

# Acceptance, social support, and educational access provide safety net for former child soldiers

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The Child Soldiers Global Report 2008<sup>1</sup> estimates that more than 300,000 children are engaged as soldiers around the globe, and more children are recruited every year in ongoing and new conflicts. Although a number of multinational coalitions are aligned to stop the recruitment of child soldiers, some countries persist in not only the recruitment of children but also in exposing children to both the psychological and physical dangers associated with combat.

In the June issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, Harvard researchers report on the mental health outcomes of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, finding that community acceptance, social support and school attendance can help mitigate the damaging influences of the children's wartime experiences and post-conflict stigma.

The article, titled "Sierra Leone's Former Child Soldiers: A Longitudinal Study of Risk, Protective Factors, and Mental Health," draws on a [longitudinal study](#) of 260 male and female former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, ages 10-17 at the start of the study. <sup>2</sup> Betancourt and colleagues evaluated these youth at three time points in order to determine the long-term course of internalizing and externalizing problems and adaptive/prosocial behaviors, and investigate whether post-conflict factors contributed to adverse or resilient mental health outcomes. Virtually all of the subjects were children who were recruited by force or

abduction to join the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the rebel force which was one of the main actors in the 11-year civil war in [Sierra Leone](#). At the time of the first evaluation (2002) 55.3% of the youth lived with a least one biological parent, although the percentage decreased to 34.1% by the third evaluation (2008).

In describing the characteristics of the participants, the investigators state, "Youth joined the rebels at a mean age of 10.3 years and remained an average of 4.1 years. Participants had witnessed an average of 6.2 war-related violent events. Forty-five percent of girls and 5% of boys reported being raped during their time with the rebels. More than a quarter of the sample (26.9%, n=70) reported having killed or injured others during the war."

Investigators used a variety of standard measures to evaluate [mental health](#) outcomes, including the Post-War Adversities Index and the Child Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Reaction Index, and locally-derived assessments, such as a scale of Community Acceptance.

The findings demonstrated that increases in externalizing behavior were associated with both killing/injuring others during the war and post-conflict [stigma](#). Additionally, high baseline levels of internalizing problems were associated with surviving rape while increases in these types of problems were associated with younger involvement in armed groups and with social and economic hardships. Additionally, the article reports that long-term well being for child soldiers can be mitigated by post-conflict factors. In particular, increases in community acceptance exerted a positive influence on all outcomes investigated. For instance, with increasing levels of acceptance, the youth demonstrated significant improvements in both externalizing and internalizing behaviors. [Social support](#), school access, and increased community acceptance were also associated with increases in prosocial and adaptive behaviors.

In the *JAACAP* article, Betancourt and colleagues state, "Based on our findings, we suggest that post-conflict adversities and resources must be given closer attention in both research and service delivery. Such understanding of the impact of multiple war-related and post-conflict factors is important for identifying appropriate intervention targets. The results of this study emphasize the importance of investing in longer-term (i.e., beyond the immediate post-conflict period) approaches to monitoring and supporting the wellbeing of war-affected youth."

**More information:** Betancourt TS, Brennan RT, Rubin-Smith J, Fitzmaurice GM, Gilman SE. Sierra Leone's Former Child Soldiers: A Longitudinal Study of Risk, Protective Factors, and Mental Health. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. 2010;49:606-615.

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