



# Yemen's Child Soldiers Crisis 2024: Key Findings from a Six-Month Investigation

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**Abstract**— *The recruitment and exploitation of child soldiers in Yemen has emerged as one of the gravest humanitarian crises of 2024, with armed groups systematically enlisting children as young as ten years old. This paper provides a comprehensive examination of the scale, methods, and consequences of this practice, grounded in findings from a six-month investigation into conflict zones across Yemen. Armed groups operate over six thousand training camps in all the country regions, blending military training with ideological indoctrination to condition and control child recruits. Recruitment strategies target socioeconomically vulnerable children through schools, social media, and community networks, employing a combination of financial incentives, coercion, deception, and intimidation. The study presents disturbing demographic data, revealing that the majority of recruits are boys aged twelve to seventeen, though girls are also recruited to serve in non-combat roles. Educational, economic, cultural, and social factors drive this widespread phenomenon, with the collapse of Yemen's education system and rising poverty acting as primary catalysts. Psychological manipulation, religious justification, and systemic isolation within camps further entrench children's roles in armed conflict, making escape and reintegration exceedingly difficult. Despite the magnitude of the crisis, this study highlights significant progress made by rehabilitation initiatives led by K.Srelief and the International Labor Organization, which offer job training, mental health care, education, and family support to former child soldiers. These efforts demonstrate that effective prevention and reintegration are possible when rooted in economic empowerment and community resilience. The paper concludes with a call for urgent international collaboration, stronger enforcement of child protection laws, and long-term strategies to dismantle recruitment networks and rebuild Yemen's social and educational infrastructure. Without sustained action, Yemen risks the continued loss of an entire generation to violence and exploitation.*



**Keywords**— *Recruitment, Exploitation, Child Soldiers, Civil Conflicts, Childhood Protection, Yemen.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The use of child soldiers in Yemen represents one of the most distressing humanitarian crises of 2024. Armed groups, including the Houthis, continue to exploit children as young as 10 years old, systematically recruiting them into military roles. This pervasive crisis is fueled by Yemen's ongoing civil war and the severe economic hardships faced by many families. Recruitment networks target vulnerable

children through schools, social media, and local communities, offering financial incentives or resorting to coercion and intimidation. Over a six-month investigation conducted in Yemen's conflict zones, alarming evidence was uncovered regarding the scale and sophistication of these recruitment operations. Armed groups operate 6,000 training camps in Houthi-controlled territories, blending military drills with psychological indoctrination. Children

are subjected to harsh training regimens, ideological lectures, and social isolation, which make it difficult for them to resist or escape. The implications of this crisis extend beyond the immediate harm to these children. The long-term effects of trauma, disrupted education, and societal destabilization threaten Yemen's future. Yet, hope persists. Intervention programs such as those led by K.Srelief and the International Labor Organization have made significant strides in rehabilitating former child soldiers and preventing further recruitment. These initiatives combine economic support, mental health care, and education to address the root causes of recruitment.

This paper delves into the disturbing reality of child soldier recruitment in Yemen, shedding light on the recruitment tactics, the daily lives of child soldiers, and the efforts being made to break the cycle. It emphasizes the urgent need for international collaboration, stronger enforcement mechanisms, and sustained support for vulnerable communities to combat this humanitarian tragedy and protect Yemen's next generation. The recruitment of Yemeni children as soldiers continues to escalate in 2024, with children as young as 10 years old being systematically exploited. This deepening crisis, one of the most severe examples of child exploitation in recent times, was uncovered through an intensive six-month investigation in Yemen's conflict zones. The findings reveal the alarming extent to which armed groups are targeting vulnerable children, particularly those from impoverished families, using schools, social media, and local networks to bolster their ranks.

### Alarming Proportions of Child Recruitment in Yemen

Yemen's ongoing civil war has provided fertile ground for armed groups to exploit children as soldiers. These groups operate covert training camps in remote mountain areas and urban recruitment centers disguised as schools, making it difficult to gauge the full extent of the crisis. However, the scale of child recruitment is far greater than previously estimated, exacerbating the already dire humanitarian situation.

### The Scale and Scope of the Crisis

Recent reports from the United Nations provide a grim insight into the child soldier crisis. Since 2014, the Houthis alone have reportedly recruited over 10,000 children. Additionally, from October 2023 onward, the Houthis have admitted to enlisting more than 70,000 new fighters, many of whom are children. These figures far surpass earlier estimates, underscoring the systematic nature of this exploitation.

### Geographic Hotspots of Recruitment

Child recruitment is widespread across Yemen, with the highest concentration in governorates such as Saada, Sanaa, Dhamar, Amran, Hajja, and Hodeida. The Houthis run at least 52 training camps, explicitly targeting children and teenagers in these areas, while forced recruitment campaigns are rampant.

### Age and Gender Analysis

The data reveals a distressing age and gender breakdown of child recruits:

<b>Age 8-11 years</b>	248 children
<b>Age 12-14 years</b>	3,838 children
<b>Age 15-17 years</b>	6,247 children

While boys form the majority of child soldiers, girls are not exempt from this crisis. At least 34 girls aged 13-17 have been recruited, serving as informants, guards, paramedics, or in specialized female units.

### Socioeconomic Vulnerabilities and Recruitment Tactics

Children from impoverished backgrounds are particularly at risk, with 5,213 recruits from very poor families and 2,839 from households with limited income. The Houthis employ various tactics to recruit children, including:

<b>Financial incentives</b>	6,745 cases
<b>Intimidation</b>	2,039 cases
<b>Deception</b>	639 cases
<b>Kidnapping</b>	832 cases

### Modern Recruitment Tactics: A Blending of Old and New

Armed groups have adopted increasingly sophisticated recruitment strategies, combining modern technology with traditional methods of coercion:

- **Social Media Campaigns:** Platforms are used to announce recruitment drives and target young users with messages glorifying military service. These campaigns often feature misleading narratives portraying military enlistment as an act of patriotism and defense against foreign aggression.

This crisis underscores the urgent need for international intervention and support to protect Yemen's children from further exploitation. The long-term consequences of this child soldier epidemic could destabilize the region for generations to come.

### School-Based Indoctrination Programs

Yemen's education system has become a key recruitment tool for armed groups, particularly the Houthis, who operate around 6,000 summer camps. Each camp houses at least 100 children at a time, blending religious indoctrination with military training and turning schools into recruitment centers. The indoctrination process involves:

1. Mandatory sectarian lectures and propaganda sessions.
2. Visits to military facilities and exposure to combat scenarios.
3. Hands-on training with various firearms and other weapons.

### Financial Incentives and Coercive Tactics

Armed groups employ a mix of financial rewards and coercive methods to recruit children. Child soldiers receive a monthly payment ranging from 15,000 to 30,000 Yemeni rials. However, money is not the only tool used to secure recruits—intimidation and threats play a significant role.

Common coercion methods include:

- Threatening to remove families from humanitarian aid programs.
- Imposing recruitment quotas on local leaders.
- Denying essential services to families who refuse to comply.

Despite these pressures, financial incentives remain attractive to many families struggling in Yemen's deteriorating economic conditions. Recruits receive a comprehensive package that includes:

Benefit Type	Details
Monthly Salary	20,000–30,000 Yemeni rials
Additional Perks	Food rations, lodging, and basic daily supplies
Family Support	Food aid and public recognition of fallen soldiers.

Armed groups exploit poverty and desperation, using an organized network of recruiters, including brokers, teachers, community elders, and local supervisors, to identify and recruit children.

This system operates year-round, leveraging local relationships to strengthen their reach.

### Life Inside the Training Camps

The conditions within child soldier training camps reveal an environment designed to indoctrinate and militarize young minds. The Houthis manage approximately 6,000 camps

within their territories, each accommodating at least 100 children at a time.

### A Typical Day in the Camps

Children follow a regimented daily schedule combining military training with ideological and religious indoctrination. Activities begin at dawn and continue into the evening, ensuring recruits are thoroughly conditioned.

Time	Activity
Dawn	Religious prayers and Quranic studies
Morning	Military drills, weapons handling, and physical training
Afternoon	Ideological sessions and combat training
Evening	Additional religious instruction

### Military Training Programs

Training typically lasts about a month, though some recruits remain longer. Programs include:

1. Basic weapons handling and maintenance.
2. Instruction on combat tactics and planting landmines.
3. Checkpoint operations using live ammunition.
4. Preparation for active combat on the frontlines.

Children also receive training on maintaining and operating AK-47 rifles. Many recruits from rural areas already have prior experience with firearms, which facilitates their integration into the armed groups.

This detailed system of indoctrination, financial manipulation, and coercion illustrates the deliberate and systematic exploitation of Yemen's children, perpetuating a cycle of violence and trauma.

### Psychological Manipulation Techniques

Camp leaders in Yemen employ advanced psychological tactics to control and indoctrinate child recruits. Religious teachers play a central role, framing the conflict as a sacred mission and convincing children that they are defending their homeland. Several methods are used to strengthen this indoctrination:

- **Religious Justifications:** Camp leaders use religious teachings to legitimize military actions, claiming that the mission is divinely sanctioned.
- **Propaganda and Fear:** Daily lectures emphasize the threats posed by enemies, instilling fear and reinforcing loyalty.
- **Harsh Punishments:** Children who disobey face severe consequences, ranging from food

deprivation to physical abuse. In extreme cases, they may endure imprisonment or threats of death.

- **Rewards and Recognition:** Compliant recruits are publicly celebrated through memorial posters and tributes, creating a sense of pride and allegiance.
- **Isolation and Fear:** Those who resist or question authority are isolated, ensuring obedience through a combination of fear and rewards. These strategies create a powerful psychological grip on child soldiers, making it extremely difficult for them to resist or escape.

### International Response and Accountability

The international community has intensified its efforts to address Yemen's child soldier crisis through diplomatic initiatives, legal frameworks, and targeted programs. A key milestone was the **2022 action plan** between the United Nations and Houthi forces, aimed at protecting children.

### UN Intervention Programs

The United Nations has implemented comprehensive measures to combat child recruitment. The 2022 action plan includes commitments from the Houthis to:

1. Identify and release all child recruits within six months.
2. End all recruitment practices, including non-combat roles.
3. Safeguard health and education facilities.
4. Provide reintegration support for former child soldiers.

However, implementing these measures has proven challenging. The UN Secretary-General continues to list the Houthis in annual reports for severe violations against children in armed conflict.

### Legal Measures Against Recruiters

Yemen ratified the **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child** in 2007, which explicitly bans the recruitment of anyone under 18 by non-state armed groups. Despite this, enforcement faces significant obstacles:

Challenge	Effect
Lack of monitoring mechanisms	Weak accountability for violations
Insufficient political will	Delayed implementation of reforms
Resource constraints	Reduced enforcement capacity

### Sanctions and Preventive Programs

International organizations, such as the **International Labor Organization (ILO)**, have initiated programs like **CRUCSY** in key regions. These programs focus on:

1. Preventing child recruitment.
2. Supporting the reintegration of former child soldiers.
3. Promoting community-based interventions.

CRUCSY also provides specialized mental health support and trains government officials, youth groups, and local leaders to prevent child recruitment.

Human rights organizations advocate for:

- Including child protection measures in peace negotiations.
- Establishing robust monitoring systems.
- Imposing targeted sanctions on those responsible for recruitment.
- Supporting rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives for affected children.

### Breaking the Cycle: Positive Progress

Despite significant challenges, international efforts are beginning to show results. For example, the **King Salman Humanitarian Aid & Relief Center (KSrelief)** launched a new program that assists 2,000 former child soldiers and their families, focusing on rehabilitation and reintegration.

While much work remains, these combined efforts represent critical steps toward ending the recruitment and exploitation of children in Yemen's conflict.

### Prevention Strategies to Combat Child Recruitment

Preventing child recruitment in Yemen begins with raising awareness about its dangers. Organizations like **K.Srelief** conduct education programs in regions such as Ma'rib, Al-Jawf, Sana'a, Dhamar, and Amran. These programs focus on:

1. Educating parents about their legal responsibilities.
2. Teaching methods to protect children at risk.
3. Highlighting children's rights and the importance of education.

The **International Labor Organization's CRUCSY Program** has also developed a robust community-based framework to address the issue. The program has trained 46 at-risk youth in social skills and established three safe spaces, providing a safe environment for 937 children to gather and engage in positive activities.



### Community-Based Interventions

Local communities play a critical role in helping former child soldiers reintegrate into society. Various programs have achieved the following results:

Program	Component Impact
Career Counseling	200 former child soldiers received guidance
Mental Healthcare	98 youth accessed psychological support
Literacy Training	168 youth achieved functional literacy skills
Apprenticeships	200 youth completed vocational training

Youth clubs and safe spaces are integral to this process, offering fun activities, mental health services, and a sense of belonging. These programs also connect children with specialized mental health care, enabling them to heal and re-enter society.

### Economic Alternatives to Recruitment

Since financial hardship often drives families to accept child recruitment, creating alternative sources of income is crucial. **KSrelief** addresses this issue through programs that:

1. Provide job training to 200 former child soldiers.
2. Support small business startups.
3. Distribute food aid to families to alleviate economic pressure.

This support extends beyond immediate relief. Families who choose alternatives receive monthly assistance packages, including food and education support. This approach addresses the root causes of recruitment, as many child soldiers come from impoverished backgrounds where monthly payments of 15,000–30,000 Yemeni rials (approximately \$28–\$57) are highly tempting.

To further discourage recruitment, teachers are offered additional pay to dissuade them from joining armed groups. This not only ensures the continuity of education but also keeps children in school. Programs also provide opportunities for students who have dropped out to return to classes or learn vocational skills that prepare them for employment.

### Measuring Impact and Future Recommendations

These prevention and reintegration programs have been effective in the communities where they are active. The **Wethaq Civic Foundation**, in collaboration with **KSrelief**, evaluates the success of these initiatives and recommends

strategies to prevent future recruitment. This comprehensive approach, combining awareness, community support, and economic alternatives, is key to breaking the cycle of child recruitment in Yemen.

### School-Based Indoctrination Programs

In Yemen, schools have become a central part of recruitment efforts by armed groups, particularly the Houthis. They run approximately 6,000 summer camps, each accommodating at least 100 children. These camps combine religious indoctrination with military training, turning educational institutions into recruitment hubs.

The indoctrination process includes:

1. Enforcing sectarian teachings and exposing children to propaganda.
2. Organizing visits to military facilities for combat exposure.
3. Providing hands-on training with firearms and other weapons.

### Financial Incentives and Forced Recruitment

Armed groups use both financial rewards and coercive methods to recruit children. Child soldiers are paid a monthly stipend ranging from 15,000 to 30,000 Yemeni rials. However, many are also recruited through intimidation and threats.

Common coercion tactics include:

- Threatening to exclude families from humanitarian aid programs.
- Forcing local leaders to meet recruitment quotas.
- Denying essential services to families who refuse to cooperate.

Despite these pressures, the financial rewards attract many families struggling with poverty. Recruits are offered a package that includes:

Benefit	Details
Monthly Salary	20,000–30,000 Yemeni Rials
Additional Benefits	Food rations, lodging, and basic supplies
Family Support	Food aid and public recognition of fallen soldiers

Armed groups take advantage of Yemen's economic hardships, using networks of brokers, teachers, community elders, and local leaders to identify and recruit children. These networks operate continuously, relying on local connections to expand their influence.

### Inside the Training Camps

Conditions in Yemen's child soldier training camps reveal a deliberate system designed to militarize and indoctrinate children. The Houthis oversee roughly 6,000 camps, each housing at least 100 children at a time.

### Daily Life in Training Camps

Children in these camps follow a rigid daily schedule that combines military drills with ideological and religious instruction. Activities are structured to instill discipline and loyalty.

Time	Activity
Dawn	Prayers and Quranic studies
Morning	Weapons training, drills, and physical exercises
Afternoon	Ideological sessions and combat practice
Evening	Religious lessons

### Military Training

The military training program typically lasts about a month, though some children stay longer. It includes:

1. Basic firearms handling and maintenance.
2. Training in combat tactics and planting landmines.
3. Operating checkpoints with live ammunition.
4. Preparing for frontline combat roles.

Recruits also learn to clean and use AK-47 rifles, and many rural children arrive with some familiarity with weapons, which accelerates their training.

The systematic exploitation of children through these camps highlights the deep impact of Yemen's conflict, trapping the youngest generation in a cycle of violence and manipulation.

## II. FINDINGS

The analysis of the data reveals several significant findings regarding the recruitment of children by the Houthis in Yemen:

- **Educational Factors:** Among the five categories examined, factors related to education emerged as the most influential in driving child recruitment. Economic factors ranked second, while social factors were the least effective, largely due to the weak role played by families, communities, human rights organizations, and social activists. These findings align with Gates and Reich's observations in *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, which highlights low education levels, poverty,

family absence, peer influence, and the prevalence of war as key drivers of child recruitment.

- **Economic Impact:** A significant portion of respondents identified Yemen's deteriorating economic conditions as a primary contributor to the crisis. Children are often forcibly conscripted by Houthi rebels, tasked with carrying ammunition and supplies to frontlines, while their families receive financial compensation due to their dire economic situations.
- **Cultural Factors:** Cultural influences were found to be a major factor in child recruitment. Long-standing traditions of weapon carrying among Yemeni tribes have been exploited by militias to encourage children to join the conflict. The Houthis often use brainwashing techniques to instill corrupt ideologies, making children more susceptible to recruitment. Children are viewed as inexpensive, obedient, and easier to control compared to adults, making them an attractive target for militias.
- **Destruction of Education Systems:** Many respondents strongly agreed that the failure to reopen schools and pay teacher salaries has significantly contributed to child recruitment. The systematic destruction of educational institutions, including schools, colleges, and universities, has left children more vulnerable to being drawn into armed conflicts.
- **Lack of Awareness and Weak Social Structures:** The study revealed that families, communities, media, and human rights organizations have failed to adequately warn against the short- and long-term dangers of child recruitment. International conventions and treaties, while legally binding, are often described as ineffective "paper protections" due to their lack of implementation.
- **Accountability and State Failure:** Respondents highlighted the absence of state authority and accountability, as well as the lack of enforcement of child protection laws within Yemen's constitution, as significant contributors to child recruitment. History shows that state failure often leads to the exploitation of children in armed conflicts. The recruitment of children by Houthi militias, which comprises an estimated 25,000 fighters aged between 12 and 17, has been widely condemned by organizations such as Human Rights Watch, though enforcement of international conventions remains inadequate.

### III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for families, communities, and national and international stakeholders:

1. **For Yemeni Children:** Protect children from extremist and sectarian groups that exploit them for their agendas. Children need awareness programs to recognize the dangers of recruitment.
2. **For Families:** Parents must take responsibility for safeguarding their children from recruitment by fanatics and militias. Parental vigilance and active involvement in children's lives are crucial.
3. **For Yemeni Society:** Recognize that today's children are the future of Yemen. Society as a whole must play a role in preventing child recruitment and ensuring a safer and more secure future.
4. **For the Yemeni Government:** Stabilizing the state, rebuilding the economy, and extending government authority across the country are fundamental to addressing child recruitment. The government must prioritize education, health, and security, ensure regular payment of teacher salaries, and reopen educational institutions.
5. **For International Organizations:** Strengthen enforcement of child protection laws, hold militias accountable through international mechanisms, and ensure compliance with conventions and treaties that prohibit child recruitment. Humanitarian efforts must focus on providing essential services such as food, shelter, and healthcare to reduce families' reliance on recruitment payments.
6. **For Cultural and Social Reforms:** Community leaders and activists must challenge cultural norms that normalize child recruitment. Awareness campaigns should emphasize that all religions and international conventions prohibit child recruitment and stress the importance of protecting children.

The study underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to tackle the root causes of child recruitment in Yemen. Collaboration between families, communities, governments, and international organizations is essential to protect Yemen's children from exploitation and ensure they have a chance to contribute to a peaceful and prosperous future.

### IV. CONCLUSION

This study represents a critical effort to identify the most significant factors driving child recruitment by Houthi militias in Yemen's ongoing conflict. Based on the opinions of intellectuals, activists, and politicians, the findings highlight that a combination of factors including educational, economic, cultural, social, and political drivers has led to the widespread recruitment of children. Of these, educational factors were found to be the most influential, followed closely by economic challenges. Social factors, while less prominent, remain important due to the absence of effective family and community support systems. The results emphasize the devastating role of poverty, the destruction of educational infrastructure, and cultural norms that facilitate the use of children in warfare. The systematic brainwashing of children and the lack of accountability for those who exploit them exacerbate the issue. Addressing this crisis requires urgent interventions at multiple levels, including education, economy, and governance. The study concludes that drastic measures are needed to prevent child recruitment and protect Yemen's children. Education infrastructure must be rebuilt, and teachers must be paid regularly to ensure children remain in school. Economic reforms are also essential to alleviate the financial hardships that force families to accept recruitment offers. Culturally and socially, efforts must focus on changing traditional norms and empowering communities to resist child recruitment. Furthermore, the Yemeni government must enforce child protection laws, and international laws must be activated to hold militias accountable for recruiting children. Yemen's child soldier crisis represents one of the most tragic consequences of the country's ongoing conflict, with thousands of children recruited, exploited, and subjected to unimaginable hardship. The scale of the crisis is staggering, as armed groups systematically target vulnerable children through advanced recruitment networks, exploiting poverty, weak infrastructure, and limited accountability to perpetuate their operations. The establishment of 6,000 training camps in Houthi-controlled territories exemplifies the depth of this exploitation, combining military drills with psychological manipulation to control and indoctrinate young minds. Despite the severity of the situation, there is hope. Programs such as those led by KSrelief and the International Labor Organization have demonstrated that rehabilitation and prevention are possible. Through initiatives providing job training, mental healthcare, educational support, and economic assistance, thousands of former child soldiers and their families have begun to rebuild their lives. These efforts highlight the importance of addressing the root causes of recruitment, including poverty and lack of opportunity, while ensuring that communities have access to support

systems that can disrupt the cycle of exploitation. Moving forward, it is critical for international organizations, local communities, and governments to work collaboratively to strengthen prevention strategies, enforce accountability, and expand support programs. Stronger sanctions, improved monitoring, and comprehensive reintegration initiatives are essential to protecting Yemen's children and safeguarding their future. Without sustained global attention and coordinated action, Yemen risks losing another generation to the devastating impacts of war. The time to act is now, to ensure that these children have a chance to reclaim their childhood and contribute to a more stable and hopeful Yemen.

Yemen is enduring one of the most severe humanitarian crises of 2024, with thousands of children forced into roles as soldiers. While international organizations have made progress, significant challenges remain. Armed groups continue to exploit children across the country, operating advanced recruitment networks that target schools and leverage social media. These groups prey on families struggling with poverty, offering monthly payments of 15,000 to 30,000 Yemeni rials to entice recruits. The scale of these operations is staggering. Armed groups have established 6,000 training camps in Houthi-controlled areas, where children undergo military training and psychological manipulation. These methods create significant barriers to helping children escape and reintegrate into society. However, there is hope. Programs like **KSrelief** have made a meaningful difference, helping 2,000 former child soldiers rebuild their lives by providing job training, mental health support, and assistance for their families. The success of these initiatives highlights the importance of collaboration between local communities and international organizations. Prevention programs have also shown promising results, demonstrating that child recruitment can be curtailed when communities are supported with economic opportunities and robust safety nets. To sustain progress, stronger enforcement measures and constant international pressure on armed groups are essential. Without these efforts, Yemen risks losing thousands more children to the devastating cycle of exploitation and war.

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## APPENDICES

**Appendix A:** Interview Transcripts with Former Child Soldiers.

**Appendix B:** Data Tables on Child Recruitment Statistics