

Someone Else's Children

Three hundred and three kids were taken from their beds. They came home. That is where the story should have started, and instead it stopped.

Dr. Stuart Katz

Two o'clock in the morning

Picture a school dormitory at two in the morning. Now picture men with guns walking into it.

That is what happened on November 21, 2025 in Papiri, a farming community in Niger State, Nigeria. When somebody finally sat down and counted, 303 students and 12 teachers were gone. The children were boys and girls, aged between ten and eighteen. Eighty-eight of them were grabbed while trying to run. Fifty got away into the bush and found their own way home in the dark, which is a sentence I would like you to read twice.

Four days before that, gunmen took 25 schoolgirls from a school 170 kilometers away in Kebbi State and killed a member of staff. That town is mostly Muslim. The school in Papiri was Catholic. Nobody with a gun was checking.

By late December all the Papiri children were back. A hundred were released on the eighth, another 130 on the twenty-first. Parents wept. Cameras rolled. Everybody exhaled.

Then Human Rights Watch went looking for what happened next and found nothing. No announced investigation. No arrests. No prosecutions. No public word on who did it. Their conclusion was that Nigerian authorities have simply failed to learn from the attacks that came before.

Read that again. Three hundred and three children were stolen from their beds, and as far as the public record shows, nobody has been held to account for it.

How is that possible? How does a country lose three hundred children for a month and produce no arrests?

And here is the part that bothers me more, because it is the part almost nobody asks about. Those kids came home. Then what? What did we give them?

I have spent most of the past decade arguing a single proposition: that mental illness is illness. I have sat with more than seven thousand individuals and families in crisis and put in hundreds of hours on crisis support lines. So, when I say what follows, I am not theorizing. I want to show you what happens to children when the world refuses to believe that a mind can be injured.

The wound nobody photographs

We are very good at the rescue. We are almost useless at the recovery.

When a child is dragged out of a dormitory at two in the morning, that is one injury. What happens inside her afterward is another one, and it lasts far longer. This is not my opinion. It is what Nigerian researchers found when they studied Nigerian children.

One study looked at 474 displaced Nigerian children. Nearly eight in ten had post-traumatic stress. Nearly nine in ten had depression. Almost half were severely depressed.

Then there is the number I cannot get out of my head. In 90.7 percent of those children, the trauma was actively wrecking their ability to function. Not a bad mood. Not a rough patch. A disability, stopping them from sleeping, eating, learning, and being close to other people.

A study in Yobe State found more than nine in ten displaced people showing signs of both post-traumatic stress and depression. Another, looking at young people who had lived through Boko Haram violence, found about two-thirds hitting the clinical threshold for PTSD.

So who is treating them?

Across the 47 countries of the WHO African Region there is roughly one psychiatrist for every million people. In wealthy countries it is more like ten to fourteen for every hundred thousand. Nigeria, with well over 200 million people, has somewhere between 250 and 300 psychiatrists in total. Fewer than a quarter of them work with children, in a country where about half the population is under 18.

Kenya has 45 psychiatrists for 50 million people. By several accounts, exactly one of them is trained to treat children.

One.

Across Africa, where child specialists exist at all, it works out at around one for every four million children, and almost all of them are in capital cities. Which means that for a child in a village in Zamfara or Yobe, the honest answer to "who will help her" is nobody. Not a long waiting list. Nobody.

Now hold those two facts next to each other. Nearly nine in ten of these children are impaired by trauma. And there is essentially no one to treat them.

Imagine those same children had come home with shrapnel in their legs, and we had provided no surgeons, no bandages, nothing. Imagine the outrage. Imagine the headlines. It would be a scandal in every country on earth.

Change the injury from a leg to a mind and suddenly it is nobody's emergency. We photograph the reunion and call the story finished.

And this is not just cruel, it is stupid. A traumatized teenager, out of school, angry, sleepless and unsupported, is exactly the person armed groups go looking for. Leave these kids untreated and we are not only abandoning them. We are quietly building the next war.

It is not a tragedy. It is a business.

We talk about kidnapping in Nigeria as if it were weather. It is not. It is an industry, and people have measured it.

SBM Intelligence, a research firm in Lagos, counted 4,722 people abducted in at least 997 separate incidents in a single year, from July 2024 to June 2025. At least 762 people were killed in that time. Kidnappers asked for over 48 billion naira and collected 2.57 billion. The northwest of the country accounted for well over half of it.

Ransom payments they tracked went up more than 750 percent in two years. Demands went up 860 percent. SBM's own words for what this has become: a structured, profit-seeking industry.

Then Nigeria's own government statisticians published something that makes those figures look small. In their national crime survey, they reported roughly 2.2 million people kidnapped between May 2023 and April 2024, and 2.2 trillion naira paid out in ransom. Nine out of ten kidnappings were purely for money.

That is the government's own number-crunchers describing the government's own failure, in public. And still there were no arrests after Papiri.

Why children? Because in this market children are the perfect product. They are gathered together in one building. Nobody is guarding them. And there is no price a parent will not pay. That is the whole business model, and it is why boarding schools keep getting hit.

Here is the knock-on effect, and it is where the real damage compounds. After Papiri, schools across Niger State and the states beside it closed indefinitely. To protect a few hundred children, hundreds of thousands lost their classrooms. Then parents in those regions do the math any parent would do, and they stop sending their daughters at all.

The kidnappers do not need to take every child. They only need every mother to be frightened. They have already won that part.

And the money keeps circling. Intelligence sources told AFP that a large ransom was paid to get the Papiri children out, even though paying ransoms has been a crime in Nigeria since 2022, carrying up to fifteen years. Pay, and you fund the next raid. Refuse, and you leave somebody's daughter out there. There is no clean answer, which is exactly why no family should be left alone at two in the morning to work it out for themselves.

Count the girls again

On April 14, 2014, 276 schoolgirls were taken from Chibok. You remember this one. For a few weeks the whole world knew their name.

Twelve years later, 187 have escaped or been found.

The rest? Depends on who you ask. The Bring Back Our Girls Movement says 83 are still missing. The parents, in their own open letter, say 87. The Murtala Muhammed Foundation says 89.

Stop there for a second. Twelve years on, we cannot agree on how many girls are gone.

The gap is six. Six children. Six families whose daughters fall into a rounding error, depending on whose list you happen to be reading. Somebody's child is a discrepancy.

And there is one more number from that anniversary that I think is the saddest in this entire article. Forty-eight of those parents have died without ever finding out what happened to their daughter.

Think about what that actually does to a person. Grief you cannot finish. No body, no confirmation, no funeral, no ending. Just a door you keep half-watching for the rest of your life. Psychologists have a name for it and every one of them will tell you it is among the most corrosive things a human mind can carry, because it cannot heal without information, and the information never came.

Forty-eight people carried that until they died. And as far as any public record shows, not one of them was ever offered proper mental health care for it.

The Murtala Muhammed Foundation says there has not been a single confirmed recovery in the past year, and that Chibok has become, in their words, a metaphor for neglect.

They are being polite.

A hundred dollars

Not everything that destroys a child involves a gun.

Nigeria's own National Bureau of Statistics did the biggest poverty survey the country has ever run. It found that 133 million people, 63 percent of the country, are poor in a way that goes far beyond money: no decent healthcare, no schooling, no safe housing, no security, all at once. In rural areas it is 72 percent. In Sokoto State it is 91 percent.

The people who wrote that report put it plainly. Poverty in Nigeria wears the face of a child.

The Red Cross reports nearly 6.4 million children under five suffering acute malnutrition across northern Nigeria. Médecins Sans Frontières treated more than 300,000 children for malnutrition in one year, a quarter more than the year before. Nigeria's own health survey shows child stunting getting worse, not better, between 2018 and 2023.

Now here is the part that should stop you cold.

To pull one severely malnourished child back from the edge costs about a hundred US dollars. Not a hospital. Not a research grant. Roughly a hundred dollars of fortified peanut paste.

A hundred dollars. Less than a pair of sneakers. Less than a night out. Less than most of us spend without noticing.

Children are not dying because saving them is expensive. They are dying because ignoring them is cheap.

And it does not stop when they survive. Severe hunger in early childhood is a neurological event. It changes what a brain will ever be able to do. So we are not only failing to feed these children. We are, on a scale of millions, permanently reducing what they will be capable of. Then, twenty years from now, we will talk about African productivity as though it were a mystery.

Before you write that check

The natural reaction to all this is to donate to a big international agency and feel that the matter is handled. I want to talk you out of that, and not with cynicism. With evidence.

In 2014, word got out that international troops sent as peacekeepers to the Central African Republic had sexually abused young children. Not for power. For food. Hungry children, abused in exchange for something to eat.

An independent panel led by a former Canadian Supreme Court justice examined how the United Nations handled it. The findings are hard to read. The head of the mission took no action. He did not even move to protect the children. Staff got more exercised about who had leaked the allegations than about what had been done to the kids.

And the senior official who passed the information to French authorities so somebody might actually investigate? He was suspended for it.

Suspended. For telling.

It was not a one-off. Human Rights Watch documented eight cases of abuse by peacekeepers in the town of Bambari in 2016. The troops were flown home, and as far as HRW knows, not one was ever prosecuted back in their own country. A later investigation interviewed 139 possible victims, 25 of them children, and identified 41 suspects. Every single one of them had already rotated out of the country. The Associated Press went through twelve years of UN records and estimated around 2,000 allegations against peacekeepers and staff.

The reason this keeps happening is not a mystery. The UN has immunity, and the countries that send soldiers keep the exclusive right to prosecute their own men. So justice for an African child depends on a government thousands of miles away deciding to court-martial its own soldiers. You can guess how often that happens.

It is not only peacekeeping. In 2023, American aid officials uncovered a huge, coordinated operation stealing donated food across Ethiopia. Food meant for people in famine, sold in local markets instead. In one town in Tigray, investigators found enough stolen aid sitting in the market to feed 134,000 people for a month.

It was still in sacks marked with the American flag.

USAID's own inspector general later confirmed the theft across six of the country's eleven regions. US officials thought it might be the largest theft of donated food ever recorded.

Now, the honest part, because I am not going to tell you the convenient version. When donors reacted by suspending aid, people starved. The Catholic bishop of Adigrat said it as bluntly as anyone could: stopping the food was a disaster, people were dying, children and the elderly got worse, and he called it a sin. Surveys in Tigray found severe hunger rising sharply after the pause.

So the lesson is not "aid is corrupt, keep your money." That conclusion kills children too, and anybody who jumps to it is looking for permission to do nothing.

The real lesson is harder and less comfortable. Big institutions are not a replacement for your attention. They need it. Money you hand over without looking is money that can be stolen. Responsibility you hand over without looking is responsibility you have quietly abandoned.

The people who deserve your support most are usually the ones closest to the ground. The local clinic. The community school. The Nigerian parents who have refused for twelve years to let their daughters be forgotten. They are also, almost always, the ones getting the least funding.

So give. Please give. Just ask three questions first: where does this land, who receives it, and who reports back? That is not suspicion. That is what caring about something actually looks like when you do it properly.

Whose kids are they, exactly?

Here is the thing I really want to say, and it is not mainly about Africa.

There is no version of morality in which a child's right to be safe depends on which country the adults near her happen to be from. Nobody actually believes that. If a child collapsed in front of you in the street right now, you would not first check her passport. You would just move.

The distance at which we stop feeling responsible is not a principle. It is just the point where our attention runs out, and we have dressed it up as a principle so we can sleep.

Every tradition worth anything gets to the same place by a different road. Do unto others. Care for the orphan. I am because we are. Rights belong to people, not to citizens. Whatever book you were raised on, you already agree with this. What is missing is not the belief. It is the habit.

I should tell you where I am standing when I say that.

I have spent thirty-five years in the travel business, and I have been to more than 120 countries myself. My whole working life has been built on the idea that crossing a border does something to a person. I have even given it a name, Travel Therapy, the notion that going somewhere can do real work on your mental health. I believe that. I have watched it happen in airports and on buses and in hotel lobbies for three decades.

Which is exactly why I no longer have any patience for what borders are doing to children.

Spend enough years crossing lines on a map and you start to see them for what they are. On one side of a line, a child gets a hospital, a school, somebody to talk to, and a national outcry if she goes missing. On the other side of the same line, drawn a century ago by men who are long dead and never asked her, she gets none of it. Nothing about the child changed. Only the line.

That is it. That is the entire difference. Not merit, not need, not how fiercely her mother loves her. Just which side of an imaginary stripe she was born on.

Travel, if you do it honestly, ruins your ability to pretend otherwise. You cannot sit across from a family in one country and then fly home and file their children under somebody else's problem. The passport stops mattering roughly ten minutes into the conversation.

Compassion has never respected those lines. Ours should not either.

And if the moral argument does not move you, try the practical one. About half of sub-Saharan Africa's population is under 18, and the region is on track to become the most populous on earth. So the children going untreated, unfed and unschooled right now in Zamfara and Darfur and eastern Congo are not a humanitarian footnote in somebody else's country. They are a large share of the human beings who will be running the world in forty years.

There is no future in which their condition is not our problem. Migration, conflict, extremism, pandemics, economic growth: pick any headline you claim to care about, and the line runs straight back through these children.

Act because it is right. Act because it is smart. The kids do not care which.

So what do we do?

Fine words are cheap. Five things, wherever you live.

Treat the mind like the body. Every rescue, resettlement and school reopening should come with mental health care attached automatically, not added later if the money stretches. When you look at a charity, ask a simple question: do you fund counseling, or only food and blankets? Most fund only what a camera can see.

Train local people, not visiting experts. One child psychiatrist for four million children is the wall everything else crashes into. Flying in specialists for two weeks will not fix it. Scholarships will. Training teachers, nurses and community workers in basic psychological first aid will. Paying African clinicians well enough that they stay will.

Demand the count. A country that cannot say whether 83 or 89 of its daughters are missing cannot plan or be held responsible. Ask for the numbers. From governments, and from the agencies you fund.

Give locally and check. Clinics and schools that already exist, run by people who live there. Then look at where it went. Theft thrives on donors who feel good and never follow up.

Refuse to let the story end. The most damaging habit we have is treating the rescue, or the peace deal, or the homecoming photo as the finish line. For the child, that is where the hard part begins, and it is the part nobody films.

After the cameras leave

I keep thinking about those children walking out of the forest in Niger State in December, into their parents' arms, in front of the cameras.

Statistically, a lot of them now have post-traumatic stress. A lot of them are impaired by it every single day. And almost none of them will ever see a child psychiatrist, because there is hardly one to see. They will go back to school, or they will not. They will sleep, or they will not. And they will be told what traumatized people are told everywhere: be grateful, you are home, move on.

We built an extraordinary machine for finding those children and bringing them back. That is not nothing. It is genuinely remarkable, and the people who did it should be proud.

But we built almost nothing to catch them when they landed. We treated the emergency as physical, because physical emergencies are visible, photographable, and they end.

Mental illness is illness. A child's mind is as real as her arm. It breaks as easily, it heals when treated, and it fails when it is not. Until we build that into how we fund and plan every single response to violence and poverty anywhere on earth, we will keep producing rescues that were never recoveries.

They are not someone else's children. There is no such thing. There never was.

About the author

Dr. Stuart Katz (PsyD, MPH, MBA) is a Panamanian-American-Israeli travel executive, mental health advocate, author and speaker.

He is CEO of TAL Tours and Deluxe Kosher Tours, and has spent more than 35 years organizing Jewish and custom group travel internationally. He has traveled to over 120 countries.

In 2022 he co-founded Nafshenu Alenu, a Jewish mental health education initiative. He chairs OGEN, Advancement of Mental Health Awareness in Israel, and Mental Health First Aid Israel, and serves on the Board of Visitors of McLean Hospital, an affiliate of Harvard Medical School. A certified Mental Health First Aid instructor, his work spans crisis counseling, peer advocacy, stigma reduction and suicide awareness. He has counseled more than 7,000 individuals and families in crisis, and volunteered hundreds of hours on crisis support lines.

He is the creator of Travel Therapy, an approach connecting travel with mental health and well-being, and writes and speaks on travel, leadership and mental health advocacy.

He cares deeply about the children of Africa, and about a simple idea: that a child's claim to our protection does not get weaker the further away they live.

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