





What is Forced Criminality

A form of human trafficking in which individuals, often children or vulnerable persons, are coerced, deceived, or forced to commit crimes for the financial benefit of traffickers or exploiters. This can include activities such as shoplifting, pickpocketing, drug dealing, or illegal cultivation.

Forced Criminality and Legal Frameworks

While the Palermo Protocol and the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) do not explicitly list forced criminality as a form of trafficking, they are often interpreted as covering it under broader categories such as forced labor or services. By contrast, the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive 2011/36/EU explicitly includes the 'exploitation of criminal activities' within its definition of human trafficking, marking a clearer recognition of this form of exploitation.

Coercion Methods in Forced Criminality

-  **Threats and Violence:** Perpetrators may threaten the victim or their family with physical harm. Actual physical abuse or confinement can be used to enforce compliance.
-  **Debt Bondage or Financial Control:** Victims may be told they owe a debt that can only be repaid through illegal activities. Wages or basic necessities may be withheld to maintain dependence.
-  **Psychological Manipulation:** Exploiters use fear, intimidation, or emotional manipulation to control victims. Isolation from support networks and gaslighting make victims feel trapped and powerless.
-  **Legal or Social Exploitation:** Exploiters use threats of arrest, deportation, or other legal consequences to exploit victims' vulnerabilities. They also use social pressures—such as threats to relationships or reputation—to force compliance.

Common Forms of Forced Criminality

Drug related crimes

People are forced to sell, transport, or produce drugs, often by gangs or criminal networks.

Theft and petty crime

People are forced to steal money, goods, or valuables—through pickpocketing, shoplifting, or selling stolen goods—under coercion or threats.

Fraud and scams

Victims might be forced to participate in financial scams, credit card fraud, or identity theft. It can also be online scams.

Smuggling / Recruitment

Migrants are sometimes coerced into recruiting or smuggling others, often after being trafficked themselves, and sometimes as a condition for leaving their own exploitative situation.

Violence or Intimidation

In rare cases, trafficked individuals are forced to assault others or commit acts of intimidation under threat or even forced into roles as suicide bombers or soldiers by militant groups.

Forced criminality among victims of sex trafficking

People are forced to participate in multiple revenue-generating activities that are criminalized like selling drugs, thefts, "trick and roll" (robberies conducted in commercial sex), or the recruitment of other victims.

Other criminal acts

Benefit fraud, violent offenses, or recruitment of additional victims. Traffickers may also force victims to open bank accounts, take out loans, or commit fraud in their own names — often resulting in ruined credit and lifelong debt.

Scale

 **800%**

Between 2016 and 2022, detected cases of trafficking for forced criminality **increased by 800%**, rising from 1% to 8% of all human trafficking cases globally. (UNODC, 2024).

Examples



Online Scam Operations

Victims are recruited through job ads or acquaintances for supposed professional roles (e.g., in IT, HR, or hospitality). Once they arrive — often in countries like Cambodia or Myanmar — under threats, violence, and confiscation of documents, they are **compelled to work in scam centers**, conducting fraud or extortion online.



Drug Trafficking

Criminal groups exploit both nationals and migrants, unaccompanied minors or other vulnerable populations — as spotters, drug couriers and mules, as well as for cannabis cultivation, or for carrying out violent acts.

Who Is at Risk?

Forced criminality can affect anyone, but it seems to disproportionately impacts males — especially boys. In 2022 (UNODC, 2024):

- **68% of identified victims were boys**
- **24% were adult men.**

Where is this Happening?

Forced criminality has a global footprint — while cases are officially reported in only 25 countries, it is recognized as a worldwide phenomenon.

Trends to Watch

Cybercrime is the fastest-growing form of trafficking for forced criminality. Sophisticated transnational networks now operate large-scale scamming operations, exploiting thousands for financial gain.

