



Impacts & Ongoing Risks of Covid-19: Reflections & Insights of Support Organisations and Survivors in the USA

In April 2021, an online event brought together survivors of human trafficking and individuals working across the anti-trafficking sector (79 in total) to discuss the ongoing and future challenges faced by survivors due to Covid-19. This briefing provides an overview of discussions that took place and the reflections shared by attendees.

Participants were asked to reflect on the ongoing challenges faced by survivors as a result of the pandemic, to share examples of good practice of how the sector has met Covid-19 related challenges, and discuss ways forward to address ongoing and future issues as we transition out of the pandemic. The notes made during the breakout rooms have been collated and thematically categorised in the following pages. This event was held as part of an ongoing [UKRI-funded project](#) to assess the accrued risks, impacts and mitigating responses of Covid-19 for victims and survivors of human trafficking.

It is important to note that the following reflections are the *perspectives* of participants based on their own views or experiences and are not necessarily representative of the whole sector or the whole survivor community.

The key themes covered in this briefing include:

A. [Recommendations for action](#)

B. [Examples of good practice to address challenges posed by pandemic](#)

C. Reflections on –

- [The impact of the pandemic on psychological health](#)
- [The benefits and challenges of providing online support](#)
- [The impact of the pandemic on physical health and safety](#)
- [The impact of the pandemic on housing](#)
- [The impact of the pandemic on funding for anti-trafficking organisations](#)
- [The impact of the pandemic on exploitation and re-exploitation](#)

D. [Ongoing risks faced by survivors](#)



Recommendations for action

Participants were asked to discuss what action needs to be taken, and by whom, to address the ongoing risks facing survivors as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of these issues needing to be addressed were present before the outbreak of Covid-19 but have been exacerbated because of the pandemic. The following policy and practice responses were suggested:

Recommendation	
Ensure workplace safety	<p>Federal/State Agencies</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Make workplaces less precarious and enforce PPE requirements. Hold industries to account so that those who cannot work remotely are protected.
Reform funding processes	<p>Federal Agencies</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ensure grant funding flexibilities and mutual aid are factored into future funding opportunities to ensure vulnerable communities are not left behind or left out of the conversation after the pandemic. 2. Re-examine funding application processes to assess whether they are more complicated than they need to be, and simplify them if necessary. <p>NGOs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Ensure better emergency planning processes are in place, for instance, creating reserve funding in the case of additional emergencies to ensure continuity of support for survivors.
Support survivors to be vaccinated	<p>NGOs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote the vaccine among the survivor community and provide access and support for survivors to be vaccinated.
Meet the psychological needs of survivors and allies	<p>NGOs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adopt a trauma-informed approach and highlight the importance of trauma reduction when providing support for survivors. Model some of the solutions that were used after Hurricane Katrina and other disasters to address ongoing complex trauma that will continue months after the pandemic. 2. Continue discussions on the provision of the suitability of in-person versus online mental health support for survivors as more discussion about mental health support for survivors is needed. 3. Prioritise and promote self-care, not just for survivors but service providers and allies working in the anti-trafficking sector to prevent burnout caused by the pandemic.



<p>Provide online safety</p>	<p>Federal/State Agencies</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Keep children safe online by making social media and online gaming systems more accountable. Put in place policies that safeguard children online. <p>NGOs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Ensure the safety of survivors when offering remote services, such as assessing whether survivors in situations of trafficking are able to speak freely when receiving mental health or case management support.
<p>Provide ongoing support for long-term survivors</p>	<p>NGOs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reach out to long-term survivors as they may be facing new vulnerabilities because of the pandemic. <i>Discussions indicated that recently trafficked survivors were being prioritised by support organisations and therefore long-term survivors were at risk of being de-prioritised.</i> 2. Provide longer-term support for survivors, including mentorship programmes, rather than setting a pre-determined timeframe for ending support.

Examples of good practice

Examples of interventions that have been implemented	
<p>Financial assistance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An organisation that supports survivors said that they were given lots of funding to support women. ▪ Covid-19 grants were offered to an organisation working with survivors in Maine.
<p>Looking after the safety & psychological wellbeing of staff</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ New rules were implemented by a team of researchers to make sure staff had the necessary breaks and were able to call one another for support. ▪ Healthcare staff adopted a Telehealth model during the pandemic but later adopted a hybrid model. These changes were stressful for healthcare providers so they held weekly meetings for its staff, offered one another support, and offered volunteer psychology services. ▪ An organisation based in Arizona ensured that all service providers had PPE and so far this has protected staff/volunteers.
<p>Medical care</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A university in Florida found that Telehealth trends led them to carry out a hybrid model of online and in-person support enabling patients to decide which support they opt for.



Survivor voice & representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ An organisation based in Hawaii working with survivor youth started a podcast for survivor voices.▪ There have been more discussions about representation due to wider dialogue on equity and inclusion that took place during the pandemic. This has helped empower individuals that may not have felt as visible or represented before.
Outreach and collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Street outreach has been effective as the business of sex trafficking has increased (in Virginia).▪ There has been a lot of social media outreach to survivors and telecommunication via Zoom (in Virginia).▪ Street outreach has been undertaken (in Arizona) in collaboration with other organisations including shelter programmes in areas with high prevalence of trafficking. Sharing the risk and impacts related to Covid-19 pandemic has been really helpful for these organisations working together.▪ An organisation that works with survivors in Arizona, have been working on identifying outreach communities who are at an increased risk of trafficking and they have also been working in collaboration with the Victim of Trafficking Unit which is part of the police department.

Reflections on: The impact on psychological health

<p>Mental health of survivors worsened</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ For some survivors the pandemic was very traumatic, particularly for those who lost a relative. Almost everyone knows someone who died. ▪ Psychological challenges along with other vulnerabilities have been exacerbated by the pandemic, which adds another layer of vulnerability for survivors. ▪ People have been in isolation for over a year and, subsequently, more people will need mental health support.
<p>Intersection between mental health and other factors such as poverty, housing, racism and employment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Support organisations discussed the impact of intersecting factors such as housing, poverty and mental health during the pandemic. ▪ Black Lives Matter protests during the pandemic caused a lot of anxiety for some survivors. ▪ The mental health needs of survivors need to be normalised and accepted by employers.
<p>On the brink of 'burnout': Survivors and allies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Concerns were raised that some survivors, service providers, anti-trafficking researchers and allies were at the point of 'burnout' as a result of the pandemic. ▪ The importance of trauma-informed support was highlighted. ▪ The importance of self-care for survivors, service providers and allies was also highlighted. One participant stated that provider burnout was 'REAL'. ▪ A university staff member and a survivor reported that mental health care was accessible online but that there were survivors who stopped wanting to engage due to 'burnout'.

Reflections on: The benefits and challenges of providing online support

<p>Provision of online support enabled access to support services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some participants believed that the switch to online methods of support increased survivors' access to services such as legal support. ▪ Online support increased access to services for some survivors, e.g. the provision of online mental health services increased access by removing the need for survivors to travel to (and pay for transportation to) appointments. ▪ Those who were concerned about contracting Covid-19 preferred to access medical care online. ▪ It has been possible for survivors to attend training and access services online e.g. free online seminars were accessed online (by a survivor) which they hope will build their employment credentials. ▪ The switch to using Zoom (the online conferencing platform), which began as a result of the introduction of the shelter-in-place order (<i>see for example,</i>
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	<p><i>in California</i> - https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/03/19/governor-gavin-newsom-issues-stay-at-home-order/), enabled survivors to have more access to legal support. This was described as a ‘transformative moment’ for survivors in rural settings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Justice and legal institutions all switched to Zoom and this enabled a lot more victims of human trafficking to seek support compared to before the pandemic, because in the past they may not have felt safe or may not have had access to childcare or transportation to be able to avail of legal services. ▪ Male identifying and survivors from the LGBTQ community started to engage with a podcast for survivor voices. ▪ The ability to offer online, in-person support or a combination of the two was considered by an organisation as having been helpful. ▪ Moving online meant that more meetings took place with more people being able to participate.
Reduction of face-to-face support hindered access to support services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ According to a survivor, accessing support from organisations was difficult during the pandemic with some organisations disappearing/becoming uncontactable. ▪ Organisations were hard to contact because staff were working from home. ▪ Lack of childcare for caseworkers working from home hindered their ability to provide the same level of support for survivors.
Preference for in-person support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Survivors preferred to access medical care in-person according to an organisation based in Florida. ▪ According to one organisation, the youth they worked with preferred in-person sessions. ▪ Telehealth (the provision of healthcare to an individual via remote support of healthcare professionals) did not seem to be working for the survivor populations according to one organisation.
Support for long-term survivors needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It was observed that services are being cut for ‘long-term’ survivors (survivors who have exited exploitation a long time ago). ▪ A survivor described how they lost touch with support services because they were considered self-sufficient and no longer in need of support in the same way. They said that ‘a phone call could have changed a lot’. They felt that they did not want to disappoint the organisation by returning for support.

Reflections on: The impact of the pandemic on physical health and safety

Fears around contracting Covid-19 in public-facing jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some survivors were afraid to take public-facing jobs especially if they had children.
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Increase in cases of domestic violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There was an increase in domestic violence during the pandemic e.g. financial dependence on a partner made it difficult to leave situations of abuse. ▪ Lockdown, court filings and laws (introduced during the pandemic to limit housing evictions) made it difficult for survivors to leave situations of abuse. ▪ A survivor took legal action against their partner due to domestic violence that took place during the pandemic.
Increase in substance misuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An increase in substance misuse was observed, as a way of coping with the pandemic. ▪ Lives have been lost due to overdoses.
Law enforcement's availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Law enforcement's availability decreased during the pandemic and their response was not as immediate due to concerns with coming into contact with Covid-19. This created a barrier to the provision of survivor support.
Online safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There have been no safeguards in place to protect children online during the pandemic.

Reflections on: The impact of the pandemic on housing

Need for affordable housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One support organisation stated that affordable housing had been listed as one of the first and foremost impacts on survivors. ▪ Accessing affordable housing was, and remains, a challenge for survivors exiting trafficking situations. ▪ Survivors with jobs found it challenging to secure affordable housing.
Shelters at reduced capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A lot of shelter programmes ran at reduced capacity during the pandemic. ▪ Safe houses that were available were afraid to take people in due to risk of Covid-19 transmission and are still trying to figure out how to open their doors again.
Homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some survivors did not have places to sleep during the pandemic, e.g. a survivor seeking shelter did not have ID and was turned away by the homeless shelter as a result. ▪ An organisation that provides a shelter for children who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation or sex trafficking stated that some youth wanted to go back to the streets. ▪ However, the suspension in evictions helped protect survivors from homelessness.

Reflections on: The impact of the pandemic on funding for anti-trafficking organisations

Funding for anti-trafficking work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some grants and/or funding sources were more flexible during the pandemic, but funding does not always go where it is needed. ▪ Grant applications are more complicated than they need to be. ▪ A 'one size fits all' funding stream is problematic and mutual aid and grant funding flexibilities were identified as important to ensure that needs are met whether they align with funding criterion or not, as well as looking at more cooperative ways of meeting the needs of the survivor community. ▪ A lot of funding was allocated but not to those who support people of colour. ▪ There was no emergency fund specifically for survivor-led organisations and for those that support people of colour.
How organisations make use of funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A lot of organisations receive grant money and it is often not allocated appropriately to give people the funding they need to survive or it is not given to the correct population (as in the one that would benefit most from it). ▪ The importance of cash assistance was highlighted.

Reflections on: The impact of the pandemic on exploitation / re-exploitation

Increase in trafficking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An organisation stated that people calling their hotline had increased by 150% during the pandemic. ▪ There were more victims of sex trafficking - this was thought to be connected to how everything moved online. ▪ Sex trafficking in Virginia significantly increased during the pandemic. ▪ An organisation reported a rise in youth being referred to their service and more people were referred by Homeland Security.
Re-exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One participant noted that re-exploitation through labour increased during the pandemic. ▪ A survivor participant stated that it was tempting to go back into phone (sex) work – possibly for the money - and felt that 'this is what I am, what I deserve'. ▪ Not enough organisations reached out to check on how survivors were doing and this was seen as one of the reasons why so many survivors have relapsed due to the mental health crisis caused by the pandemic. ▪ Concerns were raised that individuals may 'relapse' if organisations that support them do not get allocated necessary funding.

Ongoing risks faced by survivors

Participants were asked about the ongoing risks facing survivors as the USA begins to transition out of the pandemic. Participants anticipated that the impact to survivors' **psychological health and wellbeing** due to the Covid-19 pandemic would be ongoing. Even though the situation has improved in terms of the rates of infection of Covid-19, an increase in anxiety among survivors was noted. Plans to continue the blending of physical and mental healthcare (e.g. [Washington State Medicaid](#) - a government health insurance programme for individuals with limited resources) were a cause of concern for those who observed that Telehealth had not been working for the survivor community.

Participants identified that **a lack of access to the vaccine** for certain survivors, such as those who are homeless, was also an ongoing risk.

Participants highlighted that survivors' **financial status** could be negatively impacted in the timeframe when government assistance ends but job opportunities remain limited.

Housing survivors was also identified by participants as an ongoing risk. In particular, concerns were raised about housing survivors once the eviction moratorium ends. Some participants also stated that shelters were still at full capacity and others discussed the unaffordability of housing for survivors (more generally), which has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Participants discussed how **long-term survivors are at risk of being left behind** as support services for this group was cut during the pandemic. Concerns were raised that opportunities e.g. gaining qualifications, could be limited to recently trafficked survivors and that those who left situations of trafficking prior to the pandemic may get side-lined.

Both **transitioning back to in-person support** and **continuing online support** were identified as factors that could negatively impact survivors as the USA transitions out of the pandemic. For instance, concerns were raised that Telehealth had not been effective for all survivors but was likely to be continued in some locations. On the other hand, it was anticipated by participants that the return to in-person services may hinder access for survivors, especially in terms of coming forward for legal support.

Participants highlighted that certain **forms of exploitation had been enabled by online methods** e.g. sex trafficking and labour trafficking, and expected that this would be an ongoing risk that would need to be mitigated. Particular focus was given to the online safety of children and youth.

The partners working with the Rights Lab on this project include the University of Sheffield, the Survivor Alliance, the International Anti-Human Trafficking Network (IAHTN), the Human Trafficking Foundation (HTF), Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX) and Anti-Slavery International / the Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group (ATMG). The research team were supported by a Survivor Alliance Research Advisory Group. The research team is grateful to the UKRI for funding this project. For further information about the project, please contact Vicky Brotherton at vicky.brotherton@nottingham.ac.uk

Further written materials stemming from this research will be published in due course here:

<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/research-projects/covid-19-risk-and-response-impacts-and-mitigations-for-modern-slavery-victims-and-survivors.aspx>