

2015

# Vulnerability

Robert W. Spires

*University of Richmond*, [bspires@richmond.edu](mailto:bspires@richmond.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/spcs-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Spires, Robert. "Vulnerability." In the *Encyclopedia of World Poverty*, edited by Mehmet Odekon, 1636-1639. Thousand Oaks, Ca: SAGE Publications, Inc. 2015.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Professional and Continuing Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Professional and Continuing Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

---

## Vulnerability

Vulnerability is susceptibility to, or risk of exposure to, hazards and stresses related to social problems, environmental problems, economic problems, or political problems. The word *vulnerability* is often used in conjunction with poverty and may specifically imply vulnerability to poverty or to poverty-related issues. Individuals, communities, groups, regions, and nations can be vulnerable and poverty increases this vulnerability. Vulnerability is associated with natural disasters, environmental issues, economic problems, and political conflicts. Disadvantaged and marginalized people are typically considered more vulnerable to hazards and stresses associated with poverty. Often, vulnerability refers to the likelihood that particular poverty-related problems will impact individuals or groups. However, vulnerability can also denote the ability of individuals or groups to cope and recover after exposure to hazards or stresses.

Vulnerability reduction is a central element to international development efforts such as the Millennium Development Goals established by the United Nations. The International Labour Organization's rural employment and development efforts focus on poverty and vulnerability reduction. Poverty reduction efforts for children by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) also center on addressing vulnerability among

disadvantaged children. Poverty-related social issues are often discussed in terms of vulnerability as impoverished individuals and groups are considered more vulnerable to health issues, violence, abuse, exploitation, and discrimination.

### **Vulnerabilities of the Poor**

People living in poverty are considered more vulnerable to health issues such as diseases, which can be perpetuated because of a lack of access to health care. Diseases such as malaria and waterborne illnesses are more prevalent among the chronically poor worldwide. Communities with high poverty rates are also more vulnerable to issues such as disease, malnutrition, and high infant mortality rates. High rates of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa are also linked to high poverty rates. Vulnerability to HIV/AIDS is particularly high in countries such as Swaziland, where poverty, poor health care access, and susceptibility to the disease are highly interconnected. Widespread disease perpetuates the cycle of poverty in the developing world by incapacitating large portions of the working-age population. Large numbers of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS have lower educational attainment than their peers, and are a significant economic burden on social services and the health care sectors of countries such as Malawi and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Individuals living in impoverished conditions are more vulnerable to violence in a variety of forms. Higher rates of domestic violence, child abuse, and neglect have been disproportionately associated with economically disadvantaged groups. Violent crimes are more prevalent in impoverished communities, and residents of these communities are vulnerable to violent crimes related to drug trafficking, gun violence, and gang activity. Urban, overcrowded and highly impoverished communities, such as the favelas in Rio de Janeiro or the slums of Mumbai, have disproportionately high murder and gun crime rates. Women and children are more likely to live in poverty, and low-income women are more vulnerable to domestic violence, drug abuse, and depression. Children who witness domestic violence are also more likely to experience abuse or neglect. The interrelated effects of poverty-related violence increase the likelihood that victims of

domestic violence are vulnerable to other negative experiences. As with vulnerability to other poverty-related issues, the effects are interlocked with and compounded by a variety of negative consequences.

Research on human rights and social justice focuses significant attention on disadvantaged individuals and groups' vulnerability to exploitation. Undocumented migrants, such as Mexican immigrants to the United States, are highly vulnerable to labor exploitation. Vulnerable children in war-torn parts of the developing world, such as central Africa, are often forced into child soldiering. Impoverished women in the rural global south are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation through prostitution. Ethnic minorities, such as the Rohingya from Myanmar who are vulnerable to forced labor on fishing boats in Southeast Asia, face exploitation in a variety of forms as they migrate for work. Discrimination against ethnic minorities, such as the Roma of eastern Europe, has manifested as racially motivated violence toward marginalized people, as well as social barriers to employment access.

Vulnerability is often used in conjunction with discussion of environmental issues and natural disasters. Impoverished individuals, families, and communities are more vulnerable to the negative effects of natural disasters such as hurricanes and typhoons, tsunamis, and earthquakes. People living in remote and impoverished regions experience longer response times for disaster relief. Housing structures in poor communities are often less effective in withstanding high winds and floods associated with hurricanes and tsunamis.

Developing countries have less disaster relief infrastructure, leading to slower recovery for the economy and the people after major disasters. Women, children, and the elderly experience disparate negative effects from natural disasters. Women and girls were more vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. The 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines killed thousands and forced millions into homelessness, making a large portion of an already impoverished region of the country more vulnerable to future disasters, exposure to the elements, violence, and exploitation. Trafficking of women and children is expected to rise as a result of the disaster.



*A father and daughter rest on a concrete slab in the aftermath of Super Typhoon Haiyan, Guiuan, Eastern Samar Province, Philippines, November 15, 2013. One of the strongest tropical cyclones ever recorded and the deadliest Philippine typhoon in modern history, Haiyan killed thousands and displaced millions from their homes. This already impoverished region became even more vulnerable to disaster, exposure to the elements, violence, and exploitation. (U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Liam Kennedy)*

Environmental degradation and pollution disproportionately affect impoverished people and communities. Toxic-waste dumping is often in closer proximity to poor communities, particularly communities with large percentages of ethnic minorities, and is an issue that has led to the term *environmental racism*. The environmental justice field has found that impoverished individuals are also more likely to live closer to industrial facilities that create air and water pollution. People living in the large squatter camps surrounding cities like Mexico City and Johannesburg are also more likely to experience breathing issues due to the air degradation caused by coal, wood, and trash burning in makeshift dwellings.

Political conflicts are also highly connected to the concept of vulnerability. Civil war in the Sudan, resulting in the creation of South Sudan in 2011, displaced large numbers of the rural poor and forced already vulnerable people to

abandon traditional lands that provided livelihoods for farmers. Large numbers of the world's migrants are displaced by political conflict and war, and the resulting informal migration puts disadvantaged groups, such as the hill tribe minorities of Myanmar, in even more vulnerable situations.

*Vulnerability* is a term that is intimately linked to poverty-related issues such as health problems, violence, and exploitation. Poverty makes people more vulnerable to the myriad issues related to natural disasters and environmental degradation. Political conflict causes numerous problems for those involved, but the impoverished are even more vulnerable to such problems, and recovering from these issues is further complicated by a lack of resources common in impoverished communities.

Robert Spires  
Valdosta State University

**See Also:** Child Soldiers; Children; Disease; Domestic Violence; Exploitation; Feminization of Poverty; HIV/AIDS; Migration.

**Further Readings:**

- Bakody, Jennifer. "After the Earthquake, Protecting Haitian Women and Girls From Violence." (2010). United Nations Children's Fund. [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/haiti\\_53204.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/haiti_53204.html) (Accessed September 2014).
- Beaubien, Jason. "AIDS, Other Diseases Create Poverty Trap in Africa." (2006). National Public Radio. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6247813> (Accessed September 2014).
- Bragg, H. Lien. "Child Protection in Families Experiencing Domestic Violence." (2003). Child Abuse and Neglect User Manual Series. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolence.pdf> (Accessed September 2014).
- Lawrence, Sharmila, et al. "Depression, Substance Abuse, and Domestic Violence: Little Is Known About Co-Occurrence and Combined Effects on Low-Income Families." (2014). National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University. [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_546.pdf](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_546.pdf) (Accessed September 2014).
- Minujin, Alberto, et al. "Children Living in Poverty: A Review of Child Poverty Definitions, Measurements, and Policies." (2005). United Nations Children's Fund. [http://www.unicef.org/policyanalysis/files/child\\_poverty\\_final\\_draft\\_4\\_05.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/policyanalysis/files/child_poverty_final_draft_4_05.pdf) (Accessed September 2014).
- Oxfam. "Typhoon Haiyan: The Response So Far and Vital Lessons for the Philippines Recovery." (2013). <http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/bn-typhoon-haiyan-philippines-response-071213-en.pdf> (Accessed September 2014).
- World Bank. "Brazil Fights Crime While Bringing Development to the Favelas." (2013). <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/03/21/brazil-crime-violence-favela> (Accessed September 2014).