

# Your Clothes BY THE NUMBERS

## 20 billion

NUMBER of garments  
Americans buy in a year.

SOURCE: OVERDRESSED

## 2%

PERCENTAGE of clothes sold in the U.S.  
that are made in the U.S.

SOURCE: OVERDRESSED

## \$73 billion

VALUE of clothes imported  
into the U.S. in 2012.

SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

## 10 pounds

WEIGHT of clothes  
thrown away, on average, by  
each American in a year.

SOURCE: ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

## 80%

PERCENTAGE decline in American  
garment workers in the past 20 years.  
The number has shrunk  
from 900,000 to 150,000.

SOURCE: BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS



**Bangladesh:** Digging through the rubble of a clothing factory that collapsed in April, killing 1,127 workers



**China:** Making cotton shirts for retailers like Banana Republic and J. Crew

graduated in June from Brooklyn Technical High School in New York City. "The main issue is affordability."

Americans love to shop, and for many, like Aye, the most important considerations are price and style. But some are now taking a harder look at where, how, and under what conditions their clothes are produced.

Much of the questioning stems from a disaster last April a world away in Bangladesh. A factory building collapsed, killing more than 1,100 workers and injuring 2,500 more. The workers had been making clothes to sell in the United States and Europe for companies like Benetton and Children's Place. Investigators later discovered that the

building owner had illegally added extra floors and allowed the factories inside to install heavy equipment that the building wasn't strong enough to support.

The deadliest accident in the history of the garment industry, the Bangladesh collapse has led to calls for greater safeguards for workers in third-world countries, where most of the clothes we wear are made.

"Consumers are definitely hooked on walking into a store and buying something cheap and trendy," says Elizabeth Cline, author of *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*. "But more people are beginning to realize there are some hidden costs."

Some industry observers have dubbed today's clothing market "fast fashion."

Clothes are produced so rapidly—a design can go from sketch to store shelves in a few weeks—and can be manufactured so inexpensively that brands can churn out whole new collections month to month.

### Cheaper Labor, Lower Prices

Until the 1970s, most of the clothes Americans wore were made in the U.S. That's when clothing production, like a lot of manufacturing, including cars and electronics, began shifting overseas where labor costs were much lower. As recently as 1990, 50 percent of the clothes sold in the U.S. were made in the U.S. Now, it's just 2 percent.

Today, most U.S. clothing companies manufacture their merchandise in

# The Triangle Disaster

How a fire a century ago at a New York factory changed U.S. labor laws

The fire that broke out on March 25, 1911, at the Triangle Waist Company factory in New York City lasted only half an hour. But it killed 146 people and had an enormous impact on the nation.

Fed by oily floors and bins full of flammable material, the fire spread quickly through the factory where young immigrants made blouses. There was no sprinkler system. Many burned to death behind locked exit doors. Others plunged to the ground when a rusty fire escape collapsed. More than 50 workers had no alternative but to jump from a ninth-floor window as a crowd below looked on in horror.

The Triangle factory fire was one of the deadliest workplace disasters in American history.

"It was an incredibly galvanizing event for the nation's labor movement and the rights of workers," says Bruce Raynor, former president of Workers United, which represents garment workers. "After Triangle, people were

countries like China, Bangladesh, and Vietnam, where factory workers earn a fraction of what U.S. workers make. Cheaper labor costs mean lower prices for shoppers and higher profits for retailers. That's helped make fashion a multi-billion-dollar global industry. And it's changed the way Americans shop.

In the late 1920s, the average middle-class woman owned nine outfits, rotating them until they wore out. As recently as the 1980s, most Americans bought new clothes two or three times a year as the seasons changed. But by introducing new items continually, stores lured customers into making more frequent purchases. By 1991, Americans were buying about 34 pieces of clothing a year, says Cline.

Since then, U.S. consumption of clothes has doubled: Today Americans buy on average 68 garments and eight



Battling the Triangle fire on March 25, 1911

so shocked, not only by the terrible disaster, but by the drama of these young immigrant women who were treated as less than human."

Within a few years of the Triangle fire, New York passed 36 safety laws, spurring other states to do the same. By 1938, Congress had banned child labor, set a national minimum wage, and guaranteed overtime pay.

pairs of shoes per year. At the same time, the cost of clothing has plummeted. Americans today devote about 3 percent of their spending to clothes, compared with 7 percent 40 years ago.

"Clothing has gone from a long-term investment purchase to a disposable good," says Cline. "Fast fashion has a lot of parallels to fast food. It's a similar psychology to the dollar menu at McDonald's: You go in all the time for a quick, cheap fix."

At the same time, the shift in manufacturing to developing countries has provided jobs to millions of poor people in third world nations. Many of those factory workers toil in "sweatshops" under unsafe or difficult conditions and for little

**Fast fashion is like fast food. You go in all the time for a quick, cheap fix.**

pay, at least by Western standards. On the other hand, factory jobs provide many people—often rural women living in terrible poverty—with their first paychecks; in China, jobs like this have enabled more than 200 million people to move into the middle class in the last decade.

China is the world's biggest ready-to-wear clothing producer, but it has lost business over the past few years as its workers' paychecks have grown. The average clothing factory worker in China now makes \$1.26 an hour; in nearby Cambodia a garment worker makes 52 cents. (In the U.S. the minimum hourly wage is \$7.25.) That savings has led major retailers, including Gap, Benetton, and Sears, to shift some business to Thailand, Indonesia, and Bangladesh.

## \$2 a Day in Bangladesh

With 5,000 garment factories employing more than 4.5 million people, Bangladesh is now the world's second-leading clothing exporter, after China. Its low wages and loose regulation have helped it attract billions of dollars in orders from Western retailers.

Bangladesh has seen some of the worst practices in the global garment industry. Wages are the lowest in the world, starting at roughly \$37 a month,

or about \$2 a day. Factory conditions are often unsafe, and workers are forced to work long hours.

After the factory collapse, Bangladesh's government launched strict inspections and announced plans to raise the minimum wage.

"We're hoping this will be a game-changer in the way that the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire was in the United States," says Sally Greenberg, executive director of the National Consumers League, a consumer and workers rights group, referring to the 1911 fire in a New York City garment factory (*see box*).

Bangladeshi officials warn, however, against drastic changes that might damage Bangladesh's economy.