

policy

BRIEF

Why Do Children ‘Fight’? Explaining Child Soldier Ratios in African Intrastate Conflicts

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SUMMARY:

Child soldiers are a growing and an increasingly publicized phenomenon. Yet theory regarding the causes of child soldier rates is underdeveloped and empirical evidence is largely anecdotal. In this paper we examine the two most popular explanations for child soldiers—poverty and orphan rates—and contrast them with an alternative explanation that focuses on the protection of internally displaced persons and on refugee camps. Employing a variety of quantitative and qualitative techniques, we then provide systemic tests involving intrastate conflicts in Africa for all three explanations. While by no means definitive, our research findings provide support for our explanation focusing on the protection of camps, suggesting that more empirical research along these lines is warranted.

According to our research, child soldier participation rates in intrastate African conflicts occurring between 1975 and 2003 ranged from zero percent to a staggering 53 percent.

The growing phenomenon of child soldiers, those under the age of 18, in intrastate armed conflict has been greeted with increasing alarm by both international organizations and the popular press. Evidence suggests that the numbers have increased significantly over the course of the last decade, and the expectation is of a continued problem. A 2003 UNICEF report suggests that there were then an estimated 300,000 such children serving in 72 government military forces or in armed rebel groups in about 20 countries around the world the prior year.

In terms of both numbers of child soldiers and number of conflicts where they participate, Africa provides the largest concentration on one continent. By the late 1990s, fourteen out of the 40 current or recent armed conflicts where children participated took place in Africa. Furthermore, it is estimated that about 120,000 children, or 40 percent of all child soldiers, were soldiering in Africa at the beginning of this century, the continent with the largest single problem.

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Africa has certainly been the fastest growing region for child soldiers in recent years and sources suggest that the average age of the children enlisted in some African countries is declining—from their teenage years to as low as 9 or 10. According to our research, child soldier participation rates in intrastate African conflicts occurring between 1975 and 2003 ranged from zero percent to a staggering 53 percent.

Yet, there has been remarkably little systematic evidence collected on the issue of the causes of child soldiers in armed conflicts. Leading international humanitarian organizations such as UNICEF, Human Rights Watch, The Swedish Save the Children organization, and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers have offered a wave of reports. But much of their evidence focused on individual country studies rather than systematically conducting cross-national comparisons. The scholarship on this issue has been characteristically prone to broad generalizations that are often hard to compare across cases.

Poverty is most often cited as a key factor in explaining the phenomenon of child soldiers. It certainly makes intuitive sense to suggest that richer countries, when they experience a conflict, generally don't employ child soldiers. Among alternatives, the rate of child orphans is often cited as a popular explanation for child soldier recruitment rates because orphaned children are purportedly more prone to joining existing quasi-institutions represented by military factions. Furthermore, the whole problem of high orphan rates in Africa is exacerbated by the continent's growing rate of HIV/Aids.

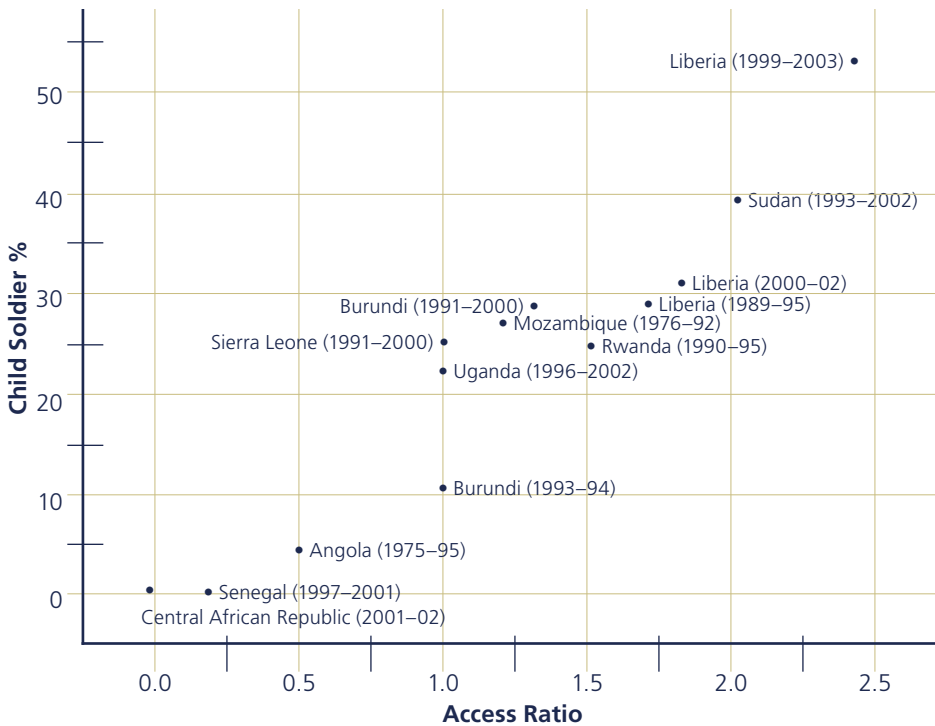
Our own research on child soldiers in Africa suggests, however, that neither poverty nor orphan rates explain significant variation of child soldier rates across African countries and conflicts we examined. According to our measures, for example, The Democratic Republic of the Congo (the conflict lasting from 1996 to 2001) and Liberia (1989–95) had vastly different poverty rates (80 percent and 40 percent below poverty line, respectively) despite having similar child soldier participation rates (28 percent and 29 percent) relative to the size of the entire military forces of belligerents during their intrastate conflicts in early and late 1990s. Likewise, Senegal and Burundi in the late 1990s had similar poverty rates while their ratios of child soldier participation differed radically (zero percent and 31 percent).

Overall, the percent of orphaned children across 19 African countries we examined varied little (from 9.75 to 17.3 percent) to explain the much broader variation of child soldier rates (from zero to 53 percent). Experiencing the same orphan rates in their countries (around 10 percent), Senegal and Sudan had vastly different child soldier rates of zero percent and 39 percent during their conflicts in late 1990s to the early 21st century.

Our findings suggest that both poverty and orphan rates inform us little about whether a country is likely to have child soldier participants in armed conflicts. All the countries we examine are poor, with alarming poverty rates by OECD standards; all host a large pool of orphaned children; and all have significantly higher rates of child soldiers than is historically the case in the context of Western intrastate conflicts. Nevertheless, lots of poor and orphans-abundant countries, even in Africa, don't employ child soldiers when they experience intrastate wars.

Our findings revealed that child recruitment is linked to a degree of protection of a predominant child population in refugee sites and camps for internally displaced people (IDP). Where children are well protected in camps, child soldier rates are consistently low. The dominant literature largely ignores the importance of whether belligerents have access to IDP and refugee camps. The following chart demonstrates that the data we collected supports the proposition that access and child soldier rates are related:

Graphing the Relationship between Access and Child Soldier Rates



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Reich is a professor of international affairs at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs and the inaugural director of the Ford Institute for Human Security at the University of Pittsburgh. He has published four books and more than 30 articles and book chapters on foreign policy, multinational corporate behavior, slave and forced labor, and corporate social responsibility.

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Our research took three forms. First, we created an unprecedented database on child soldier participation in 19 African intrastate wars and compared their child soldier participation rates against alternative arguments stressing poverty, orphans, and access to camps. Then we conducted a second, multiple regression test in which we assessed the impact of all three factors. It revealed that only access was significantly related to child soldier ratios and predicted that every single unit increase in access was matched with a 20-unit increase in child soldiers. Finally, we examined the dynamics of different levels of camp protection in two major Liberian conflicts. The findings of all three approaches confirmed our findings—greater protections might lead to smaller numbers of soldiering children.

Clearly, our research suggests that posting large numbers of suitably armed troops to guard IDP and refugee camps against raids by warring factions is the dominant way to ameliorate the problem of child soldiers in Africa. Historically, such camps are supposed to be off limits to belligerents and generally assumed to be under the protection of a legitimate judicial authority, whether a sovereign government, a regional authority or an international organization. But protection is often, in practice, uneven or nonexistent, leaving congregated population of children living in camps subject to raids by rebel or, in many cases, even governmental forces.

The Ford Institute for Human Security plans to expand this research effort as part of our larger project on child soldiers. For copies of the research paper upon which this brief is based, titled *Why Do Children 'Fight'? Explaining Child Soldier Ratios in African Intra-state Conflicts*, please send a request by e-mail to FIHS@pitt.edu or call 412-648-7434.





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