



Violence and the Right to Education in the Northern Triangle of Central America

Luis-Miguel Lázaro Lorente  and Míriam Lorente Rodríguez 

Department of Comparative Education and History of Education, University of Valencia, Spain

ABSTRACT

Based on a human rights and development approach, this article aims to study the influence and impact of structural violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America on children's right to education. First, it analyses the context of poverty, inequality and generalised violence that plagues the sub-region under study. Secondly, a diagnosis is made of the situation regarding the right to education through indicators of educational completion and efficiency, including critical moments in the transition through the education system, as well as the phenomenon of school dropout. The article then analyses a series of determining factors in the violation of the right to education, insofar as they are linked to the situation of generalised structural violence. Finally, a series of conclusions are offered in order to guide debate and reflection on possible solutions to the problem studied.

Keywords RIGHT TO EDUCATION, VIOLENCE, EL SALVADOR, GUATEMALA, HONDURAS

1 INTRODUCTION

The full realisation and exercise of the right to education, enshrined and recognised in Article 26 of the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 13 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, and Articles 28 and 29 of the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, remains a pipe dream in many countries of the developing world today. The postulation of this right is often "purely rhetorical" (Unterhalter, 2003, p. 8) because, as Ruiz points out, among other reasons, the right to education is often "not established, but rather implied [our own translation]" (Ruiz, 2021, p. 19) without much precision as to its content and objectives, thus often preventing its effective realisation. UNESCO data at the end of 2018 is clear and reveals little or no progress on the protection of this right for more than a decade: 258 million children and young people are out of school. Of these, 59 million are at the primary school level, 62 million at lower secondary school level, and 138 million at upper secondary level —about one-sixth of the world's population of school children aged 6-17. Already in 2019, before the onset of the COVID19 pandemic, the UN estimated that, without urgent and effective action, at least 12 million



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Corresponding Author

Luis-Miguel Lázaro Lorente,
Luis.Lazaro@uv.es

Av. Blasco Ibáñez, 30 - 3, 46010,
Valencia, Spain.

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primary school-aged children would never enter school. The size of the out-of-school gap between countries is particularly significant: 19% of primary school children, aged around 6-11 years, do not attend school in low-income countries, compared to only 2% in high-income countries. This is a gap that grows even wider for older children and youth, with around 61% of all 15-17 year olds out of school in low-income countries, compared to 8% in high-income countries (UIS/UNESCO, 2019).

The existence of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education, and the targets to account for its possible success by no means guarantee its achievement by 2030 (UIS/UNESCO, 2022). On the contrary, the COVID19 pandemic, "the largest disruption of education systems in history", has affected nearly 1.6 billion students in more than 190 countries and on all continents. The widespread pre-emptive response of closing schools and other learning spaces "has affected 94% of the global student population, up to 99% in low- and lower-middle-income countries" (United Nations, 2015, p. 2). And, in particular, it has further exacerbated the existing gaps in the enjoyment of this right for the most vulnerable groups around the world, especially in developing countries (Meinck, Fraillon, & Strietholt, 2022; UNICEF, 2022).

This negative impact has been particularly intense in Latin America, the region of the world with the longest overall school closures (Huepe, Palma, & Trucco, 2022). Up to February 2022, the global average number of weeks with schools closed since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, and the rapid school closures as a preventive measure that followed, was 20 weeks, compared to the Latin American regional average of 37 weeks. Particularly significant is the case of Honduras, where schools were closed for 97 weeks during this period. In total, schoolchildren in the region have lost close to 300 billion hours of face-to-face learning, with all the negative consequences that this implies (Jaramillo, 2020; UNICEF, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

2 A HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH

In addition to the elements usually associated as determinants to the non-fulfilment of the right to education, such as underfunding, lack of educational provision, shortage of classrooms and teachers, the value of education for families, gender, class or ethnic discrimination, and endemic poverty, structural violence must also be considered one of the elements that in many countries of the world —not necessarily with declared armed conflicts— conspires to significantly compromise this right in societies where basic human rights are not very well respected. It is this problem of structural violence and its conditioning factors — in a regional context of enormous systemic inequality as an obstacle to the realisation of the right to education— that we wish to address here. To this end, we will focus on the analysis of three countries that reflect the scale of the problem like few others, the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America (hereinafter NTCA): Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

In order to carry out this analysis, we will adopt the global approach to human rights postulated by the United Nations through international agencies such as UNICEF and

UNESCO, understanding it as an approach that takes into account “social, cultural, economic, political, legal and educational factors that support or undermine the realisation of the right of education recognised in the Convention on the Rights of the Child” (Lázaro, 2015, pp. 113-114). It is a perspective that, in turn, is embedded in the broader approach of the rights-based framework which “submits that every human being, including every child, is entitled to decent education, even when one cannot be sure that this education will pay off in human capital terms” (Robeyns, 2006, p. 75). As Katarina Tomasevski argued: “From the human rights viewpoint, education is an end in itself rather than merely a means for achieving other ends” (Tomasevski, 2003, p. 33).

The methodological approach here is based on the principles that inform this rights-based approach following the criteria established by the United Nations and OEA-GTPSS (2015), seeking to assess and analyse “the immediate, underlying and structural causes of the non-realisation of rights” (UNICEF/UNESCO, 2007, p. 116).

3 THE BURDEN OF INEQUALITY IN LATIN AMERICA

The United Nations could not fail to include, as one of the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, the tenth: “Reduce inequality within and between countries” (United Nations, 2015). Despite some progress in reducing inequality globally, although not across the board in all regions of the world, the fact is that economic and social inequality in contexts of poverty is still a problem that is far from being overcome, at least in terms of making lives more liveable for the most vulnerable social groups. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequalities among the most vulnerable (Lázaro-Lorente, Ancheta-Arrabal, & Pulido-Montes, 2020).

Therborn (2013) considers that any inequality is undoubtedly a violation of human dignity insofar as it prevents the possibility for all human beings to develop their capacities. For Dubet (2011) it is clear that inequalities are harmful both for the individuals who are victims of them and for society, and, as Rawls (1999) argues, the key to a good quality of life lies in respect for human rights, which leads to better governments and societies. We speak here of social structures where inequalities are closely interrelated and determine each other in a reciprocal manner in such a way that they “tend to form a cumulative process in which in the end privileges accumulate in a polarised way so that advantages accumulate at one end of the social scale and handicaps at the other end [our own translation]” (Bhir & Pfefferkorn, 2008, p. 29). This is a polarisation that is reproduced from generation to generation (Stiglitz, 2012, 2015).

We refer here to societies, such as the NTCA societies, with persistent categorical inequality, countries in which the ruling groups and classes manage the means and resources that control the governments (Tilly, 1998). These are collectivities where it is difficult to achieve equality of position in order to reduce the gap between people’s incomes and living conditions and thus increase equality of opportunity (Dubet, 2011). These are countries where there is no real extension and strengthening of social services, societies in which there is no desirable and necessary “general enrichment of the concrete substance of

civilized life, a general reduction of risk and insecurity, an equalization between the more and the less fortunate at all levels-between the healthy and the risky” (Marshall, 1965, p. 113).

From this perspective, it is essential to consider that the Latin American reality is marked precisely by inequality favoured, among other things, because ”Latin American states have not known how to socialise or discipline their elites, and that, on the contrary, it is the elites who use them to pursue their private interests [our own translation]” (Waldmann, 2004, p. 117). In 2004, for the World Bank, there was little doubt that Latin America was ”the region with the highest levels of inequality in the world” (De Ferranti, Perry, Ferreira and Walton, 2004, pp. 53-54). As Burchardt (2012) points out, this persistent inequality has been structural in the region since the end of the 20th century until today. González and Martner also argue that Latin America ”continues to be the most unequal region of the world” (González & Martner, 2012, p. 8). Alicia Bárcena, executive secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (henceforth ECLAC), has no doubt that in Latin American countries a well-established economic characteristic ”refers to the high levels of inequality in the distribution of household income. The high concentration of income and wealth in a few families appears as a hallmark of the region [our own translation]” (Bárcena, 2015, p. 9-10). Espíndola reinforces this assessment when he writes that this is ”one of the most sadly salient features that characterises us: that of being a region with significant and persistent levels of social inequalities [our own translation]” (2016, p. 9). This is exactly what ECLAC has been denouncing for years, given that ”Inequality is a historical and structural characteristic of Latin American and Caribbean societies, and has been maintained and reproduced even in periods of economic growth and prosperity” (ECLAC, 2019, p. 14).

We refer here to both intra-national inequalities and inequalities between countries in the region. In fact, Amarante and Colacce state that ”nearly 90% of overall regional inequality originates within the countries” (2018, p. 21), with Central America the most unequal sub-region in 2014. As the latest World Inequality Report shows, especially since 2008, overall inequality between countries has decreased, but, on the contrary, inequality within countries has increased. In the Latin American region, ”The Bottom 50% in Latin America holds 630 times less household wealth than the Top 10%”, more specifically ”The top 10% in Latin America captures 77% of total household wealth, compared with 1% captured by the bottom 50%” (Chancel, Piketty, et al., 2022, p. 38-39). This is a situation that translates into an absolutely unequal exercise of economic, social and cultural rights by Latin Americans.

4 STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY AND VIOLENCE IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA

The end of the civil wars in Guatemala (1960-1996) and El Salvador (1980-1992) created expectations in their civil societies of being able to live in fairer and safer communities, with better levels of human development and less violence. However, in these two countries and in Honduras, the reality is far from achieving these ideals, with post-conflict societies

facing high levels of violence, social exclusion, weak or non-existent law enforcement, and systematic violation of basic human rights (Lorente, 2016; Moser & van Bronkhorst, 1999; Pillay, 2006; UNDP, 2007; UNODC, 2007; Zinecker, 2006) (Lorente, 2016; Moser & Van Bronkhorst, 1999; Pillay, 2006; UNDP, 2007; UNODC, 2007; Zinecker, 2006). As Zinecker (2012) points out, the average homicide rates in El Salvador and Guatemala exceed even those of the civil war era.

Although some of the Latin American countries with the highest homicide rates have improved somewhat –including El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala– the fact remains that of the 20 countries with the highest homicide rates in the world, 17 are in Central America, the Caribbean and South America, to the extent that in 2017 the region had the world's highest homicide crime rates. More specifically, in 2017, El Salvador ranked first of these 20 countries, with an absolute number of homicides of 3,954 and a rate per 100,000 inhabitants of 60.0. Fourth place went to Honduras with an absolute number of homicides of 3,791 and a rate per 100,000 inhabitants of 42.8. Guatemala, with an absolute number of homicides of 4,410 and a rate per 100,000 population of 26.1, was fourteenth in that ranking (Muggah & Tobón, 2018; ?). This is just what the latest report on human development in the region underlines: Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the most violent regions in the world: "Moreover, the countries in LAC exhibited vastly higher homicide and crime victimization rates than other countries at similar levels of inequality" (UNDP, , p. 186).

This is a context that, in addition, favours the intergenerational reproduction of educational inequality, when, as Moser and van Bronkhorst point out, "Good schools and school-based programs can mitigate many of the adverse impacts of violence on youth" (Moser & van Bronkhorst, 1999, p. 15).

There is not complete unanimity on the correlation between inequality and violence and crime in the NTCA. However, the studies and positions that do correlate them are the vast majority. Zinecker (2012) questions the causality of structural factors, such as poverty and inequality, and affirms that another neighbouring country with similar rates of inequality, Nicaragua, does not suffer the epidemic violence that El Salvador and Guatemala endure. For Ruth Prado, on the contrary, "it is undeniable that they influence the production and reproduction of violence through lack of access to opportunities, marginalisation and exclusion [our own translation]" (Prado, 2018 , p. 239).

The relationship between inequality and crime, violent or otherwise, has been the subject of study for decades. The most established ecological theories of crime to explain variations in crime rates according to different and contrasting variables are Robert Merton's pressure theory (1938), Clifford Shaw and Henry D. McKay's theory of social disorganisation (1942), and Gary Stanley Becker's economic theory of crime (1968). In all of these, inequality plays an undoubtedly conditioning role (Kelly, 2000). For Wilkinson it is clear that "The best-established environmental determinant of levels of violence is the scale of income differences between rich and poor. More unequal societies tend to be more violent" (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 1). Kelly Morgan, from a study of a set of urban settings in the United States, noted in 2000 that "for violent crime the impact of inequality is large, even after controlling for the effects of poverty, race, and family composition" (Kelly, 2000, p.

537).

The World Bank, in a 2014 analysis of the case of Mexico between 2006 and 2010, argued that, had inequality not decreased, with a more equitable distribution of income, as measured by the Gini coefficient, in most Mexican municipalities in that period, the increase in violence and homicide rates would have been even greater than it actually was (Enamorado, López-Calva, Rodríguez-Castelán, & Winkler, 2014). A more recent global study of 16 countries between 1900 and 2014 finds a "strong correlation between socio-economic factors and crime rates" (Anser, et. al., 2020, p. 23). This is emphasised by De Courson and Nettle, for whom "Comparing across industrialised societies, higher inequality-greater dispersion in the distribution of economic resources across individuals is associated with higher crime and lower social trust" (De Courson & Nettle, 2021, p. 1). As Wilkinson argues, "inequality at the societal level, is harmful to health" (2021, p. 10).

A comprehensive approach to the key relationship between inequality, violence and criminality is facilitated by Galtung's definition of violence. For him, "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realisations are below their potential realisations" (1969, p. 168). It is this conceptual framework that gives meaning to his conception of structural violence, which Galtung defines as embedded in an unequal power structure that generates "unequal life chances" given that educational and medical resources and income are also unequally distributed, and, above all, the "power to decide over the distribution of resources is unevenly distributed", a situation that "is aggravated further if the persons low on income are also low in education, low on health, and low on power" (Galtung, 1969, p. 171). These are societies in which resources, not only economic but also social and cultural capital, have clearly unequal and differentiated processes of accumulation and distribution (Bourdieu, 1986). They are states and societies anchored in a persistent categorical inequality —by race, gender, ethnicity, class, age, citizenship or educational level— that condemns the most vulnerable groups, an inequality that, in Tilly's theorisation (1998), is sustained by exploiting and hoarding opportunities through mechanisms such as emulation and adaptation, which are generally sustained by states.

This is a picture that fits well with the characterisation of numerous Latin American countries, and very well with those of the NTCA. They are the opposite of the "well-ordered" societies defined by Rawls as "effectively regulated by a public conception of justice as fairness" in which "citizens are equal at the highest level and in the most fundamental respects", which can cover "the human needs essential to a decent human life" (Rawls, 2001, p. 31-132). This is also well in line with what Waldmann maintains when he states that "One of the characteristics of Latin American states is their structural weakness [our own translation]" (Waldmann, 2004, p. 110), as "anomic" countries whose weakness "is presented as the inability to guarantee a peaceful order binding for all and the inability to provide elementary services; that is, as a weakness related to order and another related to organisation [our own translation]" (Waldmann, 2004, p. 112). States such as Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, then, are "unable to meet the basic needs of citizens with regard to the maintenance of order and security [our own translation]" (Waldmann, 2004, p. 114).

In this regard, [Wilkinson and Pickett \(2009\)](#) stress that inequality equals structural violence that becomes chronic within this state framework, and the fear of violence conditions the most vulnerable in a very special way, depriving them of basic freedoms. Furthermore, there is no doubt that studies make it clear that if income inequality increases, crime also increases in those countries. Laura Chioda emphasises that, for Latin America, "High homicide rates have become the norm for the region, despite the significant gains in economic growth and poverty reduction" (Chioda, [2017](#), p. 82).

5 CHILDREN AND YOUTH, STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

Structural violence haunts the daily lives of people living in the NTCA. They endure homicide rates that are considered endemic as defined by the World Health Organization [WHO \(2020\)](#) and still remain an invariant regional feature. It is telling to note that the Latin American region is home to only 8 per cent of the world's population, but in 2017 it accounted for 37 per cent of all violent deaths (?). Add to this robbery, extortion, threats, kidnappings, disappearances, femicide and sexual violence, and we are dealing with a type of violence that permeates life in all contexts, public and private, with children suffering in particular. In this regard, the United Nations Development Programme points out that:

In most LAC countries, the majority of children experience violent discipline at home. Close to two million children in the region have fallen victim to sexual exploitation, and 48 percent of the victims of human trafficking in Central America and the Caribbean are children, compared with 34 percent worldwide. All five countries with the highest homicide rates of adolescents in the world are located in the region: Venezuela, Honduras, Colombia, El Salvador and Brazil ([UNDP, 2021](#), p. 186).

What is undeniable is that the context of structural inequality and violence in fractured societies greatly conditions expectations among the youngest members of Latin America's low-income social groups, for whom unemployment and poor quality education and training are the norm. In the countries of the NTCA, this marginalisation often finds in criminal violence a way out of this lack of opportunities of all kinds. These are the young people who, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, began to join gangs and for whom, in their microcosm, using death as a natural way of life for the short period they hoped to survive was the norm ([Levenson, 2013](#)). Thus, it is by no means coincidental that homicide rates of children under the age of 18 are extremely high, especially in El Salvador and Honduras. In 2017, Guatemala had an estimated rate per 100,000 inhabitants of 5.6, El Salvador 10.9 and Honduras 16. These are the highest rates in the region, along with Belize (6) and some South American countries such as Brazil (11.6) and Colombia (11) ([WHO, 2020](#)). Particularly cruelly, from January 2010 to March 2018, 1,522 students from all levels of education were murdered in Honduras alone. Of these, 953 were in primary or secondary education ([ONV-IUDPA-UNAH, 2018](#)).

We will now focus on the more strictly educational field, in particular on one of the problems that, in our opinion, and beyond the real coverage of schooling, most seriously

compromises the real exercise of the right to education: school dropout and how the structural violence endured by the countries of the NTCA conditions this reality (Table 1).

Table 1 Completion rates¹ and educational efficiency² in the Northern Triangle, Central America and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Country/Region	% Primary completion	Lower secondary completion (ISCED 2)	% Upper secondary completion (ISCED 3)	% Drop-outs in secondary education ³ (ISCED 2)	Drop-outs in secondary education (ISCED 3)	% early school leavers ⁴
Guatemala	83,4	54,5		4,6	5,5	51,1
Honduras	85,7	56,5	46,9	6,5	5	49,2
El Salvador	91,9	77,2	64,4	7,8	7,1	33,5
Central America	94,4	81,4	53,5	36,8
Latin America and the Caribbean	92,6	82,7	62,5	22,5

Notes:

.. No data available

¹The educational completion data corresponds to the year 2020.

²The data on educational efficiency corresponds to the time range of 2017 to 2021.

³The dropout rate is the ratio of students who drop out of school to the number of students who started school.

⁴The early school dropout rate is the proportion of young people aged 18-24 who completed lower secondary education as the highest level of education achieved and are not attending any level of education

Source: Own elaboration based on [BID \(2022\)](#); [ECLAC \(2019\)](#); [MINED \(2018\)](#); [Ministerio de Educación \(2020\)](#); [Ministerio de educación \(2021\)](#); [USINIEH \(2017\)](#).

At the beginning of this century, as [Espíndola and León \(2002\)](#) pointed out, school dropout in Latin America was one of the most serious educational problems in the region, a problem that, as highlighted by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), has only worsened in the countries of Mesoamerica; Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Belize ([Echenique, 2019](#)). This situation is particularly complicated in the NTCA, where early school dropout rates are, on average, 22% higher than in the rest of the Latin American and Caribbean region. This problem affects up to 50% of young people in Guatemala and Honduras and more than a third of them in El Salvador. Thus, as one progresses through the education system, completion rates show very significant falls of between 25% and 45% at the end of secondary education in these three countries. The data for El Salvador is slightly more favourable than that for Honduras and Guatemala in this respect. When comparing this indicator in the NTCA with the Latin American region, it can be seen that the situation is polarised at the higher levels of education, so that in primary education there is a difference of barely 5% on average to the detriment of the sub-region, reaching 20% at International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2 and 13% at ISCED 3. This situation denotes an even effort throughout the Latin American region with respect to the primary level of education, where, in general terms, high quotas of educational coverage have been reached. However, this effort is inevitably permeated again and again in the transition to secondary education by numerous social, economic and geographical gaps which, in a context of generalised structural violence, only reduce the real educational possibilities of children in the NTCA. In this sense:

In the Northern Triangle of Central America, violence is endemic and is costing young people their lives or their futures. Gang violence frequently takes place around or in schools, disrupting learning, leaving young people feeling vulnerable, fearful and often unwilling to run the risk of attending school (Theirworld, 2018, p. 29).

In Guatemala, the most recent studies show that there are still large gaps in access to the real benefits of the right to education. This is particularly true for rural populations and indigenous peoples. With the exception of primary education, the gaps in access and educational achievement in pre-primary, basic and diversified education are very high (De Lovo, 2022). Regarding the reasons for school dropout in the country, change of family residence is one of the main reasons, which may be due to economic or work-related causes for the family, including the minors themselves, as well as causes associated with violence (G. Flores, 2019).

In El Salvador, the main reasons associated with school dropout are economic problems, followed by problems of coexistence and insecurity in the area (NRC, 2019b). Specifically, as reported by teachers, the percentage of students who drop out due to violence in the third cycle totals 8.2% (Montes, 2019), and gang violence affects school dropout in 653 schools, 12.65% (MINED, 2018).

In the case of Honduras, the main reasons associated with dropping out of school are economic problems; in second place is lack of food assistance and in third place is the need for support at home. Conflict and/or problems of coexistence, as well as being considered an unsafe area, are in fifth and seventh position respectively (NRC, 2019b). For its part, the Honduran Ministry of Education indicates that the causes of school dropout could be related to migration, poverty, generalised violence, school violence, child labour and early teenage pregnancies (USINIEH, 2017).

In the same vein, the Norwegian Refugee Council notes for both Honduras and El Salvador that, although there are numerous reasons (which have been listed above) for dropping out of school, all of them are linked to poverty, violence, displacement and the lack of adequate public provision and infrastructure. Thus, behind the causes identified in both countries, there are other reasons that can be inferred, such as child and youth recruitment for criminal purposes; restricted mobility due to invisible borders between territories controlled by criminal groups; and sexual violence against girls by criminal groups (NRC, 2019a, 2019b) (Table 2).

This dynamic of daily insecurity due to violence has driven a growing migratory flow. It is migrating in order to survive, undertaking a long journey in order to have the right to have rights, including the right to education. A phenomenon that continues to grow is that of minors from the three countries who migrate unaccompanied to the United States. A study carried out by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Regional Office for the United States and the Caribbean (UNHCR) through interviews with hundreds of minors clearly showed that in all cases, violence by organised armed criminal actors and violence in the home were behind this dangerous journey to the North:

Forty-eight percent of the displaced children interviewed for this study shared experiences of how they had been personally affected by the augmented violence in the region

Table 2 Conditional elements of the right to education related to structural violence in the Northern Triangle (selected indicators).

	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras
Homicide rate of children under 18/100,000 population (2017)	10,9	5,6	
Forced internal displacement due to violence ¹ . Number (2021)	175.000	243	247.000
Intention to move to other countries due to insecurity. Percentage (2016)	37,1	17,2	35,1
Gang members. Number (2020)	70.000	15.000- 20.000	25.000- 35.000
Feelings of sexual harassment in the classroom (2018)	2,75%	3,40%	..
Teenage pregnancy. Aged 14-19 ² . Percentage (2018) ³			25
Early marriage ⁴ . 15-19 years old. Percentage (2018)			

Notes:

.. No data available

¹The indicator refers to new IDPs in the case of El Salvador and to the total number of IDPs in the case of Guatemala and Honduras.

²In El Salvador, the data refers to the 10-19 age range.

³The data for Honduras refers to the year 2016.

⁴The data for Guatemala is divided into 6% of marriages and 14% of de facto unions.

Source: Own elaboration based on (IDMC, 2022; Ministerio de Educación, 2018; Montes, 2019; NRC, 2016, 2019a, 2019b; REDLAC, 2019; WHO, 2020).

by organised armed criminal actors, including drug cartels and gangs or by State actors. Twenty-one percent of the children confided that they had survived abuse and violence in their homes by their caretakers. (UNHCR, 2014, p. 6)

The same UNHCR study highlights the reasons for Salvadoran children to leave their homes, revealing that "Sixty-six percent of the children cited violence by organised armed criminal actors as a primary motivator for leaving, and 21% percent discussed abuse in the home. Fifteen percent of the children discussed both violence in the society and abuse in the home". Only seven percent pointed to situations of deprivation. In the case of Guatemalan children, almost half of whom were members of an indigenous population, "the three dominant themes that emerged were deprivation, discussed by 29% of the children; abuse in the home, discussed by 23%; and violence in society, discussed by 20%" (UNHCR, 2014, p. 9). Finally, in the case of children in Honduras, "Forty-four percent of these displaced children were threatened with or were victims of violence by organised armed criminal actors. Twenty-four percent of the children reported abuse in the home". Furthermore, "Eleven percent reported that they had been victims of both violence in society and abuse in the home", and twenty-one percent of the children discussed situations of deprivation (UNHCR, 2014, p. 10). In the same vein, Acuna's work with data from Customs and Border Protection and data from the countries of origin of these children arriving at U.S. borders provides evidence that violence in the countries of origin is a key driver of child migration (Acuna, 2018).

Violence —homicidal or not— and criminality in all its dimensions, make up the panorama of generalised insecurity which, among other consequences, also feeds the phenomenon of forced internal displacement, especially in the NTCA (IDMC, 2022; Raderstorf, Carole, Zechmeister, & Camilleri, 2017; Sistema Regional de Monitoreo,

2019). This is a problem that also affects minors; between 2016 and 2018, 418 minors displaced by generalised violence in the NTCA were assisted by NGOs. More than 60% of them were under 11 years old ([Sistema Regional de Monitoreo, 2019](#)). In the Honduran case, the profile of these children displaced by violence is associated with coming from precarious homes with high environmental risk and vulnerability, disintegrated by the phenomenon of generalised violence, migration or the violent death of one of their family members ([J. Flores & Amaya, 2020](#)).

Gang activity in the NTCA is a serious concern for its population. It is estimated that Guatemala has between 10,000 and 15,000 gang members, Honduras between 25,000 and 35,000, while El Salvador has around 70,000. Many of them are in prison; they constitute 40% of the prison population in El Salvador and 5% in Guatemala [Aceña \(n.d.\)](#). According to UNICEF (cited in [NRC, 2016](#)) in Honduras more than 4,700 children and young people have been recruited by criminal gangs (*maras*). These gangs have extortion as their main source of income ([Raderstorf et al., 2017](#); [UNODC, 2018](#)), an activity in which minors have a constant presence that exposes them to committing criminal acts, to violence, to ending up in prison or to dying early ([JIFE, 2020](#)). In Honduras "more than 500 educational centres in the two main cities of the country, the Central District and San Pedro Sula, are located in violent environments or under the watch of organised crime, which causes school dropouts [our own translation]" ([Flores and Amaya, 2020](#), p.15).

In the case of Guatemala, [G. Flores \(2019\)](#) notes that, years ago, schools were a symbol of refuge and protection for children from violence on the streets or in their own homes. Now, some of them have become real recruitment centres for gangs, as well as for the criminal activities they carry out. For its part, [MINED \(2018\)](#) outlines that 15.5% of schools in El Salvador report that their internal security is affected by gangs. Likewise, up to 640 schools have high rates of dropouts due to the close presence of gangs, and 13 schools have been forced to close one or more times due to gang threats. In the case of Honduras, in San Pedro de Sula alone, 10 young people per school requested a transfer due to violence, bringing the figure to around 3,000 students in this situation ([Monzón, 2016](#)).

Another issue of undeniable impact on the right to education related to criminal groups is the aforementioned invisible borders that are generated between areas and communities in the municipalities of these countries due to the struggle for territorial control. This generates mobility restrictions imposed by these groups that make it difficult, if not impossible, to access schools in areas controlled by rival gangs, as well as the risk of being assaulted, harassed or recruited on the way to school ([NRC, 2019a, 2019b](#); [REDLAC, 2019](#)). This is also the case with high levels of sexual harassment and violence that "can come from criminal groups, who regularly force girls and adolescents to be 'girlfriends' of gang members (in a coerced or forced manner) [our own translation]" ([REDLAC, 2019](#), p. 5).

Closely linked to the above reality is the phenomenon of early marriage, which affects around one-fifth of adolescents and young people in the NTCA. Thus, in 2018, 7% of Salvadorans and Hondurans in the main municipalities of these countries cited pregnancy, maternity and paternity as the main cause of dropping out of the education system ([NRC, 2019a, 2019b](#)). Similarly, in areas where criminal gangs are found in Honduras, one-fifth of

children indicate that they are parents, 82% of whom are girls (NRC, 2016).

Finally, another reason for dropping out of school is teenage pregnancy, with extremely high rates in the NTCA, which seriously undermines the educational opportunities of thousands of minors. In Honduras, 8% of out-of-school children were mothers or fathers, while in El Salvador 22% of out-of-school girls were mothers, and 173 educational centres report pregnancy as a cause of school dropout in the country (MINED, 2018). In the case of Guatemala, only 1 in 10 adolescents who are pregnant or in forced unions continue in school.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Beyond the actual coverage of schooling, we understand that dropping out of school is one of the main obstacles to the exercise of the right to education as a basic human right. There is growing international demand in forums within the framework of the United Nations to expand the right to education encompassed by SDG 4, either by extending this right to the field of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), as requested by the Special Rapporteur on the right to education Barry (2022) or, in particular, to higher education, as called for in 2021 by the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) (Lázaro-Lorente, 2022; Theirworld, 2018). This highlights the relevance of the problem of early school leaving from the human rights perspective with which this text has been approached.

Even taking into account the fact that school dropout has always been a formidable obstacle to the achievement of the right to inclusive and quality education in the NTCA countries, as it is in the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean, the fact is that this educational problem has worsened in recent years as poverty and persistent inequality have been added to the other factors that determine school dropout, which are the result of perennial structural violence in the NTCA countries. However, as our work shows, in the last fifteen years this phenomenon of school dropout has been deepened by structural violence in the NTCA which, inevitably, due to the criminal action of gangs —beyond obvious conditioning factors such as poverty and inequality— has ended up conditioning the logical continuity towards secondary education. Violence and insecurity reduce educational opportunities by becoming part of the daily panorama of children and young people, even in their own educational centres.

The odious ways in which this undesirable influence manifests itself are manifold, from forced recruitment into the gangs to participate in criminal activities, to their territoriality policy that impedes the freedom of movement of schoolchildren and their enrolment in secondary schools, to internal displacement and emigration. It must also not be forgotten that problems such as early pregnancy and early marriage, also linked to a large extent to gang violence, have conditioned girls' educational opportunities.

This is a structural violence which, in a regional context strongly characterised by inequality, disproportionately hits the most vulnerable groups in the societies of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. It is a dynamic that has ended up consolidating a growing

phenomenon of forced internal displacement and a migratory bloodletting to the North, with many minors fleeing violence in order to survive, thus closing off or, in the best of cases, indefinitely postponing their opportunities to continue receiving education in the school system. Precisely because of the permanent and structural nature of the problems, the solutions, which are by no means easy, must also inevitably have this double characteristic of permanence and structural nature, addressing the problems in a sectoral manner without losing the necessary holistic approach. There is a broad consensus among NGOs and international organisations working in the NTCA countries on the possible measures which, in coordination with the education authorities, could be developed. Among them, it is worth highlighting as a priority those that have to do with making the necessary adjustments to public education policies that effectively guarantee the protection of the entire school community. Likewise, involving families and civil society as a whole becomes necessary—in coordination with national, regional and local authorities—to respond to violence, forced displacement, school dropout, school desertion and abandonment, physical and sexual abuse, and forced recruitment of minors (REDLAC, 2019).

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