Pandemic and

human security

The impact of COVID-19 on communities in Medellín and proposals to address it

Pandemic and human security

The impact of COVID-19 on communities in Medellín and proposals to address it

Pandemic and human security

The impact of COVID-19 on communities in
Medellín and proposals to address it

Authors

Alexandra Abello Colak

Beatriz Hernández Chaverra

Erica Muriel Holguín

Julián Andrés Muñoz

Lina María Zuluaga García

Lorena Tamayo Castro

Mariana Ortiz Usma

Pablo Emilio Angarita

Yorlady Benjumea Ocampo

Institutions

Observatorio de Seguridad Humana de Medellín

Facultad de Derecho y Ciencias Políticas - Universidad de Antioquia

Latin America and Caribbean Centre - London School of
Economics, LSE

Corporación Mi Comuna

Corporación Con-Vivamos

Corporación Cultural Nuestra Gente

Medellín

July 2021

Contents

Introduction

More than a year on from the declaration of the pandemic in Colombia, COVID-19 has claimed more than 100,000 lives. Of these, 12.9% have been recorded in Antioquia[1], the department with the second highest number of confirmed cases, and more than 5,000 people have died in its capital, Medellín, the second largest city in the country. But while the loss of life is one of the most horrific direct consequences of the pandemic, it is certainly not the only one. The global health crisis and the measures implemented to contain the spread of the virus have had profound economic, social and institutional impacts which need to be analysed in each context in order to understand the magnitude of the challenge that an appropriate, proportionate response to the pandemic in each city supposes.

This report examines the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on some of the most populated and most vulnerable communities in Medellín. Monitoring conducted between April 2020 and February 2021[2] provides the basis for a contextualised analysis of what, to date, the pandemic has meant for broad sectors of the population. On the strength of this analysis, we argue that the public health crisis caused by COVID-19 has not only deepened and exacerbated historical problems which affect the lives and well-being of people; it has also led to a **progressive and generalised surge in human insecurity in the city, which calls for a concerted, comprehensive, multidimensional, participatory strategy** which acknowledges the differential impacts that the pandemic has had on different groups and can help mitigate the rise in threats and risks to human security.

The pandemic is a situation unprecedented this century which, as will be seen, threatens the lives, survival, rights and welfare of large sectors of the population and especially of the people living in those communities with what are historically the lowest standards of quality of life. This means that Medellín should move towards **developing a 'recovery strategy with a human security perspective'** capable of addressing the multidimensional impact of the pandemic in all its complexity. Such a strategy should be constructed through multi-stakeholder engagement and public-private partnerships in which different professional and business associations, community organisations, universities, churches and state entities can come together.

This report aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact of the pandemic and provide ideas on how to move towards the articulation of that strategy. This assessment is the result of the joint work of community and academic researchers from the Human Security Observatory (OSH) at the University of Antioquia[3] and the Latin America and Caribbean Centre (LACC) at the London

---

1. DANE (2021).
2. The monitoring was carried out in two stages: the first between April and June 2020, and the second between August 2020 and February 2021.
3. The Observatory is part of the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Antioquia.

School of Economics and Political Science, and professionals belonging to the following community organisations: Corporación Convivamos, Corporación Cultural Nuestra Gente and Corporación Mi Comuna, together with the residents of communes 1 Popular, 2 Santa Cruz, 3 Manrique, 4 Aranjuez, 6 Doce de Octubre and 13 San Javier. The report contains a characterisation of the human security situation in the most vulnerable communities in Medellín and its effect on the influence of illegal armed actors and the dynamics of violence in the city. It also provides an analysis of the state response to the pandemic and the impact of this response on the communities, and puts forward some concrete ways to begin to tackle the human security crisis which is deepening in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.
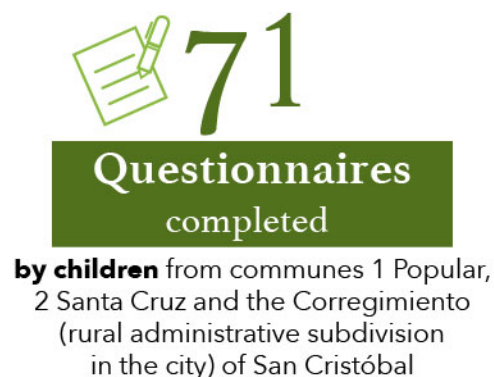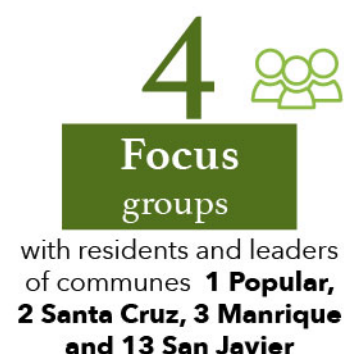

Map 1: Communes of Medellín. Based on: https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Comunas_de_Pandelin.png

Methodological details

The impact of the pandemic was monitored using a **participatory methodology for co-constructing human security diagnostics**[4], combining different data collection methods. The communes which were monitored were selected because they are the most populated, have recorded the highest number of cases of COVID-19, have the lowest scores on the multidimensional Index of Living Conditions and are home to the largest number of people living in poverty.

The data collection methods used were:

44
Semi-structured **interviews** of people living in the **selected communities**[5]

4
Focus groups
with residents and leaders of communes **1 Popular, 2 Santa Cruz, 3 Manrique and 13 San Javier**

103
Online questionnaires[6]
completed by **people living in both the selected** and other communes[7]

7
Semi-structured **interviews** with government officials and representatives of **civil organisations**

Review
of secondary information
(official reports, newspaper articles, academic papers, etc.)

5
Context analysis sessions
with **community researchers and leaders belonging** to six community organisations

71
Questionnaires completed
by **children** from communes 1 Popular, 2 Santa Cruz and the Corregimiento (rural administrative subdivision in the city) of San Cristóbal

---

4. OSH (2014); Abello Colak & Pearce (2019).
5. 36 women and 8 men.
6. Representatives from Corporación Libélula and Red de Organizaciones de la Comuna 6 took part in the collective design of the virtual questionnaire used in the second stage of monitoring.
7. 67 women, 35 men and one unspecified person.

CHARACTERISATION OF THE HUMAN SECURITY CRISIS
deepening in the context of the pandemic

In Medellín, the pandemic has laid bare historical problems which persist in the city: high levels of poverty and inequality, and problematic relations between state actors, residents and illegal armed actors in some areas. It has also given rise to the **deepening** **of a human security crisis** in several parts of the city. Several indicators of six dimensions of human security demonstrate the widespread and progressive rise in human insecurity in the communities monitored:

Table 1. Indicators showing a deterioration in human security by dimensions:

Economic security

- Number of people who have experienced a **critical decline in earnings** as a result of loss of employment, pay cuts or being unable to resume subsistence activities in the informal economy.

- Number of people who have experienced a **substantial deterioration in their economic situation;** self-perception of poverty.

- Number of people who have had to resort to forms of **informal debt** (loans from friends, relatives, acquaintances or loan sharks).

- Number of people who have had to **move in with relatives** or move to areas where housing costs are cheaper.

- Number of people engaging in **prostitution as a form of subsistence.**

Food security

- Number of people who **cannot eat three meals** a day.

- Number of people who **depend on food aid and subsidies** to pay for utilities and food.

Health security (physical and mental)

- Number of people requiring **medical care** due to physical health conditions as a consequence of **COVID-19.**

- Number of people who **cannot access health services** for medical conditions unrelated to COVID-19.

- Number of people reporting a **deterioration in their mental health.**

- Number of **suicides** and suicide attempts.

Personal security

• Number of cases of **gender-based violence.**

• Number of cases **of violation of the rights of children and adolescents,** including sexual and other forms of abuse.

• Number of cases of **sexual exploitation** in community areas (appearance of houses of prostitution).

• Rising **tension and conflict** between couples and parents-children (number of cases of domestic violence).

• Risk of young **people and children being recruited and exploited** by armed groups.

• Consolidation of **violent control** by illegal armed groups.

• Number of people who have suffered **stigmatisation** because they caught the virus or live in areas with high COVID-19 case rates.

Community security

• Rising **tension and conflict** between neighbours (caused by problems of coexistence and aid distribution).

Political security

• **Interference of illegal armed groups** in spaces for civic engagement and aid distribution processes.

• **Risks to leaders** who perform community work.

The deterioration in these human security indicators shows that the pandemic has prompted two developments in the city:

1) A significant increase in the number of people facing imminent threats and risks to their lives and well-being, and constraints on their access to and exercise of fundamental rights.

2) A reduction in the capacity and credibility of key institutions to respond to these threats in those communities most affected by the pandemic, leading to survival strategies which further amplify the risks to human security.

In order to better understand the human security crisis deepened by the pandemic in Medellín, it is necessary to look at the set of problems that people are facing on a daily basis, the local and community context in which they occur, how these are interrelated, creating objective and subjective situations of insecurity for people, and how they, the state entities and other local actors have responded to these issues.

We shall now analyse the threats and vulnerabilities that are affecting the lives, survival, dignity and rights of people in various dimensions, and the limitations on the ability of the state institutions to respond to these problems in the communities.

1.1 Interconnected threats to human security

In the communities most vulnerable to the spread of the virus and the side effects of infection prevention strategies, such as strict stay-at-home orders and restrictions on mobility, the most visible impact has been a **sudden, widespread increase in the precariousness of the economic situation and living conditions** of many households. The crudest expression of this precariousness came during the strict lockdown imposed in the city, which meant a drastic drop in income in many communities and even saw many people going hungry[8].

As the first monitoring report, published in June 2020[9], showed, the inability to continue pursuing the economic activities on which they depended for their livelihoods, the loss of employment or wage cuts, coupled with the rising prices of basic goods and utilities[10], were the main causes of **increased economic**[11] **and food insecurity** for a lot of people[12]. Consequently, although the economy has started to reopen, there is a high risk of economic hardship turning chronic for many people, particularly considering that restrictions are still being implemented to contain new peaks in cases. Worse still, it is estimated that the pace of economic recovery in Latin America will be much slower than in other region[13]. As an indication of what this slow recovery may imply, the monitoring showed that of the 92 people from different vulnerable communities asked about their work situation, 59 reported that they had had to suspend the activities in which they were engaged, and 48 were still unable to return to work at the end of 2020.

The rise in **unemployment** in Colombia and throughout Latin America as a result of the pandemic, which has affected young people and women disproportionately[14], is pushing into conditions of extreme vulnerability families that have no savings or access to credit through the financial system because they depend on informal economic activities[15]; women are the heads of household in most of these families. Such is the case of most of the population in several sectors in the city's

---

8. In February 2021, the social pulse survey conducted by the National Administrative Department for Statistics (DANE) revealed that while 7.11 million households ate three meals a day in 2020, this figure had fallen to just 5.4 million by the date the results were released. This means that 1.6 million families could no longer rely on that amount of daily food as a result of the pandemic. Of these, 92,214 families went from eating three times to having just one meal per day, and a further 9,010 households could not even afford a daily meal (Portafolio, 2021).

9. OSH and LACC (2020).

10. Due to the increase in the consumption of utilities, particularly water.

11. The percentage of people who reported that the economic situation in their household had worsened increased from 17% in 2019 to 37% in 2020. In Zone 1 - North-east, the percentage rose to 44% (Medellín Cómo Vamos, 2020a).

12. In Medellín, the percentage of people who ate less than three meals a day increased from 16% to 22%. In Zone 1 - North-east, it rose to 30%; in Zone 3 - East central, to 25%; and in Zone 6 - South-west, to 21% (Medellín Cómo Vamos, 2020a).

13. United Nations (2021).

14. In Latin America, the pandemic has led to the loss of 17 million jobs. In Colombia, most of the jobs lost were held by women, and the youth unemployment rate rose from 16% to almost 30% (IDB, 2021).

15. Many women, for instance, work in domestic service or sell food in the streets or products by mail order.

northern and central western zones (such as communes 1 Popular, 2 Santa Cruz, 3 Manrique, 4 Aranjuez, 6 Doce de Octubre and 13 San Javier, included in the monitoring).

As will be shown later, the case of the neighbourhood of El Sinaí in commune 2 Santa Cruz is particularly illustrative of the vulnerability that exists in these areas. Of the 2,956 people who live in this sector, only 150 had formal employment in June 2020[16], an unsettling figure considering that 956 families live there and one which confirms that the vast majority of the active population depends on the informal economy. Moreover, several people who had informal employment in this community lost their income when the area was sealed off by the local government, preventing them from going to work. Those with formal employment also saw their income reduced as a result of unilateral decisions taken by their employers which forced them to take leave on lower pay or even, in some cases, unpaid leave. In other parts of the city, such as certain neighbourhoods of commune 4 Aranjuez, a high level of vulnerability was also found, especially among the considerable number of people living in tenements and those engaged in prostitution as a means of subsistence.

Following the lockdown declared on 25 March 2020, many households were left without sustenance in the most vulnerable parts of the city. Their only sources of food were the provisions and complementary food aid offered by the local government, non-governmental community organisations and the private sector, and the aid provided through the programme Medellín me cuida (Medellín looks after me) and the Presidency's National Solidarity Income Programme. However, the information collected shows that the aid provided during the strict lockdown was not enough to meet the needs of the number of families living in extreme vulnerability. This was the case, for example, of fa-

milies living in settlements in commune 2 Santa Cruz and high mountainous areas of commune 1 Popular and 3 Manrique, and a significant number of people in commune 4 Aranjuez. The Mayor's office only compiled a partial roll of the vulnerable population in commune 4 Aranjuez which did not include all households, so many were left without access to aid and were forced to contact civil organisations.

The monitoring conducted has also revealed that, despite the reopening of the economy, many **families still do not have sufficient income to cover their basic needs.** Numerous people who are receiving some form of aid have confirmed that, at present, it is their only income and that they use it to pay for utilities and buy food. However, it is not enough to meet the needs of families and cover other essential expenses, such as rent, school tuition fees, transport and medicine.

As will be discussed later, the precariousness of their situation has a profound impact on people's well-being and physical and mental health, forcing them to seek alternatives which can generate further risks. Those who took part in the monitoring conducted stated that the pandemic had forced them to make difficult decisions or to do things they would not have done before in order to support their families. While some spoke of trying to be enterprising, cutting non-essential spending, giving up studies or selling possessions, others acknowledged having to go into debt, performing demeaning work, begging for food and money to survive or even having to steal.

One of the significant findings of the monitoring carried out was the rise in the **use of survival strategies** which, in the local context, imply greater risks and vulnerabilities for several population groups. Informal borrowing, for example, is one of these strategies. The high number of people who have had to resort

---

16. Information provided by local government officials to leaders in this sector during the restrictions on free movement between areas.

to informal loans from friends and relatives, and through *pagadiarios*[17] points to **informal borrowing on a massive scale** in the most vulnerable communities. And while this practice is not new, the fact that there is a growing number of people who need to ask for such loans, coupled with difficulties paying them off in the context of slow economic recovery and the prominent role played by armed actors in dealing with problems in these communities, especially debt collection[18], means that, in the short-to-medium-term, indebtedness will augment the risk of falling victim to violence and coercion at the hands of armed groups for a growing number of people living in these areas.

The **rise in the number of people engaging in prostitution and cases of the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents** exposes other dangerous survival strategies which indicate the worsening of problems that pre-existed the pandemic. When the economy reopened, the increase in the number of people working in prostitution was evident not only in areas which have traditionally operated as tolerance zones but also in other areas where prostitution did not previously exist. The growth in the number of young men engaging in prostitution 'for reasons of survival' is particularly conspicuous. Although the problem of the commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, associated with the tourism industry, was already growing in Medellín before the pandemic[19], and the number of sex workers had increased with the arrival of migrants, the problem has worsened yet further

in the city with the deterioration of living conditions as a result of COVID-19. The emergence of houses devoted to prostitution in which minors are exploited and cases of young girls and adolescents who are abused or exploited in exchange for money or so their families are not thrown out of their homes were identified as growing problems in the communities[20]. Therefore, it is important to note that although an increase in the number of victims of the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in the city has been reported since 2015, especially in commune 10 Candelaria, Parque Lleras in Poblado, Barrio Colombia, Avenida 33 and parks in the city centre[21], the monitoring carried out suggests that this problem is also on the rise in the communes selected for study.

It is clear that, during the pandemic, the degree of vulnerability and the number of people at risk of sexual exploitation has risen. In addition to the violation of rights that this problem represents, the fact that criminal actors have control of the areas where prostitution takes place and that sexual exploitation may become a source of criminal income for some of them[22] means that these phenomena augment the risk of violence and exploitation by armed groups.

At the same time, the pandemic has also contributed to a **progressive deterioration in the mental health** of the people living in these communities. The emotions that they report having experienced most intensely in recent months are anguish, anxiety, high levels of stress, worry, anger, fear and despair[23]. The strict lockdown, which forced people to live

---

17. The pagadiarios are informal loans often controlled by organised crime groups. Of the 103 people asked if they had had to ask for loans, 58 confirmed that they had fallen into debt during the pandemic. Of those 58, 44 had resorted to informal loans from relatives, friends or pagadiarios, and only 14 had applied for loans from banks and credit unions. Most of these people live in the most vulnerable communities in the city.
18. Blattman et al. (2020).
19. Medellín Mayor's office (2017).
20. Focus Group, November 2020.
21. Medellín Working Group against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents, Colombian Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, and the University of Antioquia (2020).
22. Medellín City Council Public Policy Observatory (2017).
23. These are the emotions that 127 of the 137 surveyed claimed to have felt most acutely.

together in poor, overcrowded housing conditions, coupled with the difficult economic situation, has driven numerous people to move in with relatives or to areas where the cost of housing is cheaper[24]. This explains why many reported that the main reasons why they felt these emotions were their inability to work in order to support their families, the precarious economic situation, the worsening of family problems and family conflicts, and, to a lesser extent, fear of catching the virus.

Under these conditions, as those taking part in monitoring acknowledged, increased levels of aggressiveness, short tempers and depression come together with such historical problems as sexism to fuel greater **tension and conflict in both households and the wider community itself,** often ending in violence. This is reflected in the significant increase in the number of reported cases of domestic violence, gender-based violence, violation of the rights of children and adolescents, and couple and parent-child conflicts.

Following the imposition of preventive stay-at-home orders in March 2020, emergency calls rose by 84.34% and calls on account of domestic violence by 96.74%. The Office of the Attorney General registered a total of 110,071 victims of domestic violence in 2020, of whom 75.43% were women and 20.36% men[25], and a monthly average of 162 cases of sexual abuse against minors, mostly aged between 6 and 14, for the months of March, April, May and June 2020. Similarly, the Medellín City Attorney's Office confirmed that the number of cases rose in the first three months of 2021 and

that, although most abuse occurs within the family setting, the number of cases of sexual abuse committed by neighbours had increased by 16.37 % during the pandemic[26].

The violations of rights and conflicts reported daily to Family commissaries' offices also increased exponentially. In one of the communes in the North-east zone, for example, there are between 30 and 40 requests for child-care interventions and some 30 family-conflict interventions every day, not counting cases of gender-based violence[27]. As discussed later, this situation has overwhelmed the already weakened capacity of police stations, conciliation centres and houses of justice to deal with demand.

The difficult situation in homes, coupled with the difficulties generated by online education from home and, more recently, the demands of the blended learning model[28], has also given rise to tension and conflict between parents and children, threatening both access to education and mental health due, among other things, to the excessive school workload. Hence an increase in the **school drop-out rate[29]** has been reported in all the communes, which, in a context like that of Medellín, means a high **risk of young people and children being recruited or exploited by armed groups.** And although this historical phenomenon is a problem which several organisations have been pointing out for a long time in the city[30], the number of minors, aged 7 and upwards, being used by armed groups as lookouts, to sell drugs and collect protection money has increased palpably with the pandemic. This prompted the Municipal Ombudsperson's office to issue a warning

---

24. In several communes, an increase in these cases was reported, with several families living in one home or people moving to other communes; the higher parts of communes 1 and 3, for example.
25. 5,760 were recorded in the first month of 2021. According to the National Police, it is estimated that a woman was a victim of domestic violence every 6 minutes in 2020 (Corporación Sisma Mujer, 2021).
26. Poveda (2021).
27. Interview with an official from a Family commissary's office (6 March 2021).
28. The start of blended onsite/remote schooling, in which children only attend school a few days a week, means that most schoolwork is still being carried out at home.
29. According to the municipal education department, the pandemic caused the school drop-out rate to rise from 2.8% to 5% by the end of 2020. At least 8,241 students had stopped attending online classes or lost contact with their teachers by August 2020.
30. Villa (2012); Convivamos (2018).

that the nationwide increase in cases of child recruitment was also evident in the city and that some 58,000 minors were at high risk of being used by or drawn into criminal groups[31].

The worsening economic situation increases the risk of recruitment, not only because, as many residents acknowledge, parents are faced with the dilemma of having to choose between buying food and paying school fees but also because studying is becoming an increasingly less attractive or possible option for many young people and children who also feel under pressure to contribute to household income. This facilitates the association of minors, especially those who live in conditions of poverty and greater social exclusion, with armed groups which offer them money. Although it is traditionally young men and boys who are most at risk of recruitment, it is important to note that the association of young women and girls with criminal groups is becoming increasingly common.

While several people reported numerous shows of solidarity and support between neighbours during the pandemic, **conflict in the communities** as a result of the diverse, multicultural nature of their members also rose, these areas having historically received migrants from other parts of the country and, more recently, from Venezuela[32]. In this regard, it was worrying to see an increase in conflicts in a number of communes due to the inclusion of Venezuelan migrants on the lists to receive provisions and aid. These conflicts, in several cases violent, were especially prominent in communes 2 Santa Cruz and 3 Manrique. Also noticeable have been the conflicts between Colombian and Venezuelan women engaging in prostitution, which have ended up being mediated by armed actors imposing their own violent, extortionate form of order.

The pandemic also brought into the open the **challenges and issues encountered by community leaders.** In the face of the difficult situation caused by the lockdown, their work became even more important. They were the ones to whom people came for help, information, support and guidance in such an unprecedented situation. While this gave them a better overview of the needs that the pandemic generated in the communities, it also brought many additional pressures and even risks[33], especially for leaders who perform key tasks, such as activating care and protection protocols in these areas. The leaders also faced the difficult situation of being at high risk of infection and having their own economic problems. At the same time, the pandemic provided some leaders who had access to aid distribution with the opportunity to adopt exclusionary, clientelistic practices which heightened tensions in their communities; that is, they allowed armed

---
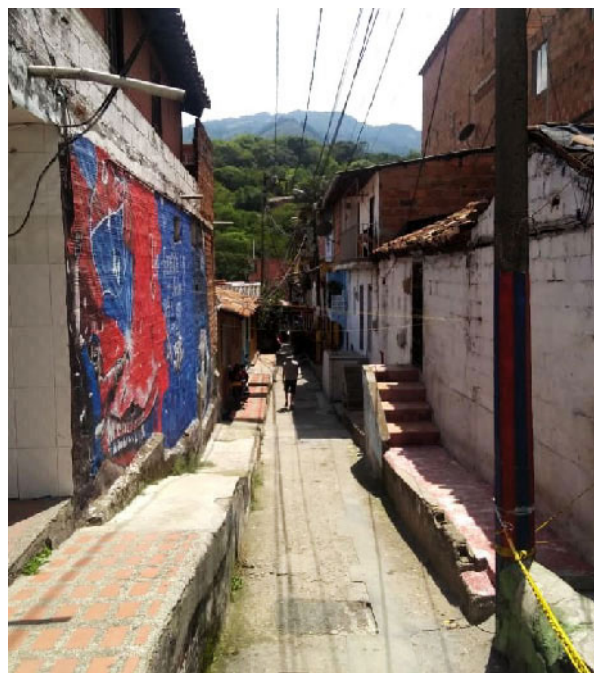
31. Medellín Ombudsperson's office (2020).
32. According to UN figures, 5.4 million Venezuelans have left their country in the last 4 years and, of these, 34% are in Colombia. According to the Colombian Migration Service, there are 1,729,537 Venezuelans in the country (Colombian Migration Service, 2021).
33. One example is of a leader who helped distribute provisions in her neighbourhood and was threatened and accused by residents of failing to help some of them.

actors to benefit from the situation in some communes, as discussed later in the report, which biased the objective distribution of provisions according to people's needs[34].

The situation regarding **access to timely medical care** is worrying. Those living in the communities stated that they had had problems making appointments, even when they said they showed symptoms of COVID-19. Several people who needed medical attention encountered difficulties due to delays in access to testing and receiving results. In some cases, they did not get the results until 20 days after having the test, which reduced the possibility of halting the spread of infection. To this must be added the problems people had getting medical appointments for other causes. The community leaders and residents confirm that still now people have great difficulty getting appointments with consultants and accessing gynaecological care, lab tests and dental services due to the closure of health centres and the priority given to COVID-19-related cases[35]. The chief concern of those living in these communities is the bottleneck of patients waiting for care and how long it will be before the service provided by local health centres, which is still limited and working through telephone appointments, gets back to normal. Furthermore, people who have needed emergency care for reasons unrelated to COVID-19 have refrained from going to the doctor for fear of infection or distrust in the medical care available. Several stated that they knew of friends and relatives who had suffered cardiovascular events or asthma attacks

and, apprehensive of what might happen, had not sought hospital treatment in time, in some cases with fatal consequences.

One serious problem identified, given the medical conditions to which the pandemic has given rise, was the **difficulty accessing mental health care.** Residents and leaders reported an increase in cases of depression, suicide attempts[36] and difficulties involved in getting timely care. Cases which shocked the residents of commune 2 Santa Cruz included that of a young man who took his own life in the presence of his wife and children, and the suicide of a 15-year-old girl. These two events are particularly illustrative because friends and family tried to activate health care protocols in both cases, failing to prevent these deaths even though they had contacted their Family commissary's office and even the police days before.

Two additional phenomena compounded the risks to health and personal security. In some cases, people who caught COVID-19 were **stigmatised and discriminated against,** which led many to conceal the disease for fear of being victimised or forced to move out. There were cases in two communes in which people were threatened by members of illegal armed groups and forced to leave the neighbourhood, some together with their families, for contracting the virus. Other forms of discrimination arose after an area in commune 2 Santa Cruz was sealed off, as discussed in section 3.1 of this report.

---

34. This problem was especially evident in communes 1 and 2, where some leaders used the lists of families in need and provision distribution for electoral purposes, benefiting those who voted for them and excluding certain groups.
35. Of the 92 people asked about access to health services, 52 reported having had difficulties. One mother even said that she had lost her son after he came down with dengue haemorrhagic fever and had failed to receive prompt treatment because he did not show COVID-19 symptoms.
36. Lockdown led to an increase of 26% in the number of suicides in the city. Most cases involved young people aged between 18 and 28 (Ramírez, 2020).

1.2 Capacity and credibility of state institutions as an aggravating circumstance for human insecurity in the communities

As seen in the previous section, the pandemic has exacerbated risks and threats not only to people's health but also to their economic, food, community and personal security. That is why it is very important to analyse the responses of key institutions in these areas to the increased levels of vulnerability and how the inhabitants perceive their responses.

While the responses of the state are discussed in more detail in section 3 of this report, it is important to emphasise here that **human insecurity has risen in the communities, not only due to multidimensional threats associated with the pandemic but also as a result of a reduction in the capacity and credibility of state institutions which are vital** for the welfare of residents. In the context of this public health crisis, the importance of health centres, which either had to close or only offer a partial service, and institutions like the police and Family commissaries' offices truly came to the fore.

It was down to the police to implement the preventive stay-at-home orders and other restrictions to avoid the spread of infection and

control compliance while continuing to protect people and their property, and respond to emergency situations. Regarding the perception that people have of the difficult **job of the police[37]** in the context of the pandemic, leaders and residents recognised tensions and sometimes even clashes between the community and the police force, especially during the first weeks of lockdown. The adverse consequences of lockdown for residents gave rise to protests and aggressive responses from the police towards the community in parts of communes 1 Popular[38] and 2 Santa Cruz. Tensions of this kind come against a backdrop of complex relations, undermined by mutual distrust between the communities and the police, which have prevented any improvement of the credibility of the latter in poorer neighbourhoods.

In addition to these tensions and problems, the credibility of the police was also affected by its inability to control clandestine parties and respond quickly and efficiently to the mounting number of emergency calls made as problems of coexistence and domestic violence increased. Some of those who reported witnessing acts of violence at home or in their area claimed that the response of the police had not been satisfactory or efficient, while others chose not to turn to the police to resolve such incidents.

This difficult situation is compounded by the deteriorating capacity of the neighbourhood **Family commissaries' offices** to deal with the increase in the number of cases of domestic violence, gender-based violence, family conflict and violation of the rights of children and adolescents. While the pandemic has highlighted the importance of these offices in the communities, it has also exposed their serious shortcomings when it comes to handling the volume of cases they receive. Indicative of the

---

37. When we talk about the job of the police, we refer to street-level policing, not the institutional functions of such entities as the inspecciones de policía (municipal police administrative departments) or the mayor, who, according to the constitution, is ultimately the head of the city police.
38. In the San Pablo district in commune 1, for example, there was tension between the riot police and local residents when provisions were being given out.

difficult situation is that people who apply for appointments to deal with family conflicts or processes related to child maintenance lawsuits must wait up to two months in some communes because the rise in the number of cases is overburdening officials. There is also a lack of interest in using the university legal aid clinics and conciliation centres with which agreements have been reached to offer alternatives during the pandemic. The fact that they offer online assistance is yet a further disincentive for people to make use of the services these resources offer.

A source for concern which is worsening the already difficult state of affairs is the 29% cut in the budget that the Mayor's office has allocated to the Family commissaries' offices for 2021[39], further affecting their ability to function by forcing them to reduce both their staff and the use of resources that are important for their operation. The budget cut has affected, for example, the availability of vehicles for home visits and to transport minors or women who require urgent attention.

The immediate consequence of the incapability of these institutions to meet the needs of the residents of these communities is an **inability to protect fundamental rights in a context in which a larger number of people face multidimensional threats to their lives and well-being; while the perception of state neglect and a lack of belief in its institutions both grow.** This increases the risk of people turning to the armed groups for solutions, which entails far greater risks and more potential abuse while increasing the capacity of these groups to monitor, control and exploit the challenges these communities face.

---

39. Medellín Ombudsperson's office (2021).

2

SIDE EFFECTS
of the human
security crisis

2.1 Consolidation of territorial control by armed groups

In Medellín, as in other cities, there are illegal armed groups[40] which exert territorial control over large areas and have the ability to infiltrate local governance and the provision of services in low- and middle-income communities[41]. The strategies that these actors use to profit from local and transnational illegal activities, and their daily interaction with citizens and state officials have a profound impact on life in the communities and the dynamics of insecurity and violence in the city. That is why changes and continuities in the way these groups act in the context of the current public health crisis need to be taken into account in order to understand the magnitude of the impact of the pandemic on people's lives.

The monitoring revealed that **the behaviour of the armed actors in the neighbourhoods was neither uniform nor stable** during the period in which the stay-at-home order was in force: in several communities, there were reports of armed groups organising provision deliveries and neighbourhood clean-up days. However, in some areas they ensured compliance with the social lockdown measures in an aggressive and threatening manner, imposing curfews and even forcing several people with COVID-19 and their families to leave the neighbourhood. In another area, although the armed groups prevented people from being thrown out of their homes for not having resources to pay their rent during the early weeks of lockdown, they began to support evictions as the weeks passed.

As for the illegal activities under their control, **their income actually increased.** The armed groups continued to collect protection money, or 'vaccinations' as such payments are known locally, especially from traders and shopkeepers, and to collect on debts contracted through informal loans and pagadiarios, which, in some neighbourhoods, led to people being forced to move to other parts of the city and the dispossession of property belonging to families unable to pay off their debts in cash.

The Illegal control of the prices of everyday household products, such as eggs and arepas, and the sale of adulterated gas bottles also continued. The prices of psychoactive substances sold through micro-trafficking also rose. In some areas, these groups also benefited from the closure of bars and businesses as a result of COVID-19 restrictions by renting out houses for clandestine parties where drugs and alcohol were sold, and prostitution took place. In the medium term, the increase in informal borrowing in the communities benefits these groups, who control many of the pagadiarios in the city, and intervene in and manage the collection of informal debts owed by residents in the neighbourhoods.

Against this background, it is important to note that, in some areas, the stay-at-home order led the armed actors to change the way they sell drugs at neighbourhood level; from selling them at specific points of sale to home delivery. This meant a **reconfiguration of some groups**, enabling them to expand their presence and exercise greater (violent) control in the communities.

The power they had accrued in the neighbourhoods allowed them to **intervene in the distribution of the aid** that the state earmarked for the communities in 2020, providing them

---

40. It is estimated that there are some 350 local youth gangs controlled by about 20 larger criminal organisations in Medellín (Blattman et al., 2020).
41. Blattman et al. (2020); Abello Colak & Guaneros-Meza (2014).

with further benefits and opportunities. Such intervention was manifested in one commune through the pressure they exerted on members of the Community Action Boards (JAC) to split up the provisions allocated to the area in order to increase the number of people receiving food. And in another commune, they themselves decided who should receive the provisions the police delivered to the community. In addition to these actions, in some areas the armed groups forced small business owners and local supermarkets to give them provisions to distribute in the most vulnerable outlying neighbourhoods.

Actions of this kind, which make them look like benefactors of the community and even instrumentalise state resources, are more problematic considering the violent way in which they intervene in intra-family conflicts and problems between neighbours, which, as already seen, increased exponentially with the pandemic. In addition to these practices, illegal armed actors 'discipline' children and young people in the streets, intervene in cases of gender-based violence, punish sexual abuse, when their members are not involved, and control certain forms of crime, such as robberies. Some of these actions bring them economic benefits, for example by illegally 'fining' those involved in conflicts. All these activities also allow them to **amass an authority which surpasses, in the eyes of the people, that of the police and other state institutions,** contributing to the public perception that the armed groups are more effective than the state in the provision of services and maintaining order[42].

The complex relationship that these armed actors have forged with the police aggravates this situation yet further. These groups regulate the lives of the communities, often with the consent of official agents in the neighbourhoods, which has facilitated the consolidation of an amalgamated order[43] and a hybrid form of governance[44] in which illegality and legality permanently converge in the city.

During the pandemic, the hybrid way in which the communities are governed manifested itself when, as the residents of one commune reported, the uniformed police officers availed themselves of the leaders of illegal armed groups to break up parties in the neighbourhoods held in violation of the restrictions, officers saying that 'People don't listen to us, but they listen to the armed groups.' In another commune, the members of armed groups were allowed to distribute the provisions taken there by the police for vulnerable families. These practices, which distort the boundaries between police and illegal armed groups, come coupled with the fact that police officers commonly suggest that people in the communes in the north east of the city ask armed actors to 'solve' problems which the officers recognise they are unable to deal with properly.

While a relationship of this kind is not new for residents, the increase in these practices in the middle of the human security crisis caused by the pandemic increases the vulnerabilities and risks that people face. On the one hand, it makes it increasingly dangerous to turn to the authorities when one is a victim of abuse and crimes committed by members of armed groups, and, on the other, it strengthens and legitimises the power of these actors, enabling them to exploit the communities and distort the provision of public services and resources intended to meet their needs.

The precarious living conditions of the communities in the midst of the pandemic have become a source of opportunities for these groups, not only because they heighten their

---

42. Doyle (2020).
43. Dávila (2018); Arredondo *et al.* (2019).
44. Abello Colak & Van Der Borgh (2018).

ability to instrumentalise the needs of the residents through the recruitment of young people and minors but also because, in the mid-to-long term, they can open up other types of illegal businesses which are already expanding. One of these is the illegal occupation and sale of plots of land, which allows them to take advantage of the economic situation of vulnerable families, some displaced from other parts of the city, who see the land which these groups offer them as achievable, affordable options, even though this entails other risks and threats for them.

The social order imposed by armed actors in the neighbourhoods relies on the exercise of violence and coercion, even when this does not result in homicides. As discussed in the next section, the armed groups use violence or threats both to regulate their illegal business and to provide violent forms of protection in the neighbourhoods[45]. By generating opportunities for these actors to consolidate their power, the pandemic also affects the possibility of de-legitimising the use of violence in society.

2.2 Reproduction of multiple forms of violence

While the city has experienced a sustained reduction in both the number of homicides and the crime rate since the pandemic began[46], it is important to point out that the phenomenon of violence in Medellín should be understood from a broader perspective than that which analysis focussing on fluctuations in the homicide rate can afford. This is because, first, several of the most populated communes, such as 1 Popular, 2 Santa Cruz and 13 San Javier, have been affected historically by other complex phenomena, like disappearances and forced displacement within the city limits, the incidence of which rose in early 2020 compared to previous years[47]. Second, because urban violence is a phenomenon which involves countless acts of violence by different actors in different social spaces, and although these are not always lethal, they still have a profound impact on communities and society.

In Medellín, the level of coercion and non-lethal violence that many people experience on a daily basis at home, on the street, in schools and prisons, to name but a few social settings, has been high for several decades even though very significant reductions in homicide rates have been registered. This is known as a situation of chronic violence[48], which is further characterised by the intergenerational reproduction of lethal and non-lethal violence.

In this context, **the human security crisis, deepened by the pandemic, is facilitating and accelerating mutually reinforcing links between non-lethal forms of violence occurring in different social spaces.** That is to say that violence occurring in family environments can be more easily linked to violence committed in public spaces, sometimes by illegal armed groups, which perpetuates chronic violence in the medium and long term. By way of illustration, and as recorded in the June report, evidence was collected on the way the members of illegal armed groups intervened violently in several cases of domestic violence and violence against women,

---

45. Bedoya (2010).
46. According to Medellín's Security and Coexistence Information System, 2020 saw a 37% drop in homicides on 2019, making 2020 the least violent of the last 40 years, with 348 homicides and a crime rate of 13.7 per 100,000 inhabitants (Medellín Cómo Vamos, 2020b).
47. Lombo (2020).
48. Pearce (2007); Adams (2017).

resulting, for example, in the attempted lynching of a man accused of killing his partner in commune 2 Santa Cruz.

In two other communes, several cases were reported of people who, driven by their despair at not being able to bring in any money during the early weeks of the strict stay-at-home order, decided to flaunt the curfews imposed and, on occasions, steal. This prompted violent threats and reprimands from the illegal armed actors who claim control of the neighbourhoods. In at least two of these cases, the young people who were attacked by these groups had already had problems and conflicts in their homes as a result of the difficult economic situation and their inability to generate income to support their families.

These dynamics are certainly not new, but attention should be drawn to the greater extent to which **non-lethal forms of violence are interlinked, reinforced and reproduced in contexts of high human insecurity,** like those evident in several of the city's communes. The increase in family conflicts, problems between neighbours and the number of people who are being forced to borrow money at usurious rates, move home or even work for these groups or prostitute themselves poses a very high risk of more victims of exploitation and violence in the short and medium term; for the illegal armed groups use violent actions to maintain a social order which benefits their own interests to the detriment of the rights of the communities in which they operate.

3

STATE
RESPONSES
to the pandemic

The state's response to the pandemic has included policies at local and national level which highlight important differences in terms of institutional capacities at the two levels. In this regard, **national policies to help the most vulnerable,** a strategy which covers most of the population, have included: reconnection to the water supply, VAT repayments and financial relief for small- and medium-sized enterprises facing difficulties paying off loans.

At local level, the Medellín Mayor's office implemented the following strategies in response to the crisis caused by the pandemic:

> • Unconditional cash handouts: financial support from the Medellín me cuida (MMC) programme and the Municipal Department for Social Inclusion, Family and Human Rights. This consists of COL$100,000 (US$26) per household in cash to purchase goods and services, ideally those associated with basic household food requirements.

> • Deliveries of packages and complementary food aid from local government sources (units under the Municipal Department for Social Inclusion, Family and Human Rights) and donations from other actors.

> • Vouchers donated by other actors to purchase food and other goods in D1 stores.

> • Other services: Accommodation for the vulnerable population and COVID-19 cases, humanitarian transport, self-care, psychosocial support and other care for vulnerable populations[49].

According to the information collected, the Municipal Department for Social Inclusion, Family and Human Rights played an important role during the early months of the pandemic, which were alarming in terms of the speed of infection. To make matters worse, numerous false news stories were also spreading, and Venezuelan migrants were arriving in massive numbers. The initial responses to the situation were aimed at establishing shelters and primary food and humanitarian support, and attending people evicted from tenements, victims of forced displacement, migrants, etc. To do this, a primary care model was set up, and this was later supported by other municipal departments[50].

A number of Territorial management offices were created later to characterise the most vulnerable population and offer the state health, food and shelter services[51] to the communities. These offices were led by the heads of the municipal departments and the directors of the decentralised agencies in coordination with the security forces. While this form of administration, more concentrated in each commune and corregimiento, was designed to better cover the communities in terms of support, it also caused tensions in some communes due to the limited resources available and how people were prioritised for aid. According to the community residents interviewed and some officials, the aid was given through the Community Action Boards (JAC) and Local Administrative Boards (JAL) instead of through focalised programmes such as those for children, the elderly or vulnerable families, or human rights working groups and other territorial bodies, as will be seen later in the case of the El Sinaí sector in commune 2 Santa Cruz.

The residents' perceptions of how the pandemic has been addressed reflect a contrast between their expectations that a comprehensive approach to the public health crisis would be implemented and how the authorities have actually acted, which has resulted in the **prevalence of control measures, the use of**

---

49. Medellín Cómo Vamos and Proantioquia (2020).
50. Interview with public official 1 (2020).
51. Matta (2020).

force and the imposition of fines. This highlights the existence of 'a state acting under the logic of protecting citizens but which uses force, and the fact that they call in the riot police is disproportionate'[52].

The pandemic highlighted problems affecting economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR). For example, never before had tools like computers, mobile phones or internet connections been essential for guaranteeing rights such as education, access to vital information (health protocols and processes to access state services) and the right to participation through the Medellín me cuida platform and other voting and electronic participation processes. The pandemic has also exposed failings in terms of the right to dignifying work, which is still far from being guaranteed for the entire population. During the period of strict lockdown, in which most of the population had to stay at home, only a limited number of people could work from home; in most cases, the residents of the communities selected could not work.

The monitoring revealed that state representatives recognise lessons learnt from a contingency for which no government was prepared. First of all, the need to share information with citizens in an appropriate and timely manner has been acknowledged because 'everything hit people like a rainstorm, especially in the case of El Sinaí'[53], the sector which was sealed off for two weeks. Extensive educational work is, therefore, needed in order to explain the severity of the pandemic from a perspective

of shared responsibility to safeguard public health and lives. It is necessary to start with a characterisation of households and analyses of how to respond in time in terms of food security and shelters. It is also necessary to find ways to deal with social resistance to the preventive measures imposed when responding to disease outbreaks[54]. These are some of the challenges that municipal officials identify.

The Medellín me cuida application, created in response to the pandemic and which, according to the Mayor's office, has more than 3 million registered users, has been effective in providing the population with information and measuring certain statistics[55]. However, it is necessary to cross-check the data with other sources to ensure better information and, consequently, a better coverage of services. On the other hand, assessment of the effectiveness of the application to prevent new peaks in the pandemic is far from satisfactory, as the situation in the early months of 2021 demonstrated.

Although the initiatives and strategies implemented in response to the pandemic were, in theory, based on a holistic approach, the monitoring conducted in the selected communes shows that they did not go far enough in socio-economic terms and that existing inequalities and social gaps grew considerably. As will now be seen, some of these strategies even had negative consequences for the residents of particularly vulnerable sectors.

---

52. Interview with public official 1 (2020).
53. Interview with public official 2 (2020).
54. Interview with public official 2 (2020).
55. The application generated controversy, to the extent that, between May and June 2020, human rights organisations filed actions claiming that it violated the fundamental rights to habeas data, privacy, freedom and work. Their actions were finally dismissed.

3.1 Sealing off El Sinaí and the response to the crisis in the neighbourhood
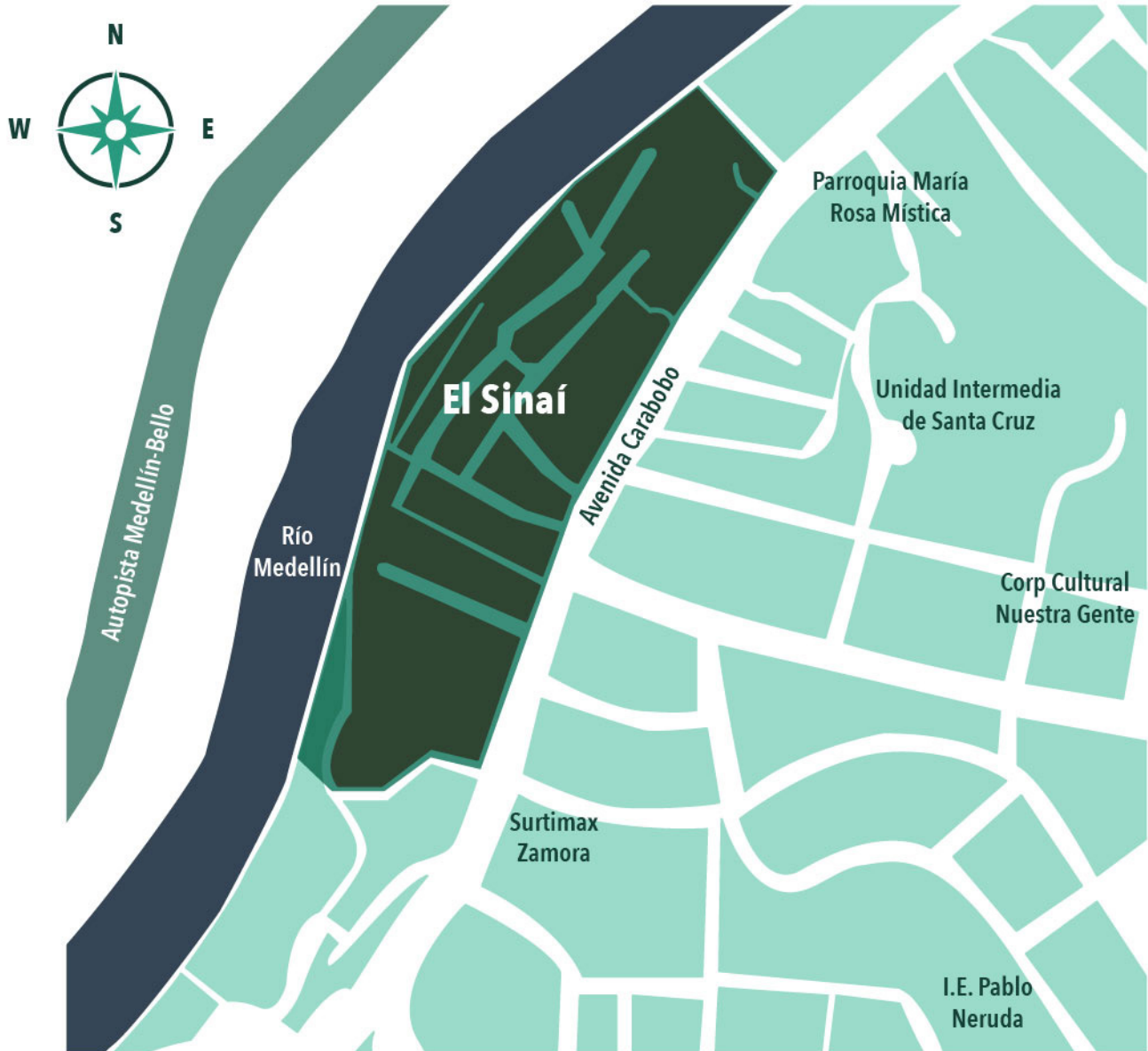
Map 2: El Sinai neighbourhood. Based on: https://www.micomunados.com/sinai/

This section analyses the impact of sealing off El Sinaí in June 2020. While locals consider El Sinaí a neighbourhood, it is officially classified as a sector of the Santa Cruz neighbourhood in commune 2, in the North-east zone. This was a high-profile case in which, based on an increase in cases of COVID-19, the Medellín Mayor's office decided to seal off the area for 14 days, the estimated period of time needed to reduce transmission according to the health information

available at the time. As already mentioned, although the response to the pandemic was based on a holistic approach to support the population, the way in which the sector was sealed off generated numerous difficulties, identified not only by the residents of commune 2 but also by officials managing the situation.

The monitoring conducted showed that **sealing off the area had a negative impact on the community, particularly due to the way in which the measure was suddenly put in place and the widespread deployment of armed forces that it involved:** riot police, mounted police, regular police and the army, with back up from helicopters constantly flying over the sector with spotlights and megaphones announcing that no-one could leave their home.

Some community leaders questioned the fact that, contrary to the strategy aiming to guarantee rights, intervention in El Sinaí was led by the municipal departments for government and security, and not by those for health and social inclusion, which were also present but less prominent on the ground. This, together with the initial high visibility of the security forces, demonstrates the stance that the Mayor's office was taking on the subject.

The residents of El Sinaí only discovered that a biosecurity measure was being implemented when their distress led them to enquire what was going on. The testimonies collected show that everybody felt as though an operation to capture a criminal was in progress; they felt imprisoned and criminalised because the neighbourhood was closed off with a barricade along Carrera 52 manned by the security forces. Those without a work permit registered in the Medellín me cuida programme were not allowed to leave under any circumstances and, likewise, no-one could enter the area except personnel authorised by the Mayor's office.

The residents' chief complaints focused on how the measure affected their work. This neighbourhood is mainly inhabited by families which depend on informal work and live from day to day. Not being able to leave the area

meant that they had no way to go about their business. Given the situation, the Mayor's office promised subsistence supplies for the 14 days the measure was to last, but the community reported that this promise was not fully met and that families suffered food crises. In addition to the obstacles residents faced regarding work, there was also an increase in mental health issues, and children and young people had serious difficulties receiving education because most homes do not have internet access, and the option they had of getting printed worksheets from their schools was not feasible because these were outside the sealed-off area.

Identity at stake

After several meetings and discussions between the Mayor's office and the community, agreements were reached to mitigate the problems generated by the measure, including greater freedom of movement according to the last digit on people's identity cards, a measure which allowed some people to leave the area on specific days in order to work. For this purpose, a disinfection station was set up for people to wash their hands and have their temperature taken when they left and entered the neighbourhood. A group of professionals was also assigned to offer health care in homes.

Due to the great impact of the news in the city, the residents of El Sinaí were stigmatised and several claim that they lost their jobs because they lived in Santa Cruz, others simply taking it for granted that they were COVID-19 positive. For this reason, some people felt compelled to deny their local identity and say that they lived somewhere else so they would not be singled out and would be allowed to work.

Stigmatisation

As the idea that 'everybody in Santa Cruz was infected' became widespread, the commune in general and particularly El Sinaí, a

neighbourhood which has historically suffered discrimination for different reasons, were stigmatised. In the 1990s, the commune was discriminated against on the grounds of the violence affecting the community; the men were branded as criminals and the women as prostitutes. The residents of El Sinaí have suffered the consequences of several armed clashes, evictions and displacements, and, not being officially recognised as a neighbourhood, they have also had to live with the stigma of being intruders, which has served as an argument for the state to try to evict them. Being located on one of the city's main arteries, several urban regeneration plans have been designed for the area which would mean the demolition of the residents' homes. The locals, however, have stood their ground as a community and still live there today. **In this historical context, sealing off the area became another source of labelling and stigmatisation.**

Several leaders in El Sinaí have fought for recognition of their neighbourhood and created a citizen oversight group to demand their rights several years ago. When the area was sealed off, the community saw an opportunity to further its efforts for recognition and, through the meetings held with the Mayor's office about the COVID-19 situation, demanded that El Sinaí be officially recognised as a neighbourhood. The media have now started to refer to El Sinaí as a neighbourhood, which is a great achievement for the community, although official state recognition has yet to be given.

Defending the community, appeals and demands

Sealing off El Sinaí generated mistrust among its residents, who wondered whether the measure taken due to the pandemic was really an excuse to characterise and displace them so there would no longer be any obstacles to the urban projects that they had so strenuously resisted. They particularly feared that the increased state presence was related to construction work for the northern river park project. To make matters worse, the promises of provisions were not fully met, and they declared themselves in food crisis for the 14 days that the measure lasted.

The answers to the questionnaires and interviews conducted show that many people suffered from panic and depression, intra-family problems increased, as did stress, and the situation affected the behaviour of children. In one answer, a mother explained that her son felt terrified whenever he heard the helicopters at night. The child continued to experience post-traumatic stress symptoms after the measure was lifted and now suffers from high levels of anxiety and stress, causing him to bite his nails and feel frightened whenever his family leave the home. Other children also said that they missed being able to play and feeling free while the area was sealed off:

> 'I felt like I didn't matter. I had the sensation I was being punished.'

> 'I was bored because I couldn't go to the park or school.'

When asked what they thought should be done after experiencing this situation in the neighbourhood, the answer most people repeated was how important it was to support employment, especially for young people:

> 'Jobs should be created. Almost everyone fell out of work. They should open up employment.'

> 'The city authorities should do a survey to find out who is unemployed, particularly among young people; also work initiatives, so there isn't so much conflict and to keep people's minds off things.'

During the focus group held in the neighbourhood, the need for campaigns to de-stigmatise the area was highlighted so that people would stop branding the residents as infected or disobedient and treat them with respect, as citizens.

Lessons learnt

A number of the officials who managed the sealing-off of the area pointed out lessons learnt and challenges faced. The first was the importance of **educational work to explain the severity of the pandemic from a perspective of shared responsibility** in order to safeguard public health and lives, and to avoid confusion, suspicion and distrust among the people. Another lesson learnt was the importance of **taking into account the sociocultural characteristics of communities.** Several cultures coexist in El Sinaí as a result of different groups settling there over time. These include chocoanos, costeños and, more recently, Venezuelans. This is important when it comes to education and providing psychosocial care for the stress caused when the neighbourhood was sealed off without warning. The officials also acknowledged the need for **dialogue with local leaders in order to develop community initiatives** to help address the emergency; although the state limited grassroots support actions, the citizens made a great contribution.

Although there was talk of the possibility of sealing off other areas after the experience in El Sinaí, this did not eventually occur despite the high number of cases registered in other neighbourhoods. In some neighbourhoods in other communes, people resisted the implementation of such measures, even refusing to be tested for COVID-19, for fear of having to endure what people had gone through in El Sinaí. For these reasons, the lesson learnt from this experience regarding the presence of the state is that **situations involving public health and social crisis call for a complex humanitarian response in which every component of the machinery of the state acts in a complementary and coordinated manner.**

4

## PROPOSALS to address the human security crisis

History shows that disasters and contingencies which destabilise society often provide opportunities for the implementation of predatory policies and practices which benefit just a few and worsen social problems, perpetuating and exacerbating the vulnerability of large parts of the population[56]. However, this is not inevitable. Crises can also serve as catalysts for the mobilisation of multiple actors capable of putting in place strategies and policies which drive positive change.

This is precisely the call which UN-Habitat makes in its latest report on cities and pandemics. In the report, it encourages the implementation of recovery policies through which to build fairer, greener and healthier cities following the pandemic[57]. The problems that COVID-19 has worsened and highlighted call for responses which are not focused on returning to 'normal' but on **'building better' and with a human security perspective.**

The results of the monitoring conducted in several communities of Medellín suggest that the multidimensional impact of the pandemic requires the implementation of a **'recovery strategy with a human security perspective'** which is **multidimensional, comprehensive, concerted and participatory,** and can

help tackle and mitigate the rise in threats and risks to people and their communities. This is not only necessary to protect the fundamental rights and welfare of people but to prevent the effects of the pandemic from consolidating the power of illegal armed groups and facilitating the reproduction of multiple forms of violence in the city. We propose that a **broad-based working group** be formed in the city to define and implement this strategy, which should hinge on recognition of the distinct impacts that the pandemic has had on different groups and sectors of the population, and must rely on multi-stakeholder engagement and public-private partnerships through which different professional and business associations, community organisations, universities, churches, civil society organisations and state entities can come together.

With a view to directing efforts towards the coordinated mobilisation of a range of institutional and social actors to respond to the human security crisis that the pandemic has deepened in the city, here are some more specific proposals. They include ideas from the residents of the communities where monitoring was conducted and seek to address threats and risks to human security in its different dimensions:
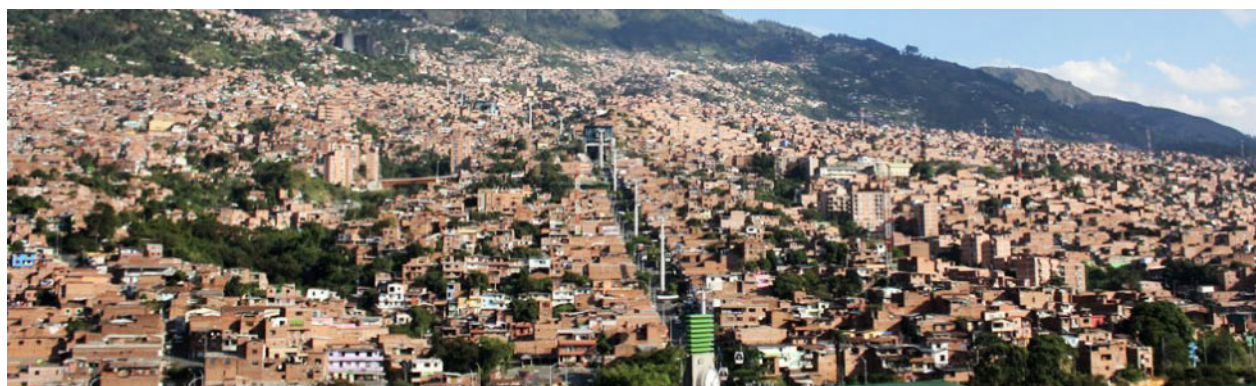
56. Klein (2007).
57. The report proposes that efforts focus on four priority areas: rethinking the form and function of the city, applying inclusive planning; addressing systemic poverty and inequality in cities; rebuilding a 'new normal' urban economy; and clarifying urban legislation and governance arrangements (UN-Habitat, 2021).

Proposals	Dimensions of human security targeted
• We propose that the Medellín Mayor's office convene civil society organisations, community organisations, the private sector (local traders, large- and medium-sized businesspeople) and academics to take part in a **city-wide dialogue to agree on a 'recovery strategy with a human security perspective'.** We recommend that this dialogue be convened by the mayor and led by the Municipal Department for Social Inclusion, Family and Human Rights, and that the other local government departments also play an active part. Such dialogue would allow concrete actions to be agreed on to respond to the impacts of the pandemic on economic, personal, community and health security in the most vulnerable communities.	
• Use the information collected through the surveys which the local government carried out in the communities to **assess their level of vulnerability** and serve as a basis for designing support and prevention interventions which respond to their specific needs. These diagnostics can be established in partnership with academics and those community organisations which have worked to gather granular data on needs in these areas.	
• Design **support programmes for people working in the informal economy,** including not only assistance and economic relief measures but also measures which will enable them to increase their skills for employment in the formal economy and establish work cooperatives and initiatives which will make it possible for them to live with human dignity.	
• Design a **labour market inclusion strategy for young people in line with their expectations and realities.** This should be led by the municipal departments for youth and social inclusion, and should be agreed with both young people from those neighbourhoods where youth unemployment is the highest and youth organisations in the city.	
• **Expand and publicise economic relief and credit access programmes** so that more people can benefit from utility and rent payment facilities. Examples of such initiatives would be the implementation of a basic income programme and highlighting the Paga a tu medida (pay as suits you best) programme, which is not yet widely known but whose utility has been recognised by the residents.	
• Work with state and private schools, and organisations which focus on youth and childhood issues to **assess the situation regarding students dropping out of school and mental health problems among young people, adolescents and children** in order to design programmes and initiatives to support particularly vulnerable groups.	

Proposals	Dimensions of human security targeted
• **Diagnose the impact of the pandemic on women's mental and physical health** under the leadership of the Municipal Department for Women and with the active participation of women's organisations in the city in order to improve the implementation of welfare and gender-violence prevention programmes, and initiatives for women's mental, sexual and reproductive health, placing special emphasis on teenage pregnancy.	😊 ➕
• **Increase the budget of the Family commissaries' offices** and strengthen their professional, technical and logistical capabilities so they can respond efficiently to the demand for services in communities.	😊 👥
• **Ensure that public officials take on board the gender perspective** in the performance of their duties in order to: 1. Make sure that all female victims receive effective support which protects their rights; 2. Avoid re-victimisation processes in accordance with the provisions of Act 1257 of 2008.	😊
• **Assess the effectiveness of the current protocols** in dealing with the violation of the rights of children and adolescents, and gender-based violence in order to identify their limitations and improve them.	😊 👥
• Set up **controls and watchdog mechanisms to protect assistance and local investment programmes to meet the recovery needs of communities from the influence of armed actors.**	☝️ 👥 😊
• **Increase mediation and conflict management capabilities in schools and at family and community level** through free workshops and training for community mediators, and include non-violent conflict resolution in the primary- and secondary-school curriculum.	😊 👥 ➕
• **Improve the capacity of the police to address the everyday problems affecting communities and create mechanisms through which these communities can assess its work.**	☝️ 👥 😊
• **Create psychosocial care rapid response teams** for the most vulnerable communities with psychologists and social workers equipped to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in different population groups. This could be done in collaboration with universities and community organisations which are on the ground on a permanent basis.	😊 👥 ➕

Proposals	Dimensions of human security targeted
• **Support the work of social and grassroots organisations devoted to defending the rights and promoting the engagement of young people and children** so they can implement initiatives to prevent violations, and highlight and strengthen young people and children's resilience to the effects of the pandemic.	☝️ 👥 🙂
• Design communication and intervention initiatives in collaboration with youth organisations in the city to advance in the decriminalisation of drug use and the implementation of **programmes to increase individual, collective and state capacities to reduce, manage and prevent problematic use.**	🙂 👥 ➕
• **Expand support programmes for people who engage in prostitution.**	🙂 $ ➕
• **Develop community-level initiatives that promote co-existence in multicultural spaces** and improve relations with the inhabitants of Venezuelan origin who live in the city.	🙂 👥
• **Generate constructive dialogue on the exercise of leadership** in the city through which to rethink and address the challenges that the pandemic has revealed concerning leadership at community, political and institutional levels, with particular emphasis on its ability to respond to the aspirations and needs of the most vulnerable communities.	☝️ 👥
• **Constantly monitor the human security situation in the city** through assessments which combine quantitative and qualitative methods with a segmented perspective through which to better understand the impacts of the pandemic on different groups (for example, people with disabilities, the LGBTIQ population, migrant population, etc.) in the short, medium and long term.	🥖 ➕ 👥 🙂 $ ☝️

In all events, every measure and strategy adopted in order to respond to the human security crisis being experienced in vulnerable communities must, in the spirit of the national constitution, be the result of agreements reached with the community and take into account all the different voices within it.

References

Abello Colak, A. & Pearce, J. (2019). 'Co-constructing security "from below": A methodology to rethink and transform security in contexts of chronic violence', in Kloppe, G. & Abello Colak, A. (eds.) (2019). *Human Security and chronic violence in México: New perspectives and proposals from below.* Porrúa.

Abello Colak, A. & Van Der Borgh, C. (2018). 'Everyday (In)Security in Contexts of Hybrid Governance: Lessons from Medellin and San Salvador'. *LACC - Research Briefing.* London School of Economics.

Abello Colak, A. & Guarneros-Meza, V. (2014). 'The Role of Criminal Actors in Neighborhood Governance'. *Urban Studies,* 51(15), 3268-3289.

Adams, T. (2017). *How Chronic Violence Affects Human Development, Social Relations, and the Practice of Citizenship: A Systematic Framework for Action.* Woodrow Wilson Center. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/chronic_violence_final_by_tani_adams.pdf

Alcaldía de Medellín (2017). *Explotación sexual comercial de niños, niñas y adolescentes asociada al turismo en Medellín.* Alcaldía de Medellín.

Arredondo, A.; Ríos, J. & Bedoya, J. (2019). 'La coerción extorsiva en Medellín. Análisis en perspectiva de su amalgamamiento y la afectación a los derechos humanos'. *Revista Relecturas*, 42 (abril), 133- 193.

Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (2021). *Observatorio Laboral COVID-19. Informe periódico: un año de COVID-19 en América Latina: ¿Cuál es la magnitud de la crisis laboral?* https://observatoriolaboral.iadb.org/es/assets/pub_obslab/Informe_OLC_202102.pdf

Bedoya, J. (2010). *La protección violenta en Colombia. El caso de Medellín desde los años noventa.* Instituto Popular de Capacitación (IPC).

Blattman, C.; Duncan, G.; Lessing, B.; Tobón, S.; Mesa, J. (2020). 'Gobierno criminal en Medellín: panorama general del fenómeno y evidencia empírica sobre cómo enfrentarlo'. *Nota de Política CIEF,* 1. Universidad EAFIT.

Convivamos (2018). *Informe alterno y participativo por los derechos de la niñez en Medellín 2018, 'Voces de niñas, niños y adolescentes en contra de la explotación sexual y comercial, el reclutamiento, uso y utilización'.* Corporación Convivamos.

Corporación Sisma Mujer (2021). *Boletín No.25, Día Internacional por los derechos de las mujeres.* https://www.sismamujer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/8M.pdf

DANE (2021). *Comunicado de prensa: Informe de seguimiento - Defunciones por COVID-19 (confirmados y sospechosos), neumonía e influenza, marzo 2 de 2020 a mayo 9 de 2021.* Press release. https://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/poblacion/defunciones-covid19/comunicado-defunciones-covid-2020-02mar-2021-09may.pdf

Dávila, L. (2018). *Reglas, crimen y orden: un estudio sobre la seguridad en Medellín.* La Carreta Social.

Doyle, C. (2020). '"The Criminal Actors Have a Social Base in Their Communities": Gangs and Service Provision in Medellín, Colombia'. *Latin American Politics and Society,* 63(1), 1-21.

Klein, N. (2007). *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism.* Alfred A. Knopf Canada.

Lombo, J. (2020/2/17). 'Homicidios en baja, desapariciones en aumento: ¿qué está pasando en Medellín?'. *El Espectador.* https://www.elespectador.com/judicial/homicidios-en-baja-desapariciones-en-aumento-que-esta-pasando-en-medellin-article-905023/

Matta, N. (2020/4/13). 'Alcaldía designará "gerentes" para atender la pandemia en cada comuna de Medellín'. *El Colombiano.* https://www.elcolombiano.com/antioquia/comunas-y-corregimientos-de-medellin-tendran-su-propio-gerente-para-atender-la-pandemia-CN12799931

Medellín Cómo Vamos & Proantioquia (2020). *Atención social durante la pandemia por covid-19: ¿Cómo ha sido el manejo en Medellín?* https://www.medellincomovamos.org/system/files/2020-11/docuprivados/MCV%20Documento%20Atenci%C3%B3n%20social%20durante%20la%20pandemia.pdf

Medellín Cómo Vamos (2020a). *Encuesta de percepción ciudadana de Medellín 2020.* https://www.medellincomovamos.org/calidad-de-vida/encuesta-de-percepcion-ciudadana

Medellín Cómo Vamos (2020b). *Seguridad y convivencia.* https://www.medellincomovamos.org/sectores/seguridad-y-convivencia

Mesa contra la ESCNNA Medellín, Minciencias & Universidad de Antioquia (2020). *¡Es necesario profundizar en la lucha contra la explotación sexual comercial de niños, niñas y adolescentes en Medellín! Diagnóstico y recomendaciones para la erradicación de la Explotación Sexual Comercial de Niños, Niñas y Adolescente en Medellín en la administración municipal, 2020-2023.* file:///C:/Users/USUARIO/Downloads/CARTILLA_ESCNNA_Medellin.pdf

Migración Colombia (2021/1/31). 'Colombia termina el 2020 con un 2.35% menos de migrantes venezolanos en su territorio'. *Noticias Migración Colombia.* https://www.migracioncolombia.gov.co/noticias/colombia-termina-el-2020-con-un-2-35-menos-de-migrantes-venezolanos-en-su-territorio

Observatorio de Políticas Públicas del Concejo de Medellín (2017). *La ESCNNA como renta criminal en Medellín.* Universidad de Medellín & Universidad EAFIT.

Observatorio de Seguridad Humana de Medellín (OSH) (2014). *Nuestras voces sobre seguridad humana en Medellín. Diálogos sobre seguridad.* Universidad de Antioquia.

Observatorio de Seguridad Humana de Medellín (OHS) & Latin America and Caribbean Centre (LACC) (2020). *Primer reporte de monitoreo: la seguridad humana de las comunidades de Medellín en tiempos de COVID-19.* https://www.repensandolaseguridad.org/publicacioness/noticias/item/primer-reporte-de-monitoreo-la-seguridad-humana-de-las-comunidades-de-medell%C3%ADn-en-tiempos-del-covid-19.html

Pearce, J. (2007). *Violence, Power and Participation: Building Citizenship in Contexts of Chronic Violence.* IDS Working Paper 274. https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/12080/Wp274.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Personería de Medellín (2020). *Alerta temprana. Guarda y promoción de los derechos humanos [noviembre 5].* http://www.personeriamedellin.gov.co/index.php/component/phocadownload/category/122-legalidad-del-software

Personería de Medellín (2021). *Procesos en las comisarías de familia están presentando retrasos a causa de la reducción del presupuesto destinado para las mismas en 2021.* Press bulletin. http://www.personeriamedellin.gov.co/index.php/boletines-y-comunicados-antes-del-2021/406-procesos-en-las-comisarias-de-familia-estan-presentando-retrasos-a-causa-de-la-reduccion-del-presupuesto-destinado-para-las-mismas-en-2021

Portafolio (2021/3/25). '2,4 millones de hogares ya no comen tres veces al día'. *Portafolio.* https://www.portafolio.co/economia/dane-2-4-millones-de-hogares-ya-no-comen-tres-veces-al-dia-en-colombia-550416

Poveda, C. (2021/3/17). 'En 2021 se han registrado 284 casos de abuso sexual en Medellín'. *Noticias TeleMedellín.* https://telemedellin.tv/en-2021-se-han-registrado-284-casos-de-abuso-sexual-en-medellin/433572/

Ramírez, J. (2020/6/1). 'Suicidios aumentan un 26 % durante la cuarentena en Medellín'. *RCN Radio.* https://www.rcnradio.com/colombia/antioquia/suicidios-aumentan-un-26-durante-la-cuarentena-en-medellin

UN-Habitat (2021). *Cities and Pandemics: Towards a More Just, Green and Healthy Future.* https://unhabitat.org/cities-and-pandemics-towards-a-more-just-green-and-healthy-future-0#:~:text=The%20UN%2DHabitat's%20Report%20on,lasting%20and%20sustainable%20recovery%20from

United Nations (2021). *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2021.* https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/world-economic-situation-and-prospects-2021/

Villa, H. (2012). *Informe alterno derechos de niñas, niños y adolescentes. Región Medellín 2004-2010.* https://es.calameo.com/read/0024530078bca886cee66

Pandemic and human security

The impact of COVID-19 on communities in Medellín and proposals to address it

Universidad DE ANTIOQUIA
Facultad de Derecho y Ciencias Políticas

LSE Latin America and Caribbean Centre

mi comuna

CON-VIVAMOS

CORPORACION CULTURAL NUESTRA GENTE