

# Kids Count Alaska 2004



Institute of Social and Economic Research  
University of Alaska Anchorage

# Kids Count Alaska<sup>2004</sup>



## Data Book

Prepared by Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER)  
University of Alaska Anchorage

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Front cover: Fireweed (*Epilobium angustifolium*)

The cover graphic and other Alaska wildflower illustrations in this data book are by Clemencia Amaya-Merrill.

## Acknowledgments



We thank many people for their help. Our most heartfelt thanks go to the Alaska families who so generously shared their adoption stories with us. Those stories appear on the divider pages for each section.

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The Bauer Family  
The Green Family  
The Terry Family  
The West Family  
The Family That Could Be Your Neighbor  
(A family that asked us not to use their last name)

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Kids Count is a nationwide program of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The foundation produces a national data book each year, detailing the condition of America's children. It also sponsors Kids Count programs in all 50 states. Feel free to copy, distribute, or otherwise use information from the Kids Count Alaska Data Book, citing the source as:

Kids Count Alaska 2004 Data Book, prepared by Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska Anchorage, with funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.



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**ABOUT THIS YEAR'S BOOK**

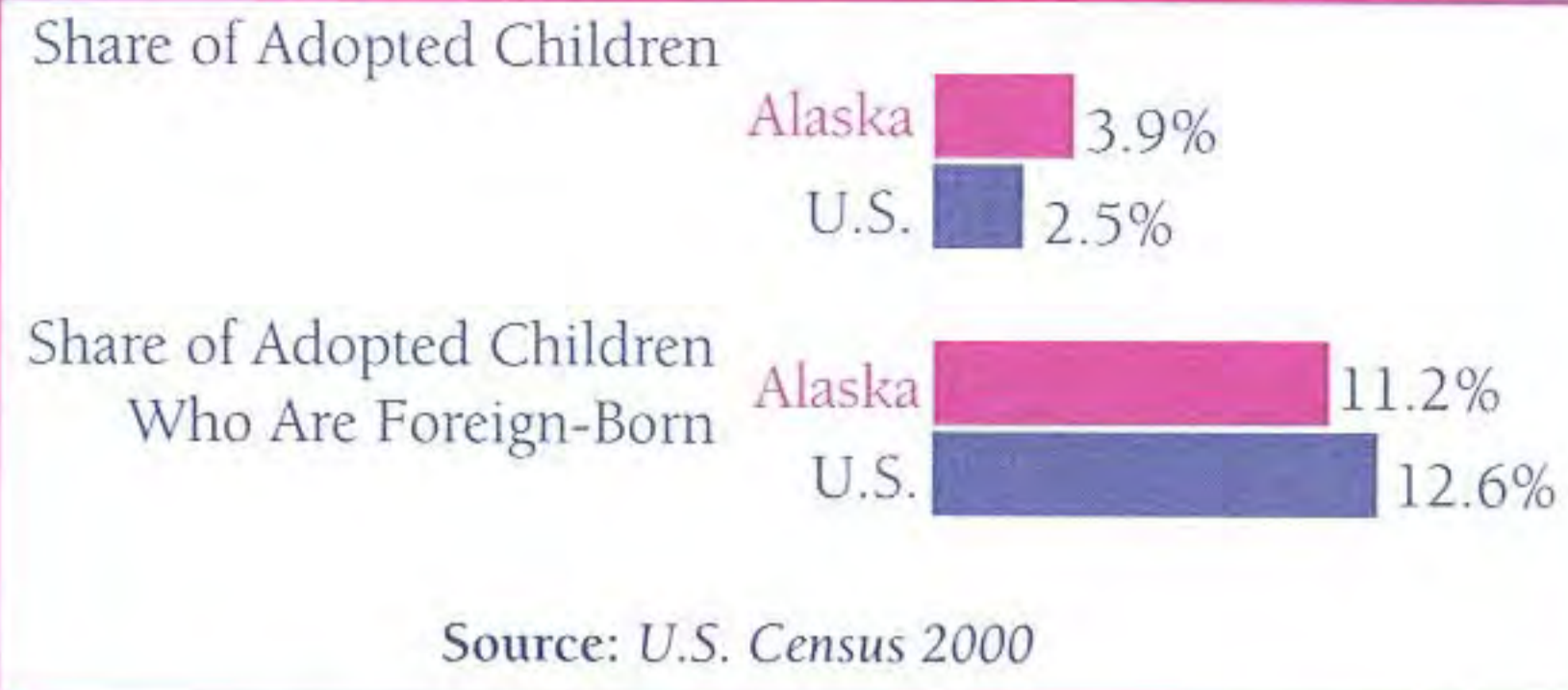
In Kids Count Alaska Data Books, we try not only to describe how Alaska's children are doing but also to give readers a glimpse of life in Alaska. This year we look at adoption. Nearly 4% of children in Alaska are adopted, according to the 2000 U.S. census—the biggest share in any state. The range in other states is from 2% to 3.4%, and the national average is 2.5%.

The Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics provided us with detailed information on adoptions in recent years. On this page and the next we show the big picture of adoption in Alaska—characteristics of adopted children, types of adoptive families, and methods of adoption.

We also show the personal face of adoption. Several Alaska families with adopted children very generously shared their stories with us. We report those stories on the section-divider pages of this book, on the back side of the illustrations. It was hard to decide how to illustrate the stories. We decided to use Alaska wildflowers, which are beautiful and diverse and brighten our lives—just like the children their families described to us.

**WHO ARE ALASKA'S ADOPTED CHILDREN?**

About 4,300 children were adopted from 1999 through 2003. Just over half the families adopting children in



recent years were two-parent families adopting children unrelated to them, but nearly a third of the adoptions involved step-parents adopting their spouses' children. About 12% were single parents adopting children.

Nearly half the adopted children were age 4 or younger, but many were older—nearly one quarter were between 10 and 17 years old. Girls were slightly more likely to be adopted, making up 53% of the total.

About 44% of the children adopted between 1999 and 2003 were White, 41% Alaska Native, 3% Black, and 4% Asian or Pacific Islander; the race of the remaining 8% of adopted children was not reported.

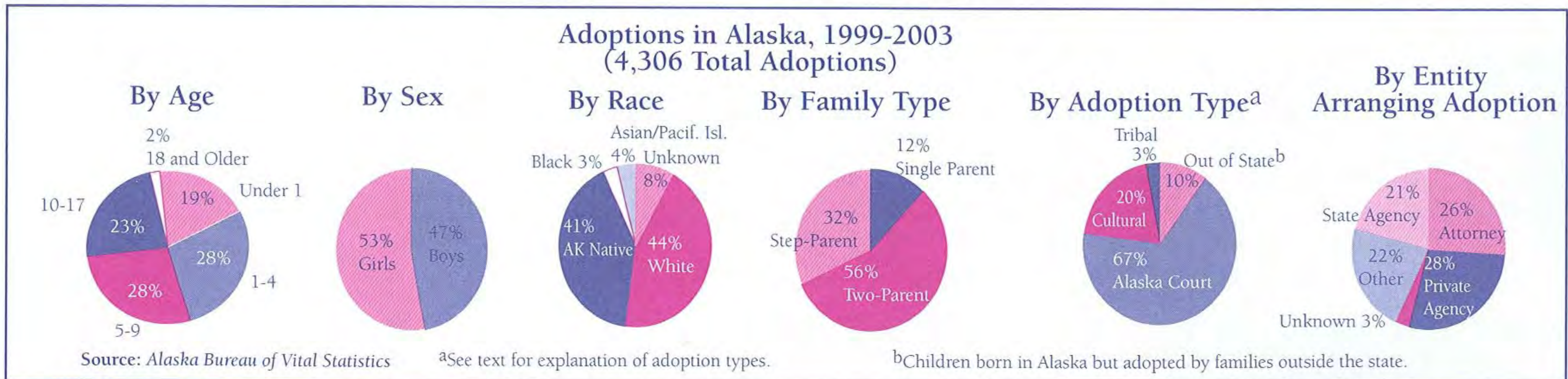
Alaska Native children make up a substantially larger share of adopted children than they do of all children in Alaska—about 25% of all children but 41% of adopted children. That higher share among adopted children partly reflects the traditional prevalence of adoption in

the Native community. It also helps explain Alaska's higher percentage of adopted children.

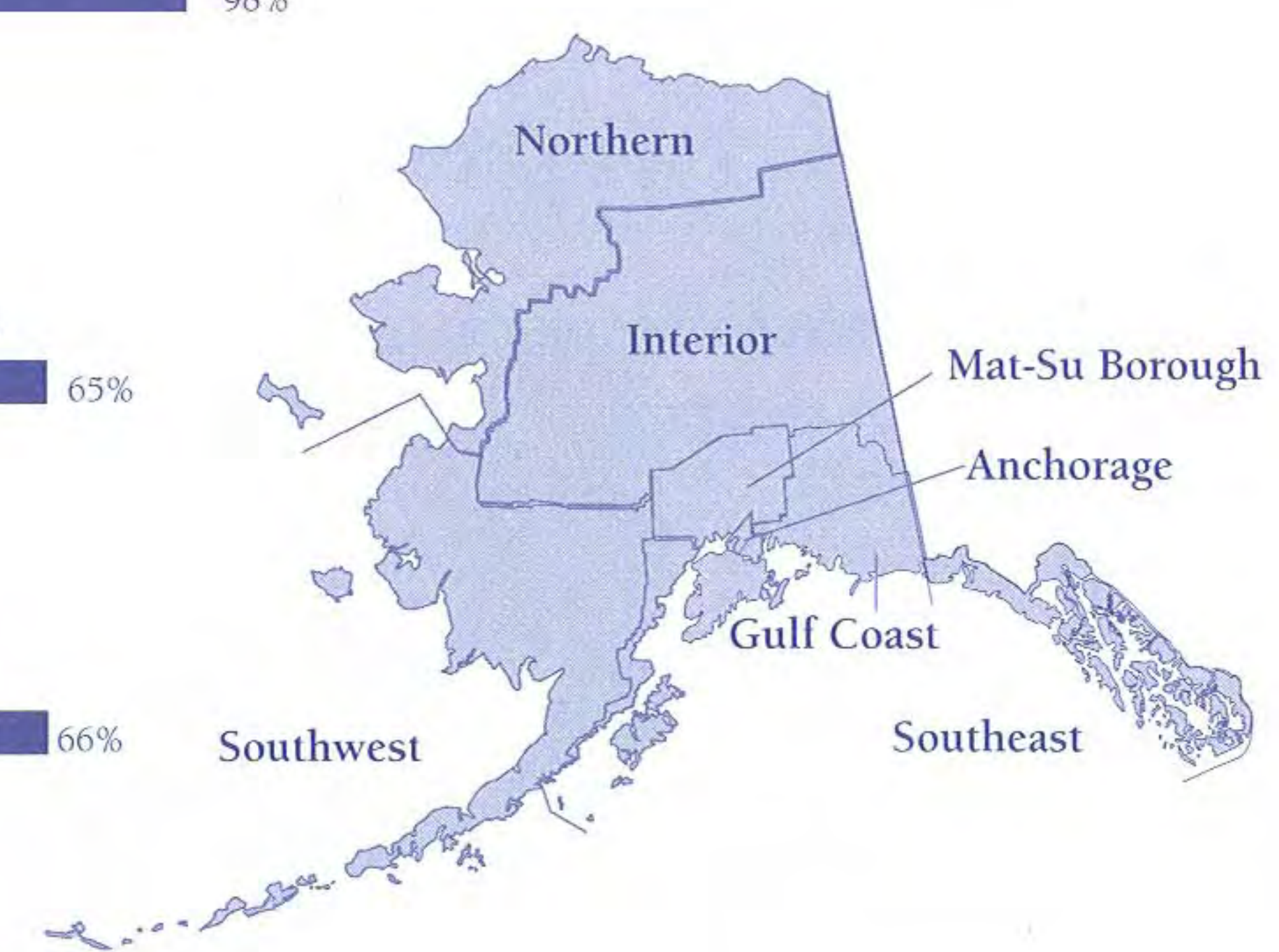
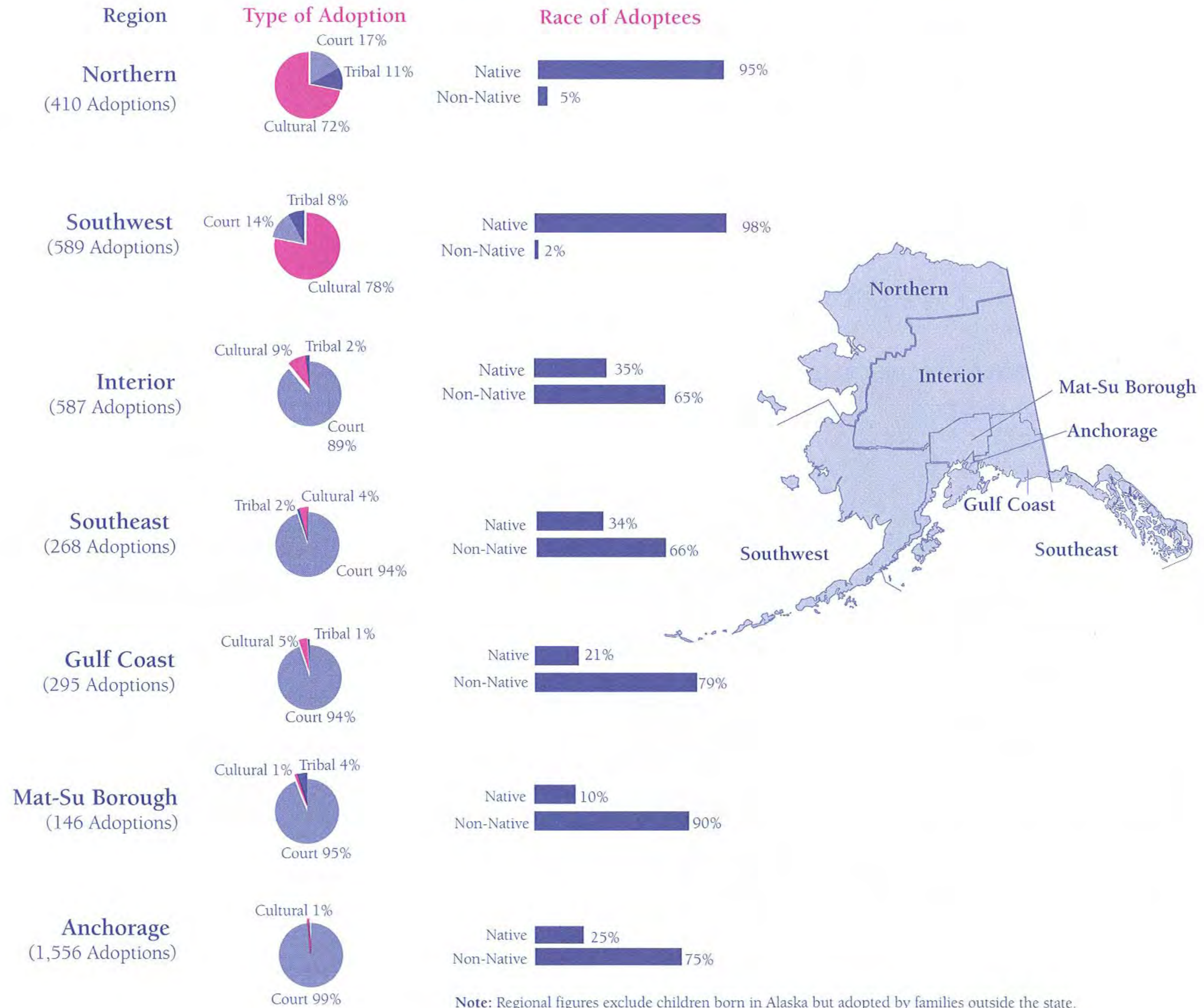
Adoptions are common among extended Native families, and in the past many of those adoptions were informal. Today many adoptions in the Native community are still done without court orders. Under terms of the federal Indian Child Welfare Act, a family with at least one Native parent can (if the birth parents agree) adopt a Native child by applying to the Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics for a new birth certificate, reflecting the adoptive rather than the birth parents' names. These are cultural adoptions and must be approved in advance by local village councils.

In cultural adoptions, the new birth certificate serves as proof of adoption, since there is no court order. As the figure on the facing page shows, in the Northern and Southwest regions, where Alaska Natives make up most of the population, most adoptions are cultural adoptions.

But the state government in recent years has also recognized tribal adoptions, which are approved by orders of tribal courts. There is a small but growing number of tribal adoptions among Native families. In areas where non-Natives are in the majority, almost all adoptions are done through the Alaska court system.



### Regional Picture of Adoption in Alaska, 1999-2003



Note: Regional figures exclude children born in Alaska but adopted by families outside the state.

Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

### WHAT IS KIDS COUNT ALASKA?

Kids Count Alaska is part of a nationwide effort, sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, to collect and publicize information about children's health, safety, and economic status. We draw together information from many sources and present it all in one place. We hope this book gives Alaskans a broad picture of how the state's children are doing and provides parents, policy-makers, and others interested in the welfare of children with information they need to improve life for children and families. Our goals include:

- Broadly distributing information about the status of Alaska's children
- Creating an informed public, motivated to help children
- Presenting additional indicators important to Alaska and regional measures when possible

### WHO ARE ALASKA'S CHILDREN?

More than 203,000 children age 18 or younger live in Alaska. That's just under a third of Alaska's total population of nearly 650,000. Overall, boys outnumber girls by about 5%, and in all age groups there are more boys than girls, as the table above shows.

More than 40% of all Alaska's children live in Anchorage, the state's largest city (see map on facing page). In the rest of the state, the shares range from 5% in the Northern region to 15% in the Interior.

White children make up the majority of children in Alaska—about 64%—but 25% are Alaska Native, giving Alaska by far the largest percentage of Native American children in any state. And while other minorities make up much smaller shares of children—from about 1% to 4%—the state's children have become more diverse in the past 15 years.

	1990				2003				
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
<b>Total Alaska Population</b>	550,043	289,868	260,175	648,280	333,686	314,594			
<b>Children by Age</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>		<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>				
Under 1	11,963	6.6%	6,109	5,854	10,195	5.0%	5,268	4,927	
1-4	44,014	24.5%	22,616	21,398	41,299	20.3%	21,301	19,998	
5-9	51,508	28.6%	26,543	24,965	50,947	25.0%	25,963	24,984	
10-14	42,939	23.9%	22,333	20,606	57,167	28.1%	29,273	27,894	
15	7,652	4.3%	4,021	3,631	11,232	5.5%	5,770	5,462	
16	7,341	4.1%	3,786	3,555	11,021	5.4%	5,687	5,334	
17	7,453	4.1%	3,887	3,566	10,960	5.3%	5,722	5,238	
18	7,069	3.9%	3,834	3,235	10,647	4.2%	5,498	5,149	
<b>Total 18 and under</b>	<b>179,939</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>93,129</b>	<b>86,810</b>	<b>203,468</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>104,482</b>	<b>98,986</b>	

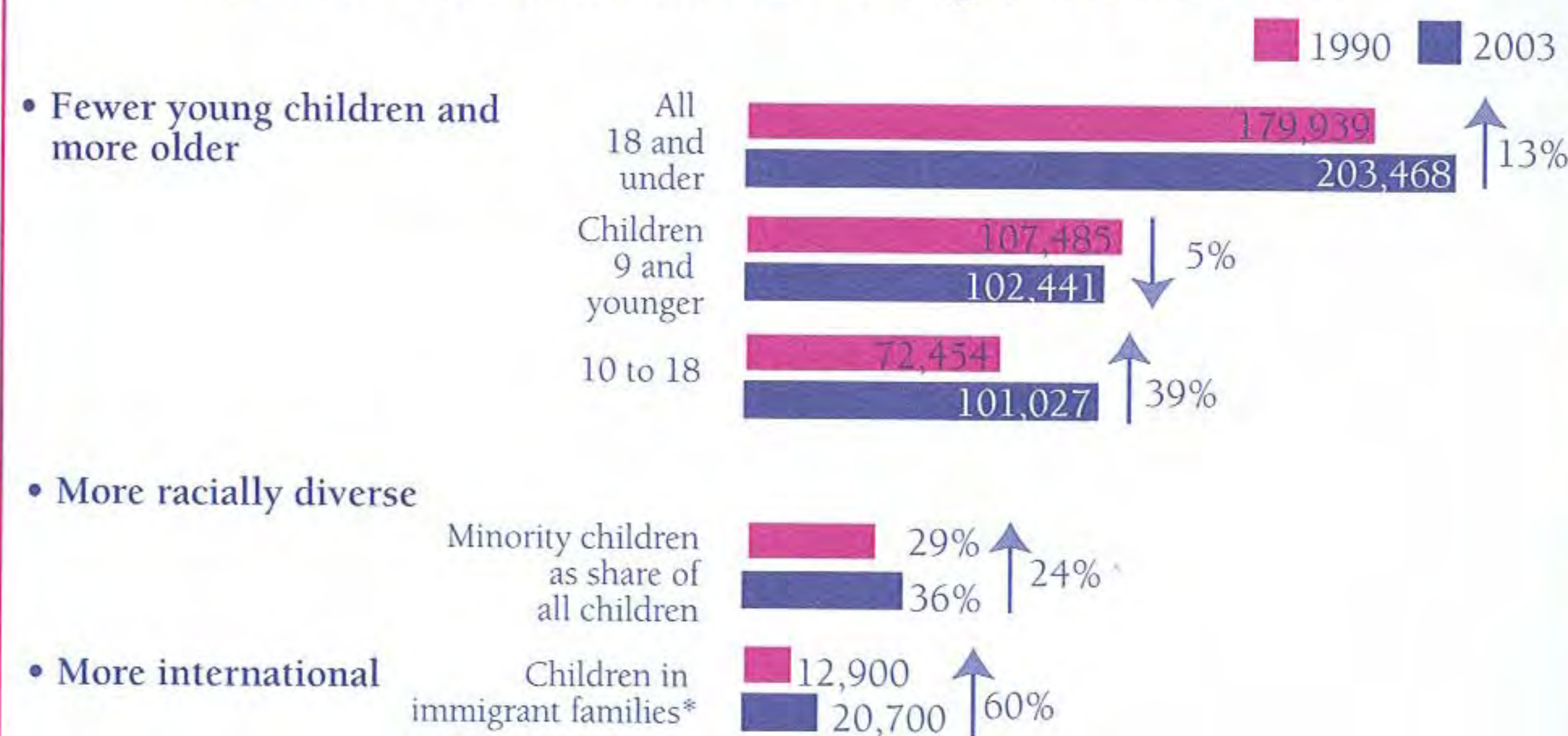
Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development estimates

As the adjacent figure shows, minority children made up 36% of all children in 2003, up from 29% in 1990.

Another change since 1990 is that Alaska has fewer young children and more older children. Numbers of children ages 10 to 18 went up nearly 40% from 1990 to 2003, while the number age 9 or younger dropped 5%.

Yet another change is growth in the number of children from immigrant families. While they still account for only about 1% of all children in the state, their numbers grew

### How Did Alaska's Children Change, 1990 to 2003?



\*Children born outside the U.S. or having at least one foreign-born parent.

Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation; Population Reference Bureau; Kids Count Alaska

more than 60% between 1990 and 2003. A final sign of the growing diversity and internationalism of Alaska's children is the figure on page 8, showing languages spoken by Anchorage school children.

**Boroughs and Census Areas, by Region****•Municipality of Anchorage****•Matanuska-Susitna Borough****•Gulf Coast Region**

Kenai Peninsula Borough  
Kodiak Island Borough  
Valdez-Cordova Census Area

**•Interior Region**

Denali Borough  
Fairbanks North Star Borough  
Southeast Fairbanks Census Area  
Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area

**•Northern Region**

Nome Census Area  
North Slope Borough  
Northwest Arctic Borough

**•Southeast Region**

Haines Borough  
City and Borough of Juneau  
Ketchikan Gateway Borough  
Prince of Wales/Outer Ketchikan Census Area  
City and Borough of Sitka  
Skagway-Hoonah-Angoon Census Area  
Yakutat Borough  
Wrangell-Petersburg Census Area

**•Southwest Region**

Aleutians East Borough  
Aleutians West Census Area  
Bethel Census Area  
Bristol Bay Borough  
Dillingham Census Area  
Lake and Peninsula Borough  
Wade Hampton Census Area

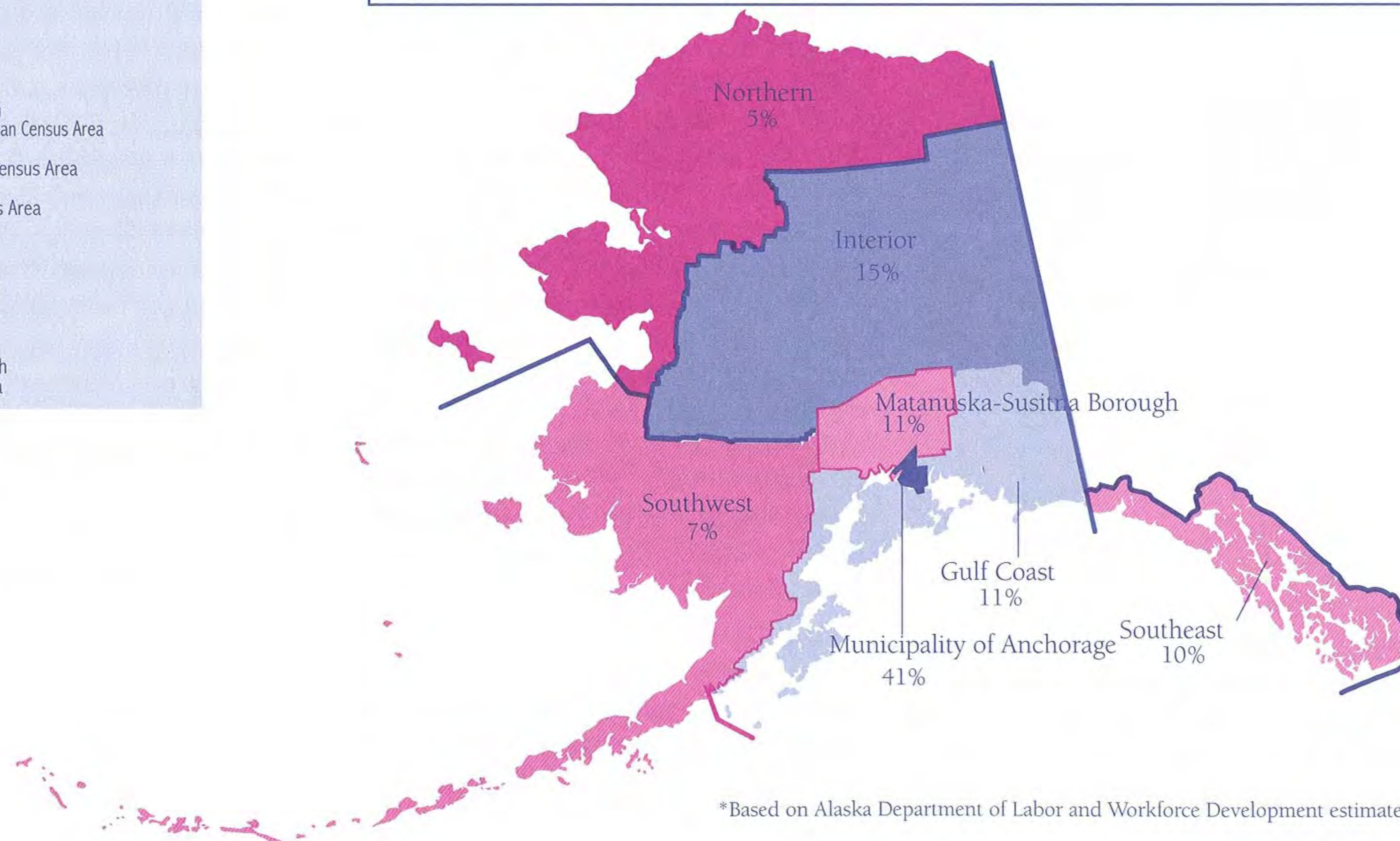
**RACIAL COMPOSITION OF CHILDREN (19 AND UNDER) BY REGION, 2003 (IN PERCENTAGES)**

	White	Alaska Native <sup>a</sup>	Black	Asian	NH/PI <sup>b</sup>	Mixed Race <sup>c</sup>
<b>Anchorage</b>	69.3	12.7	6.3	5.7	1.3	4.7
<b>Mat-Su</b>	83.6	12.8	0.9	0.7	0.2	1.8
<b>Gulf Coast</b>	76.2	16.6	0.6	4.5	0.4	1.8
<b>Interior</b>	70.1	18.9	5.9	1.5	0.3	3.2
<b>Northern</b>	8.3	88.9	0.2	1.5	0.3	0.9
<b>Southeast</b>	63.1	30.0	0.6	3.6	0.4	2.3
<b>Southwest</b>	9.8	87.5	0.3	1.4	0.1	1.0
<b>Alaska</b>	63.7	25.0	3.7	3.7	0.7	3.1

<sup>a</sup>Includes Native alone or in combination with other races. <sup>b</sup>Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

<sup>c</sup>Children of Native and another race are included in "Alaska Native."

Source: 2000 U.S. Census, adjusted by Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development for errors in age imputation



\*Based on Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development estimates



Anchorage is home to about one in four Alaskans, and people unfamiliar with the city may be surprised by its growing international population, as reflected in the adjacent figure. Students in Anchorage public schools speak dozens of languages other than English as primary or secondary languages. The most common is Spanish, followed by Tagalog (a language of the Philippines), Samoan, Hmong (Southeast Asia), and Korean. There are also significant numbers who speak Yupik, Inupiaq, and other Alaska Native languages.

**Languages Spoken by Anchorage School District Students, 2004**

Total students: 49,479



1. Spanish	1,741
2. Tagalog (Philippines)	850
3. Samoan (Pacific Island)	759
4. Hmong (Southeast Asia)	699
5. Korean	384
6. Lao (Laos)	320
7. Yupik	278
8. Mien (Thailand)	157
9. Russian	136
10. Inupiaq	97
All other languages	861
Total	6,282

Source: Anchorage School District

**CHANGE IN SOURCE OF SAMPLE DATA**

Before we look at the Alaska/U.S. comparisons shown on the facing page, we want to talk about the new data source for several of the national Kids Count indicators. As of this year, the Kids Count program is using a new data source—the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS)—for indicators

that are based on information from a sample of the population. It formerly used data from the bureau’s Current Population Survey. The indicators based on the ACS sample are the share of children living in poverty; the share of children in single-parent households; the share of children with no parent working full-time; the percentage of teens who drop out of school; and the percentage of teens not in school and not working.

The ACS was started in 2000 and is designed to replace the long form that about one in six U.S. households were asked to complete in the 2000 census and previous 10-year censuses. That long form provided detailed information that was collected only once every 10 years. The ACS promises to provide more timely detailed information. It is also designed to represent places with smaller populations. The Current Population Survey is designed to provide only statewide data and has a small sample size in Alaska. But it was our only source of relatively current data for several indicators until the ACS was established.

However, in the early years the ACS sample was not complete, and most of the interviews were in Anchorage. It has been increasing the number of Alaska interviews every year. By 2005 the ACS in Alaska was at its full sample size, but the Census Bureau was still in the process of making the sample representative of smaller communities across the state. So over time the ACS figures will better represent Alaska, as more places are incorporated in the sample.

**ALASKA/U.S. COMPARISONS**

The table on the facing page shows how Alaska ranks among the states on the national Kids Count indicators. The good news is that Alaska has relatively few babies born with low birth weights and a lower infant mortality rate than in most other states.

The teen birth rate is also falling, and a smaller share of children in Alaska are poor than in many other places. (But as we’ll report in the Economic Well-Being section, the unadjusted national measure of poverty may underestimate poverty in Alaska, where living costs are higher. Alaska also has a unique state program that makes annual payments to all residents, and those payments keep many children and families above the poverty line.)

Alaska ranks close to the national average in the share of children growing up with single parents. In a special analysis in the Economic Well-Being section, we report income, education, and other characteristics of Alaska women raising their children alone.

More disturbing news is that Alaska’s children and teenagers die at higher rates than in most other places; accidents and suicides take an especially high toll. But as we discuss in the Children in Danger section, rates of accidental death have declined in recent years, and the state has established a special council to look at ways of reducing the number of suicides.

Alaska’s teenagers are also more likely than average to drop out of school and to be unemployed. More Alaska children live in households where no parent works full time; that’s especially true in rural areas, where year-round jobs are scarce.

**INTERPRETING THE INDICATORS**

Keep in mind that Alaska has a relatively small number of children, compared with other states, and when you divide them by region, race, and sex, the numbers get much smaller. So rates for many indicators are based on small numbers that can fluctuate considerably from year to year. We try to minimize those fluctuations by using averages over several years.

## 2002-2003 NATIONAL KIDS COUNT INDICATORS, U.S. AVERAGE AND ALASKA

	U.S. Rate	U.S. No. of Cases	Alaska Rate	Alaska No. of Cases	Alaska Rank in U.S.
<b>Alaska At or Better Than National Average</b>					
Percentage of babies with low birth weight (2002)	7.8%	314,077	5.8%	579	1st
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births) <sup>b</sup> (2002)	7.0	28,034	5.5	55	7th
Percentage of children living in poverty <sup>a</sup> (2003)	18%	12,673,100	14%	26,000	16th
Teen birth rate (per 1,000 girls 15-19) <sup>b</sup> (2002)	43	425,493	40	1,068	25th
<b>Alaska Worse Than National Average</b>					
Percentage of teens (ages 16-19) who drop out of school (2003)	8%	1,131,000	10%	4,000	39th
Percentage of teens not in school and not working (2003)	9%	1,266,000	13%	6,000	48th
Percentage of children in single-parent households (2003)	30%	22,081,000	31%	58,000	33rd
Percentage of children with no parent working full-time (2003)	33%	23,676,000	40%	75,000	48th
Child death rate (per 100,000 children 1-14) <sup>b</sup> (2002)	21	12,008	29	42	44th
Teen death rate (per 100,000 teens 15-19) <sup>b</sup> (2002)	68	13,812	76	43	34th

<sup>a</sup> Based on the U.S. Census Bureau's poverty threshold figures, which are not adjusted for Alaska's higher living costs and may underestimate poverty in Alaska.

<sup>b</sup> These rates are based on small numbers of deaths and can therefore fluctuate sharply from year to year.

**Note:** Alaska figures in this table may differ from later figures in the regional graphs. The figures above are from the national Kids Count program; our regional figures may be based on different years and are sometimes measured differently.

**Source:** Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Kids Count Data Book*, 2005

**GOOD NEWS SINCE 1990**

The recent rates of death among infants, children, and teenagers in Alaska are considerably below what they were a decade ago.

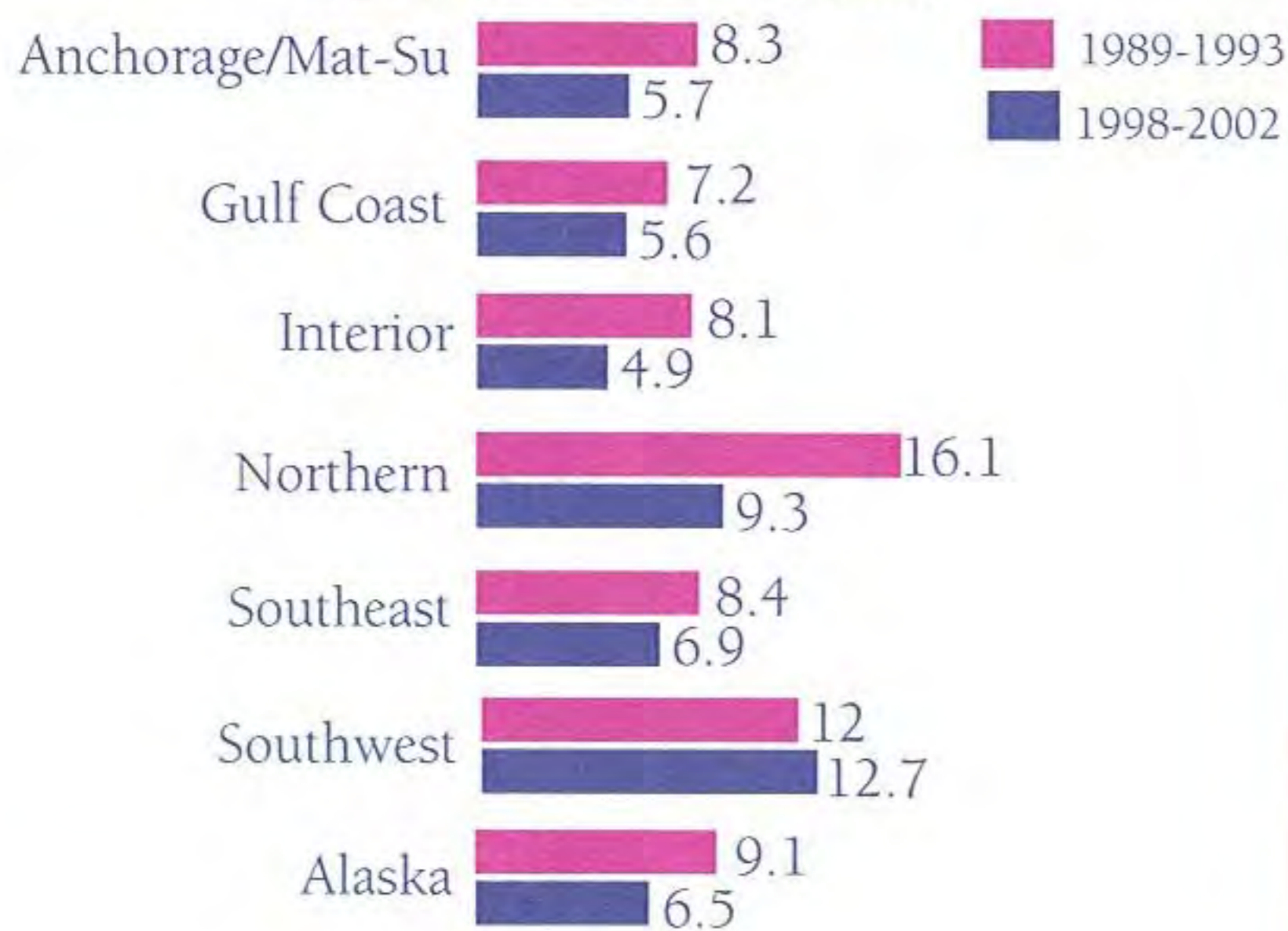
**Infant Mortality Down**

The rate of infant mortality dropped more than 25% statewide between 1989-1993 and 1998-2002. In 2002 Alaska had among the lowest rates of infant mortality in the nation. Rates also declined in all regions except the Southwest.

Several things have contributed to declining infant mortality in Alaska, including improved prenatal and neonatal care and more parental awareness of ways to help prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. In particular, improved sanitation, housing, and medical care in rural villages have created healthier environments and contributed to a long-term decline in infant mortality among Alaska Natives.

**Alaska Infant Mortality Rates**

(Per 1,000 Live Births; Annual Averages, 1989-1993 and 1998-2002)



Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

**Fewer Children Die**

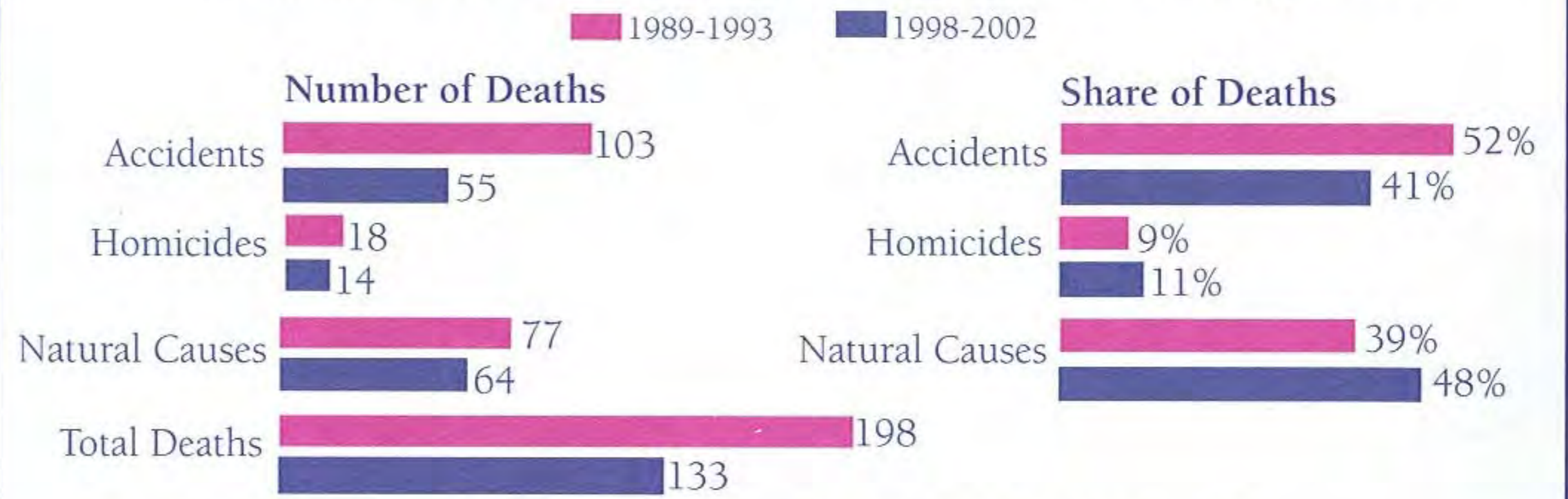
Both the rate of death among young children (ages 1 to 9) and the actual number of deaths were down in the most recent period. That happened even as the total number of children in Alaska grew.

A decline in accidental deaths explains much of the improvement. During the period 1989-1993, a total of 103 children were killed by accidents. By contrast, during 1998-2002, that number was just 55—down nearly 50%. Analysts credit more widespread use of life vests, seat belts, and other safety equipment with saving many children’s lives.

The number of children who died of natural causes was also down in the most recent period, from 77 during 1989-1993 to 64 during 1998-2002. That drop probably reflects improved treatments for childhood illnesses and increased availability of medical care for rural residents. And the number of young children who were murdered dropped from 18 to 14—but any number of murdered children is a shameful statistic.

Fewer children dying translated into a lower rate of death. The statewide rate dropped about 25%, and in some regions—the Gulf Coast, Northern, and Southeast—the rate dropped considerably more. But in the Southwest, the child death rate remained unchanged. And

**Numbers and Causes of Death, Alaska Children Ages 1-9**

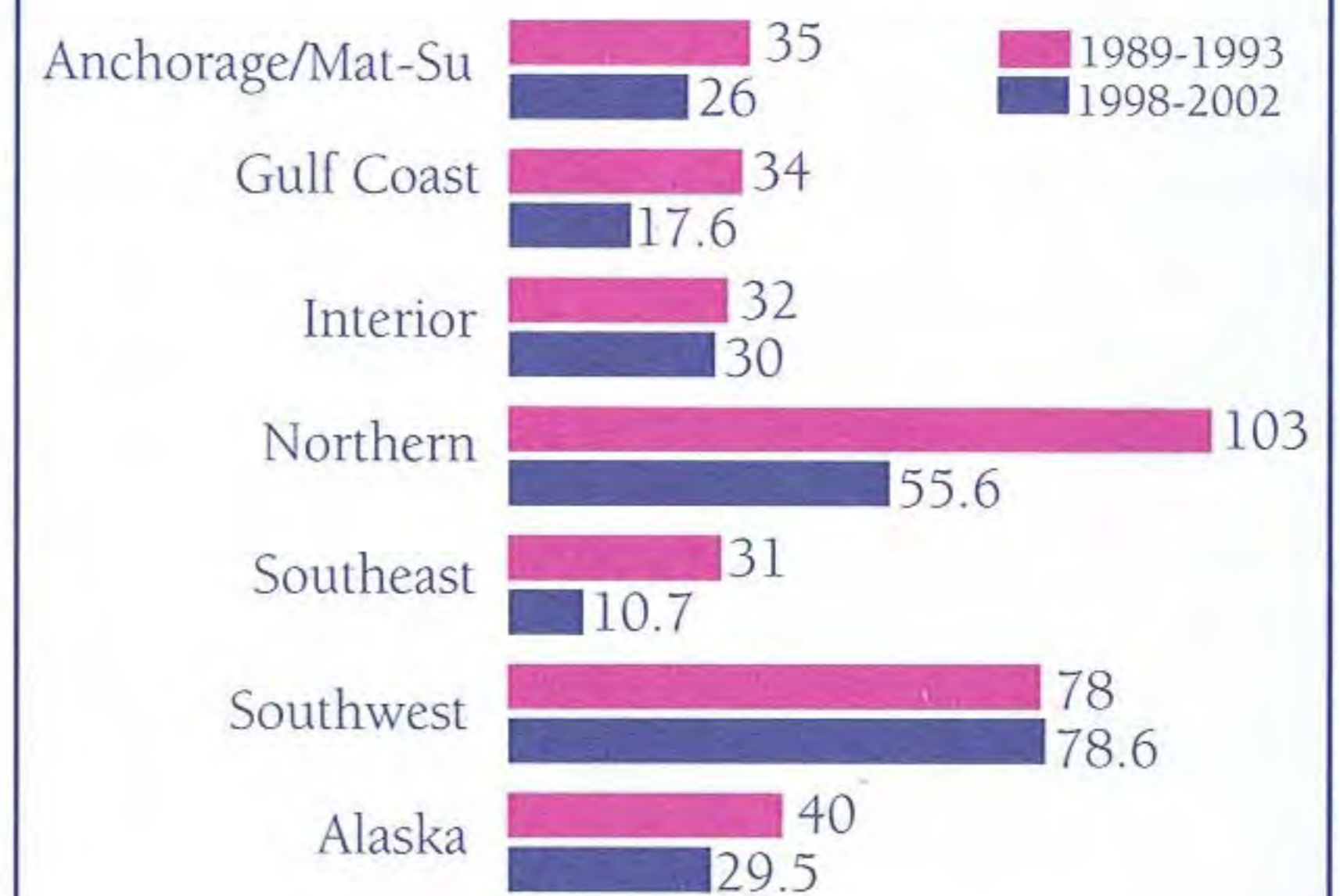


Note: Total Number of Children Ages 1-9: 1990: 95,522; 2000: 96,762

Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics; U.S. Census Bureau

**Child Death Rate By Region**

(Per 1,000 Children Ages 1-14; Annual Averages, 1989-1993 and 1998-2002)



Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

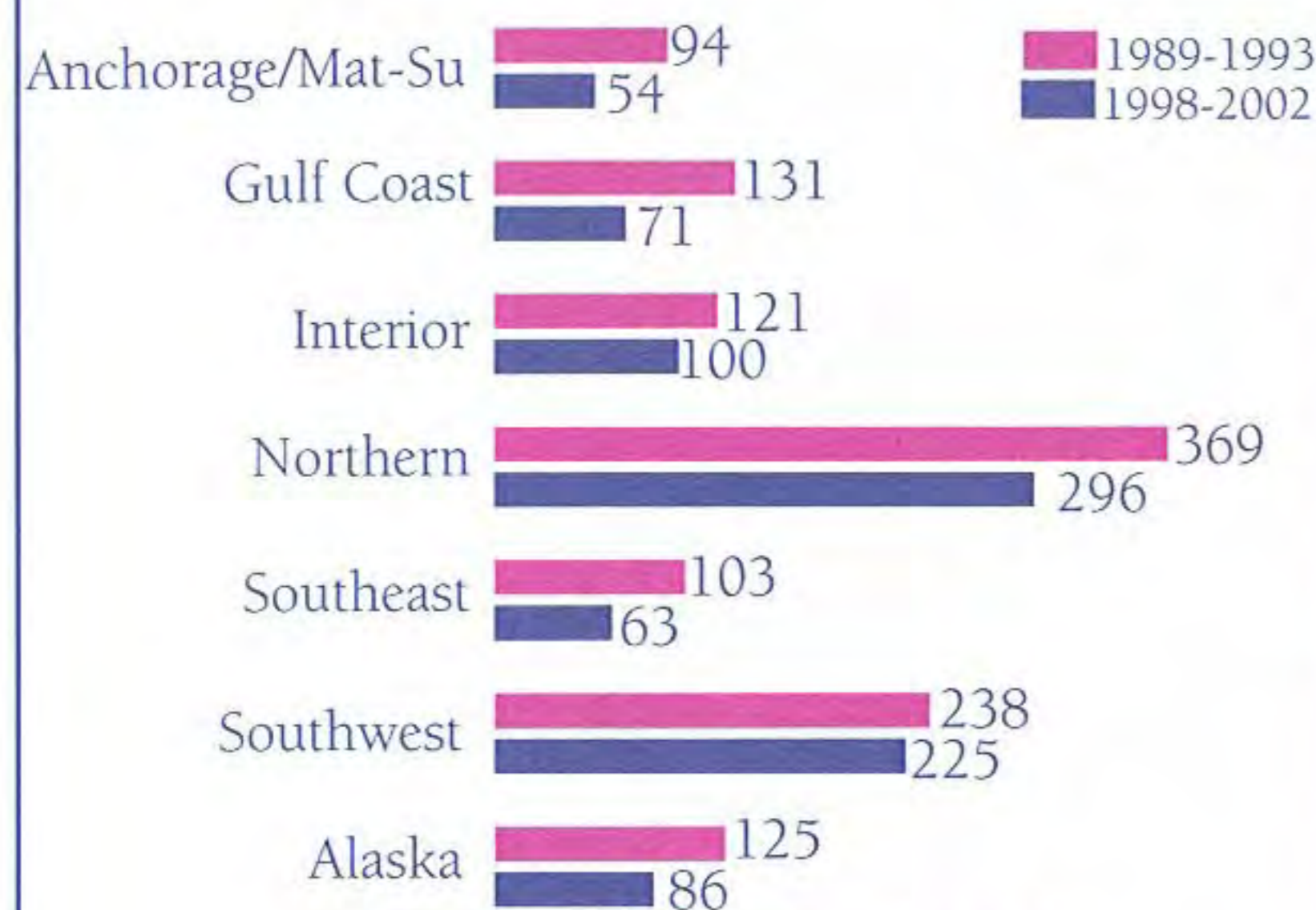
despite the recent declines, Alaska still has among the highest rates of child death nationwide.

**Teen Death Rates Decline**

Rates of violent death—death by accident, suicide, or homicide—among Alaska’s teenagers also declined in the past decade. The statewide rate dropped almost a third between 1989-1993 and 1998-2002. Rates were also down in all regions. But

### Teen Violent Death Rate\*

(Per 1,000 Teens Ages 15-19; Annual Averages 1989-1993 and 1998-2002)



\*Death by accident, suicide, or homicide  
Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

table shows a clear illustration of just how high the suicide rate in remote rural areas is. Outside Anchorage and the Interior (including Fairbanks), the rate of suicide among teenagers in the remainder of the state nearly equals the rate of accidental death. That is staggering, if you keep in mind that in the U.S. as a whole, accidents kill nearly five times more teenagers.

### SNAPSHOT OF SINGLE MOTHERS

For this year's data book, the Institute of Social and Economic Research did a special analysis of the characteristics of Alaska women who are raising children alone, using detailed data from the 2000 U.S. census. These are single women with children and no other adults living in their households. Not included in the analysis are single mothers with other adults in their households. Those other adults could be unmarried partners or relatives who provide some help in raising the children.

### TEEN VIOLENT DEATH RATES, BY MANNER AND REGION

RATE PER 100,000 TEENS 15-19, 5-YEAR AVERAGE, 1998-2002

REGION	ACCIDENTS	ASSAULT/HOMICIDE	SUICIDE
Anchorage	27.6	8.2	13.3
Interior	54.0	7.7	38.6
Remainder of State	57.9	2.6	52.6
Alaska	45.5	5.6	35.1

Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

Alaska Native and Black women make up a disproportionate share of single mothers. Incomes of single mothers are less than half the median among all households, and nearly half of them are among the poorest households. Despite their low incomes, more than 80% are in the labor force—either with jobs or looking for jobs. And their education levels are relatively high. Only 8% lack high-school diplomas, and 15% hold at least four-year degrees.

The Children in Single-Parent Households section (page 27) talks more about families headed by single parents.

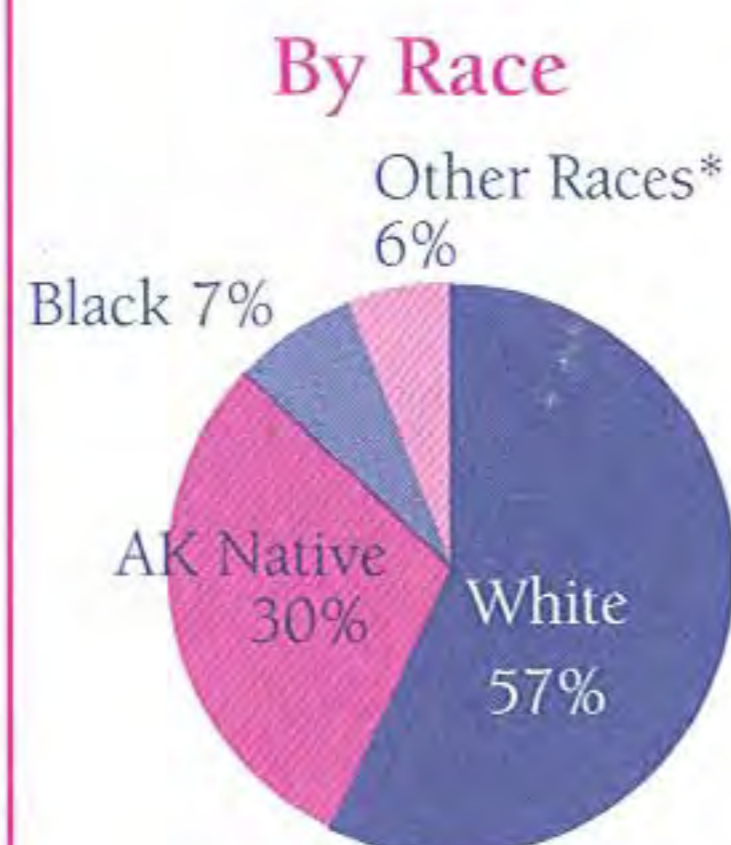
rates of teenage death in Alaska remain among the highest in the U.S, and the rates in the rural Northern and Southwest regions remain about three times higher than the statewide rate.

And while the overall rate of violent death among teenagers is down, that's largely due to a drop in accidental deaths. The rate of suicide among Native teenagers in rural places has not dropped. The adjacent table shows rates of death by accident, homicide, and suicide in Anchorage and other areas of the state.

Anchorage has a higher rate of teen deaths from homicide, but its rates of accidental death and suicide are far lower than in more rural areas. The

### Who Are the Alaska Women Raising Children Alone?\*

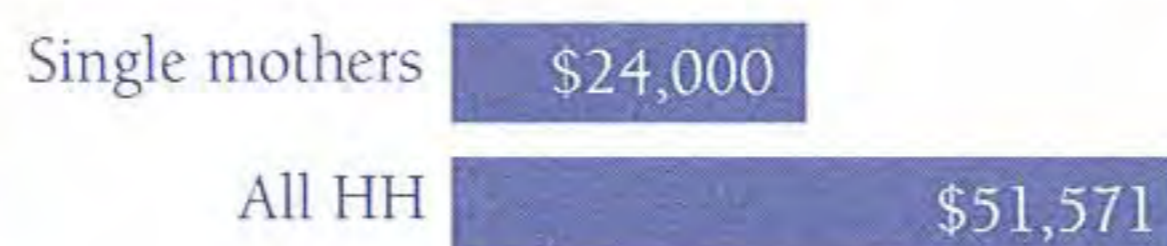
(As of 2000, 11,631 Women with 20,755 Children)



\*Asian, Pacific Islander, and non-Native mixed race

### By Income

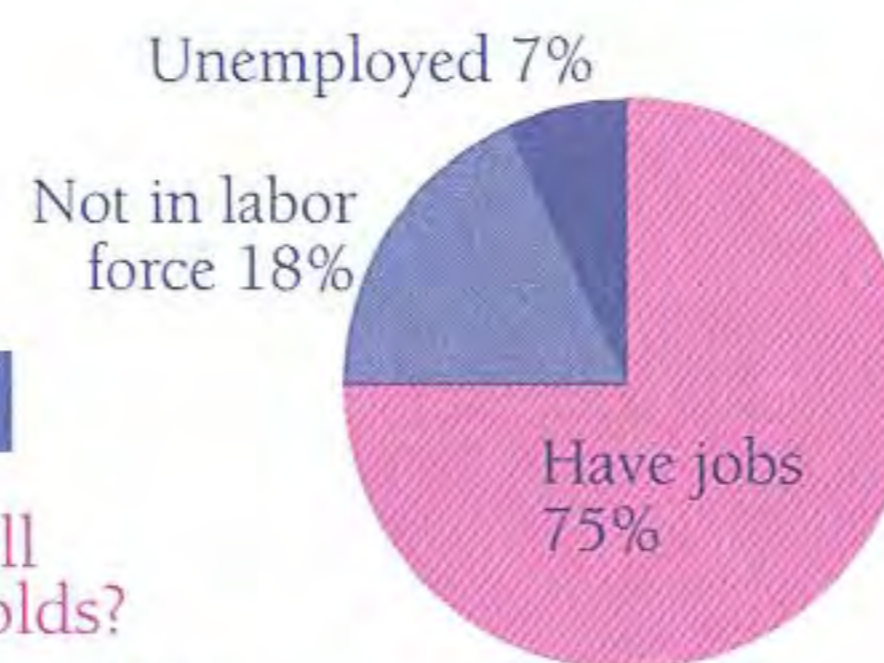
Median 1999 Income



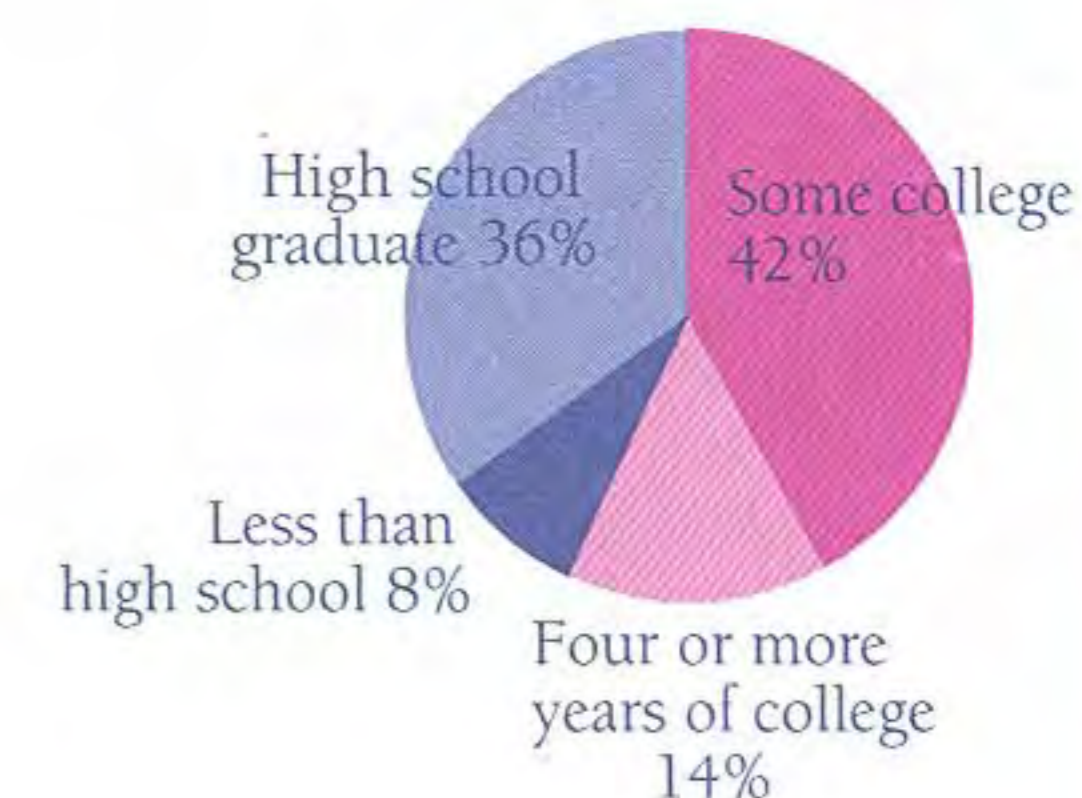
### Where Do Single Mothers Fall in Income Range of All Households?

Bottom 20% of HH: 49% of single mothers  
Top 20% of HH: 1.4% of single mothers

### By Job Status



### By Education



\*Single women with children and no other adult in the household  
Source: ISER calculations with U.S. census micro data



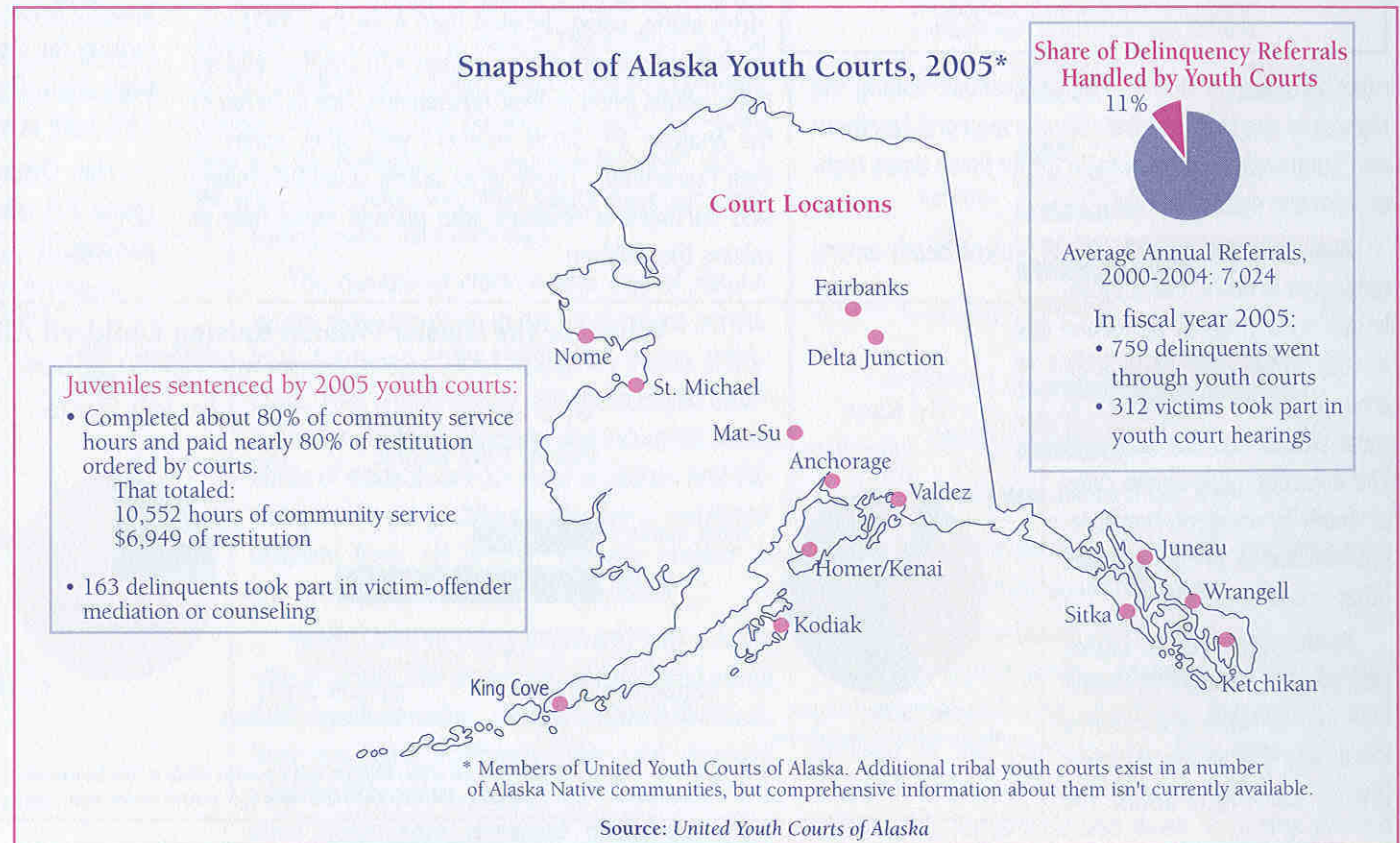
## ALASKA YOUTH COURTS

This year for the first time, Kids Count Alaska looks at youth courts in the state. Such youth courts are a growing alternative to state juvenile justice systems across the country. They offer juveniles who've committed non-violent crimes a chance to be judged by their peers and to make amends through things like community service and payments to victims.

Youth courts are a relatively recent phenomenon, so few studies of their effectiveness are available. But limited available information indicates that juveniles who go through youth courts are less likely to commit more crimes than those who go through standard juvenile justice systems. They're also less expensive than traditional juvenile courts.

Fourteen courts currently belong to the United Youth Courts of Alaska (as the map shows). Anchorage's youth court was the first and it has won national awards. There are also a number of additional tribal youth courts, operating under the auspices of Alaska Native tribal organizations, not shown on the map because we have little information about them.

The map provides a snapshot of youth court operations in 2005, and the Juvenile Justice section provides a more detailed discussion. We hope to continue coverage of Alaska youth courts in next year's data book.



# Infancy



*Alaska wildflowers are beautiful and diverse – just like the adopted children their families told us about. Turn the page to read about the Terry family.*

*Primrose  
(Primula cuneifolia)*



### THE TERRY FAMILY

Trina and Bruce Terry of Anchorage believe adoption is “a beautiful way to be a family.” They have five adopted daughters—11-year-old twins and younger daughters ages 10, 8, and 6.

All their children came to them through the state’s foster care system. All were born into families that abused alcohol or drugs, and all have learning problems or special medical needs. Trina acknowledges that raising five children with special needs “has its challenges,” but emphasizes that she and her husband have “the better end of the deal” because their children bring them such joy.

The Terrys decided to adopt children after they had been married 10 years. As the first step toward adoption, they became foster parents. Under the state system, foster parents can begin adoption proceedings after a foster child has been with them six months, if the child’s birth parents have relinquished their rights or had their rights terminated.

Their twin daughters came to them as infants who had been born two months premature. Their next daughter was 6 months old when she came to them, and the next was 15 months old. Soon after that they adopted their fifth daughter.

The Terrys credit the state Office of Children’s Services (OCS) with helping them get the speech, vision, and physical therapy their children need. Trina describes OCS support and state assistance programs as “fantastic” and says that without such programs they could not provide the help their children need.

Both Trina and Bruce are very involved in their children’s education, and Trina is a teacher herself. Because of their children’s special needs and therapy schedules, they first attended a private school. More recently the Terrys and two other parents established a home-school co-op, with a certified teacher. But the Terrys plan to enroll their children in public school as soon as possible, to give them critical “real world” classroom experience.

The Terry children are of Laotian-Thai, African-American-German, and Caucasian descent. Trina reports that their children have just begun to notice that not all families are multi-ethnic. Some of the children are in contact with their birth families; that’s a choice the Terrys give their children as they get older. Trina tries to collect pictures from the children’s birth families—so the children will have an answer when someone asks, “Who do you look like?”

Trina also reports that her children believe putting babies up for adoption is the right thing to do. That became clear to her not long ago, when a friend from their church had a baby girl. The Terry children saw the new mother bringing her baby to church week after week. Trina realized something about that was upsetting them. Finally they told her what was bothering them: “Why hasn’t that woman given up her baby for adoption yet? Doesn’t she realize there are families out there who want to adopt her?”

That pretty much says it all about Trina and Bruce Terry: they are raising five adopted daughters who feel so loved they can’t understand why a mother wouldn’t put her baby up for adoption.

**DEFINITION**

The Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics now uses the Adequacy of Prenatal Care Utilization (APNCU) index to assess the adequacy of prenatal care among expectant mothers. That's a fairly new index; in previous years, the bureau used the Kessner index. But the National Center for Health Statistics reports that the APNCU index is an improved measure.<sup>1</sup>

That index is calculated with information from birth certificates about when mothers began getting prenatal care and how many times they saw their doctors during pregnancy. It classifies prenatal care based on the expected number of visits for uncomplicated pregnancies. That number varies, depending on when a pregnant woman first sees a doctor and the gestational age of her baby when it's born. The index has four categories of prenatal care:

- (1) Inadequate care: the mother made fewer than half the expected visits.
- (2) Intermediate care: the mother made between 50% and 79% of the expected visits.
- (3) Adequate care: the mother made at least 80% of the expected visits.
- (4) Adequate plus: the mother made at least 10% more than the expected number of visits.

Mothers whose prenatal care falls into the first two categories—inadequate and intermediate—are classified as having “less than adequate” care, as shown in the bar graphs on the next page.

The Bureau of Vital Statistics has also changed how it classifies women whose level of prenatal care is unknown. Previously it counted those mothers in the “inadequate” care group; now it excludes them from the calculations. So levels of prenatal care reported in earlier data books are not comparable to those shown here.

And finally, reporting of prenatal care by the mother's race has also changed, because the 2000 U.S. census changed the way respondents could report their race. The figures for the most recent years separate data for Asian and Pacific Island mothers; previously the two were combined.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

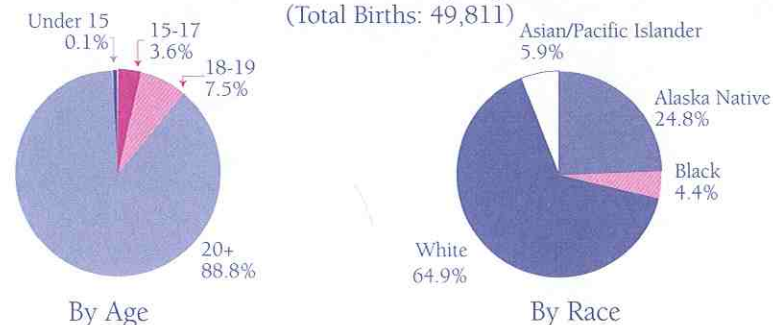
Early and continuing prenatal care promotes healthy mothers and babies; it also gives doctors the chance to spot and perhaps prevent developing problems. Among its proved benefits is reducing the number of babies born with low birth weight, one of the leading causes of infant mortality.<sup>2</sup>

Prenatal visits can also help discourage pregnant women from smoking—which is linked to low birth weight. The share of pregnant women who smoke in Alaska has dropped, from 23% in 1990 to about 17% by 2000. But that percentage is still considerably above the national average of 12% in 2000.<sup>3</sup> The National Center for Environmental Health is planning a new stop-smoking initiative among pregnant Alaska Native women (who smoke at higher rates than non-Natives) and a new study assessing the fetal effects of smokeless tobacco.<sup>4</sup>

One piece of good news for pregnant women in Alaska is that wild salmon and other fish from Alaska waters have such low levels of mercury and other contaminants that they don't pose health risks. In fact, the Alaska Division of Public Health recommends unrestricted consumption of fish and marine mammals from Alaska waters.<sup>5</sup>

**Births in Alaska,\* 1998-2002, By Age and Race of Mother**

(Total Births: 49,811)



\*Excludes small numbers of births to mothers whose race is unknown.

Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

That's not true of mackerel, swordfish, and other fish from elsewhere in the U.S., which have levels of mercury high enough to harm fetal brain development. Dieticians have long promoted eating fish for healthy fetal development—but not if those fish have significant levels of mercury and other contaminants.<sup>6</sup>

**DATA**

Close to 50,000 babies were born in Alaska from 1998 through 2002. Most were born to mothers at least 20 years old. But during that 5-year period about 1,700 babies—or 3.5%—were born to mothers age 17 or younger, and another 3,700 or so were born to girls 18 and 19. So despite the good news we report later on the declining birth rates among teenagers, a thousand or so babies are born to teenage mothers in Alaska every year.

About 65% of those who had babies from 1998 to 2002 were White, 25% were Alaska Native, 4% were Black, and 6% were Asian or Pacific Islanders.

As the table on the next page shows, Alaska women are more likely than women nationwide to get late or no prenatal care—and less likely to get care in the critical first trimester.





**PERCENTAGE OF MOTHERS RECEIVING LATE OR NO PRENATAL CARE,\* 2003**

U.S. 3.5%                      Alaska 4.7%

**PERCENTAGE OF MOTHERS RECEIVING CARE IN FIRST TRIMESTER, 2003**

U.S. 84.1%                      Alaska 81.3%

\*Final 2002; preliminary 2003

Sources: National Vital Statistics Report, Vol. 53, No. 9, November 23, 2004; Children's Defense Fund

Nearly 5% of pregnant women in Alaska got late or no prenatal care in 2003, compared with the U.S. average of 3.5%. And only about 81% of pregnant women in Alaska saw doctors during the first trimester, compared with 84% nationwide.

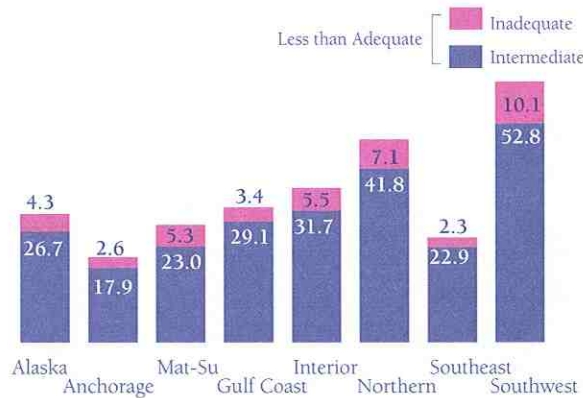
The bar graphs show the average shares of pregnant women in Alaska—by age, race, and region—who got less than adequate prenatal care in the period 1998-2002.

About a third of Alaska mothers of all ages get less than adequate prenatal care, but it is the youngest mothers who really fail to see doctors often enough during their pregnancies. In the period 1998-2002, about half the mothers 17 or younger got less than adequate care, as did 40% of those 18 and 19.

It comes as no surprise that pregnant women who have the easiest access to larger medical facilities in Anchorage and other urban areas tend to get more prenatal care, and those in the most remote areas—the Northern and Southwest regions—get less. About 21% of pregnant women in Anchorage got less than adequate care during 1998 to 2002, while half of those in the Northern region and two thirds of those in the Southwest got less than adequate care.

White and Black mothers are the likeliest to get adequate prenatal care, while Alaska Native and Pacific Island mothers are the least likely. The high share of Alaska Natives who get less than adequate care—nearly 50% from 1998-2002—is partly explained by the fact that many live in small, remote villages. It's less clear why Asian and Pacific Island women also tend to visit doctors less often when they're pregnant.

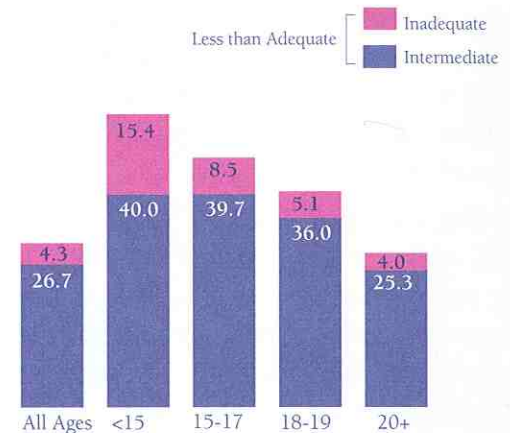
**Percentage of Mothers Receiving Less Than Adequate Care, By Region (5-Year Average, 1998-2002)**



Note: See text for description of recent changes in definitions and method of calculation.

Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

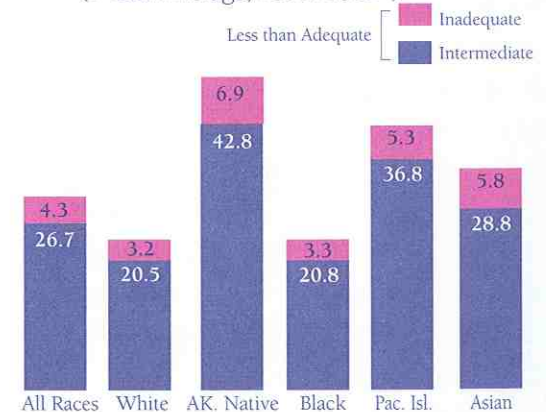
**Percentage of Mothers Receiving Less Than Adequate Care, By Age (5-Year Average, 1998-2002)**



Note: See text for description of recent changes in definitions and method of calculation.

Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

**Percentage of Mothers Receiving Less Than Adequate Care, By Race (5-Year Average, 1998-2002\*)**



\* Figures for Asian and Pacific Islanders (including Native Hawaiians) are averages for 2000-02.

Note: See text for description of recent changes in definitions and method of calculation.

Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

Percent of Babies With Low Birth Weight  
Trend 1985-2002



There are also economic costs. Many babies with low birth weight are born prematurely, and a recent estimate put the average hospital costs for premature infants nationwide at \$79,000—compared with \$1,500 for babies born without complications.<sup>9</sup>

Growing numbers of multiple births across the country are contributing to an increase in the percentage of babies nationwide born weighing under 5.5 pounds. In Alaska, multiple births increased from 2.3% of all births in 1990 to 3.1% in 2003—accounting for one quarter of babies with low birth weight born in Alaska.<sup>10</sup>

**DEFINITION**

Infants born weighing less than 5.5 pounds (2,500 grams) are classified as having low birth weight. Within that category are babies born at very low birth weight—about 3 pounds, or less than 1,500 grams. Regional data reflect the mother’s place of residence, not the baby’s place of birth.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

We’ve said it in every Kids Count Alaska Data Book, but it bears repeating: cigarette smoking is the biggest single cause—and the most preventable cause—of low birth weight. Smoking accounts for an estimated 20% to 30% of babies with low birth weight nationwide.<sup>7</sup> Other causes also contribute but are less well understood.

Being born that small is second only to birth defects as the leading cause of infant mortality nationwide. Very small babies who live are much more likely to have long-term disabilities.<sup>8</sup>

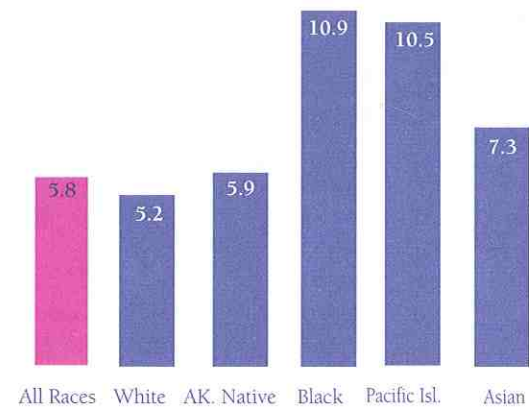
**DATA**

At 5.8%, Alaska had the lowest rate of babies with low birth weight nationwide in 2002. Alaska’s rate has consistently been below the U.S. average since 1985—but it has trended up, just as the national average has.

From 1998-2002, an average of just under 6% of Alaska babies were born at low birth weight. Rates in most regions were similar, but Anchorage’s rate was highest at 6.3% and Southeast’s lowest at 3.8%.

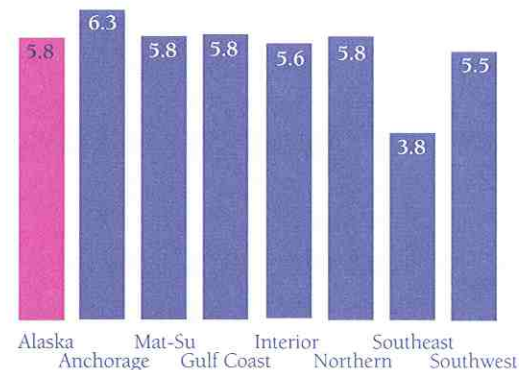
Shares of babies with low birth weight varied considerably by race in recent years, from lows of under 6% among White and Alaska Native mothers to highs of nearly 11% among Black and Pacific Island mothers.

Percent of Alaska Babies With Low Birth Weight, By Race  
(5-Year Average, 1998-2002\*)

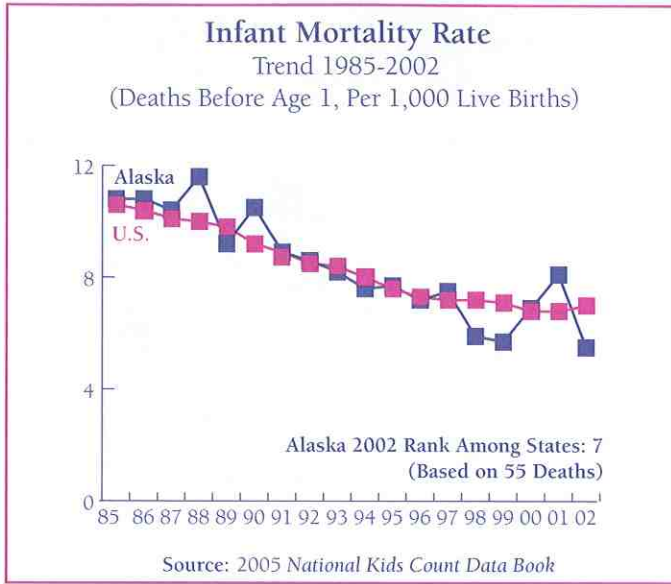


\*Figures for Asian and Pacific Islanders (including Native Hawaiians) are averages for 2000-2002.  
Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

Percent of Alaska Babies With Low Birth Weight, By Region  
(5-Year Average, 1998-2002)



Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics



**DEFINITION**

The infant mortality rate is the number of deaths among infants under one year, per 1,000 live births. Infant deaths are recorded by where they lived, not where they died.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

The infant mortality rate is a sign of how good living conditions are—whether the food, housing, sanitation, and health care in a given place are adequate for children to survive and grow. The rate nationwide has declined sharply since the 1980s—but by the end of the 1990s, 27 countries still had lower rates than the U.S.<sup>11</sup>

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention attribute that relatively high U.S. rate largely to differences in infant mortality by race.<sup>12</sup> Black infants die at more than twice the national average—a rate that is in turn strongly linked to the high rate of babies with low birth weight born to Black mothers. As we see in the figure on the next page, low birth weight is the second leading cause of infant mortality nationwide.

Analysts don't understand why more Black infants are born very small and are more likely to die in their first year. The fact that Black Americans on average have less access to prenatal and other health care, and are more likely to be poor, explains some but not all the difference.<sup>13</sup>

Another factor that contributes to the higher U.S. infant mortality rate is that American Indian and Alaska Native babies nationwide die of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) at twice the rate among White infants. Again, the reasons for that disparity aren't all understood. The Indian Health Service reports that improved access to prenatal care, advising parents to place infants on their backs to sleep, and stop-smoking campaigns have the potential to reduce SIDS.<sup>14</sup>

The higher rates of infant mortality among Black and Native American children help explain why the overall U.S. infant mortality rate remains higher than in two dozen other countries. But those higher rates among some minorities don't explain why the U.S. rate has stopped declining, as the trend graph shows.

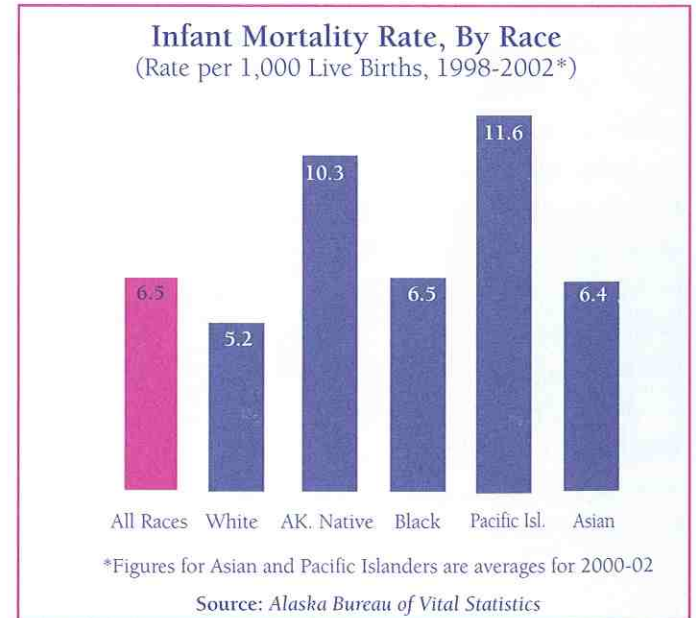
Analysts believe the reverse in the long-term trend is due to the growing number of premature babies who are born at low birth weight and therefore face a much higher risk of dying. There are more underweight babies largely because of (1) growing numbers of multiple as well as single births to mothers who use fertility treatments; and (2) growing numbers of older women having babies. Women who use fertility treatments or are older tend to have more premature babies.<sup>15</sup>

**DATA**

In 2002 Alaska had among the lowest rates of infant mortality in the country, and the long-term trend has been down. But as the trend graph shows, Alaska's infant mortality rate can fluctuate sharply from year to year—because a relatively small change in the number of actual deaths can make a considerable difference in the rate of deaths.

The bar graph shows the average annual infant mortality rate by race in Alaska for the period 1998-2002. As is true across the country, the rate was lowest among White infants (5.2 per 1,000). But while mortality among Alaska's Black infants was higher (6.5) than among White infants, it was not twice as high, as it is nationwide.

Infant mortality was highest among Pacific Island infants (11.6 per 1,000)—but that rate is based on a small number of actual deaths. The state population of Pacific Island people is small; more data in future years will help confirm the rate.



The death rate among Alaska Native infants was also high, at 10.3 per 1,000. But that was a decline from the rate of 11 from 1997-2001, and it shows that the long-term decline in death rates among Alaska Native infants is continuing.<sup>16</sup>

Infant mortality also varies considerably by region in Alaska. From 1998-2002, the mortality rate was highest in the Southwest and Northern regions—which are the most remote areas of Alaska, where medical care is much more limited than it is in the regions with better access to hospitals and other major medical facilities.

### CAUSES OF INFANT DEATH

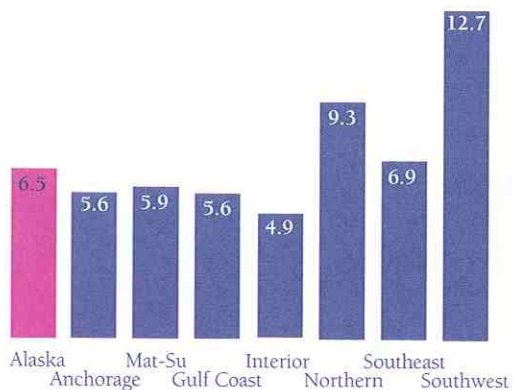
The adjacent figure compares the leading causes of infant mortality in Alaska and nationwide in 2001. Keep in mind that the Alaska figures are based on small numbers of infant deaths, so the ranking of causes can fluctuate considerably from year to year.

In 2001, accidents killed more babies in Alaska than any other single cause and were responsible for nearly 20% of deaths—compared with 4% nationwide. Alaska still poses many hazards for children (as we discuss more in the Children In Danger section).

By contrast, the share of babies who die as a result of low birth weight is much smaller in Alaska than nationwide. In 2001, low birth weight was responsible for 16% of infant deaths across the country, compared with 6% in Alaska.

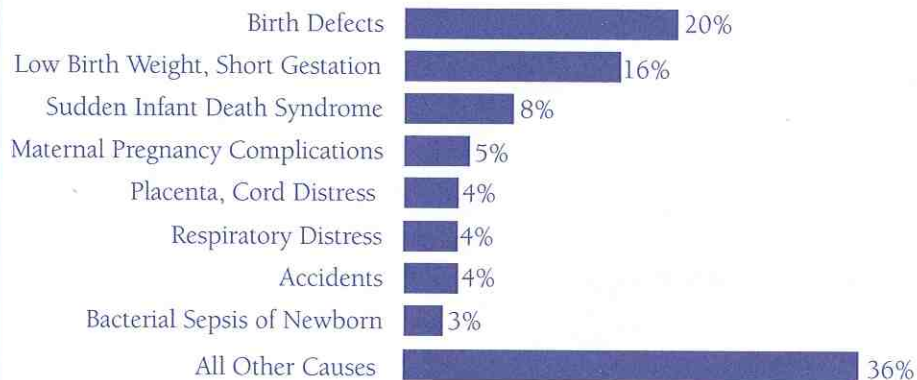
Birth defects are common causes of infant death in Alaska and nationwide, as is SIDS.

**Infant Mortality Rate By Region**  
(Per 1,000 Live Births, 5-Year Average, 1998-2002)



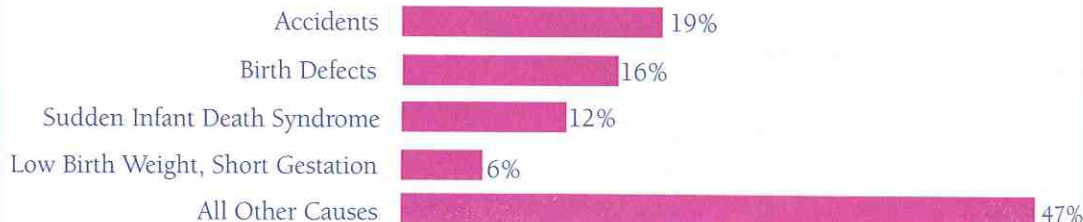
Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

**Leading Causes of Infant Mortality in U.S., 2001**



Source: CDC/NCHS, National Vital Statistics Reports, Vol. 52, No.9

**Leading Causes of Infant Mortality in Alaska, 2001**

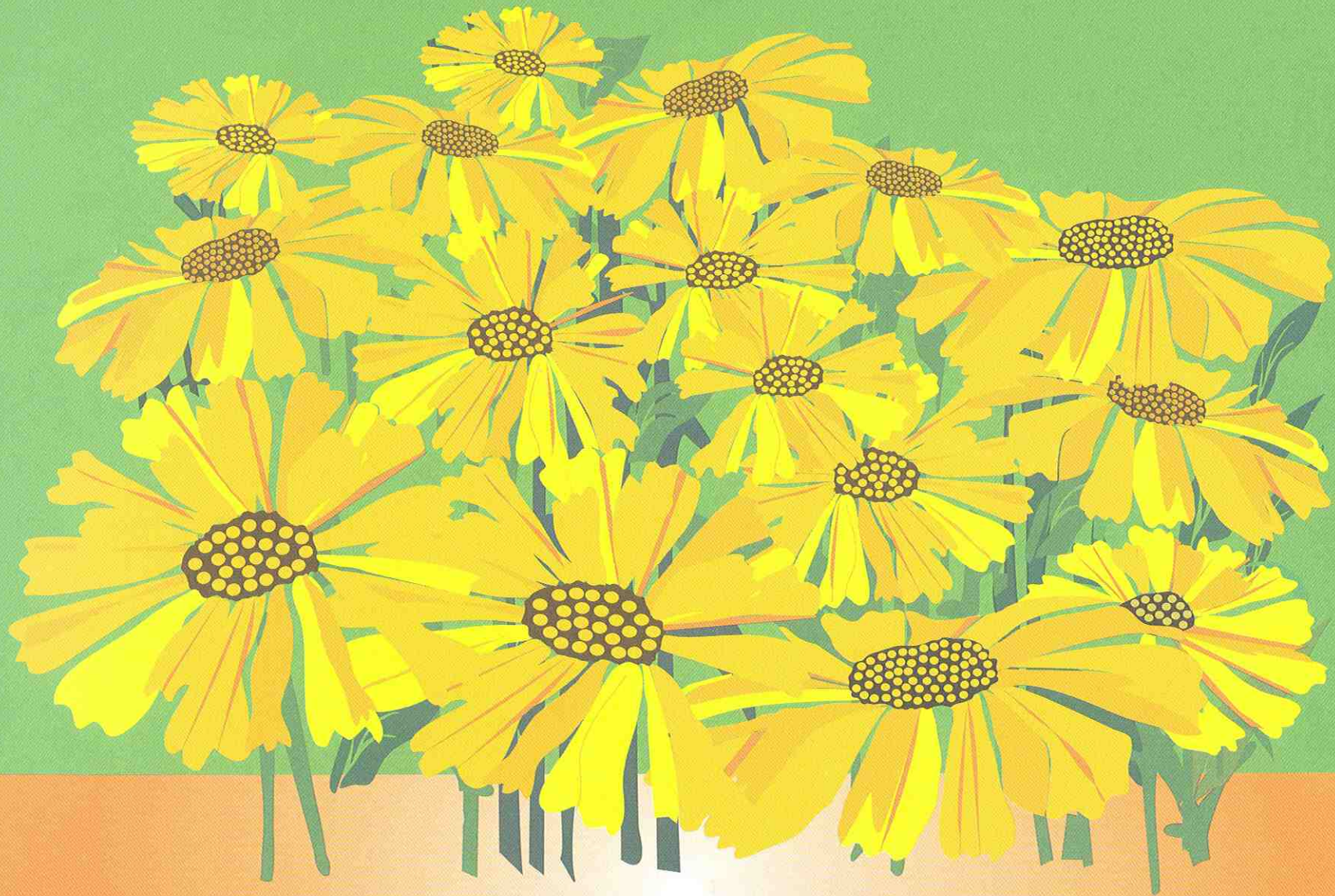


Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics



1. [National Vital Statistics Report](#), Volume 51, No. 2. December 18, 2002. Page 14.
2. See Infant Mortality indicator.
3. E. Peterson, A. Fenaughty, and J. E. Eberhart-Phillips. [Tobacco in the Great Land: A Portrait of Alaska's Leading Cause of Death](#). Section of Epidemiology, Division of Public Health, Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. February 2004. Page 227.
4. "Environmental Health Activities in Alaska." National Center for Environmental Health newsletter, May 2004 ([www.cdc.gov/neh](http://www.cdc.gov/neh)).
5. Alaska Division of Epidemiology [Bulletin](#), "Use of Traditional Foods in a Healthy Diet in Alaska: Risks in Perspective." Volume 8, No. 11, December 2, 2004.
6. Joyce A. Nettleton, "Good News: Contaminants Very Low in Alaska Fish." Retrieved June 2005 from [www.oceanbeauty.com](http://www.oceanbeauty.com).
7. "Low Birth Weight and Pre-Term Births in Alaska," [Title V Needs Assessment: Special Series Fact Sheet](#). Women's, Children's, and Family Health, Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. Volume 1, No. 10. March 2005.
8. M. Hack, N.K. Klein, H.G. Taylor, "Long-Term Developmental Outcomes of Low Birth Weight Infants." In [The Future of Children](#) 5(1):19-34. Los Altos, CA: Center for the Future of Children. The David and Lucile Packard Foundation. 1995. Cited in source listed in note 7.
9. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Nationwide Inpatient Sample, 2002. Retrieved February 2005 from [www.marchofdimes.com](http://www.marchofdimes.com). Cited in source listed in note 7.
10. Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics, cited in source listed in note 7.
11. National Center for Health Statistics, 2005. Cited in [Factsheet](#), Office of Minority Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved June 2005 at [www.cdc.gov/omh/AMH/factsheets/infant.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/omh/AMH/factsheets/infant.htm).
12. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [MMWR](#), July 12, 2002/ 51(27); 589-592.
13. See discussion in 2003 national [Kids Count Data Book](#), Annie E. Casey Foundation. Pages 40 and 41.
14. Indian Health Service, [Issue Summary](#), "SIDS Among American Indians and Alaska Natives," April 2, 2002. Retrieved June 2005 from: <http://info.ihs.gov>.
15. See note 13.
16. For a discussion of long-term infant mortality rates and other health trends among Alaska Natives, see Chapter 3, [Status of Alaska Natives 2004](#), Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska Anchorage. May 2004.

# Economic Well-Being



*Alaska wildflowers are beautiful and diverse — just like the adopted children their families told us about. Turn the page to read about the Bauer family.*

*Arnica  
(Arnica unalaschcensis)*



### THE BAUER FAMILY

Adam and P.J. Bauer of Homer have three children—two biological sons and an adopted daughter who Adam says “rounded out our family in a very special way.” Their sons are 17 and 20 and their daughter is 16.

They are also currently foster parents to an 18-year-old boy with muscular dystrophy and a 2-year-old girl who will ultimately go back to her biological parents.

Adam Bauer describes foster care and adoption as “parts of the same coin.” He wishes that more families would open their doors to children in their communities who need safe homes, whether through adoption or foster care. “Whenever you offer something to a community, you always get something back.”

The Bauers didn’t start out to be an adoptive family. Eight years ago they had two young sons and were operating a child-care program in rural Alaska. They agreed to act as an emergency foster family, over a weekend, for an 8-year old girl. But within days a state social worker asked them to become the girl’s foster parents—and in just over a year they made her a permanent part of their family.

Her life was hard before she came to the Bauers, but today her parents describe her as “an exemplary young lady” and a straight-A student who is a Girl Scout, a judge in the local Youth Court, and a volunteer at the museum.

Adam Bauer believes more families would come forward to help children in need, if they understood how the state adoption system works. He thinks the Office of Children’s Services does a good job with many “terrible situations that get dumped on their doorstep,” despite the criticism it receives for its failures.

The Bauers provide an excellent example of how well the state adoption system can work. And Adam reports that the Bauer family is “much more complete and whole” because of the girl who came to them through that state system.

### Percent of Children Living in Poverty

Trend 1985-2003



Alaska 2003 Rank Among States: 16  
(Based on 26,000 Children)

\*See text Source: 2005 National Kids Count Data Book

### Who Is Likeliest To Be Poor?

(As of 2002)



\*Related by birth, marriage, or adoption

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Housing and Household Economic Division, Small Area Estimates Branch. <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/saie>

### SIGNIFICANCE

There are various poverty measures—but under any measure, millions of children are growing up poor in the most affluent nation in the world. Nearly one in six U.S. children under 18 lives in a family whose income is below the federal poverty threshold. As the figure above shows, children are more likely than adults to be poor, and the youngest children are the likeliest to be poor, in Alaska and the U.S. as a whole.

Many children from poor families go hungry; don't have warm clothing; live in dangerous, rundown neighborhoods; don't get regular medical care; and don't do well in school. The effects of poor nutrition and inadequate medical care can follow them throughout life.

### DATA

The trend graph shows that an estimated 14% of Alaska children and 18% of children nationwide lived below the poverty line in 2003. Alaska has among the smallest shares of poor children in the country—but that's in part because Alaska's unique Permanent Fund Dividend program keeps many families out of poverty (see page 25).

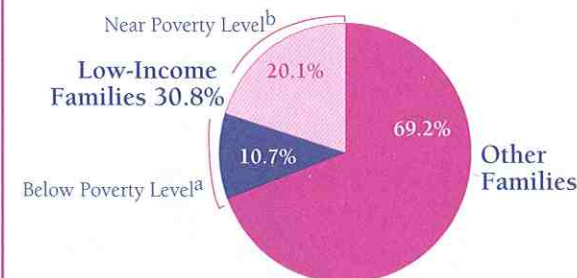
We look at several measures of poverty among Alaska children: (1) the percentage in families at or near the federal poverty line; (2) the percentage in families receiving public assistance; (3) the percentage receiving free or reduced-price school meals; (4) the percentage in families claiming the federal Earned Income Tax Credit.

The National Center for Children in Poverty reports that nearly 31% of Alaska families with children have "low" incomes; that includes 11% of families at or below the poverty threshold and another 20% with

incomes up to double the poverty threshold—or about \$37,700 for a family of four. Those within 200% of the federal threshold are often referred to as "near poor."

The map on the next page shows the share of school children in each of the state's 53 school districts whose families receive public assistance. Public assistance, as we use it here, means children in families that receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families,

### How Many Alaska Families With Children Have Low Incomes?



<sup>a</sup>Income at or below federal poverty threshold, which was about \$18,850 for a family of four in recent years.

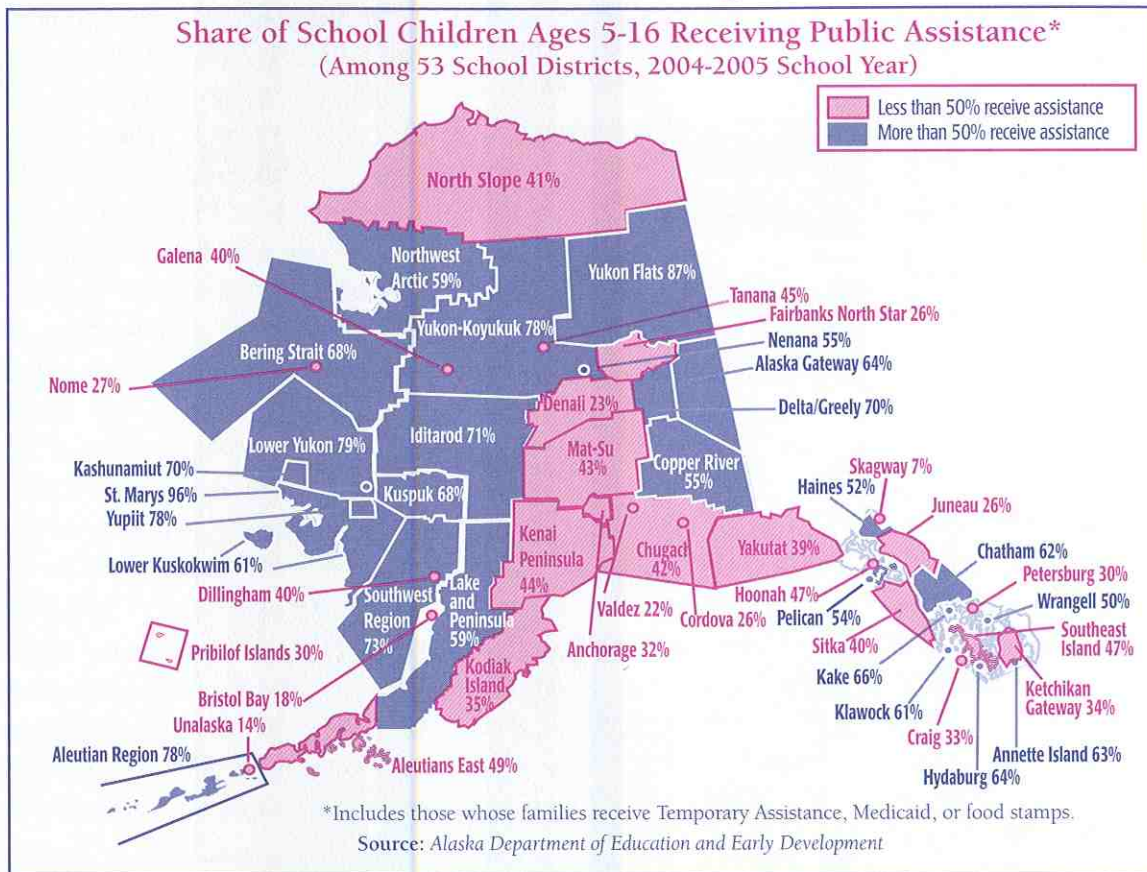
<sup>b</sup>Income between 100 and 200 percent of federal poverty threshold, which was about \$37,700 for a family of four in 2004. This is a three-year average of CPS data for 2001, 2002, and 2003.

Source: National Center for Children in Poverty

### DEFINITION

The trend graph above shows poverty as measured by the U.S. poverty threshold, set by the federal Office of Management and Budget each year. In 2004 that was about \$18,850 for a family of four. There are two important points to keep in mind about the figures. (1) They are not adjusted to take into account different living costs across the U.S. So in Alaska—especially rural Alaska—and other places with higher living costs, they may underestimate poverty. (2) Figures before and after 2000 are not exactly comparable. All the figures are based on the poverty threshold, but in 2005 the Casey Foundation began using a new source—the American Community Survey—to measure how many children fall under that threshold. It also re-calculated figures back to 2000. As we discuss in the Introduction section, the ACS sample for Alaska is still being developed.





might go hungry has both nutritional and educational benefits. Children who eat nutritious breakfasts or lunches tend to do better on standardized tests and to be absent less often than those who don't.<sup>2</sup>

Children in families with incomes less than 130% of federal poverty guidelines, adjusted for Alaska's higher costs, are eligible for free meals.<sup>3</sup> Those with family incomes between 130% and 185% of the guidelines can buy meals at reduced prices. For the 2003-2004 school year, Alaska children from four-person families with annual incomes up to \$43,605 could qualify for reduced-price meals.

As the pie chart on the next page shows, 35% of public school students statewide received free or reduced-price meals in the 2003-04 school year. That amounted to 36,740 Alaska children—27,093 got free meals; 9,647 got meals at reduced prices.

But the percentages getting free or reduced-price meals varied a lot around the state. The highest percentages were in Southwestern Alaska, where 82% of the students in both the Yupit and Southwest Region districts got either free or reduced-price meals. The lowest shares were in Juneau (13%) and Unalaska (11%).<sup>4</sup>

Despite what seem like clear benefits of the meal program, not all Alaska districts or schools take part, and some parents whose children could qualify don't apply. State officials believe that the level of paperwork involved has discouraged some schools and parents in the past. Now, the state Department of Education and Early Development and the Division of Public Assistance are working together to reduce that paperwork, and they hope to bring more qualified students into the program.<sup>5</sup>

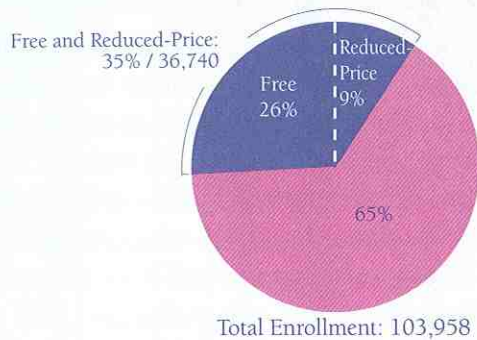
Medicaid, or food stamps.<sup>1</sup> Keep in mind that the share of students receiving public assistance can fluctuate a lot in small districts from year to year. In districts with few students, a shift of a handful of students on or off public assistance can quickly change the percentage.

In the 2004-2005 school year, the share of students whose families received public assistance ranged from 7% in Skagway (in Southeast Alaska) to 96% in St. Marys (in Southwest Alaska). But both these districts have only about 150 students, so the shares can fluctuate considerably from year to year.

In the larger districts on the road system in Southcentral Alaska, and in the larger city or borough districts in Southeast Alaska, about a quarter to a third of students come from families on public assistance. In the remote rural districts in Western and Interior Alaska, that share ranged from 59% to 87%. Put another way, in some remote rural districts there are relatively few families that don't receive some form of public assistance.

A third measure of poverty among Alaska children is the percentage receiving free or reduced-price meals at school. Those can be just lunches, or breakfasts and lunches in some districts. Research over the years has shown that providing meals for children who otherwise

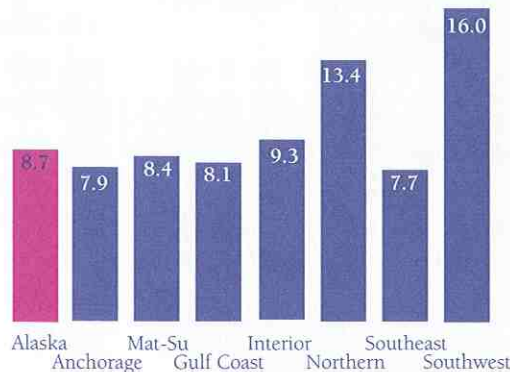
### Share of Alaska School Children Receiving Free or Reduced-Price Meals (2003-04 School Year)



Source: Alaska Department of Education and Early Development

A final measure of poverty among children is the share of Alaska families claiming the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). This credit reduces federal income taxes for low-income workers. Claimants must earn money during the tax year, but if their incomes are low enough, they can apply for a credit to offset part of their tax bill. The qualifying income varies by household size. In 2003, a married couple with two children

### Families With Children Claiming Federal Earned Income Tax Credit, 2002 (As Percentage of All Filers)



Source: The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.

could qualify if their annual income was below about \$34,700.

In 2002, 8.7% of Alaska families with children claimed the credit, up from 7.1% in 2001. The share claiming the credit in 2002 varied from 7.7% in the Southeast region to 16% in the Southwest. The total credit for Alaskans who applied in 2002 was \$52.7 million, up from \$41.3 million in 2001.

But even though the share of families claiming the credit—and the total credit amount—increased between 2001 and 2002, it's clear that not all Alaska families who are eligible are applying. Either they don't know about the credit, or they don't understand under what circumstances they can apply.<sup>6</sup>

### HOW DO PERMANENT FUND DIVIDENDS REDUCE POVERTY?

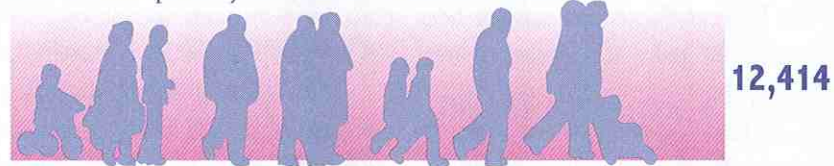
The State of Alaska has a \$30 billion savings account called the Permanent Fund, built with some of the oil revenues the state collects from North Slope oil production. Since the 1980s, the state has made annual cash payments to all Alaskans from the earnings of the Permanent Fund.

Special ISER calculations with data from the 2000 U.S. census show that poverty among children in Anchorage could double without Permanent Fund dividends.

We don't have calculations for the entire state, but average incomes are lower in remote rural areas—so the effects of the dividends on poverty in rural areas are likely even more dramatic.

### How Many More Anchorage Residents Could Fall Below the Federal Poverty Line, Without Permanent Fund Dividends?

Below 2000 poverty threshold\* with dividends



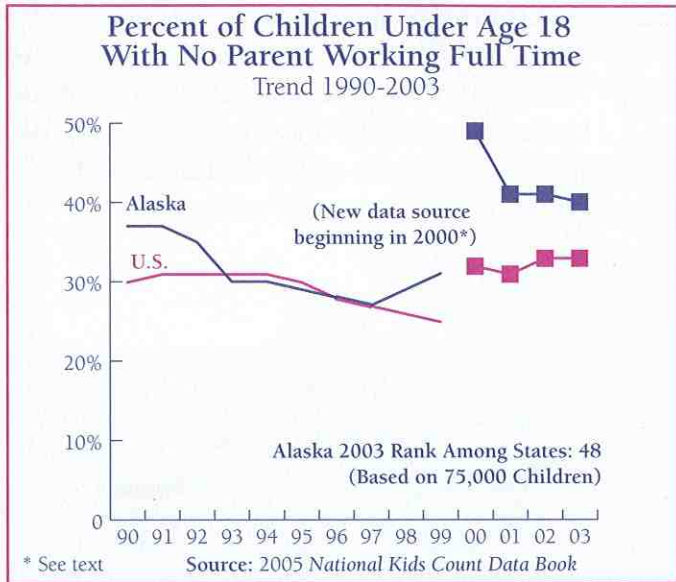
Below 2000 poverty threshold\* without dividends



- Overall poverty could nearly double, from 5% of residents to nearly 9%.
- 5,600 of the additional poor would be children, bringing total poor children to 11,650.
- Poverty among Alaska Natives could more than double, from 2,240 to 4,660.

\*The federal poverty threshold was about \$17,500 for a family of four in 2000.

Source: ISER calculations with U.S. Census data



## DEFINITION

This indicator reports the percentage of children living in families where no parent has regular, full-time employment. The most recent years of this indicator are based on the American Community Survey, which is designed to provide more timely information than the previous source, the Current Population Survey. See the Introduction section for more discussion of this change. For children in single-parent families, having “no parent working full time” means that the resident parent worked less than 35 hours per week in the 50 weeks before the survey. For married-couple families, the indicator means that neither parent worked at least 35 hours per week in the 50 weeks before the survey.

## SIGNIFICANCE

Full-time work is a major measure of financial stability for families. In general, children in families with at least one full-time worker are less likely to be poor, more likely to be healthy and to have health insurance, and more likely to do well in school.<sup>7</sup>

## DATA

Since 2000—with figures based on the American Community Survey—the share of children reported as having no parent working full time has been higher than in earlier years, both nationwide and in Alaska. In 2003, the U.S. average stood at 33%, compared with 40% in Alaska.

The Alaska numbers are based on an ACS sample that is still being developed; over time we’ll see whether the U.S.-Alaska gap declines.

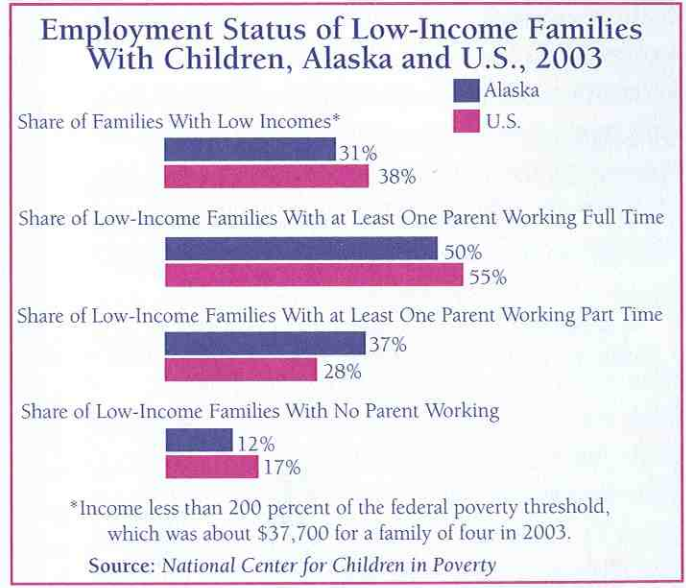
Still, we do know that full-time, year-round jobs are scarce in remote, rural areas of Alaska. Many of the rural jobs that do exist are seasonal jobs in construction or fishing. And even fishing jobs have become scarcer, with prices and values in the salmon fisheries dropping in the face of increased competition from farmed salmon and other factors.<sup>10</sup>

Some children are much more likely than others to have parents working full time. Close to 90% of American children living with both parents have at least one parent working full time. But in households headed by single parents, the share is much lower—63% in households headed by single fathers and 47% in households headed by single mothers.<sup>8</sup>

About 30% of children in households with incomes below the poverty line have parents who work full time, compared with 86% of children in households above the poverty line. And about 82% of White children nationwide have parents who work full time, compared with 61% of Black children and 71% of Hispanic children.<sup>9</sup>

Also, a recent report from the Casey Foundation estimated that 52% of the children in rural Alaska had no parent working full time, compared with 32% in Anchorage and 33% in rural areas nationwide.<sup>11</sup>

The bar chart below shows that even having full-time workers doesn’t keep families from being low-income (defined as having incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty threshold). The National Center for Children in Poverty estimates that in 2003 half the low-income families in Alaska and nationwide had at least one full-time worker. About a third of low-income families in Alaska had parents who worked part time, and in about 12% neither parent worked.



**Percent of Children in Single-Parent Households**

Trend 1985-2003



Alaska 2003 Rank Among States: 33  
(Based on 58,000 Children)

\*Before 2000, this indicator measured the percentage of families headed by single parents.

Source: 2005 National Kids Count Data Book

**DEFINITION**

This indicator now measures the percentage of children living in single-parent families; previously it measured the percentage of single-parent families. So the figures before and after 2000 are not comparable. The recent figures are based on sample data from the American Community Survey; previously the data source was the Current Population Survey.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

Most American children are still growing up with both parents, but that share has dropped from 85% in 1970 to about 68% today. Children in single-parent households are about five times more likely to live with their mothers than their fathers—but the share of single-parent households headed by men increased from 1% to 5% in the past 30 years.<sup>12</sup>

Single-parent families on average have lower incomes. Nationwide, two thirds of the children being raised by single parents live in low-income households; in Alaska the share is just over half.

We expect married couples to have higher incomes than single parents, since in most couples both parents work. But the income difference is more than double between single mothers and married couples in Alaska. The median income of married-couple families is 2.5 times that of single mothers. Single fathers, by contrast, do better: the median income of married couples in Alaska is just 1.85 times that of single-father families.<sup>13</sup>

Over the years, research has linked poverty or near-poverty to many problems for children, including not only the obvious ones like going hungry and living in substandard housing but also poorer health and trouble in school.

Now, recent research has estimated that being poor accounts for only about half the additional health, educational, and psychological problems seen in many children from single-parent families. A recent Child Trends document reports that children living with both their biological parents in happy marriages tend to do better in many ways than children living with either single parents or step-parents.<sup>14</sup>

Those findings may seem self-evident—that children of happy marriages tend to be happier and more successful. Also, a lot of children being raised by single parents or with step-parents are doing just fine. But the point is that the millions of children growing up with just one parent—usually their mother—do face a harder road than those fortunate enough to have both parents.

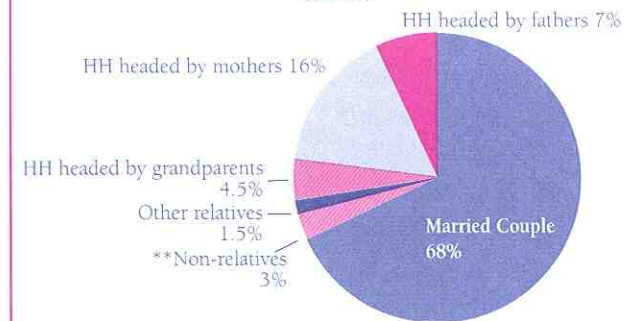
**DATA**

The American Community Survey, which is based on a sample of the population, estimated in 2003 that 31% of Alaska children lived in single-parent households, compared with about 30% nationwide.

The 2000 U.S. Census, a survey of the entire population, found that 68% of Alaska children live with both parents; 16% with their mothers; 7% with their fathers; 4.5% in households headed by their grandparents; 1.5% with other relatives; and 3% with non-relatives or in some sort of group quarters. (See pie chart below.)

Even though the two data sources differ somewhat, it's clear that many Alaska children are growing up with just one parent. That share varies considerably among children of different races, as the bar graph on the next page shows.

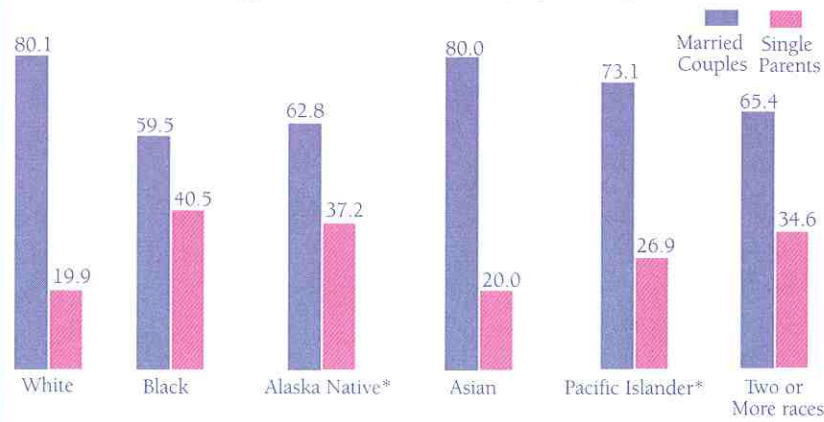
**Living Arrangements of Alaska Children\* (2000)**



\*Based on who heads household.  
\*\*Includes children living in group quarters or institutions.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Percent of Alaska Children Living in Married-Couple and Single-Parent Families, by Race, 2000



\* Alaska Native includes American Indian; Pacific Islander includes Native Hawaiians.  
 Source: Population Reference Bureau, analysis of data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census Summary File 1 (Tables P28A-P28H)

About 80% of White and Asian children in Alaska live in married-couple families, compared with about 60% of Black and Alaska Native children. Among Pacific Island children, about three-quarters live with both parents.

As a final way of looking at single-parent families, the adjacent figure describes the income, race, education, and job status of Alaska women raising their children alone. These are women living in households with their children and no other adults. This is a special calculation the Institute of Social and Economic Research did with 2000 U.S. census micro data. It excludes single women with other adults living in their households. Those other adults might be

unmarried partners, grandparents, other relatives, or roommates. But we excluded them because we decided the clearest measure of "single mother" is a woman alone with her children.

As of 2000 there were more than 11,500 women in Alaska raising about 20,500 children by themselves. Nationwide, minority women are over-represented among single mothers, and that's somewhat true in Alaska as well.

About 68% of Alaska women of child-bearing age (15-45) are White, but only about 57% of single mothers are White. Alaska Native women make up about 21% of women of child-bearing age, but 30% of single mothers. Black women make up about 3% of Alaska women 15 to 45, but about 7% of single mothers.

But Asian, Pacific Island, and women of mixed race together make up more than 8% of Alaska women ages 15 to 45 but less than 7% of single mothers.

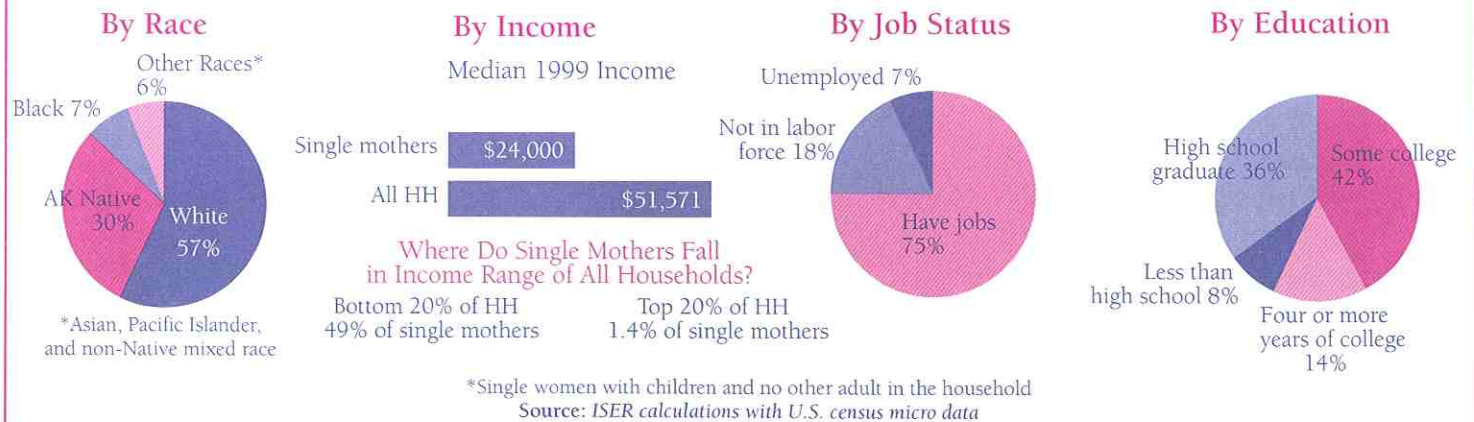
Like single mothers nationwide, these Alaska women don't make much money: their median income in 1999 was less than half the average for all Alaska households. Nearly half of them were in the poorest 20% of Alaska households and just over 1% were in the wealthiest 20% of households.

It is apparently not lack of education that costs single mothers income. About 92% of Alaska's single mothers have at least high-school diplomas; about 88% of all Alaska adults are high-school graduates. More than half have some college credit, and close to 15% have at least four-year degrees.

And most of Alaska's single mothers—82%—are in the work force. As of 2000, 75% had jobs and another 7% were looking for work. Only 18% reported being out of the work force.

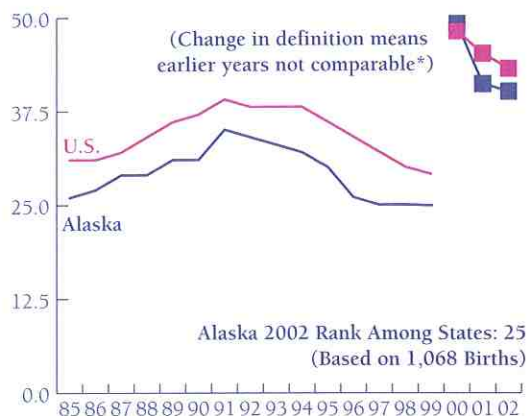
Who Are the Alaska Women Raising Children Alone?\*

(As of 2000, 11,631 Women with 20,755 Children)



### Teen Birth Rate

Trend 1985-2002  
(Births per 1,000 Girls Ages 15-19)



Alaska 2002 Rank Among States: 25  
(Based on 1,068 Births)

\*Previously, this indicator measured births to girls 15 to 17.

Source: 2005 National Kids Count Data Book

### SIGNIFICANCE AND DATA

Some of the best news among teenagers in the past decade has been that they are having fewer babies. The trend graph to the left shows that between 2000 and 2002 the birth rate among girls 15 to 19 dropped from 48 to 43 per 1,000 nationwide and from 49 to 40 in Alaska.

The bar chart below breaks out the birth rate for younger (15 to 17) and older (18 and 19) girls between 1990 and 2002. The rate among younger girls dropped nearly 40% both nationwide and in Alaska. But the drop among older girls was much larger in Alaska—38% compared with 12%.

Another sign of the declining birth rates came in a recent announcement by the National Center for Health Statistics, which reported that

in 2004, births to teenagers accounted for just 24% of all births to single women nationwide—down from 50% in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup>

The declining teen birth rate is good news not only for teenage mothers and their babies but for society as a whole. Many years of research have documented the problems teenage mothers and their babies routinely

face, including inadequate prenatal care that can lead to health problems for babies and mothers; lack of education and earning power among teenage mothers, who often drop out of school; lack of financial support from the fathers of the babies; and high rates of poverty and dependence on welfare.<sup>16</sup>

In 2004 a congressional committee produced concrete examples of what the declining birth rate means, by asking the question: what if the teen birth rate had stayed at its 1991 level? The committee estimated that 1.2 million more babies would have been born to teenagers by 2002; that 400,000 of those children would have been living below the poverty line; and that about 430,000 of them would have been living with single mothers.<sup>17</sup>

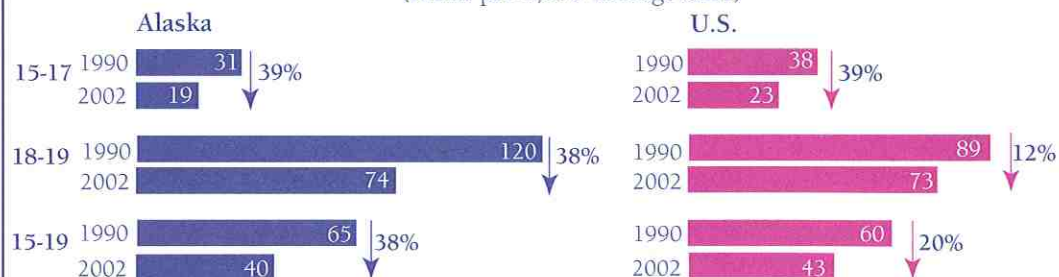
The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy then examined the same question for each state. For Alaska, the campaign reported that if birth rates had stayed at their 1991 level, teenage mothers would have had 4,400 more babies by 2002; nearly 10 percent more Alaska children under age 6 would have been living in poverty; and 1,000 more children under age six would have been living with single mothers.<sup>18</sup>

### DEFINITION

The most recent figures in the trend graph above report births per 1,000 girls ages 15 through 19. That's a change; previously this indicator measured births only among girls 15 through 17. So the earlier numbers are not comparable with the most recent numbers—but they both show a downward trend. The regional numbers for Alaska have always included births to girls 15 through 19, but the figures are 5-year averages rather than single-year figures. The regional data reflect the mother's place of residence, not the baby's place of birth.

### Declining Teen Birth Rates, Alaska and U.S., 1990 to 2002

(Births per 1,000 Teenage Girls)



Source: C.D.C., N.C.H.S. Vol 52, No.19 May 10, 2004



**RATES BY RACE AND REGION**

Birth rates are down among girls of all races in Alaska. Between 1995 and 2002 the rate among White and Alaska Native girls dropped about 25%; among Asian girls 40%; and among Black girls nearly 50%. Keep in mind, however, that numbers of Asian and Black teenagers in Alaska are relatively small, so the figures are subject to more fluctuation.

Despite declines among all races, the birth rates among Alaska Native girls remain more than double those of White and Asian girls and a third higher than those of Black girls.

Teen birth rates also vary a lot within regions of Alaska, as the adjacent bar graph shows. From 1998 to 2002, the statewide teen birth rate was 46 per 1,000. The Mat-Su Borough, the Gulf Coast, and the Southeast region all had rates below the state average—from 30 to 35 per 1,000. The rate in the Northern region was nearly double the state rate, at 90 per 1,000; the rate in the Southwest was 75.

And while teen birth rates in all regions are down somewhat, regions with the highest historical rates—the remote Northern and Southwest regions—have seen the smallest declines. During the period from 1993 through 1997, the Northern region had a rate of close to 100 births per 1,000 girls; that dropped to 91 in the period from 1998 to 2002. The Southwest rate from 1993 through 1997 was 81, compared with about 76 from 1998 through 2002.

**Birth Rates for Teens, By Race, 1995 and 2002**

(Rate per 1,000 Girls 15-19)

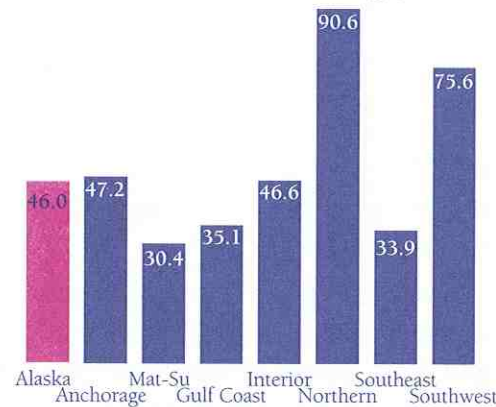


\*Numbers of babies born to Black and Asian teenage mothers are relatively small, so rates can fluctuate significantly.

Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

**Birth Rate for Teens, By Region**

(Rate per 1,000 Girls 15-19, 5-Year Average, 1998 to 2002)



Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

**DEFINITION**

The most commonly published figures on health insurance coverage are from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS), which surveys a sample of households across the U.S. and in Alaska. The question used in the CPS is designed to determine how many people did not have insurance at any point in the previous calendar year. Nationwide, there is debate over the accuracy of the answers to that question—that is, whether the respondents understand the question and accurately recall their own coverage for the previous year.

But even if we assume that everyone answers the question accurately, the CPS figures likely underestimate the percentage of Americans without stable health insurance coverage. Those who report having insurance for even a small part of the previous year are counted as insured.

In Alaska, there is an additional question about how well the CPS figures reflect the share of Alaskans without health insurance. The CPS classifies as "uninsured" Alaska Natives who are eligible for health care through the Indian Health Service (IHS), which provides health care for Native Americans nationwide.

IHS coverage isn't technically "insurance," because care is available only at IHS hospitals and clinics. Still, IHS does provide health care, and classifying IHS-eligible Native American children as "uninsured" overstates the share of Alaska children without health care coverage. That's because nearly one-quarter of the children in Alaska are Alaska Natives; across the country, only about 1% of children are Native American.

**DATA**

The line graph is based on CPS data and classifies IHS-eligible Native children as uninsured. It shows that about 12% of children in Alaska and nationwide were without health insurance in 2002. Both the national figures and the Alaska figures trended down from 2000 to 2002.

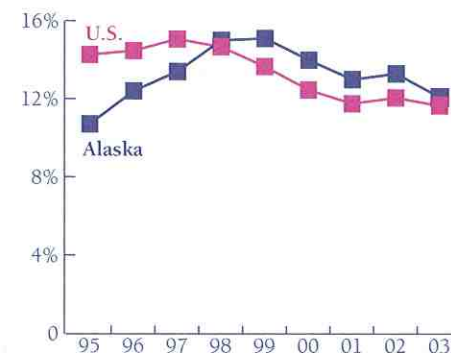
That's at least in part because more children were covered under the special Medicaid expansion program for children (and pregnant women) whose family incomes are somewhat too high to allow them to qualify for traditional Medicaid but who lack other coverage. In Alaska that program is called Denali KidCare. Children from families with incomes up to 175% of the poverty threshold can qualify. Enrollment in Denali KidCare increased from 8,033 children in 1999 to 21,966 by 2004. But as we'll discuss on the next page, many who could qualify are still not enrolled.

The bar graph shows percentages of children whose parents have coverage through employers or government programs or no coverage at all. These figures, from the American Academy of Pediatrics, are also based on CPS data, but with an adjustment: children eligible for care through IHS are not classified as uninsured but are combined with those covered by Medicaid.

On average from 2001 to 2003, employer-based insurance covered 64% of children in the U.S. but only 53% in Alaska. The share of Alaska children covered under either Medicaid or IHS programs was considerably higher than the U.S. average—nearly 39% compared with 24%. And the share of uninsured children in Alaska was about 8%, compared with 12% nationwide.

The line graph shows trends in coverage, but the bar graph probably better reflects coverage in Alaska, where so many children are eligible for IHS programs.

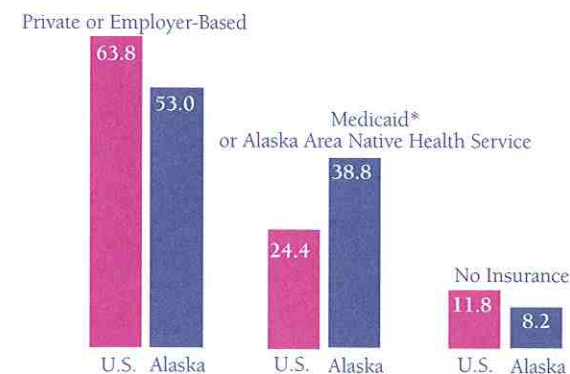
**Percent of Children Without Health Insurance\* U.S. and Alaska, 1995-2003**



\*This source includes as "uninsured" children who are eligible to receive medical care through the Alaska Area Native Health Service.

Source: Population Reference Bureau, analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. Each year is the midpoint of a 3-year average.

**Health Care Coverage for Children (18 and Under), Alaska and U.S. (Average, 2001-2003)**



\*Includes Denali KidCare

Source: American Academy of Pediatrics, based on U.S. Census CPS data



CPS data estimate the number of uninsured Alaska children at around 24,000 on average from 2002 through 2004. About 25% of those uninsured children are 5 or younger and 75% are between 6 and 18.<sup>19</sup>

The adjacent pie chart shows more information about uninsured children in Alaska. About one-quarter of uninsured children live in households with incomes below the federal poverty threshold; in 2004, that was \$18,850 for a family of four. Close to one in five are in households with incomes between 100% and 174% of the federal poverty threshold.

Together, those children account for 42% of uninsured children. But they should be eligible for either the traditional Medicaid program or Denali KidCare—available to children from households with incomes up to 175% of the poverty threshold.<sup>20</sup>

Why aren't they enrolled? In fact, some of them probably are receiving IHS health care—but we can't sort out how many. The only source for this information is CPS data, which we know count IHS-covered children as uninsured. But state officials also believe that some children who could qualify for Denali KidCare are not enrolled. It's not clear why.

Of the remaining 58% of uninsured children in Alaska, about 13% are from families with incomes just high enough to disqualify them for Denali KidCare.<sup>20</sup> The remaining 45% are from families with incomes at least 250% of the federal poverty level.

### WHY DON'T ALL ALASKANS HAVE HEALTH COVERAGE?

The ranks of uninsured Americans are growing. Those with low incomes and few assets can qualify for coverage through Medicaid. But the soaring costs of that program are causing policymakers nationwide to look at ways of keeping costs down—either by narrowing the pool of eligible people or reducing services covered.

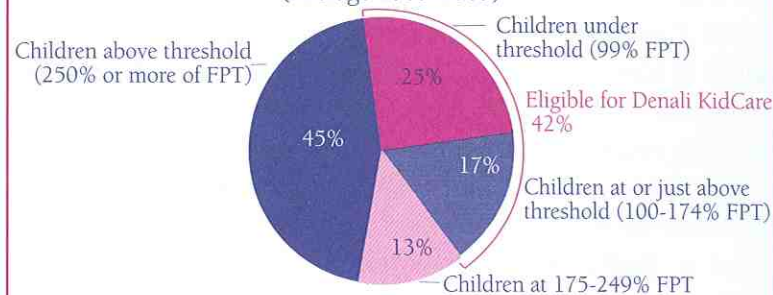
Health insurance used to be a fairly universal benefit for people with full-time jobs, but the rising costs of premiums for both employers and employees have radically changed that picture.

For Alaskans, the problem is exacerbated because medical costs and health insurance premiums are much higher than the U.S. average.<sup>21</sup> In 2005, the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services received funds to study ways of providing uninsured Alaskans with affordable health insurance. But right now, for many Alaskans:

- **Employer-based coverage is not available or not affordable.** Many people in Alaska work for small businesses—and we know that with the rising cost of health insurance premiums, small businesses often find it very hard to offer health insurance. About 26% of Alaska workers are employed by businesses with 20 or fewer workers.<sup>22</sup> In Anchorage, the state's largest city and headquarters for many of the state's largest employers, only about a third of those employed by private industry work for businesses that have as many as 100 employees.<sup>23</sup>

In September 2005, the *Anchorage Daily News* reported the results of a survey by United Benefit Advisors, which found that costs for employer-based insurance in Alaska “were 25% higher than the national average, 35% higher than in the West, and 40% higher than in Seattle” and that “full family coverage averaged \$927 per month nationwide, with an employee contributing \$381. The average was \$1,183 in Alaska, with an employee contributing \$617.”<sup>24</sup>

### Alaska Children Without Health Insurance, By Poverty Threshold\* (Average 2003-2005)



\*As measured by family income relative to the federal poverty threshold (FPT).

Source: Population Reference Bureau, analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, 2003-2005 average.

- **Buying individual private health care insurance can be prohibitively expensive.** Families USA reported that in 2002 “a typical standard individual health insurance policy in Alaska cost \$2,580 per year for a healthy 25-year-old woman and \$7,368 per year for a healthy 55-year-old woman. A healthy single 25-year-old woman with earnings equal to the poverty level of \$8,980 per year would have to spend 29% of her income on health insurance to buy such a policy.”<sup>25</sup>
- **People often lose health insurance when they lose their jobs.** Under some circumstances, those who lose their jobs can continue their insurance coverage for a period of time, but people without jobs find it hard to pay hundreds of dollars a month in premiums. The published unemployment rate for Alaska in 2003 was 7.8%. But that published number underestimates the problem in rural Alaska, because it counts as “unemployed” only those actively looking for work. In rural areas, where jobs are scarce, many people don't look for work when they know no jobs are available.



**ENDNOTES FOR ECONOMIC WELL-BEING**

1. This year's numbers for share of children receiving public assistance aren't directly comparable to those in last year's book because of two changes in the calculations. First, none of this year's percentages include children in correspondence programs. This means that the percentage given for a school district more accurately reflects poverty among the children actually living in that district, unaffected by those who may live elsewhere but are enrolled in correspondence programs the district offers. It also means that we can include a percentage for each school district, whereas last year we didn't include percentages for those districts where more than 20% of the students were correspondence students. The second change is that the figures we receive from the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development now include only those students ages 5 to 16; previously the numbers included those through age 17. Finally, the figures exclude students in boarding or private schools.

2. Trish Fitzpatrick and Elsie DeRoose, "Nutrition and School Performance," in EPINorth, Vol. 15, Issue 2, Spring 2003.

3. Unlike the federal poverty threshold, which is not adjusted for differences in living costs around the country, the federal poverty guidelines are adjusted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The threshold is used mainly for statistical comparisons; the guidelines are used as a measure of eligibility for free and reduced-price school meals and some other federal programs.

4. Reported at [www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/cns/NSLP.html](http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/cns/NSLP.html) (Web site of Alaska Department of Education and Early Development). Retrieved April 7, 2005.

5. In the past, parents were mailed a "letter of direct certification" and instructed to take the letter to their local schools. If the letter was lost or missing, parents were required to submit an application at the school. Starting in the fall of 2005, the Division of Public Assistance sent an electronic list of eligible children to the Department of Education and Early Development, which then matched the list with its student data. The matched list was sent to the appropriate school district. Now, children who are on the list don't have to submit an application and are automatically eligible to receive free school meals. The Division of Public Assistance and the Department of Education and Early Development update the list monthly. Once a child's name is on the direct certification list, that child is eligible to receive free meals for the entire school year according to Stacy Goade, the

state's Child Nutrition Services program coordinator. (Personal communication, March 18, 2005).

6. Alaskans who think they might be eligible can get more information at [www.irs.gov/individuals/article/0,,id=130102,00.html](http://www.irs.gov/individuals/article/0,,id=130102,00.html).

7. Child Trends Data Bank, Secure Parental Employment. See [www.childtrendsdatabank.org](http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org).

8. Federal Intragency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2005. Washington, D. C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. Based on data from Current Population Survey, Annual Economic Supplements.

9. *Ibid.*

10. The Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development has reported that 40% of Alaska resident salmon permit holders who had fished in 1988 were no longer fishing in 2002.

11. Annie E. Casey Foundation, City and Rural Kids Count Data Book, issued in 2004.

12. Child Trends, Family Structure. Retrieved from [www.childtrendsdatabank.org](http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org).

13. Population Reference Bureau, analysis of 2000 U.S. Census Summary File 3 (Tables P15, PCT 39 and PCT 40). Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count Census Data Online. Retrieved from [www.aecf.org/kidscount/census](http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/census).

14. See note 12.

15. Reported in Anchorage Daily News, October 29, 2005. Page A-6.

16. See The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, What If: How Declines in Teen Births Have Improved Poverty and Child Well-Being in Alaska, April 2005.

17. U.S. Congress, Ways and Means Committee-Democrats, "Steep Decline in Teen Birth Rate Significantly Responsible for Reducing Child Poverty and Single-Parent Families." Issue Brief, April 23, 2004. Cited by National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (see note 16).

18. Same as note 16.

19. Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey files from 2003 through 2005, by Laura Beavers of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

20. In 2004, the Alaska Legislature changed the income eligibility level for Denali KidCare, from 200% of the federal poverty threshold (about \$37,700 for a family of four) to 175%. State officials estimate that roughly 1,000 Alaska children are from families with incomes between 175% and 200% of the poverty level.

21. See, for example, Alaska Division of Medical Assistance, Are Medical Care Costs Higher? Health Care Cost Project Analysis, November 2001.

22. Families USA, Who's Uninsured in Alaska and Why? November 2003. Page 2.

23. Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

24. Reported in Anchorage Daily News, September 3, 2005. Page E-1.

25. See note 22.

# Education



*Alaska wildflowers are beautiful and diverse – just like the adopted children their families told us about. Turn the page to read about the Green family.*

*Wild Iris  
(Iris setosa)*



### THE GREEN FAMILY

Michelle Green has three adopted children—two girls who are 16 and 5 and a boy who is 3. She's also in the process of adopting a 12-year-old girl.

She is a sergeant in the Air Force, stationed at Eielson Air Force Base near Fairbanks. As a single, working mother, she says having children has made life “a lot more chaotic” but also created “a lot more love to go around.” Michelle’s mother lives with her and helps take care of the children.

Years ago, living in a poor neighborhood, Michelle saw children being taken away from drug-addicted parents. She decided that when she was older she would adopt children who needed help and “make a difference in their lives.”

Her oldest daughter—whom Michelle describes as “an awesome kid”—was in the foster care system for 13 years before Michelle adopted her. Her only regret about adopting an older child is that she won't have as much time with her before she grows up.

Michelle says she doesn't aspire to be “the only mommy” in her children's lives, and she encourages them to keep in touch with their birth families if they choose. She describes her own role in their lives as helping them “deal with the life they were dealt.”

She is an outspoken advocate of adoption, regularly talking to groups about the benefits of adoption and counseling other families who are adopting children. She tells them that the process of adopting each of her children took from one to two years and involved some “big obstacles.”

But she also tells them that despite the difficulties and “some painful times,” adoption is “the most wonderful thing you'll ever do.”

**Percent of Teens (16-19) Who Are High-School Dropouts**  
Trend 1985-2003



\*See text Source: 2005 National Kids Count Data Book

for the dropout indicator. It also re-calculated figures back to 2000 (which is why the lines in the trend graph break at 2000). The new source is intended to provide more current information than the previous source—which was the Current Population Survey. (The Introduction section discusses that source change.)

The Alaska dropout rates by race and region (shown on the next page) are for those in grades 9 to 12 who dropped out of school during the 2003-04 school year. They are figures from the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, which defines dropouts as those who (1) left school without graduating or completing an approved program; (2) moved out of the school district or state and did not enroll elsewhere; (3)

**DEFINITION**

States, school districts, and organizations around the country use several ways of measuring dropout rates. Those measurements are often based on different data sources and different methods of collecting data. These differences make comparisons tricky, unless it's clear which definition of "dropout" is being used.

As a step toward standardizing the reporting of high-school dropout and graduation rates, in July 2005 the governors of 45 states—including Alaska—signed a compact using a common definition for determining high-school graduation.<sup>1</sup> Figures from that common definition aren't available yet, but we'll report them when they are.

The trend graph above is based on the definition in the national Kids Count Data Book: the share of teenagers 16 through 19 who are not enrolled in high school and have not graduated. Those who have general equivalency diplomas (GEDs) are considered graduates. In 2005, the national book began using the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey as the data source

enrolled in adult education programs or schools not approved by the district; or (4) were suspended or expelled and didn't return.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

No matter how you measure the dropout rate, it's still true that millions of Americans don't graduate from high school; in 2003, more than a million Americans ages 16 to 19 were high-school dropouts.<sup>2</sup> That's extremely worrisome, as columnist Bob Herbert recently wrote in the *New York Times*: "In an era when a college education is virtually a prerequisite for maintaining a middle-class lifestyle, an extraordinary number of American teenagers continue to head toward adulthood without even a high-school diploma."<sup>3</sup>

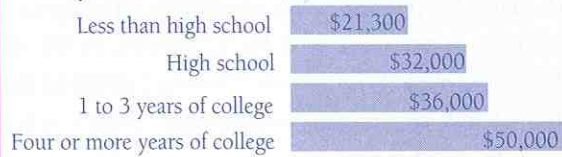
Research shows that Americans who fail to graduate from high school are less likely to be employed; typically earn less than graduates when they do have jobs; are more likely to rely on public assistance programs; and represent a disproportionate number of those in prison or on death row.<sup>4</sup>

Teenage girls who drop out of school are also more likely to become single mothers than their peers who stay in school and tend to become parents at an earlier age.<sup>5</sup>

High-school dropouts earn a lot less than those with more education, and that gap has been increasing over time. The figure below shows earnings of workers in Anchorage, Alaska, but the pattern is similar nationwide. In 2000, Anchorage workers with less than a high-school education earned only about two-thirds of what high-school graduates earned and just over 40% of what college graduates earned. But as recently as 1980, high-school dropouts in Anchorage were able to earn 70% of what college graduates did.

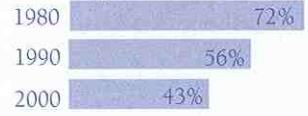
**What Difference Does Education Make?**

**Median Earnings of Anchorage Workers,\* By Education Level, 2000**



\*Full-time workers

**Median Earnings of High-School Dropouts as a Share of Earnings of College Graduates**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

**DATA**

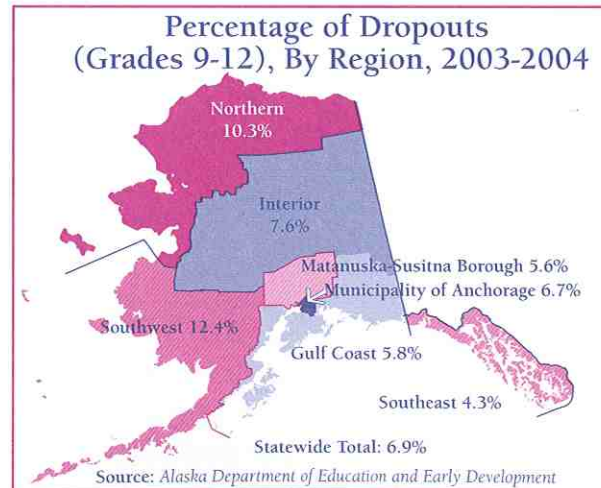
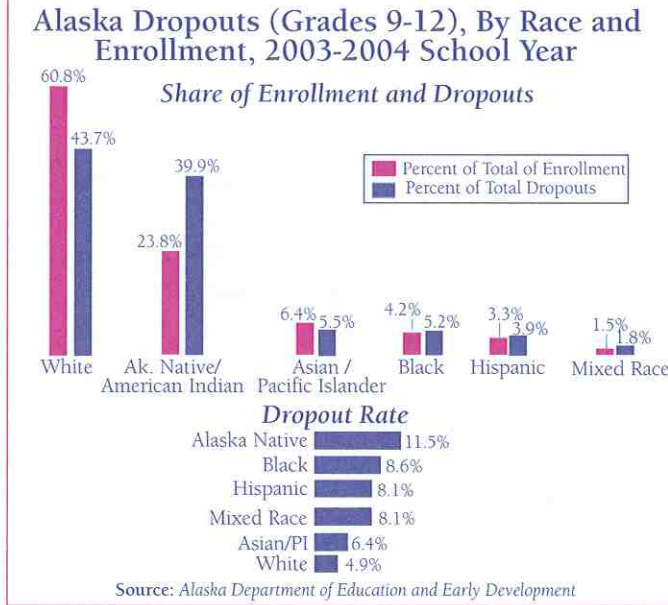
As shown in the trend graph on the previous page, the percentage of Alaska teenagers 16 to 19 who are dropouts bounced up and down between 2000 and 2003 but was at the national average—10%—in 2003. It's not clear what has made Alaska's dropout rate so variable in recent years, but part of the explanation may lie in the new data source the national Kids Count program is using.

That new source, as we discussed at the outset, is the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS in Alaska doesn't yet include all the places that will ultimately be sampled. But the U.S. Census Bureau is adding to the Alaska sample to improve its accuracy over time.

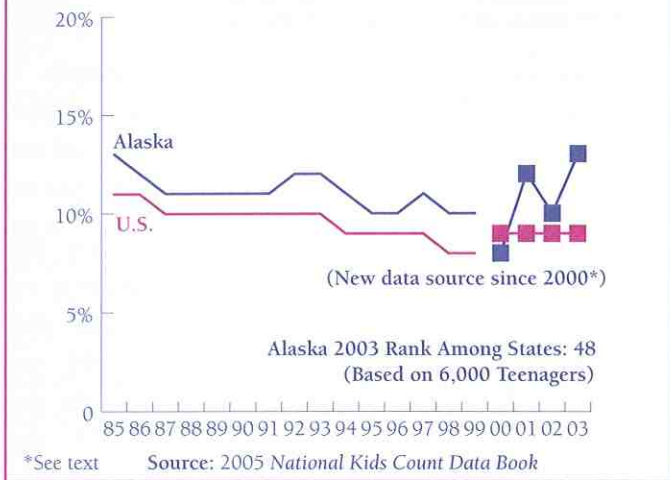
Figures in the adjacent bar graph and map are from the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development and are based on school district data.<sup>6</sup> In the fall of 2003, 40,238 teenagers in grades 9 through 12 were enrolled in Alaska schools; by the end of the school year, 2,758—6.9%—had dropped out. The dropout rate varies considerably by both region and race within the state.

Minority students are much more likely than White students to drop out. Alaska Native students make up about 24% of high-school enrollment, but 40% of total dropouts. Native students have the highest dropout rate in the state—11.5% in 2003-2004. That was more than double the rate of 4.9% among White students. Other minority students also dropped out at considerably higher rates than White students: mixed-race and Hispanic students at 8.1%, Black students at 8.6%, and Asian/Pacific Islanders at 6.4%.

Regional dropout rates in 2003-2004 were lowest in the Southeast (4.3%) and Mat-Su (5.6%) regions and highest in the Southwest (12.4%) and Northern (10.3%) regions. Rates in the Gulf Coast, Anchorage, and the Interior were in-between, from 5.8% to 7.6%.



**Teens (16-19) Not in School and Not Working**  
Trend 1985-2003



Some young people end up out of school and out of work because they're transitioning from foster care or juvenile detention. Others are teenage mothers who dropped out of school and have no way to care for their children while they work. Whatever the reasons, disconnected young people face a bleak future. The longer they stay disconnected, the more their chances for higher education and better-paying jobs dwindle.<sup>7</sup>

And teenage girls who are neither in school nor working are more likely to rely on public assistance. Teenage boys who are out of school and without jobs are more likely to end up in jail.<sup>8</sup>

**DATA**

The trend graph shows that in 2003, 9% of Americans ages 16 to 19—nearly 1.3 million—were neither in school nor working. In Alaska the share of teenagers who are disconnected has been higher than the national average for most of the past 20 years. But that gap has increased considerably since 2000, reaching 13% in 2003.

These higher figures for Alaska also carry over into early adulthood. In 2002, there were an estimated 10,000 Alaskans ages 18 to 24 who were neither employed nor in school. That means about one in five young adults in Alaska are disconnected, compared with one in six nationwide.<sup>9</sup>

Again, as is true of growing dropout rates, we don't know what has been pushing up Alaska's rate of disconnected young people while the national average has stayed flat.

But since the Census Bureau is still building its ACS sample in Alaska, figures for future years may provide a better picture of whether the recent higher rates actually represent a trend.

We don't have breakdowns of disconnected teenagers by sex and race in Alaska, but the table below shows those breakdowns nationwide in 1995 and 2004, compiled by the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics.

The percentage of disconnected teenagers (ages 16 to 19) in the U.S. dropped from 9% to 8% in the last decade. Black teenagers, teenage girls, and Hispanic teenagers in particular saw improvements. Each of those groups cut their share of disconnected teenagers by 25% or more.

Still, despite those improvements, minority teenagers remain about twice as likely as White teenagers to be disconnected, and teenage girls are still somewhat more likely to be disconnected than boys.

**PERCENTAGES OF U.S. TEENAGERS (16-19) NOT IN SCHOOL AND NOT WORKING, BY SEX AND RACE, 1995 AND 2004**

	1995	2004	Change
All 16-19	9%	8%	-11%
Teenage Girls	11%	8%	-27%
Teenage Boys	8%	7%	-13%
White Teenagers	7%	6%	-14%
Black Teenagers	14%	10%	-29%
Hispanic Teenagers	16%	12%	-25%

Source: Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics

**DEFINITION**

This indicator measures the percentage of teenagers 16 to 19 who are not in school, not in the military, and not working. It includes high-school dropouts as well as those who have graduated from high school (or earned GEDs) but aren't working.

In 2005 the national Kids Count program changed data sources and also re-calculated figures back to 2000. It now uses the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS); it previously used the Current Population Survey. The ACS is designed to provide more current information, but is still not fully developed in Alaska. (The Introduction section discusses that change in more detail.)

**SIGNIFICANCE**

Teenagers who are neither in school nor working are often called "disconnected," because they're not doing the things that help young people become productive members of their communities.

**DEFINITION**

There are various ways to measure school achievement. Here we use reading and math scores from the two most recent National Assessments of Educational Progress and results of the spring 2005 Alaska High School Graduation Qualifying Exam.

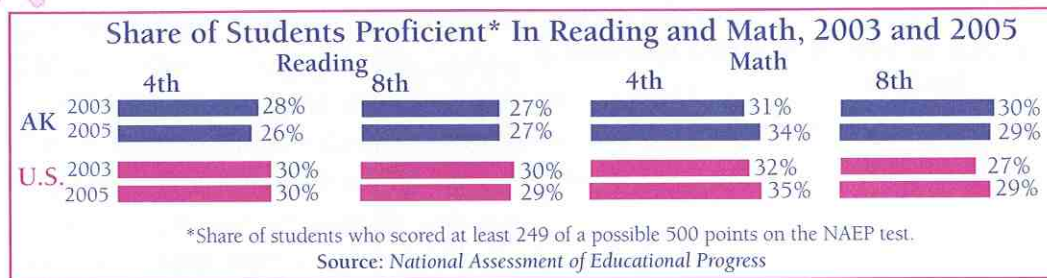
Every two years, the National Center for Education Statistics conducts the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to track math and reading skills among 4th and 8th graders nationwide. Also known as the nation's report card, the NAEP allows states to compare how well their students are doing, compared with students nationwide; assess how groups of students are doing; and track progress over time.

The NAEP is based on a random sample of students from a representative group of schools in each state. The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandates that all states and school districts receiving Title I federal education funds take part in the NAEP assessments.

Alaska requires all high-school students to pass the High School Graduation Qualifying Exam before they can receive diplomas. Students first take the test in tenth grade and can repeat it until they pass. It tests reading, writing, and math proficiency. Students who don't pass all three sections won't receive diplomas; if they meet all other requirements for graduation, they will receive "certificates of achievement."

Passing the graduation exam in order to receive a diploma has only been a requirement since 2004, and it's not clear how colleges and employers will see certificates of achievement in lieu of diplomas.

During the 2003-04 school year, the average daily attendance in Alaska's 518 public schools and 53 school districts was close to 131,000. In that year, Alaska spent



\$9,800 per student. But there are big differences among Alaska's school districts—in remoteness, climate, energy sources, and other factors—and therefore big differences in spending per student. Remote rural districts with relatively few students may spend triple the statewide average. The districts with the most students and the best road or ferry connections—like Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau—spend less.<sup>10</sup>

**NAEP TESTS**

The figure above shows the share of students—in Alaska and nationwide—who scored high enough on the 2003 and 2005 National Assessments of Educational Progress to be rated "proficient" in math and reading in the 4th and 8th grades. The "proficient" category also includes students who scored high enough to be considered not only proficient but advanced.

Students taking the NAEP test can score a maximum of 500 points; those who score at least 249 points are considered proficient. Those who score 214 to 248 points are scored as having "basic" skills; scores below 214 points are "below basic."

We don't yet have detailed breakdowns of the 2005 scores by sex, race, and family income. Below we first compare overall scores of Alaska students with those nationwide and then report more detailed breakdowns of the 2003 Alaska results.

**Alaska and U.S. Comparisons**

Barely one-quarter of Alaska's 4th and 8th graders read well enough to score as proficient in the 2005 NAEP tests—and the share of 4th graders who were proficient actually declined between 2003 and 2005. Nationwide, the share of 8th graders who are proficient readers also dropped between 2003 and 2005, from 30% to 29%.

The only improvement in Alaska's NAEP proficiency scores between the 2003 and 2005 assessments was an increase in math proficiency among 4th graders. The share scoring as proficient increased from 31% to 34%. Among Alaska 8th graders, the proficient share dropped from 30% to 29%. As of 2005, math proficiency among Alaska 4th and 8th graders was essentially at the U.S. average.

**2003 Scores by Sex, Race, and Income**

Girls in both 4th and 8th grade did better than boys on the 2003 reading test nationwide, but the gap in Alaska was larger. Alaska girls scored an average of 13 points higher than boys, compared with an 8-point difference nationwide.

White students scored higher in reading than minorities in Alaska, with a gap of 42 points between White and Alaska Native 4th graders. Students from low-income families—as measured by eligibility for free or reduced-price school meals—scored about 30 points lower than



students from higher-income families. Those scores track with research showing that living in poverty or near-poverty puts children at high risk of doing poorly in school.<sup>11</sup>

### 2003 Math by Sex, Race, and Income

Alaska boys scored very slightly better than girls in math in both 4th and 8th grades, but the gap was just two points among 8th graders. As was true on the reading test, White students scored higher than minority students in both 4th and 8th grades. But the gap wasn't as large as it was in reading scores; White 4th graders scored 24 points higher than Alaska Native students in math. And students from low-income families again scored lower—about 25 points below those from higher-income families.

### HIGH-SCHOOL GRADUATION QUALIFYING EXAM

The figure below shows how Alaska 10th graders scored on the High-School Graduation Qualifying Exam in spring 2005. Several of the same patterns we just discussed for the NAEP test results are also evident in these results.

Students as a whole did better in math and writing than in reading; just 69% passed the reading test, but 72% passed math and 84% writing. Why so many more students pass writing than reading puzzles many observers in Alaska, because the two skills are so closely related.

Girls outscored boys in reading and writing—but especially in writing, with 90% of 10th grade girls passing compared with 78% of boys. In math, boys had a slight edge, with 73% of boys and 71% of girls passing.

White students were more likely to pass all three sections of the exam than minority students, but the gap was biggest in percentages of White and Alaska Native students passing the reading test. Just 44% of Native 10th graders passed in 2005, compared with 82% of White students.

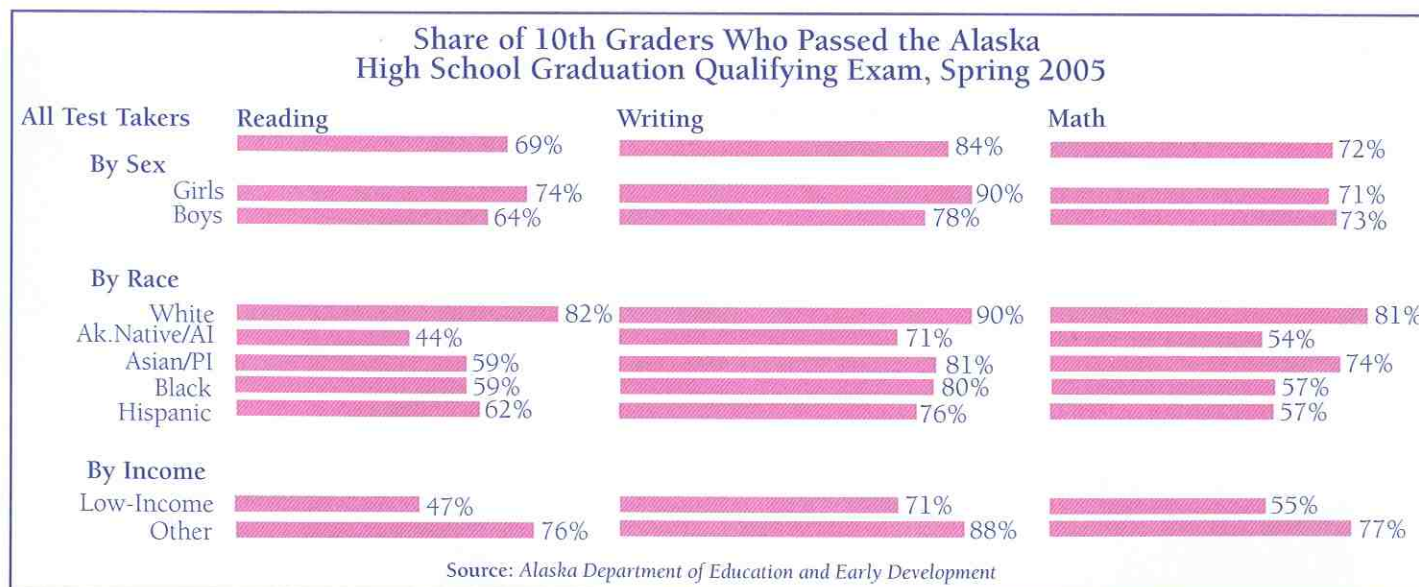
And again—as we saw with the NAEP results—students from low-income families (also measured by eligibility for free or reduced-price school meals) were much less likely to pass the exam than students from

families with more money. The gap was biggest in reading scores, with just 47% of low-income students passing compared with 76% of those from higher-income families.

Overall, the figure below tells us that a lot of Alaska 10th graders fail the exam the first time they take it—in 2005, a third failed reading and more than a quarter failed math. Within groups by race and income, much larger shares failed. Students have more opportunities to take the test in 11th and 12th grade, but significant numbers never pass.<sup>12</sup>

School achievement can't be measured only in standardized tests. Students who are not native speakers of English, students with physical or mental disabilities, students from poor families, and students from different cultures and backgrounds can be at a big disadvantage in taking standardized tests.

But Alaska and other states need to find ways of making sure that all students leave school with the skills they need to go on to college or into the job market.





### ENDNOTES FOR EDUCATION SECTION

1. Graduation Counts: A National Governors Association Compact on State High-School Graduation Data. July 17, 2005. See <http://www.nga.org>.
2. 2005 Kids Count Data Book, Annie E. Casey Foundation.
3. New York Times, July 21, 2005.
4. Based on sources cited in National Center for Education Statistics: Dropout Rates in the United States, 2001. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, NCES 2005-046.
5. Population Reference Bureau, U.S. High School Dropouts: The Gender Gap. Retrieved May 9, 2005, from [www.prb.org](http://www.prb.org).
6. Detailed Alaska dropout information was supplied by Erik McCormick of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development.
7. Rima Shore, Kids Count Indicator Brief: Reducing the Number of Disconnected Youth. Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003.
8. Ibid.
9. National Kids Count online data, Annie E. Casey Foundation.
10. For recent figures on cost differentials among Alaska school districts, see Research Summary No. 62, "How Much Different are Costs Among Alaska School Districts?" Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska Anchorage, March 2005.
11. K. Seccombe, "Families in Poverty in the 1990s: Trends, Causes, Consequences, and Lessons Learned," in Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62 (November 2000), pages 1094-1113.
12. See, for example, Chapter 6, pages 6-16 through 6-22 in Status of Alaska Natives 2004, Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska Anchorage, May 2004.

# Children In Danger



*Alaska wildflowers are beautiful and diverse – just like the adopted children their families told us about. Turn the page to read about a family that could be your neighbor.*

*Lupine  
(Lupinus nootkatensis)*



## THE FAMILY THAT COULD BE YOUR NEIGHBOR

This family has five children—one biological and four adopted—and although they wanted to share their story they asked us not to use their last name. We talked with Sherrie, the mother of the family.

Sherrie emphasized that she and her husband “are not any different from anybody else and neither are our children.” She hopes more people will come to think of adoption simply as one of the ordinary ways to create a family.

After their first child was born, Sherrie and her husband learned they couldn't have any more biological children. But they knew they wanted more children. They were able to adopt one child through a private agency. Later they were asked to be foster parents for a baby boy born addicted to cocaine. They agreed and adopted him three years later.

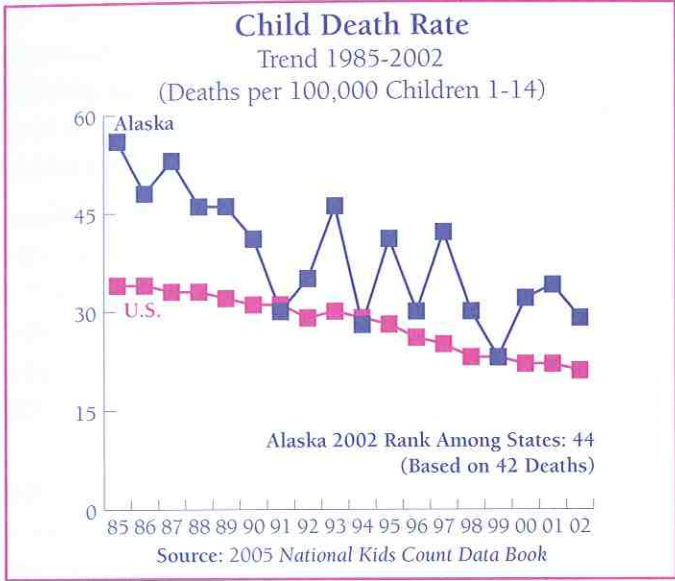
Over the years they adopted two more children—also with physical or developmental problems. Sherrie has good things to say about the state agencies and programs that provide services for children with special needs.

Like some other adoptive parents we talked with, Sherrie and her husband encourage their children to keep in touch with their birth families. Her children have siblings in several other states; they write each other and meet once a year. “When we adopted we expanded our family by quite a lot without even realizing it.”

She also talks about how adopting several children has led them to know their neighbors better—because they sometimes turn to their neighbors for help. “Adoption affects everyone, and we need the people who have jumped in and helped us. We're part of a much larger community and world.”

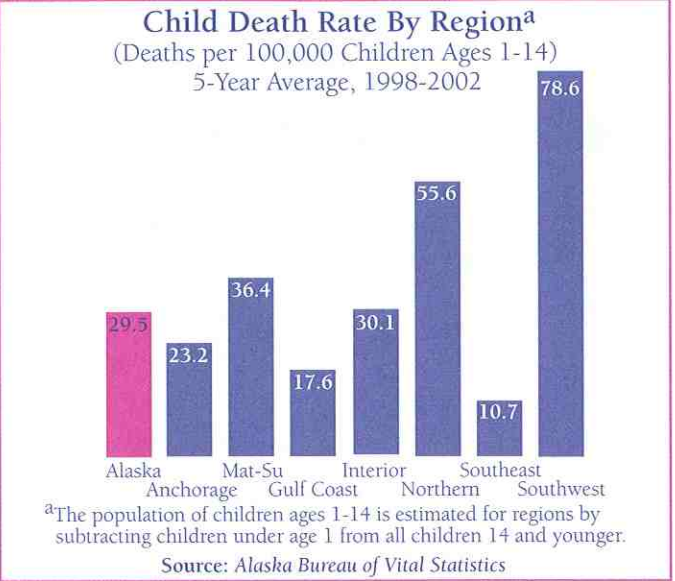
Sherrie believes that children have “unlimited potential,” if they're given the help and the love they need. Not long ago, for instance, she had trouble choosing between two types of bathroom tile, and she brought samples home. Looking at the samples, her youngest daughter asked, “Well, which one is more slippery when it's wet?”

That thoughtful question came, Sherrie notes, from a child that medical professionals once told her would never walk or talk. She sums up the benefits of adoption this way: “Every day is a pleasure with my kids.”



among the worst in the nation. As the trend graph shows, Alaska's rate also fluctuates from year to year, because it is based on a relatively small number of deaths—in recent years, about 40 to 45 deaths annually among children 1 to 14. So a slight change in the number of deaths can make a big difference in the rate of death. Taking an average rate over five years (as we do in calculating regional figures) helps smooth out those fluctuations.

The death rate among children statewide averaged 29.5 per 100,000 children from 1998 through 2002.<sup>3</sup> But regional differences are huge; the rates in the Northern and Southwest regions were five to seven times the Southeast rate.



**DEFINITION**

The child death rate is the number of deaths per 100,000 children ages 1-14, from all causes. Regional statistics are based on the child's place of residence. Manner of death information includes those 1 to 17.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

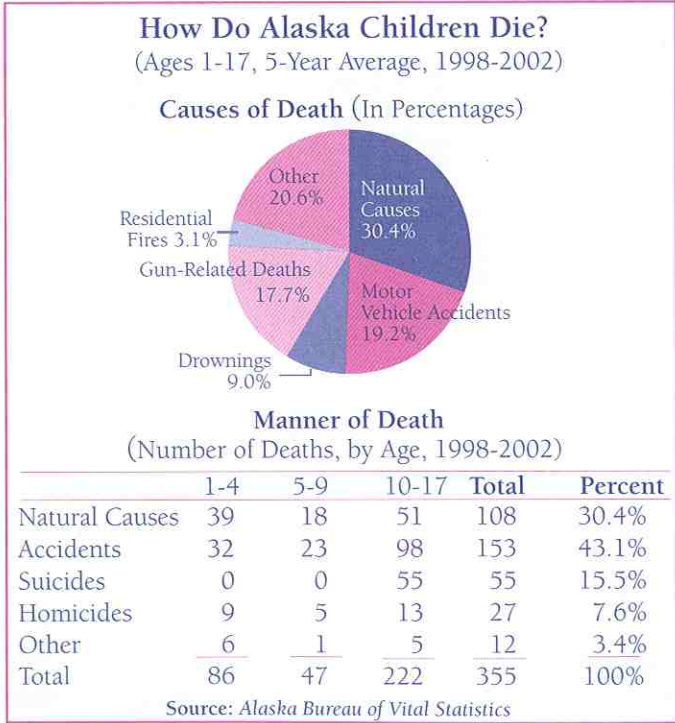
Accidents are the leading cause of death among American children, killing more than 5,600 annually.<sup>1</sup> Boys die at 1.5 times the rate of girls; Native American children die at higher rates than any other children. But rates of accidental death are much lower than they used to be—probably because Americans are now more likely to use life-saving devices like infant car seats, seat belts, life vests, bicycle helmets, and smoke alarms. The National Safe Kids Campaign reports that the rate of fatal accidents among children dropped 39% between 1987 and 2000.<sup>2</sup>

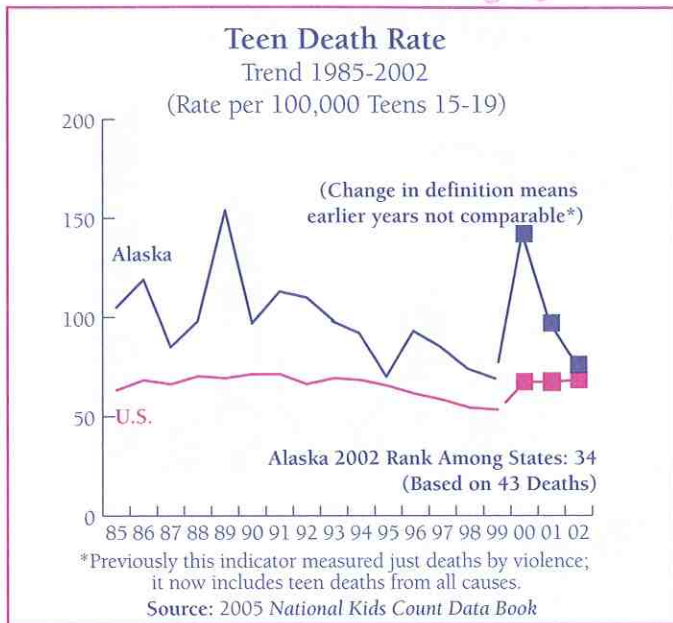
**DATA**

The child death rates in both the U.S. and Alaska have declined since 1985, but Alaska's rate remains

What kills Alaska's children? Natural causes accounted for 30% of deaths in recent years, while accidents caused more than 40%. Alaska has historically had high rates of accidental death; the state's terrain, climate, and sudden weather changes pose many hazards. But homicides and suicides accounted for nearly another 25% of deaths in recent years.

Older children (10 to 17) are more likely to die than younger children, and the causes of death vary considerably by age. Almost 85% of younger children (9 and younger) who died in recent years were killed by natural causes and accidents. But 10% of the deaths among the youngest (under age 5) were murders. Among older children, 25% of deaths were suicides and 6% homicides.





**DEFINITION**

The teen death rate is the number of deaths (from all causes) per 100,000 teenagers 15 to 19. This indicator previously measured only the rate of violent deaths—deaths from accidents, suicides, and homicides. The figures since 2000 now include deaths from natural causes, so they are higher than and not comparable to the earlier figures.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

Nationwide, three quarters of the teenagers who die each year are killed by violence. Accidents are by far the leading cause of death; homicide and suicide are the second and third causes.<sup>4</sup> There is some good news about violent deaths among teenagers. Numbers of teen suicides and homicides dropped somewhat between 2000 and 2002, and the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently reported that the nationwide rate of suicide among teenagers declined 25% from 1992 to 2001.<sup>5</sup>

Still, in 2002 more than 1,500 teenagers across the country committed suicide, and many more made attempts.<sup>6</sup>

Alaska has the sixth highest suicide rate in the nation—and we know many of those who kill themselves are teenagers. Between 1993 and 2002, 172 teenagers in Alaska committed suicide, as the pie chart on the next page shows.

The prevalence of suicide, especially among young people, prompted Alaska's governor to create the Alaska Statewide Suicide Prevention Council. The council in September 2004 released a suicide prevention plan that calls for collaboration between the state and its communities in the fight against suicide. Among other things, the plan provides tools communities can use to help prevent suicide and sets suicide prevention goals.<sup>7</sup>

**DATA**

As of 2002, Alaska's overall teen death rate was 76 per 100,000, compared with a national rate of 68. Only 17 states had higher rates. It is the high rate of violent death in particular that drives Alaska's overall rate up. Alaska consistently has among the highest rates of violent teen death in the nation. Keep in mind, however, that Alaska's rate of both overall and violent teen deaths is based on small numbers of actual deaths—so they can spike up or down from year to year.

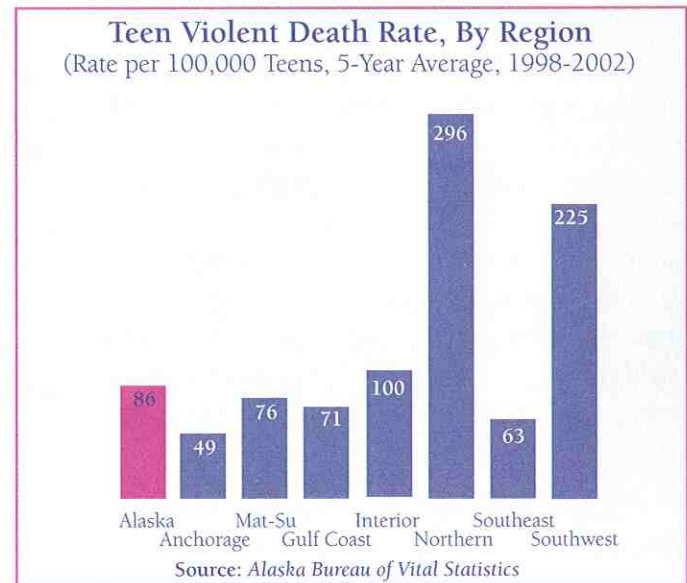
To help reduce the effects of those year-to-year fluctuations, we calculate regional rates based on five-year averages. The adjacent bar graph shows rates of violent death only. From 1998 through 2002, Alaska's violent teen death rate averaged 86, but the regional variation was enormous. Anchorage's rate was

lowest, at 49 per 100,000. The Northern region had the highest rate, at 296—six times Anchorage's. In other regions, the rate ranged from 63 per 100,000 in the Southeast to 225 in the Southwest.

**ALASKA VIOLENT DEATH BY CAUSE**

Accidents caused 60% of all violent deaths among Alaska's teenagers from 1998 through 2002, suicides another 23%, and homicides about 11%. For the remaining 6%, investigators found that the deaths were due to violence, but were unable to determine with certainty which of the three types of violence had caused those deaths.

The scale of teenage suicide in Alaska is reflected in national comparisons. Suicides account for about 14% of violent teen deaths nationwide, compared with 23% in Alaska. Also, in the U.S. as a whole, there are more homicides than suicides among teenagers—but in Alaska, there are about twice as many suicides as homicides.



The table below breaks down the overall violent death rate into rates of accident, homicide, and suicide for the period 1998 to 2002. The numbers are too small to show rates for all regions, but we can still see an interesting picture of regional differences.

In Anchorage, the rate of suicide is only about a third the statewide average, but the homicide rate is nearly 50% higher. And when we compare Anchorage with "Remainder of State," which includes many of the most remote rural areas, Anchorage's homicide rate is three times higher.

By contrast, in the remainder of the state, after Anchorage and the Interior region are broken out, the rates of death from accidents and suicides are nearly equal. This is a staggering statistic, when you consider that (1) rural accident rates are very high and (2) in the nation as a whole, accidents kill nearly five times as many teenagers as suicide.

Again, it's important to remember that the regional rates, even with five years' worth of data, are still based on relatively small numbers of deaths. But the general picture is clear: suicide rates among rural teenagers are incredibly high.

The adjacent bar graph shows rates of suicide, by region, for the decade from 1993 to 2002. For this longer period we can break out rates for all the regions. The range of rates is huge: from lows of 17 and 19 per 100,000 in Southeast and Anchorage to 97 and 246 in the rural Southwest and Northern regions.

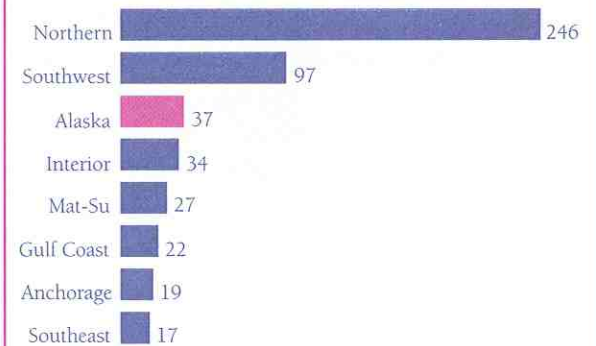
The pie graph shows, for the same period, which teenagers committed suicide, by race and sex. From 1993 to 2002, 172 teenagers ages 15 to 19 killed themselves. Of those, 81% were boys—49% Alaska Native boys and 32% non-Native boys. Girls made up nearly 19% of suicides, but Alaska Native girls were twice as likely as non-Native girls to kill themselves.

These numbers in the pie chart track with the regional rates of suicide in the bar graph. The rural Northern and Southwest regions are predominantly Alaska Native.

Despite this bad news, data from the 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Survey suggest an encouraging trend for the state. Between 1995 and 2003, the share of Alaska high-school students who reported planning to commit suicide dropped from 18.7% to 12.5%. The share of high-school girls who reported attempting suicide also dropped, from 13.8% to 10%, during that period.<sup>8</sup>

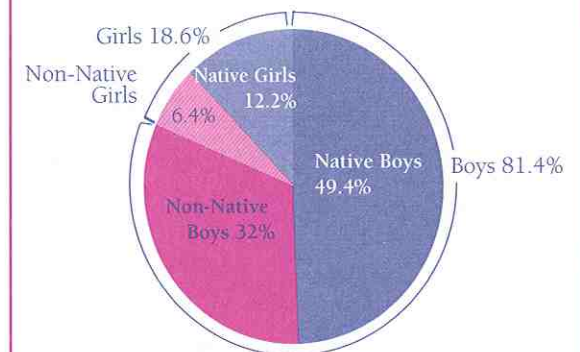
### Alaska Teen (15-19) Suicide Rate By Region, 1993-2002

Rate Per 100,000



Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

### Teen (15-19) Suicides by Sex and Race, 1993-2002



Total Suicides, 1993-2002: 172

Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics

### TEEN VIOLENT DEATH RATES, BY MANNER AND REGION

RATE PER 100,000 TEENS 15-19, 5-YEAR AVERAGE, 1998-2002

REGION	ACCIDENTS	ASSAULT/HOMICIDE	SUICIDE
Anchorage	27.6	8.2	13.3
Interior	54.0	7.7	38.6
Remainder of State	57.9	2.6	52.6
Alaska	45.5	5.6	35.1

Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics



**DEFINITION AND SIGNIFICANCE**

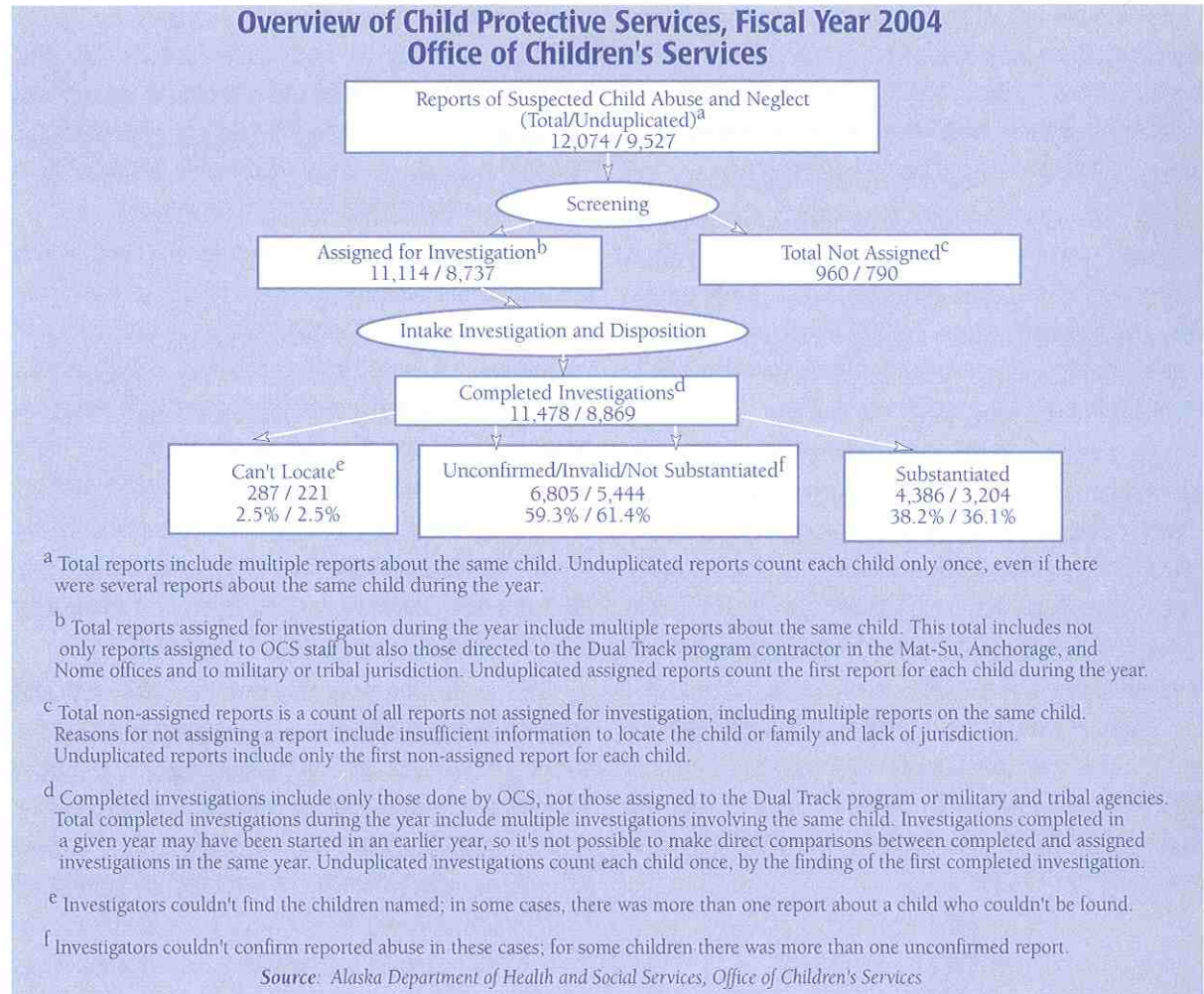
Child abuse or neglect exists when parents or other adult guardians physically or mentally hurt children in their care or fail to protect them from such harm. Hundreds of American children, especially the youngest and most vulnerable (under age 5), are killed by abuse every year. Thousands more are seriously hurt, and many suffer lifelong disabilities. Unfortunately, we don't know exactly how many children are actually abused or neglected. We only know how many suspected cases of abuse are reported, investigated, and substantiated.

**OCS INVESTIGATION PROCEDURES**

The Office of Children's Services (OCS) in the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services investigates reports of suspected child abuse and neglect in Alaska. Anyone who believes a child has been mistreated or harmed can file a report with OCS, which assigns investigation priority based on its judgment about the degree of potential risk to the child.

The adjacent chart illustrates how OCS handles reports of suspected harm. Most reports are assigned for investigation. OCS staff investigates most, but some are referred to military or tribal agencies or to the Dual Track program, which tries to prevent future abuse by providing intensive help to entire families. These cases are included in the total cases assigned for investigation, but not in completed investigation figures, because other agencies don't use the same investigation procedures.

Some reports aren't investigated, including reports where people mistakenly call OCS about matters that don't involve child abuse and cases with insufficient information for investigation. In the past some cases OCS judged to be low-priority weren't investigated, because there wasn't enough staff. But since mid-2004, OCS policy has been to assign all reports for investigation.



Most cases the OCS staff investigates are either substantiated or not substantiated; occasionally, investigators can't locate the children named.<sup>9</sup>

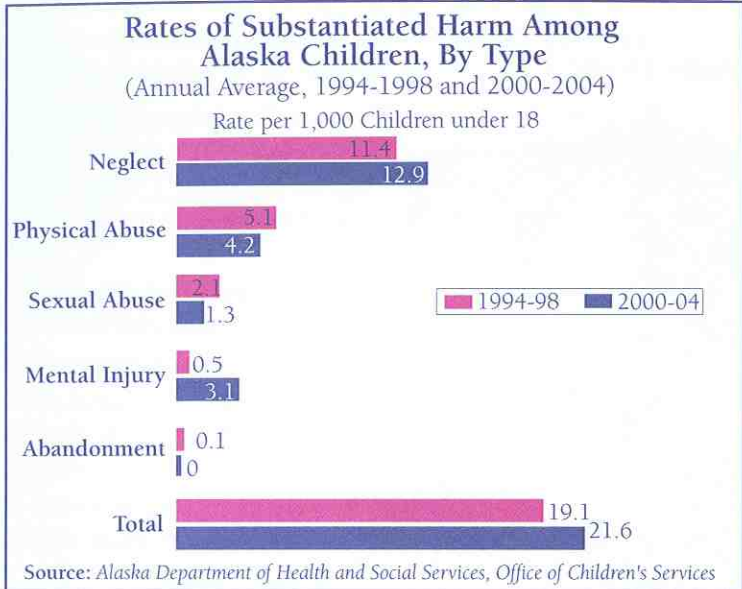
**OCS STATISTICS**

OCS received 12,074 total and 9,527 unduplicated reports of abuse or neglect in fiscal year 2004. Total reports include multiple (duplicated) reports of suspected harm to the same child. Unduplicated counts include each child only once, even if there are several reports con-

cerning the same child. Total reports measure OCS's workload; unduplicated reports show the number of individual children reported to OCS as possible victims of abuse or neglect.

Of the 11,478 investigations OCS completed in 2004, about 38% substantiated harm to children and about 60% couldn't determine whether children had been harmed. In 2.5% of cases investigators couldn't locate the children.



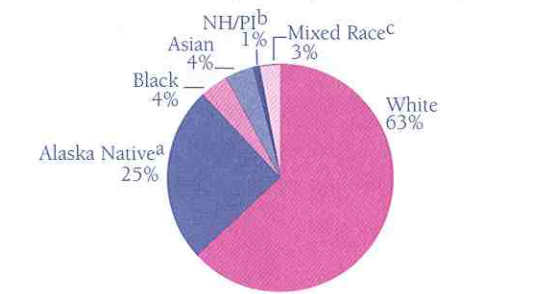


As the dark bars in the graph show, neglect was the most frequent type of substantiated abuse, at a rate of 13 per 1,000 children. Children were physically abused at a rate of 4 per 1,000; sexually abused at between 1 and 2; and mentally injured at 3. (OCS defines "mental injury" as an emotional, intellectual, or psychological injury that impairs a child's ability to function.) Few children were abandoned.

**CHILD ABUSE BY RACE**

Alaska Native children make up about 25% of all children (as the pie chart shows), but in recent years they accounted for half the children with substantiated harm. Black children make up about 4% of children statewide but 7% of the children who suffered substantiated harm. White children make up about 63% of children, but accounted for only 33% of those with substantiated harm. Asian and Pacific Island children together make up 5% of children but 3% of those with substantiated harm.

**Racial Composition of Alaska Children (2003)**



<sup>a</sup>Includes Native alone and in combination with other races  
<sup>b</sup>Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander  
<sup>c</sup>Except children of Native and other race, who are included in "Alaska Native."

Source: 2000 U.S. Census, adjusted by Alaska Department of Labor

**CHILD ABUSE BY TYPE**

From 2000 through 2004, the annual average rate of substantiated harm among Alaska children was nearly 22 per 1,000. (Individual children may be counted twice in that figure, because some children suffer more than one type of harm.)

**TRENDS IN CHILD ABUSE**

The bar graph compares annual average rates of harm, by type, among Alaska children in the periods 1994-1998 and 2000-2004. It appears that rates of neglect and mental injury may have increased, while rates of physical and sexual abuse may have declined. However, OCS says that substantiated rates of harm can also be affected by factors other than actual increases in harm. For example, in 1998 the Alaska Legislature required OCS to assess how children might have been harmed by exposure to domestic violence. According to OCS, that change tended to increase substantiated abuse, particularly neglect and mental injury.<sup>10</sup>

Also, rates based on the relatively small numbers of children in Alaska can fluctuate. We will feel more confident discussing trends as we get additional data.

### SUBSTANTIATED CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT IN ALASKA BY RACE AND TYPE OF HARM

(ANNUAL AVERAGE FY 2000-2004, UNDUPLICATED COUNT OF CHILDREN UNDER 18)

	Neglect #	Physical Abuse #	Sexual Abuse #	Mental Injury #	Abandonment #	Total <sup>a</sup> #	%
White	595	303	118	221	1	1,238	33%
AK Native	1,310	283	91	191	2	1,877	50%
Black	134	62	10	39	1	246	7%
Asian/PI	52	37	5	15	0.5	110	3%
Hispanic/Other <sup>b</sup>	110	60	17	64	0.5	252	7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,201</b>	<b>746</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>530</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3,724</b>	<b>100%</b>

<sup>a</sup>As of February 2005  
<sup>b</sup>OCS figures report Hispanic as a separate ethnic group; the U.S. census reports figures by race and includes Hispanic children within racial groups.

Source: Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children's Services

**DEFINITION**

In this indicator we look at serious and fatal injuries among Alaska children through age 19. "Serious" here means requiring hospitalization. Injuries include both accidental and intentional, but hospitalizations or deaths resulting from illnesses are excluded.

**INJURY DEATHS**

Accidents kill Alaska children at a rate 50% above the national average; the death rate from suicide is more than triple the national average; and the rate of death from homicide is close to the national average.<sup>11</sup>

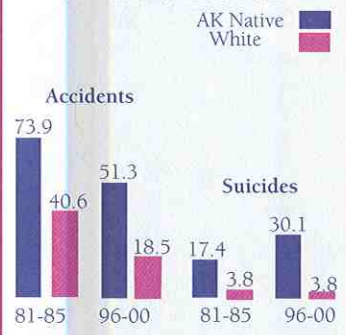
Rates of accidental death among young people in Alaska have fallen considerably since the 1980s. Suicide rates, however, have not declined, and in fact increased sharply among young Alaska Natives. The Alaska Division of Public Health also reports big differences in death rates by race and region:<sup>12</sup>

- Rates of accidental death fell among both Alaska Native and White children and teenagers between 1981 and 2000. But rates among Alaska Natives remain nearly three times higher—51.3 per 100,000, compared with 18.5.
- Suicide death rates among Alaska Native children and teenagers climbed sharply over the past two decades, from 17.4 per 100,000 in 1981-1985 to 30.1 in 1996-2000. That recent rate was nearly 10 times the rate of 3.8 among White Alaskans 19 and younger.
- Rural Alaska children and teenagers are twice as likely as those in urban areas to die by accident or suicide.

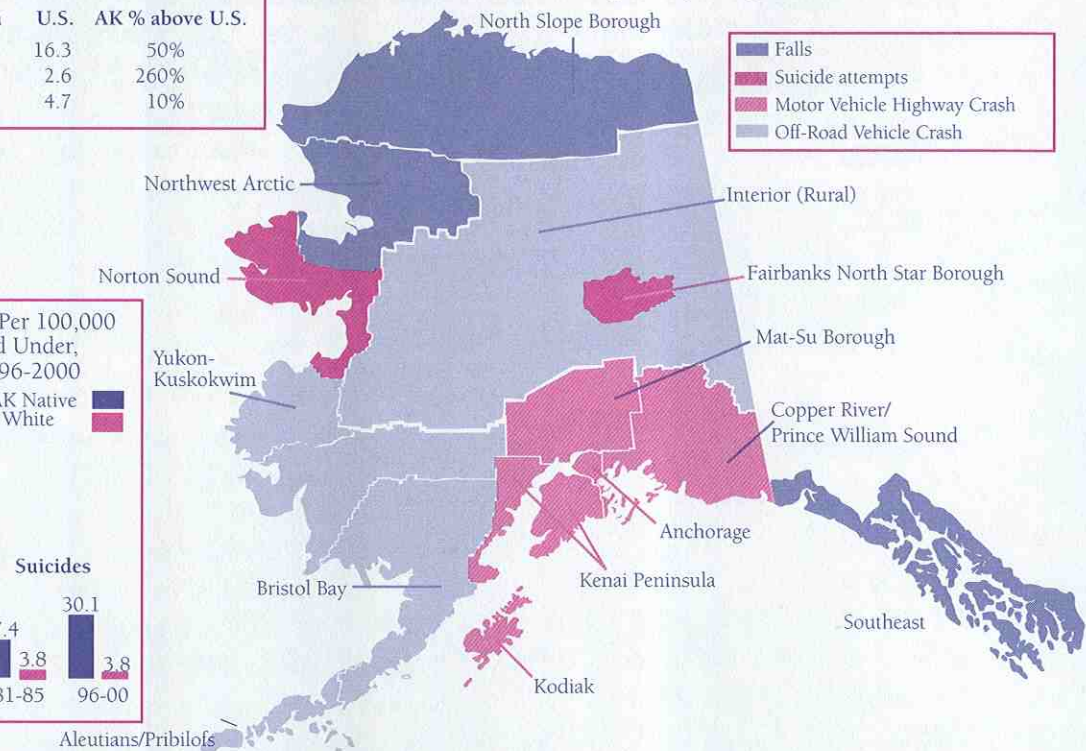
Injury Death Rates, Per 100,000, Ages 19 and Under, Alaska and U.S., 1996-2000

	Alaska	U.S.	AK % above U.S.
Accidents	24.7	16.3	50%
Suicides	9.3	2.6	260%
Homicides	5.1	4.7	10%

Injury Death Rates, Per 100,000 Alaskans 19 and Under, 1981-85 and 1996-2000



Leading Causes of Serious Injuries, Alaskans 19 and Younger, by Region of Residence, 2001



Sources: Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health, Injury Prevention and Emergency Medical Services Section and Bureau of Vital Statistics

**SERIOUS INJURIES**

Young Alaska Natives are twice as likely as young Whites to be hospitalized for accidental injuries and more than four times as likely to be hospitalized for attempting suicide or being assaulted.<sup>13</sup> There are also differences in causes of injury among regions of Alaska. (See map.)

In 2001, automobile crashes were the top cause of serious but non-fatal injuries among those 19 and under in four of the most populated areas of Southcentral Alaska (Anchorage, Kenai, Kodiak, and Prince William Sound/Copper River). Crashes with off-

road vehicles (snowmachines and all-terrain vehicles) were the leading cause of serious injury among children and teenagers in the rural Interior, Yukon-Kuskokwim, and Bristol Bay regions.

Falls caused more serious injuries than anything else in the Northwest Arctic, North Slope, and Southeast regions. Falls and crashes with off-road vehicles were about equally likely to cause serious injuries in the Aleutians/Pribilof area. And in the Fairbanks and Norton Sound regions, suicide attempts injured more children and teenagers than any other single cause.

1. National Safe Kids Campaign, Report to the Nation: Trends in Unintentional Childhood Injury Mortality, 1987-2000. May 2003.
2. Ibid.
3. Information on numbers and rates of death among Alaska children and teenagers was provided by Michael Matthews, an analyst with the Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics.
4. Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005 Kids Count Data Book. Page 40.
5. Cited in Safe Youth News Record, No. 1705. Retrieved May 13, 2005, from [www.safeyouth.org](http://www.safeyouth.org).
6. See note 4.
7. The Alaska Suicide Prevention Council and Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Alaska Suicide Prevention Plan, September 2004.
8. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, July 30, 2004, Volume 53, No. 29. Page 651. Also, T. Green, J. Middaugh, S. Saxon, and C. J. Utermohle. 2003 Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey. A joint project of the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services and the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development.
9. In mid-2004, the Office of Children's Services changed the way it categorized unsubstantiated reports of abuse. In earlier years OCS divided unsubstantiated reports into the categories of "unconfirmed" and "invalid." Now it reports all cases in those two categories as "unsubstantiated."
10. Personal communication from Kristen Tromble of OCS, December 23, 2005.
11. Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health, Alaska Injury Facts, Numbers 1 and 2, "Injury Disparities in Alaska" and "Children's Injury Disparities in Alaska." May 2003.
12. See note 11.
13. See note 11.

# Juvenile Justice



Alaska wildflowers are beautiful and diverse – just like the adopted children their families told us about. Turn the page to read about the West family.

Forget Me Not  
(*Eritrichium arctioides*)



### THE WEST FAMILY

Rich and Joy West of Anchorage have eight children: two biological children, one child for whom they are legal guardians, three adopted children and two more children they are in the process of adopting.

The Wests became interested in adoption nine years ago, when they were asked to provide short-term respite care for an 8-year-old boy who attended a special-needs school where they worked.

They enjoyed caring for the boy and soon looked into becoming foster parents. Within a few weeks, they had become his foster parents. He had 20 sets of foster parents before the Wests—but they were the last. They are now his legal guardians. They have also adopted three of his younger sisters and are in the process of adopting another boy and girl. They continue, at various times, to be foster parents for other children.

All their adopted children have physical or emotional problems, and the Wests' biological son is mentally retarded. Rich describes himself as a "full-time dad" who spends his days caring for the children.

Rich reports that the Wests' biological children welcome other children. Their oldest daughter "has gained insight into a larger world and social situations" and treats all her siblings the same, whether

they are biological, adopted, or foster. His son introduces new children to the house rules and "considers them family right away." Rich says that he and his wife "take on the tough kids" who may have suffered a lot of abuse and who many people have given up on—but who can thrive given "love and stability."

He especially remembers what happened one day before they adopted two of the girls who are now part of their family. The Wests were taking them out for day trips but returning them to a residential facility at night. One day, as he was driving the two girls back to the residential facility, the 3-year-old said something from the back seat. Unable to understand what she was saying, Rich pulled the car over and asked her to repeat what she had said. "We could come and live with you and be yours if you wanted us."

And the Wests did want the two girls. They would also like to add to the eight children they now have. "We always say we want a dozen," Rich says. "We love doing this and intend to do it as long as we can."

**NAME CHANGE**

In earlier years, this entire section was called “Juvenile Crime,” because it included only statistics on juvenile crime. This year, we’ve changed the section name to “Juvenile Justice,” because we’re including not only juvenile crime but also a description of youth courts in Alaska.

We describe youth courts because (1) they’re a fast-growing alternative to state juvenile courts nationwide; (2) they may help stop teenagers who commit one crime from committing any more; and (3) they teach teenagers about the legal system through first-hand experience. Below we first discuss juvenile crime and then discuss Alaska’s youth courts.

**DEFINITION OF JUVENILE CRIME**

The data in this section are from both federal and state sources. The state figures are delinquency referrals—police reports and notices of probation violations—among Alaskans ages 10 to 17. The Alaska Division of Juvenile Justice reports these data. Referrals are reasonable measures of juvenile crime, but keep in mind that a referral is not the same as proof of guilt.

The federal data are FBI arrest statistics from the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. This is the first year we’ve reported these statistics, which show trends in various kinds of crime and also allow us to compare U.S. and Alaska crime rates.

The state and federal data don’t entirely match, and the types of crime included in various categories differ somewhat. But the two provide a consistent picture.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF JUVENILE CRIME**

Juvenile crime has fallen in Alaska (as the figure above shows) and nationwide, but it remains widespread and higher than in many other countries.<sup>1</sup> Americans are trying various approaches to reducing it.

Children whose parents have spent time in prison are more likely to commit crimes themselves as they get older. They also face many difficulties while their parents are in prison—potentially including financial instability, high mobility, disruption in education, and reduced access to health care and other services.<sup>2</sup>

The Children of Incarcerated Parents Project estimates there are at least 6,000 Alaska children with parents in prison.<sup>3</sup> A recent survey at the Hiland Mountain Correctional Center in Eagle River found that 115 women in that prison had 211 children under age 18. A survey at Meadow Creek Correctional Facility in Juneau found that 12 men incarcerated there had 30 children under 18.<sup>4</sup>

Many people now recognize the need to provide support for families of prisoners—not only because children suffer when their parents are in prison, but also because such support might in the long run help end the cycle of intergenerational crime. One such effort in Alaska is the Children of Incarcerated Parents Project, which involves children of inmates in social, recreational, and cultural activities, tailored to individual children.

Another example of efforts to break the cycle of crime is a grant from the National Institute of Corrections, which in recent years has funded some workers in Alaska correctional facilities; those workers help inmates get services and other help for their children.<sup>5</sup>

A different approach is a national program called Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, led by more than 2,000 police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors, victims of violence, and experts on juvenile violence. The program promotes high-quality child-care and after-school activities to keep children out of trouble in the first place.

**Juvenile Crime in Alaska, 1993-1997 to 2000-2004**  
(Referral Rates per 1,000 Juveniles 10-17, 5-Year Averages)

**Individual Juveniles Committing Crimes**

1993-1997	69
1995-1999	65
1998-2002	57
2000-2004	54

**Total Reports of Juvenile Crime**

1993-1997	106
1995-1999	100
1998-2002	85
2000-2004	78

Source: Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Juvenile Justice

Fight Crime reports that by “reducing the chances that kids will grow up to have children before they are ready to be effective parents, pre-kindergarten programs can actually reach ahead to cut crime in the next generation—among the children of the children.”<sup>6</sup>

Fight Crime also cites the period between 3 and 6 in the afternoon on school days as the time when teenagers are most likely to commit or be victims of crimes; to be in or cause car crashes; and to smoke, drink, or use drugs.<sup>7</sup> It’s not clear how to combat all those problems, but a Fight Crime report cites research comparing groups of teenagers; one group had been enrolled in good child-care programs when they were 3 or 4 years old, while a similar group had not. Fifteen years later, the teenagers who had not been in good child-care programs had 70% more violent arrests.<sup>8</sup>

Also, research shows that at-risk children in good child-care programs had significantly fewer behavioral problems by age 8 than those in programs considered poor. And ninth graders from families receiving welfare who were in after-school and graduation-incentive programs



when they were in high school were found to be doing much better six years later. Those who hadn't participated were four times more likely to be dropouts, less than half as likely to be in college, and 50% more likely to have had children while they were in high school. Boys averaged six times more criminal convictions.<sup>9</sup>

Fight Crime also describes research comparing 10 housing projects where drug use and vandalism were about equal to begin with. Then Boys and Girls Clubs were established in five housing projects but not in five others. By the end of the study, the housing projects without clubs had 50% more vandalism and 37% more drug activity.<sup>10</sup>

### STATE CRIME DATA

The rate of individual juveniles committing crimes and the rate of total juvenile crime (which counts multiple crimes by the same juvenile) continue to decline in Alaska. Between 1995-1999 and 2000-2004, the rate of individual juveniles committing crimes declined 17% and the total rate of juvenile crime dropped 22%. As is true nationwide, overall juvenile crime in Alaska peaked in the early 1990s and has fallen steadily since.

The table above shows overall numbers of juvenile crimes—including multiple crimes by the same juvenile—by region and type in Alaska from 2000-2004. Statewide, property crimes make up more than half of all crimes, crimes against persons about 21%, violations of drug and alcohol laws 9%, and all other crimes 18%.

The breakdown of juvenile crime within regions is similar to the statewide breakdown. Property crimes accounted for 45% to 55% of referrals in each region. Crimes against persons ranged from 18% in Mat-Su and Anchorage to 32% in the Southwest. Violations of drug and alcohol laws ranged from 5.5% in Northern and Southwestern Alaska to 15% in the Interior. Other types

### JUVENILE DELINQUENCY REFERRALS<sup>a</sup> BY REGION AND TYPE OF CRIME (ANNUAL AVERAGE, FISCAL YEARS 2000-2004<sup>b</sup>)

Region	Crimes Against Persons		Crimes Against Property		Drug/Alcohol Laws		Other <sup>c</sup>		Total <sup>d</sup>	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Anchorage	516	17.9%	1,545	53.6%	222	7.7%	598	20.8%	2,881	100%
Mat-Su	101	18.4%	312	56.7%	55	10.0%	82	14.9%	549	100%
Gulf Coast	153	19.1%	408	51.0%	89	11.2%	150	18.8%	801	100%
Interior	186	23.5%	359	45.4%	119	15.0%	127	16.1%	791	100%
Northern	115	22.0%	294	56.2%	28	5.4%	85	16.4%	522	100%
Southeast	177	20.9%	409	48.1%	97	11.5%	166	19.5%	849	100%
Southwest	205	32.5%	330	52.3%	35	5.5%	61	9.7%	631	100%
Alaska	1,454	20.7%	3,656	52.0%	645	9.2%	1,269	18.1%	7,024	100%

<sup>a</sup> These are duplicate counts—meaning they include multiple referrals of the same juvenile; duplicated counts show the overall level of reported juvenile crime. Referrals include police reports and notices of probation violations. Juveniles charged with more than one type of crime in a single referral are included in only one category, with crimes against persons ranked first, property crimes second, drug and alcohol crimes third, and other crimes fourth.

<sup>b</sup> The state fiscal year is from July 1 through June 30.

<sup>c</sup> Includes probation violations, violations of public order and weapons laws, and miscellaneous other offenses.

<sup>d</sup> Annual average number of crimes.

Note: Percentages may total slightly more or less than 100 because of rounding.

Source: Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Juvenile Justice

of crimes clustered around 16% in most regions, but ranged from 21% in Anchorage to 10% in the Southwest.

The top table on the next page shows referrals by race to Alaska's juvenile justice system from 2000-2004: 50.6% White teenagers, 30.8% Alaska Native, 6.2% Black, 2.3% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders, 2.2% Asian, and 4.6% mixed race. Race is reported by the juveniles themselves, and nearly 1% described themselves as being of some race not specified, and 2.2% didn't designate a race.

The second table on the next page shows the population breakdown, by race and region, of all Alaskans ages 10 to 19. It allows us to see roughly how shares of crime referrals compare with overall population shares.

Among Alaskans 10 to 19, the least likely to be reported for crimes are Asians, who make up about 4% of the state's juveniles but a smaller share of those reported for crimes in all regions. About 65% of the state's juveniles are White, but they generally make up a smaller share of those reported for crimes; the exceptions are in the Mat-Su and Gulf Coast regions. Black, Alaska Native, and Pacific Island juveniles are reported for crimes at higher percentages than they make up of the state juvenile population.

The Alaska Division of Juvenile Justice is aware of this over-representation of minority groups in the juvenile justice system and is developing a plan to reduce it.<sup>11</sup>

**TOTAL JUVENILES REFERRED TO JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM, BY RACE AND REGION, FISCAL YEARS 2000-2004<sup>a</sup>**

REGION	ALASKA NATIVE	BLACK	WHITE	NH/ PACIFIC ISL.	ASIAN	MORE THAN ONE RACE	OTHER	UNKNOWN
Anchorage	16.9%	12.1%	52.6%	4.9%	4.2%	6.5%	1.6%	1.3%
Mat-Su	7.2%	1.3%	84.4%	0.1%	0.3%	3.9%	0.3%	2.5%
Gulf Coast	12.8%	0.6%	75.0%	0.4%	3.3%	3.5%	0.6%	3.7%
Interior	31.0%	6.7%	57.9%	0.3%	0.3%	1.9%	0.3%	1.7%
Northern	89.4%	0.5%	3.0%	0.5%	0.2%	3.6%	0.1%	2.7%
Southeast	36.8%	1.3%	49.8%	0.8%	0.7%	4.9%	0.7%	4.9%
Southwest	91.3%	0.2%	5.3%	0.2%	0.1%	1.7%	0.2%	1.0%
Alaska	30.8%	6.2%	50.6%	2.3%	2.2%	4.6%	0.9%	2.2%

<sup>a</sup>This is an unduplicated count of all individual juveniles referred to Alaska's juvenile justice system from 2000 through 2004. Race is self-reported by juvenile offenders.

Source: Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Juvenile Justice.

**ALASKA POPULATION, AGES 10-19, BY RACE AND REGION, 2003**

REGION	ALASKA NATIVE <sup>a</sup>	BLACK	WHITE	NH/ PACIFIC ISL.	ASIAN	MORE THAN ONE RACE <sup>b</sup>
Anchorage	12.8%	6.5%	70.3%	1.5%	5.8%	3.2%
Mat-Su	12.4%	0.9%	84.4%	0.2%	0.7%	1.4%
Gulf Coast	15.6%	0.6%	77.5%	0.5%	4.3%	1.5%
Interior	19.5%	5.1%	71.1%	0.3%	1.7%	2.3%
Northern	89.8%	0.2%	7.9%	0.3%	1.1%	0.7%
Southeast	29.4%	0.6%	64.4%	0.3%	3.7%	1.7%
Southwest	87.2%	0.4%	10.2%	0.1%	1.2%	0.9%
Alaska	24.6%	3.6%	65.1%	0.8%	3.7%	2.2%

<sup>a</sup> Includes all those who described themselves in the 2000 U.S. Census as Alaska Native alone or Alaska Native and some other race. Also includes American Indians, who make up about 0.5% of Alaska's population.

<sup>b</sup> Includes all those who described themselves as being of more than one race, except Alaska Natives and American Indians, who are included under "Alaska Native."

Source: 2000 U.S. Census figures, adjusted by Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development





**FEDERAL DATA**

The bar graphs on the left side of the adjacent figure compare rates of juvenile crime in Alaska and the nation in 1994 and 2002. They show total crime rates and rates of some specific types of crime among those 10 to 17. The pie chart on the right side of the figure shows how much each type of crime contributed to total juvenile crime in Alaska in 2002.

The federal data don't compare directly with state data. The federal figures are for single years; the state figures are five-year averages. Also, the federal government categorizes crimes somewhat differently. For instance, the federal figures put major property crimes like burglary in a separate category from vandalism, while the state includes all types of property crimes in a single category.

Still, the two sources of information provide a consistent picture. Juvenile crime in Alaska and the U.S. as a whole has dropped sharply since the 1990s, and overall rates in Alaska and nationwide are quite similar. The total juvenile arrest rate in Alaska—for all types of crime—fell nearly 30% in less than a decade and was down more than 25% nationwide.

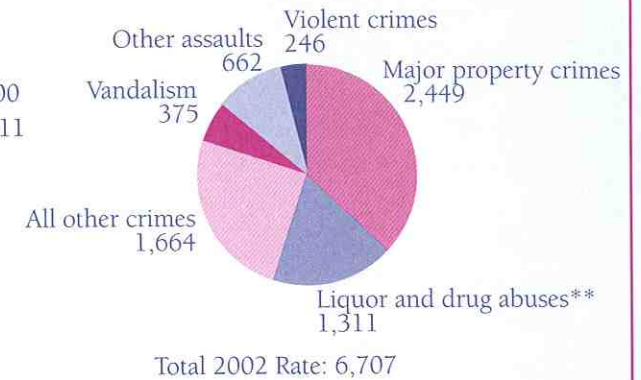
Major property crimes (burglary, theft, and arson) have also dropped sharply since the 1990s, in both Alaska and nationwide. But these property crimes remain much more common in Alaska, with Alaska's 2002 rate nearly 70% above the U.S. average.

The violent crime category has four types of crime: murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. Such violent crime has also fallen in the past decade, and in both 1994 and 2002 violent juvenile crime in Alaska was less common than it is nationwide.

**FBI Estimates of Juvenile Arrest Rate  
U.S. and Alaska, 1994 and 2002**  
(Rate of Arrests Per 100,000 Juveniles 10-17\*)



**Breakdown of Alaska  
Juvenile Arrest Rate, 2002**  
(Rate of Arrests Per 100,000 Juveniles 10-17\*)



\* Includes multiple arrests of same juvenile.

\*\* Includes driving under the influence of alcohol and violations of drug and alcohol laws.

Note: These federal figures on arrest rates differ somewhat from state juvenile referral reports and are for single years. We report state data in five-year averages; because the number of juveniles in Alaska is relatively small, figures are more subject to year-to-year variations. Crimes included in various categories also differ in state and federal figures.

Source: H. Snyder, C. Puzanchera, W. Kang. "Easy Access to FBI Arrest Statistics 1994-2002." Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2005. <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstatabb/ezucr/>

Arrests for drunk driving make up a small part of overall juvenile crime—but unlike rates for other kinds of crime, the rate of arrests for drunk driving was up sharply among teenagers in both Alaska and across the country in recent years. And rates in Alaska are roughly twice those of the U.S. as a whole.

## YOUTH COURTS ACROSS AMERICA

Youth courts are a fast-growing phenomenon across the United States. For teenagers who commit non-violent crimes, they can be an alternative to traditional juvenile justice systems. Non-profit groups, schools, and police departments typically operate youth courts, but teenage volunteers take all or most of the roles in the courtroom and hand down sentences for their peers.

A few cities set up youth courts in the 1960s and 1970s, but the numbers didn't grow much until the 1990s, when the federal government and some state governments began helping fund them. In 1991 there were about 50 youth courts nationwide. By 1998 that number had mushroomed to 500—and between 1998 and 2005 it more than doubled, reaching 1,037. These courts now hear about 100,000 cases annually.<sup>12</sup>

Adults train and oversee teenagers serving on youth courts. Juveniles who commit non-violent crimes can be offered the choice of going to youth court. The Urban Institute characterizes the average juvenile referred to youth court as 14 to 16, in trouble for the first time, and accused of a misdemeanor like shoplifting.<sup>13</sup>

The structure of youth courts varies. In some, everyone from clerk to judge is a teenager; in others, adults act as judges. Some courts have juries and some don't. The courts typically don't decide guilt or innocence—although Alaska's youth courts do have that option. Teenagers who come before youth courts usually admit they're guilty and go before the court just for sentencing.

Sentences can include doing community service, writing essays, paying victims, and attending classes. Going before these courts is voluntary, and the sentences can't be enforced. But those who complete their sentences have their delinquency charges dismissed; those who don't must return to the traditional juvenile justice system.

But why send teenagers to youth courts instead of regular juvenile court systems? Those who work with or have studied youth courts offer several reasons. Juvenile justice systems have such large caseloads that they generally focus on more serious juvenile crime. They often can't give much attention to widespread but non-violent crimes like shoplifting and vandalism.

So teenagers who commit such crimes may face few consequences. Youth courts have the dual purpose of helping relieve the burden on juvenile justice systems and making teenagers who commit less-serious crimes responsible for what they did. Experts say taking such responsibility makes teenagers less likely to commit more crimes and at the same time allows them to eliminate their formal criminal records.

On the other side, the teenagers who volunteer to be on the youth courts get training in how the legal system works, as well as first-hand experience with it. They can also sometimes get school credit.

And it costs far less to use youth courts. The American Youth Policy Forum recently estimated that the average cost per case in youth courts nationwide is less than \$500, compared with \$1,600 to put a delinquent on probation and at least \$21,000 to try a case in a traditional juvenile court.<sup>14</sup>

Little information exists on how well youth courts actually reduce crime. But in 2002, the Urban Institute evaluated youth courts in four locations, including Anchorage, and found that teenagers who went through youth courts in those places were two to three times less likely to commit crimes within the next six months than those who went through the state juvenile systems.<sup>15</sup>

## ALASKA YOUTH COURTS

In 2005, youth courts in 14 communities belonged to the United Youth Courts of Alaska, and a number of Alaska Native communities also had tribal youth courts operating under tribal jurisdiction.<sup>16</sup>

The first youth court in the state was Anchorage's, established in 1989. That court has been the model for most Alaska courts established since then and it has won national awards, according to Joseph Ehrheart, executive director of United Youth Courts of Alaska. That is a non-profit group providing various kinds of assistance to its member youth courts.<sup>17</sup>

In most respects, Alaska youth courts are like those elsewhere in the country. They're run by teenage volunteers (students ages 12 to 18) who can act as clerks, bailiffs, defense attorneys, prosecutors, jurors, and judges. They sentence fellow teenagers—usually those who are in trouble with the law for the first time and who have admitted committing a misdemeanor.

Youth courts are paid for through a combination of government and private funds. Anchorage's youth court, for example, is funded about 40% by the municipal government, 10% by United Way, 10% by federal juvenile justice grants, and the remaining 40% by businesses and individuals.<sup>18</sup> Attorneys and other adults also volunteer their time.

Alaska's teenage volunteers must attend training courses on the legal system and court procedures, spend a week working in the court system, and pass a youth court "bar exam." In Anchorage, youth court volunteers can also get school credit, if they spend 120 hours in court-related activities.

The structure of Alaska youth courts differs by community, as do the kinds of misdemeanors they consider. Anchorage's court currently has a panel of three

teenage judges who hear cases, a teenage bailiff, and teenage prosecutors and defense attorneys.<sup>19</sup> Adult advisors, usually attorneys, sit in on hearings and offer advice when asked. As is true nationwide, going through an Alaska youth court is voluntary, and sentences of youth courts can't be enforced by law. But those who complete their sentences have no formal criminal records.

Alaska has also been innovative. It was the first state to write statutes pertaining to youth courts; since then 27 other states have passed youth court statutes. Alaska's courts are also unusual in that Alaska law allows them not only to determine sentences but also to decide whether defendants are innocent or guilty. Few defendants actually plead not guilty, but they have that choice.<sup>20</sup>

The state Division of Juvenile Justice makes most of the referrals to Alaska's youth courts—about 75% in fiscal year 2005. District courts refer almost all the rest.

Statistics on youth court operations over time haven't been compiled, but United Youth Courts of Alaska collected information for fiscal year 2005. Youth courts sentenced about 760 juveniles, or roughly 11% of the total delinquency referrals that came through the state Division of Juvenile Justice that year.<sup>21</sup> Delinquents sentenced by the youth courts completed about 80% of community service the courts ordered and also paid close to 80% of the restitution. That amounted to 10,500 hours of community service and nearly \$7,000 in restitution in fiscal year 2005. About 160 delinquents—or around 20% of those

sentenced that year—also took part in mediation or counseling with victims or were on panels discussing the effects of crime on victims and communities.

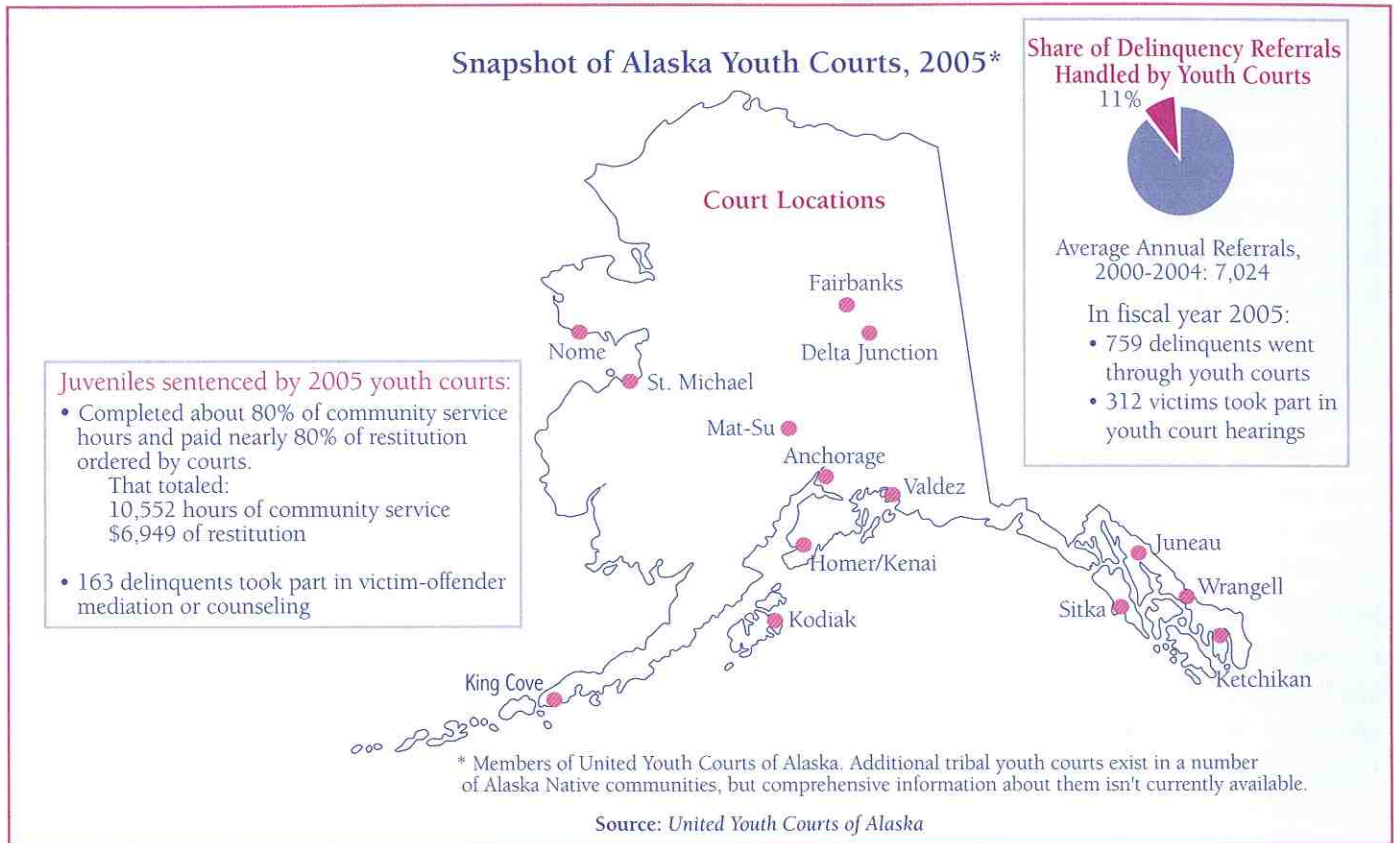
Analysts generally agree that youth courts keep many juveniles from committing more crimes. A 2002 study by the Urban Institute found that just 6% of the juveniles who went through Anchorage's youth court committed more crimes within six months after they completed their sentences. That was the lowest rate among the four youth courts the institute studied.<sup>22</sup>

But Sharon Leon, executive director of Anchorage's youth court, and others involved with youth courts also say that information on recidivism rates is limited, that

youth courts around the state currently have no standard measurement of recidivism, and that a carefully designed, long-term study of this issue is needed.<sup>23</sup>

Youth courts nationwide also cost much less than the alternatives. Information for Alaska is limited, but Anchorage's youth court reports that an average proceeding in that court costs \$569. By contrast, the annual cost of holding a juvenile at McLaughlin Youth Center in Anchorage is \$54,000.<sup>24</sup> Juveniles who commit the most serious crimes are held at that detention center. If youth courts keep teenagers from moving on to more serious crimes, they are not only benefiting teenagers, families, and communities, but also saving the state government considerable money.

### Snapshot of Alaska Youth Courts, 2005\*



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RECRUITING AND KEEPING YOUTH COURT VOLUNTEERS

In 2003, United Youth Courts asked the Justice Center at the University of Alaska Anchorage to assess ways of recruiting and keeping youth court volunteers—because those courts can't increase or even sustain the number of cases they hear if there aren't enough teenage volunteers. The Justice Center held focus groups with current court volunteers and made several recommendations. Among others, those include:

- Revise the training course to emphasize what happens in youth court. Teenage volunteers said current training covers the broad legal system but doesn't necessarily give them a clear idea of what to expect in youth courts, which handle only misdemeanors. They also felt that all recruits should be involved in mock trials before taking part in actual youth court trials, so they don't have unrealistic expectations. Currently, some but not all recruits take part in mock trials.
- Ensure that court volunteers are not themselves violating alcohol or drug laws. Some court volunteers complained that others on youth courts use alcohol or drugs themselves. They recommended that youth courts be more vigilant and impose penalties—including suspension from youth court—for those using drugs or alcohol.
- Increase efforts to let teenagers know how to get involved in youth courts. Teenage volunteers said publicity in the schools and in the press should be more explicit about specific steps potential volunteers need to take.



1. Richard A. Mendel. Less Hype, More Help: Reducing Juvenile Crime—What Works and What Doesn't. American Youth Policy Forum, supported by Walter S. Johnson Foundation, 2000.
2. Jeremy Travis and Michelle Waul, editors. Prisoners Once Removed: The Impact of Incarceration and Re-entry on Children, Families, and Communities, page 14. The Urban Institute Press, Washington, D.C. 2003.
3. Children of Incarcerated Parents Project. Mentoring flyer, undated.
4. "Incarcerated Parents in Alaska Prisons," in Alaska Justice Forum, Volume 21, No. 2, Summer 2005. Page 5. Justice Center, University of Alaska Anchorage.
5. Ibid.
6. High-Quality Pre-Kindergarten Can Prevent Teenage Pregnancy and Future Crime in Maine. Fight Crime. Report available at [www.fightcrime.org/me/mainepregnancy.pdf](http://www.fightcrime.org/me/mainepregnancy.pdf) June 22, 2004.
7. America's After-School Choice: Juvenile Crime or Safe Learning Time. A research brief by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. 2000. Available at [www.fightcrime.org](http://www.fightcrime.org).
8. Quality Pre-Kindergarten: Key to Crime Prevention and School Success. A research brief by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. July 2004. Available at [www.fightcrime.org](http://www.fightcrime.org).
9. See note 7.
10. See note 7.
11. Alaska Division of Juvenile Justice, Annual Report 2003, page 12.
12. American Bar Association, Division for Public Education, "Youth Court: A National Movement," Bulletin No. 17, 2000; Jeffrey Butts, Janeen Buck, and Mark Coggeshall, The Impact of Teen Court on Young Offenders. Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center, April 2002; "A Jury of their Peers," Time Magazine, July 18, 2005. Page 63.
13. Impact of Teen Court on Youth Offenders; see note 12.
14. Cited in Time Magazine; see note 12.
15. Impact of Teen Courts on Youth Offenders; see note 12.
16. Tribal youth courts can be structured as an actual part of tribal court systems, according to a discussion of Alaska tribal courts prepared by the Tanana Chiefs Conference. That contrasts with state-sanctioned youth courts, which are a voluntary alternative to the state juvenile justice system. We don't know how the tribal youth courts in Alaska today are structured, but United Youth Courts of Alaska hopes such information will be available in the future. See "Tribal Court Structures," Chapter 3 in Tribal Court Development, Alaska Tribes at: [http://thorpe.ou.edu/AKtribalct/chapter\\_three.html](http://thorpe.ou.edu/AKtribalct/chapter_three.html).
17. Unless otherwise noted, information in this discussion of Alaska youth courts was provided by Joseph Ehrheart, the executive director of United Youth Courts of Alaska, a non-profit group providing training materials, technical assistance, and coordination for its member youth courts.
18. "Teen volunteers have held youth courts for 15 years," in Anchorage Daily News, July 30, 2004. Page B-5. Also confirmed by personal communication with Sharon Leon, executive director of the Anchorage Youth Court.
19. Anchorage's youth court has in the past also had juries hearing cases. But it has temporarily suspended jury trials until Northeastern University School of Law completes the formal trial program it is creating for Anchorage, according to Sharon Leon, the court's executive director.
20. The law governing youth courts is Alaska Statute 47.12.400a.
21. This is a conservative estimate, based on the 7,024 average annual referrals from Alaska police departments and reports of probation violations from 2000-2004. The share youth courts handle is likely somewhat higher, because tribal youth courts, for which we don't have data, also handle cases.
22. Urban Institute study, cited in note 12. Analysts say 6 months after being sentenced is the period when juveniles are most likely to commit more crimes.
23. Personal communications with Sharon Leon of the Anchorage Youth Court, Joseph Ehrheart of United Youth Courts, and MaShelle Hess, formerly with the Alaska Division of Juvenile Justice.
24. See note 18.