



SOVEREIGN MILITARY HOSPITALLER ORDER
OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM OF RHODES AND OF MALTA

Ambassador to monitor and combat trafficking in persons

Contribution of the Sovereign Order of Malta

on

Homelessness as a cause and a consequence of contemporary forms of slavery

Critical issues

Human trafficking and homelessness are among the most critical social issues facing societies around the world today, and they are more interconnected than one may realize. Human trafficking is a modern form of slavery that involves the exploitation of individuals for various purposes, including but not limited to forced labor, the recruitment and use of child soldiers, forced marriage, sexual exploitation, forced criminality, and organ harvesting. Homelessness is the lack of stable housing that affects hundreds of millions of people globally. These two issues are closely linked, as individuals (and communities) who have suffered from homelessness are especially vulnerable to human trafficking. In order to understand the relationship between human trafficking and homelessness, one must examine the factors that contribute to both and the measures that can be taken to prevent and address these issues.

Figures

Human trafficking is a global problem that affects tens of millions of people worldwide and it is characterized by the **exploitation** of a human being, combined with **coercion** and **false promises**. This coercion can be physical or psychological. Human trafficking is composed by several forms such as **forced labor** (Women, men, children, in industry, agriculture, fishing, etc.), **recruiting**



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children as child soldiers, **forced sex** (prostitution, surrogacy), **buying and stealing children** (for adoption or abuse), **child pornography** (mainly on the internet), **organ theft** (for transplantation), and **forced crime** (begging, theft, drug trafficking, terrorism).

Latest estimates show that forced labour and forced marriage have increased significantly in the last five years, according to the International Labour Organization, Walk Free and the International Organization for Migration. According to their latest [“Global Estimates of Modern Slavery”](#), around 50 million individuals were living in modern slavery in 2021. Out of this number, 28 million were being subjected to forced labor, while 22 million were trapped in forced marriages. In comparison to the [2016 Global Estimates](#), the number of people in modern slavery has escalated by 10 million. Modern slavery is present in nearly every country worldwide, crossing ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries. More than half of forced labor cases (52%) and a quarter of forced marriages occur in high-income or upper-middle-income countries. The majority of forced labor cases (86%) are present in the private sector. Additionally, approximately 3.3 million children (one in eight of all those in forced labour) are victims of forced labor, with more than half of them involved in commercial sexual exploitation. Furthermore, around 22 million people were living in forced marriages on any given day in 2021, which is an increase of 6.6 million since the 2016 global estimates.

Human trafficking is also a highly profitable criminal business, with traffickers earning an estimated \$150 billion annually from exploiting vulnerable individuals. Victims and survivors of human trafficking are often forced into labor or sexual exploitation, and they are subjected to physical and emotional abuse, torture, and other forms of violence. According to [Polaris](#) (the nonprofit organization that runs the national human trafficking hotline in the United States), examples for private sector involvement in human trafficking are abundant: traffickers use banks to deposit and launder their earnings; they use planes, buses and taxi services to transport their victims; they book hotel rooms integral also to sex trafficking; and, they are active users of social media platforms to recruit and advertise the services of their victims. As the chief executive officer of Polaris, Bradley Myles, said *“Human trafficking is a \$150 billion a year global industry and can’t be fully addressed without businesses taking active and effective measures to reduce the potential for exploitation within*



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their own systems.” While many human trafficking activities remain underground, an increased understanding of how human traffickers use legitimate services has helped companies in various industries begin to crack the business of human trafficking. In many instances, private sector initiated efforts to combat human trafficking (often as part of their corporate social responsibility activities) have also helped companies position themselves as “service provider of choice.”

On the other hand, homelessness is another complex issue that affects hundreds of millions of people around the world. According to the 2020 [Report](#) of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non- discrimination in this context, **Mr. Balakrishnan Rajagopal**, there are currently an estimated 150 million people who are homeless globally. Without forgetting the 1.6 billion people worldwide living in inadequate housing conditions, with about 15 million forcefully evicted every year, according to [UN-Habitat](#), which has noted an alarming rise in homelessness in the last 10 years. Young people are the age group with the highest risk of becoming homeless.

Homelessness is caused by a range of factors, including poverty, unemployment, mental illness, addiction, family breakdown, and housing affordability. Homeless individuals face numerous challenges, including lack of access to healthcare, education, employment, and social services. Homelessness often results in social exclusion, which can lead to a range of health and social problems.

Homelessness is a growing problem in many parts of the world, and it is often linked to broader issues such as poverty and inequality. Homelessness can be experienced in different forms such as emergency shelters, hostels, and transitional housing. Homelessness is often a cyclical problem with individuals becoming homeless due to a range of factors, including job loss, relationship breakdown, or eviction. Once an individual loses their home, it becomes infinitely more difficult for that person to become financially stable, making them more vulnerable to crimes.

Human trafficking and homelessness are closely linked, and victims of trafficking are often initially exploited while being homeless. This is because traffickers prey on those who are most vulnerable.



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A study ([“Housing and Homeless Systems Recommendations”](#)) by Polaris, an organization fighting human trafficking, found that 64% of victims were homeless or experienced housing instability when they were trafficked. Homeless individuals are more likely to be victims of trafficking because they lack stable housing, financial resources, social support networks, medical assistance, and access to services that could help protect them from exploitation. Trafficking victims are also often forced to work in the underground economy where they may be paid low wages or no wages at all. This makes it difficult for victims and survivors to access stable housing or to escape their traffickers. Trafficking victims may also be subjected to violence, which can result in physical injuries, mental health problems, and sometimes death. Homeless individuals who are also trafficking victims may struggle to access healthcare, mental health services, and other support services.

Root causes

Historically, slavery systematically exploited specific groups of people. Today, anyone can be a human trafficking victim regardless of ethnicity, nationality, gender, age or economic status. Human trafficking is now facilitated online and through social media. Traffickers use love and affection as control mechanisms, and those victimized might not even self-identify as victims. Human trafficking is an incredibly complex issue based on dozens of contributing factors. Victims of human trafficking come from a wide range of backgrounds, but they are often from marginalized communities and face economic, social, and political challenges that make them vulnerable to exploitation. Some of the factors that contribute to human trafficking include poverty, lack of education, political instability, armed conflict, and discrimination. Because of the trauma of being trafficked, these factors can turn into a cycle, meaning that victims and survivors can sometimes struggle to rebuild their lives.

According to [UNICEF USA](#), there are three factors related to the roots of human trafficking:

- **High reward with low-risk:** traffickers are conscient that they can make huge amounts of money with a minimal risk of punishment or legal consequence. Human trafficking is the second most profitable illegal “business” in the world, second only to the drug trade.



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- **Human trafficking is fueled by the economic principles of supply and demand:** the large supply is driven by the high level of demand. Companies are compelled to seek cheap labor due to the rising demand for affordable goods, which often results in the exploitation of workers at the lower end of the supply chain. Additionally, the growing demand for commercial sex, particularly involving minors, encourages businesses such as strip clubs, pornography, and prostitution to recruit and exploit children.
- **Inequalities and disparities:** certain groups are at a higher risk of being exploited due to systemic inequalities and disparities. Situations such as mass displacement, armed conflicts, extreme poverty, limited educational and job opportunities, violence, and harmful social norms like child marriage, all contribute to individuals being pushed into trafficking. Families living in poverty or in dire circumstances may be more likely to accept dangerous job offers, while girls being denied an education may prompt parents to sell them off for marriage.

Several factors contribute to human trafficking and homelessness, and these factors are often interrelated; this includes poverty, lack of education, political instability, social isolation, armed conflict, and discrimination. Similarly, factors that contribute to homelessness include poverty, unemployment, mental illness, addiction, family breakdown, and housing affordability. Poverty is a key factor that contributes to both human trafficking and homelessness because individuals who face poverty are more likely to be exploited by traffickers.

Ways to deal with Human Trafficking and Homelessness

On 19th February 2020, the gavel fell on the 58th session of the [UN Commission for Social Development](#), which agreed the text of the historical first United Nations resolution on homelessness. A serious violation of human dignity, homelessness has become a global problem. It is affecting people of all ages from all walks of life, in both developed and developing countries.



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Trafficking networks operate across borders, making it difficult for law enforcement agencies to track and prosecute traffickers, and there is a substantial gap between the number of victims and the number of persecutions for these crimes. What can be done to address these issues today?

It is important to raise awareness through social media platforms and other digital channels to share information, personal stories, and statistics that shed light on these issues and encourage people to take action. Homeless individuals can be educated on human trafficking through outreach programs that provide them with resources and information about the warning signs of trafficking, ways to stay safe, and how to seek help if they suspect they or someone they know is a victim.

Legal approaches

We have a wide spectrum of international legal instruments which should be better used for the protection of human trafficking victims, including homeless people:

- **human rights**, which are applicable both in peace and war;
- **international humanitarian law** applicable in armed conflicts;
- **international criminal law** (human trafficking could qualify as a war crime or a crime against humanity);
- **refugee law**;
- as well as **labour law**, **international maritime law**, without forgetting both Palermo Protocols to the 2000 Convention against transnational organized crime.

All States Parties to the 1949 Geneva Conventions and 1977 Additional Protocols have the **individual and collective responsibility to "respect and ensure respect"** for international humanitarian law and should not forget victims of human trafficking, civilians and detainees, and wounded, too often overlooked.



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Activities by Faith-based Organizations and the Sovereign Order of Malta

Many faith-based organizations are working to combat and prevent human trafficking by addressing homelessness.

The Order of Malta contributes to the fight against human trafficking by:

- **Advocating, organizing and participating in conferences** through its bilateral (112 States) and multilateral diplomatic network.
- **Assisting victims through medical and social programs** through its National Associations and its worldwide humanitarian organization "[Malteser International](#)". In Italy, for example, the Order of Malta has organized clothing collections to distribute to homeless individuals in Rome for over 30 years. It is a service that takes place every week where members of the order are in close contact with the homeless while also providing them with assistance, companionship and information about the various risks they may face. When Australia experienced an especially harsh winter several years ago, the **Australian Association of the Order of Malta** used its '[Coats for the Homeless](#)' project to help those facing housing insecurity to stay warm. Nearly all National Associations are involved in activities on behalf of homeless people: for over 20 years the Order's Magyar Máltai Szeretetszolgálat in Hungary has been organizing the collection of clothes and their distribution to the homeless. In 2007, some 80,000 people in Hungary benefited from this social service, which operates nationwide through its 350 branches.
- **Offering a free online training course for helpers** in English, French and now in Italian and German as well, on <https://www.cuhd.org>
- **Organizing webinars on human trafficking** (www.adlaudatosi.org) with subtitles in seven languages ([Chinese](#), [English](#), [French](#), [German](#), [Italian](#), [Russian](#) and [Spanish](#)). Since October 2020, 26 webinars have been organized. The video-recordings, transcripts and handouts are freely available.



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- **Collaborating with religious leaders and faith-based organizations active in preventing and combating human trafficking, and rehabilitating victims and survivors:** [Pope Francis](#), the [Migrants and Refugee Section](#), the [Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences](#), the [Santa Marta Group](#) (Church & Law Enforcement Combatting Modern Slavery), [SOLWODI](#) (Solidarität mit Frauen in Not), [COATNET](#) (Christian Organizations fighting human trafficking), [Talitha Kum](#) (International Network Against Human Trafficking), the [Archdiocese of Sydney Anti-Slavery Taskforce](#) and the [Australian Catholic Anti-Slavery Network \(ACAN\)](#).

Geneva, 29 March 2023

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