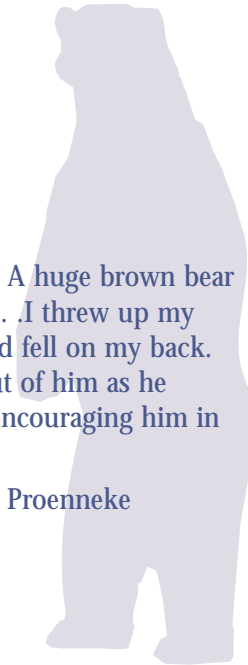

Health Risks

Youth Risk Behavior Survey

I broke out into the willows that grew around the edges of the cottonwoods. . . . A huge brown bear was coming head on, bounding through the willow clumps not fifty feet away! . . . I threw up my arms and yelled. That was all I could think to do. On he came I tripped and fell on my back. And then as he loomed over me, a strange thing happened. The air swooshed out of him as he switched ends. Off he went Never once did he look back. I was shouting, encouraging him in his flight.

Sam Keith, from the journals of Richard Proenneke
One Man's Wilderness
Published 1973; Reissued 1999
Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Books



DEFINITION AND SIGNIFICANCE

Since 1990, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have sponsored the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) at both the national and state levels. The survey asks middle- and high-school students questions about a broad range of health issues: use of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs; sexual behavior; diet and physical activity; and behaviors (like fighting and carrying weapons) that could cause serious injury.

The survey is an excellent source of data on health risks among adolescents, allowing comparisons among states and with national averages and tracking changes over time.

In Alaska, the survey is a joint project of the state departments of Health and Social Services and Education and Early Development. Alaska has conducted the survey only twice—in 1995 and 1999. However, in 1999 the Anchorage School District (by far the largest district in the state) decided not to take part in the survey.

Anchorage’s decision not to take part means that we can’t compare Alaska’s 1995 and 1999 survey findings. The data reported here are from a sample of 1,427 high-school students throughout Alaska, except in Anchorage. Also, since the response from middle schools was below what is considered a reliable level, we report only the high-school results. When reading these results, keep in mind that Anchorage (with roughly 40 percent of the state’s high-school students) did not take part in the survey.

The entire report is available online at: www.epi.hss.state.ak.us/publications.shtml

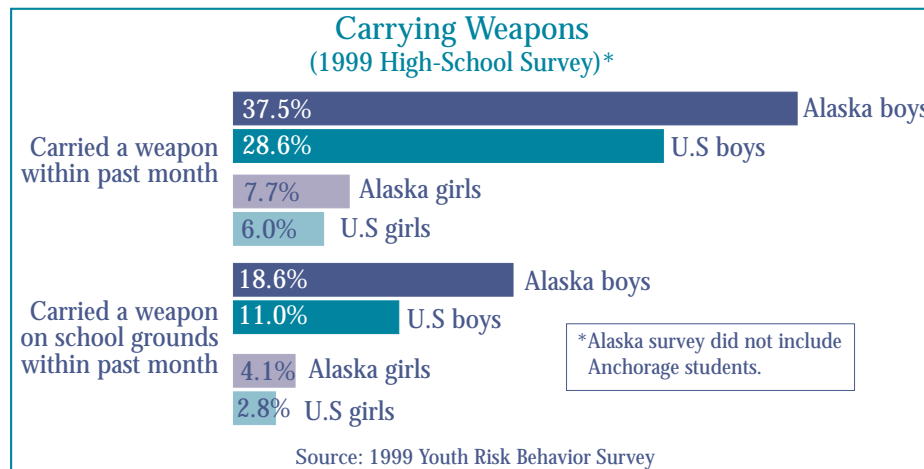
Carrying Weapons

- High-school boys surveyed in Alaska were more likely to report carrying weapons in general and on school grounds in particular during the previous month. Nearly 38 percent of Alaska high-school boys said they had carried weapons and 18 percent said they had carried weapons on school grounds. That compares with 29 percent of boys nationwide carrying weapons in general and 11 percent on school grounds.
- High-school girls in Alaska were slightly more likely than girls nationwide to carry weapons in the previous month. About 8 percent of Alaska girls and 6 percent of girls nationwide reported carrying weapons; about 4 percent of Alaska girls and 3 percent of girls nationwide carried weapons to school.

Sexual Intercourse and Violence

- By ninth grade, nearly 30 percent of Alaska high-school students report having sexual intercourse, and that share climbs to nearly 60 percent by twelfth grade. High-school students nationwide—especially younger students—are somewhat more likely to report having intercourse.
- A staggering number of high-school girls in both Alaska and the entire U.S. report being forced to have sexual intercourse at some time. Nearly one in 10 Alaska girls in ninth grade and one in five girls in eleventh grade report being forced to have sex.
- A significant but much smaller share of high-school boys in Alaska and nationwide also report having been forced to have sex—between 5 and 8 percent at different grade levels.

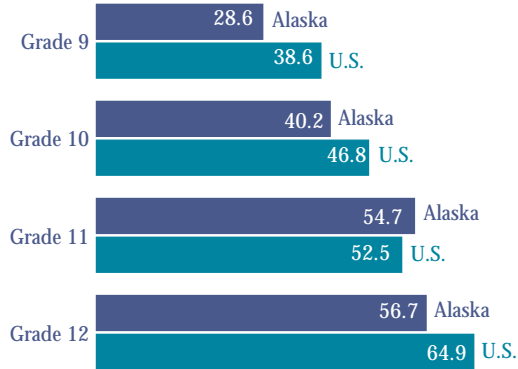
- About 10 percent of the girls and 12 percent of the boys surveyed in Alaskan high schools reported being hit, slapped, or otherwise hurt in the previous year by people they were dating. A figure that particularly stands



out is that in twelfth grade, one in five Alaska boys surveyed said their girlfriends had purposefully hit them.

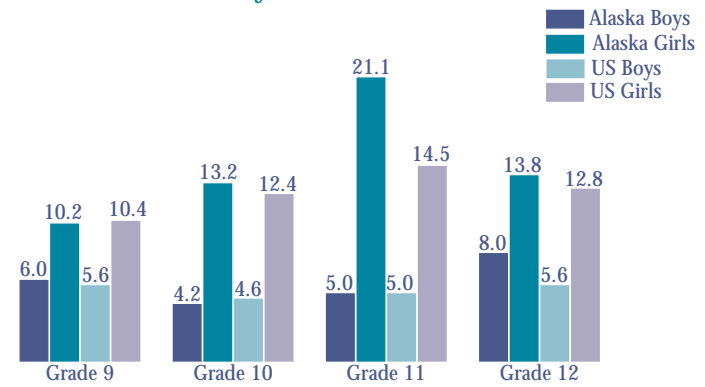
YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY IN ALASKA (CONTINUED)

High-School Students Who Have Had Sexual Intercourse



Source: 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Survey

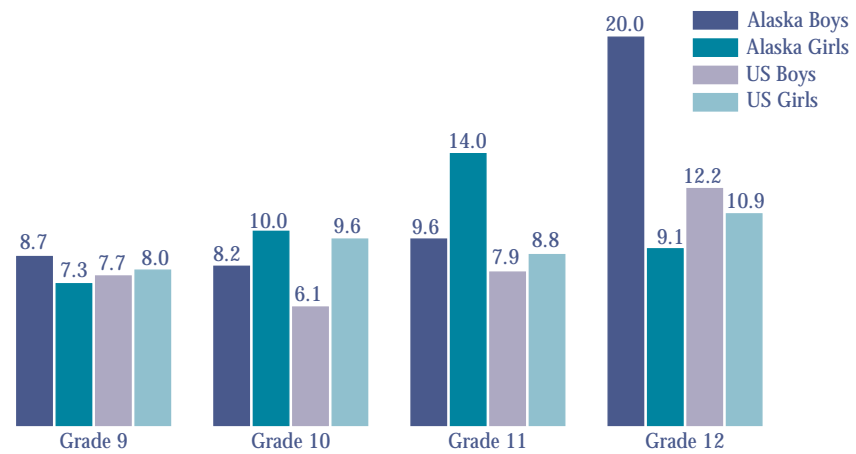
Percent of Students Reporting They've Ever Been Forced to Have Sexual Intercourse They Did Not Want



Source: 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Survey

Alaska survey did not include Anchorage high-school students.

Percent of Students Reporting They've Ever Been Hit, Slapped, or Physically Hurt On Purpose by Their Boyfriend or Girlfriend During the past 12 Months



Source: 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Survey

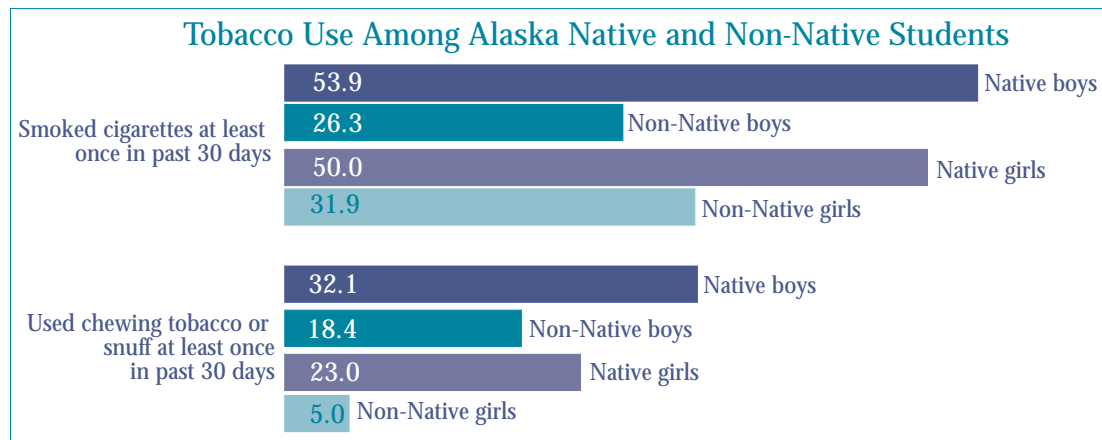
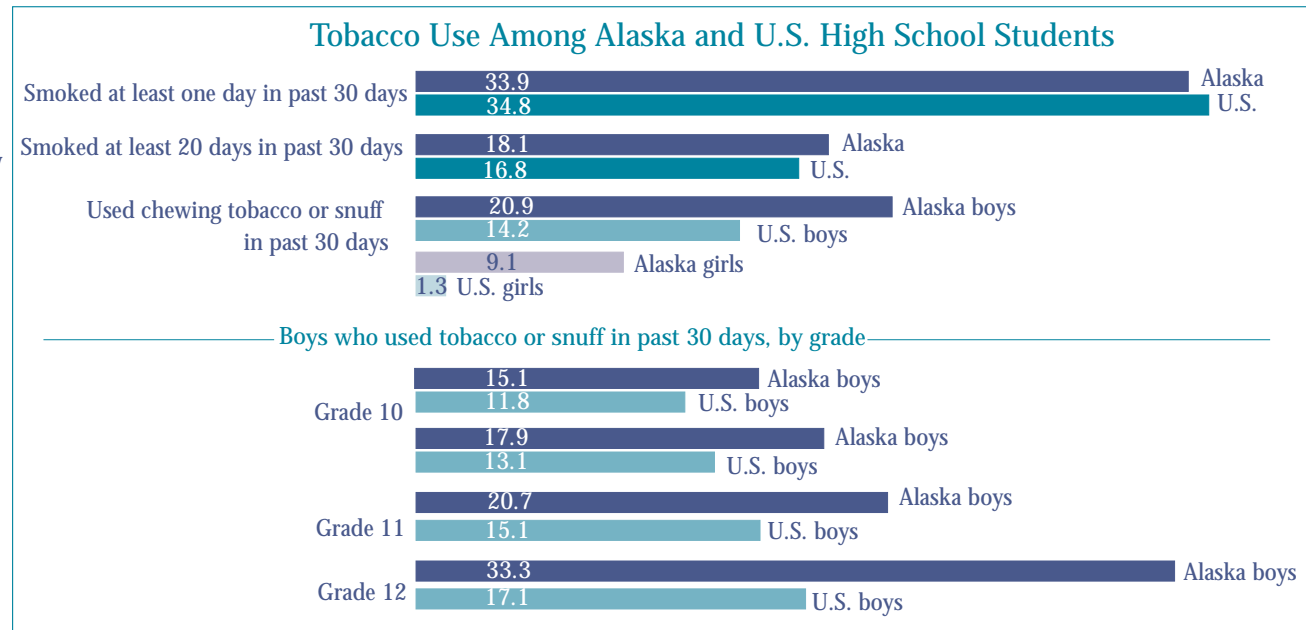
YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY IN ALASKA (CONTINUED)

Tobacco Use

- Smoking is about equally common among Alaskan and U.S. high-school students, with roughly a third reporting they smoked at least once in the month before the survey.
- Alaska's high-school students are far more likely than other U.S. students to chew tobacco or use snuff. Alaskan girls in particular are more likely than other girls to chew tobacco. About 21 percent of Alaskan boys said they had used chewing tobacco in the month before the survey, compared with about 14 percent nationwide. But nearly 10 percent of Alaskan high-school girls—almost 1 in 10—said they chewed tobacco, compared with just 1 percent —1 in 100—girls nationwide.
- The share of high-school boys nationwide and in Alaska who chew tobacco increases as they get older. But among Alaskan high-school boys surveyed, use increases much more—so that by the twelfth grade, a third of Alaska boys report chewing tobacco. That's nearly twice the rate among senior boys nationwide.

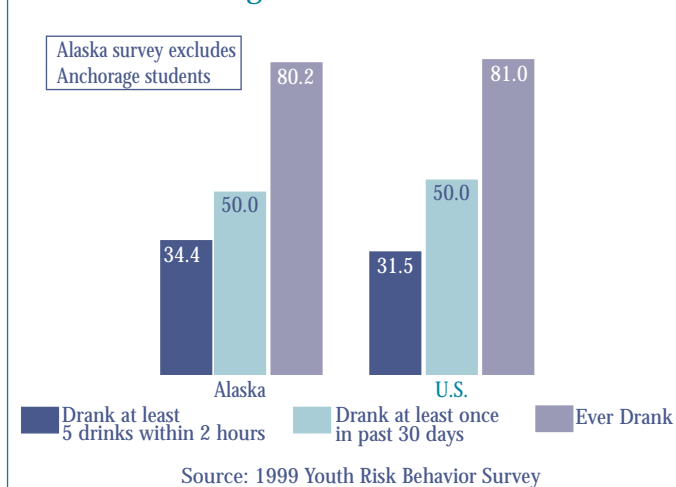
- Alaska Native students—both boys and girls—are far more likely to smoke or chew tobacco than are non-Natives. More than half of Native boys and girls reported that they currently smoked, compared with 26 percent of non-Native boys and 32 percent of non-Native girls. Nearly

double the share of Native boys (32 percent) as non-Native boys (18 percent) chew tobacco. And the share of Native girls who chew (24 percent) is nearly five times the rate among non-Native girls (5 percent).



YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY IN ALASKA (CONTINUED)

Alcohol Use Among Alaska and U.S. High School Students



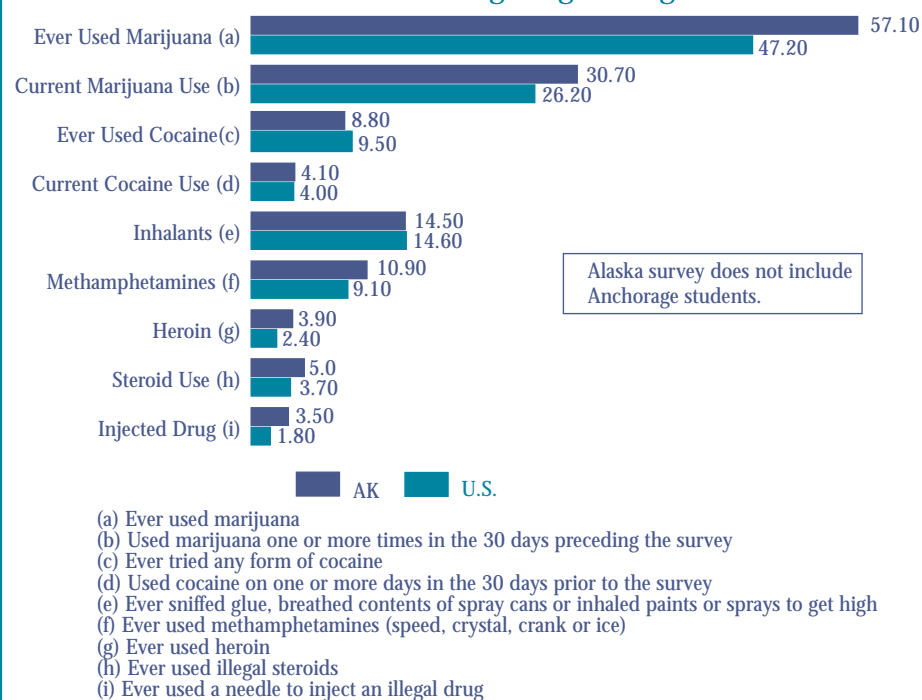
Drug and Alcohol Use

- About the same percentages of Alaskan and U.S. high-school students drink alcohol. Eight out of 10 high school students surveyed in Alaska and the U.S. reported that they have tried alcohol at least once, and about half said they had drunk at least once in the month before the survey. A third reported binge drinking in the month before the survey.
- Marijuana is the most commonly used illegal drug among high-school students in both Alaska and the U.S.—but a bigger share of Alaskan teenagers use marijuana. About 57 percent of Alaskan teens and 47 percent of U.S. teens report using marijuana at least once; 31 percent of Alaska students and 27 percent of U.S. teens reported using marijuana in the month before the survey.

- Close to one in six high-school students in both Alaska and the U.S. report sniffing glue or other inhalants at least once.
- After marijuana, methamphetamines and cocaine are the most widely-used illegal drugs among high-school students, with nearly 1 in 10 reporting at least one use.

- A bigger share of Alaskan high-school students than other U.S. students report trying heroin—almost 4 in 100 Alaskan students, compared with just over 2 in 100 nationwide.
- Five in 100 Alaskan high-school students have used steroids, compared with fewer than 4 in 100 nationwide.
- More than 3 in 100 Alaskan students surveyed report using needles to inject drugs at least once—a share twice as large as among U.S. students in general.

Percentage of Alaskan and U.S. High-School Students Using Illegal Drugs

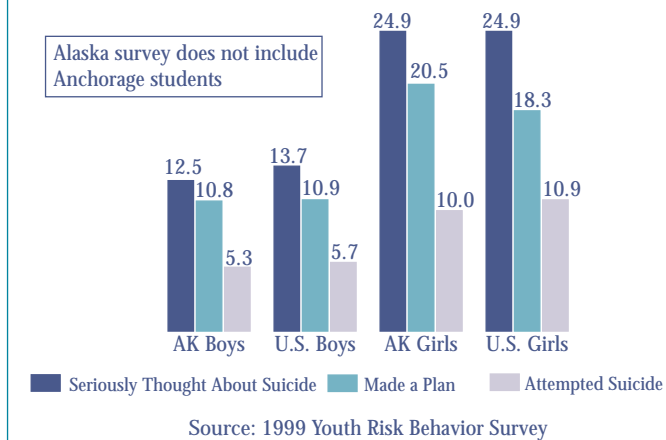


Suicide Thoughts and Attempts

As we saw in the section on injuries to children (pages 50-52), rates of suicide and attempted suicide are disconcertingly high among Alaska's teenagers, especially in northern and southwest Alaska. The Youth Risk Behavior Survey asked high-school students in Alaska and nationwide whether they had thought about or attempted suicide. The adjacent figure shows that:

- The shares of high-school students who have thought about, planned, or attempted suicide are remarkably similar in Alaska and across the country.
- High-school girls are far more likely than boys to report thinking about or attempting suicide. (However, Alaska statistics tell us that teenage boys—especially Alaska Native boys—are far more likely than girls to actually commit suicide.¹)
- A surprising one in four high school girls surveyed in both Alaska and the U.S. said they had thought seriously about committing suicide. Approximately one in five said they had made plans to kill themselves, and roughly one in ten had actually attempted suicide.
- Among Alaska boys, 12.5 percent said they had thought seriously about committing suicide, 11 percent said they had made plans, and 5 percent had attempted suicide. Rates are similar among U.S. boys, although slightly more (13.7 percent) reported having suicidal thoughts.

Alaska and U.S. Students Reporting Suicide Thoughts, Plans, and Attempts
(In Percentages)



DISCUSSION ABOUT SURVEY RESULTS

The 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Survey in Alaska found that many high-school students are doing just fine, not putting their health or their lives at risk. But a significant number are doing dangerous things. And some report that fellow students have hurt them, scared them, or forced them to do things against their will.

A staggering one in five girls in the eleventh grade report being forced to have sexual intercourse they did not want. More than half of all Alaska Native students surveyed reported regularly smoking cigarettes. Nearly one in five high-school boys reported carrying weapons on school grounds. More than three in one hundred students surveyed said they had injected drugs with needles.

Parents, schools, and communities need to find better ways to keep teenagers safe. Alaska has taken steps to curb teenage smoking by

sharply increasing cigarette taxes and better enforcing laws against selling cigarettes to minors. Preliminary research shows that these changes may be helping.²

In recent years Alaska schools have been more vigilant about trying to keep weapons out and to show that they won't tolerate fighting. Students who don't fight or carry weapons or intimidate other students need to be better protected from those who do. And violent students should not only be disciplined, but helped to change their behavior.

We need to find better ways of protecting teenagers—especially girls but boys as well—from being pressured or physically forced to have sexual relations they don't want. We need active efforts to prevent assaults and so-called "date rape."

The good news from the survey is that most high-school students are on their way to being responsible, productive adults. We need to find more ways to help all students make the most of their lives.

NOTES FOR HEALTH RISKS SECTION

¹See Matthew Berman and Linda Leask, "Violent Death in Alaska," in *Alaska Review of Social and Economic Conditions*, University of Alaska Anchorage, Institute of Social and Economic Research, February 1994.

²See Alaska Department of Revenue and Health and Social Services, *Impact of the 1997 Tobacco Tax Rate Increase in Alaska*, June 2000. Available online at: www.hss.state.ak.us

