

## Professor Aims to Improve Mental Health Care for At-Risk Youth



Youth exposure to violence is a major public health issue that can lead to a wide range of mental health problems, according to Omar Gudino, assistant professor of psychology and director of the Services for At-Risk Youth and Families (SAYF) research lab at the University of Denver. The SAYF lab aims to understand and meet the needs of children and adolescents who are at high risk of developing emotional and behavioral problems due to exposure to trauma or other forms of adversity.

Nearly half of all adolescents in the U.S. are exposed to a potentially traumatic event before the age of 17, according to Gudino, and ethnic minority youths are at disproportionate risk of being exposed to violence and having their mental health needs go unmet.

“Latino children and adolescents in Colorado and across the nation are at significant risk of having unmet mental health needs relative to non-Hispanic white youths. Although such racial/ethnic disparities are well-documented, less is known about the practical, attitudinal, cultural and systemic factors that likely contribute to them,” he said. One area of focus of the lab is to reduce these disparities.

Working in partnership with the Colorado Department of Human Services, researchers conduct focus groups with stakeholders—Latino families, clinicians and administrators from the public mental health system, and community groups that work with Latino populations—to understand the complex factors that impact disparities. Once known, researchers can translate this knowledge into effective models for reducing disparities in unmet mental health needs.

“When one focuses on working with underserved children and families, it’s easy to only focus on the extreme levels of adversity that families are exposed to,” said Gudino. “I prefer to focus on the fact that science can provide the tools to understand the needs of underserved families and to develop effective ways of addressing their needs.”

Adolescent exposure to trauma includes witnessing violence, physical assault, physical abuse and sexual assault. This can lead to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, or conduct problems, according to Gudino.

To address these concerns, the SAYF lab is developing a cognitive-behavioral therapy intervention called Life Skills/Life Story to target a wide range of trauma-related factors in adolescents.

“Our goal in the current study is to conduct an initial test of a treatment that can be applied to adolescents exposed to trauma who have a wide range of clinical problems, including PTSD and behavior problems,” said Gudino. “We will examine whether Life Skills/Life Story effectively reduces PTSD and behavior problems and whether it’s an acceptable intervention for adolescents and their families.”

Gudino has a PhD in Psychology from the University of California, Los Angeles. Prior to joining the University of Denver in 2012, he worked in child and adolescent psychiatry at New York University School of Medicine and Bellevue Hospital Center, New York.

“Through my research I have learned that despite being exposed to multiple adversities, the majority of children and families are resilient and have a tremendous capacity to overcome adversity. It’s important to view the needs and challenges of children and families in the context of their many strengths,” he said.