

OVERVIEW

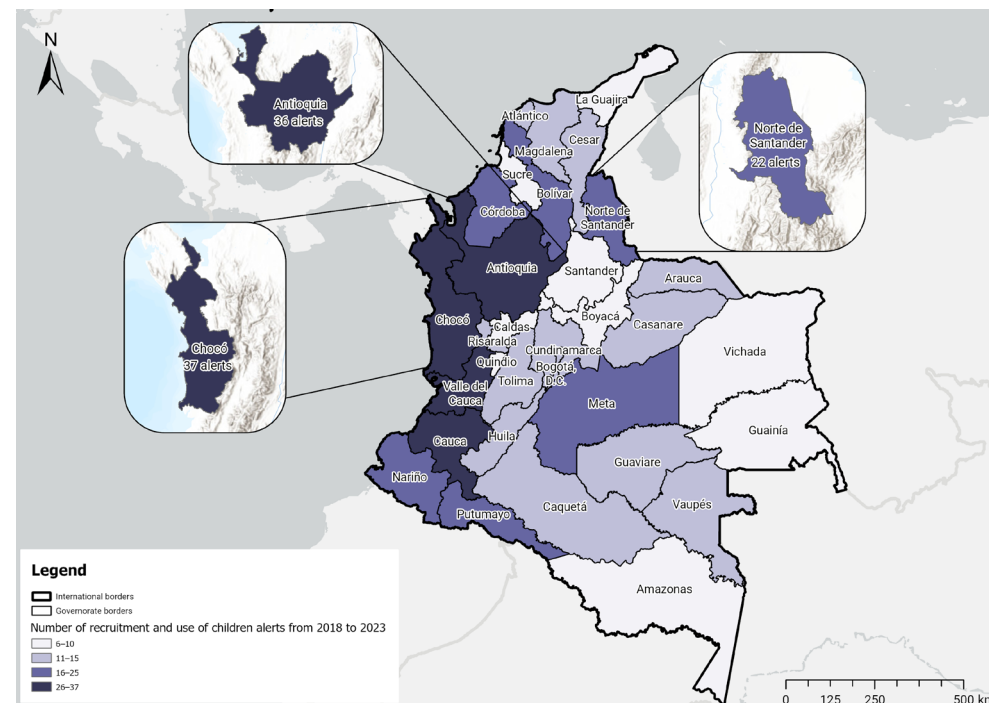
Colombia is one of the countries with the most alarming rates of children's human rights violations, including child recruitment and use (UN 05/06/2023). The recruitment and use of children by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and organised crime groups has been constant throughout Colombia's armed conflict (Comision de la Verdad 08/2022). The phenomenon has surged some years after the peace agreement signed in 2016 between the Colombian Government and former guerrilla Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP), driven by NSAGs fighting over illegal economies and social and territorial control (UN SC 13/02/2024). The information available, however, is insufficient to determining a precise timeline for this increase.

The dynamics of child recruitment and use vary across rural and urban contexts. Recruitment into NSAGs, which typically involves separating children from their families, is more common in rural areas, where there is a stronger NSAG presence (UNICEF/ICBF 11/05/2023). In urban settings, children are more likely to be engaged by organised crime groups. In both cases, children are used for criminal activities associated with illegal forms of labour, such as drug and weapons trafficking, extortion, exploitative domestic labour (e.g. cooking and cleaning), working as messengers, commercial sexual exploitation, and committing physical violence, including assassinations. When used by organised crime groups, children are not necessarily separated from their families (UNICEF/ICBF 11/05/2023; KII 23/01/2024).

NSAGs and organised crime groups have been changing their strategies for incorporating children. Although forceful tactics, such as threatening children and their families, are still used, NSAGs and organised crime groups have also started implementing less direct forms of coercion, including providing children with money and positions of power and promoting social events in communities (InSight Crime 22/02/2022; KII 13/02/2024; KII 30/01/2024; KII 29/01/2024 a).

The Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF), with the help of humanitarian organisations, primarily UNICEF, is leading the institutional response to protect children from recruitment and use, as well as helping them reintegrate into society after leaving NSAGs (UN SC 13/02/2024). An interviewee working in reintegration programmes reported, however, that ICBF resources are insufficient to address the increasing number of children exposed to recruitment (KII 30/01/2024). Further, as organised crime groups are not recognised as NSAGs in armed conflict, children recruited to and used by such groups are not included in reintegration programmes, leaving them open to legal prosecution (KII 29/02/2024).

Map 1. Number of child recruitment and use alerts, 2018–2023 – Ombudsman's Office of Colombia



Source: ACAPS using data from DP (accessed 11/03/2024)

ABOUT THE REPORT

Aim

This report analyses the current situation of child recruitment and use by NSAGs and organised crime groups in the Colombian departments of Antioquia, Chocó, and Norte de Santander. According to secondary sources and key informant interviews (KIIs), the number of verified cases of NSAG recruitment and use of children in Colombia began increasing some years after the Colombian Government and FARC-EP signed a peace agreement in 2016 (UN SC 13/02/2024; KII 13/02/2024). This report focuses on the most recent data available, for the period 2021–2023, and describes the main ways NSAGs and organised crime groups recruit and use children, including differences between both urban and rural settings and children from different population groups. The report then presents an overview of child recruitment and use in each of the three departments, followed by the impacts on children’s wellbeing and institutional responses to these protection violations.

Methodology

This report is based on a review of secondary data and 21 KIIs with representatives of humanitarian organisations, civil society organisations, national public institutions, and Antioquia, Chocó, and Norte de Santander departments. Several interviews were conducted in person during field research visits. Antioquia, Chocó, and Norte de Santander departments were selected because they have some of the highest levels of child recruitment and use by NSAGs in the country. Between 2018–2023, the Ombudsman’s Office of Colombia issued 251 early warnings on the risk of child recruitment and use, with Antioquia and Chocó yielding the highest number, as demonstrated in Map 1. Antioquia also has a high presence of urban organised crime that uses children for criminal activities, which may have been overlooked by early alerts more focused on armed conflict. Norte de Santander, on the other hand, has been included because of its active conflict and migration situation on the border with Venezuela (DP 12/02/2024). The situation in all three departments is considered critical and complex as a result of the changing dynamics of control and clashes between NSAGs (KII 21/02/2024).

Limitations and information gaps

As there is no precise information on the number of children currently recruited and used by NSAGs and organised crime groups, this report presents trends and themes based on the information available, i.e. administrative data collected by public institutions, which is not representative and likely significantly underestimates the true dimension of child recruitment and use. Secondary data on child recruitment and use at the local level is limited and has been supplemented by KIIs.

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KEY FINDINGS

- Driven by intensifying confrontations between NSAGs, child recruitment and use in Colombia appears to be increasing. The latest UN report on children and armed conflict in Colombia stated that the country task force identified an increase of 58% in verified cases of NSAG recruitment and use for the period 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2023, as compared to findings for the same previous two-year period (UN SC 13/02/2024).
- NSAGs and organised crime groups employ different approaches in their recruitment and use of children. Such approaches range from more subtle coercion, where a child is enticed with promises of money and status, to direct threats or acts of violence (KII 30/01/2024; KII 29/01/2024 a; KII 11/01/2024).
- The lack of economic opportunities, state presence, and infrastructure, as well as high levels of poverty, are the most significant factors increasing a child's vulnerability to recruitment and use by NSAGs and organised crime groups. As a result, the populations most economically excluded, such as indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and rural communities, tend to be those most affected (UN SC 13/02/2024).
- In order to increase their understanding of how to approach communities for child recruitment and use, NSAGs engage children to conduct 'espionage' within their communities. Espionage activities can also include the monitoring of rival groups (KII 29/01/2024 a; KII 22/01/2024; KII 11/01/2024).
- Sexual violence against children is a means of control and domination in NSAGs and organised crime groups. In most cases of girls' recruitment and use, they are subjected to sexual violence, including rape, unwanted pregnancies, forced abortions, and the forced use of premature birth control methods (UN SC 13/02/2024; KII 29/01/2024 a; KII 29/01/2024 b).
- NSAG and organised crime recruitment and use of children has long-term impacts on children's physical and psychological wellbeing and personal development, including the opening of a criminal record, the interruption or abandonment of education, difficulties adapting to education and work later in life, families' displacement to avoid child recruitment and use, and community and societal discrimination against children formerly engaged with NSAGs or organised crime groups (UNICEF/ICBF 11/05/2023; UNIMINUTO 03/2022; Schauer and Elbert 2010).
- In Chocó and other departments, as a result of the risk of recruitment into NSAGs, suicides have been reported among children of indigenous communities (UN HRC 15/03/2024).
- While children in Colombia are at risk of recruitment and use by both NSAGs and organised criminal groups, those engaged with organised crime are not included in the same institutional response as those recruited and used by NSAGs, even though there are marked similarities in how children are used by both types of groups and the effects of such involvement.

- The number of children recruited and used by NSAGs and organised crime groups is likely to rise in the next year (until the first semester of 2025), as armed confrontations between NSAGs increase, peace negotiations between the Colombian Government and some NSAGs experience complications, and the number of migrants and refugees passing through the country grows as part of the migration crisis affecting the Americas. Most such migrants and refugees experience poverty, heightening the risk of child recruitment and use (UN SC 13/02/2024; El Espectador 17/03/2024, Plan International 16/11/2023).

DEFINITIONS

The Paris Principles define child recruitment and use as: "A child associated with an armed force or armed group' refers to any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes" (UN 02/2007). This definition refers to armed forces or NSAGs in the context of armed conflict and, as such, excludes children in organised crime groups not considered parties to a conflict. Children in organised crime groups face similar circumstances to those in NSAGs participating in armed conflict, however, including similar roles and consequences for involvement, but are subject to a different legal regime (Legassicke et al. 25/04/2023).

This report follows, to a large extent, the definitions of recruitment and use outlined in the Colombian legal framework, as presented by the IOM and ICBF (IOM 17/03/2022; ICBF 04/01/2022). As a result of the similarities noted above, however, this report applies the term 'use' (defined below) to children associated with both NSAGs and organised crime groups.

Recruitment: the physical separation of children from their familial and community environment to directly participate in warlike, military, tactical, or support activities, playing any role within NSAGs or organised crime groups. The Colombian Constitutional Court outlined that any act of recruitment is understood as coercive, meaning that children are considered victims. This conduct is included in the Colombian criminal code under 'illicit recruitment' (IOM 17/03/2022; ICBF 04/01/2022).

Use: comprises all the practices and behaviours of those who promote, induce, facilitate, finance, or collaborate to make children participate in any NSAG or organised crime activity – using any form of violence, threat, coercion, or deception that leads to a violation of children's rights – with the aim of obtaining economic or any other kind of profit. This is included in the Colombian criminal code (article 188D) (IOM 01/2022; ICBF 14/07/2022).

As organised crime groups' use of children does not typically involve removal from their families, this report does not employ the term 'recruitment' when referring to organised crime groups, unless specific information relating to child recruitment by such groups was found.

Non-state armed groups (NSAGs): entities not officially affiliated with the state but organised enough to engage in hostilities recognised under international humanitarian law as ‘armed conflict’, often with political motivations. These groups include the National Liberation Army (ELN), FARC-EP dissident groups, and the Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AGC).

Organised crime groups: networks of individuals who are engaged in illicit activities for financial profit and use violence, corruption, and intimidation to achieve their goals. There are organised crime groups that maintain linkages with NSAGs in urban areas (InSight Crime 22/02/2022, DP 20/04/2021). Organised crime groups include Los Costeños, Los Pachelly, Los Paisas, the Venezuelan transnational organised crime group known as Tren de Aragua, and community-level organised crime groups, the operations of whom are restricted to specific neighbourhoods. These groups engage in activities such as drug trafficking, theft, extortion, and physical violence, including assassinations. In 2023, around 200 organised crime groups were identified as operating in urban areas (Pares 15/12/2023).

The distinction between NSAGs recruiting children and organised crime groups using children is not always clear. Some NSAGs have established alliances with organised crime groups operating at the local level in urban areas (InSight Crime 11/03/2024; La Silla Vacía 26/01/2024). NSAGs such as the AGC, ELN, and FARC-EP dissident groups, however, are also directly present in urban areas (Pares 15/12/2023). Sometimes, such NSAGs fight organised crime groups for control over drug trafficking in urban areas (Utadeo accessed 01/04/2023). In these cases, NSAGs are likely to incorporate children but not necessarily separate them from their homes and communities, nor make them combatants. Most of the information in this report pertains to children’s recruitment and use by NSAGs, as information on organised crime groups is far more limited; when information on organised crime groups exists, however, it is noted as such.

CHILD RECRUITMENT AND USE IN COLOMBIA

Child recruitment and use by NSAGs is one of six severe violations of children’s human rights monitored by the UN Security Council; such activities have been constant throughout the Colombian armed conflict since at least 1964 (Comisión de la Verdad 08/2022). Currently, FARC-EP dissident groups, followed by the ELN, AGC, and unknown groups are the main NSAGs involved in recruitment, as well as the Colombian Armed Forces (UN SC 13/02/2024).

There are no precise figures for the number of children currently recruited or used by NSAGs and organised crime groups. What information is available is based on administrative data collected by public institutions and other organisations, but such information is not representative and underestimates the true scope of the problem. The low number of verified cases does not reflect the magnitude and significance of child recruitment and use in Colombia, which is far worse than these numbers suggest. Still, available sources point to an increase in NSAG recruitment and use of children after the Colombian Government-FARC-EP peace agreement in 2016 (UN SC 8/12/2021). This was confirmed in the 2023 report of the UN Secretary General, which counted 348 verified cases of child recruitment and use in the period 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2023, an increase of 58% compared to the same previous two-year period (1 July 2019 to 30 June 2021) (UN SC 13/02/2024; UN SC 8/12/2021). The actual figure, however, is likely to be much higher.

The use of children by organised crime groups is also a concern, as such groups are not recognised as combatants in armed conflict and so children leaving organised crime groups are not included in reintegration programmes (KII 29/02/2024). While there are no precise figures for the number of children used by organised crime groups in Colombia, information on children’s criminal records gives an idea of its scope. Between 2016–2020, on average, 16,000 new cases entered the System for Criminal Responsibility of Youths, which investigates crimes by people between 14–18 years of age, each year. In 2021, 28% of children in this system were there for theft, 25% for drug trafficking or possession, and 13% for fabrication, trafficking, or possession of guns. Between 70–88% of all children in this system between 2018–2021 were boys (MJD 2022; ICBF accessed 01/04/2024). Children in organised crime groups appear to face similar circumstances to those involved in NSAGs; they are an important population to consider as affected by recruitment and use.

Distinguishing between child recruitment and use by NSAGs and organised crime groups

Following Colombian definitions, the 'recruitment' of children is distinguished from their 'use' by whether they are removed from their families. NSAGs engage in both the recruitment and use of children, whereas organised crime groups typically exploit children in ways that align with 'use'. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, however, the differences between 'recruitment' and 'use' extend beyond whether a child is removed from their family, as such also affects a child's likely role or activities as well as the possible impacts of their involvement with NSAGs or organised crime groups.

Figure 1. Affected groups, forms of recruitment, and potential consequences of child recruitment

Characteristics of child recruitment by NSAGs and organised crime groups

Groups at <u>heightened risk</u>	Forms of child recruitment	Potential consequences
Girls, especially Migrant and refugee girls Indigenous girls	Exploitative domestic labour Multiple forms of sexual exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restricted freedom of movement • Separation from caregivers/families • Cultural disconnect • Having a criminal record • Dropping out of school • Death • Psychological and emotional trauma
Boys, especially Indigenous boys, Afro-Colombian boys, Migrant and refugee boys	Engaged as armed combatants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forced use of contraceptives • Forced abortion

source: ACAPS

Figure 2. Affected groups, forms of use, and potential consequences of child use

Characteristics of the use of children by NSAGs and organised crime groups

Groups at <u>heightened risk</u>	Forms of child use	Potential consequences
Girls, particularly Migrant and refugee girls and children who identify as LGBTQIA+	Multiple forms of sexual exploitation and abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexually transmitted diseases • Unwanted pregnancies • Discrimination/ stigma
Children with disabilities Indigenous children Afro-Colombian children	Used as messengers for and in weapons trafficking, espionage, and drug trafficking Used in coca crop cultivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological and emotional trauma • Death • Physical injury
Boys	Used in extortion Used to commit physical violence including assassinations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threats to the security of the child's family • Having a criminal record • Dropping out of school

source: ACAPS

Note: The groups identified as at heightened risk correspond with ACAPS analysis and KIIs, but it is possible that any child could be at risk. The list of consequences here is also not exhaustive.

In the three locations covered in this report, child recruitment (as per the Colombian legal definition, where children are removed from their families) was typically associated with NSAGs engaging children as combatants and for other support tasks, such as cooking or facility maintenance (exploitative domestic labour). In KIIs, exploitation and roles sharing marked similarities with the Colombian legal definition of 'use' were discussed in relation to organised crime groups, although child use was also mentioned in relation to NSAGs. Child use involves support activities that often incorporate violence, but not necessarily within the context of armed conflict. Such activities include working as messengers, trafficking drugs and weapons, extortion, and the killing of rivals, among others. Both NSAGs and organised crime groups use children, particularly girls, for sexual exploitation (DP 07/2020).

Factors increasing the risk of child recruitment and use

Individual factors – such as economic hardship, psychological pressures, and personal grievances – provide NSAGs with opportunities to recruit children (UNIDIR 02/07/2022). NSAGs establish a feeling of indebtedness among children, compelling them to comply with group demands (KII 29/01/2024 a). One form of association is through loans managed by NSAGs. If families are unable to pay, they may be coerced into allowing their children to join the NSAG in order to ‘settle’ the debt (KII 29/01/2024 a). Familial ties can also form another recruitment tactic, as children with older family members already involved with NSAGs are enlisted by their relatives. Peer networks aiming to recruit other children into NSAGs also exert considerable influence (KII 29/01/2024 a).

NSAGs can provide a ‘stable’, vastly superior source of income to what children (or their families) might procure in the legal economy, allowing children to frame their association as a job or way out of poverty (KII 13/02/2024; KII 30/01/2024). Both NSAGs and organised crime groups also use drugs to engage children. Once children start receiving income or drugs from NSAGs or organised crime groups, they become increasingly at risk of being coerced into permanent involvement (DP 20/04/2021; KII 21/02/2024; KII 13/02/2024).

Child recruitment and use in urban and rural contexts

Child recruitment and use are present in both urban and rural areas but vary according to context. Child recruitment by NSAGs is commonly associated with rural areas, where armed conflicts primarily take place. NSAGs have greater social and territorial control in rural areas, allowing them to more effectively target children for recruitment and use. These areas have limited state presence, a concentration of illicit coca crop cultivation, and are located where drugs transport occurs, such as by rivers, making them attractive to NSAGs (UN SC 08/12/2021; ICG 24/02/2023; KII 11/01/2024). In rural areas, children are sometimes taken from their homes to perform tasks at NSAG camps or other locations (KII 15/02/2024). While NSAGs recruit some children for combat, children are also used for support tasks, such as espionage, messengering, cooking, cleaning, extortion, coca cultivation, and sexual purposes (UN SC 13/02/2024). Rural areas are home to specific groups of children at heightened risk of recruitment and use by NSAGs, such as indigenous and Afro-Colombian children (UN SC 08/12/2021; ICG 24/02/2023; KII 11/01/2024).

In rural areas, NSAGs employ persuasion, such as economic incentives and community engagement, to normalise and legitimise recruitment, make it appear voluntary, and reduce its visibility to the authorities and wider society (KII 21/02/2024). For example, children receive school supplies before the beginning of the school season and toys in the pre-Christmas period.

These tactics align with the experience of one interviewee.

“The children said that the armed members approached them in the territory from an early age, and had control of and a relationship with the community. From this proximity, a relationship is established that begins with small favours and, little by little, ends in a form of linkage that leads to recruitment. A young person in a study mentioned that he did not realise this when he became involved, and it was already too difficult to back out. It is a process that begins with small forms of use and progresses to more use, which implies a greater relationship, and ends in forms of recruitment.” (KII 23/01/2024)

Both NSAGs and organised crime groups are present in urban areas and often establish alliances (InSight Crime 22/02/2022; DP 20/04/2021; KII 29/02/2024; KII 15/02/2024; KII 13/02/2024; KII 23/01/2024). In urban areas, NSAGs and organised crime groups encourage children’s drug use and addiction to expand the local market, gain control over children, and coerce them into distributing for the group. As a result of their typically heightened economic vulnerability, displaced children arriving in urban areas are particularly at risk of coercion into drug use, which can lead to engagement in drug distribution or other forms of child exploitation (DP 07/2020). Interviewees noted that, for the most part, children engaged in organised crime groups in urban areas are used for hazardous activities, such as extortion, committing acts of violence (including killing), drugs and weapons trafficking, and commercial sexual exploitation (DP 07/2020; KII 13/02/2024; KII 15/02/2024; KII 29/01/2024 b). It is also common for NSAGs and organised crime groups to organise social events, such as football games and parties, in order to approach children (KII 13/02/2024; KII 29/01/2024 a; KII 11/01/2024).

CHILD RECRUITMENT AND USE IN CHOCÓ, NORTE DE SANTANDER, AND ANTIOQUIA

Chocó

Chocó is situated in the west of the country and has coastlines on both the Pacific and Atlantic coasts bordering Panama. The department has been affected by the presence and expansion of NSAGs since 2021, driving the deterioration of the humanitarian situation. Particularly in rural areas, NSAGs fight for control over the production and transit of drugs and illegal mining (OCHA 27/09/2023). An interviewee who worked on the issue of child recruitment and use at the department level reported that socioeconomic disparities – alongside the broader impacts of armed conflict, such as displacement, confinement, and homicide – aggravate civilians' vulnerability to child recruitment and use by NSAGs and organised crime groups (KII 30/01/2024). Descriptive statistics for Chocó department are found on Table 3 below.

Table 3. Baseline information for Chocó department

INDICATOR	CHOCÓ	COLOMBIA
Population	605,478	52,695,952
% Ethnicity (2018)	Indigenous = 16 Afro-Colombian = 78.9	Indigenous = 4.37 Afro-Colombian = 6.77
% of population in poverty according to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022)	36.8	12.9
% Illiteracy (2022)	21.9	7.7
% Low educational attainment (2022)	58.9	40.9
% Unemployment rate (2022)	12.5	11.2

Sources: DANE (03/2023 a, 03/2023 b, 11/2021, 23/05/2023 a, 23/05/2023 b, 05/04/2023).

Municipalities with proximity to the Pacific Ocean serve as strategic points in the transport of drugs, making them lucrative territories for NSAGs (InSight Crime 27/10/2023). These regions also have less law enforcement, making it easier for NSAGs to operate and recruit or use children without significant opposition. The geographical isolation of coastal communities also aggravates social and economic vulnerabilities, such as limited access to education and economic opportunities, which NSAGs exploit to recruit and use children (KII 30/01/2024; KII/29/01/2024 a; KII 11/01/2024).

Alerts issued by the Ombudsman's Office of Colombia and ICBF in 2023 highlighted the particularly high risk of child recruitment and use in Chocó municipalities, such as Acandí, Bagadó, Juradó, Río Iro, and Unguia, where concerns included NSAG use, recruitment, and sexual violence targeting children (DP 14/03/2024; OCHA 27/09/2023). In 2023, according to civil society organisation monitoring in the department, 56 cases of child recruitment were officially recorded, although the actual number may be closer to 200–400, indicating a discrepancy between this data and the true severity of the situation. Who carried out this recruitment, NSAGs or organised crime groups, is unknown (KII 11/01/2024).

Child recruitment and use in rural areas of Chocó

An interviewee noted that NSAGs in rural areas tend to employ less overt methods in their recruitment and use of children, often normalised by communities as protective measures (KII 30/01/2024). Such tactics involve persuasion through social events and payments for minor tasks (KII 17/01/2024; KII 11/01/2024). Children are coerced by these tactics and, according to one interviewee, the Government's lack of adequate presence and protective response makes children more susceptible to NSAG recruitment or use.

"(...) Because of the absence of the state, they [NSAG] have championships, they bring sweets, there is a very high [NSAG] presence. There is a strong relationship with the communities, the armed members take them [community members] as their wives, the boys become friends with them. The members offer drinks and have parties, and the children identify themselves with the armed members. They also provide loans and if they are not repaid, they force the children to join the groups as payment." (KII 29/01/2024 a)

Especially in rural areas and the collective territories of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, NSAGs have had a historical presence, contributing to their normalisation and posing significant risks to communities (DP 07/2020). This historical presence and the subsequent normalisation of child recruitment and use undermines people's ability to recognise it as exploitation.

NSAGs in Chocó have established themselves as suppliers of food and necessities, fostering a favourable perception among communities. In this department, where poverty rates are disproportionately high compared to other regions of Colombia, factors such as limited opportunities, lack of alternatives, and economic vulnerability significantly influence a community's susceptibility to child recruitment and use, particularly in rural areas. As at 2022, Chocó's monetary poverty rate was 65.1% (DANE 22/11/2022). This situation, coupled with parental consent, facilitates child recruitment and use by NSAGs (KII 29/01/2024 a). In

rural areas, NSAGs have also contributed to improving infrastructure, such as schools and health centres, replacing the state and gaining popularity by building trust and social capital among communities (KII 29/01/2024 b).

In Chocó, parents may consent to children's involvement with NSAGs for various reasons, ranging from stigmatisation, threats, and fear of reprisals to the perception that joining these groups offers protection or otherwise scarce opportunities for their children. NSAGs also employ methods of community-based espionage to ingratiate themselves with communities, so as to better understand community dynamics and build the social capital necessary to recruit and exploit children more easily (KII 11/01/2024; KII 22/01/2024; KII 29/01/2024 a).

Child use in urban areas of Chocó

Interviewees suggested that in urban areas of Chocó, such as the capital Quibdo, both NSAGs and organised crime groups more commonly carry out exploitation that matches or shares similarities with the Colombian legal definition of child use through direct violence, threats, and coercion. One interviewee reported that students are used for weapons and drug trafficking, carrying these items in their school backpacks from one location to another or to school facilities, endangering other children (KII 29/01/2024 a). An interviewee with experience responding to child recruitment and use reported that if children refuse to participate in assigned activities, they put themselves and their families at risk of violent consequences (KII 29/01/2024 b). According to the Chocó Dioceses, 183 children aged 15–18 were killed for refusing to join an NSAG in 2022. In 2023, this figure was 127 (KII 29/01/2024 a).

Urban areas of Quibdo and the Istmina municipality also have organised crime groups that use children for messengering, extortion, and espionage against rivals.

Norte de Santander

Norte de Santander is a department in northeast Colombia bordering Venezuela. As at 2022, Norte de Santander's monetary poverty rate stood at 44.8% (DANE 22/11/2022). The department is a key corridor for migrant and refugee transit (UNODC 25/05/2023). Norte de Santander is also one of the departments with the most area dedicated to coca crops, NSAGs' main source of income (Govt. Colombia/UNODC 12/09/2023). Coca cultivation has, in turn, also become one of the main economic activities available to children and their families in rural areas of this department. Table 4 gives descriptive statistics for Norte de Santander.

Table 4. Baseline information for Norte de Santander

INDICATOR	NORTE DE SANTANDER	COLOMBIA
Population	1,709,570	52,695,952
% Ethnicity (2018)	Indigenous = 0.3 Afro-Colombian = 0.4	Indigenous = 4.37 Afro-Colombian = 6.77
% of population in poverty according to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022)	18.5	12.9
% Illiteracy (2022)	8.7	7.7
% Low educational attainment (2022)	47.9	40.9
% Unemployment rate (2022)	12.1	11.2

Sources: DANE (03/2023 a, 03/2023 b, 11/2021, accessed 11/04/2024, 23/05/2023 a, 23/05/2023 b, 05/04/2023).

These factors make the department highly attractive to NSAGs, including the ELN, FARC-EP dissident groups, and both community-level and transnational organised crime groups, such as the Venezuelan Tren de Aragua. Norte de Santander's capital, Cucuta, ranks 43 on the list of the 50 most violent cities in the world, attributable to disputes over territory and migrant trafficking routes between NSAGs and organised armed groups, as well as other criminal activities (Seguridad, Justicia y Paz 02/2024). In the department, the Catatumbo region is particularly affected, as the Tibú municipality – located in the region – has the most hectares of coca crop cultivation in the country (Govt. Colombia/UNODC 12/09/2023).

Child recruitment and use in rural areas of Norte de Santander

NSAGs control rural areas with coca crop cultivation, exposing children to use (InSight Crime 28/10/2019). By providing access to money and positions of authority, NSAGs in Norte de Santander persuade children to join and encourage families to agree, offering relatives part of their children's income for coca cultivation. This has encouraged families to keep their children out of school in order to seek economic resources (Radio Nacional 11/11/2022). As such, children from economically vulnerable families are at heightened risk of NSAG recruitment and use in Norte de Santander, alongside displaced children, as displacement causes disruption to daily life, including impeding access to education (OCHA 09/2023).

Recruitment by direct force also happens in the department, as NSAGs and organised crime groups both abduct children in the Catatumbo region and rural areas of Cucuta and Zulia municipalities. An interviewee working to prevent child recruitment and use reported that the fear of potential abduction stops parents from allowing their children to go out alone or visit relatives in urban areas (KII 15/02/2024). On 20 February 2024, six youths were abducted by

NSAGs in the Catatumbo region, sparking protests by coca crop farmers. As at 7 March, the youths whereabouts still remained unknown (OCHA Monitor accessed 07/03/2024). Families tend not to seek government protection, as such institutions are absent in many affected areas. Instead, community leaders (such as indigenous authorities) and civil society organisations are active in response and protection programmes, as well as in the reintegration of recruited children via negotiations with NSAGs (KII 15/02/2024).

Child use in urban areas of Norte de Santander

One interviewee reported that, in urban areas of Norte de Santander, organised crime groups introduce children to drugs, encouraging dependency and facilitating their use or exploitation (KII 15/02/2024). According to another interviewee, children's refusal to join such groups can result in death (KII 13/02/2024).

Antioquia

Antioquia is a department in central-northwest Colombia with a narrow section bordering the Caribbean Sea. In 2022, disputes over control of drug trafficking routes and illegal mining among NSAGs led to a reconfiguration in the Bajo Cauca, Norte, Occidente, and Urabá regions, with significant humanitarian impacts for civilians, including displacement, confinement, child recruitment and use, and abductions (OCHA 20/06/2023). Table 5 gives descriptive statistics for Antioquia.

Table 5. Baseline information for Antioquia

INDICATOR	ANTIOQUIA	COLOMBIA
Population	6,903,721	52,695,952
% Ethnicity (2018)	Indigenous= 0.6 Afro-Colombian = 5.3	Indigenous = 4.37 Afro-Colombian= 6.77
% of population in poverty according to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022)	10.7	12.9
% Illiteracy (2022)	7.0	7.7
% Low educational attainment (2022)	39.9	40.9
% Unemployment rate (2022)	10.1	11.2

Sources: DANE (03/2023 a, 03/2023 b, 11/2021, accessed 11/04/2024, 23/05/2023 a, 23/05/2023 b, 05/04/2023).

In Antioquia, the dynamics of child recruitment and use in rural and urban settings are not so clearly differentiated. Instead, such dynamics are more linked to the extent of NSAG control in an area (KII 13/02/2024).

Child recruitment and use in Antioquia's areas of contested control

Child recruitment and use is more frequent in areas of Antioquia where NSAGs continuously fight over social and territorial control, such as in Ituango municipality and the Bajo Cauca region, where FARC-EP dissidents, ELN, AGC, and regional organised crime groups dispute the territory (OCHA 01/03/2024). In Bajo Cauca, child recruitment and use by NSAGs is predominantly linked to drug trafficking, armed combat, coca crop cultivation, and the installation of anti-personnel mines (OCHA 20/06/2023). One interviewee suggested that child recruitment and use is a response to NSAGs' loss of men and need to strengthen their ranks (KII 21/02/2024). The interviewee also noted cases in which NSAGs offer children money and job opportunities, which, alongside the lack of opportunities and generalised control, normalise child recruitment and use, contributing to communities' inability to denounce these acts. In the Magdalena Medio region, NSAGs use violence and threats to recruit children, leading families to displacement in order to avoid their children's recruitment (KII 21/02/2024).

Child recruitment and use in areas of Antioquia where one NSAG retains control

One interviewee suggested that, in areas of Antioquia clearly controlled by one NSAG, child recruitment and use are less necessary because the group does not need to expand (KII 13/02/2024). In such areas, the community is also less likely to report recruitment. Another interviewee described the complexity of the situation.

“Between 2018–2020, there were more confrontations, but from 2021 to date, the AGC have been consolidating territory and control of the population. This involves social control and fines, among other forms. There is increasingly strong control, [and] recruitment and use [of children] has become a justification, under the argument of ‘creating employment’ in areas with economic difficulties. These factors make it more likely for children to view involvement with these groups as an option that is not forced. This is important since children continue to be victims, but the system can perceive them as perpetrators.” (KII 21/02/2024)

Child use in urban areas

In urban areas, such as Medellín and Bello municipalities, NSAGs (e.g. the AGC) and organised crime groups use children for drug trafficking, messengering, extortion, and in the commission of physical violence, including killing. Medellín in particular has several organised crime groups working with the AGC in trafficking drugs to more rural, peripheral areas of the city (El Espectador 04/04/2021).

CHILDREN AT PARTICULAR RISK OF RECRUITMENT AND USE BY NSAGS AND ORGANISED CRIME GROUPS IN CHOCÓ, NORTE DE SANTANDER, AND ANTIOQUIA

Indigenous and Afro-Colombian children

Indigenous communities living in zones of armed conflict and coca crop cultivation are highly susceptible to child recruitment and use by NSAGs (UNICEF/ICBF 11/05/2023). A UNICEF-ICBF study on reintegrating children between 2013–2022 showed an increase in the number from indigenous communities entering the programme, from 13.2–23.02% (UNICEF/ICBF 11/05/2023). The recruitment and use of indigenous children and youth have distinct impacts on children and their communities, including disrupting traditional cultural practices and values, resulting in a loss of identity, disruption of social structures, and erosion of values within indigenous communities. The trauma of armed conflict and recruitment also has lasting psychological effects on indigenous communities (ONIC 12/2023; KII 30/01/2024). The UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recently highlighted concerns around increasing instances of suicide among indigenous children, with some attempting such to avoid NSAG recruitment (UNHRC 15/03/2024).

In Chocó, Afro-Colombian children are at particularly high risk of recruitment and use by NSAGs and organised crime groups, as 79.5% of the total population identify as Afro-Colombian (DANE 09/11/2021). Factors such as discrimination, lack of access to basic health, education, water, and sanitation services, and climate-related emergencies increase the risk of child recruitment and use in indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities (UN SC 13/02/2024).

Migrant and refugee children

The three departments discussed in this report are commonly used as transit points by migrants and refugees, such as the border with Venezuela in Norte de Santander and the Darién Gap in Chocó and Antioquia. As at September 2023, over 1,000 cases of unaccompanied or

separated children were reported in the border region of Norte de Santander, 90% of whom did not have a migratory document (GIFFM/R4V 25/09/2023).

Alongside sexual exploitation, human trafficking, and abduction, child recruitment and use are among the protection risks to which migrant and asylum seekers children are particularly exposed (OIM 31/03/2023). Transnational human trafficking networks, in collaboration with NSAGs and organised crime groups, exploit this exposure by enticing individuals with promises of employment, only to subject them to sexual exploitation (OCHA/UNCT Colombia 29/02/2024).

Unaccompanied and separated children are particularly at risk of recruitment and use by NSAGs and organised crime groups, as they are not in school and may travel in groups with adults who are not their caregivers or parents (R4V 15/02/2023). In other transit zones, such as Medellín and its greater metropolitan area (Valle de Aburrá), NSAGs use migrant and refugee children for drug trafficking and messengering. One interviewee argued that, as migrant and refugee children likely have weaker social support networks and greater economic hardship, they face higher risk of recruitment and use (KII 21/02/2024).

Children with disabilities

One interviewee noted that NSAGs perceive children with disabilities as easier targets for recruitment and use, exploiting their disability and lack of protection to manipulate them into joining. In Antioquia, there have been instances of NSAG use of children with disabilities, offering money in exchange for minor tasks. The same interviewee noted that marginalisation and stigmatisation of children with disabilities within their communities makes them more vulnerable to NSAG recruitment, as such offers a sense of belonging, identity, and purpose (KII 13/02/2024).

Gender differences in recruitment and use

Child recruitment and use by NSAGs varies according to gender. While most children recruited by NSAGs are boys, there has been a noted increase in girl recruits. The 2024 UN report on children and armed conflict in Colombia found an increase in the number of girls recruited compared to the 2019–2021 findings, from 70 to 115. As these are reported statistics, the actual figures are likely much higher. According to the report, girls tend to be recruited at a younger age than boys, as 43% of recruited girls were 15 years of age or under, compared with only 27% of boys (UN 13/02/2024). As there is an information gap regarding the gendered use of children by organised crime groups, this section focuses primarily on NSAGs' gendered recruitment and use of children.

NSAG recruitment and use of boys

Boys are typically recruited for combat roles; they are trained, armed, and expected to participate in combat. Boys between 12–17 years of age are often recruited under the guise that NSAG involvement will provide an escape from poverty, earn respect, or enable the assertion of their masculinity in contexts where traditional gender roles prioritise male strength and dominance (KII 23/01/2024). In Chocó, boys are recruited as armed combatants in both rural and urban areas (KII 21/02/2024; KII 13/02/2024; KII 12/02/2024).

One interviewee noted that, in Chocó, there had also been documented cases of boys being raped and sexually assaulted in NSAGs. Children identifying as LGBTQ+ are at risk of sexual assault and rape, but as such meet with stigma and homophobia in societies with more traditional gender norms, there is significant underreporting of these cases (KII 29/01/2024 a).

NSAG recruitment and use of girls

Although there are cases of girls being recruited by NSAGs for use in combat, girls are more typically used in domestic roles, for espionage, as recruiters of boys, or for sexual exploitation (KII 15/02/2024; UN SC 13/02/2024; KII 29/01/2024 a; DP 12/02/2024; UN 05/06/2023; KII 23/01/2024). Across the three departments, the sexual exploitation of girls was a common theme. Forms of violence and exploitation girls experience include rape and sexual assault, often under the guise of forced relationships, with girls being framed as the ‘girlfriend’ or ‘wife’ of an NSAG member.

One interviewee noted that, when NSAGs have celebrations in Antioquia, the use of girls coincides with sexual assault and rape (KII 13/02/2024). NSAGs sexually exploit girls, coercing them into sex in exchange for money or material objects by threatening the girl and her family (OCHA 20/06/2023). Similarly, in Chocó and Norte de Santander, NSAGs also sexually exploit girls, making them serve as companions or sexual partners for male combatants and commanders, with the girls receiving money or other objects in exchange (KII 15/02/2024; KII 13/02/2024; KII 29/01/2024 b). En Antioquia department, there have also been cases of NSAGs recruiting girls for commercial sexual exploitation in the border region with Panama (OCHA 01/03/2024). Interviewees noted that fear leads to the underreporting of such cases, as several girls have been murdered for speaking out (KII 29/01/2024 b; KII 22/01/2024). In both Norte de Santander and Chocó, NSAGs also, after raping girls, brandish them with tattoos to mark them as NSAG property (KII 12/02/2024; KII 30/01/2024; KII 17/01/2024).

In Antioquia, NSAGs use both girls and boys to conduct espionage in communities as a form of infiltration. The shape this espionage takes is gendered, however, with girls forced to provide sexual services to gain trust in the community. The information obtained helps NSAGs develop strategic plans to expand their influence, consolidate control over territory,

counter opposition within the community or rival groups, and monitor the movements and activities of community members, including authorities, security forces, rival groups, and potential spies (UN SC 13/02/2024).

THE CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD RECRUITMENT AND USE BY NSAGS AND ORGANISED CRIME GROUPS

For children, their families, and communities, being recruited or used by NSAGs or organised crime groups brings serious consequences. Below are some of the most prominent consequences.

- **Impacts on mental health:** boys recruited and used by NSAGs and organised crime groups experience severe psychological trauma as a result of their exposure to and participation in violence and coercion. Similarly, girls also experience significant psychological trauma as a result of exposure to violence, coercion, and sexual abuse. This trauma can manifest in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and other psychological disorders. Suicide attempts among girl survivors of sexual violence linked to child recruitment and use have been reported in Chocó and Norte de Santander (KII 15/02/2024; KII 13/02/2024; KII 30/01/2024). Child recruitment and use has also been linked to suicides in indigenous communities in Chocó (ONIC 12/23).
- **Health impacts, including reproductive health:** children who leave NSAGs often arrive to the ICBF in a state of malnutrition. Girls associated with NSAGs are also often ordered to take contraceptives at a very young age to prevent pregnancies from sexual abuse and exploitation, the long-term health implications of which can have significant effects on their physical and reproductive health and mental wellbeing (KII 30/01/2024). Girls recruited by NSAGs also face other reproductive health risks, including unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and complications from unsafe abortions (KII 30/01/2024; KII 29/01/2024 a). The ICBF, in its support for girls who experienced unwanted pregnancies, found that some were forced to abort, and others gave birth (KII 30/01/2024). In both Antioquia and Norte de Santander, cases of child marriage to NSAG members have been reported (OCHA 20/06/2023; KII 13/02/2024). Although there is less information on the health effects of girls’ association with organised criminal groups, similar sexual exploitation means girls likely experience similar reproductive health consequences.
- **Family separation:** children face separation from their families as a result of either NSAG recruitment or as a strategy to prevent recruitment – i.e. children being sent from rural to urban areas to reduce their risk of recruitment (KII 15/02/2024).
- **Cultural uprooting:** NSAG recruitment of indigenous children disrupts indigenous communities’ traditional cultural practices and values. The loss of young community members can weaken cultural identity and cohesion, leading to the erosion of indigenous languages, customs, and spiritual beliefs (Romero 19/06/2018).

- **Physical Harm:** children recruited into NSAGs or used by organised crime groups are often exposed to direct violence (including combat), leading to physical injuries or even death. They may be forced to participate in very dangerous activities, such as engage in combat, install landmines, or carry out attacks, resulting in injuries or disabilities (UN SC 13/02/2024; InSight Crime 08/04/2021). In 2023, four indigenous minors were killed by one FARC-EP dissident NSAG when attempting to escape recruitment in Caquetá (El Espectador 15/06/2023). Similarly, in urban areas, children are exposed to injury or death when they become involved in violent conflicts, drug trafficking, or other dangerous endeavours devised by organised crime groups (Alcaldía de Medellín 2019).
- **Disrupted development, including reduced access to education:** child recruitment and use by NSAGs and organised crime groups disrupt children's developmental trajectory, depriving them of education, social interaction, and personal growth. Recruited and used children typically leave school early; even if they leave NSAGs or organised crime groups later, it is difficult to re-start studies, decreasing future economic prospects. Recruited and used children are prematurely forced into adult roles, robbing them of their childhood and the chance to develop essential life skills.
- **Social stigmatisation:** children formerly in NSAGs and organised armed groups often face social stigma and discrimination upon returning to their communities. Such children may be viewed with suspicion or fear, making it difficult for them to rebuild relationships and reintegrate into society. Fear of stigma and further victimisation deters survivors from reporting sexual crimes to authorities, reducing their chance of receiving services that mitigate the harmful effects of violence (KII 13/02/2024).
- **Legal consequences:** involvement with organised crime groups exposes children to legal consequences, including arrest, imprisonment, and criminal records, with long-term consequences on future education, employment, and social integration opportunities (CONPES 06/06/2022).

RESPONSE CAPACITY

Colombia has made significant strides in aligning with international legal frameworks to protect children from NSAG recruitment and use. Colombia adopted the Rome Statute in 2002¹, under which NSAG recruitment and use of children under 15 years of age are considered war crimes (Comisión de la Verdad 08/2022). In 2002, the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child concerning the involvement of children in armed conflict began implementation, raising the age under which NSAG recruitment and use is prohibited to 18 years. In 2006, Colombia issued its Code for Infancy and Adolescence, which reiterated the protection of children during armed conflict, including protection from recruitment and use (Comision de la Verdad 08/2022).

The ICBF, the institution primarily responsible for protecting children's rights in the country, leads the institutional response to child recruitment and use by NSAGs. As part of its mandate, the ICBF leads reintegration programmes for children formerly recruited and used by NSAGs. Between 2019–2021, the ICBF supported 392 children (67% boys, 33% girls) who had been recruited and used by NSAGs (UN 13/02/2024). It is likely that this represents only a small proportion of the affected NNA. Monitoring of child recruitment and use by NSAGs falls under the responsibility of the Ombudsman's Office of Colombia, which issues alerts to municipal and national response mechanisms regarding threats and reported cases (DP 12/04/2023). The humanitarian sector supports ICBF work focused on protection and prevention, primarily through UNICEF. There is an information gap regarding the existence and scope of programmes targeting children previously associated with organised crime groups.

Schools are compromised in their capacity to protect children from NSAG recruitment and use, as NSAGs are present within or in close proximity to schools (COALICO 21/02/2024). Interviewees noted that factors such as poor educational infrastructure and threats to teachers affect students' safety within educational institutions (KII 21/02/2024). At the same time, dropping out of school exposes children to additional risks and susceptibilities, further increasing the likelihood of NSAG recruitment and use (KII 13/02/2024).

Response challenges

The Government's distinction between organised crime groups and NSAGs excludes children recruited by organised crime groups from reintegration programmes. One interviewee noted that this exclusion leaves children vulnerable to arrest and imprisonment, hindering their rehabilitation efforts (KII 29/02/2024). Consequently, these children are not formally

¹ The application of the Rome Statute began in November 2002, except for war crimes, which began seven years later (CC 2012).

acknowledged as victims, leading to a lack of appropriate legal recognition and protection. This particularly affects children in urban settings, who are often exploited by organised crime groups not officially recognised as part of armed conflict. In contrast, although children associated with NSAGs also engage in illicit activities, there is a legal framework allowing them to enter ICBF reintegration programmes after leaving NSAGs (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá 22/01/2003; Congreso de Colombia 10/06/2011).

Despite legal measures, the institutional response faces substantial challenges. While the ICBF plays a critical role in reintegration efforts, its resources are insufficient to address the increasing number of children exposed to recruitment and use by NSAGs (UN SC 13/02/2024). Factors such as territorial control, community fears of reprisal, and limited resources impede the institutional response.

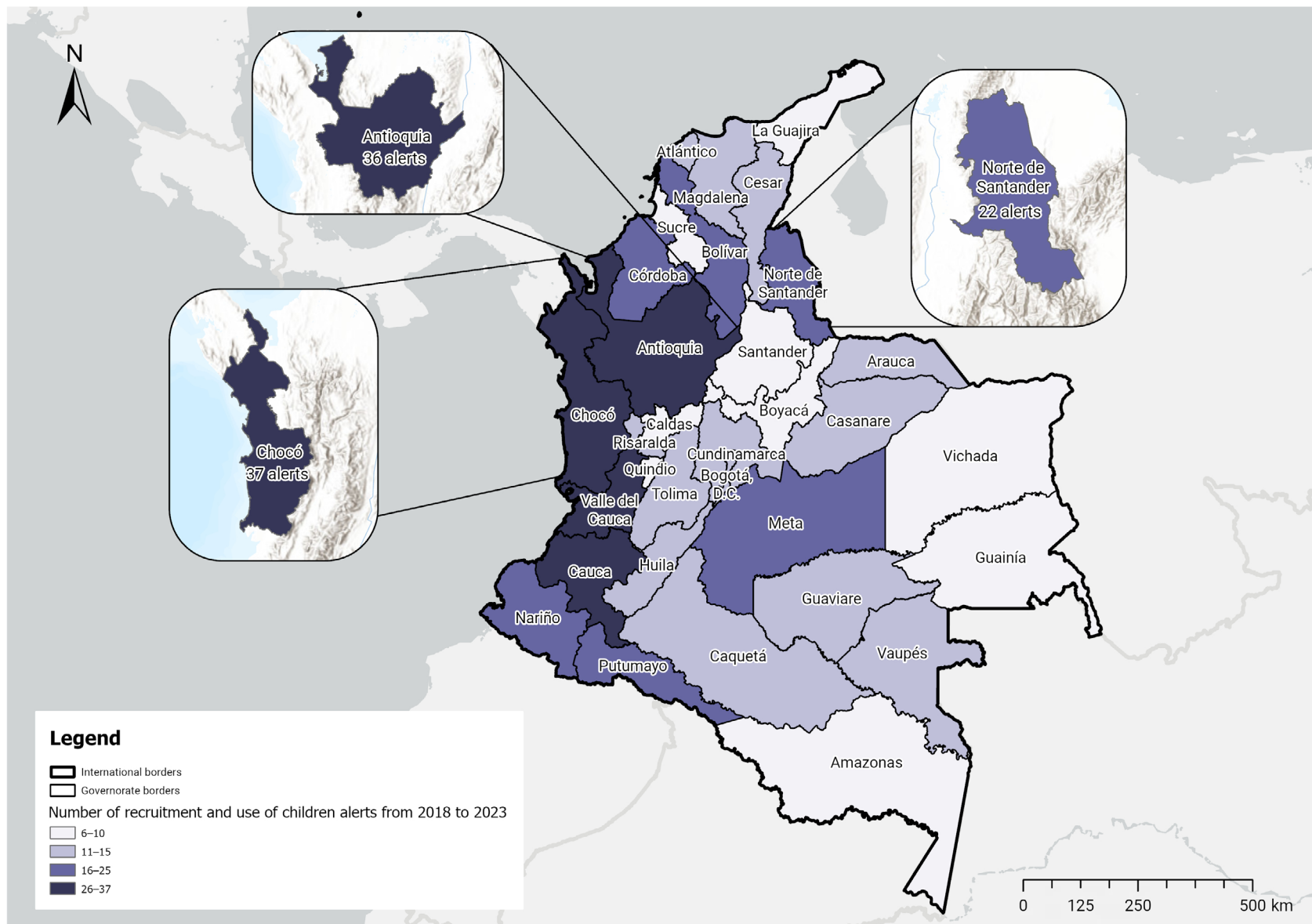
Challenges also persist at the territorial level, where institutional difficulties, security concerns, and inadequate response mechanisms hinder immediate protection. Efforts such as the Recruitment Prevention Policy and Immediate Action Teams have been introduced, but these initiatives encounter continuous obstacles, particularly in areas with high NSAG activity (COALICO 21/02/2024).

To address these issues, the Government established the Intersectoral Commission for the Prevention of Child Use and Recruitment, consisting of 22 institutions. This commission coordinates efforts among various ministries and institutions to combat child recruitment and use by NSAGs. The Catholic church and civil society organisations engage in direct interventions, negotiating with NSAGs to retrieve children, particularly in Norte de Santander and Chocó (ST-CIPRUNNA accessed 08/03/2024). Several humanitarian organisations, such as UNICEF, World Vision, and War Child run programmes focused on protection, education, and psychosocial support. Such initiatives aim to mitigate or eliminate the risks associated with child recruitment and use by NSAGs and offer prevention programmes. Civil society organisations also play a crucial role in providing alternative pathways for children living in conflict zones, helping to decrease the risk of recruitment and use by NSAGs. These organisations use innovative approaches, including programmes incorporating art and theatre, as response mechanisms to the risk of recruitment. UNICEF also collaborates with the ICBF to support reintegration programmes for children affected by recruitment and use.

In 2021, the Ombudsman's Office of Colombia introduced a prevention strategy targeting schools and adjacent communities, aiming to raise human rights awareness and strategies to avoid child recruitment and use by NSAGs. This initiative, currently prioritising 80 municipalities, includes educational materials, interactive sessions, and reports on the evolution of recruitment in prioritised locations (DP 12/2023 and 12/02/2021; El Tiempo 15/03/2024). As at November 2023, approximately 10,000 children, parents, teachers, caregivers, and educators had participated in trainings across the country. While this number is a positive

indication of outreach, further assessment is needed to determine the prevention strategy's long-term impact and effectiveness in reducing the risk of child recruitment and use by NSAGs in targeted municipalities (DP 12/2023).

MAP 1. NUMBER OF CHILD RECRUITMENT AND USE ALERTS, 2018–2023 – OMBUDSMAN’S OFFICE OF COLOMBIA



Source: ACAPS using data from DP (accessed 11/03/2024)