

Explosive weapons and child casualties in conflict: Five key facts

Explosive weapons pose a deadly threat to children in conflict zones across the globe. Every year thousands of children are killed, seriously injured, or are otherwise severely impacted by explosive weapon use – both during conflict and long after hostilities have ended.

Explosive weapons – ranging from bombs, artillery shells, grenades, missiles, landmines and improvised explosive devices – are activated by detonating a high-explosive substance. When these are used in populated areas such as cities, camps for displaced persons or other areas with a high concentration of civilians, explosive weapons often result in increased civilian casualties including child casualties.

This UNICEF fact sheet presents an updated analysis of data published in the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General's annual reports on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC), covering the period 2021–2025 and highlighting the direct physical impact of explosive weapons on children in conflict, including both fatal and non-fatal

injuries.ⁱ It builds on the previous edition of the fact sheet, which covered the period 2020–2024.

While this fact sheet focuses on the direct impact of explosive weapons on children, measured through data on killing and maiming as captured by the UN monitoring and reporting mechanism, UNICEF also recognizes the broader and prolonged threats these weapons pose to children's safety, survival, development and well-being. For instance, the use of explosive weapons in populated areas results in the destruction of civilian infrastructure upon which children depend for their survival, such as water and sanitation facilities, hospitals, schools, nutrition facilities and critical supply routes, and their use fuels displacement and psychological distress. Further, the killing and maiming of medical personnel, water and energy workers, teachers, humanitarian workers, and other frontline service providers, contributes to the growing toll of civilian casualties and has a severe impact on the functioning of essential services in conflicts worldwide.

1. Explosive weapons are the leading cause of child casualties in conflict

Chart 1

Proportion of child casualties by explosive weapons out of all children verified as killed and maimed (UN verified killing and maiming in up to 26 conflict situations 2021-2025)

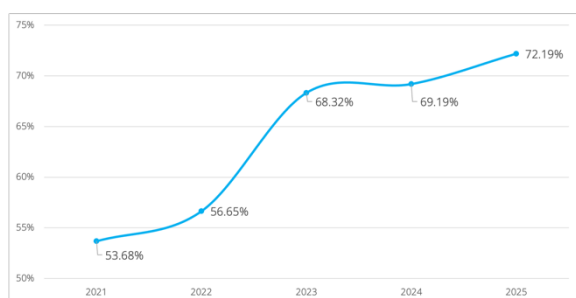
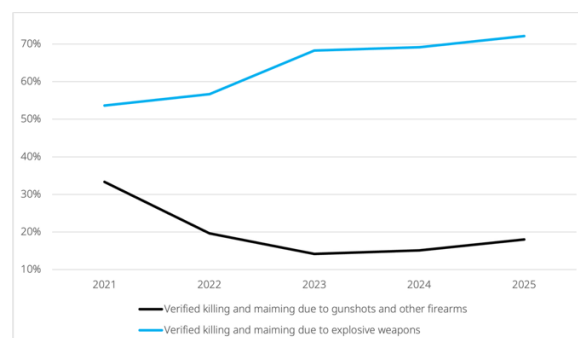


Chart 2

Trend comparisons: Proportion of child casualties by explosive weapons vs. firearms out of all children verified as killed and maimed (2021-2025)



- In conflict contexts reviewed, the use of explosive weapons is by far the leading cause of killing and maiming of children. **No other type of weapon kills or injures more children than explosive weapons.**
- Explosive weapons accounted for approximately 66 per cent of all verified child casualties during the five years reviewed, representing over 35,900 verified casualties between 2021-2025.
- The proportion of children killed and maimed by these weapons continues to increase. For the first time in 2021, explosive weapons accounted for more than half of all verified child casualties.ⁱⁱ This trend has continued to worsen every year, rising from 54 per cent of all child casualties in 2021 to over 72 per cent of child casualties in 2025. Over the same five-year period, the proportion of child casualties caused by gunshots and other firearms declined from 33 per cent in 2021 to 18 per cent in 2025.
- The conflicts with the highest numbers of children killed and maimed by explosive weapons, as verified by the United Nations between 2021-2025, were the State of Palestine, Myanmar, the Syrian Arab Republic, Afghanistan, Sudan, Ukraine, Somalia and Yemen.
- Other global data sets tracking civilian casualties from the use of explosive weapons – across all age groups – indicate that an estimated 97 per cent of such casualties occur in populated areas.ⁱⁱⁱ

2. Aerial operations remain the leading cause of child killing and maiming

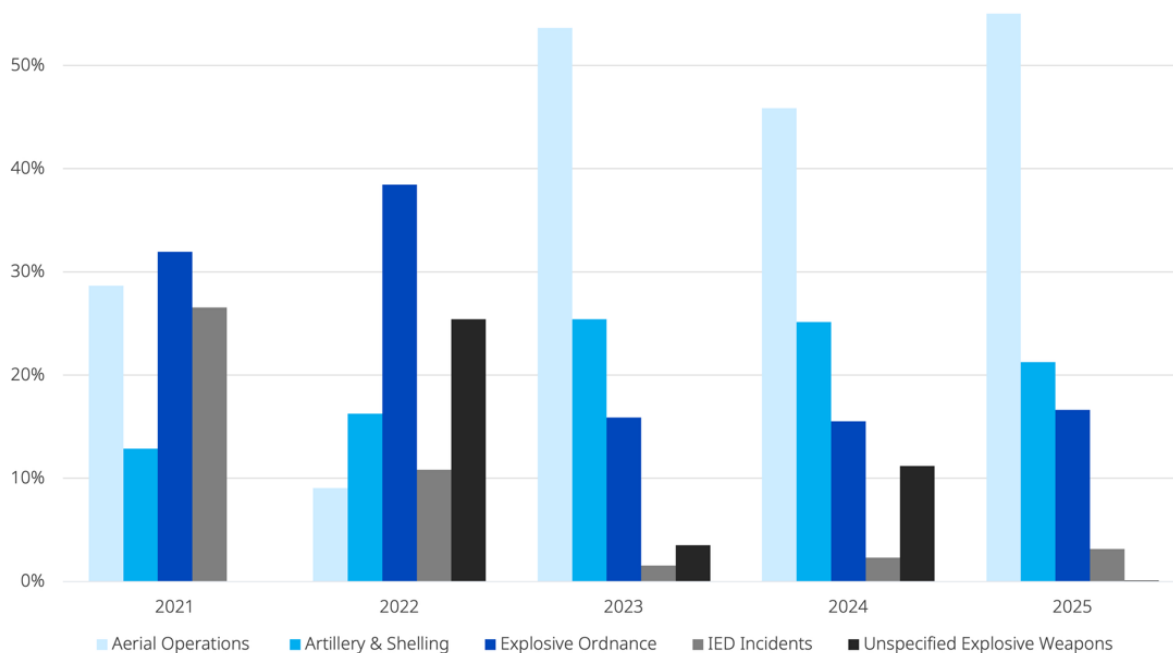
- Aerial operations are the leading cause of child casualties, representing almost 30 per cent (23 per cent in 2020-2024) of all verified cases of child killing and maiming between 2021 and 2025 (as shown in the chart 4 under “Fact 3”).
- This category encompasses several subcategories such as attacks with armed drones, air-dropped barrel bombs, cluster bombs and other bombs, and other or unspecified aerial bombings or airstrikes.
- Aerial-operation-related child casualties increased sharply from 2022 onwards, with the highest levels recorded in 2023 and 2025. The increase was primarily driven by the conflict in Israel and the State of Palestine, with notable rises also observed in Myanmar, Sudan, Lebanon and Ukraine. Afghanistan and the Syrian Arab Republic continued to report verified child casualties from aerial operations, albeit at lower levels compared to earlier years.

Armed Drones: A Growing Threat to Children

Significant data gaps remain on armed drone attacks, limiting the ability to assess their full scale and impact on children in conflict.^{iv} However, three findings emerge from existing data and documentation. **First, the harm to children posed by armed drones has reached a symbolic threshold and is of global concern, with over 1,000 children verified as killed or maimed in armed drone attacks between 2021 and 2025.** The highest number of child casualties — 415 killed or maimed — was verified in 2025. Further, in 2025, child casualties were verified across 13 situations of conflicts on four continents - Africa, Asia, the Americas and Europe - compared to 2 situations of conflict in 2020. **Second, the use of armed drones is expanding the geographic reach of hostilities, heightening the risk to children in areas that were previously not directly affected by conflict.** Armed drones can travel long distances and affect areas far beyond the traditional frontlines. **Third, while under-documented, the psychological impact of armed drones on children is significant.** The persistent sound of armed drones, and the difficulty to distinguish armed drones from non-armed drones can generate constant psychological distress, fear, anxiety, and helplessness among children and the fear can change their patterns of life, e.g. their usual movements to school or healthcare centers, for instance.

Chart 3

Evolution in categories of explosive weapons contributing to the killing and maiming of children (2021-2025)



3. Artillery and shelling have become the second largest explosive weapon threat to children in armed conflict

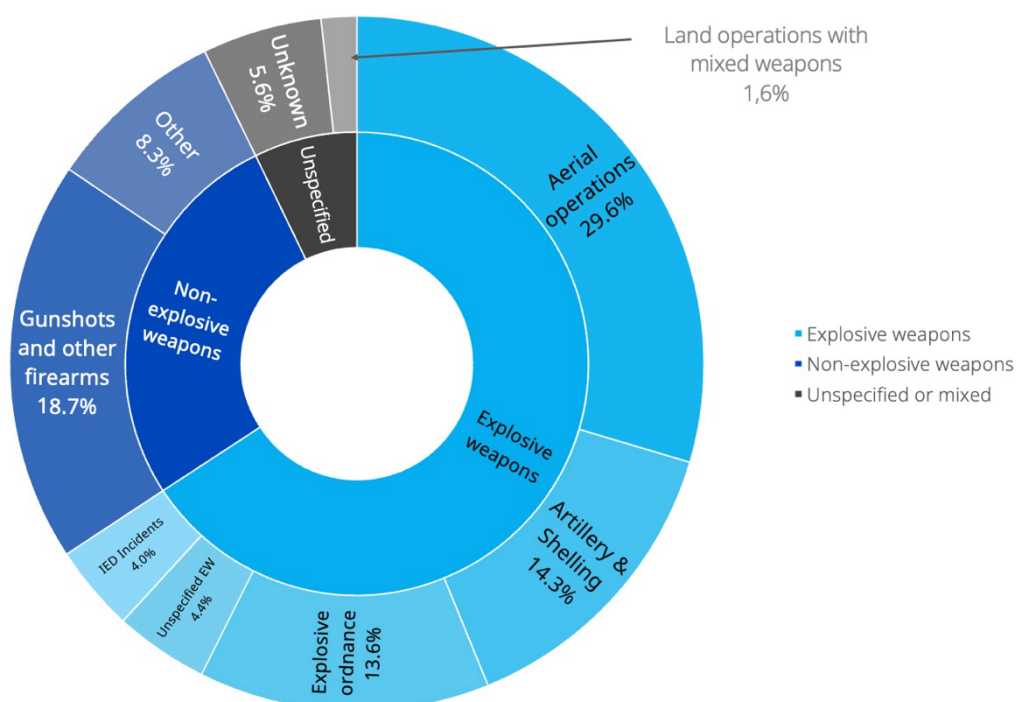
- Artillery and shelling involving mortars, rockets, and other explosive projectiles pose a major threat to children, accounting for 14 per cent of all children killed and maimed between 2021 and 2025.
- Within the broader category of explosive weapons, artillery and shelling accounted for 22 per cent of child casualties.
- Contamination by explosive ordnance, including explosive remnants of war (such as cluster munition remnants and other unexploded and abandoned ordnance) and landmines,^v are the third most significant cause of child casualties from explosive weapons, accounting for 13.6 per cent of all verified cases of killing and maiming of children during the period 2021-2025.

Among different types of explosive ordnance:

- Explosive remnants of war, including cluster munition remnants, represented the largest share at 46 per cent.
- Mines, including improvised mines, constituted approximately 14 per cent.

Chart 4

Main categories of weapons contributing to the killing and maiming of children (2021-2025)



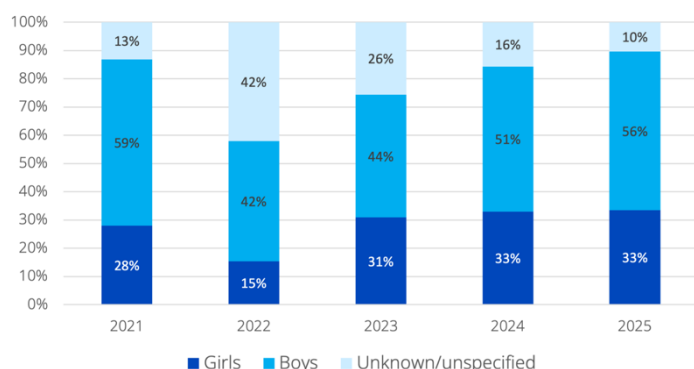
Total may not equal 100% due to rounding

4. Boys account for half of children killed and maimed by explosive weapons while girls face a growing share

- Boys accounted for 50 per cent of all child casualties caused by explosive weapons over the five-year period, making them the largest identified gender group. Girls accounted for 30 per cent, while the gender of 20 per cent of children was unknown. The proportion of girl casualties from explosive weapons rose from 28 per cent in 2021 to 33.5 per cent in 2025.
- While this upward trend may suggest that armed conflicts are becoming increasingly harmful to girls, analysis of existing data sources does not currently provide sufficient evidence as to why the proportion of girls killed and injured by explosive weapons is increasing, or why boys remain more susceptible overall. Additional data and analysis are required to determine causal linkages, recognizing the variables such as evolving conflict dynamics, social norms in relation to gender and age, access to affected areas, and changes in monitoring and reporting capacities – all of which can shift from context to context, and change within the duration of a conflict.

Chart 5

Children affected by explosive weapons: gender trends (2021-2025)



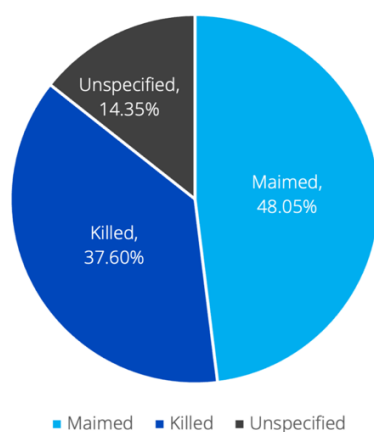
Totals by year may not equal 100% due to rounding

5. At least 48 per cent of child casualties from explosive weapons are children injured. Many will live with permanent disabilities

- An analysis of the breakdown between killing and maiming shows that, across the review period, a larger proportion of children were verified as severely injured (at least 48 per cent), compared to 38 per cent killed.
- This observation aligns with global trends documented by Disabled World in 2026 “for every child killed in warfare, three are injured and acquire a permanent form of disability”.^{vi} Moreover, data from the Landmine Monitor often indicates that for every child killed by landmines or explosive remnants of war, two are injured.^{vii}
- Child survivors of explosive weapons often suffer severe physical injuries – some lose their sight, hearing or limbs, while others lose the ability to speak. Their chances of survival are lower than those of adults, particularly if they do not have access to life-saving programmes for survivors.

Chart 6

Children affected by explosive weapons: Distribution of killing and maiming (2021-2025)



Calls to action

UNICEF calls on

- **All parties to conflict to protect and ensure respect for children's rights, including by ending the use of explosive weapons in populated areas** and holding perpetrators to account for grave violations against children. Actors with influence over parties to conflict should use their leverage to enhance the protection of children from the impact of armed drones.
- **All parties to conflict to uphold International Humanitarian Law (IHL)**, notably related to the conduct of hostilities, including the application of the principles of distinction and proportionality and by taking all feasible precautions during military operations. Parties must also prioritize the protection of civilian infrastructure essential for child survival and well-being, such as schools, hospitals and water and sanitation facilities.
- **All Member States to endorse and implement the [EWIPA Political Declaration](#)**. This should include identifying and **adopting standard operating procedures, policies, and practices that reduce harm to children**, and sharing good practices to influence the conduct of other countries and of non-state armed groups.
- **States should develop shared norms and commitments governing armed drone use in compliance with IHL**. This includes strong command and control safeguards to ensure clear accountability for attacks, including from the use of AI in targeting. Thorough training programs for drone operators, including international humanitarian and human rights law, should be carried out to mitigate civilian harm. Robust systems should be in place for civilians to report casualties from drone strikes and for states to investigate them.
- **All Member States to refrain from transferring explosive weapons to warring parties likely to use them against civilians and civilian objects** in line with national laws and international agreements such as the Arms Trade Treaty (118 State Parties).
- **State Parties preparing to revoke their commitments to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention to reconsider their withdrawal** to secure a safer future for all. All Member States to sign, ratify and fully implement this Convention and the Convention on Cluster Munitions.
- **Donors, humanitarian actors and Member States to allocate sustained funding for programmes to protect children from EWIPA** through injury surveillance, conflict preparedness and protection, explosive weapons risk education, and appropriate quality services for survivors.
- **All members of the international community to support and prioritize efforts to gather and share evidence and data on the direct and indirect impact of explosive weapons on children** to strengthen and support evidence-informed programming, policy development and implementation, and budget allocation.

ⁱ The information, trends, and analyses presented in this document should not be interpreted as reflective of the overall prevalence of killing and maiming of children in all situations of armed conflict. The UN Security Council mandated Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) agenda does not aim to document all grave violations against children in all contexts, but to provide verified evidence of grave violations in conflict contexts identified in the CAAC agenda for the year under review. For the period under review in this fact sheet (2021-2025), the situations included in the Secretary-General's annual reports on CAAC were: Afghanistan; Burkina Faso; Cameroon; the Central African Republic; Colombia; Chad (part of the Lake Chad Basin region); the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Ethiopia (included since 2022); Haiti (included since 2023); India (included until 2021); Iraq (included until 2024); Israel and the State of Palestine; Lebanon; Libya; Mali; Mozambique (included since 2022); Myanmar; Niger (previously part of the Lake Chad Basin region until 2022, and listed as a separate situation since 2023); Nigeria; the Philippines (included until 2024); Somalia; South Sudan; Sudan; the Syrian Arab Republic; Ukraine (included since 2022); and Yemen.

ⁱⁱ In 2020, the proportion of children killed and maimed by explosive weapons was 47.9 per cent.

ⁱⁱⁱ Action on Armed Violence, Explosive Violence Monitor, 2025. <https://aoav.org.uk/2026/explosive-violence-monitor-2025/>. Accessed on 27 August 2026.

^{iv} Disaggregated data on aerial operations remain very limited, with 93.5 per cent of verified child casualties attributed to aerial operations classified under "Other or unspecified aerial bombings or airstrikes" over the reporting period. This largely reflects the challenges of verifying the specific nature of aerial attacks. CAAC Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism Country Task Forces generally do not have access to specialized ballistic, forensic or weapons-identification expertise needed to determine the precise weapon system or type of attack used. In addition, verification of allegations involving specific weapon systems can be challenging or sensitive, particularly where information is insufficient to reliably identify the precise means of attack.

^v Explosive ordnance includes explosive remnants of war (ERW) - including cluster munition remnants - and landmines, including improvised landmines.

^{vi} "Disability Statistics: Information, Charts, Graphs and Tables" Disabled World, <https://www.disabled-world.com/disability/statistics/>. Accessed on 27 August 2026.

^{vii} "The Impact of Mines/ERW on Children" Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor, https://icblcmc.org/assets/Resource-Hub/2025/Factsheet-Impact-on-Children_Final-Web.pdf. Accessed on 21 September 2026.