Tuberculosis Genotyping in British Columbia

10-year Retrospective Study Report

Prepared by: Jennifer L. Guthrie, PhD Candidate Email: jennifer.guthrie@alumni.ubc.ca School of Population and Public Health University of British Columbia June 2018

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Summary

In 2012, a project was initiated by the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) to retrospectively genotype the first *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (*Mtb*) isolate from each patient with a culture confirmed diagnosis of tuberculosis (TB) using 24-locus Mycobacterial Interspersed Repetitive Unit - Variable Number Tandem Repeat (MIRU-VNTR). This report describes the resulting cluster analyses and includes the geographical and temporal distribution of large (\geq 10 persons) genotype clusters for *Mtb* isolated from specimens received at the BCCDC Public Health Laboratory (BCCDC PHL) from 2005 through 2014.

Overall, MIRU-VNTR genotyping grouped 2,290 isolates into 189 clusters (2–70 isolates/cluster) with an overall clustering rate of 42.4% and an estimated endemic transmission rate of 34.1% ("*n*-1" method).¹ Large clusters (\geq 10 persons) occurred more frequently within the *Mtb* Euro-American lineage and included mainly Canadian-born persons (87.1%–100.0%). For full details of the *Mtb* molecular epidemiology in British Columbia see Guthrie et al. (2017).²

Key Facts

No. Isolates Genotyped 2,290

No. Distinct Genotypes 1,508

Percentage Clustered 42%

No. Clusters 189

Cluster Size Range 2–70

Canadian-born Clustered 77%

Foreign-born Clustered 30%

Urban Clustered 39%

Rural Clustered 74%

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Introduction to Genotyping

Mycobacterium tuberculosis (*Mtb*) genotyping uses DNA based techniques to target specific segments of the genome allowing for the differentiation of *Mtb* strains. Genotyping has a number of public health and research applications, which will be discussed in a later section.

24-locus Mycobacterial Interspersed Repetitive Unit - Variable Number Tandem Repeat (MIRU-VNTR) genotyping has become the standard tool for molecular typing of *Mtb* for many TB programs world-wide. As a rapid technique resulting in a portable digital signature, MIRU-VNTR has replaced genotyping by restriction fragment length polymorphism (RFLP) in most laboratories. A similarly rapid method known as spoligotyping is often used in molecular studies; however, its low resolution makes it unsuitable for inferring transmission. Genomics, which utilizes the entire genome sequence, is the most recent method available and has the highest discriminatory power; however, sequencing technology and analyses have not been fully standardized for routine use and at this time is most often used for research purposes or specific outbreak investigations.

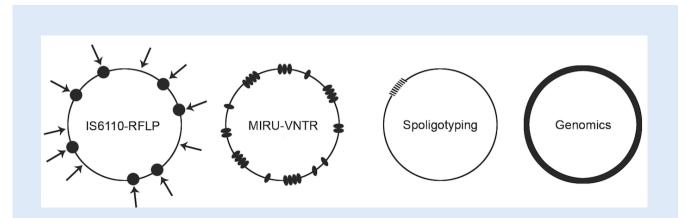


Figure 1. Common Molecular Methods for Genotyping *Mycobacterium tuberculosis.* This simple schematic, not to scale, compares four common methods used in TB molecular epidemiology, and the markings provide an appreciation of the targeted regions for analysis. In contrast, genomics which uses whole genome sequencing interrogates the entire genome, with single nucleotide polymorphisms revealing the relationship between isolates.

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What is 24-locus MIRU-VNTR?

The BCCDC PHL uses a standard method³ of 24-locus MIRU-VNTR for routine genotyping. MIRUs (Mycobacterium Interspersed Repetitive Units) represent repeated DNA sequences 40 to 110 base pairs long which are found in a number of locations around the *Mtb* genome.⁴ MIRU-VNTR genotyping is performed by PCR amplification of each MIRU locus using primers specific for the flanking region. Following capillary electrophoresis, the size of each amplicon is determined, and calculations are performed based on the known length of the repeat unit at each locus. The number of repeats at each of the 24 loci are combined to generate a digital signature that can be used to determine the phylogenetic structure and epidemiological links between strains.

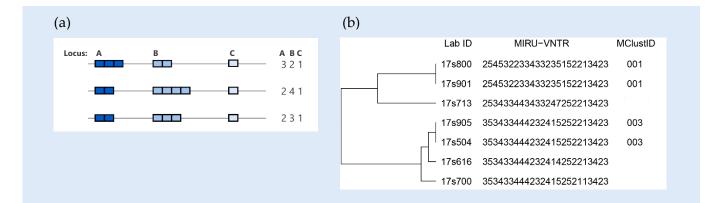


Figure 2. 24-locus MIRU-VNTR genotyping. (a) Schematic illustrating the principle of MIRU-VNTR. Each rectangle represents a repeated DNA sequence which are counted to determine the number of repeats at each locus. (b) Example dendrogram of 24-locus MIRU-VNTR profiles for 7 patients identified by a unique Lab ID. Twenty-four different loci are analyzed for each isolate and the resulting digital code is compared between patient isolates. A unique cluster identifier (MClustID) is assigned for patients with identical MIRU-VNTR profiles.

How is Genotyping Used?

As previously stated, genotyping data has numerous public health and research applications. When combined with epidemiological information *Mtb* genotyping can be a very useful tool. Genotyping results have been used to detect specimen mix-up/laboratory cross-contamination events, identify outbreaks, confirm/refute suspected transmission and differentiate between reinfection and reactivation of tuberculosis. Studies have shown that the routine use of genotyping data enhances contact investigations, leads to more effective use of resources, and can uncover previously unrecognized sources and sites of transmission.^{5,6} Furthermore, genotyping data can be used to monitor clusters over time, evaluate program performance, and understand *Mtb* population dynamics in a particular region or setting.

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Limitations

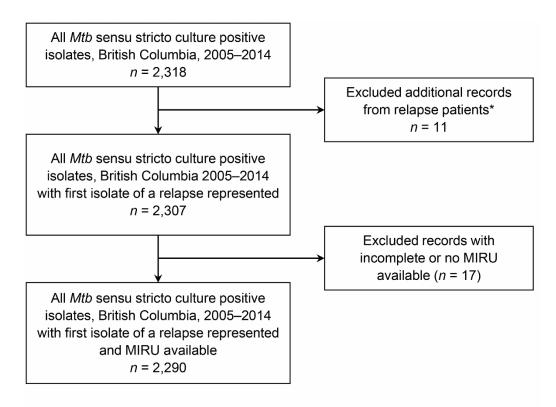
It should be noted that as with any biological test there are limitations to its interpretation. In the case of *Mtb* genotyping, the first limitation is a technical one. Bacterial isolation is required for DNA extraction and genotyping. Consequently, clinically diagnosed cases without culture confirmation (~20% of TB diagnoses in BC) are not able to be genotyped, and therefore their strain type cannot be matched to other cases and will not contribute to the genotyping database. The second issue involves the testing methodology. Standard PCR primers have been designed based on the most common DNA sequences found across *Mtb* strains used during method development but cannot capture all possible sequences that may exist globally and mismatched sequences may result in poor or failed amplification. Moreover, some strains may have a large number of repeats for a particular locus (e.g. MIRU-4052) causing the amplicon size to exceed the upper limit of the genetic analyzer instrument. Genomic rearrangements due to mobile genetic elements may also prevent amplification of some loci (e.g. MIRU-2163 and MIRU-2165). The result of these technical issues is an incomplete MIRU-VNTR pattern which impedes interpretation and, in most cases, does not allow for cluster assignment.

Further limitations involve epidemiological interpretation of genotype information. First, directionality of transmission cannot be determined by genotype data alone, and clustering only indicates that patient strains are genotypically related. Secondly, genotypic clustering does not necessarily mean transmission has occurred between the patients in question, especially in particular patient groups. Whole genome sequencing (WGS) of large MIRU-VNTR clusters elsewhere in Canada, belonging to the Indo-Oceanic lineage revealed that these clusters were not representative of local transmission but rather a common country or region of origin.⁷ In contrast, WGS of large MIRU-VNTR clusters comprised largely of Canadian-born individuals in both BC and Ontario have demonstrated that these clusters represent ongoing local transmission of TB.⁸⁻¹⁰ Ultimately, genotypic clustering should always be interpreted within the context of epidemiological information.

Data and Analysis

The study population included all persons with culture-confirmed TB residing in BC whose first specimen with *Mtb* isolated was received by the BCCDC PHL from 2005 through 2014 (n = 2,318). *Mycobacterium africanum, Mycobacterium bovis*, and *Mycobacterium bovis* bacilli Calmette-Guérin (BCG) were excluded. For individuals with a recurrence during the study period, data from their first episode only was used if isolates from their first and second episode had matching MIRU-VNTR patterns (n = 11), and data from both episodes where MIRU-VNTR indicated reinfection (n=2).

Isolates lacking an amplicon peak at any locus were repeated with newly extracted DNA, and where there remained no peak at a single locus – excluding MIRU-VNTR loci 2163 and 2165, which are treated as absent when there is no amplification¹¹ – the locus was coded as missing data and included in the analyses (n = 93). Of the 2,307 culture-positive isolates meeting study criteria (Figure 3), 17 isolates had incomplete MIRU-VNTR patterns or were unavailable for genotyping – leaving a total of 2,290 (99.2%) isolates which were successfully genotyped by 24-locus MIRU-VNTR using standard methods.³



*First episode for a relapse patient was maintained in the study; relapse was defined as a subsequent episode with a genotype ≤ 1 MIRU loci different to the initial episode.

Figure 3. Analytic Sample. Selection of the analytic sample to examine the molecular epidemiology of tuberculosis in British Columbia, 2005–2014.

Isolates with an identical 24-locus MIRU-VNTR pattern were assigned an "MClust" number (a unique cluster ID) representing a unique genotypic cluster (≥2 individuals). Large clusters (≥10 cases) were analyzed to determine the predominant birthplace (Canada or Outside Canada), and were assigned as Canada where >50% of persons in the cluster were born in Canada, otherwise the predominant birthplace was classified as Outside Canada. Cluster composition for each cluster in the study was categorized as: (i) exclusively Canadian-born, (ii) exclusively foreign-born, (iii) mixed Canadian- and foreign-born, or (iv) unknown. "Unknown" was defined as a cluster in which 1 or more individuals' birthplace was not known and the remaining clustered individuals were uniformly born in Canada or Outside Canada.

Individual-level clinical and demographic data were extracted from BCCDC's Integrated Provincial Health Information System (iPHIS). Community type was determined using the population density of the geographic service area in which each patient resided – urban (>40,000), or rural (\leq 40,000).

Mtb can be classified into seven major phylogeographic lineages reflective of the coevolution of tuberculosis and humans, and linked to ancient human migration patterns.^{12,13} As a result, lineage information provides additional epidemiological information which contributes to the overall understanding of the *Mtb* population dynamics in a setting, and may contribute to case investigations – acting as an alert where lineage does not match what is expected based on a patient's demographics and travel history. Here, major lineage was predicted for each isolate based on MIRU-VNTR using TB-Insight's CBN method.¹⁴ Phylogenetic relationships within each major lineage were visualized using a minimum-spanning tree (MST) in PHYLOViZ 2.0¹⁵ and were coloured by birthplace (Figure 4).

Tuberculosis Genotyping in British Columbia

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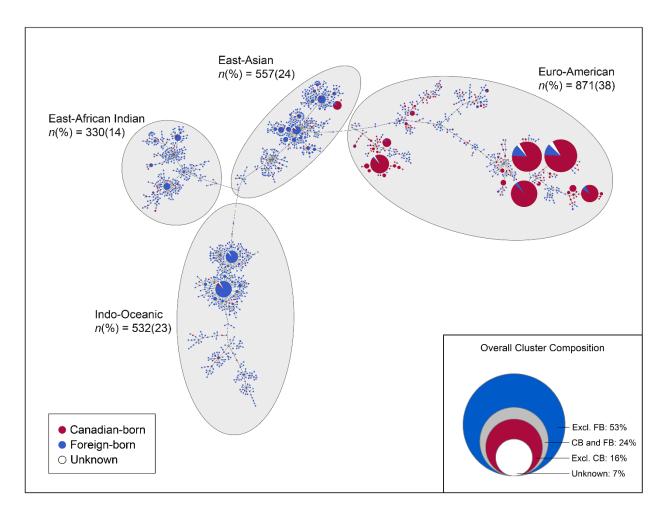
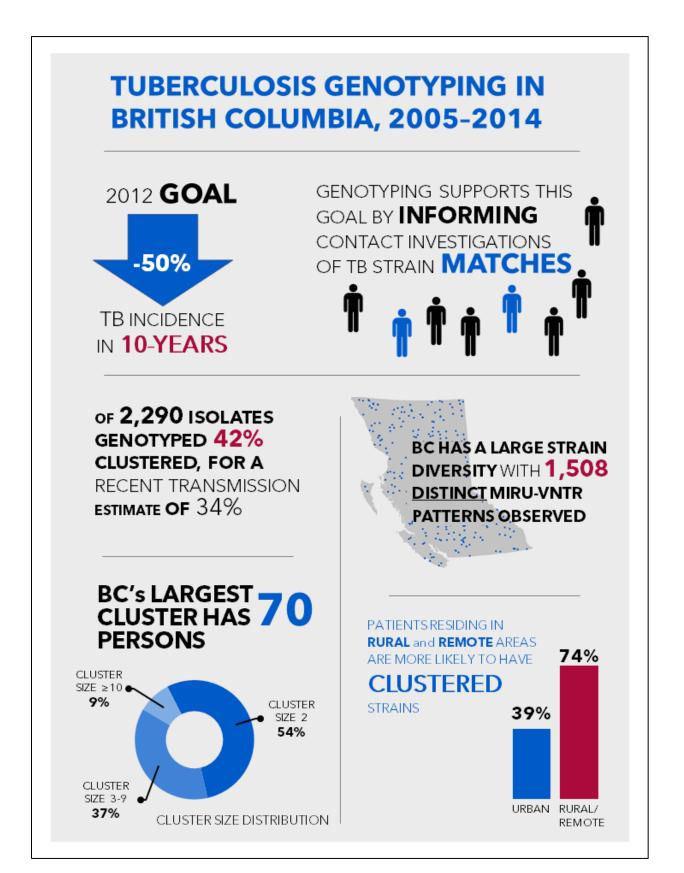


Figure 4. Minimum spanning tree analysis of 24-locus MIRU-VNTR genotyping for *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* isolates, British Columbia (2005–2014). The size of each circle is proportional to the number of isolates. Classification of strains by birthplace is visualized by color coding. The inset demonstrates overall cluster composition with respect to birthplace; relative frequency of clusters that were exclusively Canadian-born (Excl.CB), exclusively foreign-born (Excl. FB), Canadian- and foreign-born (CB and FB), or where there were cases in a cluster with only CB or FB identified in addition to ≥ 1 case of unknown birthplace. **Percentages have been rounded and may not total to 100%*.

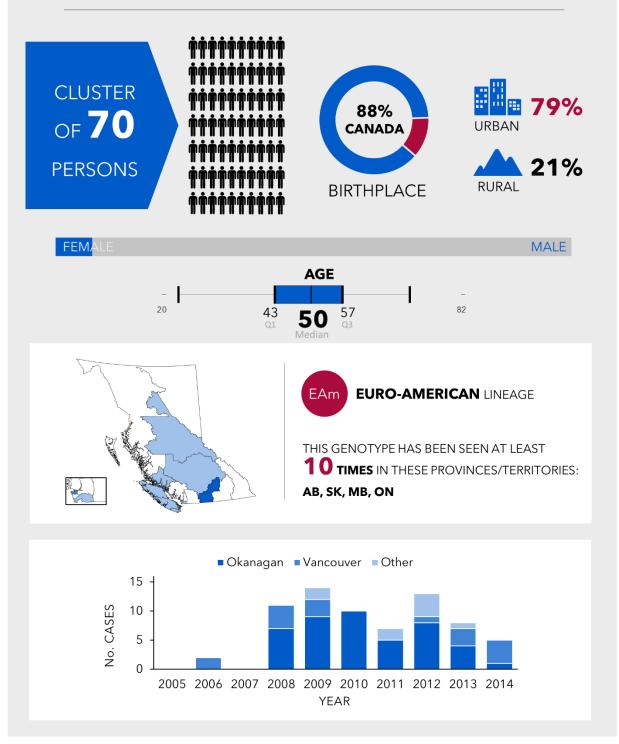


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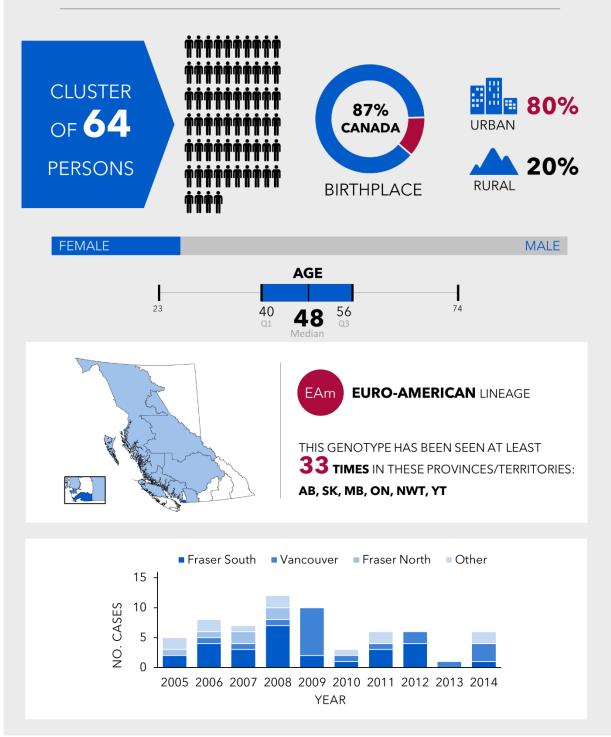
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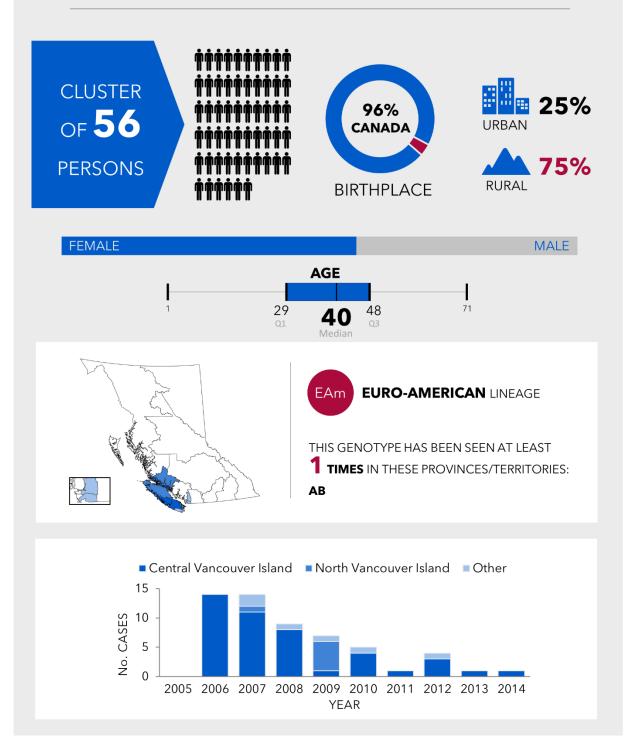
Large MIRU-VNTR Cluster Summaries

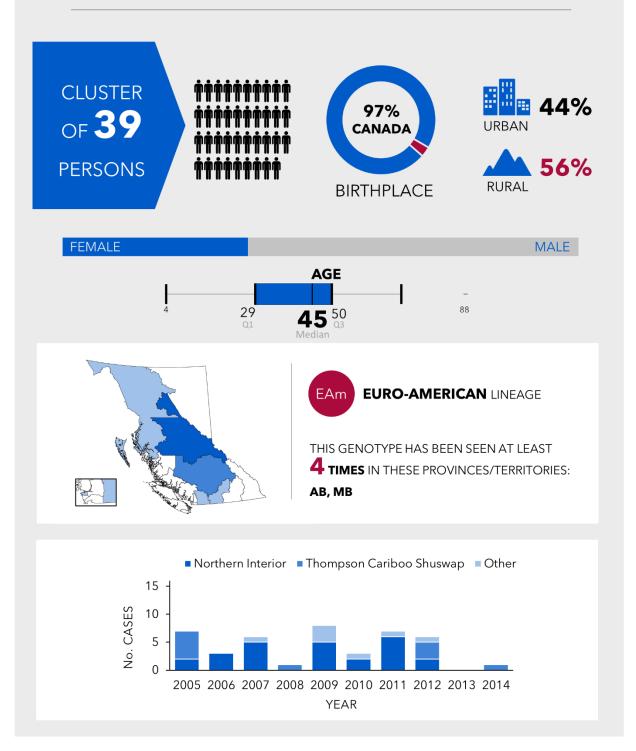
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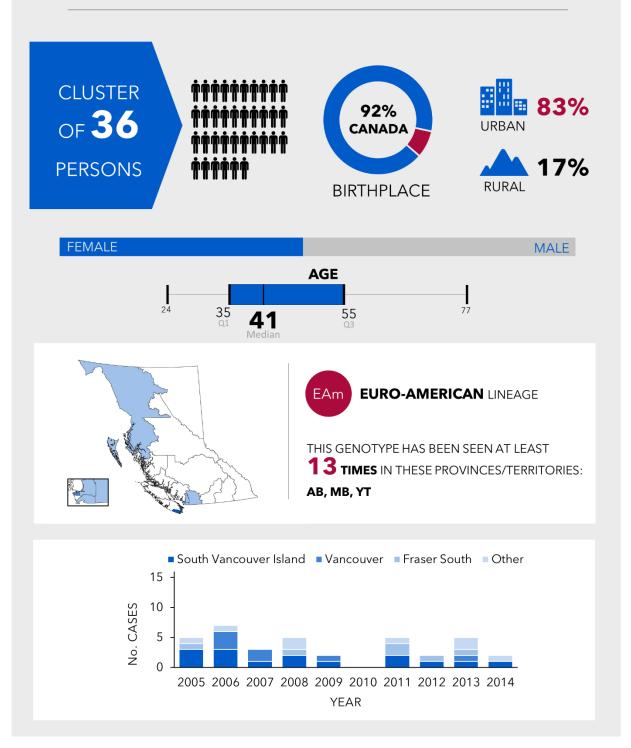
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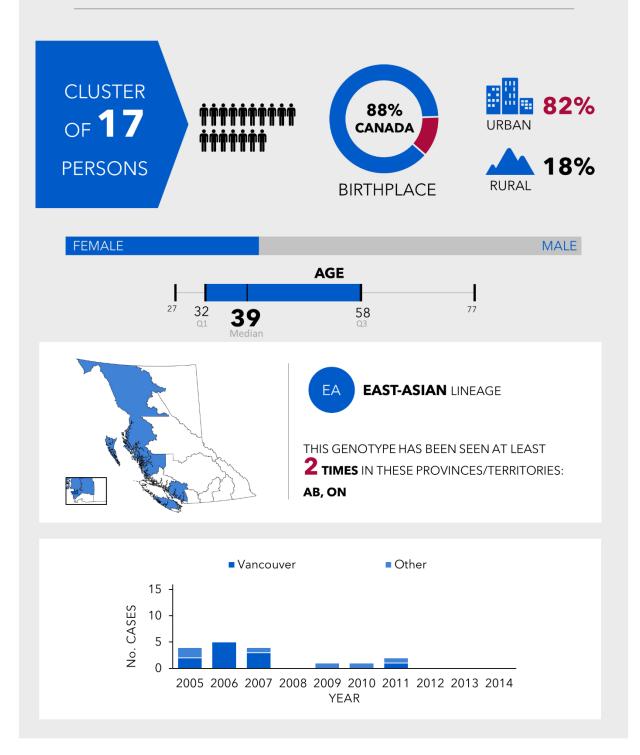




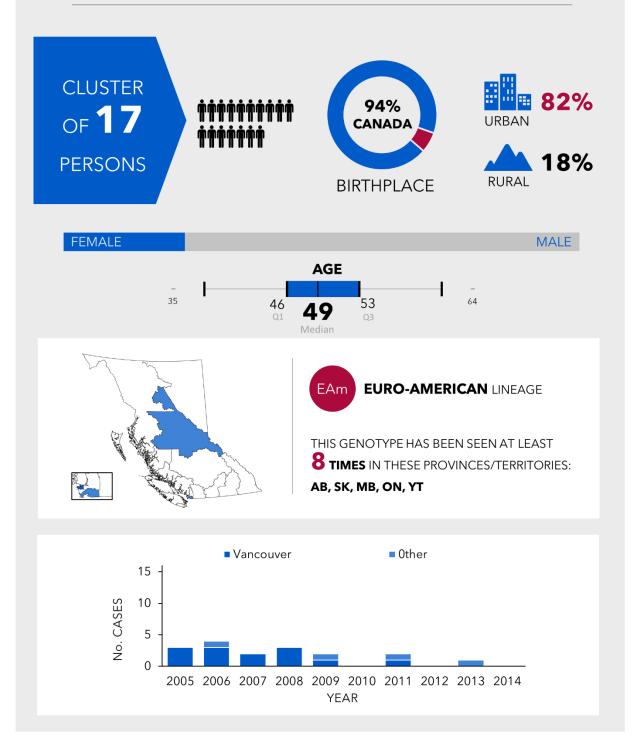


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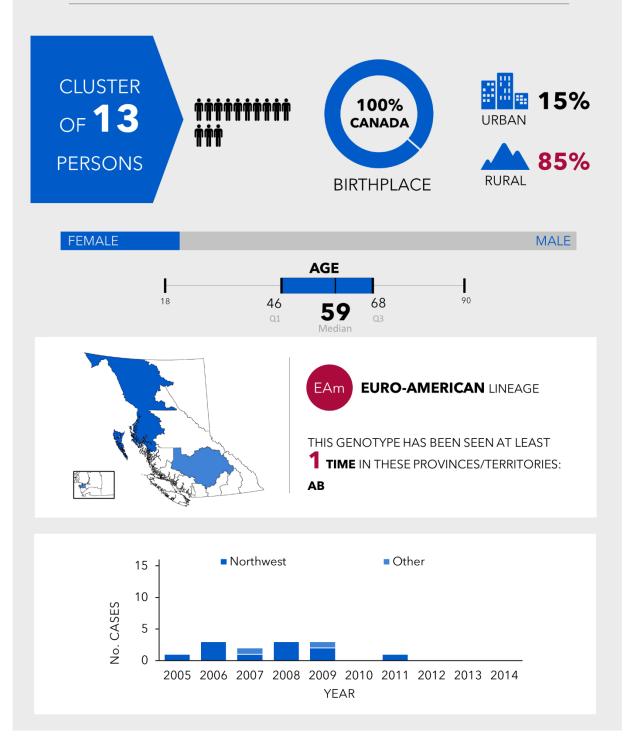




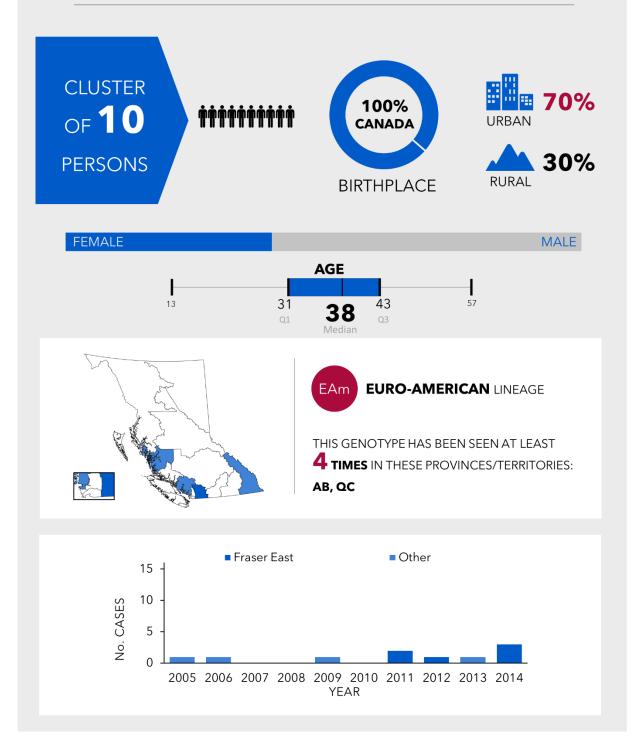


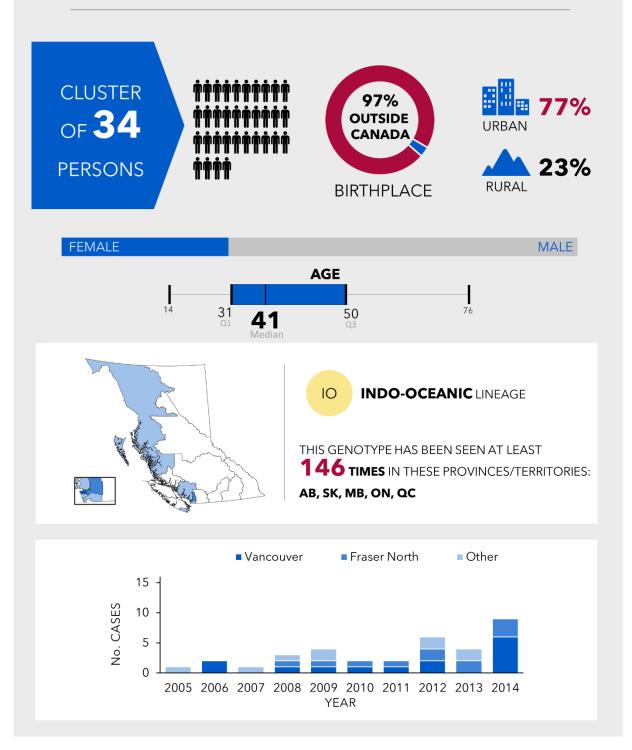


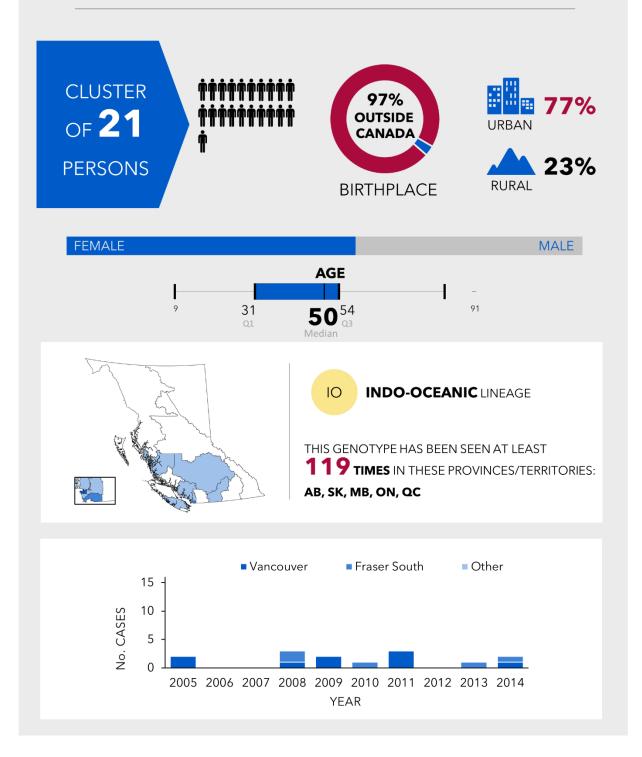




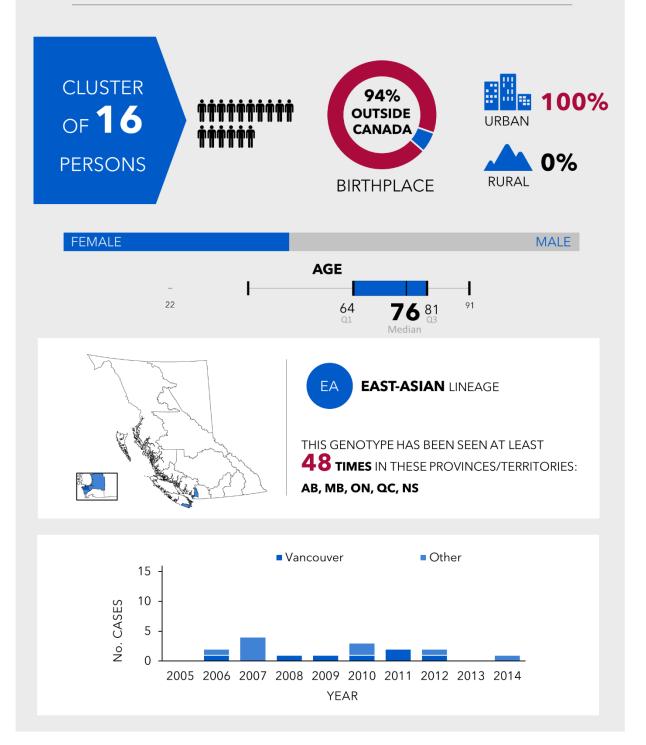




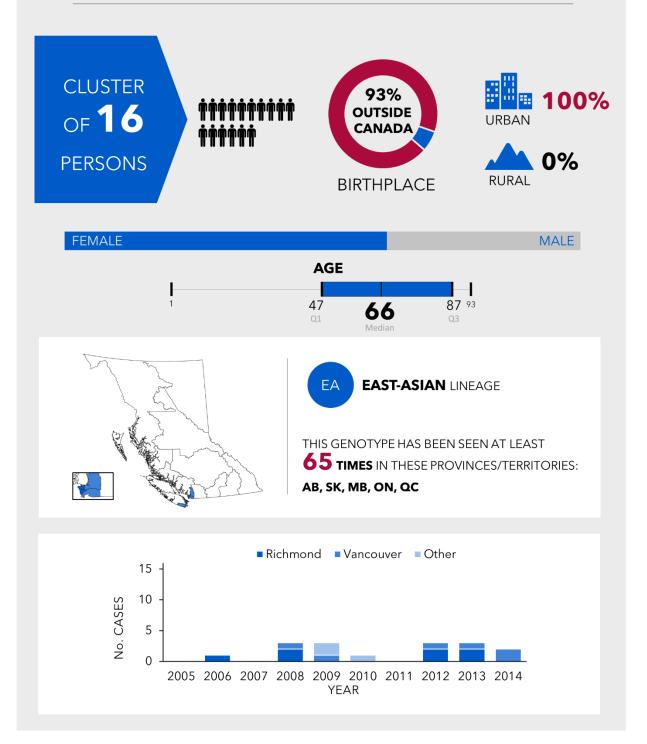




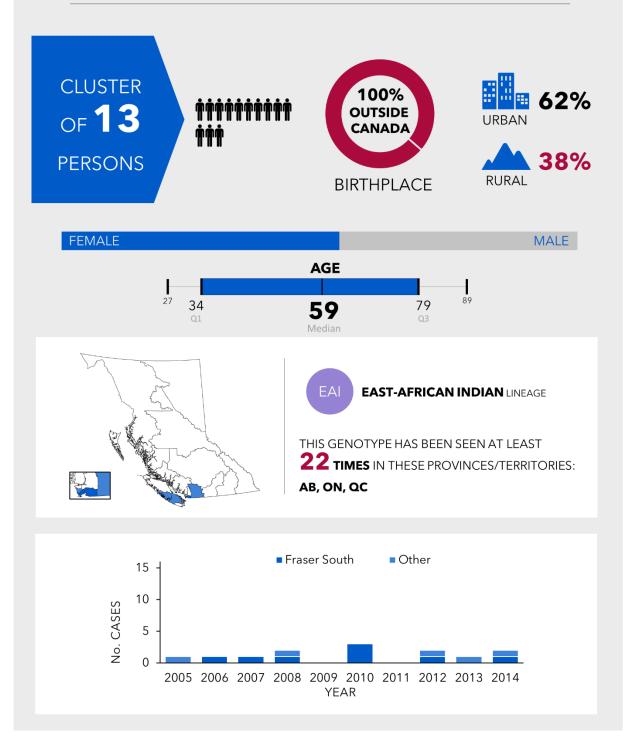




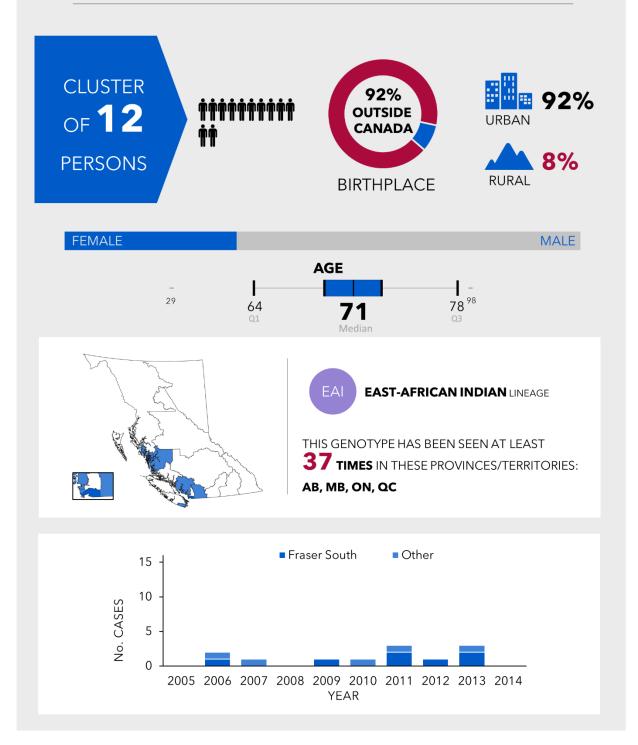




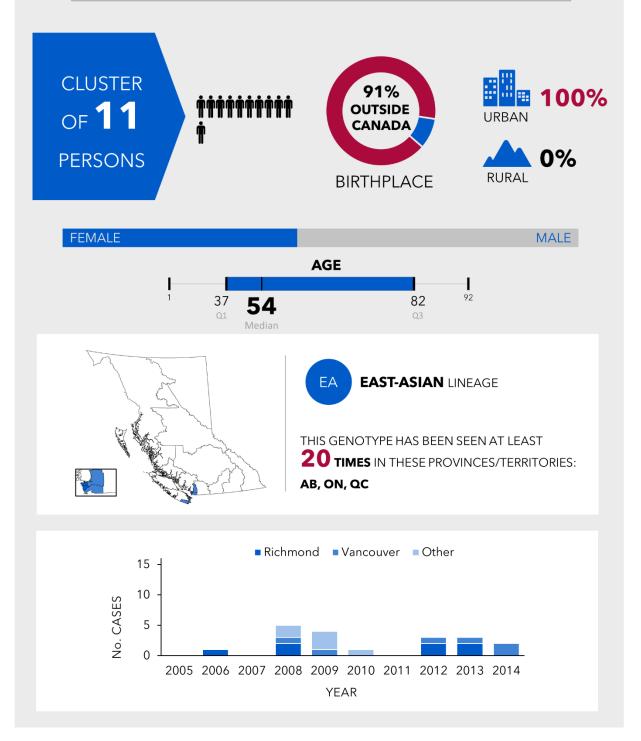












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Appendix I: 24-LOCUS MIRU-VNTR PATTERNS OF LARGE CLUSTERS

MClustID	MIRU 02	MIRU 04	MIRU 10	MIRU 16	MIRU 20	MIRU 23	MIRU 24	MIRU 26	MIRU 27	MIRU 31	MIRU 39	MIRU 40	424	577	1955	2163	2165	2347	2401	2461	3171	3690	4052	4156	MIRU (InternationalOrder)*
MClust-002	2	2	4	3	2	5	1	5	3	3	2	3	4	4	4	2	3	4	4	2	3	3	7	3	253433443433247252213423
MClust-012	2	2	5	3	2	5	1	5	3	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	3	4	4	2	3	3	5	3	253533233433335252213423
MClust-001	1	2	5	3	2	5	1	5	3	2	2	4	2	3	3	2	3	4	4	2	3	3	5	3	254532233433235152213423
MClust-003	2	3	4	3	2	5	1	5	3	3	2	3	4	4	1	4	4	4	2	2	3	3	5	2	353433444232415252213423
MClust-008	2	2	8	2	2	5	1	1	3	2	2	2	3	4	3	2	4	4	4	3	3	4	8	3	212822344443238252213433
MClust-035	2	2	3	3	2	5	1	6	3	5	3	3	2	4	5	5	4	4	4	2	3	3	8	2	263335244432558253213423
MClust-052	2	3	2	3	2	5	1	5	3	3	2	4	3	4	1	4	4	4	2	2	3	3	9	2	354233344232419252213423
MClust-134	2	2	8	2	2	5	1	1	3	2	2	1	3	4	3	2	4	4	4	2	3	3	8	3	211822344433238252213423
MClust-055	2	2	5	3	1	3	1	5	3	3	2	1	2	3	3	6	3	2	4	2	3	3	7	3	251533233433637232113223
MClust-038	2	2	3	3	2	5	1	7	3	5	3	3	4	4	5	5	4	4	4	2	3	3	8	2	273335444432558253213423
MClust-187	2	2	3	3	2	5	1	7	3	5	3	3	4	4	5	6	4	4	4	2	3	3	8	2	273335444432658253213423
MClust-046	2	2	6	4	2	5	1	7	3	4	2	3	4	2	4	2	4	4	4	2	3	4	7	4	273644424444247252213423
MClust-149	2	2	5	4	2	5	1	7	3	5	3	3	5	2	4	2	4	4	2	2	3	3	8	4	273545524234248253213423
MClust-011	2	5	4	3	2	6	2	2	3	4	3	2	1	4	10	8	4	3	2	6	3	2	7	1	5224341442218A7263223363
MClust-021	2	5	4	3	2	6	2	2	3	4	3	2	1	4	10	9	4	3	2	6	3	2	7	1	5224341442219A7263223363
MClust-032	2	2	2	3	2	5	1	7	3	5	4	3	4	4	5	6	4	4	4	2	3	3	8	2	273235444432658254213423 MIRU 24. MIRU 27. 2347. 2461. 3171

*International order of loci: MIRU 04, MIRU 26, MIRU 40, MIRU 10, MIRU 16, MIRU 11, 424, 577, 2165, 2401, 3690, 4156, 2163, 1955, 4052, MIRU 02, MIRU 23, MIRU 39, MIRU 20, MIRU 24, MIRU 27, 2347, 2461, 3171

Appendix II: MIRU-VNTR ALIASES

Locus	Alias1	Alias2	12-locus	15-locus	24-locus
154	MIRU 02		х		Х
424	Mtub04			х	х
577	ETRC			х	х
580	MIRU 04	ETRD	х	х	х
802	MIRU 40		Х	х	х
960	MIRU 10		х	х	х
1644	MIRU 16		х	х	х
1955	Mtub21			х	х
2059	MIRU 20		Х		х
2163b	QUB11b			х	х
2165	ETRA			х	х
2347	Mtub29				х
2401	Mtub30			х	х
2461	ETRB				х
2531	MIRU 23		х		х
2687	MIRU 24		х		х
2996	MIRU 26		Х	х	х
3007	MIRU 27	QUB5	х		х
3171	Mtub34				х
3192	MIRU 31	ETRE	х	х	х
3690	Mtub39			х	х
4052	QUB26			х	х
4156	QUB4156			х	х
4348	MIRU 39		х		x