

# A Generation at Risk: Protecting Children in Conflict Zones

March 2026 | Global

**Over the past few years, severe deterioration of the protection situation has been observed across crises, especially those affected by conflicts.** From occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt) and Sudan to eastern DRC and Haiti, the number of people exposed to protection risks<sup>1</sup> has increased. The impacts on individuals are significant: displacement, family separation, psychosocial trauma, loss of income, and property loss are common experiences among affected households. As a result, households often resort to harmful coping mechanisms such as child marriage, child labour, and unsafe migration to cope with their needs.

**According to Save the Children, a record 520 million children, or one in five globally, lived in active conflict zones in 2024.**<sup>2</sup> This is the third year in a row that a new record has been set, highlighting both the widespread and ongoing risks children face worldwide.

**Children remain among the most vulnerable groups impacted by conflict. Through exposure to violent events and displacement, as well as due to disruption of essential services, children face critical needs that undermine their ability not only to survive but also to thrive.** When confronted with protection risks, children

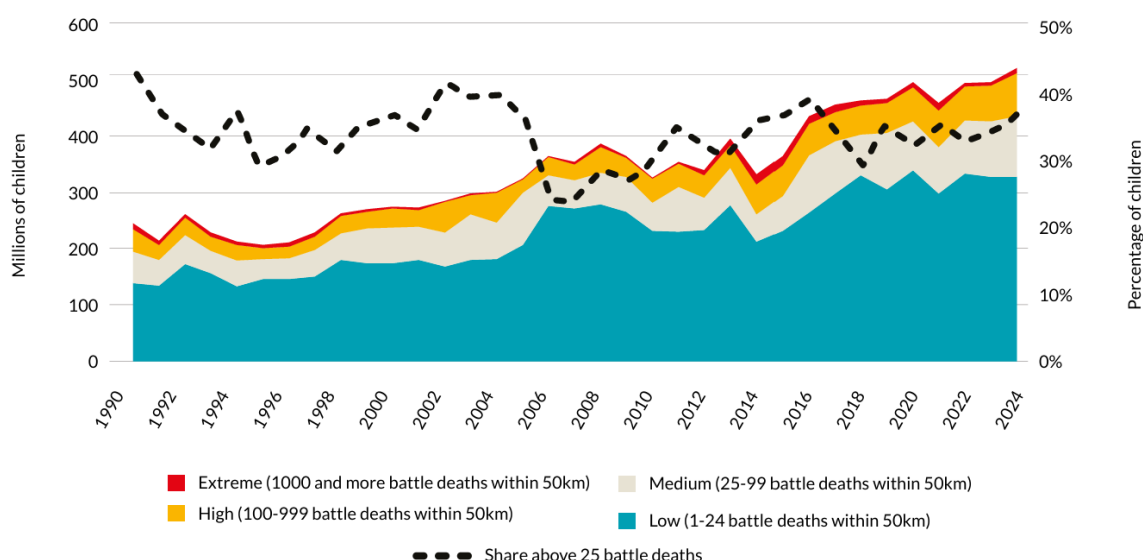
and their caregivers may be unable to meet essential needs not only for immediate survival but also for long-term development.

The cumulative effects of insecurity and deprivation can significantly affect children's psychological and social development, including their ability to learn, leading to long-term consequences as adults.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, vulnerability to violence cannot be understood in isolation from overlapping forms of oppression and discrimination, based on gender for instance.

**A thorough understanding of the protection risks faced by children<sup>4</sup> is crucial for evaluating how the protection experiences of children and their caregivers influence long-term developmental outcomes in conflict-affected environments.** As part of this effort, this paper examines how various conflict-related dynamics have potentially increased child protection risks in conflict settings.

This analysis does not intend to cover all protection risks affecting children. Instead, it concentrates on specific risks highlighted through 2025 Multi-Sectoral Need Assessments (MSNA) data and secondary sources from 2024 and 2025.

Children Living in Conflict Zones, Categorized by Conflict Intensity, 1990–2024 (Source: [Save the Children, 2025](#))



## When conflicts disrupt essential services for children...

### Increased challenges in accessing services

As the security situation worsens across multiple crisis, children's access to essential services is increasingly restricted. For the fourth year in a row, attacks on schools and hospitals have risen, totalling 2,694 incidents in 2024. These include 1,278 attacks on schools, 1,108 on hospitals, and 308 incidents where these sites were used for military purposes.<sup>5</sup> According to the MSNA, direct attacks on education has disrupted the access to education of more than 2 million children in 2025.<sup>6</sup>

**Beyond direct attacks on essential infrastructures and their staff, access to these services has been limited in several contexts.** In West Kordofan, Sudan, 46% of surveyed households in 2025 reported experiencing insecurity when traveling to/back from nutrition service centers. Similarly, for the same year, in Ituri province, DRC, 16% of households reported difficulties accessing health services due to protection threats.

### Additional barriers for displaced children

**By the end of 2024, nearly 50 million children were displaced by conflict and violence worldwide.<sup>7</sup> While displacement remains a major contributing factor for several protection risks for children, displaced children's access to essential services and justice is particularly limited due to a lack of documentation, a limited number of available services, and insecure living conditions.** In Lebanon, 15% of the out-of-school migrant children could not enrol in school due to a lack of documentation, while in Cameroon, displaced communities in the Far North face challenges obtaining birth certificates and IDs due to costs, distances to administrative centres, and lack of documentation.<sup>8</sup>

**Beyond the direct impact of conflict on access to services, harmful coping strategies, such as child separation and child labour, can further limit children's ability to access essential services and increase protection risks.**

## ...leading to a decline in protection for children and their caregivers

In conflict-affected areas, child protection risks are not driven solely by physical insecurity or repeated displacement, but also by the socio-economic pressures that conflict intensifies.

**Economic collapse, loss of livelihoods, service disruptions, and prolonged instability often compel households to adopt practices leading to child-related protection risks such as child labour, forced recruitment, child marriage, and child and forced family separation.**

### Child Separation

**Findings from recent assessments illustrate how child separation can also emerge as an important risk in fragile contexts, often overlaid with other protection concerns such as child labour or marriage.** As part of the 2025 MSNA in Mali, 9% of households reported that at least one child was not currently living in the household. The main reasons cited are work (41%) and marriage (35%). However, in Douentza and Mopti circles, spikes in marriage requests involving girls under 16 were reported, reportedly linked to economic hardship, gender norms and displacement.

As families face insecurity and economic strain during crises, gender-unequal expectations also shape coping strategies that place girls at greater risk of gender-based violence. Harmful practices perpetrated primarily against girls, such as child marriage, also constitute forms of gender-based violence. For example, in Haiti, for 2025, 7% of households reported that at least one child did not live in the household, with higher proportions among returnee households (15%) and in the North-East department (19%). In the North-East, 22% of households reporting child separation also cited child marriage as the main reason for children not living in the household.

Across contexts, these findings suggest that child separation in conflict settings is not only a direct product of conflict but also a household coping strategy in response to insecurity, gender norms and economic strain. However, such strategies often expose children, especially girls, to heightened risks of protection and long-term developmental consequences.

### Child Labour<sup>9</sup>

**When in conflict settings, reduced access to essential services is coupled with the disruption of existing livelihood opportunities and economic infrastructures, children are at higher risk of being victims of child labour.** According to UNICEF and ILO, in conflict zones, for 2024, child labour prevalence reaches 21 per cent, more than four times higher than in countries that are not conflict-affected or in fragile situations (5 per cent).<sup>10</sup> Even in countries without active conflicts but characterized by weak governance or other sources of institutional or social fragility<sup>11</sup>, child labour remains elevated at 16 per cent.

In eastern DRC, 2025 MSNA data showed that among households reporting children outside of their households, 34% stated that at least one child had left to search for work. Furthermore, 15% of all surveyed households reported that children in the household engaged in hazardous or harmful labor. Among these households, the most common harmful job types were carrying heavy loads (53%), working long hours (17%), and working in dangerous locations (16%). Respectively, in the Ituri and Sud-Kivu

regions, 12% of these households reported that children worked in mines.

In Sudan, as part of the 2025 MSNA, 31% of households reported having some children aged 5 to 17 involved in hazardous or harmful income-generating activities.

**The involvement of a child in hazardous types of labour has a significantly damaging impact on their health.**

For example, their physical and psychological immaturity amplifies the risk that hazardous work may result in serious injury or illness with potentially lifelong consequences.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, when children are involved in child labour, they may face significant barriers to accessing essential services needed for their survival and development, including health, education, and legal services, which are already disrupted by conflict. When certain forms of child labour are considered illegal under national legislation, children may face additional protection risks, such as difficulties obtaining civil documentation or exposure to human trafficking.

**Even when children can attend school while working, attendance alone does not guarantee meaningful learning.** Data from countries measuring both child labour and children’s learning outcomes indicate that children involved in child labour frequently fall behind in fundamental learning skills. Beyond area affected by conflict, data from 34 countries indicated that children involved in child labour are less likely to demonstrate basic reading and numeracy skills compared to peers of the same age who are not engaged in child labour.<sup>13 14</sup>

**Forced Recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups**

**The recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups remains a persistent protection risk in conflict settings.** According to Save the Children, 7,405 children were verified as having been recruited or used in conflict in 2024. DRC recorded the highest number of cases, with 2,365 children affected. More than 70% of all verified cases occurred in African countries, underscoring the continued and disproportionate exposure of children to grave violations across the continent.<sup>15</sup> Crisis-level data further illustrate the scale and uneven distribution of this risk.

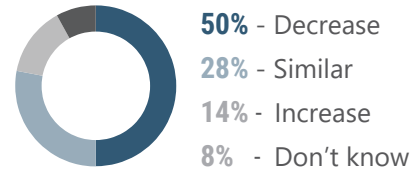
**60%** *household in Nara, Mali, reported recruitment of children by armed groups in the community*

In Mali, findings from the 2025 MSNA seem to indicate that 4% of households reported incidents of child recruitment by armed groups in their community over the twelve months preceding data collection. However, the situation is far more severe in specific areas. In Nara, Northern Mali, where armed groups have been active in 2024<sup>16</sup>, 60% of households in Nara reported such incidents, compared to 24% in Menaka and 11% in Kidal.

Although half of households experienced a decline in recruitment in the past year, 42% saw an increase or the

same level of recruitment, especially in southern areas. This underscores the fluid and regionally shifting nature of the risk, driven by changes in the security environment.

**Mali - % of households reporting a perceived increase/stability/decrease in the recruitment of children by armed groups compared with the previous years (Source: MSNA 2025)**



Children in eastern DRC have been increasingly at risk of being forcibly recruited by armed groups. Significant recruitment activity has been reported by protection partners in North Kivu (Masisi and Rutshuru territories) and South Kivu (Kalehe and Walungu territories). Protection actors also confirmed new cases of children associated with armed forces in 2025, indicating that recruitment remained an ongoing issue.<sup>17</sup>

As reflected by protection partners in Haiti, where child recruitment by armed groups has surged since 2024, recruitment is not only driven by insecurity but also by widespread poverty, lack of educational opportunities, and the disruption of essential services, across several contexts.<sup>18</sup>

**Child recruitment inflicts lifelong psychological trauma and physical harm, and it severely disrupts healthy development. Even after leaving armed groups, children often face social stigma and community rejection, making reintegration challenging.**

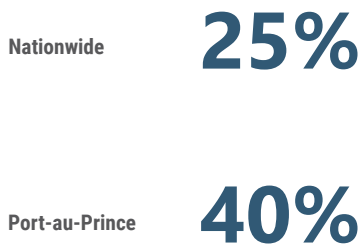
**An overlooked mental health crisis with long-term consequences**

**Beyond protection risks linked to conflict-induced vulnerabilities, disrupted essential services, and negative coping strategies, findings from the 2025 MSNA indicate widespread concerns among surveyed households regarding children’s mental health.** In Haiti, 25% of households reported behavioural changes among children, increasing to 40% in the urban areas of Port-au-Prince. These concerns have been even more pronounced among vulnerable groups. Nearly two-thirds of returnee households in urban areas of Port-au-Prince observed behavioural changes in their children, most commonly increased aggression.

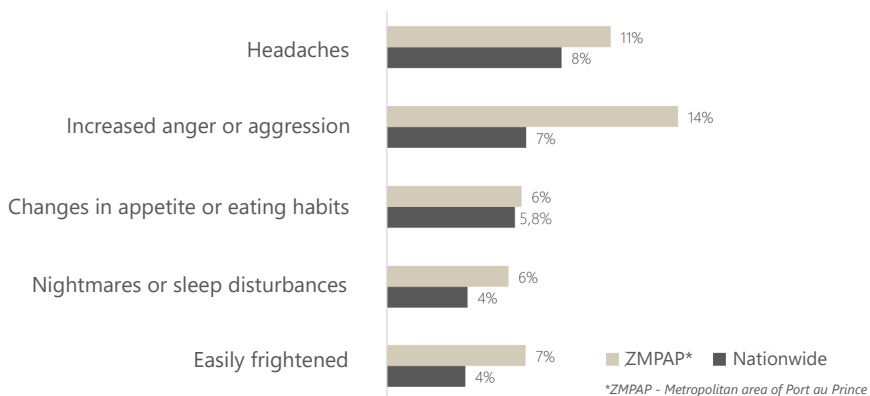
In Sudan, 52% of households reported at least one child showing signs of psychosocial distress in the past three months. The situation is particularly difficult in conflict-affected states, with 94% of households in Al Jazeera, 67% in South Kordofan, and 51% in South Darfur reporting signs of distress among children within their households.

Haiti - Reported changes children’s behavior (Source: MSNA 2025)

Share of households reporting change in their children behaviour



Type of reported behavioral and emotional changes



Conclusion

Across the crises examined, one reality stands out clearly: children living in conflict affected environments are facing an increasingly dangerous combination of insecurity, disrupted services, socio-economic strain. The evidence presented throughout this analysis shows how these pressures interact to heighten risks such as child separation, child labour, and forced recruitment, while also contributing to a widespread but often overlooked mental health crisis among children.

These risks do not occur in isolation. They reinforce one another, creating conditions in which children have fewer opportunities to learn, fewer safe spaces to grow, and diminishing prospects for a healthy transition into adulthood.

The high levels of psychosocial distress observed among children in places like Haiti and Sudan reflect not only the direct impacts of violence but also the chronic stress of growing up without stability, support, or access to basic services. These experiences have serious implications

for children’s cognitive, social emotional, and physical development, with long term consequences for learning, social participation, and future livelihoods.

Taken together, these findings underline the urgent need for a more holistic approach to child programming in conflict affected contexts. This requires strengthened systems that can prevent and respond to safety risks, improved access to education, health, justice, and mental health support, and greater investment in community based structures that help families meet basic needs without resorting to harmful coping strategies. Protecting children in conflict is not only a moral and legal obligation. It is an essential investment in future recovery and stability.

Ensuring that they are safe, supported, and able to access the services they need is central to preventing the long term and intergenerational impacts of today’s crises. Only through coordinated and funded, child-centred programming can we help safeguard a generation at risk.

Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> A protection risk can be defined as actual or potential exposure of the affected population to violence, coercion, or deliberate deprivation.
- <sup>2</sup> Save the Children, 2025. *Stop the War on Children: Security for whom?* [Link](#)
- <sup>3</sup> Apfel et Simon, 1996, *Psychosocial Interventions for Children of War: The Value of a Model of Resiliency*.
- <sup>4</sup> In this report, children are defined as all individuals under the age of eighteen. Apart from the 2025 MSNA set of education indicators, no specific age subgroups are used as the primary analysis level. Nevertheless, children across various age groups may encounter different protection risks, depending on community capacity, underlying vulnerabilities, and the specific threats present in the community.
- <sup>5</sup> Save the Children, 2025. *Stop the War on Children: Security for whom?* [Link](#)
- <sup>6</sup> Impact Initiatives, 2025, *Severe education needs persist across all crisis-affected context in 2025*. [Link](#)
- <sup>7</sup> UNICEF, *Latest Update - June 2025. Close to 50 million children had been displaced due to conflict and violence globally by the end of 2024*. [Link](#)
- <sup>8</sup> Protection Cluster, October 2025. *Global Protection Update*. [Link](#)
- <sup>9</sup> Child labour comprises work that children are too

- young to perform and/or work that, by its nature or circumstances, is likely to harm children’s health, safety, or morals. In more technical terms, child labour encompasses work performed by children in any employment, with two important exceptions: permitted light work for children within the age range specified for light work; and work that is not classified as among the worst forms of child labour, particularly as hazardous work, for children above the general minimum working age (ILO & UNICEF, 2025)
- <sup>10</sup> ILO & UNICEF, 2025, *Child Labour: Global Estimates for 2024, trends and the way forward*. [Link](#)
- <sup>11</sup> For further information about the definition of social/ institutional fragility, as part of this analysis, please consult the ILO&UNICEF report on child labour for 2024. [Link](#)
- <sup>12</sup> ILO & UNICEF, 2025, *Child Labour: Global Estimates for 2024, trends and the way forward*. [Link](#)
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> OECD, 2019, *Child Labour: Cause, consequences and policies to tackle it*. [Link](#)
- <sup>15</sup> Save the Children, 2025. *Stop the War on Children: Security for whom?* [Link](#)
- <sup>16</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2025, *World Report: Mali* [Link](#)
- <sup>17</sup> Protection Cluster, October 2025. *Global Protection Update*. [Link](#)
- <sup>18</sup> Protection Cluster, September 2025, *Haiti Protection Analysis Update*, [Link](#)

ABOUT IMPACT

Founded in 2010 and headquartered in Geneva, IMPACT Initiatives is a leading applied research organization and the largest independent provider of data in crisis-affected contexts. Through our initiatives, REACH, AGORA, and PANDA, we enable humanitarian and other aid actors to make better, evidence-based decisions by delivering timely, relevant, and methodologically rigorous data and analysis. Our extensive presence across crisis-contexts allows us to collect data directly from crisis-affected people wherever needed, including among the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach.