
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—18 AUGUST 2020

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Good morning and thank you for joining this week's press briefing.

Coronavirus cases in our region have reached almost 11,5 million and regrettably over 400,000 people in the Americas have died as a result of the pandemic.

Our region continues to carry the highest burden of Coronavirus disease globally with 55% of the new cases reported this past week. The Americas have approximately 13% of the world's population, but 64% of officially reported global deaths, so far.

Currently, the biggest drivers of the case counts are the United States and Brazil, but we are now seeing an increasing trend in parts of the region that had remained stable for multiple weeks, such as the Caribbean. Even though a few locations have reported lower numbers after being hit hard, several countries are reinforcing public health measures in areas that are facing a rise in new infections, such as Peru, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and the Bahamas, Trinidad and Tobago.

This virus is unrelenting and requires the same from us: we must stay vigilant and keep transmission under control.

The coronavirus is not only impacting our health, it's also affecting our wellbeing. We have been pushed to extraordinary lengths, and over the last few months many of us have felt:

- fearful of infection or anxiety if we are sick;
- Some of us have had grief as our loved ones have succumbed to the virus;
- uncertainty about the future, as jobs and life as we knew it came under threat;
- We may have been overwhelmed by the news and misinformation;
- and many of us felt lonely or isolated after weeks or even months of social distancing;

And while we may be dealing with this stress differently, we are all suffering – especially those affected by pre-existing mental health conditions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a mental health crisis in our region at a scale that we've never seen before. It's, so to speak, a perfect storm in every country, as we see growing needs and reduced resources to address them. It is *urgent* that mental health support is considered a critical component of the pandemic response.

I would speak about Mental Health a little bit more. Mental health illness is a silent epidemic that has affected the Americas well before COVID-19.

In our region, depression and anxiety are two of the leading causes of disability. We're also home to the second-highest levels of alcohol consumption in the world. And emergencies can worsen these conditions.

Surveys from the three countries in our region that are most impacted by COVID-19 – the U.S., Brazil and Mexico show that about half of adults are stressed by the pandemic.

And early data show that many are coping by using drugs and alcohol, which can create a vicious cycle that makes people more prone to and can exacerbate mental health issues.

In spite of increased needs during these challenging times, mental health support may be increasingly out of reach due to strict lockdowns or as the already scarce mental health staff and budgets are reallocated to the COVID-19 response.

This is especially concerning for patients that are affected by COVID-19 and their caretakers.

Patients who have tested positive for COVID-19 don't only experience physical symptoms, many also experience insomnia, difficulty to sleep, delirium or even depression. Many persons are overwhelmed with fear of developing severe illness, others are understandably worried for their lives. Initial research indicates that as much as a third of patients recovering from COVID-19 can have enduring changes in their mood, and suffer from anxiety or depression.

Doctors, nurses and health workers are working longer hours than ever before. Many of them may be risking their own lives as hospitals struggle to maintain sufficient PPE, while others are being forced to make extraordinary choices as ventilators and hospital beds become in short supply. After months of operating in crisis mode, our health professionals are facing burnout, anxiety and depression.

On another note, let's talk about domestic violence. It's important to note that these ongoing stressors are also contributing to a related problem that needs urgent attention: a rise in domestic violence.

Across our region, nearly a third of women have experienced intimate partner violence in their lives; and at least 1 in 2 children have suffered violence in the last year – and that's before the pandemic struck. Marginalized groups like indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, migrant and refugee women and children, and those living with disabilities face a greater risk of violence.

So the ongoing stay-at-home measures, coupled with the social and economic impacts of this virus, are increasing the risks of domestic violence –home is no longer a safe space for many.

For example, in Argentina, calls to a violence against women helpline increased by over a third, and in Colombia, calls on family violence to a helpline multiplied early in the pandemic. Meanwhile, in Mexico, emergency calls for incidents of violence against women increased by over 50% in the first quarter in comparison to last year. These are only a few examples of what is happening in our Region.

The real extent of domestic violence during COVID-19 is likely under-estimated, as survivors are stuck at home and support and outreach services are interrupted. With reduced contact to friends and family or barriers in access to services and shelters, we're leaving survivors with nowhere to go.

The costs of violence are extraordinarily high, so support to survivors cannot be put on hold.

Amid this grim reality, we're seeing global leaders, community members and families talk openly about these problems. Mental health and domestic violence services are essential services, and we must place emphasis on addressing the gaps that have been laid bare by the pandemic.

Today, I ask countries to take the steps that are required to ensure everyone can receive the care they need and deserve.

1) First, countries must expand and invest in mental health services

We need governments to prioritize mental health as part of the response to the pandemic. And at the same time countries, must make investments to scale up services, hire and train additional staff. One of the most effective and efficient ways to do this is to integrate mental health and psychosocial support within primary health care systems so they're easily accessible to those who need them most.

PAHO has been helping countries increase their capacity to provide mental health support at the community level amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

2) A second critical step is to act with innovation

This pandemic has upended the status quo, so it's critical that health systems offer support in new ways.

Almost every country in our region has expanded their mental health helplines so those who need to can speak to trained responder and can access care while avoiding the risk of COVID-19.

3) And finally, we must work to destigmatize mental health

Everyone who needs mental health support should feel comfortable asking for help. No one should have to suffer alone and without professional support, especially now.

Naturally, some of the same concepts apply to **domestic violence**. These services must be accessible and integrated at the local level; we need innovations to reach and support survivors, and it is paramount to fight stigma. Violence is never acceptable, and survivors of domestic violence should not be blamed.

PAHO has been helping countries to strengthen policies and services and to expand online learning for health workers so they know how to identify and support survivors of violence during the pandemic. And it's encouraging to see some places using these novel approaches to ensure survivors of violence can ask for help discreetly, such as through code words or hand signals.

Friends, mental health services are foundational to our COVID-19 response and ultimately to our rebuilding process as well.

We must step up so those living with mental health conditions as well as survivors of violence have the resources and the support that they need.

This pandemic reminds us, like never before, that good mental health is necessary for the wellbeing of individuals and societies.