

Large and Small

IMPACTS OF ARMED VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Children and youth are specifically and disproportionately affected by many consequences of armed violence, whether physiological, psychological, or social. They are victims, witnesses, and perpetrators of armed violence. This chapter describes the direct and indirect impacts of armed violence on children and youth, and highlights the utility of policies and programmes that establish and strengthen mechanisms for coping.

Direct and indirect impacts

The direct consequences of armed violence for children and youth include death, injury, and psychosocial trauma. While many lose their lives in the context of armed conflict, either as combatants or civilians, the number of wounded, disabled, and traumatized is far greater.

In addition to the direct impacts of armed violence, children and youth are vulnerable to indirect impacts: when a family member dies or is injured, when the family has to move, or when basic social services break down. Armed violence can contribute to the rise of poverty, malnutrition, and disease, which have serious long-term consequences for children and youth.

The restriction of access to and quality of education represents one of the main indirect impacts of armed violence on school-aged children. Schools may not function due to rampant instability or due to the fear that students will be abducted or attacked on the way to school. School buildings may be deliberately attacked for political reasons—for example, because they are government assets and hence perceived as ‘soft targets’—or for practical reasons. They may be occupied and used as bases for fighting forces because they have decent facilities, including toilets and kitchens.

Conflict also limits access to health care. Health facilities may come under direct attack. Those that remain open are often looted, lose their staff, or are forced to close down. The remaining facilities are sometimes difficult to reach because of restrictions on movement. The deterioration in health care provision has implications for children’s physical development, while the lack of reproductive health services affects girls and young women, especially those who are pregnant or have been raped.

Measuring impacts

The chapter shows that while direct impacts of armed violence are often visible and more measurable, the indirect impacts, including disrupted schooling, disease, and malnutrition, are more difficult to quantify. Capturing the scope of these impacts—some of which may be long-lasting or permanent—raises a number of conceptual, methodological, and practical challenges.

Although male adolescents and young men generally form the majority of the direct victims of armed violence, younger children may also suffer through targeted attacks on civilians or recruitment into armed groups. Girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, including rape and sexual slavery. Beyond the associated physical and emotional trauma, rape may lead to infection with HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies.



A coroner inspects the corpse of one of four children killed when their bus was strafed by gunfire in Chamelecon, Honduras, December 2004.
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A 16-year-old and her baby, born as a result of rape, in Goma, DRC, February 2008. © Robin Hammond/Panos Pictures



As impacts vary according to the age, sex, culture, and the specific circumstance of the individual, it is important that researchers consider socially constructed notions of childhood and health, including mental health, because these will determine how victims experience, perceive, and express impacts.

Resilience

The chapter shows that, despite their vulnerabilities, children and youth demonstrate enormous resilience and an ability to cope. While some may be passive victims of violence, very often their relationship to armed violence is more dynamic. Many perpetrate acts of violence, either voluntarily or under duress. At the same time, children and youths who are exposed to armed violence frequently demonstrate immense bravery and persistence in the face of hardship. Many survivors are forced to discover and develop survival strategies that are tested under extreme conditions and many carry heavy responsibilities, such as earning a living and caring for family members.

Way forward

Although a number of programmes have been designed to reduce the impacts of armed violence on children and youth, lessons learned have not been systematically documented and built upon. As a result, there is much debate among experts about 'what works'. For example, in the area of child reintegration—where the major challenge is to provide immediate assistance to ex-combatants before they are enticed into another conflict or begin to rely on crime as a livelihood strategy—some potential good practices have been identified from specific settings, although systematic evaluations are lacking.

More research is needed to improve the general understanding of resilience, as well as the individual and contextual factors involved, and to identify interventions that promote and strengthen coping strategies. Effective interventions would also reduce the risk of future perpetration of violence, thereby limiting the potential for its intergenerational transmission. 📌