

# Child combatants in northern Uganda: Reintegration myths and realities

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Published in Robert Muggah, ed. 2008. *Security and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Dealing with Fighters in the Aftermath of War*. Routledge. 103–126.

## 1. Introduction

At a recent Paris conference on child soldiering, the keynote speaker, French foreign minister Philippe Douste-Blazy, warned that the use of child soldiers is “a time bomb that threatens stability and growth in Africa and beyond.” They are “lost children,” he argued, “lost for peace and lost for the development of their countries.” (BBC, 2007) This lost generation metaphor has become a commonplace in discussions of child soldiers, who are presumed to return from war traumatized, stigmatized, and broken. “They are walking ghosts,” mourns a recent *New York Times* (2006) editorial, “damaged, uneducated pariahs.”

. While such alarming assertions attract much-needed attention and money to the reintegration of former child soldiers, the evidence to support these claims is weak at best. In fact, the evidence to support almost *any* claim is sadly lacking. Studies of child soldiers—and indeed of ex-combatants in general—are few in number and largely case-based, drawing on interviews with former participants.<sup>2</sup> While such studies have yielded important insights for reintegration of young ex-fighters, the evidence base is still thin. With interview accounts, moreover, one worries that the most sensational rather than the most common experiences find their way into discourse. In the absence of representative data within and across conflicts, we have little sense of the proportionality and generalizability of any findings.<sup>3</sup> This chapter con-

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<sup>2</sup> See Wessells (2006) for a thorough review of the literature on child soldiering.

<sup>3</sup> Interviewing large, representative samples of former combatants has proven expensive, time-consuming, and logistically challenging, and so even the few large-scale surveys of children and adults associated with armed groups have tended to

siders new evidence from Uganda on the impact of war on young recruits and considers what that evidence implies for the long-term reintegration of child and young adult combatants.

With or without evidence, concern for children trained to kill (and the society they return to) is more than warranted. What is worrisome is that sensational claims and popular beliefs regarding young combatants appear to drive not only fundraising and advocacy but program interventions as well. As this chapter will reveal, post-conflict programming for children and youth is (at least in Uganda) often based on popular myths, immediate needs, rules of thumb, and possibly mistaken assumptions about what sort of help ought to be provided—a state of affairs that governmental and non-governmental organizations delivering assistance in northern Uganda are the first to lament.

As it turns out, northern Uganda is an unusual but important place to evaluate the impacts of child and youth soldiering and the meaning of reintegration. Tens of thousands of civilians have been forcibly recruited by the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA, over two decades of war—two-thirds of them children under the age of 18. Only a small number of early LRA recruits were volunteers (many of whom became senior commanders in the force as time went by) and only handful of these have returned from the bush. Thus virtually all ex-combatants in this region are former abductees, and demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) programs have focused mainly on the reception and return of children and youth escaping from abduction.

While northern Uganda is seemingly a special case, it is one that allows us to assess with an unusual level of confidence and precision the very impacts of war and the meaning of reintegration for young recruits—a large and important class of ex-combatants. Consider that ex-combatants are usually a selected group—they are both self-selected and screened by the armed group—and so a comparison of their well-being to that of non-combatants can provide a misleading picture of their reintegration success. For instance, if they are poorer or socially dislocated post-conflict, it may reflect characteristics that led them to join the armed group in the first place, rather than the consequences of combat experiences. In Uganda, LRA recruitment was large-scale, involuntary, and (most important of all) indiscriminate—so much so that abduction appears to be a chance event. As a result, a comparison of abductees to non-abductees

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be unrepresentative of ex-combatants within a particular conflict. Allen (2005) and ILO (2003), for instance, provide detailed and insightful analyses of combat and reintegration experiences, but are based on convenience or otherwise non-representative samples.

years after the fact allows a tragically accurate accounting of the long-term impacts of combat and the appropriateness of current programming.

To investigate these impacts, we conducted a large-scale and representative survey of nearly 1000 household and youth in the war zone, including nearly 500 former abductees. The findings suggest a shift in our understanding of the impacts of war on children and youth and a change in our approach to their post-conflict reintegration. As will be discussed below, reintegration programming in northern Uganda has been greatly influenced by the fears of traumatization, dislocation, and a ‘lost generation’ of youth. Thus non-governmental organization (NGO) programming has tended to focus on reuniting families and providing ‘psychosocial’ care—activities to minimize psychological ‘trauma’ and social dislocation. Their economic and educational programs have tended to remain small in scale. Several large post-conflict programs by the Government of Uganda address economic and educational needs, but have only recently begun to function.

Survey and interview evidence from northern Uganda paints a different picture, however—suggesting little aggression among former abductees, child or adult, and a range of distress symptoms. Rather, frequently occurring symptoms of distress are concentrated in a relative minority, especially those that experienced the most severe violence and those who returned to the least supportive family environments. There is little evidence of hostility and alienation—if anything, distressed youth are quiet and withdrawn rather than aggressive, and political engagement is actually greater on average among former abductees. Rather, the main impact of war appears to be substantially lower education, diminished productivity, and increased poverty and inequality, largely due to time away rather than psychological distress. The impacts are greatest for children, who are more likely to have had schooling interrupted.

The chapter concludes by discussing the extent (and the limitations) of generalizing from a sample of forcibly recruited young persons. We argue that while the precise impacts of war and reintegration gaps are likely to differ in other contexts, the main patterns we observe—that is, a concentration of high distress symptoms in a minority of former combatants, and a broad-based human capital gap between ex-combatants and non-combatants—seems likely to hold more generally. A large cross-country psychological literature testifies to the resilience of the majority of victims and perpetrators of violence. Moreover, all civil war combatants—child or adult, voluntary or involuntary—lose civilian education and labor market experience as a consequence of military service. Similar consequences of ‘time away’ are observed

even among US soldiers. If true, such a pattern suggests two a shift in reintegration programming towards more targeted psychosocial programs (to those exhibiting the worst symptoms) and large and broad-based support for schooling (including adult education) and employment and enterprise development. DDR economic programs are usually focused on keeping ex-combatants occupied after demobilization and breaking their ties to and networks with armed groups. This study makes clear that long-term reintegration is a major development and humanitarian concern, as well as a security one. The consequences of large human capital losses for post-conflict redevelopment are undoubtedly substantial. With so many young people affected, and since lost education and experience take time to re-accumulate (if they re-accumulate at all), in the absence of broad-based and sustainable economic programs, the level and growth rate of income in conflict regions may be depressed for decades.

## **2. The war in northern Uganda**

The conflict in northern Uganda has both spiritual and political roots. In 1988, a spiritual leader named Joseph Kony assembled the extremist remnants of several failed insurgent groups from the Acholi region of northern Uganda into a new guerrilla force, the LRA.<sup>4</sup> Locally Kony is believed to possess great spiritual powers, and a stated goal is to seek a spiritual cleansing of the nation. Kony's movement, however, is also rooted in a longstanding political grievance. In 1986, rebels from the southwest of the country led by Yoweri Museveni overthrew an Acholi-dominated government. Several guerrilla forces in the north initially resisted the takeover, but for the most part settled for peace or were defeated by 1988. The handful of fighters that would not settle for peace gathered under Kony to continue the fight.

Kony and the LRA are often portrayed in the media as an irrational religious group inflicting senseless violence on the Ugandan populace. A closer look at the rebel group, however, yields a more nuanced view; the LRA appears to be a political and rational organization, however evil and cruel their actions. The group's political messages have been relatively consistent and coherent, although poorly articulated. Moreover, violence against the citizenry has often been selectively and strategically employed to discourage collaboration with government forces. Finally, forcible recruitment and the torture and terrorization

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<sup>4</sup> This history is based on Allen (2005), Behrend (1991, 1998, 1999), Doom and Vlassenroot (1999), Finnström (2003), Lamwaka (2002), and Omara-Otunnu (1987).

of abductees appear to have been a highly criminal yet effective means of recruiting an armed force in the absence of material resources and popular support.<sup>5</sup>

The poverty and unpopularity of Kony's movement limited his military options and ultimately accounts for the nearly total dependence of the LRA on the forcible recruitment of youth via abduction. Unpopular among their ethnically-Acholi brethren, from its earliest days the rebels looted homes and abducted youth to maintain supplies and recruits. The Acholi populace, after three years of such abductions and lootings, began to organize a local defense militia in 1991 with army assistance. To punish them for this betrayal, and to dissuade them from further collaboration with the government and army, Kony ordered the widespread killing and mutilation of civilians. Thus from 1991 onwards, Kony's war was waged not only against the government but against the populace at large. Abduction from 1995 to 2004 was large-scale and indiscriminate, with at least 60,000 youth estimated to have been taken by the LRA (Annan, Blattman, & Horton, 2006). The majority of these are adolescent males, though men and women of all ages are commonly taken.

The war would not likely have lasted these two decades, however, were it not for interference from neighboring Sudan. In 1994 Sudan's government began supplying Kony with weapons and territory upon which to build bases. Sudan's support enlarged and invigorated a weakening LRA. Rebel attacks and abductions escalated dramatically after 1995, peaking in 2002 and 2003 when the Ugandan armed forces were permitted to enter the Sudan to engage the LRA and shut down their bases. It was during the height of violence and risk in 2002 and 2003 that the Ugandan government forcibly displaced the entire rural population of Acholiland to crowded camps. Many displaced voluntarily in order to protect themselves, but threat of force by the government and army compelled many others to leave their lands. Although displaced persons might be no more than a few kilometers from their lands, the army forbade them from venturing more than a kilometer or two from the camps. The primarily agricultural economy collapsed, impoverishing the populace.

By 2004, however, the rebels appeared weakened and abductions all but ceased. In 2006 an informal truce was reached, followed by peace talks brokered by the government of southern Sudan. While the

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<sup>5</sup> See Finnström (2003) and Dolan (2005) for a discussion of the political rhetoric and activities of the LRA. See Branch (2005), Vinci (2005), van Acker (2004), and Doom and Vlassenroot (1999) for a discussion of the strategic use of violence in northern Uganda. Finally, see Blattman and Annan (forthcoming) for a discussion of the logic of child recruitment.

talks continue, progress has been slow and at alternate times the talks have come close to breaking down. Moreover, since 2006 a process of “decongestion” has sought to create smaller camps closer to people’s homes, thus increasing access to land. Moreover, as violence has abated, households have begun to cultivate their lands again. With peace uncertain and potentially distant, however, most households remain (or maintain a foothold) in the camps to this day.

### **3. New evidence: The Survey of War Affected Youth (SWAY)**

In northern Uganda, as in many other areas of armed conflict, the information cupboard has been bare. As a consequence, myths about the scale, nature and incidence of abductions and war violence abound, with the more sensational images of the former abductee often appearing to drive advocacy and programming. Even the number of youth affected has essentially been unknown. In the absence of hard data, government and aid agencies have based their DDR programming on immediate and observable needs, rules of thumb, and possibly erroneous assumptions about what sort of help ought to be provided.

To understand in more detail war experiences, their long term impacts on youth, and reintegration success, in 2005 and 2006 the authors conducted a survey of young males living in the conflict zone (a survey of females is currently underway). Youth were drawn from a representative sample of roughly 1000 households across eight sub-counties in the districts of Kitgum and Pader. In order to be sure to capture youth who had perished or migrated away over the course of the conflict, respondents were selected based on their presence in the household in 1996—a year prior to the vast majority of violence and abductions, and also a year most households remembered as the first election since 1980. In the cases where youth had migrated from their home counties—41% overall—they were tracked across the country and interviewed by local research assistants. In this fashion 70 percent of migrants and nearly all non-migrants were found, for a total success rate of 85 percent, or 741 males currently aged 14 to 30 (including 462 former abductees). Data were collected on unfound and deceased youth from their surviving household members, and the estimates presented herein are re-weighted to account for observable patterns of attrition.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The collection and analysis of these data are described in more detail in Annan, Blattman and Horton (2006) and Blattman and Annan (2007). Additional detail on psychosocial measures is contained in Annan (2007), and additional analysis of abduction experiences is provided in Blattman and Annan (forthcoming).

The quantitative data were combined with detailed qualitative interviews with community leaders, clan leaders, former rebel commanders, and dozens of youth and former abductees. Furthermore, forty of the surveyed youth were followed up by the counseling psychologist multiple times for semi-structured interviews with the youth and their family, friends and teachers. The focus of these in-depth interviews was to obtain a better understanding of psychological and social challenges and resiliency. Finally, the results of the analysis, including policy recommendations, were reviewed with and commented upon by aid agencies, psychosocial counselors, and community leaders, as well as with several groups of youth in the displacement camps surveyed.

#### **4. Abduction experiences**

In Uganda, an understanding of abduction experiences is key to understanding reintegration. The scale of abduction in the districts forming Acholiland was simply massive, including more than one in three male youth in the areas surveyed. Numerically-speaking, virtually all LRA recruits are forcible ones. A small number of volunteers were available in the early days of the conflict (and, where they have survive, have since risen through the LRA ranks). There are few accounts of youth voluntarily joining the rebels after 1990, however, and almost none after 1994.

Youth were typically abducted by small roving groups of rebels conducting night raids on rural homesteads. Lengths of abduction ranged from a day to ten years, with half gone for at least four months. Only 20 percent remained a year or more, and only 5 percent remained more than three years.<sup>7</sup>

Young adolescents were disproportionately targeted by the rebels, with youth aged 12 to 14 five times more likely to be abducted than a youth of 9 or 25. Somewhat unusually, child soldiers were not simply a source of recruits, but the preferred ones. There are three main explanations for this focus on young adolescents. First, due to a demographic boom there were dramatically more adolescents in the population than young adults. A population-adjusted comparison of the abduction probabilities by age suggests that young adolescents were only twice as likely to be targeted as a young child or a young adult. Second, lengths of abduction were falling in age—young adolescents stayed more than a year on average, while

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout this chapter, ‘abduction’ refers to any time forcibly spent with the rebels, regardless of length. Abductees thus include those taken for a few hours up to those absent for a decade.

young adults stayed only four months. The data suggest that the younger a youth the more likely he was to feel disoriented and fearful of escape or indoctrinated and loyal to Kony. Third, while young children were even more likely to be loyal and disoriented than young adults, they do not appear to have been effective as fighters, explaining the preference for adolescents older than 12 to those below that threshold.

Violence was an instrument of control in the LRA, and even short abductions involved exposure to significant brutality. The vast majority of abducted youth were tied, beaten, and abused in some fashion. Youth who fail to escape were trained as fighters and, after two or three months, were given a gun for raiding and abducting. Roughly 34 percent of male abductees reported receiving a gun, including half of all those that remained at least two weeks with the LRA. A quarter of those taken more than two weeks report being forced to kill soldiers or civilians. Stories abound of abducted youth being forced to beat or even kill family and friends to bind them to the rebel group. Twelve percent of abductees report being forced to beat someone close to them, and 8 percent report being forced to kill a family member or friend.

Four-fifths of abductees eventually escape, almost always during an unsupervised moment (such as in the heat of battle, or when sent for food and water). The remainder can, tragically, be assumed perished as relatively few remain with the LRA at this time. A blanket Amnesty has been granted to all “returnees” and, as discussed below, self-reported rates of acceptance by the family and community are high.

## **5. Existing DDR efforts**

Given the forcible nature of abduction, and since the core of the LRA remains at large at the time of writing, demobilization and disarmament activities have been somewhat incidental to the post-conflict process so far.<sup>8</sup> As noted, virtually all returnees are escapees, with a smaller number captured or released. There have been no large-scale returns or demobilizations. Rather, returnees have trickled in as individuals or small groups, often reporting to local leaders, army detachments, or heading straight home. Roughly half of our respondents went straight home without reporting to any authorities, abandoning any weapons in the bush (if they had any to begin with). The other half of respondents reported to an army detachment or were picked up by the army in the bush. These youth were typically passed to a NGO-operated reception

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<sup>8</sup> The current size of the LRA remains unknown, with estimates ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand fighters. A very different DDR process than that which has taken place so far may be required should a peace agreement be reached and demobilization begun.



center within a few days—usually after an interrogation by the armed forces for intelligence on the LRA. Demobilization and disarmament were thus incidental to the process of return, and current and past programming has focused predominantly on the “R” in DDR—reintegration.

Reintegration programs and service, meanwhile, have been highly disaggregated. Historically, local and international NGOs (with financial support from both bilateral and multi-lateral donors) have provided the bulk of assistance. More recently, two major government programs have begun to offer demobilization and reintegration packages.

### *Non-governmental reintegration programs*

A principal instrument of reintegration has been the reception center—organizations run alternately by international and local NGOs that receive formerly abducted youth upon their return. The centers provide partial to full medical care for injuries sustained in the bush, family reunification, and “counseling”—in reality group discussions and advice-giving led by local social workers. After a stay of a few weeks or months a formerly abducted youth is sent home to his or her family with a few household items, such as a mattress and an extra set of clothes.

Within the camps, the follow-up and monitoring of vulnerable youth (including former abductees) is performed on a relatively modest scale. As of late 2005 and early 2006, roughly one in ten former abductees had received some follow-up care from an NGO.<sup>9</sup> The vast bulk of NGO activity in northern Uganda has been directed at emergency support to the displaced population—food delivery, water and sanitation, and so forth. Non-emergency aid spending generally falls under the umbrella of “psychosocial” care, where the objectives are the mitigation of psychological impacts of violence and the promotion of social acceptance. NGOs and NGO workers tend to view former abductees through a psychological trauma lens. Forms of support include support for clubs, school support, “counseling”, and assistance in starting a vocation or small business. Such assistance is overwhelmingly targeted at various categories of vulnerability: orphans, “child mothers”, and former abductees. The vast bulk is intended for youth under eighteen.

Communities and families have also sought to aid reintegration, often through traditional and Christian cleansing ceremonies. Traditional cleansing ceremonies are performed by elders to cleanse the youth

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<sup>9</sup> Such results are echoed by Allen & Schomerus (2006).

from spiritual pollution, or *cen*, and are seen as appeasing the spirit with an animal sacrifice.<sup>10</sup> Five percent of youth reported being haunted by spirits, or *cen*, with the large majority being the formerly abducted. The collective understanding of *cen* is that it can spread from one person to another, polluting a family or community. This has social implications on a youth with serious emotional distress (especially nightmares or flashbacks) since a community may be frightened of being polluted by him or her. Just under half of the formerly abducted males reported having a cleansing ceremony performed for them. Family members of the formerly abducted explained that it was important for them to know whether the youth killed anyone, primarily because they worried about spiritual pollution.

### *Government reintegration programs*

The Ugandan government's role in DDR has historically been much more modest than the NGO and community effort, but is beginning to expand.

From a legal perspective, all rebels have been offered amnesty by the government via the Amnesty Act of 2000. The Act exempts from punishment or prosecution all those who, since 1986, were actual participants in combat or who collaborated with or otherwise aided the perpetrators of war or armed rebellion, provided they report to the authorities and renounce their association (MDRP, 2007).<sup>11</sup> The sole exception to the Amnesty appears to be the senior leadership of the LRA, who have been indicted by the International Criminal Court for their war crimes. While not limited to members of the LRA, LRA ex-combatants (particularly former abductees) make up the bulk of expected and actual 'reporters'.

The general attitude towards Amnesty in Acholiland was initially one of indifference, as there seemed to be little to be gained from its receipt, and little to be feared by its absence. The significance of Amnesty recently begun to change, however. In 2005, the Amnesty Commission began providing 'reinsertion packages' to all reporters (including registered former abductees) that consisted of a substantial cash payment and several household items. By 2005 a backlog of 11,200 reporters had registered with the Commission but had not received any form of support. With financial support and technical assistance from the World Bank and the Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Program (MDRP), by the end of August 2006 the Amnesty Commission had delivered resettlement services and payments to these

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<sup>10</sup> Baines (2005, 2007) and Harlacher et al. (2006) describe these ceremonies and their significance in detail.

<sup>11</sup> A copy is available at [www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/northern-uganda/documents/2000\\_Jan\\_The\\_Amnesty\\_Act.doc](http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/northern-uganda/documents/2000_Jan_The_Amnesty_Act.doc)

(and several hundred more recent) reporters (MDRP, 2007). The vast majority of former combatants had, by 2005, demobilized of their own accord. Thus, in order to pay out reinsertion packages, the names of former abductees were called over the radio to re-report, in many cases many years after their return.

The government also provides services to former combatants and their communities via the Northern Uganda Social Action fund (NUSAF), a large peace, economic, and community development program serving all northern Districts, including the LRA affected region. Under NUSAF, communities or groups can apply for funds for a variety of projects and programs, including conflict resolution services, vocational training, enterprise development and livestock restocking. Beneficiaries include, but are not limited to, former combatants. The program is notable for being the largest program in the north aimed at promoting employment among vulnerable youth. Programs directed at youth only began in earnest in 2004 and 2005, however, and cover a relatively small proportion of the population. While it has been an important complement to reintegration programs in the north, it has not been a substitute,

## **6. Challenges and lessons learned**

### ***Limits to the reception center approach***

Reception centers represented the first and most comprehensive attempt at large-scale reintegration of formerly abducted youth. They are widely credited with having played an instrumental role in the reinsertion of youth back into their families and communities. In addition to providing basic medical care, anthropologist Tim Allen (2005) has emphasized their importance as “liminal space”—a place for youth to begin their transition from the bush to “normal” life. Social workers also seek to provide youth with counseling and advice-giving, individually or in groups. Perhaps most importantly, reception centers proved adept at locating the immediate and extended families of returned youth and arranging reunification.

In retrospect, the reception center approach can be criticized on several grounds. First, one perhaps ought to question what is meant by “reintegration” in the context of the mass displacement of the Acholi people. The life most youth return to is bleak. Youth returning from abduction are sent to live with their families in cramped and crowded internal displacement camps. The vast majority live relatively idle and impoverished lives—at the time of the survey, 23 percent of young males out of school had not found any

work at all in the previous month, and even when ‘employed’ they found an average of just 14 days work with gross earnings less of than two dollars a day. Water and sanitation in the camps are poor. Mortality rates are among the highest in the world, even compared to other complex emergencies (WHO, 2005). All livestock have been lost to rebels and raiders, and by army decree there is no access to land more than a mile from the camp. Thus people are denied a livelihood. While the threat of a rebel attacks make people fear to leave, their presence in camps is also demanded by the government army (under threat of imprisonment or death). These camps are therefore prisons in a very real sense. In this context, as pointed out by Tim Allen (2005), reintegration could be regarded as the process of turning young men and women into good inmates.

A second challenge with the reception centers is their partial coverage. Although NGOs have long suspected that passage through such a center is only partial, until now no data have been available to indicate the proportion. The survey data suggests that, for those taken at least two weeks, only half pass through a reception centre. Rates are lowest for those taken less than a month (roughly one third) and highest for those abducted more than a year (more than two-thirds). These figures are alarmingly low, especially given that passage through a reception center is the primary means by which a youth receives NGO assistance and that, as we will see below, even short abductions seem to have substantial adverse impacts on education, health, and livelihoods.

### *Challenges facing the Amnesty program*

Of some concern is the government’s payment of ‘reinsertion packages’ to former combatants via the Amnesty Commission. While the payout of reinsertion packages followed, and thus were not covered by, the survey, community meeting to present and discuss the survey findings coincided with the first payouts of reinsertion packages in 2006. The evidence on the Amnesty program is thus largely anecdotal, and awaits serious evaluation.

Reinsertion packages are generous by local standards, and are thus highly desired. Packages, however, have been paid out to former combatants slowly and in piecemeal fashion. In most cases the payouts come years after an abductee’s return. More seriously, at the time of distribution, resentment of these packages was high among non-abducted youth and households. Those not abducted by the armed group have suffered a great deal due to war violence and displacement, and the public payment of relative ge-

nerous packages to abductees (who may themselves have committed terrible acts against the community) years after the fact appeared to have rankled the community leaders and individuals interviewed by the authors. Upon revisiting communities 12 months later, discontent was no longer apparent. Nevertheless, the approach seems to carry with it serious risks.<sup>12</sup> For example, following several LRA attacks in Pader County, it was reported to the authors that community members were listening to a radio discussion about the Amnesty Commission packages given to former LRA combatants and they insisted that if the Amnesty Commission opened an office in their sub-county, they would “burn it down”. They emphasized how unfair it was that the returnees—abducted or not—benefited from services while those who are merely victims were left with nothing. Similar sentiments were echoed in meetings in several communities, arousing by far the more intense emotions and discussion of any issue in the meeting.

Several additional issues plague the payout of reinsertion packages, and will continue to challenge any future DDR programs planned or underway. First, the line between combatants and non-combatants is blurry because of the nature of recruitment and abduction. In particular, most abductions are short in length. One long-term abductee explained in apparent frustration, “I would like to know why some formerly abducted who took a short duration in captivity, like 5 weeks, are now getting assistance but some like us who took over 10 years are not yet getting anything from the government.” These frustrations are often aggravated by a lack of transparency in the targeting, timing, and appropriateness of the packages. For instance, the same youth asked whether, “in giving packages to us—the formerly abducted people—in the future, will there be any criteria or differences in giving these packages depending on the duration one took in captivity?”

Second, while joining the rebel group is almost always involuntary, those who remain with the group for a long time do exercise some agency, perhaps a great degree. For instance, 44 percent of abductees taken longer than two weeks report having felt allegiance to Kony and the LRA at some time. Majorities were involved in looting, stealing, and violence against civilians. A quarter were forced to kill at some time, often a civilian. The disproportionate targeting of aid to perpetrators over victims may lead to increased resentment. In particular, several former abductees explained that it is difficult to watch the top commanders rewarded. One youth who was with the LRA for 10 years explained that, “sometimes the

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<sup>12</sup> There are many questions surrounding the use and appropriateness of the Amnesty Act, many of which have been addressed by Allen & Schomerus (2006).

thought comes as to why it is that we are not getting any assistance. Not even 50 shillings and yet the former LRA leaders who did more evil are being paid money and for us we are living like dogs. The government does not think about us but about those leaders.”

### **7. Reintegration program design: The wrong focus?**

The chief problem with reintegration programs in northern Uganda may be the focus on broad-based psychosocial assistance to the ‘traumatized’ former combatant. A survey-based assessment of the impacts of abduction suggests that the most pervasive and arguably largest impact is on education and livelihoods rather than physical or psychological trauma.

The LRA’s recruitment tactics provide a unique but tragic opportunity to identify the lasting impacts of military service and the gaps to be filled by reintegration programs. In most contexts, ex-fighters are a selected segment of the population, including those who chose to join, those screened by the armed group, and those more vulnerable to abduction. Thus a comparison of combatants to non-combatants confuses the impacts of abduction and combat experiences with pre-existing differences. In Uganda, however, not only was there no self-selection into the rebel group, but LRA abductions appear to also be independent of all of a youth’s characteristics other than age (Blattman & Annan, 2007). That is, there appear to be no differences in pre-abduction wealth, education, and orphaning between those youth that were abducted and non-abducted. Non-combatant youth of the same age and location as abducted youth can therefore be used as a comparison group, and the impacts thereby identified.

#### ***Psychological reintegration***

Based on these comparisons, there appears to be little basis for the emphasis on disabling trauma. The survey and interview evidence suggest that on average formerly abducted youth appear similar in their mental health to youth in the area who have not been abducted. The majority of youth—both abducted and non-abducted—report low levels of psychological distress symptoms and high levels of prosocial behavior. Frequent symptoms of distress are concentrated in a minority of abductees, especially those that experienced the most extreme violence—roughly a sixth of abductees.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Annan (2007) for an in-depth discussion of the psychosocial impacts, including risk and protective factors.

The predominant story of these youth is one of psychological resilience, with family acceptance and associated with the strongest resiliency among youth. Overall, family acceptance is remarkably high. Only 1% of youth report that their family was unhappy or unwelcoming upon their return. Over 94% of the youth report being accepted by their families without insult, blame or physical aggression. From a 23-year old who was abducted for 2 months: “When I just came home, I was really happy to be home. I couldn’t realize whether people hated me or not. Life in the bush was not for people but for animals. I found life good at home. Both of my parents were alive. No neighbors said anything bad to me.”

A minority experience frequent distress symptoms such as nightmares, flashbacks, withdrawal, and hyper-arousal. These symptoms are often interpreted as spiritual haunting, or *cen*, and seen as both individually harmful and as potentially polluting to the family and community. Such serious distress appears to be closely associated to the degree of violence experienced and committed. From the survey data, each additional act of violence reported by a former abductee (out of twelve major types of incidents) is associated with a (roughly) ten percent increase in reported levels of distress (Annan, 2007; Blattman & Annan, 2007).<sup>14</sup> This link between violence and distress holds for non-abducted youth as well.

### *Social reintegration*

The reception from the community, while typically strong and welcoming, was not quite so unanimous. While almost no one reported that their community blamed them for the things they had done, more than a quarter of returnees said that they were insulted by community members upon return, or that community members were afraid of them. Even so, these insults and fear did not seem to deter their long-term reintegration: 94% reported that they felt “very” or “somewhat” accepted by their community at the time. Moreover, there was no significant difference between the abducted and non-abducted in reported levels of 14 concrete forms of social support, suggesting that former abducted youth are able to find support within their communities.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This estimate controls for potentially confounding factors such as length of abduction. The experience or commission of violence is not exogenous, of course, so we must be cautious with a causal interpretation of the violence-distress link. For instance, if sociopathic tendencies lead some abductees to commit more violence as well as feel less remorse, we might underestimate the causal relationship between violence and distress. Other confounding factors may likewise lead our estimate to over- or under-state the causal relationship.

<sup>15</sup> Examples of social support include whether in the previous month someone lend you money or belongings, watched your belongings while you were away, comforted you when you were sad, gave you advice or counsel, and so forth.

Where persecution of formerly abducted youth by the community takes place, however, it seems to take specific forms and follow regular patterns. First, alcohol is often part of the problem. Youth report that verbal abuse often comes from drunken community members. Further, arguments are often about scarcity of resources. Second, returnees were least accepted and sometimes persecuted by grieving parents and families whose children had not yet returned. Returnees explain that relatives of unreturned youth would angrily ask them why they returned when their children were not so fortunate. From a youth abducted for three years, “When I returned, some people used very bad and unkind language because some of them whose sons and daughters were abducted but did not return felt bad that I returned.” Third, these insults seem to occur more frequently when there is rebel activity in the area. Unable to react against the LRA, the community seems to displace their anger onto the youth who have already returned. Fourth, children who return with some marks from the rebels such as any form of deforming injury or disability take quite sometime to adjust because they are teased and constantly reminded of their experience. Those who exhibit abnormal behavior that is labeled as spiritual pollution (*cen*) seem to be more stigmatized as well.

Finally, particular youth are targeted and insulted when the community knows or suspects they were involved in raids or killings, as this 18-year-old youth describes, “I think they are talking like that because when I was abducted, the rebels beat me and asked me to show them where goats could be got. So I showed them the neighbor’s goats because we didn’t have goats of our own. So ever since I returned, the owners of these goats are on my case and some have very bad thoughts about me and I think some of them can even kill me. And I think that if it were possible, I should not continue staying in [my camp].” A social worker from a reception centre later disclosed that this youth was actually known to have killed some members of the community and that they had discussed several alternative living situations for him. He also described how recent attacks made the situation worse for him: “...In case you heard about the recent ambushes on the roads, they took place last week but its making life very hard for me. Because wherever people see me, they say, ‘Look at the murderer. There he is passing.’”

### ***Educational and economic reintegration***

While psychologically and socially resilient on average, the survey-based analysis imply a large and broad-based impact of forcible recruitment upon education and earnings—impacts that come as a conse-



quence of time spent with the rebel group in the bush rather in school or acquiring employment experience. The average loss of schooling is roughly nine months, almost exactly the same amount as the average length of abduction. This schooling loss, while seemingly moderate, has a disproportionate impact on a youth's skills. Former abductees are also twice as likely to be illiterate, in part because the years of schooling missed by adolescent abductees—grades six and seven—are ones where students in Uganda typically learn to read and write. The economic consequences of this skill loss are substantial. Abducted youth are half as likely to be engaged in skill- or capital-intensive employment, and have a third lower daily earnings. The education gap seems to account for nearly two-thirds of this earnings gap, followed by loss of experience and injuries.

The evidence suggests that these educational and economic gaps are not driven by exposure to violent trauma, but rather time out of civilian education and labor market experience. Longer abductions, not violent trauma experienced, are associated with the greatest gaps in education, skilled employment and wages. A decomposition of wages into the individual components of human capital suggest that the gap in education among abductees appears to account for roughly 60% of the gap in wages and productivity. Since children and adolescents are more likely to have their education interrupted than young adults, the education and wage impact of child soldiering is greater than that for adults ones.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that abducted youth are engaged in lower-productivity employment. Local labor markets could be characterized as an occupational ladder increasing in skill and resource requirements, which a youth gradually ascends through the slow accumulation of education and capital. One young man's experience is representative of that relayed by many youth: "I began [my business] when I was still at home. I was making charcoal. But when people came to the camps, I started riding a boda boda [bicycle taxi]... I used to ride as a boda boda on all the roads but when the rebels started killing boda boda cyclists along the way. I left this job and then started studying. ... [Later] the money that I had saved helped me to start this business." By many accounts, abduction interrupts a youth's ascent up this ladder, or pulls him off one rung and places him on a lower one.

Abducted youth exhibit some catch-up over time. Among former abductees in our sample, the education and wage gap is smaller the longer a youth has been back since abduction, after controlling for potentially confounding factors such as length and age of abduction. However, the gap does not appear to close

fully, suggesting that, in the absence of significant economic and educational interventions, abduction has led to a persistent gap, or inequality, between ex-combatants and non-combatants in the population.

### *Violence and alienation*

A final concern is that abduction and war violence may increase youth' hostility, aggression, and political alienation. There is only weak evidence to support this view. Formerly abducted males were no more likely to have been in a physical fight in the past month, and there was no difference in reported attitudes towards spousal abuse. Overall, levels of violence are not high, and we observe little difference among abducted youth. As a technical school teacher explained, "None of them [former abductees] has yet displayed any serious form of indiscipline like theft or physical fights." Rather, "it's the non-abducted students who are very stubborn [defiant]," he explained, "There is always some fear in the formerly abducted students but this goes away say after the first year and after this, you can hardly differentiate the formerly abducted and the non-abducted."

Fewer than five percent of all youth reported behaviors and attitudes associated with hostility (such as cursing, taking things without permission, or getting angry for little reason). Former abductees were, however, somewhat more likely to self-report such behaviors. It is difficult to interpret such self-reported disparities in the absence of any evidence of differences in actions. It may reflect a willingness to admit to hostile feelings rather than real changes in behavior.

As for political exclusion, preliminary results suggest that political engagement actually *increases* as a consequence of abduction. Formerly abducted youth were one quarter more likely to vote in the 2005 referendum, and were twice as likely to report holding a community leadership position (Blattman, 2007). Abduction has little relationship with other, non-political forms of participation such community group or committee membership, however. The principal determinant of this heightened political engagement, moreover, appears to be the degree of violence experienced—more violence is associated with a greater propensity to vote and be a community leader. Indeed, violence experienced while abducted appears to be the only war experience that is significantly and consistently relate to political participation, and accounts for nearly all of the observed relationship between abduction and participation. Evidence presented in Blattman (2007) suggests that this link from violence to political action is most consistent with theories of

‘expressive’ participation, whereby youth are motivated to action by a desire to express frustration over adverse past experiences and right past wrongs.

## **8. Implications for peacebuilding and security**

With new evidence at hand, it is worth considering whether child soldiers are indeed “a time bomb” that “threaten stability and growth” as feared. In northern Uganda at least, the adverse impacts on growth are much more obvious than those on stability. There is no obvious evidence of violence or political alienation, and indeed the opposite may be true. The economic and educational gaps, however, appear large and seemingly persistent and with so many youth affected, the aggregate consequences for the region’s income and growth are undoubtedly large.

Of course, what may be more important for predicting future security risks is not an average increase in the propensity for violence, but rather an increased risk of violence among a very small group. After all, both Kony’s movement and previous guerrilla movements in northern Uganda were begun by a small handful of distrustful and dislocated professional soldiers (Behrend, 1999). What happens in a very small, statistically ‘invisible’ group may thus be more important than the average impact on the bulk of ex-combatants.

Related to this concern, a real risk is that the poverty and inequality that come as a result of war and abduction increase the likelihood of future conflict. Some scholars of civil war have suggested the idea of an economic ‘conflict trap’, where the adverse economic impacts of war make the outbreak of further conflict more likely. Some theorize that poverty leads to increased rebellion, as individuals may have relatively more to gain from soldiering than peace when economic opportunities are poor (e.g. Grossman & Kim, 1995; Sambanis, 2004; Walter, 2004). Others argue that inequality, perhaps even that arising between combatants and non-combatants, leads to greater discontent and, ultimately, rebellion and turmoil (e.g. Gurr, 1971). This study draws a fairly concrete link between participation in civil conflict and persistent poverty and inequality. The link from there to violence has yet to be made, however, and ought to be a focus of future research.

## **9. Implications for reintegration program design and targeting**

The evidence from male youth in Uganda suggests that more targeted psychosocial programs and broad-based economic and educational recovery programs are most appropriate.

### ***Targeted, specialized, and culturally relevant psychosocial interventions***

Psychologically, a minority of former combatants experience frequent symptoms of distress. Furthermore, a small number of youth continue to be harassed by community members or are estranged from their families. These youth seem to need more than what is offered through the current general psychosocial programs and network of helpers, and assisting them may take more specialized interventions than the wide-scale community-based programming that has been taking place. Moreover, these services need to be culturally-relevant and draw on local resources.

Culturally-appropriate individual or group symptom-reduction interventions are likely to be the most successful approach for some of the most extreme cases that have not improved with the available social networks and interventions (such as ceremonies, prayers, or recreational activities). In northern Uganda there are currently a handful of diploma-level counselors who have been trained in mental health interventions. Many are working in full-time positions in other capacities, however, and are only able to meet with their cases on occasion due to travel and time constraints. Building the capacity and reach of these counselors as well as increasing the number of counselors able to provide interventions would help to treat this population.

For those youth who continue to be stigmatized by the community, it is not clear that the current approach—broad-based community-sensitization meetings and public messages—will address the causes of the stigmatization. As discussed above, stigmatization and conflict are often between the youth and a specific handful of people over specific and persistent grievances. Rather than large-scale sensitization campaigns, family- and community-based conflict resolution interventions might better address the issues that are emerging.

Anecdotal evidence collected alongside the survey also suggests that resentment runs high in communities over the targeting of the formerly abducted for aid and assistance. While the survey and research design did not allow a formal evaluation of reintegration packages and programs, above we noted post-survey interviews with individual youth, as well as community meetings with both youth and elders in

eight camps, that suggest that the targeting of former abductees continues to upset and offend many community members. Stigmatization rather than reintegration may be the unintended consequence of such an approach to service delivery. As discussed below, targeting youth according to well-identified needs rather than combatant status may be less stigmatizing and more effective.

### ***Broad-based economic and educational interventions***

The survey and interview evidence suggest that formerly abducted youth have a deficit of education and experience, and may need assistance to get back on track. In the current war economy, youth face an occupational ladder of entrepreneurial activities, ascending in skill and capital intensity. A best strategy may be to support them in this climb through programs that increase their access to skills, equipment, and working capital (i.e. start-up and operating funds). Official reintegration packages, providing cash and household items years after return, likely do little to help youth make up their losses and increase their productivity. Many NGO programs appear to have done better, promoting skills training and micro-enterprises. Of course, there have been no evaluations of the success of these programs, and so their actual impact upon economic development and reintegration is unknown.

Even if effective, however, the promotion of entrepreneurial activities is at best a short-term solution, and a partial one at that. The survey evidence suggests that most youth earn only a meager income from the casual labor and odd jobs that form the basis of employment in camp economies. Increasing the supply of these services by scaling-up of vocational training and enterprise development programs will soon run up against an inevitable constraint: a lack of demand. It is far from clear that camp economies can support more kiosks, more tailors, more charcoal production, or more bicycle taxis. The economics is simple: as these services increase, prices will fall, making such activities unprofitable for all.

The only real option for helping households generate a real income appears to be a return to the original productive base of the northern Ugandan economy: a combination subsistence farming, cash-cropping, and livestock rearing. Yet until recently there has been little or no government or NGO focus on returning people to the land, increasing agricultural productivity (through access to inputs or extension services), or re-stocking the cattle population of the north. Cattle stocks in particular are thought to have fallen from hundreds of thousands in the 1980s to nearly zero today.

Finally, in terms of closing the education gap, age-appropriate educational interventions will be required for adolescents and young adults. Understandably, the bulk of attention so far has been upon keeping primary schools open and running. These programs do little to help the bulk of ex-combatants returning from conflict, and indeed little to help youth over 15 years of age more generally. These are an important group. The 11% of youth who are illiterate are almost all unschooled young adults, and it has severely reduced their earnings opportunities. At the time of writing, however, there were no fast-track literacy and numeracy programs in operation in the north.<sup>16</sup> Most youth who missed out on primary school have no other option than to rejoin primary classes with children many years younger. The sole adult-oriented program in existence, which uses the government adult literacy curriculum, serves the young adult population but uses methods and materials geared towards primary students. It also moves at the same pace as regular primary school—one year for each standard—a pace that few adults can afford given their financial, parental, and social obligations.

### *Targeting based on needs rather than combatant status*

The anecdotal evidence is strongly suggestive that targeting of former combatants as a group is counter-productive, primarily because it can be stigmatizing within the community. As an alternative, broad-based, inclusive support, as we have advocated for education and economic programs, need not create categories or stigmatization, especially when they are both merit- and need-based. Rather, targeting programs to *all* war-affected youth based on well-identified needs rather than combatant status may be more effective and less stigmatizing than current categories of vulnerability, and yet still reach the most vulnerable by default. As discussed in Annan et al. (2006), the markers for vulnerability include serious injuries, illiteracy, low levels of education (i.e. less than three years), persistent unemployment, estrangement from families, severe symptoms of psychological distress, and conflicts with community members. Moving from a system of circumstantial categorization to one based on specific, easily identified, and acute needs promises more effective and less stigmatizing targeting of assistance.

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<sup>16</sup> In 2005 and 2006, an adult literacy program was launched in Gulu with support from the International Rescue Committee. The program, however, used a standard (children's) curriculum and required that as many years be spent in the program as years of education received—that is, the program did not provide fast-track opportunities for adults.

## **10. How applicable are lessons from the Ugandan case?**

Can such findings and recommendations be generalized beyond northern Uganda? In spite of the special circumstances in Uganda, evidence from other conflicts suggests that the general patterns we observe among Ugandan ex-combatants may hold true in other settings. For instance, the psychosocial resilience of the average youth is consistent with the idea that resilience is ordinary rather than extraordinary (Masten, 2001). What is remarkable is that this resilience is ‘ordinary’ even in an area of such extreme violence, something that varies widely across different studies (e.g. Ajdukovic & Ajdukovic, 1998; Dyregrov, Gjestad, & Raundalen, 2002; Dyregrov, Gupta, Gjestad, & Mukanoheli, 2000). The relationship between increased exposure to violence and higher emotional distress is similar to other findings (Mollica, Poole, Son, Murray, & Tor, 1997). Moreover, the relationship between violence, long-term reintegration success, and political participation is consistent with evidence from post-war Sierra Leone (Bellows & Miguel, 2006; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2005). Finally, the economist Joshua Angrist (1990, 1998) has also found a large negative earnings impact from military service among white American youth drafted into the Vietnam War. As in northern Uganda, the source of this earnings gap appears to be time away from civilian education and work experience. While only a handful of data points exist, the similarity of findings in such disparate circumstances is striking. While levels of income, schooling, and economic activity will change across contexts, what may remain constant is the relative gap between ex-combatants and civilians, the greater prevalence of economic and educational impacts relative to psychosocial ones, and the relevant channels of impact.

In the meantime, it is worth considering special features of the Ugandan case, to thereby understand whether larger, smaller, or completely dissimilar results could be expected in other contexts. There are several seemingly special features of the Ugandan case. First, we are dealing with the reintegration of conscripts rather than volunteers. While the results are most easily generalized to other instances of forcible recruitment, they may actually understate the consequences of voluntary participation in other unpopular armed groups. Popular discourse in Uganda holds that the abducted should not be held accountable for their actions. Parents of non-abducted children, for instance, frequently noted in interviews that it could just as easily have been their child that was taken, and all recognize the importance for their community of welcoming back the two fifths of young males that were taken over the years. The remarkable community response observed in Uganda directly diminishes the social exclusion of abducted children,

and indirectly may mute the economic, social and psychological impacts. That is, volunteer recruits, had they existed, might not have been so easily forgiven and reintegrated into the community. Globally a third of child soldiers are thought to be forcibly recruited (ILO, 2003). For the other two thirds of child soldiers, who might not receive as warm a welcome after war, the treatment effects estimated in this paper might be regarded as a minimum impact.

Second, the armed group was highly unpopular, poor, and unskilled, and few investments were made in training youth. Alternatively, had participation in the armed group offered social prestige, relevant training and experience, or a chance at enrichment, then we might have observed fewer gaps in the economic performance of former combatants. For instance, in the same study of US Vietnam veterans discussed above, Angrist (1990) found that African-American draftees experienced a net gain in long-term earnings. Angrist speculates that the effect may be due to a willingness by employers to hire black veterans over non-veterans after the war. Also, the training and experience available to black males in the US army may have been superior to the limited options available to them in a relatively unequal US labor market.

A third unique feature of the Ugandan case is that the majority of abductees were children at the time of abduction. This cruel focus appears to have come as a consequence of the LRA's dependence on forcible recruitment—under coercion, young adolescents appear to have made more dependable recruits due to their propensity to become indoctrinated or be more easily disoriented. Where rebel groups possess more resources or command greater respect or support, a higher proportion of the rebel group is likely to be adult. The evidence from Uganda suggests that the impacts of soldiering on adults will be less than that for child soldiers when the returns to education are greater than the returns to work experience. One reason is that wages and productivity in northern Uganda appear much more responsive to additional education than to additional work experience. Another is that work experience may also be more easily regained than education, especially where remedial education programs are scarce. Children, who trade schooling for soldiering, may thus experience greater long-term economic losses than adults, who are more likely to miss out on work experience. In economies where the relative return to work experience is greater, however, the opposite could be true.

Before we can make any such conclusions and generalizations with confidence, however, there is an acute need for more research in more zones of conflict. Moreover, to understand which reintegration



programs have what impacts and unintended consequences, evaluations of DDR will be required. While research such as that reviewed in this chapter may help identify the gaps between combatants and non-combatants as a consequence of conflict, the ability of government and NGOs to fill these gaps—a key determinant of the allocation of reintegration resources—is still unknown. Moreover, the potentially adverse unintended impacts on combatants—whether stigmatization or other still hidden effects—compel us to ensure that DDR programs are doing no harm. The aim should be to move from *ad hoc* to evidence-based policy in post-conflict reintegration, redevelopment, and peace-building.

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