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**ORIGINAL STORY** 

## Suicide Haunts Latina Youth in NYC



Thirty-five percent of girls at the La Vida es Preciosa (Life is Precious) program suffer sexual abuse, putting them at a high risk of suicide.

(Photo via El Diario)

Like many other families, the Parapis were looking forward to taking the 4th of July holiday off to head to the beach and enjoy the fireworks in the evening. But their plans were tragically altered in the early hours of Friday June 27, when their 14-year-old daughter Alejandra hung herself in the basement of their East Elmhurst home, in Queens.

The motive for suicide of the young Ecuadorean – who crossed the border as a little girl to reunite with her parents – is a mystery tormenting everyone in her family.

“It is very painful. We cannot stand even talking about her,” said Alejandra’s father standing at the front door of their house, located on 101st Street and 32nd Avenue.

“The police are investigating the motive, but we still don’t know what could have driven her to take her own life,” he said.

The day of the tragedy, Alejandra was supposed to finish school at noon but left two hours earlier because of a schedule change. The teenager, who lived on the ground floor of the three-story house, arrived at around 2:30 p.m. on Thursday. Her body was found by relatives at 1 a.m. Friday morning.

Walther Sinche, president of the International Ecuadorian Alliance and a close friend of the family, said that Alejandra's parents came to the U.S. from their native town of Cuenca, in Ecuador, and left her in the care of her grandmother on her father's side. The separation caused the child great anxiety and behavior problems.

"Her grandmother could not deal with the situation, so the family decided to send the 6-year-old girl to New York. She crossed unaccompanied; she was brought in by coyotes. It was their only choice to bring the family back together," said Sinche.

The activist remembered that Alejandra's arrival was not a happy occasion.

"The girl did not recognize her parents at first. She was scared and reluctant; she was in shock," he explained. "In time, she seemed to adapt. Everything looked normal."

Alejandra had two sisters, 4 and 7 years old, both born in New York. "She looked like a happy child. There's just no explanation for this," said Sinche.

On Monday, June 30, a wake was held at Funeraria Rivera (Rivera Funeral Home), in Corona. Alejandra's remains will be buried in Ecuador. If you wish to give a donation to her family, please call (347) 684-7340.

### **Hispanic girls are twice as likely to take their lives**

Alejandra's death brought the spotlight back to the high incidence of suicide among young Latinas. The latest report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revealed that 26 percent of Hispanic teenage girls contemplated suicide in 2013, compared to 21 percent in 2011.

In New York City, the rate went up 3 percent in only two years. In Queens, that

number almost doubled (20 percent) during the same period.

In Brooklyn and Staten Island, close to a quarter of the Hispanic teenage population contemplated suicide last year. In both boroughs, the suicide attempt rate increased 5 percent.

Dr. Rosa Gil is the founder of La Vida Es Preciosa (Life Is Precious), a program helping young Latinas to overcome suicidal thoughts and their parents to identify it. Gil said that the process of "acculturation" is a recurring factor in suicide statistics among Hispanic teens.

"When these girls migrate to the U.S., they face much isolation in their adaptation process," said the expert. "The language barrier, problems getting acquainted with a new school system, as well as bullying are some of the disturbing and stressful experiences they endure."

Another factor is sexual violence. Out of the 150 young women served by La Vida Es Preciosa, 35 percent have suffered sexual abuse, which puts them at high risk of suicide.

Gil pointed out that many of these teenage girls belong to low-income households in poor neighborhoods. They have limited access to mental health specialists who understand their language and culture.

Other warning signs that parents should watch out for are poor academic performance, isolation, weight changes and aggressive conduct, added Gil.

"It is advisable to monitor how much time youths spend connected to social media and engaging in texting. Abusing these platforms inhibits their desire to verbalize their feelings and problems," said Gil.

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