



Save the Children

A DECADE OF DISTRESS

The harsh and unchanging
reality for children living in
the Gaza Strip

Every child has the right to a future. Save the Children works around the world to give children a healthy start in life, and the chance to learn and to be safe. We do whatever it takes to get children the things they need – every day and in times of crisis.

Save the Children in oPt

Save the Children is one of the largest non-governmental organisations working in Gaza, addressing the immediate humanitarian and long-term development needs of children and adults. We have over 30 years of experience on the ground and currently implement programmes in the areas of education, child protection, livelihoods and economic opportunities, and psychosocial support. We also provide water and sanitation services and work through our partners to provide a range of other services.

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In grateful memory of Dr Walid Mousa, Gaza Field Office Manager, leader, humanitarian and advocate. May he rest in peace.

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Cover photo: Najwan (name changed to protect identity), 13, pictured with her younger brother, lost the ability to speak due to psychosocial distress following the death of her father during the war in 2014. With speech therapy and support from a counsellor, her speech returned and she now has an ambition to become a teacher. (Photo © Mohamed Nayef/Save the Children)

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Summary

“Whenever I meet any child, they don’t have any more hope, no plans for the future. They say, ‘Today we are alive but tomorrow we don’t know’, they are very frustrated. When we tell them that there might be a truce and the situation will get better, they say, ‘No! If it was going to improve it would have improved a long time ago’. The children say that the situation will not improve, they can’t see any change happening. They say that the situation will only get worse. When you ask any child, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ they answer, ‘Is there a future?’, ‘Will we be living tomorrow?’”

Child protection and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) worker, Save the Children partner organisation

In their short lives, children in Gaza have experienced three wars and an 11-year Israeli-imposed land, sea and air blockade, which has led to chronic poverty and restricted their freedom of movement outside Gaza. Children and young people in Gaza live under the constant threat of further conflict and deepening economic hardship, with little opportunity of escape. Based on Save the Children interviews, it is clear that the ongoing instability and feelings of entrapment have left many children and young people in Gaza with a deep sense of insecurity, fear and hopelessness, and have had a profound impact on their mental health and well-being.

In 2015, one year after the 2014 conflict, Save the Children surveyed 413 children and

352 mothers in some of the hardest hit areas of Gaza to understand the impact of the crisis on children’s mental health. We found that children were still experiencing high levels of severe emotional distress because of their experiences, with many living in fear and having nightmares every time they slept.¹ By 2017, the UN estimated that 25% of children in Gaza (290,000 children) still needed continuous psychosocial support.²

Our latest research was undertaken in February 2018, a month before the start of the escalation in violence which was the result of Palestinian demonstrations on the border and the response of Israeli security forces. The research clearly shows that children and young people in Gaza continue to suffer.

25% 290,000 children

By 2017, three years after the 2014 conflict, the UN estimated that 25% of children in Gaza (290,000 children) still needed continuous psychosocial support.²

KEY FINDINGS FROM QUESTIONNAIRES COMPLETED WITH CAREGIVERS AND CHILDREN LIVING IN GAZA

Overall, the key finding of our research is that children and young people in Gaza are vulnerable, and if they are not already living in a state of toxic stress are at high risk of developing serious and long-term mental health issues.

When we explored three different domains with children and caregivers – emotional, conduct and relationships with peers – what they told us is of great concern. On average, the ranges in which they reported in these areas all fell within the high or ‘abnormal’ level, meaning that if assessed by a professional, they would most likely be given a mental health diagnosis.

Our research, led by Save the Children’s mental health professionals, suggests it is likely that children and young people in Gaza reported in the high or abnormal range due to the myriad of stressors they reported facing in their lives – the protracted nature of the situation in Gaza; the considerable length of time they have been exposed to conflict-related stressors; the exacerbating impacts of the blockade and electricity crisis; and the inability of most children and families to escape their situation due to restrictions on their movements, leaving them trapped inside Gaza with no respite in sight.

Importantly, we also found that many of the children and young people surveyed have strong protective factors at play in their lives, such as support from family, which are likely to be protecting most of them from developing serious mental health issues. A significant number of children and young people reported that their families are a key source of support in their current circumstances. While our research shows children and young people in Gaza are at high risk of developing serious and long term mental health issues, strong family support is likely to be holding them back from the brink of a mental health crisis.

Another key finding of our research, however, is that caregivers say their capacity to support their children is being pushed to the limits by the blockade, chronic poverty and insecurity, and would likely be utterly destroyed in the event of another conflict.

Since this research was undertaken in 2018, the situation in Gaza has continued to deteriorate: many children and their family members have been killed and thousands more injured as a result of mass demonstrations at the Israel–Gaza perimeter and the response of Israeli security forces. In the face of fresh insecurity, and the anxiety and fear this brings, we are deeply concerned about the mental health and well-being of children in Gaza, and the capacity of their caregivers to support them, which will only deteriorate further if there is a new conflict in Gaza.

HIGH/ABNORMAL

In three different domains, emotional, conduct and relationships with peers, the ranges in which children and caregivers reported fell within the high or ‘abnormal’ level. If assessed by a professional, they would most likely be given a mental health diagnosis.

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and if they are not already living in a state of toxic stress
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SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Save the Children urgently calls for the following:

DUTY BEARERS

- Take urgent steps to protect children and families in both Gaza and Israel from physical and psychological harm.
- Resume negotiations to find a durable and just solution to the crisis and agree on a lasting ceasefire.
- The government of Israel to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration and, along with the Palestinian Authority and the de facto authority in Gaza, fully operationalise and implement the Guidelines on Military Use of Schools and Universities in Armed Conflict by minimising the use of school or university buildings for military purposes.

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- Take urgent steps to prevent the situation in Gaza from deteriorating.
- Reinvigorate its engagement to press for an immediate end to the blockade of Gaza and for Palestinian reconciliation as immediate requirements to alter the status quo and allow for the recovery of Gaza.

DONORS

- Fully fund the 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for the occupied Palestinian territory.
- Recognise the importance of and fully fund mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for children, young people and their caregivers in Gaza, including services and programming that:
 - provide specialist care and interventions in schools, in the community or at home;
 - strengthen children's and young people's resilience and positive coping strategies;
 - enhance children's protective environments by creating more safe spaces for children and young people;
 - assist caregivers to maintain strong, supportive and protective family units for children.

- Donors must also support humanitarian agencies, local partners and civil society organisations to implement and scale up child protection and MHPSS programming and services in Gaza, as well as to strengthen government child protection and MHPSS capacity and services.
- Fully fund the UN's emergency fuel needs and financially support initiatives to rehabilitate Gaza's energy supply in the long term.

HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES WORKING IN GAZA

- Prioritise MHPSS for children, young people and caregivers in all aspects of their programming.
- Invest in strengthening the capacity of local organisations to provide specialised and non-specialised MHPSS programming and services and protective environments for children.
- Call for greater investment and prioritisation of MHPSS and child protection in Gaza as part of the HRP 2019, and urge the international community, including parties to the conflict, to bring an end to the violence and the blockade and broker a lasting peace.

The time to act for Gaza's children is now

There has never been a more important time than now to act for children in Gaza. Save the Children calls on the international community to reverse a decade of inaction and take decisive steps to address the situation in Gaza and mitigate the lasting impact it could have on children's and young people's physical and mental health.



PHOTO © MOHAMED NAYEFS/SAVE THE CHILDREN

“I was nine years old during the war in 2014. One night they were shelling while I was asleep, and I got hit on my head by shrapnel from a bomb blast. I was bleeding massively and it didn't stop. My father picked me up and ran out to the street which was empty because of the shelling around us. He took me to the hospital. I fainted and was unconscious for four days. I stayed at the hospital for four months, but they couldn't get the shrapnel out of my head. It's still in there. I need to go to a good hospital to have the surgery, perhaps in Germany. The best thing would be to get it out, but they say it can be dangerous to remove. I get dizzy from time to time, especially if I stay too long in the sun. I'm not allowed to walk long distances any more. I have a loud and clear message to the world. We need people to stand by our side, we need their help to be safe and live in peace. And I want to get the shrapnel out of my head so my life can be as it was before again.”

Shaiyma, 13 years old (Name changed to protect identity)

Background

While Palestinians across the West Bank and Gaza have experienced many years of conflict and adversity, the situation in Gaza has significantly worsened over the past decade. Three devastating wars, from which it has never fully recovered, and a full Israeli land, sea and air blockade on Gaza have stifled economic growth, entrenched widespread poverty and chronic food insecurity and brought long-term mental anguish for many Palestinians, particularly children.

Children in Gaza have experienced three wars in the last decade – in 2008–09, 2012 and 2014. The 2014 conflict – often referred to as the 50-day war – was the most devastating round of hostilities since the beginning of the Israeli occupation in 1967.³ More than 2,200 Palestinian civilians, including 551 children, were killed and over 11,200 Palestinian civilians, including 3,436 children, were injured, with 10% suffering a permanent disability.⁴ Six Israeli civilians were also killed and up to 1,600 injured, including 270 children.⁵ Nearly 18,000 homes, 82 hospitals and clinics and 259 schools in Gaza were destroyed or damaged during the 2014 conflict.⁶ At the height of hostilities, 500,000 Palestinians, or 28% of the Gaza population, were displaced and 17,700 still remained displaced in 2018.⁷

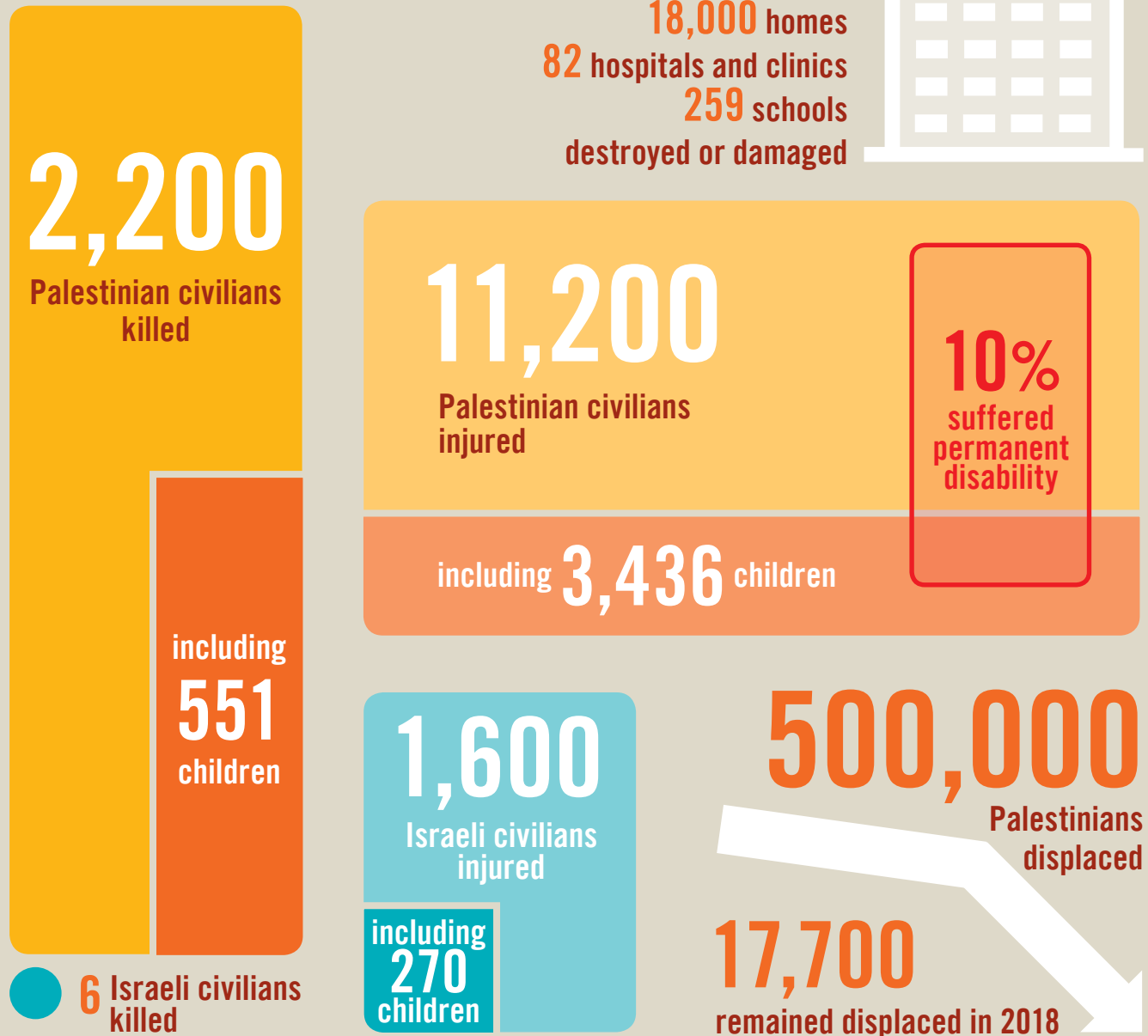
Since Palestinians began mass protests at the Israel–Gaza perimeter fence on 30 March 2018, the security and humanitarian situation in Gaza has further deteriorated. As of 31 October 2018, 228 Palestinians, including 43 children, and one

Israeli soldier had been killed and 24,362 Palestinians and 40 Israelis injured during the months-long demonstrations, violence and hostilities. A total of 2,274 Palestinian children have been hospitalised for the injuries they sustained. Almost half of the hospitalised Palestinians were wounded by live ammunition.⁸ In response, the UN General Assembly has deplored the use of any excessive, disproportionate or indiscriminate force by the Israeli military against Palestinian civilians.⁹ The launching of flammable kites and balloons from Gaza has also resulted in extensive property damage in Israel.¹⁰ Rockets fired from Gaza are also likely to have impacted on the mental well-being of Israeli children and their families living near the Israel–Gaza perimeter.¹¹ There are growing concerns that the protests and escalation in attacks between Israel and Hamas, the de facto authority in Gaza, in recent months could trigger a new Gaza conflict. Many children in Gaza are living in constant fear that at any moment their lives might be upturned once again.

“I’m afraid of war. The sound from shelling is so loud and scary, I had to cover my ears all the time. I was so sad when the war came (back in 2014), many houses got destroyed and many were killed. They shelled my neighbour’s house and a rocket fell into my house. It did not explode so we called the emergency services for help. They took it out from the house but then it exploded out on the street, many of them were killed.”

Salem, 13 years old (Name changed to protect identity)

2014 conflict – the 50-day war



30 March–31 October 2018

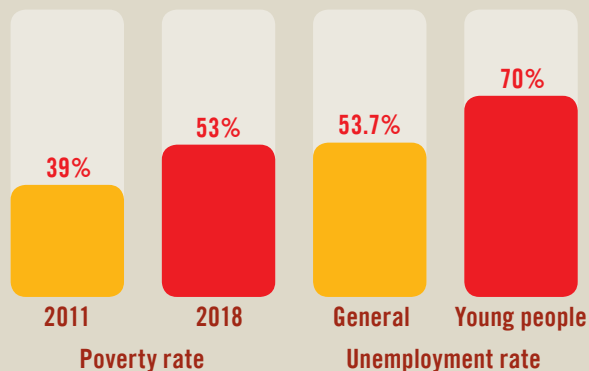


In addition to a decade of violence, children in Gaza have lived through an 11-year Israeli land, air and sea blockade. Under the blockade, the ability of children and their families to leave Gaza has been

significantly restricted. The vast majority of Palestinians are not allowed to travel out of Gaza. Only a minority who fall into special categories – such as those who require medical treatment outside Gaza – are allowed to exit, although even their ability to do so is becoming increasingly diminished.¹²

Longstanding access restrictions imposed under the blockade have undermined Gaza's economy, resulting in high levels of unemployment, food insecurity and aid dependency. The poverty rate in Gaza is 53%, having risen 14 percentage points since 2011,¹³ with unemployment reaching its highest ever recorded rate of 53.7% (rising to 70% among young people) in July 2018.¹⁴ The stalled reconciliation process between the Palestinian Authority and the de facto government in Gaza has

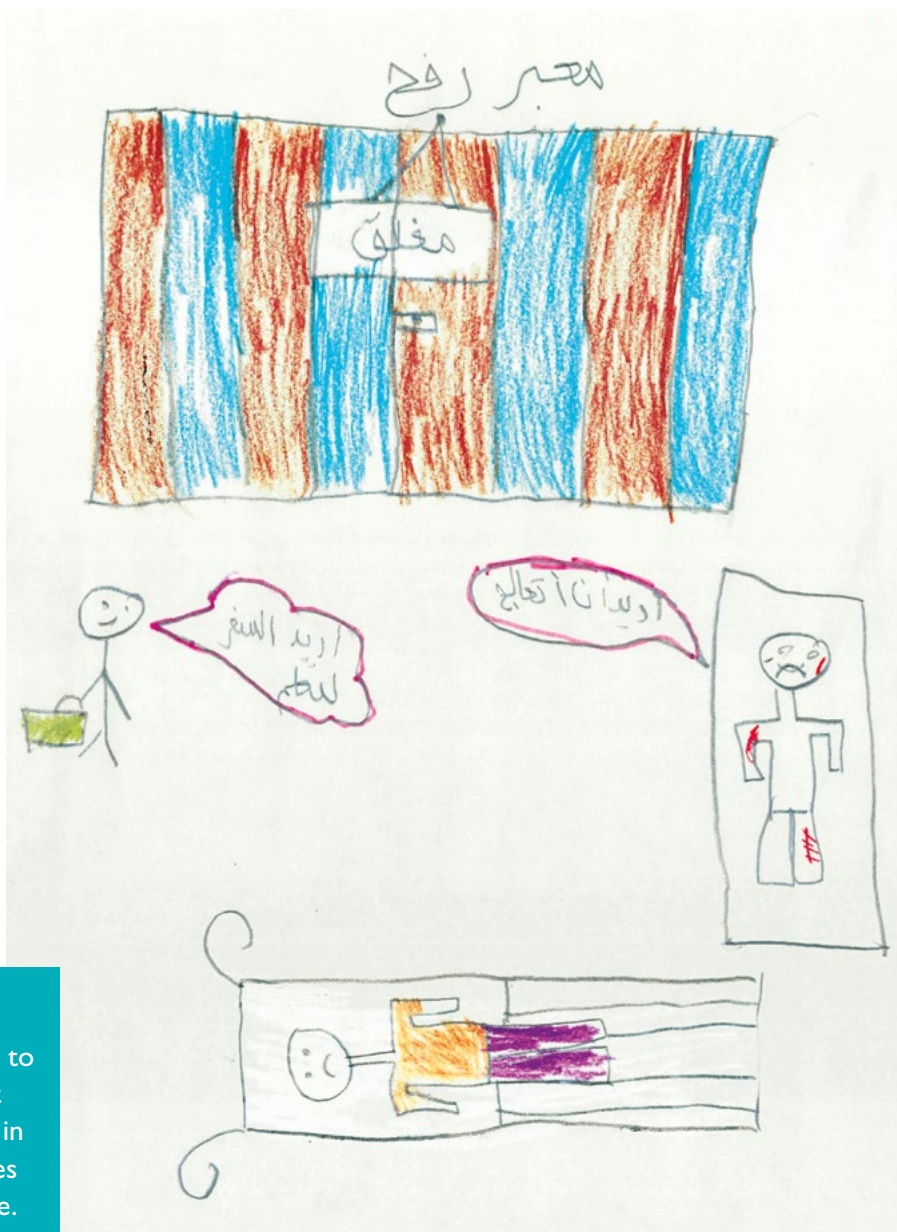
Poverty and unemployment rates in Gaza



Restricted movements

“As a child living in Gaza Strip, I suffer from the closure of all crossings in and out of Gaza. There are many wounded people and patients who have not been treated in hospitals, who need to be treated abroad. Also, my brother is a new graduate, but there are no job opportunities to join. He got a scholarship opportunity abroad. However, because of the closure of the crossings, he could not leave Gaza and lost the opportunity.”

Samar, 11 years old (Name changed to protect identity)



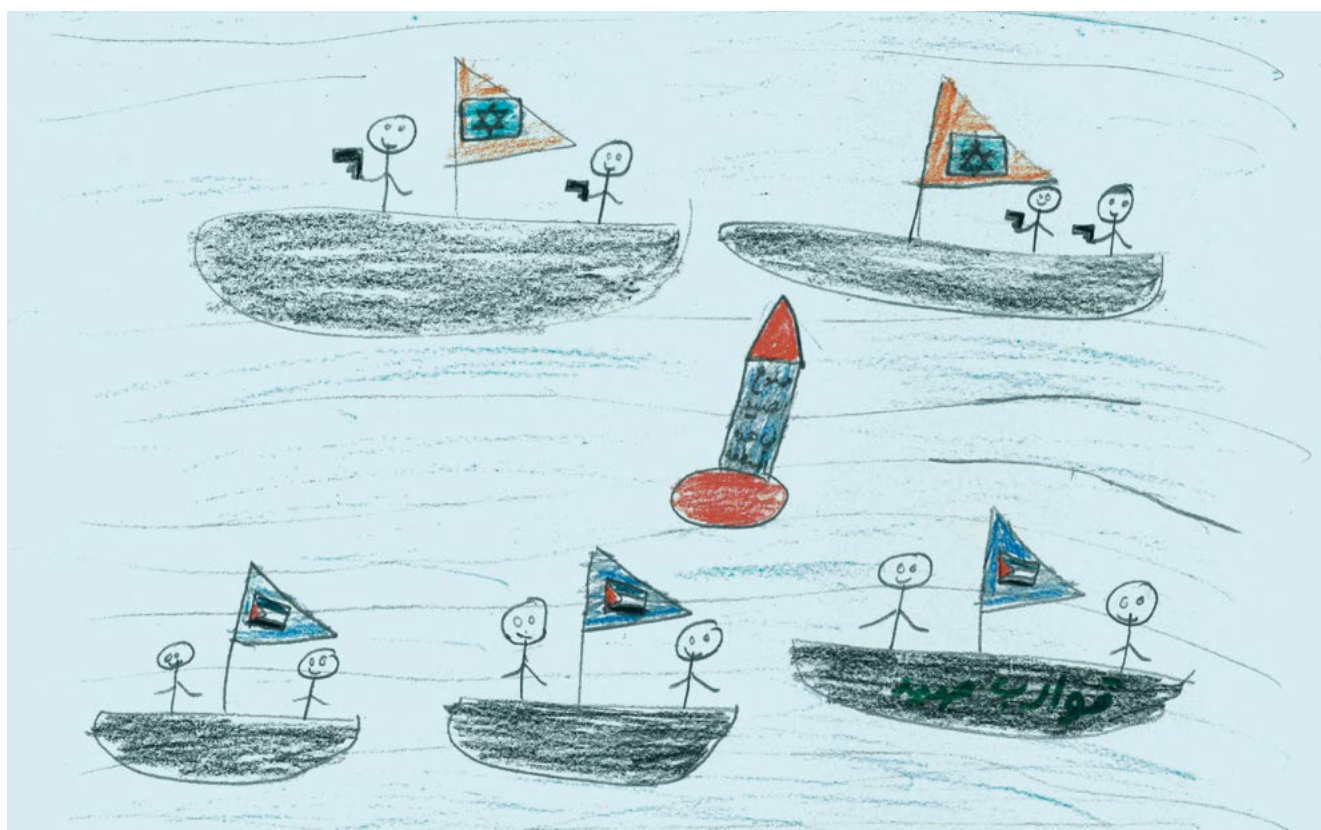
A note on the artwork

Save the Children asked children to draw pictures and describe what made their lives difficult in Gaza in 2018. The pictures on these pages illustrate the challenges they face.

also led to public servant salary cuts, deepening the economic distress of many families in Gaza. These conditions prompted the UN to predict Gaza would be “unliveable” by 2020.¹⁵ The World Bank also recently concluded that if the status quo remains unchanged and financing gaps continue to widen, including funding to UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency), the UN agency responsible for Palestinian refugees, the “Gaza economy is expected to slip into deep recession, significantly raising the potential for unrest.”¹⁶

In response to recent protests and other violence, Israel has further tightened its blockade on Gaza by periodically closing border crossings. This has had detrimental effects on the already limited movement of commercial supplies and people.¹⁷

Lack of fuel in Gaza is also a significant issue. Blockade restrictions, uneven supply through Israeli and Egyptian pipelines, the internal Palestinian divide and unaddressed damage to the Gaza Power Plant from the 2014 conflict, are all factors that have affected the steady supply of fuel to Gaza. This situation has caused a long-term power crisis in Gaza that leaves families without electricity for up to 19 hours a day.¹⁸ The lack of power has led to a breakdown in essential services, including sewage management and access to clean water, and has seriously affected the operation of hospitals and other healthcare facilities.¹⁹ While facilities providing critical health, water and sanitation, and solid waste collection services are kept running on emergency fuel provided by the UN, its supply is at a dangerously low level because of chronic



Sea blockade

“We are a family of fishermen; my family suffers a lot from Israel’s restriction on the fishing area. If any fisherman decides to cross this area, he might be shot, detained or sprayed with sewage by Israelis, they might also seize their boats, or destroy them, depends on what they want to do. Fish populations are also harmed, because there are many Palestinian fishermen, and they fish a lot which affects fish reproduction, because they restrict the area we can fish in.”

Ibrahim, 10 years old (Name changed to protect identity)

underfunding. In August 2018, the fuel crisis looked set to deepen, with Israel announcing it would halt all fuel imports to Gaza in response to ongoing violence at the Israel–Gaza perimeter.²⁰ However, in October 2018, under a UN-brokered deal, Qatar provided \$60 million to supply fuel to Gaza's power plant for the following six months. With a reduction in tensions in early October, Israel lifted its temporary ban on fuel deliveries, allowing for the first UN-monitored delivery of Qatar-funded fuel to Gaza. The situation remains uncertain, however, as the Palestinian Authority has voiced its disapproval of the agreement and could take measures to limit its fuel and electricity supply to Gaza, as could Israel if there is another escalation in violence.²¹

Overall, lack of donor funding (which has declined since the de facto authority took control of Gaza

in 2007) has been a significant contributor to the worsening situation in Gaza. International aid for humanitarian activities in Gaza and the West Bank hit an all-time low in 2018 when UNRWA's biggest donor, the United States, cut all funding to the agency. While several other donors have stepped in to bridge the funding shortfall, the 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan for the occupied Palestinian territory remains one of the most underfunded appeals globally.²²

The humanitarian situation and dire economic conditions in Gaza, and restricted freedom of movement out of Gaza, have a significant effect on children's mental health and well-being and exacerbate their distress and fears that the situation could change for the worse at any given moment.



Sewage

"We children suffer a lot of problems in Gaza – like the sea. The sewage goes to the sea and this leaves us with no spaces to swim in. When we swim in the sea we get skin diseases. This is why I ask you not to dump the sewage into the sea."

Rania, 11 years old (Name changed to protect identity)

“What kind of future can you expect for these children?”

PHOTO © MOHAMED NAYEF/SAVE THE CHILDREN



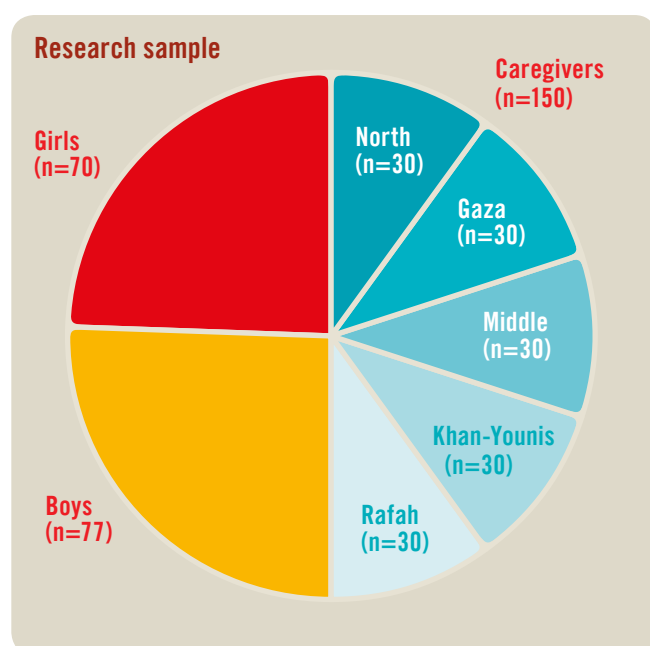
“The thought of the future is distant – what kind of future can you expect for these children? I don’t know, it’s a very dark future. The difficult situation, the blockade, the lack of electricity, the economic situation – what kind of future can you expect? Of course, this all has a negative effect on the mental health of children. And we’ll see the results of this when they grow up and become adults – they are deeply disappointed by the situation and this is a big problem. They all wish to go outside of Gaza to study and live. Most families in Gaza just think about how to leave Gaza because here the situation makes us – it’s like living in a prison. What do you expect people in prison to think about? They think about freedom. So here in Gaza all children and youth think like that. The children are aware of the entire situation around them – they are clever and they know what’s going on. That’s the important thing – they’re aware of all the conditions they’re facing and this affects them negatively – their mental health, their behaviour, their education level, how they understand their curriculum in the school. All factors are connected.”

Programme Officer, Save the Children

Methodology

In order to better understand how more than a decade of conflict, blockade and relative international inaction has affected children's and young people's mental health and well-being in Gaza, Save the Children conducted a survey of 300 children, young people and caregivers in five governorates across Gaza.

A total of 300 mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) questionnaires were completed by children, young people and caregivers across five governorates (North, Gaza, Middle, Khan-Younis and Rafah). Young people aged 12–17 years old (average age 14; girls n=70; boys n=77) completed 150 questionnaires, and 150 questionnaires were completed by caregivers – 30 in each governorate.²³ The sample was selected randomly among children and their caregivers based on urban, rural, camp and access-restricted areas where Save the Children had experience working with the communities.



Prior to the research, to ensure the safety and protection of participants, the Save the Children field team and partner staff received training on assessment tools, practical exercises on the use of such tools, and information on ethical considerations including confidentiality, child safeguarding and the

'do no harm' principle. The data collectors selected had already received training in psychosocial first aid, child safeguarding, counselling and child resilience, and on how to refer children with high levels of mental health distress or psychosocial support needs to specialised mental health services. The team obtained the informed consent of all participants. In addition to obtaining children's consent, parents provided consent for their children to participate.

The research was completed prior to the Palestinian mass protests that began on 30 March 2018, which have intensified violence and escalated tensions in Gaza due to the response of Israeli security forces. Given these recent developments, it is likely that the severity of distress found by this research has been further amplified. In September and October 2018, we conducted in-depth interviews with five child protection and MHPSS workers in Gaza to help contextualise the data provided by the questionnaires and also to gain a deeper insight into the likely impact of the mass protests on the mental well-being of children, young people and caregivers. We interviewed one Save the Children staff member and four staff members from Save the Children partner organisations who are working on child protection and MHPSS interventions in Gaza.

We also asked children to draw pictures and describe what makes their lives difficult in Gaza. Some of these pictures and descriptions appear in this report, along with quotes from other children and caregivers we interviewed.

This research builds on a body of earlier research undertaken by Save the Children on the impact of conflict on the mental health and well-being of children and caregivers in Syria and Iraq.²⁴

Key research findings

SOURCES OF DISTRESS

Our research found that children and families in Gaza are living in a near-constant state of distress, with little hope for an end to their ordeal. They have been subjected to the horrors of war, dire economic conditions, and have little opportunity to escape the harsh realities of life. The violence and insecurity that children have witnessed throughout this 11-year period, and their feelings of being unsafe at home, at school or in their communities, we believe, could have lasting impacts on their physical and mental health if the international community does not act.

THE FEAR OF WAR

The biggest sources of distress cited by caregivers, children and young people were the threat of conflict, the fear of bombs, and the constant insecurity caused by the unstable political situation (60%), with 78% of caregivers reporting that children and young people were most scared of bombing and aircraft sounds. Child protection and MHPSS staff also reported that children's and young people's main sources of distress were conflict-related sounds and the constant threat of war and death.

"They think tomorrow might be a war, next week might be a war. This is the thing that makes the children most scared, because in the last war in Gaza there were no homes left without an injured child or a dead child or a demolished house. This is a big problem that contributed to a psychological shock in the children."

Child protection
and MHPSS worker,
Save the Children
partner organisation

"Children in Gaza suffer from wars and shelling. There are children in other countries who feel safe while children in Gaza do not feel safe. In Gaza, there is no safety, there are children unable to continue their education because of war and shelling, other children are afraid from the sound of planes and missiles. We call for your help, there are many children who are afraid, there are children who lost their lives, they got bombed and killed – we hope that you will help us."

Firas, 11 years old (Name changed to protect identity)



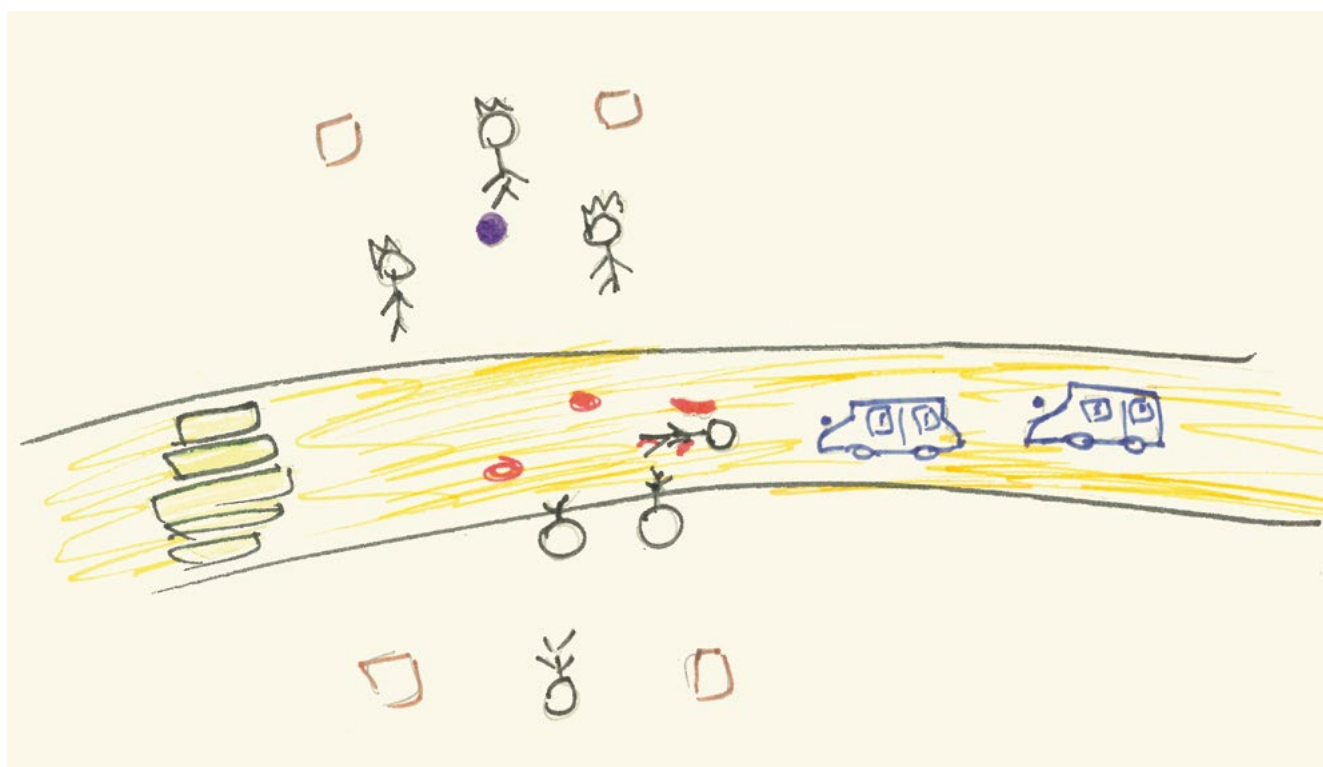
NOT FEELING SAFE

Children and young people commonly reported feeling unsafe when they are away from home and their parents; this is another key source of stress. Children and young people have a constant anxiety about being separated from their parents, with 63% never feeling safe away from them. Children also told us they felt anxious when “there was no one with them” during the night when the lights were off. Caregivers reported similar observations: 70% said children almost always feel safe at home, but 63% said children never feel safe away from their parents. Child protection and MHPSS staff also told us that children worry about the war starting while they are away from home and not with their parents. The level of stress they are experiencing in Gaza is deeply concerning, as it likely inhibits them from exploring in ways that other children, who feel safe when away from their caregivers, can do. This can have a detrimental impact on their social development and peer groups, and can be a risk factor for mental disorders later in life.

“I myself am a mother of four children. They always ask to sleep on my bed if someone says that war is coming. We do not want them to sleep next to windows. My son has started wetting his bed because he’s so afraid.”

MHPSS worker,
Save the Children
partner organisation

To add to this anxiety, lack of safety when outdoors remains a key issue in Gaza. Children reported not feeling safe when walking alone (31%), when they are more likely to be bullied or harassed, or when there are electricity cuts at night. Similarly, caregivers reported that 27% of children always feel frightened to walk alone and 27% only sometimes



Safe play areas

“My drawing shows that there is a lack of friendly spaces for children to play in, so they are forced to go to streets next to their houses, and this causes car accidents, children playing in the streets will get killed.”

Rana, 14 years old (Name changed to protect identity)

feel safe playing outside. Children also reported they are fearful of traffic accidents when they play outside, and child protection and MHPSS staff noted that cars were a key safety risk because children have limited safe spaces to play in. As one child protection worker in Khan-Younis stated, even when children are playing, “they are still at risk, they are still suffering”.

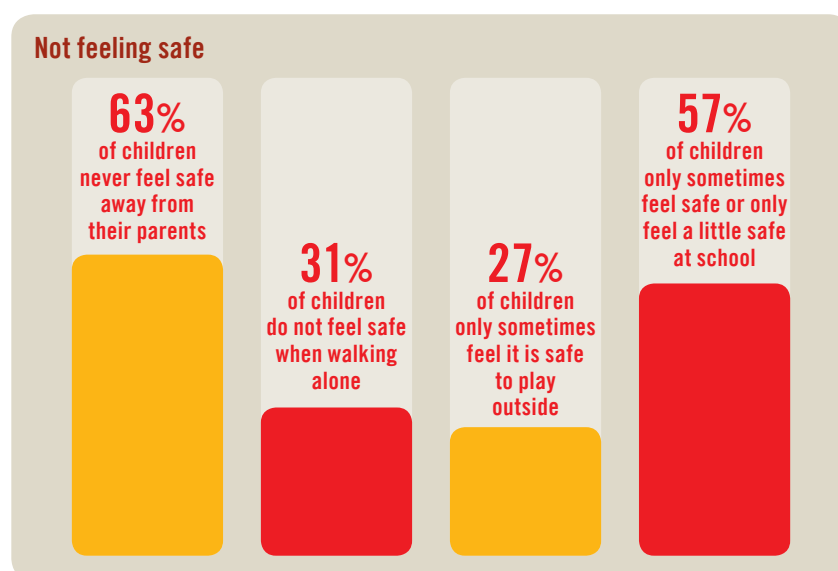
Over half of the children and young people surveyed also reported feeling only a little or sometimes safe at school (57%), with only 26% feeling safe at school most of the time. Children are likely to not feel safe at school, as school buildings have been damaged or destroyed by conflict or targeted demolitions in the past. As detailed above, children may also feel less safe at school either because they are away from their parents or due to the lack of safe spaces to play. As noted further below, children may also experience physical, psychological and sexual violence at or on the way to school.

Caregivers also reported that children and young people are regularly exposed to physical, psychological and emotional violence in the home, at school and in the community. Some caregivers highlighted sexual abuse at home and in the community (10%), with child protection and MHPSS staff also raising it as an issue of concern.

These findings are reflected in a recent child protection rapid assessment undertaken by the Child Protection Working Group in Gaza, of which Save the Children is a member.²⁵ Key informants reported that children are most at risk outside the home and on their way to school, the key risks being car accidents and environmental hazards,

such as sewage overflow. In terms of violence, key informants reported that children experience physical and psychological abuse at school by both teachers and peers. Physical and psychological violence in schools was attributed both to schools condoning such behaviours in adult–child interactions and to challenges to the education system and infrastructure, including overcrowded classrooms and high teacher–student ratios. Key informants also reported that home was not always a safe space for children due to domestic violence and corporal punishment, with tensions at home named as one of the main stressors for children. In terms of sexual violence, a third of key informants reported sexual violence as a key risk for children, with over half noting that sexual violence against children is most likely to occur when they are playing around their homes or villages, followed by incidents at school or home. Over half of key informants reported that sexual violence against children has increased, with many seeing it as part of a wider pattern of violence in communities and connected to other challenges, such as lack of adequate housing.

Taking the findings above together, it is likely that a proportion of children and young people in Gaza are suffering from physical, psychological or sexual abuse and feel unsafe at home, in their communities or at school. Feeling safe in their everyday world is an important factor in people’s well-being and mental health. Without a sense of safety, children and young people will not have the chance to recover from the heightened stress levels they are experiencing, which can have a lasting impact on their well-being and mental health.



THE IMPACTS OF THE LONG-STANDING BLOCKADE

The chronic situation brought about by the blockade has led to a deterioration in all aspects of life in Gaza over the past ten years and has taken a heavy toll on children and caregivers. Most caregivers surveyed told us that the blockade has had a significant impact on their children's lives, as well as on their own capacities to support their children. Caregivers reported that poverty brought on by the 11-year Israeli blockade and worry about how they will provide for their children's needs is their main source of stress (45%); 30% of caregivers reported that the dire economic conditions have had an impact on children and young people. In a 2015 study of children and adolescents from Gaza, economic pressures were found to negatively affect their mental health, both directly as a source of stress and indirectly through reduced resources that could buffer the impact of the adverse situation they live in.²⁶ This study found that children from families with a monthly income of \$300 or less were

POVERTY
45% of caregivers reported that their main source of stress is **POVERTY** brought on by the blockade and worry about how they will provide for their children's needs

"The first time I heard about the blockade on Gaza I was at school, we were all watching the television. It makes life very hard. There's no fuel, no electricity, no drinkable water and we cannot move freely. We are trapped here and there are no safe places to go. I want to be able to travel and live in peace like other children in world. I hope this blockade will end soon."

Salem, 13 years old (Name changed to protect identity)

found to have higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and anxiety than children from families with higher monthly incomes. The situation is likely to have worsened in the three years since this study was undertaken as economic conditions in Gaza have deteriorated further.

All of the child protection and MHPSS staff interviewed for this study noted that poverty exacerbated by the blockade has placed a huge strain on caregivers, and they have witnessed a significant increase in domestic and community violence.

The electricity crisis in Gaza is also affecting children's and young people's mental health and well-being. Lack of electricity not only causes anxiety for children but also impairs their ability to perform day-to-day activities. More than three quarters of caregivers (78%) noted that

"The situation in Gaza is very complicated. On the one hand we have the blockade, which is chronic, and on the other hand we have the war that might erupt any moment... All this has affected the mental health of children and their caregivers, and you can imagine how this affects the way in which they treat their children."

Child protection worker,
Save the Children

“Through the case management approach we go, for example, to treat a child who is being exposed to violence by the father, and we approach the father and he says ‘I know, I just can’t control myself, I know I’m harming my child’, but he’s just frustrated, nervous all the time, feeling helpless, unable to meet the needs of his family and all of this is reflected on his wife and children. And this is the case for almost everybody.”

Child protection worker,
Save the Children partner organisation

darkness when the power is turned off is another key source of stress and frustration for children and young people. They must rush to complete their homework or chores before it gets dark and lack of electricity restricts their ability to play or entertain themselves. Many also fear the dark at night, especially if they are alone.

“The worst thing that I daily face is the power outages, there’s never any electricity when I come back home from school and want to watch television. This also forces me to do my homework before the sunset. All these things make me really angry.”

Salem, 13 years old (Name changed to protect identity)

78% of caregivers reported that
for children and young people
darkness
when power is turned off
is a source of
stress and frustration

Child protection and MHPSS staff noted that due to lack of livelihood opportunities, they see more parents struggling to provide their children with good food, access to health and medical services, and emotional support. They also reported an increase in caregivers resorting to negative coping strategies, including early marriage, child labour and school drop-out, with one child protection worker noting these issues were a sign of “a society collapsing”.

Numerous studies show that these types of daily stressors can contribute to levels of distress and clinical disorder that equal or exceed that of exposure to direct war.²⁷

“We are witnessing several phenomena that we never saw before amongst children in Gaza – hundreds of children at traffic lights, begging on the streets, trying to sell chewing gum, or even to clean your car just to get one Shekel. This never happened in Gaza before – three years ago, or up to 2014, you could count five to 10 children doing this and now you can count hundreds of them.”

Child protection worker,
Save the Children
partner organisation

SIGNS OF DISTRESS

The impact of living in a state of instability as described above – war, violence, loss of loved ones, economic hardship – as well as the inability to escape this situation, all have a serious and detrimental impact on a child's mental and physical well-being, according to Save the Children's survey findings.

EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL CHANGES

When we asked children and young people how they feel living day to day with these stressors, they reported experiencing a range of different emotions. The impact of the conflict has clearly taken a toll on children's emotional well-being as they reported feelings of depression (62%) and grief (55%). The lack of a sense of safety is also clearly leaving them distressed, as half of children said they suffered from persistent feelings of fear. A majority of children also reported feeling tense (58%) and nervous (55%), particularly boys.

Children's behaviours are important indicators of their psychosocial well-being and our research shows that children's emotional distress is accompanied by significant behavioural changes and physical symptoms. When we asked children how they react when they feel difficult emotions, almost all reported that they scream or become angry (86%). Many caregivers also reported that children's fear, anxiety and tension often lead to aggressive behaviour.

“There have been drastic changes in children's behaviour in the recent years in Gaza, and we see these changes on a daily basis.”

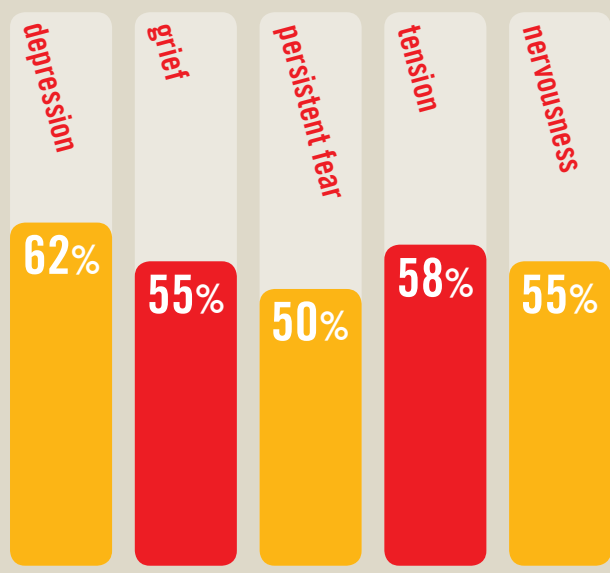
Child protection worker,
Save the Children

When we asked caregivers if they had noticed an increase in different types of behaviours in children and young people over the past few years, most caregivers reported that children were more nervous (93%), they regularly experienced nightmares (63%), had difficulty sleeping (68%) and frequently wet the bed (53%). This lack of sleep can have a harmful impact on children's physical and mental health and increase the risk of psychiatric disorders such as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder and attention deficit disorder (ADHD),²⁸ as well as a range of long-term health problems including obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and even early death.²⁹

Almost half of the children reported illnesses, with 49% feeling sick some or a lot of the time. Nearly half of the caregivers reported that children lost the ability to speak (42%). Child protection and MHPSS staff also reported that children often have speech problems, which are serious issues requiring further investigation. Prolonged adversity, such as

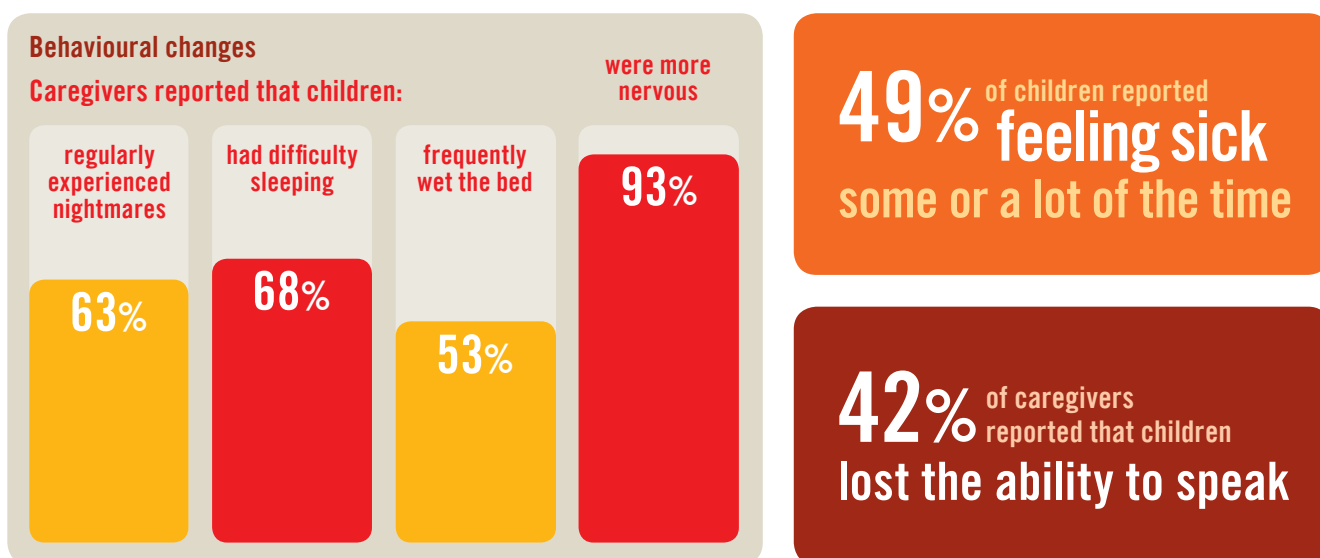
Emotional well-being

Children and young people reported feelings of:



“The war in 2014 had a very strong impact on [my son]. Before, he did not have any issues at all, but after, he started bedwetting, biting his nails and showing many signs of anxiety. He has become very sensitive to loud sounds, and he gets easily uncomfortable and anxious, eg, when there are fireworks. It does not matter that he knows it is just fireworks, he still covers his ears in a way that expresses a lot of fear.”

Leila, mother (Name changed
to protect identity)



“I was only 10 years old when the war broke out in 2014. I was so afraid of the shelling. I remember going to my mother to sleep next to her, because I had horrible nightmares almost every night.”

Deema, 15 years old (Name changed to protect identity)

that which children in Gaza have been exposed to for the past 11 years, can have severe impacts on a child’s cognitive development, learning and memory. Therefore, the speech impairments that caregivers and staff are reporting corroborate our deep concern that children are vulnerable to, if not already experiencing, the effects of toxic stress.

Child protection and MHPSS staff in Gaza reported the same significant changes in children’s and young people’s behaviour. They noted that many children they work with have difficulty sleeping and suffer from nightmares, hyperactivity, anxiety and bedwetting. Child protection and MHPSS staff in Gaza also reported that children can be either very shy and withdrawn, or aggressive, angry and verbally abusive. They have also witnessed an increase in children and young people being more violent towards each other.

Many of the behavioural and emotional changes that children in Gaza are reporting suggest that the impacts of living in an ongoing difficult environment are setting in. Prolonged exposure to sources of stress make them vulnerable to toxic stress. Toxic stress is defined as the ‘most dangerous form of stress response’ that can occur when children

experience strong, frequent or prolonged adversity without adequate adult support.³⁰ The continuous activation of children’s toxic stress responses, and multiple causes of this stress, can have a life-long impact on their mental and physical health, including their cognitive, socioemotional and physical development.³¹ As discussed below, however, these impacts are not inevitable if children have supportive relationships with caring adults early in their lives.

“We work in 16 main centres across Gaza and there are 10–20 psychological problems in every centre that vary between bedwetting or pronunciation problems. Many caregivers come to us worried about these new behaviours.”

Child protection worker,
Save the Children

AN ABNORMAL SITUATION

When we explored three different domains with children and caregivers – emotional, conduct and relationships with peers – what they told us is of great concern. On average, the ranges in which they reported in these areas all fell within the high or ‘abnormal’ level, meaning that if assessed by a professional, they would most likely be given a mental health diagnosis. It is likely that children and young people have reported in the high or abnormal range due to a range of factors:

- the protracted nature of the situation in Gaza
- the considerable length of time they have been exposed to conflict-related stressors with diminished ability to receive support (which could further deteriorate)
- the exacerbating impacts of the blockade and energy crisis
- the inability of most children and families to escape their situation due to restrictions on their movements, leaving them trapped inside Gaza with no hope in sight.

While the levels of emotional and behavioural responses and distress that children and young people in Gaza experience are worrying, it is important to note that many of their responses are quite normal under the circumstances. Eleven years on from the start of the blockade, children say they experience fear, sadness and anger. For instance, they feel ‘angry’ when the electricity is cut, or are fearful of losing their loved ones if another war was to start. These are typical responses that anyone might have in such circumstances, and are even more understandable in the abnormal context in which children and young people in Gaza are living. If children were displaying no emotional reactions,

and appearing numb or robotic, this would mean they were desensitised to the violence around them or had normalised their situation.

Furthermore, the research also highlighted the fact that children are not displaying only negative emotions, with most feeling happy (71%), confident (72%) and energetic (68%) some or a lot of the time. The fact that children and young people in Gaza are still displaying positive emotions in their current circumstances suggests there are strong protective factors at play, such as support from family and friends or access to school.

FEELING SUPPORTED BY FAMILY AND FRIENDS

As discussed above, when children live in stressful and protracted difficult situations, it is essential for their mental health that they have someone to turn to for support, either at home or at school. The presence of a safe and supportive figure in their lives serves as a protective factor against the distressing impacts of conflict and war.

Importantly, most children and young people in Gaza said they felt safe at home (71%) and that they could turn to families and friends for support.

Most children and young people surveyed felt supported by the people around them: 91% felt their parents were able to take care of them; 77% felt supported by their siblings and 66% by friends. When children and young people are afraid or sad, 60% turn to their family for support, 89% have good relationships with their parents, and 43% reported playing with their siblings to help them feel better.

Positive emotions

Children reported feeling, some or a lot of the time:

happy

71%

confident

72%

energetic

68%

Safety and support

Children and young people reported feeling:

safe at home

71%

that their parents were able to take care of them

91%

supported by their siblings

77%

supported by their friends

66%

Children and young people reported having good relationships with the people around them:

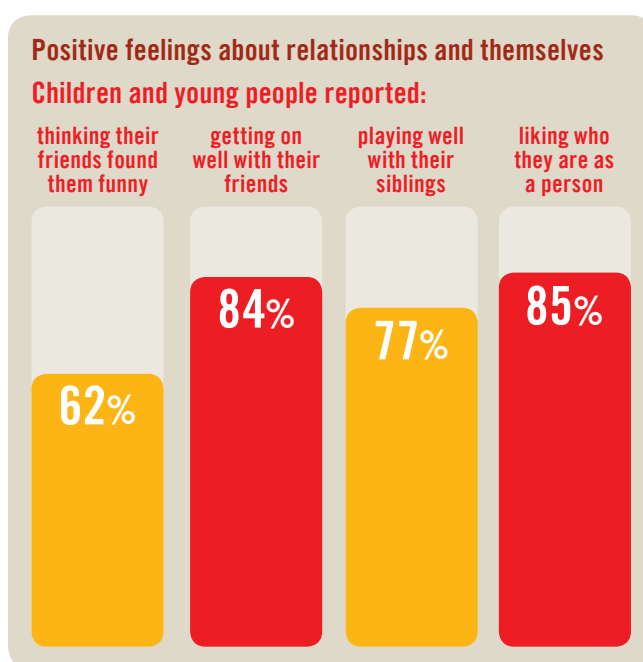
- 62% thought their friends found them funny
- 84% said they got on well with their friends
- 77% reported that they play well with their siblings
- 85% like who they are as a person.

Feeling positive and connected in relationships is an important protective factor for well-being and mental health. On the whole, children and young people in Gaza reported that the family unit is a strong and positive experience for them. Caregivers also recognised that children and young people are likely to turn to families and friends for support.

The presence and strength of the family unit and home environment is an important protective factor for children's and young people's mental health in Gaza. While children and young people live with an ever-present fear that the situation could quickly worsen and their caregivers and siblings could be killed or seriously injured, as in the 2014 conflict, families have not been torn apart to the same extent as families in other places with active conflict and significant displacement, such as in Syria and Iraq.³² As found in our research with conflict-affected children in Syria and Iraq, the wholesale destruction of a child's immediate family unit has a devastating impact on their mental health and puts them at acute risk of developing serious and life-changing conditions, such as toxic stress and other mental and physical illnesses.

If the situation escalates in Gaza and caregivers are less able to support children and young people, the tables could quickly turn and they will be at high risk of developing long-lasting mental health and psychosocial difficulties.³³ The loss or injury of a mother or father, a sibling or best friend could erode what little sense of security they have left and have a devastating impact on their short- and long-term mental health.

As noted by child protection and MHPSS staff interviewed for this study, caregivers' capacity to support their children is already being pushed to the limit by the blockade and chronic poverty, and would most likely be utterly devastated in the event of another conflict. When our team asked caregivers how they were feeling, the majority said they were unhappy (71%), they were not able to overcome their own difficulties (80%), they had lost confidence in themselves (85%) and they often felt worthless as a person (75%). Considering that most



children and young people said their caregivers are supportive, caregivers must be working very hard to provide a safe and protective space at home under considerable strain. Concrete steps need to be taken now to relieve the pressures on caregivers so they can continue to support their children if the situation should worsen. In addition to ending the blockade and improving economic conditions for caregivers, they are likely to also need MHPSS support.

“The things the adults are going through all have an impact on how they treat children. Here at Tamer Institute we have sessions called ‘helping the helpers’ targeting the caregivers because they also need psychological support. Because they need to relax and be calm and to be ready to deal with children. And so, it’s very important to care about the caregivers. Because the situation is very difficult for the caregivers and that negatively affects children.”

**Child protection worker,
Save the Children
partner organisation**

HOW CHILDREN ARE COPING

When we asked children and young people in Gaza how they deal with the problems and difficult situations they face, they reported using a range of methods to help them cope.

In times of crisis, knowing how to effectively regulate emotions can help children maintain good mental health and well-being in the face of adversity. This is particularly true when they have supportive adults in their lives to help them manage the difficult emotions that come as a natural response to adversity.

Encouragingly, many children reported using positive coping strategies such as turning to family and friends for support, using techniques like praying to calm themselves down, and trying to look at the positive side of the problem or how to solve or accept it.

Overall, children's and young people's responses indicated high levels of resilience and positive thinking. Despite all they have been through, most young people thought they were doing well (88%), could come up with ways to solve their problems (96%) or get the things out of life that are most important to them (95%), and could find ways to solve problems even when others want to quit (88%).

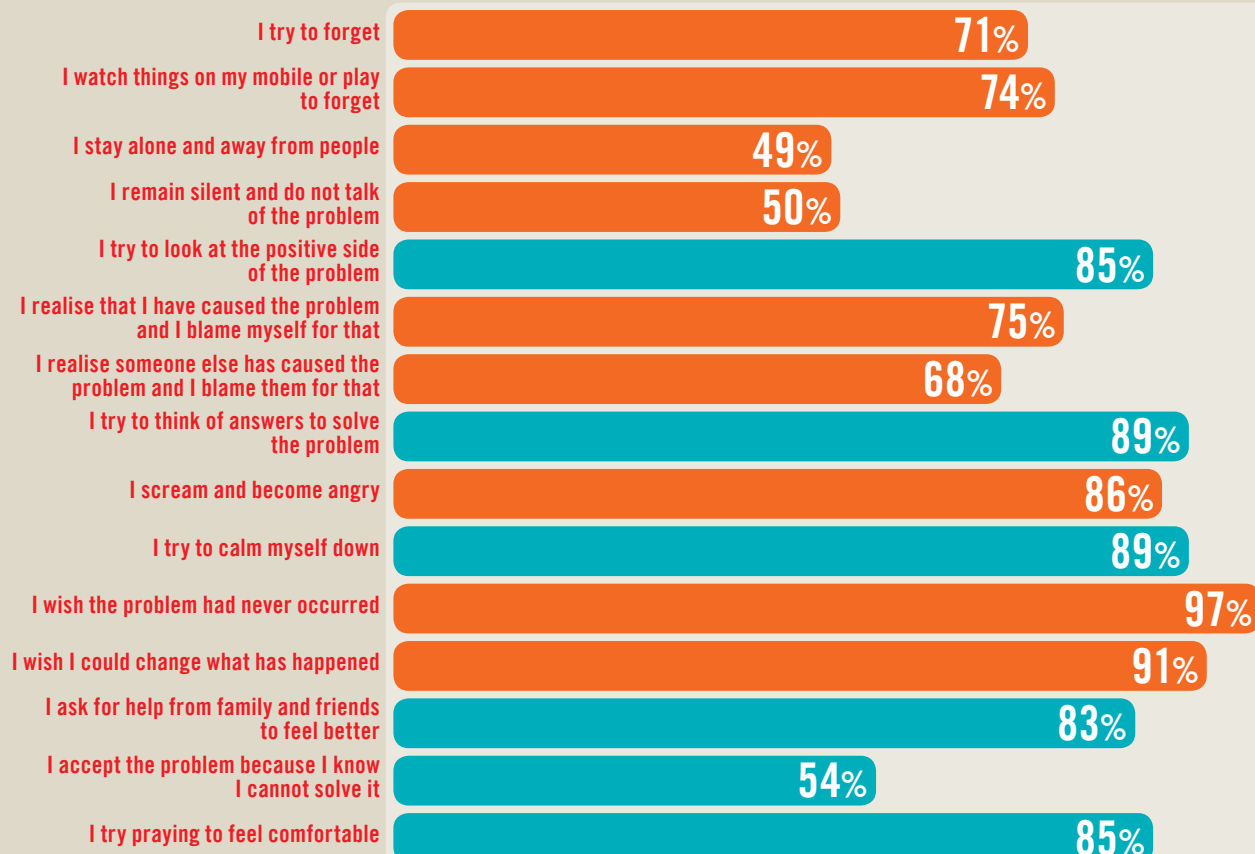
However, a high percentage of children also reported using other coping strategies, such as avoidance, to manage their difficulties. Some of these strategies include trying to forget (71%) and distracting themselves through play or using their mobile phone (74%). Half of all children interviewed said they tried to stay away from people or remain silent and not talk about issues. Many children said they blamed themselves or others for the problem and wished it had never occurred or that they could change what had happened. It is important to notice when children use unhelpful coping strategies, as it can negatively affect their mental health in the long term. In several studies of children and young people who have experienced conflict or other traumatic events, including children in Gaza, it was found that emotional regulation strategies such as denial, rumination, blaming others, emotion and thought suppression, and avoidance can be dysfunctional and can put children at higher risk of PTSD, depression and psychological distress.³⁴



Political conflicts, such as the conflict in Gaza, have been found to increase dysfunctional coping strategies and lead to aggressive and non-prosocial responses.³⁵ For example, some child protection and MHPSS staff in Gaza reported that children and young people may be participating in the mass protests due to their state of despair about the current situation, but because of the Israeli military's response to the protests, they are putting themselves at risk of injury or death. Worryingly, some child protection and MHPSS staff interviewed also noted that some of the children and young people they work with take drugs to cope and that youth suicide rates are high and often underreported. Drug abuse was also reported as a key issue of concern in the 2018 CPRA, with 26% of key informants reporting substance abuse as a coping mechanism used by children under stress.³⁶ In relation to suicide, a recent study of Palestinian middle-school students living in Gaza and the West Bank, as well as in UNRWA camps in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, found the rate of suicidal thinking in young Palestinians surveyed was higher (at 25.6%) than that found in most other studies of adolescents around the world or in any other country in the Middle East that participated in the same survey (which had suicidal thinking rates ranging from 15.6% to 23.7%).³⁷

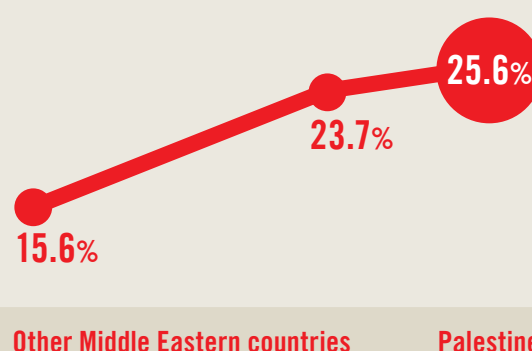
Children's and young people's coping strategies

Positive coping strategies



Overall, our research suggests that most children in Gaza are trying to find positive ways to cope with their adverse circumstances, which shows they have not given up, and their responses indicate they still have hope in a better future. However, while children's resilience may be strong and it may seem they are coping, they are nevertheless displaying emotions and behaviours that suggest they are reaching a critical point and are not getting enough attention. Considering this, and the issues child protection and MHPSS staff have raised, it is clear that children are in dire need of support to help them overcome adversity and safeguard them from further distress and psychosocial harm.

Without this support, children and young people in Gaza may exhaust their strategies to cope with emotional distress and lose hope about feeling better, which will cause their mental health to

Rates of suicidal thinking among adolescents³⁷

deteriorate sharply. It is therefore important to act now to ensure their mental well-being is better supported and their current levels of resilience and belief in a positive future bolstered.

There is still hope – what needs to be done to support Gaza's children

Overall, the key finding of this research – that in February 2018 children and young people were reporting behaviour consistent with severe distress – is deeply worrying, especially as the situation in Gaza has worsened since then.

Considering that the 2014 conflict will still be fresh in the minds of many children and young people, and many will have seen family members and friends injured or killed in the mass protests, they are likely to harbour anxieties that it could all happen again and may be worried about the impact that could have on them and their families. If there is a new Gaza conflict, the overriding state for most children will likely be toxic stress, especially if their families have exhausted their coping strategies and are less able to support them.

These findings put into stark relief the urgent and immediate need to take targeted action to improve the mental well-being of children and young people in Gaza before their situation worsens. However, as also outlined in this report, while the findings of this research suggest there is a child mental health crisis in Gaza, all hope is not lost. There are two important factors that have held children and young people back from the edge: their responses suggest they have some level of resilience and experience a strong sense of support when they are with their families. This means that every effort must be made to build on that resilience, to ensure caregivers are supported to keep their families strong, and to immediately address the psychosocial distress children and young people are already experiencing.

Given the levels of insecurity that children in Gaza are reporting, it is also essential that the international community prioritise the creation of safe places for children to play and feel safe. This is important to the development and well-being of children in any context, but even more so given the extreme level of distress that children in Gaza

continue to live in. Without safe areas to explore and play in, children will have few outlets to reduce their stress levels, which would have a detrimental impact on their mental and physical well-being.

Ensuring that children and young people feel safer at school is key. If school is a safe space, it can provide children and young people with a refuge from repeated stressors. By simply being in a safe school environment, children and young people can take a break from their worries and do things they enjoy and which will benefit their future, for example, learning and playing. While in the classroom, children and young people can also be supported to deal with their problems by learning positive ways to cope with their situations and manage their emotions. Being in school also provides a focus and helps foster a sense of purpose and hope for the future, particularly when education systems have the support in place for staff to create a nurturing environment in which children can learn. However, most children in our study reported feeling safe at school only a little or some of the time; therefore, increased efforts are needed to ensure children in Gaza feel safer at school and that schools are indeed true zones of peace. Steps also need to be taken to ensure children feel safe outside their homes and on their way to and from school and have safe play areas, as many reported being bullied and harassed and are at high risk of accidents when on the street.

Considering the key finding of this research – that many children and young people are currently at high risk of developing more serious and longer-term mental issues, the international community must prioritise and invest in specific

interventions to help children and young people overcome underlying mental health issues and safeguard them from further harm. Children and young people must be able to access appropriate treatment and support, whether that be at home, at school or through more specialised services.

Ultimately, however, improving the overall situation in Gaza will be critical to securing the long-term mental well-being of children, young people and caregivers. The international

community must reinvigorate their engagement to press for an immediate end to the blockade of Gaza, and for Palestinian reconciliation as an urgent requirement to alter the status quo and allow for the recovery of Gaza. All parties have duties and responsibilities to protect civilians in Gaza and Israel and resume negotiations to advance the goal of a just and sustainable peace in line with previous agreements, relevant UN resolutions and international law.



PHOTO © MOHAMED NAYEF/SAVE THE CHILDREN

“I hope that the blockade ends without any more wars, I don’t want to be afraid again. I wish there were jobs for everyone and no more poverty. I want to finish my studies to become a doctor and treat people. I want to help my people.”

Deema, 15 years old (Name changed to protect identity)

Two of Save the Children's projects in Gaza

Providing rapid MHPSS support to conflict- and violence-affected children

Save the Children's child protection in emergencies project aims to contribute to timely and efficient responses to child protection risks and violations during emergencies through supporting strong and cohesive child response mechanisms. The project targets boys and girls from different socioeconomic backgrounds, especially the most marginalised, with a focus on conflict- and violence-affected communities.

The project supports the establishment of psychosocial support emergency teams (under the child protection and MHPSS working groups in Gaza called Governorate Protection Focal Points) to conduct emergency visits to conflict- or violence-affected children, conduct rapid assessments, provide psychosocial first aid within 72 hours of each incident, and refer cases to specialised service providers. In addition, affected children are referred to group counselling sessions

based on child resilience methodology, a non-clinical psychosocial and protection methodology that focuses on children's positive coping and resilience as well as promoting mental well-being. Given the acute humanitarian context in Gaza, group counselling sessions are complemented by individual counselling to children. The project further builds the capacity of child protection and MHPSS professionals in providing high-quality MHPSS services. Moreover, the project equips parents and community caregivers with skills, knowledge and resources as frontline responders to child protection risks in emergency and non-emergency contexts. The project also contributes to strengthening the Child Protection Community-Based Mechanism through mobilising and training child protection committees to enable them to support child protection responses.

Helping families and communities support vulnerable children in Gaza

This project aims to increase individual, family and community capacities and preparedness to support vulnerable children's well-being and resilience. The project addresses children's mental and physical well-being in an integrated approach at individual, family, community and national levels.

First, the project aims to ensure that vulnerable children have improved access to high-quality psychosocial support through the provision of individual counselling sessions and case management, while at the same time aiming to build children's long-term resilience skills through structured resilience sessions and by providing recreational activities, safe play areas and child-friendly spaces. Second, working with

parents and caregivers to improve their competence to support the mental well-being of their children, accompanied by the introduction of positive parenting and discipline techniques. Third, the project includes a set of activities focused on strengthening communities to reduce their vulnerabilities and improve their preparedness and capacity to respond to future emergencies. Fourth, systemic violations against Palestinian children are largely predictable, and therefore the project includes building the capacity of local partners and community-based organisations in preparedness, supporting children affected by emergencies, and linking marginalised communities with the national referral systems, including community centres.

Recommendations for action

Children and young people in Gaza have lived through more than a decade of conflict and deprivation. Their childhoods have been marred by three major wars and they have repeatedly experienced or witnessed violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.

Our study has shown that even when there is a break in active conflict, children still live in constant fear that tomorrow war will come again and they feel repressed on a daily basis by the longstanding blockade and chronic energy crisis. This protracted situation has left children and young people with little hope that things will change and with the belief that, as it has been for their parents, this will be their harsh and unchanging reality for the foreseeable future. It is no surprise that after more than a decade of living like this, children and young people in Gaza are on the brink of a mental health crisis. While the situation in Gaza has the potential to permanently damage an entire generation of Palestinian children, such an outcome is not inevitable. As this research shows, there are ways to help children and young people buffer the worst of their situation – but there is no time to lose to bring them back from the brink.

As a first key step, the international community must acknowledge the grievous harm that has been done to Gaza's children over the past decade and finally take decisive action.

Save the Children urgently calls for the following:

DUTY BEARERS

- Take urgent steps to protect children and families in both Gaza and Israel from physical and psychological harm by ending the violence, maintaining law and order in line with international humanitarian and human rights law, including the right to peaceful assembly, and ensuring the current situation in Gaza does not escalate into full-blown conflict.
- Resume negotiations to find a durable and just solution to the crisis and agree on a lasting ceasefire. This includes putting an end to the long-standing blockade of Gaza, addressing

the electricity crisis, and resolving the internal Palestinian divide, which are all essential steps to establishing durable peace, reconstruction, recovery and long-term sustainability in Gaza.

- The government of Israel to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration and, along with the Palestinian Authority and the de facto authority in Gaza, fully operationalise and implement the Guidelines on Military Use of Schools and Universities in Armed Conflict³⁸ by minimising the use of school or university buildings for military purposes.

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- Take urgent steps to prevent the situation in Gaza from deteriorating, by calling on parties to the conflict to protect civilians in Gaza and Israel and resume negotiations to advance the goal of a just and sustainable peace in line with previous agreements, relevant UN resolutions and international law.
- Reinvigorate its engagement to press for an immediate end to the blockade of Gaza and for Palestinian reconciliation as immediate requirements to alter the status quo and allow for the recovery of Gaza.

DONORS

- Fully fund the 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for the occupied Palestinian territory to: alleviate the urgent daily needs of almost two million people in Gaza; and in particular to support services to meet mental health and psychosocial needs as a matter of immediate and urgent priority. Donors are also urged to step in and help the United Nations Relief and Works Agency meet its acute funding shortfall so it can continue to implement its crucial services.

- Recognise the importance of and fully fund mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for children, young people and their caregivers in Gaza, including services and programming that:
 - provide specialist care and interventions in schools, in the community or at home depending on children's and young people's needs;
 - strengthen children's and young people's resilience and positive coping strategies;
 - enhance children's protective environments by creating more safe spaces for children and young people, including safer schools, play areas and travel routes, addressing all forms of violence at home, at school and in the community, and strengthening child protection systems and networks;
 - assist caregivers to maintain strong, supportive and protective family units for children by supporting the mental health and well-being of caregivers and relieving the key stressors and daily challenges they face, including the economic pressures placed on them by the blockade.
- Donors must also support humanitarian agencies, local partners and civil society organisations to implement and scale up child protection and MHPSS programming and services in Gaza, as well as to strengthen government child protection and MHPSS capacity and services.

HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES WORKING IN GAZA

- Prioritise MHPSS for children, young people and caregivers in all aspects of their programming and contribute to collective efforts to meet the overwhelming mental health and child protection needs of children, young people and caregivers, and build greater community resilience and strong family units.
- Invest in strengthening the capacity of local organisations to provide specialised and non-specialised MHPSS programming and services and protective environments for children.
- Call for greater investment and prioritisation of MHPSS and child protection in Gaza as part of the HRP 2019, and urge the international community, including parties to the conflict, to bring an end to the violence and the blockade and broker a lasting peace.

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A DECADE OF DISTRESS

The harsh and unchanging reality for children living in the Gaza Strip

“What kind of future can you expect for these children? It’s a very dark future. The difficult situation, the blockade, the lack of electricity, the economic situation. This all has a negative effect on the mental health of children. And we’ll see the results of this when they grow up and become adults.”

Programme Officer, Save the Children

Children and young people in Gaza live in economic hardship, under the threat of further conflict and with little opportunity of escape.

This report describes a research project undertaken in 2018, led by Save the Children’s mental health professionals, that aimed to better understand how these conditions have affected children’s and young people’s mental health and well-being.

The survey of 300 children, young people and caregivers in five governorates across Gaza revealed high levels of severe emotional distress, with many children and young people living in fear and having nightmares every time they slept. A key finding of the research is that while children and young people in Gaza are resilient, they are vulnerable to toxic stress and are at high risk of developing serious and long-term mental health issues.

More positively, a significant number of children and young people reported that their families are a key source of support in their current circumstances, and it is this that is holding them back from the brink of a mental health crisis. But caregivers say their capacity to support their children is being pushed to the limits by the blockade, chronic poverty and insecurity, and would most likely be utterly destroyed in the event of another conflict.

There is however still hope, and the report makes a number of recommendations for actions to be taken urgently by duty bearers, the international community, donors and humanitarian agencies working in Gaza.

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