



NOTE

This is an excerpt from IDMC's 2019 Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID).

SPOTLIGHT

MEDELLIN AND SAN SALVADOR

Urban displacement and criminal violence

Medellin is Colombia's second city with a population of around 2.5 million people. Once considered the most violent in the world, it has successfully reduced poverty and violence over the last decade. Criminal gangs still operate in many peripheral neighbourhoods, however, where they continue to force individuals and families to flee. Estimates put the number of people displaced at between 5,000 and 15,000 a year.

Displacement patterns associated with criminal violence in Medellin are mainly intra-urban, as people move from one neighbourhood to another in search of safety. Where they move to is influenced by a number of factors, including family ties, economic opportunities and the nature of the threats they face. A fifth of respondents in a recent study said they had fled violence more than once.³³² Returns only tend to take place once a new gang has taken control of the area, the reason for flight, such as an unpaid debt, has been resolved or generalised violence has abated. The activities of street gangs appear to trigger most of the displacement.

The same study identified two different types of trigger for displacement: targeted gang violence, including gender-based violence, forced recruitment, extortion and threats against community leaders based on their rights activism; and generalised violence fuelled by shootouts between gangs or clashes between gangs and police that may lead whole neighbourhood blocks to flee.

Medellin's IDPs tend to share socioeconomic conditions and characteristics. They are usually younger, have more children and are more likely to have been active in their community than their non-displaced peers. They are also likely to incur significant financial and social losses as result of their displacement. Many lack tenure documents for their homes, and for property owners, violence tends to drive down prices. Many IDPs also struggle to find work and afford three meals a day, and children's education is disrupted even if only temporarily.

Similar patterns emerge in El Salvador's capital of San Salvador, where insecurity and criminal violence also push people to leave their homes. For those who have been victims of crime or targeted persecution, it is often the only reason they flee. For others, it may be one of several considerations, including economic conditions and family reunification. Other factors are also emerging, such as violence perpetrated by the security forces, drought and food shortages.³³³

Much of the urban displacement that takes place in El Salvador is effectively invisible, because many of those affected prefer to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals. Most, however, is known to take place from informal settlements in peri-urban areas of large towns and cities. IDPs tend to move to safer neighbourhoods in the same city in an effort to minimise disruption to their work, education and family and social networks. If they are unable to find a viable local option, however, or if the threats or violence they face are severe, people will flee further afield, whether it be to another city, department or country. In fact, what was previously a largely intra-urban phenomenon appears to be becoming less so. Some urban-to-rural displacement has been observed and it is thought to be increasing, but many more people choose to leave the country instead.

Several similar patterns emerge in the displacement occurring in Medellin and San Salvador. Much of it takes place in marginal neighbourhoods and many people flee within the same city, to minimise the disruption to their lives, but others flee beyond the city and even country borders. As increasing numbers of case studies shed light on the drivers, triggers and impacts of displacement associated with criminal violence in Latin American cities, the issue can no longer be ignored.³³⁴

| Notes

332. Martson, "The Urban Displaced: Fleeing Criminal Violence in Latin American Cities", 2019.
333. IDMC, Refugee Law Initiative, "An Atomised crisis. Reframing displacement caused by crime and violence in El Salvador", September 2018.
334. See: IDMC, "Understanding and estimating displacement in the Northern Triangle of Central America", September 2018; *ibid*; IDMC, "Cristosal, Refugee Law Initiative, A web of violence, Crime, corruption, and displacement in Honduras", April 2019.