Medellin youth experiences before, during and after belonging to an illegal armed group, 2005

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Abstract *A better understanding of the experiences of young people before, during and after belonging to an illegal armed group (IAG) can provide information to promote their reintegration into urban settings in Colombia and to help prevent violence. A qualitative study with a hermeneutic historical approach was performed to examine these experiences from the perspective of direct or indirect participants in the armed conflict. Fifty individuals aged 14-24 years (7 women and 43 men) with low socioeconomic status from Medellín were interviewed; 26 of them had a history of direct experience with IAGs. What stands out in their stories are descriptions of obstacles to progress in their lives; lives marked by stigma, poverty, violence and inequality; the differences of opinion among these young people regarding whether to belong to these illegal groups; how becoming an active member of an IAG creates both an opportunity for the present and an additional obstacle for the future, which adds complexity to the risk behaviors they assume; and how the reintegration process offers new expectations regarding access to educational and employment opportunities and social recognition. All of these factors point to the need for not only a comprehensive reintegration process but for more inclusive and equitable social policies, in this case for children and young people.*

Key words *Youth, Life experiences, Social inequity, Violence, Qualitative research, Colombia*

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Introduction

In Colombia, there is a complex network of illegal armed groups (IAGs), among which guerrillas such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, for its Spanish acronym), the National Liberation Army (ELN, for its Spanish acronym) and the Popular Liberation Army (EPL, for its Spanish acronym) stand out. In addition, there is a reconfiguration of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC, for its Spanish acronym), a paramilitary group that demobilized in 2005 and that initially devolved into five criminal groups[1] that have been gradually reassembling as more localized, neighborhood-based criminal structures in certain areas of the country[2].

Although Medellin's leadership addressed this problem with a per capita investment in justice and security that in 2014 exceeded those of other major cities in the country by as much as 10 times[3] and which allowed it to move from the 10th most violent city in the world in 2010 to the 49th in 2014[4], the efforts have not yet achieved the expected results[5]. Although there is a recognized paucity of data on the existence of small criminal gangs that control neighborhoods or small sectors in Colombia[2], 119 to 239 criminal groups have been documented in the city[6] (the numbers differ according to whether the less-organized gangs are included). In 2009, after the culmination of the paramilitary demobilization process[7], the homicide rate in the city increased to 94.0 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants[8]; however, the rate for 2014 was only 26.9[4]. These variations show how much more we need to understand and do regarding this problem. Based on these coarse data and considering that violence is exercised by a variety of offenders (such as IAG members, drug traffickers, organized crime groups and serious offenders who do not belong to armed groups, such as participants in brawls and family violence), we can say that the phenomenon of violence in Colombia is particularly complex and severe.

In this regard, differences have been reported among groups of aggressors, such as paramilitary members, severe offenders and brawl participants. The subgroups of offenders with the most similarities in terms of the severity of their crimes are the paramilitary members and severe offenders[9]. A low educational level and coming from families with a high number of stressors, such as a single parent, drug use, alcohol abuse, forced displacement and the murder of family members, have also been reported in these subgroups.

The paramilitary group reported extreme poverty during childhood, including hunger resulting from a lack of family income and dropping out of school to help the family financially[10].

Young men aged 14 to 28 years constitute the majority of both victims[3] and victimizers. The predominance of problem behaviors in this group is apparent in the early years of life and is attributable not only to biological factors but also to socialization processes[11]. These persistent offenders are more likely to have other problems, such as poor academic performance, school dropout, delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual precocity and promiscuity, domestic violence and violations of traffic rules[12].

Regarding the reintegration into civilian life by IAG members, between 1990 and December 2014, 57,082 men and women from various groups demobilized in Colombia[13,14]. Available figures indicate that 30,692 of them have been active participants in the reintegration program; 84.0% of them are men and 16.0% women; the majority (86.0%) is between 26 and 50 years old, and 7.0% are between 18 and 25 years of age; and 20.0% (6,314) live in Antioquia[15]. Recruitment occurs between 13 and 14 years of age, and the average length of stay in illegal groups is 14 years. Through the reintegration program, former IAG members receive financial support, psychosocial care, formal education, job training and community interventions[16].

The Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process of the AUC began in August 2002, when this group expressed its intention to initiate this type of process to the national government[17]. Within this process, demobilization refers to "the formal and controlled discharge of active members of armed forces or groups. It involves two stages: a first stage during which demobilized members are grouped together in special areas or camps, and a second stage called reinsertion that includes temporary support and assistance measures to meet the immediate basic needs of demobilized members. Subsequently, the reintegration process occurs, in which demobilized members acquire civilian status and gain employment and income"[13].

To gain a better understanding of the reintegration process, a study of young individuals' experiences with IAGs was conducted to analyze the process in urban settings in Colombia and to serve as a guide for preventing violence and building a more peaceful and inclusive society, a possibility that is emerging in the wake of the peace process.

Methodology

From a hermeneutic historical approach, in which the human being is considered an interpreter of his or her reality[18], a qualitative study was conducted to gain an understanding of life from the participants' point of view and from an EMIC perspective[19]. Thus, it was possible to understand the meanings that a heterogeneous group of young individuals from Medellin assigned to their experiences with IAGs. At the time of the interviews (the last semester of 2004 and the first semester of 2005), the social context was marked by a new reintegration process for the AUC and paramilitary groups.

In total, 50 young individuals participated; 26 of them were men who showed clearly aggressive behavior. In fact, they were AUC members, and five were in the process of demobilization. The remaining participants, 17 men and 7 women, had never participated in criminal activities, but they knew IAG members and resided in neighborhoods where these groups operate. All of them were between 14 and 24 years old and lived in neighborhoods in low or very low socioeconomic strata and high levels of violence. This selection was made purposively[19].

To identify and gain access to the participants, a network of individuals was established to make contact with them. In the case of the young individuals belonging to IAGs, it was first necessary to contact the AUC group bosses. In addition, institutions dedicated to the rehabilitation of these young people were contacted, as were teachers and community leaders. Potential participants were contacted personally or by telephone. Information was collected through semi-structured interviews. Fifty interviews were conducted in the community or at a place, day and time agreed upon with the head of the IAG or the institution.

The interviews were transcribed in full prior to analysis, which was performed using the tools of grounded theory[20]. The interviews were openly and then axially coded. From this analysis, 13 descriptive categories emerged that were grouped into three analytical categories. This article presents one analytical category, *Experiences with illegal armed groups*, whose properties and dimensions could be clearly conceptualized.

The development of this study followed the guidelines included in Resolution 8430 of 1993[21] by the Colombian Ministry of Health regarding research involving human beings, which ensure the physical and mental safety of the participants. The criteria of the Helsinki Declaration[22] presented by the World Medical Association in 2008 were also considered as a commitment to protecting the participants' life, health, dignity, integrity, right to self-determination, privacy and confidentiality. The study was endorsed by the Ethics Committee of the Research Center of the National School of Public Health. All of the young individuals who participated did so in an informed and voluntary manner.

Results

The category *Experiences with illegal armed groups* corresponds to situations the young people experienced in relation to belonging to an IAG, whether they experienced them directly or through other young people, neighbors or neighborhood friends. Specifically, it refers to everything that the young individuals mentioned as personal experiences or the experiences of neighbors or friends regarding entering or participating in an IAG or their experiences after having belonged to these types of groups. Both the young individuals who were not a part of an IAG and those who were active members mentioned how they were invited by these groups as a means of solving their economic, social and family problems; they also described what they saw happening to friends who became active members.

In the following sections, the experiences with armed groups are temporally ordered, i.e., before, during and after the experience. Thus, the obstacles to progress in life that these young individuals faced before their membership in an IAG are examined first. The contrasting opinions of these young people while deciding whether to become active members of some of these groups is also explored. We then describe what the armed group offered the young individual once he or she became an active member. Finally, we present experiences with the beginning of reintegration into civilian life because some IAG members were undergoing this process at the time of the interviews. The components of the category are presented in Figure 1.

Before: Obstacles to progress in life that the young individuals faced before joining an illegal armed group

It is clear that for the young people interviewed, *studying, making progress in life* and *forming a family* are the most important personal and social expectations. However, they identified

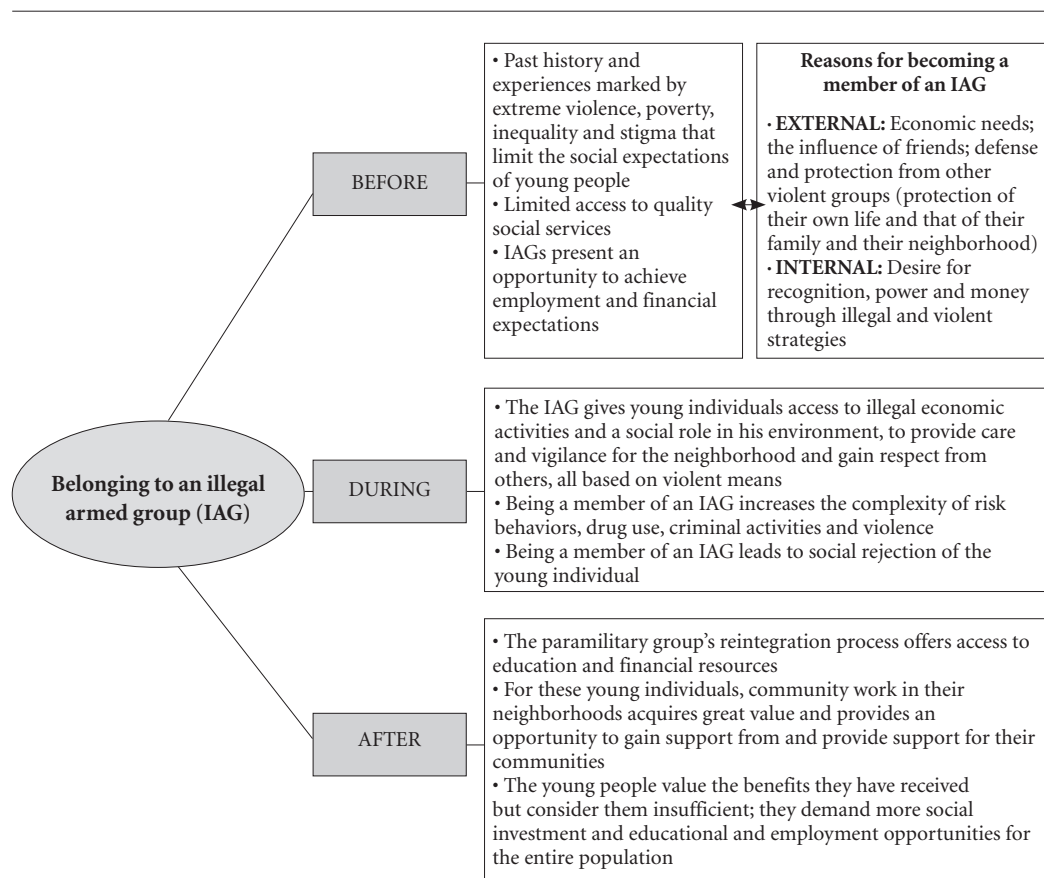|		
	BEFORE	• Past history and experiences marked by extreme violence, poverty, inequality and stigma that limit the social expectations of young people • Limited access to quality social services • IAGs present an opportunity to achieve employment and financial expectations	**Reasons for becoming a member of an IAG** • **EXTERNAL:** Economic needs; the influence of friends; defense and protection from other violent groups (protection of their own life and that of their family and their neighborhood) • **INTERNAL:** Desire for recognition, power and money through illegal and violent strategies
Belonging to an illegal armed group (IAG)	**DURING**	• The IAG gives young individuals access to illegal economic activities and a social role in his environment, to provide care and vigilance for the neighborhood and gain respect from others, all based on violent means • Being a member of an IAG increases the complexity of risk behaviors, drug use, criminal activities and violence • Being a member of an IAG leads to social rejection of the young individual
	AFTER	• The paramilitary group's reintegration process offers access to education and financial resources • For these young individuals, community work in their neighborhoods acquires great value and provides an opportunity to gain support from and provide support for their communities • The young people value the benefits they have received but consider them insufficient; they demand more social investment and educational and employment opportunities for the entire population

Figure 1. Experiences of young people in Medellín with illegal armed groups, 2005.

external and internal obstacles to achieving these goals. Among the external obstacles, the young participants mentioned *economic hardship, social stigma* and *a lack of social, academic and job opportunities*. Thus, from an early age, they had to find ways to meet their own and their family's basic needs. They also observed that that there are few opportunities and that those opportunities are mainly for certain groups of people. Meanwhile, the young people noted that are stigmatized as troublemakers and likely to exhibit criminal behaviors because they are young and come from low socioeconomic neighborhoods (Figure 1). In their own words:

I'm from Urabá [a coastal area of northwestern Antioquia, at the confluence of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans]. *I am here* [in the neighborhood] *for the same reason that we all are, because of the violence, displaced... When they tell you to leave, you have to leave.... We started wandering around; we went to Cáceres, Antioquia, but it was very bad over there because there were*

no jobs, so we went to Taraza, but it was also bad, so my mom decided to leave for the city.... From two places, they threw us out, said that we could not build [a ranch, hovel] *over there.... We've been here four years; the rest we have wandered from here to there.... So I never studied because I would plan to attend school, but we had to leave. What could I do? I did not have the documents they asked for to be able to study.... I never thought I would need to beg, but I had to do it.* HA 17 years

Life at school was very elegant; childhood experiences with peers, homework…. It was also a bit hard because we went to school without having eaten anything, so the only thing we did was think about the hunger, but it was cool. It was a very cool experience. HA 21 years

... The biggest obstacle one faces here is getting a job because you go to a company, show your resume, and just for saying that you're from a poor neighborhood, you lose many points.... HA 23 years

First, there were the militiamen. With them you started talking, hanging around doing nothing,

and they would suddenly and forcefully show you who had the most power, making shots close to your ear, firing a gun into the air so you would leave.... They would go into this or that store: "Gimme five thousand - pesos - or give me twenty thousand", or from this house, "Gimme one thousand, and you too".... Too complicated, people had to wake up at four or five in the morning to buy breakfast, lunch and dinner because at that time, the shooting calmed down, and they no longer had to go out into the street. HA 19 years

What does your mom tell you? She tells me that if I use drugs, then what can be done? She has also sold drugs. It's like a family job; my aunts have also sold a lot. HA 16 years

Amid all this, belonging to an IAG presents a social and employment opportunity (Figure 1) in their neighborhood:

My dad gave me everything, but then he was killed, and I started lacking everything because I lived in that neighborhood full of paracos [paramilitaries]. *I asked them for work, so I started selling cocaine and cocaine base.* HR 16 years

I remember that the problems at that time involved the neighborhood youth with the guerrillas, who always wanted to take these areas and abuse young women, abuse the businesses.... Then, everyone complained.... They [the paramilitaries] *helped us at that time, so we ended up mingling with them.* HA 24 years

Before: Contrasting opinions of young people regarding whether to join a "combo" or illegal armed group

As the above statements show, in one way or another, the young people who were interviewed related life experiences that gave them very close proximity to poverty and violence. In this context, the clearest reasons for some of them to enter an IAG were external, such as economic needs, protecting their own life and being influenced by friends. In such cases, the decision was motivated by the desire for *recognition, power and money*, where *violent and illegal acts* became strategies to achieve their goals. At that point, from the participants' point of view, internal obstacles existed that kept them from fulfilling their own expectations:

I was in the combo [IAG] *because of the needs we had at home, as a way to make a living.... If I did not bring food, we did not eat that day.* HA 21 years

...Then, my friends told me "See, you know what, we're going over there, which is where the money is, and taking this, the money". And then I arrived.... they had the weapons, then, ah! So the boy is

healthy [not involved in criminal activities].... *So you know, there's always a first time.* HA 24 years

You enter the illegal armed group to feel a like hero, to feel like the coolest dude on the block. They see you in an illegal armed group with a firearm and they say "Ah! This guy, we must respect him."

However, for young individuals who did not enter an IAG despite having had the same opportunity to do so as their neighbors, the decision to enter a "combo", although influenced by friends and marked by frustrations, is ultimately a matter of character; the decision is based on who you are and not so much on circumstances.

I never belonged to any armed groups.... Basically, it's your own criteria.... Many times, they tell you, "Stay here", then you say, "No, I already have my own life, and why should I get into that? I'm not interested." HR 23 years

A young man living in a neighborhood like that must have something like a shield, a critical attitude to know if that's what he wants.... When those guys become active members of an IAG, it's as if they lacked a more structured personality, they are more easily influenced. HR 23 years

During: Being an active member of an illegal armed group is an opportunity for the present but another obstacle for the future

Belonging to an armed group was an alternative that initially offered *novelty, a job* and *money* to the study participants; thus, the armed group was the environment in which they acquired the *social recognition* they lacked after living with poverty, violence, difficulty accessing education and a lack of good job opportunities (Figure 1). The scenario is such that young people believe that by joining the group, their lives will change, and all of their problems will immediately be solved. The "combo" presents a new lifestyle, where in the midst of their new job – which is illegal – and the associated money, tasks and relationships with peers who share their concerns, they gradually become active participants in the group.

First, a person had at home, let's say... his TV, his recorder, his refrigerator, his home with a tiled floor, with luxuries; they were the first to enjoy those luxuries. Now I can enjoy them as well, and even more expensive ones.... That material part, it gives me a lot of pride. HA 23 years

At that moment, I felt weird because it was the first time... I told myself, "But why am I doing this?", but joyful because we now had money; we were doing fine. HA 24 years

Data analysis indicated that initially, these expectations are met, as the IAG becomes a social support network that offers protection and friendship; however, over time, the group's dynamic encourages young individuals to use drugs, increase their consumption of psychoactive substances, and engage in theft, the use of force, violence and illegal practices to achieve the group's goals. These behaviors become recurring patterns that young people adopt in everyday situations and when confronting difficulties. Personal desires and motivations to study and work legally fade or are even forgotten; instead, the group's interests become increasingly important.

Being a member of an armed group became a significant experience in the lives of these young people (Figure 1). They fulfilled some expectations, such as *making money, working, acquiring a place in society* and *creating strong bonds with their peers*. At the same time, it led to their biggest losses: the loss of *tranquility* because they always felt that their lives were threatened and were therefore in constant anxiety, always having to be cautious and alert to stay alive, and experiencing the perpetuation of hatred and revenge; over time, they also had to address the loss of freedom and family ties and the death of friends. While some young individuals chose to belong to an IAG, others had very different personal goals, resulting in an increasingly marked separation between childhood friends.

Who sets the rules now in the neighborhood? I don't know. I've been a little more isolated from the neighborhood. I went to college and secluded myself there. HR 23 years

I was armed for four years.... Those years were really bad. I had to leave the neighborhood, leave my mom and live with some aunts because it was very hot [violent]. HA 23 years

In 10 years, they have killed approximately 11 of my friends... while committing crimes or during brawls. HA 24 years

Before, when I began [the vice, drug addiction], *well, it was cool, but because of it I flunked out of school and they kicked me out of my house, so I joined the boys* [IAG], *and then we started having violent fights with the militants* [paramilitaries], *and by then I was too involved... just wandering around, doing nothing but stealing in buses and buying vice, bullets and standing on the terrace.* HA 23 years

Amid experiences with drugs, violence and loss, some of the young people who were interviewed managed to reflect on how problematic and damaging the activities of the illegal group

were for them, their families and society, triggering the desire to *leave the combo*; this desire grew even stronger when the government offered of a new process of reintegration to the IAG, which members could enter either individually or as a group:

... Some contractors from "My River" came to clean the creek, and they called those who were most involved in violence and those who had financial problems at home.... From that moment, I reacted, and I have enjoyed working since. HA 24 years

... I hung out with my friends from the combo, and they began killing them, so you start thinking. "If I continue down this path, they will also kill me."... It is something worth thinking about. HR 23 years

From the combo, you get the money to get some fresh air; you feel supported.... But it's very bad. People greet you on the street, but behind closed doors, they say: this [expletive]... *he should be dead.* HA 17 years

... At the time, you think, I mean, owning a weapon means power, whereas in the end, without a gun, you are nothing; however, when we saw the children getting frightened, I mean, seeing you and hiding, that is not, for me, a good thing. HA 24 years

Afterwards: The beginning of the process of reintegration into civilian life for some illegal armed groups and what it means for young people - a new expectation

At the time of the interviews, the process of reintegration for the AUC was beginning, and this represented *new expectations in the lives* of the young people involved. They hoped to access *educational and employment opportunities, to make goals for themselves* and *to motivate themselves to achieve them* (Figure 1).

With the reinsertion process, perhaps it is easier to gain employment; right now, they are offering opportunities, creating small businesses; they are offering [technical] *courses at SENA* [Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje, the Colombian Public Training and Employment Agency] *to study.* HR 23 years

When we were going through hard times, we used drugs; today, because we are studying, we no longer wish to do so. We can say that we are busy with something, and as a result, drug use is no longer in our mind.... HA 20 years

In the combo, we are like 37 men.... Among ourselves, we say, yes, we have all changed a lot. About

11 of us demobilized; the rest have not yet demobilized, but everyone wants to demobilize to have new goals.... HA 19 years

We draw attention to the importance of community for these young people. At the beginning of the process of resocialization, they perform community activities, not the warlike actions they performed when they actively participated in IAGs; thus, it is *the community* that directly *observes, witnesses, values* and *promotes positive changes* in their behavior. The interviews show that they *enjoy working with and for the community* (Figure 1).

Now, here in the neighborhood, we are sort of leaders, and people are supporting us a lot. We have a project to build a chapel... and later on, we will see if we ask for the sports field. HA 20 years

I was in the AUC for three years. Over there, we lacked nothing, but we faced the danger of being caught by the police. In contrast, now we obey the law and feel like citizens; we are part of the law abiding community... HA 21 years

We ourselves patrol around here, keeping an eye out so that no neighbor is stealing from another, so nobody gets killed. We ask the National Police for support.... If we catch people stealing, we do not kill them but turn them in to the police.... Before, we did kill them. HA 19 years

In contrast, other youth, regardless of whether they had been active members of armed groups [i.e., those who were less optimistic, with less encouraging views of and interest in the future of the reintegration process] expressed reservations about this process, despite the positive expectations of the moment. It was not clear to them that the process has achieved what public proposals claimed it would. For others, the new reinsertion meant a temporary solution that did not satisfy all their interests and needs; therefore, the idea of returning to the armed group and repeating the pattern of risk behaviors persisted.

We want the mayor to continue helping us.... At the moment, we see everything going well; we want him to continue helping us. We have committed for up to six months; if after six months, everything stops, what are we going to do?... Go back to the same thing...? HA 19 years

What would you prefer? To keep on working at what you're doing now, or return to combat? No, I would prefer combat again, becoming a paramilitary again ... HA 21 years

More than one person who participated in the war is working now.... They are behaving well, but there are those who are waiting to see when another war breaks out. HA 15 years

From another point of view, although the young people interviewed did not deny the opportunities it creates, they believe that resocialization alone will not change violent behaviors and that a shared responsibility is essential (Figure 1). They believe that those involved in the reintegration process must be personally motivated towards it and that in terms of the government's role, a process of social and economic reintegration is not enough. Their social expectations are broader and include more social investment, a more equitable country and more effective involvement of the government in their communities; only then will the chain of violence stop, neighborhood armed groups disappear, peace be achieved and permanent security maintained.

We now have the opportunities from the program [the reinsertion program] *... However, one sees young folks right here from the neighborhood who can only hang out on the corners with nothing to do because there are no jobs.* HA 21 years

What we ask the government the most is for collaboration, not only for us [the demobilized] *but for the whole community.... With opportunities to continue studying, with employment, which is what the poor need the most.* HA 23 years

I would like to ask the municipal administration, yes, for classes for mothers by psychologists because perhaps there is too much intrafamilial conflict, between children, mothers. HA 24 years

Discussion

Given the complexity of the social conflict in Colombia and the focus on gender, age and ethnicity in the process of demobilization, disarmament and reintegration[23], it is important to note that the results presented here describe the experiences of young individuals involved with IAGs, and although for sampling purposes, no differentiation was made by gender, the community only identified men as having had direct experiences with illegal armed groups.

The living spaces and the illegal actions of these young individuals are described from the perspective of low-ranking militiamen in an armed organization within an urban area: Medellin. Medellin is a city with over two million inhabitants, of which approximately 375,000 are young people aged 15 to 24 years; approximately half of them belong to families with a low socioeconomic status[24], like the young people interviewed for this study. Thus, the conclusions and recommendations arising from these results

are related to these characteristics; they are very different, for example, from those experienced by women in a rural context or by high-ranking men in these armed groups. Another aspect to consider is that these are young individuals who belonged to paramilitary groups, not guerrillas.

The young individuals interviewed mentioned experiences related to inequality, such as poverty, violence, stigma and a lack of social opportunities. Hence, their novel experience with the reintegration policy coincides positively with their basic needs[13]: barriers to accessing public services begin to be lifted, resuming their education becomes a personal development goal and offers them the possibility of accessing qualified employment, earning money by studying addresses their basic needs, and improved relationships with their neighbors provide social recognition. All these alternatives, which at the time were led by the Municipality of Medellin, continue to be offered today by the Colombian Agency for Reintegration[25,26].

However, as the young people themselves affirmed, it is not only they who need more opportunities, it is the whole community. Along the same line, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime considers that the achievements in reversing the violence in Colombia are the result of control measures and calls for actions to prevent violence, such as improving parenting and life skills and reviewing cultural norms[7].

The social inequality in Colombia still presents an unfavorable context for children and youth. Although the country showed a high Human Development Index score in 2013 (0.71)[27], it continues to be, as it was in 2005, one of the most unequal countries in terms of wealth distribution, according to the Gini index of 0.51 for 2005[28] and 0.53 for both 2012[29] and 2013[30]. Meanwhile, the Youth Development Index for Medellin in 2011 (which applies to individuals aged 14 to 26 years old)[31] showed an average of 72.50

on a scale of 1 to 100, with significant differences in key domains. The domains that contributed the most were *access to education* (19.00), *goods and services* (16.80) and *health* (11,20), while those that contributed the least were *youth development* (3.90), *democracy and participation* (2.90) and *decent jobs* (0.80), i.e., there were gains in access to goods and services, but problems with their quality and relevance are implied because there were no corresponding significant gains in youth development.

In connection with the above, although there is a good coverage for basic education, the situation with secondary education is worrisome because the expected results have not been achieved. In 2013, the gross coverage rate was 79.2%; it is unlikely that the goal of 93.0% for 2015[32] can be achieved, which presents a widespread problem throughout the country. Even on international tests, Colombia is ranked among the lowest, and a positive association with inequality[33] is evident. In addition, the relationship between inequality and violence has also been documented at the local level in Colombia[34]. Thus, despite government efforts, inequality remains a problem in this country, and under specific conditions, such as those reported by the young people interviewed in this study, it is linked to other difficult problems, such as violence.

Although a valuable investment in security is being made in this country and the peace process is advancing, the expected results are at risk from the permanence and reconfiguration of new criminal gangs, such as those in Medellin, coupled with the risk of recurrent illegal acts committed by demobilized individuals, which occur in 24.0% of cases in Colombia[35]. As our study shows, the calls for more opportunities that the young people who were interviewed made 10 years ago based on their own experiences can be complemented today with the need for not just more but better opportunities.

Collaborations

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