

Addressing Psychological Constraints and Early Childhood Development in Conflict-Affected Settings

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Motivation: conflict and forced displacement are on the rise

- 2 billion people live in conflict-affected settings (25% of the population)
- 115 million forcibly persons displaced worldwide
- Long-lasting socioeconomic consequences
 - Chronic poverty (Blattman and Miguel 2010; Ibáñez, Moya, and Velásquez 2022).
 - Mental Health (Shultz et al 2019).
 - Early Childhood Development (Akresh et al 2012; Singhai 2019; Akresh et al 2020).

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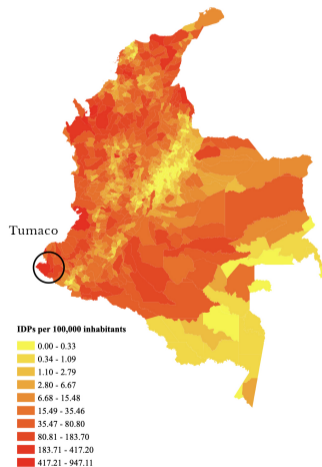
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This talk: Mental health as a psychological constraint for ECD & evidence from a psychosocial intervention

Setting: conflict and forced displacement in Colombia

Figure: Displacement (1997-2018)

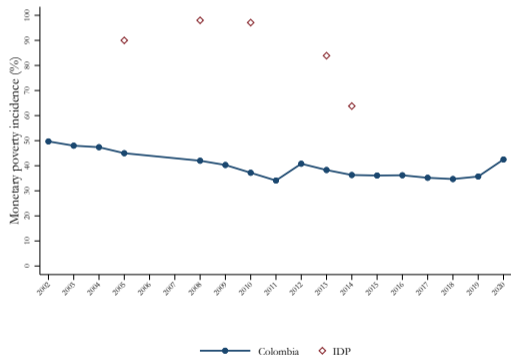
- Protracted conflict: 1950's and ongoing
- 8.6m IDPs \approx 19% of IDPs worldwide
- 2.9 million Venezuelan 'refugees'
- IDPs + Refugees \approx 20% of population



Setting: comprehensive legal and programming frameworks

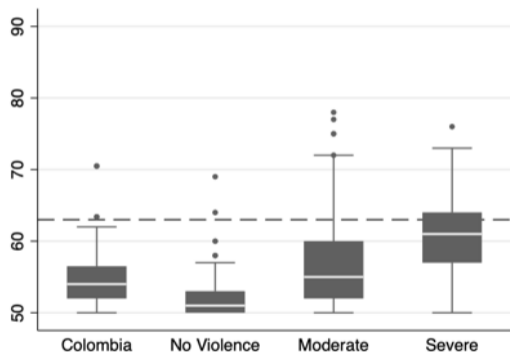
- Constitutional Court Ruling (2004) & Victims' Law (2011)
- Humanitarian assistance, social protection, reparations
- Yet, 60% of IDPs are poor
- 76% poor in 2022 as cash transfers were put on hold

Figure: Poverty: Colombia & IDPs



Conflict and Mental Health

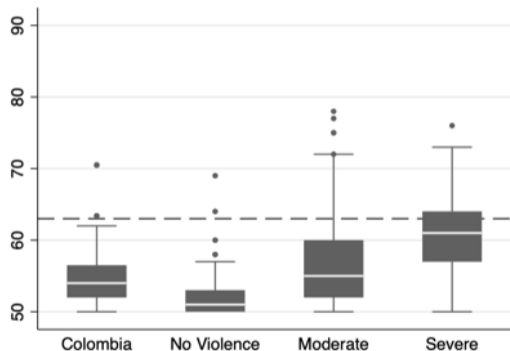
Figure: Anxiety: Dose-Response Relationship



- 20 % of people in conflict areas have mental health problems
- In Colombia, 27 and 35% of IDPs are at risk of developing Anxiety and Depression
- Trauma follows a dose-response relationship (Mollica 2007).

Conflict and Mental Health

Figure: Anxiety: Dose-Response Relationship



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Effects of psychological constraints

- Expectations of upward socioeconomic mobility (Moya and Carter 2019).
- Employment and income trajectories (Moya et al 2022).



**What does it mean to be
born and raised in
conflict-affected settings?**

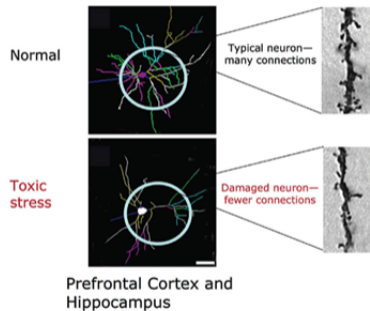
Early childhood is a unique stage in our life

- Rapid brain development: one million new neuronal connections per second
- Foundations for physical and mental health and skill acquisition
- Lays the ground for life-long health and socioeconomic trajectories
- Most important factor for ECD is the availability of nurturing relationships between the child and an adult (Almond and Currie 2011; Black et al. 2016)

Early childhood is also the most sensitive period to stress and adversities

- **Toxic Stress:** combination of adversities and deficits in nurturing care
- Leads to the overactivation of different biological systems, including the stress-response system
- Affects brain architecture, skill acquisition, and physical and mental health
- Life-altering effects

Persistent Stress Changes Brain Architecture



Source: Harvard Center for the Developing Child

A missing link: caregivers' mental health and ECD

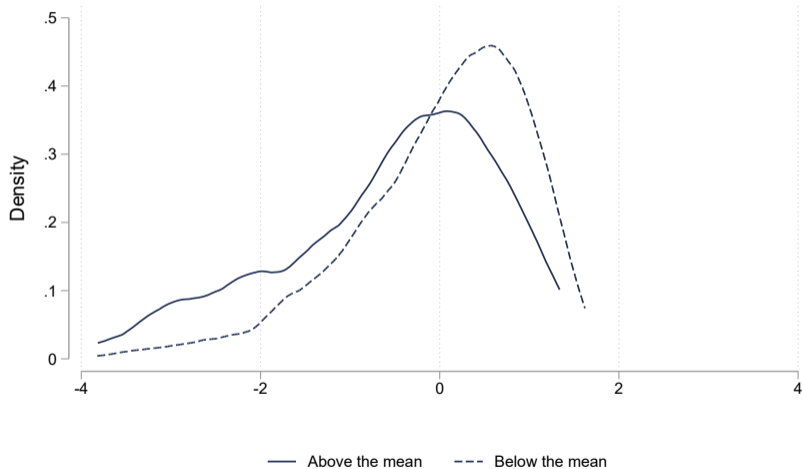
- Healthy and secure attachment between a caregiver and the child can buffer the physiological effects of stress \Rightarrow **Tolerable Stress**

A missing link: caregivers' mental health and ECD

- Healthy and secure attachment between a caregiver and the child can buffer the physiological effects of stress ⇒ **Tolerable Stress**
- But the capacity to build nurturing relationships is endogenous to conflict and displacement
- Trauma drains emotional resources, hindering caregivers' capacity to be emotionally available for children and lowering parental self-efficacy (Lieberman et al 2005).

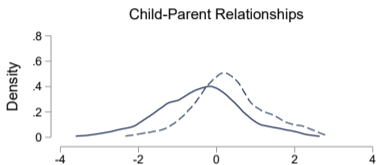
The mental health consequences of conflict ⇒ **binding Psychological Constraint**

More severe conflict deteriorates caregiver's mental health

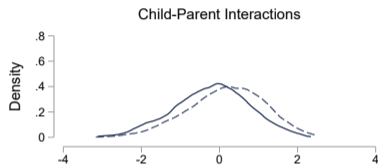


Notes: Kolmogorov-Smirnov p-value: 0.000

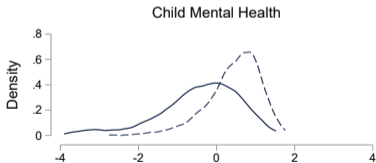
Caregiver's mental health problems associated with more stressful relationships and worse child outcomes



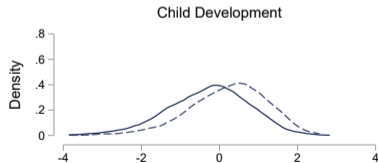
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— At risk - - - Not at risk

Caregiver's mental health mediates the effect of conflict on young children

TABLE 1— CONFLICT AND CAREGIVERS' AND CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

	Long-run conflict		Recent conflict		Truce	
	Caregivers (1)	Children (2)	Caregivers (3)	Children (4)	Caregivers (5)	Children (6)
<i>Panel A. Reduced-form estimates</i>						
Conflict exposure	-0.17 (0.016)	-0.11 (0.015)	-0.19 (0.031)	-0.16 (0.033)	0.08 (0.044)	0.06 (0.046)
Observations	1,376	1,376	1,317	1,317	1,317	1,317
R ²	0.12	0.19	0.46	0.44	0.44	0.42
F-test	7.36	11.90	21.78	16.87	19.88	15.47
<i>Panel B. Mediation analysis</i>						
Average mediation effect		-0.09 [-0.109, -0.069]		-0.07 [-0.097, -0.059]		0.03 [0.003, 0.063]
Total effect		-0.11 [-0.144, -0.083]		-0.13 [-0.19, 0.072]		0.05 [-0.043, 0.137]
Percent of total effect mediated		0.78		0.55		0.46

Notes: Panel A reports the results from estimating model 1. Columns 1 and 2 use the number of conflict-related violent events measured prebaseline (intensive margin); columns 3 and 4 use dichotomous exposure to recent conflict (extensive margin) between baseline and follow-up data collection; columns 5 and 6 use the exposure to the truce decreed between illegal armed groups. Specific controls for each regression are discussed in detail in the online Appendix. Panel B reports the results of the mediation analysis following Imai et al. (2010). Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses for panel A, while panel B reports confidence intervals in brackets. Mental health indices are scored in a positive scale, meaning that positive (negative) coefficients represent an improvement (deterioration) in mental health.

And yet, parenting interventions have ignored caregiver's mental health

- Most successful: Jamaica Home Visit Intervention and Reach-Up (Grantham-McGregor et al 1991; Black et al. 2017; Attanasio et al 2019; Bernal et al 2020).
- Address a different constraint: **cognitive constraints** on why and how to promote responsive care and stimulating environments as pathways to empower caregivers.
- Only 12% of 478 ECD impact evaluations measure maternal mental health (Evans, Jakiela, and Knauer 2021).

Semillas de Apego

Psychosocial program for caregivers of young children in conflict-affected settings

- **Objective:** Promote maternal mental health as outcome & vehicle to foster healthy child-parent relationships and early childhood development.
- **Structure:** 15-weekly group-based sessions of 15/20 caregivers
- **Community model:** Each group is led by 2 community facilitators (para-professionals and former participants)

Semillas de Apego

Structure

- Stress-reduction practice: sensory awareness, mindfulness, sun salutations
- Main activity: reflective practice w/ arts and crafts to ground information
- Group discussion: how to incorporate lessons and strategies at home

Semillas de Apego

Detailed Objectives

Maternal Mental Health

- Understand the emotional toll of violence and forced displacement
- Promote non-judgmental introspection
- Foster sensorial awareness and self-regulation
- Recognize capacities for resilience

Child-Parent Relationships

- Understand children's needs and how they respond to adversities
- Restore security
- Enhance repertoire of parenting strategies

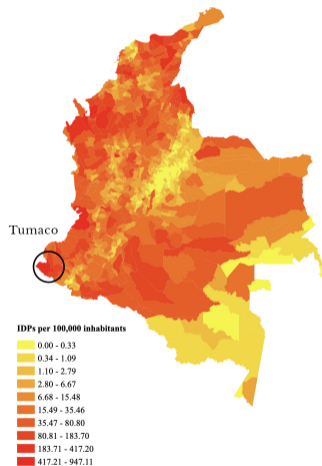
Parenting Teams

- Restore trust
- Build parenting teams
- Empower and re-define gender roles

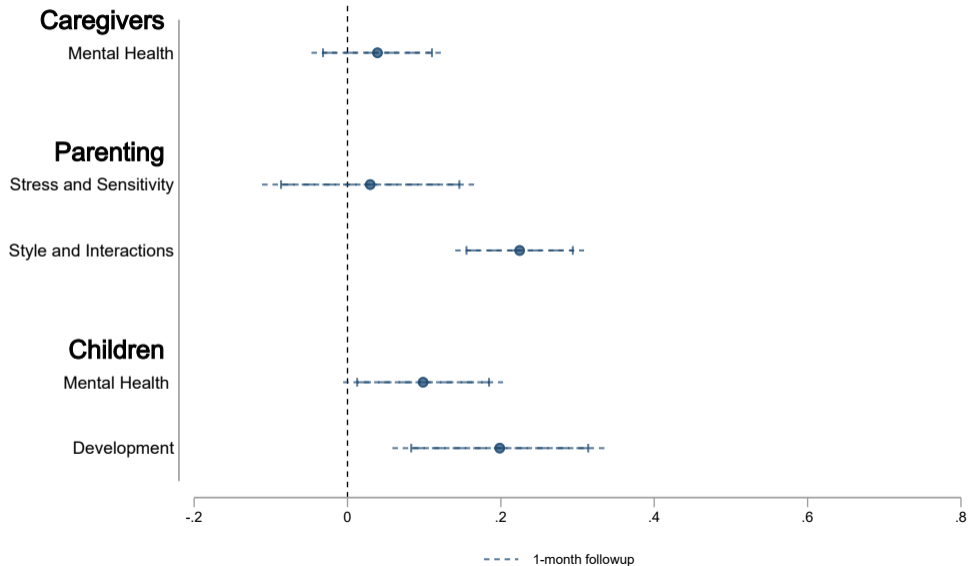
Early Childhood Development

Impact Evaluation 2018-2020

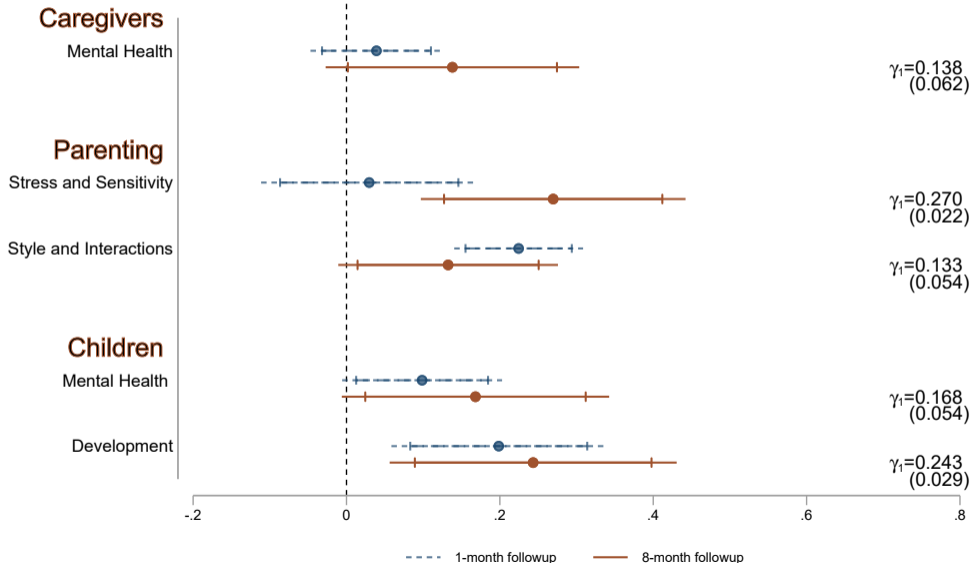
- Setting: Tumaco, Colombia
 - Homicides: 101 vs 29 in Col (40 in DC)
 - Poverty: 45% vs 20% in Col.
- Sample: 1,376 caregivers of young children served by public Childcare Centers.
- **Treatment:** Semillas de Apego + regular services provided by childcare centers.
- **Control:** Regular services provided by childcare centers.



Results : 1-month followup



Results: 8-month followup



Discussion

- Results speak to the urgency of considering mental health as a psychological constraint
- Mental health underlies many dimensions and processes for human capital accumulation and socioeconomic trajectories
- We also highlight the need and feasibility of implementing community-led psychosocial models in conflict and humanitarian settings
- Semillas de Apego: cost-effectiveness and scalability:
 - Cost per participant: US\$435 vs US\$600 of similar govt program.
 - ROI:
 - Evidence of scalability from at-scale pilot (2022)
- 2023-2026: Scale-Up
 - 15 municipalities - 15,000 participants.
 - Enhanced model with play-based activities (Sesame Workshop).