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Social Science & Medicine

Volume 34, Issue 5, March 1992, Pages 533-548

Guatemalan Indian children and the sociocultural effects of government-sponsored terrorisms

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[https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(92\)90209-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(92)90209-9)

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Abstract

The effects of government-sponsored terrorism, characteristic of the contemporary Central American Civil wars, are particularly devastating to children. In Guatemala, the Mayan population felt the worst of a systematic and brutal counterinsurgency, where over 400 rural villages were destroyed between 1981 and 1983. This research is intended to elucidate selected characteristics of the psychosocial trauma of civil war as experienced by Guatemalan Mayan children, to describe some of the sociocultural effects of civil war on the children's Mayan ethnic identity those factors that helped them to survive severe trauma and loss.

Specifically, during the summer of 1988, 32 children in Guatemala and 36 exiled in Mexico, between the ages of 8 and 16, participated in research designed to compare the

negative effects of civil war and the adaptive capabilities of children who have experienced the trauma of the loss of immediate family members, the witnessing of violent crimes and the displacement from their homes. In addition to a semi-structured, open-ended interview and taped personal story/testimonies, several traditional psychological instruments were used to facilitate our understanding of the overall well-being of these children who have been affected by systematic violence.

The long-term effects of this trauma cannot be fully anticipated, but the results suggest that these children suffer an abiding fear and face many uncertainties. The children in the orphanages in Guatemala have few expectations for the future and those in refugee camps in Mexico see a bleak future with few opportunities besides survival. The training and preparation of community mental health workers is a realistic possibility with positive effects for the psychic health of the children.



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Keywords

children of war; terrorism; children's survival resources; community health workers

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Government-sponsored terrorism or violence is a characteristic of current civil war in Latin America, designed to discourage popular uprisings that respond to the lack of access to resources and services that are necessary for survival.

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