

Comments to the article “Is Violence Against Union Members in Colombia Systematic and Targeted?”

Executive Summary

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In this paper, Benetech’s Megan Price, Ph.D. in Biostatistics from the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University, and Daniel Guzmán, BA in Statistics from the National University in Colombia engage an important academic debate with serious human rights implications in Colombia.

For decades, thousands of union leaders and members have been killed, disappeared and threatened in Colombia. Yet magnitude, patterns, and causes of anti-union violence are debated. Over the past two years, that debate and the attention paid to it has intensified, particularly as countries negotiating free trade agreements with Colombia, such the United States, have made union violence an explicit obstacle to finalizing agreements.

In November 2009, two Colombian academics, Daniel Mejía and María José Uribe, from the *Centro de Estudios sobre Desarrollo Económico* (CEDE) at the *Universidad de los Andes* published a study entitled, “Is Violence Against Union Members in Colombia Systematic and Targeted?” This paper concludes that “. . . on average, violence against unionists in Colombia is neither systematic nor targeted.” (p.1)

Given the political, economic and social importance of this debate, any study that makes claims about patterns and magnitude of union violence in Colombia requires the highest level of precision and scientific rigor. Therefore, in their response, Price and Guzmán present – in technical and methodological detail – the reasons they find the conclusions in Mejía and Uribe’s study to be overstated. In short, Price and Guzmán believe that weaknesses in the data, in the model choice, and in the model interpretation used in Mejía and Uribe’s study, all raise serious questions about their strong causal conclusions.

Based on their careful review and critique, Price and Guzmán conclude that Mejía and Uribe’s study does not resolve the question, “is violence against union members in Colombia systematic and targeted?” for following reasons:

- UNKNOWN UNDER-REGISTRATION. The Mejía and Uribe study uses convenience sample data as the basis for its claims. These data are based on available, observable reports on union homicides and union activity which have been collected without a scientific random selection method. These data cannot be relied upon to represent an underlying larger population or to accurately describe patterns over time and space.
- POSSIBLE VIOLATION OF MODEL ASSUMPTIONS. The statistical methods used in the Mejía and Uribe study to evaluate the relationship between union homicides and “union activity” are based on commonly used least squares regression and instrumental variables analyses. These methods rely on very strong assumptions. However, Price and Guzmán do not believe that the study adequately addresses the data’s potential violations of these assumptions and the potential ramifications on the estimates when these assumptions are violated. Violations of these assumptions could change the magnitude of parameter estimates (used to quantify the relationship between union activity and union violence) and the significance of parameter estimates (used to determine the presence or absence of any relationship).
- UNCORRELATED ERRORS. One of the main modeling assumptions which Price and Guzmán believe these data violate, uncorrelated errors, has a direct affect on significance tests used in the Mejía and Uribe study. Therefore they are highly skeptical about the reliability of the conclusion that union activity and union violence are not significantly associated.
- POOR QUALITY MODELS. The descriptive and analytic results presented in Mejía and Uribe’s study indicate that union member homicide rate is a highly variable outcome measure. This variation results in poor-quality models. Price and Guzmán find that control variables in the various model formulations show inconsistent and indeed reversed effects, suggesting problems with the model specification, with the data on homicides, or both.

The poor quality of these models, the unknown under-registration inherent in the data, and the questionable modeling decisions, mean that the strong conclusions in Mejía and Uribe’s study are unsupported by the analyses. Price and Guzmán point out that unchecked, those conclusions distort the truth about violence against unions and can mislead important social, economic and political decisions in Colombia.

In addition to questioning Mejía and Uribe’s conclusions about whether violence against unions is systematic and targeted, Price and Guzmán believe that the broader question about overall patterns and magnitude of union homicides in Colombia is still unanswered. They plan to continue this scientific and statistical debate which is relevant for current trade negotiations, and more importantly, for clarification of the historical truth about the victims of human rights violations in Colombia.

The complete document can be seen at <http://hrdag.org/resources/publications.shtml>