

Building on Cultural Meanings & Practices to Prevent Alaska Native Youth Suicide

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Agenda

- Suicide is an act, but what does it mean and for whom?
 - Consider differences across and within groups as a way to understand what might be happening.
- Explore ways in which we can think about and do suicide prevention in a culturally and evidence-based way.
- Importantly, how can we foster key protective factors as a means to prevent suicide?

Suicide is many things.

stop pain



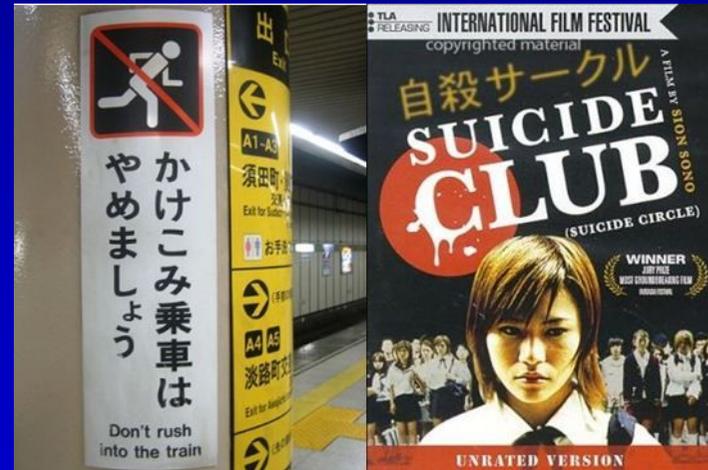
I have no future
I feel useless

I'LL GET YOU!

The DEVIL is at Work

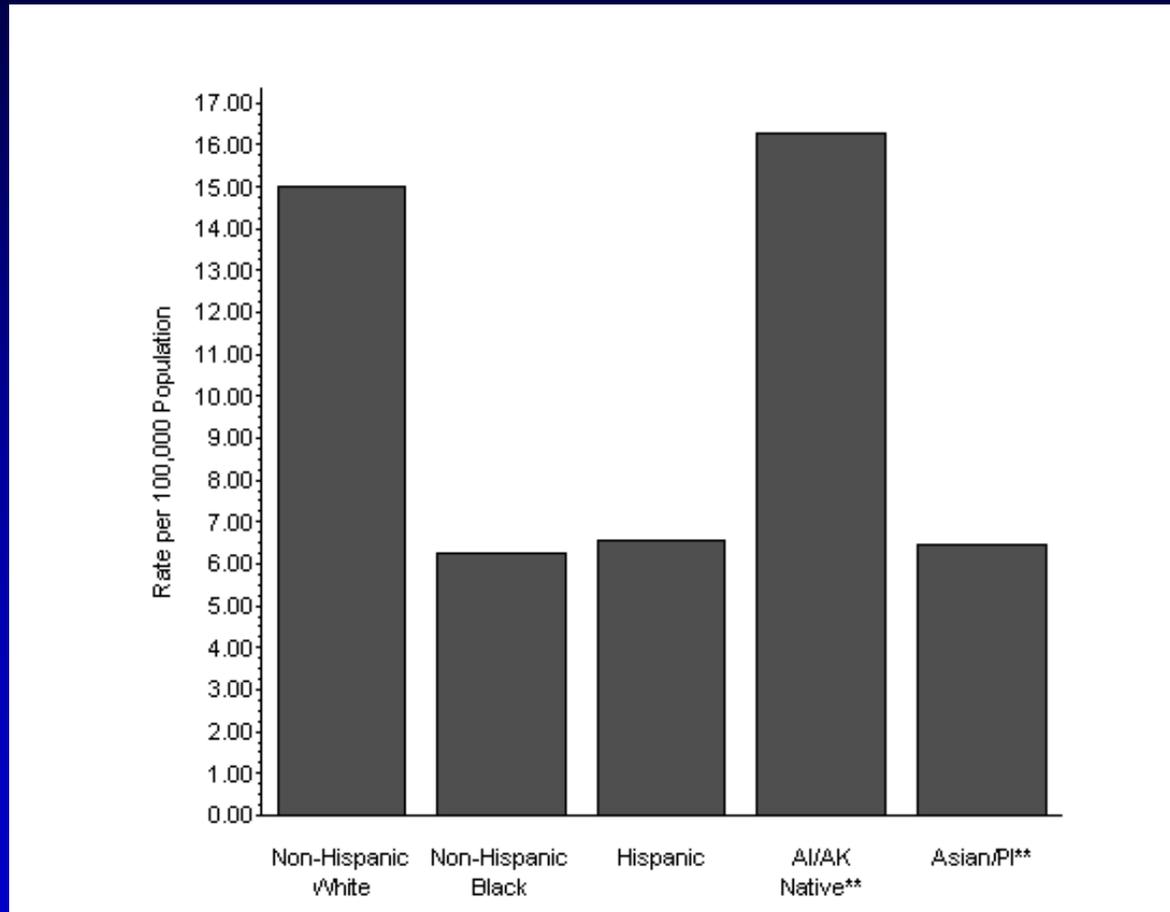
Culture LOSS

Show me you care~



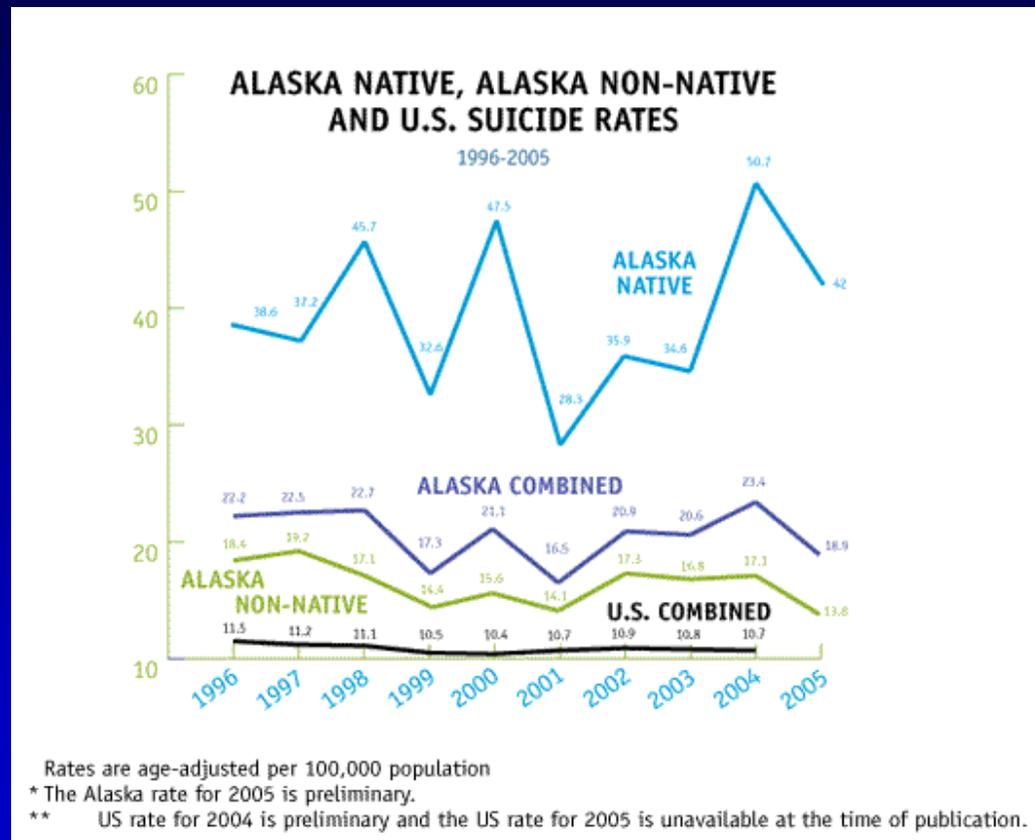
...Prevention efforts must reflect this.

Suicide Rates* Among Persons Ages 10 Years and Older, by Race/Ethnicity, United States, 2002-2006



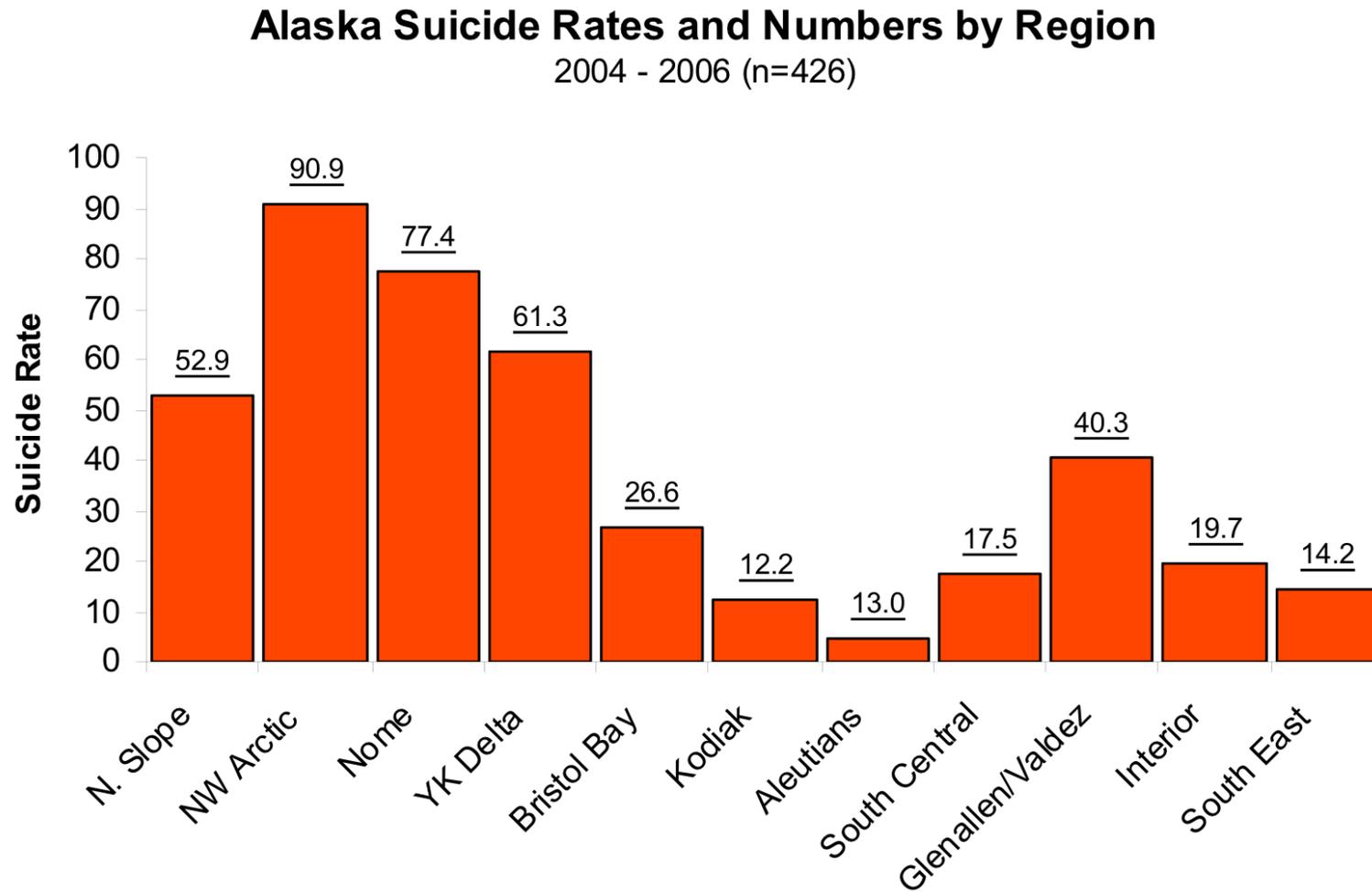
Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention

Ethnic Differences Within the State of Alaska



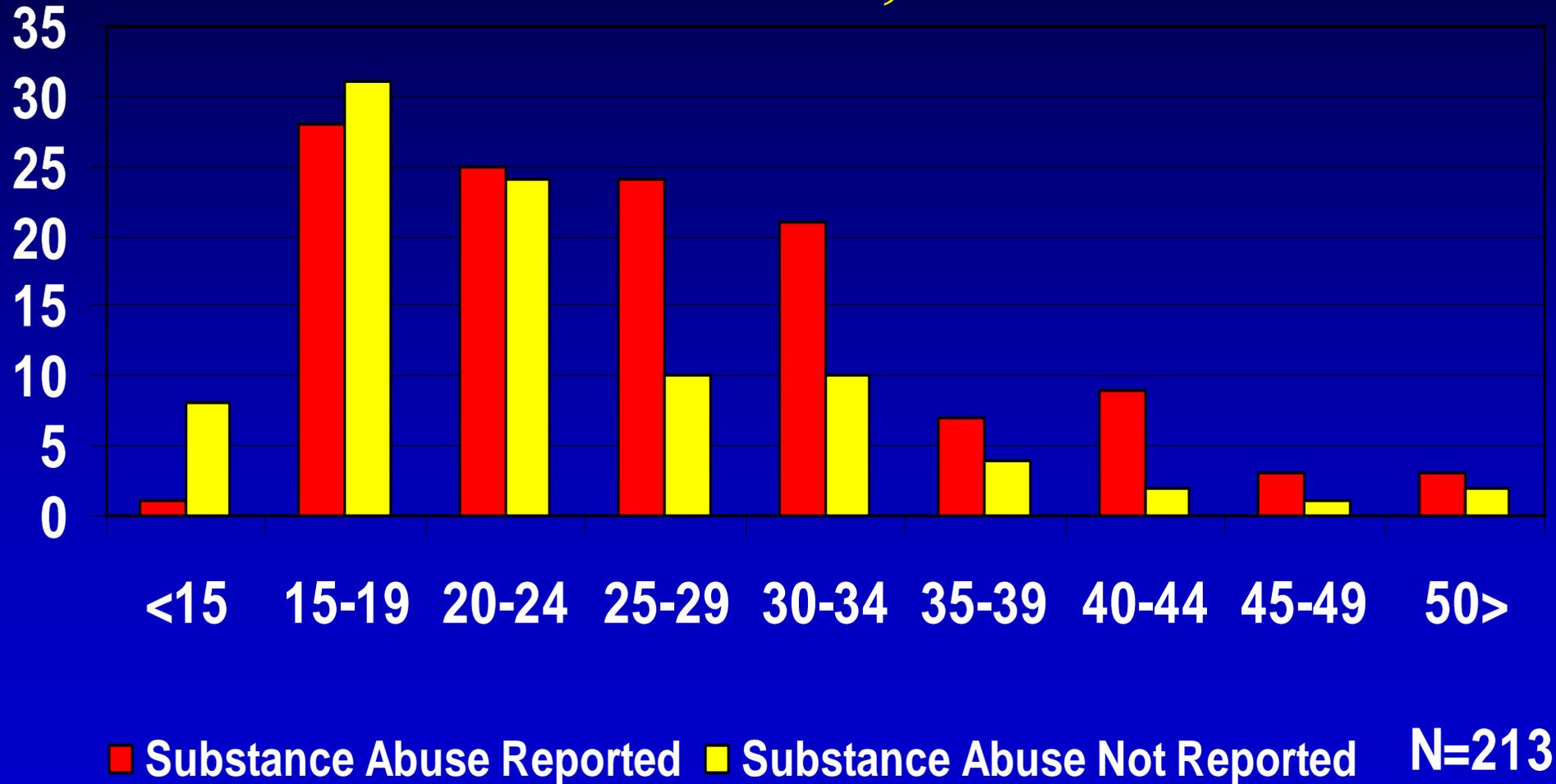
Suicide Prevention Council, Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics,
Health and Social Services, State of Alaska

Disparities in Alaska Suicide Rates



Allen, J., & Butler, J. EPIDEMIOLOGY OF SUICIDE IN ALASKA. Presentation at:
Behavioral and Mental Health Research in the Arctic Conference - June 2009

Substance Abuse & Suicide Deaths, Northwest Alaska, 1990-2001



Continuum of Suicide Prevention: Cultural Factors Shape Each Level



Alaska Native Tertiary Prevention

- Drinking alcohol increases a person's suicide risk
- Key risk factor: alcohol & injury (Emergency room)
- Lethality of method matters (target: guns)
- Impulsive (if stop it now, might not re-occur)
- Informal systems of support are commonly used by people who are suicidal.
 - Peers*, Family members, Pastor or other mentor
 - Sometimes (not often)...counselor (need cultural training)

Suicide in Native Community is Bigger than Personal Problems or Mental Illness, so Prevention Must be MORE than individually-focused and clinically-based.



Mental Health Services can really only deal with the most scary cases, and even then, needs community, family and friends to be involved.



Bringing it all together



Basic suicide
prevention
information

Intimate
knowledge of the
social, spiritual and
cultural context.

Most successful interventions involve many more people than just the behavioral health practitioners

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Suicide Prevention Intervention Training

- Professionals teach how to identify at-risk people, take immediate action, and support the individual.
- Community members teach mh professionals about culturally important factors to consider.
- Through learning and teaching, relationships develop that will help the formal and informal support systems respond better to suicidal youth.

SPIT: Build Connections Between Community Members & Clinicians

- Community Suicide Intervention Training



- Clinician Training on Cultural & Community

- Local people more ready and willing to intervene.
- Practice taking action (think about traditional roles, most appropriate way, context)
- Build local support network (for helpers and for those helped)

- Local warning signs, risk factors, language use, patterns...
- Getting to know and beginning to work with local “natural helpers”
- Creating collaborations to strengthen local safety net.

Continuum of Suicide Prevention: Looking Closely at Risk & Protective Factors



High Suicide Rates in Indigenous Communities are Associated with Community and Cultural Disruptions:

Community: Traditional systems were systematically torn apart...

Family: Gaps between generations (speaking different languages), intergenerational and on-going trauma...

Personal: Interpersonal strife, substance abuse, identity struggles (esp. young men)...



e.g. Lehti, et.al, 2009; Bjerregaard, 2001; Kirmayer, Brass, Tait, 2000

Manifested in People's Experiences

Community: “What is left for those to feel like a man? They were traditionally the caretakers of the family; now things are really changing. They no longer feel like they are caring for their families. Subsistence is really important for men to feel like they are contributing. It gives them a place.”

Family: “We learn from the older ones...we just learn from our parents, too, and our relatives. They teach us those bad things (suicide and alcohol abuse).”

Personal: “(Men are) tired of how they live and the way they live.”

Bolstering Community Protective Factors

Decolonizing Efforts:

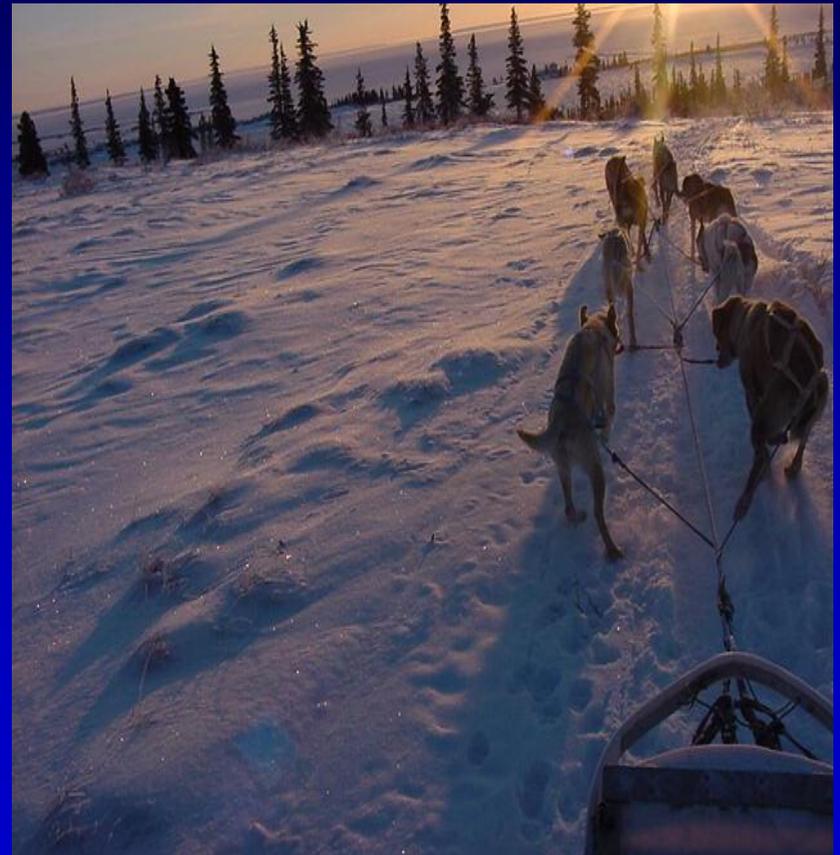
~Self-governance

~Local control

~Cultural engagement

~Space for people to gather

(Chandler & Lalonde, 1998)



Bolstering Family Protective Factors

- Clear ways to step into adult roles
- Ability to contribute--Creating feelings of purpose, responsibility to others.
- Having role models to show them how to be “responsible” adults (Respected Elders and adults).



Bolstering Personal Protective Factors

- Gain clarity about who I am
- Gain clarity about my life's blessings (Hope kits)
- Get clear about what I can do
- Feel good about my accomplishments
- Feel hopeful about the future
- Feel better



- Cultural identity
- Positive outlook
- Self-efficacy
- Self-esteem
- Hopefulness
- Wellbeing

Intergenerational Dialogue Exchange & Action (IDEA)



Continuum of Suicide Prevention: Building on Local Values & Resources



Life is Short, Take Advantage



Thank You!

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