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SHACKLED THE CONTEMPORARY FACE OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Abstract

The paper examines the present form of human trafficking, thus the contemporary face of modern slavery, including its legal aspects, various forms, examples, methods of exploitation employed by perpetrators, the geopolitical factors that shape its scale and scope, as well as the efforts and problems of the organizations working to reduce the global impact of this phenomena and also the efficiency of the countermeasures used against human trafficking on national and international levels. Author uses material and analysis, from organisations such as: UNHCR – *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*. IOM – *International Organization for Migration*, Europol – *European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation*, Interpol – *International Criminal Police Organization* ICC – *International Criminal Court*, U.S. Department of State information and other non-governmental organisation – NGO's.

Keywords

human trafficking, crime, security, armed conflict, force labour,
sexual exploitation, children trafficking, children exploitation, organ trafficking,
illegal international adoption

Introduction

The history of human trafficking dates back to ancient times, when slavery was a widely accepted economic and social practice. Ancient Rome, Greece, and Egypt operated on the basis of slave labour, with people treated as commodities; bought, sold, and inherited. In the Middle Ages, the slave trade became more institutionalized, and with the colonial expansion of Europeans, this phenomenon acquired a global dimension, exemplified by the transatlantic slave trade of the 16th–19th centuries, which primarily involved Africans being transported to the Americas.¹ It was only in the 19th century that systematic efforts to abolish slavery began. The slave trade was banned (Great Britain in 1807),² and slavery itself was prohibited (the United States in 1865 with the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution).³ Despite these steps, the phenomenon did not disappear the forms, terminology, and mechanisms changed, evolving to adapt to new realities. This is clearly visible in the modern aspect of human trafficking, which in many ways continues the old model of exploitation, adjusting it to global capitalism, illegal migration, and the organized crime associated with it.⁴ In developed countries, it takes on more subtle forms for example; forced labour in the service sector, domestic care, or construction. In contrast, in states with unstable political or economic situations, such as those affected by armed conflicts, human trafficking often takes the form of organized exploitation of civilians by paramilitary groups, smugglers, criminal organizations, and even official state structures. According to the Global Slavery Index 2023, around 50 million people worldwide are affected by problem of the modern human trafficking.⁵ Every 30 seconds someone becomes a victim of it, it generates an annual turnover of \$150 – 250 billion, that's equivalent to 3 times the GDP of a medium-sized European country.^{6,7} The occurrence is one of the most severe violations of human rights, remaining a global issue with a complex and dynamic nature, depriving its victims of freedom, dignity, and fundamental rights. The definition of human trafficking was precisely established in the Palermo Protocol (2000), which supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. According to this protocol, human trafficking is defined as: “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat, use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or a position of vulnerability, for the purpose of exploitation,” including but not limited to prostitution, forced labour, or slavery.⁸ The issue

1 D. Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 1.

2 *An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (47 Geo. III Sess. 1 c. 36).

3 *Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution*.

4 K. Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*, University of California Press, 2004, p. 7.

5 *Global Slavery Index*, Walk Free Foundation, 2023. <https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/> accessed 14 Oct. 2025

6 *Mariposa*, 2019. <https://www.mariposacenter.org/blog/every-30-seconds-another-person-becomes-a-victim-of-human-trafficking/> accessed 14 Oct. 2025

7 *Worldomete*, 2023. <https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/gdp-by-country/> accessed 14 Oct. 2025

8 United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, *Palermo Protocol*, 2000.

of human trafficking falls within the broader framework of human rights, migration law, and social rights, and its eradication requires international cooperation and comprehensive measures.

Material and methods used for research

The research process of theoretical aspects for this material used analysis, inference, data analysis and the author's observations, data from organisations as: UNHCR – *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*. IOM – *International Organization for Migration*, Europol – *European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation*, Interpol – *International Criminal Police Organization* ICC – *International Criminal Court*, U.S. Department of State information and other non-governmental organisation – NGO's.

Legal repercussions U.S. vs Europe

In the U.S., human trafficking is prosecuted under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) and various federal and state laws. It covers both sex trafficking and labour trafficking, including forced labour, debt bondage, and exploitation of minors. Penalties for trafficking are severe. a person convicted of trafficking adults may face up to 20 years in federal prison, and if the trafficking involves aggravating circumstances (e.g. kidnapping, sexual abuse, or death), the sentence may increase to life imprisonment. For child trafficking, the penalty can also include a minimum of 15 years up to life.⁹ Convicted traffickers may also face fines, asset forfeiture, and mandatory restitution to victims. However, prosecution is challenging. Human trafficking is often hidden, victims are afraid or unwilling to testify, and traffickers use complex methods to evade law enforcement. According to U.S. Department of Justice reports, although hundreds of trafficking cases are prosecuted annually, conviction rates remain relatively low compared to the estimated scale of trafficking.¹⁰ In addition, many cases are prosecuted under related charges (e.g., kidnapping, rape, immigration violations) rather than trafficking per se, due to evidentiary issues.

In the European Union, human trafficking is criminalized under Directive 2011/36/EU, which mandates all member states to penalize trafficking with effective, proportionate, and dissuasive penalties, including a minimum of 5 years imprisonment, and 10 years or more for aggravated offenses (such as those involving children, organized crime, or severe exploitation).¹¹

9 18 U.S. Code. Article 1589, 1584, 1590

10 National Institute of Justice, 2020. <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/gaps-reporting-human-trafficking-incidents-result-significant-undercounting> accessed 14 Oct. 2025

11 Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council

Each EU member state enforces its own laws.

- Germany: under 1 up to 10 years, with harsher sentences if minors are involved.¹²
- France: Up to 20 years' imprisonment and significant fines.¹³
- Poland: 3 to 15 years for trafficking-related crimes.¹⁴
- Netherlands: from 6 to 15 years for aggravating factors.¹⁵

Conviction remains difficult across Europe. The European Commission and Europol have noted systemic underreporting, difficulties in identifying victims, limited cooperation across borders, and insufficient training of frontline professionals. Although all EU countries have legal frameworks in place, enforcement varies significantly. In 2022, Eurostat data revealed that only around 30% of registered suspects in trafficking cases across the EU were eventually convicted, and the conviction rate for cross-border trafficking was even lower.¹⁶ Both the U.S. and the EU have strong legal frameworks against human trafficking, with potential sentences ranging from 5 years in EU to life imprisonment in US, depending on severity. Nonetheless, prosecution remains difficult, often due to the hidden nature of trafficking, lack of victim cooperation, and complex transnational operations. Improving identification, victim support, and international cooperation remains essential to increasing conviction rates and combating trafficking effectively.

Modern forms of human trafficking

Forced Labor

One of the most common forms of human trafficking is forced labour, which occurs in agriculture, construction, industrial or domestic environment, and the fishing sector. Victims are forced to work under threats of violence, confiscation of documents, debt bondage, or other forms of coercion.

Sexual Exploitation

The most recognizable and widely publicized form of human trafficking is sexual exploitation, which includes forced prostitution, child pornography, and trafficking of women for so-called forced or polygamous marriages. Victims are often subjected to physical and psychological abuse, and their rights are completely disregarded.

Exploitation of Children

Children are especially vulnerable to trafficking for various purposes – including labour, sexual exploitation, begging, or even as soldiers or slaves in armed conflicts. In some parts of the world, child trafficking for organ removal is also a serious issue.

¹² *German Criminal Code*. Strafgesetzbuch StGB. Section 232

¹³ *French Penal Code*. Article 225-4-1,2,3

¹⁴ *Polish Penal Code*. Article 189a-1

¹⁵ *Dutch Criminal Code*. Article 273-F

¹⁶ *European Commission*, 2024. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/newly-released-data-show-increase-trafficking-human-beings-2024-02-28_en accessed 14 Oct. 2025

Organ Trafficking

Organ trafficking is one of the most brutal forms of exploitation, where victims – often poor or homeless or from underdevelopment countries – are coerced or deceived into giving up their organs for the black market. Transplants involving organs obtained in this way take place in many countries and represent a serious violation of medical ethics.

Other Forms

Other forms of human trafficking include forcing victims to commit crimes, trafficking related to armed conflict, and trafficking for illegal international adoption.

Methods used by perpetrators

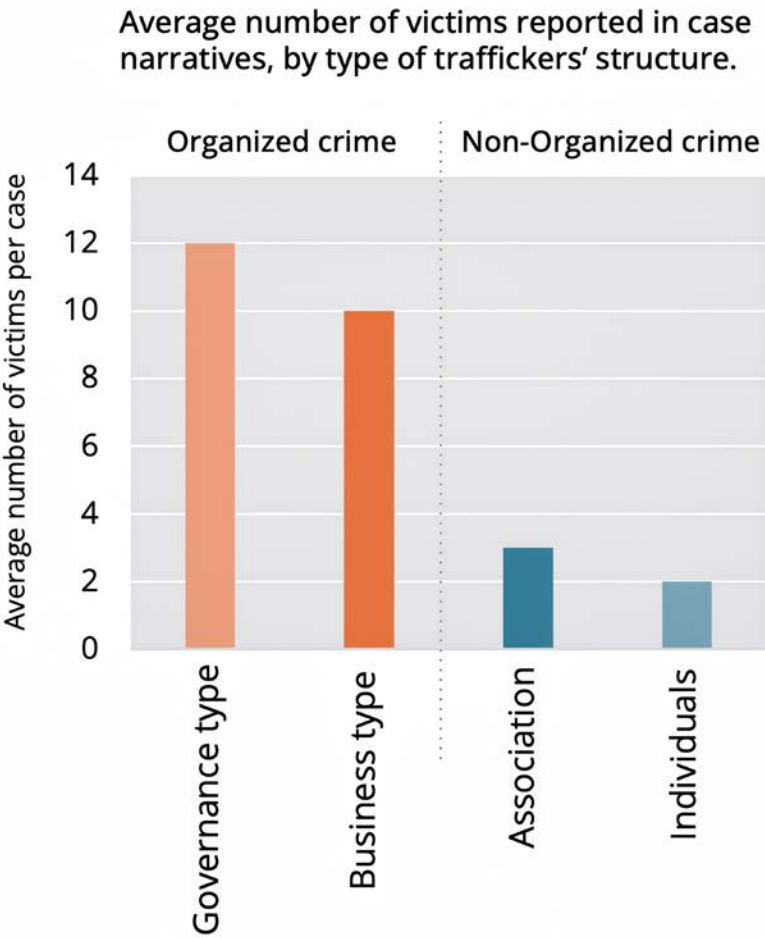
Perpetrators of human trafficking employ a variety of techniques for recruiting, controlling, and exploiting victims. Modern technologies have significantly facilitated their activities. Recruitment often takes place under the pretext of legitimate employment, education, or improving one's living conditions. Offenders exploit the trust of victims and their families, as well as their difficult economic and social circumstances. Common methods include fake job advertisements, fraudulent employment agencies, and the use of social media. Once the victim has been recruited, perpetrators use physical and psychological violence, threats, confiscation of identity documents, and social isolation. Victims are often made dependent on the traffickers for long periods, with their sense of hopelessness deepened by the lack of access to assistance. The internet and modern technologies, social platforms, encrypted communication tools, dark web and globalisation enable criminals to communicate more easily, recruit online, and monitor and control victims to execute criminal activities and exploitation.

Geopolitical conditions shaping human trafficking

The political and economic situation worldwide has a significant impact on the scale and nature of human trafficking. Conflicts such as the war in Ukraine, has caused a mass displacement of people, increasing the risk of human trafficking practice, particularly involving women and children. Since the outbreak of the full-scale war in 2022, serious concerns have arisen regarding the forced relocation and deportation of Ukrainian children to the Russian Federation and occupied territories. According to Ukrainian authorities and international organizations, thousands of children particularly from orphanages, care homes, and conflict zones have been taken without consent and relocated under the pretext of evacuation, protection, or adoption to Russia motherland. In 2023, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova, accusing them of unlawfully deporting children

from Ukrainian territories. Russia has denied wrongdoing, framing the transfers as humanitarian aid.¹⁷ The scale of this event is under ongoing investigation and requires further research however some sources indicated the number of 20.000 thousands victims involved.¹⁸

Chart No. 1



Source: UNODC elaboration of court case summaries.

*Based on information on 5,451 traffickers convicted in 961 court case summaries.

Source: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024_Chapter_1.pdf

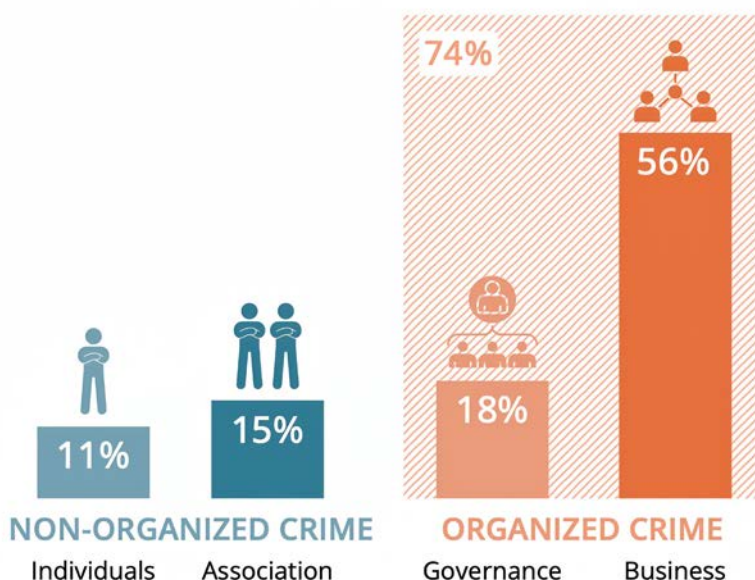
17 *International Criminal Court*, 2023. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-war-rants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and> accessed 14 Oct. 2025

18 *Wikipedia*, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_abductions_in_the_Russo-Ukrainian_War accessed 14 Oct. 2025

Another example comes from different geographical region, China, between 2010 and 2012, a series of suicides occurred at the facilities of Foxconn Technology Group, a major electronics manufacturer in Shenzhen, known for producing components for companies such as Apple, Sony, and other global tech giants. During this period, at least 14 workers died by suicide, with most victims jumping from the dormitory buildings on factory grounds. The majority of those affected were young migrant workers who had relocated from rural areas of China in search of employment. Working and living conditions within Foxconn factories was unacceptable to our western standards. In response to mounting public criticism and pressure from corporate clients, Foxconn implemented a number of measures aimed at preventing further tragedies. Most notably, the company installed anti-suicide nets on its buildings to physically deter further incidents.¹⁹

Chart No. 2

Share of traffickers reported in court case summaries, by type of structure *



Source: UNODC elaboration of court case summaries.

* Based on information on 3,121 traffickers convicted in 942 court case summaries.

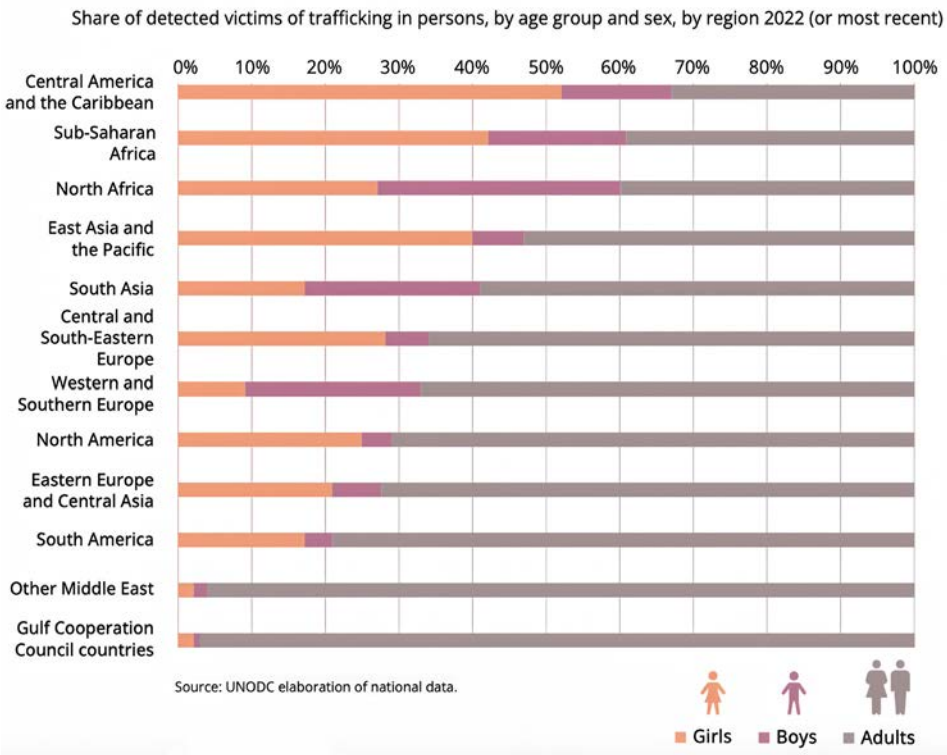
Source: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024_Chapter_1.pdf

¹⁹ *Industriall*, 2010. <https://www.industriall-union.org/archive/imf/foxconn-electronics-workers-suicide-in-china> accessed 14 Oct. 2025

Example from US, Jeffrey Epstein case, a wealthy American financier, and Ghislaine Maxwell, a British socialite, were at the centre of one of the most high-profile sex trafficking scandals of the 21st century. Epstein was accused of operating an extensive sex trafficking network, targeting underage girls, many of whom were recruited under the guise of offering financial support or employment opportunities. Ghislaine Maxwell was identified as a key accomplice who helped groom and recruit victims. The abuse, which spanned decades, involved powerful individuals and took place in multiple locations, including Epstein's private island, New York mansion, and Florida residence. Despite early legal troubles in the mid-2000s, Epstein managed to avoid serious consequences through a controversial plea deal. However, renewed investigations led to his arrest in 2019. He died shortly after in jail under suspicious circumstances, officially ruled as suicide. Maxwell was later arrested in 2020 and stood trial in 2021. She was found guilty on several counts, including sex trafficking of minors, and sentenced to 20 years in prison. The case highlighted systemic failures in addressing sexual abuse, the influence of wealth and power, and the global reach of trafficking networks. It also reignited public discourse on justice for survivors and accountability for elite offenders.²⁰ As we can see from the above examples modern slavery has many faces, but its common, unchanged denominator remains the same: exploitation, often through deception, coercion, or the abuse of vulnerability and can be perpetrated by individuals or state actors.

²⁰ Bill Chappell, *Jeffrey Epstein files: Tracing the legal cases that led to sex-trafficking charges*, NPR, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/07/25/nx-s1-5478620/jeffrey-epstein-crimes-timeline-legal-case> accessed 14 Oct. 2025

Chart No. 3

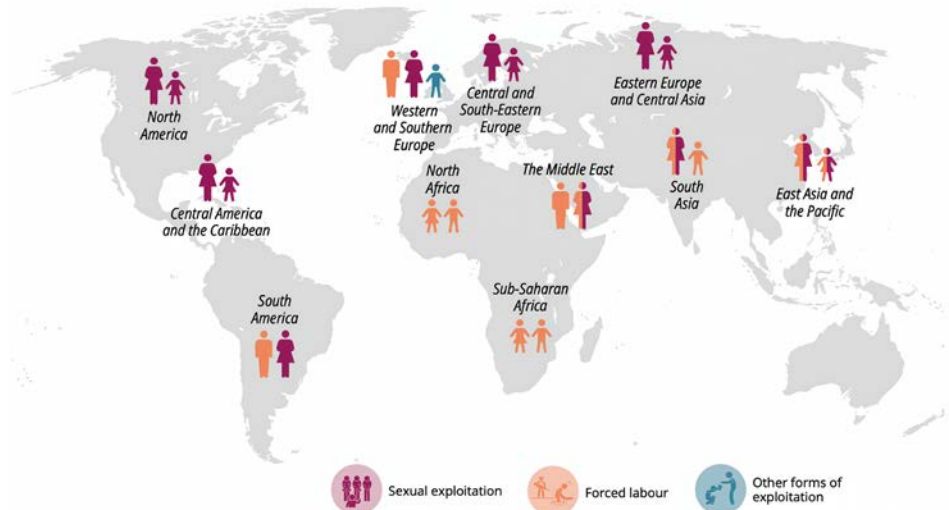


Source: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024_Chapter_1.pdf

Monitoring organizations have reported an increase in sexual exploitation and forced labour in both war-affected regions and beyond. Areas such as Syria, Yemen, and those impacted by the conflict between Israel and Hamas serve simultaneously as sources and destinations for human trafficking. While significant research is still needed to fully assess the scale of the problem, ongoing military actions and political instability hinder reliable academic inquiry.

Chart No. 4

Main detected victims and forms of exploitation



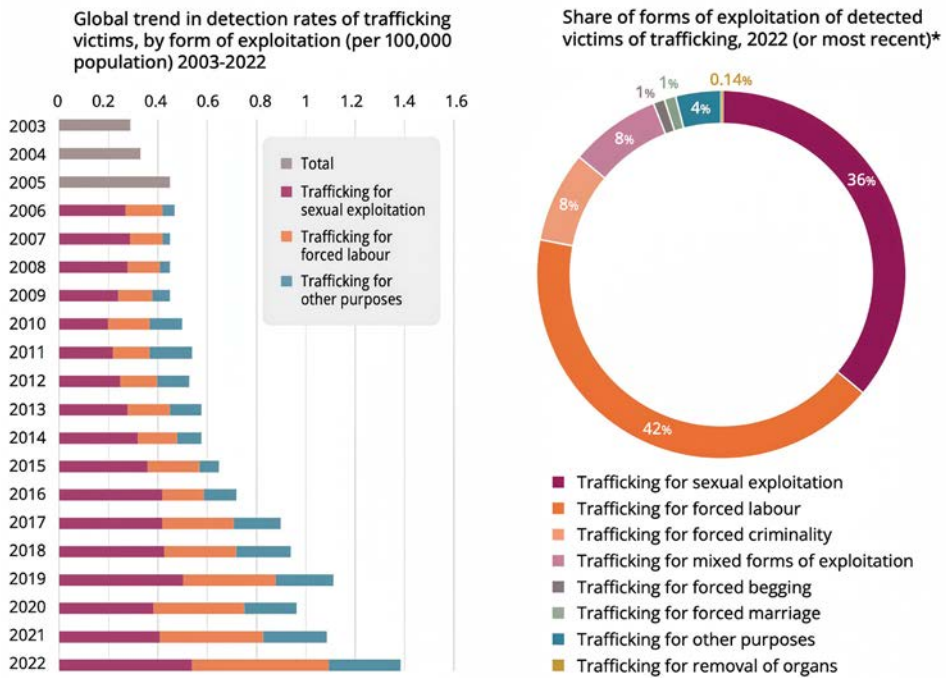
Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Source: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024_Chapter_1.pdf

Armed conflicts, migration, and fragile governance further fuel this phenomenon, manifesting in the sexual exploitation of women and children as well as the forced labour of migrants. South America, in countries such as Brazil, Colombia and Peru, human trafficking takes the form of sexual exploitation, forced labour in agriculture, and drug trafficking involving children and adolescents. Mexico and US fighting a war with cartels known for brutal tactics and diversified criminal operations such as Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), Los Zetas, Sinaloa, Juárez or Gulf Cartel, combating human trafficking problems alongside with drug trafficking. In times of chaos, criminals can recruit victims more easily, border controls are weakened and state apparatus is dysfunctional.

Chart No. 5



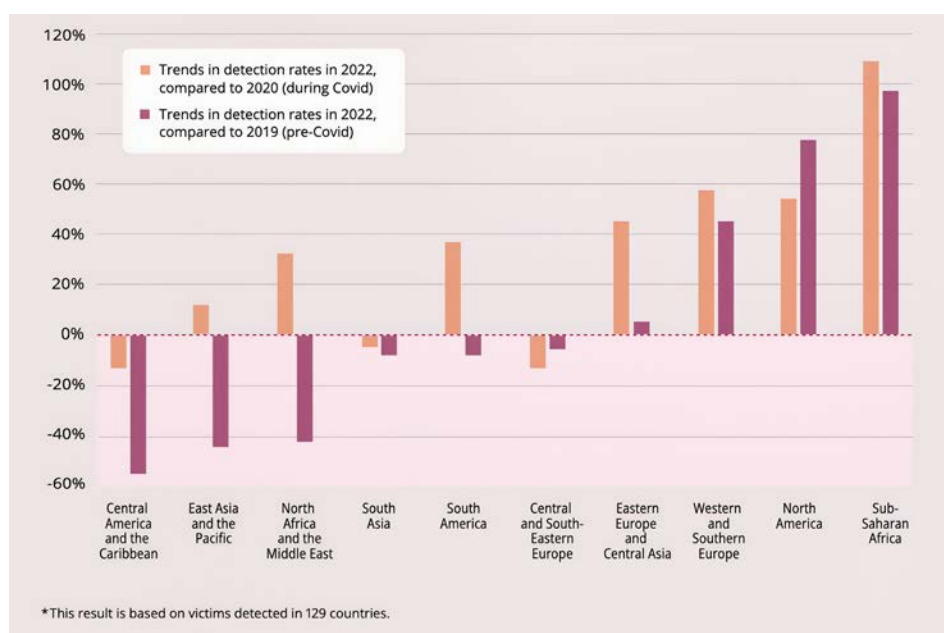
Source: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024_Chapter_1.pdf

Migrations crises driven by persecution, poverty, or climate change increase the number of people at risk of exploitation. Migrants often cross borders illegally, which makes it more difficult for them to obtain legal protection. It is essential to draw a distinction between human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Human trafficking is characterized by the exploitation of individuals, in contrast, migrant smuggling involves a consensual arrangement between a migrant and a smuggler to facilitate unauthorized border crossing. While trafficking constitutes a grave violation of fundamental human rights, smuggling primarily represents an infringement of national immigration and border control regulations. Conversely, smuggling may form part of a human trafficking operation when individuals are transported without their genuine consent and the smuggler engages in the exploitation of their person. Poverty and lack of prospects, combined with limited access to education and employment, leads many people to undertake risky journeys and accept dubious job offers, which often result in forced exploitation.

Summary conclusion

The Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, published annually since 2001 by the U.S. State Department's Office to monitor and combat trafficking, it evaluates and ranks governments according to their efforts to address human trafficking, using criteria from the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000.²¹ The ranking system has four main categories: Tier 1 – Governments fully comply with TVPA minimum standards. Tier 2 – Governments do not fully comply but are making significant efforts. Tier 2 Watchlist – Same as Tier 2, but with significant victim numbers, lack of progress, or reliance on future commitments. Tier 3 – Governments neither comply nor make significant efforts. According to the UNODC, human trafficking affects millions of people worldwide, but documented cases represent only a fraction of the real scope due to the hidden nature of the crime. For instance, between 2020- 2023, 202,478 trafficking victims were detected across 156 countries, yet the actual numbers remain much higher.²²

Chart No. 6



Source: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024_BOOK.pdf

21 *Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act*, 2000. <https://www.congress.gov/106/plaws/publ386/PLAW-106publ386.htm> accessed 14 Oct. 2025

22 Acraht, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons*, 2024, <https://acrath.org.au/2024-global-report-on-trafficking-in-persons> accessed 14 Oct. 2025

Chart No. 7



Source: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024_BOOK.pdf

The Walk Free report indicates that around 50 million people live in conditions of modern slavery worldwide.²³ In 2024, Europol emphasized that human trafficking is the third-largest source of income for organized criminal groups in Europe.²⁴ Countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, and those serving as

23 Walk Free Foundation, *Global Slavery Index*, 2023. <https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/> accessed 14 Oct. 2025
24 Europol, *EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment*, 2024. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/EU-SOCTA-2025.pdf> accessed 14 Oct. 2025

transit points are particularly at risk. Globally, it is the most profitable source of income for organized criminal groups, second only to the counterfeiting of luxury goods, the counterfeiting of pharmaceuticals, and drug smuggling. The fight against human trafficking is based on multi-level actions. Many countries have adopted national strategies and laws aimed at identifying and protecting victims, as well as prosecuting perpetrators. Educational programs and training for law enforcement officers are being implemented. The UN, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the UNODC, and other agencies coordinate activities, collect data, and promote international cooperation. NGOs often work to assist victims by providing shelter, psychological and legal support. They also organize awareness campaigns and training sessions. Despite the involvement of many stakeholders, combating human trafficking faces numerous challenges. Victims often do not report to the authorities due to fear, stigma, or lack of trust. There is a shortage of effective identification tools, which makes providing assistance more difficult. After being freed, victims often do not receive adequate support, increasing the risk of returning to exploitative situations. Criminals use advanced methods of concealment, and weak legal frameworks as well as corruption hinder effective prosecution. The contemporary face of human trafficking is extremely complex, reflecting changing social, political, and technological realities. The scale of the phenomenon is immense, and its forms are diverse. Despite existing countermeasures, it is necessary to further intensify efforts, especially in the areas of victim identification, public education, data accessibility and international cooperation and prosecution. Only a comprehensive approach will make it possible to effectively curb this violation of human rights.

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