Safeguarding Futures: Rethinking Preventative Approaches to Protect Minors from Recruitment and Use in Colombia

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1. **Introduction**

Reports on children in armed conflicts highlight obstacles to prevention and protection efforts while emphasizing the need to recognize child soldiers as more than just victims. After the Machel Report (United Nations General Assembly, 1996) numerous legal initiatives were undertaken to safeguard children (*Rome Statue of the International Criminal Court,* 1998). These took the form of frameworks (“Paris Commitments to Protect Children from Unlawful Recruitment or Use by Armed Forces or Armed Groups,” 2007), conventions (United Nations, 1989), protocols (United Nations General Assembly, 2000), guidelines and principles (“Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups,” 2007; “Cape Town Principles and Best Practices,” 1997), among others. Scholarly works have also explored these phenomena from various perspectives. Authors like Drumbl emphasize the challenges of reintegrating child soldiers into their communities, underscore their agency as active citizens (2012a, p. 482), and point out the various forms that illicit use of children can take during periods of political violence. All of these dynamics inhibit preventative efforts.

Understanding child soldiers presents two key challenges. Firstly, there is a misconception regarding child soldiers as young children carrying large weapons and serving as frontline combatants in African countries. Most child soldiers are adolescents between 15 and 17 years old, only 40% of them are of African origin, and many have roles beyond combat duties (Drumbl, 2012b, p. 481). Additionally, documenting the prevalence of child soldiers faces significant obstacles like underreporting and competition among agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the field who do not share their data (Firchow, 2018a, p. 24). Consequently, policymakers’ understanding of the root causes of conflict – such as motivations for joining armed groups and the socio-economic context that drives youth toward violence (Garbarino, Governale, and Nesi, 2020a, p. 4) – including post-conflict involvement in illegal armed groups or gangs, remains insufficient.  This chapter thereby links to research about trafficked children and criminalized children as expertly dealt with by Silvia Scarpa in this volume.

Post-conflict scenarios bring forth fresh challenges as pernicious new groups and actors emerge. Some of these entities are sustained by illegal economies (Vélez and Lobo, 2019, p. 72; Gutierrez, 2020, p. 1008). New groups exhibit high adaptability and dissuasion strategies which keep them from direct confrontation with the National Army and Police forces and thereby render them difficult to combat. In fact, gangs and small armed groups are often where minors begin their criminal journeys, especially minors more vulnerable to structural violence. Furthermore, this chapter explores the inability of peace agreements to prevent youth violence despite including child recruitment in negotiation agendas, notably, due to the shift from armed violence to criminal violence and the multiplication of new emerging groups that aim to navigate within the thin line between being an armed and an organized crime group.

Furthermore, boys aged between 14 and 17 from low-income households face stigma and discrimination by other fellow citizens and some police officers (Alvarado, 2013, p. 230; Callejas Fonseca and Piña Mendoza, 2005, p. 64), creating a binary perception of this group of adolescents where they are dangerous, poor, or helpless. Such binary categorizations impede the understanding of the big picture and exacerbate the gap between institutions and the very population they aim to safeguard (María Paula Espejo, 2021, p. 8). A need consequently arises for context-specific prevention strategies with an intersectional approach that includes age, socioeconomic status and gender, at the very least.

This chapter analyses the use of minors and the accompanying challenges for the prevention of child recruitment and use in post-conflict scenarios. Colombia will be our case study as it meets key characteristics addressed above, namely, the presence of atomized groups involved in illegal economies – including drug trafficking, arms, human trafficking and illegal mining (Gutiérrez D. and Thomson, 2021, p. 26) – within the context of a transitional period introduced by the Havana negotiations. Our entry ramp is the literature on child recruitment and its challenges in transitional justice periods already identified in the secondary literature (Kiyala, 2018, p. 194; Daly, 2018, p. 656; Fisher, 2013, p. 1; Steinl, 2017, p. 14), the Colombian case, and data from the Ombudsperson’s Office in Colombia.

Part 2 of this chapter examines the sources of violence in the current Colombian context. Part 2 shows how the country's Early Warning System has collected data intending to prevent systemic human rights violations. Part 3 comprises the heart of this chapter providing the results of the analysis of the documents provided by the Colombian Ombudsperson Office, with a specific focus on the geographic distribution of illegal armed actors and the strategies they employ for the recruitment and utilization of minors. Part 4 identifies and proposes effective preventive mechanisms for the problem of the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts. Part 5 concludes.

1. **Background to the Violence and Responses Thereto**
2. ***The Colombian armed conflict***

The conflict in Colombia follows a center-periphery logic that has given rise to two contrasting experiences and divergent perspectives concerning the country’s needs (Laengle Scarlazetta, Loyola Fuentes, and Tobón Orozco, 2020, p. 1). Despite ongoing violence, monitoring the conflict’s evolution and dynamics and preventing the recruitment and use of minors by armed groups remain imperative (Suárez and Lizama-Mué, 2020, p. 98). Efforts throughout the conflict have been persistent yet unsuccessful. As conflict and violence have transformed over the years, new challenges have arisen and the justice system has not caught up with the mutating scenario to effectively protect minors.

Colombia’s violent history is characterized by a dozen peace negotiations and three central transitional processes involving various armed groups resulting in different documents, agreements, or national legislation and policies (Guzmán Campos, Fals-Borda, and Umaña Luna, 2005, p. 1).

The first major transitional period was prompted by the demobilization of several groups following the 1991 Constitution such as M-19, Movimiento Quintín Lame (MQL), Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL), and Partido Revolucionario de Los Trabajadores (PRT). A second transitional period began after the San José de Ralito I and II accords between Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) paramilitaries and the Alvaro Uribe Velez administration. This lead to the enactment of Law 975, also known as Justice and Peace. Law 975 faced significant criticism from national and international human rights organizations due to its perceived inadequate contribution to justice, truth, reparation, and non-recurrence guarantees for victims and society at large (Delgado Barón, 2011, p. 174; Olarte, 2012, p. 195). Debates have surfaced surrounding the actual demobilization of the AUC, as observers consider the AUC a ‘narco-paramilitary’ group unwilling to relinquish drug trafficking profits while retaining close ties to drug lords and ‘parapolitics’, namely, politicians financed by drug traffickers from different political parties and different regions in the country who facilitated strategic rural corridors for drug-trafficking (Durán-Martinez, 2018, p. 1). The third tranche involves the implementation of the peace accord signed with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) guerrillas on 24 November 2016 at the Teatro Colón in Bogota after the Havana negotiations (Government of Colombia and FARC-EP, 2016, p. 1). These negotiations were conducted between 2012 and 2016 in Havana, Cuba. This peace accord has received international recognition for its inclusion of gender, ethnic, and territorial perspectives, adhering to the highest standards of international human rights law and transitional justice (Segura and Mechoulan, 2017, p. 1). However, challenges in Colombia’s political climate and institutional capacity to implement the agreements have hindered a glide-path to peace. New factions of the FARC have emerged, along with antecedent armed groups that remain active such as the guerrilla Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC), and the Águilas Negras. Additionally, drug-trafficking organizations operate in gray zones,[[1]](#endnote-1) further complicating efforts to protect civilians from systematic human rights violations in rural and urban areas (Maria Paula Espejo, 2021, p. 157).

Overall, the Colombian case has been classified as a non-international, protracted armed conflict due to its longevity, intractability, mutability, and widespread violations of international humanitarian law (Cárdenas Díaz et al., 2018, p. 23). The conflict’s root causes include land disputes, limited political participation and representation, and deep sectarianism fueled by political leaders and traditional parties. Colombia has a backdrop of poverty, inadequate access to basic services, and a complex political culture permeated by illegal groups and their interests that increase further the generalized lack of trust in institutions, resulting in prevailing inequality, particularly affecting vulnerable populations such as peasants, Afro-Colombians, and indigenous communities (Pizarro Leongómez, 2015, p. 5). These populations are predominantly found in peripheral urban and remote rural areas characterized by high poverty rates and limited state presence (Gordon et al., 2020, p. 697). The conflict has led to devastating consequences, with approximately nine million victims including 210,000 forcibly disappeared individuals, over 750,000 displaced persons, and numerous massacres across 62% of municipalities. Child recruitment, a typically underreported phenomenon, has resulted in at least 16,238 documented cases between 1990 and 2017 (La Comisión, 2022).

Illegal economies –particularly drug trafficking – along with socio-economic inequality have consistently played crucial roles in perpetuating cycles of violence. These illegal economies pull and push youth toward illegal groups (Maria Paula Espejo, 2021, p. 157). It is important to note that all armed groups, regardless of their ideological orientation or tactics, have used minors in hostilities. The actors responsible for violence throughout the conflict include guerrillas, paramilitaries, drug cartels/traffickers, criminal gangs, and the Colombian army (Segovia, 2017, p. 1).

1. ***Ombudsperson’s Office – role, efforts and timeframe***

The Ombudsperson’s Office is responsible for monitoring Colombia’s human rights guarantees. It operates through fifteen delegates and four national directorates. It has regional offices and dedicated teams for each area. In 2001, the Early Warning System (SAT,- Sistema de Alertas Tempranas in Spanish) was established amidst Colombia’s intense violence. The system issues early warnings[[2]](#endnote-2) on human rights and international humanitarian law violations concerning the armed conflict.

Since 2017, the 2124 Decree following the peace accord mandated SAT to alert about impediments to peace agreement implementation. Follow-up reports assess institutional responses to warnings and their efficacy in preventing or mitigating risks. SAT’s warnings hold value for international organizations, human rights entities, and social leaders. However, the Ombudsperson’s recommendations lack binding force. They operate as a moral authority without legal or administrative power to hold institutions accountable for action or inaction. Despite the preventive spirit of the warning documents, most of them include recent, current or ongoing human rights violations. Nonetheless, data within the SAT documents is valuable due to the widespread presence of the team’s analysts across the country and their confidential engagement with communities which grants them privileged information.

In analyzing SAT documents, this chapter divides the covered period into four-time segments:

1. 2001-2005: Conflict - Justice and Peace Law

2. 2006-2011: Post-Demobilization of Paramilitary Groups

3. 2012-2016: Havana Peace Negotiations

4. 2017-2022: Post-Agreement Phase

These divisions help track changes in conflict dynamics, actors, and strategies tied to child recruitment and use. Cardeli et al. utilize Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory to explore the personal, social, and cultural factors that contribute to a child’s involvement in violent groups (2022a, p. 318). They examine the interactions among the individual child, microsystem (family, peers, and school), mesosystem (interactions within the microsystem), exosystem (government, politics, and social services), and macrosystem (culture and ideology) in the context of minors recruited by Central American gangs and terrorist organizations. Factors such as religion (predominantly Catholic/Christian), culture (machismo), socio-economic vulnerabilities, and public policy play a role in understanding children’s involvement in violence. The interactions among these systems provide insights into key elements, moments, and actors that can inform effective strategies for preventing child recruitment and use (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión, 2011, p. 87; Nagle, 2008a, p. 7). We find this a helpful frame for Colombia, as well.

To deepen the upcoming data analysis there are key aspects of the Colombian legislation worth mentioning. According to Colombia’s Civil Code, article 34: ‘The term *boy* or *girl* (children) refers to persons between 0-12 years of age, and *adolescent* to persons between 12 and 18 years of age’. In this chapter, we will use the terms and age groups suggested by the Civil Code. We interchangeably use the terms “adolescent” and “teenagers”. The term “minor” will refer to all those from 0 to 18 years of age, and any other age reference will be to those classified in adulthood (19 and older). Across the chapter, we will refer to age categories to add layers of information that will contribute to expanding the understanding of the different interactions among Bronfenbrenner’s theory that will inform our discussion, which is largely focused on adolescents rather than combatant children.

Another key policy for our analysis is the Permanent Directive No. 15 (2016) from the Ministry of Defense. This Directive classifies illegal groups into Organized Criminal Groups[[3]](#endnote-3) and Organized Armed Groups[[4]](#endnote-4) and focuses on transnational crime and not the internal armed conflict. This classification undermines the guarantees for protecting and redressing victims of systematic human rights violations, as it restricts the acknowledgment of individuals as victims based on the acknowledgment afforded to the perpetrator. Put differently, this directive prioritizes the recognition and categorization of illicit groups over the imperative to safeguard and ensure redress for victims, a principle that has significantly advanced within the legal framework of Colombia, exemplified by the Victims' Law of 2011. An illustration of this phenomenon is evident in the potential obstacles faced by victims associated with dissidents or spoilers of peace agreements—those who refrained from surrendering or actively sabotaged negotiations, demobilization efforts, and processes related to disarmament and reintegration (DDR)—in gaining inclusion within the Unique Registry of Victims, as they are classified merely as victims of common crime. Consequently, this situation adversely affects statistics concerning insecurity and common criminal activities in urban settings, thereby diminishing or negating the significance attributed to groups such as those discussed in this chapter, especially those addressed as Localized groups.

Consequently, we chose our own group categories for our analysis: guerrillas, paramilitaries, strongholds, FARC dissidents, and localized armed groups. Another available classification is the one suggested by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), but it fails to overcome our reservations concerning the Permanent Directive when it comes to victims’ guarantees.

1. **Data and Methodology**

The dataset from the Ombudsperson’s Office consists of 1753 documents, which can be categorized as follows[[5]](#endnote-5):

·       Early Warnings (378) and Risk Reports (681) provide information on potential risks and threats in conflict-affected areas of the country. These also offer general recommendations to authorities for mitigating human rights violations.

·       Notes (558) and Follow-Up Reports (136) provide updated information on previously identified risks, evaluate the implementation of recommendations, identify new risks, and track the situation over time.

Out of the total 1753 documents, 1105 (63%) mention recruitment and use of children (NNAJ) with 796 (45%) specifically describing situations related to this issue. The acronym NNAJ is used in the Ombudsperson’s Office’s data to refer to minors under 18 years of age, children (boys and girls), adolescents, or young people (hereafter, when mentioning NNAJ we refer to any of these categories or all at once). Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of documents released from 2001 to 2022 and the occurrence of NNAJ terms therein. Notably, reports mentioning NNAJ recruitment and use were initially low from 2001 to 2008 but steadily increased thereafter to account for over 90% of the institution’s communications. The decrease observed from 2019 onwards does not necessarily indicate reduced risk but rather reflects limitations in report production due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

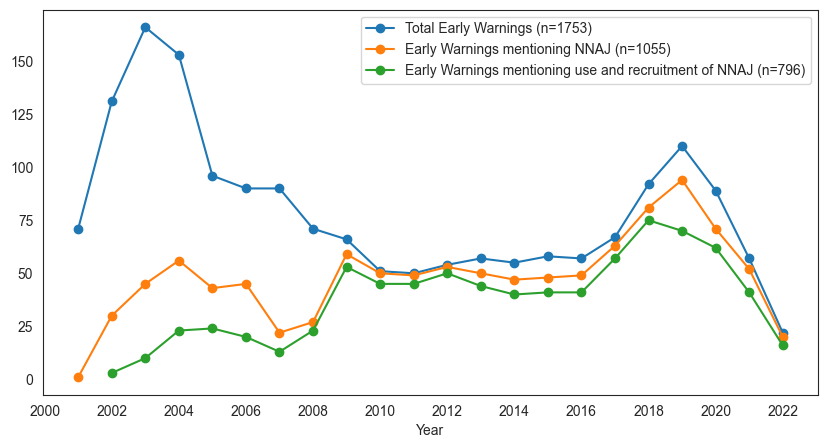


Figure 1. Annual distribution of documents released by the Ombudsperson’s Office [Own Elaboration]

This study applies NLP algorithms to uncover latent patterns of child recruitment and use in the Early Warning Reports released by SAT. This is achieved by identifying, collecting, and analyzing information from reports, including actors involved, locations, risk factors, recruitment strategies, and recommendations for child protection. The research project adopts the data science pipeline developed by Lizama and Suárez (2022, p. 410), which guides researchers through various stages from conceptualization to research communication. This NLP-based approach has been applied in similar contexts (Daughton et al., 2019, p. 9; Suárez and Lizama-Mué, 2021, p. 409; UN Global Pulse, 2019) to extract information from textual data in the context of digital peacebuilding.

To conduct a longitudinal analysis of child recruitment and use in Colombia using the Ombudsperson’s SAT, we extract the following information from each report: release year, Colombian departments mentioned in the warning, criminal organizations involved in recruiting children and national/territorial institutions addressing the problem (actors), and the actions described in the reports that entice or force children into illegal activities (recruitment strategies). The 1753 PDF reports were converted into plain text using two Python libraries: 1) pyPDF, a toolkit that allows text and metadata extraction from PDF documents (Fenniak 2014), and 2) Tesseract-OCR for Optical Character Recognition on the images included in the reports (Hoffstaetter et al., [2010] 2023). Tables and images were transformed into paragraphs while retaining the original sentence structure.

Among the challenges to processing this dataset, we found that the reports lack a predetermined format. Critical sections such as Antecedents, Description of the Risk Situation, or Recommendations are in unlikely order, under different headings, or structure. To ensure the quality and reliability of the information, three data-cleaning steps were taken. First, a spell-checking Python library was used to minimize errors introduced in the conversion from PDF to plain text (Kelly, 2011). Non-matching terms were replaced with relevant suggestions. Second, entities with similar meanings were interchanged with a common term (e.g., replacing different variations of “FARC” with “FARC-EP”). The ultimate step involved lemmatization to reduce words to their base forms (lemma), enhancing context relevance in analytical models. In this process, words with inflectional endings such as "s," "ed" and "ing" are replaced by their lemma. For example, reference to the verb " to build" might appear as "building," "builds" or "built." All these words will be replaced by “build”.

To extract required data points, our analytical approach employs two NLP subtasks: Named Entity Recognition (NER) and Semi-Supervised Key Phrase Extraction. NER involves recognizing entities placed in the text such as persons, organizations, locations, time expressions, quantities, and monetary values (Goyal, Gupta, and Kumar, 2018, p. 21). We utilize the NER model in SpaCy, a state-of-the-art Python library optimized for NLP tasks (Honnibal et al., [2014] 2020). This pre-trained model for the Spanish language performs accurately and efficiently, enabling the identification of dates, organizations involved in child recruitment and use, and targeted Colombian departments (“Spanish · spaCy Models Documentation,” 2022). Key Phrase Extraction focused on identifying recruitment and use strategies. It involved extracting significant phrases from segments/sentences where NNAJ is mentioned alongside recruitment and use. An intermediary step involved the identification of key phrases aligned with strategies, followed by an automatic approach for the remaining segments.

A multimodal network[[6]](#endnote-6) incorporating actors, departments, and strategies was built to extract information on key nodes and their relationships during different periods of the Colombian conflict analyzed in this study. A "network" is a mathematical or computational representation of complex systems where individual components, termed nodes, are interconnected by relationships, named edges or links. In this article, the network encapsulates a methodological approach to analyze and understand the interconnectedness of Actors, Departments, and Strategies based on how they co-occur in the documents released by the Ombudsperson Office.

**RESULTS**

1. ***The Actors Across Time***

Various actors –guerrillas, paramilitaries, strongholds, dissidents, and localized armed groups – employ different strategies for using and recruiting minors. Historical and geographical contexts also influence the tactics of actors to recruit and use minors. This argument will be explored in more detail in forthcoming sections after presenting the different profiles of each group category.

Guerrillas are left-wing armed groups with communist ideologies which emerged during the Cold War. They aim to redistribute socio-economic and political power (Leongómez, 1991, p.7). Guerrilla groups in Colombia, the FARC-EP, and the National Liberation Army (ELN) are prominent actors in this category. Debates have arisen regarding the validity of their social justice discourse in light of the casualties and victims resulting from their actions, particularly following the end of the Cold War and the events of 9/11.

Paramilitary groups, in contrast to guerrillas, formed a unified counter-insurgent front comprising various factions across Colombia. On the other hand, like guerrillas, they are characterized by large combatant groups and weaponry. The AUC, for example, united multiple auto-defence blocks around the country (Guaqueta and Arias, 2011, p.465); and financed their operations through contributions from targeted wealthy livestock farmers and participation in drug trafficking (Romero Vidal and Ávila Martínez, 2011, p.149). Collaboration between paramilitaries and the Colombian Army has sparked debates and investigations due to the commission of grave violations of international humanitarian law (Romero, 2003, p.178).

The Strongholds category encompasses armed groups that emerged after the Justice & Peace process in 2005, such as Los Rastrojos, Águilas Negras, Gaitanistas Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, Los Urabeños, and The Gulf Clan. These groups primarily focus on economic control, notably on drug trafficking and other illicit activities. They often establish close relationships with political families and entrepreneurs at local and regional levels. They exert influence on political outcomes through campaign financing, vote buying, and imposing codes of conduct on the civilian population, in a fashion similar to paramilitaries and guerrillas during the late 20th and early 21st centuries.[[7]](#endnote-7) Strongholds, as paramilitaries, rarely confront the Colombian Army but are distinguishable because of their operational organization. We chose Strongholds to name this conglomerate of groups to distance our analysis from the Colombian institutional jargon, as these groups have been labelled as neo-paramilitaries, post-demobilized AUC groups, and Bacrim at their earlier stages (Criminal Bands). All labels bear a political charge that vindicates them, or not, as actors part of the Colombian conflict and, in consequence, have effects on their victims’ rights.

FARC Dissidents comprise a group of small factions that emerged after the Havana Accord between the guerrillas and the Colombian government. This category includes peace accord spoilers and rearmed combatants. There are over 30 new fronts of dissidents across the country that are either independent or under the leadership of Ivan Márquez, Gentil Duarte, or Comando Coordinador de Occidente (CCO). The power struggle between these dissident groups affects rural areas, such as southern municipalities in Tolima, Cauca, and Caquetá, with the civilian population caught in the middle as various factions claim legitimacy as successors to FARC.

The final category encompasses Localized Armed Groups, which operate within smaller geographical remits and focus on controlling urban-level illegal economies such as drug trade and human trafficking. Actors in this category include La Constru, Los Paisas, La Cordillera, La Terraza, La Oficina De Envigado, and other organized crime groups. These groups maintain links with Strongholds groups and international crime organizations such as Mexican cartels. To avoid direct confrontation with law enforcement, their members adopt civilian clothing which makes it difficult to distinguish them as combatants or members of specific groups. This category presents the most complexity, as it exists in a gray area between illegal armed groups within the armed conflict and international organized crime.

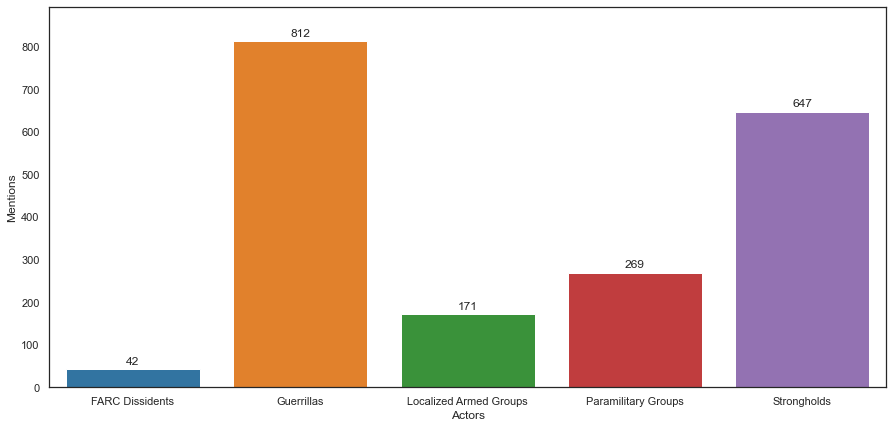
Figure 2. Number of mentions of the conflict actors in the context of recruitment and use of NNAJ [Own Elaboration]

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of conflict actor references in the Ombudsman’s Office documents from 2001 to 2022. As the conflict evolved, new categories emerged due to group demobilization, mutation, and the formation of new alliances, such as the emergence of FARC Dissidents after the 2016 Peace Agreement. The percentages of mentions in the Early Warning reports are as follows: Guerrillas (42%), Strongholds (33%), Paramilitary groups (14%), Localized groups (9%), and FARC dissidents (2%). This distribution reflects the transformation of the Colombian armed conflict and the adaptive strategies of illegal groups in response to events in the country’s recent history. During transitions, governments are urged to show favourable results. Accordingly, the political cost of acknowledging the emergence of new groups can be taken as a lack of state power and control. In consequence, Police, Army and regional administrations systematically deny and challenge the affirmations of warning documents from SAT stating the presence of illegal armed groups within their territories. Hence, when victims approach institutions they face challenges to ensure their protection, reparation, and safety.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the changing prominence of group categories over time. Localized groups are noteworthy due to their limited geographical reach and collaboration with Strongholds groups. While localized groups have remained consistently active, other categories have experienced varying levels of decline as shown in Figure 4. Notably, only few instances arise where all groups simultaneously decrease their activity, other than the exceptional case of 2020 attributed to challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each category encompasses multiple groups that emerged in different contexts, meeting specific criteria based on their interests and tactics. These groups employ diverse mechanisms to sustain their operations, including collaboration and merging. Figures 3 and 4 provide empirical evidence of the lifespan of each category, considering negotiations, peace accords, and implementation stages that support our four-period selection.

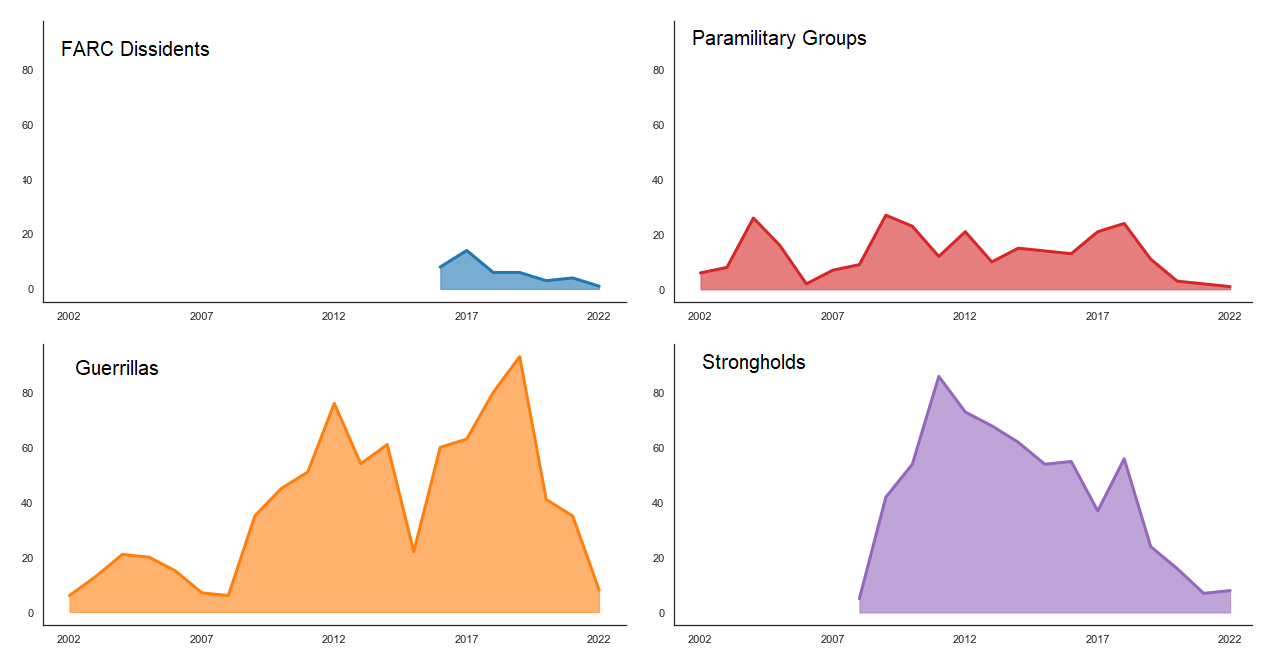


Figure 3. References to Actors of the Conflict in the documents (Part1) [Own Elaboration]

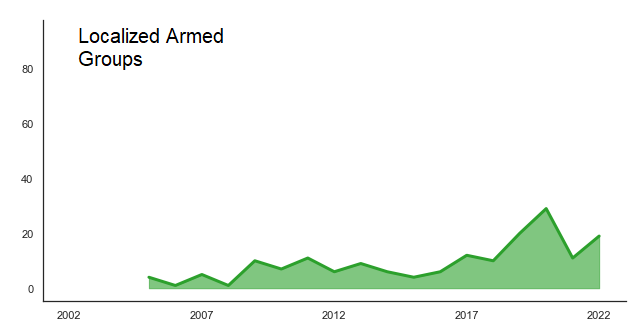


Figure 4. References to Actors of the Conflict in the documents (Part2) [Own Elaboration]

1. ***Recruitment and use across the territory***

The recruitment and use of minors has spread across various regions in Colombia, as depicted in Figure 5, which illustrates the municipalities mentioned in reports indicating detected risks. The node size reflects the number of related documents from the Ombudsperson’s Office. Despite the office’s focus on preventing international humanitarian law violations, the data reveals an ongoing and persistent recruitment issue unaffected by the provided warnings. While the expansion of areas mapped with illegal group’s presence can be a partial result of the increase of territory covered by the SAT’s team, recruitment remains prevalent throughout the conflict and transitional periods.

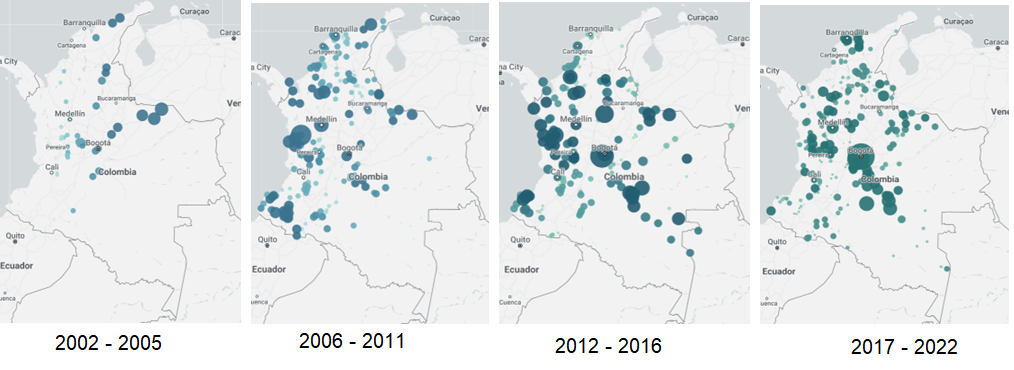


Figure 5. Geographic distribution of Early Warnings mentioning recruitment and use of NNAJ (Periods) [Own Elaboration]

Historically, the peripheral regions have endured most of the armed conflict in Colombia. Peripheral regions experience both direct and structural violence. However, Figure 6 demonstrates that armed groups have increasingly utilized minors in populated areas, especially in the central regions, where cities are situated. The urban expansion of child recruitment suggests the diversification of groups and/or changes in recruitment strategies. Therefore, it was crucial to investigate whether the interests and tactics of these groups have shifted following the power redistribution resulting from FARC’s demobilization process and the territorial disputes and influences among Strongholds, Dissidents, and Localized groups that emerged in the wake of the implementation of the peace process.

Despite a decrease in the number of released documents during the pandemic, the post-conflict periods 2006-2011 and 2017-2022 (see Figure 5) demonstrate an escalation in the recruitment and use of minors. The loss of manpower, reconfigurations resulting from DDR processes, and the emergence of smaller groups further increase the risks faced by teenagers and young adults, particularly in impoverished and uncertain contexts like those exacerbated by COVID-19. The rise of Localized and Stronghold groups, also stemming from power reconfigurations following peace agreements, aligns with the fragmentation of child use phenomena nationwide and the broader Latin American trend during periods of transition to gang violence.

The geographic distribution of groups across Colombia, as presented in Figure 6, demonstrates that peace accords and negotiations, even when they acknowledge and condemn child recruitment and use, do not necessarily translate to a decrease in the practice. These findings indicate the complexity of the fights that ensnare children as well as the difficulty in ending such fights. Figure 6 illustrates the geographical distribution of Early Warnings related to child recruitment and use by various armed actors during the Colombian conflict and post-conflict phases. It is important to note that a single warning document may mention multiple groups, so the size of the nodes provides a better understanding of the groups utilizing minors rather than the spatial coverage on the map.

The Paramilitary, Stronghold and Localized armed groups have a similar geographical distribution pattern with different node sizes that respond to the nature of their tactics and the scale of operations. These three maps support the claims of a transformation and adaptation of Paramilitary groups across the Colombian armed conflict and transitional justice processes, as well as a possible coexistence and collaboration between the remaining Strongholds and emerging Localized groups.

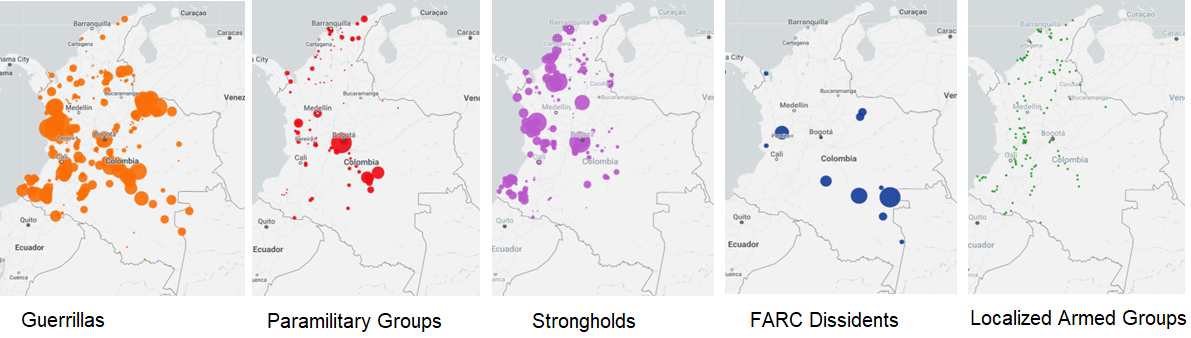


Figure 6. Geographic distribution of Early Warnings mentioning recruitment and use of NNAJ (Actors) [Own Elaboration]

1. ***Strategies by Actor***

Methodologically, the identification of recruitment and use strategies for NNAJ involved a semi-automatic process. Relevant segments mentioning NNAJ, recruitment and use each were extracted. Keywords related to strategies were identified. A tagging system was developed and then refined on the Ombudsperson’s Office archive. Table 1 presents the 12 main strategies detected in the documents, the number of documents mentioning each, and some specific examples. Out of 796 documents on recruitment and use, 279 (35%) did not mention strategies. Two key elements are important for the analysis. First, the Colombian case presents several regional particularities, hence, even within the same group (especially for Guerrillas and Paramilitaries) their regional operations adapt to cultural and geographical contexts. Second, multiple strategies can coexist, this means that while in one place of the country girls are being recruited for non-combat activities, girl teenagers can be recruited as a vehicle to involve and recruit boy teenagers in another region. Additionally, these strategies adapt to the time and context the conflict is taking place and are the ones identified over two decades. In consequence, some are the mutation of others, for example, *recruitment family quota*, which was vastly implemented by guerrillas in the late 1900’s and beginning of the 00´s is not a common practice as *gifts, promises and handouts* are nowadays. It is important to highlight that strategies for recruitment adapt to territory, culture and time. Hence, the terms in Table 1 align with the transformation of the Colombian conflict and the emerging communication and status-quo norms like using technology to reach or attract younger generations.

 Table 1. Total of documents mentioning recruitment strategies and use of children [Own Elaboration].



The strategies mentioned in Table 1 correspond to the ones employed by all group categories and across the four delimited periods. Networks were modelled to examine influential nodes or entities (Departments, Actors, and Strategies) and the links between them following the methodology explained in the section above. A connection between two nodes is established in the network if the two entities coexist in the same document. Four networks resulted from this analysis that correspond to the periods delimited in the chapter. Examination of the Colombian conflict and post-conflict confirmed the transformation and complexity of the phenomenon. Node types are represented color-coded: Departments (purple), Strategies (orange), and Actors (green). Node size indicates influence, with larger nodes having a greater impact. Considering that the early years of SAT operations had a limited presence across the country, as well as a more limited mandate, focus is placed on period-specific strategies rather than reported cases, actors, or locations. Paramilitaries were prominent prior to demobilization under Justice & Peace (2005), exhibiting diverse strategies (6 out of 12).

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Figure 7 Network of Actors, Departments, and Strategies of Recruitment and Use (Justice & Peace 2001 - 2005) [Own Elaboration]

In the period after Justice & Peace and before negotiations with FARC, warning documents revealed increased group and strategy diversity, including gender-based violence targeting girls, drug consumption induction, and discreet recruitment through recreational activities and persuasion. Some conflict zones, primarily peripheral rural areas (e.g., Amazon and Pacific regions), were highlighted. Guerrillas played a significant role in recruitment strategies but were not the sole actors, insofar as Paramilitaries, Strongholds, and Localized armed groups engaged in recruitment and use as well (Figure 8).

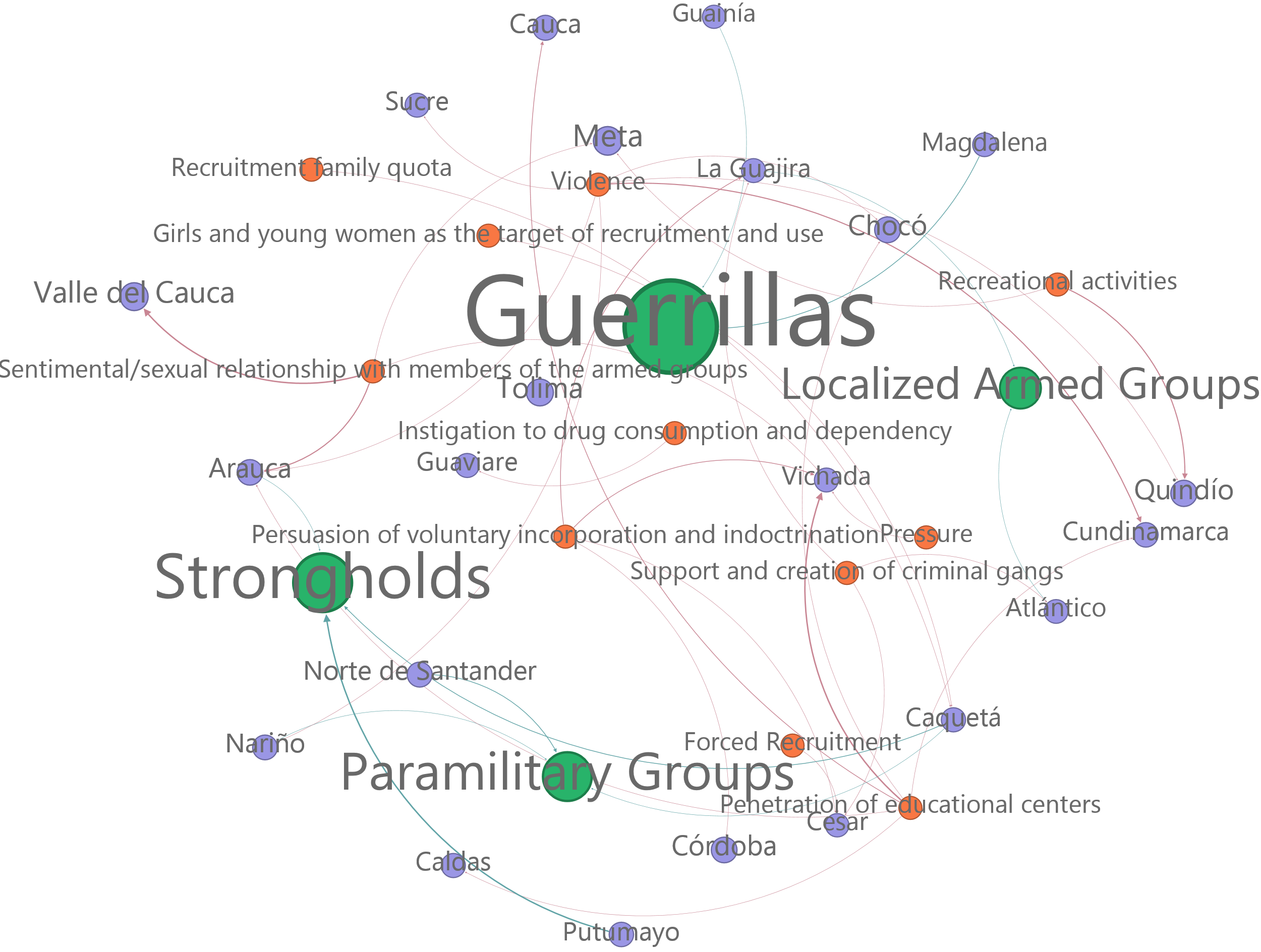


Figure 8 Network of Actors, Departments, and Strategies of Recruitment and Use (Conflict 2006 - 2011) [Own Elaboration]

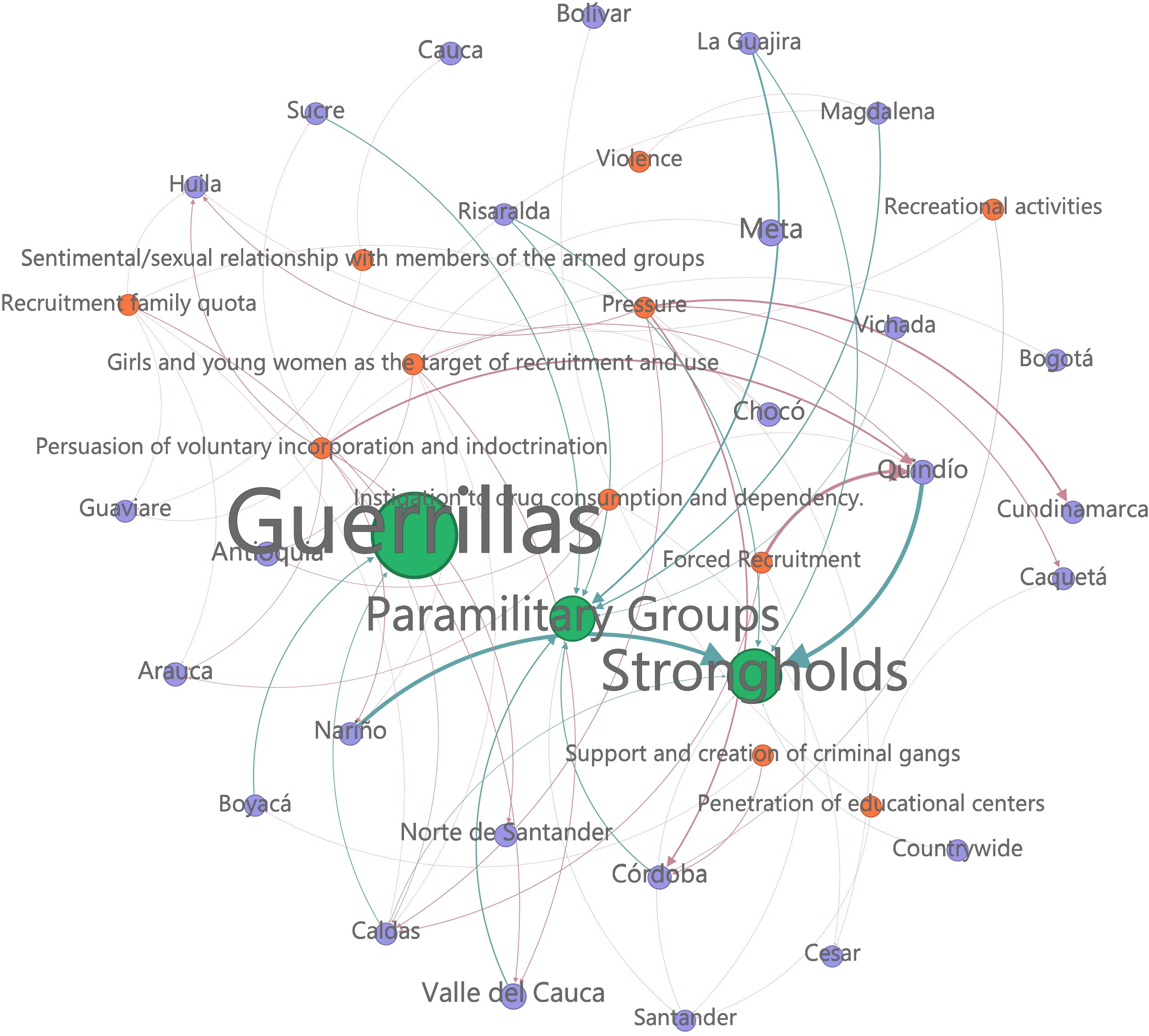


Figure 9 Network of Actors, Departments, and Strategies of Recruitment and Use (Peace Negotiations 2012 - 2016) [Own Elaboration]

The network analysis (Figures 7 to 10) demonstrates the persistent nature of recruitment and child use across periods, territories, and group categories. Complexity increased with new strategies, new actors, and newly affected departments. The 2012-2016 period introduced strategies such as access to educational centers by means of violence, pressure, or attempts to indoctrination (Figure 9). Stronghold groups gained significance, driven by economic interests in illegal goods trafficking while maintaining child use to fulfill their goals. The avoidance by Stronghold groups of confrontation with legal forces may explain their presence in more departments and intermediate cities and capitals. Activity intensified in departments such as Risaralda, Santander, and Bogota (Figure 10), indicating an urbanization of the armed group dynamics and a shift toward use-related strategies (i.e., offering money and protection) rather than recruitment (i.e., recruitment as family quota).

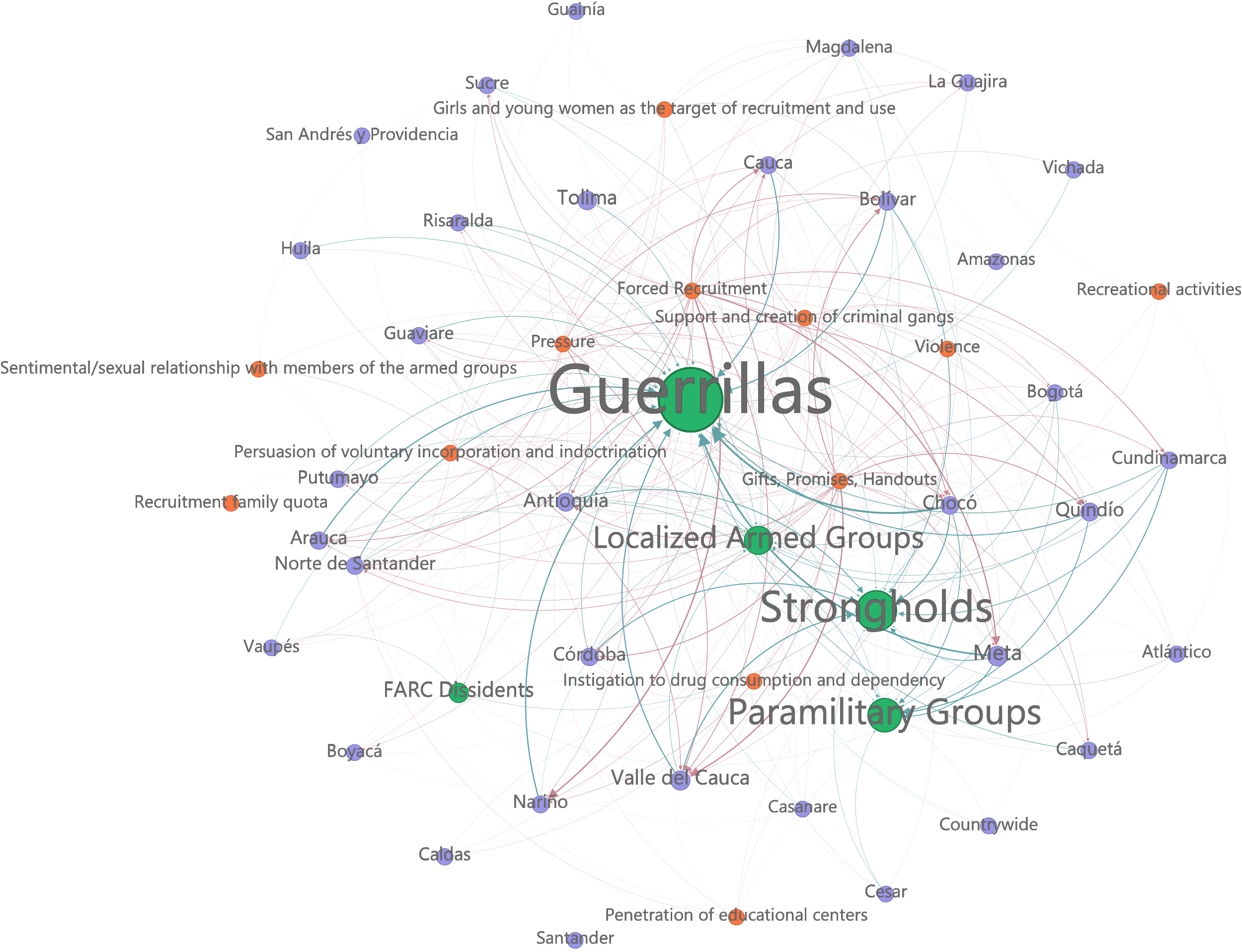


Figure 10 Network of Actors, Departments, and Strategies of Recruitment and Use (post-Agreement 2017 - 2022) [Own Elaboration]

The network for the post-agreement period (Figure 10) includes the most nodes (51) and connections (251). Low-key strategies, such as “Gifts, Promises, Handouts” remained prevalent and became more manipulative and covert. Given the high inequality rates in Colombia – the country has a 54.2 value on the Gini Index – youth are susceptible to joining illegal armed groups (Cardeli et al., 2022a, p. 318) particularly Localized groups employing low-key strategies (Figure 10) that may pass as voluntary enrollment for some actors like the Police and the Army. Minors starting as messengers or drug transporters often progress to combatant roles in their early adulthood or even during their late teenage years if they do not lose their lives before reaching adulthood. These dynamics enable groups to gain influence in urban areas and exert power over public policy decisions without physically controlling territory as guerrillas had done in the past century, but rather by exercising control socially and politically over the civil population. Several results of the Localized groups end up being catalogued as urban insecurity.

1. **Discussion**

Our discussion comprises two main sections: theoretical insights derived from analyzed data, challenges identified, recommended pathways for prevention strategies, and practical proposals for institutions and international agencies/donors. This offers a comprehensive perspective for researchers and stakeholders addressing prevention and non-recurrence in post-conflict settings.

The significance of classifying armed groups is crucial, particularly in discerning forces mobilized to combat threats to civil population security. However, we underscore the importance of considering the flip side: how the classification, or outdated scope, induces uncertainty for victims and public servants implementing policies without national consensus on victim identification and entitlements. For instance, in some cases, Colombia’s Victims’ Unit has only registered cases in the Unique Registry of Victims (RUV) if guerrillas or paramilitaries are responsible (Ferreri Nápoli, 2022, p. 14). It is crucial to recognize human rights violations, analyze group interests, and acknowledge that victims' suffering occurs independently from the perpetrator. The type of perpetrator alone cannot determine the cognisability of injury. To put victims at the center and to find ways to improve guarantees for the enjoyment of human rights for all populations is vital and entails the moral responsibility to acknowledge the diverse needs to foster reconciliation in post-conflict realities (María Paula Espejo, 2023, p. 57).

As discussed in the results section, localized groups coexist with strongholds and international criminal organizations which in turn contributes to increased insecurity and violence in Latin America. This phenomenon, observed in Colombia, shares comparative similarities with Central American gangs (Garbarino, Governale, and Nesi, 2020b, p. 15; Nagle, 2008b, p. 10). In Colombia, the blurred lines between armed groups, organized crime, and international crime underscore an acute need to reassess prevention, particularly focusing on teenagers to break violence cycles. This is a central theme of how children’s fights are not only armed fights.

To address the issue of younger generations becoming cannon fodder, prevention strategies must involve teenagers in the design and implementation process. Recognizing teenagers' agency, needs, and interests is paramount. Co-designing strategies with survivors, informed by academia and social organizations, can create genuinely engaging and feasible programs. We note similarities with work by Kirsten Fisher in northern Uganda and Myriam Denov in Rwanda (as published in this volume) when it comes to the need for inclusivity. We highlight the need for context-specific strategies that align with ecological systems (Cardeli et al., 2022b, p. 318). Addressing the issue locally, tailoring to regional nuances, and adopting an intersectional approach can yield positive results.

What about insights gleaned from the Ombudsperson Office’s endeavours? Despite scrutinizing early warning data, our access to follow-up reports highlighted challenges in securing timely institutional responses preceding the forewarned scenarios. A notable deficiency in institutional communication, coordination, and collaboration arises. We advocate for the incorporation of measures to augment institutional processes and communication within prevention strategies. Another imperative lesson involves a paradigm shift in the methodological approach, signifying that the Ombudsperson’s Office can further benefit from its national presence by adopting more participatory methodologies such as the Everyday Peacebuilding Indicators.

Research has established that urban violence and insecurity significantly influence community perceptions of everyday peace indicators (Firchow, 2018b, p. 10). Post-conflict environments amplify the importance of daily life, prompting a reassessment of how peace manifests among various demographics, including minors. This shift in perspective and methodology necessitates collaboration with partners open to transformative approaches. International donors should carefully consider the projects they support so as to ensure alignment with community needs and realities. Additionally, addressing funding competition, which often inhibits information sharing between institutions and NGOs (Firchow, 2018b, 21), is crucial to effectively address targeted population needs and advance efforts to reduce child recruitment and use in conflict contexts.

1. **Conclusions**

In summary, the timeline, geographical distribution, and strategies in Early Warning documents highlight a transformation in how Colombia approaches post-conflict and intends to build a more sustainable peace, as the latest 2016 Peace Accord promotes. Moreover, the findings suggest the country also has the opportunity to grant more attention and resources to the criminal context that has systematically reshaped violence and impeded an effective transition to peace and non-recurrence guarantees. Groups have shifted from "hard" recruitment like abduction to "soft" tactics, promising protection, gifts, and salaries unlikely in legal contexts, particularly for vulnerable minors.

A notable factor is the discreet growth of Localized armed groups, coinciding with the introduction of "soft" recruitment strategies, that profit on structural violence conditions to avoid raising attention from the Public Force to reach youth in urban contexts and expand the presence and influence of illegal groups across the national territory as shown in Figure 10. These groups, dispersed across the country, lack substantial weaponry, blend with civilians to avoid confrontation, operate independently, and are motivated by socio-political influence. Collaboration with Strongholds groups amplifies the influence of Localized groups.

Data analysis reveals a major challenge in prevention mechanisms by the Ombudsperson’s Office. Despite issuing warnings for two decades, success is rather limited. A comprehensive analysis of recommendations is hindered by inconclusive data due to changes in form and concepts. Yet, our data indicate Strongholds and Localized groups pose a significant threat, requiring a unified institutional and legal approach for prevention, intervention, and support of affected youth. Effective strategies must closely consider cultural and social contexts, draw lessons from other Latin American countries, and prioritize the perspectives of recruited children over focusing solely on involved groups (see also Bodineau in this volume). Updating group classifications or the legal guarantees for truth and reparation for victims regardless of the group remains crucial.

In conclusion, our proposal advocates to adopt inclusive and participatory methodologies so as to achieve a deeper understanding of the entangled relationships between minors and violence. This understanding is pivotal to address the needs of minors, and sensitize group classifications to current challenges. This approach promises significant contributions to prevent the illicit use of children and to propound post-conflict reconstruction. Implementing this shift requires acknowledging practical challenges and advocating further research on prevention strategies tailored to adolescents hailing from complex family backgrounds.

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1. There has been an ongoing debate around SAT’s warnings that get constantly challenged by the Defense sector that advocates several groups are organized crime or non-related to the armed conflict. This creates a gray zone because victims of these groups are not recognized as such and are not entitled to reparation despite being recruited, displaced, or threatened by their socio-political activity, among others. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Former “Informes de Riesgo”, Risk Reports in English. The “Informes de Seguimiento” are what the office called Notas de Seguimiento (Follow-up notes) in the early years of the System. The change in names and acronyms for the reports answers an institutional renewal process to meet the legal standards of both national and international human rights protection guidelines and compromises acquired over the years on human rights protection. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Defined as: "Structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences established in accordance with the Palermo Convention, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit”. See (Colombian Ministry of Defense 2016, 7) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Defined as: "Those who, under the direction of a responsible command, exercise such control over a territory as to enable them to conduct sustained and concerted military operations". See (Colombian Ministry of Defense 2016, 5) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Five confidential documents were excluded from the present analysis. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. A "network" is a mathematical or computational representation of complex systems where individual components, termed nodes, are interconnected by relationships, named edges or links. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See (Defensoría del Pueblo 2022, 1) The document addresses the national risk for social leaders and civil population during the national elections for Congress and President in 2022. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)