Arms, Violence and Youth in Central America

While not attempting to give a categorical diagnosis about the nature of social violence, we must point out that violence is growing, chiefly among the poor, urban, male, unemployed and young population. This last segment is at risk as it has proven to be the most vulnerable.

> ***Criminal policy is a part of social policy. Thus, progress in criminal justice aimed at reducing violence and crime will be insufficient if no parallel progress is achieved in social policy toward improved levels of distributive justice and social integration.***
>
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> ***A society isolated of its youth has cut its ties:***
> ***It is doomed to bleeding to death.***
> Kofi Annan, Secretary General, UN

INTRODUCTION

Central America has been identified as a sub-region displaying post-conflict characteristics; with some stages successfully completed, while other have failed or are still in progress. A notable dilemma, however, remains unaddressed: the relationship between violence and youth. Traditionally, this relationship has been perceived as a symbiotic, with youth perceived as violent, as a logical consequence of their presumed lack of maturity or experience.

A part of the effort to understand this relationship has been the continuous attempt by some segments of civil society and political circles to grasp one among

many dimensions of violence: how it impacts a specific sector of the population –in this case youth– and to what extent is that violence being furthered by that age group. The reason for this is that, while on the one hand we understand that youths are the primary victims of violence, on the other, violence tends to originate in this group. Thus, a vicious circle develops and expands with increased intensity day by day, threatening to embrace the entire society. At present, youth and violence display a strong link throughout Central America, urgently requiring a creative solution to what can be seen as the great urban tragedy of the region.

Violence has accompanied humankind since the dawn of history and it is in no way a phenomenon restricted to the developing world. "Violence is the result of the complex interplay of individual, relationship, social, cultural, and environmental factors."[1] It results from a variety of sources, thus demanding comprehensive solutions. It also has a multiplier effect, resulting, among other things, from the way it is perceived, either from what the media conveys or from society's own understanding of violence, which then reinterprets and translates it.

Violence is not specific to a particular social class, nationality, religion, or ethnic group. It permanently combines social, economic, cultural, and even political factors. Therefore, it is a ubiquitous, structural phenomenon, with an undeniable social class component. All of this makes violence more tangible among the destitute, banned strata of society, as these are the hardest hit by poverty.

We must clarify that being young should be no crime. However, in our small region, youth and crime have nearly become synonyms. In fact, a small number of youth, say four or five, can often be perceived as threatening. This perception has little to do with belonging to a given social stratum, since danger and exploration are clear attributes of youth. There is much talk about youths´ search for recognition as a group, as well as for its own identity. However, society perceives youth as synonymous to rebels on their way to becoming criminals.[2]

1. Some precise concepts

Throughout human history and in every human group youths have expressed themselves in different ways; some through sheer rebelliousness

[1] Pan American Health Organization. World Report on Violence and Health. Etienne G. Krug et al, eds. Washington D.C. 2003 p. 37

[2] Krauskopf, Dina. Violencia Juvenil, Alerta social. In Revista Parlamentaria. Vol. 4, Issue 3, December 1996.

while others support different attitudes, convictions, or ideologies. Who has not ever heard of mischief or misdemeanor carried out by bands of youths? Everywhere, youth groups are a compelling point of reference for community life, whether in a quarter, neighborhood or district. The first attempts at socialization beyond school and family, where individuals are surrounded by friends, neighbors, and classmates, occur in that milieu. These groups, which theoretically meet to share experiences and opinions, have similar names in almost all Central American countries. Sometimes they are known as "the corner's *barra*," the neighborhood's group or simply "the gang," while others are called the clan, the tribe, or the "*gallada*," just to mention the names we are most familiar with.

Youth groups share common interests, such as music, supporting the school's local or national sports club, or clothing style. These collective features provide youths with a sense of belonging and an identity that allows them to develop into a new generation with a distinctive set of characteristics.

Over time we have heard of different instances of youth violence commonly related to confrontation between youths from different ethnic groups, nationalities and neighborhoods, as well as of fans from different sports teams. Moreover, confrontation has sometimes occurred between youths from different schools that maintain high levels of competition and hold their own "natural" confrontation fields.

We have also heard of student movements seen as communist and/or socialist and thus perceived as threatening to government stability. The appearance of these groups resulted in repression and confrontation with the police and military, though, as Merino points out, "Neighborhood gangs, which became widespread in the 80s, were totally unrelated to those from the 60s engaged in fighting students' groups with political interests."[3]

Beyond events with a definite ideological meaning, neighborhood youth groups were perceived as typical local players. This was true until the mid 80s when the term "mara" was first introduced in Guatemala (1985). Merino points out that the term comes from "marabunta," referring to the huge swarms of ants destroying everything as they pass. It establishes a relationship between the number of members and the level of destruction caused by

[3] Merino, Juan. *Las maras en Guatemala*. In Maras y Pandillas en Centroamérica. Volume I. ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP Publicaciones UCA, Managua, 2001.p. 168.

the *maras*. He even goes on to find a similarity with the term "grasshopper" used in Costa Rica with the same meaning.[4] From that time on, the term became widespread in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala as a synonym for gang. Youth violence –under the gang mode– has boomed in all Central American countries, and even in Panama, since the 90s on.

Despite these identical meanings, clarifying some concepts was seen as essential for the purposes of this study. The reason for this is that, while this phenomenon is similar all over the region, it is clearly homogeneous in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador and it shows specific differences compared to Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama.

This study addresses two scopes of youth violence: street violence and school violence, also known as student violence.

The following is a classification aimed at further clarifying the differences between the street gang and mara phenomena, as it occurs in Central America. As previously stated, in the northern Central American countries the term *mara* stands for street gang. We must also point out, however, that many American street gangs (which are not a phenomenon unique to the United States) have emerged as a result of massive migration into that country. This type of phenomena has always occurred throughout American history.

The *street gang* phenomenon has to do with specific populations, such as the Latin Kings, a group of Puerto Ricans who immigrated to Chicago and settled there beginning in the 1940s. Their initial goal was to protect themselves against discrimination, racism, and the realities of being an uprooted population. Similar situations combining the search for identity with the development of defensive societies have fostered the involvement of illegal immigrants in these groups and their participation in criminal activity, including, among others, drug sales, car theft and burglary, with possible links to organized mafias. Reportedly, in 1997, street gangs comprised –in Los Angeles alone– 150,000 members and 1,350 gangs and bands.[5]

- **The *barra*[6]**

Barra is a term used in several countries to mean a group of friends sharing

[4] Ibid. p. 112
[5] Clarín Digital. *Guerra de Pandillas en Estados Unidos*. April 13, 1997. Argentina.
[6] Researcher's elaboration based on a large amount of work on the topic.

common interests who often frequent the same places. In addition, the term is used to identify the following of a sport's team. The *barra* is basically a group of peers. Initially, it was seen as a point of convergence and socialization for children and youth from a quarter or neighborhood, primary, or high school. The idea is a close reference group, different from one's own family. It is generally restricted by geographical/physical space: a quarter or neighborhood (*barra* seems to bear some relationship to *barrio*, Spanish for quarter) where everyone knows each other, grows up together, and identifies within a specific context. Now, clear hierarchies exist. It is a group of friends who have created links since childhood.

- Student violence

This seems to be the less studied phenomenon throughout the region. In many countries, student violence tends to be connected to gang activity within schools.

As pointed out above, there are neighborhood and school *barras*. When dealing with student violence, we must keep in mind that the student *barra's* activity has its counterpart in that of another primary or high school group. To a certain extent, this antagonism has been considered "natural," involving at least two opposing schools, each with its own allies and rivals, i.e., similar or opposite schools. This is the traditional point of reference for student violence, which is generally visible in quarrels resulting from sports competitions. For instance, in El Salvador, in the 50s and 60s it was customary for groups of youngsters to fight each other on the streets. These youths identified themselves with specific schools and were also the fans of baloncesto teams whose rivalry led to the fighting. The phenomenon comprised mostly students from the elementary and middle education levels.[7] In Costa Rica, confrontations at basketball games between the Liceo de Costa Rica and the Colegio Seminario teams have become routine. Similar conflicts have also occurred in Guatemala.

Confrontation between gangs within one school differs from the above-mentioned phenomenon. It boomed from the 90s on, takes place within schools and includes only students. Since some causal relationship has been recently discovered between high levels of student violence and gangs, we must highlight that this is closely related to gang activity in

[7] See Santacruz Giralt, María, and José Miguel Cruz Alas. *Las maras en El Salvador*. In ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP. Maras y Pandillas en Centroamérica. Op. cit., p. 30.

the schools themselves. We want to stress, however, that this phenomenon is quite different from that of non-student gangs. It is more like a students' *barra*: it consists of confrontation between groups of students inside the school who identify themselves with rival soccer teams, as has been the case in Costa Rica. At this level, however, the relationship between violence, student, *barras*, and gangs is not always clear, even though this second mode goes beyond school competitiveness and relates to a broader experience. In this case, external confrontation has penetrated the school.

Student violence is the type of violence occurring within schools among students, as we have seen previously. At a different level, it also occurs between teachers and students. Although all forms of school violence are a source of concern, this latter is among the most significant ones, since it challenges the quality of interpersonal relationships within such an important socialization space as is school. Beyond rivalry, intolerance and the inability to live with others within an atmosphere of mutual respect are shown in this case.

- **Street gangs**

The term "gang" has at least two meanings. On the one hand, it describes a group of friends who meet to have fun, more like a *barra*. On the other, it means a group that has developed to deceive and harm others, involving infractions of social and juridical standards. Thus, while gangs occur within the sound context of a group of friends, they also entail the potential for mischief and vandalism, subsequently leading to the potential for crime, mainly minor crime or contravention, as part of the group's activities.

In addition to maintaining peer relationships between its members, the gang also shows other common-interest features. These include sharing similar victimization, rejection, and/or desertion experiences and a sense of group identity that overrides the territorial feeling and leads to very strong ties between group members. Such ties can even compete with family bonds. Another feature of the gang is the attraction and proximity of the relationship between members of the same generation. This occurrence often leads to breaking with parents or other closely-related adults and promotes feelings of autonomy and independence.

Krauskof characterizes gangs as follows: "We must keep in mind that gangs and bands are independent, self-organized groups whose meaning is shared by its members. They are youth rearrangements at the edge of socially approved patterns and closed groups rejecting outwardly-imposed

standards and that can replace both school and family. "[8]

According to most studies, gangs have their own organizational structures and develop behavior codes and social standards for its members. Gang members share specific interests and expressions including appearance –tattoos, symbols, language, moving around in groups, and so on– as well as a certain level of organization. They develop processes aimed at involving a larger number of individuals and their activities go beyond their own neighborhoods. They no longer meet at a corner, a sports field, or a park. Instead, they appropriate the streets and broaden their territories, sometimes to large extents. Gangs are often linked to violence and criminal activity, as well as alcohol and psychoactive substances, which have a strong presence in these groups.

In fact, this latter feature is a hallmark of gangs, as it does not necessarily appear in *barras*. Gang members consume such substances out of curiosity and to experience a feeling of well-being, alleviate pressure, feel like "adults" or "grown-ups", identify themselves closely with their group, reach an elevated status among peers, and to demonstrate their independence in relation to figures of authority.

According to Oscar Valverde and other researchers, "… peer groups serve other functions related to emotional connection, reflection, and development of new situations and perceptions, as well as support to carry out frightening or distressing tasks, exploration of behavior, social skills and aptitudes, and uncensored expression of ideas, feelings, and needs, among other things. As can be seen, the importance of belonging to a group of friends, either male or female, is such that those failing to insert successfully into one of these groups may undergo tremendous emotional hardship or do whatever is required to belong to one."[9]

Crime committed as a gang has an immediate objective: it aims to meet a specific need, although it does not necessarily turn into a lifestyle or a permanent source of income. Gangs also employ weapons, specifically, firearms and weapons with blades –many a time manufactured by themselves– though not all members are allowed to carry them.

For clarity of exposition we have broken down the term "violence" as follows:

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[8] Krauskof, Op. cit. p. 796

[9] Valverde, Oscar et al. Caja Costarricense del Seguro Social. Adolescencia. Protección y Riesgo en Costa Rica. Múltiples aristas, una tarea de todos y todas. San José, 2001.

Structural violence refers to a number of permanent occurrences with interrelated, overlapping causes and consequences, such as poverty, inequality, and discrimination, among others. Structural violence is attributed to government, as it is the entity with the ability to employ force and violence through its institutions. While not arguing about the topic, we must say that the government imposes an ideological and political project with ripple effect on all structures in the country, which gives violence its structural character.

Political violence refers specifically to forms of dominance generally imposed by the government. Opposing its ideology can lead to political and ideological confrontation to introduce innovations or change the direction of government. Civil war, revolutionary movements, and so on can develop from this kind of confrontation.

Social (economic and cultural) violence has to do with the demonstration of structural violence at a social level, e.g., family, community, and the like, where conflict that is inherent to context manifests itself through a generalization of violent behavior. Legitimizing the use of force as a means to solve conflict subsequently legitimizes violence and gradually makes it a socially-acceptable behavior. Social violence also involves economic and cultural components.

Direct violence refers to concrete action, in which causes and effects can be clearly identified. Armed confrontation is an example of this type of violence, as is interpersonal conflict or crime, with the ability to create damage, which can be immediately assessed. However, direct violence always derives from structural violence. Other examples include torture, war, murder, confinement, repression, and so on.[10]

It is in this sense that we affirm that political-ideological violence prevailed in Central America throughout the 80s. In the midst of the peace process in Guatemala and El Salvador, reconciliation negotiations in Nicaragua, and reconstruction in Panama after the U.S. invaded that country, the region experienced a boom of violence, chiefly affecting the area's young population. Changes in the region may have highlighted other demonstrations of violence, including youth violence and, generally speaking, social violence. This can be explained

[10] In relation to structural violence and its impact on children and youth, see Campos, Armando, (Consultant,) Insumo para el Informe de Desarrollo Humano. UNDP, Costa Rica (unpublished.)

as a consequence of an environment that favors violent response, in spite of efforts made to attain stability in the region, in which the roots of conflict remained –and still remain– unresolved. Some degree of slack in the internal situation led to demonstrations–that could be labeled as pathological– which developed as a result of tacit acceptance of such violence. Through observation of the activities of repressive government, i.e., the military and the police, the function of these bodies was redefined. Among other things, this provided additional room for expression and action, which could be used to strengthen those internal processes as well as to weaken them. For that reason most research on the matter points out that, from the 90s on, youth gangs appear as a generalized phenomenon in which violence takes on traits of crime. Even though violence was present in the region prior to this period, other political-ideological priorities existed, as previously pointed out. Once the peace processes were completed, another type of violence took priority. In relation to this, researchers point out that, "…the grouping of a large segment of youths into gangs does not result from chance or from isolated factors (e.g., acculturation, lack of social adaptation, and so on.) Rather, it results from a historical process that, together with other factors –such as the transformation of social, political, and economic problems from the postwar era, the growing difficulties of youth to insert itself in society, and the effects of immigration and acculturation– has led to the appearance of a solidly structured phenomenon of youth organization."[11]

Gangs are brought together for different reasons, e.g., support for specific sports teams, preference for musical trends, or criminal inclinations, which implies a high degree of territoriality within a context of socioeconomic rejection. In other words, they share a neighborhood or an environment commonly showing territorial, time, social, and even gender connotations. Thus, experts say that, "Current roles resulting from gender result in risk and differential adversity. Male groups are hardest-hit by heavy consumption of alcoholic beverages and other drugs; driving cars under the effect of alcoholic beverages or at early stages of life without protective devices (seatbelts in the case of cars, helmets in the case of motorcycles); a tendency toward physical fighting, especially those carrying firearms and weapons with blades; accidents; homicide and suicide."[12]

[11] Krauskof, Op. cit.
[12] Idem, p. 788.

Table 1
Number of youths taking part in *maras* in Central America

Country	Estimated number of youth in *maras*
Guatemala	14,000
Honduras	40,000
El Salvador	10,000
Nicaragua	4,500
Costa Rica	2,600
Panama	1,385
Belize	100
Total	**72,585**

Taken from Delgado, Jorge.

As usual, the precise number of individuals involved in gangs and *maras* in the region is unknown. The above figures come close to 75.000 members, while some newspapers in the region point out that the number of *mara* members in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador ranges between 200,000 and 500,000.[13]

Areas with youth gangs are precisely those lacking the presence of government institutions, e.g., crime-preventing agencies such as the police. Violent behavior prevails in gangs, together with a tendency for high-risk criminal activity and drug consumption. As previously mentioned, gangs are also linked to organized crime. As a result of social rejection, gangs revolt by refusing to adhere to social and legal standards. In many instances, gang members lack family support or have been hurt at home, and thus come to befriend people already involved in gangs.

Gang/*mara* inroads and youth crime levels increase in urban areas, where general crime levels are also higher. Semi-rural areas, however, have also been hit by this phenomenon, which suggests that it is not an exclusively urban occurrence. Rather, it extends to areas close to production centers; for instance, zones experiencing alternative development processes, which subsequently lead to multiple maquila industries, as in the case with Honduras.

• The *mara* phenomenon

Maras are professional gangs, displaying both gang and band features; they are also more closely associated with organized crime. *Maras* have socialization processes, which allow them to distinguish members from non-members. Usually, they have shared codes of conduct and expression involving specific vocabulary, gestures, and symbols, as well as a number of expressions important to group acceptance. *Maras* often adopt initiation

[13] See "*FBI investigará situación de Maras*". La Nación, Thursday, January 13, 2005. San José, Costa Rica. p. 19-a, and "*Las pandillas siembran el terror en Centroamérica*." www.nacion.com\ln-ee\2003\agosto\06\mundo5.html

rites, which often include permission to join that must be granted by the entire group or engaging in violent acts. In addition, *maras* engage in illicit acts and gradually turn their members into criminals. There are few exit opportunities and oftentimes the only alternative is the activity of religious groups which, unfortunately, is often limited.

Other characteristics include compulsory violent procedures, uninhibited group action, and a hierarchical structure. *Maras* play a significant economic role for their members as they often provide a livelihood to many of them, help support their families (in the case of those who have them) and support those being tracked by the authorities, helping them stay away while things calm down and risk decreases.

It appears as though the economic factor is a determinant for *mara* development. Thus, it has been said that, "Mara crime revolves around economy… both in terms of why they steal (youth unemployment, low salaries, being active in family economy, and so on) and in terms of what they steal (on the one hand, things easiest to sell, those most scarce or those with the highest demand; on the other, what is most coveted").[14]

Maras are also found in northern Central America, mainly in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Not surprisingly, they correspond to the Central American countries with the highest emigration rates toward the United States. These are also the hardest-hit nations as a result of massive U.S. deportation policy, which has impacted a significant number of illegal immigrants in the United States. Randall Richard mentions an estimated eleven million eight hundred thousand illegal individuals living there.[15] In fact, he mentions 250,000 individuals not considered citizens and enjoying liberty under parole, who have been rated as "deportable." According to legislation passed in 1996, this condition is applicable to non-citizens convicted to serve one or more years. This cause-effect relationship seems to be so significant that some political analysts feel this phenomenon should be central to conversations between the United States and Central American countries. Not only does this phenomenon seem to be a reflection and consequence of a policy toward the region, it is also a key point, in terms of human security, within this relationship. Unfortunately, the issue has not been addressed, at least not in this way, by any of the involved countries.

[14] Merino, Op. cit. p. 181

[15] Richard, Randall 500.000 Criminals Raised in America Wreak Havoc in Many Nations, October 28, 2003

The aforementioned phenomenon is expressed in a variety of ways. The language of *maras*, for instance, is saturated with *spanglish*. Specific symbols, such as tattooed gang numbers and letters, are used indistinctly in all three countries. Many elements are consistently demonstrated in the United States, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Thus, we can assert that *maras* are a multinational, globalized phenomenon, which specialize in criminal activity. *Maras* have their own branches in each of these countries, as well as smaller groups (*clikas*) with different support functions. In the case of El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras, *maras* maintain strong external links, such as Mara 18[16] and Mara Salvatrucha[17], since both originated in Los Angeles. The Vatos Locos are a Mexican *mara* with cells linking it to different countries. These cells operate as a network so that members arriving from a different country are accepted by the group, provided they identify themselves properly.

Maras' criminal activities involve the use of weapons with blades. However, other type of arms are very popular –most of them bought on the black market– including high-caliber arms such as AK-47 machine guns, FALs, Uzi, Mini-Uzi and Galil rifles or automatic pistols, among others. In addition, *maras* display high levels of alcohol and drug consumption. Some *maras* bar consumption of specific drugs by their members, as they hinder necessary quick reactions.

Criminal activities linked to *maras* include crime against property, sexual offenses –e.g., rape– and crime against life, i.e., murder; local crime is related to drug distribution and sale. *Mara* participation in organized crime is sometimes suspected, such as through illicit drug trade. As mentioned above, personal appearance plays a significant role. Mara members are recognized for their apparel or their tattooed bodies, shaved heads, and loose clothes. They wear necklaces, bracelets, and earrings. In addition, they enjoy rock

[16] *Mara* 18 began in Los Angeles 18th. Street and is made up chiefly of Mexican immigrants. It also includes Asian and African members, among others, and is one of the largest maras in the country. They are identified by 666 or 18 and see Mara Salvatrucha as their natural enemy. http://www.knowgangs.com/gang_resources/18th/18th_001.htm

[17] *Mara* Salvatrucha, *MS-13* or "MS" are different names to identify a group of young gang members, mostly Salvadoran immigrants, who settled in California in the 80s, when they fled from El Salvador's internal conflict. Honduran, Mexican, Peruvian, Ecuadorean, Nicaraguan, and Guatemalan members also joined. http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mara_Salvatrucha

and other types of "heavy" music "[18] and mark walls with graffiti and symbols to mark their territory. Thus, it is said that "conflict to defend/expand territory provides meaning to the existence of maras."[19]

As previously indicated, another feature of *mara*-related crime is its highly-organized structure, with a system of national branches and international links. We also pointed out that some research suggests a causal relationship between mass deportations from the United States and *maras* in northern Central America. In effect, *mara* structure seems to have consolidated as a result of deportation, which has allowed regional *maras* to duplicate violent and criminal behavior from the gang culture in Los Angeles, Chicago and New York, as explained above. Since some *maras* began with Central American youngsters linked to American gang groups, this indicates that, once evicted from the United States, they have transferred that violent culture to their new surroundings. With this culture transfer, they bring in a whole set of values unfamiliar to the region.[20] Researched sources confirm this by stating that, "They arrived as children, together with their parents who fled poverty and war; they attended school and they lived on the streets from Los Angeles to New York. Deportation is a crime-prevention policy in the United States. While less than 2,000 individuals were deported in 1986, the figure for 1995 went up to 33,842, and 77,000 individuals were expected to be deported by 2003."[21] The same source points out that, in Honduras, the number of murder cases increased from 1,615 in 1995 to 9,241 in 1998, which coincides with the first group of 7,000 criminals deported from the United States to that country. "We are sending back sophisticated criminals to simple, less-developed societies" (author's underlining), said Al Valdez, Assistant District Attorney and a gang expert from Orange County, California. "Local authorities cannot handle them," he said.[22]

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[18] Heavy music originated from a rock variety (*hard rock*) involving heavier use of keyboards and synthesizers in music performance. When additional guitars were introduced, the metal variety began (*heavy metal*.) These musical trends are characterized by force, density, and reiteration of the abovementioned musical instruments.

[19] Castro and Carranza. *Las Maras en Honduras*. In ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP. Maras y Pandillas en Centroamérica. Op. cit., p. 242

[20] Idem, p. 306.

[21] See Randall Richard, op. cit. The author points out that 80% of deported individuals have been sent to Latin American and Caribbean countries. These are Jamaica, Honduras, El Salvador, Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala , and the Dominican Republic. Mexico alone had 340,000 deportees in 2003. In Jamaica, one of each 106 males over 15 is a criminal deported from the United States. By 2003 there were 10,000 deportees in Kingston.

[22] Ibid.

• **The band**

Bands are local criminal organizations made up of two or more individuals who associate to commit crime on a regular basis and whose members are armed. They are local in that they operate in a country, instead of defending a territory, as is the case for *maras* and gangs. Also, bands do not exclude foreigners from participating as members. Bands operate for financial gain. In fact, they make their livelihood by ensuring their members not only subsistence but also access to improved purchasing power and higher consumption levels.

Bands display high levels of specialization and devote their resources to committing crime. Planning is a key part of their activity and involves a precise distribution of tasks. Depending on their areas of specialization, bands can often serve a function of carrying out specific "jobs", thus implying that their criminal activity is not permanent in nature. The most common criminal activities of bands include car theft, card counterfeiting, illicit drug trade, and kidnapping, just to mention a few of the most common criminal activities. Such bands are suspected to engage in more than one of these activities simultaneously.

Band members are generally older than gang or *mara* members. Occasionally, bands can use expertise or temporary alliances, and they can also have international trade links in order to learn about new ways to commit crime. Bands have access to larger, more sophisticated technological resources than gangs and use available infrastructure. They are much closer to organized crime, which has extensive international contacts, cooperation networks, and high mobility; thus bands are more multinational and permanent.

Table 2
An attempt at categorizing youth delinquency forms [23]

Concept	Territorial traits	Social traits	Economic traits	Activities	Other traits
Student violence	Restricted to school and its surroundings. Most often displayed on school grounds and the area around school.	More frequent at public than at private schools.	No distinction is made in relation to the students' economic status. However, it occurs more frequently at public schools.	Several types identified: confrontation between students; confrontation between teachers and students; verbal aggression, physical aggression; destruction of goods, and so on.	Suspected links to youth gangs or sport *barras*. Limited female participation.
Barra A group of friends sharing common interests and frequenting the same places.	Quarter, neighborhood. A specific meeting place, usually a street corner, a park, a sports field, and so on.	Neighbors and friends who have grown together, share physical socialization space, and visit the same places. Not necessarily identified with drug, alcohol and cigarette consumption.	Neighborhood-type-determined. Frequent in middle- and lower-class sectors.	Generally, street disorder; confrontation with similar groups. Members carry out the same activities: engage in specific sports, support the same teams, listen to the same music, and so on.	No definite leader; no organized structure; generally they do not use weapons. No women (except only in Costa Rica)

Continued...

[23] See below the work of Carmen Rosa de León and Itzia Sagone about Guatemala and that of Magda Raudales for Honduras, providing a more specific categorization of gangs and *maras*

Concept	Territorial traits	Social traits	Economic traits	Activities	Other traits
Gang A group developed to deceive and hurt others.	Goes beyond the neighborhood or quarter and appropriates an extended geographical sector that it defines as its own territory. It appropriates the streets. In Nicaragua, gangs are divided by quarters; in Panama, by streets.	Between 10 and 40 members, aged 9-29. Characterized by drug and alcohol consumption. Members live in marginal, impoverished quarters, do not attend school, and generally come from dysfunctional, unstable, or destroyed families. Gangs have their own initiation rites and behavior codes, and tend to commit crime. They work as a team and apply the "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" rule.	Poor. Their crime is aimed at meeting basic living requirements such as food, clothing, and the like, together with access to and consumption of alcohol and drugs, and resources. Gangs engage in drug-related business.	Vandalism, car theft, damage to property, burglary, theft, armed robbery, aggression, violence, sex crimes, minor crime and contravention. Murder is not frequent at this level, but it grows as links to drug distribution increase.	One or two leaders, generally the oldest and boldest. Specific organizational structure. Use of firearms and arms with blades, bayonets, machetes, knives and stones, and –to a lesser extent– rudimentary weapons manufactured by members, guns, and AK-47s. Little presence of women; however, some gangs are made up exclusively of women.

Continued...

Concept	Territorial traits	Social traits	Economic traits	Activities	Other traits
Mara Multinational, professional boys gang in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and México.	Transition stage between gang and band. Clearly-defined territory. Trespassing by another *mara* leads to violent confrontation. Protection of quarter. Loyalty is the major value. Disloyalty is unforgivable.	Between 50 and 200 members, living in marginal quarters, not attending school, and generally coming from dysfunctional, unstable, or destroyed families. *Maras* have their own initiation rites and behavior codes, and tend to commit crime. Violent behavior and strong links to branches established through deported members. Application of the "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" rule. Drug consumption. Continuous conflict and confrontation with other *maras*. Rights and duties within the group.	Drug sale and distribution. Livelihood/meeting basic needs. Some members have jobs. Common fund. Fee charged for specific activities (such as robbery) carried out to obtain money. Wear on vogue clothing and spend money to purchase drugs. Occasionally linked to organized crime (although not necessarily cross-border) such as illicit drug trade, traffic in arms, and so on.	Vandalism. Theft. Murder. Armed robbery. Rape. Drug sale and distribution. All sorts of crime. Careful planning.	Clearly-defined hierarchical structure. Divided into smaller groups (*clikas*). Develop affiliation systems and have branches. Use of tattoos, symbols, and particular vocabulary. Use of firearms and weapons with blade. Some members manufacture their own weapons. Women present, although not in large numbers. Some maras are exclusively made up of women. Maras or members move to other cities to escape legal punishment (groups of collaborators between 6 & 11 years old.) Some identify them w/ mafias.

Continued...

Concept	Territorial traits	Social traits	Economic traits	Activities	Other traits
Band Group of armed individuals.	Characterized by extension, diversification, and specialization of criminal activities, rather than by identification with a specific territory.	Some members have a large criminal record. High level of organization. Groups are not large. May be linked to politicians and influential contacts. Not necessarily lasting over time.	High income and consumption levels. Crime as a livelihood.	Murder by hired agents. Bank attacks and armed robbery. Kidnapping. Illicit drug trade. Other types of crime with an economic impact.	High-caliber firearms; specialized resources. High levels of planning. Use of technology. Few women.

2. Factors to analyze

As previously mentioned, violence is a phenomenon with a large number of causes, which chiefly impacts youth. Central America has become a focus of violence as a result of numerous interrelated factors. Outstanding among this is the region's recent history of prominent political violence and armed confrontation, which involved not only ideological and political conflict, but also disputes between families and peoples. As pointed out by Sergio Ramírez and Edelberto Torres Rivas,[24] violence has been present in the region since prior to the Spanish Conquest. However, civil wars in the 1980s made it commonplace, thus legitimizing violence and facilitating its major legacy: a culture of violence.

While peace accords and political negotiation led to dialogue and reconciliation, the structural causes of conflict in Central America have persisted and deepened. Today, a larger portion of the region's population lives in poverty because, despite a decrease in incidence,…the total number of poor individuals in the region increased between the beginning and the end of the decade as a result of population growth. Thus, while there were some 16.8 million poor people in 1990, this figure had grown to 18.8 million by 2001, i.e., 2 additional million poor individuals emerged in that time.[25]

In other words, access to opportunities remains a privilege, not a right, and income continues to increasingly concentrate in the hands of fewer individuals. Also, despite the relative stability of democratic election systems throughout the region, as well as the existence of improved opportunities for political participation, participation is rare and characterized by strong indifference toward politics. Consequently, conditions exist for extended social violence. Some analysts indicate that, "The violent climate prevailing in the region, with its local differences, is not a fortuitous fact since violence is a social development growing progressively as the life standards of large sectors of the population deteriorate".[26]

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[24] For comments on this, see The Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress, Las armas de la violencia (audiovisual) interview with Edelberto Torres-Rivas. See also Ramírez Mercado, Sergio: "Recuerdos del poder: 18 Conejo ", La Nación, Friday, June 4, 2004.)

[25] See UNDP, State of the Region. Second Report on Human Development: Central America and Panama. San José, Costa Rica. 2003, pp. 50-51

[26] Delgado Salazar, Jorge. La criminalización de la juventud centroamericana: el predominio de las políticas públicas represivas. Paper submitted at Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, 2005, p. 8.

Additional factors exist, e.g., unresolved social rejection in the region. Rather than decreasing, inequity is growing, leading to the denial of progress and failure to meet basic needs such as food, health, housing, clothing, education, and opportunities for employment for large segments of the population. As in the rest of Latin America, the structural causes of poverty in Central America remain the pending task and, as analysts stress, "Next to malls,[27] which are tokens of globalization, huge towns appear to show the existence of a dual society in which wealth is often accumulated in just a few hands, while assigning risk between extended segments of our population. Consequently, poverty and social violence are becoming globalized, too."[28]

Table 3
Incidence of total and extreme poverty in Central America[29]
Percentage of population under poverty lines

	Central America 2000	Costa Rica 2000	El Salvador 1999	Guatemala 1998	Honduras 1999	Nicaragua 1998	Panama 2000
Total poverty %							
Total	51.2%	23.1%	47.5%	56.7%	70.2%	47.9%	40.5%
Urban area	34.5%	19.3%	37.6%	28.8%	62.4%	30.5%	23.4%
Rural area	68.1%	28.1%	61.2%	75.6%	76.6%	68.5%	68.9%
Extreme poverty							
Total	26.7%	7.1%	20.1%	26.7%	52.9%	17.3%	26.5%
Urban area	13.5%	4.8%	12.2%	7.0%	39.7%	7.6%	11.1%
Rural area	40.0%	10.2%	30.9%	39.9%	63.6%	28.9%	52.2%

[27] Large trade centers aimed at attracting middle-class people, located in peripheral areas of cities, open all week and offering a large variety of goods from all sorts of stores.
[28] Delgado Salazar, Jorge, op. cit.
[29] Sauma, Pablo, paper, Desafío de la Equidad Social. Segundo Informe de Desarrollo Humano en Centroamérica y Panamá. http://www.estadonacion.or.cr/Region2003/Paginas/indice.html

The explanation for the above table indicates that, "…the incidence of poverty is not only more significant among Central American children and youth (61.5% of Central American children and youth between 0 and 14 are poor,), but a large portion of all poor people is made up of children and youth; 47.9% of Central American poor are children and youth 14 years old or less ("Poverty has the face of a child.")[30]

Among Central American households, 24.5% are headed by single women. This occurs more frequently in urban than in rural areas. Moreover, the highest rates of illiteracy are found among the poor. This segment of the population has the lowest levels of education[31] and those who once attended schools have been effectively banned from continuing as a result of the system's conditions. In addition, the quality of their education is poor on every account. By 2000, 46.8% of the Central American population between 15 and 64 either had no formal education or had incomplete elementary schooling. The population of both Central America and Panama is chiefly young and a large percentage is not covered by the educational system, which leads to deeper differences and marginalization.

On the other hand, as previously stated, the poor population has restricted access to basic services, lives in crowded quarters in housing units built with poor-quality materials and, among other things, finds it difficult to access drinking water, electricity, public lighting, solid waste disposition, as well as sewage and sewage-water treatment. Most of this population finds its way to the informal and agricultural sectors of economy, which generally pay very low wages. We must point out here that, between 1990 and 2000, statistics analyzed both by the Comisión Económica para América Latina (CEPAL) and the World Bank indicate that, although the region has advanced significantly in terms of the GDP's share devoted to health and education, it has also experienced an alarming fall in terms of agriculture and infrastructure. Thus, the sources point out that "…everyday life for the poor is marked by the syndrome of poverty. Personal and family problems are closely related to insufficient income and the failure to meet various basic needs, including housing, food, education, sanitation, and so on."[32]

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30 Sauma, Pablo. Ibid. p. 13.

31 We chose to use abandonment rather than desertion. In doing so, we are following Paulo Freire's pedagogical lead, who maintains that boys, girls, and adolescents are expelled from the school system, as opposed to deserting, which implies a willing act that in their case clearly does not take place.

32 Sauma, op. cit. p. 21.

Table 4
Total population, on a per-country and per age bias
(individuals between 0 and 19 years old), 2005

Country	Total population	Individuals between 0 and 19 years old	Percentage
Guatemala	12,699,780	6,863,647	54.04%
Honduras	7,346,532	3,581,188	48.75%
El Salvador	6,874,926	3,015,548	43.86%
Nicaragua	5,483,447	2,775,417	50.61%
Costa Rica	4,321,717	1,672,541	38.70%
Panama	3,228,186	1,280,985	39.68%
Belize	266,260	125,958	47.30%
TOTAL	**40,220,848**	**19,315,284**	48.02%

Source: Delgado Salazar, Jorge. Ut supra, page 4.

This is the general picture of the Central American population. However, we must make an attempt at understanding the effects of social marginalization and inequity on individual behavior, to which we must also add an examination of the coexistence between wealthy and destitute segments of the population. On a related note, Sauma suggests, "Consensus exists on the fact that poverty comprises deprivation, impotence, and vulnerability. Deprivation occurs when individuals do not have enough income and assets to meet their basic needs, and also lack of access to public services provided by government, as well as lack of access to opportunities. Impotence is the result of a lack of organization, representation, and direct access to political power to change the situation on their own. Moreover, they are vulnerable to different kinds of shocks and crises."[33]

On the other hand, these situations impact interpersonal relationships and primary family links, where these insufficiencies are shown through family breakdown and the lack of optimal emotional conditions required by human development. One more factor of vulnerability, in the case of youth, is consumerism, together with the impact of alcoholism and abuse of psychotropic substances. Thus, several researchers point out that, "The youngsters are willing to affirm their own personal identity, but the system instead offers them opportunities for lavish consumption. They want to be recognized as individuals, but the society renders them invisible or

[33] Idem. pp. 1 - 2.

brands them dangerous. They look for recreation and fun, but are offered sex, drugs, arms, and violence through TV. They demand opportunities and a sound environment, buy they receive deprivation, rejection, and violence."[34]

The major expressions of youth violence are student violence and crime. The latter comprises, on the one hand, the most spontaneous, unorganized delinquency and, on the other, carefully-planned, fully-structured criminal activity under a hierarchical system, shown through the actions of gangs or *maras*.

The basic components of violence are aggression and a tendency toward aggression. Although not particular to Central America, the following is obviously commonplace there: the presence of aggressive individuals, in this case youngsters, who were victimized and abused at home or who were deserted by their parents. In addition, they were denied access to education or the chance to stay within the educational system, and suffered total lack of access to culture or to the labor market under protection and on an equal footing with others. As a result, many of these youngsters developed violent and aggressive behavior –as a defense mechanism– thus becoming both victims and victimizers.

In a milieu where marginalization and rejection prevail, the "identity" of the above-mentioned age group is related to the excitement resulting from risk and danger. The threat perceived from these groups by the society as a whole causes it to react in ways that result in increased levels of rejection. Subsequently, the groups react in a more aggressive and violent fashion. In other words, society marginalizes them because they jeopardize what it perceives as security, thus leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy: youth groups are dangerous because they were marginalized and because they obtain power from others' fears. Although they acquire a negative identity as a result of unaccepted behavior, they nonetheless acquire some sort of an identity. Violence and aggression provide these groups with power, respect, and social recognition that, despite being negative, still make them feel powerful.

- **Violence and Youth in Central America**
  Driving Factors

- Accelerated urban development processes (population concentra-

[34] Abaunza, Humberto and Ricardo Andino. La sociedad contra los jóvenes. Las pandillas de Estelí. First edition, Managua. Fundación Desafíos. December 2002, pp. 58-59.

tion and fast growth.)
- Armed conflict (violent patterns of common living.)
- Privatization of public space.
- Weakened family structure.
- Violence within families.
- Socialization patterns reflecting a lack of positive models.
- A culture of violence.
- Poverty.
- Youth excluded from the labor market.
- Youth excluded from the formal education system.
- Difficulty in developing own identity
- Drug consumption
- Emigration and acculturation

Note: See Santacruz Giralt, María and Cruz Alas, José Miguel. IN: MARAS Y PANDILLAS EN CENTROAMÉRICA P.32

Social violence impacts the entire society. However, as pointed out above, it permeates deeper in majority sectors experiencing socioeconomic conditions that are inadequate for providing their members with a decent standard of living. These conditions are fully manifested in urban areas. However, in general, social violence –which goes beyond access to goods and services, purchasing power issues, and impoverished conditions in most of the population–, is also related to government failure in the social arena and impacts primary socialization axes such as the family, the school, and the media, the latter of which serve to bring social and cultural uniformity.

Violence also hinders social development. We have insisted that this phenomenon can be broken down in order to focus our analysis on some specific areas. However, we want to stress here that this is a structural phenomenon that must be addressed from a holistic standpoint and that, therefore, cannot be separated from the context wherein it takes places. Thus, when dealing with social violence we must notice that it is made up, in turn, of secondary violence networks where violence within the family and youth violence, just to mention a couple, are closely interrelated. Not surprisingly, in almost all studies on the matter we can assume that youth at high risk, including gang members or those previously involved with crime, were at the same time victims of violence within their families or were abused in their own homes. In other words, they were involved, for some continuous period of time, in an abusive circle.

As we have demonstrated, violence is structural and manifests itself in a number of different ways. These include those characterized for their specific impact and expressions and not so much by the milieu where they take place. Based on impact, violence can be classified as:

a. **Physical violence.** Comprises the use of force and involves all types of physical aggression against people. It also includes sexual violence.

b. **Psychological or emotional violence.** It has to do with repeated verbal abuse and the use of threats, scorn, and humiliation to manipulate. Can have a significant impact on individuals' physical and mental health.

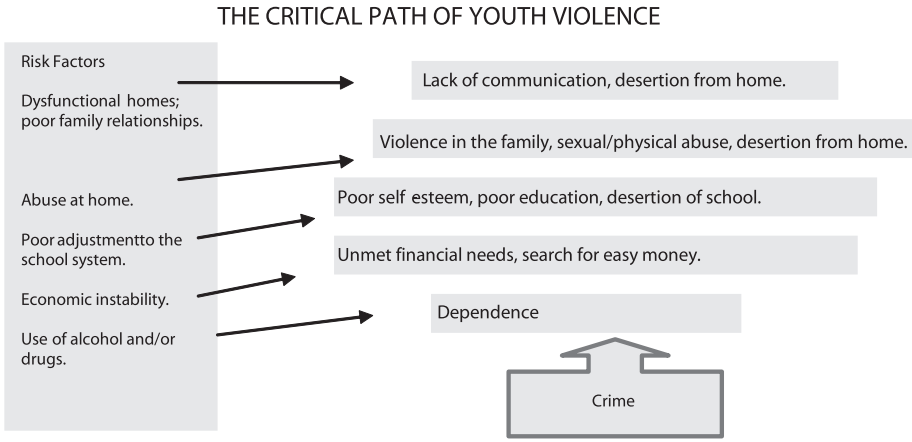
c. **Sexual violence.** Includes all sexual contact through the use of force, intimidation, or coercion.

d. **Violence against property.** All actions or omissions involving damage or loss, plundering or destruction, and depriving individuals of their property.[35]

Studying the phenomenon of violence in depth requires addressing the so-called "critical paths," which generally consist of duplicating violent, authoritarian patterns with which people grew up and that, first and foremost, are manifested within the family. In effect, it is in this circle that violence within the family occurs and impacts those at a disadvantage or who are the most vulnerable. Previously - mentioned types of violence are seen at different levels, depending on the segment at which they are aimed. At home and family levels, most violent expressions are aimed at women, children, adolescents, and elders.

We know, however, that this perpetuates itself later on through various mechanisms legitimizing violence, including neighborhoods, schools, and streets. Youth are most impacted by violence at family, school, and community level, as an increased subordination and dependence relationship exists. Also, a working hypothesis we have in relation to violence is directly related with the key role played by [the media] either through their general focus, their news sections, regular broadcasts, music, or movies.

[35] See Diálogo Centroamericano, issue 51, Violencia Intrafamiliar. The Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress. San José, Costa Rica. 2004.



The family, an element of the critical path of youth violence

Another factor with a strong impact on the development of violent behavior has to do with family breakdown. A weakening of the family as a core of socialization and the continuous presence of violence within the family can contribute to a perception of violent/aggressive behavior as normal. In addition, violence within the family is also a determinant of the critical path of youth violence.

The abovementioned behavior within the family is duplicated later on at school and thus becomes legitimate, even though it is not exclusive of school. This behavior is learned at home, projected at the community, and accepted as normal, as a part of daily life. Analysts have pointed out that, "It has been determined that schools, communities, and homes are contexts that –by exposing individuals to violence and serving as objective reference points of a violent reality– socialize youth in the values promoting violence, thus closing and feeding back a vicious circle that can hardly be broken without an effort involving society as a whole."[36]

Violence is found worldwide; it is inherent in human relations and it impacts individuals. Children and youth cannot escape it; in fact, they are the most vulnerable groups hit by violence. However, the type of violence with the

[36] Santacruz Giralt, María and Nelson Portillo Peña. Agresores y agredidos. Factores de riesgo de la violencia juvenil en las escuelas. Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública. El Salvador, 1999. p. 6

most impact on individuals is the one seen on a daily basis in the inner circle of the family, the school, and the community. In brief, violence originates in a daily lifestyle going beyond family, school, and neighborhood. Some of the "supreme" values transferred as a part of that lifestyle are security and control. These are shown through extreme individualism and by demarcation of individual territory. In a nutshell, violent attitudes result, among other sources, from society itself as a consequence of its individualistic, competitive character, leading it to forget about promoting the social character of people. Thus, a new vicious circle results: societies feel surprised by children's and adolescents' behavior but, at the same it, they contribute to that behavior. From a sociological standpoint, this violent behavior of youths can be interpreted as the result of the predominance of the individual above common interests.

The school on the critical path

Defining the function of education at a social level goes beyond the goal of this study. We think school is one of the most important places of socialization and, for our purposes, we will use the definition provided by the Pan American Health Organization in relation to formal education: "…it attempts to socialize children and youth, both male and female, by teaching them codes and behaviors allowing them to interact normally and functionally with other members of their society. It also attempts to transform "culture," the set of symbols and data that humankind, and each society, has accumulated over the centuries. In addition, it attempts at "developing personality" by taking advantage of individual talents and at "developing character" through ethical and esthetical values."[37]

Accordingly, a review of the current educational system as a whole and, particularly, that of Central America, would be vital. This system reinforces the vertical, intolerant patterns transferred from homes and increasingly tends to disregard individual differences and to reinforce a marginalization pattern by tending to expel those who do not adapt to the system. Thus, it begins an ejection process as it becomes exclusive in its attempt to homogenize. In other words, this is a highly hierarchical, generally authoritarian system, restricting student participation and essentially turning them into passive subjects in the process.

[37] UNDP. Los retos educativos del futuro. Estado de la educación en América Latina y el Caribe. First edition, September 1999, p. 90

In terms of the region as a whole in relation to student violence, Costa Rica and El Salvador have not critically addressed or paid particular attention to the issue. Throughout the rest of Central America, however, student violence tends to be seen as a direct result of other violent phenomena, e.g., participation of students in gangs or *maras*. However, different forms of youth engagement in violent behavior are also exhibited. These result from the combination of a number of driving factors whose presence does not necessarily lead to the same phenomenon. A case in point here is the significant difference perceived between the youth crime phenomena in northern and southern Central America.

Media

The media is a powerful tool to transfer cultural, religious, and philosophical values, among others, or –on the contrary– the media can convey negative values and work against culture. It shares this function with home and school, although with different levels of responsibility. The definition of what the media is, is not, or must be, is also out of the scope of this study. Therefore, for the purposes of our research, we are only interested, for the time being, in a few issues related to the media. One of these, still highly debatable but increasingly validated by research, is the relationship between television and aggressiveness. Jaime Robert[38] points out a number of conclusions regarding the link between these two:

- A positive relationship exists between exposure to aggressive content and aggressive behavior.
- TV encourages aggression through hostile behavior models that viewers can imitate.
- Watching aggressive behavior facilitates breaking inhibitions against showing aggressive behavior.

In relation to this, the media could be helping increase violence levels chiefly as a result of unfiltered cultural influence transferred beyond national borders. In effect, thanks to the globalization of technological tools and increasingly easy access, electronic games, music, movies, and TV can be promoting a number of patterns, such as consumption, as well as violent messages not in line with autochthonous culture. Thus, these technological tools can become a means to

[38] Robert, Jaime. Televisión: violencia y socialización. In Reflexiones, Universidad de Costa Rica, issue 19, 1994.

legitimate the use of violence either in an informative fashion or even as a game.

People in general, and specifically youth and children, cannot escape this influence. They are exposed to a number of messages with highly violent content, with no filter from either the media or the family regarding the message conveyed. For this reason, the message will depend to an extent on the viewer's perception, maturity, objectivity, and ability to discern. This is the case, for instance, for undefined, contradictory, or violent messages.
It is important to highlight again the fact that access to the media, chiefly, TV and video games, is not specific to a social class, as well as the media's strong impact on youth and children, as these two groups devote a significant portion of their time to such media sources.

And here we must pause. All available research and statistics consistently indicate that "Poverty has focused massively in urban areas, where high growth rates for the youth population occur."[39] If we turn to the same sources to plot cities –particularly Latin American cities– taking into account youth and child settlements and those for poor people, we can affirm that public recreation areas have been progressively reduced, to the detriment of youth. This pushes, all the more, children and youth toward electronic games and television for entertainment.

Recent research indicates that the impact of TV shows, especially on very young people such as small children, is key, as it directly relates to the development of children. The book by Carmen García Galera, *Televisión, violencia e infancia,* deals in depth with this relationship. In her book, Ms. García includes an empirical demonstration of the impact violent TV shows have on children; she points out that boys watch TV for longer periods of time than girls do. Also, boys and girls from lower social strata spend more time watching TV. Boys watch a larger number of violent shows, with those between ages 11 and 12 as the most violent ones, which in turns leads them to a more significant exposure to violence. Of course, she adds that there is an inverse ratio between the time devoted to TV and that devoted to school activities.[40] These are part of the conclusions from studies related to children who watch TV on average two hours per day on weekdays and

[39] PAHO/WHO, op. cit. p. 40.
[40] See García Galera, Carmen. *Televisión, violencia e infancia*. Editorial Gedisa. First edition, Spain, 2000

four hours on weekends. Needless to say, the additional time children spend on TV watching has a negative impact on their ability to learn, the development of language abilities, gross and fine motor coordination, and their ability for family and community socialization.[41] This is still more serious in the case of children devoting more than two hours per day to watch TV. In these cases, their ability to concentrate, as well as their socialization at school is clearly reduced.[42] The same is true of unrestrained use of computers. In other words, focusing on computers or TV watching for more than a given number of hours affects negatively key abilities of people. This impact increases, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the younger the individual.

There is a wealth of research relating to the content of electronic games as well as to unfiltered Internet. These tools are usually harder to access. Therefore, poor youngsters reach them at public places, where they also come into contact with alcoholic beverages, drugs, and some kinds of gangs.

The significant role played by the media confirms even more the need to conduct research and provide training, together with the players from the media, to transform the negative aspects of their roles so that they can contribute to the development of a culture of peace. These players include owners, journalists, opinion makers, academicians, civil society organizations, and so on.

Young males, the victims of violence

A number of common traits are found when establishing the characteristics of offender youths: this is a basically male phenomenon, with youngsters between 13 and 29 (adolescents or young adults) as its major players; most of these youths come from financially-depressed areas or low-income urban zones with high birth and population density rates. They have little schooling, high unemployment levels and occasionally belong to ethnic or racial minorities. Although being young, male, poor, unemployed, and with little education does not necessarily necessitate being violent, world statistics show that people with these characteristics are the major victims of social violence.

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[41] A recent study by Harvard University and the University of Stanford established the impact of having a TV set at a school child room as compared to having a computer and the reverse impact on schoolchildren academic performance. For further detail see http://www.nacion.com/ln_ee/2005/julio/05/aldea6.html

[42] Ibidem

In fact, in relation to the previous assertions, we must emphasize that violence and crime go hand in hand with poverty. Even though we prefer not to have a biased, discriminatory view of violence, which does not contribute to analyzing the phenomenon in its entirety, violence and crime occurring in the upper social strata –in which people have more financial resources– differs even in terms of reference, such as "unadjusted" and "rebel" youngsters who display disorderly behavior. Moreover, in these upper social strata, violence is dealt with at clinics and special schools instead of juvenile jails and similar centers. Research conducted in Honduras, for instance, provides interesting data relating to this. In brief, the percentage of youth violence occurring in the upper social stratum normally goes undetected and, as pointed out by Anayansi Turner, "…almost all jails around the world are populated with poor prisoners."[43] In relation to this, jail statistics all over the world as well as criminological science display a wealth of data. Among the most prominent of these studies is the lasting work of Argentinean criminalist Eugenio Raúl Zaffaroni, as well as others carried out by the United Nations Latin American Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders , whose researchers, Carranza and others, are quoted throughout this work.[44]

When victims of violence are mentioned, they are mostly youngsters who share the same social and economic conditions as their victimizers. In other words, these are not upper- or upper middle-class youngsters, but rather those living in the same neighborhood. Violence among people sharing the same status seems aimed at eliminating competitors through intimidation, revenge, fear, and threat of destruction. Although youth violence is perceived as aimed at established, institutional authorities (family, school, police, and so on,) it is also directed to other young people identified as "the enemy"; "those belonging to the other group," or the opposite gang or *mara*. It is also important to mention that those who, while not belonging to any of these groups, enjoy what violent youngsters do not have: being young, male, employed, and with a certain level of purchasing power, that is, those who have succeeded at inserting themselves into the production, family, and educational processes. Thus, "…the culture of consumption and the dream of becoming

[43] See below.

[44] "See the work of Zaffaroni, Eugenio Raúl: Manual del Derecho Penal, Cárdenas, editor and distributor, Mexico 1988, and Carranza y Solana, op cit.

members of the middle class tempt even destitute *mara* members."[45]

4. Arms, violence and youth: some figures

"In many countries where violent conflict has taken place, interpersonal violence rates remain high, even after the hostilities are over. This is due, among other reasons, to the availability of arms and the increased social acceptance of violence."[46] We must conclude this is particularly true of Central America for a number of reasons. First, internal antagonism led to almost general conflict all over the region. In turn, this led to the inflow of large numbers of arms into the region, which are still being used, plus arms transfers to and from the black market. Several investigations mention two million war weapons.[47] Second, the area is known as a zone where traffic in arms, as well as illicit drug trade, occurs. This worsens extraregional conflict and organized crime activities, both inside and outside the area. Third, war indirectly led to a social "acceptance" of some sorts of violence as a "plausible way" to solve conflict and this subsequently promoted acquiring, owning, and carrying firearms.

As a result of these phenomenons, firearms have proliferated in the hands of the civilian population. There is also an increasing trend toward people taking the law into their own hands and, ultimately, using firearms chiefly for murder and –to a lesser degree, to commit suicide– with epidemic characteristics, as has been pointed out, among the young, male demographic.

By way of summary

The following data was collected by the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress. It purposefully engaged in collecting, systematizing, and analyzing data, and has done so for all six countries involved in this study. In addition, it influences –as

[45] Ibidem.

[46] PAHO/WHO, op. cit., p. 15.

[47] One and half a million illegal weapons are thought to exist in Guatemala, while legal-weapon records show only 147,581. In El Salvador, 224,600 illegal weapons are thought to exist, with only 175,400 legally registered. Figures from the Honduran Armory indicate 400,000 illegal weapons, with only 88,337 legally registered. No data for unregistered weapons are available for Nicaragua and Panama, but Nicaragua shows 70,000 firearms registered and 65,000 owners, while local studies estimate between 100,000 and 500,000 unregistered weapons. Panama shows 96,614 registered weapons, while no data are available for unregistered ones. In Costa Rica, 149,000 registered weapons are recorded, while 280,000 are thought to be owned illegally.

needed and to the extent of its power– the development, reformulation, or reinforcement of specific public policies. In order to collect the aforementioned information, it engaged in daily follow-ups of two newspapers in each country for an extended period of time, that is, between 2000 and 2004. The data provide different kinds of information, but only that data seen as most relevant to the purposes of this study is highlighted; it demonstrates the following behavior:

Table 5
Costa Rica
Victims on a per-age basis, 2004

Age Range	- 10	11-18	19-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	56-60	61-65	66-70	71 +	NS
Number of victims	21	53	116	44	49	43	41	26	13	15	12	7	8	172
Victims from arms	8	31	68	21	32	24	22	14	6	8	5	4	3	77
Injuries from arms	4	18	28	9	13	11	10	8	4	3	5	1	2	55
Death from arms*	4 2.64%	13 8.60%	40 26.49%	12 7.94%	19 12.58%	13 8.60%	12 7.94%	6 3.97%	2 1.32%	5 3.31%	0	3 1.98%	1 0.66%	22 14.56%
Others	9	19	38	21	12	15	15	9	3	4	4	2	6	70
NS**	4	3	10	2	5	4	4	3	4	3	3	1	0	25

* Includes suicide.
** Non-specific. Cases mentioned without specific reference to the way the injury or the murder took place.

The newspapers followed up in Costa Rica were *La Nación* and *Diario Extra*. These periodicals recorded a total of 620 violent events, with 89 female (14.3%) and 531 male victims (85.6%.) Also, 51.9% of events, –accounting for 322 people– were carried out using firearms. Out of these, 46.8% –151 individuals–died (degree of lethalness in the use of firearms.) Injured victims amounted to 171 individuals (53.1%.) An interesting breakdown of casualties shows that the groups under the most risk are individuals between 11 and 25 years old (35.09% of casualties) and those between 31 and 40 years old (21.18% of casualties resulting from attacks with firearms.) These two groups account for 56.27% of all victims. Thus, in line with the table above, we can say that over 64% of casualties range between 11 and 40 years old and, within this range,

there were 97 of all 151 casualties reported by newspapers. Firearms were also used in these cases. We must highlight here that in the case of 14.56% of victims (22 people) no reference is made to age. Obviously, this biases the information and this particular data, when analyzed in isolation, accounts for the second largest item, behind the 19-25 age group.

This demonstrates the impact of firearms on adolescents and young adults, even on those who have not completed their education and who could fully join the productive forces of society, with the ensuing economic impact.[48]

Table 6
El Salvador
Victims on a per-age basis, 2004

Age Range	- 10	11-18	19-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	56-60	61-65	66-70	71 +	NS
Number of victims	23	123	331	153	88	61	40	22	24	18	11	6	6	124
Victims from arms	16	108	291	126	74	49	33	15	18	13	9	5	1	105
Injuries from arms	11	15	28	19	8	4	3	2	4	4	2	1	0	25
Death from arms*	5 0.6%	93 12.6%	263 35.7%	107 14.5%	66 8.96%	46 6.25%	30 4.0%	13 1.7%	12 1.6%	9 1.2%	7 0.95%	4 0.54%	1 0.1%	80 10.8%
Others	7	15	40	27	14	12	7	7	6	5	2	1	5	19

In El Salvador *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* were followed up, and these recorded 1,030 violent events, with 92 women (8.9%) and 938 (91.0%) men victimized. This ratifies the significance of gender in terms of the impact of violence. Firearms were involved in 863 events, accounting for 83.7% of all cases, while other types of weapons (sharp weapons, weapons with blades, contusive weapons, and so on) were employed in 16.2% of cases. Out of 863 cases where firearms were used, 736 casu-

[48] Costa Rica's Ministry of Health has developed and applied to violence the Indicator of Potentially Lost Years of Life. This means that, if an individual dies as a result of violence –prior to attaining the average life expectancy for a given country– that individual's ability to produce wealth as a part of the economically active population of a country engaged in production is lost. The amount of wealth is estimated on the basis of those years. Generally speaking, the population segment hardest hit by violence are youth, which means greater loss for the countries

alties resulted (85.2%), which –again– shows the degree of lethalness in the use of firearms. The age group with the most victims indicates that youth and young adults are the group under the greatest risk (11- 30 years old) as this account for 62.8% of all casualties (463 as compared to 736 deadly victims.) Here we must highlight that, in the case of 10.8% of casualties, no precise age was indicated, leading to distorted data, as age is rated four in terms of importance. According to data collected by the Salvadoran press, young males are under greater risk of being killed with firearms.

Table 7
Guatemala
Victims on a per-age basis, 2003*[49]

Age Range	- 10	11-18	19-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	56-60	61-65	66-70	71 +	NS
Number of victims	17	134	222	126	80	55	45	28	23	15	10	7	6	213
Victims from arms	12	109	170	116	69	45	36	22	19	11	9	5	4	187
Injuries from arms	4	14	17	11	11	12	1	5	3	4	1	1	0	42
Death from firearms*	8 1.1%	95 13.8%	153 22.2%	105 15.2%	58 8.4%	33 4.7%	35 5.0%	17 2.4%	16 2.3%	7 1.0%	8 1.1%	4 0.58%	4 0.58%	145 21.0%
Others	5	25	52	10	11	10	9	6	4	4	1	2	2	26

Information in Guatemala was taken from the newspapers, *Al Día* and *La Prensa Libre*. These recorded 981 violent events with 142 female and 839 male victims (14.7% and 85.5%, respectively.) Firearms were used in 814 cases, that is, 82.9% of all recorded events. In turn, these resulted in 688 casualties (84.5% of victims - degree of lethalness in the use of firearms) and 126 injured individuals (15.4%.) In view of the number of resulting casualties, individuals between 11 and 30 years old are the age group at greatest risk (353 of all 688 cases recorded, that is, 51.3% of all victims.) We lack information about the age of 145 deadly victims, accounting for 21.0% of casualties.

[49] Due to data confusion, we were unable to report information about victims on a per age-range basis. Thus, we offer data for 2003, instead of 2004, as is the case for the rest of the countries.

Table 8
Honduras
Victims on a per-age basis, 2004

Age Range	- 10	11-18	19-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	56-60	61-65	66-70	71 +	NS
Number of victims	22	81	215	109	98	70	51	39	31	13	12	5	9	115
Victims from firearms	16	69	189	95	86	60	47	31	25	11	10	3	4	104
Injuries from firearms	4	3	13	7	4	5	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	24
Death from firearms*	12 1.7%	66 9.6%	176 25.6%	88 12.8%	82 11.9%	55 8.0%	45 6.5%	31 4.5%	24 3.4%	11 1.6%	9 1.3%	3 0.4%	4 0.5%	80 11.6%
Other arms	6	12	26	14	12	10	4	8	6	2	2	2	5	11

In Honduras *La Tribuna* and *EL Heraldo* newspapers were followed up. These reported 870 events, with 119 female (13.6%) and 751 male victims (86,3%). Of these, 750 were attacked with firearms (86.2%), with 686 casualties resulting (91.4 % of lethalness.) Firearms account for a high risk to the population between ages 19 and 25 (50.4% of victims and 346 casualties.) Total casualties amount to 60.0% of total figures when adolescent victims are included. The age of 80 victims, accounting for 11.6% of the total, is not registered.

Table 9
Nicaragua
Victims on a per-age basis, 2004

Age Range	- 10	11-18	19-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	56-60	61-65	66-70	71 +	NS
Number of victims	4	38	86	34	24	18	11	5	9	8	1	3	5	82
Victims from arms	0	8	25	9	9	4	2	2	3	2	0	0	1	20
Injuries from arms	0	0	5	5	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	13
Death from firearms*	0	8 14.0%	20 35.0%	4 7.0%	7 12.2 %	2 3.5%	2 3.5%	1 1.7%	3 5.2%	2 3.5%	0	0	1 1.7%	7 12.2%
Others	4	30	61	25	15	14	9	3	6	6	1	3	4	62

Information in Nicaragua was taken from *La Prensa* and *El Nuevo Diario*. According to these periodicals, 328 victims resulted for 2004, 54 females and 274 males (16.4% and 83.5%, respectively.) Eighty-five of these events involved firearms (25.9%). Nicaragua is an extraordinary case, as its population presumably possesses a significant number of firearms, but data from the newspapers indicates a low degree of firearm use in violent acts.[50] For the purposes of this study, we must highlight that 85 events involving firearms resulted in 57 casualties, with a 67.0% "effectiveness" in the use of firearms. This constitutes a risk factor to adolescents and young adults, a group recording 28 casualties, i.e., 41.7% of all victims. The risk factor increases for the 31- 35 age group (7 victims, accounting for 10.4% of the total figure. Both groups added account for 52.1% of total victims. In relation to what occurs in the rest of the countries, a significant change in terms of frequency of events takes place for the 26- 30 year age group. We must also indicate that the age for 25. 3% of victims (17 individuals) were not reported.

Table 10
Panama
Victims on a per-age basis, 2004

Age Range	- 10	11-18	19-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	56-60	61-65	66-70	71 +	NS
Number of victims	16	84	155	98	66	50	41	24	14	7	10	4	11	150
Victims from arms	12	62	98	51	33	21	16	10	7	3	3	2	2	89
Injuries from arms	10	44	50	23	13	12	8	3	4	0	1	1	0	60
Death from farms*	2 1.1%	18 10%	48 26.6%	28 15.5%	20 11.1%	9 5%	8 4.4%	7 3.8%	3 1.6%	3 1.6%	2 1.1%	1 0.5%	2 1.1%	29 16.1%
Other arms	4	22	57	47	33	29	25	14	7	4	7	2	9	61

[50] In this case we had access to official figures from the National Police for the years prior to 2004. These show a global increase in crime with firearms and indicate that, in 2000, 56.4% of 611 criminal events involved firearms and 43.5% a different type of weapon, with casualties in 58.2% of all cases. Also, in 2001, for a total of 696 criminal events, firearms were used in 60.3% of cases, i.e., 420 events, with 240 casualties (57.1% of all cases.) For 2002, 758 events were recorded by the National Police. Out of that total, firearms were used in 445 instances, accounting for 58.7% of all events, with 246 casualties (55.2%.) Also, for 2003, out of 694 recorded events, firearms were used in 398 cases (57.3% of events), with 244 casualties (61.3% of total victims of firearms.)

The two newspapers followed up in Panama were *El Siglo* and *La Crítica*, which recorded 730 events during 2004, with 74 female (10.1%) and 656 male victims (89.9%.) Firearms were used in 409 cases (56.0%) with 180 casualties (44.0%). Injured people accounted for 55.9% of all victims. Thus, Panama shows a lethalness of use of firearms under 50%. The age group under the greatest risk comprise the 19-35 age group, with 96 casualties (53.3%.) If we add the adolescent group to this (18 individuals) then 63.3% of the population between 11 and 35 would be at risk.

This exercise exemplifies that the victims of violence are young males, mainly at risk from firearms, with lethalness ranging between 44% in Panama and 91% in Honduras. In all countries, victims mainly constitute the population group ranging between 19 and 25 years old.

Table 11

Country	Use of firearms	Degree of lethalness	Use of other arms
Costa Rica*	58.6%	46.8%	41.3%
El Salvador	83.7%	85.2%	16.2%
Guatemala**	82.9%	84.5%	17.0%
Honduras	86.2%	91.4%	13.7%
Nicaragua	25.9%	67%	74%
Panama	56.0%	44.0%	43.9%
Total	65.55%	69.81%	34.35

* In the case of Costa Rica, ouf of 620 events, the newspapers did not record the kind of weapon used in 71 of them. For this reason, the analysis is carried out based on the recorded data, i.e., 549.
** In the case of Guatemala, the data are for systematized information taken from newspapers for 2003.

Recorded newspaper data shows that Nicaragua is the country with the lowest firearm use rates (25.9%), and Honduras is the country with the highest rate (86.2%.) The highest lethalness rate also occurs in Honduras, with 91.4% of casualties resulting from attacks with firearms. As previously pointed out, Panama is the country with the lowest lethalness rates and is also the one with the highest rates of injuries from firearms.

Firearms are involved in at least 65.5% of all recorded events, including accident, murder, and suicide, among others. The above tables also show that the population at risk from

firearm attack is the age group ranging between 11 and 40 years old. However, the most vulnerable age group is that made up of individuals between 19 and 26 years old.

Over 77% of victims from attacks involving firearms died as a result of their injuries. It is worth noting here that violent events recorded by newspapers, with the exception of traffic accidents, help us obtain a representation of different expressions of violence, i.e., presence of firearms as compared to other objects used; degree of use of firearms; and victims' sex or age as a risk factor, among others. The task of the researchers' team manages a regional sample. Figures from other groups, including research organizations, public security forces and the judiciary are likely to display significant variations. Thus, there is a need to collate both sets of data.

One argument is that, even though any object can become a killing weapon or a weapon that causes irreparable injury, firearms are the great winners in the race for lethalness. In other words, the presence of firearms increases the odds for casualties resulting from violent events. This is due to the capacity of firearms to inflict damage; the fact is that distance is not a barrier to do so, and a number of devices related to them exists that can augment their damaging and destructive characteristics, e.g., telescopic sight, silencers, and so on.

Table 12

Country	Victims from arms	Percentage	Deaths from firearms	Percentage	Injuries from firearms	Percentage
Costa Rica	322	10.09	151	4.73	171	5.36
El Salvador	863	27.01	736	23.07	127	3.98
Guatemala*	760	23.83	658	20.63	102	3.19
Honduras	750	23.51	686	21.51	64	2.00
Nicaragua	85	2.66	57	1.78	28	0.87
Panama	409	12.82	180	5.64	229	7.18
Total	3,189	100	2497	77.36	721	22.58

* The data for Guatemala correspond to follow-up of newspapers for 2003.

Legislation and more

All Central American countries adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child,[51] and, as a result, enacted Children and Adolescent Codes aimed at providing comprehensive care to these population segments. In addition, they enacted criminal legislation specifically intended for under-aged individuals.

Only in Nicaragua this is regulated by the Children and Adolescent Code.

Despite progress resulting from the Convention and from this legislation promoting, among other purposes, the reinsertion of under age infractors into the society as a whole, we witness an increasing, basic contradiction between recently-adopted laws to reduce youth crime in some Central American countries. El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala y Panamá approved "anti-mara" or "anti-gang" laws accompanied by "hard line" government policies. That legislation has been developed with support from government security programs including the "Libertad Azul" Plan in Honduras, the Escoba Plan in Guatemala, the Mano Dura Plan in El Salvador, and action taken, under that same name, in Panama, also called "Seguridad integral con fuerza y con firmeza" by President Martín Torrijos' government.

A recent study published by the Observatorio Judicial from Guatemala indicates that, "In effect, these so-called security plans increase the already serious social stigmatization placed on the marginalized sector of our societies, mainly on youth. Also, they reinforce police power to make arrests, leading to additional arbitrariness and abuse against citizens and expanding social control of poor, socially-excluded people. In addition, they foster massive detention, illicit searching, and other police practices going against a democratic state of right."[52]

This trend, which has spread vigorously in northern Central America, is directed toward:

a) Police action focused on containing *maras*, which implies a repressive presence in marginal, poor, areas, and,
b) Legislation reforms, resulting in higher punitive ability vis-a-vis these youth groups. In practice, this entails trying children and youth as if they were adults.[53]

Since November 2003, security forces from different Central American coun-

[51] Convention on the Rights of the Child. Adopted and open to signature and ratification by the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization in its Resolution 44/25, of November 20, 1989. Put into effect on September 2, 1990, in line with Article 49.

[52] Monterroso, Javier. Análisis comparativo de los Informes sobre Políticas Represivas y Criminalidad Juvenil en Centroamérica. In El Observatorio Judicial. issue 46, year 6, November-December 2003. Instituto de Estudios Comparados en Ciencias Penales de Guatemala.

[53] "In most common-law countries, as is the case of the United States, regulatory legislation generally operates this way, that is, individuals under age are judged as such if their acts were those of an individual under age, and they are judged as adults, if their crime was that of an adult. Beyond challenging this judicial doctrine, the fact is that the former juridical system to

tries have met frequently to exchange information, attain uniform control of deported gang members, and homologate legislation. This is how institutions respond to gangs, which are held as the main perpetrators for between 20% and 45% of all murders, and for 70% of crime in the region.[54] In effect, in El Salvador, a 21.4% reduction of murder and a 22.1% decrease in injuries were attributed to be results of the implementation of Plan Mano Dura. Positive results were also attained in Honduras in relation to this, with a 36.2% fall in murder and a 41.7% decline of injuries.

Despite the above, the effectiveness of those policies is debatable, as murder figures have grown to 9.5 per day, according to the Universidad Centroamericana Jose Simeón Cañasin El Salvador. In his article, "El Salvador, lo que no debe hacerse con las pandillas,"[55] Joaquín Villalobos highlights the fact that the police recognized a 32% increase in murder cases during the previous year. Other reasons exist to challenge these examples of legislation, as indicated throughout this study.

Proposals toward addressing the issue on a regional basis and aligning procedures, even including military personnel in dealing with the problem, have been proposed at different levels. The reason for this is that they involve different initiatives from police forces, military forces, and heads of state. These endeavors were even proposed as a part of the Sistema de Integración Centroamericano (SICA) in July 2005, as already pointed out.

Changes in the region indicate a tendency toward establishing a much more repressive system than the one currently in place. That system would

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deal with crime from individuals under age in the United States –unlike the previously-mentioned former Latin American system for irregular situations– was an actual criminal system. Thus, this new doctrine, in the case of those countries, improves the procedural rights and guarantees of individuals under age. On the contrary, for Latin American countries and in the light of our previous analysis regarding differences between that irregular-situation doctrine and the new Comprehensive Protection doctrine (with the Convention on the Rights of the Child as its major expression) this represents a worsening for children and adolescents. The reason for this is that the previous irregular-situation system, beyond its purpose, was not based on due process, but clearly separated judging adults from judging people under age. New youth criminal legislation, assumedly based on the same purpose, is in fact creating a new criminal system duplicating the failures of the previous irregular-situation doctrine, but lacking its good features.)

[54] Rojas, Marjorie. El fenómeno de las pandillas y maras en Centroamérica, Panamá y Belice. Dirección de Inteligentes y Seguridad. Ministerio de la Presidencias, 2004.

[55] Villalobos, Joaquín. El Salvador, "Lo que no debe hacerse con las pandillas". Also published in El Diario de Hoy of El Salvador, June 22, 2005. www.iadialog.org

nullify all chances to give a comprehensive response to the problem. However, this repressive response has led to a large number of adverse reactions, both from civil society organizations working with children and adolescents and from the entire field of human rights, including the Comisión de Derechos Humanos de Honduras (CODEH,) the Universidad Centroamericana de El Salvador (UCA) and the Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD), de El Salvador, to mention just a few.

Adverse reactions have to do mainly with issuing laws that not only violate international juridical standards on human rights but even border on unconstitutionality as they also violate local juridical standards, including the constitution. They also have to do with establishing and implementing policies dealing exclusively with repression, without taking into account prevention as a part of a human security stance. Thus, for instance, Honduran legislation proposes restricting the habeas corpus right, so that it can only be applied on working days, thus openly violating its own constitution and even world and inter-American conventions.

Likewise, Honduras has reformed its criminal legislation to accommodate what criminal doctrine refers to as "open criminal patterns," discarded by world criminal science several decades ago. Some examples include Decree #117-2003, introducing Article 332 from Honduras Criminal Code, and Law #48 from Panama, enacted August 30, 2004, establishing that, "…the use of personal or collective identification symbols by members" characterizes gang followers. In other words, these are criminal standards creating a priori criteria regarding the guilt of potential infractors based on prejudice, rather than on action. This criterion can also collide with other legal principles such as lawfulness and its derivation to due process and the so-called typification principle stating that nobody can be convicted without incurring into a behavior previously typified as criminal[56]. In addition, Article 332 of Honduras Law 117- 2003 returns to old typifications we can find in Spanish medieval law, such as vagrancy or, even worse, expanding the unlawful assembly crime in a way that borders on negating the constitutional right to assemble.

The case of El Salvador is highly significant in this regard, as the Constitutional Court declared unconstitutional the bill submitted by the Executive Branch of the government

[56] Sala Constitucional de El Salvador

in relation to the above-mentioned issue.[57] The same was done by the Inter American Court of Human on its Consultative Opinion number 17\2002, dated August 28, 2002. In addition, FESPAD stated that the Anti-mara Act contradicts both the Political Constitution and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In addition, it specified that … "This Act proposes ambiguous, discriminatory criteria for implementation, such as appearance (clothing and tattoos) which negatively affect the dignity of individuals, the right of equality, criminal law acts, and the right of self-image, thus contradicting the basic principles governing criminal law in liberal states."[58] In the same vein it states, "The major criticism made about this initiative is the promotion of repression –by the police force– as the way to deal with a social issue that has grown under the very feet of those now encouraging increased institutional violence toward the youth; thus, it provides an inappropriate response from a social and punitive standpoint."[59]

Unfortunately, the public at large has also expressed its approval of this hardening of government policy, both in terms of repression and in terms of legislation, in an attempt at attaining increased security. The situation tends to become even more complex when links are confirmed to exist between the youth crime phenomenon –through gangs or maras– and international terrorism.[60] The way we see it, these are just "new" justifications to legitimate government violence in order to encourage regression in terms of human rights protection. This is done with a poor justification: fighting a problem that requires creative, multidisciplinary proposals and, above all, those having respect for human rights as their starting point.

Again, as we have pointed out before, from April 2005 onward, different meetings between the Central American armed forces and those from the United States have been taking place.[61] Their goal is to create an alliance to fight gangs in the region.

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[57] Amaya, Edgardo. *Bases para la discusión sobre política criminal democrática*. Ediciones FESPAD. San Salvador, 2003. p.

[58] Ibidem, p. 37.

[59] www.esmas.com/noticierostelevisa/internacionales/432460.html. *Vincula EU a la Mar Salvatrucha con organizaciones terroristas*.
www.ipsnews.net/interna.asp?idnews=29275. *Activists worried by Summit's focus on war on gangs, 29 June 2005.*

[60] http://www.nacion.com/ln_ee/2005/abril/17/ultima-ce12.html *Ejércitos de la región piden apoyo a EEUU para crear fuerza especial*, www.nacion.com/ln_ee/2005/abril/01/ultima-ce6.html Región busca alianza contra "*maras*" con EE.UU., México y el Caribe.

[61] UNDP, op. cit. p. 243.

With an eye to this, Bantz J. Craddock, Head of the Southern Command of the United States, was asked for support to create a selected regional force to fight illicit drug trade, terrorism, traffic in arms and people, and organized crime. The *mara* and gang issue was also included on this agenda. These meetings culminated in an agreement made in Tegucigalpa in late June 2005 regarding the creation of such a force. Dan Fisk, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Issues represented the U.S. government. In this context, the statement in the Second Report on Human Development: Central America and Panama (2003) is still more significant: "In regards to this, the loss of geostrategic interest in Central America and the rearrangement of the region's military to deal with issues that, even though undertaken as their own, are actually part of the agenda for U.S. domestic issues, is increasingly visible."[62]

CONCLUSIONS

Increased violence is a reality in Central America and Panama and it affects, to a great degree, the young population. All forms of violence are interrelated. Thus, they are structural and multidimensional in character.

Among the youth, we found a number of factors conditioning violence. Despite varied experiences in the countries of the region, the outcomes tend to be increasingly similar: an age and gender bias, lack of access to culture and education, as well as to health care and employment, and a status as a socially and economically excluded group. The results of these factors are found in each Central American country, although with different degrees of seriousness. Generally speaking, however, violence tends to be a problem in overwhelmingly traditional structures such as the family, the school, and the government. Finally, in the case of some expressions of violence, religion is seen as an alternative. Some cases have been documented where individuals leave gangs behind as a result of deep involvement in religious activities. In fact, this is one of the very few reasons of desertion acceptable to gangs. Leaving the gang is something deserters usually pay for with their lives. Unfortunately, even in this case, some religious activities are being challenged, so that alternatives for youths have become increasingly limited.

[62] www.iadialog.org Dialogue in the Press. Joaquín Villalobos. La mara salvatrucha, El Salvador en Otra Guerra. Also published in El Diario de Hoy, El Salvador, April 27, 2005.

Something we are clear about is that crime is just a side effect of violence, as are gangs, *maras*, and student violence, which are_among many activities impacting the youth. At the same time, we have detected a number of changes resulting from social evolution and leading to a proliferation of violence:

a) Tolerance for violence. Violence has become natural in a number of contexts and is present at different levels in both interpersonal and family relationships.

b) A dilution of socialization contexts such as families, schools, and communities. The media can also be included as developers (destroyers) of culture and values.

c) Reduced participation of government in social processes.

d) A lack of hope.

e) Insensitivity to others' pain and to violence itself.

f) A lack of precision in the messages conveyed by the media.

g) Increased social inequality.

h) Prevalence of social exclusion processes, and

i) Increased consumerism.

Becoming an adolescent involves three specific phases: (1) Separation from parents as a part of the search for individuality; (2) challenging the authority of major benchmarks and (3) the importance of the "peer group." This latter element involves sharing interests with individuals experiencing similar situations.

This point of coincidence is found at the *barra*, the group from the neighborhood. The conditions found in the environment will shape those youth expressions as well as the way these individuals are perceived by the rest of society in a context where youths are a majority and where they are misunderstood and coerced.

Central America and Panama are fearful as a result of the *maras* and their potential expansion. Deportations are a major element differentiating *maras* in northern Central America from gangs in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama. On the other hand, very similar conditions existing in the region could foster the *mara* phenomenon. "Anti-mara" legislation such as that found in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, as well as "antigang" legislation such as that from Panama, together with hard-line and extra hard-line policies responding to *maras* with punishment and repression can only intensify this phenomenon and initiate a regression from the humanizing of security forces.

More severe legislation, imposing strict punishments and repressive action, do little to solve this growing problem. Rather, these measures feed the cycle of violence and even lead to a multiplication of violence. Apparently, some governments have chosen to go back to the age of sheer force. Thus, while attempting to fight crime they are actually helping spread violence and create additional chaos.

Youth are a subordinated segment of the population. Politically, they have no weight since they are unable to vote and generally their political participation is very limited. From the point of view of family, they are submitted to the designs of their parents/guardians. In terms of education, they are under the authority of their teachers. In addition, those coming from impoverished sectors are marginalized as a result of an absence of or difficult access to education, culture and health care, as well as for a lack of alternatives for participation and representation, access to jobs, and a better standard of living. As their poverty level increases, they become increasingly invisible and socially excluded.

Government polices to contain the gang phenomenon use gangs and *maras* as a pretext to take action with a clearly military character. This can lead to a generalized threat since history in this region has proved that relying on the armed forces to keep domestic order has been a clear cause of conflict in the region.

Intelligence agencies in Guatemala and Honduras are increasingly considering the danger of gangs and *maras* becoming terrorists. Likewise, a direct relationship has been established between the guerrillas from the 80s and the gangs, leading to paranoia and confusion. Obviously, we are witnessing a social problem –rooted in unemployment, marginalization, little access to education and health care, and family disintegration– manifesting itself as a political/ideological problem.

While human rights defense groups and, particularly, groups advocating the rights of adolescents encourage quitting that approach, society as a whole approves of the use of more repressive policies, a larger number of policemen, presence of the military on the streets, longer jail terms, and even establishing or reinforcing capital punishment, depending on each country's legislation.

The dilemma faced by the Central American society is how to address the gang and *mara* problem and how to incorporate adolescents and youths between ages 11 and 25 into the solution of this problem. It must be done by taking into consideration that this segment accounts for 50%

of the population in Central America and that these generations will soon replace the current generations in each country in the region.

A challenge faced by this society is, precisely, involving youth as full members –which they are– of society; including them as a key segment; giving them the chance to learn and have fun and to have access to employment ensuring them a good standard of living, as well as to develop conditions to meet their basic needs. In addition, it must help them reduce the inequalities found at the very base of conflict and diminish the risks that make this group a vulnerable segment.

Society must provide youth with good living conditions instead of treating them as outcasts, since it is developing them based on its very image: violent, insensitive, egotistic, and lacking solidarity.

The words of Joaquín Villalobos in the Inter-American Dialogue are interesting. He said: "The constant repetition of a message of force aimed at arousing vindictive instincts multiplies the culture of violence as hard line and also includes fighting between neighbors or husbands hitting their wives. When maras began, they were a youth social violence issue impacting the poor. Since no action was taken, they began killing and stealing. When repressed, they became even more violent. They were imprisoned en masse and became organized and armed nationwide. Now they have become hired assassins to organized crime and have created a serious regional crisis. The security plan implemented a year ago has failed. If not improved, worse is yet to come."[63]

[63] www.iadialog.org Dialogue in the Press. Joaquín Villalobos. La mara salvatrucha, El Salvador en Otra Guerra. Also published in
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