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BY ALMOST EVERY MEASURE of economic and social well-being, youth suffer more than any other age group from war violence. Since 1989, 75 countries have been involved in war or intermediate conflict. In the past decade, an estimated two million children and youth have died in armed conflict, and at least six million have been disabled. An estimated 20 million children and youth have been forced to flee their homes (UN 2005) and an estimated 300,000 child soldiers—boys and girls under the age of 18—are involved in some 30 conflicts around the world (UNICEF 2004).

Not all war-affected youth receive equal attention and resources. Post-conflict programming is often based on immediate and observable needs, rules of thumb, and possibly mistaken assumptions about what sort of help ought to be provided. Government and aid organizations delivering assistance on the ground are often the first to lament this state of affairs. In northern Uganda, as in many other post-conflict areas, services for children are more common than programming for young adults. Yet interventions have focused on the needs of young children, and ignored the pressing needs of older children and young adults. According to a recent survey of 750 youth combatants and non-combatants in northern Uganda, young adults are at least as badly affected by war as children (and in some cases more so).

The rebel Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) terrorized northern Uganda for two decades. More than 1.5 million people were displaced from their homes, tens of thousands were attacked, maimed, or killed, and at least 60,000 youth are thought to have been forcibly recruited into the LRA (Annan et al., 2006). The rebels mostly abducted young men between the ages of 13 and 18, but people of all ages and both sexes were taken. The duration of abductions ranges from one day to ten years, and the abductees’ experiences are indeed terrible: two-thirds were severely beaten, a fifth were forced to kill, and nearly ten percent were forced to murder a family member or friend to bind them to the group. The non-abducted suffer as well: nearly all have witnessed a rebel attack, and almost a third lost at least one parent to war violence. These data come from one of the first large-scale and representative surveys of the war experiences and well-being of male youth in an armed conflict, the Survey for War Affected Youth (SWAY).

The consequences of war for youth

THE CONSEQUENCES of abduction and forced soldiering on youth can be terrifying. Yet in spite of widespread anecdotal evidence of the psychosocial trauma of conflict, this research finds that young people are remarkably psychologically resilient: over ninety percent reported fairly high levels of positive social functioning and low levels of aggression. Family connectedness is also quite high. Moderate to high levels of
emotional distress tend to be concentrated in the minority of youth that have experienced the most severe violence. Instead, the primary impact of war on youth is primarily material, affecting health, education, and economic status most severely. Using non-abducted youth of the same age and villages as a basis for comparison, the research suggests the following impacts of abduction on young people in northern Uganda:

- **Physical impairment.** Those who had been abducted are more than three times as likely to have a serious physical injury or illness that impedes their ability to work. Nearly a third of these injuries were directly inflicted by the LRA. Two percent of youth still suffer from extremely serious war wounds, suggesting that there are thousands of returnees in urgent need of treatment. Nutrition among all young people is poor, with 40 percent of youth eating just once per day.

- **Lost education.** Those abducted have nearly a year less education—a substantial amount when median educational attainment is only seven years. As a consequence, those abducted are twice as likely to be illiterate, in part because many could not afford primary schooling as children, and because remedial adult education programs are unavailable.

- **Lower earnings and occupational status.** Economic success is largely a function of the young person’s accumulated physical and human capital. Few young people have access to land, and the combination of poor health and lost education mean that wages for employed abductees are one-third lower than for the non-abducted, and abductees are half as likely to be engaged in skilled work.

- **Concentrated psychological distress.** Contrary to expectations, the survey finds only mildly greater emotional distress among former abducted youth on average. Moreover, abduction seems unrelated to average levels of hostility and sociability. Roughly a fifth to a quarter of youth exhibit moderate to serious symptoms of distress, however, and these youth are disproportionately former abductees. The youth who struggle most tend to be those exposed to the most severe violence and who have returned to weaker social support and poorer family ties.

- **Possibly greater political engagement.** Formerly abducted youth appear more likely than those who had not been abducted to vote, and they are twice as likely to be minor community leaders. Moreover, this relationship between abduction and political participation appears to be driven by the amount of violent trauma to which a youth was exposed. Although counterintuitive, this evidence is consistent with a recent study in Sierra Leone that finds that households that lost a family member during the war are more likely to be politically active and aware (Bellows and Miguel 2006).

**Older youths fare worse**

By many measures, young adults in the Ugandan conflict are currently performing worse than younger children. For instance, young adults appear slightly more likely to be illiterate than adolescents. Moreover, those abducted as young adults appear to have lower educational attainment and earnings than those abducted as young children (Figure 1).

One reason for poor adult performance is that universal primary education was only introduced in 1997, and remedial adult education is extremely limited. As a result, illiteracy is slightly more common among adults than among children (Figure 2).

A second reason for poor adult performance is that the average age of abduction appears to have risen over time. Older youth were thus more likely to be abducted in the later years of the conflict, and so on average are more recently returned and less well reintegrated. Child soldiering appears to have been “worse” than adult soldiering in the sense that schooling was more likely to be interrupted. Even so, since child soldiers have been back longer than adult ones on average, the current population of young adult abductees appear to be performing slightly worse in economic terms.

Finally, the poor performance of young adults may also be due to the inadequacy of aid and assistance for their age group. Fewer young adults than children report receiving assistance from NGOs. Those abducted after the age of 17 were less likely to have passed through a reintegration center (the principal intervention in the north) before going back to the community, and were less likely to have received NGO services or to have received an amnesty certificate. Younger returnees have somewhat greater social support and suffer less stigma. Anecdotal evidence suggests that they are also less likely to be held accountable for their past actions by the community.

The current practice of identifying and targeting youth via reception centres may be particularly counter-productive—not only does this approach overemphasize the formerly abducted, it misses fully half of all abductees (who never passed through the centres). Reception centres, in their current form, also appear to be better equipped for and skilled at reception than they are at follow-up of abductees. The current system for program targeting heavily emphasizes traditional categories of vulnerability, including orphans, child-headed households, and the formerly abducted. This omits many of the most vulnerable youth, and leads to the stigmatization of former abductees.

**Implications for post-conflict services**

These findings cast some doubt on the effectiveness of post-conflict programming to date. There has been insufficient attention paid to the needs of older victims and combatants. Young adults are a central category of concern, and not merely an addendum to child support and protection programs.

While targeting is necessary, it can be based on observable needs such as such as illiteracy, war wounds, extreme psychosocial challenges, or an absence of care-givers, which may minimize stigmatization while serving the most acutely vulnerable. Broad-based, inclusive support need not create categories or stigmatization, especially when selection mechanisms are transparent and both merit- and need-based. Improved targeting must also be accompanied by longer-term follow-up by service providers among youth.
There also appears to be a mismatch between the needs of youth and the programs on offer. Current programming focuses primarily on humanitarian needs and psychosocial support (broadly-defined) with less emphasis on education and economic interventions. Assistance should be reoriented towards broad-based education and economic support, combined with targeted interventions to the youth facing the greatest social, psychological, and material challenges.

- Support broad-based schooling at both secondary and tertiary levels. This should provide opportunities for the most able as well as the most vulnerable, and provide alternative age-appropriate literacy and numeracy programs for older youth.
- Increase funding for youth economic programs. Ultimately the only real economic solution is to return youth and their households to their land and traditional livelihoods. Thus economic programs must include innovative strategies for increasing access to land in addition to the current attention on other income-generating activities.
- Provide immediate medical assistance to youth with serious war wounds, which are devastatingly common, and have to date received little attention.
- Target psychosocial programming towards the most adversely affected individuals, and focus on conflict resolution and family support and connectedness.
- Design programs based on evidence rather than anecdote or impression, and this will only come from more formal and informal evaluation of programs.

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References


Endnotes

1 “War” is defined by the Uppsala Conflict Database as a violent conflict with at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in one year, and “intermediate conflict” as a conflict with at least 25 battle related deaths per year (Uppsala Conflict Database 2007).

2 A ceasefire agreement between the rebels and the Government of Uganda was signed in August 2006, and peace talks continue intermittently. Negotiations are suspended as of February 2007, while the parties search for an acceptable venue.

3 741 male youth between the ages of 14 and 30 were surveyed in 2005 and 2006, including 463 formerly abducted youth. Detailed results of the sample, survey and results are available in Annan et al., 2006 and Blattman and Annan 2007. A survey of females is underway. Further details of SWAY are available at www.sway-uganda.org.

4 Blattman and Annan (2007) demonstrates that the LRA’s methods of abduction resulted in a near random sample of youth entering the armed group. The likelihood of abduction is independent of youth and household characteristics thought to be primary determinants of participation in armed groups in other contexts. Thus the comparison between abducted and non-abducted youth provides relatively accurate assessments of war’s impacts.