



S. Agha/Mercy Corps

# ADVANCING ADOLESCENTS

## Evidence on the Impact of Psychosocial Support for Syrian Refugee and Jordanian Adolescents

NOVEMBER 2016

### Overview

Jordan is hosting one of the largest populations of Syrians in the region – more than 650,000 people, of which 28% are between the ages of 11 and 25. This refugee population faces severe challenges. A staggering 93% of refugees living outside the camps are under the Jordanian poverty line.<sup>1</sup> Most are living in host communities absent strong family and social networks. Syrians also face tensions with Jordanians in host communities that are competing for scarce resources ranging from access to water, jobs and education. As is the case in the majority of crises, young people are disproportionately affected by the fallouts. Only 5% of Syrian adolescent refugees are registered in formal secondary education, stymying their prospects for safe and equitable employment and

their ability to support themselves and their families.<sup>2</sup> Against this backdrop, resources for psychosocial support programs are particularly scarce, with the percentage of programming addressing this issue in Jordan just over 1% of the total joint UN appeal for the country in 2016.<sup>3</sup>

All of these factors are jointly contributing to two related sets of consequences:

- › **A lost generation of youth:** The widespread deprivation and prolonged stress amongst Syrian adolescents living in Jordan contributes to the deterioration of their well-being and human capital, resulting in mental health issues and increased incidences of high risk behavior. This severely curtails their prospects for future development. In neighboring Lebanon, a staggering 41% of Syrian refugee youth report having suicidal urges.<sup>4</sup> Rapid action is needed to avoid a similar trend in Jordan and capitalize on the immense potential adolescents represent.
- › **Social instability:** Isolation and hopelessness, combined with experiences of violence and injustice, is pervasive among Syrian adolescents in Jordan. This is a dangerous recipe for producing violent attitudes and actions.<sup>5</sup> Without positive social connections and prospects for their future, young people affected by conflict and displacement may become a destabilizing force for their communities and the region.

Resources for psychosocial support programs for Syrian refugees in Jordan are scarce, amounting to just over 1% of the total joint UN appeal for the country in 2016.



C. Nelson/Mercy Corps

Humanitarian and development actors are recognizing the need to provide targeted support to young people in Jordan and the region to tap into their ambition and potential, and mitigate negative individual and societal impacts. However, little credible evidence exists on which to base the design of such interventions aimed at ensuring adolescents' safety, social ties, and emotional well-being. To fill this evidence gap, Mercy Corps undertook a rigorous impact evaluation of its Advancing Adolescents program in Jordan, which is designed to "strengthen the resilience of host community and Syrian refugee young people through equitable access to psychosocial support, protection and informal learning opportunities."

## SUMMARY RESULTS

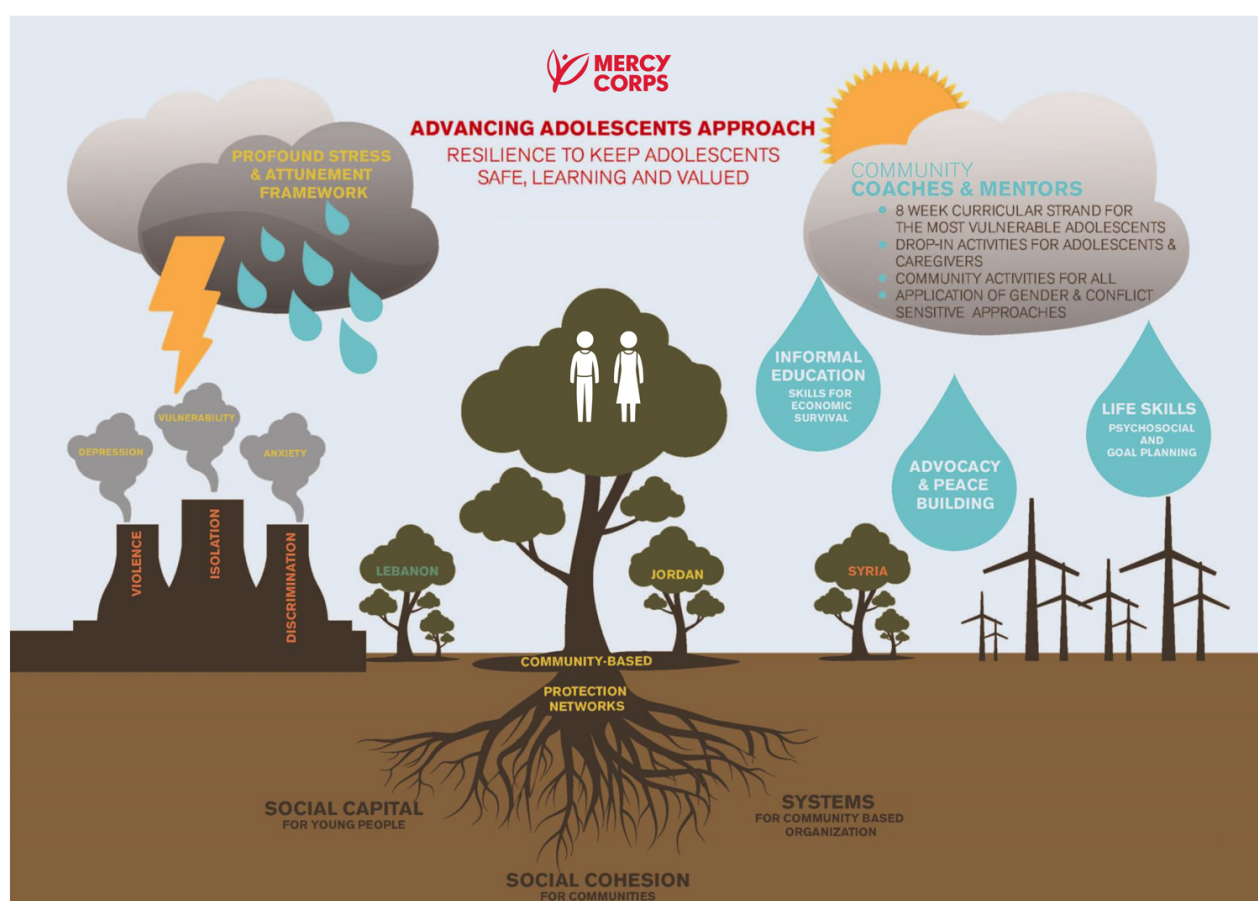
The Advancing Adolescents program had positive impacts on Syrian and Jordanian adolescents':

- › Social networks, including trust between Syrians and Jordanians;
- › Perceptions of safety and protection in their communities; and
- › Confidence in their future, including employment prospects.

# The Advancing Adolescents Program

The Advancing Adolescents program, funded by the Government of Canada, began in 2014 within the regional No Lost Generation (NLG) initiative, a UNICEF-led initiative to prevent the loss of an entire generation to the effects of war, violence, and displacement. The program was designed in response to growing evidence on the pivotal role that the adolescent years play in shaping social behavior and relationships over time, decision making skills, as well as attitudes around the use of violence.<sup>6</sup> The program enhances young people’s emotional development and mental health. In post-conflict and refugee contexts, social and emotional well-being is not only a ‘nice to have’ approach, it lays the foundation for programmatic impact in areas related to education, economic opportunities, and social and civic engagement.

**Figure 1:** Framework for Mercy Corps’ Advancing Adolescents Approach



As shown in the Figure 1, Mercy Corps builds this foundation of social and emotional well-being through a framework called Profound Stress and Attunement (PSA). PSA provides a holistic platform for young people to develop empathy and resilience in response to their needs, and supports measurable psychosocial improvement. PSA is informed by current neuroscience research and supports adolescents to strengthen their self-esteem and efficacy, and build strong ties to their families and communities. One such tie is with mentors who implement thematic educational and skills building trainings in safe and familiar locations in the community. These activities, in addition to community-based protection networks, further support young people to learn and make plans for how to contribute positively to their communities, such as through joint service projects implemented by young Syrians and Jordanians.



Through this model, populations affected by long-term stressors, like conflict and displacement, are able to understand what they are experiencing as a normal response to an abnormal situation. By teaching recognition of the brain to emotions, triggers, and reactions, participants are more able to manage impulse control, assess risk for themselves and others, and to approach their future with skills and strategies to enhance their resiliency in diverse conditions. Using the PSA approach helps young people to understand the brain's reactions to stressors so they can rebuild empathy for self, others and community.

In post-conflict and refugee contexts, social and emotional well-being is not only 'nice to have'; it lays the foundation for adolescents' education, economic opportunities, and social and civic engagement.



P. Biro/Mercy Corps

## Research Methodology and Questions

Between July 2015 and April 2016, Mercy Corps conducted a randomized impact evaluation of the Advancing Adolescents program in Jordan. This evaluation is the first ever rigorous evaluation we are aware of to examine the impact of a program applying a Profound Stress and Attunement framework.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, the research analyzed the effects of the suite of skills trainings, workshops, psychosocial support, mentoring and community projects supported through the Advancing Adolescents program. The evaluation results provide new insights into the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions in humanitarian settings.

The impact evaluation sought to answer two key questions:

1. **Does the Advancing Adolescents program work?** The program outcomes examined included: psychosocial well-being, levels of social trust, breadth and diversity of social networks, perceptions of safety and security, and confidence in the future.
2. **For whom does the Advancing Adolescents program work?** The subgroups analyzed included Syrians and Jordanians, more and less vulnerable youth, boys and girls, and younger and older participants.

## Key Findings

### Making friends, not foes

The program had significant positive effects on the levels of trust exhibited by the adolescents involved. Program participants demonstrated higher levels of trust for people in their community and of people of other nationalities and religions. **Program participants also reported an increase in the number of friends outside of their own community, having on average 4.8 more friends of other nationalities than the control**

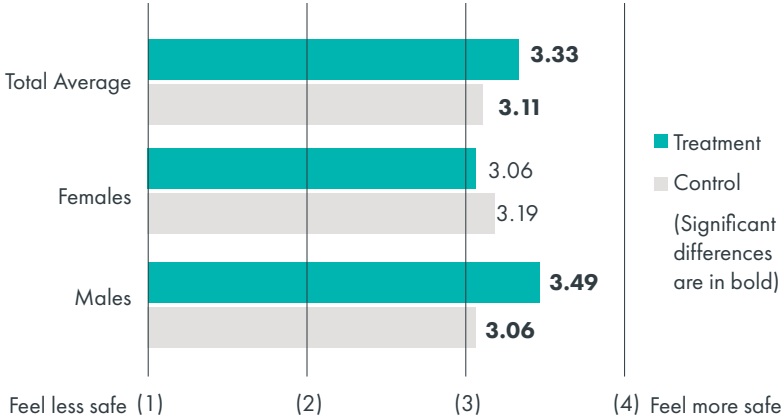
**group.** The program contributed to this impact by bringing together a diverse group of young people in a safe and secure environment to participate in planned activities, invest in their community, and create a forum for sharing ideas and concerns. The program also increased the likelihood that participants are able to build the trust necessary to maintain strong interpersonal relationships with a diverse group of peers.

These results are significant in light of the isolation and social tension affecting young people in Jordan. They reinforce previous studies’ findings that effective psychosocial interventions can help rebuild social networks, which decrease the internalization of stress by individuals affected by conflict and displacement.<sup>8</sup> Further, Mercy Corps’ research in Jordan has shown that building connections and trust between Syrians and Jordanians is critical to reducing the tensions and the likelihood of violence between the groups.<sup>9</sup> The Advancing Adolescents program appears to be an effective model for strengthening these elements of social stability.

**Feeling safe and secure**

Overall the program had a positive impact on participants’ perception of safety and protection. **Specifically, youth in the treatment group were more likely to indicate greater access to safe spaces and feeling safe in their community compared to the control group.** However this impact was driven by male participants with female participants showing no evidence of impact. The limited impact for girls will be further explored. However, initial reflection indicates this may be due to the limited interaction girls had with their communities outside of the safe spaces supported by the program. Both boys and girls had access to supervised transportation to and from the center and frequently activities, such as community events, were held within the safe space. Therefore due to protective measures for girls that encouraged their participation, they experienced little change in their interactions with the community, while boys traveled to and from the center with more independence and were more engaged in community activities outside of the safe spaces.

**Figure 2:** Program impact on youth feelings of safety in their community

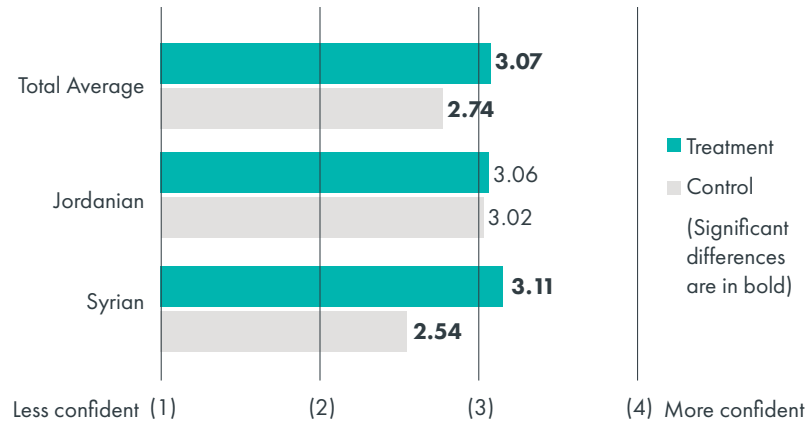


Young people’s sense of security in their communities is vital for numerous reasons. Syrian refugees have reported being in a constant state of anxiety because their mobility is undermined due to safety concerns in their community.<sup>10</sup> Studies by Mercy Corps and others have shown that previous exposure to violence is among the strongest predictors of young people’s likelihood to engage in or support violence.<sup>11</sup> By improving young people’s protection from violence and insecurity, the Advancing Adolescents program may be contributing in important ways to reducing the risk of future violence among participating youth.

## Confidence in the future

Program participants had significantly higher aspirations for their future than youth in the control group. Participants were 22.4% more likely to say they were completely confident in their ability to find a job in the future, and 14.5% more likely to be completely confident in their prospects for the future overall. The results on overall confidence were primarily driven by Syrian respondents who saw a larger overall effect than their Jordanian peers. The finding on Syrian’s confidence in their job prospects is somewhat surprising considering it is illegal for Syrians to work without a permit, which remains difficult to obtain. Though as a result of the February 2016 London Conference the Government of Jordan has pledged to allow work permits for 200,000 Syrians.

**Figure 3:** Program impact on young people’s confidence in their future



Impacts on participants’ confidence largely stem from a holistic set of program interventions that provide participants with a restored sense of normalcy. These include intentional goal-planning sessions, interactions within a protective social support network, structured group activities, community engagement, and practical training that includes a focus on skills to build individual’s economic opportunities and resilience.

These findings are important because the generation of young people targeted by the program, both Syrians and Jordanians, will ultimately become the drivers of economic and social development in the region. It is critical to give these young people confidence, self-esteem, and other skills that serve as a foundation for rebuilding their lives and communities. This has been documented through research that has shown that greater confidence and a goal for the future “intertwines with a sense of empowerment and the possibility of activity for the child in a situation marked by helplessness”.<sup>12</sup>

The *Advancing Adolescents* program contributed to two critical outcomes: positive social development of individual adolescents, and the foundations for broader social cohesion and social stability in Jordan.



C. Nelson/Mercy Corps

# Recommendations for change

Taken together, the findings from this impact evaluation point to the efficacy of holistic, science-based psychosocial support interventions like the Profound Stress and Attunement framework. When applied in the Advancing Adolescents program this framework contributed to two critical outcomes in refugees and vulnerable host communities affected by conflict and crisis: 1) positive social development of individual adolescents; and 2) the foundations for broader social cohesion and social stability.

Drawing on this evidence and looking to the future, Mercy Corps recommends a number of changes in programming and policies targeting adolescent populations in humanitarian and refugee settings.

Donor and national governments should prioritize investments in evidence-based models demonstrated to improve adolescent social and emotional well-being, such as Mercy Corps' *Advancing Adolescents* approach.



S. Agha/Mercy Corps

## Prioritize and increase funding for programming that addresses psychosocial and mental health needs of adolescents in complex emergencies

- › Promoting social and emotional well-being of adolescence is foundational for their economic and social development. Donor and national governments should prioritize investments in evidence based models that have been demonstrated to improve adolescent social and emotional well-being, such as Mercy Corps' *Advancing Adolescents* approach. Implementing agencies should integrate such proven models into child and youth friendly spaces and other traditional approaches to supporting adolescents in emergencies.

## Cultivate support and buy-in from local institutions and key stakeholders on approaches that facilitate meaningful engagement of young people in their communities

- › Build networks and partnerships between young people, civil society and local government to facilitate meaningful dialogue with and engagement of youth. These should be geared towards initiatives that tackle injustice and inequalities, build tolerance, trust and effective youth citizen engagement in refugee hosting communities.
- › Provide regular opportunities for youth to connect with each other, and engage in and influence decisions in their communities. This can help build young people's sense of voice and belonging, and reduce their isolation and other grievances that have linked to risk of engagement in violent acts, including violent extremism.<sup>13</sup>

## **Tailor adolescent programming to meet the needs of boys and girls**

- › Increase commitments and resources required to ensure hard-to-reach boys and girls have equal access to programs and services. For instance, ensure provision of supervised transportation, especially when promoting girls access to safe spaces.
- › Conduct campaigns with key stakeholders inclusive of civil society, public and private sector that promote females' access to safe spaces and enforce stricter laws that penalize acts of harassment directed toward male and female adolescents in the community.

## **Improve accountability of investments and coordination of initiatives to promote youth development in complex crises**

- › Disaggregate donor funding targets and disbursements by sex, age and sector as part of joint appeals in complex emergency settings to establish a baseline and track changes in financial support for adolescent and sectoral programming over the life of the response.
- › Support Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) efforts to expand their existing Gender Marker to include age. This will 1) promote the design of program activities that are more responsive to gender and age considerations, and 2) encourage the collection and analysis of sex and age disaggregated data needed to differentiate impact of program activities by sex and age.
- › Better align new global humanitarian initiatives focused on young people, including the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action and the Global Refugee Youth Consultations (GRYC). As part of this process, outline structural solutions -- both financial and operational -- to ensure that resources support the commitments and actions, and catalyze action across UN, donor and implementation channels.



# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The Jordanian poverty line is JOD 813.70 (roughly \$1,150) per year. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=11831>
- <sup>2</sup> Christophersen, Mona. "Educating Syrian young people in Jordan: Holistic Approaches to Emergency Response." International Peace Institute (n.d.): n. pag. International Peace Institute, Dec. 2015.
- <sup>3</sup> This figure represents NLG designated funds falling broadly under the sectoral areas of psychosocial and mental health services, violence prevention and social cohesion outputs against the total budget for the Jordan 2016 3RP Interagency requirements. Available online at: <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Jordan-matrices.pdf>
- <sup>4</sup> Anderson, Sulome. "Syria's Refugee Children Have Lost All Hope." Foreign Policy. N.p., 29 June 2016.
- <sup>5</sup> Proctor, K., "Youth & Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence" (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2015), [www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/youth-consequences-unemployment-injustice-and-violence](http://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/youth-consequences-unemployment-injustice-and-violence).
- <sup>6</sup> Our future: a Lancet commission on adolescent health and wellbeing. The Lancet, Vol. 387, No. 10036,
- <sup>7</sup> There have been rigorous evaluations of the impact of other approaches aimed at improving psychosocial outcomes among conflict-affected youth. For example, see: Barry, M. M., et al (2013). A systematic review of the effectiveness of mental health promotion interventions for young people in low and middle income countries.
- <sup>8</sup> Betancourt, T. S. (2004). Connectedness, social support and mental health in young people displaced by the war in Chechnya.
- <sup>9</sup> "Seeking Stability: Evidence on Strategies for Reducing the Risk of Conflict in Northern Jordanian Communities Hosting Syrian Refugees," Mercy Corps, October 2014.
- <sup>10</sup> Serrato, Bryant. "Refugee Perception Study: Za'atari Camp and Host Communities in Jordan." Oxfam, June 2014.
- <sup>11</sup> Beza Tesfaye and Rebecca Wolfe, Why Youth Fight: Making Sense of Political Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa (Portland: Mercy Corps, 2014).
- <sup>12</sup> Apfel, Roberta, and Bennett Simon. "Psychosocial Interventions for Children of War: The Value of a Model of Resiliency." Psychosocial Interventions for Children of War: The Value of a Model of Resiliency (1996)
- <sup>13</sup> Proctor, K. (2015) From Jordan To Jihad: The Lure Of Syria's Violent Extremist Groups. Mercy Corps.

## CONTACT

AMIE WELLS  
Regional Youth and Adolescent Advisor  
awells@mercycorps.org

JON KURTZ  
Director of Research and Learning  
jkurtz@mercycorps.org

KARI DIENER  
Deputy Director of Policy and Advocacy  
kdiener@mercycorps.org

**Acknowledgement:** The authors are indebted to the following individuals for their contributions to this research: Jane MacPhail, Noura Shahed, Natasha Shawarib, and the entire Advancing Adolescents program team in Jordan, Matt Streng, Amie Wells, Kari Diener, Tara Craft, Reimar Macaranas, Beza Tesfaye, Laura Blanchard, Sean Kelly, Catherine Panter-Brick, and Rana Dajani.

**Suggested citation:** Kurtz, J. "Advancing Adolescents: Evidence on the Impact of Psychosocial Support for Syrian Refugee and Jordanian Adolescents," Mercy Corps. November 2016.

### About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



45 SW Ankeny Street  
Portland, Oregon 97204  
888.842.0842

[mercycorps.org](http://mercycorps.org)

40 Sciennes  
Edinburgh, EH9, 1NJ, UK  
44.131.662.5160

[mercycorps.org](http://mercycorps.org)