Children are disproportionately affected by hostilities and weapons. The image that one associates with the plight of children in war is that of a young boy in tattered clothes holding an assault rifle alongside fighting parties, at the risk of the child’s life. Children are affected in multiple ways: schools and hospitals are attacked, and education or health personnel are threatened or killed using weapons, children are subjected to abduction, rape and other forms of sexual violence under threat of weapons, and humanitarian actors cannot access children due to insecurity perpetuated by available weapons.

The complex interaction of the legal arms trade, illicit diversion, illegal arms trafficking, lack of enforcement capacity, insecurity and corruption too often leads to weapons ending up in the hands of children. The uncontrolled availability of and trafficking in weapons, in particular small arms and light weapons, poses a threat to children and contributes to violations of their most fundamental rights. Furthermore, the availability of weapons destabilizes communities and exacerbates situations of insecurity, including by facilitating the commission of serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law, such as direct violence against children. While direct effects include deaths, maiming, sexual violence, recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups, and mental and psychological harm; there are also long-term socio-economic consequences, such as denial of the right to education and health, the delivery of life-saving humanitarian assistance, and the denial of a self-determined future in peace and dignity for children.

In 2021, the situation of children in armed conflict was marked by a sustained high number of grave violations (SYMBOL SG report on children and armed conflict). In this context, escalation of conflict, the multiplication of armed actors and intensification of armed clashes, often fuelled by the availability of and trafficking in small arms and light weapons, as well as growing disregard for international humanitarian law and international human rights law had a severe impact on the protection of children. Cross-border spill-over of conflicts and intercommunal violence affected children in regions awash with guns and other weapons, in particular in the Central Sahel and Lake Chad basin regions. The use of landmines, IEDs, ERW and explosive weapons in populated areas and their availability further compounded the grave vulnerabilities that children face, putting them at risk of grave violations of their rights.

Mitigating the impact of conventional arms, including small arms and light weapons, is central to ensuring that children do not bear the brunt of armed conflict as they currently do. Staggering numbers of children killed, maimed or recruited and used are verified by the United Nations in 21 situations on the children and armed conflict agenda and in the Lake Chad basin, and these grave violations against children are the most verified grave violations year after year. More worrying still, other grave violations are rising, notably rape and other forms of sexual violence, and abductions, particularly targeting girls. Continued high levels of denial of humanitarian access to children, and attacks on protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals, remain a concern.