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EDITORIAL



## Increasing understanding for syrian refugee children with empirical evidence

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### ABSTRACT

Today, Syrians represent the largest refugee group in the world. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2012, more than 5.2 million Syrians have fled the country as refugees, and about half of these are children. Most of the Syrian refugees are currently living in neighboring countries, with Turkey hosting the largest group with numbers above 3.2 million as of November 2017. Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq combined host about 2 million Syrian refugees. While the Syrian crisis, deservedly, has been covered in the news and debated in terms of its effects internationally, we lack empirical evidence of how this crisis is affecting children and families. This special issue is designed to begin to address this important gap in the literature with five new empirical studies on Syrian refugee children, focusing on their psychological and educational needs.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### Brief historical context

In order to understand the ongoing crisis in Syria, one has to look at the history of the region. Syria is a very diverse country in ethnicity and religion, comprised of Sunnis, Alawites, the Druze, Christians and Kurds. The tensions among these groups have deep historical roots but the more recent history of colonialism in the region further exacerbated unrest in the area. Modern Syria was built after years of political infighting that ended in 1971 when Hafez al-Assad took power. He was elected for a 7-year term but like several other leaders in the region, he was transformed into a dictator and remained in power until his death in 2000. Then he was succeeded by his son, Bashar. Western educated, Bashar was expected to open the country to democracy but that dream faded away with the first anti-government protests in March 2011. The government crackdown that followed pushed more than 5000 civilians into Lebanon, marking the start of the Syrian refugee crisis.

A small demonstration of opposition demanding the release of political prisoners turned into a massive popular uprising after the military opened fire on the demonstrators. In June, 2011 President Bashar al-Assad ordered the army to enter the town of Jisr al-Shughour, near the Turkish border. This initiated the second major exodus of Syrian refugees, with more than 10,000 Syrians fleeing to Turkey. As the war as raged on, the number of refugees has been increasing steadily, reaching hundreds of thousands by the end of 2011, nearly 500,000

by the end of 2012, and by the end of 2013, The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recorded 2.3 million registered Syrian refugees. Since then, the number of Syrian refugees has reached a record of 5.2 million as of August 2017. In addition to the more than 5 million Syrians who live outside of the country as refugees, an equal number of people are displaced internally, making half the population of the country displaced overall. There currently are more refugees coming out of Syria than any other nation (UNCHR, 2016), and estimates from early 2017 suggest that one in four Syrian children have fled Syria. Despite several international calls for action, only a small percentage of Syrian refugees are settled in Europe or North America. Germany has taken in the largest number of Syrians of any nation outside the Middle East, a number that reached 200,000 in 2016. Canada, the US, and several other developed countries have increased the number of refugees they will accept through resettlement programs, family reunification programs, emergency scholarship programs, and humanitarian admission programs. With the election of Trump, however, the US put up several barriers to accepting new refugees from Syria.

Despite the fact that the Syrian crisis began more than 5 years ago and despite the fact that it affects millions of people and many countries, our understanding of the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis on human development based on empirical research is still rather limited. . There are several news stories that outline and document the suffering and trauma experienced by adults and children before fleeing, and the scarce resources and services within refugee camps. From these reports it is clear that Syrians refugee children in particular are at very high risk for mental health problems and educational difficulties. What is lacking, however, is empirical evidence that goes beyond news reports. Governments, civil society and donors desperately need more research to assess the unique challenges and needs of Syrian refugee children in order to move beyond simply documenting the crisis. The current special issue is designed to do just that.

## Conceptual framework

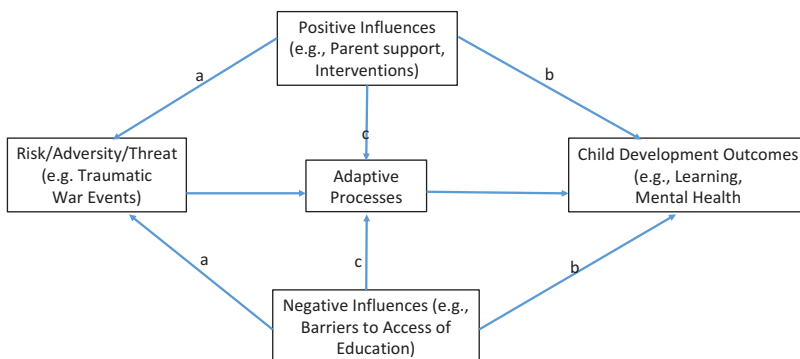
There are many and complex risks to Syrian refugee children's development. Most prominently, these include exposure to armed conflict, political violence, forced displacement from home and/or community, and material and economic deprivation. These adversities affect people of all ages but particularly children. The systems that underlie their holistic development (cognition/language, physical/health, social/emotional) are especially open to influence during childhood. In addition, children depend on parents, families and institutions for protection and nurturance during this formative period of life. Also, children have less power to command needed resources and to make critical decisions. For these and other reasons, children should be at the center of our concerns about the Syrian War and the consequent Syrian refugee crisis.

The history of modern studies of the effects of war on children date back to World War II and the pioneering works of Anna Freud and John Bowlby in the UK. Then, as now, basic dilemmas faced society: is it better to keep children and their families in their home communities but be exposed to greater physical danger? Or is it better to separate children and their families from their home communities, facilitate moves to safer environs, but expose them to uncertain legal status and certain forms of deprivation?

Over the last 60 years, studies of the influence of war and its cofactors (displacement, deprivation, etc.) have become more interdisciplinary: not the purview of child psychologists and psychiatrists alone, but also scholars in public health, education, sociology, political science and other disciplines. Such studies have also become more systematic (e.g. larger and more representative samples, more multivariate and multi-level, and more attentive to causal inference). A third trend over the last six decades is for studies to strive to be more informative to practitioners and policymakers, helping them to answer key questions about interventions for children affected by conflict: what works? for whom? how? under what circumstances?

The papers in this special issue reflect some of these trends. The field today is heavily influenced by a ‘risk and resilience’ framework, one that is attuned to the specific social–ecological contexts in which and the developmental processes through which exposure to war and its related adversities impacts children’s present functioning and potential futures (Aber et al., 2017; Cummings, Merrilees, Taylor, & Mondì, 2017; Masten & Narayan, 2012; Yoshikawa, Wuermli, & Aber, *in press*). The larger field of risk and resilience research, especially as applied to children in crisis contexts, works from a framework that can be summarized in Figure 1. Risks (like exposure to war and related events) are defined as factors that increase the probability of a bad developmental outcome (like low achievement in reading or math, or like depression). Other factors can influence how risks affect outcomes by (a) increasing or reducing risks, (b) directly influencing development (positively or negatively) and (c) moderating the influence of the risk on development.

The calls for such theoretical frameworks, robust samples and multivariate and multilevel designs needed to study such a complex phenomenon are beginning to be heard. And the works reported in this special issue – by Turkish research teams with Syrian refugee populations in isolated settlements in the South and in urban communities as well – are early answers to these calls. In addition to the basic descriptive and pilot intervention research presented here, there is a growing interest in and commitment to collaborative efforts – across developmental and intervention scientists, across countries and across regions. (For instance, a network of research/practice partnerships is forming to develop more reliable, valid and feasible measures.)



**Fig. 1.** Adaptation of a Risk and Resilience Framework to the Study of Children Exposed to the Syrian War.

## In this special issue

The five papers presented in this special section of *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, are among the very first to emerge from the Syrian War and Refugee Crisis. They are sentinel pieces, showing that good research can be done even in the harshest of situations. They also pose the challenge to strengthen this work to be as useful to children, youth, families and frontline practitioners and policy-makers as possible. We thank these researchers for showing the way; and we thank *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies* for providing us this opportunity to assemble this work.

Specifically, this special issue came about after a conference at Bahçeşehir University in Istanbul, Turkey, on the Syrian refugee crisis. The editors invited several scholars who work on empirical projects focusing on the Syrian refugee crisis. As you will see the articles represent diversity both in terms of discipline and focus. The five articles accepted for this special issue focus on the psychological implications of the war (Oppedal, Ozer, & Sirin, [this issue](#); Ozer, Oppedal, Sirin, & Ergun, [this issue](#)), the educational implications (Uyan-Semerci, et al., [this issue](#)) and implications for parents (El-Khani, Ullph, Peters, & Calam, [this issue](#)) as well as an innovative intervention that addresses both psychological and educational needs of the children (Sirin, Plass, Homer, & Vatanartiran, [this issue](#)). The articles also represent diversity in terms of methods that the authors utilized, ranging from field surveys (Oppedal et al., [this issue](#); Uyan-Semerci et al., [this issue](#)), to qualitative methods (Al-Khani et al., [this issue](#); Ozer et al., [this issue](#)), to an experimental intervention (Sirin et al., [this issue](#)). All the studies on Syrian refugees represented in this special issue were conducted in Turkey, with one addition of data gathered in Syria for comparative purposes (Al-Khani et al., [this issue](#)).

Oppedal et al.'s field study on Syrian children in a Turkish camp documents the nature and depth of the traumatic experiences and the implications in terms of mental health symptoms, such as depression. Specifically with quantitative data gathered from 285 young children ( $M = 12.5$  years old,  $SD = 1.28$ ). The authors found that older girls reported more depressive symptoms than boys, but there was no gender difference for the younger cohort. There was also some evidence of a dose-response association between the numbers of traumatic events and depression. The authors also found strong evidence for social support as a protective factor for children. Social support reduces some of the negative effects traumatic experiences have on children's mental health outcomes. These findings should give hope to those who advocate for services that are geared toward providing better social support networks for refugee children.

Ozer et al., working with the same sample of children as Oppedal et al., provide a nuanced, rich look into children's understanding of war and peace. In a comparative design, she provides a creative analysis of Syrian refugee children's drawings of peace and war, comparing the drawings of those who have been exposed to war to Turkish children who have not. Results, as expected, showed that war exposure had an *effect on children's conceptualization of war and peace*. Those who were exposed to war illustrated more concrete aspects of the concepts compared to their nonexposed peers. Likewise, as expected (Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1998), boys focused more on concrete aspects of war, while girls focused more on the negative consequences of war. Null findings in this study are also noteworthy. Age, for instance, did not seem to explain much variation on these results. Similarly, contrary to the authors' expectations, there

was no significant difference between the two cohorts in terms of war vs. peace emphasis. Together, these findings, through the children's drawings, give us a rare look into children's conceptualization of war and peace.

Al-Kham et al.'s qualitative inquiry was designed to investigate the parenting needs of Syrian parents who had recently fled conflict and were residing in refugee camps and shelters in Syria and Turkey. Through interviews and focus groups with parents and support workers in refugee camps, the authors found three areas of acute need: parents' desire for parenting advice and actively seeking support; the value of discussing parenting issues, and perceived barriers to accessing support. It is clear that refugee parents were very interested in receiving parenting support and they made active attempts to acquire information. Any future program designed to serve the needs of this at risk population should pay attention to these results. More importantly, these results demonstrate the importance of having parents be active participants in the conversations about what types of help they need and what they want to learn from research projects, interventions, or policies for refugee families in pre-resettlement contexts.

Uyan-Semerici et al., shifts our focus to access to education for Syrian refugee children with rich data gathered from 541 households in Turkey. The results paint a troubling picture. More than half of the school-age children are not currently in school. The authors identified a set of financial and structural barriers that put refugee children at risk for school dropout or failure to enroll. Family socioeconomic status, a key indicator of academic outcomes (Sirin, 2005), seems to play a similar role in the lives of Syrian children just as it does in non-refugee populations. Uyan-Semerici et al.'s analysis shows that as the income of the family increases, a child's propensity to attend school also increases and, more importantly, of all the factors examined, parental education seems to be the main driver of school access. Family size (more than seven members) and the number of children in the house (four or more children) also seem to explain some of the variation, albeit not as strongly as SES. Combined, these findings provide an insight into how to increase school access for Syrian refugee children; prioritize support to families with the lowest incomes, those families who have more than four children, and those parents with the lowest education.

Finally, Sirin et al. developed Project Hope, an innovative intervention using an online, game-based learning material for refugee children. In a pilot study, researchers tested the effectiveness of a 40-h intervention in Turkey. Data gathered from a controlled field experiment show promising results for this unique approach to learning. Specifically, there is preliminary evidence that participation in Project Hope resulted in significant improvements in Turkish language acquisition, coding skills, executive functioning and overall sense of hopefulness. Given the limited resources, interventions like Project Hope are much needed in the field; However, we need more empirical evidence in order to better understand the overall implications of these findings.

## Recommendations

Combined the five papers in this special issue provides an empirical base to better understand the psychological and educational needs of Syrian refugee children and also shows ways to address these needs through targeted interventions. There are now more than 65 million refugees and internally displaced people in the world and unfortunately

the number is going up fast in recent years. Future work on refugee children can make a difference in a number of significant ways. First and foremost, we need to find new ways to effectively document psychological and educational needs of refugee children in order to highlight the fact that food and shelter is not enough. Second, we have to move beyond identifying needs and provide innovative new tools to address these needs. Sirin et al.'s work provides one way of doing this with digital gaming. Third, given the importance of public support for refugee children's needs, we need to identify how the general public develops its attitudes towards refugees in general and refugee children in particular.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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