METHODOLOGICAL GUIDE FOR DOCUMENTING ATTACKS ON EDUCATION: PRACTICAL LESSONS FROM COLOMBIA

Kobo

Cover photo: Interviewer collecting information from a teacher in a rural school in Chocó, Colombia.

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The aim of this document is to provide practical guidance for field data collection on attacks on education. The focus is on identifying attacks, measuring their scope and impacts, documenting prevention and response measures, and assessing teachers' perceptions of justice. This guide offers recommendations for designing a large-scale survey, including methodological approach, sampling strategy, questionnaire design, and engagement with local partners. Two template questionnaires related to this guide are available in Kobo's form library. The intention of this guide is to bridge methodological rigor and operational feasibility, connecting study design to response and advocacy efforts.

This methodological guide presents concrete examples and lessons learned from a large-scale survey Kobo conducted to document attacks on education in Colombia. That study identified over 600 incidents across four departments, including attacks on schools, threats against teachers, military occupation of schools, and child recruitment on the way to or from schools. It also recorded measures to prevent and respond to attacks on education, such as early-warning systems and psychosocial support. This guide offers general best practices while also reflecting on unique aspects of attacks on education in Colombia. The Kobo research team relied on resources from across the sector to develop the original study and included them as references in this document.

The intended audience for this guide is researchers, information management officers, academics, and data analysts working in the education-in-emergencies, civilian protection, and similar humanitarian and human rights fields. It assumes a basic familiarity with research design and data collection, analysis, and management; rather than provide a general research guide, the following pages relate the research approach specifically to attacks on education. This document may be best suited for researchers at organizations planning to actively collect data about attacks on education, though organizations with systems designed to passively receive reports of attacks may also find some relevance. Although documenting incidents of attacks on education is included, this methodological guide is most relevant for investigating *impacts*, or the knock-on effects and consequences of attacks for students, educators, and schools, as well as prevention and response measures and other aspects of attacks.

RELATED RESOURCES:

- Kobo and LA CID's report "Learning under fire: Attacks on education in Colombia, 2020-2025"
- Kobo's form library with survey questionnaires on attacks against education in Colombia, prevention and response measures, and related topics
- Colombia dashboard on the Track Attacks on Education Data Portal (TRACE)
- Op-ed and blog post related to the project

THE NEED FOR ROBUST DATA ABOUT ATTACKS ON EDUCATION

Robust data about attacks on schools, students, and educators is crucial. Thousands of attacks occur each year in armed conflicts around the globe, leading to deaths, injuries, and destruction of infrastructure.[i] Despite their gravity, attacks on education often go unreported, and the impacts of these attacks, such as student dropout rates and psychological effects, are not well documented. Furthermore, high-quality data collection and analyses are critical for advocacy, prevention and response, and accountability initiatives to limit these attacks.

KEY GUIDANCE FOR COLLECTING ATTACKS ON EDUCATION FIELD DATA

- *Develop a multi-methods research approach:* Given the relative rarity of attacks on education and the challenges of gaining access to affected areas, sampling strategies designed for hard-to-reach populations or conflict settings are encouraged, as is triangulating data from multiple methodological approaches.
- *Ensure the highest ethical standards:* Independent ethical review, informed consent (or assent), guaranteed confidentiality, and proactive steps to avoid re-traumatization, among other ethical considerations, are essential given the experiences of study participants.
- *Maintain security standards:* High standards for the safety and security of study participants and the research team should be maintained throughout data collection.
- *Leverage existing resources for collecting data:* Aligning research with definitions of attacks on education and the *Toolkit* from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) is crucial to ensure collected data align with – and are useful for – the wider education-in-emergencies and protection sectors.
- *Engage the Education Cluster:* Informing the in-country Education Cluster (or similar humanitarian coordination body) is key since engagement may allow the research team to present the project and receive feedback, identify opportunities to collaborate on data collection, avoid duplicating existing efforts to monitor attacks on education, work within existing safe schools frameworks, and build relationships for subsequent advocacy or programmatic response.
- *Coordinate with local authorities:* Coordinating with local government or other authorities can be essential for the team's security and to access relevant information such as school lists; connecting research to the Safe Schools Declaration may also help make the project legible and relevant, if operating in one of the more than 120 endorsing countries.
- *Cultivate local partnerships:* Engaging a local partner organization can be crucial for a range of reasons, from access and contextualizing research instruments to finding expert enumerators and ensuring community ownership of research findings.
- *Identify expert enumerators:* Enumerators with key attributes are crucial, as they help build rapport with research participants and effectively manage access challenges; attributes include being local to the research site, speaking the relevant language(s), having worked in the humanitarian or protection fields, and data collection experience.
- *Provide psychosocial support*: Strongly consider proactive steps to providing mental health support for research participants and the research team, such as training enumerators in psychological first-aid in case study participants show signs of distress, connecting enumerators and study participants to psychological services as needed, and partnering with a local organization to provide the broader education community self-care and mental health workshops or resources.
- *Select digital data collection tools that are secure and reliable in conflict-affected areas:* A digital platform that is designed for challenging settings, operates offline, and securely collects, transmits, and stores data is crucial for research validity and upholding ethical standards.

COLOMBIA STUDY BACKGROUND

Despite recent ceasefire agreements and peace negotiations, including the 2016 peace accords between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the government, Colombia continues to experience armed conflict. In particular, armed violence has increased in some rural areas of the country over recent years, affecting more than eight million people.[ii] Around 388,000 people were forcibly displaced by conflict in 2024,[iii] and non-state armed groups have imposed forced confinements on communities, preventing civilians from going about their daily lives or leaving the area. Hundreds of human rights defenders and civil society leaders have also been killed in rural violence, with women and leaders from Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities particularly affected.[iv]

Amid conflict in Colombia, attacks on education violate students' right to education, and in some cases, their right to life. Armed confrontations near schools, occupation of educational facilities, and school-related child recruitment, among other attacks, keep students from receiving an education and sometimes result in death or injury.[v] Although much of this violence is indiscriminate, teachers are also targeted due to their perceived political affiliations, union ties, or community roles.[vi] These attacks differentially impact marginalized groups, including Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, and female educators and students, as well as students with disabilities.[vii]

Despite their gravity, attacks on education often go unreported, and the impacts of these attacks, such as dropout rates and psychological effects, remain less than fully understood. To uncover additional attacks on education and contribute to advocacy and response efforts, Kobo carried out a survey in four of Colombia's most affected departments in 2025. The study documented attacks on education and associated injuries and deaths, and recorded the impacts of these attacks, alongside measures to prevent and respond to them and educators' perceptions of justice.[viii]

Since attacks on education are relatively rare, Kobo's research team surveyed schools and teachers in purposively selected municipalities where existing data suggested attacks had occurred or similar types of conflict violence were present. To gain access to conflict-affected regions and reach affected educators, Kobo worked with a local partner, contracted local enumerators, and worked closely with local governments and community leaders. The research covered a range of attacks on education relevant to the Colombian context that occurred between 2020 and the first half of 2025. Definitions from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) were used throughout the project.

RELEVANT RESOURCES FOR COLLECTING DATA ABOUT ATTACKS ON EDUCATION

Researchers are strongly encouraged to draw on existing resources for collecting data. By relying on the definitions of attacks on education and the *Toolkit* from GCPEA, researchers can ensure that collected data align with the wider education-in-emergencies and protection sectors.

RESOURCES:

- GCPEA's *Toolkit for Collecting and Analyzing Data on Attacks on Education*
- GCPEA's *Education under Attack* report series
- The TRACE Data Portal, a collaboration between Kobo, GCPEA, Insecurity Insight, and the Education Above All Foundation
- UNESCO's data quality framework, severity index, and reports on data landscapes in West and Central Africa, among others
- UNICEF's monitoring of attacks on education
- The UN's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism guidelines and field manual
- Education Clusters' monitoring of attacks on education
- NRC's monitoring of attacks on education in Colombia and globally
- The ICC's guidance for documenting international crimes for accountability purposes
- Save the Children's "I want a peaceful sky" report on Ukraine and other resources
- Institute of Development Studies and Save the Children's research on Niger and the Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Right to Education Initiative's guide to "Monitoring Education under Attack from a Human Rights Perspective"
- COALICO's monitoring reports in Colombia
- Kobo and LA CID's report "Learning under fire: Attacks on education in Colombia, 2020-2025"
- Kobo's form library with survey questionnaires on attacks against education in Colombia, prevention and response measures, and related topics

RESEARCH DESIGN

METHODOLOGICAL APPRAOCH

Documenting attacks on education requires a methodological approach that balances rigor and adaptability to conflict dynamics. On the one hand, high research standards must be maintained during field data collection to capture the scope of attacks, ensure marginalized voices are included, and obtain reliable findings. On the other, the security context requires advanced planning, particular ethical considerations, and adaptability in the research and sampling design. The following list provides a structured pathway for defining the core elements of the methodological approach.

STEP 1: CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

A thorough contextual analysis should be carried out before the methodological approach is decided. This preliminary phase should include a review of relevant non-governmental organization (NGO) and news reports, as well as related policy and academic literatures, and meaningful engagement with local stakeholders, including education authorities, civil society and humanitarian organizations, and community leaders. This analysis should include a stakeholder mapping, familiarity with the relevant dynamics and actors in the conflict, and reviewing existing data sources for gaps. The aim of this stage is to generate a nuanced understanding of the context to inform the methodological approach.

In particular, researchers should identify the most relevant types of attacks on education – based primarily on the context, while also taking into account organizational or response priorities. In Ukraine, for instance, shelling and aerial bombings of schools are relatively frequent, while abductions of students are more prevalent in Nigeria, and child recruitment at, or on the way to or from, school is more commonplace in Yemen.[ix] Researchers are encouraged to follow GCPEA's definitions of attacks on education and military use of educational facilities to ensure alignment with the wider education-in-emergencies sector.

This step is the opportune moment to explore existing datasets on attacks against education and ensure the project aligns with, complements, and does not duplicate these data collection efforts. For instance, the researcher might ensure the project investigates the *impacts* of attacks on education, meaning the knock-on effects of attacks for students, teachers, schools, and communities, since several organizations already collect incident reports (e.g., GCPEA, Insecurity Insight). Alternatively, the research design might identify a territory where little data collection has taken place, or develop questionnaires asking about underexplored aspects of attacks on education.

The context, most relevant attack type, and data landscape should all directly inform the methodological approach, sampling strategy, and questionnaire development.

STEP 2: UNIT OF ANALYSIS

A unit of analysis (e.g., schools, universities, teachers, students, education ministry officials) should also be selected based on who or what is the primary target of attack or most affected by attacks. This decision should be informed by research aims, organizational priorities or constraints, ethical considerations (such as interviewing children), and safety concerns (for the research team and study participants). The unit of analysis will subsequently determine whether schools or another profile of respondent are sampled, what questions are asked, ethical approaches, and how data are analyzed.

STEP 3: METHODOLOGY

A researcher then typically selects between quantitative, qualitative, or multi-methods approaches based on their research aims (e.g., depth, generalizability), as well as resource and security constraints and organizational priorities. Generally, a mixed-methods design is recommended, as it effectively bridges the gap between numerical findings and deep, nuanced experiences. The quantitative component captures the scale and frequency of attacks, while

the qualitative narratives are indispensable for providing context, relaying personal experiences and impacts of attacks, and probing topics of interest, such as recommendations for how to address attacks on education.

STEP 4: SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT

Next, a sampling strategy and data collection instrument are developed. The means of sampling (e.g., random, purposive) should take conflict dynamics, ethical and safety considerations, and the unit of analysis into account. Meanwhile, the researcher should review data gaps in existing studies before identifying study locations and developing the survey or interview questionnaire to ensure the project is not duplicating existing efforts. The instrument should also be written in language relevant to participants (e.g., ministry of education officials, teachers, students). More details about sampling strategies and questionnaire development are below.

STEP 5: DATA MANAGEMENT TOOLS

Finally, digital data collection tools must be considered. Platforms that allow for offline data collection and encrypted data uploads, such as KoboToolbox, are strongly recommended to meet the dual priorities of gathering comprehensive data in challenging settings and maintaining the security and confidentiality of research participants.

ADAPTING THE STUDY TO THE CONTEXT

When adapting a study to a particular context, researchers must often make adjustments to protect the safety of staff and participants, respect cultural sensitivities, and maintain data integrity. Contextualizing the research goes beyond careful translations to include using locally relevant language and categories in the questionnaire, adjusting to unique elements of the education system when sampling, and recognizing cultural norms when scheduling interviews. Although this may apply most to international researchers developing studies meant for several countries, capital-based researchers may need to make adjustments when working in less familiar areas of the same country.

COLOMBIA

In Colombia, the research team made several adjustments to accommodate security concerns and take local language usage into account. First, following a security assessment that flagged the risk of armed groups intercepting enumerators and inspecting their devices, sensitive language about attacks was removed from the survey title – the first thing armed groups would see – and a more innocuous title was used. Enumerators were also given a standard script to describe the work as evaluating education access if questioned at check-points or by anyone other than a potential research participant.

Second, recognizing Colombia's regional linguistic diversity, the research team included place-specific options for the enumerators to read in several questions. For instance, the local word for “boat” (a means of getting to school for some) is different between Chocó and Nariño departments and enumerators read aloud the contextually relevant one. This ensured understanding among teachers working in remote areas, a smooth interview, and standardized categories for analysis.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

In addition to documenting attacks on education, an objective of research on this topic is typically for findings to inform policies, prevention and response measures, and otherwise promote access to education during conflict. One of the best ways to ensure that research findings inform policy is to consult with relevant stakeholders early, in particular asking what topics are of interest to them and incorporating those into the research. Likewise, planning the dissemination of findings from the outset of the project is often key to increasing the likelihood of their uptake into education policy or programming.

COLOMBIA

In Colombia, the Kobo research team’s first step was to establish contact with the Ministry of Education. The Ministry was receptive to the project, in part because it was developing a relevant policy to ensure the right to education during emergencies, called the Comprehensive School Risk Management and Education in

Emergencies Policy, within its Disaster Risk Management in Education program.[x] This research also came after the Colombian government endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration in 2022 and had already developed an Action Plan for its implementation. Kobo met with Ministry officials several times to inform them about the project and seek their feedback before finalizing the research design.

The research team also presented the project to the Education Cluster, a coordination body for local and international NGOs working in the education-in-emergencies field in Colombia. The team outlined the design, sampling approach, and anticipated outcomes of the study, then received feedback on the project. The aim was to further contextualize research instruments, avoid duplicating existing data collection efforts, and find ways to inform ongoing protection and prevention initiatives.

Finally, the team met with key international and local education-in-emergencies and protection NGOs to share research objectives and receive feedback. A key aim of these meetings was to identify questions of interest and underexplored topics so they could be incorporated into the project, as well as to seek their operational advice for collecting data about sensitive topics in insecure regions.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Several important steps must be taken to ensure high ethical standards for projects collecting field data about attacks on education. Among other duties, the research team must ensure the research design is appropriate for the context and profile of respondents, gain respondents' informed consent and ensure their confidentiality, and avoid re-traumatization among survivors of attacks on education. Planning and an ethical review should be undertaken well in advance of data collection.

First, the research protocol should undergo a rigorous ethical review process to ensure alignment with ethical research standards, humanitarian principles, and legal frameworks. These ethical reviews are sometimes internal to a research or humanitarian organization or they may be conducted by local oversight committees or US- or Europe-based Institutional Review Boards. In general, it is best to have an independent review from an outside organization paired with a local review, even if that is from local experts or education-in-emergencies organizations (in the case that recognized local research review boards have not been established or do not apply to the topic).

RESOURCES FOR ETHICAL REVIEW:

- Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) or Ethics Committees at universities and hospitals
- *The Belmont Report* (guiding principles for research with human subjects)
- The Common Rule (U.S. regulations for the protection of human subjects)
- Office for Human Research Protections guidance
- Professional association ethics codes
- Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) modules for research, ethics, compliance, and safety

A detailed informed consent form must also be developed to ensure that potential respondents understand the risks and benefits of participating in the research before they agree to participate. The consent should also include the name of the organization conducting the study, the topics to be covered, and the duration of the interview. A description of how the information collected will be used and how any identifiable details will be shared (if at all) should also be incorporated. Participation should be clearly optional, and potential respondents should know that they can end the interview or skip questions at any point before agreeing to participate.

If schoolchildren or other persons under 18 years of age are to be included in the study, then informed assent from the children must be obtained, in addition to the consent of their parents or legal guardians. Teachers should also be consulted, and their consent gained, if participant recruitment will occur in schools. The

researcher must also ensure that interviews and all other interactions are conducted in a child-friendly, safe, and age-appropriate manner.[xi]

Steps should also be taken ahead of data collection to develop a trauma-informed research design.[xii] While not all can be detailed here, some key considerations are:

- Recognize that trauma is widespread in conflict-affect settings
- Conduct background research about trauma-causing events in the community
- Partner with community organizations
- Adapt the data collection schedule to the needs and constraints of the community
- Prioritize participant self-determination
- Draft questionnaires to remind respondents they can stop or pause the interview and control other parameters on the interview process.

High ethical standards must also be maintained during the interview stage.[xiii] When conducting interviews, the research team should ensure that:

- No payment or other advantages for participation in the study is offered
- The same person is not re-questioned about the same events, particularly if events involve violence and the person may have been included in similar studies by other organizations
- The number of people in the space where the interview is conducted is kept to a minimum
- Interviewers maintain a professional, respectful demeanor during the interview, building trust with the interviewee, and actively listening to the respondent's answers and needs.

With all respondents, but in particular survivors of attacks on education and other violence, the team should take steps to limit and avoid re-traumatization during interviews.[xiv] The research team should:

- Pay attention to the signs of stress, fatigue, and trauma, and offer to take breaks or to end the survey as needed
- Identify steps that could minimize potential re-traumatization, such as slowing down the pace, adjusting the location of the interview, and discussing support that might be helpful during the interview (e.g., presence of a support person)
- Recognize that even questions not expected to be sensitive by the research team may trigger strong emotions in interviewees
- Begin with less sensitive questions, then gradually move towards those that may be more sensitive for interviewees
- Help respondents recount rather than relive experiences, meaning interviewees sharing experiences from the past while being grounded in the present time and place
- If strong emotions emerge, actively listen with empathy and humility but do not try to problem-solve the respondents' experiences
- Connect the interviewee with psychosocial support mechanisms when necessary.

The above lists are not exhaustive and are meant only as guidance.

COLOMBIA

In the case of Colombia, the Kobo research team developed a trauma-informed research design and questionnaires. Ahead of data collection, the team submitted the study to an independent Institutional Review Board based in the US, which evaluated the research design, sampling and recruitment procedures, method for obtaining consent, and questionnaires. Local and international education-in-emergencies and protection organizations also provided feedback on the study from an ethical standpoint, which the research team incorporated. For this study, potential respondents were informed that their anonymized, aggregate responses would be used to produce a report and in advocacy efforts, during the informed consent process. Also, only respondents over 18 years of age were included.

Finally, the research team used a data collection mobile app with encryption (KoboCollect, part of the KoboToolbox platform) to protect interviewees' confidentiality and for secure data storage.

SAFETY AND SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS

The safety and security of study participants and the research team is paramount; relevant measures are necessary to protect both groups from risks like reprisal, stigmatization, and physical harm. Careful planning and preparation are essential to minimize risk, uphold the ethical principle of "do no harm," and ensure confidentiality of the collected information. The research team should take concrete steps such as conducting a risk assessment, ensuring safe interview locations, using trusted intermediaries, and secure methods of transportation and communication, among others.[xv]

COLOMBIA

In the case of Colombia, several steps were taken to ensure study participants' safety. For one, respondents selected the interview site, which sometimes included meetings in administrative or union offices, community centers, or cafés in neutral towns or cities away from interviewees' schools. The optional nature of the survey was also stressed from the first point of contact, and enumerators were trained in ensuring participants' confidentiality. Finally, the research team worked closely with local government and community leaders and constantly monitored the security situation; if there was an increase in violence or threats, the team rescheduled the interviews.

The research team sometimes worked in municipalities affected by armed confrontations, forced confinements, and other security challenges, which required adaptations for their safety. When violence increased in one municipality, enumerators were instructed to move to a safer one selected from an established list, carrying out surveys in the new one until the old municipality stabilized. When physically entering a municipality was not possible, phone interviews were implemented in a limited number of instances. To promote safety, enumerators also worked in teams of two at times.

Separately, the weather, in particular strong rains and flooding, impacted access to remote municipalities with unpaved or damaged roads and could have put the team at risk. The data collection calendar was rearranged when this happened, allowing enumerators to postpone visits when conditions had improved.

SAMPLING STRATEGIES

The first step in developing a sampling strategy is determining the unit of study (e.g., schools, teachers), based in part on the type(s) of attacks on education of interest. It is worth noting that some potential study participants might be relevant to the topic but may not be feasible as respondents for security concerns (e.g., perpetrators of attacks) or ethical considerations (e.g., children). Next, the availability of relevant resources for sampling (e.g., lists of schools, membership lists of teachers unions) must be assessed. When these factors are combined with project aims, resource constraints, and organizational priorities, the research team is ready to decide on a sampling strategy.

RANDOM SAMPLING

Given the relative rarity of attacks on education, randomly sampling units from a region or country is not generally recommended. Attacks are also often isolated to certain areas, depending on the context (e.g., rural areas, districts where non-local teachers are sent), so sampling an entire region may not reveal many relevant cases or prove cost-effective. Due to security concerns, it may also be more effective to manage access to a smaller number of areas. However, random sampling might be considered where up-to-date sampling frames are available, and if the aim is generalizable findings, such as producing a percentage of all schools attacked in a region or year.

RESPONDENT-DRIVEN AND NON-PROBABILITY SAMPLING

Instead, a non-probabilistic method, such as snowball sampling, is generally recommended to study attacks on education. Alternatively,

respondent-driven sampling - which combines snowball sampling with a mathematical model to weight responses and compensate for the lack of randomness - might be considered.[xvi] Non-probabilistic sampling increases the likelihood of reaching relevant cases (e.g., teachers or schools that suffered an attack) by identifying respondents through their networks when a sampling frame is unavailable. This method may also be useful if respondents are hesitant to participate, since referrals can help respondents overcome shame or stigmatization in some cases to still be interviewed.[xvii] The education sector in many countries has several attributes that favor snowball and other non-probabilistic sampling strategies, such as a tight-knit community that transmits information within its network and many points of contact to seed new referral pathways.

COLOMBIA

In the case of Colombia, the Kobo research team used two separate sampling strategies for two distinct surveys (one survey of schools, with head teachers responding, and one of teachers). In the first case, the research team purposively selected relevant municipalities, then randomly selected schools within the municipality (and included any attacked schools, if known). Specifically, the team used existing reports of attacks on education from GCPEA and data on related conflict violence from the Education Cluster to select municipalities where attacks had occurred (or were likely, since there were relatively few attacks and they were isolated to particular municipalities). The research team then used a random number generator to sample from an up-to-date list of all schools in the relevant municipalities with the aim of including schools that might otherwise be excluded (e.g., small, very rural schools). All schools, regardless of level, in the municipality had equal chance of entering the sample.[xviii]

A unique feature of education in Colombia is that, in general, one or more smaller schools (*sedes*) are typically organized under a larger, or main, educational institution (*principal*). All of these units were treated equally in the sampling. Although enumerators typically knew of no specific schools that had been attacked in the municipality before entering, they were encouraged to include attacked schools in the sample if they learned of them while in meetings with the local education ministry or when surveying other schools – in order to increase the number of affected schools in the study. Once at the school, the enumerator spoke with the head teacher about the school.

In the second case, the research team used snowball sampling to reach teachers. Using referrals from initial respondents, such as teachers or school administrators, was an efficient means of identifying respondents in rural and conflict-affected municipalities where traditional sampling methods are impractical. Stigma may have also kept teachers who survived an attack from participating, which referrals helped to overcome in some cases. To mitigate some of the limitations of this sampling method, enumerators used many seeds, including by identifying potential respondents at schools where they were administering the first survey (but excluding the head teacher who received the first survey).

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

The next step is questionnaire design. General guidance applies for question wording and survey duration; however, there are several aspects of attacks on education that are likely to impact the questionnaire. Researchers should take special note of these unique aspects.

In line with general guidance, a survey instrument with question types designed to collect qualitative and quantitative data is crucial for documenting attacks on education and measuring their scope and impacts. Questions should be drafted at a level the respondents understand; while teachers are generally well-educated, instruments should still be drafted without jargon and in accessible language (and if children are participants, children-centered interview methods should be explored beforehand). Interview duration should also respect respondents' time, so no more than an hour is recommended unless absolutely necessary, and half an hour is better.

GENERAL TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN:

- Keep questions clear and simple
- Ask about only one thing per question
- Avoid leading or biased wording
- Use neutral, specific language
- Ensure answer options are complete and non-overlapping
- Match question type to the information needed for analysis
- Keep the survey length reasonable
- Pilot questions with a small group before administering the questionnaire

DEFINITIONAL BOUNDARIES

The first aspect for researchers to pay special attention to is definitional boundaries. As with many legal and other concepts, attacks on education have very precise definitions – but ones that respondents (and others) are extremely unlikely to know, or even to fully grasp the nuances of after description. In effect, teachers cannot be asked questions such as, "Has this school been attacked," or "Have you been attacked," because they may respond affirmatively with bullying, cyber attacks, gang violence, or parents making threats in mind, rather than attacks perpetrated by state forces or non-state armed groups. Instead, the recommendation is for the questionnaire to describe the relevant violence and types of actors, then ask practical questions (e.g., "Has there been a shootout near the school," "Has an armed actor occupied or used the school," "Have you been targeted because of your membership in a union"). The included sample questionnaires offer more suggestions, and GCPEA's definitions should be carefully reviewed to ensure alignment.

RESPONDENTS WHO HAVE NOT EXPERIENCED ATTACKS ON EDUCATION

The next aspect for close attention is that the research team is unlikely to know whether the respondent (or school) experienced an attack ahead of the interview. This is because attacks on education are rare, underreported, and – as mentioned above – their definitions are opaque. As such, a survey that accommodates two profiles of respondents is strongly recommended: one profile that experienced an attack (with corresponding questions) and one profile that has not (with questions about general insecurity and concerns). Interesting comparisons can then be drawn in the analysis phase between respondents (or schools) that experienced an attack and those that did not.

EXAMPLE: WHY A RESEARCH TEAM MAY NOT KNOW IF A SCHOOL WAS ATTACKED AHEAD OF TIME

A researcher might think to themself that the first step to collecting data related to attacks on schools (or students or teachers) is finding or making a relevant list. That is logical. However, in most conflict-affected contexts, such a list is unlikely to exist, due to capacity and resource constraints, or will be incomplete, due to underreporting. Then, the researcher might think to sit down with a ministry official or administrator and ask them to point out schools that have been attacked on an official list of educational institutions (if one is up-to-date). However, this is unlikely to work, since the administrator may not understand the nuances of what constitutes an attack, and there might be schools in the study area that experienced attacks but did not report them to the administrator for political or bureaucratic reasons or out of fear.

In the end, the researcher should develop a sampling strategy that works without a list of attacked schools (or students or teachers), and draft a questionnaire that can accommodate both profiles of respondents (having survived an attack and not).

DISAGGREGATION

Questions should allow for disaggregations (during the analysis stage) that are relevant to the education-in-emergencies sector and study population. Examples include breaking analyses down by gender, disability, ethnicity, level of schooling, and rurality. The questions should also

cover impacts of violence unique to education, such as dropout rates, lost learning, and decline in educational quality. (Refer to GCPEA's *Toolkit* for relevant disaggregations, questions, and indicators).

COLOMBIA

In the case of Colombia, the research team developed two questionnaires – one for schools (administered to head teachers) and one for teachers – both of which included closed- and open-ended questions. The quantitative question types were used to track the number of incidents and measure numerical impacts (e.g., dropouts), while the qualitative questions collected narrative testimonies for analyzing teachers' experiences and recording details about prevention and response measures.

The *primary survey* was directed at schools (head teachers were the main respondent) to document attacks, their impacts, any prevention and response measures, and perceptions of justice. The questionnaire had two sets of questions, one for schools that experienced an attack (since 2020), and one for schools that had not. The former answered questions about the attack(s) and response; the latter answered questions about security concerns and any measures they may have taken to prevent attacks. Both sets answered similar questions about the provision of education at the school and their attitudes towards justice. In the case of attacks, respondents were asked to share information about 0-3 incidents, depending on how many the school had experienced.

The *supplementary survey* focused on educators (including teachers' union members, ministry officials, and retirees). Given the high number of attacks against teachers in Colombia, the survey focused on targeted violence against educators. It focused on qualitative experiences of violence; any protection measures taken by the community, union, or government; how their teaching and livelihood was impacted; and perceptions of justice. The survey had two sets of questions – one for teachers who experienced an attack, and one for those who were knowledgeable about the topic or who had worked closely with colleagues that were attacked.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

PARTNER SELECTION

The first step of data collection is often engaging a local partner to run field operations – or for a researcher to double-check their own organization's capacity to do so. Some key criteria to take into account when considering implementation partners (or to ensure are available in one's own organization) are:

- *Experience with education-in-emergencies, protection, or related programming:* Partners with such experience are crucial for contextualizing the study design and instruments to local realities and recommending any related interventions for schools, students, or teachers.
- *Data collection experience:* Partners with staff and expertise in the relevant form of data collection (e.g., face-to-face interviews, phone surveys) and sampling strategy (e.g., random walk, snowball).
- *Contextual knowledge and language abilities:* Partners with demonstrated contextual knowledge and familiarity with the relevant language(s).
- *Experience operating in violent contexts*: Partners with demonstrated access to high-risk areas for safe data collection in study sites.
- *Security and logistics capabilities:* Partners with security protocols for enumerators, including safe transportation and contingency plans in case of emergency, as well as covering the logistics of equipment (e.g., mobile phones) and fieldwork (e.g., accommodation).
- *Administrative capacity:* Partners with experience managing international funding and compliance with financial reporting standards, alongside the ability to rapidly hire enumerators in fragile contexts.
- *Psychosocial support know-how:* Partners with protocols to safeguard participant well-being, including providing psychosocial support and referral to local services, as well as experience providing trauma-informed training to equip enumerators with skills for handling demanding interviews while ensuring their own psychological wellbeing.

In the case of Colombia, the Kobo research team prioritized finding a partner with education-in-emergencies and child protection experience over methodological expertise, given Kobo's long history in data collection and conducting research trainings. Through a competitive selection process, Kobo partnered with La Corporación Infancia y Desarrollo, a Colombian childhood development, education, and protection organization. This partnership was critical to navigating Colombia's complex conflict dynamics while prioritizing data quality, sampling rigor, and participant and enumerator safety and psychological wellbeing.

ENUMERATOR SELECTION AND TRAINING

The composition and preparation of the field team are critical to the data quality, ethical integrity, and overall success of the project. Researchers should seek out the following attributes among interviewers (or balance them across the team):

- *Experience working as an enumerator*: Enumerators with relevant past experience in data collection, regardless of the mode, are likely to be more effective, will already know if they like the work, and will require less time to train.
- *Experience working for humanitarian organizations or in conflict-affected settings*: Enumerators are thus likely to possess a strong understanding of navigating complex

and sensitive environments and may have some familiarity with the topic.

- *Being local to the research site:* Familiarity with the local context, including language, social relations, and safe access routes, and possessing pre-existing relationships with community leaders and local authorities are indispensable for generating the trust necessary to conduct sensitive research effectively and safely. In contexts where relevant, gender balance, ethnicity, and other characteristics should also be taken into account, particularly with an eye to the enumerators reflecting the populations they will interview – to the extent legally and otherwise practicable.

Enumerators should receive comprehensive training. Sessions should include:

- Background and definitions of attacks on education, based on GCPEA resources
- Data collection ethics, including informed consent and confidentiality
- Best practices in data collection, including consistency across interviews and the importance of following the sampling strategy
- A walk-through of the questionnaire to gain familiarity and ask questions
- Basic psychological first-aid to safely manage interactions with distressed participants
- Practical guidance in conducting surveys (e.g., how to contact and establish rapport with a participant in a culturally sensitive manner)
- Hands-on practice with data collection tools (e.g., KoboCollect)

In the case of Colombia, Kobo hired teams of enumerators from the four selected departments with relevant experiences and aptitudes, then flew them to the capital of the country, Bogotá, for a weeklong training.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection can begin once enumerators have been identified and trained. At this stage, the researcher should ensure that enumerators have the right platform to administer surveys. Given that attacks on education occur in conflict-affected and otherwise challenging settings, the platform should generally work on low-cost digital devices, allow for offline data collection, and securely store and transmit data. Tools that allow for closed- and open-ended questions are also recommended, since qualitative and quantitative questions and analyses are encouraged when documenting attacks on education and their impacts. Researchers may also want to collect Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates, depending on safety and confidentiality protocols.

KoboToolbox (the platform) and KoboCollect (the app) meet the above criteria, so the research team had enumerators use the app on mobile devices in Colombia. The team leveraged key KoboToolbox features:

- *Tiered data access:* A tiered permission system was used to limit data access based on team role. Only the lead researcher had full access to the complete dataset; regional supervisors could view data only from their assigned departments; and enumerators had no access to submitted responses, protecting participant confidentiality.
- *Tailored survey flow:* Skip logic was used to ensure the questions were relevant for each participant. For instance, teachers who reported experiencing an attack were routed to a bank of relevant questions, while others answered general questions on school safety and insecurity in the area.
- *Audio recording and other question types:* To prioritize participant comfort, the survey incorporated multiple question types beyond standard multiple-choice and text. Many participants found audio recording to be the most comfortable format for sharing complex and difficult experiences of violence, which also allowed enumerators to show signs of actively listening and empathy (rather than typing the answer on their device). Drop-down menus and structured formats like date

selectors also contributed to a cleaner dataset.

MONITORING DATA COLLECTION PROGRESS

Research projects can benefit significantly from real-time monitoring of data collection progress. Tracking progress allows the research team to promptly identify and address data quality problems and fieldwork challenges as they emerge, rather than waiting until an enumerator escalates a problem or data collection is complete.

In Colombia, the research team used KoboToolbox to conduct data quality checks, track fieldwork progress, and ensure the project aligned with teachers' availability and the various academic calendars of the four departments. A Power BI dashboard was connected directly to KoboToolbox via an application programming interface (API), which automatically tabulated and displayed the number and location of surveys each enumerator had completed. Field supervisors used this dashboard to check enumerators' performance and progress, eliminating the need to download sensitive datasets onto local devices. Enumerators also used the up-to-date information to track their own goals.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data cleaning and analysis are the next steps in the research process. Before analysis begins, reviewing the data for duplicate incidents of attacks on education and triangulating incidents with other reports on the topic is crucial (i.e., ensuring that attacks follow general patterns for the area, including weapons type, number injured, and perpetrators). Irregularities should be interrogated and, in some cases, discarded.

Given the data likely to be collected, conducting basic statistics on the quantitative data and thematic analysis on the qualitative data are likely appropriate. Data disaggregation relevant to the education-in-emergencies and protection sectors is recommended, including by gender, disability, ethnicity, level of schooling, and similar factors. Ultimately, these steps should lead to written analyses, graphs, and maps illustrating relevant findings, such as trends in attack type, affected regions, drop-out rates by gender, and rates of psychological distress.

For the Colombia project, the research team used R, a statistical software, for data cleaning and analysis. In particular, the scripts in this and similar statistical software allowed the researchers to track data manipulation and ensure reproducibility. For qualitative data, the team leveraged a KoboToolbox feature to automatically transcribe audio recordings, which significantly minimized processing time and allowed for the rapid identification of key themes and nuanced narratives. Some of the data was visualized in a dashboard on the TRACE Data Portal, while other analyses were presented as charts (made in Excel) in the final report.

LIMITATIONS

All studies face limitations, particularly when carried out in violent or insecure contexts. Field data collection about attacks on education is no different. The key, however, is to mitigate these limitations where possible, share them in the final report, and discuss how these limitations may affect research findings.

Some common limitations might be that findings are not generalizable due to the sampling design, that fewer attacks were reported than expected due to access restrictions, or that impacts of attacks are not fully measured because respondents did not understand the question wording. Another limitation might be the underreporting of particularly sensitive attacks on education, such as sexual violence and child recruitment at or en route to schools, due to fear and stigma. Researchers can attempt to mitigate this by ensuring that interviewees understand the findings will be reported anonymously and by taking steps to avoid re-traumatization; nonetheless, it remains a prevalent limitation in research on the topic.

In the case of the Colombia project, surveys were carried out in the majority of sampled municipalities; however, access restrictions might have slightly affected findings, likely depressing

the total number of attacks, since these were municipalities where rates of violence were the highest. Also, findings are not generalizable to the departments or country, since municipalities (and, within some, all schools) were not randomly selected. However, the research team determined this was an adequate trade-off in order to increase the likelihood of including more schools that experienced attacks and to learn about them in depth, particularly given the infrequency of the violence. The study also explicitly framed its conclusions as context-specific insights rather than nationally representative data.[xix]

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE COLOMBIA STUDY

The Kobo research team learned several important lessons while carrying out data collection on attacks on education in Colombia. Several of these lessons have been incorporated into this methodological guide and others will be taken into account during future research projects on the topic.

Some of the lessons learned were:

- *Approach multiple levels of government and authorities, as appropriate:* The research project benefited from insights and materials from several levels of government, but the team had planned to be in touch with only one. As appropriate, the research team will approach multiple levels of government and authorities when carrying out data collection about attacks on education – likely beginning at the top, if the education system is centralized.
- *Create and leverage a Power BI dashboard to monitor survey progress:* The research team's original plan was to tally the number of survey submissions in KoboToolbox and e-mail them to field supervisors weekly, including by enumerator and department. However, the idea was raised to create a Power BI dashboard (connected directly to KoboToolbox via API) so that supervisors and enumerators could track progress in real-time. This saved time and motivated the team.
- *Design succinct and focused questionnaires:* Feedback from enumerators and teachers highlighted that the surveys were too long, and that certain questions seemed repetitive. Moving forward, the team will prioritize key questions.
- *Test the planned analyses before data collection:* Although data analyses and visualizations had been planned before data collection, the team could have used a dummy dataset to test the R code, variable aggregations, and cross-tabulations, saving data cleaning and manipulation time during the analysis phase. In future studies on the topic, the team will pre-test the code to avoid known problems such as mismatched variable names.
- *Further integrate the data collection project into advocacy and programmatic activities:* The research team collaborated with local education organizations from the outset, participated in local advocacy events, released findings on relevant international days, and shared findings at a local event with stakeholders in Spanish (and made them publicly available in Spanish). Nonetheless, more can be done. For the next round, the research team will attempt to further tie data collection to government and NGO programming, education policy dissemination, and advocacy to limit and respond to attacks on education.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ABOUT ATTACKS ON EDUCATION

Taking into account findings from Kobo's study and other resources on the topic, some recommendations for future research about attacks on education are:

- *Conduct field research on novel trends:* Field data collection about novel trends in attacks on education would be useful for informing prevention, response, advocacy, and accountability efforts. Examples include drone strikes and new forms of school-related child recruitment.
- *Document prevention and response efforts:* Further documenting community, school, union, and government actions to prevent and respond to attacks on education would be useful to inspire additional responses elsewhere and perhaps draw attention to and generate funding for these responses.
- *Document the economic impacts of attacks on education:* Beyond documenting the immediate educational impacts, develop an understanding of the economic consequences of attacks, including by researching loss of income for teachers, financial burden on caregivers who may now have children at home, and estimated lost earning potential for students who miss long stretches or drop out of school.
- *Explore other data collection techniques:* Supplement surveys with other methodological approaches to enrich data validity and depth. Consider integrating structured focus group discussions or participatory mapping to understand communities and children's perceptions.
- *Build community capacity for ongoing monitoring:* Future projects could integrate a capacity-building component for local communities to explore options for monitoring attacks on education in their area. This could enhance local ownership of monitoring, empower communities to advocate for their own protection using evidence they collected, and ensure the sustainability of the project. Safety measures would need to be a priority, and a civil society or international reporting mechanism should be present to receive the reports.
- *A deeper and wider methodological guide:* A composite methodological guide and bank of sample questionnaires would be useful for the sector, once field studies have been completed in additional contexts, focused on other attack types, and using distinct sampling strategies.

ENDNOTES

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[xiii] Eurojust, International Criminal Court, "Documenting international crimes and human rights violations for accountability purposes: Guidelines for civil society organisations," September 2022.
[xiv] For more, see Eurojust, International Criminal Court, "Documenting international crimes and human rights violations for accountability purposes: Guidelines for civil society organisations," September 2022; Edward J. Alessi and Sarilee Kahn, "Toward a trauma-informed qualitative research approach: Guidelines for ensuring the safety and promoting the resilience of research participants," Qualitative Research in Psychology August 2022, 20(1):1-34.
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[xix] For more details about study limitations, see Kobo and LA CID, "Learning under fire: Attacks on education in Colombia, 2020-2025," November 2025.