

# Defining and Measuring Modern Slavery

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## Defining Slavery:

Definitions of modern slavery fall into a number of categories. There are legal definitions, those given in international treaties and conventions, and those that exist in the public mind. As with so many important and universal concepts, the word “slave” tends to have subtly different meanings in different languages. How can we arrive at a definition that encompasses all forms of slavery?

The key to defining slavery is to look closely at the core characteristics in the life of a slave and in the slave’s relationship with their master or slaveholder. While most North Americans and Western Europeans tend to hold in their mind a picture of slavery that existed in the Deep South before 1865, slavery existed at the beginning of human history and has taken many forms over the past 5,000 years. Nearly every culture and historical period has known slavery, and it has been “packaged” differently at each time and place. There have been religious justifications for slavery in many different cultures, and racial differences have been used to rationalize slavery as well. The true nature of slavery, however, does not exist in the “packaging” or justifications for slavery. Slavery exists first in the lives of slaves.

If we look closely at the lives of slaves throughout human history we find that the core characteristics of slavery are the same. Slavery means the loss of free will, it means that violence will be used to maintain control over the slave, and it means that the slave will be exploited, normally in some sort of economic activity, but possibly for sex or even as an object of conspicuous consumption. Slaves may be kidnapped or captured, tricked into slavery, or born into slavery, but their lives will be controlled through violence and they will be exploited. Normally the life of a slave is marked as well by the fact that they receive no payment for their work, only subsistence.

Focusing on these core characteristics of slavery avoids the confusion generated when state-sanctioned or legal slavery is thought to be “true” slavery. In fact, slavery existed before the first written laws were established, and has existed in cultures without a written legal code. When a large number of countries began to abolish slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were actually only ending legal permission for slavery. The exploitative and violent relationships between slaves and masters continued, and have actually multiplied in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Today, while there are numerous legal and academic definitions of slavery, the most important thing is to focus on the lived experiences of slaves. When a situation of extreme exploitation is examined, it is important to ask: “Can this person walk away? Are they under violent control?” Of all the core characteristics, the most important is the presence of violent control; it is the foundation of all slavery. After violent control is established slavery can then take any one of many forms: human trafficking, debt bondage slavery, contract slavery, slavery linked to religious practices, or state-sponsored forced labor.

*Slavery – a relationship in which one person is controlled by violence through violence, the threat of violence, or psychological coercion, has lost free will and free movement, is exploited economically, and paid nothing beyond subsistence.*

## Measuring Slavery

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When slavery was legally sanctioned in many countries, slaves were counted and measured, their economic value was recorded, and they were listed in legal documents from contracts to wills. For that reason we have useful, though partial, measures of the numbers, demographics, and economic value of slaves for much of human history. Today the story is much different.

Because slavery is illegal in all countries and banned by international conventions, it is now a hidden crime. Like other crimes, we have only rough and partial information about the incidence and impact of slavery around the world. The measurement of slavery is also made more difficult by a special fact about slavery that does not apply to the measurement of most crimes. Most individual crimes are short-lived, a burglary, theft, mugging, or assault will normally begin and end in a matter of minutes. The result is that the victim is normally free to report the crime once it is over. In slavery, the crime can last days, weeks, years, even decades. For the entire period that the crime goes on, the victim, the slave, cannot report the crime and is normally hidden from the public by the slaveholder. The fact that slaves are locked away means that they are difficult to find and count.

Because slaves are hidden, indirect ways of measuring slavery must be found. Two major attempts have been made to determine the amount of slavery in the world. These two research efforts used similar methods and came to very similar results. The first attempt to measure the global incidence of slavery was undertaken by Dr. Kevin Bales, then at Roehampton University in London, from 1996 to 2000. His research team collected information on slavery from official sources, the media, non-governmental organizations, and any other source they could find, and then sorted that information by country. Each report was assessed and given a ranking as to its perceived reliability, and then country totals were aggregated. These country totals were then passed for review to independent scholars and officials knowledgeable about that country or region and adjusted according to the suggestions of these experts. Bales' country totals added together suggested that 27 million people were in slavery around the globe.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) made the second attempt to measure global slavery, terming it "forced labor," from 2002 to 2005. The ILO used a similar methodology of collecting "validated reports of forced labor cases" from a wide variety of sources. They improved on Bales' methodology by also using the "capture-recapture" method - having two independent teams compiling separate lists that were then compared and balanced at the end of the project. The ILO, because of their status as a UN agency, were more restricted in some of the data sources that they could use, and for that reason emphasized that theirs was "a strict minimum estimate of forced labor." This caveat reflected the fact that some countries, thought to have large numbers of slaves within their population, required that the ILO only count "official" government estimates. Even with this possible undercount, the estimates generated by the ILO were close to those made by Bales except for the region of Asia. The total minimum number in forced labor around the globe, as estimated by the ILO, was 12.3 million.

*While some estimates of global slavery have ranged as high as 100 million, the two careful and scientific attempts at estimation suggest a range of 20 to 30 million, since both Bales and the ILO sought to create minimum and conservative estimates.*

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