Kids on the Front Lines: Stopping Child Recruitment in Colombia

Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°55
Bogotá/Brussels, 12 February 2026

What's new? Recruitment of children to fight in armed and criminal groups has boomed across Colombia over the last decade, with hundreds of minors lured into joining violent groups on false promises of wealth, status and protection. This war crime disproportionately affects Colombia's ethnic communities and those who live in conflict zones.

Why does it matter? Armed groups rely on minors to maintain territorial control. Children carry out high-risk tasks, suffer abuse, and are punished with death if caught escaping. Recruitment shatters communities' ability to resist armed groups because locals fear their own family members will be the targets of reprisals if they speak out.

What should be done? Colombia should act promptly to identify children at risk, boost protection at schools (where recruitment often happens) and strengthen its criminal investigations into the perpetrators. Foreign donors should support police efforts to track recruiters and help strengthen communities' ability to prevent the crime from taking place.

I. Overview

From Colombia's most remote corners to its urban centres, a growing number of children are joining the ranks of armed and criminal groups. Recruitment has grown to such an extent that it has reshaped the country's armed conflict. Kids now fight on the front lines in high-risk combat roles. Sexual abuse at the hands of group members is common, and affects mostly – but not only – girls. Drawn in through criminal trafficking networks, minors often join up with the false hope of enjoying a better life or escaping difficult homes. Instead, child recruits are treated as commodities: vital to controlling territory, but replaceable in the eyes of commanders. State efforts to halt this phenomenon have been haphazard, often leaving communities as the first

responders. Authorities can and should do much more to identify and protect vulnerable kids, safeguard schools, investigate perpetrators, and help recovered children return safely to their homes.

Recruitment of minors has risen sharply since 2016, when a landmark peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Force of Colombia (FARC), then the largest rebel group in the country, brought the number of child combatants to its lowest level in a decade, to just over 100. In 2024, more than 620 cases were reported. Though alarming, the figure is still likely an undercount as families rarely report their children's disappearances out of fear of reprisals from armed groups, and in the hope that silence will help them to be safely recovered. It is hard to know the true scale of this practice, which is considered a war crime and eligible for prosecution by the International Criminal Court. That said, Colombian police estimate that more than half of new recruits are children, while Defence Ministry data indicates that armed group membership grew by roughly 3,300 between December 2024 and July 2025. These new arrivals, plus minors already in the armed groups, means there are likely well over a thousand child combatants in the country.

Rising rates of child recruitment are symptomatic of a conflict that has been transformed in recent years. Despite the state's efforts to retake control of the areas where the FARC guerrilla operated for decades, it was unable to establish its writ over swathes of far-flung territory criss-crossed by lucrative drug trafficking routes and home to abundant natural resources. With an eye on these illicit opportunities, an array of armed and criminal groups jumped in to fill the space vacated by the FARC. For these groups, children have become cheap, expendable fighters who can fill the most dangerous roles, whether on the front lines of combat or in the production and delivery of explosive devices. They are foot soldiers in campaigns of expansion and cannon fodder in fights with rivals. Young people are swept up into criminal networks by running errands or standing guard; they are also exploited for sexual services by group members.

Children today are rarely seized from their homes by force. Instead, many of these kids run away, lured by fraudulent promises of wealth, status, or even protection. Armed and criminal groups have grown adept at weaving myths around their operations, patrolling in luxury cars and delivering school supplies to low-income households. For boys, the attraction of joining is often based on promises of quick wealth and social status. Girls are drawn in under the illusion that they might escape domestic violence at home or find stable romantic partners. These baits are particularly attractive to a generation whose childhood was shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, and who see few job opportunities and little prospect of a stable livelihood in the years ahead. Despite apparently acting on their own volition, as minors, these combatants are considered forced recruits under international

law. In practice, the majority are tricked into joining under false pretences.

Besides the toll on children themselves, the consequences of recruitment reverberate across communities. One reason armed and criminal groups employ the tactic is to intimidate locals into acquiescing to their presence. Parents who report a missing child or speak out are often threatened; their children may even be killed in retaliation. Once a minor has been absorbed into an armed outfit, relatives frequently do everything in their power to ensure they return safely, including not reporting the crime or agreeing to collaborate with the group that took the child. Forced recruitment swells the ranks of armed groups, but also tightens the iron grip they seek to impose on local people.

Colombia is only beginning to take the steps needed to prevent children from falling into armed groups' snares – and much more needs to be done. Existing state programs are under-resourced and overly bureaucratic, lacking the agility needed to step in when children are in imminent danger. Security forces rescue the majority of children who leave criminal groups, yet schemes to help them return to their homes and communities are falling far short. Many kids face ongoing security threats and psychological challenges after they are back with their families. With help from foreign partners, Colombia should invest in improving security around schools and supporting local community defences, bolster criminal investigations into recruitment networks, and improve care for recovered child combatants and their families.

II. Why Recruit Children?

The recruitment of children has evolved in step with changes in Colombia's conflict. Over the course of half a century of insurgency against the state, the former FARC forced at least 18,677 children to join their ranks.[1] About half of those recruited were fifteen or older, the age at which the former rebel group's internal rules allowed children to enlist, though kids as young as eleven or twelve also joined.[2] Indigenous communities were particularly affected, a pattern that continues to this day. Other armed organisations recruited minors, too. Right-wing paramilitary groups, which boomed in the 1990s as they fought guerrilla movements, held some 2,800 children in their ranks at the time of their demobilisation in the mid-2000s, according to the

[1] "JEP establece que al menos 18.677 niños y niñas fueron reclutados por las FARC-EP", press release, Special Jurisdiction for Peace, 10 August 2021.
[2] Following the signing of the 2016 peace agreement, Colombia's Constitutional Court formally ruled that all children under eighteen are forced recruits, clarifying the debate about whether the standard was fifteen or eighteen years old. See "Sentencia C-007/18", Constitutional Court, 2018.

Attorney General's Office.[3] The National Liberation Army (ELN), the largest leftist insurgency that remains in arms, has also recruited individuals fifteen and older – though at times it has targeted younger children as well.

Traditional patterns of forced recruitment saw armed groups press young boys to join their ranks. "It was viewed by groups as 'military service'", remembers one mother in the Catatumbo region, on the border with Venezuela.[4] Other children, particularly the girls who accounted for roughly 30 per cent of those forcibly recruited, carried out menial jobs as cooks or cleaners or were forced into sexual slavery, one of the main crimes now under investigation by the country's transitional justice system. Before signing the 2016 peace agreement, the former FARC agreed to stop recruiting children, and the final accord included provisions for minors to enter a special process enabling them to return to civilian life.[5] Child recruitment figures fell precipitously as a result, along with many other indicators of violence. In 2016, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (known as ICBF) reported just over 130 cases, the lowest number in a decade.[6]

That drop would prove only temporary, however. The former FARC's departure left behind voids that new and existing armed groups rushed to fill. In the process, young people became a coveted commodity because they could serve as foot soldiers to help stake out control over coca crops, drug trafficking routes, mines and other lucrative assets that criminal groups coveted. "There was a lot of recruitment of minors and youth as groups tried to gain force", a cleric in Arauca, an eastern department on the border with Venezuela, explained.[7] Unlike the former FARC, which did not pay their members, some illegal groups started offering salaries after 2016, while all of them promised material benefits such as cell phones and motorcycles. "For a young person who has never had resources, this is very attractive", a young man from rural Arauca explained.[8]

Old and new illegal armed groups began to lure young people into joining their organisations. The ELN – which in 2016 became the largest remaining leftist insurgency – moved swiftly to take former FARC areas and trafficking routes, and recruited children to hold the territory they acquired. In the aftermath of the peace accord, an array

[3] "Los paramilitares reclutaron más de 2.800 menores para la guerra", Verdad Abierta, 26 March 2010.
[4] Crisis Group interview, Cúcuta, April 2025.
[5] "FARC-EP ponen fin a reclutamiento infantil", press release, UNICEF, 12 February 2016.
[6] "Estudio de caracterización de la niñez desvinculada de grupos armados organizados al margen de la ley (2013-2022)", UNICEF and the Colombian Family Welfare Institute, 2023, p. 15.
[7] Crisis Group interview, Arauca, March 2022.
[8] Crisis Group interview, Arauquita, March 2022.

of so-called FARC dissident groups emerged as some mid-level commanders returned to arms with the goal of reactivating the guerrilla's illicit businesses.[9] They recruited from a new generation and are now the most reliant on children. Meanwhile, the armed organisation that has grown most rapidly since 2016, the Gaitanista Army (autodenominado Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, EGC), appears to prefer recruiting fighters aged eighteen and over. That said, police and other state officials monitoring recruitment now report that children are joining their ranks too.[10] They have also tapped children to carry out errands, spy, and inform on police and military movements in their areas.

Today, all large armed and criminal groups in Colombia recruit children without exception, according to police data.[11] Every department in Colombia is affected. FARC dissidents have been particularly active in the country's south west (with alarming increases in underage recruitment in the departments of Cauca, Huila, and Guaviare, in the country's south). The Gaitanista Army for its part has targeted young people in the central region (especially in Caldas, Sucre and Cesar).[12]

After criminal networks recruit children from these areas, organisations often relocate them to localities where they are either expanding or in confrontation with rival outfits. As they break into new areas, these groups often instil a harsh regime of social rules over the local population as a way to solidify control.[13] Children are forced to play a part in these coercive efforts. They serve as lookouts, monitoring whether residents are adhering to curfews and movement restrictions. They also alert fighters when state security forces conduct patrols. Extortion, a common feature of life in areas where armed groups are present, can require going house-to-house to collect payments; children sometimes perform this task. "Recruiting children is pure

[9] Dissident groups of the former FARC emerged in three main ways. A first group, today known as Central Army Command (Estado Mayor Central or EMC), is led by former members of the FARC who never signed the 2016 agreement. A second group of dissidents emerged under the leadership of former FARC chief negotiator Iván Márquez in 2019, when he left the peace process and took up arms in Venezuela. Finally, a number of smaller, localised factions emerged on the initiative of mid-level commanders who left the demobilisation process and then recruited new foot soldiers. Many of these fronts have subsequently allied themselves either with the EMC or another faction known as Central Army Command of Blocs and Fronts (Estado Mayor de los Bloques y Frentes or EMBF). See Crisis Group Latin America Report N°92, *A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia's FARC*, 30 November 2021; Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°52, *Rebel Razing: Loosening the Criminal Hold on the Colombian Amazon*, 18 October 2024.

[10] State Ombudsperson internal document seen by Crisis Group, May 2025. See also Crisis Group Latin America Report N°105, *The Unsolved Crime in "Total Peace": Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas*, 19 March 2024.

[11] Colombia National Police data seen by Crisis Group, September 2025.

[12] Colombia National Police data seen by Crisis Group, September 2025.

[13] Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°54, *Exploiting Prejudice: LGBTQI+ People and Armed Groups in Colombia*, 3 December 2025.

income generation", a senior military commander explained. "The more bodies they have, the more areas they can control".[14] These trends also apply to urban criminal groups, which employ children to act as lookouts, extract income from local people through extortion, and deal drugs.

Similarly, new recruits are sent to areas where rival groups are wrestling for control. In recent months, the military has rescued high numbers of child recruits in Catatumbo, where violent clashes in January between the ELN and FARC dissident Front 33 led to heavy casualties. Both groups have subsequently sought to repopulate their ranks, including by bringing in more minors. The military has also recovered children recruited from across the country in the department of Guaviare, where two rival factions of FARC dissidents have been locked in fighting.

III. How Recruitment Happens

Children's daily lives in conflict-affected areas help explain why they are targets for recruitment. Many of the minors who join Colombia's armed groups have grown up in environments wracked by armed violence. In rural areas, which were particularly hard-hit during the country's half-century of conflict, they might have relatives and neighbours who are members of an armed group. They are likely to have seen its members visiting local stores, patrolling the streets or socialising in town centres. Children who are targeted for recruitment tend to be vulnerable: they are predominantly poor and may suffer from parental neglect and domestic violence. The contrast between these children's difficult material conditions and armed group members' false offers of an easy life make them easy prey. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities are more heavily represented among new recruits relative to their share of the population; girls are being recruited in increasing numbers as well.[15]

A. *False Promises*

Armed and criminal groups propagate the idea that recruits enjoy prosperity and power if they join their ranks. In many cases, they entice children not just with these promises, but also by chipping away at the safety net that would normally protect underage residents. To this end, recruiters focus on schools and recreation. In the most affected areas, armed groups have transformed the classroom from a safe space

[14] Crisis Group interview, March 2025.
[15] "Estudio de caracterización de la niñez desvinculada de grupos armados organizados al margen de la ley (2013-2022)", UNICEF and the Colombian Institute for Family Wellbeing, 2023, pp. 25-26.

– one that fills children's time, imaginations and stomachs – into a site of forced recruitment.[16]

This focus on education dates to the COVID-19 pandemic, when recruitment expanded precipitously. Many public schools in rural Colombia were shut for as long as eighteen months. "The minute we stop teaching is the moment when recruitment begins", a teacher in Tumaco, in the south west of the country, noted in 2021.[17] As families struggled to make ends meet amid persistent lockdowns, children found themselves with ample free time. The shuttering of boarding schools for rural children left many families not just without access to a classroom, but deprived of a safe space that provided regular meals.[18] Criminal groups capitalised on these children's needs by offering food, social spaces, and even activities such as football clubs.[19]

The north of Cauca – a department along the Pacific coast with a large Indigenous population and a long history of conflict – has become ground zero for child recruitment. Fronts of the FARC dissident faction EMC have set up camps near schools, exposing students to armed fighters as they enter and leave class. "They maintain a presence right outside the schools, with their cars, their motorcycles, their cell phones, and even alcohol, so that the children see 'the good life'", according to an Indigenous leader who tracks recruitment in the region.[20] Similarly, in the Catatumbo region, near the Venezuelan border, families report that another dissident group, Front 33, delivers school supplies to households that cannot afford the basics. A social leader explained, "the child gets his school kit, and what does he think of the armed groups? They are superheroes who give him something no one else ever has".[21]

In some urban areas, criminal groups tell their young members to stay in school in order to lure fellow pupils into joining through promises of luxury goods, parties and alcohol.[22] In other cases, these peer recruiters foment use of illicit drugs. Community leaders com-

[16] For more on violence in schools, attacks on school facilities, and their use by armed groups for recruitment, see "Education Under Attack: Colombia", report, Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2024.
[17] Crisis Group interview, Viento Libre, September 2021.
[18] In the most remote areas of Colombia, particularly in the Amazon region where population density is low, many public schools offer room and board. Children would otherwise need to travel unmanageably long distances to attend class daily. These institutions also offer meals for all students.
[19] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°98, *Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"*, 24 February 2023.
[20] Crisis Group interview, local Indigenous authority, Santander de Quilichao, November 2024.
[21] Crisis Group interview, local community leaders from Tibú, Cúcuta, April 2025. This story is confirmed by UN agencies' staffers working in the area.
[22] Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous authority, Santander de Quilichao, November 2024; senior police official, Bogotá, September 2025.

plain that children join criminal groups or collaborate through carrying out small tasks in order to support their drug habit.

Although many teachers and administrators in these settings are aware of recruitment, it is risky for them to intervene. "We have had experiences with school principals who tell us, 'the armed group told me certain pupils are theirs, and I cannot flunk or fail them, or I will pay the price'".[23] A particular variation of school recruitment surfaced last year in Catatumbo, where the Front 33 built a series of "reformation" camps allegedly to help troubled young people overcome laziness, addiction and petty crime. Some parents delivered their children to these sites, where they received punishments for their alleged misbehaviour, including forced labour. "This is a grey zone of recruitment, because many of these children later become part of the support networks of these groups", a UN official said.[24] During military operations in early 2025, dozens of children were recovered from these camps, many of whom had been kept there for months.[25]

Colombia's armed and criminal groups have also reached would-be recruits on social media. On Facebook, TikTok and other platforms, these illicit organisations produce videos and pictures aimed at children, ranging from the groups' own songs and music videos to recruits' personal testimonies of their supposedly adventurous lives as fighters.[26] Some of these videos make explicit promises of salaries or, for girls, the promise of all-expenses-paid plastic surgery. Colombian authorities working to trace these networks say content creators are adept at changing accounts, hiding IP addresses, and speaking directly to children's concerns and local cultural practices.[27]

Campaigns are not just online. A mother who works to prevent recruitment in Catatumbo explained: "What else can young people strive toward? They reach fourteen or fifteen years old without ever having stepped into a shopping mall, because of their parents' modest resources. But then they meet men who have the best shirts they have seen, the best cars, and the respect of everyone, and always the most beautiful girlfriends".[28] Sometimes, the promises are simpler; one mother in Medellín, Colombia's second biggest city, recounted that her son had been offered a free trip to see the ocean for the first time but never returned. She fears he was forced into the ranks of a criminal group in the region.

[23] Crisis Group interview, state Ombudsperson, Bogotá, June 2025.
[24] Crisis Group interview, UN official, Cúcuta, April 2025.
[25] Crisis Group interview, state Ombudsperson, Cúcuta, April 2025.
[26] "Nota Informativa: Atrapados en las redes del conflicto: aumento del reclutamiento de niñas y niños", UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 27 June 2025.
[27] Crisis Group interview, senior police officer, Bogotá, September 2025.
[28] Crisis Group interview, Cúcuta, April 2025.

Recruiters also exploit children's desire for affection. Indigenous authorities monitoring recruitment in Cauca say sometimes girl recruits have surgery in order to be featured in posts for social media or so they can recruit young boys in person.[29] Girls also fall for the promise of love. One common strategy involves trying to make them "fall" for a group member. Take the case of a fourteen-year-old girl recruited in the southern department of Caquetá. For a period of months, an armed group member repeatedly visited her at home and ultimately convinced her to run away with him. Although the child's family rescued her just weeks after her disappearance, the same man contacted her again on WhatsApp and she left home a second time.[30]

Recruitment can also happen gradually, over an extended period. Particularly in urban areas, children as young as eight or nine are tricked into running errands or keeping a lookout in exchange for food or money.[31] After fulfilling these minor roles, the children grow up within the social environment of the criminal organisation; by the time they reach adolescence they are firmly ensconced in the group.

B. *Vulnerable Targets*

Armed and criminal groups systematically identify households where children have unmet needs and offer what the kids are lacking: food, opportunity, a sense of belonging. Women associated with armed groups have convinced girls to join in the hope of escaping domestic violence. One eighteen-year-old girl recounted that, because of where she lived, she had regular interactions with armed group members and finally decided to go with them because "my home was very difficult, I lived among a lot of conflict".[32] Once inside, she found fellow children as young as twelve and thirteen who had also joined to escape violent or problematic family members.

In many cases, children are escaping from multigenerational trauma. Local women in Guaviare recounted several cases of recruitment among the children of victims of Colombia's past conflict. Having been victims themselves, these parents are psychologically and economically ill-equipped to provide basic necessities for their children, rendering them vulnerable to groups' predatory behaviour.[33] As one mother who had fled her community explained: "The groups identify which households are displaced and approach them, on the logic that this family is vulnerable and we can take their child".[34] Along the Colombia-Venezuela border, "the most at risk child is a migrant child",

[29] Crisis Group interview, Santander de Quilichao, November 2024 and January 2025.
[30] Crisis Group interviews, family members, January 2025.
[31] Crisis Group interview, senior police officer, Bogotá, September 2025.
[32] Crisis Group interview, December 2024.
[33] Crisis Group interviews, San José del Guaviare, September 2025.
[34] Crisis Group interview, San José del Guaviare, September 2025.

a mother in the region explained.[35] Colombia is host to the largest share of Venezuelan migrants in the world, and many arrive destitute.[36] Although Venezuelan children are legally allowed to attend Colombian schools, caregivers often need them to work for sustenance. Armed groups approach the most vulnerable households and promise children the best pay, even if this is often not borne out in practice. Both boys and girls are recruited on the pretence of being able to support their families and experience a quality of life they have never had access to before.[37]

Outreach to minors often comes from individuals they know, such as friends, neighbours or classmates. This personal connection makes the offer much harder and riskier to resist. Recruiters know where a child lives and who their family members are; they also are familiar with children's daily routines. Those who decline to join often face harassment, threats, or violence against them or their families. As a result, government authorities believe there have been hundreds of cases of households fleeing their communities to avoid forced recruitment.[38]

C. *Recruitment Networks*

Armed and criminal groups have at times claimed that they are either not aware that their recruits are minors, or that these children arrive at their doorstep in need of care.[39] Both of these claims are disingenuous. Child recruitment is rarely ad hoc. Instead, networks of traffickers are in charge of deliberately luring minors into armed groups. In some cases, they are formally part of illicit organisations. Senior recruitment commanders employ a network of managers and low-level recruiters, with specific quotas and parameters to fulfil.[40] The EMC and other dissident groups are among those who use this system.[41] Other recruiters essentially work as freelancers, bringing in children with attractive

[35] Crisis Group interview, Cúcuta, April 2025.
[36] At least 2.8 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants currently live in Colombia, about 80 per cent of them holding residency rights. Venezuelans are more than twice as likely as Colombians to experience multi-dimensional poverty. See "Informe de migrantes venezolanos en Colombia", Colombia Migration, 12 June 2024; "Informe de Pobreza Multidimensional de la Población Migrante Venezolana en Colombia", International Organisation for Migration, 13 March 2025.
[37] Crisis Group interviews, mothers in Catatumbo, Cúcuta, April 2025.
[38] Crisis Group interview, state Ombudsperson, Bogotá, June 2025. See also "Note de prensa: 470 niños, niñas y adolescentes desplazados diariamente por la escalada de violencia en Colombia, mientras que familias temen por reclutamientos forzoso", press release, Save the Children, 21 February 2025.
[39] "We remind you that the difficult socioeconomic conditions are what forces children to join our organisation, including exclusion and the denial of basic rights from the state", message from EMC on WhatsApp, 16 November 2025.
[40] Ibid. National Police documents seen by Crisis Group, September 2025.
[41] Crisis Group interviews, police and military officers, Bogotá, March and September 2025.

qualities and selling them to whichever armed group is willing to pay the most.

In both cases, the final recipients of these children often pay for the recruits. Within a single armed group, one regional front with robust recruitment systems may sell children to another that is short on fighters. Freelance recruiters send children to the highest bidders. "Children are products to be sold", a senior police official notes.[42] "Each child has a price, depending on their characteristics", Crisis Group heard from Edgar Tumiña, an Indigenous leader. Tumiña was assassinated in March 2025, weeks after speaking with Crisis Group, for his work rescuing children from armed groups' ranks. "Any regular child fetches about 500,000 pesos (roughly $135), or up to 2,000,000 pesos (about $540) for a girl with a 'good' body".[43] In Catatumbo, community leaders report that recruited girls sell at a far higher price if they are virgins.[44] Across the board, many recruiters are women, who take advantage of being able to interact with children without raising suspicion.

The groups buying these children often keep detailed registries with their information, including the fact that they are minors. In November 2025, the state Ombudsperson reported that at least fifteen children had been killed in aerial bombardments of the EMC by the military between August and October of 2025. In response, the group released names, birthdates and, in some cases, copies of the birth certificates of these children, together with headshots and their places of origin.[45] The disclosures, sent directly to journalists and analysts, were a stunning admission of knowingly committing a war crime. Humanitarian officials say the EMC is not unique; the EGC also has detailed records of its members, including children.[46]

Recruiters work with a network of dedicated transporters, who traffic these children to their new locations or buyers, whether that is dozens or thousands of kilometres away. Children are frequently sent on public transport with handlers to receive them and redirect their travel at each stop. When there are large numbers of children, they are trafficked on privately contracted buses.[47] Groups often send children far from home, as mentioned above, to place recruits in areas where

[42] Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, September 2025.
[43] Crisis Group interview, Santander de Quilichao and Toribio, November and December 2024.
[44] Crisis Group interview, leader from Catatumbo, Bogotá, April 2025.
[45] Documents seen by Crisis Group in November 2025.
[46] In the case of minors, the EGC omits the birthdate from its official records until the child is of age. Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, 2025.
[47] In one case, for example, a transporter of children from the Carlos Patiño Front of EMC was caught in Meta while moving minors in buses. Crisis Group interview, police officers, Bogotá, September 2025. The military has also documented this phenomenon in Guaviare.

groups are trying to expand or facing competition from rivals.[48] But they also aim to make it more difficult for their parents to find them – and for minors to escape.[49] The children killed in the bombing of the EMC, for example, were based in the southern departments of Guaviare and Amazonas, but their places of birth included Putumayo, Nariño, Caquetá, Norte de Santander and Arauca.[50] Sometimes minors cross borders. The ELN, for example, commonly sends recruits from Venezuela into the battlefield in Colombia. Even when children are not moved vast distances, they are often relocated away from their homes.

As a result of this system, families and community members who wake up to find children missing often have few clues as to where they have gone. As one mother explained, "the pattern of disappearances today is deeply linked to recruitment".[51] The plight of parents looking for their kids may only be resolved when they are killed in combat and their body is returned, though not all casualties are recovered. Armed groups sometimes refuse to hand over children's remains in order to hide their battlefield losses.[52] Other armed factions involved in negotiations with the government conceal child casualties to avoid exposing how heavily they rely on minors in their ranks. A growing number of families across Colombia have formed *buscadoras* groups, such as those seen in Mexico, seeking clues about their sons and daughters.[53]

IV. Inside Armed Groups

Although children fill all manner of roles in armed and criminal groups, almost all of them are at high risk because senior commanders regard minors as essentially expendable. "They are the least of the least", one police officer put it.[54] Children rarely benefit economically from their participation in illicit activities. Instead, they are in the service of group members who do.

[48] Police believe that EGC is also moving recruits into areas where they are trying to expand, for example in Vichada, Casanare and Meta. Crisis Group interview, senior police officer, Bogotá, September 2025.
[49] Crisis Group Report, *Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"*, op. cit.
[50] Documents seen by Crisis Group in November 2025.
[51] Crisis Group interview, mothers, San José del Guaviare, September 2025.
[52] Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous authorities, Santander de Quilichao, November 2024; humanitarian officials, Bogotá, June 2025.
[53] Amid a wave of mass disappearances in Mexico, *buscadora*s groups emerged as a response to paltry state efforts to find those who have gone missing. Formed mostly by women, they devote themselves to looking for lost loved ones. Similar groups of family members in Colombia have begun to adopt this moniker to describe their struggle for truth. See Angélica Ospina, "En busca de los desaparecidos en México", Crisis Group commentary, 31 May 2024.
[54] Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, September 2025.

Recruits brought into armed groups that are either expanding or engaged in clashes with rivals are often sent directly to the front lines as fighters. In the EMC, children may represent as many as 37 per cent of all fighters, the defence minister said in December 2025.[55] Recovered children recount that before seeing combat they receive little training beyond basic instructions on how to use a weapon. "When you arrive, they put you in camouflage and you enter battle", said a fourteen-year-old girl who fought in a faction of FARC dissidents.[56] Children are also often given few supplies, including food. "Children often battle hunger for days in the jungle", Tumiña said.[57]

With limited preparation, children at the front lines often experience high casualty rates.[58] The EMC places younger recruits in a "curtain" formation, surrounding core fighters as a form of protection. This is meant to deter military operations, as soldiers are trained not to fire on child combatants. In practice, however, the strategy ensures that children are the first casualties in combat.[59] Children are used as bodyguards for senior commanders for the same reason.[60] This is evident in mortality figures: nearly a third of those killed in recent clashes between rival groups in Guaviare were minors. Or consider fighting in Catatumbo in January 2025 between the ELN and Front 33, which is involved in peace negotiations with the government. Commanders from Front 33 reportedly told their government interlocutors that they attributed their heavy losses to the fact that their fighters were so heavily reliant on inexperienced children.[61] Still, in the aftermath of the confrontations, these groups have recruited heavily, including among children, to repopulate their ranks, according to government and military officers.[62]

While children receive little training to prepare them for direct combat, the groups do invest in teaching them how to use explosives. As they have come under heavier pressure from the military in recent months, armed and criminal groups are leaning more often on asymmetric attacks.[63] All large armed groups now use roadside bombs, landmines, grenades and armed drones. Children are often involved in

[55] "Mindefensa revela que el 37 % de las disidencias de 'Iván Mordisco' estarían integradas por menores combatientes", *El Tiempo*, 11 December 2025.
[56] Crisis Group interview, November 2024.
[57] Crisis Group interview, Santander de Quilichao, November 2024.
[58] Crisis Group interview, senior humanitarian official, Bogotá, April 2025.
[59] Crisis Group interviews, Santander de Quilichao, November 2024 and Bogotá, May 2025; senior military officer, San José del Guaviare, September 2025.
[60] One example is the former regional EMC commander alias Cholinga. After his death in a military operation, Crisis Group saw photos in which he was surrounded by children in his daily life.
[61] Crisis Group interview, participant in talks, Cúcuta, April 2025.
[62] Crisis Group interviews, Cúcuta, April 2025.
[63] Elizabeth Dickinson, "Los Cuatro Frentes de Batalla del EMC", La Silla Vacía, 4 September 2025.

building and deploying explosives because they are seen as tech savvy, quick to learn and apt to follow instruction manuals, often found on the internet.[64]

Girls, while sometimes at the front lines, often fall into forced sexual relationships or domestic service roles. Reports of sexual abuse are widespread among recovered girls, many of whom were also forced to receive contraception implants.[65] At times, girls become the "property" of a certain armed group member or commander, who decides if and who else can exploit her for sexual services in return for payment to the man in question. An Indigenous elder in Cauca recounted the following story:

> A girl who recently escaped told us that, from the moment she arrived, she realised that the only way to feel protected was to get close to the commander. But of course, the commander used her as he wished. She was fourteen. Many girls have awful experiences: they take them to very remote locations where they are alone and are used for their bodies.[66]

In Catatumbo, women community leaders said that girls are often brought to parties specifically to be raped by group members. "We have seen recovered girls who are very sick or injured, who are pregnant, and very traumatised", one woman recalled.[67] Girl recruits are also used to draw in more minors, both boys but also other girls, promising them "luxury cars and rich boyfriends", one recovered young woman said.[68]

Recruits in urban areas, as well as some younger children in rural areas, often fill roles linked to providing practical support to operations, as well as conducting basic reconnaissance. "They do the logistics, bring the food, watch over the businesses, and stand guard for intruders. Groups need a lot of bodies to control territory", a senior military commander explained.[69] Many of these children are told by their recruiters to continue to live at home and attend school as they discreetly perform their functions within the armed group.[70] Sometimes this involves a sporadic disappearance: "The child will be gone

[64] Crisis Group interview, UN official, Cúcuta, April 2025. See also Elizabeth Dickinson, "Los cuatro frentes de batalla del Estado Mayor Central", La Silla Vacía, 4 September 2025.
[65] Crisis Group interview, state ombudsperson officials, Cúcuta, April 2025 and Bogotá, June 2025. See also Cristal Downing, "Amid Aid Cuts, a Renewed U.S. Policy Increases Health Risks for Women and Girls in Conflict Areas", Crisis Group Commentary, 3 March 2025.
[66] Crisis Group interview, Indigenous elder, Santander de Quilichao, November 2024.
[67] Crisis Group interview, woman social leader, Cúcuta, April 2025.
[68] Crisis Group interview, December 2024.
[69] Crisis Group interview, senior military commander, February 2025.
[70] Crisis Group interviews, state Ombudsperson office, June 2025.

for two or three months and then return home as if nothing happened, then disappear again. We know that they are working for the armed group from their houses".[71] These kids may go on to become recruiters themselves, to sell drugs locally on behalf of larger criminal structures, or to alert the organisation to police and military patrols.[72]

Finally, children are increasingly employed in the illicit businesses either run by armed and criminal groups or serving their members. In extractive industries such as mining, children provide cheap or even unpaid labour to boost the groups' profit margins. Groups also take a portion of the service fee paid to children, as occurs in child prostitution rackets. Taking advantage of desperate conditions among Guaviare's Nukak Indigenous community, for example, recruiters have lured girls as young as seven and eight years old into prostitution rings in urban centres.[73]

V. The Fallout

Child recruitment is one of the most effective strategies that armed groups have developed to break communities' resilience. Households that have lost a child fear for their safety and often stay silent in the face of armed group pressure, knowing their son or daughter could pay the price if they speak out.

A. *Leaving and its Aftermath*

There are four primary ways that children leave the groups. The first and most tragic is their death in combat.[74] Secondly, children do occasionally succeed in running away. Thirdly, families and communities try to rescue their stolen children directly.[75] And fourthly, most children are recovered by the military. In 2024, the armed forces

[71] Crisis Group interview, mother, San José del Guaviare, September 2025.
[72] For example, one alleged senior recruiter in Cauca known as Alias "Karina Cortes" was captured at age 22, having been forcibly recruited herself into the Jaime Martínez Front as a fifteen-year-old child. See "Cayó alias Karina Cortés, cabecilla de las disidencias de las Farc: era la encargada de varias actividades entre ellas los fusilamientos", Infobae, 29 March 2025.
[73] Crisis Group interview, Indigenous leader, San José del Guaviare, September 2025.
[74] Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, Bogotá, June 2025.
[75] These rescues can be confrontational, as two recent cases demonstrate. In March 2024, a female Indigenous leader was fatally shot while trying to recover two minors from the EMC. The incident sparked outrage and caused Petro to cancel a ceasefire with the group. See "Murió Carmelina, la líder indígena herida en ataque de las disidencias en Cauca", *El Espectador*, 17 March 2024. More recently, the EMC fired on a group of Indigenous leaders seeking the halt the recruitment of minors from the same region. See "Cauca: indígenas se enfrentaron a disidentes de las Farc al tratar de rescatar dos niñas reclutadas a la fuerza", *El País Cali*, 15 October 2025.

rescued 294, the highest number in over a decade.[76] That year, in just one military jurisdiction in the south west of the country, soldiers recovered 131 children.[77] In Guaviare, the number rose from one child in 2023 to sixteen in 2024.[78] Often, these recoveries happen during combat. Kids who want to leave will run to passing patrols. Soldiers, increasingly trained to recognise minors on the front lines, are instructed to not shoot but instead to bring the child recruits back with them.

Children who manage to leave the ranks of criminal groups are often still not safe. This is particularly true for escapees. In the immediate days and months after running away, these children – and in many cases their family members – are at imminent risk of assassination. A social leader in Catatumbo explained: "The internal code [within armed groups] is to kill anyone who leaves, because otherwise you would have disorder among the ranks. So they either kill the child or they kill those closest to them [such as family members]. The children join these groups under false pretences and there is no way out".[79]

The military has found a number of murdered children along the Pacific coast in the last two years, believed to have been killed for escaping from FARC dissident factions.[80] Colombia's national Ombudsperson is aware of similar cases in areas under EGC control, including one mass killing of ten child escapees.[81] Police have also captured recruiters who later testified to being involved in laying down the death penalty against children who tried to desert.[82]

Even children whose release is negotiated are not fully safe from retaliation. Armed groups know where a child lived, went to school, and who their family is. Tumiña, who oversaw the recovery of dozens of children in his community, recalled a number of murder attempts against rescued kids, intended to send a message to others not to leave.[83] Similarly, rescued former recruits can be targeted by rival

[76] "Seguimiento a indicadores de seguridad y resultados operacionales", Colombia Ministry of Defence, August 2025.
[77] Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, March 2025.
[78] Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, San José del Guaviare, September 2025.
[79] Crisis Group interview, social leader from Catatumbo, Bogotá, April 2025. Examples of killings of runaway child recruits are widespread across regions and criminal groups. Perhaps the most emblematic case happened on 17 May 2023, when four children were executed by the EMC in Caquetá as they sought to escape. When reports of the incident emerged, President Gustavo Petro suspended a ceasefire with the group in that department. See "La matanza de 4 menores en Colombia por la que el presidente Petro suspendió el cese al fuego con las disidencias de las FARC", BBC, 22 May 2023.
[80] See for example "Ejército colombiano halla fosa común con jóvenes que habrían sido víctimas de reclutamiento", Associated Press, 9 December 2024.
[81] Internal document seen by Crisis Group, May 2025.
[82] Crisis Group interview, police official, Bogotá, September 2025.
[83] Crisis Group interview, Toribio, December 2024.

armed organisations, who perceive them to have a bias toward a specific party to the conflict. In Putumayo, for example, communities said that a newly arriving faction of FARC dissidents known as the Carolina Ramírez targeted families of recruits from a rival organisation, the Comandos de la Frontera.[84] Children who were initially rescued or held by the military have also been targeted by armed groups that accuse them of having handed information to security personnel while in custody. Although police and military forces are not allowed to interview demobilised children, civil society groups reported some cases in which they did exactly that.[85]

Children who manage to return home are also at high risk of being drawn back into groups – often after being threatened that they or their family will be hurt if they refuse. At times, members of armed groups physically go in search of children. More often, the harassment begins digitally, as the minor will continue to have access to the same phone number and social media accounts. Crisis Group heard numerous stories from children who had left armed groups but then been recruited again, usually by the same illegal outfit. In addition to direct threats, rescued children may return because of a sense of duty and belonging – characteristics that make them ideal recruits in the first place. Girls are particularly vulnerable to being drawn back in by romantic partners.[86]

Beyond these immediate risks, many returned children struggle with a lingering stigma in their communities. "The girls particularly face strong rejection, they are ostracised", an Indigenous elder in Cauca said.[87] Girls and young women who have been labelled as the former girlfriends of armed group members are deemed to be unworthy of being in a relationship and are prevented from joining community activities. These prejudices may extend to the entire family, affecting social relationships and even livelihoods.

This combination of pressures means that many of those who return home end up leaving with their families for safety. "This is a rupture in the life of a child that can never be healed", a municipal official in Guaviare said, noting that most child recruits cannot go back home.[88] These individual displacements are rarely registered in official statistics as having any connection to recruitment, in part because families fear sharing information that could draw groups' attention to their

[84] Crisis Group interviews, social leaders, Puerto Guzmán, February 2024.
[85] Crisis Group interviews, civil society groups working on recruitment, Cúcuta and Santander de Quilichao, 2024 and 2025.
[86] Crisis Group interviews, recovered children, Toribio, December 2024.
[87] Crisis Group interview, Santander de Quilichao, November 2024.
[88] Crisis Group interview, San José del Guaviare, September 2025.

case or new location.[89] A child and their family often relocate to urban areas to start over with little support.

Recovered children tend to be severely traumatised. Girls may have sexual wounds; some return to their home communities pregnant or having had unsafe abortions.[90] Other children have combat injuries. Community leaders working to prevent recruitment in Cauca and Catatumbo reported numerous cases of children taking their own lives.[91] Social stigmatisation exacerbates these challenges and often complicates the return to civilian life, making it increasingly likely that a child will return to the armed group if it comes calling.

B. *The Effects on Society*

Recruitment shatters community cohesion and spreads fear across whole families and neighbourhoods, weakening their resistance to the stranglehold of armed groups. By stealing society's youngest members and piercing nuclear families, armed and criminal groups establish dominance. "Recruitment can ruin a family, shatter everything they have built, rupture a home, and end friendships", one mother in Catatumbo explained.[92]

Recruitment is particularly harmful to traditional leadership structures in Indigenous communities, which have resisted the presence of armed groups in their territories. This is the case in Cauca, where taking young people is at the centre of a FARC dissident group's strategy aimed at destroying the way of life of the Nasa people. Factions of the EMC have systematically assassinated Indigenous leaders; traditional medics; and members of unarmed guards that have legal autonomy to control Nasa territory in the area. Recruiting children is an added threat, as it means that these community bodies are unlikely to regenerate. "We are headed toward a complete extermination. They are going to finish our people", an Indigenous leader from this community said. In December, a court agreed with this assessment and issued an arrest warrant against the EMC's most senior commander for attempted genocide.[93]

[89] Colombia's reporting system does not explicitly ask victims the cause of their displacement; authorities believe many relocations linked to recruitment are never registered as such.
[90] Crisis Group interviews, mothers, Cúcuta, April 2025.
[91] Crisis Group interviews, family and community members, Toribio and Cúcuta, December 2024 and April 2025.
[92] Crisis Group interview, Cúcuta, April 2025.
[93] Crisis Group interview, Indigenous leader, Santander de Quilichao, November 2024. On 10 December 2025, a judge issued an arrest warrant for the leader of the EMC faction for genocide of the Indigenous Nasa community in northern Cauca. See "Juez ordenó captura de 'Mordisco' por genocidio al pueblo Nasa", La Silla Vacía, 10 December 2025.

Families whose children have disappeared often have few options to report the crime, and much less to push back against the armed group's actions. In many of the most conflict-affected areas, residents fear that armed groups have informants or even members within government institutions, meaning that perpetrators would learn of any victims who report crimes against them.[94] "The groups kill whoever reports a crime, so people stay silent", one social leader from Catatumbo said.[95] In Cauca, family members who have raised alarm about missing children have experienced harassment, for example having their houses painted with armed group graffiti. Other families fear that if they report a case of recruitment, the armed group may take their other children in retaliation.[96]

One senior military officer explained that recruitment marks a critical turning point in armed groups' struggle for control over communities. "When they start to take children, from that point forward, the area will be very hard for us to recover control of", he said. "The community is silenced into submission".[97]

VI. Efforts to Tackle Recruitment

Colombia's state institutions have struggled to keep up with the rising numbers of recruitment cases, particularly given low rates of reporting. Minors often slip away unnoticed or start collaborating without raising alarm, especially in urban areas where children might continue to live at home while performing tasks for a criminal group. Only a small number of cases ever trigger an official state response, leaving communities to act on their own. Officials are aware of the inadequacy of their interventions; "even as recruitment itself has changed", one said, "our policy responses have not".[98]

A. *State Responses*

Colombia's current approach to addressing armed groups' recruitment of children is chaotic. At least nineteen agencies and ministries, as well as the local administrations of Colombia's more than 1,000 municipalities, contribute to the effort.[99] While the presidency's human rights office is meant to coordinate these efforts, it has less than half a dozen full-time staff dedicated to the task.

[94] Crisis Group interview, state Ombudsperson officials, Bogotá, June 2025.
[95] Crisis Group interview, social leader from Catatumbo, Bogotá, April 2025.
[96] Crisis Group interview, Indigenous authorities, Santander de Quilichao, November 2024.
[97] Crisis Group interview, Cúcuta, April 2025.
[98] Crisis Group interview, state Ombudsperson official, Bogotá, June 2025.
[99] Crisis Group interview, official involved in policy coordination, Bogotá, September 2025.

The state's effort to curb recruitment faces at least three major obstacles. First, it is under-resourced. In 2024, for example, the national police had just three investigators working on child recruitment. In recent months that number has risen to 25, but officials are still overstretched, with just one analyst working to monitor and document examples of digital recruitment.[100] Prevention programs face a similar crunch. Each municipality is expected to create an Immediate Action Team to address recruitment risks, but there is no funding assigned to this nationwide policy, meaning each town is left to scrape together its own resources for the task. As an official in the Ombudsperson office put it: "we have realised that nothing about these teams is operational, they do not have plans of action, they do not have indicators or forms of verification. Essentially, we are leaving local mayor's offices to respond alone".[101]

Secondly, official responses are too slow. While preventing child recruitment and rescuing children often demand immediate action, bureaucratic red tape can take days or weeks to break through. "If you want to report a case, the official attending you often says, 'wait for business hours', when the situation is urgent", one victim explained.[102] In any case, many communities in the most conflict-affected areas distrust institutions because they fear certain officials' complicity with armed and criminal groups could compromise their security. The lethargic response to crime reports only fuels this wariness. "Why would you come forward with a case, if you know that no one will deal with it?", one former local official explained.[103]

That said, some new programs could help strengthen the state response. The Colombian Family Welfare Institute in 2024 launched an initiative called "Dreamcatchers" to prevent recruitment nationwide, including through the construction of youth and community centres where children can engage in sports, art, and cultural activities to help them avoid being lured into an illegal group. So far, the program has at least two permanent locations, and aims to hold ad hoc events in several hundred municipalities.[104]

The Family Welfare Institute is also responsible for helping rescued children return to their families and communities. In 2024, 318 children entered this recovery program, double the total from 2022 and up from just seventeen in 2016.[105] Many kids, however, never join,

[100] Crisis Group interview, police officers, Bogotá, September 2025.
[101] Crisis Group interview, state Ombudsperson official, Bogotá, June 2025.
[102] Crisis Group interview, woman social leader, San José del Guaviare, September 2025.
[103] Crisis Group interview, San José del Guaviare, September 2025.
[104] "Bienestar Familiar ha prevenido el reclutamiento de más de 122 mil niños con el programa 'Atrapasueños'", press release, Colombian Family Welfare Institute, 2 April 2025.
[105] Ibid. ICBF responses to questions from Crisis Group, 8 November 2022.

either because of their family's doubts about the quality of the program, or for reasons including distrust of the state, fear about reporting the case and a lack of space in recovery facilities.[106] Furthermore, not all child recruits are eligible for the same level of state support. To join a reincorporation program, the minor must have been a part of an armed group that is considered to be part of Colombia's internal conflict.[107] Kids who have been forced into urban criminal groups, for example, do not usually qualify. For those who do join, families told Crisis Group they felt that the recovery program fell short of their expectations, particularly in addressing the plethora of mental health challenges facing children who have experienced major trauma.[108]

B. *Community Initiatives*

On some occasions families and community members try to rescue their stolen children directly from the clutches of armed and criminal groups. Indigenous leaders from the Nasa community are among the most experienced and organised in their efforts to recover minors. When a child is taken and their location is identified – often through a web of hearsay and community outreach to group members – elders and unarmed Indigenous guards undertake perilous journeys to their reported locations. When possible, these delegations try to talk to the armed group that has possession of the child.

There is, of course, no guarantee of success: members of Indigenous communities report that appealing directly to criminal groups has grown more difficult, as they are ever more reliant on child recruits to hold territory. Fronts of the EMC, for example, have sent word they will allow a family visit but then leave would-be rescuers waiting until they are forced to return home because their funds run out.[109] When

[106] Many members of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities distrust the state initiative and opt for reincorporation programs for children which they have designed in accordance with constitutional mandates that give ethnic minorities the prerogative to create their own plans. Children from Indigenous communities in Cauca, for example, enter a local "reharmonisation" program drawing on local spiritual and cultural values. Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous authorities, Santander de Quilichao, November and December 2024.

[107] "Lineamiento técnico del programa de atención especializada para el Restablecimiento de derechos y contribución al proceso de Reparación integral de niñas, niños y adolescentes víctimas de Reclutamiento ilícito, que se han desvinculado de grupos armados", Colombian Family Welfare Institute, 2021. After leaving a group, a child is interviewed by a social worker under the provisions of the Operational Committee for the Laying down of Arms (CODA) to determine what sort of experience they have had in an armed group and which program they are eligible for. Children in criminal groups are usually advised to attend less intensive or home-based programs that are not necessarily directed at former recruitees. See "ABC: Desvinculados", Colombian Family Welfare Institute, no date.

[108] Crisis Group interviews, family and community members, Toribio and Cúcuta, December 2024 and April 2025.

[109] Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous elders, Santander de Quilichao, April 2025.

children are released, armed groups require that the minor be under the "guarantee" of an adult, to ensure that he or she will not join a rival outfit. Should that child enter another group, the adult is held responsible and faces retaliation. Rescuers also run the risk of being caught up in combat or being killed. Tumiña, who led dozens of recovery operations like this, was assassinated by nine shots to the head for his work, following months of death threats. He told Crisis Group that he used a mix of pleas for humanitarian relief and appeals to spirituality to secure children's release.

Other civic groups have also built local systems to try to recover children. One such network, for example, seeks to establish direct channels to armed groups. Failing that, they seek to raise cases with local armed commanders' mothers or other family members. As a last resort, they go public with a case – though this is almost always a last option, as it can put the child or their relatives at risk of retaliation. Teachers and administrators who have reported missing children or the presence of armed recruiters have received threats or been killed.[110] Local networks of mothers and family members also try to help children who are at risk of being taken, for example by scrambling together funds to pay a bus fare or taxi ride to evacuate children and their families. "We, mothers, are the ones who carry the weight of this burden", one woman said.[111]

VII. Safeguarding Children at Risk

Ending the recruitment of minors will prove difficult without a broader de-escalation of Colombia's conflict. Still, the government could adopt specific interventions to safeguard children at risk of being recruited by illicit groups. A combination of more robust prevention, improved investigations and prosecutions, and comprehensive child recovery programs would provide a major boost to efforts to protect Colombia's at-risk children.

A. *Prevention*

The lack of information about the extent of child recruitment poses one of the largest obstacles to addressing the problem. The Colombian government could take a series of steps to improve its ability to record the total number of cases nationwide and also reduce fears about reporting. These include expanding the definition of who has fallen prey to illicit groups and the number of state institutions that can receive

[110] Crisis Group interviews, Indigenous community, Santander de Quilichao, November 2024. See for example "Docente Luis Ernesto Sánchez, reconocido líder social en El Cerrito, Valle, fue asesinado en Cali; esto se sabe", *El País de Cali*, 28 September 2025.
[111] Crisis Group interview, local community leader, Cúcuta, April 2025.

reports of the crime; buttressing social programs to combat the scourge of recruitment; and stepping up support for existing community initiatives.

Both for victims' safety and for the state's ability to respond, Colombia should expand the definition of recruitment to include not just membership in armed organisations that are considered part of the internal conflict, but also those children absorbed into urban criminal groups. State officials told Crisis Group that the limited scope of the current definition of recruitment has hindered their ability to carry out a proper diagnosis of the problem.[112] The formal definition should also include less visible forms of exploitation, such as cases in which children are used to run errands, stand guard for criminal groups or organise logistics. In cities, many of these minors remain at home while filling these roles. All of these kids should be eligible to participate in state recovery programs. Given that children experience trauma, exploitation and exposure to violence in criminal groups, their cases should be treated with the same gravity as those of more conventional child soldiers.

Authorities should also extend the range of institutions that can formally receive reports of disappeared children.[113] Currently, the police and the Attorney General's office can record formal case reports. The state Ombudsperson, local municipal control offices, and international observers could also be authorised to help receive and then refer cases, with the family's permission. The state, furthermore, should accept reports not just from immediate relatives, but also from individuals who have vital information about the particulars of a case, including teachers, provided that the confidentiality of the victims, their family and the reporting party are protected.

Employees of Colombia's existing social programs that aim to support poor households, address domestic violence and tackle child malnutrition should also remain alert to recruitment risks.[114] Better information about areas with high rates both of deprivation among children and insecurity could help policymakers identify municipalities or

[112] Crisis Group interviews, Bogotá, May and October 2025.
[113] In September 2025, Colombia's Office of the Inspector General ordered state institutions to unify their data collection on child recruitment, in order to have a more comprehensive view of the problem. The same order required institutions to ensure anonymous and safe reporting channels. "Directiva 15 del 2025", 9 September 2025.
[114] Among the most important of these programs is the System for the Identification of Beneficiaries for Social Programs (SISBEN), through which low-income citizens and permanent residents can qualify for cash transfers, access to state housing, health care subsidies, and educational benefits. One official in the Ombudsperson's office explained, "prevention means looking at issues such as domestic violence, poverty, [and] school desertion … we already identify these things, just not from the perspective of them being risks for recruitment", Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, June 2025.

communities where the risk is higher. Limited resources should be directed to these regions. Possible state initiatives could include creating safe spaces for children outside school or training opportunities for young people. Authorities would also do well to create a clear hierarchy of what agency or ministry is in the lead in each anti-recruitment program to avoid losing time and money in addressing coordination challenges.

One area that warrants particular attention is school safety. In the most affected regions, the classroom has gone from being a safe haven to a site of recruitment. Armed group members have access to these facilities, allowing them to entice pupils into joining their organisations. They use schools for their own logistical needs, including as a venue to safeguard fighters, care for wounded, sell drugs, and hold meetings with the community. In areas where two or more armed groups compete for territory, schools have been attacked with drones, surrounded with landmines, and turned into arms depots.

School closures during active armed combat leave children with ample free time and without food, since Colombia's public education system provides meals to nearly six million children.[115] Hungry and idle, they become easy prey for violent outfits. As a signatory, Colombia should follow the guidelines of the Safe Schools Declaration in seeking to ensure that classrooms are protected from militarisation of any kind.[116]

That said, in areas where armed groups are exploiting these institutions, Colombian authorities should not sit idle. Acting within the terms of the declaration, the Education Ministry and the Colombian Family Welfare Institute should be able to ask for police support when they identify schools facing acute risks. In those cases, the police could dedicate forces from a specific unit created in the 2016 peace accord with a focus on community relations, UNIPEP, to guard the perimeter.[117] UNIPEP personnel should act as a deterrent against armed groups and be ready to protect students in the event of an attack or armed combat.

In communities that are already at the front lines of preventing recruitment, Bogotá could do more to support their efforts rather than

[115] "Programa de Alimentación Escolar en Colombia no está en riesgo para el 2025", press release, Unidad Administrativa Especial de Alimentación Escolar, 5 March 2025.
[116] "The Safe Schools Declaration", December 2014. Colombia signed the document in November 2022 and launched its strategy to comply with it in 2026. See "Plan de Acción sobre Escuelas Seguras", Ministry of Education, 2022.
[117] The Police Unit for Peacebuilding (Unidad Policial para la Edificación de la Paz) was created as part of the 2016 peace agreement with the specific goal of promoting dialogue with communities and implementing the accord. The unit tends to enjoy higher levels of trust among conflict-affected communities than security forces overall. See "Unidad Policial para la Edificación de la Paz", Colombian National Police, undated.

seeking to replace or duplicate them. One effective way to help could be through the creation of local emergency funds that could be deployed quickly, for example to relocate a child at imminent risk. These could be managed through the office of the Ombudsperson or another state control agency, to prevent elected officials from favouring or discriminating against certain beneficiaries based on their political affiliations. Foreign donors who have taken an interest in recruitment prevention could also be encouraged to reinforce existing community efforts.

B. *Investigation*

Colombia's police have begun a concerted effort to map the criminal structures devoted to child recruitment. This campaign is fundamental to ending the impunity that has so far surrounded the practice. Recruiters are often civilians who do not carry arms. Many are women, enabling them to approach children without drawing attention. As a result, security forces may not identify these individuals as having links to criminal organisations. In addition to direct recruiters, logistics providers, transport operators, and document forgers are implicated in the recruitment of children. Identifying and prosecuting members of these networks can send a strong message of deterrence and also offer some measure of redress to victims' families.

A number of international organisations and NGOs are also lobbying social media and other digital platforms to prevent criminals from using online tools to entice children. Given the scale and speed with which new accounts are created, Colombian police and Attorney General's office will need more resources to expand their monitoring of criminal presence online, whether to track hidden IP addresses and locations, identify individuals involved, or use social networks to map and dismantle recruiting networks. Limited staffing, competition for prosecutorial resources and a lack of technological tools all hamper the police's ability to combat criminal groups' digital campaigns to lure children into their ranks. Budgetary support, including from foreign donors, could give a major boost to the work of Colombia's security forces in bringing recruiters to justice.

As information about child trafficking emerges, Colombia should consider building a more systematic approach to recovering children from armed groups. Even though security forces have at times been aware of training camps and other areas holding a large number of child fighters, they have not had either the political mandate or the capacity to intervene. Instead, air support, troops and other capabilities are often pulled into other priorities. Making child recovery an operational objective could help ensure limited resources such as helicopter flying hours go toward these efforts. Any intervention must prioritise the safety of the children involved, ruling out hard-handed

military operations in favour of policing strategies similar to those used in hostage recovery.

In addition to law enforcement approaches, child recruitment must remain front and centre in any peace talks or negotiations with armed organisations. Talks between the Colombian government's representatives and the EGC in September, for example, yielded an agreement for the group to take a census of children in its ranks and return them to the Family Welfare Institute.[118] Follow up on these voluntary commitments is critical to ensure that the state sends a clear message about how seriously it takes child recruitment. To remain in peace talks, groups must commit to ending the practice. At some stage during negotiations, state officials will also need to discuss judicial terms that both encourage groups to release existing victims while also holding recruiters accountable for these war crimes.[119]

C. *Recovery*

According to family members, state services to help children in the aftermath of recovery from an illicit group fall short of what is needed.[120] Often placed by the Family Welfare Institute in group homes, former recruits recount that they encounter bullying, social discrimination (for example tensions between kids from rural and urban areas), and insufficient empathy from their adult carers. These children suffer social isolation and self-harm; some have even attempted suicide. The state should devise ways to address children's mental health to strengthen their ability to return to civilian life and avoid adding to their trauma. Their families also need support. Many will have had to relocate after their child's recovery, and may be struggling to find their place in new neighbourhoods where job opportunities are sparse. For ethnic communities that run their own recovery programs,

[118] "Declaración del Proceso para la Desmovilización al autodenominado Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia – (a)EGC y la construcción de paz con el pueblo en los territorios", 18 September 2025.

[119] Legal options for addressing child recruitment through transitional justice vary. Paramilitary commanders who demobilised in the 2006 process led by President Álvaro Uribe were at times ordered to pay reparations to victims of child recruitment under their command, on a case-by-case basis. Critics of this process say that the majority of instances of child recruitment never came to light. Commanders of the former FARC, meanwhile, are the defendants in a case, focused on child recruitment at the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, a transitional court set up by the 2016 peace agreement. Incorporating new criminal or armed groups into similar justice processes would likely require either new legislation or certain legal amendments to the penal code. For more on best practices see "Through a New Lens: A Child-Sensitive Approach to Transitional Justice", International Center for Transitional Justice, report, August 2011.

[120] For an overview of state programs for children and how these services have evolved over time, see "The Evolution of Inclusion: Three Decades of Policies and Programmes to Manage Exits from Armed Groups in Colombia", report, UN University Centre for Policy Research, 2021.

which vary enormously in quality and scale, Colombia could consider offering technical support or periodic visits from specialists, such as trauma-trained psychologists.

Particular sensitivity is needed in addressing violence against women and girls. Minors may not fully understand their experiences or be able to recount them immediately. For the same reason, it is essential that the Family Welfare Institute ensures that – if a child returns to family custody or leaves the program before turning eighteen – they are in the hands of a guardian who can help them continue their rehabilitation and not exacerbate past abuse.[121]

To be sure, limited resources circumscribe what the state agency can provide. UNICEF has stepped in to provide critical support, advice and programming throughout Colombia's experience with child recruitment.[122] Donors should step in where possible to ensure there are enough spaces for children in existing programs as well as more comprehensive services to support their full recovery.

VIII. **Conclusion**

The forced recruitment of Colombian children is both a personal tragedy for hundreds of individuals and their families, as well as a devastating blow to communities across the country. Recruitment shatters trust within communities and paves the way for armed and criminal groups to tighten their stranglehold. Children who escape or are rescued face immediate risks; state support for their recovery is paltry. Returning to civilian life is arduous and replete with peril.

Colombia's government and foreign partners should make the safety of these children a priority. This entails providing better targeted prevention and help, as well as greater support to the many families and communities that are already fighting to stop recruitment. Armed and criminal groups are so dependent on minors that they have told government interlocutors in peace talks that they are unable to free them without ceding ground in their fight for territorial control. This cannot be an excuse for armed and criminal groups to continue engaging in a war crime. Child recruitment must be a red line in ongoing and future talks, in order to protect Colombia's next generation and a country whose hopes for peace is vested in them.

Bogotá/Brussels, 12 February 2026

[121] Children who turn eighteen but have not yet completed a full recovery process are transferred to the National Reincorporation Agency to continue their process. See "Sexto séptimo informe combinado convencional y periódico de Colombia: Convención sobre los derechos del niño", Colombia Foreign Ministry, July 2020.
[122] "The Evolution of Inclusion", op. cit.

International Crisis Group

Crisis Group has offices in Bogotá, Brussels, Dakar, Istanbul, London, Nairobi, New York and Washington, DC and has a presence in more than 25 different locations in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and the Americas.

See www.crisisgroup.org for details