

This week

Child soldiers adapt to life after war

Even after being kidnapped, brutalised and forced to kill, children can show a remarkable ability to recover

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"MY SQUAD was my family, my gun was my provider and protector and my rule was to kill or be killed... I felt no pity for anyone. My childhood had gone by without my knowing, and it seemed as if my heart had frozen."

So wrote Ishmael Beah, a boy soldier conscripted into the Sierra Leone army to fight against the rebel Revolutionary United Front, in his memoir *A Long Way Gone*. By the time he was rescued in 1996, Beah was high on drugs, pumped up on a diet of war movies, and numb from killing.

According to UNICEF, some 300,000 boys and girls under the age of 18 are fighting in more than 30 conflicts worldwide. The widespread view, often propagated in media reports, is that these child soldiers represent a lost generation, irredeemably brutalised by the violence in which they have participated. Yet research presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in Washington DC on 5 May paints a more encouraging picture.

While conflict devastates children's lives, studies from some of Africa's war zones indicate that former child soldiers mostly integrate well once they return home. There are even suggestions that they are more engaged and productive citizens than their peers who were exposed to violence but never forced to fight.

"We want to present counter evidence to this notion that child soldiers are badly broken," says Jeannie Annan, a psychologist at New York University and

co-director of the Survey of War Affected Youth (SWAY). She has studied communities affected by the conflict in Uganda, where a brutal rebel force called the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has been fighting government troops since the late 1980s. Peace talks began in 2006.

At the height of the conflict, the Acholi people of northern Uganda bore the brunt of the LRA's assaults, which included violent attacks, looting and frequent abductions of their youth. Some of those kidnapped were kept for just a few days, but the majority were held for longer, and many were forced to become LRA fighters themselves.

Previous studies of former child soldiers have mostly been limited to a few dozen individuals, and have not compared their experiences with other youths from the same communities. SWAY's study was far larger, involving interviews with

"Aid efforts need to concentrate on educational and economic opportunities for all rather than targeting former child soldiers"

741 young men and boys and 619 young women and girls in the region.

About 40 per cent of the male youths, who were between 14 and 30 when they were interviewed in 2005 and 2006, said they had been abducted at some point. Many of these people's experiences were horrific: 57 per cent had been severely beaten and 24 per cent attacked with a weapon (see Chart), and many had been forced



to commit atrocities. Some 23 per cent admit to having killed and about the same proportion say they were eventually allowed to sleep with a gun, both signs that they had been taken into the ranks of the LRA's fighters.

SWAY found that all young people in the affected regions are suffering as a result of the conflict, mostly because of disruption to their education and ability to earn a living. But in relative terms, the former child soldiers were bearing up reasonably well. "They're doing poorly, but everyone is doing poorly," says Chris Blattman of Center for Global Development in Washington DC, a co-director of SWAY.

Fewer than 10 per cent of young people in the survey had symptoms linked to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as frequent nightmares and insomnia – and the former child

soldiers did not seem to be especially badly affected. They were also reintegrating well. Just 3 per cent of young men who had been abducted said they were now having difficulties with their families, and fewer than 10 per cent said they were having problems being accepted by their neighbours. "They are not social pariahs," says Annan.

The biggest problems with reintegration were experienced by young women who had been forced into sexual slavery by the LRA, Annan says. Of those who had returned home with children, 14 per cent said that their families sometimes said hurtful things about them.

SWAY found that former abductees were no different on important socioeconomic measures from those who remained with their families, so any differences between the ex-child soldiers and other Acholi

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After the fighting, what next?

youth are likely to be a result of their different experiences of the conflict. It is a "tragic natural experiment", says Blattman.

Men who had been abducted were slightly more likely to report being aggressive, though this mainly took the form of cursing and shouting rather than physical violence. Remarkably, former abductees seem to have become more engaged as citizens: they were 22 per cent more likely to have voted in a 2005 referendum on a new, multi-party constitution, and 73 per cent more likely to be a member of a peace-promoting organisation. "They're more invested in their community," says Annan.

Neil Boothby, director of the Program on Forced Migration and Health at Columbia University in New York, has further evidence to challenge the stereotype of former child soldiers as permanently brutalised barbarians. He has

followed the long-term well-being of 40 boys abducted by the Renamo rebels in Mozambique in the 1980s and forced to become fighters.

In 1988, Boothby's team, working with the charity Save

the Children, began helping the boys, then aged 8 to 16, who were being housed at a rehabilitation centre in the capital, Maputo. Within a few months, the team had located the boys' relatives and returned them to their villages in southern Mozambique. Each was given aid, including food and clothing, and help integrating into their communities for up to a year.

When Boothby interviewed the men 15 years later, almost all owned their own homes, and 80 per cent were married. They were more likely than an average rural Mozambican to earn extra money doing odd jobs in addition to farming, and 75 per cent of them had children who attended primary school – compared with the national average of 52 per cent.

Furthermore, the communities were surprisingly welcoming. The boys reported few problems being accepted by their families and neighbours, even though some of them had been involved in rebel attacks on their own communities. "When we first got there, the government was telling us that they'll never be able to go home," says Boothby. "That just wasn't true."

Boothby found a higher incidence of PTSD symptoms than the SWAY researchers recorded, with 15 of the 40 Mozambican former boy soldiers still having recurrent nightmares in 2003. But the men had mostly worked

out their own ways of dealing with their psychological trauma. Many shunned alcohol, as they associated getting drunk with their time with Renamo, and one avoided walking past a tree from which his father had been hanged.

Psychiatrists usually think of this kind of avoidance of painful memories as a bad thing. "But in rural Mozambique, where there are no mental health professionals, it's adaptive," Boothby argues. Attempts to help former combatants with PTSD may conflict with local spiritual beliefs and even do harm, he adds. The boys he studied went through cleansing ceremonies in which they confessed to their violent acts, to reconnect with protective spirits. After doing so, custom demands that they should not talk about it again.

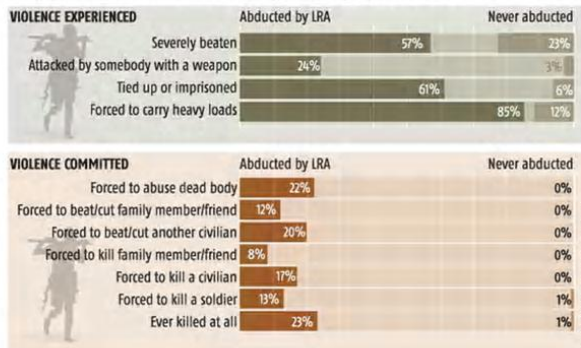
Michael Wessells, also at Columbia University, has worked with former child soldiers across the globe and has found them to be similarly resilient. This suggests, Annan and Blattman argue, that aid efforts need to concentrate more broadly on improving educational and economic opportunities for war-torn communities, rather than targeting former child soldiers for particular assistance with reintegration.

It is even possible that such targeted efforts might sow the seeds of resentment. In 2006, tensions rose in Acholi communities when the Ugandan government gave out large payments to former abductees. "People used the word 'murderers', which I'd never heard before," Annan recalls.

UNICEF, which backed the SWAY study, has taken its findings on board in its work in northern Uganda, but Blattman says that some other organisations are still targeting aid to former child soldiers. For those who want to help the survivors of conflict, Wessells has the following advice: "Don't go in with preconceived ideas, and try to understand through the eyes of local people how they see their situation." ●

LIFE AS A CHILD SOLDIER

The experiences reported by 791 young males in northern Uganda, where conflict has raged since the 1980s between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and government forces



SOURCE: SURVEY OF WAR-AFFECTED YOUTH