

Editorial: The politics of evidence, data and research in anti-trafficking work

Sallie Yea

Please cite this article as: S Yea, 'Editorial: The politics of evidence, data and research in anti-trafficking work', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 8, 2017, pp. 1—13, www.antitraffickingreview.org

Introduction

Since the mid-2000s, critical commentators have raised concerns about both the paucity of evidence on important aspects of human trafficking, and the difficulty of obtaining meaningful data.¹ Policy formations, advocacy campaigns, concrete interventions, and popular understandings of human trafficking have all had accusations of wild claims and unfounded assumptions levelled at them. Guesstimates prevail and take on a life of their own in such a context.² Calls for more robust evidence to prove or disprove claims about the nature, extent and location of human trafficking, the characteristics of trafficked persons, and the continued investment in particular types of responses have abounded. This has occurred in light of the growing potential for unsubstantiated claims to fulfil the place of rigorous evidence to inform anti-trafficking work.

With some of these concerns in mind, the *Anti-Trafficking Review* decided to devote an issue to the question of 'evidence' in anti-trafficking work. But before exploring these themes in further detail here we should first attempt to achieve some degree of clarity about the terms we are employing in this special issue. In particular, it is important to distinguish between evidence, data, and research; particularly so as many in the anti-trafficking community tend to use these terms interchangeably. Whilst research is a broad term encompassing the activities that generate knowledge and extend understanding through active investigation, data is normally understood as the results of such investigation. Although it has quantitative overtones (discussed in further detail below in relation to human trafficking), data should certainly not only—or even primarily—be understood as just statistics. Rather, it encompasses a wide range of information derived from an equally expansive bevy of methods, including participatory activities, life stories, interviews, and ethnography. Evidence, on the other hand, is not simply another word for data, but implies the ability to give substance to belief and therefore the ability to (dis)prove a proposition or suggestion. The notion of 'truth' then is important when considering evidence. But, as Jo Doezema rightly pointed out over fifteen years ago, anti-trafficking can become a dangerous ideology which involves 'the distortion of truth for political ends.'³ Evidence, in other words, should never be thought of as politically neutral and the recognition that truths are social, political and moral constructs has a long pedigree in the social sciences. Scholars of human trafficking are increasingly recognising this as relevant to understanding the continued human rights abuses, inequalities and exclusions, and repressive policies often carried out in the name of anti-trafficking.⁴

Better Research?

Given the recognition that meaningful evidence on human trafficking is both sparse and prone to manipulation, and that the knowledge has largely been filled by wild claims emerging from the media, NGOs and governments, amongst others, much energy has consequently been spent on attempts to better design research so it produces more meaningful data: data that can be compared, that more deeply engages with individual experiences and that enables estimates to be made. In 2005 a special issue of the journal *International Migration* critically discussed the key challenges in conducting research with trafficked persons and other key stakeholders. Issues of ethics, access,

¹ E Gozdiak and M N Bump, *Data and Research on Human Trafficking: Bibliography of research-based literature*, Institute for the Study of International Migration, Georgetown University, Washington DC, 2008; T K Logan, R Walker and G Hunt, 'Understanding Human Trafficking in the United States', *Trauma, Violence and Abuse*, vol. 10, issue 1, 2009, pp. 3—30; S X Zhang, 'Measuring Labor Trafficking: A research note', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 58, pp. 469—482.

² D A Feingold, 'Think Again: Human trafficking', *Foreign Policy*, issue 150, 2005, pp. 26—32; A Farrell, J McDevitt, N Perry, S Fahy, K Chamberlain and W Adams, *Review of Existing Estimates of Victims of Human Trafficking in the United States and Recommendations for Improving Research and Measurement of Human Trafficking*, Humanity United, Washington DC, 2009.

³ J Doezema, 'The Ideology of Trafficking', paper presented at the Work Conference 'Human Trafficking', 15 November 2002, Centre for Ethics and Value Inquiry (CEVI), Ghent University, 2002, p. 2.

⁴ B Anderson and R Andrijasevic, 'Sex, Slaves and Citizens: The politics of anti-trafficking', *Soundings*, vol. 40, 2008, pp. 135—145; B Anderson, 'Where's the Harm in That? Immigration enforcement, trafficking, and the protection of migrants' rights', *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 56, issue 9, 2012, pp. 1241—1257.

context of disclosure, remuneration for research participants, and a range of related concerns emerged as impacting both the opportunity to conduct research and the rigour with which research can be conducted.⁵ Having attended several subsequent conferences and workshops on research in human trafficking, I have seen very little that is new emerge beyond the issues outlined in 2005, apart from the scholarly investment in more elaborate and thoughtful discussions of ethical issues in research and ‘evidence gathering’.⁶

One area that begs further attention in questions about evidence concerns how trafficking research can benefit from approaches in social sciences that take seriously notions of critical reflexivity, positionality and power relations that accompany research design, fieldwork and undoubtedly the analysis of data produced. Yet in the vast majority of research reports on human trafficking I have come across—which now number well in the hundreds—these concepts are all but vanquished. There appears no time (or perhaps value) to invest in processes that recognise our role as researchers in not only shaping research design but also outcomes. Critical, post-structuralist and feminist optics in the research process, in other words, seem to have a limited validity in many (particularly commissioned/non-academic) studies of human trafficking, despite the increasingly prominent place of such concepts in the broader social sciences approaches to research. In the field of international development, for example, a large body of research on participatory, critical and feminist approaches has emerged over the past decade, offering to correct the self-assured objectivity of some foundational approaches to poverty and marginalisation in important ways.⁷ These approaches are valuable not only because of the methodological reflections they seek, but also because they take seriously different scales (the body/ the everyday) and subjects (migrants, victims and survivors) of human security that have been marginalised in traditional state-centric approaches to security.⁸ Such a perspective enables researchers to think about evidence in novel ways, raising hitherto neglected questions, such as what is the impact of heightened immigration restrictions on the vulnerability of migrant workers, including sexual labourers? And how do bureaucratic classifications of and responses to human trafficking affect the agency and voice of trafficked persons themselves?

Investment in all aspects of research is necessary to generate ethically and methodologically rigorous evidence where co-learning by different types of stakeholders conducting research on trafficking is encouraged and supported. Ethnographic studies should be particularly encouraged; a quick scope of the literature over the past fifteen years reveals only a handful of ethnographic, book-length treatments of human trafficking and anti-trafficking.⁹ There is no reason why qualitative, longer-term, ethnographic studies such as these should not be amenable to discussions about evidence in the same vein as quantitative research.

Quantity or Quality?

Beyond the need for better evidence through research, important questions remain about what kind of evidence is valued amongst the anti-trafficking community. As the above discussion suggests, the questions to which evidence is brought to bear are undeniably oriented foremost to quantification, particularly through measurement of scale and the increasing reliance on indicators to inform measurements. Whether through the publication of accurate numbers or, more commonly, estimates, there now exists an almost obsessive tendency to know the scale, proportion, size, major sectors and geographical concentrations of human trafficking. One of the most common iterations emerging in recent years from the anti-trafficking community is the question of scale. In every context where I have conducted research I have been repeatedly asked by governments, NGOs and members of the public the following questions: How many trafficked people do you think there are in the country? Do you know where they come from? Is the problem mainly to do with the sex industry? If I respond that I do not know (as we are seeking understanding about ‘hidden populations’), my value as a researcher is diminished. The questions that make research valuable are, in other words, increasingly oriented to quantification and designing better methods to elicit reasonably accurate estimates. Hence, we now have organisations like Walk Free Foundation with their *Global Slavery Index* estimating that 45.8 million persons are held in slavery¹⁰ and the International Labour Organization (ILO)’s estimate of 21

⁵ F Laczko, ‘Data and Research on Human Trafficking’, *International Migration*, vol. 43, issue 1-2, 2005, pp. 1—16.

⁶ D Siegel and W de Roos (eds.), *Ethical Concerns in Research on Human Trafficking*, Springer, London, 2016.

⁷ P Maguire, *Doing Participatory Research: Feminist approaches*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1987.

⁸ J K Lobasz, ‘Beyond Border Security: Feminist approaches to human trafficking’, *Security Studies*, vol. 18, issue 2, 2009, pp. 319—344.

⁹ R Parrenas, *Illicit Flirtations: Labor, migration and sex trafficking in Tokyo*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2011; S Cheng, *On the Move for Love: Migrant entertainers and the U.S. Military in South Korea*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Pennsylvania, 2010; S Yea, *Trafficking Women in Korea: Filipina Migrant Entertainers*, Routledge, London, 2015; S Molland, *The Perfect Business: Anti-Trafficking and the sex trade along the Mekong*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2012.

¹⁰ Walk Free Foundation, *Global Slavery Index*, Walk Free Foundation, 2016.

million forced labourers worldwide. Many have cautioned against the value of such estimates,¹¹ as does Anne Gallagher in this issue.

The usefulness of global estimates is taken up in the debate section of this special issue, with the question of whether global trafficking prevalence data indeed advances the fight against human trafficking. Two of the contributions argue in the positive (David and Robinson *et al.*) and two in the negative (Feingold and Dottridge). Beyond their arguments, we might also suggest that despite—or perhaps because of—the wholesale quantification of human trafficking evidence and the increasing invocation of indicators they are worthy of more critical introspection than they have generally been accorded to date. It is important to consider the arguments of recent critical work in the social sciences on the increasing role of measurement and use of indicators in understanding complex social phenomena, including in the arenas of poverty/ development and human rights. Merry summarised these concerns with the following: ‘The deployment of statistical measures tends to replace political debate with technical expertise. The growing reliance on indicators provides an example of the dissemination of the corporate form of thinking and governance into broader social spheres.’¹² As she elaborates, ‘a key dimension of the power of indicators is their capacity to convert complicated, contextually variable phenomena into unambiguous, clear, and impersonal measures. They represent a technology of producing readily accessible and standardized forms of knowledge ... Indicators submerge local particularities and idiosyncrasies into universal categories, thus generating knowledge that is standardized and comparable across nations and regions.’¹³ Indicators, in other words, can conceal as much as they reveal. Thus, as I argue elsewhere, indicators can have the effect of excluding important dimensions and experiences of, in this case, human trafficking or disciplining these dimensions. This occurs when indicators obscure the co-constitution of different elements of exploitative labour relations. What is often concealed by indicators, in other words, is how the elements that inform them can combine in ways that are productive to the emergence of unfreedom in labour situations.¹⁴

Critiques also centre on the key role of measurement and statistics as forms of governmentality,¹⁵ producing contexts for the biopolitical management of subjects, knowable to the anti-trafficking community as interventions for managing victims, vulnerable populations and perpetrators. For example, indicators of human trafficking enable migrants to be sorted into trafficked (underpinned by normative assumptions about gender, vulnerability, exploitation and the need for protection), and non-trafficked (conversely, underpinned by notions of indomitability and exclusion from protection). These concerns about the power of indicators to ‘sort’ migrants into categories of deserving and undeserving have been made by a number of commentators in relation to human trafficking and forced labour¹⁶ and migration more generally. Casas-Cortes, for example, suggests that the quantification of migration (where migrants settle, their mode of arrival and so on) can be understood as efforts to ‘render knowledge of migration as an object of governmentality’.¹⁷

In sum, the privileging of quantification in research with trafficked persons and indeed on any aspect of human trafficking is perhaps understandable as the discipline is increasingly fraught with demands from policy-makers, bureaucrats, donors, the media and even civil society to justify claims. However, these claims are often construed in narrow terms that direct researchers’ efforts in the ways they articulate their findings and the questions they ask. Where governments, and sometimes international organisations and NGOs carry out research themselves a healthy scepticism abounds as to the impartiality of the data produced. Efforts to look for better ways to estimate trafficking prevalence should not, of course, be abandoned but merely tempered in favour of a more balanced focus on different types of data, information and questions that move beyond the current preoccupation with prevalence.

¹¹ A Guth, R Anderson, K Kinnard and H Tran, ‘Proper Methodology and Methods of Collecting and Analyzing Slavery Data: An examination of the Global Slavery Index’, *Social Inclusion*, vol. 2, issue 4, 2014, pp. 14—22; J Brunner, *Inaccurate Numbers, Inadequate Policies: Enhancing data to evaluate the prevalence of human trafficking in ASEAN*, East-West Centre, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, 2015.

¹² S E Merry, ‘Measuring the World: Indicators, human rights and global governance’, *Current Anthropology*, vol. 52, no. S3, 2011, pp. S83—S95, p. S83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. S84.

¹⁴ S Yea and S Chok, ‘Unfreedom Unbound: A cumulative approach to understanding unfree labour in Singapore’, *Work, Employment and Society* (in press), 2017.

¹⁵ See M Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-78*, Palgrave, New York, 2009.

¹⁶ W Chapkis, ‘Trafficking, Migration and the Law: Punishing immigrants, protecting innocents’, *Gender and Society*, vol. 17, issue 6, 2003, pp. 923—937; S A Fitzgerald, ‘Biopolitics and the Regulation of Vulnerability: The case of the female trafficked migrant’, *International Journal of Law in Context*, vol. 6, issue 3, 2010, pp. 277—294.

¹⁷ M Casas-Cortes *et al.*, ‘New Keywords: Migration and borders’, *Cultural Studies*, vol. 29, issue 1, 2015, pp. 55—87, p. 63.

The Politics of Evidence

The significance of ideology in anti-trafficking efforts noted by Doezema earlier in this Editorial speaks to a broader concern that is addressed in this issue: namely the manipulation, misuse and, at worse, neglect of existing evidence altogether. In Singapore, for example, I have witnessed firsthand the ways in which film screenings and other public events by NGOs to raise awareness about human trafficking resulted in a privileging of the ‘child sex slave’ as the valid frame of reference for characterising human trafficking, even when some research began to indicate the prevalence of human trafficking amongst other groups and in other sectors outside the sex industry.¹⁸ Gender and age bias in anti-trafficking efforts are certainly not restricted to the Singapore context, but they do provide a stark reminder of the oftentimes growing chasm between actual situations of trafficking and the self-perpetuating myths that come to form the basis of much action in the field. Indeed, the power of (mis)representations to take the place of empirically informed evidence was well acknowledged in an earlier issue of *Anti-Trafficking Review*.¹⁹ Others have noted with concern the ways political and other agendas, including conservative and moral ones, have influenced the construction and use of ‘evidence’ in anti-trafficking efforts.²⁰ These observations urge us to undertake a more critical introspection of both the absence and manipulation of evidence in anti-trafficking work, and the continued investment in projects and policy stances based on thin evidence at best or no evidence at all.

The Singapore example above demonstrates how resources continue to be poured into criminal justice responses targeted at the sex industry, despite growing evidence of the prevalence of trafficking amongst male workers in the construction and shipyard sector, migrant fishers, and foreign domestic workers. Undoubtedly political interests in narrowing the parameters of victimhood so as to exclude large populations of migrant workers who form an important crux underscoring Singapore’s economic miracle provide an important explanation for the discounting of evidence in this context.²¹ On a larger scale, numerous studies have indicated time and again that some of the foundational assumptions that form the basis of anti-trafficking efforts are flawed to say the least. Whilst images of dark, shadowy figures associated with transnational criminal networks persist as ‘traffickers’, studies from a range of regions have revealed the significance of individual, small scale local recruiters/ traffickers operating with some familiarity with victims themselves.²² Similarly, a large number of studies have now been published suggesting that criminal justice responses are less than effective in curbing trafficking, and should be tempered in favour of a greater focus on prevention. However, by its very nature success in prevention is far more difficult to measure and evaluate, making it less attractive to governments and international organisations alike.²³ These examples suggest then that there is often a significant amount of evidence available to inform and (re)direct anti-trafficking policy and practice, but that it is often maligned in favour of responses that are based on pre-existing assumptions, political interests, or support a particular ideology and morality.

Scholars of human trafficking could do well to consider the substantial critiques that have emerged in related fields, such as development, in questioning these prevailing logics of intervention. Over two decades ago James Ferguson,²⁴ for example, examined how ‘development’ projects were divorced from the political realities that undergird them, rendering them technocratic interventions that gave the impression of being politically neutral. Importantly, as Ferguson noted, power and political proclivities often provided the key in explaining why certain projects failed, and indeed why particular programmatic interventions continued to be pursued despite limited evidence of their success.²⁵ A more robust critique of anti-trafficking evidence would do well to consider the conceptual aids provided by these types of critiques. To date, researchers of trafficking have noted the ways political interests centred around (exclusionary) migration policies have invoked a protectionist/prevention discourse around vulnerability—particularly for women—in tightening their borders against entry of particular types of migrants.²⁶

¹⁸ S Yea, ‘Mobilising the Child Victim: The localisation of human trafficking activism in Singapore’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 31, issue 6, 2013, pp. 988—1003.

¹⁹ R Andrijasevic and N Mai, ‘Editorial: Trafficking (in) representations: Understanding the recurring appeal of victimhood and slavery in neoliberal times’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 7, 2016, pp. 1—10, www.antitraffickingreview.org

²⁰ G Jahic and J O Finckenauer, ‘Representations and Misrepresentations of Human Trafficking’, *Trends in Organized Crime*, vol. 8, issue 3, 2005, pp. 24—40; R Weitzer, ‘The Social Construction of Sex Trafficking: Ideology and institutionalisation of a moral crusade’, *Politics & Society*, vol. 35, issue 3, 2007, pp. 447—475.

²¹ S Yea, ‘Trafficked Enough? Missing bodies, migrant labour exploitation, and the classification of trafficking victims in Singapore’, *Antipode*, vol. 47, issue 4, 2015, pp. 1080—1100.

²² D A Feingold, 2005.

²³ European Commission, *Study on Prevention Initiatives on Trafficking in Human Beings*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2015.

²⁴ J Ferguson, ‘The Anti-Politics Machine’, in A Sharma & A Gupta (eds.), *The Anthropology of the State: A reader*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden MA, 1992, pp. 270-286.

²⁵ Regarding migration in general, see also A Percoud, ‘Depoliticising Migration’, in *Depoliticising Migration: Global governance and international migration narratives*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015, pp 95—123.

²⁶ See Fitzgerald, 2010; Anderson, 2012; R Andrijasevic, ‘Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns’, *Feminist Review*, 2007, vol. 86, pp. 24—44.

This type of critical scholarship could be extended to explore the politics of other anti-trafficking measures and, in particular, the ways evidence is ignored or manipulated to perpetuate such exclusionary and unhelpful stances.

This Special Issue: Evidence and effectiveness

So far in this Editorial I have focused on some of the key issues concerning the questions to which evidence is brought to bear and how this ‘disciplines’ research in both methodology, use, interpretation and presentation of data. More recently there have been calls not only for evidence to inform policy and anti-trafficking interventions—termed ‘evidence-based policy’—but often vocal demands for evidence of the normative basis on which anti-trafficking practices rest and, relatedly, the effectiveness of such practices. In contrast to well-accepted treatise on aid effectiveness more generally, many in the anti-trafficking community, including the contributors to this special issue, have lamented the paucity of evidence to inform policy directives and concrete interventions and the lack of monitoring and evaluation of interventions. Some of the contributors ask, for example, why governments privilege criminal justice responses to human trafficking and devote disproportionately large resources to it, when there is little evidence to suggest they are effective in countering human trafficking or, indeed, providing victims with justice and restitution. Logistical issues (such as access) are important to consider, but political interests are equally important.

Three of the contributions in this issue focus on the evidence that is used—or rejected—to formulate national anti-trafficking policies. They demonstrate how, even when evidence does exist, anti-trafficking laws and policies can still be based on assumptions, morality, political agendas or external pressures. Huschke and Ward’s contribution presents a study that the authors conducted on the applicability of the ‘Swedish model’ (a ban on the purchase of sex) in Northern Ireland and its possible impact on human trafficking. The study found that sex workers and their clients oppose the ban and the police have limited powers to enforce it. However, despite this solid evidence that the ban would have very limited effect on human trafficking, the Northern Ireland Assembly voted to adopt the measure. The authors conclude that ‘evidence ... is of little interest for proponents of the Swedish model’. The paper also reveals how crucial it is to actually talk to subjects affected by human trafficking policy and law, including sex workers and their clients—something no one should have to emphasise fifteen years after the signing of the UN Trafficking Protocol.

In their contribution, Millar, O’Doherty and Roots describe the difficult process of conducting socio-legal research on human trafficking in Canada and, in particular, the ‘formidable task’ of obtaining verifiable data on trafficking prosecutions and the implications this has for anti-trafficking laws and policies. Their research shows that Canadian anti-trafficking legislation is based not on robust evidence but on sensationalistic media reports, NGO advocacy and international pressure from the US government through its annual *Trafficking in Persons* Report. It also raises the important question of the availability and accessibility of court data that can be used to conduct research and produce evidence. The authors conclude with five recommendations for the Canadian government to facilitate research, in order to create evidence-based policies.

The links between human trafficking and vulnerability factors, such as poverty, unequal development and gender-based violence, are generally well documented and accepted in literature and policies on human trafficking. Climate change, on the other hand, is rarely considered as such a vulnerability factor. Using the Indian Sundarbans as a case study, Molinari shows how climate change in the region has exacerbated the same factors that lead to human trafficking, such as loss of livelihoods and forced migration. Despite this evidence, climate change rarely features in anti-trafficking policy and discourse. One reason, argues Molinari, may be that it does not fit neatly into the dominant anti-trafficking narrative of vulnerable women and girls and malevolent crime gangs.

Lynch and Hadjimatheou take a different approach to ‘evidence’ in their contribution. They explore the (physical) evidence on which border force officers (BFOs) at London Heathrow airport can count to implement their duties to identify potential victims of trafficking and refer them to support services. They outline the main frustrations that BFOs have with regard to their anti-trafficking work, namely, the limited power to stop and question nationals of the European Economic Area countries, the lack of powers to search travellers’ phones and view their social media profiles and the limited exchange of intelligence information with other police departments. The authors acknowledge the problematic profiling based on race and gender that occurs at borders but hope to initiate a more honest discussion about what can be reasonably expected of BFOs with regard to their anti-trafficking duties.

As already mentioned in this Editorial, the need for—and use of—global prevalence data on trafficking has been hotly debated for over a decade, but even more so in the past few years with the publication of the *Global Slavery Index* (GSI) by the Walk Free Foundation. In her contribution, Gallagher undertakes the onerous task to unravel the methodology behind the GSI and to question some of its findings. For example, why is wealthy and peaceful Brunei

among the most vulnerable countries to ‘modern slavery’ and Singapore—among the safest, given its almost one million migrant workers, many of whom lack any protections. In addition, Gallagher reflects on the surprising lack of critical engagement with the Index by those involved in anti-trafficking work and, more broadly, the increasing influence of ‘philanthrocapitalism’ in the anti-trafficking and other development fields.

The final two thematic papers in this issue focus, to different extents, on the role of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in anti-trafficking work. From his perspective of an M&E practitioner in Southeast Asia, Harkins lists nine constraining factors to producing robust evidence for the success of anti-trafficking interventions. While some of these relate to broader issues, such as lack of definitional clarity or a criminal justice focus, others stem from insufficient investment in and capacity for conducting M&E. In his experience, most anti-trafficking projects ‘bean count’ direct outputs (such as numbers of participants trained or people reached) rather than outcomes (such as better information and knowledge acquired). Consequently, this lack of capacity precludes the production of meaningful evidence of which interventions work and which don’t.

Similar findings are shared by Van Dyke in her contribution, which explores the M&E data collected by anti-trafficking organisations working in partnerships in England and Wales. There too, the data collected by these partnerships focuses on outputs (numbers of awareness-raising materials, people reached, victims referred or suspects convicted) rather than outcomes or impacts (such as learning, enhanced wellbeing, improved referral, or increased confiscation of assets of traffickers and compensation to victims). She concludes that more robust and purposeful data collection is necessary in order to evaluate the work of anti-trafficking partnerships.

For the debate section of this issue we invited contributors to defend or reject the proposition ‘Global trafficking prevalence data advances the fight against trafficking in persons’. In her contribution, David defends the proposition by demonstrating how statistics on other crimes and victims of crime have led to improved understanding and policy measures targeting these crimes. Acknowledging the limitations of current data on trafficking, she adds that data is nevertheless critical if we are to adequately respond to human trafficking and related crimes. Feingold, for his part, rejects the proposition as what he calls ‘the numbers game’. He points to definitional problems, such as using the term ‘modern slavery’, as well as generally questions whether we can ever have serious and reliable estimates and whether they would actually help trafficked persons or anyone else. Robinson, Branchini and Thame defend the proposition on the condition that data is collected rigorously and presented in sufficient detail as to allow meaningful analysis. They offer five recommendations for improving data collection and prevalence estimates. Finally, Dottridge rejects the proposition by pointing out how global estimates obscure the situation of groups of people who have been known to endure slavery-like conditions for decades. Using the examples of Paraguay, Cambodia and Russia, he demonstrates how neither the *Global Slavery Index*, nor the US TIP Report give us any helpful information about which people and in which industries in these countries suffer exploitation.

Conclusion

The argument that lack of evidence or neglect of evidence can lead to ineffective anti-trafficking policies and practices is an important one made in all the papers in some way or another. But should we also look to research anti-trafficking itself? Such a focus has been suggested by some commentators already. Sverre Molland, for example, outlines the need for researchers examining human trafficking to undertake ‘tandem ethnography’ that explores both the, ‘social worlds of trafficking and anti-trafficking’, helping to understand both their co-constitution and enabling state responses to human trafficking to be critically framed in relation to the phenomenon itself.²⁷ Ultimately, examining the moral, political, and economic interests at stake in understanding the nature, direction and reticence of particular policy and advocacy stances and anti-trafficking projects themselves is a task that begs for a deeper and more politically-charged call to research. Evidence may then well take on a different and less technocratic guise than currently inhabits the world of human trafficking research.

Lack of effectiveness is tied to lack of sound justification for policy in the first place. The logic is circular and takes us back to the questions posed at the outset of this Editorial: why is there such a dearth of good research on human trafficking? How can research be better designed and carried out in ways that avoid the prescriptive logics of intervention? It is hoped that the papers in this special issue, and the considerations put forward in the four debate pieces, will contribute to the extension of our ways of thinking about why evidence is important, what evidence matters, and how research to produce meaningful evidence can be better designed and carried out.

²⁷ S Molland, ‘Tandem Ethnography: On researching “trafficking” and “anti-trafficking”’, *Ethnography*, vol. 14, issue 3, 2013, pp. 300—323.

Sallie Yea is an Honorary Fellow in the Department of Social Inquiry at La Trobe University, Australia. Prior to this she held academic positions in Human Geography and International Development in Singapore, Melbourne and New Zealand. She has published widely on the subject of human trafficking including journal articles in *Antipode*, *Political Geography* and *Gender, Place and Culture*. She has also published an edited volume titled *Human Trafficking in Asia: Forcing issues*, and a monograph titled *Trafficking Women in Korea: Filipina migrant entertainers*, both with Routledge. She is currently working on an edited volume exploring the issue of trafficking of migrant fishers, and a monograph exploring human trafficking and the anti-trafficking movement in Singapore.