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Urban violence and humanitarian action in Medellin

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HiCN Working Paper 148

June 2013



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Executive summary

Colombia has long experienced acute forms of political violence in and at the periphery of its major cities. Humanitarian agencies have also for decades protected civilians in order to minimize suffering within armed conflicts. Yet in recent years, humanitarian organizations have started to engage in settings that are neither war nor peace. These environments feature complex forms of politically- and economically-motivated violence. The city of Medellín (Colombia), in particular, is the paradigmatic example of such an environment where different types of violence come together in complex ways.

Humanitarian agencies only recently started expanding activities in these so-called “other situations of violence” in and around urban centers. Their focus has typically been on conflict-related violence in rural areas where guerrilla fighting has tended to be more intense. This paper provides a critical review of the character and dynamics of these settings. It considers emerging forms of urban violence and the ways in which humanitarian agencies are responding. It focuses primarily on the activities of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the world’s premier relief agency, in Medellín. The focus on Medellín is deliberate – it is a bellwether for other similar interventions underway around Latin America and the Caribbean.²

¹ Claudia Navas was a researcher and Liliana Bernal was a research assistant at CERAC. We gratefully acknowledge the editing and proof reading contribution of Andrew Berry and comments and direction of the Project by Jorge A. Restrepo, director of CERAC and Robert Muggah, from HASOW and the Igarapé Institute.

² This study complements other efforts underway in the cities of Ciudad Juárez, Port-au-Prince and Rio de Janeiro. See www.hasow.org

The paper offers a number of conceptual and practical insights for humanitarian agencies that are considering action in urban spaces.

The proposed framework is directly informed by International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and Human Rights Law (HRL) and consists of two basic variables. The first is the *intensity* of violence, understood as the threshold or tipping point that determines when situations of acute violence transform into a violent conflict. The second is the *organization* of violence, which is intended to identify the command structures within armed groups and their capacity to sustain military operations in order to be considered “parties in conflict” or, in the vernacular, “organized armed groups” (ICRC, 2008: 3). Conceptually, the paper draws from Muggah (2012) to examine the characteristics of urban violence.

This paper tests the intensity and organization of violence in the case of Medellin. It finds that while not experiencing outright warfare, Medellin confronts a complex form of intense and disorganized violence. For one, the city exhibits different forms of lethal and non-lethal violence that has humanitarian implications for the lives and livelihoods of specific segments of the population. At the same time, the large number of armed actors together with their disorganized structures and their complex relationships are dynamic and, consequently, highly volatile. Due to the extreme levels of violence in Medellin, there is also a high demand for humanitarian services that agencies such as the ICRC are able to provide. But as the paper shows, delivering such services is much more complicated than in more “traditional” settings.

The paper offers a number of conceptual and practical insights for humanitarian agencies that are considering action in urban spaces. It finds that the determination of the scope and scale of intervention invariably depends on highly localized conditions, including the intensity and organization of violence. The first section considers the methods employed to administer the assessment. Section two considers the intensity and organization of violence in Medellin, highlighting its transformation over time. The paper draws attention to the number and types of armed actors in the city, as well as their motivations, organization and relationships. The third section reviews some of the historical features of ICRC’s engagement, drawing primarily from readily available public documentation. It complements this with a short treatment of how ICRC is viewed by public authorities and communities and implications for effective intervention.

Introduction

Medellin has been affected by acute and chronic violence since the 1980s. Over the years, violence has been impacted by two processes – one exogenously and the other endogenously driven. These two forms of violence come together in insidious ways. The former relates to the decades of old national armed conflict while the latter is shaped by confrontations perpetrated by local armed actors. These groups include illegal security companies, youth gangs, organized criminals, and the so-called *combos*. This local constellation of actors is in turn influenced by more powerful structures, including formal conflict groups or larger criminal organizations.

In the case of Medellin, levels of violence often exceed those of armed conflict elsewhere in the country.

Predictably, then, the city of Medellin is severely affected by overlapping layers of violence. Such violence has tremendous humanitarian consequences. For one, homicidal violence, displacement and victimization impinges on the rights and liberties of individuals and communities. What is more Medellin features pervasive structural violence, including far-reaching and often not easily detectable social, economic and territorial control over large swathes of the population. Such violence is systematic and widespread, even if it remains to a certain extent invisible to the public and non-governmental authorities (Gómez, 2012).

This paper examines endogenous and exogenous forms of violence that affect Medellin. As such, it contributes to the ongoing discussion over whether certain forms of urban violence outside of war zones can be characterized as “armed conflict” or “other situations of violence”. There are legal conditions that set out when an armed confrontation can be declared an “armed conflict”, but from an empirical basis, these parameters are more opaque (Muggah, 2012). In the case of Medellin, levels of violence often exceed those of armed conflict elsewhere in the country. What is more, here is a blurring of political and criminal violence. Determining whether and when the situation is an armed conflict or not is not straight-forward. And yet such questions are of critical importance when deciding on humanitarian priorities, determining the appropriate use of force, or the types of military or policing interventions to undertake.

The paper adopts an empirical approach to determining whether Medellin has crossed the threshold into “armed conflict”. It seeks to assess whether its residents qualify for a more concerted humanitarian engagement or whether more conventional law enforcement and social welfare measures are appropriate. Drawing on the conceptual framework established by Muggah (2012), the report offers an innovative assessment of the intensity and organizational features of violence in the city, two criteria that are essential to establishing whether an armed conflict is occurring or not. The authors find that the situation in Medellin does not qualify as an “armed conflict”. Rather, violence is disorganized, even if meted out by a complex panorama of armed groups. Among the key findings are:

- The intensity of violence as measured by homicides, disappearances, displacement, sexual attacks and the use of military hardware in Medellin is highly heterogeneous and dynamic. Over the past five years intensity of violence has increased significantly.
- The organization of violence in terms of “conventional armed actors” and an array of “local armed groups” is complex, but it appears that local groups are instrumentalized by a variety of interests and adopt tactics of social, economic and territorial dominance over populations conducts and the use of territories and their assets.

- The levels of intensity and organization of violence in Medellín seems to vary according to the influence of armed actors (armed conflict groups and large criminal organizations) and their inter-relationships, alliances with local actors, and the impact of specific interventions (formal and informal) launched in the city.
- The intervention of the ICRC in Medellín fulfills its mandate for humanitarian work in a legal framework that while consistent with principles of international humanitarian law (IHL), falls under the terms of human rights law. As a result, its intervention in the city exhibits particular features, distinct from its traditional approach.
- ICRC's operation in Medellín raises different reactions among public authorities, local experts and communities. While many appreciate the agency's role in facilitating mediation and supporting local protection, others are concerned with the legal precedents it may be setting in relation to the application of IHL, and the risks of mediating with local armed groups given their lack of unity, command and control.

This paper is intended to identify insights and lessons to assist humanitarian actors currently intervening in Medellín, but also similar settings around the globe. By applying a conceptual framework focusing on the intensity and organization of violence in urban settings, it also allows for the practical determination of priorities for assistance and modalities of intervention. The first section considers the methods employed to administer the assessment. Section two considers the intensity and organization of violence in Medellín, highlighting its transformation over time. The paper draws attention to the number and types of armed actors in the city, as well as their motivations, organization and relationships. The third section reviews some of the historical features of ICRC's engagement, drawing primarily from readily available public documentation. It complements this with a short treatment of how ICRC is viewed by public authorities and communities and implications for effective intervention.

Revisiting methods

The paper was shaped by a mixed methodology involving both qualitative and quantitative aspects. It is important to stress that much of the data is based on publicly available sources, and that interviews were conducted in Bogotá and Medellín on a voluntary basis. It is also critical to note that the paper was prepared for the HASOW project, an independent research initiative considering issues of urban violence and humanitarian action in four cities, including Medellín. The study was undertaken by researchers affiliated with CERAC. At no time did the team receive information or support from the ICRC during the course of the study. This was due to the ICRC's commitment to confidentiality, neutrality, impartiality and independence. Instead, information on the ICRC was generated through available publications and consultations with partners.

Out of respect for the ICRC mandate, it was also decided to avoid direct contact with

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those who were immediately benefiting from ICRC’s activities. In deference to security concerns for both researchers and respondents, and the absence of beneficiary profiles, the team was not able to visit the neighborhoods where the ICRC operates. And while direct access was not pursued, the research team nevertheless interviewed community leaders, civil society organizations and other humanitarian agencies in Medellín, all of whom feature direct contact with the communities where the ICRC are administering programs. All information related to the ICRC, then, is based on interviews with these actors. What is more, the research team undertook a systematic review of academic literature, media reports and official documents of the ICRC in Colombia. A total of 75 documents were collected (see References). This literature informed the conceptual approach and provided a historical overview of their role and rationale for operating in Medellín.

In order to generate an empirical treatment of the intensity and organization of violence, the research team gathered official data from the National Police, the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) and the Information System Security and Coexistence (SISC) from Mayor’s office in Medellín. The data obtained from SISC is geo-referenced between 2003 and 2012, and provides records on homicides, sexual violence, forced displacement and weapons seizures. This data allowed for a careful review of trends in violence intensity and organization in Medellín, by *Comuna*³ and across specific neighborhoods. Meanwhile, qualitative fieldwork in Medellín was undertaken over a 17 day period. A total of 23 informants were interviewed, including representatives of local government, academics, non-governmental organizations, community leaders and grassroots organizations. Unstructured interviews were conducted to assess local knowledge and perceptions on the context of violence in the city, as well as the presence of armed groups. Interviews were also undertaken to assess the outputs and outcomes of ICRC’s activities in the city.

A short history of violence in Medellín

In order to differentiate an armed conflict from other situations of violence it is necessary to determine if the confrontation has reached a minimum level of intensity, that is, a “threshold” or tipping-point. Following Muggah (2012) , quantitative and qualitative indicators such as

1. the duration of armed violence;
2. the number, duration, type of confrontations;
3. the types of weapons used;
4. the number and caliber of weaponry;
5. the number of actors involved;
6. the levels of destruction;

³ Medellín is divided into 16 Comunas. Each Comuna includes several neighborhoods.

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7. the rates of displacement; and
8. the involvement of United Nations Security Council, among others, can help to identify if a situation can be categorized as an armed conflict or not.

The paper presents the first empirical attempt to test violence intensity in Medellín based on a selection of the above-mentioned indicators. It also accounts for other direct impacts of violence that are relevant to understanding the situation of violence in the city, including sexual violence, the characteristics of victims, displacement and forced disappearances. Crucially, metrics are geo-referenced and available between 2003 and 2012. Since the ICRC started to explore engagement in Medellín only in 2011 with a dedicated program starting in 2012, this section draws attention particularly to this most recent period. It is important to stress that Medellín has long experienced intense forms of violence, at least since the 1980s. The connection between exogenous dynamics (e.g. national conflict and the market for narcotics and other illicit goods) and endogenous features (e.g. relationships between local armed groups with communities, conventional armed actors and criminal organizations) have profoundly shaped the intensity of violence in the city.⁴ In fact, it is possible to differentiate four phases of armed violence in the city.

Drug cartel violence with gradual penetration of guerrilla groups (1989-1998)

The first phase of Medellín's experience of intense organized violence emerged in the wake of narco-cartels. It is worth recalling that conditions were ripe for inter-personal and collective violence owing to the rapid arrival of thousands of displaced people entering the city during the 1960s and 1980s, most of them seeking refuge from the conflict in rural areas (Angarita, 2003: 98). Against this backdrop, drug trafficking emerged as a source of lucrative economic development for families and communities that otherwise lacked basic needs. The public authorities were patently unable to provide essential needs such as housing, employment and other welfare functions (Angarita, 2003, p.98). In relatively short order individuals involved in small-scale drug trafficking learned the business and became better organized. During the 1980s, drug trafficking professionalized, and services such as the production and distribution of narcotics, the protection of business, and vendettas required the establishment of strong military apparatus (Yarce, n.d.). This process also consolidated a culture of 'easy money', in which violence was a privileged mechanism for solving conflicts, and strengthening criminal capacity of the local armed actors, including the *combos* (Yarce, n.d.).

By the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s, guerrilla groups such as M-19, ELN, EPL and FARC developed a military project to enter urban areas through the so-called militias. Initially, both drug dealers and militias developed their own businesses, without confrontations (Yarce, n.d.). However, in by the early 1990s, when the public

⁴ Interview 8, November 9, 2012.

forces started to fight drug trafficking in earnest, disputes over the control of key neighborhoods rapidly escalated. They triggered an increase in homicides that reached a peak between 1991 and 1992, an astronomical 444 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (Asesoría de Paz y Convivencia de Medellín in Yarce, n.d.). In 1993 Pablo Escobar was killed, but drug trafficking did not die with him. Neither did the presence of *combos* or militias groups. Instead, Escobar left a generation of well-equipped youth with guns and military know-how as well as criminal structures known colloquially as *Oficinas*. *Oficinas* consisted of groups that facilitated the supply of criminal services between *combos* and delinquents in *Comunas* (Ceballos, 2000, p.338).

The ascendance of paramilitaries over guerrillas and the militarization of state response (1998-2003)

The next phase of Medellín's experience with intense violence occurred in 2001, when the paramilitary group, AUC, expanded its operations.

The next phase of Medellín's experience with intense violence occurred in 2001, when the paramilitary group, AUC, expanded its operations.⁵ It launched a series of decisive counterinsurgency operations to ensure territorial control. *Combos* and other criminal groups joined either the militias or paramilitaries, taking the armed confrontation to several neighborhoods and endangering the lives of literally thousands of residents. While lower than at the height of the reign of Escobar in the early 1990s, homicide rates shot-up to 165 and 174 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2001 and 2002, respectively. This period was also particularly bloody in other parts of Colombia, owing in large part to the formidable killing capacities of the AUC.

In 2002, in response to spiraling violence, the government launched military operations in the *Comunas* (neighborhoods) where the militias had the greater presence. One of these military operations – *Operación Orión* – took place over a four day period in October 2002 in the infamous *Comuna 13*. The operation transformed the dynamics of violence in the city. Approximately 1,000 men from the armed forces, entering by air and land, with the support of the paramilitary groups of the area (particularly with the *Bloque Cacique Nutibara*, BCN) took over the *Comuna* and triggered an armed confrontation against the militias. The results were monumental, including mass killings, displacement and the forced disappearance of 150-300 people (Verdad Abierta, 2012). The results of the operation were not entirely unexpected. It led to the hegemony of the paramilitary – notably the BCN – in *Comuna 13* as well as in other areas of the city.⁶ But homicides and violence continued as a result of the armed confrontations between *combos* and other local armed actors. In particular, those who used to be part of the militias continued their violent actions while seeking a “new boss”.⁷

5 In 2001 the paramilitaries were present in 211 municipalities of Colombia and the 50 per cent of the population was exposed to their violence (Granada, Restrepo y Vargas, 2009, p.94).

6 According to a local journalist: “after Operación Orión Medellín experienced a ‘paramilitarization’, meaning that no militia groups were left in the city.

7 Interview 10, November 11, 2012.

Intra-paramilitary disputes and the demobilization of the paramilitary (2012-2008)

This third period was characterized by the armed confrontation between two paramilitary groups: the BCN, led by “Don Berna”, and the *Bloque Metro* (BM) led by “Doblezero”. Following armed encounters, the BCN emerged victorious and assumed control over the BM and also over the armed bands linked to its structure. However, the BCN, “rather than an illegal armed federation, with a chain of command built over a history, common interests and objectives fully shared by all its members, was a criminal network” (IEP, 2007: p.54). In truth, it was a network composed of several criminal groups, each one with different objectives and leadership structures that, ultimately, submitted to “Don Berna” owing to its lavish use of violence and terror (Verdad Abierta, 2008). Part of the structure of the BCN is the *Oficina de Envigado*, a criminal cell that still remains active today.

This third period was characterized by the armed confrontation between two paramilitary groups.

Between 2003 and 2005 the paramilitary bloc *Bloque Héroes de Granada* as well as the BCN (including “Don Berna”) demobilized. However, “Don Berna” still controlled the *combos* from jail. The hegemony of “Don Berna” led to an important reduction in the rate of homicides in 2003 (93 per 100.000 inhabitants) which lasted until 2008 following his extradition to the United States. However, some attribute this fall in homicides to the allegedly unofficial negotiation between the municipal government, led by Sergio Fajardo, and “Don Berna”. From 2003 to 2008, despite the reduction in homicides, *combos* and *bands* loyal to “Don Berna”, maintained their territorial control through non-lethal violence (e.g. extortions, threats, social control).⁸

Dispute for control of *Oficina de Envigado* and the entrance of *Los Urabeños* (2008-2012)

A new round of violence emerged with the extradition of “Don Berna” in 2008. Specifically, there was an internal struggle to monopolize the criminal *Oficina de Envigado*, with Maximiliano Bonilla, alias “Valenciano”, and Erick Vargas, alias “Sebastian”, as key pretenders to the throne. The confrontation between these groups generated ripple effects across the city whether registered as homicide, death threats, intra-urban forced displacement, youth recruitment, sexual violence or other metrics (Otálvaro et al., 2012, p.22). In 2011 “Valenciano” was captured in Venezuela, with “Sebastian” also picked-up in August 2012. The absence of leadership and the loss of certain key trafficking routes led to a weakening of the *Oficina de Envigado*, triggering yet another violent round of interactions between the *combos* and other criminal groups (La Silla Vacía 2012). The entry of yet another pretender to the throne, the neoparamilitary group *Los Urabeños*, introduced a new and violent dimension to an already unstable situation.

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Medellin has experienced successive (but different waves) of organized and disorganized violence over the past three decades. This started with the dominance of the Medellin Cartel and was followed by overlapping and cascading armed confrontation between militia groups and paramilitaries. Another phase involved the dominance of the paramilitaries, but this too gave way to criminal organizations (with paramilitary backgrounds). Over the years, local armed actors have adapted and learned ways to use violence as a means of ensuring economic as well as a strategic social control over their communities.⁹ But more importantly, they have served as “criminal assets” for the dominant armed groups and criminal organizations that control the illicit markets of the city.

Mapping violence intensity

The intensity of violence in Medellin has been highly dynamic and episodic, even if at above average rates. It has been shaped by a complex array of actors, and closely connected to the competition between them. Overall, Medellin has been affected by a process of violence transformation. This can be described as “a phenomena in which some basic characteristics of violence change, such as its distribution and the impact on population, the forms in which it is practiced or the processes that produce it. A process of transformation generates a permanence of violence through time, despite some of its manifestations and characteristics modify” (Granada, Restrepo y Vargas, 2009, p.93).

Although the levels of organized and interpersonal violence in Medellin have declined significantly over the past decade,¹⁰ it remains one of the most violent cities in the country. Since 2003, homicidal violence in Colombia dropped steadily, and Medellin seemed to follow the national trend. The city's homicide rate fell from 93 homicides per 100,000 in 2003 to 28 homicides per 100,000 by 2007 (Figure 1) in spite of fluctuations described in the previous section. However homicide rates began to register a sharp incline between 2008 and 2011 to 70 per 100,000. The increase can be explained by the breaking up of the paramilitary hegemony, with the extradition of *Don Berna* to the U.S., and the beginning of a new phase of violence with confrontations between the factions of ‘*Sebastian*’ and ‘*Valenciano*’.

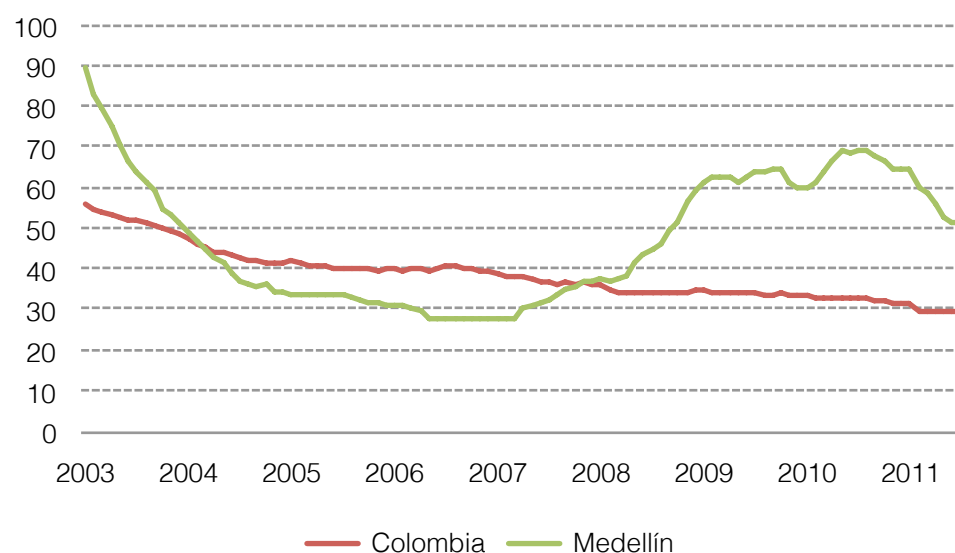
The intensity of violence is distributed unevenly across the territory of Medellin and its changes reflect local dynamics between armed groups. For the period 2003-2012, as shown in Figure 2, the *Comunas* registering rates higher than 5 homicides per 10,000 inhabitants include the *Comunas* of *Aranjuez* (*Comuna* 4), *Villa Hermosa* (*Comuna* 8), *La Candelaria* (*Comuna* 10), *San Javier* (*Comuna* 13) and *Guayabal* (*Comuna* 15). Notably, *Comuna* 10 registered 25 homicides per 10,000 inhabitants in 2010 –the highest rate of the period– followed by la *Comuna* 13 with a rate of 17 homicides per

⁹ Interview 8, November 9, 2012

¹⁰ In 1991 Medellin registered a homicide rate of 381 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (Gómez, 2012: 19).

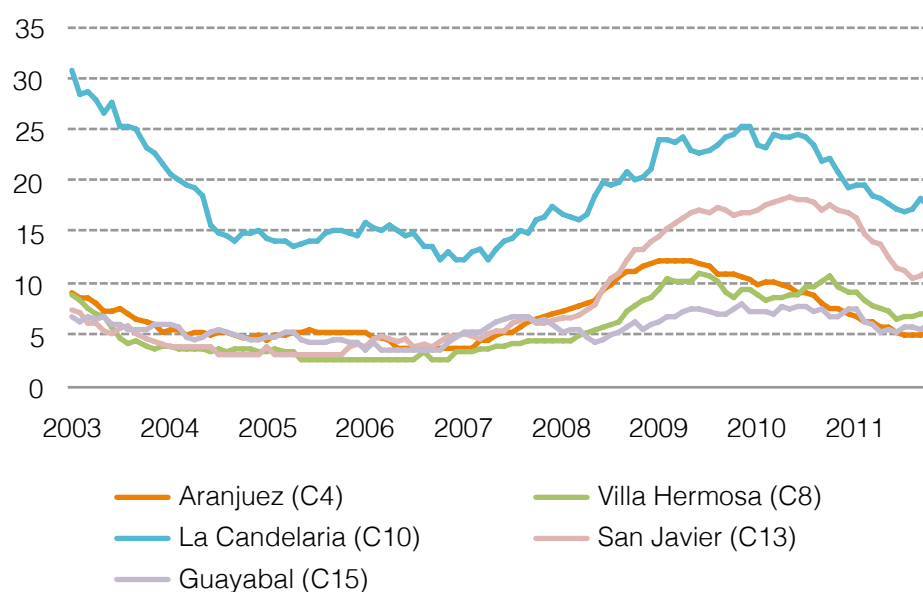
10,000 the same year. However, it's important to point out that in terms of numbers of homicides, in 2010, *Comuna 13* registered more homicides than *Comuna 10*, (231 and 201, respectively).¹¹

Figure 1. Homicide rates in Colombia and Medellin 2003-2012 (per 100,000)



Source: National Police of Colombia. Data processed by CERAC.

Figure 2. Comunas with rates higher than 5 homicides per 10,000 inhabitants 2003-2012



Source: SISC. Data processed by CERAC.

¹¹ Due to the differences in the size of the population of each of these Comunas (in 2010 Comuna 13 had a population of 133,918 whilst Comuna 10 with 85,000), the levels of violence can be concealed if observed by rate.

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What else might explain the particularly egregious rates of violence in *Comuna 10*? For one, it is the economic center of Medellín and therefore features the highest concentration of trade and businesses (legal and illegal) within the city. As a hub for thousands of buyers and sellers, it is hardly surprising that it concentrates informal enterprises specializing in prostitution, human trafficking, money laundering, arms trafficking, gambling and smuggling. This *Comuna* registers the largest concentration of the city's "floating" population.¹² Therefore the murder rate for the population of the *Comuna* could be lower. Given this concentration of private enterprise, *Comuna 10* is also home to multiple illegal private security organizations (called *Convivir*). These actors charge legal and illegal businesses a *vacuna*, a tax, that businesses pay in exchange for security and keeping the area free of beggars (even thieves are known to pay these organizations to enter the area).¹³

It is also important to note that violence perpetration varies temporally – not just over the course of the month or week, but also during twenty-four hour cycles. Acute violence tends to concentrate rather than be spread out evenly over time. Among *Comunas* not included in Figure 2, those with rates lower than 5 homicides per 10,000 habitants over the same period, violence tends to be concentrated during specific periods. For example, *Comuna 6* recorded 31 homicides in July 2009 averaging one homicide per day. Also in January 2010 *Comuna 1* registered 39 homicides, averaging just over one homicide per day. These *Comunas* show the existence of heterogeneous violence, where their yearly average homicide rate is low, but there is a high level of violence in some months.

Predictably, some neighborhoods are more affected than others at a particular moment of time. When analyzing the micro-dynamics of violence at the neighborhood level, there is a variation in intensity between 2003 and 2011 (as shown in Maps 1 and 2). On the one hand, there is a clear overall reduction of homicidal violence in Medellín over this time period. This reduction, however, is greater in some neighborhoods than others, for example the following all experienced reductions in homicidal violence: *Comuna 1* (neighborhoods *Popular* and *Carpinelo*)¹⁴, *Comuna 2* (neighborhoods *El Playón de Los Comuneros* and *Villa del Socorro*)¹⁵, *Comuna 7* (neighborhoods *Robledo* and *Cucaracho*)¹⁶ and *Comuna 10* (neighborhoods *Prado* and *Guayaquil*)¹⁷. However, it is important not

12 The term "floating" refers to those people who either work in or visit the *Comuna* on a daily basis but who do not actually live there. This causes some methodological difficulties when assessing data from the *Comuna* since official records do not take this "floating" population into account.

13 Interview 5, November 8 of 2012.

14 *Popular* registered 36 homicides in 2003 whilst in 2011 it registered only 3. *Carpinelo* registered 31 homicides in 2003, whilst in 2011 it registered just 3.

15 *El Playón de los Comuneros* registered 17 homicides in 2003 whilst in 2011 registered only 3. *Villa del Socorro* registered 37 homicides in 2003 whilst in 2011 registered just 5.

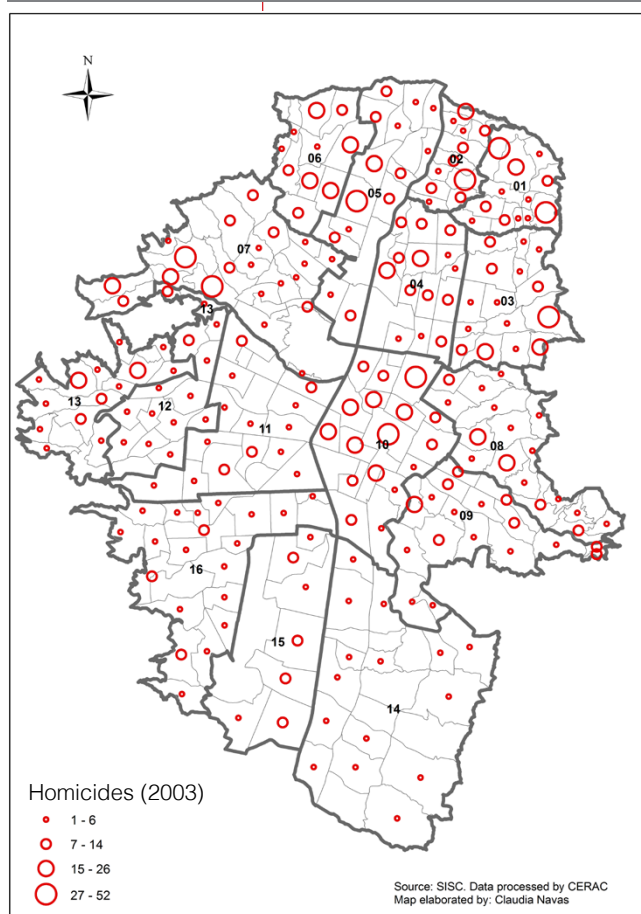
16 *Robledo* registered 30 homicides in 2003 whilst in 2011 it registered 3. *Cucaracho* registered 31 homicides in 2003, whilst in 2011 it registered 7.

17 *Prado* registered 33 homicides in 2003 whilst in 2011 it registered 8. *Guayaquil* registered 17 homicides in 2003 whilst in 2011 it registered 4.

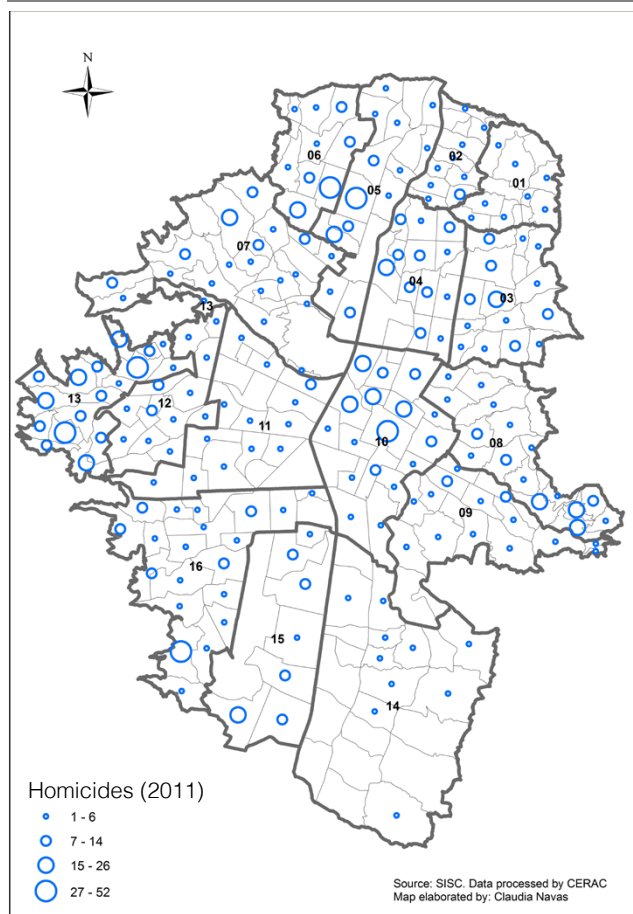
to overstate these reductions, as may imply that they are not necessarily safe, but rather that one armed group dominates over the others. In these cases, homicide rates may not be the best indicator to identify the intensity of violence. Better metrics might include forced displacement, sexual violence, extortion, social control mechanisms (See section 2).

In contrast, Map 2 shows a significant concentration of homicide rates in some neighborhoods of *Comuna's* 8 and 13. The neighborhoods particularly affected in *Comuna* 8 were *Villatina*, *Las Estancias*, *Villa Turbay* and *Villa Liliam*, and the neighborhoods most affected in *Comuna* 13 were *La Pradera*, *Las Independencias* and *El Salado*. These two *Comuna's* have been historically affected by acute insecurity and have played an important role during the aforementioned phases. It is no coincidence that the ICRC's program is being pursued in some of these neighborhoods. The high concentration of homicidal violence in *Comunas* 8 and 13 can be attributed to the arrival of the new armed group, 'Los Urabeños'.¹⁸ It is important to note the geographic location of both *Comunas* that makes them more vulnerable to organized violence, as both are connected to strategic corridors for drugs and arms trafficking.

Map 1. Homicides by neighbourhood 2003

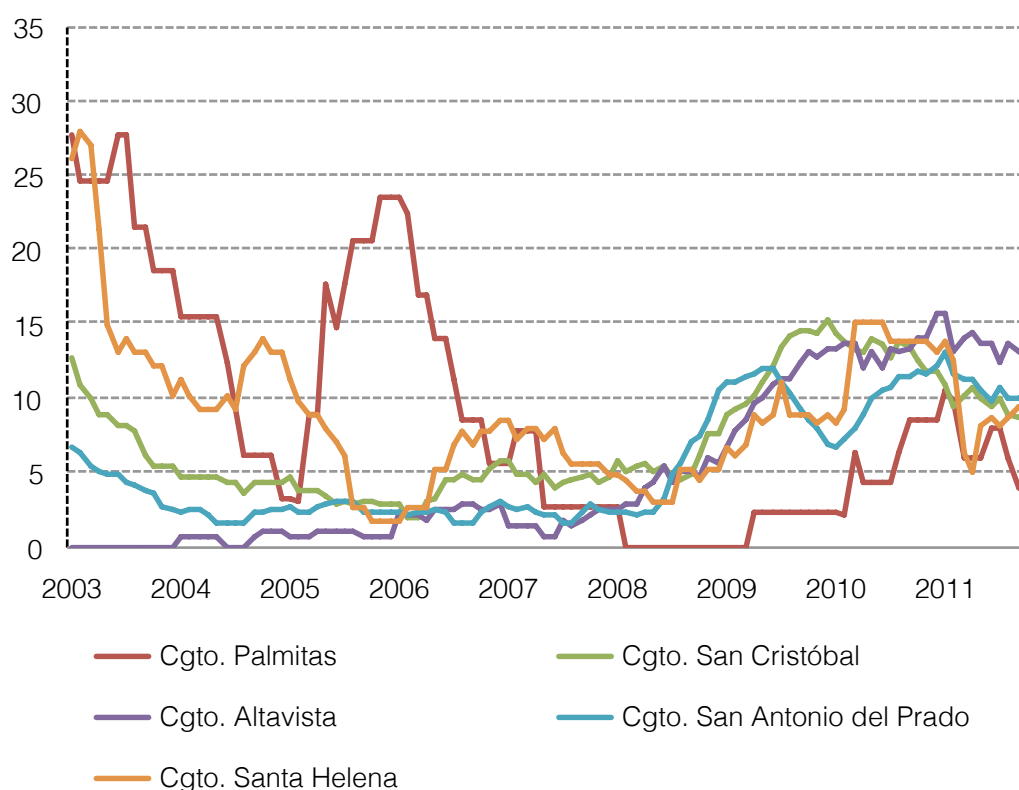


Map 2. Homicides by neighbourhood 2011



Typically, those seized with examining the urban dynamics of Medellín are less preoccupied with “rural” violence at the periphery of the city. As Figure 3 shows, in 2010 and 2011, the townships of *Altavista* and *Santa Helena*, register the highest homicide rates among other rural areas of the city. This is not surprising since both of them share borders with the *Comunas* 13 and 8, respectively.

Figure 3. Homicide rates per 10,000 inhabitants in rural localities of Medellín



Source: SISC. Data processed by CERAC.

There is a comparatively recent debate on the participation of children in *combos* and delinquent groups in the city. It is possible to identify that since 2009 there appears to be a worrisome increase in the victimization of children ranging from 0 to 17 years (Figure 4). It can be seen that in 2009 the homicidal violence rate for this age group increased dramatically from 2008. The age group most affected by violence in the city, is between the ages of 18 to 24 years old, with the highest rates of homicide of the series, followed by 25 to 49 year old group.

Figure 4. Homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants by age group

Source: SISC. Data processed by CERAC.

The demographic breakdown of homicidal violence as shown in (Figure 5) depicts the male population as being the most affected, as is the case in most high-violence environments in or outside of Colombia. However it can be seen that from 2008 there has been an increase in the number of attacks against women, a trend that has been highlighted in the media and by NGOs, and that is probably linked to the increase in the use of women by criminal groups.

Figure 5. Homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants by gender

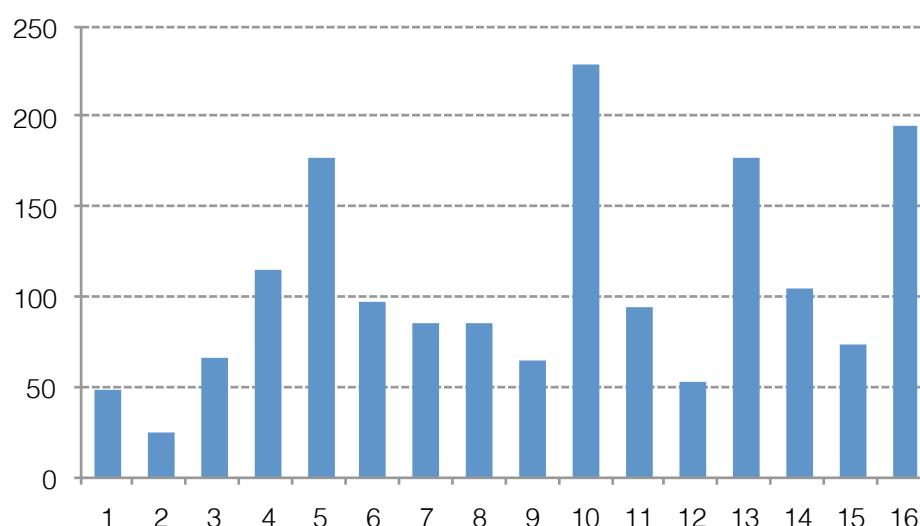
Source: SISC. Data processed by CERAC.

Medellin is considered to be one of the principle centers for the distribution of small arms and light weapons in the country.

Mapping weapons used

Medellin has been historically affected by arms trafficking, due in large parts to matters of history, geography and political economy. Indeed, Medellin is considered to be one of the principle centers for the distribution of small arms and light weapons in the country (Craggin and Hoffman, 2003: 48). The city itself also generates considerable demand for weapons due to the existence of vibrant criminal groups linked to drug trafficking and other illegal economies, hundreds of criminal gangs, illegal private security companies, and 'combos', among others. But like violence, these are not necessarily evenly distributed. As Figure 6 shows, *Comuna 10* featured the highest number of firearms seized in 2011, corresponding to 13 per cent of all the firearms retrieved across the city. This is not surprising, as noted above, since *Comuna 10* is also home to the highest concentration of trade and businesses (legal and illegal).

Figure 6. Firearms seized by *Comuna* in Medellin (2011)



Source: SISC. Data processed by CERAC.

Despite the fact that there is no official information available on the type and caliber of weapons seized in Medellin, the research team was able to identify more unofficial anecdotal reports. These reports show that sophisticated weapons such a Miniuzi, M60, Glock Pietro Beretta, Bushmaster and Winchester rifles, and FN Herstal PS90 were seized in the last few years, mainly from important members of the '*Oficina de Envigado*' and '*Urabeños*' (Colorado, 2012). This shows that the level of armament is robust and equivalent to even military and police capabilities in some respects. Also, the presence of long-range rifles and high-power small arms (referred to as the "matapolicias"), suggests a kind of mini "arms race" in which criminal groups try to extend the firepower and capacity against that of other groups and the authorities.

Mapping population displacement

Forcible displacement is widely recognized as a mechanism of territorial control – largely inherited or learned from groups involved in armed conflict. This tactic is used extensively by local armed actors in Medellín over the past five years. Forced displacement is in some ways a more effective mechanism of territorial control than homicide. This is because homicides are a typical security indicator used by governments to identify priorities and organize interventions. A spike in homicides tends to draw the attention of the public authorities and incite responses, which can generate costs for armed groups. Moreover, displacement does not leave the same kind of physical evidence as homicides, limiting investigations by local authorities and accountability for armed groups (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2011: 7).

In 2010, Medellín featured the second highest number of people expelled in the country: 5,932 individuals left the city.

Since 2008, reported rates of forced displacement have significantly increased. This includes displacement from Medellín to other towns of Colombia and also displacement within Medellín itself – known as intra-urban displacement (IUD). In 2010, Medellín featured the second highest number of people expelled in the country: 5,932 individuals left the city due to violence that year (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2011: 4). Likewise, in 2010, a total of 5,962 people were victims of IUD, having moved to other neighborhoods or *Comunas* within the city (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2010: 5; Alcaldía de Medellín, 2011: 11). Between January and July 2012, 1,600 people were displaced from their homes due to armed confrontations between armed groups (El Colombiano, 2012). There has also been an increase in massive forced displacements (MFD)¹⁹ in the city since 2009. In 2010, for example, there were 12 reported cases, of which 4 occurred in *Comunas* 3, 8 and 13 in the month of June (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2011: 13).²⁰

As Map 3 shows, in 2011 the neighborhood that experienced the highest levels of expulsion was *Comuna* 13. Neighborhoods *Veinte de Julio*, *Las Independencias*, *Belencito* and *San Javier No. 1*, were also dramatically affected by this type of violence. Particularly, in *Las Independencias*, a total of 353 people left the neighborhood in 2011, which represents 2.2 per cent of its population. In *Comuna* 8, the neighborhood of *La Sierra*, also registered high levels of IUD, as well as neighborhoods *Santo Domingo de Savio No. 1* and *Popular* in *Comuna* 1, *Santa Cruz* in *Comuna* 2, *Castilla* in *Comuna* 5, *Moravia* in *Comuna* 4, *Barrio Caycedo* in *Comuna* 9 and *El Rincon* in *Comuna* 16.

What is more, Medellín receives the second highest number of displaced populations in the country (Bogotá is first). In 2010, Medellín received a total of 12,496 people displaced from different areas of the country due to armed conflict (Alcaldía de Medellín,

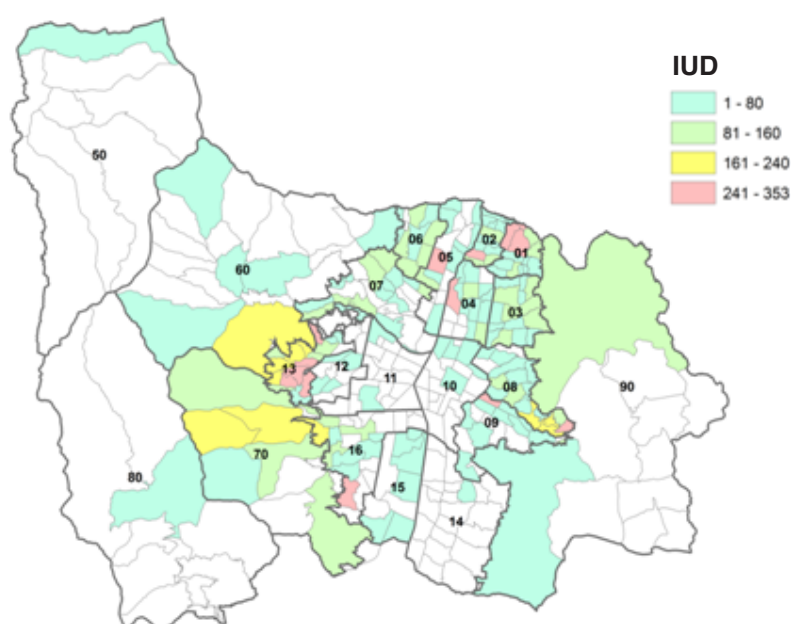
¹⁹ A forced displacement is cataloged as “massive” when 10 or more families, or 50 or more people, leave their homes as a result of a common event.

²⁰ A possible interpretation of the increase in MFD records in Medellín is that it has become a new strategy – inherited from the paramilitaries. The idea is to entrench armed groups at the local level by carrying out violent invasions on other territories controlled by local actors (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2010: 9-10).

2011: 6). On this matter it is important to highlight that many displaced families that come to Medellin from other parts of Colombia, are often re-victimized in the city by local armed actors. Both phenomena, intra urban and the reception of internally displaced populations, highlights a dramatic humanitarian crises. There are also challenges that present complex logistical requirements. The sheer extent of displacement persisting in and out of Medellin is all the more remarkable when juxtaposed by the considerable institutional capacities of the city. Indeed, Medellin was ranked as the City of the Year by the Wall Street Journal and Citi Bank in 2103.²¹

The challenges of responding to urban displacement are increasingly well known.²² Amongst the many challenges for humanitarian actors seeking to support these populations are the complex means of negotiating access in settings marked by local divisions and tensions. In many cases, this requires providing aid via intermediaries in settings subject to a strong and sustained presence and dominance from violent groups, with a lack of hierarchical or stable structures. Complicating matters is the lack of confidence and social capital in communities who are subjected to such controls. It is difficult, then, to operationalize basic principles of humanitarian action – including the principle of distinction – given the ways in which different armed groups themselves are blurred with civilian structures.

Map 3. Records of Intra-urban displacement by neighborhood 2011



Source: SISC. Data processed by CERAC.

21 The competition includes a list of 200 cities compiled by the Urban Land Institute. Cities were selected based on eight criteria: Environment & Land Use, Culture & Livability, Economic / Investment Climate, Progress & Potential, Places of Power, Education & Human Capital, Technology & Research and Mobility & Infrastructure. See <http://www.citigroup.com/citi/news/2013/130301a.htm>.

22 See the special edition of Forced Migration Review (2010) at <http://www.fmreview.org/urban-displacement/>. Also consult ODI's project from 2009-2012 at <http://www.odi.org.uk/projects/2437-sanctuary-city-urban-displacement-vulnerability>.

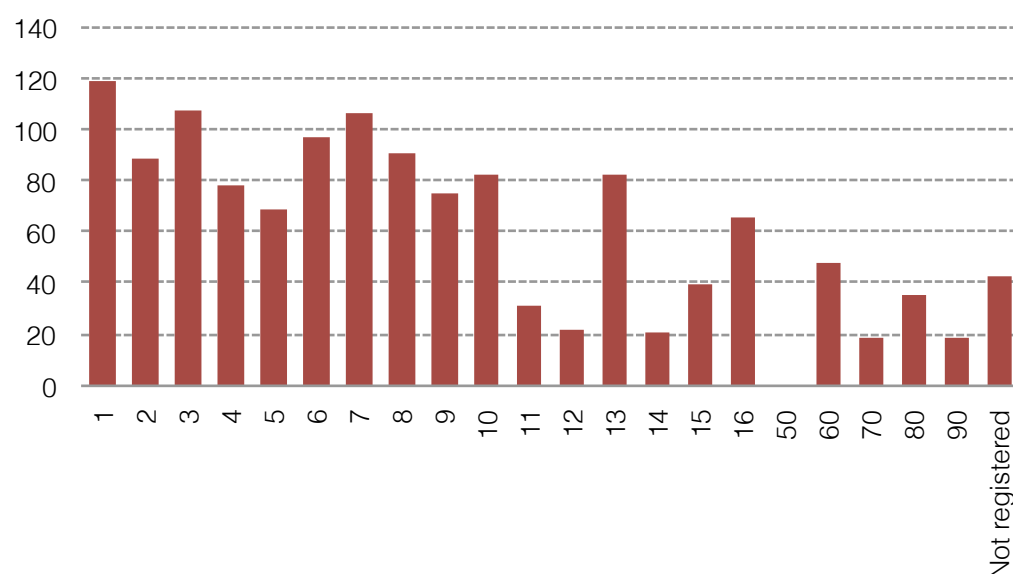
Mapping sexual violence and disappearances

Despite the limited availability of statistics on sexual violence, it is widely recognized that it is used by armed groups not only as a means of retaliation but as a strategy for territorial control (IPC, 2010). Local analysts are adamant that sexual violence is a key indicator to measure the intensity of violence in Medellin. According to SISC, in 2011, there were a total of 1,346 reports of sexual violence in Medellin, which represents a rate of 57 reports per 100,000 inhabitants. As Figure 7 shows, the *Comunas* most affected by this type of violence appear to be 1, 3 and 7, each reporting more than a hundred cases. While *Comunas* 2, 6, 8 and 13 each registered more than 80 reports of sexual violence. It is important to stress that such violence often occurs behind the headlines, and its patterns are thus difficult to trace with confidence.

For example, some *Comunas* experienced high levels of homicidal violence in 2011, including *Comunas* 6, 8 and 13 (see Map 2). However *Comunas* 1 and 7 showed a reduction in homicidal violence between 2003 and 2011. What both sets of figures conceal is that in 2011 these same *Comunas* suffered dramatic increases in sexual violence.

Homicidal figures alone do not indicate intensity. What is still unknown is whether these cases are due to collective or intra-family violence. There is insufficient information available to explain the reported disparities in sexual violence between neighborhoods. What can be ascertained, however, is a correlation between different forms of violence and a high prevalence of sexual violence, despite the common underreporting problems of the latter.

Figure 7 . Records of sexual violence* by Comuna in Medellin (2011)



* Includes 16 different types of sexual violence according to the Colombian Law.

Source: SISC. Data processed by CERAC.

Sexual violence is also reported as a cause of forced displacement.

According to a local journalist, some armed groups of the city, particularly “*Los Triana*” and other ‘*combos*’ who are in control of the northern *Comunas* of Medellin (*Comunas* 1 and 2), routinely use sexual violence as a mechanism of territorial control.²³ Likewise, in 2012 a social organization called, *Instituto Popular de Capacitación* (IPC) reported how two armed groups used sexual violence as a means of retaliation. Both groups sexually assaulted women from the other groups’ territory as a means of revenge, a total of 10 sexual assaults were recorded. Sexual violence is also reported as a cause of forced displacement. In 2009, for example, out of 638 reported IUD cases, 20 of them were due to sexual violence against women (IPC, 2010). Clearly more research is required to better understand the underlying motivations and patterns of such victimization.

The state of forced disappearances in Colombia is by definition difficult to determine with precision. The lack of longitudinal data is pronounced since public officials and private citizens are loathe to report pending or solved cases. However, recent records indicate that until November 2011 there were 16,907 outstanding cases (Mesa de Trabajo sobre Desapariciones Forzadas, 2012). In Medellin, this practice has been widely adopted by local actors, and levels of disappearances are comparatively high. Between January and October 2011, 553 people were reported as disappeared, out of these, 51 cases were classified as forced disappearances (Personería de Medellín: 2011: 20). In 2012 the number of people disappeared had increased significantly. In October, there were a total of 643 cases reported, of which 344 cases were declared ‘whereabouts unknown’ (RCN, 2012).

According to some community based organizations and leaders, it is necessary to interact with local authorities to determine the causes of the disappearances. The existence of ‘torture houses’ have been reported where armed groups mutilate and dismember their victims. Likewise, disemboweled corpses have been found on the banks of river.²⁴ Forced displacement is similar to forced disappearance, which is a violent practice often used in the context of armed conflict, particularly by paramilitaries.

Organization of violence

The ICRC and other humanitarian organizations are often required to differentiate an armed conflict from other situations of violence. In addition to using the “intensity” criterion, they also often examine whether a minimum level of “organization” is exhibited by the armed actors. Following Muggah (2012), organizational characteristics can be determined on the basis of indicators such as

1. the existence of command structure and disciplinary rules and mechanisms;
2. the existence and use of headquarters;
3. the display of control over certain territory;

²³ Interview 9, November 9, 2012.

²⁴ Interview 4, November 8, 2012.

4. the ready access to weapons, equipment and military training;
5. the ability to plan, coordinate and carry out military operations;
6. the definition of a unified military strategy;
7. an ability to speak with one voice; and
8. a capacity to negotiate ceasefires/peace accords.

This section evaluates the organization of each armed actor in Medellin using some of the indicators mentioned above. It is important to point out that relevant and reliable administrative data on armed groups is limited. Moreover, there are few detailed studies of such actors, much less their organizational characteristics, in Medellin. As a result, the following analysis draws heavily from Colombia's academic literature and information gathered in the course of fieldwork in Medellin proper. As such, the assessment considers the internal structures of armed actors operating in Medellin and the relationships between them and other local armed groups.

It is possible to distinguish three basic types of illegal armed groups that have persisted in Medellin since the 1980s. The first encompasses the '*combos*' and the second are the armed bands. Though similar, they vary in size – '*combos*', for example, are typically smaller than bands and are less well organized. However, often feature certain specializations: some can offer one or more illegal services (e.g. assassinations, robbery, extortion, protection, trafficking, sexual exploitation), and they also have strong territorial attachments by neighborhoods or even blocks (Gómez, 2012: 44). The third type of armed actor is labeled, admittedly generally, as "large structures". They include major drugs cartels, guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and large criminal groups – that control the '*combos*' and bands in order to satisfy their interests. As a result, whether there is one hegemonic group or more, there is "criminal capacity installed" in the city, in the form of '*combos*' and bands, which are necessary for the armed structures to control in order to achieve their particular interests (Semana, 2012).

There are no reliable estimates of the number of *combos* and bands that are currently operating in the city: since 2011 t estimates have hovered between 100 and 300 separate organizations (El Colombiano, 2011; Semana, 2012). Such estimates, however, may be only valid for a few months, given the dynamic situation of these groups and their frequent conflicts. It is also important to stress that most *combos* have members younger than 35 years old (Gómez, 2012: 46). Children are often used to transport illicit drugs and weapons or perform surveillance activities. There have also been reports of children being involved in assassinations and attaining certain levels of leadership within a group (Interview 15, November 15 of 2012). The recruitment of children, voluntary or forced, is a strategy that is being used more often by the armed groups (Interview 14, November 14 of 2012).

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Meanwhile, it is possible to identify two²⁵ primary armed structures, especially between the 2008-2012 period. The first is the 'Oficina de Envigado' which is a criminal organization that emerged from the drug cartel of Medellin in the 1980s. This organization achieved hegemonic control of the city from 2003 to 2008, until the extradition of alias "Don Berna". After the captures of aliases "Valenciano" (2011) and alias "Sebastian" (2012), the internal fragmentation of this organization has worsened. Drug trafficking and money laundering are the most common illegal activities of this group. The second group is the 'Urabeños', a neo-paramilitary group with a national presence that has gained control over some areas of the city since 2011²⁶. There were two motivations for this group to enter Medellin. One was to improve their strategies and connections for money laundering, or the "legalization of capital extracted from drug trafficking and illegal mining" (Semana, 2012). Such services are provided by lawyers, accountants, business administrators and experts in investments, most of them linked to the "Oficina de Envigado" and are then cloaked in legality. The other reason is to influence and ultimately benefit from the process of land restitutions that are taking place within the city (Semana, 2012).

As such, the *Oficina de Envigado* and *Urabeños* are the primary armed actors operating in Medellin. Both are not necessarily in conflict. In fact, there is evidence of an alliance forged between them in some areas of the city. The lack of leadership and fragmentation of the *Oficina de Envigado* has likely weakened its structure. This has resulted in '*combos*' and armed actors either aligning with *Urabeños* or, if they are sufficiently powerful, to continue fighting in order to maintain control of their existing territory. The objective of these structures "rather than partial or total destruction of the state (or the system), as in the case of insurgent organizations, on the contrary, is to weaken the state to the extent that they are able to replace its multiple functions" (Gómez, 2012: 49).

It is also important to stress the presence of other armed actors – notably the National Police and Military forces. Indeed, they are widely present in Medellin and exert a considerable influence and impact. Residents have alleged that there is a possible collaboration between certain members of these forces and illegal armed groups, a factor that is also associated with an escalation of violence and human rights abuses. Respondents interviewed in the course of this paper noted that the public security forces represent comprise an analogous or even higher risk to their safety and personal security than the illegal armed actors.²⁷ For example *Comuna* 13 is the most militarized urban area in the whole of Colombia. Out of 23 military bases located in Medellin,

25 Some analysts claim that neo-paramilitary groups such as Águilas Negras, Los Paisas and Los Rastrojos have some influence in the city, however, either there is insufficient evidence to support this, or their influence is not sufficiently strong (Gómez, 2012: 45).

26 According to some experts, the presence of the 'Urabeños' can be traced to 2008 (Semana, 2012).

27 Interview 17, November 15, 2012.

14 are based in this *Comuna*, yet this *Comuna* has the highest levels of homicide rate of Medellin (CMH, 2012). The profound deficit legitimacy of the public security forces not only reduces the likelihood of local denunciations, it also raises the level of impunity. Moreover, it strengthens the roles of *combos* and armed bands as providers of protection and justice (CMH, 2012).

Mapping command structures and rules

There is surprisingly limited information on the internal command structures and internal regulatory mechanisms of armed groups in Colombia. There is also comparatively little known about the disciplinary rules of either *Oficina de Envigado* or the *Urabeños*, which limits our understanding of their organizations. However, it is possible to identify some key characteristics of their command structures by reviewing their use of violence and how they generate revenue (Tobón, 2012: 5). Indeed, some of their characteristics have been uncovered through information gained from U.S. and Colombian authorities.

By way of example, the command structure of the *Oficina de Envigado* is headed by a board of directors made up of accountants, businessmen, lawyers, and even politicians who are generally anonymous. Also according to a local analyst, this board of directors serves the interests of the mafia, landowners, farmers and other sectors of society.²⁸ Leaders such as “*Sebastian*” are in effect powerful gunmen who serve the interests of the board members and maintain control over their territory and responsible collecting revenues through illegal activities (El Tiempo, August 11 of 2012). As a result, their organization can be characterized, more precisely, as a “criminal company” that provides protection to specific private interests or “customers” who contract their services (Gambetta, 2007: 34).

By way of comparison, the structure of the *Los Urabeños* has evolved over the years to become more organized and united.²⁹ Initially, this group entered the city bringing with them members from other regions of Colombia. According to one local analyst, the entry of outsiders triggered a rise in homicides in the city and raised the risk of violence to the local population.³⁰ Members of the *Urabeños* risked attack since they were not recognized within the community. What is more, certain local armed actors were not willing to cede their territorial control. This prompted the leader of the *Urabeños* “*Mi Sangre*”, to gain control over the *combos* and other local armed actors through negotiations with the *Oficina de Envigado*, and in particular with “*Valenciano*”. The negotiations were about drug trafficking routes in exchange for control of some areas of the city in which to confront “*Sebastián*” (Verdad Abierta, 2012).

²⁸ Interview 8, November 8, 2012.

²⁹ As soon as the neo-paramilitary phenomena began Colombian authorities initially identified a total of 36 neo-paramilitary groups with a total of 3,000 members. Today, they count just 6 with an estimated 6,000 members (Tobon, 2012:11).

³⁰ Interview 12, November 14, 2012.

The profound deficit legitimacy of the public security forces not only reduces the likelihood of local denunciations, it also raises the level of impunity.

Command structures and disciplinary rules – if they exist – only endure as long as there is a leader and a strong criminal organization.

Mapping relationships between armed actors

The mapping of relationships between armed actors in Medellín (e.g. *Oficina de Envigado*, *Urabeños*, *combos* and other criminal groups), reveals an elaborate system of competition and patronage. On the one hand, *combos* and other criminal groups offer several services that are essential for larger structures, such as the *Oficina de Envigado* and the *Urabeños*. Depending on the *combo*, they provide services such as collecting rent money, controlling drug and arms trafficking routes, extortion, money laundry, controlling local and social groups, and also selective assassinations. *Combos* need to maintain a strong territorial attachment to be perceived as a legitimate actor within the community and to protect their business interests.³¹ On the other hand, some *combos* look to endorse larger structures for protection and arms supplies. Structures such as *Oficina de Envigado* and *Urabeños* have strong linkages with members of law enforcement institutions that are able to guarantee impunity. They are also able to supply weapons due to their connections with international networks of arm traffickers.³²

Through analyzing the links between non-state actors a demand and supply rationale emerges. This rationale informs their interrelationships and also the dynamics of armed confrontations. It is possible to detect a two-way logic of demand and supply in the relationships between these armed actors. *Combos* and bands operate as “annexed criminal forces” of bigger structures that, in turn, can take territorialized control of the population. The weakening of *Oficina de Envigado* as a result of the capture of “*Sebastián*” and the loss of several routes for drug trafficking has encouraged *combos* and bands either to join *Los Urabeños* or – if they have enough military capacity – separate from this structure and fight against them on their own. This shows that the command structures and disciplinary rules – if they exist – only endure as long as there is a leader and a strong criminal organization (La Silla Vacía, 2012).

Mapping territorial control

The different tactics employed by armed groups in order to maintain their control over a specific territory are often analogous to the violations experienced by individuals and communities in that same area. Indeed, armed groups operating in Medellín have adopted know-how and experience from militia, paramilitary groups and criminal organizations in relation to the ways of maintaining and preserving territorial control. As a result, many of these groups assume techniques and strategies that are characteristic of armed conflict groups even if they are not operating in formal combat roles (Otálvaro et al., 2012, p.45). To achieve territorial control, armed actors must build a *vital space* “in which control is deployed, not only over physical space, with the presence of men

31 This is exemplified by a local analyst: “who controls the population wins the war” (Interview 8, November, 2012).

32 Interview 8, November 9, 2012

The Human Security Observatory of Medellin (OSHM) recently documented and inventorized mechanisms used by combos and other armed bands to maintain their territorial control.

in a particular geography, but also over immaterial spaces, economic and social” (Gayraud in Gómez, 2012: 47). Additionally, local armed actors develop both violent and non-violent practices. The former, seek to generate fear in order to achieve submission of the population, while the latter, looks for cooperation and legitimacy within the population (Gómez, 2012: 50). These types of controls, together with the strategy of penetrating public forces and other institutions, reinforce the domain of the group over a territory. This in turn reinforces the legitimacy of local armed actors as providers of justice and security as well as other services.

Despite the existence of these structures in communities and neighborhoods of Medellin, of which the citizens, organizations and local authorities are fully aware, their modus operandi are hard to determine with certainty. Even so, it is possible to infer its magnitude on the basis of reports on the practices uses by armed groups to maintain control over their territory. Specifically, the Human Security Observatory of Medellin (OSHM) recently documented and inventorized mechanisms used by *combos* and other armed bands to maintain their territorial control. In particular, they identified three types of sub-controls: sociopolitical control, economic control and territory control (Gómez, 2012: p. 49). Socio-political control aims to establish a specific order which guarantees the security of the illegal armed group, and implies the imposition of rules and social practices. Economic control seeks to dominate the resources resulting from legal and illegal economic activities. Territorial control seeks to achieve the appropriation of the territory and conservation of the group. Each of these types of controls encompasses a large set of practices that result in major humanitarian impacts on the communities involved.

Reviewing humanitarian action in Medellin

Colombia’s prolonged experience of armed conflict has ensured a heavy humanitarian presence in the country. Along with many other relief and development agencies, the ICRC has operated in Colombia for more than forty years. Indeed, ICRC operations in the country are the largest in Latin America and the Caribbean and among the most far-reaching in the world (ICRC, 2010). Its geographical reach is extensive and covers 25 remote rural areas of the country which are the most affected by armed conflict and where humanitarian needs are considered to be most critical owing to the lack of state presence, health services and basic social welfare infrastructure. In many ways, the Colombian armed conflict constitutes a classic setting for humanitarian action. The ICRC “whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance” has managed to access populations effectively for years with its mandate and emblem recognized by all formal parties of the conflict (ICRC, 2010).

As in many other parts of the world, the ICRC has nine main activities in Colombia.

The ICRC intervention in Medellin is unprecedented in Colombia and will likely have wider implications for humanitarian actors working in Colombia and other parts of the world.

These include protecting civilians, visiting detainees (prisoners of war), reuniting families, ensuring economic security, water and habitat, health, cooperation with National Societies (Colombian Red Cross), building respect for the law and safeguarding health care. In Colombia, owing in part to the magnitude and severity of the conflict, the ICRC carries out additional activities such as protecting and facilitating the relocation of people who are under threat of death, participating in the finding of truth and the whereabouts of disappeared people, undertaking risk reduction activities in communities contaminated with weapons, facilitating the release of people held by armed groups, providing assistance to displaced peoples (both in rural and urban areas), and developing economic security programs aimed at increasing the economic self-sufficiency of communities and preventing displacement (ICRC, 2010; ICRC, 2011: p. 16).

The ICRC's urban violence program

In 2011, however, the ICRC made a distinct shift from past approaches by undertaking an assessment of urban violence in Medellin and designing a new intervention known as "More Space for Humanitarian Action, More Alternatives". The program was conceived as a pilot run for four years (from 2012 to 2016) and was developed in alliance with the Colombian Red Cross (CRC) with the cooperation of local authorities. The ICRC intervention in Medellin is unprecedented in Colombia and will likely have wider implications for humanitarian actors working in Colombia and other parts of the world. Indeed, it represents "... the first time that the ICRC decides to intervene comprehensively in an urban context in Colombia with the explicit objective of addressing vulnerability generated by violence. The ICRC has intervened in urban contexts such as in Rio de Janeiro, however, there is not a situation of armed conflict like in Colombia".³³

ICRC's program in Medellin was conceived as a comprehensive and multidisciplinary response to urban violence. Its overall objective is to mitigate both direct and indirect humanitarian impacts of violence in selected neighborhoods and to increase the protective factors of people exposed to violence.³⁴ The program was initially launched in eight neighborhoods located in *Comunas* 1, 6, 7, 8 and 13, which are considered to be "hot spots", the most affected by violence. The intervention is based on three pillars: assistance, prevention and protection. Each of these columns are mutually reinforcing. Intriguingly, they move well beyond a response to basic humanitarian needs to a more transformative exercise of building resilience in communities.

³³ Interview 1, November 7, 2012.

³⁴ Interview 21, November 16, 2012.

Figure 8. Pillars of the program of the ICRC in Medellin

PROTECTION	PREVENTION	ASSITANCE
- Confidential dialogue with both legal and illegal armed groups - Visits to detainees	- Dissemination of human rights in educational institutions - Improve pacific coexistence in educational institutions and its surroundings	- Contribute to health access - Improve economic security

Very generally, the *assistance* component is designed to enhance access to health and strengthen family's economic security. ICRC has developed a medical program that focuses on preventing sexually transmitted diseases and promoting sexual and reproductive health (ICRC, 2013). The emphasis is on supporting young women and girls as well as actual and potential victims of rape. ICRC has also supported the development of a quick referral system as well as investing in the capacity to provide rapid medical and psychological support. What is more, the ICRC has implemented a scheme in selected *Comunas* that seeks to strengthen entrepreneurship and provide guidance and support for young males who are at risk of recruitment. ICRC targets 100 families that exhibit an entrepreneurial profile (ICRC, 2013). Most of the selected families already have businesses and a young family member who is at risk of joining or being recruited into an armed group or gang. ICRC also seeks to help these families with micro-credit and technical assistance. The expectation of this initiative is that it will reduce the incentive of young people to perpetrate violence.

Meanwhile, the *prevention* component is developed in approximately 15 educational institutions and seeks to improve coexistence, strengthen resilience, disseminate human rights among youth, teachers and parents, and provide first aid, and sexual and reproductive health care courses (ICRC, 2013). It focuses primarily on educating young people and their families in values consistent with international humanitarian law and human rights. To this end, ICRC is involved in developing a curriculum and modules in 14 schools (with an expectation of growing this by 16 more owing to municipal government replication) and working with teachers and parents alongside students. A focus is also on supporting educational brigades with training in first aid, law and good practice, also in cooperation with the *Paz, Acción y Convivencia* (PACO) program. A key objective of the ICRC is enhancing safe behavior and positive role models amongst the youth. ICRC is seeking to work with both the armed and civil police to train them on the basic principles of correct use of force, human rights and policing methods, such as collecting evidence and proper arrest procedures. ICRC also supports the updating of manuals and related doctrine to ensure that local practices are consistent with international norms.

In its confidential dialogue, the ICRC promotes the implementation of standards that regulate the use of force, arrests and detentions by the security forces.

Unlike previous interventions where ICRC and CRC personnel work together, the *protection* component is managed exclusively by the ICRC. This component includes visits to detention centers and confidential dialogue with both legal and illegal armed actors. As in other settings – whether urban or rural - ICRC is involved in constant dialogue with both civilians and armed groups in the *Comunas*.³⁵ Such negotiations are important to assess, and ensure the security of ICRC and its partners. ICRC has secured agreement from the authorities (ICBF) to visit jails and detention rehabilitation centers to ensure they are up to standard, they are also working to ensure the authorities adopt violence prevention as a theme, including exploring reinsertion options for former perpetrators (e.g. PACO and ICBF-supported efforts). In its confidential dialogue, the ICRC promotes the implementation of standards that regulate the use of force, arrests and detentions by the security forces. Furthermore, it seeks to encourage armed groups to respect the civilian population and basic infrastructures such as health centers, schools and public spaces. ICRC also visits young detention centers in order to improve their conditions of detention and their chances of reintegration into society. (ICRC, 2011: p.9).

Perceptions of the ICRC operation

Although conceived in 2011, ICRC's program for Medellin was only implemented in 2012. Given that the program had only just lifted off at the time of this research, it is difficult if not disingenuous to subject it to any kind of assessment or evaluation. It would be premature to attribute any changes in the *Comunas* in which they are working to their intervention at this early stage. Indeed, the intent of this paper is not to measure the outcomes or impacts of ICRC activities. Rather, the intention is to identify a number of emerging trends from communities themselves. It is worth underlining that the present study was administered independent of the ICRC. This was considered important for reasons of autonomy, but also security. Information was instead gathered directly from key informants in Medellin and it offers some indicative clues about possible results, challenges and risks associated with ICRC intervention.

Not surprisingly, there are varied perceptions among respondents about the ICRC intervention in Medellin. For most community leaders, journalists and community-based organizations, the intervention is generally favorably regarded. Given ICRC's reputation as an independent organization, this is hardly remarkable. Many view ICRC as an important actor that contributes to limiting the use of violence and building respect for humanitarian standards. For others, including representatives of the municipal government, the intervention less relevant in the city since, in their view, IHL is not applicable. Indeed, this perception underlines again the central question of the HASOW project and this paper which relates to the contexts in which IHL applies.

³⁵ Interview 21, November 16, 2012.

One of the most controversial activities pursued by the ICRC in Medellin relates to confidential dialogue with local armed groups.

One of the most controversial activities pursued by the ICRC in Medellin relates to confidential dialogue with local armed groups. They are involved in discussions, even if indirectly, with the *combos* in order to convince them to promote and respect IHL and human rights law. There are fears, however, that such dialogue may legitimize these groups and give them a political platform or means of extending their control. According to government representatives, “having a dialogue with the *combos* or other armed actors in the city, ultimately, will give them a political recognition status, that these groups do not have and this won’t be accepted by the institutions”.³⁶ This is a commonly cited anxiety in cities where gangs are active and gang truces are brokered, including most poignantly in El Salvador.³⁷

There are concerns in some quarters that the promotion of respect for IHL may not be effective for many armed groups. This is because violence has transformed over the past decade and many armed groups lack clear command and control. Indeed, as the above analysis suggests, many groups lack visible leadership and do not have the ability to speak with one voice, in contrast to the times of “*Don Berna*”, or even “*Sebastian*” and “*Valenciano*”. Previous experiences have also shown that even if there are agreements to comply with codes of conduct or pacts, such groups also may not stick to their commitments. This is amply demonstrated by the fact that even after negotiated (albeit unofficial) ceasefires – as from 2003 to 2008 with “*Don Berna*” – violence increased severely when the ceasefire broke down.³⁸ A more controversial activity suggested by the ICRC in 2011 when developing a diagnostic was to establish “neutral zones”. These were demarcated areas in which no armed groups – not even public forces – could enter. The democratic and constitutional implications of such a move were potentially profound. The proposal was rejected by the local government, however, since they were not prepared to “limit the presence of the public forces in any part of the territory” given their constitutional mandate.³⁹ As a result, this proposal was unsuccessful.

Notwithstanding some of these more skeptical observations, most respondents, particularly community leaders and grassroots organizations, were adamant that the ICRC has played an essential role in empowering communities. They have taught them how to protect themselves when armed confrontations escalate, and also how to rescue and relocate people at risk while providing assistance to victims.⁴⁰ However, some respondents highlighted that the ICRC could play a better role in “regulating and monitoring the performance of the security forces” since it is considered to be one of

³⁶ Interview 16, November 15, 2012.

³⁷ See, for example, reports of InSight Crime at <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-catholic-church-pawn-or-player-in-gang-truce>.

³⁸ Interview 18, November 16, 2012.

³⁹ Interview 16 November 16, 2012.

⁴⁰ Interview 14 November 14, 2012.

the major risk factors confronting communities.⁴¹ Overall, respondents often noted the relevance and necessity to protect and assist victims of organized violence in urban settings. Even so, reservations over the confidential dialogue with local armed actors and the ways to apply the principle of distinction in Medellin persist.

Possible consequences of ICRC action in Medellin

Even a superficial examination of ICRC activities in Medellin suggests that it is fulfilling its mandate of protecting the lives and dignity of victims of organized violence. At the outset, the program is being undertaken in neighborhoods historically affected by high levels of violence, suggesting that those areas featuring the greatest (apparent) need are being targeted. Moreover, the program focuses on sub-sections of the population that are especially exposed or affected by organized violence, notably children and youth. As such, the intervention addresses both victims, but also potential perpetrators. The ICRC is not interested in solely reducing violence, but also preventing it. Indeed, efforts to promote economic security for families and youth while promoting respect for human rights in educational and detention centers is testament to this. Finally, its mediation efforts with public forces to improve policing practices and protocols on the use of force may well help prevent abuses and human rights violations in the future. Their activities are highly valued, especially by human rights defenders, community organizations and others.

Even so, there are still questions about what precedents ICRC activity in Medellin may set for the organization and the humanitarian sector as a whole. The very act of setting up a dedicated program to prevent and reduce violence and promote community resilience in a city is a landmark for the organization. It echoes similar types of activities underway for some years in Rio de Janeiro, Port-au-Prince and other settings. A basic question that the organization has been required to confront is whether the intensity and organization of violence in Medellin merits a humanitarian response. And while the above analysis suggests that the situation is not formally an “armed conflict”, the ICRC has clearly opted to engage in spite of the non-applicability of IHL. For the ICRC, human rights law is sufficient and the “principles” of humanitarian law still apply. This may be sufficient given its legacy and reputation in Colombia – and thus not necessarily transferable to other settings.

The ICRC is “learning by doing” in Medellin, as it is in other settings marked by urban violence. It is new territory, and offers many risks but also new opportunities. To be sure, urban theaters are distinct from rural settings where the ICRC has traditionally operated in Colombia. This requires that while sticking to some core mandate priorities, the ICRC may be required to adapt its modalities. Indeed, Medellin exhibits comparatively strong institutional capabilities and considerable financial resources. It

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⁴¹ Interview 17 November 15, 2012.

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has a relatively high level of health and educational infrastructure and sophisticated public organizations. Rather than "substituting" for state services, the ICRC in many cases help guide, coordinate and direct some to those confronted with humanitarian needs. This requires a level of convening, facilitating, influencing and coordinating – not the usual comfort zone of the ICRC.⁴² In rural areas, where basic services are often lacking, the ICRC may resort to more operational activities.

Time will tell if the ICRC is effective or not in enhancing protection in neighborhoods where it is intervening. Indeed, Medellín presents a formidably complex array of armed actors with constantly shifting alliances and forms of competition. It is difficult to determine and differentiate their various motivations much less predict the trajectory of organized violence. The engagement of the ICRC with *combos* or other criminal groups takes the agency into a grey zone, particularly given the absence of IHL. This surely generates a high level of risk for communities and ICRC personnel. To continue and be successful in these areas, the ICRC will need to continue expanding and guaranteeing its reputation as a neutral and independent humanitarian organization amongst the communities and local armed actors.

Conclusions

The entry of ICRC to Medellín is unprecedented and potentially path-breaking. It is engaging a context that is seized by multiple and overlapping forms of organized violence – with tendencies that resemble armed conflict. While the situation may not present the same intensity and organization as conventional wars, it nevertheless offers an extreme variation of an "other situation of violence". Indeed, Medellín shows levels of violence with high intensity (sometimes exceeding warfare) but low organization (particularly over the past few years). The paper finds that communities in these settings have considerable humanitarian needs. The impacts of violence extend well beyond homicides and displacement. Indeed, a key finding is that many of the costs of Medellín's violence are hard to detect, owing in large part to under-reporting or a failure of outsiders to record the "right" metrics. Indeed, non-lethal violence is virtually invisible, but is essential to maintaining various forms of social, economic and territorial control.

The volatility and dynamism of organized violence in Medellín is staggering. The paper has provided a glimpse into the ways in which alliances between (competing) groups are forged and quickly evaporate. An appreciation of this dynamism is essential for humanitarian agencies seeking to engage in such environments. It has dramatic implications for negotiation strategies, but also basic security for personnel, partners and beneficiaries. If nothing else, it places a major premium on constant and continuous dialogue. This may be the single most important value-added of the ICRC as compared

42 Interview 21 November 16, 2012.

to other organizations, and is in large part due to their reputation for independence, impartiality, and neutrality.

A final reflection is that the city of Medellin is in some ways fragile. While exhibiting many characteristics (and accolades) of a developed urban center, it also suffers from many deficits. The longevity of organized violence in the city has had a corrosive effect, hindering its efforts to provide basic functions. Its most essential obligations – to provide security and control territory – are routinely threatened by armed groups. This in turn undermines the government's legitimacy since it erodes basic relationships and mutual obligations between the state and citizens. As a result, local armed groups rapidly fill the void. They effectively substitute for the state in its essential functions – law and order – even if of an informal sort. Predictably, their stature and legitimacy then grows. While many gaps in knowledge remain – including on the command structures of armed groups, their use of non-lethal violence, and their relationships with formal public and private entities – it seems that Medellin will continue exhibiting frailty in years to come.

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The Humanitarian Action in Situations other than War (HASOW) project is based at the International Relations Institute of the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (IRI-PUC) with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The aim of HASOW is to comprehensively assess the dynamics of urban violence and the changing face of humanitarian action. Administered between 2011 and 2013, HASOW focuses on the dynamics of organized violence in urban settings, including Rio de Janeiro, Ciudad Juarez, Medellin and Port-au-Prince.

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