

What SJSU Students Want You to Know About Human Trafficking and Transportation

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An estimated **49.6 million** individuals are currently trapped by human trafficking worldwide.

Transportation systems, including airports, bus terminals, and transit networks, serve as critical infrastructures for moving goods and people during major events like international sporting events or festivals—but they also inadvertently function as facilitators for human traffickers to move their victims across regions.

California consistently reports the highest number of human trafficking cases in the country, and it will be hosting several major sporting events in the coming years.

For Human Trafficking Prevention Month, the Mineta Transportation Institute is highlighting the voices of four student researchers who, under the guidance of MTI Research Associate Dr. Kezban Yagci Sokat, are working on two research projects: 1) a Senate Bill 1 [research](#) project that will help us understand what each of us can do to combat human trafficking in our communities, and 2) a project focused on understanding the human trafficking risks in global supply chains and the impact of the new Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDD) legislation to combat it.

These projects are a continuation of Dr. Yagci Sokat's previous work on the intersection of human trafficking and transportation. She is author of the MTI-funded study "[Understanding the Role of Transportation in Human Trafficking in California](#)" and has been featured in prior MTI webinars—including [Combating Human Trafficking in Transportation](#) for Caltrans Safety Awareness Week, along with [Evelyn Chumbow](#), Director of Advocacy & Survivor Leadership, Human Trafficking Legal Center ([HTLC](#)) and [Christi Wigle](#), Co-Founder & CEO of [United Against Slavery](#).

Engaging students in project based learning opportunities is critical and we have documented how researching this issue has affected the students personally, why it matters to them, and what they want people to know. Read on to learn more from the students' point of view:

MTI: What does human trafficking awareness mean to you as a student, and why do you think it matters on a college campus?

Connie Cheung: In an academic setting we open our minds to learning, and we've been given an opportunity to spotlight human trafficking as a complex issue that impacts so many people here at SJSU. SJSU supports so many intersectional identities and issues. Informing the student body of how to spot the signs of trafficking adds another layer of education that other schools don't offer. SJSU students are a diverse group of people. We deepen our understanding of the struggles of our community and the world in a way that prepares us for situations when we can step in and use the awareness and actions we can take to report trafficking incidents.

Radhika Mandhanya: Human trafficking awareness took on a completely different meaning for me after working on the Senate Bill 1 project titled "Combating Human Trafficking at Major Events through Transportation" under the guidance of MTI Research Associate Dr. Yagci Sokat. Before that, I thought of trafficking as being far away; however, now I realize the extent to which it intersects with our daily transportation systems, along with the many major events taking place throughout the state of California. I believe that awareness as a student means refusing to allow any such predatory acts to be left unexposed. Accordingly, creating a culture among students on campus is necessary for preventing exploitation and providing support for the research into and development of purposeful solutions to this rampant problem. Having the opportunity to be part of the work that MTI does to protect not just our campus community but also those who are the most vulnerable throughout the state has made me extremely thankful for the opportunity presented to me by MTI. This project truly shows me that my studies can be an avenue for creating positive change.

Mirah Rasoarimino: As a student, Human trafficking awareness is important because it serves as a reminder to us to stay cautious about what is happening around us. Anyone can be a target, so knowing the signs helps us to keep our campus safer and encourages us to support one another.

Pranav Santhakumar: As a student, human trafficking awareness is understanding that what defines our lives as students is exactly what makes us so vulnerable to human trafficking. Because college students need money, housing, and belonging, they make us prime targets for fake job offers, manipulative relationships, and other forms of exploitation. Especially on a college campus, where most of us are separated from our support systems and long-time friends and family, it can be easier for traffickers to isolate and control us by convincing us that we have nowhere else to go. Therefore, awareness to me not only means understanding that relationship and our vulnerability but also recognizing the signs of that manipulation early and the resources we have to prevent it.

MTI: What role do you think students—particularly those who frequently use buses, trains, rideshares, or flights—can play in recognizing or reporting concerning situations?

Connie Cheung: When we inform student commuters who frequent public transit, we have more eyes looking out for people who are being trafficked. Students play such an important role in reporting incidents before the situation gets much worse. As commuters who do report and/or recognize the situation unfolding, we have the ability to change someone's life because of the awareness they've learned at SJSU.

Radhika Mandhanya: During my time with the MTI SB1 grant project, I was able to recognize the importance of transportation in relation to traffickers. Now, I am aware that many students who utilize public transport regularly are directly on the front line of being trafficked. By having access to so many public places, I was able to notice some of these things during my research; these observations can range from quite minor to very significant depending on the event and time of year and the level of busyness of the particular location. I am thankful for the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of transportation systems through my research through MTI versus as a passenger. I have learned how important it is to be aware and to be active participants in our own safety and the safety of those around us. Students must always be mindful of their surroundings and utilize their instincts when it comes to the safety of others. As individuals and collectively, we should learn how to safely report any concerns that we have regarding possible trafficking. It is empowering to know that our normal daily activities support the greater good in terms of protecting those that are vulnerable.

Mirah Rasoarimino: As a commuter myself, I have learned that a lot can happen while riding on buses. I have encountered many uncomfortable situations, so I know how important it is to stay aware and not be on your phone all the time. You start to notice and pick up on some behaviors that don't feel right. If something does not seem right, students should let the driver or staff know, allowing them to address the situation safely.

Pranav Santhakumar: As someone who uses public transportation very frequently, the most important role we can play is understanding that we do not need to be a hero, just an aware and responsible witness. To me, that role looks like being observant of your surroundings, noticing patterns such as a person restricting another's speech or movement away from them, a person looking confused about where they are going, or seeming terrified and withdrawn. If a student sees these behavior signs, even if they are not 100% sure, raising a concern will always be better than ignoring them and hoping for the best. From here, they can contact trained professionals discreetly by texting relevant hotlines and sharing information with campus resources if they believe the victim is a student.

MTI: Before working on human trafficking and transportation/supply chain research, what did you know about the issue, and what surprised you the most as you learned more?

Connie Cheung: Previously I—and I think many students now—have such a rudimentary understanding of human trafficking. We understand that it's deeply important, but many of us haven't been taught how to spot the signs, who to report it to, what it could mean for the victim, and the impact it has on the supply chain/transportation industry. Working on this SB1 research has shown in more detail the broadness and interconnectedness human trafficking has had and may continue to have on global society at large. Working and meeting with professionals leading the way to change has been eye opening. It has been heartwarming to see how many people are committed to saving victims of exploitation, and it's an unforgettable experience.

Radhika Mandhanya: Prior to becoming involved with the SB1 Project at MTI, my understanding of trafficking was primarily derived from what I learned through academia and through the media. I did not comprehend how important and necessary the transportation network was to both the victim's exploitation as well as to the victim's rescue. The shocking lack of consistent and reliable data, along with the effects this has had on how organizations responded to incidents of trafficking (especially during large-scale events), was a profound eye-opener for me. Participating in this research gave me the opportunity to view this issue much more through a practical and technical framework than previously anticipated. Honestly, I felt privileged to have been able to contribute to something that will likely impact future policymaking within California and throughout the United States and to be a part of an issue that has become more personal, immediate, and human.

Mirah Rasoarimino: Before working on human trafficking and supply chain research, I had only general knowledge about human trafficking, mostly that it mainly involves people being taken and forced into situations against their will. I did not know that there could be many indicators like debt payment or psychological pressure. The amount of human trafficking coming from supply chains surprised me as well as I learned more during this research.

Pranav Santhakumar: Before working on human trafficking issues, my understanding was largely shaped by headlines and Hollywood movies. I believed it started with a physical kidnapping in a dark alleyway and that victims were locked in basements and sold across borders. But as I studied the logistics, supply chains, and the transit of human trafficking, I realized that the business model of human trafficking operates completely in plain sight. Traffickers don't use white vans or secret underground tunnels; they use public transportation because it's cheap and anonymous. Even if a victim could physically run away, they don't, as their restraints are psychological; they believe the traffickers' threats that "the police will arrest you, not me" or that they will be hurt if they do so.



Student researchers volunteered to support Safety in Motion: Combating Human Trafficking, Exploitation & Violence, a one-day conference bringing together partners working to prevent and respond to trafficking in the Bay Area.

MTI: Large sporting events can increase risk factors for trafficking. Why do you think awareness is especially important as the Bay Area prepares to host the Super Bowl and World Cup?

Connie Cheung: As the Bay Area prepares to host the Super Bowl and the World Cup everyone is traveling to see the big games. We are proud to host such fun and exciting events and while it's going on in the foreground we have many people in the background to protect victims by using this opportunity to catch perpetrators. As individuals, we can use the knowledge to report incidents that will lead to aiding the police in their search to find predators to ensure that the people who are going to major sporting events can be further protected and safe while fans have fun watching the games.

Radhika Mandhanya: I have come to understand that there are many layers of risk involved in large scale events such as the Super Bowl and World Cup that one would never have realized. The massive entry of international tourists, the flow of air planes, buses, and rideshares as well as the strain put on temporary work people all give opportunities to traffickers. Through this project, I realized that such risks cannot be resolved at the last minute by being aware. They need to be prepared in concert by transportation, law enforcement, service and community partners. The experience of working with MTI has demonstrated to me how much safer the region is when partners exchange information in real time. MTI has helped in conducting research that makes California better prepared to deal with events of this magnitude and also provides students such as myself opportunities to make a difference. I am very proud of being a part of a project that secures our local community and informs global discussions about preventing trafficking.

Mirah Rasoarimino: Awareness matters during big events like the incoming Super Bowl and World Cup because everything becomes so busy with people rushing around, packed transit, and a lot of activity happening at once. In that kind of environment, trafficking can blend in easily. There's also a big increase in labor demand, which can open the door to labor trafficking in the work that goes on behind the scenes of these events. Therefore, it is important to reinforce safety and educate people on recognizing indicators of human trafficking and labor trafficking, which also helps people protect themselves by understanding what situations might be unsafe.

Pranav Santhakumar: As the Bay Area prepares to host the World Cup and the Super Bowl, human trafficking awareness becomes increasingly important, as these events will dramatically amplify the demand for cheap labor. With the large crowds, temporary workers, and surge in short-term housing, the pressure to build and maintain necessary infrastructure increases. This leads to rapid subcontracting, where vetting processes break down, and unethical practices tend to go unnoticed. This means more vulnerable populations are coerced into construction, hospitality, or janitorial work under threat of debt bondage or false pretenses to meet these tight deadlines. As Bay Area students and future professionals, understanding this issue is the first step toward advocating for higher supply chain transparency within our community. As many of us are also working part-time, using public transit, and renting out rooms, we are also in a position where we might notice labor exploitation and have the opportunity to report it to our supervisors, security, or local hotlines. By advocating for and recognizing the effects of human trafficking, we can ensure that these events don't come at the expense of our community's safety.

About the Students

Connie Cheung



Radhika Mandhanya



Mirah Rasoarimino



Pranav Santhakumar



Connie Cheung expects to finish her undergraduate degree in Sociology from San José State University in 2027. As part of the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, she works with MTI Research Associate and Associate Professor at SJSU Dr. Kezban Yagci Sokat on the SB1 research on combating human trafficking. She has always been passionate about caring for people and sociology, and she brings that perspective to the work she does, looking critically at local and global issues in order to make a meaningful impact.

Radhika Mandhanya is pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration with a concentration in Business Analytics and a minor in Computer Science at San José State University, with an expected graduation date of May 2026. She is passionate about applying technical and analytical skills to support people and communities. Through her research and volunteer work in human trafficking awareness, she has explored how data, transportation, and education can truly make a difference in protecting vulnerable individuals.

Mirah Rasoarimino is a Business Analytics major at San José State University, graduating in May 2027. Through the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, she conducts research examining human rights risks in global supply chains. Guided by a strong belief in the importance of community and mutual support, she is committed to contributing positively to the lives of others. Mirah strives to bring light to the world through both her work and her daily interactions.

Pranav Santhakumar is an Industrial and Systems Engineering major at San José State University, graduating in May 2029. He is an Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program student researcher examining human trafficking risks within global supply chains. Driven by a dedication to sustainability and the real-world impact of engineering systems, Pranav works to advance solutions that promote ethical and efficient supply networks. Previously, he contributed to research on green architecture implementation and engaged in advocacy efforts supporting stronger tobacco regulation.