This policy brief represents the first annual update of a mapping of the number of children living in conflict settings around the world, extending the existing data series to 2017. More than three quarters of the world’s children were living in a conflict-ridden country in 2017. Even more worryingly, more than 420 million children, or more than one in six children, were living very close to a conflict zone – that is, less than 50km from where the actual fighting took place. Despite some recent progress in data collection and research, we need more systematic knowledge on 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, sexual exploitation, and the denial of humanitarian access.

**Children Affected by Armed Conflict, 1990–2017**

**Brief Points**

- In 2017, approximately 1.8 billion children under the age of 18 (81% of all children) were living in a conflict-affected country.
- In 2017, approximately 420 million children (more than 1 out of 6) were living in a conflict zone. This constitutes a 7% increase from 2016, which this update calculates as 393 million children.
- In 2017, approximately 142 million children were living in high intensity conflict zones, i.e conflicts with more than 1,000 battle-related deaths. This marks a substantial decrease from 2016.
- 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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Annual Update of Children in Armed Conflict

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 an update of 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 was the first measure that could provide a systematic spatial and temporal measure of the children-conflict nexus, and the current update to the data series now includes the year 2017.

In addition to new data on armed conflict for 2017, new and more accurate population estimates have become available since the former report was completed. Hence, in the updated version of the dataset, we have used these improved data, both recalculating the estimates from the previous report covering all years back to 1990 and updating through the year of 2017. This makes our estimates of the children living in conflict-affected areas more precise.

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 434 million children (aged 0–18) were living in peaceful countries in 2017, whereas the rest – 1.87 billion children (81% of all the world’s children) – were living in conflict-affected countries.

This is an increase from 2016, but this is mainly due to some very populous countries like China and Indonesia experiencing several low intensity conflict events in 2017. Further, this does not necessarily imply that all these children were affected by armed conflict in 2017. In fact, armed conflict very rarely engulfs an entire country. Most often, the actual 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. And in 2017, less than 0.1% of China’s children were living in conflict zones. 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.

Regional Patterns

Where are the 420 million conflict-affected children located? As shown in Figure 2 (A) below, the world region with the most conflict-affected children is Asia, where some 195 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 152 million children living in conflict zones. The corresponding numbers for the Middle East, the Americas, and Europe respectively are 33, 31, and 7 million.

According to our estimates, out of all the children in the world, about 420 million children (approximately 18%, or more than 1 in every 6 children) were living in conflict zones in 2017.

Figure 2: Numbers and shares of children living in conflict zones 2017, 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) v4, (CIESIN, 2016) and World Population Prospects (UN, 2017).
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 2017. 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 40%. In other words, in the Middle East, 2 out of every 5 children were living in conflict zones in 2017. For Africa, 26%, or 1 in every 4 children, were living in conflict zones. For Asia, the Americas, and Europe, the corresponding shares were 16%, 11%, and 5%, 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 56 million children living in conflict zones, followed by Pakistan, Nigeria, Egypt, Bangladesh, and the Philippines. Together, these six countries are home to more than half of all the children that lived in conflict zones in 2017.

**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 420 million children, an increase of more than 50% from the 1990s, and a 7% increase from 2016, where 393 million children were reported to have been affected by conflict.

**Conflict Intensity**

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 420 million children worldwide that live in conflict-affected areas in terms of conflict intensity, and how has the situation developed over time?

In 2017, about one third (33.7%) of the children living in conflict zones lived in high intensity conflict zones with more than 1,000 battle-related deaths in a year. This is a decrease from 2016 when the corresponding share was 46.8%.

Figure 4 below depicts the numbers of children living in conflict zones by the total intensity level of the conflict in the country over time.
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.

However, the UCDP GED started coding events in 2011; thus, all events prior to 2011 were backdated. It is therefore likely that data coded after 2011 is more precise and consistent due to simultaneous coding and better access to sources. Thus, for our data, this means that the number of children affected by conflict before 2011 might be underestimated, while the estimates for 2017 are more accurate.

Denial of Humanitarian Access to Children in Conflict

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. This can include killing and maiming, as well as denial of humanitarian access to children in conflict. One notable exception is the UN Secretary-General’s annual report on Children and Armed Conflict, which reports on the various grave violations against children (including denial of humanitarian access) for a select number of countries. Hindering medical care and assistance to populations in relief situations is considered a denial of humanitarian access (DHA). The data on DHA is very limited, but according to the UN reports, the denial of humanitarian access to children in armed conflict has become more prevalent in recent years.

Most often, DHA is deliberately enforced due to security or political reasons, often in areas where marginalized ethnic groups reside, such as the Rohingya in Myanmar or Palestinians in Gaza. Armed conflict does not free states from their obligation to allow access for humanitarian access. The Geneva Convention, prohibiting denial of humanitarian access. The same convention prohibits attacks on humanitarian workers assisting children.

In 2017, as many as 1,432 incidents of DHA to children were verified by the United Nations. More than half of these incidents (783) took place in South Sudan, a country where 47% of all children were living in a conflict zone in 2017. Other countries that top this dubious ranking include Yemen (248 verified incidents), Syria (107 verified incidents), and the Central African Republic (101 verified incidents). These numbers of verified incidents are of course staggering in themselves, but there is reason to believe that the actual figures are much higher.

Denying children access to humanitarian assistance may lead to a high number of deaths. In fact, a recent study by Zachary Wagner and colleagues published in The Lancet concludes that in Africa, for the period 1995–2015, the number of infant deaths indirectly related to conflict was more than three times the total number of direct deaths from armed conflict. Armed conflict may increase the risk of infant and child mortality through malnutrition, infectious disease risk, and through effects of maternal health, such as complications of labour and delivery. In our own recent study on armed conflict and maternal health care published in Demography we find that organized violence in sub-Saharan Africa causes around 47,000 children to be born outside health facilities every year.

Policy Recommendations

Our mapping of children in conflict-affected areas has several implications for policy and further research. First, there is an urgent need to protect the more than 420 million children that were living in conflict zones in 2017. 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, for example related to the denial of humanitarian access. In short, more resources should be invested in generating and managing data related to children and armed conflict across time and space.

Further Reading

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

Tollefsen, Andreas; Gudrun Ostby & Siri Aas Rustad (2018) Technical Appendix for ‘Children Affected by Armed Conflict, 1990–2017’. Available at: www.prio.org/Projects/Project/?x=1765

Notes

1. This figure is based on Save the Children’s coding of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict’s reports for 2017.