While armed conflicts and crises affect people of all ages, children are particularly susceptible to the effects of violent conflict. This policy brief provides updated figures on the numbers of children at risk from violent conflict around the world. In 2020, more than two thirds of the world’s children were living in a conflict-ridden country. Approximately 452 million children – more than one in six – were living less than 50 km from where the actual fighting took place. Despite improved population data, we still need more systematic knowledge on how these children are both directly and indirectly affected by armed conflict, such as through killing and maiming, child soldier recruitment, sexual exploitation, denial of humanitarian access, and poor health conditions.

**Brief Points**

- The number of children living in conflict zones has been increasing since 2000.
- In 2020, 1.6 billion children (68%) were living in a conflict-affected country.
- Approximately 452 million children (over one in six) were living in a conflict zone in 2020. This constitutes a 5% increase from 2019.
- In 2020, Asia was the world region with the highest total number of children living in conflict zones (184 million children). Africa had slightly less with 182 million.
- The Middle East continued to have the highest share of children living in conflict zones relative to the total child population (34%).

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Increased Attention to Children in Conflict

Amid the global Covid-19 pandemic, armed conflicts and crises continue to affect people of all ages. Children are particularly susceptible to the detrimental effects of war. Since the mid-1990s, the issue of war’s impact on children has been high on the international agenda. In 2005, the United Nations Security Council established a working group on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) to address issues related to children in armed conflict situations and to recommend methods of protecting children impacted by armed conflicts. A Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) was introduced to systematically monitor, document and report on six types of grave violations committed against children in situations of concern around the world. Although it is of course extremely valuable that the UN collects data on this problem, it does not include all conflict-affected countries in its data. Furthermore, the UN’s information varies greatly in specificity and accuracy.

In short, despite this continued interest among policymakers, we still lack systematic and detailed information on the numbers of children killed in armed conflict worldwide. However, we can say something more confident and systematic about the number of children who 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 are more exposed to various forms of violence.

This policy brief summarizes the key findings from the fifth annual update of a mapping exercise of children living in conflict zones, commissioned by Save the Children. The indicator of children living in conflict zones is the first measure to provide a systematic spatial and temporal measure of the children–conflict nexus, and the current update to the data series now includes the year 2020. In addition to new data on armed conflict for 2020, we also calculate the number of children living close to high-intensity conflict zones, i.e. children living within 50 km of areas where more than 1,000 people were killed within one year. We furthermore calculate the number of children living in areas that have seen continuous conflict over several years.

How Many Children Live in Conflict-Affected Countries?

In order to estimate the number of children worldwide who are affected by armed conflict, we first need a definition of the latter. 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’. 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 conflict event, as defined by the UCDP Georeferenced Events Dataset (UCDP GED), in a given year. According to our estimates, about 750 million children (aged 0–18) were living in peaceful countries in 2020, whereas the rest – 1.6 billion children (68% of all the world’s children) – were living in conflict-affected countries. This is about the same level as in 2019.

How Many Children Live in Conflict Zones?

In order to provide estimates for the number of children living in conflict zones, we need to isolate the geographical areas within countries that are affected by conflict. The UCDP GED 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 50 km 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 yellow) with the conflict zones (marked in orange) that show where actual fighting took place in 2020. 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 and the UN 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 452 million children (more than 19%, or more than one in six) were living in conflict zones in 2020. This is an increase of approximately 5%, or 23 million children more than in 2019.

Regional Differences

Where were all of the 452 million conflict-affected children in 2020 located? As shown in Figure 2A, Asia was the world region with the most conflict-affected children, with almost 185 million children living in conflict zones. Africa follows right behind, with almost 183 million children living in conflict zones. The corresponding 2020 numbers for the Americas, the Middle East, and Europe respectively are approximately 45, 30, and 9 million.

However, in order to capture the regional risk of children, these numbers must be considered relative to the overall regional population size. Figure 2B shows the proportion of children in each world region that were living in a conflict zone in 2020. As the figure shows, although Asia had the largest number of children living
in conflict zones in 2020, the relative share of children living in conflict zones vis-à-vis children in peaceful areas was higher in the Middle East. Here, the share of conflict-affected children was the highest relative to the overall population size in the region, at approximately 34%. In other words, in the Middle East, more than one in three children were living in conflict zones in 2020. This is a decrease from the situation in 2019, when about 39% of Middle Eastern children were living in conflict zones.

Time Trends and Conflict Intensity

According to the latest data updates, the number of children living in conflict zones has increased from 429 million in 2019 to an all-time high of 452 million. Despite some variation from year to year, the number of children living in conflict zones has generally increased over time since the end of the Cold War, as shown in Figure 3. The figure also shows the number of individual conflict events over time. We see a sharp increase in the number of conflict events in 2012; however, a similar parallel increase cannot be found in the number of children at risk. This suggests that the increase in conflict events is mainly happening in areas that are already experiencing conflict, which does not expose a higher number of children to conflict. This increase is also due to a rise in non-state conflicts, which often occur in countries with already ongoing conflicts. However, although there is no sharp increase in the number of children exposed to conflict, the increase in conflict events suggests that those at risk experience more (severe) conflict. In the latter years we see the trends of conflict events and affected children going in opposite directions, with a higher number of children being affected by a lower number of events. This is likely due to the fact that conflicts increasingly happen in more populous areas.

We also see that the share of children living in areas with more than 25 battle deaths each year has increased (orange line). Over the past eight years, the number has been above 4% of the total child population in the world, with an all-time high in 2016 at 6%. 2014 and 2015 were however, a similar parallel increase cannot be found in the number of children at risk. This suggests that the increase in conflict events is mainly happening in areas that are already experiencing conflict, which does not expose a higher number of children to conflict. This increase is also due to a rise in non-state conflicts, which often occur in countries with already ongoing conflicts. However, although there is no sharp increase in the number of children exposed to conflict, the increase in conflict events suggests that those at risk experience more (severe) conflict. In the latter years we see the trends of conflict events and affected children going in opposite directions, with a higher number of children being affected by a lower number of events. This is likely due to the fact that conflicts increasingly happen in more populous areas.

However, not all children in all conflict zones are exposed to the same levels of conflict intensity. And there can be large variations within countries, even when a conflict reaches a high-intensity threshold at the country level. Figure 4 shows the number and share of children living in conflict zones with various intensity levels. The main share of children lived in low-intensity areas (i.e. 1–24 battle deaths within one year) in 2020 (pale blue). Nonetheless, 5% of all children in the world – 122 million – lived in conflict zones with more than 25 battle deaths in the same year, which is an increase from 100 million in 2019. Out of these 122 million, around 50 million children lived in areas with more than 100 battle deaths, and out of these, approximately 6.4 million – a decrease from 7.6 million in 2019 – lived within 50 km of the highest conflict intensity – i.e. 1,000 or more battle deaths (bright blue area). These are children who suffer the most during conflict, in terms of forced migration, collateral damage and psychological trauma.

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CONFLICT TRENDS 04|2021

THE PROJECT PRIO

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 mapping of children in armed conflict, as the fourth yearly follow-up of PRIO’s background report to Save the Children’s 2018 flagship report, The War on Children. This research was funded by Save the Children.

Policy Recommendations

Our mapping of children in conflict-affected areas has several implications for policy and further research. First, we argue that the actors who work to address and reduce the impact of war on children need to support the development of more systematic knowledge on the various ways in which children are affected by armed conflict. This includes data on how children are directly affected by conflict, as well as how they are indirectly impacted, i.a. through adverse health effects and obstacles to critical development, such as educational opportunities. In short, more resources should be invested in generating and managing data related to children and armed conflict across time and space.

There is reason to worry that, over time, the Covid-19 pandemic will worsen the root causes of armed conflict, such as unemployment, socioeconomic inequalities, and social stigma. These effects demand international humanitarian and political responses and must not come at the expense of conflict prevention, peacemaking, or sustaining peace agreements. On the contrary, there is an urgent need to protect the more than 452 million children who were living in conflict zones in 2020. Concrete measures that can be taken include the following:

• Support high-quality peacekeeping operations in conflict-affected areas.
• Design and uphold credible sanctions against armed groups during conflicts to reduce all grave violations against children.
• Increase aid to conflict-affected countries in order to rebuild infrastructure and health systems that benefit children.
• Ensure that the Covid-19 response does not divert funding from conflict-affected areas.

Note

The authors based their calculations for Figures 2–4 using:
UCDP (2020) ‘UCDP Georeferenced Events Dataset’. Available at: ucdp.uu.se/downloads.

Further Reading


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