

Conscientious objection to conscription: a review of the current situation worldwide

What is conscription?

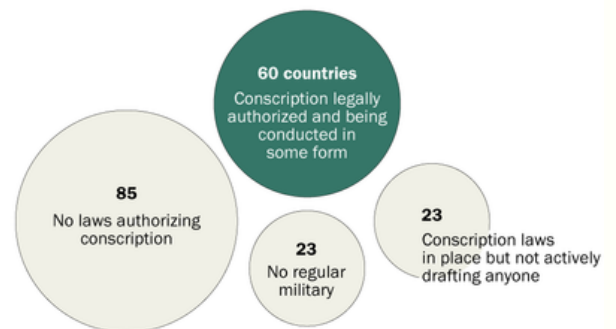
Compulsory military service, or conscription, is when citizens of a country are required by law to spend a certain amount of time in military training / military service.

How many countries have compulsory military service / conscription?

In 2019 the Pew Research Center produced this diagram showing that 60 countries had active conscription and a further 23 countries had conscription laws in place but were not actively drafting anyone (1).

The remaining 108 countries had no conscription. Of these, 85 had armed forces but no conscription and 23 had no regular military forces at all.

Fewer than a third of the world's countries draft people into their militaries



Note: Excludes five countries where the central government lacks monopoly on legitimate use of force or where conscription status is unclear.
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data.



Which countries have conscription?

This map shows the status of military conscription in different countries around the world in 2020. The 'No enforced conscription' category includes countries with no conscription and those which have conscription on the law books but are not currently drafting anyone (2).

How does conscription vary between countries?

The details of compulsory military service vary between countries, e.g. whether it is men only or men and women, the age at which citizens are required to do their military service, the length of service etc. Some countries may have *selective conscription* when all eligible citizens are required to register for military service but only some are selected to do it. Conscription laws may apply in wartime and in peacetime, or just in wartime. Countries with a conscription law may also vary in how strictly they apply it:

'Despite the fact that Senegal has had a law on conscription since it became independent, usually this law is not applied. In general, Senegal's army is made up of volunteers, who can join at the age of 18' (3).

Where is the right to conscientious objection recognised?

The right to conscientious objection to military service is recognised in some countries which have conscription, but not all. Conscience has produced a detailed information table for each continent, listing whether countries have compulsory or voluntary military service (or none), whether the right to conscientious objection has been recognised, and giving further details of the situation in each country (3,4,5,6,7).

Looking at these tables it is clear that situations in countries vary, and are not necessarily static. Compulsory military service may be suspended or abolished and the right to conscientious objection suspended or abolished with it. Equally there have been countries where conscription has been re-introduced after a few years or introduced for the first time:

'Sweden has reintroduced conscription for all; Ukraine, Georgia, Lithuania and Kuwait have reintroduced conscription for men after short hiatuses; Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have introduced conscription for the first time' (8).

How do conscientious objectors' experiences vary?

Conscientious objectors from different countries may have different experiences:

In Algeria 'conscientious objectors are considered deserters and they can be imprisoned for 30 days in a military prison. Then, when they are released, they are automatically drafted for military service. They could be in the military for up to two years' (3).

'Australia has a law (from 1903) recognising the right of conscientious objection. Interpretation of this right has been evolving since then, and including other motivations as well as religious ones. However, there is no recognition for selective conscientious objection yet (objection to participation in a specific war)' (7).

'Since 2019 there has been an option in Turkey to pay in order to avoid military service. Conscientious objection is not recognised. Those who declare themselves as conscientious objectors are prosecuted. They can be imprisoned and they face a "civil death" where they are excluded from all social, cultural and economic life. As a result many conscientious objectors decide to leave the country' (6).