INCREASING THE POLICY-RELEVANCE OF RESEARCH ON ATROCITY PREVENTION STRATEGIES AND TOOLS

Toward a 10-year collaborative research program

RAPPORTEUR'S REPORT JUNE 2024

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FOR THE PREVENTION OF GENOCIDE

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teaches that the Holocaust was preventable and that by
heeding warning signs and taking early action, individuals
and governments can save lives. With this knowledge,
the **Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide**
works to do for the victims of genocide today what the
world failed to do for the Jews of Europe in the 1930s
and 1940s. The mandate of the Simon-Skjodt Center is
to alert the United States' national conscience, influence
policy makers, and stimulate worldwide action to prevent
and work to halt acts of genocide or related crimes against
humanity, and advance justice and accountability. Learn
more at **ushmm.org/genocide-prevention.**

COVER: Attendees engage in a discussion at the June 2024 research
agenda workshop. *Leigh Vogel for US Holocaust Memorial Museum*

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OVERVIEW

On June 7, 2024, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide convened leading social scientists, policy makers, and funders of policy-relevant research for a one-day workshop to explore how the Center should contribute its staff resources and research budget to improving policy-relevant research about atrocity prevention strategies and tools. Participants discussed the following topics:

- Positive examples of research informing policy on atrocity prevention and general lessons to be drawn from these cases;
- Key obstacles to policy-relevant atrocity prevention research, including gaps in the topics covered by the literature, obstacles to inference about the effects of atrocity prevention policy actions, and obstacles to synthesizing findings from a large body of studies; and
- Strategies to increase the volume, relevance, quality, and impact on policy of atrocity prevention research.

This rapporteur's report summarizes the workshop's key themes in accordance with the Chatham House rule of non-attribution.

INTRODUCTION

Simon-Skjodt Center staff presented key findings from the Museum's "Tools for Atrocity Prevention" systematic review and surveyed obstacles to policy-relevant atrocity prevention research. They described how policy makers do not encounter "average" cases of mass atrocities. Thus, research identifying factors that are associated with greater likelihood of a tool's success is more policy-relevant than research estimating a tool's average effects. The overall conclusions about existing atrocity prevention research included topical gaps in research coverage, difficulty measuring the causal effects of atrocity prevention actions, and obstacles to synthesis.

Positive examples of research informing policy

Participants mentioned work by specific scholars, including Frances Stewart's research on horizontal inequalities and development assistance,[1] Benjamin Valentino's research on atrocity perpetrator strategy and rationality,[2] and Dara Cay Cohen's research on sexual violence,[3] as having contributed to shifts in understanding of core issues related to mass atrocities.

Another participant cited the move away from the notion that "ancient hatreds" cause mass atrocities towards research linking a variety of risk factors to mass atrocity onset as a successful example of scholars informing policy and broader understandings.

Multiple participants discussed the Political Instability Task Force (PITF) as a research effort that likely informed policy.[4] However, one participant described that while scholars know PITF outputs were circulated throughout the US government, they do not know if it affected policy outcomes. They suggested that producing an after-action research report on PITF's efficacy could produce useful lessons.

One participant mentioned the Oxford Guidance on the Law Relating to Humanitarian Relief Operations, developed by the Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict and the Oxford Martin Programme on Human Rights for Future Generations, as an additional example of research that helped inform policy and led to further academic and policy collaboration.[5]

Closing this session, one participant cautioned scholars against pursuing the questions that policy makers want them to answer rather than drawing attention to issues that policy makers should be thinking about. Another participant cautioned against the misalignment between policy makers' and researchers' motivation and desired outputs for certain projects, citing the Global Terrorism Database as one effort where those goals may have been in tension.[6]

TOPICAL GAPS

A forward-looking approach to addressing gaps

As the global environment continues to change, multiple participants suggested a forward-looking research approach focused on the future of mass atrocities. This would include identifying high-priority questions policy makers may confront in the years ahead, via methods such as structured scenario planning.

Participants described the following topics as gaps requiring more research attention, either through data collection and / or analysis:

- The effects of tools when used in different sequences or combinations
- Strategic aims of policy tools (e.g., structural and operational prevention)
- Analysis of more fine-grained categories of actions rather than broadly defined tools (e.g., for military interventions and for development assistance)
- An expanded atrocity prevention toolbox, including refugee assistance and protection, election assistance, diplomatic engagement, and tools aimed at curbing or addressing the spread of atrocity-motivated ideology and hate speech
- Unintended consequences of policy actions
- Population tolerance to mass atrocity episodes

- Atrocity prevention decision-making amid uncertainty and incomplete information
- Civilian resistance to mass atrocities
- Patterns of non-state armed groups committing atrocities and government actors committing atrocities in response to these apparent threats

OBSTACLES TO INFERENCE

Experimental and quasi-experimental methods

One participant described how quantitative empirical studies, particularly large-sample studies, provide an opportunity to examine causality for atrocity prevention interventions. They cited Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerje's work on the effects of global poverty interventions and Lisa Hultman's work on United Nations peacekeeping as models for this.[7]

Addressing gaps through mixed methods

Given the complex nature of mass atrocity cases, multiple participants suggested the need for mixed methods research to address decision-making and to identify specific factors related to the context in which tools are used and how the tools are designed. These methods may include qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) or analysis of differently structured quantitative data, such as network analysis.

Identifying questions for causal inference

One participant posed a series of questions that they said should be examined before considering which specific methods are most suitable for causal analysis of atrocity prevention action, including:

- What is the goal of causal inference?
- What is a non-atrocity episode?
- What does it mean for a policy to "work"?
- How should scholars promote "good policy"?

They also underscored the complex nature of atrocities, involving many different actors and occurring at different scales, and asked how researchers should identify the efficacy of the intervention in these shifting environments.

Concerns regarding causal inference

One participant noted that ethical considerations in this field make randomized controlled studies difficult, and they suggested an over-emphasis on causal inference may harm the field. Another participant said that scholars should be clear about the limitations of causal inference and clarify the role of scholarship in this space.

OBSTACLES TO SYNTHESIS

One participant noted that research efforts should focus on how research will be used rather than on research synthesis. Multiple participants noted that clear definitions of the conceptual space and specificity of how mass atrocity outcomes relate to other topics and fields would be useful. One participant said that scholars should avoid an idiosyncratic approach to identifying novel concepts and instead research topics that may nest and

embed into each other. However, they suggested this may not be feasible absent stronger incentives (e.g., via a major donor or journal editors) for individual scholars to adopt common concepts and definitions.

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THE POLICY RELEVANCE OF ATROCITY PREVENTION RESEARCH

Promoting diversity and inclusion

Participants agreed it is necessary to improve diversity and inclusion in this field. They suggested the Center provide fellowships and funding to individuals outside atrocity prevention networks in the Global North. To encourage participation from Global South scholars, one participant suggested that "in-region" workshops could be a useful alternative to DC convenings. Participants also suggested that scholars and organizations share best practices for overcoming visa obstacles for visiting fellows.

Focusing on the future of mass atrocities

A few participants disagreed about how applicable past research and research synthesis on atrocity prevention interventions are to the current context. Some asserted that most atrocity prevention research took place during a unique period of "liberal peacebuilding," which has been upended by increasing great power competition. Others suggested that, while global changes may make atrocity prevention more challenging, tools like diplomacy have not fundamentally changed.

Research on sequencing and combining atrocity prevention tools

Participants recommended multiple different efforts to advance research on the effects of atrocity prevention tools when used in different sequences and combinations, including (1) a database of atrocity prevention tools the Center outlined in one of its straw-man proposals; (2) "mixed-method" research that analyzes atrocity prevention decision-making using qualitative data and methods, such as QCA or configurational analysis, or differently-structured quantitative data, such as network analysis. Participants encouraged the Center to pursue a range of approaches rather than one centralized project to advance research in this area.

A formal ontology project

Multiple participants suggested that a formal ontology project would likely not catch on among researchers, short of much more funding than the Center's current resources permit.

Strengthening relationships and collaborations

Participants noted that regular scholar and policy maker convenings can help ensure a sustained commitment and collaboration for co-creating a research agenda. They described the Center as uniquely positioned to organize conversations in this space. Participants said repeated interactions with policy makers are helpful in informing policy practice.

Documenting policy decisions

Multiple participants suggested investing in an oral history collection of practitioners involved in atrocity policy decision-making. They suggested that the Museum could interview people in key atrocity prevention government positions when they leave government as well as practitioners from non-government organizations. Additionally, participants suggested that practitioners could collect insights on their activities

and policy aims to help research efforts later. Participants also described "after-action" reports about policy responses to specific episodes of potential or ongoing mass atrocities as a tool for documenting and circulating lessons learned.

Data collection

Multiple participants suggested that data collection about atrocity prevention tools would be constructive but time-consuming. They suggested that the Center needs to determine its purpose before pursuing a data collection effort, which would then inform the collection process.

Considering the cost of large-scale data collection efforts, participants suggested adding variables to existing datasets produced by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) project or the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). One participant said that for any data collection effort to spur significant new research, it must cover a substantial time period and be updated regularly, as was the case with the Correlates of War project, UCDP's armed conflict data, ACLED, and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data sets.[8] Participants suggested that data on more mass atrocity variables would be helpful.

One participant suggested that scholars help diplomatic missions collect data on their activities. The participant described how a toolkit to inform data collection on US development assistance activities and outcomes could be used internally and could offer opportunities for scholars. One participant suggested that scholars develop this data collection toolkit for one United States Agency for International Development mission as a pilot.

Multiple participants indicated their interest in the Center establishing standards for how policy and non-governmental organizations collect data about their activities. Participants also said that existing data collection efforts should be stored in a central repository so that scholars know what is already available.

Fellowships

Participants agreed that PhD fellowships in this field could inspire more policy-oriented scholarship and increased representation of Global South scholars. Participants suggested that Center-led, subject-specific workshops for PhD students on core concepts could foster further study in this field. Participants suggested multiple strategies that PhD workshops would advance, including interpersonal relationships between scholars and practitioners, defining atrocity prevention-related research challenges for PhD students to pursue, and building policy communication skills.

Participants cited the United States Institute of Peace's Peace Scholar Fellowship Program and the Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellowship for mid-career professionals as successful models for the Center to consider adapting.[9] They suggested that working across the career range would be useful. Other participants noted that Center fellowships could partner with federal agencies to give new scholars a policy perspective.

Publications

One participant suggested identifying or developing a blog to host policy-relevant work on atrocity prevention issues. Participants also suggested that the Center organize a special edition journal or essay series for practitioners to address identified topics related to the future of mass atrocities. To increase research

circulation, one participant suggested that paying for open-access journal articles could also increase the use of policy-relevant insights.

ENDNOTES

[1] See, e.g., Frances Stewart, "Horizontal Inequalities: A Neglected Dimension of Development," QEH Working Paper Series – QEHWPS81, 2002, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/24119604_Horizontal_Inequalities_A_Neglected_Dimension_of_Development.

[2] See, e.g., Benjamin Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the 20th Century,* Cornell University Press*,* 2005, https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9780801439650/final-solutions/#bookTabs=1.

[3] See Dara Cay Cohen's research on this topic here: https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty/dara-kay-cohen.

[4] Jack A. Goldstone et al., "A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability," *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 1 (January 2010): 190–208, https://www.systemicpeace.org/vlibrary/PITFForecastingInstabilityAJPS2010.pdf.

[5] "Oxford Guidance on the Law Relating to Humanitarian Relief Operations in Situations of Armed Conflict," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict, and the Oxford Martin Programme on Human Rights for Future Generations, 2016, https://www.elac.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/oxfordguidancepdfpdf.pdf.

[6] "Global Terrorism Database," University of Maryland, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, accessed June 2024, https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/.

[7] See, e.g., (1) "Understanding Development and Poverty Alleviation," The Committee for the Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, 2019, https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2019/10/advanced-economicsciencesprize2019.pdf; and (2) Lisa Hultman's research on United Nations peacekeeping: https://www.uu.se/en/contact-and-organisation/staff?query=N3-664.

[8] (1) "About the Correlates of War Project," accessed June 2024, https://correlatesofwar.org/; (2) "Uppsala Conflict Data Program," Department of Peace and Conflict Research, accessed June 2024, https://ucdp.uu.se/; and (3) "Datasets," V-Dem, accessed June 2024, https://www.v-dem.net/data/.

[9] (1) "Peace Scholar Fellowship Program," USIP, accessed, June 2024, https://www.usip.org/grants-fellowships/fellowships/peace-scholar-fellowship-program; and (2) "International Affairs Fellowship," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed June 2024, https://www.cfr.org/fellowships/international-affairs-fellowship.

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