



COLOMBIA CASE STUDY

Global Thematic Review on Education

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This Case Study focuses on:

- A context in which residential education settings are seen as entirely separate from residential care and fall under the regional Secretariats of Education.
- A geographically challenging environment with remote rural communities.

INTRODUCTION

Residential education forms part of the Colombian government's strategy to provide education in remote and rural areas.^{1,2} In 2022 there were 34,114 students in residential education settings known as 'school residences' in Colombia, 2,646 of which were based in Guaviare in mostly rural areas.³ **In Colombia, the term 'school residences' is used to describe the residential part of a school, where students access accommodation and meals while attending the connected school.**

Guaviare is a department in the southern central Amazon region of Colombia, comprising vast areas of sparsely populated terrain including large areas of dense rainforest, and few urban areas. The region has historically faced periods of violence and instability from the presence of various illegal armed groups including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), often related to coca farming in the region.⁴ There have been reports of forced recruitment of children and adolescents by armed groups in Guaviare, alongside warnings of such risks issued by local authorities.^{5,6} School residences are often seen by families and communities as offering students greater protection from the effects of armed conflict – including forced recruitment, landmines and displacement – than they would receive at home with their families;⁷ and simply being in school may help protect students from forced recruitment.⁸ However, illegal armed groups have also been known to recruit children from school residences.⁹

FINDINGS

EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE ARE DRIVERS OF INSTITUTIONALISATION

In 1959, a rural school boarding programme was proposed to promote the social and economic rehabilitation of the regions affected by political violence, and to raise the level of education in rural areas of Colombia.¹⁰ In 2018, the Government of Colombia made a step towards reforming this system, indicating the desire to ensure the “transformation of current boarding schools into school residences.”¹¹ In Guaviare, as in other areas of Colombia, the government’s rural education strategy provides access to education for children from rural communities who may otherwise be unable to attend school due to the long distances between their homes and the nearest schools,¹² challenges often exacerbated by the difficult terrain, inadequate road infrastructure and limited transport options.

It is commendable that the government has put in place such a strategy to increase children’s access to education. However, many school residences are characterised by an institutional culture which, for instance, isolates children from their communities and fails to provide individualised care due to high child-to-carer ratios (discussed below).¹³

Importantly, although a lack of schools close to children’s homes was key driver of admissions,¹⁴ a number of other social and economic drivers were found, including:

- access to food (reported by 38 schools/84%)
- a need for childcare while parents worked (reported by 35 schools/78%)
- access to basic non-educational services (reported by 32 schools/71%)
- protection from violence within the community (reported by 26 schools/58%).¹⁵

Indigenous students were more likely to be admitted, at least in part, for economic reasons (21.9%) than their non-indigenous peers (8%).

The range of preventable social and economic drivers likely reflects the high levels of need and multidimensional poverty affecting many families,^{16,17} and suggests that state-funded residential schools are used to help meet the broader social protection needs of vulnerable families. This may explain why over three-quarters of the students sampled came from less than 25 km away from their school residence, and over a quarter from less than 10 km away.

MEETING CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO EDUCATION CAN UNDERMINE THEIR OTHER FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

Right to education and the conflict with other fundamental rights

The Political Constitution of Colombia sets out children's right to access education (Article 67). It also sets out their right to a family life without separation from their family, and to safety and security (Article 44)¹⁸ – rights which are undermined for many children in school residences. These rights are also, of course, protected for children in Colombia through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), namely in Article 28 which protects a child's right to education, Article 6 which protects a child's right to life, survival and development, Article 19 which protects a child's right to protection from violence, and Articles 7, 9, and 18 which together protect a child's right to a family life.

While the use of school residences undoubtedly enables many children from rural areas to participate in schooling in Colombia where otherwise they would not, this approach comes at a price.

While children are accessing their right to an education, they are being denied their right to grow up and thrive within families – the essential units which would typically provide them with the care, nurture, socialisation and protection needed for healthy development.¹⁹

The current systems in place in Colombia place these two rights in conflict, leaving families with difficult choices.

Right to a family life

For many children in school residences, long distances and poor communication infrastructure prevent regular contact with their families. School residences are often far away from the communities they serve; over half of those surveyed reported having students that travelled over 25 km to reach the school, with the longest distance reported as being 305 km. Reported journey times ranged from 25 minutes to ten hours. Many regions lack transportation between students' homes and schools – although this is provided by the local government in some regions – and roads can be impassable due to poor infrastructure and flooding.

"Sometimes parents, due to the conditions, struggle having their children back home every eight days, or every month. Sometimes children go much longer without seeing their families because some of them live really far away." (Representative of local government department)

While a number of children did manage regular face-to-face contact with their families, for others it was infrequent and was compounded by a lack of telephone and internet connection in many rural communities. Staff in six school residences (13% of those surveyed) reported cases of children who did not visit their families at all during the school year due to the long distances, a lack of transportation or funds for the journey, and children's stated desire to stay at the school residence to access food and basic services.

There was an overrepresentation of students from ethnic minority groups, from indigenous communities in particular, in the school residences.²⁰ They were less likely to have frequent contact with their families and more likely to be in classes intended for children younger than themselves, arguably demonstrating a breach of children's UNCRC Article 2 right to non-discrimination.

These challenges inevitably make it difficult for many families to play a meaningful part in their children's everyday lives, supporting them to develop, or simply enjoying spending time with them as they grow. All of this means that children's enjoyment of their right to family life is fundamentally compromised: not only are children unable to maintain regular, meaningful contact with their families but they are also living in an impersonal environment lacking the types of care that can only be provided in family environments.

Rights to life, survival and development, safety and security, and protection from violence

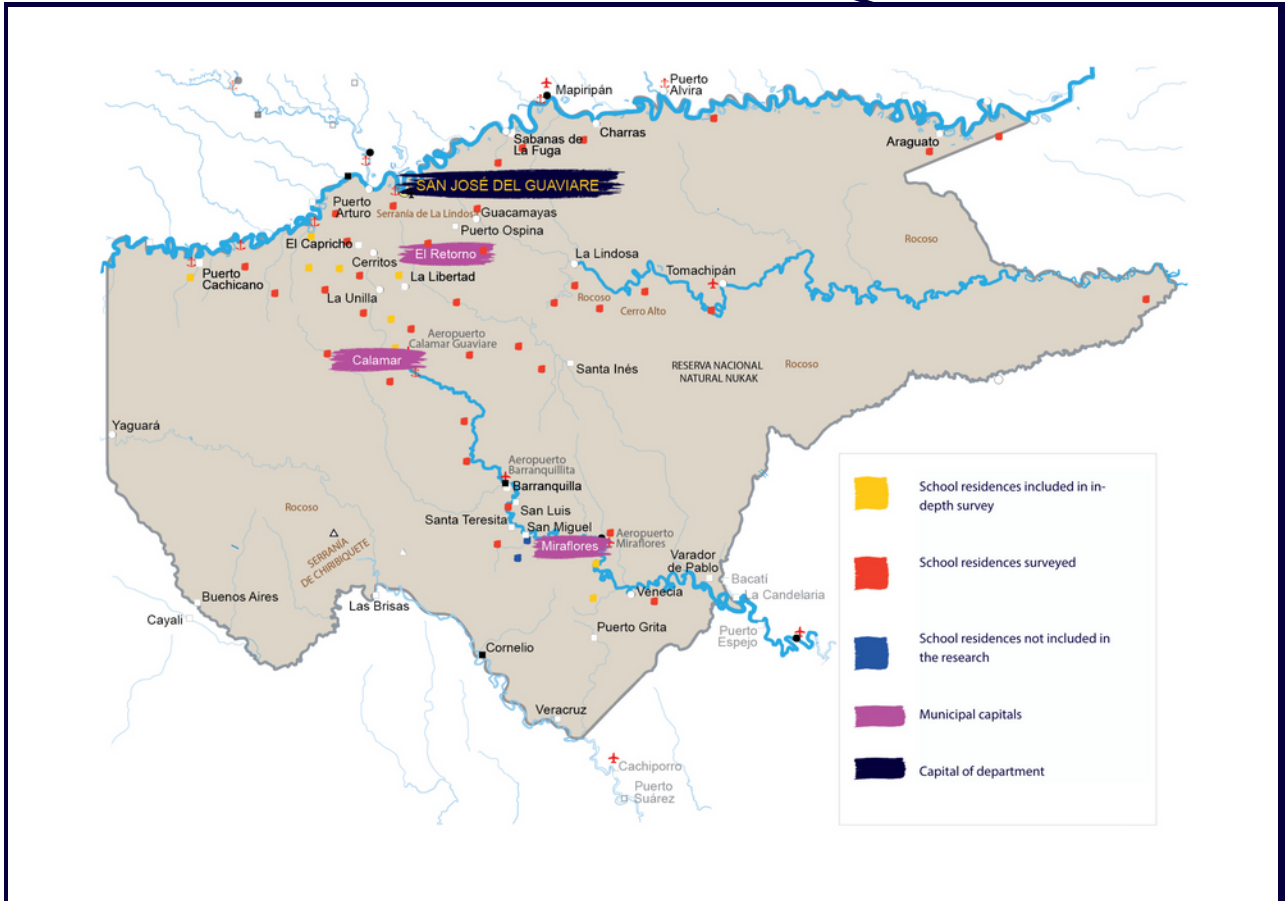
As stated above, children in Colombia have the rights to life, survival and development, safety and security, and protection from violence. Lumos research has highlighted that all of these rights can be severely compromised for children living in school residences. In some school residences, children's rights to health (UN CRC Article 24) and to an adequate standard of living (UN CRC Article 27) were also impacted.

- **Some school residences housed large numbers of students, sometimes without gender and age segregation, with insufficient numbers of staff.** The largest school residence housed 173 students, and student-to-staff ratios ranged from 9:1 to 98:1 across the residences. With families often far away and communication often limited, low staffing levels inevitably posed risks to students' development and wellbeing.
- **Very young children are living in school residences.** In Guaviare in 2022, 101 pre-primary aged children (aged 4-6) and 1,011 primary aged children were enrolled in school residences.^{21,22} These residences are not designed to cater for younger children, and as such they are unlikely to offer the age-appropriate education, facilities, resources or focused one-on-one attention essential for their development, safety and wellbeing.²³ Younger children were housed alongside unrelated older children and young adults in 78% of the school residences, creating additional safeguarding risks, particularly given that staff oversight is inevitably compromised when student-to-staff ratios are higher.
- **Safeguarding mechanisms are lacking.** Almost half of the school residences did not have risk management plans in place, and over a third did not have the legally required mechanisms for the prevention and management of violence and sexual abuse.
- **Over a fifth of staff in school residences did not receive inductions or training when they joined.** Inductions for new staff, together with initial and ongoing training in safeguarding and other practical aspects of their roles, are integral to ensuring safe, high-quality services for children.
- **Lack of external services and protection mechanisms.** These risks are compounded by the remote location of many school residences (Graphic 1.1). It takes over an hour to travel to the nearest town from 28 of the school residences (62% of those surveyed), with travel times ranging from 1.5 hours to two days.²⁴ This means that timely external support would be difficult for many children to access if a problem or incident were to occur. For example, 16 school residences (36%) reported that Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) child protection programmes or services were not available in their area, and almost two-thirds of residential schools had no health centre in

their local area.

- **Children and adolescents are exposed to recruitment and conflict by armed groups while living in school residences.** One fifth of school residences had been affected by armed conflict, including clashes between, and recruitment into, illegal armed groups. Grouping children and adolescents in school residences in remote areas may facilitate the forced recruitment of children and adolescents in larger numbers.

Graphic 1.1: Map of Colombia and the municipality of San José del Guaviare



EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE CAN PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES TO PROGRESS CARE REFORM

The 2018-2022 government administration included a strategy, "Pact for Colombia, Pact for Equity" within its National Development Plan,²⁵ which included objectives for improving rural education. Proposed developments included improving physical conditions within school residences, engaging families more in children's education, and introducing much-needed regulations within the system.

Investment in school residences, for example to improve the ratios of staff-to-students and provide age- and gender-segregated spaces, may help to mitigate some of the risks mentioned above but it cannot overcome the problem that this model of education separates children from their families and communities, perpetuating the harms that derive from ongoing separation and violating their right to a family life. Furthermore, investment in institutions has been shown to disincentivise eventual closure or transformation of institutions and use resources which could otherwise be used to develop family and community-based care and services.²⁶

It is also important to consider that in 2020, more than three times as much government funding was allocated just to providing meals and staff supervision in the school residences than was spent on funding for education across Guaviare (including teachers' salaries and running the schools themselves).²⁷ As residential services tend to be less cost-effective than non-residential ones,²⁸ if this money was instead invested in non-residential services then education could be strengthened and bolstered across the region.

However, as long as the drivers of admissions continue to exist, children will continue to be separated from their families as their right to access education is prioritised over their right to a family life. Strong coordination and joint planning between government ministries including education, social welfare (the ICBF), health, and social prosperity,²⁹ NGOs and other stakeholders within the system, is required to address the range of social and educational factors which drive admissions.

The Government of Colombia is currently embarking on a care reform agenda led by the ICBF and involving stakeholders from across government ministries and other key stakeholders. This provides a great opportunity to ensure integration between reforms to education and the protection system.³⁰ The government's drive to improve rural education and its commitment to care reform must not be siloed but instead viewed as complementary, with accessible education and the reforms that enable it, considered within the wider ecosystem of services for children and families. The effectiveness of such an integrated, systems-wide approach is illustrated in the **Moldova Case Study**, which forms part of this research pack.

CONCLUSIONS

- **Educational policy and practice are drivers of institutionalisation.** School residences form part of the government’s strategy to enable children to access education in remote and rural areas where many do not have access to schools close to home.
- **Social and economic drivers also cause children to enter school residences: these non-educational drivers, such as access to food, and a lack of access to childcare for working parents** may also, at least in part, explain why children living much closer to the residences in question attended them.
- **School residences are both an enabler and barrier to children’s rights as enshrined in both Colombian law and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.** While children are accessing their right to an education, they are being denied their right to grow up and thrive within a family unit. In some cases other rights are also being negatively impacted in school residences, including children’s rights to protection from violence and to life, survival and development. **Children’s rights to safety and security are undermined** by the conditions within school residences and a lack of effective safeguarding mechanisms, and by their isolation from external health and child protection services.
- **Educational policy and practice can provide an opportunity for care reform. Working collaboratively, the protection system and education sectors can plan and implement integrated reforms to tackle the reasons why children are separated from their families and ensure valuable funds are invested wisely.** The nascent care reform process led by the ICBF provides a perfect opportunity to do this. Many residential stays could be prevented if additional support was provided to families, for example with transport to schools or to after-school childcare – to address the social factors for admission. Given that community-based support services are often more cost-effective to run than residential services, this could also mean that valuable funds could be used more efficiently to support greater numbers of students.

METHODOLOGY

This case study is based on a study carried out by Lumos, with input from the Colombian Ministry of Education and the Education Secretariat in Guaviare, between 2019 and 2020.^{31, 32} The research team visited 41 of Guaviare's 45 school residences to administer surveys with staff; telephone interviews or interviews in alternative locations were used in the remaining four residences due to access challenges. The surveys focused on resident and semi-resident students (students who take meals at the school residence but do not sleep there), as opposed to day students. They also looked at the school residences themselves and the services available to resident students.

ENDNOTES

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3. Ibid.
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8. Norwegian Refugee Council (2016). Colombia: Education is key to end the violence [webpage]. <https://www.nrc.no/news/2016/des/colombia-education-will-be-key-to-end-the-violence/>
9. Charles, M. (21 May 2020). Abducted, brainwashed and plied with alcohol: Farc's child soldiers. The Telegraph. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/abducted-brainwashed-pliedwith-alcohol-farcs-child-soldiers/> [accessed 20 Aug 2020].
10. Ministerio de Educación Nacional, Corporación Opción Legal, Consejo Noruego para los Refugiados & UNICEF (2013). Diagnóstico Situación de los Internados Escolares en Colombia.
11. Departamento Nacional de Planeación (DNP) (2019). Bases del Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2018-2020 [Bases of the National Development Plan 2018-2020]. <https://colaboracion.dnp.gov.co/CDT/Prensa/BasesPND2018-2022n.pdf> [accessed 19 Jul 2023].
12. Ministerio de Educación Nacional. Plan Especial de Educación Rural [Special Rural Education Plan]. op.cit.
13. There are numerous definitions of what the term 'institution' means when referring to children, but based on agreed international definitions, an institution can be defined as any residential setting where an 'institutional culture' exists. This includes at least one (often more) of the following features that evidence shows can harm children, including: Children are separated from their families and raised by personnel who are paid to care for them, and who usually work shifts, children lack the opportunity to form a healthy emotional attachment to one or two primary caregivers, contact with the birth and extended family is not actively enabled, encouraged or supported, and may even be discouraged, care is generally impersonal and the needs of the organisation come before the individual needs of the child, large numbers of unrelated children live together in the same building or compound and the setting is isolated from the broader community and exists outside the broader community (for example, using high walls or fences, barbed wire, guards on the gate, and on-site education meaning children lack opportunities to access the community through school).
14. A lack of schools close to children's home was reported as a reason for admission in 93% (42) of the school residences surveyed.
15. Additionally, 6% of the children came from families forcibly displaced by armed conflict, and 5% were admitted for protection from armed conflict.
16. OCHA (2021). Panorama de las necesidades humanitarias Colombia [Overview of Humanitarian Needs Colombia]. <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/colombia-panorama-de-las-necesidades-humanitarias-2021-abril-2021> [accessed 18 Jul 2023].
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20. 18% (412) of the resident students were indigenous, despite only 9% of Guaviare's population being indigenous.
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22. A draft decree issued by the Ministry of National Education, proposing additional sections to be integrated into Decree 1075 of 2015, states that children must be aged eight or over to live in a school residence (Article 2.3.3.5.9.2.1 of the draft decree). Ministerio de Educación Nacional (2018). Proyecto de Decreto [Draft Decree]. <https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/portal/secciones-complementarias/Proyectos-normativos-para-observaciones-ciudadanas/371303:Proyecto-de-Decreto> [accessed 17 Jul 2023].
23. van IJzendoorn, M.H., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M.J., Duschinsky, R. et al. op.cit.
24. Travel times were assessed according to the most common method of transport available and appropriate for the terrain in that specific area.
25. Departamento Nacional de Planeación (DNP). op.cit.
26. European Coalition for Community Living (2010). Wasted Time, Wasted Money, Wasted Lives ... A Wasted Opportunity? https://www.researchgate.net/publication/239781583_Wasted_time_wasted_money_wasted_lives_a_wasted_opportunity [accessed 19 Jul 2023].
27. In 2020, 19,390,132,690 COP (3,959,940 GBP) of public funds was spent on a 15-month contract with the private service provider, to supply the pastoral and catering staff and food for Guaviare's school residences (this did not cover salaries of educational staff or school facilities or activities). In the same year, the Ministry of Education allocated 6,363,533,498 COP (1,299,589 GBP) to fund Guaviare's 234 school sites in Guaviare (which excludes the pastoral staff and food provided in the school residences). Information provided by the Education Secretariat in Guaviare; on file with Lumos.
28. Hainsworth, J., Pop, D. & Ammirati, B. (2014). Towards a Stronger Economic Evidence Base to Support Child Protection Reform: From Institutions to Family Based Care and Community Level Services: Submission to the UN OHCHR Report on Better Investment in the Rights of the Child. <https://bettercarenetwork.org/library/principles-of-good-care-practices/transforming-institutional-care/towards-a-stronger-economic-evidence-base-to-support-child-protection-reform-from-institutions-to> [accessed 17 Jul 2023].
29. The Department for Social Prosperity (DPS) is the national entity responsible for providing economic subsidies to families. It also offers programmes to increase access to services and family well-being. Together with the ICBF, they form the "social sector" in Colombia.
30. Departamento Nacional de Planeación (DNP). op.cit.
31. Unpublished; on file with Lumos.
32. Lumos has worked in Colombia since 2017.



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