Exploring the Relationship Between Humanitarian Emergencies and Human Trafficking: A Narrative Review

Viktoria Curbelo, MPH

Director of Education, Training, and Advocacy at LifeWay Network

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the connection between humanitarian emergencies and human trafficking by conducting a narrative review of secondary sources. The search strategy for this narrative review included a number of relevant key terms. As humanitarian emergencies are likely to occur in the future, this paper investigates studies about conflict, disease outbreak, and natural disasters to provide further insight on the relationship between humanitarian emergencies and human trafficking.

Introduction

The spread of COVID-19 had a significant global effect, ensuring that nearly everyone felt the brunt of the pandemic in some capacity. The crisis raised new questions, leaving those in the human trafficking community to reconsider the impact of the virus on survivors, service deliverers, advocates, fundraisers, educators, organizations, elected officials, and other concerned individuals. Among inquiries regarding safety protocol, staffing capacity, funding implications, and ongoing service delivery, one of the biggest questions remained: how does COVID-19 impact human trafficking victims and perpetrators worldwide?

News media and communications immediately after the onset of the COVID-19 crisis described the relationship between human trafficking and the pandemic as positively correlated. While many experts were careful to exercise caution while speaking about the landscape of human trafficking during COVID-19, other claims were more strongly worded. Some articles claimed with certainty that human trafficking had increased during the pandemic. While some of these statements may in fact have proven to be true, finding evidence-based sources to affirm these statements was challenging in the early stages of the pandemic. There is a valid need to understand human trafficking after a humanitarian emergency hits, whether it is to raise funds, mobilize resources, or to inform programs, policy, and practice.

As a human trafficking educator, I was pressed by media outlets and concerned individuals to provide concrete statistics involving human trafficking and the COVID-19 crisis. The same pressure has been expressed by others in the human trafficking field: "Journalists, bowing to the pressures of editors, demand numbers, any numbers. Organizations feel compelled to supply them, lending false precision and spurious authority to many reports."[1] These events

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[1] Feingold, David A. "Trafficking in Numbers: the Social Construction of Human Trafficking Data." *Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts: The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict* 46 (2010): 51.

prompted me to further research the landscape of human trafficking data and emergencies in order to understand what is currently known thus far between humanitarian emergencies and human trafficking through review of secondary sources. Although the impetus for this research was sparked by my personal experience during the COVID-19 crisis, the research question posed in this article explores the bigger question of the relationship between humanitarian disasters and human trafficking (inclusive of pandemics). As humanitarian disasters will likely continue to occur, having an understanding of what the literature has indicated thus far can serve as one of many starting points for the future.

Methodology

Research Question:

This article reviews literature to explore the question, "What is the relationship between humanitarian emergencies and human trafficking?"

Relevance of the Research Question:

The research question proposed in this article may seem to have an obvious answer. As mentioned by Shambika Raut in her article about natural disasters: "Although it may seem logical that the risk for trafficking increases following a natural disaster, the link is rarely recognized or examined closely...therefore there is a need to examine the link between human trafficking and natural disasters."[2] Although Raut is speaking specifically about natural disasters, her statement applies to all forms of humanitarian emergencies, and does inspire the question: What has the academic literature established about this relationship?

As humanitarian emergencies continue to arise, how and if humanitarian emergencies affect human trafficking will continue to present itself as a question as new crises emerge. Polaris Project, which operates the National Human Trafficking Hotline, published a statement in March 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, speaking to the nature of the crisis with caution:

> "Many of you have asked what effect COVID-19 and the response is having on the trafficking landscape. The reality is we don't – and can't – know for certain, but we are deeply concerned. Specifically, we are worried that the economic effects of this virus will increase some of the vulnerabilities that make people susceptible to sex and labor trafficking in the first place – economic need, unstable living conditions, and substance use issues among others."[3]

Although not all emergencies are equivalent, policy makers and practitioners can benefit from understanding what evidence has been broadly suggested in the past.

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[2] Raut, Shambika. "A Cross-country Analysis of the Impact of Civil War and Natural Disaster on Human Trafficking." PhD diss., Central Michigan University, 2019.

[3] "The Effect of COVID-19 on Human Trafficking." Polaris, July 29, 2020. https://polarisproject.org/blog/2020/03/the-effect-of-covid-19-on-human-trafficking/.

The research question is focused on the connection between humanitarian disasters and human trafficking. It considers articles that ask questions such as: Do natural disasters, conflicts, and disease outbreak further the likelihood of human trafficking? Are there moderating or modifying variables between humanitarian emergencies and human trafficking? Do certain humanitarian emergencies decrease human trafficking? Is there no relationship between the two variables?

One of the criteria in the literature review looks at the relevance of literature to the research question. Several studies that were excluded discussed both human trafficking and humanitarian emergencies, but were not designed to explore the relationship between the two. For instance, some articles discussed program evaluations for human trafficking programs and services during humanitarian emergencies. Some articles had entirely separate focuses such as examining a state's performance during humanitarian emergencies, or exploring the role of social work in an emergency. The current research question is specifically focused on how and if human trafficking and humanitarian emergencies are connected with each other.

Study Design:

This narrative review paper is exploratory in nature, and seeks findings related to the research question by reviewing secondary sources. Narrative reviews summarize literature around a research question in order to bring greater insight into an area of interest.[4] Researchers have prevously utilized narrative reviews to explore human trafficking and similar topics.[5,6] Although narrative reviews are not as rigorously structured as systematic literature reviews, they hold a critical place in academia and it would be erroneous to say narrative reviews are always unstructured.[7] Narrative literature reviews are valued for their expansive coverage of a topic, and can lead to further questions, considerations, debates, and ideas for further areas of research. Additionally, as research is rapidly published, there is a need for holistic assessment of various pieces. Many published pieces may raise similar points, and at times may even conflict with one another. Regardless, narrative reviews serve to consolidate and bring disparate literature into one place for consideration.[8]

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[4] Green, Bart N., Claire D. Johnson, and Alan Adams. "Writing Narrative Literature Reviews for Peer-reviewed Journals: Secrets of the Trade." *Journal of Chiropractic Medicine* 5, no. 3 (2006): 101-117.

[5] Barnert, Elizabeth, Zarah Iqbal, Janine Bruce, Arash Anoshiravani, Gauri Kolhatkar, and Jordan Greenbaum. "Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Children and Adolescents: A Narrative Review." *Academic Pediatrics* 17, no. 8 (2017): 825-829.

[6] Dolatian, Mahrokh, Arash Mirabzadeh, Ameneh Setareh Forouzan, Homeira Sajjadi, Hamid Alavi Majd, and Farnoosh Moafi. "The Role of Domestic Violence in Pregnancy on Maternal and Fetal Outcomes, Narrative Review in Past Decade of Studies in Iran." *Advances in Nursing & Midwifery* 22, no. 79/s (2013).

[7] Green, Johnson, and Adams, "Writing Narrative Literature Reviews for Peer-Reviewed Journals: Secrets of the Trade." 101-117.

[8] Green, Johnson, and Adams, "Writing Narrative Literature Reviews for Peer-reviewed Journals: Secrets of the Trade." 101-117.

The limitations of narrative literature reviews should also be noted. Narrative reviews grant flexibility for authors to include and exclude articles outside of the key word search, and narrative reviews do not require summarization of every article identified.[9],[10] With this flexibility and discretion, there is more opportunity for bias in narrative reviews than other types of studies. Authors can create selection bias by only choosing literature that confirms their preexisting beliefs.

Although not all narrative reviews document its search criteria and key words, this paper does outline its steps in the next section to provide transparency about the process. Furthermore, all articles that met the criteria were summarized in this review. This research aimed to follow steps outlined by Huedo-Medina et al in order to minimize bias and strengthen the design of the research: 1) Conduct research; 2) Identify key words; 3) Review abstracts and articles; 4) Document results.[11]

Key Words:

Key words for this narrative review were: "Human Trafficking," AND "Armed Conflict," "Armed Conflicts," "Disease Outbreak," "Disease Outbreaks," "Disaster," "Disasters." Databases searched were PubMed, PsychINFO, and Google Scholar.

Search Strategy

A search was conducted from November 2020 to December 2020. The following criteria was adhered to: 1) Only peer-reviewed studies were included; 2) Research needed to explore the connection between humanitarian disasters and human trafficking; 3) The search was limited to primary analysis of data; 4) Only articles written in English were included.

For article searches conducted in PubMed and PsychINFO, the listed keywords had to be present in either the title or abstract of the article for inclusion in this review. Google Scholar only has an option to search key terms in the title or the full text of an article. As a result of this limitation, articles were only included from Google Scholar if the key term appeared in the title in order to obtain more precise matches.

For the purpose of this review, I used the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR)'s definition of humanitarian emergency: "A serious disruption of the functioning of a society, causing widespread human, material, or environmental losses which

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[9] Baumeister, Roy F., and Mark R. Leary. "Writing Narrative Literature Reviews." *Review of General Psychology* 1, no. 3 (1997): 311-320.

[10] Green, Johnson, and Adams, "Writing Narrative Literature Reviews for Peer-reviewed Journals: Secrets of the Trade." 101-117.

[11] Huedo-Medina, Tania B., Estrellita Ballester, and Blair T. Johnson. Research Syntheses Related to Childhood and Adolescent Sexuality: A Critical Review. Philadelphia: Elsevier, 2013.

exceed the ability of the affected society to cope using its own resources."[12] These disasters can be both man-made (i.e. conflict, environmental) and natural (i.e. disease outbreak, cyclone).

Results

Five papers met criteria for this narrative review. An initial search produced 59 articles, and removed 15 duplicates. Once the duplicates were removed, 44 were screened to ensure they met all criteria and answered the research question. 39 were excluded for not meeting criteria including: 28 results that were not related to the research question (including one article that could not be located for review. Since this article could not be examined to ensure it satisfied the research criteria, it was unfortunately excluded.)[13]; Seven were systematic literature reviews; and four were not studies. Only five articles fulfilled all criteria.[14,15,16,17,18]

Studies in this review were published within the last five years (2016-2019). From the five remaining articles, only one article focused on outbreaks.[19] Three articles focused on natural disasters,[20,21,22] and one article focused both on conflict and natural disasters.[23] Low results in each of these categories suggests the need for more literature in all three areas, but particularly in conflict and outbreaks. It is possible that the low matches were also a result of the search criteria.

[12] "Disaster," UNDRR, accessed December 1, 2020, https://www.undrr.org/terminology/disaster.

[13] Bhadra, S. "Human Trafficking in Humanitarian Crisis of Natural and Manmade Disasters in India." *Social Work Journal, Assam Central University* 3, no. 2 (2015): 44-56.

[14] Raut, "A Cross-country Analysis of the Impact of Civil War and Natural Disaster on Human Trafficking."

[15] Boria, Maria Gabriella. "Human Trafficking and Natural Disasters: An Empirical Analysis." PhD diss., Boston College. College of Arts and Sciences, 2016.

[16] Flåte, Katherine Olsen. "Human Trafficking Following the 2015 Nepal Earthquake: a Case Study of How a Natural Disaster Impacts People´s Vulnerabilities and the Role Disaster Response and Recovery Plays in Countering It." Master's thesis, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Ås, 2018.

[17] Worsnop, Catherine Z. "The Disease Outbreak-Human Trafficking Connection: A Missed Opportunity." *Health Security* 17, no. 3 (2019): 181-92. doi:10.1089/hs.2018.0134.

[18] Tu, Jenny. "Institutional Quality and Human Trafficking in the Wake of Natural Disasters A Cross-Sectional Analysis of the Impacts of Natural Disasters on the level of Human Trafficking." Master's thesis, 2018.

[19] Worsnop, "The Disease Outbreak-Human Trafficking Connection: A Missed Opportunity," 181-192.

[20] Boria, "Human Trafficking and Natural Disasters: An Empirical Analysis."

[21] Flåte, "Human Trafficking Following the 2015 Nepal Earthquake: A Case Study of How a Natural Disaster Impacts People´s Vulnerabilities and the Role Disaster Response and Recovery Plays in Countering It."

[22] Tu, "Institutional Quality and Human Trafficking in the Wake of Natural Disasters a Cross-Sectional Analysis of the impacts of Natural Disasters on the level of Human Trafficking".

[23] Raut, "A Cross-country Analysis of the Impact of Civil War and Natural Disaster on Human Trafficking."

Four reviews were quantitative and had a cross-sectional study design.[24,25,26,27] The remaining article was a qualitative analysis conducted through semi-structured interviews.[28]

Discussion

Natural Disasters:

Four articles in this narrative review discussed the relationship between human trafficking and natural disasters. Jenny Tu examined the impact of human trafficking after a disaster hits, specifically investigating if the "Quality of Government (QoG)" serves as a moderating factor.[29] QoG is the ability for a government to provide security, resources, and goods for its citizens. As an emergency can hinder QoG, Tu hypothesized that human trafficking could become more prevalent as more individuals migrate to receive goods elsewhere and become trafficked in this pursuit. In addition to QoG, Tu used an additional three indicators including: Government effectiveness, rule of law, and political corruption. All four indicators are overlapping, but slightly different. She employed the method of Ordinary Least-Squares (OLS) with a multivariate regression to examine the relationship of natural disaster, quality of government, and human trafficking. Data came from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)'s 2006 report on Trafficking in Persons: Global Patterns and the Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT). Tu used EM-DAT data from countries that were hit by a natural disaster in 2016. Findings found that disasters appear to impact human trafficking outflows, but QoG was not a significant moderating factor. She did not rule out that QoG can have an impact on human trafficking flows independently from natural disasters.

Similarly, Gabriella Boria explores the likelihood of human trafficking outflows occuring after a natural disaster. She also employed a Ordinary Least-Squares regression. Her study used data from the US Trafficking in Persons (TIP) 2013 report, which provided information on 120 countries. She found that the probability of human trafficking outflows increased by 30.4% after a natural disaster.[30] She also took into account economic factors such as GDP, the unemployment rate, and trade share of GDP. She found that the devastation to a nation's economy is positively associated with an increase in human trafficking.

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[24] Worsnop, "The Disease Outbreak-Human Trafficking Connection: A Missed Opportunity," 181-192.

[25] Boria, "Human Trafficking and Natural Disasters: An Empirical Analysis."

[26] Tu, "Institutional Quality and Human Trafficking in the Wake of Natural Disasters a Cross-Sectional Analysis of the Impacts of Natural Disasters on the Level of Human Trafficking."

[27] Raut, "A Cross-country Analysis of the Impact of Civil War and Natural Disaster on Human Trafficking."

[28] Flåte, "Human Trafficking Following the 2015 Nepal Earthquake: A Case Study of How a Natural Disaster Impacts People´s Vulnerabilities and the Role Disaster Response and Recovery Plays in Countering It."

[29] Tu, "Institutional Quality and Human Trafficking in the Wake of Natural Disasters a Cross-Sectional Analysis of the Impacts of Natural Disasters on the Level of Human Trafficking."

[30] Boria, "Human Trafficking and Natural Disasters: An Empirical Analysis."

Both Tu and Boria asserted the need for sub-national analysis to uncover what drives the relationship between natural disasters and human trafficking.[31,32] One case study in this review by Katherine Olsen Flåte conducted semi-structured interviews with practitioners and government officials in Nepal after the 2015 earthquake struck.[33] Flåte's research applied the "pressure and release" model to explain how root causes exacerbated situations of trafficking, while drawing on evidence from her interviews with practitioners and her own experience.

The professionals interviewed by the author noted various reasons why they believed human trafficking increased after the disaster. One overarching theme in the observations made by interviewees was the increased demand for work due to a recently disrupted economy. After the earthquake, individuals were more frequently approaching families, claiming to be (or know) aid workers, educators, and religious figures. The absence of job opportunities in the aftermath of disaster also led to an increase in migration. At times, children fled in search of work without their families or with a peer. Lastly, the interviewees reported noticing more child marriages. These unions were arranged by parents with the hopes that such marriages would create a secure future for their children. These observations of increased migration, child marriage, and demand for job opportunities noted by the professionals interviewed are consistent with general risk factors of human trafficking.[34,35,36]

Natural Disaster and Civil War:

Shambika Raut's 2019 article hypothesized that nations with high intensity conflict and natural disasters are more likely to experience human trafficking. This study examines different types of trafficking including prostitution, labor exploitation, debt bondage, involuntary domestic servitude, child prostitution, child labor, and children in armed conflict. Interestingly, the article supports Tu and Boria's research that there is a postive correlation between natural disaster and human trafficking, while surpisingly finding an inverse relationship between civil war and human trafficking. The relationship was positively correlated when a civil war and a natural disaster occured within the same year. This study focused specifically on civil war, so there

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[31] Tu, "Institutional Quality and Human Trafficking in the Wake of Natural Disasters a Cross-Sectional Analysis of the impacts of Natural Disasters on the Level of Human Trafficking."

[32] Boria, "Human Trafficking and Natural Disasters: An Empirical Analysis."

[33] Flåte, "Human trafficking following the 2015 Nepal Earthquake: A Case Study of How a Natural Disaster Impacts People's Vulnerabilities and the Role Disaster Response and Recovery Plays in Countering It."

[34] Bales, Kevin. "What Predicts Human Trafficking?" *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 31, no. 2 (2007): 269-279.

[35] Wheaton, Elizabeth M., Edward J. Schauer, and Thomas V. Galli. "Economics of Human Trafficking." *International Migration* 48, no. 4 (2010): 114-141.

[36] Avis, William. "Key Drivers of Modern Slavery." (2020).

needs to be more research to support findings and explore why civil war may have this effect. As other evidence has suggested, conflict generally is predictive of human trafficking.[37]

Outbreaks:

Only one article found in the review focused on outbreaks. Research conducted by Catherine Worsnop conducted a logistical regression using United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Human Trafficking Indicators (HTI) datasets.[38] She examined factors such as countries (specifically examining "source country"), the rank of trafficking (low or high in intensity), and whether or not an outbreak occurred.

Her findings point favorably to the possibility that disease outbreaks lead to heightened instances of human trafficking. However, it is not clear why human trafficking is heightened around outbreaks, and which risk factors are heightened: "the article demonstrates that outbreaks are associated with trafficking outflows, but what are the specific mechanisms driving this relationship? One possibility is that outbreaks can cause or amplify several socioeconomic and policy-related trafficking risk factors, including economic hardship and lack of economic opportunity, weakening family ties and structures, stigma and isolation, and the diversion of government resources away from trafficking prevention activities like border control, corruption control, and rule of law generally." Further research is needed to strengthen the assertion that the specific risks factors she mentioned are at play, or if there are factors independent of those that have an effect.

Moderating Factors:

Several studies explored potential moderating variables. A moderating variable is a variable that can explain the strength between two given variables, in this case the two variables are humanitarian emergencies and human trafficking. A few of the studies in the review attempted to explore the possibility of additional variables serving as a moderating variable between humanitarian emergencies and human trafficking. Such papers include Jenny Tu's article, which looked into Quality of Governance (QoG) and related indicators. Raut investigated regime type. Lastly, Boria explored economic indicators. Boria suggests that future research should look at factors such as the legalization of prostitution, internal and external conflicts, and gender.

Research Gaps

1. Most of the articles conducted a cross-sectional analysis. Cross-sectional studies cannot establish causality, as there is potential for the outcome (human trafficking) to have occurred before exposure (humanitarian disaster). A variety of different research methods to portray a holistic picture of the relationship between humanitarian emergencies and human trafficking

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[37] Bales, "What Predicts Human Trafficking?", 269-279.

[38] Worsnop, "The Disease Outbreak-Human Trafficking Connection: A Missed Opportunity", 181-92.

would be needed to assess definitively the impact of various humanitarian disasters on human trafficking.

2. Moderating effects: While there does seem to be a positive correlation between humanitarian emergencies and human trafficking (with the exception of conflict and human trafficking), it begs the question: what drives this relationship between these two variables? Some research in the review attempted to explore moderating variables such as Quality of Governance (QoG), type of regime, and economic factors. Exploring additional variables could paint clearer pictures as to why these two variables appear to be connected.

3. With the exception of one study mentioned in this review, all of the articles utilized cross-national data, with two articles utilizing the UNODC's report and two using the TIP report. One advantage of using these datasets is having the ability to compare information from country to country. However, there is variance in reporting from each country that can occur depending on factors such as differences in: awareness of human trafficking, effectiveness in reporting, and willingness to report. As described by one of the authors: "The biggest problem in the study of human trafficking lies in not having reliable data at both cross-national and national level. That being said, cross-national analysis is a poor test of these phenomena due to the vast number of missing data and availability of data."[39] Additional studies should conduct sub-national analysis to compliment these studies as well.

Limitations to the Narrative Review

As addressed previously, narrative reviews can inadvertently introduce bias to a study. Additionally, only one author conducted this narrative review. Increasing the number of individuals who conduct a narrative review can support the reliability of findings by ensuring at least two separate individuals arrive at similar findings and ensure interrater reliability.[40]

There is further limitation in only including literature found through a key term search. It is very likely that more relevant literature than what was included could have addressed the research question of this literature review. If such articles did not have any of the identified key terms in their title or abstract, however, they were excluded from this review.

As mentioned, keywords in Google Scholar do not provide the option for users to search by title and abstract only. As a result, only titles of articles in Google Scholar were searched. Although this decision aided in narrowing down the literature to more relevant results, this method likely excluded relevant publications.

Finally, only five articles matched criteria, which is very low considering the broad width of the topic of humanitarian disasters (earthquakes, hurricanes, civil war, genocide, floods, epidemics, etc). Narrative reviews are not considered the most rigorous study design, and are

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[39] Raut, "A Cross-country Analysis of the Impact of Civil War and Natural Disaster on Human Trafficking."

[40] Belur, Jyoti, Lisa Tompson, Amy Thornton, and Miranda Simon. "Interrater Reliability in Systematic Review Methodology: Exploring Variation in Coder Decision-making." *Sociological methods & research* (2018): 0049124118799372.

more exploratory in nature rather than confirmatory. More research would have to be done to confirm findings from reviewed literature.

Conclusion

During the COVID19 pandemic, understandably questions were raised about how the pandemic would affect human trafficking. As new humanitarian emergencies arise similar questions will present themselves in the future. Insight on the relationship between the two can support accurate communication to the public and enhance practice. The importance of this question became salient to my anti-trafficking education efforts during the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic.

This paper explored, "what is the connection between humanitarian emergencies and human trafficking?" This narrative review combed through secondary sources, finding few results (n=5) about the relationship between human trafficking and humanitarian emergencies. Natural disasters and outbreaks were found to be highly predictive of increased human trafficking outflows. Not all types of humanitarian emergencies, however, showed positive correlations with human trafficking. One study interestingly suggested an inverse relationship between conflict and human trafficking, however, this was only based on one study, and the study did not look at interstate war.

Some moderating factors were explored in the literature including regime type, economic factors, and quality of governance. More literature is needed on specific types of humanitarian emergencies, and more country-level investigations. One qualitative case study extracted insight from practitioners after the Nepal earthquake, who spoke to economic risk factors and vulnerabilities. More qualitative research would support in understanding these relationships as well. Overall, future research should continue to delve deeply into the relationship explored by this paper.

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coronavirus/has-covid-19-pandemic-emboldened-human-traffickers-some-advocates-for-survivors-believe-it-has.

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