

National Academy of Sciences

Prevalence and Policy in the Federal Government

My name is Abby Long and I am a Program Adviser at the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons- also known as the TIP Office- at the U.S. Department of State. Thank you for being here today and thank you to my colleagues for helping me prepare. I am going to address prevalence and policy from the perspective of the TIP Office International Programs team, which supports the implementation of our Office's foreign assistance budget. As many of you know, the TIP Office partners with foreign governments, international organizations, other federal agencies, civil society, the private sector, and survivors of human trafficking to develop and implement effective strategies to confront modern slavery. The TIP Office is responsible for bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, targeted foreign assistance, and public engagement on human trafficking. The International Programs team focuses internationally on foreign assistance, but many of our observations and lessons we have learned could apply to the United States.

The TIP Office International Programs Team Sees Value in Reliable Prevalence Estimates

On the International Programs team, we see value in prevalence estimates produced from rigorous research and a robust process of expert consultation and peer review. We get a clearer picture of the problem and a better understanding of the resources it will take to fight human trafficking. Federal government anti-trafficking efforts rely on funding from Congress. Members and staffers sometimes ask the Department about prevalence in order to better understand the problem and help make budgetary decisions. An accurate prevalence country or industry estimate can help us explain our funding needs to Congress and to other State Department internal stakeholders. We could also use such numbers to encourage federal government partners to include trafficking components in their foreign assistance projects where appropriate. Questions on prevalence also come from the public and stakeholders in the anti-trafficking community. Consequently, we take into account prevalence estimates where they exist but where they do not, we rely on grantees for qualitative information that give us an indication of high or low levels of prevalence. In places where there are no estimates or qualitative evidence of any kind, we must explain why we do not have them and what it would take to get them.

Prevalence is Important, but not a Key Criterion in our Regular Programming

Applicants frequently include citations from prevalence estimates in their funding applications as a justification for their proposed programming, even though the level of prevalence is not a formal funding criterion for our regular programming. It is, however, in the Program to End Modern Slavery (aka PEMS), which I will talk about later. While prevalence is not an explicit criterion, we frequently fund programs in areas with high estimated prevalence of human trafficking. Despite this, prevalence is one factor out of several that we consider informally when it comes to programming decisions. The TIP Office consults extensively with federal government partners on programming decisions; the chief driver is the TIP Report, and the tier rankings that stem from whether or not governments meet minimum standards as defined in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. The International Programs team uses the recommendations that accompany each TIP Report country narrative to create programming objectives

for the next year's funding process. We also consider the existence of political will to fight human trafficking in the country as this often has a huge impact on the likelihood of project success.

The TIP Office Recognizes the Utility of Reliable and Replicable Prevalence Methods

Given the high interest, the International Programs team recognizes the value in the development of reliable and accurate information, data, and measurement strategies for prevalence. These will be useful for program planning and we can share these with colleagues in the federal government working on hidden populations. For instance, we have colleagues that work with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex populations and that work with people with substance use issues that could adapt the strategies to design programs that better access their target populations. Any prevalence estimate the TIP Office funds, uses or cites must be carefully scrutinized because, as representatives of the U.S. Government, our work is regularly subjected to intense examination. The use or funding of any estimate could garner significant attention from the media, governmental partners, and be subjected to audits or investigations.

Most of the countries that the TIP Office International Programs team works in are not currently close to being able to implement a multiple systems estimation (MSE) method, but we still recognize the importance of establishing data collection systems that can move the country or region in that direction. Setting the groundwork for future MSE studies is not typically the primary objective for funding a database; TIP Office Program Officers usually want to start a database to help improve the quality of care that a victim receives, serve as a tool for law enforcement, and/or to improve organizational sustainability. The TIP Office has funded a database, the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC), which launched in 2017. We see this as a promising practice for data sharing as it has significantly increased data collection and coordination in its victim assistance database. In addition to IOM's own data, it receives data from Liberty Shared and Polaris. Other anti-trafficking organizations are currently undertaking the needed steps to include information in the database. The full dataset contains 91,000 victims of 169 nationalities exploited in 172 countries. CTDC makes public an anonymized version that contains data on approximately 55,000 victims.

Program to End Modern Slavery is the First Systematic Integration of Prevalence Estimates into Regular Programming

The TIP Office recognizes the many challenges in implementing reliable prevalence estimates. In spite of the challenges, when the first round of PEMS funding was issued in 2017, prevalence became a systematic part of TIP Office programming. The Program to End Modern Slavery (PEMS) represents a groundbreaking U.S. foreign assistance program funded by Congress with a total of \$100 million to date. The Program aims to support transformational projects that seek to achieve a measurable and substantial reduction of the prevalence of modern slavery—also known as human trafficking—in targeted populations in specific countries or regions. Thus far, the TIP Office has made two awards under PEMS totaling \$46 million to the non-governmental organization—the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery and one \$4 million award to the University of Georgia Research Foundation. The legislation that established PEMS specified that “there is a need for international public and private cooperation to increase resources for programs to reduce the prevalence of modern slavery by building the capacity of foreign governments to deter its perpetrators” and that implementing partners must work in countries with high prevalence of modern slavery. Prior to that, it had not been a regular part of TIP Office grant making and it still is not a main criterion for our regular program decision-making

process, which is independent from the PEMS funding. Prevalence estimates have been included in some of our recent bilateral funding opportunities, but only a handful of TIP Office-funded projects have incorporated their own prevalence estimates. Currently, there are no public prevalence estimates from PEMS. Once we receive the estimates, the expectation is that with this intense investment of financial resources in a geographically concentrated zone, we will be able to determine which programs awarded under PEMS are contributing to a decrease in prevalence. We can then consider scaling or replicating these projects or activities. If the prevalence estimates have returned accurate, validated figures, we can also consider repeating these methodologies.

Recommendations

As we discuss how we can improve collaboration between research and practice, I have a few recommendations I want to share:

1. Prevalence Estimates Should be done Rigorously

I will start my recommendations by reiterating some points on the importance of quality and research designs to utilize a victim-centered approach. This means that, at a minimum, researchers should review the design with survivors of trafficking to ensure there are no adverse potential effects. We also expect adherence to ethical principles and depending on the design, this might mean that we require Institutional Review Board approval. We emphasize solid anonymization practices when collecting data from and about trafficking victims. Throughout the process, we expect transparency, which is a general research best practice. We typically expect to see all documentation related to the estimates in advance, including analysis plans, and fully disclosed once the estimate is complete. The anti-trafficking field is very small and by extension very collaborative. The prevalence measurement stakeholders in the anti-trafficking field are an even smaller list. We expect to hear feedback and results from consultations with experts. We expect that methodologies are replicable and we would love to see them replicated. We also expect to see innovation, but at the same time, rigorous methods. Throughout the process, we also expect to have frank conversations on the limitations and assumptions behind any chosen methodology.

2. A Reduction in Prevalence is Only One Component of Project Success- Must be Accompanied by Robust Monitoring and Evaluation.

From the perspective of the TIP Office, funding for prevalence estimates should not come at the expense of funding that goes to monitoring and evaluation. Part of this is because programs funded by the TIP Office are actually quite small. Aside from PEMS, the typical TIP Office grant has been \$750,000 over 3 years, and grants are often implemented in different locations. Given this amount of funding and the geographic dispersion, it is unlikely that we are going to see reductions in prevalence for that amount of money over that period of the grant. The other reason is that human trafficking is a complex crime that is exacerbated by flawed and unequal systems. After 17 years of grant making and extensive social science research, we have a better understanding of what improves the quality of systems and makes them less conducive to trafficking and, ideally, better equipped to combat the crime. We know that improving the skills and capacity of stakeholders can lead to better functioning institutions and that a victim-centered approach improves the chances of a sustainable recovery and an environment in which justice can prevail. Projects that educate and raise awareness can help build government will to fight human trafficking, which in turn can benefit future researchers who are trying to compile prevalence estimates. Prevalence estimates alone do not give us an idea of the severity of the crime, but

paired with mixed methods, they can paint a fuller picture of the victim experience and help design programs that better protect victims or prevent traffickers from committing the crime in the first place. As a result, the TIP Office would rather see thorough monitoring and evaluation plans, ideally using an impact evaluation methodology that helps us see what activities are most effective in improving activities.

3. Prevalence Studies Should Use an Impact Evaluation Methodology

Human trafficking is a complex crime that stems from multiple extenuating political, sociological, cultural, and economic factors. An observational prevalence study on its own cannot tell us which programmatic activities contributed to the decrease or increase of prevalence because it is impossible to control for those factors. However, when prevalence studies utilize an impact evaluation methodology, with a treatment and control group, we can identify what factor, or combination of factors, has affected the increase or decrease in prevalence. Impact evaluations do not have to be randomized controlled trials, they should be, but they could also be quasi-experimental, cohort, case-control, and analytic cross-sectional studies.