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## Human Trafficking and Nutrition: Assessing the Effects of U.S. Public Policy on Food Security and the Malnourishment of Refugees

Moxie R. McCandless  
*Seattle Pacific University*

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HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND NUTRITION: ASSESSING THE EFFECTS OF U.S. PUBLIC  
POLICY ON FOOD SECURITY AND THE MALNOURISHMENT OF REFUGEES

by

MOXIE MCCANDLESS

FACULTY MENTORS:

JOEY FREEMAN, ALYSSA WALTER, RAPHAEL MONDESIR

HONORS PROGRAM DIRECTOR:

DR. CHRISTINE CHANEY

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## Abstract:

This research paper aims to assess the challenges associated with human trafficking within the lived experience of refugees, specifically focusing on food security, and the resulting system shaped by existing United States policies and programs. By examining this complex relationship, the study seeks to shed light on the influence of power dynamics on fulfilling basic human needs and to propose more effective strategies for improving food security among marginalized populations.

A comprehensive literature review is conducted, and a community nutrition needs assessment is performed in King County, Washington. Qualitative interviews are conducted with human trafficked organizations, government officials, and experts to gain insights into the specific challenges faced by this vulnerable group in attaining sufficient and nutritious food. Concurrently, quantitative analysis is performed on relevant data sources to evaluate the impact of current US policies on food security outcomes for human trafficked refugees.

Preliminary findings suggest that the association of human trafficking with the refugee experience presents significant obstacles to achieving food security. The study reveals how United States policy, including immigration policies, refugee resettlement programs, and social welfare programs, plays a crucial role in shaping the population's finite duration of aid. Additionally, the influence of power dynamics inherent in these policies is highlighted, which can further exacerbate the challenges faced by human trafficked refugees in accessing an adequate food supply.

By examining the relationship between United States policy and food security challenges, this research paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the impact of policy on basic human needs, particularly among marginalized populations. The findings underscore the urgency for more effective strategies and interventions to address the obstacles to food security in the United States. These insights have implications for policymakers, humanitarian organizations, and advocates seeking to address the systemic issues contributing to food insecurity and to promote equitable access to nutritious food for marginalized populations.

## Introduction

The multifaceted convergence of human-trafficked refugees and food security is heavily affected by the policies enacted by host countries. As a nation that prides itself of being a haven for refugees fleeing persecution and violence, the United States harbors a number of human-trafficked refugees with backgrounds in labor or commercial sex exploitation. Unfortunately, these refugees will continue to face numerous obstacles in accessing basic necessities such as food and shelter—severe food insecurity and exacerbated health problems are only continuing to grow.

Food security is defined as “people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”<sup>1</sup>. Under this definition, it is the responsibility of a community to ensure food accessibility, utilization, and stability for all.

Immigration policies and labor protections, including minimum wage and workers' rights, can substantially impact the availability of jobs and wages, which affects refugees' ability to secure adequate food and nutrition.<sup>2,3</sup> Additionally, U.S. domestic policies that undermine support for refugees further impede their access to food assistance programs, perpetuating their dire situation of food insecurity.<sup>4,5</sup>

The complexity of this issue is further compounded by the challenges related to law enforcement and victim services. While the United States has undertaken considerable efforts to combat human trafficking, the access of human-trafficked refugees to justice and services remains limited, hindering their ability to escape from exploitative situations and access necessary support.<sup>2,6</sup> This, in turn, exacerbates their already precarious food security and contributes to a vicious cycle of poverty and exploitation.

To tackle these interrelated challenges, a comprehensive approach is necessary that addresses the intersecting issues of U.S. domestic policy, human-trafficked refugees, and food security. This demands an intricate and inter-disciplinary approach involving law, economics, social policy, and humanitarian assistance. Comprehensive policies that safeguard the human rights of refugees, ensure access to adequate wages, workers' rights, and food assistance programs, and prioritize support for trafficking victims are crucial to addressing these complex and interconnected challenges.<sup>2-5</sup>

Ultimately, to effectively address the intersection of U.S. domestic policy, human-trafficked refugees, and food security requires a steadfast commitment to social justice and human rights.<sup>7</sup> This necessitates a multidimensional approach that recognizes the complex nature of these issues and prioritizes the welfare and human rights of the most vulnerable and marginalized populations.<sup>8-12</sup> This paper serves to assess the challenges an association with human trafficking has within the refugee lived experience on food security, and the subsequent

system created out of current United States policy and programs . Using this lens, we can better understand the influence power has over basic human needs and begin to create more effective strategies to improve food security for marginalized populations.

### **Current Service Access Barriers:**

In recent years, the U.S. government has taken a number of steps to address food insecurity among refugees through a variety of public policies and programs.<sup>13</sup> These policies range from nutrition assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, to programs aimed at improving access to healthy foods, such as the Healthy Food Financing Initiative and the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000.

Despite these efforts, food insecurity remains a persistent problem among the refugee population. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the issue, with many refugees losing their jobs and experiencing economic hardship.<sup>14</sup> In addition, language barriers, cultural differences, and limited access to transportation can all make it difficult for refugees to access food assistance programs and resources.<sup>15</sup>

As many survivors of human trafficking have had immediate needs met under various programs and policies, there remains a lack of support for long-term needs including mental health care, permanent housing, and financial aid.<sup>12</sup> Existing services are usually dependent on immigration status and criminal record, further strengthening the barrier to accessing assistance.<sup>16-18</sup>

## **Methodology and methods**

### **Methodology**

This review uses a thematic synthesis methodology process to describe ways of analyzing the findings of various studies to generate new themes and knowledge links around the findings of the original studies. Thematic synthesis methodology is a qualitative research method that involves systematically analyzing and synthesizing data from multiple sources to identify common themes or patterns. In the case of assessing the intersection between U.S. domestic policy and human-trafficked refugees, the question of how does U.S. domestic policy impact human-trafficked refugees in terms of access to services and support was used as the base for this search.

In addition, a community needs assessment was performed to examine the severity of food insecurity for sex-trafficking victims within King County, Washington (Appendix A).

## **Search Strategy:**

To identify relevant studies for this review, a comprehensive systematic search was conducted across four databases: PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search strategy included combinations of the following keywords: "human trafficking," "refugees," "U.S. domestic policy," and "immigration policy". The search was conducted in April 2023, and there were no restrictions on the publication date or language. A total of 431 articles were identified in the initial search.

## **Inclusion Criteria:**

To be included in the review, articles had to meet the following inclusion criteria: published in English language, focused on the United States, and specifically addressed the intersection between U.S. domestic policy and human-trafficked refugees.

## **Exclusion Criteria:**

Articles were excluded if they: did not meet the inclusion criteria, were duplicates, were not peer-reviewed articles, including editorials, commentaries, and letters.

## **Screening and Data Extraction:**

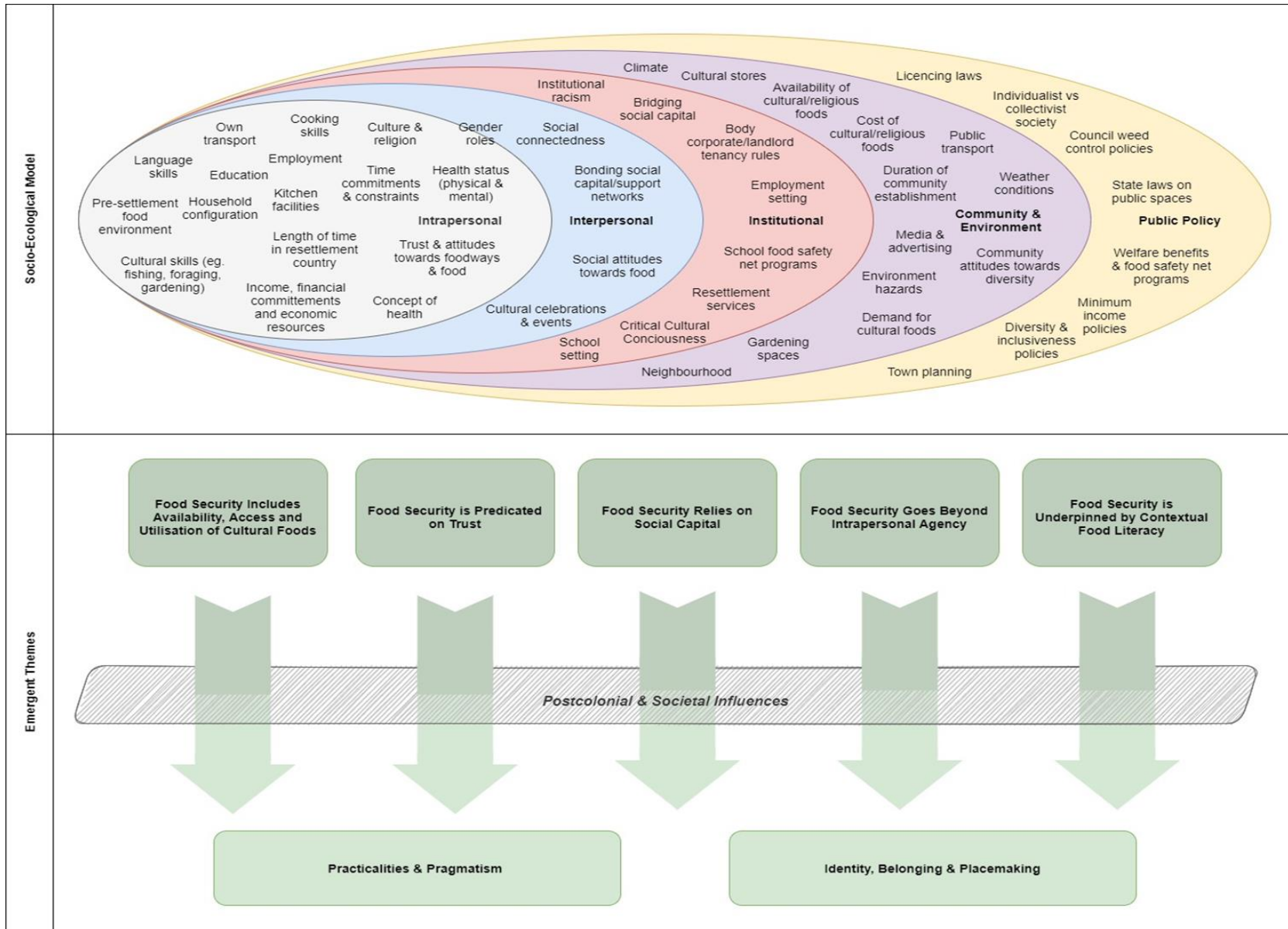
After removing duplicates, titles and abstracts of the remaining articles were screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus. Full-text articles were obtained for the remaining articles, and the same reviewers independently screened them against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Data were extracted from the articles using a standardized form that included author, year, study design, study population, and key findings.

## **Data Synthesis:**

The data extracted from the included studies were synthesized narratively, highlighting the key themes related to the intersection between U.S. domestic policy and human-trafficked refugees.

## **Data Table:**

A social-ecological framework was used with reference to Gingell et. al to summarize the characteristics of the included studies.



## **Data analysis:**

All studies selected were eligible for synthesis and used to identify emerging themes of identity, culture, health, and agency. Topics of accessibility, food safety, and competing priorities were also noticed during the study collection.

## **Resulting themes:**

Immigration policies such as the President Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy implemented in 2018 resulted in the separation of thousands of migrant families at the U.S.-Mexico border. This policy led to the detention of many families, including children, in overcrowded and under-resourced facilities.<sup>19</sup> Many human-trafficked refugees were among those detained, and they often faced long wait times for food and limited access to basic nutrition.<sup>20, 21</sup> Additionally, many families who were separated under this policy were not reunited, leading to ongoing challenges in accessing food and other necessities. The President Trump administration's "Remain in Mexico" policy have had a significant impact on the ability of human-trafficked refugees to access services and support in the U.S.<sup>20</sup> This policy restricts the ability of human-trafficked refugees to access food by requiring asylum seekers to remain in Mexico while their cases are processed in the United States, which can take months or even years. While in Mexico, asylum seekers, including those who have been trafficked, may face food insecurity, as they may not have access to adequate nutrition or may be unable to afford food due to limited financial resources.

Immigration policies within the United States continue to have a significant impact on the access to food for human-trafficked refugees.<sup>22</sup> Human trafficking victims, many of whom are forced into labor or sex work, often come from low-income backgrounds and lack access to basic necessities such as food. Immigration policies that restrict access to resources and services can exacerbate this issue, leaving victims of trafficking in a vulnerable and precarious situation. Some Ukrainian refugees have started to become eligible for programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), however many refugees still may not be able to obtain legal work permits or access government benefits.<sup>23, 24</sup>

Advocacy and community organizations play a critical role in supporting human-trafficked refugees access to food. These organizations exist as food banks, emergency assistance, and other resources that can ameliorate the emotional stress of having to find sources of food. Advocacy efforts aimed at reforming immigration policies and addressing systemic issues of poverty and inequality can help to improve the access to food for human-trafficked refugees and other vulnerable populations. Below are some potential themes of existing barriers to food security found during the thematic search.



## **Service and support access:**

Human-trafficked refugees often face significant barriers to accessing services and support, including language barriers, lack of knowledge about available resources, and fear of deportation, with each case barring unique circumstances.<sup>16</sup> These barriers can range from practical issues such as lack of financial resources and access to food banks to more systemic issues such as discrimination and exploitation.<sup>19</sup>

Financial barriers can be a significant challenge for human-trafficked refugees, as they often lack financial resources and may not have legal work permits. As a result, they may struggle to afford basic necessities like food.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, human trafficking victims may be required to pay off debts or fees to their traffickers, which can further limit their financial resources. Human-trafficked refugees often come from diverse backgrounds and may not speak English, which can create significant language barriers. This can make it challenging for them to access food banks, apply for government benefits, or navigate complex food assistance programs, which may result in the lack of awareness about various resources available, such as food banks, soup kitchens, or other forms of assistance.<sup>25</sup> They may also face difficulty in accessing information about these resources due to language barriers or lack of internet access.

Fear deportation creates the avoidance for accessing food banks or other forms of assistance, leading to increased risk to food insecurity and malnutrition. Other factors creating avoidance could be seen from limited mobility due to physical or mental health issues, disabilities, or other factors.<sup>26-28</sup> This can make it challenging for them to travel to food banks or grocery stores, especially if they lack access to transportation. Unfortunately, this also creates stigma and discrimination due to their immigration status or experiences of exploitation. This stigma can make them hesitant to seek help or support, including food assistance.

## **Intersectionality and systemic barriers:**

Human-trafficked refugees often face multiple forms of discrimination and oppression, including racism, sexism, and classism. Common barriers found surround the intersection of their immigration status, experiences of exploitation, and structural inequalities. These systemic barriers are often deeply entrenched and require systemic change to address. Some of the systemic barriers that affect human-trafficked refugees' access to food include immigration policies that restrict their access to resources and services. Refugees who lack legal immigration status or hold criminal charges may not meet eligibility requirements for many programs within the U.S.<sup>27</sup>

Victims of human trafficking and their family members who have received a Letter of Certification or Eligibility from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) are considered qualified aliens under PRWORA. This means that they are generally eligible for SNAP benefits to the same extent as refugees.<sup>6</sup>

Many human-trafficked refugees are forced to work in low-wage jobs where they are exploited by their employers. This exploitation can result in low pay, unsafe working conditions, and limited access to food, with some employers withholding wages or threatening workers with deportation, further exacerbating their food insecurity. Employers may also discriminate based on race, ethnicity, or country of origin, which can limit their access to employment opportunities and basic necessities such as food. With limited access to education and training opportunities, legal employment prospects and earning potential is limited— as so is the access to adequate nutrition.

Addressing systemic barriers to accessing food for human-trafficked refugees requires a comprehensive approach that includes policy and legislative changes, advocacy efforts, and community-based interventions. This approach should prioritize human rights and address the structural inequalities that contribute to food insecurity among this population. Strategies may include increasing access to education and training opportunities, reforming immigration policies to provide more comprehensive support for human-trafficked refugees, and providing targeted resources and support for community organizations working with this population.

### **The role of advocacy and community organizations:**

Advocacy and community organizations play a crucial role in supporting human-trafficked refugees and advocating for policy changes that can improve their access to services and support.<sup>29</sup> Working to address the systemic barriers that human-trafficked refugees face, they remain focused on providing direct assistance to individuals and families in need.

Many advocacy and community organizations provide direct assistance to human-trafficked refugees by distributing food, creating food pantries, and organizing community meals.<sup>30-33</sup> They may also provide grocery vouchers or other forms of financial assistance to help individuals and families purchase food. In addition, advocacy and community organizations may conduct outreach and education programs to inform human-trafficked refugees about available resources and support services. This can include providing information about food banks, SNAP, and other government programs, as well as educating individuals about their rights and entitlements— this includes work to change policies and legislation that impact human-trafficked refugees' access to food such as advocating for changes to immigration policies that restrict access to benefits or working to secure funding for food assistance programs.<sup>34</sup> These are critical roles that are often underfunded that are extremely important for the ongoing support of human-trafficked refugees' access to food by providing direct assistance, outreach and education, advocacy and policy change, culturally sensitive support, and community building.<sup>33, 35</sup> These organizations are essential in addressing the systemic barriers that human-trafficked refugees face and in promoting the rights and well-being of this vulnerable population.

## Discussion:

Human trafficking is a global problem that affects millions of people, including refugees, who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation due to their displacement, lack of resources, and limited legal protections. The United States is one of the largest destination countries for human-trafficked refugees, and its domestic policies have a significant impact on their lives. However, the intersection between U.S. domestic policy and human-trafficked refugees is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires a comprehensive and coordinated response. The purpose of this systematic review is to synthesize the existing literature on this topic and provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of U.S. domestic policies on human-trafficked refugees. This review will identify key themes related to the intersection between U.S. domestic policy and human-trafficked refugees, including the impact of U.S. immigration policies, the government's response to human trafficking, access to essential services, and the criminalization of sex work and lack of labor protections for undocumented workers. By providing a comprehensive understanding of this issue, this systematic review aims to inform the development of effective policies and programs that address the root causes of human trafficking and provide support and protection for human-trafficked refugees. This review will be of interest to scholars, policymakers, and practitioners working in the areas of human trafficking, refugee studies, migration, and international human rights.

The results of this systematic review highlight the numerous challenges that human-trafficked refugees in the U.S. face when accessing essential services, including legal and social services, healthcare, mental health, education, employment, and housing. These challenges are often the result of systemic issues related to U.S. domestic policy, including immigration policies, the criminalization of sex work, and the lack of labor protections for undocumented workers.

The impact of U.S. immigration policies on the vulnerability of refugees to human trafficking was apparent throughout this search, and lack of legal pathways for migration and asylum can leave refugees with few options for seeking protection, increasing their vulnerability to trafficking. The Zero Tolerance policy has led to increased separation of families at the border, which leaves children and adults being more vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. The criminalization of sex work and the lack of labor protections for undocumented workers. Many human-trafficked refugees are forced into sex work or exploitative labor situations because they lack legal status and face significant barriers to accessing safe and legal employment. The criminalization of sex work also creates an environment in which traffickers can operate with impunity, as their victims are often afraid to report abuse for fear of being arrested or deported.

Another key finding of this review is the inadequate response of the U.S. government to human trafficking. The lack of coordination between government agencies and the failure to provide comprehensive and coordinated support for human-trafficked refugees can make it difficult for these individuals to access the services they need to recover from their experiences

and rebuild their lives. Human-trafficked refugees also often lack knowledge of available resources and face significant language and cultural barriers when seeking assistance.

Overall, the results of this systematic review underscore the need for policy changes and improved support systems for human-trafficked refugees in the U.S. This includes reforms to immigration policies, such as providing legal pathways for migration and asylum, as well as improved labor protections for undocumented workers. It also includes better coordination between government agencies and increased funding for services that can help human-trafficked refugees access the support they need. Addressing these issues is critical for ensuring that human-trafficked refugees are able to recover from their experiences and build new lives in safety and dignity.

By synthesizing these themes and drawing conclusions based on the evidence from the literature review and analysis, we can gain a better understanding of the intersection between U.S. domestic policy and human-trafficked refugees and identify areas where policy changes and advocacy efforts may be needed to improve their access to services and support. Food insecurity is a known problem, however as a basic human need, it is not addressed to the level it should be. It is clear that the potential food assistance laws within our local, state, and federal bodies of power need public advocacy to raise awareness and demand this issue to be addressed in legislative chambers. The lack of food support for human trafficked refugees in the United States is not an isolated issue, but rather a consequence of ignorance and oversight within our government representatives. By empowering marginalized communities, including human trafficked refugees, and involving them in decision-making processes, we can create a more just and equitable society where the basic needs of all individuals, regardless of their background, are met.

## **Appendix A.**

### **Community Nutrition Needs Assessment for Women Escaping Sex Trafficking in King County, Washington**

#### **One Page Summary:**

As we attempted to embark on this population of young girls that have essentially been dehumanized, it was clear that we found and saw things that come with a multitude of problems. Because human trafficking is clearly an issue here in the streets of Seattle Washington, we want to reiterate that it is a global issue and just because we based our findings between 80th Street to 130th Street of Aurora that doesn't mean that it's not a worldwide issue. We also want to state that because human trafficking is such a problem it also comes with a handful of problems that affect the victims. For this paper, one of the main issues at hand is food insecurity and poor nutritional practices. As we assessed the situation both visually and from testimonials given by people we interviewed, it was clear that poor nutritional practice revolved around each and every victim. The main source of food was mainly fast food and with no regards to nutritional value or healthy eating habits. It was what was more convenient for them and what their predators would offer them. In a statement given, "the abusers tell you when you eat, what you eat and even if you eat." This shows the ongoing problem with not just being trafficked but having a nutritious meal being provided. This is the case with both people being trafficked AND people leaving this life. After leaving, most of these victims have become so traumatized that it becomes difficult to educate them or show them healthy eating patterns because interactions with other humans becomes so hard for them. Not only that but most of them don't really take their nutritional status as much of an importance because of all the other factors that have caused them so much trauma. We wanted to propose an action where there are certain factors setup for these young women to search for help when it comes to their nutritional status and getting proper care. While there are certain organizations like REST, WARN and Genesis Project, this matter is an ongoing one and becoming more and more concerning as we move forward. We mentioned that 500-700 underage victims are being recruited every year and a lot of them are persuaded because of the trauma they have suffered before coming into human trafficking. Malnutrition was a big issue when we looked at these victims and with Bill 5114 that was passed in the Washington State Senate just

recently, we wanted to propose an action where more help is available for these victims regarding their nutritional status. The help of RD's would greatly help and also to educate them about the importance of human trafficking and looking for signs of malnourishment. It is clear that human trafficking won't be going away anytime soon so the more resources there are for these young victims the more help we can provide them not just nutritionally but physically and mentally as well.

### Goal:

The purpose of this community needs assessment is to determine the level of nutrition access of women escaping sex-trafficking in King County.

### Objectives:

- 1: Assess the level of nutritional education and counseling provided to women transitioning out of the sex trade
- 2: Identify common nutritional deficiencies of women post involvement in sex trade
- 3: Understand how survivors' experiences with intersecting systems (employment, criminal, societal norms) affect their access to adequate nutrition.

### Key points:

- Target population: women leaving sex trade in seattle
- Age group: 11-30
- Number of people experiencing the problem: 500-700 women a year , specifically 606 used REST as a resource in 2022<sup>2</sup>
- Effect on the population's health: The effect on the population's health due to human trafficking comes with many issues. Issues such as malnourishment and dental issues, trauma, STD's, substance abuse problems, infertility. etc.
- Globally, over 40 million people live in slavery and of those that live under these conditions are recruited into the sex trade which comes with an abundance of nutritional issues <sup>11</sup>.

- In 2020, 50% of human trafficking victims identified in Federal cases were young girls, children under the age of 18. Most girls are “tricked” or coerced into trafficking before they are 14-15 years old<sup>12</sup>.
- Seattle is known to be one of the top cities for sex trafficking. Statistics are hard to track, but the Port of Seattle, which has been working to fight human trafficking since 2007, says 500 to 700 minors in King County are forced into prostitution every year<sup>13</sup>

### **Background and History:**

Sex trafficking (ST) is a form of modern-day slavery in which individuals are (1) exploited to perform commercial sex acts through the use of force, fraud, or coercion or (2) the individual being exploited is under 18 years old.

Within King County, Seattle has been associated with high numbers of ST for over ten years— since 2007, the Port of Seattle has accounted for 500 to 700 minors recruited into ST every year, with the demand for younger and younger women steadily increasing<sup>12</sup>. Unfortunately, these numbers can only serve as a rough estimate, although the actual number is likely much higher. The most common ways for women to become involved in ST is to be trafficked by a family member, loved one, or someone they met online: there is usually some immediate connection between the trafficker and the victim. In 2020, a report from Washington Against Sexual Exploitation<sup>1</sup> (WASE Forward) found 89% of victims residing in Washington became involved with ST as children, and as they could not find services to help them live independently outside of the ST community, many do not end up being able to escape their traffickers until they are over 30 years old. The lack of support and stigma against these vulnerable women often keeps them in dangerous situations. Current agencies within Seattle operate on limited budgets of less than \$700,000—inadequate funding for these programs is hurting the ability to help more women escape<sup>2</sup>.

### **Importance of the Nutrition Needs for Young Women:**

Specific nutrient recommendations are not currently available for formerly trafficked child and adolescent populations, but population-based nutrition needs for this demographic can be applied. During adolescence, specific nutrient needs for girls are high at this stage in life, and

nutrition has a significant impact on a child's full growth potential. During puberty, her weight and height increases, skeletal growth is completed, bone mass increases and the body begins to change in composition. However, as current data trends suggest, there continues to be a high buyer demand for bodies similar to pre-pubescent girls with minimal muscle development.

However, protein and calcium needs are highest between the ages of 11-14 years of age due to a biological need for increased muscle mass to support proper skeletal growth. Currently, the RDA for protein in women of this age range is 46g/day (10-35%) and for calcium it would be an RDA of about 1,200mg. Iron and folate levels also increase with the start of menstruation with the expansion of necessary blood volume and protein synthesis. The RDA for iron is around 18mg for women and 8mg for men and folate RDA is around 300-400 micrograms per day. Poor iron status during adolescence is linked to poor cognitive development in later adulthood, solidifying the importance that adequate amounts of protein, calcium, iron, and folate deserve attention in formerly trafficked populations.

Malnutrition can be identified during a physical exam of a formerly trafficked child or adolescent and treated in accordance with international guidelines, including micronutrient supplementation where indicated. Wounds and physical injuries will increase nutrient requirements during recovery, with consideration of longer-term nutrition centered on a nutritionally balanced diet is needed.

### **Current Resources Offered:**

There is some initial advocacy for transition services for women escaping traffickers, but there is still a lot of work that needs to be done in order to meet the complex needs of adults with experiences in ST. As of February 20, 2023, Senate Bill 5114 was passed in the Washington State Senate; and it is currently in the House waiting to be read on the floor. If this bill is successfully passed, it would direct money from the Office of Crime Victims Advocacy to create the first Washington network of healing, support, and transition services.

Since the pandemic, ST exposed many to violent situations with an extreme lack of availability of resources and freedom outside of the hands of buyers. Criminals have been adjusting to the "new normal" created by the pandemic as well as their business model that comes along with human trafficking. The resources that are offered to these



victims and the money funded is being put into organizations like REST, WARN, and WASE, etc<sup>2</sup>.

To gather quantitative data, we compared several reports performed nationally to investigate the level of nutrition availability.

### **Secondary Data Analysis of Target Population:**

Some key statistics within the past recent years were in 2019 there were 265 cases involving human trafficking. In 2020 there were 239 cases and in 2021 there were 233 and within each of these cases as well as with any other human trafficking victims there were common health issues seen within each and a lot of them experienced food insecurity and poor nutritional practices during their trafficking<sup>17</sup>.



Fig. 1: Locations of Sex Trafficking in Washington State:  
<https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/2019%20Washington%20State%20Report.pdf>.

### Qualitative data windshield survey:

To assess the availability of food access to these women, we performed a windshield survey on Aurora Ave between intersections at 80th Street and 130th Street. This section of Seattle, specifically the highway Aurora Avenue North, is colloquially associated with higher numbers of ST cases and prostitution with an estimate of 300

women trafficked daily and a 34% increase in the number of minors seen on Aurora Ave N. During this survey, we found (as of 2/20/2023):

- types and availability of grocery stores and restaurants: approximately 20 restaurants
  - 9 of them being fast food restaurants
  - 1 grocery store
  - 6 gas stations/convenience stores.
- the built environment: One of the more dangerous roads in Seattle Washington for pedestrians and drivers.
- Health services: There are zero health services within this location.
- Community organizations and programs:
- 1 church: Iglesia Pentecostes Vida Abundante

We also know that this area does contain volunteers from various Seattle non-profit organizations (REST, the Genesis Project, WARN, etc.) who offer “care packages” to ST women, including hygiene supplies, nail polish, and single-serving pre-packaged snacks.

Based on these findings, it is necessary that the county continues to direct efforts towards transition services, especially involving food and nutrition. Because we did not feel safe directly asking the women what their access to nutrition was, we turned to our key informants, Benjamin Gauen and Kerri O’Ferrell.

### **Key Informants:**

Benjamin Gauen is a Senior Deputy Prosecuting Attorney with the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, who focuses on crimes related to ST. He has nearly 10 years of extensive felony trial experience specializing in cases involving sex trafficking, sexual assault, child abuse, and domestic violence. Ben leads his office's involvement in the Ending Exploitation Collaborative (EEC) in King County. The EEC's survivor-informed, multi sector approach has resulted in concrete changes in criminal justice practices, technological interventions, and workplace policies that reduce victimization and hold sex buyers accountable.

Ben is a member of several anti-trafficking task forces in Washington State and frequently works with policy makers around the United States in an effort to help victims.

His insight into the severity of the ST issue in King County reaffirms that this population deserves more help from the county to put an end to ST. Because of the limited funds assisting organizations have access to, organizations are limited on their access to food support. Nutrition education during a victim’s transition out of ST needs to be emphasized, as many do not have prior knowledge of federal food assistance programs. If Senate Bill 5114 successfully passes, Gauen would like to see the addition of nutrition education and access to food improved.<sup>1</sup> Coming from a situation where they have no control over their daily life, offering information about nutrition education, skills, using SNAP, etc. are all ways that would help to improve adequate knowledge about fueling their body to be healthy.

Kerri O’Ferrell, head of media outreach for Real Escape from the Sex Trade (REST), who was able to provide us some insight into the limited nutrition resources REST currently can provide. REST is a Christian organization that works to bridge critical resources and ST women together by establishing loving relationships through a needs-based model. During our zoom call, we discussed:

- Food accessibility and (if any) support currently offered
- Single women supporting young children
- If there is any current RD (registered dietician) affiliated with REST
- Any additional nutrition support REST would like to see from the county
- Cooking skills/nutrition education currently provided

The problems circulating food insecurity and quality for this population are serious and can cause lasting implications for mental and physical health. O’Ferrell informed us that many women are often deprived of proper nutrition and sleep from their traffickers until the woman’s daily quota is met, and if not met they are told they are “unworthy” of food and sleep— even though these are two human rights that are necessary for survival.

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<sup>1</sup> As written in February 2023. Effective July 23, 2023, Substitute Senate Bill 5114 will direct money from the Office of Crime Victims Advocacy to create the first Washington network of healing, support, and transition services.

Although there is some food support offered to women in REST safe houses, REST does not prioritize nutrition education and food support to the extent O’Ferrell believes women need. This is primarily due to limited funds. Currently, REST offers initial food access and can connect women to other resources around the Seattle area through their Pathways Services Center. Here, women are able to rest, get snacks, a hot meal, and the opportunity to get some clothing and hygiene items, and contact information for other resources. Hiring a full-time dietician would be the next step for increasing the level of personalized care.

A new addition to their outreach is the REST Community Advocates, who work directly with women in the process of escaping to provide them additional support through grocery gift cards and free grocery delivery. Unfortunately, the services and support Community Advocates are not standard practice. The stigma and criminalization of these women has hindered access to available nutrition support. As criminal charges affect eligibility for food assistance programs, many women escaping ST in Washington are unable to afford adequate amounts of food.

REST and other survivor support organizations would greatly benefit from being able to hire a registered dietician to provide nutrition education and counseling to this community. As both Gauen and O’Ferrell alluded to, traffickers tell the women when and what they are allowed to eat (if at all). Since many enter trafficking rings from an early age, it is likely that they have always experienced extreme food insecurity. There are many long-term implications surrounding potential future disordered eating/eating disorder behaviors based on their relationships with food before escaping.

### **Discussion and Conclusion:**

The sex trafficking circles tend to recruit young, underage girls from the age of 11 to 15 years old who come from a background of food insecurity, trauma, previous sexual abuse, and depression, raising the risk of developing an association with a trafficker who promises them a better life— many are not able to escape until older than 30. Life after escaping the sex trade can manifest a multitude of related socioeconomic and health setbacks in their life— food insecurity and poor nutritional practices are often overlooked despite being a crucial determinant of the survivor’s feeling of independence after escaping.

By providing this community needs assessment, we hope to communicate how increasing the budget spent on transitional nutrition education, counseling, and partnered meal/food services can help survivors transition to a life after sex trafficking. Also asking the office of crime victims advocacy to increase the funding going towards survivors and organizations by \$100,000 annually. By increasing the funds, it could help with funding in regard to getting a RD on site and improve food access.

## **Appendix B.**

### **Honors Symposium Presentation on “Human Trafficking and Nutrition: Assessing the Effects of U.S. Public Policy on Food Security and the Malnourishment of Human-Trafficked Refugees”**

**Moxie McCandless**

**Presented on May 11, 2023**

#### **Panel Description:**

##### **Hungry for Power**

Traditionally, power in the United States has been a self-perpetuating structure. Dominant groups within the country define the parameters and restrict opportunities. Access to power – or lack thereof – often becomes embedded in society, ranging from policy application to institutional perception. If left unchallenged, therefore, the constructs of power in the United States will only escalate the already problematic social division that currently exists. This panel seeks to interrogate these invisible hierarchies of power through the disciplinary lenses of sociology, philosophy, and public health. Each panelist’s research provides differently useful approaches toward dismantling them, from their construction to their impact.

Traditionally, the United States has experienced a self-sustaining system of power where influential factions within the country establish boundaries and limit opportunities to outsiders. The ability to wield power, or the absence of it, frequently becomes deeply ingrained in society, affecting everything from policy implementation to how institutions perceive individuals. If this situation goes unchallenged, the existing social divisions in the United States will only worsen as the structures of power continue to exacerbate the problem.

When we examine the issue of the lack of food support for human trafficked refugees in the United States, we see a clear manifestation of the unequal distribution of power and its impact on various marginalized communities. It is no secret that those who wield power tend to shape policies and dictate the allocation of resources. Unfortunately, in this case, the voices and needs of human trafficked refugees have been largely ignored, leaving them in a constant state of food insecurity and vulnerability.

Limited language, cultural barriers, employment certifications, potential criminal records, and unconscious bias are some of the reasons for the low use of current in place programs. The lack of adequate food support for these survivors is not an isolated incident but rather a symptom of the larger systemic inequalities that persist in our society. It is a reflection of the barriers faced by marginalized communities in accessing basic resources and services, perpetuated by the entrenched power structures that define the parameters of assistance and restrict opportunities.

The unequal distribution of power not only affects policy implementation but also influences the institutional perception of certain groups.

When power remains concentrated in the hands of a few, it creates a narrative that frames these individuals as disposable, unworthy of the support and resources they desperately need. This narrative further entrenches their marginalization and perpetuates their food insecurity.

If we are to address the issue at its core, we must challenge the structures of power and redefine the parameters that define our society. The plight of human trafficked refugees is deeply intertwined with their food insecurity.

Often arriving in the United States with limited resources, these individuals face immense challenges in rebuilding their lives. The trauma they have endured, coupled with their lack of social support networks, makes their journey towards recovery even more arduous. Food, a basic necessity of life, becomes a pressing concern for these

survivors, yet our system falls woefully short in providing them with adequate long term assistance.

In recent years, the U.S. government has taken a number of steps to address food insecurity among refugees through a variety of public policies and programs. These policies range from nutrition assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. There are also programs aimed at improving access to healthy foods, such as the Healthy Food Financing Initiative and the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000.

Despite these efforts, food insecurity remains a persistent problem among the refugee population. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the issue, with many refugees losing their jobs and experiencing economic hardship. Language barriers, cultural differences, and limited access to transportation can all make it difficult for refugees to gain access food assistance programs and resources. As many survivors of human trafficking have had immediate needs met under various programs and policies, there remains a lack of support for long-term needs including mental health care, permanent housing, and financial aid.

Programs such as REST, Genesis Project, and WARN provide immediate food resources, however are currently unable to provide more than six months of care from the victim's initial extraction. For women, There is some initial advocacy for such transition services, but there is still a lot of work that needs to be done in order to meet the complex needs of adults with experiences in Sex Trafficking. Senate Bill 5114 was introduced on January 9, 2023 and after several substitutions and readings, 5114 passed both Washington State chambers, with unanimous third reading support. Effective July 23, 2023, Substitute Senate Bill 5114 will direct money from the Office of Crime Victims Advocacy to create the first Washington network of healing, support, and transition services.

Hopefully, this creates more opportunity for victims of sex trafficking to gain more long term food support during their transition out of the trade. As this is an association



uncommonly studied, my review used a thematic synthesis methodology process to describe ways of analyzing the findings of various studies in order to generate new themes and knowledge links around the findings of the original studies.

In the case of assessing the intersection between U.S. domestic policy and human-trafficked refugees, the question of how U.S. domestic policy impacts human-trafficked refugees in terms of access to services and support was used as the base for this search. Over 400 articles about food insecurity, human trafficking, immigration, and domestic policy resulted in emerging themes of accessibility, agency, culture, and health.

This topic is extremely multifaceted, and could not be completely addressed in one research paper, let alone this presentation.

If this information sparks something in you as it did for me, I encourage you to investigate the exhaustive barriers refugees and human trafficked victims face.

Today, I can only offer a suggestion: increase the access to government public funds through the reduction of eligibility requirements.

In March of this year, millions of people across much of the United States began confronting cuts in their food stamp allotments, with March 1st signifying the end of pandemic-era emergency hunger relief. An additional \$3 billion more per month was given to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Understandably, significant concern is being given to the anticipated increase in poverty rates and the looming hunger cliff for many when the financial aid decreases this summer. Poor households with immigrants will be among those forced to make hard choices between food and other survival needs, with resulting food insecurity leading to poor health outcomes. This affects not only these individuals but their broader communities.

This is particularly the case for immigrant households with children, which are less likely to access SNAP benefits than the U.S. born children. Since 1996, federal law has limited certain noncitizens' access to government funded public benefits, including SNAP. These restrictions, including a five-year waiting period before lawful permanent

residents (green-card holders) can access benefits, vary not only by immigration status but also by benefit program. Unauthorized immigrants remain ineligible for federally funded food assistance, as they were before the 1996 law.

To estimate the impact of the restrictions on immigrants' eligibility for federally funded SNAP, a report done by the Migration Policy Institute using data from the US Census reports explored how many would have been eligible if not for the 1996 change in law that made many lawfully present immigrants no longer eligible.

The exercise found that restoration to pre-1996 standards would mean that about 1.2 million more people would be in households where all members are immigration-status eligible for federally funded SNAP—up from the present 6.6 million. (it is important to note that these numbers do not account for state-funded programs that extend eligibility for some noncitizens. But again, this is state dependent).

An increasing number of legislators have suggested this regulation be lifted, either partially or completely, because of the harms of limiting safety nets for low-income families. One such congressional proposal is the Lifting Immigrant Families Through Benefits Access Restoration Act of 2021, or LIFT the BAR Act, which was introduced by U.S. Representative Pramila Jayapal (D-WA) and, as of February 2023, had 100 Democratic co-sponsors. Under this proposed bill, immigrants holding a legal status would have access to public benefits, including SNAP, without a five-year waiting period, provided they meet other program-specific requirements. This would be a huge step to addressing the prevalent issue of food insecurity. Aside from any changes, this may be enacted in 2024.

So, What? This seems straight forward—right? Increase access to food assistance— Why hasn't this already been done?

It comes down to lack of information within our government. Food insecurity is a known problem, however as a basic human need, it is not addressed to the level it should be.

Moving forward, it is clear that the potential food assistance laws within our local, state, and federal bodies of power need public advocacy to raise awareness and demand this issue to be addressed in legislative chambers.

The lack of food support for human trafficked refugees in the United States is not an isolated issue, but rather a consequence of ignorance and oversight within our government representatives.

My study highlights the intersection between U.S. domestic policy and human-trafficked refugees, and identifies areas where policy changes and advocacy efforts may be needed to improve their access to services and support.

By empowering marginalized communities, including human trafficked refugees, and involving them in decision-making processes, we can create a more just and equitable society where the basic needs of all individuals, regardless of their background, are met.

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## Appendix A.

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