



ACLED Methodology for Coding Political Armed Groups in Colombia and Venezuela

ACLED's coverage of armed actors in Colombia and Venezuela presents a number of unique methodological challenges. On one hand, there are many similarities between Colombia/Venezuela and other countries in the region. Hazardous media environments persist in both countries on a level comparable to those in Mexico or the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), leading to similar journalistic limitations when reporting on specific actors. Colombia continues to rank as one of the most dangerous countries for journalists in the Western Hemisphere, in part due to the threat of violence by armed groups leery of exposure ([Reporters without Borders, 2019](#)). In Venezuela, meanwhile, state suppression of independent media has steadily increased since the 2016 political and economic crisis, and "police and armed pro-government gangs have detained, harassed and attacked journalists" for covering public dissent ([Committee to Protect Journalists, 12 April 2017](#)). As a result, reports of violent events often lack details such as the names of specific armed groups involved.

On the other hand, Colombia and Venezuela require unique methodological considerations because of the types of groups operating within their borders. While criminal drug-trafficking groups are certainly active in Colombia and Venezuela, violence is split between criminal groups and armed groups with stated political goals. For this reason, Colombia and Venezuela are not amongst the countries in which ACLED interprets solely criminal violence to significantly impact territorial control and the state stability to a degree that warrants classification as 'political violence' (for more information on that, see ACLED's [methodology primer](#) on gang-related violence and under what conditions ACLED collects such information). Accordingly, specific criteria have been established within ACLED data collection which aim to, within reason, exclude violence committed by local criminal groups (i.e. 'criminal violence') while still capturing violence committed by armed groups with political goals (i.e. 'political violence').

Where possible, ACLED codes the specific names of armed groups operating within Colombia and Venezuela. In these cases, the most popular name of the group is used, including well-known acronyms where applicable. Notable groups in Colombia include the **EPL: Popular Liberation Army**, **ELN: National Liberation Army**, as well as **FARC: Revolutionary Armed Forces of**



Colombia dissident groups.¹ The latter two have also established a presence in states along Venezuela's western border. These groups are coded with an interaction code of 2.

However, for most events, source material may be lacking in detail. The **Unidentified Armed Group** actor is used in a number of scenarios under these circumstances. Firstly, in such cases where it can be reasonably assumed that an unidentified group is either a political militia or rebel group, and not a strictly criminal group. For both Colombia and Venezuela, these parameters are met if the actor in question is an armed **group** (multiple persons), has sophisticated **weapons** (e.g. firearms, explosives, etc.),² and is operating in regions with known insurgencies.³ These latter regions include:

Colombia:⁴ Parts of Antioquia; Arauca; Bolívar; Boyacá; Caquetá; Casanare; Cauca; César; Chocó; Córdoba; Guaviare; Huila; La Guajira; Meta; Nariño; Norte de Santander; Putumayo; Santander; Valle del Cauca; Vaupes; Vichada

Venezuela:⁵ Parts of Amazonas; Apure; Barinas; Bolívar; Carinas; Fálcon; Guárico; Lara; Mérida; Táchira; Zulia

As in other regions covered by ACLED, the Unidentified Armed Group actor is also applied to events where a salient political target (e.g. politician, prominent activist, etc.) is attacked as a result of their

¹ A number of FARC sub-commanders refused to demobilize following the 2016 peace deal in which the national organization was officially dissolved and transitioned into a political party (represented in the data as **FARC: Common Alternative Revolutionary Force**). Prior to the demobilization, FARC's organizational breakdown consisted of seven 'blocs', each containing five or more 'fronts' with around 200 fighters in each; these 'fronts' form the basis of many dissident groups today who retain their organizational identity and territory of operation ([CISAC, July 2019](#)). Unspecified FARC dissident groups are coded using the catch-all **FARC Dissident: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia Dissident Faction** primary actor, while specific dissident groups are noted by a slight variation in the actor name – e.g. **FARC Dissident - 1st Front: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia Dissident Faction (1st Front - Armando Rios)**.

² Under certain circumstances, the presence of sophisticated weapons is implied by the source rather than specified, such as when a group simply 'clashes' with police; these would be included. Further, non-lethal events such as abductions may also be included without specific reference to sophisticated weaponry.

³ Researchers review evidence of group movement on a weekly basis and update these lists accordingly. Reports specifying that an event took place in a region with an insurgent 'presence' would qualify for inclusion.

⁴ There is an ELN presence in Vichada, Narino, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Chocó, Casanare, Arauca, Boyacá, Santander, Norte de Santander, Bolívar, Antioquia, Córdoba, César. FARC dissidents are present in Caquetá, Putumayo, Narino, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Choco, Antioquia, Cordoba, La Guajira, Norte de Santander, Arauca, Vichada, Meta, Huila, Guaviare, Vaupes ([Colombian Organized Crime Observatory, 2020](#)). There is evidence of a Popular Liberation Army (EPL)/Los Pelusos presence in the Catatumbo region of Norte de Santander state ([InSight Crime, 14 March 2018](#)).

⁵ There is evidence of ELN presence in Zulia, Táchira, Apure, Amazonas and Bolívar, with some recent bases reported in Barinas, Guárico, Lara and Fálcon ([InSight Crime, 28 January 2020](#)). FARC dissidents have been reported in Zulia, Mérida, Táchira, Apure, Guárico, Bolívar and Amazonas ([InSight Crime, 27 June 2019](#)). Patriotic Forces of National Liberation (FPLN)/previously called Bolivarian Liberation Forces (FBL) have operated in Apure, Táchira, Carinas ([InSight Crime, 15 July 2019](#)).



identity. For Colombia and Venezuela, this list is expanded to include off-duty police/military officers, farmers, indigenous groups, and social leaders – all frequent targets of guerillas and insurgent groups. Unidentified Armed Groups are coded with an interaction code of 3, per ACLED methodology.