



# Children Affected by Armed Conflict, 1990–2016

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Conflict Trends Project  
[www.prio.org/ConflictTrends](http://www.prio.org/ConflictTrends)

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This policy brief represents the first attempt to map the number of children living in conflict settings around the world. More than half of the world's children live in a conflict-ridden country, and more worryingly, one in six children lives very close to a conflict zone – that is, less than 50 km from where the actual fighting takes place. However, we lack sufficient data to tell us much about how these children are impacted by conflict. More resources should be invested in collecting and managing systematic data on the various ways in which these children are directly affected by armed conflict, such as through killing and maiming, child soldier recruitment, and sexual exploitation.

## Brief Points

- In 2016, approximately 1.35 billion children under the age of 18 (59% of all children) were living in a conflict-affected country.
- In 2016, approximately 357 million children (1 out of 6) were living in a conflict zone.
- In 2016, approximately 165 million children were living in high intensity conflict zones, i.e. conflicts with more than 1,000 battle-related deaths.
- The number of children living in conflict zones has been steadily increasing since the year 2000.
- Asia is the world region with the highest total number of children living in conflict zones.
- The Middle East is the world region in which a child has the highest probability of living in a conflict zone.

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## The Knowledge Gap

Since the mid-1990s, the issue of war's impact on children has been high on the international agenda. Despite this continued interest among policy-makers, there is a lack of high-quality, systematic evidence regarding the direct and indirect effects of armed conflict on children.

There is currently no systematic and detailed information on the numbers of children killed in armed conflict. However, we can say something more certain about the number of children that live in conflict-affected areas, or 'conflict zones'. This is an important indicator, because children living in conflict zones often lack access to education and health facilities, and they are more exposed to various forms of violence.

This policy brief summarizes the key findings from a mapping exercise of children living in conflict zones that was conducted for a recent background report on children and armed conflict, commissioned by *Save the Children*. The indicator of children living in conflict zones is the first measure that can provide a systematic spatial and temporal measure of the children-conflict nexus. While it does not inform us directly of the many harms that befall children in conflict (such as direct killing and maiming, sexual violence, and child soldiering), it is an important first step in assessing how many children are at risk of falling prey to such harms.

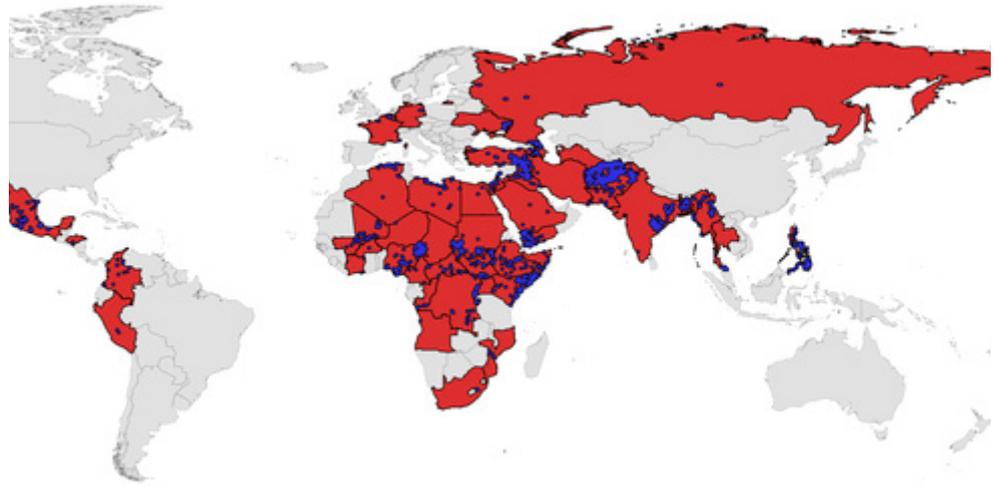


Figure 1: Conflict-affected countries and conflict zones, 2016. Created by authors based on UCDP GED dataset (Sundberg & Melander, 2013; Croicu & Sundberg, 2017).

## How Many Children Live in Conflict-Affected Countries?

The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) defines armed conflict as 'armed force used by an organized actor against another organized actor, or against civilians, resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year' (Croicu and Sundberg, 2017). Conflicts usually consist of several individual incidents or events of lethal violence that occur at a given time and place.

As a starting point, we estimated the number of children living in countries that experienced at

least one lethal conflict event, as defined by the UCDP Georeferenced Events Dataset (UCDP GED), in a given year.

According to our estimates, about 942 million children (aged 0–18) were living in peaceful countries in 2016, whereas the rest – **1.35 billion children (59% of all the world's children) – were living in conflict-affected countries.**

However, this does not necessarily imply that all these children were affected by armed conflict in 2016. In fact, armed conflict very rarely engulfs an entire country. Most often, the actual

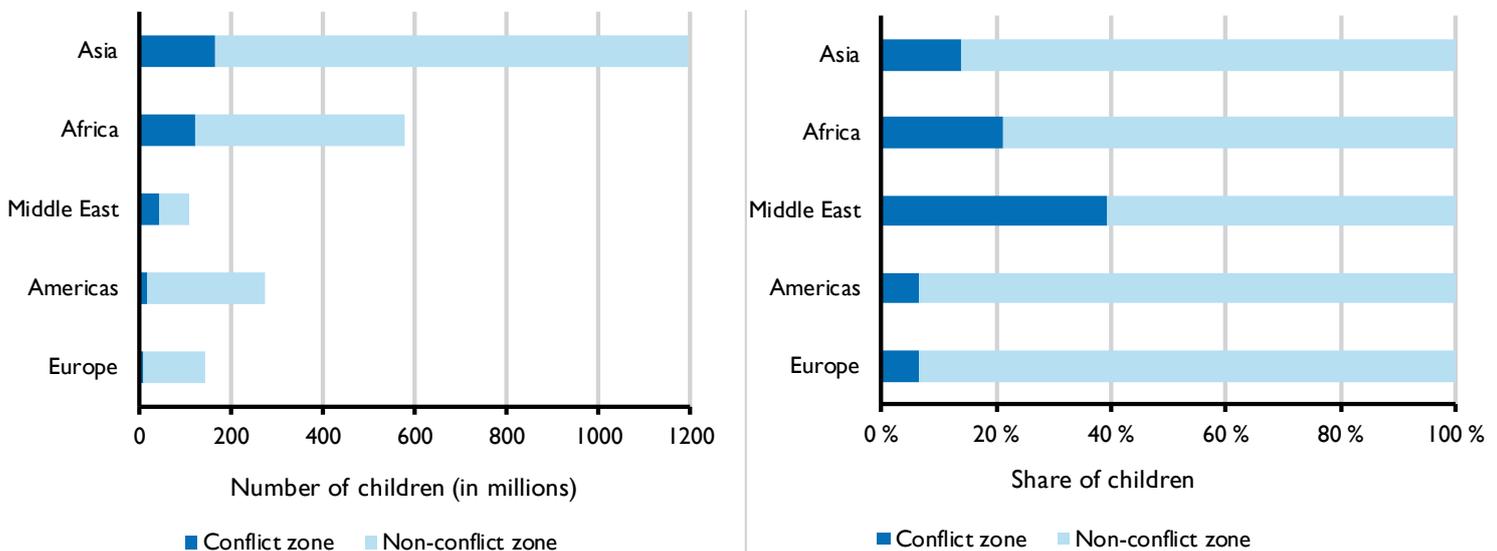


Figure 2: Numbers and shares of children living in conflict zones 2016, by world region. (A) Children affected by conflict (left), (B) Share of children affected (right). Source: Authors' calculation based on UCDP GED dataset, Gridded Population of the World (GPW) v3, (CIESIN, 2005) and World Population Prospects (UN, 2017).

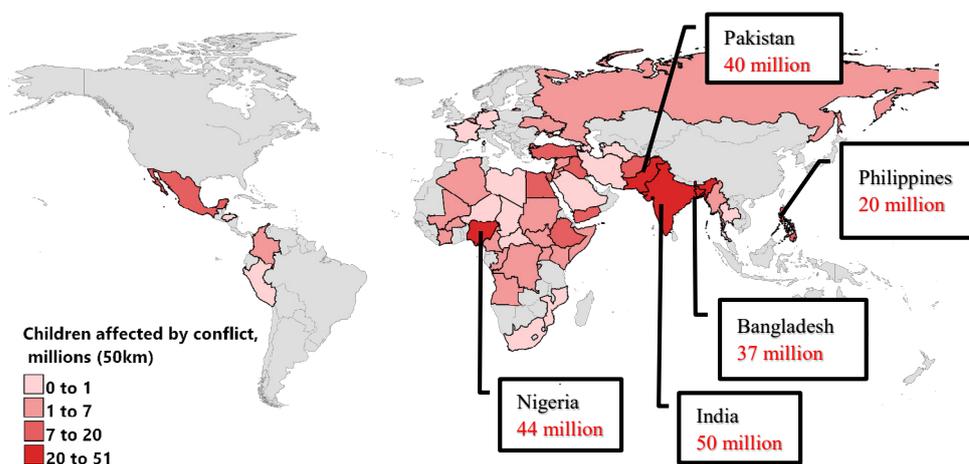


Figure 3: Estimated number of children living in conflict zones, 2016. Source data: UCDP GED dataset, Gridded Population of the World (GPW) v3, (CIESIN, 2005) and World Population Prospects (UN, 2017).

fighting is confined to smaller areas. For instance, the Boko Haram insurgency has taken place primarily in the northern parts of Nigeria, and the conflict between the Iraqi government and Islamic State occurred in Sunni-majority regions. Hence, in order to get a better sense of the number of children affected by armed conflict, we need to consider exactly where within countries the actual fighting is taking place.

### How Many Children Live in Conflict Zones?

So, which areas within countries are affected by conflict? The UCDP GED dataset provides detailed information on the location of each separate conflict event or incidence of organized violence, including the geographical coordinates for each individual event. For each of these conflict event locations, we draw circles, or ‘buffer zones’, with a 50 km radius around each conflict event. The rationale for this is that this is arguably a reasonable distance within which conflict events could be expected to impact people’s daily lives.

The map in Figure 1 overlays the conflict-affected countries (marked in red) with the conflict zones (marked in blue) that show where actual fighting took place in 2016. The red color indicates that at least one conflict was going on in the country, while the blue color indicates conflict areas defined as 50 km buffer zones around all UCDP GED events. As shown in the map, with few exceptions, the conflicts are usually concentrated in limited geographical areas within countries.

In order to estimate the number of children affected by conflict, we use local population estimates from CIESIN (2005) and the UN (2017) to estimate how many children under the age of 18 live within these conflict zones.

According to our estimates, out of all the children in the world, about **357 million children (approximately 16%, or 1 in every 6 children) were living in conflict zones in 2016.**

### Regional Patterns

Where are the 357 million conflict-affected children located? As shown in Figure 2 (A), the world region with the most conflict-affected children is Asia, where some 166 million children live in conflict zones. This represents almost half of all conflict-affected children globally. Africa comes in second in this unpleasant ranking, with almost 121 million children living in conflict zones. The corresponding numbers for the Middle East, the Americas, and Europe respectively are 42, 18, and 9 million. However, although Asia is the world region with the highest number of children living in conflict zones, this does not mean that the conflict risk for children is highest in Asia. These numbers must be considered relative to the overall regional population size.

Figure 2 (B) shows the proportion of children in each world region that were living in a conflict zone in 2016. As the figure shows, although Asia has the largest number of children living in conflict zones, the relative share of children living in conflict zones vis-à-vis children

in peaceful areas within the region is higher in both the Middle East and Africa. The figure shows that the Middle East is the region in which the share of conflict-affected children is the highest relative to the overall population size in the region, at approximately 39%. In other words, **in the Middle East, nearly 2 out of every 5 children were living in conflict zones in 2016.** For Africa, 21%, or more than 1 in every 5 children, were living in conflict zones. For Asia, Europe, and the Americas, the corresponding shares were 14%, 7%, and 6%, respectively.

There are also large variations within world regions. Figure 3 indicates which countries have the highest absolute number of children living in conflict zones. These are also the countries with the highest overall population. We see that most of these countries are situated in Asia. India has the highest number, with more than 50 million children living in conflict zones, followed by Nigeria, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Philippines. Together, these five countries are home to more than half (57%) of all the children that lived in conflict zones in 2016.

### Time Trends

The number of children living in conflict zones has increased over time since the end of the Cold War, although the number of countries with armed conflicts has remained quite stable. While the number of affected children was at its lowest in the early- and mid-1990s at around 200 million, it is now at a high of more than 300 million, an increase of more than 50% from the 1990s.

### Conflict Intensity

Figure 4 depicts the numbers of children living in conflict zones by the total intensity level of the conflict in the country over time. Low intensity is defined as less than 25 battle-related deaths, medium intensity is defined as 25–999 battle deaths, and high intensity is defined as 1,000 or more battle-deaths in a country-year. Although the number of children living in conflict zones has increased steadily from 1990 to 2005, the proportion of children in each of the three intensity-levels did not change dramatically during that time period. While alarming in and of themselves, the numbers and proportions of children living in conflict zones do not provide the full picture of the extent to which children are affected by armed conflict. The level of conflict intensity varies a great deal between and across conflict zones. What is the overall situation for the 357 million children

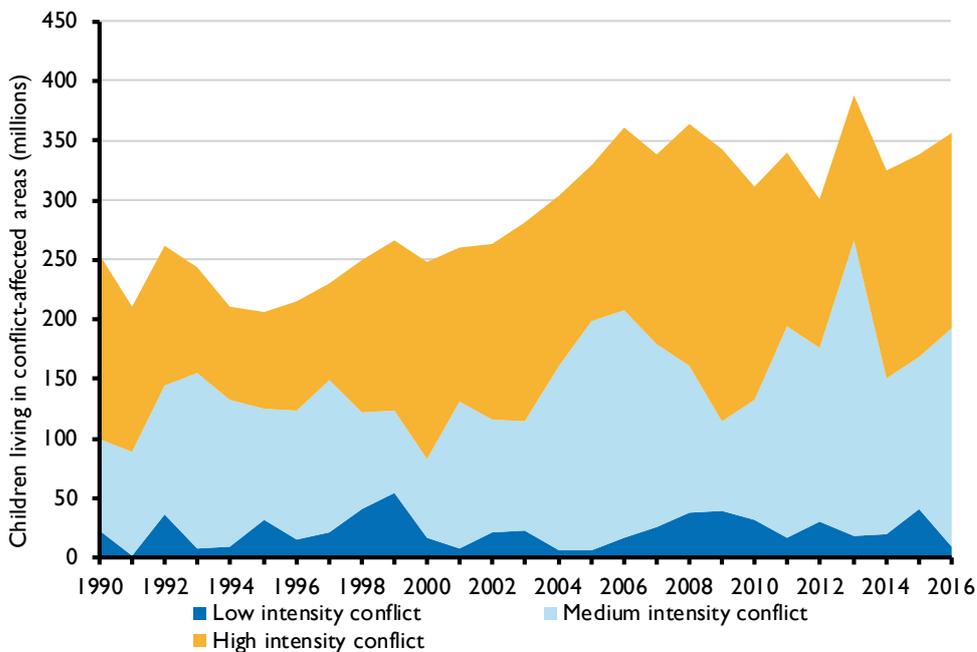


Figure 4: Children living in conflict-affected zones, by conflict intensity, 1990–2016. Source data: UCDP GED dataset, Gridded Population of the World (GPW) v3, (CIESIN, 2005) and World Population Prospects (UN, 2017).

worldwide that live in conflict-affected areas with regard to conflict intensity and how has the situation developed over time?

In 2016, a little under half (46.2%) of the children living in conflict zones lived in high intensity conflict zones with more than 1,000 battle-related deaths in a year.

#### Indirect vs. Direct Harm

While the number of children living in conflict zones can inform us about how many children can be considered “at risk” of conflict-related harm, we lack precise data on the actual harms committed against children during conflict, such as the number of children killed. One notable exception is the annual reports of the

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UN Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict that report on the killing and maiming of children in conflict for a select number of countries from 2005–2016. While useful, these data are not collected in a manner that is systematic enough to make it the subject of rigorous large-n analysis. Hence, one of the main challenges going forward in addressing the question of how armed conflict impacts children is to produce more systematic and detailed data on the harms that befall children in conflict (for example, on the number of conflict casualties that are children).

#### Policy Recommendations

Our initial mapping of children in conflict-affected areas has several implications for policy

### THE PROJECT

The Conflict Trends project aims to answer questions related to the causes of, consequences of and trends in conflict. This policy brief is based on a larger background paper on armed conflict and children led by Gudrun Østby, that PRIO has prepared for Save the Children’s flagship report, *The War on Children*. This research was funded by Save the Children.

and further research. First, there is an urgent need to protect the more than 350 million children that currently live in conflict zones. Concrete recommendations in this regard include the following:

- Supporting high-quality peacekeeping operations in conflict-affected areas.
- Designing and upholding credible sanctions against armed groups during conflicts to prevent child soldiering and the use of sexual violence against children.
- Increasing aid to conflict-affected countries in order to rebuild infrastructure and health systems that benefit children.

Equally important is the fact that the actors who actively work to address and reduce the impact of war on children need to **support the generation of more systematic knowledge on the various ways in which children are affected by armed conflict**. This includes data on how children are both directly impacted by conflict through killing and maiming, child soldier recruitment, and sexual exploitation, as well as how they are indirectly impacted through adverse health effects. In short, more resources should be invested in generating and managing data related to children and armed conflict across time and space. ■

#### Further Reading

Bahgat, Karim, Kendra Dupuy, Gudrun Østby, Siri Aas Rustad, Håvard Strand & Tore Wig (2018) ‘Children and Armed Conflict: What Existing Data Can Tell Us.’ Background report for Save the Children’s Global Flagship Report on Children in Armed Conflict, ‘Protecting Children in War’. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo.

Save the Children (2018) *The War on Children: Time to End Grave Violations against Children in Conflict*. Available at: [www.savethechildren.net/waronchildren/](http://www.savethechildren.net/waronchildren/).

### PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.