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### Why They Join, Why They Fight, and Why They Leave: Learning From Colombia's Database of Demobilized Militants

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# Why They Join, Why They Fight, and Why They Leave: Learning From Colombia's Database of Demobilized Militants

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*For nearly ten years the Colombian government has systematically debriefed men and women who have left the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and other violent extremist organizations. Today, the Colombian government maintains a database of more than 15,000 digitized interview transcripts—the largest of its kind in the world. With the proper enhancements and analysis, the database can provide critical insights into topics such as extremist recruitment, motivation, information operations, intelligence activities, leadership, and tactical and operational adaptation and innovation. Although Colombia's political violence is unique in many respects, further research using the database contributes to our understanding of the dynamics of insurgency in other regions. Ultimately, this research could enhance efforts to prevent recruitment into, and encourage current members to exit violent non-state groups, such as gangs, terrorist groups, militias, and drug trafficking organizations.*

**Keywords** AUC, Colombia, counterinsurgency, demobilization, ELN, FARC, insurgency

For ten years, Colombia's security forces have systematically debriefed men, women, and children who have left the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia; FARC), the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army; ELN), and other violent extremist organizations. Today, the government maintains an electronic database of more than 15,000 digitized interview transcripts—which, to our knowledge, constitutes the largest of its kind in the world. These interviews, which have been conducted as part of a program to re-integrate former militants into Colombian society, offer a window into all aspects of the country's violent groups.

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A number of academic studies have analyzed data drawn from surveys of ex-militants. Using a fine-grained, micro-level approach, this research has shed new light on how and why individuals joined armed groups, why they remained committed to those groups for as long as they did, and why they chose to leave the armed struggle behind. Mauricio Flores-Morris used survey data from interviews with 42 former insurgents to explain the decisions of individuals to continue to participate in armed resistance to the Colombian state.<sup>1</sup> More recently, Ana M. Arjona and Stathis N. Kalyvas interviewed 821 ex-fighters. Their research offers important insights into recruitment patterns among left-wing armed groups and right-wing paramilitary organizations.<sup>2</sup>

The Colombian government database offers the opportunity to build on this research by examining the recruitment, retention, and defection of thousands of individuals. Once properly coded and sorted, this database could provide the basis for testing theories put forth by other scholars, and for exploring various issues in exceptional depth. For example, sorting the interviews would allow for a focus on specific populations, such as children, women, and minority groups. Moreover, analysis of the database could lead to findings relevant to policymakers, analysts, and practitioners concerned with preventing deadly conflict, deterring participation in violent extremist organizations, and promoting political reconciliation.

During 2011, we were granted short-term access to the database. Using a small sample from the electronic files, we carried out a preliminary analysis of two categories of former militants: children who served in the FARC, ELN, and paramilitary groups; and university students who fought in the ranks of FARC. This research note presents that initial analysis. To provide context, we begin with an overview of Colombia's demobilization campaign, the *Programa de Atención Humanitaria al Desmovilizado* (Program for Humanitarian Attention to the Demobilized; PAHD). We then describe the database in greater detail and identify its key strengths as well as its limitations. The research note concludes with ideas for how the database might be used to explore other important aspects of Colombia's internal conflict, including militant recruitment strategies, the effect of government-sponsored amnesty programs on armed groups, and the nexus between drug trafficking and political violence.

### **Colombia's Demobilization Program**

In 2002, the administration of then-president Álvaro Uribe Vélez created the PAHD as a strategic tool within the broader "Democratic Security Policy" for combating violent extremist groups. The goals of the program are to induce the renunciation and surrender (i.e., the "demobilization") of members of illegal armed groups, to weaken and demoralize those groups, and to offer social re-integration for those who voluntarily leave the conflict and participate in the program. This program is run by an agency within the Ministry of Defense in cooperation with several other ministries responsible for public health, justice, social protection, and interior affairs.

The first demobilized combatants were members of paramilitary groups operating under an umbrella organization, the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (United Self-Defense Forces; AUC). These groups reached agreements with the government in 2003–04 to demobilize collectively and turn in their arms.<sup>3</sup> This first tranche of former AUC members demobilized during the 2002–2006 period and included approximately 32,000 people.<sup>4</sup> The second group of demobilized combatants consists

of ex-members of the FARC and ELN. Approximately 21,000 former guerrillas have been accepted into the demobilization program since 2002. Unlike the AUC, these ex-guerrillas did not demobilize *en masse*. Rather, each surrendered individually to the police, army, and other security forces. To be accepted into the PAHD, each former militant has been required to offer compelling evidence that he or she had actually belonged to a guerrilla group and was entering the demobilization program voluntarily.

During the interviews, former militants are expected to provide full information about their activities within the armed group, and where, why, and how they left the organization. These interviews are integral to the demobilization process. An interview is a requirement to get status as a "demobilized illegal combatant," which grants the individual access to a variety of benefits, including psychological counseling and a modest stipend.

Interviews are held within hours of FARC or ELN members agreeing to lay down his or her weapons. These interviews (which are accompanied by medical and psychological examinations and the immediate provision of protection, medical care, food, and new clothes) can be conducted by the army, the marines, or the national police, depending on where the individual presents himself or herself for demobilization.

In some cases individuals are interviewed more than once by different agencies (e.g., intelligence, justice, the treasury), in order to obtain information needed to verify their claims of FARC or ELN membership. An inter-agency committee meets weekly to review these interview records, along with other information about each candidate for PAHD, in order to decide whether the individual should be accepted into the program. Since February 2011, according to PAHD officials, each candidate has been interviewed twice (once by a specially trained analyst) to ensure that information is as accurate as possible.

### The PAHD Database

The interview records are kept within the demobilization program, in an office in Bogotá. Each transcript contains personal information, including age at the time of demobilization, gender, education, place and date of birth, and the family's economic situation. Each interview record also typically includes operational and organizational information, including the following:

- organizational affiliation,
- unit identification (e.g., front, bloc),
- length of time in the armed group,
- date of enlistment,
- date of departure,
- final position in the organization, and
- motivations for leaving the armed group.

The database, which as of October 2011 contained 15,308 unique records, is composed of interviews conducted during the 2002–2010 period. Table 1 categorizes these records by (former) group membership.

In general, the depth and breadth of data is greater in the more recent interviews than in the older ones. Interview records vary in length. Some are as short as three pages, while others are as long as forty. Beyond basic personal data, the records vary

**Table 1.** Affiliations of former militants

Group	Number of ex-militants
FARC-EP	12,126
AUC	695
ELN	2,203
Other	284
Total	15,308

widely in their content. Some are focused heavily on tactical details such as the location of training camps and arms caches, while others explore in detail individual stories of life inside the armed group—political, administrative, and combat experience, training and indoctrination, and interpersonal relationships. As mentioned above, every interview includes a question about motivation for leaving the armed struggle. PAHD analysts have coded each interview using one of 23 factors. The top five motives, in terms of frequency, are shown in Table 2.

### *Limitations of the Database*

The PAHD database of interview records presents an unprecedented opportunity to study, across a broad and large population and over time, the self-reported experiences and motivations of former members of insurgent and paramilitary groups. The sorting of records by age, gender, educational background, and region of birth offers numerous possibilities for exploring important sub-populations, and comparing experiences across different groups. Furthermore, several hundred insurgents have been demobilized each year since 2002, so that sorting by week or month of entry into the insurgent group, or of demobilization, presents opportunities to observe trends over time, and to study the impact of specific counter-insurgency policies, changes in economic or environmental conditions, and other events.

However, it is important to understand the limits of the PAHD database. The interview records are inconsistent and to some degree incomplete. The database contains relatively few interviews with former AUC members, as undergoing an interview was not a condition of AUC demobilization from 2002 to 2006. The interviews were conducted under diverse conditions by a large number of military and police personnel using a variety of interview instruments. A review of the files shows significant variation in the recording and formatting of the interviews. Depending on how they

**Table 2.** Primary motives for exiting armed groups

Motivation	Number of ex-militants
Desire for a change of life	5,002
Mistreatment	3,993
Pressure from military operations	2,089
Absence from family	768
Demoralized about the armed struggle	628

were entered into the database, some interviews can be searched electronically for key words using a commercially available software program. Others, however, must be searched manually. In many cases, subjects likely to be of particular interest to researchers do not appear to be coded. For example, in the case of motivations for leaving the FARC, only one reason was assigned to each interview—a shortcoming, given that in Colombia, as in every conflict zone, an individual is likely to have multiple reasons for leaving (as well as joining) a violent non-state group.

In our judgment these limitations do not pose insurmountable barriers to further research and analysis. Our preliminary review indicates that the PAHD database will require careful re-organization, cleaning, and in many instances, re-coding if the information it contains is to be further analyzed to examine themes and answer questions of specific concern to academic and policy-research specialists.<sup>5</sup> This labor will require time, and careful guidance and supervision to ensure standardization, but such an effort is well within our capacity working with Colombian partners. This re-organization and re-coding can be conducted sequentially across specific populations, allowing some analysis on those populations to proceed while the rest of the task is completed.

It is likely that at the end of this process some share of the interviews will prove unusable due to a lack of relevant information or unreliable initial recording. We are beginning with over 15,000 interview records, however, so processing the set of usable interview records will almost certainly suffice to support interesting qualitative and quantitative analyses.

### **Preliminary Research Example: Child Soldiers**

According to one widely cited estimate, at least 10,000 children participate in Colombia's illegal armed groups.<sup>6</sup> This involvement takes a variety of forms, ranging from the relatively mundane, such as carrying messages, cooking, and doing other chores, to patrolling and combat operations. Under United Nations criteria, any person under the age of 18 who is part of an armed group, regardless of whether he or she bears arms, should be considered a child soldier.<sup>7</sup> If local media accounts are correct, children as young as seven have entered armed groups.<sup>8</sup>

For insurgent and paramilitary organizations, underage recruits have considerable appeal. In the country's impoverished hinterlands, the supply of children eager to escape neglect, family abuse, and lack of opportunity is substantial. As the Colombian security forces have chipped away at groups like the FARC, the underage population functions as an important manpower reservoir. Perceived as "malleable" by militant commanders, children, particularly from rural areas, are seen as physically hardy and therefore suitable for the rigors of life in a guerrilla column.<sup>9</sup>

Our preliminary analysis was drawn from a set of 535 interviews with children who demobilized between 2002 and 2008. Time constraints allowed for only a limited, qualitative examination of the 535 interviews. Eight transcripts were selected from that group for further scrutiny. The selection was arbitrary, although individuals from each of the three main armed groups, the FARC, ELN, and AUC, were included intentionally.

Each report contained basic information such as age, height, weight, and education, but other content varied widely. As discussed earlier, these interviews were conducted by a variety of Colombian government organizations and interview forms varied from agency to agency. All were asked why they left their respective armed groups and in

some instances, former combatants were asked explicitly about their reasons for joining. In some cases, motivations for joining, while not asked about explicitly, emerged during the course of an interview and could be identified when the report was reviewed.

The governments of Colombia and the United States, the UN, and many NGOs have accused the ELN, AUC, and particularly the FARC of forced recruitment of combatants through threats, violence, and intimidation. Coercion of children and their families has certainly occurred. However, this admittedly tiny subset of eight former militants suggests a more complex picture. Interviewees cited the tediousness of their former lives, family ties to armed groups, and the desire for a better quality of life rather than coercion as principal reasons for joining the armed struggle. What emerged from these interviews is the sense that these children were not simply passive victims, but quasi-independent agents faced with a limited menu of unpalatable options.<sup>10</sup>

Alejandro,<sup>11</sup> who left the FARC in 2005 as a thirteen-year-old foot soldier, told his military interviewer that he had first joined the ELN after having worked in a mine. One brother was already in the ELN and two others had joined the FARC. According to the interview, Alejandro deserted the ELN after being treated badly and returned home. Two weeks later, he joined the FARC after his former ELN commander came looking for him. However, conditions in the FARC were even worse—tormented by hunger, he deserted the group a few months later. Elena, 14 years old at the time she left the ELN in 2004, similarly insisted that she had joined the armed campaign voluntarily.

Former members of paramilitaries often reported that their AUC recruiters held out the promise of money and a better way of life. Carlos, an eighteen-year-old foot soldier when he left the AUC in 2004, told his interviewer that the man who recruited him had offered fulfilling work and Carlos accepted on the spot. Before he joined the AUC, seventeen-year-old Alexander explained that he had a tedious, ill-paying job on a rice plantation. One night at a pool hall, a man offered Alexander a more promising job at a feedlot. However, after days of travel to his would-be place of employment, he was met by another, heavily armed man who informed him that he would not be working in a feedlot, but would instead be joining the AUC. Three months later, Alexander ran away.

Ill-treatment by commanders was the reason given most often for leaving an armed group. Seventeen-year-old Jorge told his police interviewers in 2007 that during his first encounter with his ELN commander his superior greeted him with the phrase “welcome to the revolution.” His first eight months in the ELN were devoted to political work and spreading propaganda among rural residents. Later, Jorge’s involvement in a botched kidnapping earned the wrath of his commander, who threatened to kill him and then ordered him to lay land mines as a punishment. Jorge deserted the ELN soon after.

### **Preliminary Research Example: University Students**

The radicalization of university students and their entry into violent extremist organizations is a subject of considerable interest to policymakers, academic specialists, and non-governmental organizations.<sup>12</sup> In Colombia, recent press accounts highlight the FARC’s growing interest in recruiting university students, both as a source of relatively well-educated manpower and as useful components in the movement’s reported efforts to restart an urban campaign.<sup>13</sup>



Militants with a university background form a very small percentage of the FARC's membership. During its nearly 50 years of existence, the FARC has been an overwhelmingly rural insurgent movement that has drawn most of its fighters from peasant backgrounds. Indeed, of the 12,126 former FARC fighters in the PAHD database, only 34 individuals had some post-secondary education. But as is the case in many other Latin American insurgencies, several members of the most influential current cohort of FARC's top leadership, including Alfonso Cano (whom Colombian forces killed on November 11, 2011) and Ivan Marquez, were former university students.

### *FARC Recruitment*

Radicalization, mobilization, and recruitment into violent extremist organizations typically takes place at what Lorenzo Vidino describes as the "intersection of an enabling environment and a personal trajectory."<sup>14</sup> In the case of FARC recruitment, the ideologically charged atmosphere at many of Colombia's universities appears to function as an important enabler. The highly politicized university environment allows recruiters to move about freely, deliver political messages, and come into contact with potential militants.

Interviews in the PAHD database highlight the importance of personnel connections between potential recruits and serving FARC members. In this the FARC is hardly unique; affective ties are a factor in recruitment into a wide variety of clandestine, underground, and violent extremist groups.<sup>15</sup> In addition to these enablers, there is a set of "triggers" which lead an individual to make the decision to join the FARC. The combination of university education and subsequent unemployment or underemployment appears particularly significant. The gap between their relatively high levels of education and the harsh realities of an existence at the economic margins seems to push some individuals towards political extremism, anti-system responses, and violence.

### *Exiting the FARC*

Once inside the FARC, some former students serve in a combat capacity in rural areas, while others become part of militia networks in charge of political activities and military actions in cities. A significant percentage of individuals with post-secondary education go on to assume FARC leadership positions. Table 3 summarizes the positions of university students in the organization at the time of demobilization.

**Table 3.** FARC-EP roles at time of demobilization

Position	Total	%	Students	%
Cadres	1,233	10.17	9	26.47
Foot soldiers	5,604	46.21	7	20.59
Specialists	427	3.52	2	5.88
Militia	4,835	39.87	10	29.41
Political cadres	27	0.22	6	17.65
Total	12,126	100.00	34	100.00

Our preliminary review identified three main factors that contributed to decisions to leave the armed struggle. First, many former militants cited ideological disenchantment, and in particular, the FARC's perceived deviation from the revolutionary principles that had first attracted these young people to the movement. Second, interviewees mentioned the many hardships they endured in the FARC: hunger and extreme fatigue, the relentless nature of the government's counterinsurgency campaign, and physical abuse by commanders. Finally, many demobilized guerrillas cited their wish to reconnect with their families and rebuild their personal lives.

## Conclusion

The PAHD database presents a singular opportunity for large-scale research on Colombia's illegal armed groups. After it is thoroughly reviewed, and appropriate software and other enhancements are made, the database could be used for both quantitative and qualitative inquiries. The size, richness, and sortable nature of the data would permit researchers to analyze specific subsets within the FARC, ELN, and AUC, including women, children, and ethnic minorities. Researchers could also conduct thematic investigations, such as individual and group motivations for entering and exiting the country's armed groups. Potential research questions include the following:

- What impact do amnesty programs have on the performance and organizational cohesion of militant groups?
- How do illegal groups generate and administer funds?
- How does the removal of key leaders (i.e., "decapitation") affect armed groups?
- What linkages exist between illegal armed groups and drug trafficking organizations?
- Does involvement in drug trafficking corrupt insurgent leaders or contribute to disillusionment among rank-and-file militants?
- How have recruitment strategies varied over time?

The political violence in Colombia is unique in many respects. However, further research using the PAHD database could contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of insurgency in other regions. Ultimately, this research could help inform efforts in other settings to prevent entry into, and encourage current members to exit from, violent non-state groups, including gangs, terrorist groups, militias, and transnational organized criminal enterprises.

## Notes

1. Mauricio Florez-Morris, "Why Some Colombian Guerrilla Members Stayed in the Movement Until Demobilization: A Micro-Sociological Case Study of Factors that Influenced Members' Commitment to Three Former Rebel Organizations: M-19, EPL, and CRS," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 2 (2010): 216–241.

2. Ana M. Arjona and Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Rebelling Against Rebellion: Comparing Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Recruitment" (paper delivered at Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, Oxford University, workshop on "Mobilisation for Political Violence: What Do We Know?," Oxford, UK, March 17–18, 2009), <http://www.kent.ac.uk/politics/carc/reading%20group/Arjona%20Kalyvas%20Mobilisation%20for%20Political%20Violence.pdf>. For broader accounts of insurgency and counterinsurgency in

Colombia, see James J. Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia: The Origin and Direction of the FARC-EP* (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2011); and Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez, *Las FARC (1949–2011): De Guerrilla Campesina a Máquina de Guerra* [The FARC (1949–2011): From Peasant Guerrilla to War Machine] (Bogotá: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2011).

3. “Collective” demobilization, as the term is used in Colombia, refers to one “which results from a process of negotiation, such as the one that took place between the paramilitary leaderships of the AUC and the government in 2003–2004. An ‘individual’ demobilization occurs in the absence of a negotiation between the government and the insurgents.” See Douglas Porch and María José Rasmussen, “Demobilization of Paramilitaries in Colombia: Transformation or Transition?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 6 (2008): 522. In the case of the AUC, individual demobilization effectively ended in 2003, while collective demobilization concluded in 2006.

4. High Presidential Counselor for Reintegration, *Historical Brief*, 2011, available at [http://www.reintegracion.gov.co/Es/ACR/Paginas/historical\\_brief.aspx](http://www.reintegracion.gov.co/Es/ACR/Paginas/historical_brief.aspx). For more on the effects of the demobilization program on FARC-EP, see Javier Alexander Macías, “Deserción: Sentencia de Muerte de las Farc” [Desertion: The FARC’s Death Sentence], *El Colombiano.com*, [http://www.elcolombiano.com/BancoConocimiento/D/desercion\\_sentencia\\_de\\_muerte\\_de\\_las\\_farc/desercion\\_sentencia\\_de\\_muerte\\_de\\_las\\_farc.asp](http://www.elcolombiano.com/BancoConocimiento/D/desercion_sentencia_de_muerte_de_las_farc/desercion_sentencia_de_muerte_de_las_farc.asp)

5. Updated software, available today at a very modest cost, will allow researchers to search the database more quickly and comprehensively.

6. United States Department of State, *2011 Trafficking in Persons Report—Colombia*, June 27, 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4e12ee8a9.html>.

7. “Official Definition of a Child Soldier—From Cape Town Principles,” *Child Soldier Relief*, July 22, 2008, <http://childsoldierrelief.org/2008/07/22/official-definition-of-a-child-soldier-from-cape-town-principles>.

8. See for example *Radio Cadena Nacional* (Bogotá), “FARC’s Female Rebel Surrenders to DAS in Mitu (Vaupes),” August 8, 2008, *Open Source Center*, LAP20080808003001.

9. Alma Guillemprieto, “The Children’s War,” *New York Review of Books*, May 11, 2000 (on-line edition, subscription required).

10. For more on this point see Ingunn Bjørkhaug, *Child Soldiers in Colombia: The Recruitment of Children into Non-state Violent Armed Groups*, MICROCON Research Working Paper 27 (Sussex, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2010.).

11. Pseudonyms are used in this section to protect the identity of the interview subjects.

12. See for example Quilliam Foundation, *Radicalisation on British University Campuses: A Case Study*, October 18, 2010, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/index.php/component/content/article/713>.

13. See for example, “Nuevo Jefe de las Farc Busca Infiltrar Marchas Universitarias” [New FARC Chief Seeks to Infiltrate University Marches], *Elespectador.com* (Bogotá), November 10, 2011, <http://elespectador.com/print/310466>.

14. Lorenzo Vidino, “*The Buccinasco Pentiti*: A Unique Case Study of Radicalization,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 3 (2011): 407.

15. Donatella della Porta, “Introduction: On Individual Motivations in Underground Political Organizations,” *International Social Movement Research* 4 (1992): 8–9.