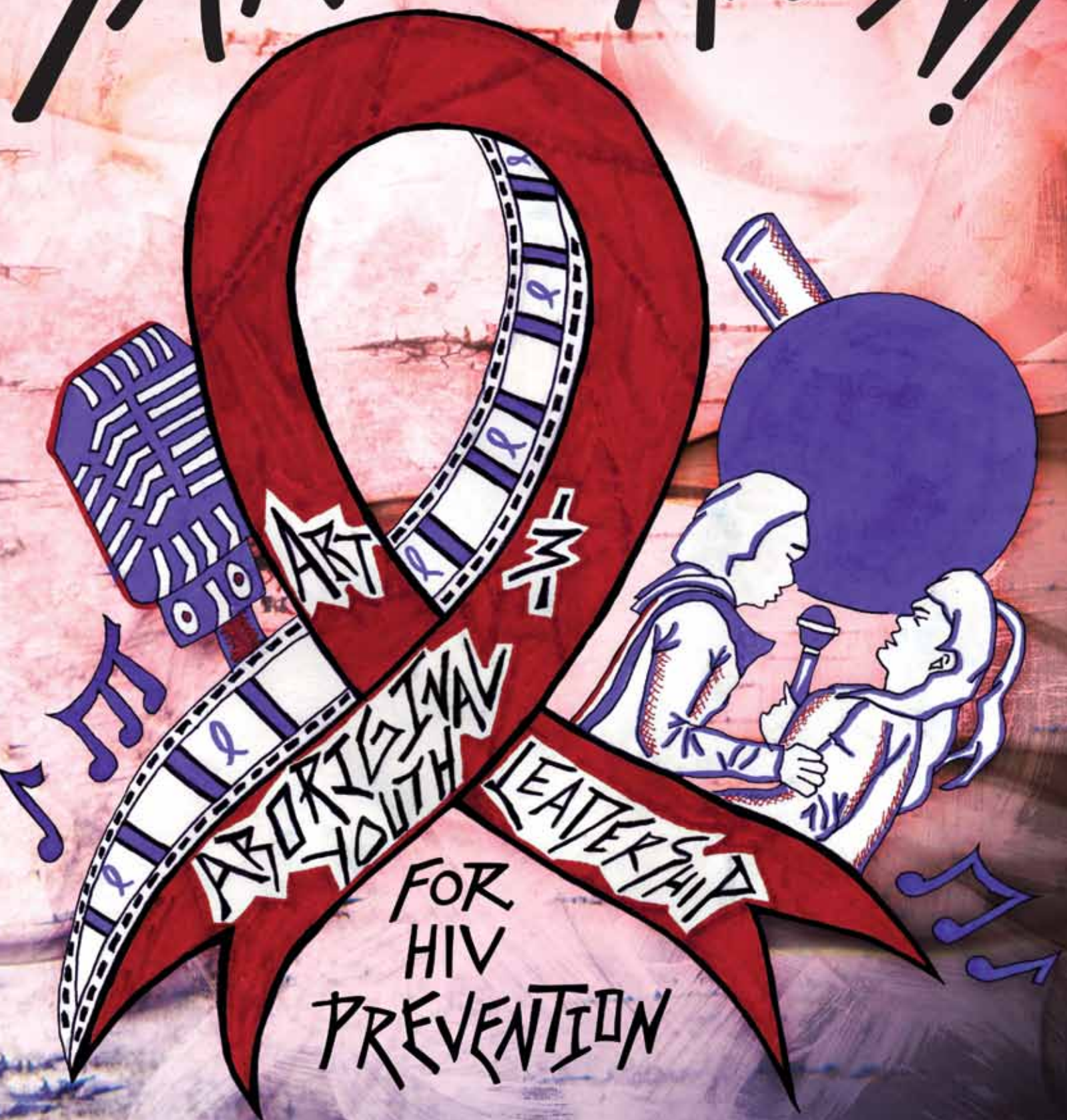


# TAKING ACTION!



ABORIGINAL  
YOUTH LEADERSHIP

FOR  
HIV  
PREVENTION



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Taking Action!** is a community-based research project that explored: How do Aboriginal youth understand HIV in relation to their communities, cultures and colonization? Is using art a good way to talk about HIV with Aboriginal youth? What are some new HIV prevention possibilities?

Six Aboriginal communities in Canada were involved: the urban Aboriginal community in **Toronto**, Ontario (October 2008), **Kettle and Stony Point First Nation & Aamjiwnaang First Nation** in southwestern Ontario (February 2009), **Kahnawá:ke First Nation** and urban youth in Montreal, Quebec (May 2009), **Nak'azdli First Nation** in northwestern British Columbia (October 2009), the urban and on reserve youth around **Charlottetown**, on reserve youth in Prince Edward Island (May 2010), and **Puvirnituk** in Nunavik, Quebec (October 2010). In each of these communities, culture- and art-centred workshops for young people were held that explored the links between HIV and colonization. More than 100 youth participated; 70 engaged in follow-up interviews to reflect on their experiences.

Many youth talked about how prior to attending our workshop they did not know much about HIV or the high prevalence rates of HIV in Aboriginal communities. Nevertheless, the majority of youth participants saw clear connections between the historical and on-going colonization of Aboriginal peoples and the increased risk of HIV for Aboriginal youth.

Youth in this study, however, were not content to sit back and watch, or to repeat the same old patterned behaviours of their parents and grandparents. They wanted a better future for themselves and for their children. Many of them are actively resisting colonial oppression and the lateral violence that stems from it by re-connecting with their cultural traditions and heritage. Youth talked about the importance of knowing where they come from, of learning their language, of re-learning their traditional teachings around gender roles and sexuality, and of having pride in their cultural heritage and identity. Many youth felt that re-connecting with their culture would help build stronger, healthier communities and in turn, lower their risk for HIV. Although in some cases it was difficult to move past the harm caused to their communities, youth were determined to use their assets to create a better tomorrow. Youth in this study were unanimous that art is, indeed, an effective way to talk about HIV.



# ➔ WHAT IS THIS ABOUT?

**Taking Action!: Using Arts-Based Approaches to Develop Aboriginal Youth Leadership in HIV Prevention** is a community-based research project funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. It grew out of the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network's concerns for trying to find new strategies to engage Aboriginal youth in thinking about HIV prevention.

Our goals were to study:

- How do Aboriginal youth understand HIV in relation to their communities, cultures and colonization?
- Is using art a good way to talk about HIV/AIDS with Aboriginal youth?
- What are some new HIV prevention possibilities?

We are a team made up of three National Aboriginal Organizations (The Native Youth Sexual Health Network, the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network & Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada) and three universities (York University, McGill University and the University of Toronto). We worked closely with six Aboriginal communities across Canada: the urban Aboriginal community in Toronto, Ontario (October 2008), Kettle and Stony Point First Nation and Aamjiwnaang First Nation in southwestern Ontario (February 2009), Kahnawá:ke First Nation and urban youth in Montreal, Quebec (May 2009), Nak'azdli First Nation in northwestern British Columbia (October 2009), the urban and on reserve youth around Charlottetown, on reserve youth in Prince Edward Island (May 2010), and Puvirnituk in Nunavik, Quebec (October 2010). In each of these communities, we worked with local youth coordinators, elders and community organizations to host culture- and art-centred workshops for young people where we tried to answer our research questions.

# ➔ WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

## **Globally youth are leading the HIV prevention revolution**

According to a UNAIDS report released in 2010, "young people are leading the prevention revolution by taking definitive action to protect themselves from HIV... [As a result,] HIV prevalence among young people is falling in 16 of the 21 countries most affected by HIV." [1]. For the first time, reductions in HIV among young people have coincided with a change in sexual behaviour. Despite this good news, an estimated five million people between the ages of 15 and 24 are living with HIV globally, and in 2008, there were an estimated 900,000 new HIV infections among this age group. Indigenous youth continue to be disproportionately affected, including Aboriginal youth in Canada.

## **HIV affects Aboriginal youth at higher rates than other groups across Canada**

Aboriginal youth are overrepresented in the Canadian HIV epidemic. The Public Health Agency of Canada estimates that the "new infection rate among Aboriginal people was about 3.6 times higher than among non-Aboriginal people in 2008... [Furthermore,] the age at HIV diagnosis for Aboriginal people tends to be lower than for people of other ethnicities." [2]. A national review of HIV prevention programming targeted to Aboriginal youth reveals significant gaps in services, capacity and prevention resources [3]. The increasing Aboriginal youth infection rates, coupled with a recent surge in sexually transmitted infections and a decline in youth knowledge about HIV, are signs of the potential for the spread of HIV among youth in Canada [4]. This is particularly of concern as nearly half of the Aboriginal population is under 25 [5].

## **A shared legacy of colonization**

HIV follows patterns of inequity [6, 7]. Globally, Indigenous peoples are more likely to be economically disadvantaged, displaced from their lands or live in rural locations, have lower educational attainment and poorer health outcomes than their non-Indigenous counterparts [8]. Locally, these outcomes can be linked directly to historical and ongoing systemic oppression. Factors facing Aboriginal peoples in Canada that put them at risk for HIV include racism, assimilation, the legacies of the residential schools, persistent economic inequality and cultural and social isolation [9-15]. As a result, Aboriginal peoples are disproportionately affected by many factors that increase their vulnerability to HIV infection, including higher rates of substance abuse, sexual and physical violence, sexually transmitted infections, and limited access to, or use of, health care services [16]. While most HIV prevention approaches tend to focus on individual behaviours, an active engagement with the social, political and historical determinants of health (e.g. colonialism) that shape these behaviours may be crucial to reaching Aboriginal youth [3, 17-20].

## **A shared right to self-determination**

Despite great diversity among First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada, *The Toronto Charter: Indigenous Peoples' Action Plan on HIV/AIDS* [21] reminds us that many Indigenous Peoples have shared experiences relating to the AIDS epidemic and its impacts on communities. It asserts that Indigenous Peoples have the right to determine their own health priorities and the right to control all aspects of their lives, including their health. Our research shows that when given the opportunity, Aboriginal youth across Canada have a lot to say about preventing HIV; they have a sophisticated understanding about how structural inequalities and colonization have led to creating conditions of risk; and some are extremely dedicated to reversing these trends [22-25]. What is clear from the international experience is that young people can be change agents. We urgently need to find ways to support young people in taking a leadership role in the HIV prevention revolution [1].

## **One size fits all strategies probably won't work**

To address these risk factors, culturally sensitive HIV prevention services and education are needed [9, 11, 12, 14, 16, 26-33] in forms that go beyond a pan-Aboriginal approach to address the diverse and distinct cultures of Aboriginal youth [3, 20]. Traditional knowledge in sex education works better in some communities than in others [3, 17]. Messages need to be tailored to the different environments in which youth live with attention to the specific challenges faced by urban youth, youth on reserves, Inuit youth and those in rural areas. [3, 20, 33].

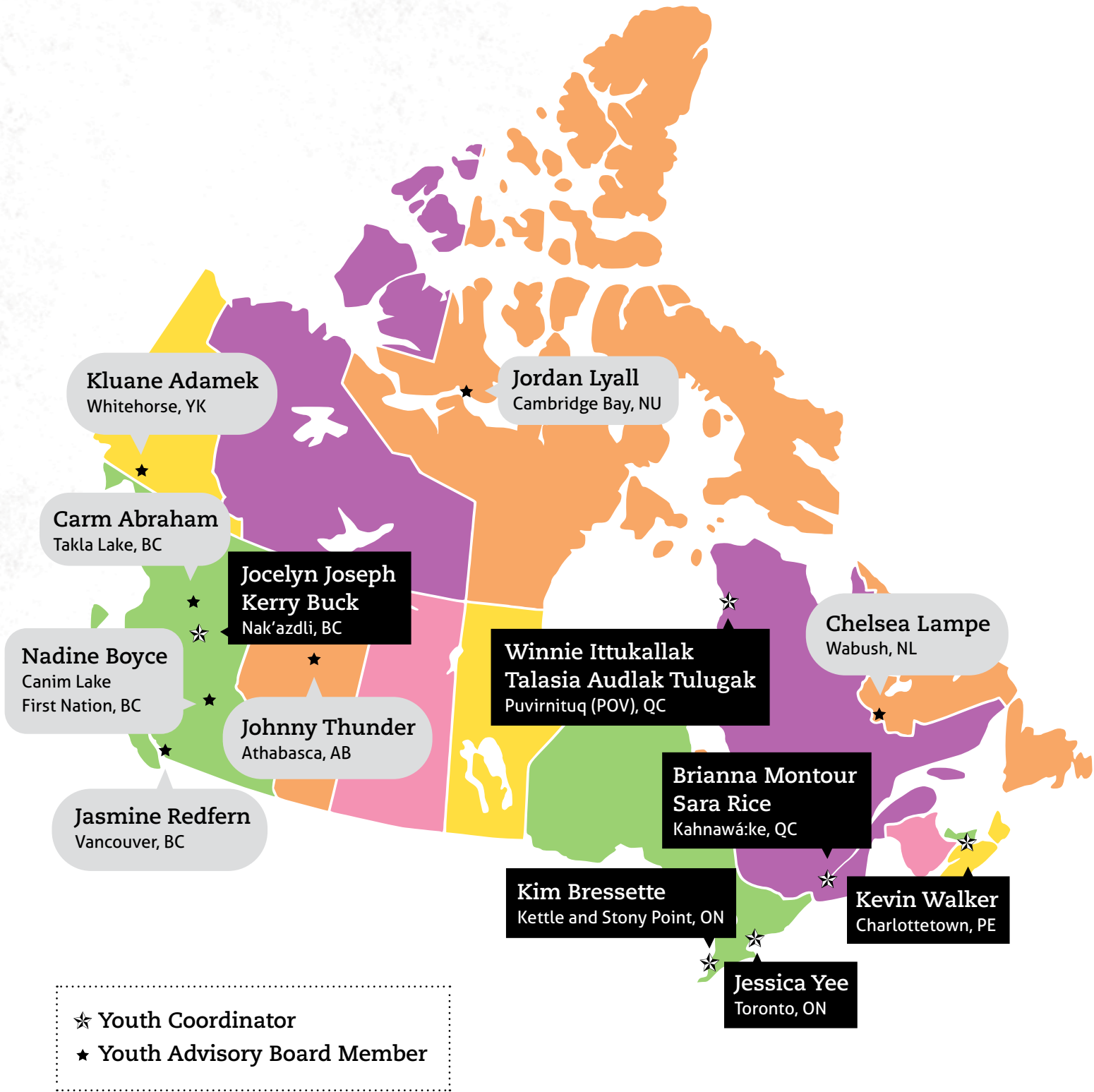
## **We all need to get involved**

Peer education has been found to be an effective choice for HIV prevention with Indigenous youth [3, 9, 11, 12, 17, 34-37]. This approach has benefits for the peer educators, as well as the youth they are targeting [9, 18, 19, 34, 35, 38]. Overall, however, all members of the community need to be a part of the solution: this includes youth, elders, front-line workers, community members, nurses and community organizations [3, 10, 12, 13, 17, 26, 31, 32, 34, 35, 39-41]. Involving leaders in the community will build awareness and provide supportive adult role models for youth [3, 42, 43].

## **Youth can lead the way**

By taking successful concrete actions towards improving their communities, youth can build their self-respect and confidence to cope with other life situations [44] while becoming better connected with their communities and peers [45]. Furthermore, engaging in community action projects can foster positive relationships with caring adults [46, 47] and allow marginalized youth who sometimes have few positive outlets to believe they can make a positive difference [48, 49].

# → COMMUNITY MAP





# WHAT DID WE DO?

**Taking Action!** adopted a community-based participatory research approach [50, 51]. One of the unique aspects of our research is that Aboriginal youth have been meaningfully involved in all stages of the project—from design to implementation to dissemination. Given the historical human rights violations that have happened in the name of research “on” indigenous communities, we believed it to be vitally important to do research “with” aboriginal youth that was respectful of the diversity and talents of young people [52].

We partnered with a diverse cross-section of Aboriginal communities across Canada. In each case, we approached relevant authorities (e.g. youth centres, health centres, research councils, chiefs, elected councils, mayors) and sought permission to partner with communities in a respectful way. In each community, we hired (1-2) local youth coordinators who took the lead in organizing workshops in their own communities.



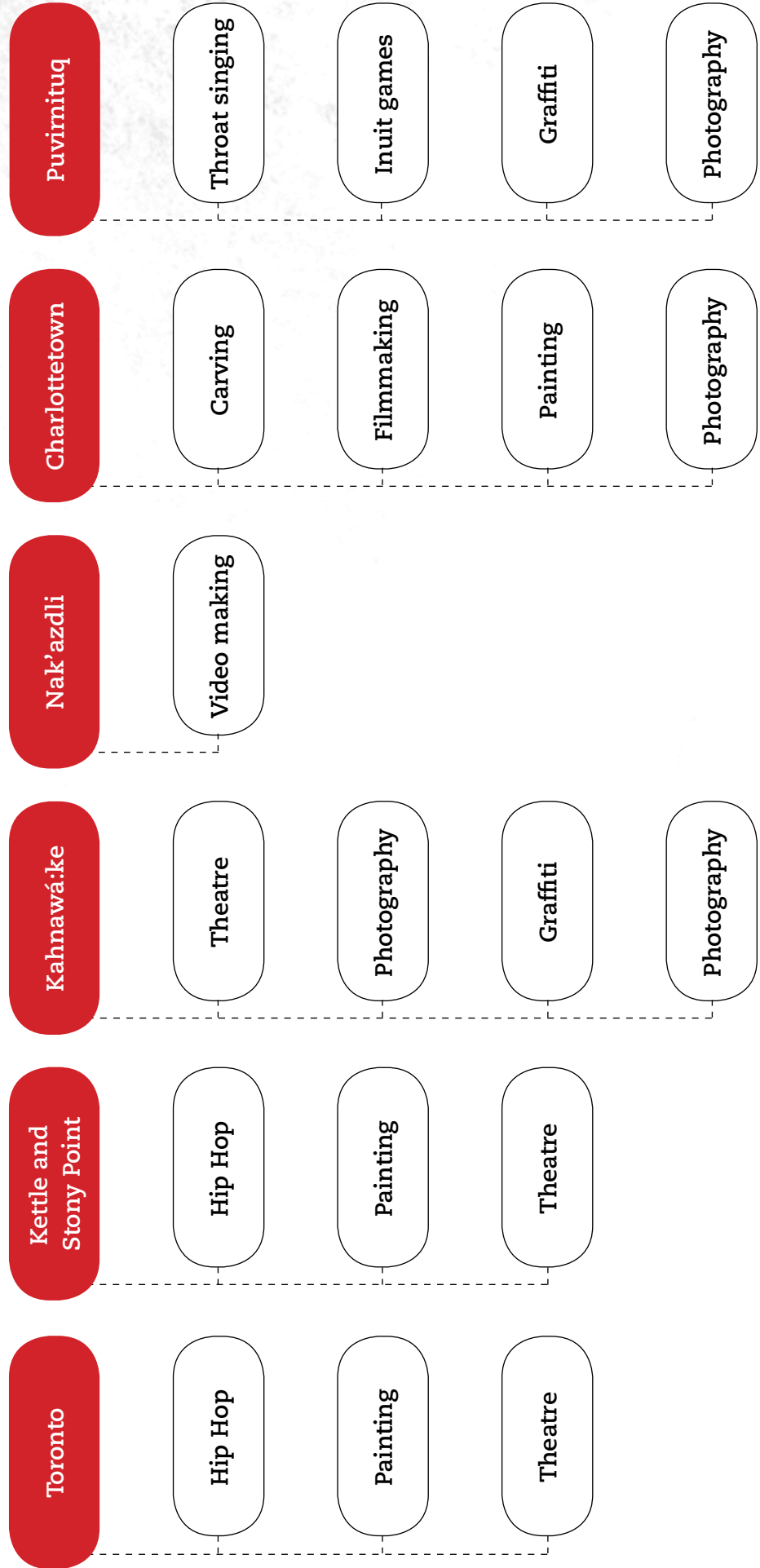
Each youth coordinator conducted a mini-needs assessment to figure out the best way of organizing their **Taking Action!** weekend. They polled their peers on the types of art they wanted to make, the types of food they wanted to eat and how they wanted the weekend organized. We worked with each coordinator to support them in organizing their weekend. Every community was unique.

However, there were some similarities across all six communities. **Taking Action!** workshops were all organized by local youth coordinators with the support of local elders and other community members, as well as the **Taking Action!** research team. The goal of these workshops was to provide youth with a chance to develop art projects that unpack the links between structural inequalities, individual HIV risk, and Aboriginal culture(s). All workshops happened over the course of a weekend. During each workshop, we engaged in a variety of games and activities to (a) teach about HIV risk and possibilities for prevention and (b) instill cultural pride. An example of such a game might be to ask youth what made them be proud to be Native and have them shout out positive attributes of their community that could contribute to slowing the spread of HIV. *For more information on how our workshops were organized, please download our Youth Coordinator manual at [www.TakingAction4Youth.org/resources/publications/](http://www.TakingAction4Youth.org/resources/publications/).*

In each community, we also linked youth (where possible) to local aboriginal youth artists. During the bulk of the weekend, youth worked in groups to explore the issues through their chosen media and developed artistic pieces that linked HIV with structural issues. Workshops were a mix of technical skill building around their chosen media, an opportunity to explore, document, edit, and refine created media on the issue and group reflections/critique. Some examples of the art forms explored include: Photography/photo-voice, hip hop, video documentary, mural making, painting/drawing, popular theatre, carving and throat singing. Youth created pieces of art that talked about:

- Colonization, racism, assimilation, isolation, and residential school system legacies
- Healthy sexuality and HIV risk
- Aboriginal cultural knowledge and traditions

# ➔ COMMUNITY ART MEDIUMS





On Sunday evening we held an open house in each community for the youth to perform and display their work and hosted wider discussions about the impact of their art. In many of the communities, the art work has been displayed in prominent spaces for several weeks or months following the weekend. In some communities, the weekend and associated productions were highlighted by local media. The artwork has also been featured in multiple local, national and international conferences and gatherings. In all cases, the work has been displayed online (on Facebook, as well as [www.TakingAction4Youth.org](http://www.TakingAction4Youth.org)). We also made a video about each community's experience that can be found on our website.

We then followed up with each willing workshop participant three to six weeks after the workshop and invited them to participate in individual interviews. During these interviews we asked youth to reflect on their experiences of the workshop, what they learned and what they thought could be done to lower the rates of HIV in their communities.

Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. Then a team of researchers went through all the transcripts, coded them for main themes and summarized key ideas. That's what you will find here in this report.

## ➔ WHO PARTICIPATED?

More than 100 youth participated in our workshops; 85 were between the ages of 13-20 and filled out our surveys; 70 participated in follow-up interviews. In some communities little children, parents and grandparents also participated in various activities. In other communities, we held much more youth-focused events. Nearly 2/3 our research participants identified as female (63%).

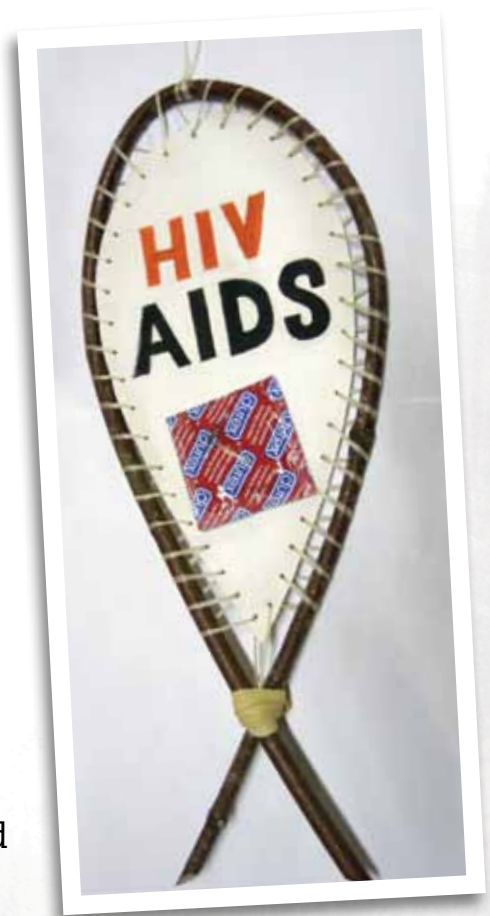
## ➔ WHAT DID YOUTH LEARN ABOUT HIV?

Many youth talked about how prior to attending our workshop they did not know much about HIV or the high prevalence rates of HIV in Aboriginal communities.

“ I didn't know it was so high, [among] Aboriginals. Cause nobody talks about it. I didn't know.”

Several youth shared how many myths and misconceptions were cleared up for them:

“ So I didn't know too much,... I knew it was transmitted through bodily fluids. I did not know which ones, I was wondering if saliva was part of that but it's not that, it's just blood and sexual liquids.”



In addition to playing lots of games to share facts and information, at nearly every workshop, someone living with HIV came to share their story. Many youth talked about how meeting someone who was living with HIV was enlightening and transformed their thinking about HIV/AIDS and those who are affected:

“ I learned that a person with HIV positive and a person without HIV are the same. They are both [the] same as a human being.”



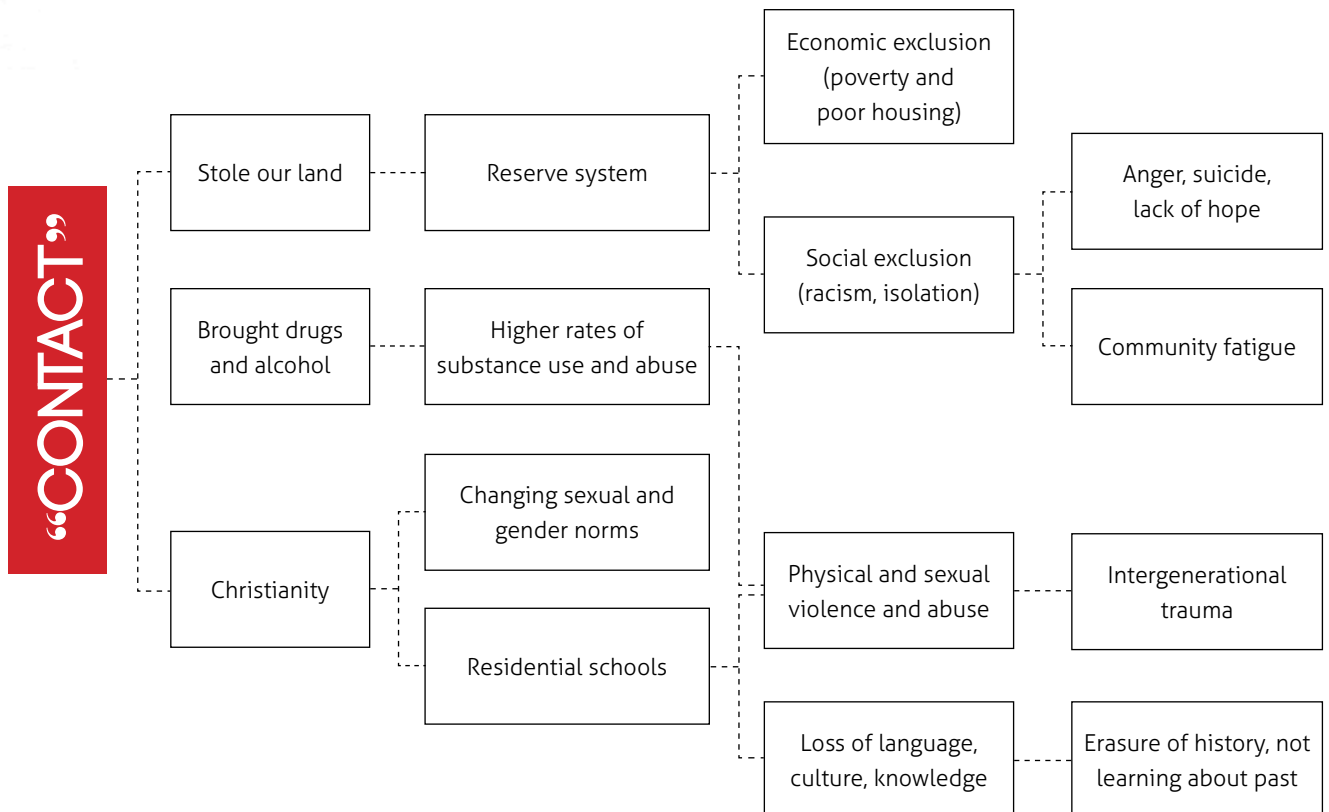
# HOW DOES OUR PAST INFLUENCE OUR PRESENT?

## The Links Between Colonization, Structural Inequities and HIV

Some youth had never been taught about colonization or the residential school system in Canada and were unfamiliar with the history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. However, the vast majority of youth who participated had a fair to excellent grasp of the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization.

“ We got taken from our homes and got sent to school... and got forced to learn their language.”

When asked about how the past might relate to present challenges, like HIV, most participants began their explanations with the point of European 'contact.' Three primary (inter-related) explanatory themes for how the arrival of Europeans lead to tragic trajectories of increased risk emerged. These included: (a) They stole our land; (b) They introduced drugs and alcohol; and (c) They tried to convert us. The impacts of 'contact' included loss of home, culture, spirituality and community.



## Early Colonization

<b>Land</b>	<p>“We have to get our culture back. We have to find some other spiritual strength that our ancestors had, in order to do that we need to go back to the land, yes the land, it’s all important.”</p> <p>“And then all the White people from England came and took us all off... they took all our communities and all that from us. Like, they pushed us all into little communities, when it used to be all ours.”</p>
<b>Substances</b>	<p>“The big main thing is that before the colonization of the White people and stuff, we didn’t have needles to inject ourselves with. It was really the Europeans who brought it over. I don’t want to say, like, all white people are bad, but...”</p> <p>“Hmm, I really think it’s just the European introduction of alcohol and bad tobacco and drug use and needles and everything. The Aboriginal community was fine for millions upon millions of years. We were perfect. We didn’t know what HIV was. So, really, them coming over just ruined everything for us.”</p>
<b>Conversion, Assimilation</b>	<p>“I’d like to say that it’s because of the Europeans coming and their whole thing of the man being better than the woman, whereas in the Aboriginal community it’s the woman who’s better than the man, for the most part.... It’s the whole European colonization thing that really ruined it.”</p> <p>“They were forced out of their homes and if they spoke their language they were beat up, there were a lot of bad things that went on, girls were abused and stuff, different stuff if you even thought or spoke you would be in trouble and stuff like that... I know it wasn’t nothing nice.”</p>



# ONGOING IMPACTS OF COLONIZATION

“Today? I believe it’s still going on”

Participants described how while many of these experiences happened in the past, the impacts of colonization are ongoing. They include such things as (a) economic exclusion (poverty and poor housing), (b) social exclusion (racism, stereotypes, isolation), (c) physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and (d) the loss of language, culture and knowledge.



## Ongoing Colonization

<p><b>Economic Exclusion</b></p>	<p>“Well, a lot of people are on welfare and stuff.”</p> <p>“A lot of Aboriginal communities are impoverished. Well, not necessarily impoverished, but there is pretty poor education on reserves.”</p>
<p><b>Social Exclusion</b></p>	<p>“The problem with Aboriginal people is just like the isolation that they have to go through. Isolation from each other, from their communities, from their traditional ways. I think that can have all sorts of negative repercussions, and I think that HIV is one of them.”</p> <p>“When they felt degraded for being Inuit... I still see that with White people... when they think Inuit, they’re drunks, they’re not clean or stuff like that... [A friend] was going through that at her work not too long ago, her co-workers at the youth protection saying that Inuit treat their kids like dogs, they eat on the floor.”</p>
<p><b>Loss of Hope</b></p>	<p>“Like, maybe alcohol would probably just let all your feelings come out even more and then you’d probably just get even more sad. And even, some people probably kill themselves when they get really sad on—from that stuff...”</p> <p>“Most people I know are just screwing up their life. Because all they do is, ‘Oh, nothing good is ever going to happen with my life’, so they just smoke their life away, get high every day, drink. And they really don’t give a shit about nothing else.”</p>
<p><b>Physical, Emotional and Sexual Abuse</b></p>	<p>“I guess in a way residential schools, I don’t know if it’s bad or anything, they say it was bad where they preach them and teach them how to be civilized but to ourselves like torture where we can speak language around them, all that physical, sexual and mental abuse and then when we were able to go home they did not know much of the culture anymore and they just felt like crap I guess and then they went to alcohol and drugs I guess and yeah.”</p> <p>“I heard about teachers molesting their students, I only saw old pictures when people were forced to go to those schools... I think they took advantage because um they couldn’t speak the language much, I don’t know.”</p>



# SO HOW DOES ALL THIS RELATE TO HIV?

Most youth linked heightened levels of HIV to vulnerabilities created through the on-going legacy of colonialism. These include the trauma experienced through the residential school system, getting torn away from family, being punished for speaking Indigenous languages (and forced to speak English or French), not being taught traditional ways and experiencing physical and sexual abuse. These experiences meant that many generations of Aboriginal youth were systematically denied their heritage and as a result communities lost knowledge, traditions and families were destroyed. Many returned from the schools and turned to substance use to numb the pain. In turn, substance use both directly (e.g. sharing needles) and indirectly (e.g. less likely to use protection) put youth at risk for HIV risk.

In addition to loss of culture, community and spirituality, traditional knowledge about sex and sexuality was also lost.

“My grandfather went to residential school and so they didn’t really talk about that kind of stuff. And my parents were sure to tell me about that stuff... Like my grandmother is reading about when this girl got [her period]... and she thought she was dying until someone finally told her what was going on. So I think it is important to be educated about that.”



Many youth linked historical losses to the isolation, substance abuse, and intergenerational trauma that underlie the high HIV rates in their communities today.

How does this all lead to HIV?	
<b>Isolation</b>	<p>“Well... we owned [this land] before. And then the Europeans and the French came and they kicked us off... they put us on these tiny little reserves, way out in the country... Well, everybody is all together, so if one person happened to get HIV and didn’t realize that they got HIV, ‘cause they’re way out in the country, and then we’ll never get time to just drive in for random HIV tests... then, they could still sleep around with other people and everybody’s getting HIV, and then keep spreading on that reserve.”</p>
<b>Substance Abuse</b>	<p>“Cause we live in small areas and it’s just so easy to get into drugs and alcohol. And when you get stoned or drunk it’s easier to get... to have sex, ‘cause, um, you don’t know really what you’re doing... And you don’t use a condom.”</p> <p>“Drinking plays a big part when you are too drunk to know or recognize who your partner is.”</p>
<b>Intergenerational Trauma</b>	<p>“Honestly, I think the reason why it affects Aboriginal youth is because of their past and like how their parents aren’t that great considering what they have been through. And I think a lot of Children’s Aid, like they have to deal with Native people and like a lot of drama happens with them, so they think like ‘oh, I am going to go out and do this’ and all this bad stuff. And like somehow they manage that they somehow go get themselves HIV.”</p> <p>“We were kind of forced out of our culture. And tried to be made into another. And I guess it affected children and then when they had their kids, they kind of pushed those onto their kids. Like some of their problems onto their kids. And it just like kept going, I guess.”</p>



# WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE? RESISTANCE, CULTURAL PRIDE, AND MOVING FORWARD



“Because we are natives and we stand strong to our pride.”

Some youth told stories about the importance of challenging colonization and changing the direction of their futures. Many were committed to writing a different, more positive history for their children. Culture was a key factor in maintaining a sense of pride and in remaining future-oriented. Cultural identity is a complex concept that means different things to different people, especially because each Nation has its own rich culture and history. However, many youth indicated that culture was very important to them. Through practices of decolonization, youth spoke to the importance of reclaiming their culture. They identified a number of benefits inherent in connecting with culture:

Resistance	
<b>Desire for change</b>	<p>“I was brought up not to hate white people but to look at them differently like they are the bad people, I have changed, I really understand what happened but things change, I have moved on.”</p> <p>“Yeah, gotta change those things, could have stopped the sexual abuse before it goes on to the next generation and you gotta, I don’t know, you cannot teach your children the same things that your parents taught you because if you keep doing that then you are going to go backwards instead of forward and forward is always the way to go.”</p>
<b>The importance of connecting to culture</b>	<p>“I am a big believer in traditional ways.”</p> <p>“Yeah, because it is good to know where you come from and who you are.”</p> <p>“I don’t want... our culture to disappear.”</p>
<b>Benefits of cultural connection</b>	<p>“We have to get our culture back. We have to find some other spiritual strength that our ancestors had, in order to do that we need to go back to the land yes the land, it’s all important.”</p> <p>“Culture can tell you how to keep your body healthy, like through praying and other medicines.”</p>

Participants also spoke about the particular components of their culture that were important to them. Even if youth had not experienced some elements of their culture firsthand, many aspired to learn and share in traditions they saw as part of their cultural identity. Intergenerational connections were seen to be especially important in the passing on of valuable traditions. Some youth were also aware of the ways in which their culture had been damaged and would have to be repaired in order to create a better future. Many youth talked about the importance of food, dress, music, art and language in making connections with their culture:

## Reclaiming Culture

<b>Language</b>	"I really want to learn my language."
<b>Hunting</b>	"Hunting and taking good care of each other would help."
<b>Music</b>	"Yes, it's got to do with history and your language and it is not just about drumming. Like a big part of your culture is drumming but it is also history, stories that make up the drumming, like the poems that are translated into a song. That is what I think."
<b>Storytelling</b>	"Yeah, because a lot of things are just passed down by word of mouth, so like there is a lot of like stories being told and everything."
<b>Art</b>	"I like traditional Aboriginal art, I have always found it especially beautiful and interesting. Maybe something inherited."
<b>Ceremony</b>	"Well, my grandma and my mom make regalias and other crafts. And, ah, I do a little bit of like traditional praying, burning tobacco, sage, cedar. Going to saunas. Like homemade ones."
<b>Medicine</b>	"Get more involved in culture, medicine, keeping the body healthy, and not, like, learning it is not cool to party and stuff."
<b>Elders</b>	"We should talk to our elders more because they have our culture and tradition and we need to learn it more because really that is the future".

The right of young people to know their culture and language is protected by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [53]. While many youth were proud of their culture and saw ways to strengthen themselves and their communities through tradition, a number of youth also said that they felt disconnected from their traditional culture. In some of their words, the disconnect echoes a history of colonization and cultural erasure through assimilationist strategies. Some young people were not as connected to their cultures, but did not make the connection to colonization, perhaps because oppression is systemic and, therefore, oftentimes invisible [54].

## Cultural Disconnection

"We see how our grandparents were raised. They were in this snow, they were in the canoes, they were cutting fish and everything like that... the next generation had screens and TVs and everything like that and they were not on the land and they were not being taught the same morals."

"Well, like most of my friends don't really like making crafts or do traditional praying and stuff like at all. And some of them just go to church, but they are like half. I think they should know both of them too."

"Like my grandma is like super Christian like she goes to church every Sunday but my parents don't really do that and I find it is the boringest thing ever and since I don't speak the language if I go to longhouse I won't understand anything and it is boring there too."

## Culture and HIV

Many youth talked about how reclaiming culture and traditional knowledge might help curb the HIV epidemic. In particular, a number of youth talked about how reclaiming traditional knowledge about sex and sexuality might improve the situation.

### Cultural teachings about sex and sexuality

“Culture is a big deal because if you know about your culture you will respect your body more rather than not knowing anything and doing whatever you see or hear people do.”

“So I think just like going back to having the facts, being educated at a young age... I was talking to my auntie who is... in a fasting camp. And she mentioned that like, way back before like colonization, that people were really frank about sexuality and that they thought that that was the best way to protect people because then they knew like, they knew the facts. And I think that is important also.”

Others shared how European devaluation of women has affected their communities and detracted from traditional understandings of women’s importance. Some youth suggested that women with HIV were more likely to be stigmatized because of these internalized beliefs:

### European Devaluation of Women

“In our culture... because of the powerful positions that women have had I don’t think there should be [that inequality] that’s definitely something from the European descent that men are superior to women, and I can tell there are always harsher punishments for women or whatever, I think it’s definitely from there, so actually yeah our culture has deteriorated so much that now women are, would have the worst treatment between a man and a woman if they both have HIV, the women would get treated much worse.”

“I’d like to say that it’s because of the Europeans coming and their whole thing of the man being better than the woman, whereas in the Aboriginal community it’s the woman who’s better than the man, for the most part... and it just comes from that whole thing, where people would see men as being better, so there’s no way they could have those faults, but the women were just low, and they’re degrading, and so... It’s the whole European colonization thing that really ruined it.”

Culture was also seen by some youth to be of importance in revitalizing communities and strengthening youth. Some youth talked about how returning to traditional ways (spending time on the land, hunting, etc.) might be an important distraction from substance use and give youth skills and self-esteem:

“Because people will be like I wish I could remember my culture and then start like going out with friends and family hunting and stuff and it will cut down on drinking and all that a little bit and then they will be like just yeah.”





Some youth were concerned that HIV was connected with the Aboriginal community in a stigmatizing way:

“Because they just don’t want to connect the two. They think, ‘Oh, well, if I connect Aboriginalism with HIV, then because I’m Aboriginal, I’m going to get HIV’. And so, I don’t want them to connect that, but I want them to know that they are connected, just not in that way.”

However, others felt that there were important lessons to be learned from the epidemic. Moving forward in a good way meant confronting the issue head on and dealing with it in constructive ways:

“I would neither get rid of HIV or suicide, because that would probably eliminate the chance to learn from this whole thing, and... my main point for this whole conversation I think was to get Aboriginal culture to accept that these problems are in the culture, so I would probably eliminate denial... well there is going to be negative things in every culture, like unfortunately now part of our culture is HIV, not to say that it’s permeated our culture or something but it is part of our culture... when things come along you do have to accept them and acknowledge them.”

## Resilience

Youth talked about their resilience and the resilience of their communities in a number of ways. In seeing how people rebounded and resisted, youth were able to share the strengths and assets of their communities. Positive outlooks and a continued sense of pride were thought to be crucial in building a strong future. Many youth advocated for a less discriminatory, more productive and accepting approach to future relationships. Many youth described resiliency in terms of strength and perseverance:

“We just have to keep teaching the youth and hopefully one of them will catch on, and then teach their kids, and their kids. And that’s really the only thing that we can do, just hope that... [it] catches on and it spreads.”



## The past as a bridge to the future

For some youth, creating a stronger future meant retaining lessons from the past while keeping an eye on moving forward. Many youth talked about the ways in which maintaining culture and traditions were critical to building a proud and healthy future. Although in some cases it was difficult to move past the harm caused to their communities, youth were determined to stay focused and to use their assets and determination to create a better tomorrow.

“ ‘Cause if you forget the stories and songs, we forget the past. And if we forget the past, then there’s no history. If there’s no history then there can’t be a future.”

## → WHY ART?

“ Because everyone is involved with art and music, everyone loves any kind of art, so I really think people like doing it, like making it and people like watching it and getting involved and... I really think um getting the message across through art is good because everyone loves art, you know and everyone is going to see it somehow or watch it somehow, so I think it is good, it is a good way to get the message across.”

Nearly everyone who participated in the **Taking Action!** workshops told us that they had a great time. In evaluation circles at the conclusion of every workshop, youth shared how much they enjoyed learning from artists and how great it was to get a chance to really jump in and participate in creating something. In our follow-up individual interviews, we got a chance to hear more from young people about how making art was a really good way to help them express themselves.

Youth were very clear that the process of making art was important because, it is: Fun (engaging, not boring), Participatory (hands-on), Empowering (we get up and do it), Builds self-esteem (helps you feel good about yourself), Healing (lets you talk about the hard stuff without talking), Teaches cultural practices and skills (art teaches us new things). In addition, the process enhances recall and helps to facilitate dialogue about difficult topics. We also heard from many youth that having choices about different art forms helped ensure that there was something for everyone.



## The process of making art

<b>Fun</b>	"Because it's fun and it teaches you stuff and that's what kids like doing, like, to get active and art kind of stuff."
<b>Participatory</b>	"Like more group activities, instead of like sitting there and listening because I have trouble with that sometimes."
<b>Empowering</b>	"Rather than being told what to do... We don't just worry about it, we get up and do it."
<b>Builds pride and esteem</b>	"[We should play our movie in] every reservation in Canada and North America if you can... Basically worldwide or nationwide... Because we are natives and we stand strong to our pride."
<b>Learn about culture</b>	"Because people will be like I wish I could remember my culture and then start like going out with friend and family hunting and stuff and it will cut down on drinking and all that a little bit and then they will be like just yeah."
<b>Healing</b>	"Yeah, because it is hard for me knowing that my dad is [HIV positive] and I don't really know how to cope with the fact that he is going to go and even just getting the family mentally prepared for the loss, because I know it is going to be hard when my dad hits the hospital stage."
<b>Learning skills</b>	"[It was the first time I handled camera equipment and] I am pretty interested in it."
<b>Enhances recall</b>	"You talk so much you don't really remember, but if you do art you are going to remember it all."
<b>Help talk about hard things</b>	"Well I think that is the most important starting point to talk about safe sex, so it is a condom and he is smiling and he is like yay I am a condom, so sex, no HIV, well that's the point of HIV prevention, so I think that was my favourite and I remember the guy who did the motorcycle one and explaining it, HIV, AIDS, rides you don't want to take, it is really cool too."
<b>Different types of art engages different youth</b>	"Yeah, some people might not like any certain kind of art, like music, and you know, someone may like music a lot but don't like painting. Somebody likes painting. You can get something for everybody. And I know a lot of kids like art and stuff because it is fun."

Not only was it fun to make the art, but youth also repeatedly shared stories about how proud they were of what they had accomplished. Many created stunning pieces that were shared on local radio stations and newspapers, displayed in (and sometimes on!) community centres, health centres and other public places. They talked about how their final products: instill pride, communicate and transmit information, raise awareness, convey emotion, draw youth into learning about HIV, are tangible and long lasting, and can bridge, change and challenge traditional culture.



The Products	
<b>Pride about art</b>	"Yeah, because everyone is like really proud and happy for us and brought more people together to see it and yeah."
<b>Communicates and transmits information</b>	"Art is always good because people do respond better to visual things and I know a lot of people don't like to read,... when you see an image that just strikes you I'm sure everyone has had this experience at least once. It just makes you think about something."
<b>Raises awareness</b>	"Because some people don't know that it's safe to be around them and it's okay to do the things you did before with them before you knew they had it. They are the same."
<b>Conveys emotion</b>	"I think it was, a lot of people were generally touched by it. I saw some people crying. I got flowers from two people I did not know before."
<b>Product can be something tangible and long lasting</b>	"Maybe just like one day like copy to every town and then they can use [the video] wherever they want to. Like if they want to like professionals here can use it in their own workshops and if they want like professionals like you guys come in then they can call you guys in and you guys can do some workshop and presentations. Just more education and they can talk a lot about it because the video is a short one."
<b>Bridges and challenges culture</b>	<p>"I think youth definitely pay attention to art and it is something that can bridge the gap."</p> <p>"The whole carving thing will get us in touch with our spiritual side and will connect Aboriginal with the HIV—and so will connect it in a positive way."</p> <p>"Yeah I think it was good to show it through shared art culture, because art is part of our culture or just part of any culture really, it actually is culture pretty much, so it is a great way to get it out there! To get ideas out there, to get anything out there."</p>



# ➔ WHAT DID THE YOUTH CREATE?

## THE PAIN!

HIP HOP SONG BY KETTLE AND STONY POINT YOUTH

*“And we all just started combining words and lyrics, and we made our song.”*



## INTERPRETIVE DANCE BY PUVIRNITUQ YOUTH

The interpretive dance shows how a member of the community catches HIV. The community rallies around the individual and raises her up to support her.

*“The message means that we can end HIV by supporting each other.”*

## CARVING BY PEI YOUTH

Some youth in PEI carved talking sticks. Talking sticks are traditional items. When someone in a talking circle is holding the stick, everyone else is supposed to listen and give them their attention. Each talking stick had an animal totem on top and a stone at the bottom to help ground the speaker. They were also adorned with two eagle feathers—one to symbolize purity (and help you talk from the heart) and the other to symbolize wisdom (so the speaker remembers to speak wisely).



# BY MY NAME

DVD BY NAK'AZDLI YOUTH

*"I'm proud to be Carrier. We can resist stereotypes. We can get our knowledge back."*

*"Don't call us Indian. Call us by our name"*

*By My Name* was created by Nak'azdli youth. The video shares Carrier history and culture as well as information about HIV transmission and prevention. The youth talk about the importance of elders and participating in ceremonies, such as drumming, as a decolonizing strategy.



## REZPECT MURAL BY KETTLE AND STONY POINT YOUTH

*"The flower represented traditional medicine."*

## DO IT RIGHT

HIP HOP SONG BY  
TORONTO YOUTH

*"Well, what they had us do was like write a verse... we ended up putting all of our verses together and made an actual song."*

They can't understand me  
My jeans may be baggy  
That don't give the cops the right to grab me  
Unhand me. This world is so unhappy.  
Kids feel their life is so crappy...  
And people who criticize the way you look  
They'll try to make you small and try to get you shook  
Make you wanna retaliate with a left hook.  
Don't criticize me. Don't isolate me.  
Cause we need to stay united  
Accept me. Don't reject me.  
Cause we gotta stand strongly  
Keep the fire burning brightly  
Cause we're all the same inside.  
Everyday is a struggle  
You just gotta hold on tight.  
Get up on your feet and do it right



## → STRENGTHS

This project was an academic-community partnership, with strong youth and community involvement. Community and youth researchers from across the country, a national Aboriginal youth advisory committee, and local community youth coordinators played a key and essential role in the success of this project. Working with local community youth coordinators ensured that the workshops were relevant and responsive to the needs of each community and not one-size-fits-all. It also ensured that the workshops were viewed as community events and therefore as 'insider' versus 'outsider' workshops.

This feeling of 'by and for community' was reinforced by our explicit effort to engage elders throughout and the broader community by ending each workshop with a community feast and art exhibition. This had the added benefit of ensuring that the artwork created by youth was seen by others. It opened a space for community dialogue on HIV, and increased the self-esteem of participating youth by positioning them as leaders in their community.

By choosing our communities carefully and in consultation with community members, we engaged a geographically and culturally diverse group of young people to participate in our research. We also used a variety of arts-based methods to engage a broad range of youth interests and we worked closely with artists to build on youth strengths, assets and skills. To our knowledge, this is one of the largest and most diverse projects of its kind.

Finally, we made a conscious effort to situate HIV within broader social, political and historical determinants of health and well-being. As such, we attempted to challenge dominant approaches to HIV prevention and education by linking individual behaviours to structural challenges.

## → LIMITATIONS

Our sample was not intended to be representative or random. The six communities we worked with were chosen for a combination of reasons, including willingness of the community to participate, preparedness of the community to participate, personal or professional alliances and cultural and geographic diversity. In addition, local youth coordinators used a variety of recruitment methods to generate interest in this project; however, youth who participated in this project were volunteers and were likely attracted by the possibility of doing art and/or talking about HIV. Therefore, the findings of this research cannot be generalized to all Aboriginal youth populations. However, given the diversity of our youth sample and the exploratory nature of this study, we feel that our project makes a significant contribution to understandings of Aboriginal youth perspectives on colonization and HIV and on the use of arts-informed methods in research with Aboriginal youth.







# CONCLUSION

Findings from this project suggest that the majority of youth in this study see clear connections between the historical and on-going colonization of Aboriginal peoples and the increased HIV risk for Aboriginal youth. Youth believed that the isolation, substance abuse and intergenerational trauma that continues to challenge communities today is a result of colonization and is also responsible for the higher rates of HIV among Aboriginal peoples. The loss of culture, community, spirituality and traditional teachings around gender roles and sexuality—also a result of colonization—has had a significant impact on community wellness and on individuals' ability to protect themselves from HIV.

Youth also described how these experiences of the past, the impacts of colonization, are ongoing. Youth believed that the legacy of colonization for Aboriginal peoples felt like: (a) economic exclusion (poverty and poor housing), (b) social exclusion (racism, stereotypes, isolation), (c) physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and (d) the loss of language, culture and knowledge.

Youth in this study, however, were not content to sit back and watch, or to repeat the same old patterned behaviours of their parents and grandparents. Youth in this study want a better future for themselves and for their children, and many of them are actively resisting colonial oppression and the lateral violence that stems from it by re-connecting with their cultural traditions and heritage. Youth talked about the importance of knowing where they come from, of learning their language, of re-learning their traditional teachings around gender roles and sexuality, and of having pride in their cultural heritage and identity. Many youth felt that re-connecting with their culture would help build stronger, healthier communities and in turn, lower their risk for HIV.

In this project, youth used art to express their thoughts and feelings about HIV, and to create HIV prevention messages to be shared with their communities and other Aboriginal youth. They created videos, photographs, paintings, hip-hop songs, plays, and traditional artworks such as Inuit throat-songs and carvings. Many of these artworks have found a home in their communities where they are seen on a regular basis. All of them can be viewed online.



Youth reported that making art was both a fun and effective way of talking about HIV. They enjoyed the process of making art but they also felt proud of the art they produced. They felt empowered to share their art with others and through their art, to start a conversation about HIV. They also felt that art was an effective way to talk about HIV because art has the ability to convey and evoke emotion that may be difficult to get across in words alone. They described their experience of art as tangible and long-lasting, and finally, as a universal language that makes communicating across cultures, communities and even languages possible. In short, the youth in this study were unanimous that art is, indeed, an effective way to talk about HIV.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Help foster youth leadership.** Give youth an opportunity to take the lead on planning a workshop, leading a session or support them in other ways to make a difference.
2. **Further the work of decolonization in your community.** Decolonization means different things to different people. But it can start with finding things that you are proud of in your community and trying to build on your strengths and assets rather than always focusing on problems.
3. **Make sure youth have the facts about HIV.** This means sharing important information about how youth can prevent the transmission of HIV but also talking about the social, political and historical challenges that put Aboriginal youth at higher risk for HIV.
4. **Use art to start talking about HIV in your community with youth.** You can either get together and make art or use some of the *Taking Action!* artworks as a springboard for discussion.
5. **Consider hosting a *Taking Action!* Weekend in your community.** To learn more about how to do this, see our *Taking Action! Youth Coordinator Manual*. It is full of useful templates, activities and ideas for making this happen in your community.





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 Paulusi Beaulne, Inuit Games  
 Louisa Yeates, Dance  
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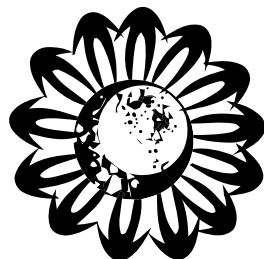
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# TAKING ACTION!

ART AND ABORIGINAL YOUTH LEADERSHIP FOR HIV PREVENTION

[www.TakingAction4Youth.org](http://www.TakingAction4Youth.org)

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