

Masculinity and suicide among men in the Americas

Why focus on masculinity and suicide?

Suicide is a serious public health problem; the number of lives lost each year due to suicide exceeds the number of deaths due to homicide and war combined. Every suicide is a tragedy that affects families, communities and entire countries. In the Americas, about 65,000 suicide deaths occur each year. The third leading cause of death in persons aged 10-24 is suicide¹ and male suicide rates account for about 79% of cases.

In the Region of the Americas, men are often taught from birth to be “manly” and reject showing emotions. These social constructs of masculinity can encourage men to understand that being a man means being tough, brave, risk-taking, aggressive and not taking care of one’s body or mind.² Consequently, men are more likely than women to underutilize health care services and are often more reluctant to seek help.³ Such constructions of masculinity must be addressed as part of a public health approach and response in order to fully address men’s health.

Traditional constructions of masculinity represent a key risk factor for male vulnerability promoting maladaptive coping strategies such as emotional inexpressiveness, reluctance to seek help or alcohol abuse.⁴

Other risk factors for suicide in men:

- Social expectations, including a greater pressure to be strong and the family provider, influence how financial and other problems may have a greater impact on men
- Personal issues of sexuality, stigma and discrimination related to sexual orientation and gender identity, and the lack of related information, can impact disproportionately on men
- “Silent” attitude toward emotional problems which limits their access to health
- Non-adherence to drug therapy

Suicide Mortality in the Americas

Region and sub regions	Males (age-adjusted rates)
Region of the Americas	11.54
Latin America and the Caribbean	8.39
North America	15.88
Central America, Hispanic Caribbean & Mexico	8.50
South America	8.27
Non-Hispanic Caribbean	11.84

What to do?

Strengthen the evidence base and raise awareness on the impact of masculinities on health through quantitative and qualitative research.

Identify the risk and protective factors related to masculinities and suicidal behavior.

Advocate for integrated responses to the different mental and physical health needs of men considering their diversity and addressing how shifting constructions of masculinity may improve health outcomes.

Actions to promote new and different forms of masculinities are powerful ways to protect men’s mental health.

Suicide is preventable!

More information: <http://bit.ly/2fxWwo3>

¹ Suicide mortality in the Americas: <http://bit.ly/2a6G900>

² PAHO’s Virtual Course on Gender and Health within a framework of Diversity and Human Rights Mod 1, General Glossary

³ Sullivan, Luke. Men, Masculinity and Male Gender role Socialization: Implications for Men’s Mental Health and Psychological Help Seeking Behavior, Canterbury Christ Church University

⁴ Moller-Leimkuhler, A. European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences (2003) 253: 1. Doi:10.1007/s00406-0397-6