While armed conflicts and crises affect people of all ages, children are particularly susceptible to the effects of war. In 2018, almost two thirds of the world’s children were living in a conflict-ridden country. More than 415 million children – over 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.
Since the mid-1990s, the issue of war’s impact on children has been high on the international agenda. However, despite this continued interest among policymakers, 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 worldwide. 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 the yearly 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 is the first measure that can provide a systematic spatial and temporal measure of the children-conflict nexus, and the current update to the data series now includes the year 2018.

In addition to new data on armed conflict for 2018 – including more nuanced data for Syria – new and more accurate population estimates from the UN Population Prospects 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 2018. 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’. 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 799 million children (aged 0–18) were living in peaceful countries in 2018, whereas the rest – 1.53 billion children (66% of all the world’s children) – were living in conflict-affected countries.

This constitutes a sharp decrease from 2017, when as many as 1.88 billion children lived in conflict-affected countries. However, this significant drop is almost entirely due to China dropping from the list of conflict-affected countries in 2018. Although China saw some low-intensity conflict events in 2017, this does not imply that all Chinese children were affected by armed conflict that year. In fact, 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 worldwide, we need to consider exactly where within countries the actual fighting is taking place.

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 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 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 (pale yellow) with the conflict zones (blue) that show where actual fighting took place in 2018. 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.

Figure 1. Conflict-affected countries and conflict zones, 2018. Source: Authors, based on the latest version of the UCDP GED.
How Long are Children Exposed to Conflict?

Both conflict duration and intensity can vary a lot across time and space. Thus, children are not necessarily exposed to conflict over long periods. This can either be because the conflict was short or because the intensity in the area where they lived de-escalated. However, for some children, conflict becomes a static part of their life. By looking at the number of consecutive years that an area has been in conflict, we calculate that 13% of the children (more than 55 million) who experienced conflict in 2018 were living in an area that had seen conflict over the past 10 years. 3% of the conflict-exposed children – more than 13 million – were living in an area that had experienced conflict for 18 consecutive years. In 2018, more than 70 million 0–5-year-olds were living in areas that had seen conflict their entire lifetime. However, note that these calculations do not take into account refugees and population movement.

Regional Patterns

Where were all of the 415 million conflict-affected children in 2018 located? As shown in Figure 2A, Africa was the world region with the most conflict-affected children, with some 170 million children living in conflict zones. This represents about 40% of all conflict-affected children globally. Asia, which topped this unpleasant ranking in 2017, now comes in second, with almost 167 million children living in conflict zones in 2018. The corresponding 2018 numbers for the Middle East, the Americas, and Europe respectively are approximately 44, 27, and 6 million.

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, as well as over time. Figure 3 shows countries...
with high-intensity conflicts (i.e. more than 1,000 battle deaths) in 2018, comparing the number of children that lived in high-intensity conflict zones in 2017 and 2018. In most cases the number has either increased or is stable. Mexico saw the largest increase, while Mali did not experience high-intensity conflicts in 2017. It is worth noting that India, which has the largest share of children in conflict, is not on this list.

However, not all children in all conflict zones are exposed to high levels of intensity, even though the conflict reaches a high intensity at the country level. Figure 4 shows the number of children living in areas with low-, medium- and high-intensity conflicts within a country. The main share of children lived in low-intensity areas in 2018 (pale blue). Nonetheless, 3.2% of all children in the world – 76 million – lived in conflict zones with more than 25 battle deaths in the same year. Out of these 76 million, around 30 million children lived in areas with more than 100 battle deaths, and out of these again, approximately 4 million children lived within 50 km of the highest conflict intensity – i.e. 1,000 or more battle deaths.

We also see that the share of children living in areas with more than 25 battle deaths each year has increased (dark blue line). Over the past four years, the number has been above 3% of the total child population in the world, with an all-time high in 2016 at 4.2%. 2016 was also the year with the highest number of children living in areas with more than 1,000 battle deaths (6.4 million children). We see a sharp drop from 2016 to 2018. These trends are highly correlated with the conflict in Syria.

**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 actively 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 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.

At the same time, there is an urgent need to protect the more than 415 million children that were living in conflict zones in 2018. 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.

**Note**

The authors based their calculations for Figures 2–4 using:


UCDP (2019) ‘UCDP Georeferenced Events Dataset’. Available at: ucdp.uu.se/downloads


**Further Reading**
