



Rosen Research Focus | Jessica Wickey Byrd & Alan Fyall

EXPLORING AND MITIGATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE U.S. EVENT INDUSTRY

Human trafficking is a global problem that affects multiple industries. The tourism and hospitality industry is particularly prone to this illicit activity, with traffickers often exploiting workers at touristic destinations and major events. Dr. Jessica Wickey Byrd and Associate Dean Alan Fyall at UCF's Rosen College of Hospitality Management recently investigated the causes, scale, reach, and impact of human trafficking at popular events. By interviewing stakeholders in the U.S., the team gathered valuable insight that could inform the mitigation of human trafficking in the event industry.

Human trafficking, the illegal capture, recruitment, transport, accommodation and/or exploitation of one or more people via force, fraud or coercion, is a serious human rights violation that currently affects 46 million people worldwide. The most common forms of human trafficking involve sexual exploitation or labor trafficking, yet victims also include children and adults who are forced into marriage or warfare.

Human trafficking spans across a wide range of industries, including the sex industry, agriculture, construction, and manufacturing. Understanding the root causes, characteristics, and effects of human trafficking in each affected industry could

help to devise more effective strategies to mitigate these illicit activities.

Hospitality and tourism are among the most vulnerable industries to the trafficking and exploitation of people, which is particularly widespread at touristic destinations and major events. Dr. Jessica Wickey Byrd and Associate Dean Alan Fyall at UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management recently carried out a study aimed at better understanding human trafficking in the event industry, by interviewing nine experts that are combatting these activities daily.

GLOBAL EFFORTS TO MITIGATE HUMAN TRAFFICKING

While human trafficking is a crime in most

developed nations, over one third of countries worldwide have not yet criminalized it. International organizations have thus been introducing various instruments for combatting human trafficking worldwide.

These instruments include non-profit organizations such as ECPAT and Airline Ambassadors International (AAI), global networks committed to ending the exploitation of children and adults, as well as prevention policies, industry-relevant codes of conduct, and technological tools aimed at detecting trafficking. These instruments have been employed by many large players in the hospitality and tourism industry, including hotel chains (e.g., Marriott, InterContinental Hotels Group, and Hilton), airlines (e.g., Delta Airlines, United Airlines, and Southwest), and large multi-national restaurants (e.g., Subway, McDonald's, and Starbucks).

Despite these widespread efforts, some segments of the hospitality and tourism industry remain particularly vulnerable to human trafficking. These include large events and popular touristic destinations.



The study aims to identify the causes, scale, reach, and impact of human trafficking in the context of major events.

trafficking. Most cities worldwide are still unprepared to deal with the occurrence of sex trafficking at major events, particularly those with a large number of attendees.

For instance, World Cup events in Brazil, South Africa, and Russia, as well as the Olympics and Formula 1 Grand Prix, have been found to be hubs for prostitution and child labor. Moreover, estimates suggest that approximately 10,000 girls and women were taken to Miami and sexually exploited during the course of the 2010 SuperBowl. At a previous event, the American Football



and the coercion of minors into selling goods or sexual favors.

GATHERING INSIGHT FROM STAKEHOLDERS

Wickey Byrd and Fyall interviewed nine individuals who have been involved in efforts to mitigate human trafficking. Each of the study participants was interviewed via the online conferencing platform Zoom for a period of 30 to 40 minutes.

The interviewees included three people working at Human Rights Advocacy organizations, which filled the roles of U.S. Director of Partnerships, President, and President and Founder, respectively. They also included a law enforcement agent and a sergeant operating in Orlando, a human trafficking task force coordinator, a retired Sheriff for the Sherriff's Office, a Professor specialized in Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery Education, and a Youth and Family Services Manager.

All interviews were semi-structured, meaning that they touched on similar topics while leaving space for individual respondents to elaborate on themes of their choosing. The researchers transcribed the interviews using AI software and analyzed them using a phenomenological approach (i.e., a method to study the experiences of individuals and identify recurring themes in their accounts).

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE EXPERT INTERVIEWS

The responses gathered by the researchers suggest that major events do not necessarily attract human trafficking, yet they create conditions that are favorable for those seeking to participate in these activities. This is because event attendees are often trying to escape their normal routine, which could contribute to thrill-seeking, unusual, and irresponsible behaviors. The respondents collectively stated that often there is a sense of 'the rules do not apply here' and a more hedonistic mindset sets in; where attendees of these major and mega events act in ways where the consequences are not part of the decision-making process. They make bad choices to engage in activities that they normally would not engage in, like human trafficking.

As mentioned by one respondent: 'Sometimes there's a tendency for people to

MAJOR EVENTS DO NOT NECESSARILY ATTRACT HUMAN TRAFFICKING, YET THEY CREATE CONDITIONS THAT ARE FAVORABLE FOR THOSE SEEKING TO PARTICIPATE IN THESE ACTIVITIES.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY AND AT POPULAR EVENTS

Compared to other dimensions of the hospitality industry, the event industry has not yet introduced as many measures to prevent, detect, and mitigate human

SuperBowl LIII, law enforcement made 169 arrests related to human trafficking.

In addition to forced prostitution and sexual exploitation, large events appear to facilitate other forms of abuse and inhumane labor, such as the exploitation of migrant workers



put on their vacation hat, which leaves many wise decisions at the door when they get off the 'plane'.

The reckless behavior of visitors can also damage an event's reputation, resulting in greater media scrutiny. Event organizers might thus believe that openly introducing anti-trafficking measures will ruin an event's reputation further, by accentuating the presence of these illicit activities.

Some respondents emphasized that vulnerable individuals are at greater risk of becoming victims of human trafficking in the hope of earning money quickly at events.

'Surrounding major events, I see minor children who are exploited either in person or online and brought into a situation where sex trafficking can occur', says one



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are being trafficked and might simply be looking for ways to earn some money.

Some of the interviewees also observed a rise in digital forms of trafficking, that are much harder to trace. 'Whether it be apps or websites, you're seeing a lot of the buying, the grooming, the actual sale is happening online; we're even starting to see it move into digital currency being used to pay, which makes it hard to track', they explain.

COLLECTIVE EFFORTS AND OPEN CONVERSATIONS AMONG STAKEHOLDERS ARE LIKELY TO BE MORE FRUITFUL IN MITIGATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING.

respondent. 'Women who may be perceived as prostitutes are being forced into prostitution, but they may also be forced into doing other things against their will'.

The same respondent explained that children and minors are often also recruited to sell products outside stadiums or other venues. These children may not be aware that they

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE HUMAN TRAFFICKING AT MAJOR EVENTS

The people interviewed by Wickey Byrd and Fyall also offered suggestions for combatting human trafficking at major events. Firstly, they highlighted the need to initiate discussions between anti-trafficking agencies, law enforcement, and event organizers.

These conversations can help raise awareness of how trafficking occurs at events and measures to address these illicit activities, such as marketing campaigns, more law enforcement and emergency shelters for victims. Interviewees also highlighted the importance of prevention measures, including investigative efforts aimed at rescuing victims early, as well as educational tools for vulnerable individuals at greater risk of becoming victims, enablers, or even traffickers.

'Early intervention means that I can get to the vulnerable victim who can be exploited, the trafficker, educating them as to human worth and value in human dignity, and the buyer, before they've ever bought the first person for sex or labor', says one respondent.

Additional mitigation strategies could include coordinated efforts by law enforcement, federal agencies, and state officials, as well as regulations that force event managers to meet specific standards of conduct if they wish to continue operating in the industry. Technology could also prove valuable for tracking human trafficking activities at events. These include tools like TraffickCam, a crowdsourcing platform where people can upload images of hotel rooms they stayed at, helping law enforcement agencies to identify places where trafficking victims were spotted.

THE CRUCIAL IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATION

This recent study by Wickey Byrd and Fyall could soon serve as a guideline for all parties addressing the exploitation of people in the event industry. In their paper, the researchers emphasize the huge value of collaboration, suggesting that collective efforts and open conversations among stakeholders are likely to be more fruitful in mitigating human trafficking.

The study was carried out in the Southeast of the U.S., where stakeholders are already working together to address a wide range of human trafficking activities. In the future, the team's findings could pave the way for new joint efforts between policymakers, law enforcement agencies, NGOs, educators, human rights advocates, and event managers across the U.S., which could help to drastically reduce both sex and labor trafficking in the event industry.

RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This exploratory study, underpinned by collaboration theory, adopts a qualitative approach by interviewing stakeholders in the U.S. to identify the causes, scale, reach, and impact of human trafficking in the context of major events.

REFERENCES

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

Based on your study findings, what could be some viable strategies for mitigating human trafficking at major events?

// Creating a registration template for event organizers to include in the registration process that includes a) verbiage condoning human trafficking, b) the local laws for participating in human trafficking, and c) what a possible human trafficking social media post or advertisement may look like. When we educate the attendees before they arrive, we can mitigate future behaviors.

It is imperative for event organizers to meet with local law enforcement and advocates to have a safety plan in place in case someone encounters a trafficking victim or a trafficker. Where do they go? Who do they call for victim support? Preparing a plan ahead of time ensures all people are trained in the event that they encounter trafficking. //

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Dr. Jessica Wickey Byrd, EdD has 25 years of experience in the hospitality industry, including restaurants, resorts, events, convention centers, non-profit fundraising, and live entertainment. As Director of the Internship Program, she launched human trafficking education in the Summer of 2020, creating robust curriculum to enhance the student's internship education.

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