

Suicidal Behavior Among Latino Youth

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Suicide is the third leading cause of death for persons aged 15 to 24 (Moscicki, 1997; National Center for Health Statistics, 1994). Suicidal behavior has been reported as a leading cause of psychiatric emergencies for youth (Robinson, 1986; Safer, 1996), and a strong predictor of psychiatric hospital admissions in this population (Hillard, Slomowitz & Deddens, 1988; Safer, 1996). The prevalence and incidence of suicide and suicidal behavior has been known to vary with several sociodemographic factors including ethnicity (Moscicki, 1995), yet most of the studies have had adults as their focus. While there have been studies of suicidal behaviors of adolescents (see reviews by Reynolds & Mazza, 1994; Roberts, 2000; Shaffer & Hicks, 1994), there is a paucity of data on the suicidal behaviors of minority youth and more specifically of Latino adolescents. This is in spite of the fact that for several years, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention has reported as part of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) that the highest rates of suicide attempts in the United States were among Latino adolescents (Roberts, 2000). During 1999, 8.3% of students nationwide had attempted suicide one or more times during the 12 months preceding the survey (CDC, 1999). These rates showed an increase from the previous study, in which 7.7% of youth reported to have attempted suicide (CDC, 1997). When the rates were broken down by ethnicity, Latino youth in the United States were significantly more likely to have attempted suicide in both years (10.7% in 1997 and 12.8% in 1999), and to have made a suicide plan (19.6% in 1997 and

17.7% in 1999), as compared to African American youth (7.3% in 1997 and 6.7% in 1999, 14.3% in 1997 and 11.7% in 1999, respectively) and European American youth (6.3% in 1997 and 7.3% in 1999, 12.5% in 1997 and 12.4% in 1999, respectively). During 1999, 19.9% of Latino youth seriously considered attempting suicide as compared to 15.3% of African American and 17.6% of European American youths (CDC, 1999). No significant ethnic differences were reported for serious suicide attempts that resulted in injury, poisoning, overdose, or treatment by a professional.

This article reviews the scientific literature related to suicidal behavior among Latino youth. We start by discussing the conceptualization of culture, and how culture may influence behavior and psychopathology, in particular, suicidal behavior. Next, we critically review the available literature that discusses rates of suicidal behavior, risk, and protective factors associated with this behavior among Latino youth. This literature is then discussed in terms of its implications for prevention. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of directions for future research.

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE

Culture serves as the web that structures human thought, emotion, and interaction, and provides resources for dealing with major life changes and challenges, including illnesses (Canino & Guarnaccia, 1997). Culture is

continuously being shaped such as migration and acculturation, and is a product of group values, norms, and of individual histories.

Psychological and behavioral health is the result of lifelong interactions of psychological, sociological, and cultural factors (Cooper & Morgan, 1981; Allen, 1981). Psychologically, particularly functional disorders, such as mood, anxiety, and culture has been shown to influence emotion, behavior, and expectations (Campos, 1994; & Campos, 1994). Given this, it should follow that cultural differences should substitute a preeminent concern in research on the causes of suicidal behavior. Ethnicity was particularly salient in the discussion of successful adaptation of Latino youth to a culturally diverse environment (Moorehead, 1989; Berry, 1993; Garza, & Cota, 1993; & Alipuria, 1990).

For several decades, research has demonstrated that culture has an effect on presentation and patterns of suicidal behavior and outcome of mental illness. Symptoms may manifest differently as well as a cultural understanding of these symptoms is important for diagnosis and treatment. In diverse populations (Canino, González, Canino, & Roberts, 1999).

Given this brief discussion, it is the fact that Latinos are a diverse group, the use of a general model conceptually and practically across dimensions of different cultural groups are grounded in their history; in particular, within each Latino community, gender, and class relations, and class relations within each country of migration; and in the moments within the culture that affected how those (Aguirre-Molina &

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