

Forced displacement in Colombia: magnitude and causes

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The intensification of civil conflicts during the 1990s resulted in a substantial increase in the number of civilian victims. Reasons for the rise of these wars include unresolved conflicts, on-going conflicts since the end of World War II, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the subsequent proliferation of armaments, and the strengthening of the illegal drug trade. All contributed to an increase in civil conflicts and intrastate wars during the 1990s. This was accompanied by an increase in the average duration of conflict: in 1947, the average conflict lasted approximately two years; by 1999 this had gone up to 15 years.¹

In contrast to interstate conflicts, whose victims mostly are members of the armed forces, victims in intrastate conflicts are mainly civilians. The civilian population is not only recruited by the rebel forces, but also attacked in order to eliminate civilian leaders, frighten civilians, widen rebels' area of influence, evacuate their opponents from a specific area, and take over the population's assets. Thus, violence against civilians is not a random and unfortunate consequence of war. Instead, it is a deliberate strategy of war. Consequently, the percentage of civilian casualties of war has increased, from ten percent at the beginning of the twentieth century, to 90 percent by 1990. Increased threats and attacks on civilians have resulted in a constantly rising tendency in the number of refugees and displaced peoples since the end of the Second World War. Since 1990, the number of displaced people has fluctuated around 25 million and the number of refugees around 13 million.²

The objective of this article is to analyze population displacement in Colombia. The first section examines the economic literature on the dynamics of forced migration and the close relation it holds with the war strategies adopted by armed groups, whether government or rebel forces. The second section deals with the evolution and causes of forced displacement in Colombia. The third section concludes.

The civilian population in civil conflicts

In intrastate violent conflict armed groups attack civilians as part of their war-fighting strategy. Attacks come from insurgent violence, state violence, and the interaction between the two. State violence against civilian populations has been frequent in some African countries, creating high refugee flows, while attacks on civilians by insurgent groups are mainly found in Latin America, generating forced migrations within a country's borders.³

Armed groups attack civilians for a variety of reasons. The exercise of territorial control is among them. Some areas are attractive for their economic wealth, for example for the cases of illicit crops, the existence of valuable

natural resource reserves, such as mining or oil resources, or if they are considered potential routes for transporting illegal drugs or weapons with ease. Other regions are important for rebel forces as part of their war strategy and the need to expand territorial strongholds. Aggression against civilians allows insurgents to take over valuable assets to finance their war operations or for their members' personal gain. Furthermore, they allow insurgents to strengthen territorial supremacy by driving possible opponents from the region, avoiding civilian resistance, weakening social networks, or separating civilians from rebel groups. Rebel groups frighten the population by murdering civic leaders and threatening the population at large. This prevents the creation of opposition groups to gain influence outside the battlefield, all at a low cost. For all these reasons, violence toward the population is not a byproduct of war. It is a deliberate strategy of war.⁴

To achieve their objectives, selective murders, massacres, death threats, forced recruitment, forced disappearances, and the destruction of property are some forms of attacks carried out by rebel forces to frighten civilians. Such attacks force the population to migrate to protect itself, and this creates flows of refugees and displaced people. The close relation between civil war and forced migration either within a country's borders (displaced population) or outside its borders (refugees) has been widely documented in a series of important studies. They have focused primarily on establishing the relation between internal conflict and the flow of refugees to other countries. Studies that evaluate migration data within a country, for example for Colombia, Guatemala, and Indonesia, have examined the relation between actions carried out by armed rebels and forced displacement. All confirm that the main reason for forced migration lies in the direct and indiscriminate attacks of which civilians are the victims.⁵

Forced displacement in Colombia

Colombia faced surges of violence for most of the twentieth century. The first half of that century was characterized by the struggle for control of political institutions, land, and resources, while the emergence of drug-trafficking and the weakening of the judicial system were important additional conflict determinants during the second half. These conflicts have exerted a progressively heavier toll on civilians. In particular, two conflicts that arose during the second half of the twentieth century targeted and inflicted significant losses on civilians. The first emerged from the

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political struggle between the two traditional and major political parties in Colombia, the Liberals and the Conservatives. The national conflict extended to Colombia's regions and fueled traditional confrontations for land and economic resources. After the assassination of a major political leader of the Liberal Party in 1948, the period known as *La Violencia* intensified. Homicide rates soared throughout this period. To end the violence, a power-sharing arrangement between the parties was negotiated in 1958. This paved the way for a peace deal and eased violence significantly, but many of the deep causes of the conflict persisted.⁶

Second, during the early 1960s, three left-wing guerrilla groups — the FARC, ELN, and ERP — emerged in the southern regions of the country. Although the objective of these groups was to seize power, their initial activities were restricted to isolated regions and consisted of sporadic attacks on government forces and occupation of rural towns and lands.⁷ Guerrilla violence intensified and expanded throughout Colombia in the late 1970 and early 1980s with the appearance of illegal drug cultivation and trade. The drug trade provided massive monetary resources to finance rebel groups. Besides funding these groups, the drug-trade instigated the creation of right-wing paramilitary groups by drug-barons and landowners. Their main purpose was to defend themselves from guerrilla aggression and to contest their territorial control over certain regions. The emergence of paramilitary groups, coupled with resources from the illegal drug trade, intensified the Colombian conflict. This resulted in increasing attacks on the civilian population.⁸

The worsening conditions led to a tripling of homicide between 1970 and 1991. The origins of today's violence are manifold and complex: the illicit drug trade, a weakening of the legal system, the appearance of armed rebels, poverty, inequality, and decades of armed conflict are among the causes.⁹ The impact of violence differs between urban and rural areas. While urban areas face high homicide rates, rural areas are subject to armed confrontations, massacres, attacks by armed rebels, and forced displacement. Kidnappings, massacres, selective murders, forced recruitment, and land mines, among others, are among the aggressions civilians face. In 2001, the number of kidnappings reached three thousand people, one of the highest in the world. By 2006, this had significantly decreased to 687 reported cases from 28 of Colombia's 32 administrative departments. The number of massacres also decreased: in 2006 only 37 cases were reported with 193 associated deaths. Active or abandoned land mines, the use of which has yet to end in Colombia, caused 1,100 victims in 1,964 incidents, a 14 percent increase from 2005.¹⁰

Forced displacement in Colombia: magnitude and geographic expansion

Forced displacement, the most dramatic victimization of civilians has reached high levels. According to the Registry for Displaced Populations (RUPD), by 31 March 2008, the displaced population numbered 2,452,152 people.¹¹ The objective of RUPD is to legally recognize displaced households and to quantify the demand for aid. The

registry is a demand-driven instrument, whereby displaced households must approach government offices to declare, under oath, the circumstances of their displacement. After a victim makes a declaration, government officials validate whether it is truthful and, if so, the legal status to be granted the members of the displaced household. About 30 percent of the displaced population is believed not to be registered, so that the total number of displaced people may number over 3.5 million, or 7.8 percent of the national population.¹²

Figure 1 shows the displacement trend, beginning in 1999, the year in which the RUPD was adopted. The figure illustrates displacements, both according to official records and according to CODHES, a nongovernmental organization. Both trend lines indicate a strong increase in forced migration between 1999 and 2002 when Colombia lived through a period of heavy conflict. After 2002, forced displacement decreased, yet an average of 266,635 people still migrated involuntarily each year, the equivalent of a medium-sized city in Colombia. Moreover, even when peace negotiations with paramilitary groups moved forward and the intensity of the conflict diminished, more than half of all forced migrations between 1999 and 2007 fell in the period of between 2003 and 2007. This indicates that a decrease in conflict does not necessarily imply an immediate reduction of forced displacement.

The magnitude of forced migration is revealed when compared with international indices. For 2008, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center for example estimates total worldwide internal population displacement at approximately 24.5 million people. Of those 14.3 percent are found in Colombia, second only to Sudan.¹³ This ranking persists independently of the data source used.

The number of people displaced is not only large; it also has steadily expanded across the country. By 2002, the number of municipalities affected by out-placement (expelled residents), had risen to 949 to affect more than 90 percent of the country's municipalities. The expansion of displacement is shown in the two panels of Figure 2 that indicate which municipalities either expelled or received displaced populations between 1999 and 2008. (Municipalities left blank neither expelled nor received displaced populations. Only a few municipalities did not expel or receive displaced

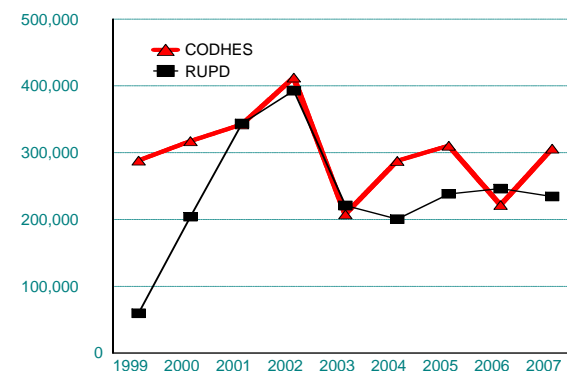


Figure 1: Number of displaced people in Colombia.
Source: Acción Social and CODHES.

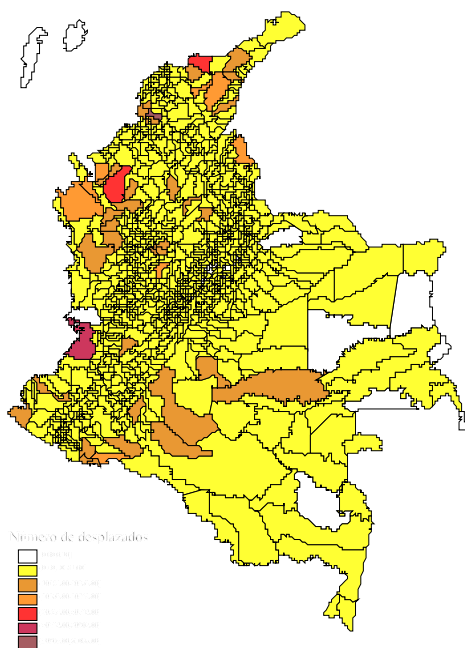


Figure 2a: Geographic distribution of displacement. Municipalities that expelled populations: 1999-2008. Source: Ibáñez and Velásquez (2008).

with 77.5 percent, and Riosucio (Chocó) with 76.1 percent. Moreover, ten percent of Colombia's municipalities have lost close to one-fourth of their population as a direct consequence of forced displacement. Pressure indicators, which calculate the arrival of displaced populations in relation to the native population, likewise indicate the difficulties faced by mid-sized cities in absorbing large migration flows. The pressure indicators for selected department capitals demonstrate this: Mocoa (Putumayo) 33.3 percent, Quibdó (Chocó), 26.4 percent, Sincelejo (Sucre) 24.6 percent, Florencia (Caquetá) 20.3 percent, and San José (Guaviare) 18.5 percent. For the eight years to 2007, all of these municipalities, which already have difficulties attending to their own population's needs, have received about one person per year for every five locals. Even though municipalities of course deal with ordinary, voluntary population movements, those that move involuntarily face extremely difficult conditions due to the victimization process described earlier, such as large asset losses, poor conditions

populations.) As may be seen, the phenomenon is not confined to remote or isolated municipalities; to the contrary, it extends throughout the whole of Colombia.

Although displacement seems to affect all of the country's municipalities, impact is more substantial in some regions than in others. When the intensity of displacement is calculated, that is, the percentage of the displaced population in relation to total population, one finds that some municipalities have lost more than half of their population. Some of the most dramatic examples are Bojayá (Chocó) with an intensity of 94.7 percent, Cocorná (Antioquia) with 93.8 percent, El Tarra (Norte de Santander) with 82.4 percent, Peque (Antioquia)

in the receiving municipalities, and the sheer difficulty of participating in the labor markets. This constitutes a humanitarian emergency that cannot be solved using the assigned resources.

*Immediate and underlying causes of displacement*¹⁴

Given their constant attacks on civilians, the main parties responsible for the population displacement in Colombia are guerilla and paramilitary groups. The worsening conflict between them has led both to adopt ever harsher measures of attack. Aside from facilitating territory control, asset appropriation, and weakening of social networks, this also forces the population to seek refuge in other municipalities. Data by Social Action reveals that when the perpetrator is reported, 45.8 percent of the time guerilla are responsible for the displacement; in 21.8 percent of the cases it is paramilitary groups, and 1.1 percent for state forces (with the remainder for other groups).¹⁵

Population displacement is provoked by any of the following situations: attacks by armed groups, indiscriminate violence, or the mere presence of armed groups. After a direct attack, civilians are displaced, but to avoid possible victimization, preventive displacement occurs as well. Table 1 lists various types of attacks civilians face: the multiplicity of attacks on the population is chilling. The main migration triggers are threats (54.5 percent), homicide or homicide attempts (53.4), indiscriminate violence (39.1), confrontations between armed groups (36), eviction notices (29.6), and massacres (21.1). Displaced populations suffer from double

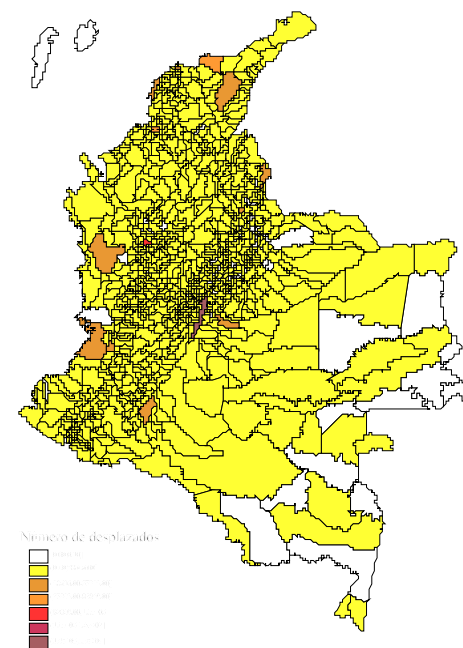


Figure 2b: Geographic distribution of displacement. Municipalities that received populations: 1999-2008. Source: Ibáñez and Velásquez (2008).

Table 1: Motive for displacement*

Variables	Percentage of households
Direct threats	54.5
Homicide attempt	18.9
Homicide	34.5
Disappearance or torture	14.4
Forced recruitment	17.3
Massacres	21.1
Kidnapping	7.6
Armed confrontations	36.0
Indiscriminate violence	39.1
Eviction notice	29.6

Source: Ibáñez and Velásquez (2008).

Note: * Percentages do not add up to 100 percent as one family may be the victim of several events.

victimization: they are subject to crimes against humanity and they are forced into a condition of displacement.

Migration strategies for displaced populations in Colombia are specific to the Colombian conflict. Ordinarily, in countries where forced migration occurs, populations generally move in massive numbers and settle in refugee camps. This happens after confrontations between rebel groups and armed forces, or after massive and direct attacks on local communities. Lack of protection by official armed forces, or their participation in the events, generates this mass migration toward other countries in search of protection.¹⁶ The situation in Colombia is very different. For the most part, people migrate individually, and few move

outside the country's borders. Figure 3 illustrates the evolution of individual and mass displacement between 1999 and 2007.¹⁷ Close to 80 percent of displacement in Colombia is individual. The highest levels of mass displacement were reported from 2000 to 2002, when attacks on and combat in municipalities were common. Individual displacement has been predominant and rising since then.

Regardless of the clear relation between the presence of armed groups, violence, and forced displacement, the underlying causes for forced migration in Colombia are difficult to identify. The last incident in a chain of events is generally the immediate trigger that forces a decision to finally flee in search of refuge. However, the origins of forced displacement can be found in the dynamics of the Colombian conflict. The following paragraphs describe some of the hypotheses on displacement in Colombia that recurrently appear in the literature.

Land disputes and the illegal takeover of lands are considered underlying causes of forced displacement. Illegal occupation of land is one of the crucial strategies of war used to clear territories of possible opponents, increase territorial control, and take over valuable land. Displacement is more intense in municipalities with high degree of informality regarding land ownership. This is particularly so in regions that are contested by armed rebels and where these groups are trying to consolidate their supremacy. These conditions generate a high displacement index among small rural

landowners, and abandoned lands are calculated to range from 1.7 to 4 million acres.¹⁸

Forced displacement also occurs where illicit crops and drug trafficking are found. The growth of illicit crops adds pressure on land and displacement because of the acquisition of lands for cocaine and poppy crops and also because of the importance of transport routes for drugs. Illicit crops' aerial

fumigation leads to asset destruction for farmers, directly affecting their income, and increases confrontations as well. The increase in aerial fumigation in the last few years has been the cause of an important migration wave. According to CODHES, 36,000 people have migrated for this reason since 1998. An estimated 13,153 people migrated during 1999 from the cocaine regions and war zones in Guaviare, Meta, Caquetá, and Putumayo. This number rises to 20,000 if interdepartmental migration is included, and to 30,000 or 40,000 if cocaine-leaf farmers and settlers are added.¹⁹

In some regions, a close relation between drug dealing and displacement is observed. Land acquisition by drug traffickers as a means to launder money generates land speculation, reduces the state's purchasing power, and impedes possibilities of negotiation between peasants and landowners. In addition, when purchasing land, drug dealers sometimes inherit social conflicts that are then dealt with by creating self-defense groups and lead to an increase in conflict, and of course displacement.²⁰

Population expulsion as a strategy of war is also a way to impede civil resistance movements, weaken social networks, and intimidate the population in order to exercise more control. Attacks on the population weaken support by the opposition and avoid civil uprisings: 65 percent of displaced people were active members of community organizations, and slightly over 11 percent participated in union or political organization in their home towns. People with strong social networks are more likely to suffer an attack by armed rebels.²¹

Finally, families living in rural areas may involuntarily migrate in order to avoid forced recruitment of their children by armed rebels. Children as young as eight have been recruited as soldiers for armed rebel groups in Colombia. For example, after an armed confrontation in October 2001, Colombian military forces discovered that close to 43 percent of guerrilla members killed in combat and 41 percent of captured members were younger than 18 years of age. UNICEF estimates indicate that close

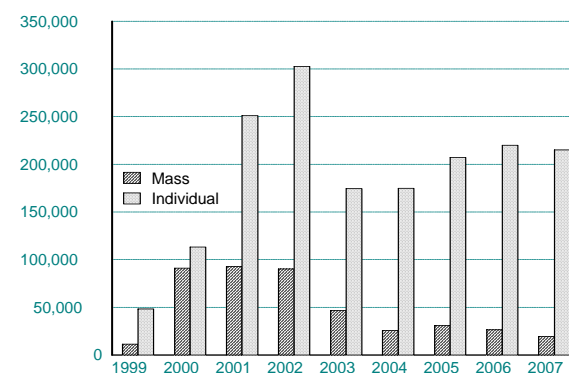


Figure 3: Mass vs. individual displacement. Source: Acción Social (RUPD).

to 14,000 minors have been recruited by rebel groups as soldiers.²²

Conclusions

The data presented in this article indicate that forced displacement in Colombia is a humanitarian emergency. Levels of forced displacement in Colombia are high, even in comparison to other countries that suffer from a similar situation. The profile of the displaced population indicates their condition both as victims of displacement and victims of violence. However, contrary to the situation in many other countries, forced displacement is not generated by state organs but by nonstate armed rebel groups. In addition, displacement in Colombia is generally individual and victims disperse within the country's borders, whereas in other countries victims participate in mass migrations and settle in refugee camps. The causes of forced displacement lie in the nature of armed conflict in Colombia. Institutional weakness, the weakening of social networks, the takeover of lands, and a desire to profit from natural resources in some areas are among the causes of forced displacement in Colombia. To achieve their war objectives, the targeting of civilians is part of the strategy of war adopted by armed rebel groups.

Notes

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1. Fearon and Laitin (2003).
2. Strategy of war: Azam and Hoeffler (2002); casualties: Cairns (1997); displaced persons: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre; see www.internal-displacement.org [accessed 28 March 2008]; also see Weiner (1993); Wood (1994); Davenport, *et al.* (2003); Lubkemann (2005); refugees: U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants; see www.refugees.org [accessed 28 March 2008].
3. Sources of attacks: Melander and Öberg (2006); Africa: Azam and Hoeffler (2002).
4. Separation: Hedmanm (2005); low cost: Lubkemann (2005); strategy of war: Ibáñez and Vélez (2008); Azam and Hoeffler (2002); Stanley (1987).
5. Important studies: Melander and Öberg (2006); Davenport, *et al.* (2003); Schmeidl (1997); Stanley (1987); Zolberg, *et al.* (1986); country studies: see Czaika and Kis-Katos (2007); Morrison and May (1994); Schultz (1971).

6. Regions: Oquist (1976); homicide rates: Brauer and Gomez-Sorzano (2004); Brauer, *et al.* (2004).
7. Southern regions: Brauer, *et al.* (2004); isolated activities: Echeverry, *et al.* (2001).
8. Gaviria (2000); Thoumi (2002).
9. Vélez (2002); Sánchez and Núñez (2001); Gaviria (2000).
10. Kidnappings, 2001: see www.policia.gov.co [accessed 16 March 2008]; kidnappings, massacres, land mines, 2006: see www.derechoshumanos.gov.co [accessed 22 April 2008].
11. Law 387 of 1997 defines an internally displaced person as “anyone who has been forced to migrate within the national boundaries, living outside her residence or her habitual economic activities because either her life, her physical integrity, or her freedom have been either violated or threatened by situations such as armed conflict, generalized violence, violations to human rights, and any other situation that may alter public order.”
12. Ibáñez and Velásquez (2006).
13. See www.internal-displacement.org [accessed 22 April 2008].
14. This section is based on the work by Ibáñez and Vélez (2008) "Civil Conflict and Forced Migration: The Micro Determinants and Welfare Losses of Displacement in Colombia" and Ibáñez and Querubín (2004) "Access to land and forced displacement in Colombia"
15. See www.acciónsocial.gov.co [accessed 21 April 2008].
16. Moore and Shellman (2006).
17. According to the official definition, a massive displacement occurs when a group of 50 or more people or 10 or more homes migrate simultaneously.
18. Underlying causes: Reyes and Bejarano (1998); Kay (2007); informal land ownership: Ibáñez (2008); displacement index and abandoned acreage: PMA (2001).
19. Puyana (1999). A more recent quantification is not available since forced displacement caused by the eradication of illegal crops is not included in Law 387 of 1997.

20. Pérez (2002); Reyes (1997). Pérez (2002) indicates that pressure on land and subsequent conflicts occur in areas where strategic resources are found, not only illicit crops, but also coal, oil, and emeralds, creating situations of violence and speculation.

21. Avoid civil uprising: Henao (1998); active in community organizations: Lozano and Osorio (1999); strong social networks: Engel and Ibáñez (2007).

22. Child recruitment: Salazar (2001); killed/captured: USCR (2003); UNICEF: www.unicef.es [accessed 6 May 2008].

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