

Between 64 and 135 Children Killed in British Military Action in Afghanistan, Analysis of MOD Compensation Payments Reveals

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Dozens of children in Afghanistan were killed following actions by British forces, with each child's death paying out – on average – just £1,656 in compensation, exclusively obtained data from Action on Armed Violence (AAOV) can reveal.

Between 2006-14, there were 64 confirmed child victims in Afghanistan where the British military paid compensation, although the number of children killed could be as high as 135.

Even the lower number is four times more than previously thought, since prior documents released by the United Kingdom's Ministry of Defence (MOD) had only revealed 16 confirmed child fatalities. Subsequent Freedom of Information (FOI) requests by AOA V reveal the MOD had not included an additional 'Notes' column within the claims database. Access to this has provided far more information on hundreds of sparsely detailed fatality compensation cases.

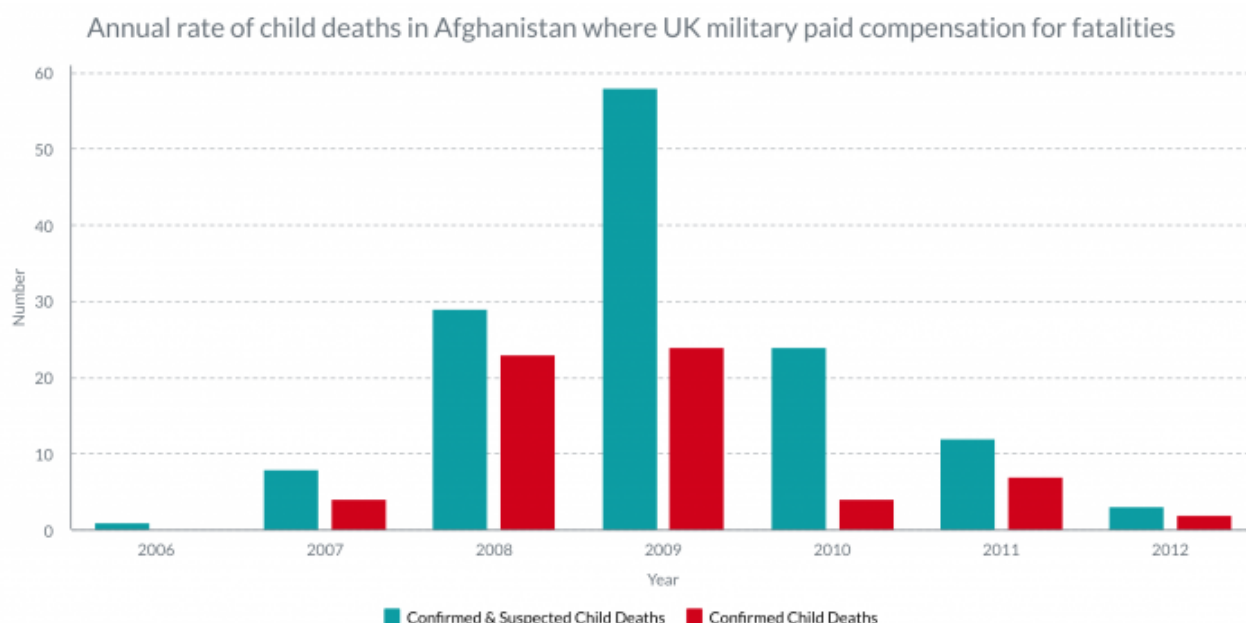
An analysis of these compensation payments shows that, between April 2007 and December 2012, there were 38 incidents involving 64 confirmed child fatalities where the relatives of the children were paid compensation following UK military engagements. These incidents specifically involved the mention of a child or the listing aged under 18.

However, if you include descriptions of the dead such as 'son', 'daughter' or 'nephew', the number of children impacted could be as high as 135 in some 47 incidents.

Of course, it is possible to be an adult son, daughter or nephew but Afghanistan has a [young population](#), the median age is 18, so the likelihood of someone's child being a minor is high. Even if just half of these additional victims were under 18, that would bring the number of children killed by British forces to 100.

In total, some 164 people (adults and children) were killed in those attacks involving confirmed or suspected children.

There is absolutely no evidence that there was a deliberate targeting of civilians or children by the British military, and these tragedies must be marked down as a consequence of poor targeting, over-use of heavy weaponry or fighting in populated areas. There was not enough evidence given by the MOD to detail the circumstances of each death, and sometimes the situation that led to a child's death was treated as cursory in the documentation.



Ages of the children

We know that the average age of a child killed during British military operations, where an age was given, was six years old. An age was given in some 27 recorded and compensated deaths.

The youngest child was one years old, the oldest was 15.

It is notable that no child (especially male) was aged 16, 17 or 18 and raises the question as to whether any male teenager killed in fighting in Helmand would have been seen as a combatant.

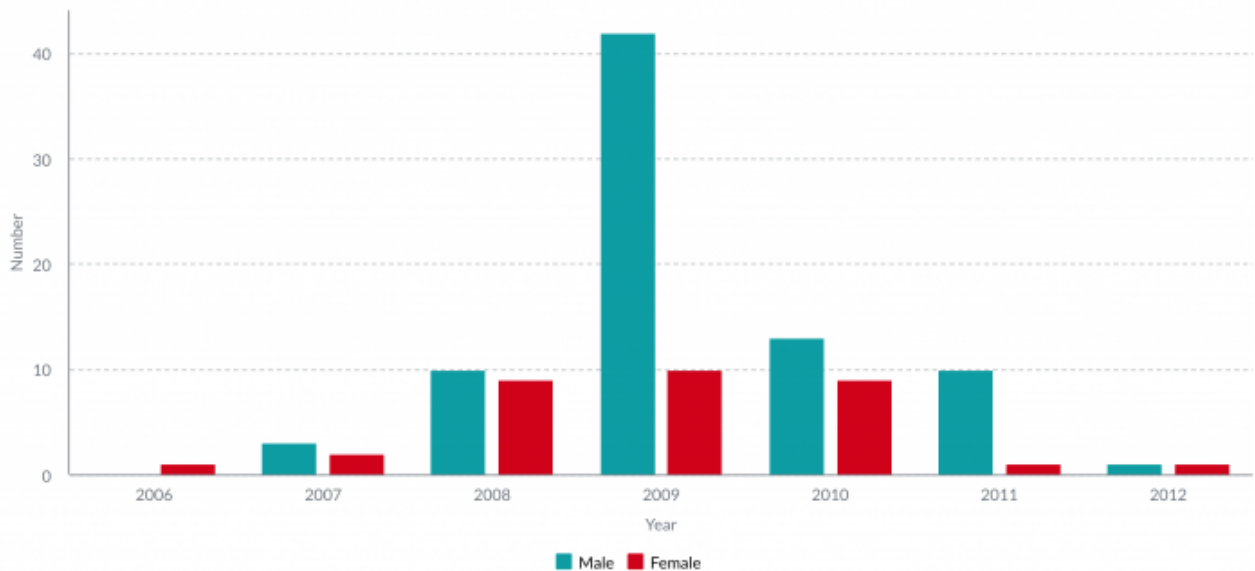
The youngest recorded victim was a one-year-old baby boy killed in March 2009. In September of the same year, an 18-month-old girl was also killed in Nad-e Ali, a district in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Both were killed alongside their mother or 'father's wife'; just over £3,000 was paid for their deaths.

Where the child's age was recorded, 41% of the confirmed 64 child victims following British Forces' attacks were aged 10 or under; 22% were five and under at the time of their death.

Gender

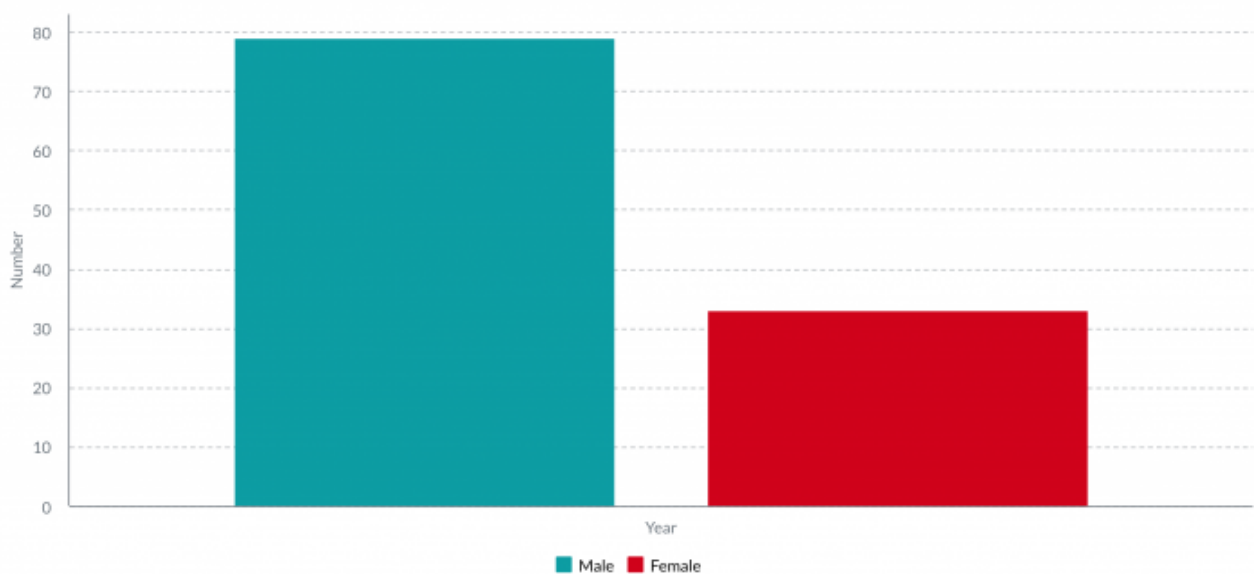
When gender was specified for known children killed in fighting, 20 boys and 18 girls were killed. When gender was specified for known children *and* suspected children, 79 boys and 33 girls were killed.

Gender of confirmed and suspected child deaths in Afghanistan where UK military paid compensation



In nine cases, children were killed beside an adult woman.

Gender of confirmed and suspected child deaths in Afghanistan where UK military paid compensation

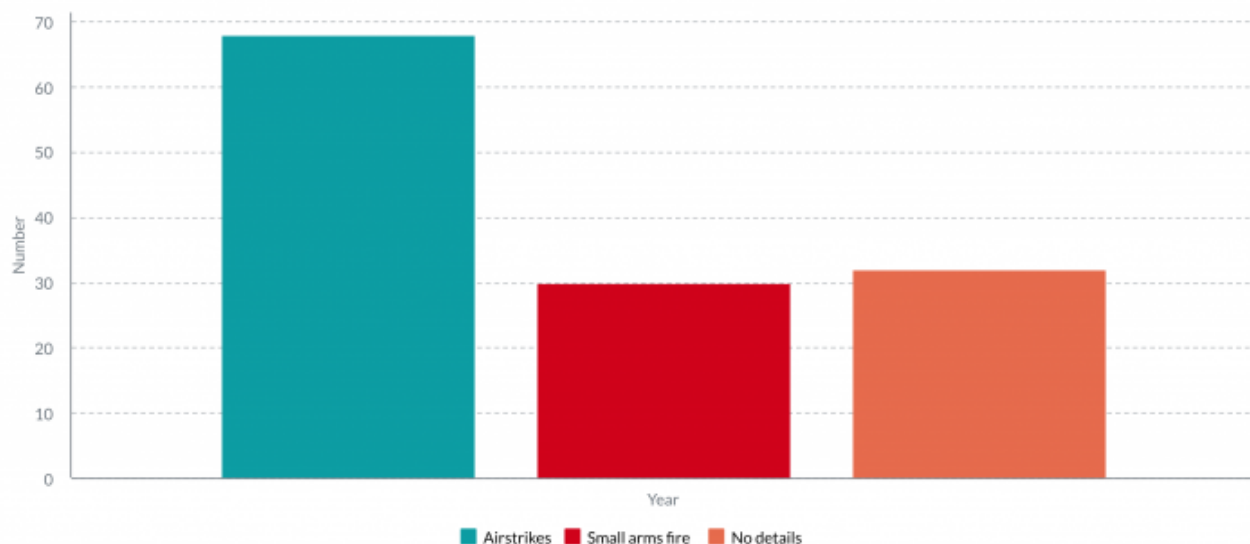


Causes of death

Crossfire and airstrikes were the two most common specified causes of death, raising questions about the rules of engagement deployed by the British military in Helmand during that time.

Some 68 of the 135 confirmed and suspected child deaths were from air-strikes, constituting some 50% of all deaths.

Types of weapons that caused confirmed and suspected child deaths in Afghanistan where UK military paid compensation



An airstrike on a village in Nawa district of Helmand killed eight members of the same family. The man brought the claim in May 2009 for the death of his nephew, alongside his nephew’s two wives and five children. The case file reveals that the grieving uncle was “advised claim has to go [be referred] to London as it is above the limit we can pay in theatre”. He took the smaller but more immediate payment of \$10,000 (£7,205) for the eight deaths. The claim had already taken 144 days to complete.

30 of the 135 confirmed and suspected child deaths were from small arms fire, such as cross-fire. These made up 22% of all deaths.

In one December 2009 case, four children were shot dead by British forces whilst they were battling the Taliban in Bolan Dasht in Nad Ali. Notes from the case file show the father: “Provided Photos of his deceased children and according to D.Commander his story fits with BritFor [British Forces’] action on that day”.

The father received the equivalent of £4,224 – just over £1,000 per dead child.

Payments

The total pay-out for the incidents involving confirmed child fatalities was £144,593, although this total includes other adults killed.

If we only include claims involving child fatalities, 36 deaths from 27 incidents, the average pay-out per victim is £1,656.

Notably, this is lower than the average for total fatality cases, £2,380, although both averages involve pay-outs that also included injuries and property damage.

Lack of detail

The total fatality figures will only be a fraction of those killed by British forces. The data only captures those Afghans who knew about and were capable of going through the arduous compensation process *and* had enough evidence for the claim to be accepted by personnel at the Area Claims Office.

The threshold for evidence of a claim was not insubstantial. Claimants were frequently asked for photos, medical reports, birth certificates and letters from local Mullahs and were formally interviewed by British personnel to confirm there was no Taliban affiliation. In one case, a man was given somebody else's compensation. He then had the amount deducted from the compensation he received for the death of his three young children.

The majority of the 881 fatality claims that were brought to the ACO were rejected. Just one-quarter of those received any compensation.

A recent (2022) BBC Panorama and parallel AOAV investigation into [SAS killings in Afghanistan](#) revealed the death of at least one child. The secrecy around these 54 deaths meant they did not feature in any official compensation claims.

Tragic figures

The peak of British engagement in Afghanistan peaked at the turn of the decade. But even after the UK's formal end to combat operations in 2014, the nation's children continued to suffer.

Between 2016-2020, there were 785 children confirmed killed, and 813 children injured by US and Afghan aerial bombardments, meaning children [made up 40% of the total civilian casualties during this period, according to UN data](#).

According to Brown University's Cost of War project, about 243,000 people have been killed in the Afghanistan/Pakistan warzone since 2001. More than 70,000 of those killed have been civilians, as of August 2022.

Notable cases

The following is a list of notable cases from the records:

- 16th October 2008, 18 killed including seven children: a mass casualty event in Nad-e Ali. 18 people killed, seven of whom were children. Incident location and description from claimant are found to match UK records. After the claimant hands over documents, confirms "names, ages, sex and relationship of all the deceased family members and also asked him to bring letter from Mullah confirming the deaths and medical report of the injured relatives". The claimant is then interviewed twice more in January before compensation of £27,254.79 (\$39,792 at the time) is agreed. *This is the highest casualty event, the most children killed in one event and the second highest payout by the MOD within this time period.*
- 6th November 2007, Kabul, one killed: records from earlier years are still sparsely detailed. This claim is described as "Shot when approaching checkpoint at high speed." This is notable as it is the greatest sum of compensation awarded for any claim, including mass casualty events. *The claimant received the equivalent of £54,347.83 (\$100,000 at the time).*
- 4th May 2012, near checkpoint Pan Kalay, Nahr-e Saraj, six killed including five children: the MOD record reads: "6 Fatalities from the same family. Mother/wife (Name Deleted) aged 25, Sons (Name Deleted) (10), (Name Deleted) (6),

Daughters (Name Deleted) (12), (Name Deleted) (5) and (Name Deleted) (2) killed after ISAF GRU-52 suffered a weapons malfunction and overshot target and impacted in compound where family were living. This was the entire family and only wife of the claimant. An officer "is due to travel back from LKG [Lashkar Gah] 8/5/12 with the funds and letters for a Shura to be held on Thursday 10/5/12 lead by CG [Commander General] ISAF who wishes to hand over the funds and apologise for ISAF's involvement." £19,317.45 (\$31,101.09) was paid to the man who had lost his entire family.

- 5th January 2010, Nahr-e-Saraj, five killed including four children: "Claims husband, 2 sons and 2 daughters killed by ISAF helicopter strike." The claim was approved 42 days later for £6,580.65 (\$10,200) after investigation.
- 24th June 2008, Sangin, three children killed: two sisters, aged four and two, and their eight year old brother "died whilst looking after sheep whose field was mortared by BF [British forces]." The father, after being rebuffed for not bringing a letter from his local Mullah, was eventually given \$5395 in compensation. A deduction was taken from his £5208.33 (\$7,500) since he had received another claimant's property compensation by mistake. He had also previously been given \$600 in an ex gratia payment for funeral costs, which was also deducted from his total compensation. In total, it took 252 days for his claim to be completed.

MOD response

An MOD spokesperson said of this investigation:

"Any civilian death during conflict is a tragedy, more so when children and family members are involved. The UK Armed Forces works hard to minimise that risk, which regrettably can never be entirely eliminated. This is done through a package of rigorous targeting processes built upon committed intelligence work, strong engagement protocols, thorough training for those operating in conflict and clear-eyed assessments after an engagement."

"We investigate reports of civilian casualties and are always open to re-examine where new information is submitted. We are following the US Department of Defence review in this field and will take into account any outcomes that may assist our own processes."

Conclusion

The challenges faced by the British military in Afghanistan were substantial. AOAV's 2020 report [For All Was Lost](#) analysed the deaths of 454 British soldiers in Afghanistan, and the years 2009 and 2010 proved to be the two deadliest for UK personnel. Often poorly equipped troops, faced with a dedicated and experienced fighting force, were caught in fierce firefights within civilian areas. Mistakes were inevitably made.

The UK Veteran Minister Johnny Mercer wrote in his book 'We Were Warriors' about civilians being killed by British failings. "At the point of his position being overrun," Mercer wrote, a young bombardier "had requested the drop from a British Harrier and in doing so had killed some civilians."

Mercer did not detail how many civilians died, but later wrote “if you create more mayhem than you need to, you are inevitably firing up the jihadists and creating more Taliban – which was not in line with the overall mission.”

The deaths of Afghan children could be argued to be a form of peak mayhem.

Iain Overton, Executive Director of Action on Armed Violence, said of the findings: “The number of children killed following British military action in Helmand should give pause for thought. War invariably leads to death and modern war will always bring civilian casualties, but not reporting on such deaths – however much it might be a source of regret and horror to the soldiers involved in the killings and however accidental such deaths were – would be an omission of responsibility and an erosion of truth.”

“This report hopes to give some details to the often-forgotten children killed in war and, in some way, to send a warning to future Westminster politicians who might consider sending troops into battle.”

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