

Targeted Funding for Anti-Trafficking Initiatives: An evidence-based anti-oppressive approach

Andrea J. Nichols and Kathleen M. Preble

Abstract

Community-driven research is key to creating evidence-based collaborative systems that meet the multifaceted needs of human trafficking survivors and address oppressions that create vulnerabilities to human trafficking. Programmes and solutions require money and evidenced-informed processes, or they risk investing in systems that will not meet the needs of the intended target populations. This paper reflects on how a community-initiated research project influenced funding to enhance anti-trafficking work in a Midwestern US state. We urge other regions to adopt this model of research and resource allocation in their own anti-trafficking efforts.

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In 2018, ten philanthropic foundations supporting anti-trafficking organisations in the US state of Missouri began to jointly question the best use and effectiveness of their funding. Through the Missouri Collaborative Against Human Trafficking (MCAHT), each organisation contributed to a pool of funding dedicated to researching the needs, demographics, and experiences of survivors in Missouri, leading to an evidenced-based strategic plan. This plan would ultimately guide their future funding decisions and prioritisation of anti-trafficking initiatives. The MCAHT was the first initiative to develop a statewide unified effort to pool resources and develop a multi-level action plan to address human trafficking. As long-time community action researchers involved in anti-trafficking efforts, we were sought out to lead this project. After discussion with the funding consortium and community stakeholders, the project became four-fold. We went on to 1) develop a statewide resource guide, 2) research resource needs and the saliency of those needs, 3) research demographics and forms of human trafficking

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experienced by survivors, and 4) create a statewide strategic plan.¹ In May and June of 2019, we distributed an electronic survey intended to uncover resource needs in social, medical, and legal services and gather demographic data from the perspective of those working with human trafficking survivors in the social, legal, and healthcare service sectors. Overall, 107 research participants who had worked directly with 422 human trafficking survivors in the previous year responded to the survey. In this short article, we focus on the research results informing the strategic plan.

Results Guiding Targeted Funding

The results of the needs assessment revealed that mental healthcare (e.g., counselling/therapy), transitional housing, shelter for adults and minors, and residential substance use disorder treatment/detox were the top-ranked needs. The saliency of needs varied somewhat from region to region; however, mental healthcare and housing were consistently highly ranked.² The part of the research project focusing on demographics indicated higher rates of trafficking for sexual exploitation of people of colour and LGBTQ+ people, and higher rates of labour trafficking of people of colour.³ Poverty was also prevalent in the backgrounds of survivors. Overall, these and other results were intended to inform targeted action, as centre points of anti-trafficking funding agendas of MCAHT members,

¹ See more information about the research methods and findings: A J Nichols and K M Preble, 'A Method to Develop a Statewide Resource Guide, Needs Assessment, and Service Inventory to Respond to Human Trafficking', *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*, vol. 7, issue 3, article 4, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2022.07.03.04>, and K M Preble, A J Nichols, and M Owens, 'Assets and Logic: Proposing an Evidenced-Based Strategic Partnership Model for Anti-Trafficking Response', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 9, issue 2, 2023, pp. 131–147, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1899525>.

² K M Preble, A J Nichols, and A Cox, 'Working with Survivors of Human Trafficking: Results from a Needs Assessment in a Midwestern State, 2019', *Public Health Reports*, vol. 137, issue 1_suppl, 2022, pp. 111S–118S, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00333549221089254>.

³ A J Nichols, K M Preble, and A Cox, 'A State-Level Analysis of Demographic Characteristics and Sex Trafficking Experiences of Survivors', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 10, issue 1, 2024, pp. 51–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.2016268>; A J Nichols *et al.*, 'An Examination of Sex Trafficking by Race and Ethnicity in the State of Missouri on State and Local Levels: Implications for Anti-Oppressive Practice', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 2023, pp. 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2023.2225993>; K M Preble, A J Nichols, and A Cox, 'Labor Trafficking in Missouri: Revelations From a Statewide Needs Assessment', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 9, issue 1, 2023, pp. 15–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2020.1855900>.

including outreach, prevention, and training efforts as well as strategic planning to address the top-ranked needs.

Strategic Plan

Following deficit identification in the needs assessment, the research team completed the next stage of the project, strategic planning, as a key component to the MCAHT funding requirements and to future funding priorities. The strategic plan was developed in collaboration with a community advisory board of eight professionals and survivors ensuring feasibility. Utilising asset maps, we identified key community resources to leverage strengths already available in communities to address identified needs, which included potential public and private funders. These maps were then used to create a strategic plan using an advocacy-based logic model, which set short- and long-term goals.⁴ Currently, the strategic plan for the most salient needs are being used to guide regional and state anti-trafficking efforts, funding goals and priorities, and are also being evaluated for ease of use and effectiveness.

Big Picture Responses to Address Root Sources of the Problem

The results of our research call for big picture funding efforts targeting umbrella issues such as poverty, housing accessibility, and access to behavioural and mental health care. Without addressing health equity and social determinants of health considerations, anti-trafficking efforts will continue to address trafficking after it happens rather than preventing it. Providing band-aid solutions as a substitute for larger scale preventative measures that address vulnerability and root sources of the problem will only result in continued human trafficking.⁵

Identity-based oppression creates vulnerability to human trafficking; as a root source of the problem, it must be included in anti-trafficking responses. Our results show structural racism is reflected and reproduced in vulnerability to human trafficking. In no region in the state were people who are white overrepresented as survivors of trafficking for sexual or labour exploitation. Other research also shows barriers to identification and resource provision experienced by people of colour and gender minorities. Genderism and

⁴ Preble, Nichols, and Owens.

⁵ E Cockbain, 'From Conflict to Common Ground: Why Anti-Trafficking Can Be Compatible With Challenging the Systemic Drivers of Everyday Abuses', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 15, 2020, pp. 155–161, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201220159>.

heterosexism were other forms of identity-based oppression, evidenced by the disproportionate number of sexual and gender minorities and cisgender women identified as survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation shown in our results.

The impact of capitalism and challenges to earning a living wage pushes people into poverty, and increases vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation, which is implicated in the extremely high number of survivors who were described as experiencing poverty. Fiscal conservatism and neoliberal policies that defund social services must be addressed to bolster services and reduce economic vulnerability through advocating on a state level for increased tax dollars to drive funding streams into social services.⁶ Weak social institutions, weak social safety nets, and systemic barriers to service access experienced by those of minoritised identities create an environment conducive to trafficking for labour and sexual exploitation. Those who experience identity-based oppression are more likely to experience criminalisation, lack of economic opportunities, and lack of access to social safety nets to address needs, leading to further vulnerability.

Coalition action by specialised workgroups to address the needs uncovered in the research to date include: 1) expanding access to mental and behavioural healthcare through online healthcare options, 2) coordinating shelter/housing for minors and adults throughout the state to improve access, and 3) improving services for LGBTQ+ survivors. Coalition action for future directions as informed by the research include advocating for funding streams to: 1) expand public healthcare coverage, 2) increase the minimum wage to provide a living wage, 3) provide free public transportation passes, 4) provide housing vouchers and transitional housing, and more, which are necessary to address vulnerability to trafficking at its root sources.

Funding should be directed to organisations that utilise anti-oppressive practice in their anti-trafficking efforts. Anti-oppressive practice involves critically analysing systems on macro, mezzo, and micro levels to identify and address oppression.⁷ On a macro level, this means political action to advocate for policies that work to address oppression and exploitation, such as poverty alleviation programmes, accessibility of housing, or measures to improve workplace and wage equality. On the mezzo level, anti-oppressive practice includes working with organisations

⁶ E Whalley and C Hackett, 'Carceral Feminisms: The Abolitionist Project and Undoing Dominant Feminisms', *Contemporary Justice Review*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2017, pp. 456–473, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2017.1383762>.

⁷ L B Gerassi, L B Klein, and M C Rosales, 'Moving Toward Critical Consciousness and Anti-oppressive Practice Approaches with People at Risk of Sex Trafficking: Perspectives from Social Service Providers', *Affilia*, vol. 37, issue 3, 2021, pp. 431–447, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08861099211025531>; L B Gerassi and A J Nichols, 'Social Work Education That Addresses Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation: An Intersectional, Anti-Oppressive Practice Framework', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 17, 2021, pp. 20–37, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201221172>.

to address barriers that are more likely to be experienced by minoritised populations, such as barriers to accessing gender-affirming shelter and racial bias in referrals to mental health care and residential programmes. On a micro level, professionals working in various sectors must critically reflect on their own positionality in relationship to their clients, discuss aspects of oppression their clients experience, and incorporate cultural humility in their practice.⁸ Inclusivity in imagery and wording on websites as well as outreach, organisational, and training materials is another aspect of anti-oppressive practice.⁹ Requests for proposals by those funding anti-trafficking initiatives and organisations should require components of anti-oppressive practice and ‘big picture’ actions. We suggest donors in other sites similarly engage in research to uncover the most effective use of funding to best meet the needs of human trafficking survivors.

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⁸ T Bryant Davis and P Tummala-Narra, ‘Cultural Oppression and Human Trafficking: Exploring the Role of Racism and Ethnic Bias’, *Women & Therapy*, vol. 40, issue 1–2, 2017, pp. 152–169, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2016.1210964>.

⁹ L B Gerassi and S Skinkis, ‘An Intersectional Content Analysis of Inclusive Language and Imagery Among Sex Trafficking-Related Services’, *Violence and Victims*, vol. 35, issue 3, 2020, pp. 400–417, <https://doi.org/10.1891/VV-D-18-00204>.