



# Children Affected by Armed Conflict, 1990–2019

While armed conflicts and crises affect people of all ages, children are particularly susceptible to the effects of war. In 2019, almost two thirds of the world's children were living in a conflict-ridden country. Approximately 426 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.

## Brief Points

- The number of children living in conflict zones has been increasing since 2000.
- In 2019, 1.6 billion children (69%) were living in a conflict-affected country.
- Approximately 426 million children (over one in six) were living in a conflict zone in 2019. This constitutes a 2% increase from 2018.
- In 2019, Africa was the world region with the highest *number* of children living in conflict zones (179 million), while the Middle East had the highest *share* of children living in conflict zones (40%).
- In 2019, more than 71 million 0–5-year-olds were living in areas that had seen conflict their entire lifetime.

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## Children in Armed Conflict

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 armed conflict's direct and indirect effects 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 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 fourth 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 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 2019.

In addition to new data on armed conflict for 2019, 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 also calculate the number of children living in areas that have seen continuous conflict over several years.

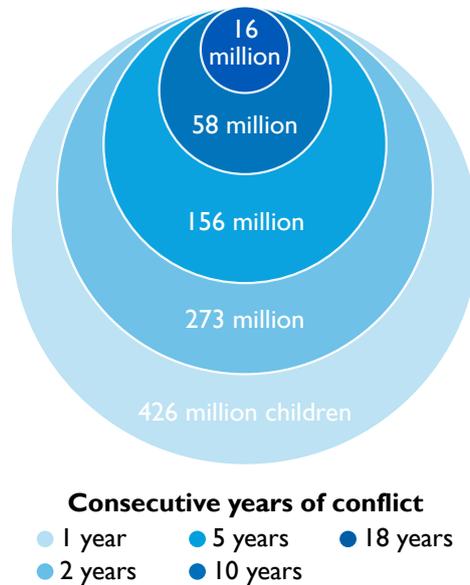


Figure 2: Number of children exposed to consecutive years of conflict

## 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 conflict event, as defined by the UCDP

Georeferenced Events Dataset (UCDP GED), in a given year.

According to our estimates, about 725 million children (aged 0–18) lived in peaceful countries in 2019, whereas the rest – **1.61 billion children (69% of all the world's children) – were living in conflict-affected countries.**

This is an increase from 2018, when 1.52 billion children were living in conflict countries. This increase of almost 100 million more children living in conflict-affected countries is not due to a large increase in conflicts, but rather due to several new countries experiencing low-level conflict events in 2019, such as South Africa, Honduras, Liberia, and Peru.

## 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 (marked in pale yellow) with the conflict zones (marked in blue) that show where

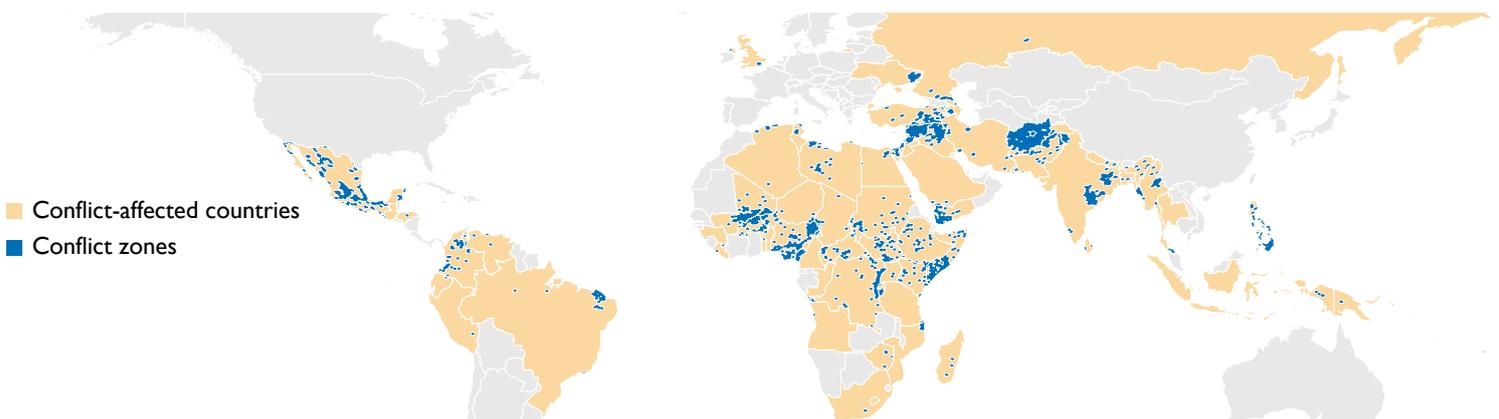


Figure 1. Conflict-affected countries and conflict zones, 2019. Source: Authors, based on the latest version of the UCDP GED

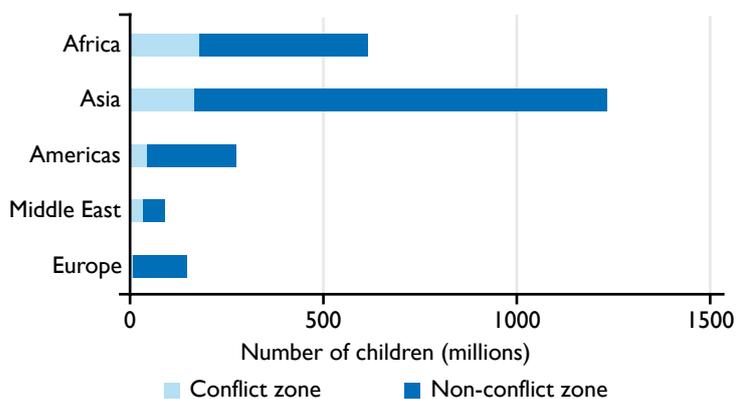


Figure 3A: Number of children affected by conflict, 2019

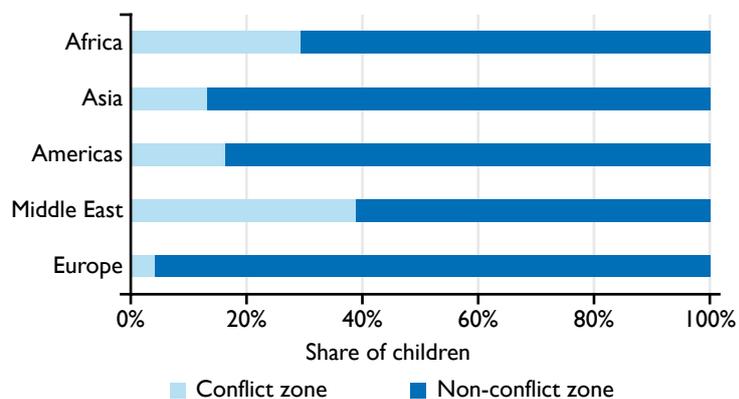


Figure 3B: Share of children in the region affected by conflict, 2019

actual fighting took place in 2019. 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 **426 million children (more than 18%, or one in six) were living in conflict zones in 2019.**

### How Long are Children Exposed to Conflict?

Both conflict duration and intensity can vary a lot across both 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. Figure 2 indicates how many children in 2019 lived in conflict zones that had experienced consecutive years of conflict. By looking at the number of consecutive years that an area has been in conflict, we calculate that 13.6% of the children (more than 55 million) who experienced conflict in 2019 were living in an area that had seen conflict over the past 10 years (i.e. the whole lifetime of a 10-year-old). Almost 4% of the conflict-exposed children – around 16 million – lived in an area that had experienced conflict for 18 consecutive years. A rough estimation suggests that in 2019, more than 71 million

0–5-year-olds lived in areas that had seen conflict their entire lifetime. Further, we calculate that there are potentially 800,000 18-year-olds who have lived in conflict their entire life. However, note that these calculations do not take into account refugees and population movement.

### Regional Patterns

Where were all of the 426 million conflict-affected children in 2019 located? As shown in Figure 3A, Africa was the world region with the most conflict-affected children, with almost 180 million children living in conflict zones. This represents about 30% of all conflict-affected children globally. Previously, Asia has been the region with the highest number of children at risk, but in the past few years we have seen an increase in Africa and a decrease in Asia. 2018 was the first year since 1990 in which Africa had a higher number of children at risk than Asia, and the difference between the two regions increased further in 2019. The corresponding 2019 numbers for the Americas, the Middle East, and Europe respectively are approximately 44, 33, and 6 million.

However, in order to capture the regional risk of children, these numbers must be considered relative to the overall regional population size. Figure 3B shows the proportion of children in each world region that were living in a conflict zone in 2019.

As the figure shows, although Africa had the largest *number* of children living in conflict zones in 2019, 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 38.6%. In other words, **in the Middle East, almost two in five children were living in conflict zones in 2019.** This is an increase from the situation in 2018, when about 31.5% of Middle Eastern children were living in conflict zones.

### Time Trends

The number of children living in conflict zones increased from 417 million in 2018 to 426 million in 2019, but was lower than the all-time-high of 433 million in 2017. However, 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. The number of *countries* with armed conflicts has remained relatively stable. While the number of affected children was at its lowest in the early- and mid-1990s at around 200–250 million, the 2019 estimate of 426 million children represents an increase of more than 50% from the 1990s (see Figure 4).

### 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. In 2019, approximately 160 million children lived in conflict zones in countries that experienced more than 1,000 battle deaths within 2019, and about 225 million children lived in conflict zones in countries

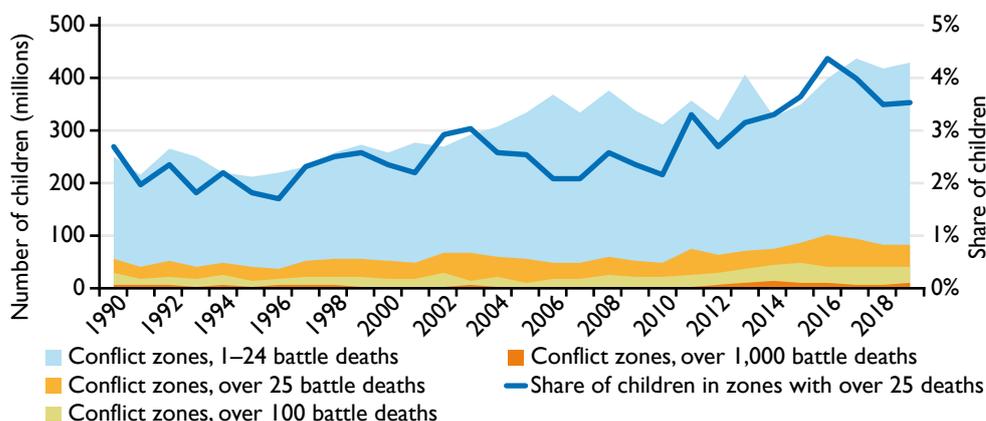


Figure 4: Children living in conflict-affected zones, by conflict intensity, 1990–2019

experiencing medium intensity conflicts (between 25 and 999 battle deaths). The countries with the highest conflict intensity in 2019 were Afghanistan, Syria and Somalia.

However, not all children in all conflict zones are exposed to high levels of conflict intensity, 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 2019 (pale blue). Nonetheless, 3.5% of all children in the world – 81 million – lived in conflict zones with more than 25 battle deaths in the same year. Out of these 81 million, around 40 million children lived in areas with more than 100 battle deaths, and out of these, approximately 9 million children lived within 50 km of the highest conflict intensity – i.e. 1,000 or more battle deaths (dark orange area). This number has doubled since 2018; the increase can largely be attributed to the increased intensity of drug wars in Mexico. These are children who suffer the most during conflict, in terms of forced migration, collateral damage and psychological trauma.

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 4.3%. 2014 and 2015 were the years with the highest number of children living in areas with more than 1,000 battle deaths (more than 10 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 426 million children that were living in conflict zones in 2019. 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:

CIESIN (2016) 'Gridded Population of the World'. Available at: [sedac.ciesin.columbia.edu/data/collection/gpw-v4](https://sedac.ciesin.columbia.edu/data/collection/gpw-v4).

UCDP (2019) 'UCDP Georeferenced Events Dataset'. Available at: [ucdp.uu.se/downloads/](https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/).

UN (2019) 'World Population Prospects'. Available at: [population.un.org/wpp/](https://population.un.org/wpp/).

### Further Reading

Bahgat, Karim; Kendra Dupuy; Gudrun Østby; Siri Aas Rustad; Håvard Strand & Tore Wig (2018) 'Children and Armed Conflict: What Existing Data Can Tell Us'. Background report for Save the Children's Global Flagship Report *The War On Children*. Oslo: PRIO.

Tollefsen, Andreas; Gudrun Østby & Siri Aas Rustad (2018) Technical Appendix for 'Children Affected by Armed Conflict, 1990–2017'.

Available at: [www.prio.org/Projects/Project/?x=1765](https://www.prio.org/Projects/Project/?x=1765).

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### THE PROJECT

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 conducted for Save the Children, as a second 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.

### PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.