![Community Psychology — Social Justice Through Collaborative Research and Action](logo)

How to Move Policy on Human Trafficking

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Human trafficking is a critical social issue. There are high levels of chronic trauma among survivors of human trafficking, who have been forced into labor or service. Research suggests the use of trauma-informed practice in both prevention and intervention.

Figure 1 Image by needpix.com. Public Domain

This study looked at bills introduced to the United States Congress between 1989 and 2016 that used keywords related to human trafficking, trauma, and research use.

> "Laws may use research evidence or processes that can have an indirect impact on trauma survivors."

The number of proposed laws that reference human trafficking have increased since 1989, and the use of research and trauma language in those bills have also increased. Though bills that included trauma-focused language rarely led to sweeping policy changes, bills that used research language were more likely to pass out of Committee and be enacted.

Highlights

Proposed human trafficking laws may be most successful in using research to guide the use of trauma-informed practice.

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Legislation using research language is more likely to pass out of Committee and become enacted.

In the future, it may be useful for legislators to use research to describe problems, identify solutions, and suggest future studies. Specifically, proposed human trafficking laws may be most successful in using research to guide the use of trauma-informed practice.

In addition to its social importance, human trafficking policy is of specific interest because we believed that research-based language would have a high likelihood of aligning with a trauma-based perspective. We were careful to consider risk and protective factors in the coding process because preventing human trafficking is just as important as responding to current victimization

Methods

We used searchable, full-text copies of bills to identify legislation (n = 1,056) introduced to Congress between 1989–2016. Selected legislation contained keywords relevant to both human trafficking and research. Trends in the use of trauma and research keywords were examined over time and used to predict the progress bills (e.g., whether they passed out of Committee). The content of the legislation was also analyzed to identify how research was used in the text.

Results

➢ The use of research evidence in human trafficking legislation, including references to trauma, has increased over time.

➢ Legislation that includes research methods or findings has the potential to support trauma-informed care, especially because legislation that uses research language may be more likely to become enacted than legislation using trauma language.

➢ Policies that require research processes such as program evaluation and evidence reviews to guide service delivery standards have the potential to support trauma-informed practices in ways that are consistent with and adapt to the most current, evolving empirical evolving empirical base.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: The work highlights the importance of building and fostering researcher-policymaker partnerships that can help build research into the language of legislation.

Social Action: This work suggests that research language may be particularly important in helping legislation move through the policy process.

Policy Makers: This work suggests that research language may be particularly important in helping legislation move through the policy process.