

E. Mark Cummings  
Christine E. Merrilees  
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Perspective on Research and  
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Perspective on Research and Intervention

E. Mark Cummings  
Department of Psychology  
University of Notre Dame  
Notre Dame, IN  
USA

Laura K. Taylor  
School of Psychology  
Queens University Belfast  
Belfast  
UK

Christine E. Merrilees  
Department of Psychology  
State University of New York at Geneseo  
Geneseo, NY  
USA

Christina F. Mondí  
Institute of Child Development  
University of Minnesota  
Minneapolis, MN  
USA

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# Preface

Over one billion children are growing up throughout the world in contexts of political violence and armed conflict. A burgeoning literature attests to the significant and many risks and challenges these environments pose to the development of children. The well-being and mental health of these children are a matter of great international concern and an issue of rapidly growing interest to scholars, students, and practitioners who may wish to contribute to both understanding of the risks and challenges and the development of more effective prevention and intervention strategies to help the children cope with these environments.

However, gaining access to the contributions of this fast-growing literature involving many regions of the world presents many obstacles to those who may want to comprehend the status of what we know at this point. For example, the pertinent literature is published across multiple disciplines and in many different publication outlets, involving diverse regions of the world, so that the process of locating and evaluating this work poses daunting, even overwhelming, roadblocks for potentially interested readers. In addition, the quality of this literature is highly variable, ranging from well-intentioned but relatively weakly designed works that may not be amenable to confident interpretation to other studies that meet relatively high, even laudable, standards of methodological rigor, analysis, and interpretation.

The goal of this volume is to accomplish an accessible, up-to-date presentation and analysis of this diverse, important literature on the risks, well-being, and adjustment of children growing up throughout the world in contexts of political violence and armed conflict, including basic and applied research on these questions. Another goal is to provide an organizational framework that fosters a systematic analysis of the quality of the research. This is broadly accomplished by the application of a developmental psychopathology perspective that provides a cutting-edge basis for evaluating and fostering the study of normal development and the development of psychopathology in children.

Specifically, a four-tiered framework informed by the tenets of developmental psychopathology is employed for integrating and evaluating the current empirical literature on this topic. Although we inevitably exclude many studies from further consideration for not meeting our minimal standards of scientific rigor, beyond that,

we endeavor to represent at least in the frequency counts for research, all studies that meet threshold for making contributions to the field at each tier. Notably, research on this topic poses great methodological, practical, financial, and statistical challenges. Our perspective is much work makes important contributions, even if not meeting all the criteria ideal in laboratory studies or in less challenging social-ecological contexts, so we endeavor in this book to be inclusive.

In terms of the organization of this volume, the urgency of the study of youth in contexts of political violence and armed conflict from a worldwide perspective is discussed in Chap. 1. Next, the guiding model for review in terms of a developmental psychopathology perspective is succinctly described in Chap. 2. More specifically, a framework for review of research from a developmental psychopathology perspective in terms of a four-tiered framework is presented in Chap. 3. This four-tiered “pyramid” model, which is shown in Fig. 3.1, reflects the assumption that research progresses up the pyramid in the following stages (1) the documentation of the developmental outcomes of exposure to violence, including level of exposure to traumatic violence and exploration of variations as a function of demographic differences; (2) studies additionally providing initial exploration of the role of mediators, moderators, and social-ecological contexts based on cross-sectional studies; (3) longitudinal, process-oriented work; and (4) prevention and intervention research.

For each tier, in the chapters that follow, the count of studies in the literature meeting criteria for each tier is indicated, and bottom-line messages of the research are reviewed. Given the extensive numbers of studies meeting criteria for each tier (especially Tiers 1 and 2), and the aim to accomplish a worldwide review across multiple contexts of conflict and violence that is our goal, the presentation of all studies meeting criteria, along with details on research design and social-ecological contexts, was not feasible. Accordingly, rich detail on the state of the art for each tier of research is accomplished through detailed presentations (e.g., region sampled, assessment timing, participants sampled, measures, and major findings) for a selected, substantial number of the best studies by our assessment for each tier (typically about 20 studies for each tier). The aim is to provide an extensive overview of the specific characteristics and contributions of many of the best studies at each level of analysis, all of which we judged as highly important in multiple respects. This approach is intended to provide interested students and scholars with a handy, conceptually organized reference or handbook of the characteristics, contents, and contributions of many of the specific, state-of-the-art studies that have been conducted throughout the world pertinent to each region of the world and tier of approach. We realize that we inevitably were not able to include all of the relevant studies. However, we feel confident we have accomplished an extensive representation of the state of the art in this volume that can serve as a ready and accessible handbook and reference for students and scholars interested in a review and critical analysis of this highly important, burgeoning area of study.

In addition, through the mechanism of this framework, the state of knowledge in this area is evaluated and critical assessments are made of the strengths and

weaknesses of current research. We recognize that there are many practical, methodological, and statistical challenges associated with studying children's development in contexts of political violence and armed conflict. Aims of this book also include providing specific bases for advancing the state of basic, process-oriented research that examines youth adjustment at multiple social-ecological levels, including advanced concepts for stronger research design and analysis, as well as more effective, theory-guided translational prevention and intervention efforts.

Accordingly, Chap. 8 provides a vision for future research from a developmental psychopathology perspective. Recommendations are made for research at each specific tier of the "pyramid" for research on political violence, armed conflict, and youth adjustment from a developmental psychopathology perspective on research and intervention. Numerous issues and questions unresolved by current research are identified, and future directions for more integrated process-oriented basic and applied research are outlined. A central theme for future research is that translational efforts for the development of more effective and scientifically rigorous prevention and intervention research must include a closer interplay between basic and applied research that elevates the state of knowledge, increasing the likelihood that applied programs make a positive impact in the lives of children and families.

Chapter 9 concludes the book by reiterating the key messages of the road map provided by this volume for future research in this area. In particular, the road map indicates the need to expand the range of analyzed outcomes and levels of the social ecology that are examined, as well as new and more rigorous approaches toward evaluating explanatory processes accounting for the developmental outcomes in children growing up in the contexts of political violence and armed conflict. In conclusion, this volume is intended to encourage researchers to advance programs of research that are informed by developmental theory, basic and applied research, and that employ adequately sophisticated research designs and statistical methods to address the core challenges, stresses, concerns and possible sources of protection and resilience related to the normal development and development of psychopathology in children growing up in contexts fraught by political violence and armed conflict.

Notre Dame, USA  
Geneseo, USA  
Belfast, UK  
Minneapolis, USA

E. Mark Cummings  
Christine E. Merrilees  
Laura K. Taylor  
Christina F. Mondì

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## About the Authors

**E. Mark Cummings, Ph.D.** is a professor and Notre Dame Endowed Chair in psychology at the University of Notre Dame. Guided by the emotional security theory, his work focuses on processes associated with adaptive and maladaptive family functioning and children's and adolescents' development. Dr. Cummings is also interested in relations between family and community contexts and youth development, including pathways to adjustment and well-being in international samples of families exposed to community violence, and relations between political violence, armed conflict, and child development. His current research is also concerned with family- and community-based interventions for families and children.

**Christine E. Merrilees, Ph.D.** is an assistant professor in the Psychology Department at the State University of New York at Geneseo. Her research uses developmental and social psychological theory with advanced longitudinal methods to assess the impacts of conflict and intergroup divide on youth development. Her work has been published in high-impact journals in developmental, clinical, and social psychology, and her current research focuses on ethnic identity and contact processes that impact well-being and intergroup attitudes and behavior.

**Laura K. Taylor, Ph.D.** is a lecturer in the School of Psychology with the Centre of Identity and Intergroup Relations at Queen's University, Belfast, Northern Ireland. She has published more than two dozen peer-reviewed articles on her research, which uses a developmental intergroup framework to study risk and resilience processes related to the impact of political violence on children, families, and communities. Her more recent work has focused on constructive outcomes and positive youth development.

**Christina F. Mondt, M.A.** is a graduate research fellow of the National Science Foundation and a doctoral student in Developmental Psychopathology and Clinical Science at the University of Minnesota. Her research interests are in socio-emotional processes underlying normal development and the development of psychopathology and in school- and family-based early childhood interventions.

# Chapter 1

## Political Violence, Armed Conflict, and Youth Adjustment: A Worldwide Perspective

**Keywords** Developmental psychopathology • Armed conflict • Political violence • Social-ecological model • Developmental contexts • Longitudinal research • Translational research

Over one billion youth under the age of 18 are growing up in contexts of political violence and armed conflict worldwide (United Nations, 2009). The conditions and challenges of these young people's lives are diverse, from the wars in the Middle East and Africa, to the crises in Ukraine and Russia, to the lingering tensions of the Troubles of Northern Ireland. While they are often not the focus of public concern, youth are among the most vulnerable victims of political violence and armed conflict. As multiple levels of their social ecologies are disrupted, if not devastated, youth must navigate development without the security of their homes, schools, and communities (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Boxer et al., 2013; Ladd & Cairns, 1996).

Recent reviews have called attention to the urgency of studying and intervening for youth living in contexts of political violence and armed conflict (Betancourt, Meyers-Ohki, Charrow, & Tol, 2013b; Jordans, Tol, Komproe, & De Jong, 2009; Masten, 2014; Masten & Narayan, 2012). Yet the challenges related to conducting research in these contexts are considerable, and despite an increasing number of published studies in this area in recent years, significant gaps in knowledge remain. There is an urgent need for well-delineated theoretical and methodological approaches that will advance scientific understanding and inform effective translational research and practice.

We concur with Dawes and Cairns' (1998) assertion that we have "counted enough symptoms," and argue that the relationship between exposure to political violence and increased risk of multiple negative outcomes has been well-established in the previous research. We posit that moving forward, there is a critical need for advanced understanding of the following: (a) causal processes that require longitudinal research; (b) the significance of the many levels of youths' social ecologies (e.g., home and community) that are affected by political violence and armed conflict; and (c) cogent implementation of research findings in the development of evidence-based prevention and intervention programs, consistent with the principles of translational research (Cicchetti & Toth, 2006). These recommendations

reflect the need for understanding adjustment trajectories from a developmental perspective, including process-oriented tests of treatment effectiveness models (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Merrilees, Taylor, & Shirlow, 2014; Cummings & Valentino, 2015).

The present book begins by defining the scope of political violence and armed conflict, and by highlighting the urgency of studying youth in these contexts. Next, we introduce the developmental psychopathology as a guiding model for fostering cogent scientific bases for translational work in these contexts (Cummings, Merrilees, Taylor, & Mondì, 2017). We then introduce a four-tier “pyramid” model, grounded in the tenets of developmental psychopathology, for conceptualizing the state of research on political violence, armed conflict, and youth adjustment. This is followed by a review and critique of representative work falling within each respective tier. Finally, we conclude by providing a “road map” of innovative future directions, guided by developmental psychopathology and translational research perspectives, for future research and intervention work in this area.

Whereas the previous reviews have focused on basic or applied research on youth and political violence, the present book systematically demonstrates how basic research should be utilized to inform translational work (Cicchetti & Toth, 2006; Gunnar & Cicchetti, 2009) by reviewing the state of the extant research in this area from a developmental psychopathology perspective (e.g., Cicchetti & Cohen, 2006; Cummings et al., 2017; Cummings & Valentino, 2015). Implicit in this approach are assumptions that: (a) a diverse body of research is essential to optimally inform the development of prevention and intervention programs, and (b) the progression of research in this area can be organized into a conceptually rigorous framework. The extensive, inclusive scope of the review of relevant research and the “road map” grounded in developmental psychopathology and translational research perspectives are among the current book’s innovative contributions (e.g., “value added”) in relation to previous work (e.g., Attanayake et al., 2009).

## Defining Political Violence and Armed Conflict

Our definition of *political violence and armed conflict* refers broadly to contexts involving violent acts with sectarian or group-based (e.g., political, ethnic, religious) motivations. This definition parallels Dubow, Huesmann and Boxer’s (2009) designation of *ethnic-political violence* as “violence sanctioned by different influential political and social bodies based on a history of conflict between ... groups” (page 114). Notably, we distinguish acts of political violence and armed conflict from other forms of interpersonal violence that lack group-based motivations (e.g., murder, domestic abuse), though political violence and armed conflict may affect these forms of violence (e.g., Cummings et al., 2012b). For the sake of brevity, throughout this book we will interchange the use of the terms *political*