THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN THE HEALTH & WELLBEING OF INDIGENOUS YOUTH

Chris Lalonde, University of Victoria

COMING TOGETHER

BREAKING DOWN SILOS TO SERVE CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Territory acknowledgement

"We acknowledge with respect the Lekwungen peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day."

Michael Chandler (1938–2019)

Overview

- Identity development
- Youth suicide
- Self-determination & health status
- Partnerships with:
  - Inter Tribal Health Authority
  - Carrier-Sekani Family Services
  - Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs

Identity Development

- Philosophy: Conditions of Selfhood
- Self Unity
  - Selves are singular at any moment in time
- Self Continuity
  - Selves must persist through time

Identity Development

- How do young people solve the philosophical problems of Self Unity and Self Continuity?
- What happens if they fail?

Identity Development

- "Life is like a skiff moving through time with a bow as well as a stern" (William James)

Backwards Referring
(responsibility & moral order)

Forward Anticipating
(getting our just desserts)

Selves, Cultures, & Time

- For the concept of "self" or "person" to make sense, selves must persist through time
- Despite changing, you must still (somehow) remain the same person
- Individual failures in "Self-Continuity" are associated with increased suicide risk
- Success in promoting "Cultural Continuity" is associated with decreased suicide rates

Self Continuity

Ownership of
your own past

Investment in
your own future

- How is it that you're still the same person you were 10 years ago?

Selves, Cultures, & Time

- How we measure self-continuity
- How failures are associated with suicide
- How culture influences the way young people reason about continuity
- How we measure cultural continuity
- How cultural continuity helps us understand variability in suicide rates

Measuring Self-Continuity

- Self continuity in the lives of story characters
  - Jean Valjean
  - Ebineezer Scrooge
  - Self descriptions (past *vs.* present)
- "Despite all these changes, how are you still the same person?"

First Nations Stories

Have a think…

- How are YOU still the same person you were 10, or 20, or 30 years ago?
- What would *you* say to convince *me*, that, despite all the changes that have taken place in your life, you are still the *same* person?

Conceptions of Continuity

Simple

"I still have brown eyes"

AGE

Complex

"I am the ship that sails through the troubled waters of my life"

Two Strategies

- Essentialist—Defeat change:
  - Self as enduring "entity"—find some aspect of self that endures despite change in other quarters
- Narrative—Embrace change:
  - Self as "narrative"—identify relations that weave together separate time-slices of the self

Essentialist responses

- "I used to be really aggressive and get in lots of fights, but now I try to get the best marks in my class. So I'm still *aggressive*, but in a different way."
- "To you, it *looks* like I've changed, but it's just that I'm letting the *real* me come out now."

Narrative responses

- "I am completely different now *because* of all the things that happened to me. Some things I decided to change, but other things just happened to me—like when my parents got divorced."
- "I'm on my own now, so I have to make up my life—kind of as I go along. Who I am now is *because* of all those changes."

Self Continuity & Suicide

- Compare the reasoning of suicidal and non-suicidal persons in psychiatric wards
- Non-suicidal patients are slightly delayed, but all can defend notions of continuity
- 80% of suicidal patients could mount *NO* argument about continuity (self or other)
- Failures in self continuity ‘predict’ suicide risk

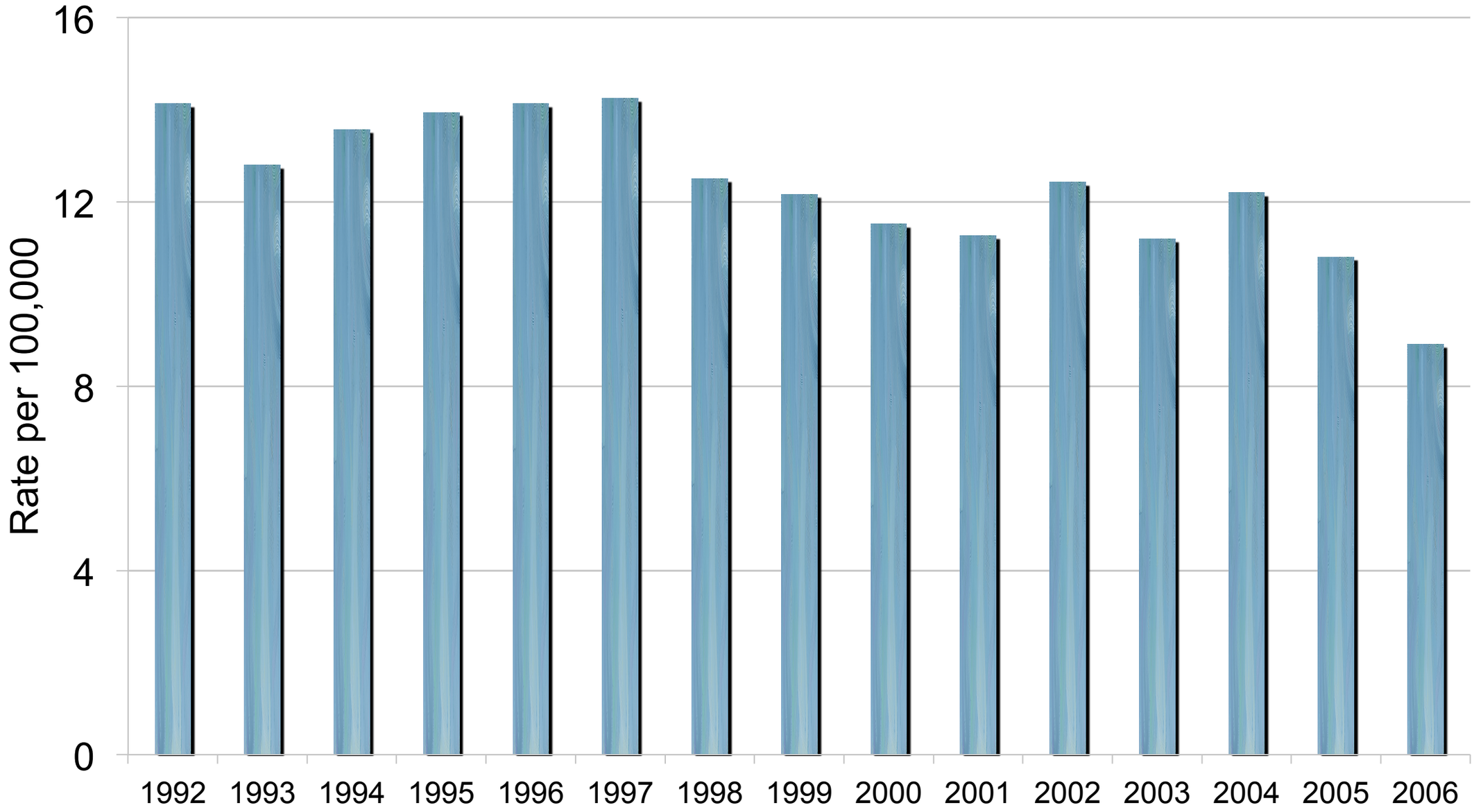
Why Indigenous Suicide?

- Is being *Indigenous* a risk factor?
- Is being *Narrative* a risk factor?
- Or do rates vary by *Place*?

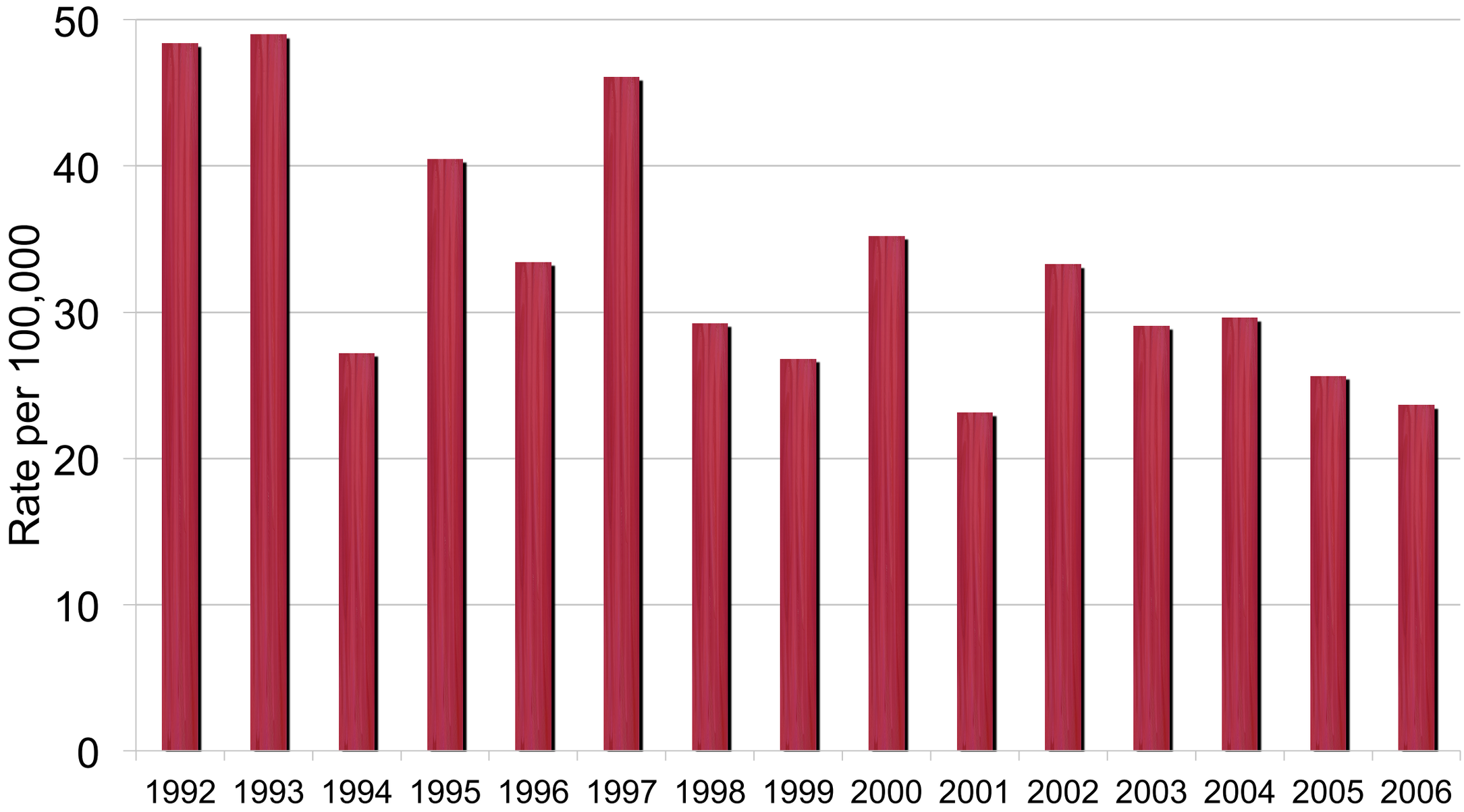
Some Statistics…

- With apologies to anyone whose life has been touched by suicide

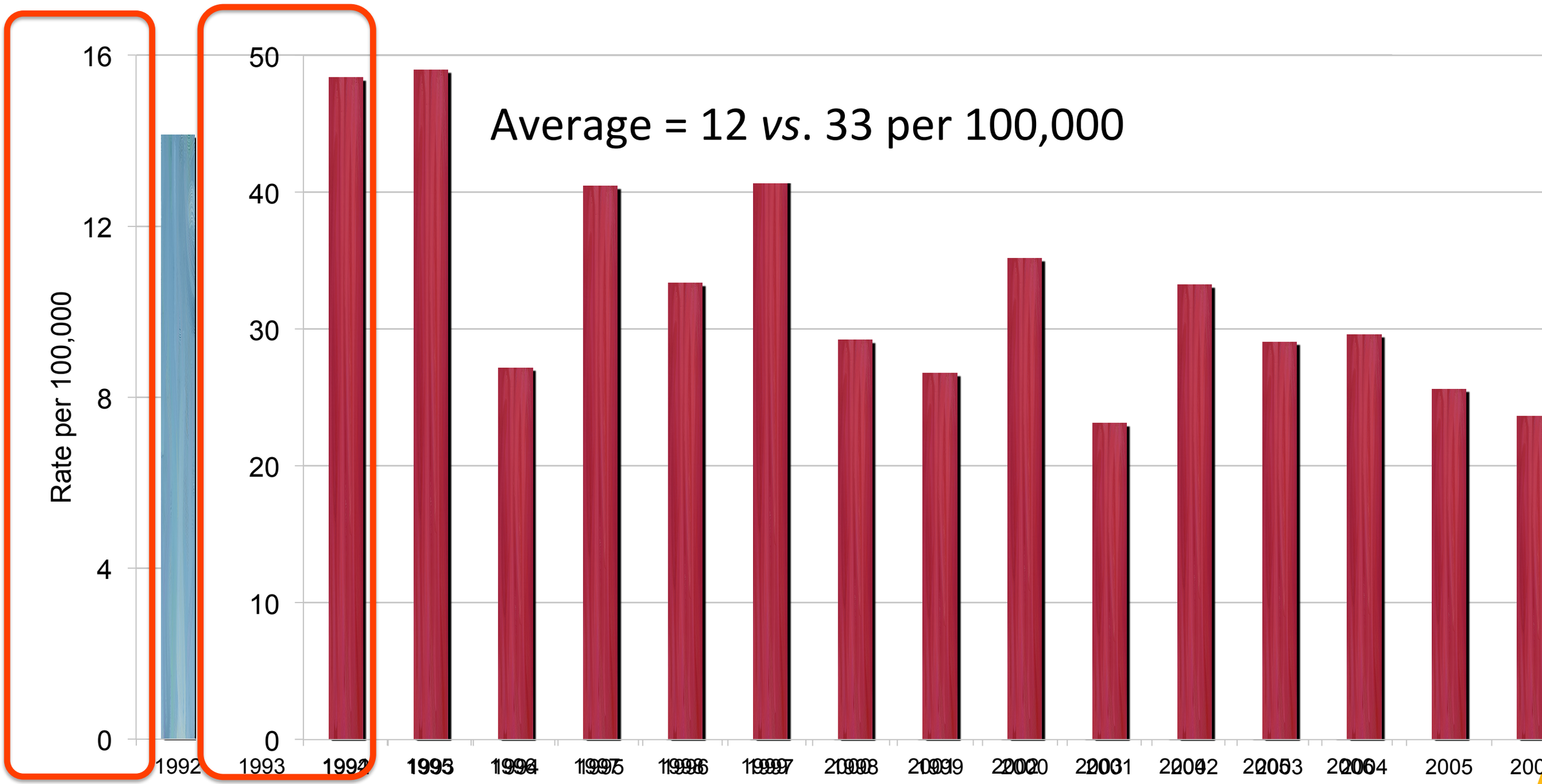
Suicide Rate by Year (BC)



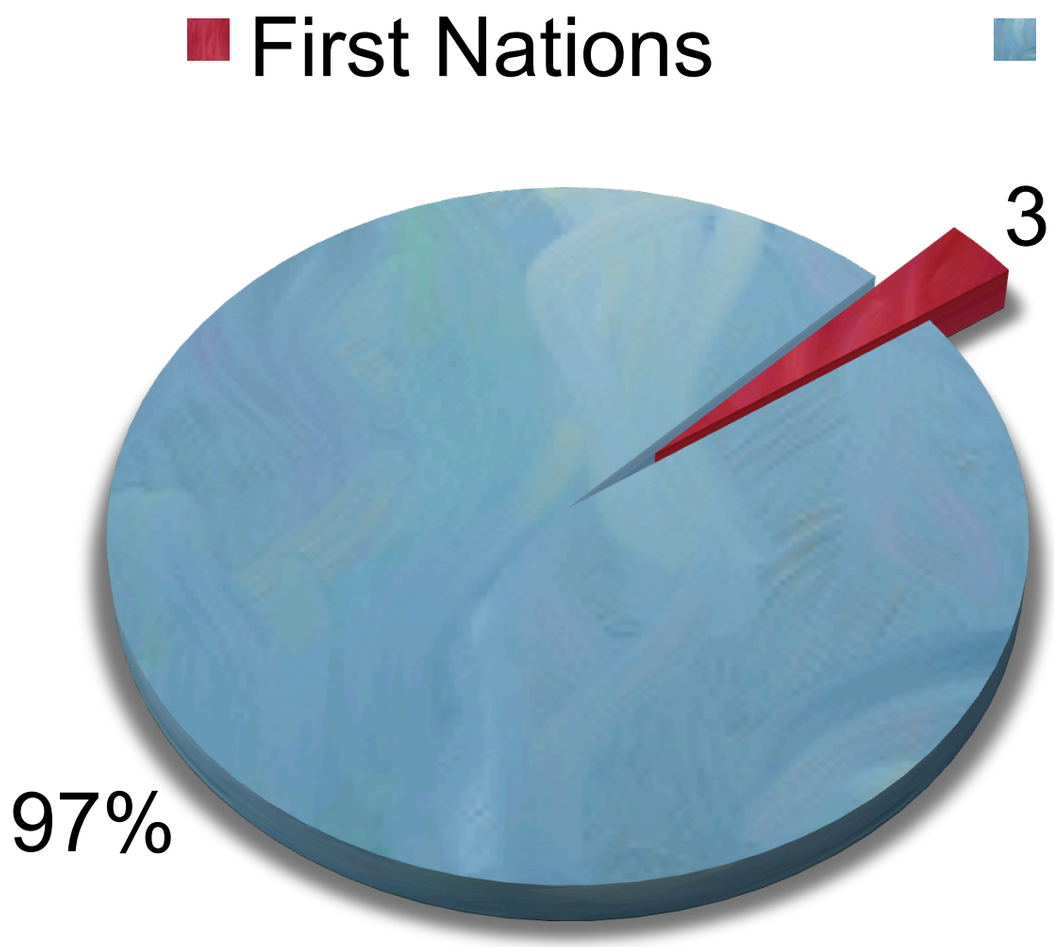
First Nations Suicide Rate by Year (BC)



Notice the Y-axis…

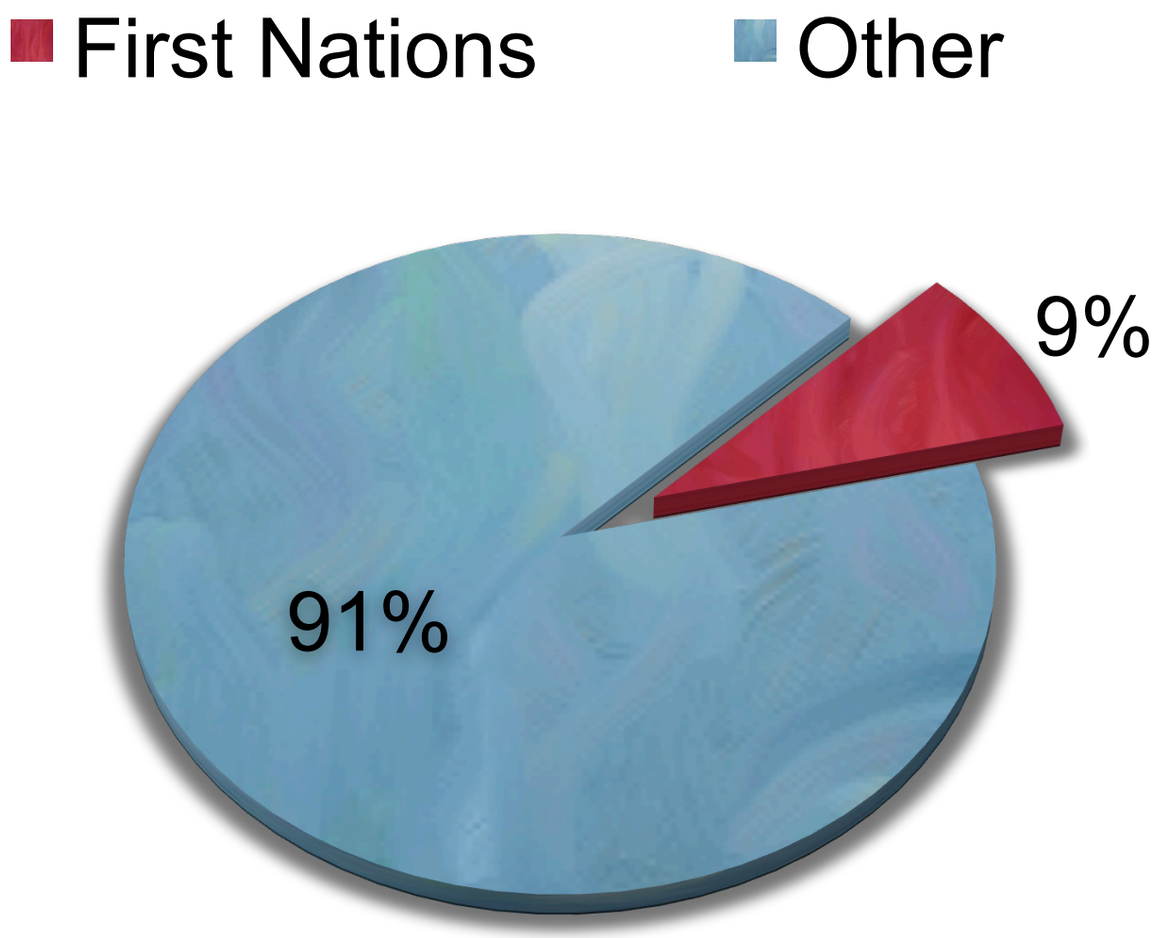


Population of BC



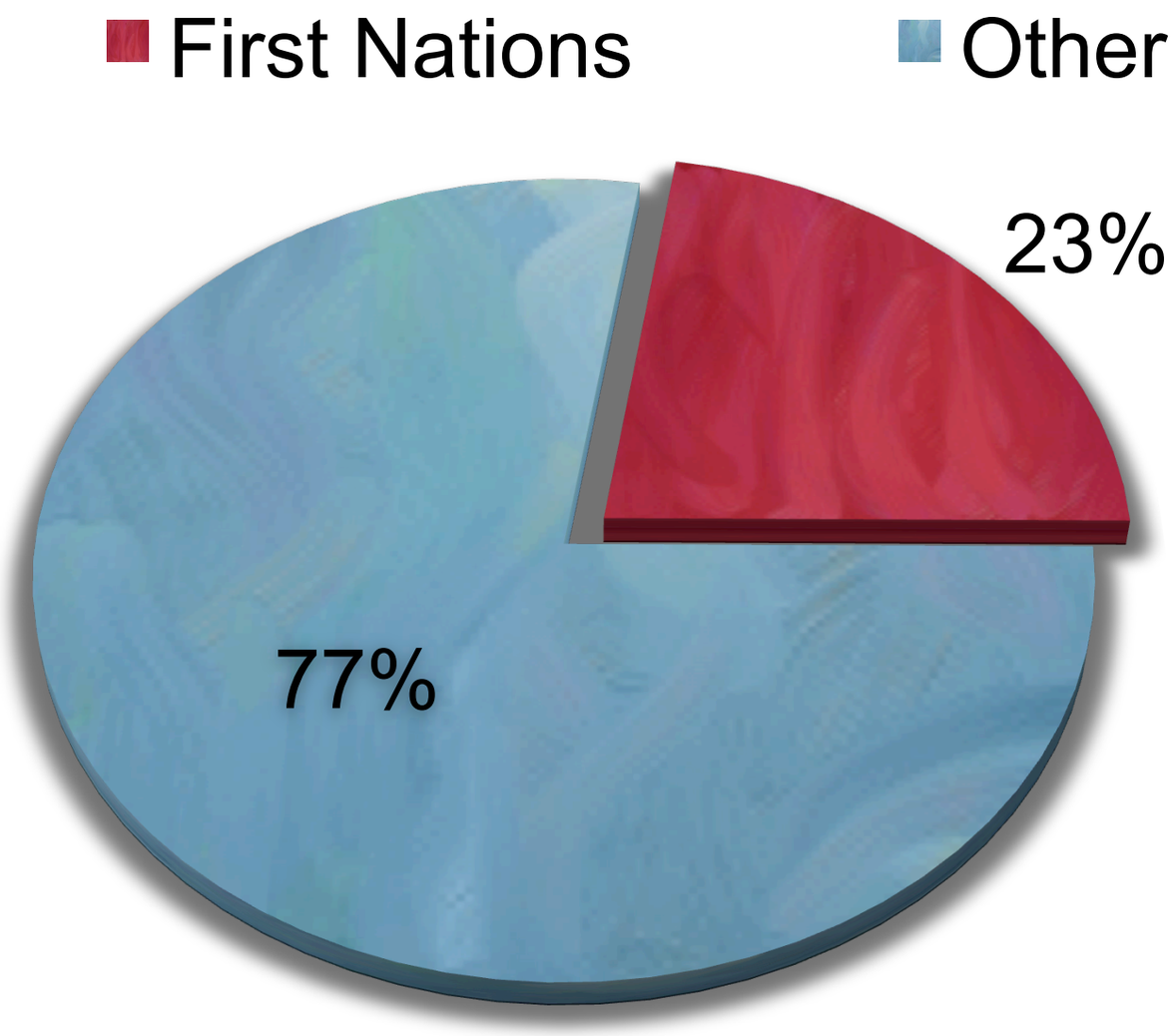
First Nations persons represent about 3% of the total population of BC

Suicide by Population



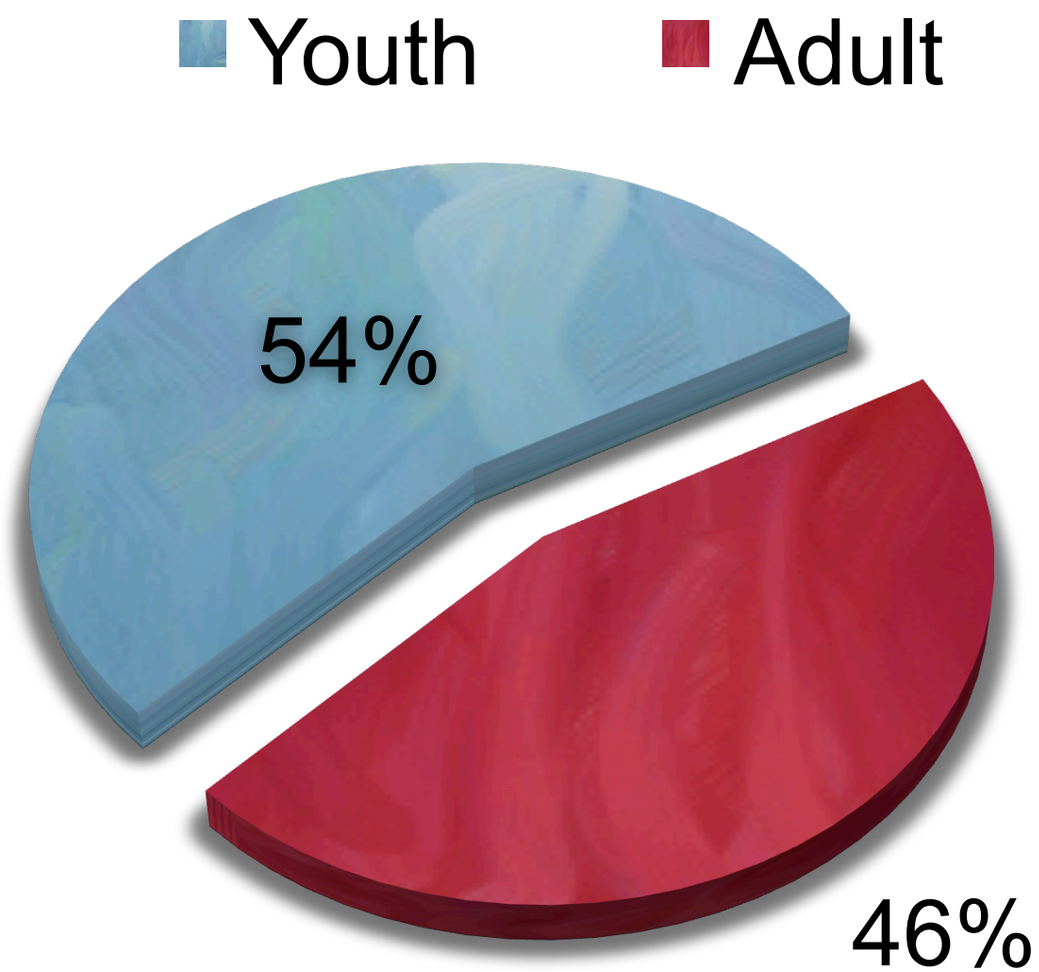
First Nations people account for more than 9% of all suicides in BC

Youth Suicides



Nearly 1/4 of all youth suicides are First Nations

First Nations suicide



Over half of all Indigenous suicides are young persons

NEWS | Apr 30, 2013 | 2:58

Neskantaga waits for help

Remote northern Ontario First Nation community faces suicide epidemic

Google search

native suicide epidemic

Web Images Maps More Search tools

About 2,980,000 results (0.19 seconds)

Scholarly articles for native suicide epidemic

Suicide prevention in American Indian and Alaska … - Middlebrook - Cited by 79

A **suicide epidemic** in an American Indian community - Tower - Cited by 27

A bibliography on **suicide** and **suicide** attempts among … - May - Cited by 28

Suicide Epidemic Discussed by Alaska **Native**…

indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/.../alaska-**native**-leaders-convene-...

Aug 23, 2013 - Alaska **Native** elders from the Lower Yukon village of Alakanuk have successfully come together to prevent **suicide** locally. The community is **...**

Aboriginal suicide rate **'epidemic'** - Canada.com

www.canada.com/vancouversun/story.html?id=b40747b2-00fe-49bc...

Apr 21, 2007 - MONTREAL - **Native** communities should draw on cultural strengths for internal solutions to tackle a.

Google search

first nations suicide epidemic

Web Images Maps More Search tools

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Scholarly articles for first nations suicide epidemic

… as a hedge against **suicide** in Canada's **First Nations** - Chandler - Cited by 477

… as a protective factor against **suicide** in **First Nations** … - Chandler - Cited by 46

Suicide among Canadian **aboriginal** peoples - Kirmayer - Cited by 147

Suicides prompt **First Nation** to declare state …

www.cbc.ca/.../**suicides**-prompt-**first-nation**-to-declare-state-of-emergenc...

Apr 18, 2013 - A small **First Nation** in northern Ontario has declared a state of **...** Remote northern Ontario **First Nation** community faces **suicide epidemic**.

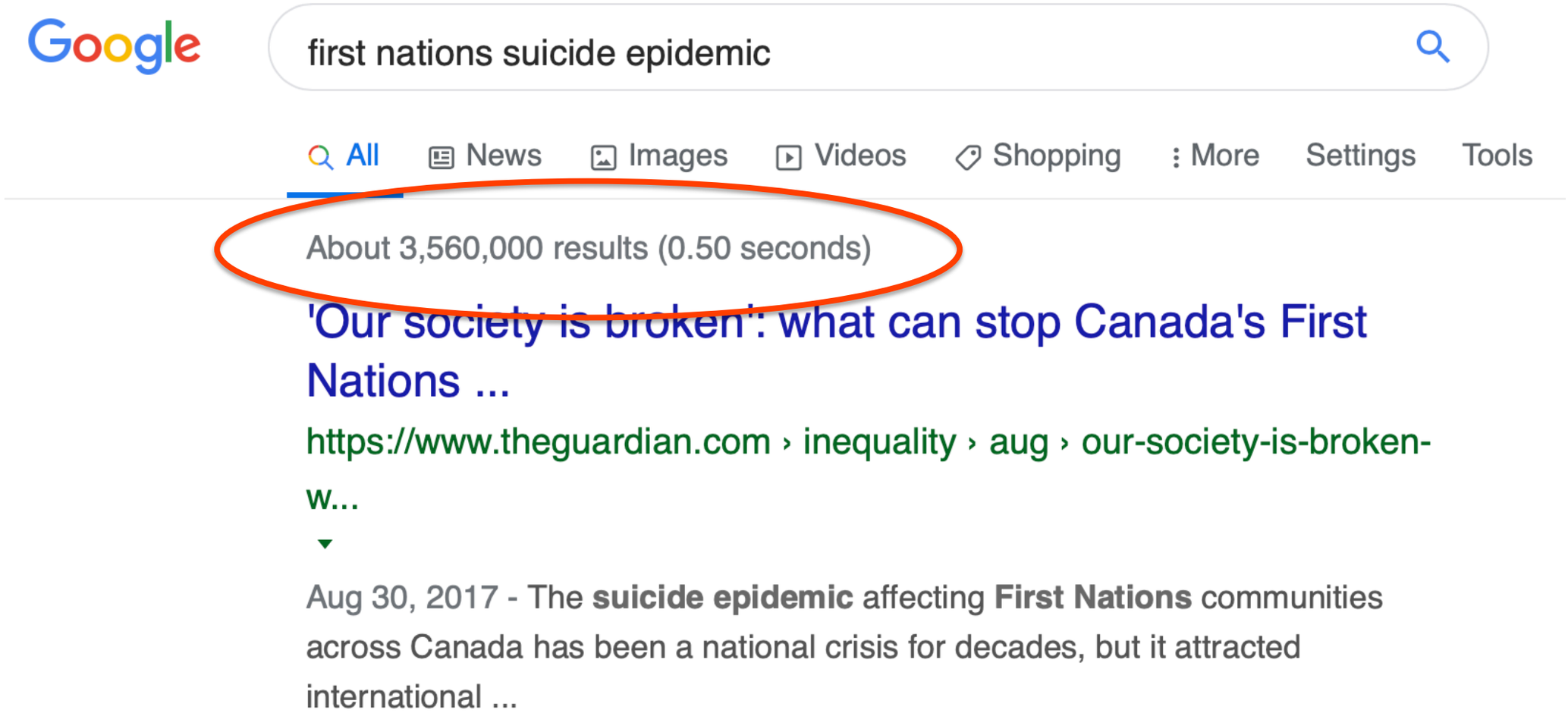
B.C. community pleads for help to halt **suicide** '…

www.cbc.ca/.../b-c-community-pleads-for-help-to-halt-**suicide-epidemic**-...

Nov 22, 2007 - Community leaders in Hazelton, B.C.,are calling for help after a recent rash of **suicide** attempts by **aboriginal** youths. Earlier in November **...**

Google Search

Google Search



Are all youth at risk in this “epidemic”?

- There is an “epidemic” of suicide in “the” Indigenous population
- Is being Indigenous a risk factor?
- **Incorrect, insulting, & dangerous**

*A BASIC GUIDE TO NAMES

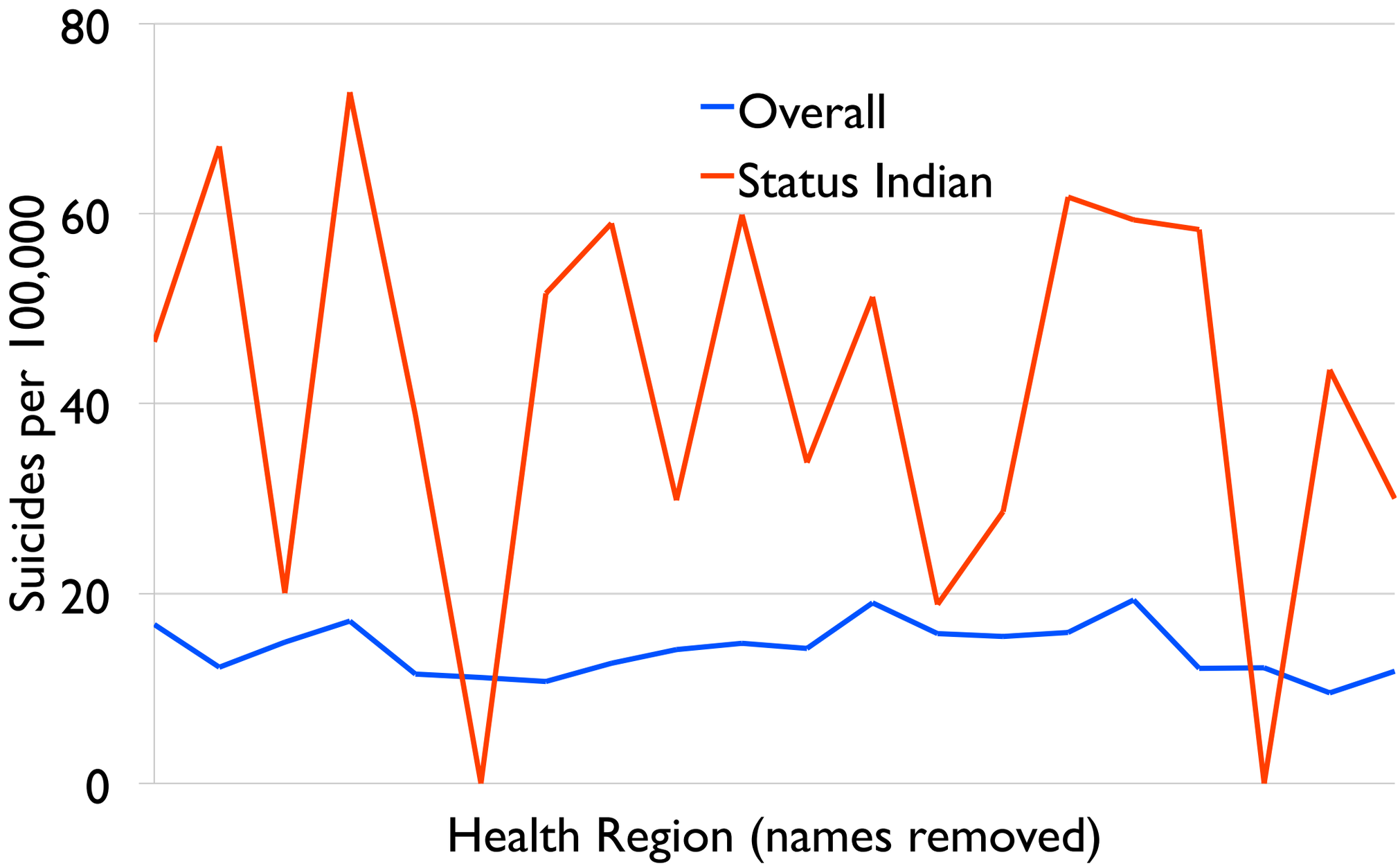
Listed below are the First Nations Peoples as they are generally known today with a phonetic guide to a common pronunciation. Newcomers to these phonetic pronunciations may still find a huge gap between what they say and what they hear a native speaker saying. The best way to learn these names is to listen closely when in the presence of someone more familiar, and perhaps even ask for a quick lesson. Also included here are names formerly given these groups, and the language families to which they belong.

People	Pronunciation	Have Been Called	Language Family
Haida	Hydah	Haida	Haida
Ktunaxa	Tun-ah-hah	Kootenay	Ktunaxa
Tsimshian	Sim-she-an	Tsimshian	Tsimshian
Gitxsan	Git-k-san	Tsimshian	Tsimshian
Nisga'a	Nis-gaa	Tsimshian	Tsimshian
Haisla	Hyslah	Kitimat	Wakashan
Heiltsuk	Hel-sic	Bella Bella	Wakashan
Oweekeno	O-wik-en-o	Kwakiutl	Wakashan
Kwakwaka'wakw	Kwak-wak-ya-wak	Kwakiutl	Wakashan
Nuu-chah-nulth	New-chan-lulth	Nootka	Wakashan
Tsilhqot'in	Chil-co-teen	Chilcotin	Athapaskan
Dakelh	Da-kelh	Carrier	Athapaskan
Wet'suwet'en	Wet-so-wet-en	Carrier	Athapaskan
Sekani	Sik-an-ee	Sekani	Athapaskan
Dunne-za	De-ney-za	Beaver	Athapaskan
Dene-thah	De-ney-ta	Slave(y)	Athapaskan
Tahltan	Tall-ten	Tahltan	Athapaskan
Kaska	Kas-ka	Kaska	Athapaskan
Tagish	Ta-gish	Tagish	Athapaskan
Tutchone	Tuchon-ee	Tuchone	Athapaskan
Nuxalk	Nu-halk	Bella Coola	Coast Salish
** Coast Salish		Coast Salish	Coast Salish
Stl'atl'imc	Stat-liem	Lillooet	Int. Salish
Nlaka'pamux	Ing-khla-kap-muh	Thompson/Couteau	Int. Salish
Okanagan	O-kan-a-gan	Okanagan	Int. Salish
Secwepemc	She-whep-m	Shuswap	Int. Salish
Tlingit	Kling-kit	Tlingit	Tlingit

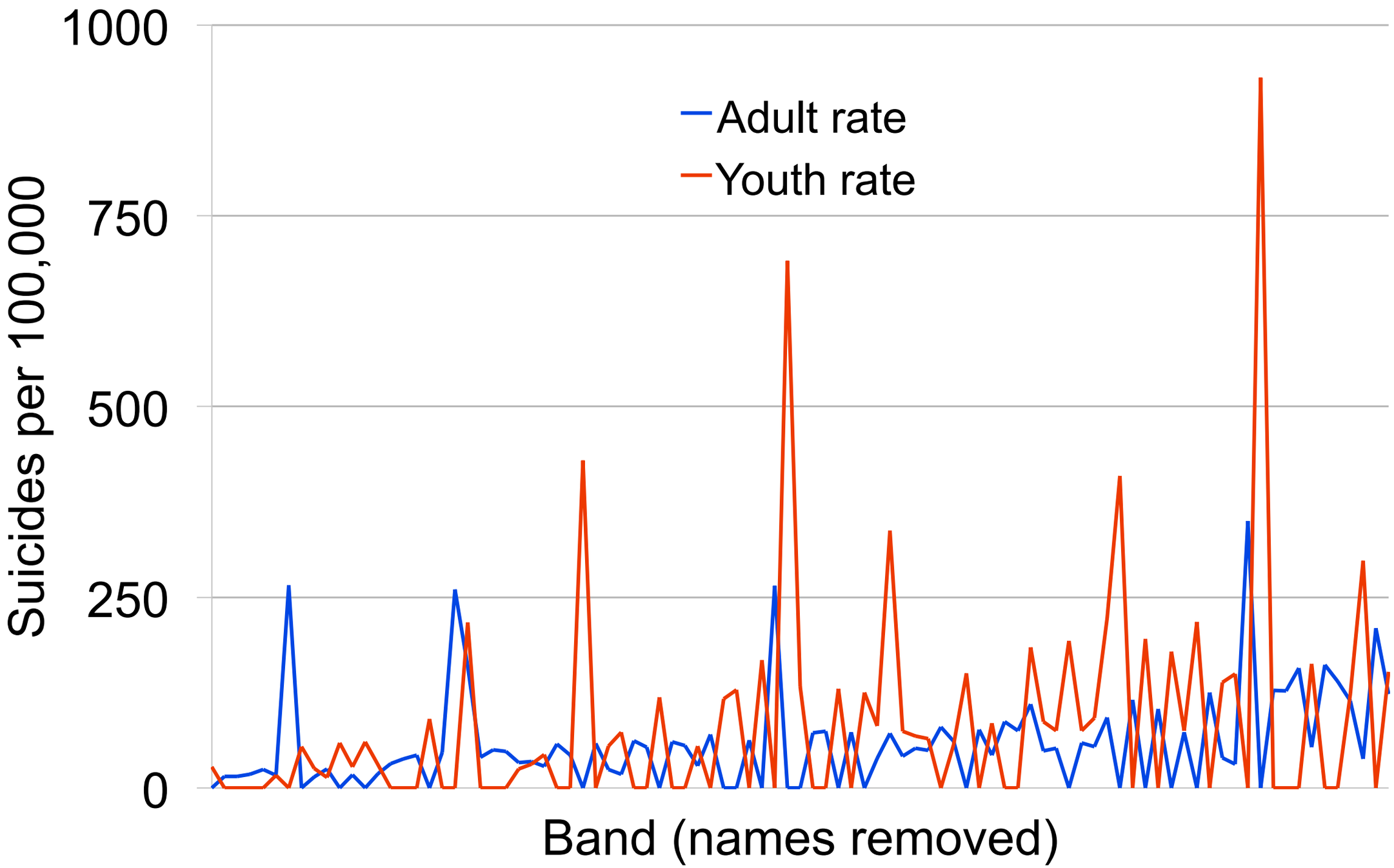
* Adapted from Cheryl Coull's "A Traveller's Guide to Aboriginal B.C." with the permission of the publisher Whitecap Books.

** Although Coast Salish is not the traditional First Nations name for the people occupying this region, this term is used to encompass a number of First Nations Peoples including Klahoose, Hamalco, Shammon, Sechelth, Squamish, Halq'emeylem, Stlq'emeylem, Hul'qumi'num, Pentlatch, Straits.

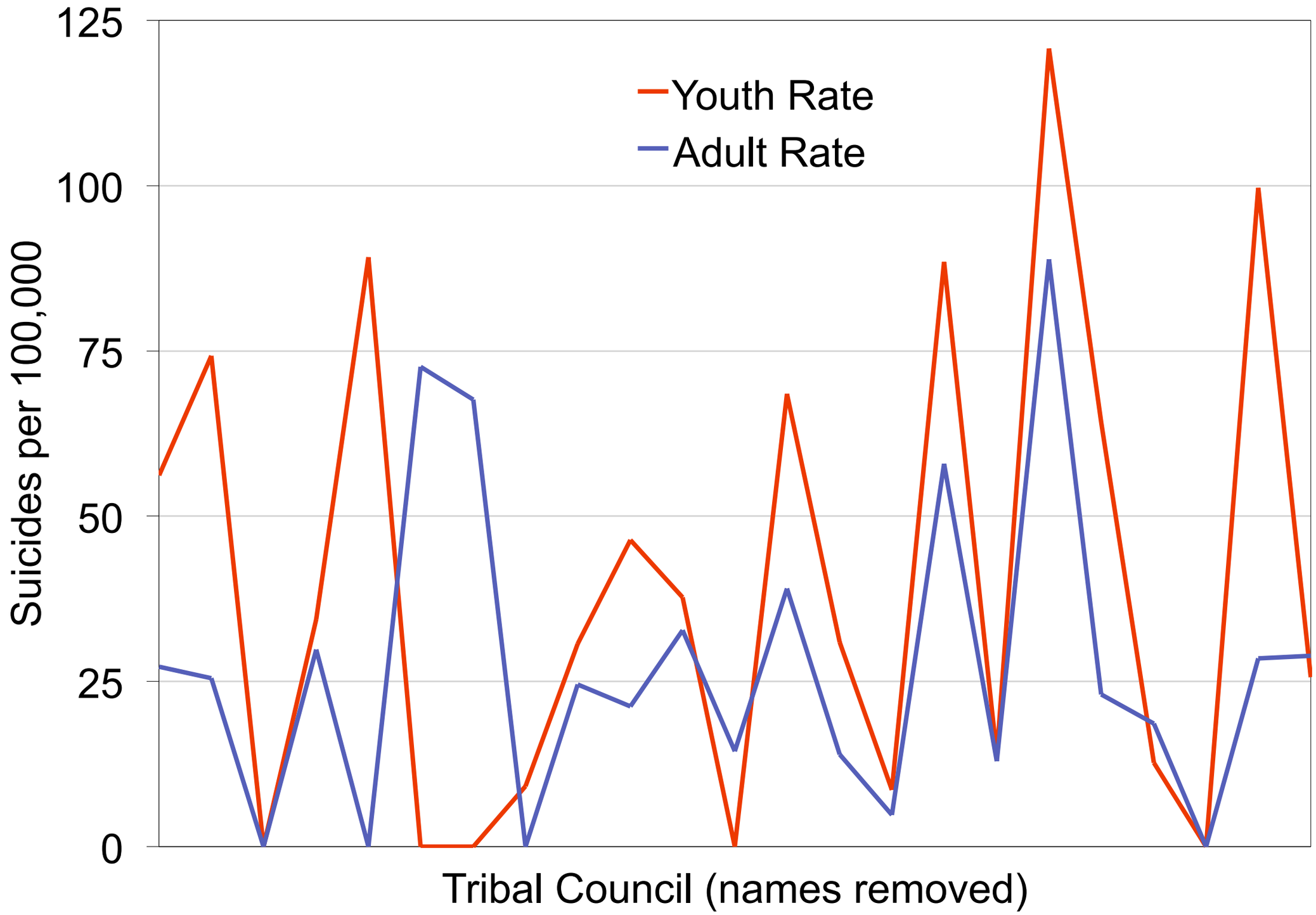
Suicide Rate by Health Region (BC)



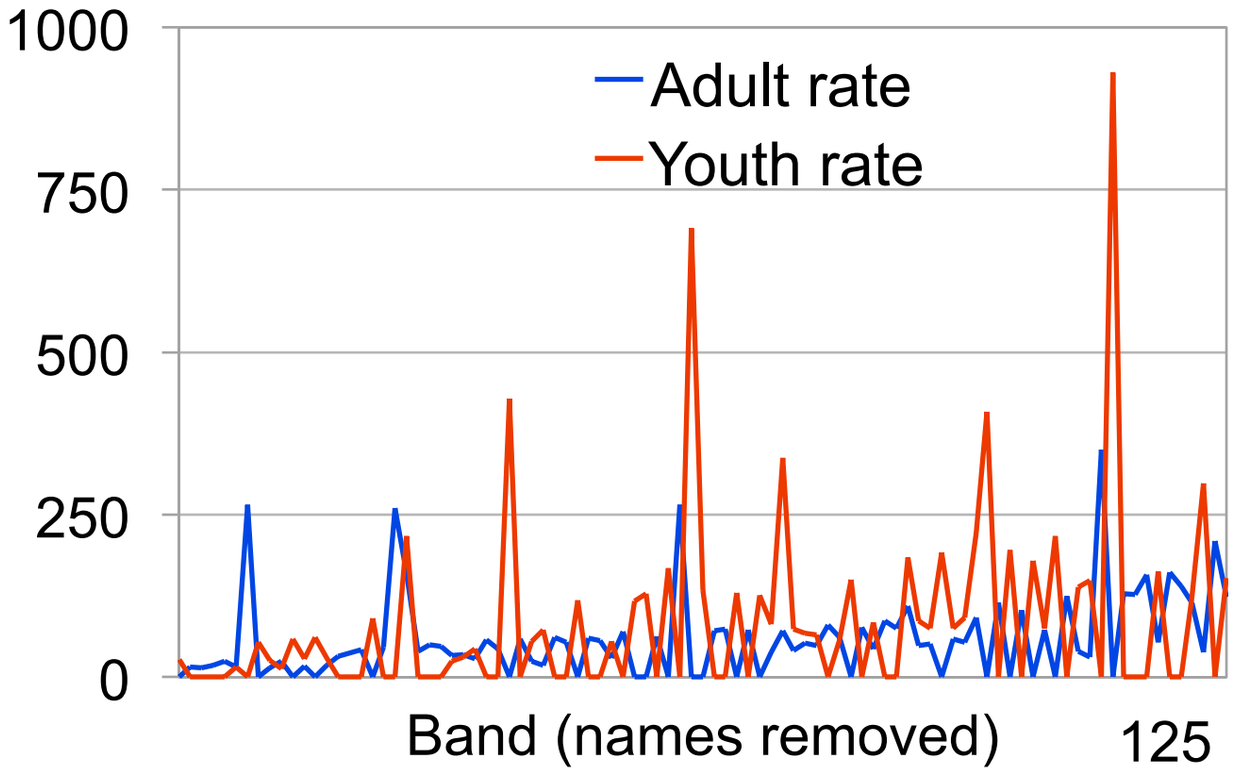
Suicide Rate by Band

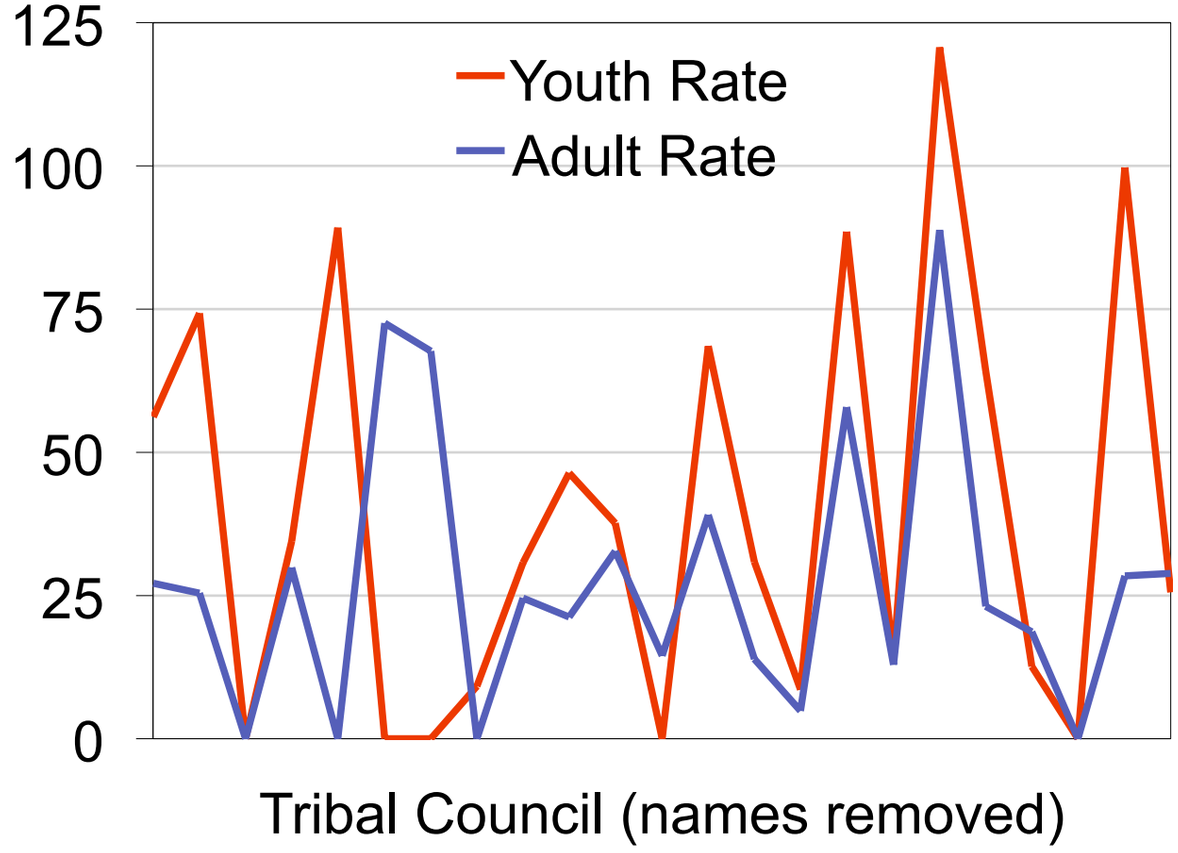


Suicide Rate by Tribal Council

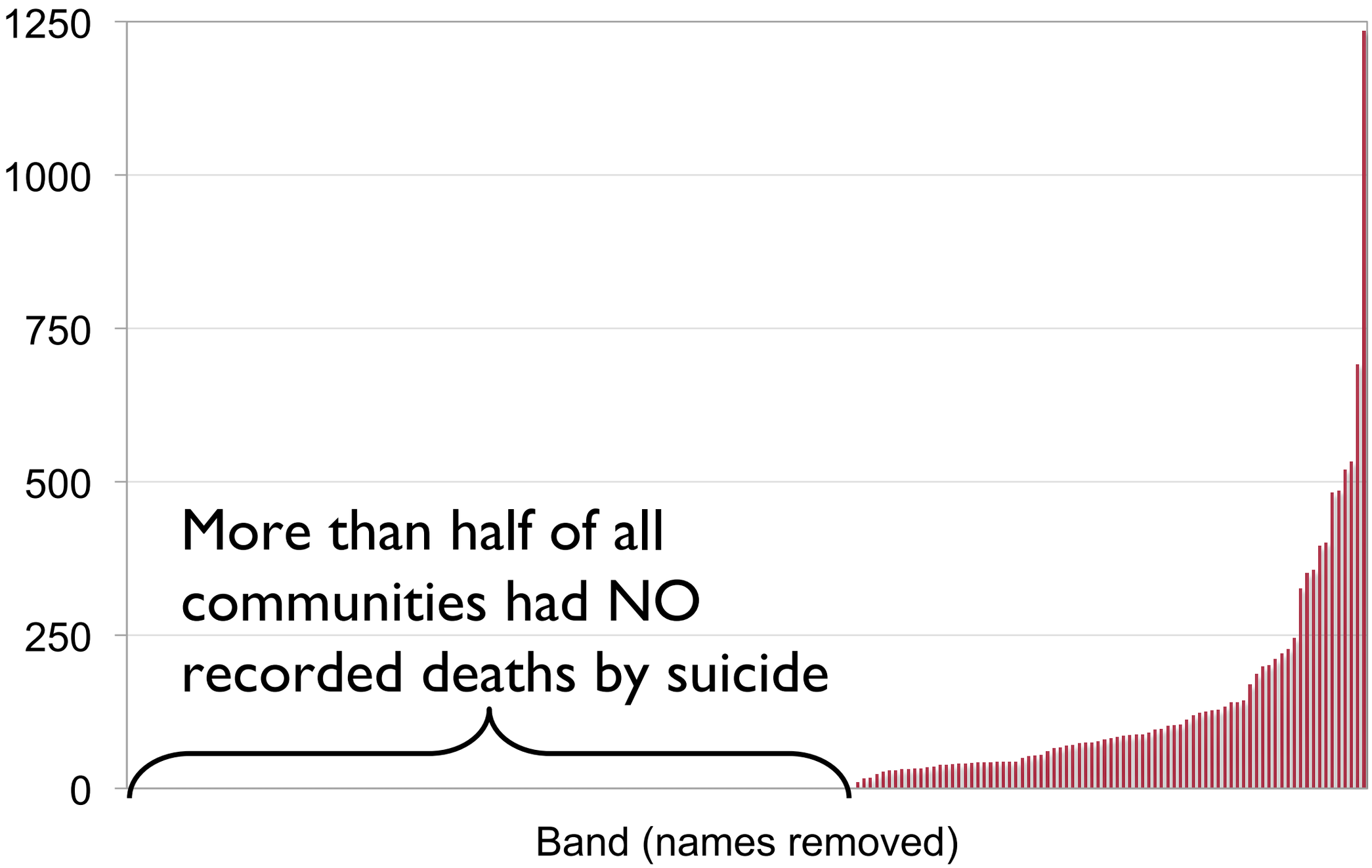


This is not an “epidemic”





Youth Suicide by Band



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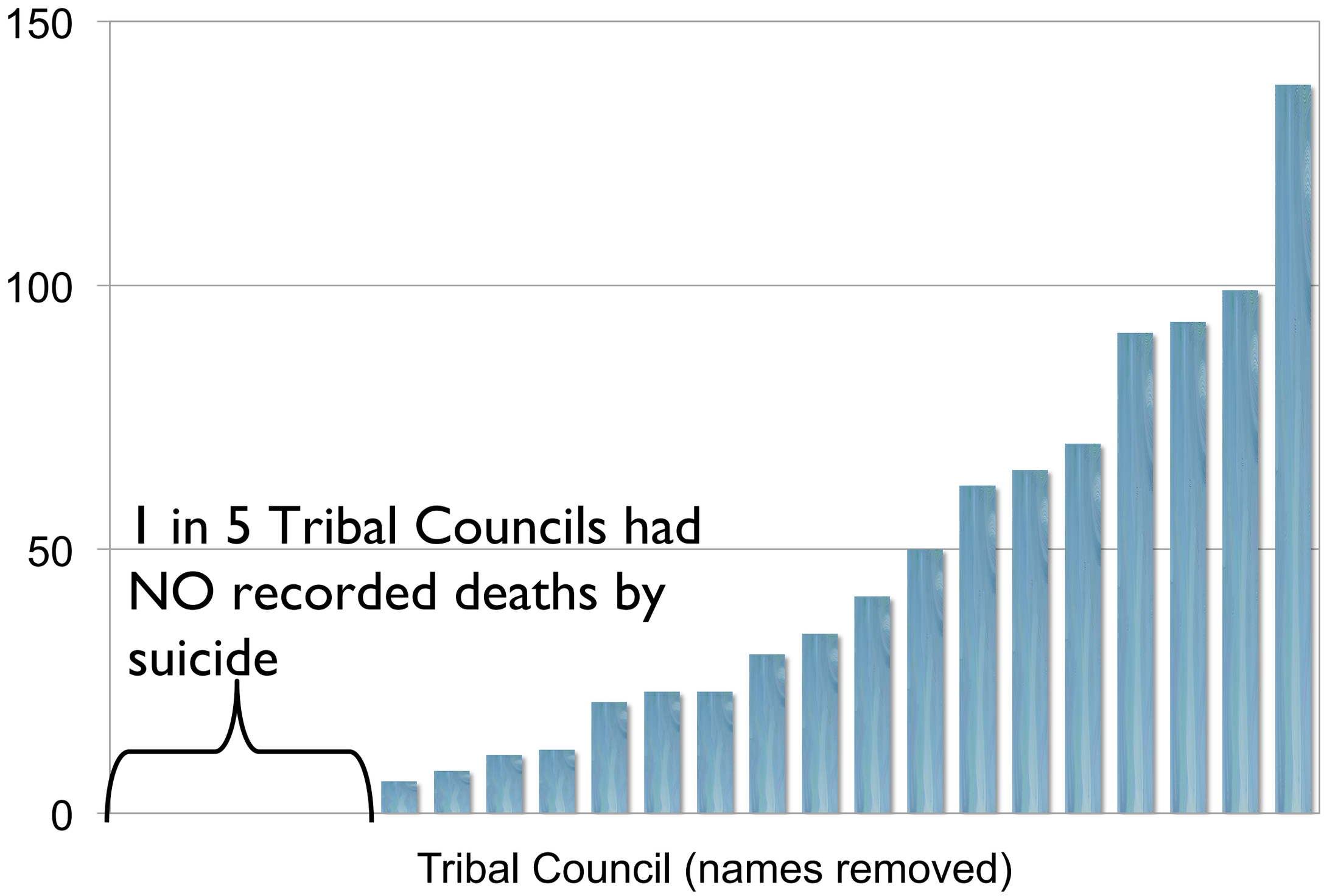


Cultural Continuity

Preserve and promote culture

Navigate toward a shared future

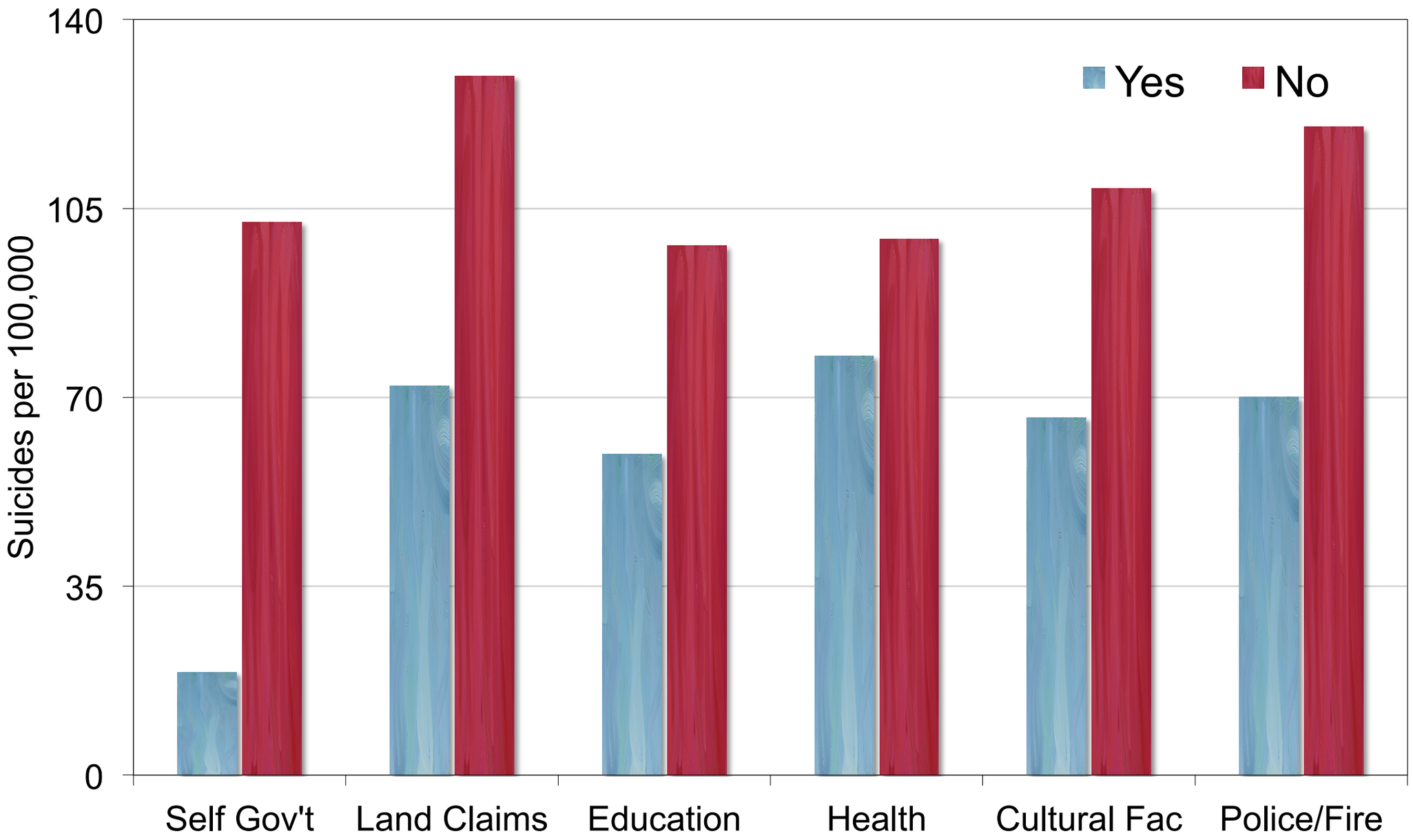
- How to measure cultural continuity in 200+ First Nations communities?

Cultural Continuity Indicators

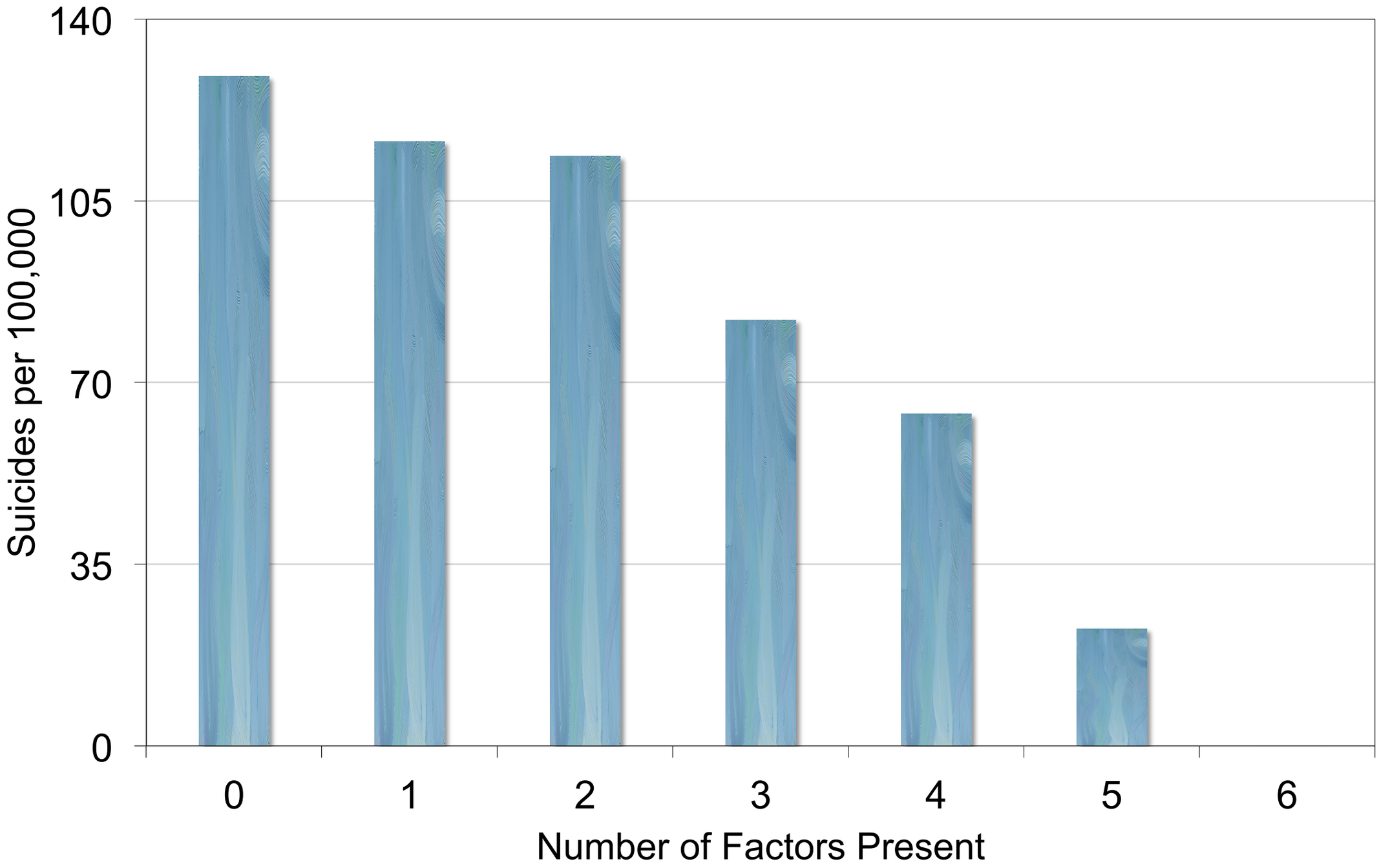
- Self-Government
- Land Claims
- Education
- Health Services
- Police/Fire services
- Cultural Facilities

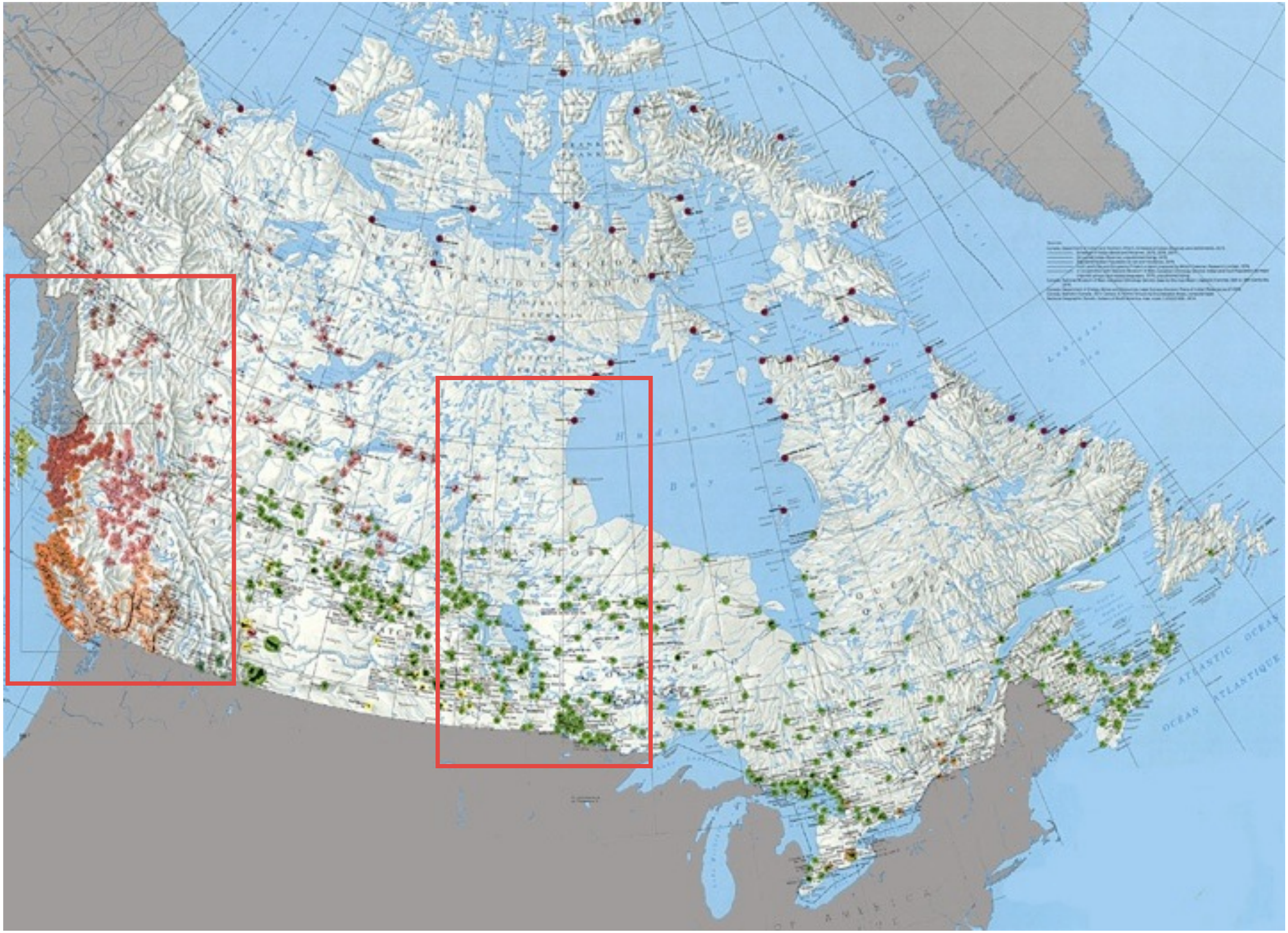
- Women in Government
- Child & Family Services
- Language
- Elder-Youth Interaction
- Youth Programming
- School Curriculum

Cultural Continuity Factors



Number of Factors Present




ATLANTIC OCEAN
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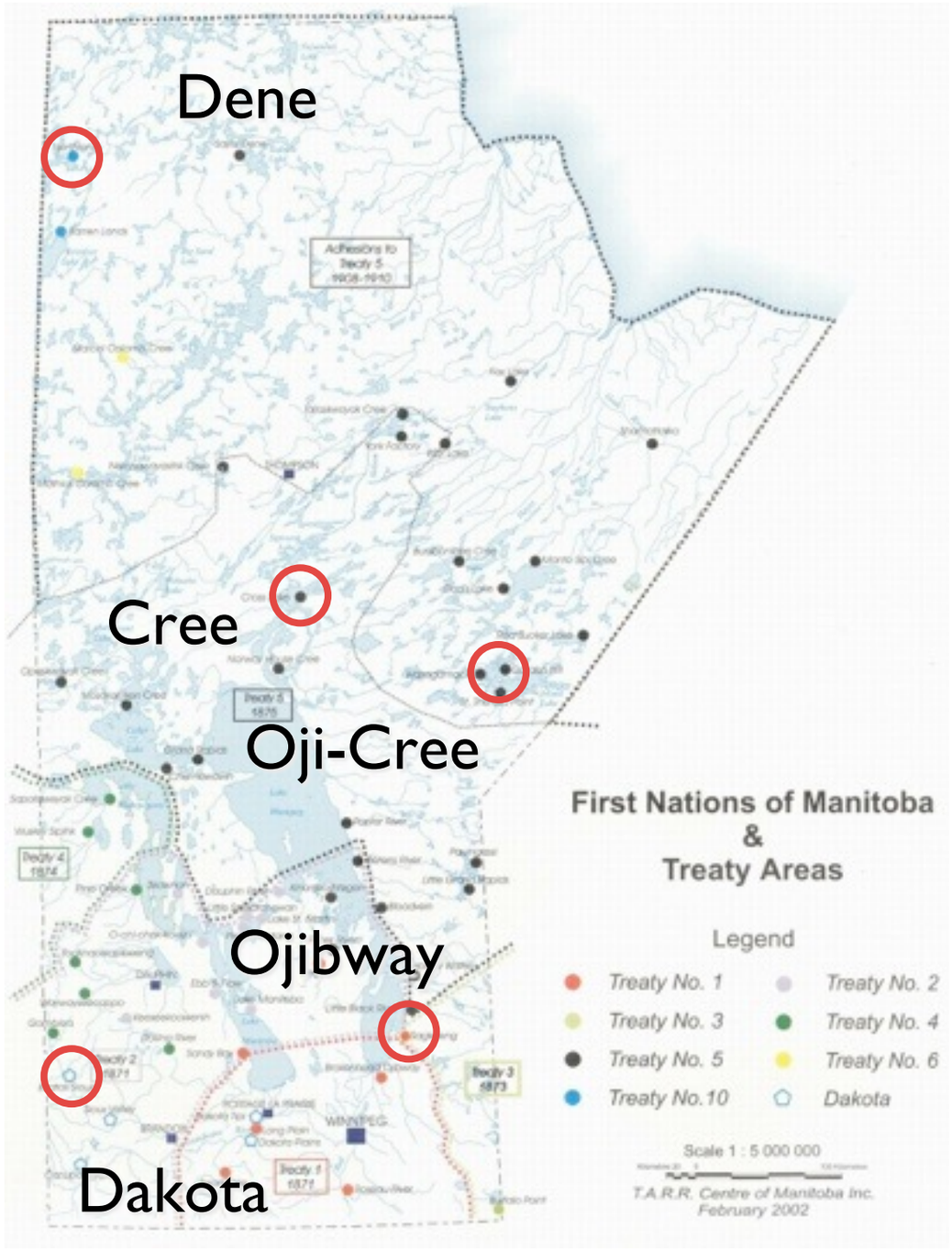


- Two 2-day meetings in Winnipeg with 4-5 representatives from each of the five partner communities
- Research team visits to each partner community
- *Finally* starting to analyze the data…

Health Outcome Measures

- Suicide
- Suicide Attempt
- Substance Use
- Sexually Transmitted Infections
- Self-Injury
- Others too numerous to mention…

Community Indicators

- Language Revitalization
- Traditional Foods
- Traditional Medicines
- Cultural Structures & Activities
- Community Gatherings & Events
- Ceremony
- Churches & Religion
- Elder-Youth Interaction
- Treaty Issues / Inherent Rights
- Education
- Police/Fire Services & Justice Initiatives
- Health Services
- Water & Environment
- Youth-Focused Programs
- Governance
- Community Support Services
- Family Supports

Community Survey — Sample Items

- Education

  Are children taught your FN cultural traditions & history through the school?

- Language Revitalization

  Is language instruction available in your school?

- Cultural Structures & Activities

  Do you have designated areas in your community for ceremony?

- Health Services

  Does your community control health services—do you decide who is hired and how services are provided?

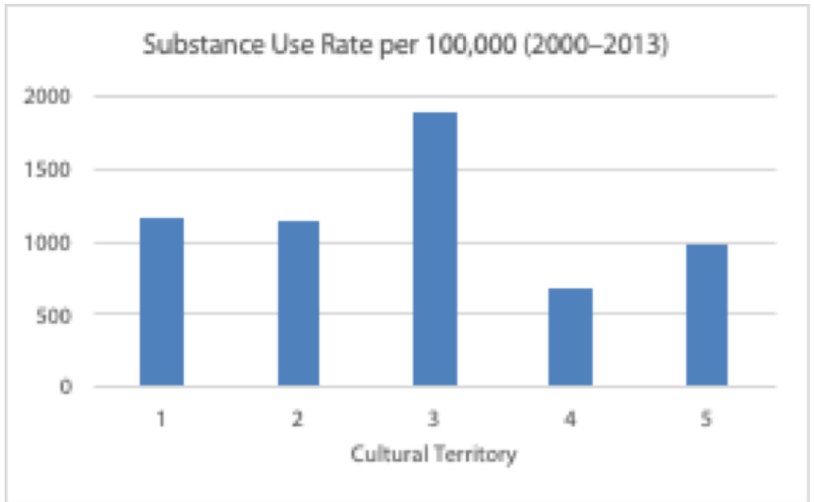
- Traditional Medicines

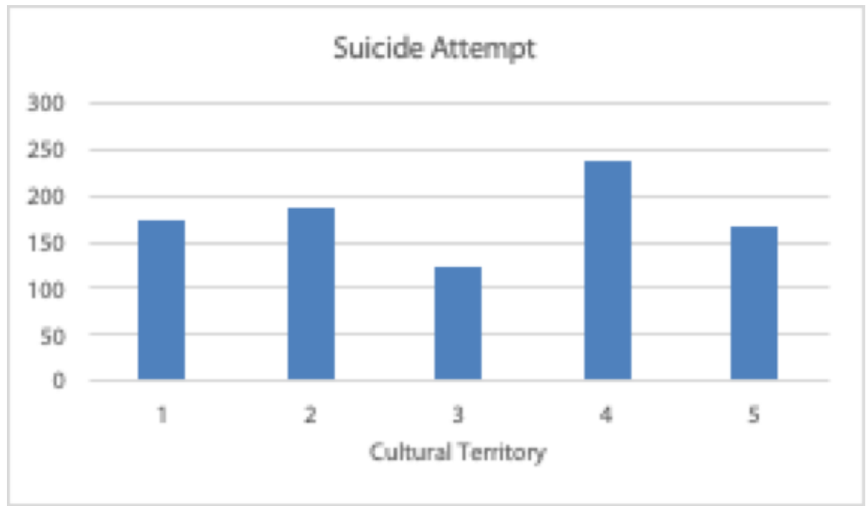
  Are there traditional healers in your community?

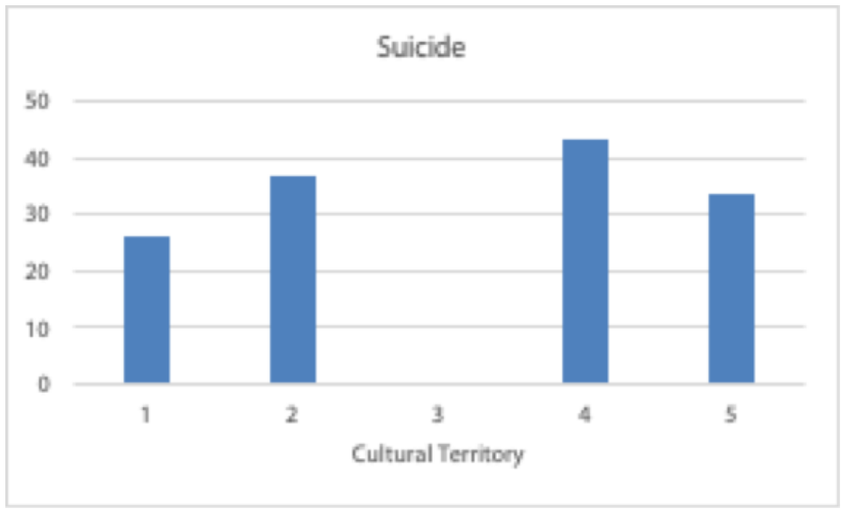
What we want to know

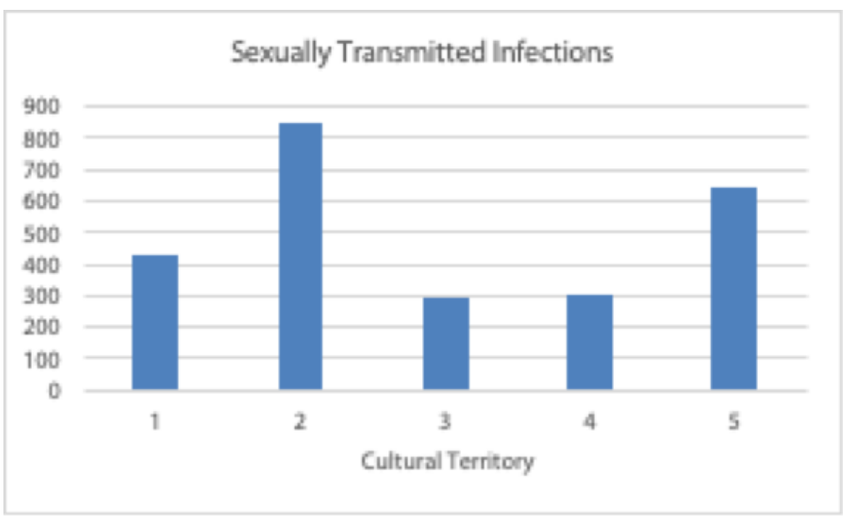
- Are community efforts to preserve & promote culture associated with health outcomes?
- Are community efforts to exert control over a collective future associated with health outcomes?
- Analyses depend on community-level variability in both health outcome & cultural continuity data
- Do communities & cultural territories differ on these variables?

Health Outcome Data

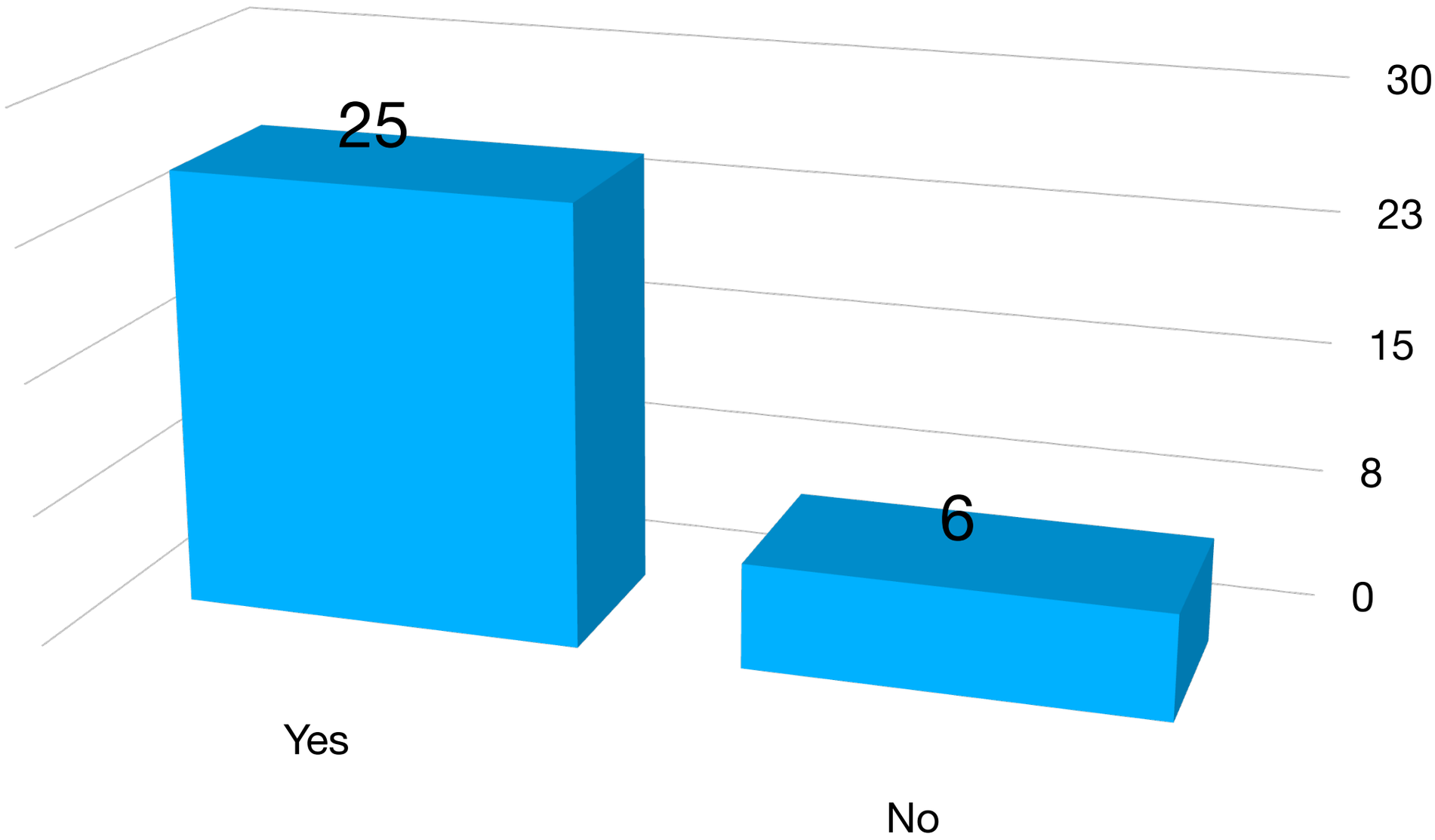




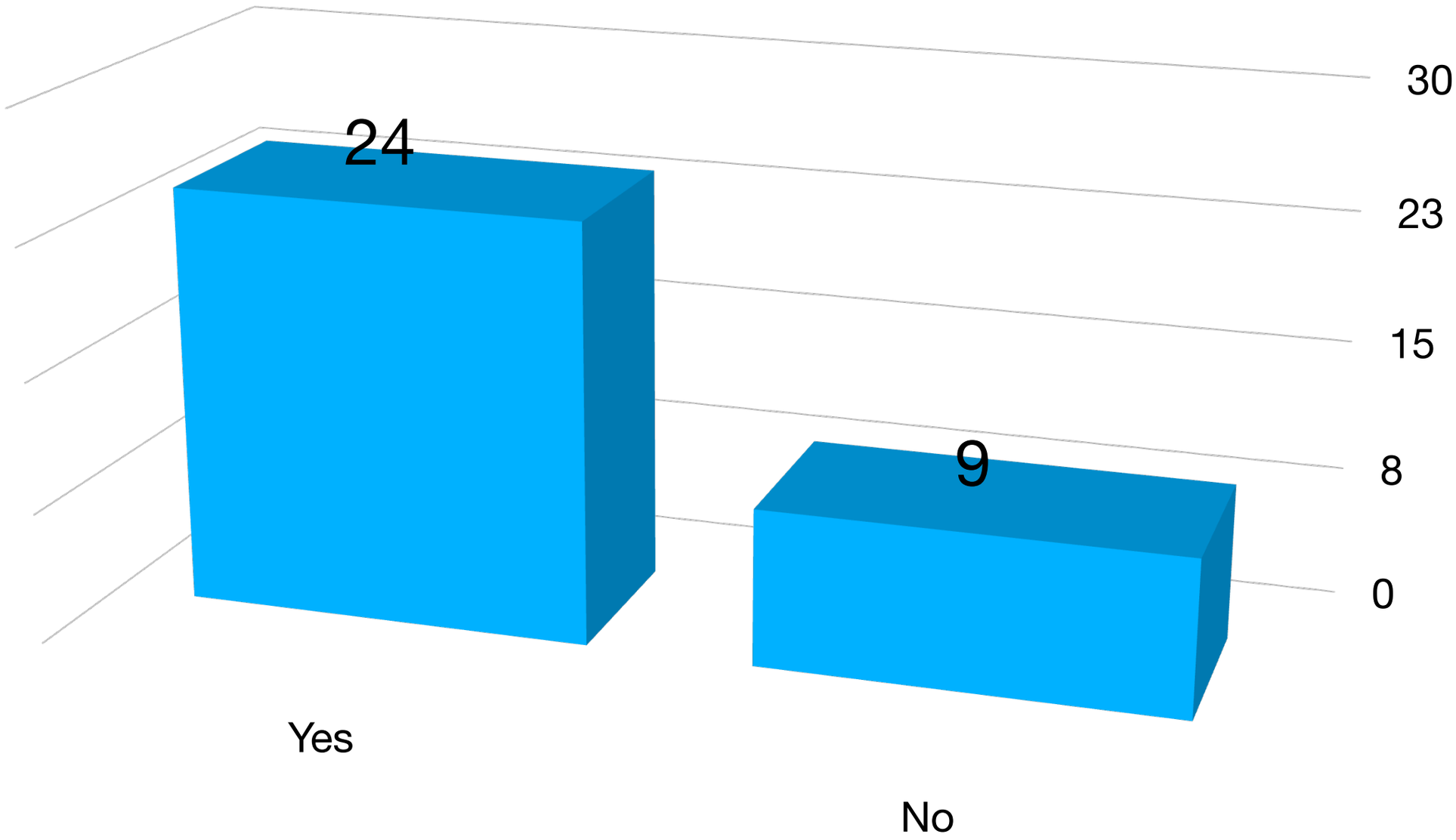




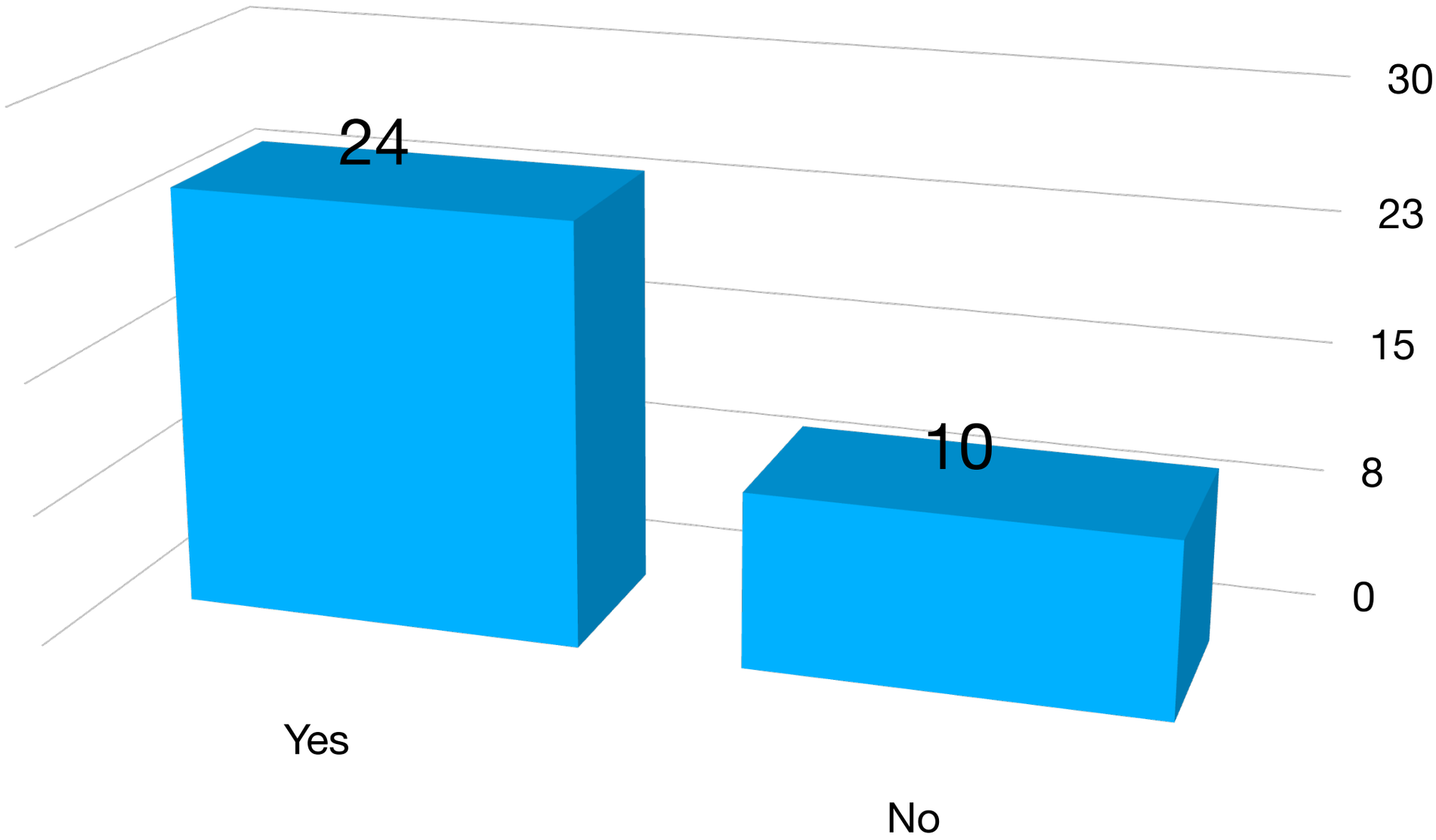
Are children taught your FN cultural traditions & history through the school?



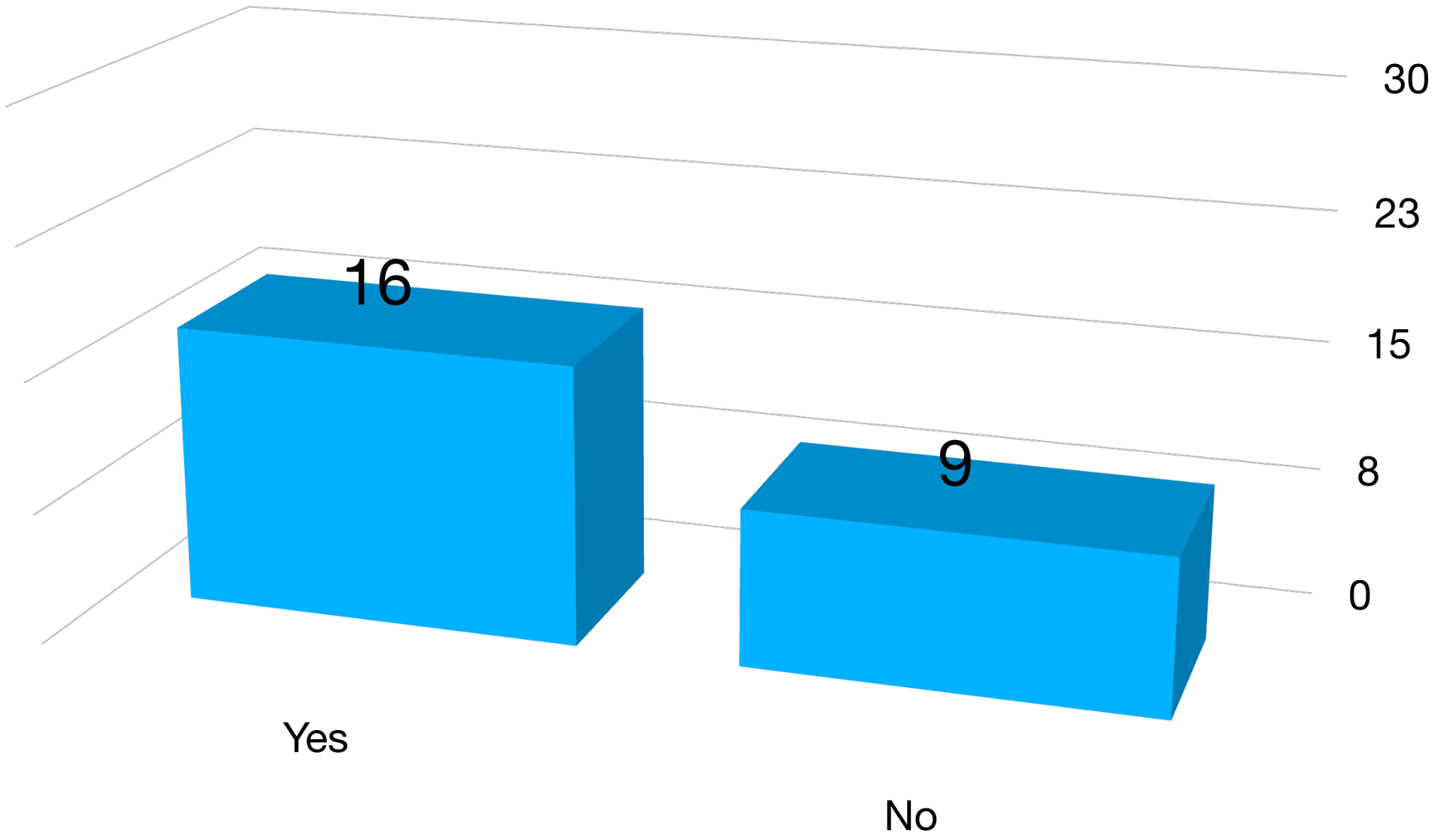
Is language instruction available in your school?



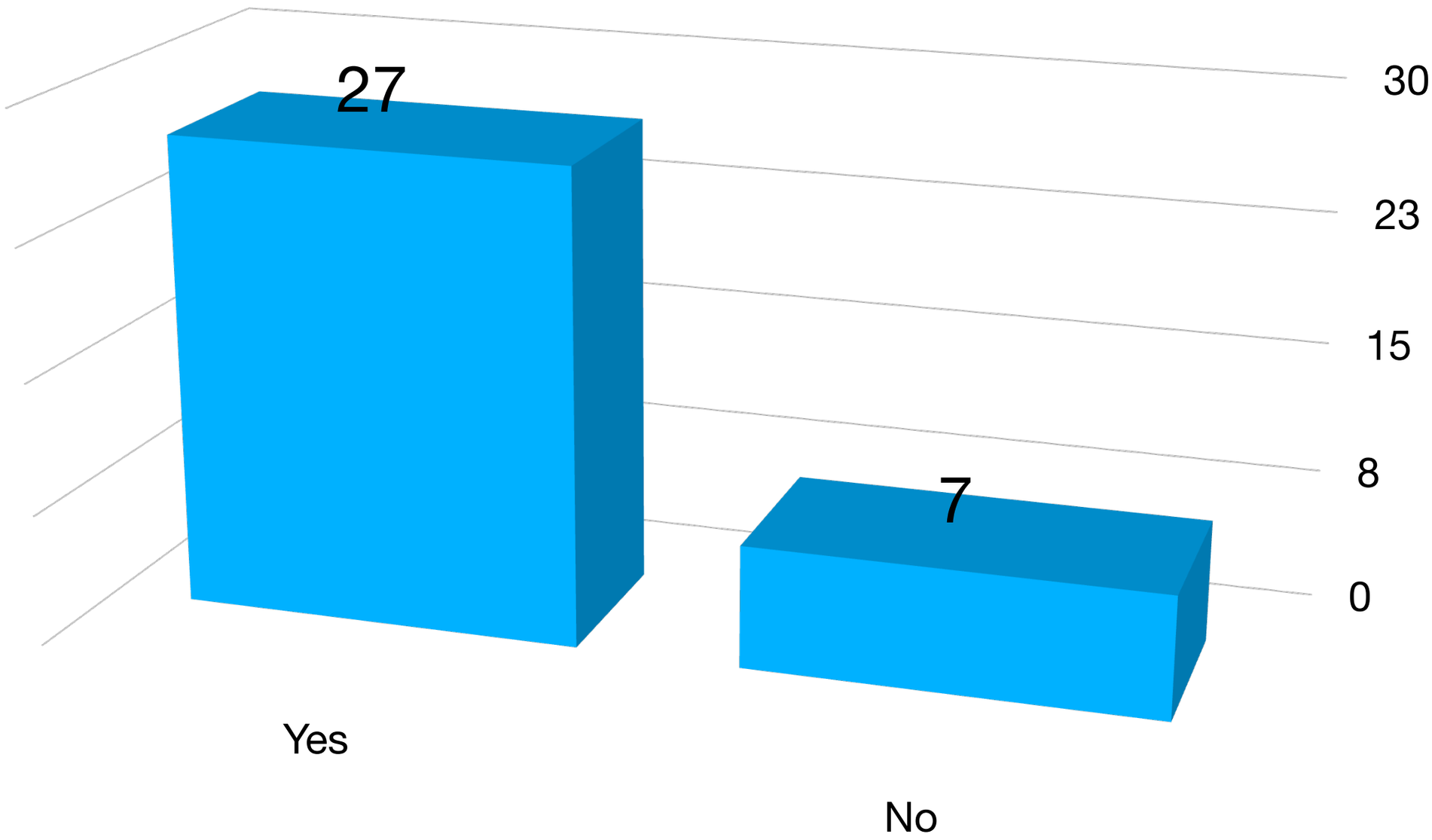
Do you have designated areas in your community for ceremony?

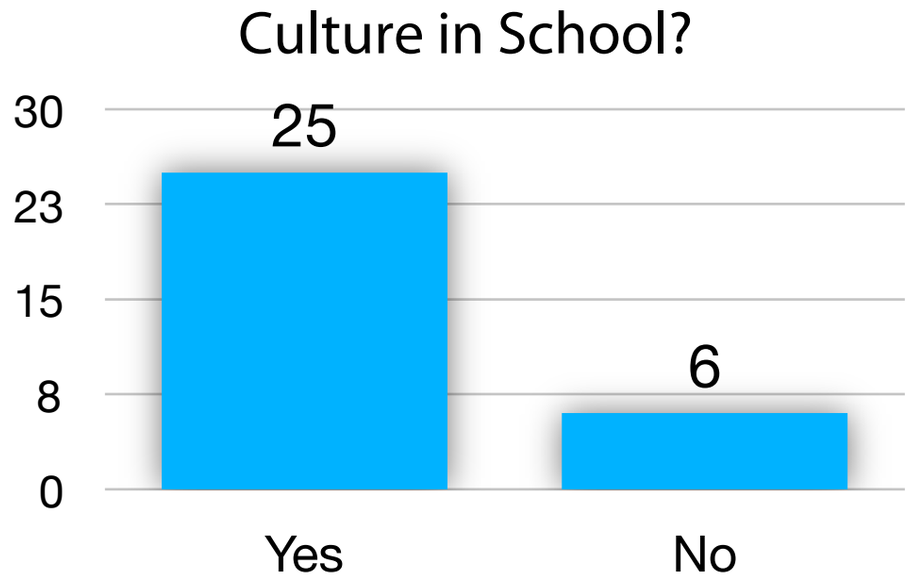


Does your community control health services?



Are there traditional healers in your community?




Culture in School?
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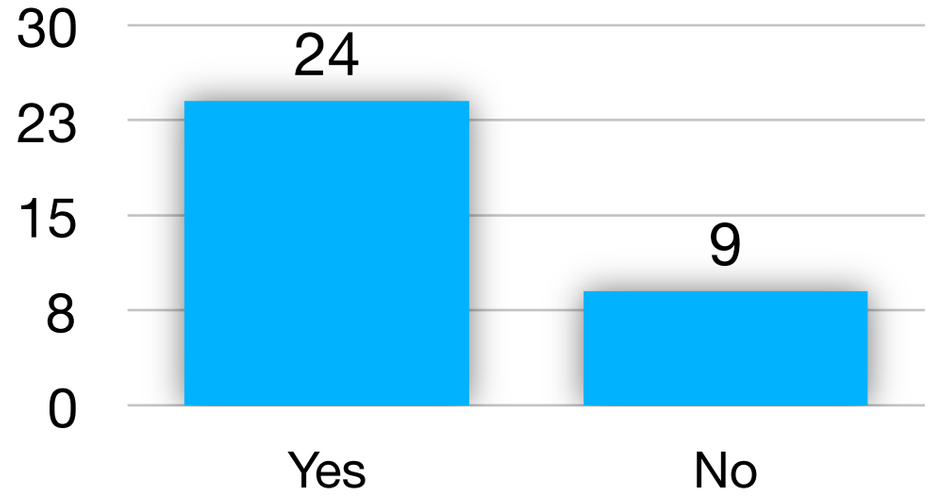
Language in School?
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Yes
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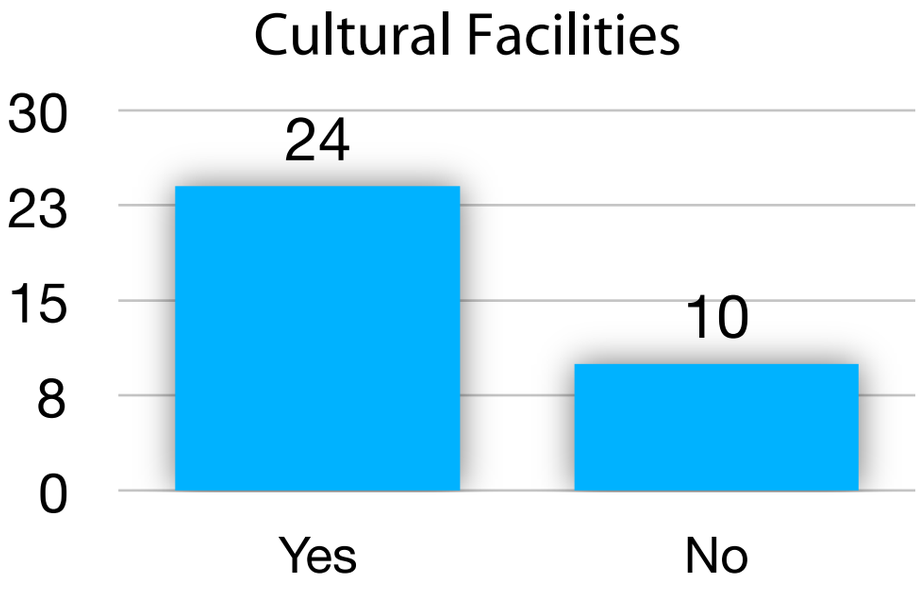
Cultural Facilities
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24
10
Yes
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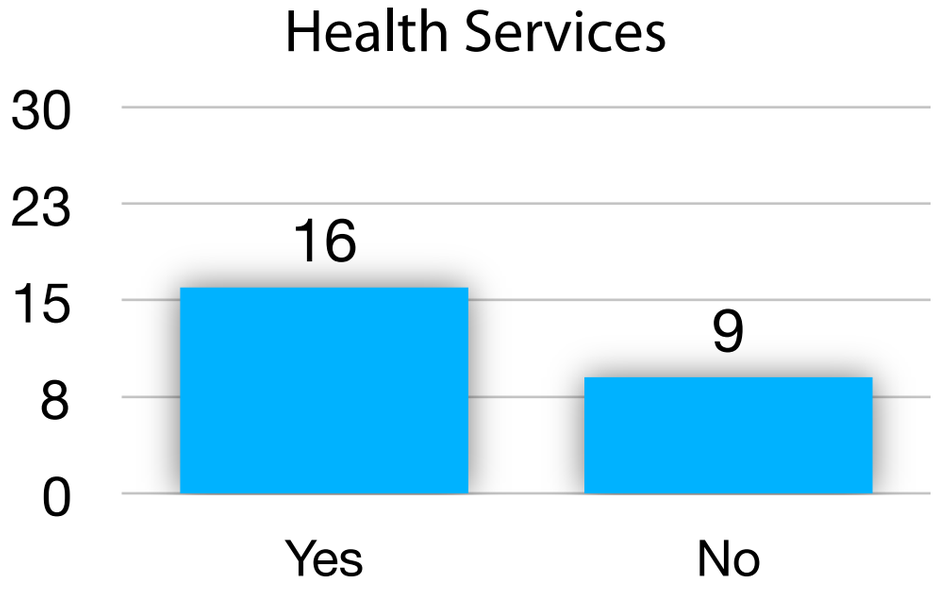
Health Services
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Yes
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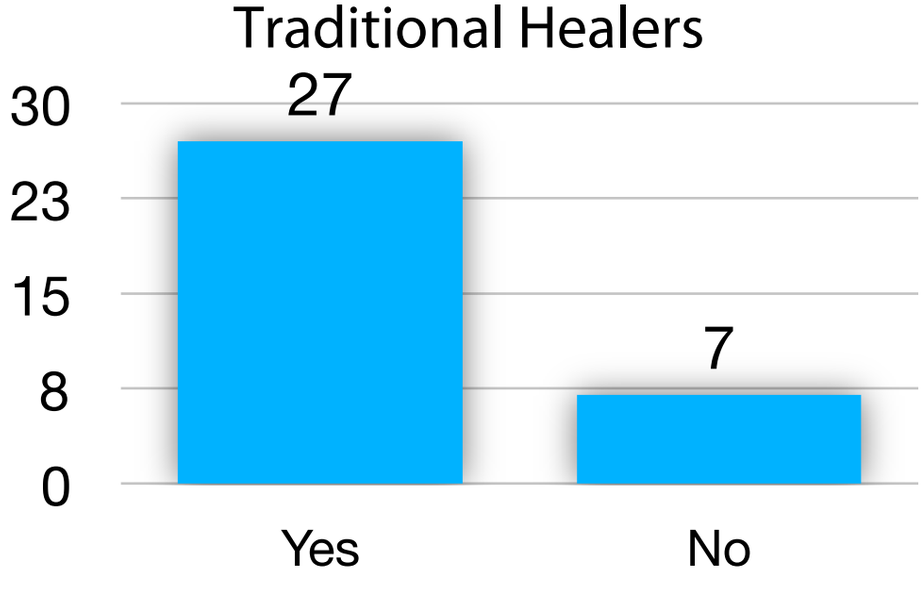
Traditional Healers
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7
Yes
No

I wish I could to tell you more,
but I can't just yet…

Our community partners
need to see the results first!

University of Victoria

CENTRE for Aboriginal Health RESEARCH

But I can say this with complete confidence:

Promoting culture, promotes health!!

University of Victoria

Thank you (& thanks Michael)

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