Reports, in which it ranks other countries unilaterally against standards it sets and imposes sanctions for perceived poor compliance (Chuang, 2005). Nevertheless, much of the documented spending on activity specifically conceptualised as anti-trafficking flows from the Global North to the Global South (see, for example, Akullo, 2020; Gleason & Cockayne, 2018). That too reflects, and contributes to, political pressure on countries across the world to do *more* to combat trafficking, in a way that is increasingly criticised as a new form of imperialism (Chuang, 2005; Kempadoo & Shih, 2022; McGrath & Watson, 2018). The controversial but increasingly evident re-framing of anti-trafficking from a criminal justice issue to an international development one is perhaps most evident in its inclusion as a target in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.[3] This repositioning has been criticised for underscoring the misconception of trafficking as being something imported from poor countries 'over there' and detracting from the role of richer countries in enabling exploitation – within their own borders, in their increasingly globalised supply networks, and through the impacts of colonial legacies, uneven development and discriminatory immigration regimes (McGrath & Watson, 2018).

For all the spending on anti-trafficking activities at home and abroad, successive reviews of the evidence base have found remarkably little in the way of robust evaluations (Bryant & Landman, 2020; Cockbain et al., 2018; Davy, 2016; GAATW, 2010; Gallagher & Surtees, 2012; van der Laan et al., 2011; Zhang, 2022).

In a landmark Campbell Collaboration[4] systematic review, van der Laan et al. (2011) returned an 'empty review' of the effectiveness of interventions to tackle transnational trafficking for sexual exploitation: meaning the authors deemed the question of 'what works?' to be unanswerable. Cockbain et al.'s (2018) review of the English language literature on labour trafficking in Europe 2000–2015 did not find a *single* formal evaluation of an intervention targeted at this particular issue.

Davy (2016), whose systematic review had broader parameters than either of the two just mentioned, found just 49 evaluations of *any* anti-trafficking intervention in the English language literature worldwide from 2000–2015. Although an increase on the 14 evaluations identified in a review published six years earlier (GAATW, 2010), 49 evaluations is, clearly, a shockingly low figure in a field where billions have been (and continue to be) spent. Finally, using Walk Free's Promising Practices Database[5] of English language evaluations produced from 2000 to 2015 Bryant and Landman's (2020) review has the largest sample of evaluations. Even still it deals with just 90 trafficking-related evaluations, disproportionately geared towards the sex trades. Echoing earlier reviews, they also concluded that there is insufficient evidence to tell 'what works'. The authors also highlight an unfortunate skew towards evaluations focusing on implementation and towards outputs over outcomes.

That so many trafficking-related systematic reviews are uncovering so little in the way of reliable primary evaluations indicates, we feel, an urgent need to focus attention and investment on actually generating useful primary evaluation evidence in the first place (see van der Laan & Smit, Chapter 6, this volume).

Various reasons have been put forward to explain the low premium on evaluation in the anti-trafficking space, particularly a shortage of time, money, knowledge, technical skills, general inclination, capacity to gather relevant data, or specific financial incentives to evaluate (Bryant & Landman, 2020; Gallagher & Surtees, 2012). Other factors include political constraints, difficulties attributing impacts, and an unwillingness to expose projects to outside assessment for fear of uncovering unwanted findings and being seen as a failure. Moreover, some grassroots collectives reject formalised evaluation as a top-down imposition

ill-suited to their own conceptualisations of success (see Rivera, 2024) – although arguably that sort of critique could be grounds to reimagine the possibilities and methods of evaluation creatively and collaboratively, rather than to reject it outright. Further complicating matters, donor-funded anti-trafficking evaluations are not routinely publicly available and may be released to certain parties but not others (Bryant & Landman, 2020; Davy, 2016; Gallagher & Surtees, 2012). As will be highlighted throughout this book, to advance policy and practice in anti-trafficking, it is important to take these barriers and concerns seriously and work to overcome them, with an eye not only to encouraging the conduct of more and better evaluations but also the open publication of findings.

In tandem with the slow expansion of anti-trafficking evaluation literature, there has been a rapid growth in critical scholarship focused on anti-trafficking. This body of work is rarely formalised as evaluations, and so may be easily overlooked in conventional systematic reviews. Nevertheless, it plays a vital role in scrutinising and unsettling the assumptions, theories of change and methods of many common interventions and exposing both practical inefficiencies and active harms to already marginalised groups (Bhagat, 2022, 2023; Boyden & Howard, 2013; GAATW, 2007; Kempadoo & Shih, 2022; Smith & Mac, 2018; Tripp, 2019). Most relevant to this book, this literature also confronts us with whether certain impacts routinely framed as 'unintended consequences' were not simply foreseeable – and indeed foreseen – harms treated as acceptable collateral damage. Examples include harms caused by a range of measures ostensibly motivated by an anti-trafficking logic, including harsher border surveillance of 'at-risk' groups, gendered migration bans, forcible 'raid and rescue', crackdowns on sex markets, and discriminatory profiling in the name of 'spotting the signs'. Arguably the key lesson for evaluation from this literature is the need to pay due attention to the *theory* behind interventions and recognise the potential for possible backfire effects (see Kiss & Zimmerman, Chapter 8, this volume). Another common theme running throughout many chapters in this volume is the importance of inclusive conceptualisations of evidence and listening to and learning from affected populations, most notably trafficking survivors and neighbouring groups negatively impacted by anti-trafficking interventions.

Encouragingly, demand seems to be finally growing for evidence-based approaches to anti-trafficking interventions, reflected in the growing number of evaluation studies being funded and published (see Bryant & Landman, 2020; Davy, 2016; Such et al., 2020; Zhang, 2022). More generally, this trend reflects a broader movement towards

better integration of research and practice in numerous other sectors (see Sanders & Breckon, 2023). Indeed, research on human trafficking is interdisciplinary by nature, involving neighbouring fields such as mental health, economic development, human rights and criminal justice, from which methods and findings of evaluation science can be transferable.

The growing interest also suggests a gradual maturation of the anti-trafficking field after more than two decades of intense focus, and likely also reflects increased appetite for public health approaches to anti-trafficking specifically, which place a strong emphasis on prevention and evaluation (for example, Chisolm-Straker & Stoklosa, 2017; Recknor et al., 2022; Sprang et al., 2022). In contrast, criminal justice-oriented approaches tend to prioritise prosecution and punishment. Despite these promising developments, it is worth remembering that the status quo is still far removed from the following prescription: 'Because human trafficking is a public health issue, intervention and prevention efforts must be founded on a strong evidence base and informed by affected populations, including those with lived experience, and by using an equity lens' (Sprang et al., 2022, p. 5S).

Overall, then, it is arguably becoming less tenable for donors to keep pouring money into anti-trafficking without paying at least some attention to evaluation. There are also now more evaluation-specific funding calls, most notably the US State Department's annual Program to End Modern Slavery (PEMS), established in 2017. PEMS has since awarded more than USD 150 million to competitively selected projects that are research-driven and evaluation-oriented, including intervention development research, prevalence estimates and randomised controlled trials, to try to establish what is effective in reducing the prevalence of specific forms of trafficking.[6] Meanwhile, the UK similarly established a £5 million Modern Slavery Policy and Evidence Centre (funded by a Research Council), although it has funded relatively little formal evaluation research amid the broader body of research supported.[7]

As the calls for evidence-based policy in anti-trafficking spread, we would encourage readers to ask not just 'what works' but also 'for whom', 'how', 'under what circumstances', 'according to whose measures of success' and so on (see Sidebottom et al., Chapter 4, this volume). One-size-fits-all prescriptions are unlikely to be effective in dealing with such complex and context-dependent social issues: a common thread through this book is the importance of specificity and local context. It is also worth reflecting on how the power to set the evaluation agenda concentrates, what the interests are of those controlling the purse strings, and what

the implications thereof are for which evaluations – and which researchers – are funded. It also remains to be seen whether a growing appetite for generating evaluation evidence will be matched by a willingness for *acting* on such evidence, particularly where it includes unwanted or embarrassing findings, challenges orthodoxies or points to the need for more extensive course correction in anti-trafficking efforts (see also Hynes, Chapter 10, this volume; Quirk, Chapter 7, this volume). Indeed, while we talk a lot in terms of 'evidence-based' policy and practice, the more realistic term is 'evidence-informed', because it is a pipe dream to think anti-trafficking (and other areas of messy social policy) will be guided by evidence above all else: Too many other factors, including political, economic and other considerations also influence policy, practice and funding decisions.

Why does anti-trafficking evaluation need a whole book of its own?

In a nutshell, this book is needed because human trafficking and anti-trafficking are enormously complex and contested topics, interventions (and evaluations) in this space are challenging, the idiosyncrasies of this domain present particular difficulties and evaluation has thus far been woefully neglected. In addition to a call to action, this chapter provides a brief analysis of the main challenges for evaluation in this domain as we see them. We highlight these issues not to put off the prospective evaluator, but rather to stress the challenges that need to be grappled with to make evaluation evidence useful for the purposes of generating improvements. These challenges reappear in different guises and contexts throughout the chapters in this book.

Grappling with 'fuzzy boundary' problems

The United Nations' (UN) Trafficking Protocol set out a binding definition of trafficking for the first time in international law (UN, 2000). It has been hugely influential: It is ratified by over 90% of countries worldwide and sparked one of the most intense periods of national legislating 'in the history of human rights' (Gallagher, 2015; Quirk, 2020, np). It defines trafficking as having three components: an 'act' (for example, recruitment, transportation, harbouring), a 'means' (for example, coercion, deception, abuse of power) and a 'purpose' ('exploitation'). Where children are concerned, no 'means' need apply, because they are considered

incapable of giving informed consent to their own exploitation (Cockbain & Olver, 2019). The Protocol arose from extensive political negotiations, much lobbying and bitter divisions over whether consensual adult sex work should be considered trafficking (Doezema, 2005; Goździak & Vogel, 2020).

The result was a definition that is both notoriously and *intentionally* vague, leaving considerable scope for inconsistency in how the trafficking construct is interpreted and applied (Goździak & Vogel, 2020). The meaning of exploitation is not defined and an explicitly non-exhaustive list of what it might entail is provided, arguably enabling boundary creep and a dilution of the concept (Chuang, 2014). The lines between trafficking and neighbouring issues can be unclear (in the case of child labour, or children's involvement in crime) or rapidly blur in practice (in the case of smuggling) (see Bish et al., 2024; Boyden & Howard, 2013; Chuang, 2014). States have considerable power to decide what is and is not trafficking: exemplified by the controversial but routine exclusion of prison labour (and military conscription) from dominant conceptions of trafficking (see Rivera, 2024).

Evaluators therefore need to understand that trafficking is not a clearly delineated binary issue (trafficking / not trafficking). Instead, it is an elastic and contested term with fuzzy and disputed boundaries, increasingly conceptualised as part of a dynamic 'continuum of exploitation' (Andrees, 2008; Skrivankova, 2010). Where the lines lie between routine, ostensibly 'acceptable' levels of exploitation and trafficking is unclear, almost certainly dependent on context and one's perspectives: This conversation is largely simply avoided. These boundary problems create, however, real problems for prevalence estimates (discussed shortly). Moreover, evaluators would do well to consider whether practices framed as 'anti-trafficking' interventions might actually be better understood as, for example, anti-migration or anti-sex work measures.

Disaggregating disparate issues for evaluation and prevention

Not only does trafficking have porous boundaries, it is also an umbrella concept that covers a wide and heterogenous range of issues. Empirical analysis of major datasets underscores the importance of disaggregation, both by and within different trafficking types and geographical regions (Cockbain et al., 2025). What holds for one particular context is unlikely to be transferable to another, because of the wide variations in the structures producing exploitation, characteristics of the at-risk populations, opportunity structures to exploit and causal pathways into

trafficking situations (see Cockbain et al., 2025; Kiss & Zimmerman, 2019). Concerningly, nearly half of the 90 evaluations reviewed by Bryant and Landman (2020, p. 131) did not specify a particular target sector or issue, 'but instead stated that the interventions aimed to tackle human trafficking more generally'. Such bundling together of a heterogenous set of issues under the trafficking (or 'modern slavery') umbrella risks obscuring vital distinctions and diluting intervention design and evaluation, including through aggregation biases.

In the anglophone world in particular, the situation has become even messier with the proliferation of the even vaguer and more amorphous term 'modern slavery', which includes but is not limited to trafficking. We deliberately focus on trafficking here as it remains better understood and is agreed in international law, but those interested in 'modern slavery' will find much of relevance in this book. We personally prefer to avoid the term 'modern slavery' because it is ahistorical, imprecise, all-encompassing, even more sensationalising and exceptionalising of exploitation embedded in the fabric of our societies, and can be disrespectful to those impacted by transatlantic slavery and its afterlives (see Dottridge, 2017; O'Connell Davidson, 2015; Rivera, 2024).

Ascertaining what counts as an 'anti-trafficking' intervention or evaluation

In theory, a staggering range of interventions *could* be packaged as anti-trafficking interventions. Targets could be individuals, communities / immediate environments, broader systems or structures, with considerable variation by target sector, population and geography. Examples might include measures aimed at union building, Universal Basic Income, strengthening labour rights and protections, situational prevention of child sexual abuse, organ registers, more permissive migration regimes and so forth.

To date, however, successive reviews suggest that interventions framed as 'anti-trafficking' tend to focus on individuals and individual behaviour modification, largely within the aforementioned '3Ps' framework of prosecution, protection and prevention (Bryant & Landman, 2020; Davy, 2016). Common examples include training and capacity building for professionals, awareness raising campaigns and victim support packages. People reviewing evaluations are constrained by what primary evidence exists and practical challenges identifying relevant material, given the vagaries and expansiveness of both trafficking and anti-trafficking and difficulties verifying from scant material provided

whether programmes tagged as anti-trafficking were actually 'attempting to combat human trafficking' (Bryant & Landman, 2020, p. 124).

We echo Kiss and Zimmerman's (2019) call for the next generation of intervention development and evaluations to move away from a narrow focus on individual behaviour modification to pay greater attention to hypothesised structural drivers of trafficking and barriers to accessing justice, including but not limited to criminal justice. There is arguably considerable and largely untapped potential in examining the impact of 'social protections, such as cash transfer schemes, transparent recruitment methods, worker-driven social responsibility reporting … and fairer labor immigration legislation in destination locations' (Kiss & Zimmerman, 2019, p. 2) specifically from an anti-trafficking perspective. While many such structurally-oriented approaches have long been a focus for development economics, their impact on trafficking prevention more specifically remains less well-understood (Danailova-Trainor & Laczko, 2010; Kotiswaran, 2019). Importantly, a variety of evidence indicates that 'the relationship between trafficking and development is contingent and non-linear and that structural reform is necessary in both states of origin and states of destination' if extreme exploitation is to be reduced (Kotiswaran, 2019, p. 390).

Relatedly, although not formally evaluated, the European response to Ukrainian refugees following Russia's full-scale invasion of 2022 forms a potential natural experiment around how structural mitigations might impact trafficking risks. Despite initial concerns about an explosion of trafficking among newly-displaced Ukrainians (Cockbain & Sidebottom, 2022), the opening up of safe routes and provision of ready access to the regular labour market, welfare and other social protections appear to have been important protective factors (García-Vázquez et al., 2024; Mendel & Sharapov, 2024).

Challenges in assessing impacts on prevalence

Different anti-trafficking interventions can and should have different goals and outcomes for measurement purposes. Despite the common assumption from donors that all anti-trafficking efforts should aim to reduce prevalence, that is not always an appropriate goal. When prevention is the goal, measuring a programme's impact on prevalence can be challenging for evaluators (Bryant & Landman, 2020; Davy, 2016; Gallagher & Surtees, 2012). Long-term follow-up is rare and there is often an overreliance on proxy measures that relate imperfectly to questions of prevalence and severity of trafficking (for example, awareness of risks,

intended or actual labour migration) (Zimmerman et al., 2021). Barriers to assessing impacts on prevalence include the complex systems involved (discussed shortly), difficulties isolating the impacts of interventions, the hidden nature of much trafficking, the lack of reliable sampling frames or solid baseline data, and the potentially relatively low frequency of extreme exploitation (which might mean prohibitively large samples are needed for effects to be visible). The situation is arguably improving, thanks to targeted investment in primary survey data for prevalence estimates (Zhang, 2022) – but including those estimates in evaluations can be prohibitively expensive for all but the funders with the deepest pockets.

More generally, attempts to quantify the scale of trafficking have been notoriously weak for years, beset by definitional problems, shifting counting rules, huge fluctuations, measurement inconsistencies, wild fluctuations due to varied estimation strategies, and unverified and unverifiable claims (Gallagher, 2017; O'Connell Davidson, 2015; Weitzer, 2007; Zhang, 2012). Such shaky estimates offer few useful reference points to help impact evaluation. Relatedly, many of the widely-used problem 'indicators' underpinning prevalence estimates are empirically weak and poorly substantiated (de Vries & Cockbain, 2024). Official trafficking statistics based on formally identified victims, offenders or offences are non-representative, subject to various biases and likely sensitive to fluctuations in funding, politics, awareness and prioritisation (Cockbain et al., 2025; Cockbain et al., 2020). While we wouldn't want to rule out consideration of their utility for evaluations wholesale, enormous caution and sensitivity to their limitations is needed. The same can be said of anti-trafficking helpline data (Cockbain & Tompson, 2024).

Arguably, there is much more to be done to disentangle mechanisms for prevention and to build stronger theory-led interventions, before focusing too heavily on the challenges of measuring impacts on prevalence (Kiss & Zimmerman, Chapter 8, this volume). There is also a danger in focusing too heavily on what is quantifiable, and overlooking the value of incorporating qualitative data into evaluations (Gallagher & Surtees, 2012).

Navigating sensationalism and hidden agendas

Anyone who has spent much time in the anti-trafficking field will know that it is a highly politicised, sensationalised and contested area and that anti-trafficking actors and activities are far from monolithic. For readers with more of an evaluation background, however, it is worth

underscoring the well-documented anxieties, exaggerations and vested interests at play here. The roots of current anti-trafficking discourse can be traced back to a racialised and gendered moral panic around the 'white slave trade' in the early nineteenth century (Doezema, 1999). Racism, coloniality, border control and anti-sex work agendas have been baked into anti-trafficking in its modern iteration too (Kempadoo & Shih, 2022). There have been some marked changes since the early 2000s, however, including growing recognition of the risk to men and boys (not just women and girls) and of the fact that extreme exploitation occurs across a wide range of licit and illicit labour markets, not just in the sex trades (Cockbain et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, biases and blind spots remain in how trafficking is conceptualised and operationalised and who is considered a 'worthy' victim. Anti-trafficking actors motivated by ideological interests can be particularly resistant to evaluation evidence, as shown by hostility towards evidence of the harms of the 'Nordic model' (asymmetric criminalisation of sex work) (Smith & Mac, 2018). Programme aims can be sufficiently vague and unrealistic (for example, to eradicate trafficking) that they are virtually impossible to evaluate sensibly (Davy, 2016; Gallagher & Surtees, 2012). Moreover, the dynamics of mainstream anti-trafficking can vary markedly from country to country: Understanding local context is hence vital, but can be challenging if evaluation experts are effectively parachuted in for their technical skills or prestigious affiliations but lack domain or local knowledge, or resources to develop or access it.

Bringing in expertise by experience and critical perspectives

'Success' in anti-trafficking is a matter of perspective, raising questions about who sets the parameters and how (Gallagher & Surtees, 2012; Boyd, Chapter 2, this volume). The role of lived experience as a valid and important form of expertise has long been neglected in anti-trafficking evaluations (Davy, 2016; GAATW, 2010). Yet, if interventions poorly serve target communities, can they really be said to be worthwhile? The value of lived experience is increasingly recognised in this field and beyond, but the trend towards emphasising survivor engagement or leadership in anti-trafficking risks being tokenistic, superficial and extractive – adding a buzzword without disrupting the status quo (Quirk, 2023). Nevertheless, the ongoing trend towards emphasising survivor engagement will likely shift expectations and norms for evaluations: requiring donors and evaluators to think hard about how to

engage in meaningful, participatory, non-extractive ways (see also Ash & Otiende, 2023; Boyd, Chapter 2, this volume; MC, 2024). Here, it is also important to remember that victims/survivors are not monolithic and that there are all sorts of prejudices and power structures affecting whose views and experiences are heard and valued, and to what end (Boyd & Ash, 2023).

Moreover, communities which have been negatively impacted by the anti-trafficking 'rescue industry' (Agustín, 2008) and 'war on trafficking' (Bhagat, 2023; Kempadoo & Shih, 2022; Rivera, 2024; Smith & Mac, 2018) can be understandably suspicious or hostile towards anti-trafficking actors and their programmes. It is important, therefore, to think seriously about how best to bring in the critical perspectives of broader communities affected by anti-trafficking and ensure their experiences and expertise are also taken seriously in evaluations. That is arguably even more challenging than increasing engagement with people self-identifying as survivors, and there seems to be much less interest or will to do so.

Recognising trafficking and anti-trafficking as complex systems

While yet to become a mainstream framework, there is growing recognition that both trafficking and anti-trafficking can be usefully understood as complex systems: involving multiple interconnected actors, interests, decisions, activities, processes, places and so forth, all distributed in space and time and embedded in, for example, broader structures of laws, governance and economic systems (Cockbain & Tompson, 2024; McAlpine, 2021; van der Watt & van der Westhuizen, 2017). Briefly, complex systems are varied, dynamic, unpredictable, multi-level (operating at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels) and full of interdependencies and interactions.

The determinants both of trafficking and of outcomes of anti-trafficking interventions can be multi-faceted and intersectional and can interact in unpredictable ways (Kiss & Zimmerman, 2019). Prevention-related research is still nascent in this domain and work is needed to develop intervention frameworks capable of accommodating such complexities and building stronger interventions (Kiss & Zimmerman, 2019). Complex systems perspectives pose both challenges and opportunities for considering ways to account for complexity in intervention design and evaluation alike, whereby promising avenues include realist evaluation (Sidebottom et al., Chapter 4, this volume), investment in intervention development research (Kiss & Zimmerman, Chapter 8, this volume)

and innovations in simulation methods for evaluation (McAlpine & Birks, Chapter 5, this volume).

Scope and limits of this book

We recognise that the boundaries of trafficking are porous and intersections with less extreme abuses are also important to consider. In the interests of manageability, however, this book focuses on the extreme and criminalised end of the spectrum of exploitation. The case studies, too, draw primarily from individual-focused interventions within the framework of criminal justice, public health and social care. There will be transferable lessons for a broader range of interventions, but going into detail on the intersecting areas of, for example, labour market governance, migration regimes, drug policy and so forth goes beyond the scope of what is feasible in a single book.

In disciplinary terms, this book sits above all at the intersection of crime prevention and public health, although some authors have other backgrounds. Thematically, the book covers a range of anti-trafficking activity, primarily through criminal justice or public health lenses. Methodologically, it introduces a range of relevant approaches (for example, realist evaluation, randomised control trials, systematic reviews). Geographically, the book draws on the global literature and case studies of evaluations in Europe, North and South America and Asia. We were, however, constrained by how few anti-trafficking evaluations have been done so far and by whom: As well as being underdeveloped in general, experience is centred in Global North institutions (similar holds for criminology more generally, see Eisner, 2023). So, although many of this book's contributions focus on interventions in the Global South, most of the contributors are based in the Global North (their own heritage varies). The uneven geographies of knowledge production need recognition and mitigations, perhaps through investment in building evaluation capacity in the Global South and equitable research partnerships.

The book has two parts. The first part (Chapters 1–7) is about cross-cutting issues, tensions and considerations for evaluation of anti-trafficking interventions, including key schools of thought around design, questions of survivor engagement and the politics of evidence. It draws on material from across the world and seeks to introduce key processes, principles and pitfalls. The second part (Chapters 8–11) is dedicated to a series of evaluation case studies, drawing out experiences and reflections from the messy realities of evaluation and helping demystify

the process. Often, published evaluations (like other research outputs) present a rather sanitised, simplified reconstruction of the research process, glossing over challenges encountered. Here, we have encouraged the authors to do the opposite and lay bare as much as possible the difficult decisions made, trade-offs managed, unexpected challenges encountered and lessons learnt for future projects.

The chapters to follow

Below, we provide a brief overview of the chapters to come, highlighting their focus and key contributions.

In Chapter 2, Sabra Boyd calls for survivors to be at the heart of the design and evaluation of anti-trafficking interventions. Drawing on both lived and professional experiences, she argues that listening to survivors' perspectives, ideas and needs in all their diversity is crucial to making services trauma-informed, ethical and effective. While her focus is on survivor-oriented programmes specifically, broader lessons can be drawn from the provocations she raises about the politics, economics and power dynamics of anti-trafficking programming and evaluation.

In Chapter 3, Sheldon Zhang advocates for expanded use of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) to increase the credibility of claims made about the effectiveness of anti-trafficking efforts. Although not without their limitations or applicable in all evaluation settings, he argues that RCTs should be embraced as a major evaluation tool – if not the gold standard – to assess treatment effects, settle contradictory theories about treatment strategies and scrutinise wild claims about popular anti-trafficking programmes. Alternative evaluation strategies for when RCTs are not practical are also introduced.

In Chapter 4, Aiden Sidebottom, Ella Cockbain and Nick Tilley discuss an alternative approach to RCTs, namely realist evaluation. Realist evaluations start from the premise that particular interventions will work only in particular contexts. A realist evaluation therefore centres on determining the circumstances in which interventions are effective (or not), through which mechanisms and to produce which outcomes. Realist approaches to evaluation and evidence synthesis are increasingly used in other fields, but there are few trafficking-specific examples. This chapter sets out the key assumptions of realist evaluation and why it can advance the evidence base on anti-trafficking interventions.

In Chapter 5, Alys McAlpine and Daniel Birks introduce innovative ways of using systems science theory and methods to improve

anti-trafficking efforts. Their chapter centres around agent-based modelling (ABM): a computer simulation technique increasingly popular in public health and crime prevention research. They argue that ABM has, in particular, huge potential for developing and refining intervention theory: a vital but often overlooked area of anti-trafficking intervention design and evaluation to date. Taking a realist approach, they stress the importance of context, causal mechanisms and a holistic approach to evidence.

In Chapter 6, Peter van der Laan and Monika Smit reflect on the benefits, limitations and challenges of systematic reviews in the human trafficking field, drawing on their own and others' experiences. Systematic reviews are a vital part of the evaluation toolkit, they emphasise, enabling the synthesis of evidence on the effectiveness, implementation and backfire effects of interventions. They describe key findings from a variety of major reviews in the trafficking domain, highlight factors limiting such reviews' utility and set out steps to build a stronger primary evidence-base to inform future efforts.

In Chapter 7, Joel Quirk considers the limits of what an improved evaluation evidence-base can achieve. Tying his arguments to the evolution of the anti-trafficking field, vested interests and moral panics, he contends that the real problem is not so much insufficient evidence but insufficient will to act on the evidence that *already* exists. He raises concerns that growing interest in evaluations – as important as they can be as part of the puzzle – risks playing to technocratic interests, obscuring underlying politics and reinforcing questionable hierarchies of knowledge.

Chapter 8 is the first of four evaluation case studies in this book. Here, Ligia Kiss and Cathy Zimmerman present a rare case study of intervention development research (IDR) in the anti-trafficking domain. Based on preliminary findings from a project about labour exploitation in the mining sector in Brazil's Amazon, they introduce the key questions and basic elements of IDR. This includes a strong emphasis on participatory methods, so as to learn from lived and local expertise. Greater investment in IDR, they argue, enables more theoretically-grounded and evidence-based anti-trafficking interventions, maximises the chances of positive outcomes and minimises the likelihood of wasted resources and harms to intended beneficiaries.

In Chapter 9, Protik Ali, Roy Ahn and Clifford Zinnes reflect on an RCT of an anti-trafficking programme in Cambodia. They explain the planned and eventual evaluation design, sampling and analytical procedures, core challenges encountered and partial remedies deployed.

Their experiences show how unexpected changes to implementation can have substantial implications for a planned evaluation. They warn that, despite their strengths in establishing causality, RCTs can be challenging and resource-intensive to implement and results need to be interpreted with care. Using lessons learnt, they call for careful coordination as well as greater accountability between funder, implementer and evaluator to ensure the integrity of evaluation design and delivery.

In Chapter 10, Patricia Hynes reflects on lessons learnt from the staggered implementation and evaluation of a formal guardianship scheme in England and Wales for children and young people who have been trafficked. In this case study, she argues that the rate of change has been 'glacial', despite initial legislation passed nearly a decade ago and clear evidence of the benefits of formal guardianship. She draws attention here to the non-linear process by which evidence can influence policy, as well as practical challenges in conducting evaluations on sensitive topics over short timeframes.

In Chapter 11, Elena Savoia and Rachael Piltch-Loeb present a case study of their experiences evaluating the impact of a major human trafficking awareness-raising campaign in the US (the Blue Campaign). Drawing on insights from the public health field and informational campaigns in other domains, they draw out methodological and practical challenges and opportunities for evaluating anti-trafficking informational campaigns. They argue for the importance of involving practitioners and survivors to understand parameters for effectiveness and context to interventions and to reduce the likelihood of harmful backfire effects.

Key messages

- Human trafficking is a messy, complex and contested construct, encompassing a disparate range of issues. Different issues and contexts will need very different responses.
- Despite enormous investment in anti-trafficking activity, there has been remarkably little evaluation of interventions. To enable evidence-based policy, we need more evaluations. It is vital that funders recognise this glaring shortcoming in current anti-trafficking efforts.
- There is growing evidence of the collateral damage anti-trafficking interventions can cause to target or neighbouring populations. There is an ethical and economic imperative to improve responses, minimise harmful backfire effects and maximise benefits.

- Trafficking and anti-trafficking have some idiosyncrasies that translate into specific challenges for evaluation, hence the need for this targeted book.
- This book brings together a wide range of contributors grappling with the theory and practice of evaluation of anti-trafficking efforts, including in-depth reflexive case studies. In doing so, we hope to encourage and support more and better evaluations in future.

Notes

1. Also referred to as '4Ps': the cited list, plus partnership.
2. Indicative pound to dollar conversions all based on exchange rates as of early July 2024.
3. The trafficking-related target is 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'.
4. A prestigious international social science research network known for its evidence syntheses on a variety of social issues.
5. Although having 'promising' results does not appear to be a criterion for inclusion in the database, the choice of name seems a bit odd since null results and evidence of ineffectiveness are also vital in building the evaluation evidence base.
6. See https://state.gov/program-to-end-modern-slavery/ for details on research and evaluation programmes funded by PEMS under the US Department of State.
7. See https://modernslaverypec.org/all-projects.

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2

Success is in the eye of the funder: survivor engagement in anti-trafficking evaluation

Sabra Boyd

Sabra Boyd is an award-winning journalist, hospital systems trainer, outreach worker, board member of the Housing Justice Project and familial child trafficking survivor, whose experiences inform her perspective of homelessness and human trafficking issues. Sabra was trafficked again as a homeless teenager, an experience that very much fits the data of trafficking risk factors. Anti-trafficking work for survivors who study exploitation oftentimes focuses on the intersections of risk factors, considering how things like the social determinants of health such as poverty, homelessness and other factors can unfortunately predict the trajectory of a person's vulnerabilities in life with depressing accuracy. Optimistic that life is more than an algorithm, Sabra works as a journalist and storyteller, seeking truth and striving to see the human face between the lines of a spreadsheet. To this end, her chapter in this book is written with a narrative structure to illustrate how survivor leadership is crucial for trauma-informed and effective programme design and evaluation. Sabra was born in the US to a violent organised crime boss who was a confidential police informant and human trafficker. This first-person story takes place in the late 2000s, when Sabra was a homeless teenager in Portland, Oregon, and was being trafficked by a group who groomed her while she was in a youth shelter.

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I pressed the buzzer and stood outside in the Portland, Oregon, rain, waiting. We were required to attend the homeless youth programme's workforce development classes in order to remain eligible for services such as food (most

of which I was allergic to), a bed for six hours a night (where I was repeatedly assaulted in my sleep) and case management (who suggested I should steal something and get arrested intentionally so I could sleep indoors in jail when the waitlist for the winter shelter was full). I was there that morning to attend a mandatory financial literacy workshop. I hoped they could help me with my identity theft case and clear the back taxes the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) said I owed them because my trafficker had registered his business in my name and social security number. According to the US Government, I had been the CEO of a construction company since I was five years old. In retrospect, I wish that any adult had told me to call a tax attorney, but I didn't know such things existed – I thought you only called a lawyer if you were arrested or in need of a divorce.

A long, low beeping tone followed the sound of a clicking latch as the door unlocked. I descended down the dark stairwell, lined with industrial rubber flooring. Down, into the basement of the homeless youth programme's headquarters.

Rounding the corner, I overheard my friend talking to our caseworker.

'I want to be a musician', he said.

'No', our caseworker laughed. 'You can't do that for a living. Sure, have fun playing guitar, but you need a *real* job.' My friend's disappointment was palpable in the silence.

'Ok, well what should I do, then?' he asked.

'I have these retail jobs. Or our partner shop if you want to get some experience in food service.'

My friend was quiet. I knew he was angry. He was only silent when he felt powerless. He had worked as a line cook, produce manager at a grocery store, and a barista. He had sold knives as a door-to-door salesman – a very strange job, but doubly so for homeless youth who were dispatched by multi-level marketing (MLM) men to wealthy suburban neighbourhoods with foyers larger than the homeless shelter where we slept side-by-side and on top of one another. He had also been labour-trafficked to sell magazine subscriptions for violent rival 'magazine gangs' across the US. I winced upon hearing our caseworker reiterate that he couldn't be a musician. That he couldn't be an artist. That it was irresponsible to hope for any kind of work that brought him any joy at all. It was like a bad joke about how beggars can't be choosers, barred from enjoying any aspect of life or employment. Discussing career goals and life trajectory over the next 20 years was out of the question. Grants don't fund a 20-year plan and optimism is a luxury homeless kids cannot afford.

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I start this chapter by telling my story because to talk about accurate and ethical evaluations of survivor-oriented services (the focus of this chapter), we must talk about the architecture of assessments and who the assessment is really for. Datapoints measuring a programme's success are typically austere objectives outlined by funders who don't have lived experience, rather than meaningful goals defined by survivors and programme participants themselves.

We must ask ourselves: who is the end client that the programme intends to serve – the trafficking survivor client, or the funder with parameters that dictate how someone else needs to live their life in order to qualify for help? What does a Return on Investment (ROI) even look like in the context of social services and how is it measured when discussing human lives? And is measuring this for survivors of human trafficking hypocritical at its core? In this way, many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) unintentionally replicate the despotic and paternalistic power dynamics employed by traffickers.

Anti-trafficking organisations and political leaders frequently measure human trafficking issues with economic language to quantify how grave the issue is. As a trafficking survivor, this puzzles me. Are we saying that human trafficking is a problem worth billions of dollars because of lost tax revenue or lost GDP and labour force? Quantifying human trafficking in terms of money always sounds to me like we're endorsing the monetary value of human life. But maybe I'm being too precious, because this is exactly what health insurance and life insurance companies do. Our society is exploitation all the way down. Human trafficking sits at one polar edge of the exploitation spectrum, with things like wage theft somewhere on the other slightly more legal side.

In this chapter I will argue that 'success' is in the eye of the funder, and we must manage this precarious balance delicately. In for-profit business, your end product is clearly defined when finished. Conversely, when it comes to social services, human lives are messy – especially for those of us who have fought to simply be alive at all. So, is success that a survivor is simply breathing, with no regard for their quality of life? I would argue no. But then, I am not a billionaire philanthropist who donates money for a tax break and the altruistic zing that clears my conscience of the means by which I 'earned' money for the cheques I write to charities.

Money, and the whims of philanthropists, shape anti-trafficking programmes and how they are assessed for markers of success. The economics and power dynamics at play are ironic because the very same disparity that creates said philanthropists' wealth is predicated on the

economic vulnerability and desperation that drives human trafficking and allows exploitation to thrive in the first place. The answer to the problem is the problem itself.

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At the news that my friend could not be a musician and needed to take a job in a restaurant or retail instead, he stood to leave. The low ceiling of the basement grazed his head, though he slouched dramatically like a troubadour deep in thought, his guitar slung over his back with a scrap of commandeered clothesline rope stretched taut against his chest. I knew our caseworker was urging him to be practical and consider how he would afford basic needs like rent once he moved out of the shelter. And I also knew how absolutely terrible he was at customer service.

Social service programmes frequently push clients into low-paid entry level jobs like food service and the restaurant industry, retail or warehouses because these are usually jobs with the lowest barriers to employment. For example, most job training programmes for trafficking survivors partner almost exclusively with entry-level food service, retail, and warehouse companies – jobs where your role is to be subservient to customers in a low-paid position. But for trafficking survivors who are recovering from abuse and coercion, being pushed into workplaces that train employees with slogans like 'the customer is always right' can be detrimental. They can replicate many of the same power and control dynamics as traffickers, and risk making survivors susceptible to being lured by a trafficker or abused again. For trafficking survivors who are recovering from extreme forms of financial abuse and control without any right to autonomy or little knowledge of their labour rights, this can compound trauma and render them susceptible to being re-exploited and trafficked again.

These types of jobs perpetuate the cycle of poverty, with low wages in industries notorious for wage theft. The alternative would be to fund education for survivors, or ask them what their goals and passions are in order to help them shape those into a financially sustainable career path, since limited education is another risk factor for being trafficked. But whether a client finds a job that they actually enjoy, where they aren't abused, and where there is room for growth in their career – these questions are usually ignored when assessing the efficacy of a programme that serves trafficking survivors.

We did it differently in several programmes that I helped design, including a mentorship programme for homeless and trafficked youth that helped them discover new interests and explore unexpected career goals. We used surveys for survivors to explore their interests, including

things that they had never tried before. Similar to a personality test, we asked open-ended motivational interviewing questions such as 'Do you like music?' The surveys led to custom tailored programmes like a DJ workshop that several clients wanted to explore. While only one of the participants went on to become a professional DJ, others enjoyed learning the craft and met people outside their immediate social circle, thereby expanding their perception of what was possible and available.

We often use the idiom 'meet clients where they are' in social services. However, this usually assumes that survivors are at rock bottom or hovering just above it. Meeting people where they are should also consider that survivors can exceed all expectations beyond our imagination, and maybe even their own. I say this because I have witnessed caseworkers grow resentful of trafficking survivors who they perceive to succeed beyond their station.

Language like 'reintegration into society' is also commonly used, erasing survivors' existence like apparitions. But we have always been here. We may have been hidden in society's crevasses, but we never left.

Encouraging success beyond their wildest dreams for survivors, however they may define that success, is an effective way to fight poverty and help survivors build a sustainable career. After all, poverty is one of the main risk factors for trafficking or being revictimised (Eargle & Doucet, 2021).

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When thinking about who is doing the evaluating, we must consider meaningful engagement of survivors, intersecting privileges and whether survivors are included in conducting the assessment at all. The *Meaningful Engagement of People with Lived Experience* toolkit asks, 'who gets to self-identify whether or not they have lived experience of human trafficking? How does that disclosure impact their experiences in the sector? Who gets to be respected and to have their dignity and privacy honoured?' (Ash & Otiende, 2023, p. 15). It should be noted that inclusion, in this context, often means researchers finding a convenient 'survivor' whose lived experience may have nothing to do with the target population of the study; relevancy and representation of survivors are not always easy to obtain.

There lies an inherent tension and dangerous paternalism in the fact that most social programmes are funded, led, assessed and founded by non-survivors. Inherent in this are the topsy-turvy nonprofit economics where to start a successful nonprofit, you must usually be wealthy. Therefore, a disproportionate number of nonprofits are founded and led by wealthy philanthropists who do not have lived experience of the issues they hope to influence, often rendering the programme little more than

a vanity project that needs to look good to funders at a gala, without considering the real impacts or harms on actual programme participants (Ewart-James, 2021). As numerous examples throughout human history show, good intentions do not always bear good results and in fact cause many unintended harms (in the context of anti-trafficking, see also, Cockbain et al., Chapter 1, this volume; Sidebottom et al., Chapter 4, this volume; Quirk, Chapter 7, this volume).

Because of the nonprofit sector relying on paternalistic philanthropy, disparity and suffering are required to uphold a system that needs nonprofit social programmes in the first place. As engineers might say, it's searching for a problem to fit the solution. To define the problem and reverse engineer a tested and effective solution, we must interrogate the sources of the problem and how we are complicit in the problem persisting. More tangibly, as discussed in *Research as More than Extraction*, we must face systemic racism, white supremacy, sexism, ableism, classism, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia, and aporophobia – the fear of poor people (Bunting et al., 2023). The role of inhumane immigration policies and false hierarchies of victimhood must also be considered (van der Leun & van Schijndel, 2016).

Once we start to think more carefully about intersectionality, socioeconomic push factors, structural racism and sexism, it helps illustrate how programme evaluations must include more robust datasets and diverse survivor leadership. I want to see particular emphasis on the ratio of how many survivors serve on an organisation's board of directors, hold positions of leadership in director or CEO roles, and also whether those survivors represent a diverse array of experiences and backgrounds that may effectively challenge the direction of an organisation when it starts to stray from providing ethical services.

In this regard, we must recognise the danger of tokenism, because when I was the only board member of an intervention programme with lived experience, my concerns about harmful practices were dismissed and I had no power as the only dissenting voice. I had no choice but to resign due to concerns over the legal implications of how the programme was developing and the futility of my repeated attempts to fix it. After my resignation, I tipped off the third-party auditor hired to evaluate the programme with my concerns about forced labour, safety violations and budget mismanagement.

I anguished over the decision to blow the whistle on the programme that once had saved my life when I was a teenager. However, 20 years on, their leadership had significantly changed, and the culture and mission of the programme had turned into little more than a vanity project for people

who neither understood nor cared about the harms they were causing. For example, they started a farm programme located far away from housing resources where youth were expected to work for free for 'work skills'. In addition to pointing to the US's history of chattel slavery, I tried to explain how farming was not a job skill that would allow youth to earn a living wage and underlined the hypocrisy of pushing labour-trafficked youth to do agricultural work without compensation. The location of the farm was far from where the city's shelters were located, so some youth opted to sleep outdoors so they could arrive on time in the morning.

There were so many things wrong with this programme, but each time I brought up my concerns, all the other members of the board who did not have lived experience dismissed my concerns and touted the therapeutic benefits of gardening.

This organisation never conducted a client-centred evaluation. This is how I believe they dramatically lost their way. When they did assess their programme, it only included staff and directors' perspectives, which turned into a useless closed circuit of praising and patting themselves on the back.

Unfortunately, this is not uncommon because for social services, clients are not viewed as the customer – funders are. Success is usually defined by and for the funders with little to no regard for clients' insights during and after exiting the programme being evaluated. The ethics of how to do survivor-centred evaluations of a programme (such as surveys completed by clients) must emphasise anonymity for clients' protection from possible retaliation, and to help them feel safe being open and transparent about their experiences. No human services programme is perfect, but the least we can do is to follow the asymptote of continuous quality improvement (CQI) and try our best to listen to survivors with lived experience, then set new goals accordingly. This is illustrated in Ash & Otiende's guide to meaningful survivor engagement, which describes how:

> Often, organizations or their staff may view data collection as something that is done primarily to appease funders and stay in grant compliance. When done well and thoughtfully, data collection and analysis for CQI can be one of the most valuable and essential processes an organization can engage in. It is important to incorporate evaluation into your budgets, staffing capacity, and timelines when developing funding processes. (Ash & Otiende, 2023, p. 33)

Much like best practices for motivational interviewing with clients, programme assessments benefit when we ask open-ended questions that may not elicit answers that fit neatly into a spreadsheet. We should

ask clients and former clients to help with things like SWOT analyses (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) of programmes they've participated in, as well as possible solutions, goals and interpretations for the compiled information and data.

An issue with measuring CQI in social services is that the product does not have parameters that are as clearly defined as an engineer building a software programme, for example. For a company building a product, there is a clear beginning, testing phase, implementation phase, final product and shipment to customers. For anti-trafficking programme services, the definition of a finished product is more malleable because people's lives cannot be measured in such strict margins. For this reason, programme evaluations must include survivor engagement, because true programme success must ultimately be defined by the people experiencing the programme. Survivors with lived experience and diverse backgrounds should be invited and compensated well to work on the assessment project, accurately defining parameters, identifying gaps in data collection and extrapolating information in ways that people who don't have lived experience are likely to overlook or not know to consider.

What we choose to measure, and how we measure it, shapes programme outcomes. Who is measuring and collecting data also matters, because a survey participant may feel the need to filter their answers based on the perceived power dynamics at play and how safe they feel being fully transparent with their interviewer. Fear of retaliation from organisation directors and staff is another consideration in programme evaluations. For example, I know several survivors who were sexually assaulted by shelter staff and programme directors and they did not feel safe enough to openly disclose this. As such, aside from having more formalised programme evaluations at particular points in time, it is important, also, to have an anonymous option to raise safety concerns directly to third party auditors as and when needed.

The timeframe and longevity of a study is also important. Programme participants may have insights, months or years later, that they can see more clearly as a retrospective objective after gaining more stability and not being inundated by chronic compounding traumatic events. While using trauma-informed practices that include compensating survivors for their time and expertise, seeking evidence for evaluations before and after they leave a programme is imperative. For example, there was no safe way that I could disclose that I was sexually assaulted and trafficked again as a homeless teenager, while living in a transitional housing programme in Portland, Oregon, without risking

retaliation from my perpetrators who I had to sleep next to. I also didn't want my perpetrators to get in trouble or be kicked out of the shelter and forced to sleep outside. Years later, this came up, though, when the organisation was recommended by a fellow colleague. I spoke up about the organisation's continued corruption and abuses, as witnessed by youth I work with currently. After years had passed, the threat of retaliation, homelessness and fear of the power dynamic dissipated, because my socio-economic status was no longer threatened. I still had intense anxiety about the conversation and voicing my concerns, but my physical safety was no longer a present danger.

Doctors and nurses pledge the Hippocratic Oath to first, do no harm. Survivor engagement efforts would benefit from this slogan because historically, harmful human service programmes have begun with the best intentions that usually go awry when we don't listen to clients or invite them to work in positions of leadership and as fairly paid independent consultants. The National Survivor Network and the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery outlined many of these trauma-informed ethics and best practices in their exemplary *Meaningful Engagement of People with Lived Experience* toolkit (Ash & Otiende, 2023).

Recently, a colleague recommended a programme for homeless youth that serves child trafficking survivors, at a shelter where I had stayed when I was a youth and was assaulted multiple times in the hands of those who were supposed to care for me and protect me. And I know little has changed since I left, because I still do a lot of work in that city with homeless youth outreach and art programmes, and have heard many familiar stories about this organisation. My colleague thanked me for my candour and for trusting her with this insider information. She also told me that no one else she knows has this holistic insight, both as a former client and as a professional in the anti-trafficking field. On paper, this NGO looks lovely. They hired great photographers for their brochures. Their grant writers work full-time and therefore have a larger budget with the grants they've won. They also have a dedicated marketing team and host fundraising galas – events where, as a teenager, I was paraded out on stage like a dressed-up donkey, told to smile for photos, then shooed out the door without a word of appreciation or a bite of the expensive hors d'oeuvres intended for the wealthy guests, bidding on overpriced auction items only to pay the executive director's bloated salary. Donors knew nothing about the systemic abuses at the shelter they were paying for. And how could they have known? Clients and former clients were never asked for their true stories because that isn't information that most organisations care to

even acknowledge. And why would they? There's no incentive to care about the quality and efficacy of services when clients are seen as a product to sell to funders.

For trafficking survivors whose self-image and self-worth is systematically eroded by exploitative abusers, the trauma and cognitive dissonance that occur in most human service agencies where survivors are dressed up as a sellable product, marketed to donors and grant funders, is surreal to witness. NGOs are the flip side of the capitalism coin.

Until my colleague pointed this out, I never realised how strange it was that most programmes don't survey survivors about their experiences as a client. Companies usually do exit interviews when you leave a job, or a client terminates services. But when someone leaves a homeless shelter, they're not asked to give a review – although there are some very revealing reviews on Yelp and Google for homeless shelters, jails and prisons.

I'm not sure that anyone would give a homeless shelter five stars. Living there and interacting with the staff on different shifts can provide a perspective impossible to capture by any rating metrics, such as how many clients found gainful employment in the last year or how many clients enrolled in a school of their chosen academic interests. Few train youth in shelters on how to handle abusive bosses, labour rights or fend off sexual harassment. Clients are often pushed to go to college by caseworkers who have no concerns about student debts or struggling in an academic programme that they hate. If a brochure given to donors says a specific percentage of clients found housing that year, we need to ask about the *quality* of said housing. For example, is the housing safe? Is there mould or other toxins present from nearby factories in the neighbourhood? Is the building too loud for them and their child to sleep well enough for work and school the next day? Is the space accessible to a client with a wheelchair or other mobility needs? Did clients experience microaggressions or assaults from staff or other programme participants?

The importance of measuring the *quality* of a programme's survivor engagement cannot be understated because it can heavily influence long term outcomes, success, quality of life and career trajectory. Unfortunately, most of our systems do not operate with a longitudinal lens spanning the course of a client's lifetime. But they should. Because a lifetime of trauma cannot be fixed in one fiscal year. There needs to be long-term investment in the trajectory of trafficking survivors' entire lives and longitudinal studies that examine more than just a cross section of ACEs (adverse childhood experiences) scores.

We don't even have effective data collection methods for rates of human trafficking. For example, most government statisticians in the US who analyse human trafficking data shrug their shoulders when I ask why we can't stop duplicating and triplicating child trafficking numbers. I witnessed this personally when I worked for a youth shelter for child trafficking survivors, and saw clients counted as multiple unique instances of trafficking each time they decided to stay out after school to get pizza with friends instead of returning to the shelter. This in turn led to one child being counted dozens of times as different trafficked children. These American statisticians know that inaccurate data collection is occurring, but they either don't care, or they say they're concerned with protecting anonymity. While I appreciate that sentiment for client privacy, it's a lazy excuse because there are many ways to redact and anonymise client identifiers. The ramifications for ineffectively counting human trafficking numbers are exponential. One issue it exacerbates is which organisations receive grant funding – because if your agency tries to accurately report how many clients were served, but a grant writer doesn't parse the data to be more accurate, the application that claims to have served 1,000 clients is more likely to look good on paper, and receive more funding, than the organisation who more accurately states that they served 100 people. Issues with inaccurate human trafficking data also stokes dangerous fodder for groups like QAnon that inflate trafficking numbers and fearmonger people into thinking they're about to be snatched by a trafficker every week, while shopping for bread, picking up mail or driving to school. In 2021 the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) migrated to using a more robust database that will help alleviate this bad data collection issue, but it may take a decade or longer for local police precincts, counties and states to follow and invest in improving their databases (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2021). There may also be a disincentive to collect more accurate, measured data. Because fearmongering with bloated human trafficking numbers is big business in a lot of countries.

Data-driven and *evidence-based* are frequently reduced to buzzwords that few can define. Without measurable, trackable data and objectives for programmes that serve vulnerable populations, we risk doing more harm, regardless of how good our intentions are.

So how do we put a face to the data between the lines of a spreadsheet? And how do we do this with a trauma-informed methodology that is client-centred and survivor-led? After all, most programmes serving trafficking survivors rely on grant funding and philanthropic donors to

keep their doors open, and they need to prove that they are accountable to oversight and doing the work they've been paid to do.

The dilemma is akin to Schrödinger's NGO. By observing, evaluating and surveying, are we doing harm to survivors? Are we finding an accurate output and data that we can trust with the questions we are asking, and how we are asking them? Because this is how we attune and implement changes, moving forward, that can significantly impact staff and clients.

A good illustration of these competing priorities is my colleague who works as a philanthropic consultant for wealthy people to find NGOs that align with their values and interests. She then vets the organisations through a series of rigorous rubrics that assess finances and tax returns, client testimonies and other considerations. One organisation in a poor neighbourhood in South America looked promising for the specifications of a client who wanted to donate a large sum of money. However, the NGO never answered their phone when she tried to call, and her emails went nowhere. She tried writing to them in their language. She tried calling neighbouring businesses. She found that the local business owners despised the programme because they didn't like them helping poor people who didn't buy anything from their shops. To her, being at odds with the business community was a sign that the organisation was probably doing good work. Neighbours said good things about the organisation, which was another indicator. In the end, she flew down to knock on their door in person with a local interpreter. She decided that the unanswered phone calls and emails were probably a sign of their preoccupation with their clients and direct services instead of fundraising or public relations. After she visited in person, her suspicions were confirmed and she gave the organisation a glowing review for her philanthropist client.

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After I overheard our caseworker tell my friend that he could never be a successful musician, I wanted to say something comforting to him. But I couldn't think of anything that might console him. I also didn't want to embarrass him or let him know I had overheard the conversation. He sprinted up the stairs, his guitar flopping against his back angrily.

I signed in for the financial literacy workshop session and found a seat at the table with a dozen other homeless youth clients. Over the next hour, we were lectured on how to save money – money that none of us had. I kept thinking about how I hadn't even had money to buy nail clippers or a hairbrush for months, much less save anything. I needed to save myself before I could ever think about saving money. The two

people facilitating the workshop were completely oblivious to the realities of being a homeless trafficking survivor.

At the end we were allowed to ask questions. I raised my hand, hoping to get help with the thing that stressed me every day. 'How do I prove to the IRS that my identity was stolen?' I asked the financial literacy coaches. They looked at one another. They looked back at us. They didn't know.

For weeks I had come to that basement to use my caseworker's phone to call the IRS, waiting on hold for hours. Asking to speak with supervisors. Explaining over and over again that I was a homeless teenager, not the CEO of my (trafficker) dad's construction company. 'I'm not Richie Rich,' I told them. 'I'm a homeless teenager with nothing. How am I supposed to pay this?' IRS agents and supervisors told me that it didn't matter – my signature was on all the documents. My name was on the business registration. In abject frustration, I asked if I had signed my signature in crayon. I sent them copies of my birth certificate and my ID. But none of it mattered. They didn't care. The best I could do (without an adult telling me to call a lawyer) was tell them over and over again that I was homeless, hoping they'd lower the amount I allegedly owed.

After months of this, I set up a payment plan with the IRS. I got three jobs and worked 14 hours a day, seven days a week. I remained homeless longer while I continued paying the IRS my trafficker's debt. I needed to fix my ruined credit score so I could one day hope to rent an apartment. Landlords don't like renting apartments to teenagers, even less so when those teenagers have nearly two decades documented showing how financially irresponsible they were as a child CEO. I suppose that most kindergarteners are not CEOs of companies because young children are not typically lauded for their executive leadership and bookkeeping skills.

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Had I been asked in an exit interview how my experience had been in that programme, I might have told them that I wished they had helped me find the legal representation that I desperately needed. Optimistically, this might have been a catalyst for them to implement protocols and procedures that would have prevented the same thing from happening again to future clients in similar situations. Financial abuse and identity theft is very common among trafficking survivors (especially children and young adults).

Grant funders never ask clients whether they would give a social service programme five stars. Because ultimately, these services are not for the people they actually impact. These programmes serve their funders and success is in the eye of the funder. Funders are the paying customers.

Shortly after the financial literacy class where we were told to save money we didn't have, I was again trafficked as a homeless teenager. Lured by three traffickers who I met in that homeless youth shelter. The first of them was a boy a little older than I was who was so nice to me. He was kinder than anyone had been to me in years. It's no shock that I fell for his ruse and did his bidding, snagged by what some call the 'Romeo' or 'loverboy' coercion method, which is a very common tactic traffickers use to manipulate homeless teenage targets or adult women.

Data can be beautiful as long as we acknowledge that in between those spreadsheet lines are real people and their very real lives. When I see my own life reflected in human trafficking data or toolkit checklists, it is both frightening and validating. Frightening because it confirms that I'm not alone and my lived experience is actually seen, and validating for the exact same reasons. Most of these datasets are findings from studies that were designed by other trafficking survivors with lived experience who intrinsically understand what to look for, which questions to ask and how to ask them without causing more harm.

When we talk about funding, what we're really talking about is power.

In 2023, I gathered together with a group of trafficking survivors to discuss applying for a fellowship to assess trafficking survivors' needs regarding forced criminality. After several discussions, none of us ended up applying because the grant application process would have required us to publicly disclose our home addresses – an alarming safety concern when you are a trafficking survivor who needs to remain hidden from your trafficker. Overlooked obstacles like this, embedded in systems that are designed by people who do not have lived experience of the problems they're tasked with addressing, are rarely considered. As discussed in Ash & Otiende's human trafficking prevention toolkit (written by survivors):

> When we talk about power in the human trafficking space, the discussion can feel abstract because most of the time we do not explicitly acknowledge or analyse the ways in which power is acquired, exercised and asserted. It is also important to note that the understanding of power can be quite subjective, and can take on different meanings depending on the context of the power dynamics. Social power is the capacity of different individuals or groups to determine who gets what, who does what, who decides what, and who sets the agenda. Obviously, power dynamics can influence who gets access to resources. (Ash & Otiende, 2023, p. 15)

More intentional efforts to engage meaningfully with and incorporate the input of trafficking survivors with diverse backgrounds could avoid many of these issues from the start. I reached out to the director of the agency administering the fellowship and asked them to consider changing their policy on applicants' addresses. To my surprise, they did! Within just three business days, the policy was updated for individual fellowships. I had no idea that the government could change anything so quickly, but it was a heartening improvement and an optimistic example of directors listening to survivor voices.

There is also the question of which survivors get a seat at the table, and the extractive nature of many of those invitations to the table. Several times I have been asked to give a keynote, or present as a subject matter expert with lived experience, only to be compensated less than minimum wage (if at all) or censored to the point that I have had to quit. One organisation paid me less than minimum wage, and asked me to censor and rewrite my keynote so many times that I was up until 2 a.m. the night before, rewriting a fifth draft. It was a conglomerate of the wealthiest, most powerful companies in the world. The hypocritical irony of silencing survivors and not paying them for their labour is an ignored issue for so many anti-trafficking organisations, who view us survivors with lived experience and our skill sets as inferior. To this point, many survivors feel added pressure to take on insurmountable student loan debt pursuing higher degrees just so they can command respect. The knowledge they have was acquired long before accruing the student loan debt to buy a degree certifying their legitimacy in the field. Even with a graduate degree, many survivors still encounter stigma and discrimination despite futile attempts to overcompensate with credentials. Oftentimes, you just can't win. And for this reason, many survivors choose to never be public about their lived experience. For over a decade, I worked as a hospital and clinic admin, advocating for healthcare for trafficking survivors. It was not safe for my job security to publicly identify as a survivor of human trafficking. Only when I reached the point of burnout, after attending meetings where department heads mocked homeless patients, among other offensive displays of elite cruelty, did I quit my career in healthcare to start my own business. Only then did I have the financial freedom to publicly identify as a survivor and could escape the suffocating hierarchy of working in hospitals or social service programmes where I needed to maintain a façade of non-survivor status so that I wouldn't risk losing job prospects, respect from my colleagues, and my livelihood.

Research from Bunting et al. (2023, pp. 6–7) explores similar othering, exoticisation and dehumanising power dynamics of engagement

with survivors, particularly in the Global South: 'Any attempt to grapple with these issues must confront uncomfortable and challenging questions regarding how and why knowledge gets produced, by whom, for what types of audiences, and in the service of which interests.'

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In 2024, the director of an organisation that has done immeasurable harm to the survivor community, repeatedly told me in a listening session that survivors don't all agree on everything. What she, and so many others like her, fail to understand or hear is that survivors are not a monolith, and that is our strength. The breadth of knowledge, skills and intersectionality that exists across the survivor community, and throughout the world, is beautiful and informs us of a world that is complex, deep and oftentimes messy. That mess is beautiful, and I welcome the difficult conversations that come with sorting through it. Because in that mess there are pragmatic, viable solutions.

What I don't appreciate is when executive directors who are not survivors attempt to pit us against one another or tokenise one survivor, expecting one of us to represent, for example, all trafficking survivors, the entire queer community, or all people of a specific race, culture or nationality.

I hope to see the day when these complexities are embraced, not fled from or ignored in fear. Overcoming fear is something that trafficking survivors inherently know so deeply, and those in power who determine who gets grants and who gets paid could learn from us in this regard. Because in a zeitgeist of fear, there is a marketplace for panic.

The paternalistic culture of the anti-trafficking field frequently leads non-survivors to a state of fear and defensiveness where they can't hear survivors because that would require a humility that white saviourism has no tolerance for. The origins of white supremacy in the anti-trafficking field can be found in the history of the Mann Act, or White Slave Act, as well as in how the foundations of the UK, US, and many other countries today were built upon slavery (DeBellis, 2021, pp. 114–79). As discussed by Lorelei Lee, JD's research, racism in the anti-trafficking movement has flourished thanks to these historical roots (Lee, 2021, p. 55).

Similarly, the anti-trafficking movement's woeful ignorance of disability rights has created a legal system and advocacy networks that frequently cause more harm to trafficking survivors than they help (Rein, 2021, p. 42). One researcher who explored the white supremacy and Christofascism of the anti-trafficking movement's history found that: 'By examining vast, invisible anti-trafficking coalitions in Arizona from the

20th century to today, it becomes clear that coalitions garner power and profit by facilitating the criminalisation of sex workers and offering support for other groups, most notably Mormon polygamists, whose religious practices can be tantamount to trafficking' (Dunn, 2023, p. 1).

We must also consider the US prison system's use of state-sponsored forced labour in prisons, thanks to the American Constitution's 13th Amendment loophole that allows slavery in the US if it is punishment for a crime, thereby creating a legal precedent to traffic incarcerated survivors at the hands of the State, trading a 'criminal' trafficker for a 'legal' trafficker (Beutin, 2022, pp. 47–63). The world we live in today was built by an economy of chattel slavery, and we still live in a political system and economy steeped in these horrors and inequalities (Wilkerson, 2020). However, the nuance must be noted that chattel slavery has more in common with structural racism, and use of the term 'modern day slavery' is offensive to many Black Americans (Ash & Colbert, n.d.).

Systemic racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, ageism and misogyny emphasise the importance of accurate and holistic programme assessments led by survivors with lived experience.

We must also compare the history of the domestic violence advocate movement and the disability rights movement, both of which were more survivor-led than the anti-trafficking movement. The anti-trafficking movement's origins are found more prevalently in Christian groups led by non-survivors. As described in the North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault's toolkit:

> The movements to end sexual assault and domestic violence were built out of the collective voices of survivors organizing to take care of each other where systems had failed them. The movement to end human trafficking has its earliest roots in the Victorian era "white slave panic," which was the catalyst for the Mann Act of 1910, and has largely been driven and framed by people who have never experienced human trafficking. (Croft, 2020, p. 11)

This is not to say that someone who is not a survivor of human trafficking cannot be a good advocate. There are many non-survivors in this field who do amazing work and exemplary allyship. However, the characteristic they all share is that they listen to survivors, and they see a spectrum of exploitation upon which human trafficking exists at the extreme pole. This spectrum includes countless risk indicators which may put a person at higher risk of being trafficked. Much like domestic violence

as an analogue, there is countless intersectionality along this range. Far too often, trafficking survivors are flattened in their experiences and portrayals, perpetuating the stigma of being perceived as little more than what happened to us. This is why so many trafficking survivors are asked to share their story, and little else, in order to tug at funders' and philanthropists' heartstrings, and therefore their purse strings (Quirk, 2023).

The commodification of our trauma in this way makes me not even want to use the word 'trafficking' to describe what happened to me because it has been co-opted to the point of being rendered meaningless. Adding to this, the complexity of trafficking and autonomy is lost on most funders. For example, many sex workers I know have experienced trafficking at some point in their lives outside of their consensual sex work, but because they don't want the burdensome and disempowering label of victimhood, they don't identify as trafficking survivors. Because as often as I call myself a survivor, I'm accused of having a victim mentality.

If we could shift to appreciating the multi-faceted skills, talents and knowledge of trafficking survivors, and see them as people who are more than the worst thing that happened to them, we would see survivors hired in positions of leadership rather than tokenising them and seeing them as little more than a checklisted box. While we can't completely do away with our nonprofit funding systems, we can make better efforts to listen to survivors, help them train for positions that they are interested in, and hire them to lead projects while scaffolding support along the way.

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The next morning, I ran into my friend at another organisation's homeless youth drop-in centre. This one was an arts programme that was mostly funded by artist philanthropists. Years later I learnt that their programme was so different because they weren't beholden to grant funders dictating how they needed to shape their programme for outcomes with intractable specifications like 'X number of clients need to get a job in order to continue funding'.

I overheard one of the staff chatting with him and another client about how to build a sustainable career as an artist.

'Let's figure out how to make that dream happen,' she said.

I sat down next to them to listen, drawing quietly as she shared her sage advice about having a day job to fund your art, because art saves lives.

It took me years to understand what she meant about art saving lives. And it took me a very long time to learn how to build the safety

and security with which I could pursue my dream career, but I finally did it. After years of toiling in abusive jobs that made me so miserable I was suicidal, I'm happier than I ever imagined possible. I was convinced I wouldn't even live until age 13 when I was a child, so my life today is an impossible feat in every way.

Unfortunately, these successes are not a statistic on any reports or brochures for donors at the programmes that helped me effectively as a trafficking survivor. But they should be.

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Trafficking survivors must be at the forefront of the anti-trafficking movement in positions of leadership, including design and evaluation of services. We also need to consider racism, transphobia, homophobia, sexism, ableism, as well as discrimination against sex workers. Because who gets to have a seat at the table very much dictates how the table is built. Keeping in mind tokenism, survivors should be supported and scaffolded so that they don't burn out and so that they can succeed in these positions, rather than falling off a so-called glass cliff. This approach requires more work and care than appointing non-survivors to positions of power, however, it is also a mode that counters white supremacy's influence in our work culture (Harts, 2019).

Survivors have many different backgrounds, perspectives and skillsets, so there must be a robust team of people with lived experience in order to effectively evaluate programmes for the greater good of all. This is what anti-tokenism means. For example, I am only one trafficking survivor with one perspective and set of experiences. There are countless things I have learnt from other survivors, and numerous subjects for which I defer to other trafficking survivors who have more authority on a given subject. So, while survivor engagement is crucial in deploying assessments, gathering data and building evaluation rubrics, there should be a team of survivors with many different backgrounds who can holistically measure what may be missing, what is going well and why.

Additionally, trafficking survivors should be hired by funders and included in how grants are designed and written. The grants written and managed by trafficking survivors that I have been part of have been exemplary experiences, and have created amazing programmes unlike anything I've ever witnessed previously. Survivor-led funding would lead a groundbreaking trauma-informed charge to redefine parameters for success. A survivor-centred approach like this in funder circles would truly champion a surviving to thriving culture shift.

Implementing a survivor-led evaluation of anti-trafficking programmes will shift the lens on how we define success – both for programmes and individual client participants' outcomes. Because defining success based on whether someone is employed in any kind of job is the antithesis of what it means to heal from exploitation and trafficking. When your worth as a human has been measured in monetary and labour output terms by your trafficker, the last thing programmes and funders should do is replicate that same outlook with a checklist that asks whether a survivor has a job, any job, regardless of pay or how miserable you are doing it. This shift in perspective is not easy because it is the antithesis of the anti-trafficking field's paternalistic condescension. It means that the focus will be on measuring the degree to which survivors are sustainably thriving, rather than barely surviving, their lives flattened into a metric that funders, agencies and governments can easily digest. Which would be fine if we were evaluating a manufactured product and sales projections, not our influence upon the outcomes and trajectory of real people's lives.

Key messages

- Despite being the people anti-trafficking programmes are supposedly there to benefit the most, survivors are generally not the ultimate client – funders are. Keeping funders happy influences how success is framed and measured, which can translate into unhelpful and harmful practices.
- Survivors are rarely asked about their experiences of programmes, concerns and recommendations for improvement. Rebuilding and preserving autonomy and consent for trafficking survivors is paramount to recovery, yet rarely assessed as a marker for programme excellence.
- To enable trauma-informed and more effective programmes, trafficking survivors must be included in positions of leadership both in designing interventions and in evaluating them. They need to be central in setting the parameters for success and we need to move beyond one-size-fits-all understandings of success.
- Survivor-centred evaluation can help build trauma-informed programmes that have better outcomes for clients. We need to pay more attention to continuous quality improvement and longitudinal approaches that provide insights into longer-term trajectories and reflections from different vantage points.

- To ensure ethical engagement with survivors in the evaluation process, it is vital to respect their safety and anonymity needs, compensate their contributions, recognise and mitigate unequal power dynamics, discrimination and structural barriers to participation, and avoid tokenising them.

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3

Use of randomised controlled trials to evaluate anti-trafficking programmes

Sheldon X. Zhang

Introduction

This chapter seeks to highlight the importance of rigorous evaluation and calls, specifically, for wider application of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) as a main strategy to assess the outcomes of the increasing number of anti-trafficking programmes. With so much public money being poured into counter-trafficking efforts around the world, mostly by Western governments, it is thus beholden upon the donors to account for these expenditures by demanding evidence on what works or provide solid evidential grounds to justify either the funding or defunding of any programmes. The chapter first describes the scarcity of rigorous evaluations of current anti-trafficking practices, then highlights a few arguments on why RCTs should deserve higher priority in our choice of evaluation approaches, and finally provides alternative strategies when RCTs are not practical.

Since the United Nations Human Trafficking Protocol (or the Palermo Protocol) (UN, 2000) was adopted by most countries around the world from 2000, an interdisciplinary field has emerged where researchers gather to study and evaluate various anti-trafficking efforts. Two decades later, human trafficking research has, thankfully, moved beyond the stage of debating whether the problem is real or worthy of scientific enquiry. With a few exceptions, all nations have now passed legislation and established government structures to combat human trafficking (Zhang, 2022), with significant resources invested by

both governments and civil societies. As a result, research and evaluation on anti-trafficking activities have experienced unprecedented growth.

Human trafficking is a complex social problem. The early fervour fuelled by the moral outrage over sensationalised accounts of sexual violations gave way to sobering findings from the growing body of empirical studies that point to the complexity and recalcitrant nature of the social conditions (for example, poverty, gender discrimination, irregular migration) underlying the problem (Kotiswaran, 2019). The prominence of the criminal justice narrative, one that revolves around breaking up criminal organisations and prosecuting traffickers, has given way to a structural perspective that aims at systemic change to assist identified survivors and reduce vulnerabilities to trafficking or to correct social conditions conducive to trafficking activities (Zhang, 2022).

Anti-trafficking programmes are spreading around the world. A study by researchers at the United Nations University found that between 2000 and 2013, a total of 30 donor countries provided more than USD 4 billion in various anti-trafficking programmes, of which about 60% came from the US (Gleason & Cockayne, 2018). Despite the scale of funding, surprisingly little literature exists that attests to the efficacy of any specific anti-trafficking interventions (see Cockbain et al., Chapter 1, this volume). Frankly, as a field, we know little about what works in either reintegrating survivors or preventing at-risk populations from falling prey to traffickers. Relative to other aspects of the trafficking research field (for example, prevalence estimation, victim experiences and service provisions), impact assessment remains the least developed and little knowledge has been built on best practices and efficacious programming (Zhang, 2022).

However, there are many publications, albeit by non-research entities such as funding agencies and programme implementation organisations, that prescribe intervention strategies, ranging from legislative efforts to law enforcement approaches, and from community-based programmes to victim support schemes (see Bryant & Landman, 2020). Aside from reviews on efforts by civil society organisations (see Winrock, 2020), there are also reviews of promising programmes to assist commercially sexually exploited children and young adults (for example, see Dell et al., 2019). Needless to say, current anti-trafficking efforts thus far have marched well ahead of any empirical evidence on their efficacies.

The Institute of Development Studies conducted a comprehensive literature review and constructed the *Evidence Map and Rapid Evidence Assessment on Modern Slavery* (2018), which categorises the types of interventions and associated evaluation studies. Most of the

evaluation studies located were descriptive without any specific quantitative comparisons (see, for example, Krieger et al., 2018).

In recent years, however, funding agencies are beginning to require implementation agencies to conduct impact assessments and gather empirical evidence on intervention outcomes. Leading the pack is the Trafficking-in-Persons (TIP) Office in the US State Department, which invests around USD 25 million each year under its *Program to End Modern Slavery* (PEMS), which itself subjects funded efforts to some forms of evaluation.[1] PEMS, which began in 2017, has funded USD 150 million in programming to date, with its main goal to collect evidence on what types of programmes work best to reduce specific forms of human trafficking. Under PEMS funding schemes, implementation agencies are encouraged to consider RCTs as the main evaluation strategy to assess programme outcomes. It should be noted that rigorous evaluation studies, although rare, are beginning to appear in anti-trafficking programme evaluation (see Henderson et al., 2024; Schroeder et al., 2023; O'Callaghan et al., 2013; and Brady et al., 2021).

Why RCTs are a powerful evaluation strategy

RCTs are a powerful approach in establishing causal relationships between actions and outcomes and are well suited to answer the most fundamental question in any outcome-oriented evaluation: 'Did it work?' Of course, one may add contextual elements to this overarching question, such as 'compared to what, for whom, or in what context?' (see Sidebottom et al., Chapter 4, this volume). 'Did it work?' is, however, a deceptively simple question, and one that requires a lot by way of evaluation science. Social interventions may be among the most difficult and controversial to study with RCTs (Goldacre, 2015), because, unlike experiments in well controlled laboratories, they take place amidst a multitude of other social forces that exert powerful influences which may affect the observed outcome patterns, for example, existing social networks, families and kinships, workplaces, churches, schools, government agencies, charitable organisations and community agencies.

Although anecdotal success stories are frequently touted by programme administrators, they cannot substitute for establishing an average treatment effect (ATE), that is, the overall impact on programme participants. What is frequently overlooked is that profiling successful participants is different from claiming that a programme is effective overall. Service providers frequently mix these two concepts and tout isolated successful cases as an overall success. Cherry-picking is a common strategy,

used by programme administrators and researchers alike, whereby selective outcomes are reported to bias evaluation results in favour of the programme's success (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), or hypotheses are reframed *post hoc* to suit the expected outcome narrative (Kerr, 1998). The intent-to-treat design[2] is hard for many programme agencies to swallow.

Because of the many unknown and unmeasurable personal traits or contextual variations to account for, a common and easy way to address such variations is to apply an RCT design where all eligible subjects are randomly assigned to either treatment or control, hence zeroing out, at least theoretically, the differences between the groups. This is a critical strength of RCTs that enables researchers to declare that any observed differences are most likely due to the intervention.

Although an easy concept to explain, to do RCTs correctly requires significant cooperation and participation by implementation agencies as well as buy-in from the funders. Programme administrators must work with the research team to ensure that the evaluation design and implementation procedures are adhered to. This is where RCTs are frequently disrupted (for example, see Ali et al., Chapter 9, this volume).

The rise of RCTs in social sciences

The value of randomised experiments in anti-trafficking programme evaluation can be illustrated perhaps most powerfully by looking over the fence into neighbouring fields, development economics in particular, where RCTs have been widely accepted in anti-poverty policymaking and programme evaluation around the world since the 1990s (Callaway, 2019). For instance, in a comprehensive review of impact evaluation studies from 1981 to 2012, Cameron et al. (2016) found that RCTs were the dominant method used in research on development programmes, accounting for two-thirds of all eligible evaluation studies, and more than 80% of those evaluating health- and nutrition-related interventions.

The surge in RCTs outside medical and health sciences was led by labour and development economists in the 1980s and 1990s, as part of the credibility revolution (Angrist & Pischke, 2010). Aside from the academic discipline of evaluation science, large international funders such as the World Bank also grew more interested in evaluating investment returns and social impact with their investment portfolios. In the case of the World Bank, since its establishment in 1944, billions of US dollars, either donated or guaranteed by mostly Western countries, have gone into various aid projects. However, the World Bank and the governments

that provide its financial backing rarely sought careful evaluations to demonstrate whether any of the investments had made a difference (Atabaki, 2004). In the 1990s, the World Bank began to initiate a series of randomised trials to determine whether its aid projects were doing any good, with the help of the Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Ravallion, 2009).

Pejoratively referred to as *randomistas*, a term popularised by Nobel laureate economist Angus Deaton (2006) (a prominent dissenting voice against the rapid growth of RCTs), these development economists were advocating randomised social experiments as the main tool for evaluating social interventions in general and aid programmes in developing countries in particular (Ravallion, 2009). RCTs have gained so much attention in development economics, and caused so much of a stir in how foreign aid programmes are evaluated, that in 2019 the Nobel Prize in Economics was awarded to three American economists whose 'new experiment-based approach has transformed development economics, which is now a flourishing field of research' and 'considerably improved our ability to fight global poverty' (Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, 2019, para. 1). The Nobel Prize committee singled out their contribution in applying an experimental approach by breaking down the complex problem of poverty into smaller and more precise questions and 'using field experiments to test a range of interventions that could improve' intended outcomes, such as education or child health outcomes (Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, 2019, para. 4).

Let us pause for a moment. Isn't this what most of us interested in anti-trafficking are trying to do or should be doing – seeking solutions by breaking up complex social problems contributing to the trafficking problem into small components? Much of current funding in anti-trafficking programmes around the world has been focused on creating alternative livelihoods and support systems to allow at-risk populations to escape potential trafficking situations. In other words, poverty alleviation and economic empowerment remains a core component in much of what we do in anti-trafficking interventions. The main difference between aid programmes and anti-trafficking projects is the emphasis of the latter on human rights protection and trauma-centred mental health services.

Scrutinising existing knowledge through RCTs

With few exceptions (for example, public health, and development), current knowledge on social interventions is largely produced by

non-RCT studies. We know that publication bias (or publication selection bias) is a well-documented phenomenon, where studies with statistically significant findings are more likely to be published than those with non-significant results. This bias can skew the overall understanding of a research area, leading to an overestimation of the effects being studied. For instance, in a recent large-scale study on publication bias, Bartoš et al. (2024) surveyed more than 68,000 meta-analyses containing over 700,000 effect size estimates from medicine, environmental sciences, psychology and economics, and found publication bias was most prevalent in economics and least in medicine. After adjusting for publication bias, the median probability of the presence of an effect decreased from 99.9% to 29.7% in economics, from 98.9% to 55.7% in psychology, from 99.8% to 70.7% in environmental sciences, and from 38.0% to 29.7% in medicine. Perhaps it was no accident that medicine as a field is least tainted by publication bias because this is where RCTs were first adopted and are also most widely used.

In another meta-analysis of empirical data from 159 topics in economics with over 6,000 studies and over 60,000 estimates of economic parameters, researchers found that exaggerated effect estimates are the norm, with four-fold exaggerations occurring a third of the time (Ioannidis et al., 2017). Such widespread inflations or exaggerations of intervention effects suggest that probably most inferences made from non-randomised data are substantially flawed (Ioannidis, 2018).

While studies using RCTs are not immune to publication selection bias (that is, significant findings are more likely to be published), they appear to reduce the number of significant findings simply by design. In other words, RCTs will greatly reduce the volume of significant findings and be used to double-check existing programme effectiveness claimed by other evaluation strategies (such as in cases of repeated or replicated studies). It has long been established, at least in the field of criminal justice interventions, that the rigours of evaluation designs can often predict the size of detected treatment effects, that is, the weaker the design the more likely it will produce significant findings (Wilson & Lipsey, 2001). In an article entitled 'Does Research Design Affect Study Outcome?' Weisburd et al. (2001) categorized 68 correctional programme evaluations, using the Maryland Scientific Methods Scale (that is, a one to five scale of methodological rigour), and compared the effect sizes obtained for each of the five groups of studies. Whereas the lower-quality studies all showed strong effects on recidivism, the most rigorous evaluations – those employing RCT designs – produced an average effect size of zero. Weisburd et al. (2001) found that the type and quality of

research designs was actually *more* predictive of the outcomes than were the interventions being evaluated. Returning to anti-trafficking then, one would argue that using randomised designs is critical to identifying existing intervention models that truly merit expansion and replication.

The do-gooder syndrome, the HIPPO Effect and the moral imperative for treatment efficacy

RCTs are standard affairs in biomedical research for developing and standardising therapeutic protocols. Although people may still seek homeopathic remedies or alternative medicine, it would be rare for mainstream doctors to prescribe medications and clinical procedures that have not been vetted through randomised clinical trials somewhere. Many may argue that ingesting pills or undergoing surgeries is different from receiving social or humanitarian services. That is true, to some extent, and one certainly cannot equate physical intrusion or injuries to social or behavioural interventions.

However, anti-trafficking efforts, whether at community or individual levels, invariably involve some level of disrupting, manipulating or altering the status quo. Services frequently come with explicit or implicit coercive components that require participants to surrender some of their self-determination in exchange for the 'benefits' (real or perceived). This is illustrated by Boyd (this volume), who documents 'required' components in anti-trafficking programmes that participants must comply with in order to receive benefits (for example, shelter, financial assistance or vocational training).

Although there is little empirical evidence on the efficacy of any social services in the counter-trafficking repertoire, few policymakers and programme implementers seem to be concerned about the potential negative or unintended consequences. But on what grounds do these service providers justify programming activities that intrude in or interfere with participants' private lives or make them believe that the 'prescribed' services will produce good outcomes?

The zeitgeist of our current counter-trafficking efforts embodies a paternalistic orientation and involves a decision-process over what services to provide that is driven either by 'experts', who prescribe solutions based on existing knowledge, or by the HIPPO (highest paid person's opinion) (Kohavi et al., 2007). For the former, the truth is that, with few exceptions such as food, shelter or protection from physical violence, we do not know much about what services are best to assist trafficking victims

or prevent at-risk populations from falling prey to traffickers. Whatever the existing knowledge, as Duflo et al. (2004, p. 7) concluded in relation to the multitude of experimental studies in development research, randomised evaluations frequently produce results that are 'in sharp contrast to conventional wisdom and the results of more traditional evaluations'. As for the HIPPO effect, most (if not all) who have ever received funding in counter-trafficking programming or evaluation probably have a story or two to share in private, for obvious reasons, about how programmes are changed midstream or evaluation designs altered simply because of a HIPPO.

Therefore, this chapter advocates that it is as scientifically reckless as it is morally irresponsible to prescribe interventions that seek to alter (or to use a euphemism: 'improve') a participant's behavioural, emotive or psychological state without demonstrable clinical efficacy. To believe that all social services (whether it be counselling, financial literacy, employment training, safe migration education, livelihood development or helplines) can only do good to programme participants is not only self-deceiving but also potentially harmful. The unfortunate reality is that when pressured by funders or researchers for randomised experiments, many implementation agencies frequently argue that it would be unethical to withhold or delay treatment services to the beneficiaries; or worse, that resources should not be wasted on research but be used to provide services to more beneficiaries.

RCTs represent the most potent antidote to the do-gooder syndrome and the HIPPO effect, because randomistas are theory-agnostic and rely little on prior knowledge when subjecting interventions to randomised experiments. Their null hypothesis always remains the same, that is, whatever intervention programme funders or implementation agencies put their faith in will perform no better or worse than the status quo. Consequentially, instead of blindly believing in the goodness of social services, one should insist that it is not only ethically required but also morally imperative for policymakers and programme administrators to ensure proven efficacy for the targeted populations before introducing counter-trafficking interventions on a large scale (Weisburd, 2003).

Settling contradictory theories through RCTs

Theory occupies a central role in learning about different interventions and explaining their consequences for policymaking (Ramachandran, 2020). Most would agree that effective interventions should have well-articulated conceptual frameworks that offer clear logical pathways to anticipated outcomes from planned interventions. A theory-driven

intervention also has wider implications even when the results turn out to be ineffective, because failures will allow researchers to trace observed outcomes to specific conceptual components so that modifications are possible (see also Sidebottom et al., Chapter 4, this volume; Kiss and Zimmerman, Chapter 8, this volume).

However, social theories often conjure up conflicting recipes for the same social problem, or the complexity of real-life circumstances may also invoke opposing solutions. One classic example in criminal justice is the 'Scared Straight' programmes that were once popular across the United States in dealing with juvenile delinquents (Petrosino et al., 2013). Built on deterrence principles, these programmes, which caught the attention of policymakers and correctional authorities, saw juvenile delinquents being brought to prisons to be confronted by hardcore criminals; some were brought to county morgues or shown pictures of the bloody consequences of violent crimes (Finckenauer & Gavin, 1999).

The idea behind these wildly popular programmes in the 1970s and 1980s was simple as well as seductive – once confronted by the brutalities of street lives and criminal offenses, juveniles would be 'scared straight' and cease to continue down the delinquent path. Yet contrary to the theoretical prediction, a review of nine randomised trials involving nearly 1,000 participants with average ages 15–17 years found that those enrolled in Scared Straight programmes were more likely to engage in delinquent activities than those who were left alone (Petrosino et al., 2013).

Neighbouring fields also have their share of contradictory theories. One such example is the long debate among development economists about whether foreign aid leads to dependency or sustainable economic improvement (Favereau & Nagatsu, 2020). One school of thought argues for massive investments by Western governments to lift impoverished countries out of poverty (Sachs, 2005) and the other points at international aid as the main cause for entrapping the poor and slowing development (Easterly, 2006). While one can probably find studies to support either side of the argument, Nobel laureates Banerjee and Duflo (2011) have argued that it is probably best to settle these theoretical debates through randomised experiments.

Cost of running RCTs

Relative to other types of evaluation strategies, RCTs typically require far more advance planning and collaboration with the implementation partners, because it takes time to set up the field procedures and recruit

adequate participants for random assignments, and on-going efforts are also required to maintain the integrity of the design over the duration of the study. There are many field procedures that must be considered to avoid potential implementation problems, such as differential consenting procedures, resentful demoralisation of controls, instrumentation differences (that is, different instruments being administered to treatment and control subjects) or contamination between treatment and control groups.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide detail about proper implementation of an RCT, but it is worth stressing that an RCT design requires heavy involvement of all key stakeholders, from the donor and the research team to the programme administrators and service providers. Any mismatch in timing or planned activities along the way will cause serious problems (as described by Ali et al. in Chapter 9, this volume) and all these coordinated arrangements cost money. On the other hand, it might be premature to declare that RCTs in anti-trafficking evaluation are necessarily more expensive than other evaluation strategies, as we do not know how much more an RCT costs compared to other evaluation designs. An ideal scenario would be a head-to-head comparison between an RCT and a non-experimental design (not that any donor would entertain such an arrangement).

In recent years, however, many forms of RCTs have emerged where cost can be kept to a minimum, because not all social interventions need to be large-scale, and large social changes can happen with an accumulation of small and incremental changes. For example, researchers in the field of health and behavioural sciences are increasingly experimenting with micro-randomised trials (MRTs) made possible by the advent of affordable and user-friendly mobile devices that aim at testing behavioural changes and their consequences at a more granular level, such as looking at one small intervention like automated reminders through a mobile device to take medications (Leong & Chakraborty, 2023). Associated designs and statistical procedures have thus multiplied to support and evaluate the rapid adoption of just-in-time adaptive interventions that are simple and inexpensive, mostly in the form of data collection (Xu et al., 2023; Liao et al., 2016). MRTs have been enlisted to assess clinical interventions to assist in smoking cessation (Battalio et. al., 2021), reduce alcohol use (Bell et al., 2020), moderate stress at work (NeCamp et al., 2020), monitor and encourage physical activity among low-income patients with diabetes and depression (Liu et al., 2023), and reduce healthcare disparities in COVID-19 vaccination in underserved neighbourhoods (Klusaritz et al., 2022). By focusing on small or even

micro-level human behaviours, MRTs do not involve massive clinical undertaking and allow researchers to accumulate knowledge in small increments or through observing short-term effects of interventions.

Needless to say, RCTs are not static and many researchers are developing and testing different platforms and delivery mechanisms. Despite the fancy-sounding name, randomised experiments are quite accessible to most researchers and easily understood by practitioners. Leigh (2018; pp. 213–9) even put out an easy-to-follow recipe, entitled 'Ten Commandments for Running Your Own Randomized Trial'. The fact that we have so few RCTs in the evaluation of anti-trafficking programmes has less to do with feasibility (or even funding) but more to do with its perceived utility in generating evidence.

Cautions against randomised experiments

Like all evaluation strategies, RCTs also have their inherent weaknesses. Although strong in establishing causal relationships between an intervention and its intended outcome, or internal validity, RCTs are weak with external validity (that is, the extent to which the same study findings can be replicated in other locations or among other like populations) (Ramachandran, 2020). In other words, they are not very useful when addressing complex economic and social problems (Deaton, 2006), because it is impossible to isolate complex social conditions to just test causal connection between two covariates, and findings from one randomised experiment often are difficult to replicate in other settings.

Furthermore, certain topics are simply not suitable for randomised field experiments. For example, legislative changes that are based on moral or ideological convictions and applied across the entire society will not be suitable for randomised experiments because it will be difficult to construct the two equivalent groups of subjects if the entire social setting is exposed to the same intervention. There are also clear ethical considerations where RCTs are simply inappropriate, such as emergency shelter services, nutritional sustenance and crisis counselling for survivors, although one may try to apply RCTs to determine which type of shelter services or crisis counselling is more effective. By and large, such situations raise significant ethical implications if RCTs are considered, unless circumstances give rise to natural experiments due to timing or accidental nature of certain interventions in isolated contexts.

Following the 2019 Nobel award in economics, Kvangraven (2020) raised concerns over the perceived significance bestowed by the prize in

generating knowledge, contending that the RCT brand promoted by these Nobel laureates has created 'a more exclusive development economics' but failed to 'improve our ability to fight poverty' (Kvangraven, 2020, p. 305). Deaton and Cartwright (2018), among the most vocal critics of the proliferation of RCTs in development economics, questioned the value of generating enormous amounts of isolated and narrow empirical evidence that bore little implication on larger complex social problems and contributed little to theoretical advancement.

Deaton (2006, 2010), a Nobel prize winner in economics himself, cautioned against over-reliance on RCTs to solve the world's poverty problem, declaring that RCTs:

> have no special ability to produce more credible knowledge than other methods, and that actual experiments are frequently subject to practical problems that undermine any claims to statistical or epistemic superiority … RCT-based evaluation of projects, without guidance from an understanding of underlying mechanisms, is unlikely to lead to scientific progress in the understanding of economic development. (2010, p. 424)

These critics, citing methodological and logistical challenges, argue that randomised experiments do not produce evidence that occupies any special position in the hierarchy of scientific evidence.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, the counter-trafficking field will not have similar debates any time soon because of its underdeveloped evaluation agenda in general. Most counter-trafficking programmes are not conceptualised, designed or implemented with any RCT-type evaluation in mind. Well-designed and implemented RCTs will likely remain rare for some time to come.

Alternatives to randomised experiments

Even though RCTs are unlikely to become the dominant form of evaluation in anti-trafficking field, there are other strategies that, if used properly, can also generate informative empirical evidence. At the time when RCTs were taking off as a major evaluation strategy in the 1980s and 1990s, there was also a major methodological boom in the development of techniques on identification of treatment effects or causal inferences, many of which were aided by new or improved statistical procedures. Some of these new strategies rely on innovative designs (for

example, difference-in-difference) while others rely on sophisticated statistical procedures (for example, propensity score matching/weighting) (Imbens & Wooldridge, 2009). These alternatives to RCTs all have their inherent strengths because they were devised to tackle specific challenges and can inform us on the possible solutions when RCTs are not feasible (Baker et al., 2022; Ioannidis, 2018).

A few of these techniques are included here to illustrate how one may evaluate anti-trafficking intervention effectiveness without invoking the rigid implementation requirements of an RCT, since most anti-trafficking interventions typically target populations large in number and diverse in geography and compositions. Either that, or they are subject to phased implementation in different geographical locations or to different groups of participants. This phased implementation over time, geography and subject groups creates situations where the following evaluation techniques can be applied.

Propensity score matching/weighting techniques

Propensity score matching (PSM) has been around for decades and used to estimate the causal effect of an intervention (or treatment) by balancing the observed covariates between treated and untreated units (Zubizarreta et al., 2023). Propensity score analysis represents a class of statistical methods developed to approximate experimental conditions when randomised controlled trials are either impractical or unethical to implement.

There are several ways to estimate treatment effects by constructing statistically equivalent groups for evaluation purposes. The use of comparison groups is an old strategy in evaluation research (Austin, 2011). The most common method is sometimes called quasi-experimental design, essentially constructing a comparison group using some recruitment criteria that resemble the intervention group. For a long time, case matching (or blocking) was the method in which researchers selected a group of subjects that were the 'same' as the treatment group on some key descriptive characteristics, such as gender or school grade. Using this method, a comparable group was then used to compare with the intervention group.

There are different ways to construct a comparison group, including logistic regression, the probit model and discriminant analysis (Guo et al., 2020). McCaffrey et al. (2004) developed generalised boosted modelling to further improve logistic regression and refine propensity score estimation. Over the decades, PSM has evolved in several variations and become more sophisticated in reducing the effects of confounding variables

when estimating the effects of treatment outcomes. These techniques include propensity score weighting, inverse probability weighting and stratification (Hernán & Robins, 2020).

Propensity score weighting, instead of matching, assigns different weights to observations based on their propensity scores, thus giving more importance to observations that are less common in the treated or untreated group. *Inverse probability weighting*, similar to propensity score weighting, assigns weights to observations based on the inverse of their estimated propensity scores. *Stratification* (or subclassification), on the other hand, reduces bias in the estimation of treatment effects by creating groups (strata) where treated and untreated study participants have similar propensity scores, thus improving precision in estimation within each stratum.

Propensity score matching/weighting can probably be easily applied to anti-trafficking evaluation wherever a comparison group can be constructed to compare against those who receive intervention services. Because most anti-trafficking interventions are unlikely to roll out immediately across all locations of an agency's catchment area or even neighbouring areas, propensity score matching can be used to recruit and construct a comparison against which the treatment group can be compared.

Instrumental variables (IV) analysis

This is a classic but still relevant econometric strategy and can be used to estimate causal effects by addressing endogeneity issues, that is, the predictor variable in your statistical model is correlated with the error terms (that is, unobserved factors) (Angrist & Pischke, 2009; Staiger & Stock, 1997). For instance, one may want to study the causal relationship between education and income, exercise and weight loss, or studying and getting good grades; however, unobserved factors may affect both education and income, both exercise and weight loss, and both studying and grades. Researchers thus construct instrumental variables (IV) that are directly related to the treatment (that is, predictor variables) to examine whether changes in the IVs will impact the treatment, which in turn leads to changes in the outcome.

Suppose we want to estimate an intervention (for example, job skill training) on reducing the vulnerability to forced labour. The idea is that more employable skills will allow people to access more job opportunities and thus they will be less likely to be stuck with abusive employers.

However, their motivation might affect their attainment of job skills, which in turn changes their employment prospects. To solve this problem, we may use distance to the training centre as the instrument, because people who live closer to the centre are more likely to attend training workshops; however, distance to the training centre does not directly affect participants' job prospects. By regressing attendance (for example, frequency or time spent at the training centre) on distance to the training centre, and later applying the predicted values of the attendance on job prospects, we can better isolate the impact of the job training programme on participants' employment projects. IV estimation is among the least intrusive or disruptive empirical methods to assess causal relationships (Angrist & Pischke, 2009).

Regression discontinuity design (RDD)

Regression discontinuity techniques are designed to measure the effect of an intervention or treatment event to which individuals, companies or other entities are either exposed to or not, that is, observed changes on either side of an event or threshold (Imbens & Lemieux, 2008). For instance, to avoid ethical complications, diversity training is introduced to human resources practitioners in an institution across the board; retrospective data are used to compare the causal claims on training impact (Chambers, 2016); individuals near the cutoff point on a continuous variable are effectively randomly assigned to treatment or control groups. It estimates treatment effects by comparing outcomes on either side of the cutoff of the intervention event (Bernal et al., 2017).

RDD can be easily applied to many anti-trafficking efforts where it is impractical to separate or isolate treatment from control subjects, for example, an anti-trafficking awareness-raising campaign or human rights education programme is launched to newly arrived migrant labourers in a city. Retrospective data can be collected to compare changes on the number of complaints for employment-based abuses before and after the cutoff point.

Synthetic control methods

Researchers create a synthetic comparison unit as a weighted combination of units that either are not exposed to the intervention, or varied in their levels of exposure, to construct a counterfactual for the treated unit (Abadie

et al., 2010). In the anti-trafficking field, policy changes or new anti-trafficking ordinances typically take place at an aggregate level, thus leaving researchers with a small number of adjacent units (city, county or state) for comparison purposes. Synthetic control methods combine these untouched or differentially affected units through a weighted scheme to form a more appropriate comparison than any single unit (Bouttell et al., 2018).

Panel data methods

As the name suggests, these methods analyse panel data consisting of cross-sectional data sets collected at multiple points over time. They are powerful statistical tools because they combine both cross-sectional data (observations on multiple individuals) and time-series data, that is, repeated measures of the same group of subjects (for instance, migrant workers or domestic workers) over multiple time periods, and thus are superior to either cross-sectional or time series data analysis alone (Baltagi, 2015).

By incorporating information from both individuals and time, panel data estimates can capture within-subject variations and time trends simultaneously, offering greater efficiency as well accuracy, and produce more accurate inference of model parameters, thus capturing the complexity of human behaviour better than any single cross-sectional or time series data (Hsiao, 2007). Anti-trafficking interventions frequently provide time-specific services but the impact needs to be observed over time. A panel design is a powerful design that enables longitudinal data to examine both the immediate and residual programme effects.

Conclusion

Randomised field experiments are standard practice in a growing number of fields, for example, medicine, public health, education and development; they are also taking root in commercial businesses. Tech companies large and small, endowed with easy access to large volumes of client databases, routinely rely on randomised experiments to guide high-stakes decision-making instead of resorting to 'expert knowledge' (Imbens, 2018, p. 51). RCTs have a long way to go before they become mainstream in counter-trafficking programme evaluation. This chapter takes the position that RCTs should be the gold standard not only for evaluation in the anti-trafficking field but also for validating empirical evidence, as a moral imperative, to protect survivors and vulnerable populations from

intrusive human services. Furthermore, when large sums of public money are invested in counter-trafficking programmes, RCTs can best complement other evaluation strategies in holding funding agencies and implementation agencies accountable and ensuring ineffective programmes are not perpetuated for ideological or political reasons.

Again, there are promising signs in the human trafficking research field because more RCTs are being considered for evaluation. For example, over the past five or six years, the US State Department has routinely sent out solicitations that placed a 'mandatory' requirement for funding applicants to find ways to implement an RCT design into their programme planning and evaluation. Many other funding agencies have also started incorporating RCT-type evaluation in their funded projects to demonstrate programme impact, including USAID, Freedom Fund, IOM, the World Bank and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Innovations for Poverty Action [IPA], 2021). There will be a period of growing pains as the demand for randomised field experiments is not matched by adequate appreciation of implementation complexity and associated costs.

It is certainly not the intent of this chapter to argue against the use of other evaluation strategies, because no one methodology should monopolise any evaluation field, let alone anti-trafficking programmes. On the contrary, all methods are developed for specific reasons – because of their inherent strengths unique to the contexts in which they were being employed, where few other methods were available. Furthermore, theoretical development, statistical modelling and other evaluation strategies can inform and guide the design and implementation of high-quality RCTs (Ioannidis, 2018).

However, this chapter cautions against methodological relativism, that is, presuming evidence generated by all evaluation methods should be valued equally. As Imbens (2018) proclaimed, in the hierarchy of scientific evidence, RCTs occupy the very top. No other method can better answer the fundamental question in evaluation, 'did it work?' in most, if not all, clinical interventions. Relative to other evaluation strategies, well-designed and executed RCTs remain the most convincing to answer this question. Duflo – one of the three Nobel Prize winners in economics in 2019 – and colleagues went so far as to declare that 'creating a culture in which rigorous randomised evaluations are promoted, encouraged, and financed has the potential to revolutionize social policy during the 21st Century, just as randomised trials revolutionised medicine during the 20th' (Duflo et al., 2004, p. 8).

While this 'revolution' seems premature or too radical for the current state of counter-trafficking research, we still have a choice to

make as a research community – whether we should accommodate or tolerate randomised field experiments merely as one of many, equally valid and worthy evaluation strategies, or whether we should place higher methodological premium on them and advocate RCTs whenever possible.

Key messages

- No one strategy should monopolise an evaluation field, nor will it because of the inherent complexity of social conditions. That said, RCTs are a powerful tool in substantiating causal relationships between interventions and their intended outcomes, increasing confidence in observed treatment effectiveness and minimising competing or alternative explanations.
- It is as scientifically reckless as it is morally irresponsible to prescribe interventions that seek to change a participant's behavioural, emotive or psychological state without demonstratable clinical efficacy. To believe that all social services can only do good to programme participants is not only self-deceiving but also potentially harmful.
- When faced with uncertainty or conflicting theoretical propositions, RCTs can provide evidentiary confirmation without prejudice or ideological bias, as current anti-trafficking efforts are often driven by heavy ideological agendas.
- RCTs are simple in concept but require careful setups and optimal field conditions, making them potentially a rigid design to implement in social interventions; therefore, alternative evaluation methods must be considered where RCTs are not practical or feasible.
- RCTs vary in intensity, duration and design complexity, and therefore may not be expensive to implement. Multiple simple or micro-RCTs, either simultaneously or in a serial manner, can be strung together to assess specific procedures or steps in creating effective operations.

Notes

1. See TIP Office website for details of its funding activities, current and past funded projects: www.state.gov/program-to-end-modern-slavery (retrieved 10 Oct. 2025).
2. 'Intent to treat' is a standard strategy in RCTs to reduce selection bias whereby once study subjects are randomised into either control or treatment group, they will remain in the assigned status for the duration of the study regardless of whether they receive or complete any intervention services (see also Ali et al., Chapter 9, this volume).

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4
Realist evaluation for anti-trafficking

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Introduction

Commentators in the field of anti-trafficking have repeatedly expressed concern that many interventions have not been reliably evaluated (van der Laan et al., 2011; Davy, 2016; Dell et al., 2019). Deficiencies in the evidence base have led to calls for more and better evaluations of those interventions commonly used to tackle human trafficking (Bryant & Landman, 2020; Cockbain et al., 2018; Zhang, 2022).

Among such calls, randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are often cited as the kind of evaluation research most needed to improve anti-trafficking policy and practice. For example, the US Government – a major funder of human trafficking interventions and associated evaluation research – asserts that 'the knowledge base on effective anti-trafficking programming is limited …. The federal government is, however, moving in the right direction with increased funding of randomized-controlled trials (RCTs) and other experimental designs' (2023, p. 2). Implicit in such statements is the assumption that RCTs are the *right* method when building evaluation evidence to advance anti-trafficking policy and practice. This assumption is understandable: RCTs are a well-established method with a long pedigree. When done well, RCTs have high internal validity and therefore can provide plausible answers to a particular kind of evaluation question, namely 'what worked?' Indeed, this assumption underpins much of the evidence-based policy and practice movement taking place in allied fields such as medicine and education (Cartwright & Hardie, 2012).

RCTs are, of course, but one kind of evaluation research, capable of producing strong evidence on the effects of an intervention. But

knowing whether an intervention was effective (or not) does not, on its own, indicate with any certainty that the same intervention will be effective (or not) in the future, nor does it shed light on *why* it was (or was not) effective (Eck, 2019; Sidebottom & Tilley, 2020). To support decision-making in anti-trafficking, questions of internal validity need to be matched with questions of external validity: To what extent are study findings generalisable to other people and places? And questions of external validity are often best answered using alternative evaluation methods, operating at a level of abstraction that goes beyond a particular intervention at a given point in time.

This chapter focuses on one such theory-based evaluation method: realist evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Realist evaluation is chiefly concerned with better understanding the causal mechanisms through which outcomes are produced, and the contexts in which causal mechanisms do or do not operate. The central question in realist evaluation is, thus, 'what works for whom in what circumstances and how?' In addressing this question, realist evaluation does not subscribe to a single research method or a particular type of data collection technique. Instead, realist evaluation embraces a diverse range of data and methods (including RCTs) which help develop and refine policy-relevant theory.

The chapter plays out as follows. As the oft-described 'gold standard' of evaluation research, we begin this chapter by outlining the logic and aspirations of RCTs and how they compare to those of realist evaluation, moving on to discuss what conclusions can and cannot be validly drawn from each approach. We then set out a brief worked example of a realist evaluation of narrative exposure therapy for survivors of trafficking. This is intended to show what is involved in a realist evaluation and how it compares to an RCT. Finally, given the negative effects associated with some anti-trafficking interventions (see Boyden & Howard, 2013; Kempadoo & Shih, 2022; Smith & Mac, 2018), we finish by outlining a plan for a realist-inspired study of backfire effects in human trafficking, concerned with working out what *backfires* for whom, how and in what circumstances.

Before proceeding, it is important to stress that this chapter is not an attack on either RCTs or those who conduct them. Proponents and practitioners of RCTs have themselves identified many of the limitations which we discuss here (see Weisburd & Hinkle, 2012). We single out RCTs because, for many, they are synonymous with evidence-based policy and practice, a view that also appears to be proliferating in the anti-trafficking domain. Our motivation for this chapter, then, like others in criminology (Sparrow, 2016) and elsewhere (Deaton & Cartwright, 2018) is to provide a critical perspective on the sometimes uncritical way in

which RCTs are applied and advocated. Our argument is that whilst RCTs are important, to make good on the promise of evidence-based policy and practice there is a need to recognise, generate and make use of a wide range of research evidence, including that produced by realist evaluations.

On randomised controlled trials

RCTs are widely considered to be the cornerstone of evidence-based policy and practice. The main selling-point of RCTs is that they offer a way of reducing or removing threats to 'internal validity', shown in Table 4.1. Internal validity speaks to the attributability of an outcome to an intervention. The RCT is designed to create equivalent treatment and non-treatment groups. Only the treatment group receives the intervention. Any variation in the measured outcome between the treatment and non-treatment group can therefore be attributed to the intervention, since it is only the intervention that differentiates them. Failure to rule out threats to internal validity limits the confidence with which observed outcomes can be attributed to an intervention.

Table 4.1 Threats to internal validity

Threat to internal validity	Explanation
History	Something happens to create change that would have happened anyway, without any intervention.
Maturation	Treatment group participants mature giving rise to change, regardless of intervention.
Testing	The measurement creates the change, not the intervention itself.
Instrumentation	The measurement methods change and create the impression of real change when there is none.
Statistical regression	Treatment begins at an extreme position and tends naturally to regress towards the mean, regardless of the intervention.
Seasonality	Changes may be part of a regular set of rhythms unrelated to the intervention.
Selection	Those receiving treatment are atypical and are especially susceptible to influence.

(*Continued*)

Table 4.1 (*Continued*)

Threat to internal validity	Explanation
Mortality	Dropouts are different from those staying the course of a treatment, and these latter may change anyway.
Interactions with selection	Selection biases may interact with other threats to internal validity, for example, selection-maturation.
Ambiguity about direction of causality	Apparent effects may be associated with treatment but it may be the effect causing the treatment.
Diffusion or imitation of treatments	Those people and places not treated (for comparison purposes) may adopt the intervention themselves.
Compensatory equalisation of treatments	Those not treated (and used for comparison purposes) may be given additional services to compensate for 'missing out' on the intervention given to the treatment group.
Compensatory rivalry by respondents receiving less desirable treatments	Those not treated (for comparison purposes) may work especially hard, to equal or outperform the treatment group or area.
Resentful demoralisation of respondents receiving less desirable treatments	Those not receiving treatment (for comparison purposes) may under-perform because they feel neglected and resentful.

Equivalence between the treatment and non-treatment group is achieved through the random assignment of units – be they people or places – to treatment and non-treatment. The basic form is sometimes referred to as an 'OXO' design, as represented in Table 4.2. We measure attributes of interest before (O1) and after (O2) intervention (x) in the treatment and non-treatment groups and, given their equivalence in every other respect as a result of randomisation, any difference in change from O1 to O2 between treatment and non-treatment groups must be attributable to the intervention. Moreover, the effect size can be estimated: By how much is the change in the treatment group different from that of the non-treatment group?

In practice, as classically explained by Campbell (1957) and Campbell and Stanley (1963), there are variations in and elaborations of the OXO design, often done to help rule out potential threats to internal validity. Placebos, for example, may be needed to deal with the possibility that the observed outcome is not a function of the treatment of

Table 4.2 RCTs and the OXO pretest-posttest control group design

	Pre-intervention	Treatment	Post-intervention
Treatment group	O1	Yes	O2
Control group	O1	No	O2

interest but of the fact that any treatment is being provided. 'Treatment as usual' is sometimes used instead of no treatment, where the outcome of interest relates to the comparative effectiveness of two (or more) interventions. And 'blinding' may be used to try to make sure that no-one involved in the treatment and/or evaluation process knows who belongs to the treatment or non-treatment groups until these are revealed following statistical analysis. This is needed because the application of the treatment, the knowledge that it has been applied, and the expectations of those conducting the analysis may all affect the outcome, independently of the treatment itself.

RCTs are sometimes described as 'experiments', to suggest that the use of a non-treatment 'control' group mimics the controls used in laboratory sciences, which try to hold all things constant that might otherwise affect the result. Less familiar, perhaps, is the distinction between 'efficacy' and 'effectiveness' trials (Singal et al., 2014). In efficacy trials, treatment is provided in ways that maximise the chances that its active ingredient(s) will produce a big enough effect to be gauged through an RCT. In effectiveness trials, by contrast, the same conditions for estimating effects are used but the conditions for the intervention approximate more closely the real-life circumstances in which the treatment would be applied. The idea here is to check whether in less-than-ideal (and hence more realistic) circumstances, an effect is still produced and what size that effect is.

From the decision-maker's perspective, the RCT is like manna from heaven; easy to understand and capable of producing strong evidence on the effects of an intervention at a particular time and place. The appeal of RCTs is further enhanced if accompanied by a cost-benefit analysis where the costs of the treatment can be compared to the monetised benefits. The decision-maker can then back interventions that maximise returns, and curtail or cancel those which are deemed ineffective or where estimated costs exceed benefits. It is no wonder that across jurisdictions and across policy-domains, including, increasingly, in relation to human trafficking, RCTs are so appealing.[1]

The widespread use of evidence hierarchies only strengthens the appeal of RCTs. These are heuristics which organise research evidence

according to their assumed trustworthiness (see, for example, van der Laan & Smit, Chapter 6, this volume). RCTs (and systematic reviews thereof) sit at the peak of many evidence hierarchies, with 'less trustworthy' sources of evidence such as case studies and expert evidence located near the bottom. The Maryland Scientific Methods Scale (Table 4.3) is an example of an influential evidence hierarchy used in crime prevention (Sherman et al., 1998). RCTs occupy the top spot, below which are methods that reflect the underlying logic of comparing experimental and roughly equivalent control conditions but where randomisation is not possible.

Because freak results are possible due to sampling, because sometimes samples are too small to yield statistically significant results, because populations may vary, and because fidelity to the planned intervention is sometimes compromised, meta-analyses have built on individual studies to try to distil robust measurements of effect sizes. These marry the results of all studies that meet RCT-like methodological standards, present the findings of each within its statistical boundaries, and then synthesise them to fix on an overall treatment effect size with narrower confidence limits due to the larger sample created by merging findings. It is also assumed that if the studies tend consistently to point towards the same direction of outcome, collectively they can suggest whether the findings about the intervention can be generalised.

RCTs and, indeed, all the study designs included in the Maryland scale (Table 4.3), operate with what is known as a 'constant conjunction' account of causality. Their strength lies in how well they capture the relationship between the intervention and the intended outcome, and how

Table 4.3 The Maryland Scientific Methods Scale

Level 1	Random assignment and analysis of comparable units to program and comparison groups.
Level 2	Comparison between multiple units with and without the program, controlling for other factors, or using comparison units that evidence only minor differences.
Level 3	A comparison between two or more comparable units of analysis, one with and one without the program.
Level 4	Temporal sequence between the program and the crime or risk outcome clearly observed, or the presence of a comparison group without demonstrated comparability to the treatment group.
Level 5	Correlation between a crime prevention program and a measure of crime or crime risk factors at a single point in time.

well they rule out other variables that may influence that outcome (the threats to internal validity listed in Table 4.1). *Internal* validity, then, has to do with establishing the causal relationship within the parameters of a study. *External* validity, on the other hand, has to do with inferences that can be drawn from study findings for other situations. RCTs and kindred evaluation methods, when done well, give us high confidence that the observed outcomes are a result of the treatment under study. They have strong internal validity. But those same evaluation methods are typically not oriented towards demonstrating *how* an intervention produces its outcomes (Eck, 2019). This is important for *external* validity and the generalisability of study findings; knowing *how* interventions work and in what circumstances is important for the decision-maker to better determine whether a given intervention might work elsewhere or in different circumstances. And this is the province of realist evaluation.

Realist evaluation

Realist evaluation understands causality differently to RCTs. Rather than a constant conjunction theory of causation, it focuses on *causal mechanisms* (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Causal mechanisms relate to *how* regularities (observed repeated patterns) or changes in regularities are produced (Dalkin et al., 2015). Causal mechanisms are often unobservable. Take 'natural selection', 'magnetism' or 'gravity' in the biological and physical sciences. Natural selection comprises the mechanism behind which species survive, thrive or perish. Magnetism lies behind the behaviour of compasses. Gravity lies behind the movement of falling objects. We can observe the effects of causal mechanisms but not the mechanisms themselves. Moreover, the precise patterns we observe are a function of causal mechanisms being activated in particular *contexts*; tennis balls do not fall when released in water, for example.

Realist evaluation is a type of theory-driven evaluation (Tilley & Westhorp, 2019). Interventions are treated as theories incarnate. Even where no theory is formally articulated, interventions typically embody an assumption that they will effect change. In realist terms, that they will activate or deactivate causal mechanisms to generate changes in pre-existing regularities. The changes in regularity comprise the outcome. Figure 4.1 captures schematically the overall way in which interventions are seen to work from a realist perspective and to produce their outcome patterns. The term 'outcome pattern' is important. It is used to capture the heterogeneity of causal pathways that is typically provided by

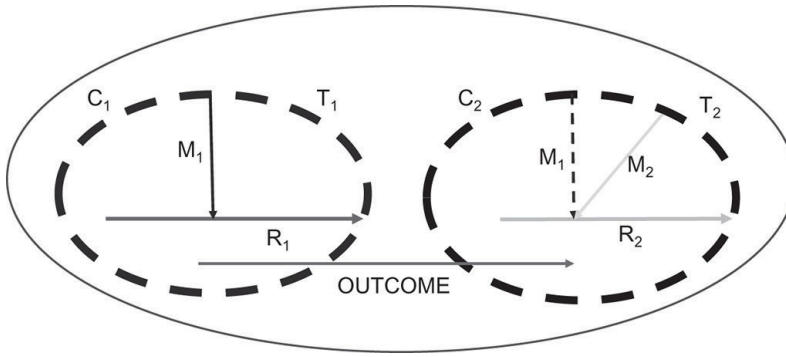

Figure 4.1 Realist evaluation. Authors' own work, 2025.

interventions creating, for example, variations in outcomes by subgroup depending on the attributes of specific subgroups and their conditions.

Let us unpack Figure 4.1. At time T_1 in context C_1, mechanism M_1 generates regularities R_1. The intervention is then applied. This leads to a change in mechanisms, in our example deactivating M_1 and/or activating M_2, thereby leading to changed regularities, R_2. The change in regularities (R_2 minus R_1) comprises the observed outcome pattern – the effect of the intervention in that particular context. The outer oval represents the broader context within which the intervention was introduced. The dashed ovals represent the more specific context in which the intervention is being implemented and wherein the activation or deactivation of causal mechanisms is generating the observed changing regularities. The products of realist evaluation are referred to as tested 'CMOCs': Context, Mechanism, Outcome-pattern Configurations. CMOCs refer simply to patterns linking contexts, mechanisms and outcomes.

In practice, interventions are always introduced into a stream of existing and evolving sets of contextual conditions, that may be relevant to the activation and deactivation of mechanisms which in turn affect what outcomes are produced. These contextual conditions also comprise mutually adaptive agents, rather than passive objects simply impacted by the conditions in which they act. Contexts can therefore change endogenously (that is from within) as a consequence of an intervention, thereby changing its consequences. Mechanisms can also operate in concert with one another, for example, where a crime opportunity triggers a criminal disposition. The consequential behaviours following the activation of a causal mechanism can then form a changed context for the activation of altered mechanisms. Arms races are an example: A adapts to the changing threats posed by B, where B's new threats arise from B's adaptation

to earlier threats from A. In the case of trafficking, for example, efforts to thwart one method of trafficking may be met by innovation by traffickers, who adopt different methods. Those trying to thwart the traffickers then try different ways to stop the traffickers, and so on.

The messy reality into which interventions are introduced poses challenges for evaluation. Against this backdrop, RCTs typically treat the intervention as a 'black box', whose workings are secondary to the task of assessing impact. By contrast, the realist evaluator is committed to opening up the black box to better understand *how* an intervention produces its outcomes. In this vein, the RCT estimates net overall intended effects – did the intervention work? The realist evaluator seeks to unpack and unpick variation in treatment effects by relevant subgroups – what works, for whom, in what circumstances and how? 'Working' here refers to having an effect. Of course, the same effect may be deemed positive for some and negative for others. In the case of trafficking, for example, governments, those trafficked, traffickers, community members from whence people are trafficked, and those in the destinations where those trafficked are taken, may have different interests, and may differ in the value they attach to trafficking or the intended and unintended outcomes of efforts to reduce it (see, for example, Gallagher & Surtees, 2012).

Realists are also concerned with synthesising findings about the effects of interventions (Pawson et al., 2005). But the approach taken is again rather different from that of a meta-analysis merging findings from RCTs (and/or quasi-experiments). Realists will want to hoover up *all* reasonable evidence, whatever method has been used to collect it, so as best to test conjectured CMOCs. Faced with the complexity of many interventions, with variations by context and subgroup, realists must decide where to focus their attention. Too specific, and findings will relate only to individual cases. Too general, and significant variation by subgroup is washed out. Ideally, realist evaluation operates at the 'middle-range', in the sense that it is neither focused on the macro level where findings are intended to be universal, nor at the level of idiosyncratic cases. Middle-range theories are tested by specifying for whom and in what respects a type of intervention works (or does not). Mak et al. (2023) provide a recent example of a realist review of psychosocial interventions for survivors of human trafficking.

It should be clear from the foregoing discussion that realist evaluation embraces complexity as an inescapable feature of interventions in social life, although this can bring practical challenges and often requires a degree of domain expertise on the part of the evaluator. RCTs typically downplay this complexity to generate simple answers, although this

may be at the expense of the heterogeneity of intervention and outcomes. Within the human trafficking literature, it is encouraging that there is a small but growing body of realist-inspired studies, pioneered by a group of public health researchers (see Kiss et al., 2021; Zimmerman et al., 2021).

RCTs and realist evaluations: when is each approach most appropriate?

RCTs are designed to achieve internal validity in a study. They are able to produce convincing evidence about the effects of an intervention in a particular place and time. In the case of standard and homogenous interventions – think vaccinations or fines imposed on those caught speeding – RCTs may therefore be most useful in measuring net treatment effects, although they risk neglecting harms that may befall subsets of those affected. Where evaluations are intended to help decision-makers make better choices in conditions that are fluid or uncertain (as indeed the context around trafficking and anti-trafficking often is), realist approaches may be more useful. That is because they improve decision-makers' ability to work out what is most promising for producing positive outcomes and most risky for producing backfire effects.

In the case of medicine, seen by many as the poster child of an evidence-based profession, an enormous amount of prior research generally lies behind trials using RCTs. Basic biochemistry, laboratory tests and animal tests all precede the clinical trial. The mechanisms behind the treatment have been worked out. The activation of the mechanisms by the treatment, say a drug, has been tested. Indicative results begin with in-vitro experiments, then animal tests, then volunteers taking the treatment, before the RCT is run with the target population. Contrast this with most interventions in anti-trafficking and in crime prevention more generally. Here, the level of background research prior to launching a trial is often limited. It is generally not known how the intervention works (or does not) and in what circumstances.

Realist evaluation thus generally requires initial theory development and articulation, aligned to the approach described by Kiss & Zimmerman (Chapter 8, this volume). This may involve discussions with policymakers, practitioners and, importantly, affected populations (see also Boyd, Chapter 2, this volume) to elicit and formalise a programme theory that may hitherto be tacit. It may also involve building theory by drawing on germane fields such as sociology and psychology. Those

theories then, of course, must be tested independently, and those tests can involve the collection and analysis of any relevant data, be that qualitative or quantitative. In realist evaluation there is no pre-commitment to any particular type of data collection technique.

In medicine, where complex interventions involving interactions are at issue, instead of RCTs and kindred approaches, theory-based evaluation with a focus on mechanisms, contexts and outcome patterns is now advocated by the Medical Research Council (Skivington et al., 2021). This recognises the need to tailor evaluation methods to the realities of differing treatment modalities. Social programmes are typically complex, with mutations occurring as those involved in delivering them, targeted by them and affected by them adapt over time. They are qualitatively different from standard, homogenous clinical treatments (such as drugs) with given dosages applied to relatively passive targets. RCTs are better suited for the former. But for complex treatments involving social interactions, theory-based and realist approaches are now advocated.

Encouragingly, the green shoots of a more pluralist approach to research evidence can be seen in recent efforts to weave realism into RCTs (and kindred designs) when evaluating social interventions, so as better to capture complexity, variability and backfire effects (see Bonnell et al., 2012; Jamal et al., 2015; van Belle et al., 2016; Warren et al., 2022). This amounts to conducting RCTs focused on trying to test conjectures relating to subgroups. Such studies could incorporate, for example, initial CMOC theory-development, subgroup sampling, data collection and analysis. RCTs are thereby designed to test specific CMOCs. They also might include provision for complementary qualitative data collection to try to identify whether the intervention has turned out in ways that had not been anticipated. It is not difficult to envisage a series of studies, building on one another to devise and test ever more subtle and sophisticated CMOC theories. Presently, however, we are not aware of any realist RCTs in the field of human trafficking. We hope readers of this book might work to change this.

Comparing RCTs and realist evaluations: a case study of narrative exposure therapy for survivors of human trafficking

The previous sections set out the general principles underpinning RCTs and realist evaluation. Let us now consider more concretely how a realist evaluation differs from an RCT, and what can and can't be learnt from

each approach. To do this, we review one of the few RCTs in the human trafficking literature. We then describe what a realist evaluation might have done differently.

We choose as our case study a UK-based feasibility RCT of narrative exposure therapy (NET) for survivors of human trafficking (Brady et al., 2021). We choose this study because, in our view, it is well-planned and clearly reported. It therefore brings out some of the strengths and challenges of mounting an RCT in the field of human trafficking. The reported motivation for the RCT is as follows. Evidence shows that trafficking survivors exhibit a high rate of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Ottisova et al., 2016). NET has been shown to be an effective treatment for PTSD (Lely et al., 2019), but evidence on the effectiveness of NET for survivors of trafficking is limited. In response, Brady et al. (2021) set out (1) to explore the feasibility of conducting an RCT into the effects of NET among trafficking survivors and (2) to determine the impact of NET in reducing PTSD symptoms among trafficking survivors.

Brady et al. (2021) provide a detailed account of how their feasibility RCT was planned to take place. To summarise, the RCT was to be a single-centre trial linked to a UK-based charity that provides support services to individuals who have experienced human rights abuses. The study was intended specifically for survivors of trafficking with PTSD. Trafficking survivors were recruited in two ways: (1) as 'existing clients' already in receipt of support services from the participating charity and (2) through referrals from external professionals. Identified individuals were deemed eligible for inclusion in the study if they (1) met the clinical diagnosis for PTSD, (2) had not received any form of trauma-based therapy hitherto and (3) were willing to take part in the treatment. Excluded were any individuals who had recently attempted suicide, had a history of self-harm, had substance misuse issues, were facing removal from the UK due to their immigration status, were currently in an abusive or exploitative situation, and/or who had social and/or legal issues that threatened their ability to engage with the treatment.

The original study design involved eligible participants being randomly assigned to one of two conditions. The treatment group would receive NET immediately and the control group would be added to a waiting list to be assessed in five months and then receive NET. Treatment was to be delivered by a team of female psychological therapists with training in NET and experience of working with trafficking survivors. Treatment consisted of a maximum of 20 NET sessions offered on a weekly basis and scheduled to last between 90 and 120 minutes. The main outcome of the study was the severity of PTSD symptoms, to be measured in two ways

(assessment by clinician and self-report) and at three timepoints (baseline, mid-treatment/wait and end-of-treatment/wait). To reduce risk of bias, clinicians taking outcome measurements were to be blinded as to whether participants had been randomly assigned to the treatment or control group.

What actually happened? According to Brady et al. (2021), of the 55 individuals who were assessed for study eligibility, only 25 went on to take part in the RCT. Assessment revealed that 20 individuals did not meet the inclusion criteria (because, for example, they did not have a diagnosis of PTSD [n = 10] or they were deemed a high suicide risk [n = 2]). A further 9 individuals were eligible for inclusion but declined to take part mainly because they didn't feel ready for trauma-based therapy at that time (n = 7). Of the 25 eligible participants remaining, the randomisation process yielded notable (albeit non-significant) disparities between the treatment (n = 15) and control groups (n = 10), particularly in relation to country of origin and whether an interpreter was needed. Moreover, those *within* the treatment group were found to differ with respect to their access to wider 'holistic' support as a function of whether they were recruited as an 'existing client' of the service provider (and therefore already in receipt of wider support services) or through referrals from external professionals (and hence receiving NET only). Blinding was also reportedly compromised either 'accidently' (as when an experimenter encountered a participant in a NET session) or when a participant disclosed whether they were or were not receiving NET.

In terms of the effects of intervention, those who took part in the NET generally agreed that the treatment was suitable for their needs. The mean number of attended sessions was 17 stretched across a mean of 7.4 months. The mean rate of cancelled or non-attended appointments was 2.5. In relation to measured outcomes, the study authors report that among those who completed NET, there was a statistically significant decrease in the severity of PTSD symptoms before and after treatment. No changes were observed among the waitlist control group. The authors concluded that 'the results are promising and suggest that NET is a viable treatment for survivors of trafficking that warrants further evaluation in full-scale RCTs' (Brady et al., 2021, p. 7).

The study by Brady and colleagues (2021) illustrated some of the challenges of doing an RCT in the field of human trafficking: recruitment proved challenging, circumstances that might affect treatment effectiveness were removed as a result of the exclusion criteria, selection biases were prominent, with the expansive exclusion parameters feasibly excluding sizeable proportions of trafficking survivors, blinding was

compromised and randomisation yielded notable differences between treatment and control group. These are limitations which the authors rightly and clearly acknowledge.

What, then, can we learn from this feasibility RCT? We learn that something about NET, possibly in combination with wider support services provided over multiple sessions by female therapists, led to an average reduction in the severity of PTSD symptoms, among a particular group of engaged trafficking survivors with particular features who lasted the course of treatment at that particular time and place. What don't we learn from this RCT? The findings do not provide information on (1) what it was about the intervention which led to the observed average treatment effects, (2) what conditions are most conducive to producing the intended average treatment effects and (3) what attributes and circumstances make some human trafficking survivors more (or less) likely to respond positively to NET.

What would a realist evaluation have done differently? The starting point of any realist enquiry is the development of testable theories of relevance to policy and practice, centred around the realist concepts of 'context' and 'mechanisms'. Those theories might derive from any number of sources including, say, research on NET and PTSD, the views of professionals delivering NET, and the subjective experiences of trafficking survivors in receipt of NET. The source of materials used to develop theory is of secondary concern. Most important is that the emerging theory (or theories) comprise testable hypotheses oriented towards better working out how an intervention produces its effects, for whom and under what conditions.

In the case of NET and human trafficking, central realist questions are: what mechanisms would NET be expected to activate (or deactivate) among survivors of human trafficking with PTSD? What conditions might plausibly affect the activation (or deactivation) of these mechanisms? And, what subgroups of human trafficking survivors with PTSD are more (or less) likely to respond positively to NET? Theory testing would then involve specifying the outcome patterns that might plausibly follow the activation of a hypothesised mechanism, with data collection, using any appropriate methods, oriented towards the outcome measures that would support or refute the theory being tested.

There is not space here to propose a large number of candidate theories and how they might be tested. For the purposes of this section, we discuss just one theory. It centres around trust. At root, NET involves participants working with a therapist to revisit and reconstruct traumatic memories. Participants are encouraged to develop a detailed narrative

of their traumatic experiences. Over time, this narrative and repeated re-exposure to traumatic memories is thought to help participants overcome previous avoidance strategies and, going forward, help separate previously harmful experiences from current threats. The realist evaluator is interested in mechanisms.

One plausible mechanism underpinning the effects of NET is trust. It could be conjectured, for example, that repeated one-on-one attention from trained and sympathetic therapists creates trust between therapist and survivor which in turn enables the survivor to see their world as less threatening and, ultimately, leads to a reduction in PTSD symptoms. This is an example of a middle-range theory. From this theory derives a series of testable and policy-relevant hypotheses about the attributes and circumstances in which trust-building is more or less likely. It might be conjectured, for example, that building trust is more likely when participant and therapist are of the same gender or speak the same language.

By contrast, it might be hypothesised that survivors whose trafficking was in some way facilitated by trusted individuals (for example, families, romantic partners or friends) suffer greater feelings of *distrust* and hence are less responsive to NET, or require higher levels of dosage. Going further still, if trust *is* a central mechanism through which NET gives rise to positive effects, it might be theorised that a reduction in PTSD symptoms among trafficking survivors would occur regardless of the content of the NET: most critical is the development and maintenance of trust between therapist and survivor built during one-to-one sessions.

The job of the realist evaluator is then to satisfactorily test these hypotheses. Doing so would likely require quantitative and qualitative methods. Qualitative interviews, for example, could be conducted, putting the proposed theory to relevant subgroups including therapist and patient. Quantitative methods would also be needed that focus on comparisons of conjectured subgroups, such as the nature of the trafficking experienced and the participant–therapist dynamic. Observational methods might also usefully be employed systematically to assess the content and delivery of NET. If the accumulated data are consistent with expectation, this of course doesn't *prove* the hypotheses, it merely corroborates them, subject to later falsification or refinement. It does, however, help us move towards a better understanding of, in this case, what it is about NET that has the potential to reduce PTSD among trafficking survivors and the ways in which positive effects might be maximised and harms reduced.

What backfires, for whom, how and in what context? A realist approach to the study of backfire effects in human trafficking

We finish this chapter by considering a further way in which a realist orientation might inform the evidence base around anti-trafficking interventions. An inconvenient truth of crime prevention is that interventions seldom work everywhere and every time. What *worked* to combat human trafficking in Nottingham may not *work* to combat human trafficking in Nepal. This poses a challenge for evidence-based policy and practice. It means that interventions that were shown to be effective (however defined) in one subgroup and in one place and time are not guaranteed to produce similar positive effects in another subgroup at some other place and time.

This challenge is further compounded by the fact that interventions that don't 'work' are not just benignly ineffective, but can also sometimes generate negative consequences: what we refer to here as a 'backfire effect'. Crime prevention is replete with examples of backfire effects (see Welsh & Rocque, 2014). The literature on human trafficking likewise identifies many examples of interventions causing harm to targeted and neighbouring populations (for example, Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women, 2007; Kempadoo & Shih, 2022), be these consequences unforeseen or, in some cases, foreseen but ignored (Blunt & Wolf, 2020; Quirk, Chapter 7, this volume; Smith & Mac, 2018). An example of the latter is the 'Nordic model' (asymmetric criminalisation of sex work), which continues to be advocated under an anti-trafficking logic despite mounting evidence of both its broad harms to sex workers at large and its specific failure to deliver on anti-trafficking promises (see Platt et al., 2018; Smith & Mac, 2018).

The systematic study of backfire effects is limited (Welsh & Rocque, 2014)[2] for several reasons. Those commissioning, designing, delivering and/or evaluating interventions are often invested in them. They are therefore liable to seek out evidence that confirms intervention success and deny or discard evidence that suggests otherwise. Positive results are also more likely than negative results to get published in the scientific literature (Sutton, 2009). Moreover, and particularly relevant to this chapter, backfire effects can easily be missed in evaluation studies that centre on determining average treatment effects and ignore variation in treatment effect by subgroup.

We believe that realistic evaluation provides a useful framework to help in identifying, understanding and pre-empting backfire effects produced by anti-trafficking interventions. We believe this because realist evaluation takes as its starting point the position that little or nothing works unequivocally for all in all circumstances. It is assumed that whilst mechanisms are neutral in themselves, they can be activated to produce negative consequences. It follows that any intervention has the *potential* to activate mechanisms that in some settings and for some groups cause harm. Indeed, as mentioned previously in this chapter, a key part of realist evaluation is about eliciting, articulating and testing hypotheses about which groups in which contexts may be more or less likely to experience intervention benefits versus harms.

It is beyond the scope of what remains in this chapter for us to set out in any detail what a realist evaluation-inspired study of backfire effects might look like. We can, however, sketch out some ideas for how such a project might fruitfully advance, and hope that readers might be minded to pursue this research agenda. A sensible starting point would be a secondary review of existing studies. The purpose would be three-fold: (1) to identify anti-trafficking interventions that have been found to produce positive, nil and negative effects, (2) to tease out the attributes of the subgroups (or settings) amongst whom (or where) there have (and have not) been backfire effects and (3) to develop a list of what types of human trafficking interventions produce what types of backfire effects amongst what populations in what contexts and how.

Published studies likely underestimate the scale of backfire effects. For this reason, we suggest there is value in supplementing the literature review with structured discussions with those groups who have first-hand experience of and explanations for any harms produced by anti-trafficking interventions, including professionals, human trafficking survivors and overlapping affected populations (for example, irregular migrants, sex workers). Ultimately, and as described in other parts of this chapter, the aim would be to work up a 'middle-range' theory of backfire effects in anti-trafficking (or subgroups of anti-trafficking interventions), which would comprise a set of archetypal causal mechanisms responsible for the adverse effects observed in the literature and the types of condition conducive to their activation. If possible, we contend that such a theory might help both in identifying, understanding and averting harmful backfire effects and as a means of sensitising decision-makers to think about backfire effects when commissioning, designing and/or delivering anti-trafficking interventions.

Conclusion

A central purpose of evaluation research is to support decision-making. It is about generating evidence to help work out how best to use finite resources in ways that maximise benefits and minimise harms. In this chapter, we discussed two kinds of evaluation evidence that can be used by decision-makers to improve outcomes in human trafficking: RCTs and realist evaluation. Each approach carries a different set of assumptions and asks a different set of questions. The former is now beginning to be widely advocated in the anti-trafficking domain, particularly by those holding the purse strings for evaluations (see Cockbain et al., Chapter 1, this volume); realist evaluation less so. It is our view that both approaches may be able to contribute to meeting the evidence-needs of decision-makers tasked with preventing human trafficking and reducing its harms.

Key messages

- Realist evaluation is a type of theory-driven evaluation. It aims to develop testable and generalisable theories about what works, for whom, how and in what circumstances.
- Realist evaluations contrast with RCTs. The latter focus mainly on estimating the net intended effects produced by an intervention in a trial. The former focus on how interventions lead to outcome patterns and the conditions needed for the production of those patterns.
- Realist methods are increasingly used in the evaluation of complex interventions in health, education and criminal justice. Presently, however, there are few realist evaluations of anti-trafficking interventions.
- We argue that the production and synthesis of evidence from realist evaluations is important to better equip decision-makers to make informed and nuanced choices about how best to tackle human trafficking.
- There is growing concern about the unintended consequences and collateral damage associated with anti-trafficking interventions. We set out how a realist approach could help develop our understanding of the mechanisms and contexts producing such harms, and thus help avoid and mitigate them in future.

Notes

1. It is important to note that cost-benefit analyses remain scarce in crime prevention in general (Tompson et al., 2021) and in the anti-trafficking literature in particular (Akullo, 2020).
2. The study of crime displacement is a notable exception.

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5

Using agent-based modelling for anti-trafficking intervention theory development and evaluation

Alys McAlpine and Daniel Birks

Introduction

Many social phenomena and corresponding interventions are described as 'complex' and, in turn, there is widespread curiosity and optimism about how 'complex systems thinking' and modelling might transform social intervention research (Stroh, 2015). Increasingly, social scientists are adopting systems science theory and methods, including widening their application in harm reduction research in public health (El-Sayed et al., 2012; Cassidy et al., 2019; Silverman et al., 2021), criminology and crime science (Birks et al., 2012; Groff et al., 2019; Walker, 2011; Johnson & Groff, 2014; Johnson, 2009). Specifically, agent-based modelling (ABM), a computer simulation technique for modelling interactive and dynamic systems from micro-behaviours (that is, agents), is starting to become a popular choice for complex intervention and implementation research (Burke et al., 2015; Tracy et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2018; Weisburd et al., 2017). The use of ABM departs from many conventional forms of modelling by enabling researchers to construct models of social problems and solutions by simulating the individuals involved, their properties, behaviours and interactions. This approach allows complex social systems and phenomena to be described in terms of causally explicit mechanism-based explanations.

There are a range of ways ABM could be used in anti-trafficking research, and violence prevention research more broadly (Goldstick & Jay, 2022; Tracy et al., 2023). This chapter focuses primarily on why and

how ABM might be used to develop and refine anti-trafficking theory, an essential but often neglected component of intervention development and evaluation (see Kiss & Zimmerman, Chapter 8, this volume). This chapter includes brief overviews on complex systems and interventions, ABM, and intervention theory, before presenting three ways ABM can enrich anti-trafficking theory development: (1) as an *integrative* platform for diverse perspectives and evidence, (2) to better explore anti-trafficking mechanism assumptions *in context*, and (3) to facilitate more *inquisitive* approaches to intervention development. We also suggest how ABM can be used to refine intervention theory through experimentation and validation. We conclude the chapter by proposing a few other aspirational ABM applications for anti-trafficking evaluation for researchers and funders to consider.

Background

Complex systems and interventions

The study of 'complex systems' began in the 1970s, primarily in the fields of physics and mathematics and, by the 1990s, was more widely adopted in economics and other social sciences. The definition of a 'complex system' is extensively debated (Estrada, 2023; Vicsek, 2002; Eidelson, 1997), but it is most often defined by a list of typical characteristics: interconnected parts, multi-scale processes, non-linear behaviours and emergent properties. Critics argue that this 'definition-by-enumeration' of features is ambiguous and inconclusive (Estrada, 2023; Ladyman, 2013) but, perhaps, it is the easiest way for multi-disciplinary or novice audiences to conceptualise a complex system. The notion of a complex system is essential when, as physicist Vicsek explains, 'the description of the entire system's behaviour requires a qualitatively new theory, because the laws that describe its behaviour are qualitatively different from those that govern its individual units' (Vicsek, 2002, p. 131).

In 2000, the Medical Research Council (MRC) launched its seminal framework for 'complex intervention' design and evaluation informed by complex system thinking. In the updated 2021 framework, the MRC offered this definition of a complex intervention:

> An intervention might be considered complex because of properties of the intervention itself, such as the number of components involved; the range of behaviours targeted; expertise and skills

> required by those delivering and receiving the intervention; the number of groups, settings, or levels targeted; or the permitted level of flexibility of the intervention or its components. (Skivington et al., 2021, p. 2)

While more explicit definitions of these embedded concepts are needed, there is a clear case for their relevance to anti-trafficking research and interventions. The systems that enable, facilitate or prevent human trafficking comprise many interacting actors and institutions (for example, victims, survivors, perpetrators, multi-sector service provision, bilateral policies).

Evidence also indicates that key mechanisms (for example, discrimination, agency, awareness) have non-linear effects which can give rise to different trafficking outcomes for individuals across different contexts. For example, in some patriarchal societies, the *most* oppressed women may actually be at less risk of labour trafficking because they are not permitted to leave home whereas women with a relative degree of agency will be at more risk (Cho, 2012). Or, another example is that it is not typically the poorest in a community who migrate for work because of the resources needed to fund the journey (Castelli, 2018). Understanding these non-linear relationships may prevent scarce intervention resources being wasted due to simplistic or narrow assumptions.

There are traces of 'complex systems' and 'complex intervention' framings in recent human trafficking theoretical developments. For example, in Figure 5.1, Barner et al. (2018) applied an ecological perspective to human trafficking intervention as a 'method to understand the complex, multilevel social, and economic factors'. Likewise, in Figure 5.2, Dang (2021) depicts a survivor's wellbeing within a multilevel social system and illustrates how wellbeing as a dynamic process relates to both chronological time and experience of time. While many researchers have described human trafficking as a complex or 'wicked' problem, it is only recently that we have examples of researchers integrating complexity-congruent theory and methods into study designs (van der Watt, 2019; Chesney et al., 2019; Chesney, 2021; McAlpine, 2021, Lavelle-Hill et al., 2021; Kiss et al., 2021; van der Westhuizen, 2015). For example, in Figure 5.3, McAlpine (2021) integrated multiple migration theories into a multi-level migration system theoretical framework to guide her study design for research on low-wage labour migration and emergent precarity, which included the use of social network analysis and ABM.

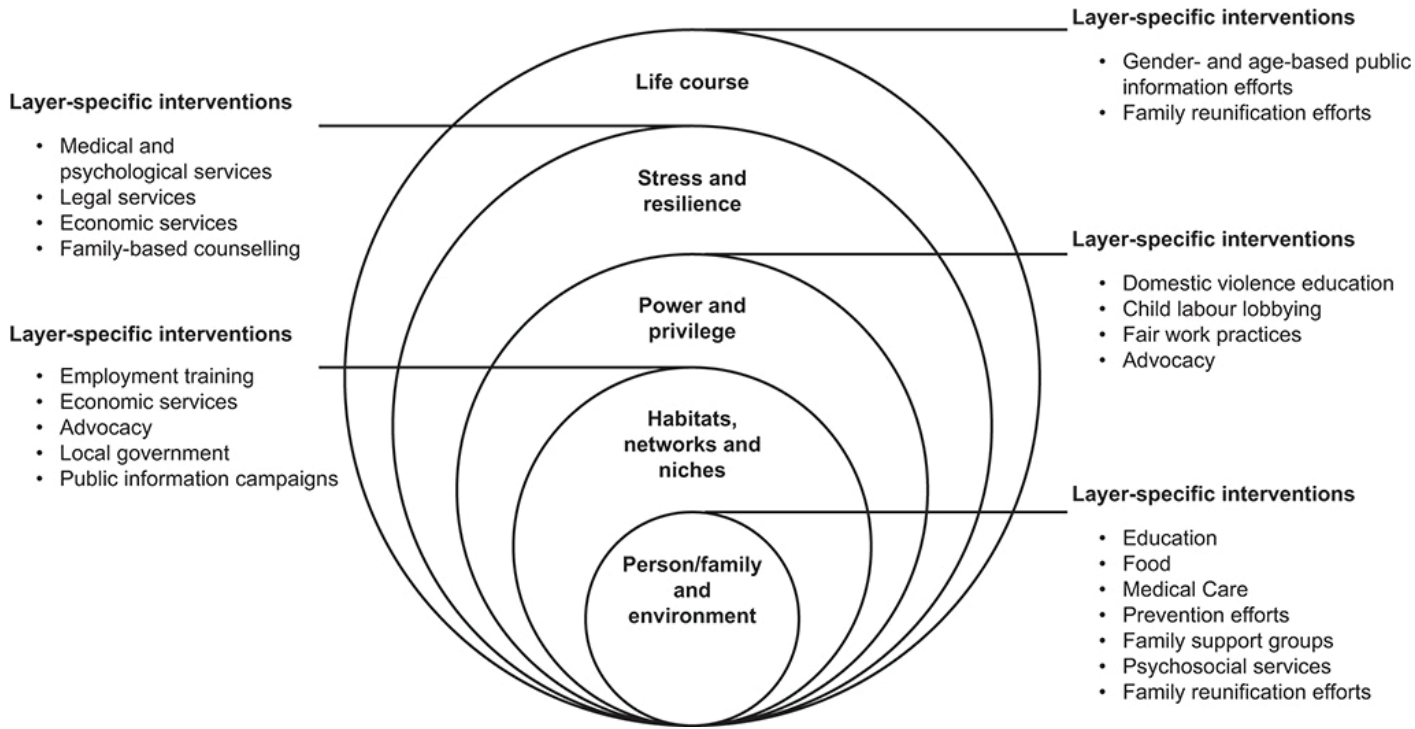
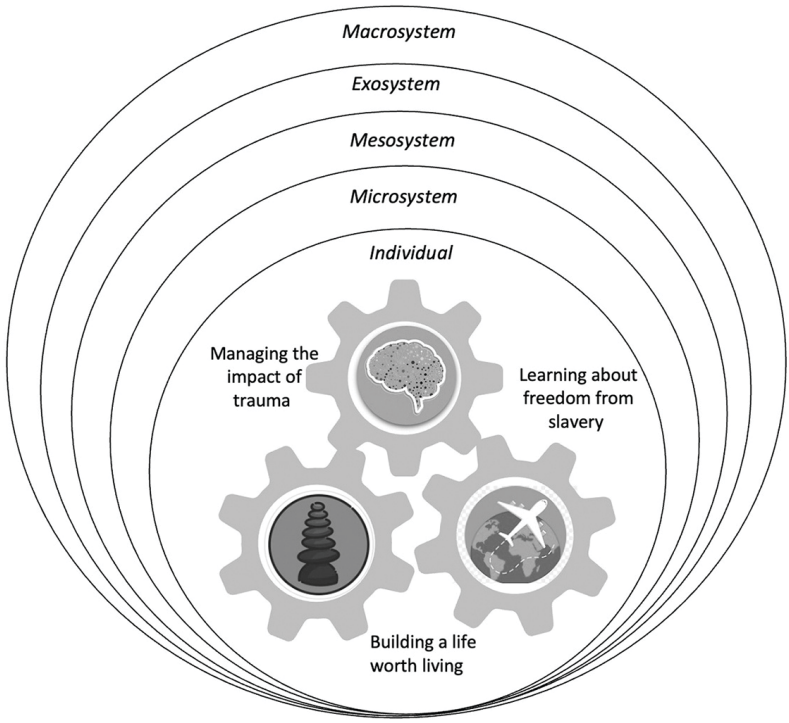
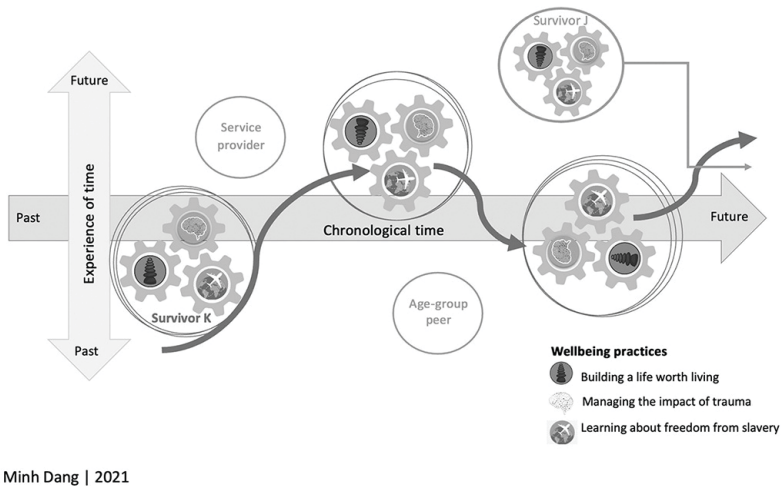


Figure 5.1 Ecological model of human trafficking intervention from Barner et al. (2018)



a. Wellbeing practices in the context of social systems



b. Wellbeing for Survivor K

Figure 5.2 Survivor wellbeing: complex interactions and social systems from Dang (2021)

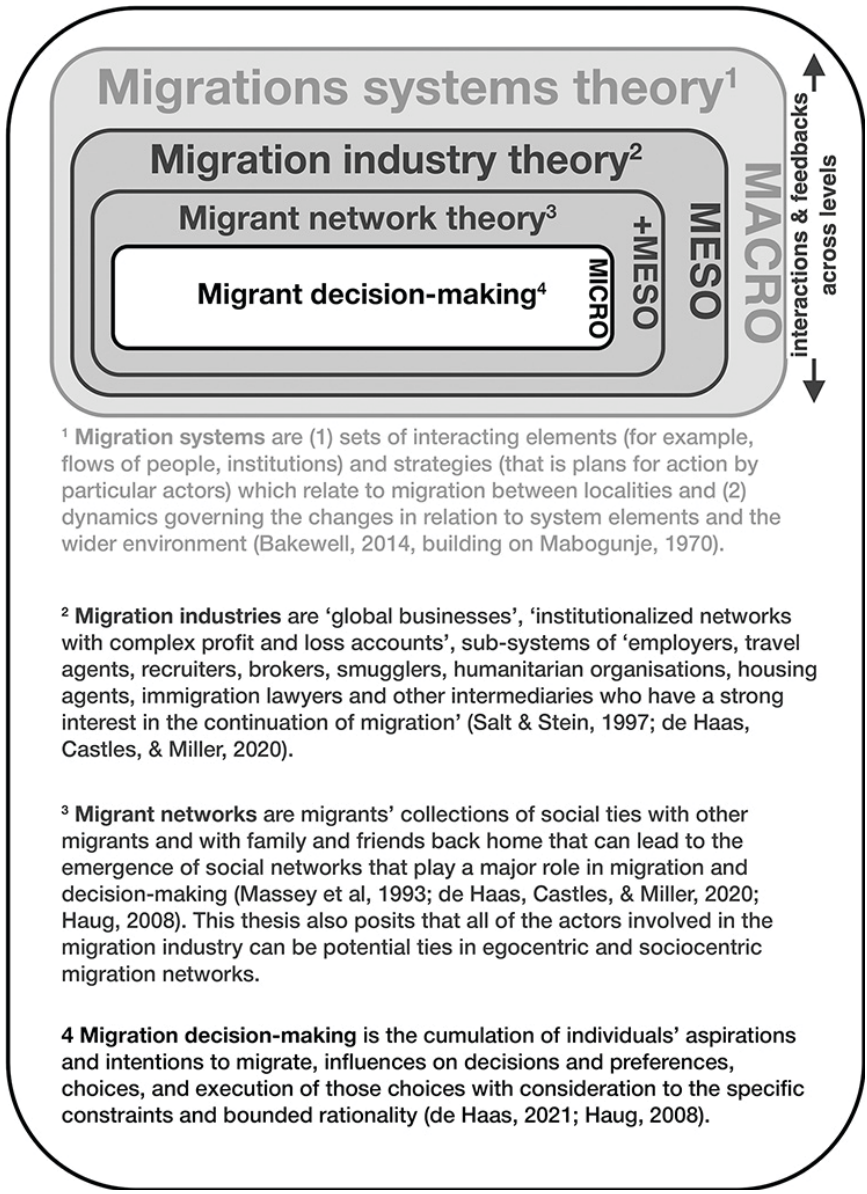


Figure 5.3 Multi-level migration system theoretical framework from McAlpine (2021)

Agent-based modelling and social simulations

ABM or 'social simulations' (that is, the use of ABM in social sciences or to simulate different social systems and behaviours) have been highlighted as a promising method in recent evaluation frameworks and guidelines, such as the UK Government-produced Magenta Book and the MRC framework for complex intervention development (HM Treasury, 2020; Skivington et al., 2021). ABMs are powerful computer simulations that model stochastic systems as a collection of heterogenous and autonomous decision-making agents that typically engage in repetitive and adaptive interactions with each other and their environment over explicit temporal and spatial scales (Bonabeau, 2002; Gilbert, 2008). In other words, an ABM is a computer-based model that attempts to replicate (or 'simulate') a real-world social phenomenon – the places, people and processes – to ask questions and make observations about how that system works. Experiments using ABM can serve as a flexible modelling laboratory in which to explore system patterns that emerge from different sets of behaviours and scenarios. For example, Cerdá et al. (2018) used ABM to simulate the impact of three potential violence prevention interventions (that is, 'violence interrupters', hot-spot policing and doubling police presence) on the prevalence of violence in a simulated NYC population.

Importantly, ABM enables exploration and manipulation of systems that would otherwise be impossible for logistical or ethical reasons, and simulation of counterfactual scenarios that are otherwise wholly unobservable (Nagin & Sampson, 2019). For example, Yonas et al. (2011) compared the impact and cost-effectiveness of a community crime reduction strategy implemented community-wide versus in spatially focused (hot spot) areas. This sort of counter-factual comparison would not be possible in the same population. Similarly, ABM is a low-cost alternative for initial intervention experimentation prior to more costly, but necessary, real-world experimentation.

There are many resources detailing the technical methods, software and potential uses of ABM for social research more broadly (Epstein & Axtell, 1996; Gilbert & Troitzsch, 2005; Railsback & Grimm, 2011; Wilensky & Rand, 2015; Edmonds et al., 2019), including ongoing debates around the capacity of these models to 'predict' or perhaps only 'partially explain' complex phenomenon (Elsenbroich, 2012; Elsenbroich & Polhill, 2023). Social simulations have been used to explore interventions in diverse contexts, such as the effect of social distancing policies on Covid-19 infection rates (Badham et al., 2021; Lopolito et al., 2024) or the effect of firearm restrictions on suicide outcomes (Keyes et al., 2019).

Currently, there are few examples of ABM used in human trafficking or labour exploitation research (McAlpine et al., 2021; Tracy et al., 2023). An exception is Ballard (2016), who developed an ABM to explore system feedback in commercial fishing related to illegal, unregulated, unreported (IUU) fishing, forced labour and fish depletion. One of the hypotheses tested was that forced labour adversely impacted on economic activity. Ballard was motivated to use ABM due to the lack of reliable data on human trafficking and global fisheries – making statistical analyses challenging. He included adjustable parameters to account for limited data and explore different assumptions where data were missing. The model demonstrated that economic losses could increase with the prevalence of IUU fishing and forced labour.

Chesney et al. (2019) used ABM to explore Crane's theory of modern slavery as a management practice in the Spanish agricultural industry. The authors used ABM to investigate Crane's five propositions about the conditions that lead to the adoption of slavery: conducive industry, availability of socio-economically disadvantaged population, conducive geographic context, supportive cultural context and accommodating regulatory context.

In 2021, McAlpine and colleagues used ABM to explore how precarity emerged across different migration networks pathways from Myanmar to Thailand and associated outcomes of precarity at destination (McAlpine, 2021). Table 5.1 provides a brief overview of these three application examples, but the full model description is in the respective papers. Chesney (2021) also presented a series of illustrative ABMs in his book on the potential uses of ABM to study worker exploitation (for example, supply chains, diffusion of good working conditions in the garment sector, introduction of fair employer intervention), which is essential reading for anyone looking into this method for anti-trafficking research.

Theory

Often, presentation of useful concepts in scientific methods, such as theory or ontology, can be bewildering in terms of application. Before we propose ways that we might use ABM for anti-trafficking 'intervention theory', we want to get on the same page about the kinds of theory we mean.

A theory, in simple terms, is an idea or set of ideas that explains something. There are many types of social theories, but they can be broadly understood in three main categories. First, there are 'grand theories' which are highly abstract, not context specific and difficult to empirically test. Regardless of their discipline (for example, psychology,

Table 5.1 Human trafficking and exploitation ABMs

Author, Year	Simulated phenomenon	Model agents	Model aim
Ballard, 2016	Forced labour on fishing boats in the South China sea	**Fishing Boats**: fish, sell fish at port, and *may* fish illegally 'off-season', over fish and/or practice forced labour **Fish**: reproduce, get caught	Exploratory hypothesis testing
Chesney et al., 2019	Modern slavery in the Spanish agricultural industry	**Employers:** employ workers, communicate with other employers, set and pay wages **Workers:** move, accept/refuse work, leave, share wage amount with other workers	Theory-led exploration of the drivers of exploitation
McAlpine, 2021	Low-wage labour migration in the Myanmar-Thailand corridor	**Migrants**: decide to migrate, plan, interact with intermediaries, migrate, find work **Intermediaries**: offer services to migrants, take payment **Employers**: offer jobs, pay wages	Descriptive model of migration pathways, networks and emergent precarity

economics) grand theories are highly philosophical (for example, Maslow's hierarchy of needs).

Second, there are 'middle-range theories' (MRT) which are embedded in empirical research and, while they may draw from 'grand theories', they aim to make more context-specific causal claims that can be empirically tested (for example, the influence of certain reference groups on decision-making).

Third, there are 'intervention theories' which make claims about how a specific programme or policy will lead to the desired outcomes. An intervention theory should be explicit about the assumptions underlying the intervention and the mechanisms by which the outcomes will be achieved. Intervention theory is seen as an essential component of any complex intervention evaluation (Moore et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2014) and is increasingly being developed in the early stages of intervention design. There are many related terminologies and frameworks that fall under this umbrella of intervention theory (for example, theory of change, theory action, programme theory, logic model / diagram, outcomes framework).

Of course, these different types of theories often reference and build on each other. For example, an intervention theory may derive from an MRT (for example, a health behaviour change intervention theory may incorporate social norms theory) or the evaluation findings for an intervention theory may be used to develop a more generalisable MRT.

Currently, there is a scarcity of rigorously developed and evaluated anti-trafficking intervention theory. Zimmerman and colleagues (2021) presented a rare example of a theory-based evaluation of a five-year empowerment and knowledge-building intervention to prevent the exploitation of South Asian female migrant workers. At present, without coherent prevention theories, we risk conflating the disruption of causal narratives (for example, aetiology) with the identification mechanisms for prevention (Kelly & Russo, 2018; Walsh & Sloman, 2011). This chapter will focus specifically on how we can use the strengths of ABM, such as its capacity to integrate evidence, experiment with counterfactuals and identify mechanistic claims, to enrich and experiment with anti-trafficking intervention theories.

ABM for anti-trafficking intervention theory

How might we use ABM to enrich anti-trafficking intervention theory development?

Regardless of the method we choose, models of complex systems, such as human trafficking and possible interventions, will always face serious limitations. Because we are relying on only partial information about the system, we can only partially explain its causal mechanisms. Moreover, the principle of equifinality states that any number of distinct causal narrative may be capable of explaining the same system behaviour. As a result, ABM identifies causally sufficient, rather than necessary, mechanism-based explanations (Epstein & Axtell, 1996). Finally, there is the multi-faceted issue of uncertainty which encompasses the reliability of our evidence, assumptions, model structure, code, and our forecasting about the future (for example, changes over time, counterfactuals, system adaptations).

So, considering these challenges and limitations, how useful is ABM for informing our anti-trafficking investments and strategies? The answer, we believe, lies not in their ability to perfectly predict the future, since we've just explained why that can't be the benchmark, but instead in their utility to support decision-makers making hard decisions with

limited knowledge and resources. Here, we talk through some of the strengths of ABM for a more integrative, in-context and inquisitive development of intervention theory.

1) Integrative modelling

As Edmonds (2015) argues, evidence is what supports or discredits our theories and therefore no evidence, whether quantitative or qualitative, should be ignored without good reason. Likewise, designing and building an ABM, especially one intended to develop intervention theory, can and should be informed by diverse individuals, perspectives and sources of evidence to ensure the intervention is acceptable, equitable and effective.

Unlike analytical modelling methods, mechanism-based models can translate and integrate varying types of evidence and insights (such as, ethnography to specify behaviour, census data to parametrise populations). For example, if we wanted to explore future strategies for trafficking identification, we might start with a model of current identification patterns that draws upon survivors' qualitative stories to write the primary rules of behaviour and then uses empirically derived probabilities for the baseline likelihood of detection. Very few methods allow for this sort of fusion of evidence from structured and unstructured data.

The option for data integration also allows us to choose the most appropriate evidence for each model component (for example, using social network data to inform interactions, qualitative reasoning to inform agent decision processes, survey data to inform distributions of actors and their attributes and so on). McAlpine and colleagues (2021), for example, integrated migration theories, social network surveys, qualitative analysis and published research to inform the design of the structure and rules in their ABM on precarious labour migration.

ABM is, therefore, particularly well-suited to incorporating other 'systems mapping' methodologies to inform the model, ranging from highly qualitative to highly quantitative, as well as from more systems-focused to intervention-focused (Barbrook-Johnson & Penn, 2022). Similarly, adjacent crime or event scripting tools, which have been applied to anti-trafficking research (Brayley et al., 2011), might also be a useful approach to structure and guide the development of human trafficking ABM that can be used for intervention theory development.

Given the hidden nature of human trafficking systems (for example, concealed crimes, hard-to-reach populations) and the challenges to evaluating anti-trafficking interventions (for example, logistics, ethics), it is even more essential that we make use of *all* evidence and insights we

do have. While it is preferable to use reliable and generalisable empirical evidence to inform every model rule, ABM can also be used to help map evidence gaps (for example, missing evidence on how perpetrators act, understanding risk-taking behaviours) and informed assumptions can be used as placeholders that can be refined and revised when evidence is available (Elsenbroich & Badham, 2020). Furthermore, competing accounts of causal mechanisms, where data is missing or in conflict, can be tested in the model 'laboratory'. This is particularly important as there is limited evidence demonstrating which human trafficking interventions worked and even less evidence of *how* they worked, which is prohibiting replicating and scaling interventions across contexts.

In addition to accommodating a range of evidence sources, the intuitive narrative of ABM lends itself to more inclusive modelling with diverse individuals (for example, front-line responders, service providers, policymakers, people with lived experience), not solely as 'stakeholders' or 'study participants' but as co-modellers. This is a particularly timely advantage of this method, as leaders of the anti-trafficking movement, including Boyd (Chaper 2, this volume) are advocating for the long overdue inclusion of voices of people with lived experience at every stage of research and more critical reflection on how evidence is produced and used (Freedom Fund, 2023).

Participatory action research (PAR) encompasses a range of techniques used to actively shift power imbalances by 'blurring the line between the [researcher and researched]' (Baum et al., 2006, p. 854) and actively engaging individuals who may not be trained researchers but have a vested interest in research outcomes (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). While there are recent examples of participatory anti-trafficking research (Paphitis & Jannesari, 2023; Miller et al., 2022; Brotherton et al., 2020), we could not find any examples of participatory anti-trafficking *modelling* (or 'collaborative modelling' or 'group model building'). While participation is not inherent to ABM (in fact, you will find many examples that are void of all participation), the narrative and visual features of ABM create opportunities for participation which should be seen as intrinsic to developing useful and acceptable models for action, such as intervention theory simulations. Indeed, there is growing interest in 'user-centred simulation' or 'participatory simulation' (Ramanath & Gilbert, 2004), but still nascent literature on best practice.

To date, most participatory ABM has focused on engaging policymakers for model uptake, however, there are emerging examples of innovative participatory ABM approaches being used with target populations (for example, engaging youth in a physical activity ABM

using storytelling structures, Frerichs et al., 2020). As policymakers become more comfortable with the models, they can ask richer questions and stakeholder engagement with the model can become much more sophisticated.

Anti-trafficking intervention theory will be more insightful, acceptable and convincing if it can make use of all evidence and represent diverse perspectives, while gauging the internal consistency of our evidence, ABM offers a useful analytical and visual platform for integrating, organising, and making sense of highly complex and varied sources of knowledge.

2) In-context modelling

Context should be a key analytical focus of any complex intervention research. Complex intervention strategies need to be specific about the context they are seeking to 'disrupt' and, in turn, possible complexities that may arise from the interaction between the interventions and its context (Skivington et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2018). Human trafficking is influenced by a range of highly contextual factors, such as geography (for example, migratory routes, industry locales, natural resources), politics (for example, labour or immigration policies), business (for example, demand for low-cost goods, employment options), sanctions (for example, laws, enforcement, social norms) and social factors (reference groups, norms, support systems) (Perry & McEwing, 2013; Gauci & Magugliani, 2022). It is widely acknowledged that anti-trafficking is context-dependent, but anti-trafficking research often falls short on critical analytical engagement with *how* context impacts on outcomes, be they prevalence or prevention. This is partially because not all study designs and methods can account for context complexity and the impact on mechanisms.

Sidebottom et al. (Chapter 4, this volume) present realist evaluation and synthesis methods as a powerful theoretical and analytical approach to address context in the form of context-mechanism-outcome configurations (CMOC). In brief, realist approaches explicitly state that an intervention will seldom work the same for everyone across every context. The method requires the researcher to identify contextual factors that determine whether a mechanism is or isn't fired in each context. This method not only forces the researcher to address context but also brings a certain degree of constraint to the exploration of context (that is, not just a long list of contextual characteristics independent from causal explanations). Similarly, ABM, which draws from similar theoretical and ontological sources, is a method that requires some specification of the

context, both in the broad physical or geographic environment of the model (for example, spatial scale, points of significance) but also the social environment (for example, social units, relationships). To code the model, explicit rules need to be written about the way agents interact with each other (social context) and the environment (physical context). In some cases, exogenous forces are also incorporated into the model, which represent less concrete forms of context (for example, political or cultural). Examples include rules around movement that reflect immigration policy (McAlpine, 2021) or around bystander response, which can represent norms around guardianship for crime prevention (Birks & Davies, 2017). The ABM serves as an abstract model of a specific context in which to explore mechanisms and experiment with explicit intervention assumptions and strategies.

While the model can contain a huge range of contextual features, like realist methods, it also serves as a useful structure by which to productively constrain the discussion of the real-world system. Because any conceptual (or qualitative) model needs to be *computationally* specified, there are both practical and analytical restrictions. Put simply, we cannot feasibly model everything and what we choose to model should interact with the system mechanism and serve some purpose in our analysis. While there has not been much written on pairing realist approaches and ABM, CMOC analysis, which is specifically intended for complex intervention evaluation, might be a useful way to guide ABM development for intervention theory. This could provide a more transparent and systematic way of mapping the system interactions, while still allowing for the discovery of new CMOC and for the observation of the *dynamics* of these configurations over time, something that is harder to capture in realist analytical approaches.

3) Inquisitive modelling

As mentioned before, integrative modelling, of both evidence and individuals' perspectives, enriches the modelling process by broadening the insights and perspectives captured in our models. Collaboration can also lead to asking more complex and useful questions for translation to practice – that is, not just enriching the model but enhancing our use of the model. An ABM can, therefore, be a 'touchstone' for debate, in part, because the model mirrors real-world contexts with graspable concepts (agents, interactions, environment) that can fuel engaged discussions. Too often, the bulk of the research process is conducted without meaningful engagement with target populations and end-users. This happens

for a range of reasons – meaningful engagement is resource-intensive, end-users are busy, working silos are hard to overcome. At the same time, there are huge gaps in the translation of evidence to practice (Grimshaw et al., 2012). Collaborative modelling can enhance the model's capacity to address key features for decision-making and engage communities (Quimby & Beresford, 2022), which are key for model buy-in and uptake. As researchers attempt more meaningful engagement in collaborative modelling, we find increasing anecdotal evidence that the modelling *process*, not just the outputs, can help decision-makers think through their options.

For example, while modelling Covid-19 policy scenarios, Badham and colleagues discovered that local planners became 'more deeply engaged with the model over time' and, even amidst substantial time pressures during a global pandemic, these decision-makers began to collaboratively develop model questions and scenarios alongside the research team (Badham et al., 2021, para. 6.4). With the right investment of time and relationship building, ABM could be better utilised as a playing field to foster more complex and potentially useful enquiry, not just a machine to produce answers. With this approach, we can more effectively communicate with decision-makers to enable them to understand what the model is and is not, decipher what the model says and does not, and determine courses of action with some understanding of model uncertainty (Thompson et al., 2022; Scrieciu et al., 2022). All the while, we must avoid falling prey to the perils of 'suggestivist modelling', which conflates the model with the real world and lacks sufficient clarity on purpose and empirical validity (Edmonds, 2022).

One reason why ABM has failed to deliver in policy practice in the past is because models produce 'messy' outcomes clouded by caveats around the collective validity of assumptions and uncertainty (the latter is true of the real-world system). Collaborative modelling can provide the shared understanding and bi-directional knowledge exchanged needed to ask more complex and useful questions, as well as the correct understanding to interpret their answers.

How might we use ABM to experiment with anti-trafficking intervention theory?

The previous section talks about features of ABM that are well-suited for developing intervention theory. This section, with the help of a baseball analogy, presents three ways ABM can be used analytically to experiment with anti-trafficking theory.

Identify leverage points for intervention theory – get in the ballpark

Many examples of experimentation using ABM involves 'what if' scenario testing. This comprises changing specific model parameters and observing changes in system behaviours and target outcomes. The parameters chosen draw from established theory in determining the system behaviour and realistic targets for intervention, but there is room to play with the model to determine what those parameters might be. This sort of scenario testing can help identify leverage points in the system that might be a suitable starting place to develop intervention theory. For example, if a model on trafficking in humanitarian contexts found that changes in the spatial layout or architecture of refugee camps reduced trafficking then it might indicate that a promising intervention could be changing the built environment.

Simulate intervention strategy – take a swing

Many ABM experimentation stops short of simulating actual interventions embedded in the descriptive system model. This is, in part, because lots of theory testing ABM work addresses abstract intervention questions using MRT and, as researcher assumptions get introduced, there can be a significant chasm between the model of the theory and the theory itself. However, when addressing intervention theories, there is a much stronger case for testing the theory by simulating the intervention components and interactions as an additional layer to the model. This simulation can draw from the previous work identifying leverage points, but ideally will be guided by a formalised intervention theory that includes the intervention strategy in relation to the context, mechanisms and outcomes of relevance.

More explicit intervention simulation can lead to refined theories of change but also identify potential implementation barriers or unintended consequences. Simulating intervention strategy, not just the context changes that result from an intervention strategy (that is, parameter change), moves us further along the continuum from 'what works' to 'how it works' (or doesn't). For example, a simulation could be used to help identify target intervention locations or population subgroups that yield high rates of behaviour change, which in turn shift long-held and widespread employment norms (for example, working conditions, pay) beyond those locations and subgroups through diffusion or peer effects respectively.

Validating intervention theory explanations – hit a homerun

Much of this chapter has focused on using ABM to critically develop intervention theory *pre-implementation,* because that is an area which has been hugely overlooked and, we would argue, needs more sophisticated

tools and approaches. However, theory validation relies on empirical testing and ABM can help guide our empirical experiments in identifying candidate causes, plausible prevention mechanisms and promising intervention strategies (as described up till this point). For example, our pre-implementation theory development might help us 'trial' ten intervention strategies to identify the three most promising for further empirical study. Or, perhaps, one configuration of our model predicts some unexpected outcome that we could reasonably design a more constrained empirical experiment. The findings of which would either increase or decrease our confidence in model validity. Empirical evaluation data can then be used to validate or dispute the original intervention theory. This two-way exchange ensures not only the robustness of our theories but the explainability of our intervention outcomes. As argued by ABM pioneer, Joshua Epstein, and widely adopted as a motto in generative social science, 'if you didn't grow it, you didn't explain it' (Epstein et al., 1998, p. 177; Epstein, 2023). This circles back to the new standard for complex intervention research being its power to explain how, why and for whom an intervention works (or doesn't).

Other aspirational applications for anti-trafficking evaluation

As indicated previously, complex interventions are challenging to evaluate due to their many components, unclear completion dates, long multi-dimensional causal pathways, and multiple population groups and targeted outcomes (Chalabi & Lorenc, 2013). In addition to the huge value ABM could add to intervention theory development, experimentation and refinement, there is also increasing interest in using ABM as a systems approach to real-world intervention evaluation. Evaluation specialists have highlighted the suitability of ABM to represent intervention mechanisms that act on an individual (or unit) basis, generate causal hypotheses, assess change over the long term and generate artificial counterfactuals if the intervention has not been implemented (Wilkinson, 2016; HM Treasury, 2020).

Enthusiasm for ABM as an evaluation method expands beyond using ABM to 'evaluate' hypothetical interventions (Chalabi & Lorenc, 2013; Morell, 2016), which is what most ABM evaluation work to date has been. Instead, many are considering how to embed ABM into real-world intervention evaluations at multiple stages (Lawlor & McGirr, 2017). To illustrate, that could mean not just using ABM for stakeholder engagement

around the intervention theory, but also to input into the evaluation design (for example, identifying possible mechanisms to collect data about) and, later, as a tool to comprehend the evaluation's causal discoveries (for example, compare evaluation findings to simulated mechanism configurations) (Chalabi & Lorec, 2013; Lawlor & McGirr, 2017). Furthermore, this approach can help identify intervention tipping points (for example, levels of diffusion) and, importantly, possible unintended or 'backfire' effects (see Sidebottom et al., Chapter 4, this volume). ABM can be used to identify potential mechanisms and causal pathways which can then inform the kind of measurement tools and data collection needed and, in the other direction, used to find causal mechanisms to explain the intervention outcomes being observed in real time (Lawlor & McGirr, 2017; Chalabi & Lorec, 2013), especially when it might not align with the original expectations set out in the intervention theory (Morell, 2016). While the application of ABM to these ends is promising and pioneering and others have called for the uptake of ABM for anti-trafficking evaluation (Chesney, 2021), there are not yet examples of ABM being embedded into a real-world anti-trafficking evaluation process in these ways.

The word of caution is that, like any method, there is a certain degree of control and influence held by the researcher or modeller. ABM allows for greater transparency and accessibility to design decisions and underlying assumptions encoded in the model compared to many other modelling approaches. One consideration is the degree to which the narrative and sometimes visual sophistication of these models might influence the valuation of the model and its findings. Like models of any form – verbal, written or mathematical – ABM remains an abstraction of reality. The validity of a model in any given context rests solely on the collective validity of the assumptions that underpin it. Consequently, it is the responsibility of the modeller to communicate the choices that have been made in constructing a model and how these necessarily contextualise the insights that it may generate – in other words, what the model can and cannot tell us. Furthermore, it is then an imperative responsibility to validate any ABM that will be used to inform real-world interventions – that is, to use available data and/or expert knowledge to challenge and critique the model's assumptions and findings.

Discussion

With every survivor's voice, critical debate and rich model, we get closer to a shared understanding of how human trafficking emerges across

different contexts and what we might do to prevent it. The better our models, the better our questions, the better our understanding, the better our models, the better our questions, and so forth. ABM can offer us an additional tool to help foster new and unique perspectives. To do this, we feel, we must be willing to navigate uncharted approaches to complex intervention research, including new ways of experimenting, critiquing and evaluating intervention theories and outcomes. As the MRC framework posits: 'A trade-off exists between precise unbiased answers to narrow questions and more uncertain answers to broader, more complex questions; researchers should answer the questions that are most useful to decision-makers rather than those that can be answered with greater certainty' (Skivington et al., 2021, p. 2).

ABM offers us a whole new area of pre-implementation experimentation with social intervention theories – adjacent to what biochemistry labs offer medical interventions before trials with human patients. This method can help anti-trafficking researchers, research partnerships and stakeholders to be more inclusive, transparent and inquisitive in our theory and intervention development, while supporting us to make better use of available evidence and perspectives, and likewise identify knowledge gaps. ABM can be used as a tool to engage more agile and evidence-based decision-making by using iterative models to bridge 'research' and 'practice' in real time and as touchstones for debate around conflicting anti-trafficking intervention theory.

It is reasonable to conclude that, given the investment of resources and time, intervention simulation could be a new frontier of intervention development methods in which iterations of an ABM follow the trajectory of an intervention development, implementation and evaluation process. An empirically informed simulation of a real-world intervention would coalesce the intervention theory learning across each stage of development. Depending on the availability of data in real time, this use of ABM to iteratively simulate interventions in real contexts over the intervention life course could be akin to developing an 'digital intervention twin' for more agile complex intervention evaluation and refinement. Primarily used in engineering, 'digital twins' are virtual models of an object or system that are updated in real time to support agile decision-making. The use of 'digital twins' is becoming more common in urban planning and healthcare (Birks et al., 2020; Dembski et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2023).

However, we must remember that survivor leadership in anti-trafficking research is critical to the development of any and all intervention research agendas and intervention theory (Paphitis & Jannesari, 2023;

Freedom Fund, 2023), and be vigilant in avoiding extractivism in our engagement (Bunting et al., 2023; Quirk, 2023). ABM is not a magic black box, in fact, if they appear so – be sceptical. The mantra that 'all models are wrong, but some are useful' is true, but some are also really misleading, so we must be wary of how models are used (Edmonds, 2022). Model transparency is one step, but model validity and usefulness rests on being explicit about what the model is for and is not for.

Adopting this new method, and all its strengths, requires enthusiasm, engagement and education. We need to invest in upskilling for more effective engagement and communication with policymakers about the strengths and weaknesses of the approach and the specific model (Thompson et al., 2022; Elsenbroich & Polhill, 2023). As others have rightly pointed out, not all anti-trafficking evaluators need to become agent-based modellers, but we would benefit from more widespread engagement and education on the strengths and potential applications of ABM to welcome it into the field of anti-trafficking intervention development and evaluation (Morell, 2016). We need to invest in trying out some new and bold approaches and staying honest and transparent about their usefulness and value for money.

Together, the strengths of this tool can facilitate critical shared understandings of trafficking prevention and foster more insightful questions about plausible intervention effectiveness, as well as supporting more effective decision-making. The degree to which ABM will lead to better interventions or more insightful evaluations is still yet to be known, until the rubber hits the road in implementing ABM as a tool in the anti-trafficking evaluation toolbox and evaluating the impact of these efforts.[1]

Key messages

- Agent-based modelling (ABM) is useful for exploring possible individual-level configurations and interactions that give rise to human trafficking.
- Experimentation with ABMs can illuminate causal mechanisms and anti-trafficking theory.
- ABM provides a new form of ethical, feasible and low-cost *in-silico* experimentation and evaluation to accompany current trial methods.
- Appropriate inclusion, due care and attention is needed when designing, communicating and using these models for anti-trafficking interventions.

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Note

1. The authors recommend Jennifer Badham's tutorial 'Agent-based modelling for the self learner', which provides a beginner's guide to NetLogo, a programming language and integrated development environment for agent-based modelling. See www.jbadham.biz/Research/ABMBook (retrieved 12 June 2025).

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6

Systematic reviews in the field of trafficking in human beings: possibilities and impossibilities

Peter van der Laan and Monika Smit

Introduction

Trafficking in human beings (THB) is a worldwide problem, seriously affecting individual victims as well as society. Exploitation of human beings often takes place in largely hidden sectors such as the sex industry and private households, and victims may have various reasons not to come forward with what happened to them. They may not consider themselves to be victims or keep quiet out of fear of repercussions or shame.

Global prevalence figures for human trafficking vary widely. For example, Robinson et al. (2017) pointed at estimates of people in situations of forced labour or modern slavery published in 2016 by the International Labour Organization (ILO): 20.9 million, and the Walk Free Foundation: 45.8 million. Many reasons contribute to these wildly varied estimates. One reason is that available data on THB reflect national frameworks and enforcement strategies rather than the actual scope of the (worldwide) problem (Andrees, 2008), and despite several initiatives (for example, Aronowitz, 2009), international data are seldom comparable. Another reason is that, although many countries make a distinction between people trafficking and people smuggling in their national penal codes, in practice the two phenomena can be difficult to distinguish and may be intertwined, thus affecting counting rules (Kleemans & Smit, 2014). Similarly, trafficking and sex work are

sometimes used interchangeably. Different definitions and counting rules also mean that numbers can differ greatly from year to year and, therefore, reliable trends are tricky to distinguish.

The trafficking phenomenon led to several conventions on human trafficking, of which the best known and most far reaching is the United Nations (UN) *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children* (2000), also known as the Palermo Protocol. The convention stimulated anti-THB legislation and anti-trafficking interventions all over the world. Many organisations, both governmental and non-governmental, are active in the fight against THB, engaging in education and awareness raising, and legislative or policy advocacy, often focusing on both labour and sex trafficking (Limoncelli, 2016). Since the late 2000s, the field of anti-trafficking efforts has become large and complex (Foot et al., 2015). However, we still know little about the effects of these interventions. We need to know more.

In this contribution we take a closer look at the outcomes of interventions intended to tackle human trafficking, with a particular focus on systematic reviews as sources of research evidence. To this end, we describe the main findings from systematic reviews looking at different aspects of trafficking research (prevalence of trafficking, types of intervention strategies and victim health and healthcare) and end with some conclusions and suggestions for future research and regarding the feasibility of systematic reviews in this domain.

Introducing systematic reviews

A systematic review is a summary of the literature on a specific topic in which data is collected and described in a transparent and structured manner to answer a particular research question(s). The (primary) studies must meet scientific and methodological criteria. A systematic review can describe both qualitative and quantitative studies. Empirical data from individual quantitative studies can be studied as a whole through meta-analysis. The results can thus exceed those of individual studies and also answer new (overarching) research questions. Systematic reviews can point out emerging trends when individual studies often produce mixed or even contradictory findings, thus generating meta-evidence to answer key evaluation questions such as 'what works?' Therefore, systematic reviews are an important part of the toolkit for those interested in evaluation science and evidence-based policy and practice (see Bullock, 2019; Neyroud, 2018).

If a systematic review concerns the outcomes of interventions – for example, interventions combating trafficking – the evaluation studies to be included must meet minimum design requirements such as pre- and post-measurement and comparable control conditions. Ideally, there would be randomised controlled experiments – the golden standard – but such evaluation studies are currently limited in the field of human trafficking (see also Sidebottom et al., Chapter 4 this volume; Zhang, Chapter 3, this volume). That is why quasi-experimental studies, and studies in which pre- and post-measurements and information about control and comparison groups are available, are also examined. The most prominent examples of such systematic reviews are the Cochrane Collaboration (medical and healthcare research) and, most relevant to THB, the Campbell Collaboration (research in the field of crime and justice, education and development cooperation) that routinely provide reviews on 'what works?' to address particular issues in specific fields (see Wilson et al., 2021).

Research on the effectiveness of anti-THB interventions

In 2011, we conducted a worldwide systematic review on the effects of interventions dealing with cross-border trafficking for the purpose of exploitation in the sex industry (van der Laan et al., 2011). The review was set up and carried out according to the Campbell Collaboration guidelines for systematic reviews.[1] Various search strategies and keywords in nine different languages were used. In all, we screened a total of 19,000 studies published between January 2000 and June 2009 and found a total of 144 potentially eligible studies that concerned interventions of a preventive or suppressive nature. In one-third of these 144 studies, no specific intervention was described. Almost half focused on sexual exploitation alone and 40% on more than one type of exploitation. Twenty studies containing a combination of the relevant keywords in their title, subtitle and/or abstract, were examined in greater depth and coded. None of these studies used an (quasi-) experimental design or pre/post-test measures using comparable control conditions (level 3 research method of the [Maryland] Scientific Methods Scale [SMS] or higher; Farrington, 2003). Consequently, the assembled studies did not provide a sound basis for drawing reliable conclusions about the impacts of anti-THB intervention strategies for tackling sexual exploitation. Also, these evaluations were not very clear in indicating and describing which

ideas, theories and background information led to the design and implementation of the intervention programmes, which made it difficult to apply any realistic evaluation or to assess interventions on their theoretical merits (van der Laan et al., 2011).

Our review was, therefore, presented as an *empty* review, since no conclusions could confidently be drawn regarding the effectiveness of the identified anti-trafficking efforts.

Also in 2011, Kaufman and Crawford published a review of prevention programmes against sex trafficking in Nepal. They found an almost complete absence of systematic outcome measurement. They pointed out that interventions developed and implemented without sound methods for assessing their effects may not only be ineffective but may have generated unintended negative effects as well. Indeed, they found evidence for such backfire effects around limiting girls' access to education (girls being taken out of school due to abduction risk) and curtailing women's freedom of movement (their right to travel being restricted). According to Kaufmann and Crawford (2011), governmental agencies and international NGOs should foster well-designed programmes that include valid and reliable measures for outcome assessment. In addition, funding agencies should require outcomes other than lists of programmes and numbers of participants, such as behavioural and attitude changes based on pre-/post-testing, and long-term follow-up evaluations.

More recently, Bryant and Landman (2020) asked, what do we know about what works in combatting human trafficking, nearly 20 years after the adoption of the Palermo Protocol? They conducted a systematic review of 90 evaluations of human trafficking interventions – mostly but not exclusively concerning exploitation in the sex industry – published between 2000 and 2015. Only two of these evaluations met level 3 of the SMS. Most used only post-test measures or qualitative reviews. Despite the fairly low standard of evaluation, half of the evaluations concluded that the programme was successful with the achievement of some programme objectives or outcomes. According to Bryant and Landman (2020), there are no concrete answers to the question of what works in combatting human trafficking. Moreover, they argue that a reduction in the prevalence of THB does not need to be the focus of every anti-trafficking intervention: progress through proxy indicators, such as reduction of risk factors or strengthening of protective factors, may be easier to achieve for many projects.

Encouragingly, Bryant and Landman did observe that the number of evaluations in this field was on the rise, as was the quality of the

evaluations: of 11 additional evaluations in an update covering 2016–2019, five met at least level 3 of the SMS, and two were randomised control trials (RCTs). The first RCT was by Archer and colleagues (2016) in Nepal to determine the effect of mass media awareness campaigns (fact-based messages and narrative formats) on norms and behaviours related to a person's vulnerability to human trafficking. Demographic data as well as data on respondents' perceptions and actions around trafficking were collected prior to and shortly after exposure to the campaigns. It turned out that those campaigns increased the ability of victims to self-identify as having been trafficked as well as knowledge about THB. Furthermore, they decreased blame from the general population directed at sex trafficking victims but increased blame for victims of labour trafficking.

The second RCT was by Gausman et al. (2016), conducted in villages in India where interventions were implemented by Manav Sansadhan Evam Mahila Vikas Sansthan (MSEMVS), a non-governmental organisation working with communities in Uttar Pradesh to eradicate forced and bonded labour. The RCT aimed to 1) determine whether forced and bonded labour had been eradicated in the villages where interventions by MSEMVS had taken place, and 2) measure the effect of the intervention on various social and economic factors relevant to households within those villages. The intervention included 1) increasing awareness of exploitative labour practices and human trafficking, 2) supporting residents to more effectively claim government services to which they are entitled (for example, birth registration, social security and pensions, housing assistance and access to healthcare), 3) promoting government delivery of fundamental rights (for example, adequate schools and teachers, functional health clinics and adequate sanitation facilities), and 4) instituting infrastructural improvements including the construction and/or repair of roads and bridges.

The study design identified three distinct cohorts: 1) hamlets that received the full intervention, 2) hamlets that received the full targeted intervention, but where a majority of benchmark achievements had not yet been met, and 3) hamlets where limited and late intervention took place (the comparison group). Gausman et al. (2016) found a nuanced and changing picture of the exploitative labour conditions and challenging socio-economic circumstances in the communities. The interventions did not eradicate forced and bonded labour, but they did produce a substantial improvement in reducing indebtedness, participation in government job programmes and community empowerment.

Felner and DuBois (2017) conducted a systematic review of evaluations of programmes and policies developed to prevent or intervene in the commercial sexual exploitation of children. They noticed limited availability and quality of implementation and effectiveness data. None of the 13 included studies made use of an experimental design and only three used a control or comparison group.

Cockbain et al. (2018) published a systematic review on the European evidence base concerning trafficking for labour exploitation. Their conclusions met those of reviews concerning other trafficking types: an overall lack of quality research. Just 18 of the 152 included publications – mostly non-academic reports – met basic criteria for scientific research and no scientific evaluations were found. The authors concluded that 'The lack of a coherent and robust research base limits the feasibility of evidence-based policy and practices' (Cockbain et al., 2018, p. 355).

An ongoing update of our 2011 review on the effects of interventions dealing with cross-border trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation in which a similar search strategy was used (see van der Laan et al., 2011),[2] shows that the number of publications on trafficking interventions – both academic and 'grey' literature – has further increased, but that very few studies on cross-border trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation met our inclusion criteria. Moreover, evaluations meeting an acceptable scientific standard to enable drawing conclusions regarding effectiveness of THB interventions, using at least pre-test and post-test measures and comparable control conditions (level 3 of the SMS), were almost absent. The study by Archer et al. (2016) mentioned above was an exception. Thus, the ongoing update of our systematic review on the effects of prevention and intervention strategies for reducing sexual exploitation has thus far turned out to be *almost empty*.

We identified only a few systematic reviews on the effects of anti-THB interventions. We did, however, find several reviews on other aspects of THB and anti-THB interventions; some of these reviews were systematic, while others were comprehensive, integrative or narrative in nature (for a discussion of the differences between these approaches, see, for example, Munn et al., 2018). These reviews are important because they offer insight in topics which are relevant to interventions against trafficking, namely: the prevalence of THB, types of intervention strategies used and victim health and healthcare. In the section below we summarise systematic reviews concerned with these three areas.

Systematic reviews on other THB related topics: prevalence, intervention strategies and victim health and healthcare

Systematic reviews on the prevalence (estimates) of THB

In her review, Fedina (2015) reported on prevalence data in 42 books published between 2005 and 2012. Twenty-seven of these books were academic, the other 15 non-academic. She found that most books relied on existing data which were not rigorously produced and were possibly inaccurate or misleading. This, she argued, may lead to inappropriate or insufficient allocation of resources and leaves policymakers and governments ill-equipped to create comprehensive legislation and effective interventions (Fedina, 2015).

Franchino-Olsen et al. (2021) investigated the prevalence of sex trafficking of minors in the US and the methods used in the studies. The scoping review included six empirical studies, published from 1999 to 2017. The authors determined that the prevalence was under-investigated and remained largely unknown.

Systematic reviews on THB intervention strategies

Three systematic reviews that concerned types of intervention strategies were found. Based on NGO-directories, reports and websites, Limoncelli (2016) presented an overview of the work of 1,861 NGOs worldwide that identified themselves as working on the issue of human trafficking. Most worked on sex trafficking. The activities they were engaged in most often were public education and awareness raising, and legislative or policy advocacy. Only a small number were engaged in vigilance activities or attempts to rescue victims. The overview did not include information about any intervention effects. Much of the information about NGOs was provided by the NGOs themselves and self-reported information may or may not reflect what actually takes place.

Szablewska and Kubacki (2018) conducted a systematic review of peer reviewed studies on anti-human trafficking campaigns. The review identified eight problems in these campaigns: stereotyping victims (for example, as young naïve women), confounding trafficking with migration, conflating prostitution with human trafficking, sexualisation of women, further victimisation of (particularly female) migrants (for example, by using stereotyping images), the role of anti-trafficking organisations (for example, by presenting the trafficking problem in an overly sensationalist

way to raise the necessary funds), data shortcomings and oversimplification of human trafficking. None of the 16 identified studies included any outcome, process or impact evaluations.

An integrative review by Poudel and Barroso (2019) explored anti-child-trafficking strategies employed by governments and NGOs in South and Southeast Asia in order to find out which of the 21 social determinants of child trafficking, earlier identified by Perry and McEwing (2013) in another systematic review, were addressed. The review covered 46 publications on social determinants of child trafficking. The authors concluded that determinants at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, community and policy levels were addressed, but seldom those at the organisational level, for example, trafficking ignorance among school personnel.

Systematic reviews on THB victim health and healthcare

Human trafficking has important implications for the physical, mental and reproductive health of victims (Macias-Konstantopoulos, 2016). Much has been published on these topics and several of the systematic THB reviews we identified concern the health of trafficking victims/survivors and the care provided to them. Wright et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review on interventions to support the mental health of trafficking survivors, former child soldiers and victims of sexual exploitation. Nine studies met the inclusion criteria, of which six were RCTs. All eight quantitative studies focused on post-traumatic stress disorder symptomatology, using different instruments. The studies focused almost exclusively on clinical outcomes which, due to potential external cofounders, may not be indicative of intervention success. None of the studies explicitly discussed the underpinning assumptions regarding the nature of the problem and the selection of the interventions to address it. According to the authors, recognition is growing that mental health is a critical area for support provision, but further work is needed to develop and test appropriate mental health interventions.

Hainaut et al. (2022) conducted a scoping review of publications on tools for identifying human trafficking victims in healthcare. They found that few of the screening tools have been validated, so there is insufficient data to conclude whether the use of these tools may lead to improved victim recognition. Further research is needed to identify evidence-based clinical screening and identification tools and best practices for prevention and intervention, and to develop evidence-driven training (Hainaut et al., 2022; Macias-Konstantopoulos, 2016). In their review of measures

for evaluating sex trafficking aftercare and support services, Graham et al. (2019) concluded that trafficking research is strongly focused on physical and mental health needs and service outcomes (for example, mental health status, experiences of abuse, trauma and violence and substance use and abuse). More than half of the 53 included studies used measures which had not been developed for or tested with people who had been trafficked for sexual exploitation. According to Graham et al. (2019), the findings highlight a critical knowledge gap regarding the effectiveness of current services. They also noted that it was not always clear who carried out the evaluation. It was possible that programme developers themselves did the evaluation thus leaving room for bias.

Garg et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review to examine the current evidence regarding barriers to healthcare faced by trafficked youth. The review included eight studies and found the following categories of obstacles in providing healthcare services to trafficked youth: 1) extrinsic barriers (trafficker control, physical confinement and influence of peers), 2) intrinsic barriers (discrimination, confidentiality, trust in healthcare providers, knowledge of the healthcare system and emotional reluctance), and 3) systemic barriers (healthcare provider knowledge, complex registration process, language barriers, appointment times and service coordination). According to the review, the combination of these barriers led to reduced utilisation and access to medical services for trafficked youth.

Albright et al. (2020), who summarised the major facilitators of and barriers to healthcare of trafficked children, concluded that the existing research revealed much room for improvement of the care system, but none of the 29 included studies involved sound evaluations.

Cannon et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review to examine which research methods were used in 70 identified publications on trafficking in persons and health since the Palermo Protocol. They noted that researchers are striving to address gaps in the trafficking knowledge base, but also that small non-representative participant samples are often used. Only three articles covered programme reviews or evaluations, and two used longitudinal data. They were concerned by the lack of intervention research and evaluation because many organisations are funded externally and are working without rigorous research evidence to guide intervention development and implementation, possibly using ineffective or even harmful strategies.

Doherty et al. (2016) focused their systematic review on trafficking for sexual as well as labour exploitation on tools to measure mental health outcomes among victims. In the seven studies identified, several

types of tools were used. The studies provided sparse information on the choice of tool, translation methods, pilot testing and modification for cultural appropriateness. The authors concluded that, 'There is a shortage of validated and culturally appropriate assessment tools for mental health research with men and women who have been trafficked' (Doherty et al., 2016, p. 470).

Muraya and Fry (2016) explored aftercare services provided to child victims of sex trafficking by reviewing published research, policy and practice. They considered information gathered to be a first step towards developing best practices for aftercare providers. However, they also noted that further research and better documentation of services are needed since a detailed description of services is missing.

Conclusion

THB is receiving increasing attention from practitioners, policymakers, (criminal justice) authorities and researchers. The number of academic and non-academic publications is large and growing annually. Nevertheless, much is still unknown.

Partly due to the hidden nature of trafficking, official data on trafficking are not always available and certainly not complete, either at a national level or at an international level. Many countries periodically report the number of identified victims and trafficking cases known to the police and cases dealt with by the judiciary. In all likelihood, these data are an underestimate of the trafficking that takes place. Therefore, little is known about prevalence, incidence and trends of THB. General victim surveys, that are commonly conducted to learn more about the victimisation of crime, usually do not address trafficking victimisation.

Over the last two decades, a lot of research has been done on human trafficking. Knowledge has grown on background characteristics, risk factors and determinants as well as on service needs that victims of trafficking may have (see, for example, Cockbain & Bowers, 2019). Thanks to better screening instruments more information is now available on the harmful effects of trafficking and exploitation. They relate to various life domains: physical, mental, and social health, family and social relations, income, education and housing.

In the areas of *awareness raising and victim support* (service provision) many initiatives have been taken. Increased knowledge about various forms of trafficking and the victims' background characteristics and risk profiles has intensified information transfer and awareness

raising activities among potential victims and the community. If designed according to clear 'theories of change' (see also Kiss & Zimmerman, Chapter 8, this volume) and targeted at the right group of people, these awareness raising campaigns can contribute to more knowledge and awareness (see also Savoia & Piltch-Loeb, Chapter 11, this volume). Whether this may lead to less trafficking is difficult to assess and remains to be seen.

Systematic reviews and future research

Systematic reviews that analyse core findings of primary studies meeting certain quality criteria are an important way to guide intervention efforts and future research. However, in our 2011 review, we concluded that, unfortunately, little could be said about the effectiveness of current counter-trafficking interventions, due to a general absence and/or poor quality of evaluation designs and methods. Today, this conclusion does not seem to have changed. An ongoing update of our 2011 review turns out to be almost empty. Other systematic reviews on the effects of anti-THB interventions show similar outcomes. These reviews found not only a limited number of primary studies but also an overall lack of quality in evaluation design, for example, not using a (quasi)experimental design or, at least, pre- and post-test measures. Additionally, many studies failed to provide a theoretical background to the intervention of interest. Regularly, interventions are labelled as 'best practice' without referencing any underlying empirical evidence or explaining the theoretical considerations that underpin an intervention (Warria, 2022).

Especially given that anti-THB interventions can have unintended negative effects, governments and organisations instigating or financing interventions in this field should, at least, request a sound theoretical intervention basis and high-quality evaluation methods. As Bryant and Landman (2020) remark, reductions of THB prevalence need not be the focus of every anti-THB intervention (or study); a focus on proxy indicators, such as a reduction of risk factors or a strengthening of protective factors may be easier to achieve and – ultimately – effective in the fight against THB.

Worthwhile mentioning in this context are alternative routes to study intervention effects (see also McAlpine & Birks, Chapter 5, this volume). An example is the publication by Baily (2015) who used a microsimulation model to estimate trends of sex trafficking and to assess the effect of interventions in terms of their reduction in sex trafficking

out of five Eastern European states. She concluded that economic growth, increased access to secondary education and restrictions on migration are most effective, while public awareness campaigns are the primary intervention used in eastern Europe. Another example is the use of Bayesian networks to evaluate interventions to prevent complex social problems such as THB, by Kiss et al. (2021). Their findings suggest that prevention should focus on the recruitment process, migration pathways and working conditions at the destination.

Apart from (primary) studies focusing on the effects of counter-trafficking strategies, policies and interventions, more reliable data on prevalence, incidence and trends need to be made available. Such information may guide designing specifically focused prevention and intervention programmes for (potential) victims and communities. It can also help in developing more comprehensive national and international policy plans and identifying promising measures (for example, sanctions) to be taken about perpetrators. Thus, the availability of reliable data is of key importance.

In general, current evaluation research on anti-trafficking efforts is affected by limited resources, lack of research expertise and data, biased methodology, inadequate ethical considerations, short-term time scales and possible bias in evaluations when funding is dependent on a positive review. The fact that many evaluations are undertaken by programme staff and not by external, independent evaluators, without clear methods and standards set out in advance, may also cause evaluation bias (Davy et al., 2016).

Even though we believe that outcome or effect evaluation is important, we suggest investing in other types of evaluation research as well. These can help with assessing the potential effectiveness of an intervention, even when long-term outcome measures are not yet available or won't become available at all, giving intervention developers and practitioners the opportunity to adjust an intervention when and where needed. Long-term outcomes remain desirable but are not easy to obtain. Other types of evaluation include monitoring, plan and implementation evaluation, formative evaluation and evaluations aiming at the individual. *Monitoring* inflow, activities, participants and practitioners makes visible what is happening in a programme. Proper planning beforehand also helps us understand the underpinning theories and mechanisms of change and point out possible strengths and weaknesses. Evaluating the implementation of an intervention shortly after it is put into practice will also provide valuable information about what went well and what went wrong, and whether implementation

was hindered by factors not known earlier. It makes it easier to adjust the programme. *Formative evaluation* helps in identifying strengths and weaknesses by interviewing persons involved (for example, victims, perpetrators, clients and practitioners). One does not always need long-term information to learn what is going well and what is going wrong. *Evaluation aiming at the individual* such as Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS),[3] N=1 studies and case studies, can be helpful as well if one is interested in, for instance, the wellbeing of victims in relation to the support offered. But we prefer evaluation research aiming at the programme or intervention, since this offers more insight to programme developers, practitioners and funders.

Finally, evaluations aimed at programmes and individuals require proper registration of basic facts and figures. Without careful monitoring of to whom an intervention is applied, which activities are carried out and how this is experienced by those involved, it will be difficult to say something about the outcomes and systematic reviews will remain empty.

Key messages

- The current lack of knowledge on what works in anti-trafficking efforts is profound and detrimental to the development of interventions, and thus in urgent need of improvement. Governments and organisations instigating or financing anti-THB interventions should have mandatory requirements for evaluation and monitoring elements.
- Of the small number of primary evaluation studies of anti-trafficking interventions eligible to be included in systematic reviews, most were weak in design and theory of change, thus yielding findings of little empirical value.
- Evaluation research is not only important for examining the efficacy of programming services, but also for understanding how the designed programme is being implemented and monitored. In other words, both outcomes and process must be evaluated.
- Not all interventions need to aim directly at reducing the prevalence of trafficking; it is also important to reduce vulnerabilities and increase resiliency among target populations.
- Anti-trafficking intervention planning should include an understanding of service needs, available resources and a clear theory of change (that is, logical pathways from interventions to expected outcomes), as well as monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plans.

Notes

1. The Campbell Collaboration is an international research network supporting the production of systematic reviews about which policies and interventions work and why. Campbell reviews cover various areas such as education, social work and crime and justice. Campbell reviews follow strict, replicable procedures (see www.campbellcollaboration.org), in essence not very different from the PRISMA protocol guidelines for reporting systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021).
2. Search period: July 2009–July 2023. This time, we limited our search to publications in English and Dutch, excluding Danish, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Spanish and Swedish: languages in which we did not find eligible studies in our 2011 review.
3. Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS) is an individualised outcome measure involving goal selection and goal scaling that is standardised in order to calculate the exent to which a person's (patient) goals are met (Kiresuk & Sherman, 1968).

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7

Evidence will not be enough: how moral panics and strategic interests bend policy and practice

Joel Quirk

Efforts to combat human trafficking and forced labour are not new. They have a layered history that goes back to at least the nineteenth century (for example, Donovan, 2006; Grant, 2005). Despite this pedigree, many people continue to portray human trafficking as an unprecedented problem for which there is still insufficient evidence available to effectively guide policy and advocacy. This formula was at least somewhat plausible during the 1990s and early 2000s, but it has become increasingly strained over time. Anyone who has closely followed the field's evolution can testify that both the overall volume and ethnographic quality of empirical research has improved dramatically (see, from amongst many examples, Brennan, 2014; Cockbain, 2018; Howard, 2017; Mai, 2018; Musto, 2016; Parreñas, 2021; Vanderhurst, 2022). It will always be tricky to talk about 'evidence', since the term can mean different things (Yea, 2017), but there should be no doubt that our current evidence base is now deep and sophisticated. Poor quality evidence still exists, but there are now many better examples of high-quality evidence.

This chapter starts with the premise that there is *already* sufficient evidence and research to draw some key conclusions about anti-trafficking interventions and associated forms of activism and policy. By taking this stance, I am seeking to push back against the still common claim that there isn't enough evidence available when it comes to trafficking and forced labour. This is an easy refrain. The stock phrase 'further research is needed' has become so ritualised that it has its own Wikipedia page and acronym (FRIN), so we shouldn't be surprised to find

people in anti-trafficking circles routinely making similar claims (for an applied example, see Hynes, Chapter 10, this volume). I am by no means anti-research or anti-evidence. I've spent many years of my life undertaking research and expect to continue doing so for years to come. What I am instead expressing here is a more specific concern that calls for more evidence ultimately risk delaying or deflecting from an urgently needed reckoning with the mountain of evidence already available.

This concern is my main point of departure for thinking through the politics and practice of evaluation, which is the main focus of this collection. Some caveats are once again required here. I have no doubt that evaluation brings something important to the table when it comes to analysing anti-trafficking, and I most definitely welcome a stronger commitment to methodological rigour more generally, since there have long been problems here (for example, Merry, 2016). My problem is not with evaluations per se, but with the underlying politics and knowledge hierarchies attached to evaluations, and more specifically with the kinds of claims about 'real' evidence which tend to accompany evaluations as a form of technocratic expertise. In my remarks to date I've deliberately used the more expansive category of 'evidence', which is not the same as the narrower category of evaluation, which involves a specific set of methods and orientations focusing upon the effects – or lack thereof – of specific interventions and programmes. Not all evaluations are the same, but both the underlying ideas and techniques behind evaluation tend to carry forward a series of claims and assumptions about 'real', 'robust', and/or 'scientifically valid' research and evidence. The generic script of 'further research is needed' here gets transformed into a more specific diagnosis which holds that further *evaluation* research is needed, since the absence of this one specific category of evidence is held to create a fundamental deficit.

This where I begin to get anxious. I have no doubt that further evaluation research can help the field, especially when actually done well, but I also worry that evaluation risks being oversold as a potential solution to a series of now longstanding problems that are not technical, but political. Here are what I regard as some of the main behind-the-scenes considerations and calculations:

1) Evidence from evaluations is currently in short supply, and therefore constitutes only a very small portion of the much larger pool of available evidence on anti-trafficking. This scarcity makes evaluation research attractive, because it can be represented as a hitherto untapped resource which has the potential to transform the anti-trafficking field.

2) This logic of untapped potential also makes evaluation research a contender for the 'next big thing' in a field which has long been searching for silver bullets to rapidly transform anti-trafficking responses while avoiding difficult political questions.
3) Evaluation research is closely aligned with larger shifts within anti-trafficking which have seen philanthrocapitalists, 'risk managers' and other technocrats take centre stage.
4) These anti-trafficking technocrats find evaluation research particularly attractive, because it aligns with their self-identity as pragmatists who 'follow the evidence', and also provides an important point of self-differentiation from 'sex trafficking' ideologues.
5) Both producers and consumers of evaluations are strongly inclined to present evaluation research as more credible and authoritative – and therefore superior – to other forms of available evidence, which in turn has the effect of at least tacitly sidelining or devaluing forms of knowledge and experience which have been generated using other methods. A good example of this larger dynamic is the fetishisation of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) as a 'gold standard'. If RCTs are 'gold' then nothing else can shine so brightly.
6) Evaluations are primarily oriented towards the assessment of already up and running programmes and interventions, and therefore typically operate within a narrow band of politically 'acceptable' parameters. Evaluations can help to (re)calibrate institutional design(s), but have less to offer when it comes to sharper shifts in institutional direction.

This overall analysis points to a bright future for evaluation research within the anti-trafficking field. There is every reason to expect that the volume and quality of evaluations will increase in the future, and that ever more funding will be allocated to support the cause. There is also no doubt that the core premise is tremendously attractive: by generating high(er) quality evidence, evaluation research can provide both more and better-quality guidance to key decision-makers.

The key sticking point here is not evidence, but politics. As I outline in more detail below, we already have a great deal of evidence regarding key aspects of anti-trafficking, yet this evidence continues to be routinely – and often wilfully – ignored by key decision-makers. This is my chapter's central provocation: Evidence will not be enough. The mountain of evidence which has already been collected has not been enough. Additional evaluation research *will still not be enough* either. You cannot resolve fundamentally political challenges using only technical expertise. The kinds of policy gains which many people are expecting from scaled-up

evaluation research won't be realised if evaluation research gets paired with a technocratic model of change which treats evaluation evidence as self-executing and enlightening. This positions evaluation research within an 'advice to the prince' model, wherein expert/establishment insiders bring rigorous new evidence, and the prince recalibrates current policy designs accordingly. Evidence is presumed to drive policy, but this model has no good answer when the prince doesn't listen to the evidence, other than to ask politely, yet again, for the prince to change course. What is ultimately required is both a theory and practice of political *contestation*, where key decision-makers are subject to sustained political pressure, rather than polite requests.

To help make sense of the issues at stake, I've divided this chapter into three main sections. In the first section, I identify several reasons why evidence will not be enough. My core argument is that key decision-makers within the anti-trafficking field have consistently gravitated towards superficial and self-serving 'solutions', continuing to embrace them despite a mountain of evidence suggesting that it is well past time to change course. Evaluation research cannot – and should not be expected to – change these now longstanding political dynamics. The second and third sections offer a potted history of the political evolution of the anti-trafficking field. I here try to distinguish between the moral ideologues who were dominant during the late 1990s and 2000s, when criminal justice and 'sex trafficking' were the main preoccupations, and the ascendance of technocratic approaches since the early 2010s, which I argue has resulted in a partial shift from a politics of rescue to a politics of risk. In my analysis, evaluations are bound up in a larger embrace of technocratic models, and are consequently subject to many of the same preoccupations and problems. Anti-trafficking technocrats are much more invested in evidence and evaluation than moral ideologues, but they also favour a model of ostensibly non-ideological 'pragmatism' which tends to end up legitimating and reinforcing, rather than politically challenging, the anti-trafficking status quo.

Evidence will not be enough

One of the main attractions of evaluation research is that it holds out the prospect of producing superior forms of evidence that stakeholders and key decision-makers *might actually take seriously*. As the anti-trafficking field has evolved, many researchers have become increasingly frustrated about governments, corporations and other actors having repeatedly

ignored findings which do not align with their agendas and interests. The most well-known example is the nexus between anti-trafficking and 'border protection' (for example, Kenway, 2021; Sharma, 2005). There is overwhelming evidence that punitive responses to migration make things worse and not better when it comes to trafficking, yet governments have consistently looked the other way. It has been similarly argued that opposition to all forms of adult commercial sex ultimately has more to do with ideology than evidence (for example, O'Connell Davidson, 2006; Wijers, 2015). These high-profile examples are not necessarily representative of all policy conversations, but the overall point holds nonetheless: key decision-makers frequently have poor track records of listening to evidence.

Evaluation research holds out the tantalising prospect of *finally* breaking these deadlocks. This is due to its elevated status within knowledge hierarchies. Evaluation is widely understood to (at least ideally) involve a rigorous and systematic process that generates forms of evidence on interventions and their impacts which warrant higher levels of credibility and authority than other forms of evidence. This makes them very attractive from a strategic standpoint, since the 'superior' evidence they are assumed to produce represents a way of boosting the signal by creating new forms of evidence which might finally persuade decision-makers to change course. There are lots of epistemological problems with knowledge hierarchies (including Eurocentrism, see Smith, 2012), but from a purely strategic standpoint the case for evaluations is compelling: They can help bolster the case for recalibration by creating forms of evidence that are harder for decision-makers to ignore.

Signal boosting using evaluations is very attractive for many reasons. However, it is also important not to underestimate the scale of the challenges which need to be overcome when translating evidence into practice. Thousands of books have been written by political scientists and economists theorising and analysing the ways in which decision-making processes have been shaped by interest groups and lobbying, political factions and funding, collective action and externalities, patronage networks, bureaucratic politics and ideological constructs around race, gender and class. Interests and ideologies routinely stand in the way of evidence which points in the 'wrong' direction, as the now extensive literature on attitudes towards guns in the US can attest (for example, Joslyn, 2020). The recent resurgence of populism has further complicated matters here, since it has paved the way for suspicion of expertise and elites (for example, Merkley, 2020). Key decision-makers can

sometimes be moved by evidence, but they also routinely fall back on various forms of motivated reasoning, where they first decide what they want to do and then cherry pick from the available evidence to retroactively justify their prior decisions.

These kinds of dynamics are common to any number of fields, but there are also further challenges distinctive to anti-trafficking. Two recurring issues can be briefly highlighted. The first relates to the dominant iconography of human trafficking, which features an individualised moral universe populated by 'victims, villains, and valiant rescuers' (Kinney, 2015). This script has proved to be massively unhelpful from both a policy and activism standpoint, since it has created an environment where both politicians and the public at large tend to have strong opinions about what human trafficking looks like, yet these strong opinions also tend to be misguided and simplistic. The second issue is that policy conversations about anti-trafficking 'solutions' tend to be dominated by lowest common denominator approaches which rarely ask for meaningful material sacrifices. Whether or not specific anti-trafficking interventions actually 'work' is often far less important than whether they are 1) politically acceptable (that is, they don't directly threaten the interests of economic or political elites), or 2) politically appealing (that is, anti-trafficking helps advance other agendas, such as anti-immigration or anti-sex work). Unlike historical campaigns against transatlantic enslavement, recent campaigns targeting 'modern slavery' and trafficking rarely challenge the interests of economic and political elites (Bunting & Quirk, 2017).

Few things in this world can be *solely* explained in terms of strategic interests, but it is difficult to argue against the less totalising claim that strategic interests have consistently made a substantial *contribution* to the orientation and implementation of anti-trafficking responses. Many prominent 'solutions' to human trafficking and related problems have poor track records, yet they continue to be strongly championed as 'solutions' because they align with powerful interests. For example, voluntary corporate self-regulation of global supply chains very clearly comes with numerous hidden costs, yet self-regulation remains the dominant model because it aligns with the interests of multinational corporations (LeBaron & Lister, 2021). Similar kinds of calculations are involved when it comes to statecraft and governance. Reflecting upon her years of experience in anti-trafficking circles, Laura Agustín (2020, p. 3) concludes that: 'Trafficking became a big-time crime issue not because of its truth but because it served governments' purposes. The interminably warlike USA loved a reason to go after bad men of the world on the

excuse of saving innocent women. European states got justification to tighten borders against unwanted migrants.'

It is also important not to mistake activity for efficacy. Lots of anti-trafficking activities have happened, but the key question is how many have translated into practical gains. One telling example comes from Mathew Archer (2024, p. 12), whose work on corporate environmental sustainability concludes that 'the tools and techniques of corporate sustainability and sustainable finance do little, if anything, to address the immense problems we are facing'. Yet, Archer (2024, p. 31) also shows that they generate extraordinary levels of activity, with at least 280,000 'travelling technocrats' sustaining elaborate models of measurement and reporting.

I am not making a new argument here. Similar kinds of arguments regarding the underlying problems with dominant anti-trafficking 'solutions' have been made over and over again (for example, Vance, 2011: Andrijasevic, 2007; Marcus & Snajdr, 2013; O'Connell Davidson, 2015). Over a decade ago, Jon Spencer and Rose Broad (2012, p. 278) registered their frustration with anti-trafficking in the following terms: 'We seem to be in an intellectual "Groundhog Day"; we cover the same ground and end up where we began and then we start all over again'. Similar sentiments were expressed by Thaddeus Blanchette and Ana Paula da Silva shortly after. Their searing critique of the dubious methods used by the United Nations Office of Crime and Drugs to analyse Brazil begins as follows: 'There it is again, the same old bullshit' (2012, p. 107). It is also necessary to distinguish further between models which are 1) ineffective and 2) harmful. According to many critics, such as Mike Dottridge (2017), the fundamental problem is that the same old *harmful* bullshit shows up time and time again despite repeated challenge and critique.

Nothing in the above remarks should be read as suggesting that everyone responds to human trafficking in exactly same way or on the same terms. There are undoubtedly important variations. What I am suggesting, however, is that there are recurring and now well-documented problems when it comes to prominent models of intervention and policy: criminal justice models and carceral 'protection' (for example, Bernstein, 2018; Musto et al., 2021), paternalistic models of 'raid and rescue' (Dasgupta, 2019), self-serving and superficial forms of corporate social responsibility (LeBaron, 2020), harmful and ineffective forms of 'ethical' consumption and rehabilitation (Shih, 2023), and sensationalist and voyeuristic forms of 'awareness raising' and 'spot the signs' (Moore, 2019). Evaluation research can undoubtedly help

to assess specific interventions, but I am not convinced that it is necessary to determine that the aforementioned models suffer from major flaws. There is no need, for example, to commission expensive and time-consuming evaluations to demonstrate that 'spot the signs' awareness campaigns targeting the general public don't work. We already know – or should already know – that they don't work. And further evidence they don't work probably won't be enough. 'Spot the signs' is ineffective at best and harmful at worst, yet it nonetheless remains popular as a cheap and undemanding 'solution' which also serves the further political function of displacing or delaying policy conversations about potentially more effective yet also more politically challenging alternatives.

The 'Groundhog Day' reference suggests that the same things happen over and over. It can sometimes seem this way to frustrated researchers, but this overstates the case. As I outline in more detail below, the anti-trafficking field has evolved in important ways over the last three decades. Some of the anti-trafficking interventions identified above have only gained traction relatively recently, such as corporate social responsibility and voluntary self-regulation. My argument is not that there have been no changes, but that evidence has consistently taken a back seat to both interests and ideologies in shaping the overall direction of travel within anti-trafficking circles. Further evaluation research is unlikely to change these underlying dynamics.

Moral idealogues, criminal justice and 'sex trafficking'

Human trafficking is not one thing, but many different things which have been uncomfortably thrown together with the passage of time. A huge amount of energy has been expended debating the relationship between human trafficking, slavery, forced labour, child labour, informal labour, exploitation and any number of allied categories (Quirk, 2023). The boundaries between these categories have proved very hard to pin down. Legal experts have tried to carefully calibrate their precise relationship, while sociological theorists point out that they have been defined and applied in overlapping and inconsistent ways, with governments and other actors routinely manipulating definitions to advance their own agendas. In response to this analytical and political jumble, many scholars and practitioners have become accustomed to treating trafficking, forced labour and slavery as essentially interchangeable and equivalent. Siobhán McGrath and Samantha Watson (2018) have helpfully if inelegantly shortened this to 'TFLS'.

The incoherence and uncertainty associated with TFLS has increasingly come to feel like an intractable problem for many people (while others just ignore the debate entirely), but during the late 1990s and 2000s the terms of engagement were, at least by comparison, less convoluted and overloaded. Human trafficking was then predominantly understood to specifically refer to the transfer of migrants extended distances by organised criminals for the purposes of illegal exploitation, combined with a pronounced focus on commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls, or 'sex trafficking'. Human trafficking was not automatically treated as equivalent to forced labour, and 'slavery' was mostly used as a rhetorical device to accentuate the horrors of trafficking. The International Labour Organization (ILO) actually spent over a decade trying to distinguish forced labour from human trafficking before finally succumbing to TFLS (Quirk, 2017).

The early development of modern anti-trafficking has been covered in depth elsewhere (for example, DeStefano, 2008; Gallagher, 2010). My main goal here is to briefly identify what I regard as some of the core features of this formative period, and to explain why and how I think they paved the way for the rapid growth of – and underlying demand for – technocratic approaches during the 2010s. One of the main things that stands out is the degree to which anti-trafficking was operationalised as a non-negotiable moral project, or calling, with ideological and humanitarian commitments consistently running far ahead of – and frequently directly away from – the available evidence. Moral idealogues are not known for carefully listening to evidence, and they upheld their Manichean approach despite the efforts of sex worker rights activists and their allies to chart a different course (for example, Skrobanek et al. 1997; Kempadoo et al., 2005).

The TFLS model is inclusive to the point of complete incoherence. The early years of modern anti-trafficking were defined by a much more selective approach, but not necessarily in a good way. One now (in)famous example of this dynamic involves the negotiations surrounding the Palermo Human Trafficking Protocol (United Nations, 2000), where early drafts of the convention produced by Argentina and the United States only focused upon the trafficking of women and children (Gallagher, 2010, pp. 77–8). This was later discarded, but the underlying premise that women and children merit special attention carried forward to its official title: The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, *Especially Women and Children* (italics added).

As Jo Doezema (2010, p. 115) has argued, Palermo also shares some of its DNA with past agreements targeting 'white slavery'. This has

always been an uncomfortable topic for modern anti-trafficking activists. There are several variations, but most versions of 'white slavery' feature a young white woman – a defiled innocent – who gets tricked and/or coerced into commercial sex by (usually non-white) violent criminals (for example, Allerfeldt, 2019; Nagel, 2015). This script may sound anachronistic and unrealistic, but it still has a profound cultural footprint. It is also the direct opposite of TFLS: the aperture gets focused on one specific scenario.

The early history of modern anti-trafficking was consumed by protracted and polarised debates over commercial sex and the definition and limits of 'sex trafficking'. This was a debate where one side had a much bigger policy footprint than the other. Experts and activists who were trying to chart a different path forward during this period talked in terms of 'rescuing anti-trafficking from ideological capture' (Chuang, 2010), finding ways of resisting growing moral panics around 'sex trafficking' Weitzer (2005; 2010), the harmful effects of the 'rescue industry' (Agustín, 2007), and the effects of labour markets and migration systems (Andrijasevic, 2010). Everyone engaged in this debate agreed that there were underlying problems that needed addressing, but anti-trafficking was often said to be making things worse (Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women, 2007).

The early history of modern anti-trafficking was also defined by concerns about migration and security. To make sense of the issues involved, I turn to a well-known debate by James Hathaway and Anne Gallagher. Writing in 2008, Hathaway offered a comprehensive critique of the Palermo Protocol from his vantage point as a legal expert on migration and asylum. The regime against trafficking was still at an early stage, but Hathaway had seen enough conclude that 1) the fight against trafficking had created a way of 'seeming to be active on the slavery front without really addressing its predominant manifestations' (2008, p. 5), and 2) it had created a transnational obligation to criminalise human smuggling on anti-trafficking grounds. In contrast to some more recent critics, Hathaway was comfortable with the category of slavery, and instead argued that anti-trafficking was displacing urgently needed anti-slavery efforts.

It was this contention, in particular, which elicited a response from Anne Gallagher, one of the key figures responsible for Palermo. Gallagher (2009, p. 791) conceded that the negotiations that led to Palermo 'had never really been about human rights', yet maintained that the Protocol was nonetheless a major human rights milestone. She argued that Hathaway had defined slavery too broadly and trafficking too narrowly (with Gallagher insisting that these two were different categories, so

definitely no TFLS here). For Gallagher, the Palermo Protocol – properly interpreted – was 'sufficiently broad to embrace all but a very small range of situations in which individuals are severely exploited for private profit'. (2009, p. 791). Most legal experts who followed this debate favoured Gallagher, since the law as written clearly supported her textual interpretation, but Hathaway definitely had reason to be concerned that far too much had been 'left out' when it came to how anti-trafficking interventions were actually operating in practice.

Gallagher also maintained that the decision to ground Palermo within an organised crime framework was both politically expedient and strategically desirable: 'It is not useful or realistic to lament the Trafficking Protocol's criminal justice focus. Such criticisms are naïve because they fail to appreciate that the alternative – a human rights treaty on trafficking – was never a serious possibility' (2015, p. 3). Not everyone agrees with Gallagher regarding the strategic value of foregrounding criminal justice and securitisation (for example, Aradau, 2004; Berman, 2003), but there is absolutely no doubt that crime and trafficking are powerfully entwinned. As Jean and John Comaroff (2016, p. 8) have argued, 'crime has become *the* metaphysical optic by means of which people across the planet understand and act upon their worlds' (italics in the original). During the late 1990s and 2000s there was a sustained effort to try to move anti-trafficking away from criminal justice and towards a 'human rights' approach (for example, Jordan, 2002), but this was very difficult to accomplish. The pull of criminal justice proved too powerful.

The late 1990s and 2000s were heavy on moral panic and light on evidence. Human trafficking was chiefly understood to mean 'sex trafficking', and this specific category was successfully invoked to support intense opposition to all forms of commercial sex (this opposition is usually described as primarily coming from second generation feminists, but this underestimates the role played by anti-feminist conservatives). Criminal justice and border security considerations dominated the ways in which potential remedies and responses were operationalised. There was a consistent blurring of fact with fiction, with highly stylised and sensationalised images and stories having profound effects upon both popular consciousness and policymaking.

The technocrats take centre stage

By (at least) the early 2010s the anti-trafficking sector was facing a behind-the-scenes legitimacy crisis. The root cause of this legitimacy crisis

was a quiet recognition that over a decade of global policy and activism had not delivered as promised, and that the simplistic and sensationalist models which had characterised earlier anti-trafficking campaigns were 1) very good at mobilising popular sentiment, and 2) very bad at guiding effective interventions. Another key sticking point was criminal justice. Tremendous energies had been expended training and equipping 'frontline' agents, yet prosecution rates remained disappointing low (for example, Gadd & Broad, 2022). Countless partnerships existed on paper, but most of them were not doing much in practice. The 'raid and rescue' model kept running into problems (for example, Barnes, 2020). In 2018, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2018, p. 45) reported that 168 states (around 93% of 181 states in their database) 'have legislation in place that criminalizes trafficking in persons'. That represents a remarkable jump from a reported 33 states in 2003 (UNODC, 2016, p. 48). A huge amount of activity had taken place, yet the overall results were disappointing.

It is not hard to work out why. Criminal justice models chiefly focus upon symptoms, rather than underlying causes. They can (at least theoretically) prosecute criminal offences once they have taken place, but they cannot – and should not be expected to – address the underlying structural conditions that leave people in vulnerable and marginalised positions in the first place. This may seem like a relatively straightforward point, but it ultimately had profound implications for the anti-trafficking field. The moral idealogues who had previously dominated anti-trafficking conversations were no longer as ascendant, and the focus shifted to a more expansive and less dogmatic approach. Trafficking went from a narrow criminal justice problem to a multi-faceted structural challenge that implicated migration, supply chains, labour markets, development, regulation and many others. Commercial sex was no longer a singular focus.

It is important to distinguish here between 1) efforts to overhaul – or even defund – criminal justice models and 2) efforts to bypass – or de-centre – criminal justice and instead focus on other priorities and approaches. Most energies have been directed towards the second approach. Criminal justice has not been dismantled but has instead been partially and incompletely set aside. Over the course of the 2010s there was a recalibration which attempted to incorporate many of the problems which Hathaway and many others had worried were being left out, and to move away from the straightjacket of criminal justice, securitisation and 'sex trafficking'.

The first and most consequential move involved widening the terms of the conversation from 'sex trafficking' to the much more inclusive

model I have described here as TFLS. This was initially and somewhat inelegantly expressed in terms of 'sex versus labour trafficking', where the principal argument was that the scale of the latter was many orders of magnitudes larger than the former and thus needed to be 1) prioritised and 2) operationalised in different terms (Shamir, 2012). This was by no means a new argument. In 2005, David Feingold wrote in *Foreign Policy* that 'the worldwide market for labor is far greater than that for sex' (2005, p. 26). It took many years for this message to gain traction, but there were many people in – or adjacent to – the anti-trafficking field who had an interest in making sure it finally landed.

Once it became clear that anti-trafficking was attracting significant amounts of political interest, countless campaigners jumped on the bandwagon by (re-)defining their own projects in TFLS terms to gain access, funding and alliances (for example, Sharapov et al., 2024). With time, the conversation expanded to include, amongst others, child soldiers, forced marriage, supply chains, forced prison labour, coercive drug trafficking by minors and tied migrant labour. As these new topics were incorporated into TFLS they also encouraged established experts in adjacent fields to follow suit, which helped to rapidly improve the overall quality of evidence and research, with labour lawyers (for example, Fudge, 2025), business scholars (for example, Crane, 2013), and many other experts bringing insights from more established bodies of knowledge.

Similarly, international lawyers found ways of deepening and justifying connections between categories, drawing upon the Trafficking Protocol, newer forced labour and child labour instruments, and a renewed appreciation of earlier slavery, practices 'similar to slavery', and forced labour conventions (for example, Blackett, 2022). One of the most important signals came in 2011, when the US Department of State declared in its annual trafficking report that movement was no longer required for trafficking to take place (2011, p. 16). In 2016, ILO bundled together Forced Labour, Modern Slavery, Human Trafficking and Child Labour under the rubric of Alliance 8.7 and the Sustainable Development Goals. International law would be repeatedly distorted and stretched (Chuang, 2014) so TFLS could emerge triumphant as the operational default.

Expanding the frame to TFLS also made it feasible to side-step the now longstanding, repetitive and ideologically entrenched argument over the status of commercial sex. Many people in the field who wanted 'to get things done' found this debate tedious and unproductive. Opening the conversation to other forms of labour paved the way for a more practical

and less polarised set of conversations which were not always specifically – or even primarily – focused on criminal justice. Understanding how labour markets and migration regimes function means taking up a huge number of incredible complex and challenging issues, including:

- Market dynamics (for example, tight or loose, bull or bear, competition versus collective action).
- Market signals (brand management, 'ethical' consumption or certification, lead firm dominance, 'ethical' investment and shareholder activism).
- The politics of the household, social reproduction and intimate labours (the performance of care, domestic work, labour within the family, paid vs. unpaid labour).
- Legal responsibility and its limits (deregulation, piece work, subcontracting, outsourcing, public procurement).
- Technological innovation and social media (#techforgood, algorithmic cruelty, online harassment and abuse, data privacy and data mining, platform work, techno-futurism).
- Incarceration (prison-industrial complexes, detention, warehousing, offshoring, forced labour).
- Work and welfare (irregular work, self-employment, health and safety, wage theft, healthcare, access to justice, collective bargaining, gendered labours).
- Migration and settlement (identity documents, pathways to citizenship, statelessness, deportation, tied visas, labour brokers, housing, family expectations, debt and deductions).
- Accountability mechanisms (labour inspections, audits, compliance and evaluation, corporate social responsibility, import bans and sanctions, international and national courts, public interest litigation).
- Stakeholder engagement (organised labour, chambers of commerce, lobbying groups, international organisations, civil society voices, government regulators, private bankers).

Arguably the most important additions to this expansive portfolio have been global supply chains and governance gaps, which cut across all of the above in complex ways, and are further complicated by the addition of conflict-related abuses and climate-related effects.

In recent years TFLS has come to be increasingly defined in terms of risk, regulation, quantification and techno-futurism, with both technocratic expertise and logics taking centre stage. The new world of 'risk' is increasingly dominated by lawyers (more civil than criminal), tech

innovators and entrepreneurs, risk management experts and 'effective altruists', auditors and evaluation consultants, development experts and staff within the neoliberal university. Yet not everyone is comfortable with this new focus on risk and regulation. There continue to be many contexts where older criminal justice models still hold sway, and police officers and prosecutors still play central roles in anti-trafficking. It is also clear the technocrats do not stand entirely apart from criminal justice. Apps, algorithms and 'risk matrices' can also be called upon to catch criminals and 'secure' borders. My argument here is not that criminal justice (or moral idealogues) have disappeared. I am instead suggesting that the dominant position of criminal justice has been eroded by technocracy.

The best starting point for thinking through this shift is Janie Chuang (2015) on philanthrocapitalism. Chuang's work is particularly concerned with the outlooks and impact of the Walk Free Foundation (WFF, established by the Australian billionaire mining magnate Andrew Forrest) but her arguments also implicate Humanity United, Legatum, Google and, crucially, a range of richly-funded private-public partnerships with governments. In her analysis (Chuang, 2015, p. 1528), modern philanthrocapitalists are more hands on than past funders, favour the 'same techniques, management styles, and value systems that helped generate the[ir] excessive income', and strongly invest in quantification measures to evaluate specific issues. I cannot do justice here to Chuang's entire argument, but there are two examples worth highlighting:

> One of the first things which Forrest did when entering the field was a 'slavery audit' on his own company, Fortescue Mining Group. He discovered – and immediately sought to correct – 'slave labor' in his supply chain. (p. 1533)

> WFF created the Global Fund to End Slavery, a public-private partnership created to escalate the resources available to fight slavery by 'go[ing] from millions to billions of government and private sector spending'. As explained by its CEO Jean Baderschneider (formerly the Vice President of Procurement for Exxon-Mobil), it aims to '[e]nsure global coordination to avoid fragmented interventions' and to '[e]stablish robust monitoring and impact evaluation efforts to ensure' sharing and scaling of 'only the most effective practices and programs'. (p. 1537)

In both these examples, monitoring and evaluation are central, with successful entrepreneurs and executives seeking to import models from

their business careers into humanitarian settings, with a stated focus to only prioritise 'what works'. This has been a clear recipe for a stronger focus on evidence and evaluation (although Forrest's initial flagship initiative, the Global Slavery Index, was criticised by Gallagher [2017] and many others as a methodological farce). The substantial funding streams that emerged from these philanthrocapitalist investments had far-reaching effects, with countless organisations acquiring strong incentives to speak back the priorities of their (potential) funders.

My reading of technocracy includes philanthrocapitalism, but also encompasses other actors and institutions as well. When I speak of technocracy I am seeking to describe and analyse a sensibility and praxis which I believe is shared by many influential individuals within the anti-TFLS infrastructure. The technocracy concept has been around for over a century, and has been used in various ways (Cole, 2022). Its two building blocks are expertise and technology, and technocrats are commonly understood as an elite managerial class within government and/or private institutions who can present a threat (or perhaps a preferable alternative) to bottom-up democratic participation and decision-making (which also makes technocracy inherently anti-populist in most readings).

This is definitely part of the technocratic equation (philanthrocapitalists are notoriously unaccountable), but for my purposes I am mostly interested in its modernist and utopian elements, wherein technical-scientific rationality becomes *the path* to a better future. Here technocracy is strongly associated with techno-futurism, where much of the case is not based on present performance, but upon the assertion that a better future is just around the corner (even if this future never actually arrives, and claims about #techforgood prove entirely unfounded).

To help make sense of these issues, I draw upon Jens Steffek's work on technocratic internationalism. For Steffek (2021, p. 15), technocracy is marked by the ways in which institutions and bureaucracies tend to 'turn all problems of politics into problems of administration' (quoting Mannheim), a strong investment in 'cooperation across borders and expert rule' (p. 16), and an enduring faith in modernisation via rationalisation and de-politicisation (see also Li, 2007, p. 7). Drawing upon Putnam, Steffek (2021, p. 187) further identifies six key characteristics of technocracy:

1) de-politicisation of issues as a strategy of rational decision-making;
2) hostility to political institutions and party politics;
3) hostility to democracy and equality-based decision-making;

4) preference for decision-making by consensus;
5) preference for debating in pragmatic rather than ideological terms;
6) strong commitment to progress and productivity.

Numbers one, five and six are particularly important for my purposes, since they pave the way for a politics of 'evidence-based' pragmatism that purports to be non-ideological and rational, yet nonetheless carries forward a highly prescriptive normative vision. As James Ferguson famously argued in the *Anti-Politics Machine* (1996, p. 256), the apparatus of 'development' does not describe things as they are, but instead plays a far-reaching yet easily overlooked ideological and institutional role in both (re)constructing and standardising poverty and other issues as 'technical problems', and thereby accomplishes the trick of pulling off 'the suspension of politics from even the most sensitive political operations'. While Ferguson was chiefly concerned with Lesotho, he was keen to highlight the role of a small group of interlocking experts who ensured that development projects 'look very similar from one country to the next', with a managerial elite of development experts 'free-floating and untied to any specific context' (Ferguson, 1996, pp. 258–9).

Ferguson conducted his research in the 1980s, and therefore focused upon the bureaucratisation and extension of state authority, but with the passage of time development has also become yet another field for private-public partnerships. This carries forward to the increasing prominence of development within anti-trafficking conversations. When McGrath and Watson introduced the concept of TFLS they were specifically thinking in terms of how it had come to be diagnosed as 'a problem of and for development' (2018, p. 22). The most important example here is the aforementioned Alliance 8.7, which gets its name from the specific numerical reference to TFLS within the Sustainable Development Goals – a technocratic and quantitative project that tries very hard to de-politicise the 'most sensitive political operations' (Ferguson, 1996, p. 256).

For McGrath and Watson, this developmental turn is marked by all kinds of problems. Drawing upon two adjacent case studies, they argued that TFLS has been defined by '(questionable) forms of quantification and rankings which valorise knowledge of "experts" in the Global North and replicate racialized re-presentations of "victims" and "abolitionists"' (McGrath & Watson, 2018, p. 29). In the case of 'underdeveloped' countries, they further argue that '"over there" is imagined as "back then"', with a simplistic and ahistorical approach to structural problems which get 'diagnosed and remedied by experts in the Global North' (p. 29).

Their critique doesn't directly apply to all forms of development, but even advocates of the potential value of a development approach are acutely aware that it could ultimately end up as yet 'another tool of imperialist humanitarianism' (Kotiswaran, 2019, p. 416).

I would endorse most of McGrath and Watson's argument, but there is one area where I think a different emphasis is valuable. Building upon an enduring theme amongst critics of anti-trafficking, they link development to a 'global politics of rescue'. This is undoubtedly an important motif, but I would argue that it has recently been supplemented – and in some cases even supplanted – by a global politics of risk, whereby there are many scenarios where rescue of exploited individuals is not even contemplated, let alone accomplished. This is where the technocratic logics behind corporate social responsibility, supply chain management, auditing and 'self-regulation', and, most importantly, 'risk management' take centre stage.

If you do a quick google search for 'risk of modern slavery' you will be flooded by countless tools, templates and consultants hawking their expertise on goods at risk, risk assessment, risk factors, risks to value chains, supplier risk, investor risk, inherent risk identification, modern slavery risk identification and management, and mapping modern slavery risk. This politics of risk frequently has no criminal justice component, but instead involves the application of technical-scientific rationality to try to reduce corporate exposure (and if other corporations are 'at risk' then that remains entirely their problem).

Over the last decade a billion-dollar market in 'supply chain doctors', auditors and evaluators, and expert consultants has emerged in relation to forced labour and 'modern slavery'. Most members of this elite managerial class of 'travelling technocrats' – to circle back to Archer's work on measuring sustainability mentioned earlier – have few (if any) close connections within law enforcement.

Within this model, TFLS becomes a technical challenge requiring risk management, evaluation and quantification, technological innovation, and recalibrating the design, operations and incentives associated with markets and regulations. The main task is to 'nudge' established systems in more humane directions (that is, improving progress and productivity). This is conceived as a pragmatic exercise, rather than an ideological project, yet the kinds of 'solutions' which typically emerge continue to be politically undemanding, voluntary and sympathetic to markets and neoliberal models. Technocrats usually position themselves as standing apart from – or above – party politics and democratic processes (TFLS is also framed as a consensus-driven bipartisan issue),

and instead being pragmatically committed to 'following where the evidence leads'. The fundamental problem here, however, is that technocratic logics ultimately circle back a 'pragmatic' version of status quo politics which typically involves relatively minor reforms, leaving existing systems perhaps just a little better than before. This is (at best) a model of technical reform. Revolution is far too ideological.

Such investment in technical-scientific rationality can result in discomfort with the political and popular aesthetics of 'sex trafficking' favoured by moral idealogues. One revealing example came in December 2020, when the opening of a 'TraffickingHub' exhibition hosted by the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool was heavily criticised by anti-trafficking organisations and other experts for 'relying on graphic and sensationalizing imagery including naked women with tape over their mouths' (Guilbert, 2020). The Museum quickly withdrew the exhibition, which was particularly controversial due its connection to Exodus Cry, an evangelical anti-pornography organisation with an unsavoury history. This incident was revealing as a clash of sensibilities, with an ideologically-driven 'sex trafficking' organisation called out for harmful content that would have been unremarkable in the 2000s. The reaction to taped mouths is instructive too. As previously discussed, moral idealogues routinely conflate fact and fiction to advance their agenda. From a technocratic standpoint, this iconography becomes a factual question: if there isn't evidence that mouths are regularly taped then women shouldn't be thus represented.

Technocrats are not entirely opposed to the use of sensationalism, but it is something that they generally expect of others and not themselves, in keeping with their self-identity of being 'the adults in the room'. However, there are also times when sensational claims and dubious methods get repackaged as authoritative 'data', such as the aforementioned Global Slavery Index. One of the most revealing developments within anti-trafficking over the last decade has been the extent to which many organisations now try to avoid taking a position on commercial sex, since they would prefer to bypass this ideologically charged issue entirely (Kenway & Quirk, 2021). This is emblematic of technocratic politics: Not taking a position on whether sex work is work is an inherently political position, yet it is understood and justified as an attempt to *avoid* politics.

Anti-trafficking technocrats are strongly invested in the *potential* of evaluations research. This emphasis on potential is vital, because the technocratic case for evaluations tends to be based on what evaluations might do in future, rather than what they have achieved to date. This is in keeping with the core premise of techno-futurism, which holds that a

bright future is just around the corner. Monitoring and evaluation have become increasingly prominent within anti-trafficking spheres, including a major focus on private audits. The underlying premise that evaluation of at least some sort is now required has emerged as a default presumption in many circles, with stronger funder preferences for evaluations compelling all kinds of reforms behind the scenes. Countless well-paid consultants are now kept busy doing evaluation work, but most of these consultants are also aware they really can't rock the boat too much, or too often, since they then might not be asked back and their client list could dry up. Some professional evaluators are insulated from their pressures, but they are the exception not the rule. The vast majority of evaluations undertaken within the anti-trafficking field are commissioned and funded by decision-makers with skin in the game regarding what these evaluations might find. This hasn't prevented individual evaluators from reaching uncomfortable conclusions at times, but these kinds of findings are notable for a reason: they don't happen as often as they should.

Conclusion

There is a famous 1964 speech by US activist Mario Savio that helps bring the key issues at stake here into sharper focus. Making the case for civil disobedience, Savio declared that:

> There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part; you can't even passively take part. And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all … One thousand people sitting down someplace, not letting anybody by, not letting anything happen, can stop any machine, including this machine, and it will stop! (Cohen, 2014, p. 188)

Savio was arrested with hundreds of others after giving these remarks, now known as the 'bodies on the gears' speech. It came at a moment where African Americans and their allies were engaged in disruptive political mobilisations against white supremacists. One of the defining features of that era was the ways in which governing structures and policing powers were consistently used against people mobilising for racial

justice (echoed in our own times by similar responses to US campus protests against Israeli genocide in Gaza). The theory and practice of civil disobedience emerged out of complex conversations regarding when and on what terms it was both ethically necessary and strategically useful to directly challenge a fundamentally unjust status quo. It was also predicated upon a deeper theory of politics that says that political elites only change when they are compelled to change, and that white supremacy would not cede ground easily or voluntarily.

Anti-trafficking technocrats do not put their bodies on the gears. They instead understand their primary task as 'nudging' established institutional designs to make the machine run a little more smoothly and (at least hopefully) humanely. To advance this modest goal, they engage in close collaborations with both the people who own the machine and the people who run the machine. They do not seek to bind the powerful by mobilising for new laws and regulations that challenge the status quo, but instead politely request political and economic elites to engage in modest reforms on a voluntary and discretionary basis. More ambitious goals are routinely dismissed as unrealistic. As 'non-ideological' pragmatists, anti-trafficking technocrats consistently maintain that they 'follow the evidence', yet their evidence almost never leads in politically radical directions. That isn't really a problem for anti-trafficking technocrats, since they primarily understand their task as generating evidence for the prince. Technocrats are rarely activists. 'Risk managers' are definitely *not* activists. They do not think about crafting strategies to try and get the machine to stop. It is possible to imagine a scenario where evaluation researchers are tasked with identifying and evaluating strategies for getting the machine to stop, but this is not the kind of project that the people who currently commission and fund evaluations are likely to be keen on.

Key messages

- The moral ideologues who previously dominated policy and advocacy around 'sex trafficking' have been partially supplanted by the anti-trafficking technocrats, who favour an open-ended framework which throws together a huge number of issues.
- Anti-trafficking as technocracy has been the main driver behind a partial shift from a politics of rescue to a politics of risk, where the immediate challenge becomes 'nudging' established systems in more

humane directions by trying to recalibrate the design, operations and incentives associated with markets, regulations and investments.

- Anti-trafficking technocrats are more invested in evidence and evaluation than moral ideologues, which creates new opportunities for evaluation research, but the capacity of evaluations to affect change is constrained by funding streams and status quo interests.
- Evidence will not be enough. We already have a mountain of evidence that key aspects of anti-trafficking policy and advocacy are *not* working. Further evaluation research *will still not be enough*. You cannot resolve political bottlenecks using only technical expertise.
- The best way of challenging bottlenecks is via political *contestation*, where key decision-makers are subject to sustained political pressure, rather than polite requests. Anti-trafficking technocrats are not (yet) up to this challenge because they favour a 'non-ideological' model of 'pragmatism' which tends to reinforce the status quo.

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8

Maximising the potential of anti-trafficking interventions through intervention development research

Ligia Kiss and Cathy Zimmerman

Anti-trafficking interventions: benefits, risks and harm

Over the past two decades, investments in interventions to prevent and respond to human trafficking have grown considerably (see Cockbain et al., Chapter 1, this volume). In many cases, however, these investments have not been guided by robust a priori assessments of the potential benefits, risks and harms that might follow intervention (Mendel & Sharapov, 2021). In some cases, costly evaluations have shown no or negligible effects, or even harm to participants (Blunt & Wolf, 2020; Harkins, 2017; Haynes, 2019; Heynen & van der Meulen, 2022; Mendel & Sharapov, 2021; Olayiwola, 2019; Zimmerman et al., 2021).

Evaluations of interventions to tackle human trafficking have been repeatedly criticised for their methodological flaws. Most evaluations of trafficking interventions describe features such as programme outreach, participants' characteristics and, less often, average population outcomes (Bryant & Landman, 2020; Davy, 2016; Dell et al., 2019; Harkins, 2017). It is not unusual for the literature on human trafficking to call for greater use of randomised controlled trials, the so-called 'gold standard' design in clinical epidemiology (Dell et al., 2019). However, without sufficient investment in theoretically grounded and evidence-based interventions, these calls are premature (Kiss et al., 2021).

Indeed, examples of interventions with underdeveloped theories, poorly defined outcomes, misidentified target groups, lacking contextual

adaptation and producing adverse effects are common in the field (Harkins, 2017; Mendel & Sharapov, 2021, 2022; Zimmerman et al., 2021). This recurrence of poorly conceptualised interventions suggests that insufficient work is being dedicated to developing theoretically grounded and evidence-based interventions that, all things being equal, have a higher likelihood of producing positive outcomes and a lower probability of generating adverse effects.

Authors writing about the value of intervention development have highlighted the importance of a multi-stage approach, starting with an intervention development phase, which leads to pilot-testing, implementation and evaluation phases (Fletcher et al., 2016; Skivington et al., 2021). They also highlight how the intervention development phase has been relatively neglected when compared to the evaluation and the implementation stages, suggesting that this neglect can lead to wasted resources and potential harm to intended beneficiaries (Croot et al., 2019; Hoddinott, 2015; O'Cathain et al., 2019).

Anti-trafficking intervention development

Anti-trafficking interventions generally share at least one of four common goals: to prevent human trafficking, identify cases, detect and punish perpetrators, and identify and respond to survivors' needs. These goals align with what are commonly known as the '3Ps' of anti-trafficking: Prevention, Protection and Prosecution, with a fourth P added: Partnerships. However, while interventions may share common goals, anti-trafficking strategies often rely on very different assumptions, underlying rationales and differ in their specific target outcomes. Moreover, between settings (for example, geographical locations, work sectors, populations), it is not unusual for interventions to be designed based on general descriptive data about the problem rather than intervention-focused understanding of the local phenomenon. Further, theories, such as theories of change (if any) are often relatively vague and exclude the causal pathways, or the 'missing middle' about *how* (or why), the intervention is expected to bring about the sought-after outcomes. And, perhaps most importantly, interventions are often designed without the involvement of people with lived experience of trafficking and local experts.

Recently, however, there has been a small but gathering trend towards intervention development research (IDR), moving away from a singular emphasis on impact evaluation (Skivington et al., 2021). Researchers

seeking solutions to complex social problems have begun to invest more time and resources in IDR to inform intervention design for feasibility testing and impact assessment (US Department of State, 2023). Well-planned and sufficiently funded intervention development – especially those intended to address complex social problems – can improve the chances that activities are effective, adopted, sustainable and do not harm the intended beneficiaries (Hoddinott, 2015; O'Cathain et al., 2019; Turner et al., 2019).

What does this mean for developing anti-trafficking interventions? To date, the emerging literature on complex intervention development has primarily focused on health (Croot et al., 2019; Hoddinott, 2015; O'Cathain et al., 2019; Turner et al., 2019). Public health scholars writing about evaluation processes, and specifically about IDR, have highlighted the importance of this often-neglected foundational stage of intervention-focused evidence gathering (Skivington et al., 2021; Fletcher et al., 2016). This IDR phase involves answering questions about, for example: how is the problem defined by whom and which specific aspects will the intervention address; what is the current evidence on interventions for the same or similar problems; who is included in the target group, how will they be reached and what needs do *they* prioritise; and what are *modifiable* risks and protective factors. Importantly, participatory, co-creation methods are strongly encouraged from the start to co-develop the necessary evidence and co-design the intervention prototype (Grindell et al., 2022).

In this chapter, we draw on O'Cathain et al.'s (2019) key stages of intervention development, paying special attention to the early stages of intervention research, which includes understanding the problem and context, reviewing published evidence, interrogating contextual influences. Although this early stage of intervention evaluation has gained growing attention in publications like the United Kingdom's National Institute of Health Research (NIHR)'s and Medical Research Council (MRC)'s complex health intervention framework guidance (Skivington et al., 2021), these approaches have seldom been applied to complex social interventions, such as human trafficking.

Here, we use a case study on Brazilian gold mining to indicate how this type of structured foundational research goes beyond general 'formative research' to answer specific questions required to design a well-targeted prototype. Findings from an IDR process can produce sufficient intervention research findings to inform an initial theory of change and initial design, which can be challenged and refined during the participatory prototype development process. Once

the design is ready, pilot testing (for example, using developmental evaluation, Patton, 2011) can indicate feasibility and acceptability using a small-scale evaluation and provide evidence on whether the intervention is ready for implementation – or if developers should return to earlier stages of intervention development. Time and resources determine the extent and intensity of each of these stages (O'Cathain et al., 2019).

Forced labour in gold mining: a case study for IDR

This section describes preliminary findings from a case study of IDR on labour exploitation in the mining sector in Brazil. The case study aims to illustrate how IDR helps point to feasible opportunities to intervene and usefully informs intervention designs to better meet beneficiary priorities.

In 2023, NORC (National Opinion Research Center) at University of Chicago adopted an intervention-focused research design to build an evidence base to inform prevention strategies to address forced labour for mining in the Brazilian Amazon region. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) would use these findings to develop one or more interventions to protect workers involved in artisanal gold mining. The first stage of the mixed-methods IDR involved an intervention-focused review (Bansal et al., 2023) to summarise what was already known about interventions in gold mining. In the second stage, NORC mapped the available resources, especially Brazilian governmental and non-governmental organisations that were already addressing or could potentially address working conditions and the health of miners. The third stage consisted of semi-structured interviews with miners, and governmental and non-governmental organisations operating in this area. These interviews explored perceptions of working conditions, policies, and intervention needs and priorities.

Finally, NORC conducted a survey, using respondent-driven sampling (RDS), with 863 mining workers in the Tapajos River basin in the State of Pará, Brazil. RDS was used as a recognised rigorous methodological approach striving to achieve representativeness among hard-to-reach populations by accounting for respondents' social network size to set up the probability of selection (Johnston & Sabin, 2010). This survey aimed to describe forced labour patterns, recruitment circumstances and

priorities from the perspective of miners. Ethical approval was granted by the Brazilian National Committee for Research Ethics (CONEP) and the NORC Institutional Research Board.

Each section below defines the question for each IDR component and describes the findings from NORC's three components of IDR research, carried out in order to inform an intervention to protect artisanal gold miners in the Amazon region of Brazil. The authors of this chapter worked as consultants on this project, and were responsible for supporting the study design, protocol and instruments development, and evidence review.

Understanding the problem and context

What aspects of the problem should our intervention address and why?

A fundamental step in intervention-focused research, like general formative studies, is to learn about the problem and understand how it manifests and is affected by the context in which it occurs. In this section, we provide a summary of what is known about exploitation in the mining sector based on the literature and interviews with local experts, including questions related to legislation, dialogue on human trafficking and the context in which it occurs.

Policies on the commercial exploration of the Brazilian Amazon region and associated use of slave labour date back to the seventeenth century, when the Portuguese Crown managed the transatlantic slave trade into the colonial Amazon territory (Gomes & Schwarcs, 2018). More recently, during the nineteenth century and particularly after the 1964 military coup, policies for the occupation of the Amazon gained traction, further boosting extractivist development models (Garnelo et al., 2023). Large national and international mineral and metallurgy industries established stakes in the region, accompanied by government investments in transport infrastructure.

Similar investments in the expansion of social development policies were not undertaken (Souza Costa & de Freitas Pereira, 2022). Exploitative work in the Amazon's extractive industries (for example, mining, lumbers, forestry products) continues to this day, long after the 1888 abolition of the slave trade in Brazil (Souza Costa & de Freitas Pereira, 2022). Informal and illegal gold mining is an industry that is rife with exploitative work (Kolen et al., 2013; Souza Costa & de Freitas

Pereira, 2022). Historically, most mine workers in the Amazon are informally employed and do not have access to labour rights (Ferreira & Mesquita, 2022). Rooted in deep social inequalities and acute land concentration, forced labour in the Brazilian Amazon takes place in remote regions of the forest, in places fraught with land disputes, violence and corruption (Hickman, 2021; Skidmore et al., 2021; Souza Costa & de Freitas Pereira, 2022). Gold mining and associated deforestation in protected indigenous lands have consistently increased over the past decade, furthering local disputes, violence and environmental degradation (Hobbs, 2023; Oviedo & Senra, 2023). Furthermore, news and anecdotal reports indicate that organised crime networks are increasingly involved in the management, transport and distribution of illegal gold in the region (Dalby & Doherty, 2023; Hobbs, 2023).

The kind of labour exploitation, abuse and occupational risks in these contexts are not always readily interpreted as trafficking. The reason for this is that, comparatively, their income is not low in the context of opportunities in the Brazilian labour market. One scholar interviewed by NORC noted that many workers in mining switch to it from farming and cattle ranching, seeking less strenuous and better paid work. Workers are usually paid based on their productivity, proportional to the amount of gold they extract. Nonetheless, 39.5% (out of n= 863) of the workers surveyed by NORC met the criteria for forced labour consistent with the Prevalence Reduction Innovation Forum (PRIF)'s 12 indicators for forced labour (Schroeder et al., 2020). Commonly reported forced labour indicators among this population were: unfair debt agreements, working under surveillance and isolated work sites; confiscated identity documents, threats to property, physical violence and having their phones confiscated were less common. The working conditions reported by interviewees met the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s criteria for forced labour under 'impossibility of leaving the employer' (ILO, 2012, p. 14). They also met the Brazilian legal definition of 'work analogous to slavery' in at least two criteria: isolating or restricting one's movement, and entrapping people to work to pay off debts (Código Penal [Penal Code], 1940, Section 1). Brazilian legislation includes references both to work analogous to slavery and to human trafficking as defined by the UN Palermo Protocol, treating human trafficking as the recruitment, transport or harbouring of people with intention of reducing them to a condition similar to slavery (Nogueira et al., 2013).

The remote nature of the mining sites, with scarce transport infrastructure, makes workers dependent on transport from managers

to leave their workplace. This isolation facilitates exploitation through debt bondage. Workers' access to goods and services is often restricted to what is available in the sites where they work, often at extortionate fees (Ministério Público Federal. Câmara de Coordenação e Revisão, 2020). If they owe more than they have earned, they may not be allowed out of the mining site (Aranha, 2018; Ministério Público Federal. Câmara de Coordenação e Revisão, 2020; Ferreira & Mesquita, 2022). As key informants interviewed by NORC explained, often workers are already in debt when they arrive at the mining site due to expenditures for transport, equipment and food. Most workers surveyed by NORC (85.8% out of n=863) reported incurring these costs in order to begin working in mining.

Identifying the population

Who will be included in (and excluded from) our target population and why?

For interventions to be well-targeted to reach and meet the needs of the intended beneficiaries, it is necessary to assess who is affected by the problem and how different individuals and subgroups experience the problem. To learn which group of miners the intervention design could be suitable for, we examined not simply demographics, but features that might, for example, indicate possible means of safely contacting miners, by exploring how they were recruited into the mining jobs and how they communicated with friends, family and one another. This section provides an overview of findings on the miners in this region.

Most workers in NORC's survey were self-identified male, multiracial or black, and with low levels of education. Results from key informant interviews also indicated that most workers were migrants who came from rural parts of Brazil with limited work opportunities. According to a Labour Prosecution Officer interviewed by NORC, recruitment networks target sites with high unemployment rates when seeking prospective workers. They often seek people with low educational levels, sometimes illiterate, not engaged in regular work, with few, unstable or no family attachments. Social media, especially WhatsApp, was reported to be a common means of contact between recruiters and many individuals who were desperate for work. Contact with prospective workers is facilitated by social networks and contacts currently working in mining.

Assessing risks, protective factors and harm

What are the factors that make people vulnerable to or protect them from the problem and which aspects of the problem are associated with harm?

At the core of IDR is investigating drivers, specifically looking for *modifiable determinants* – those factors that contribute to an identified problem and that are amenable to change via an intervention. In the case of artisanal mining, this research aimed to generate evidence to indicate the effects of exploitative conditions on individuals engaged in mining in this area. That is, the research was designed to produce evidence on the types of risks miners experienced, and to consider actions that would directly protect workers from those identified harms. Below, we describe how the mining conditions are creating harm, how the miners are experiencing risks related to the mining conditions and what might be protecting them from harm.

Research indicates that although national legal provisions impose norms for adequate health and safety conditions in mining sites, these are often ignored (Ministério Público Federal. Câmara de Coordenação e Revisão, 2020). Mining sites are mostly located in remote areas where law enforcement and government sponsored services do not routinely reach, including environmental protection areas and indigenous land. Public policies have limited reach in the Brazilian Amazon, facilitating illegal employment practices in precarious conditions and perpetuating historical low levels of social development in the region (Souza Costa & de Freitas Pereira, 2022). Living conditions in mining sites are often unclean, unhealthy and unsafe. Labour inspections find workers in illegal gold mining sites sleeping in makeshift canvas shacks, with limited or no access to clean water and bathrooms, dangerous electric installations, insufficient access to food, intense heat exposure and with poor access to medical care (Ferreira & Mesquita, 2022; Freitas et al., 2023). Ill health exposures are prevalent, especially malaria, dengue fever, ringworm, venous animal bites (that is, snakes, spiders and scorpions), mercury contamination, chronic diarrhoea, fungal infections and contact with hazardous waste (Nascimento et al., 2019).

In spite of specific legislation on the health and safety of miners and associated obligations of employers, workplace accidents are still very high and use of protective equipment is low (Silva & Alves, 2022). Serious injuries in mining sites are very frequent. Among the NORC

survey sample (n=863), 72.3% of participants reported having received medical attention for injuries and 23.4% had continued pain or difficulty resulting from injuries. Less than a third of workers, however, said that they received protective equipment from their employer, and 60.2% secured their own protective equipment.

Those workers surveyed in the NORC study also reported high levels of poor mental health symptoms, with 51.0% unable to stop or control worrying; 49.1% feeling down, depressed or hopeless; 48.2% feeling nervous, anxious or on edge; and 36.4% having little interest or pleasure in doing things. Many of the workers who reported symptoms of poor mental health were interested in receiving psychological assistance (37.5%), mental health treatment (29.9%) or drug or alcohol rehabilitation (13.0%).

Identifying target group needs and priorities

What are the intervenable needs of the target group, and which are priorities?

IDR is also dedicated to ensuring that interventions respond to the needs and stated preferences of the target group. The NORC study sought specifically to ensure workers could explain what they themselves believed they most needed by selecting from a range of potential service options. In this section, we offer an overview of how the target group report their needs and prioritise the services they want.

When asked about the types of help they might want, workers in our NORC study said they would value potential assistance related to improving workers' access to employment opportunities (58.6%), to housing and income (55.8%), job training (52.6%), literacy or educational assistance (45.6%), legal assistance (46.2%), transportation assistance (43.1%), and housing and sustenance assistance (38.6%).

When asked to consider which types of assistance they perceived as the most important, which they would prioritise above others, first, by far, was healthcare (42.3%), followed by help with a job search or employment placement (17.0%), housing and sustenance (11.9%) and dental care (7.3%). In addition to practical assistance, over three-quarters of workers (76.3%) responded that they were interested in learning about their human rights and labour rights.

Current intervention models: opportunities and challenges

What do we know about interventions that have tried to address the same or similar problems?

In addition to understanding the individual and subgroup experiences of the target beneficiaries, intervention-focused research aims to assess relevant interventions and identify how they are working – or not – and why. In this section, we describe interventions in Brazil that are relevant to the mining sector and mining population. We did not focus only on workers who were in situations of forced labour at the time of the survey, but rather on the population of miners overall, given the risks of exploitation, restricted freedom and ill-health that are prevalent in mining.

Due to the remoteness of mining sites, which are often in protected environmental areas or indigenous land, law enforcement interventions are often the only policy to directly reach mining sites. Almost half (46.8%) of the mining workers surveyed by NORC reported having witnessed police called into the mining site, and 65.7% reported having seen a labour inspector at the mining site.

Since 1995, labour inspections to identify forced labour cases are conducted by labour inspectors and the Brazilian Government's Special Mobile Inspection Groups (GFEM), in response to reports of trafficking and forced labour cases (Souza Costa & de Freitas Pereira, 2022). GFEM is comprised of labour inspectors, labour prosecutors and federal police officers. They often work in partnership with environmental agencies, such as Ibama (Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources) and ICMbio (Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation) to locate mining sites and access environmental conservation areas (Newell, 2020). Historical analysis of GFEM funding indicates budgetary restrictions and a reduction of human resources relative to the population (de Sá et al., 2020; Souza Costa & de Freitas Pereira, 2022).

At the same time, many key informants interviewed by NORC reported that workers didn't want to be rescued, didn't necessarily recognise their work conditions as exploitative, and often went back to the same type of jobs after rescue operations. Many did not see themselves as victims nor were they interested in reporting situations of exploitation to authorities. When rescued, workers are legally entitled to receive severance pay, three instalments of unemployment insurance, shelter, assistance to return to their place of origin and access to national cash transfer schemes, following Brazilian Ordinance n. 3484 from 6 October 2021 (Ministério dos Direitos Humanos e da Cidadania, 2022). However,

interview results indicate that this assistance package is insufficient and slowly delivered. As one Labour Prosecution Officer who was interviewed explained: 'So during that time of waiting to be compensated, the worker has often returned to the exploitation cycle. Then when the compensation happens, the worker is in the middle of the forest, unable to be reached. So they cannot receive their money.' Furthermore, employers frequently remain anonymous and cannot be identified, perpetuating their impunity.

The Dirty List of Modern Slavery is another geographically ambitious intervention that relies on the federal police to identify businesses using forced labour and impose restrictions on their activities. These businesses are then publicly listed and have government financial incentives revoked (Souza Costa & de Freitas Pereira, 2022). In its latest edition, the Dirty List featured 17 illegal gold mining sites that were using forced labour. However, with limited enforcement power, the effectiveness of the List is often questioned. Injunctions are easily removed, and prosecutions are much too slow (Newell, 2020).

Health was the main priority for most miners interviewed in the NORC survey. Although the national constitution recognises health as a right for all and a duty of the Brazilian State, as defined in the Brazilian Federal Constitution, access to care for remotely located populations remains limited. Remote Amazonian municipalities are only partially covered by the National Family Health Strategy. Main outreach and delivery challenges include financing, provision and retention of the workforce, and providers' geographic access and mobility. Furthermore, evidence suggests that some national health policies are disconnected from local realities in these contexts (Oliveira et al., 2011).

Finally, Brazil has a national conditional cash transfer programme targeting families in poverty and extreme poverty. The eligibility criteria limit per capita monthly family income is BRL 210 (approximately USD 38 in July 2024) (Law No. 14284, 2021). The programme also aims to promote capacity-building and employability, financial education and access to education of recipients. However, the financial benefits are capped at BRL 600 (approx. USD 117), which is much lower than the expected average income in gold mining and likely unattractive to prospective workers.

Implications of IDR findings for intervention development

Our IDR findings indicate that while Brazil has strong policies against slavery and labour inspections are active in many sectors, current government actions do not seem to meet the priorities reported by workers

in this region, who prioritised their need for healthcare and financial security.

Moreover, compensation and incentives for exiting dangerous and exploitative work in mining fail to materialise in time and are often considered insufficient. Mine workers generally receive between three to eight times the legal monthly minimum wage of BRL 1,412 (Nascimento et al., 2019) (equivalent to USD 252 in July 2024), meaning that workers who are rescued from abusive situations are not attracted by compensation schemes and other job offers. In addition, the scarcity of professional qualifications and other labour market opportunities mean that they often end up back in hazardous mining work. The potential effectiveness of cash transfer programmes to prevent human trafficking in the mining sector is probably also hindered by similar limitations.

Furthermore, the focus of policy on law enforcement and punishment of perpetrators also tends to ignore the material conditions that attract workers to exploitative work. The lack of investment in social development of rural communities in the Amazon and neighbouring states fosters the dependency of marginalised populations on exploitative work (Souza Costa & de Freitas Pereira, 2022). Results from the NORC survey indicate that workers are interested in breaking cycles of dependency through accessing employment opportunities, housing and income, job training, literacy and formal education.

Notably, a review of Brazilian policies and social support schemes indicates that there may be programmes and policies that could respond to the preferences expressed by workers. For instance, Brazil has educational policies that include or target adults, such as the Brazil Literacy, National Services for Learning and National Programme for Access to Technical Education and Employment (PROTANEC; Ministério da Educação, n.d.). Training opportunities and employment assistance can potentially prevent re-trafficking by making the current re-integration package more attractive to miners rescued from forced labour.

The remoteness of mining sites in the Brazilian Amazon, coupled with the associated illegal occupation of protected areas, are major barriers for interventions to reach workers. Any intervention in situ that is not a law enforcement strategy needs to consider gatekeepers, access and risks to safety. Although many workers who were injured reported that they had accessed healthcare during their mining jobs, health services are primarily sought only in an emergency. Miners often use traditional curative practices with roots, plants and ingredients found in the forest. If confronted with more serious illness or injuries, they tend to seek help at the nearest public health service, which is very often still far

from the mining site (Nascimento et al., 2019). Health promotion and preventive care are much rarer in mining sites.

Prevention strategies might include education about and monitoring of: waste disposal, water management, use of toilets, reforestation, mercury reactivation, responsible use of fuel, workers' rights and workers' occupational health and safety. The Brazilian National Gold Association has proposed a programme to tackle some of these issues (Associação Nacional do Ouro, n.d.) and was criticised for conflict of interest relating to indigenous population rights and deforestation (Sabrina, 2022). However, exploring collaboration with local implementation agencies to improve worker-centred strategies to prevent labour exploitation and hazardous health exposures can improve health outcomes in the short and medium term.

Education strategies might be delivered through the TV, internet and social media. Most mining workers surveyed by NORC reported having a smartphone, and previous studies confirm that many have access to TV and the internet (Nascimento et al., 2019). In cases where access to the internet is hampered by there being an unstable signal, and where access is sometimes management controlled and costly, other local channels could be explored (for example, mobile primary healthcare teams, or commercial venues for distribution of educational materials). The high prevalence of illiterate workers requires careful consideration about communication strategies.

Sustained access to health for remote populations requires work-centred strategies and cross-sector partnerships (Oliveira et al., 2011). The government's flagship health programme, the Family Health Strategy, has limited penetration in the rural Amazon (Oliveira et al., 2011). Mobile health clinics could learn from the outreach strategies of the GFEM to expand health access to miners. Importantly, as workers gain greater access to healthcare, health providers will benefit from training to identify and refer cases of forced labour.

Discussion

The prevalence of labour exploitation and the growing investments in anti-trafficking interventions demand increased attention to the evidence that informs the design and implementation of intervention prevention and response models. From an ethical perspective, interventions should demonstrate both their potential for effectiveness and that new initiatives

will not cause unintended harm. Intervention-focused evidence should be developed *before* activities are designed and implemented. Ethical and cost-effective intervention designs should be based on well-researched evidence about, for example, the target populations and how to reach them safely, causal processes that will likely lead to the desired outcomes, how cultural, structural, business and other contextual factors might influence the intervention and its effectiveness, and how the activities might inadvertently cause harm.

In this chapter, we used preliminary findings from NORC's IDR on miners in the Brazilian Amazon region to illustrate how IDR can answer essential intervention design questions – prior to investing money in expensive 'good guesses'. That is, it is not uncommon for funding bodies to support interventions that might seem logical, but which are informed by very little R&D (research and development), compared to what we would expect in other fields (for example, engineering, pharmaceuticals, computer science). This is particularly problematic because unlike many health- or education-related challenges, human trafficking is a relatively nascent area for interventions and a particularly complex multi-sector challenge.

For mining in particular, our initial findings suggest there are few interventions that currently reach miners in our study region. Moreover, the NORC survey indicates that the interventions that do reach these sites (primarily labour inspections), do not necessarily respond to the needs and priorities expressed by workers – a majority of whom said they want ready access to healthcare and greater education and literacy options. Rapid treatment for injuries, prevention of infectious diseases (for example, malaria, dengue fever) and workplace safety are the priorities expressed by workers. These stated priorities do not even account for the pernicious health risks which are common – and dangerous – in mining areas, such as water contamination, ineffective waste disposal, incorrect use of PPE (personal protective equipment) and mercury poisoning.

A second intervention design finding is that, despite the high prevalence of cases that met the forced labour criteria, workers do not necessarily recognise their situation as exploitative and often do not desire to be rescued, for example, by law enforcement. Moreover, their relatively high earnings in mining are also likely to hinder offers to be removed from these jobs or prevention strategies that do not offer the same or greater income as their mining jobs (for example, small cash transfers, micro-credit schemes or short-term benefit opportunities).

Ultimately, what our findings suggest, not surprisingly, is that the complex set of financial, health and labour exposures that affect

artisanal miners requires a multi-sector response, and a response from agencies that workers can trust, and which addresses their perceived needs. However, this IDR-informed framing might mean that although the international anti-trafficking community has traditionally favoured law enforcement interventions, these are not necessarily urgent priorities that workers believe will protect and benefit them.

The agencies that received these findings have considered the health sector to be a first point of identification and referral. In trafficking and other forms of abuse, such as intimate partner violence, healthcare providers have been trained to identify and respond to cases of abuse, because they are often the only professional that a survivor will contact and trust (World Health Organization, 2023). But, because the area where miners work is so remote, the challenge will be to facilitate access, for example, by supporting mobile clinics. Bringing services to the workers will encourage rapid treatment for injuries, illnesses and infections before they become critical. Moreover, mobile clinics will also mean that workers may not have to lose income due to travel time and expenses.

How does this mixed methods IDR study therefore differ from formative research for other trafficking projects? This IDR study was explicitly designed to answer intervention-focused questions, such as those in each subsection above. Unlike general formative work, such as situational analyses, which tend to document somewhat broad evidence, such as prevalence, patterns, laws and policies, this IDR study sought specific evidence that would be essential to designing an intervention prototype. Moreover, this work was conducted closely with the implementing partner, local research partners and local stakeholders, who co-determined the evidence that was needed and were central to interpreting what the findings meant for the design of their intervention.

In this chapter, we described the core IDR questions and basic elements of an IDR design. Once this evidence is gathered and analysed, the next steps are for the intervention implementing agencies to collaborate with representatives of the intended beneficiaries (that is, miners), relevant service providers (for example, health, education, legal aid) and local stakeholders to co-design the intervention theory of change and their intervention prototype. The prototype will then be piloted alongside an adaptive monitoring and feedback process evaluation, through which flaws could be corrected and enhancements added using, for example, a 'realist evaluation' approach (Kiss et al., 2021; see also Sidebottom et al., Chapter 4, this volume). Effective resource allocation in IDR can increase the likelihood of achieving effective

interventions whilst avoiding resource waste in evaluations of more and more atheoretical, context-insensitive interventions.

In addition to IDR, the strongest prototype development will rely on participatory and co-production research methods that are dedicated to theory development and testing (Westhorp, 2018). For the most robust exploration of intervention options, one might also utilise tools for simulation of varying scenarios, such as agent-based modelling (Ballard, 2016; Chesney et al., 2019; McAlpine et al., 2021; McAlpine & Birks, Chapter 5, this volume). These tools aim to explore why and how different intervention models might work, for whom, and what their potential adverse consequences are, before testing in the real world with real people.

After over two decades of efforts and billions of dollars invested in many good (and not so good but sounded good) guesses about how to protect exploited, trafficked and abused workers, it is time to draw on the well-established practice of R&D in our search for solutions to this complex (otherwise termed 'wicked') twenty-first century challenge. Although IDR is very early in its application for human trafficking initiatives, these approaches should lead to more evidence-informed, well-targeted, effective and cost-effective interventions which may also avoid harming the precise people they are trying to help.

Key messages

- Anti-trafficking interventions have seldom been guided by robust a priori investigations of what is needed, what is modifiable, what the potential benefits, risks and harms are that result from an intervention. In some cases, costly evaluations have shown no or negligible effects, or even caused harm to participants.
- IDR can increase an intervention's potential to be effective and reduce potential inadvertent harm to participants by informing theoretically grounded, evidence-based and beneficiary-led interventions.
- Intervention-focused evidence on gold miners in the Brazilian Amazon suggests that internationally favoured anti-trafficking interventions, such as law enforcement, are not prioritised or welcomed by this population.
- Brazilian mine workers tend to consider their legal entitlements insufficient and return to the same kind of job after being rescued. They

prioritise their access to health, job seeking assistance, training and legal advice.

- IDR that prioritises local knowledge and takes account of the specific context should lead to more evidence-informed, well-targeted, effective and cost-effective interventions and avoid wasting precious development aid funding and limited national resources.

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9

Impact evaluation of a trafficking-in-persons prevention programme in Cambodia

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Introduction

This chapter presents implementation details and findings from a randomised controlled trial (RCT) in Cambodia employed to evaluate impacts of a human trafficking prevention programme. We discuss design, sampling, and analysis steps, challenges encountered and partial remedial measures in implementing the RCT. We specifically present this in the context of evaluating donor-funded programmes, where the donor funds the implementation of the programme and brings in an independent evaluator to work in coordination with the implementing partner. The particular trafficking prevention programme evaluated here was part of a larger US Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded programme in Cambodia, which NORC (National Opinion Research Center) at the University of Chicago evaluated as an independent evaluator.

The primary focus of this chapter is on the RCT implementation steps and challenges. We begin by providing a short contextual background on trafficking in Cambodia. This is followed by a description of the two trafficking prevention interventions. We then describe the random assignment design steps and the sampling design, and then data collection, ethical considerations and the estimation strategy. The two latter sections also discuss some of the challenges we faced in terms of sampling and estimation because of mid-course modification in programme implementation and some partial remedies adopted by the evaluation team. To conclude we present high-level findings and our conclusions.

Contextual background

Cambodia experiences significant internal and cross-border trafficking, and is a source, transit and destination country for trafficked persons. According to one report, Cambodian authorities detected a total of 415 victims being trafficked into Thailand from 2015 through 2017 (UNODC, 2019). These estimates, however, do not account for trafficking flows to other countries in the Mekong region, as well as to countries in East Asia and the Middle East. Accurate statistics for the level of trafficking are lacking, partly due to the largely informal nature of cross-border migration and the difficulties in definitively identifying cases of trafficking from irregular or illegal migration. Cambodia was designated as a Tier 2 Watch List country between 2019 and 2021 and as a Tier 3 country for 2022 and 2023 by the US Government (US Department of State, 2019–2023).

There are several factors contributing to the trafficking situation in Cambodia. These include the lack of viable employment options and the demand for low-wage labour abroad, particularly in Thailand. Although the GDP of Cambodia more than doubled between 2006 and 2016 (World Bank Group, n.d.), economic growth has failed to benefit large parts of the population. The limited availability of regular paid work in Cambodia is further compounded by increased population growth. Young people aged 15 to 24 comprise a majority of Cambodia's total labour force but face disproportionately high levels of unemployment (Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, 2014), making them more likely to seek informal migration routes and thus become more vulnerable to trafficking. Rural farming families are also at high risk for trafficking due to economic hardships ensuing from climate change, unseasonal rain patterns and subsequent loss of crops that push many farmers to take out large loans for new irrigation or pesticide systems (US Department of State, 2020).

Coupled with the lack of job opportunities within Cambodia, the economic boom in Thailand has resulted in increased demand for more migrant labourers to perform dangerous, difficult and dirty ('3-D') work (Kranrattanasuit, 2014). Past research summarises this so-called push-pull relationship: Cambodia earns income (through remittances) from Cambodian citizens who are migrant workers in Thailand, while Thailand can recruit more migrant labourers to develop its economy (United Nations, 2010). This demand for labour can result in high levels of irregular and informal migration, which can render migratory job seekers increasingly vulnerable to being trafficked. Though legal avenues of migration exist, the costs associated with legal channels of migration

and labour recruitment are considerably higher than for irregular and informal channels (UNODC, 2017).

Many counter-trafficking stakeholders in Cambodia corroborated the description above during the evaluation team's scoping trip. They described the need for economic opportunities for at-risk persons to reduce these individuals' trafficking vulnerabilities, especially during certain seasons of the year (that is, post-harvest) when traditional income-earning opportunities are particularly limited. To assist with this effort, USAID/Cambodia funded a Countering Trafficking in Persons Programme that implemented a holistic, multi-year programme between 2015 and 2019 aimed at bolstering the capacity of communities and government actors in coordination with private sector and development partners. The programme was designed and implemented by Winrock International and its partners (hereinafter 'the implementing partner') to improve systems to combat trafficking through four groups of activities: (1) prevention activities, such as delivery of information on safe migration, livelihood support and skills training, and youth-led awareness campaigns; (2) protection activities, such as increased access to and quality of services for survivors and strengthening of community safety networks; (3) prosecution activities, such as providing access to legal services for the victims and training of criminal justice actors; and (4) partnership with all levels of government, civil society and private sector entities working on counter trafficking.[1] The RCT detailed in this chapter focused on evaluating the prevention activities implemented as part of this counter trafficking programme.

Trafficking prevention interventions

The prevention activities of the USAID/Cambodia counter trafficking programme (hereinafter 'the trafficking prevention interventions') address several factors that may plausibly contribute to an increased risk in trafficking, most notably the lack of viable economic opportunities in Cambodia. The interventions offered diversified, climate-resilient livelihood pathways that reduce dependence on seasonal agriculture and educate individuals at risk of trafficking on safe migration, with an emphasis on youth engagement and activism.

The evaluation team coordinated with the implementing partner and relevant USAID/Cambodia staff during the design phase of the impact evaluation to finalise the design and the details of the interventions to be implemented and evaluated. During two scoping trips to Cambodia

in November 2015 and March 2016, the evaluation team conducted two meetings with the implementing partner staff and 12 in-person meetings with counter-trafficking stakeholders, including 18 individuals from 12 different organisations, to understand the local context and feasibility of different evaluation design options. The implementing partner finally designed two trafficking prevention interventions for the impact evaluation, to address the challenges on the supply side of the trafficking problem by providing economic opportunities to the at-risk persons and their households, which was agreed to be those between the ages of 18 and 39. For the evaluation, we refer to these two interventions as treatments and describe them in detail below.

Treatment 1: 'Livelihood package' intervention

The 'livelihood package' intervention had two main components aimed at providing the at-risk persons with economic opportunities in the form of jobs in the formal sector. The first component involved connecting at-risk persons to legitimate employers through an innovative job-seeking platform called Bong Pheak. The second component focused on providing at-risk persons with soft-skills training so they can retain their formal-sector jobs to better ensure sustained economic gain. We describe these two components below.

Bong Pheak job-seeking platform[2]

The implementing partner enlisted employers from different economic sectors (for example, hospitality, construction) in Cambodia to provide job opportunities in target communes with known trafficking issues. They then partnered with Open Institute, a Cambodian nonprofit organisation, to develop Bong Pheak, an internet-based employment service platform specifically designed to provide a venue for low-skilled workers to gain access to information on job opportunities from the enlisted companies. The jobs posted on the Bong Pheak site were public and anyone, including current employees at the participating companies and non-employees, could share the postings via smartphones and/or basic cell phones through interactive voice response technology. Specifically, when a job was shared through Bong Pheak, a job seeker could press a button to signal interest in a position and employers automatically received the contact information of the job seeker. Job seekers could also create or upload a CV and send job announcements to other people in their social network.

Bong Pheak's developers focused on meeting the needs of job seekers with limited technology access: A visitor could, from the job-description

page, refer the job to somebody who only had a normal phone by stating their name, phone number, and relationship (this last item was used to create trust in the calls, with a message such as 'your sister has sent this job to you'). The person referred would receive a phone call describing the job and allowing them to apply by just pressing the number '1' on their phone. In this way, Bong Pheak takes advantage of the job referral norms already in place in Cambodia, whereby family and friends are directly involved in the recruiting process, thus providing a trustworthy source for at-risk persons seeking employment. At the same time, the platform also intended to provide clear information on the available jobs and give at-risk persons the opportunity to apply through a formal process.

Workplace professionalism training

The second component of this intervention concerned the provision of 'soft skills' training to at-risk persons, with the goal of providing them with tangible professional and interpersonal workplace skills (for example, negotiation with supervisors) that were believed to help at-risk persons find and retain jobs. This training course was called the 'Dream to Goals' Training, and it included five modules:

- Types of employment;
- Finding a job (where to find job information, finding a safe job);
- Soft skills development (technical and vocational education or training options, job skills, interview skills);
- Managing money (budgeting, savings, debt and loans); and
- Developing an action plan to achieve goals.

Together, these two components of Treatment 1 were designed to increase the number of at-risk persons in target communes who can find and keep their jobs – and consequently reduce at-risk person unsafe migration[3] – to mitigate their vulnerabilities to trafficking. The evaluation was primarily designed to test whether this intervention helped at-risk persons obtain and retain jobs that preclude the need to migrate unsafely and thereby place them at risk for trafficking.

Treatment 2. 'Livelihood package plus customised technical assistance' intervention

The 'livelihood package plus customised technical assistance intervention' was a combination of the 'livelihood package' and additional interventions customised for the communes where it was implemented.

The implementing partner placed an emphasis on the importance of working with local communal leaders to identify and provide technical assistance specific to commune needs. These additional customised interventions included:

- Training on agriculture, animal raising, vegetable growing, fish raising, garment work and other industries;
- Orientations on financial literacy, saving, bookkeeping, fund management, marketing, facilitation, resource mobilisation and livelihoods;
- Grants to start small businesses; and
- Training on farmer associations, saving groups, organic rice producer groups, vegetable producers, animal or crop-cash transfer banks, cow banks, chicken banks, rice banks and vegetable banks.

Intervention design challenges

Our original impact evaluation design had called for the customised interventions to be compared directly to the livelihood package. In other words, we proposed that the customised interventions only be part of Treatment 2. However, as the intervention progressed, and due to lower than anticipated interest in the customised interventions, the implementing partner added the livelihood package to its customised interventions under Treatment 2. The implementing partner indicated that their experience suggested almost all those offered the livelihood package would accept it. So, in theory, all Treatment 2 participants would be exposed to the 'livelihood package' and some other interventions customised to their communes, as described above. We will discuss the implications of this complication later.[4]

Experimental design and sampling

Random assignment considerations and process

Commune as unit of assignment and addressing spillover. We employed an RCT design to examine the causal effects of the abovementioned trafficking prevention programmes on economic and other outcomes of at-risk persons. We randomly assigned Cambodian communes, the third level of administrative division following province and district, to three different research groups:

- *Treatment 1 (T1)* administered the livelihood package intervention.
- *Treatment 2 (T2)* administered the livelihood package as in Treatment 1, plus additional interventions customised to commune-specific needs, as described above.
- *Control (C)*, where no programming was implemented.

The rationale behind randomising at the commune level, versus the much smaller administrative unit village level, was to reduce the risk of spillover. There are 25 provinces in Cambodia, within which there are 163 districts, about 1,600 communes, and about 14,000 villages. The concern over using village as the unit of assignment was that members of a village not receiving workplace professionalism training would hear about the contents of the training from friends and family members from another village who were receiving the training. However, at-risk persons in one commune are less likely to share information about jobs and knowledge from their professionalism training with at-risk persons in a different commune because of the greater physical and social distances between mostly non-contiguous communes included in the evaluation. For the evaluation, we had a final commune sample size of 75 with 28 communes in T1, 19 in T2 and 28 in C.[5]

Sampling design

The original sampling and analysis plan was to use a sample of randomly selected households from both treatment and control group communes in a panel design. We would then collect survey data from the randomly selected households at baseline, before the programme begins, and then from the same households at endline, after the programme ends. The purpose of this design to randomly select households, screen the at-risk persons, and then follow them to endline as part of a panel survey was twofold: (1) it would allow the evaluation to identify at-risk persons in both the treatment and control groups in exactly the same way; and (2) it would allow the evaluation to estimate programme impacts for a sample of eligible at-risk persons, whether they self-select themselves to participate in the treatments or not, after being offered the opportunity to do so.

However, because the unit of analysis is individual households and the unit of random assignment is communes, we needed a sampling plan to select villages from each participating commune and households from each selected village in such a way as to maintain the comparability across the experimental groups. We also needed to identify individual at-risk persons within each selected household to be offered the opportunity

to participate in the treatments. The original sampling plan for villages, households and individuals is detailed below.

Selection of households and individuals for treatment. After the communes were randomly assigned to an experimental arm, we randomly selected 112 Control villages, 112 T1 villages and 76 T2 villages to be part of the sample. We randomly selected households to be part of the RCT, from the entire population of households within these sampled villages.

Evaluation team at-risk person screener (October 2016). The evaluation team, in consultation with USAID/Cambodia and implementing partner staff, designed a streamlined selection protocol that could be operationalised by field teams. This protocol was used to identify the most at-risk member within the randomly selected households from the selected villages during baseline data collection in October and November 2016, prior to the onset of the trafficking prevention programmes.[6] Within each household, the enumerator began the interview with the head of household, who answered questions about each household member and other characteristics at the household level. Using these responses for all household members who were between the ages of 18–39, the enumerator used the following process of elimination until one household member was identified:

- Actively job-seeking. If no household members are looking for a job or if more than one is, then separate the members by:
- Employment status. If more than one household member is unemployed or at the same level of employment, next separate members by:
- Age. Select the youngest member of the household if the above characteristics are equal for more than one household member.

This at-risk person screener resulted in a high percentage of female respondents in the sample, which could reflect the fact that many young, at-risk males had already migrated by the time we conducted baseline data collection activities.

Sampling design challenges and revisions

After the collection of baseline data, the implementing partner began offering the treatments to those identified as at risk during the baseline data collection. However, because of a significant delay in funding, many of the counter-trafficking activities were suspended until June 2018.

During that time, the implementing partner decided to develop its own at-risk person screening protocol to identify 'additional' at-risk persons to serve in Treatment 1 communes, without consulting the evaluation team. They used this protocol to select new at-risk persons to replace those who were selected and interviewed during the baseline data collection but could not be located or refused assistance when the implementing partner later visited the village to offer Treatment 1 assistance.

Implementing partner at-risk person screener (June 2018). The implementing partner at-risk person screening protocol included individuals who were aged 15–39 years old, and met at least one of the following criteria:

- Low education (below Grade 9);
- Low level of technical knowledge (never attended a technical skill training course);
- Unemployed and seeking low-wage jobs;
- Is from a household whose income is less than USD 2.15 per day per person;
- Is from a household where someone is a member of a group that traditionally experiences social discrimination or exclusion in Cambodia (for example, disabled, HIV or AIDS);
- Is from a women-headed household;
- Household has (self-reported) past incidents of domestic violence.

The implementing partner operationalised these selection criteria as follows:

- Meeting with village leaders, village volunteers, key informants, schoolteachers, representatives of community-based organisations and other stakeholders to list those who appear to fit the criteria for assessment.
- Conducting home visits and screening those listed persons based on the above criteria.
- Selecting at-risk persons who meet the criteria.

The result of the dual screening process, however, was that in treatment communes there were at-risk person households and individuals who were selected for treatment using one of two screening methods – the evaluation team screener from October 2016 used during baseline survey, and the implementing partner screener from June 2018 used to identify additional at-risk persons after the baseline survey. In addition,

the implementing partner operationalised their screening process by non-randomly selecting households in the study villages within the treatment communes, as opposed to the evaluation team screener, which was operationalised by randomly selecting households in the treatment communes. There are two concerns related to this dual screening through which treatment participants were selected:

1) Because households and at-risk persons who eventually ended up in the treatment groups were selected using a combination of the two screeners, there is no longer a comparable group of households and at-risk persons in the control group. Remember that the households in the control group that participated in the baseline survey were identified from randomly selected households using the evaluation team screener of October 2016 only.
2) We did not have baseline information for the subset of additional at-risk persons selected by the implementing partner in 2018. Remember that we only surveyed those at-risk persons in the two treatment groups at baseline who were identified using the evaluation team screener of October 2016.

As a result, we revised our sampling and analysis plan in March 2019 to use cross-sectional data from endline only to estimate impacts. This means that we used data from a randomly selected cross-sectional sample of households from the original, randomly assigned treatment and control communes to estimate impacts, which may or may not contain households who participated in the baseline survey.[7] We also revised our selection criteria at endline so we could survey beneficiaries identified under both screeners and to identify comparable at-risk person households in the control group as closely as possible. We explain the process below.

Revised selection criteria for treatment household and at-risk persons. For the endline survey, we included all at-risk persons who received services from both treatment groups, and their respective households. We planned to use the sample of households the implementing partner selected beneficiary[8] at-risk persons from, irrespective of whether the at-risk persons initially selected participated in the interventions. For the impact evaluation, it was critical to include all selected households, as opposed to the households who participated, because the households that chose to participate are a self-selected group, who may be more or less likely to produce the sought-after outcomes. However, only the list of beneficiaries who *actually* received services was available from the implementing partner. In the absence of a list of at-risk persons selected and offered treatment, we

included all these beneficiaries who actually received the services. We included all and not a sample of them because the total number was only slightly higher than our sample size requirements.

Revised selection criteria for control households and at-risk persons. We selected households and at-risk persons from the control villages using the implementing partner screening protocol of 2018 used to identify at-risk person households for the treatment groups. Although it is not ideal to identify the control group at a different time to when the treatment households and at-risk persons were identified, specifically after the treatments have begun, the implementing partner screening protocol of June 2018, discussed above, uses mostly time-insensitive criteria (such as education level) or criteria that can easily be fulfilled using retrospective information (such as whether a household has a self-reported past incident of domestic violence).

Data collection, ethical considerations and estimation strategy

Data collection and ethical considerations

The evaluation team collected two rounds of survey data that compiled demographic information on the respondents and their households, and asked questions about income, assets, savings, employment, migration behaviour, internet use, and to assess their knowledge and attitudes towards trafficking and informal broker or employment agencies.[9]

The baseline survey was conducted in October and November of 2016 with 7,852 respondents from 3,926 households in eight target provinces of Cambodia, and the endline survey was carried out between mid-November and early December of 2019 with 2,710 respondents from 2,710 households. For treatment communes, during the endline survey, enumerator teams worked with the village chief to identify respondents on the beneficiary at-risk person list provided by the implementing partner. Once identified, the village chief led the team to the respondent's house and the interview took place once fully informed consent was secured. In the control communes, the field supervisors worked with the village chief to identify at-risk person households before scheduling interviews. The village chief then accompanied the enumerator teams as they visited the selected households for interviews. In both the treatment and the control communes, village chiefs were not present during the actual interviews. Also, the respondents received a small

amount of financial compensation, one US dollar each, to participate in the interviews. The evaluation did not survey any at-risk persons below the age of 18 because of the ethical standards for human subject research set by the NORC institutional review board (IRB), related to the inherent challenge of documenting parental consent in Cambodia given the low literacy rates among the target population.

To supplement the results of the impact analysis and gain a better understanding of the programme implementation and the perspectives of the beneficiaries, we also conducted in-depth qualitative interviews. Overall, we interviewed six implementing partner staff members in Cambodia who worked on the trafficking prevention programme implementation, plus five individuals who declined to participate in any and five individuals who had participated in some trafficking prevention programming but subsequently dropped out of the activities.

Estimation strategy

We examined impacts on outcomes systematically from short to medium to long term in three different domains: (1) Knowledge of job-seeking platforms and other means of finding employment; (2) Attitudes towards migration and willingness to migrate; and (3) Economic outcomes, such as self-reported monthly income and savings.

Our original analysis plan was based on estimating 'treatment effects' as the difference in average levels of changes in outcomes over the evaluation period across the randomly assigned communes among the experimental groups controlling for household- and individual-level characteristics, including baseline levels of the outcomes of interest. There are two important considerations for arriving at internally valid impact estimates. First, we must use samples of individuals who have similar characteristics, on average, across the three groups – Treatment 1, Treatment 2 and Control. While we have randomly assigned communes, we planned to ensure that the unit of analysis would be similar by randomly selecting villages (or matching villages in the case of T2) within communes, and by randomly selecting households within villages, and then by using the same screening process for individual at-risk persons in all three experimental groups. Second, we planned to include in the analysis all households selected to be eligible for the treatments, irrespective of whether the identified at-risk person in the household took part in the treatments or not. This is because the eligible at-risk persons who chose to participate in the treatments, after being offered the opportunity to do so, are a self-selected group that may not be comparable to the at-risk persons who chose not to participate nor to

all at-risk persons in the control group who did not have the opportunity to participate. As such, the estimated treatment effect would have been what is known as an intent-to-treat (ITT) estimate.[10]

Estimation challenges and partial remedies

Revised estimation strategy

As mentioned above, the implementing partner changed several aspects of the treatment roll-out. While this required us to modify the impact evaluation design to use a cross-sectional endline-only sample as opposed to the panel-based sample originally intended, we still were able to retain the random assignment component of the design. The impact estimates still compared a set of at-risk persons and their households who had the opportunity to participate in the treatments to a set of comparable at-risk persons and their households that did not have the opportunity to receive any services. However, the unavailability of baseline values for individual outcomes resulted in a reduction of precision for our estimated impacts.

Issues with identifying comparable at-risk persons and potential bias

Changes in the at-risk person screening process made the original plan of identifying at-risk persons in both the treatment and control groups in exactly the same way, and estimating programme impacts for a sample of eligible at-risk persons irrespective of their self-selection status to the treatments, after being offered the opportunity to do so, extremely challenging. As discussed above, we ended up using those at-risk persons who *actually* participated in the treatments as our sample of treatment individuals at endline, as opposed to those who were eligible (identified through the screener).[11]

Because of the random assignment design, estimates of treatment effects would still be possible if we could successfully replicate the at-risk person screening process in the control communes. However, not every at-risk person who was identified by the screener participated in the treatments. Those who participated are likely different from those who did not participate. While we replicated the screener in the control communes to identify a comparable group to those who were offered services in the treatment communes, those at-risk persons in the control group may not be comparable to the at-risk persons in the treatment groups who self-selected themselves into the treatments. As we will describe below, there were important differences in the at-risk persons and their household characteristics between the two treatment groups and the control group. Although we controlled for these differences while estimating the treatment effects, there could be differences in unobserved

characteristics between the self-selected at-risk persons in the treatment groups and the identified at-risk persons in the control group, leading to bias in the treatment estimates.

One potential strategy to mitigate this bias would have been to identify a comparable group of at-risk persons from the control communes by using statistical matching (see, for example, Gertler et al., 2016 and Stuart, 2010). Unfortunately, our ability to statistically match beneficiary at-risk persons to control group at-risk persons was limited because of the lack of baseline data on both sets of at-risk persons and because of the lack of time and resources. Future evaluations should plan on implementing this stage if similar challenges arise.

Empirical findings

Here, we introduce some key findings from the evaluation. Readers interested in a more technical discussion of empirical findings, along with regression results should see Ahn et al. (2020).

Wide range of beneficiary age

For the evaluation, the original screener called for identifying at-risk persons within the age range of 18 and 39 years. This age range was selected for two primary reasons: (1) the evaluation was not designed to capture outcomes of minors (note the ethical considerations described in the previous section); and (2) the evaluation was designed to capture outcomes of young at-risk workers, especially because the treatments were focused on training at-risk persons in finding and retaining jobs. Because we were collecting the endline data in 2019, three years after the original start date of the intervention, we planned to survey at-risk persons between ages 18 and 42 to include the oldest at-risk persons (aged 39 at the start of the intervention and baseline survey).

The implementing partner screener used in June 2018 included individuals who were aged 15–39 years old, thus expanding the lower limit of the age range originally set by the evaluation design. However, the age range of actual beneficiaries of the treatments was much wider in practice.

Figure 9.1 shows the age distribution of both Treatment 1 and Treatment 2 beneficiaries. The two vertical lines show the age range called for by the evaluation design at endline, 18–42. A considerable number of beneficiaries fell outside this range – 19% for Treatment 1 and almost 50% for Treatment 2. The average age of the beneficiaries for Treatment 1 was 34 years and for Treatment 2 was 44.5 years.

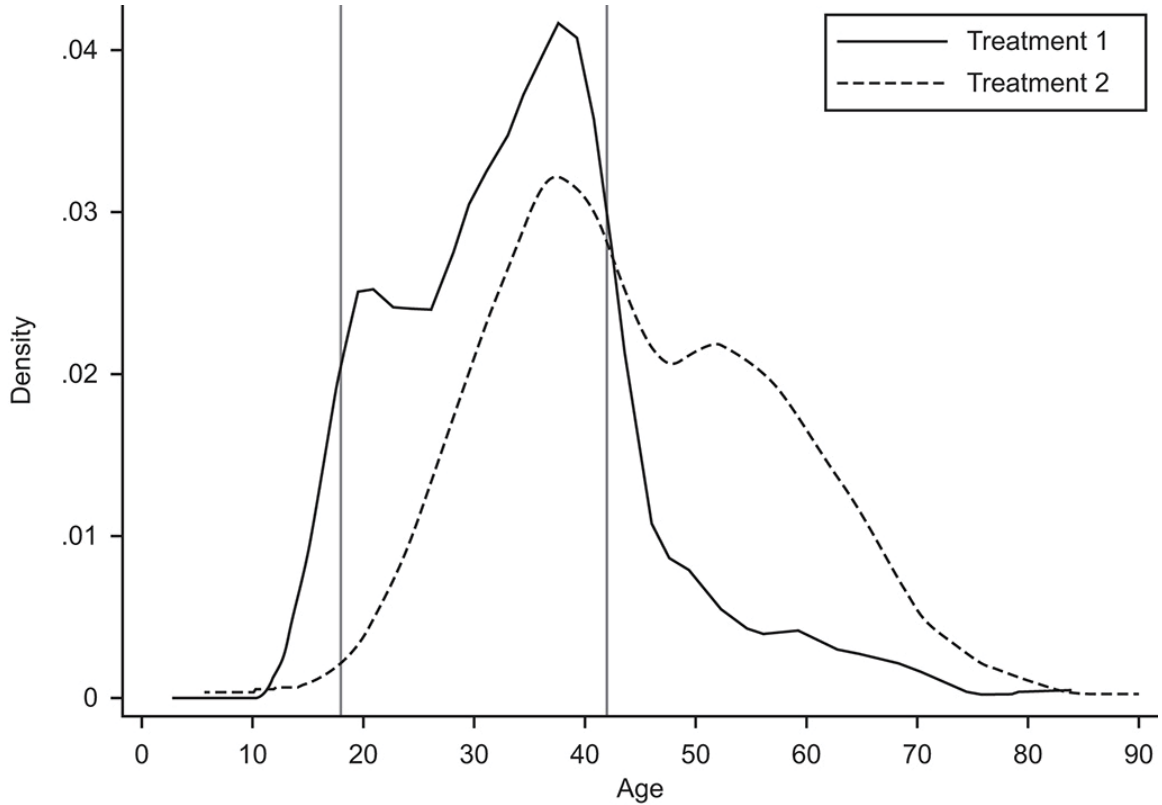

Figure 9.1 Age distribution of beneficiaries by treatment status

Source: Authors' calculations from implementing partner's programme data

The qualitative findings also confirmed that the job-seeking platform (Bong Pheak) and Soft Skills training was primarily attended by older beneficiaries. Interviews with implementing partner staff and programme beneficiaries revealed that many younger at-risk persons had already moved or migrated away from their villages and could not participate in these activities. The implementing partner also had difficulty getting the targeted group of people to participate because of their competing priorities ranging from paid work to unpaid household obligations. An implementing partner community facilitator described the challenge of recruiting beneficiaries in target villages: '… it's truly because they don't have time, especially those who work in factories or as a house caretaker for others'. Another staff member said that beneficiaries deferred their participation for future activities: 'They were busy when we called them, and they would prefer to join the next programme.' A staff member also noted: 'They [beneficiaries] have a narrow mindset when it comes to seeing the benefits of the programme. For example, they would ask, "What can I get from listening to you in the workshop or sharing knowledge the whole morning when I can get money from working for the whole morning, instead?"'

For Treatment 2, it is likely that the group included older beneficiaries because some of the customised packages were suitable for older adults, such as savings groups. But older adults (aged over 42 years) are less likely to be at risk of being trafficked and the evaluation was not focused on examining changes in outcomes for older adults.

Issues with implementation of Treatment 2

The reported implementation of Treatment 2 was not the same as either originally designed (the customised interventions only) or as revised (livelihood package plus customised interventions). As shown in Table 9.1, only 23% of the beneficiaries in the Treatment 2 group

Table 9.1 Programmes received by Treatment 2 (T2) beneficiaries

Programme received	Number of T2 beneficiaries	Included in impact evaluation
Received livelihood package (T1) only	445 (33%)	No
Received customised programmes only	605 (44%)	Yes
Received both soft skills (T1) and customised programmes	319 (23%)	Yes
Total	1,369 (100%)	924

Source: Authors' calculations from implementing partner's programme data

received both the livelihood package and the customised interventions as per the revised design. On the other hand, 44% of the beneficiaries in the Treatment 2 group received only the customised part of the intervention and no livelihood package. Because these beneficiaries in the Treatment 2 group received either the customised interventions only or a combination of the livelihood package and the customised interventions, interpretations of impacts (or non-impacts) on outcomes for this group are challenging.

In addition, 33% of the beneficiaries in the Treatment 2 group received just the livelihood package, rendering them indistinguishable from the Treatment 1 group. Because of this, we excluded this last group of beneficiaries – those who received only the livelihood package – from the Treatment 2 group.

Impacts on knowledge and usage of formal sources of information

There was some evidence of programme effectiveness in changing at-risk person knowledge and usage of formal sources of information, but uptake of the Bong Pheak job-seeking platform was low. Both interventions (Treatment 1 and Treatment 2) were successful in increasing at-risk persons' knowledge of formal sources of information about employment opportunities (for example, job websites, employment agencies). About 17% of at-risk persons in the control group stated that they know where to get information about employment opportunities. Treatment 1 resulted in an additional 9% of at-risk persons reporting that they know where to get this information. Similarly, Treatment 2 resulted in an additional 8% of at-risk persons reporting that they know where to get this information. But the percentage of at-risk persons who reported knowing this information was still very low – 26% and 25% in Treatment 1 and Treatment 2 groups, respectively. Very large impacts on shorter-term outcomes (for example, knowledge of at-risk persons regarding information sources for employment opportunities) may have been necessary to effect changes in longer-term outcomes.

Furthermore, at-risk persons in Treatment 1 group were more likely to use the Bong Pheak job-seeking platform to look for work, compared to at-risk persons in the control group. However, overall uptake of Bong Pheak, one of the main components of both interventions, was very low. Only 9% of at-risk persons in the Treatment 1 group and 2% at-risk persons in the Treatment 2 group used the Bong Pheak job-seeking platform. Less than half of the beneficiaries knew how to use the internet, and an even lower proportion had Facebook accounts. Furthermore, those who

knew how to use Facebook did not necessarily have the skills to operate a job-seeking platform outside of the Facebook or Messenger environment. Moreover, the implementing partner informed us that Facebook policies and operating criteria sometimes negatively affected how Bong Pheak worked in practice. Understanding these barriers to uptake will be important for future counter-trafficking interventions. Finally, we did not find any evidence that the interventions improved at-risk persons' confidence in either finding or keeping a job. This implies that merely knowing where to find legitimate employment did not translate into at-risk persons' confidence that they could find a job – or retain work.

However, on a positive note, for those who reported that they knew where to get information about employment opportunities, 33% in the Treatment 1 group and 12% of at-risk persons in the Treatment 2 group cited job websites as a source of information, compared to only 1% in the control group. This result is as expected because job skills training was the primary focus of Treatment 1. Notably, we also found that less than 2% of at-risk persons cited an informal broker as an information resource for employment across all three groups. Moreover, trusted informal sources such as family and friends remain the primary source of domestic employment opportunities for the at-risk persons.

Qualitative findings also paint a positive picture in terms of benefits of the programme activities. Several beneficiaries retained the salient knowledge about trafficking risks from the initial trainings related to the job-seeking platform (Bong Pheak) and soft skills, despite having attended the training two to three years prior to the endline survey. One beneficiary stated, '… there is [a] possibility that we can fall into human trafficking and their tricks, so if we want [a] job, we can contact Bong Pheak. So before accepting jobs there, we should contact Bong Pheak first, so they can find local jobs for us.' Another beneficiary said the training taught her to recognise the risks of migration, including labour and sex trafficking: 'I think that it's essential if we have a legal job, with none of the exploitation and abuse. As we apply for the jobs ourselves, they [Bong Pheak] show us [how] to find and apply for jobs ourselves with a reasonable and acceptable salary.'

Some beneficiaries also indicated they would share these lessons with family members. For example, one beneficiary reported:

> In the future, if I can find a job, I can give it to my siblings when they finish school or when they haven't found a job yet or do not know what to do. I can contact them to help my siblings. Whether to learn skills or when they already have skills but want to apply to a job, we can help our siblings or our relatives.

The interviews provided useful insights into the pedagogy of the interventions. Programme staff mentioned different methods of educating beneficiaries on the risks of migration and human trafficking, including lectures, videos, group discussion and group roleplay. One beneficiary who participated in the first half of the Bong Pheak and Soft Skills training session said that the roleplay exercise of looking for a job and then being confronted with certain risks was both 'fun' and helped the beneficiaries not feel stressed given the nature of the topic. There was a clear sense among beneficiaries and staff that videos were helpful tools for learning. Additionally, videos allowed beneficiaries with low literacy to better grasp the information, compared to instruction that involved writing words on a board in front of the beneficiaries.

Impacts on at-risk persons' attitudes and willingness to migrate

There was some evidence of programme effectiveness in at-risk persons' attitudes about human trafficking, but no changes in willingness to migrate. Both interventions had an impact on at-risk persons' views on human trafficking. Specifically, at-risk persons in both interventions were more likely than at-risk persons in the control group (by 9 percentage points in Treatment 1 and by 8 percentage points in Treatment 2) to believe that human trafficking was a big problem in Cambodia (80% in the control group, 89% in Treatment 1 group, and 88% in the Treatment 2 group agreed with the statement that human trafficking is a big problem in Cambodia). However, there was no statistical difference among at-risk persons in the view that migration can pose a big risk for trafficking. Furthermore, neither intervention had a statistically significant impact on at-risk persons' willingness to either migrate internally or internationally (66% of Treatment 1 and 62% of Treatment 2 beneficiaries reported being willing to migrate within Cambodia as opposed to 66% in the Control group; 22% of Treatment 1 and 27% of Treatment 2 beneficiaries reported being willing to migrate outside Cambodia as opposed to 21% in the Control group).

The implication of these findings is that the interventions were successful in conveying information about the magnitude of trafficking as a social problem, but not in changing at-risk persons' views of the risks associated with migration for work, either inside or outside of Cambodia. Because of the issues related to changing the at-risk person screener discussed above, the evaluation was not able to follow a group of at-risk persons identified pre-intervention to examine whether the interventions had any impacts on their decisions to migrate. That said, the difficulty in finding young male at-risk persons and the lack of impact

on the beneficiary at-risk persons' willingness to migrate suggest that the programme likely did not affect migration. However, without appropriate tracking, we could not assess whether there was a change in unsafe migration.

Impacts on economic outcomes

There was no evidence of improved economic outcomes for at-risk persons or their households. The interventions did not lead to significant improvements in at-risk person employment, nor did they lead to significant increases in at-risk persons' self-reported personal monthly income. However, Treatment 2, which included customised technical assistance such as for starting a savings group, did lead to a statistically significant impact on at-risk persons belonging to a savings group (that is, an increase of 9 percentage points relative to the control group). Fifteen per cent of Treatment 2 group reported to be part of a savings group compared to 6% in the control group. Despite this increase in participation in savings groups, we did not find any significant increases in at-risk persons' self-reported monthly savings for either of the treatment groups. One interpretation of these conflicting findings is that the evaluation's time horizon for observing impacts on monthly income and/or savings was too short, and that we might have seen positive impacts over a longer time.

In fact, the qualitative interviews of implementing partner field staff and programme beneficiaries suggested that the savings groups were very well received by at-risk persons and were the best-attended activity. For example, regarding the popularity of the savings group activity, one staff member said 'First, they understand its advantages. If they save, they could gain more and get more from the community loan. The loan could help them start an investment or any other career they choose. It is convenient for them.' Another staff member described the benefits of the savings group for potential borrowers: 'The borrower is also a member of the community saving group. They can also gain from the accumulated interest because they also put in money for savings. They can use that money to further invest in animal husbandry and planting crops.' These positive findings about the savings groups were echoed by a staff member, who believed that the impacts of the groups were enhanced when beneficiaries learnt from one another: '[T]hese groups conduct a meeting wherein they share information with each other. So, knowledge is gained from people to people who are part of the activity.'

Conclusion

This chapter describes the process of conducting an RCT, including design, sampling, analysis and findings, in the context of a trafficking prevention programme in Cambodia. The trafficking prevention programme was part of a larger project funded by USAID/Cambodia that implemented several programmes aimed at the prevention of unsafe migration contributing to labour and sex trafficking from Cambodia, the protection of survivors, the prosecution of perpetrators and the building of partnerships among public and private entities working on counter-trafficking. USAID commissioned NORC at the University of Chicago as an independent evaluator to examine the impacts of the trafficking prevention programmes.

While RCT is the gold standard when it comes to establishing causal impacts of social programmes and policies (Zhang, Chapter 3, this volume), several practical challenges may hamper the ability of the evaluators to generate unbiased estimates of impacts. This chapter provides an example of such practical challenges researchers may encounter in conducting an RCT, particularly when the implementation of the programme is carried out by a different party.

In the case of the trafficking prevention programmes in Cambodia, although the evaluation attempted to focus on a younger age group deemed to be the most 'at-risk' individuals for trafficking, the implemented programme included a much wider range of beneficiaries in terms of age. As a result, the evaluation sample did not entirely consist of the age group the evaluation team identified as the high-risk group at the outset of the evaluation. Thus, the results may not be generalisable to young, male at-risk persons in Cambodia. This implies that a different strategy and focus is warranted from both the implementation parties and the funding agencies to target young, male at-risk persons. The fact that many young men were not available to participate in our evaluation suggests that many are still migrating for work and will continue doing so. Developing programmes that educate young men about the risks of labour trafficking – and evaluating those programmes to identify protective factors against unsafe migration for work, as well as understanding at-risk persons' decision-making regarding migration – is an important area of programming that merits continued attention. Other researchers, in recent literature, have also called for interventions to prevent exploitative migration that are based on strong evidence and theories rooted in the social, political and economic realities of the migration context (for example, Zimmerman et al., 2021; Kiss and Zimmerman, Chapter 8, this volume).

Furthermore, challenges in implementation weakened the strength of the impact evaluation. Several adjustments were made to the original implementation plans that made it challenging to maintain and ensure the rigour of the evaluation. First, the changes in the screening process after the baseline data was collected led to a different group than had been identified for follow-up for both treatment and control groups during the baseline. As a result, the evaluation team had to change the design to shift from the original panel design to a cross-sectional endline-only design, because the new group of identified at-risk persons lacked baseline data. While the RCT design was still intact and impact estimates were internally valid, the lack of baseline controls resulted in some loss of precision. Second, lack of baseline information also meant that the plans and processes set by the evaluation team to follow the at-risk persons and observe their migration behaviours were also redundant after the changes in the screening process.

Finally, the non-random selection of households in the treatment communes using information from village key informants made it challenging for the evaluation team to identify a comparable group of households in the control communes. At-risk persons who were selected to participate in the programmes are likely to be different from at-risk persons who were offered services after being selected through the screener developed by the implementing partner. While communes were randomly assigned and the interventions were only offered to the treatment communes, non-random selection of households and self-selection of at-risk persons into the programme could have introduced bias into our estimates.

The lesson is that the funding agency must take a coordinated approach to add to its learning agenda from the implementation and evaluation of its counter-trafficking programmes. The most scientifically rigorous and useful learning can be achieved by coordinating and aligning the goals of different stakeholders that contribute to a common learning agenda. Where such coordination is potentially hard to impose – say, due to the expected vagaries of the operating environment – then the funding agency should probably save its funds and conduct a less rigorous and/or alternative evaluation that may shed some light on the contribution of the programmes in question (Sidebottom et al., Chapter 4, this volume).

Notwithstanding the challenges encountered during this RCT, it provided a lot of useful information for both the implementing partner and the funding agency. In fact, USAID extended their four-year Cambodia Counter Trafficking Programme in October 2019 to intensify, sustain and consolidate selected models of prevention and protection. In particular, the programme committed to strengthening the project's

savings group model, which was found to be popular among beneficiaries in our evaluation.

Key messages

- Conducting an RCT can be challenging and requires significant efforts, time and resources. Well-executed RCTs require careful design to avoid issues such as contamination between groups, sampling design to ensure representability of the target population, an ethical data collection plan and an estimation strategy that produces unbiased estimates of impacts.
- Successful RCTs require close coordination between the funding agency, implementer and evaluator to ensure the integrity of design and delivery of the planned intervention. Deviations make it challenging to maintain the rigour of the RCT and can be avoided if different stakeholders agree on common learning goals from the beginning.
- RCTs are the gold standard in examining causal impacts. However, researchers must use caution when interpreting results: 'a positive impact' may not be meaningful if the impact is small, or a null impact may not be useless as it may indicate a need for a different intervention strategy.

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Notes

1. For more details, please see Winrock International (n.d.) and Winrock International (2020).
2. For more information on the Bong Pheak platform, please see Appendix E of Ahn et al. (2020).
3. For this evaluation, 'unsafe migration' is defined as the use of informal-sector – and often unscrupulous – middlemen or brokers, which was deemed unsafe by the implementing partner and USAID/Cambodia staff based on their previous work in the country.
4. See Ahn et al. (2020) for more details.
5. To improve the precision of the impact estimates (and thus improve the statistical power of the evaluation), we used stratification at the unit of assignment – the communes – before random assignment. Interested readers should see details in Ahn et al. (2020). For a technical overview on stratification in an RCT, see Duflo et al. (2008).
6. This also had the benefit of overcoming a major logistical and operational challenge regarding selection of participants in the control communes: The implementing partner would not likely know who they would be at the start of the evaluation. If these at-risk persons were told that they were to be (or might be) selected for later programme participation, then this would risk contaminating them. Some way would have to be found to identify likely candidates for the counter-trafficking programme in these communes without telling them.
7. It is not strictly necessary to conduct a baseline survey in an RCT because the treatment and the control groups are similar in expectation after randomisation. However, there are several reasons researchers may want to collect baseline data in an RCT. For an excellent overview on this topic, see Duflo et al. (2008).
8. It is our experience that implementing partners near universally refer to programme participants as beneficiaries, irrespective of whether they derive a benefit from taking part in a given programme. We stick with that term here to reflect the original assignment.
9. Interested readers can review the survey instrument included in Appendix D of Ahn et al. (2020).
10. Interested readers should review Duflo et al. (2008) for an overview on this topic.
11. This is because only the list of participants was available from the implementing partner, not the list of eligible households and at-risk persons based on their screener of July 2018. While we had the list of eligible households and at-risk persons based on the evaluation team's October 2016 screener, the fact that eligibility was determined using two different screeners made our list incomplete.

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10

Evaluation of a trial of Independent Child Trafficking Advocates

Patricia Hynes

Introduction

In the United Kingdom (UK), there have been calls for independent guardians for unaccompanied children and young people arriving in England and Wales since at least 2009 (Pearce et al., 2009). However, it was not until Section 48 of the 2015 Modern Slavery Act 2015[1] that Independent Child Trafficking Advocates (ICTAs) were created[2] across some local authorities[3] in England and Wales.[4] Section 48 detailed how the Secretary of State was required, no later than nine months after the date of the Act being passed, to lay before Parliament a report on steps proposed in relation to the powers conferred under this Section.

From September 2014 a trial of a new ICTA service commenced, which was run by the children's charity Barnardo's, across 23 local authority areas[5] in England. The Home Office commissioned a parallel independent evaluation of this trial, appointing a research team from the University of Bedfordshire from September 2014 for one year up to August 2015, to produce a final report to be laid before Parliament in December 2015. This was the first time a trial and evaluation of Advocates for children who had experienced trafficking had taken place in England. The evaluation was to look at how the ICTA scheme was implemented, how the role of ICTAs worked in practice and the impact of ICTAs for children. For this latter aim, the evaluation used a random allocation process, prescribed by the Home Office in the initial tender document, as a basis for comparing children supported by ICTAs relative to those receiving existing provision. A mixed methods approach using both qualitative and quantitative research tools was employed, including

case file analysis, surveys, focus groups and interviews with ICTAs, key stakeholders and children.

This chapter will describe the methods and key findings from the ICTA evaluation. It will then discuss two further issues that arose as part of this evaluation, and which are relevant to the aims of this volume.[6] Firstly, the challenging task of obtaining Research Ethics Committee (REC) approval and Data Sharing Agreements (DSAs) from the 23 local authorities taking part in the evaluation, plus the necessary associated ethics approvals. Secondly, details of the final evaluation report which was laid before Parliament alongside a government report that detailed findings and conclusions of the independent evaluation but with an additional focus on (a) a lack of evidence that ICTAs reduced the number of children going missing and (b) limited benefits found of ICTAs' impact on immigration and criminal justice processes. In contrast to the independent evaluation's main conclusions that the specialist ICTA service had been successful, as measured in relation to 'several beneficial outcomes for trafficked children' (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 39), the government report described evidence from the independent evaluation as 'equivocal', which resulted in a delayed introduction to the ICTA provisions detailed within the Modern Slavery Act at that time.

The evaluation study described in this chapter was conducted during a period when reports of child sexual exploitation (CSE) in towns and cities across the UK such as Rotherham, Rochdale, Manchester and Oxford were firmly on the agenda of local authorities (for discussion of how responses to CSE changed dramatically over this period see, for example, Cockbain & Tufail, 2020). An Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham had just been published in August 2014 and, during the evaluation, the Government's response of March 2015 called for better sharing of information.[7] At that time, services and training for CSE for UK-born children were developed and developing across the local authorities within the trial and evaluation. These were resourced separately from services around human trafficking and children involved were therefore not always referred into the UK's National Referral Mechanism (NRM).[8] There were also established services for unaccompanied minors seeking asylum, refugees and missing children in many of these locations.

The broader context in which research or evaluation is being conducted cannot be ignored, and the UK's concern at the time with controlling numbers of irregular migrants saw, from 2012, the creation of policies and legislation promoting a 'hostile environment'. As Clayton and Firth (2021) outlined, the intention to create this 'hostile environment', announced by the then Home Secretary, Theresa May, was the aim

of the Immigration Act 2014. This situation was then escalated by the 2016 Immigration Act. The timing of these Acts, sitting either side of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, has since been explored by Hodkinson et al., who argue that 'state action to outlaw modern slavery is flawed, counter-productive and disingenuous' given the environment created in which a hostile state 'vulnerabilises migrants' (2021, p. 40). Clayton and Firth suggest that while the hostile environment was created for those with no permission to be in the UK, 'the hostility spills out onto lawful residents' (2021, p. 58). It is clear that the trajectory of asylum and immigration legislation and policy has resulted in any past focus on integration efforts being replaced by a culture of hostility, with the overt creation of this 'hostile environment' running counter to efforts to identify trafficking (Hynes, 2009, 2022). It is in this context that children and young people continue to go missing and/or become vulnerable to exploitation.

The subsequent roll-out of ICTAs (later re-named Independent Child Trafficking Guardians [ICTGs]) has since been glacial and staggered with evaluations (Keeble et al., 2018; Kohli et al., 2019; Shrimpton et al., 2020; Shrimpton et al., 2024) built-in at each step, plus the inclusion of a focus on ICTAs within an independent review of the Modern Slavery Act (Field et al., 2018). Now, almost a decade later, this national service still only reaches two-thirds of local authorities across England and Wales, with a full roll-out pending. To end, this contribution provides brief details of this roll-out and some concluding remarks.

Evaluation aims, approach, methods and characteristics of children

Evaluation is embedded in Home Office programmes and delivery, and the trial and evaluation of ICTAs was no exception. The complexity of the ICTA service with its varying policies and practices across 23 local authorities and the short evaluation timescale demanded a range of research methods be utilised. Local authorities were required to participate in the evaluation but received no additional resources for the trial or engagement with the research effort. Their subsequent levels of engagement were varied and in some areas there were difficulties around accessing data for some children, resulting in some data collection challenges. Part way through the evaluation the research design was refined and simplified to ensure that the evaluation became 'lighter' for local authorities. The evaluation design therefore necessarily looked in more detail at children using the ICTA service, resulting in better quality data for children

receiving these services and less information on the impact of the service relative to existing child protection and safeguarding provision.

A 12-month trial and evaluation period is a short time in which to build, deliver and evaluate a new and complex service for children, particularly given the then low levels of trafficking knowledge and awareness across some of the local authority areas. In the early months, there was concern that the throughput of numbers of children who would be involved in the trial and evaluation would be too low to draw meaningful conclusions but, ultimately, this early concern became redundant as numbers increased. Despite these anticipated limitations, the evaluation sought to answer three key questions, relating both to process and impact:

1) How was the advocacy scheme implemented?
2) How did the role of the Advocate work in practice?
3) What was the impact of the advocacy scheme for trafficked children compared to existing provision?

To respond to each of these questions, a mixed methods approach and range of qualitative and quantitative methods were used, allowing triangulation of sources (see Table 10.1).

Table 10.1 Summary of methods

Method	Data
Alternative allocation process via local authority	Core demographic information from 158 children referred into trial from all participating local authorities
Case file analysis	158 case files examined (17 with limited information)
Interviews with children	30 (21 in 'advocacy' group and 9 in 'comparator' group)
Interviews with ICTAs	6 (full number of ICTAs employed in trial)
Interviews with external stakeholders	18 (12 with operational and 6 with strategic stakeholders)
Focus groups with ICTAs, Barnardo's operational and strategic managers	9 (completed at 3 separate intervals during the 12-month timeframe)
Stakeholder online surveys	2 (at separate intervals – total 116 respondents)
Examination of records of ICTA training, supervision and use of volunteers	All records available prior to 31 July 2015 cutoff point

Questions 1 and 2 – the *how* questions – required provision of rich information and an understanding of the context in which the advocacy scheme was implemented and worked in practice, across participating local authorities. To answer these questions, in-depth interviews with ICTAs, stakeholders with operational or strategic roles and children, plus focus groups with ICTAs and Barnardo's managers were carried out. Analysis of secondary data such as records of trainings was also completed where available.

Question 3 – on the *impact* of Advocates compared to existing provision – required a more quantitative approach. This also included a randomisation process, as prescribed by the Home Office, with facets of experimental designs to engender confidence in its robustness and trustworthiness of its findings. The evaluation used an alternate allocation process as a basis for comparing children supported by ICTAs relative to existing provision. As per standard practice, all children identified as potentially having been trafficked were referred by a broad range of statutory and third sector stakeholders to the local authority for assessment. Following referral, a designated Single Point of Contact (SPoC) recorded core demographic information about each child and then allocated the child alternatively into one of two groups for this trial on a strictly chronological basis:[9]

1) An 'advocacy' group
2) A 'comparator' group

The 'advocacy' group children were then referred (with a target of doing so within two hours where possible) to the ICTA service for the allocation of an ICTA, in addition to receiving existing statutory services. The 'comparator' group children continued to receive child protection and safeguarding services as usual, based on the particular local authority's policies, practices and human trafficking awareness levels (for further details of this allocation process see the final report of the evaluation, Kohli et al., 2015). This type of randomised allocation and use of a 'control' group is often difficult to justify ethically if it means services are being withheld in any way. However, in this evaluation all children continued to receive child protection and safeguarding services, with no child subject to 'waitlist' types of 'control' groups. In other words, concerns about the use of a 'control group' in this instance were overcome, as children continued to receive the benefits of mature and existing child protection and safeguarding services, and were not in a worse position than if the evaluation had not taken place or kept waiting for service provision. Around half of the children were allocated ICTAs as well as existing provision.

Data from the ICTA services were fully available to the research team throughout. Access to data from existing service provision was mainly through local authority case files, following negotiation of access, ethical approvals and having DSAs signed. Interviews with children (n=30) were conducted with those in the 'comparator' group (n=9) being interviewed about standard child protection services and the more accessible children in the 'advocacy' group (n=21) interviewed about their ICTAs plus other services made available to them.

A case file data extraction spreadsheet was designed to obtain data from existing local authority service provision, developed with further scrutiny from members of an Expert Reference Group, comprising of legal and third sector experts. This data extraction spreadsheet contained space to record basic demographic information about each child, their involvement in social care, health and education services, criminal justice involvement, immigration status, exploitation type, the number of 'missing' episodes held on file and a range of other key information. Activities related to the child were also detailed such as whether there had been prompt initial contact between the allocated worker and the child, whether the child was accompanied to assessments and other meetings, and if the child had been helped to prepare a statement or give evidence. A key set of questions related to the frequency of contact (at 0–3, 4–6, 7–9 and 10+ months) with children (face to face or by telephone, skype or email) and with which type of professional. Evaluation team members travelled to local authority offices to extract data with details of children anonymised at the point of data extraction. Data analysis then involved the research team using *t* tests of statistical significance at 3, 6 and 9 months, although data for 9 months were limited as many cases had not matured to that point.

Of the 158 children allocated to the trial, 86 were randomly assigned to the 'advocacy' group and 72 to the 'comparator' group. There was a varied pattern of allocation across the 23 local authorities, with no allocation from six local authorities who confirmed they had no known cases of children being trafficked during the period of the trial. Ultimately, 158 case files of children were examined, with a balanced gender split (f=79/m=78, plus one unborn child), with restricted information on 17 cases. In term of age, 59% were between 13 and 16 years old, 29% between 17–18 years old and 31 had been age assessed (23 were disputed) and proposed in a further 11 cases, but this data was missing in a number of files.

All children were seen as having *social care* needs. Just under half (n=78) of the children had been referred into the NRM,[10] mainly those

in the 'advocacy' group allocation. From these 78 referrals, 43 received a positive Reasonable Grounds decision (59% in the 'advocacy' group and 42% in the 'comparator' group) with the remainder either pending or having received a negative outcome. Ultimately, 11 of the 43 who had received a positive Reasonable Grounds decision received a positive Conclusive Grounds decision and 6 received a negative Conclusive Grounds decision during the evaluation. Most EU and non-EU children were 'looked after' by local authorities (n=72%) and accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 (n=66%) with placements in foster or residential care or living with parents.

The types of exploitation they had encountered were sexual (30%), unknown (25%), criminal (16%), labour (13%) and domestic servitude (2%). Multiple forms of exploitation were recorded in 21 cases (13%), which aligns with child maltreatment more broadly wherein abuse can occur in multiple forms. Of the UK-born children included, sexual exploitation was the primary exploitation type in 20 out of 28 cases.

Immigration status: Most of the 158 children were from non-EU countries (n=110), mainly from Vietnam (n=45) and Albania (n=28). UK children (n=28) were included at that time in the EU countries total (n=47). The non-EU group saw 73 of the 110 children claiming asylum or having immigration claims being clarified.

In terms of their involvement with the *criminal justice* process, 44 children out of the overall sample were involved in proceedings as a 'victim' of trafficking (34 in the 'advocacy' group and 10 in the 'comparator' group). There were 8 cases where children were involved in the criminal justice process as an 'offender' (6 in the 'advocacy' group and 2 in the 'comparator' group) where they had been compelled to be involved in crime, and a further 6 where children were involved both as a 'victim' and 'offender' (4 in the 'advocacy' group and 2 in the 'comparator' group). There were further cases where there was either no involvement or no mention of their involvement in criminal justice processes.

Key evaluation findings

The final report, published in December 2015, found that the role of ICTAs was seen positively by most professionals as well as by the children involved (Kohli et al., 2015). The evidence generated and presented in the evaluation led to the conclusion that the ICTA service had 'been

successful as measured in relation to several beneficial outcomes for trafficked children' (Kohli et al., 2015, p.39). These outcomes included keeping children visible to support services, making relationships based on trust with children and other stakeholders, sharing expertise in human trafficking, supporting children through complex situations and speaking up for children when necessary. It was also found that ICTAs were able to maintain momentum in the cases allocated to them while also having a positive impact on the quality of child protection and safeguarding decision-making around the child. Overall, the available evidence clearly 'added value' to existing services with children being kept 'safely visible', forming 'relationships of trust and credibility' and children being helped to 'orientate to and navigate their ways through complex circumstances' (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 39). ICTAs also spoke up for children when necessary.

The final report also broke down findings in relation to the three questions the evaluation had sought to answer. The first question, on how the advocacy scheme had been implemented, reflected the presence, good reputation and operational strengths of Barnardo's when working with this population of children and young people. The original intention to refer children to the ICTA service within two hours, or as soon as practically possible, did not tend to occur in practice. Reasons for this included unfamiliarity with the trial in its early stages and the logistics of a distributed referral hub across 23 local authorities. The lack of additional resources for local authorities was also considered to be a potential part of the reason for this lack of timely referrals. The ICTA service chased referrals and sought clarifications where necessary throughout. As outlined in the evaluation, over time 'a feature of the service became the capacity to seek and find information in a robust, determined and sometimes challenging way when delays occurred' (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 17).

Question 2 on the way the roles of the ICTAs worked in practice revealed workload and training issues. Caseloads were variable but averaged 14 cases per ICTA, lower than those of social workers who at the time held an average of 23 cases each. This variance potentially explained how the frequency of contact by Advocates over telephone, Skype and email was found to be statistically significantly higher than contact by social workers at 3 and 6 months. A 'hub and spoke' model to provide services and reach across ICTA services ensured these cases remained visible. This resulted in Advocates working long hours and spending considerable time travelling long distances.

With the development of a new service addressing the multiple and varying needs of children affected by human trafficking, ICTAs came from diverse backgrounds, some of whom had social work or youth work qualifications. Training by Barnardo's included national and international standards of care such as the EU Fundamental Rights Agency's guidance on training for those working with trafficked children (FRA, 2015). ICTAs were also able to undertake the UK's Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) Level 2 training to become regulated providers of legal advice. Other trainings included child protection law, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, advocacy skills, child development in cross-cultural contexts and acting as an 'appropriate adult' in UK child protection cases across social care, immigration and criminal justice contexts.

ICTAs worked with social care, immigration and criminal justice systems and processes. All children and young people had social care needs, non-EU children were also assisted with immigration matters and both EU and non-EU children supported within criminal justice processes. ICTAs were found to be working across these processes, with independence from each and therefore able to hold a holistic view of the child, their life and their needs. For children this meant they were able to have one person who could explain all processes to them in a clear way. While work with social care and immigration took up much of their time in the initial phases of working with individual children, as time went by ICTAs were able to introduce 'a sense of normality into the children's lives, as a way of glimpsing a possible future outside the "trafficking" world' (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 23).

Children within the ICTAs' caseloads came from the UK, the EU and from across non-EU borders. The evaluation found that there were some variations in the ways the ICTA service worked with these children, with those trafficked across borders appearing to be more isolated from protective networks, unfamiliar with their rights and to have immigration questions. UK-born children were embedded within networks of protection, and it was found that they initially had difficulties in trusting and understanding the role of an ICTA in their lives. For example, in CSE cases, a range of other professionals were involved in their lives, some of whom questioned the additional need for an ICTA. This is reflective of the siloed nature of provision around exploitation in the UK more broadly, with historical services developed specifically for CSE and other forms of harm. In the words of one stakeholder:

> We had such a turnover of issues in [the organisation], at the moment it's CSE. Next month it will be FGM [female genital

> mutilation]. Next month it will be the latest fallout from the serious case review. … I think by having the CTA [Child Trafficking Advocate] based in the organisation, it keeps trafficking in people's minds. (interview with strategic stakeholder)

The evaluation also found that ICTAs were able to help orient other professionals by piecing together information about children and holding specialist knowledge that benefitted their practice.

The final question on the impact of the advocacy scheme for children compared to existing provision revealed how children in the 'advocacy' group were very positive about their Advocates, and stakeholders from social care, immigration and criminal justice contexts were largely positive about the service. Children in the 'advocacy' group saw the value of their ICTAs and the time they invested in their lives:

> **Interviewer:** And what is it that made you learn to trust him? What was it about [the Advocate]?
> **Child:** He came two or three times and I wasn't speaking to him, but he continued coming.
>
> (interview with child)

Several 'comparator' group children spoke of the way their social workers constantly changed whereas 'advocacy' group children remained allocated to the same ICTA over the course of the trial. Stakeholders also suggested that ICTAs retained a focus on the child: 'In strategy meetings between several government agencies, the advocate remained the voice of the child at all times, and often pulled lengthy discussions back to the basic principle of the child's views and interests' (lawyer, stakeholder survey).

A small minority of stakeholders felt that the service overlapped with existing service provision and 'any additional resource would be better spent on social work services' (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 6). One local authority was clear that they would not refer CSE cases of UK-born children to the ICTA service, or to the NRM at that time, as it already had established provision for these children.

Although not a specific aim at the commencement of the evaluation, children going missing from care became a clear question and cause for concern. In this trial and evaluation, there was 'no evidence that having an Advocate led to the reduction in the number of children going missing' (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 29). Chi-square analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between the 'advocacy' and 'comparator' groups relating to whether a child went missing or not. However, it was also the case that in some instances children went missing before

they were referred by the local authority into the advocacy service. When children went missing before referral, Advocates had alerted local authorities about the risks of children disappearing from placements the ICTA service considered unsuitable. ICTAs were, however, unable to easily influence decisions about accommodation provision. There was, however, 'substantial evidence that … advocates continued to coordinate formal networks of protection to ensure that the child's absence did not result in cases being forgotten or closed' (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 30). One Advocate interviewed suggested a role for a specialist Advocate to focus entirely on missing children:

> We need an Advocate for the missing to make sure that somebody is constantly going, 'Why aren't you following this case up? Where is this person? What are the police doing?' That could be a job for one person because I'm finding with some of mine that I'm the only person who's interested. (focus group with Advocates)

Going missing is a key indicator used to identify human trafficking in Statutory Guidance (Home Office, 2025) and Practice Guidance (HM Government, 2011) and other lists of trafficking indicators developed internationally and nationally. Some 46% of children (72 of the 158 children) had at least one 'missing episode' recorded during this evaluation. Of these 72 children, 27 remained missing at the end of the evaluation period, and of these 27 children, 23 were Vietnamese nationals. The evaluation recommended further research on missing children, particularly Vietnamese children, and how an advocacy service could become part of a coordinated response to missing children.

A 12-month evaluation is a short time to evaluate a complex trial and a number of operational issues were flagged as requiring further work, including the issue of children going missing. While social care was initially a key focus for ICTAs, as the trial progressed this widened to immigration and criminal justice services (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 39). In all, 44 children were involved in criminal justice proceedings as a victim of trafficking (34 in the 'advocacy' group, 10 in the 'comparator' group), eight cases as an offender where the child had been compelled to undertake criminal activity by traffickers (six in the 'advocacy' group, two in the 'comparator' group) and in a further six cases, the child was involved both as a victim and an offender. While ICTAs' involvement in the criminal justice area was less than in social care and immigration, this involvement emerged from two to nine months after allocation to an Advocate. ICTAs' work meant that children understood what

being part of an investigation could mean, were accompanied to court proceedings, and court processes and outcomes were explained to them in ways that children could absorb. ICTAs also advised the courts through expert witness statements and through giving oral testimony amongst other actions.

Ethical underpinning

The ethics of conducting evaluations or research with children who have themselves experienced human trafficking are intricate and difficult to navigate. The complexity, sensitivity and high-profile nature of this evaluation demanded clear and ethical principles, not least to ensure the involvement of children in the evaluation was ethically sound. In response, an Ethical Protocol was developed by the research team to elaborate on children's participation and a named contact was provided within the University for any issues relating to the conduct of the research team that a child or other person may have. A range of ethical frameworks informed the Protocol and attention was paid to the global movement to improve the ethical treatment of children during research (Graham et al., 2013). Drawing on an NSPCC Ethical Protocol for work in contexts of child abuse and neglect (Radford et al., 2011) the evaluation Protocol elaborated on key ethical issues of conducting research with children:

- Minimising 'harm' or potential distress to children involved in the evaluation of the trial and maximising benefits.
- Negotiating 'informed consent' with children involved at different stages of the evaluation.
- Data protection, confidentiality and limits to confidentiality if any threat of imminent or immediate harm was disclosed.
- Child protection responsibilities if abuse, the threat or potential threat of significant harm or abuse was disclosed, and reporting mechanisms to Local Authority and Barnardo's services in such instances.
- Ensuring distress to evaluation team members was minimised and their safety assured.

Throughout, the focus of the evaluation remained on services experienced rather than the child's experiences of abuse and exploitation. Research tools developed included interview guides, focus

group schedules, information sheets and informed consent forms for adults and children, Qualtrics surveys and a data extraction tool for case files (14 research tools in total). Age- and language-appropriate information sheets and informed consent forms were used for children and young people. Draft DSAs were devised as well as a random allocation spreadsheet and a letter to local authorities with instructions for the SPoCs allocation process.

Ethical considerations were guided throughout by the safety and best interests of children and in line with the principle of 'beneficence', which refers to the obligation to improve the status, rights and/or wellbeing of children in research (Israel & Hay, 2006, pp. 95–111). Limitations of a one-year evaluation were known at the outset, and became part of ethical discussions, particularly how realistic an original aim to evaluate the longer-term impacts of the advocacy service was in the space of 12 months. It was also pointed out by the practitioners that some of the processes that the children were going through were unlikely to be resolved within one year. This included the asylum process and any criminal justice proceedings which, at that time, were known to take months if not years to be resolved.

Obtaining REC approvals proved to be particularly challenging. The review process involved 27 RECs – two from within the University of Bedfordshire, Barnardo's, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), and one each from the 23 local authorities involved in the trial and evaluation. Ultimately 25 applications were submitted, with two local authorities not engaging in the ethical application process and consequently not involved in the trial. As can be seen in Table 10.2, across the 23 of the anonymised local authorities, most submissions for ethical approval occurred in the first month of the evaluation and a number were approved in a matter of weeks thereafter. However, others took longer to gain approval – from three to ten months – and up to 12 months in one instance.

The need for DSAs was a further challenge which in some cases was met within the early months, but in others delayed data collection until the final months of the evaluation. Data collection during these later months highlighted differences in practice across the local authorities, particularly in relation to trafficking-adjacent and pre-existing services such as CSE services for UK-born children which, as noted earlier, were resourced separately from human trafficking services.

Table 10.2 Local authority research ethics approvals and data sharing agreements: anonymised timescale (monthly)

	Months to gain approval											
Local authority	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**
1	S			A D								
2	S	A			D							
3	S	A				D						
4	S				D	A						
5		S			A D							
6	S	A					D					
7		S			A	D						
8	S	A										
9	S	A										
10	S	A										
11	S	A										
12	S	A										
13			S		A							
14				S	D*							
14		S				A D						
16		S					A D					
17					S		A D**					
18	S								A D			
19	S									A D		
20	S	A								D		
21	S											A D
22												
23												

S REC papers submitted
A REC approved
D DSA approved
D* Alternative to DSA approved
D** no requirement from local authority for DSA

Government response to evaluation findings

At the time that the above evaluation was published, HM Government simultaneously published a report in response to the evaluation, with both presented to Parliament pursuant to Section 48(7) of the Modern Slavery Act. The government report described the overall evidence about the impact of ICTAs during the trial as 'equivocal', with aspects of the trial showing promise but not delivering on 'some key outcomes that trafficked children are entitled to expect' (HM Government, 2015, p. 3). Two key issues were brought forward. Firstly, that there was 'no evidence that advocates led to a reduction in the number of children going missing', and secondly, that there was 'limited evidence of benefits in terms of involvement with the immigration and criminal justice systems' (HM Government, 2015, p. 2).

As outlined above, although not a specific aim, children going missing from care was a clear cause for concern during the lifetime of the evaluation. There has been a consistent presentation of evidence relating to children going missing both prior and subsequent to the 2015 evaluation (ECPAT UK, 2007, 2016; Setter, 2017). Sharp-Jeffs (2017) has also outlined the links between CSE and 'going missing' or 'running away'. Links between human trafficking and going missing are also apparent for adults, with going missing also often regarded as a key indicator of trafficking of adults (Hynes, 2017). From July 2021, separated children who arrived alone in the UK had been placed in unregulated hotel accommodation by the Home Office, removing essential oversight and safeguarding of these children, with many since having gone missing (Hynes, 2023). A court case brought by ECPAT UK[11] on the use of hotels to accommodate unaccompanied children has now resulted in a June 2024 final ruling by the High Court that Kent County Council cannot derogate from its duties under the Children Act 1989 and that the Home Office and the council should take all necessary steps to ensure that this unlawful situation does not arise again.

The government report responding to the 2015 evaluation outlined how the 'equivocal' nature of evidence included meant that they did not therefore 'propose to commence the provisions within the Modern Slavery Act 2015 at this point', that they needed 'to get this right' and 'develop and test revisions and alternatives to the current model' (HM Government, 2015, p. 3). The evaluation report, based on evidence and rigorous collection of data across 23 local authorities, concludes that Advocates' 'added value' was not, in this instance, considered enough for

Home Office Ministers to recommend that the ICTA services should go ahead at that point. In the 2015 evaluation, the focus on limited evidence of benefits for the immigration and criminal justice systems also relates to the short timescale of the trial and evaluation. At the time the evaluation took place, asylum cases and criminal justice proceedings were routinely taking considerably longer than 12 months to be decided or held.

The path to influencing policy is rarely linear but being evidence-based or at least evidence-informed is a stated aspect of UK government approaches. Carrying out applied research and evaluation to high standards of knowledge production that also has policy relevance is key to enabling such an approach. The incremental approach adopted around the introduction of ICTAs and subsequently Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs) has included the independent and rigorous evaluation of 2015, furthered in that of 2017–2019, plus subsequent evaluations. However, there is such a non-linear path towards influencing policy in increasingly politicised arenas such as trafficking and 'modern slavery' (see also Quirk, Chapter 7, this volume). Vertovec (2020) has outlined how, in relation to migration studies more broadly, there has been a low level of impact from research in relation to public understanding or government policy in this area, although good research continues to be done. Vertovec (2020) also recognises how good research may have little impact on policy, findings may be used selectively or, in worst cases, even disregarded as part of this process. Ultimately, the 2015 evaluation did become a first step towards a staged approach to the subsequent rollout of ICTGs in England and Wales, however slowly, as detailed below.

Subsequent rollout of Independent Child Trafficking Guardians in England and Wales

The subsequent rollout and evaluations of the guardianship model in England and Wales has occurred in stages.[12] From January 2017, three Early Adopter (EA) sites[13] were selected for the guardianship service meaning the service covered one-third of local authorities in England and Wales. At this stage a further two-year trial and evaluation was commissioned, encompassing the change in the title of the service from ICTAs to ICTGs. Between 2017 and 2019 this evaluation of the guardianship service was again carried out by the University of Bedfordshire, evaluating a revised ICTG model. The interim findings of the 2017–2019 evaluation had found that there were differing needs for UK-born and

'unaccompanied (usually foreign national) trafficked children' (Field et al., 2018, p. 47; see also Keeble et al., 2018).

From May 2021, a revised ICTG model was developed providing one-to-one support for children where there was no one with parental responsibility in the UK (ICTG Direct Workers), and for those with parental responsibility, a regional coordinator (ICTG Regional Practice Coordinators) to work with professionals already supporting the child.[14] Three further EA sites transitioned to this revised model of provision.[15] An *Independent Review of the Modern Slavery Act* noted that this revised model 'undoubtedly ensures a more financially sustainable ICTA service in response to increasing numbers of UK children being referred for cases of county lines and CSE' (Field et al., 2018, p. 49).

The 2017–2019 evaluation had also detailed how children went missing (Kohli et al., 2019). This evaluation found that nearly a quarter (23%) of children referred to the service went missing at some point. Male children were more likely to go missing than female, and those without a figure of parental responsibility in the UK were more likely to go missing on referral and for longer periods. Again, these were most likely to be Vietnamese nationals, primarily exploited for their labour: 44% of all Vietnamese children in the service went missing at least once and a third were missing in the longer term. Children who went temporarily missing were mainly UK-born nationals who had experienced criminal exploitation. ICTGs continued working with other agencies for a period of six months after the child went missing, at which point cases were closed. In other words, the issue of children going missing is a broader social issue which remains as yet unresolved. Practitioners often referred to the first 24, 48 or 72 hours as being a crucial period for ensuring children received the safeguarding they needed in such cases.

A Home Office and Ipsos MORI qualitative and quantitative assessment of the ICTG Regional Practice Coordinators role was published in October 2020 (Shrimpton et al., 2020). This found that around three-quarters of children supported by Regional Practice Coordinators were referred for child criminal exploitation (CCE) cases and the rest for CSE. Most were UK nationals (90%), male (70%) and between 15 and 17 years. Most of the children referred for CSE were female (80%). The assessment found that the Regional Practice Coordinators' role to raise awareness around indicators of exploitation and referral mechanisms was welcomed by a range of stakeholders. It was also found that awareness of a Section 45 defence, that provides a statutory defence for children who are accused of committing a criminal act as a direct consequence of being a victim of trafficking, could be improved across Crown

Prosecution Service teams and courts (for more on tensions around the Section 45 defence, see Heys, 2023).

In May 2021, a further change to the ICTG service following the *Independent Review of the Modern Slavery Act* was the introduction of a Post-18 Worker to support young people through what is often referred to as a 'cliff edge' or 'drop-off' of support available between child and adult services (Field et al., 2018). This Post-18 Worker role was established to support children following their 18th birthday, with additional short-term support in cases where there was exceptional need to ensure smooth transitions across services.[16] An evaluation conducted jointly by the Home Office analysis and insight team and Ipsos UK was conducted between May 2021 and April 2022 related to the Post-18 services and the Regional Practice Coordinator roles (Shrimpton et al., 2024).[17] It found that Barnardo's and external stakeholders perceived the introduction of these two roles as positive – both because of the flexibility they added to the ICTG service and the quality of support provided to children and young people.

In March 2024, a procurement notice was published by the Home Office seeking preliminary information from potential suppliers on the establishment of a national ICTG service to cover all local authorities in England and Wales through a three-year contract, to run from October 2025 to September 2028. The intended ICTG service for England and Wales continues to remain limited to potential victims of human trafficking, unlike provision in both Scotland and Northern Ireland which provide Guardians for all separated children.

Conclusion

While progress has been made in rolling-out the guardianship service, to date this has only reached two-thirds of local authorities across England and Wales almost a decade after the legislative powers were put in place. Children arriving into the UK have continued to lack an advocacy or guardianship service for several years during this staggered rollout and continue to lack this service in one-third of local authority areas. In parallel, increasing numbers of UK-born children are being referred into the UK's NRM for CSE and CCE (Cockbain et al., 2025). It is highly likely that children affected by human trafficking continue to go missing from care.

An increasing and overarching environment of hostility towards migrants and refugees prevails in the UK. The recent introduction of two key pieces of legislation – the Nationalities and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Act 2023 – has resulted in an increased need for good quality legal services and guardianship services for children. Both pieces

of legislation roll back progress made on identifying and protecting adult or child victims of human trafficking or modern slavery. The Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024 has also spread considerable fear amongst children and young people (Hynes et al., 2022).[18] A decade on, it is arguably now even more essential for children and young people arriving into the UK to have someone able to undertake the role of informing them of their rights and entitlements, ensuring they receive good quality social care, helping them to access legal services and ensuring they understand criminal justice processes. Whether decisions made by the new Labour Government, elected in July 2024, changes this environment for the better remains to be seen.

The 2015 evaluation findings included how the role of ICTAs was seen positively by professionals and children, adding value to existing services. The government response, that the evidence was 'equivocal' (HM Government, 2015, p. 3), suggested ambiguity and provided a rationale for not introducing ICTAs at that time. The UK had been heralded internationally as a world leader on 'modern slavery', and it is therefore surprising that actual provision of support to children affected by human trafficking, 'modern slavery' and/or exploitation has been so slow. As explored by Hodkinson et al. (2021) and Hynes (2022), two policy trajectories – one publicly denouncing 'modern slavery' and the other intensifying a hostile environment that creates conditions wherein exploitation can thrive – are inherently contradictory. It may be the case that staggered evaluations, that have sought to refine the English and Welsh guardianship services being provided, have potentially increased the quality of such provision in a way that ongoing reflective practice of services provided would not have achieved. However, this has also meant that for nearly a decade an unspecified number of children and young people have been unrepresented, without an Independent Advocate or Guardian by their side, something which should be urgently and fully addressed within the new contract now being advertised.

Key messages

- This case study shows paths to influencing policy trajectories are rarely linear, with evidence, rigorous evaluations and/or good research alone not always enough to influence policy. It also emphasises the challenges of short timeframes for evaluation in securing ethics approvals and data sharing provisions: key considerations when researching sensitive topics.

- The Modern Slavery Act 2015 created a role for Independent Child Trafficking Advocates (ICTAs) across England and Wales. A trial of an ICTA service and a commissioned evaluation was carried out across 23 local authority areas between September 2014 and August 2015.
- The evaluation set out to look at implementation of the service, how the ICTA role worked in practice and the impact for children. It used a mixed method approach, including a randomised allocation process to compare children supported by ICTAs relative to existing provision.
- The evaluation found that ICTAs were beneficial for children and were also seen positively by professionals, adding value to existing services. However, a government response laid before Parliament outlined the independent evaluation as 'equivocal' leading to delayed development of ICTA provision at that time.
- ICTAs were renamed Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs) following an *Independent Review of the Modern Slavery Act*. Almost a decade after legislative powers were passed, ICTGs have only reached two-thirds of local authorities across England and Wales. There is now a call for a national service to be in place by October 2025.

Notes

1. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 received Royal Assent in March 2015.
2. Following an *Independent Review of the Modern Slavery Act* 2015, ICTAs were renamed Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs) across England and Wales in July 2019.
3. A local authority is a local government organisation that is responsible for all public services, facilities, social care, education, housing and clean water in particular areas of the UK. There are 317 local authorities in England, 32 in Scotland, 22 in Wales and 11 local government districts in Northern Ireland. They are run by elected councillors.
4. Scotland had developed a non-statutory guardianship model in 2009 and prior to legislation for all separated and unaccompanied children. The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 provided for the introduction of statutory guardianships for unaccompanied children. The Scottish Guardianship Service was replaced by Guardianship Scotland in April 2023 as a statutory service, allowing any local authority or agency in Scotland to make referrals (Grant et al., 2023). Children in Northern Ireland also have Independent Guardians when those with parental responsibility are not in regular contact with the children or are outside the UK. The 2015 Northern Ireland Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) is in place. In both Scotland and Northern Ireland, provision at that time was for Guardians rather than Advocates.
5. The 23 areas were: Croydon, Derbyshire, Kent, Lancashire, Oxford, West Sussex, with Manchester City, Stockport, Tameside, Oldham, Rochdale, Bury, Bolton, Wigan, Salford and Trafford from Greater Manchester and Birmingham, and Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall and Wolverhampton from the West Midlands.
6. This contribution necessarily draws heavily from the final report of the evaluation, including quotes used therein (Kohli et al., 2015).
7. Originally published in March 2015 by HM Government as *Information Sharing: Advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers*. This has since been updated (Department for Education, 2024).
8. The National Referral Mechanism was introduced in 2009 to fulfil the UK's obligations under the Council of Europe's Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings and to

provide a framework for proactive identification and referral of potential victims of human trafficking to support services.

9. With the exception of sibling groups who were allocated together.
10. The NRM involves 'first responders' from a range of agencies referring potential 'victims' to a 'Single Competent Authority' for assessment as to whether there is sufficient evidence to identify that person as a victim of the crime of human trafficking, or, since 2015, 'modern slavery'. Following referral, the NRM involves a two-stage decision-making process. The first stage is a Reasonable Grounds decision, set out as being made within 5 working days of referral. This is based on whether there are reasonable grounds to believe that a person could be a 'victim' based on available evidence that may fall short of conclusive proof. The second stage is a Conclusive Grounds decision, to be made no sooner than after 45 days following the Reasonable Grounds decision. A positive decision entitles a 'victim' to a reflection period of at least 45 days, during which time they receive specialist support and assistance through service providers contracted by the UK Home Office.
11. For details of this legal case, see ECPAT UK, 2024.
12. For details of locations of rollout, see HM Government, 2024.
13. Initial EA sites were Greater Manchester, Hampshire and Wales (from January 2017).
14. Additional sites were Greater London (excluding London Borough of Croydon), Surrey, Essex, West Yorkshire, Merseyside, Kent, Warwickshire, North Yorkshire, Gloucestershire and Bristol, Lancashire, and Bedfordshire (see ECPAT UK, 2021).
15. West Midlands (from October 2018), East Midlands and London Borough of Croydon (from April 2019).
16. This was piloted in ICTG sites in London (Croydon), the North of England (Merseyside, North Yorkshire and West Yorkshire) and the Midlands (Warwickshire and West Midlands).
17. The evaluation was completed in March 2023 and published in May 2024.
18. The incoming Labour Government have since announced a decision to not continue with the policy to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda.

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11

The Blue Campaign: a case study on the evaluation of human trafficking informational campaigns

Elena Savoia and Rachael Piltch-Loeb

Introduction

In this chapter, we will share our experience in applying evaluation methods to assess the impact of human trafficking informational initiatives. Beginning with insights from the field of public health, we will explore the similarities and differences between human trafficking and public health information campaigns focused on topics at the intersection between health and criminology. Additionally, we will emphasise the significance of involving practitioners and survivors to help define the parameters of effective informational campaigns, aiming to comprehend the context in which such efforts are implemented while considering the potential negative consequences that such campaign may have on victims. Furthermore, we will examine the specific methodological challenges associated with determining the reasons (*the way to measure*), objectives (*the what to measure*) and approaches (*the how to measure*) of evaluating informational efforts about human trafficking.

A case study is then shared to illustrate the key steps in evaluating a human trafficking informational initiative in the United States, namely the Blue Campaign, based on our experience as external evaluators. This will include insights into the engagement of survivors and practitioners to help understand how to best frame informational efforts, the development of logic models, outcome measures, data collection instruments and the utilisation of crowdsourcing technology to gather data from the campaign's target audience. The chapter concludes with practical recommendations regarding the use of evaluation methods to evaluate information campaigns in this field of work.

Public information campaigns

To change people's behaviour and social norms, health and social impact initiatives frequently rely on public information campaigns. For example, in public health, promoting awareness of certain health risks, such as smoking or unhealthy eating and drinking habits, are fundamental strategies to improve the health of entire populations (Zhao, 2020). Moreover, other campaigns focusing on raising awareness about environmental and societal changes, such as the phenomenon of global warming or gender equality, are intended to enhance a community's wellbeing by engaging citizens in collective actions (León et al., 2022). Any attempt to transform society through collective action relies on raising awareness about the benefits and harms associated with specific risks and behaviours.

Human trafficking is not merely a crime; it is a complex social phenomenon that can be prevented and mitigated through the reduction of risks, such as an individual's vulnerabilities to abuse and exploitation, work and poor living conditions, and economic choices made at the policy and individual level (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). Essential to preventing human trafficking is the need to raise awareness about the complexity of this phenomenon and the individual, societal and environmental risks of exploitation and its moral consequences.

Human trafficking informational campaigns represent the most common and probably controversial form of anti-trafficking programmes. The controversy comes from lack of data on their effectiveness and current debate on the potential harms to victims. Haynes (2019) argues that short videos created to raise awareness about human trafficking frame the phenomenon in superficial ways and that those exposed to such campaigns may be left with a feeling of self-efficacy but no knowledge or means to respond to potential cases in an appropriate manner. The general public still lacks basic knowledge about human trafficking, and creating more knowledge is important but there is no common understanding of who should be the target of such campaigns and what outcomes to expect (Sharapov et al., 2019). These campaigns have been criticised by those working with victims of human trafficking as they may unintentionally lead to the criminalisation of trafficking victims, including arrest or deportation (International Women's Human Rights Clinic, 2015). As such there is considerable debate questioning the usefulness of such campaigns and potential harms to victims when awareness does not translate into actions to protect them.

Human trafficking informational campaigns are designed with various goals and audiences in mind and aim to raise awareness about different aspects of this phenomenon. Audiences may be the human trafficking victims themselves, professionals who may come in contact with victims, consumers of human trafficking products or clients of sex workers being trafficked, as well as the general public.

Some campaigns target individuals who are at risk of becoming victims, seeking to educate them about the recruitment and grooming tactics employed by traffickers, as well as those who are already victimised, by providing information on how to escape conditions of exploitation. Alternatively, human trafficking informational campaigns may target specific professional categories – such as police officers, first responders and other frontline workers – who, due to their roles in society and job duties, may encounter victims and need to be educated on how to recognise signs of exploitation and refer the victim to appropriate services and providers. Moreover, there are campaigns dedicated to informing the public about this phenomenon and encouraging consumers to choose products known to be 'traffik-free'. A notable example is the Chocolate Campaign, developed by the organisation Stop the Traffik (www.stopthetraffik.org). The creation of this initiative was motivated by the documented instances of child trafficking and forced labour in cocoa farming, particularly in West Africa, as reported by organisations monitoring the situation (Sadhu et al., 2020). The Chocolate Campaign seeks to raise awareness among consumers who might unwittingly contribute to the exploitation of individuals in other countries by purchasing products derived from trafficking activities (Dearnley & Chalke, 2012).

In the United States, several government agencies (for example, Department of Homeland Security [DHS], Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], Drug Enforcement Administration) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have developed and implemented human trafficking awareness campaigns on a national level for decades. While the intentions behind these campaigns are laudable, there is limited evidence of their effectiveness in preventing human trafficking and, most importantly, in helping those who are being trafficked. This is the reason why we engaged in evaluating existing campaign efforts.

The Blue Campaign

The DHS is responsible for investigating human trafficking, arresting traffickers and protecting victims, including undocumented immigrants who are victims of this crime. In 2020, it developed a nationwide human

trafficking awareness campaign to educate the public and frontline professionals on how to recognise, respond and report suspected instances of human trafficking. The campaign is named 'The Blue Campaign'. It consists of educational videos, social media postings, brochures and pocket cards distributed to various audiences, including law enforcement agents (blue uniforms), healthcare workers, employees in the transportation industry (that is, airline industry, truck drivers), law enforcement officers working on college campuses, teachers and school counsellors, and employees in the hospitality industry (US Department of Homeland Security, n.d.-a). The Blue Campaign aims to educate these professional figures on how to recognise the indicators of human trafficking, how to respond to possible cases in an appropriate manner, and how to report this crime through federal channels and anonymous helplines.

The team responsible for developing the Blue Campaign is located within the DHS Center for Countering Human Trafficking (CCHT). The CCHT is a DHS-wide effort comprising 16 supporting offices and components and is led by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) (US Department of Homeland Security, n.d.-c). Much of this awareness effort involves developing partnerships with the private sector, as well as NGOs and government officials at the state, local and tribe levels across the United States, to maximise engagement and dissemination activities. Such partnerships allow the campaign developers to understand how to focus their awareness efforts based on the needs of various industries. The Blue Campaign includes two foundational elements: (1) the prevention of human trafficking and (2) the protection of exploited persons. The latter is based on the DHS approach, which places equal value on supporting victims safely and appropriately and on prosecuting traffickers. The training videos developed as part of the Blue Campaign are specific to different audiences depicting scenarios for, say, first responders, retail employees, campus law enforcement, disaster responders and professionals working with youth. Indicators vary according to the scenario depicted and include situations such as finding identification documents of an individual controlled by another person, encountering individuals that seem to be coached about what to say, situations in which an individual is forced to work and is threatened with deportation, and so on. Some of these indicators can be found in the literature supported by consensus among professionals working in the field of human trafficking, but there is certainly a lack of evidence on how they

should be used in the context of an awareness campaign. The campaign material ends with a call to action for the individual coming across a potential instance of human trafficking to report the situation to law enforcement.

Our role as external evaluators

Our team has been engaged in the evaluation of the Blue Campaign as external evaluators since 2021. An external evaluation is the evaluation of a programme that is conducted by an individual or team of individuals not engaged in the programme's development. Our team of evaluators received funding from the Science and Technology Directorate (S&T) within the DHS, a research and development branch that serves as the science advisor to the Secretary. S&T is an entity with distinct leadership and mission from the CCHT, which is the centre in charge of developing the Blue Campaign material (US Department of Homeland Security, n.d.-b). Government agencies frequently hire external organisations to ensure independence in evaluation efforts and, in some cases, to include specific academic expertise or to bring a new perspective in determining the merit, value and significance of a specific initiative or programme.

In this case, our evaluation activities were focused on programme improvement. As such, our role was to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the Blue Campaign and support the campaign developers in understanding the informational needs of their target audience. Due to our specific background and expertise in public health, we included a public health perspective in our evaluation efforts. Including a public health perspective meant assessing the campaign activities from a victim's perspective when judging the initiative's value, worth, merit and significance (American Evaluation Association, 2014). Furthermore, our approach included an applied research methodology, where data collection efforts became an opportunity to investigate awareness beyond the goals of the Blue Campaign itself to explore and create ways to measure knowledge about human trafficking, societal barriers and policies impacting the reporting of cases. From a practical point of view, we identified a series of videos of interest based on the needs of the developers and tested the videos using crowdsourcing technology on a sample of the target population. The goal was to assess their impact in relation to a series of short-term outcomes further explained in the following sections.

Challenges in raising and framing awareness

Human trafficking awareness campaigns have proven difficult to develop and implement (Szablewska & Kubacki, 2018). However, such difficulties should not prevent evaluation efforts. Some of the challenges experienced are paralleled in the field of public health, which has a long history of conducting extensive awareness initiatives. These campaigns have served as tools across various public health domains to educate communities about specific health risks and empower their citizens with preventive measures. Efforts to raise awareness about the harmful effects of tobacco use or promote the importance of breast cancer screening are common examples (Andreasen, 1995; Stead et al., 2019; Bala et al., 2017). However, even in traditional public health campaigns, challenges arise in addressing ingrained societal norms and dispelling misconceptions, as evident in efforts to combat tobacco consumption, a well-known public health battle (Bala et al., 2017).

Human trafficking awareness campaigns encounter similar hurdles to those faced by public health awareness initiatives. These challenges revolve around shaping societal perceptions of trafficking and outlining the appropriate responses. One key obstacle stems from the expansive definition of human trafficking, which, in the United States, encompasses both sex and labour trafficking. According to the federal definition of human trafficking, as amended by statute (22 USC § 7,102) in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (US Department of Justice, 2023), sex trafficking is defined as 'the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act, which is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or if the person induced to perform it has not attained 18 years of age', while labour trafficking is defined as 'the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery', the multi-faceted nature of trafficking complicates efforts to encapsulate its entirety within the framework of a concise awareness message. For all these reasons, human trafficking awareness efforts should focus on the identification of the signs of abuse rather than the identification of a crime. This framing issue has been discussed as a core principle for developing human trafficking campaigns using a public health approach (Savoia, Piltch-Loeb et al., 2023).

In public health, educational and informational initiatives are typically developed around the protection of victims and patients. For example, domestic violence prevention efforts focus on developing

programmes and services to protect the victim. Similarly, educational efforts to reduce substance misuse focus on understanding of the needs of the person rather than the potential crime associated with such use. In public health efforts, the needs of an individual within a specific community are at the core of any programme. To frame human trafficking informational efforts using a public health approach, it is necessary to shift perspective from the awareness of the crime to the awareness of the needs and challenges faced by the victim.

On the contrary, many awareness campaigns tend to focus predominantly on the narrative of the crime, with an emphasis on the perpetrators preying on vulnerable individuals in the sex trade, often overshadowing labour trafficking situations. These narratives often lead to the neglect of labour exploitation and the conflation of sex trafficking with prostitution (O'Brien & McLeod, 2011). Additionally, visualisation techniques portraying, say, women in chains, as noted by Rister (2020), only serve to perpetuate misleading perceptions of trafficking that do not reflect the reality faced by the majority of victims. To address these shortcomings, it is imperative to diversify the portrayal of trafficked individuals when developing informational efforts, presenting a more inclusive and accurate representation of victims with a focus on the signs of abuse rather than signs of a crime.

In addition to the difficulty of accurately portraying victims, there is a practical challenge concerning the campaign's target audience and the actions desired of them. Determining whether campaigns are directed at the public, specific population subsets or particular professional groups is crucial. The target audience significantly shapes the campaign's approach, yet it is often left undefined. This lack of clarity in defining the recipient of the communication strategy often results in ambiguous messaging, particularly when anticipating specific actions from the campaign's information among a general audience.

Konrad (2019) characterises awareness campaigns as alerting individuals to traffickers' tactics and equipping them with practical strategies to evade exploitation. However, most campaigns neglect to predefine the target audience and the sought-after intervention strategies. Lange (2011) observed that early anti-trafficking campaigns in the US mirrored domestic violence awareness initiatives, suggesting reporting incidents to authorities or seeking help from hotlines. However, anti-trafficking campaigns were less successful at prompting these actions. Lange suggests this could be due to trafficked individuals' mistrust of law enforcement and government due to a history of mistreatment and criminalisation of victims, making them less likely to seek formal assistance

and challenging them to self-identify as victims, a reaction likely to be less common for other types of crimes. The lack of clarity regarding the campaign's target audience and the intended viewer actions hinders evaluating their impact due to the difficulty in determining the expected outcomes.

Szablewska and Kubacki (2018) conducted a systematic review of anti-trafficking campaigns, identifying 16 studies on such efforts. Surprisingly, none of these studies included outcome, process or impact evaluations. While these studies often employed social marketing techniques intended to reach potentially vulnerable individuals, they emphasised the need to enhance future evaluations to assess the effectiveness of these approaches.

Mis and disinformation add to the challenge

Human trafficking is by itself a target of disinformation campaigns, which further complicates efforts to raise awareness about this crime because people may be exposed to a variety of information, frequently inaccurate. As stated by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017, p. 20), disinformation consists of 'information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country'. Examples may include fabricated or deliberately manipulated audio-visual content, as well as conspiracy theories or rumours intentionally created to cause harm.

In the field of human trafficking, a notorious example of disinformation is the 2016 Pizzagate incident. During this incident, the chairman for Hillary Clinton's presidential run for office was at the centre of a conspiracy theory alleging that police had uncovered a paedophilia ring he was supposedly involved in. The ring was described as operating out of the basement of a pizza shop in Washington, DC. This false information spread on social media, and various segments of the population believed it, resulting in acts of harassment and vandalism against the incriminated pizza shop. In December 2016, an alarming incident occurred. A 28-year-old man arrived at the implicated pizza shop to investigate the alleged criminal activity and fired three shots while inside the building. Fortunately, no one was injured. The man claimed he was there to rescue the children (Haag & Salam, 2017).

Similarly, in August 2018, Polaris, an organisation based in the US that manages a national hotline to connect trafficked victims with service providers, found itself at the centre of a politically charged conspiracy theory. The theory claimed that Polaris was colluding with the

Clinton Foundation in a child sex trafficking plot (Rajan et al., 2021). This narrative was found to be spread by the QAnon theorists. In this case, threats were made to staff and individuals engaged in human trafficking prevention efforts, severely impacting the work of the organisation and undermining prevention efforts. As reported by an investigation conducted by Rajan et al. (2021, p. 4) for the Polaris project, 'QAnon followers coordinated a cyberattack to make it impossible for victims and survivors of human trafficking to get help'. This was an unprecedented direct attack at the core of the anti-trafficking movement. The incident highlighted the importance of developing informational campaigns that focus on building trust in the organisations at the frontline of prevention efforts and effective messaging, investigations and response mechanisms to mitigate the impact of disinformation campaigns. Such incidents emphasise the complexity of the information ecosystem people are exposed to and how specific segments of the population are most vulnerable to adopting conspiracy theories and, consequently, may experience a lack of trust in prevention initiatives about human trafficking.

The anti-trafficking movement has been outspoken about the dangers of misinformation propagated by the entertainment industry, highlighting the risks associated with stereotyping, oversimplifying and sensationalising human trafficking issues. During the past 20 years the entertainment industry has produced several movies and television series portraying cases of human trafficking that do not reflect the experience shared by survivors. For instance, there is a common depiction of white women as victims in human trafficking narratives, despite the reality that a majority of instances of human trafficking involve women and men from other racial backgrounds (Austin & Farrell, 2017). The oversimplification of the narratives often stems from a misunderstanding of the difference between prostitution and conditions involving exploitation, and the portraying of cases representing foreign victims only and ignoring the domestic impact of this societal phenomenon (Austin & Farrell, 2017; Farrell & Fahy, 2009).

As the information ecosystem around human trafficking narratives is increasingly obscured by misinformation spread by the film industry and conspiracy theories, the work of authentic anti-trafficking advocates, including survivors, becomes more arduous. When the public is tasked with distinguishing reality from imaginative tales, there exists a danger that the genuine problem might be disregarded alongside the unfounded assertions. Shih (2021) describes this issue well, pointing to trainings that provide racist views and give civilians a 'fantasy' of being able to spot an instance of human trafficking, while the reality is that the likelihood

of errors and inaccurate identification based on racist stereotypes is extremely high.

Therefore, when assessing the effects of an informational campaign, it is crucial to consider the intricate nature of the information landscape to which people are exposed. Understanding the sources of information individuals can access, as well as how exposure to inaccurate information affects their capacity to digest information from credible sources, becomes paramount.

Why, what and how to measure awareness efforts

It's crucial to have valid measures in place to gauge the success or failure of an awareness campaign, but determining what constitutes a valid measure of public awareness can vary widely (Niederdeppe, 2014).

Measurement is essential for ensuring accountability, advancing knowledge and enhancing system improvement efforts in any field of work. Looking at health services research can offer valuable insights into approaching the challenge of measuring any type of intervention, including public awareness efforts. The health services literature suggests that developing an effective set of performance measures involves addressing three key questions: 1) why measure, 2) what to measure, and 3) how to measure (Stoto & Nelson, 2023).

In this chapter, we provide some reflections and considerations on how we addressed these three key questions in the context of the evaluation of human trafficking awareness efforts, namely the Blue Campaign.

Why measure? In this context, the purpose of measurement is to understand the effects of a campaign on its target audience. Knowing the effect can clarify if the campaign is working as intended or needs improvement. Measurement can serve both to increase accountability, particularly when campaigns are developed with taxpayer money, and improve the campaign's content and implementation based on the evaluation results. In this evaluation study we have focused on generating evaluation results that are useful for improving the campaign design and implementation.

What to measure? Determining what to measure influences the criteria we use to measure the success of a campaign. The selection of which outcome(s) to measure is influenced, in part, by a given campaign's messages. Evaluators will need to identify specific processes and outcome measures related to the assumed knowledge, attitudes and, ultimately, behaviours of the target audiences aligned with a campaign's content and key message(s). For instance, in the field of public health,

a campaign aimed at changing eating habits may focus on outcomes related to the awareness of the health consequences of unhealthy eating, attitudes towards alternative foods and changes in consumption patterns (behaviour).

Most evaluation studies of such campaigns are limited to the assessment of individuals' changes in knowledge and attitudes, because assessing the impact on actual behaviour is often challenging to measure and requires longitudinal studies (Abdullateef, 2012; Borawska, 2017; Kemshall & Moulden, 2017). For example, to measure if an awareness campaign that aims to increase reporting of potential instances of human trafficking is having an impact on reporting behaviours, individuals exposed to the campaign would need to encounter a potential victim, have access to a system of reporting, and the evaluator would need access to a data collection mechanism to determine if the case was reported and the effect of such reporting. This is a scenario that is unlikely to occur, raising questions about the possibility of even assessing the effectiveness of a campaign aimed at increasing the reporting of cases. An alternative approach is to engage in evaluation questions iteratively, first focusing on knowledge and awareness that is generated from the campaign, and later following up with the same population to distil actions. This could pose additional challenges related to having access to a consistent population and ensuring the population is actually put in a position to act upon the information.

How to measure? To identify the appropriate metrics for measurement efforts, it's crucial to turn the constructs identified in the '*what to measure*' phase into measurable outcomes. A logic model, similar to those used in the development of health communication campaigns, can be employed to define constructs and measurement domains, establishing their relationship to desired outcomes and the campaign's key messages. This approach helps to identify relevant indicators for follow-up evaluation (Bhatia et al., 2015; Massett et al., 2017). The evaluator would construct specific indicators to assess the measurement domains of interest.

Understanding what to measure through the lens of survivors

As stated by the US Department of State, 'Survivors of human trafficking play a vital role in combatting this crime. Their perspective and experience should be taken into consideration to address this crime better and to craft a better response to it' (2023).

In the US, survivors are more than just service receivers of prevention efforts; they also manage groups, testify in legislative assemblies, educate law enforcement, engage the public and collaborate with government representatives. The engagement of individuals who have experienced exploitation is an essential step in evaluating and understanding what matters most to solve the issue and, most importantly, how to avoid harm to victims (see also Boyd, Chapter 2, this volume). The voices of survivors are essential to creating successful evaluations of anti-trafficking interventions. Because there can be a diverse set of experiences among survivors, these efforts must engage numerous survivors in attempt to capture and respond to lived experiences.

In this evaluation effort, survivors and practitioners were engaged to educate our team on the importance of the context in which campaigns are developed and the impact of how the issue of human trafficking is being framed and potential harmful consequences for the victims. We engaged a group of practitioners and survivors to counsel our team on defining the ideal audience, content and goals of awareness efforts based on the survivor's perspective so that we could compare it with the Blue Campaign's material and overall efforts. This was a huge turning point in our evaluation process because it allowed us to critically appraise the information included in the Blue Campaign and understand how campaign messages should and should not be framed.

Methods of engagement

To engage this group of advisors, we drew on two techniques: focus groups and a nominal group technique (NGT).

Focus groups: We organised a series of focus groups to explore three aspects of human trafficking awareness efforts: 1) defining the goals of human trafficking awareness campaigns; 2) identifying the target audience of these campaigns; and 3) determining the essential components of an effective awareness campaign. These enquiries were inspired by health communication and social marketing efforts. While the results of these focus groups have been described in detail in a previous publication (Savoia, Piltch-Loeb et al., 2023), in this section, we will elaborate on how this experience enlightened us about the necessity to reframe existing human trafficking campaigns.

We recruited participants from a list of NGOs and survivors working in the anti-trafficking field and the authors of reports and literature focused on trafficking. This initial group was then asked to recommend others in their network, leading to a snowball sample of participants.

Some of the participants in the focus groups were affiliated with NGOs and others were survivors working in the anti-trafficking movement. We also included authors of reports and literature focused on trafficking. During the focus group discussions, participants emphasised the absence of evidence regarding the effectiveness of human trafficking campaigns. They raised concerns about the potential negative outcomes of such campaigns, which may lead to the criminalisation of victims with the deportation of undocumented individuals living in conditions of slavery, and the arrest of victims of sex trafficking as if they were sex workers of their own will.

The focus group participants emphasised the importance of testing campaign materials to assess intended as well as unintended and potentially negative consequences of awareness efforts. Participants were sceptical about the possibility of educating the general public on recognising a potential victim during a brief interaction, due to the phenomenon's complexity and the potential to put the victim in further danger. They suggested directing awareness efforts toward the victims themselves, focusing on empowering them with knowledge about their rights and where to seek support. They pointed out the possible benefits of directing the victims to grassroots organisations, specialised in this phenomenon and with knowledge of the local context, risks, population needs, and local resources and services, rather than law enforcement officers. The value of involving survivors in campaign design was emphasised, with concerns expressed about oversimplified depictions leading to stereotyping and harm to victims. Systemic issues, such as gaps in victim support and flaws in the legal system, were identified as significant challenges to the success of the majority of awareness efforts.

Nominal Group Technique: The results of the focus groups were used to develop a series of questions to guide a consensus process aiming to identify priority areas for action for future awareness initiatives. This consensus process was implemented using the NGT, developed by Delbecq & Van de Ven (1971). This structured group communication method is designed to facilitate decision-making and idea generation within a group setting, while ensuring the equal participation of all members during the development of a programme or plan. In our project, the purpose of the NGT was to have practitioners and survivors achieve consensus on the best approaches to raising awareness about human trafficking in the United States, so as to list criteria to judge current efforts. Fifteen experts participated in the technique. A trained facilitator and a note taker guided the discussion to identify what audience should be targeted,

what outcomes to expect and specific messages and content of campaign efforts. The Blue Campaign developers, who observed the execution of the NGT, could use the actions listed by the experts to prioritise their goals, audience and message. A summary of these findings can be found in a recent publication (Savoia, Piltch-Loeb et al., 2023).

A take-home logic model to evaluate awareness campaigns

Once the question of what to measure had been determined, we developed a logic model. Developing a logic model is an important step for effectively planning, implementing and evaluating programmes or interventions. At its core, a logic model visually represents a programme's theory of change, delineating the connections between programme inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes (Savaya & Waysman, 2005). It tells a story of what the programme is attempting to do and how those activities relate to potential outcomes. To create a logic model, stakeholders define the programme's overarching goals and objectives, articulating the desired changes or impacts to be achieved (McLaughlin & Jordan, 2015). In this project we engaged with the project stakeholders, including the campaign developers and advisors, to define the campaign intended outcomes. In this chapter we propose a generic logic model, derived from such experience, that the reader could adapt and use for similar evaluation efforts.

However, we remind the reader that developing a logic model involves collaboration among stakeholders, including programme planners, implementers, funders and beneficiaries, to ensure a shared understanding of programme goals, strategies and expected outcomes. The model we propose, if adopted in other contexts, would require stakeholder engagement for identifying relevant inputs, activities and outcomes and validating assumptions and hypotheses underlying the programme's theory of change. By involving stakeholders throughout the logic model development process, organisations can enhance buy-in, ownership and commitment to the programme, fostering a sense of collective responsibility for its success (Aakhus & Bzdak, 2015). Additionally, the iterative nature of logic model development allows for ongoing refinement and adaptation based on feedback, evaluation findings and changes in the programme context (Morell, 2018; Rehfuess et al., 2018). As a result, logic models serve as dynamic tools that guide programme planning and implementation, measurement and evaluation. This also means there are limitations to the logic models that are produced. As

this process relies on expert and stakeholder input, they can be skewed towards the perspective of those who participate. Therefore, iterative thinking and adaptation of frameworks are critical.

Logic models often build on social science theory. In our evaluation effort we primarily relied on the theory of planned behavior (TPB) developed by Ajzen (1991) in developing the intermediary and long-term outcome measures of the awareness campaign. TPB connects attitude toward a behaviour, subjective norms concerning the behaviour, and perceived behavioural control of that behaviour as three key constructs to a behaviour change. Ajzen states that 'intentions to perform behaviors of different kinds can be predicted with high accuracy from attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control; and these intentions, together with perceptions of behavioral control, account for considerable variance in actual behavior' (1991, p. 179). We can derive that perceived control is based on knowledge and awareness of what is in an individual's control. We operationalised this to be a series of indicators related to knowledge acquisition after exposure to the awareness videos. In instances when actual behaviour cannot be measured because of practical realities of study design or temporality, behavioural intention can be a measurable, though imperfect, proxy outcome. In this instance, we started the development of a logic model by moving backward; first identifying the intended outcomes of the Blue Campaign and then the process measures and campaign resources related to those outcomes. We considered what the behaviours were that the campaign was reasonably expected to result in. A visual representation of the logic model is provided below (Figure 11.1).

Components of the logic model

- The first step of the logic model (Figure 11.1) is the inputs, or the 'stuff' that contributes to the campaign's ability to launch. The inputs for this effort involve campaign resources. The campaign resources include: 1) content of the campaign such as campaign materials including videos, flyers or posters; 2) the channels of dissemination of the campaign; and 3) the partnerships that aid in the dissemination of the content such as industry partners or NGO partners. In the case of the Blue Campaign, the content was often disseminated via video in partnership with the industries targeted by the awareness effort.

- The second step of the logic model (shown in the figure in the second column) is the series of process measures. The purpose of these measures is to evaluate the implementation of the campaign resources. Evaluation of process measures should answer the question, did the campaign reach the audience? The process measures we identified include: 1) increased viewing of campaign materials; 2) increased sharing of campaign materials; 3) perceived realism of campaign materials (do the materials presented seem realistic?); and 4) perceived relevance of campaign material to recipient's professional or personal experience (do the materials presented seem similar to the norms of the recipient's life?).
- The third step of the logic model (shown in the figure in the third column) is intermediary outcome measures. These indicators are precursors to the sought-after behavioural change expected to occur if the Blue Campaign has achieved the desired effect on participants. The intermediary outcomes we identified fall into two broad categories: knowledge and attitudes. Knowledge measures include: 1) recognition of what human trafficking is and is not; 2) awareness of professional and personal role and duties in recognising human trafficking; 3) awareness of settings that may pose an increased risk for human trafficking to occur; 4) awareness of appropriate communication approaches once a victim is identified; 5) awareness of appropriate reporting mechanisms to support a victim. Attitude measures include: 1) confidence in the ability to recognise instances of human trafficking; 2) confidence in handling potential instances of human trafficking; 3) reduction in stigma and discrimination towards victims; and 4) increased empathy for potential victims.
- The final step of the logic model (shown in the figure in the fourth column) is the primary outcome measures, in this case, behaviours. The intended behaviour changes as a result of a campaign are: 1) ability to appropriately refer a potential victim to services; 2) ability to appropriately communicate with a victim of human trafficking; and 3) reduction in the criminalisation of victims.

This model is focused specifically on improving knowledge, attitude and behaviour among persons in a position to encounter victims. The target audience of the campaigns that this logic model can be used to evaluate is the general public or a particular professional group. Additional research is needed to identify an evaluation model for campaigns that are focused on reaching survivors. Further research is also needed on the

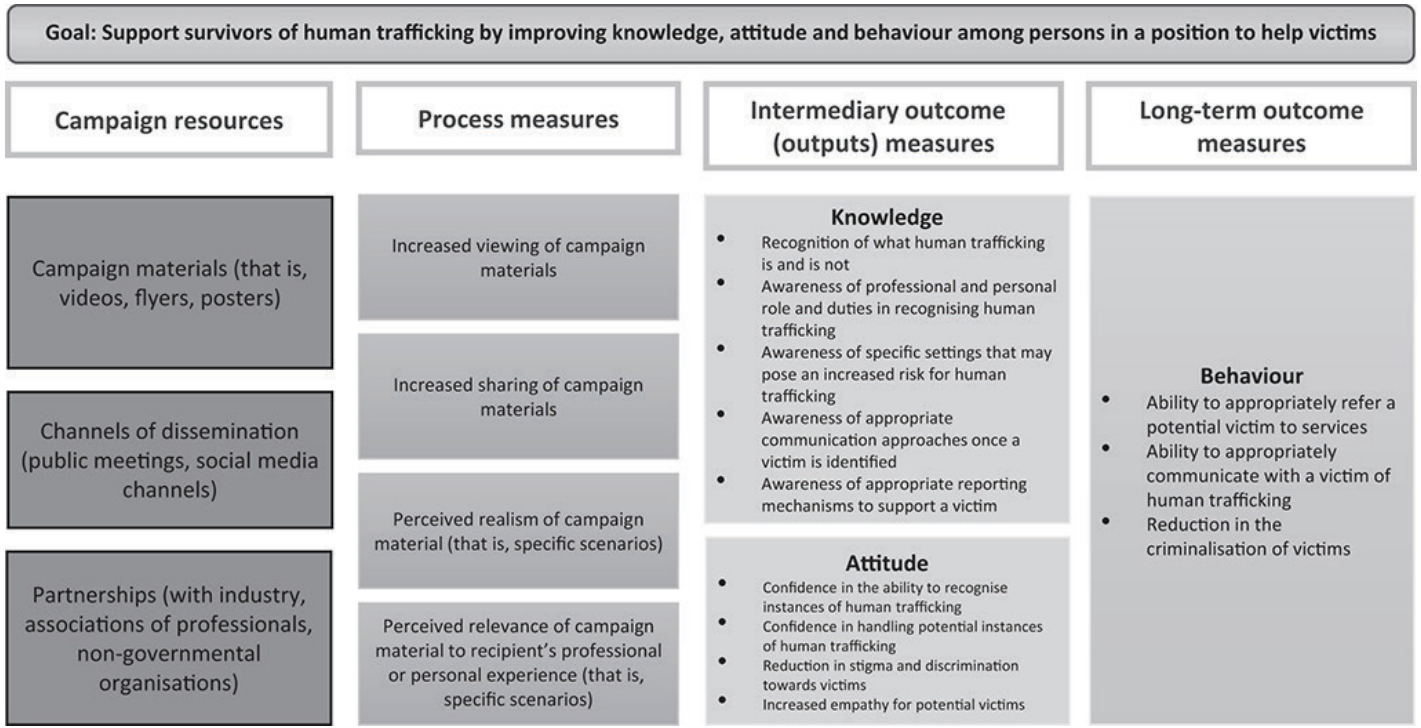

Figure 11.1 Blue Campaign logic model

relationships between the indicators presented and the relative importance of a given piece of knowledge or attitude in shaping behaviour.

After developing this logic model, we sought data sources that could give us baseline information on the target population's knowledge, attitudes and behaviours.

Our results: From baseline data to follow up

When assessing the effectiveness of an informational campaign, it is crucial to collect baseline data on the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of the target audience that the campaign aims to influence. The evaluator can then pinpoint which segments of the population would benefit most from exposure to the campaign identifying those that are most in need of such information. By using this information as a starting point, campaign developers can gain valuable insights to establish realistic goals, identify specific target groups within the population and, most importantly, allocate resources effectively to distribute materials to those who need them the most using their preferred communication channels.

In this chapter, we recall findings from work that our team has recently published that allowed us to understand what target audience would benefit the most from awareness efforts (Savoia, Su et al., 2023). In 2021, we conducted a quasi-experimental study to test the effectiveness of specific Blue Campaign videos targeting first responders. In doing so, we recruited a sample of first responders encompassing various roles within the first responder community, including healthcare workers in hospitals and community health centres, firefighters, emergency medical services and emergency management personnel (equivalent to civil protection personnel in other countries) and volunteers (that is, Red Cross). Thanks to crowdsourcing technology (that is, Pollfish, Prolific)[1] we were able to gather survey data from a sample of 2,000 respondents within a couple of days. Before testing the videos, we collected baseline data by asking the respondents about how often they come across specific situations that could be indicative of human trafficking as identified in the literature. Importantly, the participants were not told that these situations could be indicators of human trafficking.

This assessment helped in evaluating the feasibility of targeting these professional roles with an awareness campaign. For example, our findings revealed that four out of 10 participating first responders often encounter situations where a person's identification documents are controlled by another individual in a concerning manner. Additionally,

we noted a higher frequency of this situation among emergency management personnel, who are commonly involved in disaster response operations. This single piece of information has played a crucial role in emphasising the significance of increasing awareness among this group of professionals regarding this specific potential indicator of human trafficking. Moreover, it highlights the necessity of establishing a proper protocol for follow-up procedures and ensuring that only professionals with the necessary skills and training are assigned to investigate such situations further.

Baseline data are also invaluable in understanding who is already knowledgeable about human trafficking and for pinpointing topics and specific types of information where knowledge is lacking. For example, our data revealed that the majority of first responders already possess a basic understanding of human trafficking. However, our results highlighted that a significant portion of our sample was unaware that commercial sex involving minors, constitutes, by US law, an instance of human trafficking, showing the importance of raising awareness on this specific issue.

Pre-post exposure findings showed that the campaign was effective in increasing basic knowledge on the difference between human trafficking and smuggling, on the indicators of human trafficking portrayed in the videos, and about reporting mechanisms to law enforcement agencies.

When informational efforts directed at teachers and school counsellors were evaluated, we obtained similar results, with teachers and school counsellors increasing their basic knowledge about human trafficking after watching the videos. In this case, as well, we found a remarkable lack of knowledge, at baseline, about commercial sex in minors being considered human trafficking per US law. Surveys conducted six months after exposure to the videos showed that there was a decrease in knowledge retention, emphasising the need for repeated training efforts. This result points to the limited impact that short videos may have in the long term, pointing to the need to develop training activities that allow long-term knowledge retention to be established.

Translating evaluation results into practice

Central to any evaluation work is the ability to influence practice, based on the results of the evaluation. However, translating research into practice is not a simple or fast process. In March 2001, the Institute of Medicine

published a report entitled: 'Crossing the Quality Chasm' highlighting that, on average, it takes 17 years for new knowledge from randomized controlled trials to be implemented into clinical practice, with inconsistent application even after that period (Institute of Medicine, 2001).

In the field of social science, gaps between research and practice are often magnified. This lag can be attributed to the predominantly observational and qualitative nature of most studies on this topic. Observational and qualitative studies tend to fall into the lower tiers of the evidence pyramid and are often seen as less impactful. It can also be attributed to a dearth of forums where researchers can effectively communicate their findings to practitioners and policymakers, who can conversely share their experience and challenges in transferring research results into practical applications.

In our case, we were fortunate to have a mechanism in place where a government branch dedicated to science and technology provided support in transferring the results of our evaluation, highlighting the informational needs of the target audience and pointing to specific topics that require more in-depth training for the target audiences of the Blue Campaign. The funder of our evaluation, DHS S&T, was a vested partner in disseminating the results of our evaluation to the campaign developers and interested policymakers. It is worth noting that in 2018 the Evidence-Based Policymaking Act was created (Evidence Act) that 'establishes processes for the federal government to modernize its data management practices, evidence-building functions, and statistical efficiency to inform policy decisions' (Chief Information Officers Council, n.d.).

As reported by Dr Legault, senior advisor for social and behavioural sciences to DHS, during an interview with our team, DHS has been actively conducting evaluation research for different purposes since 2013–2014, as requested by law. The scope of such evaluation activities has been to inform policy and practice within DHS and its grantees. The evaluation of the Blue Campaign stemmed from an interest within the agency to understand the impact of the campaign, with the ultimate scope of providing documentation to policy leaders, so they can understand what the implementation of this informational effort is about and if it works based on its intended outcomes. Each year DHS looks at the results of these evaluations and related recommendations. Evaluations inform projects' management and allocation of funds and budgets. The Evidence Act has been helpful to foster a change on how evaluation is perceived at the government level because evaluation results are shared with the White House and the public and with the budget office (US Government, n.d.).

The S&T team facilitated meetings between our researchers and the campaign developers and helped us in translating complex statistical results into plain language for wider distribution. Our findings were referenced in the DHS 2023 annual report, thereby bringing attention to a wide national audience of policymakers and scientists engaged in prevention efforts (US Department of Homeland Security, 2023). As noted by Dr Legault, the ultimate goal of evaluation activities within a government agency should be to understand what works, what issues exist and determine how to mitigate the impact of potentially unintended negative consequences and transparently communicate with the public that the government is doing something about it. It is a way to proactively address issues that may come up from the implementation of a programme. The evaluation of the Blue Campaign was conducted by our team with this intent, to understand its impact and inform improvement efforts, fostering a culture of evaluation within a framework that values open government and transparency.

Key messages

- Human trafficking awareness campaigns should focus on raising awareness about abuse experienced by the victim rather than signs of crime.
- More evaluation studies are needed to understand the effectiveness of human trafficking awareness campaigns on the behaviours of those exposed to the campaign material.
- Survivors and practitioners should be involved in evaluation efforts to determine criteria to assess the quality of campaign products.
- Baseline data are important to identify which population segments or professional roles would benefit the most from exposure to campaign materials.
- Data collection systems need to be developed ahead of the launch of the campaign to monitor the process as well as the outcomes.

Note

1. Pollfish: www.pollfish.com; Prolific: www.profilic.com.

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Despite vast investment in anti-trafficking measures worldwide, there is a stark lack of evidence of effective interventions. It is unethical and ineffective to keep throwing money at anti-trafficking efforts without a more nuanced understanding of how they can help and harm. After all, advances in crime prevention and harm reduction both rely heavily on evaluation science. There are also particular idiosyncrasies and challenges for evaluation in this domain, since human trafficking is such a complex and contested phenomenon.

Evaluating Anti-Trafficking Interventions focuses on the sharp end of criminal abuses and brings together contributors from across different perspectives, disciplines, backgrounds and geographies. It offers both practical guidance and critical reflections on the promises and pitfalls of evaluation for anti-trafficking interventions. The book also introduces foundational theory and practice around evaluations (including both qualitative and quantitative evidence), highlights innovative new directions and draws lessons from real-world case studies. It is designed to function both as a practical companion guide and to stimulate reflection on the tensions and constraints of funding, doing and assessing evaluations in this domain. Combining an accessible style, an applied focus and academic rigour, this book has much to offer practitioners, policymakers, students, academics and others working in different settings worldwide.

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