

LEARNING UNDER FIRE: ATTACKS ON EDUCATION IN COLOMBIA, 2020-2025

Kobo

Corporación Infancia y Desarrollo

Cover photo: Burned out school bus in Chocó, Colombia.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

In Colombia, armed conflict has not spared education. Attacks on schools and teachers, child recruitment along school routes, and the occupation of educational facilities, among other attacks, take place in at least a third of the country's departments.

Kobo carried out a large-scale survey in Colombia to document attacks on education, alongside strategies to prevent and respond to these attacks. The study also focused on the impacts of attacks on schools, students, and staff, and educators' perceptions of justice. Schools and teachers were surveyed in rural, conflict-affected municipalities of Antioquia, Chocó, Nariño, and Norte de Santander departments.

Despite their gravity, attacks on education often go unreported, and the impacts of these attacks, such as dropout rates and psychological effects, are not well documented. Teachers have also made clear calls to action for how to mitigate and respond to attacks on education, as collected here. The aim of this study is to inform advocacy, prevention, and justice initiatives.

KEY FINDINGS

Key findings from this study:

- More than 600 attacks on education were documented, occurring between 2020 and the first half of 2025, in Antioquia, Chocó, Nariño, and Norte de Santander departments. These attacks involved the killing or injury of around 150 students and teachers, as well as threats against more than 140 others.
- The most common attacks included shootouts near schools, explosives planted along school routes, threats against teachers, the recruitment of children on their way to or from school, and the use of schools by armed actors as meeting spaces, bases, or defensive positions.
- The impacts of attacks included school closures, students dropping out, teachers resigning, psychological distress among students and educators, and a decline in education quality.
- Head teachers reported more than 2,800 days of school closures due to attacks on education, among schools included in the survey. On average, schools were closed for around a week.
- Attacks on education differentially affected certain groups and institutions, such as students with disabilities, female and Afro-Colombian students, and schools attended by Indigenous students.
- Around two-thirds of schools occupied by an armed actor were subsequently attacked by a rival group or force, among cases documented in this study.
- At least 40 attacked schools were in the vicinity of police stations or military bases, typically during shootouts between armed groups and government forces. This represents around 15% of all attacks on schools documented in this study.
- Teachers and communities developed and implemented strategies to avoid violence and keep students, staff, and schools safer. To prevent and respond to attacks, educators established early-warning systems to alert a school of violence, community dialogues to promote schools as peaceful spaces, and structures for reporting the occupation of schools by armed actors, among other strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Colombian government has taken noteworthy strides in implementing the Safe Schools Declaration and preventing and responding to attacks on education. Nonetheless, steps remain for the government, donors, and international and civil

society organizations to further the protection of schools, students, and educators.

Key recommendations from this study:

- The national and department-level Ministries of Education should prioritize primary schools, rural schools, and schools attended by Indigenous students for repair and re-opening. These schools were generally closed the longest after attacks.

- Government forces and non-state armed groups should take measures to limit armed confrontations near schools. Shootouts and similar engagements were the most common form of attacks on schools documented in this study.

- The Ministry of Defense and related agencies should continue to implement the Safe Schools Declaration and its *Guidelines for protecting schools and universities from military use during armed conflict*. Meanwhile, non-state armed groups should respect the *Guidelines* and avoid using schools.

- The Ministry of Defense and relevant agencies should consider moving military bases and police stations away from schools, since their co-location puts students and learning facilities at risk when non-state armed groups attack stationed forces. When asked what could prevent attacks, one teacher in Norte de Santander said, *"Locating the public forces in another place, distant from the school."*[i]

- The government, donors, and international and civil society organizations should prioritize mental health and psychosocial support for students and teachers, safer school infrastructure and routes, early warning systems, and safety training and protocols when developing safer schools programming. These were the prevention and response measures surveyed teachers called for most frequently.

- The government, donors, and international and civil society organizations should further develop targeted interventions to keep female students and students with disabilities in school after an attack on education, or reintegrate them after dropout, including through ongoing psychosocial support. These students were more likely to stop their studies than their peers after attacks.

- The government, donors, and international and civil society organizations should further develop and implement flexible distance-learning tools, taking the lack of internet and phone services for some rural and Indigenous school communities into account, ensuring continued learning after an attack on education. Among schools in the sample, a significant proportion of head teachers reported that students were not provided at-home learning guides or other material after an attack, particularly at schools in Chocó and Norte de Santander.

- The government should reinforce and strengthen the established trust between teachers and the department-level Ministries of Education and Community Action Boards to increase reporting of attacks on education for the purposes of justice. Meanwhile, trust in the military, police, and district attorney's office should be built from the ground up, since trust is low in these institutions for reporting attacks, among teachers surveyed in this study.

- The government, donors, and international and civil society organizations should build on the significant advances made to further develop mechanisms to monitor and report on attacks against education.

- The national and department-level Ministries of Education, donors, and international and civil society organizations should ensure that teachers' voices are central to education sector planning. Teachers, who confront the daily impacts of the conflict, hold critical insights for strengthening risk-mitigation, emergency preparedness, and continuity-of-learning efforts, as well as for developing measures to prevent and respond to attacks on education.

BACKGROUND

More than 6,000 attacks on education were reported around the world in 2022 and 2023 by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA). These attacks resulted in the death, injury, kidnapping, or arrest of over 10,000 students and educators, and damaged or destroyed hundreds of schools and universities.[ii] Some of the countries most affected by attacks on education during that period were Palestine, Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Myanmar.[iii]

Attacks on education are perpetrated by non-state armed groups, armed forces, and other state security entities.[iv] Examples include bombings of schools, threats against teachers, and the occupation of schools. In some contexts, female students or minority teachers are targeted in attacks, or differentially impacted by them. In other cases, students or schools are caught in the crossfire of armed confrontations. Beyond killings and injury, attacks on education sometimes have longer-term impacts, such as psychological distress or student dropouts.

Important strategies, policies, and interventions have been implemented to prevent and respond to attacks on education. For example, these involved community negotiations with armed groups in some contexts, or the updating of military doctrines and manuals; elsewhere, alternative learning sites were built in underground metro stations to protect students from bombings.[v] The fulcrum of safeguarding education in armed conflict is the Safe Schools Declaration, an intergovernmental political commitment which has been signed by 121 governments. The Declaration and its *Guidelines* provide practical guidance for militaries (and non-state armed groups, in the case of the *Guidelines*) to avoid using schools and universities for military purposes and reduce the risk of attacks on educational infrastructure.

Internationally, few attacks on education have been prosecuted. The lack of justice for these attacks may be the result of domestic and international courts overlooking crimes against children or deprioritizing the right to education, among other causes, according to GCPEA.[vi]

ATTACKS ON EDUCATION

Attacks on education are violence (or threats of violence) against schools and universities, and their students and staff, perpetrated by state forces or non-state armed groups, according to GCPEA.[vii] They generally occur in contexts of armed conflict. Attacks may be carried out for political, military, ideological or other reasons; in other cases, students, educators, and schools may be caught in the crossfire of armed confrontations.[viii] In some instances, attacks cause death or injury, damage schools, and create fear in communities leading caregivers to keep their children home.[ix]

Attacks on education can be broken into several categories: attacks on schools, the military use of educational facilities, attacks on students and staff, child recruitment at schools or along school routes, and sexual violence at educational institutions or along their routes.[x] Attacks on higher education is an additional category but is not covered in this report.

ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS

Attacks on schools include small arms fire, arson, shootouts, vandalism, explosives, and other attacks on pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools, perpetrated by state forces or non-state armed groups.[xi] Internationally, schools are attacked because they are seen as representing the state, as a means to curb girls' education, or to loot resources, among other causes. Schools are also caught in the crossfire of confrontations between armed actors.

MILITARY USE OF SCHOOLS

The military use of educational facilities involves a non-state armed group or government force occupying a school, stationing combatants nearby, or using the facility as a defensive position, weapons store, training ground, or for other military purposes.[xii] Internationally, armed actors have been

documented as using schools for less than an hour and up to several years.[xiii] Military use generally causes damage to the facility and deprives students access to learning, or – when the facility is partially occupied – puts students and teachers at risk of violence, including child recruitment, and exposes them to arms. Occupation also puts the educational facility at risk of attack from rival groups or forces.[xiv] Compared to other structures, schools and universities are often used by armed actors because they are well-built or are strategically located. In the case of state forces, schools may also be selected because the troops see public buildings as being at their disposal.[xv]

ATTACKS ON STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Attacks on students and teachers involve abductions, killings or injury with small arms, protest repression, threats, and other violence perpetrated by state forces or non-state armed groups. Crossfire, explosives, and other indiscriminate violence along school routes traveled by students or teachers also qualify as attacks. Internationally, students are targeted for their political activities, and female students are attacked for attending school in some contexts. Meanwhile, educators are targeted in some places for their membership in teachers' unions, for being a representative of the government, or for not being local to the area. Students and teachers are injured or killed in some attacks, which may have ripple effects in the wider community, including caregivers keeping their children home or surviving teachers fleeing the area.[xvi]

CHILD RECRUITMENT

Child recruitment at, or on the way to or from, school involves the recruitment of children under the age of 18 for any purpose by armed forces or groups. This may include recruiting children as spies, to participate in combat, carry equipment, or to cook, among other purposes.[xvii]

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence at, or on the way to or from, educational institutions involves armed groups or state forces sexually threatening, harassing, or abusing students or educational personnel.[xviii] Internationally, armed forces or groups have perpetrated rape in schools, forced students to undress along school routes, and committed other acts of sexual violence in schools or along school routes.[xix]

ARMED CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA

Despite recent ceasefire agreements and peace negotiations, including the 2016 peace accords between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the government, Colombia continues to experience armed conflict. Dissidents of FARC remain active, alongside several other non-state armed groups such as the National Liberation Army (ELN). Groups that succeeded the paramilitaries after demobilization, such as the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC), also continue to operate.[xx] Armed groups have fragmented in recent years, leading to an increase in violence, as splintered groups clash with one another and military forces over territorial control.[xxi]

In particular, armed violence has increased in some rural areas of the country in recent years, affecting more than eight million civilians.[xxii] Around 388,000 people were forcibly displaced by conflict in 2024,[xxiii] and non-state armed groups have imposed forced confinements on communities, preventing civilians from going about their daily lives or leaving the area. Hundreds of human rights defenders and social leaders have also been killed in rural violence, with women and leaders from Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities particularly affected.[xxiv]

ATTACKS ON EDUCATION IN COLOMBIA

Armed conflict in Colombia has not spared schools. In the first half of 2025, the Norwegian Refugee Council recorded 52 attacks on education in areas where the organization maintains a presence. The number of children, teachers, and staff affected by these attacks increased, compared to the same period the year prior.[xxv] Meanwhile, GCPEA identified nearly 200 attacks on education in Colombia in 2022 and 2023.[xxvi] In recent years, attacks on education have occurred across at least one-third of the country's departments, with Antioquia, Cauca, Chocó, and Norte de Santander some of the most affected.[xxvii]

Attacks on schools are the most reported category of attack in Colombia, according to GCPEA. These attacks typically involve improvised explosive devices planted in or nearby the school, armed confrontations near schools, and threats.[xxviii] Meanwhile, the military use of educational facilities increased in Colombia in recent years. The majority of such incidents involved schools being used as fighting positions or bases.[xxix]

Compared to other countries, Colombia experiences a high proportion of targeted attacks against teachers. Educators are typically threatened or attacked for their political leanings or union membership.[xxx]

Targeted attacks against students are infrequently reported in Colombia. However, students (and teachers) are caught in the crossfire of armed confrontations and exposed to explosives while traveling to and from school, which also qualify as attacks on education.[xxxi]

School-related child recruitment and sexual violence have also been reported in the country.[xxxii]

Although many attacks on education in recent years appear to be carried out by non-state armed groups, Colombian armed forces have also been reported as perpetrating attacks, including military use of schools.[xxxiii]

Attacks on education are underreported due to fear of reprisals, shame, and limited disaggregated data sharing, among other reasons. In particular, school-related child recruitment and sexual violence are thought to be underreported since reports often leave out the location of incidents so the connection to schools or school routes is not made.[xxxiv] Due to data and resource limitations, key topics remain underexplored in Colombia and globally, such as the impacts of attacks on education, efforts to prevent and respond to attacks, and teachers' perceptions of justice for attacks.

PREVENTION AND RESPONSE IN COLOMBIA

The Colombian government endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration in November 2022, committing to safeguard education during conflict.[xxxv] Shortly afterwards, the government developed the National Action Plan on Safe Schools to guide implementation of the Declaration. In it, several government agencies, including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, lay out concrete steps they will take to safeguard schools and guarantee the right to education.[xxxvi]

In April 2025, the government signed the Comprehensive School Risk Management and Education in Emergencies Policy. This Policy includes specific actions for safeguarding the right to education in contexts affected by natural hazards and conflict alike, such as through institutional risk plans, emergency preparedness, and continuity-of-learning policies.[xxxvii]

Moreover, since 2010, it has been a violation for a military commander to allow their troops to occupy a school, due to the risk posed to children, by Order of the General Commander of the Military Forces in Colombia.[xxxviii] The Office of the Ombudsman has also included attacks on education as part of its early warning system,[xxxix] and at least one court case involving an attack on education has been prosecuted.[xl]

Civil society, local, and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also taken steps to safeguard education in Colombia, including monitoring and reporting attacks, providing support to survivors, and ensuring the continuity of learning.[xli] Some international organizations have also directly or indirectly engaged non-state armed groups to promote respect for humanitarian norms and the rights of children.[xlii]

Finally, communities and educators have taken measures to prevent and respond to attacks on schools, teachers, and students. Among others, these measures include establishing early-warning systems, making school infrastructure safer, and reporting occupation of schools to relevant authorities, as detailed below.

METHODOLOGY

This study set out to document attacks on education and measures to prevent and respond to these attacks. It also included questions about the impacts of attacks on education and teachers' perceptions of justice. To address these topics, Kobo carried out two in-person, semi-structured surveys in mid-2025. Conducted in Spanish, the surveys were carried out in Antioquia, Chocó, Nariño, and Norte de Santander – departments selected because they are heavily impacted by attacks on education and for accessibility reasons (see map of Colombia below). The surveys covered 504 schools (with head teachers serving as respondents) and 300 educators, for a total of 804 interviews.

STUDY DESIGN

The study focuses on schools and teachers, since attacks on schools, military use of schools, and attacks on teachers are the most prevalent categories of attacks on education in Colombia.[xliii]

Two surveys were developed: one directed at schools (with head teachers serving as respondents) and one directed at teachers. Distinct surveys were administered since attacks on schools (and their military use) have unique dynamics compared to attacks on teachers; likewise, prevention and response measures and impacts of the violence are different between the types of attacks. GCPEA's definitions of attacks on education were used to design and write the survey, conduct analyses, and draft this report.[xliv]

SAMPLE

Attacks on education are relatively rare (compared to other events one might research), and no sampling frame of all schools (or teachers) that suffered an attack exists in Colombia.[xlv] As such, Kobo's team surveyed schools and teachers in purposively selected municipalities where existing data suggested attacks had occurred or were likely to have occurred.

WHERE DATA COLLECTION TOOK PLACE



First, the four study departments were selected because they were heavily affected by attacks on education, according to GCPEA data, and since Kobo's local partner, LA CID, had access and experience working in them. Within these departments, GCPEA data showed at least one attack on education in 35 municipalities (out of 260 total across the four departments), 31 of which were selected for the study (with four determined to be inaccessible). To increase the number of municipalities in the sample, data on conflict violence affecting children from the Education Cluster was used to identify additional municipalities where attacks on education were likely to have occurred (reaching a total of 55 sampled municipalities).[xlvi] The final municipalities were generally rural and conflict-affected. Both surveys were carried out in these municipalities. For the survey of schools, the research team subsequently randomly selected educational institutions; for the survey of teachers, snowball sampling was implemented.

In the *survey of schools*, the research team randomly selected schools within the purposively selected municipalities (and included in the list any attacked schools, if known). A random number generator was used to sample from an up-to-date list of all schools in the relevant municipalities provided by the department-level Ministry of Education (*Secretaría de Educación*).[xlvii] Random selection was used to ensure that small, very rural, and other schools that might otherwise be excluded had equal chance of inclusion in the sample, and because officials had no complete lists of attacked schools.[xlviii] All levels of schools were treated equally in the sample. In the cases when education officials knew of an attack or enumerators heard of attacks while at other schools, the attacked school was added to the list of schools to survey (and a randomly sampled school was removed). This was done to increase the likelihood of identifying and including schools in the study that had experienced an attack.

A total of 504 schools were surveyed. Specifically, enumerators spoke with one head teacher, school administrator, or school coordinator per school about the selected institution. Interviews were generally conducted in the schools, although a limited number were conducted in a neutral location of the educator's choosing, such as administrative offices or community centers.

In the *survey of teachers*, the enumerators asked to speak with educators who had experienced conflict violence. Enumerators identified initial respondents through unions, local Ministry of Education offices, and educator networks, including at schools where they administered the first survey (although the same respondent was *not* interviewed for both surveys). Given that many educators know one another and are in the same professional networks, snowball sampling was an efficient means of identifying respondents in contexts where other methods would have been less practical. Stigma may have also kept teachers who survived an attack from participating in the study, which referrals helped to overcome in some cases.

A total of 300 educators were surveyed, in addition to the head teachers mentioned above. Respondents to the survey of teachers included teachers, school staff, school coordinators, and local Ministry officials, among others. Interviews were conducted in schools or neutral location of the educators' choosing, such as administrative or union offices, community centers, or cafés.

SURVEY INSTRUMENTS

The research team designed and developed a standardized, semi-structured questionnaire and consent form in English and Spanish, after consulting with experts and NGO staff in Colombia. Study subjects were interviewed in Spanish. A pre-test was conducted to ensure the clarity of the questionnaire, with necessary adjustments to the language made before interviews were conducted.

The questionnaire for the *survey of schools* included sections on: respondent demographics, information about the school and the demographics of its students and teachers, insecurity in and around the school (if present), attacks on education affecting the school (if any), the impacts of these attacks, forced confinements, prevention and response measures, and perceptions of justice. Meanwhile, the questionnaire for the *survey of teachers* included sections on: respondent demographics, conditions at work and while commuting, attacks on teachers (if any), the impacts of these attacks, psychological wellbeing,

forced confinement, prevention and response measures, and perceptions of justice. If the school (or teacher) had not experienced an attack, they were asked a separate set of questions about insecurity and generalized violence in the area. This design allowed enumerators to still collect relevant data in cases where the school (or teacher) had not experienced a direct attack. Questions about attacks on universities or academics were not included in the questionnaires, since those attacks were not the focus of the study.

The study covered attacks on education between 2020 and the first half of 2025. In Colombia, classes begin early each calendar year, so January 2020 was a useful starting point, particularly given that the Covid pandemic (a memorable event) affected schools shortly after.

The instruments were coded and installed on phones running KoboToolbox, a free and open-source digital data collection platform. The tool enables quality control of completed forms and prevents common user mistakes such as missing questions. Voice recordings were collected in response to several open-ended questions, when respondents gave their consent. Specifically, the enumerators used the KoboCollect app.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data collection was carried out by trained enumerators and field supervisors over nine weeks from April through June 2025. The research team carried out a one-week training in Bogotá for enumerators, including on the questionnaires, survey best practices, ethics and safety, and attacks on education. Enumerators then returned to their respective departments to begin data collection.

To gain access to conflict-affected areas and reach affected schools and educators, the research team contracted enumerators from the selected departments who had experience collecting data or administering social programs in the relevant municipalities. The team also worked closely with local governments and community leaders.

Data were transmitted daily from the field to a secure server at the soonest point internet connection was available. After the collection phase, data were exported from KoboToolbox to a statistical software for analysis. No weights were applied to the data for analysis, since the aim was primarily descriptive.

After data collection, basic descriptive statistics were run using statistical software, while the qualitative data were thematically analyzed for patterns manually. With the exception of producing the total number of attacks on education reported in the study, data from the two surveys were analyzed separately. Most results shared in this report come from the survey of schools; where results are from the survey of teachers, it is stated in text. The research team analyzed the data by each department but found few significant differences (with the exception of at-home learning support after attacks, discussed below). Reporting findings in aggregate also helped preserve respondents' anonymity.

This study identified the impacts of attacks on education through self-reported data from head teachers and other educators (rather than administrative data, for instance). Likewise, the few details about targeting and the intentions of armed actors reported in this study are from the perspectives of educators, rather than from the armed actors.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

SCHOOLS

The sample included 504 schools (see table for the department breakdown). Head teachers at 352 (67%) of the schools in the sample reported one or more attacks on the school or its students and staff. This percentage is high precisely because municipalities were selected where attacks or similar violence were known to have taken place.

The majority of schools surveyed (56%) were pre- and basic primary schools, followed by primary and secondary schools (37%) and high schools (7%). The sampled schools enrolled a total of 63,557 students (55% female) and employed a total of 4,618 educators. Seventeen percent of the schools enrolled mostly or all Afro-Colombian students and 17% enrolled mostly or all Indigenous students.

Around one percent of students was reported as having a physical disability at these schools.

All schools were located in rural municipalities. Within those municipalities, schools were relatively evenly split between the center of a town (37%), the outskirts of a town (27%), and a location more than one kilometer from town (36%).

TEACHERS

The sample included 300 educators for the survey of teachers (see table for the department breakdown). Around 30% of educators in the sample reported having experienced an attack. Teachers were sampled in municipalities with high rates of violence and through networks of educators who had discussed violence, which explains the high percentage of respondents who experienced an attack.

Survey respondents had been at their current school or ministry for an average of ten years.

The educators had an average of 16 years of total experience in the field.

The majority of respondents were teachers (82%). Other roles included school coordinator, head teacher, school staff, ministry official, and other educational professionals. Around 1% of respondents were retired. Sixty percent of respondents were female, while 17% of respondents identified as Afro-Colombian and 20% identified as Indigenous. Less than 2% of respondents identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer (LGBTQ+).

ETHICS AND SAFETY

Ahead of data collection, Kobo submitted the study to an independent Institutional Review Board based in the United States, which evaluated the research design, sampling and recruitment procedures, and questionnaires.[xlix] Local and international education-in-emergencies and protection organizations also reviewed the study from an ethical standpoint and provided feedback, which the research team incorporated.

Department	Schools sampled
Antioquia	151
Norte de Santander	150
Nariño	104
Chocó	99

Department	Teachers sampled
Antioquia	84
Norte de Santander	84
Nariño	75
Chocó	57

Respondents provided informed consent before the interviews began. Before starting, enumerators discussed risks, made clear that participation was optional, shared topics of the survey, and informed potential respondents that their anonymized responses would be used to produce a report and in advocacy efforts. No payment or other advantages were offered for participation in the survey. Only respondents over 18 years of age were included in the study.

Enumerators conducted interviews on digital devices using KoboCollect, a data collection mobile app with encryption, to protect confidential data. Data were stored on a secure cloud server.

Several steps were taken to ensure respondents' safety, as well as to avoid retraumatization (in the case that respondents were survivors of attacks on education or other violence). For safety, respondents selected the interview site, enumerators were trained in confidentiality, and the optional nature of the survey was stressed from the first point of contact. To avoid respondent retraumatization, enumerators paid attention to signs of stress, fatigue, and trauma. When appropriate, they responded by slowing down the pace, adjusting the location, and taking other steps to promote respondents' comfort. They also offered breaks or to end the survey, and connected interviewees with psychosocial support as needed.

LIMITATIONS

The research design balanced methodological rigor against security concerns and the challenges of data collection on violent events. This study has several limitations, as is the case with all research of this type. The research team took these limitations into account, mitigating them where possible and reporting findings with nuance.

Results from the survey of schools cannot be generalized to the entire department or county, since the municipalities were purposively selected. Nonetheless, this design was used since the priority was documenting attacks and prevention and response measures, rather than producing a percentage of total affected schools or other representative results. Similarly, the sample of educators for the survey directed at teachers has several inherent biases, as a non-probability sample. Snowball sampling relies on networks, so the samples generated often share characteristics and may not be representative of the wider population. To mitigate this limitation, however, enumerators relied on many contacts for referrals across dozens of municipalities, as reflected in the diverse demographic characteristics of respondents. Since one of the aims of the project was to learn about teachers' experiences with insecurity and attacks on education, this was considered an appropriate approach.

Asking respondents about events several years in the past may have introduced recall bias; however, the wide time period was selected to increase the likelihood of identifying incidents. In cases where schools or teachers experienced more than one attack (which was relatively common), they were asked to discuss the most recent, limiting the bias.

The survey team encountered several operational and security challenges, including municipalities affected by armed confrontations and forced confinements, which required adaptations. When physical access was not possible, phone interviews were implemented in some instances (6% of school surveys and 7% of teacher surveys). A limited number of participants were also interviewed in a neutral town or city outside their municipality if they deemed it safer. Furthermore, when violence increased in a limited number of municipalities (based on continuous security monitoring), enumerators were instructed to move to a safer municipality selected from the established list. Enumerators carried out surveys in the new municipality until the original municipality stabilized or was permanently replaced (using a bank of pre-selected alternate municipalities). Enumerators also worked in teams of two at times for their safety, which slowed down the project. Despite slight potential biases, the research team deemed these adaptations necessary for the safety of respondents and enumerators.

ATTACKS ON EDUCATION

More than 600 attacks on education were documented in this study, occurring between 2020 and the first half of 2025, in Antioquia, Chocó, Nariño, and Norte de Santander departments. These attacks involved the killing or injury of around 150 students and teachers, as well as threats against more than 140 others. These attacks affected more than 47,000 students (55% female) and 3,024 educators (59% female), including Afro-Colombian (35%) and Indigenous (23%) students, as well as students with disabilities (just under 1%).

Attacks on schools were the most prevalent category of attack, followed by attacks on students and teachers and the occupation of school buildings (see chart below). In more detail, attacks included shootouts near schools, explosives planted along school routes, threats against teachers, the use of schools by armed actors as meeting spaces, bases, or defensive positions, and the recruitment of children on their way to or from school.

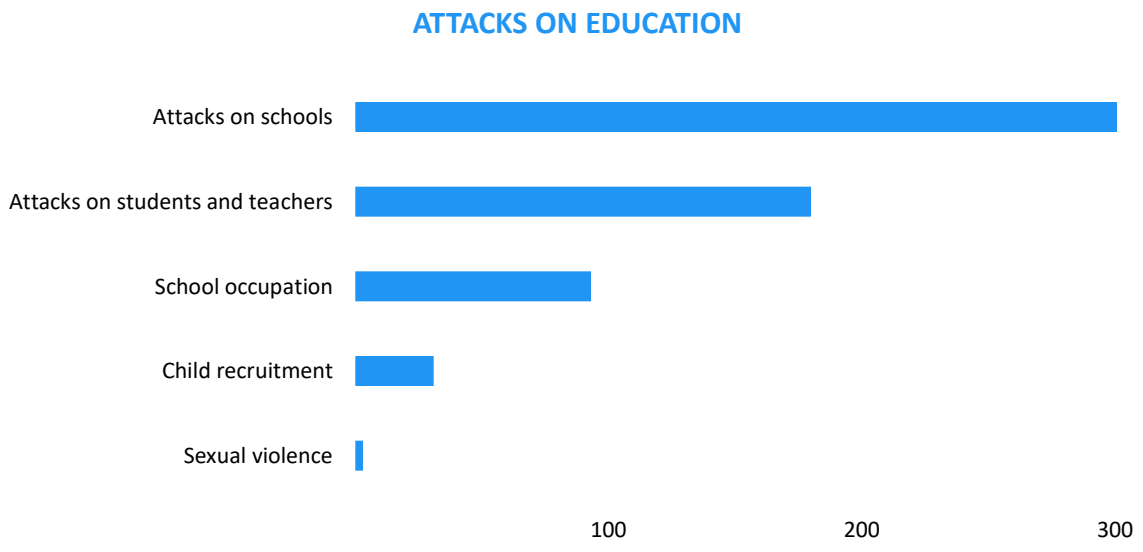
ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS

Over 300 incidents of attacks on schools were documented in the four study departments, occurring between 2020 and the first half of 2025.

At least 10 teachers were killed in these attacks (eight of them male), and three teachers were injured (all male). Three students were also injured (two of them male).

The majority of attacks on schools were shootouts nearby the schools, followed by explosive devices planted in or nearby, threats against schools, looting or vandalism, extortion, and other forms of attack (see chart below). Most commonly, these attacks occurred on schools located in towns, rather than those on the outskirts or further outside town, even accounting for the sample. Meanwhile, all levels of schools, from pre-primary through secondary, were affected without a discernable pattern.

For example, a female head teacher in Nariño shared, *"One day we were starting class at 7:30 a.m. when we heard gunshots close to the educational facility. We confirmed it was about 500 meters above the school. They [an armed group] were in conflict with the Army…The children were extremely scared, they were even crying. I shut them in the classroom; they didn't even want to go to the bathroom."* She also shared that the Ombud's office (*Personería*) called afterwards to check on and follow up with the school, students, and staff.[I]



In the case of threats, the school generally received a pamphlet or the head teacher a Whatsapp message threatening the institution (and its teachers) to open only at certain times, for perceived support of certain armed groups, or for having refused a demand from an armed group.

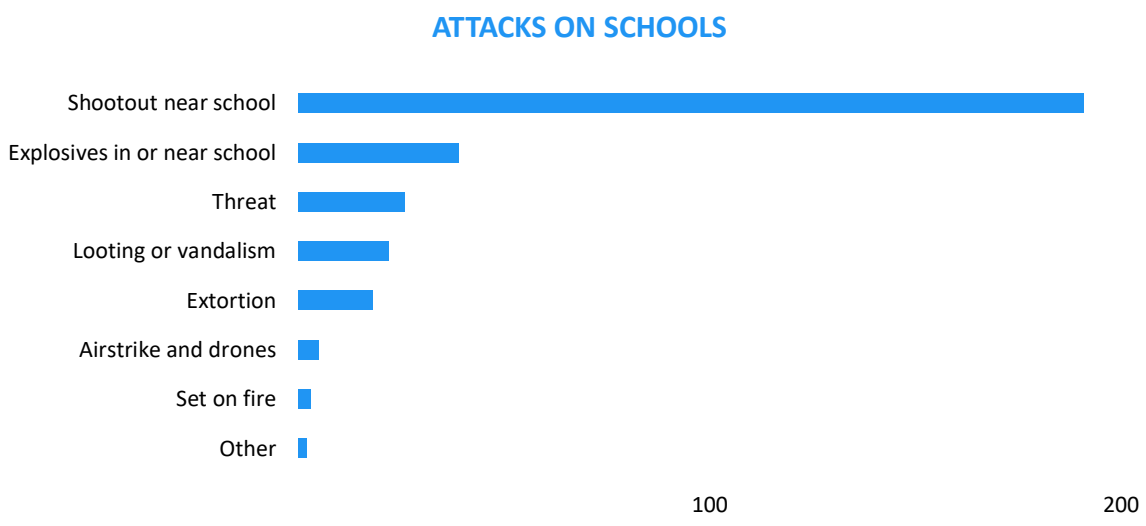
In many cases, head teachers shared that they thought the cause of the attack was armed actors competing for territorial control, or that the violence was aimed at a nearby armed group or police station. Less than 5% of respondents considered the attack to be directly targeting the school. One head teacher in Chocó said, *"It doesn't have anything to do with the educational institution, the attack was directed at the other armed group that was nearby the school."*[li] This is likely the case for shootouts and some incidents involving explosives nearby the schools; however, in the case of threats, extortion, and vandalism, the school was almost certainly the target.[lii]

ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS LOCATED NEAR POLICE STATIONS OR MILITARY BASES

Around 15% of all attacks on schools documented in this study were on schools within one kilometer of a police station or military base. This amounted to 40 schools that were attacked, some multiple times. These attacks most frequently involved shootouts, and in fewer cases involved explosives planted nearby the school.

In one example, a male teacher at a school located nearby a police station in Norte de Santander shared, *"We were holding a parade for the institution's birthday. The [armed group] carried out an attack on the police and we were in the middle of the crossfire. Shots hit windows and the facade of the institution. The attack lasted approximately 30 minutes."* No students or educators were harmed.[liii]

In another instance, a male head teacher in Norte de Santander shared that explosives were planted 50 meters from his combined-primary and secondary school. He believed the nearby armed forces were the target.[liv]



MILITARY USE OF SCHOOLS

Ninety-three incidents of military use of schools were documented across the four study departments.[lv] These incidents were reported in 86 schools, several of which were used more than once between 2020 and the first half of 2025. Non-state armed groups were reported as the primary perpetrator, although many respondents refused to provide details about the perpetrator.

Armed actors most commonly used schools as a meeting place, base, defensive and firing position, or for the school's facilities and services (e.g., internet, kitchen). Several head teachers also mentioned that the school was on a route often transited by armed actors, so they would sometimes rest at the school or nearby, even if they did not enter the institution.

For instance, a male teacher in Chocó said, *"I was in the school teaching the children when an armed group appeared. They arrived and took over the school…They were heavily armed and asked if I could arrange for the school to be used for a meeting with the community in the afternoon. Since one cannot say no to these people, I told them yes….As soon as they had their meeting, they left the school and the community."*[lvi]

Occupations of schools lasted around 65 consecutive days on average, among cases reported here. As might be expected, the duration of military use tended to vary based on the purpose of the occupation. Some instances of military use lasted only an hour or two; these were typically meetings or instances of armed actors using the internet or kitchen while passing through the area. On the other hand, schools used as a base, camp, or defensive or firing position were generally occupied for longer periods. Head teachers reported that armed actors often began the occupation in the morning or at mid-day, while students were in school.

In some cases, the school remained open while an armed actor camped nearby or used the school for meetings or its services (during the day or at night). The teachers taught students in whatever space remained at the small, rural schools, or they resumed classes after the school had been used the night before. In other cases, the school was completely closed, generally while the armed actor used it as a base or defensive position and while occupying all classrooms.

ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS WHILE OCCUPIED

Around two-thirds of schools occupied by an armed force or group were subsequently attacked by a rival. Specifically, 66 schools were attacked while being used for military purposes, among cases documented in this study.

In one instance, a non-state armed group occupied a primary school far outside town in Nariño department for half the year in 2024. The armed group used the school as a base, causing it to close and students to be transferred. *"One morning at 2 am, another group ambushed them, attacking from both above and below the school. What followed was a long confrontation with the new group, as they managed to push the old one out…eventually establishing control over the area,"* the female head teacher shared.[lvii] The occupation and subsequent shootout damaged teaching materials, toys, the kitchen and bathroom, water tanks, windows, and doors.

In another case, a male teacher from Norte de Santander explained, *"Well, everything started when the Army came to the institution and placed a guard post at the school. So, we believed that this was the reason for the insurgents or the armed group to take reprisals, not against the school, but against the military personnel who were present in the institution. And that's why there were shootouts and gunfights, especially at night, against the public forces, affecting the school's facilities and also surrounding houses … The teachers' house that is near the institution was affected due to the shootouts and the gunfight, it was also hit by bullets that are still in the walls of the house and also, well, of the school."*[lviii]

Military use was about as common in schools in town, or on the outskirts, as in schools located one or more kilometers from town. This finding might be slightly counterintuitive, since occupation of schools by non-state armed groups could be expected in the most rural areas where the state is more likely to be absent. However, at least in this sample of schools, military use also occurred in towns (in rural municipalities), where state forces might be presumed to have greater presence.[lix] Relatedly, longer durations of military use appeared more common in rural areas, while military use in towns was more commonly meetings or quick stops.

ATTACKS ON STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

At least 180 attacks on students and teachers were identified in the four study departments. These attacks were primarily against teachers, although a handful of attacks on students were recorded (primarily threats). Also, around 50 cases of explosives along school routes were documented, which affected both students and teachers. These attacks occurred between 2020 and the first half of 2025.

Explosives were planted along school routes in all four departments. The anti-personnel mines and other explosives affected students, their families, and teachers, who travel by foot, bike, boat, and bus to school. A teacher in a pre-primary and primary school in Chocó shared, *"They placed explosives on the route we travel [to school] with the children. One time they put up a flag, and a child touched it, and shrapnel flew everywhere. That gave us a terrible fright; we had to run him to the hospital."*[lx]

In another example, a male teacher from Norte de Santander said, *"Well, since this route is the main one, the armed groups leave explosives to possibly prevent the passage of military forces or the police. They leave them on the sides of the road or also in cars or motorcycles…risking the lives of the people who travel through, including the students and parents of the institution. The same for the teachers."*[lxi]

In the case of attacks on educators, four teachers were killed (three male and one unknown), four teachers were injured (three of them male), and more than 140 teachers were threatened (slightly more of them male). Aside from explosives, the most frequent forms of violence were shootouts along school routes, and threats and extortion at school, along school routes, and in the teachers' homes. Threats often involved phone calls, Whatsapp messages, and flyers addressed to the particular teacher. In the case of targeted violence or threats, respondents said attacks were directed at teachers who were Indigenous, who were leaders in the teachers' union, and who were perceived by perpetrators to be informants (to rival armed actors).

In one example, a female head teacher in Nariño said, *"After taking this position, I…received threats on two occasions where they requested that administrative changes be made, where they threatened my children, my husband…"* The teacher shared that she reported the attack to the District Attorney's Office (*Fiscalía*) and the department-level Ministry of Education, and that the situation improved after a public statement was made.[lxii]

In an example of extortion over the phone, a female teacher in Chocó said, *"I received a threat while in the classroom…telling me to deposit two or three million pesos for them. So, when I said, 'No, I don't have money and I have to go to [place] to get the money,' right then they told me, 'Ah, well, teacher, if you don't find the money for us, abide by the consequences.' I hung up, after a long time…they sent me some messages telling me that they already knew where my children lived, that they had my family located."*[lxiii] Teachers were targeted for extortion because they are known to receive a regular salary.

CHILD RECRUITMENT

Over 30 cases of school-related child recruitment were documented, affecting at least 100 students. Among the cases reported here, around 80% of the students were male, while 20% were Indigenous and 10% were Afro-Colombian.[lxiv] Many instances involved the recruitment of one student, but some cases included the same armed actor recruiting

three, or up to a dozen, students around the same time.

Head teachers in all four of the study departments reported that recruitment had occurred between 2020 and the first half of 2025, and male and female students were affected in all four departments. Although head teachers did not know the reason for recruitment (or refused to say) in more than half the cases, where available, reasons included for fighting, spying, domestic work, transporting weapons or other material, and in connection to sexual violence.

In one case of recruitment along a school route in Antioquia, a female head teacher said, *"The students walked a long way [to school] and met members of an armed group, who acted as though they were good people, and they walked with them. Then, they recruited the students who looked the strongest."*[lxv]

In another example, in an Indigenous community in Chocó, a male teacher reported that members of an armed group slowly recruited children nearby the school. He said, *"They arrived, they gave them five thousand pesos to convince the boys, that's why seven of them entered their ranks due to the money that they are going around giving. When they arrived, they stayed for a week to give away candy and toys to convince them. Some are their spies, informing them if a leader or teacher speaks ill about the group."*[lxvi]

In other cases, members of armed groups targeted girls around the age of 15 on their route to school. The armed group members used their position to pressure the girls to be their "girlfriends," a method used to recruit female students over time.

Recruitment along school routes at a point nearby the school was the most common location reported. However, head teachers also reported that students were recruited along school routes closer to home and via social media. Recruitment at the school while classes were in session was not documented in the study.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Three incidents of sexual violence were identified in this study, occurring between 2020 and the first half of 2025. In one instance, a female teacher on her way to school in Norte de Santander was sexually harassed by an armed actor, who exposed himself. The teacher reported that she suffered anxiety afterwards, and was afraid at night. A security protocol was activated after the incident, and the teacher was transferred to another municipality.

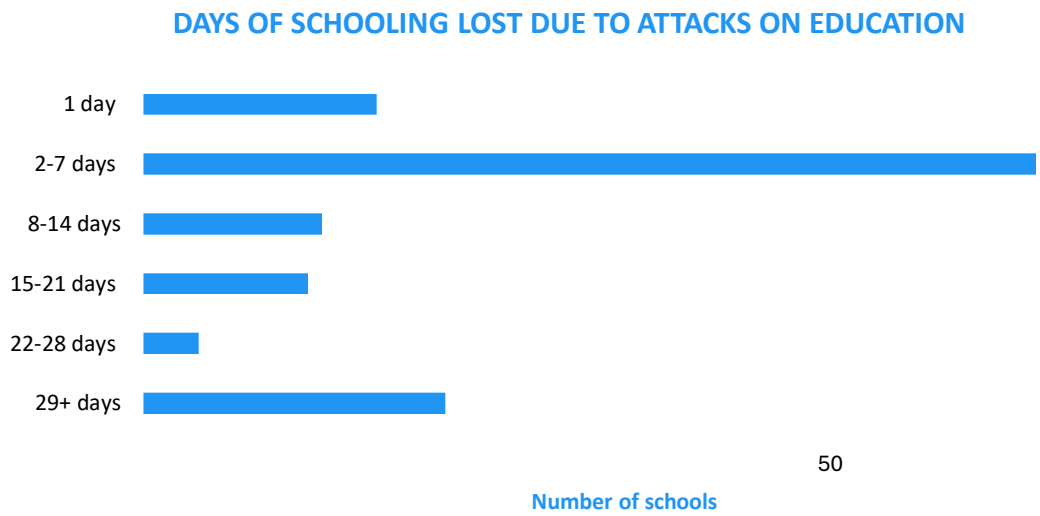
IMPACTS OF ATTACKS ON EDUCATION

School administrators and teachers reported far-reaching impacts of attacks on education. In addition to killings and injuries, impacts included damage to school infrastructure and closures, disruptions to attendance, psychological distress, and a decline in education quality. Moreover, attacks on education differentially affected certain groups and institutions, such as female students, students with disabilities, and schools attended by Indigenous students.

DAMAGE TO SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLOSURES

Head teachers at more than 15% of attacked schools reported limited or moderate damage to the institution. Damage included bullet holes in school walls, broken windows and doors, and collapsed roofs, as well as damaged water tanks, electrical hookups, and educational materials. Unlike in other contexts where missile strikes or arson are more common, schools were relatively less damaged in Colombia since the attacks included extortion, threats, and nearby shootouts, which may not have caused damage.

In the case of school occupations, head teachers of around 10% of occupied schools reported that the building sustained limited or moderate damage that required repairs, especially to windows, doors, and kitchen appliances.[lxvii] Speaking about his school being used to camp, a male head teacher in Nariño reported, *"They entered through the window, took out the supplies from the school restaurant, panela, rice, everything there was. They used the bathrooms as their own bathrooms to shower, to clean themselves. They left it very dirty, disorganized, with all kinds of cigarette packs, tuna cans, and condoms. That is, it was horrendous. And one has to get there to clean up the next day before the children arrive and check if there are any risks [for the children]."*[lxviii]



Head teachers reported more than 2,800 days of school closures due to attacks on education, among schools included in the survey. On average, schools were closed around a week at a time – with longer closures due to damage from an attack on the school, or if the school was used for military purposes, and shorter closures in the case of violence along school routes or attacks on teachers. After an attack, primary schools, rural schools, and schools attended by Indigenous students were the slowest to re-open.

When schools closed after attacks or due to military use, only slightly more than half of the students continued learning, for instance through virtual classes or study guides.

DISRUPTIONS TO ATTENDANCE AND TEACHER RESIGNATIONS

Around 10% of students at impacted schools began attending less frequently or dropped out after an attack, with female students slightly more likely to drop out than their male peers. After an attack, caregivers more frequently kept female students home as a protection measure, since the violence was perceived to be more dangerous for them, according to head teachers. Several respondents noted that female students showed significant psychological and emotional distress after attacks, particularly as they were seen as more open to showing vulnerability than their male peers.

Students with disabilities also appeared more likely to drop out after attacks. Head teachers in several schools reported that caregivers more frequently kept students with disabilities home after attacks, or withdrew them entirely, for their safety. The students were seen to be at greater risk due to perceived vulnerabilities, such as challenges understanding the situation, mobility limitations, or barriers to communication, depending on their disability. Speaking about a student with a disability compared to his peers, one male teacher in Nariño said, *"He was more affected, he was more afraid, and then his parents withdrew him from school out of fear."*[lxix]

Some teachers were also absent after attacks or resigned out of fear. Head teachers reported that, after around 15% of attacks on education, at least one teacher stopped working at the school or requested a transfer. For instance, a female teacher in Antioquia said, *"I requested the transfer because of the emotional distress that...the sexual harassment from the paramilitary chief caused, I received it [the transfer] only three months later."*[lxx]

In the case of threats or attacks directed at teachers (rather than the school), teachers appeared even more likely to resign, particularly male teachers, among respondents to the survey directed at educators. Although this relationship was not directly explored, it may be because male teachers were more likely to receive direct and credible threats or they were perceived as more of a challenge by armed actors.

IMPACT ON PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

Around 25% of educators who experienced an attack reported significant signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, among respondents to the survey directed at teachers. This included disturbing or unwanted memories or dreams, loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed, difficulty concentrating, and being extra alert, among others. Female teachers were slightly more likely to report these signs than their male colleagues, among survey respondents. One male institutional coordinator said, *"Many teachers were in constant fear, and three female teachers were admitted to hospital due to a nervous breakdown."*[lxxi]

Following an attack, approximately 10% of teachers were offered or provided with psychosocial support services, among respondents to the survey directed at teachers. Teachers mentioned that the services were provided by the Ministry of Education, the public health plan (*Entidades Promotoras de Salud*), Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (*Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar*), NGOs, and religious organizations. About half of the teachers reported that the services were effective or otherwise satisfactory.

Students also experienced psychological distress after attacks. Head teachers reported that, where possible, students were provided mental health support, with more male students receiving the

support than their female peers, among schools included in the study.

IMPACT ON EDUCATION QUALITY AND LEARNING

Attacks on education impacted educational quality and learning, in the study sample. Nearly two-thirds of head teachers reported a decline in teaching quality after their school or staff was attacked. Teachers were distracted and unable to focus on their lessons, experienced memory loss, or were constantly on alert. A male head teacher in Norte de Santander shared that education quality declined because some of his colleagues, *"...had panic attacks. One does not prepare the class well or teach normally when one is on high alert."*[lxxii]

In addition, nearly 20% of students at impacted schools struggled to learn after an attack, according to head teachers surveyed.

In the case of school closures due to an attack, students received learning guides or other material to study at home in slightly more than half of the incidents documented in this study. Specifically, a lower percentage of head teachers in Chocó (46%) and Norte de Santander (43%) reported that students were sent home with learning materials or received other distance support after an attack, compared to Antioquia and Nariño (over half). Many teachers considered these guides ineffective for students' learning, however, especially for the youngest who needed more support. One male teacher in Nariño said, *"We taught using study guides and that is not the same, the development of activities and the teaching-learning process in general are greatly affected."*[lxxiii] When paired with the loss of classroom structure, socialization, and experiential learning, teachers were certain students fell behind due to closures.

NORMALIZATION OF CONFLICT

Despite the above, some head teachers also stated that the educators and students at their schools had grown used to armed conflict. Since the violence around them had been normalized, students appeared not to be affected in some cases, and teaching and learning continued.

For instance, head teachers in certain areas mentioned that they and staff had grown used to the presence of armed actors in or near their schools, since it happened with such regularity. A male teacher from Chocó reported that armed actors repeatedly used his school as a temporary base. *"I truthfully got tired of waiting, and that's how it came to pass that on more than one occasion they'd stop for four, five, six days and wouldn't leave,"* he shared. *"So, I had to take the students and leave, teaching them in the community [instead]."*[lxxiv]

PREVENTION AND RESPONSE

Head teachers reported varied experiences responding to attacks on education and working towards their prevention. They also shared their perceptions of justice and ideas for better protecting schools, students, and staff.

When attacks on schools occurred, teachers reported following protocols or their best judgment to secure their classrooms by closing doors and windows, while instructing students to remain calm and avoid running. Some noted that their own fear was tempered by their prior experiences or training, and a focused determination to reassure and protect the children.

STEPS TAKEN TO PREVENT ATTACKS ON EDUCATION OR VACATE ARMED ACTORS FROM SCHOOLS

- A female teacher in an Indigenous community in Nariño shared the united approach taken to limit school-related recruitment. She said, *"United, all the Indigenous leaders from the territory go to speak with armed groups so they will not take the young boys and girls away from the communities (resguardos)."*

- A female teacher in Norte de Santander described a community-armed group understanding to safeguard schools. She said, *"Now there is an understanding between the [armed] groups and the community, that of not attacking or affecting the students, the teachers, and especially the [school] building. This understanding was created with the purpose of protecting the children who attend the school, it is the only thing that has been achieved."*

- A male teacher in Norte de Santander shared how he asked a member of an armed group to vacate the school, despite significant risks. He said, *"[The armed group was] distributing propaganda materials. The school, as I say, does not have a fence. I...was heading to a classroom when one of their actors came in. He was coming with a rifle in hand and with propaganda and I told him, you cannot enter the school either armed or in uniform. If you want to enter the school, well, you have to change clothes and leave the weapons outside. And the guy looked at me like that and said, excuse me, teacher. And he left."*

- To move a nearby Army camp, a female teacher in Nariño reported it to her superiors. She shared, *"Last year...the Army...set up their camps very close to the school. And this represented an imminent risk, well, of something that could happen. During these dates, the parents would not send the children to the school. I had to deliver the study guides to them so that they could learn at home. Seeing this situation, well, the director's office was informed so that they would communicate with the mayor and that he, in turn, would arrange it so that they would not set up these camps close to the school."*

- A female teacher in Norte de Santander explained the security protocol they put in place to report an attack along school routes as soon as possible, if needed. She says, *"We [teachers] are in touch and keep each other informed on the road. We only inform the director or coordinator if we will not arrive on time...if we do not manage to arrive at the established time, they carry out the process [of reporting an attack] should it be needed."*

In limited cases, head teachers or communities were able to successfully avoid violence or ask armed actors to vacate schools. In around 40% of school occupations included in this study, a teacher requested that the armed actor leave the school – a request that, if made, was more often successful than not. Educators also put measures in place to report violence if it occurred.

Among schools that had *not* experienced attacks on education (but were in conflict-affected or insecure areas), around 30% of head teachers reported having taken no steps to increase the safety of the schools, students, or teachers. Among the approximately 70% of schools that had, the most common steps were locks on the doors, gates, informal early-warning systems, and evacuation drills.

POST-ATTACK RESPONSES TO KEEP SCHOOLS SAFER

Among schools that reported attacks on the facilities, students, or teachers, or military use, only slightly more than 10% received a response of any type to keep the school safer from future attacks or insecurity. Head teachers reported that, when responses occurred, the actors most frequently involved were the communities, including the Community Action Boards (*Juntas de Acción Comunal*), education administrators, department-level Ministries of Education, Indigenous defense groups, NGOs, and the military.
The most common responses to keep schools safer were installing gates or locks on doors, establishing evacuation drills, setting up formal or informal early-notification systems, and the presence of Indigenous guards or the military. Some other responses included community dialogues about the right to education, public campaigns to raise awareness about recruitment along school routes, carrying identification cards, and updating school risk-mitigation plans. More than half of head teachers thought the response was sufficient, among those whose schools received a response to increase safety.

As discussed above, other responses to attacks included school repairs in some cases, as well as some students and teachers receiving psychosocial or other support.

REPORTING ATTACKS ON EDUCATION

Around 30% of attacks were reported in an effort to seek justice, among those documented in this study. Aside from reporting the attack to the director of the educational institution, the most common avenues educators chose for reporting were the municipal government, the departmental government, the police, the district attorney's office, the Department of Protection of Citizens' Rights (*Defensoría del Pueblo*), and community leaders. These results seem to reflect Colombia's administrative structure, in which the departments are responsible for the operations of the education sector; since head teachers' and directors' regular point of contact is the departmental and municipal governments, turning to them would be routine when reporting an attack on education.

Among head teachers who said they reported the attack, the most common reasons for doing so were to prevent future attacks, to request that authorities provide protection, and to ask for guidance. In the case of the survey directed at teachers, educators also reported the violence to seek safe relocation to another municipality.

Among head teachers who said they did *not* report the attack, the most common reasons given were general fear, fear of reprisals against themselves, their families, or their communities, as well as mistrust of the government. Some noted that other teachers who had reported incidents had been threatened or killed. Another common reason provided was the normalization of the armed conflict. A male teacher in Norte de Santander said, *"It is something commonplace in the region,"* in reference to an attack on education.[lxxv] Meanwhile, in Indigenous communities, teachers shared that community leaders may be informed of attacks but not report them any further, since doing so can lead to reprisals from the perpetrator or otherwise create risks.

More than 90% of head teachers who reported the attack either said the perpetrator was not held accountable or that they did not know what happened in the case. Speaking about extortion, a female teacher in Chocó shared, *"I went to the District Attorney's office and filed the complaint.*

After a long while, they responded to me that they had not caught anyone."[lxxvi]

In a limited number of cases, in response to a report, head teachers said education or municipal authorities made a visit, the police or military were deployed to the area, or meetings were convened with instructions for providing education in emergency situations.

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF JUSTICE

In the rural municipalities where this study took place, head teachers reported that the main actor providing justice in their communities was the Community Action Boards and Indigenous community leaders, followed by armed groups, police, and Indigenous defense groups.[lxxvii] Some respondents also reported that no actor was providing justice in the area.

The actors who head teachers reported the most trust in to effectively investigate attacks on education were the department-level Ministries of Education and Community Action Boards or Indigenous leaders, followed by the military, police, and district attorney's office.

A majority of head teachers said that they had "a little" or "some" trust in the court system to reach fair and impartial verdicts in cases related to attacks on education.

TEACHERS' CALLS FOR ACTION

Teachers shared various activities, policies, and programs they thought could be used to prevent attacks on schools, students and staff, and to avoid military use of educational institutions.[lxxviii] However, they also stressed the difficulty of addressing attacks on education, given uneven state presence, budgetary constraints, and the coordination required between levels of government and across government agencies.

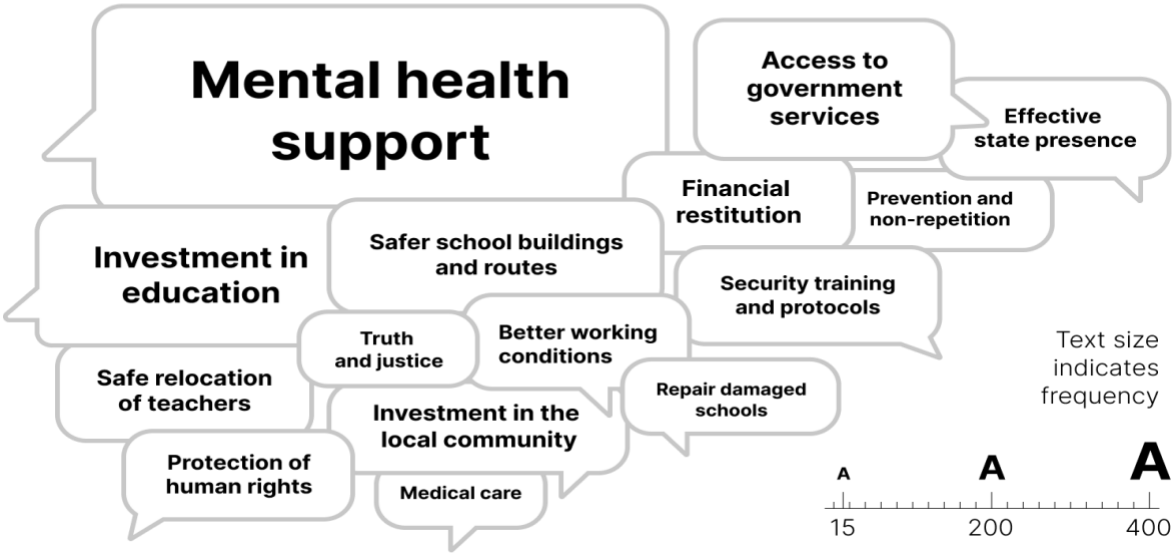
Some of these strategies have been organized into the table below. They are combined, but certain strategies are more relevant for preventing certain attack types; for instance, attacks on schools might be better prevented by building walls, while teachers may be better protected by safe relocation to a different municipality.

Head teachers also shared what restitution they thought schools, students, and teachers who were attacked or experienced direct violence should receive as part of Colombia's peace process. Teachers most frequently mentioned mental health and psychosocial support, investment in education, safer school buildings and routes, access to government services, financial restitution, and protection of human rights, among other forms of restitution.

PREVENTION AND RESPONSE STRATEGIES	
National	• Investment in education, social services, and community development • Interinstitutional dialogue and working groups to support the monitoring and reporting of attacks on education and prevention and response efforts • Continued dissemination of the Comprehensive School Risk Management and Education in Emergencies Policy • Campaigns to promote schools as safe, conflict-free spaces
Community	• Promote impartiality of education and the right to education within communities (and by extension with armed groups, in some cases) so schools and teachers are not viewed as part of the conflict (e.g., through community discussions) • Dialogue and awareness raising with armed groups so they recognize education is not part of the conflict, in line with international humanitarian law • Establish informal or formal early-warning systems to notify schools, teachers, and authorities in case of the outbreak of violence, including along school routes, to keep students from harm • Establish formal early-warning systems to notify caregivers to keep students home in case of the outbreak of violence • Regular communication with Indigenous leaders
School	• Relocate police stations and military bases away from schools • Increase presence of police and military in the area (but *not* in the immediate vicinity of the school) • Hire private security guards • Build safer infrastructure (e.g., fences, walls, security cameras, bars on windows, locks on doors) • Provide safety supplies (e.g., first-aid kits) • Provide technical support in risk reduction and violence prevention for rural and conflict-affected schools, including with a focus on gender and at-risk communities • Establish security protocols for the school to follow in the case of an attack • Run evacuation drills and drills for taking shelter • Further develop and implement flexible at-home learning support to use after an attack, including tools and guides that do not require internet or phone service, to ensure continued learning and to minimize student dropout
School routes	• Mine removal and safety (e.g., warning signs, mine awareness, risk education) • Safe transportation for teachers and students to and from school (e.g., traveling in groups, safe busing or boating)

Teachers and students	• Trainings for teachers about steps to take if an attack occurs (e.g., how to communicate with the perpetrator, how to keep self and students safe and calm, how to contact authorities) • Establish security protocols for teachers, students, and families to follow in the case of an attack, including at home (e.g., to keep students home if there is an attack at school or along school routes) • Safe, speedy relocation of teachers when threatened or after an attack • Support groups for teachers living in contexts of violence, including virtual meetings or mutual-support through messaging apps • Provision of psychosocial and other support services for students and teachers who survived an attack or who are living in contexts of violence; the support should be multi-session and long-term, as needed • Promote self-care and psychological wellbeing sessions for teachers (e.g., active pauses, relaxation spaces, and journaling) • Identification cards for teachers • Awareness campaigns for students about possible violence and dangers in the area, including recruitment along school routes • Conflict-sensitive pedagogy for students

TEACHERS' VOICES



CONCLUSION

This study documented over 600 attacks on education across four Colombian departments, occurring between 2020 and the first half of 2025, alongside innovative prevention and response measures to safeguard learning, including safer school infrastructure and early-warning systems. The impacts of attacks on education included damage to schools, student drop out, and lowered education quality, with female students, students with disabilities, and schools attended by Indigenous students differentially affected. Educators expressed the most trust in department-level Ministries of Education and Community Action Boards or Indigenous leaders when reporting attacks on education for purposes of justice. Finally, teachers made calls for action to better protect schools, students, and educators, such as providing mental health support, security protocols and trainings, and safe and speedy relocation of teachers after threats.

This study touched on several topics that merit further research in Colombia. Among them are the use of drones in attacks on schools, the use of social media to recruit students into armed groups, and whether schools without a legal title to the land (20% in this sample) are less likely to receive repairs or other support after an attack.

Recommendations based on data from this study were presented at the top of the report. Teachers' voices should be at the center of developing education sector plans to prevent and respond to attacks on education.

ENDNOTES

[i] Survey respondent #70
[ii] Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), *Education under Attack 2024*, June 2024, p 13.
[iii] GCPEA, *Education under Attack 2024*, June 2024, p 11.
[iv] GCPEA, *Education under Attack 2024*, June 2024, p 79.
[v] GCPEA, "Non-State Armed Groups and Attacks on Education: Exploring Trends and Practices to Curb Violations," September 2023, p 21; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "Ukraine's children find strength, shelter in subway schools," May 25, 2022.
[vi] GCPEA, "Enhancing Accountability for Attacks on Education: Guidance on Investigating and Prosecuting Education-Related Crimes," January 2025, pp 17-18.
[vii] In more detail, GCPEA defines attacks on education as "any threatened or actual use of force against students, teachers, academics, education support and transport staff (e.g., janitors, bus drivers), education officials, buildings, resources, or facilities (including school buses)." Perpetrators of attacks include: "armed forces, law enforcement, and other state security entities, including state intelligence, as well as associated entities such as paramilitary groups or paramilitary police." GCPEA, *Education under Attack 2024*, June 2024, p 79.
[viii] GCPEA, *Education under Attack 2024*, June 2024, p 28.
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[xlv] GCPEA data could not be used as a sampling frame because incidents were shared at the municipal-level (rather than school-level), and because GCPEA had collected relatively few incidents of attacks on education through media and other reports (around 200 over two years).
[xlvi] Severity scales for municipalities were used from the Education Cluster (humanitarian population needs), supported by similar scales from the Protection Cluster, with a focus on children.
[xlvii] A unique feature of education in Colombia is that, in general, one or more smaller schools (*sedes*) are typically organized under a larger, or main, educational institution (*principal*). All of these units were treated equally in the sampling.
[xlviii] For anonymity purposes, the data provided by GCPEA was disaggregated only to the municipal level (i.e., did not include school names or addresses), so could not be used as a sampling frame. Also, GCPEA had identified relatively few attacks on education and one purpose of the study was to identify others.
[xlix] TIER IRB protocol number: 52504081
[l] Survey respondent #466
[li] Survey respondent #158
[lii] The indiscriminate nature of some attacks on schools is distinct from other attacks documented in this study, such as military use, attacks on teachers, and school-related child recruitment and sexual violence, in which the school or person was generally the target of the violence or harm.
[liii] Survey respondent #63
[liv] Survey respondent #147
[lv] In this study, military use includes only schools (rather than universities, vocational training centers, or other institutions), because those were the only educational institutions sampled. Results should not be interpreted to mean that there are no attacks on universities in these departments (in fact, such attacks have been reported in GCPEA's *Education under Attack* report series).
[lvi] Survey respondent #417
[lvii] Survey respondent #454
[lviii] Survey respondent #147
[lix] As mentioned in the methodology section, the schools in the sample are in rural municipalities. Around 36% of the sampled schools were one or more kilometers away from the nearest town. Although the findings should be interpreted with care, it is unlikely that the finding that a significant number of schools in town were used for military purposes was the result of sampling alone.
[lx] Survey respondent #274
[lxi] Survey respondent #7
[lxii] Survey respondent #365
[lxiii] Survey respondent #380
[lxiv] Head teachers reported no students as identifying as LGBTQ+, and no connection between targeting for recruitment and students being LGBTQ+ was identified.
[lxv] Survey respondent #445
[lxvi] Survey respondent #116
[lxvii] Although the survey includes relevant questions, no direct connection between military use and child recruitment was identified. In particular, most child recruitment recorded in the survey occurred en route to school. However, there are a small number of reports of child recruitment inside or nearby schools, though the armed actor did not appear to be using the school or camped nearby at the time.
[lxviii] Survey respondent #432
[lxix] Survey respondent #54
[lxx] Survey respondent #171
[lxxi] Survey respondent #64
[lxxii] Survey respondent #75
[lxxiii] Survey respondent #459

[lxxiv] Respondent # 373
[lxxv] Survey respondent #73
[lxxvi] Survey respondent #380
[lxxvii] This section shares survey results from all head teachers in the sample – both those who reported an attack on their school, students, teachers, or military use *and* those who reported no such attack.
[lxxviii] This section shares survey results from all head teachers in the sample – both those who reported an attack on their school, students, teachers, or military use *and* those who reported no such attack.