

Editorial

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Conflict, Crime, and Violence in Colombia

Even by Latin American standards, Colombia is a violent country. It is also an exceptional laboratory for researchers interested in crime, conflict and more generally, in violence. Violence in Colombia is not a recent phenomenon: The country experienced six major civil wars during the course of the 19th century. A period of relative calm followed the bloodiest of these confrontations: “The War of the Thousand Days,” that lasted literally 1000 days (1899–1902), and resulted in the deaths of a large fraction of the population. In the late 1940s after the assassination of a liberal presidential candidate, partisan grievances flourished and a new civil war (known as “La Violencia”) began. It was ended by a power-sharing deal between the liberals and the conservatives in the late 1950s. By most accounts, the current conflict began in the mid 1960s, when two guerrilla organizations – Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) – (both are still active today) were formed. The largest of them, FARC, emerged from communist guerrillas dissatisfied by the exclusion of the left from the power-sharing deal, and from the remnants of liberal guerrillas that did not lay down their arms when the deal was brokered.

Add to this mixture cascades of drug money which makes an interesting cocktail of violence, crime and corruption. From the production and export of marijuana in the late 1970s the country began using coca paste imported from Bolivia and Peru to produce cocaine and ship it to the USA. When the infamous drug cartels were dismantled in the early 1990s, the guerrilla took over the drug business. This coincided with the interdiction by the US of the air bridge linking Bolivia and Peru to Colombia, which then started to grow its own coca bushes. The drug windfall empowered guerrillas who overtime became less politically motivated and much more violent. Meanwhile, formerly splintered private armies financed by landowners and drug lords to provide protection against the extortion by guerrillas, merged under an umbrella organization called the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC). These paramilitary militias also secured a share of the drug business and made the war a lot bloodier.

In short, after a discouraging record of violence catalyzed by the corrupting influence of narcotraffic, Colombia is today a country that suffers not only from a civil conflict but also from high levels of crime, forced displacement, kidnapping, and corruption. Social scientists interested in conflict have turned increasing

attention to Colombia and to the analysis of these phenomena. The academic output is now abundant. For instance, violence in Colombia has been the subject of other special issues, like the one published in 2012 by *Defence and Peace Economics* edited by Jurgen Brauer and Juan Vargas¹.

The issue we present here features eight outstanding papers that will provide the international reader with a good picture of the current issues related with conflict and crime in Colombia. Taken together, the contributions to the issue show that Colombia is an interesting case study for academics interested in studying conflict, crime and violence using sub-national variation and good quality data. The issue is also a mandatory source for policy makers and practitioners interested in these topics.

All the papers in this issue have benefited from the comments of external anonymous reviewers. This ensures that the issue is of very high quality despite being a special issue. In fact, many colleagues submitted papers which did not make the final cut. We also want to thank these authors for their interest in the issue.

The final product is a good mixture of papers, both in terms of topics and methodological approaches.

This heterogeneity does not come at the expense of quality and rigorous research. The paper by Thomas Flores, for instance, is a magnificent historical account of the evolution of the legal context on land tenure and distribution that ultimately created the grounds for the formation of the FARC, Colombia's largest and oldest guerrilla organization.

At the other end of the spectrum of causal inference, if one is to care about causality, perhaps for policy purposes, the issue features experimental contributions. Andrés Casas, Nathalie Méndez and Juan Camilo Cárdenas draw inference from an artifactual field experiment that recruited policy makers and policy recipients (both former victims and former victimizers of the conflict) to conclude that by and large society has redistributive preferences that favor victims over victimizers. This is of foremost importance as if such preferences were to prevail, society could not guarantee to provide to combatants material incentives to demobilize and reintegrate, and the conflict would be very difficult to end. Casas et al. call this paradox "The Hidden Face of Justice." Blanco and Vargas conduct a randomized controlled trial to inform via SMS whether internally displaced people are eligible to claim social benefits. They show that reducing the information gap between the government and the IDPs using this simple and cheap technology has potentially large benefits for the former victims.

¹ See the special issue vol. 23, no. 2, 2012 and Brauer and Vargas (2012) for an overview of the contents.

Other papers rely on carefully designed (non-experimental) identification strategies to shed light on important issues. This is the case in the papers by Nicolás Idrobo, Daniel Mejía and Ana Tribín; Natalia Lemus; and Darwin Cortes and Daniel Montolio. Using exogenous geo-ecological characteristics as an instrument, Idrobo et al. estimate the effect of the recent surge in gold mining on violence to conclude that legal and illegal mining is replacing coca growing as the main source of violence in the country. Lemus, in turn, looks at the effect of guerrilla and paramilitary attacks (that she instruments using government deterrence measures) on the recently introduced multidimensional poverty index, which is supposed to be a better characterization of the incidence of poverty than previously used indicators. Finally, Cortes and Montolio use historical instruments to make a horse race of the effect on local level conflict of investments in education versus investments in road infrastructure.

A third set of papers conduct empirical exercises to provide insights on issues where experimental or quasi-experimental methods are elusive. This does not make such papers less valuable or trustworthy as they exhibit plenty of rigor and careful empirical design. This is the case, for instance, Dario Romero's paper on the effect of violent crime on life satisfaction in the city of Bogotá. Dario's paper shows in a rather clever way that the highest impact on life satisfaction occurs when people perceive that crime is rampant, not when crime actually affects them. In turn, and using a very rich individual-level dataset that constitutes nearly a census of the stock of internally displaced individuals, Maria Alejandra Arias, Ana María Ibáñez and Pablo Querubín provide evidence of the most robust correlates of the desire of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return to their land or rather to stay in the reception areas.

In spite of this heterogeneity of methods and questions, all the papers have specific and important policy implications. Flores reminds us that understanding the original historical drivers of the current conflict, in particular the role of the inequality in the access and property of land, is a key element for finding resilient and long lasting solutions to the current conflict. Idrobo et al. call attention to the negative consequences of the recent mining boom, which the current government wants to rely on as the main engine of economic growth in the years to come. Lemus points out that conflict impoverishes rural households but not urban ones, and shows that this can be a long-lasting effect. By doing so she suggests that a successful peace process will have very large social dividends that add to the usually estimated economic dividends. Cortes and Montolio show that the provision of public goods helps reduce the incidence of conflict at the local level, but that not all types of public investments have the same impact on conflict. While improving the road infrastructure helps avoid conflict by reducing the cost of bringing the state close to the community, increasing human capital has

no effect as more educated individuals are more likely to migrate to conflict free (urban areas). These findings can inform how can local governments prioritize their budget conditional on their specific goals in the context of an ongoing internal conflict. The analysis of Casas et al. highlights the importance of designing reintegration programs that are shielded against the willingness of their managers and implementers, and perhaps against the preferences of the public as a whole. In the absence of such programs the “hidden face of justice” will most probably constitute an obstacle for resilient peace. Romero suggests that if one is to care about life satisfaction fighting crime should be complemented with policies that can resonate in improving the perception of security of citizens. Arias et al. help characterize the profile of households that are willing to return and, by contrast that of former victims who are more likely to prefer to stay in the place of arrival. Policy makers should adopt this information to help willing households to return and to avoid forcing unwilling households to do so. Lastly, the evidence provided by Blanco and Vargas was key in pushing the government of Colombia to scale up the SMS strategy throughout the whole country.

These papers and the solid package of policy implications that accompanies them could not have arrived at a better time. As this issue was being printed the Colombian government and the FARC guerrilla were in the middle of peace negotiations in Cuba. As editors, we are not only proud of this special issue, but also confident that these pages will help the negotiators discuss affairs of the foremost importance and, we vigorously hope, arrive at a better deal that will ignite a process that can conclude in sustainable peace. We hope not to have material to repeat this issue in the future, only perhaps in a history journal.

Reference

Brauer, J., Vargas, J.F., (2012), Colombia: Introduction to a Special Issue of Defence and Peace Economics, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 107–108.

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