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## Massive Civilian Displacement in Civil War: Assessing Variation in Colombia

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**Abstract:** The displacement of civilians is a frequent, yet understudied, outcome of armed groups' and civilians' behavior during civil wars. In particular, I find that displacement as a strategy of armed groups is an especially undeveloped area of study, and argue that a focus on mass displacements as the dependent variable can provide leverage for explaining variation in outcomes over time and across space. I suggest that three sets of factors explain the variation: armed groups' goals, competition among armed groups, and community governance mechanisms. After outlining the theory and hypotheses, I consider the implications of the approach for appropriate units of analysis. With data on displacement in the Colombian civil war, I use both events of massive displacement and municipal population flows as indicators of the dependent variable to consider the plausibility of the framework's empirical implications. Finally, I propose additional qualitative, micro-level research strategies to enable tests of the mechanisms underlying the theory

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## **i. Introduction**

Over the course of several days in July 2001, roughly 6,000 people entered the main town in the municipality of Peque, 226 kilometers north of Medellín in the department of Antioquia, Colombia.<sup>1</sup> At the orders of a paramilitary group, peasants from rural communities walked in some cases for several hours to reach the town, where they camped in the central plaza or found shelter in the high school. A few days later, members of a guerrilla group in the area, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), entered the town and told the residents that they should return to their homes (León 2005). Why did the paramilitary group force residents to abandon their land and communities? Why did the FARC order residents to return? This paper seeks to address variation in armed groups' strategies of displacement during war.

As with many elements of civil war violence, displacement of civilians from their homes varies substantially between and within civil wars, both in terms of magnitude and causes. Yet we know little about who flees and who does not, when, why, and how people flee their homes, and even less about armed groups' strategies of displacement. One reason for the murkiness is that data at the national level is unreliable (Crisp 2000). However, rich micro-level data has been collected in Colombia by various sources since as early as 1980. This paper takes advantage of this data to examine patterns of displacement at the sub-national level.

In addition to data shortcomings, scholars have focused primarily on the conditions that lead civilians to flee their communities, as opposed to when and why armed groups displace. In contrast, this paper presents a theory of displacement that incorporates both sets of actors – civilians and armed groups – and their interactions. In order to gain leverage over questions of armed groups' preferences for where civilians reside and which territories they prefer to be inhabited or uninhabited, I consider what predicts mass displacement. I suggest that variation in armed groups' strategies of mass displacement relate to three sets of factors: armed groups' goals, competition among armed groups, and communities' governance mechanisms. The theory implies that two units of analysis are of interest, in addition to the household: events of mass displacement and municipal population change, which I construct using micro-level data on displacement in Colombia from 1990-2006, in two datasets collected by the Colombian government and the Catholic Church. These units constitute another departure from existing studies, which generally either rely on aggregate estimates of household migration at the national level or focus on case studies. If the theory is correct, it will have implications for the tactics of violence that armed groups deploy, the communities they target, and their expansion and contraction during civil war. Displacement patterns during war also have important,

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<sup>1</sup> Municipalities are the equivalent to U.S. counties, and in this article constitute the most micro-level unit of analysis. The largest administrative units are departments, the equivalent of provinces or states, followed by municipalities, and "municipal population center," which can range from villages to cities. Other sub-municipal units are "corregimientos" and "veredas," which are smaller rural communities.

overlooked implications for post-war state building and stability.

The paper will proceed as follows. First, I provide a brief background on the civil war in Colombia and review the literatures relevant to displacement during wars. Next, I outline the factors that I propose interact to produce the observed variation in mass displacement, and the key hypotheses that result. The subsequent empirical section of this paper will be focused on the theory's implications for the appropriate units of analysis. With the data available, I consider the plausibility of the observable implications of the theory; given the shortcomings in the data, I propose alternative research strategies to further assess the theory in the future. The final section concludes with implications and extensions of the theory.

**i. Background**  
**a. Colombia's Civil War and Internal Displacement**

The civil war in Colombia has a long history with wide variation in protagonists and patterns of violence. After *La Violencia* ('The Violence'), a civil war of partisan violence and banditry roughly spanning 1949-1957, guerrilla groups emerged including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). These groups remained largely peripheral until military capacities expanded, financed by the drug trade and kidnapping for ransom in the early 1980s. During that decade, local and regional elites sponsored private militias – paramilitaries – to protect landholdings and to fight the guerrilla groups. Also during the 1980s, the drug cartels spawned private groups that specialized in different facets of violence, prompting the emergence of rival groups, which also have a complicated history fighting with or morphing into paramilitaries and guerrillas. The intensity of the conflict increased in the late 1980s, with more frequent confrontations among guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and the national armed forces. The FARC has become the most powerful and oldest insurgent group in Latin America, with between 20-30,000 fighters, while the ELN maintains a presence with around 6,000 combatants. Paramilitary groups united in 1997 under the umbrella group the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). In 2005, the Colombian government launched a demobilization process with paramilitary blocks, resulting in the demobilization of 31,800 paramilitary fighters through 2006.

Displacement in Colombia, beginning with *La Violencia*, has varied over time. One historian estimates that during the partisan warfare and banditry periods of *La Violencia*, roughly 2 million people were internally displaced (Oquist 1980). Displacement did not reach similar levels again until the late 1980s, coinciding with the increased intensity of the conflict. Between 2.5 and 3 million individuals are currently internally displaced in Colombia, comprising one of the highest IDP populations in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Seventy-five percent of the internally displaced people (IDP) registered with the Colombian government database have been displaced with their household. However, it

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<sup>2</sup> This summary of descriptive statistics on displacement in Colombia is based on the governmental agency Acción Social's system for registering IDPs. I describe the dataset more in-depth in section (iii) of this paper.

is likely that this is an under-representation of the true proportion of household displacement, since the government automatically registers massive displacements, while individuals and households must seek out the government agencies to register if they have been displaced.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 displays the relative proportions of household, individual, and massive displacement from 1997 until September, 2006.

[Figure 1 here]

Displacement patterns vary across municipalities and departments. Figures 2 and 3 show the relative amounts of displacement and arrivals, respectively, between 1990 and September, 2006 at the municipal level.

[Figures 2 and 3 here]

Mass displacement also varies on many dimensions at the municipal level, from incidence, to perpetrator, to duration of displacement, to proportion of community displaced. According to Colombian government data, the frequency of mass displacements in the 1,051 municipalities of the country ranged from zero to eleven, from 1995 through September 2006. Many municipalities experienced mass displacements by different armed groups over the course of two or three years, or within one year. Some departments have registered no mass displacements, while up to 75% of the municipalities in others have seen at least one mass displacement between 1995-2006; on average, one-third of the municipalities within a department have experienced a mass displacement. Figure 4 shows the relative proportion of municipalities affected, by department.

[Figure 4 here]

## **b. Existing Studies**

The literatures that address refugee and IDP movements fall within two broad camps: either case studies at the national level (most of which focus on the consequences of displacement rather than the causes), or cross-national, large-N analyses. In terms of the latter, the implicit hypothesis is generally that relatively higher degrees of violence (however conceived) yield relatively more displacement (proportional or absolute). Many of the studies that find support for this hypothesis (Schmeidl 1997; Morrison and May 1994; Stanley 1987) assume that civilians never make choices about whether to flee or not in conditions of violence. This tendency seems to stem from a conceptualization of violence, conflict, and war as an over-aggregated bundle that produces refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) (e.g., Cohen and Deng 1998; Weiner 1992, 1996; Zolberg 1989). The following passage from Zolberg et al.(1986) is representative of this tendency: “Refugees are generated...by the generalized violence and dislocation which

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<sup>3</sup> Most analysts and even government enumerators acknowledge that IDPs registered with the state do not represent the true level of displacement within the country, at least in part because some IDPs view registration as too risky, or lack information about how to register.

typically accompany the onset of the revolutionary process...” (159).<sup>4</sup> This approach obscures variation in displacement within and across wars.

Davenport, Moore, and Poe (2003) advanced the field by changing the assumptions about individuals’ behavior in the face of violence: they suggest that individuals monitor information about the expected behavior of armed groups and flee when they perceive that their safety is threatened. Similarly, Moore and Shellman (2003) suggest that individuals are faced with a lottery of persecution with some probability,  $p \in [0,1]$ . Both sets of authors disaggregate by armed group; Davenport et al. compare violence committed by the state, by dissidents, or produced jointly by the state and dissidents, and Moore and Shellman add “foreign troops.” However, neither set of scholars offer any theoretical basis for why violence authored by one or a combination of these groups should produce different or similar outcomes in individuals’ decisions. Further, even though they compare cross-nationally, they do not suggest why dissidents in one state should be similar to the dissidents in another. Davenport et al find that a high number of dissident violent tactics employed, the transition towards democracy, and civil wars are the three most important factors in increasing net migration. Whereas they find that civil war and “genocide/politicide” are better predictors of displacement flows than dissident violence alone, Moore and Shellman find that dissident violence is the main predictor. However, the category of dissident violence is less than clear, as they aggregate observations of riots and attacks in a country-year period.

One obvious challenge to this work is that the theories relate to household or individual-level decision-making, and even though in many cases the estimates of migration are based on households as the units of observation, the empirical analysis is based on countries as the unit of analysis by aggregating to the level of net migration. In contrast, Ana María Ibáñez and colleagues’ survey work among the internally displaced enables researchers to address questions at the individual level. They have conducted a survey among 2,322 IDP households in Colombia from over 42 municipalities and 21 departments to investigate the causes and consequences of displacement. The aim was to capture information about the migratory process of displaced households, the socioeconomic conditions in the communities of exit and arrival, as well as data on assistance programs for those households that were receiving aid from the Catholic Church or from the government. Further, the group conducted community surveys about infrastructure, public services, social organizations, and state projects in the area. Based on the authors’ analysis, roughly 60% of the IDPs surveyed had access to land before their displacement, though only 55% were legal owners; 31% of the total population had actual titles. (In Colombia, it is possible to legally possess land while lacking a title.) IDPs were unsure who, if anyone, controlled approximately 60% of the land lost, while 7% was known or assumed to be under control of an armed group (Ibáñez et al 2006).

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<sup>4</sup> Much of the literature relating to displacement during war concentrates solely on refugees, defined as “persons whose presence abroad is attributable to a well-founded fear of violence...” (Zolberg et al. 1986; 153). This focus implies that the causes of refugee flows differ from IDP movements; while some causal processes leading to the observation of refugees and IDPs may differ, I find no analytical reason to distinguish *ex ante* between refugees and IDPs.

In an earlier, smaller-scale survey of 200 IDP households in Bogotá, Medellín, and Cartagena – mostly displaced from the departments of Antioquia and Córdoba – and another 193 household surveys conducted with non-displaced households in communities in those departments suggest interesting patterns among the IDPs. Of those surveyed, 61% were directly threatened and felt that they had no choice but to leave. About 36% of those surveyed thought that conditions would worsen and left in anticipation. The remaining 3% left for other reasons. Nearly a quarter (23%) of the non-displaced households had suffered an assassination in their families, indicating that while violence matters, it is not a foregone conclusion that the household will flee after such an event (Ibáñez and Querubin 2004). Finally, Ibáñez and co-authors Deininger and Querubin in another analysis of the same survey data, point out that nearly a quarter of the displaced households participated in an organization of some sort in their community before displacement; the authors suggest that such a pattern indicates targeting by armed groups to disrupt social networks (Deininger et al 2004).

The surveys provide a much more fine-grained look at displacement within Colombia. However, the focus on civilians results in an incomplete picture of displacement. Recent studies on the micro-foundations of civil war violence, together with counterinsurgency strategy materials, provide some useful insights for reasoning about armed groups' preferences and strategies.

In terms of explaining armed group behavior, the counterinsurgency literature features the central assumption that insurgents rely on civilians as a resource; the implication that follows is that states should target civilians to curtail the resources of insurgents and defeat them. Sometimes this implies “draining the sea,” referring to Mao’s dictum that insurgent fish swim in a sea of civilians; the resettlement of civilians employed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century among colonial powers and notably, the US in Vietnam is an example. This logic has recently resurfaced in Valentino et al’s work on mass killings (2001): the authors suggest that states will commit wide-scale violence, such as massacres, during what they call guerrilla wars because they are attempting to target the perceived base of support for insurgents. It is unclear why troops would slaughter rather than displace; the circumstances under which insurgents might displace are unclear. Also focusing on the state, Azam and Hoeffler (2002) model when a state would be most likely to loot as opposed to terrorize the civilians. They use data on refugee movements in Africa to test their prediction that a state will settle on a “pure terror” equilibrium if they have sufficient resources to target the civilian population, resulting in the observed displacement. Why the state would always opt to terrorize (or displace) given more resources, though, is unclear.

Finally, the emerging literature on armed group behavior during civil wars suggests that armed groups apply different tactics in different regions and in different time periods within wars (Kalyvas 2006; Humphreys and Weinstein 2006; Weinstein 2005; Wood 2003). However, armed groups' preferences over where civilians reside is not explicitly considered. This is also true for the myriad, fine-grained studies of armed group behavior within Colombia (e.g., Echandía 1999, Gutiérrez 2003, Sánchez et al 2003, Romero 2003, Duncan 2005, Ferro and Uribe 2002).

**ii. Theory**  
**a. Research Question and Dependent Variable**

In order to gain leverage over the question of armed groups' strategies, I consider the logics of armed groups' preferences over whether or not territory is inhabited. Rather than individual displacement, then, the relevant dependent variable is mass displacement. I think it is reasonable to consider that armed groups might have stronger preferences over whether or not a territory is inhabited than over whether or not particular households stay in or leave a community. The question considered in this paper, then, is what explains variation in observed massive displacements over time and across space in Colombia? (Elsewhere, I consider displacement in general as a broader dependent variable, focusing on community change over time in terms of scale and composition – how many leave, how many arrive, and who leaves, stays, and arrives (Steele 2007).)

**b. Armed Group Type**

In most of the work on armed groups' violence against civilians, outcomes of displacement are a by-product of some other goal, rather than a strategy related to an armed groups' preferences over whether or not a territory is inhabited. If, as I suggest, it is plausible to assume that in some cases, armed groups have costs and benefits to whether or not a territory is inhabited – in other words, whether or not mass displacement is a useful tactic – then the armed groups' goals should influence those trade-offs. While Davenport et al and Moore and Shellman disaggregate by armed group, a further step is to offer theoretical grounding for why different groups' interests and strategies would produce different patterns of displacement.

A central distinction I draw between armed groups is whether or not they aim to govern a territory – ranging from the entire internationally recognized state to a portion of that state, as in secessionist wars – or if they do not have an interest in establishing an alternative to existing structures of sovereignty. I will remain agnostic about the origins of a group's strategy set. While resource-based arguments for the origin of strategies are in some cases persuasive (i.e., a group's capacity to establish sovereignty may be constrained by organizational responses to the mix of endowments available, as proposed by Jeremy Weinstein (2006)), I will treat the overall goal of an armed group as exogenous to such constraints at the local level. However, how armed groups' overall goals translate into actions at the local level is complicated.<sup>5</sup> For example, there may be some cases in which armed groups uninterested in governing end up establishing sovereignty to achieve primary goals of defeating a rival, extracting rents or engaging in other organized criminal activity. (In some cases, civilian presence may facilitate or hinder such primary goals.)

Following Elisabeth Wood (2003) and Stephen Lubkemann (2005), I use the concept of sovereignty to incorporate both relations (and the institutions employed to manage them) between civilians and the armed group, as well as the military control necessary to

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<sup>5</sup> For a more in-depth consideration of this point, see Arjona (2006), Romero (2003), Duncan (2005).

remove and repel challengers within the territory.<sup>6</sup> My claim is that displacement of civilians on a massive scale relates to armed groups' efforts to establish or disrupt sovereignty during civil war. Displacement relates to calculations regarding sovereignty because in addition to territorial space, civilian inhabitants constitute a crucial element of sovereignty. It seems reasonable that if a group is challenging the state, then it cannot hope to win by only operating in uninhabited regions.<sup>7</sup>

Armed groups that seek to establish and consolidate sovereignty should behave differently vis-à-vis civilians from those groups that only seek to behave in a predatory way (usually through disrupting rivals' sovereignty, but not imposing an alternative). Among those armed groups seeking to establish sovereignty (which I will refer to as "rulers"), insurgents and the state armed forces (which I assume operate on behalf of a state interested in re-establishing and consolidating its sovereignty) face different sets of constraints. The most important constraint that insurgents face is the need to generate resources that facilitate survival and expansion (Petersen 1993, Wood 2003). In contrast, while states do not have to rely on resources collected clandestinely from communities, contemporary state groups face constraints imposed by the international community in terms of potential sanctions (as well as possible negative reputation effects; I explore these constraints further in the following section).

Groups that I will call "predators" have fewer incentives to govern than do those groups challenging state sovereignty. It follows that, all things equal, predators will be more willing to displace a community than sovereignty-seeking groups, for two straightforward reasons. First, displacing a community would disrupt a rival's possibilities to establish sovereignty over a community – the absence of inhabitants would either eliminate the possibility for armed groups to govern an area, or it would destroy the networks and institutions of governance already established. Second, if armed groups assess different strategies in terms of costs and benefits (as I assume they do), then the costs of displacement to the predators would be less than the costs of displacement to groups attempting to govern. This is the case because they are not forgoing the possibility of governing the community in the future. The trade-offs for displacement facing the different armed groups, then, lead to a general implication that predators should displace more frequently than rulers.

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<sup>6</sup> This conception of sovereignty overlaps with the nationalism literature, which suggests that "types" of civilians should coincide with "types" of territory (i.e., "They" should live in "their" territory; "We" should live in "ours"). Along these lines, separatist civil wars should involve different targets of displacement in different territories of the state. Further, in civil wars in which the dominant cleavage is identity-based, or ascriptive, we should expect to see different targeting behavior by armed groups and different migration patterns by civilians (for example, we should expect different "types" of civilians to move to where other similar types move or live, whereas in conflicts without a dominant ascriptive cleavage, the destination of civilians should be determined by a different logic). It is important to note that unlike the literature on sovereignty, here I refer primarily to "internal" sovereignty, rather than the external recognition that sovereignty confers.

<sup>7</sup> How domestic state institutions shape insurgent tactics for disrupting state sovereignty and establishing an alternative is an area for further theorizing.



### c. Armed Group Competition

I argue that displacement is a key element of consolidating sovereignty or disrupting it. It follows, then, that in different phases of these processes, displacement should be more or less likely given a group's goals. Consider three different phases of interaction in a locality: entry, control, and exit. Entry may be thought of as an attempt to disrupt a rival's sovereignty, though each group should employ different tactics to do so. Control might be thought of as the consolidation phase of sovereignty, for those groups interested in establishing it, and as a period in which a predator group may have no rivals in the area (but does not necessarily take measures to govern). Finally, exit would be a phase in which an armed group abandons an area because a rival enters or for considerations exogenous to local conditions, such as to reinforce a battalion in another region.

Ruling insurgents are least likely to displace during the entry and control phases. As I have described their interests and preferences, it follows that civilians are a central element for achieving their goals given their constraints. However, consider a ruler's exit from a locality: if it is retreating from a community, then it has fewer incentives to avoid displacing the civilians. Further, at least three incentives exist for the group to displace. First, displacement will decrease the possibility that intelligence will be transferred from the civilian population to an incoming armed group. Second, if the retreating group is pursued heavily by a rival armed group, they might attempt to use civilians as human shields (this is more likely if the pursuing group is a state group, given the constraints of international and domestic law that some may follow). Third, the armed group in retreat may attempt to resettle the community in a more secure area in order to continue relationships of resources and governance. This last reason, however, would require that the exiting insurgents had enough resources to implement such a plan (a capacity that I assume is generally less than the state's, for example). Consistent with such an interest, but either lacking the necessary resources or finding it more effective, would be to offer incentives for civilians to follow the group to a different location. Of course, all of these incentives will be mitigated by a group's longer time horizon regarding the territory in question – if they anticipate re-entering the territory, it will be useful to leave a few reliable civilians to maintain connections to the community. Such a calculation would be most likely when the reasons for exit do not relate to a direct challenge by a rival, but rather to some factors unrelated to local conditions.<sup>8</sup>

The state is also unlikely to displace, all things equal. From Malaysia to Kenya, the counter-insurgency forces displaced and resettled communities potentially collaborating with or even only exposed to insurgent influence in many colonial wars. Apart from the ambiguous efficacy of such practices, the international community began to pressure governments to avoid such measures. States, like governing insurgents, have fewest incentives and highest costs for displacing civilians during phases of control. Finally, if a state were exiting an area, I think it is unlikely to mass displace, though for different reasons than exiting governing insurgents. Rather than use for cover or prevention of intelligence transfer, I think that state forces in retreat from a rival will only occur in areas where the state has not allocated enough resources to hold off a challenge from an

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<sup>8</sup> The factors that might alter an armed group's time horizon are another area for future theorizing.

insurgent (reflecting a tactical decision or mistake, rather than a lack of possible resources vis-à-vis the insurgents). In such cases, a handful of police officers in retreat, for example, will not have the capacity to implement a wide-scale mass displacement.

Finally, the third type of group – predators– should be most likely to displace upon entry into a territory, both relative to the other groups, and in terms of which phase it is most likely to displace. As explained above, displacing communities is a tactic consistent with an overall goal of disrupting a rival’s sovereignty. Further, upon entering a community previously controlled by a rival, additional incentives for displacement arise, such as punishment for supposed or actual collaboration with a rival. While governing insurgents may employ a similar tactic, predators should have fewer incentives to do so discriminately, and thus on a smaller scale, all things equal. Relative to other phases, while the predators control an area, they are least likely to displace on a mass scale. Presumably it would not be worthwhile to displace civilians who could otherwise be charged rents or used to produce resources for the group, all things equal. Upon exit, it is unclear what the predators will do. Like the governing insurgents, the group might want to avoid intelligence transfer to an incoming group or to use civilians as a cover from a pursuing group, but it should have fewer incentives to use resources to resettle civilians.

The table below summarizes the implications related to the stage of competition for each group:

	<b>Entry</b>	<b>Control</b>	<b>Exit</b>
<b>State</b>	No displacement	No displacement	<i>Displacement most likely</i>
<b>Ruling Insurgents</b>	No displacement	No displacement	<i>Displacement most likely</i>
<b>Predators</b>	<i>Displacement most likely</i>	No displacement	Unclear

Table 1: *Competition among Armed Groups and the likelihood of Mass Displacement*

#### **d. Community Characteristics**

Thus far, I have discussed armed groups’ preferences for displacement given their goals and the stage of interaction among groups. Yet civilians also initiate their own displacement, which may or may not coincide with armed groups’ interests. Since the argument here is that an armed group interested in establishing sovereignty will have preferences over civilian residence, it follows that beliefs about the likelihood that civilians will flee an area should influence armed group behavior at two levels: the communities targeted for entry, and the tactics of violence employed vis-à-vis that community.

First, armed groups’ decisions to target communities for entry should depend on communities’ exposure to rival groups. For the incoming governing insurgents or state, the decision to displace or not relates to the costs of generating compliance among

civilians and the costs of displacing. The costs of generating compliance depend on the past presence of a rival armed group in a community because such a past will influence an armed group's beliefs about civilians' loyalties. Civilians are more likely to have collaborated with the former armed group; such relationships can shape preferences in favor or against the previous armed group, but the likelihood that supporters of the previous group live in the community and may pass on intelligence is higher in such situations than in the absence of previous presence of a rival, all things equal. As the time period of past exposure to an armed group increases, the likelihood of mass displacement upon entry of a rival into a community increases. Further, all things equal, governors (insurgents and state armed forces) will be more likely to displace communities as the time period of a rival's presence in the community increases.

The likelihood that civilians will choose to flee after a turnover in armed group presence increases, a movement that incoming sovereignty-seeking groups should seek to mitigate if their preferences follow those described above. I assume civilians' decision to stay in or flee from a community is based on a calculation about the risks of each decision for their own safety and the safety of their loved ones. A civilian's risk of staying in a community relates to a community's past interaction with a rival armed group because the risk of being a target of persecution by the incoming group increases.<sup>9</sup>

The second community characteristic is the kind of institutions that govern the behavior of civilians within the communities. An emerging literature on the interaction between civilians, communities, and armed groups during war provides insight into how community characteristics may condition individuals' decision-making and armed groups' strategies. Community cleavages such as those rooted in class, partisanship, or kinship may also shape how armed groups interact with the civilian population and influence which members of the community leave and which do not. Kalyvas (1999, 2005) documents how local cleavages and dynamics interact with armed actors to jointly produce variations in civil war violence observed at the national level. In a recent anthropological article, Lubkemann (2005) presents evidence that patterns of displacement during Mozambique's civil war varied according to how local cleavages, especially those based on ethnicity and kinship, influenced armed group strategies and civilian behavior across regions and levels of displacement as a result. A distinction that seems relevant is whether or not the community is primarily organized by state institutions or by other institutions, such as tribal or kinship networks, or some other non-state organization. To the extent that such networks exist, such communities may be more

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<sup>9</sup> For these reasons, it would be less costly for a ruler to enter an area without previous presence of a rival if possible. Of course, a state presumably cannot avoid areas where an insurgent group has had a presence if it seeks to eliminate the insurgency. However, an implication of the logic would be that communities with less interaction could be targeted first over the course of a counter-insurgent war in order to generate compliance in those communities and eventually challenge an insurgent stronghold. This rationale relates to civilian displacement because if all possible destinations of civilians are strongholds of the state, then the state would have that much greater leverage for disrupting the insurgents' sovereignty and recapturing its own. Disregarding the possible effect of changing international norms, state forces may be more likely to displace (and resettle) civilians living in areas of longer exposure to or interaction with ruling insurgents. Indeed the likelihood of state forces resettling civilians is higher than ruling insurgents, because I assume that they have more resources in general in order to implement such a plan.

likely to displace themselves together rather than at the individual or household level. Such a possibility may give an armed group pause before entering a territory. On the other hand, Toft (2002) suggests that territory is central to the identity of ethnic groups, so they may be more reluctant to displace themselves upon entry of an armed group, or they might even attempt to prevent entry of the armed group into a territory rather than abandon it. Given an armed group's attempt to enter a community with strong non-state institutions, I think it is more likely for those communities to either resist entry of the group or to displace themselves on a community scale.

The selection of communities to target for entry will also be the outcome of the proximity and distribution of rival armed groups, as well as "strategic corridors" for movement of materiel and personnel. Distribution of sovereign territories raises the important question of the inverse consideration to what I have posed in my framework: namely, when do armed groups prefer to populate a given territory. Such a preference for a repopulation or resettlement policy may have obvious implications for mass displacement from a different territorial space.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, if a ruler decides to enter a community, the tactics of violence should conform to two general patterns: first, it should employ less indiscriminate violence, and second, it should employ less extreme measures of violence when it is employed (i.e., violence leading to fatalities should be less frequent, as should forms of violence that brutalize civilians or their corpses). The tactics of violence relate to armed groups' preferences over civilian displacement because civilians concerned about their and their loved ones' safety will reasonably monitor the form and scope of violence employed to make a calculation about their risk of staying in a community. If an armed group prefers that civilians choose not to flee, then they should minimize the perceived threat of their violence. To the extent that an armed group is interested primarily in predation, it should be less constrained in the scope and form of its violent tactics. Civilians are likely to leave communities in higher numbers the more indiscriminate or brutal the violence perpetrated is. As such, we should expect governors are more likely to apply indiscriminate and especially brutal forms of violence when they are exiting a community rather than upon entry; in general, predators are more likely than governors to use indiscriminate and brutal violence against civilians in general, all things equal.

While these characteristics of communities might shape the beliefs about how armed groups behave, the connection between community characteristics and civilians' behavior first needs to be established; I am working on these in a forthcoming project. Evaluating whether or not observable patterns of armed group behavior relate to these characteristics, as expressed as the corollaries of the hypotheses above, will require a

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<sup>10</sup> The literature on gerrymandering could be insightful for armed groups' strategies for distributing supporters and restricting enemies. Beginning to explore these questions leads to a broader set of questions about preferences over civilian location – in other words, what is the logic behind armed groups' strategies regarding where civilians reside? And this, in turn, implies a more complicated research design because the values of the dependent variable are no longer "displace" and "don't displace," but rather "displace," "resettle," "contain [preventing people from leaving an area]," and "do nothing." I am currently developing a theoretical framework with implications for these outcomes and a research design to test them.

subsequent analysis, though large-N statistical analysis cannot indicate whether or not the mechanisms posed are actually at work in armed groups' decision-making.

### **iii. Units of Analysis**

The work of Ibáñez and her colleagues has illuminated many elements of displacement at the household level; yet the survey data does not provide leverage for assessing armed groups' preferences and strategies. In contrast to the bulk of the literature on displacement, the theory outlined above shifts the focus from the household level to the community level. On the independent variable side, like Davenport et al and Moore and Shellman, I distinguish between armed groups. However, my typology differs from both of theirs because rather than solely considering dissidents and the state, I differentiate among three groups: the state, ruling insurgents, and predators. This distinction requires a more nuanced (and thornier) process to identify the units of analysis. Further, as my theory emphasizes the strategies of armed groups rather than the risk calculations of individuals, a different approach to the empirical analysis is required. I suggest two ways to improve on our understanding of displacement patterns. First, I organize existing data on displacement in Colombia according to two units of analysis: events and municipalities. Second, I propose a qualitative research design involving interviews of demobilized armed group leaders and matched-pairs case studies.

Again, the dependent variable is mass displacement, which implies shifting the unit of analysis from the household or individual to the community or territory. I construct two different measures of the dependent variable, mass displacements, one of which treats a mass displacement as an event perpetrated by an armed group, and the second, which reflects the community as the unit of analysis.

#### **a. Data and Measurement**

##### **i. Sources**

I use two data sources for displacement within Colombia. First, the Colombian government's agency, Acción Social (AS; formerly the Social Solidarity Network or RSS) registers individual- and household-level displacement in their Unique Registry System (SUR). I have access, through CERAC, to their record-level database spanning 1995 through October 2006; the database has 2.272.978 registrations. In order to register, displaced individuals and households must approach a government agency, and respond to a questionnaire. The only exception is with massive displacements. If a displacement appears to be on a massive scale, government enumerators go to the arrival point of the majority of the displaced (based on reports from regional government offices and non-governmental organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)), collect the testimony of a community leader, and registers all households in the area.

The Bishop's Conference of Colombia (Conferencia Episcopal), also collects individual- and household-level data in their system, RUT (for Ruth of the Old Testament). Again, displaced individuals and households can approach the diocese where they arrive to

register for assistance. Church officials administer an extensive questionnaire as well. The database begins in 1980, but data collection was systematized differently beginning in 1997; through 2004 the RUT includes 242,565 records.

## **ii. Unit of Analysis 1: Events**

The AS dataset on mass displacement includes events of fifty or more individuals leaving a community (over some undefined, but presumably short time span). In the data that the SUR has collected, the majority of mass displacement events do not include an attribution of the displacement to any particular armed actor. Further, the record-level data made available to us did not include the actor to whom responsibility was attributed. To avoid problems of observational equivalence between massive displacements initiated by civilians and those carried out by armed groups, I would have to remove from the dataset any mass displacements not attributed to a specific armed actor in the conflict.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, this constitutes removing the majority of mass displacement events. Figures 5-10 show mass displacement events by actor for each year between 2001-2005.

[Figures 5-10 here]

## **iii. Unit of Analysis 2: Communities**

As I have been using the concept, mass displacement refers to the removal of a community from its territorial space; therefore, it is unclear how relevant the absolute measure used by the government to indicate an event of mass displacement will be. Therefore, to examine patterns of population change at the municipal level, I also redefine mass displacement from the government threshold of 10 households or fifty people to examine variation in the proportion of municipal population affected.<sup>12</sup> I will use municipal population data from the 1993 census conducted by the Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) to estimate the net municipal population change between 1993 and 2006.<sup>13</sup> Figure 12 shows the variation across municipalities.

[Figure 11 here]

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<sup>11</sup> Attribution of responsibility for mass displacement is given by IDPs' reconstructions of events leading up to the displacement, as recounted to a government enumerator. The data I rely on for this paper is partly provided to the public in aggregate and thematic form; assessing the actors responsible for mass displacements required combining data from several databases. Disaggregated data was provided at the individual record-level to the Resource Center for Conflict Analysis (CERAC).

<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, the data available at this time was not disaggregated below the municipal level. The analysis of population movements within municipalities is a next step, at the case level, and hopefully with disaggregated government data in the future.

<sup>13</sup> The municipal-level data from the 2005 census is currently being reviewed by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) for apparent errors in some estimates, and has not yet been released.

While many of these population changes may not be related to a direct strategy by an armed group, I think it is important to have an overall sense of the patterns. Yet it is unclear how useful an analysis at the municipal level will be, even without data on the actor responsible. The municipality may be overly aggregated, as indicated by the proportion of the displaced who remain within the same municipality of their original displacement. Figure 12 displays the proportions of IDPs who remain within their municipality of origin.

[Figure 12 here]

Such patterns further indicate the need for a more fine-grained data collection strategy.

**iv. Plausibility Tests**  
**a. Armed Group Type**

Despite the shortcomings in the large-N data, some initial plausibility tests of the theory are possible. The main factors that I expect to be related to mass displacement by an armed group are: the armed groups' type, competition among armed groups, and community characteristics. In this section, I consider the appropriate units of analysis and the available data for testing the theory. I will present plausibility tests with the data available at this stage.

Armed group type – particularly among non-state groups – is a tricky *ex-ante* identification. For this process, I rely on in-depth profiles of the armed groups involved in Colombia's civil war. Scholars such as Mauricio Romero, Francisco Gutiérrez, and Juan Guillermo Ferro and Graciela Uribe have conducted extensive research on the organization of the armed groups. Returning to a problem raised earlier, of endogenous, local-level strategies, it is clear that at least some paramilitary units did engage in state-building in some localities. However, comparing the overarching goals among the main armed groups, it seems reasonable to distinguish between the guerrilla groups, especially the two largest still-existing groups, the FARC and the ELN, from paramilitary blocks.<sup>14</sup>

For the first hypothesis, mass displacements attributed to paramilitary groups should outnumber those attributed to guerrilla groups and state groups. According to both data sources, this is not the case. The total number of mass displacements attributed to guerrilla groups between 2001 (the first year that an actor is identified) and 2006 is 64. The total attributed to paramilitaries is 41. Yet the data on the actor responsible for displacement may not be reliable: the number of mass displacement events listed as “without information” is far greater than those with information: 509 cases between 1995 and 2006. When Acción Social registers a mass displacement, they take the testimony of a community leader; a lack of information about the perpetrator may reflect an

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<sup>14</sup> As more data is collected, I will refine the unit of analysis from the armed group to sub-units such as fronts or “blocks” within each armed group. The purpose of comparing the fronts within an armed group across space and time is to evaluate the extent to which fronts may be behaving idiosyncratically; in other words, whether principal-agent problems appear likely.

unwillingness to identify those responsible for fear of retribution, or a lack of trust in the government (especially if paramilitaries are perceived to operate in conjunction with government forces), or the displacement may have been initiated by the community itself in anticipation of violence.

The RUT also contains data at the record level, including actor responsible for the displacement. Figure 13 shows the relative attribution of responsibility by actor.

[Figure 13 here]

However, it is impossible to assess how representative the RUT data on perpetrator is for the overall IDP population. It is possible, for example, that those who have been displaced by guerrilla groups may also be more likely to approach the Catholic Church for assistance. It is also possible, though, that the decision to register with the church is independent of the circumstances of displacement.

Finally, Kirchoff and Ibáñez (2001) found that 58.7% of those surveyed were displaced by paramilitary groups, and that 27.9% were displaced by guerrillas; by 2003, the proportion that the guerrilla groups had displaced increased to roughly 50% (Kirchoff and Ibáñez 2001, Deininger et al 2004). Their estimates indicate a different pattern of armed groups' behavior than either the SUR or the RUT. Given the lack of reliability for the data on mass displacement events, and actor attribution, I suggest that an alternative research design is necessary that would enable more confidence in attributing events to armed actors. One strategy is to read the testimonies of community leaders that have been massively displaced to gather more information on the facts leading up to the massive displacement, rather than relying on the coding of the government. I am currently working to gain access to these testimonies (there are approximately 350 such testimonies, covering the more than 325,000 people displaced massively in the government's database). In addition to gaining insight about the event, I will be able to disaggregate to events below the municipal level.

An additional strategy will be to select cases to trace events and actors in a more in-depth way by interviewing community members and in some cases, demobilized or jailed armed group leaders. To compare across and within armed groups, I think matched pair case studies would be the most effective way to trace causality.

### **b. Armed Group Competition**

Determining the phases of armed group competition to test for correlations between timing and likelihood of massive displacement is perhaps the most challenging work for a large-N analysis. To create reliable indicators from the CERAC database on violent events, I plan to collect qualitative data linking violent events to armed group competition in localities.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The CERAC conflict measurement system is based on a software system developed for the recording of conflict actions, known as SARAC, which in turn feeds a relational database. The information system is currently based on the registration and analysis of a wide variety of sources on violent events and is fully



In the meantime, one clear circumstance in which the FARC was exiting a territory occurred in early 2002, when President Andrés Pastraña ordered the Colombian Armed Forces to retake the disarmament zone that had been ceded to the FARC in the hopes of facilitating peace talks. Comparing the maps of displacement events by actor, it is clear that more massive displacements were attributed to the FARC in the former disarmament zone, in the southwest region of the country, during 2002 than any other year. (See Figures 5-9). However, the following excerpts from a 2004 *Washington Post* article illustrate that variation exists within the territory from which the FARC was withdrawing:

Army officials said guerrillas gave orders to residents to abandon the villages or be killed, hoping to avoid mass arrests that would break up their civilian support networks. Only four of 1,000 La Union Peneya residents -- many of whom grow coca, the key ingredient in cocaine, which helps finance the guerrillas -- were there when the army arrived.

Yet further in the same article, journalist Scott Wilson continues:

Only a trickle of people have escaped the combat area because much of the population has been forbidden to leave -- a tactic employed by the guerrillas and their paramilitary rivals across Colombia to maintain their hold on regions they control (Wilson 2004).

Why did the FARC displace in the first community but not the second (indeed, forbidding exit in the second)? The variation in mass displacement by the FARC across the municipalities within the disarmament zone allows for the possibility to explore confounding factors in addition to the stage of competition that generate or prevent mass displacement.

### **c. Community Characteristics**

In the theory presented here, the factors underlying how community characteristics influence displacement patterns are the community's sources of authority and its past interaction with armed groups. Within Colombia, a reliable indicator for the presence of non-state sources of authority is the ethnic composition of the community: indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities tend to organize themselves differently from other

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geo-referenced. This system is connected to geographic information system (GIS), which has been processed and developed by CERAC. There are three categories of events in the CERAC database: clashes between two armed groups, attacks by one armed group, and "complex events," in which several events take place within a short time period (taken into account in order to prevent double-counting, for example, of an attack followed by a battle). The events are disaggregated by type, and then organized by municipality and date.

Colombian communities, around networks and institutions that are independent of the state.<sup>16</sup>

If the theory is correct, then we would expect that indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities to either exit in higher numbers per mass displacement event than other types of communities, or to have fewer incidents of mass displacement (because the such communities should either resist on a large scale or leave on a large scale, if the theory is correct). The maps of events do tend to indicate that mass displacements occurring along the Pacific coast (where the majority of communities are Afro-Colombian), and in the northeast (where many indigenous communities are based) do tend to yield higher numbers of displaced per event. (See Figures 5-9). Considering the population flows from municipalities, within the Pacific department of the Chocó, which is predominately Afro-Colombian, all 27 municipalities with the exception of the capital, Quibdó, have lost population. Unfortunately, estimates of net loss are not possible because the 1993 census did not record the populations of nine of the municipalities. Yet to adequately assess the mechanisms posed in the theory, the more relevant unit of analysis would be the community, which would be better captured at the sub-municipal level.

These brief illustrations indicate a need for further data gathering and refinement of the level of analysis to sub-municipal units. I propose studying one region in-depth to retrace the interaction among civilians and armed groups over time, especially with reference to residence and movement. To gather such fine-grained qualitative data, I will conduct interviews with community members and ex-combatants who operated in the region, and consult secondary historical and press materials. I foresee a back-and-forth between the case studies and the large-N, spatial analysis in at least 3 areas. First, the qualitative study will provide clues about indicators for stages of competition among armed groups, which can then be incorporated into the large-N test with the violent events data collected by CERAC. Second, the qualitative study will enable a more confident assessment of which circumstances of displacement and containment relate to armed groups' strategies rather than civilians' choices. For example, if I find evidence that an armed group has provided incentives for some civilians to relocate I might infer that the strategy is to resettle given the tactic employed. Such provision of incentives is impossible to observe at the large-N level. Finally, I expect the regional study to illuminate additional civilian-armed group relations that might be incorporated into a larger model of armed groups' behavior across different regions, but missed without fine-grain data.

## **v. Conclusion**

One of the most visible and devastating effects of civil wars is the displacement of civilians from their homes. By the end of 2005, approximately 33 million people

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<sup>16</sup> Another possible indicator of the kinds of social organization I have in mind is whether or not the community is organized around private property or communal land titles. However, it is possible that this indicator will erroneously point to social organization when in fact the communal land ownership is the mechanism itself: armed groups might target those communities with communal land titles because it may be more efficient to remove a community from its land and appropriate one communal title rather than several private titles.

worldwide had fled the violence of past and ongoing wars.<sup>17</sup> Roughly 12 million were refugees living abroad, while another 21 million remained within their home countries (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) 2006; 1). In this paper, I suggest that three sets of factors explain patterns of mass displacement in civil wars: armed group type, competition among armed groups, and community characteristics. The theory implies two new units of analysis: events and municipal population change. At this stage, data on displacement in the Colombian civil war helps to illuminate some patterns, though more micro-level data is necessary to fully test the implications of the theory.

If the theory is correct, it will have implications for both military and humanitarian interventions. If a link does exist between competition among armed groups and mass displacement, then observation of mass displacement events would indicate opposite patterns of expansion and contraction for different non-state groups. For governors, an associated mass displacement would indicate the group's contraction, while mass displacements associated with predators would indicate those groups' expansion.

The logics of the theory can be extended to consider different patterns of displacement across wars. If armed groups' preferences and civilians' decisions interact to produce aggregate patterns of mass displacement in civil wars, then civil wars with different macro-level cleavages should create distinct displacement patterns. A clear example would be those wars in which at least one armed group aims to govern only a certain "type" of civilian (by religious or ethnic identity, for example) in a certain territorial space; which segments of the population the group targets, and which civilians anticipate such targeting should produce outcomes closer to segregation of groups than in wars without an armed actor with such preferences. In turn, how cleavages have the potential to generate different patterns of displacement and settlement during wars can have substantial implications for efforts to end war and to govern post-war.

Finally, if we have a sense of when different armed groups might be likely to massively displace civilians, humanitarian and state agencies will be able to better anticipate assistance to those populations. The human suffering caused by displacement during war is staggering. Mortality surveys conducted by the International Crisis Group (ICG) estimate that 98% of the approximately 3.8 million deaths in the Congo since 1998 have been the result of treatable diseases contracted while fleeing violence, not direct violence itself (ICG 2005). Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) concluded that similarly indirect effects caused approximately 180,000 deaths in Darfur through 2005, as opposed to the roughly 50,000 killed outright by militias (PHR 2005). Studies on the internally displaced in Colombia have concluded that human welfare is substantially lower for this population – estimated to range from 2 to 3 million people, or roughly one in every five rural residents – than for any other subset in the country (Ibáñez and Velez 2005; Neira 2004). Improved humanitarian intervention can potentially anticipate and mitigate some of these outcomes.

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<sup>17</sup> Estimates are as of December 31, 2005, the most recent date for which global data are available.

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massive, household, and individual displacement in Colombia, 1997-Sept 2006

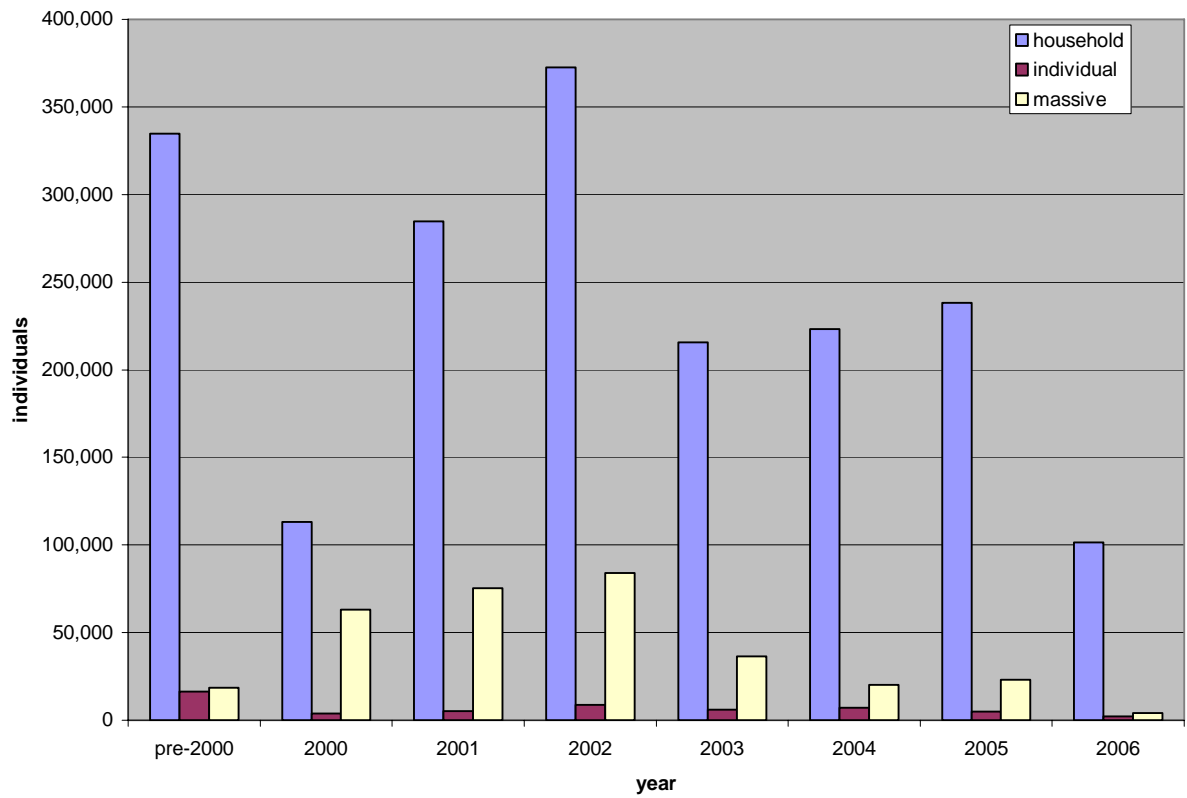


Figure 1. Source: Acción Social 2006



## Individual Displacement by Municipality, 1990-2006

Source: Acción Social Sistema Unico de Registros (SUR)

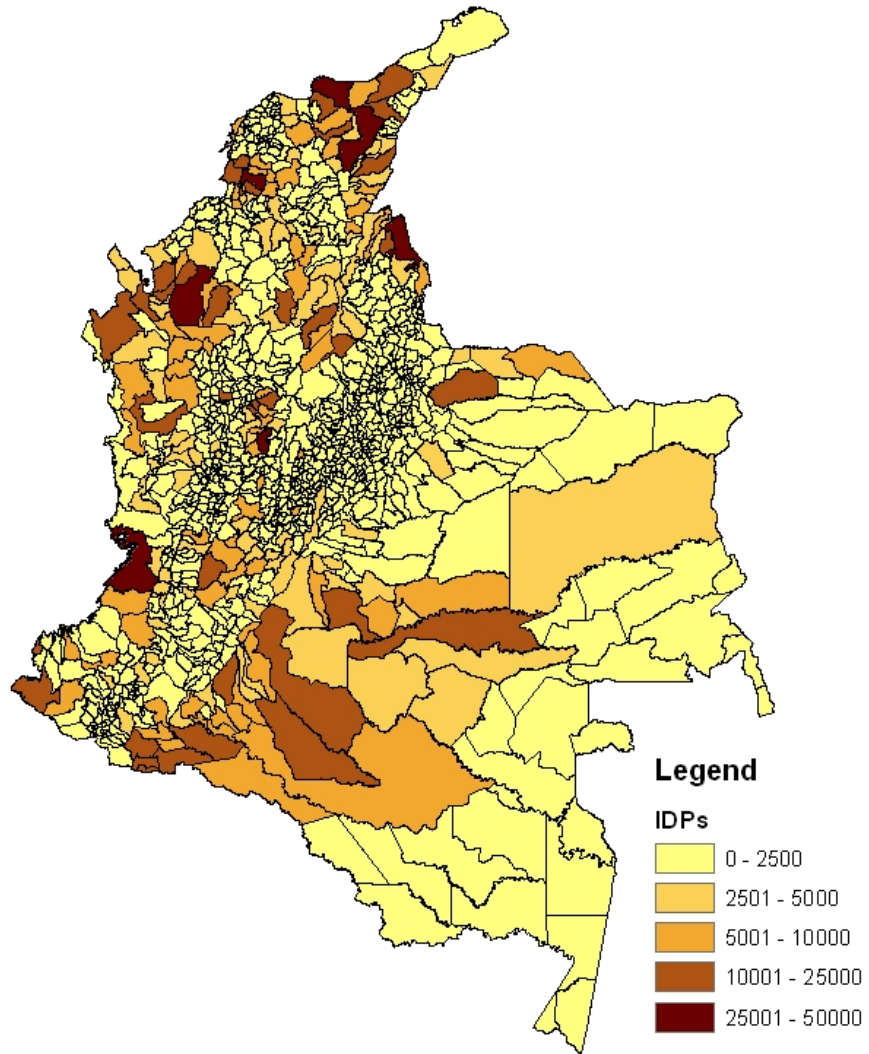
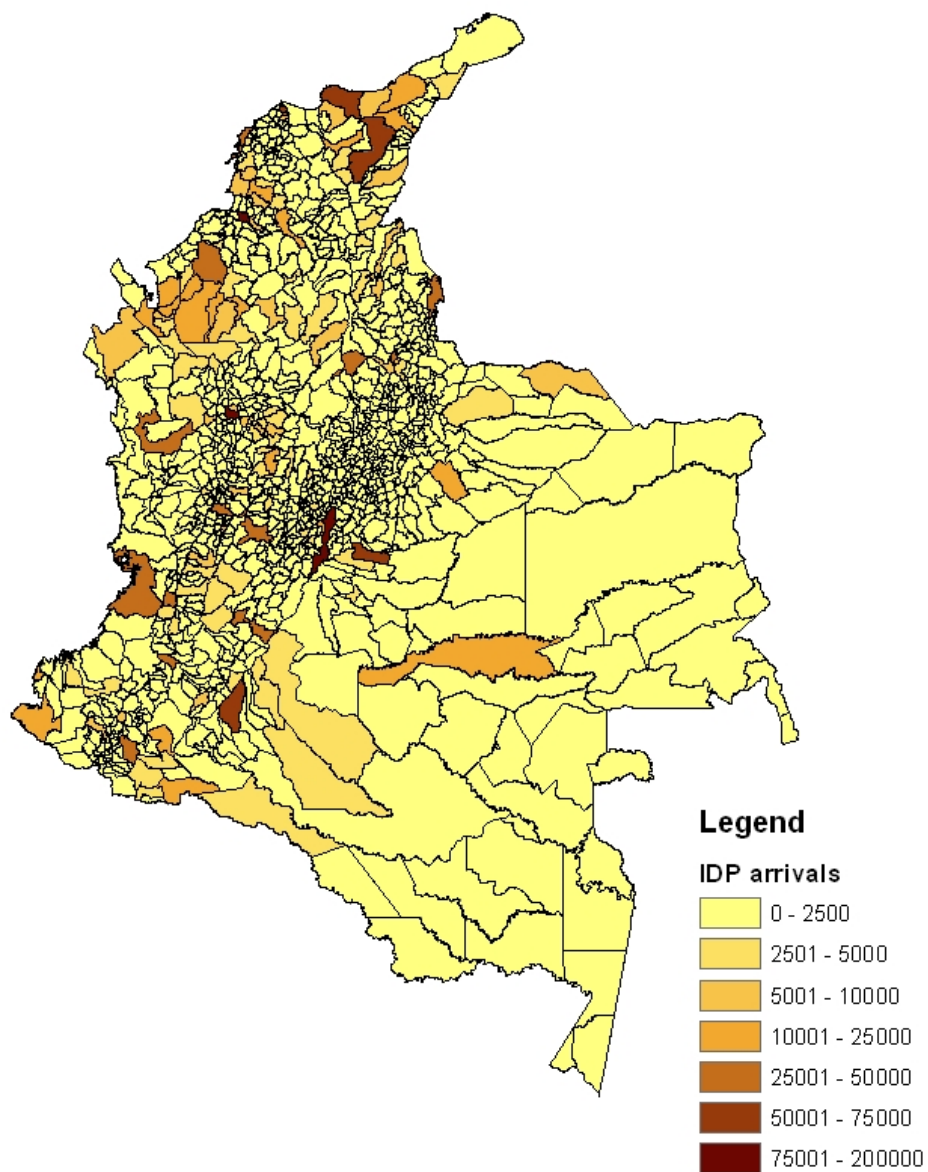


Figure 2

## Individual Arrivals by Municipality, 1990-2006

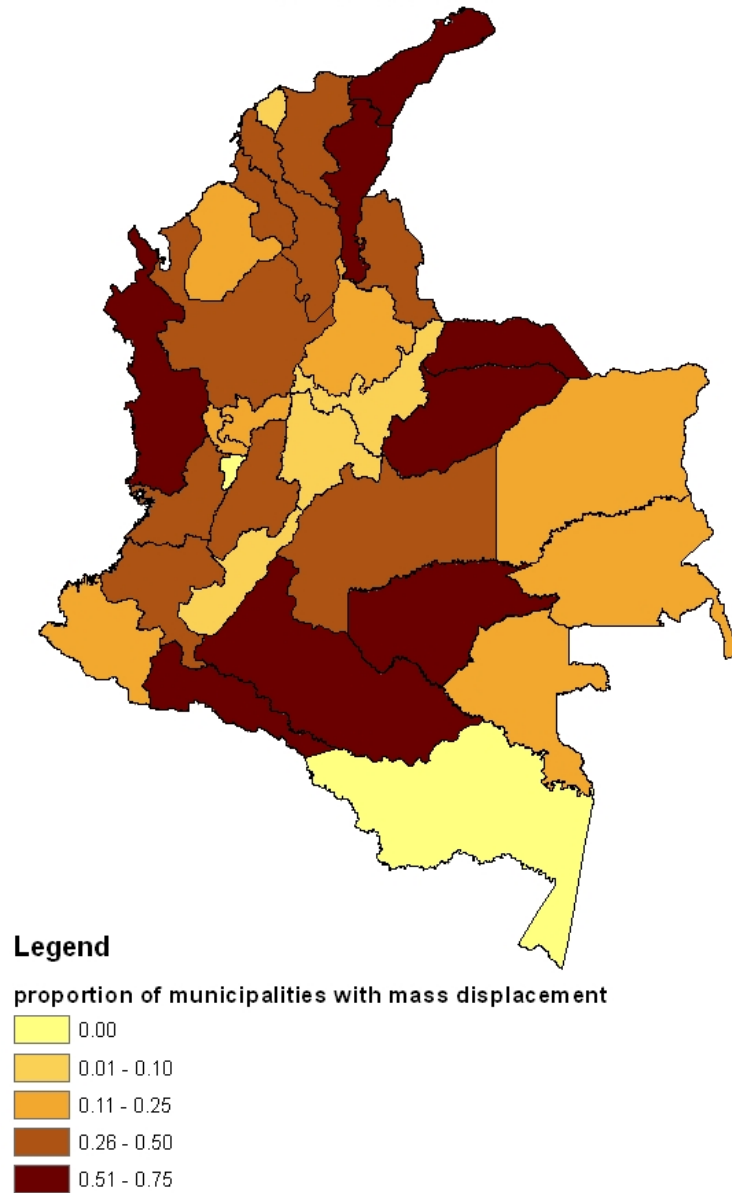
Source: Acción Social Sistema Unico de Registros (SUR)



*Figure 3*

## Proportion of Municipalities with Mass Displacements, 1995-2006

Source: Acción Social



*Figure 4*

# Mass Displacement Events by Actor, 2001

Source: Acción Social

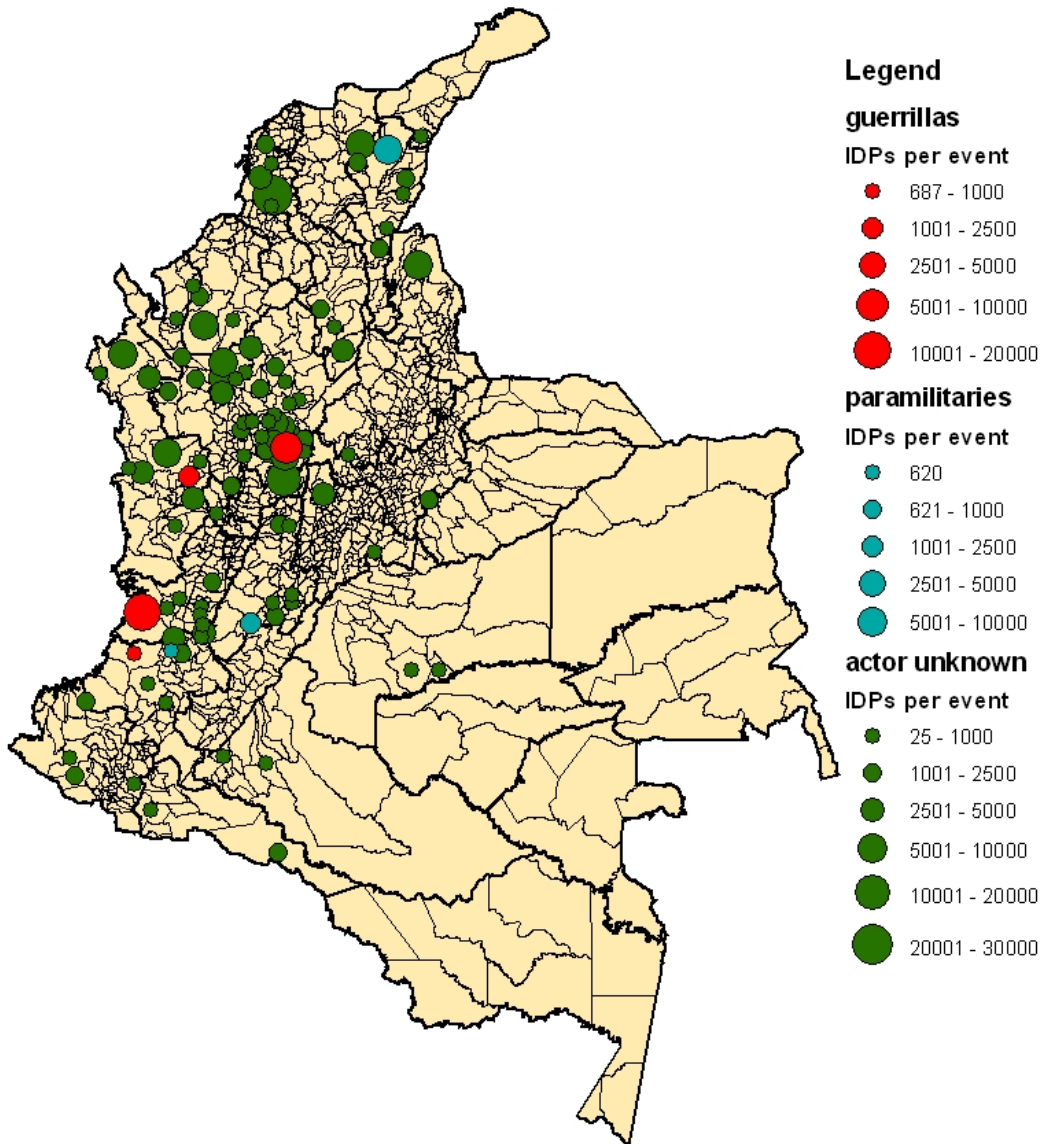


Figure 5

# Mass Displacement Events by Actor, 2002

Source: Acción Social

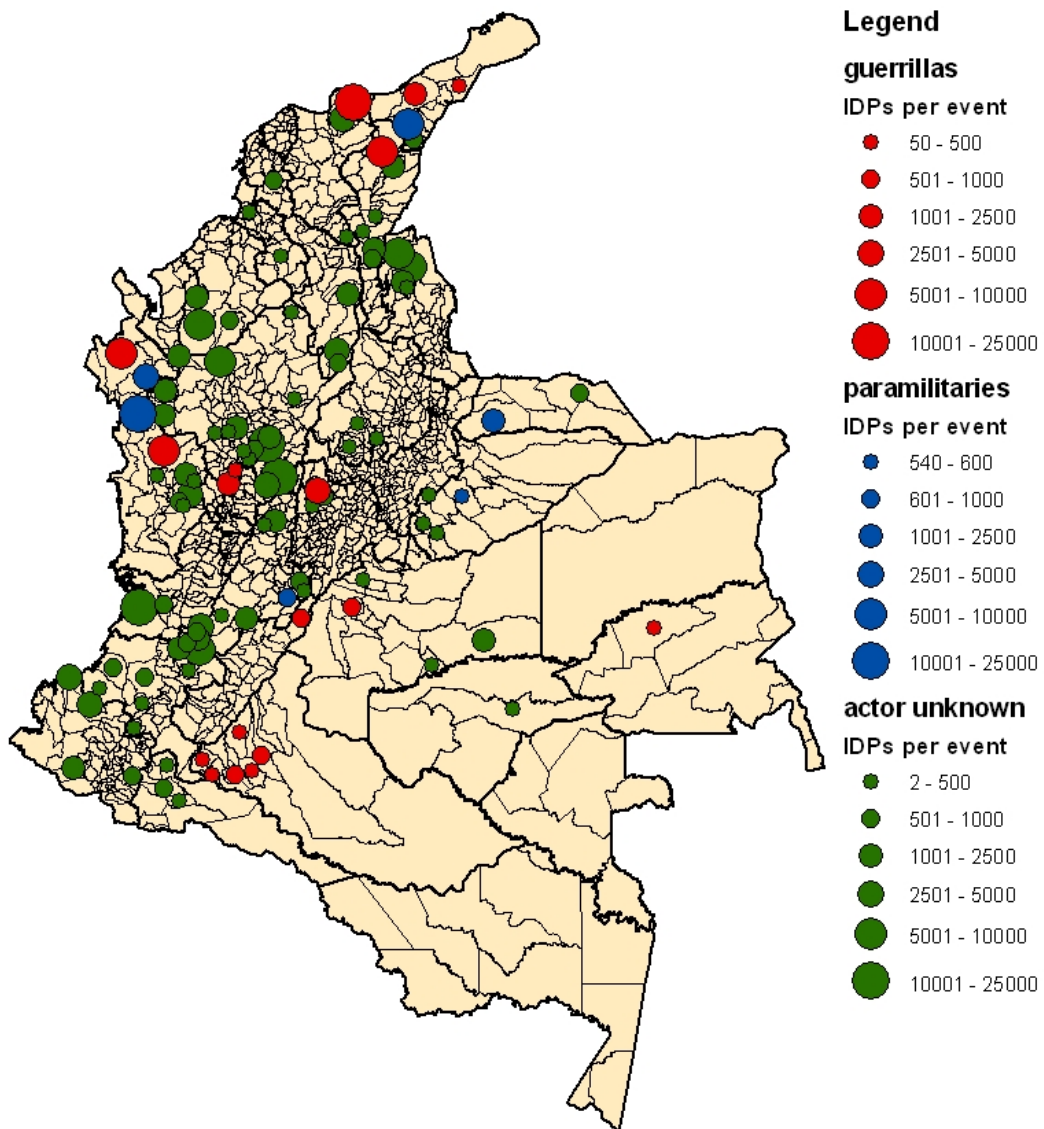


Figure 6

# Mass Displacement Events by Actor, 2003

Source: Acción Social

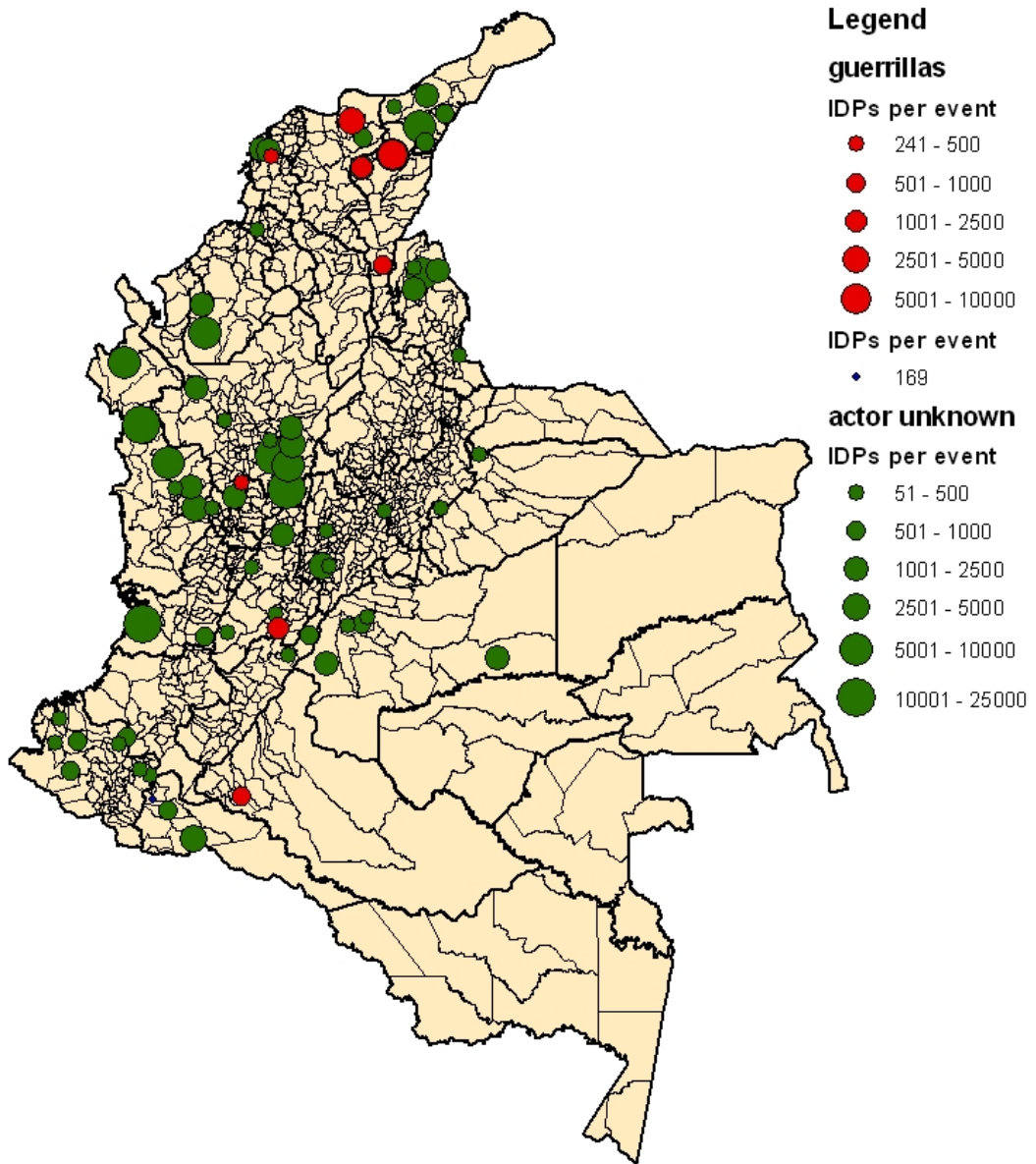


Figure 7

# Mass Displacement Events by Actor, 2004

Source: Acción Social

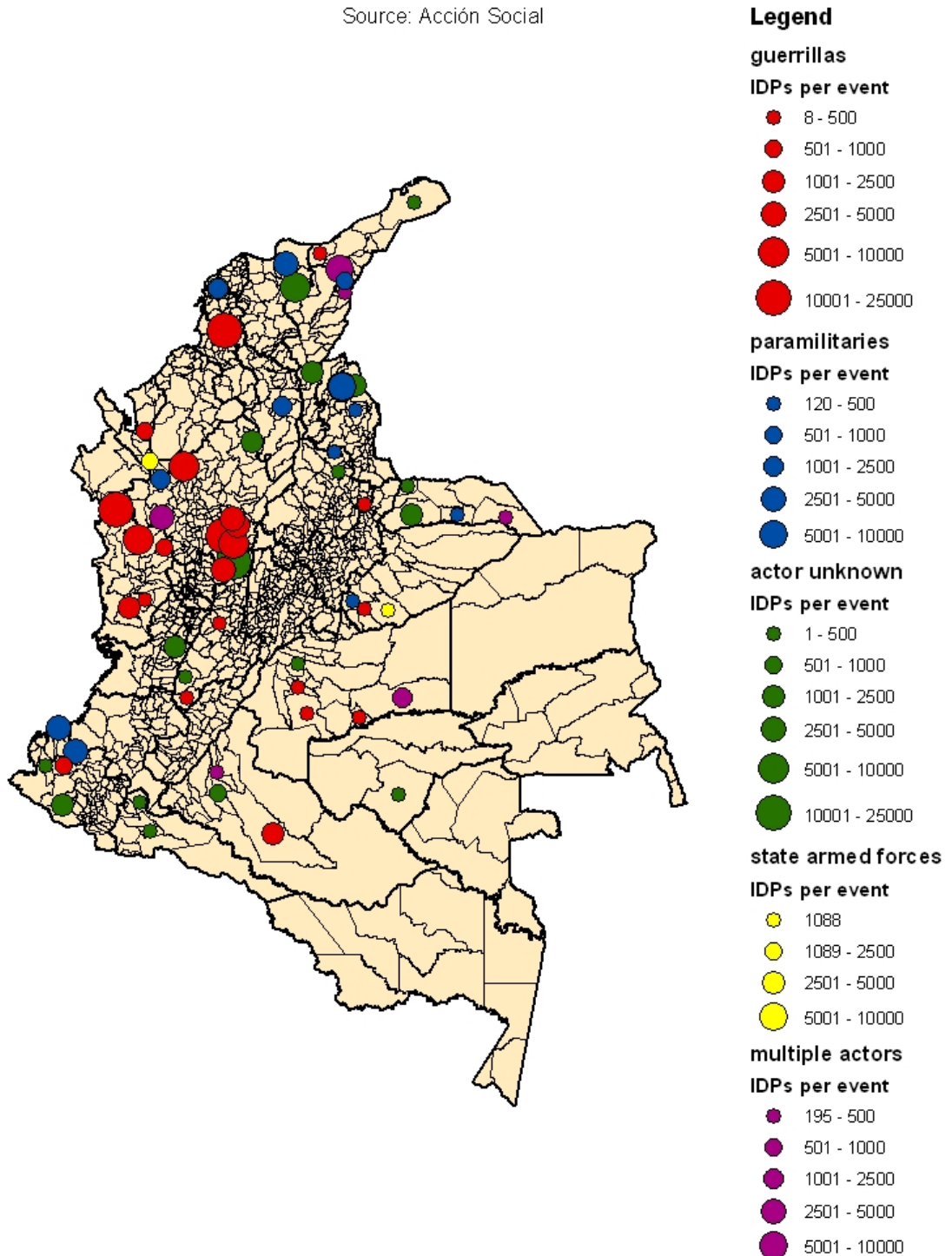


Figure 8

# Mass Displacement Events by Actor, 2005

Source: Acción Social

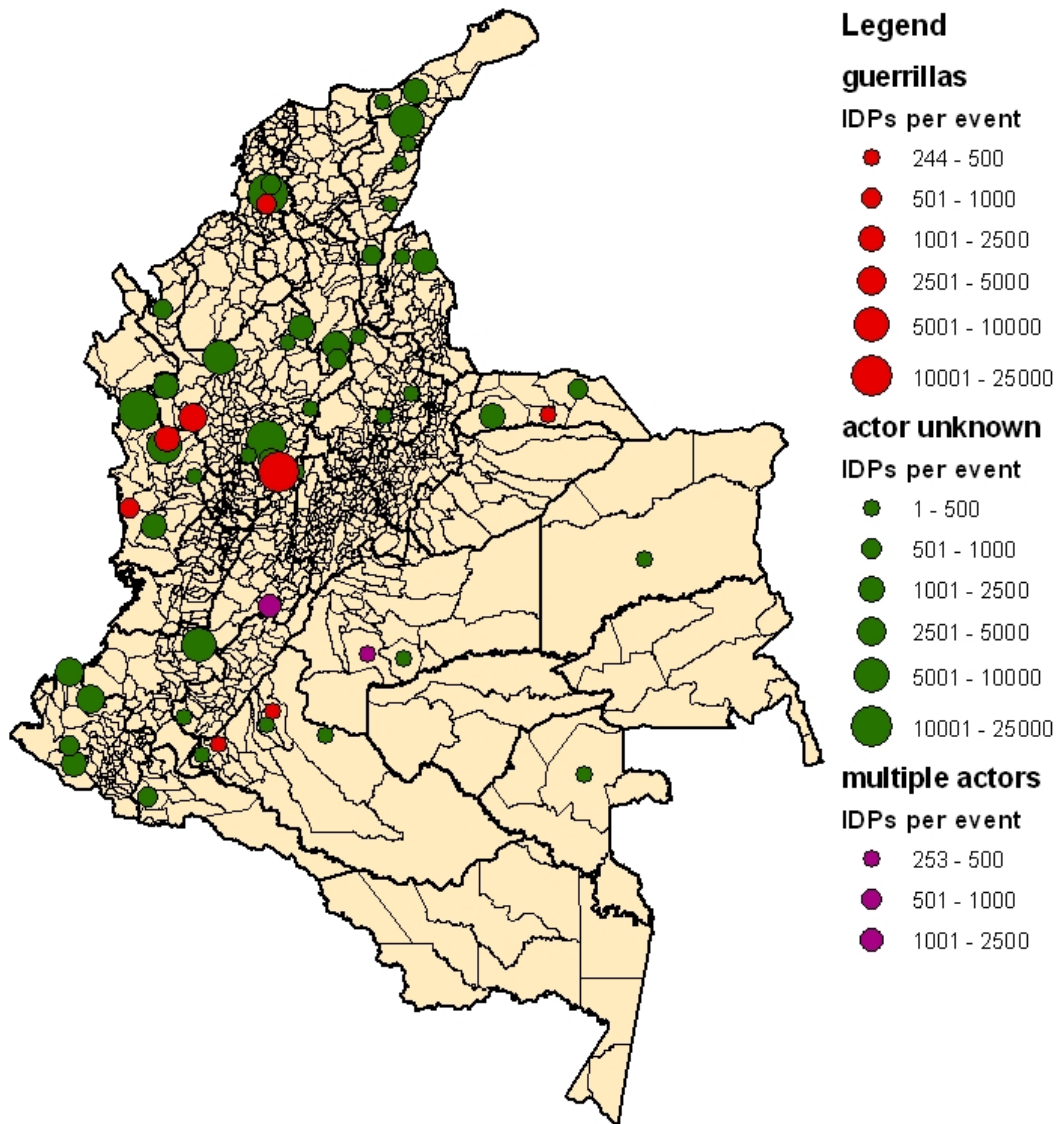


Figure 9



Mass Displacement Events by Actor, 2001-2005

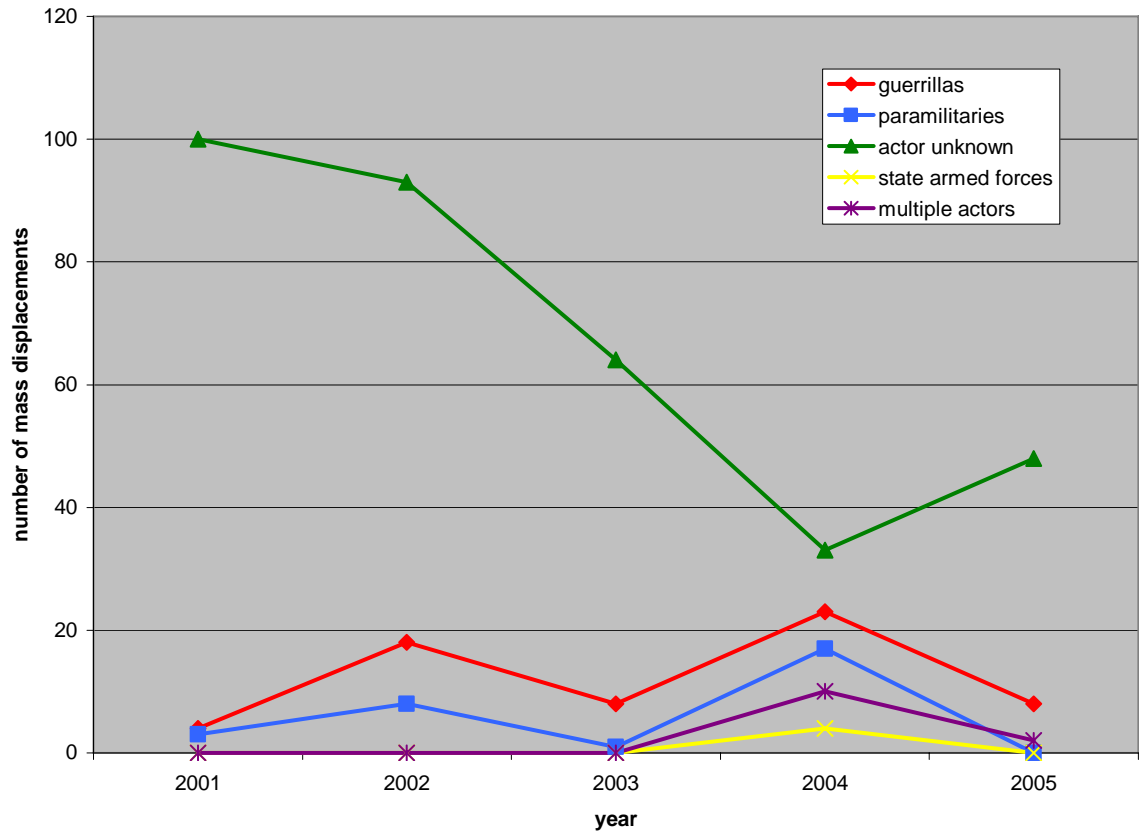
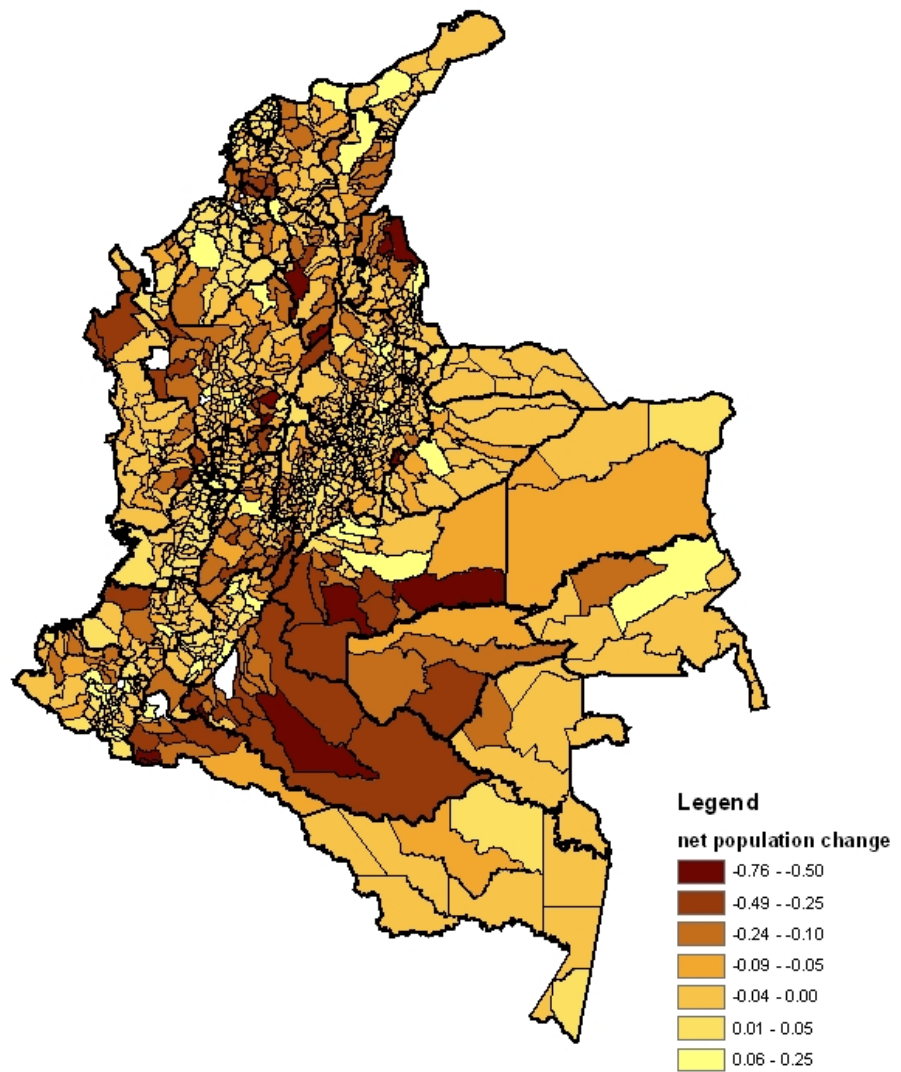


Figure 10

## Net Proportional Population Change by Municipality, 1990-2006

Sources: Acción Social SUR,  
Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE) 1993 Census



*Figure 11*

## Intra-municipal Displacement, 1990-2006

Source: Acción Social SUR

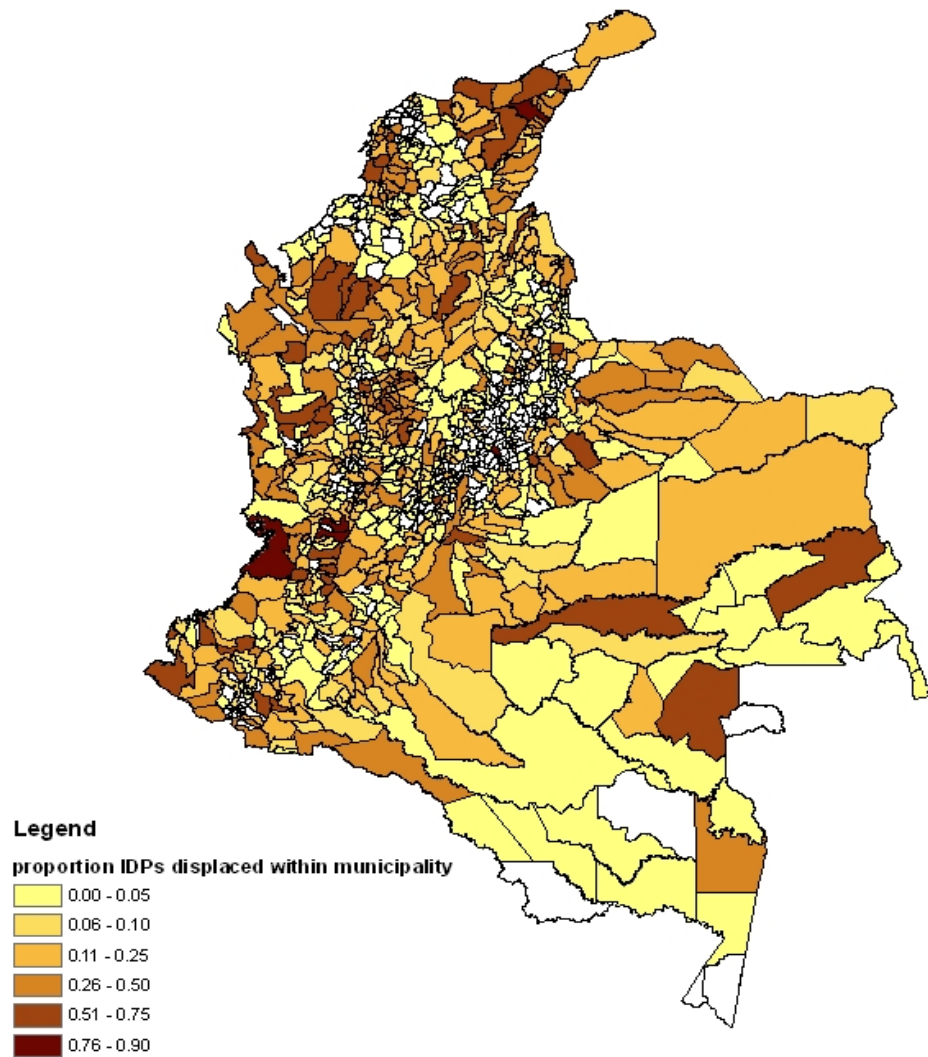


Figure 12

Displacement by Armed Group, 1980-2004  
RUT database

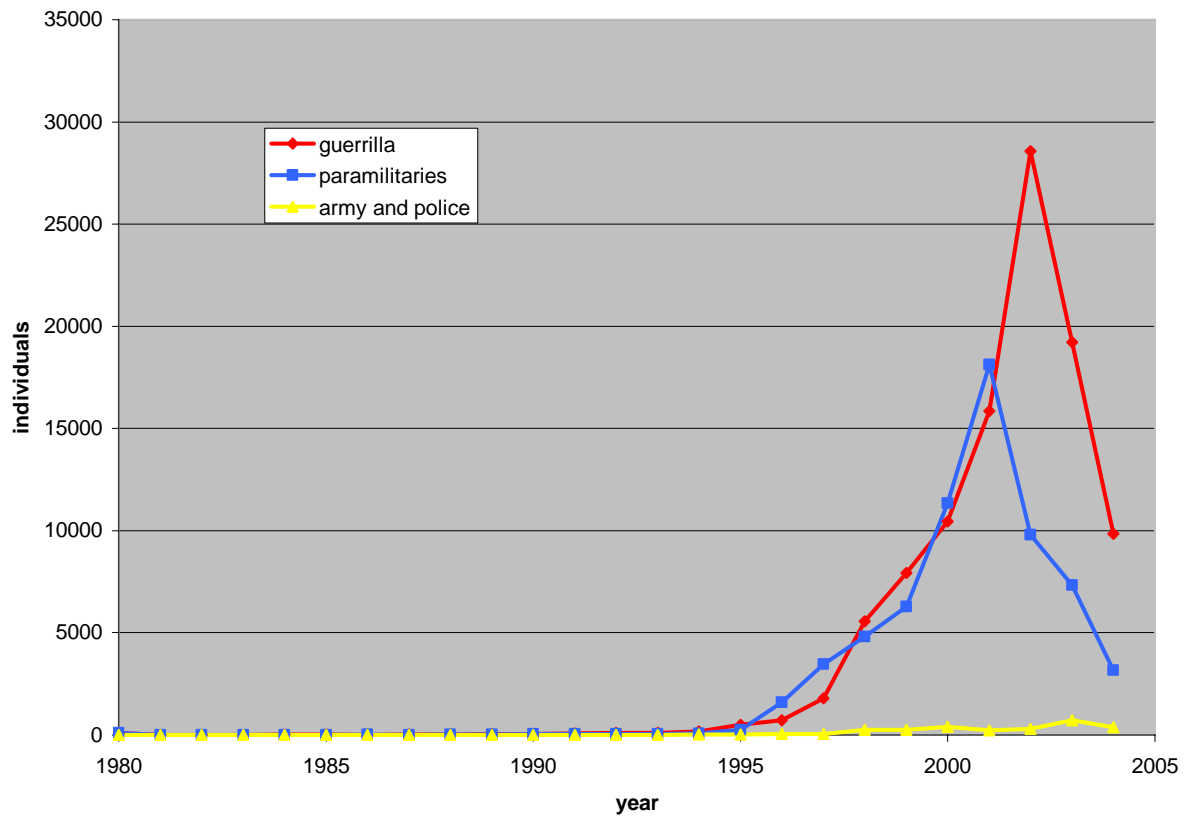


Figure 13