



FACT SHEET

Report of the PAHO High-Level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19:

A New Agenda for Mental Health in the Americas

9 June 2023

About Mental Health

Defined as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community,” mental health is inextricably linked to physical and overall wellbeing. It is also recognized as a basic human right and an essential component of Universal Health Coverage.

Good mental health benefits both individuals and society as a whole and expanding mental health services can contribute to improved social and economic outcomes and promote development. Evidence also shows that investing in mental health yields high returns in the form of increased productivity.

Poor mental health is a major contributor to disability and mortality in the Americas. While

prior to COVID-19, the Region experienced a high burden of mental health conditions, with only a small fraction of people living these conditions receiving necessary care, the pandemic exacerbated the situation by increasing risk factors for poor mental health and further straining mental health services.

In 2022, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) created the High-Level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19 to analyze the current mental health situation in the region and provide clear guidance on how to improve mental health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The result is the report A New Agenda for Mental Health in the Americas, a package of priority mental health policy and strategy actions summarized in 10 recommendations.

Situation in the Americas

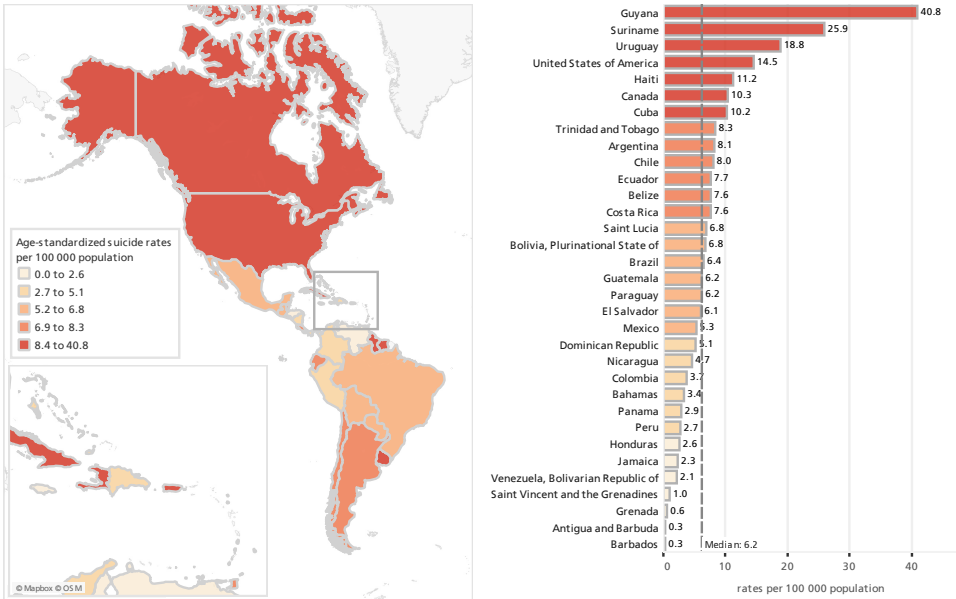
In the Region of the Americas, mental health conditions represent a significant source of disability and mortality. Nearly one third of all years lived with disability (YLDs) and one fifth of disability adjusted life years (DALYs) are attributable to mental, neurological and substance use conditions and suicide. Depressive disorders and anxiety disorders are the third and fourth leading causes of disability.

Alcohol is responsible for 5.5% of all deaths in the Americas, and 6.7% of all DALYs. 8.2% of the general population over 15 years old has an alcohol use disorder (AUD). The Region ranks as the second highest in consumption and burden of alcohol (it has the highest prevalence of women with AUD worldwide).

Suicide claims the lives of nearly 100,000 people each year. While men are more than three times as likely to die by suicide, women are more likely to attempt suicide. Between 2000 and 2019, the regional age-adjusted suicide rate increased by 17%. The Americas was the only WHO region to show a rise in suicide rate over this period.

Despite the high mental health burden in the Region, the vast majority of people living with mental health conditions do not receive the care they need. **In the Americas, the treatment gap for severe mental conditions, such as psychosis, has been estimated at 82% in 2020, indicating that out of every 10 individuals with a severe mental health condition, approximately 8 did not receive treatment.**

Suicide Mortality rate by country, rates per 100 000 population



Source: Pan American Health Organization. The burden of suicide in the Region of the Americas. ENLACE data portal. Washington, DC: PAHO; 2021 [cited 4 March 2023]. Available from: <https://www.paho.org/en/enlace/burden-suicide>

Key challenges

Insufficient and poorly allocated resources:

Countries in the Region do not devote sufficient human and financial resources to mental health in proportion to their mental health burdens. A median of only 3% of total government health spending goes to mental health, of which 43% is allocated to centralized psychiatric hospitals.

Poor service organization: In many countries, mental health service delivery is still concentrated in long-stay institutions, rather than in the community. 28% of all psychiatric hospital stays in the Americas exceed 5 years, the highest proportion for all WHO Regions.

Stigma and discrimination: Stigma and discrimination remain major barriers to mental

health care, as they can reduce help-seeking and make treatment less effective. Health care settings, though not always intentionally, can also perpetrate stigma and discrimination.

Inequitable care: Certain individuals and groups in society may be at a significantly higher risk of experiencing mental health challenges and/or face greater barriers to accessing or receiving quality mental health care. They may (but do not necessarily) include but are not limited to: people living in poverty; Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and other ethnic groups; women; people with mental health conditions; LGBTQ+ persons; people with disabilities; and migrants, refugees, and displaced people.

The COVID-19 pandemic and mental health

The COVID-19 pandemic increased well-established risk factors for mental health including unemployment, financial insecurity, grief and loss, barriers to health care, abuse and trauma, and feelings of isolation. It has been estimated that in 2020, major depressive disorder rose by 35% and anxiety disorders by 32% in Latin America and the Caribbean due to the pandemic. Groups including health and frontline workers, women, children and adolescents, Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and other ethnic groups, and people with pre-existing mental health conditions, among others, have been disproportionately impacted.

Post COVID-19 condition, or long COVID-19, which affected over 140 million individuals worldwide by the end of 2021, has also been associated with enduring mental and neurological symptoms.

Additionally, countries are still recovering from major disruptions to their mental health services, brought on by the pandemic. 65% of countries in the Region reported disruptions to essential mental health and substance use services in 2020. This number has since decreased, with 14% of countries reporting disruptions to the services in early 2023.

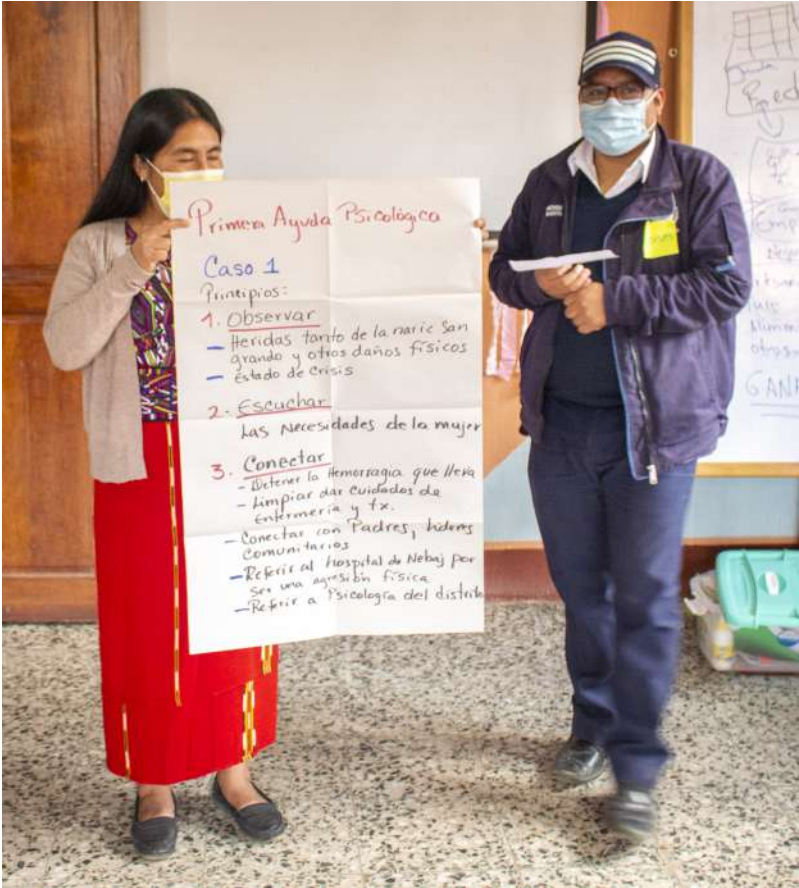
PAHO'S response

PAHO works with Member States on the development and implementation of rights-based mental health legislation, policies and plans; the improvement and expansion of community-based mental health services; the implementation of evidence-based mental health promotion and prevention programs across the life course; and the strengthening of data collection and reporting on mental health.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, PAHO has continued to support countries in key areas such as building capacity in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS); enhancing MHPSS service delivery, including by remote means; strengthening MHPSS coordination mechanisms; and developing MHPSS communications targeting the general population and key priority groups.

PAHO'S High-Level Commission on Mental Health

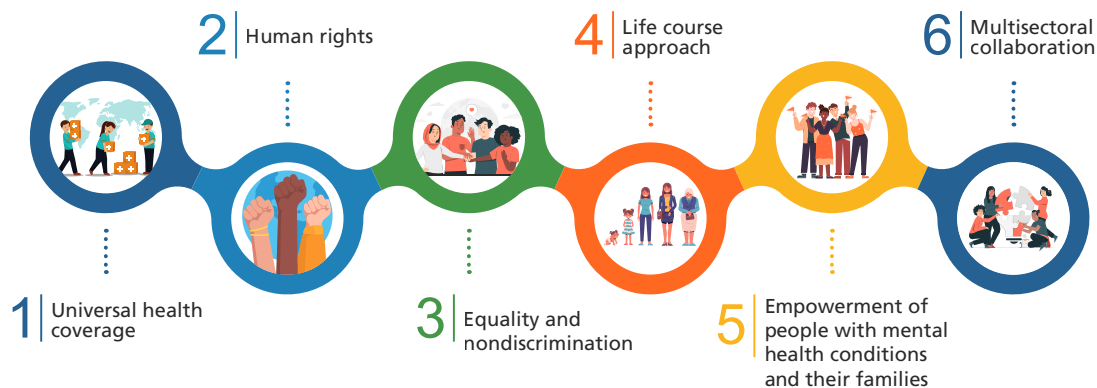
To address the growing mental health crisis in the Region, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, PAHO established the High-Level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19 in May 2022. Chaired by Former Vice President of Costa Rica, Epsy Campbell Barr, and Co-Chair Nestor Mendez, Assistant Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), the Commission was tasked with providing guidance to PAHO on advancing mental health in the Region during and after the pandemic. The Commission's 17 members, including experts from government, civil society, and academia, and people with lived experience of mental health conditions, convened technical working groups and consulted key mental health stakeholders from across the Region to develop a series of final recommendations, which have been published in a report A New Agenda for Mental Health in the Americas.



A New Agenda for Mental Health in the Americas

The report A New Agenda for Mental Health in the Americas (NAMHA) comprises the 10 core recommendations of the High-Level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19, each with corresponding action points and a case example. While not exhaustive, the recommendations focus on key priority areas identified by the Commission which require urgent action for sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

The report is built on the premise of multisectoral partnership, where different sectors and actors work together in an integrated manner by pooling financial resources, knowledge, and expertise. While it targets high-level government authorities and decision makers in the Americas, it recognizes that coordination with communities and the private sector is essential.



Ten recommendations to improve mental health

High-level government authorities in the Region are encouraged to integrate the Commission recommendations, accepted by the PAHO Director, into public policy and mental health planning and programming. As countries and territories of the Region are at different stages of mental health reform and face unique barriers and opportunities depending on local context, the recommendations will require contextual adaptation.

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1. Elevate mental health at the national and supranational levels
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2. Integrate mental health into all policies
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3. Increase the quantity and improve the quality of financing for mental health
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4. Ensure the human rights of people living with mental health conditions
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5. Promote and protect mental health across the life course
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6. Improve and expand community-based mental health services and care
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7. Strengthen suicide prevention
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8. Adopt a gender transformative approach to mental health
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9. Address racism and racial discrimination as a key determinant of mental health
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10. Improve mental health data and research

Resources

1. A New Agenda for Mental Health in the Americas: Report of the Pan American Health Organization High-Level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19: <https://www.paho.org/en/documents/new-agenda-mental-health-americas-report-pan-american-health-organization-high-level>
2. PAHO High-Level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19: <https://mhc.paho.org/en>
3. PAHO Policy for Improving Mental Health: <https://www.paho.org/en/documents/policy-improving-mental-health>
4. The COVID-19 HEalth CaRe wOrkErs Study (HEROES): Regional Report from the Americas: <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/55972>
5. Mental Health Atlas 2020. WHO, 2021: <https://www.who.int/publication/i/item/9789240036703>