

**Traffickers and trafficking.**

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**Challenges in researching  
human traffickers and  
trafficking operations**

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**2014**

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A research cooperation between IOM and NEXUS Institute



International Organization for Migration (IOM)

**NEXUS  
Institute**



## Foreword

When I began my work against modern slavery in the 1990s, information about traffickers was almost completely anecdotal: a disturbing story here, a chilling partial account told there. In many countries that I visited, residents of communities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) providing services to victims often seemed aware of the identities and residences of major traffickers in their midst who made their living from the extreme exploitation and servitude of people in their community or elsewhere. While driving between meetings in small towns in South East Europe and elsewhere I remember several occasions when NGO staff members pointed out a comparatively ostentatious house protected by high fences and dogs, saying: “that is where a big trafficker lives”. NGO staff assisting trafficked women would describe gruesome things that traffickers did to these women.

I remember these accounts that were imparted in a hushed tone perhaps reflecting some fear but also defiance. It required a large measure of courage for NGO workers to provide care in the shadow of criminals who easily resorted to violent brutality while local officials and law enforcement, some of who were patrons or complicit in trafficking operations, did nothing. I remember these stories. I do not know precisely how much of these accounts from more than a decade ago were accurate, but they were shared with just enough detail and knowing conviction from serious, committed professionals who provided care for the few victims who escaped (there was less possibility of an organised rescue back then) to lend these stories the air of credibility.

Since that time substantially more official governmental resources have been dedicated to learning about the nature of human trafficking in countries around the world. But even now, while human traffickers enslave millions of people around the world, what is known by officials about the perpetrators of this serious crime and human rights violation remains rudimentary, fragmentary and relatively meager. To a large degree, we still rely a lot on the stories. There are just a lot more of them now that have been collected.

Why this is so and what can be done to improve our understanding of traffickers and their criminal organisations and operations form the heart of this report. The consequences of this failure are significant: anything less than a

comprehensive and sophisticated inquiry into traffickers and how they operate, using modern data and intelligence acquisition and analysis, undermines the possibility of understanding the nature of this phenomenon in its totality. This failure to construct a comprehensive understanding precludes more effective criminal justice responses and deterrence by law enforcement against traffickers in countries around the world. It leaves countless individuals vulnerable to trafficking that otherwise can be prevented.

This unsatisfactory state of affairs is not at all inevitable but it will require a correction in course. In this report, the NEXUS Institute (NEXUS) describes how severe shortcomings in understanding trafficking in persons are primarily attributable to the most prevalent approach to collecting data about human trafficking used by governments, researchers and others around the world. This approach places almost exclusive reliance on interviewing trafficking victims and acquiring accounts of their experiences. But, as this report reveals, basing our understanding of traffickers and trafficking operations almost solely on what victims observe is limited and therefore problematic. The limitations of beginning and ending research about traffickers and their criminal enterprises on victim accounts are examined here in some depth. Our report illuminates and analyses the limitations, biases, assumptions and other methodological issues that arise from this predominant approach.

While survivors of human trafficking are an extremely valuable source of information about their trafficking experiences, their ability to offer a comprehensive, overarching and detailed account of the traffickers, their organisation and the activities of their criminal enterprises are almost invariably quite limited. Because in many cases victims are only exposed to a portion of a larger criminal undertaking, a continuing overreliance on those who survive trafficking will perpetuate our partial and fragmented understanding of trafficking globally. Moreover, regularly settling for getting victims' accounts only to prosecute the trafficker immediately in front of us means that we miss the opportunity to have their accounts be the starting point for wider inquiries that fit into larger systematic data collection and pro-active investigations about traffickers and their organisations within countries and transnationally. In practice this means we rarely acquire enough information to connect the dots in order to convict the most powerful criminals involved and to dismantle the most pernicious criminal networks engaged in human trafficking.

In the end, NEXUS finds that there is a critical need for governments -- and especially the criminal justice arms of governments -- as well as intergovernmental law enforcement agencies and researchers to revisit their strategies and methods to researching and investigating human trafficking. The new approach needs to more aggressively and systematically supplement the data that is currently acquired from victims of trafficking with in-depth practical evidence-based research about the traffickers themselves. Research in human trafficking

needs to develop new methods and sources in order to answer questions with significantly greater detail and precision about the range of criminal actors who are involved in trafficking incidences, the decision-making processes that drive traffickers, their strategies and methods for controlling victims, the different types of trafficking operations, how they intersect with other criminal activities, how they take place within local, national and global communities and economies, and how all of these vary from context to context, country to country, region to region in ways that inform and require targeted governmental responses.

With this report, the NEXUS Institute's Senior Researcher Rebecca Surtees illuminates specific ways to strengthen research about traffickers and their operations. Laura Johnson's work supporting the research and preparation of this report is very much appreciated by me as well.

The NEXUS Institute was created as the first think tank dedicated to addressing complex issues presented by human trafficking. Our research and policy work focuses on helping to provide the analytical basis to aid and support policy-makers and practitioners to end the impunity of the perpetrators of human trafficking and to protect and assist its victims. It is hoped that governments and others will consider the analysis presented in this report to help achieve our shared objectives to advance anti-trafficking work in important ways. I believe that if governments discuss and adopt the findings, guidance and recommendations contained in this report there will be significant and measurable improvements in advancing these objectives by obtaining a significantly better understanding of traffickers and trafficking operations.

The United States Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons has generously supported the preparation of this report and other in-depth field research and analysis by the NEXUS Institute and we are grateful for its commitment to supporting our longer-term research. This report was produced within the context of our research partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM). NEXUS has valued IOM's partnership and the body of work produced by this collaboration that has contributed to understanding the nature of modern slavery. Many at IOM -- including Richard Danziger, Sarah Craggs, Laurence Hart, Jonathan Martens and Ayima Okeeva -- have helped make our longstanding research partnership successful.

The extreme exploitation of men, women and children inflicted by traffickers around the world represents a spectrum of forms of coercion and brutality. The nature of the control exerted by one human being over another that is at the core of the concept of "human trafficking" -- whether that slavery, servitude, forced labour or slavery-like conduct manifests in the form of sex trafficking or labour trafficking -- makes it among the most disturbing and serious of criminal acts -- as well as human rights violations -- confronting us today. Since I began working on these issues, a time before human trafficking was recognised globally as the



crime that it is today, there has been substantial progress in efforts to investigate and prosecute traffickers. This trend should – and must – continue to accelerate in the future. This report is offered to help lay the groundwork for transformative changes in how professionals and researchers who are responsible for collecting and analysing data about human trafficking develop the body of understanding and actionable knowledge about traffickers. In this way, we hope that this report will contribute to the future identification and conviction of traffickers and dismantling of trafficking operations to end modern slavery.

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The NEXUS Institute

