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Citation

Vries, I. de, & Cockbain, E. (2024). Governing through indicators: structural biases and empirical challenges in indicator-based approaches to anti-trafficking policy, practice, and research. In E. A. Faulkner (Ed.), *Modern slavery in global context* (pp. 145-167). Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3748427>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Governing through Indicators: Structural Biases and Empirical Challenges in Indicator-Based Approaches to Anti-Trafficking Policy, Practice, and Research

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Abstract

In this reflective chapter, we examine the structural biases and empirical challenges underlying human trafficking ‘indicators’ (especially problem, risk and performance indicators) that are routinely used to describe and measure human trafficking, assess risk, identify abuses, evaluate responses, and encourage accountability. While frequently used, such indicators can give an undue illusion of objectivity and reliability when they are neither neutral nor unskewed. In fact, numerous factors affect which elements are privileged as ‘indicators’ and which are obscured. We therefore examine here the selectivity, politics, racialized and gendered concerns that relate to the production and use of human trafficking indicators. Since human trafficking is a complex, highly-contested, and multi-faceted practice, it is not easily reduced to the crude generalizations upon which many indicators rest. We explore how the uncritical use of indicators can both contribute to stereotypical and unachievable ideals of victimhood and engender undue criminalization or withholding of victim support. In doing so, we disentangle some paradoxes around who is deemed ‘vulnerable’, ‘at risk’, ‘worthy of support’ and requiring ‘protection’. We highlight the – routinely overlooked – weak empirical basis and other limitations of many

commonplace ‘indicators’ and challenges in building empirically-stronger and more robust indicators. The chapter concludes with overall implications of these critical reflections for policy, interventions, and research.

List of Acronyms

CSEC: Commercial sexual exploitation of children

EU: European Union

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

GRETA: Group of Experts on Action against Human Trafficking

NGO: Non-governmental organizations

NHTRC: National Human Trafficking Resource Center

TIP: Trafficking in Persons

UK: United Kingdom

UNODC: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

US: United States

Introduction

Research and policy around human trafficking build on an “indicator culture” (Musto et al., 2020, p. 7): a tendency to simplify a complex problem like human trafficking into quantifiable categories intended to make the concept easier for the wider public to understand, help in identifying instances of human trafficking, or underpin estimates of scale and other

analyses. The increasing digitization of information has enabled and helped proliferate attempts to quantify human trafficking, breaking it down into tangible aspects and guiding policy through measurable and seemingly objective standards (Merry, 2016; Merry & Conley, 2011). While various indicators shed at least partial light on the empirical realities of human trafficking, few if any apply universally to its numerous different and highly contextual manifestations. As such, the purpose of this chapter is to offer a critical reflection on the production and use of indicators.

Throughout this chapter, we use the term ‘indicators’ to refer broadly to any attempt to quantify and categorize information on human trafficking and anti-trafficking efforts. From this inclusive perspective, three main (and interrelated) types of indicators exist: problem indicators, risk indicators, and performance indicators. First, problem indicators have the purpose to facilitate the identification of human trafficking. For example, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) produced an influential list of human trafficking indicators based on assumptions such as trafficked people “believe that they must work against their will”, “show signs that their movements are being controlled”, “show fear or anxiety”, or “suffer injuries or impairments typical of certain jobs or control measures” (UNODC, n.d.). Such indicators have helped inform, among other things, investigative strategies (e.g., approaches to evidence-gathering), ‘spot the signs’ awareness-raising campaigns (Andrijasevic & Anderson, 2009), and formal processes about whether officially to recognize someone as a ‘trafficking victim’¹.

In contrast to problem indicators, risk indicators are not so much used to detect human trafficking in real time but to determine its precedents. For example, and particularly in the United States (US), research on commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) has indicated

¹ In their ongoing research into trafficking (see, e.g., Cockbain and Bowers, 2019), Cockbain and colleagues found that indicator checklists until recently formed part of the referral forms used to identify suspected victims of trafficking to the UK authorities and inform their decision making.

that prior childhood adversities such as abuse, neglect, and maltreatment put minors at increased risk of human trafficking (see, for literature reviews, Choi, 2015; de Vries & Goggin, 2020). Consequently, national and local agencies commonly adopt concerns around these childhood adversities in screening and assessing individual cases. For example, the Comprehensive Human Trafficking Assessment by the Polaris Project and the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) in the US, seek to examine concerns around CSEC through an extensive list of questions around the young people's prior childhood adversities and current behavioral and emotional concerns. Agencies at state or municipality level oftentimes capitalize on the same types of childhood concerns to assess risk to CSEC.²

In addition to indicators to detect human trafficking or flag vulnerability to human trafficking, “performance indicators” (Kelley & Simmons, 2015, 55) routinely underpin comparative evaluations of anti-trafficking efforts worldwide. In particular, monitoring and ranking systems such as the US Government's Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP) integrate quantifiable information on components such as the number of victims identified, cases investigated or people prosecuted in a given country to rank its anti-trafficking efforts. Various other ranking systems exist both at global and regional levels (see Boukli and Haynes, in this edition).

Although indicators might be useful, they are not neutral. Instead, their production and use are often inherently political, particularly given their development within a dominant anti-trafficking discourse that focuses overwhelmingly on the sexual exploitation of women and children (Charnysh et al., 2015; Cockbain et al., 2018; Farrell & Fahy, 2009). Against that

² See, for example, the Commercial Sexual Exploitation Identification Tool (CSE-IT) by the WestCoast Children's Clinic (2016) or the Human Trafficking Screening Tool (HTST) by the Florida Department of Children and Families and the Department of Juvenile Justice (2015). See, for a list of other examples, Appendix A in de Vries et al. (de Vries, Kafafian, et al., 2020).

background, we stress that our discussion of indicators is not an attempt to describe the empirical realities of human trafficking. Instead, we seek to examine the structural biases and significant empirical challenges in producing and using human trafficking indicators.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. First, we begin with a general discussion of the aetiology of problem and performance indicators, drawing attention to these indicators' selectiveness, political biases, and skewness towards specific aspects of human trafficking. Second, we examine how indicators form the “vocabulary of victimization” (Dunn, 2010, 6) through which boundaries around victimhood are articulated, producing false hierarchies of victimhood (Boukli and Renz, 2019; Carrabine, 2004) and influencing identification and access to support. Third, we reflect upon empirical challenges in developing human trafficking indicators, which tend to perpetuate such power imbalances and inequities. Fourth, we illustrate the combined biases in problem frames and empirical challenges through the example of the use of risk factors in the context of commercial sexual exploitation of children. We then conclude with some overall observations and considerations for future research, policy and interventions.

The Aetiology of Problem, Risk, and Performance Indicators

The drivers behind the development and proliferation of trafficking indicators can be understood through the concept of the “seductions of quantification” of social problems more broadly (Merry, 2016, 2017). Merry (2016) coined this term to describe global efforts to collect quantifiable information on social phenomena and guide specific policies and interventions. Increasing technological opportunities to digitize information since the early twentieth century

have created unprecedented and globalized opportunities to collect, store, share, and present information on social phenomena. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is a prominent early example of an attempt to quantify economic performance, developed in the 1930s and long since established as a standardized, systematic and internationally comparative measurement of national incomes (Merry, 2016). For international agencies such as the World Bank and the United Nations, indicators have become central building blocks to guide policies addressing global development, humanitarian problems, and human rights violations (Davis et al., 2012). When used to shape specific policies and interventions, these indicators are essentially a “technology of governance” (Davis et al., 2012, p. 94) as they set the parameters of the presumed scale and nature of a given problem, thereby underpinning a specific set of responses.

The current wave of interest in human trafficking gained momentum from the 1990s onwards (Charnysh et al., 2015; Farrell & Fahy, 2009). Initially, however, there were “as many different definitions of smuggling and trafficking as there are organizations and governments concerned with addressing this issue” (Aronowitz, 2001, p. 164). The watershed moment towards international consensus was the implementation of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (hereafter, the Palermo Protocol) in 2000, which defined trafficking for the first time in international law. This definition is notorious for its vagaries and consequent space for interpretation, linked in part to fierce and unresolved debate during its formulation around whether all commercial sexual activity should be defined as trafficking (Goździak & Vogel, 2020). The Palermo Protocol rallied governmental support for anti-trafficking and directly influenced numerous national laws and policies (Cockbain & Olver, 2019; Goździak & Vogel, 2020). Yet, considerable disparity persists

in terms of how its definition is operationalized in national (or subnational) legislation (Farrell et al., 2010, 2014).

The Palermo Protocol's adoption also prompted a wave of national and international monitoring reports, using global indicators to operationalize and quantify human trafficking and responses thereto. Most notably, the US Department of State published its new Annual Trafficking in Persons (hereafter, TIP) report a year after the Palermo Protocol, the first in an ongoing annual series to evaluate governmental anti-trafficking efforts. These reports noticeably emphasize quantifiable information like the number of victims identified and provided services. Only those countries with a "significant" number of victims – the parameters for which were unspecified – were included in the first TIP reports (US Department of state, 2001). The remit was later expanded to cover most countries, in recognition that absence of cases does not imply absence of the problem: countries with governments unable or unwilling to address human trafficking were being systematically excluded from the report (Merry, 2016). The TIP reports were followed by numerous other global reports from the UNODC, the European Union, and other regional entities, which – until today – continue to be characterized by a drive to understand what proportion of victims have been identified from the larger dark figure: the unseen and unknown part of human trafficking (de Vries & Dettmeijer-Vermeulen, 2015; Farrell & de Vries, 2020).

Alongside indicators designed to describe and count human trafficking, global monitoring and evaluation reports frequently include quantitative ratings of state efforts to prevent, protect, and prosecute human trafficking (the 3P framework). Most obviously, the TIP reports use such "performance indicators" (Kelley & Simmons, 2015, p. 55) to rank governmental anti-trafficking efforts. Yet the TIP reports – and indeed other such reports – have

been criticized for their insufficient methodological clarity and rigour (Cockbain et al., 2018; Merry, 2016) as well as questionable underlying assumptions that perpetrate a “politics of rescue” and erase the role of colonialism and its legacies in producing exploitation (McGrath & Watson, 2018, p. 25; see also Kempadoo & Shih, 2022). Scholars have therefore expressed concern about a hegemonic influence of the U.S. on rankings (Beale, 2011) and global anti-trafficking efforts through the TIP reports (Chuang & Gallagher, 2012; Gallagher, 2012; Merry, 2016; Merry & Conley, 2011). In particular, a TIP ranking can have concrete ramifications, with US financial support for other countries’ anti-trafficking efforts contingent on meeting minimum standards outlined in US federal legislation (or being deemed to be making significant efforts to do so). Similar monitoring arrangements exist on a regional level. For example, the Group of Experts on Action against Human Trafficking (GRETA) evaluates anti-trafficking efforts in member states of the European Union (EU) through extensive questionnaires that assess anti-trafficking efforts based on quantifiable information such as the number of identified victims, investigations, prosecutions, and broader anti-trafficking policies (Van Dijk & Klerx-Van Mierlo, 2014).

When used to monitor and assess countries’ anti-trafficking efforts, performance indicators can alter responses both locally and globally. For example, Kelley and Simmons (2015) demonstrate a clear relationship between TIP report rankings and the criminalization of human trafficking in domestic legislation. They found that low-ranked countries were more likely to implement new anti-trafficking laws and regulations than those with higher rankings. This finding aligns with other research suggesting that transnational pressure may influence what types of responses political or social movement groups (Dai, 2007; Van Dijk & Klerx-Van Mierlo, 2014).

Although both problem and performance indicators can facilitate decision-making and increase states' and organizations' accountability (Dai, 2007; Kelley & Simmons, 2015; Van Dijk & Klerx-Van Mierlo, 2014), there are two particularly salient issues to consider here. First, the development of indicators is rarely a neutral process. The selection and formulation of indicators, such as those underpinning the aforementioned reports, is politically driven and can all too easily reflect the unequal distribution of power, expertise, and capacity to respond (Kelley & Simmons, 2015; Merry, 2016). In the anti-trafficking arena, there is a clear Western hegemony wherein powerful actors with the means to produce knowledge and fund anti-trafficking efforts significantly influence problem definition and agenda setting (Kelley & Simmons, 2015, p. 56). For example, the TIP report system effectively positions the US as the world's arbiter of anti-trafficking activity, unilaterally assessing other countries against a Western-centric problem frame and metrics of success. These reports have been criticized therefore for the US' disproportionate influence in shaping global anti-trafficking efforts through performance-based indicators and rankings (Chuang & Gallagher, 2012; Gallagher, 2012; Merry, 2016; Merry & Conley, 2011; O'Connell Davidson, 2015).

Second, there are fundamental – arguably even insurmountable – challenges deriving from the fact that trafficking is not a clearly defined, neatly delineated and readily measurable issue (see, e.g., O'Connell Davidson, 2015). Selectivity around the boundary setting and application of indicators is further exemplified by how various states prominent in anti-trafficking (e.g., Sweden and the Netherlands) initially focused their national assessments *exclusively* on sex trafficking (see Cockbain et al., 2018), systematically excluding the myriad other contexts in which people are trafficked for the exploitation of their bodies and labour. Another example is the way in which the state-sanctioned prison industrial complex is

systematically excluded from much mainstream discourse around human trafficking and quantification exercises, despite prisons in countries such as the US, United Kingdom (UK) and elsewhere arguably constituting one of the foremost sites of labor exploitation (Smith & Hattery, 2008). As further discussed below, the production and use of indicators thus shape the focus on specific dimensions of human trafficking.

Indicators as the Vocabulary of Victimization within Human Trafficking Discourse

Research examining human trafficking discourse has shown that the issue is currently typically understood and problematized through a crime frame that highlights criminal networks and nefarious offenders engaging in severe violence, particularly against women and children (Charnysh et al., 2015; Farrell & Fahy, 2009). Although the crime lens is not new and alternative perspectives on trafficking, such as lenses centering human rights violations and women's rights, persist (Charnysh et al., 2015; Farrell & Fahy, 2009), the crime and national security lens was amplified and consolidated by the Palermo Protocol and its aftermath (Charnysh et al., 2015; de Vries, Farrell, et al., 2020; Farrell & Fahy, 2009; Johnston et al., 2015, 2015). Being part of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, the Protocol explicitly frames human trafficking as a transnational security threat to be tackled primarily through crime control measures.

In foregrounding organized crime as the main driver of trafficking, this frame obscures not only individuals' human rights (Scarpa, 2020) but also broader questions about how states, businesses and other powerful institutions can themselves create and exacerbate situations conducive to exploitation and trafficking through their policies and practices (e.g., restrictive migration regimes, limited labor rights and protections). The criminal justice frame thus turns the

complex, multi-factorial issue of trafficking into something that influential actors can readily get behind without challenging their own self-interests or confronting broader historical, structural and systemic issues (Farrell & Fahy, 2009; Kenway, 2021; McGrath & Watson, 2018). The Palermo Protocol also institutionalized the dominant focus on sex trafficking and reduced visibility of other victim groups by explicitly calling out “women and children” in the title of the protocol (see, for a discussion, Gallagher, 2001; Scarpa, 2020).

The emphasis on these specific aspects of human trafficking – while filtering out other dimensions – is a clear example of a selective problem frame through which a complex issue is simplified and conceptualized in a way that a priori lends itself to certain solutions (Druckman, 2001). Yet problem frames, as we see all too clearly with trafficking, can be based on assumptions and claims about the nature or scale of an issue that do not necessarily reflect its empirical realities (Drakulich, 2015; Goffman, 1974). The problem frame around human trafficking is a social rather than empirical construction of the problem, shaped by mass media, political elites, and movement leaders (Farrell & Fahy, 2009; Gulati, 2011; Marchionni, 2012). In fact, even the ‘empirical realities’ of trafficking are elusive – since the construct is beset with vagaries, inconsistencies and discrepancies in its definition, conceptualization and operationalization (for more, see e.g., O’Connell Davidson, 2015). In comparison to other problem frames on trafficking, research suggests that particularly the crime frame has gained strong cross-political appeal and broad public and political support for anti-trafficking efforts that align with readily-available criminal justice system strategies (Broad, 2015; Charnysh et al., 2015; de Vries, Farrell, et al., 2020; Farrell & Fahy, 2009). Moreover, various anti-trafficking efforts prioritize awareness raising and individualized interventions (e.g., arrests or ‘victim

rescues’) over broader structural and systemic change that could act on the conditions producing exploitation in the first place (Kenway, 2021).

Within these problem frames, the production of trafficking indicators thus reflects priorities on the political and social agenda. Specifically, problem and risk indicators typically reflect a central aim of identifying victims (or estimating their number), thereby providing the language for the “social and political constructions of victimhood [that] lie at the heart of regulatory policies on sex trafficking” (Boukli & Renz, 2019, p. 71). Such indicator lists often reflect and perpetuate an iconic victim narrative that focuses on the younger, white, female victim of sexual exploitation experiencing extreme physical violence (Christie, 1986; Doezeema, 2010; Srikantiah, 2007; Wilson & O’Brien, 2016). In doing so, these indicators purposefully and conveniently simplify a complex problem to facilitate decision-making, calling for intervention in what are perceived as the worst situations.

However, by drawing attention to the more ‘extreme’ manifestations of human trafficking amongst specific populations, commonplace indicators typically provide a rather limited and non-inclusive “vocabulary of victimization” (Dunn, 2010, p. 6). This vocabulary is based on sharp and false dichotomies of innocent versus blameworthy, vulnerable versus invulnerable, dignified versus undignified, and deserving versus undeserving of protection (Boukli & Renz, 2019; Musto, 2009). These dichotomies build into hierarchies of victimhood (see also Boukli & Renz, 2019; Carrabine, 2004), wherein the ‘ideal victim’ (Christie, 1986) is on top of the hierarchy representing the most innocent, traumatized and ‘protection-worthy’ victim (Elias, 1986; Srikantiah, 2007), while others are marginalized as less worthy of support. In idealizing innocence and casting trafficking victims as passive objects, the hierarchies of victimhood not only force victims to live up to an impossible ideal, but also downplay their agency and the

decisions they take – often amid constrained circumstances and limited alternatives (see, e.g., Cockbain, 2018; Gerasimov & Breuil, 2021). Furthermore, these indicators overlook the considerable variation within and between different victims’ experiences of trafficking in its various different forms (e.g., Cockbain & Bowers, 2019). Finally, the commonplace tendency to treat sex trafficking as the most ‘egregious’ form of trafficking further exceptionalizes and stigmatizes sexual labor (see Smith and Mac, 2018) and rests on a rather puritanical assumption that sexual violence is automatically experienced as worse than numerous other violations.

Within these hierarchies of victimhood, anti-trafficking efforts can embody complex paradoxes. As an illustration, Boukli and Renz (2019) draw attention to how LGBTQ+³ victims of trafficking both diverge from the iconic victim narrative – thus risking excluding them from identification and support – and are simultaneously often identified as “victims of special interest” with “exceptional” risk and “extreme vulnerability” to trafficking (e.g., in recent US TIP reports). Those who develop and deploy trafficking indicators – often the authorities, but also non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and others – play an important role in establishing and rearticulating the boundaries around victimhood. Even with the best of intentions, drawing attention to the (real or presumed) vulnerability of already marginalized groups raises several additional concerns (see also Boukli, in this edition).

First, research has consistently shown that recognizing, or constructing, vulnerability within specific communities does not equal protection (Musto, 2016; Bryant-Davis and Tummala-Narra, 2017). For example, Musto’s (2016) interview-based study with trans people involved in commercial sex (some of whom reported exploitation) documented experiences of victim-blaming among law enforcement and other professionals and a perceived differential

³ LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others

responses compared to their cis counterparts. The authors report how frontline responders assume a certain degree of willingness of trans people to engage in commercial sex, as a result of which they face a higher degree of criminalization for their involvement in commercial sex as opposed to cis women who are more likely to be identified through a victim-oriented approach (Musto, 2016). This victim-blaming and criminalization of behaviors in industries vulnerable to violence contradict concerns about the overrepresentation of trans people in the commercial sex industry, where research suggests they also experience more victimization and exposure to violence, coercion, and abuse (see, for an overview, Fehrenbacher et al. 2020).

Second, identifying certain groups or communities as ‘vulnerable’ can increase their marginalization and stigmatization, while shifting the focus away from discrimination, inequality and other structural problems that create vulnerabilities to trafficking in the first place (Bryant-Davis & Tummala-Narra, 2017). To illustrate, Bryant-Davis and Tummala-Narra (2017) draw attention to the colonial histories of sex trafficking, racial and ethnic stereotypes, and low valued social roles used to justify a demand for certain laborers in industries where work is lowly-paid and there is an increased risk to abuse, violence, and exploitation (see also Butler, 2015; Williamson, 2017). The same racialized and gendered inequalities that increase marginalization and vulnerability to exploitation can also introduce further biases into the identification and treatment of trafficked people from marginalized communities, for example impeding their access to housing, legal aid, and victim support services (Bryant-Davis & Tummala-Narra, 2017).

Third, attempts to tackle trafficking by using risk indicators often rests on the premise that identification of victims requires their ‘rescue’. However, not only is ‘rescue’ a last resort at best, trafficked people are not necessarily best served by encounters with the police, government

agencies and other authorities. For example, identification as a potential trafficking victim can put people with irregular migration status at risk of deportation, and temporary residence permits (where available at all) can be contingent on cooperating with criminal justice responses (Brunovskis & Skilbrei, 2016). Paradoxically, people driven into trafficking out of economic need can find themselves in an even worse financial situation post-escape or ‘rescue’. As an illustration, crackdowns and shutdowns of venues potentially hosting sex or labor trafficking have been associated with, for example, undue criminalization, seizure of earnings and punitive immigration responses, and could therefore leave already marginalized groups in financially worse situations, especially when no victim services or alternative means of employment are offered (see de Vries & Farrell, 2022; Smith & Mac, 2018).

Taking into account such considerations, the issue is not just that problem frames are highly selective but that they maintain and exacerbate power imbalances and inequalities along the lines of – at least – race, ethnicity, class, and gender in how they influence where resources are deployed and who is identified as a victim and deemed worthy of support. The resultant indicators oversimplify a complex problem and provide a false sense of accuracy through quantifications that camouflage structural biases in the ideological, political, and societal considerations behind these lists (Merry, 2016; Musto et al., 2020).

Empirical Challenges in Developing Human Trafficking Indicators

In addition to the power imbalances and inequities in the production of indicator lists, attempts to define human trafficking indicators face a significant number of empirical challenges. Most notably, many established lists of indicators lack an empirical basis. For example, the International Labour Organization’s widely used trafficking problem indicators

(ILO, 2009) were developed through the Delphi method of expert consultation. This method treats all participants' expertise as equivalent, creating a false sense of consensus and limited generalizability (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). Such lists of trafficking indicators can acquire the veneer of 'truth' when publicized uncritically, repeated frequently and adapted to further purposes by influential figures and organizations – especially since they are often presented as standalone 'fact', stripped of information as to how they were derived and the associated limitations and biases (Straatman, 2019). Furthermore, these widely-used indicators encourage citizen surveillance, yet with little thought as to the potential harms associated with its selectiveness and under-profiling – or over-profiling – of already marginalized groups such as people of color, migrants, sex workers (Andrijasevic & Anderson, 2009; Kenway, 2021; O'Connell Davidson, 2015).

Although lists of indicators need empirical substantiation, there are significant empirical challenges in trying to develop and validate trafficking indicators. The first and arguably most fundamental challenge comes back to the amorphous conceptual boundaries of human trafficking and shifting understandings of its meaning (O'Connell Davidson, 2015; Spencer & Broad, 2012). Despite a lengthy political history of interest in human trafficking, its criminalization in international and national legislation is still relatively new (Gallagher, 2011). Furthermore, and as stated earlier, there is substantial variation between and within countries in terms of the specific foci and parameters of their laws (Farrell et al., 2010, 2014). For example, 'sex trafficking' is constituted very differently in different places – in part reflecting differences in regulatory approaches towards commercial sex – and many countries have only legislated against trafficking across national borders (see, e.g., Cockbain, 2018). As such, the legislative landscape

provides few answers as to what exactly is specific to human trafficking, that could in turn underpin the production of indicators.

Second, as much as broad and a diverse set of definitions fail to determine what activity is specific to human trafficking, the limited number of prosecutions due to recent legislation or limited priority and capacity provide insufficient empirical ground to determine the commonalities in human trafficking events (see, for a discussion, Farrell et al., 2010, 2014). Using official records as the only empirical base for determining human trafficking indicators means immediately encountering major stumbling blocks around external validity (i.e. generalizability) since they offer only a partial picture (Cockbain et al., 2020; Cockbain & Bowers, 2019; Hundman et al., 2017). Biased indicators are an inevitability when relying too heavily on data that can be skewed by so many factors, including levels of funding, awareness, differences in ease-of-prosecution, expertise, capacity, and the prioritization of certain facets of human trafficking (Cockbain et al., 2020; Farrell & de Vries, 2020)

Third, human trafficking is a “hard-to-observe” problem (de Vries & Radford, 2021) as it is difficult to detect due to its (partially) hidden nature (Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005). Without knowing the size and characteristics of the populations involved, it is impossible to establish a reliable sampling frame through which to gather generalizable data for the production of indicators (Farrell & de Vries, 2020).

Fourth, human trafficking is also hard to observe because it interconnects with various other activities in both the illicit and licit space. For example, human trafficking intersects with various crime and social issues such as organized crime, partner violence, sexual violence, wage theft, labor law violations, or racism and discrimination (Brennan, 2014; Bryant-Davis & Tummala-Narra, 2017). It is also socially and economically embedded in ‘regular’ society as it

intersects with ordinary legitimate activity through social networks, supply chains, and/or shared geographies (de Vries, 2019; Kenway, 2021). Many of the commonly used indicators – such as underpayment, lack of protective equipment, or working excessive hours – may not be unique representations of ‘trafficking’ conditions but rather common features of a low-wage and devalued labor market at large. This difficulty in isolating human trafficking indicators from ‘ordinary’ (not necessarily better) working arrangements is illustrated by Volodko et al. (2019) in their exploratory study into trafficking indicators in online job advertisements (n=430) aimed at Lithuanians seeking work abroad. They found that 98.4% of all advertisements in their sample contained at least one of the UNODC’s trafficking indicators, throwing into question the utility and practical value of at least some of these indicators (most notably the provision of accommodation) in this context. If some element of coercion, fraud or force is a common feature of labor markets worldwide, general trafficking indicators may add little value. The influence of the dominant criminal justice lens on the choice of trafficking indicators also translates into a routine neglect of factors that are informative from a broader labor rights perspective, such as “a lack of freedom to organise collectively” or “the compulsion to find wage labor” (Vandergeest & Marschke, 2020, p. 304).

There is a growing body of research and practice that examines the online footprint of human trafficking in internet classifieds, reviews, or recruitment advertisements (e.g., Dank et al., 2014; de Vries & Radford, 2021; Latonero, 2011; Latonero et al., 2015; Venkatesh, 2011). There has also been a notable proliferation of new software claiming to predict human trafficking in digitized data sources (see e.g., Dubrawski et al., 2015; Portnoff et al., 2017). However, as much as neither the presence nor the absence of indicators is clear evidence for human trafficking in offline environments, concerns around skewness and bias in official records

multiply in online environments, for two reasons in particular. First, biases and empirical limitations associated with indicator-based approaches can apply to a larger scale in online environments due to the scalable nature of automated searches for online indicators of human trafficking. Many of these automated searches rely on official records as a presumed accurate reflection of human trafficking (a ‘ground truth’) or use well-established indicator lists with little concern for validity (de Vries & Radford, 2021; Kjellgren, 2022). For example, researchers have applied automated searches purportedly to identify sex trafficking based on the presence of pre-established keywords from UNODC’s human trafficking indicator lists (Ibanez & Suthers, 2014; Kennedy, 2012; Latonero, 2011), with little to no recognition that these indicators may insufficiently distinguish the extremes of exploitation (i.e. ‘trafficking’) from commercial sex in general. Much of the screening of the online environment for traces of human trafficking occurs without critically evaluating the relevance and meaning of human trafficking indicators in a specific online context (de Vries & Radford, 2021; Kjellgren, 2022; Musto et al., 2020).

Second, in general, even less is known about what human trafficking victimizations look like online as opposed to offline (Hundman et al., 2017). More generally, the online and automated tools to detect human trafficking are too often perceived as ‘objective’ and ‘unproblematic’ while all data analytics carry their own “implicit, generally unexamined, assumptions” (Chan & Bennett Moses, 2016, p. 33). Critical and nuanced assessments of the online manifestations of different forms of human trafficking are in their infancy, while the use of technology to detect human trafficking in online environments or to evaluate anti-trafficking efforts continues to accelerate (Kjellgren, 2022).

Problem Frames and Empirical Challenges in the use of Risk Factors: The Case of Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking of Children in the US

The aforementioned conceptual and empirical challenges in the production and use of trafficking indicators are particularly evident in the context of commercial child sexual exploitation and child trafficking. This section illustrates these concerns with a particular focus on the US, where any commercial sexual exploitation of children (aka CSEC) is considered to be a form of human trafficking. Considerable work exists on developing risk indicators profiles to identify precedents to CSEC, particularly highlighting childhood adversities such as abuse and neglect, poverty, unstable family settings, homelessness, and running away to increased risk of CSEC. These and various other risk factors populate most screening and assessment instruments used in the US (see, for an overview, de Vries, Kafafian, et al., 2020).

Like problem and performance indicators, however, risk factors can be highly selective and reflect structural and political biases. Research has also begun to suggest that these generic lists of risk factors fail to reflect the empirical variety in CSEC risk profiles. Overall, they are either too broad, whereby nearly all minors could be labelled as ‘at risk’, or too selective, when they create narrow risk profiles that perpetuate an iconic victim profile (de Vries, Kafafian, et al., 2020; Gerasimov & Breuil, 2021; Reid et al., 2019). For example, Reid and colleagues (2019) identified that the common emphasis on running away as a key risk factor for CSEC marks a large group of minors referred to the child welfare system as ‘at risk to CSEC’ while it fails to identify a significant population of exploited young people who have experienced different childhood adversities, mental health concerns, or had no obvious histories of childhood adversities at all. Other empirical work has also challenged the focus on extreme childhood

adversities as the key risk factors by highlighting their limited explanatory value: the prevalence of childhood abuse amongst sexually exploited young people does not make childhood abuse a risk factor unique to CSEC, nor indeed do all those abused in childhood go on to suffer CSEC. Such childhood adversities may increase a general risk to CSEC – *and other victimizations*. The specific risk factors that put youth at immediate or proximal risk to CSEC can look different. For example, de Vries et al. (2020) highlight that among a group of minors that all had experienced some type of childhood adversity, the most decisive signals for CSEC were not covered by most screening and assessment instruments. These included, for example, risk items that speak to social networks and interactions through which vulnerability to CSEC may be induced and maintained. Such research emphasizes the potentially crucial role of broader socio-ecological environments in creating ‘risk’. Yet, the dominant focus on individual and/or family-based risk factors tends to overlook how broader social, geographical and structural conditions structures can affect vulnerability and exposure to child sexual exploitation and trafficking (Cockbain & Olver, 2019; Firmin, 2020). Moreover, the definitions of ‘safety’ and ‘risk’ cannot simply be replicated across culturally and economically different societies where Western idealized views of childhood may have limited relevance, particularly amid harsh socioeconomic constraints.

In addition to the empirical pushback on both broadly or narrowly defined risk profiles, it is critical to reflect upon the value-ladenness inherent to notions of ‘risk’, ‘risk prevention’, and ‘risk control’ (Musto, 2016). International legislation on human trafficking (the Palermo Protocol) – and consequently much national law – proceeds from the premise that children are incapable of giving informed consent to activities constituted as exploitation (Cockbain and Olver, 2019; Vaughn, 2019). Children are thus positioned as both uniquely vulnerable to trafficking and lacking in any agency. Relatedly, much international and national legislation

requires a lower burden of proof around what constitutes child sex trafficking, which arguably facilitates the identification of children as victims and provision of support. Yet, there are valid concerns that an uncritical quantification of risk among children simply takes agency and broader societal structures and problems out of the equation (Breuil, 2021; Gerasimov & Breuil, 2021; Oude Breuil, 2008).

In particular, while legislation gives the impression that children are universally determined to be without agency in decision-making, with assumed vulnerability to trafficking, research has noted how risk judgments around trafficking and exploitation in its various forms can be highly racialized and gendered (Faulkner & Nyamutata, 2020). As has been more broadly mentioned in research on risk assessments in relation to other topics (e.g., radicalization), assessing risk can simultaneously “infantilize” and “adultify” racially and ethnically marginalized children (Vaughn, 2019, pp. 65–66). Infantilization is the perspective that children are vulnerable and need to be ‘protected’ against risky behaviors, crime, and victimization through measures of control. “Adultification” can broadly be understood as the treatment of children as adults through a victim-blaming process wherein victimization is primarily understood through involvement in illicit acts and met with harsher measures of control (Davis, 2022; Vaughn, 2019). Similarly, in the context of CSE, institutionalized measures of control are deployed to address both the “infantilization” and “adultification” of risk, which can further marginalize young people by maintaining and exacerbating a disconnect from socio-economic opportunities (e.g., education). Against that background, risk measurements can be deeply problematic when they trigger risk control measures that maintain and exacerbate a disconnect from socio-economic opportunities (e.g., education), may not have a child’s best interests at

heart, and do not address broader factors that increase resiliency and safety (Vaughn, 2019, p. 66).

This complex relationality between risk and control also speaks to the paradox in anti-trafficking efforts mentioned earlier. On the one hand, risk instruments can set an unrealistically high threshold for victim identification by maintaining and perpetuating an iconic and popular victim profile based on stereotypes of exceptional vulnerability and extreme harms (Christie, 1986; Elias, 1986; Srikantiah, 2007). Few victims meet this profile and can thus be excluded from access to victim services and social justice (Reid et al., 2019; Srikantiah, 2007). On the other hand, risk instruments can be – and sometimes have been – misused as discriminatory tools to identify ‘risky groups’ that need continued ‘protection’ through substantial means of control (Musto, 2016; Vaughn, 2019). The racialized and gendered framing of marginalized groups as ‘at risk’, ‘vulnerable’, and ‘in need of control’ is troublesome as these labels maintain, rearticulate, and exacerbate the systematic inequalities embedded in anti-trafficking discourse (see e.g., Boukli & Renz, 2019; Bryant-Davis & Tummala-Narra, 2017; Fehrenbacher et al., 2020; Vaughn, 2019).

Implications for Policy, Interventions and Further Research

Given the considerations of this chapter, indicator-based approaches to policy, practice and research addressing human trafficking require greater scrutiny, transparency, and refinement, testing and improvement. As indicators underpin anti-trafficking efforts, interventions and research, it is vital that they are approached more critically, the assumptions and data behind them interrogated robustly and the potential unintended (or intended) consequences of their use

given proper attention. To this end, there needs to be more discussion on how research, policy and practice can move towards a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of human trafficking. Five central thoughts may guide these discussions.

First, greater consideration needs to be given to what exactly success means – or should mean – in evaluations of anti-trafficking policy and practice. Recognizing the structural and social embeddedness of human trafficking, there is an obvious need to transition from a narrow criminal justice lens that defines success in terms of offenders prosecuted and victims ‘rescued’ towards a more inclusive, rights-based approach that also incorporates general improvements to labor market conditions, safe migration routes and so forth. The major challenge here is that this approach requires a fundamental reconceptualization of human trafficking from a binary issue (trafficking versus not trafficking) towards seeing trafficking as part of a broader problem on a continuum of exploitation (Skrivankova, 2010) which runs from decent work conditions to the extremes of forced labor. This continuum can be dynamic in nature, as individuals shift in and out of more or less exploitative situations (see also O’Connell Davidson, 2015). Such a reframing of the problem, and thus the risk and responses, shifts focus away from individual-based factors towards paying greater attention to the structures and systems that produce exploitation.

Second, and more modestly, even without this core reconceptualization of human trafficking, the development of problem, risk and performance indicators could very usefully incorporate more local sources of knowledge – in particular from the Global South. Doing so could help mitigate the hegemonic influence of the US and Western-European countries in shaping global anti-trafficking efforts (McGrath & Watson, 2018; Merry, 2016). Third, there is a clear need for greater awareness and explicit recognition of how stereotypes and prejudice within

anti-trafficking discourse – as articulated through some indicator lists – can exacerbate trauma and cause other tangible harms. Recognizing the dangers of ‘risk profiling’ – both in terms of under-profiling and over-profiling – is critical to prevent further institutional revictimization and broaden identification and access to victim care and justice (Bryant-Davis & Tummala-Narra, 2017). Before indicators are deployed – be it for research or intervention purposes – there really ought to be explicit consideration around who might be harmed due to under- or over-profiling and how these harms could be better mitigated (obvious examples here include ‘spot the signs’ campaigns that effectively profile and further stigmatize certain groups such as irregular migrants or sex workers, see also Kjellgren, 2022).

Fourth, given the many different manifestations of human trafficking and their impact on various populations, it seems fundamentally misguided to seek to universalize either problem or risk indicators across different forms of human trafficking, demographic groups or geographical contexts. As such, methodological approaches to the production of indicators would benefit from seeking inductively to identify what is and drives human trafficking victimizations while accounting for temporal and contextual variation in individual, family-based and socio-ecological factors associated with human trafficking experiences. This shift requires greater investment in and prioritization of this sort of bottom-up, context-specific, deeply nuanced approaches, which seem to be undervalued currently compared to top-down global estimates of scale based on supposedly ‘one size fits all’-indicators. Yet while the latter may yield headline grabbing statistics, as we have shown they are all too often simplistic and based on scant data. On a linked note, studies at the micro and meso level can be valuable in teasing out useful insights into the immediate socio-ecological contexts within trafficking victimizations occur: for

example the role people's social networks or geographical activity may play in affecting exposure and risk (see, e.g., Cockbain, 2018; de Vries et al; 2020b; Firmin, 2020).

Fifth, while computational approaches have an obvious appeal in an increasingly digitized world, it is vital to acknowledge that they are no silver bullet for detecting human trafficking and come with their own (often unspecified) assumptions, biases and other limitations and risks (Chan & Bennett Moses, 2016; Kjellgren, 2022; Musto, 2016; Volodko et al., 2019). Thus, both the development and the deployment of such computational tools needs to be approached critically and the implications for the privacy and welfare of potentially affected groups needs to be explicitly considered alongside the anticipated and actual benefits derived for genuine victims of abuse. Technological advancements undoubtedly help sift, sort and prioritize otherwise unmanageably large volumes of information and compare and contradict pre-existing notions on human trafficking as long as one recognizes that online data or computational tools are not neutral, generalizable, unambiguous, or unchanging; more work is needed to understand what the online manifestations of human trafficking can look like (de Vries & Radford, 2021; Kjellgren, 2022).

In conclusion, this chapter sought to elaborate on why it is important to recognize and act upon the empirical challenges and biases in the production and use of human trafficking indicators. Future work could extend this approach to integrate 'indicators', or broader descriptions of human trafficking, in research and policy that are not based on false dichotomies around victimhood but allows for the variability and empirical complexity of human trafficking.

Bibliography

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