This policy brief represents the first annual update of a mapping of the number of children living in conflict settings around the world, extending the existing data series to 2017. More than half of the world’s children were living in a conflict-ridden country in 2017. Even more worryingly, more than 420 million children, or more than one in six children, were living very close to a conflict zone – that is, less than 50km from where the actual fighting took place. Despite some recent progress in data collection and research, we need more systematic knowledge on how these children are impacted by conflict. More resources should be invested in collecting and managing systematic data on the various ways in which these children are directly affected by armed conflict, such as through killing and maiming, child soldier recruitment, sexual exploitation, and the denial of humanitarian access.

### Brief Points

- In 2017, approximately 1.8 billion children under the age of 18 (81% of all children) were living in a conflict-affected country.
- In 2017, approximately 420 million children (more than 1 out of 6) were living in a conflict zone. This constitutes a 7% increase from 2016, which this update calculates as 393 million children.
- In 2017, approximately 142 million children were living in high intensity conflict zones, i.e conflicts with more than 1,000 battle-related deaths. This marks a substantial decrease from 2016.
- The number of children living in conflict zones has been steadily increasing since the year 2000.
- Asia is the world region with the highest total number of children living in conflict zones.
- The Middle East is the world region in which a child has the highest probability of living in a conflict zone.

Gudrun Østby  
Siri Aas Rustad  
Andreas Forø Tollefsen

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
Non-conflict zone

As a starting point, we estimated the number of children living in countries that experienced at least one lethal conflict event, as defined by the UCDP Georeferenced Events Dataset (UCDP GED), in a given year.

According to our estimates, about 434 million children (aged 0–18) were living in peaceful countries in 2017, whereas the rest – 1.87 billion children (81% of all the world’s children) – were living in conflict-affected countries.

This is an increase from 2016, but this is mainly due to some very populous countries like China and Indonesia experiencing several low intensity conflict events in 2017. Further, this does not necessarily imply that all these children were affected by armed conflict in 2017. In fact, armed conflict very rarely engulfs an entire country. Most often, the actual fighting is confined to smaller areas. For instance, the Boko Haram insurgency has taken place primarily in the northern parts of Nigeria, and the conflict between the Iraqi government and Islamic State occurred in Sunni-majority regions. And in 2017, less than 0.1% of China’s children were living in conflict zones. Hence, in order to get a better sense of the number of children affected by armed conflict, we need to consider exactly where within countries the actual fighting is taking place.

Regional Patterns

Where are the 420 million conflict-affected children located? As shown in Figure 2 (A) below, the world region with the most conflict-affected children is Asia, where some 195 million children live in conflict zones. This represents almost half of all conflict-affected children globally. Africa comes in second in this unpleasant ranking, with almost 152 million children living in conflict zones. The corresponding numbers for the Middle East, the Americas, and Europe respectively are 35, 31, and 7 million.

According to our estimates, out of all the children in the world, about 420 million children (approximately 18%, or more than 1 in every 6 children) were living in conflict zones in 2017.
However, although Asia is the world region with the highest number of children living in conflict zones, this does not mean that the conflict risk for children is highest in Asia. These numbers must be considered relative to the overall regional population size.

Figure 2 (B) shows the proportion of children in each world region that were living in a conflict zone in 2017. As the figure shows, although Asia has the largest number of children living in conflict zones, the relative share of children living in conflict zones vis-à-vis children in peaceful areas within the region is higher in both the Middle East and Africa. The figure shows that the Middle East is the region in which the share of conflict-affected children is the highest relative to the overall population size in the region, at approximately 40%. In other words, in the Middle East, 2 out of every 5 children were living in conflict zones in 2017. For Africa, 26%, or 1 in every 4 children, were living in conflict zones. For Asia, the Americas, and Europe, the corresponding shares were 16%, 11%, and 5%, respectively.

There are also large variations within world regions. Figure 3 indicates which countries have the highest absolute number of children living in conflict zones. These are also the countries with the highest overall population. We see that most of these countries are situated in Asia. India has the highest number, with more than 56 million children living in conflict zones, followed by Pakistan, Nigeria, Egypt, Bangladesh, and the Philippines. Together, these six countries are home to more than half of all the children that lived in conflict zones in 2017.

**Time Trends**

The number of children living in conflict zones has increased over time since the end of the Cold War, although the number of countries with armed conflicts has remained quite stable. While the number of affected children was at its lowest in the early- and mid-1990s at around 200 million, it is now at a high of 420 million children, an increase of more than 50% from the 1990s, and a 7% increase from 2016, where 393 million children were reported to have been affected by conflict.

**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. What is the overall situation for the 420 million children worldwide that live in conflict-affected areas in terms of conflict intensity, and how has the situation developed over time?

In 2017, about one third (33.7%) of the children living in conflict zones lived in high intensity conflict zones with more than 1,000 battle-related deaths in a year. This is a decrease from 2016 when the corresponding share was 46.8%.

Figure 4 below depicts the numbers of children living in conflict zones by the total intensity level of the conflict in the country over time.
Although the number of children living in conflict zones has increased steadily from 1990 to 2005, the proportion of children in each of the three intensity-levels did not change dramatically during that time period.

However, the UCDP GED started coding events in 2011; thus, all events prior to 2011 were back-dated. It is therefore likely that data coded after 2011 is more precise and consistent due to simultaneous coding and better access to sources. Thus, for our data, this means that the number of children affected by conflict before 2011 might be underestimated, while the estimates for 2017 are more accurate.

### Policy Recommendations

Our mapping of children in conflict-affected areas has several implications for policy and further research. First, there is an urgent need to protect the more than 420 million children that were living in conflict zones in 2017. Concrete recommendations in this regard include the following:

- Supporting high-quality peacekeeping operations in conflict-affected areas.
- Designing and upholding credible sanctions against armed groups during conflicts to prevent child soldiering and the use of sexual violence against children.
- Increasing aid to conflict-affected countries in order to rebuild infrastructure and health systems that benefit children.

Equally important is the fact that the actors who actively work to address and reduce the impact of war on children need to support the generation of more systematic knowledge on the various ways in which children are affected by armed conflict. This includes data on how children are both directly impacted by conflict through killing and maiming, child soldier recruitment, and sexual exploitation, as well as how they are indirectly impacted through adverse health effects, for example related to the denial of humanitarian access. In short, more resources should be invested in generating and managing data related to children and armed conflict across time and space.

### Further Reading

Save the Children (2018) *The War on Children: Time to End Grave Violations against Children in Conflict*. Available at: [www.savethechildren.net/waronchildren](http://www.savethechildren.net/waronchildren)

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](http://www.prio.org/Projects/Project?x=1765)

### Notes

1. This figure is based on Save the Children’s coding of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict’s reports for 2017.