

Modern Slavery in the United States



A form of modern slavery: Prisoners work in the field under the supervision of a correctional officer.

Image: The Atlantic

I have 34 slaves working for me. They make my clothes, farm and pick the food I eat, build parts for my computer, and sometimes, as a treat, I get some chocolate, flowers, or maybe even some jewelry. They furnish my life with products and consumables.

I'm not like the slavers in the 1700s. I don't oversee a field of workers, and I'm not buying them from slave traders. I do however happen to own and buy things that are unethically sourced. I found out exactly how many slaves work for me from taking a [quiz](#). I was asked what my diet was, what clothes I have, what jewelry I wear, and even what sports I play. With each thing I'm consuming, there's often a slave's work behind the product.

Many of us learn at one point or another that in 1865, President Abraham Lincoln signed America's Emancipation Proclamation, and in a narrow view, we'd all believe that slavery was brought to a close. It seems nowadays in America we practice an out-of-sight-out-of-mind philosophy towards modern slavery where we consume as quickly and as much as we can with the increased speed of simply clicking a button. We rarely, if ever, ask the question of where our deodorant or our bike come from.

Today, according to Anti-Slavery International, there are at least 24.9 million people enslaved in forced labor across the world, with 16 million of them are being exploited in supply chains to get us our consumer goods. An [article](#) by The Guardian estimates that there are 40.3 million people are working as modern-day slaves including those used as forced labor. This means that 1 in 200 people in the world are modern slaves.

What does modern slavery mean?

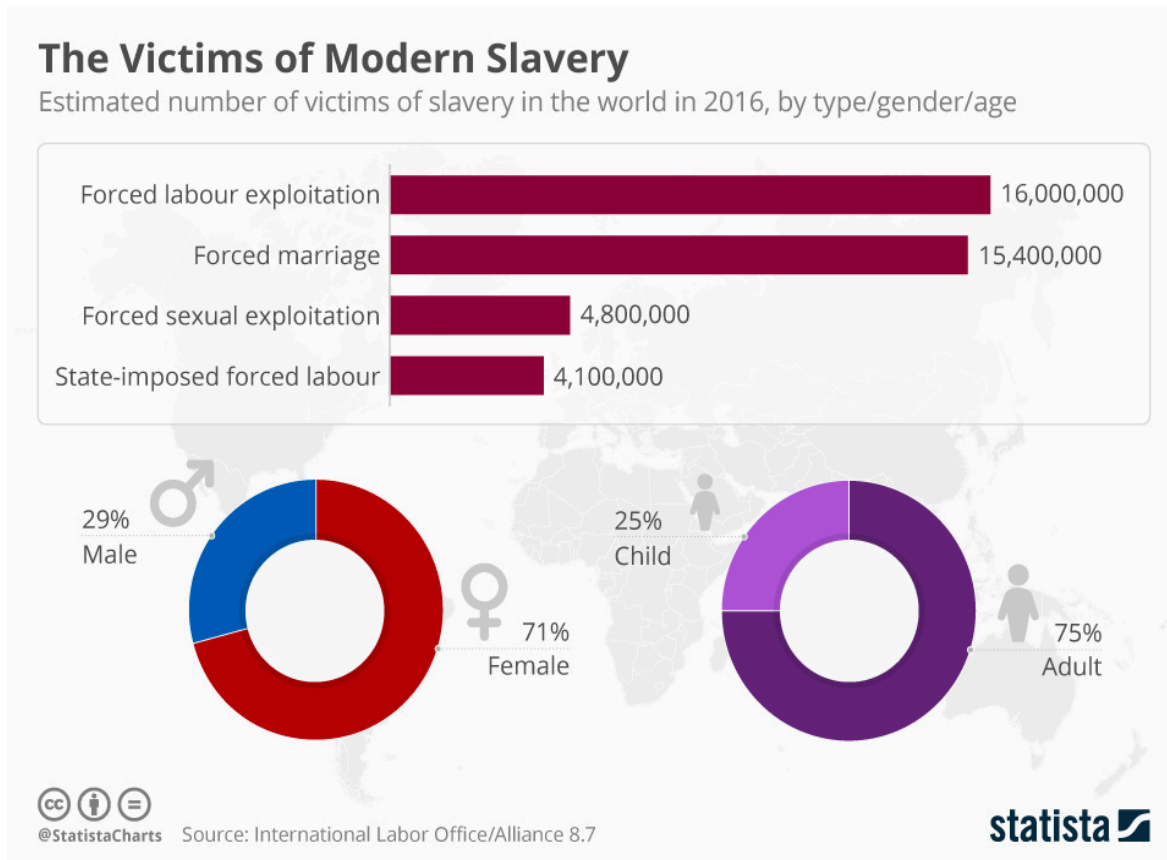


Image: Statista

Modern slavery is the continued practice of exploitation and control over workers and people. It often resembles what Americans understand slavery to be: violent practices for commercial gains, but it can also take on several different forms.

- **Domestic slavery:** Men and women do domestic tasks for a family like cooking, cleaning, being a care-taker, etc. Many who do this are considered on-call, and never have time to rest. Many times they are not compensated monetarily or with unlivable wages.

- **Bonded labor:** Families or individuals work off a debt previously accrued. This can create generational slavery as children will be trapped in bonded labor because of their parents debts and so on.
- **Supply chain slavery:** This is what we think of most commonly when we think of slavery. The trans-Atlantic slave trade would be considered supply chain slavery. These individuals are picking the raw materials that turn into our clothes and food and electronics.
- **Forced Marriage:** Predominantly affecting women and children, they are married against their will and often do not have a way out due to financial dependence.
- **Human trafficking:** Threats, violence and coercion are used in order to recruit or kidnap people to force them into labor. Often times, victims are forced into sexual exploitation, labor, criminal acts, marriage or even organ harvesting.
- **Prison labor:** There are two forms of prison labor, free labor and forced labor. Forced prison labor is where the work conditions and practices mimic those of modern slavery, little to no compensation, hazardous and harsh work environments, and unsustainable hours. Free labor is prison labor where prisoners are not paid for their work as well.

While there are countless other [forms of slavery](#), the most commonly practiced slavery in the United States is institutionalized prison labor.

How did this happen?

Although unstable political, social, and economic environments are major factors in the cause of modern slavery, Global Slavery Index believes that the breadth of modern slavery in the developed world is also misunderstood:

“On the other hand, when our assessment of government responses is correlated against GDP (PPP) per capita, we find that some highly developed, high-income countries have taken limited action to respond to modern slavery.”

While it’s easy to assume that this is only an issue in underdeveloped nations, the United States is no exception. In America, the Thirteenth Amendment protects and proliferates modern slavery through incarceration:

“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted*, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”

In the history of the American prison system, the forced labor of prisoners holds roots in chattel slavery, and so began what is called “convict leasing”, a much more profitable form of labor than the former form of slavery because the leasees do not need to spend on the care and health of the laborers.

Many misunderstand the premise of prison labor as modern slavery. There’s a false notion that because they get paid for their labor, prisoners are working individuals afforded the same protections as you or I would be. What makes prison labor modern slavery is the coercion to work. If they refuse, prisoners could seek recreation time, visits, and even solitary confinement in some states where it is still permitted.

Prison labor has become a highly profitable business practice creating almost \$500 million in revenue for corporations who contract prisoners, and in 2005, prison labor made up 4% of manufacturing jobs in the United States. While corporations are profiting millions, prisoners are sometimes paid 37 cents an hour for their work. Providing abysmal wages ensures that they have no capital to set themselves up once they are released, yet because of their felon status, [although they are learning skills through their labor in prison factories, they are still not able to be hired at the companies who previously exploited them.](#)

Slavery never ended. It has persisted for millennia whether we knew it or not, but it is time. We cannot let the exploitation of people for capital gains continue. It is time we lobby our representatives to end penal labor and unethical labor practices in the prison system.

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