

Real-time learning piece

Colombia: Using legal frameworks to address Sexual Violence

In April 2021, the End Violence Lab at the University of Edinburgh launched the [Colombia INSPIRE Coordination Course](#), a 15-module online course with support from national and transnational stakeholders: the [National Alliance to End Violence Against Children and Adolescents of Colombia](#), the [Colombian Institute for Family Welfare \(ICBF\)](#), [USAID HEARD](#), the [CDC](#), and [Together for Girls](#). The course content has been [co-designed with national partners](#) for departmental level decision-making authorities and their practitioners engaged with the [implementation, monitoring, and scale-up of INSPIRE interventions](#).

As part of the End Violence Lab's commitment to global learning, this real-time piece addresses Colombia's efforts to improve its legal framework around sexual violence with insights shared from the north-central Santander Department by an engaged course participant.

Sexual Violence Against Children in Colombia

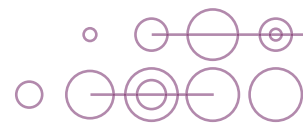


Sexual violence can happen everywhere children live their lives, including at home, in schools, in the community and online. A study conducted by the CDC, IOM, Together for Girls, and USAID in 2018 provided data to help policymakers and practitioners address this violence crime. [According to the Colombia Violence against Children and Youth Survey 2018](#), 15 per cent of girls (about one in seven) and 8 per cent of boys have experienced sexual violence in Colombia, and around 70 per cent happen in the home. [Colombia's Legal and Forensic Services](#) notes that between 2015 and 2018, [91,982 cases of sexual violence against children](#) were reported, a daily average of 55 per day—the number raised to [43,127 reports in 2019](#), a daily average of 118.

In February 2021, Colombia passed [Law 2081](#), which establishes that 'offences against the freedom, integrity and sexual development of minors, or incest' are considered serious crimes and can be persecuted *without a time limit*. This means survivors of sexual violence now have the chance to file their claims at any point in time. This is important because stigma, shame and fear can prevent survivors of violence from reporting for years, even decades after an abuse is committed.

The Law is timely. Sexual violence and intimate partner violence within the home have been on the rise in Colombia as COVID-19, containment measures have evolved. For example, in 2020 (compared to 2019), there was a [112 per cent increase in reports to the domestic violence helpline 155](#), and [85 per cent of victims of sexual violence were minors](#). Officials and service providers agree [there is underreporting](#) of sexual violence from victims of all ages. Living in confinement with the aggressor present makes seeking help difficult.





Interview with a frontline worker¹: Addressing Sexual Violence in the department of Santander, North-Central Colombia

The Santander Department in north-central Colombia is nestled deep in the Andes Mountains. Its capital city is Bucaramanga.

How have governmental and non-governmental organisations working in Santander responded to sexual violence within the home in the past years?



The Santander Department has 30,537 km² and 2,184,837 inhabitants (*Colombian national census, 2018*), and its capital is Bucaramanga.

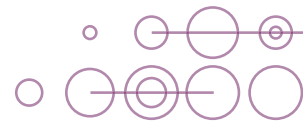
Since 2019, the Colombian Child Welfare Institute ICBF, implemented public awareness-raising campaigns in Bucaramanga in partnership with Metrolínea, the mass transportation system that operates in Bucaramanga, and some NGOs to encourage victims and witnesses to report cases of sexual violence.

In the past years, Santander has also multiplied reporting mechanisms available for victims, which led to a dramatic increase in reports. Unpublished data produced from the ICBF suggest that 73 per cent of sexual violence in Santander takes place within the home. Moreover, in 30 per cent of the cases, the aggressors are close family members with whom the victims live. For this reason, having access to anonymous reporting channels victims can trust, such as the 123 national police helpline, is crucial.

Once a case is reported, the members of the local *Intersectoral group Round Table of Early Childhood, Childhood, Adolescence and Family Strengthening* practitioners activate the Government's official intersectoral roadmap (*Ruta de atención*). This roadmap is a response system to ensure the restitution of rights for children who have suffered from violence, including sexual abuse.

¹The name of this informant is anonymous for reasons of sensitivity. Responses have been edited for clarity.





Could you mention any progress in this area?

Due to the combination of awareness-raising campaigns and improved reporting mechanisms over the past 15 years, reporting sexual abuse has become institutionalised in Santander. At the same time, we have substantially progressed in criminal law and law enforcement response to sexual violence. These advances mean that in Santander, it is now easier to prosecute sexual violence cases, perpetrators are held accountable for their actions most of the time, and penalties for perpetrators are increased.

Even so, these measures, which involve a substantial engagement and investment by the State, have not been enough to prevent new cases. Moving forward, we need to improve prevention and the existing response, assistance and support mechanisms. One example of efforts to use an INSPIRE strategy to indirectly address child sexual abuse is Santander’s interagency initiative for violence prevention, the ‘Santander Positivo: Crianza para la generación de la paz’ (Positive Santander: Parenting for peace-building). The programmes’ seminars and workshops have provided almost 2,000 families with tools to raise their children in a safe, loving and predictable environment. In addition, hundreds of families have received direct support services on positive parenting.

How do you feel the Coordination Course is helping practitioners improve interventions to address sexual violence at home?

It’s wonderful to see that the technical practitioners are building their capacity and working on the Departmental Plans with the support of high-level decision-makers. This comes to show the government is very committed to ending sexual violence. Although these are long-term processes, I’m sure that, in 30 to 40 years, we will be speaking about low numbers of sexual abuse.

Conclusion: The commitment of front line service providers in ending sexual violence in Colombia is critical. So too are their realistic perspectives around slow and steady investment in the law, in locally adapted campaigns with clear messages, response and support services ready to assist. Importantly, the integration of prevention services in the home, where violence in Colombia is most likely to occur with parents and caretakers, builds on evidence from INSPIRE. Over time, change can happen.

