

## Concept note

### Experts' Meeting

## Strengthening the public health approach to youth violence in the Americas

7-8 October 2019

PAHO HQ, Washington, DC

### BACKGROUND

**Violence in all its forms has an enormous impact on the health** of populations and individuals, including children, adolescents and youth. The numbers are stark. The Region of the Americas has the highest homicide rate in the world. Homicide is a leading cause of death among adolescents and youth, particularly men and boys. In some settings, young men are also the main perpetrators of violence. In addition to these deaths, millions of young people sustain violence-related injuries that require emergency medical treatment, and countless others go on to develop health problems and adopt high-risk behaviors such as smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, and unsafe sex as a result of their exposure to violence. Beyond homicides, bullying and sexual violence contributes to mental and physical ill-health and disability among adolescents and youth. Without attention to the topic of youth violence, the health of adolescents and youth in the Americas cannot be assured.

**Attention to the topic of youth violence is timely.** Efforts to eliminate violence, including a specific indicator on reduction of homicides, is a key part of the Sustainable Development Goals globally as well as the Sustainable Health Agenda for the Americas 2018-2030. In 2016, WHO Member States committed to the Global plan of action on strengthening the role of the health system, within a national multisectoral response, to address interpersonal violence, in particular against women and girls, and against children. The plan provides evidence-based guidance on strengthening responses to all forms of violence, including youth violence. In 2017, the 29th Pan American Sanitary Conference reviewed and applauded progress on addressing violence in the Region and stressed the need to scale up efforts. This experts' meeting is a critical component of such a scale-up. Action on youth violence is further supported by and in line with Member States' commitments under the Plan of Action for Women's, Children's and Adolescent's Health (2018-2030) with the overarching goal of contributing to the health of young people in the Region of the Americas. It is also aligned with the objectives of the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescent's Health (2016-2030) and the Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (AA-HA!) guidance.

**Attention to violence and especially youth violence is not new to the Region.** The Region of the Americas has a longstanding history of preventing and responding to youth violence and many partners are active in this field. Examples include ongoing efforts in the Region and in countries to implement and strengthen attention to INSPIRE: Seven strategies for ending violence against children; the Caribbean Summit on Youth Violence Prevention resulting in the Caribbean Youth

Advocacy & Action Agenda on Violence Prevention, and the OAS Hemispheric Plan of Action to Guide the Design of Public Policies to Prevent and Reduce Intentional Homicide. These experiences and lessons learned are invaluable resources to guide the Region's response to youth violence.

There is a large body of evidence about factors associated with increased risk of youth violence, as well as appropriate interventions aimed at prevention. Preventing youth violence requires comprehensive approaches that take into account the multiple individual, family, community and society-level risks for violence. Firstly, the health sector has a critical role to play in advocating for and supporting evidence-based prevention programs through partnership across sectors. WHO has developed a number of 'best buys' that can help to reduce the likelihood of violence. These best buys stress the importance of strengthening health-in-all- policy approaches to violence, including reducing risk factors for youth violence, such as behavioral problems, bullying, child maltreatment, and the harmful use of alcohol. Secondly, there are opportunities to strengthen integrated approaches within the health sector, for example by strengthening linkages with child and adolescent health programs. Thirdly, the health system can and must provide access to quality, comprehensive services for survivors. This is an important entry point for interventions, especially since pre-hospital and emergency medical services to treat the severe injuries often associated with youth violence (e.g. due to gunshots, stabbings, beatings and burns) are poorly developed in many settings. There is a need for evidence-informed policy and clinical guidance and strengthened capacities among health workers to identify, treat and refer young people at risk of violence. Finally, health systems also have an important role to play in improving data collection and evidence to inform policies and programs for prevention and response.

In spite of the broad-ranging commitments to reduce violence, **a comprehensive health sector response to youth violence and its social determinants is yet to be achieved**. There is a need to accelerate action, working hand in hand with partners at the regional, national and local level.

In order to gain a better understanding of opportunities for action, PAHO is organizing this **two-day experts' meeting** with the purpose of engaging stakeholders in a regional dialogue to seek their advice on possible joint actions to strengthen a public health approach to youth violence in the Americas. Key sub-themes of the meeting include:

- Youth violence prevention, including armed and gang violence prevention among adolescents and youth:
  - o Through strengthening attention to youth violence in adolescent and child health programs;
  - o Through strengthening collaboration between health and other sectors (e.g. police/justice, education and social welfare);
  - o Through strengthening connections with prevention of other forms of violence, including child maltreatment, bullying, dating violence and intimate partner violence.
- Clinical and psychosocial response services for adolescents and youth, including emergency care services and referral.

The meeting will be jointly organized by the NMH/NV and FPL/CAH units. Efforts will be made to engage other units at PAHO HQ with interest in youth violence.

## **OBJECTIVES**

- Review the current status of efforts, lessons learned, challenges and opportunities for advancing a public health approach to youth violence in the Americas;
- Reach consensus on regional and country-level strategies and actions to strengthen the role of the health sector within a multisectoral response to youth violence in the Americas.

## **EXPECTED OUTCOMES**

- Agreement on challenges, opportunities and lessons learned in advancing a public health approach to addressing youth violence in the Americas
- Agreement on priority actions for strengthening the role of the health sector within a multisectoral response to youth violence in the Americas
- Improved regional partnerships and efficiency in the allocation and use of regional resources for youth violence.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

The meeting will include approx. 30 participants. Participants will consist of a combination of experts (practitioners, program managers, academics, policy-makers) from the health sector, other government departments and Non-State Actors with expertise in and practical experience of responding to youth violence. In addition, regional and UN partners as well as representatives of youth groups will be invited.