▶ Synthesis review of human trafficking studies from 2010 to 2022[1]

This synthesis review provides an overview of key findings from human trafficking studies published between 2010 and 2022. We classify 238 records by methodology, study design, region, factors and outcomes in an online tool that allows users to (i) filter the search, (ii) visualize the evidence landscape and gaps and (iii) access the metadata of the record in the "Research to Action" (RTA) Bibliography. We also classify these records by academic discipline, policy area and the Palermo Protocol 4Ps paradigm in this synthesis review. We assess the factors and outcomes associated with human trafficking using taxonomy developed in consultation with research and policy experts on the subject matter. Additionally, we explore the characteristics and geographical variations of counter-trafficking programmes and policies. The current literature highlights the multifaceted nature of human trafficking and the need for increased awareness, improved evaluations, targeted interventions and enhanced collaboration among stakeholders to effectively address this human rights violation.

Key findings

▶ **Factors and outcomes associated with human trafficking:** Most studies published between 2010 and 2022 highlight the socio-economic conditions and migration pathways of victims and survivors of trafficking. The majority of studies assess the linkages between the vulnerability factors and the means (such as violence and fraud) and purpose (for example, sexual exploitation and child sexual exploitation) of trafficking.

▶ **Counter-trafficking efforts:** Empowerment, training and awareness raising are emphasized in counter-trafficking programmes, but studies reveal a prevailing lack of awareness and a need to provide appropriate training for stakeholders, including first responders.

▶ **Limited focus on interventions:** Few studies focus on interventions or impact evaluations, which highlights the need for data collection, improved evaluations and long-term assessments.

▶ **Barriers to effective interventions:** Studies reveal first responders' false perceptions of trafficked persons and inconsistencies in the operational interpretation of trafficking. Crises and corruption are among the top barriers to the identification of victims and survivors of trafficking.

▶ **Geographic focus:** Most studies examine trafficking at global and transnational levels in the Global North, with fewer studies from the Global South. The most common destinations studied are the United States, the United Kingdom and India.

► Introduction

During the four-year period from 2016 to 2020, for the first time since 2000, global efforts to reduce child labour made no progress. The most recent estimates show that the total number of children in child labour worldwide increased by over 8 million to 160 million between 2016 and 2020. Moreover, the latest data indicate that 27.6 million persons were in situations of forced labour on any given day between 2017 and 2021. Due to the hidden nature of human trafficking, there are no estimates of the prevalence of human trafficking that capture the full scope and scale of the issue. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic fallout threaten to further erode global progress unless urgent mitigation measures are taken.

The deadline for the goal set in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Target 8.7 to eliminate all forms of child labour by 2025 and to eradicate forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking by 2030 is fast approaching. To accelerate progress and scale up the impact of ongoing efforts, it would be timely to create and disseminate new knowledge guided by evidence and convene partners to leverage resources.

Although there is a growing body of evidence and research on human trafficking, forced labour and child labour, significant information gaps persist.

To address the evidence gaps on SDG Target 8.7, the RTA project has developed an annotated Bibliography and Evidence Gap Maps (EGMs) to present relevant research in an organized manner. The Bibliography and EGMs are used to identify research gaps and to articulate a Global Research Agenda on human trafficking, forced labour and child labour.

The structure and methodologies for developing the Human Trafficking EGM were devised during multiple consultations involving the academic community and experts from international organizations, policy actors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), country representatives and funding partners.

This review describes the methodologies used to develop the Human Trafficking Bibliography and EGM. It examines key findings from records, including peer-reviewed papers and reports published between 2010 and 2022. It outlines the latest research trends concerning the factors associated with human trafficking, as well as programmes and policies to combat this grave human rights violation. Through the Human Trafficking Bibliography, EGM and consultations, we identify the knowledge gaps and the priority areas for research.

The definition of human trafficking in this review follows the Palermo Protocol.[2] The review examines the relevant literature according to the broad principles of anti-trafficking, also called the 4Ps – prevention, protection, prosecution and partnerships. This review is guided by the three research questions listed below.

Guiding questions

► What are the common factors associated with human trafficking?

► What are the characteristics of counter-trafficking programmes? How do these programmes prevent or reduce the incidence of human trafficking?

► What are the geographical variations in counter-trafficking programmes and policies?

In the next section, we start by describing the selection criteria and methodology for the Bibliography. We present further disaggregation of the literature by thematic area, method, study design, academic discipline and policy area. In the Findings section, we discuss the implications of research findings and suggest priority areas for future work. We conclude by highlighting the research gaps and call for greater commitment to translate research into policy solutions.

► Methodology

Rationale

This review aims to explore human trafficking literature published since 2010 to examine the current research trends associated with human trafficking and to identify gaps in research. It originates from the evaluation of over

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[2] United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (entered into force 25 December 2003), which supplements the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000).

1,400 records published between 2010 and early 2022, of which 238 were selected and reviewed as part of the RTA Human Trafficking EGM. The RTA project aims to accelerate the use of rigorous research developed by scholars, policymakers and practitioners in support of efforts to tackle human trafficking around the world.

Rigorous research on tackling human trafficking includes:

- **descriptive studies** on human trafficking factors and outcomes of human trafficking;
- **causal studies** on the factors influencing the prevalence and remediation of human trafficking;
- **relational studies**, which investigate the association between two or more variables associated with human trafficking.

This review examines the extant records in line with the research questions. Findings provide the basis for mapping gaps in current research and identifying future directions of research.

Key definitions

This review uses the terms "human trafficking" and "trafficking in persons" as defined in the Palermo Protocol.

Article 3(a) of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, which supplements the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000), known as the Palermo Protocol, defines trafficking in persons as:

> the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

Following article 3 of the Palermo Protocol, human trafficking has three constituent components: (1) an *act* relates to what is done and includes recruitment, harbouring or transporting an individual; (2) the *means* relates to how it is done and includes the use/threat of force, fraud, debt manipulation, withholding of pay, confiscation of identity documents, psychological

coercion, reputational harm, manipulation of the use of addictive substances, threats to other people or other forms of coercion; and (3) the (exploitative) *purpose* relates to why it is done and focuses on exploitative practices including, for example, forced labour, bonded labour, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, and other forms of exploitation.[3]

Keyword searches

Keyword searches were performed by screening paper titles, abstracts and full content. The selected databases (see the section "Data sources" below) were searched for keywords associated with research relating to human trafficking. The following keywords were used to filter records: "bonded labour", "child sexual exploitation", "debt bondage", "forced labour", "forced prostitution", "human trafficking", "migration and exploitation", "migration and prostitution", "modern slavery", "Palermo Protocol", "trafficker's prosecution", "trafficking prevention", "transnational organized crime" and "victim protection".

Data sources

Searches for academic and non-academic sources related to human trafficking were conducted via core academic web-search engines and databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest, PubMed and Scopus. Additional searches were conducted via Libraries Worldwide (access to which was facilitated through Oxford Brookes University Library) and WorldCat.org. The full list of academic sources is given below.

Academic sources

- DOAJ – Directory of Open Access Journals
- Gale Academic OneFile
- Google Scholar
- Jisc Library Hub and PubMed Library of Congress
- JSTOR
- Libraries Worldwide
- ProQuest
- Scopus
- WorldCat.org

With a particular focus on recent records (2018 to 2022), in addition to the databases detailed above, the websites of various organizations were examined for relevant research papers and reports. The organizations listed

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[3] Please refer to article 3 of the Palermo Protocol and the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) *Guidelines*

Concerning the Measurement of Forced Labour for more information.

below were selected due to their extensive research on human trafficking and their engagement in human trafficking prevention or victim protection.[4]

Non-academic sources

- Anti-Slavery International
- ECPAT
- Free the Slaves
- Human Rights Watch
- ILO and IOM
- Oxfam
- Polaris
- Private Agencies Collaborating Together Incorporated (PACT)
- Save the Children
- United Nations (UN Women; Unite Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC); United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC); United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF))
- United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
- Walk Free Foundation

A plethora of records emerged linked to human trafficking, of which only records of formal research based on primary data sources were evaluated for inclusion in this review.

Online survey

A survey of IOM country and regional offices was conducted from 22 February to 1 April 2021. Officers from 53 IOM offices responded to the survey. Over 80 per cent of the responses received were from country offices.

Two survey questions were particularly relevant to the Human Trafficking Bibliography:

1. Please can you share any impact evaluation articles or assessments focusing on legislation/policy/practice to combat human trafficking or address the link between migration (labour migration and migrant workers) and other forms of exploitation, such as child labour and forced labour?
2. Can you please upload any relevant research and data products that are not publicly available below, e.g. bibliographies, literature reviews?

A total of 35 papers and reports were uploaded by IOM colleagues. Some direct URLs and titles, including ten literature reviews, were shared (Bryant and Landman 2020; Goździak et al. 2015, among others). In total, 1,314 papers and reports were included in the initial screening.

Inclusion criteria

The records are included based on *study relevance*, *peer-review* (of academic studies), *conceptual or theoretical frameworks* and *empirical evidence.* The *relevance* of the study is established based on criteria that are widely used to appraise the trustworthiness of qualitative research: credibility, dependability, confirmability, validity and transferability (Creswell and Miller 2000; Tracy 2010; Gough 2015). Relevance is also established based on whether a component of human trafficking is an outcome in the study. Determining whether studies are peer-reviewed helps to establish the validity, quality and originality of academic studies. These are criteria for the inclusion and evaluation of academic records (Maxwell 1992; Denzin 1978).

We review the conceptual frameworks based on whether the record provides practical recommendations and suggestions that inform policy. Studies included in this review discuss, examine and assess policy and legal frameworks; they provide novel (theoretical and conceptual) frameworks to guide future research and action. As such, they inform the assessing, facilitating or mitigating of factors or outcomes of human trafficking. Such frameworks are also used in providing social and political recommendations for tackling human trafficking, as well as developing tools that identify the relationships between each of the factors studied.

A final criterion for including and reviewing records is the use of *empirical evidence* in relation to the research phenomenon (Smith 1984; Creswell and Miller 2000). This relates to the data collection and analysis methods used and their relevance to the research questions developed within a set discipline, theory or philosophy.

Empirical evidence

The use of empirical evidence is an important criterion informing this review. Empirical evidence includes both primary datasets collected by the researchers for the purpose of the study and secondary sources.

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[4] While 'victim of trafficking' is the legal term established in the Palermo Protocol, 'survivor' is often used by practitioners to empower individuals who have survived the experience of human trafficking.

Primary data collection and analysis includes interviews, questionnaires, surveys, ethnographic research, case studies of countries or instances of trafficking, observations and focus groups. Some qualitative studies rely on multiple datasets often compiled through interviews and observations. Ethnographic studies are also included, although these are less common.

Secondary sources are generally analysed along with primary datasets. Secondary sources include desk research on previous case studies, victim files, analysis of court transcripts and victim interviews recorded by the police. Triangulation methods are used in some qualitative and mixed methods studies to establish the credibility and trustworthiness of findings.

Exclusion criteria

Records that are not based on original research, such as conceptual papers, literature reviews, bibliographies and reports based on other studies, are excluded. Reviews of previous studies, legal frameworks and policies based on secondary datasets are excluded from the Bibliography. Records that are theoretical in nature or whose primary contribution is related to theoretical frameworks are excluded. Additionally, records analysing historical data (datasets collected prior to 2000) are excluded.

► **About the records**

Publication year

This review examines literature on human trafficking published between 2010 and 2022, when the EGM was developed. Records analysing datasets collected prior to 2010 are excluded. The years with the highest number of records selected are 2013, 2014, 2017 and 2018 (figure 1).

Figure 1. Included records by year, 2010–2022
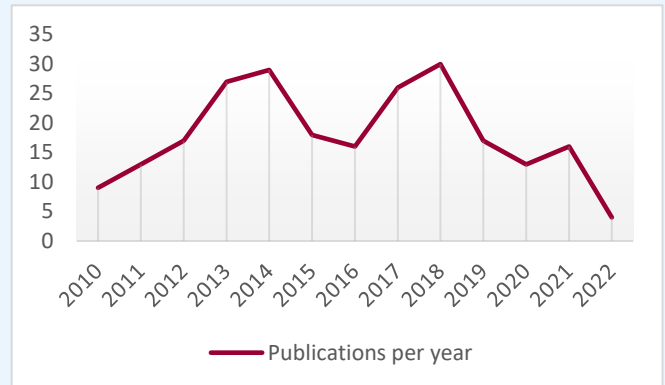
Source: Authors' research.

Methodologies

We consider three methodologies: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods. Quantitative research relies on numerical data while qualitative research relies on personal accounts or interviews. Mixed methods research considers a combination of quantitative and qualitative data.

While quantitative methods and the use of statistics can illustrate the scope and scale of trafficking issues, interviews with and the personal stories of trafficking persons can complement data, especially in settings where data are not available, by highlighting the vulnerabilities of different populations. Figure 2 shows that the majority of academic and non-academic records apply qualitative methods.

Figure 2. Included records by method, 2010–2022
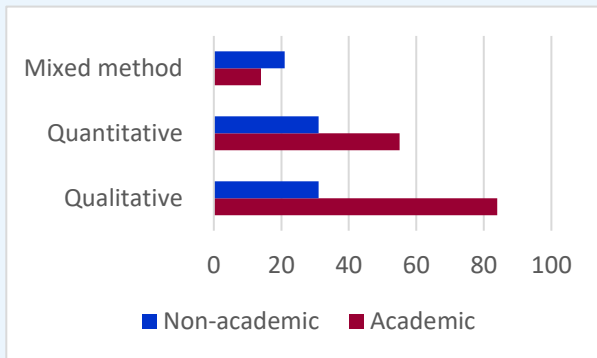
Source: Authors' research.

Study design

The selected records were classified as either causal (including randomized control trials (RCTs) and impact evaluation (not RCTs)), descriptive or relational.

Causal studies

o RCTs are defined as experimental studies in which participants or beneficiaries of a programme or policy (for example, on counter-trafficking) are assigned to treatment and control groups. Randomization mitigates the issue of selection bias – without randomization, participants with certain characteristics would self-select into treatment groups. While RCTs are often classified as the gold standard for examining causal relationships between an intervention and an outcome, they can be difficult to implement in reality.

o An impact evaluation is defined as an assessment of the impact of a project, an intervention or a policy relevant to human trafficking. Relevant impact evaluations do not need to have human trafficking as their primary focus, given that most impact evaluations focus on the intervention itself rather than the topic of human trafficking, as it is the intervention that is being evaluated.

Descriptive studies

Descriptive studies describe a setting where human trafficking is present. They do not assess the efficiency or effectiveness of a programme or policy, but they provide information about victims and survivors of trafficking. Descriptive studies include records which apply qualitative and mixed methods. To qualify for inclusion, the primary focus of the descriptive study must be human trafficking.

Relational studies

Relational studies investigate the association between two or more variables. They are also known as correlational studies. Relational studies include records which apply regression analysis within a quantitative and mixed-methods framework.

Academic disciplines

The selected records were derived from the following academic disciplines: public health, environmental and occupational health, international relations, government and law studies, multidisciplinary studies, law and criminal justice, sociology and political science, and economics.

The predominant disciplines, in terms of the number of records reviewed, are public health and environmental and occupational health. A large proportion of the records focused on sexual exploitation and labour exploitation, and specifically on prevention and victim protection.

International relations and government and law studies are the sources of the next largest number of records. These studies approached human trafficking from a migration perspective, focusing on sexual exploitation and labour exploitation. However, they concentrated on exploring supply and demand, prevention and prosecution efforts, and organized criminal gangs.

In contrast, fewer records emerged from the following academic fields: ethics and business ethics, physical geography, demography, women and family studies, and behavioural sciences. While an increased interest in the intersection of business and ethics was observed while sourcing records on human trafficking, many of these papers only addressed the subject from a conceptual standpoint.

Policy areas

The literature focuses predominantly on the following policy areas: advocacy, migration, social protection, administration of labour and criminal justice, and health; These areas represent over 75 per cent of the total number of reviewed records (figure 3).

Other policy areas discussed in a smaller number of records include labour markets, development, education, labour recruitment, child rights and corporate human rights due diligence. In contrast, fewer than ten records

focused on the following policy areas: credit/finance, trade and educational justice.

Figure 3. Included records by policy area, 2010–2022
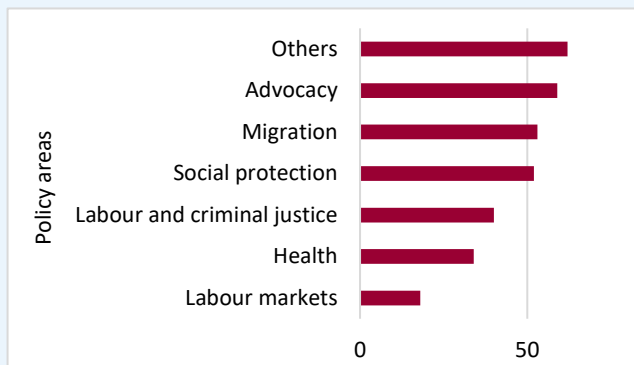
Source: Authors' research.
Note: Others include development, education, labour recruitment, child rights, corporate human rights, credit/finance, trade, and educational justice.

A large number of the reviewed records (particularly the assessment studies) rely on descriptions of human trafficking that result in cases of exploitation. Although this does contribute to raising awareness about some specific and some generic circumstances of sexual and labour exploitation, certain records fail to provide clear recommendations and policy actions suggestions. Such assessments are often conducted independently within disciplines such as public health, environmental and occupational health, and sociology and political science. They take an introductory approach to the subject of human trafficking and aim to inform rather than discuss the different policy options that might be available in a given context. The impact of assessment papers could be improved by contextualizing the subject area in terms of the extant literature and conducting primary data analysis that examines the policy areas relevant to the study.

► Linking the Bibliography with the EGM

Classification of studies

The 238 selected studies are classified based on factors influencing human trafficking and outcomes of human trafficking. The factors and outcomes were developed by the authors of this review. After consolidating the annotated Bibliography on human trafficking research, the RTA project team proposed a list of factors and

outcomes that formed the conceptual structure of the human trafficking EGM. An International Advisory Board (IAB) was consulted for determining the additional categories or subcategories of factors and outcomes, as well as identifying new research trends and directions for future research. The IAB is composed of individuals with expertise in human trafficking, forced labour and child labour research. It includes academic researchers, policy actors, employers' and workers' organizations, funding partners and civil society organization representatives.

Each record is mapped to the lists of factors and outcomes of human trafficking shown in tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Factors influencing human trafficking

Factors	Description of subcategories
Demographics	The record discusses *majority status*, *gender*, *ethnicity* or *living circumstances* as factors influencing trafficking.
Public governance and regulation	The record discusses the role of *legal frameworks*, *law enforcement*, *first responders*, *institutional frameworks* or *collective bargaining* as factors influencing trafficking.
Labour market	The record discusses the *demand for labour*, *informality*, *labour recruitment*, *economic structures and supply chains* or *due diligence and codes of conduct* as factors influencing trafficking.
Social protection and livelihood	The record discusses *violence*, *perpetrators*, *abuse*, *climate change*, *crises*, *corruption*, *unrest*, *technology and social networks* or *poverty* as factors influencing vulnerability to human trafficking.
Migration	The record discusses access to *migration status*, *migration pathways* or *people smuggling* as a factor influencing human trafficking.
Skills development	The record discusses *education level*, *remedial education*, *family coaching*, *life skills*, *access to information of individuals* or *women's economic capacity* as factors influencing vulnerability to human trafficking.
Health and well-being	The record discusses *disability*, *healthcare* or *psychosocial interventions* as factors influencing human trafficking.
Attitudes and awareness raising	The record discusses *changing attitudes and family-related social norms of first responders and communities towards survivors of trafficking, capacity-building programmes and intervention* or *communication initiatives and advocacy groups* as factors influencing human trafficking.

Note: The italic text denotes the subcategories.

Source: Authors' research.

Please refer to the "Factors and outcomes" section below for a detailed description of how the subcategories are defined.

Table 2. Outcomes related to human trafficking

Outcomes	Description of subcategories
Prevalence/ incidence	The record discusses the *prevalence or incidence* of human trafficking as an outcome.
Palermo Protocol paradigms	The record discusses *prevention*, *protection*, *prosecution* or *partnership* as an outcome. Please refer to the Palermo Protocol for more information.
Trafficking components	The record discusses the *act*, *means* or *purpose* element of trafficking, focusing on exploitative practices, including forced labour, bonded labour, child labour, domestic servitude, sexual exploitation and child sexual exploitation. Please refer to the Palermo Protocol article 3(a) for more information.
Types of exploitation	The record discusses trafficking for *forced labour/bonded labour/labour exploitation*, *child trafficking*, *trafficking for domestic servitude and/or forced marriage* or *trafficking for sexual exploitation/forced commercial sexual exploitation*.
Target group	The record discusses *the gender*, *ethnicity*, *migration background* or *vulnerability* of persons in trafficking as the targeting criteria/outcome.
Enabling environment	The record discusses creating an enabling environment by increasing individuals' access to *international policies*, *preventive services*, *protective services* or *remedies* as an outcome.
Health	The record discusses individuals' *physical*, *psychological* or *mental health*, *occupational health* or *working conditions* as an outcome.

Note: The italic text denotes the subcategories.

Source: Authors' research.

The EGM shows how the factors and outcomes intersect, highlighting where research does and does not exist (figure 4). The RTA project will update the Bibliography and EGM as more relevant research becomes available.

Palermo Protocol paradigms

Of the total 238 reviewed studies, most records focus on the prevention angle (n = 133), followed by protection (n = 68) and prosecution (n = 12). Over 70 studies have a combined focus of prevention and victim protection and/or criminal prosecution. Partnership is at the centre

of five studies, although an additional 24 provide some recommendations for partnership development and collaborations in their findings.

► **Prevention**

The vast majority of studies focused on prevention activities that can be implemented at the global, regional or country level to stop persons with specific vulnerabilities from being trapped by traffickers and organized crime networks. This focus was particularly prevalent among the multiple studies on sexual exploitation and exploitation of women and children, since they are deemed to be more exposed to vulnerability due to their lack of access to information on migration, job opportunities and legal recruitment channels.

Areas of intervention linked to prevention included: *education and access to information for vulnerable populations*, *campaigns to promote public awareness*, *developing clear and coherent migration policies* and *the improvement of migration administration and institutions.*

► **Protection**

The rights and well-being of trafficked persons were discussed in many of the studies with an emphasis on providing comprehensive and 'readily accessible services for social assistance, medical care and trauma recovery. Victim protection services recommended by the reviewed studies included temporary shelter, medical and psychosocial care and, in a smaller number of instances, legal aid. Particular attention was given to the specific needs of (young) women and children. The findings indicated the need for clinical practice guidelines to identify potential and actual victims of trafficking.

A handful of studies focused on victim protection and prevention of re-trafficking and discussed the risks of victims being treated as criminals, risk of detention and deportation if the employer notifies the police that the worker has absconded, and communication challenges impeding police and service providers due to language barriers. Areas of intervention linked to victim protection included *education and access to information for first responders*, such as *awareness campaigns and tailored training for emergency department staff, paediatric medical care providers* and *law enforcement personnel*.

► **Prosecution**

Adopting and implementing adequate legislation and policies to hold traffickers responsible for their criminal acts was reported as an important response to address human trafficking. Successful prosecution of traffickers often requires the testimony of victims, a factor that was judged to be problematic. Evidence from studies focusing on prosecution shows that most trafficking cases involve organized criminal groups or clan-based groups that use well-established transnational trafficking channels. For the most part, the poor socio-economic conditions, coupled with higher levels of corruption, in Eastern Europe, Northern Africa and South-East Asia were associated with migration to other countries, where some migrants fall prey to traffickers. Furthermore, studies identified the fact that organized criminal groups adapt well to changes in demand and opportunities for new forms of exploitation. An effective response should offer victims adequate protection and prevent them from being deported to their country of origin in return for an undertaking to provide evidence for the prosecution of traffickers or criminal networks. There were no recommendations for interventions linked to prosecution.

► **Partnership**

There is limited discussion focusing on the partnership paradigm in the records reviewed. Those that do focus on this issue advocate for international cooperation, particularly for effective prosecution, given the fact that trafficking is often a transnational problem. They state that collaboration between countries of origin, transit and destination is critical in working together to ensure that adequate evidence is gathered for effective prosecution and that comprehensive services are promptly provided to victims to ensure that they fully and effectively participate in the prosecution of traffickers.

The few studies focusing on partnership advocate for either developing or strengthening channels or structures for information exchange and international collaboration to address human trafficking. Disseminating information on the different options for legal migration and the risks of trafficking and irregular migration is believed to be crucial to protect persons with specific vulnerabilities from danger and raise public awareness on this issue. It is equally important to disseminate information in countries of destination to eliminate misleading propaganda relating to labour migration and promote migrants' labour rights. There was no evidence of interventions linked to partnership development and inter-agency collaboration in the reviewed records (IOM and Samuel Hall 2023).

► Human trafficking evidence gap map

Figure 4. The evidence landscape (top) and gap (bottom) on human trafficking

Link: https://rtaproject.org/human-trafficking-egm/.
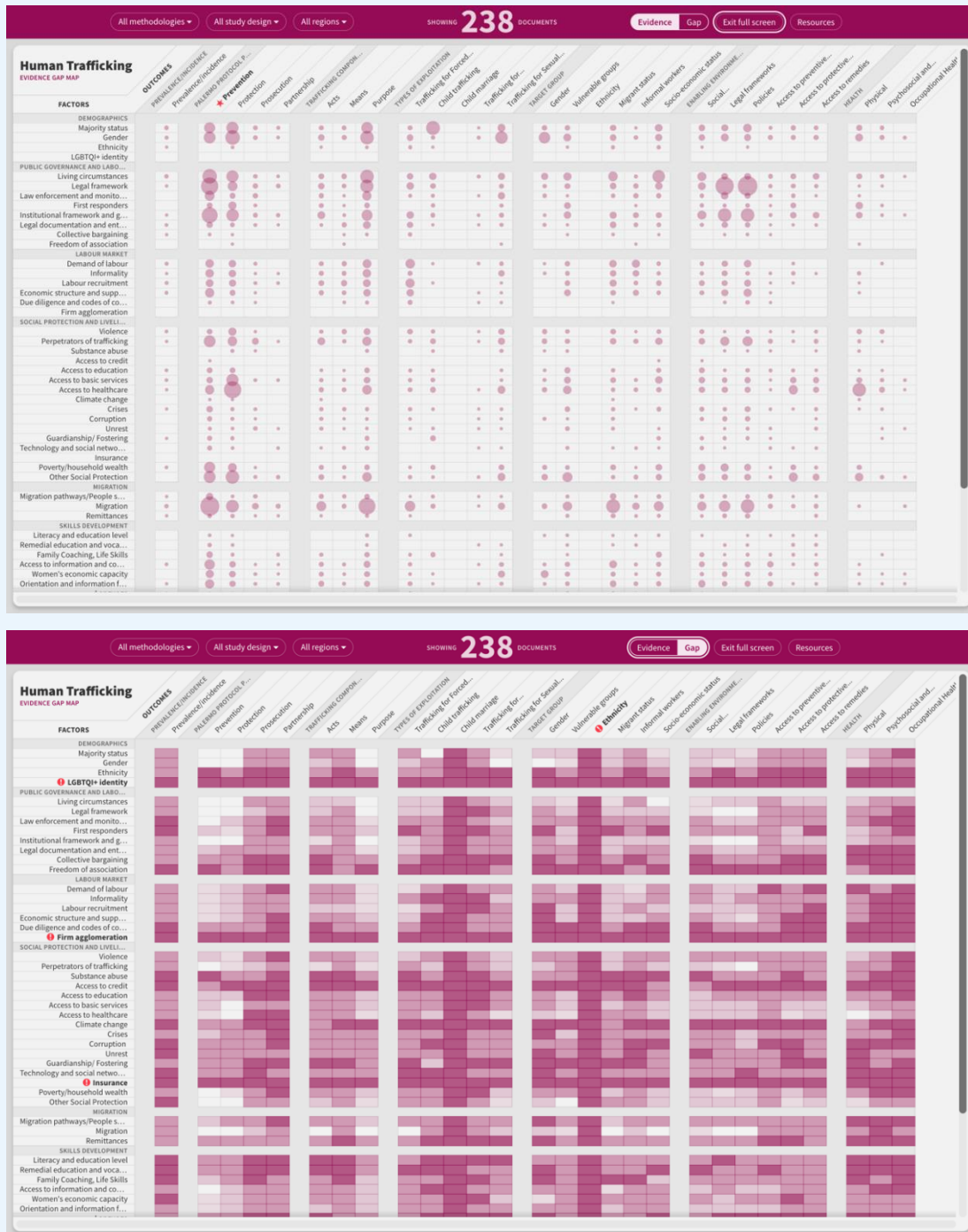
► Findings

Research trends

Factors associated with human trafficking

The factors influencing human trafficking identified across the reviewed studies relate mainly to *social protection and livelihood*. More specifically, the socio-economic conditions of vulnerable populations in countries of origin are viewed as the most common factor influencing human trafficking. This topic is often examined alongside *migration*.

Economic conditions are largely portrayed as reduced income levels or poverty while social conditions refer to family structures, health, (domestic) violence and trauma. Migration pathways are also identified as factors influencing human trafficking in studies exploring cross-border implications (discussed below in the section "Geographical variations in counter-trafficking programmes and policies").

Studies conducted in the Eastern European region and Central and North African countries show that the socio-economic conditions in countries of origin encourage migration (primarily to Western European and North American countries). Some migrants fall prey to human trafficking on their migration journey. In these instances, factors influencing human trafficking are believed to be similar to those influencing economic migration.

Poverty is suggested as a strong factor influencing trafficking for sexual exploitation, as reported in Eastern European countries, followed by trafficking for forced labour. Studies conducted in Canada, India and the United States also identify the social circumstances of individuals and families that render people vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Factors associated with sexual exploitation include a history of drug use/dependence, trauma and low self-esteem. Additionally, studies exploring trafficking for forced labour find that occupational risks may be heightened in situations involving hazardous work, long hours with limited breaks and a lack of personal protective equipment or safety training. Factors associated with labour exploitation include the use of violence and abuse, poor and deprived economic backgrounds, and overcrowded living conditions. A single study discusses trafficking for the purpose of selling babies in Bulgaria and Romania. Cases of domestic servitude, and forced begging, although less prevalent, are also associated with *social protection and livelihood*.

Results from international and global studies assessing the push and pull factors of trafficking show that the prevalence of criminal activity is strongly linked to human trafficking, in both destination and origin countries. Studies show that law enforcement and levels of corruption matter more in origin countries than in destination countries, while a low level of gender equality may have constraining effects on human trafficking, possibly because gender discrimination limits female mobility, which is necessary for the occurrence of human trafficking. Results from multiple studies conducted in India also show that trafficked persons live in poverty, with monthly income levels well below the national average. Most victims and survivors report long-lasting health, economic, social and psychological consequences. Forcibly prostituted women were more likely to have been separated from or deserted by their husbands, more likely to be working in a brothel and more likely to have experienced sexual violence in the past year. The studies highlight the gendered vulnerabilities that set women up for sexual exploitation and capture the process of the trafficking experience.

It is important to note that the coercive element leading to sexual exploitation is not clarified in all of the reviewed studies, resulting in conflation of prostitution, forced prostitution and trafficking for sexual exploitation in some of the studies. This means that the studies reviewed here point to the compelling need for interventions that clarify and go beyond the forced/voluntary divide in countries/states where prostitution is legalised.

Characteristics of counter-trafficking programmes

Attitudes and awareness raising

A large extent of the reviewed studies that focused on attitudes and awareness raising explore the experiences of trafficked persons. The evidence on empowerment, training and awareness raising is mixed. The perspectives of trafficked persons are central to several studies that promote increased training and awareness. One US study examining the experiences of sexual exploitation victims and survivors informs both the circumstances leading to trafficking and the means for intervention and prevention. It identifies homelessness as a key factor leading to the trafficking of women and girls, and confirms that men, boys, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and more (LGBTIQ+) are also vulnerable to sexual

exploitation. Most victims and survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation are identified to be citizens of the country, but not migrants, in which the research is carried out.

Homeless LGBTIQ+ youth report trading sex through online advertisements and social media, at hotels and at customers' residences. Programmes to address trafficking identify education and awareness raising among victims/survivors and people deemed vulnerable to trafficking as the most important and feasible prevention tool. Here, prevention of re-trafficking is highlighted for cases where victims and survivors are not able to access the necessary help and assistance in the country of destination. However, other studies focusing on victim/survivor experiences argue that knowledge building and awareness raising alone fail to prevent trafficking. Studies conducted across the Philippines, Bhutan, India and the United States propose solutions and make recommendations to empower vulnerable populations and prevent human trafficking. These include specifically targeted programmes to (a) ensure the participation of those individuals deemed vulnerable to trafficking (many of whom are believed to be women), (b) determine the extent to which they are able to access the necessary resources, and (c) facilitate the introduction of innovative projects or programmes. Involvement of national government and humanitarian agencies, including international and non-governmental organizations, is also advised to support and increase local government capacity in the following areas: identifying, assessing and monitoring risk factors and enhancing initiatives facilitating access to knowledge, education and innovative programmes to build safety and resilience; and reducing the underlying risk factors while strengthening preparedness for effective response.

In the context of preventing trafficking for forced labour, initiatives to address human trafficking which focused on raising awareness include actions to prevent exploitation and harm among low-wage workers engaged in "3D work" (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning). Dialogue is needed to determine the extent to which and in what ways low-wage workers are currently being exploited and to identify the ways in which work-related hazards might harm individuals, including parents, who may then be forced to send their children to work. Once again, an assessment study indicates that the community-based component of interventions is not sufficiently well researched or well designed to prevent the exploitation of migrant women. This evaluation contributes further

evidence against pre-migration knowledge building and awareness raising, because these measures are deemed unlikely to sufficiently equip migrants to overcome the power inequalities that they will encounter throughout the migration journey, especially once they are in their employment situation.

The role of social media and technology platforms is acknowledged in only one study, which criticizes mainstream media for perpetuating misconceptions. The study also stresses that media portrayals of human trafficking may contribute to policies and programmes which fail to address the structural factors that increase vulnerabilities to human trafficking and the complex needs of trafficked persons. The study notes that misconceptions can be counteracted by producing sensitive, informed media through social platforms. Advocates share their strategies for counteracting misinformation by engaging in informative conversations, utilizing social media to educate vulnerable communities and the wider public and disseminating messages from trafficking victims and survivors describing their personal experiences.

Furthermore, a separate study focusing on healthcare interventions also suggests that the media portrayal of trafficking victims and survivors has a significant influence on nurses' perceptions of this population.

► **Public governance and regulation**

    ► First responders

A core research trend that emerges from the review of studies concerns interventions involving first responders, such as paramedics, emergency medical technicians, emergency department staff (nurses and doctors), law enforcement personnel, and firefighters in tackling human trafficking. The range of interventions reported includes education and awareness raising for healthcare providers, law enforcement personnel, and vulnerable populations; community monitoring and multifaceted interventions aimed at social protection; occupational health and safety; and promoting women's economic capacity as a means of intervention to avoid sexual exploitation of women and girls. Evidence on the long-term effects of interventions is sparse. These topics are discussed in multidisciplinary, healthcare and public policy studies. A large number of intervention studies are conducted in India and the United States. Findings from US studies show that training and awareness raising lead to improvements in healthcare providers' ability to identify trafficked persons who have

been subjected to sexual exploitation and domestic servitude. In the United Kingdom, the results of an intervention with first responders show that key implications for emergency nursing practice include a significant need to heighten awareness of indications of human trafficking in order to enhance targeted and sensitive assessment, identification and preparation for reporting and referral.

Results from studies conducted with US-based first responders raise questions about the efficacy of current training and awareness techniques. Although studies acknowledge that victim identifications may be even lower in the absence of training, findings also point to the fact that encounters between victims/survivors and first responders and trained professionals are rare, despite government and media messages that victims/survivors are "hidden in plain sight". Findings show that offering training to first responders, despite improving their level of awareness, may not transform their new knowledge into action. The training builds on the assumption that, once trainees are aware of the signs of human trafficking, they will actively look for such signs in the cases that they encounter in their daily work. This essentially presupposes the capacity to multitask on the part of professionals who are likely already to be overburdened in their jobs. The study further argues that awareness of human trafficking may be insufficient to identify victims and that proactive tactical approaches, such as law enforcement, inspections and raids in places where trafficked persons are likely to be exploited (for example, commercial sex venues and migrant farm worker communities) may be necessary. In addition, a regional study examines the paradigm shift towards a victim/survivor-centred approach to the way in which communities (and specifically first responders, NGOs, social services and faith-based organizations) address the complex issues that are presented by adults linked to trafficking for sexual exploitation and prostitution-related crimes.

► Legal frameworks

Four assessment studies investigate the legal frameworks and the extent to which they aid preventive efforts. These studies exploring modern slavery and human trafficking are conducted in the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom and the United States. Findings indicate that the legislation constitutes only a partial solution to the various problems encompassed by human trafficking and modern slavery. Hence, human trafficking remains a complex problem, with more work necessary to address the

unintended consequences of the policy and implementation difficulties, such as facilitating the development of partnerships promoting multi-agency working. Partnership has been highlighted as crucial in relation to information sharing and the coordination of compliance and preventive action. A further study outlines a possible framework for a more evidence-based approach to assess the linkages between trafficking, counter-trafficking policy and human development. The study argues that the human development gains from greater mobility could be significantly enhanced if there was greater coherence between policies to combat trafficking and policies to promote development. Limitations of extant frameworks lie in the fact that policymaking is characterized by top-down decision-making, which excludes key actors and prevents policy from being informed by a robust evidence base.

► **Skills development**

In addressing the socio-economic factors that influence trafficking, several studies suggest that the dominant approach of anti-trafficking policy is to target victims and survivors by promoting skills-based income-generating activities. There is a lack of studies aiming to explore skills development of persons deemed vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation. Some studies suggest that education and skill development could empower the anti-trafficking organization in working towards the creation of self-sufficient, responsible and independent economic actors to be able to successfully navigate a market-driven economy. These approaches are discussed by studies that question whether addressing poverty as a factor influencing human trafficking by devolving responsibility to the individuals could be effective. A study from Benin suggests that "fighting poverty" requires structural reforms in the market economy rather than transferring the responsibility to individuals.

The reviewed studies also reveal *barriers to effective interventions* relating to human trafficking definitions and perceptions of victims/survivors, corruption and crises. Findings demonstrate that the culture of local law enforcement agencies across the United States and the perceptions of officials within the police force regarding human trafficking do not support the identification of a broad range of cases. Since local and national definitions of human trafficking are still evolving, the police focus on the trafficking of children for sexual exploitation, which they perceive to be the most serious problem affecting their communities. Reluctance to differentiate between

(forced) prostitution and trafficking for sexual exploitation minimizes the problem of human trafficking and makes trafficking for forced labour seem largely non-existent. These findings emerge from studies conducted in the United States.

► **Health and well-being**

Healthcare professionals and systems are reported to play a significant role in preventing trafficking, recognizing victims and survivors, and organizing appropriate interventions. Emergency department nurses are depicted as trafficked persons' only contact with the outside world. Positioned as they are, at the forefront of caring for trafficked persons, it is essential that nurses are able to recognize the signs of trafficking, are aware of the procedures for reporting potential cases and are knowledgeable about the services that are available to trafficked persons. Hence, the strong recommendation for dedicated training and awareness raising among first responders. Studies also emphasize a more widespread public health approach to prevent human trafficking that could simultaneously generate greater awareness of the less easily recognized signs of labour exploitation.

The results of health-related interventions conducted in a Canadian study on the risk factors of human trafficking suggest that those who access healthcare and other protection services must demonstrate a desire to remedy their exploitation and abuse by distancing themselves from sex work and/or drug use, as well as a desire heal from the conditions that purportedly made them vulnerable to becoming involved in sex work in the first place, such as a history of drug use/dependence, trauma and low self-esteem. Simultaneously, they must accept the "victim" label and surrender to a state-guided rescue. Furthermore, a US-based mixed-method study systematically investigated shared perspectives of trafficked persons. It identifies three unique, yet interconnected, victim profiles (avoidant, distrustful, constrained) with regard to healthcare experiences and health services interventions. This study indicates that medical professionals face difficulties in identifying trafficked persons.

Geographical variations in counter-trafficking programmes and policies

A large proportion of the studies from some academic disciplines – international relations, law and criminal justice – are concerned with cross-border implications of trafficking from a legal perspective. They examine and discuss the limitations of transnational legislation and the overall lack of cooperation to secure prosecutions and protect individuals from trafficking. Regional and national studies exploring trafficking from North African and Central African countries into the EU indicate that legislation is incapable of encapsulating all the aspects of human trafficking. National authorities, including prosecuting actors, use broad interpretations of international norms to disentangle and identify the complex scenarios of human trafficking. Studies indicate a reduction of trafficking within migration pathways where enforcement has been strengthened, but also diversion of trafficking. The form of legislation, as well as law enforcement tools offered by Eurojust and Europol, is crucial in combating trafficking for forced criminal activity.

On a global scale, studies recognize the difficulty of protecting trafficked persons from being held accountable for crimes they were compelled to commit in the course, or as a consequence, of being trafficked. This is important because it suggests that the enforcement of criminal law can have transnational negative externalities unless it is approached in a coordinated fashion. These studies also underline the importance of developing partnerships at regional or global levels. In the United States, legislation is studied predominantly in relation to cases of trafficking for sexual exploitation. State-level anti-trafficking laws are reviewed to understand the reduced number of criminal prosecutions but also the treatment of non-US citizens. Global studies also assess the criminal justice response and protection of labour rights for migrant workers and other vulnerable groups.

Key policy and practice implications are suggested in relation to arrest, court and immigration proceedings, access to appropriate support services, and to ensure the well-being of individuals. Recommendations include the development of safe and regular migration routes for those who, due to social and economic factors, need to migrate to find secure employment. Studies also stress the development of local economies and infrastructure to prevent trafficking, through the creation of local employment opportunities for communities that may be vulnerable to trafficking and/or re-trafficking. At regional level, examining migration pathways from North African countries to Europe, safe migration pathways are emphasized as the primary solution. Safe migration is proposed as a means to reduce trafficking by decreasing the likelihood of migrant deaths or harms, by reducing the profits and disrupting criminal groups that facilitate irregular migration, while at the same time reducing

overall levels of irregular migration. This means increasing the available number of safe and legal routes to Europe, as well as to other destinations, and encouraging freedom of movement and trade in the regions of source and transit. Studies acknowledge that this recommendation poses practical challenges and that, given the current political climate across Europe, this solution is unlikely to be appealing to policymakers and cannot be implemented until the refugee crisis in Europe is smaller in scale.

Studies conducted at regional and international level also find that programmes designed to build capacity among the local law enforcement authorities cannot bring about the rapid results required, due to widespread corruption. The temporary use of armed forces for some law enforcement tasks should not delay police development and reform, including the promotion of civilian oversight. The international community should do all that it can to supplement local criminal justice capacity. Studies argue that an appropriate response to human trafficking in crises should recognize human trafficking as a phenomenon inherently related to crises, not merely as a side effect. In addition, current humanitarian responses to crises do not encompass the full reality of human trafficking and exploitation, and therefore leave certain forms of trafficking unaddressed and victims/survivors unassisted. One study also explores the movement of money within the criminal organizations, the methods of bookkeeping and accounting, and the basic techniques for laundering the proceeds acquired from trafficking for forced prostitution from Bulgaria to Western Europe. By describing how the criminals engaged in human trafficking for sexual exploitation manage the money generated from this type of criminal activity, a better understanding of the criminal phenomenon itself is attained.

Research gaps

We identify the gaps in research by assessing the factors and outcomes, studies' academic discipline, geographical scope, Palermo Protocol paradigms, trafficking components and types of exploitation.

Factors and outcomes

In the online EGM, the star symbol indicates the factor and outcome for which most evidence is available in the Bibliography. Most records discuss the effect of monitoring and evaluation on the prevention of human trafficking. The exclamation mark indicates factors and outcomes with limited evidence. More research is needed on the factors Ethnicity as a demographic variable, LGBTIQ+ identity, Collective bargaining, Firm agglomeration, Insurance and Language and the outcome Ethnicity to define target group for interventions.

Academic disciplines

Some of the academic fields with limited or no research on human trafficking include ethics and business ethics, physical geography, demography, women and family studies, and behavioural science.

Geographical scope

The gap in research concerning the geographical scope of studies is twofold. First, many countries have been overlooked, particularly in the Global South.[5] The vast majority of studies are conducted in North America, Eastern Europe, North, South and Western Europe. Studies conducted in the South Asia region follow closely, in terms of number, with most taking place within India.

Second, many of the reviewed studies covering transnational human trafficking focus on the country of destination and overlook the transit and source countries. Some examples of wider studies conducted at regional level emerge from multidisciplinary research and from the fields of international relations, government and law. These studies (although in smaller numbers) explore South-East Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam), Central and North Africa, the Middle East and Turkey, and Eastern Europe. This research includes empirical comparisons of human trafficking policy across Eurasia.

Palermo Protocol paradigms

Studies focus on prevention outcomes at global, regional or country level. Short-term and medium-term initiatives are recommended to prevent human trafficking by assessing the vulnerability of migrant workers, women from specific socio-economic backgrounds and children to human trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Future research should look beyond prevention and protection efforts in the destination countries and develop dedicated studies for prosecution, protection and partnership. Practical recommendations for prosecution efforts include

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5 'Global South' is a term that broadly comprises countries in the regions of Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia (without Israel, Japan, and South Korea), and Oceania (without Australia and New Zealand) (UNCTAD 2022; 2023).

developing regional, national, and global databases and increasing data management capacity.

Trafficking components (act, means, purpose)

The vast majority of studies that discuss the purpose element of trafficking focus on exploitative practices relating to sexual exploitation and child sexual exploitation and, in a few instances, domestic servitude and labour exploitation. Thus, forced labour (including bonded labour and other forms of exploitation) and child labour are largely overlooked in the context of trafficking. Furthermore, a gap in knowledge emerges in relation to the "act" element of trafficking. The recruitment and

transportation elements of human trafficking should receive dedicated attention with the aim of providing clear recommendations and policy actions linked to migration and prosecuting organized criminal networks. Extant evidence shows that the exploitative component of human trafficking (purpose) is the focus of the greatest amount of study, rendering victim recruitment and transportation secondary as a research objective.

Table 3 summarizes the research trends and gaps, drawing on records from 2010 to 2022, indexed in the Bibliography.

Table 3. Summary of research trends and gaps

Area discussed	Research trends	Research gaps
Study design	Most studies are descriptive in nature and provide assessments on the factors and outcomes of human trafficking.	The review of literature shows that very few studies focus on interventions or impact evaluations. Evidence on the long-term effects of interventions is sparse.
Intervention programmes	Empowerment, training, and awareness raising are the core themes across counter-trafficking programmes.	Barriers to effective anti-trafficking interventions are identified relating to inconsistencies in the operational interpretations of trafficking and perceptions of trafficked persons.
Trafficking components: acts, means and purpose	The means and purpose of human trafficking are commonly assessed along with the key factors. The purpose of trafficking most commonly explored is sexual exploitation and child sexual exploitation.	Few studies examine other purposes of trafficking, such as trafficking for forced labour, slavery like practices, or child labour.
Policy areas	Most research focuses on the following policy areas: advocacy, migration and social protection.	Few studies focus on the following policy areas: development, labour markets, administration of labour, and criminal justice.
Palermo Protocol paradigms	Most studies focus on prevention and/or protection.	Few studies examine prosecution in isolation. Prosecution is discussed alongside protection and/or prevention. Partnership is never discussed independently.
Geography	Most studies concentrate on trafficking destinations in the Global North (such as India, the United Kingdom and the United States).	There is a lack of research on countries of transit and origin and those in the Global South.
Academic disciplines	Most studies are conducted in the following academic disciplines: public health, international relations, multidisciplinary studies, law and criminal justice.	Few studies are available from the following academic disciplines: ethics and business ethics, science and technology, demography and behavioural sciences.

Source: Authors' research.

► Call to action

SDG Target 8.7 calls on all parties to "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". Policy progress towards meeting these goals depends on reliable evidence on the extent of human trafficking, forced labour and child labour, as well as causal research into factors that can influence the prevalence of these circumstances.

The Human Trafficking EGM and the Bibliography offer opportunities to all stakeholders to initiate and support research addressing the identified priority areas. This review highlights the multifaceted nature of human trafficking. The majority of the reviewed studies assess the factors and outcomes of trafficking in the Global North, with the situation in the Global South less well understood. The reviewed studies underscore the need for increased awareness, improved evaluations, targeted interventions and enhanced collaboration among stakeholders to achieve SDG Target 8.7. Evidence on long-term actions is crucial for determining the prevalence of human trafficking and the effectiveness of counter-trafficking programmes.

This review highlights significant information gaps that hinder the progress of policy responses. As such, all stakeholders can contribute to addressing these knowledge gaps to deepen the understanding of the root causes of human trafficking and inform the policies needed to get back on track to achieve SDG target 8.7.

We encourage researchers, including junior researchers, to contribute to addressing the evidence gaps. In combination with the research agendas developed under this project, we encourage practitioners and researchers from different fields of specialization to undertake studies with direct policy relevance.

We invite and encourage new collaborations and innovative approaches to strengthen the evidence base on human trafficking, forced labour and child labour. We also count on further financial and technical commitment to translating research into policy action and solutions for sustainable development.

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Suggested reading on terminologies

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► The Research to Action (RTA) project

Using knowledge to accelerate progress in the elimination of child labour and forced labour

The ILO's RTA project centres on bridging the divide between policy research and policy action to tackle issues of child labour, forced labour and human trafficking. The primary objectives of the project are to increase access to evidence, facilitate understanding of available research and gaps, enhance capacity to provide evidence and fill gaps, and promote new interest and engagement in the subject area. The RTA project collaborates closely with the International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s Protection Division. The RTA project is funded by the United States Department of Labor (USDOL).

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► **rtaproject.org**