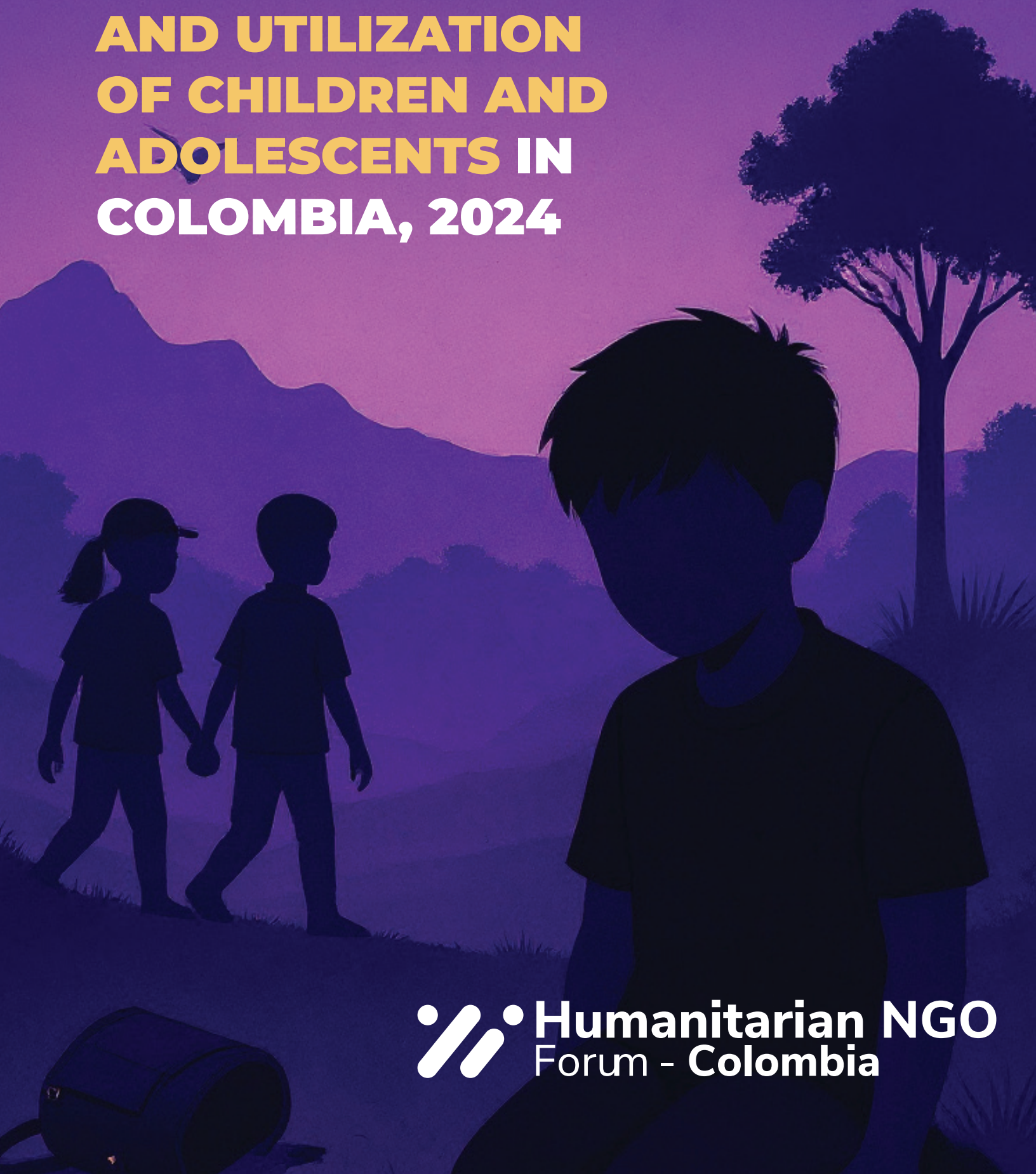


# **SITUATION OF THE RECRUITMENT, USE AND UTILIZATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN COLOMBIA, 2024**





# SITUATION OF THE RECRUITMENT, USE AND UTILIZATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN COLOMBIA, 2024

**At least 1,700 children and adolescents were recruited or used in 2024.**



## Introduction

The Humanitarian NGO Forum warns of the alarming situation regarding the recruitment, use and exploitation of children and adolescents in Colombia, as well as the significant underreporting in available records.

This report updates and complements the publication Situation of the Recruitment, Use and Utilization of Children and Adolescents in Colombia, 2021–2023. In that report, the Humanitarian NGO Forum estimated that nearly 919 minors were recruited annually by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) during 2022 and 2023. This figure is similar to the annual average calculated by the Truth Commission for the period 1990–2017, which ranged between 1,000 and 1,500.

The trends analyzed for 2021–2023 persisted into 2024. These include the ongoing territorial expansion of NSAGs, intensified social control and restrictions on mobility, and increased clashes both among NSAGs and between these groups and the security forces. New recruitment methods continue, combining threats and direct coercion with open calls—often disseminated through social media and other digital channels—raising serious concerns about the risks of recruitment and use in digital environments.

As in previous reports, this document aims to provide an approximation of the true extent of the recruitment, use, and utilization of children and adolescents in Colombia—not only as an awareness-raising exercise but also as an urgent call to action for the authorities, the humanitarian community, and civil society.

The report also examines certain regions of the country where the combination of armed control, state absence, and geographical isolation limits the capacity for accurate registration.

# 1.Trends in 2024

Among the trends identified in 2024 are the transfer of minors to other territories, an increase in the number of children killed or injured in the conflict, and an increase in attacks on schools.

In the department of Cauca alone, COALICO identified 11 deaths and nine minors under the age of 18 injured in combat between the National Army and NSAGs. Resolution 1612 verified 63 cases of deaths or injuries in 2023, and in 2024, the figure rose to 78 cases involving children and adolescents<sup>ii</sup>.

The Security Council's monitoring mechanism on Children and Armed Conflict - Resolution 1612 - verified 277 cases of recruitment in 2023 and 453 cases in 2024, representing a 64% increase in reported and verified cases. Of the total cases in 2024, 22 were killed, 14 were maimed, and 23 were victims of sexual violence.

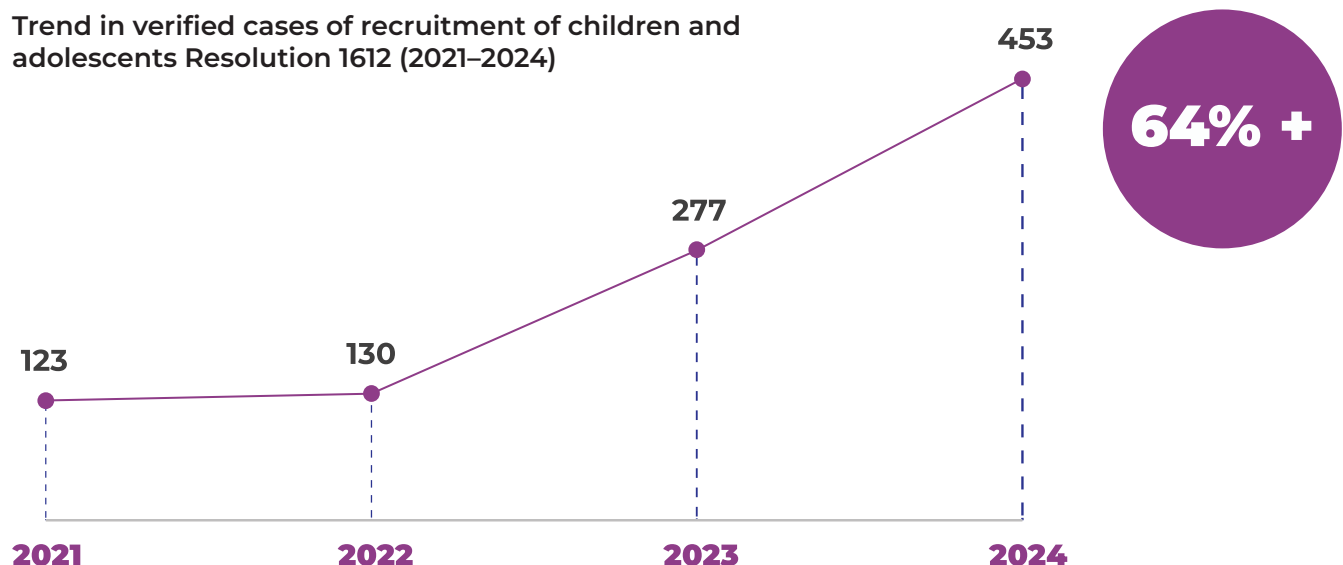
The Secretary-General's report mentions virtually all NSAGs as responsible, including the National Liberation Army (ELN), dissident groups from the FARC-EP such as the Central General Staff, the Border Commandos or the Second Marquetalia, the Self-Defense Forces/ Gaitanista Army of Colombia (Clan del Golfo) and the Colombian military forces.

Data from the Attorney General's Office indicates a 15% increase in the number of victims under the age of 18, with 384 girls, boys, and adolescents recorded as victims in 2023 and 443 in 2024<sup>iii</sup>. On the other hand, figures from the Ministry of Defense show a 19.5% increase in the number of demobilized combatants between 2023 and 2024, reaching 294 in 2024<sup>iv</sup>.

The cases registered by the Ombudsman's Office also show a significant increase. While 183 cases were registered in 2023, the number increased to 578<sup>v</sup> in 2024, representing a threefold rise between the two years. Of the total number of cases in 2024, 61% are boys and adolescents, and the remaining 39% are girls and adolescents. Regarding the latter group, the Secretary-General's report warned that 'girls are being recruited and used at an earlier age than boys.' According to the report, 47% of girls are being recruited between the ages of 10 and 14<sup>vi</sup>.

Finally, in a survey conducted by the ICRC in 35 communities affected by armed conflict, respondents indicated that the main protection risk is the recruitment and use of minors, followed by contamination by weapons<sup>vii</sup>.

**Trend in verified cases of recruitment of children and adolescents Resolution 1612 (2021–2024)**



## 2. Estimation of the magnitude of recruitment in 2024

Underreporting remains one of the main limitations in determining the actual number of child victims of recruitment. The limited institutional presence, fear of reporting, and reprisals by non-state armed groups, including the normalization of the recruitment of children and adolescents, are factors that explain why many incidents go unreported.

In its previous report, the Humanitarian NGO Forum<sup>viii</sup> noted that the historical annual average of records from the Unit for Comprehensive Care and Reparation for Victims (UARIV) or the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF) was around 200 to 300 cases per year. Retrospective exercises involving cross-referencing information, such as that carried out by the Truth Commission, reveal a figure closer to 1,000 cases per year<sup>ix</sup>.

The recruitment of minors refers to the act of incorporating or enlisting children and adolescents in state armed forces or non-state armed groups. This recruitment may be forced, through coercion, abduction or pressure, or it may also be “voluntary”, when the minor agrees to join. However, in practice, there is no valid consent due to their age and vulnerability. At the international level, **the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (2000)** prohibit the compulsory recruitment of minors under the age of 18 by non-state armed groups and limit the participation of states, while the **Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998)** classifies the recruitment of children under the age of 15 for active participation in hostilities as a war crime.



The **use of minors** is understood as the practice of employing a child or adolescent to perform functions directly or indirectly related to armed conflict, even if they have not been formally incorporated into the ranks of an armed group. In this sense, a minor may be forced to perform logistical support tasks, engage in espionage, provide domestic support to combatants, or transport weapons, supplies, and equipment. The notion of use therefore refers to situations in which minors are placed in roles that favor or facilitate warfare, even without being officially recognized as part of the military structure.



For its part, the concept of **utilizing minors** is broader than “use”. It encompasses any form of exploitation of children and adolescents by armed actors, not only in strictly military activities. This category includes both direct participation in combat and sexual exploitation—which encompasses sexual slavery, systematic sexual violence, and forced marriage—as well as forced labor, extortion, or participation in illicit activities such as the cultivation of prohibited crops or the surveillance of illegal economies. In the Colombian context, both **Law 1448 of 2011** (Victims Reparations and Land Restitution Law) and **Decree 164 of 2010** explicitly refer to the use of minors as one of the most serious violations of children’s rights, encompassing all possible forms of involvement of minors in war.



In summary, **recruitment** refers to the act of formally enlisting a person under the age of 18 in non-state armed forces or groups, **use** describes the assignment of support functions related to the conflict without formal enrolment, and **utilization** encompasses any form of exploitation of a person under the age of 18 by armed actors, whether in combat, logistical support, illicit economies or through sexual violence. These three concepts, although distinct, are interrelated in describing the breadth and severity of the impact on the rights of children and adolescents in contexts of war and armed violence.

At the end of November 2024, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) brought charges against the former secretariat of the FARC-EP for crimes related to forced recruitment and sexual violence against minors in the context of macro-case 07x. In July 2025, the members of the FARC secretariat acknowledged their collective responsibility<sup>xi</sup>. A universe of 18,677 unique victims supports the macro-case.

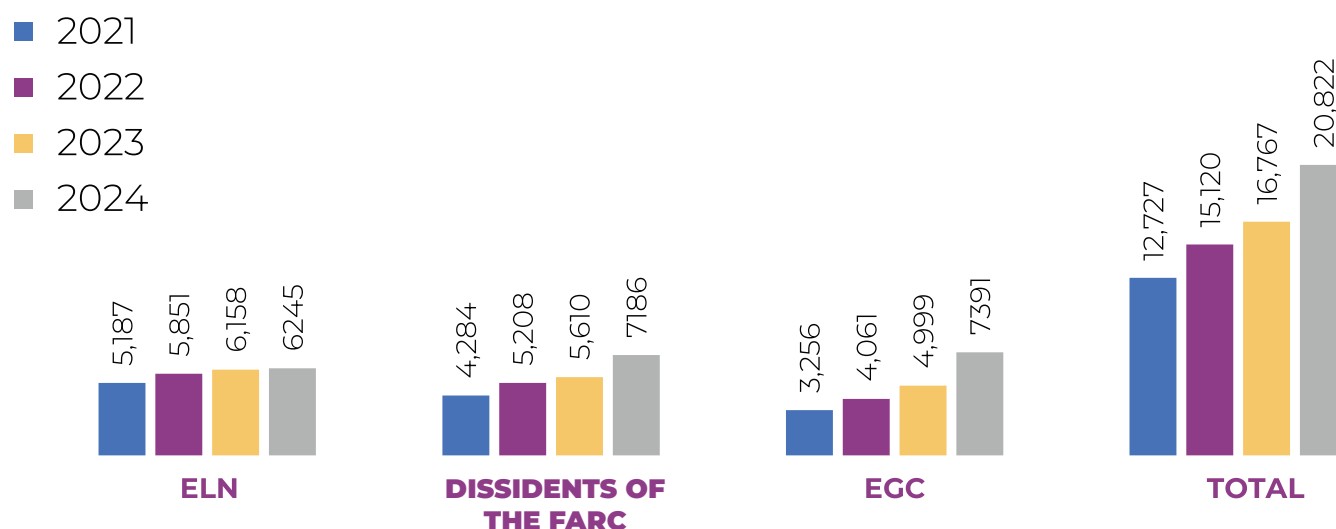
The JEP noted a peak in 2000, with 1,817 victims. At the same time, it acknowledges that these are the cases it has been able to detect, by cross-referencing ‘31 databases provided through 36 reports submitted by victims’ organizations, the State, and university institutions. In other words, at the height of the conflict, a single armed group managed to recruit nearly 2,000 children and adolescents.

The above figure serves as a baseline, although it has limitations, allowing us to gauge the magnitude of the problem of child and adolescent recruitment. As mentioned in the previous version of this document, the estimate made by the Forum for Children and Adolescents Recruited and Used by NSAGs in Colombia is based on two parameters<sup>xii</sup>:

1. **The increase in the number of NSAGs members**, based on reports and analyses published in the media, derived from calculations by the Ministry of Defense<sup>xiii</sup>.
2. **The estimated percentage of minors in their ranks**, according to previous research, is between 38 % and 52 %.

By 2024, there was a significant increase in the number of members in arms and support networks. Between 2023 and 2024 alone, growth increased by 24%, resulting in 4,000 new members joining these groups in just one year (see Figure 1). The data on the number of members comes from calculations by the Ministry of Defense, specifically from the Critical Threat Capabilities Assessment (ACCAM) published in the press.

**Figure 1. Number of members by NSAG, 2021–2024**



**Source: Critical Threat Capabilities Assessment - ACCAM.**

The category 'FARC dissidents' includes the different factions of the so-called Estado Mayor de Bloques y Frentes (led by alias Calarcá), the Estado Mayor Central (led by alias Mordisco), and groups such as the Coordinadora Nacional – Ejército Bolivariano, as well as the self-styled Segunda Marquetalia – Ejército Bolivariano.

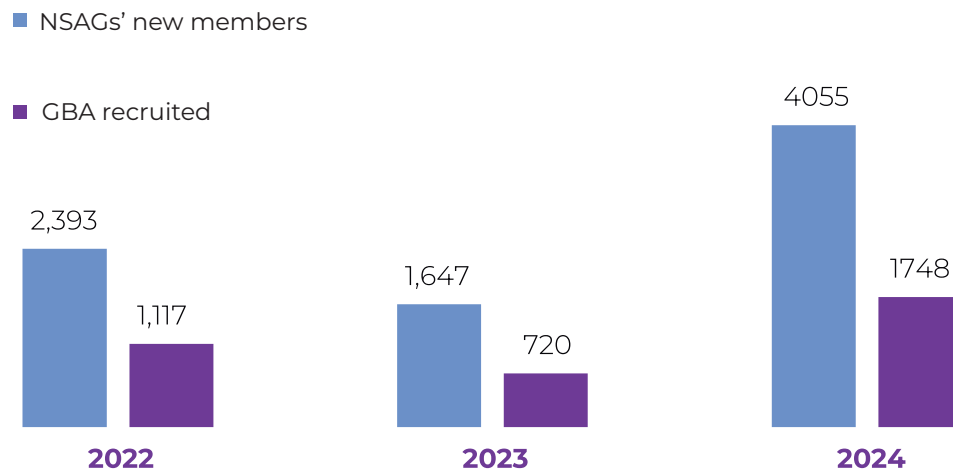
It is essential to note that the names/self-designations of the different NSAGs are provided for informational purposes only and do not imply any endorsement of them. This clarification is done in accordance with humanitarian principles (especially neutrality) and in an effort to clarify the obligations of all parties involved in the hostilities to respect protected persons.

The self-styled Gaitanista Army of Colombia-EGC by its Spanish acronym- is the group that has consistently grown the most year over year. In second place are the various factions of the FARC dissidents, which saw a 28.5 % increase in membership between 2023 and 2024 alone. The faction with the most significant number of members is that of alias Mordisco, with more than 3,000 members.

The combination of growth in the number of members of NSAGs and the persistent practice of recruiting, using and employing minors under the age of 18 during 2024 has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of children and adolescents who are victims of this practice. Applying the parameters mentioned above, it can be projected that at least 1,748 children and adolescents were recruited, used or linked to non-state armed structures in 2024.

Compared to the previous year, the figure in 2024 tripled, an increase that can be explained by the fact that the number of members also doubled from one year to the next. Although high, this figure is probably lower than the actual number, as it does not include those who are in other groups, such as the Frente Comuneros del Sur or minors who remain hidden within urban criminal networks allied with the NSAGs. The use and coercion of minors to join gangs operating in cities is also systematic.

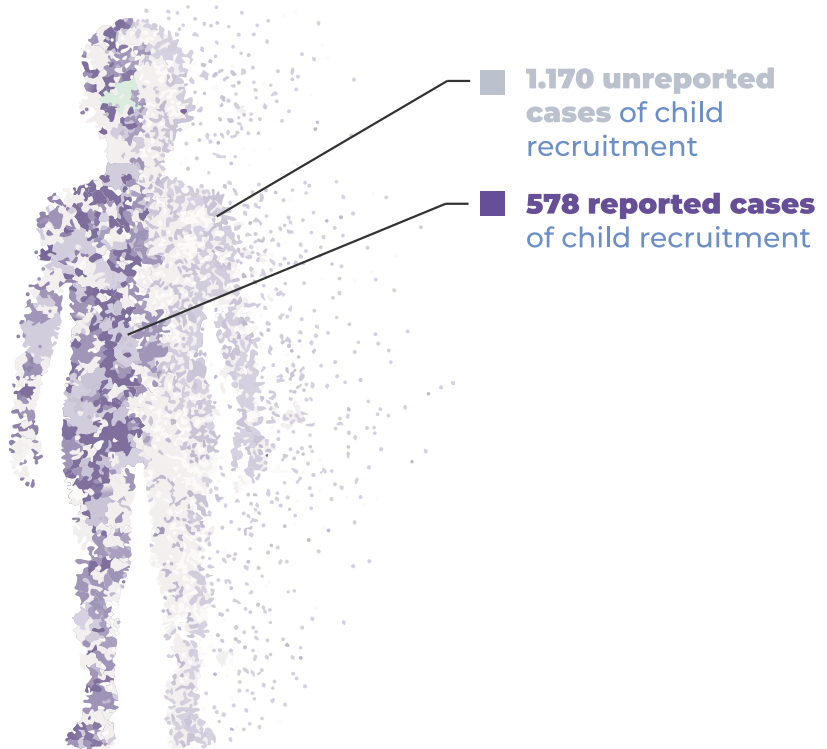
Figure 2. Estimated number of girls, boys and adolescents recruited and used by NSAGs, 2021-2024



Source: Own elaboration

## CHILD RECRUITMENT IN COLOMBIA

Behind every statistic lies a stolen childhood. **We only see 33%**, while **67% remain in the shadows**, invisible but real.



### 3. Underreporting in the Regions

The invisibility of recruitment, use, and utilization is more pronounced in remote areas, where the combination of armed control, weak state presence, and geographic isolation limits reporting and registration capacity. Four departments—Meta, Guaviare, Caquetá, and Vaupés—and the Magdalena Medio subregion clearly illustrate this problem.

In its July update on recruitment, the Ombudsman’s Office reported 578 cases of recruitment and use of minors in 2024. Most of these were from Cauca (367 cases), while in Caquetá only eight cases were recorded, in Guaviare three, and in Meta just one.

Similarly, the United Nations monitoring mechanism on the situation of children and armed conflict (Resolution 1612) verified 453 cases in 2024. Of these, 182 were from Cauca, 16 from Meta, nine from Caquetá, and seven from Guaviare.

Although the escalation of the conflict in Cauca is undeniable, the high level of reporting in this department can also be explained by the presence of humanitarian actors and established organizations such as the Cauca Regional Indigenous Council (CRIC), which document these cases. For example, in 2024, the CRIC reported that “606 children and adolescents have been taken from their homes in the last three years” xvi.

In other parts of the country, where there are fewer humanitarian organizations and a weaker state presence, recording these cases is much more difficult. This is particularly evident in several southern departments and in the Magdalena Medio subregion.

In many of these areas, strong control and disputes involving the NSAGs limit the possibility of reporting. For residents, denouncing cases is often unthinkable: on the one hand, there is a high risk of retaliation against the child or adolescent and their family; on the other, institutions are far from these territories and have few tools to safely activate protection mechanisms that guarantee the rights of children, adolescents, and their families.

The lack of institutional presence has also been exploited by NSAGs to gain favor among the population and normalize their presence and influence, both within communities and among those under 18. This shapes the way children and adolescents perceive their life prospects.

In 2024, news spread in Caquetá about the opening of the “Gentil Duarte Agricultural and Environmental Boarding School.” The school not only bore the name of a leader of a FARC dissident group but may also have been financed by that group xvii. This case illustrates the capacity of NSAGs to intervene in community life in general, and in education in particular, even influencing the naming of institutions as a means of promoting their armed activity.

Another factor that may explain the increase in recruitment cases is the confrontation over territorial control among different NSAG factions. This has been particularly evident in the departments of Meta, Caquetá, and Guaviare, where, since 2024, clashes have broken out between the Mordisco and Calarcá dissidents xviii, as well as between the Segunda Marquetalia and the Carolina Ramírez faction of the Estado Mayor Central xix, which has also fought with the Comandos de la Frontera xx.

Below are some specific events reported in the press and on social media from these territories, illustrating the impacts of recruitment and exploitation of children and adolescents.



#### Meta

In 2025, the Ministry of Defense reported the rescue of 38 minors who were victims of forced recruitment in this department xxi. These cases, which occurred mainly in rural areas, demonstrate the constant pressure exerted by non-state armed groups on peasant and Indigenous families to recruit their adolescent daughters and sons, under threats or promises of economic benefits.





## Guaviare

This department has been the focus of several rescue operations in 2024 and 2025, including:

- **February 2025:** Six minors were freed in Miraflores<sup>xxii</sup>.
- **April 2025:** Two minors were rescued in Calamar<sup>xxiii</sup>.
- **July 2025:** One minor was recovered during clashes<sup>xxiv</sup>.



## Caquetá

In the municipality of La Montañita, in 2024, pamphlets were reported in rural areas demanding that families present their daughters and sons over the age of 14.



## Vaupés

The Commission on the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples denounced the attempted mass recruitment at the Carurú Departmental School in April 2024. The Commission also reported the deployment of propaganda and threats, along with the disappearance of several members of the Bocas de Arara Indigenous community. The same statement denounced the murder of two minors who attempted to escapexxv.



## Magdalena Medio

The departments of Cesar and Bolívar also show significant underreporting. In the Resolution 1612 registry, two cases were identified in Cesar and eight in Bolívar. Meanwhile, the Ombudsman's Office reported only one case in Cesar and three in Bolívar. Military operations, however, reveal that NSAGs continue to recruit and use minors in these territories.

In a single military operation in Cesar in December 2024, more cases were identified than in any of the official reports. During this operation, the Army reported the rescue of five minors linked to a FARC dissident front<sup>xxvi</sup>. That same month, in Codazzi (Cesar), the Army recovered two Venezuelan minors who were about to be recruited by the ELN<sup>xxvii</sup>.

In Bolívar, the press has also reported cases of minors rescued after being recruited by various NSAGs. In June 2024, two minors recruited by FARC dissidents were rescued in the municipality of Santa Rosa. In November of the same year, three minors were recovered by the Army during an operation against the ELN in San Pablo, Bolívar<sup>xxviii</sup>.

These examples show **that underreporting is not merely a statistical issue: it reflects the social and territorial control exercised by non-state armed groups**, which restricts reporting and makes independent verification more difficult.

## 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The situation of recruitment, use, and utilization of children and adolescents in Colombia in 2024 shows a worrying trend: not only has the estimated number of cases increased, but they are concentrated in territories where humanitarian access is restricted, and state capacity is limited.

The problem is consistently reflected in the media, as well as in public statements and complaints from community leaders. However, there is still a high level of underreporting due to fear, coercion, normalization of the practice, and the lack of concrete mechanisms to address it. The absence of complete records and the persistence of underreporting pose major challenges to understanding the true magnitude of the phenomenon and to implementing effective prevention and protection strategies.

The estimated 1,700 minors recruited in 2024 represents an increase compared to previous years, linked to the expansion of NSAGs and their systematic use of forced and coercive practices. These dynamics are further exacerbated by the use of social media and digital platforms, which heighten the risks of recruitment in virtual environments.

The Secretary-General's monitoring of the situation of children and armed conflict in Colombia, as well as the reports of the Ombudsman's Office, capture only between 20% and 33% of actual cases. This is not a criticism of these reports, but rather a reminder that they should be understood as indicators of the seriousness of the problem, which is far greater than what can be officially verified. The international community, the Colombian State, and civil society must recognize that underreporting means the known figures represent only a fraction of the real scale of the phenomenon.

The rise in violent acts related to the recruitment, use, and exploitation of minors underscores a harsh reality in Colombia, driven by the expansion of NSAGs and their systematic use of forced and coercive practices. This trend is further exacerbated by the use of social and digital media, as well as by the normalization of the phenomenon in some communities and families.

It is essential that all actors involved in the conflict, including combatants and their commanders, understand that the recruitment of anyone under the age of 18 is strictly prohibited. This age limit is protected by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and forms part of International Humanitarian Law. Acceptance of this standard is not voluntary for NSAGs, nor is it subject to internal codes or decisions within their structures. It is a binding obligation, and violations can result in sanctions under international human rights and humanitarian law mechanisms.

Armed groups cannot invoke the supposed "voluntariness" of adolescents under 18 or of their families. Nor can they present recruitment, use, or exploitation as a way to obtain income, dignity, or power. They simply cannot recruit, integrate, or involve children or adolescents in any way in their armed activities. Any recruitment of a person under 18 is considered forced recruitment, regardless of the circumstances.

To prepare this report, we did not find consolidated figures on how many minors die or are injured in the ranks while under 18 years of age. We also do not have data on the life expectancy of a child under 18 who is recruited, due to the high risk to life and dignity placed on them by those responsible for the groups. This is an area in which we invite collective reflection by the country and the institutions responsible for the issue.

The current child protection system does not appear to stem the increasing trend in recruitment, use, and utilization. Although this is not the focus of this report, we find that the responsible state entities must review their roles, leadership, budgets, and systems. Ultimately, systems must be found that provide practical protection for minors.

Given this situation, we once again reiterate our recommendations expressed in the previous report:

### To non-state armed groups:

1. **Cease and refrain from recruiting, recruiting, or using children and adolescents under the age of 18**, regardless of the apparent or perceived will of these children or their families; it is the obligation of participants in hostilities not to accept any relationship with minors. **Immediately release any minors found in their ranks.**
2. **Refrain from conducting dissemination or propaganda campaigns** on social media aimed at fostering relationships between children and adolescents.
3. Respect neutral and impartial humanitarian actions aimed at addressing the specific needs of children and adolescents.

### To responsible state institutions and officials:

4. Guarantee the **protection of children as part of and as a requirement for any negotiation with non-state armed groups**. Therefore, they must seek the option that best protects and is in accordance with the best interests of the child, as provided for in the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and domestic legislation, which establishes that children under 18 years of age cannot participate in the conflict.
5. **Review systems such as CIPRUNNA** to ensure they guarantee children's rights in practice, improving their capacity to prevent, identify, assist, and protect children and adolescents at risk of involvement and recruitment. This commitment entails overcoming the barriers and limitations between different administrative levels that delay prevention and a timely response. Identifying administrative responsibilities with adequate human, financial, and logistical capacity is key in times of crisis.
6. Provide the **financial resources to implement the public policy** for the prevention of recruitment, exploitation, and sexual violence against children and adolescents defined by the Government, especially in territories with the lowest financial capabilities.
7. Guarantee the **permanent or systematic presence of civilian government institutions** in areas that are difficult to access and have the highest number of recruitment reports.
8. Guarantee the implementation of the **safe schools plan**.
9. Improve **coordination and complementarity in the humanitarian response of humanitarian actors or child rights protection groups** to provide prevention and protection alternatives in the territories and the restoration of rights in institutions with proven expertise and capacity.
10. Ensure the adequacy of **specific protection measures with a differentiated ethnic approach** when dealing with children and adolescents belonging to ethnic peoples and communities.

### To the humanitarian community - donors and humanitarian actors:

11. Improve systems **to identify the magnitude of child recruitment in Colombia** and the specific risks (to life, dignity, and fundamental rights) faced by forcibly recruited minors.
12. Place the **prevention and response to child recruitment** at the heart of strategies, response plans, and humanitarian policies.

- 13. Provide and fund humanitarian organizations** with funding schemes focused on the immediate protection of children and adolescents at immediate risk of recruitment, as well as their families.

### To Colombian society:

14. Contribute to establishing **the prohibition of recruitment of minors under 18 years of age as a national demand** for children and adolescents, demanding that armed groups and state entities urgently and immediately include it as a requirement in the framework of any approach, conversation, or negotiation between the parties.

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