

# Research in Rural Alaska in a Pandemic: Engaging Indigenous Communities at the Collision of Public Health Crises

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*Photos by Georgianna Ningeulook,  
Scammon Bay, Alaska (2020)*



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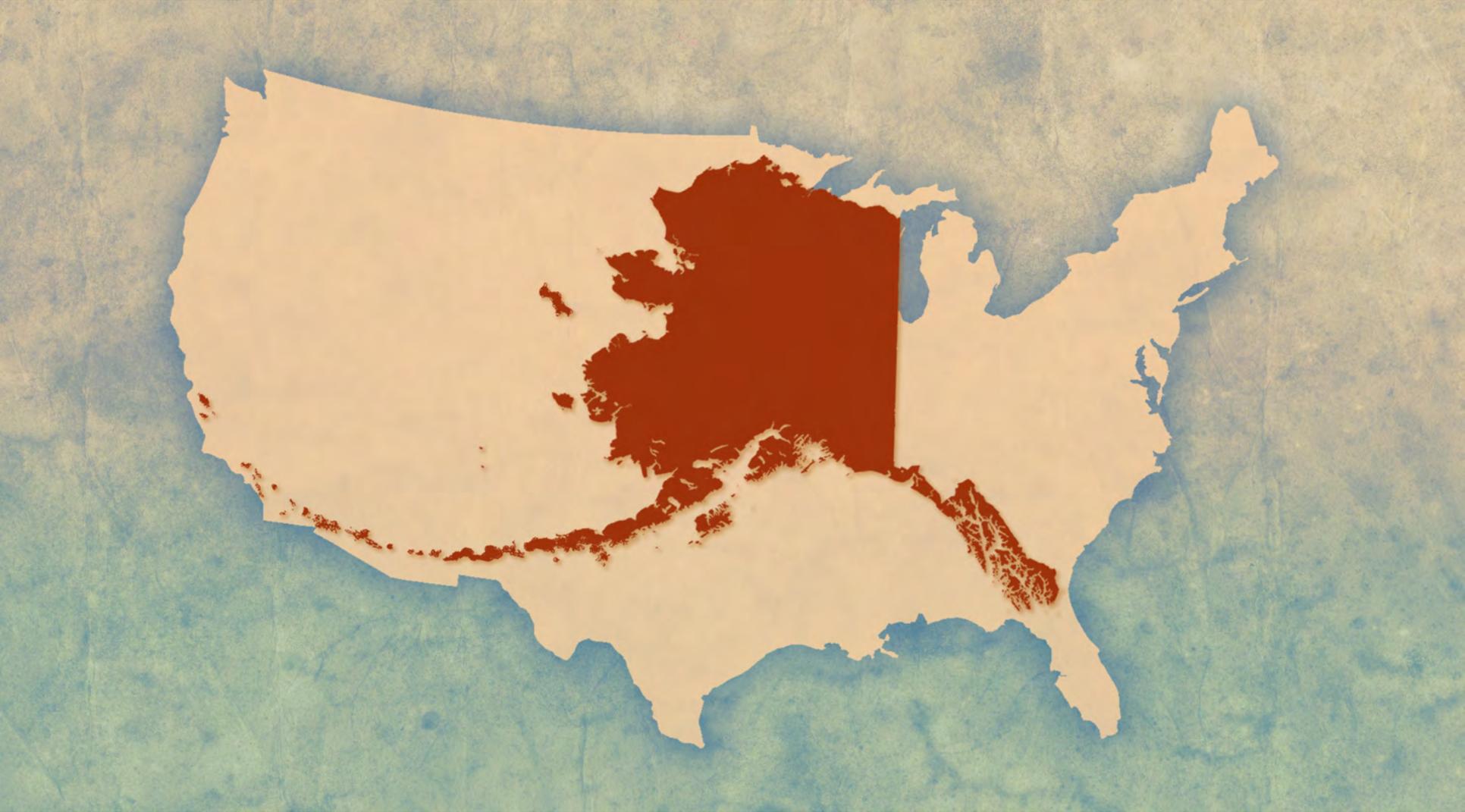
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# Presentation Overview

- Alaska Rural Context and Indigenous Health Transitions:  
*Public Health Crises Pre-COVID*
- Ongoing Community-Engaged Research in Rural Alaska  
to Reduce Suicide and Substance Misuse Disparities:  
*Suicide Prevention in a Pandemic*
- Impacts of COVID-19 and Rural Yup'ik Community  
Responses:  
*A Community Partner Perspective*



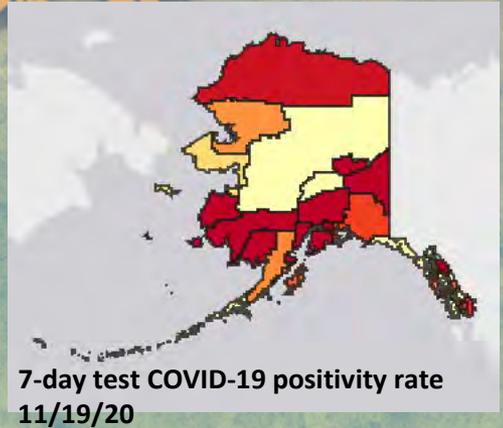
# Unique Characteristics of an Alaskan Context





# Rural Characteristics of Communities in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta

- No roads; air transport for freight and patient care beyond routine
- 58 Yup'ik/Cup'ik villages (~25,000 pop) serviced by a single payer hospital in Bethel
- Telehealth & CHAP/BHA service delivery model in village clinics
- Most villages ban importation and sale of alcohol and vote to be 'dry' under the AK local option law<sup>1</sup>
- 75-85% of diet comes from subsistence foods (seal, whale, walrus, moose, birds, fish (salmon/halibut, etc))



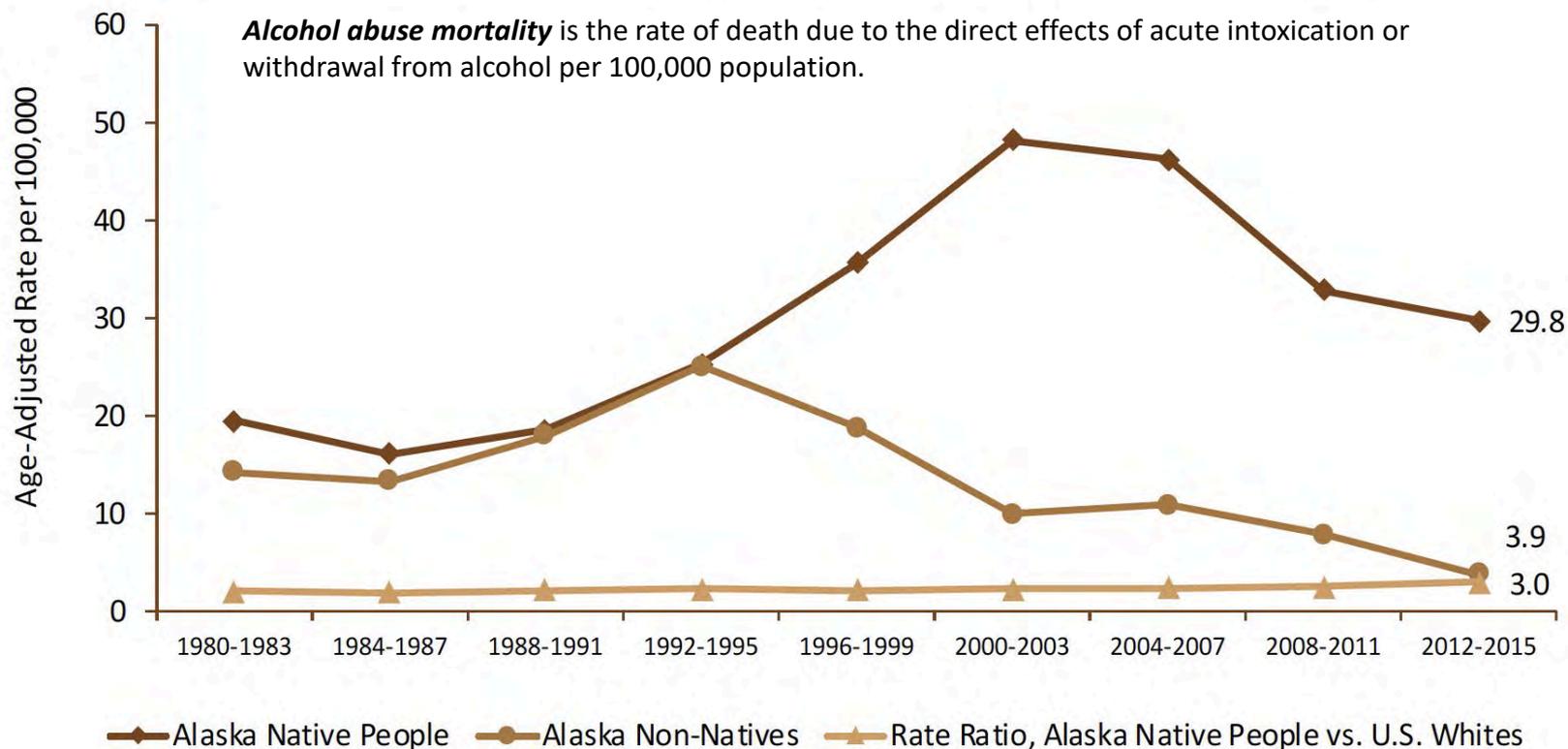
<sup>1</sup>Berman M. *American journal of public health*, 2014.

# Statewide Data Alcohol Abuse Mortality



## Age-Adjusted Alcohol Abuse Mortality Rate per 100,000 Population, 1980-2015

Data Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics

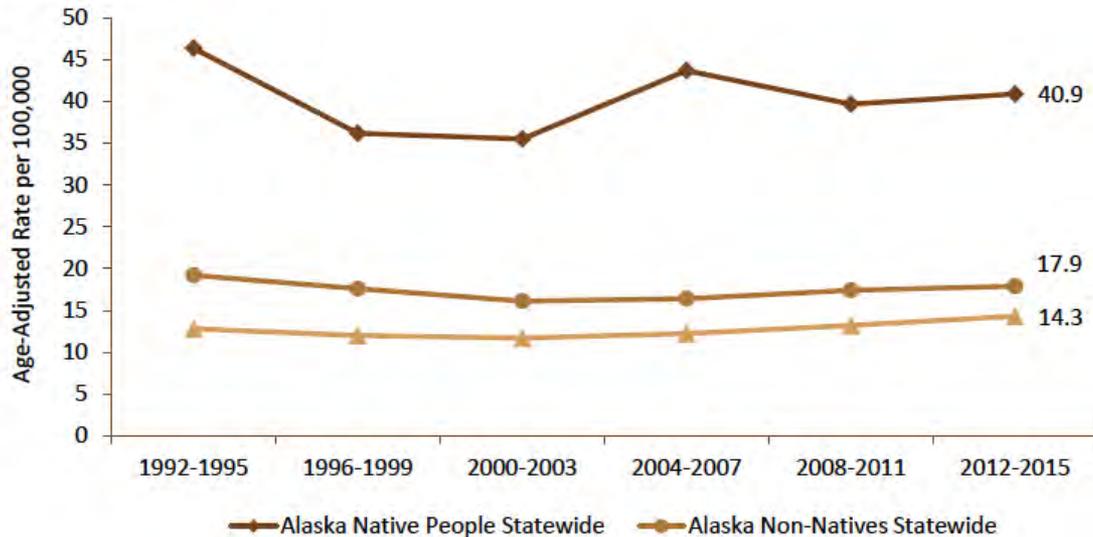


# Suicide in Alaska: A Public Health Crisis

## Age-Adjusted Suicide Mortality Rate per 100,000 Population, 1992-1995 to 2012-2015

Data Source: Alaska Division of Public Health, Alaska Health Analytics and Vital Records Section; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Vital Statistics System

Appendix Table C-41

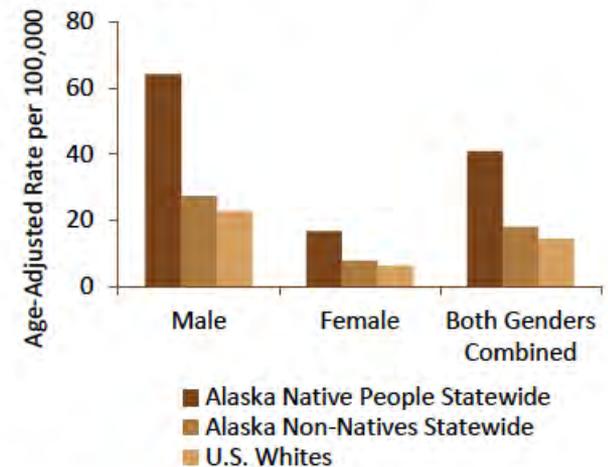


Note: U.S. Whites data are for 2012-2014.

## Age-Adjusted Suicide Mortality Rate by Gender, 2012-2015

Data Source: Alaska Division of Public Health, Alaska Health Analytics and Vital Records Section; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Vital Statistics System

Appendix Table C-42



Note: U.S. Whites data are for 2012-2014.

- *Of those tested, a large proportion of Alaska Native suicide decedents were positive for alcohol (54%).*
- *Two-thirds of Alaska Native suicide decedents were younger than 29 years old*
- *The highest suicide rate was found among Alaska Native male decedents aged 20–29 years (155.3 per 100,000 persons).*

Craig, J. & Hull-Jilly, D. (2012) Retrieved Sept 26, 2020 from [http://www.epi.hss.state.ak.us/bulletins/docs/rr2012\\_01.pdf](http://www.epi.hss.state.ak.us/bulletins/docs/rr2012_01.pdf).

# Ongoing Research to Reduce Alaska Native Youth Suicide/Alcohol Risk

## Qungasvik (Tools for Life): Prevention of Alcohol/Suicide Risk in Alaska Native Youth

(R21AA016098, R24MD001626, R21AA015541, R01 AA023754, SM063445, SM053557, SM635560)

- Leverage a 20+ year CBPR partnership in the development and testing of a strengths-based, community-level intervention grounded in a multi-level theory of protection<sup>1</sup> and an Indigenous theory of change and implementation.<sup>2,3</sup>
- Engages "culture as prevention" in an Indigenous intervention science.
- Provides Indigenous youth with protective childhood experiences as a hedge against risk.

# QUNGASVIK

## TOOLBOX

A Model for Promoting Reasons for Life and Reasons for Sobriety in Yup'ik /Cup'ik Communities

Online Digital Manual:

<http://www.qungasvik.org/preview/>



<sup>1</sup>Allen et al. *Am. J. Community Psychol.*, 2014

<sup>2</sup>Rasmus et al. *J. Community Psychol.*, 2014

<sup>3</sup>Rasmus et al. *Cultur. Divers. Ethnic Minor. Psychol.*, 2019

# Scammon Bay's Qungasvik Project



**Geogianna Ningeulook (top center  
and right), Abraham Rivers, Wybon  
Rivers**









# **Intergenerational Resilience Resides in Yup'ik Culture and Communities** ***We Survived in the Past as We Do Today by Pulling Together as People***



# **Impacts of COVID-19 in Rural YK Communities**

## ***Health Disparities Research at the Collision of Multiple Public Health Crises***

- February 2020 to June 2020 – no cases outside of Bethel hub in YK
- July 2020-Sept 2020 cases remain low and are contained in communities
- Oct 2020—present rates skyrocket – 37 communities, 1,570 cases, 10 deaths. Impacts and spread varies by community.
- Alaska Native people 16% of the state; represent quarter of the deaths
- Containment in rural AN communities presents special challenges (lack of housing, multi-generational and multi-family units, necessity to hunt/fish for livelihood and distribute food across households, untreated addictions and interpersonal violence, increasingly cold/inclement weather, lack of clinical resources and providers, lack of transportation for food delivery, etc.)
- *Food security of primary concern as rural airlines go bankrupt, travel bans are enacted and freight is reduced*

# Rural Yup'ik Community Responses to COVID-19

- Tribes activate self-governance and institute travel bans, social distancing, quarantine and masking policies and lockdown/hunkerdown restrictions.
- State subsistence restrictions are lowered and Tribes use COVID-19 funding to support subsistence activities (hunting, fishing, gathering) and the delivery of subsistence foods and wood for heating to Elders.
- Utilizing community strengths and resilience factors, such as our Yup'ik language, culture and spirituality along with traditional systems of taking care of one another (to increase testing, distribute PPE and a vaccine when ready, etc.) is how we will overcome the pandemic and continue our healing work.



*Alaska Qungasvik Team, 2019*

# **Promoting Alaska Native Legacies of Strength and Resilience**

**With respect, acknowledgement and gratitude to the Alaska Native Elders, youth and communities and to our partners, supporters and funders, quyana tailuci!**

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