



Psychosocial well-being and educational outcomes of children in conflict-prone areas of the Jammu region

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Received 13 March 2026; Accepted 22 Apr 2026; Published 18 May 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64171/JSRD.5.S2.150-155>

Abstract

The intermittent cross-border firing and shelling have taken decades to take place in the border districts of Jammu and Kashmir, which are located in a volatile geopolitical environment. This has caused an unending sense of insecurity and vulnerability to the civilian population living near the Line of Control (LoC). This research article is a systematic analysis of the multidimensional and in-depth effect of this low intensity, repetitive violence on the education eco-system and the developmental curve of children in these war-torn regions. By combining quantitative data on the school closures and structural damage with the qualitative data of humanitarian reports, psychological studies and first-person testimonies, the study unveils a thoroughly rooted crisis. This analysis has found three key channels of impact: First, there is the direct disruption of schooling with frequent and long school closures, destruction of physical school facilities, and the pervasive sense of fear of commuting that results in chronic absenteeism. Second, the psychological impact on children, who show the high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms, which have the devastating effects on cognitive mechanisms, including the ability to concentrate, remember, and retain the learning. Third, the undermining of the learning environment in which the perpetual fear of violence upsets the routine, drains family and community resources and fosters an overall air of fear, which is the opposite of learning. The research posits that cross border shelling has a ripple effect of interrelated misfortunes that stretch way beyond physical injury. It essentially breaks the education chain causing a tremendous learning gap, high dropout rates and termination of the long-term academic and professional goals. In turn, such an environment does not only threaten the immediate safety of children but also compromises their psychological condition and cognitive functioning, which is a severe threat to the human capital development of a whole generation. The results highlight a dire need to have a multi-pronged response. This also involves the introduction of conflict sensitive educational policies like building of bomb proof school shelters, flexible school schedules and portable school units. Additionally, it is very important to integrate strong psychosocial support systems in schools to assist children to deal with trauma and develop resilience. Lastly, the research recommends more robust policy and legal models, which would place the right to safe, inclusive, and quality education among children in the forefront even in the most militarized settings, which would help safeguard their growth without placing them in the cross fire of war.

Keywords: Cross-border shelling, Conflict-sensitive education, Jammu & Kashmir, Child development, Psychosocial support

Introduction

Jammu and Kashmir has one of the most militarized regions in the world that runs along a border between India and Pakistan known as the international border and Line of Control. The living population in border villages in districts of Poonch, Rajouri, Jammu, Samba and Kathua has been experiencing successive bouts of cross boundary firing and shelling by artillery. These security events though differing in degree and frequency at different times have led to the atmosphere of perpetual uncertainty and fear which is simulating every sphere of everyday life and even the most basic right to education. Children in the border regions have special difficulties which make the experiences of such children not similar to those of other children in more stable regions. It is estimated that there are 250 million children in armed conflict zones all over the world and they face an immediate danger to their lives as well as a long term handicap to their development. The uncertainty

of shelling, the need to evacuate regularly and the omnipresence of army activities are some of the factors that make the educational experience disruptive, traumatizing, and limited in opportunities. According to the educational practice, schools in these regions frequently become places of education, emergency shelters, and teachers have to juggle both pedagogy and crisis management and trauma. This paper examines how cross-border violence demonstratively subverts the processes of schooling and child development in a set of inter-related mechanisms. It looks at the immediate effects on educational infrastructure and access, the psychological and cognitive effects on the children whose lives have been affected and the overall developmental consequences of growing up in a conflict zone. The discussion attracts attention to how continuous insecurity is causing short-term and long-term developmental deprivations which could continue throughout the lifespan.

Access and infrastructure of education

Physical damage to schools

The direct threats to the educational infrastructure in the border villages are the cross-border shelling. The buildings that are used in schools and are in the area of the artillery fire are vulnerable to the fact that they can be damaged in terms of its structure due to the shells, and it can be considered as a dangerous building to use or at all. Although buildings may be physically intact, the perception of their danger does not allow parents to send their children to school, and teachers to their posts when active firing is underway. The demolition or damage of school facilities induces both short-term and long-term education interruptions. Repair and reconstruction takes up time, resources and security clearance which, may take months and years to come. In this transitory stage, students do not get formal education or attend improvised classes at new places that do not have the necessary facilities including enough lighting, air conditioning, furniture, learning aids and hygiene facilities. This suboptimal situation inevitably negatively impacts on the quality of the education. In border areas, the physical damage to schools is a constant reminder of how unstable everyday life can be ^[1]. This often makes educational environments less safe.

Disrupted school attendance

The most obvious effect of cross-border shelling is perhaps the interference of normal school attendance. Schools have been made to shut down suddenly when they are faced with the occurrence of a firing usually lasting a few days or more weeks. Such uncertainties about the closures imply that neither the teachers nor students can plan continuity in education. Constant disruptions distort the academic program, and establish a huge problem on curriculum coverage. The attendance rates in border schools are low even in times when no shelling is taking place. In addition to causing physical harm, the sporadic nature of conflict causes students to miss school, which puts them in a vicious cycle of learning gaps that impede their long-term academic progress ^[2]. Parents, naturally more concerned with physical safety than with attending school, send children home when tensions run high, or when the previous experience teaches them that it is more dangerous. Studies done on military deployments have proved that parental absences and house transfers have negative effects on the test scores of children with the most significant effect on young children and those whose background is of disadvantage ^[3]. This trend of intermittent attendance causes learning gaps which are accrued over time in leaving border children much behind their counterparts in more stable regions on the curriculum and learning attainment.

Availability and retention of teachers

There are long-term issues of attracting and keeping qualified teachers in border schools. These postings are not appealing to educators due to the risky working conditions, lack of proper infrastructure, and seclusion by the urban centers. A high turnover rate is experienced by many teachers who are being

transferred to safer schools as soon as possible, and this explains why many are transferred to border schools which adds to the instability of the education system. In case of shelling, teachers in non border areas might hesitate to resume their duties even after things have normalised. The local teachers who stay usually work under conditions of great level of stress and fear which unavoidably influence their ability to provide quality education. Teacher shortage and diminished instructional competence are secondary disadvantage to students in border schools.

Instructional interference and instructional waste

It is the disjointed nature of schooling in border regions that experience conflict that implies that students hardly ever get sustained and methodical teaching. Every distraction leaves holes in the learning process which get harder to fill the bigger the accumulation. Teachers who resume after closures have no options available to them, which are impossible: either they can attempt to address gaps in content, and they realize that many students have already been absent in the previous lessons, or they can proceed with new content, and they will leave those students that had been missing lessons behind. The sum total impact of such disruptions is high loss of learning. In border schools, students are generally underage in terms of their competence in the basic subjects, like mathematics, science, and language arts. Studies indicate that a high-quality and extended schooling has a direct positive relationship with the academic and cognitive development in children, and reading and mathematics abilities have a bidirectional relationship with cognitive processes like working memory, reasoning, and executive functioning ^[4]. Such learning gap imposes barriers to upward mobility in the system of education and restricts future educational and professional opportunities.

Psychological and emotional impact

Trauma and fear

Children who are exposed to the sound of the artillery firing, visuals of ruined houses, and the fear of their relatives develop acute responses to stress that may be transformed into chronic psychological disorders. The fact that the shelling incidents are not predictable generates a constant level of hypervigilance and fear. Children might get frightened by high-volume sounds, have sleep problems and develop the sense of separation anxiety when they are not with their caregivers. Childhood traumas have been observed to have tremendous impacts on psychological development. Research has shown that the effects of war trauma disrupt cognitive functions, which rely on academic success, such as IQ, concentration, memory, and attention ^[5]. Children exposed to violence or are exposed to life-threatening events are at high risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, and depression. The psychological conditions do not only lead to urgent suffering, but also disrupt cognitive processes, social life, and academic achievement.

Cognitive development and concentration

The permanent stress of the conflict zone has implications on brain development and cognitive ability of children exposed to it. Childhood experiences explain a significant part of human brain development, neural pathways of sensory aptitude, language, and cognitive potential are in place in the initial couple of years of life. The high levels of cortisol that arise due to constant stress may disrupt the memory, attention and the executive functions of planning and solving problems. The children in constant fear and anxiety cannot focus during lessons, learn new information and complex cognitive activities. Studies in conflict areas across the world have proved that children who are exposed to violence exhibit poor performance in terms of mental capacity as opposed to those who are not exposed.

According to one of the recent studies on the Syrian refugee children, children with post-traumatic stress reactions had considerably worse cognitive functioning in comparison to those without the reactions, which directly reflects the connection between trauma exposure and cognitive impairment [6]. The deficits are manifested in various areas such as attention span, working memory, processing speed, and academic performance. Exposure to trauma and cognitive impairment develops a vicious cycle where the psychological distress will result in learning problems, which in turn can drive stress and inadequacy.

Social and emotional development

Childhood plays a key role in the development of social skills, emotional regulatory skills and self-efficacy. These developmental processes are interfered with by the children in the border regions in various ways. Poor peer communication as a result of school closing minimizes social learning and formation of relationships.

The fear and anxiety modeling of adults in the community affect how children respond emotionally and cope with it accordingly. Besides, the militarized children can acquire normalized attitude towards violence and conflict which define their world outlook and relations with others. The constant danger awareness may cause too much caution and avoidance of risks or, on the contrary, violence desensitization. Both trends have long-term implications of social adjustment and mental health. The inability to manage mental health and psychosocial problems halts the development of a child and leads to an inability to continue participating in the life of society [7].

Broader developmental consequences

Nutritional and health impacts

The tensions between countries generally interrupt the supply chains and market access in villages near borders, impacting food security and nutrition of children. The aspect of displacement during shelling cases disturbs the usual food habits and can compel families to live on the little food available. Persistent nutritional deficiency at a critical stage of development may hinder physical development, immune

system and cognitive development. The social economic background during childhood has an impact on neural development and an adult life in terms of cognitive ability and mental illness with poverty being especially harmful to cognitive ability.

There is also a loss of access to healthcare during active conflict. Vaccination, maternal and child health services and regular health care will be hard to obtain due to limited movement or destruction of facilities. Children living along the borders can see an increase in untreated diseases and health problems that disrupt the attendance of school and their ability to learn.

Economic poverty and child labour

When agricultural activities in border communities are interrupted, livestock is lost, property destroyed and employment terminated, the families usually end up being economically insecure. Financial hardships on the family could compel the children, especially adolescents, to join the family efforts by working instead of going to school.

Boys can be taken out of school to work in the field or in casual jobs, whereas girls can be left at home to do house chores or look after little children. The financial effects of interstate warfare therefore place some indirect pressures that drive children out of school. Although there is a reopening of schools after disruptions, not all the students come back to school because of the economic need or altered family conditions that make them not to go back to school. This trend is among the reasons why the dropout rates are higher in border schools than in the region.

Gender-specific impacts

Border girls are particularly vulnerable. Parents especially the father are also not keen on sending out daughters to school during such times of high insecurity because of the fear of lack of safety and movement within the possibly unsafe areas. In some societies cultural values might favour the boys when there is a limitation of resources, hence girls may have different effects in terms of education opportunities in times of crisis.

Marriage and family formation is another issue influenced by the disruption of education. Families in difficult economic situations and uncertainty can marry off daughters, and they consider it as a solution to their economic problem and social security. The combination of gender norms and conflict-related disruptions provokes certain disadvantages of girls which are not confined to the impact on the education process in particular cases but influence the whole direction of life.

Coping mechanisms and resilience

Community support systems

Despite the significant challenges, border communities have developed various coping mechanisms and support systems. Extended family networks provide material assistance during displacement, emotional support during crises, and alternative childcare arrangements that enable some educational

continuity. Community members often collaborate to organize informal educational activities when formal schools are closed. Religious and cultural institutions sometimes play important roles in providing stability and routine during uncertain times. Community spaces may serve as alternative learning venues, while local leaders work to maintain social cohesion and collective morale. These indigenous support systems, while insufficient to fully compensate for systematic disruptions, provide important buffers against the most severe consequences of conflict exposure.

Resilience factors

Not all children exposed to cross-border violence experience identical developmental outcomes. Research on resilience in conflict-affected populations has identified protective factors that moderate the impact of adverse experiences. Strong evidence base supports the claim that secure and consistent caregiving relationships are critical for children to weather the extreme stressors of war and conflict ^[8]. Strong attachment relationships with caregivers, positive peer relationships, engagement in structured activities, and a sense of meaning or purpose can buffer against the psychological effects of trauma. Individual characteristics such as temperament, cognitive abilities, and coping styles also influence how children respond to adversity. The resilience of children is significantly impacted by daily stressors in their environment that are heightened during war, with positive parenting style and warmth moderating the relationship between war exposure, mental health, and academic achievement ^[9]. Some children demonstrate remarkable resilience, maintaining academic performance and psychological wellbeing despite challenging circumstances. Understanding the factors that promote resilience can inform interventions designed to support all children in border areas.

Role of teachers and schools

Teachers in border schools often serve as critical sources of stability and support for students. Beyond their instructional roles, teachers provide emotional support, model coping strategies, and create structured environments that offer predictability amid chaos. Schools themselves serve as important symbols of normalcy and hope, representing continuity and investment in the future. Beyond providing a protective environment and contact with peers, education programs can provide space to deliver curriculum-based interventions and equip appropriate adults with skills to support children's recovery ^[10]. Effective teachers in conflict-affected areas often adapt their pedagogical approaches to address the specific needs of traumatised students. This may include incorporating psychosocial support activities, creating safe spaces for emotional expression, and adjusting academic expectations to account for learning disruptions. The quality of teacher-student relationships becomes particularly important in contexts where children may have experienced disruptions to other attachment relationships.

Policy and programmatic responses

Need for conflict-sensitive education

Border regions should have specifically designed educational policies and programs that would respond to the special requirements of the conflict-based contexts. Conflict-sensitive education implies a comprehension of the context within which education occurs, the interaction between context and education programming, as well as responding to downplay negative effects and maximize positive effects on conflict ^[11]. Proper solutions would be flexible academic schedules which are capable of accommodating the disruptions, accelerated learning programs to fill the learning gaps and curriculum changes which are tolerant to the lived experiences of the students.

Safety should be a priority in infrastructure planning, which should involve the building of fortified schooling structures, setting up of alternative learning areas in large numbers, and developing guidelines on how to close down and re-open the school within a short time. There should also be sufficient provision of learning materials that can be easily distributed, whenever schools resume their classes after a shut down. Conflict and crisis impact on the lives of school-aged children in an estimated 73 countries, and over 30 percent of the affected children are out of school ^[12], highlighting a clear need to implement systematic methods to meet educational requirements in these situations.

Psychosocial support programs

Since the exposure to violence has strong mental health consequences, an in-depth psychosocial support should be included in the educational program in the border communities. Mental health and psychosocial mentorship is now viewed as an essential aspect of humanitarian response, which must be addressed through multi-sectoral cooperation and a graded system of intervention ^[13]. They involve the training of teachers on trauma-informed pedagogies, development of school-based counseling services, and the development of peer assistance programs. Mental health literacy programs on a community scale have the potential of reducing stigma and enhancing help-seeking of psychological distress.

According to the estimates of Save the Children, an estimated 24 million children in high-intensity conflict areas may suffer high distress and mild to moderate mental health issues and require proper care ^[10]. Interventions based on psychosocial processes must be culturally relevant and community-based and utilise local knowledge of distress and healing in addition to incorporating evidence-based therapies. The programs, which include children and caregivers, could be especially effective because they handle the stress at the family level and build positive relationships. The number of interventions trials on young people in humanitarian areas has increased over the past few years, although the evidence base is inconsistent, and further research is recommended to be more effective ^[14].

Teacher training and professional development

The problem of teacher recruitment and retention needs a holistic approach to policy actions. This can be in terms of monetary rewards to those teachers whom work in border zone,

better accommodation and amenities, better security solutions and appreciation of the hecticness of such assignments in the career growth standards. The teacher can be more effective and can have better job satisfaction due to professional development opportunities, which are specifically sensitive to teaching in contexts of conflicts. It is also important to support the mental health and wellbeing of teachers themselves. Peer support groups, access to mental health services, and institutional policies are resources that help teachers in stressful workplaces to cope with the psychological burden of their job. Wellbeing investment in teachers eventually translates into student benefits in the form of better instruction and relationship preservation.

Coordination and advocacy

To solve the problem of educational effects of cross-border shelling, the collaboration of various stakeholders such as education departments, security forces, humanitarian organizations, and representatives of the local community is necessary. Timely information flow allows responding quickly to the arising crisis and solving a problem in a common way. Policy advocacy can make sure that special needs of border populations are taken into consideration and resources are distributed. Evidence-based advocacy must involve documentation of educational effects and developmental outcomes in border areas. The extent of the challenges can be proved by systematic data collection of school closures, attendance rates, learning outcomes, and psychological wellbeing that can be used to argue to invest more in conflict-affected areas. Although critical, child protection in emergencies, education in emergencies and mental health and psychosocial support are also critically underfunded, with such programming only 0.14 percent of overseas development assistance during 2015-2017 ^[10]. The civil society organizations have significant roles in raising the voices of children by communities living on the border and hold authorities responsible in ensuring that the rights of children are upheld.

Conclusion

Multi-faceted and deep effects of cross-border shelling in the border regions of Jammu and Kashmir on schooling and child development. The upheavals go way beyond the immediate acts of violence to cause systematic disadvantages that add up throughout childhood and result in lifetime paths. Children in these regions are denied the access to education, face learning deficit as a result of discontinuous schooling and they develop psychological disorders that disrupt both cognitive and social developments.

The effects of growing up in a militarized border area do not focus on the educational achievement only but extend to the wider spheres of wellbeing such as mental health, physical growth, opportunities in the economic condition, and social assimilation. Combination of direct violence, chronic insecurity, economic hardship, and disrupted services worsens the weaknesses to an extent that border children stand at the grave disadvantage regarding developmental aspects, when compared to their counterparts in more stable areas.

The challenges will need thorough, coordinated and long-term interventions focusing on the rights and needs of the children despite the continued security concern. Educational programming that is sensitive to conflict, psychosocial support service, teacher support system and infrastructure investment are all needed elements of a sufficient response. Other than programmatic interventions, long-term advocacy of peaceful solution to tensions at the borders is the most essential need to safeguard the developmental future of children in such afflicted regions. The children of the border regions in Jammu and Kashmir can be seen as a symbol of the people at risk as well as an example of incredible strength. They should be provided with the opportunities to obtain education, assisted in their development, and safeguarded against violence that will allow them to fulfil their potential despite the adverse conditions under which they are born. The political determination, allocation of resources and the realization that investing in the wellbeing of children on the border is not only a humanitarian necessity, but also a prerequisite of stability and growth of the region in the long term is necessary to ensure these rights.

Disclosure statement

The author reported no potential conflict of interest.

Note on author

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