

Conflict-related Sexual Violence in Colombia's Armed Conflict

Table of Contents

- Introduction
- Analyzing data of registered cases
- Analyzing data of registered victims
- Conclusion
- Sources

About the Memory and Conflict Observatory

This report draws on data from the Memory and Conflict Observatory of the Colombian Center for Historical Memory to assess cases of sexual violence during Colombia's internal armed conflict (1964–2016). The Observatory documents events from the conflict through an extensive research effort: over five years, approximately 100 researchers analyzed 10,236 datasets from 592 sources, recording 353,531 incidents, including massacres, kidnappings, child recruitment, forced disappearances, sexual violence, and other forms of violence. In this report, I analyzed different datasets to provide new insights of conflict-related sexual violence as well as any reporting gaps in the available data.

About Colombia's armed conflict

Understanding the impact of conflict-related sexual violence requires examining its historical and political context. Colombia's 52-year armed conflict between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the government – once the world's longest civil war, formally ended with a 2016 peace accord. According to Human Rights Watch, violence linked to the conflict has forcibly displaced more than 8.1 million people since 1985. Human rights defenders, journalists, and Indigenous and Afro-Colombian community leaders—often at the forefront of land rights, environmental protection, and accountability efforts—have been frequent targets of intimidation, threats, and killings. These abuses have been carried out by the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas—another insurgent group involved in the conflict—along with FARC dissidents who rejected the peace accord, and paramilitary groups seeking to control territory, silence dissent, or protect illicit economic interests such as illegal mining, drug trafficking, and land grabbing.

Data from the Memory and Conflict Observatory indicate that between 1958 and 2018, there were 15,738 registered victims of sexual violence. Despite this staggering figure, impunity for these crimes exceeds 90%. The full extent of sexual violence during the conflict remains unknown, as many cases have only recently begun to be documented.



Source: Al Dia News

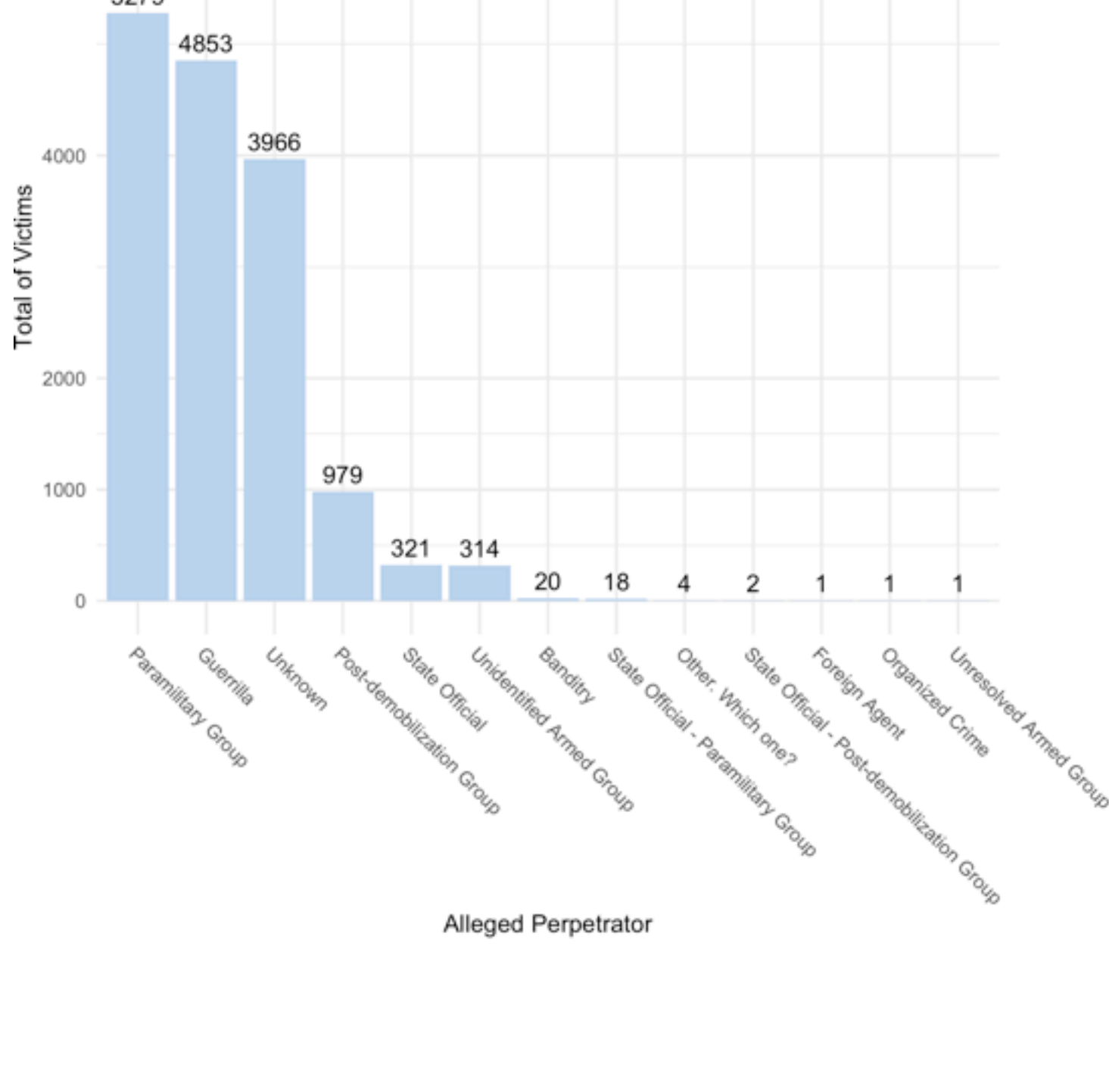
Introducing the data

To provide a complete perspective of conflict-related sexual violence, two datasets from the Observatory of Memory and Conflict were used in this project: "Casos Violencia Sexual" presents information about the cases of sexual violence, and "Victimas Violencia Sexual" provides details of the victims of these cases. The information used from both datasets has been translated to English for this project.

Analyzing the data of registered cases

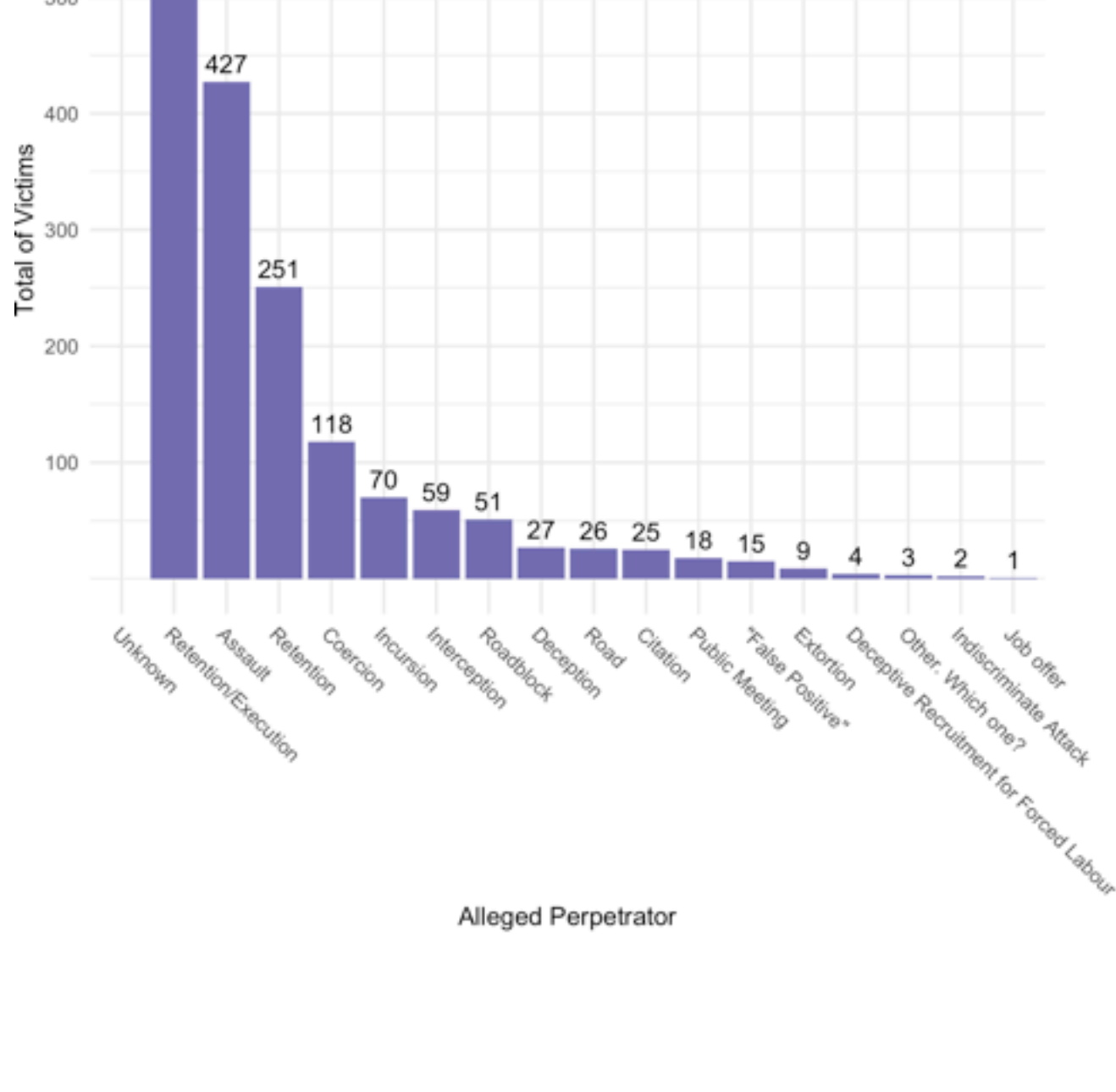
Number of victims per alleged perpetrator

One notable finding from the Casos Violencia Sexual dataset is the distribution of sexual violence cases by alleged perpetrator. Right-wing paramilitary groups, unknown perpetrators, guerrilla forces, post-demobilization groups, and state security forces account for the vast majority of incidents. For decades, during Colombia's internal conflict, armed groups used sexual violence as a weapon to terrorize communities and assert control over regions lacking a strong government presence. While guerrilla groups are often the most cited perpetrators in public discourse, the data reveals that right-wing paramilitary groups were responsible for even more documented cases—an important insight that challenges common narratives about the conflict's dynamics.



Number of victims per event modality

Second, in the dataset, event modality refers to the type of event during which the sexual assault occurred. It shows that “unknown” events account for 14,125 of the 15,738 registered cases—highlighting both the massive underreporting of these crimes and the lack of detailed information for most incidents. Given that sexual crimes in Colombia rarely result in convictions, the likelihood of perpetrators facing sanctions is minimal. This widespread impunity discourages many survivors from reporting their cases (ABC Colombia, 2020). When excluding “unknown” cases, the most frequently documented contexts for sexual violence were retention/execution, assault, and coercion (see chart below).

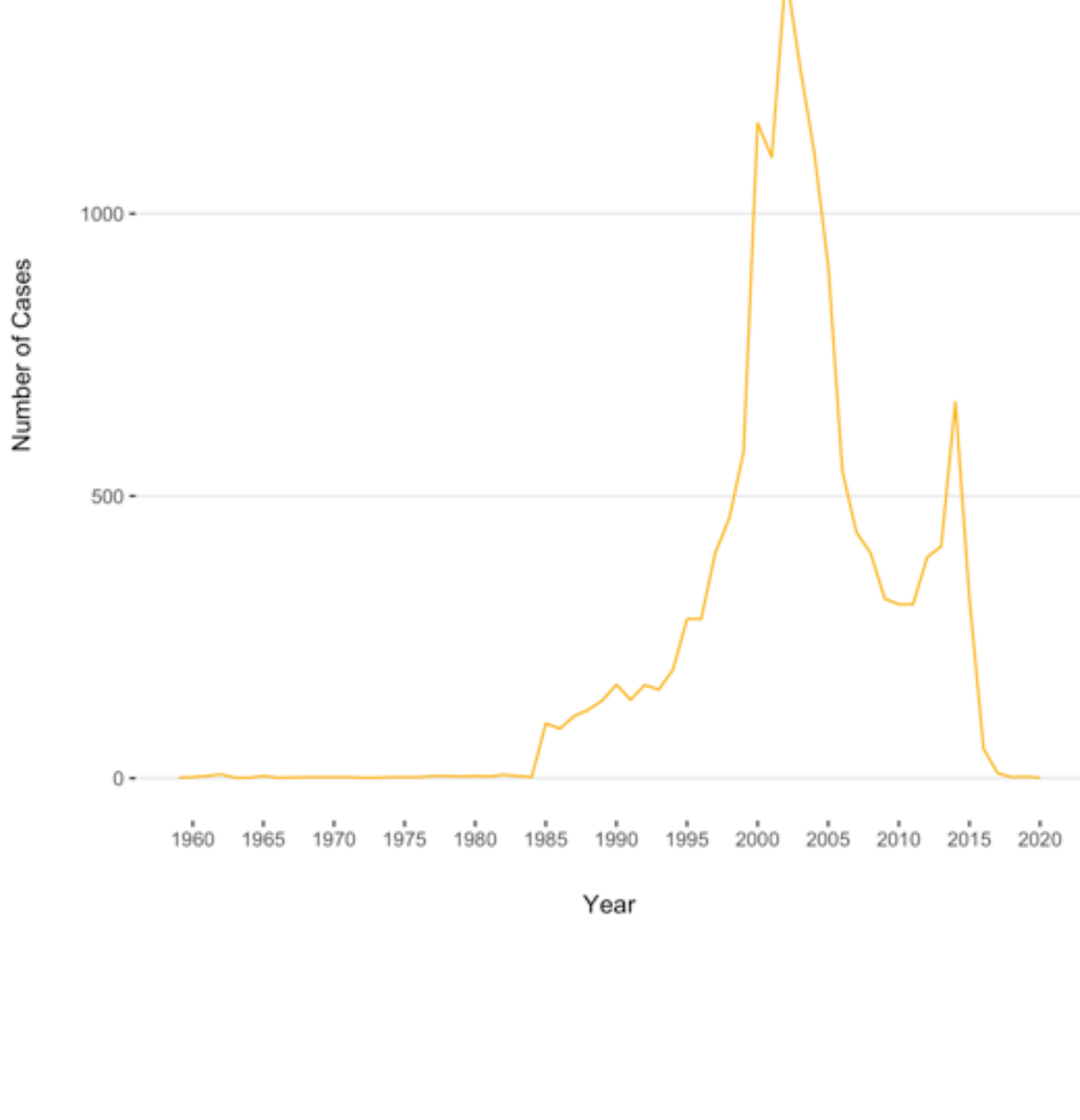


Total of cases per year

The following chart shows the trajectory of reported cases of sexual violence from 1959 to 2020. The Colombian armed conflict officially initiated in 1964 with the creation of two separate guerrilla groups, the FARC and the ELN. The first reported case of sexual violence in this dataset is from 1959.

As the chart below indicates, violence increased significantly in 1985. According to [Justice for Colombia](#), right-wing paramilitary groups were created in the 1980s by a combination of landowners, business leaders, drug cartels, and the Colombian Army to combat the threat of the different guerrilla groups like FARC and ELN. These groups were largely operated with the support of the Colombian government. According to the same source, this period was the most intense in terms of human rights abuses as the paramilitaries expanded across the country.

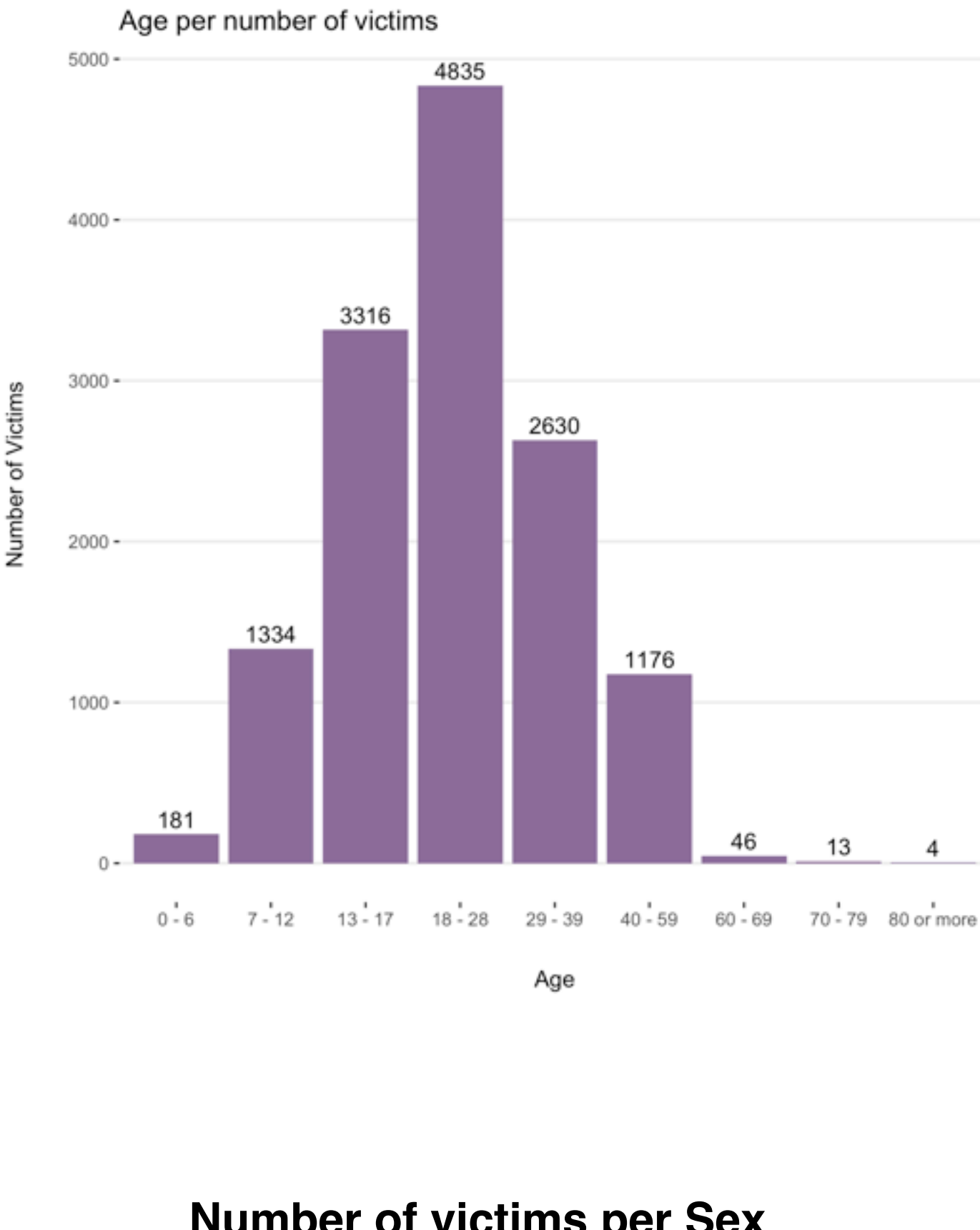
The chart also shows that conflict-related sexual violence peaked in the early 2000s. In 2002, Alvaro Uribe became president promising to adopt a hard-line approach against the guerrillas with the support of the paramilitaries, reports [Justice for Colombia](#). This approach led to both an intensified militarization of the country and a spike in human rights abuses, which serve as important context for understanding the case count peak during this time. Additionally, according to Human Rights Watch, between 2003 and 2006, a "deeply flawed government demobilization process" occurred where many members of right-wing paramilitary organizations remained active and reorganized into new groups. These successor groups continued to commit human rights abuses, including killings, disappearances, and sexual abuses.



Analyzing the data of registered victims

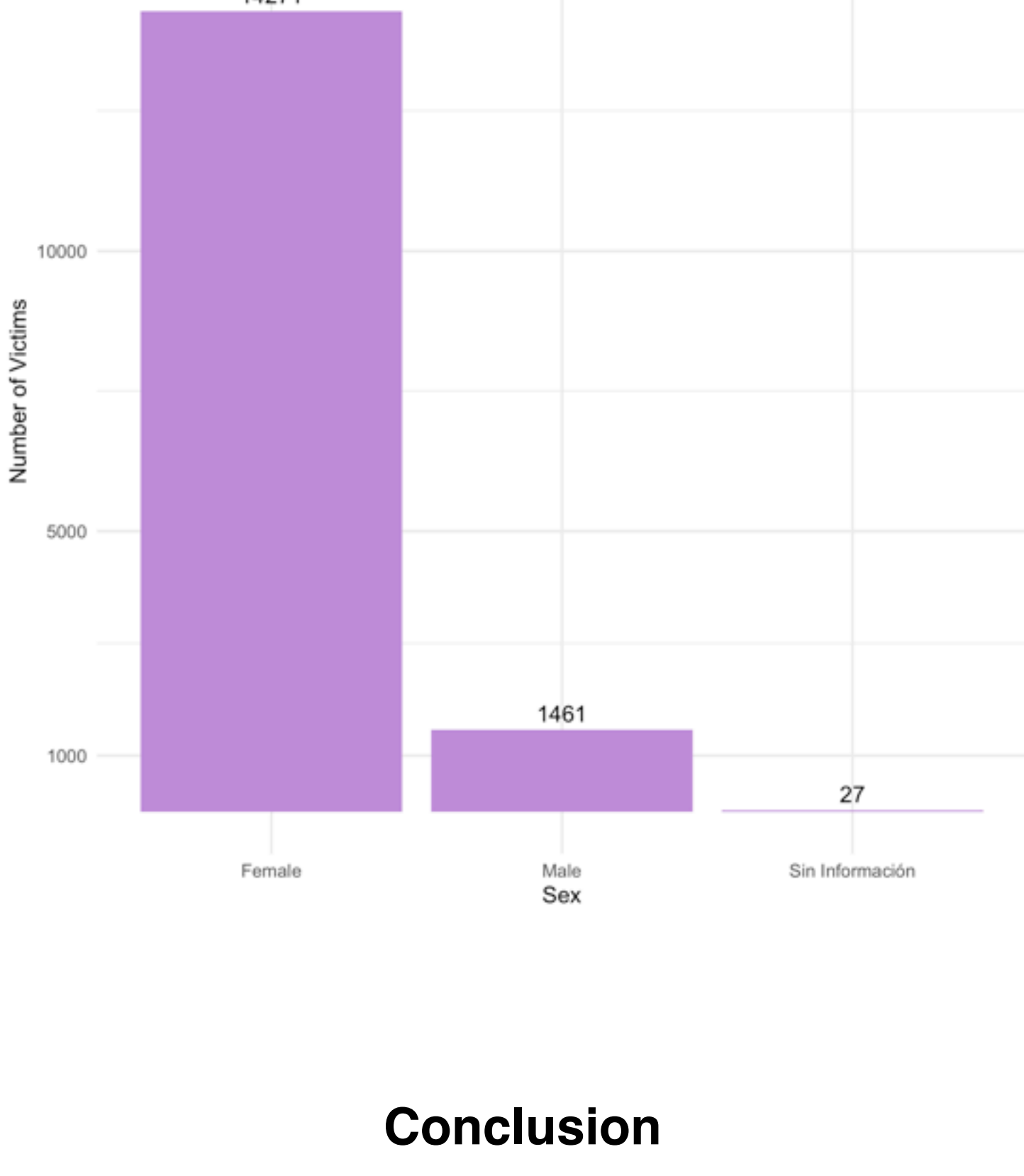
Number of victims per Age

The following chart shows the number of victims per age group. The dataset has 9 different age groups. There are 2224 victims whose age was not reported. The age group with most victims reported is 18-29 - with 4835 cases. Ages 13-17 come next with 3316. According to a report published by [US Office on Colombia](#), many children subjected to conflict-related sexual violence have suffered this violation following their recruitment into illegal armed groups. The full scale of that recruitment is unknown. However, in 2019 [Save the Children International](#) reported that Colombia is the 6th country with the highest share of children living in conflict zones with reports of sexual violence perpetrated by conflict actors (with 24% of all children in the country facing this risk). Although a peace deal was signed in 2016, conflict-related sexual violence continues to be widespread and systematic.



Number of victims per Sex

The following chart shows the number of victims per sex. The dataset has 2 different sex groups: male and female and there are 27 victims whose sex was not reported. The conflict has affected women disproportionately - with an alarming number of 14,271 victims, 91% of the total cases were reported against women. According to [Colombia Human Rights Review](#), the most vulnerable groups of women, particularly Afro-Colombian indigenous, rural, lesbian or bisexual, transgender women and women with disabilities, are at greatest risk. These groups disproportionately suffer serious violations without government protection or access to justice. Additionally, there's not sufficient data that tracks the prevalence and nature of gender violence on underrepresented groups.



Conclusion

Although data on conflict-related violence in Colombia exists, it significantly underrepresents the true number of incidents. Factors such as fear of retaliation, economic and emotional dependence, societal acceptance of violence against women, and victims' limited knowledge or access to justice contribute to this underreporting. While this project analyzed patterns by sex, age, perpetrator, event type, and year, many cases remain hidden due to these challenges. To better capture the experiences of women facing intersecting forms of discrimination, the Colombian government must begin collecting sex-disaggregated data.

Sources

- [Colombia Human Rights Review](#)
- [Center of Historical Memory](#)
 - [Human Rights Watch](#)
- [Memory and Conflict Observatory](#)
- [US Office on Colombia](#), [ABC Colombia](#), [Sisma Mujer](#)
 - [Justice for Colombia](#)
 - [Save the Children International](#)