

## EarthTrends: Featured Topic

Title: **Child Refugees: Young and Vulnerable**  
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Of the 50 million refugees and displaced people in the world, approximately half are children—most of them victims of war. All refugees live a life at risk, stripped of land, jobs, and family support systems. However, of this already vulnerable population, children are surely the most vulnerable. Child refugees often face deficits in education and nutrition. In the absence of parents or other guardians, too often children take to the streets in search of food, safety, and stability—a far cry from playground games. Some of the most poignant facts about child refugees:

### War creates child refugees.

- War is the primary factor in the creation of child refugees. It is also a principle cause of child death, injury, and loss of parents. In the last decade, war has killed more than 2 million children, wounded another 6 million, and orphaned about 1 million.
- Forced military recruitment of children is a serious and growing practice. More than 300,000 boys and girls under 18 years old are currently serving as "child

soldiers." Many are less than 10 years old. These children are separated from their families, lack education, face poverty, and are often subject to drug and sexual abuse.

- Even if children in war-torn areas do not become refugees, their education and employment opportunities often suffer. For example, school buildings are frequently targets of war. During Mozambique's civil war in the 1980s and 1990s, almost half of the nation's schools were destroyed.
- Prolonged war and conflict often give rise to grinding poverty; poverty is widespread among child refugees.

### Abuse and legal status play a role, too.

- Children also flee their homes because they fear various forms of abuse such as rape, sexual slavery, and child labor.
- Circumstances of birth also play a role in depriving children of a legal home. Each year 40 million

children are not registered at birth, depriving them of nationality and a legal name.

### Many child refugees are orphans or separated from their parents.

- The combined ravages of AIDS and war have created a large pool of orphan refugees and displaced children, particularly in Africa. The toll of Rwanda's civil war, for example, left orphan children to head some 45,000 Rwandan households, with 90 percent of these headed by girls.
- "Separated Children" are those under age 18 and living outside their country of origin without parents or legal guardians to care for or protect them. Every year, about 20,000 separated children apply for asylum in Europe, North America, and Oceania. Overall, children account for approximately half of all individuals seeking legal asylum in developed countries.

- Separated children are not often legally recognized as refugees in western countries. In Europe, for example, where there may be as many as 50,000 separated children at any given time, only an estimated 1-5 percent of those who apply for asylum are granted refugee status.

**Humanitarian organizations can help, but are making little headway in reducing overall child refugee rates.**

- There have been some notable successes in

meeting the needs of child refugees. For example, a global tracing program organized by humanitarian organizations reunited more than 67,000 children with their families in Africa's Great Lakes region between 1994 and 2000.

- Budgetary restrictions hamper further efforts to help child refugees. Between 1994 and 1999, the UN requested \$13.5 billion in emergency relief from its member nations, much of it for children. It

collected less than \$9 billion.

- Today, aid organizations realize their care for child refugees must go beyond food and shelter. Education is a primary need, too, giving refugee children the tools to survive and make a healthy, productive home of their own.

## REFERENCES

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