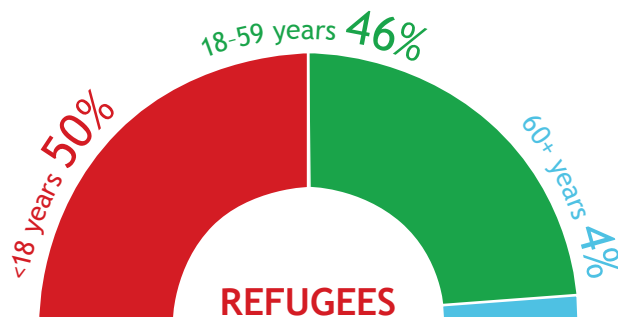


# THE IMPACT AND EFFECTS OF WAR ON CHILDREN

Modern warfare does not take place in isolated or remote battlefields and is not fought between opposing countries. The vast majority of contemporary conflicts take place within a specific country, not between countries. In this new form of warfare, civilians are often caught in the midst of the fighting and routinely targeted. Presently, civilians make up to 90% of the casualties. (War Child)

“Today’s conflicts frequently involve different ethnic or religious groups, combining political, communitarian and criminal violence. Violence that appears indiscriminate may also be deliberately targeted at certain groups of civilians, and may include the use of sexual and gender-based violence. These armed conflicts may be aimed at securing social or economic power, and usually affect areas in repeated cycles. When UNHCR was established in 1950, armed conflict usually meant wars between States and generally allowed limited scope for humanitarian action until the conflict ended.” (THE STATE OF THE WORLD REFUGEES | 2012 | UNHCR SUMMARY)

Children account for the majority of civilian casualties. Mostly, they do not die from the weapons themselves, “but from preventable diseases that aren’t prevented or treated because the health systems and infrastructure have been destroyed.” (War Child) For example, to date more than 2.7 million children died in the Democratic Republic of Congo as a result of the conflict there, and the conflict continues. (War Child)



**Children** below 18 years constituted 50 percent of the refugee population in 2013, the highest figure in a decade.

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War affects children in many of the same ways that it affects adults. There are, nonetheless, specific effects on children. Firstly, children’s access to the care, empathy, and attention of adults who love them is often restricted or non-existent. In times of war, the loss of parents, the separation from parents, the parents’ extreme preoccupation with protecting and finding subsistence for the family, and the emotional unavailability of depressed or distracted parents lead to significant and frequent disruption in their attachments. In some cases, children may be in substitute or temporary care with someone who has limited connections or familiarity with them (distant relatives or neighbours, an orphanage). Many war-affected children lose all adult protection and become in the refugee parlance “unaccompanied children.” (Santa Barbara, 2006)

War also has an enormous impact on childhood, which may adversely affect the life trajectory of children much more than adults. Consider for a moment the impact on their young lives.

- Children often experience disrupted or no schooling. One of the most damaging effects of war is the way it disrupts and destroys children’s education. There is much evidence that education is really the best weapon against poverty and conflict.
- Children are often forced to move into refugee or displaced person camps where they may wait for years in extremely trying and difficult circumstances for normal life to resume, if it ever does.
- War destroys the local economy, agriculture, industries, jobs, and infrastructure. Since today’s conflicts usually take place in the poorest countries, the impact is huge. Parents struggle to feed their children and provide them with basic necessities. Children may be forced to stay at home to look after siblings or work instead of going to school, or they may even end up on the streets in situations of acute poverty.
- The bombs and bullets of war often kill, maim, and disable children. Some are recruited to become soldiers and are placed directly in the firing line. It is estimated that there are tens of thousands of young people under 18 serving in militias in about 60 countries. Hundreds of thousands of children die each year in warfare. When conflict has ended or ebbed, landmines

and unexploded ordinance can remain a threat for years. Children may lose limbs, their sight, or cognitive capacity.

- Many more children die or become fatally ill from the indirect physical effects of war. War destroys hospitals and health centres, and medical personnel are killed or forced to flee. Millions of children have died from treatable diseases like diarrhea, malaria, and cholera because of a lack of medical attention. Refugee children are particularly vulnerable to the deadly combination of malnutrition and infectious illness.
- Increasingly, many children are subjected to rape and sexual violence as these are frequently used as “weapons” of war. Girls and young women may have babies as a result, or are so injured and maimed that they will not be able to bear children in the future.
- The psychological effects of war and war-related trauma may be severe. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may result as the effects on vulnerable and impressionable children can be worse than on adults. Many children cannot understand the cause of the conflict or why it is happening. Severe losses and disruptions in their lives lead to high rates of depression and anxiety in war-affected children. These impacts may be prolonged by exposures to further privations and violence in refugee situations. Their experiences may make it difficult for them to form healthy relationships with adults or with their peers. Some cope by turning to alcohol or drugs.
- These children often lose their social life. Girls who are raped may be marginalized by society and lose marriage opportunities. Boys who have been forced to become child soldiers are often expelled from their communities because of

the violence they inflicted on the communities and sometimes their own families. Children may lose their community and its culture during war, sometimes having it reconstituted in refugee or diaspora situations.

- Moral and spiritual impacts can also occur. The experience of indifference from the surrounding world or, worse still, the malevolence may cause children to suffer loss of meaning in their construction of themselves in their world. They may have to change their moral structure and lie, steal, and sell sex to survive. They may have their moral structure forcibly dismantled and replaced in training to kill as part of a military force.

Almost half of the world’s forcibly displaced people are children and many spend their entire childhood far from home.

In 2013, an estimated 51.2 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced due to conflict and persecution.

The largest refugee camp complex in the world is Dadaab in north-east Kenya. Since it opened 22 years ago to host a maximum of 90,000 people fleeing civil war in Somalia, it has grown into five camps hosting more than 350,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, including third generation refugees born in the camp.

Source: UNHCR

For children, a refugee camp may not offer the protection one would hope. A study done by the UNHCR during the 2005 to 2007 period in Southern Africa with refugee and returnee children testifies

to the vulnerability of children during times of displacement or asylum. The key findings were as follows:

“Although the refugee situations differ in several respects—size, ethnic mix, location, quality of services, etc., most of the key problems identified during the participatory assessments were quite similar:

- Children experience violence within and outside refugee camps, as well as in reintegration and urban situations.
- Refugee children often experience discrimination by local residents—including teachers—and sometimes experience discrimination within camps from members of other ethnic groups.
- Gender-based violence directed at girls, including harassment and rape, is widespread.
- Children living without parents are especially vulnerable, due to lack of adult protection and scarce economic resources.
- Forced marriages, often resulting from rape and pregnancy, are common in several camps.
- Alcohol and substance abuse by adults often results in violence and sexual assault against children.
- Some of the tasks assigned to children (such as collecting water and gathering firewood) put them at risk for discrimination and rape.”

(Source: UNHCR, Through the eyes of a child: refugee children speak about violence: A report on participatory assessments carried out with refugee and returnee children in Southern Africa 2005-2007). <[www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/txis/vtx/home/pendocPDFViewer.html?docid=47c804682&query=Through the eyes of a child](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/txis/vtx/home/pendocPDFViewer.html?docid=47c804682&query=Through%20the%20eyes%20of%20a%20child)>.

The impact on refugee children extends long after the war has ended, or the children have returned home or restarted their lives in another country. Many may never regain the potential they had before war.

“I want to educate the next generation, because education brings peace.”

—Afghan refugee girl

“If the school wasn’t open I would be working right now. That would make me sad because children aren’t meant to work; we are meant to be in school and studying... Education is very important. Only if I am educated can I help take care of my mother and get a good job. When I am older this is what I will do.”

—Chin refugee boy (Myanmar)

Source: UNHCR, Global Report 2013: Educate a Child

## Resilience and Hope

At times, the effects of war on children seem overwhelming and insurmountable, but there is hope. It is essential that we recognize that these children are often incredibly resilient and possess a great desire to survive and thrive. To do so; they do need the right environment, as well as protection, care, and support. When they do experience such conditions they remarkably, if not miraculously, thrive, recover, and overcome the really difficult, tough start or periods in their lives.

This is a crucial point and it should form the basis for educators and others who work with war-affected children in the field, or in the countries and communities to which refugee children immigrate and resettle. We must not treat war-affected children as helpless victims but, instead, seek to build on their own resilience, strengths, and capabilities. Educational programs and related programs should strive to give young people the resources and opportunities to rebuild their own lives and create the protective environment that will allow them to do so. In the support document *Life After War: Education as a Healing Process for Refugee and War-Affected Children*, greater detail is provided regarding how schools can support war-affected learners. It also addresses the importance of education in both healing the effects of war and rebuilding community. The document also details the linguistic, literacy, and academic tools that will allow these children to thrive.

The narratives that follow speak to the effects of war on new Canadians of war-affected backgrounds and their experiences in rebuilding their lives in Manitoba, with an emphasis on their educational experiences and pathways. To a large degree, they attest to the resiliency of such children, the healing that has taken place, and their hope for their future.



© V. Vick/UNHCR. April 2008. UNHCR News Story: Uganda: The Gift of Education. Siripi Primary School in Rhino camp refugee settlement in Arua. Most of the students are refugees who fled the decades long civil war in Sudan. <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/unhcr/4598181832/>>. Used with permission. All rights reserved.