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**Discourses on Violence in
Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua:
Social Perceptions in Everyday Life**

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Abstract

Central America has the reputation of being a violent region with high crime rates, youth gangs, drug traffic, and ubiquitous insecurity. Politicians, the media, and social scientists in and outside the region often claim that the societies are in complete agreement with their judgment of the situation and that all society members are calling for law and order and social segregation. Focusing on Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, the paper analyzes the social perception of violence and crime. On the basis of essays written by secondary school students and interviews with citizens from all walks of life in the three countries, the paper points out how elite arguments on violence and crime are translated into everyday life, and what society members suggest be done to deal with these problems. The sources prove that there are noticeable hegemonic discourses on violence and crime in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Simultaneously, a majority of the respondents call for social and integrative solutions rather than the so-called "iron fist." The repressive trend in Central American policies therefore does not necessarily receive the presumed affirmation asserted by many authorities on and in the region.

Keywords: Central America, violence, crime, public discourse, social perception

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Zusammenfassung

Gewaltdiskurse in Costa Rica, El Salvador und Nicaragua:
Die gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung von Unsicherheit

Zentralamerika steht in dem Ruf, eine sehr gewaltsame Region zu sein, in der hohe Verbrechensraten, brutale Jugendbanden, Drogenhandel und allgegenwärtige Unsicherheit den Alltag bestimmen. Politiker, die Medien sowie politische Beobachter in und außerhalb der Region behaupten oft, die Bevölkerung teile ihre Einschätzung der Situation unwidersprochen und plädiere für mehr *law and order*. Dieser Beitrag analysiert sowohl die gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung von Gewalt und Kriminalität in Costa Rica, El Salvador und Nicaragua als auch die Vorstellungen zu möglichen Lösungen. Auf der Grundlage von Interviews und Schüleraufsätzen geht der Beitrag der Frage nach, welche Inhalte öffentlicher Aussagen bei der Bevölkerung Niederschlag finden. Die Quellen belegen, dass hegemoniale Diskurse über Gewalt, Kriminalität und Unsicherheit zirkulieren, die gültiges Wissen darstellen und Wirklichkeit konstruieren. Gleichzeitig scheint die Mehrheit der Bevölkerung den repressiven politischen Lösungsansätzen zu widersprechen.

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Article Outline

1   Introduction

In the 1990s—after the wars in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua came to an end—there were great hopes for a peaceful and promising future for the Central American region. However, after just a few years, political analysts noticed that things had gone in a direction one would not have hoped for. "Violence in El Salvador," Cruz and colleagues declared in 2000, "has changed its nature, but not its intensity" (Cruz/González/Romano/Sisti 2000: 173). Today—more than ten years after the last Central American war ended in Guatemala—the region seems to be even more violent, anomic, and vulnerable than before. In its latest report on crime and violence in Central America, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) states,

> The countries of Central America are diverse. But they have one thing in common. They are all affected—to varying degrees—by drugs, crime and poverty. [...] Where crime and corruption reign and drug money perverts the economy, the State no longer has a monopoly on the use of force and citizens no longer trust their leaders and public institutions. As a result, the social contract is in tatters, and people take the law into their own hands either to defend themselves or commit offences.
>
> (UNODC 2007: 9)

This evaluation might be right in a way, but it also is unproven and speculative. Social reality is more complex, and the spread of crime and violence is far less causally determined than the UNODC report—as only one example—indicates. In this paper I will prove that this is the hegemonic point of view. I discuss reality as an objectivated social construction in terms of Berger and Luckmann (1966) and truth as valid only at a specific moment, that is, changing permanently over the course of time (Foucault 2003: 193; Foucault 2005: 34). This paper is part of the research project "Public spaces and violence in Central America." Through this project, we have analyzed media, political, and juridical discourses on violence, crime, and insecurity in Central America. We have demonstrated that there is an inflationary trend in Costa Rican, Salvadoran and Nicaraguan newspapers to report on crime, violence, and insecurity and that these mass media sensationalize insecurity in the three countries (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a). We have also pointed out that powerful national and international actors such as the mass media and politicians considerably influence the social construction of Central American youth gangs as violent and well-organized criminal networks connected to international drug trafficking and terrorism (Huhn/Oettler 2006; Huhn/Oetter/Peetz 2008a). Recently, Oettler has examined trends in the political discourse about crime and violence (Oettler 2007) and shown that there is a tendency to treat both topics as very important in Costa Rican, Salvadoran, and Nicaraguan society. She points out that there is a complex set of specific topics which together enforce the impression of an unsafe and violent region. Peetz has analyzed the legislation regarding crime and violence in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua and points out that there is a trend towards greater control of personal life through law and towards the construction of "typical" offenders (Peetz 2008).

Within the outlined context, this article explores two related subjects. First, it examines the reflection of political and media discourse in everyday life. Does society follow the antiliberal trend in politics and the media? Discourse positions exercise power if and only if they become "valid knowledge" (Jäger 2001: 87). I explore the adoption of the hegemonic discourse on the basis of 213 essays written by secondary school students in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua and 90 semistructured qualitative interviews, also conducted in the three countries. Secondly, I examine the envisioned solutions to the perceived problems of violence and crime. The underlying questions are as follows: Does society perceive violence, crime, and insecurity as fundamental problems? How does society define the problems, and is there a consensus about them? Whom do the people blame? And finally, which solutions

to possible problems circulate in society? Does society want to act collectively or individually, mercifully or unmercifully, and how far are people willing to go? These questions help to test the hypothesis that in Central America anti-liberal positions dominate discourses on violence and crime, which leads to a wide acceptance of repressive policies on the one hand, and of social disintegration and segregation on the other. "If development is the process of building societies that work, crime acts as a kind of 'anti-development', destroying the trust relations on which society is based," UNODC states in the above-mentioned report on crime and development in Central America (2007). I doubt the universal validity of this ostensible argument. The students' essays and interviews, analyzed in this paper, contradict the common statement in international social sciences and political debates that there is *one* common problem with violence and crime in the entire Central American region leading to *two* predetermined consequences: mistrust and social disintegration.

Following this introduction, the paper will initially point out why the analysis of public discourse on violence matters—as well as the analysis of everyday discourse in particular—in attempts to supplement the understanding of Central American social and political realities and risks. I will then describe the hegemonic discourses on violence, crime, and insecurity in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua as well as the prevalent political outcome. I will also briefly outline the discourses of international and Central American political, academic, and media elites as the bases of discourses in society. Subsequent to that, I will present the essays and interviews as our study's empirical basis and examine the everyday discourse on violence, crime, and insecurity.

2 Discourses on Violence in Central America

There is a dominant perception of violence, crime, and insecurity in Central America. International organizations, the national and international press, political institutions, and social scientists create the image of the region as a violent, dangerous, and chaotic place. On an international level, Central America is often lumped together as a homogeneous hot spot, with Costa Rica as an occasional exception. The cited UNODC report may serve as an example, as well as Godnick/Vázquez (2003) or Boraz/Bruneau (2006). In addition to the drug trade and the general degree of violence and crime, youth gangs known as *maras* are one of the most discussed topics in the international debate about Central America as a violent region (e.g., Huhn/Oettler 2006; Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2008a). A famous statistic may serve as an example. Interpol officer Hernández (2005) and Bruneau (2005) of the US Naval Postgraduate School have both rated the number of *mara* members at a definite 69,145 persons—including 2,660 in Costa Rica.[1] The UNODC report uses this exact figure, even though its authors admit, that

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[1] According to social scientists, national police officials, and NGO activists—all interviewed by the author in Costa Rica in fall 2006—there are no youth gangs comparable to the *maras* in Costa Rica. Allan Fonseca Bolaños, officer of the Organization of Judicial Investigation (OIJ), confirmed that groups of young delinquents

accurately estimating the number of gang members is extremely difficult. Aside from the fact that it is a clandestine activity, there are varying degrees of gang involvement, and it is often difficult to know who to include in the count.

(UNODC 2007: 60)

On national levels, hegemonic discourses reveal a slightly different picture with the same basic tenor. In El Salvador, homicides and the *maras* are the most discussed issues in public discourses on violence and crime. The Salvadoran press showcases violence and crime as the country's most important problem and *maras* as the most dangerous actor, responsible for the majority or at least a big part of all crimes (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a).[2] This image—which certainly is not all wrong—is replicated in social sciences, too (Cruz/González 2002 or Whitehead/Guedán/Villalobos/Cruz 2005: 72 ff.). In a recently published report, Zinecker states that things are as *bad* or *horrible* in El Salvador as in Afghanistan, the Congo, the West Bank, and Gaza (2007: 7). For the most part, the question of public perception and reasoning remains mostly unposed.

In Nicaragua, what is most remarkable about the public discourse on violence and crime is that, at first sight, there almost appears to be none. International policy papers on crime and violence often emphasize the low homicide rates in Nicaragua, a postwar country which is also the poorest in Central America. "In Central America," UNODC states, for example, "the safest countries are arguably the richest (Costa Rica) and the poorest (Nicaragua)" (2007: 12). State representatives also regularly declare that Nicaragua is a safe country and that there is no crime problem (Rocha 2005). Nevertheless, news on crimes is very common and its general tenor contradicts the image of a safe country (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a: 22 ff.).

In Costa Rica, the degree of public panic is almost as high as in El Salvador but actual crime rates are very low by comparison. Firstly, there is a traceable sensationalist treatment of crime and violence in the mass media (Fonseca/Sandoval 2006 and Vergara 2008). Secondly, politicians give the impression that there is a serious crime problem in the country, one that is getting worse every day (for example, Laura Chinchilla, vice president and minister of justice—in *La Nación*, 09-21-2006 or 08-19-2007 or Arias 2008).

The majority of academic research on violence and crime in Central America argues on the basis of crime statistics (assumed to be objective and irrevocable) and implicates logical reasons and consequences.[3] The most frequent topics are the reasons for high crime rates and the best possible political answers to reducing crime and violence. The past wars are consid-

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in Costa Rica are not comparable to *maras* in El Salvador, Honduras, or Guatemala. Erick Cháves, member of a human rights NGO, confirmed the same.

[2]   Lately, other crime-related issues, such as small weapons distribution, the drug trade and drug abuse, or gender-related violence, are being discussed in public more frequently—not least because they are being put on the agenda by national and international human rights organizations (Oettler 2007).

[3]   Elsewhere, we have discussed the doubtful reliability of Central American crime statistics (Huhn/Oettler/ Peetz 2006b, pp. 8-13). Certainly, crime statistics are questionable worldwide (cf. Muncie 1996; Maguire 2002; von Hofer 2000 or MacDonald 2002).

ered to be the most obvious reason for high crime rates, followed by poverty and unequal distribution of economic wealth (e.g., Cruz/González/Romano/Sisti 2000; Cruz 2004; Fajnzylber/Lederman/Loayza 1998; WHO 2002). Generally, these investigations might be right. Nevertheless, crime rates do not reveal much about the perception of the phenomenon and about tendencies among society for dealing with a problem. Garland has recently proven that public panic is a response to crime statistics rather than to popular political crime-fighting discourses and an emotionalization of crime policy (Garland 2003: 10). Wieviorka has additionally pointed out that a concrete act of violence can be seen very differently in the course of time (Wieviorka 2006: 210). An act of violence might be seen as justified at one time (such as killing enemies in times of war) and be demonized at another time. The same is true for the public perception of punishment. Kury, Kania, and Obergfell-Fuchs have demonstrated this on the basis of the perception of the death penalty in Germany, for example. Approval of the death penalty has declined in Germany since its abolition in 1949, with a backslide in the mid-seventies when the terrorism of the *Rote Armee Fraktion* was a topic of heated discussion (2004).

Crime and violence are both direct physical acts and social constructions at the same time. One person might react directly to an act of violence. A whole society, in contrast, reacts to the collective allocation of meaning. To answer the question of how crime and violence affect society, it is more important to analyze the discourses than rates or statistics. The discourse on environmental pollution provides an example of a case where a certain actuality does not necessarily cause a given reaction and a certain discourse—such as media or scientific discourse—leads neither to knee-jerk absorption nor logical or unavoidable consequences in society. Even if the scientific community unanimously agrees on a particular environmental hazard, this does not necessarily mean that there is a consensus about the threat or that everybody abandons the habits that cause this hazard. On crime and violence, Arriagada and Godoy state,

> Sensationalist treatment of violence and delinquent events can generate a climate of fear and a strong feeling of vulnerability in the population, which is not always real, or corresponding to the observed level of violence.
>
> (Arriagada/Godoy 1999: 10)

Discursive negotiation processes take place in many different societal locations, such as the mass media, the scientific community, politics, civil society, or everyday life. Contrary to the widely accepted assumption that powerful actors would simply create beliefs or knowledge, I agree with Jäger, who states that no individual, but rather the whole society, determines discourse and that no single person or group is able to anticipate its outcome (Jäger 2004: 148). Certainly, powerful actors have a greater capacity to shape the hegemonic discourse on violence and crime as higher-level threats. A famous example is the mass media, which holds and wields symbolic power, in the terms of Bourdieu (1992). Even so, there has to be a

transmission of these positions into everyday life for them to become "valid knowledge." If this translation into "valid knowledge" occurs, crime, violence and insecurity might become an "integral part of social organization" (Garland 2003: 106). Societal disintegration and segregation are taking place in society; these processes are not arranged from above. Therefore, it is important to consider everyday discourse as the subjectivation of current social discourses. One should thus differentiate between experience in the form of an incident and experience in the form of understanding (Jay 1998: 44 ff.). I differentiate between firsthand and secondhand experience in the essays and interviews: the one personally experienced and the one someone *knows about*. Reasoning based on secondhand experience is a strong indicator of a transfer of discourse to personal thinking or consciousness.

Link defines what I call everyday discourse in this paper as an inter-discourse in society, characterized by being an amalgam of the different, special discourses of professionals (Link/Link-Heer 2002: 11). Metaphors, stereotypes, and the lack of differentiation are important parts of the inter-discourse, whose role is the translation of special discourses in professional circles into "valid knowledge" in all of society (Link 2005: 90).[4] With this consideration and the search for secondhand knowledge, one might illustrate the link between elite discourses or special discourses and their translation into everyday life.

Because this is not a theoretical or, least of all, a linguistic study but rather an empirical examination, it will not describe or define these categories in a more detailed way. The bottom line is to uncover, or not to uncover, the essential elements of elite discourses on violence in everyday life, in order to determine whether generalizations of problems and solutions are applicable for the Central American countries as well as for the region overall.

3   Making Everyday Discourse Accessible

Between October and December 2006, we asked 213 secondary school students in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua to write short essays on their thoughts and experiences. We also interviewed more then 90 persons in the three countries.

In each country, one-third of the students attended an urban public school in an underprivileged district, one-third an urban private school, and one-third a rural public school. Table 1 shows the distribution of the students in the three countries as well as their gender.

The age of the students was between 10 and 18 years, with 77 percent between 14 and 17 years old. The age distribution was much more homogeneous in the three private schools.

We did not ask the students to write about crime, violence or insecurity, nor did we tell them about the topic of our research before the essays were collected. Instead, we asked them to write about two general questions:

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[4]   Recently, Waldschmidt, Klein, Tamayo Korte and Dalman Eken published an article about the significance of inter-discourse in FQS (2007). This article illustrates the role of inter-discourse in a very elaborate way.

1) What are the biggest problems of your country and how would you solve them if you were president?

2) Do you feel safe in your country, your neighborhood, your family, and your school?

We assured them that we would not show the handwritten essays to the teachers and asked them to sign their texts with a fictitious name. The underlying expectation was that the students' essays would reflect significant topics and perspectives circulating in society.[5]

Table 1:   Essays per School by Gender

Country		Male	Female	Total
Costa Rica	Rural public school	6	14	20
	Urban public school	10	14	24
	Urban private school	9	11	20
El Salvador	Rural public school	17	21	38*
	Urban public school	11	14	25
	Urban private school	12	7	19
Nicaragua	Rural public school	8	13	21
	Urban public school	10	17	27
	Urban private school	8	11	19
		91	**122**	**213**

* For practicable reasons we asked students from two different rural schools in El Salvador. In this table, data are summarized.

Source: Author's compilation.

In order to represent the whole society, we also interviewed males and females of different ages with different jobs, social backgrounds, and experiences, in different locations in the three countries. We spoke to policemen, judges, prison wardens and guards, social workers and NGO activists as well as to nurses, businessmen, domestic employees, priests, street vendors and pub owners. Thus, we spoke with people who deal with crime and violence professionally and also with others who do not. On the basis of occupational classification, we made a list of potential interviewees before undertaking our field research in order to assure the comparability of the social spectrum in all three countries. According to the methodological considerations of problem-centered interviews (Witzel 1982), we developed a guideline for the questions and topics we wanted to address in each interview, without imposing our theoretical considerations.

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[5]   The Universidad Centroamericana in Managua published the students' essays: Huhn/Oetter/Peetz 2008b.

4   Social Perceptions of Crime, Violence, and Guilt

The students′ essays are a valuable source for determining the impact of hegemonic discourses among society. As mentioned above, we took particular pains not to ask the students to write about violence or crime. This procedure was based on the belief that everybody (and not only in Central America) would state that crime and violence are important problems if asked directly about this (e.g., Garland 2003: 107). Nevertheless, out of all possible topics, 58 percent of the students named this complex of topics as one of the most important problems. This may not be representative evidence, but it is a clear indicator of the importance of the topics in everyday life. The students could have written about all subjects possible, and they did, but in large part they also wrote about violence, crime, and insecurity.

Particularly noticeable is the fact that 67.7 percent of the students in Costa Rica named violence and crime, as did 80 percent in El Salvador, but only 19.4 percent in Nicaragua did so. Thus, the topic seems to be less important in Nicaragua. This finding coincides with trends in public opinion polls such as the *Latinobarómetro* (2006: 40) and the discourses in national media and politics mentioned above.

There is a relatively large spectrum of topics covered in the Costa Rican students′ essays. Those mentioned most are crime, insecurity, drug abuse, corruption, poverty, the state of education, the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), the bad condition of streets, and high gas prices. Our analysis of Costa Rican print media shows that these are in fact the most discussed topics on a nationwide level. The essays indicate that the choice of subjects is influenced by hegemonic discourses in society. The level of the question's abstraction—"What are the biggest problems of your country and how would you solve them, if you were president?"—led to relatively abstract answers. Most students wrote about what they thought (or knew) to be nationwide problems, not about their own, their family's, or their community's problems. Why should sixteen-year-old adolescents write about gas prices, foreign direct investment, or free trade otherwise?

It is noticeable that the students′ argumentation is often is far more liberal than the hegemonic discourse. While the media, politicians, and society tend to blame persons (mostly immigrants) for the "crime problem" in Costa Rica (Huhn 2005; Sandoval 2006) and while there is an explicit trend towards more repressive punishment,[6] the students basically hold circumstances responsible and advocate changing these first. The typical assumption in Costa Rica, that immigrants from Nicaragua are the stereotypical delinquents, is reproduced in only one essay. On the other hand, many students in all three schools blame poverty, unemployment, and a lack of education for high crime rates and recommend changing these drawbacks. "The most important problems are: poverty, unemployment, and the problems caused by this: delinquency, drug abuse, etc.," 16-year-old Tita from a poor suburb of San

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[6]   Douglas Durán Chavarría, criminologist and professor at the Maestría en Criminología of the Universidad Estatal a Distancia in Costa Rica, told the author in an interview in November 2006 that there has been a trend towards punitivity and punishment since the 1990s (C24).

José states. "There is delinquency because there are no jobs," 16-year-old Silvestre from the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan border town La Cruz argues. "With a good and disciplined education, violence and crime will decrease," 16-year-old Laura Nützi from the private Humboldt College in San José writes. These are three examples of a prevalent viewpoint among all Costa Rican students. In contrast, calls for the "iron fist" (*mano dura*) are rare. Only six students make an argument for a police clampdown or higher penalties, three from the capital's marginalized suburb and three from the Humboldt College respectively. Finally, it is remarkable that only one student (from Humboldt College) mentions domestic violence, although this subject plays an important role in nationwide discourses on violence and crime, with children and adolescents being typical victims. To sum up, the Costa Rican students take up the topics of the nationwide hegemonic discourse without necessarily taking up all its typical arguments.

The topic spectrum in the Salvadoran students′ essays is a bit more limited than in Costa Rica. The prominent role of delinquency as the most important and often the only problem is very obvious. Furthermore, *maras* are often referred to as a synonym for delinquency. Other topics are pollution, poverty, unemployment, corruption, and education, but all in all, there are just a few essays that do not mention the youth gangs. In contrast to Costa Rica, in the rural public school and a suburban public school some students talk about domestic violence, a topic that is also discussed in public but clearly less frequently than in Costa Rica— where it is mentioned rather seldom in the essays. Drug abuse, a prominent topic in the Costa Rican essays, is brought up in only two Salvadoran essays.

As in the Costa Rican case, this choice of topics corresponds with the hegemonic discourses in the media and politics. Like the students in Costa Rica, most Salvadoran students also wrote about nationwide problems, and they did so in a very abstract way. There is only one obvious exception, which refers to a lifeworld perception of age-appropriate needs or desires that are not the subject of any discourse concerning society as a whole: José Alberto, student at a suburban school near San Salvador would build more soccer fields as president. An exception of a different nature is 17-year-old Lincoln Six Eco from the private school Escuela Alemana in San Salvador. His is the only essay with an explicit personal expression of fear: "The most important problem of the country is violence. I can't believe the level it achieved in the last years and it truly scares me." More representative is the expression of 16-year-old Samanta from a suburban public school who states in respect of the *maras* that "the people don't dare to go out". She writes about "the people's" fears and thoughts, not about her own.

There is a balance between calls for the iron fist and revenge, and an insight into the structural reasons for youth violence which would have to be changed by prevention or rehabilitation. With the exception of the private school Escuela Alemana, there is always a group of approximately half of all students who suggest solutions of *mano dura*, including life imprisonment or even the death penalty. In the private school, the answers are a bit more liberal,

but there is also often a mixture of both, a call for drastic steps and a simultaneous request for rehabilitation and prevention. "The only option I can think for a real change would be the extermination of all delinquents found guilty and the establishment of a better education system for the future generations," 17-year-old Tangui from the private school states. As the analysis of newspapers (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a) or election results (Oettler 2007) show, this statement complies with the thinking of many Salvadorans.

There are strong indications of the nationwide discourses on violence and crime in the Salvadoran essays. The prominent role of the *maras* is the most obvious example. Secondly, in the majority of the essays, there is no justification for the choice of delinquency, and especially the youth gangs, as the most important problem; in El Salvador, it seems, this statement is common sense. "The first (problem) I would solve is the delinquency […] I would implement the death penalty, because it is a real plague," 14-year-old Rosita Fresita from a suburban public school writes. Thirdly, if there is a justification, it often does not correspond with what we would expect a teenager to say: "The most important problem is the gangs, because these people destroy private property," Carlos Santos, an 18-year-old student from the suburban public school writes. As mentioned above, the suggested solutions are, fourthly, indicators of an everyday discourse. Death penalty, police presence, rehabilitation programs, prevention by better education—all these (comparatively sophisticated) solutions are evidence of the frequent examination of the topic. This becomes clear in comparison to suggested solutions to other problems. In respect of unemployment, for example, a frequently mentioned solution is "I would give all people work" (Diego Armando Maradona; Marc Antony; Elena and Kimberly).

In Nicaragua, finally, public discourses are as verifiable in the essays as in Costa Rica and El Salvador. Violence and crime, though, do not play an important role in this context. As in Costa Rica and El Salvador, there is a broad consensus about the country's most important problems and this consensus does not always coincide with personal problems. Poverty, a lack of education, unemployment, corrupt politicians, and the undependable electricity are the topics nearly all students agree on. As interviews with the teachers confirm, especially some students from the private school Colegio Alemán do not have to worry about many of these problems in their personal life. The clear agreement about the country's biggest problems depends on nationwide hegemonic discourses. Also in Nicaragua, the mentioned topics comply with the newspaper analysis (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a).

On violence and crime, there is no such consensus at all. There is only one essay from the urban private school where violence is mentioned. Cindy (17 years old) writes about poverty. In this context she states that "corruption and violence in the country are consequences of the poverty, too." She does not go into that any further. In the rural public school, violence or crime are not even mentioned once. Javier Moreno (14 years) would help the drug addicted if he were president. Especially in Costa Rica, the reference to drugs mostly involves crime or violence. Javier Moreno does not make this connection in his essay. He just

wants to help addicts as victims of a serious personal problem. In the suburban public school, the argumentation goes to the opposite extreme. In the Colegio Camilo Zapata, a school in one of the most insecure areas of metropolitan Managua, twelve of 27 students write about violence and crime as important problems. This is strong evidence of an subnational discourse accompanied by direct personal experience and fears. Two students name youth gangs as an important problem. Mostly, the students write about thievery. Drug abuse plays an important underpart in most of these essays.

To sum up, the Nicaraguan essays widely reflect the nationwide hegemonic discourses, as do those in Costa Rica and El Salvador. Violence and crime are as marginal as they are in other societal locations. The essays corroborate Rocha´s statement that the hegemonic belief in Nicaragua is that violence and crime are not important problems. The Colegio Camilo Zapata is an exception in its deviation, maybe indicating a different perception among the urban lower class.

While the students´ essays are a valuable source for examining the impact of hegemonic discourses, the interviews are particularly suitable for the analysis of the valid knowledge about the national or regional situation and its consequences. In the second question, we asked the students to state whether they feel safe or threatened in their lifeworld. There is a sensation of insecurity in the majority of the essays, but there also is a noticeable discrepancy between firsthand and secondhand experience. In large measure, the students feel safe in places they know, even if other people would be scared in these places (as is often the case with marginalized suburban districts). This does not mean that the fears and concerns of the students should not be taken seriously. The personally unknown can certainly scare anyone. At any rate, the essays indicate the importance of knowledge imparted by discourse. The interviews are more detailed texts about everyday knowledge. Therefore, in the following I will specify three subjects regarding the interviews: the question, who people blame (for personal threats and for those everybody knows about), and the solutions they envision to the problems of crime and violence.

First, I will take a brief look at the general estimation of the situation. During the interviews, many interviewees talked about changes concerning the situation of crime and violence. Table 2 shows the distribution.

Table 2:   Estimation of the Present Situation Concerning Violence and Crime in Comparison with "the Past"

The present situation is…	Costa Rica	El Salvador	Nicaragua
the same	2	1	2
worse	23	14	11
better	4	2	0

Source: Author's compilation.

Table 2 demonstrates that there is basically a trend towards pessimism in the interviews. This finding indicates three things. First, the sensation of insecurity in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua complies with observations made in many other countries all over the world (see for example, Roberts/Stalans 1997). Secondly, there is a deep sensation of insecurity (and sometimes anomy in terms of Waldmann 2002) in the present, even though two of the countries abandoned war in recent years (so that a gasp of relief would be conceivable). Thirdly, to some degree the interviewees answers correspond with national and international discourses in the media and politics and trends in legislation.

With a few exceptions, the interviewees did not talk about personal experience, but mainly about ideas and beliefs. I can not prove whether these are determined by discourses; this is a basic theoretical assumption. What I can prove are conformances and contradictions to media coverage and the political mainstream. Certainly, the point is not to portray the interviewees as falling for media sensation or political propaganda. Most interviewees made very thoughtful and complex statements. Nevertheless, the focal point was always the discourses about violence and crime, and the interviewees commented on those in a supportive or depreciative way. Thus, everybody contributes to hegemonic discourses—the media or politicians as well as the interviewees. "A discourse is, so to speak, the result of all the efforts people make to act in a society. The result is something that nobody wanted to come out like that, but which everybody has contributed to in different ways" (Jäger 2004: 148).

There are two significant indicators of secondhand knowledge in the interviews. Firstly, a lot of people made universal statements about things and secondly, these statements often differed from their personal experiences. We asked, for example, which places are considered the most dangerous and if the people had personal experience with the violence they talked about. There is an obvious discrepancy between personal experience and "valid knowledge" determined by discourses. Similarly to what was indicated in the students´ essays, a lot of interviewees feel safe in places others would fear, just because they know them, and vice versa. A bus driver from a marginalized suburb of San José told us, for example, that his neighborhood was one of the few places where he is not afraid (11-05-2006, San José). Many other interviewees from Costa Rica referred to exactly this district when we asked them which places in the town or the country they lived in were the most dangerous.

In the following, I will oppose our findings about prototype perpetrators or reasons for the "crime and violence problem" in media and political discourses to the perpetrators or reasons mentioned in the interviews.

In current Costa Rican discourses about crime and violence, a few reasons are reiterated again and again. There is clear agreement about the increase in crime, violence, and insecurity since the 1980s. The most frequently named actors are immigrants and young people, and commonly named reasons are a soft immigration policy, the rise of drug abuse, corruption, and the moral decline of society (Huhn 2005; Huhn/Oetter/Peetz 2006a; Sandoval 2006; Oettler 2007). The majority of interviews contain these topics and assumptions.

There is a close connection between the discourse about crime and violence and that about certain groups of immigrants. Nicaraguans, Colombians, and migrants from the Caribbean islands are often held responsible for crime and violence. Asked if the situation had changed in recent years, a nurse from a San José hospital said, "There used to be less violence […] the immigration of Nicaraguans has affected us very much, because they come like wolfs, looking for everything they find to send it there. Therefore, this has stimulated our circle of aggression and violence" (10-31-2006, San José). A bus driver answered the same question in the following way:

> The invasion of many foreigners, many Colombians, many Nicaraguans, many Chinese. […] The Nicaraguan who doesn't work and is a criminal. The Colombian, who comes to deal with drugs or to do what we call "sicario"—murder for money. Many, there are many foreigners here and coming in is easy. They come to commit crimes. That is part of the problem.

> (11-05-2006, San José)[7]

They both blamed immigrants and considered them to be a homogeneous social group. The nurse even compared them with dangerous animals. Costa Rican mass media often draw the same picture (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a), and opinion surveys prove that many Costa Ricans would absolutely agree with these statements (e.g., IDESPO 2006: 6). This was true of a prison warden we interviewed. He told us about criminal gangs in Costa Rica. Asked who might be the members of these gangs, he said, "Well, this is very influenced by foreigners who have these customs, right. They are from Colombia or from Nicaragua" (11-24-2006, San José). The warden furthermore opined that Costa Ricans are affected by the criminal intents and "methods," and therefore, the brutality of Costa Rican perpetrators increases too. This threat was often expressed in the interviews. A businessman (with German origins) said, "So, brutalization increased […] The Tico (Costa Rican) normally is a peaceful person. But he also likes to learn things and he has quickly learned how to make a fast buck. This is the influence of Nicaragua, of Colombia, and so on" (10-11-2006, San José). On the other hand, the discourse during the last few years against xenophobia in Costa Rica was also made very explicit in the interviews. Nevertheless, the discourse about immigrant perpetrators remained a point of reference, no matter whether people agreed or disagreed with it. The power of this discourse in everyday life was very evident in the interviews.

The last quote also refers to the topic of moral decline, which often accompanies "everything-used-to-be-better statements" and incomprehension of the youth. Asked, what might be the

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7 Also noteworthy is the fact that the bus driver told us much later that he is a Nicaraguan immigrant himself. The discourse about immigrant perpetrators contains some remarkable caprices. So, immigrants themselves sometimes believe in the xenophobic discourse. Another example is the fact that most guards in residential areas, shopping malls or car parks are immigrants and the people trust them as an individual they know. But at the same time, a lot of people would state that they have to hire a guard (in person of an immigrant) because there are too many immigrants (who are supposedly notorious criminals) in the country.

reasons for crime and insecurity, an NGO representative said that while the people's image and prestige were very important in Costa Rica, they wanted everything as soon and as easy as possible, at the same time: "the people want it fast, the fast triumph […] international crime or illegal activities like corruption are the fast way to get what I had to study for and have to work for, honestly and sparingly" (11-06-2006, San José). A barkeeper saw the reasons for crime and insecurity in the changing of Costa Rican family values: "The reason for violence. This is a family problem […] Families where the father and the mother take drugs, for example. They leave their children out in the rain and the children end up on the street, start stealing and taking drugs" (11-05-2006, San José). A taxi driver answered the question about the reasons for crime in the following way: "In the past, the young were working. I remember that I was working since I was 12 […] today not, today the people sneak out of studying; they don't study but don't want to work either, they take drugs" (12-08-2006, San José). These are only some examples of a number of answers in which the interviewees stated that moral decline and drug abuse were the main reasons for negative social change. This might not be wrong. Nevertheless, it corresponds obviously with known discourses in the media and politics.

All in all, suspiciousness, enviousness, or incomprehension of foreign and unknown groups are a key feature of many interviews if the question was whom to blame for misery. However, many people see through the role of media or the statements of politicians. These statements are not copied exactly in everyday discourse, but they are most often the reference point, and people modify them according to their personal experiences and their environment.

As mentioned above, in El Salvador, high homicide rates and the omnipresent *maras* are the main (and often the only) topics concerning crime and violence in the media and in politics. In politics, anti-liberal trends in fighting and penalizing members of the youth gangs prevail, and this clearly constitutes the focus of security and crime-fighting policies. At the same time, the media draw the picture of *maras* as the main threat to everyone's life and social order. Potential reasons for the existence and violence of the youth gangs are barely discussed in the mass media. *Maras* serve as the epitome of evil, and the media reporting implies that this portrayal does not have to be justified, questioned, or traced back to other problems. As expected, the choice of topics is similar in everyday life, even if the thoughts about reasons and culprits seem to be a bit more complex in everyday discourse.

Almost all Salvadoran interviewees mentioned the high homicide rates as an indicator of the high level of personal and societal insecurity in El Salvador. In the same manner, most of the interviewees mentioned the *maras* as a synonym for all kinds of threats. They did not necessarily speak mainly about youth gangs. Often the *maras* were mentioned in subordinate clauses in order to highlight something by using the most common phenomenon as an example, or the interviewees referred directly to the well-known mainstream discourse: "Generally, they blame social groups today, disreputed *maras* and all that, but there is familiar violence, violence in the streets, in traffic, there is violence in all thinkable forms," a paramedic stated (12-07-2006, San Salvador).

A judge from the Juvenile Court spoke about *maras* and delinquent adolescents as the main perpetrators, but she interpreted this kind of violence as a postwar problem and a problem evoked by personal hopelessness and a lack of opportunities (10-25-2006, San Salvador). This perception does not correspond with the iron-fist discourse of politics and the media. A police officer from a rural city who talked about youth gangs in the interview said something similar:

> The majority says, that the war is the reason, but I think maybe it isn't […] the government has not kept an eye on the situation, that everybody have a proper job […] if there would be job opportunities, but there aren't, so I think that this is the principal reason.
>
> (11-08-2006, Nueva Concepción, Chalatenango)

Asked what might be the reasons for high crime rates and violence in El Salvador, a prison guard also said, "poverty, poverty is the principal cause […] because of the low income, they are not able to give a livelihood to the youth and this also generates delinquency" (11-27-2006, near San Salvador). Asked the same question, a businessman stated, "Socioeconomical. At any time, everybody comes to his limits. […] If I starve and my family does, and if I don't know what I can feed my children tomorrow—forget school, forget clothing—everybody comes to the point: Don't give a shit, now I'm going to steal" (12-01-2006, San Salvador). These statements are from public employees and persons whom the media and politicians would usually portray as typical victims but never as perpetrators. Nevertheless, they do not automatically take up the main elements of political explanation and solution for the situation. A lot of people seem to be much more insightful and socially minded than the media and political debates suggest.

To sum up, media and political discourses influence everyday discourse, but a lot of people do not seem to accept the monocausal reasoning of politicians. Instead, they seem to search for underlying structural reasons. Thus, populist political actions and media arguments do not have a fully resounding impact in everyday life. Salvadoran everyday discourses on violence and crime suggest that society does not accept declarations that seem to be too easy and do not correspond to day-to-day experiences. Nevertheless, the main topics of the hegemonic discourses on violence and crime find a considerable echo in everyday knowledge.

In Nicaragua, current discourses about violence and crime differ from those in Costa Rica and El Salvador as well as from international discourses about the whole region as an insecure place. Violence and crime are not used as the main arguments in political discourses, as they are, significantly, in El Salvador and, a little less, in Costa Rica. As mentioned previously, the government states that Nicaragua is a very secure country, with an efficient police force and a high level of social trust. Mass media often report on crime and violence, but these topics are treated less prominently than in Costa Rica and El Salvador. The media tends not to construct prototype perpetrators (with youth gang members as an exception to some degree).[8]

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[8]   As indicated, youth gangs are the most important topic in regional and international media and political discourses (and in the realm of civil society) about violence and crime in Central America. Therefore, Nicara-

The interviewees confirmed this impression somewhat. Confronted with the question of "whether things had changed," some interviewees indicated that there *might* be more crime today and that insecurity *could* have increased, but they often were not very certain. Many of the interviewees believed that crime rates might be higher today, but they did not linked that impression to their personal life. "I can't really say but indices of violence always increased, generally," a bus driver stated for example (11-30-2006, Managua). Asked whether he thinks there is more violence or crime today than before, a taxi driver said, "Let's say, now in December it is awkward, you know, because a lot of people get what they call aguinaldo (Christmas bonus) in mid-December, so the people walk around with their money and the thieves know that" (11-22-2006, Managua). "Everything-used-to-be-better statements" in respect of violence, crime, or public security were very rare in the Nicaraguan interviews.

As already mentioned above, for all the three countries, the factor of the known and the unknown played a very important role in the Nicaraguan interviews. Interviewees who had the impression that there is a lot of violence or crime mostly localized it in "other" places. Asked if the people walk home at night after Mass, a priest said that the people walk home without fear, because everybody knows and trusts each other (11-28-2006, Managua). Some minutes before, a taxi driver speaking about the same district had told us that it is one of Managua's most dangerous places. A shopkeeper in another infamous district said, "This is the Habana district. All over there is Dimitri and Enrique Schmitt and that is where they are, all the thieves, all the delinquency, drugs, everything, but not here" (11-30-2006, Managua).

Some interviewees compared the Nicaraguan situation with other Central American countries to reach the same conclusion: Nicaragua is a quiet and secure place. An informal money changer in Managua's city center said, "There is street violence in Nicaragua but not comparable to other Central American countries. I went to Costa Rica; I was in Panama; I was in El Salvador; and I was in Honduras" (11-29-2006, Managua). Talking about youth gangs, a social psychologist said, "Well, I think they (youth gangs) exist, but they do not paralyze the city like it happens in some places like in some places in Guatemala which you can't enter either during the day or at night" (11-24-2006, Managua). In Costa Rica (as the other Central American country without youth gangs in terms of *maras*) many interviewees, in contrast, expressed the fear that the country might be the place "where they come next."

People who definitely had the impression that there was a problem of violence and crime today mostly linked it to socioeconomic causes (in terms of, "there is more poverty today, so there is more crime") or relativized it in some way. An employee of a private security agency stated,

> I think, concerning the changes in public security, one always has to consider that
> there are more and more social and economic problems. Unemployment, a lack of par-

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guan print media cannot (and maybe do not want to) ignore the issue. Nevertehless, the attention or sensationalization is more obvious in Costa Rica and El Salvador.

ticipation in the educational system. And if you know that the needs of the population are not satisfied [...] risks increase in every kind of society.

(11-01-2006, Managua)

An NGO activist answered the question of whether there is more crime and violence in Nicaragua today in the following way: "This I think—that violence has increased." Some minutes before, she had stated the following in response to the question of whether people often talk about violence and crime in everyday life:

If there is a newspaper announcement about anything, an incident, right, or if we heard a report or watched a report that has to do with it, well then we comment on it; but no, if not, we talk about other topics, we talk about politics, right, we talk about the energy crisis which is on the tip of everyone's tongue.

(11-07-2006, Managua)

The feeling that there is a problem of crime and insecurity concerning the whole society remains diffuse.

All in all, there is little alarmism, fear, or pessimism concerning crime and violence in the Nicaraguan interviews. Of course, people talked about violence and crime, they sometimes knew victims (or had become victims themselves) and remembered incidents in their neighborhoods. But altogether, it was not the main problem addressed by the majority of the interviewees. This impression complies with the Nicaraguan students´ essays and corresponds with discourses in other societal locations.

5   Is There a Unanimous Call for Law and Order?

Finally, I will take a brief look at the envisioned solutions people have in mind. Some tangible consequences that come along with the particular discourses are very obvious in all three countries. The ever-increasing number of private security agencies and the growth of the informal private security sector are a clear indicator of increasing spatial segregation and social disintegration (Call 2000: 34). A walk through Central American cities provides evidence of the physical consequences, such as the fortification of domiciles and office buildings. Nearly every building in San José or San Salvador is wrapped in barbed wire (with slums as an exception), and there is virtually no car without an alarm (see also Rico 2006: 31-32). It is also obvious that calls for the iron fist by politicians may bring them votes in elections, or at least do not necessarily cost them votes. Therefore, it might seem obvious that, at least in El Salvador and Costa Rica, the majority of people call for repressive policies and rigorous kinds of protection. Many academic and political consulting papers draw these conclusions. Nevertheless, the interviews reveal a more complex picture.

Table 3 shows solutions to the "crime problem" suggested by the 90 interviewees. It indicates that the spectrum varies from repressive suggestions to more liberal or preventative ones.

Table 3:   Envisioned Solution to Violence and Crime

	Costa Rica	El Salvador	Nicaragua	Total
(Moral) education*	11	14	12	37
Greater police presence or police efficiency**	14	11	4	29
Prevention*	6	4	4	14
More social justice*	3	6	3	12
More drastic laws or judgments**	7	2	2	11
Fighting corruption*	2	6	2	10
Rehabilitation*	1	4	3	8
Community policing*	2	4	2	8
More justice and accessibility*	1	4	3	8
More private security**	5	0	2	7
Poverty reduction*	1	3	3	7
Vigilantism**	4	2	1	7
Religion/faith***	3	1	3	7
More restrictive migration policies**	5	0	0	5
Development assistance*	0	1	4	5
Changes in the political system*	0	3	1	4
Ban on small weapons*	1	1	1	3
Human rights*	0	2	1	3
Military operations on home soil**	0	2	0	2
International cooperation in crime fighting**	0	1	1	2
Calls for prevention and liberal action or for fighting the deeper roots of delinquency	**27**	**52**	**39**	**118**
Calls for advancement of crime fighting	**35**	**18**	**10**	**63**

*   Calls for preventive solutions and approaches to the social causes of crime and violence.
**   Calls for law and order.
*** In the case of religion or faith as a solution to the "crime problem" it was not possible to generalize the attitude behind the statement.
Source: Author's compilation.

The solutions marked with two stars are the typical calls for law and order. More police-presence, drastic laws, and the call for private security and vigilantism are the oft-cited, obvious reactions to insecurity and fear. The intensification of repressive migration policies is a typical Costa Rican answer (an immigration country, in contrast to El Salvador and Nicaragua as emigration countries). Military operations on home soil may be an answer that is only possible in El Salvador as it is a more militarized country than Nicaragua or Costa Rica. The solutions marked with one star, though, do not match the stereotypical assumption that there is (only) a trend towards repression, segregation, and mistrust. Many interviewees

looked behind the ostensible crime problem and named social causes that would have to be changed for the collective good. And some definitely felt sorry for the "typical" offenders rather than hating or condemning them. Prevention and social justice—as two of the three most noted solutions to the "crime problem"—are good examples of a desire for an equitable society. The call for rehabilitation (with El Salvador as the country where most people called for it and the country with the iron fist in crime fighting and punishment) proves that there is a willingness to give mercy. And calls for more social justice, fighting corruption, and poverty reduction prove that a lot of people recognize the social roots of crime and violence.

All in all, liberal or preventative solutions to problems clearly dominate in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Most of the interviewees considered the answer to the problems to be solidarity and beneficial social change rather than egoism and social exclusion. In Costa Rica, liberal and repressive solutions are roughly equal. All in all, interviewees named both liberal and repressive solutions. Nevertheless, even a mixture of both is not equivalent to the often assumed exclusive call for law and order.

Some excerpts from the interviews may also demonstrate that the call for the iron fist is not as inevitable as international policy papers such as the UNODC report suggest. The Costa Rican businessman cited above, speaking about the reasons for crime in Costa Rica, said, "The reasons are obvious: the poor people. They don't have another chance to earn a living than by violence. […] I only can solve the problem by education" (10-11-2006, San José). A Salvadoran NGO member stated as a concluding remark that "the Salvadoran state has to take action in prevention concerning crime as well as all other social problems" (11-28-2006, San Salvador). A Salvadoran prison guard said as a concluding remark, "Well, I think that it would be important to pay more attention to employment. Well, that they give attention to the youth and that they give them the needed opportunities for them to develop. […] What's most important is that there would be better conditions for the boys" (11-27-2006, prison near San Salvador). A Nicaraguan taxi driver stated almost the same thing when asked what he would change as president: "First of all, it would be work, work for the people, because this is the biggest problem. Because there is no work, the adolescents start stealing" (11-22-2006, Managua). These examples are representative of many of similar statements. Most of the interviewees had preventive or disintegrative solutions in mind, even if they called for rigorous steps at the same time.

Without going into further details, these findings indicate three things: Firstly, people do not necessarily call for non-liberal solutions concerning violence and crime, even if they believe that "things" are bad or even worse than before or if they are afraid of crime and violence. The appreciation of fellow human beings seems to be an attribute that can be strengthened or weakened by societal discourses. Secondly, the Costa Rican suggestions provide evidence that constant sensationalization of insecurity in the media and in politics may turn the tide. Not only violence and crime but also, and perhaps especially, the hyperbole with which they are reported and discussed perpetuate the vicious circle (see also Bejarano 2006: 28-30 and Fonseca/Sandoval 2006: 33-34). Opinion makers need to be aware of this responsibility.

Thirdly, the Salvadoran suggestions in turn provide evidence that short-run, populist political action, such as the *mano dura* policies of recent years, do not detract from structural social problems and the quest for a social contract in the long run.

6   Concluding Remarks—on Heterogeneous Discourses on the Spread of Evil

Based on the theoretical approach that public opinion depends on hegemonic discourse rather than individual experience, the students' essays and the interviews prove at least three things. Firstly, there are hegemonic discourses about crime and violence as nationwide and very important problems in Costa Rica and El Salvador. This is not the case in Nicaragua. Secondly, the essays and interviews emphasize our findings that there are concrete topics within discourses on violence and crime which correspond with some but not all special discourses. The essays and interviews prove that discourses on violence and crime have a strong social impact in Costa Rica and El Salvador and, thus, that they are hegemonic. In particular, the media discourse and the political discourse seem to play important roles. The responses of our sources comply with our overall findings about these discourses, which we analyzed in the research project on public spaces and violence in Central America. The subject of domestic violence is an exception. This subject plays an important role in Costa Rican mass media and politics; by contrast, it hardly appears in the essays. Key issues from some important national or international NGOs are also often missing in the essays and interviews. As Oettler has recently pointed out, some NGOs try to implement topics in Central American discourses on violence and crime (Oettler 2007). They do so with varying levels of success. The existence of small weapons, one of the main areas of interest of the Costa Rican Arias Foundation, does not receive any attention in the essays or interviews, and the agenda setting concerning youth gangs, where Nicaragua plays a role (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2008a), is not reflected very strongly in the Nicaraguan essays or interviews. Thirdly, the essays and interviews contradict the common statement in international social sciences and political debates—initially adopted by us, too—that there is *one* common problem with violence and crime in the entire Central American region (for example Avery 2007 or UNODC 2007).

The above-cited UNOCD report may serve as an example of a "not quite correct" but typical generalization of Central American realities. The findings of this paper indicate that people are not as satisfied with anti-liberal policies in El Salvador as one might expect. If they have "lost confidence in their leaders" (UNODC 2007: 9), a lack of the iron fist might not be the main reason. And there are no signs that society (or the majority) wants to "take law into their own hands […] to protect themselves" (ibid.). "Our houses have more fences than a prison," 17-year-old "5" from the Costa Rican Humboldt College states. People feel distressed not only about crime rates but also about the current antisocial physical and verbal reality, which is created by discourses on violence and crime. This provides space for alternative political and social approaches.

The interviews and essays prove that there are noticeable hegemonic discourses on violence and crime in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua which have truth value, exercise power, and come along with collectively handed down symbolism. We can find the same public panic, the same mistrust, and the same stereotypes in everyday discourses as in Central American media and politics. But the interviews and essays also prove that there is potential for a social and political paradigm shift vested in the discourses themselves. People do call on the political leaders to improve the situation of insecurity, but a majority of the students and interviewees vote for sustainable and comprehensive solutions. The majority call for poverty reduction, sustainable labor-market policy, better education, and the integration of disadvantaged groups rather than for more repressive crime fighting or harder punishment.

Anti-liberal positions dominate discourses on violence and crime in the media and in politics, particularly in El Salvador and a little less in Costa Rica. In contrast to our initial expectations, this does not necessarily lead to a wide acceptance of repressive or anti-liberal policies among society. The UNODC statement that "crime acts as a kind of 'anti-development', destroying the trust relations on which society is based" (UNODC 2007) needs to be supplemented with attention to social discourses and the power they exercise. Social disintegration and segregation are currently a reality in Central America, but the responsible handling of security issues instead of panic mongering and the stoking of fears, especially in the media and politics, has the potential to reverse this inauspicious trend.

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