

Risk and Protective Factors: Hispanic Populations

Hispanic or Latino is defined as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.¹ In this information sheet we use the term “Hispanic” except in some cases where the referenced study used the terms “Latino” and “Latina.”

This sheet covers the common risk and protective factors for Hispanic populations. For data on suicidal thoughts and behaviors and suicide deaths in these populations, go to the web page “Hispanic Populations.”

Risk Factors

Across all racial and ethnic populations, some of the most significant risk factors are:^{2, 3}

- Prior suicide attempt(s)
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Mood and anxiety disorders
- Access to lethal means

For individuals who are already at risk, a “triggering” event causing shame or despair may make them more likely to attempt suicide. These events may include relationship problems and breakups, problems at work, financial hardships, legal difficulties, and worsening health.

In addition, research has shown the following to be among the most significant risk factors in Hispanic populations.

Alcohol: According to the National Violent Death Reporting System 2003–2009, of the Hispanic suicide decedents tested for alcohol, about 28% were legally intoxicated at the time of death. Of the four racial/ethnic minority groups studied, Hispanic populations had the second highest rate of alcohol use during an attempt.⁴

Mental health services access and use: Compared to non-Hispanic White people, Hispanic people underutilize mental health services, are less likely to receive care that follows recommended guidelines, and are more likely to rely on informal supports (e.g., family) and primary care providers than on mental health specialists for mental health services.⁵

In a large national survey, Hispanic adults who reported suicidal thoughts or attempts were less likely than non-Hispanic White adults to seek or receive psychiatric services.⁶

Percentages of Adults Who Did Not Seek or Receive Any Psychiatric Services in the Year Prior to Having Suicidal Thoughts or Attempts

	Hispanic Populations	White Populations
Suicidal Thoughts	61.6%	42.8%
Suicide Attempts	45.7%	24.1%

In a recent survey, Hispanic populations were less likely than other racial/ethnic groups to call a suicide crisis line during a suicidal crisis.⁷

Alienation: In an analysis of suicide notes to determine motivation, reported alienation among Hispanic people was double that of non-Hispanic White people. Alienation causes a loss of well-being when the individual feels emotionally disconnected from his or her family of origin or society.⁸

Acculturative stress and family conflict: Differences between the level of acculturation in parents and their children can create conflict and stress in the relationship, especially with Hispanic adolescent girls. This conflict and stress appear to play a pivotal role in Hispanic girls' suicide attempts.^{9, 10}

Hopelessness and fatalism: In a four-year analysis of a nationally representative sample, Hispanic adolescents and young adults had the highest rates of hopelessness and fatalism among all racial/ethnic groups.¹¹

Discrimination: Perceived racial discrimination is associated with suicide attempts among Hispanic college students (Gomez, 2011).¹²

Protective Factors

Across all racial and ethnic populations, some of the most significant protective factors are:^{13, 14}

- Effective mental health care
- Connectedness to individuals, family, community, and social institutions
- Problem-solving skills
- Contacts with caregivers

In addition, research has shown the following to be among the most significant protective factors in Hispanic populations.

Familism: Hispanic populations have scored high on measures of familism, which has been described as strong feelings of commitment, loyalty, and obligation to family members that extends beyond the nuclear family. The interdependent nature of family includes making family needs a priority over individual needs and being able to turn to family for support. Youth reporting strong, supportive relationships with their parents are less likely to attempt suicide.^{15, 16}

Ethnic affiliation: Latina adolescents with greater involvement in Hispanic culture have more positive relationships with their mothers and fewer withdrawn-depressive behaviors and suicide attempts.¹⁷ In addition, ethnic identity is positively associated with self-esteem among Latino/Latina adolescents, and has been shown to moderate the relationship between perceived discrimination and depression.¹⁸

Religiosity and moral objections to suicide: Individuals identifying themselves as Hispanic report higher scores on measures of moral objections to suicide and on measures of religiosity compared to people who do not identify as Hispanic.¹⁹ They are also more likely than other racial/ethnic groups to belong to religious denominations that have strong beliefs prohibiting suicidal thoughts and behaviors.²⁰

Caring from teachers: One recent national study found that perceived caring from teachers was associated with a decreased risk of suicide attempts by Latina adolescents.²¹

References

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