

# Slavery in the 21st century

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**Contemporary slavery**, also known as **modern slavery** or **neo-slavery**, refers to institutional slavery that continues to occur in present-day society. Estimates of the number of slaves today range from around 21 million<sup>[1]</sup> to 46 million,<sup>[2][3]</sup> depending on the method used to form the estimate and the definition of slavery being used.<sup>[4]</sup> The estimated number of slaves is debated, as there is no universally agreed definition of modern slavery, those in slavery are often difficult to identify, and adequate statistics are often not available.

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## Definition

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The Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons agency of the United States Department of State says that "'modern slavery', 'trafficking in persons', and 'human trafficking' have been used as umbrella terms for the act of recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing or obtaining a person for compelled labor or commercial sex acts through the use of force, fraud, or coercion". Besides these, a number of different terms are used in the US federal Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 and the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, including "involuntary servitude", "slavery" or "practices similar to slavery", "debt bondage", and "forced labor".<sup>[5]</sup>

According to American professor Kevin Bales, co-founder and former president of the non-governmental organization and advocacy group Free the Slaves, modern slavery occurs "when a person is under the control of another person who applies violence and force to maintain that control, and the goal of that control is exploitation".<sup>[6]</sup> The impact of slavery is expanded when targeted at vulnerable groups such as children. According to this definition, research from the Walk Free Foundation based on its Global Slavery Index 2016 estimated that there were about 40.3 million slaves around the world in 2016.<sup>[6][7]</sup> In another

estimate that suggests the number is around 45.8 million, it is estimated that around 10 million of these contemporary slaves are children.<sup>[3]</sup> Bales warned that, because slavery is officially abolished everywhere, the practice is illegal, and thus more hidden from the public and authorities. This makes it impossible to obtain exact figures from primary sources. The best that can be done is estimate based on secondary sources, such as UN investigations, newspaper articles, government reports, and figures from NGOs.<sup>[6]</sup> Modern slavery persists for many of the same reasons older variations did: it is an economically beneficial practice despite the ethical concerns. The problem has been able to escalate in recent years due to the *disposability* of slaves and the fact that the cost of slaves has dropped significantly.

## Causes

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Modern slavery is often seen as a by-product of poverty. Countries that lack education, economic freedom, the rule of law, and have poor societal structure can create an environment that fosters the acceptance and propagation of slavery. Slavery is most prevalent in impoverished countries and those with vulnerable minority communities, though it also exists in developed countries. Tens of thousands toil in slave-like conditions in industries such as mining, farming, and factories, producing goods for domestic consumption or export to more prosperous nations.<sup>[8]</sup> Because of these factors, slavery continues and will continue to expand unfettered by international efforts to stop it.

In the older form of slavery, slave-owners spent more on getting slaves. It was harder for them to be disposed of. The cost of keeping them healthy was considered a better investment than getting another slave to replace them. In modern slavery people are easier to get at a lower price so replacing them when exploiters run into problems becomes easier. Slaves are then used in areas where they could easily be hidden while also creating a profit for the exploiter. Slaves are more attractive for unpleasant work, and less for pleasant work. Because the unpleasantness of the work is not internalized it is easier for people to pull slavers in.

Modern slavery can be quite profitable<sup>[9]</sup> and corrupt governments tacitly allow it, despite it being outlawed by international treaties such as Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery and local laws. Total annual revenues of traffickers were estimated in 2014 to over \$150 billion dollars,<sup>[10]</sup> though profits are substantially lower. American slaves in 1809 were sold for around the equivalent of US\$40,000 in today's money.<sup>[11]</sup> Today, a slave can be bought for \$90.<sup>[11]</sup>

Kevin Bales once said in a TED Talk, "This is an economic crime," "People do not enslave people to be mean to them; they do it to make a profit."<sup>[12]</sup>

## Types

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### Slavery by descent and chattel slavery

Slavery by descent, also called **chattel slavery**, is the form most often associated with the word "slavery". In chattel slavery, the enslaved person is considered the personal property (chattel) of someone else, and can usually be bought and sold. It stems historically either from conquest, where a conquered person is enslaved, as in the Roman Empire or Ottoman Empire, or from slave raiding, as in the Atlantic slave trade or Arab slave trade. In the 21st Century, almost every country has legally abolished chattel slavery, but the number of people currently enslaved around the world is far greater than the number of slaves during the historical Atlantic slave trade.

Since the 2014 Civil War in Libya, and the subsequent breakdown of law and order, there have been reports of enslaved migrants being sold in public, open slave markets in the country.<sup>[13]</sup>

Mauritania has a long history with slavery. Chattel slavery was formally made illegal in the country but the laws against it have gone largely unenforced. It is estimated that around 90,000 people (over 2% of Mauritania's population) are slaves. In addition, forced marriage and child prostitution are not criminalised.<sup>[14]</sup>

Debt bondage can also be passed down to descendants, like chattel slavery. See the section on [debt bondage](#) below for more information on that. Sex slaves in the modern world are often effectively chattel, especially when they are forced into prostitution. Once again, see the section on [sexual slavery](#) below for more information.

## Government-forced labor and conscription

Government-forced labor, also known as *state-sponsored labor*, is defined by the International Labor Organization as events "which persons are coerced to work through the use of violence or intimidation, or by more subtle means such as accumulated debt, retention of identity papers or threats of denunciation to immigration authorities."<sup>[15]</sup> When the threats come from the government the threats can be much different. Many governments that participate in forced labor shut down their connections with the surrounding countries to prevent citizens from leaving.

In [North Korea](#), the government forces many people to work for the state, both inside and outside North Korea itself, sometimes for many years. The 2018 Global Slavery Index estimated that 2.8 million people were slaves in the country.<sup>[16]</sup> The value of all the labor done by North Koreans for the government is estimated at US\$975 million, with *dulgyeokdae* (youth workers) forced to do dangerous construction work, and *inminban* (women and girl workers) forced to making clothing in [sweatshops](#). The workers are often unpaid.<sup>[17]</sup> Additionally, North Korea's army of 1.2 million soldiers is often made to work on construction projects unrelated to defense.<sup>[17]</sup>

In [Eritrea](#), an estimated 300,000 to 400,000 people are in an indefinite military service program which amounts to mass slavery, according to UN investigators. Their report also found sexual slavery and other forced labor.<sup>[18]</sup>

About 35–40 countries are currently enforcing military [conscription](#) of some sort, even if it is only temporary service.

It is imperative to note that government-forced labor comes in different forms as governments have also been known to participate in forced labor practices that do not include military service. In [Uzbekistan](#), for example, the government coerces students and state workers to harvest cotton, of which the country is a [main exporter](#), every year; forcefully abandoning their other responsibilities in the process.<sup>[19]</sup> Of course this isn't the only type of slavery found in this example as the use of students, including those in primary, secondary, and higher education, means that [child labor](#) is also prominent.<sup>[20]</sup>

## Prison labor

In [China's](#) system of labor prisons (formerly called [laogai](#)), millions of prisoners have been subject to forced, unpaid labor. The laogai system is estimated to currently house between 500,000 and 2 million prisoners,<sup>[21]</sup> and to have caused tens of millions of deaths.<sup>[22]</sup> In parallel with laogai, China operated the smaller [Re-education through labor](#) system of prisons up until 2013.<sup>[23]</sup> In addition to both of these, It has been alleged that China is also operating [forced labor camps in Xinjiang](#), imprisoning hundreds of thousands (possibly as many as a million) of [Muslims](#), [Uyghurs](#) and other ethnic minorities and political dissidents.<sup>[24]</sup>

At first China denied this, claiming there was no suppression of ethnic minorities, no arbitrary detention or re-education centers in Xinjiang.<sup>[25]</sup> About a month later, China went back on this, with the Xinjiang government formally legalising the prisons.<sup>[26]</sup>

In 1865, the [United States](#) passed the [13th Amendment](#) to the [United States Constitution](#), which banned slavery and involuntary servitude "except as punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted",<sup>[27]</sup> providing a legal basis for slavery to continue in the country.<sup>[28]</sup> As of 2018, many prisoners in the [US](#) perform work. In [Texas](#), [Georgia](#), [Alabama](#) and [Arkansas](#), prisoners are not paid at all for their work.<sup>[29]</sup> In other states, as of 2011, prisoners were paid between \$0.23 and \$1.15 per hour.<sup>[30]</sup> [Federal Prison Industries](#) paid inmates an average of \$0.90 per hour in 2017.<sup>[28]</sup> In many cases the penal work is forced, with prisoners being punished by [solitary confinement](#) if they refuse to work.<sup>[31][32]</sup> From 2010 to 2015<sup>[33]</sup> and [again in 2016](#)<sup>[34]</sup> and in 2018,<sup>[35]</sup> some prisoners in the [US](#) [refused to work](#), protesting for better pay, better conditions, and for the end of forced labor. Strike leaders are currently punished with indefinite solitary confinement.<sup>[36][37]</sup> Forced prison labor occurs in both

public/government-run prisons and private prisons. The prison labor industry makes over \$1 billion USD per year selling products that inmates make, while inmates are paid very little or nothing in return.<sup>[28]</sup> In California, 2,500 incarcerated workers are fighting wildfires for only \$1 per hour, which saves the state as much as \$100 million a year.<sup>[38]</sup>

In North Korea, tens of thousands of prisoners may be held in forced labor camps. Prisoners suffer harsh conditions and have been forced to dig their own graves<sup>[39]</sup> and to throw rocks at the dead body of another prisoner.<sup>[40]</sup> At Yodok Concentration Camp, children and political prisoners were subject to forced labor.<sup>[40]</sup> Yodok closed in 2014 and its prisoners were transferred to other prisons.<sup>[41]</sup>

## Bonded labor

Bonded labor, also known as Debt bondage and peonage, occurs when people give themselves into slavery as a security against a loan or when they inherit a debt from a relative.<sup>[42]</sup> The cycle begins when people take extreme loans under the condition that they work off the debt. The "loan" is designed so that it can never be paid off, and is often passed down for generations. People become trapped in this system working ostensibly towards repayment though they are often forced to work far past the original amount they owe. They work under the force of threats and abuse. Sometimes the debts last a few years, and sometimes the debts are even passed onto future generations.<sup>[43]</sup>

Bonded labor is used across a variety of industries in order to produce products for consumption around the world<sup>[42]</sup>. It's most common in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal.

In India, the majority of bonded laborers are Dalits (Untouchables) and Adivasis (indigenous tribespeople).<sup>[43]</sup> Puspall, a former brick kiln worker in Punjab, India stated in an interview to antislavery.org; "We do not stop even if we are ill - what if our debt is increasing? So we don't dare to stop."<sup>[44]</sup> In India, when compared to the price of land, paid labor or oxen, the price of slaves costs 95% less than in the past. While a strong law was enacted, The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, convictions are almost impossible and the fines are often less than \$2.<sup>[45]</sup>

## Forced migrant labor

People may be enticed to migrate with the promise of work, only to have their documents seized and be forced to work under the threat of violence to them or their families.<sup>[46]</sup> Undocumented immigrants may also be taken advantage of; as without legal residency, they often have no legal recourse. Along with sex slavery, this is the form of slavery most often encountered in wealthy countries such as the United States, in Western Europe, and in the Middle East.

In the United Arab Emirates, some foreign workers are exploited and more or less enslaved. The majority of the UAE resident population are foreign migrant workers rather than local Emirati citizens. The country has a kafala system which ties migrant workers to local Emirati sponsors with very little government oversight. This has often led to forced labor and human trafficking.<sup>[47]</sup> In 2017, the UAE passed a law to protect the rights of domestic workers.<sup>[48]</sup>

Vietnamese teenagers are trafficked to the United Kingdom and forced to work in illegal cannabis farms. When police raid the cannabis farms, trafficked victims are typically sent to prison.<sup>[49][50]</sup>

In the United States, various industries have been known to take advantage of forced migrant labor. During the 2010 New York State Fair, 19 migrants who were in the country legally from Mexico to work in a food truck were essentially enslaved by their employer.<sup>[51]</sup> The men were paid around ten percent of what they were promised, worked far longer days than they were contracted to, and would be deported if they had quit their job as this would be a violation of their visas.<sup>[52]</sup>

## Sex slavery

Along with migrant slavery, forced prostitution is the form of slavery most often encountered in wealthy regions such as the United States, in Western Europe, and in the Middle East. It is the primary form of slavery in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia, particularly in Moldova and Laos. Many child sex slaves are trafficked from these areas to the West and the Middle East. An estimated 20% of slaves to date are active in the sex industry.<sup>[53]</sup> Sexual exploitation can also become a form of debt bondage when enslavers insist that victims work in the sex industry to pay for basic needs and transportation.<sup>[54]</sup>

There can be situations when boys are targeted for sexual exploitation. In 2005, the Gulf Times reported that boys from Nepal had been lured to India and enslaved for sex. Many of these boys had also been subject to male genital mutilation (castration).<sup>[55]</sup>

Many of those who become victims of sex slavery initially do so willingly under the guise that they will be performing traditional sex work, only to become trapped for extended periods of time, such as those involved in Nigeria's human trafficking circuit.<sup>[56]</sup>

## Forced marriage and child marriage

Mainly driven by the culture in certain regions, early or forced marriage is a form of slavery that affects millions of women and girls all over the world. When families cannot support their children, the daughters are often married off to the males of wealthier, more powerful families. These men are often significantly older than the girls. The females are forced into lives whose main purpose is to serve their husbands. This often fosters an environment for physical, verbal and sexual abuse.

Forced marriages also happen in developed nations. In the United Kingdom there were 3,546 reports to the police of forced marriage over three years from 2014 to 2016. Reported cases are the tip of an iceberg.<sup>[57]</sup>

In the United States over 200,000 minors were legally married from 2002 to 2017, with the youngest being only 10 years old. Most were married to adults.<sup>[58]</sup> Currently 48 US states, as well as D.C. and Puerto Rico, allow marriage of minors as long as there is judicial consent, parental consent or if the minor is pregnant.<sup>[59][60]</sup> In 2017–2018, several states began passing laws to either restrict child marriage<sup>[61][62][63]</sup> or ban it altogether.<sup>[64]</sup>

Bride-buying is the act of purchasing a bride as property, in a similar manner to chattel slavery. It can also be related to human trafficking.

## Child labor

Children comprise about 26% of the slaves today.<sup>[53]</sup> Although children can legally engage in certain forms of work, children can also be found in slavery or slavery-like situations. Forced Begging is a common way that children are forced to participate in labor without their consent. Most are domestic workers or work in cocoa, cotton or fishing industries. Many are trafficked and sexually exploited. In war-torn countries, children have been kidnapped and sold to political parties to use as child soldiers. Forced child labor is the dominant form of slavery in Haiti.

Child Soldiers are children who may be trafficked from their homes and forced or coerced by armed forces. The armed forces could be government armed forces, paramilitary organizations, or rebel groups. While in these groups the children may be forced to work as cooks, guards, servants or spies.<sup>[65]</sup> It is common for both boys and girls to be sexually abused while in these groups.

## Fishing industry

According to Human Rights Watch, Thailand's billion-dollar fish export industry remains plagued with human rights maltreatment in spite of government vows to stamp out servitude in its angling industry.<sup>[66]</sup> Human Rights Watch conducted interviews with 248 fishermen, it documented the forced labor of trafficked workers in the Thai fishing industry. Trafficking victims are often tricked by brokers' false promises of "good" factory jobs, then forced onto fishing boats where they are trapped,

bought and sold like livestock, and held against their will for months or years at a time, forced to work grueling 22-hour days in dangerous conditions. Those who resist or try to run away are beaten, tortured, and often killed.<sup>[67]</sup> This is commonplace because of the disposability of unfree laborers.

Despite some improvements, the situation hasn't changed much since a large-scale survey of almost 500 fishers in 2012, that found almost one in five 'reported working against their will with the penalty that would prevent them from leaving'.<sup>[68]</sup>

## Occupations

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In addition to sex slavery, modern slaves are often forced to work in certain occupations. Common occupations include:

- Small-scale building work, such as laying driveways, and other labor.<sup>[69]</sup>
- Car washing by hand<sup>[69]</sup>
- Domestic servitude, sometimes with sexual exploitation.<sup>[69]</sup>
- Nail Salons (cosmetic). Many people are trafficked from Vietnam to the UK for this work.<sup>[69]</sup>
- Fishing, mainly associated with Thailand's sea food industry.<sup>[70][71]</sup>
- Manufacturing – Many prisoners in the US are forced to manufacture products as diverse as mattresses, spectacles, underwear, road signs and body armour.<sup>[72]</sup>
- Agriculture and forestry – Prisoners in the United States and China are often forced to do farming and forestry work. See prison farm.
- In North Korea, *dulgyeokdae* (youth workers) are often forced to work in construction and *inminban* (women workers) are forced to work in clothing sweatshops.<sup>[17]</sup>

Signs that someone may have been forced into slavery include a lack of identity documents, lack of personal possessions, clothing that is unsuitable or has seen much wear, poor living conditions, a reluctance to make eye contact, unwillingness to talk, and unwillingness to seek help. In the UK people are encouraged to report suspicions to a modern slavery telephone helpline.<sup>[69]</sup>

## Trafficking

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The United Nations have defined human trafficking as follows:

The 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. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.<sup>[73]</sup>

According to United States Department of State data, an "estimated 600,000 to 820,000 men, women, and children [are] trafficked across international borders each year, approximately 70 percent are women and girls and up to 50 percent are minors. The data also illustrates that the majority of transnational victims are trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation."<sup>[74]</sup> However, "the alarming enslavement of people for purposes of labor exploitation, often in their own countries, is a form of human trafficking that can be hard to track from afar". It is estimated that 50,000 people are trafficked every year in the United States.<sup>[75]</sup>

In recent years, the internet and popular social networking sites have become tools which traffickers use to find vulnerable people who they can then exploit. A 2017 *Reuters* report discusses how a woman is suing Facebook for negligence as she speculated that executives were aware of a situation that occurred back in 2012 where was sexually abused and trafficked by someone posing as her "friend".<sup>[76]</sup>

# Organizational efforts against slavery

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In the last two decades, as slavery has become more widely recognized as a formidable global epidemic, multiple governmental organizations have begun taking action to address the problem. The [State Department's](#) annual [Trafficking In Persons Report](#) assigns grades to every nation in a tier-system based "not on the size of the country's problem but on the extent of governments' efforts to meet the TVPA's minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking."<sup>[77]</sup>

The governments credited with the strongest response to modern slavery are the [Netherlands](#), the [United States](#), the [United Kingdom](#), [Sweden](#), [Australia](#), [Portugal](#), [Croatia](#), [Spain](#), [Belgium](#), [Germany](#) and [Norway](#).<sup>[78]</sup> In the United Kingdom, the government has instituted major reforms in the legal system through the Criminal Finance Act effective from September 30, 2017. Under the act, there will be transparency in regards to interbank information sharing with law enforcement agencies to help to crack down on money laundering agencies related to contemporary slavery. The Act also aims at reducing the incidence of tax evasion attributed to the lucrative slave trade conducted under the domain of the law.<sup>[79]</sup> Despite this the UK government has been refusing asylum and deporting children trafficked to the UK as slaves. This puts the children at risk of being subject to control by slavery gangs a second time. It also deters child victims from coming forward with information.<sup>[80]</sup>

In contrast, the governments accused of taking the least action against it are [North Korea](#), [Iran](#), [Eritrea](#), [Equatorial Guinea](#), [Hong Kong](#), [Central African Republic](#), [Papua New Guinea](#), [Guinea](#), the [Democratic Republic of the Congo](#) and [South Sudan](#).<sup>[78]</sup>

While countries can be scrutinized for not taking ample action to combat slavery within their borders, there is little that can be done as there are few diplomatic options for low-risk nations to consider.

## Statistics

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Modern slavery is a multibillion-dollar industry with estimates of up to \$150 billion each year.<sup>[81]</sup> International Justice Mission estimated that roughly 40.3 million individuals are currently caught in the slave trade industry.<sup>[82]</sup> International Justice Mission also reports that 1 in 4 victims of modern slavery is a child. The Global Slavery Index reports in 2018, there were 403,000 people living in condition of modern slavery in the United States.<sup>[83]</sup> India is first with 8 million, then China (3.6 million), Russia (794,000), Brazil (369,000), Germany (167,000), Italy (145,000), United Kingdom (136,000), France (129,000), Japan (37,000), Canada (17,000) and Australia (15,000).<sup>[83]</sup> Despite being illegal in every nation, slavery is still present in several forms today.



Prevalence of modern slavery, as a percentage of the population, by country. These estimates are from the Walk Free Foundation. Estimates by sources with broader definitions of slavery can be higher.

Large commercial organizations are now required to publish a slavery and human trafficking statement in regard to their supply chains for each financial year. The Walk Free Foundation reported in 2018 that slavery in advanced democratic nations is much more common than previously known, in particular the [United States](#) and [Great Britain](#), which have 403,000 and 136,000 slaves respectively. Andrew Forrest, founder of the organization, said that "The United States is one of the most advanced countries in the world yet has more than 400,000 modern slaves working under forced labor conditions."<sup>[84]</sup>

## See also

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- [Child slavery](#)
- [Modern Slavery Act 2015 \(UK\)](#)
- [Slavery in the post-Gaddafi era](#)

- Wage slavery

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## External links

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- [UN Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur on Contemporary forms of slavery - Ohvhr.org](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Slavery/SRSlavery/Pages/SRSlaveryIndex.aspx) (<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Slavery/SRSlavery/Pages/SRSlaveryIndex.aspx>)
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