

Hiding the Children: Strategic Concealment of Child Soldiers in Colombia's Paramilitary Demobilization

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Abstract

Transitional justice conditions demobilization benefits on disclosure by the very parties the law threatens. We document strategic concealment of child soldiers in Colombia's 2003 to 2006 collective paramilitary (AUC) demobilization. In the state's age-bearing reintegration records, minors are 0.46 percent of 27,983 fighters at commander-run ceremonies, against 13.7 percent of 6,990 deserters from the same war. The collapse sits at the legal threshold of 18. Deserter-based counterfactuals imply 3,265 to 4,386 missing children, roughly 3,700 to 4,950 across the official wave: about 96 percent of those expected. Children visible in adjacent state registries account for at most a quarter of those expected. No bunching appears at 18-19. The deficit extends above the threshold, consistent with screening on recruitment age, where liability attaches. The UN-monitored 2017 FARC demobilization, run under a minor-separation protocol, cuts cleanly at 18 with no deficit above it. We measure the children's disappearance from the demobilization's official accounting, not each child's fate.

Keywords: child soldiers, demobilization, transitional justice, strategic reporting, Colombia.

JEL codes: D74, K42, O12, J13.

“[T]odavía hay menores que se presentan al ICBF para ingresar al programa y que aparentemente fueron enviados a sus casas por los comandantes, días antes de la desmovilización.” (There are still minors presenting to the ICBF to enter the program who were apparently sent home by their commanders, days before the demobilization.) [MAPP/OEA \(2008\)](#), pp. 11 and 12.

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Introduction

Children made up about 20 percent of the combatants of Colombia’s paramilitary umbrella organization, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC). That is the estimate of child-protection actors, later relayed by the United Nations Secretary-General ([UN Security Council, 2009](#), para. 70). The September 2003 investigation by [Human Rights Watch \(HRW, 2003\)](#) had put the ceiling at “no more than 20 percent” of the AUC’s then-claimed 11,000 members. Between November 2003 and August 2006, the AUC demobilized an official 31,671 fighters in 38 collective acts negotiated with the Colombian government. The records of the state’s reintegration agency (ARN) cover 37 of those acts. On a force of 31,671, the 20 percent figure implies on the order of 6,300 minors. In the age-bearing ARN records associated with the ceremonies, minors are 0.46 percent of the collectively demobilized: 128 people out of 27,983.¹ Fighters who left any group individually over the same years, mostly voluntary deserters,² were minors at demobilization 13.7 percent of the time (956 of 6,990). Somewhere between the AUC’s ranks and the ceremony records, the children disappeared.

This paper measures that disappearance and characterizes how it was produced. The outcome is underrepresentation in the age-bearing ARN records associated with the collective ceremonies: absence from the state’s demobilization accounting. The law routed minors to the child-welfare agency (ICBF) rather than onto adult lists, and the deficit survives that routing. Every official channel combined, the ceremony lists, the handover records, the Defense Ministry registry, and ICBF’s own entries, received on the order of 1,000 AUC children against the roughly 6,300 expected; attributing every one of them to lawful routing still leaves about 3,100 missing. The missing-children count is a calibration against deserter reference distributions anchored on adult ages, and it survives roster padding, differential desertion by minors, and a one-year error in every recorded age. The design is an accounting comparison between two exit channels, disciplined by shape tests, reweighting, and a noise model. What the records cannot assign is each child’s individual path, lawful release or concealment, and the paper does not claim to: it measures presence in the state’s records, not the children’s welfare. The records that would separate the children’s fates do not exist at the individual level, and that absence is itself the phenomenon.

The demobilizing commanders faced a specific legal architecture. Child recruitment carried individual criminal liability under the ordinary penal code. It was excluded from the amnesty available for political crimes. It was framed publicly as a crime against humanity that the paramilitaries would have to confess. [Decreto 128 of 2003](#) routed every demobilizing minor to ICBF within thirty-six hours, and the Justice and Peace Law ([Ley 975 of 2005](#)) made collective eligibility for reduced sentences depend on surrendering all recruited minors. Every child presented at a ceremony was itself evidence of the crime the law refused to forgive. Deserters faced none of this screening. They self-selected out of their groups and self-reported their ages to functionaries with no stake in the count. The contrast between the two exit channels, same war, same years, same receiving

¹The gap between the official 31,671 and the 27,983 analyzed has three parts, all institutional. One small act (the Autodefensas Campesinas de Ortega, 167 people) never entered the ARN’s records. Roughly 3,500 of the demobilized never enrolled in the reintegration program that generates those records (non-entry is 12.5 percent in the ARN roster). And 64 records lack a computable age. [Appendix Table A1](#) reconciles every count in the paper; estimates “across the official wave” rescale to 31,671.

²The individually processed records are classified from the administrative process type; besides voluntary deserters they can include captures, rescues, and administrative re-entries. Section [Data](#) describes the classification and its validation. We use the shorthand deserters throughout.

bureaucracy, measures the age signature that commander-controlled reporting left in the records the state received.

Commander withholding of children is documented, not inferred from a histogram. The MAPP/OEA verification mission recorded minors still arriving at ICBF in 2008 who had apparently been sent home by their commanders days before demobilization (the epigraph); the Bloque Élmér Cárdenas gathered roughly 150 of its minors and sent them home before its acts, delivering 3 to ICBF. What this paper adds is scale and signature. A minority of the children are visible in adjacent state registries, and we account for them: 391 handed over within the collective process ([UN Security Council, 2009](#)), 730 surfaced through a Ministry of Defense channel during the wave ([MinDefensa, 2026](#)), 913 official ICBF deliveries in 2003 to 2006 ([CNMH, 2013](#)), and 1,039 autodefensa-origin entries into ICBF's program by the end of 2007 ([MAPP/OEA, 2008](#)). The counts overlap one another, and the largest is about a quarter of the preferred deficit of 4,064. The paper reconciles them in an accounting map rather than netting them out.

Three findings result. First, the collapse in the collective lists is not a thin left tail; it is a truncation located exactly at the legal threshold. The collective age-at-demobilization histogram records 4, 7, and 115 people at ages 15, 16, and 17. It then jumps to 1,015 at 18, 1,356 at 19, and 1,541 at 20. Deserters over the same period show a smooth left shoulder: 134, 269, 474, 552, and 464 at ages 15 through 19. We rescale five deserter-based counterfactuals to match the collective lists on the 20 to 30 age mass, where both exit channels should agree. The counterfactuals put 3,265 to 4,386 minors missing from the analysis sample. The preferred one, which reweights deserters by the probability they came from the AUC, puts the count at 4,064. Scaled to the official wave of 31,671, the deficit is approximately 3,700 to 4,950 children, with a preferred value of 4,600.³ Roughly 96 percent of the expected minors are absent from the ceremony accounting.

Second, the children were not relabeled as adults; they were removed. Commanders who simply aged minors up to 18 or 19 on paper would have left excess mass just above the threshold. The collective distribution shows the opposite. Its ratio of mass at 18-19 to mass at 20-21 is 0.72, against 1.10 to 1.17 among deserters. Its own right-side extrapolation puts observed counts at 60 percent of predicted at age 18 and 78 percent at 19: a further shortfall of roughly 1,100 young adults. The pattern is consistent with a screening rule set *above* the legal threshold. Liability for child recruitment attaches at the age of recruitment, not the age of demobilization. An 18- or 19-year-old recruited a couple of years earlier had been recruited as a minor, and was therefore also evidence of the crime. The data look like removal with a safety buffer, not like gaming at the margin. The 2017 FARC demobilization supplies the monitored comparison. There, the United Nations verified the process, a dedicated protocol separated the minors, and the government verified and accredited the membership lists the FARC supplied. Run through the identical pipeline, the FARC records show a clean administrative cut at exactly 18 and no deficit above it (pooled 18-19 observed-to-predicted ratio of 1.06, against the AUC's 0.69). The buffer is not a generic feature of collective demobilizations; it appears where commanders curated the rosters.

Third, the deserters themselves reject the alternative that the AUC simply recruited adults. Reweighting the 2003 to 2006 deserter sample by the estimated probability of AUC membership leaves its minor share essentially unchanged: 13.0 percent, against 13.7 percent unweighted. AUC deserters were not detectably less likely to be minors than guerrilla deserters. Composition differences thin a left tail smoothly. They do not produce a twenty-fold collapse concentrated at

³Netting the 263 minors that the Procuraduría found on the official lists out of the scaled prediction, instead of scaling the deficit itself, gives 3,577 to 4,846 (preferred 4,482).

a legal age cutoff.

The timing of the law itself has no cross-bloc bite, and the null is informative. Blocs that demobilized before the [Justice and Peace Law](#) took effect hid their children as thoroughly as blocs that demobilized after (0.45 versus 0.46 percent minors). The deficit was already near-total at the very first ceremony in November 2003; the incentives predated the law.

The count decides what the children were, not only how many they were. A child who exited through official channels entered ICBF's protection program, with schooling, psychosocial care, and family reunification ([Decreto 128 de 2003](#)). Colombia's Victims' Law later fixed that line in statute: members of armed groups are not victims, except children who were desvinculados while still minors ([Ley 1448 de 2011, art. 3](#)). A child erased from the lists and sent home therefore lost more than services. The child lost the legal fact of having been a child soldier, and with it victim status, reparations, and a place in every registry that budgets and prosecutions were later built on. The young adults removed behind the buffer are excluded twice over: recruited as minors, demobilized as no one, and barred as adult ex-combatants from the victim status they had earned as children. The judicial record inherits the censoring. The Justicia y Paz verdicts collected in this paper document about 1,300 paramilitary child recruits in total; the accounting implies roughly three times as many children were erased from this single demobilization wave. And erasure did not end the exposure: the children were sent home to the municipalities where paramilitary successor groups recruited next ([Springer, 2012](#)).

The paper contributes first to the literatures on DDR verification, transitional justice, and child soldiering. Armed groups recruit children deliberately, because they are cheap to retain and easy to coerce ([Beber & Blattman, 2013](#)). The child-soldiering literature has measured the consequences of recruitment for those it observes ([Blattman & Annan, 2010](#); [Sviatschi, 2022](#)). The DDR literature has measured reintegration outcomes for fighters who enter the programs ([Gilligan et al., 2013](#); [Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007](#); [Theidon, 2007](#)). This paper measures the children that official processes were built not to observe. DDR practice standards anticipate that failure mode: they require children's release to be unconditional and separate from adult processes ([UN IAWG-DDR, 2021, Module 5.20](#)) and warn that commanders deliberately exclude women and girls ([UN IAWG-DDR, 2023, Module 5.10](#)). Second, the no-bunching result is mechanism evidence on how organizations respond to legal screening. The deficit extends through ages 18 and 19 with no excess mass above the cutoff, consistent with screening on recruitment age rather than reported age. That signature distinguishes concealment from misreporting. Other DDR datasets can be tested for it, and the monitored FARC demobilization does not show it. Third, the measurement connects to public economics. Agents relocate across kinks and notches when tax and regulatory schedules create discontinuous incentives ([Kleven, 2016](#); [Kleven & Waseem, 2013](#); [Saez, 2010](#)). The AUC faced a criminal-liability notch at age 18 and did not shift reported ages across the threshold; the people below it are missing from the record. The estimator has a methodological cousin in [Fisman and Wei \(2004\)](#), who quantify evasion as the gap between two records of the same trade flow; here the two records are the screened and unscreened exit channels from the same war. The paper thus joins the literature on official statistics shaped by the parties that produce them ([Martinez, 2022](#)).

Background

The AUC collective demobilization, 2003 to 2006

The AUC was a federation of regional paramilitary blocs formed in 1997 (Daly, 2016). It entered negotiations with the government of Álvaro Uribe following a declared ceasefire in December 2002 and the Santa Fe de Ralito accord of July 2003. Demobilization proceeded bloc by bloc. Each bloc concentrated its members at an agreed site, surrendered weapons, and was processed in a public ceremony where the government registered names, ages, and identity documents. The first ceremony demobilized the Bloque Cacique Nutibara in Medellín on 25 November 2003; the last ceremonies closed in August 2006. In total, 38 collective acts staged by 37 named structures (the Bloque Norte staged two acts) processed an official 31,671 members. The ARN records cover 37 of the acts; the act of the small Autodefensas Campesinas de Ortega never entered them. Economists have begun to study the demobilization’s aggregate consequences for violence, political competition, and local public goods (Coy, 2024). This paper concerns the construction of the demobilization record itself.

The operational point is who controlled the lists. Bloc commanders assembled the rosters of who would present at each ceremony, in negotiation with the government’s Office of the High Commissioner for Peace. The state verified identities at the ceremony. It had no independent roster of bloc membership against which to check completeness. The commander mediated entry into the demobilization record, and hence into reintegration benefits and eventually into the Justice and Peace process. None of this was passive bookkeeping. Colombia’s armed groups adjusted their behavior finely to the incentives institutions created, from media coverage (Aparicio & Jetter, 2022) to the legal architecture studied here. The DDR circuits themselves shaped who could be presented as a combatant (Theidon, 2007). Individual desertion was the opposite institutional object. A fighter who abandoned any group could present alone to military, police, or civilian authorities, be certified by the operational committee (CODA), and enter the same reintegration system. No commander stood between the deserter and the registry. The government’s demobilization program (the PAHD) actively cultivated the individual route; its appeals to fighters’ identities and emotions measurably induced desertions (Aparicio et al., 2026). Those self-selected, individually reporting deserters supply this paper’s counterfactual population.

The legal architecture of child-recruitment liability

Four legal instruments made a minor on a ceremony list a liability rather than a demobilization credit. First, recruiting children under 18 was a crime under Article 162 of the ordinary penal code (Ley 599 of 2000). Unlike sedition or rebellion, it was excluded from the amnesty and pardon provisions available for political crimes under Ley 782 of 2002. The exposure was not hypothetical. The Justice and Peace tribunal later imposed on Fredy Rendón Herrera (“El Alemán”), commander of the Bloque Élder Cárdenas, the maximum eight-year alternative sentence on 309 legalized counts of child recruitment. Second, Decreto 128 of January 2003, the decree regulating demobilization benefits, required any authority verifying a minor’s exit from an armed group to deliver the child to the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF) within thirty-six hours. Minors went into a separate protection process; by design, a demobilizing child could not simply appear on the adult list. Third, the Justice and Peace Law (Ley 975 of July 2005) made the reduced-sentence regime

for collective demobilizations conditional, in Article 10.3, on the group's surrender of *all* recruited minors. Article 64 promised that the act of surrendering minors would not itself be grounds for losing benefits. The clause shielded the handover; it could not shield against the evidence the handover created. The recruitment of each surrendered child remained a non-amnestiable crime that the commander was obliged to confess, since the alternative penalty was conditional on full confession and, after [Sentencia C-370 de 2006](#), revocable for intentional omissions. A child presented at a ceremony became a documented victim and a count in the eventual dossier; a child sent home created no record at all. And the promise itself came from a regime whose rules kept moving: the Constitutional Court tightened the terms in 2006, the Corte Suprema upended the rank-and-file's legal status in 2007, and the state extradited the principal commanders in 2008, mid-process. El Alemán's sentence shows the fear was rational *ex post*: the maximum alternative penalty, on exactly the counts his surrendered and documented children supplied. Article 64 arrived in July 2005 in any case, when the deficit was already near-total; Section [Results](#) shows the clause changed nothing (0.45 versus 0.46 percent minors before and after the law). Fourth, international exposure was anticipated rather than immediate. The [Rome Statute](#) entered into force for Colombia on 1 November 2002, but Colombia's declaration under Article 124 deferred the International Criminal Court's war-crimes jurisdiction, the head under which child recruitment is charged, until 1 November 2009. What ran from 2002 was jurisdiction over crimes against humanity, and contemporaries deployed exactly that frame: the [Defensoría del Pueblo \(n.d.\)](#) stated in official communiqués that child recruitment was a crime of *lesa humanidad* that the paramilitaries would have to confess ([MAPP/OEA, 2007](#), para. 86). The operative threat during 2003 to 2006 was therefore domestic, with post-2009 ICC exposure looming over any commander planning a life after demobilization.

The combination created a bind that contemporaries understood. Presenting a child at a ceremony documented, in a state registry and in front of cameras, the commission of a non-amnestiable crime by the presenting commander. Withholding children violated the surrender condition, but a violation is only detectable if the children are known to exist. Qualitative and judicial accounts document the predictable response. Blocs released minors quietly in the weeks before their ceremonies, sending them home or discharging them without registration. The Bloque Élder Cárdenas gathered roughly 150 of its minors and sent them home before its demobilization acts, delivering 3 to ICBF. On 15 February 2005, three days before a Ralito-area ceremony, 87 minors were separated from the demobilization, each paid two million pesos. The Bloque Catatumbo demobilized 1,434 fighters in December 2004 and handed over no one under 18 ([El Tiempo, 2008, 2012](#)). The MAPP/OEA verification mission recorded the mechanism as it ran: minors were still arriving at ICBF in 2008 who had apparently been sent home by their commanders days before demobilization ([MAPP/OEA, 2008](#)). By the government's own count, relayed by the UN Secretary-General, 391 minors were handed over in the entire collective process ([UN Security Council, 2009](#), para. 70). These accounts establish that the channel existed. This paper measures its scale and its signature in the registry the commanders were curating.

A stylized incentive argument

A commander choosing whom to present at a ceremony weighs the demobilization credit of an additional name against the expected legal cost the name creates. For a fighter aged well above 18 and recruited as an adult, the cost is nil and the credit is positive: larger surrendered rosters signaled compliance and absorbed rank-and-file into the amnesty. For a fighter below 18, the name

is per se evidence of a non-amnestiable crime committed by the organization’s leadership. The expected cost jumps on the wrong side of the threshold, and no safe harbor removed it: Article 64 protected the act of handover while leaving the confession obligation and the underlying liability intact. If misreporting age were cheap and undetectable, the prediction would be relabeling: minors appear as 18- and 19-year-olds, the classic bunching response to a notch. But ceremony registration required identity documents. A falsified age is itself a detectable offense, and it leaves the underlying liability intact upon any later verification. Removal, quietly discharging the child before the ceremony, creates no record at all. It dominates relabeling when documents make ages hard to fake and when the crime attaches to the person’s existence in the record rather than to the recorded number.

The second prediction follows from the structure of the liability. Child recruitment is defined by age at recruitment, not age at demobilization. An 18- or 19-year-old presenting in 2004 with two years of tenure was recruited at 16. His file, his testimony, or his later cooperation with prosecutors could establish the crime as surely as a 16-year-old’s presence would. A commander screening to minimize exposure therefore does not cut at exactly 18. He cuts above it, with a buffer that fades as age rises and the probability of adult recruitment grows. The observable signatures follow. First, the under-18 mass collapses with no compensating excess at 18-19: removal, not relabeling. Second, the deficit extends with fading intensity through the ages just above the threshold: the buffer. Both are testable against the deserter counterfactual, and both are found. This is an interpretive framework, not a structural model. Its role is to fix which patterns count as evidence of strategic screening and which would count against it.

Data

The paper uses the administrative records of Colombia’s reintegration agency (ARN), obtained through information requests. The records comprise two components, and the match between them is internal to the ARN data. A registry component (ARN, 2019) covers 52,316 individuals with integer age at a fixed reference date, sex, demobilization date, and process type, but no group identifier. A roster component (ARN, 2018) covers 60,275 individuals with former group (*Exgrupo*), demobilization modality (collective versus individual), and program-entry status, but no age. The design classifies the registry records by exit channel and validates the classification against the roster.

We compute age at demobilization as the registry age minus the elapsed time between demobilization date and reference date, rounded to integer years. Because the registry age is an integer age at a fixed date, the constructed age carries plus or minus one year of uniform noise (unknown birthdays plus rounding). Section [Empirical Strategy](#) builds this noise into the counterfactual explicitly, and Section [Results](#) shows the headline deficit is robust to it, indeed slightly understated by it.

We assign collective-AUC status by exactly matching demobilization dates to the administrative dates of the 37 covered acts, compiled in a bloc-date map validated against official ceremony records (administrative dates lag ceremonies by up to three weeks). A *bloc* throughout is the demobilizing unit of one act: the Bloque Norte’s two acts are two blocs, and the absent Ortega act leaves 37. The match classifies 28,047 of the 52,316 registry records as collective AUC; dropping 64 records without a plausible computable age leaves the analysis sample of 27,983 ([Appendix](#)

Table 1: Data sources, classification, and age structure by exit channel

<i>Panel A. ARN administrative records and classification</i>					
	ARN records		Classification of the registry component		
	Registry	Roster	Collective AUC	Individual	JyP/other
Individuals	52,316	60,275	28,047	23,698	571
Key fields	age, sex, dates	group, modality	matched to the 37 bloc-ceremony dates		
With computable age			27,983	23,585	570
<i>Panel B. Age at demobilization by exit channel (computable ages)</i>					
	<i>n</i>	% under 18	% 18-19	Median age	% female
Collective AUC, 2003-2006	27,983	0.46	8.5	26	7.4
Individual deserters, 2003-2006	6,990	13.7	14.5	23	16.6
Individual, all years	23,585	11.2	13.5	24	21.6
Individual, 2007 and later	16,590	10.2	13.0	24	23.7

Notes: The ARN administrative records, obtained through information requests, comprise two components: a person-level registry carrying integer age at a fixed reference date, sex, demobilization date, and process type but no group identifier, and a roster carrying former group (*Exgrupo*) and demobilization modality (collective or individual) but no age. The match between the two components is internal to the ARN data. Age at demobilization is the registry age minus elapsed time, rounded to integer years (± 1 year of uniform noise). Validation of the date-based classification: on bloc-map dates the roster’s collective-modality share has a median of 1.000, with two contaminated dates (Mojana, 66%; Héroes de Tolová, 79%) implying roughly 180 individual-modality records classified as collective, a conservative error; roster collective-AUC records with program entry number 28,224 against 28,047 classified here from dates alone (0.6% reconciliation error); per-bloc counts run at a median 87.5% of official ceremony headcounts, matching the roster’s 12.5% non-entry rate ([Appendix Table A2](#)). Individual deserters demobilized under the individual-desertion resolution off bloc dates; 2007-and-later deserters are almost entirely FARC and ELN.

[Table A1](#) reconciles every count). The gap to the official 31,671 is institutional, not archival: the Ortega act (167 people) never entered the records, and the registry holds only fighters who entered the reintegration program (12.5 percent did not). Every wave-level estimate rescales to the official 31,671. Individuals demobilized under the individual-desertion resolution number 23,585 with computable ages: 5 demobilized in 2001 to 2002, 6,990 in 2003 to 2006 (the “era deserters,” the primary counterfactual sample), and 16,590 in 2007 or later, when the roster shows individual demobilizations to be almost entirely FARC and ELN.

Three validation checks support the classification. On bloc-map dates the roster’s share of collective-modality records has a median of 1.000, with contamination on only two dates (roughly 180 misclassified records), an error that moves unscreened deserter-type minors *into* the collective group. Roster collective-AUC records with program entry number 28,224 against 28,047 classified here from dates alone, a reconciliation error of 0.6 percent. And per-bloc registry counts run at a median 87.5 percent of official ceremony headcounts, a gap that matches the roster’s measured non-entry rate into the program (12.5 percent). [Appendix Table A2](#) reports the bloc-date map and per-bloc reconciliation in full.

[Table 1](#) reports the age structure by exit channel. The collective sample has 0.46 percent under 18, 8.5 percent at 18-19, and a median age of 26. Era deserters are 13.7 percent under 18, 14.5 percent at 18-19, median 23. All-years deserters are 11.2 percent under 18; post-2006 (FARC and ELN era) deserters are 10.2 percent. The stability of the deserter minor share across groups and periods is the first indication that the collective figure, not the deserter figure, is the anomaly.

Empirical Strategy

Estimand and counterfactual construction

The estimand is the number of minors absent from the collective demobilization records relative to the age distribution the records would show absent commander screening. The identifying comparison is between two exit channels from the same war observed in the same registry: commander-curated collective lists and self-reported individual desertions. The maintained assumption is that, conditional on reweighting and after anchoring on ages where both channels are unscreened, deserters’ age-at-exit distribution is informative about the latent age structure of collective ranks. The assumption is not innocuous: deserters self-select, and minors may desert at higher rates. The design addresses it through multiple counterfactuals, a composition test, external benchmarks, and the explicit selection bounds of Section [Alternative Explanations](#).

Each counterfactual takes a reference age distribution and rescales it so that its mass on ages 20 to 30 equals the collective sample’s. The anchor ages are chosen because both channels should record them without screening: they are above any plausible liability buffer, and the two distributions’ shapes are similar there (mass at 20-25 relative to 26-35 is 0.95 in the collective sample and 1.23 among era deserters). Deserters skew younger throughout; the anchoring and the multiple reference samples are designed to absorb that skew. Predicted minors are the rescaled reference mass below 18; missing minors are predicted minus observed. Five reference samples are used: era deserters (2003 to 2006); era deserters reweighted to the collective sex composition; era deserters reweighted by the estimated probability of AUC membership; all-years deserters; and post-2006 deserters only. In the AUC-probability reweighting, each deserter receives weight $P(\text{AUC} \mid \text{demobilization year} \times \text{wartime residence department})$ estimated from the roster (mean weight 0.31). We prefer the AUC-probability-weighted counterfactual as the closest approximation to “AUC deserters”; the post-2006 counterfactual is the mechanical lower bound, since FARC-era deserters have the lowest minor share of any reference group.

Separating censoring from composition

The central threat is compositional: perhaps the AUC genuinely recruited fewer children, and the thin left tail is real. The design separates the hypotheses on shape. A recruitment-preference difference thins the left tail smoothly: fewer 17-year-olds, proportionally fewer 15-year-olds, with no special behavior at any particular age. Censoring at a legal threshold produces a discontinuous collapse located at the threshold, with the observed-to-predicted ratio falling by an order of magnitude across a single year of age. The two hypotheses therefore have different signatures in the ratio of observed to counterfactual counts by single year of age, and different implications for mass just above the threshold: relabeling produces excess at 18-19, removal produces no excess, and a recruitment-age buffer produces deficit. The paper reports all three diagnostics. The first is the ratio profile across the threshold. The second is the bunch ratio (mass at 18-19 over mass at 20-21), benchmarked against the deserter distributions. The third is a right-side extrapolation of the collective distribution’s own adult shape (quadratic fit to log counts on ages 20 to 40), projected below 20.

The noise model

Because constructed ages carry plus or minus one year of noise, a hard administrative cut cannot appear perfectly sharp in the data, and the observed 115 seventeen-year-olds are not necessarily 115 surfaced minors. The simulation treats the AUC-weighted counterfactual as a latent continuous age distribution, censors it below a threshold τ retaining a fraction k of those below, adds the two uniform half-year noise components (birthday timing and registry-age rounding), and re-tabulates integer ages. Fitting (τ, k) to the observed counts asks whether any smooth thinning, any relabeling scheme, or any censoring rule reproduces the data, and at which threshold. The simulation also disciplines the headline estimate against the noise: measurement error moves mass across the threshold in both directions, and the fit quantifies the net effect.

Results

The collapse at eighteen

Figure 1 plots the age-at-demobilization distributions. The deserter distribution rises smoothly through the teens; the collective distribution is empty below 17 and vertical at 18. The counts are stark enough to report directly: 4, 7, and 115 collective demobilized at ages 15, 16, and 17 (records at 13 and 14 complete the 128), against 1,015, 1,356, and 1,541 at 18, 19, and 20. Era deserters, from a sample one-quarter the size, record 134, 269, and 474 at ages 15, 16, and 17. Relative to the AUC-weighted counterfactual, observed collective counts are 0.7 percent of predicted at 15, 0.6 percent at 16, and 5.6 percent at 17. The collapse is located at the legal threshold and nowhere else: by age 20 the observed-to-predicted ratio is statistically indistinguishable from one, and the profile between is the buffer pattern examined below.

Table 2 reports the missing-minors estimates across the five counterfactuals. Predicted minors range from 3,393 (post-2006 reference) to 4,514 (era deserters); observed minors are 128; the implied deficit is 3,265 to 4,386, with 4,064 under the preferred AUC-weighted counterfactual. Roughly 96 percent of predicted minors are absent. The analysis sample excludes program non-entrants; scaled to the official wave of 31,671, the deficit is approximately 3,700 to 4,950 children (preferred 4,600). We report the range rather than a point estimate deliberately: its width is the honest measure of counterfactual uncertainty, and the qualitative conclusion does not depend on the choice. Sampling uncertainty is an order of magnitude smaller: bootstrap confidence intervals, resampling individuals and, separately, the 37 blocs, are reported with **Table 2**, and they are narrow because the deficit is universal across blocs. A 54-specification curve (**Appendix Figure A1**) varies the reference distribution, the anchor window, a one-year reference-date shift in either direction, and the exclusion of the five blocs whose administrative dates required imputation. All 54 specifications return a positive missing-minors count (range 1,146 to 7,415, median 3,382). The spread is dominated by the reference-date shift, the bluntest perturbation, which moves every age in both samples by a full year and should be read as a worst-case bracket; within any fixed shift, the estimate varies by less than a factor of 1.5.

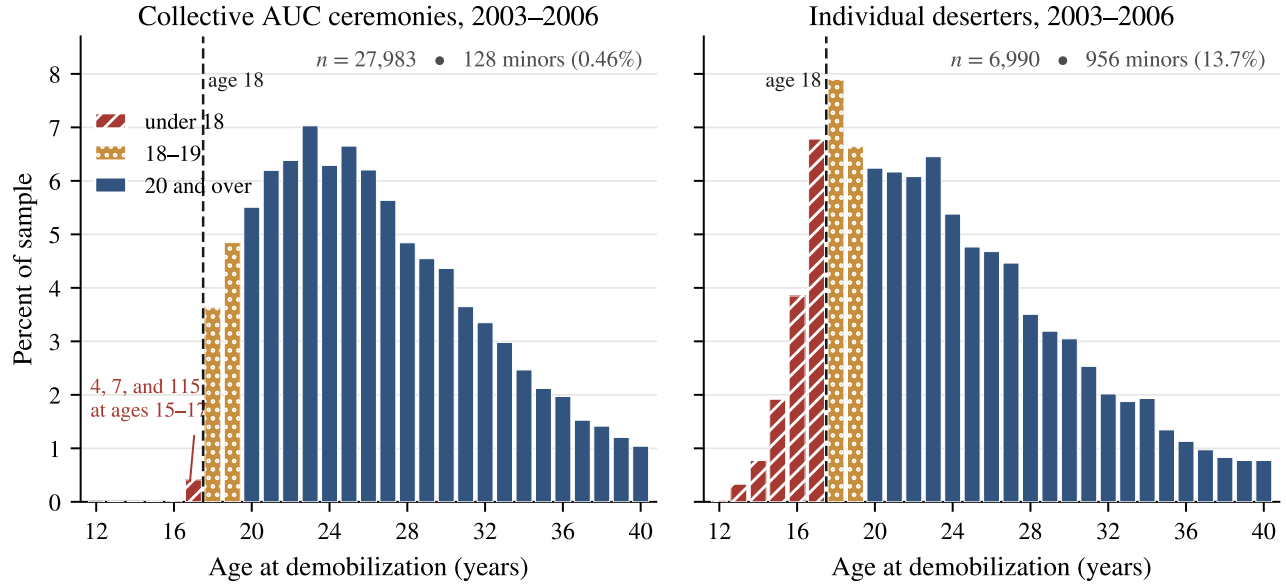


Figure 1: Age at demobilization: collective AUC ceremonies versus individual deserters. *Notes:* Each panel plots the share of its sample at each integer age of demobilization, 12 to 40, computed from the ARN registry component (age at the reference date minus elapsed time, rounded; plus or minus one year of uniform noise). The dashed line marks the eighteenth birthday. The collective lists record 4, 7, and 115 people at ages 15, 16, and 17 (one record each at 13 and 14 completes the 128 under 18), then 1,015, 1,356, and 1,541 at 18, 19, and 20. Deserters from the same war and years record 134, 269, and 474 at ages 15 to 17 from a sample one-quarter the size.

Table 2: Missing minors under five counterfactual age distributions

Reference distribution	Scale factor (anchor 20-30)	Predicted under 18	Observed under 18	Missing under 18	Obs./pred. at 17
Era deserters, 2003-2006	4.72	4,514	128	4,386	0.051
Era deserters, sex-reweighted	4.63	4,033	128	3,905	0.056
Era deserters, AUC-weighted (preferred)	15.08	4,192	128	4,064	0.056
bootstrap 95% CI				[3,746, 4,414]	
Deserters, all years	1.41	3,728	128	3,600	0.065
Deserters, 2007 and later	2.01	3,393	128	3,265	0.073

Memo: scaled to the official wave of 31,671

$\approx 3,700$ to 4,950

Notes: Each reference age distribution is rescaled so that its mass on ages 20-30 equals the collective sample's mass on 20-30; predicted minors are the rescaled mass below 18. The AUC-weighted counterfactual weights each 2003-2006 deserter by the estimated probability of AUC membership, $P(\text{AUC} \mid \text{demobilization year} \times \text{wartime residence department})$, from the roster (mean weight 0.31; its scale factor is relative to the weighted reference mass). The 95% confidence interval is an iid bootstrap resampling individuals in both samples (2,000 replications, SE 171); a cluster bootstrap resampling the 37 blocs gives [3,711, 4,442]. The memo row rescales the analysis-sample deficit proportionally by 31,671/27,983 (the analysis sample counts program entrants only): 3,265 to 4,386 becomes approximately 3,700 to 4,950, with a preferred value of 4,600. Netting the 263 minors that the Procuraduría found on the official lists out of the scaled prediction instead gives 3,577 to 4,846 (preferred 4,482).

No aging-up: removal with a buffer

If minors had been relabeled as young adults, the collective distribution would show excess mass at 18-19. [Figure 2](#) and [Table 3](#) show the opposite. The collective bunch ratio (mass at 18-19 over mass at 20-21) is 0.72, against 1.10 for all-years deserters and 1.17 for era deserters. The collective distribution’s own right-side extrapolation, which uses no deserter information at all, puts observed counts at 60 percent of predicted at age 18 and 78 percent at 19, a shortfall of 1,061 people beyond the under-18 deficit. That own-fit figure is the paper’s convention for the 18-19 shortfall; the deserter-anchored counterfactuals imply a larger gap (2,000 to 2,400) but conflate the buffer with counterfactual shape error, and we prefer the number that avoids the objection. Ages 18 and 19 are on the legal side of the threshold; there was no per se offense in presenting them. The deficit there is consistent with the recruitment-age logic of the liability: a young adult recruited a year or two before had been recruited as a minor, and was therefore also evidence. The pattern (total removal below 18, fading deficit through 19, normal mass by 20) matches a screening rule set above the legal threshold with a buffer, and matches no relabeling scheme. We describe it as consistent with recruitment-age screening: the ratios at 18 and 19 are boundary extrapolations, and part of the shortfall could reflect residual shape error or roster composition. The buffer is not fragile as a fact: all 54 specifications in the specification curve show an 18-19 deficit (observed-to-predicted ratio 0.20 to 0.73, never reaching one), and every one of the 37 blocs individually has a ratio below one (range 0.00 to 0.96). The monitored FARC comparison in [Section The FARC Comparison, 2017](#) shows the buffer is not a generic feature of collective lists: no buffer appears where rosters were not commander-curated. An appendix exercise ([Appendix Table A7](#)) maps the deserter reference into the recruited-under-18 shares implied by tenure assumptions, a scenario mapping under both age conventions, not a force-wide estimate. Documentary evidence supports the premise that time in ranks was understood as incriminating: the truth-mechanism interviews record commanders ordering members to *understate* their years of membership precisely to avoid criminal incrimination ([CNMH, 2019](#), p. 70).

The censoring simulation, as an illustration

The hard-cut simulation asks where a censoring rule would have to sit to reproduce the observed counts, and its location result is unambiguous: within the grid, $\tau = 18.0$ with a keep rate of 2 to 5 percent is the best-fitting hard cut, by a wide margin ([Table 3](#), Panel B). Every displacement degrades the fit sharply. The chi-square on ages 13 to 17 rises from 29 at $\tau = 18.0$ to 262 at 17.5 and 927 at 17.0, because the simulated mass at age 17 explodes relative to the observed 115; thresholds above 18 are decisively rejected by the observed counts at 18 and 19 ([Appendix Table A3](#) reports the full grid). The simulation remains an illustrative location diagnostic, not an accepted data-generating process: it fails absolute goodness of fit, with the minimum chi-square of 29.4 standing against critical values of 7.8 to 11.1, so no hard cut plus uniform noise fully describes the data and we claim no exact threshold or keep rate as structural parameters; the location result survives the misfit, since every displaced threshold fits far worse. Two implications carry. The noise cannot manufacture the deficit, because under total censoring it *adds* observed 15-to-17-year-olds relative to a clean cut, so the headline estimate is, if anything, understated by the measurement error. And no τ up to 21 reproduces the additional 18-19 shortfall, which reinforces the reading of that shortfall as a behavioral buffer, or as counterfactual shape error, not as part of the mechanical cut.

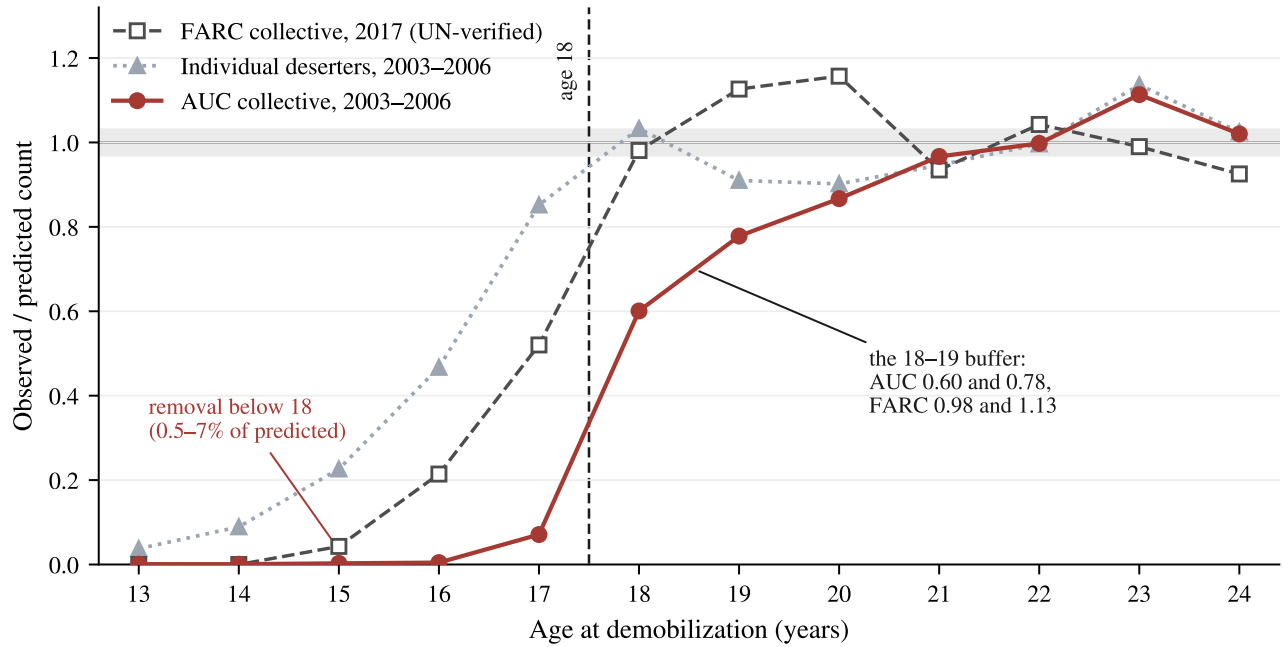


Figure 2: Observed-to-predicted ratio profiles by age: the collapse, the buffer, and the monitored comparison. *Notes:* For each sample, predicted counts at each age are the right-side extrapolation of the sample’s own age distribution (a quadratic fit to log counts on ages 20 to 40, projected left), so no cross-sample information enters any profile. The dashed line marks the eighteenth birthday; the shaded band marks a ratio of one. The AUC collective profile collapses to 0.5 to 7 percent of predicted below 18 and remains at 0.60 and 0.78 at ages 18 and 19 (the buffer); the 0.7, 0.6, and 5.6 percent quoted in the text benchmark ages 15 to 17 against the AUC-weighted deserter counterfactual instead of the own fit. The 2017 FARC demobilization, run through the identical pipeline, shows a sub-18 deficit from formal minor separation that stops at the eighteenth birthday (0.98 and 1.13 at 18 and 19). Deserters show a smooth profile through the threshold. Underlying counts: Table 1.

Table 3: The 18-19 buffer: bunching diagnostics and the censoring simulation

<i>Panel A. Mass just above the threshold</i>			
	AUC collective	Era deserters	FARC 2017
Bunch ratio: mass(18-19)/mass(20-21)	0.72	1.17	–
Observed/predicted, own right-side fit:			
at age 18	0.60	1.03	0.98
at age 19	0.78	0.91	1.13
pooled 18-19	0.69	0.97	1.06
Implied 18-19 deficit (count)	1,061	28	–29
Local step statistic: obs(17)/mean(18,19)	0.10	0.93	0.41
<i>Panel B. Hard-cut censoring simulation (illustrative); best grid fit $\tau = 18.0$, keep 2 to 5%</i>			
	Age 15	Age 16	Age 17
Observed collective counts	4	7	115
Simulated, $\tau = 18.0$, keep 2% ($\chi^2 = 29$)	12	25	90
Simulated, $\tau = 18.0$, keep 5% ($\chi^2 = 94$)	31	63	147
Best fit below 18: $\tau = 17.5$, keep 2% ($\chi^2 = 262$)	12	26	438
Best fit above 18: $\tau = 18.5$, keep 5% ($\chi^2 = 89$) ^a	30	63	99

Notes: Panel A: the bunch ratio benchmarks the collective 18-19 mass against the deserter distributions (all-years deserters: 1.10); the observed-to-predicted rows use each distribution’s own quadratic fit to log counts on ages 20-40, projected below 20, so no deserter information enters the collective column. The FARC bunch ratio is omitted because the FARC age distribution rises through the twenties, which makes the raw ratio uninformative; the fit-based rows are the valid comparison. Panel B: the simulation censors the AUC-weighted counterfactual below τ , retains a fraction of those below, adds the two uniform ± 0.5 -year noise components (birthday timing and registry-age rounding), and re-tabulates integer ages; χ^2 compares simulated to observed counts on ages 13-17. Thresholds below 18 fail because the simulated mass at 17 explodes; ^athresholds above 18 can match ages 13-17 but are rejected by the observed counts at 18 and 19 (χ^2 on ages 13-21 of 883 to 16,532, against 437 at $\tau = 18.0$). The best fit does not pass absolute goodness of fit ($\chi^2 = 29.4$ against critical values of 7.8 to 11.1), so the exercise is an illustrative location diagnostic for the cut, not an accepted data-generating process (Appendix Table A3 reports the full grid).

Adult roster padding

Contemporary observers documented non-combatants entering collective rosters for benefits. This threatens the counterfactual’s denominator, so we treat it in the main analysis. At the Bloque Norte’s El Copey (Chimila) act, the record relayed by the Inter-American Commission counts only 880 shock-force members among the 2,215 demobilized (CIDH, 2007, fns. 20 and 21); the Commission had earlier doubted the Cacique Nutibara’s roster (CIDH, 2004, paras. 94 to 98), a doubt Human Rights Watch’s interviews echoed (HRW, 2005); and 58 percent of the demobilized paramilitaries later interviewed under the truth mechanism reported joining in 2003 to 2006, the negotiation period itself (CNMH, 2019). Padding concentrated at adult ages inflates the 20-30 anchor mass and therefore the predicted number of minors. Appendix Table A4 reports the deficit as a function of the padded share p of the anchor mass, which holds 17,810 of the sample’s 27,983 records; the grid treats p as free because the documentary record does not pin it down. The count falls linearly, from 4,064 at $p = 0$ to 2,806 at $p = 0.30$, and the deficit per 1,000 true members falls from 145.2 to 124.0. Padding therefore shrinks the deficit; what it cannot plausibly do is close it, since zeroing the count would require p equal to 0.97. Dropping the five acts with documented padding suspicions, both Bloque Norte acts and the three Don Berna blocs, together 26.5 percent of the sample, leaves the per-member deficit unchanged: 145.4 against 145.2 per 1,000. That says the result is not driven by the most notorious ceremonies, not that padding elsewhere is zero. Padding located in the anchor also cannot generate a discontinuity at exactly 18: the step from 115 at age 17 to 1,015 at 18 is a fact of the collective lists themselves, not of any counterfactual. (Padding keyed to benefit eligibility at 18 could itself sharpen the raw step, so the step tells against anchor-located padding specifically.) Even explaining the 18-19 shortfall as pure padding would require 31 to 48 percent of all 20-to-30-year-olds on the lists to be fake, and would still leave 94 to 96 percent of predicted minors missing.

Heterogeneity across blocs and the Justice and Peace test

The deficit is universal across the organization. Every one of the 37 blocs has an under-18 share below 1.6 percent; the 128 surfaced minors scatter thinly across blocs (at most 21 in any single bloc). The buffer is equally universal: all 37 blocs show an 18-19 observed-to-predicted ratio below one (range 0.00 to 0.96). The share under 20 varies more, from 0 to 15 percent, and correlates modestly with bloc size ($r = 0.31$). Table 4 collects the six blocs where external records meet the ceremony lists most cleanly; the full 37-bloc panel is Appendix Table A5. Section External Validation places it against the child-recruitment counts documented in Justicia y Paz verdicts.

The recruitment-age logic makes one further heterogeneity prediction: in recently founded blocs, an 18- or 19-year-old is mechanically more likely to have been recruited under 18, so the buffer should bind harder there. Coding all 37 blocs by founding year (Appendix Figure A2) gives a test that is directionally supportive but marginal, and we report it as unconfirmed. The size-weighted correlation of the bloc 18-19 ratio with years active is +0.245 (one-sided permutation $p = 0.077$), rising to +0.301 ($p = 0.048$) when the three Don Berna blocs with documented roster padding are excluded; the signal comes almost entirely from the three pre-1990 veteran organizations, and a binary split at founding year 2000 is slightly wrong-signed. Either the recruitment-age channel is second-order relative to a blanket screening norm, or founding year is too noisy a proxy for the tenure mix of a bloc’s youngest cohort. The robust fact is the universality, not the gradient.

Table 4: Six blocs where external records meet the ceremony lists

Bloc	Demob. <i>n</i>	Documented recruitment	Handed over at act	External record
Élmer Cárdenas	1,660 ^a	309	3	El Alemán sentencia : 309 counts legalized; ~150 minors gathered and sent home
Catatumbo	1,102	149 ^b	0	1,434 demobilized, none under 18
Vencedores de Arauca	421	73	21	29% of demobilized reported entering as minors (CNMH-DAV, 2019)
Mineros	2,562	327	–	Cuco Vanoy sentencia (2018)
Tolima	189	–	16 ^c	delivered to ICBF the day before its act
Calima	457	–	27	per-act handover record

Notes: Demobilized *n* is the analysis-sample count (program entrants with computable ages); “documented recruitment” is the count of child recruitment established in [Justicia y Paz verdicts](#) over the bloc’s history (a floor that partly reflects prosecutorial effort); “handed over at act” is the per-act handover record where one exists. ^aSum of the bloc’s three demobilization acts (Costanero, Pavarandó y Dabeiba, Norte Medio Salaquí); the 309 counts span all three. ^bThe [Mancuso macro-sentencia](#) legalized 149 recruitment counts jointly across Catatumbo, Norte, Córdoba, and Montes de María; the count cannot be attributed to Catatumbo alone. ^cDelivered to ICBF the day before the act, so the ceremony record itself shows none. The full 37-bloc panel is [Appendix Table A5](#).

The deficit was already near-total at the first ceremony in November 2003, twenty months before the [Justice and Peace Law](#) was sanctioned on 25 July 2005, and the sharpest available quasi-experimental test confirms that the law’s timing has no cross-bloc bite. Eleven blocs (4,881 people of the analysis sample) demobilized before the law; twenty-six blocs (23,102) after. If [Ley 975](#)’s explicit minor-surrender condition had created the concealment incentive, post-975 blocs should hide more; the weighted under-18 shares are 0.45 and 0.46 percent, and bloc-level tests on the under-18 share and the bunch ratio are null ([Appendix Table A6](#)). The same null prices Article 64’s safe harbor: if the July 2005 promise that surrendering minors would not cost benefits had changed the calculus, post-975 blocs should have surfaced more children, and they surfaced none. We read the null as a floor effect rather than as evidence against strategic behavior, because the incentives predated the law: the non-amnestiable domestic crime on the books from 2000, [Decreto 128](#)’s minor-routing framework from January 2003, and the negotiation framework that became [Ley 975](#) under public discussion from 2003. The null also disciplines the paper’s claims: because the cross-bloc timing variation has no bite, the design is an accounting exercise with shape-based mechanism tests, not a difference-in-differences, and the paper claims nothing stronger.

The missing women

The underrepresentation has a sex dimension. The collective lists are 7.4 percent female, against a paramilitary benchmark of 12.34 percent from the truth mechanism’s structured interviews ([CNMH, 2019](#), pp. 34 and 35) and deserter benchmarks of 15 to 17 percent. Because the benchmark is uncertain, and a share gap does not count omitted people without assumptions about missing men, padding, and true roster size, we do not translate the shares into a headline number. The claim the data support is narrower and lives just above the threshold, where the sex-specific pipeline ([Appendix Table A8](#)) compares each sex to its own reference distribution. At 18-19 the female observed-to-predicted ratio is 0.353 against 0.568 for men: a missing fraction of 0.647

against 0.432, about 50 percent higher.⁴ Below 18 both sexes are at the floor, with 97 percent or more of predicted minors absent, so no differential under-18 deficit can be claimed. The full benchmark discussion and the descriptive age profile are in [Appendix Figure A3](#). The pattern is consistent with the [judicially documented](#) retention of girls and young women within bloc structures, among other explanations, and it matches the DDR practice standards’ warning that commanders deliberately exclude women from demobilization processes ([UN IAWG-DDR, 2023, Module 5.10](#)).

Alternative Explanations

Rerouting to ICBF under a different date. Minors from collective demobilizations were legally required to transit through ICBF. If they later entered the reintegration registry with an ICBF-exit date rather than the bloc ceremony date, they would appear in our data as “individual” demobilizations, and the collective deficit would be a bookkeeping artifact. The data show date clusters among under-18 individual records consistent with batch processing (73 dates with five or more), so the channel exists. Its scale can be gauged two ways. The roster shows 26 to 44 percent of 2003-2006 individual demobilizations were AUC, which under independence of age and group implies an *expected* 300 to 420 AUC-origin minors among the 956 era-deserter minors. Because age and group membership may be dependent, that is an expectation, not a cap. The calculation that needs no independence assumption is the subtract-everything scenario: treat every child visible in the individual channel as a rerouted collective child, and subtract all 956 era-deserter minors along with the 128 observed from the predicted 3,393 to 4,514. That leaves roughly 2,300 to 3,400 missing (preferred 3,108). Under the paper’s estimand, absence from the ceremony-linked records, this subtraction is not the right operation, since a rerouted child remains absent from the collective accounting; we report it as a robustness floor.

Pre-ceremony handover and lawful routing. Documented pre-ceremony releases (blocs discharging minors in the weeks before demobilizing) are sometimes offered as the benign version of events: the children were dealt with, just not at ceremonies. The external record caps that version. It shows 391 minors handed over through the entire collective process (OACP count, relayed in [UN Security Council, 2009](#), para. 70), less than a tenth of the deficit, and the fullest accounting of AUC minors reaching ICBF by any route through 2007 stops at 1,039. One distinction should be stated without euphemism. A child formally presented and correctly transferred to ICBF is absent from the adult ledger without any commander concealment, so absence from the ceremony-linked records is not per se evidence of strategy; the decomposition of the deficit into quiet lawful-adjacent release and strategic concealment is not identified, and the paper does not claim otherwise. What the documentary record does establish are the two anchors between which that decomposition sits. First, formal routing was small: 263 minors on the official lists and 391 handed over, against the roughly 6,300 the child-protection estimates imply. Second, commanders withheld children in documented cases: the Élmér Cárdenas releases, the Catatumbo zero, the minors the [MAPP/OEA \(2008\)](#) recorded arriving at ICBF after being sent home days before ceremonies. Quiet pre-release without registration removed children from the demobilization’s official accounting whatever its intent.

⁴These ratios use the deserter-anchored convention and average to its pooled 0.54, not to the own-fit 0.69 of [Table 3](#); [Appendix Table A1](#) reconciles the conventions.

Differential non-entry into the reintegration program. The analysis sample is demobilized individuals who entered the ARN registry; if collective minors demobilized officially but never enrolled, the deficit would be a program-selection artifact. Non-entry runs the wrong way: 12.5 percent for collective AUC against 15.8 percent for individuals. For non-entry to explain the gap, essentially all 4,016 collective non-entrants would need to be minors. The official ceremony records themselves contradict that: the Procuraduría’s count (PGN, 2006) of minors on the official lists of all 31,671 collectively demobilized is 263. The hole is in the state’s own primary record, not in program enrollment. And minors could not legally enroll in the adult program: institutional exclusion from adult lists and the routing obligation are the same administrative boundary, and the deficit records how few children crossed it through any documented channel.

Real composition: the AUC recruited adults. This is the alternative with the most at stake, and three tests reject it as the main story. First, the direct composition test: reweighting era deserters by the probability of AUC membership leaves the minor share at 13.0 percent, against 13.7 percent unweighted; AUC deserters were not less likely to be minors than guerrilla deserters. Second, the shape test: recruitment preferences thin the left tail smoothly, but the observed ratio profile collapses discontinuously at the threshold (5.6 percent of predicted at 17, 60 percent at 18, roughly parity by 20), a censoring signature, not a preference signature. Third, magnitude: deserters do skew younger than collective adults even at 20 to 35, but the shape gap there is modest (relative mass ratios 1.23 versus 0.95) and cannot generate a twenty-fold collapse at 15 to 17. A related denominator threat, adult roster padding, is treated in the main analysis: even a 30 percent padded anchor leaves 2,806 missing (Appendix Table A4). Composition may trim the upper end of the estimate range, which is why the range is reported, but it cannot produce the observed pattern.

Deserter self-selection, and bounds. The remaining threat to magnitude (not to existence) is that minors desert at higher rates than adults, making the deserter counterfactual too young and the deficit overstated. The concern can be formalized and bounded. Let k denote the minor/adult desertion-hazard ratio; the anchored counterfactual’s predicted minor count then scales as predicted/ k , so the missing count is a declining function of k ; Table 5 reports the grid. At $k = 1$ (no differential desertion) the deficit is the headline 4,386 under the era-deserter reference; at $k = 2$, minors deserting at twice the adult rate, it is still 2,129; even $k = 3$ leaves more than 1,100 missing. Eliminating the deficit requires k of 29 to 35: minors would have to desert at roughly thirty times the adult rate, which would imply that nearly all of any bloc’s minors walked out within a couple of years. The external benchmarks moreover point the other way: era deserters are 13.7 percent minors against the roughly 20 percent that child-protection actors placed in AUC ranks (UN Security Council, 2009), consistent with k of about 0.6 to 0.9. The same calculation for post-2006 (FARC-era) deserters against documented FARC minor shares gives k of 0.26 to 0.45. Deserter flows appear to *under*-represent minors, plausibly because minors were more surveilled and less able to flee, in which case the $k = 1$ headline is conservative. A fully deserter-free check brackets from above: the collective distribution’s own right-side extrapolation implies a 12-to-17 deficit near 8,150. The post-2006 counterfactual already supplies the reported lower bound of 3,265.

The alternatives combined. The alternatives can also be stacked, and it is worth seeing how much stacking it takes. Take the most conservative counterfactual. Pad the roster with non-combatants. Let minors desert faster than adults. Treat every minor in the individual channel as a rerouted collective child. With 20 percent padding and minors deserting at 1.5 times the adult

Table 5: Selection bounds: missing minors as a function of differential desertion

Minor/adult desertion-hazard ratio k	Missing minors	
	Reference: era deserters	Reference: all-years deserters
$k = 1$ (no differential desertion)	4,386	3,600
$k = 1.5$	2,881	2,357
$k = 2$	2,129	1,736
$k = 3$	1,377	1,115
Breakeven k^* (zero concealment)	35.3	29.1

Notes: With minor/adult desertion-hazard ratio k , the anchored counterfactual’s predicted minor count scales as predicted/ k , so missing(k) = predicted/ k – 128. External benchmarks are consistent with $k \leq 1$: era deserters are 13.7% minors against the roughly 20% that child-protection actors placed in AUC ranks (UN Security Council, 2009), consistent with $k \approx 0.6$ to 0.9, and the same calculation for post-2006 deserters against documented FARC minor shares gives $k \approx 0.26$ to 0.45; if $k < 1$ the $k = 1$ headline is conservative.

rate, about 700 children are still missing. Zeroing the count takes far more: a roster that is 74 percent fake, or minors deserting at nearly three times the adult rate on top of 30 percent padding, with all 956 individual-channel minors assumed to be relabeled collective children.

Every piece of that stack sits where the evidence says it cannot. The external benchmarks put desertion selection at or below one. No source documents diffuse padding near 30 percent. Only 26 to 44 percent of the individual channel was AUC at all. And the stack double-counts: calling the 956 rerouted and inflating the desertion ratio are the same correction, applied twice.

The stack also buys only the level. No combination of padding, rerouting, and desertion produces the collapse at exactly 18, the 18-19 deficit without bunching, the female differential at the threshold, the deficit in all 37 blocs, or the clean cut in the monitored FARC records. The alternatives contest the count’s precision; the signature has no rival account.

External Validation

External sources check the estimates on three margins: the aggregate, the accounting map of surfaced minors, and the bloc level. They are not independent replications of the preferred estimate; their role is to validate that under-accounting occurred, to document that concealment was practiced, and to bracket the aggregate.

The aggregate. The deficit of approximately 3,700 to 4,950 across the official wave implies a minor share of AUC ranks of roughly 11.7 to 15.7 percent. The external estimates bracket it from above. Human Rights Watch’s (2003) September investigation concluded that “no more than 20 percent” of AUC forces were under eighteen, about 2,200 individuals on the AUC’s then-claimed strength of 11,000. The figure is a ceiling on a force that would nearly triple by demobilization; the wave-era benchmark is the UN Secretary-General’s, relaying child-protection actors who placed the under-18 share at “approximately 20 per cent of the total number of AUC combatants,” roughly 6,300 on 31,671. The same report relays “credible information that a considerable number of children were not handed over by their commanders” (UN Security Council, 2009, para. 70). Our implied share sits below both, making the headline deficit conservative relative to the

external record. A survey benchmark points the same way from within: 47 percent of all demobilized fighters in the consolidated reintegration records reported having *entered* their group as minors (CNMH, 2015, p. 209); the figure pools all groups and records recruitment age rather than demobilization age, but it stands against lists on which 0.46 percent were minors at exit.

The accounting map. The counts of AUC minors who surfaced through official channels form a consistent accounting map (Appendix Table A9). The map must be read as a reconciliation, not as a set of independent estimates of one number: each entry counts a different object in a different universe, and the entries overlap. On the official lists themselves, the Procuraduría (PGN, 2006) found 263 minors among the 31,671 collectively demobilized.⁵ Handed over within the collective process were 391 (OACP, in UN Security Council, 2009); another 648 AUC children demobilized individually over 1999 to 2008 (same source). The two figures sum to the 1,039 autodefensa-origin minors that ICBF recorded entering its program from 1999 through December 2007 (MAPP/OEA, 2008). But the accounting windows differ (the 648 runs through 2008, the 1,039 ends in December 2007), so we read the closeness as suggestive consistency between overlapping registries, not as an administrative identity. Inside that reconciliation sits the 913 children officially delivered to ICBF in 2003 to 2006, a figure the CNMH itself flags as very probably neither the totality of the AUC’s minors nor of its desvinculados (CNMH, 2013, pp. 328 to 330). The Ministry of Defense channel count of 730 during the wave (below) overlaps the ICBF figures without matching them, and judicial recruitment counts are historical floors, not ceremony-date stocks. Every entry in the map is a fraction of the estimated deficit, from about 6 percent of the preferred 4,064 (the 263) to about a quarter (the 1,039). For scale, the AUC, the conflict’s largest single exit, contributed about a sixth of ICBF’s cumulative intake of demobilized minors from *all* armed groups through 2018: 1,055 of 6,570 (ICBF, 2018). In the 2006 demobilizations the imbalance was starkest: 63 AUC children against 17,581 adults (UN Secretary-General figures, via CEV, 2022). The archive tells the same story: the CNMH’s (2017) *Una guerra sin edad* documents 16,879 recruitment cases over 1960 to 2016, with paramilitaries accounting for 27 percent (3,041 records) of cases with an identified recruiter. The CNMH itself attributes the *under*-registration of paramilitary recruitment to exactly the practice this paper measures, children returned home instead of handed over; a court-ordered state search later located 275 of them.

The Ministry of Defense series. A newly available Ministry of Defense administrative series records each minor who surfaced through state channels from January 2003, with municipality, exact date, and group of origin (MinDefensa, 2026). It supplies a fourth accounting: 730 AUC minors surfaced through this channel during the wave, followed by 53 in 2007 and a near-zero trickle after, the same order as every other entry in the map. The series cannot track late registration by the children sent home, because a minors-at-exit series loses them as they age past 18. It also permits a timing test. When each municipality is assigned to its primary recruiting bloc, independently of ceremony timing, minors surfacing through this channel show *no* elevation in the month before the bloc’s ceremony: 15 exits observed against 16.3 expected (Appendix Figure A4). What survives is a small elevation in the ceremony fortnight, weeks minus one and zero jointly, about twice the weekly baseline (permutation $p = 0.048$), fragile and driven largely by the Vencedores de Arauca act, at which the bloc handed over 21 minors.⁶ The corrected result

⁵The 263 and the paper’s 128 count different objects, a document audit of the official lists against registry program entrants; Appendix Table A1 reconciles them.

⁶An earlier version of this paper reported an 8.2-times pre-ceremony spike in this series; that figure was an artifact of nearest-ceremony assignment, which concentrates event time near zero mechanically (permutation null mean 7.6, $p = 0.32$), and it is withdrawn.

is consistent with the documented at-act handovers and with the accounting: few of the children released before ceremonies appear in this channel, whatever their subsequent paths, matching what the [MAPP/OEA](#) described.

The bloc level. [Justicia y Paz verdicts](#) provide external, judicially established recruitment counts for individual blocs, and they land precisely where the ceremonies show nothing. [Table 4](#) collects the sharpest cases and [Appendix Table A5](#) the full panel. Nine blocs have counts from [their own sentencias](#), from Élder Cárdenas’s 309 ([the El Alemán verdict](#)) and Mineros’s 327 down to Cundinamarca’s 6. Two umbrella sentencias add counts that span several blocs and must be allocated, not multiplied. The [Mancuso macro-sentencia](#) legalized 149 recruitment counts jointly across Catatumbo, Norte, Córdoba, and Montes de María. The [Bloque Central Bolívar macro-sentencia](#) documented 232 recruitment victims across the BCB’s six demobilization acts. Sentencia counts are floors whose size partly reflects prosecutorial prioritization, not only recruitment intensity, and the umbrella counts must be allocated across constituent acts before any cross-bloc use. Against these recruitment histories stand the per-act handover records, where they exist. The Bloque Catatumbo, inside the Mancuso umbrella, demobilized 1,434 fighters and handed over zero minors. The Bloque Tolima delivered 16 to ICBF the day *before* its act. The Bloque Calima handed over 27. The Vencedores de Arauca, with 73 judicially documented recruits and 29 percent of its demobilized reporting entry as minors ([CNMH-DAV, 2022](#)), presented 21. And the Bloque Élder Cárdenas, with 309 established by verdict, delivered 3, after gathering roughly 150 of its minors and sending them home. Every external source confirms recruitment of minors at scale in precisely the blocs whose ceremonies recorded none.

The FARC Comparison, 2017

The 2016 peace accord with the FARC provides the regime contrast the AUC process lacks: a monitored-regime comparison, not a no-liability placebo. Criminal exposure for child recruitment remained fully alive in the FARC process. [Ley 1820 of 2016](#), the amnesty law, expressly excludes the recruitment of minors from amnesty (Article 23). The Constitutional Court fixed the excluded conduct at recruitment of anyone under 18 for conduct after 25 June 2005 ([C-007 of 2018](#)). And the special jurisdiction (JEP) opened a dedicated macro-case on child recruitment in March 2019 ([Caso 07, Auto 029](#)). By 2024 the case had charged six former members of the FARC’s last Secretariat with war crimes of recruitment and use of children. What distinguished the FARC process was the monitoring and the mechanics of roster construction, not the absence of liability. Minor handover was negotiated explicitly, monitored by the UN verification mission ([United Nations, 2017](#)), and executed through a dedicated separation protocol (the Camino Diferencial de Vida) before and during the concentration in transition zones. The membership lists, supplied by the FARC, were then verified and accredited by the government rather than entering the record as delivered ([DAPRE, 2018](#)). The JEP’s restorative sanctions (*sanciones propias*, five to eight years of non-custodial sanction for full acknowledgment of responsibility) lowered the expected severity of punishment relative to ordinary criminal justice. The price of a confessed recruitment count was therefore low and stable under the JEP, where under Ley 975 the same confession fed a custodial cap that omission could revoke; the two regimes put opposite prices on surfacing a child. Concealment incentives were therefore attenuated rather than absent; liability itself was never removed. If the method of this paper is measuring commander screening rather than some generic feature of collective demobilization lists, the identical pipeline applied to the 2017 records should

find no buffer where rosters were not commander-curated.

It finds none ([Figure 2](#)). We take the 13,145 collective FARC records with 2016 to 2018 demobilization dates (of 13,266) and impute age at demobilization exactly as for the AUC. The same right-side extrapolation, a quadratic in log counts fit on ages 20 to 40 and projected left, gives observed-to-predicted ratios at 17, 18, and 19 of 0.52, 0.98, and 1.13 for the FARC. The AUC collective lists stand at 0.07, 0.60, and 0.78 (AUC-era deserters: 0.85, 1.03, 0.91). Pooled over 18-19, the FARC ratio is 1.06 and the implied deficit is minus 29 people; the AUC ratio is 0.69 and the deficit is 1,061. The FARC distribution shows exactly what a formal separation protocol produces: a sub-18 deficit (minors were routed out, as intended) that *stops dead at the eighteenth birthday*, with ages 18 and 19 at or slightly above the smooth fit. The AUC distribution shows the cut plus the buffer. A fit-free version gives the same ordering: the local step statistic (the count at 17 over the mean of 18 and 19) is 0.10 for the AUC, 0.41 for the FARC, and 0.93 for deserters. The result is not an artifact of fit window: the FARC pooled 18-19 ratio stays in 0.97 to 1.17 across windows of 20-35, 21-45, and 22-40, a band the AUC's 0.69 never approaches ([Appendix Table A10](#)).

Three boundaries fix what the comparison establishes. The FARC's own sub-18 deficit relative to extrapolation (about 770) is not evidence of FARC concealment and we do not use it as such: minors were formally separated before registration, and the informative statistic is the shape at and above 18. The FARC age distribution peaks near 31, so the global fit is looser; the window sensitivities and the fit-free step statistic address this. And the sharpest point: FARC members aged 18 or 19 in 2017 could well have been recruited as minors, exactly the population the AUC screened out, and their recruiters remained criminally exposed before the JEP; they nonetheless appear on the FARC rosters in the numbers a smooth fit predicts. The comparison does not isolate the liability mechanism from the monitoring mechanism, since the two processes differ in verification, roster protocol, conflict stage, and demography at once. What the contrast shows is that the buffer signature appears where commanders curated the rosters and does not appear where the lists were externally verified, in the only two large collective demobilizations the Colombian registry records.

Implications

For the accounting of the conflict. The immediate implication is numerical: conditional on the calibration, the ceremony-linked reintegration records understate child soldiering in the AUC by a factor of roughly thirty. The 128 minors in the collective records against a predicted 4,200, and approximately 3,700 to 4,950 across the official wave, stand beside the 391 minors handed over in the process ([UN Security Council, 2009](#)), the 263 the Procuraduría ([PGN, 2006](#)) found on the official lists, and the counts established in [Justicia y Paz verdicts](#): the judicial record has so far documented only a fraction of what the demographic accounting implies. Reparations eligibility, victim registries, and the historical record have all been built downstream of the censored lists.

For DDR design. The mechanism evidence carries the design lesson. The AUC process delegated list construction to the party whose crimes the lists would document, and attached a criminal-liability notch to a single observable. The pattern in the records is consistent with deletion, executed with a buffer, before the state ever observed the roster, not with misreporting at the margin. Three margins follow. First, verification of roster *completeness*, not just identity:

demographic screening of the kind used here is cheap and could run in real time, since an age distribution with a hole at the legal threshold is detectable at the first ceremony. The FARC comparison shows what a monitored process with externally verified rosters looks like instead: a clean cut at 18 and nothing missing above it. Second, the sequencing of liability and disclosure: a regime that conditions benefits on surrendering minors while making each surrendered minor evidence against the surrendering party sets its two instruments against each other. [Ley 975](#)’s Article 64 recognized the problem without solving it: it shielded the act of handover while the evidence the handover created remained prosecutable, confessable, and, after [C-370 de 2006](#), grounds for revoking the sentencing cap if omitted. The point is now embedded in practice standards, which require children’s release to be unconditional and separated from adult demobilization and its bargaining ([UN IAWG-DDR, 2021, Module 5.20](#)). Third, the buffer result warns that screening distortions do not respect the legal threshold that causes them. Young adults recruited as children are missing from the process alongside the minors, and any accounting keyed to status at demobilization will miss liability keyed to status at recruitment. The same logic extends to the young women whose absence Section [Results](#) documents ([UN IAWG-DDR, 2023, Module 5.10](#)). The evidence does not say that conditioning benefits on child surrender is wrong; it says the condition must be designed against the concealment response it predictably invites, because the deficit was near-total from the first ceremony onward.

For transitional justice more broadly. Transitional-justice processes generate the data by which they are later judged, and this paper documents how strategic actors shape that data at the point of entry. The estimand here, absence from the ceremony-linked demobilization records, is measurable wherever a screened and an unscreened exit channel coexist, and the two signatures established here, the threshold collapse and the buffered deficit without bunching, are portable tests. What the measurement cannot do is follow the children. Some went home; some entered ICBF protection late and uncounted; some were absorbed into successor groups whose recruitment the state spent the next decade fighting. The administrative silence that made the concealment effective is the same silence that now bounds what any researcher can know about its consequences. Conditional on the reference distribution and the anchor, we can state a range for the number of children absent from the ceremony-linked record; the record was constructed precisely so that no one could say more.

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Table A1: Reconciliation of counts: from the official wave to the analysis sample

<i>Panel A. The official wave and the ARN-covered wave</i>	
Official collective demobilizations, 38 acts, 2003-2006	31,671
minus the Ortega act, never in the ARN records	−167
ARN-covered wave, 37 acts	31,504
<i>Panel B. The roster component (program entry)</i>	
Roster records, collective-AUC	32,240
entered the reintegration program	28,224
did not enter (12.5%)	4,016
<i>Panel C. The registry component (ages): the analysis samples</i>	
Registry records	52,316
on the 37 collective act dates	28,047
individual-desertion process type	23,698
other special processes	571
Collective, computable age 10 to 60 (analysis sample)	27,983
Individual, computable age 10 to 60	23,585
demobilized 2001-2002	5
demobilized 2003-2006 (era deserters)	6,990
demobilized 2007 or later	16,590

Notes: The three components measure different populations and none nests exactly in another. The roster’s 32,240 exceeds the official 31,671, as accreting administrative registries typically exceed point-in-time official counts; the direction is conservative, since a larger true roster implies more missing children per official member, not fewer. The registry’s 28,047 records on act dates against the roster’s 28,224 program entrants is a reconciliation error of 0.6%. The per-act official headcounts compiled in [Appendix Table A2](#) sum to 31,970 including Ortega, against the official aggregate of 31,671; per-act figures come from heterogeneous official sources, and all wave-level scaling in the text uses the official aggregate. Two further pairs measure different objects. The Procuraduría’s 263 minors ([PGN, 2006](#)) is a document audit of the official lists of all 31,671; the paper’s 128 are registry entrants whose computed age at demobilization is under 18. Minors were to be routed to ICBF rather than enrolled in the adult program, so the two counts need not nest: the 128 measure how many under-18 records entered the adult registry anyway. The sex-specific 18-19 ratios of [Appendix Table A8](#) (0.353 female, 0.568 male) use the deserter-anchored convention, whose pooled value is 0.54; the own-fit convention of [Table 3](#) gives 0.69 and is the paper’s headline because it is the more conservative of the two.

Appendix (for online publication)

This appendix collects the supporting exhibits referenced in the text: the reconciliation of every count in the paper, the bloc-date map and reconciliation underlying the classification, the specification curve, the full censoring-simulation grid, the padding-sensitivity grid, the 37-bloc panel with judicial validation, the pre/post-Ley 975 tests, the bloc tenure test, the recruited-as-minors scenario mapping, the missing-women benchmarks and sex-specific pipeline, the accounting map of surfaced AUC minors, the Ministry of Defense event-time diagnostic, and the FARC fit-window sensitivities.

Appendix tables

Table A2: Bloc-date map and per-bloc reconciliation against official headcounts

Bloc	Admin. date	Official headcount	Roster count	Registry count	Coverage ratio	Date imputation
Cacique Nutibara	2003-12-16	868	868	759	0.87	+21 d
Bananero	2004-11-25	451	454	354	0.78	–
Sur del Magdalena/I. San Fdo.	2004-12-04	48	48	39	0.81	–
Cundinamarca	2004-12-09	148	149	130	0.88	–
Catatumbo	2004-12-10	1,434	1,435	1,103	0.77	–
Calima	2004-12-18	564	612	457	0.81	–
Córdoba	2005-01-18	925	925	777	0.84	–
Sur Oeste Antioqueño	2005-01-30	126	125	100	0.79	–
Mojana	2005-02-02	109	109	135	1.24	–
Héroes de Tolová	2005-06-15	464	464	533	1.15	–
Montes de María	2005-07-14	594	597	504	0.85	–
Libertadores del Sur	2005-07-30	689	678	541	0.79	–
Meta y Vichada	2005-08-06	209	209	157	0.75	–
Héroes de Granada	2005-08-10	2,033	2,030	1,863	0.92	+9 d
Pacífico	2005-08-23	358	151	125	0.35	–
Anillos de Seguridad	2005-08-27	300	301	272	0.91	–
Centauros	2005-09-03	1,134	1,126	901	0.79	–
Noroccidente Antioqueño	2005-09-11	222	222	193	0.87	–
Frente Vichada	2005-09-24	325	325	265	0.82	–
Tolima	2005-10-22	207	211	189	0.91	–
Frentes NE Antioqueño (BCB)	2005-12-14	1,922	1,923	1,770	0.92	+2 d
Mártires de Guática	2005-12-15	552	552	442	0.80	–
Vencedores de Arauca	2005-12-23	548	491	421	0.77	–
Mineros	2006-01-20	2,789	2,791	2,562	0.92	–
Puerto Boyacá	2006-01-28	742	743	676	0.91	–
BCB-Santa Rosa del Sur	2006-01-31	2,519	2,534	2,341	0.93	–
Resistencia Tayrona	2006-02-03	1,166	1,168	1,064	0.91	–
Magdalena Medio (Isaza)	2006-02-07	990	993	890	0.90	–
Próceres del Caguán	2006-02-15	552	553	483	0.88	–
Sur del Putumayo	2006-03-01	504	515	435	0.86	–
Julio Peinado Becerra	2006-03-04	251	252	232	0.92	–
Norte-El Copey	2006-03-07	2,215	2,217	2,000	0.90	+1 d
Norte-La Mesa	2006-03-09	2,544	2,546	2,266	0.89	+1 d
Héroes del Llano y Guaviare	2006-04-11	1,765	1,767	1,408	0.80	–
Costanero	2006-04-12	309	310	290	0.94	–
Pavarandó y Dabeiba	2006-04-30	484	487	461	0.95	–
Norte Medio Salaquí	2006-08-15	743	797	909	1.22	–

Notes: “Admin. date” is the demobilization date in the ARN registry component matched to the bloc’s official ceremony (administrative dates lag ceremonies by up to three weeks). “Official headcount” is the ceremony headcount from official records; “roster count” is the roster component’s collective-AUC count on that date; “registry count” is the classified registry count with computable ages. The per-act headcounts compiled here sum to 31,970 including the Ortega act (167), against the official aggregate of 31,671; per-act figures come from heterogeneous official sources, and all wave-level scaling in the text uses the official aggregate. The coverage ratio (registry/headcount, median 0.875) matches the roster’s measured 12.5% non-entry rate into the reintegration program. The last column flags the five blocs whose administrative dates required imputation relative to the official ceremony date; dropping them (27% of the sample) leaves the per-capita deficit essentially unchanged ([Appendix Figure A1](#)). Two blocs with coverage above one (Mojana, Norte Medio Salaquí) reflect the date contamination documented in the text.

Table A3: Censoring-simulation fit over the (τ, k) grid

Threshold τ	Keep rate k	χ^2 (13-17)	χ^2 (13-21)	Simulated counts at age				
				15	16	17	18	19
<i>Observed collective counts</i>				4	7	115	1,015	1,356
16.0	0%	2,507	3,652	26	760	1,964	2,318	2,118
16.0	2%	2,533	3,677	38	766	1,969	2,314	2,119
16.0	5%	2,572	3,722	56	783	1,964	2,321	2,116
16.0	10%	2,644	3,793	85	810	1,961	2,322	2,116
16.5	0%	1,910	3,058	0	346	1,783	2,318	2,120
16.5	2%	1,929	3,074	12	363	1,792	2,315	2,122
16.5	5%	1,988	3,135	31	391	1,797	2,320	2,115
16.5	10%	2,093	3,239	62	436	1,807	2,321	2,112
17.0	0%	927	2,041	0	44	1,096	2,278	2,117
17.0	2%	959	2,072	13	67	1,114	2,274	2,119
17.0	5%	1,052	2,166	32	104	1,142	2,276	2,119
17.0	10%	1,205	2,322	62	164	1,187	2,283	2,115
17.5	0%	275	1,155	0	0	405	1,975	2,117
17.5	2%	262	1,146	12	26	438	1,982	2,114
17.5	5%	372	1,264	31	63	487	1,994	2,115
17.5	10%	559	1,465	63	127	564	2,009	2,117
18.0	0%	146	548	0	0	51	1,161	2,066
18.0	2%	29	437	12	25	90	1,179	2,066
18.0	5%	94	512	31	63	147	1,214	2,069
18.0	10%	266	707	62	125	246	1,277	2,074
18.5	0%	13,292	14,816	0	0	0	344	1,709
18.5	2%	164	1,437	12	25	40	381	1,720
18.5	5%	88	1,042	30	62	99	444	1,731
18.5	10%	237	883	62	127	200	541	1,753
19.0	0%	13,292	34,947	0	0	0	44	1,022
19.0	2%	164	9,986	12	26	40	89	1,044
19.0	5%	91	4,984	31	64	100	157	1,079
19.0	10%	234	2,455	63	126	199	270	1,132
19.5	0%	13,292	1,046,666	0	0	0	0	335
19.5	2%	158	22,763	12	26	41	47	371
19.5	5%	90	9,114	32	63	100	117	423
19.5	10%	236	4,310	61	126	202	231	515
20.0	0%	13,292	1,084,966	0	0	0	0	42
20.0	2%	165	40,156	12	26	40	46	83
20.0	5%	90	17,407	31	63	99	115	146
20.0	10%	237	8,012	62	126	202	231	249
21.0	0%	13,292	2,937,394	0	0	0	0	0
21.0	2%	164	87,804	12	25	40	47	42
21.0	5%	90	36,494	31	63	99	115	106
21.0	10%	234	16,532	62	126	198	232	213

Notes: The simulation treats the AUC-weighted counterfactual as a latent continuous age distribution, censors it below τ retaining a fraction k of those below, adds the two uniform ± 0.5 -year noise components (unknown birthdays and registry-age rounding), and re-tabulates integer ages; the χ^2 columns compare simulated to observed counts on ages 13-17 and 13-21. The grid minimum is $\tau = 18.0$, $k = 0.02$ (χ^2 on 13-17 of 29.4). Thresholds below 18 are decisively worse on ages 13-17 alone (minima of 263 at $\tau = 17.5$, 930 at 17.0, 1,922 at 16.5, and 2,509 at 16.0), because the simulated mass at 17 explodes. Thresholds above 18 plateau near 90 on ages 13-17, which that window alone cannot separate from $\tau = 18$; the discrimination comes from ages 18-19, where they are rejected (χ^2 on 13-21 of 883 to 16,532 at keep rates of 2 to 10 percent, against 437 at $\tau = 18.0$). Absolute goodness of fit fails everywhere (minimum 29.4 against critical values of 7.8 to 11.1), and no $\tau \leq 21$ reproduces the 18-19 shortfall (simulated 1,182 to 2,080 against observed 1,015 and 1,356): the exercise ranks candidate cut locations within the hard-cut model, it does not certify a data-generating process. Read strictly within that model, the best-fitting keep rates of 2 to 5 percent would attribute most of the 115 observed seventeen-year-olds to rounding noise from true 18-year-olds; because absolute fit fails, this is an illustration conditional on the model, not an estimate of a retention rate.

Table A4: Sensitivity of the deficit to adult roster padding

Padded share of anchor mass p	Predicted under 18	Deficit	Deficit per 1,000 true members	Obs./pred. under 18
0.00	4,192	4,064	145.2	0.030
0.05	3,982	3,854	142.3	0.032
0.10	3,773	3,645	139.1	0.034
0.15	3,563	3,435	135.7	0.036
0.20	3,354	3,226	132.1	0.038
0.25	3,144	3,016	128.2	0.041
0.30	2,934	2,806	124.0	0.044

Notes: Padding a fraction p of the 20-30 anchor mass with non-combatants inflates the anchored scale by $1/(1-p)$, so $\text{deficit}(p) = 4,192 \times (1-p) - 128$ under the preferred counterfactual. The rate column divides the deficit by true membership, $N - pA$, where $N = 27,983$ and $A = 17,810$ is the observed anchor mass: the rate falls from 145.2 at $p = 0$ to 124.0 at $p = 0.30$, a decline of about 15 percent, so padding shrinks both the count and the per-member rate. Zeroing the count requires $p^* = 0.97$. Excluding the five acts with documented padding suspicions (both Bloque Norte acts, Cacique Nutibara, Héroes de Granada, and Héroes de Tolová; 7,402 records, 26.5% of the sample) gives 145.4 missing per 1,000 against 145.2 in the full sample, and an 18-19 ratio of 0.530 against 0.526; this exclusion is a diagnostic that the result is not driven by the most notorious ceremonies, not a bound on diffuse padding elsewhere. The grid also assumes the padding sits in the 20-30 anchor; eligibility-driven padding beginning at age 18 could itself sharpen the raw step at the threshold. Padding evidence: [CIDH \(2007, fns. 20-21\)](#) (El Copey/Chimila: 880 shock-force members of 2,215 demobilized); [CIDH \(2004, paras. 94-98\)](#) (Cacique Nutibara); [HRW \(2005\)](#); [CNMH \(2019\)](#) (58% of interviewed demobilized joined in 2003-2006). Documented membership in social-support fronts is not itself demonstrated fake membership, which is why p is treated as a free parameter.

Table A5: Bloc-level panel: concealment measures and external judicial validation

Bloc	<i>n</i>	Demob. year	Founded	% under 18	Obs./pred. 18-19	Documented recruited	Handed over
Mineros	2,562	2006	1994	0.55	0.61	327	—
BCB-Santa Rosa del Sur	2,341	2006	1998	0.56	0.48	232 ^c	—
Norte-La Mesa	2,265	2006	1996	0.62	0.61	149 ^b	—
Norte-El Copey	2,000	2006	1996	0.30	0.45	149 ^b	—
Héroes de Granada	1,863	2005	2003	0.00	0.49	—	—
Frentes NE Antioqueño (BCB)	1,770	2005	1999	0.62	0.58	232 ^c	—
Héroes del Llano y Guaviare	1,408	2006	2002	1.49	0.63	—	—
Catatumbo	1,102	2004	1999	0.18	0.34	149 ^b	0
Resistencia Tayrona	1,064	2006	1985	0.09	0.75	58	—
Norte Medio Salaquí	909	2006	1997	0.33	0.45	309 ^a	—
Centauros	901	2005	2001	0.22	0.48	—	—
Magdalena Medio (Isaza)	890	2006	1977	0.11	0.67	53	—
Córdoba	777	2005	1988	0.51	0.49	149 ^b	—
Cacique Nutibara	759	2003	2001	0.00	0.67	—	—
Puerto Boyacá	676	2006	1982	0.59	0.72	70	—
Libertadores del Sur	541	2005	2000	0.00	0.39	44	—
Héroes de Tolová	533	2005	2004	1.88	0.73	—	—
Montes de María	504	2005	1997	0.00	0.34	149 ^b	—
Próceres del Caguán	483	2006	2001	0.21	0.65	232 ^c	—
Pavarandó y Dabeiba	461	2006	1996	1.52	0.69	309 ^a	—
Calima	457	2004	1999	1.09	0.45	—	27
Mártires de Guática	442	2005	2001	0.23	0.72	232 ^c	—
Sur del Putumayo	435	2006	1998	0.92	0.69	232 ^c	—
Vencedores de Arauca	421	2005	2001	0.48	0.96	73	21
Bananero	354	2004	1995	0.00	0.64	—	—
Costanero	290	2006	1995	0.34	0.43	309 ^a	3 ^a
Anillos de Seguridad	272	2005	2002	0.00	0.54	—	—
Frente Vichada	265	2005	2001	0.00	0.81	232 ^c	—
Julio Peinado Becerra	232	2006	1990	0.00	0.35	10	—
Noroccidente Antioqueño	193	2005	1997	0.00	0.50	—	—
Tolima	189	2005	2000	0.00	0.35	—	16 ^d
Meta y Vichada	157	2005	1997	0.00	0.55	—	—
Mojana	135	2005	1998	0.00	0.72	—	—
Cundinamarca	130	2004	1995	0.77	0.47	6	—
Pacífico	125	2005	2000	0.00	0.38	—	—
Sur Oeste Antioqueño	100	2005	1997	0.00	0.46	—	—
Sur del Magdalena/I. San Fdo.	39	2004	1999	0.00	0.00	—	—

Notes: *n* is the analysis-sample count (program entrants with computable ages); % under 18 is the bloc's minor share on its own list; observed/predicted 18-19 scales the deserter reference to the bloc's local 20-24 mass (all 37 ratios are below one; range 0.00 to 0.96). Founding years are coded from Verdad Abierta, CNMH monographs, and [Justicia y Paz sentencias](#). "Documented minors recruited" are counts established in [Justicia y Paz verdicts](#) over the bloc's history; "handed over at ceremony" are per-act handover records where they exist. ^aBloque Élder Cárdenas figure ([El Alemán sentencia, 16 Dec. 2011](#)): 309 legalized recruitment counts span the bloc's three demobilization acts (Costanero, Pavarandó y Dabeiba, Norte Medio Salaquí); allocate, do not triple-count. The bloc gathered roughly 150 of its minors and sent them home before its acts, delivering 3 to ICBF. ^b[Mancuso macro-sentencia \(31 Oct. 2014\)](#): 149 recruitment counts span Catatumbo, Norte (both acts), Córdoba, and Montes de María jointly. ^c[Bloque Central Bolívar macro-sentencia](#): 232 documented recruitment victims span the BCB's six demobilization acts. Umbrella counts must be allocated across constituent acts before any cross-bloc use, and sentencia counts are floors that partly reflect prosecutorial effort. ^dDelivered to ICBF the day before the act. Sources: validation appendix; [Appendix Table A9](#).

Table A6: Blocs demobilizing before and after the Justice and Peace Law (Ley 975, 25 July 2005)

	Pre-975	Post-975	Test
Blocs	11	26	
People (analysis sample)	4,881	23,102	
Share under 18 (%)	0.45	0.46	Fisher $p = 1.00$
Bloc-mean share under 18			t -test $p = 0.81$
Share 18-19 (%)	7.9	8.6	
Bunch ratio 18-19/20-21	0.63	0.74	t -test $p = 0.20$

Notes: Blocs are classified by whether their ceremony date precedes the sanction of [Ley 975 de 2005](#) (25 July 2005); people counts are the analysis sample of 27,983. The Fisher exact test is on the pooled under-18 counts; the t -tests compare bloc-level means. The null is read as a floor effect: concealment was already near-total at the first ceremony in November 2003, because the incentives (the non-amnestiable domestic crime from 2000, [Decreto 128](#)’s minor-routing framework from January 2003, and the anticipated negotiation framework) predated the law.

Table A7: Scenario mapping: recruited-under-18 shares implied by the deserter reference distribution under tenure assumptions

Tenure scenario	P(recruited under 18) = P(exit age < 18 + T)			
	Era deserters		AUC-weighted	
	Continuous	Rounded	Continuous	Rounded
Fixed tenure, 1 year	0.26	0.22	0.25	0.21
Fixed tenure, 2 years	0.32	0.28	0.31	0.27
Fixed tenure, 3 years	0.38	0.34	0.37	0.33
Fixed tenure, 4 years	0.44	0.41	0.43	0.39
Exponential tenure, mean 2 years	0.31	0.28	0.30	0.27
Exponential tenure, mean 3 years	0.37	0.33	0.36	0.33
Exponential tenure, mean 4 years	0.42	0.39	0.41	0.38
<i>Memo: pooled survey context, entered as minors</i>			0.47	

Notes: Each cell computes $P(\text{recruited} < 18) = P(\text{exit age} < 18 + T)$ on the exit-age distribution of 2003-2006 deserters (raw and AUC-probability-weighted) under the stated tenure scenario. The table is a scenario mapping of the deserter reference distribution, not a force-wide estimate of the AUC’s recruited-as-child share: deserters are an age-selected exit flow, tenure T is assumed rather than observed and is likely correlated with exit age, and the reconstructed ages are imputed. “Continuous” treats the reconstructed age as continuous; “Rounded” applies the integer-age convention (threshold 17.5). For two- to three-year tenure the continuous convention gives roughly 31 to 38 percent and the rounded convention roughly 27 to 34 percent. The memo row is context only: 47% of demobilized fighters in the consolidated reintegration records, pooled across the AUC, FARC, ELN, and other groups, reported entering their group as minors ([CNMH, 2015, p. 209](#)); it is not an AUC-specific bound. On tenure: [CNMH \(2019, p. 113\)](#) reports time-in-ranks for the demobilized, and documents (p. 70) commanders ordering members to understate their tenure to avoid criminal incrimination.

Table A8: Sex-specific pipeline results

	Men	Women
Collective sample n	25,918	2,065
Reference sample n (era deserters)	5,832	1,158
Observed under 18	99	29
Predicted under 18	3,422	649
Missing under 18	3,323	620
95% CI	[3,049, 3,615]	[527, 724]
Observed/predicted under 18	0.029	0.045
95% CI	[0.023, 0.036]	[0.029, 0.064]
Observed/predicted 18-19	0.568	0.353
95% CI	[0.520, 0.624]	[0.284, 0.433]
Missing 18-19	1,633	404
Female – male difference, obs./pred. 18-19:	-0.216 $[-0.301, -0.119]$, $p < 0.001$	
Female – male difference, obs./pred. under 18:	$+0.016$ $[-0.002, +0.036]$	

Notes: The full pipeline (sex-specific deserter reference, anchored on ages 20-30) is run separately by sex; confidence intervals are from 2,000 bootstrap replications resampling individuals in both samples. Sample sizes are counts on the 10-60 age grid used throughout the paper (summing to 27,983 and 6,990); 62 collective and 8 reference records aged 61-77 fall outside the grid and enter no calculation. Below 18 both sexes are at the floor (97% or more of predicted minors absent), so no differential under-18 deficit is claimed; the under-18 rows condition on censored band sizes and cannot show missing girls. The differential lives in the 18-19 buffer, where the female missing fraction (0.647) is about 50 percent higher than the male (0.432). Both are conditional on the sex-specific reference distributions. Female share by age band in the collective sample: 21.3% at 16-17, 9.3% at 18-19, 6.2% at 25-34; among era deserters: 27.6%, 27.1%, and 8.8%.

Table A9: The accounting map: official counts of surfaced AUC minors, by channel

Count	Object	Source
263	Minors on the official lists of the 31,671 collectively demobilized	PGN (2006), via Defensoría (n.d.) and CEV (n.d.)
391	Minors handed over in the collective demobilization process	OACP, in UN Security Council (2009), para. 70
648	AUC children demobilized individually, 1999-2008	UN Security Council (2009), para. 70
730	Minors surfacing through the Ministry of Defense channel during the wave, 2003-2006 (804 through 2016; municipality- and day-coded)	MinDefensa (2026) [‡]
913	Minors delivered officially to ICBF, 2003-2006	CNMH (2013, pp. 328-330)
1,039	Autodefensa-origin minors entering the ICBF program, 1999-Dec. 2007	ICBF, via MAPP/OEA (2008)
1,055	AUC minors in ICBF cumulative intake, 1999-2018 (16% of 6,570)	ICBF (2018)
<i>Memo items</i>		
63	AUC children demobilized in 2006, against 17,581 adults	UN SG, via CEV (2022, pp. 224-225)
<450	Minors reaching ICBF from AUC demobilizations (press count)	El Tiempo (2008)
704	AUC minors in the ICBF desvinculados program by 2008 (of 4,353 total)	CNMH (2015, p. 459)
101	Interim Procuraduría count of minors among >30,000 demobilized, June 2006	PGN (2006, T. 2, p. 390), via Springer (2012)
5,935	ICBF cumulative intake since 1999, all armed groups, by June 2016	CNMH (2017, fn. 108)
8,082	ICBF cumulative intake since 1999, all armed groups, by May 2025	ICBF (2025)

Notes: The map is an accounting reconciliation, not a set of independent estimates of one number: each row counts a different object in a different universe, and the rows overlap. The reconciliation reads: 391 (handed over at collective acts) + 648 (individual AUC child demobilizations, 1999-2008) sums to the 1,039 ICBF program entries of autodefensa origin through December 2007, but the accounting windows differ (the 648 runs through 2008, the 1,039 ends in December 2007), so the equality is suggestive consistency between overlapping registries, not an administrative identity. The 2003-2006 ICBF delivery count of 913 (CNMH, 2013: “Entre 2003 y 2006, fueron entregados oficialmente al ICBF 913 niños, niñas y adolescentes...”) sits inside that reconciliation; the MinDefensa 730 records surfacing through state channels at the municipality-day level and therefore overlaps the ICBF rows without matching them (the same source records 53 further AUC minors in 2007 and a near-zero trickle after); the 263 is a subset of ceremony lists, not a handover count; and judicial recruitment counts (Appendix Table A5) are historical floors, not ceremony-date stocks. These sources validate that under-accounting occurred and that concealment practices are documented; they do not independently validate the estimated deficit of 3,265 to 4,386. Every row is nonetheless a fraction of that deficit, from about 6 percent of the preferred 4,064 (the 263) to about a quarter (the 1,039). [‡]Channel count, consistent with but not identical to the ICBF program-entry counts.

Table A10: FARC 2017 comparison: sensitivity of observed/predicted ratios to the fit window

Fit window (ages)	At 17	At 18	At 19	Pooled 18-19
20–40 (main)	0.52	0.98	1.13	1.06
20–35	0.46	0.89	1.05	0.97
21–45	0.57	1.06	1.21	1.14
22–40	0.59	1.10	1.24	1.17
<i>AUC collective, main window</i>	0.07	0.60	0.78	0.69
<i>Era deserters, main window</i>	0.85	1.03	0.91	0.97

Notes: Each row refits the quadratic in log counts on the stated age window and recomputes the FARC observed-to-predicted ratios. The FARC pooled 18-19 ratio stays within 0.97 to 1.17 across windows, a band the AUC’s 0.69 never approaches. The FARC fit is looser than the AUC’s (R^2 0.871 versus 0.988 on ages 20-40) because the FARC age distribution peaks near 31; the fit-free local step statistic (count at 17 over the mean of 18 and 19: AUC 0.10, FARC 0.41, deserters 0.93) gives the same ordering without any global fit.

Appendix figures

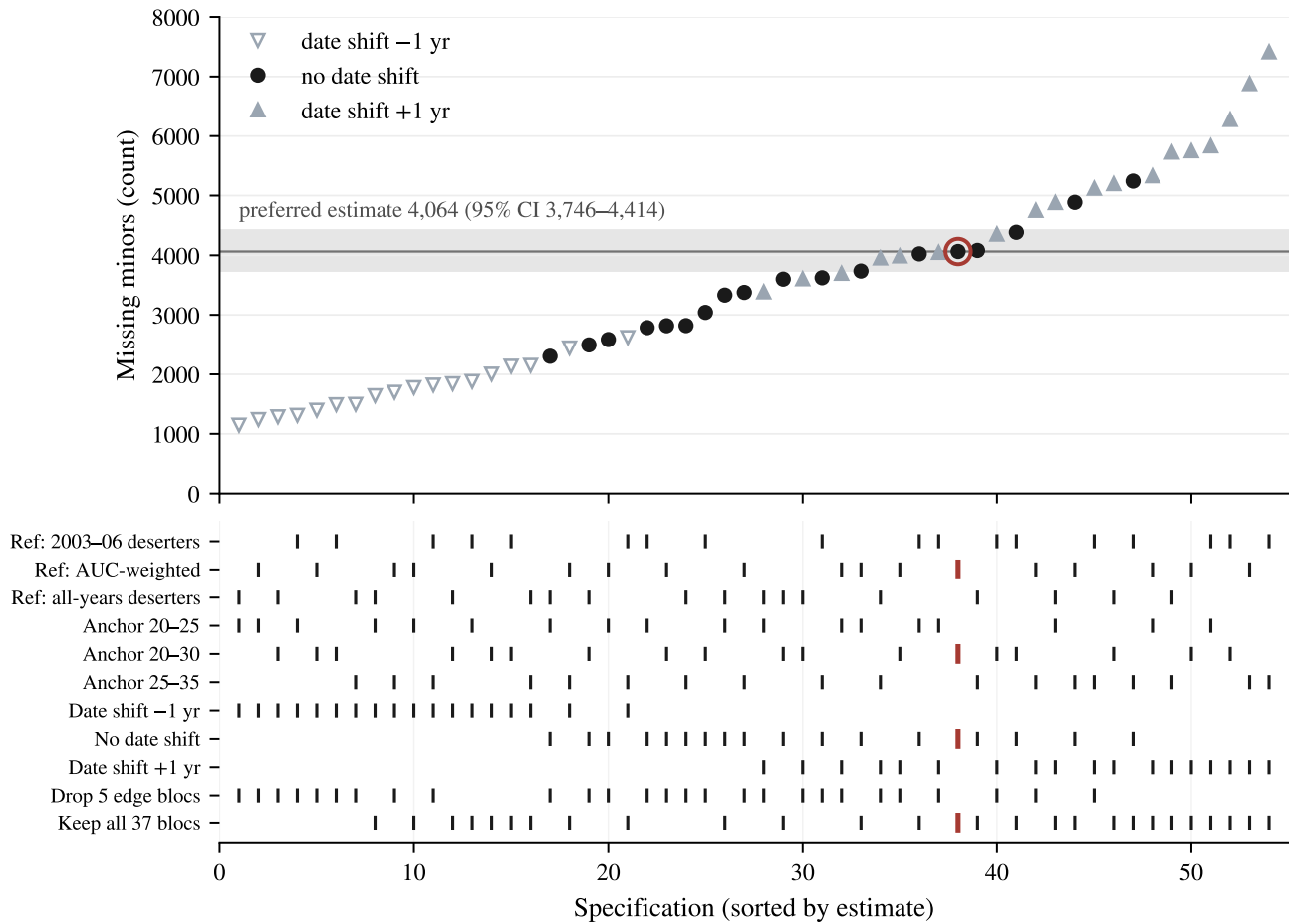


Figure A1: Specification curve: missing minors across 54 specifications. *Notes:* Each point is the missing-minors estimate from one specification, varying the reference distribution (2003–2006 deserters, AUC-weighted deserters, all-years deserters), the anchor window (ages 20–25, 20–30, 25–35), a one-year shift of the age reference date in either direction, and the exclusion of the five blocs whose administrative dates required imputation; the lower panel marks the choices active in each specification. The horizontal line and band mark the preferred estimate of 4,064 and its bootstrap 95 percent confidence interval; the open red circle (and red ticks) mark the preferred specification. All 54 estimates are positive (range 1,146 to 7,415, median 3,382); the spread is dominated by the reference-date shift, the bluntest perturbation, which moves every age in both samples by a full year.

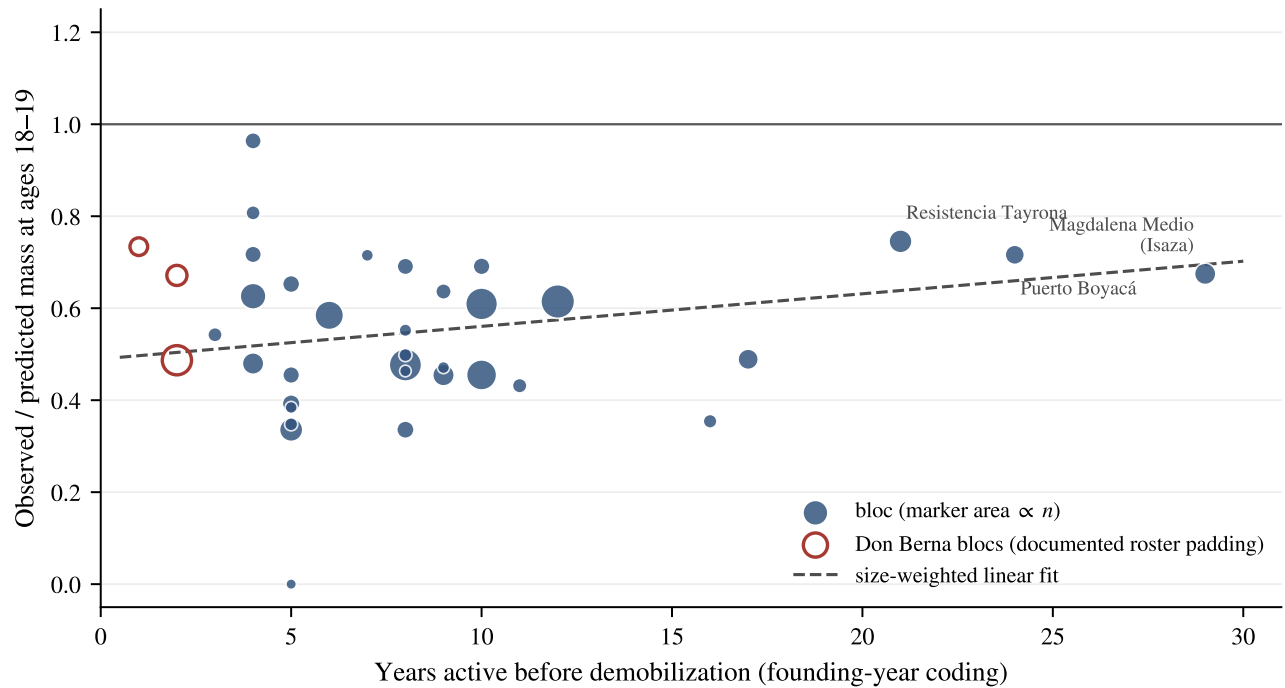


Figure A2: Bloc tenure test: the 18-19 deficit and years active. *Notes:* Each marker is one of the 37 blocs; the vertical axis is the bloc's observed 18-19 count over the count predicted from the deserter reference scaled to the bloc's local 20-24 mass, and the horizontal axis is years between the bloc's coded founding year and its demobilization. Marker area is proportional to bloc size; open red circles mark the three Don Berna blocs with documented roster padding (Cacique Nutibara, Héroes de Granada, Héroes de Tolová). Every bloc sits below one (range 0.00 to 0.96). The size-weighted correlation with years active is +0.245 (one-sided permutation $p = 0.077$), +0.301 ($p = 0.048$) excluding the Don Berna blocs, with the signal driven by the three pre-1990 veteran organizations labeled; a binary split at founding year 2000 is slightly wrong-signed (bootstrap 90 percent confidence interval on the difference spans zero). Reported as suggestive only.

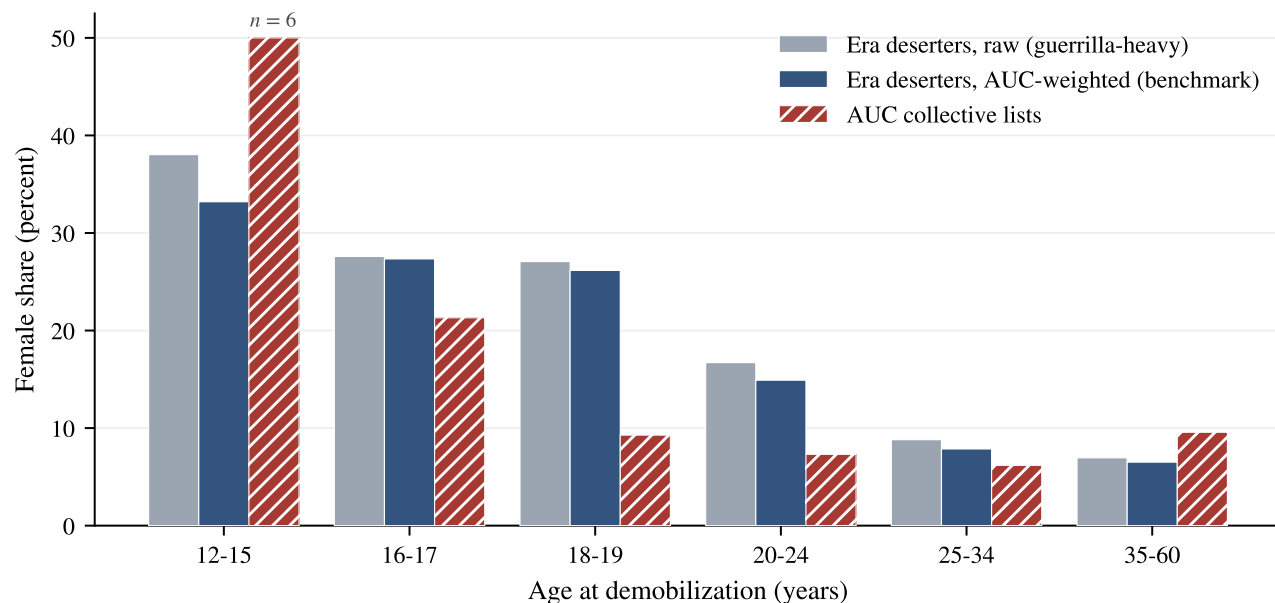


Figure A3: Female share by age band: collective lists against deserter benchmarks (descriptive).

Notes: Bars show the female share at each age band of demobilization among 2003-2006 deserters (raw), AUC-probability-weighted deserters, and the AUC collective lists. The collective share matches or exceeds the benchmarks below 16 ($n = 6$) and above 35, but is a third of the AUC-weighted benchmark at ages 18-19 (9.3 against 26.2 percent) and half at 20-24. The profile is descriptive: a uniform relative under-registration of women would itself produce larger percentage-point gaps where the underlying female share is higher, so the age gradient does not by itself separate retention from composition or from under-registration. The conditional sex-specific ratios are in Appendix Table A8.

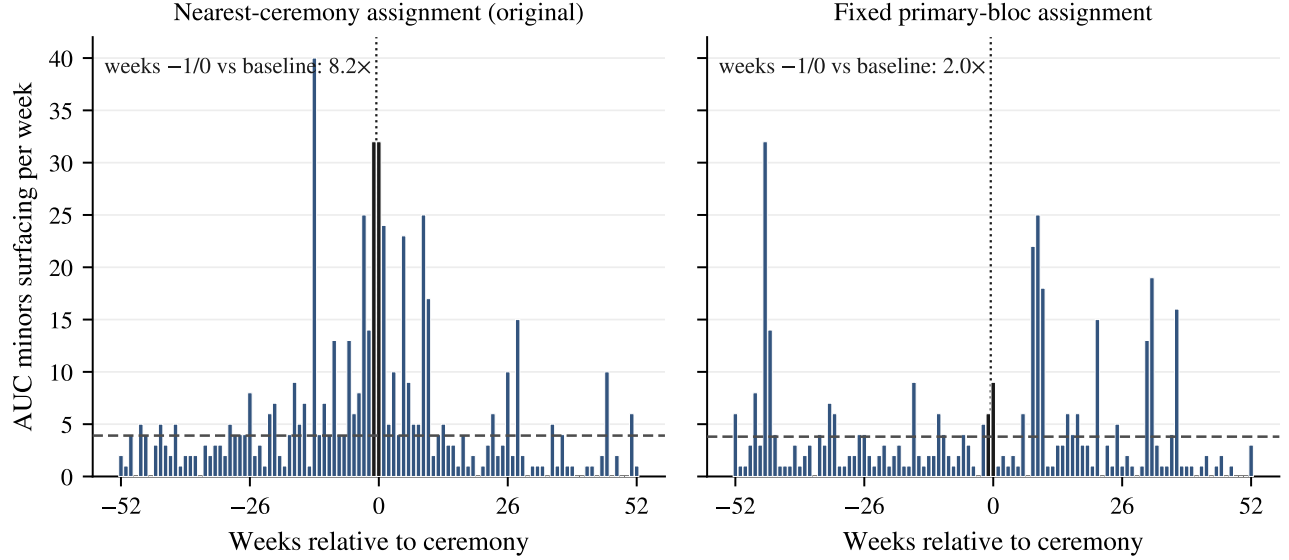


Figure A4: The Ministry of Defense series in event time, under two municipality-to-bloc assignments. *Notes:* Each panel counts the AUC minors recorded in the MinDefensa desvinculación series as surfacing through state channels in a bloc’s recruitment-origin municipalities, in weekly bins relative to that bloc’s demobilization ceremony; the dashed line is the weekly baseline computed away from the act. The left panel reproduces the construction used in an earlier version of this paper and now withdrawn: assigning each record to the nearest own-territory ceremony in calendar time concentrates event time near zero mechanically (weeks minus one and zero at 8.2 times baseline, but permutation null mean 7.6, $p = 0.32$). The right panel fixes the assignment independently of timing, giving each municipality to its primary recruiting bloc: the month before the ceremony shows no elevation (15 exits against 16.3 expected at baseline), leaving only a small elevation in weeks minus one and zero jointly (about twice baseline, permutation $p = 0.048$) driven largely by the Vencedores de Arauca at-act handover of 21 minors.

The missing women in detail

The right benchmark for the AUC’s true female share is genuinely uncertain. Raw era deserters are 16.6 percent female, but the deserter pool is guerrilla-heavy, and guerrilla ranks carried far higher female shares than paramilitary ranks (roughly a quarter to two-fifths for the FARC: [Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008](#); [Herrera & Porch, 2008](#)). For paramilitary ranks, the CNMH’s structured interviews with 9,021 demobilized paramilitaries record 12.34 percent women ([CNMH, 2019](#), pp. 34 and 35). Weighting deserters by the probability of AUC membership gives 15.2 percent. The sex-specific pipeline ([Appendix Table A8](#)) conditions on the censored band sizes (the 16-17 band holds 122 people), so it mechanically cannot detect missing girls below 18; its informative margin is the threshold band, where the female observed-to-predicted ratio is 0.353 against 0.568 for men.

[Appendix Figure A3](#) plots the descriptive age profile. The collective lists under-represent women at every age below 35, and the gap is largest at the youngest adult ages. A uniform relative under-registration of women would itself produce larger percentage-point gaps where the underlying female share is higher, so the age gradient does not by itself separate mechanisms: the gap mixes genuine recruitment composition with under-registration, and the data separate the two only as far as the conditional ratios allow. The data do not identify retention as the mechanism.