



Beyond the rubble: eight overlooked ways that urban warfare is affecting children

August 22, 2024, Analysis / Children in conflict / Conduct of Hostilities / Education in Armed Conflict / Persons with disabilities / Protection of education / Social Protection / Special Protections / Special Themes / Urban warfare

🕒 14 mins read



Timothy P. Williams

Child Protection Consultant; Adjunct Professor, Global Child Protection, Boston College School of Social Work



Alexandra Jackson

Global Adviser on Child Protection, Operations Division, ICRC



Vanessa Murphy

Legal Adviser, ICRC



*In cities from Gaza to those in Sudan and Ukraine, childhoods are irrevocably changed by urban warfare. Yet despite the number of children affected and the increasingly urbanized nature of conflict, the detail of the child-specific nature of the harm caused remains poorly understood by practitioners and decision-makers. To address this gap, in 2023 the ICRC published a new report – *Childhood in Rubble: The Humanitarian Consequences of Urban Warfare for Children* – drawing from existing literature, 52 interviews with experts, and the organization’s firsthand experience.*

In this post, three of the report's contributors set out eight overlooked ways that children are affected by urban warfare and outline a set of legal, policy and operational recommendations that states, non-state armed groups and humanitarians could implement to elevate the protection of children from media rallying cry to political priority.

ICRC Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog - Beyond the rubble: eight overlooked ways that urban warfare is affecting children

Rarely a day goes by without stark media images depicting how war ravages the lives of children in urban conflict zones. These visuals, though powerful, only scratch the surface of the complex and profound impact that war in cities has on millions of children. There is the immediate destruction, violence and chaos. There are also the consequences of urban warfare that are long-lasting and unseen as the news cycle moves on.

Here, we delve into eight overlooked ways in which urban warfare impacts children, based on analysis in the ICRC's recent report, *Childhood in Rubble: The Humanitarian Consequences of Urban Warfare for Children*. By providing a fuller understanding of the many different kinds of interconnected harm done to children in war in cities, the report aims to inform a better-tailored humanitarian response and calls for renewed efforts by warring parties to prevent reasonably foreseeable harm to children from their operations.

#1: Children have distinct patterns of life in cities that change during warfare

Children experience conflict in cities *differently* than adults. In the labyrinth of a city during war, the simple acts of going out to play, buying food, gathering firewood or going to school can be filled with danger. Children are usually smaller than adults and armed forces tend to know less about the places they frequent, so they may be more easily obscured and overlooked during intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities. Their previous routines and ways of moving about the city, often centred around schools, playgrounds and homes, are disrupted, and this exposes them to unforeseen risks and pushes them into locations that they did not go to before. They are hurt or killed by explosive devices, collapsing buildings, landmines, or snipers.

Child-specific essential services – such as maternity and paediatric health units, and education facilities – suffer too: in planning and conducting their military operations, warring parties may undervalue civilian objects that are essential for children's life and development.

#2: Children's natural curiosity and inherent need to play and explore puts them at serious risk in hazardous environments

The *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor* reported in 2023 that children accounted for 49% of documented casualties (where age was known) of landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW), and 71% of casualties from cluster munition remnants (when the age and type of weapon was known). Children are *naturally curious*, which can expose them to risks. They may be inclined to pick up and play with colourful or intriguing objects and explore abandoned buildings in urban warfare environments. Those damaged buildings may crumble around them or conceal landmines and explosive remnants of war, causing death or devastating injuries in a flash.

Moreover, during a bombing or explosion, adults often understand the need to seek cover due to the potential for secondary explosions or building collapses, whereas children *may not know* this. What's more, they may panic, be left behind or seek shelter elsewhere in the city, risking separation from their families.

#3: Explosive weapons exact a particularly brutal toll on children's bodies

The same explosive weapons that wound or maim an adult combatant *can more easily kill a child*. With their smaller size and distinct anatomy – lower weight, disproportionately smaller abdominal walls, comparatively larger internal organs, less blood, and with torsos closer to the ground – children are more susceptible to die from explosive violence. These physical characteristics mean that children who survive a blast *have been found to be* more likely than adults to have shrapnel in their heads, necks, upper limbs and trunks. The effects of blasts on children *can also lead to* loss of limbs or sensory impairments, resulting in long-term health consequences and disability that reframe a child's future and path into adulthood.

Providing treatment for children after an explosive incident is also challenging. Children may be weakened by malnutrition, exposure to poor hygiene conditions and dirty or inadequate water supplies. Children tend to *have more health needs and require more surgical procedures* than adults after blasts, and treatment is further hampered by a lack of paediatric medical expertise in emergencies (though valuable resources, such as the *Paediatric Blast Injury Field Manual*, exist for healthcare workers).

#4: The impact of war in cities can leave a significant mark on children's mental health and well-being in the immediate- and longer-term

Research indicates that in conflict affected areas, over 22% of people suffer from mental health conditions, which is three times the global average. For children, the intense stress from experiencing warfare can alter the architecture of their developing brains, potentially contributing to cognitive and emotional issues such as anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. Children never forget the loss of their pets or their childhood home, friends and neighbours. They endure trauma from witnessing or experiencing violence, injuries, deaths, family separation, or the cascading effects of economic hardship.

Children who have experienced conflict or displacement *report* insomnia, stress, anxiety, panic attacks, grief, bedwetting, fear of loud noises, and nightmares. The presence of planes or drones can trigger *fear and screaming* among children, associating these sounds with bombings. At worst, and without support, affected children may consider suicide or engage in self-harm, reflecting the profound psychological impact of living in a conflict zone.

#5: Access to education is severely disrupted

Urban warfare severely undermines children's education in numerous ways beyond attacks that damage or destroy schools or kill students and education personnel. Even when teachers remain and schools can stay open, reaching them safely can be impossible. Conflict disrupts essential services used in schools, such as electricity, water and heating, as well as transport, which further complicates access, especially for children with disabilities. The scarcity of resources, damaged classrooms and facilities as well as the displacement of teachers further disrupt the learning process.

For *younger children*, child-care activities are similarly affected. For older children, disrupted examination schedules and transition rates have long-term consequences, impacting their academic performance as well as future education and opportunities. For example, *OECD has estimated* a reduction in earnings of 7.7% for one year of lost schooling; additional years of schooling are systematically associated with higher employment.

The challenges of *implementing remote or blended learning*, establishing temporary learning spaces, and maintaining secure educational records for displaced children as well as those who remain behind, can be complex and administratively burdensome – especially in contexts where education infrastructure is destroyed and where internet or radio connectivity is unreliable – yet such solutions may be the only remaining pathways to providing life-changing education.

#6: Risks to children with disabilities are exacerbated

Children with disabilities are often disproportionately affected by urban warfare. Mobility is reduced for all children, but those in wheelchairs or with sensory impairments—such as hearing or vision disabilities—face even *greater obstacles*, for example when elevators don't function, routes are obstructed and assistive devices are broken. Those with hearing or visual impairments may be unable to hear warnings or see new hazards like damaged buildings or checkpoints that block previously safe paths.

Support for children with intellectual disabilities is likely to be reduced or non-existent. Furthermore, medical and rehabilitation professionals, crucial for their care, may evacuate, be displaced or be unable to attend work. As part of the reconstruction of a city post-conflict, significant investment is required in technical services, accessible infrastructure and support for people with disabilities.

#7: Children's experiences are often gendered

Children's experience of urban warfare tends to differ based on sex and gender. Research finds that boys *are more likely* to be directly affected by explosive weapons, landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) due to being out in the community. They may be running errands for the family, meeting friends, collecting scrap metal or combing through damaged buildings which may be weapon contaminated. Boys may also be more targeted for attack by armed actors, as they are more likely to be perceived as a security threat than girls.

Girls also experience the *gender-specific* impact of urban warfare, within the context of gender-based inequality present in most societies. Gender gaps in access to education *widen in situations of displacement*; in certain contexts, girls and women face gender-based *barriers to health care*, including a lack of qualified female practitioners. While sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) affects both girls and boys, girls experience it in *higher numbers*.

#8: Displacement and family separation is common

The dynamics of urban warfare, with its constant movement and shifting frontlines, increase the risk of children being separated from their families. Children and families are often forced to leave their homes, either due to the direct consequences of fleeing violence or indirect consequences like school closures and lack of access to essential services. The destruction caused by urban warfare also impedes safe and dignified returns, *leaving children in displaced families to grow up in limbo*.

Children can lose contact with their families quickly as a result of evacuations, sheltering from attacks, in the confusion of internal displacement, or when crossing international borders. Those with disabilities and/or located in institutions such as orphanages may be overlooked in evacuation plans, compounding their vulnerability. Displacement can *reduce children's access to vaccination programmes* and other timely healthcare interventions, leading to preventable diseases and disability that can have lifelong health consequences for the individual child, their family and the community.

Recommendations: Action needed to prevent and respond to this harm to children

States, parties to armed conflict and humanitarian actors make choices about what, who and how to prioritise their resources as they plan and conduct their respective activities in the midst of war. And while children are often spoken about in public-facing communications and multilateral fora, they often don't actually receive the specific attention warranted by their vulnerability when organizations engage in decision-making. *Chapter 4 of Childhood in Rubble* encourages a change to the inadequate *status quo* with actor-by-actor recommendations, summarized in brief here.

The international law and standards protecting children in armed conflict are detailed and robust, but time and time again are violated and forgotten. Part of the problem is that many states have left gaps between their international commitments and their domestic frameworks. States should update their domestic legal frameworks to match their existing international legal obligations, and endorse and implement higher standards too – including the *Paris Principles on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, the *Safe Schools Guidelines on the Military Use of Schools*, and the *Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas* (EWIPA Political Declaration).

Relevant ministries and other public entities should develop preparedness plans to protect and reduce risks to children in the event of hostilities. These can include child-sensitive evacuation plans (including shelters and messages adapted to accommodate children), and policies that foresee child health and educational service continuity in anticipation of the disruption of conflict. Children in detention mustn't be forgotten: plans to reduce the number of detained children to mitigate crisis-related risks have been shown to work in emergencies, with *UNICEF estimating* that over 45,000 children were released from detention during the COVID-19 pandemic, because of good preparedness measures among other reasons.

Armed actors should develop specific doctrine and/or adapt existing doctrine and standard operating procedures to specifically address the protection of children in urban environments, and incorporate awareness of the specific needs of children, and the risks they face, in military training. Those involved in planning military operations in urban areas should take into account the specific situation of children when reviewing options to avoid and/or mitigate harm to civilians – useful measures can include putting in place civilian-casualty tracking systems, disaggregated by age and sex where feasible, and involving advisers with child protection expertise in planning.

Finally, humanitarian actors too should more systematically anticipate the specific risks to children during the conduct of hostilities in urban areas. This will improve their capacities to prevent and reduce harm, in line with existing guidance for working with children in emergencies (the *Child Protection Minimum Standards* among others).

Other recommendations set out in the report encourage better gender, age and disability data collection and disaggregation, and ensuring that media portrayals of children respect the dignity of the child and are avoided when not in the child's best interest.

Conclusion

The world of harm inflicted on children by urban warfare is a stark reminder of the need for restraint in military operations. Among the many causes for despair, there are some prospects for improved protection of children's lives. Perhaps the most significant recent development is the adoption of the *EWIPA Political Declaration* in 2022, now endorsed by 87 states. The first *international follow-up conference to review implementation of the EWIPA Political Declaration*, held in Oslo in 2024, offered a platform to consider concrete measures that prioritize the safety and well-being of civilians, including children in conflict zones. The protection of children was mentioned throughout the different sessions by states and humanitarian organizations and included a focus on the protection of critical infrastructure, including that used by children, as well specific actions taken by militaries to avoid, reduce and mitigate civilian harm, including against children. The ICRC's related *recommendations to the Conference* highlight the importance of child-specific measures in recommendations 2.10.1, 5.4, and 5.9.

In closing, the pervasive media imagery of children experiencing urban warfare memorialises some of the most vulnerable and traumatic moments for themselves and their loved ones. While these images can help to raise awareness, we must also avoid reducing children to mere symbols of a conflict, overshadowing their individual stories as well as the immediate- and longer-term support they require.

It's crucial to balance the need for awareness with the protection, privacy and dignity that children inherently deserve. The best way to do this is for states, weapons bearers, humanitarian actors, communities, families and children themselves to analyse and share what happens specifically to children in urban warfare, to consider the many complex and intersecting factors that lead to harm or to protection holistically, to take steps to minimize and mitigate that harm, and to support recovery through approaches which consider children and their needs at every step of the way.

See also:

- Abby Zeith, *Trapped in conflict: urban sieges and encirclement*, June 20, 2024
- Laura Boillot, Laurent Gisel, Paul Holtom, Frederik Siem, Dina Abou Samra, Juliana Helou van der Berg, *Protecting civilians in conflict: the urgency of implementing the Political Declaration on Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas*, April 22, 2024
- Ruben Stewart, Celia Edeline, *The NSAG handbook: helping non-State armed groups reduce civilian harm during urban warfare*, March 30, 2023
- Charles Deutscher, Chandni Dhingra, *Present and engaged: how the ICRC responds to armed conflict and violence in cities*, January 19, 2023
- Paul Reavley, *Bombs & blast waves: Why children in conflict need special care*, September 13, 2018

Tags: armed conflict, conduct of hostilities, explosive weapons, IHL, international humanitarian law, protection, urban warfare

You may also be interested in:





War's long legacy: the continued importance of the Geneva Conventions 75 years later

● 14 mins read

Analysis / Children in conflict / Conduct of Hostilities / Education in Armed Conflict / Persons with disabilities / Protection of education / Social Protection / Special Protections / Special Themes / Urban warfare
Ellen Policinski

Next week marks the 75th anniversary of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949. Against a ...



International humanitarian law and Islamic law: a principled and inclusive dialogue

● 7 mins read

Analysis / Children in conflict / Conduct of Hostilities / Education in Armed Conflict / Persons with disabilities / Protection of education / Social Protection / Special Protections / Special Themes / Urban warfare
Ahmed Al-Dawoody

Around two thirds of ICRC operations are in Muslim countries where armed conflicts are in ...