



THE ALLIANCE
FOR CHILD PROTECTION
IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

The Unprotected: The Impact of Humanitarian Crises on Children and their Protection in 2025 - 2026



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1. OVERVIEW

Across 2025 and into 2026, the number of children affected by wars, disasters, and humanitarian crises continued to rise. By the millions—from Sudan to Gaza, from Ukraine to Colombia—children are bearing the severe consequences of violence, displacement, and climate shocks, increasingly compounded by the convergence of all three.

Around [one in five children worldwide](#) now lives in or close to situations affected by armed conflict or armed violence. Living in such contexts significantly heightens children’s exposure to violence, exploitation, neglect, and abuse, while undermining their safety, development, and well-being.

Hundreds of millions of children are exposed every day to violence, hunger, fear, and deprivation, including denial of access to health care, education, safe housing, and the protective and nurturing environments of their families and communities. These cumulative risks are affecting children across diverse crisis settings.

[Every child is entitled to the right to be protected.](#) This includes the right to survive, to develop to their full potential, and to grow into adulthood with agency and dignity. Yet for large numbers of children worldwide, particularly those living in fragile and conflict-affected settings, these rights are not being realised.



Despite their resilience, children remain among the most vulnerable in situations of armed conflict, displacement, and disaster. As violations of international humanitarian and human rights law persist—and in many contexts intensify—insufficient accountability and rising impunity are allowing these violations to continue unchecked, increasing children’s exposure to harm and undermining their protection.

The humanitarian system is mandated to protect children in situations that threaten their survival or long-term development. However, today the system is not only facing strain, but is contracting. Structural challenges, escalating needs, and a deepening funding crisis are driving the closure, scale-down, and fragmentation of child protection services, often without safe or principled transition arrangements.

What began as an emerging crisis in early 2025 has, by 2026, become a documented and widespread rollback of child protection services. Evidence now confirms that millions of children are losing access to critical protection and support services at precisely the moment when risks are intensifying.

Major humanitarian reforms, alongside funding reductions, are reshaping what support is prioritised, delivered, and sustained. These dynamics are narrowing the space for effective child protection, reducing the availability of essential services, including both specialised child protection interventions and broader sectoral responses that contribute to children’s protection.

Taken together, these trends point to a global environment that is becoming increasingly unsafe and unpredictable for children affected by crises, underscoring the urgent need to reaffirm child protection as a central priority within humanitarian action.

2. AT A GLANCE: CHILDREN IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES IN 2025- 2026

- **Conflict is spreading:** 2024 and 2025 have seen the [highest number of countries engaged in armed conflict](#) since World War II, with this trend continuing into 2026.
- **1 in 5 children affected by conflict:** Over 500 million children live in or close to armed conflict or armed violence.
- **Record levels of displacement:** [Nearly 50 million children are displaced](#) due to conflict, violence, and natural disasters, accounting for 40% of all forcibly displaced people globally.
- **Grave violations of children's rights are surging:** [41,370 grave violations](#) perpetrated against children were verified in 2024 – a 25% from 2023.
- **Brutality is intensifying:** Increasing numbers of children are subjected to multiple, overlapping violations (e.g. abduction, recruitment, sexual violence).
- **Humanitarian access is shrinking:** Verified incidents of denial of access rose from [5,205 in 2023](#) to over [7,900 in 2024](#), with further increases expected in 2025.
- **Climate change is intensifying:** [One billion children](#) are at extremely high risk of climate induced disasters; an estimated [20,000 children are displaced every day](#) due to extreme weather.
- **Funding cuts driving collapse:** Sudden cuts in [humanitarian assistance](#) are forcing the closure and scale-down of child protection services, leaving children without critical support.
- **Wider impacts on children's lives:** Cuts could contribute to [4.5 million additional deaths of children](#) under five years of age by 2030 and also leave six million children out of school by next year, while disrupting already underfunded child protection systems.



3. THE CHANGING HUMANITARIAN ARCHITECTURE: SYSTEM CONTRACTION INCREASING RISKS FOR CHILDREN

Since 2025, the humanitarian sector has been undergoing major shifts that profoundly impact what support children can realistically access in crises. These changes are no longer incremental but represent a system-wide contraction in both ambition and delivery of critical child protection services, deepening further into 2026.

Since 2025, the humanitarian sector has been undergoing major shifts that are significantly affecting what support children can access in situations of conflict and crisis. These changes—driven by rising needs, funding shortfalls, and system-wide reforms—are reshaping how responses are prioritised and resourced, with direct implications for children’s protection.

From 2025 onwards, the Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) has been scaled back in the context of constrained funding and an increasing emphasis on prioritisation. The [2025 GHO](#) was reduced to a US\$32.6 billion appeal targeting 114.4 million people—just 38.3% of the 298.9 million people in need globally and 64% of those originally targeted. The [2026 GHO](#) continues this trend, targeting 87 million people at a cost of US\$23 billion, representing the [lowest coverage in a decade](#), despite rising needs.

These reductions reflect a combination of factors, including fiscal pressures, shifting donor priorities, and broader political dynamics shaping humanitarian engagement. In practice, they are resulting in a narrowing of humanitarian response, with increasing emphasis on the most acute needs.

At the same time, major [humanitarian system reforms](#)—including the humanitarian reset and other restructuring processes—are reshaping how responses are organised and delivered. This is having a direct impact on both specialised child protection prevention and support services, as well as all programming across all sectors that contribute to preventing child protection risks in humanitarian settings.

What New Evidence Shows: Rising Child Protection Violations and Shrinking Services

A recent report on the [Impact of Funding Cuts on Children and their Protection in Humanitarian Contexts: On Year On](#), the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action confirms that funding shocks in 2025 have evolved into system-wide deterioration in child protection.

- **Violations increasing:** Nearly 75% of practitioners report rising child protection violations, with 45% reporting a significant increase.
- **Conflict contexts hardest hit:** 53% report risks increasing significantly in conflict settings (vs 26% elsewhere).
- **Services collapsing:** 91% report reduced access to child protection services; ~25% report full closures in some locations.
- **Fewer children reached:** 55% report reduced coverage, with major cuts to frontline presence and activities.
- **Core services disrupted:** MHPSS (64%), cash assistance (63%), programmes for children associated with armed groups (59%), and case management (58%).
- **Workforce and quality declining:** Over 60% report inability to meet Minimum Standards, with major losses in technical capacity.
- **Funding collapse driving impacts:** 84% report budget cuts, with half losing over 40%.

4. HOW CRISES ARE AFFECTING CHILDREN'S PROTECTION IN 2025/2026

Children experience humanitarian crises in ways that are immediate, deep, and long-lasting. The convergence of shocks in 2025 and 2026—including escalating armed conflicts, widespread displacement, climate disasters, and funding shortfalls—is intensifying risks to their protection, development, and well-being.

Dangers and Injuries:

What this means: During humanitarian crises, children are at elevated risk of physical and environmental dangers that can result in injury, impairment, and death. Humanitarian crises can increase everyday hazards and risks, as well as create new ones, particularly for children who are displaced in unfamiliar surroundings. These risks are being intensified by climate change, which is increasing the frequency and severity of floods, storms, and extreme weather, compounding the dangers children face in conflict—and displacement-affected settings, particularly for those living in unfamiliar or unsafe environments.

Latest data and trends:

- **Climate-related disasters are increasingly [disrupting children's safety and protection](#).** Floods, storms, and cyclones destroy homes, schools, and health facilities, forcing families into unsafe displacement and increasing risks of injury, disease, family separation, and erosion of protective environments.
- **In Sri Lanka, Cyclone Ditwah affected [over 275,000 children](#),** with flooding and landslides causing severe damage to homes and vital infrastructure, causing widespread displacement and increased risk of disease outbreaks and unsafe living conditions.
- **Explosive remnants of war (landmines and unexploded ordnance)** remain one of the deadliest threats to children. Children account for [nearly half of all casualties worldwide](#), as they walk to school, play, collect water, or return to contaminated areas with their families.
- **In Syria, at least [188 children were killed or injured](#) by landmines and unexploded ordnance in just three months in 2025** as families returned to former frontlines to rebuild their lives, highlighting how explosive hazards continue to make everyday activities life-threatening for children.

Physical and Emotional Maltreatment:

What this means: The maltreatment of children refers to any action—including the failure to act—that results in harm, potential harm, or the threat of harm to children, and can have serious short- and long-term impacts on children, including death. This can include neglect as well as physical and emotional abuse and violence. Evidence indicates that maltreatment is widespread and can increase in humanitarian settings where a children's protective environments are weakened.

Latest data and trends:

- In 2024, **nearly 12,000 children were killed or injured in conflict**—the highest toll ever, [mostly due to explosive weapons](#), with national armed forces and government armed forces being the main perpetrators.
- The deadliest conflicts for children in 2024 were the **occupied Palestinian territory** (2,917 children), **Sudan** (1,739 children), **Myanmar** (1,261 children), **Ukraine** (671 children) and **Syria** (670 children), due to deaths and life-threatening injuries.
- **In Gaza**, more than [64,000 children](#) have been reported killed or injured since October 2023—including over [10,000 who sustained life-altering injuries](#) requiring long-term rehabilitation and psychosocial care.
- In 2024 alone, [1,739 children were killed or maimed in Sudan](#), nearly half of them by artillery attacks and rocket fire.

Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC):

What this means: Unaccompanied and separated children are children who have been separated from their parents or their usual primary caregivers, often at moments of extreme vulnerability. Separation may occur during conflict, displacement, flight across borders, evacuation, detention, deportation, or as a result of family coping strategies. [UASC are frequently identified late](#)—at borders, in asylum systems, or after exploitation has already occurred—leaving them at heightened risk of serious protection violations, including violence, psychological harm, trafficking, sexual exploitation and abuse, unlawful recruitment or use by armed forces or armed groups, detention, and permanent loss of identity or legal status.

Latest data and trends:

- The total number of children displaced by conflict and violence rose to [48.8 million](#) by the end of 2024, with large populations of children driven from home around the world. Displaced children are at higher risk of family separation.
- [UASC represent at least 1%](#)—often significantly more—of affected populations in the majority of situations studied, including refugee, conflict, and climate disaster contexts.
- [Sudan is facing the world's largest displacement crisis](#), with more than 9.5 million people internally displaced and an estimated 4.34 million seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. As a result, child and forced family separation is a major concern. Thousands of unaccompanied and separated children have been registered both within Sudan and in neighbouring countries. The Sudan Protection Cluster planned to support 22,000 UASC in 2025—underscoring the scale of the issue given that the number of UASC is estimated to be much higher.
- In Gaza, over [58,000 children](#) have lost one or both parents, and thousands of families have been separated from one another.
- In 2025, it was estimated that a record high of more than [4,000 children](#) were on the move without a parent or caregiver in Latin America and the Caribbean.

- In 2024, [21,323 unaccompanied and separated children](#) arrived in Europe through key mixed movement routes, representing 51% of those below age 18 and 10% of all arrivals.
- In countries and regions where data are available, adolescents represent the largest proportion by age of the unaccompanied and separated child population. However, [emerging evidence](#) points to a recent increase in the share of younger children who are travelling unaccompanied.

Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Forces and Armed Groups:

What this means: The [growing scale and intensity of armed conflicts](#) across the globe casts a dire shadow over the lives of children affected by conflict. Recruitment and use of children into armed forces and armed groups continues, despite a widespread prohibition in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and subsequent security council resolutions. Children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG) are often abducted, forcibly recruited or used, facing complex and oftentimes life threatening challenges during their association, as well as upon their release related to their development, protection, and reintegration.

Latest data and trends:

- In 2024, recruitment was the third-most frequently occurring grave violation in conflict after maiming and killing and the denial of humanitarian access. A total of 7,402 children were recruited and used and 4,573 children were abducted.¹
- In 2024, the following countries had the highest number of children recruited and used: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, and Myanmar.²
- The number of children detained for actual or alleged association with parties to conflict surged to 3,018, depriving children of their rights.³
- UNICEF estimated that child recruitment into armed groups in Haiti has [risen by 70% in 2024](#), where up to half of all armed group members are children and some are as young as eight years old.⁴

Sexual and Gender Based Violence:

What this means: Sexual and gender-based violence is a serious child protection risk in humanitarian crises and displacement settings, exposing children to sexual violence, exploitation and abuse, child marriage, neglect, and psychosocial distress. These risks are intensified by conflict, displacement, poverty, and the breakdown of protective systems, and in some contexts sexual violence is deliberately used as a tactic of war. Adolescent girls face heightened risk due to gender norms and power imbalances, while boys, LGBTQI+ children, and children with disabilities also experience sexual and gender-based violence, exploitation, and social exclusion that are often overlooked. Survivors suffer profound and long-lasting physical, psychological, and social consequences, yet most cases remain unreported due to stigma, fear, insecurity, and limited access to safe, child-centred services.

¹ United Nations (2025). Children and armed conflict. Report of the secretary general

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ [UN News - Haiti: Massive surge in child armed group recruitment, warns UNICEF](#) (February 2025).

Latest data and trends:

- The number of verified cases of sexual violence as a grave violation against children in conflict [increased by 35%](#) from 2023 to 2024, including a sharp rise in gang rape, underscoring the systematic use of sexual violence as a tactic of war.
- Sexual violence against children is endemic, systematic, and worsening across the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, where protection and gender-based violence service providers recorded **more than [35,000 cases of sexual violence against children](#)** in the first nine months of 2025.
- These figures represent only a fraction of actual cases due to stigmatisation, fear of reprisals, harmful social norms, and the absence of and lack of access to services, amongst others.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Distress:

What this means: Humanitarian crises can cause immediate and long-term psychological and social suffering to children and their caregivers. Major causes of distress include repeated exposure to violence and death, separation from family members, displacement, and weakened family and community networks and support systems and services. Mental health is a human right and must be included in humanitarian action.

Latest data and trends:

- Globally, one in eight people (970 million) live with a mental health condition, and [in settings affected by armed conflict this rises to 22%](#), with sharp increases in depression and anxiety.
- Relentless exposure to violence and loss has triggered an acute [mental health crisis](#) among Gaza's children. [Clinical data and frontline reports](#) reveal symptoms such as severe anxiety, depression, nightmares, and emotional numbness.
- Children living in Sudan, one of the world's most neglected humanitarian crises, bear the brunt of the ongoing war and the collapse of economic, educational, and health care systems. [Studies show extremely elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress.](#)
- UNICEF data from Lebanon in January 2025 found that [72% of caregivers said their children were anxious or nervous during the war, and 62% said they were depressed or sad.](#) These rates represented a surge from pre-war data, despite pre-existing crises in the country. This psychological distress persisted for many children even after the ceasefire.

Child Labour, including the worst forms:

What this means: Child labour refers to work done by children that are too young to work, that harms their physical and psychological health and development, and that disrupts their education by keeping them out of school or forcing them to balance school with work. The worst forms of child labour include trafficking, recruitment and use into armed forces and groups, sexual exploitation and illicit work, among others. Child labour and humanitarian crisis are deeply interconnected, as child labour often becomes a negative coping mechanism for families who are affected by conflict, climate shocks, and displacement.

Latest data and trends:

- In conflict-affected areas, child labour rises to 21%—over four times the rate seen in stable, non-conflict settings, where it stands at 5%. Even in countries without active fighting but marked by weak governance or broader institutional and social fragility, the rate remains a high 16%.
- In Gaza, family and community protection systems have either collapsed or significantly weakened, with one in four families now reporting sending children into hazardous or exploitative work to survive.
- In Lebanon, the share of children aged 5–17 engaged in work tripled between 2009 and 2016, rising from 1.6% to 6%—well before the onset of the 2019 economic crisis. Child labour has continued to climb since then, with Syrian and Palestinian refugee children disproportionately affected. The economic collapse pushed rates even higher, from 9% in 2020 to 15% in 2023. Alarming, 79% of working children are engaged in hazardous forms of labour.
- Before the escalation of conflict in 2023, an estimated 18% of children in Sudan were engaged in child labour. Since then, the conflict-driven economic collapse has pushed this number sharply upward. Many families, struggling to survive, have been forced to send their children to work—often in agriculture or with nomadic groups—to secure food, leading to widespread school dropout.

Explore the content of this report through the interactive webpage on the Alliance website [here](#).

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