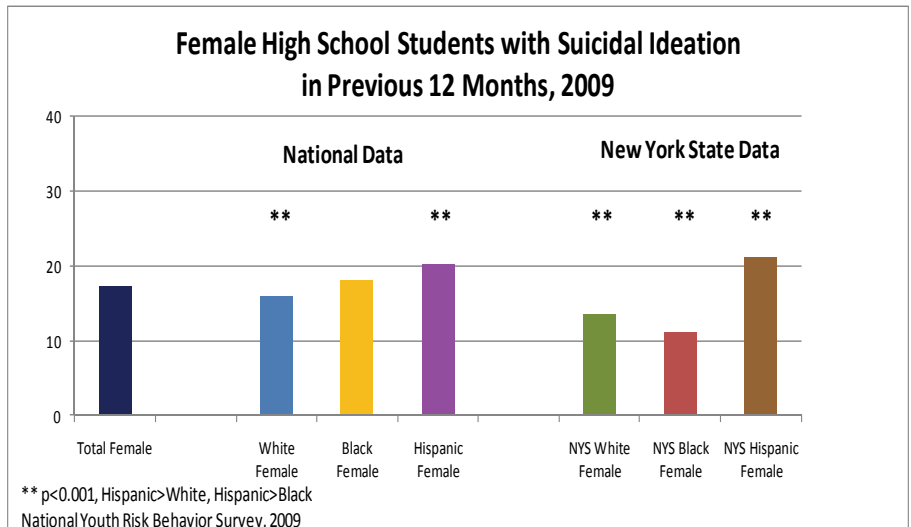




Suicidal Ideation and Behavior among Latina Adolescents

Problem: A previous suicide attempt is the strongest risk factor for completed suicide. According to the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, in 2009 one in seven adolescents in the U.S. had seriously considered attempting suicide within the past 12 months and one in nine had made a suicide plan. Female adolescents of Latino descent (“Latinas”) consistently report significantly higher rates of suicidal ideation and behavior compared to non-Latina Black and non-Latina White female adolescents in New York State (See Figure). In addition, among youth who contemplated or attempted suicide, Latino youth of both genders are significantly less likely than White youth to use mental health services in the year of their suicidal ideation or attempt.



Findings: A variety of factors impact the high rates of suicidal ideation and behavior among Latina adolescents, including:

- **Low levels of mutuality (i.e. feelings of empathy, reciprocity) between mothers and daughters** Both Latina youth who attempted suicide and their mothers report significantly lower levels of mutuality than Latina youth who did not attempt suicide and their mothers. Low levels of mother-daughter mutuality is associated with internalized (i.e. anxiety, depression) and externalized (i.e. aggression, rule-breaking) behaviors which are linked to suicidal behavior.
- **Low levels of support, affection, and communication** Latina youth who attempted suicide report significantly less support, affection, and communication with their mothers than Latina youth who did not engage in suicidal behaviors. Mothers of girls who attempted suicide also report less communication with their daughters than mothers of girls who did not attempt suicide.
- **Family conflict** Conflict between Latina youth and their parents is associated with low self-esteem and internalizing behaviors which in turn is linked to suicide attempts.
- **Generational status** Second and later generation Latina youth are more likely to attempt suicide than first generation Latina youth.

Emerging research suggests that suicide attempts among Latina youth follow a pattern in which attempts are often preceded by a triggering event followed by an intense flood of emotions. This event typically occurs within a context of instability and stress. Latina teens who attempt suicide identified four main sources of distress: changes in family structure, parental conflict, physical or sexual abuse, and bullying by peers.

Strategies: Latina adolescents should be assessed for suicidal ideation and behavior and at-risk youth linked to mental health services. It is important that suicide prevention and intervention programs involve the girls together with their families and target communication and conflict resolution within the family. Emotional regulation and impulsivity should be addressed and healthy coping skills taught and reinforced to handle intense emotions and distress. Additional research is necessary to more fully understand the high rates of adolescent Latina suicidal behavior and to develop effective, culturally competent prevention and intervention strategies. *Comunilife*, a community organization founded by Dr. Rosa Gil, has developed *Life Is Precious*, a family-focused, culturally competent mental health and youth development program working to reduce suicide risk in Latina adolescents in Brooklyn and the Bronx. The Center of Excellence for Cultural Competence is collaborating with Life Is Precious to evaluate this promising program and to decrease rates of suicidal ideation and behavior among Latina adolescents in New York State.

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