

Wikipedia – Sweatshops

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sweatshop>

## INTRODUCTION

A **sweatshop** is a working environment with conditions that are considered by many people of industrialized nations to be difficult or dangerous, usually where the workers have few opportunities to address their situation. This can include exposure to harmful materials, hazardous situations, extreme temperatures, or abuse from employers. Sweatshop workers often work long hours for little pay, regardless of any laws mandating overtime pay or a minimum wage. Child labor laws may also be violated.

Although often associated with poor [developing countries](#), sweatshops may exist in any country. Sweatshops have existed in several different countries and cultures, including in the [United States](#) and [Europe](#). Sweatshops usually employ low levels of technology, but may produce many different goods, for example, toys, shoes, clothing, and furniture.

Some economists, such as [Paul Krugman](#)<sup>[1]</sup> and [Johan Norberg](#)<sup>[2]</sup> have defended the existence of sweatshops. They state that sweatshops provide a livelihood and employment opportunities to those who would otherwise have had worse alternatives.

## HISTORY

While many workplaces through history may have been relatively crowded, dangerous, low-paying, and without job security, the concept of a sweatshop has its origins between 1830 and 1850 as a specific type of workshop in which a certain type of middleman, the *sweater*, directed others in *garment making* (the process of producing clothing), under arduous conditions. The terms *sweater* for the middleman and *sweating system* for the process of subcontracting piecework were used in early critiques like [Charles Kingsley](#)'s *Cheap Clothes and Nasty*, written in 1850. The workplaces created for the sweating system were called *sweatshops*, and variously comprised workplaces of only a few workers, or as many as 100 or more.

In the sweatshop of 1850, the role of the sweater as middleman and subcontractor (or sub-subcontractor) was considered key, because he served to keep workers isolated in small workshops. This isolation made workers unsure of their supply of work, and unable to organize against their true employer through collective bargaining. Instead, tailors or other clothing retailers would subcontract tasks to the sweater, who in turn might subcontract to another sweater, who would ultimately engage workers at a [piece rate](#) for each article of clothing or seam produced. Many critics asserted that the middleman made his profit by finding the most desperate workers, often women and children, who could be paid an absolute minimum. While workers who produced many pieces could earn more, less productive workers earned so little that critics termed their pay *starvation wages*. Employment was risky: injured or sick workers would be quickly replaced by others.

Between 1850 and 1900, sweatshops attracted the rural poor to rapidly-growing cities, and attracted immigrants to places like [East London, England](#) and [New York City's](#) garment district, located near the [tenements](#) of New York's [Lower East Side](#). Wherever they were located, sweatshops also attracted critics and labor leaders who cited them as crowded, poorly ventilated, and prone to fires and [rat](#) infestations, since much of the work was done by many people crowded into small tenement rooms.

In a report issued in 1994, the United States [Government Accountability Office](#) found that there were still thousands of sweatshops in the United States, using a definition of a *sweatshop* as any "employer that violates more than one federal or state labor law governing minimum wage and overtime, child labor, industrial [homework](#), occupational safety and health, workers' compensation, or industry registration"[2]. This recent definition eliminates any historical distinction about the role of a middleman or the items produced, and focuses on the legal standards of developed country workplaces. An area of controversy between supporters of [outsourcing](#) production to the [Third World](#) and the anti-sweatshop movement is whether such standards can or should be applied to the workplaces of the developing world.

Sweatshops are also sometimes implicated in [human trafficking](#) when workers have been tricked into starting work without [informed consent](#), or when workers are kept at work through [debt bondage](#) or mental duress, all of which are more likely in cases where the workforce is drawn from children or the uneducated rural poor. Because they often exist in places without effective workplace safety or environmental laws, sweatshops sometimes injure their workers or the environment at greater rates than would be acceptable in developed countries. Sometimes [penal labor](#) facilities (employing prisoners) are grouped under the sweatshop label.

Sweatshops have proved a difficult issue to resolve because their roots lie in the conceptual foundations of the world economy. Developing countries like [India](#), [China](#), [Vietnam](#), [Bangladesh](#) and [Honduras](#) encourage the [outsourcing](#) of work from the developed world to factories within their borders in order to provide employment for their people and profits to their employers. The shift of production to developing countries is part of the process known as [globalization](#), but may also be described as [neoliberal globalization](#) to emphasize the role that [free market economics](#) plays in outsourcing.