



Frequently Asked Questions

What is slavery? Slavery is the holding of people at a workplace through force, fraud, or coercion for purposes of sexual exploitation or forced labor so that the slaveholder can extract profit. Free the Slaves uses a sociological definition to describe slavery: a person who is forced to work, without pay, under threat of violence, who cannot walk away.

How many people are in slavery? Because slavery is a crime and a fugitive enterprise, it is difficult to get exact estimates of its magnitude. A 2017 joint research study by United Nations International Labor Organization, the group Walk Free and the United Nations International Organization for Migration puts the figure at 40 million. About a quarter of the world's slaves are children. The vast majority are women and girls.¹

Where is slavery most prevalent? Slavery exists in every country—no country is immune. However, the highest concentrations of people in slavery are found in the Asia & Pacific region and in sub-Saharan Africa.

What does slavery look like? Slavery manifests in different ways. Here are the most common forms of slavery:

- **Debt Bondage**—also called bonded labor. This typically involves a person accepting a loan from a moneylender. The borrower (and often his or her family as well) is expected to “work off” the loan. In practice, the amount owed continues to grow over time, and the loan can never be repaid.
- **Contract Slavery**—where a worker is deceived into slavery through the use of a false employment contract. Slaveholders create contracts to lure individuals with promises of employment, yet once they arrive at the workplace they are forced to work for no pay and cannot escape.
- **Sex Trafficking**—when an adult engages in a commercial sex act, such as prostitution, as a result of force, fraud, threat or coercion. The “consent” of the victim is not relevant—if threat or force has been applied the act cannot be consensual. Child sex trafficking differs from adult sex trafficking in that children can never be considered to have consented to the sale of sex acts.

¹ Detailed global slavery statistics source: [Global Estimates of Modern Slavery](#)

- **Forced or Servile Marriage**—when a person, usually a woman or girl, has been forced into marriage against her will. The girl may be sold by her family, given to repay a family debt, or given to restore the girl’s “honor.”
- **Domestic Servitude**—where household workers, such as maids, are not permitted to leave the household in which they work; they typically receive little or no pay and are frequently abused.
- **Worst Forms of Child Labor**—situations in which children are held in forced labor, engage in prostitution or pornography, or participate in illicit activities.
- **Child Soldiers**—when children are forced, coerced, or persuaded to become soldiers and engage in combat in violation of international norms forbidding the use of children as members of armed forces.

Watch our video [What Does Slavery Look Like Today](#) to see the impact of various forms of slavery around the world. Read [Free the Slaves books](#) for more details on slavery today.

In what industries is slavery most prevalent? About 50 percent of slavery is forced labor in agriculture, manufacturing, construction, fishing, mining and other physical-labor industries; about 12.5 percent is sex slavery in forced prostitution; about 37.5 percent is forced marriage.

What are the causes of slavery? In a word, slavery is due to *vulnerability*. Poverty alone does not explain slavery. Most slavery victims are poor, but not all poor people are in slavery. Rather there are special vulnerabilities that make some poor people susceptible to becoming enslaved...

- **Lack of Awareness of Rights and Risks.** Often, people do not know their rights and accept forced labor and exploitation. For example, people in debt may wrongly believe the moneylender has the right to hold them as servants until the debt is paid. The schemes of traffickers sound attractive and plausible. The risks of certain acts, like surrendering one’s passport, are not understood.
- **Absent or Weak Protective Organizations.** Poor communities often lack effective local organizations that can serve as protectors and buffers against those perpetrating enslavement. Disorganized communities are especially vulnerable to becoming enslaved.
- **Absence of Critical Services.** People turn to exploitative moneylenders in the absence of a legitimate source of credit. Children not in school are vulnerable to traffickers. A health crisis can drive people into debt and slavery.
- **Inadequate Legal Protection.** Poor and marginalized groups and communities are the least likely to be protected by the law. Weak laws and lack of law enforcement reduce the risk to slave holders and traffickers.
- **Survivor Vulnerability.** The survivors of slavery are often traumatized, have a perceived or real dependence on their traffickers, are impoverished, and are sometimes without marketable skills. They are frequently stigmatized, especially women and girls victimized by sex trafficking. Survivors are at high risk of becoming re-enslaved.

How can slavery be stopped? The key to stopping slavery is helping vulnerable communities and people acquire the assets and tools that will overcome their vulnerability. All Free the Slaves programs begin with contextual research to define the vulnerabilities and pathways leading to slavery and needed interventions. Based on that research, we adopt the following basic strategy...

- **Capacity Building.** We provide training, technical assistance, and grants to strengthen local organizations and agencies to achieve sustainable solutions. Our partners may include

nongovernmental organizations, government agencies, advocacy coalitions, and international organizations. All our programs are designed and implemented with and through local partners to build long-term capacity.

- **Educating and Organizing Vulnerable Communities.** We help communities understand their rights and the risks of trafficking. In the Congo, for example, we support the broadcasting of anti-slavery messages over a network of community radio stations. In Nepal, we explain the risks of labor trafficking and how to migrate safely. We work with communities to organize anti-slavery committees that act as a neighborhood watch against slavery and as a bridge to the police and other authorities.
- **Increasing Access to Basic Services.** Mobilized communities advocate for schools, health and credit. Free the Slaves helps link communities to resources that can provide these basic services.
- **Legal Protection and Liberation.** We advocate for better laws and improved law enforcement. We train police and other government officials, as well as journalists so they can better report on slavery. We cooperate with local organizations and authorities to liberate those in slavery. Sometimes this involves raids on work places; in other cases, emboldened communities chase off the slave holders and traffickers without external assistance.
- **Reducing Survivor Vulnerability.** We help survivors gain access to medical care, counseling, support groups, vocational training, employment and other essential services. In India, for example, we support an ashram that cares for girls and women victimized by sex trafficking. We provide legal services to survivors so they can pursue restitution and agitate for prosecution of perpetrators.

See the [Free the Slaves Community Model for Freedom](#) for details.

Is there a difference between human trafficking and slavery? As a practical matter, human trafficking is when someone is moved from one place to another for the purpose of enslavement; slavery is the exploitation that happens when they arrive. As a legal matter, however, in many places the term trafficking means enslavement—no movement away from home is required for an anti-trafficking law to apply. About 23 percent of people in slavery are being exploited outside their home country, most people around the world are enslaved right in their home communities.

How can people know if products they buy or companies they invest in are tainted by slavery? Visit [KnowTheChain.org](#) to check corporate compliance with California's groundbreaking law that requires major companies to investigate their supply chains and disclose what they're doing about slavery. Learn more on our [Slavery-Free Commerce](#) page.

How can I help? Visit our [Take Action](#) pages for ideas on mobilizing your friends, family, faith community, neighbors, co-workers and classmates. Become an abolitionist yourself by [donating today](#) to Free the Slaves.