



LOS ANGELES AT THE CROSSROADS: PRIORITIZING LABOR TRAFFICKING PREVENTION AHEAD OF THE 2026 MEN'S WORLD CUP AND 2028 OLYMPICS

As Los Angeles prepares to host the World Cup in 2026 and the Olympics in 2028, these events will bring a wealth of opportunities, tourists, and attention to the city. When discussing human trafficking in relation to these large-scale sporting events, the focus often falls solely on sex trafficking. However, labor trafficking, also requires urgent attention.

[FIFA](#), [LA28](#), Los Angeles City and County have a unique opportunity to prevent forced labor and human trafficking on the global stage as they finalize their procurement policies and [human rights strategy](#) for the 2026 Men's World Cup and 2028 Olympics. By taking decisive action, they can ensure that forced labor and human trafficking are not a part of the Los Angeles Olympics and Men's World Cup preparations. Thousands of vulnerable workers in industries like construction, janitorial services, security, and garment production have been documented over the last decade to suffer from labor trafficking and exploitation, including wage theft and unsafe working conditions that sometimes lead to death, during the buildup to major sporting events. Despite the scale of these abuses, they have often been ignored until after the games are over.¹ ²Los Angeles can be the first City and County to take a stand on the global stage to prevent labor trafficking at the Olympics and World Cup by:

- (1) Adopting existing federal procurement policies for Los Angeles City and County in its FIFA and LA28 human rights and procurement standards to prevent human trafficking as outlined [here](#).
- (2) Using the global stage to educate its community and the world that sex trafficking, while horrific is present in all major cities and that outreach, education and supportive services for victims is needed at **all times** but has NOT been reliably documented to increase at sporting events, while labor trafficking which has been shown to increase has been ignored.

LABOR TRAFFICKING AT THE WORLD CUP AND OLYMPICS: A DECADE OF DOCUMENTED EXPLOITATION

The chart below presents data on instances of labor trafficking at the Olympics and World Cup events over the last ten years. It highlights how vulnerable workers are exploited and trafficked.

WORLD CUP

OLYMPICS

Qatar 2022

During preparations for the 2022 World Cup, thousands of migrant workers from countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, and India faced severe exploitation. Many workers endured unsafe living conditions, withheld wages, and confiscation of passports, which led to forced labor-like conditions. The recruitment process also left many in debt bondage due to exorbitant fees. Reports estimated that more than 6,500 workers died during the preparation stages for the event, underscoring the dire situation faced by laborers.³ ⁴

Paris 2024

Rahab's Daughters, a U.S.-based nonprofit, reported over 1,000 cases, with the majority linked to labor trafficking in industries such as construction, retail, and hospitality. Vulnerable populations, including refugees, were coerced into exploitative labor under false pretenses. This exploitation often involves force, fraud, or coercion, with traffickers using sporting events to capitalize on increased demand for labor.⁵

¹ Wang, V. "Faced With Questions about Forced Labor in China the I.O.C. is Tight Lipped," (2022) , retrieved from <https://humantraffickingsearch.org/resource/faced-with-questions-about-forced-labor-in-china-the-i-o-c-is-tight-lipped/>

²Formisano, C. "FIFA World Cup: Combating Modern Slavery at Mega Sporting Events (Dec 13, 2022), retrieved from: <https://www.bsr.org/en/blog/fifa-world-cup-combatting-modern-slavery-at-mega-sporting-events>

³ Murphy.1321. "Human Trafficking and Forced Labor in the Context of the Olympics and Major Sporting Events," (March 5, 2018) retrieved from: <https://u.osu.edu/osuhtblog/2018/03/05/human-trafficking-and-forced-labor-in-the-context-of-the-olympics-and-major-sporting-events/>

⁴ Formisano, C. "FIFA World Cup: Combating Modern Slavery at Mega Sporting Events (Dec 13, 2022), retrieved from: <https://www.bsr.org/en/blog/fifa-world-cup-combatting-modern-slavery-at-mega-sporting-events>

⁵ Business Insider. "The Dark Side of the 2024 Paris Olympics," (August 6, 2024), retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/paris-olympics-games-sex-labor-human-trafficking-exploitation-2024->



Russia 2018

Workers, including migrants from Central Asia and North Korea, experienced wage theft, unsafe working conditions in extreme cold, and lack of contracts. At least 17 workers died, and others faced coercion. Despite some monitoring efforts, FIFA failed to adequately address or publicly disclose labor abuses. Many workers were afraid to report these conditions due to fear of retaliation.⁶

Brazil 2014

Labor trafficking concerns arose, particularly in the construction industry, where workers faced exploitation. Many migrant workers from neighboring countries were subjected to unsafe working conditions, unpaid wages, and overcrowded living environments. The Brazilian government faced criticism for inadequate labor protections and the lack of strong oversight, allowing abusive practices to continue. Despite efforts to draw attention to these issues, labor trafficking during the World Cup received less attention than other forms of human trafficking.⁸



Beijing 2022

Human rights organizations raised concerns about forced labor, particularly by Uyghur Muslims in China's Xinjiang region, being used to manufacture merchandise for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. These groups suspected that products like official Olympic uniforms and merchandise were produced under exploitative conditions in factories tied to China's forced labor programs. The I.O.C. was criticized for its lack of transparency and failure to address these allegations, despite repeated inquiries.⁷

Brazil 2016

Vulnerable workers were exploited in the construction of Olympic venues and infrastructure. Many migrant workers, especially from poor regions of Brazil, faced harsh conditions such as unpaid wages, long working hours, and unsafe environments. Human rights organizations reported forced labor and exploitation in the lead-up to the games.⁹

Russia 2014

There were reports of widespread labor abuses among migrant workers constructing the Olympic venues. Workers faced poor living conditions, unpaid wages, and threats if they tried to leave.¹⁰

[7#:~:text=Wijeyakumar%20said%20the%20group%20plans,report%20publicly%20following%20the%20Olympics.&text=In%20the%20months%20leading%20up,majority%20being%20for%20labor%20trafficking.](#)

⁶ Human Rights Watch. "Russia/FIFA: Workers Exploited on World Cup 2018 Stadiums," (June 14, 2017), retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/14/russia/fifa-workers-exploited-world-cup-2018-stadiums>

⁷ Wang, V. "Faced With Questions about Forced Labor in China the I.O.C. is Tight Lipped," (2022), retrieved from <https://humantraffickingsearch.org/resource/faced-with-questions-about-forced-labor-in-china-the-i-o-c-is-tight-lipped/>

⁸ Anderson, K. "Cases of Forced Labor and Policy Responses Regarding Human Trafficking Legislation at Mega Sporting Events," (May 27, 2015) retrieved from <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/39764298-f367-4497-9c35-b1cd508d6937/content>, at 64-80

⁹ Murphy.1321. "Human Trafficking and Forced Labor in the Context of the Olympics and Major Sporting Events," (March 5, 2018) retrieved from: <https://u.osu.edu/osuhtblog/2018/03/05/human-trafficking-and-forced-labor-in-the-context-of-the-olympics-and-major-sporting-events/>

¹⁰ Anderson, K. "Cases of Forced Labor and Policy Responses Regarding Human Trafficking Legislation at Mega Sporting Events," (May 27, 2015) retrieved from <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/39764298-f367-4497-9c35-b1cd508d6937/content>, at 44-63



MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT LARGE SCALE SPORTING EVENTS

There are many misperceptions that exist about human trafficking and large scale sporting events. The chart below debunks some of those myths.

MYTH	FACT
<p>Sex Trafficking Increases During Large Scale Sporting Events</p>	<p>There is no empirical evidence linking major sporting events, like the World Cup, to a rise in sex trafficking or child sexual exploitation¹¹, despite widely circulated media estimates.¹² Studies from the Men’s World Cup in Germany and South Africa found no significant increase in trafficking during these events. Reports highlight that labor exploitation and displacement are often bigger issues, while sex trafficking is often conflated with voluntary sex work and women are more often arrested for commercial sex¹³ Instead of focusing on short-term, unsubstantiated fears, efforts should address the structural factors that contribute to exploitation, such as poverty, intergenerational trauma, and domestic violence.¹⁴</p>
<p>Labor Trafficking is Not an Issue During Large Scale Sporting Events</p>	<p>As seen in the chart above, labor trafficking is a major issue during large scale sporting events. Thousands of vulnerable workers in industries like construction, janitorial services, security, and garment production have been documented over the last decade to suffer from labor trafficking and exploitation, including wage theft and unsafe working conditions that sometimes lead to death, during the buildup to major sporting events.^{15 16}</p>

¹¹ L Martin and A Hill, ‘Debunking the Myth of “Super Bowl Sex Trafficking”’: Media hype or evidenced-based coverage’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 13, 2019, pp. 13-29, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201219132>.

¹² Los Angeles Times, *Editorial: The dangerously fake link between the Super Bowl and human trafficking*, Feb. 26, 2022. Available at <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-02-06/super-bowl-trafficking-link>

¹³ See for example Kylie McGivern, *Human trafficking operations surrounding the Super Bowl results in dozens result of arrests for prostitution*, ABC News, March 4, 2021. Available at: <https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/full-circle/human-trafficking-operations-surrounding-the-super-bowl-result-in-dozens-of-arrests-for-prostitution>
 (Documenting a Tampa superbowl human trafficking operation resulted in 46 arrests with “Forty of those arrests were women in prostitution.”)

¹⁴ Dolinsek, S. “World Cup 2014: On myths and reality of sex trafficking.” (June 7, 2014), retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/6/7/world-cup-2014-on-myths-and-reality-of-sex-trafficking>

¹⁵ Wang, V. “Faced With Questions about Forced Labor in Chian the I.O.C. is Tight Lipped,” (2022) , retrieved from <https://humantraffickingsearch.org/resource/faced-with-questions-about-forced-labor-in-china-the-i-o-c-is-tight-lipped/>

¹⁶ Formisano, C. “FIFA World Cup: Combating Modern Slavery at Mega Sporting Events (Dec 13, 2022), retrieved from: <https://www.bsr.org/en/blog/fifa-world-cup-combatting-modern-slavery-at-mega-sporting-events>



Law Enforcement Operations Are Needed During Large Scale Sporting Events in Order to Prevent Trafficking

A USC study¹⁷ found the exact opposite. Their research showed that:

1. Operations fail to protect sex trafficking victims
 - a. Operations identify few victims and instead lead to the arrest and criminalization of victims and sex workers
2. Operations do not consistently result in successful prosecution of sex traffickers
 - a. Operations identify few or no traffickers
3. Operations are not effective tools to prevent sex trafficking
 - a. Do not address root causes, fail to connect survivors with support and instead make trafficking victims more vulnerable, trust law enforcement less, and force them to rely more on their traffickers.

CONCLUSION

While large sporting events like the World Cup and Olympics often bring attention to sex trafficking, it is essential to focus on labor trafficking, not just during these events but year-round. The exploitation of vulnerable workers in the production of goods and services used by cities and counties is widespread and often overlooked. As Los Angeles prepares to host the World Cup in 2026 and the Olympics in 2028, the city must prioritize efforts to combat labor trafficking and protect workers from exploitation on a large scale. Without immediate intervention, we risk perpetuating this hidden abuse on a massive scale.

ABOUT SJI

The Sunita Jain Anti-Trafficking Policy Initiative ("SJI") is an evidence-based and community-informed think tank that intentionally fills gaps in human trafficking prevention with an intersectional approach through systemic change and policy innovation. SJI focuses its policy advocacy on 5 pillars: Government Accountability, Racial Justice, Immigrant Justice, Climate Justice, and Economic Justice.

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¹⁷*Over-Policing Sex Trafficking. How U.S. Law Enforcement Should Reform Operations*, International Human Rights Clinic USC Gould School of Law (2020) . Retrieved from: <https://humanrightsclinic.usc.edu/2021/11/15/over-policing-sex-trafficking-how-u-s-law-enforcement-should-reform-operations/>