

COLOMBIA

Impact of the armed conflict on children and youth



Thematic report
31 March 2022

OVERVIEW

According to Colombia's Victims Unit, between 1985 and 2021, armed conflict in the country affected more than two million children and youth,¹ including through displacement, confinement, recruitment, abuse, and sexual violence (COALICO 2021; UN SC 08/12/2021). Although violence decreased after the 2016 demobilisation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), attempts by other armed groups to take over the power vacuum in areas previously dominated by the FARC-EP has increased conflict levels. Between 2020 and 2021, there was an astounding 88% increase (from 12,481 to 23,465) in the number of conflict-affected children and youth (COALICO 2020 and 2021). Displacement impacted around 13,000 children among those affected by conflict in 2021 (OCHA 08/02/2022; COALICO 2021). The number of children and adolescents recruited into armed groups to bolster their ranks has also increased (InSight Crime 15/04/2021).

The clear increase in conflict in departments near the Pacific coast (Cauca, Chocó, Nariño, Valle del Cauca) and the border with Venezuela (Arauca, Norte de Santander, Vichada) has, in turn, increased cases of displacement and confinement. Between 1 January and 17 March 2022, the number of people affected by confinement and displacement doubled compared to the same period in 2021. The first two-and-a-half months of 2022 has seen 44% as many people affected as were in all of 2021 (OCHA accessed 17/03/2021). The number of children affected by conflict is highly likely to increase in 2022.

Key messages

- Armed conflict affects every aspect of the lives of children and youth, making it difficult for them to access education, health services, and livelihoods.
- Conflict exposes children and youth to possibly long-term or life-long physical and mental health impacts.
- Available figures on children and youth affected by armed conflict are likely underreported because of threats, fear of reprisals by armed groups, a lack of awareness of protection services, and long distances to urban centres to report cases.
- The recent increase of violence in Colombia will likely increase the number of children and youth affected.

About this report: this report analyses how armed conflict in Colombia has affected children and youth. It looks at specific trends and conflict dynamics in the most conflict-affected departments. It also provides an overview of the general impacts of conflict and specific impacts of displacement and confinement.

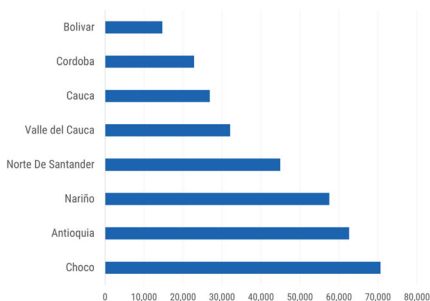
Methodology and limitations: this report is based on a review of UN and NGO reports, OCHA Monitor data, and media articles. Key informant interviews provided additional information. Most numerical data in the report is from Colombia's Victims Unit which has recorded victims of the conflict since 1985. However, the data only reflects registered victims and is likely incomplete. Data on the number of displaced children comes primarily from COALICO and OCHA and data used to analyse the total number of people affected also comes from OCHA. Disaggregated data for all conflict events is lacking.

¹ In Colombia, the term 'los niños, niñas, y adolescentes' refers to children under the age of 18. In this paper, 'children and youth' will refer to those under the age of 18, because disaggregated data for 18- and 19-year-olds (in line with WHO's classification of adolescents as between the ages of ten and 19) is not commonly available.

NATIONAL TRENDS AND CONFLICT DYNAMICS

Most (55%) conflict-affected children and youth between 1985 and 2021 were in the departments of Antioquia, Bolívar, Cauca, Chocó, Córdoba, Nariño, and Valle del Cauca, where armed groups fought over the territorial control of coca crops and strategic routes for irregular economies, such as drugs and illegal mining (Victims Unit accessed 21/02/2022). Children are an easy target frequently used by armed groups to increase their numbers (InSight Crime 15/04/2021). Armed groups target indigenous children in particular because they know the lay of the land where these groups operate (InSight Crime 01/04/2021).

Children and youth affected by armed conflict between 2016–2021



Source: Victims Unit (accessed 21/02/2022)

Children are highly vulnerable to armed conflict. Children and youth made up between 32–42% of all conflict-affected people in Antioquia, Bolívar, Cauca, Chocó, Córdoba, Nariño, Norte de Santander, and Valle del Cauca between 2016–2021. This is 83% of conflict-affected children and youth in Colombia (Victims Unit accessed 21/02/2022).

In Chocó and western Antioquia, there are clashes between the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AGC) over the control of strategic corridors connecting these areas to the Pacific Ocean, where they facilitate the transit of drugs abroad (InSightCrime 24/10/2021 and 27/10/2020; Indepaz 04/10/2021).

In northern Antioquia and southern Córdoba, there are clashes between the AGC, Fronts 18 and 36, and Los Caparros over the control of the passage to the Magdalena Medio region and its connection with seaports in the north, as well as over gold mining and coca cultivation (Indepaz 04/10/2021; FIP 07/07/2021; EE 23/07/2021; Revista Cien Dias 30/04/2021).

In Nariño, there are clashes between the ELN, the AGC, and a FARC-EP dissident group known as the Western Coordination Command over the control of coca crops in the Telembi triangle (Barbacoa, Magüi Payán, and Roberto Payán). Approximately 53% of Nariño's coca crops are in these areas (Colombia Drug Observatory accessed 25/02/2022). Nariño is also a connection point for drug trafficking with Ecuador and the Pacific Coast (Pares 19/08/2021; InSight Crime 01/11/2021).

In the Catatumbo area of Norte de Santander, there are confrontations between the ELN, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), Los Rastrojos, and the AGC (Pares 22/02/2021; InSight Crime 19/01/2021; EE 02/01/2022). Approximately 28% of the country's coca crops are grown in the Catatumbo area and trafficked to Venezuela and Brazil (Colombia Drug Observatory accessed 25/02/2022).

In rural areas of Buenaventura municipality in Valle del Cauca, there are clashes between the AGC and the ELN, who fight over the control of income from drug trafficking and illegal mining (El Tiempo 28/11/2021; Ombudsman's Office 14/10/2021; CLJP 25/08/2021).

In Cauca, there is fighting between the Western Coordination Command and the ELN over control of the Micay River, which facilitates the transit of irregular economies, principally drug trafficking, to the Pacific Coast (Pares 19/08/2021; Indepaz 04/10/2021).

In southern Bolívar, there are disputes between the ELN and the AGC over the control of coca crops, gold, and coltan (Colombia Informa 17/03/2022). Between 2018 and early 2021, these two groups were allies and divided control over the area (Revista Cien Dias 30/04/2021). Territorial disputes over control began later in 2021 (Indepaz 04/10/2021; RCN Radio 17/02/2022).

Children and youth recruited and used in the armed conflict

Armed groups forcibly recruit or persuade children and youth to join them then use them in combat or as informants, porters, and traffickers. These children and youth receive military training to become combatants. Girls are sometimes used for sex (UN SC 08/12/2021). Between the second half of 2016 and the first half of 2021, armed groups recruited more than 800 children and youth into Colombia's armed conflict (UN SC 31/12/2019 and 08/12/2021). In most cases, armed groups convince children by offering them money or food, taking advantage of their socioeconomic conditions related to poverty, inequality, and a lack of opportunities (CNMH 12/12/2017; Cerosetenta 12/02/2018; TNH 10/09/2020). In many areas where armed groups operate, which are also some of the poorest in Colombia, people view joining an armed group as the only way out of poverty (Ombudsman's Office 07/2020; El Universal 20/04/2021).

Between 1960 and 2016, the FARC-EP was the main perpetrator of child recruitment (CNMH 12/2017). After the group's demobilisation, the ELN became the group with the highest number of recruited children (OCCO 02/2022; CNMH accessed 28/02/2022). The average age of recruitment is 15. According to available data, approximately 86% of recruited children are 13–17 years old, around 14% are seven to 12 years old, and less than 1% are six years of age or younger (CNMH 11/02/2022). People underreport numbers because of fear of reprisals, a lack of awareness of protection services, long distances to urban centres to report cases, and a lack of faith in reporting mechanisms (UN SC 08/12/2021; Ombudsman's Office 07/2020; InSight Crime 01/04/2021).

Sexual and gender-based violence

Between 1959 and 2020, nearly 31% of people affected by sexual violence in Colombia's armed conflict were girls under 18 years of age (CNMH 19/06/2021). Members of armed groups, including high-level commanders, sexually abuse girls. In some cases, members of armed groups manipulate girls into believing they are in a consensual relationship; in others, they force girls to accept abuse through threats to them and their families (InSight Crime 08/04/2021; TNH 10/09/2020; CNMH 12/2018). Some members also abuse boys. The stigma of being considered homosexual because of the abuse hinders them from reporting, making reported cases of the abuse of boys rarer (Lopez Gomez 01/06/2018; Giraldo Aguirre and Gallego Montes 15/06/2020).

There is an underreporting of cases because children and youth do not know how to report cases themselves, are threatened by armed groups, or may have normalised the abuse or are unaware that their experiences constitute abuse (CNMH 12/2018; Razón Pública 12/12/2021).



GENERAL IMPACT OF CONFLICT ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Conflict has a multidimensional impact on the lives of children and youth, affecting all elements of their lives: **health** (physical and mental), **access to clean drinking water, food security, access to shelter and adequate household goods, education, and protection.**

Physical health: conflict-affected areas tend to be rural and lack proper health infrastructure, qualified medical personnel, and medicines and vaccines, and accessing healthcare can be difficult and dangerous (MIRE 23/02/2022; Garcés Palacio et al. 02/10/2020; Caracol Radio 29/06/2021; INS 2017). The situation means children are less likely to see doctors for regular check-ups, affecting vaccine uptake. They are also exposed to diseases, such as cholera, typhoid fever, and acute diarrhoeal diseases, which can be fatal without timely treatment (Ministry of Health 12/2019; INS 2017).

Mental health: some conflict-affected children and youth suffer from depression and anxiety, have difficulty paying attention, and struggle to bond with their parents and friends (Piñeros-Ortiz et al. 22/09/2021; ICBF et al. 2014). Trauma can be managed or overcome only with proper psychological support (Tamayo-Agudelo and Bell 05/2019). When children and youth lose their parents because of conflict, they have to prematurely act as adults to support the household and raise their siblings. Combined with exposure to violence, this affects their social and emotional development and continues to affect them well into their adult life, leading to isolation, loneliness, and difficulty expressing feelings (Moreno Acero et al. 02/02/2022; Añas Campos and Roa Mendoza 10/2015; Duque 12/2017). Forcibly recruited children who manage to escape armed groups cannot return to their families and instead have to live with foster families or in state homes (InSight Crime 08/04/2021).

Access to clean drinking water: during armed conflict, children and youth are less able to access clean drinking water, especially those in communities far from fresh water sources (OCHA 20/10/2021, 18/11/2021, and 18/02/2022). Sometimes, explosive material or corpses thrown into rivers contaminate water sources. Illegal activities, such as mining, oil refining, and deforestation, also affect water quality and safety (MIRE 07/03/2021). Access to clean water is essential not only for drinking water but also for cooking and hygiene, with children under the age of five especially at risk of acute diarrhoeal diseases and malnutrition (UNICEF 11/11/2021; MIRE 07/01/2022 and 30/01/2022).

Food security: armed conflict disrupts access to food and markets, compromising food security. When threats, displacement, and confinement affect families, they are unable to access their crops, limiting food availability. Conflict also disrupts income generation, with the lack of economic resources to pay for food increasing food insecurity. Families become unable to provide food for their children, affecting their physical and mental development (OSLOMET 2021; Marrugo-Ligardo et al. 2018; FAO 30/03/2016).

Shelter and household goods: in Colombia, armed conflict has resulted in people living in overcrowded conditions or dwellings without walls, doors, or internal divisions, exposing children and youth to risks related to health, safety, security, protection (from gender-based violence and forced or persuasive recruitment), and privacy (MIRE 07/01/2021; OCHA 22/02/2022; NRC 28/07/2021; KII 09/03/2022). Adequate shelter decreases exposure to illnesses and diseases and is an essential pillar in preventing and mitigating violence, especially gender-based violence (Protection Cluster 12/01/2021; MIRE 07/01/2021).

Education: armed conflict in Colombia has directly affected education, mainly in rural areas. Schools are central to ensuring the mental health of children and youth, where children can express their feelings and experiences through educational activities and games. They also serve as safe spaces where children are removed from the dynamics of conflict (Save the Children 29/06/2017; KII 02/03/2022; TNH 10/09/2020; InSight Crime 15/04/2021). The closure of schools as a COVID-19 containment measure has left children and youth without these safe spaces and increased their vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups (KII 02/03/2022; KII 09/03/2022; TNH 10/09/2020; InSight Crime 15/04/2021). The lack of access to schools (related to the pandemic or because of conflict) contributes to an increase in dropout rates, reducing future opportunities and the chance for children to improve their lives (Melo-Becerra et al. 02/11/2021; 360 Radio 02/02/2022).

Sometimes, armed groups use schools as places of war, setting them up as bases from which to fire on the enemy or as a refuge from attacks (Pesquisa Javeriana 20/09/2021; EE 22/03/2021).

Protection: conflict also makes some children orphans, sometimes forcing them to live in difficult conditions, including overcrowding, a lack of food, and challenging access to education and healthcare (Plan International 2020). Some children live with close relatives, but conflict tends to occur in more rural and poorer areas where new living conditions, even with family, may constrain resources to be inadequate for all their needs, especially when their relatives also have children (Moreno Acero et al., 02/02/2022). Orphaned children and youth are vulnerable to land dispossession because they are less likely to know or be able to defend their rights and are subject to deception or threats by armed groups (ICBF accessed 01/02/2022). In general, children have less knowledge, money, and resources (CNRR et al. 07/2009).

IMPACT OF DISPLACEMENT ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Between 2016 and 2021, the number of children and youth affected by displacement increased by more than 600% (COALICJO 2021, 2020, 2019, 2018, 2017, and 2016). When children and youth are displaced, they face a total disruption to their lives, including risks related to **family separation, protection, mental health, education, and access to food and other material goods**. For their parents, displacement affects access to livelihoods (KII 02/03/2022).

Family separation can occur during displacement, either during the act of displacement itself, when children and youth are separated during the journey, or at the end point, when socioeconomic needs require family members to move again in search of job opportunities (Moreno-Acero et al. 10/12/2020; Plan International 2020). Family separation also occurs when armed groups threaten children and youth, leading families to decide that their children must move for their safety while the family stays behind (CNMH 12/2017).

Protection: overall, children are more vulnerable, especially in the context of displacement, where they have to leave their homes and adapt to a new context. Sometimes, they face discrimination based on their ethnicity or race, all while trying to understand their new situation as displaced people (Plan International 2020). This often applies to children from indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, who are discriminated against because of their languages, traditions, and culture (CNMH 2013; UNHCR 26/12/2017).

Orphaned children and youth are at high risk of forced recruitment during displacement. They are more vulnerable when they do not have family members or other adults to protect them, exposing them to threats and kidnapping (UN SC 08/12/2021; CNMH 12/2018).

Mental health: a national mental health survey found that rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (12%) and mental health disorders (11%) are significantly higher among conflict-displaced teenagers than among their non-displaced counterparts (2% and 7%, respectively) (Marroquín Rivera et al. 19/05/2020). The impact of displacement on mental health also affects adults, who continue to suffer from mental health disorders because of a lack of care and support (McEniry 07/04/2019).

Education: Colombia's education system struggles to support children and youth affected by displacement. Schools do not have the necessary tools to meet the educational needs of children who have faced intermittent interruptions to their schooling (Ramos Pérez 07/2017; KII 02/03/2022). Sometimes, schools reject displaced children because their age does not correspond to their level of schooling. They also experience bullying (EE 04/09/2021; Vera Márquez et al. 26/12/2014).

Food: food security concerns stemming from disruptions to food production, distribution, and marketing are limited to rural areas occupied by armed groups or where there is active fighting. The location and severity of food security needs in the country have shifted over time as areas of conflict change. Food insecurity affects displaced children and youth who do not receive adequate nutrients for their physical and mental development (Sierra-Puentes and Bejarano Riveros 2020; FAO 2017). Families and children affected by displacement face food insecurity upon the loss of land used for food production, affecting access to and availability of food (Afanador et al. 26/10/2021; OSLOMET 2021).

IMPACT OF CONFINEMENT ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Confinement is understood as the limitation on the mobility of a population and their access to at least three basic services or goods (such as food, education, health, water and sanitation, and livelihoods) for at least one week (OCHA 27/04/2015). Between 2016 and 2021, the number of children and youth affected by confinement increased by 349% (Victims Unit accessed 28/02/2022). During confinements, families face mobility restrictions and have limited access to **livelihoods** and services, such as **healthcare** and **education**.

Movement restrictions affect **livelihoods** by limiting access to crops and livelihood activities, such as fishing and hunting. The impact on livelihoods directly affects the nutritional intake of children and youth (Ombudsman's Office 04/10/2021; OCHA 09/11/2021). As a coping mechanism, families reduce the number of meals per day, especially for adults who skip meals to feed their children (TNH 25/11/2021). Parents skipping meals does not always mean enough food for children to meet their nutritional needs (Sierra-Puentes and Bejarano Riveros 2020; Afanador et al. 26/10/2021).

Confinements directly affect **health** by reducing the nutritional intake of children and youth and restricting access to medical facilities (OCHA 30/11/2021; Béndixsen Gutiérrez 2016). Families struggle to receive emergency and non-emergency care, including medical treatment for chronic illnesses (TNH 25/11/2021; MIRE 31/03/2021).

Confinement often disrupts **education**. Many families choose to keep their children at home to prevent their exposure to mines and forced recruitment. Sometimes, schools suspend face-to-face activities because of mobility restrictions (MIRE 01/12/2021). When schools remain open, the lack of teachers or tools to help them cope with the difficulties at hand and the various needs of their students affect educational attainment (MIRE 15/11/2021 and 11/10/2021; KII 02/03/2022).

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HUMANITARIAN ACCESS AND RESPONSE

The increase in conflict between armed groups has made it difficult for humanitarian organisations to access affected communities because of security conditions for humanitarian workers. In 2021, humanitarian organisations were able to respond to only 44% of reported displacements and 58% of reported confinements (OCHA 28/01/2022). In some cases, clashes between armed groups have led to the suspension of humanitarian missions (KII with MIRE 07/03/2022). In others, the presence of armed groups has led to delays in delivery and restricted the scope of assistance (MIRE 16/01/2022 and 12/09/2021).

INFORMATION GAPS

- Threats, fear of reprisals by armed groups, a lack of awareness of protection services, and long distances to urban centres to report cases lead to the **underreporting** of cases of conflict affecting children (including through sexual abuse, recruitment, displacement, and confinement).
- Although there is information on the impact of armed conflict on children and youth, there is limited information on their different needs in displacement and confinement scenarios.
- **Disaggregated data** of affected children is not available for many cases reported.