CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) contracted with the Institute of Social and Economic Research, at the University of Alaska Anchorage, to look at social and economic conditions among Alaska Natives in 2004 and in the recent past.

This report marks the first comprehensive look at conditions among Alaska Natives since 1989.1 That earlier report found Alaska Natives to be far more likely than other Alaskans to be poor or out of work; to live in unsafe conditions; to lack the education needed for better-paying jobs; and to suffer many effects of alcohol abuse. Alaska Natives were also more likely to die young and violently.

AFN wanted to know how conditions had changed 15 years later. We found, as we’ll report in detail in the chapters that follow, some changes for the better—as well as some persistent problems and some new challenges.

One of our major findings is the increasing urbanization of Alaska Natives. For the past 30 years, thousands of rural Natives have been moving to Anchorage and other urban places. By 2000, Alaska Natives were as likely to live in urban places as in remote villages. And if current trends continue, by 2020 more than half of Alaska Natives will live in urban places. The next time AFN considers changing conditions among Alaska Natives—perhaps after the next census—it will be important to look at how social conditions vary among Native living in urban and in rural places. For instance, does easier access to health care make Natives in urban places healthier? Is the widespread problem of alcohol abuse worse in urban or in rural places? Right now we don’t have the data to answer such questions.

We hope this report gives Alaska Natives information they can use, as they think about how to shape a healthy social and economic future for themselves and their communities. It is broader and more detailed than the 1989 study, and it has the benefit of data from the 1990 and 2000 federal censuses.

Scope of Report and Data Sources

We concentrate on reporting current social and economic conditions among Alaska Natives and changes since 1990. But to show long-term trends we also report data back to 1960 whenever possible. We look at conditions among Alaska Natives as a group and at differences among urban and rural areas, men and women, and people of different ages. We also compare conditions among Alaska Natives and other Alaskans, both now and in the recent past.

To do this work, we used a wide range of existing data sources. We did a number of analyses that hadn’t been done before, but we didn’t collect primary data through surveys or other means.

Our principal source was data from the U.S. census. That data, collected every 10 years, is the most complete and reliable source of data available—but it isn’t perfect. Some

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census data is collected from all households, and some is collected from only a sample of households and extrapolated to all households. Any sample that’s intended to represent an entire population is subject to error. And with each census, the federal government may change questions or definitions, making comparisons over time harder.

**New Census Definition in 2000**
The biggest problem we faced in this analysis was that in 2000 the federal government broadened its definition of Alaska Native. We’ll remind readers about this issue in later chapters, but it’s so important that it’s worth introducing at the outset.

Before 2000, people who were Alaska Native and some other race had to choose just one primary race when answering census questions. But in 2000, they could specify more than one race—and about 21,000 people identified themselves as Alaska Native and some other race. We included all 21,000 people as Alaska Native in this analysis, along with those who identified their race as Alaska Native alone.

But we recognize that if the census had stayed the same as it was in 1990—and people had to choose just one primary race—then at least some of those 21,000 people might not have chosen Alaska Native. But we don’t know how many.

So the 2000 numbers are not directly comparable with those from earlier censuses, and they may overstate the growth in the Native population between 1990 and 2000. We can’t eliminate those problems, but we took them into account as much as possible.

We adjusted numbers from the 1980 and 1990 censuses, estimating how many more people might have identified themselves as Alaska Native and some other race, if they’d had that choice. We also report, whenever appropriate, counts under the old definition and the new definition in 2000. That allows readers to see how much of the Native population growth between 1990 and 2000 results from people identifying themselves as Alaska Native and some other race. Appendix A explains in detail the adjustments we made and how we define Alaska Native in this analysis.

**Other Data Sources**
We also used data from many other federal, state, and private organizations. Those include the Alaska departments of Education and Early Development; Health and Social Services; Labor and Workforce Development; Community and Economic Development; and Environmental Conservation, as well as the University of Alaska Anchorage’s Office of Institutional Planning, Research, and Assessment. Besides data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, we also used federal data from the Alaska Area Native Health Service, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Bureau of Economic Analysis. Additional data came from the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, the Alaska Native Health Board, and other Native organizations.

**Report Organization**
This report is in three volumes, plus a stand-alone summary. This volume is the main body of the report, with six chapters and several appendixes. Appendix A includes detailed technical notes and more information on data sources; Appendix B lists all Alaska communities and their Native and non-Native populations as of 2000; and Appendix C consists of demographic, social, and economic profiles of the total Alaska
population from the 1990 and 2000 U.S. censuses, reported by the 12 regions of the Alaska Native regional corporations.

The next chapter in this main volume, Chapter 2, discusses demographic changes Alaska Natives have seen in recent times—changes in how many Alaska Natives there are, where they live, and what their households look like. It also reports differences between Alaska Natives in urban and in rural areas; between men and women; and among people of different ages. It compares demographic change over time, as well as current conditions, among Alaska Natives and non-Natives. It concludes with a discussion of what current demographic trends may mean for the future.

Chapter 3 describes health and well-being among Alaska Natives. It reports on long-term improvements in health care, sanitation systems, and housing in Alaska Native villages. It also includes many measures of health, including life expectancy, infant mortality, leading causes of death, and others. The chapter documents a number of serious social problems—like high rates of domestic violence—that experts link to alcohol abuse. And it discusses the spread of diabetes and other modern American health problems—problems often related to behavior—among Alaska Natives.

Chapter 4 reports on long-term economic trends and current economic conditions among Alaska Natives, statewide and by region. It includes many measures of economic conditions, including numbers of Alaska Natives in the labor force, average wages, types of jobs, and levels of poverty. It also compares work status among Native men and women and among Alaska Natives and other Alaskans. The chapter ends with a look at the future implications of current economic and population trends.

Chapter 5 describes the economy of remote rural Alaska, where most of the population is made up of Alaska Natives living in about 150 small villages in northern, interior, and western Alaska. This chapter is different from the other chapters, in that it looks at the well-being of Native communities rather than individuals; it is a complement to Chapter 4. It discusses why the economy of the region is small; describes sources of jobs and talks about the role of subsistence hunting and fishing; and provides a sample of the region’s very high living costs.

Chapter 6 discusses education among Alaska Natives, starting with a brief look at how the 1976 Tobeluk v. Lind consent decree—which required the state government to build high schools in villages throughout Alaska—transformed rural Native education. It continues with a description of current challenges in Native education. The chapter includes a number of measures of education status, including shares of Alaska Natives with high school diplomas or college degrees; scores on standardized tests; and dropout rates. It concludes with a brief discussion of measures for which there are currently no data—like how much Alaska Native students know about their histories and cultures.

Appendix Volumes
Volumes II and III of this report consist of detailed tables with a wealth of social and economic information on Alaska Natives, from the 2000 census, reported by the regions of the Alaska Native regional corporations. We compiled these tables as separate volumes for the convenience of readers interested in detailed information on specific regions.
One volume reports characteristics of those who described themselves as Alaska Native alone; the second volume provides the same information, but for all those who described themselves as either Alaska Native alone or Alaska Native and some other race.