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Andrea J. Romero · Lisa M. Edwards
Sheri Bauman · Marissa K. Ritter

Preventing Adolescent Depression and Suicide Among Latinas

Resilience Research and Theory



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Chapter 1

***La Llorona* Calling: The Epidemic of Latina Adolescent Depressive Symptoms and Suicidality**

La Llorona (the weeping woman) is a powerful image in the mind of many Latinos throughout the Americas who have been told the story as young children. A beautiful young woman who becomes caught in a love affair gone wrong chooses to drown her children and ultimately herself in the river. She becomes an unsettled soul, doomed to roam rivers, and arroyos wailing for her lost children crying, “mis hijos (my children).” Embedded within the story are messages to young women, and men, about the potentially fatal outcomes of unhappy love affairs, and the possibility of profound depression and suicidal inclinations. The story has many variations depending on who the speaker is and who their audience is, but the final ending is always the same: tragic and long-lasting torment for the young woman.

Scholars have reclaimed this story of *La Llorona* by re-envisioning the woman as one who is angry, crying over the patriarchal oppression, and has fear of the future for her children (Garcia 1997). In this version, the *La Llorona* story is retold as a powerful and resilient woman who is fighting to determine her own future and that of her children (Anaya 2011). We begin the discussion of the 30-year epidemic of Latina adolescent depressive symptoms and suicide attempts by also reclaiming the interpretation of the epidemiological findings from a perspective that is focused on the strength and power of young women—rather than as victims of their class, culture, or families. Additionally, we include a review of recent literature of protective factors as well as risk factors, in order to focus on prevention efforts that may be consistent with Latina adolescents’ gendered and cultural roots. Our ultimate goal is to raise awareness among researchers, scholars, counselors, and prevention specialists about the public health issue of Latina adolescent depression and suicidality as a means to inspire new research and interventions that may save the lives of more young women in the future.

Latina Adolescents in the United States

Latina adolescents are among the fastest growing ethnic and gender subgroups in the United States today, and in several states, they are the largest ethnic minority under the age of 18 years (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Currently, Latinos of

all ages make up 16.7 % of the population and account for 43 % of the population growth in the past 10 years, which far surpassed the 39 % growth projected in 2000 and is primarily attributed to births rather than immigration (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). Mexican descent individuals comprise the majority of the U.S. Latino population at 64 %, with the next largest ethnic groups being Puerto Rican at 9.0 %, Central American at 7.6 %, and Cuban at 3.4 %. Most Latinos in the United States are citizens who speak English very well, although many are also bilingual and speak Spanish at home. In fact, 92 % of Latino children are U.S. citizens, although a large proportion (52 %) has at least one parent who is an immigrant; 36 % of the entire Latino population is foreign born (Fry and Passel 2009). The majority of Latino children have two parents living at home (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Among children under the age of 18 years old, Latinos make up 24 % of the U.S. children's population (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2013). Latino children are overrepresented among U.S. children living in poverty at 34 %, which has increased by 5 % over the past 11 years (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2013). Estimates range from 20 to 37 % for Latino children who do not have health insurance (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2013; Fry and Passel 2009).

Latinas are quickly becoming a significant population in the United States, with current demographic data indicating that there are 24.2 million Latinas (5.96 million between ages 10 and 24) (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). Many Latinas are young and are more likely than Latino men to graduate from high school and enroll in college (Center for American Progress Action Fund 2008). Furthermore, many are choosing careers in politics and starting their own businesses (Center for American Progress Action Fund 2008). Yet Latina adolescents have long been more likely to suffer from depression (see Fig. 1.1) and engage in suicidal behavior (Rasmussen et al. 1997; Roberts and Chen 1995; Roberts et al. 1997) than their male counterparts. We refer to these statistics as an epidemic because depressive symptoms affect a disproportionately large percentage of Latina adolescents, and this health disparity has been problematic for over 30 years (CDC 2008). Moreover, it is associated with disproportionately high rates of suicide attempts among Latina teens. A persistent disparity has been documented for Latina girls since the 1960s; they have among the highest rates of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation

Fig. 1.1 Percentage of Adolescent Female Depressive Symptoms Over 12 years: *Source* Centers for Disease Control Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS)

