







Weekly Briefing

Latvia social briefing:
Mental Health in Latvia:
Unveiling Challenges and Charting the Path Forward
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Mental Health in Latvia: Unveiling Challenges and Charting the Path Forward

Summary

In the examination of Latvia's mental health landscape, a comprehensive assessment reveals multifaceted challenges and potential avenues for intervention. Initially, we drew attention to the epidemiology of mental disorders, elucidating the prevalence rates and juxtaposing them against national suicide statistics - a pressing concern given Latvia's disconcerting standings within Europe. Delving deeper into etiological considerations, socioeconomic determinants emerge prominently. Factors such as economic disparities, truncated educational opportunities, and unemployment rates present as significant stressors. Additionally, the psychological imprints of history, notably the Soviet occupation, remain embedded within the national psyche, perpetuating generational trauma.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic further compounded these issues, intensifying mental health issues across demographics. Navigating the healthcare provisions, Latvia boasts a spectrum of services, ranging from in-patient psychiatric units to grassroots counselling initiatives. However, these services are not without their limitations. Access disparities, particularly pronounced in rural areas, coupled with prevailing stigmatizing attitudes and economic impediment, hinder these efforts. This account culminates in a series of strategic recommendations. These encapsulate the development of mental health infrastructure, the propulsion of destigmatizing public campaigns, the seamless integration of mental health paradigms into primary healthcare, the bolstering of community-driven initiatives, and a call for research endeavours tailored to Latvia's unique sociocultural milieu.

Introduction

In the panoramic landscape of Latvia, characterized by its lush forests, scenic beaches, and rich cultural tapestry, there lies a less visible but deeply impactful facet of the nation: the mental well-being of its citizens. Mental health, often overshadowed by physical health concerns, plays a pivotal role in the overall prosperity and resilience of a country. With intertwining historical, socio-economic, and contemporary challenges like the recent pandemic, the nation finds itself at a crucial crossroads. This briefing delves into the nuances of Latvia's

mental health situation, from hard-hitting statistics to the intricate factors influencing the mental health of its population, culminating in actionable recommendations to pave a path forward. Through a holistic understanding, it becomes evident that mental health isn't just a personal issue; it's a societal one, demanding collective action and empathy.

Overview of the Mental Health Situation in Latvia

1. Prevalence of Mental Disorders [1]:

- Recent surveys and studies have indicated a rising trend of mental health disorders in Latvia. As per the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and alcohol use disorders are among the top causes of disability in Latvia.
- Common disorders include depression, anxiety, and PTSD¹. It's estimated that a significant percentage of the Latvian population will experience a mental health disorder at some point in their lives, with depressive disorders being particularly prevalent.

2. Suicide Rates [2]:

- Latvia has had historically high suicide rates. As of 2019, Latvia had a suicide rate of approximately 21 per 100,000 people, making it one of the highest rates in Europe.
- The reasons behind this are multifaceted, with social, economic, and historical factors playing a role. Males, in particular, are more likely to commit suicide than females, a trend consistent with many other countries.

3. Other Relevant Statistics[3]:

- Age groups most affected: Young adults and the elderly are particularly vulnerable to mental health disorders. The pressures of societal integration, education, and employment play a role for the former, while isolation, health issues, and bereavement may impact the latter.
- Gender differences: Women are more likely to be diagnosed with anxiety and depression, while men are more likely to suffer from substance abuse disorders and are more prone to suicide.

¹ **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** is a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event

- Urban vs. rural differences: Mental health services are predominantly centered in urban areas, making access a challenge for those in rural regions. This disparity can exacerbate the severity of mental health issues among rural residents due to limited resources and professional assistance.

Factors Contributing to Poor Mental Health in Latvia

1. Social Determinants of Health:

1.1. Economic disparities [4]:

Latvia's Gini coefficient², a measure of income inequality, was 34.5 in 2019, indicating a significant disparity between the rich and the poor. Economic disparities, difference in financial status can contribute to mental health stressors, especially among those in lower income brackets.

1.2. Unemployment rates [5]:

In 2020, due to the economic impact of COVID-19, Latvia's unemployment rate jumped to 8%, up from 6.3% in the previous year. Unemployment has long been associated with an increased risk of mental health issues.

2. Limited educational opportunities [6]:

Although Latvia has made significant strides in education, access to quality education can be limited in certain regions, exacerbating feelings of hopelessness and contributing to mental health distress.

3. Historical Trauma:

Soviet Occupation [7]:

Latvia experienced half a century of Soviet occupation, from 1940 to 1991, leading to generational trauma. Thousands of Latvians were deported, executed, or faced persecution. The ripple effects of this trauma continue to be seen in the mental health of Latvians, with many elderly still recalling the horrors they witnessed.

4. COVID-19 Pandemic:

The pandemic caused significant upheaval in Latvia, as in the rest of the world. As of the end of 2020, the country had reported a number of cases. The isolation,

² **The Gini coefficient (Gini index or Gini ratio)** is a statistical measure of economic inequality in a population. The coefficient measures the dispersion of income or distribution of wealth among the members of a population.

uncertainty, health concerns, and economic downturns resulting from the pandemic have undoubtedly contributed to the mental health crisis. Reports showed a spike in feelings of anxiety, depression, and stress among the general population.

Mental Health Services in Latvia

1. Available Services [8]:

1.1. In-patient Psychiatric Care: Latvia provides hospital-based psychiatric care for individuals with acute or severe mental health conditions.

1.2. Community-based Counseling Centers: These centers offer outpatient services and cater to those who need therapy or counseling but don't require hospitalization.

1.3. Specialized Programs: Latvia has programs specifically tailored for various demographics:

- Youth: Focused on addressing issues like anxiety, depression, and stress from educational pressures.
- Elderly: Recognizing the unique challenges of this age group, services are tailored to address issues like dementia, isolation, and the mental health implications of chronic illnesses.

2. Challenges in Access [9]:

2.1. Limited Resources in Rural Areas: While urban centers like Riga have a more robust mental health infrastructure, rural regions lag behind in resources and accessibility to care.

2.2. Stigma: Mental health stigma is pervasive in many cultures, and Latvia is no exception. The societal stigma associated with seeking mental health care prevents many from accessing the services they need.

2.3. Economic Barriers: Mental health care can be cost-prohibitive, making it difficult for many residents, especially those from lower economic backgrounds, to seek help.

2.4. Silver Economy / Project Argentum [10]:

Project Argentum³ (Silver Economy) emphasizes the importance of catering to the elderly demographic, particularly in sectors such as health and wellness. The project recognizes the

³ The silver economy encompasses economic activities, products and services aimed at meeting the needs of people over 50. It includes both the purchases they make and the economic activity they generate. This concept emerged from the markets of Japan, the country in the

potential of the elderly population in contributing to the economy while also acknowledging their unique needs.

In the context of mental health, Project Argentum underlines the necessity for specialized services tailored to the elderly, considering the specific challenges they face, like isolation, chronic diseases, and bereavements. By aligning mental health services with the principles of the Silver Economy, Latvia aims to create an inclusive environment where mental well-being is prioritized for all age groups.

Recommendations for Improving Mental Health Outcomes in Latvia

1. Strengthening Mental Health Infrastructure [11]:

Given the notable urban-rural disparity in mental health services, Latvia needs to prioritize its healthcare budget towards expanding these services in underserved regions. By building more community counseling centers and psychiatric facilities in rural areas, not only can care be more accessible, but it can also help reduce the burden on urban centers.

2. Public Awareness Campaigns [12]:

Latvia's historical and cultural context makes mental health a delicate subject. By launching national campaigns, the government and NGOs can combat prevailing stigmas, educate the public on mental health's importance, and emphasize the benefits of early intervention.

3. Integrate Mental Health into Primary Care [13]:

Most individuals frequent primary care facilities for routine health check-ups. By integrating mental health screenings and services into primary care, early detection of potential issues becomes possible, leading to timely interventions and improved patient outcomes.

4. Support Community-Based Initiatives [14]:

Local NGOs and grassroots organizations in Latvia often possess a unique understanding of community-specific mental health needs. By providing them with adequate resources and support, the government can enable these organizations to tailor interventions effectively, ensuring that cultural and regional nuances are accounted for.

world with the highest percentage of elderly people in the population. Under this paradigm, population ageing is an opportunity for society. The European Union is firmly committed to promoting the silver economy.

5. Research and Training [15]:

To offer effective and culturally sensitive care, it's vital to comprehend the unique challenges faced by the Latvian populace. By investing in research focused on Latvia's mental health landscape and training professionals in culturally apt care methodologies, the nation can ensure that interventions are both relevant and effective.

Conclusion

In summation, Latvia's mental health landscape is marked by both challenges and potential. While the historical backdrop, socioeconomic conditions, and recent global events accentuate the mental health challenges, the country also possesses a foundation of services and community resilience. To truly elevate the mental well-being of its citizens, Latvia must marry its rich cultural understanding with global best practices, informed research, and localized strategies. This fusion promises not only to address the immediate concerns but to foster a national environment where mental health is prioritized, understood, and holistically addressed.

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