



The Super Bowl is NOT a large human trafficking event.

Sex trafficking during the Super Bowl is not higher than the rate of sex trafficking in general^{1 2 3}. However, media and politicians often report alarmingly increased numbers of sex trafficking victims related to major sporting events, such as the Super Bowl, with misinformation and limited empirical data.⁴ In fact, research does not suggest sex trafficking uniquely increases in relation to these events,^{5 6 7 8 9} or even that the demand for paid sex workers is significantly greater during the Super Bowl.¹⁰

This myth is fueled by several false narratives. First, there is a widely held presumption that large groups of men will innately lead to more demand for sex workers, which has then been automatically conflated with higher rates of sex trafficking.¹¹ Second, there is a widely held false assumption that most sex workers are victims of trafficking. But, of course, there are many people in the sex trade who voluntarily choose to work in the sex industry. Third, there is a widely held false assumption that sex workers are uniquely exploited during the Super Bowl. More accurately, some of the sex workers working in the game's host city may experience exploitation, as do many laborers in other industries, but exploitation is not the same as being trafficked.

However, the conflation of these experiences — sex workers, sex trafficking victims, and exploitation— has allowed this myth to gain a strong footing in political and advocacy spaces.¹²

For clarity, sex workers are adults who consensually provide sexual or erotic services in exchange for goods or money. Sex work is always consensual but, like most laborers, there

¹ Lavietes, 202

² Polaris, 2016

³ Miller et al., 2016

⁴ Martin & Hill, 2017

⁵ Martin & Hill, 2019

⁶ King, 2019

⁷ Abrams & King, 2023

⁸ Cassidy, 2015

⁹ Sweat, 2023

¹⁰ Ham, 2011

¹¹ Ham, 2011

¹² Ham, 2011

may be exploitation. That does not inherently mean they are victims of sex trafficking. Sex trafficking is a form of human trafficking and occurs when someone has been forced into the sex trade via fraud, coercion, or deception, and can sometimes include extreme examples of exploitation. Exploitation occurs when a sex worker is taken advantage of for personal or financial gain.

Poor research has worsened the problem; data on trafficking is difficult to obtain and has frequently been overblown or cited without resources. More so, this research has often conflated or falsely identified key terms, such as sex work, sex trafficking, labor trafficking, sexual exploitation, and consensual recruitment into the sex industry, which have contributed to unreliable research that then influences policy.¹³ In turn, political leaders have increased policing and security resources during these events to target sex trafficking victims. While these enforcement actions have largely failed to intercept victims of trafficking, they have resulted in increased incarceration of consensual sex workers, unhoused people, and immigrants.¹⁴

Myth #1: Does sex trafficking significantly increase during the Super Bowl?

No. Research has found there is neither a correlative nor causal relationship between the Super Bowl and sex trafficking.¹⁵ More so, several agencies specifically working to address sex trafficking, including Polaris, Federal Agency National Institute of Justice, and GEMS, have likewise found little or no increase of trafficking during the Super Bowl.^{16 17}

The media first started reporting an increase in sex trafficking related to major sporting events during the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. Though the Greek authorities never found the number of sex trafficking victims reported in the press, the media has continued to purport these storylines without evidence.¹⁸

Despite increased vigilance and policing by host cities, there have been very few arrests related to sex trafficking during the Super Bowl. There were no incidents of sex trafficking

¹³ Weitzer, 2014

¹⁴ Ham, 2011

¹⁵ Martin & Hill, 2019

¹⁶ Wyyette, 2021

¹⁷ Polaris, 2016

¹⁸ Martin & Hill, 2017

found in relation to the 2008, 2009, or 2011 Super Bowl. Similar outcomes were found for Olympics that occurred during the same time period.¹⁹ In 2019, the Atlanta chief of police also reported there were no arrests related to sex trafficking in the Atlanta metro area and refuted reports falsely suggesting there were arrests for sex traffickers made during the Super Bowl.²⁰ During the 2021 Super Bowl in Tampa, over 70 arrests for prostitution-related crimes were made but only 6 were believed to be victims of trafficking²¹, which is less than 3% of Tampa's total sex trafficking arrests that year.²²

In addition to arrests, trafficking numbers in relation to the Super Bowl have also been tracked via analysis of sex worker advertisements and calls to the National Human Trafficking hotline. However, neither approach really indicates an objective increase in trafficking.²³

A study by Xi Huang and colleagues found an increase in online advertisements for trafficked sex workers during the 2020 and 2021 Super Bowl. However, the validity of this research is compromised because some of the indicators used to identify ads posted by traffickers are similar to that which we might see in ads posted by sex workers. These indicators include in-call services only or keeping their locations private in the ad, which can also be common practices sex workers use for safety. This research also considers sex workers with temporary or short stays as a sign of trafficking, but this would be common for sex workers traveling to Super Bowl cities in the hopes of optimizing the number of potential clients.²⁴ Lauren Martin and Annie Hill aimed to further analyze the issue, and conducted a wide scale literature review over 8 years. They found the Super Bowl may correlate with a slight increase in commercial sex work advertisements but no more than other events such as holiday weekends or trade shows. In addition, Marting and Hill also found the data connecting an increase in sex work ads with sex trafficking to be largely inconclusive.²⁵

There has also been an increase in calls to the National Human Trafficking Hotline during some Super Bowls but Polaris, the agency that runs the hotline, rejects the notion that this represents a meaningful increase in sex trafficking during this time. Instead, Polaris reports this is likely due to increased advertisement of the hotline during the Super Bowl and not

¹⁹ Ham, 2011

²⁰ King, 2019

²¹ Trujillo, 2021

²² Wooddell, 2023

²³ Polaris, 2016

²⁴ Huang et al., 2024

²⁵ Martin & Hill, 2017

actually indicative of an increase in trafficking.^{26 27} Overall, there is not significant research suggesting sex trafficking increases in relation to the Super Bowl.

Myth #2: Isn't it better to prepare for increased sex trafficking during the Super Bowl just in case?

Not necessarily. While increased education about how to spot and report potential sex trafficking is certainly important, the sudden increase in policing and public awareness campaigns on sex trafficking during the Super Bowl can actually be harmful for several reasons.

For years, host cities and government officials have repeatedly expressed concern about increased sex trafficking and released plans to increase resources to intercept and respond to incidents of sex trafficking.^{28 29 30 31} Some people assume that sex trafficking naturally increases as the opportunity for sex work does, arguing that it makes sense to overprepare for sex trafficking victims even if the research doesn't support its necessity. However, Ronald Weitzer conducted an extensive literature review and found that an increase in demand for sex work does not necessarily correlate with an increase in sex trafficking³². Kateca Wyette's review actually found less demand for sex workers during these major sporting events.³³ The increased law enforcement focus on sex trafficking during these events can have negative effects.

Firstly, overly focusing host cities' policing resources on sex trafficking can increase the criminalization of sex workers, immigrants, unhoused individuals, and low income communities. Research has shown sex workers with marginalized identities are more likely to be arrested or harassed by police in relation to the Super Bowl.³⁴

Secondly, the increased messaging about sex trafficking in connection with the Super Bowl creates two serious misunderstandings. Initially, it gives the impression that the Super Bowl is the problem, rather than focusing on the systemic, socioeconomic, or patriarchal root causes of sex trafficking. Those causes, not the Super Bowl, require the attention of

²⁶ Grinberg & Maxouris, 2019

²⁷ Polaris, 2016

²⁸ Tasler, 2022

²⁹ Potter, 2023

³⁰ City News Services, 2022

³¹ Sant et al., 2023

³² Weitzer, 2014

³³ Wyette, 2021

³⁴ Martin & Hill, 2017

policymakers and the public. This increased messaging also gives the impression that trafficking is primarily for the purpose of sex when Polaris reminds us that at least half of global trafficking victims are trafficked for other kinds of labor.

When it comes to events like the Super Bowl, food service workers, agricultural workers, and manufacturing workers are all among the victims of trafficking whose labor provides the chicken wings, beer cans, nachos, and apparel fans consume.³⁵ In fact, major sporting events and the global sports business are more likely to have higher rates of human trafficking and exploitation unrelated to sex,³⁶ including labor and athlete trafficking.³⁷ The overemphasis on sex trafficking during events like the Super Bowl overlooks the proven increase of other types of human trafficking and disproportionately directs resources from definitive victims of human trafficking to hypothetical victims of sex trafficking.

Lastly, the increase in trafficking awareness campaigns often falsely depict trafficking victims in a singular manner, amplifying victims' helplessness or meekness and the perpetrator's violence. Of course, this is not always the experience of trafficking victims.³⁸ This falsely educates the public to look out for a certain version of trafficking, overlooking and remaining ignorant to the rest.

Overall, there is not significant evidence to suggest sex trafficking is drastically higher in relation to the Super Bowl than other times in the year. Resources spent on intercepting traffickers during the Super Bowl would be better spent addressing the root causes of sex trafficking such as economic disparity or family violence, increasing effective year-round public education about the realities of sex trafficking, and amplifying workers' rights for sex workers to minimize exploitation and increase safety.

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³⁵ Polaris, 2019

³⁶ University of Nottingham Rights Lab, 2021

³⁷ Cyphers & Thompson, 2016

³⁸ Martin & Hill, 2017

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