

Displaced Children

The Psychological Implications



Paramjit T. Joshi, MD^{a,*}, John A. Fayyad, MD^b

KEYWORDS

• War • Displacement • Refugees • Exile • Children

KEY POINTS

- Millions of people across the world have been displaced or live in exile and/or as refugees largely as a consequence of wars, acts of terrorism, and catastrophic natural disasters.
- Today, more than ever before, cities, villages, and towns in many parts of the world have become battlefields, and children are the ones who get caught in the cross fire.
- The effects of overwhelming and inescapable stressors are challenging and complex for children whose age and psychological immaturity render them extremely vulnerable.
- The often intertwined contributions of psychosocial, economic, political, cultural, religious, and community variables have come to be appreciated as confounding factors having an enormous psychological impact.
- Children may be provided food, shelter, and clothing and have their medical needs attended to, but their emotional and psychological needs go unrecognized and unmet, with dire and monumental long-term consequences.

INTRODUCTION

Today, more than ever before, cities, villages, and towns in many parts of the world have become battlefields, and children are the ones who get caught in the cross fire. Regardless of the specific character of any particular war or act of terror or a natural disaster that often involve large numbers of victims to be displaced, such circumstances by definition involve destruction, pain, and death. Although these physical losses can be reconstructed or replaced, with the accompanying pain and sorrow gradually diminishing, the psychological scars, the trauma and the horrifying images and memories, do not heal as easily. These experiences are perhaps most challenging and complex for children whose age and psychological immaturity render them more

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^a Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, Children's National Medical Center, George Washington University School of Medicine, 111 Michigan Avenue Northwest, Floor 2.5 West, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20010, USA; ^b Faculty of Medicine, St George Hospital, University Medical Center, Balamand University, Institute for Development, Research, Advocacy and Applied Care (IDRAAC), Beirut, Lebanon

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: PJOSHI@childrensnational.org

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vulnerable to the effects of overwhelming and inescapable stressors. It has generally been found that the psychological effects related to war and terrorism are quite similar to those associated with natural and man-initiated disastrous events, and the often intertwined contributions of psychosocial, economic, political, cultural, religious, and community variables have come to be appreciated as confounding factors having an enormous psychological impact.

There are now more than 50 million displaced people, the highest figure since World War II (United Nations [UN] Report 2013).¹ The wars in Syria and South Sudan and the conflicts in the Central African Republic, Iraq, Kenya, and Afghanistan have all added to these alarming numbers. There are now a staggering number of refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced people (Fig. 1). It has not been that high since the post-World War II era, when half the globe or more was dislocated.¹

Half of the displaced are children, according to a UN refugee agency report.¹ The annual report, released by the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), showed a jump of 6 million people from 2012 to 2013. The massive increase was attributed to the war in Syria and the displacement in the Central African Republic and South Sudan. The war in Syria has resulted in 2.5 million refugees and has displaced 6.5 million people within the country, according to the report.

Afghans, Syrians, and Somalis accounted for more than half of the total refugees (Fig. 2). Pakistan, Iran, and Lebanon hosted more refugees than other countries. Most of the global forced displacement was internal displacement within countries, a record 33.3 million people and the largest increase in any group in the report.

In addition, more than 1 million submitted applications for asylum in 2013. A record number were children separated from parents. The year 2013 also saw one of the lowest levels of refugees returning home in 25 years. The UNHCR releases annual statistics showing that more than 51 million people were forcibly displaced at the end of 2013, the largest number since the end of World War II. Half of the world's refugees in 2013 were children.¹ An estimated 10.7 million individuals were newly displaced because of conflict or persecution in 2013. An average of 32,200 individuals per day were forced to leave their homes and seek protection elsewhere because of conflict and persecution in 2013. Lebanon hosted the most refugees in relation to its population, 178 registered refugees per 1000 inhabitants. These figures are likely to be

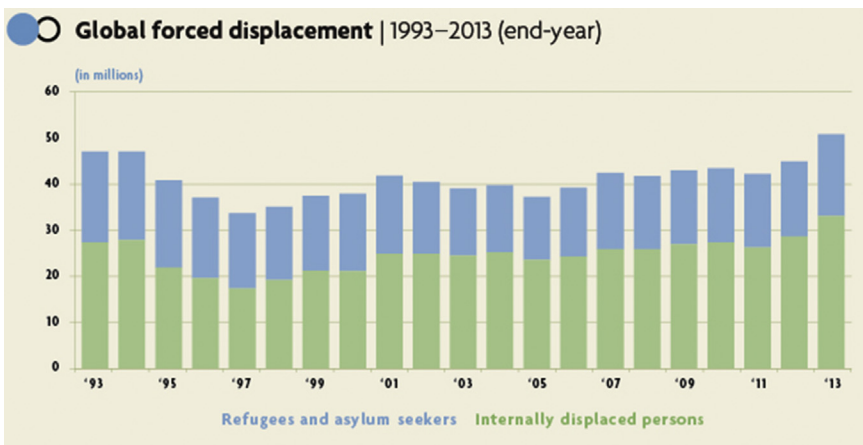


Fig. 1. Global forced displacement. (From United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Displacement: the new 21st century challenge. Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR, 2013. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org>.)

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