

## Demonstrating the effectiveness of mental health support for war-affected adolescents

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the mental health impacts of humanitarian crises, including conflict. Psychosocial interventions exist to help alleviate stress and foster holistic development and wellbeing, but evidence of their effectiveness has been limited.

The study, 'Measuring the health and wellbeing impacts of a scalable programme of psychosocial intervention for refugee youth', was led by Yale University, USA, between 2015 and 2017. It examined the impacts of an innovative psychosocial intervention delivered by Mercy Corps to adolescents in Jordan affected by the Syrian crisis.

Study findings validated the intervention, helping Mercy Corps secure additional funding, and informed amendments to programme design and global organisational policy. They demonstrated the value of applying a rigorous, mixed-method research design to test intervention impacts in humanitarian settings and increased the capacity of researchers and humanitarian organisations to test similar interventions. The study led to sustained partnerships which continue to build the evidence base on health and psychosocial wellbeing in humanitarian settings.

Title: Measuring the Health and Wellbeing Impacts of a Scalable Programme of Psychosocial Intervention for Refugee Youth

Location: Jordan

Study type: Mixed methods randomised controlled trial

### IMPACTS

- Validated the intervention, boosting delivery teams' confidence in their work and helping to secure additional funding for a second phase of the intervention
- Enabled Mercy Corps to improve monitoring and evaluation methods and program design and implement the intervention throughout the Middle East
- Tools developed by the study have improved the capacity of researchers and humanitarian organisations to test such interventions

### RESEARCH IMPACT LEARNING

- Value of interdisciplinarity
- Meaningful engagement leading to enduring partnerships

## BACKGROUND



Humanitarian crises have critical impacts on health, especially for children and adolescents. Ongoing stress can impact mental health and the development of social and emotional learning. War-affected and refugee youth, specifically, face multiple challenges to mental health and optimal development. While psychosocial interventions have been developed to alleviate stress and protect the wellbeing of war-affected adolescents, the evidence on their effectiveness remains weak.

The conflict in Syria has caused millions of refugees to flee to neighbouring countries, including an estimated 1.3 million to Jordan by 2014. Violence, loss of socioeconomic support, and insecurity have profoundly affected refugee families, and have contributed to children and adolescents experiencing profound stress, with little or no access to mental health services and psychosocial support.

## THE STUDY



The study assessed the effectiveness of a psychosocial intervention delivered by Mercy Corps in northern Jordan. The eight-week intervention, Advancing Adolescents, was delivered by trained community workers. It aimed to alleviate stress, build resilience and foster social cohesion. The research team worked with a cohort of war-affected Syrian refugees and Jordanian adolescents aged 12 to 18 years.

A randomised controlled trial was conducted, measuring the psychosocial, biological and cognitive signatures of profound stress before the intervention, immediately after the intervention, and one year later. The survey used international scales to measure mental health, as well as tools relevant to the regional context such as the Human Insecurity Scale. Additionally, an Arabic-language version of the Child Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM) was developed and validated. Importantly, for the first time in conflict settings, stress biomarkers (such as hair cortisol) and experimental tests of cognitive function (such as working memory) were used, going beyond self-reported data.

Research was informed by sustained interdisciplinary and intercultural engagement, including community engagement led by Taghyeer, the Jordanian research partner. For example, community meetings enabled Syrian and Jordanian fieldworkers and local families to genuinely discuss ways to ensure a fair and transparent randomisation process for the study. Local hairdressers joined the research team to offer complementary haircuts to young people, a creative gesture to facilitate sampling processes.

*“Having a local research partner enabled depth of research... without Taghyeer we would not have taken on the burden of a [randomised controlled trial]”*

– Matt Streng, Director, Young People and Protection, Mercy Corps

## FINDINGS



The study showed that a brief, group-based intervention delivered to conflict-affected adolescents by trained community workers can be effective at both reducing feelings of psychosocial stress and insecurity, and regulating stress physiology in the body. Advancing Adolescents had positive impacts on adolescent stress, perceived insecurity and mental health difficulties related to depression and anxiety. Some of the impacts of the intervention were sustained for a full year after programme participation. Adolescents with higher war-related trauma exposure benefitted most, but so did youth distressed by lack of opportunity, poverty and social marginalisation. Findings indicated that providing psychosocial support to adolescents who experience multiple childhood adversities is critical. However, no impacts on resilience were found.

It was the first study to demonstrate that levels of the stress hormone cortisol could be reduced in war-affected adolescents by engaging with a brief psychosocial intervention. Specifically, cortisol levels, which reflect the body's alertness to environmental challenges, were reduced by a third in participants engaged in the intervention. Notably, the study relied on a project design that engaged with local communities to better understand the links between stress biology and lived experiences, and better linked research to humanitarian practice and policy.



*Dima Hamadmad presents results of the study in Arabic to the study participants and their parents in Mafraq, Jordan, in 2018. Credit: Ghufraan Abudayyeh/Taghyeer Foundation*

# COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT



Study findings were translated into clear and actionable messages, with multiple reports covering different aspects of the findings, and disseminated by the partners locally and globally.

Syrian refugees and Jordanian host communities were a priority for engagement throughout. This fostered a sense of ownership among local communities to ensure that findings were meaningful and relevant to them. Taghyeer organised four Arabic-language forums at community centres to discuss the results with study participants and their families. Mercy Corps co-organised a 'No Lost Generation' dissemination event with War Child and local stakeholders to discuss the implications of the results for policy and practice. The Principal Investigator from Yale used global connections to promote the research at ten events hosted by key humanitarian and global health stakeholders, such as the World Bank, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), National Institutes of Health and the World Health Organization, and was invited to speak on the psychosocial impact of humanitarian crisis at key policy dialogues hosted by Wilton Park and the No Lost Generation event. Jordanian and Syrian researchers were supported by additional funding secured by the Principal Investigator to attend global events, to ensure local expert perspectives were amplified. Fifteen academic articles were produced.

Yale University, Taghyeer, and Mercy Corps collaborated on media engagement to secure wide coverage. The study was featured in 2018 in *Science* magazine, and in an award-winning documentary, *Terror and Hope: The Science of Resilience*, which showcased how scholars, humanitarians and war-affected young people work together to put science to work in community-based interventions. These media opportunities raised awareness of the impacts of conflict – and the possibilities for intervention – among lay audiences and humanitarian stakeholders.

## UPTAKE AND IMPACT



Study results validated the intervention, boosting delivery teams' confidence in their work and helping to secure additional funding for a second phase of the intervention from Global Affairs Canada. They enabled Mercy Corps to improve programme design and implement the intervention throughout the Middle East region, for example by adopting Arabic-language tools, increasing programme duration, adding a livelihoods component, and including family members. Monitoring and evaluation methods at Mercy Corps were also improved due to the culturally-relevant approaches and interdisciplinary tools developed. A new, contextually informed understanding of the importance of mental health and social and emotional wellbeing as a key outcome for adolescent development has informed Mercy Corps' global policies and programming, for example the Future Proof Approach.

Scientific impact was significant. The research initiative was "important, even groundbreaking" (Dr Danny Pine, Child Psychiatrist at US National Institutes of Health), demonstrating the value of applying an experimental research design, that combined scientific rigour with cultural engagement, to a humanitarian intervention. The study has been extensively cited, including in research on adolescent mental health and resilience in Greece, Zambia and Ethiopia, the latter funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and UNICEF. The tools developed have improved the capacity of researchers and humanitarian organisations to test such interventions and are available for open access, with demand indicating wide use in research and practice in Arabic-speaking countries. For example, Save the Children approached the research team to develop and test an online version of the adapted resilience measure for programming with youth in Syria and Jordan.

Finally, the study has built the capacity of Syrian and Jordanian researchers. One Syrian fieldwork staff member had the opportunity to contribute to teaching on conflict and resilience at Yale University. Partnerships have been sustained, particularly between the Principal Investigator and Co-Principal Investigator Dr Rana Dajani at Hashemite University, with new projects with Syrian and Jordanian communities led by Yale, Taghyeer and other universities. These initiatives continue to strengthen the evidence base on programming focused on health, learning and functioning in crisis settings.

# RESEARCH IMPACT LEARNING



## VALUE OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY

The research bridges the biological, social and developmental sciences, engaging both scholars and practitioners in equitable partnerships (with partners empowered to engage different stakeholder groups based on their own expertise). This helped develop locally informed, broadly relevant research outcomes and outputs that were useful to initiatives including: donor advocacy, community engagement, capacity strengthening within research and practice, and humanitarian programming.

## MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT LEADING TO ENDURING PARTNERSHIPS

Opening up dialogue about results and their implications enabled the adolescents, families and Mercy Corps programme officers to value the scientific approach used by the study and interpret the findings on stress and resilience with reference to lived experiences. The meetings helped build trust and mutual understanding between Syrian and Jordanian communities, Mercy Corps programme officers and the research team. These meaningful connections provided strong motivation among key academic partners to continue funding relevant research that could benefit Syrian and Jordanian communities.

# PARTNERS

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Yale University; Mercy Corps; Taghyeer; University of Western Ontario; Queen Margaret University; Harvard University

## ABOUT ELRHA

Elrha is a global organisation that finds solutions to complex humanitarian problems through research and innovation. This study was funded by Elrha's Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC) Programme which aims to improve health outcomes by strengthening the evidence base for public health interventions in humanitarian crises.

R2HC is funded by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Wellcome, and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) through the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR).

R2HC captures detailed case studies through a process that triangulates and validates evidence on uptake and impact. The case study methodology and full version of this summary case study including references are available on request.



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