

# Stop Trafficking!

# Awareness Advocacy Action

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FOCUS: This month's newsletter examines the role of sports in human trafficking.

The sports industry is estimated to be worth \$2.3 trillion annually, according to the [World Economic Forum](#). While mega sporting events can facilitate the promotion of human rights, traffickers exploit this sector at major sporting events by recruiting and exploiting young athletes, and as a means for labor and sexual exploitation. By raising awareness and understanding the connection between human trafficking and sports, we can all play a role in ending this crime.

Some problems that exist in addressing human trafficking and sports are that sports are often regarded as leisure and not labor, and sports bodies see trafficking outside their purview. Labor protections usually do not apply to athletes. This creates voids in accountability where exploitation can be visible but difficult to address or prosecute.

It is difficult to give exact numbers on the scale of trafficking in sports, as there is a lack of verifiable data. However, according to the [2020 Trafficking in Persons Report](#), within Europe's soccer industry alone, it is estimated that there are 15,000 human trafficking victims each year, mainly from West Africa. Though it is mostly boys being lured into sports trafficking, the development of women's sports, notably football, also attracts young girls.



## Three Types of Trafficking

There are three general types of trafficking and sports according to the [Global Thematic Report on Sports Trafficking](#).

The first is the trafficking in sports, which is found primarily in football (soccer), baseball, ice hockey, and basketball. Typically, young players or their families pay an agent or an intermediary who claims to have contact with professional clubs abroad. Here, players obtain a contract or the opportunity to try out with a club, though this involves degrees of ownership of the person and exploitation. There is usually no housing, and the agent controls their mobility. The victim is also brought to a different country. Continued support depends on whether the player wins.

Typically, the young athlete is from South America, Africa, or Asia and is moved across borders to either Europe or the United States. The trafficking of West African players into Europe appears to be the most common migration pattern in football, driven by the earning potential of European Football clubs. In contrast, the United States has "recruited" baseball players from [Latin America](#).

Athletes are recruited and exploited primarily for their talent and the material benefit that they can provide their traffickers

## Definition of Sport Trafficking

"The act of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring, or receiving an individual—typically an athlete or aspiring athlete—within or across borders, through coercive, deceptive, or other abusive means for the purpose of exploitation in, through, or around sports. Exploitation may manifest as forced labor, sexual exploitation, slavery, and servitude within sport-related activities or events. In the case of children, no means need to be present".

<https://mission89.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/GLOBAL-THEMATIC-REPORT-ON-SPORT-TRAFFICKING..pdf>

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# Awareness

or other actors who are complicit in their ongoing exploitation. The athlete is exploited by contracts or debt bondage, both forms of labor trafficking. Some of these athletes are sex trafficking victims as well. Those in positions of authority, such as coaches or judges, may misuse their influence to force young athletes into engaging in sexual activities in exchange for preferential treatment, good scores, opportunities, or advancement in their respective sports. Also, the trafficker may pimp out the athlete while on tour to judges or other officials as well, benefiting the trafficker.

The second form is trafficking through sport, where the athlete is recruited through the use of fraud and deception for exploitation outside the sport. Traffickers, usually with links to organized crime, use false promises of careers in a sport to vulnerable youth, generally living in poverty. Once the person is away from their family, often in another country, the victim is abandoned with no documentation or money and then forced into trafficking for labor or sexual exploitation to industries unrelated to sport. In some cases, they become victims of organ trafficking.

The young athletes may not report their trafficker out of fear of repercussions on their families. There is also a sense of shame and embarrassment for falling victim to the trafficker's false promises. This also explains the lack of data on trafficking in sports, as so many victims never come forward.

In the third type, trafficking around sport, sport is incidental to the exploitation of the person; the person trafficked is not an athlete nor engaged in the sport. Examples include forced labor in the building of sporting facilities and stadiums, the manufacture of sports equipment, uniforms, and memorabilia, or sex and labor trafficking that may occur during major sporting events. Labor trafficking could involve janitorial and waste-disposal services, security services, and hotel staff in the accommodation and hospitality sector.

It was not until the publication of the [2020 Trafficking in Persons \(TIP\) Report](#) that the United States State Department officially recognized human trafficking in sports.

*Sir Mo Farah, born in Somalia, is a 2012 and 2016 Olympic gold medalist in track. He was trafficked by an unknown woman from Somalia to London at the age of nine and was forced into child labor as a domestic servant. When allowed to go to school, he confided to his Physical Education teacher that he was being trafficked. He became a British citizen in 2000 and represented England at the Olympics.*



*A young Nigerian man had been a talented, aspiring football player in his home country. He was lured by two agents working together, who promised him a football career in Denmark and Ukraine. He subsequently paid them over 1 million naira (\$704) to facilitate his travel. They fled with the money, leaving him in serious debt.*

*“The confluence of athletes’ desire to play, their families’ hopes of escaping poverty, agents’ desire to profit, leagues’ interest in marketing competitive players and games, and teams’ eagerness to find young talent all create an environment that, if left unregulated, could be ripe for traffickers to exploit.”*

*2020 Trafficking in Persons Report*

*Many children, typically from the Global South, see sports as a way out of disadvantaged backgrounds, which makes them vulnerable to the false promises of traffickers. Traffickers prey on the ambitions of young athletes, using false promises to lure them into abuse and deception. Typically, as part of the grooming process, the trafficker builds relationships of trust with their intended victims to create a sense of dependency.*



## Sex Trafficking and the Super Bowl

A 2019 study in [Anti-Trafficking Review](#) examined 55 articles regarding the connection between major sports events, including the Super Bowl, and trafficking rates for sexual exploitation. The study found little empirical evidence connecting the two. Overall, experts say no direct link exists between the Super Bowl and an increase in sex trafficking. An increased awareness of trafficking around the Super Bowl, along with an increase in security, may lead to more arrests for human trafficking.

While studies consistently show no clear empirical evidence of a statistical spike in sex trafficking directly caused by the events themselves, there is a perception and concern that the large influx of visitors, including corporate guests, creates increased demand for commercial sex, which traffickers may try to meet. Anti-trafficking organizations report that survivors have indicated they were brought to host cities because of the expected demand.

***FIFA has created guidelines prohibiting international transfers of children under 18 in football. However, it comes with five exceptions:***

*1. parents moving to a new country in which the new club is located for reasons not linked to football; 2. the transfer takes place within the EU or EEA; 3. proximity to the national border; 4. the player flees his country of origin for humanitarian reasons without parents and is temporarily permitted to reside in the country of arrival; 5. the player is a student and moves without his parents to another country temporarily for academic reasons.*

*However, these rules have not been adequately enforced.*

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## The FIFA World Cup in Qatar

As Qatar prepared to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the Khalifa International Stadium refurbishment drew attention due to documented human rights violations against migrant workers. Amnesty International uncovered abuse of over 100 workers and widespread labor rights violations.

The majority of Qatar's workforce consisted of 2 million migrant workers, mainly from South Asia, who operate under a sponsorship system that gives employers extensive control over their lives. This system makes workers highly vulnerable to exploitation, as losing sponsorship can result in deportation without any legal recourse.

Migrants who worked on the project reported having to pay recruitment agents fees ranging from \$500 to \$4,300 (a practice prohibited by Qatari law). Workers were promised fair wages and decent working conditions, but upon arrival, they found squalid accommodations and wages significantly lower than those promised. Employers confiscated workers' passports to prevent them from leaving. Fear of reprisal was widespread among workers, and managers leveraged financial penalties and threats to withhold permits to coerce compliance.

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# Advocacy

In 2021, the [Guardian](#) reported that 6,500 migrant workers from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka died in Qatar since it won the right, in 2011, to host the World Cup in 2022.

Many of these deaths occurred in the construction industry. Other migrants who died during this period included:

Ghal Singh Rai from [Nepal](#), who paid nearly £1,000 in recruitment fees for his position as a cleaner at a camp for workers constructing the Education City World Cup stadium. Within a week of arriving, he killed himself.

Mohammad Shahid Miah, from Bangladesh, died when floodwater in his room came into contact with an exposed electric cable, electrocuting him.

In [India](#), the family of Madhu Bollapally has never understood how the healthy 43-year-old died of “natural causes” while working in Qatar. His body was found lying on his dorm room floor.



The [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#) (OSCE) is a regional security organization of 57 participating States, all of which have equal status, and decisions are made by consensus. In December 2023, the group met in Vienna with civil society organizations, national anti-trafficking experts, law enforcement, sports organizations, local authorities, and international organizations that have developed awareness-raising campaigns to combat trafficking. All member states approved an action plan to raise awareness of human trafficking around sporting events as a prevention measure and with the intent to decrease demand that enables trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

## Human Trafficking and Large Sporting Events

Large sporting events attract many tourists, money, and job opportunities, and they also create a breeding ground for traffickers to engage in labor and sexual exploitation. Although there is some controversy on whether major sporting events necessarily cause human trafficking, the large crowds and increased demand for services create an environment with heightened risks for exploitation and violence.

This year, the South Bay area of California, specifically Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties, is hosting the Super Bowl, March Madness, and the FIFA World Cup. Law enforcement and victim advocates, as well as representatives from the hospitality and transportation industries, are collaborating on preparedness and prevention efforts.

A primary focus is on public awareness and training for industry professionals to spot signs of trafficking. For the past several years, California has had the highest number of human trafficking cases in the United States. The Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) even wrapped buses and light rail trains with informational sleeves and promoted its alerts app for reporting suspicious activity.



**Foot Solidaire**, a non-governmental organization that helps return boys who have been duped into leaving their countries by unscrupulous football (soccer) agents, estimates that 15,000 teenage footballers are moved out of 10 West African countries every year, many of them underage.



*Al Bangura*, a former Premier League soccer player for Watford in England, was raised in Sierra Leone. When his father died, Bangura, at the age of 15, fled to Guinea, where he met a Frenchman, who trafficked him to France and then England, as a sex trafficking victim. When in England, Bangura sought asylum.

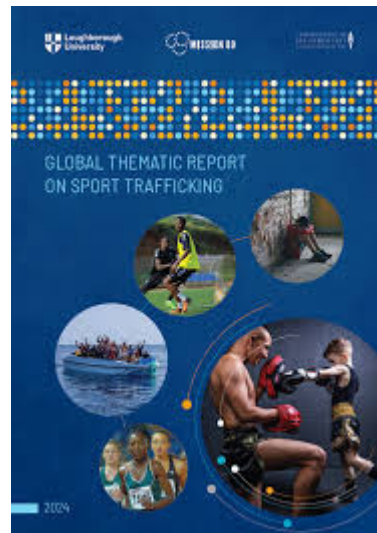
## Action

Sport has a powerful effect on children's well-being and can promote greater physical health, emotional and mental balance, and the development of important skills. But sport can also expose children to grievous harm and violence. At the extreme end is the sale of athletes, particularly in major sports such as football. Child athletes can easily fall victim to human trafficking, sometimes for the purposes of economic or sexual exploitation.



Everyday participation in sport can also expose children to violence and harm. Instructors and coaches typically enjoy substantial impunity due to their authoritative role and the significant pressure exerted on children to perform, often with the support of parents who are unaware of the potential for harm.

The [Global Thematic Report on Sport Trafficking](#) (2024) was produced by Mission 89 and was made possible through the financial support of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK (CPA UK). While highlighting the economic benefits of the sports industry, which is estimated to be between \$471 billion and \$1.4 trillion annually, the report sheds light on



how this lucrative industry has become a magnet for traffickers exploiting vulnerable individuals, particularly young athletes from the Global South.

# Action



It's a dream that boys just about everywhere share, but it seems

particularly acute in Africa. Becoming a world-class footballer, playing on a brightly lit European pitch, with your name emblazoned on the back of a jersey like idols Didier Drogba, Sadio Mane, or Mohamed Salah. What you do not imagine is being trafficked to a foreign country and struggling to survive. Every year, thousands of aspiring African players are duped, exploited, and even abused as they try to land spots on professional teams abroad. Abdul Gafar Deeko from Ghana is one of them. Please click [here](#) to view this YouTube video..



As part of the [Centre for Sport and Human Rights \(CSHR\)](#) Generation 2026 initiative advancing safer, youth-inclusive sports in the lead up to the FIFA World Cup 2026, CSHR and partners have developed the [ASSIST tool](#). The ASSIST tool is a collaborative tool developed by the Centre for Sport and Human Rights and Loughborough University, in collaboration with global experts, including those in North America.

## Tackling Human Trafficking at Large Sporting Events

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce hosted Tackling Human Trafficking at Large Sporting Events, emphasizing the business community's role in developing strategies to raise awareness of human trafficking at major sporting events. Please click [here](#) to view this webinar which begins around the 7-minute mark.

Human trafficking remains a pressing global issue, with the sports industry emerging as an overlooked yet significant domain of exploitation. Legal and policy frameworks play a critical role in safeguarding athletes, particularly young and vulnerable individuals, from trafficking. International instruments such as the Palermo Protocol establish the foundation for combating trafficking, while regional initiatives, including the European Union Directives, the African Union Plan of Action, and the ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons, provide localized support.

National legislation, including the Modern Slavery Act and the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), further demonstrates governments' commitment to tackling this issue. However, systemic challenges such as weak rule of law, corruption, and inadequate funding hinder effective implementation, particularly in developing nations.

Addressing sports trafficking requires a multi-stakeholder approach that involves sports organizations, NGOs, law enforcement, and rehabilitation centers. These entities work collaboratively to protect athletes, support victims, and promote their reintegration into society. This paper underscores the importance of strengthening international cooperation, enhancing national legal compliance, and raising awareness among stakeholders, including coaches, players, and agents. By fostering collective action, the global community can create a safer and more equitable environment for athletes worldwide.



**It's a Penalty** focuses on 4 key strategic areas to end human trafficking, exploitation, and abuse locally and globally:

**Campaigns** - raising awareness about human trafficking, exploitation, and abuse during major sporting events.

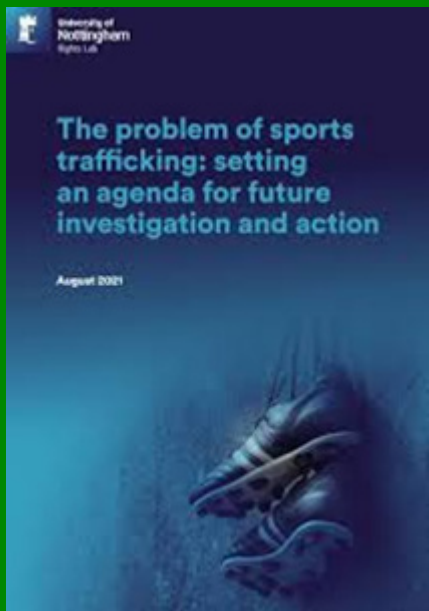
Partnering with sporting governing bodies, NGOs, the travel & tourism industry and law enforcement. They have run 12 Campaigns, including the Olympic and Paralympic Games, Super Bowls, and Commonwealth Games, reaching over 1.6 billion people.

**CommonProtect** – advocating for legal reform to improve protection from sexual exploitation and abuse for children throughout the Commonwealth.

**Partnering** with lawyers, Commonwealth institutions, child protection experts, and local NGOs.

**Student Ambassador Network** – educating and raising up UK university students to prevent human trafficking and exploitation.

**Safe to Compete** – training sports coaches and parents of children in Little Leagues (age 5-12 years) in the USA to prevent abuse and exploitation. Partnering with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).



The University of Nottingham Rights Lab has issued a series of recommendations to prevent and tackle trafficking in sports in its 2021 Report, “*The problem of sports trafficking: setting an agenda for future investigation and actions*”. Recommendations include:

1. Awareness raising: sport clubs, associations, and governing bodies should raise awareness of the issue of trafficking among their staff, but also among professional athletes.
2. Clear regulations on ethical recruitment: the recruitment practices of young athletes should follow modern slavery, human trafficking, and labor and employment rights and standards.

International standards and regulations on children’s rights should also be followed, as trafficking in sports mainly affects young boys and girls.



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