

Risk of forced labor is widespread in US food supply, study finds

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Eliminating forced labor is a vital starting point for creating a just and sustainable food supply, but most of us don't know much about the labor conditions involved in producing our food. It's possible that the people who picked and processed some of the items on our dinner table worked in conditions that involved force, fraud, coercion, or debt bondage.

In a study published July 24 in *Nature Food*, researchers at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University and the University of Nottingham Rights Lab calculated the risk of forced [labor](#) across all aspects of the U.S. food supply, excluding seafood.

They found that the majority of forced labor risks came from animal-based proteins, processed fruits and vegetables, and discretionary foods—products such as sweeteners, coffee, wine, and beer. They also found that 62% of the risk of forced labor came from production or processing that occurs on U.S. soil.

"We often think of our risk here in the U.S. as coming from imports, but there's plenty of risk that comes from our domestic food production as well," said Jessica Decker Sparks, VG14, assistant professor at the Friedman School and senior author on the paper. "And that's important because some of the more effective tools we use to try to eliminate or mitigate risk of forced labor in the U.S. are trade bans or trade sanctions. They're focused on imports."

News reports have highlighted documented incidents of forced labor in lower-income countries, particularly in the chocolate and coffee industries, but poverty, [language barriers](#), and precarious immigration statuses can create populations that are just as vulnerable to exploitation in the U.S. as those overseas.

Visas for seasonal agricultural laborers, for example, tie workers to a single employer who they are often dependent on for housing and transportation. Workers don't have a lot of options if an employer withholds pay or verbally, physically, or sexually abuses them. By highlighting the aspects of our food supply where the risk of forced labor is high, both domestically and abroad, the researchers hope to provide legislators and companies with the information they need to take action to prevent these kinds of abuses.

"We're talking about a systemic issue," said Nicole Tichenor Blackstone, assistant professor at the Friedman School and first and corresponding author on the paper. "This research is for policymakers to inform how we can change regulation, monitoring, and enforcement of forced labor prevention; and it's also for businesses and other supply chain actors who have the power to change conditions to mitigate risk and collaborate with workers to do so."

To calculate which areas of the food industry have the highest risk for this type of exploitation, the researchers used data from the U.S. Department of Labor and State Department as well as various reports from non-governmental organizations.

Along with study authors Bethany Jackson, senior research fellow at the University of Nottingham, and Edgar Rodríguez Huerta, research fellow at the University of Nottingham, they followed the supply chain for every land-based food commodity in the U.S., looking at each stage of production, the policies in place in various locations, and any previous reports of forced labor. They also relied on investigative journalism sources, combing through 40,000 articles on forced labor in food commodities across the world for any documented incidents that might not have been included in other reports.

They found that risk is widespread in the U.S. food system. A lot of the high-risk products are hand-picked, such as tomatoes, berries, and [citrus fruit](#), or those that require significant processing, such as boneless beef or apple juice concentrate. The goal isn't to get consumers to stop purchasing a particular food—these actions can actually hurt workers, the researchers said—but to prompt the systemic changes needed to create a food system that works for everyone.

"It's about widening the lens," Blackstone said. "We want to broaden the conversation to make sure we're not just focusing on our own health as

individuals, but also the health and well-being of people working to bring food to our tables."

The researchers stressed that efforts should be on guaranteeing decent work—not just eliminating forced labor, the most extreme version of worker exploitation. In the U.S., worker-driven social responsibility programs such as [Milk with Dignity](#) and the [Fair Food Program](#) have made marked improvements in labor conditions at participating dairy and produce operations. They provide a model that could potentially be replicated and scaled up to help eliminate exploitative practices across other food industries.

"Risk assessments are just one part of the package," Decker Sparks said. "We need to look at strategies for how we respond, but also how we prevent the problem. And that's going to require something much more transformative and directly driven by workers."

More information: Nicole Tichenor Blackstone, Forced labour risk is pervasive in the US land-based food supply, *Nature Food* (2023). DOI: [10.1038/s43016-023-00794-x](https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-023-00794-x).
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