

# The Hidden Costs of Cheap Clothes

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From fast food to “fast fashion,” Americans are addicted to cheap prices and throw-away goods.

Based on the previous U.S. Census figures, apparel is the second-biggest consumer sector, after food, and we are spending \$282 billion on new clothes annually. The price of clothes dropped by about 25% from 1992 to 2002, so you might think we would be spending less on clothes. But Americans keep buying more. By 2002, consumers were buying 75 or more items per person per year (and it has increased since then).

Every year, Americans buy 40 T-shirts per household, and 94% are imported. The average

American then *discards* nearly 70 pounds of clothing and other textiles each year, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Ten million tons of thrown-away clothes and textiles tossed in U.S. landfills every year damage the environment. But even more serious harm is done in the fiber production, dyeing, and manufacturing processes. Cotton growing, in particular, uses tremendous amounts of water, weed killer, and pesticides. (More than half of the irrigated land in the world is planted in cotton.)

Cheap prices of clothes don't reflect the environmental costs of textile and apparel manufacturing,

or the health costs to workers in other countries. Ground water for farming and drinking water are being polluted in many towns in southern India. Significantly higher than normal occurrences of certain cancers in China appear to be caused by the harmful “micro-environments” (or factories) in which Chinese workers produce the millions of pieces of cheap clothing that Americans buy. There is frightening information available about processes used for all



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fibers, but the bottom line is that almost all textile production has a harmful impact on the environment.

### Unintended consequences

It's hard for us as consumers to understand what harm we are doing when we take advantage of super buys at the big box stores (like WalMart) in our country. Most of us would never intentionally harm others. Yet the prices we pay for new cheap clothes do not provide for a living wage for workers, many of whom are children, who labor very long hours, in unsafe conditions to satisfy our desire to buy cheap new clothes. The prices we pay do not provide for environmental clean-up of waters and soils polluted by the textile production processes. Most importantly, the prices we pay do not provide for the healthcare of overseas workers who get sick from the unhealthy factory conditions and the polluted drinking water full of textile dyes from factories near their homes.

Global competition in the garment industry means poor working conditions for many laborers in developing nations. In Bangladesh, a child laborer works for 10 hours a day to earn the equivalent of one U.S. dollar. Some Chinese workers, who export 30% of world apparel, make as little as 12-18 cents per hour in poor conditions.

### What can we do?

Thrift stores are good for recycling clothing, but they represent only a tiny fraction of total sales – less than five percent of the market for new goods. Most donated clothes eventually are baled, shipped, and sold to impoverished countries.

By some estimates, 60% of the energy used in the life cycle of a cotton T-shirt is related to how we handle it once it's in our homes – washing and drying at high temperatures. As consumers, we can “go green” by using detergents that work well at lower temperatures, air-drying instead of machine-drying, extending the usable life of garments, buying fewer and more durable garments, and recycling into the used clothing market.

It's also difficult to imagine how we can make a difference with large corporations whose controlling principle is profit. But Margaret Mead, a renowned anthropologist, said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” There are many organizations working to improve conditions for workers and protection for the environment. Here are just a few you might want to research:

- **THE CLEAN CLOTHES CAMPAIGN:** dedicated to empowering workers in the global garment and sportswear industries;
- **THE ECUMENICAL COUNCIL FOR CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY:** a church-based investor and member coalition working for economic justice, environmental stewardship, and corporate responsibility;
- **THE ETHICAL TRADING INITIATIVE:** an alliance striving to improve the lives of working people who make consumer goods; and
- **THE FAIR TRADE CENTER:** works to increase awareness of social and environmental responsibility.

Consumer awareness and joining with others to hold corporations accountable may be the best hope for sustainability in the fashion industry. In other words, we need to learn as much as we can about the unintended consequences of our passion for fashion. And we need to act on what we learn.



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**Sources:** “Dress for Excess: The Cost of Our Clothing Addiction,” by Stan Cox, <[www.alternet.org](http://www.alternet.org)>; “Waste Couture: Environmental Impact of the Clothing Industry,” Luz Claudio, *Environmental Health Perspectives* 115.