Pan American Health Organization
World Health Organization
Americas Region

PAHO

A Mental Health Crisis in the Americas

Effective solutions for social development with equity

The Americas faces a mounting mental health crisis, with **160 million people living with mental health conditions,** fueling rising disability and premature deaths. **Mental, substance use, and neurological conditions caused 650,000 deaths in 2019, nearly tripling since 2000,** with projected increases ahead.

The Region also includes countries with some of the highest suicide mortality rates worldwide. **Suicide in the Americas has risen over the past 20 years (2000-2020), with over 100,000 deaths recorded in 2021.**

Despite the growing need, only 20% (or 1 in 5) affected persons in the Americas receive treatment, far below the global average of 1 in 3. **The region also has the highest proportion of long-term stays in mental institutions**—an inefficient, outdated form of care that violates human rights standards. Stigma, discrimination, and neglect further exacerbate vulnerabilities.

Unfortunately, chronic underinvestment and insufficient prioritization of mental health have hindered progress toward 2030 global targets. Meanwhile, poverty, social inequities, and urban violence further strain mental health systems and worsen outcomes in the region.

This context provides a critical moment to scale up PAHO's proven track record of interventions in the Americas region. With support from international stakeholders, the region can expand on successful cases of modernization of mental health laws, expansion of access to mental health services, and reduction of deaths by suicide.

Mental Health: A Barrier to Societal Progress

Mental health is crucial to well-being and development, impacting every facet of life. When mental health suffers, people can't thrive—inequities deepen, economies stall, and societies regress.

Mental health conditions worsen physical illnesses like HIV, cancer, and diabetes, leading to poor outcomes and a life expectancy reduced by up to 25 years. They also fuel unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and incarceration, creating ripple effects across households and communities.

The economic toll is staggering, with depression and anxiety alone costing the global economy $1 trillion annually in lost productivity. Yet, investing in mental health offers immense returns—every $1 spent on treating depression yields $4 in savings and productivity gains. Regional studies in Jamaica, Peru, and Suriname confirm returns as high as 4.6 times over 15 years.

Addressing mental health isn't just a health issue, it's essential for social and economic progress.

Facts

160 million
people living with mental health conditions.

650,000
deaths in 2019 caused by mental, substance use and neurological conditions.

100,000
deaths recorded in 2021 by suicide.

Only 1 in 5
affected persons in the Americas receive treatment.

The PAHO Advantage: Driving Mental Health Progress

- **A network of international and national mental health specialists:** Through its presence of specialized mental health experts in every country and track record of successful engagement, PAHO is uniquely equipped to tackle the region's mental health challenges.

- **Setting standards for mental health policy:** PAHO's leadership has shaped global and regional mental health policy, from the groundbreaking Caracas Declaration in 1990 to the 2023 High-Level Commission on Mental Health and COVID-19. Its regional Strategy for Improving Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, and collaboration with the OAS on a 2024 resolution linking mental health and human rights, have established the evidence for policies to address the crisis, and elevated mental health on national political agendas.

- **Creating modern mental health laws:** Through PAHO's support, countries like Guyana, the Bahamas, Paraguay, Argentina, Costa Rica, Panama and Mexico have passed new national mental health laws. Advances in the new laws include protections for the rights of people with mental health conditions and establishment of mental health services.

- **Expanding access to mental health services:** With guidance from PAHO, a number of countries in the region have advanced both access to and decentralization of mental health services, including:

  - In **Argentina**, PAHO trained 800 health care professionals to integrate mental health disorders into health care settings, and expanded services to five new provinces, achieving 100% integration into primary health care centers in La Rioja's capital.

  - With PAHO's support, **Paraguay** has expanded access to mental health service coverage for 345,000 people, by training professionals in 80 Family Health Units on -mental, neurological, and substance use disorders.

  - **Belize** also continues to draw on PAHO's support to decentralize and expand mental health services; this collaboration has helped the country to reach 72% treatment coverage for psychosis, compared to the regional rate of 18%.

  - Since the creation of the Mental Health Section in the **PAHO Virtual Campus of Public Health,** half a million people have been certified in various courses in the areas of mental health and suicide prevention.

- **Reducing deaths by suicide:** With contributions from PAHO's technical cooperation, suicide mortality rates have decreased in high-burden countries. For example, in Trinidad and Tobago, rates decreased by 50% over the last 20 years, corresponding to PAHO's support for an expanded crisis line, increasing the capacity of community based mental health services and health professionals' skills to respond to people with suicidal behavior, along with the development of media guidelines for reporting on suicide and groundbreaking media monitoring system.

The Path Forward: Addressing Mental Health in the Americas

To address the region's mental health crisis, PAHO will continue to convene governments and key stakeholders to elevate mental health across public and private sector agendas. By developing tailored, multisectoral mental health action plans, **PAHO will provide countries with a clear roadmap to mobilize resources and implement impactful, evidence-based strategies.**

Suicide prevention will remain a cornerstone of PAHO's efforts. Through national, evidence-driven prevention plans and targeted actions for vulnerable groups, PAHO will work with various government sectors and external stakeholders to achieve significant reductions in suicide mortality.

To expand access to care, **PAHO will lead large-scale training initiatives, equipping communities and health professionals to deliver high-quality, community-based mental health services.** These efforts will boost treatment coverage, empowering countries to meet the growing mental health needs of their populations.

As the leading organization for setting standards, shaping policies, and implementing mental health programs in the Americas, **PAHO remains the region's most reliable partner to respond to the increased need during this crisis.**