

“Sex Trafficking and the 2018 Super Bowl in Minneapolis: A Research Brief”

June 2017

Introduction

In June of 2016 the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota (WFMN) asked Dr. Lauren Martin at the University of Minnesota Robert J. Jones Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC) to conduct a review of the scholarly literature on the connections between sex trafficking and Super Bowls, as well as a review of media coverage in the United States related to this topic. Dr. Martin assembled a team to conduct this research, which included Dr. Annie Hill, Nicolas Demm, Cheyenne Syvertson, Prerna Subramanian, and Zoe Wisnoski.

We reviewed academic publications and analyzed US-based print media coverage on the connection between mega-sporting events and sex trafficking in North America, Europe and South Africa. This report provides an overview of the most relevant findings for the work of the Super Bowl committee in Minneapolis.

This research brief has four sections: research overview including methods, top line project findings, issues to consider, recommendations, and short bios of our team members.

Research Overview

The project had three research goals:

1. Assess currently available scholarly and empirical evidence as to whether Super Bowls (and other so-called “mega sporting events”) increase the overall market for sex (specifically sex trafficking) in the host city.
2. Highlight key themes and discourses related to efforts to address sex trafficking at past Super Bowls in the United States, and other mega sporting events worldwide.
3. Based on scholarly evidence, highlight potential areas of concern and make research-based recommendations for planning in advance of the 2018 Super Bowl to be held in Minneapolis.

Our team sought to be thorough, comprehensive and systematic in our study of the already existing knowledge-base on potential links between sex trafficking and the Super Bowl. For the academic literature search we used search terms “sex trafficking,” “prostitution,” “Super Bowl,” “football,” and “sporting event.” We identified 95 potentially relevant scholarly publications. Of those we systematically reviewed 55 that were deemed most relevant, 43 articles were included in our systematic literature review.

For our review of US-based print media we searched LexisNexis and Google News with the search terms “sex trafficking,” “prostitution,” and “Super Bowl” between 2009 and 2016. We identified and analyzed 111 print media stories. These were thematically analyzed using a qualitative analysis software called NVivo.

Detailed methods and findings from these studies are provided in separate documents. Here we provide an overview of our top line (or main) findings.

Top Line Findings:

- 1. There is some empirical data to support claims that the Super Bowl, like many other large and localized public events, correlates with an increase in the number of advertisements in the online market for commercial sex in the host city. However, the Super Bowl does not appear to have the largest impact and evidence suggests the impact is short-lived. The data are inconclusive as to the extent of trafficking by a third-party facilitator in relation to the noted increase in online ads for sex.*

The empirical data from U.S. Super Bowls and other mega sporting events worldwide (i.e., the FIFA World Cup and Olympic Games) still in its infancy. Thus, we identified three scholars who have conducted empirical studies on this topic in the U.S. Available evidence suggests that the Super Bowl does have a temporary impact on the commercial sex market in the host city, but that the Super Bowl may not be unique in this regard as other types of events (such as trade shows, holiday weekends, and other sporting events) also impact a local sex market.

Empirical studies in the United States have analyzed the online “escort” advertisements on Backpage.com as a proxy for sex industry activity. Several recent (2015, 2016) and convincing empirical studies were conducted by Artur Dubrawski and his team from Carnegie Mellon Auton Laboratory.¹ This team uses a big data, machine-learning approach that counts features of all female online advertisements in the adult entertainment section of Backpage.com. Their 2015 study examined ad volume for a 91-day period before and after the Super Bowls in Indianapolis, New Orleans, and New Jersey and compared these volumes to nationwide escort advertisement patterns. They found an increase in ad volume that they characterized as “not very large.” Their 2016 study analyzed 33 events of similar size and scope in the US, including sporting events, trade shows, and holiday weekends. They found that U.S. Super Bowls do correlate with an increase in the number of individual online advertisements for sex.

To better understand whether events draw an influx of new individuals to a local sex market, the research identified “new-to-town” ads. They found an increase in ads that appear to be “new-to-town” in and near the Super Bowl host city at the time of the event. However, the study found that many other events they analyzed also showed an increase in overall ad volume (e.g., the Consumer Electronics Show) and “new-to-town” ads. While Super Bowls showed an increase in “new-to-town” ads, they did not demonstrate the most substantial increase in advertising or “new-to-town” ads. They found that Memorial Day weekend at Myrtle Beach showed the largest

¹ Dubrawski, A., Miller, K., Barnes, M., Boecking, B., & Kennedy, E. (2015). Leveraging publicly available data to discern patterns of human-trafficking activity. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 1(1), 65-85. doi:10.1080/23322705.2015.1015342; Miller, K., Kenney, E., & Dubrawski, A. (2016). *Do public events affect sex trafficking activity?* Unpublished manuscript.

and most consistent draw of “new-to-town” advertisements for sex. They also found that the market goes back to “normal” levels of online advertising after the event. Therefore, it appears that **Super Bowls do generate an increase, but not to the degree that is often publicized in the media and other reports.**

The studies most widely reported in the media were conducted by Roe-Sepowitz et al. (2014, 2015) at Arizona State University.² They used a research team to manually review ads in the adult services section of Backpages.com in host cities before, during and after the Super Bowl. They also placed decoy advertisements for sex on Backpages.com and tracked the number of calls received from individuals interested in purchasing sex based on those ads. They found some evidence of an increase in online advertisements around the Super Bowl; while they received a lot of calls responding to their decoy ads at the time of the Super Bowl, they did not see a significant increase in calls from comparison ads posted in the same city in a different week. However, the results were not conclusive and interpretation of their conclusions were inconsistent in media reports.

Laterno et al. (2011), from the University of Southern California’s Annenberg Center on Communication, used computational linguistics, data mining and mapping tools to analyze the online market for sex, again focusing on Backpage.com.³ They looked at online ads during the 2010 Super Bowl in Texas. They identified a noticeable increase in advertisements for sex compared to the daily average number of ads. The authors suggested that part of the increase could have been due to a pattern of increasing ads over the weekend. Further, they were not able to discern any linguistic cues as to the proportion of ads that involved trafficking or minor victims.

Another important consideration in the empirical study of the impact of the Super Bowl on sex trafficking is the proportion of individuals in the sex market who are “trafficked” and whether this proportion changes as a result of the Super Bowl. This is a perennial problem in all research on commercial sex due to the extreme difficulties of conducting research on this topic. The market is hidden, dangerous, stigmatized and illegal. Therefore, high quality empirical research is hard to perform. Estimates range from 5% to 20% of the overall market. But methods for ascertaining trafficking based on online advertisements alone, while potentially promising are not yet convincing.

Interviewing people who provide sex (i.e. sex workers) themselves is another approach to exploring empirical data on the connection between mega sporting events and sex trafficking. Several studies in South Africa (2010 FIFA World Cup) and in Vancouver (2010 Winter Olympic Games) interviewed self-described sex workers to determine if they noticed any

² Roe-Sepowitz, D., Gallagher, J., Bracy, K., Cantelme, L., Bayless, A., Larkin, J., Allbee, L. (2015). *Exploring the impact of the super bowl on sex trafficking 2015*. Phoenix, AZ: Arizona State University School of Social Work, Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research; Roe-Sepowitz, D., Gallagher, J., & Hickie, K. (2014). *Exploring sex trafficking and prostitution demand during the super bowl 2014*. Phoenix, AZ: Arizona State University School of Social Work, Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research.

³ Latonero, M., Berhane, G., Hernandez, A., Mohebi, T., & Movius, L. (2011). *Human trafficking online: The role of social networking sites and online classifieds*. Los Angeles, CA: University of Southern California Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy.

changes in the commercial sex market, including an increase in trafficking.⁴ The South African studies obtained relatively large sample sizes over 1,000 individuals recruited by online and newspaper advertisements. They found little to no change in the sex market in relation to the 2010 World Cup with no discernable increase in non-South African people selling sex or people new to the city. Likewise, research conducted in correlation with the 2010 Vancouver Olympics (with a much smaller sample size) did not find any increase in people selling sex who were new to the city. Instead, they found a decrease in the reported number of sex buyers during the Olympics period.

We must note several weaknesses of the empirical data. The studies primarily considered only two aspects of the marketplace for sex: publically accessible online advertisements and self-described “sex workers” experiences. We found no studies that explored other aspects of the marketplace for sex, including private parties, street-based sex trading, links to other components of the legal commercial sex industry, etc. It is therefore probable that important aspects of the market have not yet been studied in relation to large scale events. Changes in the online marketing environment may or may not be an actual proxy for the number of people involved in the marketplace. Previous research shows that the number of advertisements is not a one-to-one correspondence to the number of people. Some escort ads refer not to people but to agencies. Further, results from studies outside of the U.S. may or may not be applicable to the Super Bowl because of differing legal, social and cultural contexts. Finally, sex trading is not illegal in all locations and that makes generalizations about trends risky.

2. *We found the first documented concerns about the impact of mega sporting events (i.e., FIFA World Cup, Olympics) on sex trafficking in the host city from 2004 Athens, Greece Olympic Games.*

The 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece seems to be the first instance of significant international discussion of an association between sex trafficking and a major sporting event. Responses in Athens set the stage for how other host cities of international sporting events would respond. The pattern is as follows. Typically efforts begin with predictions of a huge increase in human trafficking and a call for local officials to prepare and put in place measures to prevent trafficking and arrest traffickers. Prostitution is legal in Greece, so concerns about sex trafficking intermingled with concerns about migration, anti-immigration sentiments, and international trafficking. Greek authorities responded by creating free legal aid services, funding for a hotline, and support for housing and other services. They also conducted a licensing drive of the legal sex industry to attempt to deter illegal indoor and street-based prostitution. Greek NGOs launched a public awareness campaign to raise awareness of sex trafficking. Results were mixed. Efforts did lead to an increase in arrests of women and use of restrictive immigration and border control efforts. The large estimates of numbers of trafficking victims did not materialize. Yet the debates and activities in Athens 2004 set the template for how international NGOs and host cities across Europe and in South Africa dealt with sex trafficking at subsequent mega sporting events.

⁴ Richter, M., Luchters, S., Ndlovu, D., Temmerman, M., & Chersich, M. F. (2012). Female sex work and international sport events - no major changes in demand or supply of paid sex during the 2010 soccer world cup: A cross-sectional study. *BMC Public Health*, 12(1), 1-12. doi:10.1186/1471-2458-12-763; Deering, K. N., Chettiar, J., Chan, K., Taylor, M., Montaner, J. S. G., & Shannon, K. (2012). Sex work and the public health impacts of the 2010 Olympic Games. *Sexually Transmitted Infections*, 88(4), 301-303. doi:10.1136/sextrans-2011-050235.

Similar patterns unfolded during the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany, with the potential number of trafficking victims for the event estimated to be 40,000 people. This number proved to be unfounded. The intertwined narratives of anti-immigration, HIV/AIDS risk, debates about sex work vs. sex trafficking, and international pressure came to the fore around the 2006 World Cup. Like Greece, prostitution is legal and regulated in Germany. A toned down but similar pattern of host city preparation generated scholarly attention for the 2008 European Championship, 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada, and the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa. In all instances, police involvement seems to have led to an increase in the number of arrests of women selling sex, some of whom may have also been victims of cross-border and domestic trafficking.

These international examples have some applicability to the U.S. Super Bowl: similar narratives, sensationalist figures about potential trafficking, and reliance on police enforcement. While instructive, these examples may also be of limited utility because of differing legal frameworks for prostitution, migration issues, and different cultural and social contexts.

- 3. We found a tendency across host cities of past Super Bowls (and international mega sporting events) for media and other commentators to recycle unfounded and exaggerated numbers of potential people victimized by sex trafficking as a result of heightened demand spurred by the event.*

News media coverage and the scholarly literature points to a tendency to use large and unfounded estimates of a predicted number of victims in combination with exaggerated claims. Media and public officials have made claims that the Super Bowl is the biggest human trafficking event in the U.S. In 2011, the Texas Attorney General asserted that the event is “commonly known as the single largest human trafficking incident in the United States”.⁵ Estimates of numbers of “prostitutes” and trafficking victims for the Super Bowl range from 10,000 to 150,000 or more.

Akin to the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany and its estimates of 40,000 new victims, formerly discredited or unattributed numbers tend to circulate in the mainstream U.S. press. This is a general pattern in media and scholarly work on sex trafficking (Fedina, 2015). Use of erroneous and exaggerated figures creates a heightened sense of panic and may spur action. But, ultimately, unsupported claims serve to discredit legitimate efforts to prevent sex trafficking, reduce harm, and identify and help victims.

As described above, there is empirical evidence that like many large scale and localized events, the Super Bowl does impact local sex markets. However, the evidence does not support the claim that the Super Bowl creates large numbers of potential victims or the claim of Super Bowls being the biggest event-based impact. Exaggeration could reduce the credibility of important efforts to combat sex trafficking and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation, as well as efforts to destigmatize the women involved in the sex industry.

⁵ Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2014.

4. *A common host city response to a perceived increase in trafficking at mega sporting events has been to increase police surveillance of the online sex market. But, some policing efforts have been shown to have negative consequences.*

Almost all host cities increased police surveillance of the online sex market and, when applicable, increased regulation of the legal commercial sex industry. Host cities of mega sporting events around the world have different legal regimes related to commercial sex, ranging from completely illegal (e.g., the majority of the U.S.) to legal brothel systems. Further, the European Union, North America, and South Africa have differing legal approaches to migration and immigration. Thus policing can involve diverse local, national or international police and security agencies.

In the United States, media reports and the academic literature suggest that policing of the online sex market in concert with the Super Bowl has led to an increase in arrest rates of buyers, sellers and traffickers in host cities; as well as rescue of victims, typically described as young females. However, media reports also document a troubling by-product of policing wherein individuals who are marginalized in the sex industry have been arrested and/or harassed by the police in relation to the Super Bowl, particularly if they do not fit a stereotypical notion of “victim.” This same pattern has been noted in other mega sporting events worldwide. Because a criminal record for prostitution has long-term negative consequences, this approach may serve to further harm the women the campaigns are trying to help. It may also further stigmatize some women and individuals exploited in the sex market.

5. *Several host cities have used mega sporting events to raise awareness of sex trafficking (sometimes with mixed results).*

Several host cities have used the occasion of a mega sporting event to raise awareness of sex trafficking and to increase supportive services for individuals wanting to exit the sex trade. This can certainly be a moment when sex trafficking prevention efforts can reach the public eye. Further, the association between football, male privilege and sex markets has been used as an occasion to reframe commercial sex from a “boys-will-be-boys” mentality to highlighting violence, force, coercion, and exploitation within the marketplace for sex. As described above, the Athens 2004 Olympic Games showed that making a link between a mega sporting event and sex trafficking can lead to significant funding and social service efforts.

However, we found several downsides to some of these awareness campaigns. Most were based on exaggerated numbers. As noted above, use of unfounded numbers will likely backfire, discrediting a legitimate concern with exploitation and trafficking in the marketplace for sex. More importantly, in an effort to garner support and sympathy, many awareness campaigns present a stereotypical picture of who is a victim of sex trafficking. They tend to show a young, white female who is naive and in need of a man to rescue her. This portrayal promotes stereotypical gendered notions of women as weak and men as strong. Finally, some campaigns, particularly in Europe and South Africa, were enmeshed in anti-immigration and racialized discourses. In these locales sex trafficking was primarily seen as an international problem of human smuggling and immigration. In the U.S., efforts have effectively put the concept of

domestic trafficking front and center in awareness raising campaigns associated with Super Bowls. We provide more discussion of this below.

6. *There is a common narrative structure to most host city awareness raising activities associated with the Super Bowl or other mega sporting events.*

As noted above, the awareness campaigns typically portray the victim of sex trafficking as a naive and helpless young woman in need of rescue. This narrative trope can reinforce gendered stereotypes of women in need of protection and rescue from strong men (e.g., police, NFL players, male football fans). Alongside this narrative, many campaigns suggest that victims are worthy of support only if they meet, and embody, certain criteria. Campaign images suggest these criteria include being young, sexually innocent, physically forced, weak, and scared. This image can be juxtaposed in the public realm with a woman who “chooses” to be a “prostitute.” This type of campaign imagery can reinforce stigma against women who do not meet this criteria and oversimplifies the social, economic and other pressures involved in the commercial sex industry.

The rescue narrative suggests that all individuals in the commercial sex industry will respond well to being rescued by police or social services. In fact, many individuals have not had previous positive relations with police and services and are reluctant to be “rescued” for a variety of reasons. Research shows that, even for trafficking victims, exiting the sex industry is a process that takes time and should be guided by the self-determination of each individual according to her or his own needs.⁶

Many campaigns portray sex trafficking as tantamount to kidnapping and obvious coercion. We know from research that people in the sex trade experience all kinds of overt and more subtle forms of violence, exploitation and manipulation. Over emphasis on a total lack of physical freedom may make it harder for many individuals to see themselves in anti-trafficking campaigns. Similarly, campaigns typically do not acknowledge the complex relationships that often occur between victims and traffickers.

7. *A final note on the literature related debates about the nature of sex trafficking and commercial sex.*

In the absence of empirical evidence, the majority of studies we identified analyze the narratives and debates about sex trafficking and mega sporting events, rather than conducting empirical studies of the commercial sex market. There is a clear rift in these reports and scholarly articles that are related to the narrative tropes described above. Some scholarly authors take it at face value that mega sporting events lead to increased trafficking. They see it as a given that sports, masculinity, travel, and purchasing sex are linked. These articles tend to talk about the opportunities for prevention of sex trafficking and law enforcement interdiction. Others believe the association between mega sporting events and sex trafficking is pure hype and part of a discourse around creating a so-called “moral panic” in the public. They take it as a given that there is no increase in trafficking. This group of authors sees the media frenzy and induced

⁶ Research studies provided upon request.

“moral panic” as really about controlling sexuality, debates about migration, and promotion of an “abolitionist” position.

We believe that careful consideration of empirical evidence and attention to best practices in victim support and empowerment will allow us to wade through the often-fractured debates around the nature of the marketplace for sex and to craft better responses that reduce exploitation, violence and inequity, and that truly prevent exploitation and help victims find a pathway out.

Issues to Consider and Recommendations

We know that preparations and planning have been underway to prevent and intervene in any potential instances in sex trafficking in the Twin Cities as a result of the 2018 Super Bowl. There are undoubtedly many stakeholders, issues, and considerations to weigh and balance in this planning effort. Based on our findings described above, we wanted to highlight several potential issues for planning teams to consider.

1. We know that law enforcement will have a role in the Twin Cities’ response to the 2018 Super Bowl. As noted above, this approach can harm women by increasing arrests. We suggest the committee consider a recommendation to police to NOT focus on arresting women and men selling sex, and instead offer connections to supportive services, if desired by the individual. This would reduce one of the significant downsides of previous host city responses to Super Bowls and other large sporting events that we identified above.
2. The empirical evidence suggests that the Super Bowl will likely be associated with a temporary shift the local online sex market, with more advertisements and possible more “new-to-town” advertisements. However, empirical data is not clear as to the degree of sex trafficking within the online sex market. Thus, a more accurate message might be to talk about how the Super Bowl represents a unique opportunity to spotlight a normally hidden issue and engage men in anti-trafficking activities. Another salient message could be that sex trafficking is not a one-time event.
3. While engaging men is clearly important, we want to caution against framing the issue as “helpless” women in need of protection from men. Rather, this mega sporting event and discussion can be a unique opportunity to highlight the important role for women and men in preventing sexual exploitation.
4. We suggest that the committee explore using an empowerment lens for all aspects of the campaign. By this we mean several things. The campaign could use carefully crafted messages that includes women and men as having a strong and positive role to play. It could provide additional options and choices for victims of sex trafficking and other individuals exploited in the marketplace for sex. The campaign could broaden and deepen understanding of the everyday aspects of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking. A full description of ideas was provided to the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota in a separate document called: “Sex Trafficking and the Super Bowl: Outlines of a Proposed Empowerment Model for Public Awareness Campaigns.”

A full literature review is available upon request. Email Lauren Martin, mart2114@umn.edu.

This brief was prepared by Dr. Lauren Martin and Dr. Annie Hill.

Dr. Lauren Martin, Director of Research, University of Minnesota, The Robert J. Jones Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC)

Dr. Annie Hill, Assistant Professor, University of Minnesota, Department of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies