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13 August 2021

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Colombia: Situation of Afro-Colombians, including ability to relocate in Bogotá, Cartagena and Barranquilla and access housing, employment, education, and healthcare; impact of COVID-19 (2019–July 2021)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Colombia has a total population of 50.3 million (UN 21 Apr. 2021, 1). According to a 2019 report on the ["most recent" (IMF 22 Feb. 2021, Sec. 5.1.1)] 2018 census focusing on the Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal and Palenquera (*Negra, Afrocolombiana, Raizal y Palenquera, NARP*) [1] population by the Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, DANE), 2,982,224 Colombians self-identified as NARP, compared to 4,311,757 in the census of 2005, a drop of 30.8 percent (Colombia 6 Nov. 2019, 16). The same source provides the following statistics:

	Population who self-identified as NARP in the 2018 Census	Population who self-identified as NARP in the 2005 Census	Percentage change from 2005 to 2018
Atlántico department [with Barranquilla as its capital]	140,142	227,251	-38.33
Bolívar department [with Cartagena as its capital]	319,396	497,667	-35.82
Bogotá capital district	66,934	97,885	-31.62

(Colombia 6 Nov. 2019, 35)

Sources report that the Afro-Colombian population is concentrated in western departments (Amnesty International 9 Jan. 2020) or along the Pacific coast, in Cauca department and "in and around" Cali (Associate Professor 12 July 2021). Information on the Afro-Colombian populations of the cities of Barranquilla, Cartagena and Bogotá could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The 2019 DANE report indicates that there are [translation] "barriers to ethnic and racial self-identification," particularly in urban settings, including "racism and racial discrimination" (Colombia 6 Nov. 2019, 12). In a 2019 follow-up report on recommendations made on the human rights situation in Colombia, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organisation of American States (OAS) notes that the measures taken by the Colombian government to address the "invisibility" of Afro-descendants in Colombia, including adopting programs to collect and disaggregate data on Afro-Colombians, have been "partially compliant" with IACHR recommendations (OAS 6 Apr. 2020, Sec. H, para. 164). According to the Global African Worker (GAW), a US-based online magazine that focuses on workers of African descent with a "progressive, anti-imperialist and worker-centered approach" (GAW n.d.), there

continue to be "no reliable statistics on specific problems of work, education, health, food, housing and forced displacement" faced by Afro-Colombians (GAW 11 June 2019).

According to Freedom House, Afro-Colombians constitute the "largest" segment of internally displaced persons (IDPs), and 80 percent of Afro-Colombians live below the poverty line (Freedom House 3 Mar. 2021, Sec. F4). A 2020 DANE report indicates that 37 percent of people who self-identify as Black or Afro-descendant live in poverty, 10 percent above the national average (Colombia Sept. 2020, 9). The same source states that in Cartagena, which is among Colombian cities with the [translation] "greatest number" of people self-identifying as NARP, 12.4 percent of the population has [unsatisfied basic needs (*necesidades básicas insatisfechas*, *NBI*)] (Colombia Sept. 2020, 26). Information on the poverty rates of Afro-Colombians in Bogotá and Barranquilla could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Treatment of Afro-Colombians

2.1 Treatment by Society

According to sources, Afro-Colombians living in Bogotá, Cartagena and Barranquilla experience racial discrimination (Associate Professor 12 July 2021; Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a full professor at the University of Ottawa, who is also a researcher at the Observatory on Violence, Criminalization and Democracy (OVCD) [2] indicated that [translation] "some" members of Colombian society perceive Afro-Colombians as having [translation] "supported" or been "involved" in illegal activities, including "drug trafficking, prostitution and paramilitarism" (Full Professor 7 July 2021). The same source further stated that this belief is [translation] "especially common" in "tourist cities" such as Cartagena, given the presence of sex trafficking (Full Professor 7 July 2021).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an associate professor at the University of Toronto's Department of History, who is also a researcher at the OVCD, stated that "[o]rdinary" Afro-Colombians who are displaced face "increased scrutiny and pressures" and added that Afro-Colombians who migrate to Bogotá will "stand out" for being an ethnic minority,

while those who migrate to Barranquilla and Cartagena from rural areas of the Pacific coast will "stand out" due to their accents (Associate Professor 12 July 2021).

2.2 Treatment by Authorities

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a Bogotá-based senior analyst at International Crisis Group whose research has focused on armed conflict and migration dynamics in Colombia, indicated that in Bogotá, Cartagena, and Barranquilla, Afro-Colombians reside in "low-income settlement areas" where local politicians have "relationships" with "criminal armed groups," and the police are "co-opted by an armed group"; there is "absolutely no trust in the authorities," resulting in "very low reporting of crime" (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). The Associate Professor similarly stated that there is a "nexus" between regional political power and paramilitary successor groups "across the country," and further noted that paramilitary groups are "particularly present in low-income neighbourhoods where internally displaced Afro-Colombians are located" (Associate Professor 12 July 2021). In interviews conducted in 2020 by the same source, Afro-Colombians described experiencing police harassment and expressed mistrust of the authorities, who may assume that Afro-Colombians are from a "troubled" region or are a member of a guerilla group or criminal organization; this mistrust affects the willingness of Afro-Colombians to access services for displaced individuals (Associate Professor 12 July 2021). According to the GAW, members of Afro-Colombian social movements face "police harassment" (GAW 11 June 2019). Citing Temblores ONG, a Colombian NGO that "monitors state violence," the *Guardian* reports that there were 7,992 cases of assault and 30 cases of sexual assault in 2020 and that the victims were "often" migrants and Afro-Colombians (*The Guardian* 25 Feb. 2021). According to the New Humanitarian, a non-profit news organization focusing on humanitarian crises (The New Humanitarian n.d.), it is difficult to obtain information on the extent of police violence against Afro-Colombians, since data collected by the police is not disaggregated by race or ethnicity (The New Humanitarian 25 Sept. 2020).

According to the Full Professor, there has been violence against Afro-Colombians participating in anti-government protests in urban centres; Afro-Colombians in Bogotá, Cartagena and Barranquilla are targeted by the riot police [(Escuadrón Móvil Antidisturbios, Esmad)], a civilian police force that reports to

the Ministry of Defence (Full Professor 7 July 2021). The same source added that, in the wake of protests related to the security situation and authorities' response to COVID-19, Afro-Colombians in Bogotá, Cartagena and Barranquilla have been [translation] "very affected" by security forces' "rhetoric" and "perception" of them as supporting guerrillas and drug traffickers; riot police have "targeted" leaders of African descent (Full Professor 7 July 2021). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.3 Treatment by Armed Groups

A December 2019 IACHR report covering the period from January 2016 to December 2019 indicates that Bogotá and Atlántico department were among the areas where human rights defenders, including Afro-Colombian leaders, received the "largest number of threats" (OAS 6 Dec. 2019, para. 20, 22, 56, 127, 129). The Full Professor indicated that Afro-Colombian leaders are [translation] "targeted" by criminal groups in cities such as Bogotá, Cartagena, and Barranquilla (Full Professor 7 July 2021).

The Senior Analyst reported that Afro-Colombians in low-income urban areas face forced recruitment (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). The Full Professor reported that young Afro-Colombian men are [translation] "almost exclusively" targeted by drug traffickers for forced recruitment, "especially" in Bogotá and Cartagena (Full Professor 7 July 2021). A report by Fundación Paz y Reconciliación (Pares), an NGO conducting research and analysis on topics such as security, internal armed conflict and criminality (Devex n.d.), states that ten youths from an Afro-Colombian neighbourhood in the municipality of Soacha near Bogotá were recruited by the criminal gang Los Paisas (also known as El Mesa) (Pares 15 Mar. 2020). The same source adds that there are at least 20 criminal groups [translation] "possibl[y]" present in Soacha (Pares 15 Mar. 2020).

According to the Full Professor, young Afro-Colombian women who migrate to urban centres face harassment and threats, as well as recruitment into prostitution and human trafficking, particularly in Bogotá and Cartagena (Full Professor 7 July 2021). The Senior Analyst similarly reported "issues of sexual exploitation" for Afro-descendent women, adding that there is "very serious" underreporting of gender-based violence in poor settlements in Bogotá, Barranquilla and Cartagena; in Bogotá, there have been instances of sexual and

gender-based violence being used as a threat against individuals who might be considering reporting a crime or resisting exploitation (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021).

3. Ability to Relocate to Bogotá, Cartagena, and Barranquilla

3.1 Rural Internal Displacement

The Full Professor stated that there is a [translation] "double dynamic" at play for Afro-Colombians in relocating to urban centres such as Bogotá, Cartagena, and Barranquilla (Full Professor 7 July 2021). First, the "promised" restitution of legally recognized Afro-Colombian ancestral lands along the Pacific coast has not been successful; Afro-Colombian leaders defending human rights are being threatened and killed by paramilitary and criminal groups in the region (Full Professor 7 July 2021). Second, upon migration to urban centres, Afro-Colombians are targeted by armed criminal groups (Full Professor 7 July 2021). According to an article authored by Dr. Sheila Gruner, an associate professor in community, economic and social development at Algoma University in Canada, Afro-Colombian communities have a constitutional right to collectively titled land in areas on the Pacific coast; however, violence in the region has risen to "critical levels" since the peace talks (Gruner 8 Mar. 2021). The same source adds that the Colombian government has "no effective presence" in the area and has "effectively abandon[ed]" these communities (Gruner 8 Mar. 2021). For further information on the situation and treatment of Afro-Colombians on the Pacific coast, including their displacement and right to land, and the implementation of the land restitution program, see Response to Information Request COL200219 of May 2020.

A 2020 UNHCR report indicates that the security situation along the Pacific coast has led to the "confinement of an increasing number of communities," which "predominantly" impacts Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples, especially in the departments of Chocó and Nariño (UN 24 June 2020, 39). According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), COVID-19 restrictions have "hampered the work of humanitarian agencies helping displaced people in Colombia" (HRW 13 Jan. 2021). For further information on the restrictions on movement placed on Pacific coast communities by armed groups, see Response to Information Request COL200219 of May 2020.

3.2 Urban Internal Displacement

According to the Senior Analyst, the cities of Bogotá, Barranquilla and Cartagena have "large" IDP populations that include Afro-Colombians, who settle in low-income neighbourhoods (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). The Full Professor reports that Afro-Colombians relocating to cities such as Bogotá, Cartagena and Barranquilla often arrive [translation] "already very impoverished" (Full Professor 7 July 2021).

According to the Senior Analyst, armed groups are "easily" able to locate Afro-Colombians who relocated to escape their threats, since the groups have "networks in all the major cities" (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). The same source added that in Bogotá, the presence of criminal groups in low-income settlements drives the continued intra-urban displacement of Afro-Colombians (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.3 Access to Housing

According to a 2019 IACHR report on the situation of human rights in Colombia, Afro-Colombians are faced with "serious obstacles" in accessing housing (OAS 21 Mar. 2019, para. 160). The Senior Analyst stated that Afro-Colombians experience racial discrimination when trying to access housing in "all major cities" (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). The same source added that Afro-Colombians live in low-income settlements in the southern parts of Bogotá (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a professor of sociology at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), who is also a researcher at the OVCD, stated that Afro-Colombians who migrate to cities live in informal settlements or in neighbourhoods subsidized by the government (Professor of sociology 12 July 2021). The same source added that Afro-Colombians build informal housing on the outskirts of the city, in areas with no public services (Professor of sociology 12 July 2021). The Senior Analyst noted that in the absence of free public services, low-income settlement areas rely on informal services, including water and public transit, provided by criminal groups for a fee (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). The same source added that Afro-Colombians who resettle in Cartagena are often concentrated in areas "prone to flooding" and face challenges due to their geographic segregation (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021).

3.4 Access to Employment

According to a March 2019 IACHR report, Afro-Colombians face "serious obstacles" in accessing employment, particularly senior and managerial positions (OAS 21 Mar. 2019, para. 160). The Senior Analyst reports that Afro-Colombians who relocate to low-income areas in Bogotá, Barranquilla and Cartagena experience "labour market discrimination" and a lack of economic opportunities (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). According to the Professor of sociology, Afro-Colombians are [translation] "traditionally" dependent on agriculture but cannot continue to farm when they relocate to major cities (Professor of sociology 12 July 2021). According to the Associate Professor, Afro-Colombian women were negatively affected by COVID-19 lockdowns as they are "usually" employed in the service sector (Associate Professor 12 July 2021). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.5 Access to Education

According to the March 2019 IACHR report, Afro-Colombians are faced with "serious obstacles" in accessing education (OAS 21 Mar. 2019, 548). According to GAW, educational establishments in Colombia do not "regularly" track their numbers of Afro-Colombian students (GAW 11 June 2019). The Senior Analyst reports that there is a "registry of poverty" [(Sistema de identificación de potenciales beneficiarios de programas sociales, Sisbén)] through which Colombians can register to access free healthcare and education (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). The World Bank explains that the Sisbén is an "[i]ntegrated [s]ocial [r]egistry," which helps target the allocation of social assistance programs by collecting socio-economic data of people in the registry (World Bank 15 Dec. 2020, para. 5). Sources indicated that the process to register is bureaucratic (Professor of sociology 12 July 2021; Senior Analyst 8 July 2021) and "very complicated" (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). The Senior Analyst indicated that the education level of the displaced people migrating to the city is "not sufficient to navigate" the system (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). According to the same source, barriers to accessing these resources also include the following:

There is a lot of paperwork and documentation involved, often documentation that displaced Afro-Colombians do not have, as well as a series of visits from the state to the person's house. Even if they complete the registration and get through all of these steps, it can take months and months before their application is processed. (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021)

According to the Professor of sociology, while primary and secondary schools are more accessible in cities, schools and buses are not available in IDP neighbourhoods, and students in these neighbourhoods have to walk for 40 minutes to travel to school (Professor of sociology 12 July 2021).

Sources report that there are scholarships for post-secondary education reserved for Afro-Colombian students (Full Professor 7 July 2021; *Semana* 2 July 2021). According to the Full Professor, another reason that Afro-Colombians relocate to cities like Bogotá, Cartagena and Barranquilla is to pursue post-secondary studies (Full Professor 7 July 2021). The same source added that Afro-Colombians studying political science or journalism are [translation] "at higher risk" of being targeted and noted that some Afro-Colombian journalism and political science students refused to be interviewed by the source during protests due to "their fear of being targeted by the police and armed groups" (Full Professor 7 July 2021). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.6 Access to Healthcare

According to GAW, health service providers in Colombia do not collect information on the "ethnic-racial composition" of their patient population; as a result of this lack of information, providers report that they are unable to design health policies for Afro-Colombians (GAW 11 June 2019). According to the March 2019 IACHR report, Afro-Colombians are faced with "serious obstacles" in accessing healthcare (OAS 21 Mar. 2019, 548). The Full Professor reported that Afro-Colombians who relocate to major cities arrive with little financial resources, resulting in an inability to pay for healthcare (Full Professor 7 July 2021). The Professor of sociology noted that [translation] "underprivileged" Afro-Colombians have access to free health care through Sisbén; however, the service is slow and cannot meet demand (Professor of sociology 12 July 2021). According to the same source, the [translation] "incredibl[y]" bureaucratic application process "impedes" access to services (Professor of sociology 12 July 2021). An Afro-

Colombian woman interviewed by the same source was unable to receive treatment at a hospital due to the lack of ID; the woman was ultimately transferred to a private hospital, which only required payment and not ID (Professor of sociology 12 July 2021). In another interview conducted by the Professor of sociology, an Afro-Colombian woman in Barranquilla who had healthcare through Sisbén had to sell soup to pay for the bus fare to the hospital (Professor of sociology 12 July 2021).

4. Impact of COVID-19

According to a 2020 IACHR annual report citing the National Institute of Health, 46,953 Afro-Colombians have died from COVID-19, and the areas with the highest rates of COVID-19 cases include Bogotá (7,472), Barranquilla (7,343) and Cartagena (3,713) (OAS 16 Apr. 2021, para. 263). The same source states that COVID-19 "has deepened the historical racial inequality, which is reflected in the structurally precarious conditions" in departments where Afro-Colombians have settled (OAS 16 Apr. 2021, para. 263). According to Justice for Colombia (JFC), a British trade union organization supporting the work of Colombian civil society (JFC n.d.), "African-Colombians are disproportionately affected by structural inequalities that se[e] many people living in highly precarious conditions, in substandard housing and with little or no access to essential services such as clinics, schools and decent roads" making them "highly vulnerable" to COVID-19 (JFC 16 Feb. 2021). According to OCHA, Afro-Colombian communities are "particularly affected" by the increased food insecurity brought about by isolating from COVID-19 (UN 21 Apr. 2021, 6).

The Senior Analyst reported that the COVID-19 lockdown has created new barriers to accessing public services for IDPs due to the transition of many processes to online platforms, since displaced Afro-Colombians "might not" have internet access (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). According to the DANE, 26.9 percent of NARP households have access to the internet, compared to 43.4 percent of the national average (Colombia 6 Nov. 2019, 56). According to the Professor of sociology, many Afro-Colombians are illiterate and do not have access to internet and have had to seek the help of intermediaries to apply for social assistance (Professor of sociology 12 July 2021).

According to the Senior Analyst, Afro-Colombian children face "labour and sexual exploitation and recruitment into armed groups" due to COVID-19 school closures (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021).

5. State Protection

According to sources, the Office of the Ombudsman (Defensoría del Pueblo) receives complaints of human rights abuses (Full Professor 7 July 2021) or mistreatment (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). The Senior Analyst indicated that the Office of the Ombudsman can only receive the complaint, "anonymize it," and try to advocate for intervention by other government agencies "in the broader context," rather than act on any specific case or complaint (Senior Analyst 8 July 2021). According to sources, the government of Colombia selected a new Ombudsman (Full Professor 7 July 2021; *Semana* 14 Aug. 2020), who assumed the post in August 2020 (*Semana* 14 Aug. 2020). According to the Full Professor, the Office of the Ombudsman [translation] "worked quite well" in the past; however, the new Ombudsman [translation] "is completely complacent when it comes to state violence" and data on complaints received "are no longer being published" (Full Professor 7 July 2021). The same went on to state the following: [translation]

Currently, anyone who tries to file a complaint is faced with a wall, and this in a context where the State has declared that the military have the right to shoot at protesters, who are presumed terrorists, and armed groups threaten people if they file a complaint. Therefore, Afro-Colombians who suffer mistreatment are forced to go through NGOs, such as Temblores, which provides data to the UN in the absence of government-provided data ... [Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz, Indepaz] is another important NGO that works on Afro-Colombian rights and records complaints. However, these NGOs do not have the ear of the government and are viewed by the government as troublemakers. In this environment, fewer complaints are filed. (Full Professor 7 July 2021)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to sources, another protection mechanism available to Afro-Colombian is the writ for protection (*tutelas*) (Delaney 2008, 54; Professor of sociology 12 July 2021), which allows them to take legal action against any infringements upon their fundamental constitutional rights (Delaney 2008, 54). Sources report that in some cases where the judge ruled in favour of the plaintiff, the legal decision was not implemented (FPP and Resguardo Indígena de Origen Colonial Cañamomo Lomapieta 26 Mar. 2021, 8; Professor of sociology 12 July 2021).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, DANE) notes that the Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal and Palenquero population (*Negra, Afrocolombiana, Raizal y Palenquera, NARP*) consists of three ethnic groups: 1) the Raizal of the Archipelago of San Andrés and Providencia; 2) the Palenqueros of San Basilio; and 3) Blacks and Afro-Colombians as well as mixed race and Afro-descendant individuals (Colombia 6 Nov. 2019, 10).

[2] The Observatory on Violence, Criminalization and Democracy (OVCD) is a research team funded by Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and is conducting research on the criminalization of human rights advocacy in Latin America, including in Colombia (OVCD n.d.).

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Internet sites, including: Al Jazeera; Asociación Minga; Asociación Nacional de Afrocolombianos Desplazados; Center for Strategic and International Studies; *The City Paper*; Colombia – Departamento Nacional de Planeación, Ministerio de Educación Nacional, Ministerio del Interior, Observatorio Contra la Discriminación y el Racismo, Ministerio de Vivienda, Ciudad y Territorio, Sistema de Identificación de Potenciales Beneficiarios de Programas Sociales; Colombia Reports; Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz; Inter-American Dialogue; *El Tiempo*; Instituto de estudios para el Desarrollo y la paz; Médecins sans frontières; Temblores ONG; UN – International Organisation for Migration; Washington Office on Latin America; *The Washington Post*.

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