

# Demographic Models Associated with Incarcerated Alaska Native Criminal Offenders

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## *Introduction*

People offer many different ideas to explain the disproportionate number of Alaska Natives in the Alaska Corrections System. In the Spring 1997 of the 3000 inmates in Alaska's correctional institutions, approximately a third were identified as Native (Schwartz 1997). Natives, however, constitute 15.6 percent of the state population (U.S. Census 1990). One common perception is that the crimes that lead to incarceration are predominantly committed in villages. Even while recognizing that many crimes by Natives actually occur in non-village locations, the conventional wisdom holds that the villages are the genesis, and Natives committing crimes in non-village locations are often visiting from a village. This position also holds, as a corollary, that alcohol abuse is a key catalyst to criminal behavior.

The conventional wisdom is reflected in recent major policy studies. General disorder, related to alcohol abuse (with a focus upon criminal acts), was the basis of Alaska's Local Option Laws. In a report to the State Legislature in 1986, testimony and other documentation on alcohol abuse-related crime in Alaska Native villages was offered to support laws allowing villages to enact local ordinances limiting or prohibiting usage of alcohol (Joint Special Committee on Local Option Laws 1986). In 1994 the Alaska Native Commission again stressed the dysfunction (including criminal behavior) in village Alaska. It stated, "Alcohol abuse and violence running rampant in Alaska Native society have disheveled family and village life" (Alaska Native Commission 1994: 6). Academic studies further enhance the view that Native crime is a village phenomena. Angell (1981: 28) reports rural crime rates as twice as high for violent crimes as for urban rates. Lee (1988: 9) also reports in western Alaska village rates of known offenses were roughly twice as high as in the state at large. For the North Slope of Alaska, Copus and Holmes (1990: 9) drew similar conclusions about higher rates of crime in villages. The conclusion one is drawn to is that the over-representation of Natives in Alaska's correctional system is due to the crime occurring in the villages. A

corollary to this, of course, is that a reduction of village crime will lead to a reduction in the number of Natives incarcerated. No doubt this is true, but the magnitude of the reduction is directly related to the number of Natives who were actually in the village when the crimes were committed versus those who committed their crimes in places other than villages. In other words, even if the rates in villages are higher than the state at large, and if more than 50% of Alaska Natives live in villages (U.S. Census, 1990),<sup>1</sup> the overall impact of village crime reduction on Native incarceration rates may be minimal if most of the inmates do not come from villages.

This issue was raised by the research of Copus and Blurton (1995). A study of one year's state judicial records for two interior villages revealed relatively few crimes in general and even fewer crimes for which incarceration resulted. For example, ". . . of the 34 cases in which the offender was officially found guilty of a crime, in only three was the offender sentenced to any significant period of incarceration. The maximum period of actual incarceration time required was 90 days" (1995: 138). It is questionable that an extrapolation of the findings from these two villages to all of Alaska villages would account for the numbers of inmates.

Thus the question as to where Alaska Native offenders reside is pertinent. Obviously all inmates do not come from the villages, and even an estimate of the percentage of incarcerated Natives who were in a village at the time they committed their crime would not give a complete demographic picture of the population. To gain a more complete understanding, a number of questions concerning the demographics of Alaska inmates are now posed:

1. What is the demographic model most common of Native inmates?

Six models of crime demographics are suggested. These are:

- i. Offender raised in a village and commits crime in village;
- ii. Offender raised in a village and commits crime in urban area;
- iii. Offender raised in urban area and commits crime in village;
- iv. Offender raised in urban area and commits crime in urban area;
- v. Offender raised in an urban/village mixed setting and commits crime in village; and
- vi. Offender raised in an urban/village mixed setting and commits crime in urban area.

2. Is there a relationship between the type of crime and demogra-

phic model?

3. Is there a relationship between juvenile incarceration and demographic model?
4. Is there a relationship between juvenile incarceration and type of crime?

### *Methodology*

The data were collected by interviews and examination of pre-sentence investigation reports (PSI). The interviews were conducted in the Spring of 1996 at the Fairbanks Correctional Facility and during the Winter of 1997 at Spring Creek Correctional Facility in Seward. The Fairbanks facility is classified as medium security and the Seward as maximum. Both are State of Alaska facilities. There were 25 inmates interviewed in the Fairbanks facility and 21 in Seward. There were an additional four inmates included in the Seward sample based on pre-sentence information only. The interviews were voluntary and some of the inmates who were approached did not volunteer for a variety of reasons. Although the authors believe the number of inmates refusing to participate was small enough to not bias the results (correctional officers did the solicitation from a list of all Native inmates at the facilities), caution should be exercised in interpreting the results. An interview was typically conducted with both authors present taking independent notes for later consolidation. The inmates were interviewed individually, according to a standard semi-structured format of questions, with no correctional personnel present. Each interview was about 30 minutes. The PSIs are thorough documents, required by law, prepared by a state probation officer. The PSIs contain detailed information on inmates' demographic and criminal histories, allowing a cross-check of the interview data. The PSIs were the major source of adult and juvenile criminal history information while the interviews focused on the demographic history.

### *Results*

The 50 inmates were an average of 33.4 years of age; the youngest was 16 years and the oldest was 62. All inmates were male. All inmates were classified by the correctional administration as Alaska Natives. However, the degree of native ancestry varied to include cases of mixed racial lineage. All inmates were incarcerated for felonies.

### **What Was The Most Common Demographic Model?**

The demographic models under study are a combination of upbringing and

crime location. The upbringing of the inmate was characterized as village, non-village, or mixed. A place of residence was defined as a village if its population was predominantly Native and in a remote or semi-remote location. An example of a place of residence that has a high percentage of Native residents (64%) in a semi-remote location (western Alaska) is Bethel. This is not withstanding the fact Bethel has a population of over 4,600 residents. Determining villages by this method identified those residential areas that have uniquely non-western attributes. The characterization of an inmate as either village, non-village, or mixed was made based on agreement of the authors. An inmate raised in a village or a non-village area, through high school, was called village or non-village, as appropriate. There were cases where the inmate was raised in a substantial combination of village and non-village environments and these were termed "mixed." For example, one inmate was born in Kotzebue and, at three, his family moved to another state.

**Table 1** Frequencies of the Six Possible Demographic Models for Upbringing and Immediate Crime Location.

Model (upbringing x location)	frequency	percent
Village x Village	18	36
Village x Non-Village	4	8
Non-village x Village	2	4
Non-Village x Non-village	7	14
Mixed x Village	7	14
Mixed x Non-village	12	24

He returned to Kotzebue at age seven and attended the first grade, then moved to Anchorage to attend second and third grade. He attended fourth grade back in Kotzebue, where he remained. An additional factor used to determine he had a mixed upbringing was his statement, "When I came back at age seven to Kotzebue, it was a culture shock." Crime location was established in two different ways. First, the place where the immediate crime for incarceration was determined from the PSI. Second, based on the PSI and interviews, each inmate was characterized given their "life-time crime demographics." The latter was a measurement of whether the adult crimes,

over the inmate's criminal history, were either predominantly village, non-village or a mixture of both.

Of the six possible models, those involving rural crime location accounted for 54% of the cases (see Table 1). Does this indicate the perception of the location of inmate crime being in the villages is vindicated? Yes and no. Yes, in that over 50% of the time inmates committed their immediate crime in a village. No, in the sense that not much above half was found. Clearly, however, a significant amount (46%) of Native crime is estimated to be committed in non-village areas. The most common model was where the inmate had a village upbringing and committed a crime in a village. This accounted for 36 percent of the inmates. The least common model was where the inmate was raised in an non-village setting and committed the immediate crime in a village.

Another way to examine the relationship between upbringing and immediate crime location is shown in Table 2. The results show a statistically significant relationship between upbringing and location of immediate crime. Considering upbringing as the "independent variable," the analysis indicates that where the inmate was brought up has an influence on where the crime was committed. Eighty-two percent of the inmates raised in a

**Table 2 Relationship Between Upbringing and Immediate Crime Location.**

Immediate Crime Location	Upbringing		
	Village	Non-Village	Mixed
Village	18 (.82)	2 (.22)	7 (.37)
Non-Village	4 (.18)	7 (.78)	12 (.63)
Total	22	9	19

Chi-Square=12.8; p=.002; numbers in parentheses ( ) indicate proportions by upbringing.

village committed their immediate crimes in the villages. Only 18 percent of those inmates raised in villages were in non-village settings when they committed their immediate crimes. Likewise, most inmates (78 percent) raised in non-village settings committed their immediate crimes in non-vil-

lage locations. It is interesting that inmates with a mixed upbringing exhibited an apparent preference for committing crimes in non-village locations with almost twice the number of mixed inmates having committed their immediate crimes in non-village settings as those having committed their immediate crimes in villages. This may suggest that non-village locations are more conducive to criminal activities given an offender's substantial

**Table 3 Upbringing and Adult Crime History.**

Adult Crime History	Upbringing		
	Village	Non-Village	Mixed
Village	18 (.82)	1 (.11)	4 (.21)
Non-Village	3 (.14)	8 (.89)	7 (.37)
Mixed	1 (.4)	0 (0)	8 (.42)
Total	22	9	19

Chi-Square not computable; numbers in parentheses ( ) indicate proportions by upbringing.

exposure to both village and non-village settings. Furthermore, of the 50 inmates studied, 19 were classified as having had a mixed upbringing. This demonstrates mobility and immersion in more than one cultural environment during their upbringing and is a significant characteristic of Alaska Native inmates. Also of importance is that 41 of the 50 inmates have either a pure village background or a significant influence of a village environment. Thus, it would be accurate to characterize the over-representation of Natives in the Alaska Correctional System as calling for a focus on village etiology in that only 9 of the 50 (18 percent) were found to have no substantial village influence in their upbringing.

The previous two tables have analyzed the relationship between demographics and the crime for which the inmate was incarcerated at the time of the interview. Since inmates typically have criminal histories, it is also instructive to examine the influence of upbringing upon adult criminal history. The fact that an inmate committed his immediate crime in a village does not guarantee the inmate had not previously committed crimes in non-village locations. Table 3 provides information on the relationship between

**Table 4 Immediate Crimes Frequency and Upbringing.**

Crimes	Total Frequency	Upbringing (Number)		
		Village	Non- Village	Mixed
Murder	11	7	1	3
Robbery	2	0	1	1
Sexual Assault	13	8	3	2
Drugs	4	0	2	2
Vehicular Manslaughter	1	0	0	1
Burglary	7	4	0	3
Import/Alcohol	1	0	1	0
Assault	8	3	0	5
Theft	2	0	0	2
Felony Driving While Intoxicated	1	0	1	0

demographics and adult criminal history. The adult criminal history was examined by the authors, relying primarily on the PSIs. Each inmate was classified, again, as village, non-village or mixed, depending on where the adult crimes occurred. For example, as a juvenile, one inmate committed crimes in both village and non-village locations but, since his adult crimes were exclusively committed in non-village areas, he was classified as non-village.

Not surprisingly, Table 3 indicates that, when a person is raised in either a village or non-village environment, their crimes are most likely to be committed in that same environment. Even when the upbringing is a combination of village and non-village (i.e., mixed) over half of the 19 mixed inmates still were choosing to commit their crimes predominantly in either a village or non-village area. Of the choices, non-village is the preferred one for inmates with a mixed upbringing. Thus adult criminal history follows the same general pattern found when examining only the most immediate crimes. A further implication is that inmates are not simply roving around

the state committing crimes regardless of where they were brought up. This dispels the notion that village Natives are committing their crimes incidental to travel to non-village areas.

### Is There A Relationship Between The Type Of Immediate Crime Committed And Demographic Model?

Table 4 gives the actual crimes for which the inmates were incarcerated at the time of interview. Although many inmates had multiple counts the most serious was the one recorded. Further, some inmates were incarcerated at time of interview because of parole or probation violations. In those cases the crime recorded was the original crime for which the inmate was either probated or paroled.

The information in Table 4 suggests a relationship between some crimes and upbringing. For example, of 11 murders, 7 were committed by inmates raised in villages. There appears to be a relationship between the amount of violence and upbringing. To examine this possibility further, the immediate crimes committed, shown in Table 4, were classified as either violent or non-violent. The crimes of murder, robbery, sexual assault and assault were classified as violent and the rest were non-violent. This classification of violence is based on the Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime

**Table 5**  
Relationship Between Upbringing and Type of Immediate Crime

Type of Crime	Upbringing		
	Village	Non-Village	Mixed
Violent	18 (.82)	5 (.56)	11 (.58)
Non-Violent	4 (.18)	4 (.44)	8 (.42)
Total	22	9	19

Chi-Square=3.5; p=.18; numbers in parentheses( ) indicate proportion by upbringing.

Report. The case of vehicular manslaughter was not recorded as violent, since there was no criminal intent of violence.

Statistically we are not able to state that there is a relationship between upbringing and type of crime according to accepted social science standards, which would require the p-value to be less than .05. In other words, where



the inmate was raised may not be related to whether the inmate had committed a violent (per FBI classification) or non-violent crime (see Table 5). This notwithstanding, the pattern does suggest that violence is associated with a village upbringing. Eighteen of the 22 inmates classified as village were also classified as being incarcerated for a violent crime. Only 5 of the 9 non-village inmates were so classified, as were 11 of the 19 mixed. Furthermore, during the interviews conducted at the Spring Creek Correctional facility, the authors both noted that a significant number of the inmates with a village upbringing had been incarcerated for either murder or sexual assault. Given the number of murders and sexual assaults and those crimes' seriousness, they deserve special inquiry. Of the 11 murders, 7 were committed by inmates classified as village and, of the 13 sexual assaults, 8 were committed by village inmates. Table 6 presents this and other information in detail.

The p-value indicates there is very likely a relationship between upbringing and whether the immediate crime was either murder or sexual assault as opposed to any of the other crimes reported in Table 4. The data also suggest that a practical difference exists, given that 68 percent of the rural inmates were incarcerated for either murder or sexual assault as

**Table 6 Most Serious Offenses (Murder & Sexual Assault) and Demographic Models.**

Type of Crime		Upbringing		
		Village	Non-Village	Mixed
	Most Serious	15 (.68)	4 (.44)	5 (.26)
	All Others	7 (.32)	5 (.56)	14 (.74)
	Total	22	9	19

Chi-Square=7.2; p=.03; numbers in parentheses ( ) indicate proportion by upbringing.

compared to 45 percent and 26 percent for the urban and mixed groups respectively. Therefore, based on the data shown in Tables 5 and 6, there appears to be a relationship between the places inmates were raised and the type of crime for which they were incarcerated. Combined with the findings in Table 2, suggesting that rural inmates committed their crimes in village,

the conclusion is that a significant portion of the most serious crimes committed by Alaska Natives takes place in villages.

### Is There A Relationship Between Juvenile Incarceration and Demographics?

Each inmate was identified as either having been incarcerated in a juvenile institution or not. Juvenile incarceration entailed more than being placed in a foster care home or even direct contact with the criminal justice system.

**Table 7** Prior Incarceration as a Juvenile and Demographic Model.

Juvenile Incarceration		Upbringing		
		Village	Non-Village	Mixed
Yes		5 (.23)	4 (.44)	12 (.63)
No		17 (.77)	5 (.56)	7 (.37)
	Total	22	9	19

Chi-Square=6.9; p=.03; numbers in parentheses ( ) indicate proportion by upbringing.

Some time in a state facility, like the McLaughlin Youth facility in Anchorage, was necessary for an inmate to be classified as having been incarcerated as a juvenile. Table 7 presents these results.

As indicated by the statistical analysis, there is good reason to believe that there is a relationship between type of upbringing and whether an inmate was incarcerated as a juvenile. Village inmates were much less likely to have been confined in a state juvenile facility as a juvenile. Only 23 percent of village inmates were so confined as compared to 44 percent and 63 percent of the non-village and mixed inmates respectively. It is interesting that inmates who had a more transient childhood were much more apt to have experienced being juvenile incarceration than their village or non-village peers. It is also interesting that, while the mixed group of inmates had experienced the greatest incidence of juvenile incarceration, as a group they were the least likely to have committed murder or sexual assault as an adult.

**Is There A Relationship Between Juvenile Incarceration And Type Of Crime Committed?**

Given the current focus and questioning by observers of the criminal justice system of juvenile incarceration, this is an important relationship to examine. Some argue that juvenile incarceration is dysfunctional and likely to lead to worse crimes being committed by the offender once released from juvenile incarceration. Consequently, such observers support alternatives to juvenile incarceration. Others more representative of the policy orientation of Alaska, call for increased use of juvenile facilities. Table 8 provides information relevant to these issues. Again, the adult crimes were categorized as either "most serious" (murder and sexual assault) or other.

**Table 8 Relationship Between Juvenile Incarceration and Type of Adult Crime.**

Type of Crime		Juvenile Incarceration	
		Yes	No
	Most Serious	7 (.33)	17 (.59)
	All Other	14 (.67)	12 (.41)
	Total	21	29

Chi-Square = 3.1; p = .08; numbers in parentheses ( ) indicate proportion by upbringing.

Although there is indication of a relationship between an inmate having been incarcerated as a juvenile and whether they committed either murder or sexual assault as an adult, statistically the p-value indicates caution is needed before accepting the existence of the relationship. It should be noted that Table 8 suggests that those inmates who are incarcerated for the most serious offenses were less likely to have been incarcerated as a juvenile. This may be due to the previous finding that a relationship exists between the offender being raised in a village and the commission of the most serious offenses. It is not surprising to find a lesser use of state juvenile incarceration in remote village locations. On the other hand, the results could be interpreted to support the contention that early state intervention in the form of incarceration may reduce the seriousness of future criminal acts.

### *Discussion*

In large part, the results were consistent with prevailing perceptions about Alaska Native involvement in criminal activity. Criminal activity resulting in Alaska Native incarceration frequently occurs in or has a nexus with village locations. 54 percent of the inmates participating in the study had committed their immediate crime in a village location. Over 80 percent of the inmates interviewed received a significant component (either wholly or in part) of their upbringing in village locations. Violence, as represented by murder and sexual assault crimes, was predominantly a village phenomenon with 68% of the inmates incarcerated for murder or sexual assault having been raised almost exclusively in village locations.

While the above facts suggest that any attempt to reduce Alaska Native involvement in criminal activity and subsequent incarceration should include a significant component focused upon the villages, the facts should not be interpreted to imply that violence and crime are rampant in the villages. First, it is not surprising that more than 50 percent of the inmates had committed their crimes, resulting in incarceration, in a village location. An analysis of the 1990 Census data indicates that more than 50 percent of Alaska Natives live in the villages. Consequently, it is reasonable to expect that a greater number of Alaska Native inmates come from villages than non-villages. Secondly, the offenders who were predominantly raised in village locations (and consequently most likely committed their crimes in village locations) more often were incarcerated for murder or sexual assault; offenses for which the greatest terms of incarceration are expected. This greater length of incarceration should result in a greater percentage of the Alaska Native inmates being from villages at any one instant. This could also explain why Copus and Blurton (1995) observed essentially zero occurrences of crimes resulting in significant incarceration when studying all the criminal cases recorded for a one year period in two villages. The occurrence of criminal activity resulting in incarceration may be infrequent in villages, but when it does occur, the current study indicates it is likely to involve murder or sexual assault and long incarceration periods.

A characterization of criminal activity resulting in incarceration occurring infrequently in the villages but most likely involving murder or sexual assault when it does, appears to be consistent with the study's results on juvenile incarceration. While inmates with predominantly village upbringings were the most likely to have committed a murder or sexual assault, they were the least likely to have been incarcerated as juveniles. Assuming the absence of juvenile incarceration indicates an absence of serious juvenile offenses, the study suggests the village offenders/inmates typically did not

exhibit patterns of committing serious crimes, at least as juveniles. One possible explanation for this phenomenon, may be that the serious criminal activities occurring in the villages may be somehow associated with a prevalence of tragedies occurring in the villages. Although not formally documented through the study's survey questions, both authors noted the frequent existence of multiple personal tragedies during the juvenile lives of the offenders. For instance one inmate spoke of his mother and sister dying in the same year.

The absence of juvenile incarceration seems to defy the common belief that adult serious offenders establish criminal behavioral patterns as juveniles, which result in extensive juvenile records and incarceration. Although beyond the scope of this study, it must be asked if the paucity of juvenile incarceration of inmates from village locations is due to a lack of State juvenile delinquency enforcement services in the remote villages, rather than an absence of serious juvenile criminal activity. If the former, namely a lack of juvenile delinquency enforcement services, is the case, then the prevalence of murder and sexual assault in the villages demands the State expend greater resources for intervention programs directed at village juvenile delinquents. It may be that the serious crimes were committed by inmates who actually were juvenile delinquents but were undetected by the State's juvenile system. While any such expansion of intervention programs in the villages would likely include traditional state probation and parole programs, locally driven intervention programs should be encouraged including the possible use of tribal governments' programs as has been suggested by Copus and Blurton (1995) and the Alaska Native Commission (1994: 91).

In conclusion, the study indicates any State effort to reduce the incidence of crime committed by Alaska Natives and thus reduce the incarceration rate of Alaska Natives should have a significant focus upon the villages. The lack of relationship between juvenile incarceration and the commission of murder or sexual assault is troubling. Either the juvenile system is overlooking these offenders while they are juveniles, or some circumstance exists that seems to create a situation in which a person without a serious criminal history suddenly acts out violently in a murder or sexual assault. Either case merits the State's attention. As we have seen, of the inmates studied, over 80 percent had a significant village component to their upbringing and over 68 percent of those who were incarcerated for murder or sexual assault had an almost exclusive village upbringing. It is also evident that in-depth studies of the juvenile system in village Alaska, and the life histories of murder and sexual assault offenders who commit their crimes in villages are warranted.

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#### Endnote

1. Authors reviewed the 1990 Census data for Alaska with regard to Alaska Natives residing in Native villages. The authors noted that approximately one-third of the Alaska Native population resided in the larger communities dominated by non-Native values (i.e., Ketchikan, Juneau, Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kodiak, Sitka etc). Realizing that a significant number of small rural communities are not dominated by Native cultural values and hence would not be classified as villages for the purpose of this study, the authors feel safe in stating that more than 50% of Alaska Natives within the state reside in villages.

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