



Testimony

of

**Lily Tom, DSW
Assistant Commissioner
Bureau of Children, Youth and Families**

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

before the

New York City Council Committee on Women's Issues

and

**Committee on Mental Health, Mental Retardation, Alcoholism, Drug Abuse and
Disability Services**

and

Committee on Civil Rights

regarding

**Oversight: Exploring the Availability of Suicide Prevention Services
for Adolescent Latinas in New York City**

April 4, 2011
250 Broadway
New York City

Good afternoon Chairpersons Ferreras, Koppell, and Rose, and members of the Committees. My name is Lily Tom, and I am the Assistant Commissioner for the Bureau of Children, Youth and Families in the Mental Hygiene Division of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. On behalf of the Department, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the serious problem of suicide attempts among adolescent Latinas.

Adolescence is a time of heightened risk for mental health problems. As teens go through this phase of development, their search for self-identity and independence often leads to experimentation and risk-taking behavior. Conflicts with parents, relationship problems with romantic partners and peers, and pressure to achieve academically are all stressors that can lead to anxiety and depression. Studies suggest that intergenerational conflict is one of the primary explanations for suicide attempts and self-injurious behavior among Latina youth. For adolescents, suicide attempts are often expressions of despair and anger, and not necessarily an attempt to end one's life. Nevertheless, these behaviors represent serious mental health issues and reflect deep seated distress and suffering.

Overview

The biennial Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), a collaboration between the Departments of Health and Mental Hygiene and Education, and the Centers for Disease Control, provides important information on the prevalence of suicidal behaviors among the City's public high school students. In 2009, the survey found that about three of every ten City youths reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. Rates were higher among females than males, and among Hispanic students compared to whites, blacks, and Asians. In fact, on average over the past decade, 44% of Hispanic girls have reported sadness that lasts at least two weeks and seriously impairs their ability to carry out their usual activities. Hispanic girls also reported one of the highest rates in the City of suicide attempts, over 14%, and 5% reported an attempt that needed medical attention. Though suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15-24 year-olds in New York City, rates of suicide in this age group are lower than for older populations. There have been fewer than 20 completed suicides per year in NYC in this age group over the last ten years. Also, rates of completed suicide are much higher for males than for females. In contrast, hospitalizations for self-inflicted injuries are higher for younger adults, particularly women.

It is important to note that the Youth Risk Behavior Survey also identifies other populations that have increased rates of suicidal behavior in New York City. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning (LGBQ) youth, in particular, have the highest rate of reported suicide attempts, almost 30% compared to just over 7% among heterosexual youth in 2009. Of note, also in 2009, are other groups with high rates: the rate among black female adolescents was 10%, among black male adolescents was 10%, and in Hispanic male adolescents, 9%.

The survey also provides information about teen stressors and behaviors that could contribute to the psychological distress that may be expressed in a suicide attempt. City public high school teens who reported attempting suicide also are about three times more likely to report dating violence and binge drinking than students who did not report a suicide attempt.

I will now discuss some of what the Department is doing to address the issue of self-injurious behavior among adolescents in New York City.

Program Highlights

To determine how best to reach out to adolescents, we conducted 29 focus groups with over 100 teenagers from 2007 through 2010. We found that even when adolescents experience considerable stressors, they tend to ignore traditional sources of information, such as print materials and posters in schools and community centers. Even when youth-specific mental health services are available, many adolescents remain unaware of them or are reluctant to reach out. Barriers include adolescents' developmental sense of invincibility; the belief that they should solve their own problems; and prevalent negative attitudes and social stigma toward -- and experiences with -- seeking mental health help.

With the internet increasingly dominant in teens' social lives, reaching teens with any kind of public health message requires online strategies. To promote mental health among teenagers, the Department launched an online campaign on Myspace, with related content on Facebook and YouTube in the summer of 2008. The campaign focused on reducing the stigma associated with discussing mental health issues and help-seeking. It provided accessible, age-appropriate information about depression, risk taking, peer pressure, drugs and alcohol, and dating violence. The goal was to promote help-seeking by shifting social attitudes and normalizing the process. We also enabled users to e-mail LifeNet, the Department's crisis intervention and referral hotline, as they contemplated getting help. We carefully developed ten character profiles, two of which were Latina girls struggling with depression and suicidal thoughts. The profiles were carefully developed with particular focus on the social, emotional, cultural, and inter-generational factors unique to this population. We learned from our focus groups that in crisis, the girls turn to their friends and then family, rather than professionals, so we created help-seeking narratives that modeled how friends could be helpful.

The City is currently working on a new City-wide teen portal, which will incorporate a newly designed Department teen health site. The portal, which will also leverage content from other City agencies that serve teens, will provide information about programs, services, and resources in New York City. This year, we are also developing a guide for teens to raise their general awareness about mental health and available services. Getting Help for You or Someone You Care About will be rolled out as part of an outreach campaign which will also feature palm cards and other promotional material and coincide with the launch of the new teen site on nyc.gov.

Additionally, as you know, the Mental Health Association of New York City continues to run the City's LIFENET information and referral hotline with the ongoing support of the Department. Since 2005, LIFENET has provided multilingual, 24-hour, seven day a week phone-based information, support and referrals to people with mental and substance abuse disorders, including those at risk for suicide.

Resources

Schools offer a critical opportunity to identify and treat children's mental health problems. Two hundred and fifty-seven schools throughout the City have school-based mental health programs and provide mental health services onsite or through partnerships between the schools and hospitals or community-based agencies. Over 4,500 students were seen in the 2009-2010 school year.

DOHMH and the Department of Education's joint School Health Program is currently conducting a pilot program called Screening the At-Risk Student (STARS), in which school health nurses and physicians are being trained to assist in identifying youth with previously undiagnosed depression or existing depression who are at risk for suicide or other harmful behaviors, and who may need additional mental health services and supports. The STARS program provides nurses with information and consultation about the effects of trauma and depression on mental health outcomes. The program is currently available in five schools, one in each borough, and will be rolled out to more schools Citywide in the upcoming school year.

I also want to recognize the important work of our State partners. The New York State Office of Mental Health is collaborating with Kognito, Inc. to pilot an online program that educates teachers on how to spot students with depression and anxiety, and who are at risk for suicide, engage them in discussion, and make an appropriate community referral. This crisis intervention program will be offered at no cost to teachers, and the Office of School Health will roll out the program in select City schools this fall. Additionally, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention will make its materials available to educators as part of its "More Than Sad" Campaign, which was sponsored by the Office of Mental Health. This campaign provides teachers with tools that can be used in the classroom to raise awareness about depression and other risks for suicide and reduce the stigma associated with speaking up and getting help.

In conclusion, mental health problems and suicidal behavior among young people in our City is a serious public health issue and requires interventions along many fronts. In order to reach Latina adolescents, and adolescents of all backgrounds throughout the City, we must intensify our commitment to public education and to improving access to mental health services. We must also continue working to reduce the stigma, silence, and shame associated with speaking about psychological distress and mental illness; promote the early identification of depression; and normalize the seeking of help. We must also address the problems of excessive drinking and intimate partner violence. Importantly, these efforts must consider cultural factors and take place within the unique contexts of our communities. And, addressing these issues needs to include attention to family

dynamics and the role of parents. Last, we must continuously evaluate our efforts to ensure that we are reaching teens with messages that adolescents will respond to. The Department is committed to improving the health and mental health of all New Yorkers and will continue to look for different ways to support our young people so that they can be healthy and successful.

I appreciate the Council's attention to this important issue, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have at this time.

Thank you.