

Save culture! Save lives!

Christopher E. Lalonde, University of Victoria

Michael J. Chandler, University of British Columbia

Today, many communities struggle to hold on to the almost bare threads of culture. The languages, stories, music, dancing, traditions are being restored despite protests from some non-aboriginals who continue to call for assimilation with all its inherent destruction for Aboriginal Peoples.

Is it worth the effort, the struggle, and the fight to restore culture?

- The clear message is that the First Nations communities that have taken active steps to preserve and rehabilitate their own cultures are also those communities in which youth suicide rates are dramatically lower.
- Invest in cultural heritage - insulate against suicide.
- Being connected to your culture provides you with a valuable resource, an ally to draw on when your sense of personal identity is in shambles.
- A strong continuity in culture - a strong protective factor.
- It is not true that all First Nations have a higher rate of suicide than the general population - but some First Nations do have dramatically high rates. Some communities have suicide rates 800 times the national average. But there are others where suicide doesn't exist.

"The restoration of Aboriginal culture is a necessary, meaningful and comprehensive community approach to suicide prevention. The latest research proves it works". "I hope we all will sit up and take note, especially those Reform politicians who would destroy us by their efforts to get rid of our culture and communities."

The associations between youth suicide rates and measures of cultural continuity.

The cultural life of the First Nations of BC has been so undermined by government policies and practices explicitly conceived as ways of systematically rooting out all traces of aboriginal culture that much of what remains is not so much continuous cultural life, as an attempt to reconstruct it after the fact. As such, our inclusion criteria needed to be expanded to include whatever evidence was there to be found of efforts on the part of communities to preserve or rebuild or reconstruct their culture by wrenching its remnants out of the control of federal and provincial government agencies. In the end, and without further apologies or excuses,

we settled upon a small handful of variables that were generally available and, in our view, could be counted as markers of attempted cultural rehabilitation. These included: **a)** evidence that particular bands had taken steps to secure aboriginal title to their traditional lands; **b)** evidence of having taken back from government agencies certain rights of self-government; evidence of having secured some degree of community control over **c)** educational services; **d)** police and fire protection services; **e)** and health delivery services; and finally, **f)** evidence of having established within their communities certain officially recognized “cultural facilities” meant to serve as a means of helping to preserve and enrich their cultural lives. Each of these proposed marker variables is listed out and further specified below. By hypothesis, it was anticipated that, to the extent that each of these “protective factors” was present in a given community, some quanta of cultural continuity would be added in place, and some reduction in that communities’ overall suicide rate would be definitely reduced.

Markers of cultural continuity

Self government

Although just over 12% of all Native youth (2,201 of 17,902) reside in communities that enjoy some measure of self-government, this factor appears to provide the greatest protective value with an estimated 102.8 fewer suicides per 100,000 youth within communities that have attained self-government against those that have not (18.2 vs. 121.0 suicides per 100,000). Results for this and other cultural factors are shown in Figure 5.

Land claims

While the majority of youth suicides (50 of 97, or 51.5%), and the majority of the youth population (64.3%) are to be found within communities marked by long standing efforts to exert control over their traditional land base, the rate of suicide within these communities is substantially lower: 86.8 vs. 147.3 suicides per 100,000.

Education

Similarly, while just 21.8% of the youth population live in communities in which a majority of children are known to attend band controlled schools, only 11.3% of all youth suicides occur in such communities, the difference in suicide rates between communities that do and do not have such educational systems in place is substantial: 71.1 vs. 116.2.

Health services

A slight minority of the youth population (46.4%) live within communities that have some measure of control the provision of health care services and, as expected, an even smaller percentage of youth suicides (38.1) occur in such communities, resulting in comparative rates of 89.0 and 125.1.

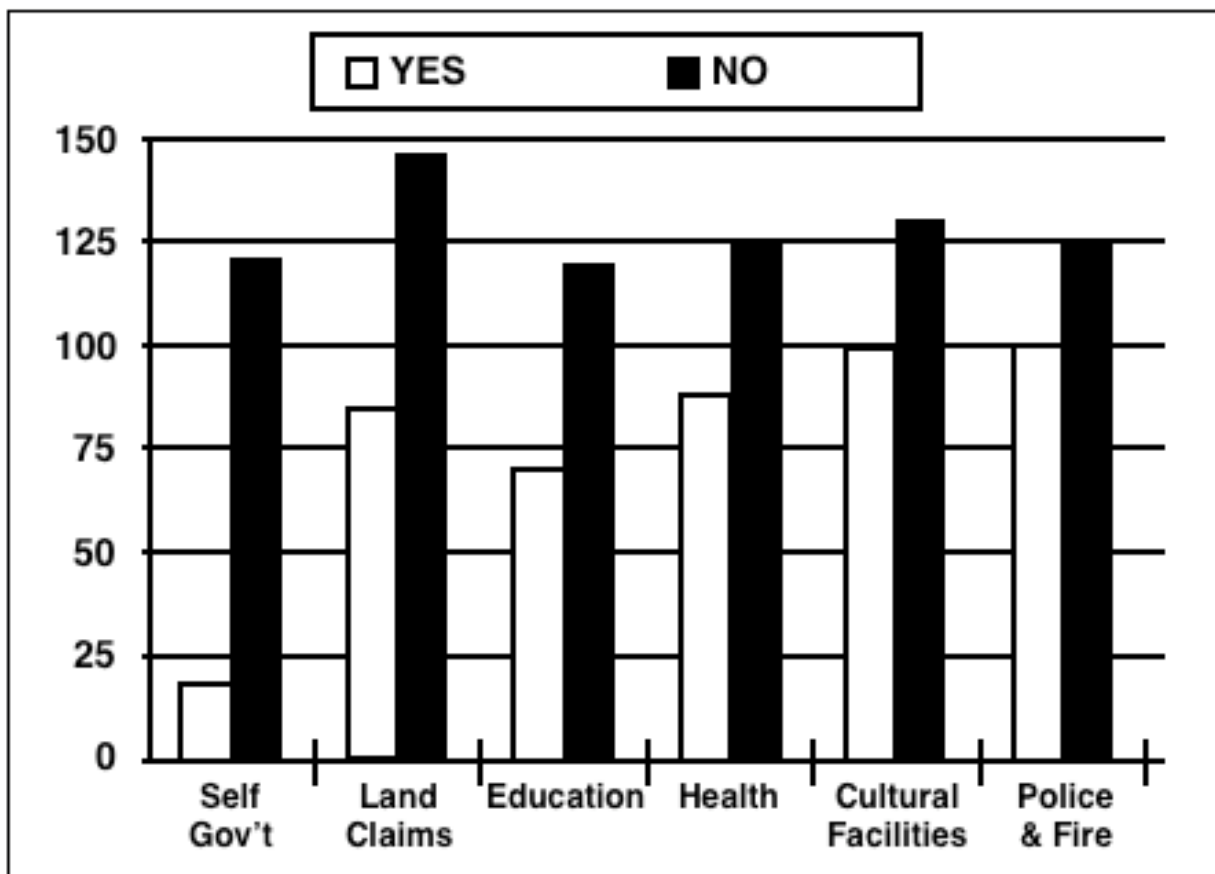
Cultural facilities

The percentage of suicides within communities that contain cultural facilities was lower (56.7) than the proportion of the population that resides in such communities (61.7) resulting in lower overall suicide rates: 99.4 vs. 128.7.

Police & Fire services

Finally, communities that control police and fire services contain 62.1% of all Native youth, but account for only 56.7% of all youth suicides, resulting in suicide rates of 99.0 and 123.7.

Figure 5: Youth suicide rates by cultural continuity factors.

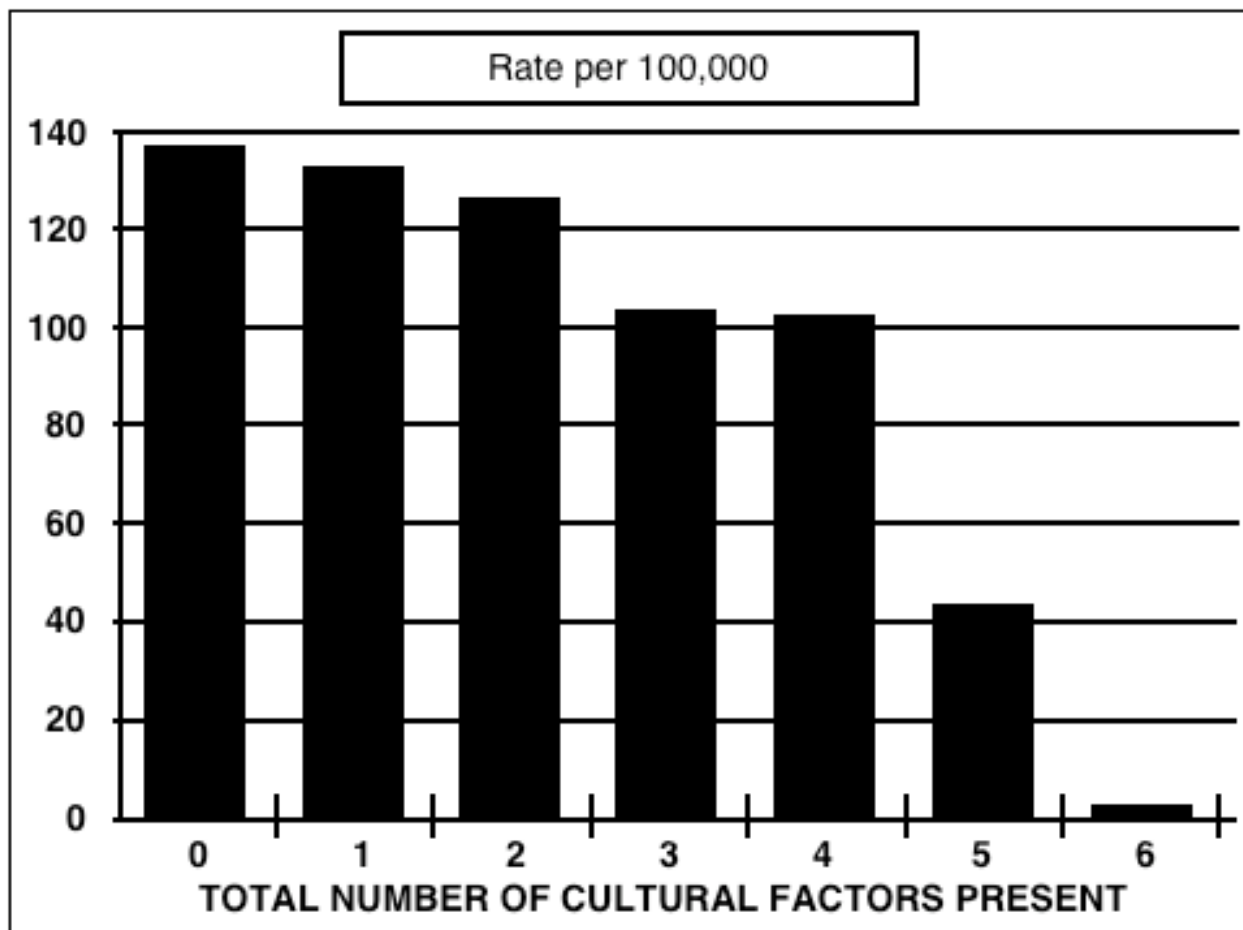


Summing across cultural factors

To assess the overall effect of these markers of cultural continuity, each community was assigned a single point for each factor present and thus a total score ranging from 0 to 6. The resulting suicide rates that attach to these scores are displayed in Figure 6, and ranged from a high of 137.5 for communities in which none of the factors were present, to zero (no suicides within the 5-year study window) for communities in which all 6 factors were present.

Taken all together, these results are abundantly clear: First Nations communities vary dramatically in the rates of youth suicide that they evidence, and these differences are strongly and clearly influenced by a group of predictor variables or protective factors all meant to index the degree to which these various bands are engaged in community practices that serve the purpose of helping them preserve and restore their Native cultures.

Figure 6: Youth suicide rates by the number of factors that are present in the community



What we believe these restorative efforts could accomplish within these cultural communities is not just the strengthening of those family and peer relations that might help shepherd any adolescent from any cultural background across awkward transitional moments in the formation of a mature sense of self-continuity (though clearly they do this too), but, more importantly, such efforts serve to highlight the important connection between self- and cultural continuity. If, by contrast, you happen to live in a culture, as do contemporary First Nations youth, the fundamental meaning of which is understood to reside in the continuity of its own narrative history, and if your culturally sanctioned ways of thinking about your own self-continuity are similarly prescribed to be narratively based, and, finally, if, after 10,000 years of adaptive success, your culture happened to have been declared “stone aged,” and moribund, and a laughing-stock—that is, if your cultural practices have been criminalized and beaten out of you through generations of residential schools and genocidal approaches to your language and cultural life—then woe be upon you and your chances of declaring your personal existence as having any worthwhile or enduring meaning. This, as it turns out, is precisely what has happened to the culture of every aboriginal group across North America and beyond. Coming to some better appreciation of these deep-running cultural differences is critical to the success of any ongoing effort to better understand and hopefully reverse the trend toward steadily increasing suicide rates among First Nations youth. The clear message that is sent by the evidence brought out in this report is that the communities that have taken active steps to preserve and rehabilitate their own cultures are also those communities in which youth suicide rates are dramatically lower.