Securing the Olympic City: Federalized Anti-Trafficking Governance in Olympic Los Angeles

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Abstract

This thesis examines how anti-trafficking governance is organized and justified in Los Angeles, ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, 2027 NFL Super Bowl, and 2028 Olympic Games. Drawing on Black Feminist Geography, and community engaged case study, the research combines document analysis of publicly available government documents with five semi-structured interviews involving law enforcement officials and allied anti-trafficking NGOs. Findings argue that anti-trafficking governance extends beyond criminal investigation through collaborative governance. While these practices are framed through the language of victim protection and humanitarian care, they simultaneously expand policing authority, diffuse institutional responsibility, and uphold territorial forms of urban governance. Rather than representing exceptional responses to sport mega-events, these arrangements intensify longstanding carceral infrastructures that precede and outlast the events themselves. It further argues that ambiguity surround trafficking, victimhood, jurisdiction, and sanctuary protections, function as productive mechanisms through which collaborative anti-trafficking governance and spatialized policing continue to expand.

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1.0: Introduction

Sport mega-events (SMEs) are no longer staged as simple spectacles of athleticism. They function as laboratories of governance,[1] where discourses of terrorism, crime, and human-trafficking are mobilized to justify expansive security regimes, corporate privatization, and intensified policing of marginalized communities (Boykoff, 2021; Fussey & Klauser, 2015). Across SME host cities, security investments have ballooned under the promise of 'total security,' even as scholars underscore that such safety is more posture than protection (Fussey & Coaffee, 2012). These dynamics are especially visible in Los Angeles (LA), a city whose police apparatus has long been militarized through racialized enforcement, federal infusions of cash, and discretionary policing that targets racialized, immigrant, queer, and working-class communities (Balto & Felker-Kantor, 2022; Felker-Kantor, 2016; 2018). With the return of the Olympic Games in 2028, designated as a National Special Security Event in 2024 (USSS, 2024), Los Angeles becomes a critical site to examine how historic patterns of policing resurface under new rhetorics of 'protection.'

This thesis engages abolitionist theory as both method and praxis, drawing specifically on abolition geographies and prison abolition scholarship to refuse symbolic or decorative gestures in favour of practices that are materially accountable to communities most impacted by carceral expansion. Guided by the insights of Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022), Angela Davis, (2000; 2011), Kelly Oliver (2017), and Elizabeth Bernstein (2007; 2010), it situates SME security and anti-trafficking governance within broader analyses of prison and police abolition, the non-profit industrial complex, carceral humanitarianism, and carceral feminism. In doing so, it examines how neoliberal restructuring and bipartisan moral panics translate into punitive infrastructures that criminalize rather than protect (Axster et al., 2021). Rather than treating anti-trafficking enforcement as a temporary response to large scale events, this thesis argues that it has become an enduring mode of governance through which municipal, county, federal, and non-state actors collaborate to expand policing authority under the language of victim protection. In this sense, anti-trafficking campaigns tied to SMEs are not exceptional. They absorb century-old logics of

[1] Throughout this thesis, *governance* refers to the organization and exercise of authority across interconnected state and non-state institutions. This understanding reflects the collaborative, spatial, and multi-scalar forms of power, rather than the actions of governments or individual actors alone.

policing and discipline, producing profits for law enforcement and non-profit actors while endangering racialized, migrant, and sex-working communities in the name of rescue (Beutin, 2023; Gallant & Lam, 2024; Shih, 2023).

Using Los Angeles County as a qualitative case study, this thesis examines how anti-trafficking governance has undergone reorganization. While the Figuroa Corridor – and its subsequent anti-trafficking policing project – served as the entry point for this research, the analysis ultimately expanded beyond a single neighbourhood to examine the broader governance arrangements linking municipal, county, federal, and NGO actors.

Developed in collaboration with community advocates and sex workers in Los Angeles, this research resists extractive methodologies and instead foregrounds community knowledge as expertise. Using a qualitative design that combines: (i) document analysis (Morgan, 2022; Quinlan, 2021); and (ii) semi-structured interviews with law enforcement and allied stakeholders (Ekberg & Gao, 2018; Fukshima et al., 2020), this thesis examines how anti-trafficking narratives circulate through institutions and how those narratives are negotiated, contested, and operationalized by actors responsible for their implementation. Interview findings further reveal that many participants themselves questioned dominant assumptions linking SMEs to increases in human trafficking, even as anti-trafficking infrastructures continued to expand through task forces, federal partnerships, and "victim-centred" policing initiatives. Against this backdrop, this thesis asks: What are the official and unofficial rhetorics and tactics employed by law enforcement – framed within heightened concerns about human trafficking – and how do these ultimately shape geographies of sex work and its resistances in Los Angeles County ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, 2028 NFL Super Bowl, and 2028 Summer Olympics.

At stake is more than the security planning of a single event. Anti-trafficking governance in Los Angeles crystalizes broader contests over who belongs in urban space, and who must be removed. The findings offered throughout, demonstrate that the significance of SMEs lies less in producing exceptional forms of policing than in accelerating and legitimizing existing governance arrangements. Anti-trafficking, then, emerges not as a temporary panic, but a durable apparatus through which policing authority is welded to humanitarian expertise, federal collaboration, and NGO economies. By situating contemporary anti-trafficking enforcement within histories of militarization, neoliberal privatization, and gendered/racialized criminalization, this thesis positions mega-event security as less about the neutral protection than

about the management of populations, the protection of capital, and the reproduction of inequality (Broudehoux, 2015; Larkins, 2018). Centring abolitionist commitments, it seeks not only to analyze these dynamics, but also to imagine knowledge otherwise: rooted in solidarity, accountability, and oriented toward dismantling rather than legitimizing carceral power.

2.0: Literature Review

This literature review explores how sport mega-events (SMEs) have come to justify and expand global policing regimes, particularly though the invocation of terrorism, crime, and sex trafficking as urgent threats. While the event itself may be athletic in nature, the SME is increasingly structured as a site of militarized governance and carceral experimentation.

The review proceeds in three parts. The first section, Section 2.1, traces how the perceived threat of terrorism, especially following the 1972 Munich Olympics and 9/11, has been leveraged to justify mass state investment in sport mega-event (SME) security infrastructure (Atkinson & Young, 2012; Szabolcs et al., 2022), framed in the language of public safety and state power. This section outlines how SMEs have long served as rationales for exceptional spending on policing, military, and surveillance infrastructure, commonly justified through promises of risk management and control (Fussey & Coaffee, 2012; Mastrogiannakis & Dorville, 2013). The LA84 Games, staged during a peak moment of Cold War anxiety and neoliberal restructuring, are analyzed as a case in which private sector influence and securitized urban planning consolidated a model of Olympic governance that continues to inform SME host-city policy today (Fussey & Klauser, 2015).

Section 2.2 shifts to the specific case of Los Angeles, mapping the longstanding militarization of its police apparatus, the LAPD. It traces the LAPD's evolution from settler militias to a professionalized paramilitary force, with attention to its sustained targeting of Black, Indigenous, immigrant, queer, and working-class communities (Balto & Felker-Kantor, 2022; Felker-Kantor, 2024).

Section 2.3 turns to sex work, trafficking and the SME. It examines how the United States has extended carceral feminist logics through instruments like the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report (Mitchell, 2022), intensified domestically in Super Bowl host cities (Sant et al., 2023) and exported to Olympic and FIFA host cities abroad (Oliver & De Lisio, 2023). Despite limited empirical evidence, these narratives are shown to shape law enforcement operations, NGO funding, and policy interventions that disproportionally construct trafficking victims (often racialized, gendered, and in precautious immigration positions), as subjects of rescue within highly profitable regimes of moral authority. This section highlights how SME anti-trafficking campaigns function not only as sites of securitization, but also as bipartisan mechanism for the

regulation of bodies globally. Together, these sections situate the broader historical and political context for upcoming sport mega-events in Los Angeles. The histories of SME security, LAPD policing, and anti-trafficking governance offer cautionary insights into the communities and neighbourhoods situated at their intersections.

2.1: Security and the SME

Sport mega-event (SME) security has become a multibillion-dollar industry (Clément, 2024; Mastrogiannakis & Dorville, 2013; Szabolcs et al., 2022), generating extensive scholarship on the political and economic consequences of escalating security expenditure (Bennett & Haggerty, 2011; Fussey & Klauser, 2015; Toohey & Taylor, 2008). Much of this literature traces the flows of capital underpinning security provision (Fussey, 2015; Fussey & Klauser, 2015; Larkins, 2018), examining how investments in policing, surveillance, and infrastructure tend to reinforce state power and protect existing relations of accumulation (Boykoff, 2021; Broudehoux, 2015; Zimbalist, 2020). This body of work has been particularly attentive to how state and quasi-state actors such as FIFA and the IOC determine priorities for security governance (Duckworth & Hunt, 2016; Fussey & Klauser, 2015). While this scholarship provides an important foundation, this section examines how SME security has evolved beyond responses to terrorism to become a broader technology of governance, setting the context for trajectories that will inevitably shape preparations for the 2028 Los Angeles Olympic Games. While these security regimes undoubtedly produce broader social and public health consequences – including displacement, disrupted access to services, and changing relationships with state institutions – as demonstrated within broader urban studies literature on policing and gentrification (e.g., Moore & Gleit, 2026), those consequences remain comparatively underexamined within the SME security literature. Accordingly, this section then looks to examine the institutional arrangements through which security practices are organized and justified.

This analysis conceptualizes neoliberalism through the crisis of legitimacy that emerged during the Thatcher and Reagan era, characterized by the restructuring of the state through "massively slashing the social wage by cutting welfare benefits, public education, and public housing" (Gilmore, 2022, p. 220). It draws on SME security studies, particularly the work of Gruneau & Neubauer, (2012), Gaffney (2014), Boykoff (2020, 2021), Hall (2006), and Silk (2014), which frames the Games as laboratories for neoliberal experimentation within host cities.

At first glance, the coupling of neoliberal austerity and expansive security spending may appear contradictory: how do sweeping public spending cuts (austerity) coexist with multimillion, and increasingly, multibillion-dollar investments in policing? However, scholarship consistently demonstrates that policing and security function as central mechanisms through which ruling classes protect capital and manage its distribution (see, for example: Chacko, 2023), often through the systematic exclusion or regulation of marginalized populations (see also, Axster et al., 2021). Rather than diminishing under austerity, security expenditures are frequently preserved or expanded to safeguard commercial zones, private investments, and elite infrastructure. In this way, security under neoliberalism operates as a mechanism for protecting capital, managing surplus populations, and maintaining social order through coercive governance rather than redistributive provision.

2.1.1: The Development of SME Security Logics

While 9/11 is often framed as a pivotal moment in global security studies, Toohey & Taylor (2008) argue that the terrorism panic following the attacks merely intensified concerns already present at global Games "similar to the aftermath of the 1972 Munich Olympic attack" (p. 451). The Munich Games marked a significant shift in the security paradigms of the SME, particularly in relation to terrorism (Toohey & Taylor, 2008). Held in an effort to rehabilitate Germany's international image after the Nazi-led 1936 Berlin Olympics, the 'Serene Games' of 1972 aimed to project a peaceful, apolitical, and demilitarized national identity (Schiler & Young, 2013). However, this effort was disrupted by a Palestinian militant group seeking to draw attention to the plight of Palestinian hostages held by Israel and to avenge the losses of the Nakba. The group kidnapped and ultimately killed two Israeli athletes/coaches in the Olympic Village, and the subsequent failed rescue operation by German authorities resulted in the deaths of all the hostages (Hassan, 2016).

The attack captured global attention, not only altering SME security practices but also reshaping counterterrorism strategies worldwide, amplified by its sensational live media coverage and later cinematic adaptations (Macdonald, 2001; Spielberg, 2006) – prompting SMEs to respond with increasingly visible security measures aimed at reassuring the public (Clément, 2024). The Munich attack also sparked international criticism, particularly from Israel, which condemned German authorities for their lack of preparedness (Hassan, 2016). In response, future

Olympic hosts adopted more comprehensive and militarized security strategies. Fussey & Klauser (2015, p. 194) observe that the following 1976 Montreal Games featured "an unprecedented investment in security infrastructure," including fortified Olympic architecture, a highly visible military presence, and the segregation of Olympic transport from urban fabric. This moment signaled a broader transformation: the institutionalization of security not only as a logistical necessity but as a form of political theatre. Security became embedded in the very architecture and planning of mega-events. While the 1976 Montreal Olympics echoed the militarism of the 1936 Berlin Games, their Cold War context reframed militarization not as a fascist spectacle but as a nostalgic return to state-controlled security during a time when global anxieties had shifted from conventional warfare to the nuclear arms race.

The growth and visibility of security at the SME became a collaborative endeavour, involving steep financial and logistical investments from host cities, authorities, and organizing committees. At the 1976 Montréal Olympic Games, a staggering $1.5 billion budget enabled the deployment of a 17,224-person security force – comprising the Canadian Armed Forces, Montréal Urban Community Police, RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police), Sûreté du Québec, Toronto Police Department, OPP (Ontario Provincial Police Department), National Harbours Board Police, Immigration officials, the Montréal Fire Department, and 2,910 private guards (Clément, 2024). Duckworth & Hunt (2016) describe the effort as, "the largest military endeavor in Canada since the conclusion of World War II" (p. 75), marking a clear return to wartime logics – this time deployed domestically.

The Canadian federal government subsidized these efforts with $23 million from the RCMP (originally budgeted as $14.3 million), $21 million from the Department of Defence, and over $3.7 million combined from the OPP and Montréal police (Clément, 2024).[2] The organizing committee, allocated a mere $1.8 million to private security (Clément, 2024). The total estimated cost of security at Montréal reached $52 million, a dramatic leap from the $2 million spent at the 1972 Munich Games (Clément, 2024). This marked the beginning of exponential growth in SME security spending, as organizers sought to reassure the public amid growing fears of terrorism (Fussey & Klauser, 2015). State violence and protest-related terrorism remain central themes in

[2] Gruneau & Neubauer (2012) note tightened reins on federal expenditure for the 1976 Montréal Olympic Games – as to avoid showing the province excessive favouritism during an intense political period of Québec's sovereignty aspirations. While these figures would suggest these cuts were not made from security investment, it is unclear where such cuts were made.

SME literature, with the 1972 Munich attack, the 1996 Atlanta Olympic bombing, and the 2001 9/11 attacks consistently identified as pivotal security events, fomenting heightened periods of "terror panic" (Atkinson & Young, 2012; Clavel, 2013; Hassan, 2016; Machado et al., 2021). These events are linked not only by the presence of insurgent threats but by the actualization of harm – spectacularized and widely mediatized.

Fussey & Coaffee (2012) acknowledge the significance of these events, but caution against overreliance on them, arguing for a more complex understanding of terrorism's operational diversity. They write:

> [B]eyond the overstated (although important) emphases on Munich (1972), Atlanta (1996) and 9/11 (2001), lies a more complex picture of terrorist aspiration and action. Given the varying operational and targeting agendas that diverse ideological motivations bring, this generates considerable challenges for those charged with providing security. As such, whilst 'total security' is often proclaimed and aspired to, in a world of constrained financial, human and conceptual resources, its realization necessarily involves selective choices over the projected composition of risks and hazards. (p. 269)

While the threat of terrorism remains a central justification for rising security investments, the post-9/11 era saw an unprecedent acceleration. Szabolcs et al. (2022) note that security budgets rose from $0.25 billion USD at the 2000 Syndey Olympics to $1.3 billion USD in Athens 2004.[3] However, Mastrogiannakis & Dorville (2013) estimate the latter at closer to $2.2 billion, highlighting discrepancies that reflect the opaque nature of security funding. This lack of transparency – stemming from overlapping jurisdictions and the involvement of both state and non-state actors – makes it difficult to accurately assess costs. Nevertheless, what remains clear is the increasing visibility and cost of Olympic security, driven largely by efforts to pacify public anxiety (Toohey & Taylor, 2008; Bennett & Haggerty, 2011).

This concern aligns with Foucauldian interpretations of security as a *dispositifs*: a strategic configuration of institutions, technologies, and discourses designed not to eliminate risk, but to manage populations and spaces. As Mastrogiannakis and Dorville (2013) explain:

[3] Security expenditures are reported in the currencies used by the original sources. Given inconsistencies in how costs and currencies are reported across the literature, no standardized currency conversion has been undertaken.

> In this sense, security is not seen as a fundamental value or a condition, as a possibility, it is not the result of the vigorous global protecting effort to eliminate, reduce or manage contingency. As Foucault underlines, security matches with a security dispositive, as a web of power relations; as a set of procedures different from others; as a strategic configuration; as a set of heterogeneous institutions, instruments of prohibition and prescription, heterogeneous material elements and discourses of a certain kind; and as an assemblage of multiform combinations of rationalities and technologies of government. (p. 135)

From this perspective, Olympic security becomes less about responding to immediate threats, and more about exerting long-term governance. It serves as a tool to manage urban populations under the guise of protecting them from loosely defined and largely imagined terrorists (Toohey & Taylor, 2008). Fussey & Klauser (2015) further illustrate how this logic shaped the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics. Drawing from "the violence at Munich, and penury of Montreal" (p. 194), they show how Los Angeles – without competition after Denver and Tehran withdrew their bids – used the opportunity to reshape the Games in its own image. This led to unprecedented privatization, including corporate sponsorship, private financing, and a heavy reliance on private security. They write:

> Private security assets augmenting and, in some cases superseding (e.g. Seoul 1988, Athens 2004), extant policing structures – Olympic security became refocused towards supporting the needs of private capital (p. 195).

This marked the rise of neoliberal security: where public institutions increasingly serve market interests. In Los Angeles and beyond, law enforcement began functioning less as a protector of public safety and more as an enabler of corporate priorities.

This trend continued at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, where security planning was shaped not by universal standards, but by negotiations between competing "elite" actors. As Klauser (2015) notes, "implementing specific security and surveillance measures is not so much a question of universal principles than of everyday negotiations and micro adjustments between different actors, interests and stipulations" (p. 233). In Rio 2016, this dynamic intensified. With

heightened state-private entanglements, security operated less as a public good and more as a commercial enterprise (see also, Boykoff, 2021; Zimbalist, 2020). Larkins (2018) describes state security in this context as "function[ing] as a business […] within these private networks" (p. 150). The result was a security apparatus legitimized by terrorism discourse, yet deployed to protect zones of exclusivity for Olympic sponsors (Duignan & McGillivray, 2019). These security measures actively reshaped the city, restricting access for residents while enhancing visibility for corporate partners. Zimbalist (2020) documents how security investments, originally justified by fears of unrest, were ultimately mobilized to suppress dissent, such as labour strikes and protests prior to Brazil's 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics.

Tracing these dynamics through the Brazilian context, Zimbalist (2020) demonstrates how these security investments leading into the 2014 and 2016 Olympics – employed to limit public access – were catalyzed by civil unrest. Labour strikes across the country in the weeks before opening matches for the 2014 World Cup, provided notable disruption in the capital and stadium host city of São Paulo (Zimbalist, 2020). Further, José Mariano Beltrame, the head of Rio's favela pacification program, known as the Pacifying Police Unit (UPP), was shot "eighty days before the start of the World Cup" (Zimbalist, 2020, p. 181); affirming "former FIFA secretary general Jeroma Valcke's observation: 'Less democracy is sometimes better for organizing a World Cup'" (Zimbalist, 2020, p. 181). In this convergence of security, capital, and spectacle, SMEs emerge not simply as a site of celebration, but as a *contested terrain* (De Lisio et al., 2024) where state and semi-private actors produce spatial and social exclusions under the guise of protection.

Despite the scale of research on how SME security is enacted, far less attention is given to *who* is impacted. Exceptions such as Boykoff (2020), Broudehoux (2015), De Lisio et al. (2016, 2024; 2026), and Pauschinger (2020) point to the systematic displacement and marginalization of vulnerable communities, often excluded from the purported benefits of the Games. As Broudehoux (2015) notes, these residents are rendered "structurally irrelevant, unworthy of equal rights and opportunities" (p. 127). This research thus seeks to situate SME security within the broader histories of urban security in Los Angeles, re-centring analysis on the communities most affected by these practices. The 1984 Games serve as a foundational case for understanding the security logics shaping the 2028 Olympics, illuminating how authoritarian policing often travels with neoliberal expansion. Section 2.2 will explore these themes in greater depth, using LA84 to

establish the political and economic context that continues to shape security governance in the city today.

2.1.2: LA84, Neoliberalism, and State Violence

To understand the context of the 1984 Olympic Games, the 1980 Moscow Olympics must first be considered. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, a politically vulnerable U.S. President Jimmy Carter called for the boycott of the 1980 Games as a show of strength (Black, 2022). The U.S. Olympic Committee, under federal pressure, complied: "persuading more than sixty countries (including Canada, Japan, Isreal, West Germany, and most Islamic Countries) to follow suit" (Black, 2022, p. 697). This boycott rendered the Moscow Games a diminished global event and positioned the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, awarded by default due to lack of competition, as a stage for reinvention. With LA as the sole bidder, the private Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee (LAOOC) and the IOC were primed "to embrace a fully commercialized model" (Black, 2022, p. 698). This created fertile ground for what Fitt (2024) calls LA's "neoliberal awakening," wherein the Olympics were mobilized to transform the city into a privatized, market-driven space tailored to global capital (p. 165). Nauright (2014) echoes this view, noting LA84 marked a broader shift: the reimagination of the mega-events as vehicles for economic regeneration. These changes extended beyond institutional structures; they were embedded in the visual, cultural, and affective aesthetics of the Games.

Neoliberal acceleration was evident not only in broadcasting deals and corporate sponsorships but in the logic of "Reaganomics," credited by many to the success of LA84 (Fitt, 2024; Gruneau & Neubauer, 2012). The LAOOC's *Festive Federalism*, the name of LA84's widely celebrated iconography, eschewed national symbols and U.S. colours, creating the illusion of supra-national celebration, manufacturing "individualism, pluralistic identities, and multi-cultural diversity in an Olympic-branded, supra-national space" (Fitt, 2024, p. 167). The Olympic Arts Festival (OAF), held before the Games began, curated "non-linguistic (and therefore non-national)" artistic expressions that celebrated a post-race individualism, carefully avoiding political or racial solidarity (Fitt, 2024, p. 167). These choices foreground neoliberalism's myth of meritocracy, casting identity and struggle aside in favour of market-based competition on the Olympic stage.

While the LAOOC claimed independence from U.S. politics, the Reagan administration eagerly appropriated Olympic symbolism. Republicans hailed LA84's profitability as proof that sacrifice and deregulation led to success. During a 1984 campaign rally in New Jersey, Reagan declared: "Like our Olympic athletes, this nation should set its sights on the stars and go for the gold" (Gruneau & Neubauer, 2012, p. 149). He then laid out a neoliberal blueprint: tight monetary policy, lower taxes, and non-unionized "enterprise zones" (Gruneau & Neubauer, 2012, p. 149). In this sense, the link between neoliberalism and LA84 is not abstract, but materially and rhetorically embedded in the Games themselves.

Through LA84 is often remembered as a turning point in Olympic economics and anti-communist propaganda (Boykoff, 2021), scholars argue these shifts are inseparable from state violence (Axster et al., 2021). Federal agencies such as the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) and Office of Law Enforcement Assistance (OLEA) had already begun militarizing police forces in prior decades.[4] Yet, in LA, the 1984 Olympic Games awarded the LAPD a cash boost unseen by any other U.S. PD. As Boykoff (2020) explains:

> The federal government allocated $50 million for Olympic security, some of which was used to streamline communications among law enforcement groups. After the games, federal officials bequeathed its state-of-the-art equipment to the LAPD, including a military-grade armoured vehicle that police converted into a 14-foot battering ram for drug raids. In addition, LA police secured an $800,000 budget line for the Olympics to secure automatic weapons, infrared night-vision equipment, an improved communication system for the SWAT team, and robot capable of handling explosives. (p. 64)

Boykoff (2020) connects this militarization to American exceptionalism narratives (O'Connor et al., 2024; Schweizer, 2022), widely celebrated as proof of national strength. The scale of domestic militarization was so striking that a Japanese journalist likened Los Angeles to that of a military base.

This expansion is not free from racial logics. Drawing on precedents – set by LAPD Chief Parker, Presidents Johnson, and Nixon, Chief Daryl Gates used LA84 as "cover for his 'law and order' approach, which often slippery sloped into breaking the law to get what he wanted"

[4] See Section 2.2 for a more detailed discussion.

(Boykoff, 2020, p. 63). Similar to the United States Secret Service's (USSS's) NSSE strategy for LA28, LAPD collected intelligence years ahead of the Games through its Public Disorder Intelligence Division (Boykoff, 2020). During the event, they deployed "saturation tactics" in target neighbourhoods like South-Central and Skid Row – both in proximity to event venues – foreshadowing contemporary SME policing strategies (Boykoff, 2020).

While domestic forces were mobilizing, international pressure from the IOC also intensified. Prior to 1984, security was largely left to local organizing committees. However, the appointment of Ashwini Kumar as the IOC's first Security Delegate in 1983 marked a turning point (Duckworth & Hunt, 2016). Kumar and IOC Director Madame Berlioux began articulating the IOC's failures around terrorism preparedness. In September 1983, Kumar led the first-ever security meeting between an IOC delegate and an organizing committee. While terrorism dominated the agenda, attention was also given to "law and order problems and control of any demonstrations" (Duckworth & Hunt, 2016, p. 78). As Broudehoux (2015) reminds us, SME security is not just about what is protected, but also who is policed. In Los Angeles, these logics were deeply racialized and spatialized through the LAPD. While this section has established terrorism as a key justification for Olympic securitization, the next section turns to the historical practices of the LAPD to examine how these security frameworks materialize – and crucially, against whom.

2.2: Historical Overview of the LAPD

The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) did not emerge as a militarized force overnight. Its authority was forged over more than a century of racialized public-order enforcement, strategic alliances with business interests, and massive infusions of federal funding during the War on Crime (1965) and War on Drugs (1971). From chain gangs to vice squads, from Chief Parker's "professionalization" model to modern surveillance regimes, the LAPD built a discretionary policing apparatus designed to control marginalized communities and regulate the city's social order. This section traces those roots, not as static historical facts but as enduring structures. Examining how earlier logics of policing – racial surveillance, selective enforcement, and federal investment – continue to shape Los Angeles provides critical insight into the city's preparations for the 2026 World Cup, 2027 Super Bowl, and 2028 Olympics. These mega-events reactivate

familiar strategies under new justifications, extending longstanding patterns of urban governance and social control.

2.2.1: Racialized Origins in the LAPD

Before the 1984 Olympics, the LAPD had already spent decades sharpening its tools of racial control. Following the federal declaration on the War on Crime (1965) and War on Drugs (1971), the department expanded its discretionary authority through deeply racialized policing. Former LAPD Chief William Parker was central to this shift, transforming the department into a "professional" force modeled on military-style discipline (Felker-Kantor, 2016). This marked a stark break from the department's vigilante origins.

Established in 1851 as a volunteer patrol, the early LAPD functioned more like a legal vigilante group than a professional police body, enforcing racial exclusion while doing little to curb violence (Balto & Felker-Kantor, 2022). Using local public-order codes, early law enforcement targeted Indigenous, Mexican, and Chinese communities, often criminalizing their presence and forcing labour on county chain gangs (Balto & Felker-Kantor, 2022, p. 11). By 1869, as the LAPD became a paid force, it focused heavily on transient populations such as "tramps" and "hobos" (Balto & Felker-Kantor, 2022, p. 13). The racial bias of early policing intensified with cases like the 1882 arrest of then-Police Chief King for conspiring with Chinese immigrants in Chinatown's opium dens (Maya, 2001). As policing evolved into the 20th century, officers increasingly enforced spatial control over racialized and gendered groups, including Black women who were targeted based on imagined hypersexuality and criminality (Balto & Felker-Kantor, 2022). The LAPD also served as the enforcement wing of the Merchants and Manufacturers Association, which represented 80% of LA's businesses and aimed explicitly to "break the back of organized labour" (Balto & Felker-Kantor, 2022, p. 18).

In the 1930s and '40s, LAPD vice squads developed aggressive tactics against South Central's growing Black population; tactics later used against queer communities (Ellison, 2019). These strategies crossed lines of race, gender, sexuality, and class but shared a common target: non-normative presence in urban space. Following WWII, LAPD reforms adopted the "harm

principle," supposedly justifying intervention only when conduct caused material harm.[5] Yet, in practice, this doctrine enabled selective policing of marginalized groups under the guise of neutrality (Balto & Felker-Kantor, 2022, p. 19). Discretionary enforcement became the norm, particularly in queer and Mexican American spaces, where "aggressive" or "outrageous" behaviour marked individuals as threats to urban order.

2.2.2: Force, Resistance, and Federal Investment

Chief William Parker led the LAPD from 1950 to 1966, marking a transformative era. Just a year into his tenure, the 'Bloody Christmas' scandal where LAPD officers beat seven young men in custody – five of whom were Mexican American – sparked public outrage (Escobar, 2003). While civil rights groups demanded accountability, Parker reframed criticism as a threat to public order, branding opponents "allies of hoodlums" (Escobar, 2003, p. 188). With support from LA's political elite, Parker insulated the department from external oversight, consolidating its professional and unchecked status.

Federal support for policing escalated dramatically in 1965 when President Johnson launched the War on Crime. Though the Crime Commission emphasized the complexity of crime, its solutions were deeply racialized and gendered, framing inner-city Black and Brown communities as the problem (Balto & Felker-Kantor, 2022; Escobar, 2003; Felker-Kantor, 2024). The Law Enforcement Assistance Act (1965) and the Safe Streets Act (1968) created federal agencies like OLEA and the LEAA, funneling billions to police departments. Of the $10 billion disbursed by the LEAA between 1968 and 1981, 75% went directly to law enforcement (Felker-Kantor, 2024, p. 367). The LAPD eagerly adopted this funding, positioning itself as a national model. It framed civil disobedience as existential threats and embraced militarized policing as essential to national survival (Felker-Kantor, 2024). These developments laid the groundwork for federalized local policing during mega-events, not as exceptions but as the continuation of a longstanding pattern.

Resistance grew alongside repression. In 1965, the arrest of Marquette Frye sparked the Watts Uprising, prompting a militarized response. Approximately 15,500 personnel, including

[5] The harm principle is a legal and philosophical concept which holds that the power of the state to restrict individual liberty, especially through criminal law, should only be exercised to prevent conduct that causes measurable harm to others or to society. In this view, behaviour that does not result in demonstrable harm should not be subject to criminal prohibition or state interference.

members of the National Guard, were deployed to enforce curfews and suppress the unrest. By the end of the uprising, 34 residents had been killed, the majority of whom were Black (Felker-Kantor, 2016, p. 56). This moment marked LAPD's pivot to counterinsurgency policing, using war-time tactics to suppress dissent (Murch, 2015, p. 165). President Nixon's 1971 declaration of the War on Drugs further expanded police powers, establishing the Office of Drug Abuse Law Enforcement (ODALE) and directing resources toward narcotics enforcement in communities of colour (Felker-Kantor, 2024, p. 369). Although short-lived, ODALE marked a crucial step toward militarized surveillance, later embraced by the Reagan administration amid Cold War anxiety and demographic shifts following the 1965 Immigration Act. In Los Angeles, this meant targeting street vendors and treating undocumented immigrants as "criminal aliens" to bypass non-enforcement policies (Balto & Felker-Kantor, 2022, p. 25).[6]

2.2.4: White Gay Sex and the Uneven Policing of Racialized Sexuality

While the 1992 uprising and the beating of Rodney King often dominate discussions of LAPD misconduct, the 1980s also saw a less examined dynamic: the uneven policing of sexuality. As the LAPD militarized further, backed by LA84 Olympic funding, it simultaneously built alliances with white queer communities while intensifying the criminalization of Black women through prostitution policing. The Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Police Task Force (LAGLPTF) – formed in 1981 and officially recognized by the LAPD in 1982 – sought to reduce harassment in "Gay LA," particularly West Hollywood (Ellison, 2019). Yet, the task force promoted a specific image of the respectable white gay consumer; one who could enjoy nightlife discreetly, but owned property and stayed "off the streets" (Ellison, 2019, p. 106). The LAPD liaison discouraged collaboration with antiracist and Black- or Latino-led organizations, reinforcing racial divisions (Ellison, 2019, p. 106).

At the same time, prostitution arrests surged, especially in Hollywood. These arrests overwhelmingly targeted Black women, functioning as tools of racialized sexual control. As Ellison (2019, p. 101) observes, "for any given year between 1970 and 1990, prostitution arrests always exceeded sex crimes arrests, particularly in Hollywood." Even under the harm principle,

[6] While these modern practices are still in the process of unfolding, the LAPD's history of work arounds for immigration nonenforcement policy appears to mirror their participation in ICE immigration enforcement across the city in June 2025—despite sanctuary city policy (see also Libor, 2025).

Black women were disproportionately policed, with their sexuality constructed as inherently deviant. As Balto & Felker-Kantor (2022) succinctly illustrate:

> The racialized application of the harm principle played out even more directly in the policing of Black women, whose sexuality—including but not limited to those who worked in the sex economy—had long been discriminatorily policed and punished, dating back to the 19th century. Under harm-principle policing, however, officers even more routinely exercised broad discretionary powers to regulate sexual and racial boundaries. When, for instance, Los Angeles County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn (board member from 1995-1992) declared "an all-out war against narcotics and open prostitution" in the predominantly African American South Central neighborhood, the policing of white women in the city for "nonmarital straight sexual practices" was radically reduced, in tandem with the increased policing of Black women on suspicion of prostitution. (p. 20)

LA County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn's 1980s campaign to eradicate "open prostitution" in South Central led to intensified policing of Black women, particularly through loitering offences, while similar behaviour by white women elsewhere went largely ignored. This contradiction, i.e., LAPD partnering with white gay groups while criminalizing Black female sexuality, highlight how policing operated as a racial and gendered mechanism of urban control, particularly in preparation for the 1984 Olympics. Section 2.3 will further explore these dynamics through the lens of anti-trafficking work at sport mega-events.

2.2.5: Living History

As this section has demonstrated, the historical development of the LAPD reveals remarkable continuity in the racialized, gendered, and spatial logics through which policing authority has been exercised. From the regulation of minority communities to the federal investments of the War on Crime (1965) and the War on Drugs (1971), the department repeatedly expanded its authority by reframing longstanding practices of social control under new institutional and political imperatives. These histories suggest that policing in Los Angeles has been shaped less by discrete moments of reform than by successive reorganization of police power.

Understanding these historical continuities is essential for situating contemporary anti-trafficking policing. Rather than emerging as a novel humanitarian response, anti-trafficking enforcement builds upon many of these earlier policing traditions, reorganizing the governance of commercial sex industries and those work within it, through the language of protection, public safety, and interagency collaboration. The following section therefore examines how these historical logics have been developed globally in relation to the SME, in their starkly U.S. influence, where longstanding projects of control, federal reach, and racialized governance are increasingly justified through the protection of vulnerable populations.

2.3: Sex Work, Trafficking, and the SME

Sport mega-events (SMEs) have become prominent sites for the production and circulation of moral panics around sex trafficking. Early scholarship speculated that these high-profile events would drive large-scale trafficking of women and girls to meet an assumed surge in demand for commercial sex. However, such claims have been increasingly challenged on both empirical and political grounds. This section reviews the literature on sex work and trafficking in the context of SMEs, examining how anti-trafficking narratives are mobilized to justify heightened surveillance, expanded policing, and carceral interventions in host cities. Through an analysis of Olympic, FIFA, and Super Bowl-related discourse, it foregrounds how anti-trafficking campaigns – despite a lack of supporting evidence – continue to attract carceral investments and sustain myths that portray all sex work as inherently exploitative. These dynamics are further explored through the lens of critical trafficking studies.

2.3.1: Anti-trafficking Panics & SME Narratives

Contemporary anti-trafficking narratives around SMEs emerged alongside the development of the UN Palermo Protocol. Finalized in 2000 after negotiations at the UN Centre for International Crime Prevention, the Protocol – formally titled the *UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children* – was primarily conceived as a law enforcement tool in response to the perceived rise of transnational organized crime (Goździak & Vogel, 2020). As Touzenis (2010) notes, it was designed with weak human rights protections and limited victim support mechanisms (as cited by Goździak & Vogel, 2020). A central point of contention during its drafting was the framing of sex work. Religious and

radical feminist groups – led by organizations like the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) – lobbied for a definition that treated all sex work as exploitation, denying the possibility of consent. In contrast, the Human Rights Caucus argued that prostitution could constitute legitimate labour and that, in the absence of coercion, it should not be conflated with trafficking (Goździak & Vogel, 2020). The final definition of trafficking in the Protocol centres on coercion, deception, and exploitation:

> [t]he recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. (UN Protocol, 2000, p. 42)

Exploitation is further defined to include "at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation..." (United Nations, 2000, p. 2). Although the Protocol does not explicitly equate all sex work with trafficking, the inclusion of prostitution within the definition of exploitation has enabled discretionary interpretations that conflate consensual adult sex work with trafficking. Building on this foundation, U.S. lawmakers – particularly Republicans – drove the passage of the *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* (TVPA) in 2000, which remains a central instrument of U.S. federal anti-trafficking policy (Goździak & Vogel, 2020). The TVPA, aligned with the Palermo Protocol, laid the groundwork for the annual U.S. *Trafficking in Persons* (TIP) Report, which evaluates other countries' compliance with U.S. trafficking policy and has become a powerful tool of diplomatic influence, particularly in SME contexts.

The growing global emphasis on trafficking enforcement soon turned attention toward SMEs as potential sites of increased demand for paid sex. Zita Gurmai, a Hungarian politician, stated during European Parliament proceedings that, based on "past experience," notably the 2004 Athens Olympics, international sporting events appear to cause spikes in trafficking (European Parliament, 2006). This led to a Europe-wide anti-trafficking initiative, culminating in the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings (Gould, 2010). Similarly, U.S. Congressman Christopher Smith sponsored a resolution

urging Germany to implement the Palermo Protocol in advance of the 2006 World Cup. In response, the U.S. State Department recommended increased police presence, and German authorities complied, launching campaigns and prevention plans in line with U.S. guidance (Hennig et al., 2007; Kimm & Sauer, 2010; Tavella, 2008). Yet, a report by the International Organization for Migration (OEM) concluded that "all data ... strongly indicate that an increase in human trafficking did not occur either during or after the World Cup" (Hennig et al., 2007, p. 5). Despite this, U.S. legal and ideological frameworks continued to shape global anti-trafficking norms and justified expansive surveillance measures in SME host cities. Empirically, these findings complicate claims that SMEs produce measurable increases in trafficking. The persistence of these narratives is therefore less an empirical question than one of political and institutional interpretation.

2.3.2: US influence and the TIP Report

Mitchell (2022) argues that U.S. anti-trafficking policy has been instrumental in enforcing anti-prostitution agendas globally, using tools like the Anti-Prostitution Loyalty Oath (APLO) and the TIP Report to pressure nations against decriminalization. The APLO, attached to the 2003 President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), required NGOs to denounce both prostitution and trafficking as a condition of funding. Mitchell (2022) further notes that U.S. anti-trafficking discourse is inseparable from a history of white supremacy, with white feminist movements often aligning with racialized protectionist logics. He traces these dynamics back to the 1910 Mann Act, which helped fuel the "white slavery" panic by portraying non-white men as sexual threats to white women, a narrative that continues to inform anti-trafficking rhetoric today. The Clinton administration's policies further entrenched these logics. The 1996 *Charitable Choice* initiative, expanded in 2000, allowed faith-based organizations to receive federal funding for anti-trafficking work, effectively formalizing a carceral infrastructure underpinned by bipartisan moral panic and Christian interventionism, particularly within the SME context. The following section, then, pays attention to how scholars have interpreted – and in some cases, taken up – the political effects of U.S. anti-trafficking policy, rather than evaluating the empirical effectiveness of those policies.

2.3.3: Existing Research and US Justification

Milivojevic & Pickering (2008) begin their analysis of the 2006 World Cup by citing a 2003 speech from President George W. Bush, in which he called sex trafficking a "special evil." This rhetorical framing reflects how U.S. political discourse continues to define the parameters of global anti-trafficking interventions. The authors conclude that protective measures often restrict rather than expand women's rights, revealing their carceral underpinnings, stating: "'[p]rotective' measures that prevent women from exercising their agency further, narrow women's options and restrict rather than protect women's rights" (p.38).

Despite frequent reliance on the TIP Report, its empirical validity has been widely questioned (Merry, 2016). Hayes (2010), a frequently cited source in SME trafficking literature, admits that data on sex trafficking at these events is "scarce" (p. 1107), yet still speculates that unreported trafficking likely occurred during the 2006 German World Cup. This contradiction undermines the OEM report's authority, particularly since legalized prostitution in Germany saw no increase in demand during the 2006 World Cup. Other scholars interpret Hayes (2010) differently. Bowersox (2016) reads the work as a caution against overreliance on trafficking panic, arguing that the link between SMEs and trafficking has only "superficial validity" (p. 206). In contrast, Sant et al. (2023) and Boecking et al. (2019) use Hayes (2010) to reinforce panic-driven narratives. These divergent uses of Hayes (2010) underscore how trafficking literature is shaped less by empirical evidence than by the strategic mobilization of selective sources. The empirical evidence linking SMEs and trafficking therefore remains limited. The significance of this literature therefore lies less in demonstrating trafficking prevalence than in illustrating how particular claims become mobilized despite evidentiary uncertainty.

Even as evidence of trafficking surges at SMEs remains elusive, anti-trafficking narratives persist, driven by U.S. policy, sensational media, and political rhetoric. These narratives help construct the sex worker, particularly racialized, migrant, and poor sex workers, as a subject in need of rescue. What follows is a consideration of the material consequences of these rescue narratives: intensified surveillance, policing, and the economic incentives that drive these interventions.

2.3.4: Carceral Logics and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex

Anti-trafficking campaigns tied to sport mega-events (SMEs) are often framed as humanitarian interventions. However, they operate within, and actively reinforce, the same carceral logics that shape broader anti-trafficking efforts. In the SME context, these campaigns leverage the visibility, funding streams, and international legitimacy of the event to justify intensified surveillance and policing of marginalized populations, all under the guise of protection. The 'rescue' industries that emerge around SMEs function through a non-profit industrial complex, in which NGOs, law enforcement, and private actors capitalize on moral panics to secure funding, political influence, and institutional legitimacy (Oliver & De Lisio, 2023). Far from being incidental, punitive measures such as police raids, surveillance, and asset seizures are central to how anti-trafficking efforts are structured, consistently prioritized over the rights, safety, and well-being of sex workers themselves (Gallant & Lam, 2024).

The non-profit industrial complex (NPIC), introduced by Gilmore (2007) as an extension of the prison-industrial complex (PIC), traces the states relationship to social movements through shadow networks of non-profits. Similarly to the PIC, the NPIC entails a succession of steps that begin with a transfer of expertise away from the state and toward private industry. This transfer of expertise brings with it a transfer of state and corporate funds which guardrail the work previously done by states, into tight leash non-profits whom risk losing funding streams with deviation from logics of punishment and incarceration. Through law enforcement partnership, humanitarian efforts within the NPIC are co-opted into carceral frameworks, where 'care' is performed through surveillance, criminalization, and control, rather than through structural change or the protection of marginalized communities. Gilmore (2007) emphasizes that this arrangement allows the state to maintain power and legitimacy while outsourcing the work of social welfare, effectively neutralizing radical movements by absorbing them into professionalized, bureaucratic, and highly profitable non-profit structures that perpetuate, rather than dismantle, systems of harm. This network of non-profit, non-state actors, is what Gilmore (2007) refers to as the shadow state.

While literature explicitly tasked with tracing the development of the NPIC and carceral feminism in SME anti-trafficking campaigns is sparce (see for exception: Oliver & De Lisio, 2023), a broader body of empirical research documents the punitive consequences of anti-trafficking beyond the SME context. It is through these documented practices that the NPIC

provides a useful interpretive framework for understanding contemporary anti-trafficking governance. Gallant & Lam (2024) note the ways the once (openly) criminalized sex-worker is now subject to state control as supposed care, and as they posit: "the most dangerous gang in the sex industry is law enforcement" (p.164). As Oliver & De Lisio (2023) trace the highly profitable non-profit industrial complex of SME related anti-trafficking, it too offers economic gain to law enforcement involved in its enactment – especially in the U.S., Gallant & Lam write:

> [i]n the US, forty-one states and the district of Columbia have laws that authorize the police to seize assets, including cash, bank account funds, cars, and homes for suspected involvement in prostitution related offences. (Gallant & Lam, 2024, p. 164)

Described, is legal robbery at gun point, sometimes amassing over a million U.S. dollars in seizures over the course of a singular operation (Gallant & Lam, 2023). The contradictions of the NPIC are made especially clear when examining how anti-trafficking efforts unfold in practice, often resulting funding, and seizure related profitability.

Rather than offering protection, these interventions often reproduce the very harms they claim to remedy. Particularly, when enforcement is led by police or conducted through state-sanctioned institutions. While law enforcement remains the coercive arm of these operations, the rehabilitation component is often managed by non-profits whose funding structures and state partnerships reproduce carceral logics. In the SME context, this convergence transforms global sporting events into high-visibility stages for performing 'rescue' narratives – securing political legitimacy and economic gain for state and non-state actors, while entrenching the very systems of surveillance and control they claim to dismantle.

2.3.5: Empirical Gaps and Contestations

As demonstrated, the association between sex trafficking and sport mega-events (SMEs) is widely circulated but remains poorly supported by empirical evidence. Nonetheless, anti-trafficking narratives persist, driven less by data than by moral arguments and the influence of U.S. foreign policy, particularly through instruments like the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report. These narratives often rest on deeply racialized and gendered assumptions about sex work, portraying it as inherently violent and in need of external intervention. Across global

contexts, the U.S. emerges not only as a leading exporter of anti-trafficking discourse but also as a central force in shaping the policy environments where such narratives gain traction, especially in SME host cities. Despite the lack of substantiated trafficking spikes during these events, this research investigates how political and institutional momentum behind anti-trafficking campaigns continues to expand at the SME.

This work specifically aims to interrogate the logics of policing that emerge through these campaigns, focusing on how law enforcement harnesses anti-trafficking rhetoric to target spaces closest to event venues, and in neighborhoods marked by heightened real estate speculation. Rather than assuming trafficking occurs at these events, this study centres the police strategies that utilize its threat, illuminating how anti-trafficking functions as a tool of urban control and displacement.

A recurring limitation across SME anti-trafficking literature is the marginalization of sex workers, not only as subjects of inquiry but as producers of knowledge and resistance. Most academic accounts rely on law enforcement data, NGO reports, or state-authored policy frameworks like the TIP Report, which reinforce state-centric narratives while overlooking the lived experiences of sex workers themselves. This reliance on secondary and often carceral data sources reflects a broader methodological gap: the scarcity of ethnographic or participatory research that engages sex workers as experts on their own conditions. As a result, the field risks perpetuating trafficking myths while silencing those most directly impacted by anti-trafficking interventions.

Yet outside of academia, sex worker-led and survivor-informed organizations have long documented the harms produced by these carceral responses. For instance, Freedom Network USA (2021), in coalition with service providers, trafficking survivors, and sex worker advocates, emphasizes that Super Bowl anti-trafficking operations are frequently accompanied by police raids, mass surveillance, and sensationalist media campaigns, none of which have led to increased identification of trafficking survivors. Instead, these efforts often result in the arrest and displacement of adult, consensual sex workers and the intensified targeting of Black and Brown communities. Their report challenges the persistent myth that the Super Bowl is a trafficking "hotspot," demonstrating how these narratives not only lack evidence but also produce real and repeated harm under the guise of rescue. Similarly, projects like *Stop the Raids* have documented the everyday realities of sex workers in host cities, including heightened

surveillance, displacement, and loss of income, offering critical insights largely absent from scholarly literature. More recently, sex worker-led operations have mobilized directly against the anti-trafficking narratives surrounding the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Groups such as *the Sex Worker Inclusionary Feminist Alliance* (SWIFA) in Vancouver have publicly challenged FIFA-related anti-trafficking campaigns, while organizations such as *COYOTE Rhode Island* have critiqued high-profile announcements of "trafficking" arrests during World Cup preparations, arguing that these operations frequently conflate consensual sex work with trafficking and obscure the harms of intensified policing. These accounts highlight an empirical gap that is not one of silence, but of erasure: while sex worker voices are often excluded from academic debates, they continue to speak, organize, and theorize through grassroots advocacy, media production, and community-led research. This project thus takes sex worker knowledge seriously. It is premised on the belief that those most affected by anti-trafficking enforcement possess the analytical tools necessary to interpret its logics, trace its harms, and imagine alternatives.

2.4: Conclusion

SME security emerges from the literature as less a neutral safeguard than a political economy: spectacular, privatized, and increasingly federalized investments that promise 'total security' while, in practice, managing risk discretionarily. From Munich through LA84 and the post-9/11 accelerations, security has cohered around the protection of capital and exclusion of urban space, even as costs balloon and accounting remains opaque (Fussey & Klauser, 2015; Szabolcs et al., 2022; Toohey & Taylor, 2008). At the same time, the literature makes clear that these dynamics are inseparable from neoliberal political economy. Investments in policing and security persists even during austerity, exposing the contradiction that while welfare, housing, and education are cut, coercive infrastructures expand (Chacko, 2023; Gilmore, 2022). Neoliberalism thus relies on security as both a justification and a technique of governance: embedding private capital in public policing (Fussey & Klauser, 2015; Larkins, 2018) and sustaining growth through the exclusion of marginalized groups. As Axster et al. (2021) argue, neoliberalism is not possible without state violence, and mega-event security exemplifies this dependence, manufacturing 'safety' for elites while reproducing targeted harms against those rendered structurally expendable.

Furthermore, the LAPD has long relied on targeted enforcement practices that disproportionately criminalize racialized, immigrant, and economically marginalized populations (Felker-Kantor, 2016, 2024). From its 19th-century origins in settler colonial violence to its 20th-century role as a militarized force aligned with federal "wars" on crime and drugs, the LAPD has used discretionary policing and surveillance to regulate urban space along lines of race, class, gender and sexuality (Balto & Felker-Kantor, 2022). The 1984 Los Angeles Olympics exemplified how SMEs legitimize and expand these enforcement patterns, as the LAPD targeted historically Black and Brown neighborhoods with aggressive policing under the cover of public safety (Boykoff, 2020).

The final section shows how U.S. federal pressure shapes the global landscape of anti-trafficking discourse, often under the guise of humanitarian concern and human rights adherence (Goździak & Vogel, 2020). Through the TIP report, the U.S. exports its carceral approach to sex work, conflating it with trafficking and incentivizing law enforcement-led *rescue* operations (Mitchell, 2022). Despite a lack of empirical evidence connecting SMEs to increased trafficking, U.S. agencies remain central to the production of panic, legitimizing surveillance, arrest, and asset seizure programs that disproportionately harm racialized and migrant sex workers. This imperial influence not only guides international policy but also drives domestic enforcement strategies. The result is a deeply contradictory security logic, one that claims to protect the vulnerable while enabling state violence against the very populations it purports to save (Gallant & Lam, 2024). Through this lens, anti-trafficking becomes less about victim support and more about extending U.S. geopolitical and carceral reach, through highly profitable security and rescue industries.

This review shows that security at sport mega-events (SMEs) functions less as a response to concrete threats and more as a mechanism for organizing urban life through enforcement. Tracing the historical expansion of SME security from Munich 1972 to the upcoming Los Angeles 2028 Games, the review highlights how these events become sites of speculative investment: shaped by counterterrorism discourse, corporate interests, and colonial logics of control. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) exemplifies how policing in the city has long relied on targeted enforcement strategies that disproportionately surveil and criminalize marginalized communities. These patterns shift across time, from vagrancy and prostitution laws to extreme forms of state violence yet consistently reflect efforts to regulate public space along

racial and economic lines. The intensification of anti-trafficking panic during SMEs further legitimizes these practices, as the global visibility and political stakes of the events are used to justify heightened militarization and surveillance, often at the behest of the U.S. federal government. In this context, security is not a neutral or protective force, but a strategic, historically contingent tool for determining who belongs in the city – and who must be removed.

3.0: Methodology

> We need theories that work: We need guides to action. We need to take apart – to *dis*articulate – theory from decorative imitation if we are to rearticulate its epistemological power in political praxis. (Gilmore, 2022, p. 75)

> As commitments to a world beyond prisons and policing expand inside and outside the academy, we see the pressing need to take seriously the methodological demands of how we do abolition. (Chennault & Sbicca, 2025, p. 157)

This research adopts a feminist, abolitionist, and community-engaged methodology, emphasizing non-extractive practices, community safety, and accountability to marginalized groups. It is grounded in the work of key scholars: Ruth Wilson Gilmore, whose abolition geography links carceral expansion to racial capitalism through the dynamics of place, struggle, and collective liberation; Angela Davis, who situates abolition within feminist, historical, and global movements, connecting prisons to broader systems of oppression while envisioning transformative futures; Kelly Oliver, who develops an ethics of responsibility and "response-ability," challenging dehumanization and reimagining relationality beyond carceral logics; and Elizabeth Bernstein, who critiques the entanglement of feminist anti-violence and anti-trafficking movements with punitive state power.

Angela Davis (2000, 2003) defines the prison industrial complex (PIC) as a system that links the expansion of incarceration with the interests of private corporations, government institutions, and others who profit from mass imprisonment. Within this economic arrangement, incarcerated labour generates profit, while the growth of prisons yields both political and economic capital for the state. In this context, prisons are no longer framed as sites of rehabilitation, but as mechanisms of social control embedded within capitalism's drive for endless growth. Davis situates mass incarceration within a deeply racialized history, where Black and Brown communities are disproportionately criminalized and confined. While this research does not focus on the labour of incarcerated people, it centres the criminalization of racialized bodies as a source of profit, especially in Los Angeles, where Olympic development has intensified real estate speculation and state violence. Here, criminalization is not a byproduct of

safety concerns, but a tactic of dispossession and control, exerted on the very populations the state claims to protect.

Kelly Oliver (2017) offers the concept of carceral humanitarianism, the idea that benevolent claims to "care" and "protection" are often used to justify confinement and violence, especially in the context of migrant detention. Her analysis is especially relevant to recent events in Los Angeles, including the June 2025 deployment of the U.S. National Guard, which, for the first time in history, occurred without a governor's directive. This unprecedented federal move was framed as a response to community resistance against ICE raids, but in practice, extended the logic of migrant detention to domestic populations. As Oliver argues, carcerality and care are contradictory, even when presented in humanitarian terms. The militarized suppression of protests in LA in 2025 revealed the violent underpinnings of so-called "freedom" agendas, where humanitarian discourse becomes a veil for domination. These dynamics directly mirror the federal security agenda surrounding the upcoming Olympic Games.

Elizabeth Bernstein (2007, 2010) names this convergence carceral feminism, critiquing how some feminist anti-violence and anti-trafficking movements have aligned themselves with the state, police, and prison systems. Carceral feminism often prioritizes criminalization as the primary response to gendered violence, reinforcing classed and racialized surveillance and punishment. In the anti-trafficking arena, this manifests in the construction of sex work as inherently exploitative, justifying increased policing while sidelining structural solutions like labour protections. Although some anti-trafficking actors frame their work as apolitical and grounded in human rights, Bernstein argues that these campaigns are fundamentally tied to punitive institutions, not liberation. This alignment supports the growth of the rescue industry, a profitable extension of the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC), which enacts real harm on the very groups it claims to protect, particularly migrant, trans, and racialized sex workers (Gallant & Lam, 2024). Together, the NPIC and carceral feminism offer a framework to understand how anti-trafficking efforts at SMEs serve not justice or safety, but the expansion of carceral systems and NGO profiteering.

Taken collectively, these thinkers build a framework for understanding security and criminalization at SMEs as racialized, gendered, and profit-driven, operating through logics of discipline and exclusion. Gilmore (2022) provides the spatial and political analysis of abolition geography, while Davis (2000; 2003) exposes how incarceration generates profit by

criminalizing Black and Brown communities. Oliver (2017) reveals how these practices are justified through humanitarian language, and Bernstein (2007; 2010) shows how anti-trafficking movements reproduce these same logics under the banner of feminism. Although intensified during sport mega-events, these anti-trafficking efforts are not new. Rather, they extend centuries-old patterns of racialized control, capitalist accumulation, and state violence. In the case of Los Angeles, they are part of a broader project of urban transformation through imprisonment, where gendered and racialized bodies are rendered disposable in the name of global spectacle, public safety, and humanitarian concern.

These commitments shaped the research design in concrete ways. Rather than treating abolitionist and feminist perspectives as abstract theoretical lenses, they informed numerous decisions throughout the project. These included the collaborative development of the research questions and interview guides with community groups, ongoing collaboration with community members and people with lived and living experience throughout the research process from project design through the review of research outputs, the selection of institutional actors capable of explaining how anti-trafficking governance is organized, and a rejection of taken-for-granted assumptions that police intervention constitutes the natural or necessary response to exploitation. Instead, interview guides were designed to examine how participants themselves understood, justified, and negotiated anti-trafficking enforcement, allowing logics to emerge through their own accounts rather than presuming their legitimacy. Rather than beginning from the assumption that policing is the inevitable response to trafficking, this researched approached police intervention itself as a social and political phenomenon requiring critical interrogation. These commitments also informed ongoing decisions around confidentiality, and the anonymization of community partners. In this sense, abolition functioned not only as an analytical framework, but as a methodological commitment that shaped how knowledge was produced throughout the project.

3.1: Defining the Case

This thesis was originally conceptualized under conditions of heightened federalized policing in Los Angeles ahead of several forthcoming SMEs. As the work developed, however, the rapid extension of anti-trafficking governance intensified federal involvement, and evolving forms of criminalization required a research design capable of adapting to an evolving institutional

landscape. A case study design was therefore selected to provide the flexibility to define, map, and examine these shifting governance arrangements while remaining grounded within a clearly bound empirical setting. As Thomas (2015) writes, "[y]our case study is defined not so much by the methods that you are using to do the study, but the edges you put around the case" (p. 21). While this approach preserves methodological flexibility, the study remains bounded by geographic and phenomenological parameters consistent with case study research (Creswell, 2018).

Geographically, the case is situated within Los Angeles County, with particular attention to anti-trafficking governance in its preparations for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, 2027 NFL Super Bowl, and 2028 Olympic Games. Although interviews were also conducted with participants involved in anti-trafficking operations surrounding the 2026 NFL Superbowl in Santa Clara County, these were incorporated to provide comparative insights into California's broader anti-trafficking infrastructure rather than to establish a second case. These interviews were employed to think about parallel SME anti-trafficking preparations in Los Angeles County, therefore situating its geography as the primary unit of analysis throughout the study.

Rather than being defined by fixed temporal boundaries alone, this case is bounded by the emergence and development of anti-trafficking governance surrounding preparations for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the 2027 NFL Super Bowl, and the 2028 Olympic Games. The empirical focus therefore centres on the institutions, polices, partnerships, and policing practices mobilized in anticipation of these events, while remaining attentive to the ways they evolve throughout the course of the research (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Historical documents and literature extending beyond this period are incorporated where necessary to trace the institutional, legal, and organizational genealogies of contemporary anti-trafficking governance. Consequently, the case is bounded not by the dates of the evidence itself, but by the phenomenon under investigation: the consolidation of anti-trafficking governing within Los Angeles County as preparation for upcoming SMEs.

Further justification for the case emerged in September 2024, with the establishment of the Figueroa Corridor Human Trafficking Initiative (FCHTI), involving a multi-agency partnership. The initiative represented a significant consolidation of municipal, county, and federal anti-trafficking enforcement within neighbourhoods sandwiched between Olympic venues. Its emergence closely followed the June 2024 designation of the LA28 Olympics as a

National Special Security Event (NSSE) – the earliest such designation in U.S. history (USSS, 2024) – highlighting the growing intersection of SME security, federal policing, and anti-trafficking governance. Simultaneously, community advocates reported sustained increases in policing, surveillance, and displacement following Los Angeles' successful Olympic bid, with these dynamics intensifying after both the establishment of the FCHTI and broader shifts in the federal political landscape. Together, these developments positioned Los Angeles County as a particularly important case through which to examine how anti-trafficking governance evolves alongside preparations for the SME.

3.2: Community Partner

This research was conducted in collaboration with community advocates, service providers, sex workers, and individuals with various lived/living experience in Los Angeles. To preserve the confidentiality of those who contributed to this research, identifying details have been omitted. Throughout this thesis, these collaborators are therefore referred to collectively as community advocates. Consistent with the ethical commitments of community engaged research, this approach was developed collaboratively during the writing of the thesis to ensure that research findings minimized the identification of individual organizations and community collaborators.

3.3: Positionality

As a white, cisgendered, heterosexual, male researcher, I acknowledge my privileged position within academia and society, which shapes my engagement with both community members and institutions. My race and gender specifically grant me access to law enforcement, policymakers, and spaces often closed to the sex workers and organizers central to this study. While committed to sex worker liberation, I recognize my outsider status – living in Toronto and not directly involved in sex work – and the need for ongoing reflexivity to avoid extractive or voyeuristic practices. At the same time, I recognize that these aspects of my identity are neither fixed nor exhaustive, but relational and contingent, shaping both the opportunities and limitations of the research. This research rejects claims of objectivity, grounding itself in solidarity and abolitionist ethics. The ongoing collaboration with community advocates ensured accountability, centring the needs and directives of those working directly in opposition to policing and displacement. I approach this work aware of the political nature of research and the necessity of active

accountability. For this project, accountability involved being explicit about the political commitments informing the work, maintaining ongoing collaborations with community advocates throughout the research and writing process, incorporating community feedback into methodological and analytical decisions, and collaboratively determining matters of representation – including the anonymization of the community partner. Most significantly, early conversations with community advocates reshaped the research design by moving the project away from interviewing sex workers and toward examining the institutions exercising anti-trafficking power, recognizing both the extractive burden frequently placed on criminalized communities and the need to better understand the logics through which these institutions justify intervention.

3.4: Methods

This project employs a qualitative design in effort to capture the complexity of anti-trafficking governance practices surrounding sex work and anti-trafficking initiatives in Olympic Los Angeles. This research asks: What are the official and unofficial rhetorics and tactics employed by law enforcement – framed within heightened concerns about human trafficking – and how do these ultimately shape geographies of sex work and its resistances in the Los Angeles County in the lead-up to the 2026 FIFA World Cup, 2027 NFL Super Bowl, and 2028 Summer Olympics?

Combining document analysis and semi-structured interviews allows for both contextual and empirical engagement with the research question. Document analysis provides insight into the official discourses and institutional logics shaping enforcement practices; while semi-structured interviews foreground the perspectives of actors directly involved in the application of these practices. Taken together, these approaches generate opportunities for cross-checking across data sources; while also sustaining a reflexive, abolitionist methodological stance that resists claims of objectivity and instead foregrounds positionality, power, and the politics of knowledge production.

Research Question	Objective	Method
How do municipal, county, and federal institutions construct, organize, and justify anti-trafficking governance in preparation for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, 2027 NFL Super Bowl, and 2028 Olympic Games?	To examine the law-making dimensions of anti-trafficking governance, focusing on how municipal, county, and federal institutions construct and legitimate regulatory frameworks through legislation, policy, interagency coordination, and official discourse.	Document analysis of publicly available government materials, including legislation, policy documents, operational announcements, press releases, and institutional communications produced at municipal, county, state, and federal levels.
How do law enforcement officials and allied anti-trafficking partners understand and operationalize anti-trafficking policing in the context of sport mega-events?	To examine the law-preserving dimensions of anti-trafficking governance, analyzing how law enforcement officials and allied partners operationalize anti-trafficking policing through everyday practices, institutional logics, and collaborative security arrangements surrounding sport mega-events.	Semi-structured interviews with municipal and county law enforcement officials and allied anti-trafficking NGO partners, recruited through purposive/snowball sampling.

3.4.1: Document Analysis

Document analysis offers a valuable methodological tool for consolidating findings from other sources while providing access to information that may otherwise be inaccessible through interviews or observations alone (Morgan, 2022). Within Chapter 4, document analysis serves two complimentary purposes. First, it provides the historical and institutional context necessary to situate anti-trafficking governing in Los Angeles prior to the analysis of interview data. Second, it enables the reconstruction of organizational relationships, legal authorities, and collaborative arrangements that comprise contemporary anti-trafficking enforcement surrounding

the 2026 FIFA World Cup, 2027 Super Bowl, and 2028 Olympic Games. The analysis included a range of documents, not limited to those produced by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), but also including materials from the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD), city and county government agencies, and federal bodies involved in anti-trafficking and SME security efforts.

Rather than employing a discourse analysis, this project adopts document analysis because of its methodological flexibility and its capacity to examine documents as evidence of institutional organization, policy development, and collaborative governance. While researcher subjectivity inevitably influences the interpretation of any text, document analysis provides an opportunity for data to guide inquiry in ways not predetermined by rigid analytical frameworks. As Morgan (2022) notes, maintaining the credibility of data is crucial in document analysis; therefore, only documents produced by city, county, state, or federal government agencies were included. This decision ensured a consistent source of institutional knowledge and aligns with the chapter's focus of mapping the organization of anti-trafficking governance. Documents were therefore selected not because they represented a singular discourse, but because they performed different forms of institutional work, including establishing legal authority, announcing collaborative initiatives, communicating enforcement priorities, and documenting organizational change over time.

This work explicitly rejects the notion of document analysis as an objective or neutral practice. As with semi-structured interview data, analysis was an iterative process, using both deductive and reflexive strategies to identify patterns, contradictions, and trends across documents (Morgan, 2022). Deductive coding drew on sensitizing concepts derived from abolition geographies and prison abolition scholarship, alongside the priorities identified through ongoing collaboration with community partners. Reflexive coding remained open to emergent themes, particularly those that challenged or complicated these initial interpretive frames. Reflexivity was engaged as an ongoing process of critical self-interrogation, recognizing that my positionality, shaped by identity, politics, and lived experience, inevitably mediates how data is read and what is rendered meaningful. Acknowledging the political power of knowledge production, this approach does not pursue neutrality but rather critical accountability, including the ongoing discussion of key themes, codes, and categories with the research team for purposes

of clarification and critique. It is through sustained engagement with doubt, critique, and potential error, that reflexivity becomes a methodological asset rather than a limitation.

To support a cohesive and rigorous methodological framework, document analysis intends to contextualize interview data by offering historical, institutional, and contextual insight, and is used to cross-reference and critically assess claims made by law enforcement actors, in addition to providing readers necessary understandings for assessing analytical claims. An initial corpus of documents was identified at the outset of the research. This was refined iteratively as additional relevant materials were located.

3.4.2: Semi-Structured Interviews with Law Enforcement

Semi-structured interviews in Chapter 5 were conducted with four key members of law enforcement, and one allied partner. Participants included one LAPD Detective, two LASD members (one retired, and one active duty), a HT Task Force Commander from Santa Clara, and a 15-year anti-trafficking advocate from Santa Clara. Although the study initially sought to recruit participants exclusively from Los Angeles County, the timing of data collection alongside preparations for and implementation of the 2026 NFL Super Bowl in Santa Clara provided a valuable comparative perspective. As a recent sport mega-event site operating within the same state legislative and anti-trafficking frameworks, Santa Clara offered insight into how these institutional arrangements function across California, while also enabling participants to reflect on recently implemented operational practices.

Interviewees were given the opportunity to choose how they wished to be identified in research outputs in accordance with confidentiality protocols. In some cases, participants consented to being identified by their respective agency; in others, they requested to remain de-identified beyond general reference to their institutional position. Consequently, participants are identified by organizational affiliation or role rather than by name or explicit professional title. While the sample size is limited, theoretical saturation – defined as the point at which additional interviews cease to generate substantively new insights – was reached with respect to the institutional arrangements examined in this thesis. Across interviews, participants consistently returned to the same core themes surrounding federal collaboration, sport mega-events, victim-centred policing, discretion, and anti-trafficking governance, suggesting that additional interviews were unlikely to substantially alter the central analytical findings. Material that did

not contribute to these saturated thematic clusters was not included in Chapter 5, except where it was analytically relevant for identifying contradiction or tension.

This approach was selected in close consultation with community advocates, which emphasized the importance of hearing directly from law enforcement actors in order to better understand the institutional logics, contradictions, and justifications underpinning anti-trafficking policing in Los Angeles. Semi-structured interviews offered a flexible yet guided approach to data collection, allowing for open-ended responses while enabling follow-up questions as needed (Ekberg & Gao, 2018; Fukushima et al., 2020). This flexibility was particularly advantageous when navigating potentially contradictory or evasive statements, as it allowed me to probe deeper into inconsistencies and elicit more nuanced insights into institutional practices.

Participants were recruited using a purposive/snowball sampling strategy, beginning with initial contacts through existing professional and research networks, including connections facilitated through faculty networks at UCLA Law. This approach was appropriate for accessing a population that may otherwise be difficult to engage, particularly when discussing politically sensitive topics such as policing and anti-trafficking enforcement (Serrano-Montilla et al., 2025). Given that participants occupied leadership, supervisory, or specialist positions within anti-trafficking enforcement, these interviews are best understood as illuminating the institutional rationales, governance structures, and collaborative arrangements through which anti-trafficking policing is organized. They are less able to capture the everyday enactment of these policies by frontline officers, where discretionary practices, interpersonal dynamics, and localized forms of policing may diverge from official institutional narratives. Consequently, this research speaks most directly to the governance of anti-trafficking rather than to the totality of its implementation. While efforts were made to ensure representation across different levels of law enforcement, the final sample included only municipal and county officials. Despite participants from these jurisdictions expressing broad agreement on several discussed themes, these findings should not be interpreted as representing all policing perspectives, but rather the viewpoints of those occupying positions responsible for coordinating, overseeing, or shaping anti-trafficking governance.

3.5: Qualitative Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded (with consent), professionally transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo software. The analysis began with open coding to identify emerging categories from the data, followed by the development of broader themes through axial and thematic coding (Lam & Mayuom, 2023; Skipper & Pepler, 2021; Stalker et al., 2020). This process was collaborative and iterative. Emerging themes and codes were shared with community advocates for feedback throughout the research process, ensuring interpretive validity and grounding analysis in community knowledge. While the research retained primary responsibility for coding and analysis, community advocates contributed to the refinement and critique of thematic interpretations at key stages of the research process.

Document analysis was conducted in parallel with interview analysis. Publicly available policy documents, legislative materials, institutional communications, and operational reports were coded using the same iterative and theory-informed approach. As with interview data, analysis of documents was guided by sensitizing concepts drawn from abolition geographies and prison abolition scholarship, while remaining open to emergent themes within the data. Across both data sources, analysis proceeded reflexively and iteratively, moving between empirical material, emerging themes, and theoretical frameworks in order to identify patterns, contradictions, and silences in institutional accounts of anti-trafficking governance and policing in the context of the sport mega-events.

While my social position facilitated greater access to interviewing law enforcement, the analysis of these interviews was not undertaken in isolation. Instead, coding and interpretation were informed by the intellectual leadership and lived expertise of community advocates. Under the guidance of the community advocates, sex workers and individuals directly impacted by anti-trafficking policing contributed to key stages of the coding process, particularly in the discussion and refinement of emerging codes and themes. As Graça et al. (2018) emphasize in their action research with street-based sex workers, "[t]hese relationships must be horizontal, cooperative, respectful, nonjudgmental, and empathic, must attempt to validate subjective knowledge, and must be associated with promoting empowerment and mutual learning" (p. 260). In collaboration with my supervisor, I initial coded interview transcripts to identify preliminary themes. These were then shared with community partners for discussion, feedback, and critical review in March 2026, followed by ongoing engagement and feedback in weekly meetings throughout the

duration of the project. This iterative process supported the refinement of analysis across both interview and document data. Rather than constituting a fully co-coded process, collaboration functioned as a form of interpretive validation and critical engagement, ensuring that emerging findings remained accountable to community perspectives. All research outputs were developed through this iterative process of review and revision, with final approval resting with the community advocates and sex workers.

Several of these strategies were employed to enhance the rigour and transparency of the analytic process. Coding decisions, thematic development, and revisions were documented throughout the analysis for dissemination and approval of community advocates, creating an "audit trail" that recorded the evolution of interpretive decisions (Carcary, 2020). Analytical consistency was strengthened through weekly discussion with my supervisor and community advocates, whose critical feedback challenged emerging interpretations, refined thematic boundaries, and prompted reconsideration of analytical assumptions where appropriate. This iterative process emphasized transparency, reflexivity, and interpretive credibility over replication, ensuring accessible community engagement in the analysis process.

3.6: Conclusion

The choice of a case study design (Thomas, 2015; Cresswell, 2018) enabled the research to remain geographically and phenomenologically bounded, while offering flexibility in tracing the intensification of enforcement strategies. Methodologically, this study is guided by abolitionist, feminist, and community-engaged approaches that resist extractive logics and foreground accountability, reflexivity, and solidarity.

Guided by Gilmore's (2022) insistence that theory must be affirmed through praxis, Davis's (2000; 2003) framing of the "prison industrial complex" as racialized profit, Oliver's (2017) critique of carceral humanitarianism, and Bernstein's (2007; 2010) analysis of carceral feminism, the research design deliberately centres how policing practices are rationalized and enacted in the context of Los Angeles' upcoming sport mega-events, while acknowledging contestation as an important but subsequent avenue for future research.

Taken together, these approaches generate a rigorous framework that not only interrogates how anti-trafficking governance is operationalized as a security strategy – leading to future work that better centres the ways in which communities resist the very carceral logics

under study. By weaving together abolitionist theory, case study flexibility, qualitative methods, and community accountability, this methodology positions the project to critically examine the racialized, gendered, and profit-driven policing of human trafficking in Olympic Los Angeles, while advancing knowledge practices that are community-led and oriented toward transformation rather than extraction.

4.0: Badge Bingo

Before turning to accounts of anti-trafficking policing in Los Angeles and the number of county and federal actors operating within its geographies, it is necessary to briefly outline the institutional landscape through which these activities occur. Throughout the interviews, law enforcement and allied NGOs frequently referenced a range of agencies and collaborative bodies involved in anti-trafficking enforcement: from municipal police departments, county, state, and federal law enforcement, prosecutors, task forces, and non-governmental organizations. For readers unfamiliar with the particularities of enforcement in the U.S., these institutional relationships may not be immediately apparent.

Enforcement authority in the U.S. is distributed across multiple levels of government, which although not uncommon, requires some knowledge of these structures. Municipal governments are city level, headed by an elected Mayor, and are housed within a larger county. Counties (in most U.S. states, except Louisiana, where a county is referenced as a "parish," and Alaska, where "boroughs" are the closest county equivalent) are regional levels of governments which typically house several municipalities, and is led by an elected Board of Supervisors, sometimes referred to as a Board of Commissioners. A state, then, is a collection of counties, led by a Governor. States collectively make up the country of the U.S., which is represented by an elected President.

The U.S. civic structure is somewhat comparable to the division of municipal, provincial, and federal responsibilities in Ontario, Canada, where York University is located. For Ontarian readers, however, it is important to note that municipal governance operates through what the province terms a two-tier system, which despite the name, consists of two separate tier groupings, and three individual tiers (Province of Ontario, 2019). *Single-tier* municipalities, assume all municipal responsibility and services, whereas *upper-* and *lower-tier* municipalities share those responsibilities. This distinction is important when comparing police services. In Ontario, policing is typically provided by either *single-tier* municipalities, such as Toronto, or *upper-tier* municipalities, such as York, Durham, and Peel Regions. Consequently, while these agencies like Toronto, York, Durham, and Peel Police Services are technically municipal level police services, their geographic scope and governance structure are often more comparable to U.S. county-level agencies than to Ontario's *lower-tier* municipalities. It is then, most useful for

Ontarian readers, to think about *single-* and *upper-tier* municipalities when referencing the U.S. county, and *lower-tier* municipalities when referencing the U.S. municipality.

Returning to the U.S., anti-trafficking enforcement is shared among agencies operating at municipal, county, state, and federal scales. Each possess distinct legal authorities (e.g., arrest, investigative, and prosecutorial powers), jurisdictions (e.g., municipal, county, state or national scope), and organizational mandates (e.g., public safety, prosecution, or immigration enforcement). While these distinctions can appear blurred through task forces, grant funded partnerships, and interagency collaborations, they remain important for understanding the intuitional landscape of anti-trafficking enforcement.

Importantly, such arrangements are not exceptional. Rather, they emerge at the intersection of U.S. federalism and broader neoliberal shifts in governance. Federalism, a political organization most commonly understood (yet widely contested) as *self-rule plus shared rule* (Fenna & Schnabel, 2024), provides the institutional framework through which authority is distributed across municipal, county, state, and federal actors – while neoliberal governance increasingly encourages these actors to address social problems through partnerships, collaborative networks, and shared responsibility, especially in the infusion of private industry NGOs. Anti-trafficking governance has then become organized through task forces, grant funded initiatives, and interagency collaborations that connect agencies, and private industry, operating under distinct legal authorities and jurisdictions.

Canadian policing arrangements grant local police authority as *Peace Officers* under the (federal) Criminal Code, meaning all police agencies across Canada have the authority to investigate, arrest, and charge individuals for federal criminal offences. U.S. federalism structures this authority differently. Given state's rights, and the country's arrangement as a constitutional republic, states assert certain political autonomy from the U.S. federal government entirely. Hence, municipal, county, and state police find their authority *not* in the power of the federal government, but rather the state government.[7] Meaning, in matters related to federal crime, state level policing is powerless without the assistance of federal law enforcement

[7] As political subdivisions of the State of California, county sheriffs and municipal police ultimately derive their authority from state law. The sheriff's office is established through the California Constitution Art. XI (§§ 1,4) and corresponding statutory provisions, while Art. XI (§ 5(b)(1)) grants charter cities authority over the constitution, regulation, and government of their own municipal police force. The duties of sheriffs and peace officer powers exercised by both sheriff's deputies and municipal police officers are defined in the California Government Code (§§ 26600-26602) and California Penal Code (§ 830.1), respectively.

partners. To then provide comprehensive law enforcement structures that are capable of enforcing both state and federal law, collaborations with federal agencies are indispensable to local policing apparatuses.

As Richman & Seo (2022) argue, collaborative federalism in the U.S. has long facilitated relationships between local and federal law enforcement agencies. Rather than displacing the role of local policing, these arrangements have historically expanded federal capacity by making federal agencies indispensable to local investigations, while simultaneously strengthening local policing autonomy and diffusing meaningful state and federal oversight of local operations, most notably resulting in instances of racially targeted policing. Anti-trafficking enforcement, particularly in the context of mega-event policing, should therefore be understood not as exceptions to established practices, but as a reification of longstanding governance arrangements that increasingly operate through collaborative enforcement networks. The overview of Los Angeles' anti-trafficking governance offered in this chapter demonstrates the multiplicity of actors assembled around a shared goal – despite claims of local and state authorities to limit federal agents through claims of sanctuary – blurring jurisdictional boundaries while clashing institutional mandates.

As will become evident in subsequent discussions, anti-trafficking governance in Los Angeles rarely operates through a single institution acting independently. Instead, policing unfolds through a networked assemblage of law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, service providers, and federal partners that exercise authority in coordination with one another. Understanding this assemblage from its multiple situated perspectives is essential for interpreting the actions of actors discussed in Chapter 5. To contextualize these findings, this chapter draws on publicly available documents produced by various law enforcement agencies to map enforcement and prosecutorial responsibilities in Los Angeles. In doing so, it outlines the key agencies involved in anti-trafficking enforcement and clarifies their respective roles, jurisdictions, and responsibilities in the policing of prostitution and human trafficking.

4.1: LAPD

Municipal police departments typically constitute the most visible form of law enforcement in the U.S. and are generally responsible for policing within the boundaries of a specific municipality. Unlike federal law enforcement agencies, whose authority extends across

the country and is limited to specific categories of federal crime, municipal police agencies are tasked with enforcing state and local municipal ordinances within their respective jurisdiction. Their responsibilities typically include patrol operations, emergency response, criminal investigations, trafficking enforcement, and the maintenance of public order. As a result, municipal police officers are often the first point of contact between residents and the criminal legal system.

The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) serves as the municipal law enforcement agency for the City of Los Angeles. Organized geographically by bureaus and divisions, the department divides the city into four geographic operation bureaus (Central, South, Valley and West), made up of 21 geographic divisions within the four bureaus, in addition to six administrative and support bureaus (Detective, Counter-Terrorism and Special Operations, Administrative Services, Personnel and Training, Professional Standards, and Transportation Services), all six of which contain a number of specialized divisions. The department is responsible for policing the city's approximately four million residents and the diverse neighbourhoods that comprise the municipality. While the LAPD's authority is generally limit to city boundaries, they engage in frequent collaborations with agencies at the county, state, and federal level. Consequently, municipal policing in Los Angeles often extends beyond the image of the local patrol officer and into broader networks of interagency governance.

Given the LAPD is tasked exclusively with crime control, they occupy a frontline role in conducting street-level enforcement activities, responding to community complaints, identifying potential 'trafficking' cases and referring investigations to other specialized units or partner agencies. LAPD's human trafficking section, known as the *Exploitation & Investigative Section* located in LAPD's Detective bureau, defines their objectives as follows:

> The Exploitation & Investigative Section is responsible for the investigation and enforcement of state and federal crimes involving the sexual exploitation of human beings; reduce the vulnerability of children to acts of sexual criminal activity and strengthen the capabilities of federal, state and local law enforcement through training programs and investigative assistance. The objective of the section is to identify and rescue individuals who are being sexually exploited through prostitution as well as to identify and initiate investigations into those responsible for this exploitation. (LAPD, n.d.-a, paras. 1–2)

As stated above, they LAPD are not within their authority to make federal arrests, given they are authorized by the State of California, and hold no federal power. It is then only through collaboration with federal agencies that these objectives remain possible. Further, although municipal departments possess arrest powers, they do not independently prosecute criminal offences. Rather, investigations conducted by local police are referred to prosecutorial authorities who determine whether charges will be filed.

As of 2026, the LAPD reports to employ roughly 8600 sworn individuals and 2400 civilian personnel (LAPD, n.d.-b), making it one of the largest municipal police departments in the county. As a municipal police department, the LAPD is primary responsible for enforcing municipal ordinances and California state law within the city boundaries of Los Angeles. In matters related to commercial sex/prostitution and human trafficking, the LAPD primarily enforces California state statutes governing prostitution (PC § 647(b)), pimping and pandering (PC §§ 266h-266i), loitering with intent to purchase commercial sex (PC § 653.25) and human trafficking (PC § 236.1).

4.2: LASD

In addition to municipal police departments, the U.S. also has county level law enforcement that is organized through *elected* sheriffs and their respective sheriff's departments. U.S. counties function as a distinct layer of government situated between municipalities and state governments, possessing their own administrative responsibilities and law enforcement institutions. As result, sheriff's departments often exercise authority and perform functions that differ from those of municipal police agencies, despite both being involved in criminal investigations and public safety activities. Importantly, although Los Angeles is a city, it sits within the larger Los Angeles County, which includes numerous municipalities that are often collectively referred to as "LA" because of their association with the county, despite being distinct from the City of Los Angeles. This is similar to Toronto, where "Toronto" is often used to refer both to the City of Toronto and the broader Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) serves as the primary law enforcement agency for the Los Angeles County. Unlike the LAPD, whose jurisdiction is limited to the City of Los Angeles, the LASD is responsible for policing – in the capacity of regular patrols and crime control comparable to municipal police – only in unincorporated areas of the

county[8] as well as numerous 'contract cities'[9] that do not maintain their own municipal police departments. Sheriff's departments additionally oversee county jail facilities, provide courthouse security, and perform a range of county-wide investigations and administrative functions. These responsibilities are carried out by LASD's 18000 sworn and civilian employees, positioning the LASD as the largest sheriff's department in the U.S. by metric of sworn personal and total full-time employees.

A notable distinction between sheriff's departments and municipal police departments is their leadership structure: whereas municipal police chiefs are appointed by municipal governments, sheriffs are elected officials accountable to county voters, which in California, and 40 other states, follows the completion of a 4-year term. This bureaucratic arrangement affords sheriff's departments a degree of political autonomy not available to municipal police, while simultaneously positioning the sheriffs as influential actors in policy and law surrounding crime, public safety, and enforcement priorities. As shared by current LA County Sheriff Robert G. Luna: "the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department remains committed to combating human trafficking and protecting the vulnerable" (LADA, 2025, para. 4), identifying anti-trafficking enforcement as a departmental priority.

Similarly to the LAPD, in LASD's municipal patrol functions within contract and unincorporated municipalities, the LASD is responsible for enforcing California state statutes. In relation to commercial sex and human trafficking, the relevant state statues mirror that of LAPD: prostitution (PC § 647(b)), pimping and pandering (PC §§ 266h-266i), loitering with intent to purchase commercial sex (PC § 653.25) and human trafficking (PC § 236.1).

4.3: City, District & U.S. Attorneys

While the above agencies are responsible for investigating crimes and making arrests, it is prosectors who ultimately determine whether charges will be filed. In the U.S., prosecutorial

[8] An unincorporated area refers to an area within a county that lacks a municipal government. About two-thirds of landmass, and over one million residents of LA County are in unincorporated areas, including notable communities such as East LA, Altadena, and Marina del Rey. The LASD reports they provide patrol services to 153 unincorporated communities in LA County. See: (LASD, n.d.-a)

[9] A 'contract city' refers to municipalities which hold municipal government, but do not operate some municipal services. Rather, they enter under contract with the county to deliver services to residents at subsided rates, comparative to operating their own municipal services such as policing. West Hollywood, Malibu, Carson, Compton, and Calabasas, are all examples of municipalities which contract LASD to provide municipal police services. A list of contract cities operated by the LASD is available at: (LASD, n.d.-b)

authority is vested in government attorneys who review evidence, determine appropriate charges, and represent the state in criminal proceedings. For readers unfamiliar with the U.S. criminal legal system, it is important to distinguish between police agencies, which investigate alleged offences, and prosecutors, who decide whether and how those offences will be pursued through the courts.

Within Los Angeles County, prosecutorial responsibilities are divided across municipal, county, and federal levels of government. At the municipal level, the Los Angeles City Attorney's Office serves as the chief legal officer for the City of Los Angeles and is elected by its constituents. In addition to representing the city in civil matters and advising municipal departments (such as the LAPD), the City Attorney prosecutes misdemeanor offences of state law and violations of municipal ordinances occurring within city boundaries. At the County level, the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office serves as the primary authority for state felony offenses and other serious criminal matters throughout Los Angeles County and is elected by its constituents. Unlike the City Attorney, whose authority is confined to the City of Los Angeles, the District Attorney's jurisdiction extends across the county's incorporated and unincorporated municipalities. Consequently, the office occupies a central position within the regional criminal legal system and regularly collaborates with municipal police departments, sheriff's departments, and other law enforcement partners.

Federal prosecutions are overseen by the United States Attorney's Office (USAO), which represents the federal government in criminal proceedings arising under federal law. U.S. attorneys are appointed by the President and confirmed by the senate. Unlike municipal and county prosecutors, who enforce local and state statutes, the USAO prosectors offences involving federal criminal codes, including immigration related crimes, organized crime, public corruption, narcotics, and certain human trafficking offenses. The USAO is divided into districts, of which Los Angeles is represented by the Central District of California. Federal prosecutors frequently work alongside agencies such as HSI and the FBI, particularly in cases involving interstate activity, transnational networks, or offences falling within federal jurisdiction. It is only federal agencies (except in cases of joint task force participation from local enforcement) that can push cases to the USAO.

The distinction between these offices reflects the layered structures of governance in the U.S. While each possesses prosecutorial authority, they operate at different scales and under

different legal frameworks. City attorneys generally focus on state misdemeanors and city ordinances, district attorneys typically oversee state felony prosecutions at the county level, and U.S. attorneys pursue violations of federal law. Human trafficking enforcement may involve any of these actors depending on the circumstance of a particular case, though trafficking offences are most commonly prosecuted through county or federal courts. Across all 3 levels of prosecutorial authority in Los Angles, the sitting attorneys have made clear that anti trafficking enforcement is a priority for their offices. At the City Attorney's Office: Hydee Feldstein Soto co-leads the Figueroa Corridor Human Trafficking Task Force (LA City Attorney, 2025); at the county level: LA District Attorney Nathan Hochman's office maintains a specific human trafficking operation, and in January of 2026, touted the doubling of human sex trafficking convictions achieved through the office in 2025 (County of Los Angeles, 2026); while the Central District of California (First Assistant) U.S. Attorney[10] Bill Essayli's office also maintains a human trafficking program (USAO, 2026). Hence, the significance of these offices extends beyond their formal jurisdictions and statutory responsibilities.

Importantly, prosecutors do not merely process cases generated by law enforcement agencies. Through their authority to determine charges, negotiate plea agreements, and decide whether cases proceed to trial, prosecutorial offices exercise significant influence over how criminal laws are interpreted and enforced in practice. Participants in this study consistently referenced prosecutors as operating across and through multiple jurisdictions, underscoring the extent to which anti-trafficking governance is shaped not only by policing activity but also by the very discretionary practices of legal actors embedded throughout the criminal legal system. While these offices are formally situated at different levels of government, anti-trafficking governance frequently brings them together through task force structures, grant funded partnerships, and joint investigations. As a result, the distinction between municipal, county, and federal prosecutions is often less visible in practice that it is in institutional design, as investigations commonly require multiple layers of law enforcement coordination and case-building across agencies.

[10] At the time of writing, Bill Essayli is the de facto U.S. Attorney for the Central District of California, serving as the First Assistant U.S. Attorney. Essayli was appointed interim U.S. Attorney by President Trump in April 2025 and failed to receive senate confirmation within the interim period. A federal judge later ruled that he had unlawfully continued acting as U.S. Attorney past the 120-day interim period, disqualifying him from serving as the U.S. Attorney. The ruling, permitted him to remain the *First Assistant* U.S. Attorney, and Essayli currently remains the top federal prosecutor for the Central District of California until a new interim is appointed (USAO, 2025).

4.4: ICE

On top of municipal and county law enforcement, the U.S. also contains a range of federal law enforcement agencies operating with their own distinct legal authorities and jurisdictions. Federal law enforcement agencies are responsible for investigating violations of federal law, coordinating activities across state boundaries, and addressing offences deemed to be of national concern. Unlike local police department and sheriff's offices, whose authority is generally limited by geographic jurisdiction, federal agencies possess investigative powers that extend through the U.S., and often beyond, to other countries who have a pre-arranged diplomatic process for U.S. investigations outside of the country. However, federal law enforcement is not administered solely from Washington. Agencies such as Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Department of Justice (DOJ) maintain regional and local field offices throughout the county, including Los Angeles. Consequently, federal personnel frequently operate alongside municipal and county actors, often participating in the same investigations, task forces, and enforcement initiatives.

One of the most prominent agencies involved in anti-trafficking enforcement is HSI. HSI serves as the principal investigative arm of the U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which itself operates within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). While public discussion often treats HSI as a distinct agency, it remains institutionally situated within ICE and shares the broader agency's mandate concerning immigration enforcement, border security, and transnational crime.

Following the passage of the Homeland Security Act in November 2002, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officially formed in March 2003 to centralize national security functions. As part of this reorganization, the investigative arms of the U.S. Customs Service and the Immigration and Naturalization Service merged into the newly formed Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). In 2010, this investigative directorate was officially rebranded as Homeland Security Investigations to better reflect its expansive, cross-border criminal mandate. Today, the agency investigates a wide range of offences including human trafficking, human smuggling, immigration violations, money laundering, narcotics trafficking, and transitional organized crime. Given its origins in immigrations and customs enforcement, HSI occupies a unique position within the federal anti-trafficking apparatus,

operating at the intersection of criminal investigations, border governance, and victim immigration relief. Thes activities exist alongside broader federal anti-trafficking initiatives, including international partnerships and foreign-policy mechanisms such as the U.S. Department of State's annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, which – as described in greater detail in Chapter 2 – evaluates the anti-trafficking efforts of foreign governments and has historically informed the allocation for foreign assistance (i.e., via the United States Agency for International Development, or USAID).

Alongside HSI, the FBI serves as one of the primary federal investigative agencies operating within the U.S. Unlike HSI, whose investitive mandate is rooted in immigration enforcement, the FBI operates under the Department of Justice (DOJ) and possesses broad authority to investigate violations of federal criminal law and threats to national security. The Bureau's jurisdiction includes terrorism, organized crime, public corruption, civil rights violations, cybercrime, interstate criminal activity, and human trafficking. Through a similar network of field offices located throughout the country, again, including Los Angeles, the FBI frequently collaborates with local law enforcement agencies and federal partners on complex investigations that cross municipal, state, or national boundaries.

The DOJ occupies a distinct position within the federal enforcement landscape. Rather than functioning solely as an enforcement agency, the DOJ serves as the chief federal law enforcement department of the U.S. and oversees a range of federal investigative bodies, including the FBI, as well as federal prosecutorial offices. To clarify the dual enforcement and prosecutorial role of the DOJ, it is headed by the U.S. Attorney General, a member of the President's Cabinet, to whom U.S. Attorneys ultimately report. Despite this formal chain of command, U.S. Attorneys retain considerable discretion in determining which cases to pursue and how to set enforcement priorities within their respective districts.

The HSI and FBI, however, are the two main federal enforcement agencies present in Los Angeles anti-trafficking enforcement landscape. Given their position as federal agencies, they are responsible for enforcing U.S. federal law. While there is no federal law prohibiting consensual commercial sexual activity between adults (despite its common, and nearly uniform criminalization at the state level), the HSI and FBI primarily enforce federal statutes governing forced labour (18 U.S.C § 1589), trafficking with respect to forced labour and servitude (18 U.S.C § 1590), and sex trafficking of children by force, fraud, or coercion (18 U.S.C § 1591), all

of which are principally derived from the *Trafficking and Victims Protection Act*. The HSI and FBI are also within authority to arrest for interstate transportation for unlawful sexual activity (18 U.S.C § § 2421-2423), which is a product of the *Mann Act*.[11]

4.5: NSSE

The National Special Security Event (NSSE) designation was established in 1998 under President Clinton's Presidential Decision Directive 62, designed to address "unconventional threats" to the U.S. homeland (Franklin, 2014, p. 285). Two years later, the Presidential Threat Protection Act of 2000 formally authorized the U.S. Secret Service (USSS) to plan and coordinate security operations at events designated NSSEs (Franklin, 2014). While NSSE designation introduces new levels of complexity in federal-municipal security collaboration unseen during earlier Olympic Games in Los Angeles, even the 1984 Olympics saw substantial federal involvement and pressure. What has changed is the degree of formality, coordination, and the scale of militarization enabled by NSSE status.

The upcoming 2028 LA Olympics, along with the 2026 World Cup and 2027 Super Bowl, have all been granted NSSE status by presidential order. According to the USSS, although the official NSSE designation was made in January 2024, formal planning began even earlier: on June 12, 2024, with the first meeting of the Executive Steering Committee (USSS, 2024, para. 3). This marks the earliest NSSE designation ever issued, signaling unprecedented coordination among federal agencies, including DHS, DOJ, and local law enforcement partners (USSS, 2024). This federalized security mandate also empowers federal agencies to assert jurisdictional authority over local police forces, due to their obligation to comply with federal law (Franklin, 2014). This raises critical concerns about the potential for federal authority to override local accountability measures and policies, particularly in the context of Los Angeles' self-designation as a sanctuary city.

In 2024, LA officials reaffirmed its sanctuary policy as one that would remain in effect through the LA28 Games. According to City Councilmember Nithya Raman (2024), the policy is

[11] Numerous scholars have noted the Mann Act's emergence in the white-supremacist anxieties of the early twentieth century (Langum, 2007; Pliley, 2014). While framed as anti-trafficking legislation, its enforcement frequently targeted interracial relationships and racialized men accused of transporting white women across state lines, revealing how concerns about "white slavery" panics were often entangled with efforts to preserve racial and sexual hierarchies (Donovan, 2003).

meant to “keep ICE out of LA and further strengthen our commitment to our immigrant communities” (para. 7), in direct response to rising national discourse around mass deportations following the re-election campaign of Donald Trump (Raman, 2024, para. 1). However, despite these intentions from LA City representatives, Brian Lewin, Special Agent in Charge at the U.S. Secret Service Los Angles Field Office, is directly quoted in the USSS press release announcing the Olympic games as an NSSE, noting: “The security planning for the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games will be a huge undertaking that will require close coordination between law enforcement and public safety partners at all levels” (USSS, 2024, para. 4). All levels, including LA City and Trump’s federal government.

Given the increase in ICE, DEA, and DHS activity vis-à-vis the NSSE security umbrella, it remains unclear how these competing mandates will play out. The tension between local sanctuary commitments and federally mandated policing represents a crucial flashpoint for observing how contemporary mega-event security may undermine local democratic control.

As chapter 2.2 has demonstrated, policing in Los Angeles is deeply entangled with federal power, racial capitalism, and evolving logics of containment. From 19th-century public order codes criminalizing Indigenous and racialized populations, to Cold War counterinsurgency, to the federal surges of the War on Crime and War on Drugs, the LAPD has not merely adapted to federal priorities: it has often helped to define them. With the return of the Olympic Games in 2028, now under an NSSE framework defined by intensified federal oversight, expansive surveillance authority, and militarized enforcement tools, these histories are not just critical background. They are the context, the blueprint. The security strategies unfolding today do not mark a break with the past, but rather a repackaging of carceral logics, now legitimized under the guise of counterterrorism and public safety. Marketed as exceptional (or event) security planning; is, in reality, the next iteration of a long-standing policing project, one that continues to recycle panic and repression, just with renewed federalized authority.

In relation to anti-trafficking, despite intensified presence throughout NSSE preparations, the significance of these events may lie less in the creation of new enforcement structures than in the expansion of existing ones. Increased funding, personnel, visibility, and coordination undoubtedly accompany event preparations; however, anti-trafficking enforcement has long operated through federal partnerships and investigations that routinely traverse municipal, county, state, and international jurisdictions. Consequently, the federal reach associated with

upcoming SMEs should not be understood as entirely novel, but rather as widening extensions of collaborative arrangements already embedded within anti-trafficking governance. The following section examines how these relationships increasingly take shape through task force structures.

4.6: Task Force Frenzy

Task forces occupy a distinct position within the U.S. criminal justice system. Unlike municipal police departments, sheriff's offices, or federal investigative agencies, they are not independent law enforcement bodies with their own jurisdictional authority. Rather, task forces function as collaborative governance structures that coordinate agencies operating under separate legal mandates through information sharing, joint investigations, resource pooling, and coordinated enforcement efforts. While they have long been used to address crimes perceived to cross jurisdictional boundaries – such as trafficking – they have become particularly prominent in anti-trafficking enforcement through the DOJ's Enhanced Collaborative Model (ECM) program.

Established in 2010, the ECM provides federal funding through the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) to support multidisciplinary anti-trafficking task forces that bring together law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and NGOs under a shared "victim-centred" framework (McCoy et al., 2022). Consequently, contemporary anti-trafficking governance is increasingly organized through task force structures that blur conventional distinctions between municipal, county, federal, prosecutorial, and non-state actors. Within these arrangements, NGOs often supply trans-informed and victim-centred language, even as partner agencies maintain robust criminal enforcement capacities and direct access to deeply carceral federal prosecution pathways (McCoy et al., 2022).

The significance of task forces therefore extends beyond their operational coordination function. As collaborative governance structures, they provide a mechanism through which agencies with distinct legal authorities, jurisdictions, and mandates are assembled around a shared enforcement agenda. Rather than dissolving jurisdictional boundaries, task forces operate across them, producing a layered form of governance in which enforcement is coordinated through shared intelligence, joint operations, and pooled resources. It is through these arrangements that anti-trafficking enforcement in Los Angeles is increasingly organized.

Community members first alerted us to a neighbourhood-specific anti-trafficking imitative announced in September 2024: the Figueroa Corridor Human Trafficking Initiative

(USAO, 2024). Publicly framed as a coordinated effort to combat trafficking and exploitation along a 3.5-mile stretch of South Figueroa Street between Gage Avenue and Imperial Highway, the initiative brought together a wide range of actors, including: the LAPD, HSI, FBI, the LA City Attorney's Office, the LA County District Attorney's Office, and the Central District of California U.S. Attorney's Office. Notably, the initiative is significant not only for the range of agencies involved but also its strong federal presence. Rather than creating a new enforcement body, it consolidated existing mandates under a shared anti-trafficking framework directed toward a specific urban corridor. This corridor is also expected to serve as a major throughway for FIFA World Cup and Olympic-related traffic, alongside event-specific transit expansion (LA Metro, n.d.).

The Figuroa Corridor traverses neighbourhoods historically subjected to intensive policing practices, including vice enforcement campaigns, gang suppression initiatives, and broader law-and-order strategies that have discriminatorily targeted Black and Latino communities throughout South-Central Los Angeles (Bloch & Phillips, 2022; Boyd, 2012; Felker-Kantor, 2018). In this sense, the initiative extends a longer genealogy of place-based enforcement. In the context of the 1984 Olympic Games, similar "saturation" policing strategies were deployed in South-Central Los Angeles (Boykoff, 2020), a pattern that is again anticipated under contemporary special event security regimes (i.e., the current NSSE). Anti-trafficking enforcement and event preparation thus increasingly converge through geographically targeted, multi-agency collaborations that present coordinated institutional action, even where underlying mandates and enforcement priorities may differ.

By 2026, this model of geographically targeted anti-trafficking task forces had begun to expand beyond Figuroa Corridor. In January of 2026, city and county officials announced a new anti-trafficking initiative structured as a task force focused on Western Avenue between Olympic Boulevard and Santa Monica Boulevard, with heightened attention near Koreatown and the Greater Wilshire area. As with the Figueroa Corridor operation, the Western Avenue initiative brought together law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, municipal officials, and service providers under a coordinated anti-trafficking framework (LA City Attorney, 2026).

While the Figueroa Corridor initiative represented the first task force intervention identified in this study, it did not emerge in isolation. Through semi-structured interviews, it became clear that these arrangements closely mirrored governance structures already

institutionalized through the Los Angeles Regional Human Trafficking Task Force (LARHTTF). Established with funding under the DOJ's EMC, the LARHTTF is co-led by the LASD, and the NGO Saving innocence, and includes leadership-level participation (as grant co-signatories) from HSI and the DOJ/USAO (LARHTTF, n.d.-a). Beyond this core leadership structure, the LARHTTF includes a broad network of additional state and non-state partner agencies (LARHTTF, n.d.-b).

Given that the task force itself does not function as a patrol or arresting body, nor does it operate under a single jurisdictional mandate, its significance lies in its capacity to coordinate institutions that would otherwise operate under separate legal authorities and bureaucratic structures. In doing so, the LARHTTF further blurs the jurisdictional distinctions outlined throughout this chapter, complicating municipal claims to sanctuary governance in Los Angeles while enabling forms of collaborative enforcement that extend across municipal, county, federal, and NGO sectors.

Importantly, interview participants situate these collaborative structures in relation to the forthcoming "mega-sporting events" in Los Angeles. The LARHTTF explicitly announced the creation of a dedicated human trafficking subgroup linked to preparations for the 2028 Olympic Games, operating within its broader organizational framework. Taken together, the Figueroa Corridor Human Trafficking Initiative, its subsequent expansion to Western Avenue, its embeddedness within Olympic planning structures, and the continued institutional consolidation of the LARHTTF suggest that anti-trafficking governance in Los Angeles is increasingly being mobilized through pre-existing collaborative infrastructures in anticipation of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, 2027 NFL Super Bowl, and 2028 Olympic Games.

4.7: Conclusion

This chapter has provided the institutional context necessary for interpreting the analysis that follows. It has outlined the agencies, jurisdictions, and collaborative governance structures through which anti-trafficking enforcement is organized in Los Angeles, with particular attention to task force-based coordination across municipal county, federal, and non-governmental actors. In doing so, it has demonstrated how these arrangements do not simply reflect discrete enforcement initiatives but rather constitute an embedded and scalable infrastructure of collaboration that can be activated across different urban sites and policy priorities.

With this foundation in place, the analysis now turns to how participants understood, navigated, and justified policing practices in relation to forthcoming mega-sporting events. In particular, it examines how this collaborative governance structure shape the framing and operationalization of anti-trafficking enforcement in anticipation of large-scale, event-driven urban security regimes, with implications for accountability and transparency in policing practices, including within jurisdictions designated as sanctuary cities.

5.0: Productive Ambiguities

This chapter examines findings from semi-structured interviews with law enforcement officials and allied stakeholders. Section 5.1 revisits and critically interrogates two enduring narratives surrounding human trafficking in the context of major sporting events, demonstrating how interview data challenge assumptions that have persisted despite their historical prominence. Section 5.1.1 examines the widely circulated claim that large sporting events drive increases in sex trafficking, while Section 5.1.2 explores the myth of the "sanctuary city" in the context of the National Special Security Event (NSSE), with particular attention to its implications for the everyday policing of human trafficking.

Section 5.2 then examines the victim-criminal paradox within California's contemporary anti-trafficking framework. Against the backdrop of recent shifts toward victim-centred policing approaches in Los Angeles County and across California, this section identifies tensions and contradictions in law enforcement understandings of human trafficking, commercial sex, and the individuals involved. In doing so, it critically assesses how these competing perspectives continue to shape policing practices despite reforms intended to prioritize victim protection.

5.1: In/convenient Myths

Mitchell (2022) describes a frenzy of anti-trafficking moral panics that accompanies the sport mega-event. Building on his work, this section examines several anti-trafficking moral panics through the perspectives of law enforcement officials and allied NGO workers. Section 5.1.1 interrogates the evidentiary foundations of contemporary anti-trafficking policing by examining what is known, what remains uncertain, and what may ultimately be unknowable about human trafficking. In doing so, it considers how assumptions and claims – often advanced despite limited empirical evidence – come to justify significant policing investments and enforcement operations.

Section 5.1.2 then examines the policing consequences of these moral panics, focusing on how anti-trafficking initiatives undermine the promise of "sanctuary" in mega-event host cities. In particular, it explores how anti-trafficking enforcement extends beyond traditional policing by deputizing state agencies, charitable organizations, businesses, and members of the public into systems of surveillance and enforcement. Taken together, these analyses examine the political

utility of anti-trafficking moral panics as mechanisms for legitimizing intensified policing, facilitating neighbourhood gentrification, disregarding the expressed needs of sex workers, and expanding the reach of the carceral state.

5.1.1: SMEs as Drivers of Human Sex Trafficking

The bus rolled east from Downtown Los Angeles toward Echo Park, passing a familiar landscape of billboards, bus shelters, and oversized public advertisements. It was late January 2026 – National Human Trafficking Prevention Month in the United States – and anti-trafficking messaging seemed impossible to avoid. At nearly every stop, posters warned of hidden victims and urged the public to "know the signs." One advertisement stood out: actor Liam Neeson, whose portrayal of a vigilante father in *Taken* (2008) has become one of popular culture's most recognizable depictions of human trafficking, stared back from a bus shelter beside a large QR code.

Assuming the campaign was part of a municipal or state public awareness initiative, I scanned the code. Rather than directing me to resources produced by the City of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, or the State of California, it led instead to *It's a Penalty*, one of the most prominent and well-funded organizations in the global sport mega-event anti-trafficking movement. The website opened with Neeson's short film *What is Human Trafficking?* and described the organization's mission as "harness[ing] the power of sport to prevent abuse, exploitation, and human trafficking on a global scale," positioning every major sporting event as an opportunity for worldwide action and intervention.

The ubiquity of these campaigns illustrates the visibility and reach of anti-trafficking narratives surrounding sport mega-events. Yet what proved striking in my interviews was not their prominence, but the extent to which many law enforcement officials themselves questioned their value. Rather than embracing high-profile awareness campaigns such as those promoted by *It's a Penalty*, law enforcement interviewed argued that they misrepresented the realities of human trafficking, diverted resources, and, in some cases, did more harm than good. It is this tension – between the public visibility of anti-trafficking campaigns and the more ambivalent perspectives of those tasked with enforcing anti-trafficking laws – that frames the discussion that follows.

Despite the visibility of anti-trafficking campaigns surrounding SMEs, and despite Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva publicly declaring the Super Bowl "one of the major events that draws human traffickers to the region," interviewees across jurisdictions consistently rejected the notion that these events uniquely increase human trafficking (CNS Staff, 2022, para. 3). Instead, participants described trafficking as an ongoing market that responds to shifting economic opportunities rather than to sporting events themselves. In discussion of economics, two interviewees explicitly stated in discussion of trafficking that "economics drives exploitation". Dually, this assertion speaks to both the economic need met by sexual labour, and the economic prospect of the event. SMEs temporally concentrate visitors, disposable income, and commercial activity, creating conditions in which exploitation may become more profitable without fundamentally altering the prevalence of trafficking. As one LASD agent states: "For traffickers, it's an opportunity to make a lot of money from their victims," Lt. Marcela Castillo of the Sheriff's Department continued, "in an event this big, with many people, they think there's more business" (Pasadena Now, 2026, para. 3). Yet despite this rhetoric, in an interview with a 15-year anti-trafficking advocate involved in multiple SME operations across California, I was told:

> So, we don't take the position that sporting events cause an increase in trafficking because trafficking is happening every day. It's just a migratory crime […] sporting events aren't uniquely driving human trafficking.

This skepticism emerged repeatedly across interviews. As a LASD Supervisor explained:

> There has been like a, a minimal amount of research done as to whether there's an if there's been an uptick or if there is an uptick in human trafficking during large scale sporting events – the answer to that right now is no.

Despite the unprecedented scale of anti-trafficking preparedness surrounding the event, some interviewees questioned whether operations reflected any meaningful increase in trafficking activity. Reflecting on his involvement in an anti-trafficking task force for the NFL Super Bowl,

a retired LASD Sergeant remembered no substantial increase in trafficking-related activity, despite the extensive enforcement, stating:

> We saw an increase in ads on MegaPersonals […] but we didn't see any notable increase in CSEC activity at all. Our arrests weren't bigger than any other day we would have done that […] I have to go back through the stats, but I think we might have arrested maybe one person from out of state that came in for the game during the whole time we were, we were up on the Super Bowl [LVI in 2022, at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California] – and we were running operations every night.

This uncertainty also prompted retrospective questions about the necessity and scale of the anti-trafficking operations themselves. Reflecting on the command structures established during Super Bowl LVI in 2022, the same Retired LASD Sergeant explained:

> And I kind of found out that, I don't know, maybe we didn't need to [run an anti-trafficking operation]. Maybe we could have just rolled with the command post the day of the [event].

Despite the obvious doubt of the Retired LASD Sargeant, institutional pressure to visibly operationalize anti-trafficking preparedness at the event was explained:

> On the other hand, there's so much concern about it that if I would have proposed that we don't have a command post, everybody would have lost their mind. They wanted to see a, a dedicated command post for human trafficking.

These accounts reveal a central contradiction: even where law enforcement openly questioned the empirical basis for heightened trafficking concerns at SMEs, anti-trafficking infrastructures continued to expand, accruing additional budgets and partnerships each time. The Olympics announcement in 2017 most especially triggered institutional responses – with a new Sheriff's task force, a $1 billion congressional appropriation, a House committee hearing, an LAPD $96M

procurement request – that are disproportionate to any demonstrated evidentiary basis and that will structurally outlast the Games themselves.

While no definitive data supported these assertions – and research, including studies by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (Ham, 2011) demonstrate that sex trafficking was frequently being conflated with sex work – anti-trafficking infrastructure nevertheless continued to expand (see also Martin & Hill, 2019). Fourteen organizations, including *Saving Innocence*, partnered with the NFL and the Rams through the newly formed South Los Angeles Anti-Human Trafficking Committee, while Homeland Security Investigations agents were also deployed to the area. The outcome of these enforcement efforts underscored this disconnect, although the LAPD reported 179 prostitution-related arrests in the lead-up to Super Bowl LVI, only four people identified as trafficking victims were connected to support services (CNS Author, 2022).

Interviewees continuously expressed skepticism about trafficking claims associated with SMEs, yet the House Homeland Security Committee established a "Task Force on Enhancing Security for Special Events" in May 2025, and a December 2025 hearing was titled "A Scourge Against Humanity: Addressing Human Trafficking at Mass Gatherings," examining trafficking risks tied to the 2028 Olympics. Congress then allocated $1 billion for Olympic security and $625 million for World Cup security in the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act," signed into law in 2025 (Homeland Security Committee-R, 2025). LAPD separately requested nearly $100 million in city funds for vehicles and equipment for the Olympics – including 300 patrol vehicles, vans, an armored SUV, an upgraded radio network, and more than 1600 body cameras – with the budget request explicitly noting that the new vehicles would replace outdated fleet vehicles well after the Games concluded (Rainey, 2026).

Hence, the economic opportunities created by the SME should not be questioned through traffickers alone. While interviewees consistently questioned whether SMEs produced measurable increases in trafficking, the events continue to generate substantial economic opportunities for anti-trafficking governance structures. In this sense, the economics of the SME extend far beyond exploitation of trafficking victims, and towards the exploitation of trafficking panic in the procurement of funding for anti-trafficking governance, and broader carceral power.

Repeatedly, participants identified external anti-trafficking NGOs as key actors in producing and circulating these narratives. Organizations like *It's a Penalty*, and the multitude of others that look to capitalize on the surge of attention and capital which the event garners, were

described by the Retired LASD Seargent who worked on 2022 Super Bowl operations, as "parachute organizations." He went on to explain:

> A lot of these parachute organizations have, like they came up with hotlines and we're like, oh God, we already have a hotline. There's the National Human Trafficking Hotline. Stop it with the hotlines. Are you kidding me? There's, like, hotlines everywhere.

While hotlines were noted as a deeply saturated tactic, the intentions of these organizations were also questioned. The Retired LASD Sergeant further noted, "it can get overwhelming because everybody with good intentions wants to be involved. Some of them just want to promote their organizations, you know." Participants described these organizations as using the heightened visibility of the sport mega-event to insert themselves into existing anti-trafficking funding streams, often through campaigns that projected a level of empirical certainty yet without the evidence to support.

These accounts point to broader tensions surrounding the NGOization of anti-trafficking governance. While participants frequently described anti-trafficking organizations as sensationalist or reductive, the critiques were less directed at anti-trafficking policing itself and more at the proliferation of actors seeking visibility and authority within it. Rather than rejecting intervention outright, interviewees more often expressed frustration with the growing number of non-profit organizations attempting to attach themselves to the event and its associated publicity. The Retired LASD Sergeant was not alone in this feeling.

A LASD Supervisor also recounted stories of the 2022 Super Bowl, which was before his time with the human trafficking task force but carried stories of "chaos." The anti-trafficking advocate quoted above, who was involved in the 2026 Santa Clara NFL Super Bowl, also described the global anti-trafficking industry as thee problem, dating back to the 2014 opening of Levi Stadium, referring to such organizations as "swoopers."

> So, in 2014, I had it really bad. I mean, there were so many swooper agent groups that were coming to different sporting events, and they really aren't good for the sensationalism […] but overall, *It's a Penalty* I'd say is definitely, they're a harder organization because they have a lot of high-level visibility. And they, they kind of have a

> lot of partnerships going into the World Cup, like Uber has signed on for them. Airbnb has signed on for them. They're trying to put up their ads like in multiple cities, and one of my first conversations with them was don't touch our funding because service providers have had millions of dollars cut in the United States.

Noting both the sensationalism leveraged by their campaigns, in addition to their costly price tags, "parachute" or "swooper" organizations find little support in law enforcement or their allied service providers. This tension was further exacerbated by broader conditions of austerity and shrinking social services funding in the US. However, the pushback against these organizations appears to strengthen the relationships between law enforcement and more locally situated anti-trafficking organizations.

In discussing the 2022 Super Bowl operations in Los Angeles County, a retired LASD sergeant described pushback against "parachute" organizations, noting that it was those embedded in the local nonprofit and law enforcement communities who ultimately had to "put their foot down."

> There was a lot of parachute organizations we had to manage. Luckily, I had [name of former deputy], so I didn't have to manage any of that crap. He retired and became the law enforcement liaison for *Saving Innocence*. So, he knew everybody. He knew everybody in that nonprofit space. And we had to swap these people in and say, no thank you, we got it. No thank you, we got it. No thank you, we got it.

These accounts suggest that the conflict was not primarily between the state and private organizations, but over who possessed legitimate authority to govern anti-trafficking interventions during the sport mega-event. Rather than rejecting anti-trafficking policing, participants sought avenues to further capitalize in an ever-burgeoning market of various and multiple law enforcement and non-profit entities.

Anti-trafficking work, in this sense, enabled the state to displace responsibility while distancing itself from meaningful intervention. At the same time, private funding streams continued to reward the sensational appeal of "parachute" or "swooper" organizations such as *It's a Penalty*, which advance overly simplistic, carceral solutions. Despite the formal distinction

between international and local anti-trafficking NGOs, collaborations between law enforcement and local nonprofit partners – such as *Saving Innocence* – function to professionalize anti-trafficking work in ways that echo Chief Parker's earlier transformation of the LAPD's policing model. This professionalization consolidates authority within policing institutions while tending to marginalize external critique.

Within this framework, LASD's integration of NGOs like *Saving Innocence* into its operational model reflects an effort to incorporate "lived experience" into police work while maintaining institutional control over its interpretation and deployment. The result is a symbiotic arrangement in which NGO narratives reinforce carceral authority, while law enforcement validation in turn legitimizes NGO participation (and funding) under the banner of community accountability. Authority, however, remains tightly bounded. In this configuration, the arrival of external "parachute" or "swooper" organizations disrupts the shared authority established between law enforcement and local NGO partners, thereby threatening the coordinated resource and narrative infrastructure mobilized during the SME.

This relationship became further complicated following the completion of interviews, in the lead-up to the 2026 World Cup in Los Angeles, when the LARHTTF partnered with *It's a Penalty* despite interviewees repeated critiques of "parachute" or "swooper" organizations. Rather than resolving tensions identified above, this partnership illustrates how organizations criticized for sensationalism remain institutionally useful within SME anti-trafficking governance. Despite the previous attempts of local law-enforcement and NGO partnerships to push back against international anti-trafficking NGOs, the financial backing of *It's a Penalty* from the likes of Uber and Airbnb, produces an inconvenient competitor in an increasingly crowded anti-trafficking landscape. By bringing the organization into the operations of the task force itself, local actors can neutralize this competition through incorporation, expanding the coalition while simultaneously preserving their monopoly of anti-trafficking, absorbing competitors into their expansive governance network. Their value then lies less in the empirical accuracy of their claims than in their capacity to generate visibility, procure funding, and reinforce the legitimacy of trafficking intervention. The event specific contingency of this arrangement ensures an expiration that returns exclusive authority to local actors for long after the events have left town.

Taken together, the myth of sex trafficking as an exceptional event-based threat is sustained only insofar as it reinforces, rather than disrupts, existing regimes of expertise and governance. While participants repeatedly questioned the empirical foundations of event-specific trafficking claims, the economic and institutional value of those claims remained considerable: justifying dedicated task forces, overtime deployments, congressional appropriations, NGO partnerships, and expanding governance networks that outlast the events themselves. Hence, the profitability of the event is not exclusive to illicit markets these funding initiatives purport to police. They also, sustain an expanding anti-trafficking economy in which state agencies, NGOs and, and private actors compete for funding, visibility, and authority. The normalization of trafficking as an everyday object of intervention therefore reproduces not only policing itself, but the arrangements through which anti-trafficking governance continues to expand irrespective of the event.

5.1.2: Sanctuary Cities and Federal Leadership

Sanctuary cities – defined through policy which leverages a loophole in federal law requiring local and state agencies to share, but not collect, information useful to federal investigations – are frequently positioned in public and political discourse as sites of resistance to federal immigration enforcement. In California especially,[12] sanctuary policies have long been mobilized as symbolic opposition to federal administrations focused on the deportation, detention, and regulation of migrant populations (see especially, Roy & Zablotsky, 2025). In practice, however, sanctuary protections operate less as a total refusal of collaboration with federal agencies and more through limits placed on local participation in immigration enforcement and information sharing. While agencies operating under sanctuary policies restrict the collection or disclosure of immigration status information, these protections become increasingly complicated within policing frameworks that rely heavily on federal enforcement. Human trafficking enforcement represents one such framework. Irrespective of the National Special Security Event (NSSE) designation attached to the 2026 FIFA World Cup, 2027 NFL Super Bowl, and 2028 Olympic Games, anti-trafficking policing already operates through deeply federalized infrastructures. As

[12] In addition to local Sanctuary policy in cities like Los Angeles, California is also a Sanctuary state, enacted under the California Values Act (SB 54), and is codified in the California Government Code §7284-7284.12

discussed earlier (see: Chapter 2.3), this federalization closely tracks the Palermo Protocol's framing of trafficking as a transnational criminal issue requiring coordination across jurisdictions. In practice, this means that local anti-trafficking investigations routinely depend on federal partnerships, databases, prosecutors, immigration tools, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms that extend beyond the reach of municipal or county policing alone.

The purpose of this section, then, is not to argue that sanctuary protections are entirely absent within Los Angeles or California, but to examine the myth of their totality as it is complicated through anti-trafficking governance and selective forms of federal collaboration. Drawing on interview data, this section demonstrates how local agencies negotiate the sharing of information – especially immigration-related information – with federal field offices under the stated imperatives of victim protection, transnational crime control, and event security.

Despite the symbolic boundaries established through sanctuary policy, interviews consistently described federal collaboration as essential to anti-trafficking investigations. Across jurisdictions, participants framed trafficking not as a localized crime contained within municipal, county, or state borders, but as a highly mobile form of exploitation requiring inter-jurisdictional coordination. In practice, this renders federal partnerships not exceptional features of event-based operations, but routine elements of anti-trafficking enforcement. In this context, an LASD supervisor described federal involvement as critical to extending investigations beyond local jurisdictional limits:

> Well, it obviously gives us the ability to expand out investigations outside of LA County, if, if we need to, even outside of the state, if necessary […] So, having that federal nexus helps us out in conducting our investigations where we, if we suspect, or we determine that a trafficker or a victim is being moved outside of California, we can easily contact out federal partners.

Rather than describing federal involvement as supplementary, interviewees frequently framed these partnerships as structurally necessary to anti-trafficking policing itself. Federal agencies were repeatedly positioned as providing investigative capacities unavailable to local departments, including interstate coordination, intelligence databases, prosecutorial pathways, overtime funding, and personnel support during large-scale event operations.

This federalization was particularly visible in recent human-trafficking task forces in neighbourhoods slated for Olympic development. In the case of the Figueroa Corridor Human-Trafficking initiative, an LAPD VICE detective described the involvement and increased assertiveness of FBI, HSI, and USAO partners in determining whether cases would remain within local jurisdiction or escalate to federal prosecution. They explained:

> […] before it was, they wanted multiple victims, multiple juveniles, multiple adults showing that they were going they were taken from different locations other than just Figueroa, that they were going to other counties […] or even out of state. USAO has recently become more aggressive where they will take the one-on-one cases […] But, definitely, the FBI and the USAO and HSI have become more aggressive on a lot of these cases now.

Similarly, a Commander of a Human Trafficking Task Force described federal prosecutors and agencies as deeply embedded within operational planning surrounding the 2026 NFL Super Bowl:

> The traffickers are not bound by the same boundaries that we are. And so in recognizing that, we work closely with the US Attorney's office, there's a federal prosecutor that we work with that's assigned to human trafficking cases and was brought into this planning effort, how to participate in our daily shift briefings and calls, where we were discussing certain traffickers that were crossing jurisdictional boundaries or met thresholds, like minimum mandatory threshold for charging with the US Attorney's office.

These collaborations extended beyond prosecutions alone. Interviews also described federal enforcement agencies as integrated into intelligence-sharing systems, operational command structures, and regional information networks surrounding anti-trafficking enforcement. As a retired LASD sergeant explained in discussion of the 2022 NFL Super Bowl: "At the command post for the Super Bowl, we had Homeland Security [HSI] and FBI there with us." In the case of the 2026 NFL Super Bowl, this integration was described in even greater detail by a Commander of a Human Trafficking Task Force:

> That's really where the secret sauce comes down to is having everyone co-housed and co-located in one location. To not just include law enforcement, but more importantly, the analysts. So, we had analysts from I think, we had 20 different analysts from multiple different agencies and organizations working together, co-housed with good information sharing. So, they were they were basically creating intel packets real time […] In this instance, it was HSI that was the point on, they were the designated, you know, federal lead on Super Bowl. And I believe, and that rotates from agency to agency based on the event.

Together, these insights demonstrate that anti-trafficking policing surrounding SMEs and beyond does not merely involve occasional federal cooperation but instead operates through deeply integrated federal-local infrastructures that blur the boundaries between municipal policing, federal enforcement, and event security governance.

Yet, despite the extensive federal integration described by interviewees, participants also emphasized the importance of maintaining boundaries between anti-trafficking collaboration and immigration enforcement. Across interviews, local agencies and their allied service providers framed sanctuary protections as ongoing commitments that constrain the forms of information sharing and cooperation permissible with federal partners. In this sense, sanctuary governance did not emerge as a total refusal of federal collaboration – as is often assumed in political discourse – but rather as a negotiated attempt to selectively delimit how that collaboration occurs.

This distinction became notably visible in discussions surrounding HSI, whose placement within ICE, and the agencies respective immigration enforcement mandate, complicates the relationship between anti-trafficking enforcement and immigration control. While interviewees frequently described HSI as indispensable partners in trafficking investigations, participants also repeatedly emphasized efforts to maintain separation between anti-trafficking operations and immigration enforcement practices. A Commander of a Human Trafficking Task Force described these boundaries directly:

> There's still local relationships that happen and that have been built up over time to kind of weather the storm for the changing policies. I know that we're in, we're in close communication with our federal partners. We have been very clear on what, what we're going to do and what we're not going to do on the local side for law enforcement. And that's like, we're not participating in any immigration enforcement. We are not sharing any data that will that will relate to that or lead to that.

These "local relationships" refer to various federal field offices, such as HSI and FBI field offices located throughout the country, which house federal agents participating in local anti-trafficking efforts. In this configuration, federal agencies become "localized" and partially abstracted from their broader federal and transnational reach. In describing municipal and county organizations becoming increasingly reliant on "local" federal partnerships, a 15-year anti-trafficking advocate explained:

> Right now, because of so many things happening, we're all relying a lot on our local partnerships that have been working. And I know law enforcement's keeping a really clear line of not discussing immigration with federal.

Yet these boundaries remain neither fixed nor absolute. Rather than describing sanctuary protections as rigid refusals of engagement with federal agencies, interviewees more often framed collaboration as a negotiated, case-by-case process shaped by vulnerability, victimization, and access to services. The same advocate explained:

> I think it's hard because some, some jurisdictions, some cities like to do a hardline [that they] are not working with federal agencies. But at the end of the day, if federal agencies are here and they're working on issues like trafficking, you just have to go case-by-case and see what that looks like and see what is most helpful to somebody who's in a vulnerable position.

The ambiguity of these relationships became especially evident in discussions surrounding "continued presence," a temporary federal immigration protection available to non-citizen

victims participating in criminal investigations. This example provides a useful illustration of how sanctuary protections simultaneously limit and require different forms of federal collaboration. Interviewees repeatedly described continued presence as one of the most important resources federal agencies could provide in trafficking cases, particularly for migrant victims who might otherwise face detention or deportation. A 15-year anti-trafficking advocate explained:

> So, in cases where, like a federal agency is investigating a case, they identify somebody who's a victim, but they're foreign born. Continued presence is like an immediate kind of protection signed off by law enforcement that will, it's a temporary status that allows that person to stay here because they are participating in this, in a criminal investigation.

Importantly, access to this protection remains inseparable from participation in criminal enforcement processes themselves. While sanctuary rhetoric frequently positions local agencies in opposition to deportation regimes, interviewees simultaneously described immigration relief as materially dependent on the disclosure of immigration-related information to federal agencies and on prosecutorial collaboration in federal trafficking investigations. In other words, local agencies may refuse to participate in immigration enforcement while simultaneously relying on federal immigration authorities to secure temporary immigration protections for trafficking victims. In practice, protection becomes conditional upon legibility within systems of criminal victimization administered through the same federal infrastructures sanctuary policies ostensibly seek to resist.

These contradictions reveal the limits of understanding sanctuary as a straightforward refusal of federal governance. Rather than operating outside federal enforcement structures, anti-trafficking governance within sanctuary jurisdictions – and especially in SME moments – functions through selective collaboration, negotiated information sharing, and conditional protections justified through the language of victim safety, humanitarian intervention, and public protection. In this configuration, the myth of sanctuary emerges.

5.2: Victim/Criminal Paradox

Across interviews and jurisdictions, participants described anti-trafficking governance as having undergone significant cultural and operational shifts over the past decade. Whereas commercial sex enforcement was once framed primarily through arrest, detention, and red-light abatement, interviewees positioned contemporary anti-trafficking work through the language of rescue, victimization, trauma, and service provisions.

In this framing, individuals engaged in commercial sex, particularly minors, were no longer understood as offenders, but as vulnerable persons requiring state intervention. A 15-year anti-trafficking advocate described this transformation as emerging alongside broader legal and cultural shifts within the state, particularly surrounding the criminalization of minors engaged in commercial sex:

> Before that, you would actually have a child who could not consent to sex, could be prosecuted for being sold for sex, which is crazy. And so, you start to see a culture shift happening with law enforcement, where they start recognizing, okay, if they're engaged in commercial sex under 18, automatically victim.

Law enforcement interviewees similarly described a movement away from prostitution criminal enforcement toward explicitly "victim-centred" approaches, even for those over 18. An LAPD VICE detective contrasted earlier policing strategies on the Figueroa Corridor with contemporary anti-trafficking operations:

> Back in the day when I first started […] what the community was complaining about was these girls work[ing] on the corner, and we arrested them. Now our focus is to identify them as victims and try and get them resources and try to get them any services they may need. So, the approach has definitely changed from an arrest to a rescue with LAPD.

This shift helped explain the newfound professional model in anti-trafficking policing requiring collaboration between law enforcement and NGO service providers, particularly those involving survivor advocacy and trauma-informed intervention. An LASD Supervisor explained that many anti-trafficking units increasingly relied upon organizations which staff survivors, whose experiences were positioned as essential to victim-centred approaches:

> A lot of these groups like *Saving Innocence* […] their caseworkers are survivors who have been through this [and] that have been trafficked. So, they have like, a, an understanding of it that none of us will ever have. And they can communicate with a lot of these victims in a different, at a different level than we ever could.

Despite this shift, one interviewee acknowledged this transition away from straightforward criminalization remained contested and uneven. They acknowledged that individuals engaged in commercial sex continued to be interpreted through unstable and often contradictory frameworks of victimhood, consent, coercion, and criminality. This contradiction was absent from interviews with law enforcement. As the 15-year anti-trafficking advocate explained, while California had moved toward recognizing minors engaged in commercial sex as victims, adults remained positioned within far more discretional legal and institutional terrain:

> Over 18, we still have human trafficking on the books, but you still have prostitution on the books. So, for a lot of law enforcement agencies, prop 35 mandated kind of baseline training on trafficking. But, but that's baseline. And so, for patrol, who might be engaging with individuals who are selling sex, what is their level of understanding of how a person identifies?

The significance of this this discretion extends beyond individual officers' levels of training. It raises the question of who has the authority to define victimhood in the first place, and how those determinations are made in practice. Across interviews, victimhood was not described as a fixed or self-evident status, but as an interpretive category negotiated through engagement.

Despite repeated references to victim-centred policing, across all interviews, interviewees described victimhood itself as unstable, difficult to identify, and often resistant to classification. Participants emphasized that individuals engaged in commercial sex rarely self-identified as trafficking victims during encounters with law enforcement, complicating attempts to distinguish between consensual sex work, coercion, survival strategies, and trafficking victimization. Rather than presenting victimhood as immediately visible, or self-evident, participants more often described it as something that had to be interpreted, investigated or gradually disclosed over

time. Regardless, victimhood was always assumed by state actors and their allies. As was explained by an anti-trafficking advocate: anti-trafficking training increasingly focused on trying to move officers away from rigid distinctions between "victims" and "criminals," particularly given the complex and non-linear realities through which people move in and out of trafficking:

> Very few survivors identify as a human trafficking survivor, you know, and, and this is just the nature of trafficking too. It's not really linear. So you might have somebody who may have been trafficked at one point, but now they are a sex worker working with their own, with [their] own agency or maybe you know, maybe there are drugs, like if their trafficker had used drugs on them and now they're kind of working to fill that need with, with drugs or, there's a hundred different circumstances, right?

Yet in spite of these acknowledgments of complexity, participants also described law enforcement encounters as requiring officers to make rapid determinations about how individuals should be categorized and managed. The anti-trafficking advocate continued: "What's hard is that an officer is relying on that one instance to kind of make a conclusion about […] what bucket they fall in." This instability surrounding victimhood appeared throughout interviews with both law enforcement and service providers.

While participants emphasized that commercial sex workers should be treated as "potential victims," they also described investigative processes aimed at determining the legitimacy, extent, and nature of victimization claims. A Commander of a Human Trafficking Task Force explained:

> Like I said, we look at all people engaged in commercial sex work as potential victims […] because there's so much victimization that happens. Oftentimes, we don't know that until we do, like a pretty extensive follow up investigation.

The Commander went on to describe investigations involving: "social media accounts, […] physical surveillance, […] cell phones, […] financial records, […and] IP addresses" in order to determine: "who is an actual victim of human trafficking […] versus who is in the space working independently." Similarly, an LAPD VICE Detective described victimhood as something

contingent upon disclosure and investigatory interpretation during police interactions. They explained: “We’re going to treat them like a victim, unless otherwise during the interview, it changes things.”

Importantly, these assessments were not merely descriptive but carried significant implications for the duration and intensity of police intervention. Depending on how individuals were interpreted, encounters could escalate into prolonged investigations involving federal partners, referral to NGO service providers (i.e., diversion programs), repeated police contact or alternatively criminal citation and prosecution. Participants emphasized that disclosures were often delayed, inconsistent, or absent altogether – often rationalized as a result of prior trauma, coercion, and distrust, which combine to shape interactions with law enforcement. A retired LASD Sargeant explained:

> 90% or more of victims are straight up uncooperative. Which is why when, when detectives come to our unit, because they think it’s oh so sexy to work human trafficking, and everybody wants to work this stuff – because you’re a badass because you’re working human trafficking, I have to say, ‘Hey, dude, just understand you’re dealing with uncooperative prostitutes. Like, straight up uncooperative. Okay, but I still expect you to make a case. Okay, so even though they’re uncooperative, I want a case. So, figure it out.’ I know the victims uncooperative. Your job is to make her [cooperative] or make a case without her.

Rather than constraining intervention, however, this uncertainty appears to expand the investigative and interpretive scope of anti-trafficking policing itself. This expansion was described in concrete operational terms: investigations extended beyond initial police encounters through repeated follow up interviews, social media monitoring, financial record analysis, cell phone examinations, physical surveillance, and ongoing engagement with service providers. Rather than ending when exploitation could not immediately be established, uncertainty itself became grounds for additional investigative work. When victimhood is understood as difficult to immediately identify – and framed in practice as marked by “uncooperative” subjects – this ambiguity is mobilized to justify prolonged surveillance, contact, interviews, intelligence gathering, and intervention as necessary mechanisms for constructing evidentiary cases of

presumed exploitation that may not yet be visible, disclosed, or substantiated through victim cooperation. In this sense, the "victim" is not a fixed or self-evident category, but is actively produced through policing practices, evidentiary logics, and institutional interpretation.

As Gilmore (2022) urges in her essay *What Is to Be Done?*, the past offers lessons we must attend to in attempting to understand the present, poising three guiding questions of: *why this*; *why this here*; and, *why this here and now?* Read through these questions, former LAPD Chief Parker's professionalization model reveals an earlier reconfiguration of police authority that consolidated institutional expertise while insulating policing from external scrutiny. Returning to the neo-professional of anti-trafficking policing – that is, a contemporary iteration of police expertise, which is increasingly protected through collaboration with NGOs, survivor experts, and trauma-informed practitioners – participants consistently described service provisions offered by NGOs as deeply integrated into enforcement operations. Rather than signaling a retreat from policing, these multidisciplinary arrangements suggest what Gilmore characterizes as the anti-state state: a political formation in which the state appears to withdraw by dispersing responsibility across non-state actors, while simultaneously extending its governing capacities through these very relationships. Within anti-trafficking governance, NGOs and survivor advocates therefore do not replace police authority so much as become incorporated into its everyday exercise, broadening the reach and legitimacy of policing through "victim-centred" expertise. If Parker's model sought to professionalize policing under moments of public pressure by consolidating expertise within the police, anti-trafficking governance extends that project by professionalizing collaboration through the co-located anti-trafficking task force arrangement. The result of this anti-state state arrangement is not a diminished police presence, but a broader institutional assemblage through which policing is simultaneously humanitarianized, legitimized, and insulated from criticism, as the coercive capacities of policing become increasingly reframed through the language of care and expertise.

Across interviews, participants framed collaboration with advocates, NGOs, and survivor support organizations as essential to anti-trafficking work, particularly in situations where individuals declined to disclose trafficking victimization during initial police encounters. Rather than replacing policing, however, these service-based interventions often operated alongside citations, detentions, investigations, and street-level enforcement activities. A retired LASD

Sergeant contrasted earlier position related enforcement models with more recent anti-trafficking operations conducted alongside service providers:

> Before, we would just write them a ticket, and say, you know, take off, or we might attempt an interview and then for human trafficking and say, and when she tells us to go f ourselves, we go, okay, here's your ticket. See you later. Now they have service providers at the command post. So once these girls are processed, they we put the service providers in the doorway, so they have to sit and talk with her, you know, before they leave. So, every single one sits down with a service provider whether they talk to them or not, we walk away. We don't have anything to do with that portion, but they're at least put in front of them.

Interestingly, these instances were not framed as punitive, but as opportunities for eventual disclosure. Because many individuals were described as initially "uncooperative" or "unwilling" to identify themselves as trafficking victims, repeated contact itself became positioned as the central component of victim centred policing. Similarly, an LAPD VICE detective described anti-trafficking encounters as lengthy intervention processes centred around services, advocacy, and ongoing communication:

> We advise them, hey, this is a long-term relationship because this is a long process. And we're going to be with you, and the advocates are going to be with you every step of the way.

Yet despite this therapeutic and service-oriented framing, coercive elements of criminalization remained embedded within these encounters. One participant described prostitution citations as continuing features of anti-trafficking operations. The retired LASD Sargeant explained:

> If she says, 'I'm a victim' at the time of arrest, there is no prostitution citation. There is no criminal investigation at all. It's, she's straight up handled as a victim. But you and I both know that nine times out of ten, they don't say anything that night. So, the nice thing

> about misdemeanors is that we can make them go away. With the stroke of a pen, I can make a misdemeanor go away.

The Retired LASD Sergeant further described prostitution citations as discretionary tools intricately linked to service provisions:

> If we process her out as a writer, a ticket for prostitution, and then I get a call a couple of weeks later from a service provider and say: hey, after that operation, she came to me, she's getting services. She doesn't want to talk about her pimp, but she is getting services, and I believe that she is a trafficking victim, that that ticket doesn't go. We don't even file it. We just write a report. We just write a report and file it. We don't file it with the DA.

Hence, criminalization does not disappear under victim-centred policing frameworks but instead becomes conditional and increasingly intertwined with NGO involvement. Access to non-criminalization is contingent upon disclosure, cooperation, engagement with services, or institutional recognition as a trafficking victim. At the same time, law enforcement retains discretionary authority over whether individuals receive support or are subjected to citation, producing a stark binary with little room for recognition of legal, consensual sex work. It is therefore clear that the ongoing criminalization of commercial sex sustains these dynamics. Rather than producing a clear separation between care and punishment, anti-trafficking interventions – together with the broader criminalization of commercial sex – operate through overlapping humanitarian and coercive logics in which care, surveillance, criminalization, and rescue become increasingly difficult to disentangle.

Difficult, but not impossible, within the logics of anti-trafficking enforcement. While this section has focused on the contradictions produced by victim-centred policing within legal regimes that continue to criminalize commercial sex, these tensions become partially resolved in moments of territorial dispute. Hubert's (1996) ethnographic study of the post-Rodney King LAPD is useful for understanding this dynamic. He argues that police legitimacy does not rest only on abstract legal authority, but is materially demonstrated through the capacity to regulate, clear, and territorialize space. If state authority is constituted through the governance of geographic boundaries, then policing becomes the mechanism through which that authority is

visibly enacted in everyday urban life. As Hubert (1996) notes, “it is only with the capacity to control and clear space that the police are in many situations able to restore the order they are presumed to maintain” (p. 6). Space, in this sense, is not only a site of speculative development, profit, or political power, but also an arena in which police power reproduces its own legitimacy and authority.

Applying these observations, tensions of the victim/criminal which disappear in the clearing of space become not contradictions, but continuations of logics foundational to police authority itself. A Retired LASD Sergeant made these arguments clearest in discussing their opposition to Nordic model policing:

> These very same people who advocate for this don’t live on 67th Street, west of Figueroa […] The sex acts aren’t occurring on Figueroa, they’re not occurring on Long Beach Boulevard, they’re occurring in the neighbourhoods where people live. Minority people, I might add, who live in these, who live in these neighborhoods. So, my argument is what about them? Do they deserve a safe neighborhood, free from this kind of blight? You know, what about them? But all these service providers who advocate for us to lay off the girls, they don’t live there. They don’t have to wake up to having pimps smashing on their girls at two in the morning in front of their house. They don’t have to do that. So, my argument is that there has to be crime control. Got it? There has to be crime control because this, this whole thing about the Nordic Model is a bunch of crap. Because as long as it’s legal for one, guys are going to come. So, if girls are going to be out at the corner of 67th and Figueroa, dudes are going to be there. It does not matter whether it’s illegal for the guys or not. But in the meantime, girls standing in bikinis at the intersection where your kids have to wait for a bus. How would you feel about that?

Important to contextualize in this quote, is that the Retired LASD Sergeant does not reject the possibility, that individuals engaged in commercial sex may simultaneously be victims of trafficking of coercion. In fact, they explicitly acknowledge that “the majority are either actively being trafficked or have been trafficked in the past.” Yet, this recognition does not displace the perceived necessity of enforcement. Rather, victimization becomes secondary to broader concerns surrounding territorial order, neighbourhood safety and the regulation of urban space.

The issue, then, is not whether vulnerability exists (victimization vs. criminalization), but whether that vulnerability suspends the obligation of police to restore and maintain a "normative" (Hubert, 1996) spatial order.

These instances appeared repeatedly across interviews, including amongst participants otherwise deeply committed to victim-centred approaches. As the 15-year anti-trafficking advocate describes, complaints from residents frequently push law enforcement toward "prostitution abatement, arrest and move" strategies, particularly in neighbourhoods surrounding schools, libraries, and other public infrastructure. While remaining critical of these approaches, they nonetheless acknowledged the ways "community harms" become central to how commercial sex is spatially governed. Likewise, an LAPD VICE detective described anti-trafficking enforcement as requiring officers to navigate competing expectations surrounding victim "rescue" and neighborhood order:

> And there's, there's families there, right, that are walking their kids to school, walking their churches. And it, you know, it's kind of a, you're the vice unit, you're stuck between, hey, you know, you want to provide a safe community for people to be able to walk down the street. But at the same time, we're trying to rescue victims as well.

The issue, then, is not one of individual hypocrisy, nor individual failure of officers to understand victimization. Rather, anti-trafficking policing positions commercial sex simultaneously as a site of exploitation and as a visible disruption to normative order. Once concentrated with highly visible – and in the case of the SME, speculative – urban spaces, the language of rescue does not necessarily replace crime control logics, but becomes increasingly entangled with mandates of dispersal, containment, and territorial control.

Hence, even within the most benevolent efforts of victim-centred policing, criminalization is recast and reorganized through the language of humanitarianism. Individuals engaged in commercial sex are framed as vulnerable populations requiring protection and services, while the spaces they occupy continue to be governed through logics of territorial disorder. The *blade*,[13] then, becomes a site where rescue serves to contest urban territories. Anti-

[13] The term "blade" is commonly used by police and sex workers to describe a street or geographic area where visible street-based sex work is concentrated.

trafficking enforcement does so through the overlapping projects of care and spatial management in which police legitimacy remains tied not simply to the identification of victims, but to the visible restoration of normative spatial order itself. Victimization is secondary only to conditions of public nuisance, which police *must* respond to as criminal for the purposes of their own public legitimacy.

Across interviews, the distinction between victim and criminal rarely emerges as fixed, stable, or immediately identifiable. Instead, anti-trafficking enforcement appeared to operate through fluid assessments of vulnerability, cooperation, disclosure, spatial context, and investigative interpretation. While participants consistently emphasize the importance of victim centred approaches, they simultaneously described practices in which criminalization remained available, discretionary, and reversible. In this sense, anti-trafficking policing appears less concerned with resolving the contradictions between victimization and criminalization than governing through movement between the two categories.

Given these institutional interpretations, victimhood itself must not be understood as a protected or self-evident status. Individuals engaged in commercial sex-work were frequently described as "potential victims," yet this potentiality remained contingent upon ongoing assessments conducted through investigations, service engagement, and repeated police contact. Simultaneously, participants acknowledged that many individuals neither disclosed trafficking victimization nor accepted services during initial encounters with law enforcement. The uncertainty surrounding trafficking identification therefore did not destabilize intervention itself but rather expand the discretionary authority of anti-trafficking systems to continually reassess and reinterpret vulnerability. Materially, this translates into longer investigative timelines, repeated institutional contact, expanded surveillance practices, and the conditional suspension of criminal sanctions rather than their disappearance. This flexibility was frequently framed as necessary given the realities of trauma, coercion, and delayed disclosure. Yet, the effect of this arrangement is that criminalization never fully disappears within victim-centred policing frameworks. Punitive enforcement becomes selectively suspended, deferred or administratively withdrawn depending on evolving determinations of victimhood, cooperation, and intuitional legibility. The category of "victim" therefore remains deeply conditional, negotiated through interactions between law enforcement, service providers, prosecutors, and the ever-building structures of anti-trafficking governance.

Territorial logics solidify these dynamics. Commercial sex workers are simultaneously positioned as vulnerable subjects requiring protection and as visible manifestations of spatial disorder requiring police intervention. The instability between victimization and criminalization consequently enables anti-trafficking police to remain highly adaptive, allowing institutions and their NGO partners to mobilize humanitarian language while retaining the coercive capacities of policing and spatial control.

These findings demonstrate that the victim/criminal paradox is not simply an inconsistency internal to anti-trafficking enforcement, nor a transitional problem awaiting resolution through improved policy or training. Rather, it functions as a governing logic through which police discretion is exercised. Rather than replacing criminalization, victim-centred frameworks introduce a new, institutionally defined category of intervention in which individuals engaged in commercial sex remain subject to continual assessment and reclassification by police, prosecutors, and service providers. Whether someone is recognized as a victim, treated as a criminal, or positioned somewhere in-between, is therefore less a matter of self-identification than of intuitional interpretation, leaving those most affected agentless in how they are understood, protected, or punished.

5.3: Conclusion

This chapter suggests that contemporary anti-trafficking governance is sustained less by empirical certainty than by institutional flexibility. Repeatedly, participants questioned dominant public narratives surrounding sport mega-events, rejected simplistic claims that events drive trafficking, and acknowledged the instability of victimhood itself. Yet these uncertainties rarely constrained intervention. Instead, they expanded the opportunities for collaboration across municipal, county, federal, and non-state actors while simultaneously broadening the discretionary authority through which trafficking, vulnerability, and commercial sex were interpreted and governed.

Rather than revealing inconsistencies within anti-trafficking enforcement, the myths and contradictions examined throughout this chapter appear constitutive of its operation. The uncertainty surrounding trafficking prevalence justifies continued investment in task forces, surveillance, and preparedness; the ambiguity of sanctuary enables selective forms of federal collaboration; and the fluid boundaries between victimhood and criminalization permit ongoing

intervention without requiring stable legal or social categories. In each case, ambiguity functions not as an obstacle of governance, but as one of its central organizing conditions.

Viewed together, these findings reinforce the argument developed throughout this thesis: that anti-trafficking enforcement surrounding the 2026 FIFA World Cup, 2027 NFL Super Bowl, and 2028 Olympic Games should not be understood as an exceptional response to exceptional events. Rather, these interventions represent the continuation and intensification of longstanding governance arrangements that depend less upon resolving uncertainty than governing through it, allowing myths, discretionary classifications, and collaborative enforcement, to continually reproduce the conditions for police intervention.

6.0: Beyond Rescue, and Towards Abolition

This thesis follows a relatively straightforward question: What are the official and unofficial rhetorics and tactics employed by law enforcement – framed within heightened concerns about human trafficking – and how do these ultimately shape geographies of sex work and its resistances in the Los Angeles County in the lead-up to the 2026 FIFA World Cup, 2027 NFL Super Bowl, and 2028 Summer Olympics? Across interviews, public documents, and institutional announcements, findings suggest that anti-trafficking governance operates through a series of mutually reinforcing ambiguities that simultaneously justify expanded police force while obscuring the realities of persons in the throes of abandonment (Gilmore, 2017, p. 45). Official rhetorics of victim protection, exist alongside unofficial logics of territorial control, nuisance, neighbourhood management, and institutional preservation. Together these rhetorics authorize an increasingly expansive carceral assemblage that extends well beyond simply identifying victims of trafficking as a feature of SME security.

The tactics examined through this thesis likewise exceed taken-for-granted understandings of anti-trafficking policing. Rather than relying exclusively on arrests or criminal investigations, governance increasingly unfolds through collaborative task forces, intelligence sharing, NGO partnerships, federal-local coordination, public awareness campaigns, neighbourhood specific initiatives, and the selective deployment of immigration information/protections. These tactics were presented institutionally as mechanisms of care and coordination. However, they functioned to extend the reach of policing across multiple jurisdictions while simultaneously diffusing responsibility across an increasingly broad network of state and non-state actors

More fundamentally, this thesis intends to demonstrate that anti-trafficking governance is profoundly linked to spatial governance. Interviews and documents suggested that enforcement was not organized solely around identifying exploitation but around managing particular urban spaces – particularly those of heightening real estate speculation. The Figuroa Corridor, Western Avenue, and surrounding neighbourhoods appear not as locations where trafficking and crime might occur, but as politically significant spaces undergoing simultaneous processes of (re)development, carceral saturation, and mega-event preparation. Importantly, as the literature review suggests, these processes are not exclusive to the event but demonstrate a continuation of

patterns long established in the context of Los Angeles. Within these evolving spaces, victim-centred rhetoric frequently co-existed with longstanding logics of territorial, population, and neighbourhood control. Consequently, anti-trafficking (and more broadly, enforcement practices) *also* participates in the production of urban space itself.

Viewed through this lens, the 2026 FIFA World Cup, 2027 NFL Super Bowl, and 2028 Olympic Games do not simply produce temporary security responses. Rather, they intensify pre-existing governance arrangements through which particular bodies, neighbourhoods, and forms of urban survival become visible as objects of intervention. The events may offer political urgency and exceptional legitimacy, but enforcement infrastructure both precedes and outlasts the events themselves.

The broader significance of these findings lies in what they reveal about governance under conditions of uncertainty. Across this thesis, ambiguity repeatedly emerged not as a problem to be resolved, but as a resource through which governance could expand. Uncertainty about whether SMEs produce measurable increases in trafficking did not prevent the growth of task forces, funding streams, awareness campaigns, or policing operations. Uncertainty about who counts as a victim did not limit the intervention but instead widened the discretionary authority of policing. Uncertainty about jurisdictions did not produce institutional paralysis, but rather justified deeper collaboration across municipal county, federal, prosecutorial, and NGO sectors. Even sanctuary itself became ambiguous, operating not as a refusal of federal authority, but as a negotiated boundary within already federalized anti-trafficking systems.

This relationship is what makes ambiguity productive. Its power does not depend upon empirical certainty, stable categories, or clearly demarcated jurisdictional boundaries. Instead, it expands through their instability. The trafficking victim, the sex worker, the public nuisance, the federal partner, the local ally, the service provider, and the community protector, are not fixed positions, but categories continually up for interpretation by a professional class staffed and funded by the state. This instability allows anti-trafficking governance to remain adaptable: able to mobilize humanitarian language, crime-control rationales, immigration relief, public safety concerns, and neighbourhood order dependent on the priorities at hand.

This helps explain why anti-trafficking enforcement is better understood not as a discrete policing strategy, but as a collaborative governance assemblage. Actors do not simply participate in parallel efforts, they become connected through task forces, grants, co-located command

posts, public campaigns, and shared claims to expertise. This is where the abolitionist stakes of this project become clearest. The problem is not only that anti-trafficking happens alongside the criminalization of sex work, nor only that SMEs justify expanded security. Rather, the problem is that carceral power increasingly works through institutions and vocabularies that appear non-carceral: service provisions, survivor expertise, immigration relief, public awareness, and victim centred care. Anti-trafficking governance then works not only by adding officers, funding, and surveillance technology, but by expanding the range of actors and practices through which policing and imprisonment becomes legitimate.

Read through Gilmore's (2017; 2022) insistence that abolition requires theories that work, these findings ask us to examine not only spectacular moments of police violence, but the whispers of institutional arrangements in which policing and prisons are normalized, softened, and reproduced. The anti-trafficking apparatus in Los Angeles is powerful, precisely because it does not present itself only as punishment. These are the very conditions which make intervention harder to contest. Abolitionist critique must therefore attend to the forms of governance that make policing appear necessary, benevolent, and inevitable, especially when those forms are organized around populations already denied full agency, protection, and decriminalized work.

Equally as important are the voices that remain largely absent from the above text. While guided by priorities of community advocates, this work intentionally sought to understand anti-trafficking governance from the perspectives of the institutions exercising power. In doing so, it asked how police, prosecutors, federal agencies, and their allied organizations understand and justify their own practices. While I believe deeply in the value of this analysis, that does not position its understanding as comprehensive. These accounts are most valuable in conversation with the lived experiences of those most directly impacted by anti-trafficking policing, including sex workers, migrants, outreach workers, and neighbourhood residents whose everyday lives continue to be reshaped by development, displacement, and intensified surveillance surrounding the games. Understanding how these communities negotiate, resist, and survive these urban processes remains essential to developing a truly abolitionist analyses grounded not only in understanding state power, but also in the practices of collective survival that *always* emerge alongside it.

Finally, this thesis has argued that anti-trafficking governance should be understood as one expression of a broader transition in modern policing: one in which coercive authority increasingly operates through collaboration, humanitarianism, and dispersed forms of governance. The framework I attempted to develop here, offers not a conclusion to anti-trafficking governance, but an entry point for the reorganization of police power. If abolition, as Gilmore (2022) argues, requires theories that work, then it also requires research capable of tracing these evolving formations of power as they emerge, transform, and endure. It is my hope, then, that this thesis offers at least one small step in that direction.

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