

# Cornell Scott-Hill Health Center Research Provides Critical New Insights into Monolingual Puerto Rican Behavioral Health Clients

*Study cites high suicide risk and cultural constructs as key issues to be addressed*



*Behavior Health Clinicians pictured from left to right: Dr. Ylara S. Blanco, Dr. Ingrid V. Rodríguez, Ms. Jean Castillo, and Ms. María José Carranza.*

When Cornell Scott-Hill Health Center's Dr. Ylara Blanco, Psy.D., noticed a disconnect between existing psychological literature on Puerto Ricans and the Puerto Ricans she was treating at the Adult Psychiatric Clinic on Columbus Avenue, she decided to do something about it. Together with a team of behavioral health professionals from the clinic, Dr. Blanco embarked on a research study aimed at gaining a better understanding of today's "typical" monolingual Puerto Rican behavioral health client, an understanding that Dr. Blanco and her team hope will lead to better services for all Puerto Rican clients.

Last summer, Dr. Blanco and her associates, Dr. Ingrid Rodriguez, Ph.D., Maria José Carranza, M.S.W. and case manager Jean Castillo, B.S., gathered information on ninety-eight monolingual Puerto Rican clients who were, at that time, receiving services in Spanish at the Adult Psychiatric Clinic. After studying the data, as well as examining their own experiences with these clients, the team found dramatic differences between their clients and Puerto Ricans represented in previous studies—not surprising given the fact that the previous studies were done almost thirty years ago.

Today's "typical" monolingual Puerto Rican client at the Cornell Scott-Hill Health Center is female, aged forty-five to forty-nine, has three children, is separated or divorced, is unemployed and receives less than \$14,000 a year in federal benefits.

In addition to "typical" demographic information, Dr. Blanco's team found that today's clients exhibit a greater tendency to engage in circular migration, frequently traveling back and forth between Puerto Rico and the United States. They also retain much closer ties to their communities in Puerto Rico, where there is still a stigma attached to mental health issues and treatment. These two

factors make treating today's clients more challenging.

Most concerning to Dr. Blanco and her team, though, is the high suicide attempt rate that was found in the study. In fact, almost fifty percent of clients studied had a history of suicide attempts.

"Although the biopsychosocial profile did not find a great amount of clients with psychotic features, the history of suicide attempts among the group place them at a higher risk than other Latino groups seen at the clinic, and requires a more intensive clinical approach," said Dr. Blanco.

Dr. Blanco and her team hope that this new understanding of the "typical" monolingual Puerto Rican client seeking behavioral health services here at the Cornell-Scott Hill Health Center will lead to better services for all Puerto Rican clients. Most importantly, according to Dr. Blanco, is the need for more bilingual, bicultural clinicians and prescribers.

As Dr. Blanco explains, "When a clinician understands not only the language but also the socio-political and cultural aspects that come into play when a Puerto Rican client is in session, it makes it easier for the clinician to address issues that are secondary to cultural constructs and beliefs, and also allows the clinician to incorporate the influence of culture into the therapeutic session as a strength, thereby removing it as a potential obstacle for recovery."

While the study focused on clients here at the Cornell-Scott Hill Health Center, Dr. Blanco believes that the findings and recommendations could apply to Puerto Rican communities throughout the United States.

Dr. Blanco and her team presented their research at two major conferences in November and December—the 57th Convention of the Puerto Rican Psychological Association and the Public Policy Forum for Special Populations at John Jay College in New York. The paper was well received at both conferences, generating a lot of interest and discussion about the topic. Dr. Blanco was especially encouraged by the numerous inquiries from attendees in Puerto Rico who wanted to know how they could help bridge the gap between providers and services needed, therefore decreasing health disparities for Puerto Rican and other Latino clients in the U.S.

The Cornell Scott-Hill Health Center's bilingual behavioral health services are currently offered at 428 Columbus Avenue in New Haven.

