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MEAC Findings Report 25

Recidivism Risks in the “Differential Assistance” Process for People Exiting Criminal Groups in Colombia

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MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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KEY FINDINGS

- Half the “differential assistance” process participants surveyed said they had been invited to (re)join an armed group since entering the programme and were often offered money.
- When asked why they are motivated to stay in the differential assistance process, most respondents said they were driven by a desire to start their lives again.
- A majority of respondents (58 per cent) reported being very close with their families, but in contrast, they were less likely to have close relationships with friends or have any friends at all.
- Many process participants reported being economically insecure and struggled to cover basic needs.

This Report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of UNU-CPR and UNIDIR’s Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project. MEAC is a multi-donor, multi-partner initiative to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transitions. While the Findings Report benefited from feedback from MEAC’s donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.

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Background

About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably, without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNU-CPR and UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. The MEAC project and accompanying case studies are supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; the UN Development Programme (UNDP); and the International Organization for Migration (IOM); and is being run in partnership with the Secretariat of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience; UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); UNICEF; and the World Bank.

About this Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict prevention, conflict transitions, and related interventions into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present short overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses on their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

About this Report

This report is based on data collected as part of original survey research conducted with individuals formerly associated with criminal groups – including FARC dissident groups - who were interviewed between April and September 2022. This survey took place thanks to the cooperation agreement established between MEAC and the Reincorporation and Normalization Agency (ARN by its Spanish acronym) in Colombia; MEAC is grateful to the ARN for its collaboration in this work. The interviews took place in three cities in Colombia - Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali – where the ex-associates were participating in exit programming provided by the Colombian Government. The survey enquired about ex-associate conflict experiences and their transition out of their group and back into civilian life. This report focuses on recidivism risks that may affect their transition to civilian life and the potential for them to return to an armed group or participate in other illegal activities. These findings may be useful to the Government, the UN, and NGO partners working to implement and support the

differential assistance process, and may inform the design and implementation of similar interventions in Colombia in the future. The report ends with an examination of key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

Criminal Groups and Recidivism in Colombia

Overview

As has happened in other contexts, the peace agreement with the FARC-EP in 2016, and the subsequent process of FARC-EP laying down weapons and reincorporating into civilian life, took place against a backdrop of proliferating splinter groups vying with pre-existing and expanding criminal groups for territorial control. The FARC dissident groups splintered off from the FARC-EP either before or after the agreement, as has been discussed in more detail in a separate MEAC report on this topic.¹ In addition to the FARC dissident groups, there are a number of other armed actors such as the 'Pelusos,' the 'Caparros,' and the 'Clan del Golfo' who arose in the wake of previous negotiations in Colombia.

These criminal groups are spoilers to the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement and broader peacebuilding efforts in Colombia. Communities across Colombia are affected by the insecurity caused by these groups, including through forced displacements, forced confinements (in which citizens are not allowed to leave their homes or communities), and child recruitment. This is particularly true in rural areas with a historically weak State presence, especially in the departments of Chocó, Putumayo, Cauca, Nariño, and Arauca. In these regions, criminal groups have tapped into illegal economies such as drug production and trafficking, and have also taken advantage of community vulnerabilities such as poverty. This, combined with their role in killing hundreds of former members of the FARC-EP, led the Secretary-General to call attention to the need for their dismantlement in a June 2022 report.²

The 2016 peace agreement called for increased efforts to reduce insecurity, especially in rural areas. In response, in December 2020, the Duque administration signed into effect Decree 965, which provides an exit pathway or differential assistance process for individuals who leave criminal groups of their own accord or as a result of being captured (i.e. not as a result of the entire group standing

¹Javier Cárdenas, Cristal Downing, Kyle Johnson, Ángela Olaya, and Juanita Vélez, "[Perceptions of FARC Dissident Groups in Colombia: Implications for Future Peace](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 17* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

² United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "[About OCHA Colombia](#)", Accessed 6 June 2022; The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "[Confinamientos en Colombia - Enero a abril 2022](#)", fact sheet, 25 July 2022; United Nations Report of the Secretary-General, "[Report on the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia](#)", United Nations, 27 June 2022, S/2022/513.

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down).³ This pathway is managed by the Reincorporation and Normalization Agency (ARN) and includes a 12-month transition period during which time participants receive basic services, followed by a more comprehensive and longer-term support programme that includes education, health services, and/or housing,⁴ as described in detail in a separate MEAC report.⁵ As of May 2022, 375 people had left criminal groups and joined the differential assistance process, of whom 249 had exited the 'FARC dissident groups,' 112 the 'Clan del Golfo,' eight the 'Caparros,' and six the 'Pelusos.'⁶

This differential assistance process is still in its early stages, and MEAC aims to contribute timely evidence of its impact, as well as identify the factors that could affect its impact, so that ARN practitioners can adjust programming and enhance its effectiveness. One of the most important measures of programme effectiveness is recidivism – the rate at which formerly associated individuals return to illegal activity, including but not limited to rejoining illegal armed groups. Early studies of recidivism amongst ex-combatants highlighted security threats, access to land as a livelihood resource, and poverty as contributing factors.⁷ More recent research in Colombia using data from the long-standing reintegration programme found that ex-combatants from different armed groups found acceptance by family was key to avoiding recidivism. Conversely, the presence of or contact with armed groups was found to correlate with a return to armed activity. Recidivism rates and risks differed by group. For example, former paramilitaries were more economically motivated than former FARC-EP or ELN guerrilla members and were drawn to whatever activity paid the highest wage, even if it meant returning to illegal activity. Ex-guerrillas were more likely to avoid recidivism the higher their educational attainment became.⁸ Another study in Colombia also emphasized the role of family among other social factors, and highlighted dissatisfaction with support programming, real or perceived insecurity, degree of connection to a former armed group, and duration of exposure to support programming as additional factors that determined the likelihood of recidivism.⁹ Given that the differential assistance process has been operating for less than two years, data on recidivism among its participants is not publicly available. MEAC has data on many of these specific areas that are considered to contribute to recidivism and has analysed this data in the present report.

³ Organized Armed Groups (GAO), in accordance with the provisions of Law 1908 of 2018 and Directive 15-2016, are considered to be those that, under the direction of a responsible commander, exercise such control over a part of the territory that it allows them to carry out sustained and concerted military operations (Decree 965 of 2020).

⁴ ARN is the government office that has accompanied and provided permanent advice to those ex-combatants on transition to civilian life in Colombia.

⁵ Javier Cárdenas, Cristal Downing, and Juanita Vélez, "[Security Threats Affecting People Exiting Criminal Groups in Colombia](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 19* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

⁶ Presidencia de la República de Colombia, "Empalme Gobierno Nacional," July 2022.

⁷ Paul Collier, "[Demobilization and Insecurity: A Study in the Economics of the Transition from War to Peace](#)," *Journal of International Development* Vol. 6, No. 3 (June 1994); Bøas Morten and Hatløy Anne, "[Getting In, Getting Out: Militia Membership and Prospects for Re-integration in Post-war Liberia](#)," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* Vol. 46, No. 1 (January 2008); Richard Hill, Gwendolyn Taylor, and Jonathan Temin, "[Would You Fight Again? Understanding Liberian Ex-Combatant Reintegration](#)," Special Report, No. 211 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2008);

⁸ Oliver Kaplan, and Enzo Nussio, "[Explaining Recidivism of Ex-combatants in Colombia](#)," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 62, No. 1 (May 2016).

⁹ Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, "[Return to legality or recidivism of ex-combatants in Colombia: Dimension of the phenomenon and risk factors](#)," Serie Informes No. 22 (Bogotá: Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, 2014).

Findings

The following report provides an overview of risk factors that could increase the likelihood that participants in the differential assistance process return to armed groups and criminal activity. The findings highlighted herein are based on survey data collected between April and September 2022, thanks to cooperation between MEAC and the ARN. MEAC and its implementing research partner in Colombia, Fundación Conflict Responses, conducted a 60-minute survey with a sample of 50 ex-combatants from criminal groups residing in Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali. Respondents were asked a series of questions about their experiences before they entered their respective group, their lives within the group, experiences during the conflict, perceptions of the differential assistance programme, and their well-being. This series of questions was designed to understand how and why ex-members of criminal groups enter the differential assistance process, and to highlight their experiences in and perceptions of the process, as well as other factors that could influence their transition to civilian life.

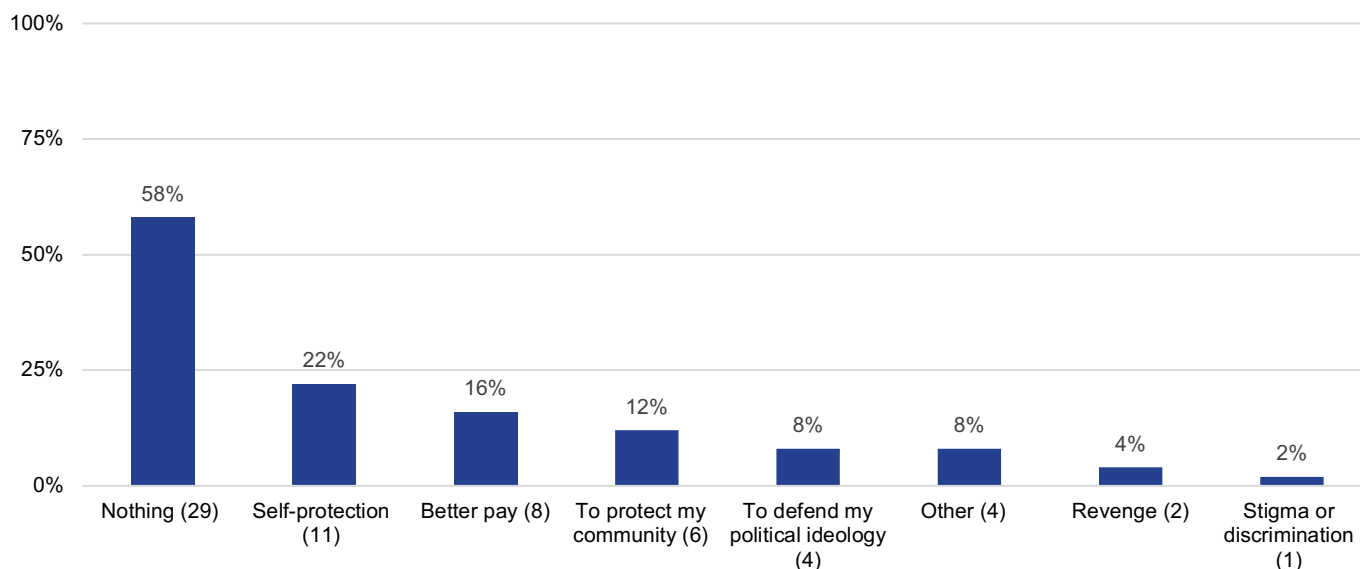
This research is based on a small, hard to access sample and the findings drawn from it are likely influenced by its makeup. The sample was composed mostly of young men between the ages of 18 and 50. Twenty-one of the 50 respondents (42 per cent) self-identified as Afro-Colombian and a small number of other respondents self-identified as indigenous. Most of the respondents were born in the Colombian Pacific region and spent their time in armed groups in various parts of the country before beginning their transition to civilian life. Most had exited the 'Clan del Golfo' (26 people or 52 per cent) or one of the 'FARC dissident groups' (19 people or 38 per cent). Other groups represented in the sample included the 'Pelusos' (three people or 6 per cent) and the 'Caparros' (2 people or 4 per cent).

Possible Motivations to Join an Armed Group in the Future

Recidivism is defined as rejoining an armed group or participating in other illegal activity.¹⁰ As an entry point to discussing possible recidivism risks and, contrastingly, reasons that motivate participants to stay in the differential assistance process, the MEAC survey asked respondents what could motivate them to join an armed group in the future. This multiple-choice question presented respondents with several options to choose from. As can be seen in Figure 1, most respondents (29 people or 58 per cent) reported that nothing would motivate them to join an armed group in the future.

¹⁰ Paul Coller, "[Demobilization and Insecurity: A Study in the Economics of the Transition from War to Peace](#)," *Journal of International Development* Vol. 6, No. 3 (June 1994); Bøas Morten and Hatløy Anne, "[Getting In, Getting Out: Militia Membership and Prospects for Re-integration in Post-war Liberia](#)," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* Vol. 46, No. 1 (January 2008); Richard Hill, Gwendolyn Taylor, and Jonathan Temin, "[Would You Fight Again? Understanding Liberian Ex-Combatant Reintegration](#)," Special Report, No. 211 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2008); Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, "[Return to legality or recidivism of ex-combatants in Colombia: Dimension of the phenomenon and risk factors](#)," Serie Informes No. 22 (Bogotá: Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, 2014).

Figure 1 – What would motivate you to join an armed group in the future? Please select all that apply.



Respondents who admitted that they could be motivated to rejoin an armed group highlighted insecurity as a contributing factor. Eleven of 50 respondents (22 per cent) reported that the need for self-protection would motivate them to return to a group. This reinforces findings featured in a separate MEAC report, which examines how the security threats that participants face in the differential assistance process could increase the risk of recidivism.¹¹ Furthermore, six of 50 respondents (12 per cent) said that they would consider returning in order to protect their community. This is particularly interesting in light of where respondents currently lived. Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali are all places where some criminal groups have influence and therefore may represent a threat to the community.

In order to understand the scope of potential return to an armed group, MEAC asked respondents whether they had been invited to return to an armed group since they exited their previous group. Half of the sample responded positively, confirming that they had been invited to (re)join an armed group.¹² These 25 respondents were asked follow-up questions regarding the nature of the offer; they were asked which group made the offer, if the offer tempted them, and why they decided not to accept it. The majority – 18 of 25 (72 per cent) – reported that they had been offered money as part of the invitation. Furthermore, six respondents said they had been offered a position of power. Interestingly, security and protection were selected infrequently, contrasting with the value placed on such motivations as possible reasons why respondents would rejoin an armed group.

¹¹ Javier Cárdenas, Cristal Downing, and Juanita Vélez, "[Security Threats Affecting People Exiting Criminal Groups in Colombia](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 19* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

¹² It is worth noting here that the actual number of respondents who received such an invitation may be higher than this, as some may have been reluctant to report these invitations for fear of losing benefits.

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In terms of which groups are extending these offers, out of the 25 respondents who said that they had been invited to (re)join an armed group since exiting their previous group, 14 (56 per cent) said that the offer was made by a 'FARC dissident group.' A few others reported that the invitation was made by the 'Clan del Golfo' or AGC, or the ELN, and three stated that they did not know. These invitations did not necessarily come from the former armed group of the respondent who received them. This suggests that armed groups may either target participants in the differential assistance process indiscriminately based on the opportunity to recruit people with experience in armed groups, or target those with knowledge of the group they fight against, which may be useful to their operations. Of those 25 who were approached to (re)join an armed group, 28 per cent were tempted to accept the offer. These figures are comparable to previous studies of potential recidivism in the reintegration process,¹⁴ suggesting that recidivism risk may be similar among the differential assistance population as compared to the reintegration process participants, and therefore, that a similar level of effort should be made to mitigate this risk from this relatively early stage of process implementation.¹³

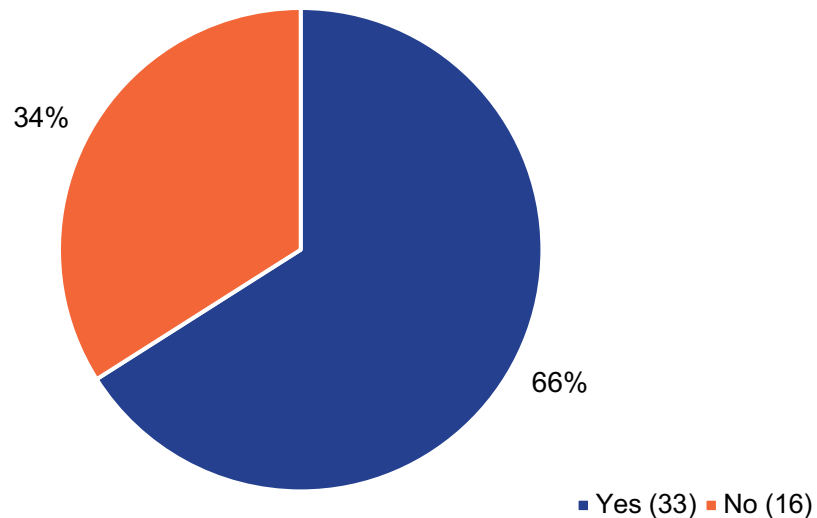
The majority of process participants who were approached reported not being tempted by the invitation (18 of 25 respondents, or 72 per cent). Among the factors that were decisive in their decision to reject the invitation to join an armed group was the idea of remaining 'in legality,' which was the main reason provided by most of the participants (10 of 25 or 40 per cent). Two answer options, one relating to the risk of dying or being injured, and the other to connection with family, were each selected by six respondents, underscoring the importance of both security and social support networks in combating recidivism among individuals who have left armed groups. Among the reasons offered by the other seven respondents were the pay offered and the protection they perceived the armed group could provide.

Perceptions of the Differential Assistance Process

Previous research has found that ex-combatants' sense that the intervention in which they are participating meets their basic needs leads to continued engagement in the programme, which in turn has an impact on recidivism rates – that is to say, the longer they engage, the less likely recidivism becomes.¹⁴ MEAC respondents were therefore asked whether they felt that the differential assistance process has met their needs.

¹³ The 2014 report using ARN data also showed that 24 per cent of former combatants in Colombia's individual reintegration process returned to some illegal activity. MEAC's survey did not ask an equivalent question in the baseline.

¹⁴ Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, [Return to legality or recidivism of ex-combatants in Colombia: Dimension of the phenomenon and risk factors](#), Serie Informes No. 22 (Bogotá: Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, 2014).

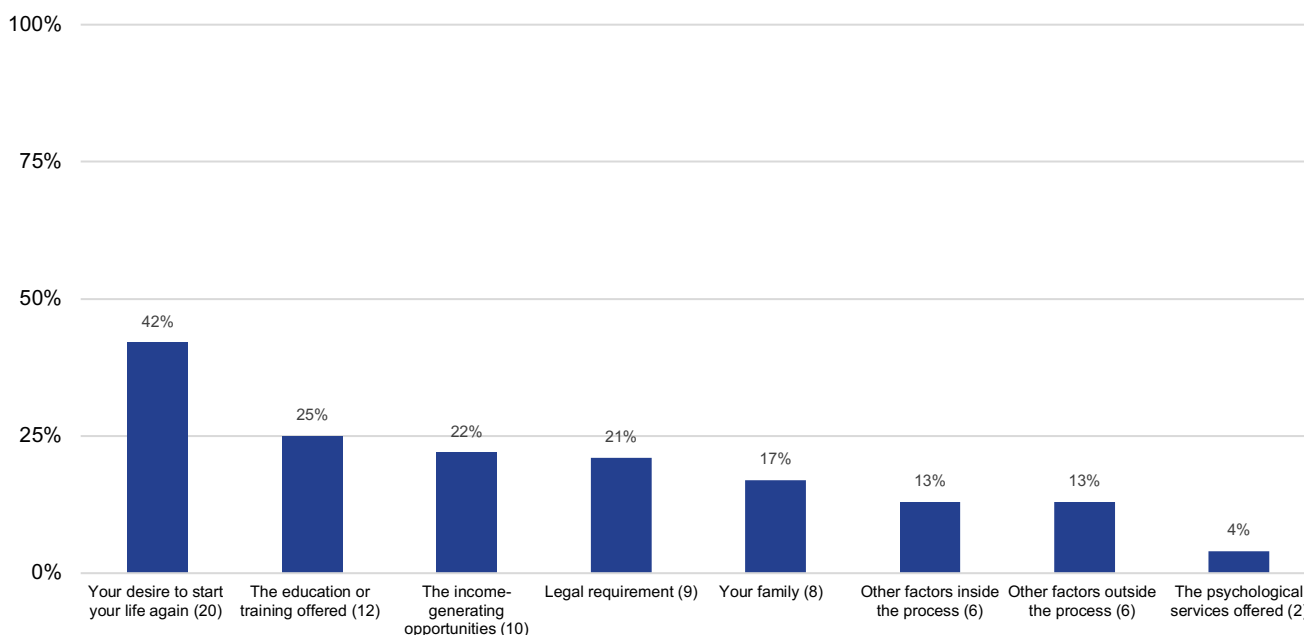
Figure 2 – Do you feel like the differential assistance process has met your needs?

As shown in Figure 2, 33 of the 49 respondents who answered this question¹⁵ (66 per cent) reported that they felt that the differential assistance process does meet their needs, while 16 (34 per cent) stated that it does not. Nonetheless, almost all respondents (47 of the 50, or 94 per cent) reported that they would like to complete the process. This implies that a large portion of those who believe that the process does not meet their needs – at least 14 of them – would still like to complete it. This may be because they believe that there are enough positive aspects of the differential assistance process that outweigh the issue of their needs not being fully met. There may also be factors external to the process that influence their willingness to continue in the process even if it does not meet their needs, such as a perception among some that if they complete it, they will be given amnesty. This expectation was mentioned informally with MEAC researchers in the margins of interviews, and it is one that does not appear firmly grounded in law or practice.

In order to understand the motivations for continued engagement in more detail, MEAC asked about respondents' motivations for staying in the differential assistance process.

¹⁵ One respondent refused to answer the question, so it is not taken into account in these calculations.

Figure 3 – What motivates you to continue in the assistance process?



As Figure 3 shows, 20 of the 48 individuals who responded to this question¹⁶ (42 per cent) wanted to start a new life outside of the conflict, while 12 respondents (25 per cent) said that education and training was a key factor in motivating them to continue their engagement in the process. Income-generating opportunities were important for 10 respondents (or 22 per cent), while nine reported that meeting legal requirements influenced their decision to continue in the process; although, again, this was a misconception of the process. Family was selected as an answer option by eight respondents, and this may reflect the fact that respondents did not have family members who depended on them in such a way that their participation in the process made a difference to their family situation.

Respondents' desire to start their lives again is the dominant reason for why they are motivated to stay in the differential assistance process. They may see the programme as an 'investment' through which they can improve their life, despite the initial 'costs.' Or, there may be other motivations. For example, at least two ex-combatants mentioned that they hoped to leave Colombia and thought that the differential assistance process may assist them in doing so. They both also reported that the monetary benefits provided by the process were insufficient, so part of their motivation for wanting to leave Colombia was to seek high sustainable salaries.

Finally, in order to understand potential exits among process participants, the MEAC survey asked what reasons respondents thought could lead them to leave the process before completing it. Twenty-two respondents of 50 (44 per cent) reported that nothing could lead them to leave the

¹⁶ Two additional individuals refused to answer the question.

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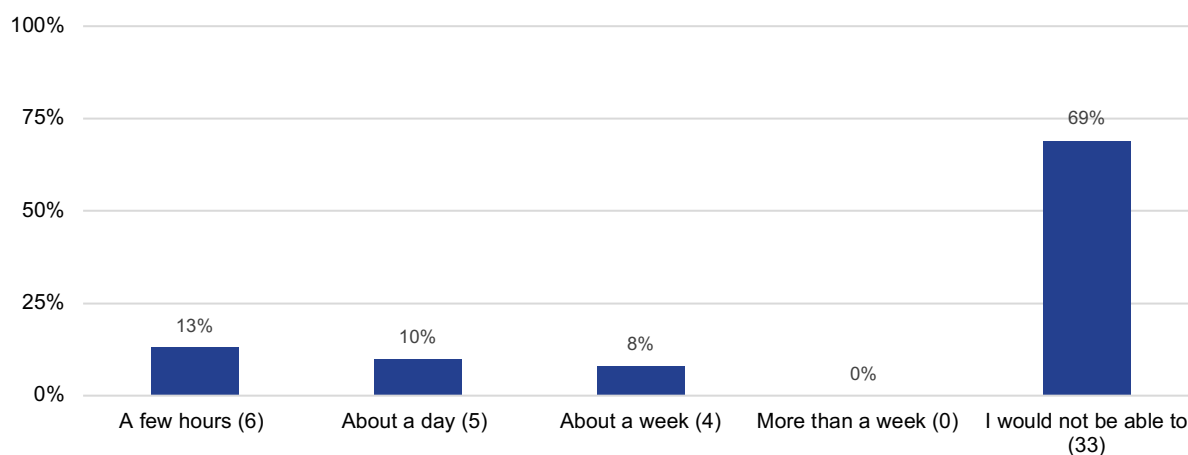
process before completing it. Of those who reported they might be tempted to leave the process, possible reasons included better legal income-generating opportunities outside the process (five respondents out of 28), better security outside the process (five respondents out of 28), and uncertainty about their legal situation (four out of 28).

How one enters the differential process seems to impact the potential of staying in the programme. In a focus group held with ARN professionals in September 2022, some pointed out that there is a difference between differential assistance process participants who leave an armed group because they were captured and those who surrender voluntarily. Based on their experiences working with this population, ARN professionals reported that at the beginning of the process those who were captured showed less interest and less commitment to the process than those who turned themselves in to the military or another State entity. "[The captured ones] barely connect to academic training, they do not find meaning in the process. They feel they are in the wrong place," said one of the officials. This suggests that those who enter the process because they were captured may need specific engagement to increase their commitment to the process and keep them from straying from it, and potentially returning to an armed group that they never wanted to leave. Further research is needed to understand this distinction in more depth.

Relationship with an Armed Group

Research has indicated that social networks are central to both remobilizing armed groups on a collective level, and to facilitating recidivism among individual ex-combatants.¹⁷ Therefore, MEAC asked participants a series of questions that aimed to understand the connections they maintained with their former armed group, or others.

Figure 4 – If you had a friend who wanted to join the group you were part of, how long would it take you to get in touch with someone to help them join?



¹⁷ Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, [Return to legality or recidivism of ex-combatants in Colombia: Dimension of the phenomenon and risk factors](#), Serie Informes No. 22 (Bogotá: Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, 2014); Mateo Vásquez-Cortés, [Peer Effects and Recidivism: Wartime Connections and Criminality among Colombian Ex-combatants](#) (2021).

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As can be seen in Figure 4, the majority of respondents to this question – 33 of 48¹⁸ (or 69 per cent) – stated that they would not be able to get in touch with the armed group of which they were part to help someone join. This lack of a sustained connection would likely hinder their own attempts to remobilize should they decide to rejoin the conflict. Although the survey data suggests that most process participants have cut ties with their previous armed group, it is also possible that some respondents were reluctant to answer truthfully because they feared possible legal repercussions for having reported that they maintained ties with their former groups. Nonetheless, a sizeable minority of respondents – 15 of 48 (31 per cent) – stated that they could contact their former armed group within a few hours to a week. This is significant, as it means that nearly one-third of the former members of criminal groups in the MEAC survey sample could rapidly reconnect with their former armed group, suggesting they could potentially rejoin the conflict quickly, if they so desired.

Beyond institutional connections, the MEAC survey sought to understand whether respondents' social networks also allowed them to maintain connections to individual armed group members, asking respondents 'Are any of your family or friends currently involved in an armed group?' Most – 31 of 50 (or 62 per cent) – reported that they did not have family or friends who were currently involved in an armed group. Nineteen respondents, or 38 per cent, stated that they did have family or friends actively involved in an armed group. Again, this figure suggests that a sizeable portion of participants in the differential assistance process may maintain the kinds of networks that make it hard to fully transition to a civilian existence, and such connections with active combatants has historically been shown to increase the chances of recidivism.

Positive Support Networks in Family and Friends

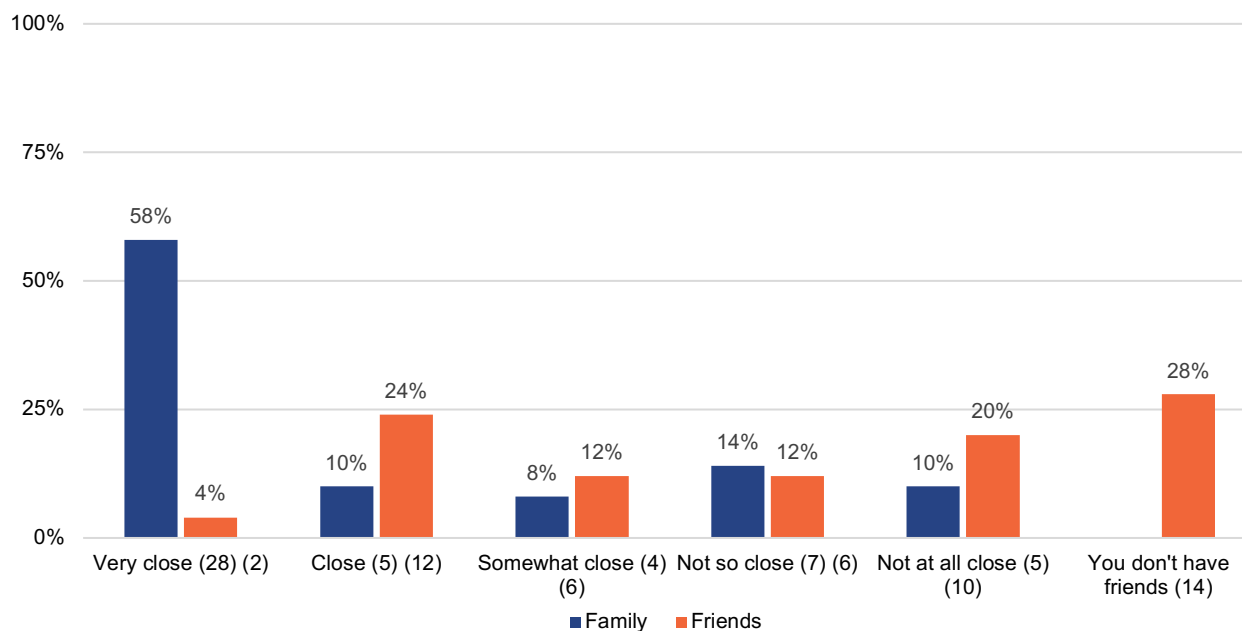
In addition to potentially contributing to recidivism risk, support networks have been found to be a key factor in ensuring that individuals formerly associated with armed groups do not return to illegal activity.¹⁹ For instance, the probability of recidivism decreases if ex-combatants have healthy and strong relationships with their families, as long as the family does not motivate the person to rejoin an armed group and does not engage in any criminal activity.²⁰ To explore different facets of the composition and quality of social networks of people in the differential assistance process, respondents were asked about how close they are today with their family and friends.

¹⁸ One additional respondent refused to answer, and another responded, 'I don't know.'

¹⁹ Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, [Return to legality or recidivism of ex-combatants in Colombia: Dimension of the phenomenon and risk factors](#), Serie Informes No. 22 (Bogotá: Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, 2014); Oliver Kaplan, and Enzo Nussio, "[Explaining Recidivism of Ex-combatants in Colombia](#)," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 62, No. 1 (May 2016).

²⁰ Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, [Return to legality or recidivism of ex-combatants in Colombia: Dimension of the phenomenon and risk factors](#), Serie Informes No. 22 (Bogotá: Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, 2014).

Figure 5 – Today, how close are you with your family/friends?



As shown in Figure 5, when it comes to their relationship with their families, most respondents reported being very close with their families (28 of the 49 respondents or 58 per cent).²¹ If family members are themselves not associated with the armed group and are supportive of the individual's transition, these close connections have the potential to reinforce the differential assistance process and a participant's transition. Figure 5 shows a different picture of friend networks. Overall, in comparison with the closeness they reported with their families, respondents were less likely to have close friends or friends at all.²² The contrast between respondents' closeness with their family and their closeness with their friends is particularly striking when looking at the answer option 'very close.' Only two respondents said that they were very close with their friends. Furthermore, 14 respondents answered that they do not have any friends at all. This raises questions about respondents' support networks outside of the differential assistance process, since previous research has shown that relationships with friends not involved in criminal activity are key to avoiding recidivism.²³ The respondents may be cutting ties with previous friends because they are involved in criminal activity, or they may be avoiding new friendships out of fear of having to answer questions about their pasts. Whatever the reason, the lack of a positive peer support system could undermine their transition to

²¹ The rest of the respondents were distributed almost equally across the other answer options: five of 49 (10 per cent) said they were close with their family, four said they were somewhat close (8 per cent), seven said they were not so close (14 per cent), and five respondents reported that they were not at all close with their family (10 per cent). One respondent refused to answer the question about closeness with family.

²² 14 of 50 respondents who answered the question (28 per cent) stated that they do not have any friends, 10 (20 per cent) reported being not at all close with their friends, and six respondents (12 per cent) reported being not so close with their friends.

²³ Mateo Vásquez-Cortés, *Peer Effects and Recidivism: Wartime Connections and Criminality among Colombian Ex-combatants* (2021).

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civilian life. For those who cannot find a sense of community and companionship in their new location, there are concerns that they may turn back to armed actors to find social fulfillment.

Not all relationships are equally important. Having someone to mentor and guide you – especially during a difficult transition – is likely important for staying in the differential assistance process. The MEAC survey asked respondents the following question: ‘In the past month was there someone who gave advice or assisted you in making plans for the future?’ The survey also asked a follow-up question: ‘Who gave you advice or assisted you?’ Most respondents – 42 out of 50 (84 per cent) – reported that they had received advice or assistance from someone in the past month, most often from a family member or a romantic partner (37 respondents or 88 per cent), from a friend (14 respondents), or someone their neighbourhood, place of work, or school (6 respondents). Notably, 18 of 42 respondents (43 per cent) reported that they had received advice or assistance from their assistance professional, suggesting that ARN professionals do have an important role in guiding and supporting process participants and therefore helping them to avoid recidivism. These results reinforce the other findings that those exiting armed groups are often heavily reliant on family members for support. The primacy of the family could be the result of relocation and security concerns that lead to a more limited social circle. This is reinforced by another MEAC report, which found that disengaged individuals who were associated with armed groups as children relied on their families after they left as they were afraid that interactions with community members or friends undermined their security and resulted in stigma.²⁴ This data shows the potential role that family could play as a social support network – assuming the connections are positive, and do not enable criminal activity – in reducing the risk of recidivism. The findings also suggest that strengthening other social relationships, including those with ARN professionals, could be useful in broadening support structures that could dissuade re-entry to armed groups or other criminal activity.

Although most respondents did have support networks, eight out of 50 respondents (16 per cent) reported not having anyone to provide them advice or support. This may be cause for concern as social support has been highlighted as a key factor for a successful transition to civilian life.²⁵ For participants who do not have social networks to support them during the differential assistance process, the ARN professionals may take on extra importance. There may be benefit in working to help low-networked process participants form relationships that can help support them as they transition to civilian life. This could happen within the differential assistance process itself if deemed safe; as long as there are no security concerns related to participants with similar experiences being brought together to provide mutual support.

²⁴ Cristal Downing, Ángela Olaya, and Sofía Rivas, ["It's Like Starting From Scratch": Informal Support Accessed by Individuals who Disengaged from Armed Groups as Children in Colombia](#), *MEAC Findings Report 21* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

²⁵ Oliver Kaplan and Enzo Nussio, ["Community counts: The social reintegration of ex-combatants in Colombia"](#), *Conflict Management and Peace Science* Vol. 35, No. 2 (March 2018); Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, [Return to legality or recidivism of ex-combatants in Colombia: Dimension of the phenomenon and risk factors](#), Serie Informes No. 22 (Bogotá: Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, 2014).

Economic Stability and the Ability to Fulfil Basic Needs

Livelihoods and income generation have been identified as key factors in full and sustained transitions to civilian life. Without a steady and predictable income, it is difficult for people formerly associated with armed groups to support themselves and fulfil their, and their families', basic needs, raising the possibility that they may fall into poverty and return to an armed group or other illegal activity in search of financial sustenance. MEAC therefore asked a series of questions that aimed to understand the economic situation of individuals in the differential assistance process, and their perceptions of basic needs fulfillment. Overall, 36 of 50 respondents (72 per cent) reported that they currently had a way to make a living, with only 13 (26 per cent) reporting that they were unemployed.²⁶ As stable income or employment is essential for sustaining the transition to civilian life, MEAC followed-up by asking whether individuals who reported having a job had a formal contract. Beneficiaries in the differential assistance process were more likely to have informal employment – with employment contract rates 14 percentage points lower than the national average.²⁷ These measures indicate that individuals in the differential assistance process may rely on more informal, less steady employment arrangements than the general population, increasing the insecurity of their economic situation, and in turn, raising the risk that alternate income sources could become more attractive, including from armed group wages and spoils. Finally, irrespective of formalization of employment, it is also clear that a significant minority of process participants are not making much money. Nineteen of 50 respondents (38 per cent) reported that they earned less than the minimum wage in Colombia (1,000,000 pesos per month or approximately USD\$220), which is comparable to the 43 per cent of the national population who receive less than the minimum wage.²⁸ Economic instability among differential assistance process participants is important to consider, given that financial incentives were often cited as a possible reason respondents might be motivated to return to armed groups (see Figure 1 where eight of 50 – or 16 per cent – selected this answer option).

Next, MEAC sought to understand whether respondents' employment was sufficient to provide for their basic needs. Of those who had employment, half reported that their income allowed them to cover their basic needs; another half reported that it did not. But even those who said their income allowed them to meet their basic needs shared challenges. One respondent, for example, reported that he was trying very hard to find a job that lasted more than a few days, and every month was very worried about paying rent and meeting his families' needs. The ARN stipend of 480,000 pesos was not enough to meet his rent of 600,000, so his need for employment was acute. Towards the end of each month, if he had not yet earned what he needed for the rent, he would leave the city where he lived and seek work on a farm for a few days, then return to pay the rent. He did not feel that the situation was sustainable and was considering leaving the city and possibly the differential

²⁶ One respondent was unsure how to answer and selected 'I don't know.' Although a very small sample, this is roughly the same as the national unemployment rate which is currently at 11 per cent. See Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, "[Information October 2022](#)," accessed 8 December 2022.

²⁷ 26 of the 36 respondents with jobs (72 per cent) did not have a contract; this compares to 58 per cent of the Colombian employed population who work in the informal sector or do not have contracted employment. See Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, "[Mercado Laboral Nueva medición de informalidad laboral Julio 2022](#)," presentation, accessed 8 December 2022.

²⁸ Infobae, "[El 43,1 % de los trabajadores recibe menos del salario mínimo en Colombia](#)," 5 December 2022.

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assistance process in order to seek better paid and more regular work, but was anxious that if he did this, he would be at greater risk of being identified and receiving security threats from his former armed group and would miss the benefits of the assistance process.²⁹ In another example, a respondent who reported that the stipend was *not* enough to meet his rent of 600,000 pesos, stated that he knew of several other participants in the differential assistance process who used their stipends to buy pistols or revolvers to work as hitmen in order to pay for their basic needs.³⁰ That same participant, while struggling to find and maintain a formal job, decided to take a job infiltrating the armed group of which he was previously a member, to provide information for the military. He was required to share the specific coordinates of mid-level commanders so that the security forces could then target them. He felt that the job was very risky; if he was found out, the armed group would kill him on the spot. Part of the reason he accepted the job was a promise from the military that if he fulfilled his part, he would be offered a chance to live in the United States with his family – although it's unclear whether this promise could or would in fact be fulfilled.

To better understand how factors in respondents' daily lives could contribute to recidivism risk, the MEAC survey explored respondents' ability to fulfil their basic needs, such as food or housing. With regard to the former, the survey asked, 'Over the past week, have you gone hungry even if only for one day?' Approximately half (26 of 50 respondents) reported that they had gone hungry during the week before data collection. Describing this problem in more depth, one respondent explained that since he entered the differential assistance process, he had not been able to find a stable source of income from which to provide for his wife and six children. He explicitly mentioned being constantly hungry. This data is cause for concern, as it indicates that around half of the population in this process may suffer food insecurity, which may make them more vulnerable to the offers of higher salaries or basic needs support provided by armed or criminal groups.

There are signs that process participants often did not have a stable residence, which could reflect security threats or an inability to regularly pay for housing. When asked what type of housing they lived in over the last month,³¹ almost half (48 per cent) lived in two or more types of housing, suggesting many process participants do not have a stable residence, which in turn is likely to make stable employment more difficult. One explanation for why respondents moved around frequently was due to security threats against them, as addressed below and in a separate MEAC findings report on this topic.³² Altogether, these findings show that respondents were in many cases unable to meet their basic needs or were otherwise living in precarious situations, which suggests a heightened vulnerability to re-recruitment and recidivism.

²⁹ Interview with differential process participant, July 2022.

³⁰ Interview with differential process participant, October 2022.

³¹ The answer options were: 'hotel,' 'boarding house,' 'apartment,' 'house,' 'room,' 'farm,' 'traditional ethnic housing' or 'other.'

³² Javier Cárdenas, Cristal Downing, and Juanita Vélez, "[Security Threats Affecting People Exiting Criminal Groups in Colombia](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 19* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

Security Threats

Threats from armed groups and other security risks – both real and perceived – are known to affect the likelihood that individuals in reintegration processes return to armed groups.³³ MEAC asked a series of questions that aimed to understand the types of security threats that respondents in the differential assistance process experienced, in order to assess the possible impact of insecurity on recidivism, and on their participation in the differential assistance process more broadly. These findings are outlined in detail in a MEAC findings report on this topic and are included here only in summary form.³⁴

Of the 50 respondents in the MEAC survey, 30 (60 per cent) had received threats since entering the differential assistance process. Almost all believed that the threats had come from the armed group from which they had exited, suggesting that the group might have been retaliating for defection or attempting to prevent individuals from sharing information about their former groups with State entities. In fact, respondents expressed concern that requests for information from the military and other institutions put them at heightened risk of threats. As people are known to join armed groups in search of personal safety – and in fact, 11 of 50 respondents (22 per cent) said that they could be motivated to return to an armed group for self-protection – this finding could indicate a need for increased protective measures for individuals in the differential process, thereby reducing the need to return to armed groups.

In terms of the effects these threats have on respondents' daily lives and transitions to civilian life, of those who received threats, 60 per cent (18 out of 30 who received threats) stated that they had changed their place of residence due to security issues. In other cases, respondents indicated that they limited their movements to protect themselves. Eleven of the 30 threatened respondents stated that the threats negatively affected access to the differential assistance process and their ability to meet with ARN professionals. As exposure to programming has been shown to decrease the likelihood of recidivism,³⁵ this impact also indicates a need to address security threats to this population as a way to address potential recidivism risk.

The vulnerability to re-recruitment and recidivism among the participants of interventions that aim to support the transition to civilian life is affected by multiple factors, including aspects internal to the process itself, such as the ability of the process to meet their needs, and aspects outside the process, such as the frequency with which armed groups invite participants to join them and the social networks that participants maintain. It is important that processes such as differential assistance counter these external factors; MEAC findings suggest they may be prevalent in the lives of process participants and could therefore increase the likelihood of participants returning to armed groups or other illegal or criminal activity.

³³ Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, [Return to legality or recidivism of ex-combatants in Colombia: Dimension of the phenomenon and risk factors](#), Serie Informes No. 22 (Bogotá: Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, 2014).

³⁴ Javier Cárdenas, Cristal Downing, and Juanita Vélez, "[Security Threats Affecting People Exiting Criminal Groups in Colombia](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 19* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

³⁵ Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, [Return to legality or recidivism of ex-combatants in Colombia: Dimension of the phenomenon and risk factors](#), Serie Informes No. 22 (Bogotá: Fundación Ideas Para la Paz, 2014).

Policy and Programmatic Implications

Participants in the differential assistance process have, in most cases, made an important first step in moving away from illegal activity by defecting from their group and turning themselves in to the State. In other cases, in which they entered the process as a result of capture, their continued engagement represents an opportunity. In all cases, participation in the process indicates some sort of willingness to attempt a transition to civilian life. That said, the MEAC findings presented in this report suggest that differential assistance process participants may be vulnerable to re-recruitment efforts or the draw of criminal activity for multiple reasons, both inside and outside the process itself. In order to counter the influence that these factors could have, institutions involved in the design and implementation of this, and future processes, may consider strengthening several areas of service provision.

One area in which the process could be strengthened to capitalize on participants' willingness 'to start a new life' is income generation and education. These were mentioned as motivations to stay in the process, but the findings also suggest that in the area of economic stability, in particular, the process' offering on its own – or even when supplemented by employment income – may not be sufficient to cover the basic needs of participants and their families. To reduce the draw of recruitment campaigns and illegal activity, the process could assess its support packages to determine if they are sufficiently well calibrated to ensure participants are securely housed and able to find stable, sufficiently paid employment.

In terms of factors outside the process that could have an impact on the likelihood of recidivism, security was highlighted as an issue for many participants, as described both above and in a separate report on this topic. Indeed, self-protection was the second-most selected answer option when respondents were asked what could lead them to rejoin an armed group in the future. This indicates a need for strengthened protection mechanisms to ensure that process participants feel that the State is providing for their safety and can respond effectively in the case of threats against them. If they do not feel protected, they may feel they have no other choice but to join an armed group for protection.

With regard to social support networks, which can promote sustained transitions to civilian life, the MEAC data suggests that support could be strengthened in two main areas. The first is the family, which many participants noted was the source of their closest relationships. When those close family bonds are positive and help promote defection and transitions to civilian life, the differential assistance process should seek to support and leverage them. The second area is social relationships outside family, particularly with friends. Respondents in the MEAC sample generally reported few friendships. Given, however, that friendships with non-affiliated individuals could also potentially help support positive outcomes, the differential assistance process could look to foster them amongst participants and those outside the programme. This could be done in numerous ways including through sports and other cultural activities, as well as psychosocial support to help those who have a tendency to avoid friendships.

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The findings presented herein show that some differential process participants maintain connections with armed groups. These links could put them at increased risk of recruitment campaigns and offers by armed groups. It is an obvious but underemphasized point that this continued connection and proximity to armed groups is only possible because these groups persist. Efforts to dismantle or stand down these groups using various approaches – including the suggested ‘Total Peace’ strategy – are therefore important to complement individual defection programmes like the differential assistance process. A strategy that has mutually reinforcing components like these could help redress both individual-level vulnerability to recidivism as well as larger peacebuilding efforts in Colombia.

The findings outlined in this report highlight points of vulnerability to re-recruitment and other recidivism risks for current participants in the differential assistance process. Implementation of the process has expanded and strengthened since its initiation in December 2020. The data and participant experiences presented herein could be useful in further tailoring the process to make it as robust as possible in supporting full and sustained transitions to civilian life for its participants.

