

SPOTLIGHT

01

DEMAND-  
SHOCK  
EXPLOITATION

# ANTICIPATING EXPLOITATION

SPOTLIGHT SERIES

Examining emerging threats in modern slavery and human trafficking

Major Sporting &  
Entertainment Events



Independent  
**Anti-Slavery**  
Commissioner

## Major Sporting and Entertainment Events

### Pressure Points for Exploitation

#### Executive Summary

Major sporting and entertainment events have long been associated with concerns about trafficking, labour exploitation and sexual exploitation. While the evidence does not support simplistic claims that such events automatically cause significant increases in trafficking, it does suggest that they can create conditions that increase vulnerability to exploitation.

This Spotlight examines exploitation risks associated with major sporting and entertainment events through the lens of "demand shock exploitation", an emerging threat identified in the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner's report: *Anticipating Exploitation: A Futures Analysis*, a strategic foresight assessment which identified 21 emerging threats likely to shape exploitation in the United Kingdom over the next decade.<sup>1</sup>

Demand shocks occur when rapid increases in demand for labour, goods or services create opportunities for exploitative actors to profit from gaps in oversight, recruitment and safeguarding. The strongest evidence relates to labour exploitation. Major events require large temporary workforces and can create recruitment pressures that increase the risk of exploitative practices, poor working conditions and labour rights violations. Evidence relating to sexual exploitation is more nuanced. While there is limited evidence of dramatic trafficking increases, research suggests that traffickers may adapt their operations in response to heightened demand.

Major events present opportunities as well as risks. Their global visibility can be used to raise awareness, strengthen reporting mechanisms, improve cross-sector collaboration and promote preventative action. International frameworks such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights provide a foundation for embedding safeguarding and exploitation prevention throughout event planning and delivery. By adopting a whole-of-lifecycle approach to safeguarding, organisers, governments and businesses can reduce vulnerabilities, strengthen human rights protections and ensure that major events leave a positive legacy long after they have concluded.

## **Introduction**

The relationship between major events and exploitation has long attracted public attention. International sporting competitions such as the Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup and Super Bowl, alongside large-scale music festivals and entertainment events, have frequently been associated with concerns about trafficking, labour exploitation and sexual exploitation. Media reporting has often suggested that major events generate significant increases in trafficking. However, researchers have cautioned that the available evidence remains limited.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these limitations, major events remain important from an exploitation perspective. The Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner's (IASC) *Anticipating Exploitation* report, a strategic foresight assessment drawing on participatory futures methods and insights from more than 50 stakeholders, including individuals with lived experience, identified demand shock exploitation as a key threat likely to shape the prevalence and nature of modern slavery and human trafficking over the next decade.

Demand shocks occur when a sudden increase in demand for goods, services or labour creates conditions in which exploitation becomes more likely. While often discussed in the context of labour markets, demand shocks can also affect other sectors, including commercial sex markets, where increased consumer demand may create incentives for traffickers and exploitative actors to expand operations.

Large sporting and entertainment events generate precisely these conditions. They require substantial temporary workforces across sectors with known risks, such as construction, hospitality, transport, security, catering and venue operations. At the same time, they attract large numbers of visitors, increase demand for accommodation and entertainment services, and create complex networks of contractors, subcontractors and temporary service providers. These pressures can increase vulnerabilities to labour exploitation through unethical recruitment practices, poor working conditions and workforce shortages. They can also create opportunities for sexual exploitation by increasing demand for commercial sex services, encouraging traffickers to relocate victims, expand advertising activity and adapt their operations to maximise profits.

Figure 1: Demand Shock Pathway



Emerging evidence from preparations for the 2026 FIFA World Cup illustrates how these dynamics may operate in practice. Analysis conducted by STOP THE TRAFFIK across host cities in the United States and Canada has identified increasing volumes of online advertisements associated with commercial sex markets, alongside changes in language and service offerings that may indicate adaptation by exploitative actors in anticipation of heightened demand.<sup>3</sup> While such findings do not demonstrate a direct increase in trafficking prevalence, they provide a contemporary example of how major events can create conditions that increase opportunities for exploitation and make detection more difficult.

As the UK continues to host major sporting tournaments, cultural events and international entertainment programmes, understanding how demand shocks can affect both labour and sexual exploitation will become increasingly important for policymakers, event organisers and safeguarding practitioners.

### **Illustrative Future Scenario**

This scenario is intended as an illustration of how exploitation risks may develop under certain conditions. Drawing on the strategic foresight methodology used in *Anticipating Exploitation*, it explores a plausible future in which rapid increases in demand associated with major events are not matched by adequate planning, oversight and safeguarding interventions.

#### ***Hypothetical Case Study: A Major European City, Summer 2034***

Three weeks before the opening ceremony of the European Games, a city in Europe is operating at full capacity. Hotels across the city are fully booked. New temporary accommodation sites have emerged to accommodate visitors. Additional hospitality workers, cleaners, drivers, security personnel and event staff have been recruited through a network of labour providers to meet unprecedented demand. Little due diligence has taken place on these labour providers and their subcontractors to assess ethical recruitment practices.

A group of workers recruited overseas arrive expecting employment in hospitality and venue operations. Upon arrival, they discover that recruitment fees are substantially higher than originally advertised. Accommodation costs are deducted directly from their wages and workers are informed that leaving their employment may also result in the loss of their housing.

Meanwhile, visitor numbers continue to increase. Short-term accommodation providers report record bookings. Hotels experience exceptionally high occupancy rates. The movement of thousands of visitors each day creates an environment in which unusual activity attracts little attention.

During the event, safeguarding agencies identify several cases of labour exploitation linked to subcontracted service providers. At the same time, law enforcement agencies investigate reports of commercial sexual exploitation operating through temporary accommodation and hotel settings.

The Games are ultimately considered a success. The city benefits economically. The infrastructure legacy is celebrated. Yet post-event reviews conclude that exploitation risks were present throughout the event ecosystem, largely hidden within otherwise legitimate economic activity.

The event itself did not cause exploitation. Rather, it amplified vulnerabilities that already existed.

## **Labour Exploitation and Major Events**

The strongest evidence linking major sporting events and exploitation concerns labour exploitation. Major sporting events require substantial temporary workforces to support:

- Construction and infrastructure projects.
- Hospitality and accommodation services.
- Catering and food provision.
- Cleaning services.
- Security operations.
- Transport and logistics.
- Venue management.

The scale and speed of workforce mobilisation associated with major events can create significant recruitment pressures. Where labour shortages emerge, employers may become increasingly reliant on subcontractors, temporary labour providers and informal recruitment channels, reducing transparency and increasing the risk of exploitative practices.

Research examining major sporting events has repeatedly highlighted concerns regarding migrant worker exploitation and poor labour standards associated with event infrastructure and supply chains. The 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi attracted significant scrutiny following allegations of labour exploitation, poor working conditions and unsafe accommodation among construction workers involved in event preparations.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Human Rights Watch documented allegations of wage theft, unsafe working conditions and labour rights violations affecting construction workers involved in preparations for the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia.<sup>5</sup>

Preparations for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar generated even greater international attention. Human rights organisations, trade unions and international bodies raised concerns regarding the treatment of migrant workers involved in the construction of stadiums, transport networks, hotels and other event-related infrastructure. Reported issues included excessive recruitment fees, restrictions on worker mobility, wage abuses, unsafe working conditions and inadequate protection from extreme heat. While significant labour reforms were

introduced in the lead-up to the tournament, concerns remained regarding implementation and enforcement.<sup>6</sup> The Qatar experience demonstrated how the scale and urgency of delivering major event infrastructure can create conditions in which exploitation risks emerge across complex supply chains, particularly where large numbers of migrant workers are recruited to meet concentrated labour demands.

These issues are not confined to past events. In the *Anticipating Exploitation* research, experts participating in the Delphi survey noted that the concentrated labour demands associated with future "mega sporting events" will continue to create conditions in which exploitation becomes more likely, particularly where recruitment, oversight and worker protections fail to keep pace with demand.<sup>7</sup>

The challenge is not unique to sporting events themselves. Rather, any event that concentrates labour demand within a compressed timeframe can increase incentives for exploitative recruitment practices while reducing visibility across complex supply chains.

The demand shock framework therefore remains highly relevant to forthcoming events. Preparations for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, for example, are expected to generate substantial demand across accommodation, transport, hospitality, security and venue operations.<sup>8</sup> Although current monitoring has focused primarily on risks of sexual exploitation, the scale of workforce mobilisation required across North America illustrates how major events continue to generate the labour market pressures identified throughout the wider literature. This reinforces the importance of embedding ethical recruitment, labour monitoring and safeguarding measures throughout event planning and delivery.

### **Sexual Exploitation and Major Events**

Academic and public concern regarding trafficking and sexual exploitation in the context of major sporting events can be traced largely to the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany, which generated extensive international debate about the potential for increased trafficking for sexual exploitation and prompted a range of anti-trafficking interventions.<sup>9</sup>

The research presents a more nuanced picture. The absence of evidence for dramatic trafficking spikes does not mean exploitation risks are absent. Rather, major events may create conditions in which opportunities for sexual exploitation increase while detection becomes more difficult. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime notes that large visitor flows, increased demand for accommodation, expanded hospitality sectors and intensified commercial activity can all heighten vulnerabilities to exploitation.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, research examining Super Bowl periods in the United States identified increases in online advertisements displaying indicators associated with sex trafficking,<sup>11</sup> while the McCain Institute found evidence suggesting that trafficking networks adapt their operations around major events.<sup>12</sup> Evidence from anti-trafficking interventions conducted alongside Super Bowl events also illustrates how major events can create opportunities for both exploitation and detection. Following anti-trafficking training delivered to approximately 6,000 Uber and Lyft drivers during Super Bowl LIII in Atlanta, one driver reported that, in the run up to the event, "a smartly dressed passenger got out of his car and handed him a business card and said if anyone asks for young boys or girls during the Super Bowl to send them to the address on the card." Another driver recalled: "One time, I picked up the same girl who looked 15 but said she was 21 and dropped her off at different locations one night."<sup>13</sup> These testimonies suggest that major events may create opportunities for exploitative actors to expand or adapt their activities in anticipation of increased demand. At the same time, they demonstrate the value of targeted awareness raising and training in equipping frontline workers with the knowledge and confidence to recognise, report and respond to potential indicators of trafficking and sexual exploitation. The most credible conclusion is therefore that major events can increase opportunities for sexual exploitation without necessarily generating measurable increases in trafficking prevalence.

Evidence from preparations for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games illustrates these dynamics. Monitoring conducted by STOP THE TRAFFIK identified widespread use of Estonian telephone numbers within advertisements, raising questions regarding trafficking routes and the transnational organisation of exploitation networks. Advertised prices frequently exceeded €300 per hour and €3,000 per

day, illustrating the substantial profits available within commercial sexual exploitation markets and the financial incentives created by major events.<sup>14</sup>

Emerging intelligence from preparations for the FIFA World Cup 2026 points to similar patterns. Monitoring of advertisements around host cities in Los Angeles, New York City and Toronto identified increasing advertisement volumes as the tournament approaches, with average daily listings increasing by approximately 161% in Los Angeles and 65% in Toronto.<sup>15</sup> This finding aligns with wider research suggesting that major events often act as catalysts for the relocation and intensification of existing exploitation rather than the creation of entirely new trafficking markets. Traffickers appear to adapt to anticipated demand by relocating victims, utilising temporary accommodation, refining advertising strategies and increasingly relying on digital platforms and financial services to maximise profits while reducing visibility.

### **Entertainment Events and Festivals**

Compared with sporting events, the evidence relating specifically to entertainment events and music festivals is less developed. Existing research has focused primarily on sexual violence, harassment and safeguarding concerns rather than trafficking. Studies conducted in the United Kingdom and Australia<sup>16</sup> have identified several characteristics associated with increased vulnerability in festival environments:

- High visitor volumes.
- Temporary accommodation.
- Alcohol and drug consumption.
- Crowded environments.
- Reduced guardianship.
- Limited reporting mechanisms.
- Increased anonymity.

While these factors do not demonstrate a direct increase in trafficking, they reinforce wider findings that exploitation can become more difficult to identify in large-scale event settings where significant numbers of temporary visitors, workers and service providers converge. From an exploitation perspective, these

environments should therefore be viewed as potential risk settings requiring proactive safeguarding measures.

### **Hotels and Transport: Critical Intervention Points**

Hotels and transportation systems are consistently identified in the literature as critical points at which trafficking and exploitation may be facilitated, observed and disrupted. A frequently cited study by Polaris, a leading United States anti-trafficking organisation, found that 79% of trafficking survivors in the United States surveyed reported interacting with hotels or motels during their exploitation.<sup>17</sup>

Hotels may be used for:

- Commercial sexual exploitation.
- Temporary accommodation.
- Victim movement between locations.
- Meetings between traffickers and buyers.

This creates important opportunities for intervention. Hotel reception staff, housekeeping teams, maintenance workers and security personnel may observe indicators of exploitation that would otherwise remain hidden. This is particularly relevant in the context of major events. Analysis relating to both the Paris 2024 Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup 2026 suggests that hotels, private apartments and short-term rental properties may be increasingly utilised as locations for commercial sexual exploitation.<sup>18</sup> These findings complement Polaris's research on the central role accommodation providers can play within trafficking operations and reinforce the importance of equipping frontline staff to recognise, report and respond to indicators of exploitation before harm escalates.

Transportation systems play a similarly important role. Polaris found that 82% of survivors reported interacting with transportation systems during exploitation.

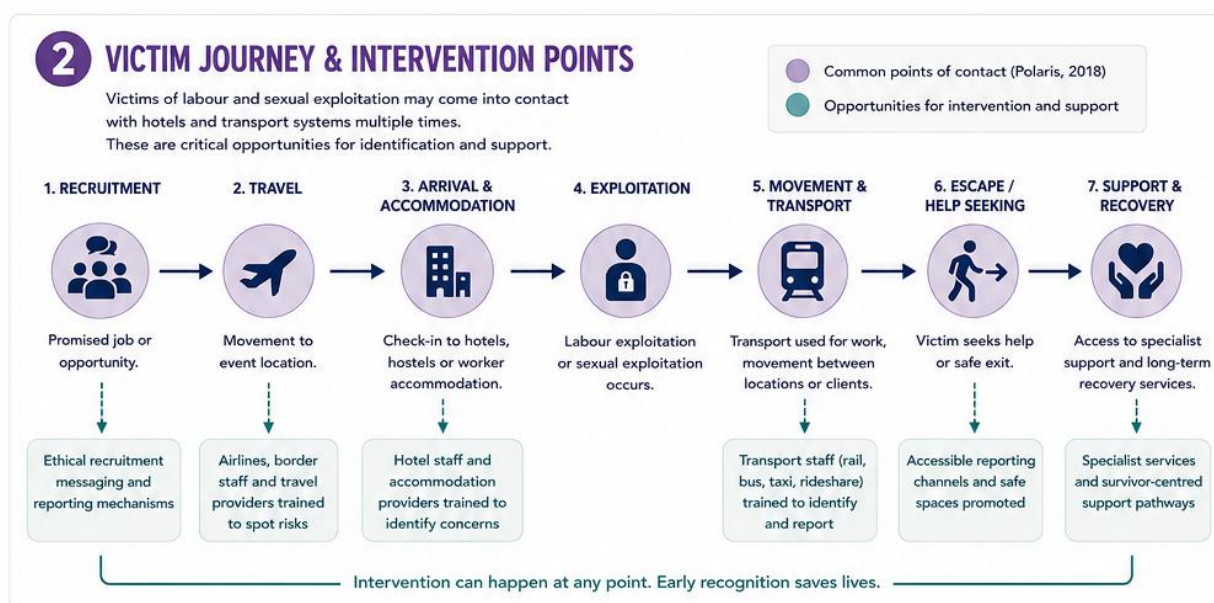
Transport networks may facilitate:

- Recruitment.
- Victim movement.
- Labour exploitation.
- Sexual exploitation.

Transport systems often provide critical escape routes for victims seeking safety. Airline staff, rail operators, bus services, taxi providers, rideshare companies and logistics workers therefore represent important safeguarding partners.

The significance of this becomes clearer when viewed within the broader victim journey. Exploitation rarely occurs in a single location. Victims are often recruited, transported, housed and exploited across multiple settings and jurisdictions, bringing them into contact with a range of businesses and frontline workers. Figure 2 below illustrates how trafficking frequently involves a series of interconnected stages rather than a single event. From recruitment and transportation through to accommodation and exploitation, victims may encounter multiple systems and services along the way. Each stage presents opportunities for intervention.

Figure 2: Intervention Points



### Prevention: From Awareness to Anticipation

While much of the discussion surrounding major events focuses on risks, these occasions can also create valuable opportunities for awareness raising and prevention. The global visibility of sporting and entertainment events provides a platform through which organisers, governing bodies, charities and public authorities can engage audiences on issues relating to exploitation and safeguarding.

The Clewer Initiative, for example, argues that sport is uniquely positioned to promote awareness and encourage preventative action across communities, organisations and event structures.<sup>19</sup> Major events can help amplify public understanding of exploitation, strengthen reporting mechanisms, support staff training, and encourage collaboration between businesses, law enforcement, civil society organisations and survivor-led groups. When integrated into broader safeguarding strategies, awareness campaigns can contribute to earlier identification of risks and help foster a culture of vigilance and prevention.

Viewed in this way, major events represent not only potential pressure points for exploitation but also opportunities to strengthen the systems designed to prevent it. However, translating awareness into meaningful action requires a shift from reactive responses to proactive prevention.

Internationally, organisations including FIFA and the International Olympic Committee have begun incorporating human rights considerations into event planning and host selection processes. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights provide a recognised framework for identifying, preventing and addressing exploitation risks across labour supply chains and event delivery systems.<sup>20</sup> However, implementation remains inconsistent. The IASC has argued that voluntary approaches alone are unlikely to be sufficient and has called for stronger forced labour regulation requiring businesses to conduct human rights due diligence and address exploitation risks within their supply chains.<sup>21</sup> As the Law Institute notes, monitoring programmes must extend beyond stadiums to encompass the full range of event-related infrastructure, while transparency regarding identified violations and remediation efforts is essential to building accountability and trust.<sup>22</sup>

Researchers consistently highlight a range of practical measures that can reduce vulnerabilities and improve detection throughout the event lifecycle, including:

- Ethical recruitment systems.
- Labour inspection and monitoring.
- Supply chain due diligence.
- Hotel sector training.

- Transport sector training.
- Survivor-centred support services.
- Online advertisement monitoring.
- Clear reporting pathways.
- Independent post-event evaluation.

Figure 3 below illustrates how these measures can be embedded throughout the lifecycle of a major sporting or entertainment event. Exploitation risks do not emerge solely during the event itself. Rather, vulnerabilities can arise at every stage, from planning and procurement through to event delivery and post-event evaluation. Effective safeguarding therefore requires a whole-of-lifecycle approach, with prevention, monitoring and response mechanisms integrated throughout event planning and execution rather than applied as isolated interventions.

Figure 3: IASC Example of Preventative Framework



The challenge for future hosts is not simply to respond to exploitation when it occurs, but to anticipate risks before they emerge. By embedding human rights due diligence, ethical recruitment and survivor-informed safeguarding throughout the lifecycle of an event, organisers, governments and businesses can reduce vulnerabilities and create a lasting legacy of prevention.

### **What the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner is doing**

A particularly promising development is the collaboration between the IASC and It's a Penalty, an international non-governmental organisation that uses major sporting events and global platforms to raise awareness of human trafficking, exploitation and abuse. Since its launch, It's a Penalty has delivered high-profile campaigns at events including the FIFA World Cup, Olympic Games, Super Bowl and Commonwealth Games, working with governments, sports governing bodies, airlines, hotels, businesses and law enforcement agencies to promote awareness, strengthen reporting mechanisms and support preventative action. Through these campaigns, the organisation has helped bring issues of exploitation and safeguarding to audiences that might not otherwise engage with them.

Building on this experience, the IASC and It's a Penalty are developing a practical toolkit for future event organisers and state sponsors. Grounded in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the toolkit is intended to support organisers in identifying, assessing and mitigating exploitation risks throughout the event lifecycle, from bidding and planning through to procurement, delivery and post-event evaluation.

The preventative framework outlined in Figure 3 demonstrates how exploitation risks can be anticipated and addressed at each stage of an event. It recognises that major sporting and entertainment events are not inherently drivers of exploitation. Rather, they can provide an opportunity to demonstrate leadership, innovation and good practice in human rights protection. When safeguarding is embedded from the outset, major events can leave a positive legacy that extends beyond economic growth and infrastructure investment, strengthening worker protections, safeguarding systems and anti-exploitation efforts long after the event has concluded.

Through this collaboration, the IASC is seeking to move the conversation beyond awareness and towards practical implementation. The aim is to ensure that future events are remembered not only for their sporting or cultural achievements, but also for the standards they set in protecting people from exploitation.

This commitment to prevention is reflected in the IASC's work on business accountability and supply chain transparency. In 2025, the IASC developed model forced labour legislation that would require businesses to undertake human rights due diligence and take proactive steps to identify, prevent and address exploitation risks within their operations and supply chains.<sup>23</sup>

Developed through extensive engagement with businesses, survivor groups and international partners, the proposals have been submitted to the UK Government as part of wider efforts to strengthen protections against forced labour and human rights abuses. Together, these initiatives reflect a shared objective: moving from reactive responses to exploitation towards a preventative approach that addresses risks before harm occurs.

---

<sup>1</sup> Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (2026) [Anticipating Exploitation: A Futures Analysis](#) London: Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner

<sup>2</sup> Finkel, R. and Finkel, M. (2015) 'Human trafficking and major sporting events', *Tourism, Culture and Communication*, 15(1), pp. 15–28. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020) *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*. Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

<sup>3</sup> STOP THE TRAFFIK (2026) *FIFA World Cup 2026: Anticipated Risks of Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking*, Issue 001, 27 February 2026.

<sup>4</sup> Free the Slaves (2010) *Slavery in the Shadow of India's Commonwealth Games*. Washington, DC: Free the Slaves.

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch (2018) *Red Card: Exploitation of Construction Workers on World Cup Sites in Russia*. New York: Human Rights Watch.

<sup>6</sup> Sullivan, M. (2022) '[A World Cup Built on Modern Slavery](#)': Stadium Workers Blow the Whistle on Qatar's 'Coverup' of Migrant Deaths and Suffering', *Rolling Stone*, 9 November.

<sup>7</sup> Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (2026) [Anticipating Exploitation: A Futures Analysis](#). London: Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner

<sup>8</sup> STOP THE TRAFFIK (2026) *FIFA World Cup 2026: Anticipated Risks of Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking*, Issue 001, 27 February 2026.

<sup>9</sup> Henning, J., Craggs, S., Laczko, F. and Larsson, F. (2007) *Trafficking in Human Beings and the 2006 World Cup in Germany*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration; Oliver, B.J. (2023) 'Rights, not rescue: trafficking (in)securities at the sport mega-event', *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020) *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*. Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

<sup>11</sup> Roe-Sepowitz, D., Gallagher, J., Risinger, M. and Hickle, K. (2015) *Exploring the Impact of the Super Bowl on Sex Trafficking*. Arizona State University Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research.

<sup>12</sup> McCain Institute (2018) *Preventing and Addressing Sex Trafficking at the Super Bowl*. Washington, DC: McCain Institute.

<sup>13</sup> It's a Penalty (2019), 2019 Campaign Impact Report, p. 9. Testimonials from Uber drivers who received anti-trafficking awareness training during Super Bowl LIII in Atlanta

<sup>14</sup> STOP THE TRAFFIK (2024) [Human Trafficking and the Paris Olympics](#).

<sup>15</sup> STOP THE TRAFFIK (2026) *FIFA World Cup 2026: Anticipated Risks of Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking*, Issue 001, 27 February 2026.

<sup>16</sup> Fileborn, B. (2016) *Reclaiming the Night-Time Economy: Unwanted Sexual Attention in Pubs and Clubs*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. Fileborn, B., Wadds, P. and Tomsen, S. (2020) 'Sexual violence and safety in the night-time economy and at music festivals: a qualitative study', *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 32(3), pp. 346–361. Fileborn, B., Wadds, P. and Barnes, A. (2021) 'Setting the stage for sexual violence prevention: Bystander intervention and music festivals', *Violence Against Women*, 27(11), pp. 1863–1884.

<sup>17</sup> Polaris (2018) *On-Ramps, Intersections, and Exit Routes: A Roadmap for Systems and Industries to Prevent and Disrupt Human Trafficking*. Washington, DC: Polaris.

<sup>18</sup> STOP THE TRAFFIK (2026) *FIFA World Cup 2026: Anticipated Risks of Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking*, Issue 001, 27 February 2026.

<sup>19</sup> The Clewer Initiative (2023) *The Role of Sport in Tackling Modern Slavery and Exploitation*. London: The Clewer Initiative; Sant, S.L., Maleske, C., Wang, W. and King, E.J. (2022) 'Leveraging sport events for the promotion of human rights in host communities: diffusion of anti-trafficking campaigns at Super Bowl LIV', *Sport Management Review*.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations (2011) *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework*. New York and Geneva: United Nations.

<sup>21</sup> Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (2025) [Strengthening the UK's Forced Labour and Human Rights Legislative Framework](#). London: Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner

<sup>22</sup> Law Institute (2025) *Human Trafficking in Sports: Spotlight*.

<sup>23</sup> Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (2025) [Strengthening the UK's Forced Labour and Human Rights Legislative Framework](#). London: Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner