Children are particularly vulnerable in times of conflict and crisis. In 2022, more than two thirds of the world’s children were living in a conflict-ridden country. More than one in six were living less than 50 km away from where the actual fighting took place, a 2.8% increase from the year before. This policy brief provides the yearly update of the number of children at risk from violent conflict around the world, covering the period 1990–2022. The mapping was commissioned by Save the Children and generated by PRIO.

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**Brief Points**

- In 2022, approximately 468 million children (18.8%, or more than one in six) were living in a conflict zone.
- Around 96 million children were living in high-intensity conflict areas (with 100 or more killed within 50 km of the fighting). This is a decrease of some 8.3% from 2021.
- Close to 41% of all children exposed to conflict lived in an area that experienced more than 25 battle-related deaths within a 50 km radius.
- In 2022, as in 2021, Africa was the world region with the highest total number of children living in conflict zones (183 million children). The total number in Asia was 145 million.
- The Middle East continued to have the highest share of children living in conflict zones relative to the total child population (with as many as 39%, or more than one third of all children in the region).
Background

Since the mid-1990s, the issue of war’s impact on children has been high on the international agenda. In 2005, the United Nations Security Council established a working group on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) to address issues related to children in armed conflict situations and to recommend methods of protecting children impacted by armed conflicts. While it is very valuable that the UN collects data on this problem, it does not include all conflict-affected countries in its data. Furthermore, the UN’s information varies greatly in specificity and accuracy. Despite the continued interest among policy-makers, we still lack systematic and detailed information on the numbers of children killed in armed conflict worldwide. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), in 2022, fatalities from organized violence around the world increased by a staggering 97%, (from 120,000 to 237,000) compared to the previous year. We do not know how many of the direct fatalities from organized violence were children under the age of 18. However, we can say something systematic 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 seventh annual update of a mapping of children living in conflict zones, commissioned by Save the Children and generated by PRIO. With the current update, the data series now includes the period 1990–2022.

How Many Children Live in Conflict-Affected Countries?

In order to estimate the number of children worldwide who are affected by armed conflict, we use as our starting point the UCDP definition of armed conflict: ‘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’.

We calculate 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, relying on population data from CIESIN and age-distribution data from the UN. According to our estimates, approximately 1.7 billion children under the age of 18 (68%, or more than two out of three children) were living in a conflict-affected country in 2022. This was approximately the same level as in 2021.

Conflict Risk over Time

Figure 2 graphs the number of children living in conflict zones over time. The estimated 468 million children living in a conflict zone in 2022 constitute a 2.8% increase from 2021, which this update calculates as 455 million children. However, the number is slightly lower than for the record year of 2020, which had 496 million children living in conflict areas according to the latest update. Over time, despite some fluctuations, there has been a general steady increase in the number of children living in conflict zones. According to our estimates, out of all the children in the world, about 468 million children (18.8%, or more than 1 out of 6) were living in a conflict zone in 2022.

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 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 map in Figure 1 overlays the conflict-affected countries (marked in yellow) with the conflict zones (marked in orange), which show where actual fighting took place in 2022. With some 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 468 million children (18.8%, or more than 1 out of 6) were living in a conflict zone in 2022.
Middle East

...battled to 2021, the number of children exposed to conflict (1–24 battle deaths) which has increased across all levels, but it is high-intensity conflict locally has not increased as significantly. This could possibly be explained by the clustering of high- and extreme-intensity events in Ethiopia. These events are particularly located in the north of Ethiopia in the Tigray region. Four extreme-intensity events in this region accounted for over 97,000 deaths. With high-intensity events (with 100–999 deaths) included, the lethality is even higher. However, the entire Tigray region is only inhabited by 6.1% of the total population. Hence, although the intensity of the events in northern Ethiopia is high, these events do not reach a large share of the population. The war in Ukraine also contributes to the high numbers of high- and extreme-intensity events in 2022. Ukraine went from 0 high-intensity events in 2021 to 72 in 2022 following Russia’s invasion. Most of the high-intensity events in Ukraine are clustered in the east and north. Even though the region in the east and the city of Kyiv are highly populated, no high-intensity events took place in the populated regions in the west and the parts of central Ukraine.

**Conflict Intensity**

Some countries are harder hit by conflict than others and see higher total fatality numbers. Although Russia’s invasion of Ukraine dominated news headlines, it was the war in Ethiopia that was the most lethal in 2022. With more than 101,000 fatalities, the war in Ethiopia alone accounted for nearly half of all battle-related deaths during 2022. The Russia-Ukraine war was the second most deadly war, with some 81,500 fatalities.

In 2022, the majority of the conflict-exposed children in the world (53.4%) lived in high-intensity conflict countries (i.e. 1,000 or more battle deaths per year in country), some 41.4% lived in medium-intensity conflict countries (25–999 battle-deaths) and 5.1% of the conflict-exposed children lived in low-intensity conflict countries (below 25 battle deaths). But what about the shares of children who were affected by conflict in their proximate vicinity? Figure 3 displays the number of children exposed to various conflict intensity levels locally (i.e. within 50 km). In 2022, approximately 59% of the children exposed to conflict were living in an area that experienced between 1 and 24 battle deaths (low intensity). 20% were living in an area with between 25 and 99 battle deaths (medium intensity). 17% were living in an area with between 100 and 999 battle deaths (high intensity). Finally, some 14.7 million children, or 3% of all the conflict-exposed children, were living in an area of extreme conflict intensity (1,000 battle deaths or more). Over time, there has been an increase across all levels, but it is the group of children exposed to low-intensity conflict (1–24 battle deaths) which has increased the most.

Despite the large increase in conflicts compared to 2021, the number of children exposed to high-intensity conflict locally has not increased as significantly. This could possibly be explained by the clustering of high- and extreme-intensity events in Ethiopia. These events are particularly located in the north of Ethiopia in the Tigray region. Four extreme-intensity events in this region accounted for over 97,000 deaths. With high-intensity events (with 100–999 deaths) included, the lethality is even higher. However, the entire Tigray region is only inhabited by 6.1% of the total population. Hence, although the intensity of the events in northern Ethiopia is high, these events do not reach a large share of the population. The war in Ukraine also contributes to the high numbers of high- and extreme-intensity events in 2022. Ukraine went from 0 high-intensity events in 2021 to 72 in 2022 following Russia’s invasion. Most of the high-intensity events in Ukraine are clustered in the east and north. Even though the region in the east and the city of Kyiv are highly populated, no high-intensity events took place in the populated regions in the west and the parts of central Ukraine.

**Regional Differences**

Where were all of the 468 million conflict-affected children in 2022 located? As shown in Figure 4A, for the second year in a row, Africa was the world region with the highest number of conflict-affected children in 2022, with about 183 million children living in conflict zones. Asia was the region with the next highest number, with about 145 million children living in conflict zones. The corresponding numbers for the Americas, the Middle East, and Europe respectively are approximately 69, 63, and 9 million.

However, in order to capture the regional risk to children, these numbers must be considered relative to the overall regional population size.
The Conflict Trends project aims to answer questions related to the causes, 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 the 7th yearly 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.

**Policy Recommendations**

The actors who 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. Based on what we already know, there is an urgent need to protect the more than 468 million children that were living in conflict zones in 2022. We recommend the following measures:

- Support high-quality peacekeeping operations in conflict-affected areas.
- Specifically address children’s needs in peace negotiations as early as possible in the peace process.
- Create safe spaces for children 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, education and health systems that benefit children.

**Notes**


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### Countries with Most Children at Risk

In Figure 5, panel A lists the 10 countries with the highest numbers of children at risk of armed conflict. Almost half (49.8%) of the world’s children at risk reside in five countries: Nigeria, India, Mexico, Ethiopia and Pakistan. Panel B focuses on the countries with the highest shares of children at risk relative to the total child population. Here, three countries stand out: Burundi, El Salvador and the Palestinian Territories. In these countries, practically all children lived within 50 km of one or more violent events in 2022. In terms of territory, these are all fairly small countries. Three countries feature on both of the lists, meaning they are among the top ten countries when it comes to both the highest numbers and shares of children at risk: Afghanistan, Mexico and Myanmar.

### Further Reading


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