

There Are More Slaves Today Than at Any Time in Human History

By [Terrence McNally](#), [AlterNet](#). Posted August 24, 2009. www.alternet.org/story/142171

The world suffers global recession, enormous inequity, hunger, deforestation, pollution, climate change, nuclear weapons, terrorism, etc. To those who say we're not really making progress, many might point to the fact that at least we've eliminated slavery.

But sadly that is not the truth.

One hundred forty-three years after passage of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and 60 years after Article 4 of the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights banned slavery and the slave trade worldwide, there are more slaves than at any time in human history -- 27 million.

Today's slavery focuses on big profits and cheap lives. It is not about owning people like before, but about using them as completely disposable tools for making money.

During the four years that Benjamin Skinner researched modern-day slavery, he posed as a buyer at illegal brothels on several continents, interviewed convicted human traffickers in a Romanian prison and endured giardia, malaria, dengue and a bad motorcycle accident.

But Skinner is most haunted by his experience in a brothel in Bucharest, Romania, where he was offered a young woman with Down syndrome in exchange for a used car.

Currently a fellow at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and previously a special assistant to Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, Skinner has written for *Newsweek*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Foreign Policy* and others. He was named one of *National Geographic's* Adventurers of the Year 2008. His first book, now in paperback, is [A Crime So Monstrous: Face to Face with Modern-Day Slavery](#).

Terrence McNally: What first got you interested in slavery?

Benjamin Skinner: The fuel began before I was born. The abolitionism in my blood began at least as early as the 18th century, when my Quaker ancestors stood on soapboxes in Connecticut and railed against slavery. I had other relatives that weren't Quaker, but had the same beliefs. My great-great-grandfather fought with the Connecticut artillery, believing that slavery was an abomination that could only be overturned through bloodshed.

Yet today, after the deaths of 360,000 Union soldiers, after over a dozen conventions and 300 international treaties, there are more slaves than at any point in human history.

TM: Is that raw numbers or as a percentage of the population?

BS: I want to be very clear what I mean when I say the word slavery. If you look it up in Webster's dictionary, the first definition is "drudgery or toil." It's become a metaphor for undue hardship, because we assume that once you legally abolish something, it no longer exists. But as a matter of reality for up to 27 million people in the world, slaves are those forced to work, held through fraud, under threat of violence, for no pay beyond subsistence. It's a very spare definition.

TM: Whose definition is that?

BS: Kevin Bales's. [*His Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* was nominated for the 1999 Pulitzer Prize, and he is the president of Free the Slaves] I'm glad you asked because he's not given enough credit. He originally came up with the number 27 million, and it's subsequently been buttressed by international labor organization studies. Governments will acknowledge estimates of some 12.3 million slaves in the world, but NGOs in those same countries say the numbers are more than twice as high.

Kevin did a lot of the academic work that underpinned my work. I wanted to go out and get beyond the numbers, to show what one person's slavery meant. In the process of doing that, I met hundreds of slaves and survivors.

TM: As an investigative reporter rather than an academic, you take us where the trades are made, the suffering takes place and the survivors eke out their existences.

BS: In an underground brothel in Bucharest, I was offered a young woman with the visible effect of Down syndrome. One of her arms was covered in slashes, where I can only assume she was trying to escape daily rape the only way she knew how. That young woman was offered to me in trade for a used car.

TM: This was a Romanian used car?

BS: Yes, and I knew that I could get that car for about 1,500 euros. While that may sound like a very low price for human life, consider that five hours from where I live in New York -- a three-hour flight down to Port au Prince, Haiti, and an hour from the airport -- I was able to negotiate for a 10-year-old girl for cleaning and cooking, permanent possession and sexual favors. What do you think the asking price was?

TM: I don't know ... \$7,500?

BS: They asked for \$100, and I talked them down to \$50. Now to put that in context: Going back to the time when my abolitionist ancestors were on their soapbox, in 1850, you could buy a healthy grown male for the equivalent of about \$40,000.

TM: When I first read such big numbers, I was shocked.

BS: This is not to diminish the horrors that those workers would face, nor to diminish their dehumanization one bit. It was an abomination then as it is today. But in the mid-19th century, masters viewed their slaves as an investment.

But here's the thing: When a slave costs \$50 on the street in broad daylight in Port au Prince -- by the way, this was in a decent neighborhood, everybody knew where these men were and what they did -- such people are, to go back to Kevin's term, eminently disposable in the eyes of their masters.

TM: If my reading is correct, the biggest concentrations of the slave trade are in Southeast Asia and portions of Latin America?

BS: If you were to plot slaves on the map, you'd stick the biggest number of pins in India, followed by Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan. There are arguably more slaves in India than the rest of the world combined.

And yet, if you look at international efforts or American pressure, India is largely let off the hook because Indian federal officials claim, "We have no slaves. These are just poor people. And these exploitive labor practices," -- if you're lucky enough to get that term out of them -- "are a byproduct of poverty."

Let me be clear, the end of slavery cannot wait for the end of poverty. Slavery in India is primarily generational debt bondage, people whose grandparents took a debt.

TM: To go back to the definition: Forced to work against their will with no escape.

BS: Held through fraud under threat of violence for no pay beyond subsistence. These are people that cannot walk away.

I stumbled upon a fellow in a quarry in Northern India who'd been enslaved his entire life. He had assumed that slavery at birth. His grandfather had taken a debt of 62 cents, and three generations and three slave masters later, the principal had not been paid off one bit. The family was illiterate and innumerate. This fellow, who I call Gonoo -- he asked me to protect his identity -- was still forced to work, held through fraud under threat of violence for no pay beyond subsistence.

Since he was a child, he and his family and his children, along with the rest of the enslaved villagers, took huge rocks out of the earth. They pummeled those rocks into gravel for the subgrade of India's infrastructure, which is the gleaming pride of the Indian elites.

They further pulverized that gravel into silica sand for glass. There's only one way that you turn a profit off handmade sand, and that's through slavery.

TM: Another method you describe: Someone shows up in a poverty-stricken village saying they need workers for the mines hundreds of miles away.

BS: It's a massive problem in the north of Brazil. What's tricky about this, in many cases these workers want to work. But they don't want to be forced to work under threat of violence, beaten regularly, having the women in their lives raped as a means of humiliating them, and then not being paid anything.

TM: They are transported to the mines, and when they arrive, they have a debt for that transportation, which is greater than anything they will ever be able to repay.

BS: And if they try to leave, there are men with guns. That's slavery. In the Western Hemisphere, child slavery, as we spoke of before, is most rampant in Haiti. According to UNICEF, there are 300,000 child slaves in Haiti.

TM: Does that mean in Haiti or originating in Haiti?

BS: That means within Haitian borders.

TM: So with all the poverty in Haiti, there are still people who can afford 300,000 slaves?

BS: Well if they're paying \$50.

I went back last summer with Dan Harris of ABC *Nightline*. He was pretty incredulous of my claim. In fact, it ended up taking him 10 hours from ABC's offices in Manhattan, but by the end of those 10 hours, he'd negotiated with not one, but three traffickers who'd offered him three separate girls.

As he put it, the remarkable thing is not that you can get a child for \$50, but that you can get a child for free. When you go up into these villages, you see such desperation on the parts of the parents.

I want to make clear, I never paid for human life; I never would pay for human life. I talked to too many individuals who run trafficking shelters and help slaves become survivors. They implored me, "Do not pay for human life. You will be giving rise to a trade in human misery, and as a journalist, you'll be projecting to the world that this is the way that you own the problem." If you were to buy all 300,000 child slaves in Haiti, next year, you'd have 600,000.

TM: If you were to buy the 300,000 slaves in Haiti in one fell swoop, you would be telling traders, "Hey, business is good," and so they'd grab more slaves.

BS: You're talking about introducing hard currency into a transaction that in many cases hasn't involved hard currency in the past. You're massively incentivizing a trade in human lives.

TM: These are those who practice what they call redemptions, buying slaves their freedom. Who's doing it, and what's your analysis of it?

BS: On the basis of three months spent in southern and northern Sudan, two months in southern Sudan in particular. ... There was one particular evangelical group based in Switzerland, organized and run by an American who raised cash around the States. They'd go to a Sunday School or a second-grade class in Colorado, talk about slavery, and say, "Bring us your lunch money. If you can get us \$50, we will buy a slave's freedom."

It was a very effective sales pitch. They managed to raise over \$3 million dollars by my calculations over the course of the 1990s.

In theory, they were giving money to "retrievers" who would go into northern Sudan, and through whatever means necessary, secure the slaves' freedom and bring them back down into the south.

In the context of the Sudanese civil war, slavery is used as a weapon of war by the north. Northern militias raid southern villages, and in many cases, kill the men and take the women and children as slaves and as a weapon of genocide. That much is not questioned. There is no question that these slave raids were going on.

I found that redemption on the ground was enormously problematic. There was scant oversight. They were literally giving duffel bags full of cash to factions within the rebels that were at that point resisting an ongoing peace process.

What they risked doing, whether through recklessness or through intent, was to become essentially angels of destruction at a time when a negotiated peace was just beginning to take hold. Thankfully, at this point they've scaled back the redemptions.

TM: So they were collecting money in the States to free slaves, and then funding a rebel movement in a war, and ...

BS: Potentially prolonging the war.

Thankfully, in the end, the death of rebel leader John Gurang meant that a different faction came to be more powerful. From my perspective, however, what was going on there was largely fraudulent.

I went back and asked the rebel officials, "What do you do with this money?" and they said, "We use it for the benefit of the people." Which begs the question, "But I thought this was being used to buy back slaves. I don't get it."

And they said, "Well you know, there's clothes, uniforms ..." They didn't actually say arms, but they said all sorts of things that they needed hard currency for, and this was their way of getting the cash.

I don't blame the rebels. If I were in a similar situation, I'd probably do the same thing. The most important point is this: By the merest estimates there are still some 12,000 slaves held in brutal bondage in the north of Sudan, and the government has not

arrested or prosecuted one slave raider, one slave trader, one slave master. And as long as that continues to be the situation, the government of Sudan is in gross violation of international law.

TM: How does the distinction between sexual slavery and other sorts of labor show up, and how does it matter?

BS: When we're defining slavery, fundamentally at its core it's the same in each and every circumstance. We're talking about people forced to work held through fraud, under threat of violence, for no pay beyond subsistence. If we're talking about forced commercial sexual slavery, forced prostitution, there's an added element of humiliation or shame, because we're talking about rape.

In many parts of the world and in many traditional societies, if a woman is raped it's her fault. If a woman is liberated and tries to go back to the village she comes from, she will never again lead a normal life.

I think it's safe to say even in the United States, which we assume is a much more welcoming, tolerant society, women who've been in prostitution, regardless if it's forced or not, have a difficult time leading a normal life afterward.

There is a school of thought that sexual slavery is somehow worse than other forms of slavery. I actually don't buy that. I think that all slavery is monstrous, and no one slave's emancipation should wait for that of another. At the same time, if some people are moved to fight sexual slavery and sexual trafficking at the exclusion of other forms of slavery, God bless them, as long as they're fighting slavery at the end of the day.

TM: Briefly, what is the situation in America?

BS: On average, in the past half-hour, one more person will have been trafficked to the United States into slavery. About 14,000-17,000 are trafficked into the U.S. each year and forced to work within U.S. borders under threat of violence for no pay beyond subsistence.

TM: What can people do?

BS: On a personal basis, they can support [CAST](#) (Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking) in Los Angeles. CAST has the oldest shelter in the country for trafficked women and has terrific programs that help victims of all forms of trafficking. It's a solid, mature organization.

They can also get involved with [Free the Slaves](#). And they can talk about the issue more. Barack Obama is still setting his foreign policy agenda. He needs to hear from all of us that the true abolition of slavery needs to be a part of his legacy.

Interviewer [Terrence McNally](#) hosts [Free Forum](#) on [KPFK 90.7 FM](#) in Los Angeles (streaming at [kpfk.org](#)). Visit [terrencemcnally.net](#) for podcasts of all interviews, and more.
