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**Experiences and psychosocial impact  
of the El Salvador civil war on child soldiers**

**by Maria L. Santacruz and Rubi E. Arana**

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The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers unites national, regional and international organisations and Coalitions in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. Its Steering Committee member organizations are Amnesty International, Defence for Children International, Human Rights Watch, International Federation Terre des Hommes, International Save the Children Alliance, Jesuit Refugee Service, and the Quaker United Nations Office-Geneva.

Psychosocial web page Editor's introduction:

**Experiences and psychosocial impact of the El Salvador civil war on child soldiers.  
Maria L. Santacruz and Rubi E. Arana (2002).**

We reproduce in our tenth edition, a paper previously published in *Biomédica*, by Maria Santacruz and Rubi Arana (2002) which we have translated from the original Spanish in order to share its important findings more widely. We publish both the English and the Spanish versions for our readers.

Santacruz and Arana present the psychosocial outcome of 293 ex-child combatants from the Salvadorian civil war, some ten years after the peace accords were signed. These now young adults were largely members of the Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN). The majority were recruited by the age of ten years, with an average age of 15 years when the peace accord was signed in 1992. Poorly educated prior to the war (25% had received no education at all), they struggle to make a decent living and represent a largely forgotten group living in poverty in post war El Salvadorian society.

In their analyses, the authors examine the influences which led these then children to 'volunteer' to fight; the absence of formal post conflict reintegration programs; the current poverty and social marginalization of these young adults, and the emotional changes they experienced as a result of their war time experiences. The young people themselves rated the changes they perceived in their emotional state, revealing that two out of three were currently troubled by memories of their war time experiences, while many reported anxiety, tiredness and/or depression as well as anger, sadness and dissatisfaction. A number of factors influenced their emotional wellbeing. These included the depth of their negative wartime experiences; the breakdown of important social networks and the occurrence of permanent injury or disability. Post war factors were also important. For example, community acceptance or rejection post conflict, and the availability of family support, are seen to exert an important influence upon individual outcome and the success or otherwise of the reintegration process. Disillusionment, either with individuals or the reintegration process, also impacts upon emotional wellbeing. The authors suggest that a combination of childhood participation in war and adult membership of a historically underprivileged majority does not bode well for a healthy emotional outcome.

Overall, these results support the importance of looking beyond the individual to their social relationships, social structure and social context if we are to gain an understanding both of the genesis of psychosocial trauma and the psychosocial impact of childhood participation in combat. The authors argue cogently for El Salvadorian society to recognize its responsibility for these forgotten youngsters. It is not possible, they suggest to "speak of reconciliation and peace within El Salvadorian society while there remain some social groups who were profoundly affected by the armed conflict but have yet to receive the assistance they need" (p17).

Dr Linda Dowdney  
Editor



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## **Experiences and psychosocial impact of the El Salvador civil war on child soldiers**

**by María L. Santacruz<sup>1</sup> and Rubí E. Arana**

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### **Abstract**

This paper describes an exploratory research project undertaken with 293 ex-combatants who participated as child soldiers in the El Salvador civil war either as members of the *Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front [FMLN]) or as soldiers in the Salvadorian armed forces (la Fuerza Armada de El Salvador [FAES]). The aim of the research was to assess the impact upon them of their past military experiences, and to examine their current living conditions. Although nearly ten years have passed since the peace accords were signed, the ex-combatants continued to exhibit signs of emotional disturbance. Current underprivileged living conditions and social marginalization were decisive factors in their psychosocial presentation. These factors inhibited the ex-combatants' re-entry into civilian life and placed at risk their familial, community and social reintegration.

**Key words:** child soldiers, civil war, psychosocial impact, social exclusion and marginalization.

### **Introduction**

If it is true that, in their wake, all wars leave consequences that affect members of society, then it is also true that those consequences are greatly magnified in a civil war such as the one in El Salvador - a civil war which subverted the very foundations of Salvadorian society and its most vulnerable groups for more than a decade. Of these groups, it was children who suffered the worst effects, being, in general, the least well equipped in terms of material and psychosocial resources to deal with the situation. This applies particularly to those involved in the Salvadorian civil war as

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'child soldiers'. Their involvement not only violated their fundamental rights, but also allowed them to be exploited for political ends, exposed them to the ravages of war and submerged them in violence (1). In addition, they were torn away from the few sources of psychosocial support available to them - such as family, friends and community - which could have helped them to cope with the ordeals they experienced.

Many Salvadorians hoped that the end of the armed conflict would facilitate good will towards ex-combatants; focus post war efforts to compensate them for their involvement in the conflict, and assist them in the transition to civilian life. However, in relation to child and youth combatants these hopes went unrealised. They were overlooked in the peace agreements and ignored by leaders of the warring groups after the cease fire. It appears that Salvadorian society practically ignored the fact that a large number of children and young people had directly participated in the war and equally ignored the inevitable consequences that this would bring in the short and longer term. As a result the current lives of those "child soldiers" – now young adults – represent a testament to the marginalisation that they have suffered as a group since the cessation of hostilities.

In the context of post-war El Salvador, the subject of child soldiers has not received the attention it deserves as is demonstrated by the paucity of research and available information on the subject. With this in mind, an investigation which commenced at the end of 1998 and was known as: '*Child Soldiers: lessons learned*', was undertaken by the Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública de la Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (IUDOP [University Institute for Public Opinion of the José Simeón Cañas Central American University]), under the auspices of the United Nations' Children's Fund (Unicef). It was directed towards any ex-combatants who had participated in the war as child soldiers (2) with the main objective of learning about their experiences during their participation in the armed conflict that had engulfed the country for twelve years, and to highlight the impact, if any, that these experiences had had upon their development. In addition, the project aimed to assess any positive and negative effects upon them of the processes of settlement and reintegration into civilian life. Ignacio Martín-Baró's psychosocial trauma theory, which emphasises the dialectic dimension of trauma at both the individual and social level, was employed when assessing the impact of participation upon these children and young people.

This article focuses on a limited aspect of the above investigation, namely the assessment of whether psychosocial trauma consequent upon participation in armed conflict was present in these ex-combatants. Some variables which might influence the impact of trauma in this group of young people are also described. Additionally, the article presents some of the characteristics of the current life conditions of ex-combatants and analyses the role that these play in the reintegration of these individuals into civilian life.



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## Theoretical antecedents

### ***Child Soldiers in El Salvador: a brief description of the phenomenon***

According to the document based on the deliberations of symposium<sup>2</sup> on the *Prevention of child recruitment in the Armed Forces, demobilisation and social reintegration of child soldiers in Africa (3)*, a child soldier is understood to be any person of less than 18 years of age who is, or has been an active member of any type of armed group, be it formally organised or otherwise, and who has carried out any activity that was or could have been of benefit to that group in question. These activities include participating as a combatant, a cook, a guard or messenger<sup>3</sup> and also as a result of family members being involved in the armed group. It also includes young girls who have been recruited for sexual purposes or forced to marry any member of the armed group in question.

The participation of children in the war, be it as soldiers or through involvement in other functions, has increased in recent years. The statistics cited by Ambassador Olara Otunnu<sup>4</sup> could not be more dramatic: in the past ten years 2 million children have died in wars; 6 million have been mutilated; twelve million have been made homeless; one million have been made orphans and ten million have suffered permanent psychological and spiritual damage. (4,5). With regard to their participation as combatants, Maier (6) states that in 1988 200,000 child soldiers across the globe were involved in conflict despite the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention that prohibit the recruitment of children of less than 15 years of age, an age that many human rights defenders consider in itself to be still too young.

If child soldiers are a universal phenomenon in societies torn apart by armed conflict, the war in El Salvador was no exception. Despite a lack of specific and reliable data about the number of children and young people who swelled the ranks of the Salvadorian army and the guerrillas during the conflict, the phenomenon of child combatants or "child soldiers" was clearly significant. According to the analysis carried out by the *Fundación 16<sup>th</sup> January*<sup>5</sup>, of the almost 8,000 guerrilla ex-combatants in El Salvador, slightly more than 2,000 were under 18 years of age at the time of their demobilisation after the peace agreement was reached (7). On the other hand, there is no information about the number of underage people that participated in the Salvadorian army. Wessells indicates that, at least 20 % of the members of the El Salvador Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas de El Salvador [FAES]) were made up of underage individuals (1).

The reasons that drive children and young people to become involved in armed conflict include, amongst others, various personal and contextual circumstances such as need, poverty, loneliness, revenge, a lack of alternative opportunities and survival,

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<sup>2</sup> Organised by UNICEF in Cape Town, in collaboration with the local working group within the framework of the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

<sup>3</sup> "Messengers" in our context.

<sup>4</sup> Successor to Graça Machel, as the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General for children and armed conflict.

<sup>5</sup> This analysis entitled "Child and young ex-combatants in their process of reintegration into civil life" was written by the aforementioned foundation with the assistance of Licenciado José Luis Henríquez and financed by Rádda Barnen from Sweden.



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Machel (5) proposes that children who come from contexts of marginalisation, poverty or separation from their elder relatives or carers are those most likely become child soldiers. According to Machel's report, in some cases hunger and poverty may drive parents to offer their children for such service. In other cases, the children become soldiers in order to survive - a military unit can serve as a refuge, guaranteeing regular food, clothing and medical attention.

In the case that interests us, the reasons why many children were inclined to participate in the Salvadorian armed conflict may be linked to personal factors such as survival, revenge, commitment, the need to stop being defenceless victims and to give their identity some meaning, or the aspiration of becoming change agents "capable of transforming the country" (7). Yet, none of this takes into account the forced recruitment into an armed gang - a process which takes no consideration of the rights of children and young people to an alternative life, and which on many occasions disregards their rights altogether.

If the interaction of multiple personal and social variables contributed to these children becoming involved in war, the lasting effects on these individuals – today's young adults – are emotional, intellectual, physical and social.

### ***Intervention of children in the war: psychosocial trauma***

The armed conflict claimed many lives from the gangs involved. However, some sectors of the civilian population, above all children and young people, were the most affected, finding themselves caught in a "cross-fire", whose root causes in most cases were not clear. This lack of understanding did not stop the violence, terror, repression and devastation of the war and brought with it conditions suitable for the rise of what Martín-Baró (8, 9) refers to as 'psychosocial trauma'. This concept was constructed and used by that author to define those psychic and social problems linked to wartime situations. In broad terms, unlike post traumatic stress disorder, psychosocial trauma is not just found in the variable explanations of the phenomenon at the individual or intra-psychic level, but also includes the contextual dimension which the individual relates to, and upon which the condition exerts an influence (9). Some of the dynamic characteristics of psychosocial trauma to bear in mind are:

- Its dialectic-historic character; the trauma should be understood in the light of the relation that the individual has with their society as this is rooted in the relationship that people have with their environment;
- It is socially produced; to face it, understand it and solve it requires not just attending to the person affected, but also to the social structures or conditions that have allowed the trauma to occur;
- The social relationships of the individuals in question are not the only causes of the trauma; however, maintaining these relationships can multiply the number of people traumatised.

Despite the fact that the trauma is produced socially, the repercussions it has on the individual are also influenced by their own background, their level of participation in the conflict, their personality and their unique personal experiences. From this perspective, the author conceives psychosocial trauma as the crystallisation of distorted and dehumanising social relationships in individuals; an 'abnormal' social



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normality which particularly affects children (9). Sadly, it is not uncommon to find this 'abnormal normality' of which Martín-Baró speaks in part of our modern reality, a reality in which the dehumanisation of relationships, a lack of trust, the use of violence and erosion of the social fabric are all elements we find in post-war Salvadorian society.

Henríquez and Méndez (10) propose that the effect that the war may have had on Salvadorian children is based on three basic elements: how close they lived to the conflict zone, the context in which they experienced the war (here social networks play a very important role), and the extent to which they placed an ideological value on the event itself (either to see oneself as a defenceless victim or as having the ability to take some positive elements from the experience). In this respect, Martín-Baró maintains that the most common emotional reactions that the children experience to having actively participated in the war are fear, anxiety, a sense of defencelessness and a loss of control. Contrary reactions may occur such as emotional flatness due to the excessive emotional intensity of their experiences. This author cites the 'action versus flight' dilemma that faces many children in dealing with this situation who may react by choosing taking a direct role in the war, or who, in choosing not to do so, effectively become its victims. It should not, however, be forgotten that the child soldiers were also victims of the armed conflict even though participating as protagonists in the activities that were occurring around them may have offered them a chance to lessen the sensation of being objects of circumstance, and furthermore, paradoxically to have provided some minimal conditions by which to subsist within an extreme situation.

### ***Family and community as protective factors in the face of war experiences***

Due to their vulnerability to, and dependence on, their immediate environment, children are also affected when their family - their most important personal and social reference point - is threatened, and in many cases, destroyed in the context of war. One of the most traumatic experiences for a child is to be taken away from their family or their community. This is a common situation in war, be it because the child is separated from parents or siblings who have joined the armed struggle, because they lose contact with them due to fleeing or 'bolting'<sup>6</sup>, because family members have been abducted, murdered or have been made to 'disappear', or because they themselves have become involved in an armed group.

According to Fraser, close family members 'filter' the impact that war experiences can have on the child. The family can give support, security and a reference point for the young by providing them with different ways of dealing with the reality they are immersed in and offering alternative answers to threatening situations. Understanding this helps us to understand the damage caused by the separation from, and destruction of, family and community networks as a consequence of civil wars.

Punamäki holds that it is impossible to socially reintroduce war affected children and ask that they have desirable moral values if the society in which they are immersed is conflictual (11). Here it is not only the family, but also the community as a broader

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<sup>6</sup> An Expression used to describe a quick escape ("to bolt" is the same as saying to leave at full speed). During the war it characterised fleeing abruptly from the residential or community area due to the approaching army. This 'flight' was typically sudden and did not allow the escapees to take personal belongings with them as they fled to save their lives.



collective or network within which the family group is immersed and from which they take their rules, values and attitudes of how to deal with reality, that is important. The extent to which children are negatively affected by war depends, in part, on the strength or effect of other mediating factors such as certain child developmental processes; the availability of close or extended family members and the solidarity of the community. Macksoud maintains that communities can contain the destabilizing and violent impact of war upon young people by providing constructive educational or social activities that offer opportunities to discuss and channel the violence that surrounds them in a constructive way (12). Jensen and Shaw postulate that the breakdown of social structures can become a critical factor influencing the impact of a traumatic situation upon inhabitants as it is those same structures that provide the rules and the contexts that people use to interpret and understand the traumatic circumstances (13). In fact, society as a whole has an important role to play in how traumatic situations are processed and integrated, as well as a responsibility for repairing and improving the lives of those affected.

## Materials and methods

### Sample

This interview study was designed with an intended sample of 300 ex-child combatants who had served with either the Salvadorian Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas de El Salvador (FAES), or the *Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN)<sup>7</sup>, and who would have been under 18 years of age at the time the peace agreement was signed in 1992. Given the lack of reliable and accessible information about each of the target groups, it was decided to carry out half of the proposed interviews (150) with the ex-combatants from the Armed Forces, and the other half with ex-combatants from FMLN. There was a similar lack of information about the number of women involved in the 'Frente', but given their importance in combat ranks, it was decided to carry out 30% of the interviews with demobilised women. However, due to the difficulties in contacting and interviewing young people demobilised from the El Salvadorian Armed Forces, the majority of interviewed ex-combatants were from the FMLN. This limitation resulted in a greater weighting being placed on the children who participated in the FMLN in relation to those who participated in the Armed Forces. This is one of the main limitations of this research.

The sample of FMLN ex-combatants resided in 61 communities which were distributed across 7 departments of the Republic of El Salvador. Unfortunately, ex-soldiers from the FAES could not be found in such demobilised communities because when the Armed Forces dispersed, these young people were not relocated to settlements or communities. Therefore, the interviews took place either at specific residences or in cantons containing communities of demobilized FMLN members.

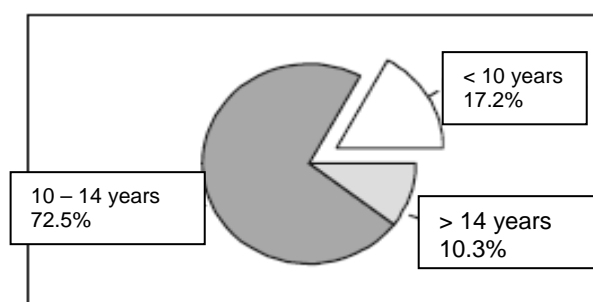
The final sample consisted of 293 participants, 278 of whom had belonged to the FMLN and 15 (5.1%) who were ex-combatants from the FAES. Of the 'Frente' sample, 33.1% (97) were female ex-combatants. In total, 71 communities or cantons belonging to 31 municipalities of 11 departments across the country were visited. More than half the population in the survey was born between 1976 and 1979. This implies that the average age of this majority group was 10 years when they joined the

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<sup>7</sup> Also known as "Frente" [Front].



guerrilla groups or army (figure 1) with an average age of 15 years when the peace agreement was signed in 1992.



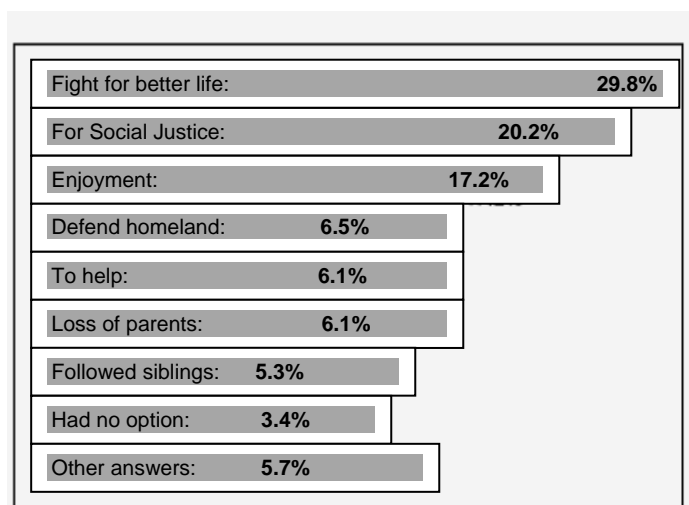
**Figure 1:** Age upon joining the armed conflict

At the time of writing, 47.8% are married or with a partner and 58.7% have children. Of the men questioned in the study, 55.6% worked in agriculture; 15.3% had specialised jobs (mechanic, brick layer, shoe maker and other similar jobs); 9.7% said they were studying, and 7.7% said they were day labourers, amongst other jobs. 68% of the women interviewed currently look after the home and children, while only 5.2% work in agriculture or as day labourers. 10.3% of the young women were studying and 9.3% stated that they were currently employed in other jobs.

In the division of functions within the military groups during the conflict, three out of five men were combatants, while 23.7% of the women occupied the same role. The men were more frequently involved as combatants and messengers, while the women performed the tasks of cooking, logistics, sanitation although they were also active as combatants. Finally, only slightly more than one third of all the interviewees, 36.8%, stated that they had been formally demobilised. This indicates that at least three of every five young ex-combatants – particularly the younger amongst them – did not formally leave the armed ranks. This process would have benefited them in the transition to civilian life.

### ***Instruments***

The interview used in this study consisted of a total of 132 variables divided into nine themes. The first part was designed to collect geographic data: department, municipality and community of residence of the interviewees; the second gathered socio-demographic data (general characteristics of the interviewees). The third part gathered information about their combat experience: conditions and reasons for joining the armed struggle (see figure 2); responsibilities; positive and negative situations that the ex-combatants lived through; and drug use and sexual practices during the war. A fourth section was dedicated to the invalids and permanently injured members of both groups in order to try to learn the type of incapacity that affected the young person and the assistance that they had or had not received as part of the reintegration programmes that took place after the peace agreement.



**Figure 2** *Motivation for joining the conflict*

The fifth part of the interview was composed of various sections. One section contained a series of questions designed to investigate the demobilisation experiences of the FMLN and FAES ex-combatants; another collected the experiences of the ex-combatants during the process of reintegration into civilian life; some indicators about the social reintegration process such as employment, earnings, access to basic services and their current level of education; and one series of questions was exclusively oriented to gaining an understanding of how satisfied the interviewees were in their new civilian roles and the type of basic services to which the minors who lived with them had access.

The psychosocial impact of their experiences was measured using the interviewees' own assessment of the extent of their altered emotional or psychosomatic state. This was based on a questionnaire using a scale on which the ex-combatant indicated the frequency with which, in their own opinion, they suffered each of the emotional states on a given list. The last part of the questionnaire was directed towards gathering additional information from key informants within the community who could add to the information provided by the ex-combatants.

Given the scope and objectives of this article, only the data related to living conditions and the psychosocial impact variables, along with limited information about socio-demographics and social reintegration are presented here.

### **Procedure**

The first step was to contact different organisations that work with, or have projects with, demobilised individuals from the armed conflict. For various reasons these entities did not offer the help necessary for the researchers to locate these people, which made it difficult to gather information, especially about the ex-combatants of the FAES. For this reason, the field team thought it necessary to go into the communities – those about which they had information and which, after the peace agreements, were populated by ex-combatants. Once in the communities they identified the demobilised individuals that met the requirements for the survey. Having identified those individuals suitable for the sample group, the themes and



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objectives were explained to the participants and then the interview was conducted and the general comments of the ex-combatants as well as the precise responses to the questionnaire were recorded as exactly as possible. This work was carried out between 1st December 1998 and 26th January 1999.

## Results

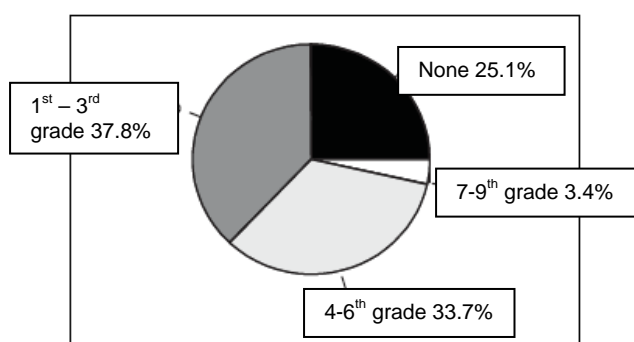
In this article we present results that show the current life conditions of these young people as well as a description of some variables related to the level of impact that their war time experiences and the process of demobilisation and reintegration into civilian life had had upon them.

### ***Marginalisation and living conditions in the present day***

If it is true that for many the experiences suffered as combatants or participants during the war could be considered the trigger factor for various ailments, current life conditions play a significant role in evaluating these consequences. It could be argued that the quality of life of these young people is similar to a large number of the Salvadorian population in terms of poverty and marginalisation. However, for the ex-child soldiers these conditions become even more important considering that they are already bearing a series of negative experiences suffered during the war. In this sense, throughout this description of the current life conditions of these young ex-combatants, there is a sense of social disadvantage and marginalisation in their situation.

Firstly, the low level of education: one quarter of the young people interviewed had not received any formal education when they joined the armed ranks; 37.8% had received education up to the first level (first to third grade of primary education), another third had been educated to some of or all the second level (fourth to sixth grade), and only 3.4% of the sample group stated they had studied any part of the third level (seventh to ninth grade) (see figure 3). In other words, the level of education of these ex-combatants was fairly low when they joined the ranks. These low levels of education are not related to the age of the youths during this period; when they joined, three quarters of the interviewees were between the ages of 10 and 14 years, with an average age of 10.3 years. That is to say by the time they joined the armed groups they should have already received some primary education. This suggests that the conditions in which they lived - together with those that arose in rural areas of the country in the context of the war – influenced their limited level of formal education.

Years later results indicate that the level of formal education has not increased: at the time of the interviews only 1 in 5 young people (21.8%) were formally studying. This is particularly the case for younger male adults and for those not living with a partner, indicating that the large majority do not study, which has repercussions on other aspects of their lives – for example their current occupation. Most of the employment amongst the interviewed males related to agriculture (63.3%) whilst for the women domestic chores (68%) predominated.



**Figure 3** *Level of education of ex-combatants before the armed conflict*

Half of the interviewees did not receive an income (50.5%). This situation was most common amongst the women and the younger people. Of those that said they received a salary for their work, the average was not more than 1.000 colons per month<sup>8</sup>, which is low considering that in most cases this was the only income for the household (see figure 4). Where women did receive a salary (24.7% of the interviewees) it was less than that of the men. In fact, two thirds of those women who received a salary earned less than 500 colons per month.

When questioned about the services that they receive in their communities, only 55% claimed to have access to healthy drinking water. The great majority received nothing to assist them economically with their reintegration into civilian life (see figure 5). It is important to add that many, almost three in ten of these young people, suffer various types of physical disability for which only 5 of every 100 claimed to receive physical therapy and 7 of every 100 received psychological therapy.

The fact that, since the peace accords, no programme has been designed to meet their material needs, or to anticipate the psychic emergencies that these young people have suffered, shows not only a lack of provision but a lack of political and legal initiative in including this group in the formal programmes said to be specifically directed towards them<sup>9</sup>.

Many of these young people, especially those who were formally demobilised and moved to locations together, received some benefit that mostly consisted of what is known as a 'personal set' (i.e. clothes, food, furniture and medicine), as well as medical attention. However, many had to be 'creative' in order to receive these benefits: many told us that they had stated they were older than they really were; pretended to be disabled or obtained an unofficial card showing that they had been demobilised, etc. Normally these benefits were given when the ex-combatants were formally demobilised, but it should be taken into account that the vast majority of

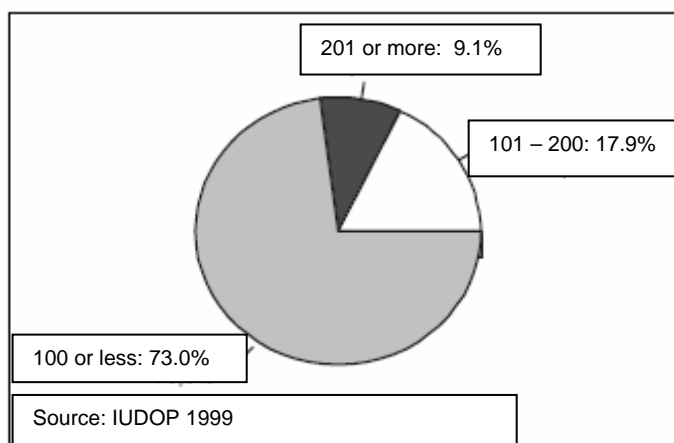
<sup>8</sup> Approximately US \$114.75 the year the research was carried out; from January 2001, one dollar was the equivalent of 8.75 colons.

<sup>9</sup> Of all the reintegration programmes designed to benefit the demobilised population and the FAES and FMLN ex-combatants, only one programme is known of that directly involved young people. The object of this programme was to help the participant to rejoin formal education or provide them with some kind of technical training. On the other hand, it was stipulated that if they were contracted and were between 16 and 18 years of age, they could become members of cooperatives and other associations that imply ownership and later apply to be agricultural workers once they reached their eighteenth birthday

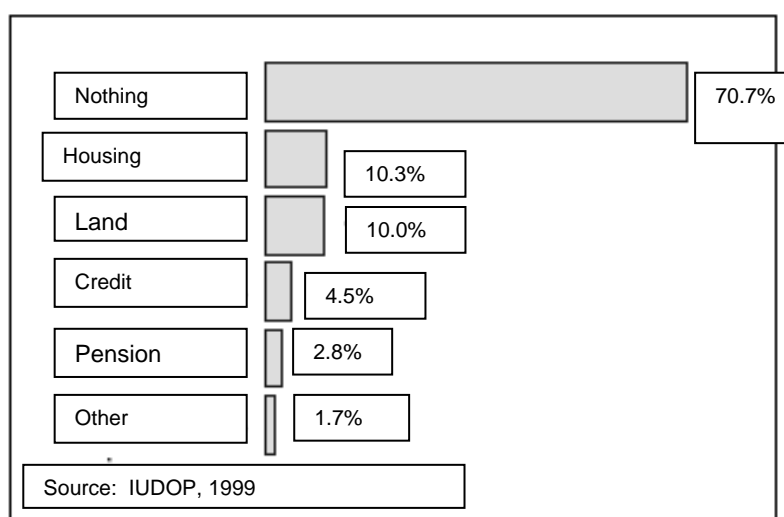


them were simply separated from the ranks which meant they had little or no chance to receive any type of benefit.

The information available indicates that when these young people sensed some kind of dividend for their years of participation in the armed conflict, the effort and the initiative put into gaining this benefit came from the individual themselves, and not from any organised or planned effort from the government or from the leadership of their ex-guerrilla group to meet the needs of these individuals at the time of their reintegration into civilian life.



**Figure 4** *Monthly earnings in dollars*  
(In the year of the study, one dollar was equivalent to 87.1 colons)



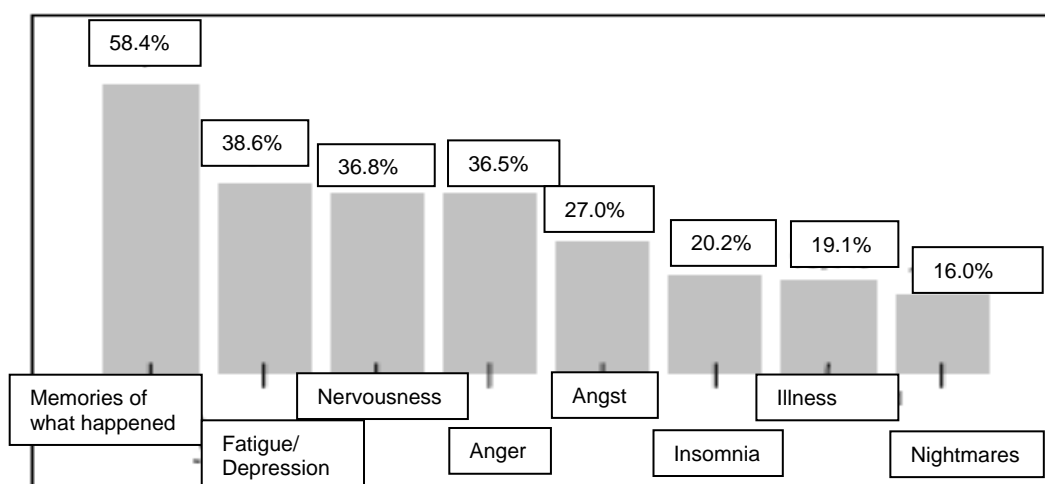
**Figure 5** *“What contributed most to your economy during your transition to civilian life?”*

This is particularly relevant when you take into account the young age and little or zero formal training that the vast majority of them had when they reintegrated into social life and with which they had to undertake other activities to maintain themselves and their families.



### **Psychosocial impact: alteration of the emotional state and community support networks**

To get a relative measurement of the emotional scars resulting from the ex-combatants' participation in the armed conflict, a series of items were included that explored the frequency with which the interviewees suffered differed states of mind and which, under other circumstances, would not have frequently been present: illnesses, insomnia, nightmares, nervousness, angst, memories of situations they lived through during the war, fatigue, depression or episodes of sadness. Figure 6 shows the proportions of the interviewees who claimed to suffer always or nearly always one or a combination of those previously stated emotions. In general it was noted that, although not all the interviewees showed signs of emotional alteration, almost three out of five always or often remember situations that they lived through during the war. In addition, 38.6% said that they felt tired and depressed quite often; a similar number, 36.8%, said that they felt nervous and 36.5% said they were easily annoyed.



Source IUDP 1999

**Figure 6** Individuals who stated they always or nearly always suffered emotional changes

A scale of psychosocial impact was created using the eight emotional states previously mentioned in such a way that an individual's rating could range from 0 to 32 points. Table 1 presents the proportions of respondents scoring positively on the different levels of frequency of the indicators in question.

The ratings with the highest absolute value indicate the highest level of psychosocial impact. The average for the scale in general was 15.2, with a standard deviation of 6.2 points. Upon further analyses of the different socio-demographic and reintegration indicators it was demonstrated that none of the variables of gender, age, demobilisation condition (having been separated from the ranks or having been located with other ex-combatants after the war), civilian status or having children exerted a significant statistical influence on the psychosocial rankings. This may be related to the homogenous socio-demographic conditions amongst the interviewees leading to a lack of 'points of contrast' (variability) within the group. It was concluded,



therefore, that the analyses revealed no significant psychological impact for these particular socio-demographic variables.

Nevertheless, analysing the results in the light of other information, certain variations in outcome were identified. One of those was related to what the interviewees classified as the worst experience that they had suffered during the war. The different responses allowed four categories to be created from these negative experiences: the death of significant individuals or family members; attacks, clashes or 'bolting'; being injured in combat or being permanently wounded, and a group of other types of answers. Amongst these, the highest average ranking on the impact scale was from those who identified the death of family members, parents or combat colleagues as their worst experience ( $x=16.4$ ,  $DE=5.5$  - where  $x$  signifies the average for this variable on the scale, and  $DE$  the respective standard deviation). The next highest scoring group was those indicating permanent wounding or injury in combat ( $x=15.9$ ,  $DE=7.0$ ). In fact, the rankings for these two groups of individuals were significantly different from the other categories ( $F(3, 277) = 8.011$   $p<0.001$ ). Another clear difference was identified when contrasting the average impact score of those who were currently disabled ( $x=17.5$ ,  $DE=6.8$ ) with those combatants who suffered no disability, which revealed that the former group had a significantly higher average impact score than the latter.

**Table 1** Responses from psychosocial impact section for options 'sometimes', 'nearly always' and 'always' (proportions presented as percentages).

Indicators	Sometimes	Nearly Always	Always	Total
Gets ill	40.6	12.6	6.5	59.7
Insomnia	20.8	11.3	8.9	41.0
Nightmares	29.7	9.9	6.1	45.7
Nervousness	34.0	22.0	14.8	70.8
Feelings of angst	39.2	19.8	7.2	66.2
Fatigue/depression	35.8	17.4	21.2	74.4
Thinking about what happened	25.6	18.8	39.6	84.0
Easily annoyed	26.6	15.0	21.5	63.1

Source: Based on results from 'Child Soldiers, lessons learned' (IUDOP, 1999)

Another significant difference emerged on ratings of acceptance into the community. Those individuals who indicated that they had difficulties in being accepted into the community after the war, even though they were a minority compared to those who experienced no problems in this regard, had a rating significantly higher on the psychosocial impact scale ( $x=19.6$ ,  $DE=5.1$ ;  $t(285) = 3.266$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), than those who did not experience rejection or any other problem in returning to their community ( $x=14.9$ ,  $DE=6.1$ ). Almost two in every five people were of the opinion that their communities were not ready to receive and reintegrate the young ex-combatants. In addition, amongst the young ex-combatants interviewed, some stated that they felt disappointed, be it in a person or an event, and these individuals had a higher



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average psychosocial impact score ( $x=17.3$ ,  $DE=5.9$ ) than those individuals who experienced no sense of being let down ( $x=13.9$ ,  $DE=6.0$ ). Finally, relevant statistical

differences were found on the psychosocial impact scale between those who had access to health services ( $x=14.7$ ,  $DE=5.9$ ) and those who did not receive those services ( $x=17.1$ ,  $DE=6.6$ ).

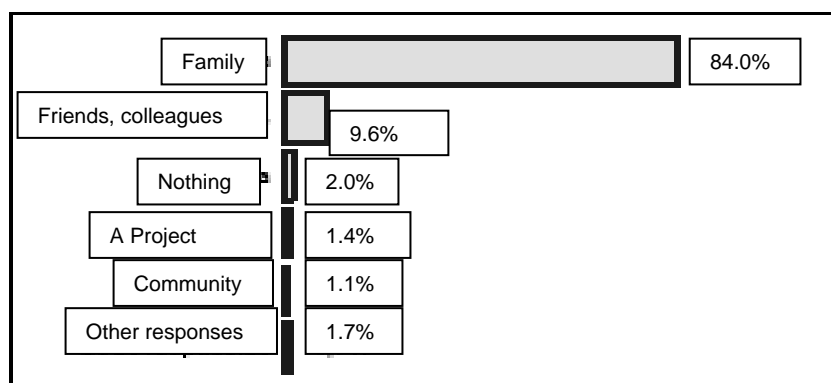
A series of questions at the end of the questionnaire were directed to people who were close to a young person who had been interviewed, that is to say, family members, neighbours or other key social contributors. Due to various reasons only in less than 30% of the cases was it possible to get declarations from this group. Nevertheless, the information available shows a direct proportional relationship between the declarations from these key contributors as to their levels of certainty that the young ex-combatant was sad or depressed and easily annoyed, and that young person's level of impact score<sup>10</sup> (9). This indicates that the higher the certainty of the key contributors about the emotional alteration of the young person, the higher was the young person's rating for these items on the impact scale. Along the same lines and with the same certainty with which the key contributors have described low levels or an absence of emotional alteration in the young ex-combatants, they have also reported better relationships between the ex-combatants and the rest of the community (Pearson=-0,39,  $p<0.0001$ ). At the same time, this frequency indicator with which the key contributors perceive the young ex-combatants to be sad or easily annoyed related positively to the psychosocial impact scale (Pearson=0,48,  $p<0.0001$ ), which suggests that the external indicator provided by the key contributors is a criteria which, although indirect<sup>11</sup>, supports the results of the impact scale and suggests that the perceptions of these key contributors is closely related to the way in which the young ex-combatants – above all those suffering from emotional alteration - perceive their own situation.

Given this situation, one of the factors that seems to have best helped to contain psychosocial impact and helped individuals overcome these situations, experiences and difficult life conditions is the family. This was best reflected in one of the questions in the questionnaire that probed the opinions of the ex-combatants about the person or event that had most helped them at a psychosocial level in their reintegration into civilian life. For almost half of the sample group it was the family. Similarly, four out of every five respondents indicated that of all the factors that could have facilitated their process of reintegration into civilian life, the family was the most useful during this process (see figure 7).

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<sup>10</sup> Pearson=0.43,  $p<.0001$ , for the frequency with which they see the young person sad and Pearson = 0.43 for the frequency with which they see the young person depressed or easily annoyed.

<sup>11</sup> Given that this information is not available for the whole sample, this external criterion cannot be taken as definitive.



Source: IUDOP, 1999

**Figure 7** *Most useful supports in the transition to civilian life*

## Discussion

The vast majority of Salvadorian child soldiers originated from the rural areas of the country and joined armed groups at a young age. The official reasons for joining the ranks given by the young people were interesting; most claimed to have joined 'voluntarily'. The most cited motives were to fight for a better life, for a fairer society and because they wanted to. On first inspection these answers seem to indicate a clear idea on the part of the child soldiers as to their motives for fighting. It could have been the typical indoctrination that children and military personnel are subject to, seeking to motivate the individual by alluding to the 'social prestige' of the combatant or in other cases to ideas of 'nationalism', 'liberation' or other similar principles. On the other hand it is arguable as to whether these young people really 'voluntarily' chose to become involved in the war (assuming they had not been subject to forced recruitment), or whether the war, in a sense, chose them by not offering them any alternatives, or by not permitting even minimum conditions in which to live and develop healthily. This suggests the 'action-flight' dilemma that many children had to face during the war and which in many cases they resolved by joining the armed ranks.

When a child or adolescent has lost all, or various members, of their family; when the social fabric that maintained them and gave them a sense of meaning and identity has disintegrated; when the options for survival are reduced and the probability of becoming just another victim grows as the violence of war intensifies, no longer can one speak of voluntary options. External factors – combined with the precarious conditions in which many lived before the outbreak of war – provide the necessary counter arguments to tip the balance in favour of joining the armed ranks. In this sense the situation in El Salvador is perfectly described by Machel's theory (5), which emphasises poverty, marginalisation, the breakdown of social networks - as well as the survival opportunities and guaranteed food and health care that becoming a combatant provides – as important predictors for children joining the ranks of the army and guerrillas.

It is several years since the war ended and since the beginning of the transition that saw these children put down their weapons and rejoin civil society. Yet despite the time that has passed, the information from this investigation suggests that the armed conflict has left a latent psychosocial impact in these individuals. Although it is difficult for research to measure the real or total impact of the war, indicators were



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found suggesting a psychosocial impact of a psychosomatic nature such as states of altered emotion, expressions of anger, sadness, nervousness, angst and dissatisfaction, amongst others. Analyses points to these ailments, or afflictions which were identified by the ex-combatants themselves, as being significantly related to particular variables. In the first place, the level of psychosocial impact was found to be related to the depth of negative experience that the ex-combatants had suffered during the war. The breakdown of important help networks and suffering from disabilities are experiences that have the potential to affect the ability of young people to function and their emotional state after the war. This may be explained by the important role that the child and young person's social networks play in modulating the impact of their experiences (10) and also the psychosocial impact that a person may suffer as a consequence of an injury which in many cases may be permanent.

If the experience of death, the disappearance of close support networks and receiving a debilitating injury are potentially traumatic elements for those who live through them, this potential is drastically increased in those who suffer them as a product of the violence of civil war. In this light, the data related to the Salvadorian case suggests that the family constituted an element of protection and support that facilitated transitions and helped these young people overcome the problems that they encountered along the long road to reintegration into civilian life.

A second factor related to the frequency with which these ex-combatants said that they experienced definite indicators of psychosocial impact was the difficulty some experienced in reintegrating themselves into the places and communities from which they came. Most probably their psychosocial impact scores were influenced by the level of welcome or rejection they received, along with the importance of the individual's social structure and the feeling of solidarity and acceptance from the members of the community in the process of transition to civilian life. As such, the acceptance or rejection of the community is a very important factor. To become part of a much needed and intimate source of references that give a sense of belonging would provide – in theory – the possibility of constructive activities that aid the ex-combatants in their development, or provide the necessary space to vent, and as such help conclude the process of integration and foster understanding of the war experiences they have lived (12, 13). With this observation in mind it is easier to imagine the sensation of neglect and vulnerability that many experienced, having to live through the war and post war period without their family, without any reference group or with feelings of rejection from the members of the community to which they returned, particularly if these situations were also a product of the experiences which they suffered during the war.

It is important to remember that, in many cases, the civil war devastated entire communities, displaced large numbers of the population from their places of origin and fragmented families and external networks to such an extent that, at the end of the war, many population groups had literally to look for new settlements and ways of life. Consequently, the disarticulation of the social fabric not only become more frequent, but also itself became an obstacle to the absorption of new members of civil society who were in need of social and psychological help. This problem, combined with a scarcity of planning and the fact that neither governmental nor non-governmental entities made the population aware and sensitive to their situation, did not help the ex-combatants in their transition to civilian life.



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A third factor related to the levels of psychosocial impact indicated by the ex-combatants is the sense of deception and frustration that they felt. This sensation – that could range from disillusionment with certain individuals or with the demobilisation and reintegration process, through to disappointment in their personal lives – is related to high levels of impact and with an altered emotional state, which, in itself is linked to poor or deteriorated relations with the rest of the community. In this sense, the general emotional state, which these individuals may be suffering for various reasons, is related to the characteristics of the context in which they find themselves. A large part of the problem is that the level of risk that their participation in the war implied is not, in their opinion, proportional to the non-existent or scarce compensation they received when the war ended, particularly because the sense of marginalisation that they experienced was not something that the majority expected as a result of the process. In fact, in general analyses we find that very few received any remuneration as part of a programme designed and implemented to meet the needs of the underage ex-combatants.

Nevertheless, these factors can only suggest the ‘psychic and personal level of impact’ that the war left on these child soldiers. From our theoretical perspective this impact also has a social dimension which should test those causes and situations brought on by the war, but that only come to light in the present day and within the reality of each one of these people; they should make reference to limited opportunities that their current life conditions offer; they should underline the need to improve the socio-material context of these young ex-combatants to try to enable them to function as well as possible as members of civil society.

In fact, ten years after the signing of the peace agreement and the end of the armed conflict, the conditions in which these people live still leave a lot to be desired. One of the hypotheses derived from this attempt to investigate these ex-combatants is precisely that their current life conditions do not help them to adjust to the post-war reality. If the war is guilty for much of this situation, the situation in peace time has not created opportunities for these current young adults and adults. Today, their multiple needs, the high levels of poverty, the zero or minimal access to many basic services, as well as their low education levels, all contribute to make their reintegration into civilian life more difficult for many ex-combatants who have the right and capacity to live their lives with dignity and to provide for the needs of their children and offer them a childhood different from the one they themselves had. These individuals exist in a reality plagued by many different needs that should not, and cannot, be solved from the perspective of welfare and aid, but that will worsen if more resources are not provided that would allow for minimum development conditions to grow and from which they can find alternative solutions to their own needs.

From this, we can see that one of the lessons to be learned from experiences of the young combatants in El Salvador is that once the conflict in question has ended, one must not relegate to the realm of the forgotten that section of the population that was directly involved in it. It is particularly important not to overlook or marginalise one of the most important and vulnerable social groups – that of children and young people.

We cannot speak of peace and reconciliation within El Salvadorian society while there remain some social groups who were profoundly affected by the armed conflict but have yet to receive the assistance they need. It is worth remembering that this group of young people took part in and directly suffered from the armed conflict from



infancy, so it is likely that the effects of this experience will continue to reverberate throughout their lives.

It is thus from the lives and experiences of these individuals that we must learn that it is impossible to build a present without taking account of the past, and that there can be no social harmony if the population has not been socialized and taught from early childhood to develop and manage social relationships in accordance with principles of social harmony. One cannot expect emotionally healthy adults – in the holistic sense of the words - if during their childhood these young people were constantly exposed to the sickness of war, and if in early adulthood they continue to belong to the historically under-privileged majority.

We would like to finish with a further reflection, namely that we consider that it is necessary to underline that these situations can be minimised or avoided in so far as efforts are made to avoid children becoming members of military groups. It is necessary to increase awareness of the damaging effects that allowing children to become involved in such a situation can have on a society. In fact, protecting children immersed in war conflicts is not just an act supporting the protection of their fundamental human rights, it is also a strategy in itself to solve social problems by stopping violence being transmitted across the generations (12) and, as in El Salvador, a way to minimise the impact of war, one of the most devastating and dehumanising events that a person can experience.

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