

Understanding Colombia Series

THE EFFECTS OF ARMED CONFLICT ON COLOMBIA'S CHILDREN

In Brief

- The culture of conflict in Colombia has led to an increase in gang violence in urban areas and “social cleansing” campaigns against street children.
- Between 11,000 and 14,000 Colombian children are directly involved in the conflict, having been recruited as child soldiers by the various illegal armed actors.
- Sexual violence against children has been used as a tool of conflict by all armed actors.
- Children displaced by the conflict face many obstacles to getting the education accorded to them under Colombian law.
- Healthcare is a central concern for displaced youth, with the daily calorie intake of these children averaging well below global standards.
- An increased amount of US assistance should be allocated for street children, child soldiers, displaced children, and child laborers in

Background

It is estimated that 16 million of Colombia's population of 42 million are children under the age of eighteen. Unfortunately, the internal war has disproportionately affected Colombia's children and youth. From landmines to forced recruitment and displacement to sexual violence – Colombia's children have been exposed firsthand to the horrors of the war that has engulfed their country for more than four decades. With problems in access to healthcare and education, their future is further compromised. Despite this, many of Colombia's youth are working to create a culture of peace in their country.



*Children in the peace community of San José de Apartadó.
(Amnesty USA)*

Important Facts

Social violence: The culture of crime and violence resulting from armed conflict, illegal drug trafficking and the proliferation of small arms threatens Colombian children. Lack of employment options and the prevalence of illegal activities propel young people into collaboration with gangs, drug traffickers, guerrillas, urban militias, local police, the armed forces and others linked to the conflict. Increasing numbers of children have become victims of murder and physical abuse through their association with the internal conflict and the social norms mandated by the illegal armed actors who control their communities. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has specifically critiqued extrajudicial killings, disappearances, torture and the so-called “social cleansing” campaigns that target street children.

Child soldiers: As of February 2008, Colombia is one of thirteen countries in the world where child soldiers are involved in conflicts, according to the UN. It is estimated that between 11,000 and 14,000 children are serving in various armed groups. A September 2003 Human Rights Watch's report found that these actors recruit minors, often forcibly, to work as messengers, informants, guards and human shields. Government armed forces are also known to employ children as informants and runners in propaganda activities and intelligence operations. Although Colombian laws have prohibited the recruitment of children under 18 for military service since 1999, the Colombian Armed Forces promote military recruitment through programs such as “Soldiers for a Day” in military high school institutions.

Sexual violence: As documented by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, guerrilla and paramilitary forces systematically use rape and sexual violence against children as a tactic to destabilize the civilian population. The US State Department estimates the number of children forced into commercial sex work as between 20,000 to 35,000. Furthermore, Colombia's law-enforcement investigative agency, the Department of Security, has found that Colombia is among the top three sources of trafficked-persons in the Western Hemisphere. Increasing numbers of Colombian families arriving in border regions fuel the creation of crime rings to recruit girls into prostitution abroad.

Education for displaced children: Although the Colombian government states that displaced children are to be given priority access to the educational system, there is no specific budgetary provision to facilitate this pledge. On some occasions, local school authorities refuse to accept displaced children in their schools, citing student failure to present appropriate identification documents or payment. Due to these obstacles, it is estimated that between 70% (UNICEF) to 85% (Ombudsman) of displaced children do not attend school. Although certain municipal Secretaries of Education have demonstrated a commitment to providing education to displaced children, often their resolve is insufficient in the face of opposition from school principals.

Health care: The World Food Program consistently reports that the average daily food consumption of displaced children is well below the recommended calorie intake for people in emergency settings. Colombian and international NGOs report cases in which government armed forces, paramilitary, and guerrilla groups block humanitarian supply shipments to communities, effectively cutting children and their families off from healthcare, medicine, food and other essential supplies. UNAIDS has further cautioned that social instability, poverty, disempowerment, and physical and sexual violence – all by-products of the armed conflict – facilitate the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Constitutional Court decree: In *Auto 251* of 2008, the Colombian Constitutional Court declared that the government's efforts to protect displaced children had been "insufficient to make progress against grave violations of their fundamental rights." The Court found that displaced children – who make up 50% of all displaced people in Colombia – face "special risks," including sexual violence. As such, the Court decreed that the government must take greater strides to protect displaced children.

What can the US do?: The US should increase development aid to support groups working with displaced children, street children and child laborers so that they can access nutritional needs, education, and health care. This aid can support employment training and provide income to families, thereby reducing the need for children to seek employment with the armed actors or illegal groups.

"Displacement usually means a series of calamities for children – homelessness, physical torture, severe trauma, malnutrition, little formal education, loss of family members and exposure to atrocities."

- Niousha Roshani, *Colombia's Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement*

Take Action!

Write a letter or call your US Congressmen/women asking them to urge the Colombian government to protect the rights of the youth and children. Ask your congressional representatives to increase the amount of US aid directed to displaced children, ex-child soldiers, and street children, while reducing aid to the armed groups – both State and illegal – that recruit them. To find the address and phone number of your senators and representatives, please visit www.congress.org

For More Information

Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

www.child-soldiers.org

Planeta Paz

www.planetapaz.org

UNICEF

www.unicef.org

MADRE

www.madre.org

Child Rights Information Network

www.crin.org

U.S. Office on Colombia

connecting civil society to policymakers



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