

OPINION

400 million children beset by war is a global public health crisis

War trauma has cascading effects on future generations.

By **Theresa Betancourt** Updated December 26, 2023, 3:00 a.m.



Palestinian children participated in an activity intended to support their mental health, amid continuing battles between Israel and the militant group Hamas, on Dec. 18, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. SAID KHATIB/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

From Ukraine to Sudan to Gaza, war takes a devastating toll on children. UNICEF estimates that [more than 400 million children globally live in areas affected by war or other conflict](#). While the world's diplomats work toward — and international organizations call for — an end to the bloodshed around the world, they must also prepare a parallel plan to meet the consequences of war on children's mental health.

A 2008 meta-analysis of 7,920 children exposed to war — including samples from the Palestinian territories, Israel, Bosnia, and Rwanda — found that [47 percent had probable post-traumatic stress disorder, 43 percent depression, and 27 percent anxiety, with many of these conditions co-occurring](#). Every armed conflict adds to the burden on global mental health. In 2023, for the first time, health care professionals around the world designated mental health disorders as a [higher health concern than cancer](#).

Armed conflict shapes the architecture of the child's developing brain. Childhood exposure to repeated traumas without the key buffering support of parents or other caregivers [disrupts development of the neurobiological stress systems](#) that help children regulate their emotions, build relationships, and respond in healthy ways to everyday stressors. Trauma exposure has consequences for physical health in the immediate aftermath and [sometimes decades later](#).

War trauma exacerbates every other public health issue. It puts a stranglehold on access to nutrition, clean water, adequate prenatal care, education, stable housing, and secure caregiver relationships — all recognized as crucial for child development and mental health. War trauma has cascading effects on future generations as well. Intergenerational studies of war have documented how [parental trauma can lead to harsher parenting practices](#), leading to emotional and behavioral troubles in children and intergenerational cycles of harm.

For the children who survive war, [research shows](#) their outcomes can be improved once the conflict ends. That will require systems of mental health, social services, and psychosocial support in conflict-affected settings starting from the earliest moment possible. This work will require a global child-trauma network to help rebuild systems of mental health, social services, and psychosocial support in regions torn asunder by war. There are a growing number of research-based examples to follow.

In Sierra Leone, two decades of study and work with children once ensnared in that country's brutal civil war yielded the [Youth Readiness Intervention](#), a multistep intervention that has shown it can help war-affected youth through a combination of therapy, mentoring, and community-based support. The model has served communities around the world.

In post-genocide Rwanda, working closely with colleagues at the University of Rwanda, we have developed and evaluated a [Family-Strengthening Intervention](#) to enrich parent-child relationships, promote early childhood development, and prevent family violence. This home-visiting intervention, known as Sugira Muryango, is delivered by a government child protection workforce and can be integrated into other health and social programs. It has also been implemented successfully in Sierra Leone and Colombia.

Efforts like these will require scale. In the United States, an example can be found in the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) — launched with congressional funding in 2000 — which has greatly increased access to evidence-based trauma and grief-focused mental health care for children and families exposed to a range of traumas. The network has developed more than 10,000 local and state partnerships to integrate supports into systems that serve children.

Just as it is crucial to end the Hamas-Israel war and the war in Ukraine, as well as other areas experiencing conflict, it is essential to begin preparing for the day when they do end. Central to those efforts should be an initiative to help all children affected by war to heal, develop with physical and mental well-being, and be prepared for a future that far outshines the darkness of this moment.

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