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 The impact of multiple stressors on individual mental health in war conflict areas.
 

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Zakariya Chouhan  
Research Summary

### Abstract

War is a state of armed conflict between societies. It is generally characterized by extreme aggression, destruction, and mortality, using regular or irregular military forces. Among the most significant consequences of war, is the impact on the mental health of the normal population. Various studies observing the mental condition of the general population have shown a definite increase in the incidence and prevalence of mental disorders. Prevalence rates are associated with the degree of trauma, and the availability of physical and emotional support. Healthy communities and families foster and support individuals who are resilient to mental health challenges and able to adapt to social, economic, or environmental stressors. Creating opportunities and environments where an individual can successfully navigate challenges and enhance their resilience can in turn contribute to fostering healthy circumpolar communities.

### Introduction

Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. Since the inception of Humanity, there have been wars and conflicts all over the globe. No matter the reasons and outcomes for these conflicts, the civilian suffering is always an impending factor in these situations. In modern day conflicts, the civilians not only suffer from physical distress but also complex mental and social challenges. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is prevalent and chronic among refugee and displaced populations.<sup>1</sup> Research also shows that the impact of trauma is long-term. Child survivors of the Nazi holocaust and Japanese concentration camps were found to experience PTSD symptoms as late as 40-50 years following their traumatic experience.<sup>2</sup> Some researchers postulate that these 'invisible wounds' can leave a society vulnerable to a recurrence of violence.<sup>3</sup> This paper briefly reviews the evidence

from published literature about the impact of war on the mental health of the general population.

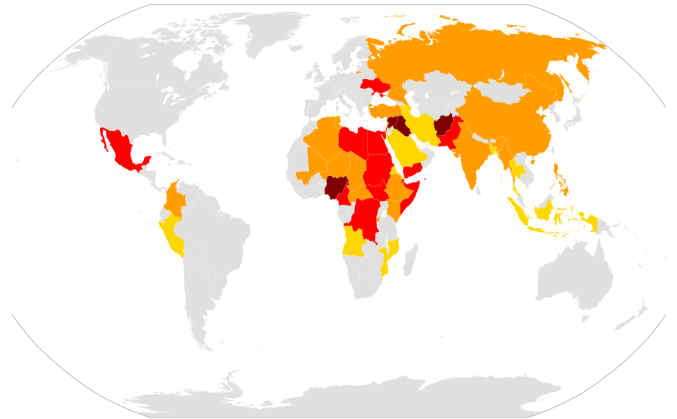


Figure 1: Conflict areas around the globe. Darkest to lightest goes from major wars, wars, minor skirmishes to minor conflicts.

### Methods

We performed a systematic review of peer-reviewed qualitative and quantitative studies focused on resilience and mental health in children and adolescents affected by war conflict in low and middle-income countries. This paper briefly reviews the evidence from published literature about the impact of war on the mental health of the adults, children and adolescents. For the purpose of this paper, the term "war" is used to include both wars waged between countries and conflicts within countries.

### Discussion

Many studies show over 36% of the people who have been in the conflict zones are suffering from PTSD and over 50% suffer from chronic depression. The multivariate logistic regression analysis showed a strong associations of gender, marital status, forced displacement, and trauma exposure with the outcomes of PTSD and depression. Men, internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees and persons displaced more than once were all significantly more likely to have experienced eight or more traumatic events.<sup>4-6</sup> MSF (Medicins Sans Frontières) has been running different programs for the mental health and

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well-being of children in conflict-ridden areas where they noticed that most of the children leave such programs early so now priorities are shifted towards understanding 'why children leave such programs at an early stage'.<sup>7</sup>

An increased vulnerability to the psychological consequences of war has been observed in women. A high correlation between mothers' and children's distress has been observed in a war situation. It has been a known fact that maternal depression in the prenatal and postnatal period predicts poorer growth in a community based sample of infants. Trauma-related psychological problems in children are high and affect different age groups, the most vulnerable being adolescents. The direct correlation between the degree of trauma and the amount of the psychological problems is consistent across a number of studies.<sup>1,5-8</sup> The greater the exposure to trauma, both physical and psychological, the more differentiated are the symptoms.<sup>8</sup>

Subsequent life events and their association with the occurrence of psychiatric problems have important implications for fast and complete rehabilitation as a way of minimizing the ill effects of the conflict situations. Studies are consistent in showing the value of both physical support and psychological support in minimizing the effects of war-related traumas, as well as the role of religion and cultural practices as ways of coping with the conflict situations.<sup>1,5-8</sup>

### **Conclusion**

People suffer from a huge burden of disease in war or conflict zones because of poor nutrition, poor sanitation, lack of health facilities etc. These directly affect mental health and also perpetuate risky behaviours such as alcoholism, drug dependency etc. The United Nations (UN) and its sub-agencies, including the World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) among others play a pivotal role in providing relief to war afflicted areas. Several NGOs collaborate with the

Nation's Ministry of Health to provide relief to the suffering population. The major challenges for relief agencies include securing full and unimpeded access, directing the right aid to the right people, preventing misappropriation, ensuring staff security as well as managing relief and limited resources over time. The nations around the world must understand the need for much neglected mental health as the future of their country lies inside the minds of their citizens.

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