

## Youth violence in Central America: discourses and policies

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# Youth Violence in Central America: Discourses and Policies

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**Peter Peetz<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

The article analyzes the social construction of youth violence in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador on the one hand, and the related security policies of the three states, on the other. In each country, there is an idiosyncratic way of constructing youth violence and juvenile delinquency. Also, each country has its own manner of reaction to those problems. In El Salvador youths are socially constructed as a threat to security, and the state implements predominantly repressive policies to protect citizens against that threat. In Nicaragua and Costa Rica, where the social discourse on youth violence is less prominent, the state's policies are neither very accentuated nor very coherent, whether in terms of repressive or nonrepressive measures. There are strong relationships and mutual influences between the public's fear (or disregard) of youth violence and the state's policies to reduce it.

## **Keywords**

Central America, youth violence, discourse analysis

Within the policy and research field of violence, crime, and insecurity in Latin America, analysts increasingly see violent and criminal behavior among youths as a crucial topic. In many countries, youth violence is identified as

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one major cause of insecurity (see, for example, Fournier, 2000). In addition to the concerns raised from a mere security perspective, social actors and scholars focus on youth violence from other viewpoints as well; they discuss it, for instance, with regard to social and development policies. As approximately one-third of the Latin American population is under 15 years of age, social phenomena among youths are highly relevant to the present and future development of the region. On the other hand, in the field of violence and security studies, interest in the different phenomena, causes, and consequences of youth violence began to boom when the debate on violence in Latin America shifted its focus from political to criminal and social violence, that is, from guerrilla warfare, state terrorism, and “dirty wars” to street delinquency, organized crime, gang violence, domestic violence, vigilante justice, and so forth (see, for example, Kurtenbach, 2005). Youth violence gains importance as an issue interrelated with many other problems: youths and petty crime, youths in gangs, violent youths as (former) victims of domestic violence, youths and drugs, and so on. The most prominent youth violence phenomenon in Latin America is the Central American—more exactly the Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran—*maras*, a special type of youth gang that originated in the context of emigration to and deportation from the United States.

This article argues that in some countries of Central America—and presumably in other parts of Latin America—specific groups of young people and, to a certain degree, the younger generation as a whole are socially constructed as a threat to citizen security (*seguridad ciudadana*). In particular, youth gang members are constructed as the number-one menace to the security of the whole of Central America. In this vein, the persecution of youths in the name of *seguridad ciudadana* is legitimized and justified.

The analysis is organized as follows: First, the methodological and theoretical bases of the article are laid out. In particular, the terms *seguridad ciudadana*, youth violence, and discourse are operationalized. Then, some statistical data on youth violence are given in order to facilitate a rough notion of the empirical reality of that phenomenon in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador. The next section examines the way in which the media, politicians, scholars, and “common people” in the three countries discuss the issue of youth violence. Subsequently, the focus shifts to the policies undertaken in the three countries to reduce this phenomenon. The concluding section connects the discursive and the policy dimensions, with the aim of detecting possible linkages between both, and reflects briefly on the relevance of the findings for Latin America.

## Methodological and Theoretical Considerations

This article is part of a research project that analyzes the origins, development, and institutionalization of the “talk of crime” (Caldeira, 2000) in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador.<sup>1</sup> The sample of countries was chosen to include a small number of cases that, in spite of their relative homogeneity as Central American nations, feature some differences generally assumed to be of high relevance in the violence and security context: The sample covers countries with a relatively low and a relatively high level of development (Nicaragua and El Salvador vs. Costa Rica), countries with and without a recent history of armed conflict (Nicaragua and El Salvador vs. Costa Rica), and countries with crime and violence problems perceived as high/increasing and low (El Salvador and Costa Rica vs. Nicaragua). The research design is not comparative in a strict sense: First, the three countries are analyzed not only as individual cases but also as part of Central America as one “bounded system” (Stake, 2000). Second, the analysis does not pretend to detect causalities between independent and dependent variables by comparing countries that feature those variables with countries that do not. The project and this article do not aim to explain *why* a given discourse exists or *why* a government adopts a policy. Rather, the endeavor is to find out *which* discourses exist (and which of them are hegemonic) and *what* societal and political context they exist in.

Oettler (2007, pp. 27-28) summarizes some of the main results of the project as follows:

Public life in the three Central American countries . . . is shaped by the fear of crime, albeit with varying threat levels and different objects of fear. . . . [T]here are crossnational discursive leitmotivs. . . . The notion of organized youth violence has amounted to the most important feature of national and international debates on violent Central American “realities.”

Given the prominence of youth violence in the Central American discourses of violence, this article aims to provide a more detailed analysis regarding that topic. It focuses particularly on the social construction of youth violence on the one hand, and the youth violence-related security policies of governments in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador on the other.

The methodological approach of the project and, hence, of this article is to conduct a discourse-analytical examination of the talk of (youth) crime in the

three countries using a qualitative research design. The article does not intend to discover the “real” dimensions, causes, or consequences of violence in Central America. Instead, it focuses on the way the Central American societies treat the perceived security problems discursively. Therefore, it analyzes written and spoken statements of different powerful and less powerful speakers in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador.<sup>2</sup>

Empirically, the discourse analysis is based on sources gathered in the three countries in late 2006. The main sources consist of

1. Press articles: The research team examined the online-versions<sup>3</sup> of the two most important daily newspapers of each country,<sup>4</sup> taking into account all issues between 2004 and 2006. The team members copied all leading front-page articles<sup>5</sup> related to violence or crime, totaling some 1,000 articles, into a database. Using computer software for qualitative data analysis (“atlas.ti”) they categorized the articles into eight topic clusters, one of which was “crime/violence and youth.” From this subcorpus of approximately 250 articles, the author of this article defined 7 characteristic articles to be quoted here.
2. Party platforms and speeches of prominent politicians, both from government and opposition parties: The research team either downloaded these sources from the Internet or obtained them as hard copies during their field research. Between 20 and 30 of such documents were found for each country. For this article, all documents were screened for content related to youth violence or juvenile delinquency. Relevant passages were then extracted, compiled, and compared to each other in order to identify “typical” quotes.
3. Scholarly texts: Since the beginning of the project (and before), the research team compiled and viewed secondary literature on violence in Central America. For this article, only texts focusing on youth violence and juvenile delinquency were taken into account.
4. Qualitative semistructured interviews: The members of the research team interviewed about 30 people in each in country. The aim of the interviews was not to gather “expert” information but to collect statements (“speech acts”) on different aspects of the topic of violence from people as diverse as possible, in terms of socioeconomic background, profession, gender, age, and so on. Before going to the field, the researchers decided on a list of interviewee categories that had to be covered. Some categories were related to the research topic (e.g., one policeman in a rural and one in an urban area, security guard,

judge) others were not (bus driver, house maid, priest, business man, etc.). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and “coded”—similar to the press articles and the political documents—using the *altas.ti*-software.<sup>6</sup> All interview passages regarding youth violence and crime were filtered out to be added to the specific corpus of this article.

5. Pupils' essays: The data set also includes 226 brief texts written by pupils from 10 (3 in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, 4 in El Salvador) rural and urban, marginal and elite schools. The majority of the pupils were between 14 and 17 years old. In a first step, the juveniles were only confronted with the following question: “Imagine you were the president of the country. What are the country's most important problems and how would you solve them?” Thus, this question was not directly linked to the research question but rather allowed for a variety of answers related to the violence and security topic or not. The second question was, “Do you feel secure in your family/neighborhood/village/town/country? Why/Why not?” The handwritten answers were typed and also entered in the *altas.ti* database, so that text passages referring to youth violence were easy to be picked out and to be utilized for this article.<sup>7</sup>

This selection of sources was chosen, first of all, to cover both powerful and less powerful speakers. The source selection also reflects the research project's aim of achieving insights regarding the discourses that circulate in specific discursive spaces, in particular in the media, in the political arena, in the academic debate, and in “everyday discourse.”<sup>8</sup> It is assumed here that the argumentative foundations of state responses to youth violence and juvenile delinquency are closely linked to the way youth crime is constructed in these discursive spaces.

The security policies are analyzed on the basis of the existing literature on the matter, the media coverage,<sup>9</sup> and some of the previously mentioned qualitative interviews.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the analysis regarding youth violence as such, the analysis of the related policies will not focus on the discursive dimension and will not discuss questions with respect to how knowledge about those policies is generated. Instead, it will analyze the security policies using “conventional” (positivist) policy analysis. This is not a contradiction to the constructivist approach of this article. The inclusion of a non-discourse-analytical section is legitimate because the subject of this part of the analysis (security policies on youth violence) is much less a disputed “reality” than the subject of the discourse analysis (youth violence). And only this combination of

constructivism-inspired and positivist methods allows for the detection of the relationships between discourses and policies. From a policy analysis point of view, this research design is in line with Hajer's (1993, p. 45) claim that "the real challenge for argumentative analysis is to find ways of combining the analysis of the discursive production of reality with the analysis of the (extradiscursive) social practice . . . ."

### "Seguridad Ciudadana"

All over Latin America, government policies meant to prevent and/or combat youth violence are generally designed and implemented within the context of the state's policies of *seguridad ciudadana*. The concrete meaning of *seguridad ciudadana* varies significantly, depending on who uses it (and where, when, etc.).<sup>11</sup> However, many authors agree that the term relates to two levels of reality. First, it refers to a condition or a state: to the absence of threats that could endanger the security of a person or a group. In this sense, the term has a highly normative meaning. It describes an ideal situation—probably inexistent in any part of the world but existing "as an objective to strive for" (González, 2003, p. 17). Second, it refers to public policies aiming (but probably never managing) to achieve this ideal situation. In other words, it refers to policies that seek to eliminate security threats or to protect the population vis-à-vis these threats. In this latter sense, the term *seguridad ciudadana* refers to an empirically existent social practice.

Governments and other actors use the term *seguridad ciudadana* because it has the connotation of a preventive and, to a certain degree, liberal approach to problems of violence and crime—as opposed to merely repressive ways of addressing these issues.<sup>12</sup> The expression as such emphasizes the protection of the citizen. It thus contrasts with the protection and defense of the state as postulated by the concept of *seguridad nacional* (national security), which dominated the public debate on security in past decades. The terminological shift suggests that the state now protects the physical integrity, property, and individual rights of all citizens. Yet the concept and practice of *seguridad ciudadana* tend to create a difference between citizens who deserve protection and social groups considered to be a potential threat. Depending on the country, the latter may be, for example, drug addicts or dealers, ethnic groups, immigrants, or, as this article argues, youths. In a way, people who are part of these groups become the "criminal other" because the policies of *seguridad ciudadana* implicitly exclude them.<sup>13</sup> Often, the state does not protect these people, and their human and civil rights are violated. This, in turn, is justified by the alleged need to protect those citizens considered to deserve protection.

## Youth Violence

When we categorize an act as juvenile delinquency or youth violence, we pick one of the many aspects of a given deed and define it as the distinctive one. Apart from the fact that the act is considered criminal or violent,<sup>14</sup> the age of its perpetrator becomes the crucial characteristic by which to classify it.<sup>15</sup> Other aspects, such as the sex or ethnicity of the offender or the victim, the place where the “crime” was committed, the nature of the deed (theft, graffiti spraying, murder), and so forth, are not relevant for the categorization as youth violence. However, those other aspects might be highly important, for example, in terms of the offender’s motives, the methods used to prosecute the crime, or the society’s chances of preventing similar acts. The fact that one and the same crime (e.g., the assassination of a woman by a young migrant) may simultaneously be an act of youth violence, immigrant criminality, and *femicidio* (“femicide,” murder of a woman) shows that the way we perceive a phenomenon is heavily dependent on socially determined and historically mutable categories.

### *The Discourse Analytical Approach*

From this constructivist point of view, youth violence exists by virtue of its being socially constructed; the dimensions and causes we attribute to it, as well as the approaches we invent to combat or prevent it, depend at least as much on the characteristics of this construction as on the behavior of a country’s youths. Therefore, this article contains only a very brief empirical introduction to the dimensions of youth violence in Central America and does not aim to contrast the “reality” of youth violence or youth gangs<sup>16</sup> in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador with the social construction of that “reality.” Taking the constructivist approach seriously, it makes no sense to present exhaustive statistical data on homicides committed by juvenile offenders with the intent of unmasking a discourse as exaggerated or erroneous. Whether a discourse is right or wrong is not the issue here. Instead, this article aims to identify the specific characteristics of the discourses and address the question of whether and how the discourses are interrelated with the security policies of the respective countries.

The measures taken by governments and other actors are not “natural” reactions to a phenomenon such as youth violence. Rather, they depend on the specific perception each actor has of the problem, and this perception, in turn, is influenced by the public discourse regarding the phenomenon. The specific power relationships in a given society determine both the discourse and the

impact it has on policy making. A discourse is generated in multiple discursive spaces, in which different actors compete regarding the definition and interpretation of specific violence and crime phenomena. Discourse is understood here as a “regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements” (Foucault, 2002, p. 90). By means of repetition and acceptance, a discourse is a condition and—at the same time—a consequence of collective practices: “Discourse is socially constitutive as well as shaped” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). It constructs, transforms, and structures the collective practices. Contrary to the assumption that individual actors, such as politicians or the mass media, “create” or control opinions that are then accepted by society, Jäger (2004, p. 148) postulates that a discourse is hard to control:

No individual determines the discourse. A discourse is, so to speak, the result of all the many efforts people make to act in a society. What comes out is something that nobody wanted to come out like that, but which everybody has contributed to in different ways.

In spite of these self-generating dynamics, discourses are not produced in a chaotic way. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has claimed that the historical and ideological context in which a text (or any other discursive event) is produced has to be taken into account as much as the text itself (see, for example, van Dijk, 1999; Wodak, 2001).

## **The Empirical “Reality” of (Youth) Violence in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador**

Despite the discourse analytical approach of this article, it is necessary to present some fundamental data on the magnitude of youth violence in the three countries analyzed. This empirical overview provides only a rough idea regarding the question whether the discourse is in any way congruent with the empirical reality of the respective countries or not. Crime statistics are themselves a product of discursive practices and tend to reflect police activity as well as socially constructed categories of offenses, victims, offenders, and so forth (see, for example, Caldeira, 2000, pp. 106-115). Thus, the data given here should not be understood as a description of how serious the problem of youth violence in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador “really is” (or is not), but as a short insight into “what we think we know” about the issue.

In the Latin American, and especially in the Central American context, Nicaragua and Costa Rica are both considered countries with relatively low levels of violence. In the academic and political debate, this is usually

substantiated citing the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants. According to data provided by the UNDP-funded OCAVI-initiative (*Observatorio Centroamericano sobre Violencia*, Central American Violence Observatory), from 2003 to 2006, Nicaragua's homicide rates have oscillated between 12 and 13 and Costa Rica's between 6 and 8 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>17</sup> Data regarding the question of how many homicides, or how many violent or criminal acts in general, are attributable to young offenders are hard to find for both countries, and the existing sources are not always complete and cross-nationally comparable. The Nicaraguan police (Policía Nacional, 2006, p. 55) published statistical information attributing 6.6% of all registered offenses in 2005 to juveniles. In 2006 the percentage decreased to 6.1% and in 2007 to 5.3% (Policía Nacional, 2008, p. 3). Neither the police nor other governmental or nongovernmental institutions in Nicaragua publish any information regarding the number (or the share) of homicides committed by minors. For Costa Rica, data from the country's Yearbook of Judicial Statistics suggest that from all penal cases treated in the justice system, the share of cases in the juvenile justice system slightly decreased from 4.9% in both 2005 and 2006 to 4.7% in 2007.<sup>18</sup> Neither the Yearbook nor other sources contain information on the percentage of (all kinds of) homicides committed by minors. Yet the source gives the following absolute numbers for "homicidio doloso" (murder/intentional homicide) regardless of the age of the offender: 2005:300; 2006:338; 2007:357.<sup>19</sup> In 2005 and 2007, the courts found 3<sup>20</sup> and 16<sup>21</sup> minors guilty of homicide, respectively (no data for 2006). In a nutshell, according to the statistical information available, both Costa Rica and Nicaragua feature relatively low levels of (youth) violence.

El Salvador is considered one of the most violent countries in Latin America. This is primarily due to a high homicide rate that increased from 37.3 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2004 to 55.3 in 2006, according to the OCAVI data. Regarding the contribution of youths to violence and crime in El Salvador, the Supreme Court's Office for Juvenile Justice (Unidad de Justicia Juvenil, 2007) published statistical data on juvenile delinquency. The share of criminal acts attributed to minors fluctuated from 5.61% in 2004, going up to 6.11% in 2005, and down again to 5.47% in 2006. These official data, thus, do not suggest a major or continuous increase. Juveniles seem to be responsible for about 6% of all crimes registered through the justice system. The same source also shows data on the share of homicides attributed to minors from 2000 to 2004. It is somewhat higher and increased from 5.72% in 2000 to a peak of 10.7% in 2003 and slightly decreased to 9.96% in 2004 (the source does not present data for later years). Considering the high overall homicide rate of the country, it is certainly no exaggeration to state that El Salvador is confronting a serious problem of (lethal) youth violence. While analyzing the discourse

on this phenomenon, it should be kept in mind, nevertheless, that there are still 10 times more homicides attributed to adults than to minors.

According to the official crime statistics presented here, the share of both penalized offenses in general and of homicides in particular committed by minors is relatively low in the three countries. Percentages of approximately 6% or 10%, like those of El Salvador, must also be interpreted in light of the fact that in Central America, youth under 18 make up for a considerably higher share of the total population than, for example, in many OECD countries. In Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador 33%, 44%, and 39% of the population, respectively, were under 18 in 2007.<sup>22</sup>

## **The Social Construction of Youth Violence in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador**

This section aims to detect the hegemonic discourses on youth violence in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador. Therefore, not only are the discourses of “powerful” speakers, such as the media, politicians, and scholars, analyzed but also those of “less powerful” members of society, such as high school students. It is necessary to consider both “powerful” and “less powerful” speakers because a discourse can only be identified as hegemonic, first, if it is the discourse of the discursive elite, and, second, if nonelite members of society also accept it as “valid knowledge” (Jäger, 2004, p. 149). Regarding the discursive elite, in addition to that of political actors—whose (discursive and material) power does not need to be explained—the media’s and the academic community’s discourses are included in the analysis. The media, for example, high-circulation newspapers, not only reproduce and multiply opinions, they also produce and transform them (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 28). Especially in Central America, media are not only commercial institutions but are also pursuing a political agenda of their own (Huhn, Oettler, & Peetz, 2006b, pp. 11-19). Scholars and the institutions they work for can be considered discursively “powerful” because they are important producers of the argumentative bases of the public debate. Their findings and interpretations are often (adapted and) reproduced in the media and in the political realm, and they influence governmental and nongovernmental decision makers through counseling.

### *The Media Discourse*

As shown in a previous work (Huhn, Oettler, & Peetz, 2006b), in the two Nicaraguan newspapers analyzed (*La Prensa* and *El Nuevo Diario*), the

front-page articles on crime and security published in the years 2004-2006 very rarely refer to problems of youth violence or juvenile delinquency. Other issues, such as drug-related crime or particular cases (of murder, fraud, violations, etc.), are much more prominent. Most of the (few) front-page articles in which youth violence *is* a central topic refer to youth gangs, either to the *maras* in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala or to Nicaraguan *pandillas*. For example:

[Headline] We kill our parents, if it is necessary/[Subhead]The majority grew up in Latin ghettos and neighborhoods of Los Angeles until they were deported to El Salvador and Tegucigalpa/[Sub-subhead] First, young combatants of the civil war, now a primary source of organized crime. (*El Nuevo Diario*, July 10, 2005)

or

[Headline] Violent gangs in night of fight/[Subhead] . . . Stones, machetes, tubes, and sticks were the objects used by the members of the gangs “The Possessed” and “Those from Below” and by their family members to attack five officers from the Fifth Police District. (*La Prensa*, October 4, 2004)

In quantitative terms, press coverage of youth violence in the Costa Rican newspapers (*Al Día* and *La Nación*) does not differ significantly from that in Nicaragua. Gangs also play an important role in (the few) youth violence-related front-page articles, sometimes foreign *maras*, but mostly domestic *pandillas* (or *chapulines* as they are called in Costa Rica). For example:

[Headline] Neighborhoods of San José sieged by 15 youth gangs/  
[Subhead] Gangs even have divisions consisting of delinquent children.  
(*La Nación*, June 6, 2004)

Also, Costa Rican newspapers publish front-page articles about another topic: youth violence and insecurity in schools and universities, as these headlines exemplify: “Drugs and violence unstoppable in [school] classes” (*Al Día*, February 28, 2005), “Violence corrodes and burdens 200 schools” (*La Nación*, March 14, 2006). Whereas Nicaraguan newspapers refer to youth violence rather as a potential future issue (threatening to spill over from other parts of Central America in the form of *maras*), *Al Día*, and *La Nación* postulate that, in Costa Rica, serious problems of youth violence are already a reality.

The two Salvadoran newspapers analyzed (*El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica*) treat the topic of youth violence and especially that of youth gangs prominently. Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz (2006b) show that this observation is valid for both newspapers throughout the period under review (2004–2006). Apart from this quantitative evidence, it is also important to note that both the content and the wording of many of the newspaper articles tend to emphasize the seriousness of the *mara* problem. Headlines such as “*Maras besiege Soyapango* [a shanty town in the metropolitan area of San Salvador]” (*El Diario de Hoy*, April 25, 2004) or “297 homicides in May” (*La Prensa Gráfica*, June 1, 2006) are typical examples.

### *The Political Discourse*

Alongside the media, other powerful speakers in the debate about youth violence and delinquency are political actors (political leaders, government officials, parties, parliamentary factions, NGOs, etc.). The sources analyzed (speeches of prominent politicians, party platforms, etc.) show that in Nicaragua youth violence is an issue rarely addressed in the political realm. The government programs drafted by political parties in view of the 2006 general elections are a good example. In the 15-page Government Program of the now-ruling FSLN,<sup>23</sup> the only reference to youth violence reads,

We are going to work on the issue of gangs in Nicaragua; we are oriented towards social reintegration of their members as a form of solving the exclusion of those sectors in a social manner, and, at the same time, giving sustainability to citizen security. (Alianza Unidad, 2006, p. 12)

Not surprisingly, the only passage—located on page 44 of a total of 45—referring to youth violence in the MRS<sup>24</sup> program sounds quite similar:

We are going to implement programs to work with youths organized in gangs and to promote their integration into the labor market and into community life. (Alianza MRS, 2006, p. 44)

Regarding the right-of-center parties, no ALN<sup>25</sup> document containing the party’s or its presidential candidate’s plans concerning youth violence has been found. The policies the PLC<sup>26</sup> proposes, in terms of *seguridad ciudadana* in general, seem to be inspired by the *mano dura* (iron-fist) rhetoric of successful contenders in previous elections in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Yet with regard to the particular issue of youth violence, it is difficult to find

any differences from the preventive and rehabilitation-oriented stances of FSLN or MRS:

We are going to strengthen citizen security, especially in neighborhoods with major population concentration, applying a zero-tolerance policy against delinquency. Also, we will encourage social reintegration of the juvenile groups at risk. (Alianza PLC, 2006, p. 37)

Regarding documents from political actors, the Costa Rican case is similar to the Nicaraguan in terms of the relatively low importance of youth violence within the broader context of insecurity. It is crucial to note, though, that this broader context is of much higher relevance in the public debate in Costa Rica than in Nicaragua. As for Nicaragua, there are rather few sources with any kind of “official” character (speeches of high-ranking politicians, party platforms, etc.) that explicitly address the issue of youth violence or juvenile delinquency. Sometimes, as in the following extract from then president Óscar Arias’ inaugural speech, youth and crime are only implicitly linked—here, by connecting education with crime and by mentioning “school corridors” as a site of (small-scale) drug trafficking:

Education and security. From today on, we are going to adopt a clear course in public education. We are going to adopt a clear course in the fight against insecurity and drugs. We are going to be tough on delinquency, but even tougher on the causes of delinquency. We are going to deepen the preventive orientation of the Public Force [that is, the police] and we are going to provide it with more resources. We are going to fight drug trafficking relentlessly. And not only the big drug trafficking, but, in particular, small-scale drug trafficking, as it happens at the corners of our neighborhoods, in the parks of our communities, at the doors and in the hallways of our schools. This will be one of the first priorities in terms of citizen security. (Arias Sánchez, 2006, p. 6)

The quote also provides a good example of the government’s approach to reducing (juvenile) delinquency. In a way, Arias’ rhetoric resembles that of the Salvadoran government, as it advocates repressive policies in combination with preventive and rehabilitation-oriented measures. Apparently, there is no consensus among political actors in Costa Rica about this approach, at least not with regard to juvenile delinquency. The main opposition party, the leftist PAC,<sup>27</sup> for example, issued a government program before the 2006 elections.

Although the program contains some “zero-tolerance” elements regarding drug-related crime, it appears to be unconditionally opposed to repression as a way of fighting juvenile delinquency:

We have to stop the hidden tolerance these groups [of organized crime] operate with in many neighborhoods of the capital and other cities of the country, as well as in rural areas, where the sale and the consumption of drugs often happens in the presence of the authorities who let it happen with indifference.

Propositions:

–The attention to specific problems of children and youths with delinquent behavior and of youth gangs, by means of training programs that take into account their dignity, generate labor, and foster their integration in society.

–Prevention and rehabilitation of youths in marginalized rural and urban areas by means of a variety of social and educational programs and projects which respect them as human beings. (PAC, 2006, pp. 46-50)

The document explicitly refers to “youth gangs” (“*pandillas juveniles*”). The political class seems to be sharing the media’s view and depiction of youth violence as a twofold problem: of gangs on the one hand, and other problems (particularly drugs and violence in schools) on the other.

As to El Salvador, many leaders and organizations from different political camps portray juvenile delinquency, and in particular the *maras*, as one of the biggest problems the country is currently facing. To give only one of myriad possible examples, then President Saca declared the following in an address to the people of El Salvador on the second anniversary of his assumption of the presidency:

But it is in the issue of citizen security where we confront the biggest challenge. Organized crime and the delinquency of gangs constantly hit decent citizens, who are the immense majority, and this is an attack against the stability of the country. (Saca, 2006)

There are obvious linkages between the discourse of the government and the media discourse, not only regarding the general aspects (youth gangs depicted as one of the main problems of the country), but also in terms of more specific representations of gangs. For example, in September 2005, *El Diario de Hoy* (September 28, 2005) began to describe *maras* as parts of organized

crime networks, stating, “Recent police intelligence confirms the dramatic change the gangs have gone through, as they use the available infrastructure to commit crimes typical of organized crime.” In July 2006, *La Prensa Gráfica* (July 3, 2006) quoted then Interior Minister René Figueroa (talking about an initiative of the executive to reform the country’s penal code): “Figueroa . . . said that this reform is designed to treat gangs as ‘organized crime, linked with kidnapping, the drug trade, and contract killing’.”

As to the former opposition, now governing FMLN<sup>28</sup> issued a platform for the 2004 elections that stated the following among 15 “Big Goals for El Salvador”:

7th, secure country: Progress of citizen security, the reduction of social violence, the overcoming of the mara problem, and the effective fight against all kind of crime and impunity. (FMLN, 2003, p. 18)

Still, in many newer sources from left-wing political actors such as FMLN, the issues of juvenile delinquency and youth gangs are not mentioned. For example, the Platform of Hope, published by the FMLN parliamentary faction in 2005, contains a section (section VIII) on violence and crime. Implicitly, it accuses the ARENA<sup>29</sup> government of being responsible for “the avalanche of homicides that has grown, even tripled, during the governments of Flores and Saca” (FMLN, 2005, p. 19). But nowhere in the document does the party directly address juvenile delinquency or youth gangs. It can only be speculated that those leftist actors were deliberately trying not to contribute to what they saw as a security paranoia—from which only the right has managed to benefit at the ballot box.

### *The Academic Discourse*

In the academic debate on violence and insecurity in Nicaragua, a considerable corpus of literature on youth-specific topics, particularly youth gangs, has emerged in the past few years (e.g., DIRINPRO, NITLAPAN, & IDESO, 2004; Rocha, 2005, 2007; Rodgers, 2007). This is in contrast to the relatively low profile these topics have had, as we have seen, in the media and in the political arena. Presumably, the fact that—outside Central America—*maras* are known as a “Central American” problem has contributed to this academic overrepresentation of gang issues in Nicaragua as well as in Costa Rica. One of the most important publications on youth gangs in Central America, the four volumes of *Maras y Pandillas en Centroamérica* (Cruz, 2006; ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, & IUDOP, 2001, 2004; ERIC, IDIES, IUDOP, NITLAPAN,

& DIRINPRO, 2004), is a typical example: Despite all the differences between Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran *maras* on the one hand, and Nicaraguan *pandillas* on the other, each volume includes one chapter on the Nicaraguan case just as it does for the three other countries (the case of Costa Rica, though, is not included). Also, it seems that Nicaragua's past, marked by revolution and armed conflict, has drawn some attention to the country's (few) gangs and has turned it into a more interesting study subject than, for example, Honduran *maras*.

In the case of Costa Rica, it can be assumed that the academic infrastructure, which is relatively well developed in comparison to all other Central American countries, allows for the inclusion of a topic such as youth gangs on the agenda, even if it may not be a key problem for the country itself (but rather for its neighbors). In this context, it is important to note that, when scholars from Costa Rica study youth gangs in other parts of the isthmus—especially when they publish their results in Costa Rica—this has to be considered part of the Costa Rican (and Central American) academic discourse on youth violence. Nevertheless, Nicaraguan and Costa Rican scholarly literature on youth gangs and youth violence is, in quantitative terms, not comparable to that of El Salvador.

In El Salvador, youth violence and gang activity can currently be considered the number-one issue. The corpus of literature on these matters has grown exponentially in recent years<sup>30</sup> and some of the most recognized research institutions of the country, such as IUDOP,<sup>31</sup> have focused on these themes and have participated in conferences and symposia with high public visibility. In general, the viewpoint of the scholars working on El Salvador does not differ much from the media's and many politicians' point of view, particularly in terms of one fundamental aspect: Youth violence, and the *maras* in particular, are depicted as one of the country's biggest problems and as a serious threat to public security. There are a number of disagreements, both among researchers and between them and political actors or the media, regarding specific aspects of the issue, for example, the size and characteristics of the gangs or the way youth violence could or should be prevented or combated. But there is a broad consensus about the prime importance of the subject for El Salvador among Salvadoran and international researchers alike.<sup>32</sup>

### *The “Everyday Discourse”*

To investigate if and how the discourse of the media, political actors, and scholars corresponds with (or contradicts) the discourse of other, less powerful,

**Table 1.** Youth Violence as a Central Theme in Pupils’ Answers

	Private school			Urban public school(s)				Rural school		
	NI	CR	SV	NI	CR	SV1	SV2	NI	CR	SV
Total participants per school	19	20	19	27	24	25	27	21	20	10
1st (open) question	1	0	16	2	0	11	13	0	0	6
2nd question (related to personal security)	5	0	4	3	0	14	20	1	0	4

Notes: NI = Nicaragua; CR = Costa Rica; SV = El Salvador (two urban public schools in El Salvador).

members of society, brief texts drafted by students and interviews with people from different social backgrounds were analyzed.

In both Nicaragua and Costa Rica the issue of youth violence is only of marginal importance in the students’ texts. In their answers to the open, not violence-related question about the most urgent problems of the country, only three participants in Nicaragua and none in Costa Rica mention youth violence or juvenile delinquency as a major problem (Table 1). In the case of the three relevant answers from Nicaragua, two contain an explicit reference to youth gangs. “Talia,”<sup>33</sup> from a public school in Managua, writes,

First, the most urgent problems are the gangs, drugs, theft, etc. I would solve it by placing police in every spot where the thefts occur; the gangs should search for god because god can change them and take care of them wherever they may be.

The third one refers to street delinquency perpetrated by youths in general, not necessarily by gangs:

Invest in education: delinquency in the country would be reduced, because youths would not hang out in the streets anymore. (“Xelene,” from a private school in Managua)

As to the interviews, the differences between Nicaragua and Costa Rica are more significant. In Nicaragua, for 10 of the interview partners, youth violence, particularly *pandillas*, is an important topic. In Costa Rica, the odd interviewee mentions youth violence or youth gangs, but no one addresses

the issue in such a way that it could be assumed he or she considers it a central security problem. In Nicaragua, for example, a Managua nurse, when asked about street violence, says,

Ah, street violence has increased enormously; I mean, the majority of the patients we treat here, the vast majority are due to violence, that is, fights between gangs, aggressions when a person is robbed. That has increased much more than the other kind of violence—domestic.

To the question, “What role do the gangs play? Are there many gangs here in Managua?,” she answers,

A lot of gangs, too many gangs, too many gangs and also there are many—we call them thieves, that means, people who steal. Maybe, the gangs do not steal from you. The gangs, what they generate is insecurity in the neighborhoods, because they fight against each other because of drugs.

Apparently, in Nicaragua there is a phenomenon that occurs inversely in Costa Rica: Although for many Nicaraguan “common people” youth gangs and other forms of youth violence are an important cause of concern, the dominant speakers in the public discourse (with the notable exception of the social science community), that is, the media and political leaders and institutions, tend to ignore or implicitly downplay the problem. In Costa Rica, politicians, scholars, and, to a limited extent, the media tend to give the issue a higher profile than less powerful speakers do.

For El Salvador, both the students’ texts and the interviews reveal a high level of concern—and fear—vis-à-vis gang and youth violence. Table 1 shows that in El Salvador a majority of participants (46 out of 81 students) in the “school experiment,” responding to the open, not violence-related question, mention youth violence as a major problem in the country. For example, “Dominic,” from a public secondary school in the center of San Salvador, writes,

As president, the first thing I would do is the gang problem; it would be, if the gang member quits the gang or, at least, behaves well, I would see the report to consider his progress and then decide whether to let him out of prison or not.

Interestingly, in the answers to the not-violence-related question, a higher proportion of pupils from the private school and from the rural school than from the urban public schools refer to youth violence as an important problem in the country.<sup>34</sup> Yet in the second question, directly asking for personal experiences with security/insecurity, the proportion of private school children who refer to *maras* or other youth violence phenomena is low. In contrast, in the urban public schools many participants report having had such problems personally.<sup>35</sup> The students of the private school, who usually have an upper middle-class background—which, in El Salvador, includes certain security standards—seem to be more reflective about youth violence than their peers from the public school, even if, for the latter, *maras* pose a much more immediate threat.<sup>36</sup>

Many Salvadoran interview partners also express their preoccupation with youth violence and the *maras*.<sup>37</sup> The following short extracts of two of the interviews illustrate this: Answering the question, “And how do you perceive the situation of the country, El Salvador, and also of the city here, in terms of violence?” a taxi driver says,

Yes, there is quite a lot of violence, there is very, very much violence. It has increased because . . . the government has not put much interest in it. The laws are very weak for the youngsters who are gang members.

Asked about the differences between the situation during the civil war and today, a consultant from a German company’s Salvadoran office responds,

Well, let’s put it simply, at the times of the civil wars, it was kind of a social movement. . . . Today, there is simply the threat that the socio-economic context has become negative because of the massive population growth, because young people have hardly any chance of finding a meaningful job. . . . And what makes the situation somewhat difficult is, very simply, that these people, these young people, organize in youth gangs, which originated in the USA.

### *Comparing the Discourse of Powerful and Less Powerful Speakers*

In light of the above analysis of the sources, it can be confirmed that youth violence, and the *mara* issue in particular, are depicted by both powerful and

less powerful speakers in El Salvador as one of the country's main problems. Furthermore, the selected quotes indicate which security policies those speakers see as the appropriate ones in the attempt to tackle these problems. Whereas the citations reflect a rather repressive approach, there are a considerable number of sources, especially academic texts and interviews, which reveal a more liberal way of thinking, particularly through an emphasis on prevention or on the need to fight the "deeper causes" of the violence (poverty, lack of education, lack of values, etc.). Apparently, within the consensus about the gravity of the issue of youth and gang violence, there are competing opinions about the way to solve those problems. Yet with the most influential media companies, the ARENA government, and other powerful actors (e.g., the business-friendly think tank FUSADES<sup>38</sup>) on its side, the repressive approach was the hegemonic one at the time of the study.

However, as to the discourse of the Salvadoran governments, the sources show that, at least since former President Saca took office in 2004, the repressive discourse against *maras* has been combined with one of prevention and rehabilitation. An example is this passage from Saca's inaugural speech on June 1, 2004:

We are going to use "Super Iron Fist" to bring the delinquents before the law, but at the same time we will lend our hand to avoid that those who are in risk become delinquents and to rescue and rehabilitate those who want to be reintegrated into society. (Saca, 2004)

The 2004 government program of then ruling ARENA party also emphasizes this combination of repressive and nonrepressive measures:

There will be special concentration on the particular situation of gangs, both in terms of prevention and sanctions and in terms of the reintegration of their members into society. (ARENA, 2004, p. 11)

As the next section of this article argues, this combination strategy is (at most) only halfheartedly implemented in actual policies and thus mainly exists on the rhetorical level. But nevertheless, an interesting result of this analysis is the finding that there is significant congruence between the government's discourse on how to reduce youth gang violence on the one hand, and the opinions most of our interview partners express on the other. Twenty-two interviewees in El Salvador make a statement about what kind of solution they see to insecurity.<sup>39</sup> Of these 22, 13 demand measures that can be categorized

as repressive; 20 argue for nonrepressive action.<sup>40</sup> Thus, 11 of the 13 who argue for repression also want nonrepressive policies to be implemented, and only 2 of the 22 want exclusively repressive measures. A police officer from San Salvador, for example, complains about judges who, in his view, are too permissive:

What are the law reforms good for, if, at the end, the judges do not implement the laws, do not judge according to sanity and reason?

Nevertheless, later on, he takes a more preventive, education- and value-oriented (although at the same time control-oriented) stance:

Security is everybody's matter. It is the priest's matter, the mayor's; it is the teachers' matter; it is the taxi drivers' matter; it is the matter of all of us who belong to society. The responsibility of the priest is to guide the believers. If he knows a woman's son who already tends towards delinquency, well, bring him to church and start to indoctrinate him according to the doctrine of the church. So he can see if he can save him, as they say, save his soul. That way, they have already generated security.

Apparently, the discourse of the government and that of many "ordinary people" about how to confront (youth) violence have much in common in El Salvador. And even if the sources do not allow assumptions in terms of causal relations, they do suggest there is at least some kind of close interrelatedness and (presumably mutual) influence between the two discursive spheres.

In sum, in Nicaragua, youth violence seems to be treated as being of rather marginal relevance by powerful speakers, such as politicians or the media. It is depicted as being of slightly higher importance by other, less powerful, members of society. In Costa Rica, where violence and crime in general are a much-discussed topic in all spheres of society (Huhn, 2008), youth violence in particular is more prominently addressed by political actors, academic authors, and the media than by "common people." For El Salvador, the sources show that youth violence and particularly the *mara* gangs are seen throughout society as the country's main security problem. It seems that for some parts of Salvadoran society, the gangs are in fact the only important security issue. The fear of youth violence is so intense and ubiquitous that not only (alleged) gang members but also the entire younger generation come under suspicion.<sup>41</sup>

## Government Policies to Reduce Youth Violence in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador

This section will examine the government policies designed to counter juvenile delinquency and youth violence in the three Central American countries. It will also point out whether and how these policies correspond with the hegemonic discourse on those subjects in the three societies. For Nicaragua and El Salvador, much information on the governments' anti-youth-violence policies is available in the existing literature, in the case of Nicaragua especially in the works of the Managua-based researcher José Luis Rocha. Due to the lack of relevant scholarly analyses regarding Costa Rica, in contrast, the section regarding that country relies more on information gathered in interviews and through media monitoring.

### Nicaragua

For Nicaragua, Rocha (2005, 2006, 2007) and Rocha and Bellanger (2004) have analyzed the state's reaction to youth violence and in particular to youth gangs. There seems to be a substantial difference between the official policies, as they become manifest in laws, directives, budgets, and so on, on the one hand, and the actual performance of lower-ranking policemen or other state representatives directly confronted with the problem on the other. On the official level, the institutional history of the Nicaraguan police, the *Policía Nacional* (National Police), is one of the main reasons the state has not opted for a repressive approach to youth violence.

The highest positions in the National Police are held by approximately forty former combatants of the revolution; they occupy the highest echelons and are divided into two networks: the traditional economic elite network and the FSLN network. (Rocha, 2005, p. 3)

Both power groups inside the police have no interest in introducing iron-fist policies. The "traditional economic elite network" wants to present Nicaragua as a country with low criminality and, thus, high attractiveness for foreign investments. Extensive repressive measures and the public attention they provoke would make it difficult to uphold that image. The "FSLN network," in turn, formerly had an interest—at least until Daniel Ortega won the elections in 2006—in maintaining a positive relationship with the *pandillas*, because Sandinismo saw the gangs as potential support groups for public unrest. Moreover,

the Sandinista elite's ability to use sociological terms and concepts and their notoriously superior discursive capacity in relation to their Central American colleagues enabled the appearance of innovative proposals and an assessment of citizen security that deepened the analysis of youth gangs without criminalising their members. (Rocha, 2005, p. 5)

Instead of tightening repression, the *Policía Nacional* focuses on community-based rehabilitation; this may include negotiating armistices between *pandillas*, finding (or helping to create) work opportunities for ex-gang members, and so on.

Together with the police, the parliament and other state institutions have also fostered a nonrepressive, preventive, and rehabilitation-oriented approach to confronting youth violence in Nicaragua. In particular, the approval of the Code of Childhood and Adolescence in 1998 and the instauration of a Special Ombudsman's Office for Children and Adolescents in 2000 were of paramount importance in this context. Both were not so much a consequence of the ideological conviction of the legislators as an effect of the then ruling party's (PLC) efforts to show compliance with foreign donors' demands for the strengthening of human rights and the rule of law (Rocha & Bellanger, 2004, p. 325). Nevertheless, the code and the office, together with subsequent legislation and institutional reforms,<sup>42</sup> have reinforced the approach of the police. They promote the idea that youth violence should not be treated primarily as a security problem, but as a problem of social integration, education, health, and human rights. The implementation of this set of legal and institutional changes has been clearly reflected in the judiciary's dealings with juvenile offenders since then: "The number of adolescents deprived of liberty decreased from 449 in 1998 to only 36 in 2003" (Rocha, 2005, p. 7).

Still, the picture of the nonrepressive handling of youth-violence problems in Nicaragua has to be redrawn when the behavior of the police on the local level is taken into account.<sup>43</sup> For Managua, Maclure and Sotelo (2003, p. 681) note that measures against *pandillas* such as the Plan for Integral Development against Youth Violence are, fundamentally, of a repressive nature:

Although the plan was couched in language that referred to the education and rehabilitation of young delinquents, . . . [its] guiding principle . . . was that of crime control. Accordingly, police units were mandated to crack down on youth violence by arresting known gang leaders and indicting them for criminal offenses. . . . [M]ore than 400 adolescents in Managua, many under 15 years old, had been systematically rounded up and incarcerated by the police, without judicial warrants.

Furthermore, Rocha (2005, p. 10) pinpoints another factor undermining the official, nonrepressive approach of the central authorities:

Due to the ideological, social, and generational gap between the majority of police officers and those at the highest echelons, most policemen do not act according to their superiors' discourse.

Thus, excessive police violence against youths is widespread. A report of the Ombudsman's Office states that 47% of adolescents detained by the police have been mistreated (PDDH, 2002, p. 93). In 2005, a survey among children and adolescents cast a similar light on what is going on in many police stations:

Police facilities are perceived as insecure places. As to the actions of some policemen, the consulted persons had observed corruption, physical and sexual violence . . . , arbitrary action, and transgressions in the detention procedures for adolescents or children. . . . (CONAPINA & CODENI, 2005, p. 60)

Despite these problems of implementation that Nicaragua's "official" policies to reduce youth violence must face—problems all other countries of the isthmus also have to deal with, to a varying degree—the overall trend in the past 10 years has been the favoring of a human and children's rights-based approach implying only a minimal amount of repression. This makes Nicaragua different from all other Central American countries; in particular, the governments of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have decided to resort to the rhetoric and practice of the iron fist (see below for the example of El Salvador).

### *Costa Rica*

It is very difficult to describe the Costa Rican state's policies with respect to youth violence or juvenile delinquency because reliable information on this matter is extremely hard to find, even in Costa Rica itself. This seems to indicate, first, that there are no high-profile government policies in this field and, second, that the policies implemented do not generate much concern or criticism in the press, among scholars, or among NGOs (where the project researchers searched for information). Apparently, there has been no major policy change, either toward repressive or toward

antirepressive policies, since the introduction of the Juvenile Justice Penal Code in 1996.

This law, just like the Code of Childhood and Adolescence in Nicaragua, applies the norms of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child to Costa Rican legislation. It is considered a major step and a paradigmatic change from castigatory law to a rehabilitation-oriented approach based on human and children's rights. As one of the sources revealed,<sup>44</sup> this general bias of the code was pushed through mainly by international cooperation agencies such as UNICEF and by technical advisors who drafted the code's wording. The legislators themselves seem to have been less convinced than the approbation of the law may suggest: In a last-minute change, they increased the maximum imprisonment for those under 18 years of age from 5 years, as the technical commission recommended, to 15 years (Article 131). They thus created a certain contradiction between the general antirepressive bias of the code and this specific stipulation, which made Costa Rica one of the countries with the longest maximum prison sentences for adolescents worldwide. Yet according to an official statement of the Costa Rican government (quoted in DNI, 2004, p. 31), the maximum sentence has been imposed only once.

The actual practice of prosecution and jurisdiction is seemingly less draconic than the legislators who approved the law intended. In a way, this is the opposite of what occurs in Nicaragua. In the latter, a fundamentally antirepressive official policy is only halfheartedly implemented, so that youths, to a certain degree, are exposed to repressive actions; in the former, the difference between official strategy and concrete implementation further softens a somewhat ambiguous approach. As the few sources we found indicate, government policies regarding youth violence and juvenile delinquency lost some of this ambiguity with the coming into office of the Arias administration (May 2006). They now seem to tend more exclusively towards a preventive and rehabilitation-oriented approach. The National Plan for the Prevention of Violence and the Promotion of Social Peace (see Ministerio de Justicia, n.d.), issued by the Justice Ministry, does not reveal any plans for repressive action against adolescents. On the contrary, the plan highlights the government's aim both to strengthen existing programs and to create new prevention and rehabilitation initiatives in the fields of education, labor market integration, recreation and sports, political participation, and so on. According to Costa Rican crime statistics, juvenile delinquency appears to have decreased slightly in recent years (Costa Rica Poder Judicial, 2007, p. 35). It is impossible for the author of this article, however, to assess whether this decrease is due to government policies or to other factors.

## El Salvador

Until recently,<sup>45</sup> the government of El Salvador has clearly favored repressive measures, the so-called *mano dura* (iron-fist) policies, to reduce delinquency in general and youth gang violence in particular.<sup>46</sup> Police forces have steadily grown in terms of budget and staff. The government has increasingly involved the military in combating youth gangs—to the extent that the armed forces have managed to regain much of the domestic power they had gradually lost following the end of the civil war. The police and the military patrol the cities and carry out massive operations, especially in neighborhoods known to be affected by *mara* activities. In these operations, security forces make extensive use of weapons and other military equipment (armored cars, helicopters, etc.) and detain and kill high numbers of suspected youth gang members. Often, youths are arrested on the grounds of being tattooed, a distinctive—though not an exclusive—sign of gang members. Shortly afterwards, many of the detained adolescents and young adults have to be released because of a lack of substantial evidence that they have committed a crime.

In the past, this situation led to harsh conflicts between the government and the judiciary, in particular the judges: Representatives of the executive authorities accused judges of not sentencing young criminals and of sabotaging the government's anticrime policies. The judges, in turn, blamed the prosecuting institutions for not providing the necessary evidence. Therefore, beginning in mid-2006, the government has shifted its strategy from massive arrests, which have since become less frequent, to more selective, intelligence-intensive operations. This strategy change was preceded by a gradual but clearly traceable alteration in the way both government officials and the media depicted *maras*: Before late 2005, the gangs were generally characterized as a massive and dangerous, though largely locally based, phenomenon of youth culture. Since then, newspaper coverage and the statements of security authorities have strongly emphasized the gangs' international connections and their relationships to the drug trade—creating the image of *maras* as “organized crime” and downplaying their subcultural and youth-cultural background.

The repressive measures against youth gangs enacted by the authorities have been accompanied by changes in the legislation. These legal changes tend to restrict the civil rights of the citizens or of specified groups of the population, such as minors. In 2003 the Salvadoran parliament passed the Anti-*Maras* Law. Ultimately, the Supreme Court annulled the law because it violated the constitution and international treaties the country had signed.

The law would have given judges the right to judge minors between 12 and 17 years as adults if they were members of a youth gang. In 2004, the legislature enacted the Law for the Combat of Delinquent Activities of Special Illicit Groups or Associations. It did not include the regulations the court had ruled out with regard to the Anti-*Maras* Law, and it was designed as a temporary law, expiring after 90 days. But it still increased punishments for minor and adult gang members and restricted their legal rights. In early 2007, the Law against Organized Crime and Offenses of Complex Realization came into force. Designed with the intention of accelerating criminal procedures, the law creates special tribunals for homicides, kidnappings, and extortions perpetrated by “structured group[s] of two or more persons.” It also enables the prosecution authorities to carry out “covert operations” and to use “any technical instrument or skill of transmission, recording of sound, image, or any other communication signal.” This means the law makes trials for some of the most serious offenses faster and expands the possibilities for covert investigations. More important, it defines offenses considered typical of the Salvadoran youth gangs—homicides and extortions—as acts of organized crime. Thus, it turns the government’s depiction of *maras* as structures of organized crime into a formal legal norm.

According to Salvadoran crime statistics, the repressive policies against youth violence in El Salvador have, so far, not been successful in reducing (youth) violence. They may even be assessed as counterproductive.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, the ARENA government kept unwilling to change its approach to tackling youth crime. Measures aiming at prevention and rehabilitation, such as the programs *mano amiga* (friendly hand) and *mano extendida* (outstretched hand), were fundamentally underfunded and can thus not be considered a serious step toward less repressive policies. The report of the National Commission for Citizen Security and Social Peace (Comisión Nacional, 2007, p. 51) concluded:

The programs to prevent and treat youth violence that have been implemented in the country so far have been limited in scope, focused on some municipalities, with low levels of coordination between the institutions responsible for their implementation. They have not managed to cover an important part of the population exposed to major risks. . . . Regarding programs of reintegration and social rehabilitation of youth gang members and young offenders they are even more limited than prevention initiatives.

## Concluding Remarks: *Seguridad Ciudadana* and the Talk of Youth Crime in Central America

In the three countries analyzed, the public discourse on youth violence can be summarized as a mixture of viewpoints locatable on a continuum between favoring repression on the one hand, and advocating preventive, rehabilitation- and human rights-based policies on the other. Every country has a specific “mix ratio” of these viewpoints, Nicaragua being located rather on the nonrepressive side, Costa Rica somewhere in the middle, and El Salvador on the more repressive side. But neither in Nicaragua nor in El Salvador can the discourses be described as purely nonrepressive or purely repressive. In Nicaragua and Costa Rica, where the social discourse on youth violence—compared to El Salvador—is less prominent in the public debate and less homogeneous between powerful and not so powerful speakers, the state policies are neither very accentuated nor very coherent, whether in terms of repressive or nonrepressive measures. In El Salvador, the state’s response to youth violence and juvenile delinquency coincides with a generalized public fear regarding these phenomena.<sup>48</sup> This congruence also applies to particular aspects of youth crime policy. One example of this is the shift in the depiction of youth gangs (in the media and government discourse) from a youth culture problem to one of organized crime, parallel to a corresponding shift in the authorities’ strategies to combat the gangs. In the “everyday discourse” and among politicians in El Salvador a kind of hybrid discourse has developed, which combines the advocating of both repressive and preventive action. But, during the ARENA government, the actual policies did not shift toward such balanced combination.

In El Salvador youths in general are socially constructed as a potential threat to security. Youth gang members in particular are constructed as the “criminal others” from whom society has to be protected by means of specific *seguridad ciudadana* policies. The same might also apply in the cases of Guatemala and Honduras, which appear to be similar to El Salvador, but (because of the limited geographical scope of the sources analyzed for this article) this cannot be substantiated here. For Nicaragua and Costa Rica, neither social discourse nor governmental policies suggest that adolescents in general are being stigmatized as a security threat. A closer look at the sources would be necessary, though, to check whether there are particular groups of young people, for example, young drug addicts, young immigrants, and so on, who are systematically constructed as the dangerous “Other.” In any case, it seems that in Nicaragua and Costa Rica there are other characteristics than simply “being young” that turn a person into a source of fear and an object of security

policies. Nevertheless, *maras* are constructed as an imminent (Costa Rica) or only possible (Nicaragua) threat, and the governments of both countries have taken part in an increasing number of regional and international initiatives to fight the gangs.

The analysis of the three countries as individual cases and as a “bounded system” has provided a differentiated insight into the discourse on youth violence in Central America. Given the uncontested prominence of the *mará* issue in the region’s (youth) violence debate, the focus of most of the relevant literature is on El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, with the perception that these are the countries with a massive *mará* presence and that they have a higher prevalence rate of crime and violence problems. This article has taken Costa Rica and Nicaragua fully into account and has shown that even in one of these “non-*mará* countries,” Costa Rica, the discourse on youth violence is an important topic in some discursive spaces, although not as important as in El Salvador. Thus, it is not necessarily the presence of youth gangs that draws public attention to the issue of youth violence. Moreover, as the depiction of *maras* as an imminent or future threat in Costa Rica and Nicaragua shows, the youth gang problem—or, more exactly, the discourse regarding it—in one part of the “bounded system” has produced significant effects on the way youth violence is discursively treated in other parts of the system.

On the basis of the sources analyzed in this article, it is not possible to draw conclusions concerning *causal* relationships between discourse and policies. However, the analysis suggests that there is a strong relationship and mutual influence between the public’s fear (or disregard) of youth violence and the state’s policies to reduce that kind of violence. Based on the explorative findings of the qualitative research presented in this article, it is possible and necessary to conduct more and differently designed research to determine what the causal linkages between discourse and policy in the field of youth violence in Central America are. Also, further research efforts should be undertaken to discover why, how, and by whom the discourses are originally generated and what the power relationships that cause them to become hegemonic—and relevant in the policy-making process—are. This kind of “archeology” (in the Foucaultian sense of the word) would help in understanding the deeper roots of anti-youth-crime policies that in some countries such as El Salvador, tend to disregard human and children’s rights.

Overall, it seems fruitful, not only for Central America but also for other Latin American countries, to emphasize the social discourse on violence and crime while researching public policies that address these problems. The concept of *seguridad ciudadana* is not specific to Central America; it is present and relevant all through Latin America. In each context, there may be other

groups of citizens marked by society as the “criminal others” from whom society has to be protected, be they immigrants, ethnic minorities, a specific age group, drug consumers, football fans, or whoever. In this article, it has been shown that one of these demonized groups can be a whole generation, as in El Salvador. Political and social actors across Latin America should be aware that such “intergenerational apartheid” (Lock, 2006) has damaging effects for democracy, human rights, and development in the region. They should design policies not only to prevent juvenile delinquency and youth violence—as states and civic organizations increasingly do—but also to prevent societies from defining their own adolescents as a threat to the citizens’ security.

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### Notes

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2. The division of speakers into more and less powerful members of society is based on the concept of “discursive power” as used in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); see for example, van Dijk, 2001, pp. 352-371.
3. Note that the online versions sometimes differ from the printed versions.
4. In each country, the two newspapers with the highest circulation were chosen. In Nicaragua *La Prensa* and *El Nuevo Diario*, in Costa Rica *La Nación* and *Al Día*, and in El Salvador *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy*.
5. On the particular relevance of front pages and front-page headlines, see Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz (2006b, p. 9).
6. See Oettler (2008, pp. 11-16) for detailed information on how the interviewees were selected, how the interviews were processed, and so on.
7. The pupils’ essays were documented in Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz (2008b). The volume also includes detailed information on the characteristics of each school, the practical procedure of generating this part of the data set, and the main results of the “school experiment.” For a methodological evaluation, see Oettler (2008).

8. On the definition of “everyday discourse” used in the project, see Huhn (2008).
9. For the reconstruction of the security policies, in addition to the newspapers included in the data corpus of the discourse analysis, other media, especially online newspapers and news services, were consulted.
10. Some of the interviews, though conducted primarily with the intention of generating discursive events to be analyzed in the discourse analysis, have many characteristics of “expert interviews.” Some interviewees, such as criminologist and judge Douglas Durán in Costa Rica, can undoubtedly be considered “experts.”
11. For example, there is no consensus as to whether *seguridad ciudadana* also refers to nonintentional (traffic accidents, natural disasters) or economic and social risks and threats.
12. By “repressive” I mean measures (against actual, assumed or potential perpetrators of violent or criminal acts) that include the use or the threat of using (counter)violence. Repressive security policies consist of, for example, armed operations of the police or the military aiming at arresting (or killing) assumed criminals. The repressive approach, typically, is based on the idea of punishment and deterrence. Nonrepressive approaches, in contrast, embrace alternative methods such as prevention, reintegration of offenders into society, restorative justice, and fighting the (societal, socioeconomic, cultural, etc.) root causes of violence and crime.
13. See the concepts of “criminology of the other” in Garland (2001) and, regarding legislation to control and sanction members of these groups, the concept of *Feindstrafrecht* in Jakobs (1985).
14. It is important to note that what is defined as violence and delinquency in a given society is highly dependent on the social context (see Huhn, Oettler, & Peetz, 2006a, pp. 19-22).
15. Like violence or delinquency, “youth” is a social and, therefore, variable category.
16. Regarding youth gangs in Latin America in general, Strocka (2006, p. 134) notes that “the *actual* degree of violent and criminal activity is not the issue. What distinguishes youth gangs from other forms of youth groups is that society generally *perceives* the former to be . . . associated with illegal and violent activities. Youth gangs are socially constructed as essentially violent and criminal groups . . . who represent a social problem and a serious threat to society. One might say that gangs only exist to the extent that their existence is problematic” (italics in original; see also Huhn & Oettler, 2006; Huhn, Oettler, & Peetz, 2008a). For phenomenological information on the number of gangs and gang members, on the violent or illegal activities perpetrated by them, and so on (see, for example, Demoscopía, 2007; ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, & IUDOP, 2001; Peetz, 2005; Rubio, 2007; Smutt & Miranda, 1998; WOLA, 2006).
17. See [http://www.ocavi.com/docs\\_files/file\\_378.pdf](http://www.ocavi.com/docs_files/file_378.pdf) (June 3, 2009).

18. The percentages are calculated on the basis of the Yearbook data, accessed via <http://www.poder-judicial.go.cr/planificacion/estadistica/judiciales/2007/Presentaci%C3%F3n%20anuario2007final.htm> (June 4, 2009). What is here referred to as “all penal cases treated in the justice system” is the combined number of all cases in the categories “penal,” “violencia doméstica” (intrafamily violence), and “penal juvenil” (youth crime/juvenile criminal law). In Costa Rica, there are special judicial institutions (courts, attorneys, etc.) for cases of intrafamily violence so that these cases had to be added, in order to get the total number of cases generally regarded as “penal.” Without considering the “violencia doméstica” cases, the percentages of juvenile criminal law cases of all criminal law cases were 6.5% (2005), 6.4% (2006), and 6.3% (2007).
19. Accessed via <http://www.poder-judicial.go.cr/planificacion/estadistica/judiciales/2007/graficos/12-Fiscal%EDAs%20Penales%20Adultos%20%20110-est-08%20Cuadros%206-8.pdf> (June 4, 2009) (p. 9).
20. Accessed via <http://www.poder-judicial.go.cr/planificacion/estadistica/judiciales/2005/24-Juzgados%20Penales%20Juveniles%20176-182.htm> (June 4, 2009) (sheet 182).
21. Accessed via <http://www.poder-judicial.go.cr/planificacion/estadistica/judiciales/2007/23-Juzgados%20Penales%20Juveniles%201389-PLA-2008%20Y%20115-est-08.htm> (June 4, 2009).
22. UNICEF data, see <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/> (June 3, 2009).
23. *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front).
24. *Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista* (Sandinista Renewal Movement), party of Sandinista dissidents.
25. *Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance).
26. *Partido Liberal Constitucionalista* (Constitutionalist Liberal Party).
27. *Partido Acción Ciudadana* (Citizen Action Party).
28. *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front).
29. *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (Nationalist Republican Alliance).
30. To name but a few (some referring to *maras* in Central America in general, but treating the case of El Salvador with special emphasis): Aguilar Villamariona, 2006a; Reguillo, 2005; Savenije, 2004; WOLA, 2006.
31. The *Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública* is part of the prestigious Jesuit University UCA (*Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas”*).
32. See Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz (2006a, pp. 26-29) for a more detailed analysis of scholarly (and other) publications on the Central American youth gangs.
33. For anonymity’s sake, the students were asked to mark their respondent sheets with fake names.

34. In the private school 16 out of 19 participants mention youth violence, mainly *maras*, as a serious problem in the country. In the two urban public schools (one in the center of San Salvador and one in Ciudad Delgado, which is part of the “metropolitan area” of San Salvador) the proportion is 11 out of 25 and 13 out of 27, respectively, and in the rural public school (in the village Las Trancas in Chalatenango province) 6 out of 10.
35. Private school: 4 out of 19, public school in the center of El Salvador: 14 out of 25, public school in Ciudad Delgado: 20 out of 27, and rural school: 4 out of 10.
36. The results of a survey (IUDOP, 2006, p. 20) show a similar trend with regard to insecurity in general. Interviewees with an upper-class background are more worried about the security situation than others. Although 66.7% of upper-class respondents say delinquency is the most important problem in the country, the proportion of interviewees in the other parts of society who answer the same is lower: upper middle-class, 42.3%; lower middle-class, 50.8%; workers, 46.1%; marginalized poor, 45.0%; and rural, 47.2%.
37. As to the interviews, it does not make much sense to include quantitative aspects in the analysis because there is no statistical representativeness regarding the number (about 30 per country) and the selection of interviewees. Also, in the course of some but not all the interviews, the interviewer explicitly asked the interview partner for a statement on youth violence or youth gangs. Nevertheless, the differences between the countries should be mentioned: In El Salvador, 21 of all interviewees identified youth violence as a major problem in the country, whereas in Nicaragua 10 interview partners and in Costa Rica no interview partner expressed a similar preoccupation with youth violence in their country.
38. *Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social* (Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development).
39. Not all the answers are related to *maras* or youth violence, but rather to insecurity in general. Yet, as in the Salvadoran case, the gangs are seen as the main producers of insecurity; thus, it can be assumed that most answers are implicitly or explicitly referring to that issue (among others, at least).
40. The most important *repressive* measures demanded by the interviewees are more staff and money for the police, tougher legislation, tougher judges, more involvement of the military and private actors in the security sector, and more international cooperation to prosecute gang members. The most important *non-repressive* measures demanded by the interview partners are prevention, rehabilitation, better education, better impartment of values, urban planning, social justice, development/poverty reduction, change of the political system or of the development model, improvement of gender equality, fighting corruption,

- prohibition of weapons, more just and more accessible justice system, strengthening of human rights, and community-based policing (both lists in random order).
41. The assertion that the younger generation as a whole has come under suspicion was expressed by several interview partners. A similar statement of Moser and Winton (2002, p. 42) is based on the results of an opinion poll.
  42. In this context, the 2001 Law for the Promotion of the Integral Development of Youth and the creation of a Ministry of Youth in 2002 were of particular importance (see Rocha & Bellanger, 2004, pp. 311-323).
  43. From the perspective of policy analysis, it is important to note that the police force is an actor which, in general terms, intervenes *after* particular policies have been designed (i.e., in the implementation phase of the policy cycle; see, for example, Jann & Wegrich, 2003, pp. 89-92), even if the “highest echelons” of the police may take part in the political process at an earlier stage. This article cannot analyze how and why “street level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 1980)—the police on the local level—transform official policies in such a way that the policy output significantly differs from the (expressed) intentions of higher level decision makers.
  44. Interview with Costa Rican criminologist, Judge Douglas Durán, on November 29, 2006.
  45. On June 1, 2009, after more than 20 years of right-wing governments, left-leaning President Mauricio Funes took office in El Salvador. When this article was drafted, the security policies of the new government had not yet started to be implemented. The information given here, thus, refers to the previous administration’s policies.
  46. The information on government policies against youth violence and youth crime in El Salvador presented here derives from the Salvadorian and international press and particularly from secondary literature like Aguilar Villamariona, 2006b, Weiss, 2004, Reismann, 2006, and IHRC, 2007.
  47. Aguilar Villamariona (2006b, pp. 88-90) refers to statistical data provided by the police and forensic medicine, which show that, since 2003, homicides in general as well as homicides and other serious offenses attributed to youth gangs have substantially increased. Álvarez, Fernández Zubieta, and Villareal Sotelo (2007, p. 115) argue that *mano dura* policies have contributed to the proliferation and geographical dispersion of gangs: Fearing detention, gang members migrate internally and internationally and then recruit members in their new environments.
  48. Most probably, Cohen’s (1980) concept of “moral panic” would apply in the case of the public’s fear of youth gangs in El Salvador.

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### **Bio**

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