

Mental issues hit Latino immigrants hardest

Experts grapple with disparity when it comes to addressing Latino health care. Conference focused on what yet needs to be done for the growing number of immigrants.

As the number of Latino immigrants to the U.S. continues to rise, health experts need to focus more attention on their unique needs as the health care disparity between these immigrants and the rest of the population is widening.

At the third annual conference on disparities in Latino health, participants said not enough has been done, particularly in the area of mental health.

Keynote speaker and senior reporter for WAMU, Armando Trull, who has been covering violence in Central and South America for a decade, expressed his concern about the lack of mental care for immigrants.

“I would like to focus more on the trauma and the mental health aspect they go through, because often time it is not spoken of and keeping quiet won’t do any good,” Trull said.

The Avance Center for the Advancement of Immigrant/Refugee Health held its third annual Latino health disparities conference today. Participants focused on how to advance health equity for Latino youth and families, specifically mental health.

Trull addressed the history of violence, the ongoing wars, death, and devastation. He said that Latinos also face violence from the authorities or rape, which leads to trauma.

“These issues can take a huge toll on the mental state of these young children and that is something that needs to be taken into account because they are a part of our community,” he said.

According to Trull, the lack of health insurance and pending legal status prevents immigrants from seeking help when faced with anxiety, depression or any other type of mental issues. He believes that they shouldn’t be asked for all these documents to be able to receive health services.

“They are asked to bring this document, that document. These people didn’t have time to stop and collect all their documents when they were escaping death,” he said.

He pointed to the lack of sufficiently trained people who would understand the reality of where these people come from and address their needs as a problem that needs to be fixed.

“They don’t have the cultural competency to understand what these immigrants need,” he said.

Trull also addressed the gangs that continue to massacre and recruit young children by force in most Central American countries, which may be the source of their mental illnesses according to Trull. Young Latinos flee their countries to avoid taking part in the atrocities these groups commit, he explained.

“Most of them are gang involved because they don’t have a choice and fear for their lives, but when they’re told to kill someone that’s when they run away,” he said.

Escaping the violence and gangs by fleeing to the U.S. is half the battle. Once they settle here, they’re confronted with mental problems. Common mental health disorders among Latino immigrants are anxiety disorder, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder.

“It’s an entire library of problems that challenges these people facing the mental health spectrum,” Trull said.