Factors in R

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Introduction

Factors are an important data class for representing and working with categorical variables in R. In this lesson, we will learn how to create factors and how to manipulate them with functions from the forcats package, a part of the tidyverse. Let's dive in!

Learning Objectives

- You understand what factors are and how they differ from characters in R.
- You are able to modify the **order** of factor levels.
- You are able to modify the **value** of factor levels.

Packages

Dataset: HIV Mortality

We will use a dataset containing information about HIV mortality in Colombia from 2010 to 2016, which is hosted on the open data platform 'Datos Abiertos Colombia.' You can learn more and access the full dataset here.

Each row corresponds to an individual who passed away from AIDS or AIDS-related-complications.

```
hiv mort <-
read_csv(here("data/colombia_hiv_deaths_2010_to_2016.csv"))
## # A tibble: 5 × 25
     municipality_type death_location birth_date birth_year
     <chr>
                       <chr>
                                       <date>
                       Hospital/clinic 1956-05-26
## 1 Municipal head
                                                        1956
                       Hospital/clinic 1983-10-10
## 2 Municipal head
                                                        1983
## 3 Municipal head
                       Hospital/clinic 1967-11-22
                                                        1967
## 4 Municipal head
                       Home/address
                                       1964-03-14
                                                        1964
## 5 Municipal head
                       Hospital/clinic 1960-06-27
## # i 21 more variables: birth_month <chr>, birth_day <dbl>,
## #
       death_year <dbl>, death_month <chr>, death_day <dbl>, ...
```

See the appendix at the bottom for the data dictionary describing all variables.

What are Factors?

Factors are an important data class in R used to represent categorical variables.

A categorical variable takes on a limited set of possible values or levels. For example, country, race or political affiliation. These differ from free-form string variables that take arbitrary values, like person names, book titles or doctor's comments.

RECAP

Review of the Main Data Classes in R

- Numeric: Represents continuous numerical data, including decimal numbers.
- Integer: Specifically for whole numbers without decimal places.
- Character: Used for text or string data.



- Logical: Represents boolean values (TRUE or FALSE).
- Factor: Used for categorical data with predefined levels or categories.
- Date: Represents dates without times.

Factors have a few key advantages over character vectors for working with categorical data in R:

- Factors are stored in R slightly more efficiently than characters.
- Certain statistical functions, such as lm(), require categorical variables to be input as factors
- Factors allow control over the order of categories or levels. This allows properly sorting and plotting of categorical data.

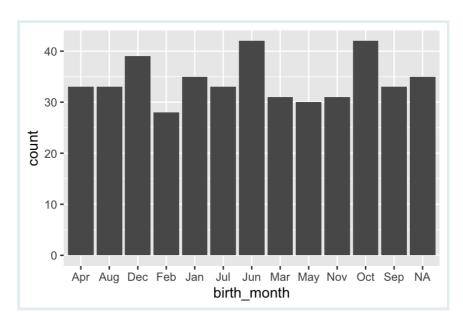
This last point, controlling the order of factor levels, will be our primary focus.

Factors in Action

Let's see a practical example of the value of factors using the hiv_mort dataset we loaded above.

Suppose you are interested in visualizing the patients in the dataset by their birth month. We can do this with ggplot:

```
ggplot(hiv_mort) +
  geom_bar(aes(x = birth_month))
```



However, there's a hiccup: the x-axis (representing the months) is arranged alphabetically, with April first on the left, then August, and so on. But months should follow a specific chronological order!

We can arrange the plot in the desired order by creating a factor using the factor() function:

The syntax is straightforward: the x argument takes the original character column, birth_month, and the levels argument takes in the desired sequence of months.

When we inspect the data type of the birth_month variable, we can see its transformation:

```
# Modified dataset
    class(hiv_mort_modified$birth_month)

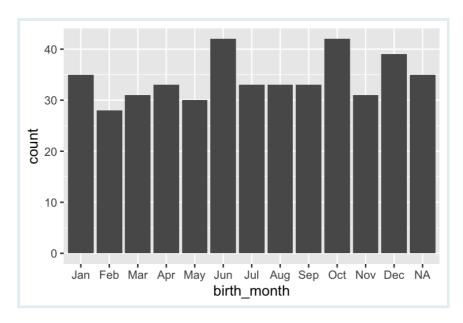
## [1] "factor"

# Original dataset
    class(hiv_mort$birth_month)

## [1] "character"
```

Now we can regenerate the ggplot with the modified dataset:

```
ggplot(hiv_mort_modified) +
  geom_bar(aes(x = birth_month))
```



The months on the x-axis are now displayed in the order we specified.

The new factor variable will respect the defined order in other contexts as well. For example, compare how the count () function displays the two frequency tables below:

```
# Original dataset
count(hiv_mort, birth_month)
```

```
## # A tibble: 13 × 2
##
      birth_month
##
      <chr>
                   <int>
##
   1 Apr
                      33
##
   2 Aug
                      33
                      39
##
    3 Dec
                      28
##
    4 Feb
                      35
##
    5 Jan
                      33
##
   6 Jul
##
                      42
   7 Jun
                      31
##
    8 Mar
##
   9 May
                      30
                      31
## 10 Nov
                      42
## 11 Oct
## 12 Sep
                      33
                      35
## 13 <NA>
```

```
# Modified dataset
count(hiv_mort_modified, birth_month)
```

```
## # A tibble: 13 × 2
## birth_month r
```

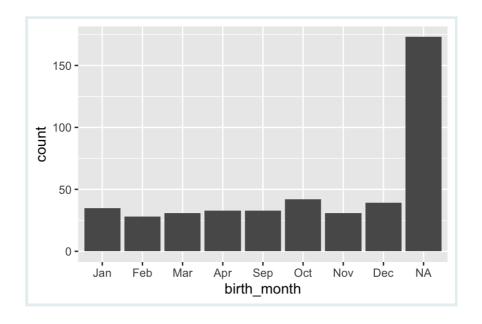
```
##
      <fct>
                    <int>
##
    1 Jan
                       35
##
    2 Feb
                       28
                       31
##
    3 Mar
##
    4 Apr
                       33
##
    5 May
                       30
##
                       42
    6 Jun
##
                       33
    7 Jul
                       33
##
    8 Aug
                       33
##
    9 Sep
                       42
## 10 Oct
## 11 Nov
                       31
## 12 Dec
                       39
## 13 <NA>
                       35
```

::: watch-out Be mindful when creating factor levels! Any values in the variable that are *not* included in the set of levels provided to the levels argument will be converted to NA.

For instance, if we missed some months in our example:

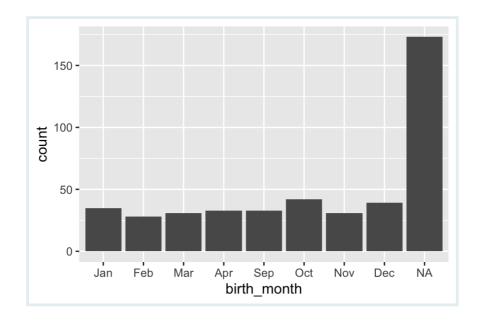
We end up with a lot of NA values:

```
ggplot(hiv_mort_missing_months) +
  geom_bar(aes(x = birth_month))
```



You will have the same problem if there are typographical errors:

```
ggplot(hiv_mort_with_typos) +
  geom_bar(aes(x = birth_month))
```



You can use factor without levels. It just uses default (alphabetical) arrangement of levels

```
SIDE NOTE
```

```
hiv_mort_default_factor <- hiv_mort %>%
  mutate(birth_month = factor(x = birth_month))
```

class(hiv_mort_default_factor\$birth_month)

[1] "factor"

levels(hiv_mort_default_factor\$birth_month)

```
SIDE NOTE
## [1] "Apr" "Aug" "Dec" "Feb" "Jan" "Jul" "Jun" "Mar" "May"
"Nov" "Oct" "Sep"
```

Q: Gender factor

Using the hiv_mort dataset, convert the gender variable to a factor with the levels "Female" and "Male", in that order.

```
# Your code here
hiv_mort
```

Q: Error spotting

What errors are you able to spot in the following code chunk? What are the consequences of these errors?

Q: Advantage of factors

What is one main advantage of using factors over characters for categorical data in R?

- a. It is easier to perform string manipulation on factors.
- b. Factors allow better control over ordering of categorical data.
- c. Factors increase the accuracy of statistical models.

Manipulating Factors with forcats

Factors are very useful, but they can sometimes be a little tedious to manipulate using base R functions alone. Thankfully, the forcats package, a member of the tidyverse, offers a set of functions that make factor manipulation much simpler. We'll consider four

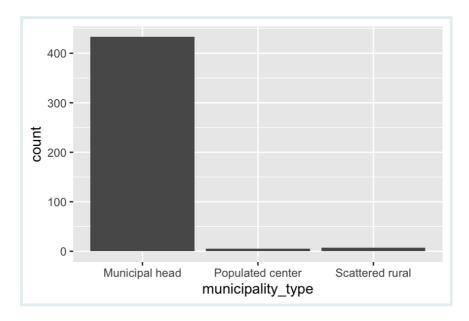
functions here, but there are many others, so we encourage you to explore the *forcats* website on your own time here!

fct_relevel

The fct_relevel() function is used to manually change the order of factor levels.

For example, let's say we want to visualize the frequency of individuals in our dataset by municipality type. When we create a bar plot, the values are ordered alphabetically by default:

```
ggplot(hiv_mort) +
  geom_bar(aes(x = municipality_type))
```



But what if we want a specific value, say "Populated center", to appear first in the plot?

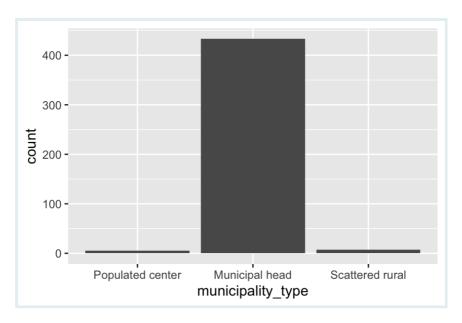
This can be achieved using fct_relevel(). Here's how:

```
hiv_mort_pop_center_first <-
    hiv_mort %>%
    mutate(municipality_type = fct_relevel(municipality_type,
"Populated center"))
```

The syntax is straightforward: we pass the factor variable as the first argument, and the level we want to move to the front as the second argument.

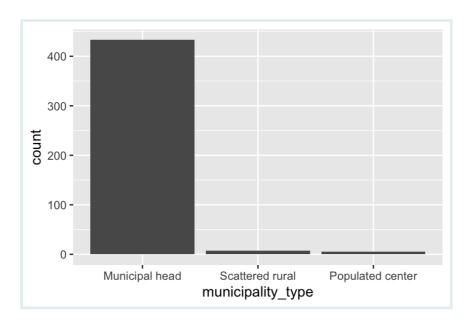
Now when we plot:

```
ggplot(hiv_mort_pop_center_first) +
  geom_bar(aes(x = municipality_type))
```



The "Populated center" level is now first.

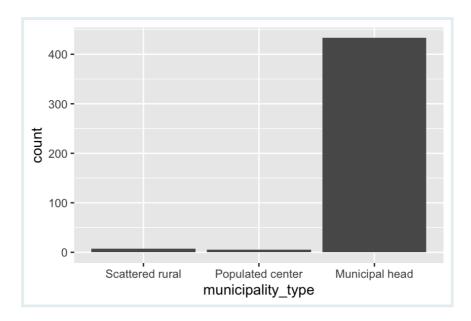
We can move the "Populated center" level to a different position with the after argument:



The syntax is: specify the factor, the level to move, and use the after argument to define what position to place it after.

We can also move multiple levels at a time by providing these levels to fct_relevel():

Below we arrange all the factor levels for municipality type in our desired order:



This is similar to creating a factor from scratch with levels in that order:



Q: Using fct_relevel

Using the hiv_mort dataset, convert the death_location variable to a factor such that 'Home/address' is the first level. Then create a bar plot that shows the count of individuals in the dataset by death_location.



```
# Your code here
hiv_mort ...
```

fct_reorder

fct_reorder() is used to reorder the levels of a factor based on the values of another variable.

To illustrate, let's make a summary table with number of deaths, mean and median age at death for each municipality:

```
## # A tibble: 25 × 4
##
      municipality_name n_deceased mean_age_death med_age_death
##
      <chr>
                             <int>
                                            <dbl>
                                                          <dbl>
## 1 Aguadas
                                 2
                                             42
                                                           42
                                             37.4
                                                           37.5
## 2 Anserma
                                15
##
                                             37.5
    3 Aranzazu
                                 2
                                                           37.5
## 4 Belalcázar
                                 4
                                             38.8
                                                           41
## 5 Chinchiná
                                62
                                             43.6
                                                           42.5
## 6 Filadelfia
                                 5
                                             42.6
                                                           43
##
   7 La Dorada
                                46
                                             41.0
                                                           41
## 8 La Merced
                                 3
                                             27
                                                           28
## 9 Manizales
                               199
                                             41.0
                                                           41
## 10 Manzanares
                                             38.3
                                                           34
## # i 15 more rows
```

When plotting one of the variables, we may want to arrange the factor levels by that numeric variable. For example, to order municipality by the mean age column:

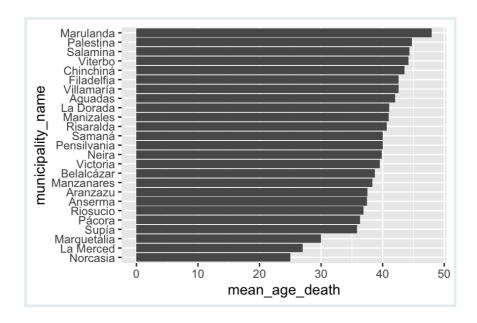
The syntax is:

• • f - the factor to reorder

• • x - the numeric vector determining the new order

We can now plot a nicely arranged bar chart:

```
ggplot(summary_per_muni_reordered) +
  geom_col(aes(y = municipality_name, x = mean_age_death))
```



Q: Using fct_reorder

Starting with the summary_per_muni data frame, reorder the municipality (municipality_name) by the med_age_death column and plot the reordered bar chart.

```
PRACTICE

(in RMD)
```

```
# Your code here
summary_per_muni #
```

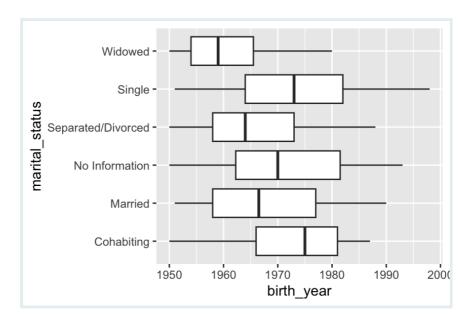
```
## # A tibble: 25 × 4
     municipality_name n_deceased mean_age_death
med_age_death
##
      <chr>
                             <int>
                                             <dbl>
<dbl>
## 1 Aguadas
                                 2
                                              42
                                                            42
## 2 Anserma
                                 15
                                              37.4
37.5
                                 2
                                              37.5
## 3 Aranzazu
37.5
```

```
42.5
                                                 5
                                                              42.6
                                                                             43
             ##
                 6 Filadelfia
                 7 La Dorada
                                                46
                                                              41.0
                                                                             41
             ##
PRACTICE
                                                                             28
                 8 La Merced
                                                 3
                                                              27
                 9 Manizales
                                               199
                                                                             41
                                                              41.0
                                                              38.3
                                                                             34
             ## 10 Manzanares
                                                 3
             ## # i 15 more rows
```

The . fun argument

Sometimes we want the categories in our plot to appear in a specific order that is determined by a summary statistic. For example, consider the box plot of birth_year by marital_status:

```
ggplot(hiv_mort, aes(y = marital_status, x = birth_year)) +
  geom_boxplot()
```



The boxplot displays the median birth_year for each category of marital status as a line in the middle of each box. We might want to arrange the marital_status categories in order of these medians. But if we create a summary table with medians, like we did before with summary_per_muni, we can't create a box plot with it (go look at the summary_per_muni data frame to verify this yourself).

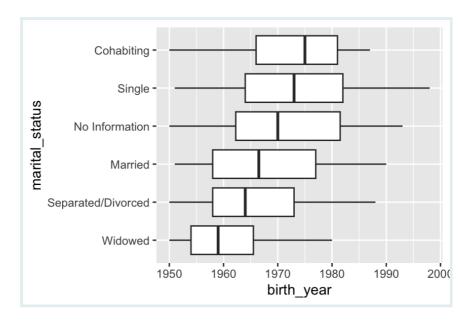
This is where the <code>.fun</code> argument of fct_reorder() comes in. The <code>.fun</code> argument allows us to specify a summary function that will be used to calculate the new order of the levels:

```
hiv_mort_arranged_marital <-
  hiv_mort %>%
  mutate(marital_status = fct_reorder(.f = marital_status,
```

In this code, we are reordering the marital_status factor based on the median of birth_year. We include the argument na.rm = TRUE to ignore NA values when calculating the median.

Now, when we create our box plot, the marital_status categories are ordered by the median birth_year:

```
ggplot(hiv_mort_arranged_marital, aes(y = marital_status, x =
birth_year)) +
    geom_boxplot()
```



We can see that individuals with the marital status "cohabiting" tend to be the youngest (they were born in the latest years).

Q: Using .fun



Using the hiv_mort dataset, make a boxplot of birth_year by health_insurance_status, where the health_insurance_status categories are arranged by the median birth_year.

Your code here

fct_recode

The fct_recode() function allows us to manually change the values of factor levels. This function can be especially helpful when you need to rename categories or when you want to merge multiple categories into one.

For example, we can rename 'Municipal head' to 'City' in the municipality_type variable:

```
## [1] "City" "Populated center" "Scattered rural"
```

In the above code, fct_recode() takes two arguments: the factor variable you want to change (municipality_type), and the set of name-value pairs that define the recoding. The new level ("City") is on the left of the equals sign, and the old level ("Municipal head") is on the right.

fct_recode() is particularly useful for compressing multiple categories into fewer levels:

We can explore this using the education_level variable. Currently it has six categories:

```
count(hiv_mort, education_level)
```

```
## # A tibble: 6 × 2
    education_level
     <chr>
                     <int>
## 1 No information
                        88
                        22
## 2 None
## 3 Post-secondary
                        29
## 4 Preschool
                         3
## 5 Primary
                       187
## 6 Secondary
                       116
```

For simplicity, let's group them into just three categories - primary & below, secondary & above and other:

```
hiv_mort_educ_simple <-
  hiv_mort %>%
  mutate(education_level = fct_recode(education_level,
```

```
"primary & below" = "Primary",
"secondary & above" = "Secondary",
"secondary & above" = "Post-secondary",
"others" = "No information",
"others" = "None"))
```

This condenses the categories nicely:

```
count(hiv_mort_educ_simple, education_level)
```

```
## # A tibble: 3 × 2
## education_level n
## <fct> <int>
## 1 others 110
## 2 secondary & above 145
## 3 primary & below 190
```

For good measure, we can arrange the levels in a reasonable order, with "others" as the last level:

This condenses the categories nicely:

```
count(hiv_mort_educ_sorted, education_level)
```

```
## # A tibble: 3 × 2
## education_level n
## <fct> <int>
## 1 primary & below 190
## 2 secondary & above 145
## 3 others 110
```



Q: Using fct_recode

Using the hiv_mort dataset, convert death_location to a factor.



Then use fct_recode() to rename 'Public way' in death_location to 'Public place'. Plot the frequency counts of the updated variable.

fct_recode vs case_when/if_else

You might question why we need fct_recode() when we can utilize case_when() or if_else() or even recode() to substitute specific values. The issue is that these other functions can disrupt your factor variable.

To illustrate, let's say we choose to use case_when() to make a modification to the education_level variable of the hiv_mort_educ_sorted data frame.

As a quick reminder, that the education_level variable is a factor with three levels, arranged in a specified order, with "primary & below" first and "others" last:

SIDE NOTE

```
count(hiv_mort_educ_sorted, education_level)
```

```
## # A tibble: 3 × 2
## education_level n
## <fct> <int>
## 1 primary & below 190
## 2 secondary & above 145
## 3 others 110
```

Say we wanted to replace the "others" with "other", removing the "s". We can write:

After this operation, the variable is no longer a factor:

```
class(hiv_mort_educ_other$education_level)
```

```
## [1] "character"
```

If we then create a table or plot, our order is disrupted and reverts to alphabetical order, with "other" as the first level:

```
count(hiv_mort_educ_other, education_level)
```



However, if we had used fct_recode() for recoding, we wouldn't face this issue:

```
hiv_mort_educ_other_fct <-
    hiv_mort_educ_simple %>%
    mutate(education_level =
fct_recode(education_level, "other" = "others"))
```

The variable remains a factor:

```
class(hiv_mort_educ_other_fct$education_level)
```

```
## [1] "factor"
```

And if we create a table or a plot, our order is preserved: primary, secondary, then other:

```
count(hiv_mort_educ_other_fct, education_level)
```

```
## # A tibble: 3 × 2
## __education_level_____
```

```
## <fct> <int>
SIDE NOTE ## 1 other 110
## 2 secondary & above 145
## 3 primary & below 190
```

fct_lump

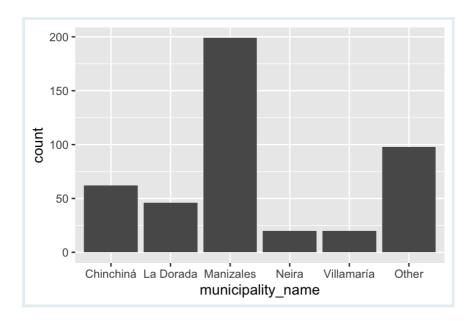
Sometimes, we have too many levels for a display table or plot, and we want to lump the least frequent levels into a single category, typically called 'Other'.

This is where the convenience function fct_lump() comes in.

In the below example, we lump less frequent municipalities into 'Other', preserving just the top 5 most frequent municipalities:

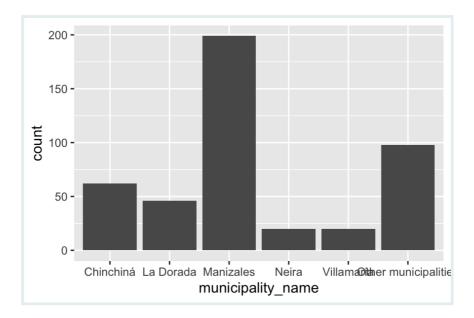
```
hiv_mort_lump_muni <- hiv_mort %>%
  mutate(municipality_name = fct_lump(municipality_name, n = 5))

ggplot(hiv_mort_lump_muni, aes(x = municipality_name)) +
  geom_bar()
```



In the usage above, the parameter n = 5 means that the five most frequent municipalities are preserved, and the rest are lumped into 'Other'.

We can provide a custom name for the other category with the other_level argument. Below we use the name "Other municipalities".



In this way, fct_lump() is a handy tool for condensing factors with many infrequent levels into a more manageable number of categories.

Q: Using fct_lump



Starting with the hiv_mort dataset, use fct_lump() to create a bar chart with the frequency of the 10 most common occupations.

Lump the remaining occupation into an 'Other' category.

Put occupation on the y-axis, not the x-axis, to avoid label overlap.

Wrap up

Congrats on getting to the end. In this lesson, you learned details about the data class, **factors**, and how to manipulate them using basic operations such as fct_relevel(), fct_reorder() fct_recode(), and fct_lump().

While these covered common tasks such as reordering, recoding, and collapsing levels, this introduction only scratches the surface of what's possible with the forcats package.

Do explore more on the forcats website.

Now that you understand the basics of working with factors, you are equipped to properly represent your categorical data in R for downstream analysis and visualization.

Answer Key

Q: Gender factor

```
hiv_mort <- hiv_mort %>%
  mutate(gender = factor(gender, levels = c("Female", "Male")))
```

Q: Error spotting

The errors in the provided code are:

- 1. Incorrect spelling in levels: "Mai" should be "May".
- 2. Incorrect abbreviation for November: "Nov." should be "Nov".

Consequences of these errors: - Months with incorrect spellings or abbreviations will result in those values being converted to NA in the factor variable birth_month. - This will affect analyses and visualizations that rely on accurate categorization of the birth_month data.

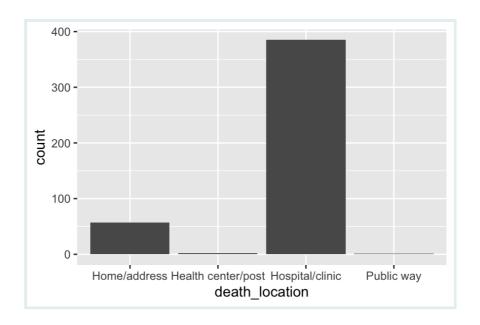
Q: Advantage of factors

b. Factors allow better control over ordering of categorical data.

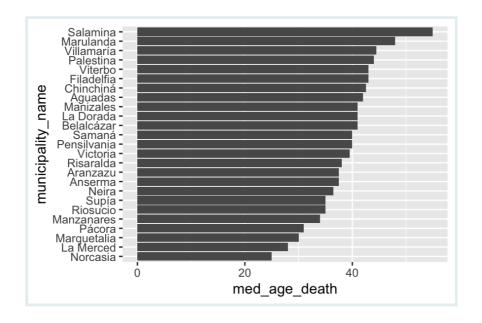
Q: Using fct_relevel

```
hiv_mort <- hiv_mort %>%
          mutate(death_location = fct_relevel(death_location,
"Home/address"))

ggplot(hiv_mort) +
          geom_bar(aes(x = death_location))
```



Q: Using fct_reorder

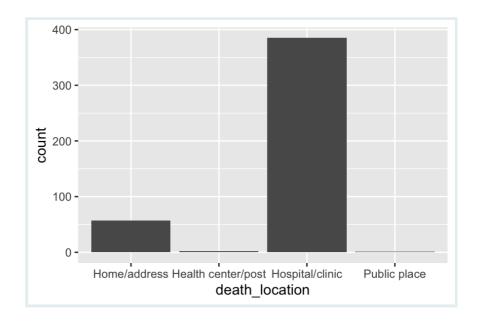


Q: Using .fun

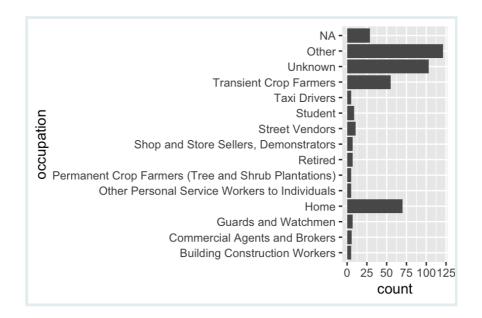
```
hiv_mort_arranged <- hiv_mort %>%
  mutate(health_insurance_status =
```



Q: Using fct_recode



Q: Using fct_lump



Appendix: Codebook

The variables in the dataset are:

- municipality: general municipal location of the patient [chr]
- death_location: location where the patient died [chr]
- birth_date: full date of birth, formatted "YYYY-MM-DD" [date]
- birth_year: year when the patient was born [dbl]
- birth_month: month when the patient was born [chr]
- birth_day: day when the patient was born [dbl]
- death_year: year when the patient died [dbl]
- death_month: month when the patient died [chr]

- death_day: day when the patient died [dbl]
- gender: gender of the patient [chr]
- education_level: highest level of education attained by patient [chr]
- occupation: occupation of patient [chr]
- racial_id: race of the patient [chr]
- municipality_code: specific municipal location of the patient [chr]
- primary_cause_death_description: primary cause of the patient's death [chr]
- primary_cause_death_code: code of the primary cause of death [chr]
- secondary_cause_death_description: secondary cause of the patient's death [chr]
- secondary_cause_death_code: code of the secondary cause of death [chr]
- tertiary_cause_death_description: tertiary cause of the patient's death [chr]
- tertiary_cause_death_code: code of the tertiary cause of death [chr]
- quaternary_cause_death_description: quaternary cause of the patient's death [chr]
- quaternary_cause_death_code: code of the quaternary cause of death [chr]

Contributors

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