



Displaced Again: The Compounding Impact of Repeated Displacement on Children in Lebanon

Policy Briefing - March 2026

Overview

Hundreds of thousands of children across Lebanon have endured the distress of repeated displacement. First uprooted during the 2024 hostilities, many are now facing the same uncertainty all over again.

Preliminary estimates suggest that, of the more than 1 million people internally displaced due to the current crisis, approximately 350,000 are children¹. Of these, over 45,000 children are currently living in collective shelters—primarily repurposed schools—across the country.

While these shelters provide immediate safety, they are often overcrowded, under-resourced, and lack privacy. Families are forced to share confined spaces with strangers, where together they are expected to navigate not only a lack of access to basic needs but also the cumulative psychological strain of repeated displacement.

This policy brief draws on interviews conducted by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with caregivers living in collective shelters in the first weeks of the current escalations. It highlights how repeated displacement and shelter conditions are reshaping children’s emotional wellbeing, behavior, and development. It also puts forward actionable recommendations to address the immediate and longer-term needs of affected children and their caregivers.

¹ UNICEF flash Update #5: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/unicef-lebanon-humanitarian-flash-update-no5-escalation-hostilities-26-march-2026>

While this brief focuses specifically on children living in collective shelters, where IRC has direct access, displacement is also significantly impacting children living outside of these settings. These children also face distinct protection and developmental risks that require targeted support.

Life Inside Collective Shelters

For many displaced families, life inside collective shelters is defined by overcrowding, instability, and a loss of dignity.

More than half of shelters are public schools that have been temporarily repurposed to accommodate those displaced. Classrooms – once safe havens of learning and childhood - now host multiple families, with mattresses placed side by side and belongings limited to what could be carried during their flight from harm. Families share sanitation facilities, often with insufficient access due to high occupancy. Despite some rehabilitation efforts as part of the 2024 crisis response, conditions for many remain seriously inadequate.

Low temperatures have further compounded hardship, with limited heating available in many shelters.

Beyond physical conditions, the social environment is equally challenging. Families are living among strangers, with constant noise, lack of privacy, and little control over their daily routines. While some attempt to cluster with familiar community members, the overall environment remains both unpredictable and highly stressful.

Impact of Repeated Displacement on Children

According to caregivers interviewed by the IRC, the instability and stress of repeated displacement and prolonged shelter life are having visible and compounding effects on their children, including:

1. Loss of Routine and Stability

Caregivers reported that maintaining routine and discipline has become nearly impossible with daily structure breaking down. Children are constantly surrounded by other children and adults, with movement, noise, and activity continuing throughout the day and night. In such crowded environments, caregivers described struggling to enforce basic routines such as regular sleeping hours, studying, or quiet time. The absence of structure, combined with the chaos of life in a shelter, has made it difficult for parents to recreate the stability that children previously relied on at home.



Sleep is extremely important for their growth and development, yet they are not getting enough of it here. I worry about this constantly, especially for my baby. I struggle every day to get him to sleep. And when he finally falls asleep, someone slams a door, or children start playing nearby, or people speak loudly.

Riham, a displaced mother in Lebanon

Several caregivers described the challenges they faced restoring normal routines for their children, such as studying and sleeping hours, after the previous hostilities ended in 2024. With several mothers explaining that just as they were beginning to rebuild a sense of normalcy and stability for their children, the new escalation has forced them to experience uncertainty again.

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Their entire lives have changed again. And life in a shelter means chaos. Every time I try to enforce any rule, my son tells me, “What’s the use if we won’t even have a home?”

Zeinab, a displaced mother in Lebanon

2. Emerging violent behavior and language

The impact of this repeated instability is becoming visible in children’s daily behavior, with caregivers describing a rise in violent behavior, use of aggressive language, and emotional outbursts. Mothers highlighted that, in addition to having experienced hostilities in 2024, hearing renewed explosions, and being forced to flee once again, children are now constantly surrounded by conversations about war and death in the shelters, where adults frequently discuss destruction, casualties, and the latest developments of the conflict in front of children.

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You can see and sense the change, even whilst playing. Before the conflict began, the way they played was peaceful and simple; now, fun revolves around playing war-related games. How do I stop this if this is what they keep on living? It is normal for them now.

Salam*, a displaced mother in Lebanon

Other caregivers described similar changes, noting how children are now showing signs of anger and aggression.

“My nephew used to be the most positive boy. Now, he slams doors, screams all the time, and his words are filled with anger and violence,” shared Zeinab.

Caregivers IRC spoke to described their continuous efforts to protect their children’s sense of childhood and maintain a semblance of normalcy despite the surrounding chaos. Many spoke about trying to encourage calm behavior and shield their children from distressing conversations and environments.

However, the reality of life in collective shelters makes these efforts extremely difficult. In such overcrowded conditions, parents often have limited control over what their children see, hear, and experience daily. As a result, despite the caregivers’ best efforts to preserve a sense of safety and normality, the shelter environment often undermines these attempts.

3. Deepening Psychological Distress and Loss of Hope

Negative thoughts are becoming deeply embedded in children's daily lives. Across ages, children appear to be increasingly anxious, gripped by constant fear of losing loved ones and their homes. Caregivers describe how this fear is manifesting in changes in their children's behavior. Many children have become unusually clingy and unable to separate from their parents even briefly. Their thoughts are often consumed by worst-case scenarios: their own death, the death of loved ones, or the destruction of their homes.

Salam* shared that her three-year-old daughter now reacts to any strong and sudden sound by asking, *"Will I get hurt now?"*

Older children, meanwhile, are internalizing a different but equally heavy burden: loss of hope for the future. After repeated disruptions to their education, many feel their prospects are slipping away.



My life is over. If my home is destroyed, and my school is closed again, what is left for me? I sleep and wake up to the news of deaths and destruction.

Aseel, a displaced 17-year-old in Lebanon

Aseel copes by caring for younger children in the shelter to distract herself. Whereas fourteen-year-old Rana describes a more withdrawn response:

"I don't feel like leaving my room, to do what anyway? I can't study; I can't do anything productive." She speaks of long, stagnant days and the strain of even basic needs, like going to the bathroom which requires waiting in line for 10-15 minutes every time. *"I wish I can go back to my home,"* she says. *"I wish that I will have a home when this is all over."*

Together, these accounts show the significant impact of fear, uncertainty, and loss on children of different ages impacted by the conflict.

4. Caregiving Under Pressure

Caregiving in a shelter has become an overwhelming reality for caregivers, who are not only trying to keep their children safe but are also expected to provide answers to questions they themselves cannot answer. Children are asking: Will we be homeless? Will more family members die? Why can't we go back already? Caregivers are navigating these conversations while carrying their own fear, uncertainty, and exhaustion.

Mothers the IRC has spoken to describe having to suppress their emotions to appear strong and reassuring, often while their husbands seek livelihoods opportunities or try to go back home, when possible, in dangerous conditions to get more belongings.

Salam explains, “*having to make sure my children are safe from the attacks, relaying the message that yes, this is happening again, and my own life as a woman in a shelter is not easy. But I have to be strong so that my children are okay.*”

This constant emotional balancing act leaves little space for caregivers to process their own distress. Zeinab echoes this strain: “*The mental health of mothers is very bad. We are constantly worried about being displaced again, about our homes, and the future of our children.*” Across interviews, caregivers consistently highlighted that beyond immediate safety, their greatest concern is the long-term impact this experience will have on their children’s well-being, development, and prospects.



Houssam, 8, carefully stacks wooden blocks during a psychosocial support session conducted by the IRC at a collective shelter in the Bekaa. Displaced twice in two years, he fears returning to southern Lebanon, with his family home already destroyed once before during the 2024 escalations.

Key Recommendations: What Can Be Done Now

Repeated and prolonged displacement is not only a humanitarian crisis but a long-term developmental emergency for children.

While an immediate cessation of hostilities remains only way to protect civilians from further harm and prevent a worsening humanitarian catastrophe in Lebanon, immediate interventions are essential to mitigate harm.

Priority actions include:

- 1. Scaling up psychosocial support (PSS)**

- **For children:** Expand access to structured, group-based PSS activities that provide safe spaces, reduce distress, and restore a sense of routine and normalcy.
- **For caregivers:** Provide parenting support and mental health services to help caregivers manage stress and support their children effectively.

2. Provision of cash assistance

Enabling families to meet their basic needs, reduce financial stress, and restore a degree of autonomy and dignity during displacement.

3. Improve shelter conditions

Invest in upgrading collective shelters, including:

- Increasing access to sanitation facilities
- Improving heating and insulation
- Reducing overcrowding where possible

4. Establish child-friendly spaces

Create dedicated, supervised environments where children can play, learn, and experience a sense of normalcy away from the stressors of life in a shelter.

IRC's Response

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) is supporting displaced families across Lebanon by providing essential health services, cash assistance, and protection support.

Working alongside partners, IRC is delivering:

- Emergency case management for vulnerable women and children
- Community-based psychosocial support for displaced children and caregivers
- Information services to help families navigate available assistance

Despite operating in a context where staff themselves are affected by displacement and insecurity, IRC continues to prioritize the safety, wellbeing, and recovery of children and their families.