

Partnership to address gambling and other high-risk behaviours among Latin America youth

Background

Adolescents form one of the largest population segments in the Caribbean and in Central and South America, making up more than 30% of the total population. Poverty, low levels of educational attainment, urbanization and unemployment of youth, violence, and the growing economic uncertainty pose special risks to this vulnerable group. Many would argue that the health of the adolescent population is paramount to the social, economic and political viability of the region.

Existing research indicates that Latin American youth are particularly at risk for a number of serious health outcomes, reflected in the high prevalence of depression, suicide, substance abuse, and tobacco use. This problem is exacerbated by the limited number of mental health services and prevention programs specifically tailored to youth.

Over the last several decades there has been a growing body of literature identifying, describing and analyzing adolescent risk behaviour in the North American and European contexts. Research in developed countries points to an elevated risk among adolescents engaging in, and adopting health-compromising behaviors such as smoking, alcohol and drug use, as well as gambling. While the causes, risks and consequences of high-risk behaviour among Latin American youth are growing, there remains limited culturally relevant data on the topic; data that is necessary to bring forth any type of concrete action towards change. The paucity of

published literature in this area is certainly not an indication of the magnitude of problems among adolescents in this region.

Action

Collaborating with leading researchers, clinicians and NGOs from Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia, Uruguay, Costa Rica, and the Netherlands Antilles, a Task Force to address youth gambling and other high-risk behaviours was established.

After months of planning and coordination, the first Task Force Meeting was held in Punta del Este, Uruguay this past November at the Latin American Psychiatry Association (APAL) Congress. The key players identified at this meeting include University of Sao Paulo (Hermano Tavares), Pathological Gambling Section of Latin American Psychiatric Association (Cesar Sanchez-Bello), McGill University, Colombian Foundation of Pathological Gambling (María del Pilar Jaime) and Julio Angel Brizuela. Members of the Task Force showed tremendous support and enthusiasm for work in the area of gambling and other high-risk behaviours. Many spoke passionately about the problems in their communities and of the need for better understanding and awareness of the risks among youth. There was general consensus and commitment from Task Force members to begin working together towards achieving the following two objectives:

1) To strengthen researchers and non-

governmental organizations' capacity to investigate the prevalence and risk factors of gambling, alcohol, and drug use among adolescents in order to promote future development of mental health treatment and prevention services.

2) To propose recommendations for policy, prevention and mental health services.

The Task Force's first step is to develop a youth gambling questionnaire that could be used across regions and countries in Latin America. The Gambling and Other Behavioural Addictions Unit, Institute of Psychiatry, University of Sao Paulo has been given funding from the Bergen Institute in Norway to conduct a high-risk behaviours study among adolescents in schools in Sao Paulo. They have agreed to allow gambling questions to be included in this study. This will be the first exploratory study on youth gambling in Brazil. It is expected that more "piggy-backing" of current and future studies could be done in order to begin collecting various data on youth gambling. This information can then be used in future funding applications.

In the New Year, the Task Force is expected to outline specific activities and timelines to help achieve the objectives. We will need to seek funding in order to begin generating the research necessary for prevention and treatment.

We will keep you posted with updates in the future.