TRILATERAL RESEARCH
Data Analysis of Child Soldier Trends in Colombia

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Introduction

The signing of the 2016 Peace Accord between the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia initiated a wave of demobilisation of over 10,000 ex-combatants who were recruited as children.

Trilateral Research is a research and technology consultancy working at the intersection of data science and social science, with the mission of making the world a better place. The findings below aim to inform a wider project focusing on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking in Conflict.

Objective

To explore the trends in the recruitment of child soldiers in Colombia and determine the factors that make them more vulnerable to join armed groups.

Methodology

Raw data was obtained from the Colombian Ministries of Ordinary and Transitional Justice. The first step consisted in translating, cleaning, harmonising and appending two datasets in order to build a unified data source, followed by an exploratory analysis in Excel.

The second step involved using Python to examine the relationship between a) children's socio-economic and demographic variables (e.g. their age, gender and activities prior to recruitment), and b) recruitment-related variables, such as the motivation to join the illegal armed group and modality of entry (forced or voluntary).

Results

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of children that joined for either economic reasons, or for family or political violence according to their age at the time of recruitment (which ranges from 7 to 17 years). The total number of cases is 517.
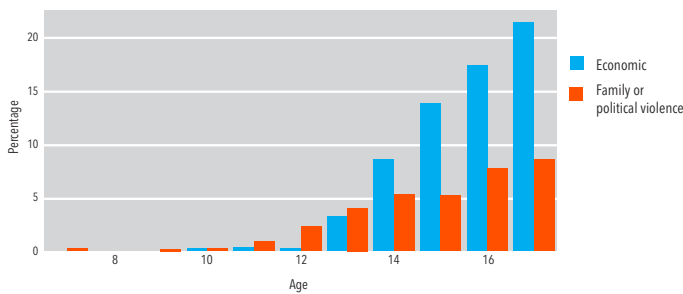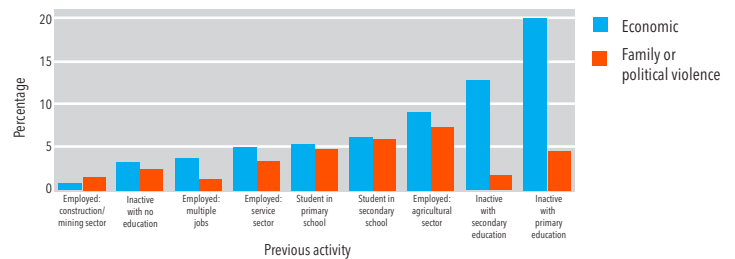

Figure 1: Recruited Children By Age Broken Down By Motivation To Join.

There appears to be an evident association between recruitment age and economic motivation: as the age of the child increases, so does the percentage of recruitments that were driven by economic reasons. For children aged 13 and below, joining for economic reasons is less prevalent, and the influence of family or political violence is behind the recruitment of most of the children.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of children that joined either for economic reasons or because of family and political violence, broken down by their activity prior to being recruited. The total number of valid cases is 448.

Figure 2: Recruited Children By Previous Activity Broken Down By Motivation To Join.

The most apparent feature is how the economically driven recruitments are the most prevalent among inactive children with primary or secondary education. These children, who occupy the top two positions in the chart, had attended school at some point but subsequently dropped out and were not active at the time of recruitment. Interestingly enough, the pattern is the opposite for full time students of either primary or secondary school: they occupy the fourth and fifth places and are almost equally influenced by economic needs and family or political violence.

Inactive children who dropped out of school may be the most vulnerable, being in a situation where securing an income is more urgent. Full time students, on the contrary, might be more reliant on school achievements to secure a more promising future for themselves in their adult life and might be less prone to interrupt their education to earn money in an armed group.

Conclusions

The high prevalence of economically-driven voluntary recruitments among late teenagers is particularly striking. In Colombia, the illicit drug trade generates a huge revenue and there is a lack of state support to guarantee an acceptable living standard. These circumstances render the option of joining an illegal armed group more economically viable than most other legal ways to make a living. Hence, the enlistment of children can be seen as "voluntary", but not free.

Key Skills Learnt

Becoming a Data Analyst Intern has proven to be a highly positive and truly enriching experience. I have become very proficient in the use of **Excel,** and getting involved with **Python** programming software has led me to being very optimistic about using its tools for my upcoming dissertation.

In addition, using the **Jira Project Planning** tool has improved my organisational skills. Producing two **blogposts** to share the details of my work with the rest of the team has given me the confidence to write in styles different from the academic writing that I usually adhere to at university.

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