

Factors, Counter-Trafficking Programs, and Geographical Variations in Human Trafficking Literature (2010–2022)

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of key findings from human trafficking studies published between 2010 and 2022. It presents recent research trends and interventions on human trafficking. The purpose of this study was to bridge the research-to-policy gap by identifying priority areas for research and creating an innovative platform, the Human Trafficking Evidence Gap Map (EGM). Through consultations and thematic coding, the most and least commonly studied factors and outcomes related to human trafficking were identified. The study reveals geographical variations in counter-trafficking programs and policies. The paper contributes to developing the Human Trafficking EGM as a tool to facilitate evidence-informed decision-making and supports progress toward the UN Sustainable Development Goals 5, 8 and 10 by enhancing the understanding of trafficking factors and outcomes. The findings empower researchers and policymakers to develop targeted interventions, strengthen legal frameworks, and foster international cooperation. Ultimately, these efforts will advance the efforts to eradicate human trafficking and promote a more just and equitable society.

KEYWORDS

Human trafficking; policy; synthesis review

Introduction

Human trafficking, a pervasive crime affecting an estimated 27.6 million people in forced labor between 2017 and 2021, yields illegal profits of an estimated U.S.\$150 billion, as noted in estimates from the International Labor Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Walk Free Foundation (2022). Amidst escalating vulnerabilities due to climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other crises, unveiling the factors and outcomes of trafficking has become increasingly challenging (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). Critics of counter-trafficking highlight the inadequate use of evidence in shaping policies, while proponents of evidence-based policy advocate for more informed financial decisions to prevent trafficking and provide justice and care to survivors. However, the ongoing lack of consensus on effective policies and their appropriate contexts underpins these discussions. This lack of comprehensive, accessible, and timely insight may hinder evidence-informed attempts to improve the utility of human trafficking research in policy settings.

In light of the prevailing challenges and lack of consensus in the current discourse, this research had two main objectives. First, we aimed to systematically review recent research trends and interventions on human trafficking. Second, we sought to bridge the research-to-policy gap by identifying priority areas for research and creating an innovative platform. Using literature from 2010 to 2022, we created an annotated bibliography (hereafter referred to as bibliography) and conducted consultations with 30

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stakeholders engaged in research and policy development. The focus on studies published between 2010 and 2022 stems from the “From Research to Action: Using Knowledge to Accelerate Progress in the Elimination of Child Labor and Forced Labor” (RTA) project, which aimed to bridge the divide between policy research and policy action to tackle issues of human trafficking (ILO, 2023a). The objective of the RTA project was to accelerate the use of rigorous research by policymakers and practitioners in support of efforts to tackle child labor, forced labor, and human trafficking. A core outcome of the project was to create an annotated bibliography – that was reviewed in this study – and illustrate a visual and comprehensive view of the evidence landscape in an online Evidence Gap Map (EGM).¹

The structure and methodology for developing the Human Trafficking EGM was devised through the review of secondary data sources and validated during consultations involving the academic community and experts from international organizations, policy actors, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), country representatives and funding partners. This informed the development of factors associated with human trafficking and outcomes of trafficking and interventions. We classified 238 records by academic discipline, policy area, the Palermo Protocol (2000) paradigm defining the acts, means, and purpose of human trafficking, and the 4Ps approach (Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnerships) commonly used in designing counter-trafficking programs (Bryant & Landman, 2020; U.S. Department of State, 2021; Zhang, 2022). We adopted a thematic coding approach (Clarke & Braun, 2013) to develop eight factors and seven outcomes related to human trafficking that form the conceptual structure of the Human Trafficking EGM. We co-created a list of keywords with the stakeholders and developed the EGM as an innovative platform to strengthen the connection between research and policy action.

This study is the foundation of the Human Trafficking EGM and is among the first to connect to an annotated bibliography where users can filter, export, and integrate results into their research (ILO, 2023a). In the next section, we introduce the methodology for the bibliography, including its research design, data sources, classification, and methodological limitations. In the Results section, we report our research findings. Then, we present some recent usage of the EGM by researchers and policy actors. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings within the 4Ps framework and conclude by calling for greater commitment to translate research into policy solutions.

Methodology for the Bibliography

To achieve the research aim, we conducted a systematic review to bridge the research-to-policy gap by identifying priority areas for research and creating an innovative platform. In line with the RTA project objectives, we focus on studies published between 2010 and 2022 to examine recent research trends and interventions associated with human trafficking.

Research Design

This study was designed as a qualitative investigation to systematically review recent research trends and interventions on human trafficking and to bridge the research-to-policy gap by identifying priority areas for research and creating an innovative platform. By adopting a constructivist lens (Yanow, 2015), we engaged in a review of secondary data sources on human trafficking and collected primary data in consultation with an International Advisory Board (IAB). Constructivism means that knowledge is social, arising from the interaction of individuals, organizations or communities (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018), but also that meaning is constructed as individuals engage with the world they are interpreting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998). This leads to designing this research as a qualitative constructivist study, where the Human Trafficking EGM is an innovative tool

¹The Human Trafficking EGM is available in English, Spanish, and French: <https://rtaproject.org/human-trafficking-egm/>

Table 1. IAB Participants by Stakeholder Group

Stakeholder group	Number of invited participants	Share of invited participants [%]	Number of participants who attended the focus groups	Share of participants who attended the focus groups [%]
Academic researcher	11	21%	7	23%
Non-academic researcher	17	33%	9	30%
Policy actor	24	46%	14	47%
TOTAL	52	100%	30	100%

Note: The italic text denotes the subcategories. Source: Authors’ research.
 “Academic researchers” refers to participants who work at universities. Their primary focus is to produce peer-reviewed journal papers. “Non-academic researchers” refers to participants who work at intergovernmental agencies, think tanks, or NGOs who primarily produce policy reports. “Policy actors” refers to funding partners and other human trafficking practitioners. Source: Authors’ research.

developed through co-creation with the academic community and practitioners to generate knowledge and achieve the objectives of this research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yanow, 2015).

The International Advisory Board (IAB)

The IAB was composed of individuals with expertise in human trafficking, forced labor and child labor research. After the first round of data analysis, the IAB was consulted following a focus group methodology (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The IAB discussed new research trends and directions for future research based on our initial findings. Moreover, the IAB determined additional categories and subcategories of factors and outcomes to enrich the application of the online EGM.

Members of the IAB were recruited based on three criteria. First, they have experience in catalyzing research uptake in policies and/or interventions related to human trafficking. Second, they are committed to engaging in productive and solutions-oriented discussions. Third, they have experience in providing or engaging diverse perspectives from different geographic, demographic, and under-represented backgrounds. Members of the IAB were technical experts representing a broad range of organizations detailed in Table 1. A total of 57 experts including academic researchers, policy actors, employment and workers’ organizations, funding partners and civil society organization representatives were invited to participate in a consultation in November of 2022 of which 30 stakeholders attended. The participants include 53% researchers (academic or non-academic) and 47% policy actors (including funding partners and practitioners).

Participants engaged in three online focus groups moderated by the authors of this paper. Each focus group included a balanced representation of human trafficking expertise, region of research specialty (or residence), and gender. Each group discussed their reflections on the taxonomy of factors and outcomes for 30 minutes. After that, the groups (all 30 stakeholders) were merged to report their key findings and gather feedback for another 30 minutes. After the consultation, a summary of the discussion and action points were circulated among participants for additional inputs.

Data Sources

Data collection was designed as a collaborative process across multiple organizations involving keyword searches and screening the titles, abstracts, and full content of academic and non-academic sources (see Table 2 for the list of data sources). The keywords were informed by definitions and terminology under Article 3(a) of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, known as the Palermo Protocol (UN, 2000; ILO, 2018). The Palermo Protocol defines trafficking in persons also referred to as human trafficking as:

Table 2. Data Sources

Academic	Non-academic
Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)	<i>United Nations (UN) organizations:</i> International Labor Organization (ILO); International Organization for Migration (IOM); UN Women; UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC); UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC); UN International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF)
Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)	
Gale Academic	
Google Scholar	
Jisc Library Hub	
JSTOR	
Library of Congress (LC Catalog)	
Libraries Worldwide	
ProQuest	
PubMed	
Scopus	
Web of Science	
WorldCat.org	
Anti-Slavery International	
ECPAT	
Free the Slaves	
Human Rights Watch	
Oxfam	
Polaris	
Private Agencies	
Collaborating Together Incorporated (PACT)	
Save the Children	
United States Agency for International Development (USAID)	
Walk Free Foundation	

Note: The data sources for the Human Trafficking EGM are selected following the methodology developed for the Child Labor and Forced Labor EGMs (ILO, 2022).

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring 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.

In line with data collection tools employed in systematic reviews (Dimas et al., 2022; Macy et al., 2023; Russell, 2018) we conducted searches for additional terminology including: “bonded labor,” “child sexual exploitation,” “debt bondage,” “forced labor,” “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.”

The keyword search resulted in 1,438 studies. During the keyword search process and up to early 2023, we collaborated with multiple organizations and applied a snowball sampling technique (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) to collect additional policy-oriented reports, including impact evaluations and descriptive studies. These organizations include the IOM, ILO, and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA). This resulted in 109 studies and reports added to the initial screening process.

Inclusion Criteria

The initial screening process resulted in a total of 1,547 studies published between 2010 and 2022. The records were assessed based on four criteria: study relevance, peer-review (of academic studies), conceptual or theoretical framework, and empirical evidence. First, the study relevance was determined by whether a component of human trafficking (acts, means, or purpose) was an outcome. Given the constructivist nature of the research, relevance was also determined using criteria to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative research: credibility, dependability, confirmability, validity and transferability (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Gough, 2015; Tracy, 2010).

Second, because peer-review is a standard proxy for valid, quality and original academic studies (Denzin, 1978; Maxwell, 1992), this criterion was employed. Third, we reviewed studies’ contributions based on whether the record provided practical recommendations and suggestions to inform policy. We included studies that discussed, examined and assessed policy and legal frameworks; these studies provide novel (theoretical and conceptual) frameworks to guide future research and policy action. For instance, these studies include frameworks to inform the assessing, facilitating or mitigating of human trafficking.

Finally, we assessed the use of empirical evidence in relation to the research phenomenon (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Smith, 1984). Empirical evidence relates to the data collection and analysis methods

used and their relevance to the research questions developed within a set discipline, theory or philosophy. The use of empirical evidence is an important criterion informing this review. Empirical evidence includes both primary datasets collected by the researchers for the study and secondary sources.

Exclusion Criteria

Because we focused on studies with policy implications, we excluded records that are not based on original research, such as conceptual papers, literature reviews, bibliographies and reports based on other studies. We also excluded reviews of previous studies, legal frameworks and policies based on secondary datasets. We excluded records that are theoretical in nature or whose primary contribution is related to theoretical frameworks. Finally, we excluded records analyzing historical data, namely datasets collected prior to 2000. The screening and review process resulted in a total of 238 records to be included in the Human Trafficking EGM. These studies were the subject of analysis and classification.

Data Analysis and Classification

The 238 studies included in the Human Trafficking EGM were grouped by publication year, academic discipline, country, study methodology, study design, policy area and the Palermo Protocol 4P Paradigm (as listed in [Table 3](#)).

Table 3. Data Classification

Group	Sub-group		
	2010-2022		
Academic discipline	Public health Environmental and occupational health International relations Government and law studies	Multidisciplinary studies Law and criminal justice Sociology and political science Economics	
Study methodology	Qualitative Quantitative Mixed methods		
Study design	Causal Descriptive Relational		
Policy area	Labor markets Health Labor and criminal justice Social protection	Migration Advocacy Development Education Labor recruitment	Child rights Corporate human rights Credit/finance Trade Educational justice
Palermo Protocol Paradigm	Prevention Protection Prosecution Partnership		

Publication year and academic discipline were mainly extracted from the journal’s metadata, or authors’ judgments in the case of non-academic reports. Countries were recorded based on the geographic locations of the study. [Appendix A](#) show that in the study period between 2010 and 2022, the majority of records were published in 2013, 2014, 2017 and 2018.

We classified the records into eight academic disciplines using information on the author’s affiliation, the scope of the journal, and keywords used in the abstract ([Table 3](#)). The categories are government and law studies, economics, environmental and occupational health, international relations, law and criminal justice, multidisciplinary studies, public health, and sociology and political

science. The most policy-oriented human trafficking studies were derived from the academic disciplines of public health, environment and occupational health.

We considered three study methodologies: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While the use of quantitative and mixed methods can illustrate the scope and scale of trafficking issues, qualitative studies complement data, especially in settings where statistical data are not available. They highlight the vulnerabilities of different populations through interviews and personal stories of trafficked individuals and other vulnerable groups (Cassell et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

We grouped the records into three study designs: causal (including randomized control trials [RCTs] and impact evaluations [not RCTs]), descriptive or relational. Causal studies examine the causal relationship between an intervention and an outcome, or they assess the impact of a counter-trafficking policy. Relevant impact evaluations do not need to have human trafficking as the primary focus, as policies and interventions are being evaluated rather than the topic of human trafficking. Descriptive studies outline settings where human trafficking is present. They do not assess the efficiency or effectiveness of a program or policy, but they provide information about victims and survivors of trafficking. Descriptive studies include records which apply qualitative and mixed methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Pocock et al., 2021). To qualify for inclusion, the primary focus of the descriptive study must have been human trafficking. Relational studies investigate the association between two or more variables. They are also known as correlational studies (Adeoti et al., 2016). Relational studies include records which apply regression analysis within a quantitative and mixed-methods framework.

We classified the studies into 14 policy areas. [Appendix C](#) shows that advocacy, migration, social protection, administration of labor and criminal justice and health represent over 75% of the 238 records. Other policy areas such as labor markets, development, education, labor recruitment, child rights and corporate human rights due diligence were discussed in fewer records.

Following the Palermo Protocol, human trafficking studies and interventions are commonly classified under the 4Ps paradigm: prevention, protection, prosecution and/or partnership. Of the 238 studies, most records focus on prevention ($n = 133$), followed by protection ($n = 68$) and prosecution ($n = 12$). Over 70 studies have a combined focus of prevention, victim protection and/or criminal prosecution. Partnership is at the center of five studies, although an additional 24 provide some recommendations for partnership development and collaborations in their findings.

After classifying the records, we used a thematic coding approach (Clarke & Braun, 2013) to develop eight factors and seven outcomes related to human trafficking that form the conceptual structure of the Human Trafficking EGM. Each record was mapped to the lists of factors and outcomes of human trafficking shown in [Appendix D](#) and [E](#). The Human Trafficking EGM shows how the factors and outcomes intersect, highlighting where research does and does not exist as detailed in [Table 4](#). The classification, conceptual structure and taxonomy of factors and outcomes were informed and validated during consultations with the IAB as shown in [Appendix D](#) and [E](#).

The Human Trafficking EGM was officially launched on the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons on 30 July 2023. To acquire feedback from a wider group of counter-trafficking experts; the authors presented the main findings and structure of the EGM in an Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) webinar a few weeks before the launch on 11 July (UN, 2023).² The authors incorporated additional feedback to improve the user experience of the EGM. The platform is intended to be a living tool that will be regularly updated, and that researchers and policy actors can suggest new policy-relevant research to be included.

²ICAT is a policy forum mandated by the UN General Assembly to improve coordination among UN organizations and other relevant international partners to prevent and combat trafficking in persons. The webinar is part of the six-webinar series on data gathering, analysis, and visualization in 2023 primarily targeted to ICAT members.

Table 4. 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 programs	Empowerment, training, and awareness raising are the core themes across counter-trafficking programs.	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 most commonly explored purpose of trafficking includes sexual exploitation and child sexual exploitation.	Few studies examine other purposes of trafficking, such as trafficking for forced labor, slavery-like practices, or child labor.
Policy areas	Most research focuses on the following policy areas: advocacy, migration, and social protection.	Few studies focus on the following policy areas: development, labor markets, administration of labor, 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: international relations, law and criminal justice, multidisciplinary studies, and public health.	Few studies are available from the following academic disciplines: behavioral sciences, ethics and business ethics, demography, and science and technology.

Source: Authors’ research.

Methodological Limitations

Although we aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the human trafficking literature, the data has some limitations. First, the data may not reflect the geographic and longitudinal variation in the real world. In general, quantitative and qualitative data on human trafficking tend to be under-reported due to the hidden nature of crime and ethical concerns related to interviewing vulnerable populations (Conti & O’Neil, 2007). Thus, the abundance of literature in certain geographic areas and years may reflect more reporting and counter-trafficking efforts rather than a higher prevalence of trafficking.

Second, our keywords may not be sufficiently broad to capture all the relevant literature. The legal interpretation and cultural perceptions of human trafficking may vary significantly across countries, which may impact the identification of victims and survivors of trafficking. Third, there can be potential sources of human bias involved in the screening and selection process despite the authors having a mix of academic disciplines and research backgrounds. This means that the classification of records into policy areas, the Palermo Protocol paradigm, as well as the factors and outcomes can be subjected to the authors’ interpretation.

Finally, while this systematic review analyzed human trafficking empirical studies spanning the period 2010 to 2022, the Human Trafficking EGM seeks to update the Bibliography and EGM as more relevant research becomes available.

Results

Socio-Economic Conditions, Criminal Activity, Gendered Vulnerabilities, and Exploitation

Across the reviewed studies, the top factors leading to the identification of human trafficking relate to monitoring and evaluation of exploitation and vulnerability, social protection and livelihood. More specifically, socio-economic conditions of vulnerable populations in countries of origin were determined to be the most common factors influencing human trafficking. This topic is often examined alongside migration.

Socio-Economic Conditions and Migration

The literature revealed that socio-economic conditions in countries of origin, particularly in vulnerable populations, play a pivotal role in influencing human trafficking. Economic conditions are largely portrayed as reduced income levels or poverty (Budiani-Saberi et al., 2014; Clark & McArthur, 2017; Sarich, 2012) while social conditions refer to family structures, health, (domestic) violence and trauma (Koegler et al., 2022). Migration pathways are identified as factors influencing human trafficking in studies exploring cross-border implications (Hernandez & Rudolph, 2015; Pocock et al., 2020). Moreover, regional and global studies emphasize the strong link between criminal activity and human trafficking in both origin and destination countries (Cho, 2015). The prevalence of crime is more pronounced in origin countries, where law enforcement and corruption levels are critical determinants (Van Dijk & Klerx Van Mierlo, 2014). In destination countries, social and economic conditions predominantly influence human trafficking, with a focus on sexual exploitation and forced labor (Clark & McArthur, 2017; Howard, 2013).

Exploitation and Vulnerability

Sexual exploitation was prevalent as the purpose of trafficking across the reviewed studies, whereas other types of exploitation, such as domestic servitude, forced begging, and child trafficking for trade or sale were less common but noteworthy (Petrinov, 2014). Studies underscore how limited gender equality and societal bias against women contribute to women's heightened susceptibility to trafficking, especially to trafficking for sexual exploitation (Shah et al., 2011; UNODC, 2016). Women subjected to forced prostitution often experience estrangement, abandonment, and sexual violence. While most studies focus on trafficking for sexual exploitation, trafficking for forced labor is associated with hazardous work, long hours, and the lack of protective measures (Crowe, 2018; Mahdavi & Sargent, 2011). Factors contributing to labor exploitation included violence, poverty, and precarious living conditions.

Operational Approaches of Trafficking and Interventions

Attitudes and Awareness Raising

A significant portion of reviewed studies explored the experiences of trafficked persons, emphasizing empowerment, training, and awareness raising. Programs targeting vulnerable populations, especially in the context of sexual exploitation, prioritize education to prevent re-trafficking. However, a debate exists on the effectiveness of knowledge-building and awareness raising alone (Chisolm-Straker et al., 2018). Recommendations include targeted programs involving national governments and humanitarian agencies to enhance local capacities and reduce risk factors (Bishop et al., 2013; Tesfay, 2015; Urada et al., 2014). In the context of preventing trafficking for forced labor, awareness raising programs aimed at combating human trafficking encompass measures to prevent exploitation and mitigate harm among workers with low wages engaged in the "3D work" (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) (Boyden & Howard, 2013; Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017).

Assessment studies suggest that the community-based aspects of interventions are not fully understood. The studies highlight a lack of effective implementation of community-based interventions, especially concerning the prevention of the exploitation of migrant women. These findings add to the existing evidence on the effectiveness of pre-migration counter-trafficking programs focused on knowledge-building and awareness-raising. Programs are perceived as insufficient due to limitations in information and training to prepare migrants to address the complex power imbalances they are likely to face during their migration journeys, particularly within an employment context. Overall, studies on attitudes and awareness raising indicate that more research is needed to ascertain the extent and means by which people with low earnings are exploited. Further research and community conversations can inform the potential risks associated with work that could negatively affect individuals, including parents and force them to send their children to work.

Public Governance and Regulation

The literature investigated the involvement of first responders in tackling human trafficking, including healthcare providers, law enforcement, and emergency personnel. Interventions encompass education, awareness raising, and multifaceted approaches, with a focus on social protection and women's economic empowerment (Jana et al., 2014; Kulu-Glasgow et al., 2012; Long & Risko, 2024; Silverman et al., 2014). Healthcare professionals play a crucial role in preventing trafficking, with a focus on emergency department nurses. Health-related interventions highlight challenges faced by trafficked individuals seeking healthcare, emphasizing the importance of dedicated training for first responders (de Shalit et al., 2021; Price et al., 2021).

Although the reviewed studies acknowledge that in the absence of training, the identification of victims could potentially be even lower, encounters between trafficked persons and first responders and trained professionals are rare (Baldwin et al., 2011; Chacón, 2017; Pocock et al., 2021). The reviewed studies show that offering training to first responders, despite improving their level of awareness, may not translate into preventive actions. Training builds on the assumption that once first responders are educated about human trafficking indicators, they will seek out these signs during their regular duties. However, this implies an additional workload for already busy professionals (de Shalit et al., 2021; Harkins, 2017; Pocock et al., 2021). Studies also contend that awareness alone might not effectively identify victims (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2020; Huang, 2017; Kulu-Glasgow et al., 2012). Instead, research suggests implementing preventive measures like law enforcement inspections and raids in locations where trafficking victims are commonly exploited, such as commercial sex establishments and migrant worker communities. In addition, regional research examines the paradigm shift toward a victim-centered 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 alone are deemed insufficient, emphasizing the need for partnerships, information exchange, and multi-agency engagement (Harkins, 2017; Pocock et al., 2021).

Geographical Variations in Counter-Trafficking Programs and Policies

A significant portion of research from academic disciplines, such as criminal justice, international relations, and law, is concerned with the legal aspects of trafficking across borders. These studies often highlight the challenges posed by transnational laws and the insufficient cooperation in prosecuting traffickers and protecting victims. To examine the geographical variation in counter-trafficking programs and policies, we classified the included sources using the 4Ps approach and by type of exploitation.

At the global level, the majority of reviewed research has studied programs or policies in preventing trafficking in persons (58%) and protecting victims and survivors of trafficking (45%) as indicated in Figure 1. For instance, these studies show disseminating information on regular migration channels and raising awareness of the risks of trafficking are effective in preventing trafficking in persons. Moreover, these studies find that disseminating information on labor migration in countries of destination can protect individuals vulnerable to forced labor and promote migrants' labor rights. The few studies focusing on partnerships advocate for developing information exchange mechanisms and strengthening international collaboration to address human trafficking. Furthermore, Figure 2 demonstrates that trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation (19%), trafficking for forced labor (17%), and child trafficking (15%) are the most commonly studied types of exploitation.

At the regional level, Figure 3 (left) suggests that Europe leads in prevention and the Americas lead in protection research, each at 33%, while Africa and the Arab States have the lowest percentages in these categories. Moreover, Europe and the Americas show a relatively balanced distribution of research across the 4Ps. Figure 3 (right) indicates the majority of reviewed research study programs and policies on the prevention of trafficking in persons, with percentages ranging from 41% to 52% across different regions. However, prosecution and partnerships consistently have the lowest share of research across all regions.

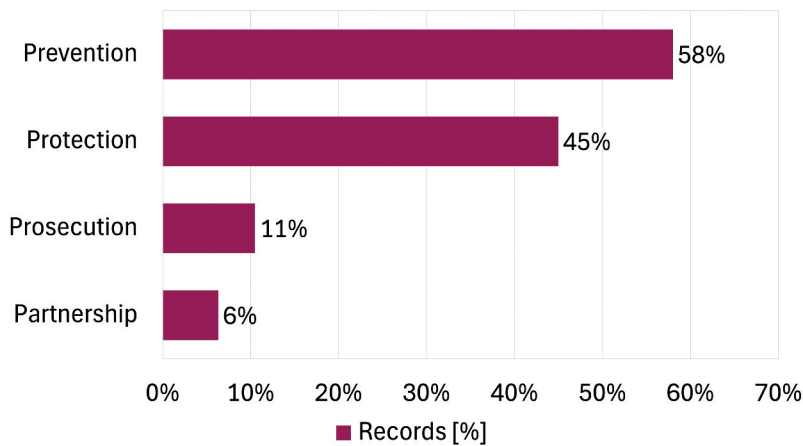


Figure 1. Research by 4Ps at the global level. Note: This figure was generated based on the records index in the Human Trafficking EGM. The raw number of records is prevention (138), protection (107), prosecution (25), and partnership (15). Some records examine several Ps, thus the percentages sum to over 100%. Source: Authors’ research.

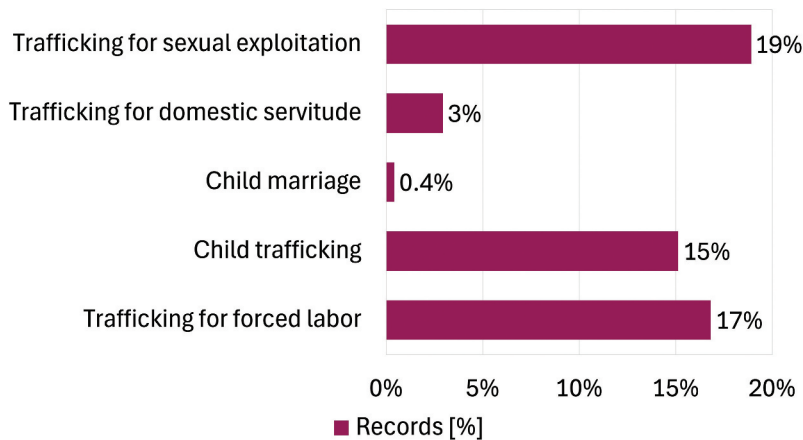


Figure 2. Research by type of exploitation at the regional level. Note: In the online EGM, the outcome “Trafficking for forced labor” includes forced labor and forced labor exploitation; “Trafficking for domestic servitude” includes forced marriage; “Trafficking for sexual exploitation” includes forced commercial sexual exploitation. Source: Authors’ research.

Policy-relevant research by 4Ps, by theme					Policy-relevant research by 4Ps, by region					
	Prevention	Protection	Prosecution	Partnership		Prevention	Protection	Prosecution	Partnership	SUM
Africa	14%	13%	8%	8%	Africa	52%	39%	6%	3%	100%
America	26%	33%	38%	33%	America	41%	42%	12%	5%	100%
Arab States*	3%	0%	4%	0%	Arab States*	75%	0%	25%	0%	100%
Asia	24%	30%	4%	25%	Asia	47%	47%	2%	5%	100%
Europe	33%	24%	46%	33%	Europe	51%	29%	14%	5%	100%
SUM	100%	100%	100%	100%						

Figure 3. Research by 4Ps at the regional level. Note: [*] indicates any of the 4Ps or regions with less than 5 records. Source: Authors’ research.

Figure 4 (left) illustrates the majority of research on trafficking for forced labor studies the context in Asia (41%) and Europe (31%). Europe shows a rather balanced distribution of research across different types of exploitation, whereas there are more variations by type of exploitation in other regions. Moreover, Figure 4 (right) demonstrates that trafficking for forced labor is the most

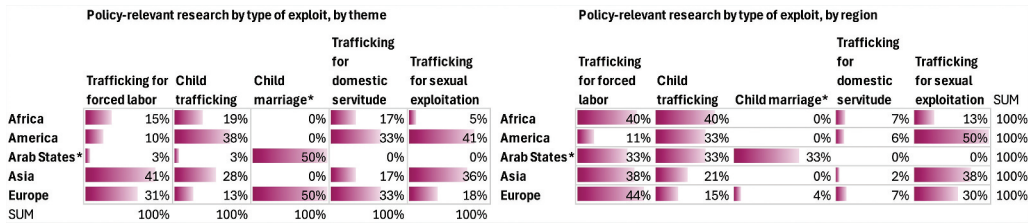


Figure 4. Research by type of exploitation at the regional level. Note: [*] indicates any types of exploitation or regions with less than 5 records. In the online EGM, the outcome “Trafficking for forced labor” includes forced labor and forced labor exploitation; “Trafficking for domestic servitude” includes forced marriage; “Trafficking for sexual exploitation” includes forced commercial sexual exploitation. Source: Authors’ research.

researched type of exploitation across all regions except the Americas, where trafficking for sexual exploitation is its most researched theme. Trafficking for domestic servitude and child marriage are among the least studied types of exploitation.

Regional and national investigations centered on trafficking from North African and Central African nations into the EU reveal that legislation struggles to encompass all facets of human trafficking. National authorities, including law enforcement agencies, interpret international norms broadly to unravel complex trafficking scenarios. Studies show a decrease in detected trafficking cases along routes where existing laws relating to migration are strengthened, but also highlight instances of trafficking diversion (Anti-Slavery International, 2014; Hounmenou, 2021). The type of legislation and tools provided by Eurojust and Europol play a crucial role in combating forced criminal activity related trafficking and aiding prosecution efforts.

Research shows that capacity-building programs for local law enforcement may be hindered by corruption and crises (Clark & McArthur, 2017). For example, Petrunov (2014) delves into the financial operations of criminal organizations involved in trafficking for forced prostitution from Bulgaria to Western European countries. The study explores money movement, bookkeeping, and money laundering techniques, enhancing understanding of the criminal phenomenon itself. The reviewed studies advocate for recognizing human trafficking as intrinsically linked to crises and corruption and address it comprehensively within humanitarian responses. Current responses often overlook certain forms of trafficking.

EGM Usage Among Researchers and Policy Actors

To bridge the research-to-policy gap, we outline the usage of the EGM among researchers and policy actors. From the research and knowledge management perspective, the Bibliography and EGM are presented as a best practice at the UN system libraries’ annual forum (ILO, 2024b). The event is a community of practice to share know-how for improving library services globally. Following the presentation, several UN agencies contacted the authors to explore ways to extend the EGM to other Sustainable Development Goals. Researchers have used the powerful filter and sorting features, e.g., by methodology, study design, and geographic region, to conduct literature reviews. As the Bibliography and EGM do not assess the quality of evidence, the authors have built on these tools and developed the Research for Policy Guidance tool considering the risk of bias (ILO, 2024b) and a meta-analysis on child labor interventions (ILO, 2023b).

From the policy and programming perspective, policy actors have used the EGM to filter by region to understand where funding resources have been channeled and what interventions have been implemented. The visual and interactive nature of the EGM has made research more accessible to policy actors. By showing policy actors the big picture – the evidence landscape (Figure 5) and research gaps (Figure 6), the tool has informed several multi-stakeholder consultations to develop Global and National Research Agendas (ILO, 2023b, 2024b). The EGM has formed the basis for discussions on

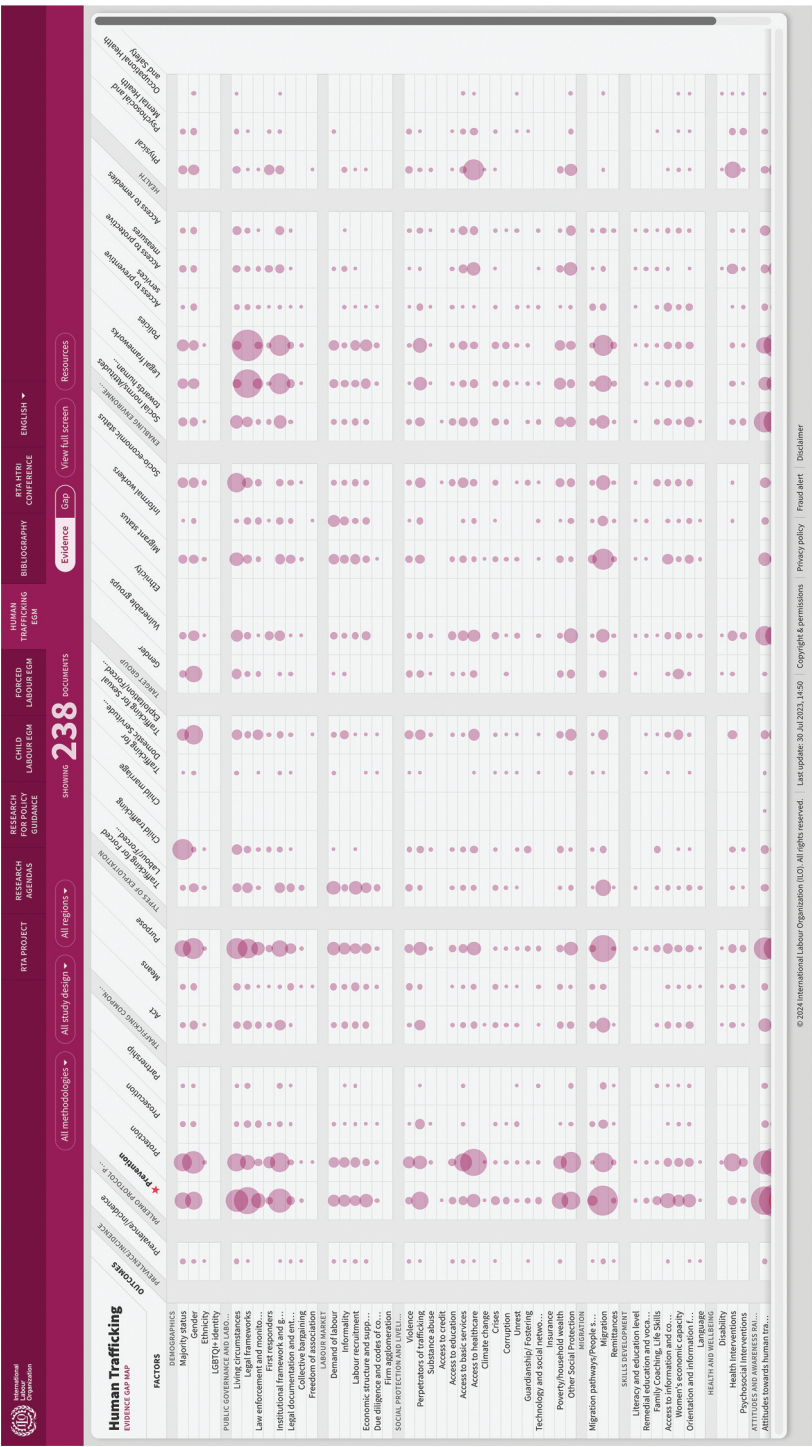


Figure 5. The evidence landscape.

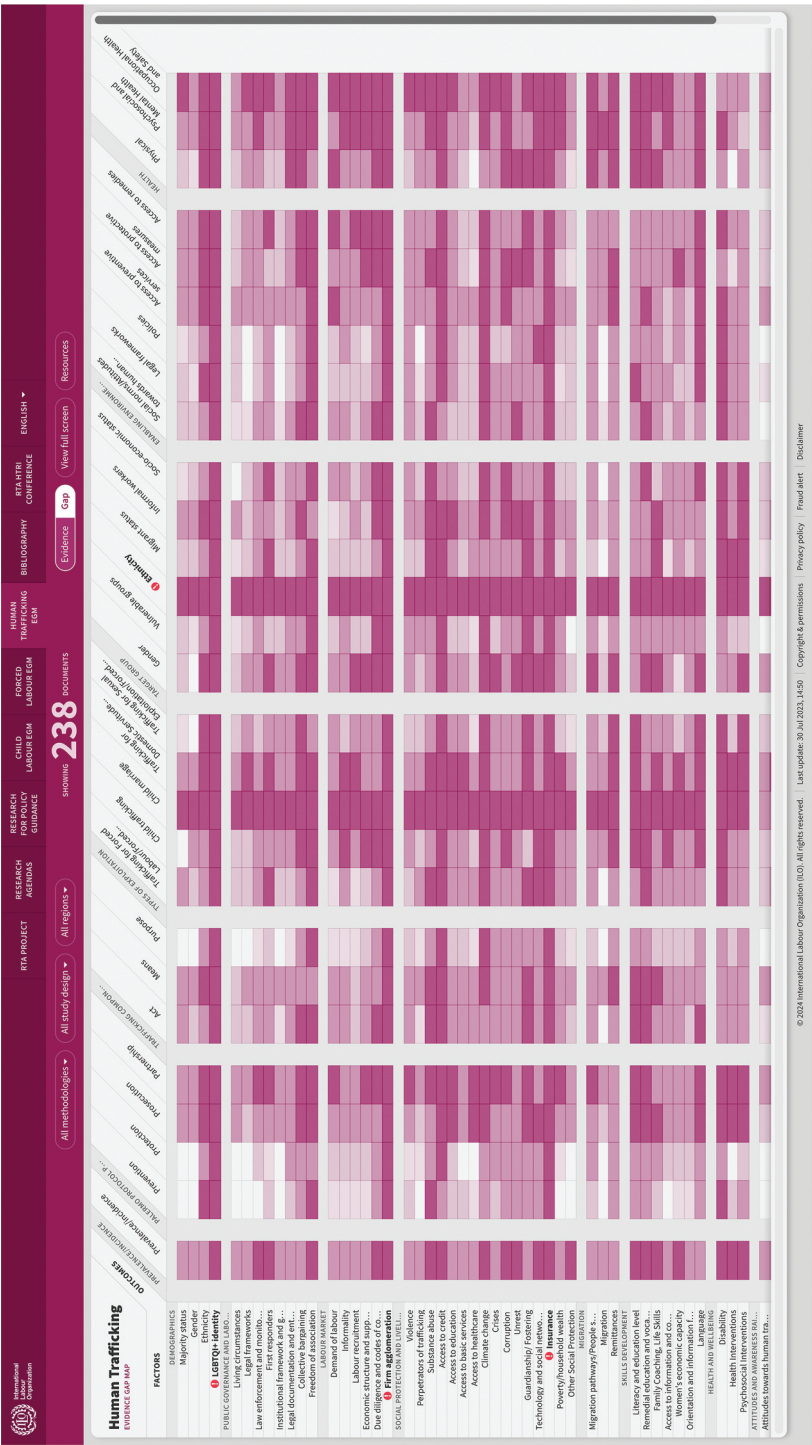


Figure 6. Gaps in human trafficking research.

research priorities, providing critical information to guide resource allocation on targeted and impactful interventions.³

As more policy-relevant research becomes available, the EGM will be updated through expert reviews, user contributions, and using machine learning techniques. EGM users are encouraged to contact the authors if new and relevant studies have not been integrated. The authors are testing machine learning techniques for identifying relevant research and tagging the taxonomy of factors and outcomes in different languages. The goal is to maintain the EGM as a sustainable and highly useful tool for our diverse range of users.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to review recent research trends and interventions on human trafficking and bridge the research-to-policy gap by identifying priority areas for research.

Our analysis produced five central findings. First, recent research highlights the socio-economic conditions and migration pathways of trafficked persons. 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. Second, counter-trafficking programs emphasize empowerment, training, and awareness raising, but the studies reviewed reveal a prevailing lack of awareness and training for stakeholders, including first responders. Third, few studies focus on interventions or impact evaluations, highlighting the need for data collection, improved evaluations and long-term assessments. Fourth, inconsistencies in the operational interpretation of trafficking, first responders' false perceptions of trafficked persons, crises, and corruption are among the top barriers to the identification of victims and survivors of trafficking. Finally, we find most studies examine trafficking at global and translational levels in the Global North, with fewer studies from the Global South. The findings provide a comprehensive analysis of human trafficking, emphasizing the significance of prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership in addressing this complex issue. Socio-economic conditions, particularly poverty and migration, are identified as key factors influencing vulnerability to trafficking, with criminal activity playing a significant role in both origin and destination countries. Exploitation, especially sexual exploitation, is prevalent, highlighting the importance of addressing gendered vulnerabilities and societal biases. Operational approaches and interventions include awareness raising among vulnerable populations and first responders, emphasizing the need for training and multi-agency collaboration to effectively identify and support victims. However, challenges such as corruption and legal limitations necessitate comprehensive responses and international cooperation to combat human trafficking effectively.

In this study, we applied the 4P approach to analyze research trends and interventions within the counter-trafficking domain. In doing so, we delved into factors associated with human trafficking and assessed counter-trafficking programs (Bryant & Landman, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yanow, 2015). We created an online Evidence Gap Map to bridge the research-to-policy gap by identifying priority areas for research and discuss its potential for influencing future policy decisions and targeted program implementation.

The findings underscore that the prevention aspect of counter-trafficking is most discussed in studies focused on sexual exploitation and the exploitation of women and children (Chisolm-Straker et al., 2018; Houston-Kolnik et al., 2020; Huang, 2017; Kulu-Glasgow et al., 2012; Pocock et al., 2021). Interventions targeting education, public awareness campaigns, and migration policy improvements highlight the proactive strategies needed to disrupt human trafficking (Long & Risko, 2024). These efforts aim to empower vulnerable populations, emphasizing the need for sustainable prevention measures.

³The Evidence Gap Map is an interactive tool. The number of records available is displayed as users hover over each factor, outcome, or intersection where a factor and an outcome meet. When users click on the intersection, the list of documents will be displayed based on the selected query. Users can also filter their search by methodologies, study design, and regions – based on options on the top menu. The relational database is linked to the Bibliography, where users can access further details about the records. Link: <https://rtaproject.org/human-trafficking-egm/>.

Examining the prosecution theme, the evidence indicates that trafficking cases often involve organized criminal groups (Anti-Slavery International, 2014; Sarich, 2012). The role of socio-economic conditions and corruption in migration patterns, especially in Eastern Europe and South-East Asia, underscores the complexity of trafficking dynamics (Clark et al, 2017; Hernandez & Rudolph, 2015; Van Dijk & Klerx Van Mierlo, 2014). However, a notable gap exists in offering specific recommendations for interventions, necessitating further exploration of effective prosecution strategies.

In the realm of protection, studies highlight the essential role of temporary shelter, medical and psychosocial care (Baldwin et al., 2011; Bouché & Bailey, 2020; Korovich & Fondacaro, 2021). Recommendations emphasize tailoring protection efforts, particularly for women and children, and educating first responders (Harkins, 2017; de Shalit et al., 2021; Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). This reflects the ongoing process of assessing the effectiveness of protection strategies, with an emphasis on adapting to the evolving needs of trafficked individuals.

Global research acknowledges the challenges of protecting trafficked individuals involved in criminal activities, requiring a coordinated approach among countries. While the literature explores partnerships at regional and global levels, there is a notable dearth of discussion on this paradigm. More studies on international cooperation are needed to assess its role in effective prosecution and comprehensive victim support.

The contributions of this study are twofold. Firstly, we have created a comprehensive picture of human trafficking empirical research by looking at publications with an emphasis on policy related and practical interventions (Kanger et al., 2020). Secondly, this research provides a practical contribution by developing an online tool that filters the reviewed publications by deriving recommendations based on our evaluation of the human trafficking literature. We have done so by evaluating the factors and outcomes of HT which enables us to (a) outline the latest research trends concerning the factors associated with human trafficking, (b) identify programs and policies to combat human trafficking, and (c) identify the knowledge gaps and the priority areas for research through consultations, the Human Trafficking Bibliography, and the interactive EGM (ILO, 2023a).

This research underscores the significance of a 4P approach by highlighting interlinked aspects of prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership in addressing human trafficking. It highlights the importance of addressing socio-economic vulnerabilities, gender biases, and criminal activities while advocating for comprehensive interventions that involve awareness raising, training for first responders, and legal frameworks. Additionally, the findings emphasize the need for international collaboration and partnership development to address the complex challenges posed by human trafficking effectively.

Future research should address existing research gaps in understanding effective partnerships, protection approaches, and prosecution practices at global, regional and country levels. To strengthen anti-trafficking efforts, it is crucial to assess the short- and medium-term impacts of targeted interventions. This includes studying how these interventions can mitigate risks and reduce the vulnerability of migrant workers, women from specific socio-economic backgrounds, and children to human trafficking and other forms of exploitation.

While identifying research gaps at the global and regional levels is essential, these gaps alone could not determine new research priorities. Future research should be guided by robust data on the incidence and prevalence of trafficking, coupled with consultations involving researchers and policy actors similar to the process for developing the RTA global and national research agendas. Future research should also look beyond prevention and protection efforts in the destination countries and develop dedicated studies for prosecution, protection and partnership. As the reviewed studies emphasize the importance of increasing data management capacity, future research should assess the impact of national, regional, and global databases on prosecution efforts. To enhance the comprehensiveness and minimize bias of the Bibliography, we suggest incorporating a feature that allows researchers to report any missing records. Finally, we suggest using artificial intelligence, such as natural language processing, to identify policy-relevant research and update the bibliography in a more efficient and sustainable manner.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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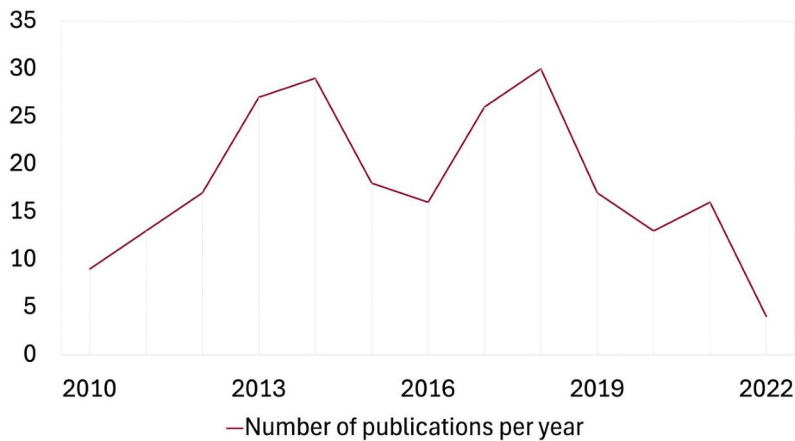
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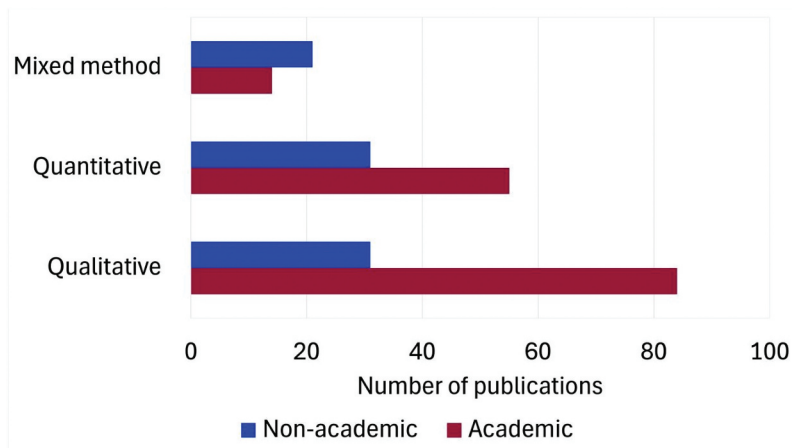
Appendices

Appendix A. Included records by year, 2010–2022



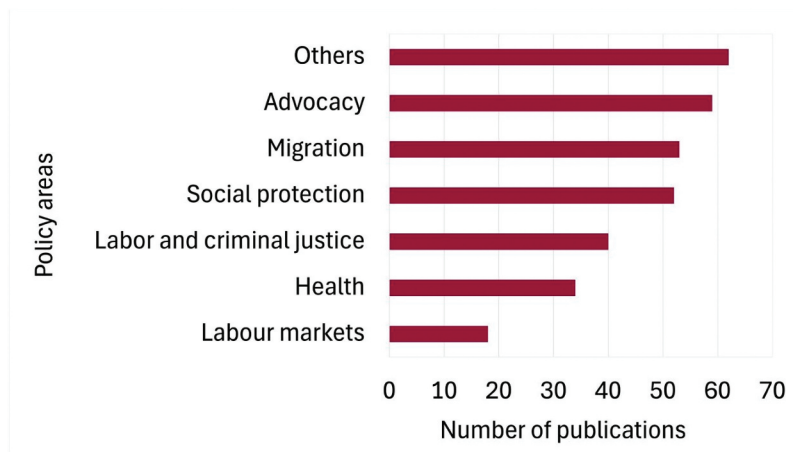
Source: Authors' research.

Appendix B. Included records by method, 2010–2022



Source: Authors' research.

Appendix C. Included records by policy area, 2010–2022



Notes: Others include child rights, corporate human rights, credit/finance, development, education, educational justice, labor recruitment, and trade. Source: Authors' research.

Appendix D. Factors influencing human trafficking

Factors	Description of subcategories
Demographics	The record discusses <i>majority status, gender, ethnicity, and/or LGBTQ+ identity</i> as factors influencing trafficking.
Public governance and regulation	The record discusses the role of <i>living circumstances, legal frameworks, law enforcement and monitoring, first responders, institutional frameworks, collective bargaining, and/or freedom of association</i> as factors influencing trafficking.
Labor market	The record discusses the <i>demand for labor, informality, labor recruitment, economic structures and supply chains, due diligence and codes of conduct, and/or firm agglomeration</i> as factors influencing trafficking.
Social protection and livelihood	The record discusses <i>violence, perpetrators of trafficking, substance abuse, access to credit, access to education, access to basic services, access to healthcare, climate change, crises, corruption, unrest, technology and social networks, insurance, poverty/household wealth, and/or other social protection</i> as factors influencing vulnerability to human trafficking.
Migration	The record discusses <i>migration pathways/people smuggling, migration, and/or remittances</i> as a factor influencing human trafficking.
Skills development	The record discusses <i>literacy and education level, remedial education and vocational training, family coaching, life skills, access to information and communication technologies (ICT), women's economic capacity, orientation and information for migrants (before/after arrival), and/or language</i> as factors influencing vulnerability to human trafficking.
Health and well-being	The record discusses <i>disability, health interventions, and/or psychosocial interventions</i> as factors influencing human trafficking.
Attitudes and awareness raising	The record discusses <i>attitudes towards human trafficking, capacity building, communication and advocacy, monitoring and evaluation, prevalence studies, and/or media (media and social justice/ investigative journalism/media exposure and awareness)</i> as factors influencing human trafficking.

Note: The italic text denotes the subcategories. Source: Authors' research.

Appendix E. Outcomes related to human trafficking

Outcomes	Description of subcategories
Prevalence/ incidence	The record discusses the <i>prevalence or incidence of human trafficking</i> as an outcome.
Palermo Protocol paradigms	The record discusses <i>prevention, protection, prosecution</i> and/or <i>partnership</i> as an outcome. Please refer to the Palermo Protocol for more information.
Trafficking components	The record discusses the <i>act, means,</i> and/or <i>purpose</i> element of trafficking, focusing on exploitative practices, including forced labor, bonded labor, child labor, 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 <i>trafficking for forced labor/forced labor/labor exploitation, child trafficking, child marriage, trafficking for domestic servitude and/or forced marriage,</i> and/or <i>trafficking for sexual exploitation/forced commercial sexual exploitation.</i>
Target group	The record discusses the <i>gender, vulnerable groups, ethnicity, migration status, informal worker,</i> and/or <i>socio-economic status</i> of trafficked persons as the targeting criteria/outcome.
Enabling environment	The record discusses creating an enabling environment by changing <i>social norms/attitudes towards human trafficking, legal frameworks, policies,</i> and/or increasing individuals' <i>access to preventive services, protective measures,</i> and/or <i>remedies</i> as an outcome.
Health	The record discusses individuals' <i>physical, psychological and mental health,</i> and/or <i>occupational health and safety</i> as an outcome.