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## 800,000 kids bearing brunt of Gaza blockade

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While the world bickers over the rights and wrongs of the Israeli blockade on Gaza, hundreds of thousands of children continue to bear the brunt of it.

Save the Children says 800,000 children are included among the population of 1.5 million in Gaza, a number supported by UNICEF. The CIA in fact records the median age of the entire population at just 17.5 years. 44% of the population it says is under 14.

Humanitarian agencies are being kept busy throughout Gaza in the wake of the blockade imposed by Israel in June 2007, which is now approaching its fourth year. The ghetto-type conditions in Gaza have been exacerbated by the three-week-long war that took place in late 2008 and early 2009, which according to UNICEF killed more than 1,400 Palestinians, of which 350 were children. Thirteen Israelis also died during the hostilities, including 3 civilians.

"Thousands of families are still living amid rubble and crumbling infrastructure due to the blockade that bars everything but limited supplies of essential humanitarian goods. Only 41 truckloads of construction materials (0.05 per cent of pre-blockade flows) have been permitted entry since the Gaza War," says UNICEF.

"Throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territories almost 12,000 children under five years old still die from preventable causes each year, as do more than 1,800 children under 12 months old," UNICEF said in a statement on its Web site. "Two thirds of households are not connected to a sewage network, meaning water is discharged into the environment

partially or totally untreated. The education system has suffered with learning outcomes plummeting for the past two years."

The United Nations has been critical of the blockade saying it violates articles 33 (prohibition on collective punishment) and 55 (duty to provide food and health care to the occupied population) of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Richard Falk, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories, says Gaza has been brought to the brink of collapse.

Education of Gazan kids was severely disrupted by the Gaza War. UNICEF says some 280 schools were damaged or destroyed, along with critical water and sanitation infrastructure and almost half of all health facilities.

A United Nations Development Program report published last month says three-quarters of the damage inflicted on Gaza during the war remains unrepaired and unreconstructed. The report says 82.50% of the education facilities damaged or destroyed during the conflict are yet to be repaired or reconstructed.

While Israel is usually singled-out as the country that has imposed the blockade on Gaza, Egypt also shares some responsibility. "Egypt shares responsibility for the collective punishment of Gaza's civilian population due to its own closure of Gaza's southern border," a Human Rights Watch report published last month says. "Except in limited circumstances, Egypt refuses to allow the passage of goods or people through the border crossing it controls at Rafah."

Human Rights Watch is one of a number of local and international humanitarian organizations at work in Gaza. Save the Children, an independent humanitarian aid organisation which is heavily involved, is also working in Israel, as are other organizations.

Save the Children, founded nearly ninety years ago, is more focused than others on children and is credited with assisting millions of children in need in more than 120 countries. The organization says it abhors terrorism of all kinds, including attacks on Israeli families. "Our work to assist children in Gaza in no way means we support terrorism," a statement on its Web site says.

"We believe we have an obligation to assist children in great need regardless of race, religion or politics. In the Middle East, where we have worked since 1953, we have sought to assist children throughout the region including children in Israel, where we still work," the Save the Children statement said.