Ex-combatants and post-conflict violence:
Are yesterday's villains today's principal threat?

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Demobilized combatants are generally portrayed as threat to security in post-conflict countries. In this article, I assess how much ex-combatants actually contribute to violence in the case of demobilized paramilitaries and guerrilla deserters in Colombia. I present evidence that puts the assumed ex-combatant-threat nexus in perspective. First, participation of ex-combatants in violence in Colombia is too small to unsettle overall criminal dynamics. Second, ex-combatants grow older and less interested in violence as well as more interested in family life. And third, criminal organizations that emerged after the paramilitary demobilization have continuously replaced ex-combatants and quickly relied on a new generation of recruits. An obsession with the ex-combatant category may inhibit more focused attention on key populations with high damage potential, like mid-ranking ex-combatants, and a broader inclusion of marginalized youth vulnerable to recruitment. Also, my analysis shows that the continuity of war economies is largely independent from whether ex-combatants or other people exploit criminal rents. Overly focusing on persons, like ex-combatants, instead of dealing with malignant structures might thus produce futile results.

Introduction

In many post-conflict countries around the world, ex-combatants – the human resources of war – are seen as the main danger for security. This view makes sense since most of them have skills in the use of violence and may apply them again after demobilization. Also, there are many examples that support it: some ex-combatants re-organized armed groups in Sierra Leone and the Republic of Congo (Themnér 2013), others joined armed groups in their own country (Zyck 2009) or in neighboring countries as mercenaries (Debos 2008), some became involved in organized crime (Human Rights Watch 2014; McMullin 2004; Moratti and Sabic-El-Rayess 2009), petty crime (Mashike 2007; Subedi 2014) and vigilantism (Maringira 2015; International Crisis Group 2013), and still others were responsible for domestic violence (Londoño and Ramírez 2007). It seems thus granted to generalize and say that ex-combatants are among the principal threats to post-conflict security.[2]

However, in this article I argue that the violence perpetrated by ex-combatants, which underlies the generalized threat perception, is smaller than assumed, due to three reasons. First, numbers: among the pool of potentially violent people in a given post-conflict country (the human resources of *post*-conflict), ex-combatants usually make up only a small fraction and their contribution to overall levels of violence is often overestimated. Second, age: ex-combatants grow older and thus less attracted to violence over time. A younger generation of potentially violent people might be more prone to repeat the mistakes ex-combatants made earlier. Third, personnel turnover: the turnover of violent organizations is high and even though

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[2] While security threats are always constructed (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde 1998), in this article I am less interested in the process of threat construction as in the underlying reality of ex-combatant involvement in violent activities.

certain dissident groups of demobilized militias and insurgencies might continue to exploit the rents of existing war economies, the share of ex-combatants in their ranks will fade over the years.

As a collateral effect of an overestimated and generalized perception of ex-combatants as key threat, more serious problems of post-conflict countries may become invisible or difficult to handle in an effective way. Other populations like marginalized youth might be more vulnerable to the opportunities provided by illegal organizations than ex-combatants, but rarely receive systematic and timely attention in post-conflict societies. Also, while most ex-combatants may be harmless, a certain subpopulation of ex-combatants, usually former mid- and high-level commanders, has a high damage potential. However, reintegration programming does little to keep those ex-combatants out of troubles and targets mostly former rank-and-file members.

Moreover, broader structural policies focusing on economic recovery (Collier et al. 2003), community development and participation (King and Samii 2014; Kaplan and Nussio 2015), institution-building (Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein 2009; Le Billon 2001; Paris 2004), and the management of war economies (Ballentine and Nitzschke 2005; Kurtenbach and Rettberg 2015) might receive less attention, where politicians and citizens single out ex-combatants as scapegoat for all sorts of post-conflict problems. Population-based approaches, like focusing on ex-combatants, might be problematic per se due to their discriminating nature (Munive and Jakobsen 2012; Söderström 2013b). But population-based approaches will continue to exist, thus we should at least have a clear understanding of the reasons why we are focusing on a specific population.

Post-conflict processes and their principal actors vary according to each context. In this article, I analyze the potential security threat emanating from ex-combatants in a case where it is most likely that they engage in crime and violence after demobilization. In Colombia, criminal opportunities abound, a culture of violence persists and even a return to armed conflict has been a possibility for disgruntled ex-combatants who joined the fight for opportunistic rather than ideological reasons (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008). This is especially true for former paramilitary (AUC) members who demobilized between 2003 and 2006.[3] The AUC itself has been highly involved in criminal activities. Even internally, its members referred to a large number of its leaders as drug lords (*traquetos*) (Anónimo 2007). And often, former AUC members in Colombia have been equated with the members of criminal follower organizations of paramilitary groups.

In order to analyze whether yesterday's villains are today's principal threat, I make use of a host of data points from different sources that I have collected over the past years, including official and non-official documents about the reintegration process, interviews with ex-combatants and key informants, and a survey with ex-combatants conducted by the Fundación Ideas para la Paz.[4]

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[3] Even during ongoing conflict activities, Colombia has experimented with several post-conflict policies, like disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), victim reparations, transitional justice, historical memory-building, demining etc. (Rettberg 2012).

[4] Documents include newspaper articles, reports from the Colombian Reintegration Agency, the Police, and from a series of institutions and NGOs overseeing the DDR process in Colombia, and academic studies by fellow researchers. Interview material was mainly collected for my doctoral dissertation – 68 interviews mostly with former paramilitary members, described at length in Nussio (2012). These interviews open a window into the ex-combatants' world. Also, I interviewed a large number of key observers such as public officials from the Police, the Military, the Attorney General's Office and different governmental bodies, NGO workers, church representatives, officials of international organizations like the Organization of American States and the United Nations and community leaders in Bogotá, Medellín, Tierralta, Montería, Santa Marta, Ciénaga, Villavicencio, Cúcuta and Florencia. This interview material provides key background for my analysis. The ex-combatant survey with 1485 participants was conducted by the Fundación Ideas para la Paz in 2008. It is used to illustrate

In the remainder of this article, I first introduce the literature on ex-combatants as threat in post-conflict societies. Second, I describe the Colombian case of ex-combatants, violence and their perception in Colombian society. Third, I analyze the three core arguments that lead to my conclusion that the ex-combatants' weight in post-demobilization violence is overestimated: numbers, age and personnel turnover. Fourth, I argue that the oversized threat perception of ex-combatants makes us blind for other populations like marginalized youth and hinders a more focused effort on specific ex-combatants with a high damage potential. Fifth, I conclude by pointing to new research avenues and to future demobilization processes in Colombia.

Literature on ex-combatants as threat to security

In most post-conflict societies, the general population looks at ex-combatants with fear and distrust (Denov and Marchard 2014; McFee 2016; McMullin 2013; Subedi 2014).[5] Early practitioners' case studies and more recent guidelines see disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) as a tool to overcome the threat that ex-combatants pose to security (Colletta, Kostner, and Wiederhofer 1996; United Nations 2006; Stockholm Initiative 2006; CCDDR 2009). Certain academic studies seem to support this generalized suspicion of ex-combatants as persistent security threat (Maringira 2015; Muggah 2009) and various scholars have tried to identify the reasons that lead ex-combatants to take up arms again or dedicate themselves to otherwise illegal activities (Bøås and Hatløy 2008; Collier 1994; FIP 2014; Hill, Taylor, and Temin 2008; Kaplan and Nussio 2016). Some have even found that ex-combatants are a key risk factor for recurring war (Haer and Böhmelt 2015; Walter 2004; Bara 2015).

However, a large literature has questioned the underlying assumption of some of this literature, namely that combatants go through a generalized "brutalization" that is difficult to revert. Fogarty and Killingray (2015, 106) studied former servicemen of colonial empires after the end of the first world war and found that "such fears [of brutalization] were largely misplaced". A growing literature about Northern Ireland even shows that ex-combatants are highly involved in community reconstruction processes inhibiting violence (Clubb 2014) and as leaders of conflict transformation (McEvoy and Shirlow 2009; see also Dwyer 2012; Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood 2015). In Uganda, Blattman found that ex-combatants are more likely than their peers to participate in political processes (Blattman 2009; see also Söderström 2013a; Ugarriza 2013). Munive (2014) highlights that ex-combatants in South Sudan are able to employ themselves without the help of a reintegration program, thus displaying more economic independence than often assumed. And even the feared networks of ex-combatants frequently serve positive purposes. Ex-combatants use them much like non-ex-combatants as informal networks which help them to get an income or simply to socialize (Utas, Themnér, and Lindberg 2014; de Vries and Wiegink 2011; Zyck 2009). In fact, Themnér (2015) found that better organized networks are less of a threat to post-conflict Liberia and are less easily remobilized.

To sum up, ex-combatants are a hotly debated topic not only among the general public of post-conflict societies, but also the practitioners' community and the scholars interested in this field, especially when it comes to security. While practitioners often justify the introduction of DDR policies with a discourse that equates ex-combatants with a security threat, a more nuanced picture emerges from the review of existing scholarly literature.

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general characteristics of ex-combatants in Colombia. This survey is described at length in Kaplan and Nussio (2015).

[5] Exceptions might include cases where ex-combatants are seen as liberators or heroes, as for example the members of the Kosovo Liberation Army or the Free Aceh Movement.

Ex-combatants and their perception in Colombia

There is a long history of demobilizations in Colombia. At least since the civil war called La Violencia, which ended in the 1950s, combatants of non-state armed factions have disarmed and reintegrated into society. More recent examples include the demobilization of various guerrilla groups in the early 1990s, including the 19th of April Movement (M-19), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) and other smaller insurgencies and paramilitary units (CNMH 2015).

Since the beginning of the Uribe government in 2002, the promotion of individual demobilization (or desertion) of guerrilla members has become a key counterinsurgency strategy. At the same time, the paramilitary groups that largely formed in the 1980s and 1990s (Romero 2003), responsible for most human rights violations in the recent conflict history (CNMH 2013), entered a negotiation process with the government and demobilized 31.671 members between 2003 and 2006 (Alto Comisionado para la Paz 2006). The Peace and Justice Law covered the demobilized members of the paramilitary groups which were a loose federation under the banner of the United Self-Defense Forces (AUC). Paramilitary leaders responsible for crimes against humanity received a prison sentence of up to eight years in exchange for telling the truth about their crimes and repairing their victims (Pizarro and Valencia 2009).[6]

Since 2006, the High Counsellor for Reintegration (ACR – today Colombian Reintegration Agency) is in charge of the reintegration process of the demobilized population.[7] A personalized reintegration route including psychosocial attention, education and vocational training was designed to help ex-combatants encounter a sustainable lifestyle. The participation in this program is voluntary but a financial incentive coupled with attendance of reintegration activities should attract the ex-combatants' interest. According to the ACR[8], a total of 57,907 members of non-state armed groups demobilized between 2003 and April 2016. During the existence of the program, 49,012 entered the reintegration program, of which 13,354 finished their process and 16,728 were still in the process in 2016. Others are either absent or left the process due to different reasons – including more than 3600 who died. Among the reintegration process participants, 74% have an employment, although most of them in the informal sector.

The Colombian reintegration program is seen as one of the most successful and professionally managed worldwide (see for example Rohrlich 2014). However, Colombia represents an untypical case since reintegration has been going on during war and has thus a counterinsurgent component (similar to the Philippines, Iraq and Afghanistan). Also, Colombia is by far the richest of all DDR countries and has been capable to assume full institutional responsibility, while most other DDR programs are to a large extent externally funded.

Several studies have looked at the effect of the collective AUC demobilization on violence in Colombia overall (Bello 2009; Gutiérrez Sanín and González Peña 2013; Howe 2012; J. Restrepo and Muggah 2009) and in certain regions (CNMH 2015; Krakowski 2015; Massé et al. 2010; Munévar and Nussio 2009; Nussio and Howe 2014). Depending on the scale of analysis, these studies come to different conclusions. Early national-level gains in different violence indicators – like homicide – are contrasted with hugely varying regional dynamics. Over a longer period of time, there seems to be no relationship between the diminishing

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[6] In my analysis, I will mostly focus on the collectively demobilized paramilitary fighters and less on the individually demobilized former guerrilla members.

[7] The recent Colombian DDR process has been widely analyzed (CNMH 2015; E. M. Restrepo and Bagley 2011; Villarraga 2013; Casas-Casas and Guzmán-Gómez 2010; Nussio 2011b; Guáqueta 2007; Derks, Rouw, and Briscoe 2011; Theidon 2007; Ribetti 2009; Palou and Méndez 2012). Local experiences of reintegration in Medellín have received particular attention (Carranza-Franco 2014; Rozema 2008; Palou and Llorente 2009).

[8] Numbers were retrieved from the ACR webpage (June 15, 2016): http://www.reintegracion.gov.co/es/la-reintegracion/Paginas/cifras.aspx

homicides since 2003 and the demobilization process, since both demobilization and non-demobilization areas experience the same underlying trend (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Homicide rates in Colombia, 1997-2010
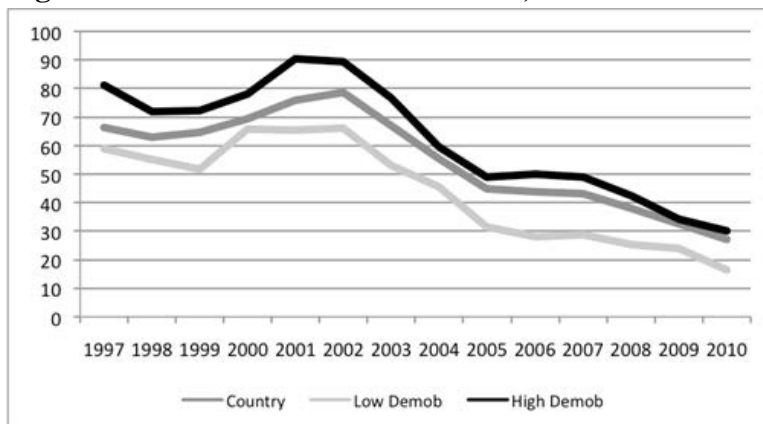
Source: Nussio and Howe (2014, 5)

While the overall effect of the DDR process on violence is difficult to identify, the AUC demobilization gave rise to a transformation of violence and more specifically speaking to a transformation of violent actors in Colombia. Reports about small dissident factions, reorganizing demobilized people and newly emerging armed groups started soon after the demobilization process ended (CNRR 2007).[9] While these groups have received their income mostly from drug-trafficking, extortion and illegal mining, their relationship to demobilized paramilitaries is debated (Massé et al. 2010).

Some observers call them "neoparamilitaries" (Granada, Restrepo, and Tobón 2009), others "new illegal armed groups" (International Crisis Group 2012). Human Rights Watch (2010) calls them "inheritors of the paramilitaries", emphasizing the continuity of political violence. According to governmental decree 2374 of 2010, they should be called criminal bands (in its Spanish acronym: BACRIM) devoid of any political agenda. Later, the Ministry of Defense released a new guideline (Directive 15 of 2016) to call them Organized Armed Groups (*Grupos Armados Organizados*).

Independent of the debate about their name, it is clear that these organizations are one of the main threats to security in Colombia, at least according to the former director of the National Police (Semana 2011; see also McDermott 2014). However, my focus in this article is not on criminal organizations but on people, and even if the BACRIM are largely lead by ex-combatants and inherited some of the paramilitary business, most of their members are not ex-combatants, as we shall discuss further below.

The existence of these follower organizations partially explains the negative stereotypes attached to ex-combatants in Colombia. In a survey with members of receiving communities, 41% stated that they fear ex-combatants (CNC 2011). According to the same survey, 82% said that they would not trust an ex-combatant. Similar prejudices are reflected in a national survey (García, Montalvo, and Seligson 2015). Only 24% of survey participants would approve that their children became friends with a FARC ex-combatant. Also, respondents see ex-combatants most often as dangerous (33.6%) and violent (16.4%). Calm (15.1%) or friendly (13.9%) are less commonly selected adjectives to describe them.

Even in Bogotá, a large city with a relatively low proportion of ex-combatants per capita and a low incidence of ex-combatants in crime (Massé et al. 2011), the Fundación Seguridad y

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[9] Different authors have analyzed the phenomenon of new illegal armed groups or BACRIM (Echandía 2013; Castillo 2014; Prieto 2013; CNMH 2015).

Democracia found that 84% of participants in a survey conducted in Bogotá thought that the presence of ex-combatants would increase insecurity (Seguridad y Democracia 2008). In an experiment, Cárdenas et al. (2014) showed that ex-combatants receive lower transfers than victims and other populations if study participants can choose over where to allocate resources.

Ex-combatants themselves frequently complain about stigmatization in their communities and often try to hide their identity, especially on the job market and for security reasons (Denov and Marchard 2014; Nussio 2012; Nussio 2011a; Ugarriza and Mesías 2009). In my own interviews around the country with diverse actors of the NGO world, local authorities, unaffiliated citizens and even among some demobilized combatants themselves (Nussio 2012), ex-combatants were also largely portrayed as one of the principal threats to security in Colombia, despite the efforts of the ACR to show positive reintegration cases. Ex-combatants are aware of these generalizations, as one of my interviewees said: "People don't like demobilized persons, nobody wants to get together with them. Why? Because that guy wants to kill me. It makes people step back."[10] Another interviewee expressed how people in his community look with suspicion upon groups of ex-combatants: "They [residents in the neighborhood] see you hanging around at the corner, and they're saying, 'they're looking who they're going to rob or what are they planning?' They keep an eye on you."[11]

Why the perceived ex-combatant threat is overestimated
In this section, I provide a series of data points from Colombia that put the general perception of ex-combatants as principal threat to security in perspective.

a. Numbers: ex-combatants make a small contribution to crime
If ex-combatants are really one of the principal threats to post-demobilization security, than they should be among the main responsible for crimes and homicides around the country. In fact, ex-combatants have appeared repeatedly in the media as perpetrators and victims of violence, and the public debate has focused on the number of ex-combatants who committed a crime. The term *reincidencia* which can be translated with recidivism is broadly used (Kaplan and Nussio 2016).[12] A recidivism rate for ex-combatants in Colombia is usually calculated for the whole period since 2003 (when the demobilization of paramilitaries began) and increases thus steadily.[13] While in 2010, the CNRR calculated a recidivism rate of 15% (CNRR 2010), more recent and sophisticated estimates by the Fundación Ideas para la Paz reported 24% (FIP 2014).[14] The ACR itself reports a lower recidivism rate (8.3% between 2003 and April 2015), since they only count ex-combatants who have already been judged by a court as proven recidivists and only refer to those who joined the reintegration process. All estimates likely underreport actual recidivism rates since some crimes go unnoticed. According to the ACR, the highest numbers of crimes committed by ex-combatants were registered between 2005 and 2007, thus during and shortly after the demobilization of paramilitary groups. The most

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[10] Interview in Bogotá, January 2009.

[11] Interview in Barrancabermeja, March 2009.

[12] *Reincidencia* or recidivism is understood as engagement in some illegal activity after demobilization.

[13] The recidivism rate is calculated as a percentage proportion: *ex-combatants committing crimes since 2003 divided by total amount of ex-combatants*. Since the total amount of ex-combatants has only marginally increased over the past years due to individual demobilizations and ex-combatants keep being arrested for crimes, the recidivism rate is continuously increasing.

[14] Included in these estimates are ex-combatants who were killed in operations against organized crime.

common crimes committed by ex-combatants from the AUC are illegal weapon possession, drug trade and possession, organized crime and homicide.[15]

While it is unclear at which recidivism rate we can talk about reintegration failure, the contribution of ex-combatants to overall levels of crime is marginal, at least considering preliminary evidence. Antioquia, one of the departments with the largest ex-combatant community, counts on approximately 6500 ex-combatants. The contribution of these ex-combatants to crime in Antioquia amounts to 0.13% – based on the proportion of arrests between 2011 and 2013 (calculations based on Ocampo 2014), while they amount to 0.10% of the total Antioquia population. Similar numbers exist for the city of Villavicencio for the period between 2005 and 2010 (Massé et al. 2011). There, ex-combatants have contributed 4.3% to the total arrests for organized crime, 4% for extortion, 3.8% for homicide, 0.6% for illegal gun possession and 0.1% for theft. Considering that the ex-combatants in this town amount to 0.2% of the total population, they are heavily overrepresented in the arrest rates, especially for serious crimes like homicide and extortion. However, their overall contribution remains below 5% for any of the mentioned crimes for the period directly after demobilization.

Seeing ex-combatants as threat in Colombia is often related to the so called BACRIM. Citizens largely identify BACRIM members with ex-combatants. It is true that most of these organizations were formed and organized by former mid and high-ranking ex-combatants (see for example El Tiempo 2014b; CNMH 2015), which I discuss further below. But most of their members are not ex-combatants. In 2009, the Colombian Police reported that 12% of the members of BACRIM were ex-combatants, based on arrest numbers (Semana 2009). Later, they reported that among the 12.100 arrests of BACRIM members, 1765 were ex-combatants from the AUC – 14.6% (Prieto 2013; see also Munévar and Nussio 2009). Based on BACRIM members killed in confrontation, the rate is lower. Of 1187 killed members of the BACRIM between 2006 and 2009, 71 or 6% were ex-combatants (Observatorio de Procesos de DDR 2010, 36). The general assumption that BACRIM consist mainly of ex-combatants is thus not justified. It is likely that most members of these organizations belong to a new generation of violent people who have been continuously recruited over the years (Nussio and Howe 2014).

Between 2003 and 2012, 3003 ex-combatants have been killed after their demobilization (according to information provided by the National Police). The highest numbers of killed ex-combatants with more than 500 each were registered between the years 2007 and 2009, shortly after the end of the paramilitary demobilization. The overwhelming majority (91%) was killed with a firearm, which indicates that many of these homicides were either commissioned or otherwise related to organized crime. According to the Police, 21% of those killed were arrested at least once before they were killed. While some of these numbers are shocking (about 5% of ex-combatants were killed after demobilizing), their overall contribution to violence in Colombia is marginal. As a percentage of the total homicides in Colombia between 2003 and 2012, ex-combatant homicides amount to 1.8% (in the peak year 2008 it reached 3.9%). It is thus not true that violence against ex-combatants (who may or may not be involved in organized crime) drives countrywide indicators of homicide.[16] Rather, ex-combatant homicides have made a marginal contribution to continuously high though diminishing levels of violence. Also, it might well be the case that ex-combatants would have

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[15] According to interviewees familiar with criminal justice in Colombia, criminals are often arrested for the crime that is most easily proven and not necessarily the most serious crime. That explains why gun possession and drug trade are in the first two positions. In the Colombian penal code, the four mentioned crimes are denominated *Fabricación, tráfico, porte o tenencia de armas de fuego, accesorios, partes o municiones*; *Tráfico, fabricación o porte de estupefacientes*; *Concierto para delinquir*; *Homicidio*.

[16] However, in certain regions homicides of ex-combatants reached enormous levels. In Córdoba in 2008, ex-combatant homicides amounted to 38% of all homicides in this department (Nussio and Howe 2014).

been as heavily involved in violence, if they had not demobilized. There is though no evidence that could support this counterfactual speculation.

To sum up, although many ex-combatants have been involved in violence (either as perpetrators or victims), their overall contribution to violence is rather small. During the first few years after the paramilitary demobilization, their participation in violent acts was largest. Also, they tend to commit serious crimes (like extortion, homicide and participation in organized crime). But over time the ex-combatants' involvement in violence decreases. The relatively low contribution to overall levels of violence has several explanations, but the most important one is that there are simply not enough ex-combatants. As a result of the collective demobilization of the AUC and the ongoing individual demobilizations of guerrilla members, more than 57.000 members of non-state armed groups have demobilized since 2003. They amount to about 1 per mille of the total Colombian population. And even though roughly 40% of this population is concentrated in only nine cities, according to the ACR, no municipality has more than 1% ex-combatants among its population. Small numbers of criminals can generate large insecurity using spectacular violence and drawing on their capacity to create and lead violent organizations (see section about mid-level commanders below), but there are just not enough ex-combatants to unsettle general crime tendencies in Colombia.

b. Age: ex-combatants grow tired of violence

Generally speaking, people become less interested in risky behavior, including the participation in violent acts, with increasing age after adolescence (Zuckerman 2007; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). This is a well-established fact in developmental psychology (Boyer 2006). Why should ex-combatants be the exception? General discourse has it that ex-combatants get used to a life of violence and would not be able to overcome this preference for a violent lifestyle after they demobilize, which might be true for a small share of them. However, a quantitative study about recidivism in Colombia shows that with increasing age ex-combatants tend to commit less crimes, this is especially true for ex-combatants who have children (Kaplan and Nussio 2016). Also, my in-depth interviews with ex-combatants confirm this finding. While younger ex-combatants without family obligations were generally more inclined towards some criminal activity after demobilizing, older respondents and ex-combatants who were parents were more interested in a calm family life.[17] Relatedly, research on street gangs finds that becoming a father can mark an important turning point for their members (Moloney et al. 2009).

This may be related to what Jonsson (2014) calls the "rebel's life-cycle", which is based on a shifting risk perception, a weakening appetite for adventure and a growing wish for a stable family life over the life course. In 2008, the respondents of an ex-combatant survey conducted by *Fundación Ideas para la Paz* were on average 29.9 years old (FARC: 28.7, AUC 31.0), while the same cohort of people joined at an average age of 21.2 (FARC: 18.5, AUC: 23.2). The typical ex-combatant in 2008, when the impact of ex-combatants on the security situation in Colombia was at its highest point, was thus almost 9 years older than when she joined. At that point, she does not belong to the age group any more that is most inclined to risk seeking and related criminal activities.

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[17] Examples taken from Nussio (2012): *'I didn't have anybody to think about, I didn't have any obligations, I didn't have children. And now, I have a daughter, she gives me a lot of motivation not to go back there'* (Barrancabermeja). *'Sometimes, you despair without any work or anything. Me at least, if I don't find anything these days, I will go back again, I have already decided. I am desperate, I owe two months of rent and the landlord is after me. This here is crazy while there, I lived well, I had a good time. [...] I have nothing to lose since I have no wife, no children, no anything'* (Bogotá). *'The only thing that hinders me from going back is my family. I try to keep my family out of any problem. They know where my family lives. In the end, it's the family that pays the price'* (Bogotá). *'If I go there and they kill me, what?, who's going to take care of my girl? Most certainly, she's going to stay with a stepfather and he won't treat her the same way I do'* (Medellín).

There is a large amount of evidence indicating that BACRIM recruits tend to be in their late adolescence. "In different regions of the country, an increasing number of youngsters between 16 and 25 years of age have been arrested for participation in illegal activities related to these [BACRIM] organizations" (Prieto 2013, 3). The joiners of BACRIM today have thus a similar age profile to the joiners of paramilitary and guerrilla groups back then. An interviewed representative of the Early Alert System of the Ombudsman's Office in Córdoba describes the profile of BACRIM recruits: "Young guys with little education or job training, guys who live in marginal neighborhoods, who don't have regular employment, nor a regular income, who, at the moment when they are offered something by the recruiters, accept."[18] BACRIM recruiters specifically target youngsters with this profile for their activities (Nussio and Howe 2014, 11). Many of the 85 to 88% of arrested BACRIM members who are not ex-combatants (see estimates by the Police mentioned above) belong to this new generation of violent people.

To sum up, a theory of a persistent preference for a violent lifestyle is unwarranted for most ex-combatants. Most have not become brutalized by war and are not forever lost in a world of violence. The majority of them, as humans in general, develop a preference for less risk-prone activities and a calm family life. Ex-combatants are thus less of a threat to post-conflict societies as most observers assume, because – with some notable exceptions – they grow tired of violence.

c. Personnel turnover: ex-combatants are quickly replaced in illegal organizations

While the continuities and ruptures between the AUC and their follower groups, often called BACRIM, are debated (CNRR 2007, 135; Massé et al. 2010), many observers in Colombia view the BACRIM as a continuation of earlier paramilitary groups (Human Rights Watch 2010). This view is based on the observation that they use similar methods, focus on similar rents from war economies and rely on similar people (e.g. ex-combatants) as the AUC. However, even if it was true that the BACRIM are a simple continuation of the earlier AUC under a new label[19], it is unlikely that they would continuously count on the same members, due to personnel turnover (i.e. employee replacement).

As noted above, by 2009 only 12% of the members of BACRIM were ex-combatants and for the period between 2006 and 2012, 14.6% of arrested members of the BACRIM were ex-combatants. During this time period, at least 85% of the BACRIM members were thus either new recruits or non-demobilized members of the AUC. Considering the turnover of other organizations, like business companies, these numbers are not surprising. Depending on the industry sector, private companies have a personnel turnover of about 20 to 50% per year (Khatri, Fern, and Budhwar 2001) and one of five accountants – a profession not especially known for job-hopping – changes his or her job per year (Arnold and Feldman 1982). Members of illegal organizations might remain in their group for a longer period of time if the group constrains exit with costly punishment (Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014; Nussio and Oppenheim 2014). On the other hand, turnover in illegal organizations is accelerated by arrests and deaths.

In addition to ageing as discussed previously, a diminishing number of ex-combatants among the BACRIM ranks is thus likely an effect of personnel turnover. Assuming that the BACRIM are a continuation of the AUC, they still count on 85% new members in 2009 (three years after the conclusion of the AUC demobilization), which indicates that they suffered a large turnover in their organization. This interpretation is consistent with evidence indicating that many demobilized and dissident members of the AUC were involved in the creation of

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[18] Interview in Montería, December 2010.

[19] I do not share this view, but accept it for the sake of the subsequent argument.

post-demobilization groups shortly after the AUC demobilization (CNMH 2015; Munévar and Nussio 2009). However, new members have replaced most of them over the course of the BACRIM's existence.

Personnel turnover has a different dynamic for higher-ranking members due to the structure of career opportunities in illegal organizations. In street gangs for example, very few have the opportunity to personally enrich themselves, while most members remain at the bottom of the pyramid (Levitt and Venkatesh 2000). This situation might lead to dissatisfaction and ultimately desistance or disaffiliation from the group for most of its rank-and-file members (Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014). However, leaders might have special incentives to stay longer. This is why former paramilitary leaders and mid-ranking ex-combatants who climbed the job ladder, held on to the few lucrative positions within the organization for a longer period of time (see next section).

To sum up, if the BACRIM are any similar to other illegal and legal organizations, they have a personnel turnover that is associated with a diminishing proportion of ex-combatants among their ranks over time. This is consistent with the fact that most BACRIM members are new recruits few years after the AUC demobilization. Higher-ranking members might stick around for longer due to their better job prospects.

Who we should not forget

A generalized perception of ex-combatants as major threat to security is not mirrored in the data about their actual participation in violence in Colombia. Still, this widely held perception might distract attention and resources from more important populations and structural policies. Two key populations that need more and better attention, especially in Colombia but potentially also in other cases, are marginalized youth and former mid-level fighters.

While it is not my intention to stigmatize an even larger social group than ex-combatants, marginalized youth are particularly vulnerable to participation in crime and violence in Colombia, but have received scant attention from authorities. Prevention of child and youth recruitment has been identified as an emergency issue in repeated reports of the Ombudsman's Early Alert System, as for example in Meta and Córdoba (Sistema de Alertas Tempranas 2010; Sistema de Alertas Tempranas 2013). However, despite the elaboration of an important public policy document about recruitment prevention (Conpes 3673 2010), the overall attention to youth has remained largely ineffective and scattered among different government institutions (Rubio Serrano 2013).

Other cases, most importantly El Salvador and Guatemala, reveal the importance of youth for post-conflict violence and stability. Gangs have been key organizations and marginalized youth the main human resources for post-war violence in these countries (Jütersonke, Muggah, and Rodgers 2009; Kurtenbach 2013).[20] Similar criminal organizations are already present in several Colombian cities, like Medellín (Baird 2015) or Cali (El Tiempo 2014a) and may gain more visibility in the future. And the fact that most BACRIM recruits belong to a new generation of violent people underlines the importance of focusing more attention and support to the human resources of post-conflict violence, who are mostly found among young males in marginalized neighborhoods (Rodgers and Jensen 2015).

Former mid and high-level combatants are not necessarily more likely to recidivate in criminal activities than other ex-combatants, but when they recidivate, they have a higher damage potential. Former mid-level fighters are potential career criminals. They moved up the ladder of their organization's hierarchy and have accumulated "criminal capital" (McCarthy and Hagan 1995). Some of them might want to benefit from their knowhow and their time

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[20] Youth gangs are evidently not an exclusive phenomenon of post-conflict societies, but post-war scenarios might facilitate the emergence of youth gangs.

invested in crime. They are the nodes in the criminal networks who hold the organizational memory about the extraction of criminal rents from existing war economies, i.e. knowledge about the smuggling routes, contacts to suppliers and customers, and strategies to cope with competitors and authorities.

It is not surprising that in the early period after the paramilitary demobilization, all follower organizations were led by former members of the AUC (CNMH 2015; CNRR 2007). Infamous druglords like alias "Cuchillo", "Don Mario" and "Otoniel" have dominated the headlines about crime in Colombia throughout the past years[21] and contributed to a generalized stigma of ex-combatants as a whole. Mid-level commanders have also been found to be important actors in other post-conflict cases like the Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone (Themnér 2011).

However, while DDR policies are mostly designed for rank-and-file ex-combatants, policymakers are rather uninspired when it comes to mid- and high-ranking commanders – those with the largest damage potential. More focused attention to this specific subgroup of ex-combatants would be beneficial for future demobilization processes. Non-tangible incentives related to their leadership skills, involvement in the design of DDR programs, political participation, personal protection schemes and enrollment in higher education programs might increase the willingness of some of them to put an end to their criminal career (see also United Nations 2014). Some of these policies already exist in Colombia (Arias, Prieto, and Herrera 2010), but even the former High Counsellor for Reintegration accepted that the incentives offered by the reintegration program had been insufficient for this population (Semana 2008).

Conclusions

Based on a large series of available data points, this article tried to put the widely perceived security threat that emanates from ex-combatants in Colombia into perspective. As I argued along the text, ex-combatants cannot be the main threat to post-demobilization violence since, first, their contribution to crime statistics is limited; second, they grow older and less interested in violence over time; and third, follower organizations of demobilized groups continuously replace ex-combatants with new recruits.

This does not mean that ex-combatants are completely harmless either. Many of them have committed crimes after demobilization, mostly in the early period after their demobilization, and others have been killed, often in relationship with some criminal activity. Also, some of the ex-combatants fulfil important roles in the criminal underworld, thanks to their skills. A few "experts" of violence may thus have a large damage potential. This is especially the case for mid and high-raking ex-combatants, who effectively created new criminal organizations that inherited some of the war businesses from the previously existing paramilitary groups.

However, a general view of ex-combatants as acute security threat does not correspond to the underlying reality presented in this paper. In fact, some ex-combatants have even positively contributed to the demobilization of former comrades or led NGOs engaged in a variety of peaceful activities (Observatorio de DDR 2009). While the presented evidence is based on Colombia, in other contexts, there might be a higher proportion of ex-combatants, which may lead to a larger impact on violence. The findings from my presentation are thus not generalizable, even though the central ideas, especially with regard to ageing and personnel turnover, may apply similarly to other cases.

Observers in other cases might show similarly generalizing views about ex-combatants as in Colombia. Several perception biases might push public opinion into this direction. Ex-

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[21] After arrests and killings of former AUC members who initially organized the BACRIM, a new generation of criminal leaders is starting to emerge (El Tiempo 2015).

combatants are an easily identifiable group and it makes sense to think of them as violent people due to their experience with armed conflict. In Colombia, most leaders of criminal organizations have effectively been mid- and high-ranking ex-combatants with pronounced criminal leadership skills and knowhow about the exploitation of war economies. One might thus wrongly infer that their followers are ex-combatants as well. Also, since the BACRIM are often identified with their leaders[22] and with the earlier paramilitary structures, the equation "BACRIM = ex-combatants" seems granted. And it is true that ex-combatants are quite often involved in crime. However, as I demonstrated above, discounting the crimes committed by ex-combatants, the general dynamics of crime and violence in Colombia would have been largely unchanged since the overall contribution of ex-combatants is marginal.

With the exception of key organizers of violence, ex-combatants are largely exchangeable for violent activities. Due to the low explanatory power of a human resources theory for post-demobilization violence, we have to turn to more structural and organizational level explanations (Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom 2008; Kurtenbach 2013; Nussio and Howe 2014; Steenkamp 2011). War economies and the governance of natural resources are important pieces in this puzzle. The Colombian case is a perfect example. While the people in charge and filling the ranks of criminal organizations have changed quickly, the war economies have seen little changes after the paramilitary demobilization and even expanded beyond drug-trafficking to new resources like illegal gold mining (Rettberg and Ortiz-Riomalo 2016). My analysis shows that if the underlying structures and war economies are not targeted, somebody (but not necessarily ex-combatants) will continue to exploit existing criminal rents. Overly focusing on persons instead of structures might thus produce futile results.

Population-based approaches for typical post-conflict social groups, like ex-combatants, will continue to exist, and there are evidently reasons that justify reintegration programming (United Nations 2006). But despite a continued obsession of policymakers with ex-combatants in the context of DDR policies, other more vulnerable populations like marginalized youth should not be forgotten. Furthermore, reintegration programming should not only target rank-and-file ex-combatants, but also give specific incentives to demobilizing mid- and high-ranking ex-combatants. A realistic evaluation of the danger that emanates from ex-combatants, as provided in this article, will help to reorient population-based policies in order to spend public resources where they are most needed.

In line with my argument, a future demobilization process of guerrilla fighters following a negotiated settlement will not be the biggest challenge for a successful post-conflict period in Colombia. Some guerrilla fighters might become dissidents of the process or remobilize into crime after demobilization. But the number of recidivists would likely be smaller than for the paramilitaries due to the larger cohesion among FARC and ELN rebels, and a larger responsibility of the armed group in the design and execution of reintegration activities (FARC-EP and Gobierno de Colombia 2016). Also, the sustainability of the peace process will depend to a much larger extent on wider changes in society and government policy, including among other things the capacity of the government to integrate the country, lead a nationwide reconciliation process, finally provide remote areas with decent public services, and tackle pervasive organized crime that continues to benefit from war economies.

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[22] The earlier called "Urabeños" are now widely referred to as "Clan Úsuga", in accordance with the last name of their leader Dairo Antonio Úsuga (a former member of EPL, FARC and AUC). However, the government recently tried to rename it to "Clan del Golfo" (El Colombiano 2016).

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