Introduction

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Recruitment into Armed Groups

of Demobilized Fighters

in Colombia: A Survey

of Massacre Disenfranchisement, the Consequences of Failed Peace

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civilians is not a random occurrence of individual and collective threats. The emergence of new
civil war processes is embedded in the network of migrants, peasants, and other
civil society actors involved in processes of violence against civilians. In Colombia, this
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groups, often under the guise of demobilization programs. The process of recruiting
ex-fighters into armed groups has not been a straightforward one, and it has been
characterized by power struggles and conflicts between different groups involved in
the demobilization process. This has led to the emergence of new forms of violence
against civilians, which have been used to further the interests of various actors in
the conflict. The focus on individual trajectories and experiences has led to
an emphasis on the dynamics of recruitment and the role of power dynamics in
shaping these processes. The literature on massacre disenfranchisement has
highlighted the importance of understanding the historical and political contexts
in which these processes occur. The research on demobilization and the role of
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processes and several demobilization programs, and the content of the relations between armed groups and politicians. It is no surprise then that the Colombian case has been privileged in conflict research.

Our focus is primarily empirical. The reason is that the theoretical literature on rebel recruitment has relied on several assumptions about the motivations of rebel joiners, such as grievances or opportunity costs that have not been properly investigated (e.g. Collier and Hoefler 2004; Gurr 1970). As a result, the focus has been, for the most part, on the macro-level factors that make such grievances more likely, or that lower the opportunity costs for participating in violence. Our empirical findings suggest, instead, that the theoretical focus on state-level attributes can be misleading, as it has led scholars to overlook the central role of the conflict's local dynamics on recruitment (Arjona 2005; Kalyvas 2006).

Our empirical strategy consists of comparing ex-combatants who joined rebel armed groups with those who joined pro-government or counterinsurgent paramilitaries. We show, first, that rebel and paramilitary joiners do not differ from each other in ways that the dominant approaches to recruitment would imply. For example, if individuals join the rebels because of grievances, we should find a substantial difference between rebel and counter-rebel motivations. However, our data suggest that few such differences exist. Second, we do find key similarities in the local contexts in which recruits of both sides lived at the time of enlisting. For example, both come from areas where the groups they eventually joined had a strong presence, and where victimization rates were much higher than elsewhere in the country. These findings suggest that recruitment tends to take place in areas that have been significantly affected by the war; they point to the necessity of incorporating an analysis of the dynamics of the conflict into any theoretical account of individual choices. This implication is in marked contrast to the dominant theoretical approaches that treat recruitment as a choice made by individuals in a war-less context.2

To conduct the survey, we initially relied on the Individual Demobilization and Reintegration Program (IDRP) launched by the Colombian government in 2002 to collect systematic data on the fighters who joined this program. In addition to the IDRP, we collected data on fighters who had been 'collectively demobilized.' Peace negotiations conducted between the government and the main paramilitary factions led to the 'collective demobilization' of about 30,000 ex-combatants of these groups. Unlike the individuals participating in the IDRP on an individual basis, who deserted their units, these 'collectively demobilized' (CD) fighters did not have to make an individual choice.

This variation provides a unique opportunity to study the determinants of demobilization among former paramilitary fighters (Arjona and Kalyvas 2009a). Furthermore, it allows for assessment of whether there is a systematic bias in the responses of individually demobilized (ID) combatants; we do so elsewhere by comparing individually and collectively demobilized paramilitaries (Arjona and Kalyvas 2009b).

More specifically, we conducted a large-scale survey of ex-combatants in the summer of 2005, following a pilot survey in the summer of 2004. We completed 821 interviews with ex-combatants, both guerilla and paramilitary deserters and collectively demobilized paramilitaries. In 2006 we implemented a control survey with 565 civilians.

We begin with a short description of the Colombian conflict and the IDRP, followed by a description of the project, and our sampling methods. In the section 'Respondent's general characteristics', we present the general characteristics of our respondents at the time when the survey was implemented. In the section 'Motivations for joining', we discuss the individual motivations of our respondents in joining an armed group. We find that rebels and paramilitaries are quite similar to each other, countering current assumptions about ideological motivations for joining these organizations. We also find that they are not predominantly motivated by material benefits, as the so-called greed theory predicts (Collier and Hoefler 2004). In the section 'War dynamics and recruitment', we examine survey responses about the characteristics of the localities in which respondents lived prior to joining. The data suggest that our respondents joined the armed groups they did in places that were deeply affected and transformed by the war. We conclude with a summary of findings and suggestions for further research.

The data

The Colombian conflict and the demobilization and reintegration program

The current Colombian conflict can be traced back to a conflict known as 'La Violencia' ['Violence'], which occurred between 1949 and 1957, when fighting between members of the two traditional parties (Liberal and Conservative) caused the death of around 200,000 people. Even though violence decreased following a pact between the two parties, several guerilla and bandit groups remained active. In the 1960s some of these groups, along with peasants aggrieved over the slow pace of agrarian reform promised by the government and state repression, disenchanted students, and communist cadres, formed several Marxist
guerrilla groups. These included the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), the two guerrilla groups we focus on. For decades, these groups were active in only a few peripheral areas of the country and their military capacity was low. In the mid-1970s, however, their increasing access to funds from the illicit drug trade and their use of techniques such as kidnapping and extortion provided additional resources that raised their military capability. Taking advantage of Colombia’s low state capacity outside the country’s main urban centers, the guerrillas expanded in new territories. The FARC was the most successful group in that respect.

The activities of the guerrillas, together with major national political reforms, affected regional elites across the country (Romero 2003; Pizarro 2006; Sánchez and Chacón 2006). As a reaction, and as a way to preserve the status quo, local and regional elites began to form paramilitary groups – later, even entire armies. While a few were genuinely self-defense groups formed by peasants, most were formed by powerful landowners and emerald-traders. The national army, although not directly involved in the emergence of these groups, has been repeatedly accused of tolerating and abetting these groups (e.g. Romero 2003), which funded their operations with voluntary and forced contributions of landlords and firms, as well as income derived from drug trafficking. Here we focus on two of these groups, the Cordoba Bloc and the Catatumbo Bloc. While the former recruited and operated mostly in the northwest of the country, the latter recruited both in the northeast and northwest, but operated near the border with Venezuela (Cañizares 2005; Verdad Abierta 2010).

From the late 1980s to the mid-2000s, the intensity of the armed conflict and the levels of violence reached unprecedented heights, with encounters between guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the army growing more frequent and more deadly, and the total number of attacks by armed groups (including homicides, massacres, kidnappings, and other attacks) increasing steadily. The FARC emerged as the most powerful group with around 20-30,000 combatants, followed by the ELN with around 6000 (Gutierrez 2003). At the same time, smaller groups such as the EPL and the M-19 negotiated their demobilization with the government in the early 1990s. Paramilitary groups also saw a tremendous expansion during the same period: by the end of the 1990s they had recruited about 10,000 combatants (Sánchez et al. 2003), and by 2003 they had close to 15,000 fighters (Gutierrez 2008).

Colombian governments signed various peace agreements between 1990 and 2000, which demobilized approximately 4800 former combatants (Franco, 2000). A voluntary demobilization program was launched in 2002, attracting around 20,000 former members of guerrilla and paramilitary groups. The government also reached an agreement with paramilitary leaders, leading to the collective demobilization of 31,810 combatants of different groups united under the umbrella of the AUC (United Self-defense Forces of Colombia).

The survey
The survey was conducted in two stages. We first tested the viability of the project and the questionnaire by conducting a pilot survey in the summer of 2004. In the summer of 2005 we conducted the survey with 821 ex-combatants, of whom 436 had demobilized voluntarily from the FARC (henceforth referred to as “IFARC”), ELN (“IELN”) and paramilitary groups (“IPARAS’ or ‘IP’); furthermore, we conducted 387 interviews in Cúcuta and Montería, two medium-sized cities in the north-west and the north-east of the country, respectively, with collectively demobilized ex-paramilitaries (“CIPARAS’ or ‘CP’) – that is, those who did not make the choice of demobilization, but did so upon their commanders giving the order to turn their weapons in.

The survey instrument was designed to gather evidence on three main areas: joining, group organization and practices, and demobilization; it includes 255 questions of which the majority are closed-ended and a few are open-ended, which allowed us to collect both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Respondents were first told about the project, its goals, and the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and interviews lasted on average 1.5 hours.

Sample and limitations
The universe of cases of individually demobilized combatants was, at the time of the survey, 7131. After leaving their organizations and joining the IDRP, former fighters chose a city or town to settle, and the government allocated them a safe house in that place. More than half selected Bogota (56 per cent), while most of the rest opted for other large cities and a few for rural areas. Ideally, our sample would have included demobilized fighters throughout the country. However, taking our enumerators to several towns was not safe at that time. Given that 56 per cent of all individually demobilized persons had chosen Bogota, we decided to select a random sample among those who were living there. Although we cannot control for potential differences between those who chose to move to Bogota as opposed to elsewhere, the wide
variation in our respondents’ place of origin suggests that our sample includes ex-combatants from all over the country. In fact, the 439 IDEs in our sample came from around 185 different municipalities located in 28 of the 33 departments of the country.

To pick our sample, we randomly selected a set of safe homes where the ex-combatants lived. Given that newly demobilized fighters were assigned to safe homes according to availability of sites, and that there were no other criteria for assigning them to a specific safe house, the distribution of ex-combatants across safe houses can be considered to be random. We initially gave a short presentation of the project to all ex-combatants, and we then asked for their voluntary participation, which was over 95 per cent. We targeted 17 safe houses (randomly selected out of 32) and conducted 315 interviews.

Due to security issues, we were forced to stop our visits to safe houses. We completed 124 additional interviews at a public office that handled all requests and paperwork of the IDEs. All beneficiaries of the Reintegration Program had to visit these offices in order to address a variety of issues related to their training, family situation, and job placement – which means that those who visit this facility do not share particular characteristics. We stratified our sample in order to overrepresent former FARC members, given that all collectively demobilized fighters belonged to paramilitary groups. We randomly selected a number of former guerrillas and paramilitary beneficiaries every day, gave them a short presentation of the project, and asked for their voluntary participation in a private location. Again, participation was over 95 per cent. We did not find any significant differences between the responses of the IDEs we interviewed in safe houses, and those interviewed at the public office.

Data provided by the Ministry of Defense in December 2005 suggest that our sample is representative of the population of IDE in terms of group membership (Figure 7.1). The sample mirrors group membership of the population of IDE in the case of the ELN and Other Guerrillas. FARC ex-combatants are slightly overrepresented and paramilitaries are slightly underrepresented, since we oversampled FARC members in the last run of interviews, as we explained before. On the other hand, according to the data of the Ministry of Defense 86 per cent of all IDEs are men, and 13 per cent are women. For reasons that remain unclear, women are underrepresented in our survey, as only 8 per cent of interviewed IDEs were women.

Even though we are confident about the quality of our sample of individually demobilized combatants, it is important to stress that it is not representative of the universe of irregular combatants in Colombia, since respondents are selected from the population of combatants who voluntarily joined a demobilization program. Given that the FARC and ELN have not signed a peace agreement to demobilize its fighters in the recent past, it was impossible to identify a representative sample of fighters of these organizations who had not demobilized. This fact implies that our generalizations about the FARC and the ELN have limitations; we may have interviewed the younger, most uncommitted and least satisfied members of the guerrillas. However, given the large numbers of individuals who have demobilized from these groups – so far close to 13,000 for FARC and 2000 for ELN, which are said to correspond to between 35 per cent and 50 per cent of their number of troops as of 2000 – we believe that our respondents do not represent the views of a small portion of these organizations, and hence their responses do provide valuable information. Furthermore, some of our findings can be crosschecked with existing aggregated data at the municipality level as well as qualitative and ethnographic data. An additional way in which the data will allow us to assess bias is by comparing interviewees’ responses about groups they didn’t join: we asked many questions about all armed groups the respondents interacted with as civilians, that is, before they enlisted, and these responses give us a sense of the bias in the responses of those talking about the group to which they belonged. Overall, however, caution is needed when making claims about the FARC and ELN based on the data included in this chapter.
Turning to the CPARAS, the universe of this population consisted of 4433 individuals at the time of the survey, living in seven towns or cities throughout the country. We decided to focus on two paramilitary factions: the Cordoba Bloc and the Catatumbo Bloc, whose former fighters were living mostly in the cities (or nearby locations) of Monteria and Cucuta, respectively. At that time, 925 fighters had demobilized from the Cordoba Bloc, and 1425 from the Catatumbo Bloc. Given that CPARAS did not live in safe houses but in independent homes, and since their contact information was highly protected, we had to rely on the cooperation of the local offices of the Ministry of Interior in both cities. Through them, we invited about 500 ex-combatants to attend a meeting at a secure place, without giving any information on the purpose of such meeting. To our surprise, around 400 out of the 500 came and, after attending a presentation on the project, 99 per cent agreed to participate in the survey. Even though we cannot control for the possible bias derived from the fact that respondents had to select themselves to attend, the fact that only 20 per cent refused to come and that they did not know about the purpose of the meeting makes us confident about the sample. We interviewed 162 former fighters of the Catatumbo Bloc (11 per cent of the entire population) and 222 of the Cordoba Bloc (24 per cent of the entire population).

As with any other survey, the responses of former combatants could be affected by a number of problems due to memory, motivation, or communication issues (e.g., Sudman and Bradburn 1982). We tried to minimize these in designing our questionnaire, for example by trying not to ask about the frequency of events or their specific timing. Yet, we are aware that survey data have limitations, and it should be complemented with other evidence such as observational data, in-depth interviews, and archival evidence. Finally, given the length of the questionnaire, boredom and tiredness could affect responses. However, both in the pilot and large-scale surveys we asked respondents to assess the questionnaire at the end and their experience of it and 95 per cent of all IDE and 97 per cent of all CPARAS provided positive feedback. To our enumerators' surprise, many respondents even wanted to talk more about their experiences after two hours of being interviewed.

Respondents' general characteristics

This section describes the general characteristics of former guerrillas and paramilitaries that participated in the survey. Figure 7.2 shows respondents by group membership at the time of demobilization, differentiating between individually demobilized and collectively demobilized. As mentioned before, only paramilitaries have demobilized collectively; hence, we only interviewed individually demobilized ex-combatants in the case of guerrilla groups. About half of our sample consists of CPARAS, mainly former members of the Catatumbo Bloc and the Cordoba Bloc, with the other half composed mainly of IFARC, IELN, and IPARAS. A small percentage fought in dissident guerrilla groups (1 per cent) and only two respondents - both IDEs - did not report their group affiliation when responding to the survey. Given that very few ex-combatants come from guerrilla groups other than the ELN and the FARC, our presentation of the data will focus on these two guerrilla groups, the IPARAS, and the paramilitaries of the Cordoba and Catatumbo Blocs.

Turning to the demographic profile of our respondents, the first thing to note is their young age: around half of all respondents were between the ages of 18 and 25 and around 85 per cent were less than 35. They spent on average 5 years fighting. Around 75 per cent of those between 18 and 25 spent more than 3 years fighting, while only 10 per cent spent less than 2 years. The average time of service did not vary greatly across armed groups - between 4 and 6 years. This pattern is consistent with the data of the Ministry of Defense on the entire population of IDE that
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had demobilized when the survey was conducted. The CPARAS have spent on average fewer years fighting.

Moving to more detailed information, we find a significant contrast in respondents’ place of residence at the time of joining different groups. Guerrilla recruits are concentrated in rural areas, whereas paramilitary recruits were in urban ones (Figure 7.3). This difference is significant at the 1 per cent level. It should be noted, however, that many towns in Colombia don’t have the characteristics that are often associated with the term ‘urban’: towns are typically small and often only a few national institutions are present, while some public utilities are inaccessible to some, sometimes most, residents.

Data on age at time of enlistment show that these groups recruited mostly very young people. About 80 per cent of those who belonged to a guerrilla group were under the age of 25 when they joined, and almost half were below 18. While the percentage of paramilitary recruits who joined before turning 25 is similar, the percentage of those who report joining at ages below 18 is smaller than among former guerrilla fighters. However, there are statistically significant differences (at the 1 per cent level) between the responses of CPARAS and IPARAS: while only 20 per cent of the former reported joining at ages below 18, 38 per cent of the IPARAS did. This suggests that younger recruits may be more likely to desert. However, it might also be that those who did not demobilize voluntarily tend to describe the group to which they belonged in a more positive way than those who deserted. Given the stigma associated with the recruitment of minors – both in Colombia and elsewhere – it is possible that the CPARAS who joined before they turned 18 did not report their true age. This difference may also indicate differences in recruitment by different paramilitary factions. Hence, this finding must be taken with a degree of caution. It is also surprising that while less than 1 per cent of CCordoba and none of CCatatumbo report joining at ages below 14, 8 per cent of IPARAS do so (the difference is also significant at 1 per cent). Once again, this could signal either a problem of underreporting, or a tendency to desert among those who enlist at a very young age.

According to the data, the groups with the highest percentage of recruits under age 13 are FARC and ELN with 12 and 8 per cent respectively. If young recruits are more likely to become deserters, this result may not be representative of the universe of guerrilla recruits. At the same time, FARC is the group with the greatest percentage of ex-combatants reporting having joined at ages above 25. Given that the FARC and the ELN have been fighting for a similar time period, it could hardly be argued that the differences between the two are due to the passage of time.

In terms of education, close to half of all respondents had some years of elementary school or completed it. Guerrilla members are less likely than paramilitaries to have attended secondary education (the difference is statistically significant at 1 per cent). Very few of the recruits of both sides attended college or received professional training; the percentages are greater among IPARAS than CPARAS (difference significant at 1 per cent). On average, ex-guerrilla fighters are less educated than paramilitaries, which might be an outcome of the difference in the groups’ base in terms of rural rather than urban areas.

Motivations for joining

We now turn to the factors that help us capture, either directly or indirectly, our respondents’ motivation for joining guerrilla and paramilitary groups. As noted in the introduction, the literature has attempted to capture motivations to join non-state armed groups primarily through structural indicators, such as poverty, inequality, or relative deprivation. By looking at individual-level data, we find that some of those assumptions do not hold, at least in the Colombian case.
action paradigm; it signals instead that emotions can play an important role (Arjona 2005) and suggests that, in some cases at least, enlistment might be better understood as a contingent process, rather than as a decision made at a particular point in time.

We also tried to get our respondents' self-reported motivations for joining (Table 7.2). We proceeded in three different ways: first, we asked

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>IFARC (%)</th>
<th>IELN (%)</th>
<th>IPARAS (%)</th>
<th>CCordoba (%)</th>
<th>CCatatumbo (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attracted by promise of money or goods</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape from domestic violence</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape from extreme poverty</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be someone in his/her community</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because he/she thought it was going to be an adventure for fun</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because his/her friends had joined before</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcedly recruited</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running away from a threat</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allure of weapons</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
them to talk about the reasons they had to join (as an open-ended question); second, based on their answer, our interviewers coded their response using a list of 13 possible motivations; and third, our interviewers asked them about the most important reasons they had to join from that list of motivations, and coded their response. We allowed for more than one answer. Table 7.2 shows the distribution of self-reported motivations as a response given when asked whether or not each item of the list played a key role in their decision.

Several patterns emerge from these responses. First, ideology is not a stronger motivator among guerrilla recruits in general as compared with the paramilitaries (16 and 14 per cent, respectively, a statistically non-significant difference). Despite the fact that rebel groups do not pay salaries or other material compensations to their members (while the paramilitaries do), recruits from both sides of the conflict do not differ in their likelihood to enlist due to ideology. More precisely, the differences between the FARC and the IPARAS is small and not statistically significant, and the CPARAS are slightly more inclined to report ideology as a motivation than FARC recruits (the difference is not statistically significant). On the other hand, IELN members do report ideology as a key motivation more often than all other ex-combatants (the differences are significant at the 1 per cent level). Although small, however, the difference between the IPARAS and CPARAS is statistically significant at the 5 per cent level. This may suggest that deserters are less likely to be ideologically motivated compared with CPARAS, or that the latter attempt to portray the group they belonged to as composed of politically motivated individuals. Contrary to the literature’s tendency to identify the most important factor motivating recruitment, these results point to the multiplicity of reasons that may lead a person to enlist in an organization of this type.

Material benefits are cited as an important motivation for 57 per cent of the CPARAS and 40 per cent of the IPARAS (the difference is statistically significant, at the 1 per cent level). This difference may imply that desertion is not principally caused by failed material promises, at least as far as the members of the paramilitary groups are concerned. Although these results could be interpreted as evidence favoring theories that stress material incentives (e.g. Collier and Hoeffler 2004), the data suggest that they fall short of explanatory power. On the one hand, if such theories were correct – that is, if people enlist because they seek material rewards – then we should observe a similar distribution in the responses of guerrilla recruits. Yet, less than a fourth of IFARC and IELN report enlisting motivated by such promises. Given that the FARC and the ELN do not offer economic rewards or salaries to combatants, a greater anticipation of such benefit among the paramilitaries is expected. This is one of the reasons why theorizing armed groups’ practices should be part of any attempt to understand recruitment. On the other hand, half of CPARAS who report being motivated by material benefits also said that they joined for ideological reasons. This overlap between material and non-material motivations even among those who enlisted in groups that offered salaries brings to the fore the heterogeneity that is often found within armed organizations.

Indirect measures of our respondents’ opportunity costs to enlist also cast doubt on the preponderant role of material benefits. Figure 7.4 shows our respondents’ occupation at the time of enlistment. Only a few respondents report having been unemployed and looking for a job at the time of enlistment (less than 3 per cent in all groups). This result counters the assumption that people enlist in an armed group when the opportunity costs are very low. It should be mentioned, however, that among those who were employed, most held temporary jobs which are usually precarious and underpaid. Nevertheless, their opportunity costs do not appear to have been as desperate as often posited in

![Figure 7.4 Occupation at time of enlistment](image)
the literature. In particular, those who are more likely to report material motivations—the CCatatumbo—are also the most likely to report having a permanent job.

Additionally, we find that employed individuals, including coca gatherers who usually earn much more money compared with what they would in any other manual job, decided to join groups, such as FARC and ELN, which do not pay salaries to their combatants. In their case, the opportunity costs seem to have been quite high. Taken together, these data fall short of demonstrating that low opportunity costs were the overriding motivation for joining armed groups.

Going back to self-reported motivations (Table 7.2), we find that revenge is a leading motivation for about 13 per cent of all respondents; most of these interviewees see an event of violence as the key determinant of their decision to enlist. FARC members are less likely than other interviewees to report revenge as a leading motivation (the difference is significant at 1 per cent for CPARRAS and 5 per cent for IPARRAS). Once again, although largely dismissed, emotions seem to play a relevant role in shaping people’s decision to enlist in armed organizations.

Although only a few respondents mentioned domestic violence as a key reason to enlist, the fact that around 3 per cent of all respondents mention joining an armed group as a way to avoid being harmed at home is quite revealing. While only 7 per cent identified ‘desire to gain power’ as a key motivation for joining, many more mentioned it explicitly in their answer to the open-ended question about their motivation to enlist. The desire of being someone in one’s community was mentioned by about the same number of respondents who reported power as a motivation. Enlisting based on the expectation of having adventure or fun was identified as a key motivation by 11 per cent of IFARC and paramilitary ex-combatants, and 15 per cent of ELN. These numbers are very high if one takes into consideration the hardship involved in becoming a combatant. Yet, given the ages at which most respondents enlisted this could reveal how youths think about combatants. About 5 per cent of all respondents said they joined as a way to seek protection or because they were running away from a threat. This includes persons who were threatened by other armed organizations but also some who were involved in private disputes.

It is worth noting that only 5 per cent of all respondents said they were forcibly recruited. Especially in the case of the ID, it could be expected that many respondents would prefer to excuse their participation in an armed group by invoking forcible recruitment. This result, together with responses given to other sensitive questions, gives us confidence about the attitude of the majority of our interviewees towards responding to the survey.

Lastly, about 7 per cent of our respondents mentioned other factors as key motivations in their decision to join. Close to 8 per cent mention the allure of weapons as a clear motivation to enlist. For 7 per cent of the IPARRAS, their decision was the result of deceit, which may explain their desertion. An impressive 5 per cent of the former guerrillas joined to be with their loved one. Almost 2 per cent of the former paramilitaries said that they joined these groups because they were rejected by the National Army.

Altogether, we argue that our survey results cast additional doubt on the assumptions of the macro literature. Neither ideology nor economic incentives appear to be the overriding motivation of those who enlisted in revolutionary or counter-rebel armed groups in Colombia. Furthermore, those who report joining the guerrillas for ideological reasons were not relatively worse off than those who enlisted for other reasons, as a grievance argument would imply. Similarly, the CPARRAS who report enlisting in pursuit of economic benefits are also more likely to report having a permanent job, which lends little support to the idea that individuals take up arms when they face low opportunity costs.

War dynamics and recruitment

We have so far approached the question of motivations as an individual choice performed in isolation, an obviously unrealistic assumption. We now turn to contextual factors that may have affected the decision to join. Our survey included questions about various characteristics of the communities in which our respondents lived. Below we present results regarding several indicators of state presence, politics, armed group influence, and violence in the localities where the respondents lived one year prior to joining an illegal armed group for the first time.

A key argument in the theoretical literature on civil war onset has centered around the idea that low levels of state capacity, usually proxied by GDP (Gross Domestic Product) indicators, encourage the formation and growth of rebel groups (Fearon and Laitin 2003). We asked our informants whether the locality where they lived one year prior to enlisting in an armed group was characterized by the presence of a variety of
Table 7.3 State presence and infrastructure in respondent's locality one year prior to enlistment, by group membership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group membership and demobilization type</th>
<th>IFARC (%)</th>
<th>IELN (%)</th>
<th>IPARAS (%)</th>
<th>CCordoba (%)</th>
<th>CCatatumbo (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health center</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to public phone (within 30 m)</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faved road</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agrarian Bank</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

indicators linked to state presence. Table 7.3 presents a summary of their responses. The results lend support to the conjecture that weaker state presence is associated with rebel recruitment and stronger state presence with counter-rebel recruitment (Gates 2002). By directly linking state absence to rebel and counter-rebel recruitment patterns, our results lend more powerful support to state capacity arguments compared with research using indirect indicators or crossnational proxies. These results also call for a better understanding of counter-rebel recruitment: is it more likely in areas where state capacity is high? Or is it where the state is present but is not strong enough to fight the rebels? Paying attention to local, as opposed to national attributes of the state is essential to better understand the determinants of participation in different types of armed groups.

Network dynamics have been a relatively neglected factor in the study of recruitment in civil wars (Gould 1995; Petersen 2001). We find that knowing members of an armed group prior to enlisting is common among recruits in all groups: about half of all respondents report having had at least one relative or friend who joined their group before they did (Figure 7.5).

The importance of proximity to combatants becomes more salient by looking at the presence of armed groups in our respondents' place of residence one year before enlistment (Table 7.4). Several patterns emerge. First, recruits tend to come from localities characterized by a high presence of armed groups. Second, the ex-combatants of each group are likely to come from localities where this group was already present before they decided to join it. At least one guerrilla group is present in about 90 per cent of localities where ex-guerrilla respondents lived, while paramilitaries were present only in about 30 per cent of these localities. Similarly, two-thirds of ex-paramilitaries come from places where paramilitary groups were present, and about half from areas with guerrilla presence. The higher presence of guerrillas in communities where paramilitary recruits lived can be explained by the fact that paramilitary groups emerged in, or expanded to, areas where the guerrillas had a strong prior presence. These results suggest, once again, that recruits come from places that have been deeply affected by the war.

Looking more closely at the patterns of these groups' presence where our respondents lived, we also find that only about 14 per cent of
Recruits, across all groups, come from localities with no armed group presence at all (Figure 7.6). Less than 1 per cent of the guerrilla members come from areas where only paramilitaries were present, and about 15 per cent of all ex-paramilitaries come from localities where only guerrillas were present. These results suggest that, contrary to a commonly held view, recruitment does not occur evenly throughout the country, but that it is locally focalized. About 60 per cent of all ex-guerrilla fighters lived in areas where only guerrilla groups were present and about 30 per cent in areas where both paramilitaries and guerrillas were present. In the case of the paramilitaries the percentage of ex-combatants coming from areas where only paramilitaries were present is smaller (around 25 per cent), perhaps because, as mentioned earlier, paramilitary groups are usually located in areas with some prior influence of guerrillas. The latter, on the contrary, still occupy – at least when our respondents enlisted – some areas of the country where paramilitary groups had not consolidated their presence.

Further analysis would be required to see whether ex-paramilitaries are more likely to come from areas where the paramilitary groups have expelled the guerrillas, or from areas were both still compete for control.

Additionally, we find that it is not mere armed group presence that matters but its ‘depth’ as well. Figure 7.7 shows the amount of time that guerrilla and paramilitary groups spent in respondents’ localities and suggests that armed groups’ presence tended to be permanent in these locations: for half of the respondents combatants stayed in the locality all day and night, and for about 20 per cent of the respondents, combatants were present several times a week.

An interesting facet of the impact of armed groups on a community where they are present is the influence of individual combatants. As shown in Figure 7.8, respondents of all groups remember the local commander of the group they ended up joining as being very important persons in their localities: guerrilla commanders are thought to be very important by most ex-guerrilla respondents but not by ex-paramilitaries, and vice-versa. However, it is worth noting that the percentage of
paramilitaries who identify guerrilla commanders as important people is not negligible – about 20 per cent do. The same applies to ex-guerrilla fighters – around 16 per cent remember paramilitary commanders being highly influential in their communities. Overall, these results point to a strong link between recruitment and the presence, and influence, of non-state armed groups in recruits’ localities.

Another result that points to the ‘endogeneity’ of recruitment to the dynamics of the war is that ex-combatants of all groups come from highly victimized families and networks: many report having relatives or friends killed, threatened, or displaced by armed groups before they joined one of them (Figure 7.9). In addition, respondents come from areas that are, on average, more violent than national averages. About half of all respondents remember armed groups perpetrating homicides one year before they enlisted, and about a third say they also committed massacres (Figure 7.10). A comparison between our respondents’ communities and the national average confirms the insight that these were unusually violent places to begin with: in 1999, when most of our respondents joined an armed group for the first time, while the national homicide rate was 54 per 100,000 inhabitants, the average in these communities was 85 per 100,000 inhabitants; likewise, while at least one massacre took place in 78 per cent of these communities between

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**Figure 7.8** Influential combatants in respondents’ community prior to enlistment

**Figure 7.9** Victimization by any armed group (AG)

**Figure 7.10** Violence by armed groups in respondents’ locality one year prior to enlistment.

Note: ‘NR’: No response.
1997 and 2000, the national proportion is 18 per cent for the same period.\textsuperscript{14}

Finally, the effect of war dynamics on recruitment is also suggested by non-negligible inter-group mobility: around 10 per cent of those who demobilized from a guerrilla group report having fought in another legal or illegal armed group before they joined the group from which they eventually deserted (Figure 7.11). The rate is higher among IPARAS, and even higher among CCordoba and CCatatumbo. These differences between former guerrillas, IPARAS and CPARAS are all statistically significant. Examples include enlisting in different organizations of the same side (i.e. persons who joined different paramilitary or guerrilla groups), and those who had previously served in the National Army and the National Police. Of those who belonged to more than one group, most were members of the national army or the police who later joined the paramilitaries (Figure 7.12). These include those who served the mandatory military training. It is worth mentioning that in the open questions, several ex-combatants declared having joined an illegal group after failing to join the National Army or the Police. In contrast, moving across guerrilla groups is uncommon, as it is among paramilitary factions. Inter-group mobility is an issue that has been neglected in the literature and further underlines conflict’s ability to beget more conflict.

![Figure 7.11 Changes of group allegiance](image)

Note: 'Dk/Dn': doesn't know or doesn't respond.

![Figure 7.12 Other group membership among defectors](image)

**Conclusion**

What do we learn from the results of this survey of Colombian ex-combatants? It is worth pointing to two key implications.

First, we find that macro-level assumptions about why individuals join armed groups do not correspond to the empirical reality of the Colombian conflict. More specifically, we find that rebels and paramilitaries in Colombia do not enlist mainly because their opportunity costs are very low and because they seek material gains. Some do, to be sure, but many do not. Likewise, grievances and ideology are not the leading motivation for rebels – or at least for those among them who deserted. Paramilitaries – both deserters and non-deserters – also fail to appear as ideologically motivated as several theories of participation in civil war would suggest. Overall, when it comes to self-reported motivations, we find that no single motivation prevails; in contrast, we find considerable heterogeneity both across and within individuals, a fact that turns the search for a single, overarching, ‘master motivation’ (e.g. ‘greed’ or ‘grievance’) that has dominated the literature into a theoretical dead-end.

Second, we find that the conflict itself is a leading (if not the leading) factor fueling recruitment through several channels. Most notably, the absence of the state from certain areas facilitates recruitment into rebel organizations, whereas an entrenched presence of armed groups
is strongly associated with local individuals joining those groups rather than any other group. We also find that many individuals who join armed groups come from highly victimized areas, communities, and families. Threats, killings, and displacements are common among the families and social networks of the ex-combatants at the time when they joined an armed group. These findings suggest that recruitment is a highly localized end-product of the conflict itself; put otherwise, it is 'endogenous' to it. It is, therefore, natural to expect considerable cross-national variation in patterns of recruitment. This variation is likely to be linked to the dynamics of the conflict, in particular the balance of power between the warring sides and their ability to locate themselves in different areas and rule them (Arjona 2010; Kalyvas 2006).

To sum up, our analysis suggests that along with abstract theorization, our understanding of the dynamics of civil conflict, including the process of recruitment into armed groups, has a lot to gain from empirical studies that track this process on the ground.

Notes

1. We would like to thank the Colombian Ministry of Interior and Justice and the Ministry of Defense for allowing us to conduct our survey in 2004 and 2005. We especially thank the staff of the Demobilization and Reintegration Program in Bogotá, and the Opportunity and Reference Centers of the cities of Cúcuta and Montería for their invaluable collaboration and support. We would like to thank Pierre Landry, whose comments on the instruments and the survey design were crucial for this project. We benefited from comments on the instrument by Laila Balcázar, John Lapinsky, Francisco Gutiérrez, Macartan Humphreys, Juan Línez, Mauricio Rubio, María Victoria Llorente, and Elizabeth Wood. Abbey Steele gave us valuable comments and worked with us in the implementation of the pilot survey. Finally, we would like to thank the students who worked as enumerators, and Andrés Clavijo, Carlos Rondón, Carlos Hernandez, and especially Laura Otálora for outstanding research assistance. We are grateful to Mauricio Solano for his unconditional support in the different stages of this project. The survey received financial support from the Program on Order, Conflict and Violence at Yale University, the United States Institute of Peace, and the Folke Bernadotte Academy. We are grateful for this support.

2. In fact, much of the theoretical literature treats the process of joining as if it consisted exclusively of 'first-joiners,' that is, those individuals joining a rebellion at the very early stages. Hence the domination of the collective action paradigm (Kalyvas and Kocher 2007) and the neglect of civilian-combatant interactions as a key explanatory factor of recruitment (Arjona 2010).

3. Eight groups have demobilized completely or in part within these agreements: M-19, EPL, PRT, Quintin Lame, CRS, Medellin Militias, Metropolitan Militias, Militias de Valle de Aburrá, Francisco Garnica Front, and Ernesto Rojas Front.


6. On July 15, 2005, a bomb exploded in front of one of the safe houses. The government then decided to close all the safe houses within a few weeks and relocate ex-combatants.


8. Even though we focus on these two factions, our sample is drawn from the cities were almost half of all CPARAS were living at that time: 32 per cent were in Montería, and 13 per cent in Cúcuta.


10. We exclude these two interviewees from the analysis in the remaining of the article.

11. Only 3 per cent do not report the time they spent fighting. These observations are not included in Figure 2.2.

12. Bear in mind as a potential caveat that these patterns may not reflect the entire make up of guerrilla groups in Colombia, given that our sample includes only guerrilla deserters.

13. About 8 per cent of FARC and 15 per cent of EELN report being coca gatherers prior to joining these groups. The percentage is below 2 per cent for all former paramilitary members.

14. Based on homicide rates reported by Colombia's National Police, and data on massacres reported by the Human Rights Observatory of the Vicepresidency of Colombia.

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