



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Children at risk of being recruited for armed conflict, 1990-2020

Haer, R. van der; Østby, G.; Rustad, S.R.; Arasmith, A.

Citation

Haer, R. van der, Østby, G., Rustad, S. R., & Arasmith, A. (2021). Children at risk of being recruited for armed conflict, 1990-2020. *Prio Conflict Trends*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3249927>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3249927>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



Children at Risk of Being Recruited for Armed Conflict, 1990–2020

The recruitment of children for use in armed conflict is one of the so-called ‘six grave violations’ against children in conflict, as well as one of the most significant consequences of armed conflict in terms of children’s wellbeing. Children in many parts of the world are being recruited by armed groups and forces, assuming both ancillary and combat roles in conflict. Commissioned by Save the Children, PRIO has estimated the number of children who live at risk of being recruited or used in armed conflict during the period 1990–2020. Our estimates suggest that the risk of recruitment has steadily increased over the past 30 years, with the highest recorded number of children at risk in 2020. This policy brief describes the methodology and main descriptive statistics on children at risk of recruitment and use in armed conflict around the world.

Roos Haer
University of Leiden

Gudrun Østby
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Brief Points

- In 2020, 22 governments and 110 non-state conflict actors in active conflicts around the world were reported to recruit children.
- In 2020, approximately 337 million children (more than 1 in 8) were living in a conflict zone associated with child recruitment.
- The share of children at risk of being recruited for armed conflict has steadily increased over the past 30 years.
- Asia had the highest number of children at risk of recruitment in 2020, with about 164 million children at risk.
- The Middle East had the highest share of children at risk of recruitment in 2020, with about 1 in 3 children at risk of being recruited.

Siri Aas Rustad
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Andrew Arasmith
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Introduction

While armed conflicts and crises affect people of all ages, children are particularly susceptible to the effects of war. Recruitment and use of children is one of the ‘six grave violations’ against children identified by the United Nations. We have estimated how many children globally are at risk of such violation during wartime.

The annual UN *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* reports identify incidents of six grave violations against children including the recruitment and use of children for armed conflict. According to the recently released 2020 report, 8,521 children were recruited for armed conflict in 2020 (UNSG, 2021). Although this data collection is extremely valuable, the UN does not cover all conflict-affected countries in their efforts. Furthermore, their information varies greatly in specificity and accuracy. For instance, one cannot deduce from their data where, within countries, the risk of child recruitment is higher. To address these gaps, we estimate the global number of children who are at risk of being recruited by armed actors (state and non-state) because they live in an area where one or more conflict actors are reported to recruit minors.

How to Measure the Risk of Child Recruitment

Estimating the number of children around the world who are at risk of being recruited to be used in armed conflict requires several steps. For the coding of child recruitment, we updated and supplemented existing data collected by the Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Secu-

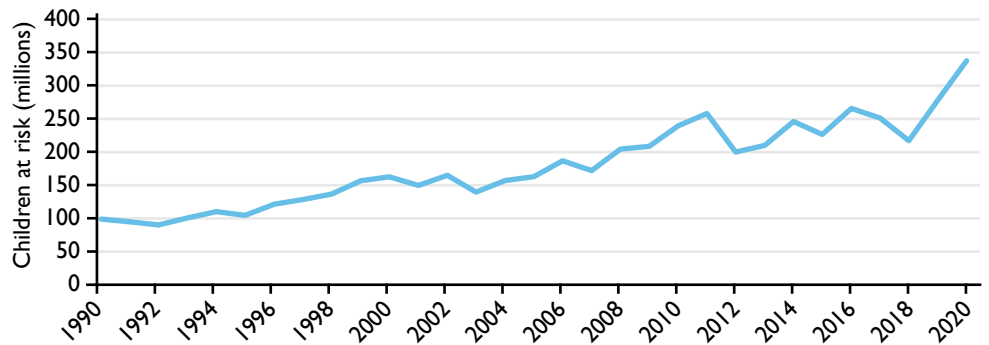


Figure 2: Number of children at risk of recruitment, 1990–2020

rity and Haer & Böhmelt’s 2016 dataset on child recruitment. We rely on the Paris Principles (2007) definition of a child associated with armed forces or armed groups:

Any person below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes.

To estimate children at risk of recruitment, we spatially link the child recruitment data with our estimates on children living in conflict zones. In other words, we calculate the number of children who live in areas where actors are reported to recruit children. We define children at risk of recruitment as follows:

Children (under 18) who live within 50 km of one or more conflict events with at least one conflict actor reported to have recruited children in that particular year.

Child Recruitment by Countries and Conflicts

In 2020, 60 countries experienced conflict, defined as either state-based conflict, non-state conflict or one-sided violence. In 39 of these conflicts, children were recruited and used in armed conflict by either the government, non-state actors or both. Figure 1¹ provides a global picture of individual conflict events and depicts which events are associated with child recruitment and which are not, based on whether or not the engaged conflict actors were reported to recruit children. The orange dots indicate conflict events where at least one of the conflict actors was reported to recruit children. The blue dots indicate conflict events where we could not find any reports of child recruitment by the involved conflict actors.

How Many Children Are at Risk of Being Recruited?

According to our estimates, out of all the children in the world, about **337 million children (more than one in eight) were at risk of being recruited for armed conflict in 2020**. This represents a sharp increase from 1990, when the corresponding number was 99 million children (Figure 2). This corresponds with the general increase in children living in proximity to violent conflict. Both the number of children affected by conflict (i.e., living within 50 kilometers of violent conflict events) and the number of children at risk of recruitment have increased steadily over the years 1990–2020. The increase in children at risk of recruitment from 217 million in 2018 to 337 million in 2020 is mainly caused by two populous countries: India and Nigeria. Together, they constitute about 34% of the children at risk of becoming recruited by

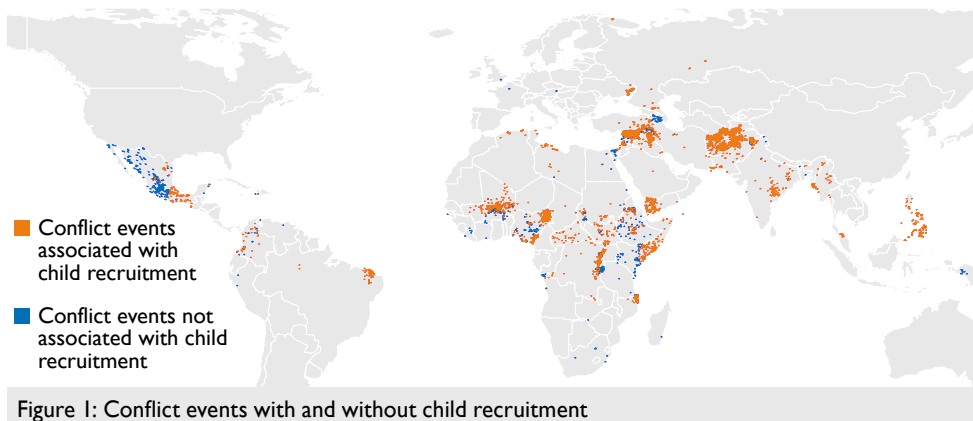


Figure 1: Conflict events with and without child recruitment

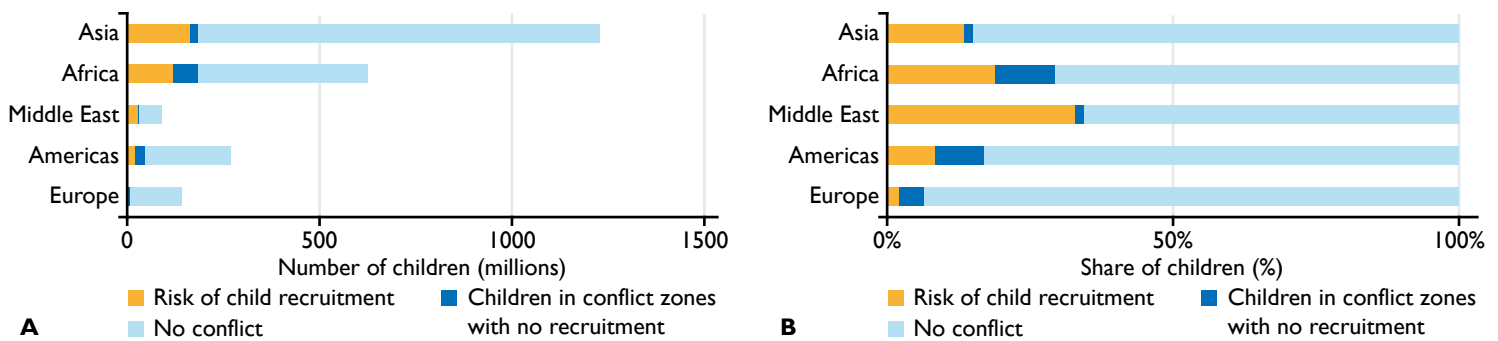


Figure 3: Number (A) and share (B) of children exposed to conflict and child recruitment in 2020, by world region.

state and non-state actors in 2020. However, all time trends should be interpreted with caution, as we are likely to have better data/reporting on child recruitment for later years.

Regional Differences

Figure 3A shows the number of children at risk of recruitment in 2020 by world region, indicated by the yellow color. The dark blue color in the figure refers to the number of children living in conflict zones but with no reports of child recruitment by the conflict actors, whereas the pale blue color represents the percentage of children in peaceful areas in both conflict and non-conflict countries. Asia is the world region with the highest number of children at risk of recruitment (164 million), followed by Africa (118 million), the Middle East (29 million), the Americas (22 million) and Europe (3 million).

Figure 3B shifts the focus onto the share of the child population at risk of recruitment (yellow) relative to the overall regional child population. This significantly changes the picture. The relative risk of being recruited by conflict actors is

highest for children living in the Middle East (33% of all children in the region) followed by Africa (19%), Asia (13%), the Americas (8%) and Europe (2%). Sadly, in some countries like Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen, almost all children are at risk of being recruited into armed conflict.

Child Recruitment by Type of Conflict Actors

Both non-state actors and state actors recruit children. Over the past 11 years, the number of governments recruiting children has been fairly stable at around 20. However, the number of non-state actors recruiting and using children for the purposes of armed conflict has increased steadily over the period, reaching an all-time high in 2020 with 110 active non-state groups recruiting children. The map in Figure 4 shows conflict events broken down by type of conflict actor. The pale blue dots indicate events with reports of child recruitment by the state; the dark blue dots represent events with reports of child recruitment by non-state actors; and the yellow dots represent events where there were reports of recruitment by both govern-

ments and non-state groups. There are some clear hot spots to be found where children are doubly exposed: Afghanistan, Syria, Southern Somalia, Yemen and North Eastern Nigeria.

Drivers of Child Recruitment

Research on the use of children in armed conflict and what motivates their recruitment has significantly increased over the past years. This literature can be divided into three strands: *structural explanations*, *supply-side explanations*, and *demand-side explanations* of child recruitment.

Structural explanations: First, the use of children in armed conflict has been linked to broad social, political and economic conditions to the recruitment of children. Several authors have pointed to the influence of the technological advancement of personal weaponry and the proliferation of small weapons that have made it easier for children to use them. Another structural factor often mentioned as influencing child recruitment is globalization. Related to the globalization argument is the idea that the state's poverty level is the driving force behind child recruitment.

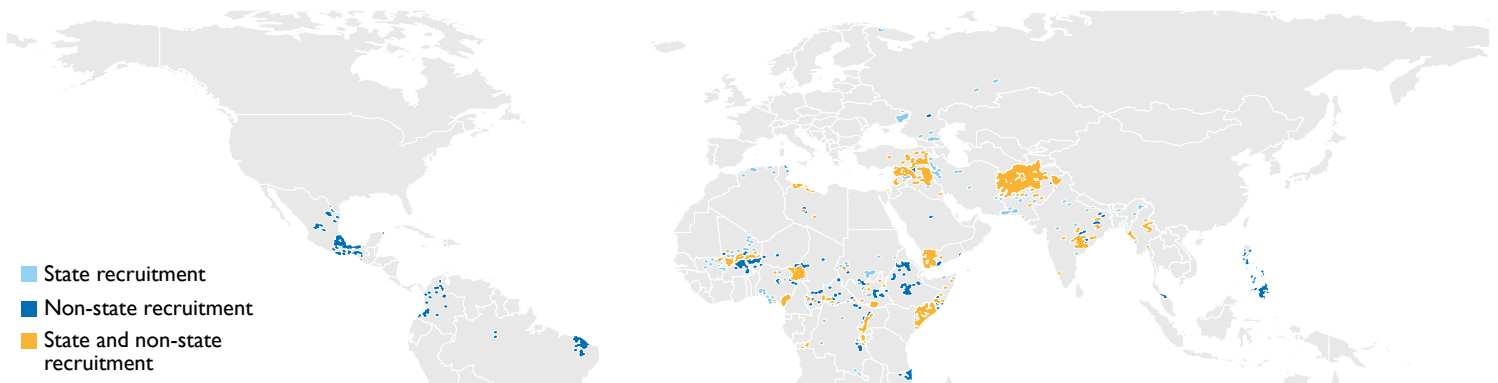


Figure 4: Child recruitment 2020 by conflict zone and type of actor

Supply-side explanations: Many researchers have turned to examine the individual motivation of children to join armed groups, that is, the supply side of child recruitment. These supply motivations are the micro-mechanisms that link social structures with preferences and decisions. They are variegated and complex and can generally be divided into push and pull factors. Push factors are negative situations that children escape by joining an armed group, such as poverty and lack of education opportunities and jobs. Pull factors are positive rewards and incentives for joining armed groups. Besides pull factors such as physical and financial security, some children are motivated to engage because of their political ideologies, or out of a desire to seek justice, while others are attracted to armed groups by the ‘adventure’, ‘the sheer fun of belonging’, or a desire to become ‘famous’.

Demand-side explanations: A third stream of literature investigates factors influencing the decision of recruiters to enlist children. One explanation centers on troop shortages and the need to maximize recruitment. The underlying rationale is that children are easy to recruit i.e., a ‘low-cost way for armed forces to generate force’. Others argue that children possess certain characteristics that make them more effective fighters in comparison to adults. For example, children are more malleable, adaptable, and obedient; thus, they are more readily indoctrinated and deceived and are consequently easier to control and retain.

Policy Recommendations

Our mapping of children at risk of being recruited into armed conflict has several implications for policy. First, there is a need for the development of more systematic knowledge on the root causes of child recruitment, as well as more systematic and nuanced data on whom is recruited where, when and by whom. At the same time,

there is an urgent need to protect the more than 337 million children that were at risk of being recruited in their home communities in 2020. We propose the following policy recommendations:

- **Strengthen the protective social fabrics around a child:** Parents, extended families, neighborhoods (in urban areas), villages (in rural areas) and teachers not only need to have information about the occurrence of child recruitment and its consequences but also need to have the tools to discourage enlistment or to protect minors from conscription.
- **Strengthen children’s agency:** Children – especially those in conflict zones – often feel helpless. Interventions that strengthen their confidence and their agency are crucial. For children who may join due to some of the above-described pull factors, such as adventure, romance, or revenge, this can perhaps be countered by providing them with information that may discourage them.
- **Create safe spaces:** Schools, community houses and hospitals need to become safe spaces for children. To counter all the possible negative consequences of armed conflict, children need to be able to access these areas without fear of being targeted, which would allow them to experience childhood in safety.
- **Discourage recruitment of children through naming and shaming:** Those that are involved in the recruitment and use of children need to be quickly identified and internationally discouraged. Additionally, they must be brought to justice. An important element of doing so is to involve governments, local actors, the media and the international community.

- **Re-integrate children who have been used and recruited by armed actors into the community:** It is important to help these children once they leave the armed group. They are often in need of a combination of several interventions: (long-term) psychological and medical help, schooling or economic help, and training in social skills. Additionally, it is important to help them with reestablishing their social fabric i.e., reestablishing a connection with family members, with their village, or with important people in their previous life. ■

Note

1. The authors based their calculations for Figures 1–5 using: Updated data on child recruitment building on Haer & Böhmelt’s dataset (2016) and Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security (data version April 29; 2021); CIESIN (2016) ‘Gridded Population of the World’. Available at: sedac.ciesin.columbia.edu/data/collection/gpw-v4; UCDP (2020) ‘UCDP Georeferenced Events Dataset’. Available at: ucdp.uu.se/downloads; UN (2020) ‘World Population Prospects’. Available at: population.un.org/wpp.

Further Reading

- Haer, Roos & Tobias Böhmelt (2016) ‘Child soldiers as time bombs? Adolescents’ participation in rebel groups and the recurrence of armed conflict’. *European Journal of International Relations* 22(2): 408–436.
- Haer, Roos (2019) ‘Children and armed conflict: Looking at the future and learning from the past’. *Third World Quarterly* 40(1): 74–91.
- Save the Children (2021) *Stop the war on children 2021: A crisis of recruitment*. Available at: resource-centre.savethechildren.net/document/stop-the-war-on-children-a-crisis-of-recruitment.

THE AUTHORS

Roos Haer is Assistant Professor at the University of Leiden.
Gudrun Østby is Research Professor and Research Director at PRIO.
Siri Aas Rustad is Research Professor at PRIO and leader of the *Conflict Trends* project.
Andrew Arasmith is Research Assistant at PRIO.

THE PROJECT

The *Conflict Trends* project aims to answer questions related to the causes of, consequences of and trends in conflict. This policy brief funded by Save the Children is based on a mapping of children in armed conflict zones with reported recruitment of children by the active conflict actors.

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.