

COLOMBIA

Attacks on schools and against students and teachers increased in 2020 and 2021 as Colombia experienced a spike in armed violence during the Covid-19 pandemic. Antioquia, Arauca, Cauca, and Norte de Santander were among the most affected departments. In contrast, attacks on higher education declined compared to the prior reporting period.

Context

During the 2020-2021 reporting period, Colombia continued to experience armed violence despite peace accords signed in 2016 between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army) (FARC-EP), which ended a five-decades-long conflict.⁵³⁸ Although the majority of FARC fighters demobilized, multiple smaller groups, known as FARC dissidents, emerged from the demobilization process and continued to operate.⁵³⁹ Fighting between FARC dissident groups, other armed groups, and government forces caused an increase in violence in 2020. The UN documented 76 massacres in 2020, in which 292 people were killed,⁵⁴⁰ an increase over previous years.⁵⁴¹ Non-state armed groups and criminal groups also increasingly targeted demobilized FARC-EP members, human rights defenders, unionists, and student, Indigenous, and Afro-Colombian leaders.⁵⁴² The use of anti-personnel mines, unexploded ordnance, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) continued to harm civilians in 2020 and 2021, as large parts of Colombian territory remained heavily mined, according to the UN and Humanity & Inclusion.⁵⁴³

Non-state armed groups remained active during the reporting period, including FARC dissident groups, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army) (ELN) and the Ejército Popular de Liberación (People's Liberation Army) (EPL), and successor groups to the paramilitary groups that officially demobilized in the mid-2000s, such as the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) (AGC).⁵⁴⁴ Armed groups imposed movement restrictions on civilians during Covid-19 in several departments, including by implementing curfews and lockdowns to slow the spread of the virus, and threatening and killing people who failed to comply, according to Human Rights Watch.⁵⁴⁵

Protesters organized nationwide marches between April and June 2021 against a proposed tax reform, police violence and health, education, and economic inequalities.⁵⁴⁶ Police officers responded by dispersing peaceful demonstrations and using excessive force.⁵⁴⁷ The government reported that 29 people died during the protests;⁵⁴⁸ civil society groups placed the number higher.⁵⁴⁹

The UN reported that over 73,000 people were displaced in 2021.⁵⁵⁰ That same year, 7.7 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance.⁵⁵¹ Food insecurity, deepened by quarantine measures, disproportionately affected some Indigenous groups, such as the Wayú and Awá.⁵⁵²

Access to education was impacted by Covid-19 and violence. Schools closed in March 2020 to prevent the spread of Covid-19, leading to an increase in the risk of armed group recruitment of children while they were not in class.⁵⁵³ School closures especially affected Indigenous children and children from rural areas who lacked electricity or the technology to attend virtual classes, while teachers were afraid to deliver learning materials in areas under armed group control.⁵⁵⁴

Attacks on schools

Over the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA identified at least 35 reported attacks on schools, primarily in rural areas. Many incidents involved IEDs installed at or near schools; confrontations in the vicinity of schools between armed groups, or an armed group and government forces, were also common. The number of reported attacks on schools per year increased this reporting period compared to 2019, when GCPEA identified nine reported incidents, but occurred at a similar rate compared to 2018, when 20 reported incidents were collected.⁵⁵⁵

In 2020, the UN verified four attacks on schools.⁵⁵⁶ Separately, the Coalition Against the Involvement of Children and Youth in Armed Conflict in Colombia (COALICO) documented five incidents of attacks on or military use of educational institutions in 2020, in Arauca, Córdoba, Nariño, and Norte de Santander departments, affecting at least 650 children, although schools were closed for in-person learning after mid-March 2020.⁵⁵⁷ Since it was unclear how many of these attacks overlapped with reports of incidents collected by GCPEA, they were not included in the total number of attacks on schools in this report, to avoid double counting.

In 2020, GCPEA collected approximately 19 reports of attacks on schools, with Antioquia, Arauca, and Norte de Santander departments most heavily affected.⁵⁵⁸ Approximately half of reported incidents involved IEDs or anti-personnel mines near schools, while over a quarter of incidents were armed confrontations in the vicinity of schools, and the remainder were lootings or vandalism of schools carried out by armed groups. Examples of IEDs and anti-personnel mines reportedly installed near schools in Colombia in 2020 included:

- On March 14, 2020, an explosive device allegedly detonated at a school in the Poblazón Indigenous reservation in Yanacona, Cauca department. The explosion killed a 13-year-old fifth grader on his way to the toilet, according to local media outlet *El Tiempo*. Classes were reportedly suspended as a result.⁵⁵⁹
- Around November 11, 2020, anti-personnel mines were found in two schools in Frontino, Antioquia department, according to local media outlet *El Espectador* citing the department's secretary of education. A public utility company discovered the mines when reconnecting water service at hundreds of schools in preparation for school re-openings after Covid-19-related closures. Due to the presence of mines and lack of running water, the schools reportedly remained closed for an additional week.⁵⁶⁰
- In a rural area of Tame municipality, Arauca department, a non-state armed group reportedly installed three explosive devices approximately 150 feet from both a school and a path transited by civilians sometime before mid-December 2020, according to local media. Colombian army troops reportedly performed a controlled detonation of the devices.⁵⁶¹

Examples of reported incidents involving armed confrontations near schools in 2020 included:

- On March 5, 2020, alleged FARC dissidents and another non-state armed group reportedly engaged in combat near a school, in El Plateado town, Cauca department. The Office of the Ombudsman, an independent government body, reported that the school suspended classes as a result.⁵⁶²
- The Colombian army and a non-state armed group engaged in fighting in the vicinity of a school in a rural area of Ábrego municipality, Catatumbo department, in early March 2020, according to an interview with an army commander in local media outlet *Caracol Radio*.⁵⁶³
- COALICO reported that a shootout between two non-state armed groups occurred near a school in a rural area of Magüi Payan municipality, Nariño department, in June 2020. The school, which was the only one in the area, was damaged in the armed confrontation, affecting the education of at least 150 students.⁵⁶⁴

In 2021, the UN verified six attacks on schools in Colombia.⁵⁶⁵ Separately, COALICO documented six incidents of attacks on schools and military use, in Antioquia, Arauca, Cauca, Cundinamarca, and Valle del Cauca departments, affecting at least 3,500 children.⁵⁶⁶ Since it was unclear how many of these attacks overlapped with reports that GCPEA collected, they were not included in the total number of attacks on schools in this report, to avoid double counting. GCPEA identified more than 15 reported attacks on schools from media and NGO reports.⁵⁶⁷ As in 2020, many of the reported incidents involved IEDs installed near schools or shootouts in the vicinity of schools. Examples of explosive weapons installed in or near schools in 2021 included:

- On January 29, 2021, alleged members of a non-state armed group detonated an explosive in El Palo town, Cauca department, according to local media outlets. Alongside several other buildings, the school was reportedly damaged in the blast, in which windows were broken and a part of the roof was destroyed. The school's security guard was also reportedly knocked unconscious by shrapnel from the blast and taken to the hospital.⁵⁶⁸
- In early February 2021, the National Army reportedly deactivated antipersonnel mines near a school, and on

school routes, in an Indigenous community reservation in Murindó municipality, Antioquia department. Citing an Indigenous organization, local media outlet *Caracol Radio* reported that a non-state armed group installed the mines, threatening the lives of students and teachers on their way to and from school.⁵⁶⁹

- On September 6, 2021, two explosive devices were detonated five meters from a school in Saravena municipality, Arauca department, while 70 students were attending classes, according to Save the Children and local media. At least one student was harmed in the incident and, in the next days, structural damages and damages to the electrical system prevented the school's approximately 670 students from attending classes.⁵⁷⁰

Examples of armed confrontations near schools in 2021 included:

- In mid-January 2021, members of an alleged non-state armed group attacked civilian facilities in Providencia municipality, Nariño department, as reported by the department's police chief to local media. Bullets reportedly struck the school and several houses during the attack.⁵⁷¹
- Local media outlets *Semana* and *El Tiempo* reported that on March 18, 2021, a non-state armed group opened fire on a police station for approximately 40 minutes in Toribío municipality, Cauca department. The nearby Eduardo Santos school was reportedly in the line of fire, forcing students and teachers to take cover to avoid being hit by bullets. During a break in the shootout, a member of the Indigenous guard evacuated the children from the school; no students were injured, according to reports.⁵⁷²
- Armed confrontations between FARC dissidents and the National Army reportedly occurred near a school in a rural area of Argelia municipality, Cauca department, on October 20, 2021. According to local media outlet *W Radio*, the conflict affected a group of students and their teacher, who had to flee the area.⁵⁷³

Attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel

During 2020 and 2021, GCPEA compiled more than 60 reports of attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel. Killings and threats constituted the most commonly reported forms of attack and occurred most frequently in Antioquia, Cauca, and Huila departments. Non-state armed groups killed and threatened teachers for their involvement in teachers' unions, as occurred in the last reporting period.⁵⁷⁴ Armed groups also threatened non-local teachers in this reporting period, in an attempt to keep out teachers and public servants from other regions, despite provisions under the peace accords to strengthen services in conflict-affected areas.⁵⁷⁵ Attacks on school students and staff peaked in 2020 with more than 35 reported incidents, compared to previous years when GCPEA collected approximately 9 and 24 reports in 2019 and 2018 respectively.⁵⁷⁶

In 2020, COALICO reported that over 60 teachers registered threats from non-state armed groups in Córdoba department. Authorities transferred some of the teachers to other locations after a teachers' union met with the Office of the Ombudsman and other government agencies.⁵⁷⁷ Similarly, in Chocó department, a local media outlet reported that 30 teachers were transferred to other locations that year after having received threats from non-state armed groups.⁵⁷⁸ Due to limited details about each instance and to avoid double counting, these threats are not included in the total number of attacks on school students and staff. GCPEA collected more than 35 reports of attacks on students and education personnel in 2020.⁵⁷⁹ For example:

- On February 7, 2020, all 25 teachers working at a school in El Salado town, Bolívar department, reportedly received messages threatening to kill and dismember them on their way to school. As a result, the school suspended classes, according to local media outlet *El Universal*.⁵⁸⁰
- On February 8, 2020, unidentified attackers shot at an official of the Colombian Federation of Educators while he was riding with his wife and bodyguards in a bulletproof car, as reported by local media outlets *Semana* and *El Espectador*. The incident occurred in Guamo town, Tolima department.⁵⁸¹
- On June 17, 2020, the ELN threatened an Indigenous leader and teacher from the Buenavista Indigenous reservation, in Putumayo department, according to the Office of the Ombudsman.⁵⁸²
- On July 4, 2020, members of the ELN's Western War Front killed a teacher in the Birrinchao Indigenous community, in Bajo Baudó municipality, Chocó department, according to the Office of the Ombudsman, which also re-

ported that the non-state armed group prevented the community from retrieving the body to hold a funeral.⁵⁸³

- A teacher from the Piguambi Palangala Indigenous community reportedly died after he was shot three times in early September 2020 while leaving the school where he taught in Tumaco municipality, Nariño department. Local media outlet *La Semana* reported that the teacher had requested protection from the government's National Protection Unit after receiving threats.⁵⁸⁴

In 2021, local media outlet *El Universal* reported that, in conflictive regions of Córdoba department, 633 teachers arriving from elsewhere were threatened against beginning to teach classes.⁵⁸⁵ Due to limited details about each instance and to avoid double counting, these threats are not included in the total number of attacks on students and staff. GCPEA gathered 24 reports of attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel in 2021.⁵⁸⁶ For example:

- In early February 2021, a FARC dissident group threatened 121 teachers by distributing pamphlets and calling the education secretary in Ituango, Antioquia department, according to a letter from the mayor of Ituango's office, which was cited in local media. The armed group allegedly threatened teachers newly assigned to the area, stating that they could not enter the municipality from other regions.⁵⁸⁷
- In late March 2021, in Ituango municipality, Antioquia department, a FARC dissident group and other non-state armed groups reportedly threatened teachers again, which led to the internal displacement of ten teachers. Threats against teachers left more than 1,500 students without classes in the municipality, according to the mayor, as reported in *Noticias Caracol* and *El Espectador*. Due to a lack of internet connectivity in rural areas, distance learning was also not a possibility, the news outlets reported.⁵⁸⁸
- On June 9, 2021, an Indigenous teacher and leader and her husband were shot to death in Corinto town, Cauca department, allegedly by a non-state armed group, as reported by ACLED and international media outlet *Infobae*.⁵⁸⁹
- In Fuente de Oro municipality, Meta department, armed men assassinated a primary school teacher as he arrived at school on August 11, 2021, according to local media outlet *RCN*. The teacher was reportedly also a member of a teachers' union.⁵⁹⁰
- Five teachers, most of them women, reportedly received death threats in Huila department in October 2021, via telephone calls and pamphlets containing the logos of non-state armed groups. According to local media outlet *Caracol Radio*, teachers in Palestina, Pitalito, and La Plata municipalities were threatened.⁵⁹¹

Military use of schools and universities

In 2020 and 2021, GCPEA identified approximately six reports of military use of educational facilities. Military use of schools occurred sporadically during this reporting period, as it did in the period covered by *Education under Attack 2020*.⁵⁹²

In 2020, the UN verified one incident of the military use of a school by a FARC dissident group in March of that year.⁵⁹³ Since it remained unclear whether this incident was among those identified by GCPEA, it is not included in the total number of incidents. GCPEA identified three reports of military use or military presence in the vicinity of educational facilities in 2020:

- For several days beginning on March 3, 2020, 50 members of an alleged FARC dissident group camped in the vicinity of a school near El Plateado town, Cauca department, according to the Office of the Ombudsman. On March 5, 2020, an armed confrontation occurred near the school between the suspected FARC dissident group and another non-state armed group, which resulted in several civilian injuries and the school being closed until March 10, 2020.⁵⁹⁴
- Local media outlet *Semana* reported that between June 11 and 22, 2020, a National Army platoon occupied a school in a rural area of Pueblo Rico municipality, Risaralda department, converting it into a base. The soldiers reportedly set up security posts and dwellings in the school, prepared meals, and made use of running water.⁵⁹⁵ In January 2021, the Office of the Inspector General called three non-commissioned National Army officers to a disciplinary hearing for allegedly violating international humanitarian law when they occupied the school.⁵⁹⁶

As detailed below, soldiers reportedly committed sexual violence against an Indigenous girl in the school while it was occupied.

- In September 2020, after a confrontation between the National Army and suspected members of a non-state armed group in La Isla, Antioquia department, explosive devices, logistics materials, and communications equipment were reportedly discovered hidden in the vicinity of a school.⁵⁹⁷

In 2021, the UN verified the military use of three schools.⁵⁹⁸ Separately, GCPEA identified two incidents of military use from news sources and NGO reports:

- Around July 18, 2021, a non-state armed group reportedly occupied a school in Nuquí Arriba community, Chocó department, causing classes to be suspended.⁵⁹⁹
- On May 13, 2021, an National Army helicopter landed at a sports field at the National Training Service's Agricultural Center in Buga city, Valle del Cauca department, where it offloaded soldiers who later returned to the aircraft and were flown away, according to local media outlets *El Colombiano* and *El País*.⁶⁰⁰

Child recruitment at, or on the way to or from, school

GCPEA identified two reported incidents of child recruitment at, or on the way to or from, school during this reporting period. In comparison, approximately five instances of school-related child recruitment were identified in 2018 and 2019.⁶⁰¹

Although COALICO reported that child recruitment generally rose in Colombia in 2020 due in part to prolonged school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic,⁶⁰² children were less likely to be recruited at or en route to school since they were primarily learning at home. The UN also verified recruitment and use of more children in 2020 than 2019.⁶⁰³ According to COALICO reports, by 2021 the number of recruitment and use incidents began to decrease.⁶⁰⁴

In April 2020, two students were reportedly recruited into non-state armed groups from a school in Valle del Guamuez municipality, Putumayo department.⁶⁰⁵

On September 15, 2021, the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca reported the recruitment of a 14-year-old and a 16-year-old student on their way to school in Las Mercedes de Caldono indigenous reservation in Cauca department, according to international media outlet *Infobae*. The report alleged FARC dissidents recruited the students.⁶⁰⁶

Sexual violence at, or on the way to or from, school or university

GCPEA identified two reported incidents of sexual violence at, or on the way to or from, school during the 2020-2021 reporting period. *Education under Attack 2020*, which covered 2017-2019, reported no incidents of school-related sexual violence by armed forces, law enforcement, other state security entities or non-state armed groups in Colombia.⁶⁰⁷

In 2020, GCPEA collected two incidents of sexual violence at or on the way to or from, schools:

- On June 21, 2020, seven National Army soldiers committed sexual violence against a girl from the Embera Chamí Indigenous group in the vicinity of a school in Pueblo Rico municipality, Risaralda department.⁶⁰⁸ The soldiers admitted to the crime and the attorney general found them guilty, according to local media outlet *El Espectador*.⁶⁰⁹ On September 28, 2021, the Supreme Court of Pereira sentenced six of the soldiers to 16 years in prison for aggravated abusive sexual intercourse with a child under the age of 14 and the remaining soldier to eight years of prison as an accomplice to the crime.⁶¹⁰
- On September 10, 2020, police reportedly detained a 15-year-old Indigenous boy who was on his way to buy posterboard for a school project in Jambaló municipality, Cauca department. Local media outlets including *El Tiempo* reported that the police accused the student of carrying camouflage and a radio and, once at the station, forced him to undress. The boy belonged to the Nasa Indigenous group of Pitayó and was released after his family and Indigenous authorities registered their objections with the police.⁶¹¹

Attacks on higher education

GCPEA collected approximately 19 reports of attacks on higher education between 2020 and 2021. During the reporting period, police reportedly responded with excessive force to several university student protests over perceived government underfunding of higher education, as well as to on-campus marches for safety provisions during the Covid-19 pandemic and for the dissolution of the Mobile Anti-Riot Squadron (ESMAD).⁶¹² In addition, local media reported that non-state armed groups attacked higher education facilities and threatened university students and professors.⁶¹³ Attacks on higher education appear to have declined slightly compared to 2019, when more than 30 such attacks were identified during student protests over education funding and on-campus demonstrations for the dissolution of ESMAD. GCPEA identified 14 reports of attacks on higher education in 2018.⁶¹⁴

In 2020, GCPEA identified approximately 15 attacks on higher education.⁶¹⁵ Examples of repression of education-related protests in 2020 included:

- On February 20, 2020, students, professors, and their unions reportedly protested against the killings of social leaders in the country, along with several government policies, at the University of Antioquia, in Medellín, Antioquia department. ESMAD and other police forces reportedly entered the University campus and used teargas to disperse protesters in response to students' and hooded individuals' use of Molotov cocktails and potato bombs. Two police officers were injured after entering the campus, according to local media reports, as was one student while running from the violence.⁶¹⁶ The rector of the University said the police operation was not effective, risked greater violence, and that he had not approved the actions, according to local media outlet *El Tiempo*.⁶¹⁷ This was reportedly the first time ESMAD had conducted a security operation within the University in eight years; the mayor had recently updated security protocols authorizing security forces to enter campuses, in case of explosives on their campuses, without prior university approval.⁶¹⁸
- On July 3, 2020, police reportedly shot firearms in the direction of students outside the University of Valle, in Cali, Valle del Cauca department, although no injuries were recorded. The students had been holding a sit-in for eight days, demanding a reduction of university fees for students in response to economic struggles caused by Covid-19 lockdowns, according to local media outlet *El Tiempo*.⁶¹⁹
- On September 11, 2020, in Ibagué, Tolima department, ESMAD police forces reportedly used a watercannon and fired teargas at protesting students near the main entrance to the University of Tolima and on nearby streets, and detained 28 protestors. The students, who threw rocks at the police, were protesting the recent death of a law student in Bogotá due to the reported excessive use of force by two police officers there.⁶²⁰

Examples of reported attacks on higher education facilities and threats against students and academic staff in 2020 included:

- On January 7, 2020, 30 alleged members of the ELN reportedly sprayed graffiti in support of their cause on University of La Guajira walls, and installed an IED 300 meters from the University in Villanueva town, La Guajira department. The Colombian police and army diffused the explosive, according to local media.⁶²¹
- On March 2, 2020, pamphlets were reportedly circulated in the University of Antioquia, in Medellín, Antioquia department, threatening ten campus organizations and unions, as well as the lives of five students and professors for their suspected leftist leanings. Local media outlet *Caracol Radio* alleged that the threatening materials were signed by AGC, however the armed group denied having issued them.⁶²²
- On March 4, 2020, a University of Antioquia professor and secretary of an association of professors was stabbed in her home, in Medellín, Antioquia department, as covered by local media outlets and Scholars at Risk. She was hospitalized for her injuries but recovered. A threatening pamphlet circulated on campus two days prior, reportedly mentioning the association of professors.⁶²³

In 2021, GCPEA identified four reports of attacks on higher education, including both conflict- and repression-related incidents.⁶²⁴ For example:

- In early April 2021, the director of the Technological University of Chocó was reportedly threatened on social media by an alleged non-state armed group for supposed mismanagement of the academic budget.⁶²⁵ His res-

idence was also shot at that same month, although the director was unharmed.⁶²⁶ The University is located in Quibdó city, Chocó department.

- Scholars at Risk and local media reported that on April 23, 2021, ESMAD police forces entered the University del Valle, in Cali, Valle del Cauca department, to forcibly remove protesting students from campus including by using teargas. Beginning April 15, 2021, the students carried out a sit-in on campus, which included blocking the entrance, to protest the partial return of in-person classes and demand adequate health protocols and necessary equipment for distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.⁶²⁷
- On July 19, 2021, security guards found two explosive devices in a garden inside Surcolombiana University in Neiva city, Huila department, as reported by local media outlet *La Nación*. Detonation experts reportedly later retrieved and disposed of the explosives.⁶²⁸

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⁵⁵³⁹ Juan Pappier and Kyle Johnson, “Does the FARC still exist? Challenges in Assessing Colombia’s ‘Post Conflict’ under International Humanitarian Law,” Human Rights Watch, October 22, 2020.

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⁵⁵⁴⁸ María Camila Idrobo, “Public prosecutor has investigated 29 deaths related to protests (Fiscalía ha investigado 29 muertes relacionadas con protestas),” *Radio Nacional de Colombia*, August 30, 2021.

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⁵⁵⁵⁰ OCHA, “Colombia: Humanitarian impact and trends between January and December 2021 (as of January 28 2022) (Colombia: Impacto y tendencias humanitarias entre enero y diciembre de 2021 (a 28 de enero de 2022)),” December 30, 2021.

⁵⁵⁵¹ OCHA, “Global Humanitarian Overview 2022,” December 2, 2021, p. 124.

⁵⁵⁵² Human Rights Watch, “Colombia: Indigenous Kids at Risk of Malnutrition, Death,” August 13, 2020. UN Women (LAC), “Mariela Casanova: Indigenous women like me can provide solutions against climate change and strengthen food security among our families (Mariela Casanova: Las mujeres indígenas podemos aportar soluciones para el cambio climático y fortalecer la seguridad alimentaria de nuestras familias),” September 4, 2021.

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