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MEAC Findings Report 14

# Current Dynamics of Child Recruitment in Colombia

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MANAGING EXITS  
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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## KEY FINDINGS

- Child recruitment in Colombia continues to be of concern in the 19 municipalities included in the MEAC survey. The municipality with the highest reported rate of recruitment was the city of Quibdó (22 per cent), reflecting current trends across the Chocó department.
- Rural municipalities where FARC dissident groups are present more frequently reported child recruitment, reflecting previous reporting that the groups are more actively recruiting there.
- A small group of respondents stated that they had perceived changes in the way armed groups recruit children. These changes related to new economic factors, deception by recruiters, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on recruitment patterns.
- Responses to a question on recruitment of Venezuelan migrant and refugee children were low and varied by municipality. Reluctance to report on this phenomenon and a lack of visibility of migrant and refugee recruitment may have led to underreporting.

This Findings Report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of UNU-CPR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project. MEAC is a multi-donor, multi-partner initiative to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transitions. While the Findings Report benefited from feedback from MEAC's donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.

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# Background

## About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups – and how do they do so sustainably, without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNU-CPR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. MEAC is supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Irish Aid, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and is being run in partnership with the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), UNICEF, and the World Bank.

## About this Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict transitions and related programming into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present short overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses on their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

## About this Report

This report is based on data collected as part of a phone survey of community members in 19 municipalities across Colombia, from April to May 2021 in 11 municipalities and November to December 2021, as outlined in detail below.<sup>1</sup> It presents findings on past and current child recruitment patterns, with a particular focus on new dynamics of child recruitment that have arisen since the peace agreement between the Government of Colombia and the FARC-EP ("Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo") in 2016, including changes in recruitment tactics and recruitment of Venezuelan migrant and refugee children. This data may be useful to government, UN, and NGO partners working in Colombia to support their policies and programming to prevent and respond to child recruitment in this changing landscape of insecurity and vulnerability. The report ends with an examination of key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

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<sup>1</sup> This research was conducted in partnership with [Fundación Conflict Responses](#).

# The Circumstances of Child Recruitment in Colombia

## Global Overview: Child Recruitment

Children are impacted by and involved in conflict in a range of ways, from their use as human shields by armed actors, to attacks on their schools, and through their association with armed groups and forces.<sup>2</sup> Children, like adults, become involved with armed groups and forces for myriad, often interconnected reasons. There is no single combination of factors that have been shown to lead to association with armed groups, nor for particular “types” of armed groups. That said, there are contextual and individual factors that can influence the trajectories of children into armed groups.

As examined in UNU-CPR’s prior research on the subject, culminating in the 2018 volume *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*,<sup>3</sup> there is a large body of grey literature on child recruitment, but few methodologically robust studies that examine the causal mechanics behind various factors leading specifically to children’s involvement with armed groups.<sup>4</sup> In the grey literature in particular, there are often discussions of “push”, “pull”, or “tipping point” factors, but the causal mechanics behind various factors influencing recruitment and association are not always clear or well supported by evidence. Despite these conceptual and evidential challenges, there are important lessons to be drawn from policy literature, often stemming from the valuable experience of working with children in conflict settings.

In any research on children in armed conflict, it is important to remember that “children do not start wars, adults do.”<sup>5</sup> For children to participate in conflict, there must be a [real or perceived] conflict. To join armed groups that are party to that conflict, there must be armed groups [that are at least] open to child involvement.”<sup>6</sup> Beyond those necessary conditions, there are structural-level security, economic, and cultural factors that can enhance the vulnerability or susceptibility to recruitment or coerced involvement in the group. First and foremost, there are security and basic survival considerations that can make it very difficult for children (or adults for that matter) to remain unaffiliated. For “when armed groups are the only employer and exert physical control over the

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<sup>2</sup> Scott Gates, “Why Do Children Fight? Motivations and the Mode of Recruitment”, *Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration* eds. Alpaslan Özerdem and Sukanya Podder (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2011); Rachel Brett and Irma Specht, *Young soldiers: why they choose to fight* (Geneva: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004),

<sup>3</sup> Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> This is due in part to challenges accessing conflict areas and affected populations, particularly CAAFAG who are an elusive subpopulation, and due to ethical restrictions on interviewing vulnerable children. Thus, studying child recruitment and use by armed groups often necessitates drawing from the broader research on other demographics (e.g., youth, adults).

<sup>5</sup> Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, “Trajectories of Children into and out of Non-State Armed Groups”, *Cradled by Conflict* eds. Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

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populace, joining an armed group may be the only realistic survival strategy.”<sup>7</sup> Children may associate with armed groups out of necessity – to cover their basic needs like food and water – or may be looking to enhance their economic position or livelihood opportunities, or escape risks and vulnerabilities such as gender-based violence. It has been argued that different conceptions of “childhood” increase the likelihood of child recruitment and one can expect to find child recruitment in places where child labour is common,<sup>8</sup> but this can be difficult to test as child labour may be confounded with other things like poverty.<sup>9</sup> Societal tensions, grievances, and community mobilization can also create conditions where children – like adults – are motivated or expected to engage with armed movements. Likewise, families can both serve a protective function against child recruitment into armed groups or help facilitate it. Family association and intra-family violence are thought to enhance the risk of child involvement in armed groups, as is displacement of families as a result of conflict. Additionally, children that are orphans or separated from their parents often lack protection, leaving them more vulnerable to recruitment and abduction.

In addition to family, there is a lot of focus on the role of peer networks in child recruitment. A large literature on developmental psychology has shown that adolescents are heavily influenced by their peers, which combined with a tendency to buck authority, trouble with impulse control, and being more prone to risk-taking behaviour, traits that can make young people vulnerable for exploitation by armed groups.<sup>10</sup>

Many of the factors mentioned thus far operate at the societal, community, or family level. There are also individual-level factors that can influence a child’s involvement with armed groups. This can be particular economic hardships, psychological factors, individual grievances, as well as a quest to find out who they are, establish their identity, build a community, and bring significance to their lives. In that vein, armed groups can represent opportunities to fulfill society’s gender and cultural expectations or dash them completely.<sup>11</sup> Some groups promise women and girls the opportunity to push back against antiquated gender expectations that would see them relegated to the homelife. Others offer young people the opportunity to transcend the hierarchical limitations of their clan or national identity.<sup>12</sup> Some armed groups provide boys the chance to demonstrate their masculinity and come into adulthood, particularly those armed groups that offer assistance in marrying, which in some societies is a key rite of passage to becoming a man.

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<sup>7</sup> Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict* (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); David Rosen, *Armies of the Young* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> The Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace, and Security has been trying to test this relationship (among others) as part of its Knowledge for Peace (K4P) platform. To date, only a very weak association between country-level child employment rates and the probability of child soldiering have been found, but current tests lack the quality data to establish with confidence what relationship exists between child labour and child recruitment and use by armed groups.

<sup>10</sup> “Applying a Brand Marketing Lens for Analysing Non-State Armed Groups That Employ Extreme Violence”, workshop, 16 January 2017, New York, NY.

<sup>11</sup> Maria Nzomo, “Gender, Governance and Conflicts in Africa”, *Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa* (2002).; Rachel Brett and Irma Specht, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> For example, groups like Al-Shabaab offer recruits the ability to transcend clan hierarchy and achieve a higher social status; Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile, [Radicalisation and Al-Shabaab Recruitment in Somalia](#) (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies and Finn Church Aid, 2014).

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Much attention has been paid of late to the role of ideology, and particularly religious ideology, in facilitating recruitment into armed groups, particularly self-avowed jihadist groups. However, from research with children who have been involved with armed groups, it does not appear that ideological fervor alone is a sufficient and necessary predictor for involvement or political violence.<sup>13</sup> There are indications that ideological justifications for violence and the use of ideological language as signs of their role in recruitment, failing to recognize that in many cases those beliefs and ways of speaking are acquired in the armed group, occurs *post facto* and not before.<sup>14</sup> How and when it is important, however, is not well understood for most trajectories into armed groups. It is unclear if ideology – as a system of ideas – can influence recruitment or if ideology represents a proxy for other causal factors, such a search for community, status, or meaning or some mix thereof.

## Overview: Child Recruitment in Colombia

Children have been associated with armed groups in Colombia since at least the 1980s,<sup>15</sup> and the first significant study of this trend was published in 2003 by Human Rights Watch.<sup>16</sup> This report estimated that, at the time of its writing, there were 11,000 children associated with armed groups in Colombia, and that 30 per cent of the ranks of the FARC, 33 per cent of the ranks of the ELN (“Ejército de Liberación Nacional”), and 20 per cent of the ranks of the AUC (“Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia”) were under 18 years of age.<sup>17</sup> Interviews with 112 formerly associated children revealed the reasons behind their recruitment, which reflected the literature from other contexts: 13 children reported being coerced, while the rest were influenced by structural factors such as poverty, individual factors including interrupted schooling and domestic violence, and incentives such as money, adventure, weapons, and status.<sup>18</sup> More recent studies in Colombia, some of which focus on children formerly associated with only some of these groups,<sup>19</sup> reveal evidence of similar factors behind child association<sup>20</sup> and make clear that while legally children are to be primarily treated as

<sup>13</sup> Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, “Trajectories of Children into and out of Non-State Armed Groups”, *Cradled by Conflict* eds. Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Mara Revkin, “I Am Nothing Without A Weapon: Understanding Child Recruitment and Use by Armed Groups in Syria and Iraq,” *Cradled by Conflict* eds. Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven (New York: United Nations University, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Mauricio Florez-Morris, “Joining Guerrilla Groups in Colombia: Individual Motivations and Processes for Entering a Violent Organization,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30 7 (2017); Human Rights Watch, *You’ll learn not to cry: child combatants in Colombia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2003); Centro de Memoria Histórica (Colombia), [Una guerra sin edad: informe nacional de reclutamiento y utilización de niños, niñas y adolescentes en el conflicto armado colombiano](#) (Bogotá: Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Human Rights Watch, *You’ll learn not to cry: child combatants in Colombia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Universidad Nacional de Colombia – Observatorio de Procesos de Desarme, Desmovilización y Reintegración (ODDR), *Caracterización de los niños, niñas y adolescentes desvinculados de las FARC-EP 2007 – 2013* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Ingunn Bjørkhaug, “Child Soldiers in Colombia: The Recruitment of Children into Non-State Violent Armed Groups,” *SSRN Electronic Journal* 27 (2010); Cristal Downing, “Child Recruitment to Illegal Armed Groups in Colombia: Peacebuilding and Development Challenges,” *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 9 3 (2014); Fransisco Gutierrez-Sanin, “Organizing Minors: The Case of Colombia,” *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States* eds. Scott Gates and Simon Reich (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010); Ryan Burgess, “Resilience Amidst Risks for Recruitment: A Case Study of ‘At Risk’ Children in Colombia”, *Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration* eds. Alpaslan Özerdem and Sukanya Podder (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2011).

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victims they are “quasi-independent agents faced with a limited menu of unpalatable options” in conflict settings. With incomplete information available, without many other options available to them, and without fully understanding the consequences of the decision, many children may “choose” to join an armed group.<sup>21</sup>

Currently in Colombia, the Government is implementing several programmes to prevent recruitment and use of children by all armed groups, including both parties to the conflict and criminal groups. UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and other UN and international entities support and complement these efforts with their own programming.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, many of the dynamics of child recruitment that have developed over the decades of conflict and violence in Colombia continue.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the topic is more prevalent than ever in the public discourse in Colombia now that transitional justice mechanisms have been set up under the 2016 peace agreement to examine child recruitment and use by the FARC-EP. These mechanisms were put in place after more than 8,000 cases of child recruitment were registered with the Attorney General’s Office. Among these mechanisms, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (SJP or JEP by its Spanish acronym) has since found that the FARC-EP recruited 18,677 children between 1996 and 2016.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, the Truth Commission’s June 2022 report estimated that in the time period from 1990 to 2017, between 27,101 and 40,828 children were recruited into armed groups in Colombia.<sup>25</sup>

Although this guerrilla group is now defunct, emerging FARC dissident groups as well as previously existing criminal groups and the ELN guerrilla group all continue to involve children in their ranks. The most recent evidence of this can be found in the July 2022 report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, which included 123 verified cases of recruitment and use of children between the ages of 12 and 17 by these groups in 2021.<sup>26</sup> While child recruitment in Colombia continues, anecdotal evidence collected informally in conversations with community members and practitioners suggested that the recruitment tactics used by longstanding and emerging armed groups may be changing. Furthermore, as the Venezuelan migrant and refugee population in Colombia increased, there were reports of child migrants being targeted by criminal groups and the

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<sup>21</sup> Note that child recruitment takes place along a continuum of coercion and while children may exercise agency in their recruitment into an armed group, it is rarely a true choice in that their options are often severely limited and many enter under some level of coercion. On why children become involved with armed groups, see William Rosenau, Ralph Espach, Román D. Ortiz, and Natalia Herrera, “Why They Join, Why They Fight, and Why They Leave: Learning From Colombia’s Database of Demobilized Militants,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 2 (2014); Centro de Memoria Histórica (Colombia), [Una guerra sin edad: informe nacional de reclutamiento y utilización de niños, niñas y adolescentes en el conflicto armado colombiano](#) (Bogotá: Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Cristal Downing, Javier Cárdenas, Kyle Johnson, Angela Olaya, Sofia Rivas, and Juanita Vélez, *The Evolution of Inclusion: Three Decades of Policies and Programmes to Manage Exits from Armed Groups in Colombia* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Defensoría del Pueblo (Colombia), [Disidencia de las Farc son responsables de la mayoría de los casos de reclutamiento forzado de niños, niñas y adolescentes](#) (Bogotá: Defensoría del Pueblo, 2022),

<sup>24</sup> Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz (JEP), [JEP establece que al menos 18.677 niños y niñas fueron reclutados por las FARC-EP](#) (Bogotá: JEP, n.d.).

<sup>25</sup> Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición, [Hay Futuro si hay Verdad](#) (Bogotá: Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición, 2022).

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Security Council, [Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary General](#) (New York: United Nations, 2022).

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ELN.<sup>27</sup> This MEAC findings report aims to contribute evidence to enable a better understanding of current dynamics of child recruitment in Colombia in order to strengthen not only efforts to prevent children’s involvement with armed actors but also interventions that support them after they leave armed groups and re-enter civilian life. Findings highlight geographic variations in recruitment that could be of use in designing localized strategies to prevent and respond to this phenomenon.

## Findings

This report is based on data collected in two 30-minute phone surveys led by UNU-CPR and its Colombian research partner Fundación Conflict Responses: one from April to May 2021 with a representative sample of 2,460 community members from 11 municipalities;<sup>28</sup> and a second from October to December of 2021 with a sample of 1,859 community members in 8 municipalities.<sup>29</sup> Twelve of these 19 municipalities are “PDET” municipalities – conflict-affected, vulnerable, and socioeconomically marginalized communities that have been chosen for the implementation of “Planes de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial” or “Regionally-focused Development Plans” stemming from the 2016 peace agreement between the Government and the FARC-EP. Respondents were asked questions on a range of topics including socioeconomic status, experiences of conflict, perceptions of security, attitudes towards violence, COVID-19, and child recruitment.

### Findings on child recruitment in Colombia

In order to understand communities’ perceptions and experiences of child recruitment, the MEAC survey asked them to comment on both past child recruitment and, in more depth, current dynamics around child recruitment. The purpose of questions about past child recruitment was not to contribute new data on this phenomenon as there is already a great deal of evidence of child recruitment over the long course of the Colombian conflict, but rather to allow a comparison of communities’ perceptions of past and current recruitment patterns. Figure 1 represents respondents’ answers to a question about past child recruitment.

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<sup>27</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Colombia/Venezuela: Border area abuses by armed groups](#) (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2022).

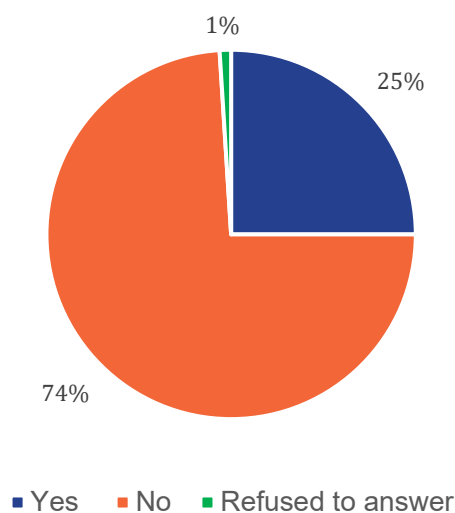
<sup>28</sup> Mutatá, Antioquia; Caldon, Cauca; San José del Guaviare, Guaviare; Guapi, Cauca; La Uribe, Meta; Puerto Asís, Putumayo; Villavicencio, Meta; Bogotá, Cundinamarca; Cali, Valle del Cauca; San Vicente del Caguán, Caquetá; and Apartadó, Antioquia.

<sup>29</sup> Medellín, Antioquia; El Carmen de Bolívar, Bolívar; Santander de Quilichao, Cauca; Valledupar, César; Quibdó, Chocó; Cúcuta, Norte de Santander; Icononzo, Tolima; Arauquita, Arauca.



**Figure 1 – Past child recruitment**

In the past, has child and adolescent recruitment been common in your community during conflict?



A sizeable minority of respondents had been aware of historical efforts to recruit and use children by armed groups. 25 per cent of respondents said that child recruitment had occurred in their communities in the past. Afro-Colombian or indigenous respondents reported the highest positive responses to this question. 25 per cent of Afro-Colombian and 28 per cent of indigenous respondents reported that child recruitment has been common in their community in the past.

The FARC, AUC, and ELN all recruited and used children from their onset and continued to rely on them to fill their ranks over decades of fighting. With few exceptions, rural municipalities of Colombia were the most impacted by child recruitment, as reflected in the MEAC data. The communities of San José del Guaviare (Guaviare department), La Uribe (Meta department), and San Vicente del Caguán (Meta department) had the highest reported rates of past child recruitment, with more than 40 per cent of respondents there reporting that child recruitment had been common in the communities in the past. These are rural municipalities where the FARC-EP – and eventually paramilitary groups – were present for many decades. These municipalities became main recruitment centres for the FARC, driven in part by the group's conflict with the AUC and the national army. Indeed, according to the Special Justice for Peace, "50 per cent of the country's recruitment was concentrated" in the Guaviare and Meta departments.<sup>30</sup>

Other locations where the armed conflict was particularly intense and illegal economies have flourished have also been hotspots for child recruitment. The urban municipality of Quibdó (Chocó department) reported the fourth highest rates of past child recruitment in the MEAC survey, at 34

<sup>30</sup> Justicia Especial Para la Paz (JEP), [Caso 07: Reclutamiento y utilización de niñas y niños en el conflicto armado](#) (Bogotá: JEP, 2019).

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per cent. Quibdó's strategic location with multiple exits to the Pacific Ocean, maritime connections with both Ecuador and Central America, and extreme poverty made it and its children the focus of recruitment efforts. Over time, the city suffered as the FARC-EP, ELN, paramilitaries, and more recently criminal groups openly fought for social, territorial, and economic control of the region.

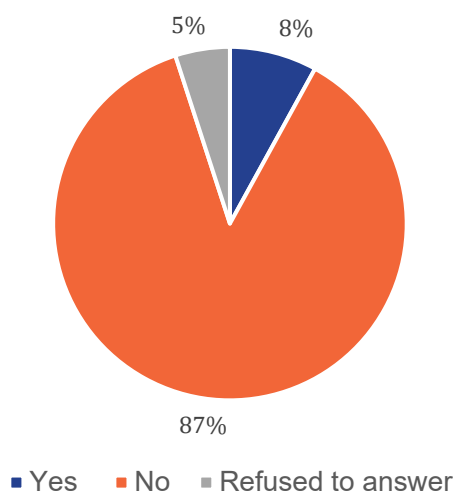
Building on these responses, the MEAC survey inquired as to which armed groups had recruited children in these communities. A large proportion of respondents (43 per cent) responded that the FARC-EP was responsible for past child recruitment, followed by 16 per cent who reported that the ELN was responsible and 5 per cent who reported that the AUC.

Evidence of the use of children by these particular groups is also reinforced by a small pilot survey with 46 individuals leaving criminal groups including FARC dissident groups in Colombia. Of these 46 respondents – all of whom were adults when they exited the group and were interviewed – 13 were recruited under the age of 18 years and had spent between a year and multiple decades within armed groups. Of these, one respondent had been recruited by the AUC more than two decades ago, before passing from the AUC to another armed group that is still active today. Four respondents reported being recruited by the FARC-EP before passing to FARC dissident groups. These patterns of recruitment continue to feed into broad insecurity and undermine the peace agreement, in addition to their direct impact on children themselves.

Indeed, after a lull around the peace agreement, the recruitment and use of children by armed groups in several territories has intensified again and even acquired new characteristics. This is due in part the rise of dissident groups; the continuation of other armed actors such as the EPL (“Ejército Popular de Liberación”), ELN, and AGC (“Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia”); and fighting over territory once controlled by the FARC-EP. In order to understand community experiences of child recruitment today, MEAC also asked if armed groups were currently recruiting children and adolescents from communities.

**Figure 2 – Current recruitment**

Are there armed groups that are currently recruiting children and adolescents from your community?



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Reported rates of child recruitment today are lower than reported rates of past recruitment, but a simple comparison may downplay the concern of recent trends. It is important to bear in mind that “past” recruitment encompasses a decades-long period, whereas “current” is much narrower in temporal scope. For respondents to report child recruitment at these rates today, in the post-peace agreement period, is troubling. For example, the municipality with the highest reported rate of recruitment is now the city of Quibdó (22 per cent). This reflects current trends throughout the Chocó department where in early 2022, social leaders and local organisations warned that children and young people – especially from indigenous communities - were resorting to suicide to avoid forced recruitment by armed groups from small neighbourhood gangs as well as the ELN and AGC.<sup>31</sup> As the authorities have pointed out, child recruitment campaigns by armed groups have particularly affected the indigenous communities that have a presence in the territory.<sup>32</sup>

Elsewhere, respondents in rural municipalities in which the FARC dissident groups are more present and active more frequently reported child recruitment, in line with reporting by external sources that those groups are more actively recruiting there. For example, in San José del Guaviare (Guaviare department) where the 1st and 7th Fronts operate, 17 per cent of respondents reported current child recruitment, and in San Vicente del Caguán (Caquetá department) where the 62nd Front and units attached to the Segunda Marquetalia operate,<sup>33</sup> this response rate was 14 per cent. Caldon also saw a 14 per cent positive response rate, reflecting how this indigenous-majority community, like others in northern Cauca department, currently experience, among other acts of violence, forceful recruitment campaigns by the ELN and FARC dissident groups such as the Dagoberto Ramos and Jaime Martínez mobile columns, Carlos Patiño Front, and Segunda Marquetalia.<sup>34</sup> When asked which groups were responsible for current recruitment, most respondents did not know. Groups to whom child recruitment was attributed included FARC dissident groups such as the Dagoberto Ramos Front and Gentil Duarte’s unit. It is important to note, however, that the number of respondents who named groups was too small to enable conclusions about patterns of recruitment by any particular group.

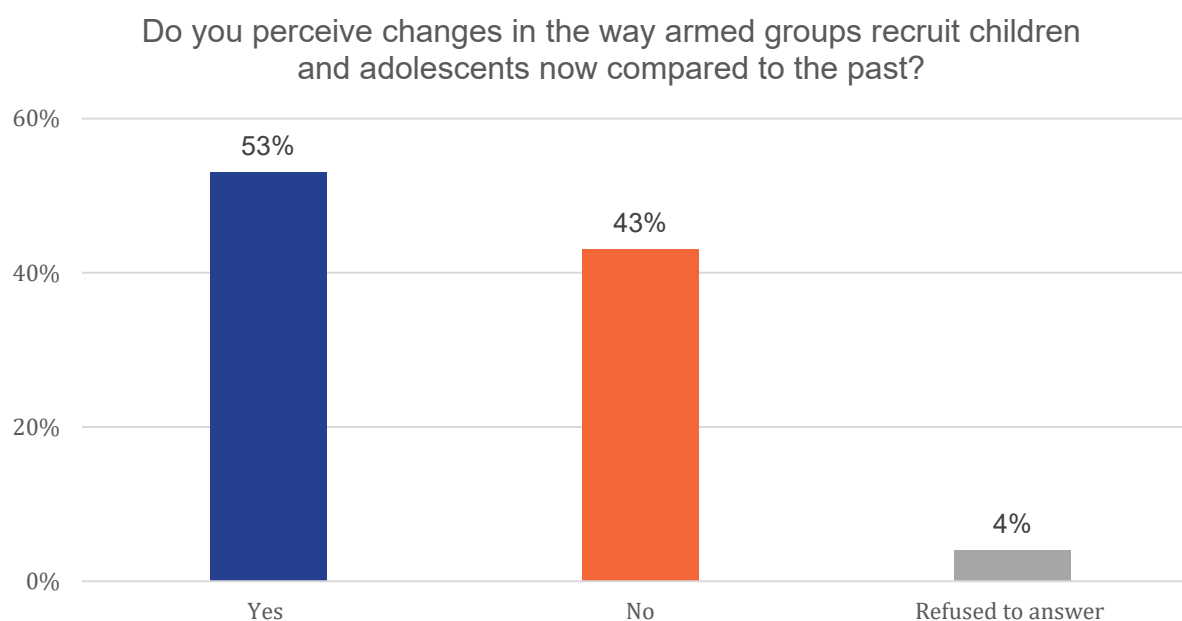
In order to understand current dynamics of child recruitment in Colombia, the MEAC survey also included questions about how recruitment patterns have changed. This included one question presented to the 244 respondents who stated that armed groups were currently recruiting children in their community, on whether they had observed changes in recruitment patterns. Respondents who had observed such shifts were then asked an open-ended question on what those changes had been.

<sup>31</sup> El Tiempo, “[Jóvenes en Chocó se estarían suicidando para evitar que los recluten](#)”, 24 March 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Noticias RCN, “[Máxima alerta en el Chocó por reclutamiento de menores por parte del ELN](#),” 12 February 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Fiscalía General de la Nación, “[Cárcel para ‘Loco Ferney’, el presunto cabecilla de la estructura criminal ‘Segunda Marquetalia’ que pretendía reorganizar y rearmar la extinta columna móvil Teófilo Forero](#),” *Crimen Organizado*, 11 May 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Çxhab Wala Kiwe – ACIN, “[Pronunciamento: Circula en Cauca panfletos ELN, Columna Dagoberto Ramos y 2da Marquetalia](#),” *Actualidad Indígena del Cauca*, 7 December 2021.

**Figure 3 – Changes in the way armed groups recruit children**

As can be seen in Figure 3, just over half of this small sample of respondents stated that they had perceived changes in the way armed groups recruit children and adolescents now. Responses to an open-ended follow-up question focused on economic pull and push factors, deception by recruiters, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, a man from San Vicente del Caguán explained that: “the economic factor makes people want to enter these groups without the need to be forced, so many people enter these groups because of poverty.” Another man from the same municipality said that children and adolescents are now motivated to enter armed groups due to the material value: “Now [the armed groups] offer money and help them financially with luxuries, material things, [...] offer high-capacity motorcycles and housing.” Other respondents reported that children are often deceived once they enter the groups as they are not given what they were promised. One woman respondent from Guapi highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on this phenomenon: “With the problem of the pandemic and without schools, those who do not like to work virtually left to look for jobs and got recruited.” These findings are especially interesting when contrasted to data from a recent MEAC survey with a small sample of individuals leaving criminal groups including FARC dissident groups. Of 46 respondents, 70 per cent (32) reported that the criminal group with which they had been associated prohibited child recruitment. This suggests that there may be a difference between the groups’ rules on this topic – which may be designed and imposed by high-level commanders – and the practice carried out in the field by lower ranking members in their day-to-day.

The MEAC survey also examined whether armed groups were targeting Venezuelan migrant and refugee children for recruitment. As of January 2022, 1.84 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees

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were present in Colombia<sup>35</sup> - some intending to stay in the country and others passing through en route to third countries such as Peru and Panama. During this time there has been an increase in migrant and refugee children travelling unaccompanied by adults, which increases their level of vulnerability and the invisibility of the phenomenon. MEAC's partners in Colombia highlighted sparse – albeit verified – reporting<sup>36</sup> and anecdotal evidence that migrant children were being targeted for recruitment by groups including the ELN and FARC dissident groups but wanted more information. MEAC therefore asked some probing questions that provide insight on where and how migrant and refugee children are being targeted. Responses to a question that aimed to ascertain respondents' knowledge of recruitment of Venezuelan migrant and refugee children were low overall, possibly reflecting reluctance to report on this topic – only 3 per cent of respondents stated that they personally knew of cases of Venezuelan child migrants and refugees who had joined or been recruited by illegal armed groups in their community.

Positive answers to this question varied by municipality. For example, in Medellín, which housed 148,714 Venezuelan migrants and refugees as of August 2021,<sup>37</sup> 8 per cent of respondents said they knew of cases of Venezuelan child recruitment. In Quibdó, which as mentioned above has high rates of child recruitment among its overall resident population, 7 per cent of respondents knew of such cases. Interestingly, border municipalities – which see thousands of Venezuelan migrants and refugees passing through each month and in which armed groups such as the ELN, Rastrojos, and dissident groups are highly active – reported lower rates, with Cúcuta at 3 per cent and Arauquita at 2 per cent.

Given this combination of factors and anecdotal evidence from practitioners who have heard of cases of recruitment of Venezuelan child migrants and refugees in border areas, it is possible that these response rates undermeasure recruitment. Respondents may have been fearful of reporting on armed group activity. There are reports of armed groups threatening community members they believe sharing information about their activity. Practitioners have highlighted this very concern. In addition, given geographic separation between Venezuelan migrants and refugees and Colombian citizens in Cúcuta,<sup>38</sup> and taking into account documented tensions between the two groups in communities across Colombia,<sup>39</sup> it is possible that respondents had low levels of direct knowledge of security and other risks affecting the Venezuelan community.

In order to understand current trends in child recruitment in more depth, in the November-December 2021 community phone survey of eight municipalities, MEAC asked whether respondents had observed Venezuelan migrant children interacting with armed groups. Again, Medellín and Quibdó reported the highest positive response rates at 13 and 12 per cent respectively.

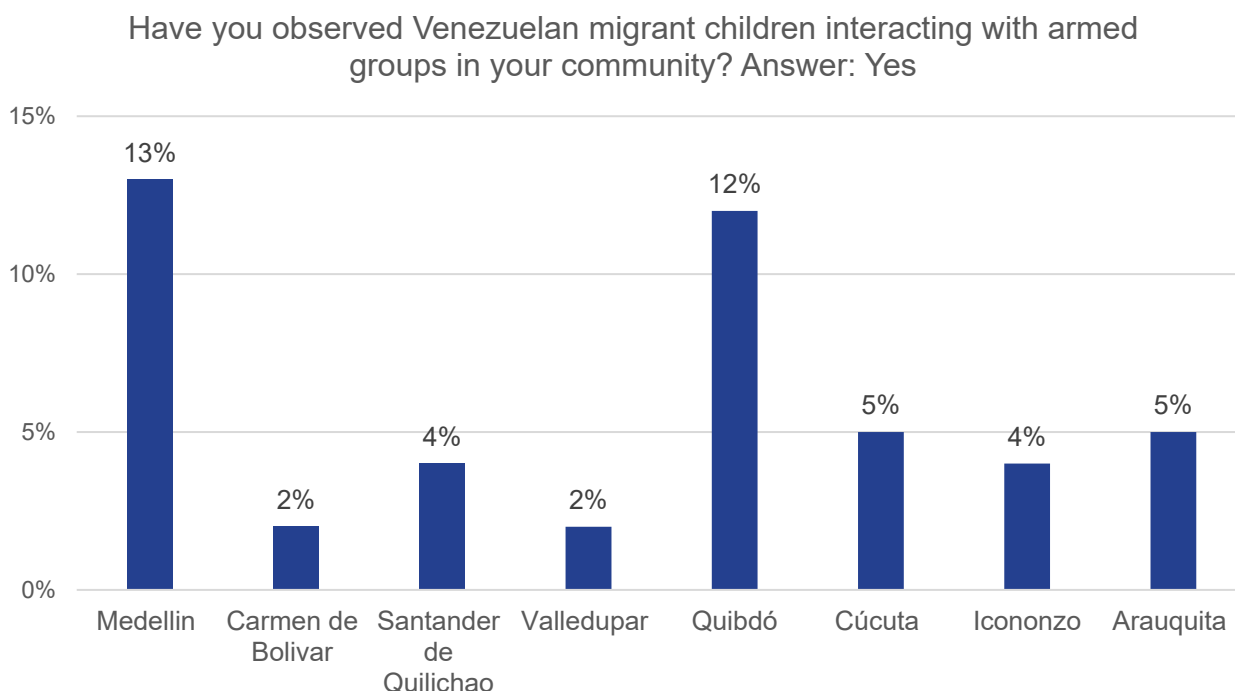
<sup>35</sup> Plataforma de Coordinación Interagencial para [Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela](#), *R4V América Latina y el Caribe, Refugiados y Migrantes Venezolanos en la Región - Enero 2022* (R4V, 2022).

<sup>36</sup> United Nations Security Council, [Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia: Report of the Secretary General](#) (New York: UNSC, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> Plataforma de Coordinación Interagencial para Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela, [Antioquia refugiados y Migrantes venezolanos - Agosto 2021](#) (R4V, 2021).

<sup>38</sup> Ivonne Astrid Moreno Horta and Paula Rossiasco, *Publicado en America Latina y el Caribe*, 11 December 2011.

<sup>39</sup> World Bank Group, [Migration from Venezuela to Colombia : Short- and Medium-Term Impact and Response Strategy](#) (Colombia: World Bank Group, 2018).

**Figure 4 – Interaction between armed groups and Venezuelan migrant children**

The majority of respondents who had observed these interactions said it had happened in public spaces such as football fields, outside billiards halls, and outside of churches. Some also specified that they had observed such exchanges outside of schools.

## Policy and Programmatic Implications

The data collected in the MEAC community phone survey confirms that children are still becoming associated with armed groups in the post-peace agreement context in Colombia. Both emerging and longer-standing groups are adapting to new sources of child vulnerability, such as migration, to draw children in their ranks. The data suggest that policy and programming efforts to prevent recruitment must be similarly flexible and adapt messaging that recognizes that although child recruitment may have declined overall since the peace agreement, it remains a significant concern in some communities.

In the context of implementation of the peace agreement, child recruitment prevention efforts are a crucial part of broader efforts to reduce armed groups' operational capacity and protect and ensure security for local communities. The peace agreement's broad scope also addresses many issues that are inextricably entwined with patterns of child recruitment, such as rural poverty and illegal economies; comprehensive implementation of the agreement is therefore essential to address this phenomenon effectively. As with all peacebuilding policies and programmes in Colombia, it is essential that child recruitment prevention efforts take a highly localized approach in order to

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adequately address the specific dynamics of each municipality. This is demonstrated in several instances in these findings, for example the frequency with which Quibdó demonstrates high reported rates of child recruitment, suggesting an acute need for accelerated efforts there. Similarly, reports of child recruitment in Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations indicate a need for approaches that recognize and aim to address the specific ways that children become associated with armed groups in those communities.

In addition, it is essential that not only child but also adult reintegration programming take into account that many participants were recruited as children in order to ensure appropriate support that recognizes that these individuals spent many of their formative years in an armed group. Those who are recruited as children but who exit as adults have often been undersupported. Moreover, they look like adults and society expects them to act as such, but in spending formative years in an armed group, they often lack the education or livelihood background necessary to meet those expectations. This is demonstrated not only through the data presented here but also in other MEAC data from the previously mentioned small pilot survey with 46 individuals leaving criminal groups including FARC dissident groups in Colombia. Of these 46 adult respondents, 13 were recruited as children and had spent anything between a year and multiple decades within armed groups.

Findings relating to the recruitment of Venezuelan migrant and refugee children also point to a specific set of implications. The MEAC data gives credence to concerns that migrant and refugee children are being recruited by armed groups and suggests that – as practitioners and UN reports have indicated<sup>40</sup> – there may be fear among community members that prevents them from openly speaking about and therefore reporting this issue. Further information gathering on this issue is essential to truly understand its nuances and support evidence-based policy and programming responses, as the need to ensure that migrant and refugee children are protected is clear.

Furthermore, the MEAC findings contribute new information on the contexts in which Venezuelan migrant and refugee children are coming into contact with armed groups, especially public recreational and religious spaces, as well as schools. This suggests that protective measures for children in these spaces could have an impact on their vulnerability to recruitment. It also demonstrates the continued relevance of the Safe Schools Declaration in Colombia, possibly as a framework for the incoming Government to implement measures that would decrease interaction between armed groups and all children in the context of education, as well as protecting their right to education more broadly.

Indeed, the incoming Government is uniquely positioned to renew efforts to address child recruitment in Colombia, as it can take these findings into account in the design and adjustment of new programmes. Furthermore, if it chooses to negotiate with the ELN or other armed groups, the new administration should ensure that child recruitment is appropriately addressed as part of any peace process in order to serve not only justice but also the needs of children potentially leaving armed groups. Similarly, policies and programmes that aim to support children as they leave armed groups

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<sup>40</sup> United Nations Security Council, [Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia: Report of the Secretary General](#) (New York: United Nations, 2021).

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should take these findings into account in order to counter current dynamics of recruitment – and potentially re-recruitment – as children leave armed groups and make the transition to civilian life.



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