

You Speak, We Shoot: On the Unintended Consequences of Community Radios on Colombia's Violent Conflict¹

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Abstract

This paper examines the unintended consequences of introducing community radios on violent conflict in Colombia. Our empirical design exploits staggered changes in municipality-year community-radio presence and compares municipalities before and after coverage begins relative to municipalities that have not yet reached coverage. Using an event study difference-in-differences framework, we find that the introduction of community radios is associated with a statistically significant increase in killings by paramilitary militias linked to right-wing interests such as the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) but not by the left-wing Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). We suggest that this result is because community radio discourse is itself left-leaning and potentially more compatible with FARC messaging. To corroborate this claim, we complement the causal estimates with a content analysis of 25 station proposals, showing that participatory and rights-based language dominates security/order framing language. Thus, the emergence of community radios is likely to threaten the AUC much more than the FARC. Consistent with this hypothesis, we find lethal violence exerted by the FARC even goes down several years after first community radio exposure in more left-leaning municipalities. Our findings highlight the nuanced and disruptive role of community radios on territorial dynamics in civil conflict zones. They underscore the dual-edged nature of media interventions, as they can unintentionally exacerbate violence in the presence of existing structures of violence, depending on how the intervention is received by those dominating the area. Policymakers are advised to integrate media-based initiatives with broader strategies for peacebuilding and governance, offering valuable insights for other conflict-affected regions worldwide.

Keywords: Community Radios, Armed Conflict, Territorial control, Media and Conflict, Violence Dynamics

1. Introduction

¹ The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank, its Board of Directors, or the countries it represents. We thank María Carolina Vélez for excellent research assistance. All remaining errors are our own.

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Community radios are meant to drive social development, particularly in rural and marginalized regions (Vision of Humanity 2024). Their purpose is not, as such, to combat violent conflict. But they are also not meant to amplify violent conflict either. And yet, this may be one of their unintended consequences. In this article, we study how community radios in Colombia causally affected violence exerted by both the armed rebel groups of the left and the paramilitary militias linked to right-wing interests.

Community radios in Colombia are typically run by local organizations or community groups. Before the rise of social media (Bestvater and Loyle 2025), they serve as arguably the major platforms for information dissemination, cultural expression, and community engagement. Unlike commercial or public broadcasters, they prioritize grassroots participation, often addressing local concerns related to education, health, and conflict resolution (Rodríguez 2001; Casanova et al. 2019; MinTIC 2023b).

We investigate whether their introduction, while intended to strengthen community ties, inadvertently alters the strategic incentives of armed groups. The institutional rules governing licensing and rollout matter because they help explain why expansion was driven by media-access policy rather than by a program explicitly targeted at conflict hotspots (MinTIC 2023a). Our empirical strategy exploits the staggered timing with which municipalities record positive community-radio presence in the panel and estimates within-municipality changes relative to municipalities that have not yet reached coverage.

Our results reveal an asymmetry in the reactions of armed groups to the establishment of community radios. They suggest that in areas with a strong presence of the paramilitary Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), the emergence of community radios is followed by a measurable increase in killings. By contrast, the number of violent victims for which the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are responsible does not increase. This divergence highlights fundamental differences in the territorial control strategies employed by these two opposing groups (Arjona 2014; Arjona et al. 2015; Acemoglu et al. 2020) and how these interact with community radios. For paramilitaries, the emergence of community radios appears to challenge their dominance, prompting violent responses to reassert control (Committee to Protect Journalists 2002; Medel 2011; Nieman Reports 2024). For the FARC, community radio may be less of a direct ideological threat and more of a channel to shape local discourse: by definition community radio is participatory and oriented toward expression, debate, and the promotion of democracy and rights and the tradition of "radio popular" in Latin America is linked to popular movements and appropriation by excluded groups (Tornay Marquez 2021). We will present evidence from station proposals suggesting that this participatory framing is strongly present in the official project language submitted for licensing. The more left-leaning tone of community radios are thus less likely to threaten the dominance of the FARC.

Consistent with this interpretation, in further estimates we find that the number of killings committed by FARC even statistically significantly decreases several years after community radios opened the more left-leaning the municipalities. It seems that in such municipalities the FARC had not much reason to resist the rise of community radios and therefore not only did not resort to more violence but actually resorted to less violence. These findings underscore the intricate ways in which media can reshape conflict dynamics, depending on local conditions, often with unintended and far-reaching consequences.

Previous studies, including those focused on Colombia, have highlighted the role of media in conflict settings, often emphasizing its potential for peacebuilding, development and social cohesion (Armand et al. 2020; Aparicio and Jetter 2022; Aparicio et al. 2023). Our analysis challenges the assumption that community media interventions are uniformly beneficial and highlights the unintended consequences of information dissemination in conflict zones. In the Colombian context, fragmented governance and territorial disputes present a unique reality where media interventions may yield unexpected outcomes. Building on the theoretical insights of Arjona (2018), our work demonstrates how media can disrupt power dynamics and thus trigger significant negative unintended consequences.

This paper makes two key contributions to the study of media and conflict. First, we construct an entirely original database for all municipalities in Colombia from 1990 to 2016. We create a unique dataset that enables precise, municipality-level analysis of community radio exposure and the occurrence of violence, distinguishable between guerrilla and paramilitary origin and a set of controls. Combined with a staggered-adoption design, this allows us to estimate how changes in community-radio presence are associated with subsequent violence while making the identifying assumptions explicit and testable.

Second, our analysis provides evidence on the impact of community radios on lethal violence by opposing parties in a civil war in a context of fragmented governance. Much of the existing literature, including the work of DellaVigna et al. (2014), Yanagizawa-Drott (2014), Adena et al. (2015), and Paluck and Green (2009), has emphasized the role of media inciting violence or exacerbating tensions in conflict settings. However, the existing literature has yet to systematically address the asymmetrical responses of different armed groups to the same media intervention. This note fills that gap by providing evidence of how paramilitaries and guerrillas respond to community radios in different ways.

2. Background

The Colombian conflict, one of the longest-running internal wars in modern history, spans decades of violence, political strife, and societal upheaval. This conflict gave rise to various guerrilla groups, the most prominent among them the FARC, founded in 1964 as a Marxist-Leninist movement initially advocating for land reform and social equality. The FARC operated primarily in rural areas, leveraging Colombia's challenging terrain to establish strongholds (Pizarro Leóngomez 2011). Its relationship with local communities was complex from the start, oscillating between coercion and forced cooperation. While the FARC established pseudo-governance structures - mediating disputes and imposing taxes - these functions were largely enforced through intimidation. Loyalty was compelled under the threat or actual use of violence, including targeted killings and civilian massacres, which served as tools of territorial control, retaliation, and deterrence against collaboration with the state and/or with the paramilitary forces. This dual approach allowed the FARC to gain some legitimacy among disenfranchised populations while maintaining strict control over dissent (Suárez 2000; Pizarro Leóngomez 2011). The FARC enjoyed some limited and highly uneven contested authority and rebel legitimacy (Minatti 2026).

The rise of the FARC-violence prompted a counter-reaction, however. By the 1980s, the paramilitary Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) emerged as a counterforce. Initially formed by wealthy landowners and supported by sectors of the state, the AUC sought to

combat the FARC and other leftist groups but quickly evolved into a network of criminal organizations (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013; Acemoglu et al. 2020). Their interactions with local communities were somewhat different from those of the FARC. Rather than seeking ideological alignment, the AUC relied on brute force to instill fear and ensure compliance (Arjona 2014, 2015). The AUC's actions, aimed at disrupting FARC-aligned communities, resulted in widespread displacement and terror, creating a volatile dynamic where civilians were frequently caught between two warring factions (Arjona et al. 2015). They also tried to capture the electoral process such as the 2002 Colombian Senate elections (Uribe 2025).

Both criminal actors pursued peace processes that varied by armed actor. Agreements with paramilitary groups, particularly the AUC (2003–2006), emphasized demobilization and weapons surrender under the Justice and Peace Law, offering reduced sentences. In contrast, the 2016 Final Peace Agreement with the FARC adopted a more comprehensive approach, combining the end of armed conflict with structural reforms, transitional justice, and victims' rights. For this reason, our estimation panel ends in 2016. However, in both cases, outcomes have been mixed with respect to truth, reparations, and the dismantling of criminal networks.

This dichotomy in strategies and their consequences highlights the asymmetry of the conflict. The FARC attempted to embed itself within communities through coercion and violence while the AUC's approach aimed at dismantling these networks through sheer violence (Committee to Protect Journalists 2002; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013). These differing tactics not only defined the interactions between the groups but also deeply shaped the experience of local communities, whose survival often depended on navigating these hostile and divergent power structures (Arjona 2018).

Against this backdrop, community radios emerged in the 1990s as part of a government initiative to democratize communication and foster social cohesion. Spearheaded by the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology (MinTIC), these radios were envisioned as tools to promote local culture, provide vital information, and serve as platforms for community dialogue (MinTIC 2023b). Their introduction represented a direct challenge to the control exercised by armed groups over public discourse.

The institutional scaffolding for this initiative was laid shortly after the 1991 Constitution declared the radio spectrum a public resource. Law 80 of 1993 and a sequence of decrees in 1995 (1445–1447) formally recognized community broadcasting as a non-profit public service, mandated local Programming Boards, and constrained transmitter power and coverage so that stations remained hyper-local (Ministerio de Tecnologías de la Información y las Comunicaciones 2025). Crucially, the regulations tasked the Ministry of Communications to give priority to municipalities that lacked existing radio services. One FM frequency per municipality was reserved for community use and licenses were capped at a single concession per town with signal strength limited to avoid interference with other radio stations in neighboring municipalities. Community radio licenses were awarded to associations of residents, rather than individuals, for renewable 10-year terms (Ministerio de Comunicaciones 2008). To adjudicate who received those concessions the Ministry invited competing community groups to submit proposals, scored them on technical and social aspects, on participation, sustainability, and diversity, and used transparent lotteries to break ties among top-ranked applicants. On the whole, allocation was done based on publicly available terms of

reference, using objective criteria, employing external jurors where appropriate and under judicial oversight.

Implementation proceeded in pronounced waves. The inaugural call in 1995 drew more than 1,300 applicants and produced 401 licenses concentrated in small municipalities; subsequent rounds in 1997-1999 extended coverage to 564 towns, while large cities remained off-limits until later reforms (Ministerio de Comunicaciones 2008). Throughout the 2000s the government periodically refreshed the rules, culminating in Resolution 415 of 2010, to formalize content quotas (at least half of programming was supposed to be devoted to local educational or cultural material) and to reaffirm the public-interest character of the service (Ministerio de Tecnologías de la Información y las Comunicaciones 2025). Yet policy attention ebbed: after a brief expansion in the mid-2000s, no new licenses were issued between 2008 and 2019, underscoring how administrative discretion over call timing produced long gaps in access to the spectrum.

The empowerment of communities that came with community radio stations significantly altered the dynamics of territorial control during Colombia's armed conflict in affected areas. According to Arjona's (2016) hypothesis, armed groups aim to establish specific social orders in the territories they control, ranging from complete governance to minimal or absent governance. Community radios, by empowering local communities with information and platforms for expression, disrupted these imposed orders, challenging the authority of armed groups, posing a threat to them (Vision of Humanity 2024). Community radios often exposed atrocities or facilitated resistance, making them targets of hostility (Committee to Protect Journalists 2002; Nieman Reports 2024; Reporters Without Borders 2024).

As the Colombian conflict progressed, controlling the flow of information became as vital as seizing territory. Both the FARC and the AUC recognized the strategic importance of shaping public opinion and controlling narratives in their areas of influence (Committee to Protect Journalists 2002; Otis 2020). However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the FARC and the AUC reacted rather differently to the threat posed to them by community radios. The FARC viewed the spread of alternative narratives as a challenge to their ideological dominance. It had historically used radio as a tool for ideological dissemination through stations like *La Voz de la Resistencia* and *Radio Patria Libre*, often sought to influence community radio stations to broadcast their propaganda (Otis 2020; Arroyave Cabrera 2024; Röhl 2024). Manuel Bolívar, a former guerrilla radio host for *La Voz de la Resistencia*, described it succinctly: "It was a war of the microphones" (Otis 2020). A stark example occurred in 2003, when José Joaquín Chávez, the manager of a community radio station in Tolima, was forced to close the station and flee the region after threats from the FARC, who demanded the station relay their messages (Reporters Without Borders 2024). This incident illustrates the guerrilla group's strategy of leveraging local media to maintain ideological control over rural populations.

In contrast, the AUC perceived the radios as a disruption to their coercive control (Committee to Protect Journalists 2002). It adopted violent tactics to suppress community radios (Medel 2011). The murder of Juan Camilo Restrepo Guerra, director of a rural community radio station in Córdoba, exemplifies this approach. Summoned to a meeting by paramilitaries, Restrepo was executed in an attempt to silence dissenting voices (Nieman Reports 2024). Similarly, journalist Flavio Bedoya, a correspondent critical of the AUC, was killed for exposing the group's abuses,

highlighting the paramilitary organization's reliance on fear and coercion to maintain dominance (Committee to Protect Journalists 2002).

These divergent strategies underscore the asymmetry in how the FARC and the AUC interacted with community radios. While the FARC sought to co-opt these stations into their ideological framework, the AUC aimed to destroy any platform that would challenge their dominance (Nieman Reports 2024). By providing independent channels of communication, community radios enabled communities to resist these power structures, fundamentally reshaping the governance dynamics in conflict-affected regions (Casanova et al. 2019).

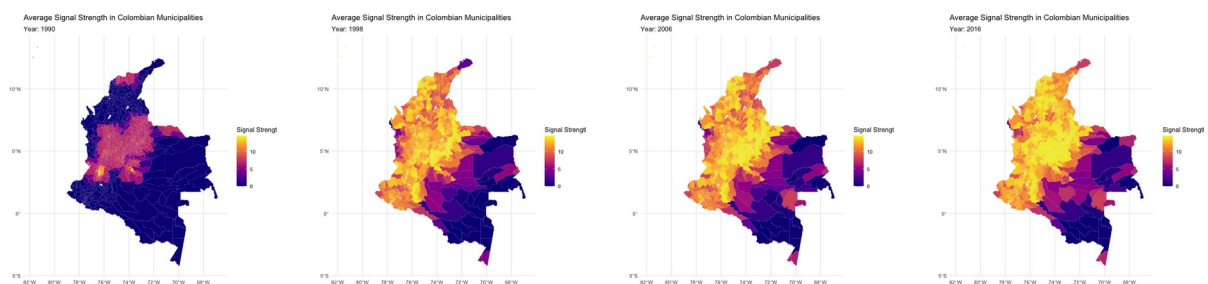
3. Data and empirical strategy

The previous section presented anecdotal evidence on how the emergence of radio stations affected conflict dynamics in affected municipalities and how the effect may have had differential impacts on violence exerted by the FARC as opposed to the AUC. However, from the anecdotes it's not clear whether the FARC will not equally resort to increased violence to being challenged and what form this might take. More importantly, anecdotes are just that. They do not represent rigorous systematic evidence, the uncovering of which is the purpose of our study.

To do so, we have assembled a detailed municipality-year estimation panel dataset based on two source datasets that integrate information on community radio infrastructure and lethal violence. The first dataset, provided by the Ministry of Telecommunications (MinTIC), records all radio stations established in Colombia between 1990 and 2016, including key details such as station type (community, commercial, or public), geographic location, transmission power, and frequency. Using this information, we individually calculated the coverage of the radio signal for every station by employing Radiomobile, a software that integrates technical parameters and terrain data through the Irregular Terrain Model (ITM). This model accounts for how mountains, valleys, and other physical features impact signal propagation, producing high-resolution estimates of signal strength across Colombia (Hufford 1999).

To link radio signal coverage with municipalities, we overlaid the Radiomobile outputs onto a shapefile of Colombia's municipal boundaries. This integration enabled the calculation of two pivotal variables: a binary variable measuring whether the signal strength within each municipality was sufficient in this locality to pick up the community radio signal and the physical distance from each municipality's center to the nearest radio transmitter. Figure 1 captures how radio signal strength has evolved over time across Colombia, illustrating the interplay between expanding coverage and the country's challenging terrain.

Figure 1. Average signal strength in Colombian municipalities (1990, 1998, 2006, 2016).



1990

1998

2006

2016

Source: Authors' calculations.

The second dataset, sourced from the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH), provides comprehensive records of violent events across Colombia. The CNMH is a government institution established to document and analyze the country's history of armed conflict. As part of this mission, the CNMH has compiled detailed databases on conflict-related violence, making it one of the most reliable and authoritative sources for understanding the dynamics of violence in Colombia (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013).

The data include granular records of lethal violence, counting the victims of violence such as selective assassinations and massacres, categorized by perpetrator group. This allows us to distinguish between lethal violence committed by the AUC paramilitary forces and the FARC guerrilla groups, which is critical given the differing strategies these actors employ to control territory and populations. For our analysis, we focus on the number of people killed in a municipality by, respectively, the AUC and the FARC. To further probe whether the violent reaction is contingent on the political leanings of municipalities, we construct a continuous measure of municipal left-leaning vote share from mayoral elections (votes_left and votes), complemented with presidential vote shares in early years (1990 and 1994) to reduce missingness.

To operationalize these data, we aggregate the number of people killed at the municipality-year level. This approach aligns perfectly with our panel structure, enabling us to quantify yearly levels of lethal violence in each municipality while preserving the granularity of the data. By linking this measure with our radio coverage variables, we can explore how the establishment of community radio exposure triggers shifts in lethal violence.

The integration of these two sources of data yields a comprehensive dataset covering 1,107 municipalities over 27 years (1990–2016), resulting in 29,889 observations. Table 1 presents summary statistics for the key variables. Positive modeled community-radio signal coverage is widespread in the panel, averaging 96.74 percent of municipality-years. This high share reflects rapid early expansion and the spatial reach of radio signals across municipal boundaries; the identifying variation in the event-study design comes from the timing of first positive coverage, not from a simple covered-versus-uncovered comparison in levels. Paramilitary forces are responsible for more killings on average than the FARC.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR ALL 1,107 MUNICIPALITIES AND 27 YEARS (N=29,889).

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max	Source
Community radio presence	0.97	0.18	0	1	Mintic
Distance to the nearest radio tower (km)	32.04	52.90	0.37	830.84	Mintic
Killings by Paramilitaries	3.12	18.90	0	1017	CNMH
Killings by the FARC	1.06	3.75	0	154	CNM

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max	Source
					H
Violence with displacement intent by Paramilitaries	0.23	1.24	0	52	CNM H
Violence with displacement intent by FARC	0.11	0.47	0	10	CNM H

Source: Authors' calculations.

Notes: MinTIC = Ministry of Information and Communications Technologies. CNMH = Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica.

The core specification of our estimation model is as follows:

$$Y_{m,t} = \sum_{\tau \neq 0} \beta_{\tau} \cdot \text{Community_Radio}_{m,t} + \gamma_m + \lambda_t + \delta \cdot \text{Distance_Transmitter}_m + \epsilon_{m,t}$$

Where:

- $Y_{m,t}$: Killings by, respectively the Paramilitaries and the FRAC in municipality m and year t.
- $\text{Community_Radio}_{m,t}$: Indicator equal to 1 if municipality m has a community radio signal above the ambient noise reception threshold in year t, and 0 otherwise.
- γ_m : Municipality fixed effects absorbing time-invariant characteristics.
- λ_t : Year fixed effects to capture national trends in violence or other macro-level shocks.
- $\text{Distance_Transmitter}_m$: Control for direct proximity to the nearest transmitter.
- $\epsilon_{m,t}$: Error term.

We estimate treatment effects using the Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) staggered-adoption difference-in-differences estimator. Let G_m denote municipality m's first year with positive community-radio signal coverage in our panel. For each treated cohort g and calendar year $t \geq g$, we estimate the group-time effect $ATT(g,t) = E[Y_t(1) - Y_t(0) \mid G_m = g]$ using municipalities that are not yet treated in year t as the comparison group. We then aggregate these group-time effects into dynamic event-time coefficients relative to the pre-treatment period. Municipalities already treated at the start of the 1990-2016 sample are always-treated units and are therefore excluded because they do not contribute pre-treatment observations.

The mechanism of community radio roll-out, which combined merit-based assessment with stochastic tie-breaking, provides the basis for the quasi-experimentation variation that we exploit. Crucially, there is no evidence that licenses were strategically placed into or granted to municipalities that experienced more or less violent conflict or were placed into or granted to municipalities in which the government wanted to directly combat the violent conflict. A key feature of this system is its dependence on the availability of space in the electromagnetic spectrum. The state can only assign licenses when spectrum bands are freed up – an event determined by technical and regulatory factors beyond the control of local actors (MinTIC 2023a). Very occasionally, complaints have been raised of influence by political connections contaminating an otherwise merit-based system for reviewing applications (Open Society Foundation 2012). More importantly, governments have exerted their discretionary power by influencing the timing of licensing calls. However, this does not imply that treatment is mechanically orthogonal to conflict. Priority rules favored underserved municipalities, which made early expansion more likely to happen in rural areas and small town than the national average.

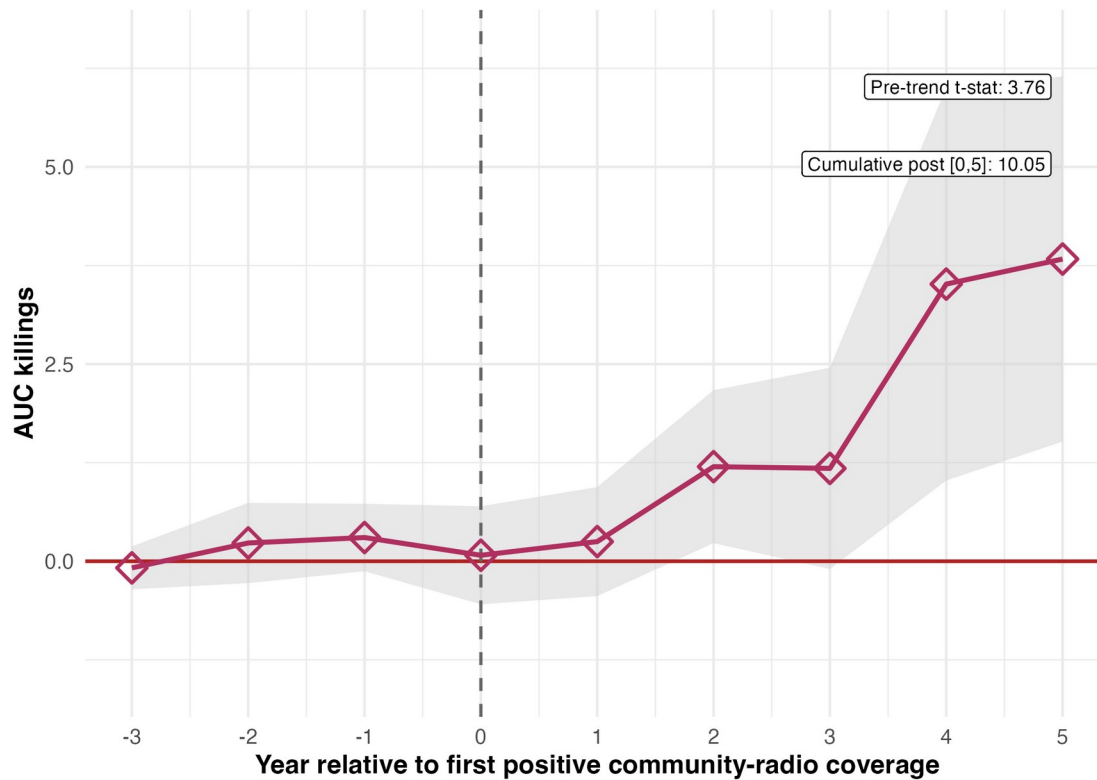
To deal with this inferential threat, our analysis does not rely on cross-sectional comparisons between small, treated municipalities and large, untreated cities. The treatment in the panel is the first year in which a municipality records a positive community-radio signal above the reception threshold. Municipality fixed effects absorb time-invariant differences across municipalities, while year fixed effects absorb nationwide shocks.

The remaining identification challenge arises from differential trends: municipalities that reached coverage earlier may have been on different violence trajectories than municipalities that reached it later. We assess this concern in two ways. First, the event-study coefficients show no systematic pre-treatment break in the main outcomes. Second, Appendix Figure A1 compares estimates obtained with not-yet-treated and never-treated comparison groups, and Appendix Figure A4 restricts the sample to municipalities that eventually receive coverage, removing the tiny number of never-treated units from the comparison group. These checks do not prove the identifying assumption, but they show directly where the design is strong and where it remains contestable.

4. Results

In this section, we present the results of our event-study analysis. Figure 1 reports the causal impact of community radio openings on lethal violence by the AUC.

FIGURE 1. EVENT HISTORY OF AUC KILLINGS (FIRST YEAR WITH POSITIVE COMMUNITY-RADIO COVERAGE AT $T=0$).

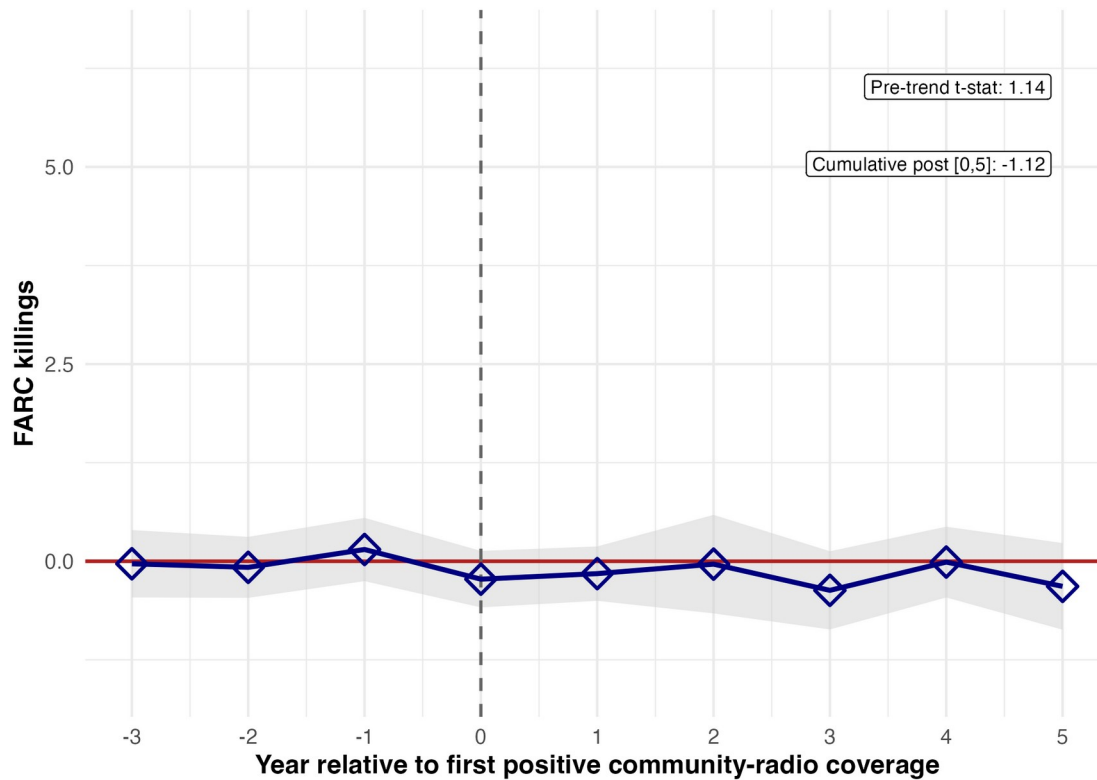


Source: Authors' calculations.

From year 2 onward after the event start (community radio starts to broadcast), AUC killings first increase a little, and then from event time +4 years after start sharply. By event time +5 the estimate is about 3.8 additional people killed per municipality-year. The post-treatment profile is therefore substantively large and increasingly pronounced over time. Over the entire post-treatment period up until 5 years after start, a municipality experiences on average circa 10 additional killings attributable to the AUC.

Figure 2 repeats the same analysis but this time for the number of victims of lethal violence attributable to the FARC as dependent variable. We do not find any statistically significant trend in the event history analysis.

FIGURE 2. EVENT HISTORY OF FARC KILLINGS (FIRST YEAR WITH POSITIVE COMMUNITY-RADIO COVERAGE AT T=0).



Source: Authors' calculations.

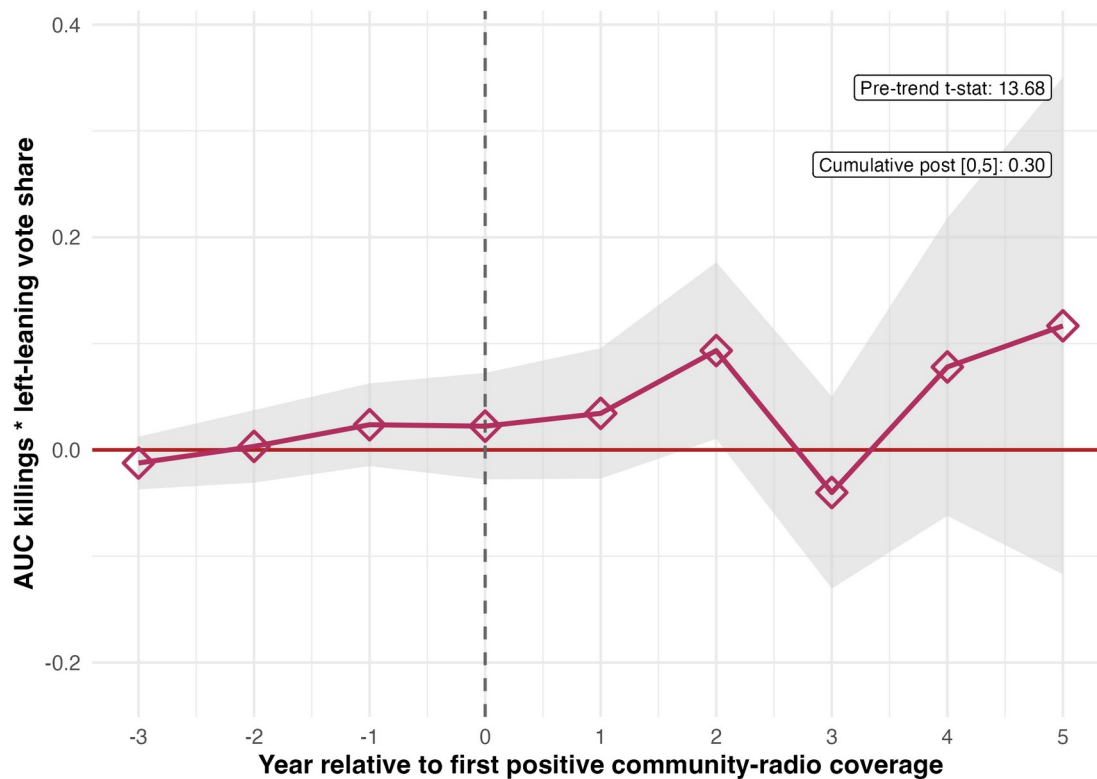
The contrasting reactions of the AUC and the FARC to community radios reflect fundamentally different approaches to territorial governance. For the AUC, whose strategy hinges on the overt and often public display of violence, community radios represent a direct threat to their ability to instill fear and maintain dominance. The resulting spike in lethal violence underscores their dependence on physical suppression to reassert authority. The onset of community-radio presence destabilizes their hold on power, forcing them into visible and violent reactions.

In contrast, the FARC does not respond in this way. It appears that the guerrilla group does not feel threatened by community radio presence in the same way that the paramilitary groups are. One explanation is that community radios are less threatening to them. To probe this explanation, we have explored whether community radio discourse itself tends to be left-leaning and therefore less threatening ideologically to the FARC, making co-optation more attractive than repression. We analyzed 25 randomly selected station proposals obtained from the government. A simple balance of participatory/rights terms minus security/order terms is positive in 23 of 25 proposals (median balance 0.67), indicating a dominant participatory/rights framing in the official project language. This evidence on radio station proposals is consistent with the interpretation that community radios posed less of an ideological challenge to the FARC, helping explain its muted response to the introduction of community radios.

To probe this interpretation further, we have interacted our treatment variable (radio station opening) with left-leaning vote share in municipalities. If our thesis is correct that community radios tend to be more left-leaning, then their opening should amplify lethal violence by the AUC in already left-leaning municipalities, but should further attenuate the violent response by

the FARC in such municipalities. As figure 3 shows, the first part of this hypothesis is not corroborated by the analysis. Interacting the treatment dummy with the left-leaning share of municipalities does not exhibit any statistically significant event history trend for AUC violence.

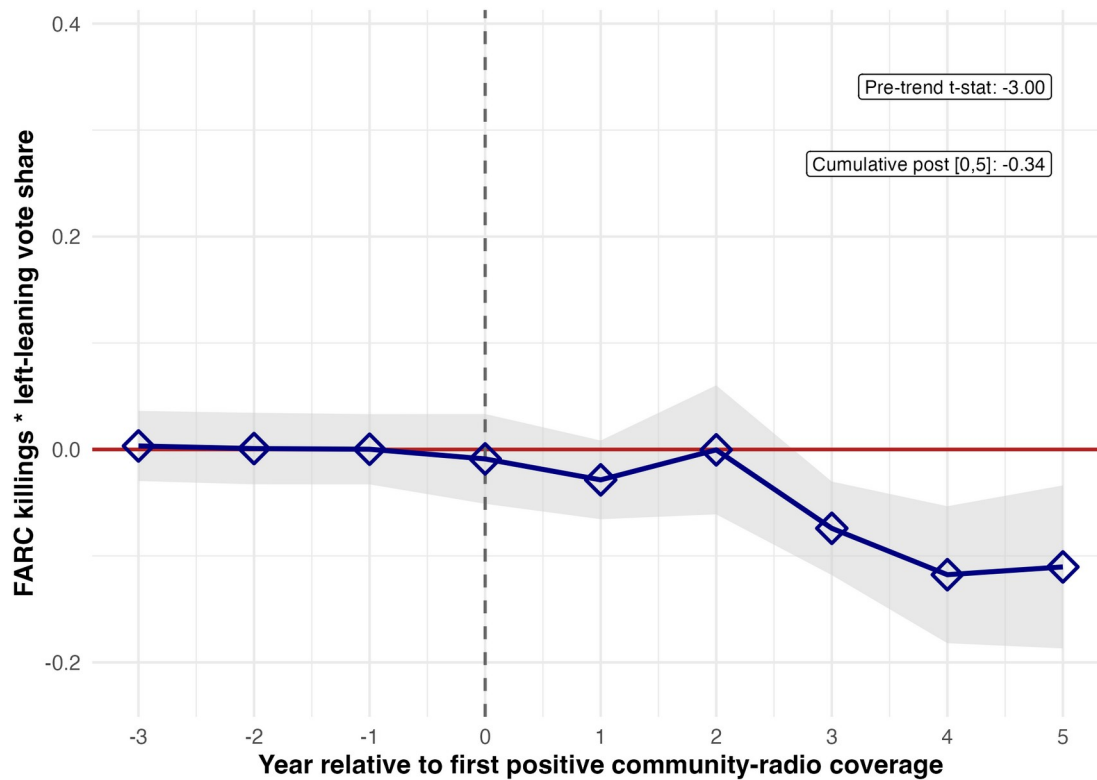
FIGURE 3. EVENT HISTORY OF AUC KILLINGS * LEFT-LEANING VOTE SHARE. ESTIMATES PRESERVE EVENT TIME BY USING KILLINGS MULTIPLIED BY MUNICIPAL LEFT-LEANING VOTE SHARE AS THE OUTCOME; THEY SHOULD BE READ AS DYNAMIC INTERACTION DIAGNOSTICS RATHER THAN MARGINAL-EFFECT CURVES OVER THE LEFT-SHARE DISTRIBUTION (FIRST YEAR WITH POSITIVE COMMUNITY-RADIO COVERAGE AT T=0).



Source: Authors' calculations.

As figure 4 shows, however, FARC killings do statistically significantly decrease in more left-leaning municipalities. This is again consistent with the interpretation that the FARC feels less threatened than the paramilitary forces by the presence of community radios given they tend to lean toward the left in general, and therefore particularly so in more left-leaning communities.

FIGURE 4. EVENT HISTORY OF FARC KILLINGS * LEFT-LEANING VOTE SHARE. ESTIMATES PRESERVE EVENT TIME BY USING KILLINGS MULTIPLIED BY MUNICIPAL LEFT-LEANING VOTE SHARE AS THE OUTCOME; THEY SHOULD BE READ AS DYNAMIC INTERACTION DIAGNOSTICS RATHER THAN MARGINAL-EFFECT CURVES OVER THE LEFT-SHARE DISTRIBUTION (FIRST YEAR WITH POSITIVE COMMUNITY-RADIO COVERAGE AT T=0).



Source: Authors' calculations.

We ran robustness checks for control-group definition, event-window choice, placebo timing, and sample composition. Appendix Figures A1-A4 report these estimates. The post-treatment results are very similar when the comparison is restricted to eventually treated municipalities only.

5. Conclusions

Community radios in Colombia emerged as a cornerstone of local engagement, aimed at bridging gaps in communication and fostering social cohesion, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. Whilst they eventually spread widely across the country, their rollout was structured by media-access rules, spectrum constraints, and staggered expansion rather than by cross-sectional sorting on conflict intensity.

Community radios were intended to empower communities through access to information and platforms for civic participation. However, our analysis shows that this empowerment could threaten armed actors that depended on controlling local information, local narratives, and the populations living in the territories they sought to govern.

This reshaping of local power dynamics became most evident in the violent responses provoked by the introduction of community radios in areas under paramilitary control. Rather than serving solely as neutral conveyors of information, the radios inadvertently disrupted the tenuous balance of power. The paramilitary AUC groups reacted by escalating lethal violence, as they sought to reassert territorial dominance.

Interestingly, this particular pattern of violence was not mirrored by the FARC. Unlike the paramilitaries, FARC-controlled areas did not exhibit a statistically significant uptick in lethal violence. We believe that this finding is because the FARC saw itself less threatened by the emergence of community radios than the paramilitary groups did. Consistent with this interpretation, we found evidence that a random selection of community radio proposals revealed left-leaning language and that lethal violence exercised by the FARC even decreases several years after community radio started in more left-leaning municipalities. Make no mistake: the FARC is a violent guerrilla group, responsible for tens of thousands of killings. But it does not seem to have seen the need to react even more violently to the emergence of community radios, as the AUC paramilitary groups did.

The reactions of the AUC and FARC to community radios reveal critical insights into how media interventions interact with localized power dynamics. The escalation of violence underscores the role of communication networks as more than neutral platforms – they are perceived as instruments of influence that can challenge existing control structures. Our results deepen our understanding of criminal governance by organized groups in the context of civil conflict.

These dynamics carry profound policy implications. The licensing of community radios, while designed to democratize media access, unintentionally disrupted the fragile equilibrium in AUC-dominated areas. This highlights the need for policymakers to consider the broader socio-political environments in which such interventions are deployed. Without a nuanced understanding of these contexts, even well-intentioned policies risk exacerbating conflicts.

The experiences of community radios in Colombia offer lessons that extend beyond the country's borders. In conflict-affected regions globally, similar interventions aimed at fostering community cohesion and empowering marginalized groups may inadvertently alter local power dynamics. This study demonstrates that media platforms, while neutral in design, can act as catalysts for violent negative consequences when they disrupt entrenched systems of control.

Extrapolating these findings to other settings requires careful consideration of context-specific factors. For instance, regions with multiple competing armed actors, fragile governance, or contested territorial control may face heightened risks of unintended violence. Policymakers and development practitioners must weigh the potential benefits of increased access to information against the likelihood of provoking yet more violence. Designing interventions that incorporate conflict-sensitive mechanisms, such as community consultation or phased implementation, can help mitigate these risks while preserving the positive potential of media development.

Appendix: Robustness Tests

This appendix reports four additional robustness exercises: (i) control-group sensitivity (not-yet-treated versus never-treated), (ii) event-window sensitivity, (iii) placebo timing tests, and (iv) an eventually-treated-only comparison that excludes the five never-treated municipalities from the comparison pool.

Figure A1. Control-group sensitivity (not-yet-treated vs never-treated) for bundled AUC/FARC killings.

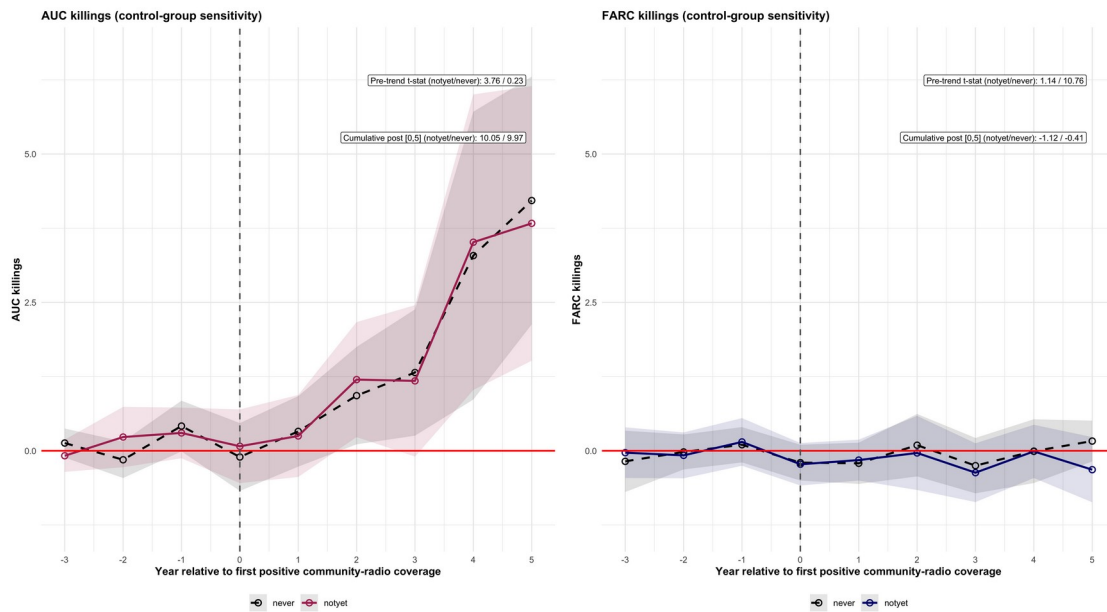


Figure A2. Event-window sensitivity ($[-3,5]$, $[-5,8]$, $[-4,4]$) for bundled AUC/FARC killings.

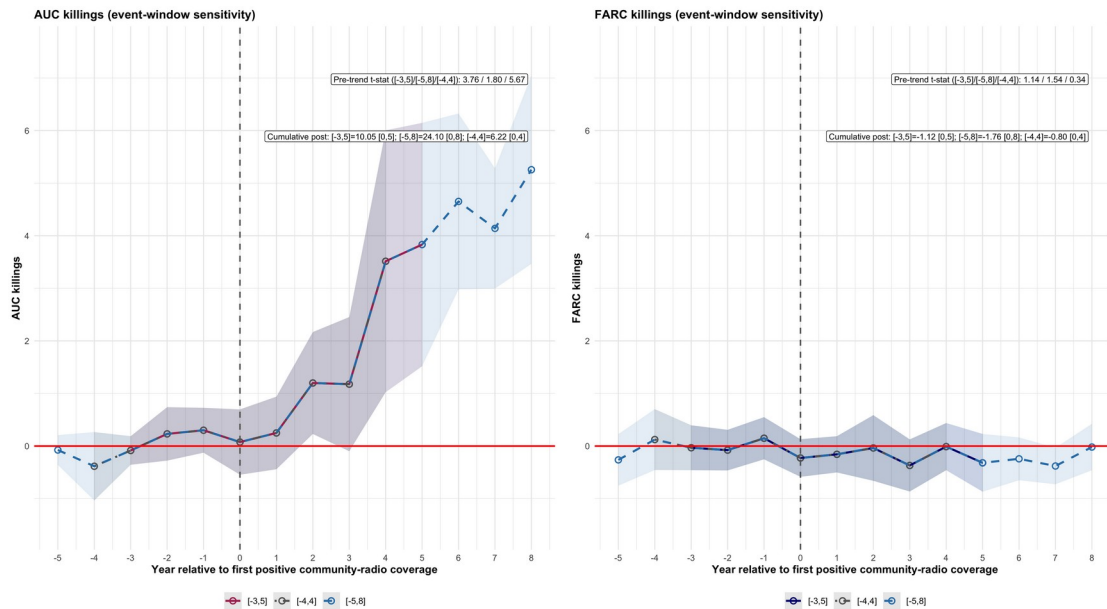


Figure A3. Placebo timing falsification for bundled AUC/FARC killings.

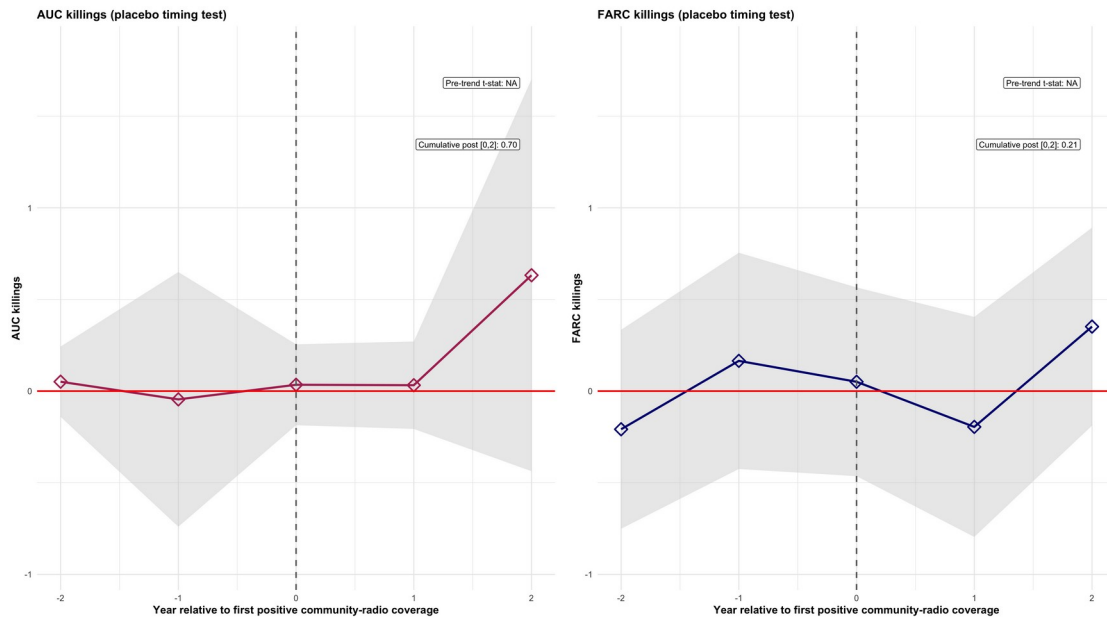
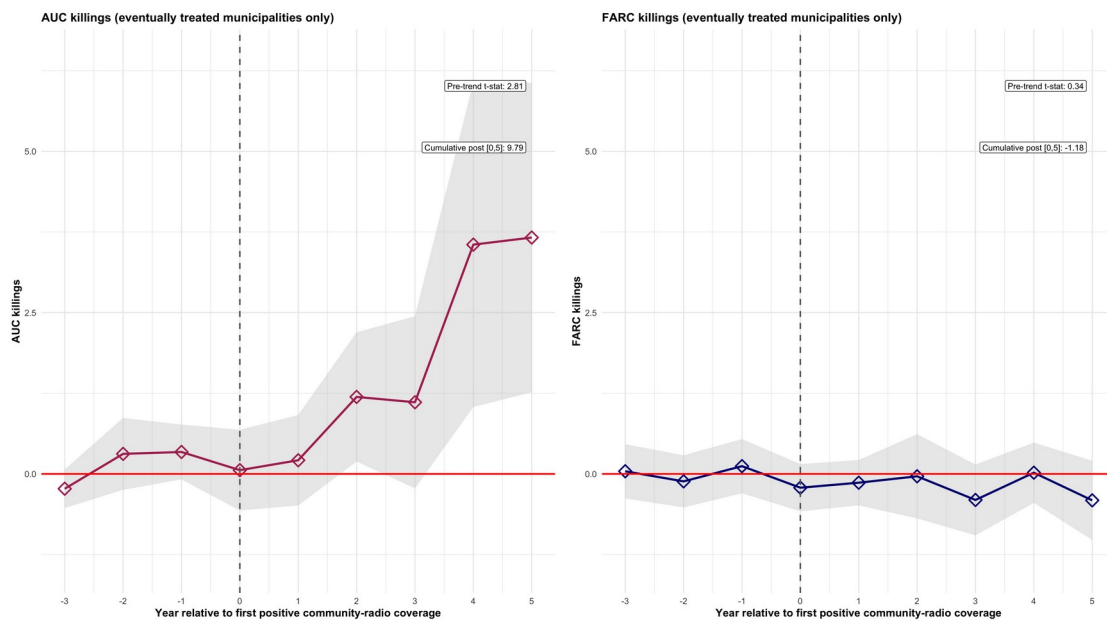


Figure A4. Event-study estimates using only eventually treated municipalities as the comparison sample for bundled AUC/FARC killings.



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