

Occupational Therapy and Survivors of Sex Trafficking: A Scoping Review

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Rationale and Need for Review

- Human trafficking is global public health crisis
 - Second largest, rapidly expanding illicit enterprise
 - Asia-Pacific includes 29.3 million in modern slavery
 - Survivors experience disrupted occupational participation
 - High prevalence of trauma-related mental health needs
 - Occupational justice supports rights-based recovery
 - Occupational therapy (OT) evidence remains limited and diffuse
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Aim and Objectives

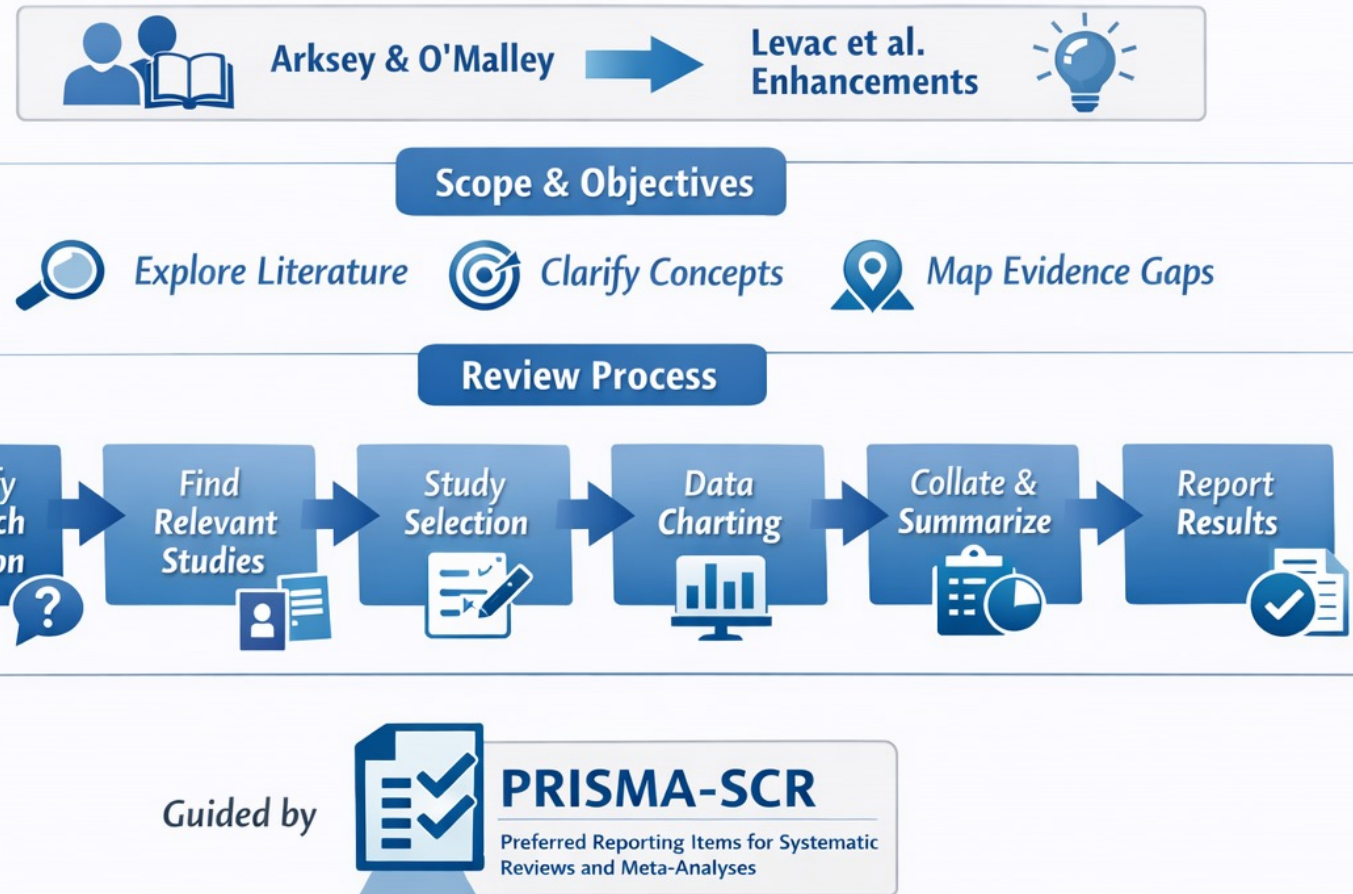
Aim

- To map occupational therapy roles using Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Model

Objectives

- Classify interventions across ecological system levels (Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem)
 - To describe occupational therapy roles and practice challenges in optimising survivor support
 - To identify gaps in the literature and inform future OT research
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Methodological Framework



Methods

Figure 1. Overview of the methodology

Methods

Criteria	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Study Type	Peer-reviewed empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, grey literature (e.g., government reports, policy documents, conference abstracts, book chapters, doctoral theses, dissertations)	Social media content
Population	Studies involving diverse populations (ages, genders/identities-expressions, nationalities)	Research focusing exclusively on other forms of trafficking without relevance to OT
Focus	Research exploring OT's role in physical, psychological, or social rehabilitation	Studies lacking methodological transparency
Research Design	Qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, case studies, conference abstracts, doctoral theses, and dissertations	Letters and literature reviews without clear methodological frameworks

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Methods



Figure 2. Research process overview

Results

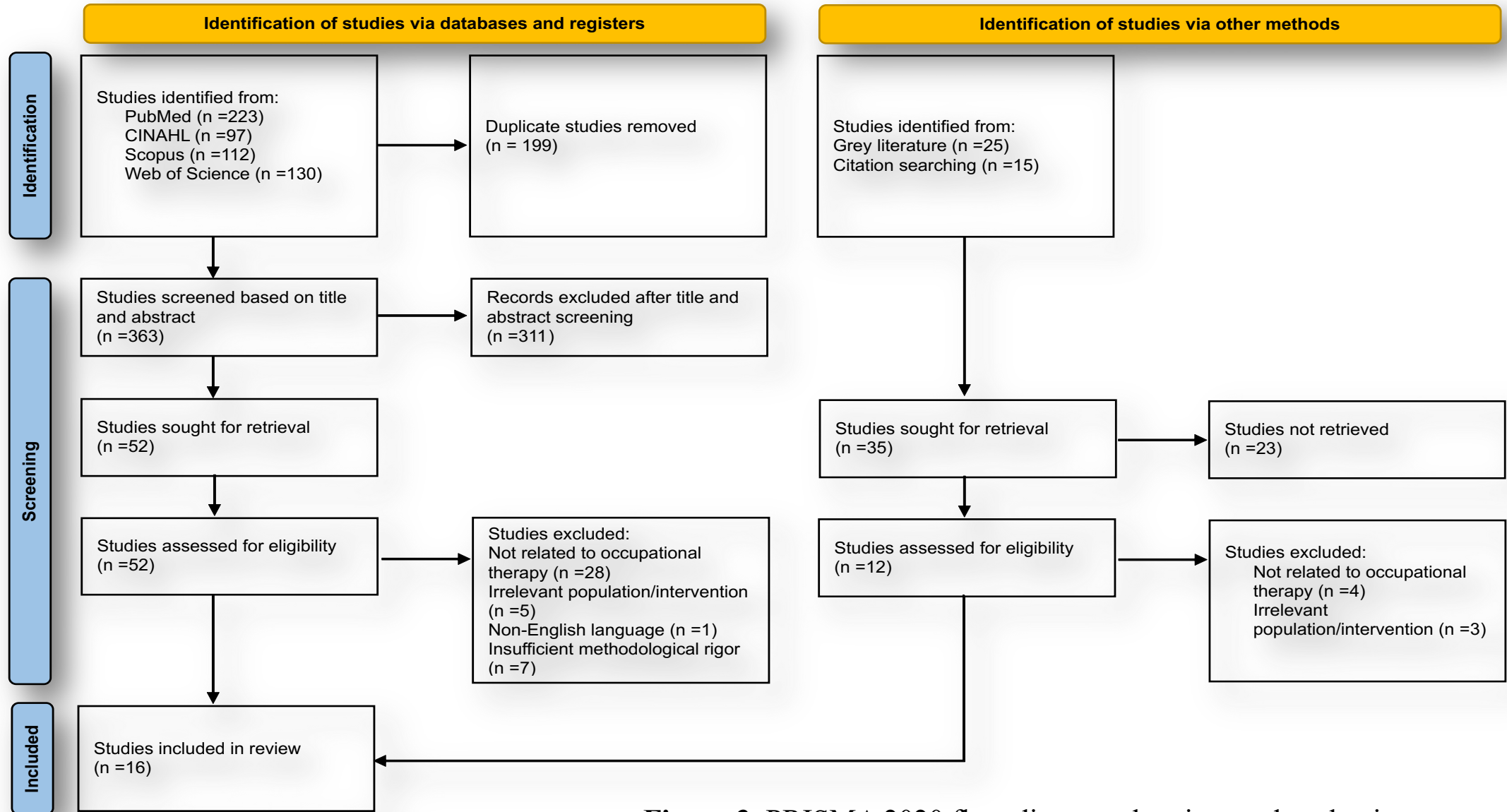
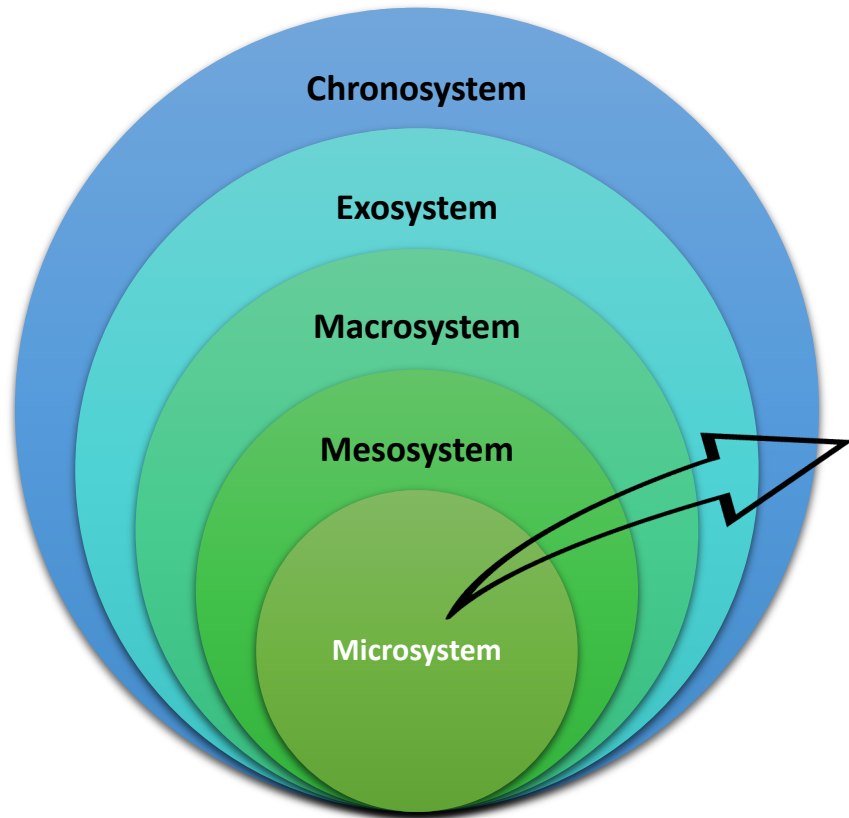


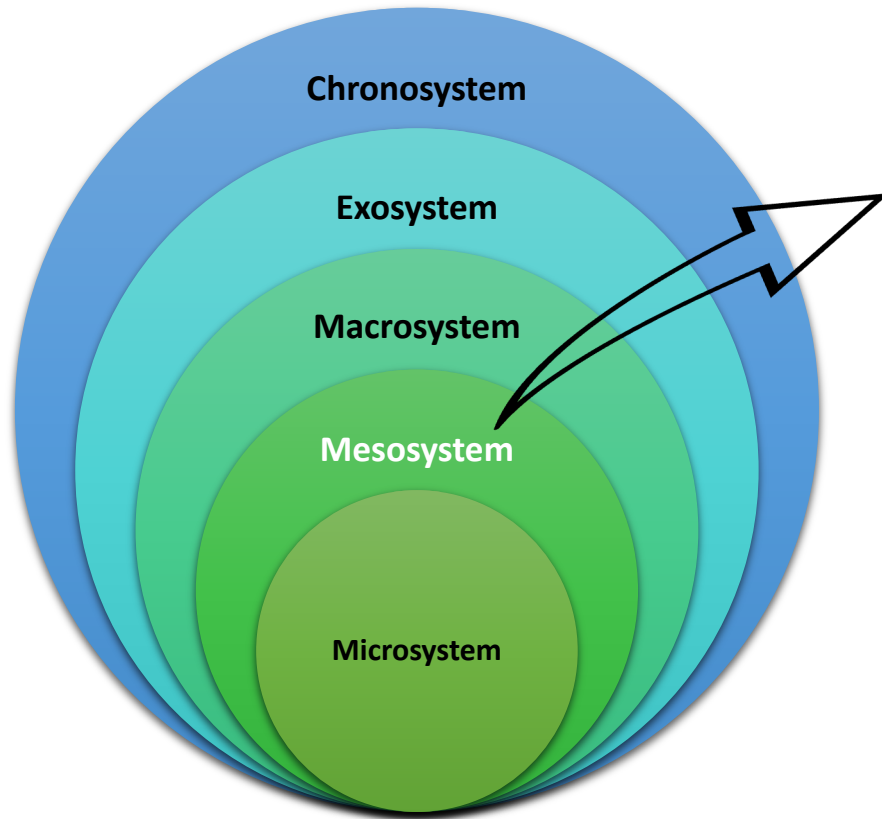
Figure 3. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram showing study selection process

Objective 1: Delineate and classify OT interventions



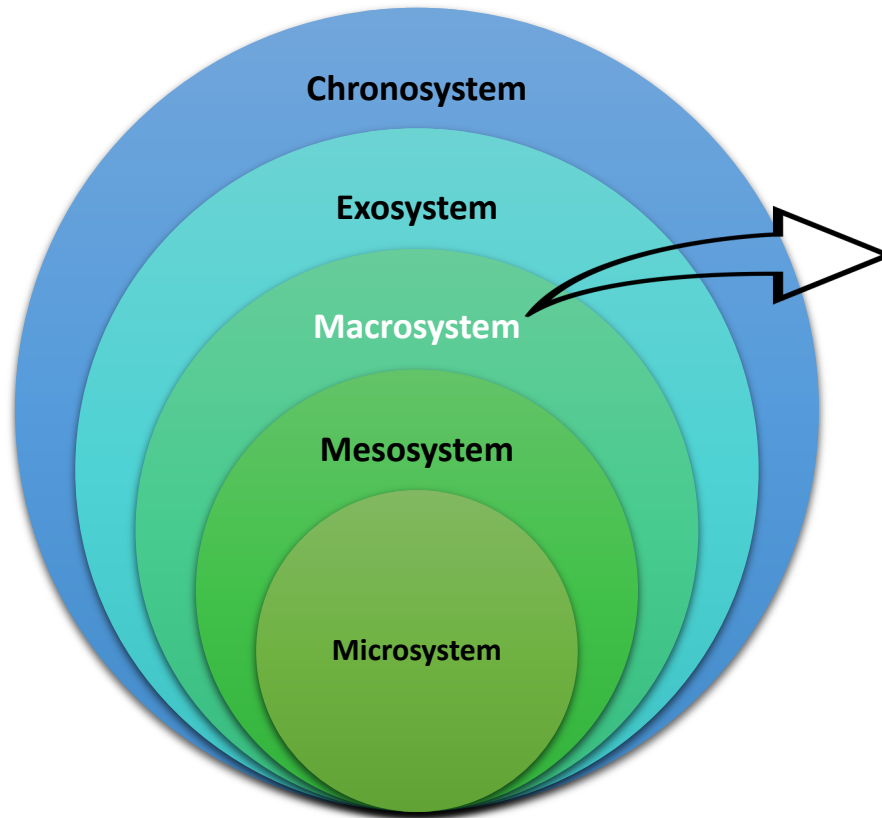
- Trauma-informed occupation-based interventions at microsystem level
- Group program improved occupational performance and satisfaction (*12-week shelter group*)
- Executive function training enhanced task performance (*8-month program*)
- Client-centred goal-directed activities built competence and confidence
- OT supported routine rebuilding post-trafficking
- Peer and survivor-mentor connections fostered trust and support
- Life skills management targeted sleep, leisure, finances (*COPM-identified problems*)

Objective 1: Delineate and classify OT interventions



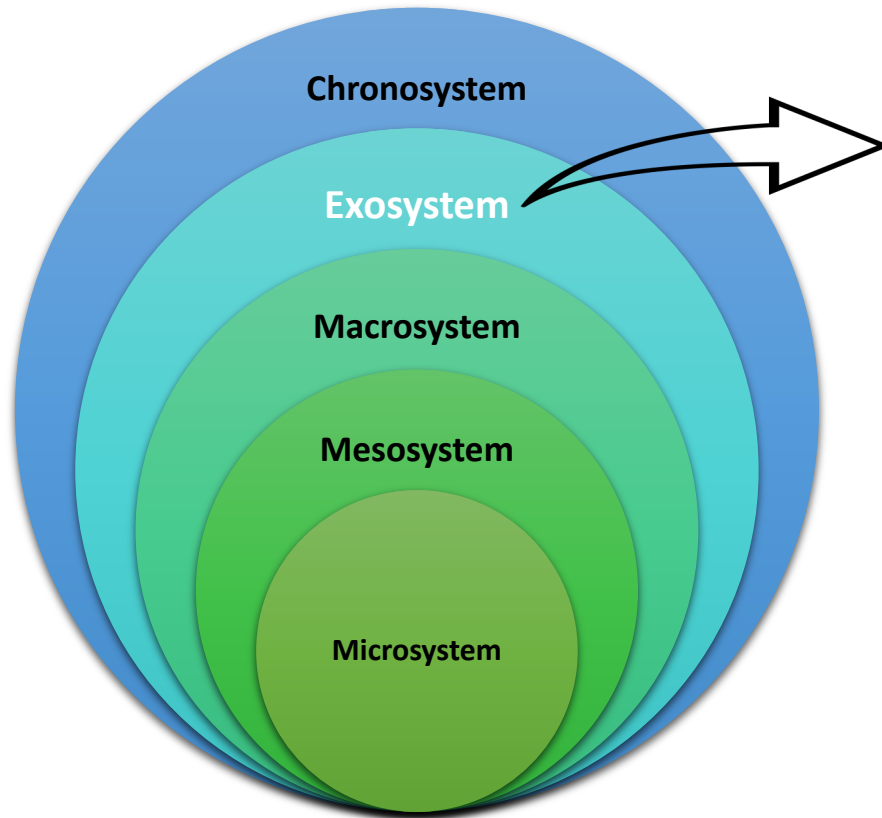
- Mesosystem emphasized links across family community services
- Interdisciplinary collaboration central to survivor support models
- Occupational therapists urged to work across sectors (social, legal, public health)
- Educational/Training efforts identified among occupational therapy students ($N = 67$)
- Students recognized need to identify triggers de-escalate
- Awareness module increased trafficking risk recognition (58.6% gain, $N = 200$)
- Studies called for training, outreach, advocacy, and interprofessional collaboration

Objective 2: Roles, challenges, and policy impact



- Trafficking framed as violation of occupational rights
- Forced occupation and deprivation cause chronic harm (*case studies*)
- Trafficking positioned as collective social injustice
- Human rights and public policy shape survivor needs
- Intersectionality reveals macro-level structural oppression (*transgender sex worker case*)
- Economic political heteronormative systems enforce occupational apartheid, pushing vulnerable people into exploitation
- Laws, culture, and policy shape rehabilitation and advocacy

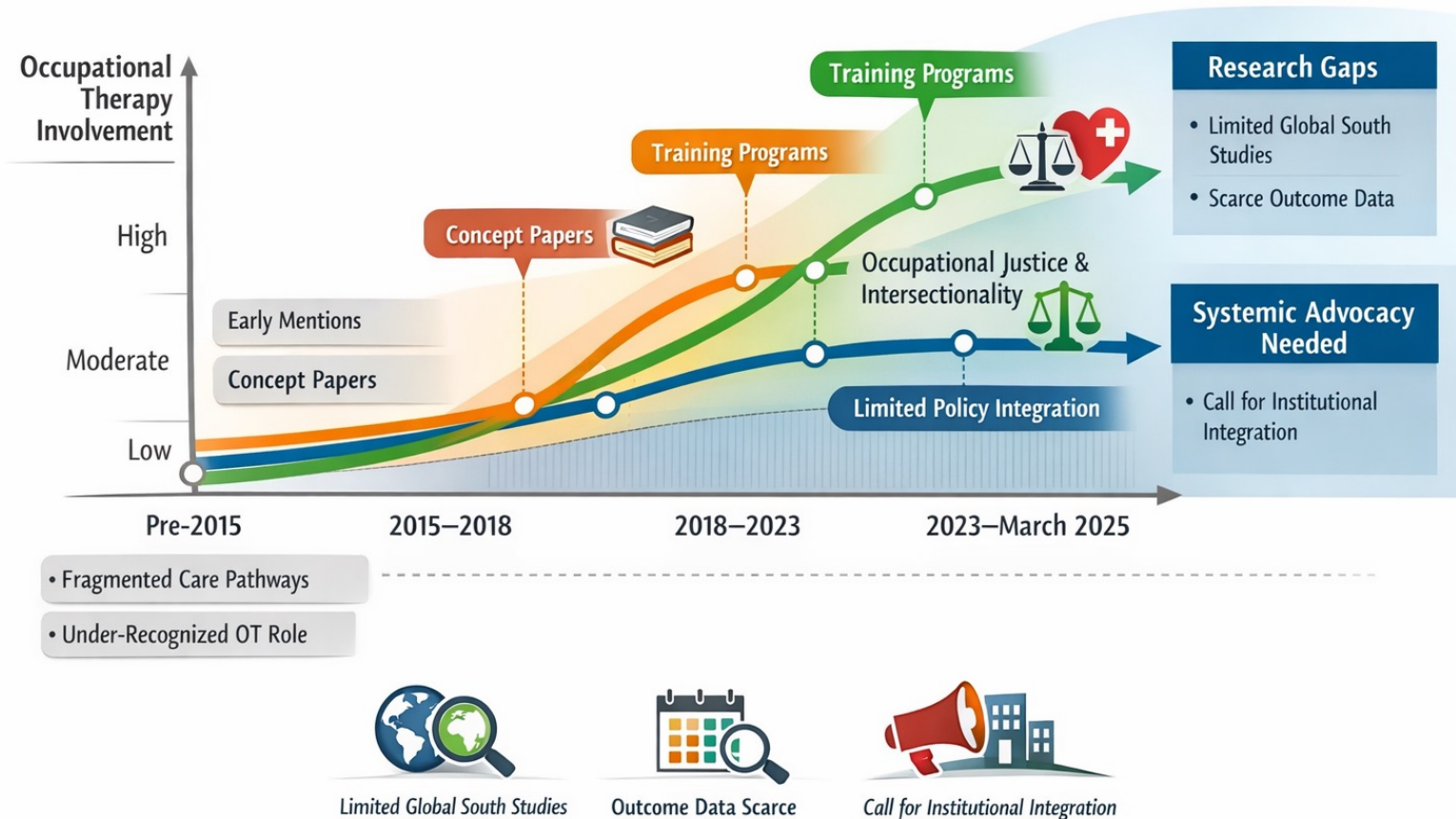
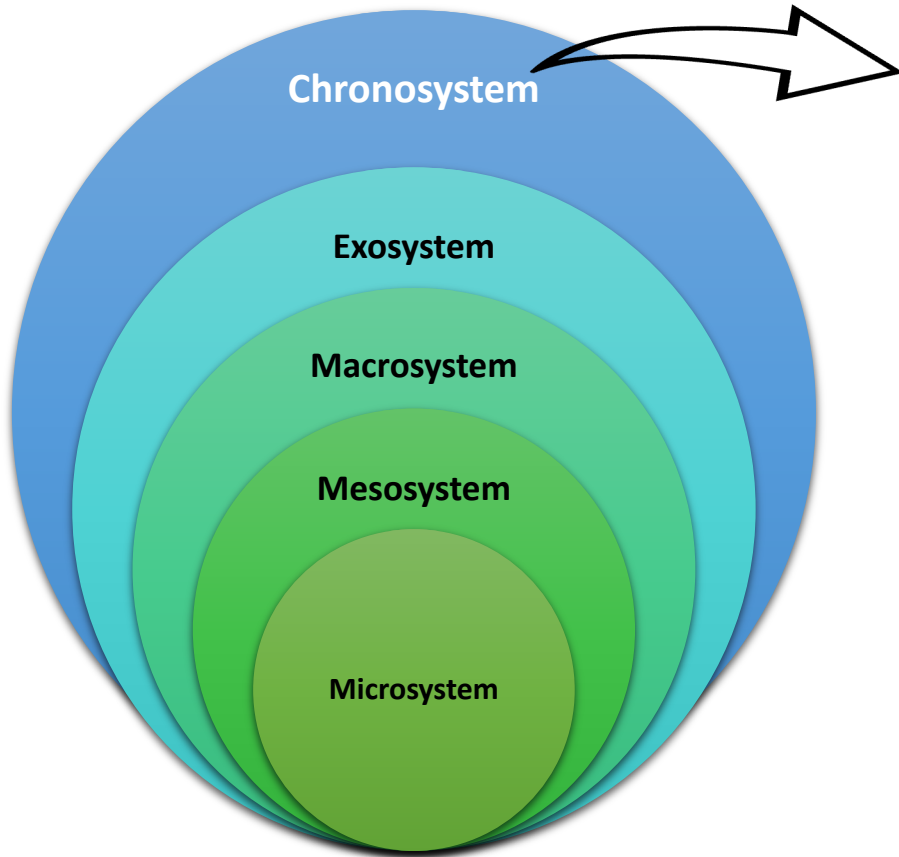
Objective 2: Roles, challenges, and policy impact



- OT rarely included in anti-trafficking policies (US Federal Strategic Action Plan), need policy integration
- Fragmented referrals hinder survivors' long-term rehabilitation
- Survivors' immediate needs met, but services often disjointed
- Coordination role of OT in rehabilitation teams largely unexplored
- Formal OT-led programs needed for community reintegration
- Collaboration across organizations essential for scalable interventions
- No studies reported direct policy outcomes
- OT can reduce extrinsic barriers via justice, housing, healthcare systems

Results

Objective 3: Identifying research gaps and future directions



Discussion – Ecological Perspectives on OT and Survivor Support

This review highlights how occupational therapy is beginning to respond to the multilayered needs of sex trafficking survivors, mapping interventions across Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework.



Microsystem

- **Individualized, trauma-informed care**
- Daily living skills, executive function, sensory integration, peer-led groups
- Varied application; global south unexplored



Mesosystem

- **Interprofessional** collaboration
- 'Call to Freedom' model, limited coordination
- Emerging co-production potential



Exosystem

- **Institutional and policy barriers**
- Limited training, inconsistent support
- Need for sustainable funding

Discussion – Structural, Cultural, and Temporal Considerations



Macrosystem

- **Cultural beliefs & inequalities**
- Stigma, criminalization, marginalized injustices
- Need for culturally responsive advocacy



Chronosystem

- **Longitudinal engagement**
- Few long-term outcome studies
- Gaps in follow-up and recovery tracking



Cross-Cutting Themes

- 1 Uneven trauma-informed interventions
- 2 Limited practitioner readiness
- 3 Nascent interprofessional collaboration
- 4 Geographic & methodological barriers

Limitations

- The scoping review aimed to map the literature, not assess quality or effectiveness, limiting definitive conclusions.
- Only English-language studies were included, possibly excluding insights from non-English-speaking regions with high trafficking prevalence.
- Of the 16 included studies, some lacked methodological detail or outcome data, restricting synthesis across interventions.
- Findings were analyzed using the ecological model, but the small number of studies limits interpretation, especially for objectives 2 and 3. Overall, the insights should be considered preliminary.

Implications

➤ *Research & Evidence*

Prioritize **longitudinal, participatory action research** that centers survivor narratives and tracks occupational outcomes over time

Examine underexplored intersections with legal aid, economic empowerment, and systemic advocacy

➤ *Practice & Policy*

Develop **global, culturally responsive practice guidelines** grounded in empirical evidence and survivor leadership

➤ *Education*

Expose students to **diverse forms of human rights violations** to build critical awareness

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Search strategies and results

Databases	Search Strategies	Results
PubMed	((‘Sex trafficking’[MeSH Terms] OR ‘human trafficking’[MeSH Terms] OR ‘commercial sexual exploitation’[All Fields] OR ‘trafficked individuals’[All Fields] OR ‘trafficked persons’[All Fields]) AND (‘Occupational therapy’[MeSH Terms] OR ‘occupational therapist*’[All Fields] OR ‘occupational practice’[All Fields] OR ‘rehabilitation’[MeSH Terms] OR ‘therapeutic intervention*’[All Fields] OR ‘client-centered care’[All Fields]))	223
CINAHL	(‘Sex trafficking’ OR ‘human trafficking’ OR ‘commercial sexual exploitation’ OR ‘trafficked individuals’ OR ‘trafficked persons’) AND (‘Occupational therapy’ OR ‘occupational therapist*’ OR ‘occupational practice’ OR ‘rehabilitation’ OR ‘therapeutic intervention*’ OR ‘client-centered care’)	97
Web of Science	(‘Sex trafficking’ OR ‘human trafficking’ OR ‘commercial sexual exploitation’ OR ‘trafficked individuals’ OR ‘trafficked persons’) AND (‘Occupational therapy’ OR ‘occupational therapist*’ OR ‘occupational practice’ OR ‘rehabilitation’ OR ‘therapeutic intervention*’ OR ‘client-centered care’)	130
Scopus	(TITLE-ABS-KEY(‘Sex trafficking’ OR ‘human trafficking’ OR ‘commercial sexual exploitation’ OR ‘trafficked individuals’ OR ‘trafficked persons’)) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY(‘Occupational therapy’ OR ‘occupational therapist*’ OR ‘occupational practice’ OR ‘rehabilitation’ OR ‘therapeutic intervention*’ OR ‘client-centered care’))	112

Thank You

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