

Dropout in post-conflict settings

The case of Sierra Leone

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Education's role in post-conflict settings

- Schools can provide
 - A safe place and a return to normalcy
 - Psychosocial and physical health services
 - Opportunities for peacebuilding curricula
 - Improve future job prospects of youth

- Yet enrollment often remains low in post-conflict countries

Civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002)



- 50,000 killed
- Millions injured
- 2 million people displaced
- 15,000-22,000 children abducted by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the government army

Longitudinal Study of War-Affected Youth in Sierra Leone (LSWAY-SL)

- Dr. Theresa Betancourt, PI
- 2002, 2004, 2008 waves
- Mixed methods
- 529 youth and their caregivers
- Focus areas:
 - Psychosocial health
 - Stigma
 - Risk behaviors
 - Educational trajectories



Wartime experiences

- Joined armed forces involuntarily
 - Average child had been taken at 11 and been with the armed group for almost 3 years.
 - “All of us were captured and marched to the bush... The children were in one line and adults in the other. Then they began to cut the throats of the adults.”
- Heavy physical labor
- Rape (14%) and physical abuse (62%)
- Forced drug use (40%)
 - “I was smoking when we were in the bush. At that time they told us that we just had to take it to harden our hearts and minds.”
- Separation from parents due to death (32%) or abduction
 - “My mother was killed [in front of me], and I was left crying and confused.”
- Killing or injuring a person (32%)

Formal rehabilitation for child soldiers

1. Interim Care Centers (ICCs)

- Run by government and child-protection NGOs
- Intended for short-term transitions (6 weeks)
- Served 5,000 combatant children and 2,000 non-combatants

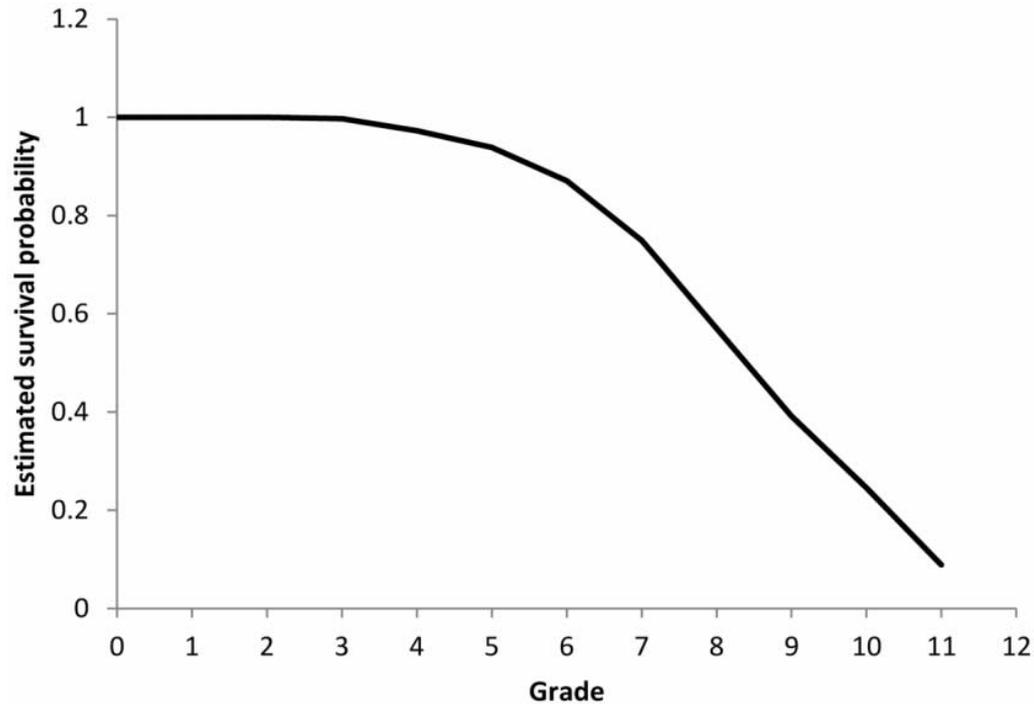
2. Primary school fees paid for former combatants

Girls largely excluded from formal processes

Education and rehabilitation

- Education normalizes children's lives
 - “[I’m feeling] fine now, because I go to school with other children and play with my friends. . . . Things are normal now”
 - “I know if he [a former child soldier] learns a trade, his future will be just as bright as any other child who was not captured.”
- Education reduces stigma from community members
 - “The community becomes happy when they see us engage in productive activities such as schooling... However, if you are stubborn and unsettled, they get worried.”
 - “We were accepted because we were sent to school.”

Yet educational persistence is poor...



What factors reduce dropout risk?

- Family financial support
 - Receiving family financial support for education → 50% lower odds of dropout
 - Lack of support drove youth to suboptimal coping methods
 - Leads to family buy-in and youth confidence
- Social support
 - 1 SD increase in social support → 45% lower odds of dropout
 - “My grandmother stopped them [from calling me names]. She told people that what happened was not my fault, as I was captured. She [also] reported [the matter] to the chief. [Now] I feel fine.”
 - “The child now fits well in the community. At first, he was provoked because he had the RUF tattoo on his body, but the teacher intervened and now he is not provoked.”

How did large-scale, international interventions affect dropout risk?

- NGO support for education
 - No significant effect on dropout
 - “They used to pay our school fees but that has suddenly stopped.”
- Formal reintegration program at an Interim Care Center (ICC)
 - Attending an ICC → odds of dropout 90% higher than non-attendees*
- What about wartime exposure to violence?

Policy implications



- Post-war social and family support is powerful
- Focus less on large-scale interventions, like paying school fees or opening ICCs
- Instead, focus on strengthening families' ability to support youth
 - Matched child savings accounts for education
- Poverty reduction → reintegration