

United Nations
High Commissioner
for Refugees



UNHCR

The UN Refugee Agency

Who are Refugee Children?

Refugee children flee their countries because their lives are in danger; they risk persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, social group, or their parents' political beliefs. Many children also flee because of war and internal conflicts. Refugee children no longer have a home, nor a country. Sometimes, they have seen family members killed or been separated from their families.

Facts and Figures

- UNHCR cares for 31.7 million refugees and other displaced people around the world. Children account for nearly half of them.
- The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most important legal framework for the protection of children. It spells out children's entitlements and countries' obligations toward them.
- An estimated 90% of global conflict-related deaths since 1990 have been civilians, and 80% of these have been women and children.
- Some 250,000 children around the world, some younger than age 10, have been recruited as child soldiers. While girls are frequently used for sexual purposes, they are virtually always also involved in other military tasks, including combat, laying explosives and performing domestic tasks.
- AIDS has killed more than 4 million children and orphaned another 15 million.
- More than 75 countries are affected by landmines and unexploded ordnance. Nobody knows how many mines are in the ground, but the actual number is less important than their impact on the safety of children.



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Every day, somewhere in the world, children become refugees. Protecting refugee children is a priority of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Together with other organizations, UNHCR does all it can to give refugee children safety, food, water, shelter, health care, education and hope for the future.

In recent decades tens of millions of children have been given a new chance to grow and prosper through better medical care, schooling and the protection of UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations. But despite these accomplishments, life has never been so desperate for many of the world's youngest citizens, including over 13 million children under the age of 18 receiving assistance from UNHCR.

When people are persecuted, or when war breaks out, children often suffer the most. Many refugee children have been tortured, physically abused or imprisoned. For many children, a refugee camp becomes a temporary home while they and their families wait for the possibility to return safely to their country. On the way to safety, refugee children suffer from hunger, malnutrition and illness. Some children need special medical and psychological treatment.

UNHCR's main responsibility is to protect refugees and it has identified five main global priority issues relating to children: separation from families and caregivers; sexual exploitation, abuse and violence; military recruitment; education; and specific concerns of adolescents.



Refugee Children

UNHCR Initiatives for Refugee Children

Ninemillion.org was created in 2006 by UNHCR in partnership with Nike and Microsoft to give millions of children better access to education and sport. The ninemillion.org website raises funds for refugee children, but it also gives voice through video and individual stories to those who often go unheard, allowing visitors to see pictures of the camps where children pass much of their lives, read refugee children's stories and understand what refugee children's lives are like.

Teachers' Corner

UNHCR offers a wide range of free educational materials including DVDs, booklets, posters and a monthly e-alert on current refugee issues.

To order materials and learn how to help refugee children, please visit the Teachers' Corner page at www.UNrefugees.org.



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Separation from families and caregivers: For girls and boys who have been separated from their families and caregivers, it is important to identify, register and document them in order to ensure their safety and trace the location of their parents or primary caregivers. Family reunification should occur if it is in the best interest of the child. UNHCR and its partners monitor temporary care arrangements, as in some cases, temporary care can present other problems for children. UNHCR helps to rebuild these separated children's lives.

Every year more than 7,500 foreign-born children make it to the United States without parents, legal guardians and valid visas or other legal-entry documents. Most of these vulnerable children are from Latin America, Africa and South East Asia. When they arrive, they are placed in adversarial immigration removal proceedings without a lawyer or guardian to help them. UNHCR supports the increasing efforts of private, non-profit and government agencies to provide volunteer lawyers in order to help ensure those children who fear persecution are able to access the US asylum process.

Sexual exploitation, abuse and violence: Refugee girls and boys have to be protected from sexual exploitation, abuse and violence. This is the responsibility of governments, the refugee community and humanitarian organizations. Raising awareness and education about these issues, ensuring improved access to assistance for victims, as well as safe living conditions and school environments, can play a role in preventing abuse. UNHCR and its partners provide health care, psycho-social support, other measures to ensure the victim's safety and well-being.

Military recruitment: Children are at risk of being recruited by armed groups. Both girls and boys participate in fighting as well as take on other duties. Girls are at a higher risk of sexual abuse, forced marriage and pregnancy. These risks can be prevented by providing alternatives such as enrollment in schools and training centers.

Education: Girls and boys of all ages have a right to quality education in a safe environment. Education, including literacy and vocational training, serves as an important tool to protect them from sexual and gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS, military recruitment, crime and drugs. It adds a sense of normality in everyday life and provides them with skills and knowledge for the future.

Specific concerns of adolescents: In refugee situations, the needs of adolescents can be overlooked as they frequently take on the role of looking after younger children. UNHCR promotes the participation of adolescent girls and boys in education, skills-training, income-generating activities, employment, participation in decision-making processes, recreational activities and life-skills education.

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