

# Cultural Continuity as a Protective Factor against Suicide in First Nations Youth

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The question of whether, in some legendary and less trammeled past, the tragedy of suicide among Canada's Aboriginal youth was once less commonplace than it is today is, perhaps, unanswerable. What is not open to serious doubt is the accumulating body of contemporary evidence (evidence forcibly brought to public attention by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples) demonstrating that, at least among certain of Canada's First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, youth suicide rates have reached calamitous proportions – rates said to be higher than those of any culturally identifiable group in the world (Kirmayer, 1994). The remarkable outpouring of concern over such suicides that followed in the wake of the Royal Commission resulted in scores of public gatherings, funded research initiatives, government reports, and scholarly publications. Although this literature is much too large to be summarized here, it is, nevertheless, possible to extract from all of these efforts a few summary conclusions to guide future research and practice.

The most obvious of these conclusions is that youth suicide is so devastating to families and friends and communities there is not (and should not be) any holding back on the range of well-intended impulses to ameliorate and prevent such tragedies. In our collective rush to be helpful, however, such preventive efforts often seriously outstrip available knowledge concerning the actual causes of suicide. To correct this imbalance, a greater proportion of our collective energies and resources needs to be devoted to better understanding

the circumstances responsible for the high rates of youth suicide that characterize some Aboriginal communities, but not others.

A second general conclusion to emerge from the available research literature is that the most promising unit of analysis is not individual youth, but rather the whole cultural communities in which they live (Lester and Yang, 2006). This follows because given that suicide is statistically rare (even when it is epidemic), it is almost never possible to predict who will or won't take their own life (Rosen, 1954); and because, although changing the subterranean thoughts and feelings of suicidal individuals remains a poorly understood art, what is required to address the crying needs of whole Aboriginal communities that exhibit extraordinarily high rates of youth suicide, is often painfully obvious.

Together, these rules of thumb underscore the importance of searching out factors associated with community-level variability in youth suicide rates and have dictated the course of the decade-long program of research to be summarized in the balance of this account.

## Cultural Continuity and Suicide in First Nations Youth

Because they are otherwise remarkably robust, death among Aboriginal youth often proves to be self-appointed. After "accidents," suicide is the major killer of young Aboriginal persons (Statistics Canada, 2001). In British Columbia, for example, where the data summarized here were collected, First Nations

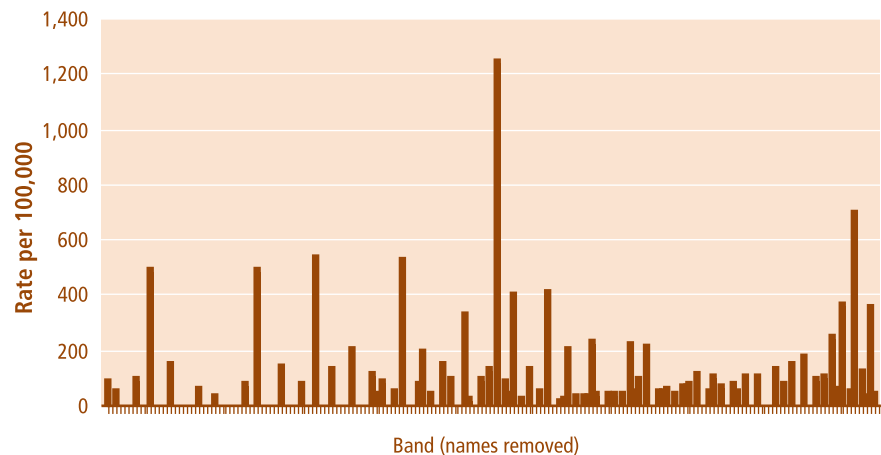
youth take their own lives at rates variously estimated to be between 5 and 20 times higher than that of the non-Aboriginal population (Chandler et al., 2003). Such summary statistics, while technically correct, need to be understood as “actuarial fictions” that regularly hide more than they reveal. Indiscriminately painting the whole of Canada’s (or British Columbia’s) First Nations with the same broad brush not only obscures the real cultural diversity that marks the lives of Aboriginal peoples, but also mistakenly substitutes the banner headline of “Aboriginality” for a much larger set of factors that could better explain the variability in suicide rates across First Nations communities.

Far from being uniformly distributed, the rate of Aboriginal youth suicide across the 200 bands in British Columbia actually varies in wildly saw-toothed ways (Chandler and Lalonde, 1998; Chandler et al., 2003). This has set an agenda for more than a decade of our own research with a focus on why some Aboriginal communities experience epidemic rates of youth suicide, while such deaths are largely unknown in others.

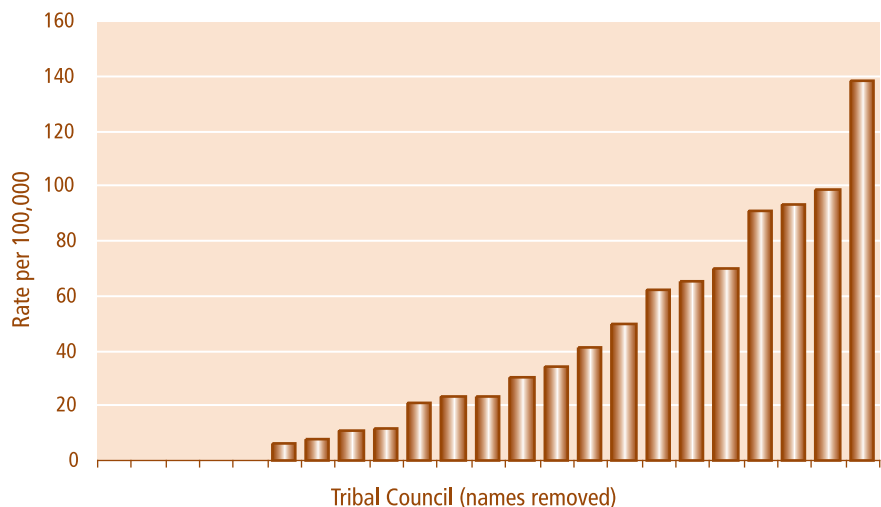
### A Developmental Back-Story

The research being reported began with the wonderment of how it could possibly happen that, with all of life’s potential, young people could so frequently take steps to end their own lives. Our earliest research efforts showed that suicide risk is related to a set of common pitfalls that mark the usual course of identity development (Chandler and Ball, 1990). Failures in

**FIGURE 1**  
Youth Suicide Rate by Band (1987-2000)



**FIGURE 2**  
Youth Suicide Rate by Tribal Council (1987-2000)



constructing a sense of ownership of one’s personal and collective past, and some commitment to one’s own future prospects, were associated with a dramatically heightened risk of

suicide. In the absence of a sense of personal and cultural continuity, our ongoing studies show that life is easily cheapened, and the possibility of suicide becomes a live option.

## From Normative to Risk and Resilience Research

However hazardous growing up may otherwise be, such risks are necessarily magnified when the cultural backcloth against which development naturally unfolds is unravelled by

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social-cultural adversities. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the identity struggles of young Aboriginal persons who must construct a sense of self-hood out of the remnants of a way of life that harsh colonial practices have systematically overthrown. In the best circumstances, one's culture can be counted on to provide young people with a backstop – some measure of sameness while outgrowing childish ways. If, instead, one's culture has been marginalized (because of colonization or decolonization or globalization), the trustworthy ways of one's community are criminalized, legislated out of existence, or otherwise assimilated beyond easy recognition, then the path for those transiting toward maturity becomes much more difficult. This is the fate, we argue, of many Indigenous youth around the world. Their culture of origin no longer computes, and their paradise has been turned into a parking lot. The predictable consequence of such personal and cultural losses is often disillusionment, lassitude, substance abuse, self-injury and, most dramatically, self-appointed death at an early age.

To the degree that the above comments hold any promise for helping us better understand why the burden of suicide falls so disproportionately on the young, and especially on some (but not other) young Aboriginal persons, then a network of related hypotheses suggest themselves.

## From Self- to Cultural Continuity

If, as argued, cultural continuity forms a critical backstop to the routine foibles of identity formation, then it similarly follows that community-level rates of youth suicide should also vary as a function of the degree to which particular Aboriginal communities find themselves bereft of meaningful connections to their traditional past, and otherwise cut off from local control of their own future prospects. More particularly, two testable claims flow from these expectations.

The first is that, because different Aboriginal communities have differently weathered their typically negative contacts with the non-Aboriginal world, their collective responses to such adversities should be equally variable. With particular reference to the problem of youth suicide, it ought to follow that, when viewed at the level of British Columbia's almost 200 separate bands, the rate at which youth suicides occur should also vary among communities.

Second, and because communities have met with varying levels of success in rehabilitating their culture, it should also happen that suicide rates will be lower in those bands that have achieved a greater measure of success in reconnecting to their traditional past, and in building ties to some shared future.

Both of these hypotheses have now been tested in two separate waves of data collection that cover the years 1987 to 2000. In both studies, every confirmed Aboriginal suicide in British Columbia was classified by band of origin and each of the province's 197 recognized bands were dichotomously coded in terms of the presence or absence of six and later eight "cultural continuity" factors, described in more detail below. Summary findings from these two data sets are reported in the paragraphs that follow.

## Results

### *Hypothesis One: Province-Wide Youth Suicide Rates as an Actuarial Fiction*

The observed suicide rate for the First Nations population of British Columbia during the period 1987 to 2000 was more than double the provincial average. If, against reason, suicide rates were unrelated to band membership, then tabulating the suicide rate for each band would have resulted in a more or less rectangular distribution. As shown in Figure 1, however, something much closer to the opposite is true. What this saw-toothed picture makes clear is that many Aboriginal communities in British Columbia suffered no youth (aged 15 to 24 years) suicides during

the 1987 to 2000 period, while, for others, the rate was many times higher than the provincial average. Figure 2 arrays youth suicide rates by tribal council.

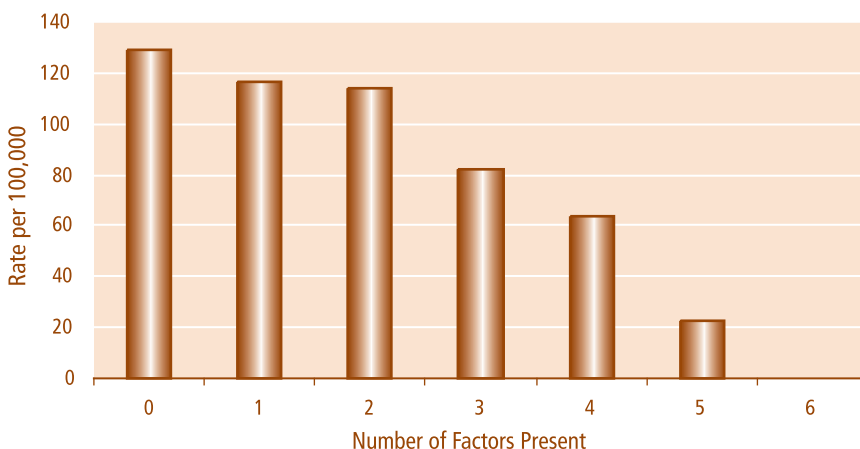
What these data show is that nearly 90 percent of suicides occur in less than 10 percent of communities, and that in more than half of all bands, and 20 percent of tribal councils, youth suicide is effectively unknown. Clearly, the “epidemic” of youth suicides regularly reported in the popular press is not a “First Nations” epidemic, but a tragedy suffered by some communities and not others.

***Hypothesis Two: Cultural Continuity As a Hedge against Aboriginal Youth Suicide***

Hypothesis Two was predicated on the assumption that distinctive cultural groups, like individual selves, are constituted by identity-preserving practices that forge links to a common past and future. On this prospect, it was anticipated that First Nations communities bereft of such culture-sustaining ties would be at special risk for suicide, while those that had achieved greater measures of success in preserving cultural connections would be better shielded from the “slings and arrows” that regularly cost young Aboriginal persons appropriate levels of care and concern for their own future well-being.

Two waves of data, meant to test this hypothesis, were again collected. During the first study period (1987 to 1992), available records were carefully sifted to locate community-level variables descriptive of common efforts to preserve links to a shared

**FIGURE 3**  
Youth Suicide Rate by Number of Factors Present (1987-1992)

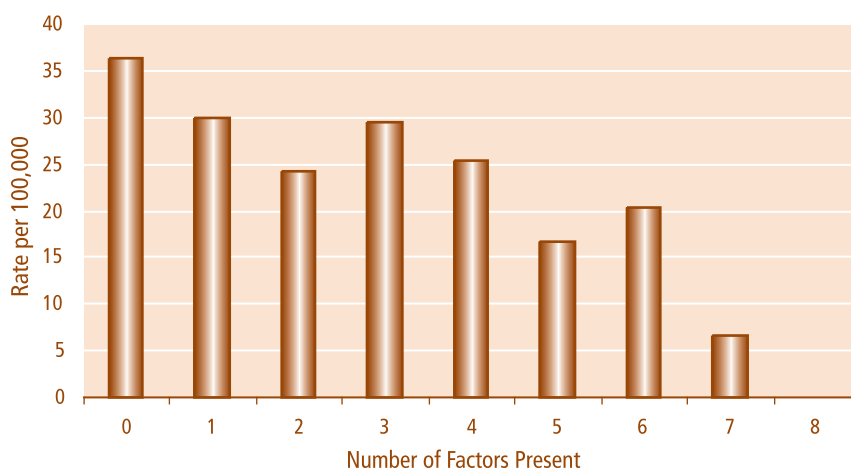


cultural past, and to forge a common cultural future. Six such markers of cultural continuity were initially identified, including indications of whether communities had achieved a measure of self-government, litigated for Aboriginal title to traditional lands, accomplished a measure of local control over health, education

and policing services, and created community facilities for the preservation of culture. Summing across these dichotomized measures yielded an overall cultural continuity index ranging from 0 to 6.

The average youth suicide rates for all bands scoring at one or the other

**FIGURE 4**  
Total Suicide Rate by Number of Factors Present (1993-2000)



of these six cultural continuity levels are detailed in Figure 3. Bands that evidenced all of these cultural continuity factors had *no* youth suicides during our first study window. By contrast, bands that evidenced none of these “protective” factors suffered youth suicide rates many times the national average.

The addition of measures of local control over child welfare services, and the involvement of women in band governance (band councils composed of more than 50 percent women) were also shown to evidence dramatically lower youth suicide rates. As shown in Figure 4, bands characterized by all eight of these cultural continuity factors show zero-order levels of both youth and adult suicide, while those characterized by none of these factors suffer epidemic suicide levels.

## Conclusion

Taken altogether, this extended program of research strongly supports two major conclusions. First, generic claims about youth suicide rates for the whole of any Aboriginal world are, at best, actuarial fictions that obscure critical community-by-community differences in the frequency of such deaths. Second, individual and cultural continuity are strongly linked, such that First Nations communities that succeed in taking steps to preserve their heritage culture and work to control their own destinies are dramatically more successful in insulating their youth against the risks of suicide.

*Full references are available in the online version of this issue. It can be accessed by visiting the PRI web site at <[www.policyresearch.gc.ca](http://www.policyresearch.gc.ca)>*

