



**JOURNAL of MODERN SLAVERY**

*A Multidisciplinary Exploration of Human Trafficking Solutions*

# **COVID-19 and MODERN SLAVERY**

Volume 6, Issue 2, 2021

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## **Abstract**

Pandemics disproportionately devastate those who are most vulnerable, including people who have experienced human trafficking. While numerous stakeholders have raised concerns regarding the potential effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on trafficked persons, very limited research exists documenting the effects of Covid-19 upon survivors. To understand the cross-cutting impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic upon human trafficking survivors, we must first listen to survivors themselves about how their basic safety, security, and health have been affected. We present findings from a rapid assessment conducted with human trafficking survivors in the Philippines regarding their experiences, needs, and priorities during the Covid-19 pandemic (n=233). Results of the rapid assessment revealed four primary concerns and priorities from the perspectives of survivors: food insecurity, loss of employment, mental health concerns, and an escalation in crisis incidents, with greater impact reported among those trafficked for sexual exploitation. Findings reinforce the need to broaden definitions of safety and facilitate emergency interventions that prioritize the most urgent needs articulated by survivors themselves.

## **Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed and deepened inequalities throughout the world, particularly for already marginalized and vulnerable populations. The crisis has heightened risk factors for human trafficking, including family maltreatment, homelessness, disruption in education, loss of employment, and financial insecurity. Preliminary evidence suggests that the

Covid-19 pandemic has worsened working conditions for trafficked persons, created additional barriers to identification of trafficked persons, and harmfully disrupted services for survivors of human trafficking.<sup>1</sup> While there is widespread concern among scholars and practitioners regarding the devastating consequences of the crisis upon human trafficking survivors, limited primary research has been conducted with survivors assessing the effects of the crisis from their perspectives. In this manuscript, we explore the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis upon survivors of human trafficking in the Philippines, drawing upon data collected directly from survivors themselves.

The Philippines is second only to Indonesia for the most officially reported number of Covid-19 cases in Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup> Despite a strict lockdown in place for much of 2020, the country continues to suffer from the Covid-19 pandemic, with an economy in recession<sup>3</sup> and a population struggling to combat the pandemic's prolonged disruptions on their lives. The economic impact of the pandemic in the Philippines includes widespread job loss and unemployment, leading to sustained income loss. Economic devastation has left many individuals unable to pay rent and afford sufficient food to support themselves and their families. For survivors of human trafficking, many of whom already fall below the poverty line, this challenge is especially dire. Despite some moratoriums on evictions,<sup>4</sup> many low-income individuals are fearful of being forced out of their homes. Out of desperation, these individuals may be vulnerable to predatory lenders – a challenge that has been documented among survivors in nearby countries like Cambodia<sup>5</sup> and has been a concern for vulnerable, low-income populations in the Philippines during past emergencies like Typhoon Haiyan.<sup>6</sup> However, with no means to repay the loans, such arrangements can trap vulnerable individuals in exploitative

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<sup>1</sup> Todres, Jonathan, and Angela Diaz. "COVID-19 and Human Trafficking—the Amplified Impact on Vulnerable Populations." *JAMA Pediatrics* 175, no. 2 (2021): 123. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2020.3610>.

<sup>2</sup> "Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker." Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker | Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 4, 2021. <https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker-0>.

<sup>3</sup> Enrico Dela Cruz Morales Neil Jerome, "Philippines Suffers First Recession in 29 Years, Braces for Grim Year on Virus Woes," Reuters, August 6, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-economy-gdp-idUSKCN25208X>.

<sup>4</sup> Postponement of all Administrative Demolition and Eviction Activities during the Enhanced Community Quarantine and State of National Emergency § (2020). <https://dilg.gov.ph/issuances/mc/Postponement-of-all-Administrative-Demolition-and-Eviction-Activities-during-the-Enhanced-Community-Quarantine-and-State-of-National-Emergency/3191>.

<sup>5</sup> Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cambodia § (2020). <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/cambodia/>.

<sup>6</sup> Sherwood, Angela, Megan Bradley, Lorenza Rossi, Rufa Guiam, and Bradley Mellicker. "Resolving Post-Disaster Displacement: Insights from the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda)." Brookings, July 29, 2016. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/resolving-post-disaster-displacement-insights-from-the-philippines-after-typhoon-haiyan-yolanda/>.



situations.<sup>7</sup> For migrant workers, the pandemic has led to increased exploitation by employers who force them to work for minimal to no pay with the threat of dismissal in cases of non-compliance.<sup>8</sup>

The mental health consequences of the pandemic are likewise grave. Many human trafficking survivors already suffer from mental health conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and self-harm, among others.<sup>9</sup> In addition to facing economic uncertainty, some survivors have been forced to isolate with their abusers, leading to a rise in domestic violence.<sup>10</sup> With the lockdown triggering memories of past isolation and constrained freedom of movement, evidence suggests a further deterioration of pre-existing psychological conditions. A survey administered by OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and United Nations Women (UN Women) in May 2020 to 94 survivors of human trafficking across 40 countries, including the Philippines, found that 70% of female respondents and 60% of male respondents said their psychological state had somewhat or significantly worsened due to the uncertainty and isolation resulting from the pandemic. Some reported a re-triggering of depression, anxiety, and PTSD.<sup>11</sup>

Simultaneously, significant concerns have been raised regarding the response of the Filipino government to the Covid-19 crisis, especially for vulnerable populations. In April 2020, the Philippines' unemployment rate rose to 17.7%, leaving 7.3 million Filipinos jobless.<sup>12</sup> In response, the Filipino Government passed the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) in April 2020, an emergency subsidy program for more than 20 million low-income Filipino families and those in the most vulnerable sectors. The program, implemented by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), distributed a subsidy of between Php 5,000–8,000 (\$104.12 - \$166.59 USD) per month for two months to qualified households toward basic food, medicine, and toiletries. With a loan from the World Bank, DSWD expanded existing cash transfer programs, like the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program, to distribute emergency cash to

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<sup>7</sup> “Updated Estimates of the Impact of COVID-19 on Global Poverty,” World Bank Blogs. Accessed October 29, 2020. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty>.

<sup>8</sup> Jimenez, Alethia and Tatiana Kotlyarenko. ODIHR and UN Women. Addressing Emerging Human Trafficking Trends and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic. 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Rani, A., & Manglam, M.K. Depression, Anxiety, Stress and Suicidal Ideas in Adolescent Victims of Human Trafficking and Sexual Abuse in a Sheltered Home at Ranchi, India. *Indian Journal of Health and Wellbeing*, no. 7 (2016): 687-690; Oram, Siân, Melanie Abas, Debra Bick, Adrian Boyle, Rebecca French, Sharon Jakobowitz, Mizanur Khondoker, et al. “Human Trafficking and Health: A Survey of Male and Female Survivors in England.” *American Journal of Public Health* 106, no. 6 (2016): 1073–78. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2016.303095>.

<sup>10</sup> “Supporting the Health and Economic Needs of Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault and Trafficking Survivors during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency.” *Futures Without Violence*, September 8, 2020. <https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/healtheconomicneedssurvivors>.

<sup>11</sup> Jimenez, Alethia and Tatiana Kotlyarenko.

<sup>12</sup> “Highlights of the April 2020 Labor Force Survey,” June 5, 2020. The Philippines Statistics Authority. <https://psa.gov.ph/content/employment-situation-april-2020>.

beneficiaries of the program—those considered the poorest of the poor.<sup>13</sup> However, many vulnerable and low-income populations have reported significant barriers to accessing funds, as they do not have the documentation needed for registration. In fact, five million households are believed to have not received aid during the initial phase of the SAP program. Some families believe they were selectively excluded by local government officials due to being non-registered voters.<sup>14</sup>

Further, the pandemic has considerably decreased the capacity of civil society actors to support survivors of human trafficking.<sup>15</sup> A survey conducted by UN Women and ODIHR found that anti-trafficking response organizations were concerned about their ability to survive the crisis. With the pandemic diverting attention and money away from anti-trafficking responses toward Covid-19 response, organizations feared they would be forced to close their emergency shelters for survivors, leading to risk of homelessness and further exploitation of survivors.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, social distancing regulations have compelled many shelters, including those in the Philippines, to turn survivors away despite having sufficient space available.<sup>17</sup> With healthcare workers overburdened with Covid-19 cases, services such as counseling have been deprioritized, precluding survivors from accessing urgent mental health support. Given law enforcement preoccupation with Covid-19 priorities, few have been able to address the rise in intimate partner violence (IPV) cases, raising concerns about survivors experiencing greater violence given the connection between human trafficking and IPV.<sup>18</sup>

While recent months have shown growing research and interest in better understanding the impact of Covid-19 on survivors of human trafficking, there is a paucity of data that speaks to this subject in the Filipino context. Moreover, most existing literature has largely neglected to capture the experiences of survivors who were previously trafficked and have since escaped. This manuscript addresses the cross-cutting impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic upon survivors of human trafficking in the Philippines. We implemented a rapid assessment within a non-profit organization in Cebu, Philippines that serves survivors of human trafficking. First, we present the

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<sup>13</sup> “World Bank Approves \$600-Million Loan to Help Modernize Social Protection Delivery in PH.” ABS-CBN News, September 30, 2020. <https://news.abs-cbn.com/business/09/30/20/world-bank-approves-600-million-loan-to-help-modernize-social-protection-delivery-in-ph>. h.

<sup>14</sup> DSWD Resolving Issues in Distribution of Subsidies (2020). <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1099695>.

<sup>15</sup> UN Women, “Brief: COVID-19 and Essential Services Provision for Survivors of Violence against Women and Girls | Digital Library: Publications,” Accessed October 25, 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/digital-library/publications/2020/04/brief-covid-19-and-essential-services-provision-for-survivors-of-violence-against-women-and-girls>.

<sup>16</sup> “As the Global Economy Melts Down, Human Trafficking Is Booming.”

<sup>17</sup> Bain, Christina, and Louise Shelley. “The Evolution of Human Trafficking During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Council on Foreign Relations, August 13, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/evolution-human-trafficking-during-covid-19-pandemic>.

<sup>18</sup> “Supporting the Health and Economic Needs of Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault and Trafficking Survivors during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency.”

rapid assessment methods, followed by key findings and implications for providing services for survivors impacted by the Covid-19 crisis.

## Methods

In March and April 2020, we conducted a rapid assessment to understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic upon survivors of human trafficking in Cebu, Philippines. The rapid assessment was implemented by 10ThousandWindows, a non-governmental organization in Cebu, Philippines providing economic empowerment programming for survivors of violence and exploitation. The purpose of the assessment was to understand the impacts of the crisis upon the nonprofit organization's clients, thereby enabling the organization to adapt services to match emerging needs and priorities identified by survivors.

A rapid assessment is a systematic process of collecting and analyzing information regarding the type, depth, and scope of a problem.<sup>19</sup> Rapid assessments are generally conducted as a prelude to designing an intervention or as a means to refine or supplement existing data on a particular problem. The goal is to provide an assessment of a particular issue swiftly and therefore allow for preliminary decision-making regarding the design and implementation of a new intervention or to refine an existing strategy.<sup>20</sup> Since rapid assessments are conducted over a short period of time, they are often appropriate in escalating crises or conflicts. In emergency contexts wherein people's lives are at risk (e.g., armed conflicts, epidemics, famine, natural disasters, etc.), it is critical to first understand the needs of the at-risk population and design a prioritized intervention plan to meet those needs. Because emergency situations necessitate urgent yet informed response, the purpose of this first step should be to perform a broad review of the crisis at-hand and not to conduct an exhaustive evaluation.<sup>21</sup> As such, a rapid assessment is a valuable tool for providing quick and accurate data for planning an initial response strategy in a crisis situation such as the Covid-19 crisis.

Most recently, in response to the growing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic globally, rapid assessments have emerged as a popular tool for developing emergency assistance programs. Humanitarian organizations, governments, and other actors have designed and implemented rapid assessments to understand the pandemic's impact on specific populations. For example, in July 2020, the International Labor Organization (ILO) conducted a rapid assessment to highlight the immediate effects of Covid-19 on vulnerable workers and small-scale enterprises

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<sup>19</sup> A Rapid Needs Assessment Guide: For Education in Countries Affected By Crisis & Conflict (2014). <https://www.usaid.gov/what-we-do/education/educating-children-and-youth-crisis-and-conflict-situations/Rapid-Needs-Assessment-Guide-Education>.

<sup>20</sup> "Rapid Assessment - Save the Children DME." Save the Children. Accessed February 3, 2021. <https://sites.google.com/site/savethechildrendme/Home/rapid-assessment>.

<sup>21</sup> Arii, Maya. "Rapid Assessment in Disasters." Japan Medical Association 56, no. 1 (2013): 19–24.

in Iraq.<sup>22</sup> The ILO also conducted a similar assessment in late 2020 to understand the pandemic's impact on unemployment rates in South Korea.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) implemented a rapid assessment to understand how the pandemic had affected temporary and seasonal labor migrant workers in the Pacific island countries.<sup>24</sup> Within the anti-trafficking movement, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) developed a set of rapid assessment tools for countries to evaluate the impact of the pandemic on essential services for victims of human trafficking. Further, UN Women conducted a rapid assessment to understand the pandemic's impact on women's civil society organizations in Asia and the Pacific, many of whom are engaged in anti-trafficking response.<sup>25</sup> The current study's rapid assessment makes an important contribution to this literature by collecting data directly from survivors of human trafficking, gathering critical insights from survivors themselves.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Eligibility criteria for the study included being a survivor of trafficking for sexual exploitation, online commercial sexual exploitation (OSEC), labor trafficking, and/or child labor and currently participating in services with the implementing nonprofit organization. Human trafficking was defined by the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons.<sup>26</sup> Online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) includes the “production, dissemination and possession of child sexual abuse material (CSAM: which are known in many jurisdictions as ‘child pornography’); online grooming or active sexual solicitation of children; sexting; sexual extortion of children (also known as ‘sextortion’); revenge pornography; exploitation of children through online prostitution, and live streaming of sexual abuse.”<sup>27</sup> Child labor is defined as work that is harmful to children's mental and physical development and deprives children of their childhood, dignity, and potential. While child labor

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<sup>22</sup> Rapid Assessment of the Impact of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Populations and Small-Scale Enterprises in Iraq, July 16, 2020. [http://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS\\_751209/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS_751209/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>23</sup> Republic of Korea: A Rapid Assessment of the Employment Impacts of COVID-19, November 5, 2020. [http://www.ilo.org/emppolicy/pubs/WCMS\\_760063/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/emppolicy/pubs/WCMS_760063/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>24</sup> Rapid Assessment of the Socioeconomic Impacts of COVID-19 on Labour Mobility in the Pacific Region, 2020. <https://publications.iom.int/books/rapid-assessment-socioeconomic-impacts-covid-19-labour-mobility-pacific-region>.

<sup>25</sup> “Rapid Assessment: Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Civil Society Organizations - World.” ReliefWeb. Accessed February 3, 2021. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/rapid-assessment-impact-covid-19-women-s-civil-society-organizations>.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations. 2000. United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime: Article 3 (a-d), G.A. res. 55/25, annex II, 55 U.S. (GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 60, U.N. Doc.A/45/49 (Vol. I)).

<sup>27</sup> Trends in Online Child Sexual Abuse Material. ECPAT International, 2018. <https://www.ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Emerging-Issues-an-Global-Threats-Children-online-2017-1.pdf>.

can exist in many forms, it includes all forms of slavery, the trafficking and prostitution of children, and work which harms the safety, health or morals of children.<sup>28</sup>

A team of 10 staff from the implementing nonprofit organization collected study data. In March and April 2020, staff conducted a total of 233 phone or virtual interviews with survivors (n=233). A semi-structured guide was used to ask about the effects of Covid-19 on: survivors' physical and mental health, survivors' financial status, the wellbeing of family members, and sources of support available during the pandemic. All surveys were conducted in Cebuano, with notes recorded in a centralized data management system in Excel. The goal of data collection was to elucidate service adaptation and implementation needs due to the Covid-19 crisis.

Interview guides were intentionally broadly open-ended to maximize opportunities for survivors to outline their priorities on their own terms. Understanding the priorities of survivors, defined by survivors themselves, is essential to ensuring that any intervention matches the goals of those directly affected and to fulfilling a client-centered, rights-based approach to research and practice.<sup>29</sup> Interviews were conducted in a manner consistent with WHO's safety and ethical recommendations for interviewing trafficked persons. Questions were framed in a supportive, non-judgmental manner with survivors guiding the pace and direction of the conversation.<sup>30</sup> Pre-screened referral information was available for relevant services as needed, including medical, psychological, legal, shelter, and other services.<sup>31</sup> Survivor safety and privacy were prioritized in all engagement.<sup>32</sup> Since interviews were conducted virtually, interviewers screened with participants whether it was safe for them to speak and the interview halted if participants' privacy was interrupted or if survivors signaled a concern. Written information regarding referrals was only provided to survivors after a discussion regarding the privacy of said information and control over devices upon which referral information was held. Information was immediately deleted following transfer, if needed. All interviews were closed in a positive manner, affirming the strengths of survivors.<sup>33</sup>

Consistent with the overall objective of achieving expedient, immediately actionable findings to inform emergency response, a simplified form of thematic analysis was conducted.

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<sup>28</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO). *Worst Forms of Child Labor*, 1999, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ddb6e0c4.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Cordisco Tsai, Laura, Vanntheary Lim, Elizabeth Hentschel, and Channtha Nanh. Strengthening services for survivors of human trafficking: Recommendations from survivors in Cambodia. *Journal of Human Trafficking*. 2021. Advance online publication.

<sup>30</sup> Zimmerman, Cathy and Charlotte Watts. *WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Women*. 2003. World Health Organization, [https://www.who.int/mip/2003/other\\_documents/en/Ethical\\_Safety-GWH.pdf](https://www.who.int/mip/2003/other_documents/en/Ethical_Safety-GWH.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Cordisco Tsai, Laura, Conducting research with survivors of sex trafficking: Lessons from a financial diaries study in the Philippines. *British Journal of Social Work*, 48(1), 2018: 158-175.

<sup>32</sup> Kelly, Liz and Maddy Coy. Ethics as process, ethics in practice: Researching the sex industry and trafficking. In *Ethical concerns in research on human trafficking* (pp. 33-50). 2018. Springer, Cham.

<sup>33</sup> Zimmerman, C. & Watts, C. (2003).



Qualitative analytic approaches often take a considerable amount of time, delaying the generation of findings relevant to an urgent concern. Adapted analytic approaches can produce time savings while nonetheless generating valid findings appropriate when timely reporting is needed.<sup>34</sup> First, we specified key research foci reflecting the core aspects in which rapid feedback was needed.<sup>35</sup> We familiarized ourselves with study data through active, repeated review of study data and discussion among team members.<sup>36</sup> We developed a preliminary analysis codebook with inclusion and exclusion criteria. A member of the research team coded for the presence or absence of themes in a matrix in Microsoft Excel.<sup>37</sup> The study team calculated simple frequencies and percentages and performed Chi-square tests to ascertain differential patterns per gender and exploitation type.

## Findings

Socio-demographic characteristics of study participants are presented in Table 2. Men comprised over 20% of survivors in the study. Over 75% of the sample had experienced trafficking for sexual exploitation only, including over 10% who had experienced online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) and over 65% who had experienced other forms of trafficking for sexual exploitation. A total of 22.3% of participants had experienced labor exploitation, including over 20% who were survivors of labor trafficking and approximately 2% who had experienced child labor. Three study participants had experienced both trafficking for sexual exploitation and child labor (1.3%). Over 70% of the sample were between the ages of 21 and 30 at the time of the survey. The majority of survivors (65.2%) had completed secondary school/high school, in part due to educational support provided by the implementing nonprofit organization (see Table 1).

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<sup>34</sup> Taylor, Beck, Catherine Henshall, Sara Kenyon, Ian Litchfield, and Sheila Greenfield. "Can Rapid Approaches to Qualitative Analysis Deliver Timely, Valid Findings to Clinical Leaders? A Mixed Methods Study Comparing Rapid and Thematic Analysis." *BMJ Open* 8, no. 10 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2017-019993>.

<sup>35</sup> Neal, Jennifer Watling, Zachary P. Neal, Erika VanDyke, and Mariah Kornbluh. "Expediting the Analysis of Qualitative Data in Evaluation." *American Journal of Evaluation* 36, no. 1 (2014): 118–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214014536601>.

<sup>36</sup> Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

<sup>37</sup> Neal, J. W., Neal, Z. P., VanDyke, E., & Kornbluh, M. (2015).

**Table 1: Characteristics of study participants (n=233)**

	Female n=185 n(%)	Male n=48 n(%)	Total n=233 n(%)
<b>Form of Exploitation</b>			
<i>Sexual exploitation</i>			
Online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC)	20(10.8)	5(10.4)	25(10.7)
Trafficking for sexual exploitation (not OSEC)	141(76.2)	12(25.0)	153(65.7)
<i>Labor exploitation</i>			
Labor trafficking	21(11.4)	26(54.2)	47(20.2)
Child labor	3(1.6)	2(4.2)	5(2.1)
<i>Sexual and labor exploitation</i>			
Trafficking for sexual exploitation and child labor	-	3(6.3)	3(1.3)
<b>Age</b>			
17-20	30(16.2)	9(18.8)	39(16.7)
21-25	60(32.4)	23(47.9)	83(35.6)
26-30	70(37.8)	13(27.1)	83(35.6)
31-35	19(10.3)	3(6.3)	22(9.4)
36+	6(3.2)	-	6(2.6)
<b>Highest Level of Education Completed</b>			
Primary/elementary	60(32.4)	10(20.8)	70(30.0)
Secondary/high school	119(64.3)	33(68.8)	152(65.2)
College/university	6(3.2)	5(10.4)	11(4.7)

Results of the rapid assessment revealed four primary concerns and priorities from the perspectives of survivors: loss of employment, food insecurity, mental health concerns, and an escalation in crisis incidents. Descriptive survey results are reflected in Table 2, stratified per gender and type of exploitation experienced. The primary impact of Covid-19 reported by survivors was a loss of employment and/or income source for themselves and/or their household members. As shown in Table 2, over 70% of survivors reported loss of employment and/or income. Disruptions in income and employment led to experiences of food insecurity among survivors. A total of 58.4% of survivors reported food insecurity, reflecting inability to meet basic needs in their household. Qualitatively, survivors reported being considerably more concerned about feeding themselves and their families than about contracting Covid-19. Additionally, 38% of survivors reported mental health concerns, particularly anxiety pertaining to their capacity to meet their basic needs.

**Table 2: Frequencies and percentages of Covid-19 impacts upon survivors per gender and type of exploitation (n=233)**

	Female	Male	Sexual exploitation	Labor exploitation	Sexual and labor exploitation	Total
	n=185 n(%)	n=48 n(%)	n=178 n(%)	n=52 n(%)	n=3 n(%)	n=233 n(%)
Employment/ income concerns	129(69.7)	35(72.9)	131(73.6)	32(61.5)	1(33.3)	164(70.4)
Food insecurity concerns	109(58.9)	27(56.3)	111(62.4)	24(46.2)	1(33.3)	136(58.4)
Mental health concerns	82(44.3)	7(14.6)	80(44.9)	9(17.3)	-	89(38.0)

During discussion of survivors' mental health concerns, implementing staff observed heightened disclosure of crisis incidents. Survivors revealed an escalation in crises, specifically a sharp increase in suicidality and reports of violence within the home. Suicidal incidents during Covid-19 were triggered by loss of income, fear regarding inability to provide for family members, familial conflict, uncertainty about future plans, and experiences of family violence. Covid-related financial stressors coupled with isolation inside the home with violent partners and family members led to an increase in reports of violence during quarantine. Moreover, survivors

reported heightened difficulties escaping family violence due to financial dependence upon perpetrators, further complicated by widespread Covid-related economic insecurity and disruptions in community service provision, particularly the closure of shelter programs to new clients.

Results of chi-square tests for independence demonstrated that female survivors were significantly more likely to report mental health concerns than male survivors ( $\chi^2 = 14.28$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). No significant differences were found between male and female survivors in relation to employment or food insecurity concerns (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Percentages of respondents reporting Covid-19 impacts and chi-square results per gender (n=233)**

	Female (%)	Male (%)	Chi-square test	<i>p</i> value
Employment/income concerns	69.73	72.92	0.19	0.67
Food insecurity concerns	58.92	56.25	0.11	0.74
Mental health concerns	44.32	14.58	14.28	<0.001

Survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation were significantly more likely to report mental health concerns than those who experienced labor exploitation ( $\chi^2 = 12.96$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Survivors of sexual exploitation also reported significantly more concerns related to food insecurity than survivors of labor exploitation ( $\chi^2 = 4.36$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ), as reflected in Table 4.

**Table 4: Percentages of respondents reporting Covid-19 impacts and chi-square results per exploitation type (n=230)**

	Sexual exploitation (%)	Labor exploitation (%)	Chi-square test	<i>p</i> value
Employment/income concerns	73.60	61.54	2.83	0.09
Food insecurity concerns	62.36	46.15	4.36	0.04
Mental health concerns	44.94	17.31	12.96	<0.001



Pertinent to the concerns survivors articulated in regard to disrupted income and food insecurity, 69 out of 233 survivors (29.6%) reported receiving government aid during the pandemic. Government assistance consisted of food packs including rice, canned goods, and noodles, distributed once in the entire duration of community lockdown. Survivors overwhelmingly reported that these food packs were consumed within a short time period. No survivors reported receiving the aforementioned DSWD Social Amelioration Program funds, and a total of 2 participants (0.86%) reported receiving financial assistance from the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). Only 18 survivors (7.7%) indicated that they received sufficient government assistance. Many human trafficking survivors are informal dwellers within their communities and/or unregistered voters. Survivors attributed the lack of government assistance received to their lacking registration/voting status in their communities, leading barangay (local government) officials not to include survivors in government relief distribution even though they were technically eligible.

## Discussion

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact upon survivors of human trafficking. Findings from this rapid assessment in the Philippines reveal that survivors' primary priority was not their physical health during the Covid-19 crisis; rather, survivors articulated that economic and mental health issues were of prominent importance from their perspectives. The current study reinforces the need to broaden definitions of survivor safety to holistic conceptions of safety that reinforce the wellbeing of survivors as whole persons, centering issues vocalized by survivors themselves. Listening to survivors' perspectives is vital to ensuring that interventions match the priorities and needs of those directly affected.<sup>38</sup>

While this rapid assessment identified economic and mental health issues as the highest priorities of survivors themselves, different patterns were observed for sub-groups of survivors, reinforcing the importance of service specialization for sub-populations. Survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation reported significantly more economic difficulties due to Covid-19 than survivors of labor trafficking. The disproportionate economic impact of the crisis upon those trafficked for sexual exploitation could be due to lower levels of education among this population in comparison to survivors of labor trafficking,<sup>39</sup> leading to more unstable employment and heightened food insecurity when any income source is disrupted. Food

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<sup>38</sup> Cordisco Tsai, Laura, Vanntheary Lim, Channtha Nhanh, and Sophie Namy. "“They Did Not Pay Attention or Want to Listen When We Spoke”: Women’s Experiences in a Trafficking-Specific Shelter in Cambodia.” *Affilia, Journal of Women and Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109920984839>

<sup>39</sup> Schilling Debra and Johanna Greeson, Sarah Walson, Daniel Treglia. *Human Trafficking Prevalence and Child Welfare Risk Factors Among Homeless Youth: A Multi-City Study*, 2018. Accessed March 20, 2021. <https://rhyclearinghouse.acf.hhs.gov/library/2018/human-trafficking-prevalence-and-child-welfare-risk-factors-among-homeless-youth-multi>

insecurity has also been linked to IPV.<sup>40</sup> Survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation may experience economic abuse from partners<sup>41</sup> who prevent them from seeking outside employment as a form of control in the abusive relationship. Any disruption in their partners' income could lead to heightened food insecurity in the household due to fewer income sources in the household.

Male survivors of human trafficking were less likely to report pandemic-related mental health concerns. There is strong cultural stigma associated with discussion of mental health in the Philippines,<sup>42</sup> and men may be more reluctant to discuss mental health issues due concerns about undermining their masculinity. Globally, services addressing the psychosocial and mental health needs of male survivors have been under-prioritized in the anti-trafficking movement. This gender bias in service provision reflects harmful patriarchal norms in the anti-trafficking sector in which women and girls are characterized as defenseless victims while men and boys are portrayed as active agents with less need for help or support.<sup>43</sup> Future research should address whether male survivors actually experienced fewer mental health concerns, or were simply less comfortable discussing mental health issues with service providers.

Findings from this study reinforce concerns regarding pandemic-related disruptions in essential services for survivors,<sup>44</sup> particularly emergency/drop-in and long-term shelters and mental health services. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, mental health services were already limited in the Filipino context due to lack of government funding and stigma associated with mental illness.<sup>45</sup> Disruptions in access to psychological and psychiatric services during the pandemic further deepens the vulnerabilities of human trafficking survivors whose pre-existing mental health conditions were exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. When coupled with survivors being widely excluded from government-funded Covid-19 relief in the Philippines, the systematic lack of support for survivors during this crisis further marginalizes an already vulnerable population. These service disruptions occur simultaneous to projected funding losses

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<sup>40</sup> Ricks, Joni L, Susan D Cochran, Onyebuchi A Arah, John K Williams, and Teresa E Seeman. "Food Insecurity and Intimate Partner Violence against Women: Results from the California Women's Health Survey." *Public Health Nutrition* 19, no. 5 (2015): 914–23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1368980015001986>.

<sup>41</sup> Koegler, Erica, Whitney Howland, Patric Gibbons, Michelle Teti, and Hanni Stoklosa. "'When Her Visa Expired, the Family Refused to Renew It,' Intersections of Human Trafficking and Domestic Violence: Qualitative Document Analysis of Case Examples from a Major Midwest City." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 2020, 088626052095797. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520957978>.

<sup>42</sup> Martinez, Andrea B., Melissa Co, Jennifer Lau, and June S. Brown. "Filipino Help-Seeking for Mental Health Problems and Associated Barriers and Facilitators: a Systematic Review." *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 55, no. 11 (2020): 1397–1413. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-020-01937-2>.

<sup>43</sup> Hacker, Daphna, Yaara Levine-Fraiman, and Idan Halili. "Ungendering and Regendering Shelters for Survivors of Human Trafficking." *Social Inclusion* 3, no. 1 (2015): 35–51. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v3i1.173>.

<sup>44</sup> UN Women.

<sup>45</sup> Martinez, et al.

for anti-trafficking organizations due to the pandemic.<sup>46</sup> Findings highlight the critical importance of continued funding for trafficking-specific services so that survivors can maintain access to much-needed support.

Further, the findings from this rapid assessment suggest several critical priorities for intervention with survivors impacted by Covid-19: emergency food assistance, enhanced employment services, access to psychosocial support and mental health services, and crisis intervention support. In light of these assessment results, the nonprofit organization implementing this rapid assessment structured its Covid-19 relief for survivors around these four priority areas, putting rapid assessment findings immediately into practice. Findings underscore the critical need to provide emergency food assistance to survivors of human trafficking in light of food insecurity being identified as the highest priority by survivors. Due to these findings, the nonprofit launched an emergency cash transfer program for survivors experiencing food insecurity. Survivors' financial needs were continually assessed to determine ongoing eligibility for cash transfers while simultaneously pursuing additional sources of financial support from other governmental and non-governmental institutions.

Given widespread disruptions in employment among survivors and their family members, employment assistance is another critical intervention priority for survivors during the Covid-19 crisis. Outside the Covid-19 pandemic, prior research has demonstrated that the number one need identified by survivors of human trafficking in Southeast Asia is safe employment.<sup>47</sup> When financial vulnerability goes unaddressed, this heightens survivors' risk for re-trafficking or experiencing other forms of abuse and exploitation.<sup>48</sup> In response to the widespread displacement from employment due to Covid-19, the implementing nonprofit significantly scaled its work immersion program (WIP), which provides survivors who are in crisis or in school with a part-time, paid work immersion experience in a safe environment. Along with substantially increasing enrollment, WIP was adapted to include remote work-from-home options for survivors in quarantine and enrollment was prioritized for survivors with the greatest financial needs and those in crisis states. Such emergency employment services provide immediate relief while supporting survivors in working toward longer-term employment goals, filling an essential gap in the anti-trafficking space.<sup>49</sup>

In response to emerging mental health concerns during the Covid-19 pandemic, many practitioners have shifted mental health support to telehealth or other online platforms, providing

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<sup>46</sup> Bain, Christina, and Louise Shelley.

<sup>47</sup> Lisborg, Anders. *Towards demand-driven, empowering assistance for trafficked persons: Making the case for freedom of choice over protection at the expense of empowerment*. Bangkok: Issara Institute.

<sup>48</sup> Laura Cordisco Tsai. "Family financial roles assumed by sex trafficking survivors upon community re-entry: Findings from a financial diaries study in the Philippines," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 2017. 27:4, 334-345, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2017.1288193>.

<sup>49</sup> Bain, Christina, and Louise Shelley.

virtual counseling, case management, and psychosocial support for survivors.<sup>50</sup> To address mental health concerns and an escalation in crisis incidents, each survivor participating in the rapid assessment was assigned a counselor to conduct virtual or phone sessions with them at least once every two weeks throughout quarantine. In addition to continually acquiring new information regarding survivors' ongoing concerns and priorities, counselors provided psychosocial support, facilitated referrals to outside services, and ensured that survivors were connected to the appropriate programs internally to meet their emerging needs.

When crises such as suicidality or IPV emerged, counselors provided crisis intervention services to survivors. Crisis intervention refers to immediate, short-term counseling and psychosocial support to people experiencing significant emotional, mental, and physical distress. Crisis intervention focuses on establishing safety, encouraging exploration of emotions, identifying alternative and new coping strategies, and increasing access to additional supports, ultimately aiming to stabilize the crisis and improve functioning.<sup>51</sup> Despite the significant mental health impacts of human trafficking<sup>52</sup> and poly-victimization experienced by many survivors,<sup>53</sup> very minimal research has been conducted regarding crisis intervention services for survivors, revealing a significant gap in the current evidence base. Findings from this study reinforce the critical need to ensure the quality and availability of crisis intervention systems within anti-trafficking organizations during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond.

It is vital that we listen to the lived experiences of survivors about how they have been impacted and how their rights can be protected during the Covid-19 pandemic. Survivors must be engaged as active partners in identifying the best approaches.<sup>54</sup> Through our rapid assessment and the process of providing Covid-19 relief services, we have systematically engaged with survivors affected by Covid-19 – first listening and understanding their concerns, priorities, and suggestions. It is recommended that anti-trafficking stakeholders prioritize the safety of the survivor as a whole person, including attention to their basic needs, physical safety, financial needs, and mental and emotional wellbeing. Desperation arising from seemingly impossible circumstances deepens vulnerability to human trafficking, re-trafficking, and other forms of

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<sup>50</sup> United Nations: Office on Drugs and Crime. Covid-19 Counselling for Trafficking Victims Goes Online in Colombia. Accessed March 2, 2021, [http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2020/May/covid-19\\_-counselling-for-trafficking-victims-goes-online-in-colombia.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2020/May/covid-19_-counselling-for-trafficking-victims-goes-online-in-colombia.html).

<sup>51</sup> Roberts, Albert R., and Allen J. Ottens. "The Seven-Stage Crisis Intervention Model: A Road Map to Goal Attainment, Problem Solving, and Crisis Resolution." *Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention* 5, no. 4 (2005): 329–39. <https://doi.org/10.1093/brief-treatment/mhi030>.

<sup>52</sup> Rani, A., & Manglam, M.K., Oram, Sian, et al.

<sup>53</sup> Cordisco Tsai, Laura, Vanntheary Lim, and Channtha Nanh. "‘I feel like we are people who have never known each other before’: The experiences of survivors of human trafficking and sexual exploitation transitioning from shelters to life in the community." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 21(1), no 16. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-21.1.3259>

<sup>54</sup> Cordisco Tsai, Laura, Vanntheary Lim, Elizabeth Hentschel, and Channtha Nanh. "Strengthening Services for Survivors of Human Trafficking: Recommendations from Survivors in Cambodia." *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 2021, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1899526>.



exploitation. It is essential that service providers expand services for survivors affected by the Covid-19 pandemic to prevent further exploitation. Survivors' voices and priorities must be at the center of all such efforts.