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UNICEF State of Palestine

“I don’t feel safe anywhere”
Children’s rights and everyday life in the West Bank including East Jerusalem

November 2026

In the West Bank village of Taybeh, a boy watches settlers approach the fence of his home. © UNICEF/SoP/2026



Fatima, mother of four children, tries to retrieve belongings from her home that was burned in a settler attack in Masafer Yatta, southern Hebron. "All I want is for my children to grow up without fear," says Fatima. ©UNICEF/SoP/2025

A child-centred account on the experiences of children and their families over the past three years.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, have long faced significant protection risks, socio-economic hardship, and barriers to accessing essential services. Over the past three years, these pressures have intensified sharply. Increased insecurity, reduced capacity of the Palestinian Authority to provide essential services, and significant declines in household income are placing children under growing pressure across every area of their lives, including education, health, protection, quality of life, and their ability to participate in decisions that affect them.

This qualitative study, conducted between January and March 2026 through consultations with children, provides insights into children's lives from their own perspectives. They reveal how children and their families experience interconnected pressures and challenges across every aspect of childhood.

Hearing directly from children is essential because their experiences are not always fully visible to adults: interviews with parents and other adults often confirmed the difficulties children described, but did not always capture the full emotional or social impact.

Key findings

Children consistently identified similar needs for a safe and dignified childhood: regular education, affordable healthcare, trusted support, safe places to play and socialise, and institutions that listen and respond. Their responses were analysed and revealed five overarching themes:

1. **Children's rights and well-being have deteriorated across multiple dimensions over the past three years.** Children described worsening conditions affecting education, health, protection, living conditions, participation, and opportunities for play and development.
2. **Challenges are interconnected and can compound one another.** A disruption in one area often created or intensified problems in others.
3. **Families are increasingly absorbing gaps in essential systems, but their coping capacity is fragile.** Caregivers described taking on greater care responsibilities to compensate for gaps in services and income.
4. **Children's mental health and psychosocial needs are substantial, but support remains uneven.** Children described multiple impacts on their mental and physical wellbeing, from fear to withdrawal and loss of motivation.
5. **Children want to be heard and to see institutions respond.** Children and caregivers described approaching schools, local councils, clinics, police, and protection actors for assistance, but responses were often limited or inconsistent.

In addition, findings also highlighted variables shaping children's lived experiences and access to rights, including **location, gender, or disability.**

- Children across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, described **common pressures, but their effects vary depending on where they live,** with children in Area C and Bedouin communities, refugee camps and displacement-affected settings experiencing the greatest pressures.
- Girls and boys experienced many of the same pressures, but **gender norms and expectations shape how they experience these pressures.**
- **Children with disabilities face additional barriers**, due to inaccessible transport and facilities, limited adapted services and the high costs of care.

The findings underscore the need for integrated, child-centred policies and programmes that recognise the interconnected nature of children's rights and respond to the multiple pressures facing children and families.

EDUCATION

Education in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, has seen worsening disruption over the past three years, affecting children's access to school, their quality of learning once they are there, and how much contact time they have with teachers and peers. Enrolment does not always translate into regular, supportive, or meaningful education.

> *"Either the army raids our school, or the teachers are on strike because the government cut their salaries"*
>
> Youssef, 16, refugee camp, Hebron Governorate.

"There is only one bus. It gets delayed a lot at the checkpoint, and sometimes the army doesn't let it enter, so we don't go to school. Sometimes, if it does not get through, I walk. If I go, I arrive very tired because the place is very far and I get exhausted from walking. When I arrive, I'm also not able to learn or understand from the teachers."

Girl, 13, Al-Jiftlik, Jordan Valley

Children described journeys to school that have become even more stressful, unsafe, and unpredictable, due to settler-related violence and delays and harassment at Israeli army checkpoints. Dangerous journeys mean children arrive at school stressed and exhausted. Fiscal pressures, due to Israel withholding an estimated US$6 billion in Palestinian Authority clearance revenues – vital resources to deliver essential services – and the challenges that the education workforce also face in reaching schools mean that **classes are typically only open two or three days a week** for face-to-face lessons, with online lessons failing to compensate for lost learning. Drastic reductions in teacher salaries, combined with the stress of living and working in such difficult conditions, translate into low morale and frequent teacher strikes. Lessons are rushed, while reduced learning



Girl plays with balloon in Jalud, West Bank © UNICEF-SoP/2026

In 2026, more than 846,000 children face barriers to safe and continuous education in the West Bank

Education Cluster

time disrupts learning continuity and decreases motivation, meaning children fall behind.

We used to attend 5 days previously, but now we attend 3 days, which makes the educational process move quickly and not focus on the student's understanding."

Children, ages 12-13, focus-group-discussion in Nablus

Insecurity, lack of support at school and financial pressures at home are **pushing more and more adolescents**

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Health-care services in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, are now increasingly disrupted and unreliable. Due to movement restrictions imposed by Israeli authorities, clinics operate for limited hours, doctors are not always present, mobile services are only available on certain days, and access to night-time and emergency care is limited.

Everyone is turning to treatment at their own expense because of frequent strikes and irregular working hours for doctors"

Rania, 17, urban area, Qalqilya Governorate.



Access barriers mean that children and their families may be unable to reach a clinic at all.

Children during a session in Hebron, West Bank, where they discussed children's rights, health and nutrition, safe and unsafe spaces, school life, governance, and leisure through simple, age-appropriate discussions reflecting their daily realities. ©UNICEF-SoP/2026

I wish there was free treatment for all children across different parts of Palestine.

Youssef, 16, refugee camp, Hebron Governorate



Sadeel 13-year-old, cares for her sister Ruqayy, 9-year-old, who uses a wheelchair in Arab Al-Rashaida, southern West Bank. "We grow up together, side by side and we continue to spend our time together," - Sadeel. ©UNICEF-SoP/2026

As with schools, many health-care facilities now only operate two or three days a week, often closing in the early afternoon. Healthcare workers are also receiving reduced salaries; combined with the stress of the insecurity and movement restrictions imposed by the Israeli army, this is leaving many demoralised and demotivated, with implications for patient care. Medicine shortages compound children's limited access to good quality health care.

The problem is sometimes I go to the pharmacy and don't find the medicine I want, and this scares me. If medicines were always available, especially for people with chronic diseases, the situation would be fairer"

Girl, focus group, ages 14–17, Masafer Yatta, Hebron Governorate.

These access constraints and pressures on essential services means that **while health care is available in principle, children do not have consistent access and cannot meet their needs.** In the absence of a predictable system, families are relying on informal support and going into debt to obtain medicines and diagnostic services and meet treatment costs, increasing the vulnerability of families who are already struggling financially, as well as compromising treatment. Inevitably, lack of continuity in care and access to medicines has particularly grave consequences for families of children with disabilities and/or chronic health conditions.

My wish is to get rid of the nightmares I am living."

Boy, focus-group-discussion, ages 15–17, South Hebron.

Provision of **formal psychosocial support services is uneven or altogether absent,** leaving children reliant on friends and family for support, or trying to keep distress to themselves to avoid worrying parents. Children with the greatest need for psychosocial support – those affected by violence detention, house arrest, displacement, disability, chronic illness, school exclusion, or bereavement, or those who are working – also face the greatest barriers to accessing specialised support. School disruption also affected psychosocial well-being. **Children described loss of routine, reduced motivation, cancelled activities, and schools becoming places of stress rather than stability.**

PROTECTION AND SAFETY

Children across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, face protection risks that compromise their safety and well-being. Streets, schools, and other ordinary public spaces for children have become **places where they fear** – and experience – harassment, violence and detention.

> *I don't feel safe anywhere. Even at home, settlers or the army can attack"*
>
> Boy, focus group, ages 14–17, Ain Al-Beida, Tubas Governorate.

Even homes, where children should feel safest, have been **raided** or **attacked**. At the same time, long-standing protection risks – such as violence within the family or at school, and exposure to unsafe work – have been exacerbated by the current insecurity and by declining household income. Children feel they have few places to turn to for support, and limited confidence that reporting would result in protection. Child protection mechanisms are weakened by poor safeguarding and complaint systems, community pressure, limited child-protection staffing and high caseloads, according to key informants.



Girl looks down from the terrace of her home at a yellow movement barrier imposed by Israeli Forces in Hebron, West Bank. ©UNICEF-SoP/2026

Nearly 180 children have been killed and more than than 1,550 Palestinian children have been injured in the West Bank since January 2024.

> *For two years now, there has been no support and no safety for adolescents. Safety is non-existent"*
>
> Hassan, 17, East Jerusalem.

The effects of detention or house arrest are particularly harmful, with adolescents released from custody reporting poor conditions and ill-treatment, and detention and house arrest disrupting children's access to education. **Nearly 350 Palestinian children are currently being held in Israeli military detention.** For these children, there is very limited legal or psychosocial support available after being released, nor are there adequate pathways to reintegrate into education.

ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Children have seen their quality of life deteriorate over the past three years. Diets are less nutritious and diverse, with some adolescents reporting that they now get by on just two meals a day.

> *Before, mum would cook whatever we asked; now she calculates it, especially chicken... Hopefully my dad will go back to work, and mum will buy for us and cook my favourite dish"*
>
> Girl, focus group, ages 14–17, Hebron Governorate.

Food prices have risen while household income has fallen; some families are also unable to access agricultural land due to movement restrictions imposed by the Israeli army and settler-related violence, reducing their access to fresh produce to consume and sell. Many households do not have the money to repair or extend homes, meaning children are living in cold, damp, and overcrowded homes, with little privacy.



Mathayel, a 13-year-old student from Arab Al-Rashayida village, lives with her family under severe economic and security pressures following restrictions and repeated violence in the area. Despite the limited space and difficult conditions, she continues her education at home. ©UNICEF -SoP/2026/Ahmad Talat

900,000 people are currently facing food insecurity in the West Bank, with one third of families unable to afford a nutritious diet

WFP quarterly food security analysis, September 2026

> *We were planning to change the house, but the war changed everything"*
>
> Salma, 12 Salfit Governorate.

Forced displacement means many children have lost their homes and are living in temporary accommodation, lacking privacy, disrupting routines, friendships, and sense of belonging. Erratic access to water, sanitation and electricity services compromises children's and families' capacity to keep clean, keep warm, and study.

Formal social assistance from the Palestinian Authority and humanitarian organisations helps but is inadequate and inaccessible for some families. Poor diets, damp, cold and overcrowded housing, and interruptions to water and electricity supplies are particularly damaging for children with disabilities and chronic health conditions. Where a child requires assistance with bathing, feeding, mobility or other daily activities, **electricity and water shortages** can disrupt important care.

> *"Before we used to go out and play in the street and go alone to Al-Aqsa, but the last two years we are afraid to cross the door of the house alone."*
>
> Girls, Jerusalem.

Play and spending time with friends are vital components for quality of life and well-being for children. As one girl in Jerusalem said, "The most enjoyable time for me is [when I am] with my friends." But in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, opportunities to play and spend time with peers are limited by insecurity, movement restrictions, and the safety and availability of facilities. **Children are afraid to leave their homes** to play outside due to settler-related violence; Many of the few and far between playgrounds and parks have been damaged or destroyed over the past three years. Online activities enable children to stay in touch with friends but are no substitute for face-to-face play and contact. Gender norms stop girls from accessing sports facilities or, in some cases, from socialising outside the house once they reach adolescence. Spaces for play and sports are often inaccessible for children with disabilities.

PARTICIPATION AND EXPRESSION

> *[Our wish is] to have a voice that is heard, and when we speak, adults hear us"*
>
> Girl, focus group discussion, ages 12-14, Al Fara'a

Children have few opportunities to express their views and participate in decision-making. At school, teachers were described as prioritising lesson completion and institutional requirements over children's views, with some children even reporting that they are stopped from participating in class due to low academic performance.

Some children identified parents, counsellors, or other adults they could approach when something felt unfair, while others, particularly those affected by displacement, could not identify anyone they would turn to. Even at home, children's views are dismissed on the grounds that they are too young to understand, or because they are female. *"Because I am a girl, my opinion is not considered important"* (girl at focus-group-discussion in Ramallah). Children with disabilities reported inaccessible schools, transport and services that limited their participation on an equal basis.



Aline during a session in Hebron southern the West Bank, where she discussed, along with other children, children's rights, health and nutrition, safe and unsafe spaces, school life, governance, and leisure
©UNICEF-SoP/2026

RECOMMENDATIONS

Urgent action is needed at three interconnected levels:

Immediate protection from harm

1

To the Israeli Authorities

Prevent and stop practices that directly harm children,

including unlawful or arbitrary detention, ill treatment during detention, demolitions affecting homes and schools, attacks on essential infrastructure, settler violence and militarized law enforcement operations that expose children to harm.

2

To the Israeli Authorities

Apply the best-interests principle

on decisions affecting children and ensure appropriate safeguards to prevent and reduce minimize the impact of detention, house arrest, demolitions, displacement, school closures, and major service reductions.

3

To the Palestinian Authority, and child protection actors

Ensure recovery and reintegration

for children affected by violence, detention, displacement, bereavement, or other serious harm through access to appropriate physical, psychological, social, and educational recovery, and reintegration support.



Girls take part in modelling clay activity in Tulkarem, West Bank © UNICEF-SoP/2026 Herwig

Strengthen services and social protection

To the Palestinian Authority, international organisations, and civil society

1. **Protect continuity, effective and safe access to essential services** across sectors that are affordable, available, and delivered with dignity, prioritizing children and areas facing the greatest barriers.

2. **Strengthen social protection and household support** for families before economic pressures result in school dropout, child labour, untreated illness, or acute distress, with attention to households affected by displacement, imprisonment, bereavement, disability, and loss of income.

3. **Invest in inclusive and sustainable local services and safe spaces,** including education (plus catch-up learning), disability services, child protection services including counselling, rehabilitation, community-based protection, and safe recreational spaces.

4. **Strengthen identification and referral of children in distress** by teachers, health workers, caregivers, and other adults working with children, while ensuring that children have direct and confidential routes to appropriate support.

5. **Monitor overlapping vulnerabilities** where multiple barriers affect the same children or households, with data disaggregated by gender, disability, displacement, and location. Qualitative follow-up should assess why gaps occur and whether services reach the children most affected.



"When I see the water truck coming, I feel excited," says Rania, 6, from Masafer Yatta. For Rania, the water delivery means she and her family can drink and cook, as well as wash in the morning before going to school. ©UNICEF-SoP/2026

Participation and accountability

To the Palestinian Authority, international organisations, and civil society

1

Create regular, safe, and inclusive opportunities for children to meaningfully participate by expressing their views and influencing decisions affecting them at home, in schools, services and communities, with active follow-up.

2

Provide child-friendly complaints and feedback mechanisms for children to raise concerns about safety, services and decisions affecting them, with clear information about their rights and assurance that concerns will be taken seriously and acted upon.

Together, these priorities call for sustained investment in coordinated, responsive systems that uphold children's rights, reduce inequalities, strengthen family and community resilience, and ensure timely support for children across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.



During a focus group discussion, adolescents used a Likert scale to express emotions and well-being in Tulkarem, West Bank ©UNICEF-SoP/2026

Methodology

The report is grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and was designed to generate in-depth qualitative evidence on children's experiences and identify recurring patterns across cases and settings. It was not focused on measuring prevalence or to produce population-level estimates. Consultations with children took place between 06 January and 04 March 2026.

Four data collection methods were used across five CRC thematic areas: focus group discussions with children, child in-depth interviews, paired interviews with caregivers or closely involved adults, and key informant interviews. The report covers refugee camps, Area C and Bedouin communities, East Jerusalem, the Jordan Valley, displacement-affected settings, and urban and peri-urban locations across the West Bank.

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Father and son leave Shi'ab al-Butum school in Masafer Yatta near Hebron, southern West Bank, for their walk home. ©UNICEF/SoP/2026/Alaa Badarneh

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Wherever he lives.
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A fair chance.
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And never give up.

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