

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 new analysis of data published in the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General's annual reports on Children and Armed Conflict, highlighting

the direct physical impact of explosive weapons on children in conflict, including both fatal and non-fatal injuries.¹

While this fact sheet focuses on the 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 and well-being. The use of explosive weapons in populated areas leads to displacement, psychological distress, and the destruction of essential civilian infrastructure such as hospitals, health centres, nutrition facilities and water and sanitation systems. It also results in the killing and maiming of medical personnel, humanitarian workers, and other frontline service providers, contributing to the growing toll of civilian casualties in current conflicts worldwide.

1. In conflict, explosive weapons have become the main threat for children

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 2020 – 2024)

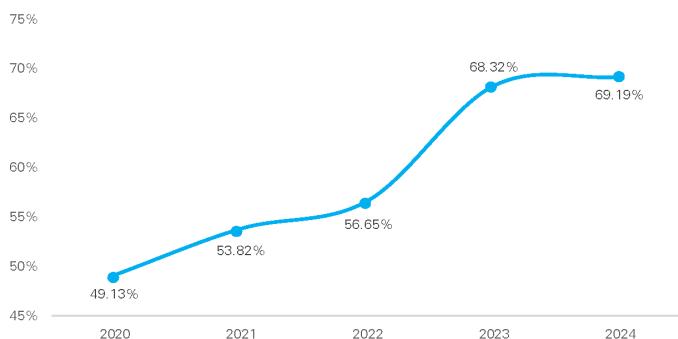
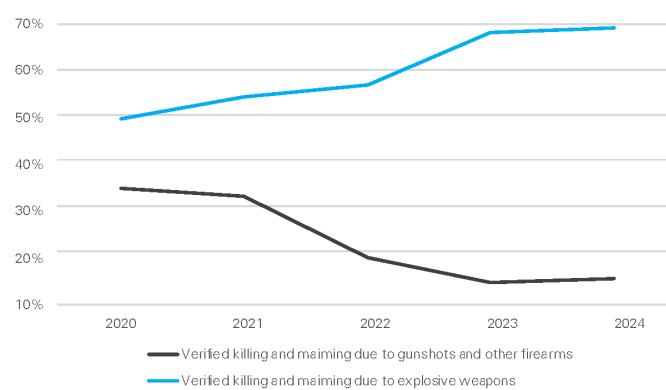


Chart 2

Trend comparisons: Proportion of child casualties by explosive weapons vs. firearms out of all children verified as killed and maimed (2020 – 2024)



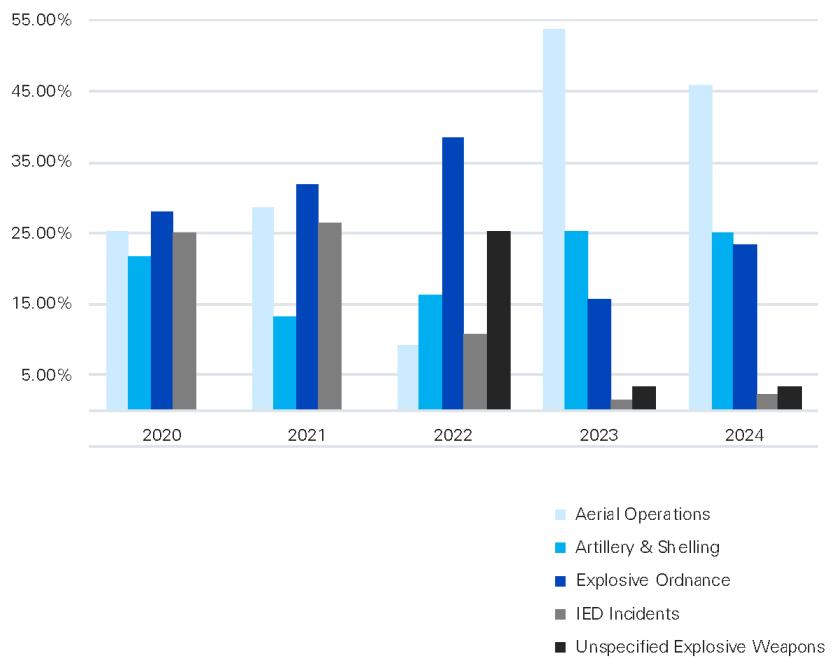
- In conflict contexts reviewed, the use of explosive weapons is now by far the leading cause of killing and maiming of children. **Nothing kills or injures more children than explosive weapons.**
- This trend is getting worse every year: growing from 49.1 per cent of child casualties in 2020 to 69.2 per cent in 2024. This corresponds with a parallel decline in the proportion of child casualties caused by gunshots and other firearms, which accounted for 15.1 per cent of child casualties in 2024. This decline suggests a shifting dynamic where explosive weapons are replacing firearms as a leading threat to children in armed conflict situations.
- Explosive weapons accounted for approximately 61 per cent of all verified child casualties during the five years reviewed, representing nearly 30,000 verified casualties between 2020–2024.
- The conflicts with the highest numbers of children killed and maimed by explosive weapons, as verified by the United Nations between 2020–2024, were Israel and the State of Palestine, Afghanistan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Myanmar, and Somalia.
- Outside of data on grave violations, 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.²

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

- Aerial operations are the leading cause of child casualties, representing 23 per cent of verified cases of child killing and maiming between 2020 and 2024 (as shown in the chart under "Fact 3").
- This category encompasses various subcategories such as attacks with weaponised Unmanned Aircraft Systems (armed drones), air-dropped barrel bombs, white phosphorus munitions, cluster bombs and other bombs, and other unspecified aerial bombings or airstrikes.
- The sharp increase between 2022 and 2024 was primarily driven by the conflict in Israel and the State of Palestine, with notable rises also observed in Lebanon, Myanmar, Sudan, Somalia and Ukraine. Afghanistan continued to report verified casualties from aerial operations, albeit at lower levels compared to earlier years.

Chart 3

Evolution in categories of explosive weapons contributing to the killing and maiming of children (2020 – 2024)

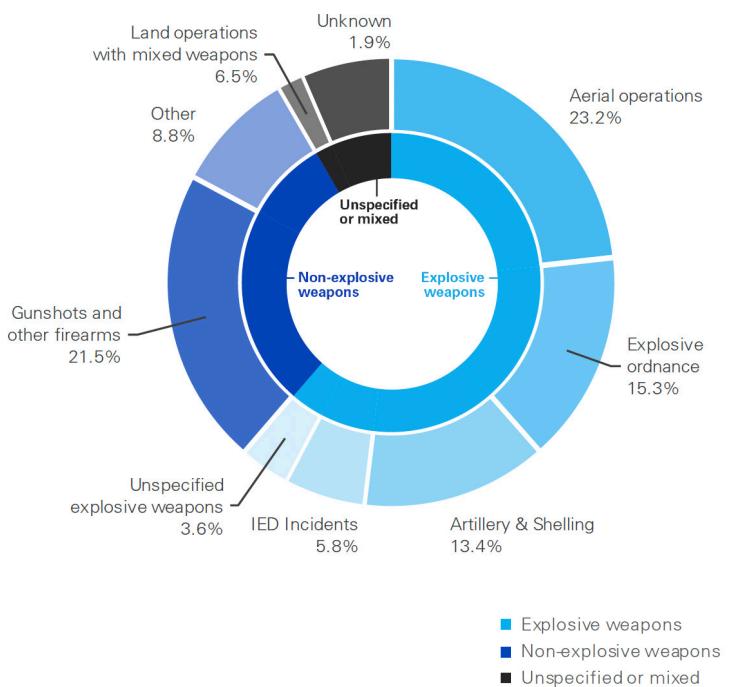


3. Contamination by explosive ordnance is the second most prominent explosive weapons threat to children in armed conflict

- Contamination by explosive ordnance, including explosive remnants of war (such as cluster munition remnants and other unexploded and abandoned ordnance) and landmines³, constitutes a major and ongoing threat for children, accounting for 15 per cent of all children killed and maimed between 2020 and 2024.
- Within the broader category of explosive weapons, explosive ordnance accounted for 24.9 per cent of child casualties. Among different types of explosive ordnance:
 - Explosive remnants of war including cluster munition remnants represented the largest share at 42 per cent.
 - Mines, including improvised mines, constituted approximately 13.7 per cent.
 - Artillery and shelling are the third most significant cause of child casualties from explosive weapons, accounting for approximately 13 per cent of all verified cases of killing and maiming of children during the period 2020–2024.

Chart 4

Main categories of weapons contributing to the killing and maiming of children (2020 – 2024)

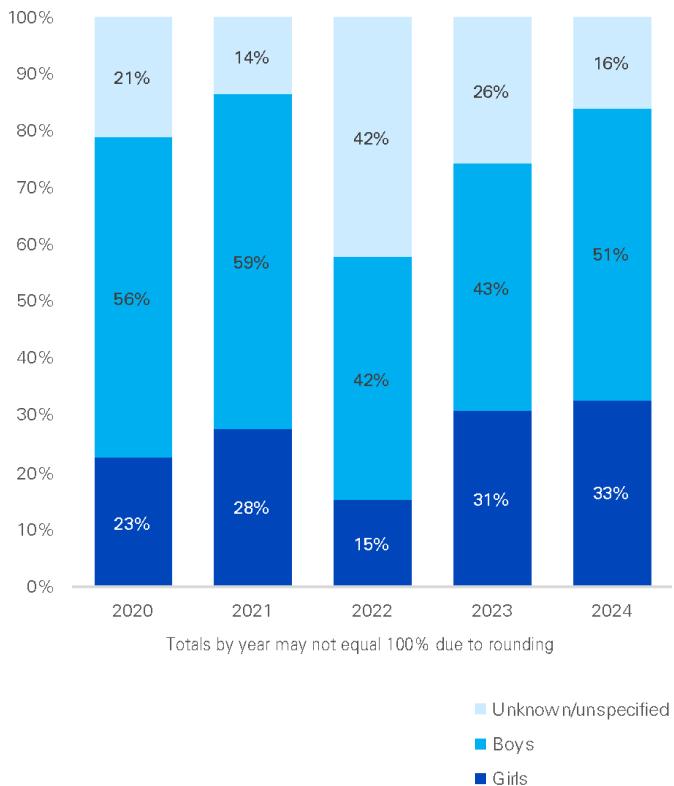


4. Boys are the first direct victims of explosive weapons but the proportion of girls killed and maimed by these weapons is steadily increasing

- Boys continue to account for the majority of casualties caused by explosive weapons over the five-year period. The proportion of girl casualties from explosive weapons rose from 23 per cent in 2020 to 33 per cent in 2024.
- While this upward trend may suggest that armed conflicts are becoming increasingly harmful to girls, analysis of existing data sources do 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 (2020 – 2024)

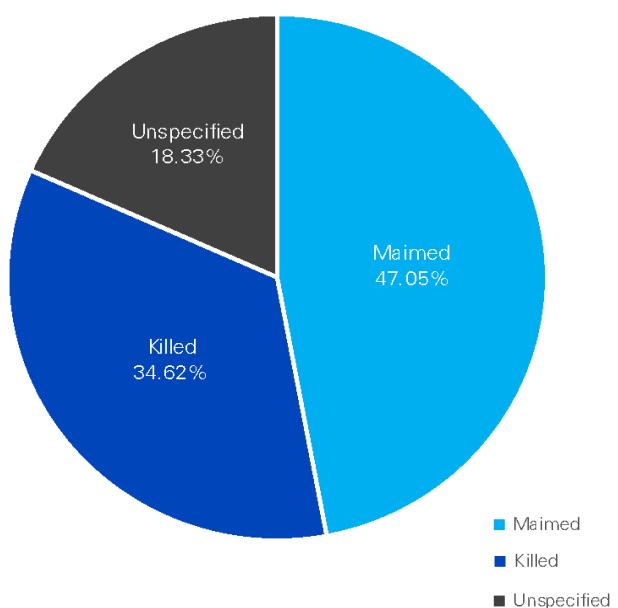


5. At least 47 per cent of child casualties from explosive weapons are children injured. Many will live with permanent disabilities

- An analysis of the breakdown between killing and maiming shows that, across the review period, a larger proportion of children were verified as injured (at least 47 per cent), compared to under 35 per cent killed.
- This observation aligns with global trends documented by Disabled World, in 2024 “for every child killed in warfare, three are injured and acquire a permanent form of disability”⁴. Moreover, data from the Landmine Monitor often indicates that for every child killed by landmines or explosive remnants of war, two are injured.⁵
- 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 (2020-2024)



Calls to action

UNICEF calls on

- **All parties to conflict - and those with influence over them** - 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 when children's rights are violated.
- **All parties to conflict to uphold International Humanitarian Law**, 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 wellbeing, 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.
- **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 (117 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 ordnance 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.

1. 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 (2020-2024), the situations included in the Secretary-General's annual reports on CAAC were: Afghanistan; Burkina Faso (included since 2020); Cameroon (previously part of the Lake Chad Basin region until 2019, and listed as a separate situation since 2020); 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; 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; Somalia; South Sudan; Sudan; the Syrian Arab Republic; Ukraine (included since 2022); and Yemen.
2. Action on Armed Violence, Explosive Violence Monitor, 2024. <https://aoav.org.uk/2025/explosive-violence-monitor-2024/>
3. Explosive ordnance include explosive remnants of war (ERW) - including cluster munition remnants - and landmines, including improvised landmines.
4. "Disability Statistics: Information, Charts, Graphs and Tables" Disabled World, <https://www.disabled-world.com/disability/statistics/>. Accessed on 21 October 2025.
5. "The Impact of Mines/ERW on Children" Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor, https://the-monitor.org/api/assets/Resource-Hub/2024/Fact-Sheet-Impact-on-Children_Final.pdf. Accessed on 21 October 2025.