

RESEARCH BRIEF: Do Major Sporting Events Increase Human Trafficking?

What the research says, and what Los Angeles must address ahead of the major sporting events like the FIFA World Cup and 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

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The short answer: No. Claims linking mega-events to surges in sex trafficking have circulated widely in media and policy conversations, but they are not supported by the research. What studies have found is more limited and more complicated.

Some studies have identified a temporary increase in online advertisements for sexual services around major events. However, researchers caution that advertisement volume is a proxy indicator, and not evidence of trafficking. Ads reflect activity, not exploitation as defined under law.

Researchers from Carnegie Mellon University analyzed online escort advertisements surrounding more than 30 large-scale public events with attendance comparable to the Super Bowl between 2011 and 2016. Most events were not associated with a significant increase in online sex-work advertising.

A more recent study examining Florida during the 2020 and 2021 Super Bowls identified a temporary uptick in online ads, but the authors caution against interpreting this as evidence of increased trafficking. They note that an unknown number of advertisements are deliberately posted by law enforcement as part of sting operations, making accurate measurement difficult. Research is further complicated by the frequent conflation of consensual sex work with human trafficking, which distorts both measurement and policy response.

Key Research

- Ham, J. (2011). [What's the Cost of a Rumour? A Guide to Sorting Out the Myths and the Facts about Sporting Events and Trafficking](#). Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW).
- Martin, L., & Hill, A. (2019). [Debunking the myth of 'Super Bowl sex trafficking': Media hype or evidenced-based coverage](#). *Anti-Trafficking Review*, (13), 13–29.

- Martin, L., & Hill, A. (2017). [Sex Trafficking and the 2018 Super Bowl in Minneapolis: A Research Brief](#). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
- Deering, K. N., & Shannon, K. (2012). [Fears of an influx of sex workers to major sporting events are unfounded](#). *BMJ*, 345, e5845.
- National Survivor Network (2022, July 7). [Learning: The Spectrum of Agency](#).

Does Research Show Labor Trafficking Increases at Major Sporting Events?

Labor exploitation is a documented risk, but not because events cause trafficking, but because they intensify existing structural vulnerabilities.

Unlike sex trafficking claims, there are documented cases of labor exploitation connected to major sporting events, particularly in construction. Migrant workers across multiple host countries have reported abusive recruitment practices, wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and restrictions on their ability to leave employment.

But sporting events are not a root cause of labor trafficking. They reflect pre-existing conditions: housing instability, lack of collective bargaining power, and lack of safe immigration status. Large-scale development can intensify these vulnerabilities, which is exactly why worker protections must be built into event planning from the start, not treated as an afterthought.

Key Research

- Timms, M. (2023, October 12). [U.S. Company Liable for Qatar World Cup Labor Exploitation, Lawsuit Alleges](#). The Wall Street Journal.
- Deutsche Welle (2024). [The Undocumented Workers Building the Olympics](#).
- Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (n.d.). [France: Olympic sites allegedly "more dangerous" than organisers have disclosed for undocumented workers](#).
- Harvard Political Review (2024, October 2). [The Paris Olympics: A Celebration for Some, a Burden for Others](#).

What Harms Do Mega-Events Actually Produce?

The documented harms of mega-events are not spikes in trafficking, they are expansions of policing, surveillance, and displacement that harm the communities most vulnerable to exploitation.

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Globally, mega-sporting events have repeatedly resulted in forced displacement of vulnerable communities, expanded criminalization of poverty and survival economies, and the concentration of enforcement resources in ways that harm the very people they claim to protect.

Los Angeles is already experiencing intensified enforcement tied to tourism, public visibility, and 'quality of life' concerns in advance of 2026 and 2028.

This includes:

- Expanded anti-trafficking sting operations
- Increased surveillance infrastructure
- Encampment sweeps
- Criminalization of 'loitering with intent'
- Heightened collaboration between local and federal law enforcement
- Increased pressure on unhoused communities and street-based economies near the Games footprint, particularly in the Figueroa Corridor

Communities most vulnerable to trafficking are often the same communities most harmed by these enforcement strategies. Historically, mega-events have expanded policing not simply to address safety, but to remove visible poverty and communities deemed undesirable from public view.

Historical Context: Los Angeles

- BlackPast (n.d.). [Operation Hammer \(1987–1990\)](#).
- Felker-Kantor, M. (2017, August 6). [The 1984 Olympics fueled L.A.'s war on crime. Will the 2028 Games do the same?](#) The Washington Post.
- Zirin, D. (2012). [Want to Understand the 1992 LA Riots? Start with the 1984 LA Olympics](#). The Nation.
- Gustafson, S. (2013). [Displacement and the racial state in Olympic Atlanta, 1990–1996](#). *Southeastern Geographer*, 53(2), 198–213.

Global Patterns

- Collectif le revers de la médaille (2024, June). ["Move Along, There's Nothing to See": 1 Year of Social Cleansing Before the 2024 Olympic Games](#).
- Human Rights Watch (2024, July). [Reporters' Guide: 2024 Paris Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games](#).
- Delisle, R. (2010, March 10). [Counting the Vancouver 2010 Olympics' broken promises](#). This Magazine.
- Woods, J. J. (2015). [The damage from mega-sporting events in Brazil](#). *Progressive Planning Magazine*, Summer 2015, 15–18.

The LA28 Human Rights Strategy: What It Gets Right—and Where Concerns Remain

The [LA28 Olympic and Paralympic Games Human Rights Strategy](#) reflects important progress: it recognizes labor exploitation risks, engages community-based organizations, and incorporates human rights language into Games planning. The section on Labor Rights demonstrates a meaningful understanding of the structural drivers of exploitation and the protective role of worker power and collective bargaining. At the same time, significant concerns remain.

Where the Strategy Falls Short

The section focused on Human Trafficking is concerning as it frames prevention as synonymous with surveillance, policing, and enforcement expansion. These criminalization-centered approaches create barriers to stability and service access, increase fear of providers and law enforcement, destabilize housing and employment, increase immigration vulnerability, and ultimately worsen long-term safety outcomes for survivors

The strategy also relies heavily on "See Something, Say Something" awareness models and public reporting mechanisms. Research has shown that generalized trafficking awareness campaigns often increase false reporting, encourage racial profiling, stigmatize migrant communities, and misidentify consensual sex work or migrant labor as trafficking, particularly dangerous during large-scale security events.

A Critical Structural Concern: National Special Security Events

The Olympics and World Cup are designated as National Special Security Events (NSSEs), making the U.S. Secret Service, a component of DHS, the lead federal agency for security coordination. Local law enforcement will work in direct collaboration with federal agencies through the California Olympic and Paralympic Public Safety Command (COPPSC).

This means federal immigration enforcement, which is currently being sued for deporting human trafficking survivors under protective visas, will have a taxpayer-funded, militarized presence at the Games. This will increase the risk of harassment, deportation, and incarceration for survivors, unhoused people, communities of color, street vendors, sex workers, at-risk youth, and all those vulnerable to trafficking.

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Global Advocacy Calls to Action

A coalition including the Sport & Rights Alliance, Dignity 2026 Coalition, ACLU, AFL-CIO, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, NAACP, and Athlete Ally have demanded FIFA:

- Reinstatement of cancelled anti-discrimination messaging
- Commit to protections against racial profiling, arbitrary detention, and unlawful immigration enforcement
- Work with community partners on finalizing Human Rights Action Plans
- Take effective steps to protect freedom of expression and peaceful protest
- Announce and implement a comprehensive Child Safeguarding Policy
- Ensure meaningful community benefit from the 2026 World Cup
- Ensure the World Cup does not lead to the jailing of unhoused populations

The ACLU of Southern California has also raised that FIFA is violating the California Privacy Rights Act by requiring stadium workers and journalists to disclose personal information — including addresses and Social Security numbers — to federal authorities.

Research on Awareness Campaign Harm

- Human Trafficking Collaborative, National Survivor Network, and Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (2024). [Red Flags: A Shift in Framework Training Resource. Prepared for the Office for Victims of Crime.](#)

What Does a Public Health and Human Rights Approach Actually Look Like?

Safety should not be measured by the visibility of policing operations. Safety should be measured by whether communities are more stable, less vulnerable, better protected, and more connected to resources after the Games than before them.

A genuine public health framework asks: what conditions make exploitation less likely? A human rights framework asks: whose rights are protected — and whose are sacrificed in the name of safety? Together, they point toward prevention strategies that are structural, survivor-informed, and community-based. Episodic and enforcement-centered approaches harm survivors.

Primary Prevention Strategies

- Housing stability
- Labor protections and worker organizing
- Low-barrier healthcare and mental health services

- Immigration relief and sanctuary protections
- Survivor-led services
- Community-based and multilingual outreach
- Youth safety infrastructure
- Anti-retaliation and civil liability oversight
- Avoid enforcement-led 'raid and rescue' operations and visibility policing disguised as anti-trafficking interventions
- Establish independent human rights oversight and public transparency mechanisms, especially around policing and anti-trafficking operations
- Protect immigrant communities and enforce Sanctuary City protections
- Prevent the forced displacement and criminalization of unhoused communities
- Expand worker protections for temporary, migrant, informal, and precarious labor sectors
- Implement a comprehensive Child Safeguarding Policy grounded in trauma-informed and non-carceral principles
- Ensure impacted communities are meaningfully involved in planning and oversight

Resource

- Villa-Hughes, C. (2024, August 7). [The Importance of a Human Rights Approach to Child Safeguarding at Mega-Sporting Events. Centre for Sport and Human Rights.](#)

Conclusion

Los Angeles has an opportunity to demonstrate what a genuine human rights and public health approach to mega sporting events can look like. The legacy of the 2026 World Cup and 2028 Games should not be expanded policing or displacement of vulnerable communities. It should be lasting investments in dignity, safety, labor rights, housing, and community well-being.

Communities across Los Angeles share a common goal: preventing human trafficking, labor exploitation, and violence. Getting there requires moving beyond enforcement-driven models toward sustained, structural investment in the people most at risk.

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