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A study at the Universidad del Rosario researches the adoption of boys and girls reintegrated into society after serving in illegal armed groups.

# BOYS AND GIRLS OF STEEL

The Colombian Office of the Ombudsman reports that some 900 minors were reintegrated into society as part of the peace process with the forces. Meanwhile, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute says that it provided services to 5,708 children and adolescents between 1999 and 2015.



← In regular adoption processes, the older the children are, the more difficult they are to reintegrate; in these cases, however, the situation may be more complicated.

In 2016, the Observatory on Gender and Diversity at the Universidad del Rosario's School of Human Sciences initiated a research project to analyze and monitor the situation of children and adolescents reintegrated into society after involvement in the Colombian armed conflict. The study seeks to describe these children, understand the causes and processes of their involvement in the armed conflict, and understand the process of restoring their rights under the aegis of the State, particularly in relation to the process of adoption.

The first results of the research indicate that 71% of minors affiliated with armed groups are boys and 29% are girls, and that the girls stay in the groups longer.

According to the 20016 study carried out by the Ombudsman, UNICEF, and the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF), the primary motivations expressed by boys, girls, and adolescents for joining armed groups were their attraction to firearms and uniforms, promises of money, sexual abuse, and family violence. Nonetheless, much more information is needed to fully describe the characteristics of this population.

This research is of great importance to Colombia because it will show the country who these boys, girls, and adolescents were, those who experienced the war and all its suffering from the inside, and how lucky they were to come out of it.

"We were initially interested in researching girls involved in the conflict because we are a gender observatory," explains Danghelly Giovanna Zúñiga Reyes, professor in the Journalism and Public Opinion Program and director of the Observatory on Gender and Diversity. "Given the imprecision of

the data on the number and characteristics of the children, however, we decided to try to reconstruct the ICBF statistics and monitor follow-up on communications from the government and the armed groups," she says.

**71% OF THE MINORS INVOLVED WITH ARMED GROUPS ARE BOYS AND 29% ARE GIRLS. THE GIRLS STAY IN THE GROUPS LONGER**

#### THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Both voluntary and forced recruitment have continued, even though articles 13, 44, 45, 50, and 67 of the 1991 Constitution guarantee the rights of boys and girls in Colombia. In addition, Colombian Law 12 of 1991 ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, two years after it was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly.

In 1999, the Colombian Congress decreed the prohibition of military service for under-18s, along with recruitment models involving them in armed service. In doing so, Colombia ad-



← The children recruited by subversive groups may now be around 15-years-old or close to reaching adulthood.

opted the optional protocol of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which seeks to increase the minimum age for membership in the armed forces.

The Law on Childhood and Adolescents protects boys and girls between 0 and 12 years of age and adolescents between 12 and 18 years of age. Those between 14 and 18 years of age who commit illegal acts are covered by the System for Youth Criminal Responsibility.

**WHAT ABOUT ADOPTION**

“We want to know what is happening with the process of adoption. In regular adoptions, the older the children are, the more difficult they are to reintegrate. In these cases, however, the situation may be more complicated: the children may have been recruited at the age of eight, and now they may be between 12 and 15, or very close to reaching legal adulthood. In general, these boys, girls, and adolescents have been outside the formal educational system, have suffered from different forms of mistreatment and revictimization, and they need more robust support for social reintegration to overcome post-traumatic

stress and increase their readiness for reconciliation,” explains Professor Zúñiga.

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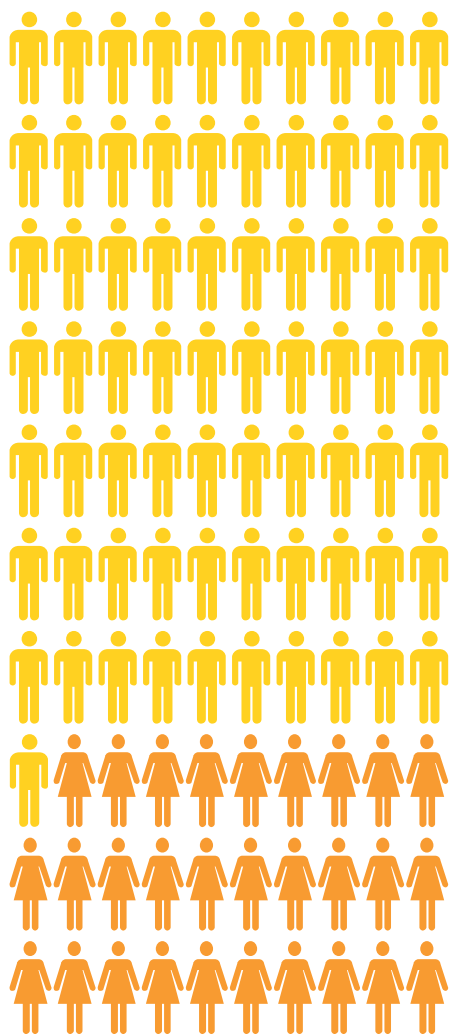
“This situation makes it incumbent upon the Colombian State to guarantee them the full restitution of their rights and to give them the education they need to establish themselves within society, considering that their situation is different from the norm. They have taken on different characteristics and developed different abilities,” she adds.

With the aim of providing comprehensive protection of childhood, the National Council on Economic and Social Policy produced a document in 2010 called Policy for the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Boys, Girls, and Adolescents by Illegal Armed Groups and Organized Criminal Groups. Its focus encompasses the following principles and imperatives: the best interests of boys and girls, the prioritization and interdependence of their rights, coresponsibility, participation, diversity, gender and life-cycle perspective.

**THEY ALL NEED HELP**

Professor Zúñiga says that the participation of women in the construction and consolidation

**5,708 BOYS, GIRLS, AND  
ADOLESCENTS DISENGAGED  
FROM THE INTERNAL CONFLICT  
AND RECEIVED ASSISTANCE  
FROM THE ICBF  
(1999 - 2015)**



**1.655**  
**29%**

**GIRLS**

**4.053**  
**71%**

**BOYS**

Source: Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF). Calculations by the ICBF Directorate of Planning and Monitoring, as of December 2015 (preliminary data)

of peace was promoted—although not without difficulty—in the agreements signed with the FARC, and that it is necessary to help the now-disassociated girls and boys by identifying the kinds of support they will require to gain access to processes of justice, reconciliation, reparation, and community reintegration.



Among the complementary actions that the State is implementing to avoid the recruitment and use of boys, girls, and adolescents, the director of the Observatory mentions the establishment of programs and messages on public and community broadcast platforms, the formulation and execution of plans to prevent recruitment, and the development of a system for gathering information on recruitment.

This work by the Observatory at the Universidad del Rosario has just begun, and will continue until 2019. It will attempt to include information on different peace processes in the country in a single report, including processes with paramilitary forces, the FARC, and the recently-initiated process with the ELN. It also seeks to compare what is happening in Colombia with other similar processes, particularly in Africa, where the reintegration of minors has been carried out under the aegis of the State in a process similar to that envisaged for Colombia.

In 2017, the Observatory will report on its initial findings through a website where all available data and initial analysis of this will be published. The immediate task for the research will be to gain access to the children in order to fully describe them. ■

↑ Researcher Danghelly Zúñiga says that the boys, girls, and adolescents involved in the conflict have been outside the system of formal education and have suffered different kinds of mistreatment and revictimization.