



Small Arms and Children

Small arms negatively affect the lives of children because:

- **Children are victims of conflict and small arms misuse**
- **Small arms proliferation and misuse interfere with the provision of basic needs and services**
- **Small arms make child soldiering possible**

Small arms are used to kill and injure children and other civilians in armed conflicts and countries at peace. In 1999 alone, Colombia's children were victims of 1,333 homicides, 58 accidents, and 16 suicides in which small arms were used. Between 1987 and 2001, 467 children died in the Israel-Palestine armed conflict as a result of gun-related violence. During the same period, 3,937 children were killed by firearms in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Small arms are also used to commit human rights abuses and cause psychosocial trauma to thousands of children. Small arms proliferation often weakens the traditional family structure and support system for children. Small arms can devastate the family, by causing death or injury of a parent or forced separation of children. Children witnessing sustained gun violence can suffer traumatic life-changing effects, which can serve as a key determinant on the decision to become a combatant at an early age, or take up a life based on the gun.

The threat of small arms misuse may impede the delivery of food assistance or interfere with the harvesting of foods and livestock production, causing children to suffer from malnutrition. Small arms proliferation often results in massive population displacement, uprooting millions of children and their families from their homes and making children more susceptible to disease, violence, military recruitment and sexual assault. Approximately 12.8 million refugees and 23 million displaced persons – half of them children – have been forced to flee due in large part to violence and conflict fuelled by small arms.

The excessive and destabilising accumulation of small arms often interrupt the monitoring of treatable diseases, organisation and delivery of health care, and vaccination programs. Small arms may reduce economic opportunities, resulting in increased poverty and hardship for millions of children and their families. The presence of small arms in a region frequently inhibits children's educational opportunities. Schools may not function due to rampant instability or because parents and teachers fear that the children will be abducted for use as part of an armed force. In the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda children are often recruited for armed service directly from schools, either through kidnappings or coercion. The weight and size of small arms makes them easy for children to use and encourages the use of children as combatants. A child as young as eight years of age can easily be taught to fire an assault rifle.

Small arms may become instruments for violence, crime and banditry. In some regions, these weapons may create a culture of violence that traps whole societies in an endless cycle of war and conflict. In Iraq, children have been militarised and taught to rely on small arms as tools of dominance and power. Economic instability and lack of economic opportunity deny children, especially adolescents, access to support services and skills training.

** Small arms are weapons that can be carried and used by one or two people, including handguns, assault rifles, machine guns, grenade launchers, anti-tank or anti-aircraft guns and light mortars. Light weapons, ammunition, grenades, landmines, and explosives are also part of this category.*