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Broken Homes, Fragile Societies: Family Disintegration as a Risk Multiplier for Global Security

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ABSTRACT

Security studies has traditionally centred on states, military capability, terrorism and interstate conflict. This focus remains important, but it can obscure the social conditions from which insecurity emerges and through which it is reproduced. This article argues that global security should also be understood in terms of the resilience of foundational social institutions, particularly the family, which remains the primary site of socialisation, identity formation, emotional development and informal social control. Drawing on an integrative review of peer-reviewed research and documentary analysis of recent reports from the United Nations, the Institute for Economics and Peace, UNDP and regional early-warning bodies, the article traces four pathways through which persistent family disintegration may generate vulnerability: juvenile delinquency and youth violence; substance misuse and psychological harm linked to adverse childhood experiences; alienation and identity-seeking; and recruitment into gangs, organised crime, armed groups and violent extremist movements. Illustrative evidence is drawn from Nigeria and the wider Sahel, Central America and Europe. The review suggests that family breakdown rarely produces insecurity on its own. Its effects are generally modest and are amplified by poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, weak community structures and abusive or absent state institutions. The article therefore conceptualises family disintegration as a risk multiplier within a wider constellation of vulnerabilities, not as a deterministic cause. It proposes that aggregate, rights-respecting indicators of family and child vulnerability be integrated into strategic intelligence, vulnerability assessment and early-warning systems such as ECOWARN, and into national action plans for preventing violent extremism. It concludes that sustainable security requires a shift from reactive, state-centric approaches towards a multidimensional framework in which social resilience is treated as security infrastructure.

KEYWORDS Broken Homes • Family Disintegration • Global Security • Human Security • Social Resilience • Violent Extremism • Early Warning • Strategic Intelligence • Security Vulnerabilities • Nigeria

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1. INTRODUCTION

For most of its history, security studies has been organised around the state. Its main questions have concerned the survival of sovereign territory, the balance of military power, and the threats posed by rival states and, more recently, by terrorist organisations. These questions have not lost their importance. Yet a view of security that begins with the state and its armed forces may overlook where insecurity begins. Violence usually has a long social history before it becomes an attack, a kidnapping or a battle, and much of that history unfolds in households, neighbourhoods and schools.

Recent data make the point clearly. The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2026 recorded 5,582 terrorism deaths in 2025, a fall of 28 per cent on the previous year, and yet the Sahel still accounted for more than half of all terrorism deaths worldwide, while Nigeria recorded the largest national increase, with fatalities rising by 46 per cent to 750 (Institute for Economics & Peace [IEP], 2026). The same report identifies youth radicalisation as one of the most pressing security concerns in Western states, noting that minors and young people accounted for 42 per cent of terror-related investigations in Europe and North America in 2025, a threefold rise since 2021 (IEP, 2026). It also estimates that 87 per cent of radicalised minors in the West had a history of neglect or psychological abuse and 77 per cent a history of abandonment (IEP, 2026). These are estimates whose underlying sample is not fully reported, and they should be treated with caution. Even so, they point towards the home. In conflict zones, the picture is starker. The United Nations verified 38,558 grave violations affecting 24,174 children in 2025, the highest number of children affected since the children and armed conflict mandate was established three decades ago (United Nations General Assembly & Security Council, 2026).

This article argues that global security should be understood more broadly to include the resilience of foundational social institutions, and in particular the family. As the primary institution of socialisation, identity formation, emotional development, value transmission and informal social control, the family forms an important but neglected part of the wider security architecture of society. The article addresses three questions. First, through what pathways may family disintegration generate individual and societal vulnerability? Second, under what conditions do these pathways become dangerous? Third, what follows for intelligence, vulnerability assessment and early warning?

The central claim is deliberately limited. The article does not argue that broken homes cause terrorism, crime or civil war. It argues instead that persistent family breakdown may act as a risk multiplier: a condition that raises the likelihood and severity of insecurity when it combines with poverty, unemployment, exclusion, weak community structures and failing institutions. The contribution is twofold. Conceptually, the article connects criminological and developmental research on families with security studies, fields that rarely engage one another. Practically, it proposes a set of aggregate indicators through which family and child vulnerability could inform strategic intelligence and early-warning systems without turning families into objects of surveillance. The article proceeds as follows. It first clarifies its key concepts and sets out an integrated theoretical framework. It then describes the method, traces the pathways from family disintegration to insecurity, examines the conditions that moderate these pathways and the limits of the argument, and closes with implications for intelligence, early warning and policy.

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The Family

The family is taken here to mean a group linked by kinship, marriage, partnership or adoption, which assumes responsibility for the care, protection and socialisation of children. This definition is intentionally plural. In many societies, the nuclear household of two parents and their children is neither the norm nor the ideal. In sub-Saharan Africa, extended kin networks carry much of the burden of child-rearing. A 2024 study in Uganda described informal kinship care as the most widely practised, sustainable and affordable form of care for children outside parental care in the region, and as an important cultural asset (Datzberger et al., 2024). Any security analysis that treats departure from the Western nuclear model as breakdown would therefore be both inaccurate and culturally biased.

Family Disintegration and "Broken Homes"

The phrase "broken home" is common in public debate, particularly in Nigeria, but it is imprecise and can carry moral judgement. This article therefore uses "family disintegration" to refer to the persistent loss of a family's core functions of care, supervision, emotional attachment and value transmission. Such loss may

follow divorce or separation, abandonment, parental death, incarceration, forced displacement, chronic conflict or violence within the home, or the placement of children away from kin without adequate substitute care. The emphasis falls on function rather than form. A two-parent household marked by violence may be more "broken", in this sense, than a stable single-parent home.

Changes in family structure are nonetheless widespread. Across OECD countries, most children still live with two parents, but more than 30 per cent of children in Lithuania live with a single parent, and around one in four do so in France, Mexico, Norway and the United States (OECD, n.d.). In the United States, more than 23 million children live in single-parent families, a share that has held at 34 or 35 per cent for about 15 years (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). Equivalent comparative data for much of Africa are weaker, a gap that is itself a problem for early warning.

Security, Human Security and Societal Security

The traditional concept of security refers to the protection of the state from external military threat. The Copenhagen School widened this agenda to include political, economic, environmental and societal sectors, and defined societal security in terms of a society's ability to maintain its identity (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver et al., 1993). The human security approach, introduced in the 1994 *Human Development Report*, shifted the referent object from the state to the person, stressing freedom from fear and freedom from want (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994). The UN General Assembly later endorsed a common understanding of human security as people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented (United Nations General Assembly, 2012). This article draws on both traditions. Human security justifies attention to the child and the household. Societal security helps explain why the failure of institutions that transmit identity and values may affect the wider social order.

Social Resilience and the Risk Multiplier

Social resilience refers here to the capacity of individuals, families and communities to absorb shocks, adapt and maintain core functions under stress. A risk multiplier is a factor that does not by itself produce a harmful outcome, but that increases the probability or severity of harm when it interacts with other drivers. The term is borrowed from debates on climate and security, and it is useful because it keeps analysis focused on interaction effects rather than single causes.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

No single theory captures the link between families and insecurity. The article therefore combines several perspectives, each of which explains a different part of the process, within an ecological frame.

Social Control Theory

Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory holds that people conform because they are attached to others, committed to conventional goals, involved in conventional activities and believe in shared rules. Attachment to parents is the first and most studied of these bonds. A meta-analysis of attachment and delinquency found a consistent, modest association between weaker attachment to parents and more delinquent behaviour (Hoeve et al., 2012). More recent work suggests that this link may operate partly through self-control: a 2025 study found that self-control mediated the relationship between parental attachment and adolescent delinquency (Manouchehri et al., 2025). From a security perspective, social control theory suggests that family disintegration may weaken the informal controls on which formal policing ultimately depends.

Social Disorganisation and Collective Efficacy

Social disorganisation theory moves the analysis from the household to the neighbourhood. Shaw and McKay (1942) observed that delinquency was concentrated in areas of poverty, residential instability and ethnic heterogeneity, regardless of which groups lived there. Later work reframed this as a problem of collective efficacy, meaning the willingness of residents to intervene for the common good, which was found to be associated with lower violence (Sampson et al., 1997). Family breakdown and community breakdown are linked: when many households lose supervisory capacity at once, the community's capacity for informal control may decline with them.

General Strain Theory

Agnew's (1992) general strain theory proposes that crime can be a response to negative emotions produced by strain, including the loss of valued relationships and exposure to harmful treatment. Family violence, parental loss and household instability are clear sources of such strain. Recent research stresses that exposure to family violence seldom occurs apart from other household hardships, such as residential instability and parental incarceration (Talaugon & Turanovic, 2025). Strain theory thus helps explain why accumulated adversity may matter more than any single event.

Attachment Theory

Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory holds that early bonds with caregivers shape emotional regulation, self-concept and later relationships. Disrupted attachment may leave young people with unmet needs for security and belonging. Recent longitudinal evidence also points to attachment as a source of protection: in a United States cohort, higher family risk was associated with less delinquency when nine-year-olds felt closer to their fathers (Fagan et al., 2025).

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model locates the child within nested systems: the microsystem of family and school, the mesosystem of links between them, the exosystem of parental work and local institutions, and the macrosystem of culture, economy and politics. This model is the integrating frame of the article. It maps closely onto recent radicalisation research, which classifies risk factors at micro, meso and macro levels. A 2026 systematic review identified family dysfunction, social isolation and low social support as key meso-level factors, operating alongside macro-level conditions such as collective strain, political conflict and group-based relative deprivation (Pandey & Behera, 2026).

Radicalisation Pathway Models

Two models are particularly relevant. Significance quest theory argues that violent extremism results from the interaction of a need for personal significance, a narrative that justifies violence, and a network that supports it (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Family disintegration may bear on the "need" element, through humiliation, loss or neglect, and on the "network" element, when the family is replaced by peers or armed groups. The evidence is supportive but mixed. A meta-analysis found associations between the model's variables and violent extremism across 42 studies (Da Silva, Trottier, et al., 2024), while a systematic review found that the theory's predictions were confirmed by 74 findings but contradicted by 29 (Da Silva, Amadio, et al., 2024). The push, pull and personal framework separates structural grievances (push), the rewards offered by groups (pull) and individual vulnerabilities (personal) (Pandey & Behera, 2026). A recent study of child soldiers in north-east Nigeria found all three sets of factors present in recruitment by Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (Onapajo, 2025). The two-pyramids model adds the reminder that radical opinion and radical action are distinct, and that most people with extreme views never act on them (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017).

Taken together, these theories suggest a layered account. Family disintegration may weaken bonds and self-control (control theory), generate strain and unmet needs (strain and attachment theories), and leave young people open to substitute sources of belonging and significance (significance quest). Whether these vulnerabilities turn into insecurity depends on the surrounding community and state (social disorganisation and ecological theory).

4. METHODOLOGY

The article uses a qualitative design combining an integrative literature review with documentary analysis. Integrative review is suited to fields where evidence is scattered across disciplines and methods, because it allows experimental, observational and qualitative studies to be synthesised within one conceptual argument (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). Documentary analysis provides a systematic way to examine official reports, policy documents and institutional data (Bowen, 2009).

Sources were identified through searches of academic databases and the repositories of international organisations, using combinations of terms such as family structure, parental divorce, broken homes, adverse childhood experiences, delinquency, radicalisation, child recruitment, almajiri, out-of-school children and early warning. Priority was given to peer-reviewed studies and official reports published in 2024 to 2026. Older works were retained mainly for foundational theory. Grey literature, including reports by the Institute for

Economics and Peace, UN agencies, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism and ECOWAS, was included because much security-relevant data on children appear only in such outlets. These sources were triangulated where possible, and conflicting figures are noted in the text.

Three limitations should be stated. First, this is not a PRISMA systematic review or meta-analysis, and the selection of cases is purposive rather than exhaustive. Second, the review is limited to English-language material, which may underrepresent Francophone Sahelian research. Third, most quantitative studies of family structure come from high-income countries, so inferences for West Africa rest partly on qualitative and grey literature. The analysis aims to build and illustrate a conceptual framework, not to estimate causal effects.

5. PATHWAYS FROM FAMILY DISINTEGRATION TO INSECURITY

Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Violence

The oldest and most consistent body of evidence concerns delinquency. The editors of a 2025 special issue on family factors in juvenile delinquency concluded that family factors, such as parental divorce, and parenting factors, such as poor monitoring, are important in explaining and predicting delinquency, both offline and online (Creemers et al., 2025). They drew on a review of meta-analyses that identified family and parental dimensions as among the strongest predictors of general offending, with small to medium effect sizes. However, the same special issue reported relatively weak associations between parental risk factors and recidivism, suggesting that family factors may matter more for the onset of offending than for its persistence (Van der Put & Assink, 2025).

Research that attempts to separate cause from correlation offers a more careful picture. Using Dutch register data and fixed-effects models, Kroese et al. (2024) found that both parental separation and parental death appeared to raise adolescent delinquency, and that the increase after separation was mainly short-term. In Austria, Frimmel et al. (2024) used a quasi-experimental design and found that parental divorce had lasting and mostly negative effects on children, with boys showing lower educational attainment, weaker labour-market outcomes and higher early mortality. These findings indicate that family disruption may carry real, if modest, consequences for young people's paths into crime and exclusion.

Substance Misuse and Psychological Vulnerability

A second pathway runs through mental health. The adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) framework, developed in the United States, groups household dysfunction, including parental separation, domestic violence, parental substance misuse and incarceration, with abuse and neglect, and links their accumulation to poor adult health (Felitti et al., 1998). A systematic review and meta-analysis found that people with four or more ACEs faced markedly higher risks of problematic drug use and of interpersonal and self-directed violence than those with none (Hughes et al., 2017). Such experiences are common. UNICEF (2024) estimates that nearly 400 million children under five, about six in ten worldwide, regularly endure psychological aggression or physical punishment at home, and that around 330 million of them are punished by physical means, an estimate based on data from 100 countries covering 52 per cent of the world's under-fives.

The security relevance of this pathway is indirect but important. Trauma, depression and substance dependence may reduce young people's capacity to resist exploitation and may increase their value to criminal networks as expendable labour. Evidence from England, for example, shows that children in care are far more likely than their peers to be drawn into the criminal justice system, and that criminal networks deliberately target such children (Children's Commissioner for England, 2025).

Social Alienation and Identity

A third pathway concerns belonging. Adolescence is a period of identity formation, and young people who lack stable attachments may look elsewhere for recognition. The GTI 2026 identifies alienation and social isolation as the main motivations for youth radicalisation in the West (IEP, 2026). In Africa, UNDP's second *Journey to Extremism* study, based on interviews with nearly 2,200 people across eight countries, found that perceptions of childhood unhappiness and a lack of parental involvement increased the likelihood of joining a violent extremist group. A one-point increase in the parental involvement rating was associated with a reduction of around 25 per cent in the odds of voluntary recruitment (UNDP, 2023). The report suggested that the path to extremism may begin partly in a child's unmet need for belonging and connection (UNDP, 2023).

The systematic evidence on families and radicalisation supports a link but also shows its limits. A Campbell review of studies covering 148,081 people found that having extremist family members (z = 0.26),

parental ethnic socialisation ($z = 0.27$) and family conflict ($z = 0.11$) were associated with more radicalisation, while family commitment was weakly protective ($z = -0.06$) (Zych & Nasaescu, 2022). These effects are small, and the authors judged the overall risk of bias to be mostly high. The more recent review by Pandey and Behera (2026) similarly places family dysfunction among several meso-level factors rather than at the centre of radicalisation.

Recruitment into Gangs, Organised Crime, Armed Groups and Violent Extremism

The fourth and most direct security pathway is recruitment. Armed groups and criminal organisations target children and youths who lack protection, and the absence of functioning families is one of the clearest markers of lack of protection.

Nigeria and the Sahel

Nigeria illustrates how family disintegration may interact with educational exclusion and conflict. UNICEF data cited by Nigeria's National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies put the number of out-of-school children at about 18.3 million, including 10.2 million of primary-school age (National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies [NILDS], 2025). A large but uncertain share of these children are almajirai, boys sent away from their families to study under Qur'anic teachers, often in distant cities. A 2025 review describes how a once well-regulated system of Islamic scholarship has become associated with street begging, child neglect, malnutrition and untreated mental illness, and with susceptibility to recruitment by extremist groups (Umar & Maaji, 2025). In this setting, the separation of children from parental care is structural rather than accidental.

The link to violence should not be overstated. An International Centre for Counter-Terrorism brief notes that Boko Haram's founder was himself a former almajiri and that the group exploited grievances among marginalised almajirai, but it stresses that the system does not in itself radicalise young people; rather, it produces a large, unemployed youth population with a strong collective identity that extremists can exploit (Okonkwo, 2025). Interviews with former child soldiers in north-east Nigeria suggest that recruitment involves a mix of coercion, material incentives and personal vulnerability (Onapajo, 2025). The UN verified 2,560 grave violations against children in Nigeria in 2025, the third-highest number of any situation monitored, and in the same year listed Islamic State Sahel Province and Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad in Niger for violations against children (Security Council Report, 2026). Conflict itself breaks families through death, abduction and displacement, which may in turn create new pools of unprotected children. The relationship is therefore circular rather than one-way.

The Americas

In Central America, gangs have long recruited from households weakened by poverty, migration and violence. A 2026 UK Home Office assessment reports that MS-13 and Barrio 18 in Honduras mainly recruit children aged 12 to 17, but sometimes as young as six, to act as lookouts and collect extortion payments (Home Office, 2026). In El Salvador, Human Rights Watch (2024) documented children who were first targeted for recruitment by gangs, sometimes under threat to their mothers, and then detained and mistreated under the state of emergency. This double victimisation shows how the state's response can deepen the harm that family vulnerability first created. In 2025 the UN also listed three Haitian gangs for grave violations against children (Security Council Report, 2026).

Europe

European evidence points to the role of state care as a substitute family. In England, children in care are about ten times as likely as other children to have ever been found guilty of an offence (27 per cent compared with 2.2 per cent), a gap that reflects both prior family adversity and the possible criminalising effect of care settings themselves (Children's Commissioner for England, 2025). Criminal networks running "county lines" drug-supply operations are known to target such children. At the same time, the rise in youth radicalisation recorded by the GTI 2026, together with its estimates on neglect and abandonment among radicalised minors, suggests that family vulnerability may also be relevant to online extremist recruitment (IEP, 2026).

6. MEDIATING AND MODERATING CONDITIONS

The evidence reviewed above suggests that family disintegration becomes a security problem mainly when it combines with other conditions. Five appear most important.

Poverty is the first. Much of the apparent effect of family structure may reflect economic hardship, since single-parent and disrupted households are more likely to be poor. The second is unemployment. In UNDP's 2023 African study, a quarter of voluntary recruits to violent extremist groups named unemployment as their main reason for joining, a 92 per cent increase on UNDP's 2017 study, and around 40 per cent said they were in urgent need of livelihoods at the time of recruitment (UN News, 2023; UNDP, 2023). Social exclusion, including educational exclusion, is a third condition, as the Nigerian case shows.

Weak community structures are a fourth. Where neighbourhoods lack collective efficacy, the loss of parental supervision is not offset by other adults (Sampson et al., 1997). A 2025 United States study using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 and propensity score matching (N = 1,523) found that moving home accounted for much of the link between the transition to a single-parent family and later delinquency (Hong & Lee, 2025). This implies that community disruption, not family structure alone, drives much of the risk.

The fifth, and perhaps the most important, is institutional failure. In UNDP's 2023 study, about 48 per cent of voluntary recruits in sub-Saharan Africa reported a triggering event, and 71 per cent of those cited human rights abuses, including action by the state, as the tipping point for joining (UN News, 2023; UNDP, 2023; see also IEP, 2026). In 2025, for the first time in three decades of UN monitoring, government forces were responsible for more grave violations against children than non-state armed groups (United Nations General Assembly & Security Council, 2026). Geography matters too: 64 per cent of terrorist attacks in 2025 occurred within 100 kilometres of an international border, in areas where state authority is weakest (IEP, 2026). A child without family protection in a well-governed city faces very different risks from a child in the Lake Chad Basin or the central Sahel borderlands.

7. A NON-DETERMINISTIC RELATIONSHIP

It is essential to state what the evidence does not show. First, effect sizes are generally small. The family factors associated with radicalisation in the Campbell review had z values between 0.03 and 0.27, and the authors could not separate risk factors from simple correlates (Zych & Nasaescu, 2022). Most children from disrupted families never offend, and very few ever join armed groups.

Second, family structure is a weaker predictor than family functioning. Frimmel et al. (2024) note that children may even gain from divorce where life after the separation is better than growing up in a two-parent home marked by conflict. Kroese et al. (2024) found that the rise in delinquency after separation was short-term. These findings suggest that conflict and instability, rather than the number of parents in the home, carry much of the risk.

Third, protective factors are strong. Closeness to fathers moderated the effect of family risk in the Fagan et al. (2025) cohort, and UNDP (2023) found parental involvement to be one of the clearest sources of resilience against recruitment. Single-parent and kinship families can and often do provide these protections.

Fourth, cultural variation must be taken seriously. In much of Africa, extended families and kinship care are normal and often protective. Young people in Ugandan kinship care described it as a way of reducing poverty and continuing their schooling, though they also reported disputes and risks to their safety (Datzberger et al., 2024). Treating these arrangements as "broken" would misdiagnose the problem.

Fifth, intact families are not always protective. Having extremist family members was one of the strongest family correlates of radicalisation (Zych & Nasaescu, 2022). Families can transmit violent ideologies as well as resist them.

Finally, there is a normative risk. Framing single mothers, divorced parents or almajiri families as security threats could stigmatise vulnerable groups and justify intrusive policing. The securitisation literature warns that labelling an issue as a security threat can move it outside normal politics (Buzan et al., 1998). The argument of this article is the opposite: that family resilience should be supported as a public good, not policed as a threat.

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR INTELLIGENCE, VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENT AND EARLY WARNING

If family disintegration is a risk multiplier, its main value for security institutions lies in strategic rather than tactical intelligence. Strategic intelligence seeks to identify the conditions under which threats are likely to emerge, over months and years, across regions and populations. Family and child vulnerability data can contribute to this task, but only at an aggregate level. Monitoring individual households would be ethically

unacceptable, legally doubtful in most jurisdictions and, given the small effect sizes involved, of little analytical value for predicting who will commit violence.

Existing early-warning systems offer a starting point. ECOWAS reports that its Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) collects data on 55 predefined peace and security indicators and 42 event types, across five sectors: governance and human rights, security and violent extremism, crime, health and environment. Eight national early-warning centres are operational and four more are being established (Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS], 2025). A separate account refers to 77 field monitors and 56 indicators (Toda Peace Institute, n.d.), a small discrepancy that may reflect revisions over time. At the continental level, the African Union's Continental Early Warning System links with regional systems including ECOWARN (African Union, n.d.), and in May 2025 the AU Peace and Security Council and the ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council called for stronger synergy between the two systems, including joint scenario planning and data exchange (Amani Africa, 2025). None of the publicly available descriptions suggests that family or child-protection indicators are central to these frameworks. This appears to be a gap.

Table 1 proposes a set of aggregate indicators that could be added to such systems, or to national vulnerability assessments.

Table 1. *Proposed Aggregate Indicators of Family and Child Vulnerability for Strategic Early Warning*

Indicator	Illustrative data source	Security rationale
Out-of-school rate, by locality and sex	UNICEF; national education statistics	Educational exclusion and loss of daily supervision
Children in street situations or almajiri systems without parental care	State child-protection agencies; NGO counts	Unprotected children open to exploitation
Orphanhood, abduction and conflict-related family separation	UN monitoring and reporting mechanism; UNICEF	Conflict-driven family breakdown
Displacement of households with children	Humanitarian displacement tracking	Loss of community and kin networks
Reported domestic violence and violent discipline	Health, police and survey data	Accumulated childhood adversity
Children in state care and care leavers	Social services	Weak substitute care and exploitation risk
Youth not in education, employment or training	Labour force surveys	Strain and availability for recruitment
Verified child recruitment and use	UN country task forces	Direct indicator of armed-group demand

Note. Indicators are intended for area-level analysis only and should be drawn from existing child-protection, education and humanitarian data systems rather than from surveillance of individual households.

These indicators would not predict individual behaviour. Their purpose is to identify places where many risk multipliers overlap, so that prevention can be targeted before violence appears.

Prevention frameworks already offer entry points. The UN Secretary-General's *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* called on states to develop national action plans and identified priority areas including community engagement, youth empowerment, gender equality, and education and employment (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The Global Counterterrorism Forum (2016) has described families as key and often underused partners in preventing and countering violent extremism, from shaping attitudes towards non-violence to recognising early signs of radicalisation. Family-focused programmes show how this idea has been put into practice. Women without Borders (n.d.) reports that its MotherSchools model, which trains mothers to recognise and respond to early warning signs, has engaged over two thousand mothers in twelve countries, including some 600 women in Germany. Independent evaluation of such programmes remains limited, and one analysis cautions that casting mothers as natural agents of peace relies heavily on gendered stereotypes (Pacific Forum, n.d.). Broader violence-prevention evidence is more developed. Parenting programmes delivered at scale, such as Parenting for Lifelong Health for Teens in Tanzania, have been

evaluated as a way to reduce violence against children within routine services (Lachman et al., 2024). Such programmes may offer more tested entry points than extremism-specific models.

9. TOWARDS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL SECURITY FRAMEWORK

The analysis leads to several recommendations. For security and intelligence institutions, family and child vulnerability should be treated as a strategic context variable in threat assessments, particularly in regions where recruitment by armed groups is high. Analysts should work with child-protection and social-welfare agencies rather than collect such data themselves, and should use aggregate indicators only.

For governments, especially in Nigeria and the Sahel, the reform of the almajiri system should be framed as child protection and education policy with security benefits, not as a counter-terrorism measure. Integrating Qur'anic schools with basic education, keeping children connected to their families, and reducing the number of out-of-school children would address several risk multipliers at once (NILDS, 2025; Umar & Maaji, 2025). Equally important, security forces must end abuses that push young people towards armed groups (UNDP, 2023).

For regional bodies such as ECOWAS and the African Union, family and child-protection indicators could be tested within ECOWARN and the Continental Early Warning System. Data-sharing with UNICEF and national child-protection systems would reduce duplication.

For donors and international organisations, investment in parenting support, kinship care, social protection and reintegration of children formerly associated with armed groups should be counted as prevention spending. According to Security Council Report (2026), the children and armed conflict agenda has secured the release of more than 220,000 children from armed forces and groups, and in 2025 more than 13,000 formerly associated children received protection or reintegration support. Reuniting these children with families, or placing them in stable kin care, may be regarded as a direct investment in future security.

For researchers, the priority is better evidence from the Global South. Longitudinal and quasi-experimental studies of family disruption, of the kind now available for Austria, the Netherlands and the United States (Frimmel et al., 2024; Hong & Lee, 2025; Kroese et al., 2024), are largely absent for West Africa.

10. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the family belongs within the analysis of global security. It is not the only foundation of security, and its disintegration is not a simple cause of violence. But the evidence reviewed suggests that the loss of family care, supervision and attachment can weaken informal social control, generate strain and trauma, create unmet needs for belonging, and leave young people exposed to gangs, criminal networks and armed groups. These effects are generally modest when considered alone. They become dangerous when they combine with poverty, unemployment, exclusion, weak communities and abusive or absent states, as they do in the Sahel borderlands, in gang-controlled neighbourhoods of Central America, and among neglected young people drawn into online extremism in Europe.

Understood as a risk multiplier, family disintegration has clear implications for security practice. It calls for strategic, aggregate and rights-respecting attention within vulnerability assessment and early warning, and for prevention policies that strengthen families rather than police them. Sustainable security, in short, requires moving from reactive and state-centric approaches towards a multidimensional framework in which social resilience is treated as part of the security infrastructure itself. In an interconnected world where local insecurity in one region can quickly have transnational effects, the stability of the household is not a private matter. It is part of the foundation on which wider order rests.

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Conflict of Interest

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