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FEMALE FLIGHT? GENDER BALANCE AND OUTMIGRATION BY NATIVE ALASKAN VILLAGERS

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Abstract: Recent surveys in Alaska's predominantly Native Bristol Bay and Northwest Arctic regions find that female high school students, more often than males, expect to migrate permanently away from their home community and region. Reports from high school graduates indicate that more young women do move away after graduation; other research establishes that Native women more often attend college or hold full-time jobs. Statewide 1990 Census data confirm a significant relation between percent female and community population, consistent with the hypothesis that "female flight" from Native villages is shifting the young adult gender balance. Bush villages tend to have more young Native men than women, whereas larger cities have more young Native women than men. Such imbalances must directly affect opportunities for marriage, family, and cultural continuity. They could also have wide-ranging indirect consequences, including exacerbation of village social and health problems associated with unmarried young men.

Over the past several years we have been conducting research among high school students in Alaska's Bristol Bay and Northwest Arctic regions (predominantly Yup'ik and Inupiat Eskimo, respectively). Our initial interest focused on the ways in which rapid natural resource development, such as the Northwest Arctic's Red Dog Mine, affects the aspirations and attitudes of rural Alaskan adolescents (1). In spring 1992 we surveyed about two-thirds of the high school students in both regions, as well as a majority of Bristol Bay region high school graduates from 1987-1991. We subsequently returned to discuss the survey results with educators and students in fifteen towns and villages.

On our travels through Native villages we sometimes heard accounts of young women moving away for jobs, education, or marriage, leaving the village with a problematic excess of young men. Other researchers have reported similar stories from elsewhere in Alaska (2,3) and from such distant lands as Greenland (4), Iceland (5), and Siberia (6). With these reports in mind, we began searching for hard evidence of disproportionate outmigration by young village women. In both our student survey results and U.S. Census data, we found indications that the phenomenon of "female flight" might be fairly common within the two regions we studied (7).

This paper begins by briefly reviewing Alaskan Native and non-Native demographics. Next we present indirect evidence relevant to female flight. Finally we turn to Census data and demonstrate that a correlation exists between Native gender imbalance and community size throughout the state of Alaska.

Alaskan Demographics

About 86 000 of Alaska's 550 000 people (as of 1990) are Native Americans. Natives constitute a small minority in cities, but they form the majority in bush (rural) villages. Figure 1 breaks down Alaska's ethnic composition for places of village (below 1000 people), town (1000 - 9999) and city (10 000 or more) size (8).

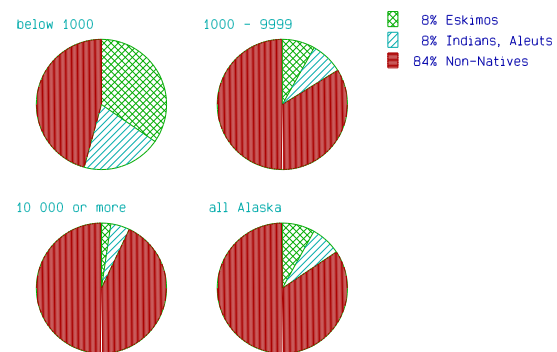


Figure 1: Ethnic composition of Alaska by community population, 1990.

Young adults (25 to 45 years old) are the most abundant age group among Alaska's white population. These young adults include many men who moved to Alaska for job or lifestyle reasons. White males outnumber white females in every age group below about 65 (Figure 2).

The age-sex distribution for Alaskan Natives, on the other hand, follows a different pattern (Figure 3). Infants are the largest single age group in this fast-growing population, which experiences comparatively little immigration from outside Alaska. Unlike the white population, Alaska's Native population exhibits no statewide gender imbalance until old age, when for both groups female longevity becomes a factor.

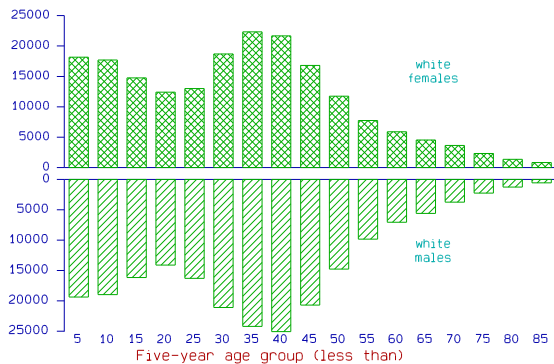


Figure 2: Age-sex distribution of white Alaskans.

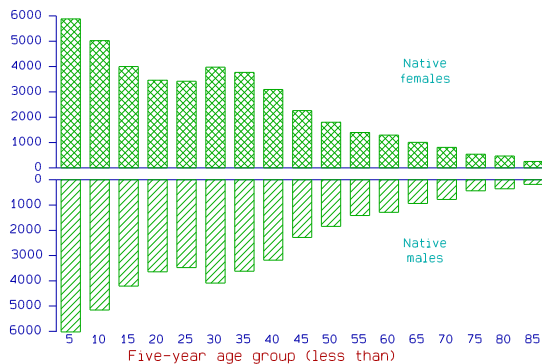


Figure 3: Age-sex distribution of Native Alaskans.

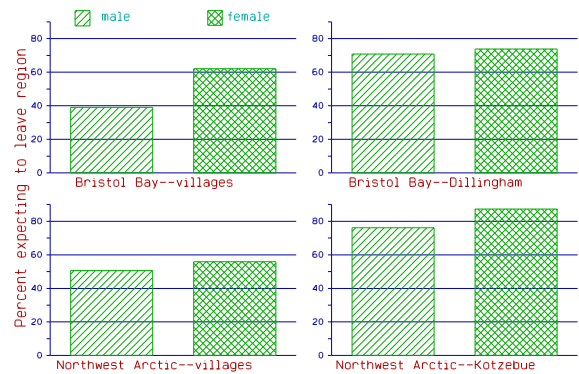


Figure 4: Male and female high school students expecting to live most of their lives outside their home region.

The Native gender balance seen in Figure 3 does not necessarily imply that no female flight occurs from Alaska itself. Young Native men have exceptionally high mortality rates (9), and for that reason alone we might expect to see more young Native women than men — but in fact statewide there are slightly fewer. The effects of differential mortality and out-of-state migration are worthy topics for further research, though beyond our scope here.

High School Students Survey

In spring 1992 we successfully surveyed over two-thirds ($n = 430$) of the high school students in fifteen predominantly Native communities of Alaska's Northwest Arctic and Bristol Bay regions (1,6). Among other things, the questionnaires asked where students thought they would spend most of the rest of their lives. About 63% said they expected to leave their present region, a much higher proportion than one might guess from the modest numbers of recent graduates reported to have actually established themselves elsewhere.

We found persistent gender differences in migration expectations: more girls than boys said they would likely move away. Figure 4 tracks this gender difference across four subsamples: Bristol Bay region villages (Aleknagik, Manokotak, New Stuyahok, and Togiak), the Bristol Bay region's hub town (Dillingham), Northwest Arctic villages (Ambler, Buckland, Deering, Kiana, Kivalina, Noatak, Noorvik, Selawik, and Shungnak), and the Northwest Arctic's hub town (Kotzebue).

Gender differences also arose when we asked about university aspirations: girls were significantly more ambitious than boys regarding higher education. In conversations with small groups of students, we heard repeatedly that school is a “girl type of thing,” in which females perform better because they work harder or are smarter or care less for alternative pursuits like hunting and basketball. Gender differences in ambitions translate into differences in outcomes; University of Alaska studies document the growing preponderance of women among Native college students (10,11). Both the anti-school

attitudes of boys, and girls' willingness to adapt, might carry over to white-collar employment in general — opening a wide gap between the opportunities boys and girls perceive.

High School Graduates Survey

In addition to surveying students, we attempted the more difficult task of surveying recent high school graduates in both regions. Six local interviewers (Inupiat in the Northwest Arctic, and Yup'ik in Bristol Bay) were hired and trained for this work. Our Northwest Arctic completion rate was low, but Bristol Bay interviewers succeeded in contacting 54% ($n = 144$) of the people who had graduated from area high schools over the years 1987–1991. Although 54% is still not high enough to insure a representative sample, our graduate survey results fit well between high school and Census data.

Among Bristol Bay graduates, women were somewhat more likely to have attended a university after graduating from high school (Table I). They were also significantly more likely to have a full-time job, and more than twice as likely to be living outside the Bristol Bay region at the time of the survey. Despite (or perhaps because of) these tangible steps towards acculturation, the women also assigned greater importance to retaining their Native language and culture.

In broad terms these results concur with the gender difference seen earlier regarding students' expectations: females more often plan to leave, and do leave. In detail, however, Table I contrasts with Figure 4. Percentages of students who think they will leave (Figure 4) appear much higher than percentages of graduates who actually left (Table I). For a young man or woman raised in rural Alaska, establishing a successful urban life presents big challenges in an unfamiliar world (12). Many try, but return to their home villages.

Table I. Gender Differences in Survey Responses by Bristol Bay High School Graduates (62 men, 69 women).

	men	women	all	χ^2 test
Attended university	26%	30%	28%	n.s.
Have full time job	54%	75%	65%	$P < .05$
Living outside region	10%	25%	18%	$P < .05$
Very important keep language	76%	93%	85%	$P < .01$

Data source: fixed-choice questions on survey conducted spring 1992.

In retrospect, graduates often wish they had taken different courses in high school. Table II lists types of courses they mentioned most often in response to our open-ended question. To bush teachers and students, the most surprising result here may be the widespread wish for more hard math, science, and academically demanding courses in general. The tone of respondents' comments indicated that many viewed their rural high schools as too easy, leaving them inadequately prepared to complete college or compete for desirable jobs.

Two significant gender differences stand out in Table II. Men more often than women wish they had taken shop classes, particularly for skills like boat building and small engine repair. Women, on the other hand, wish for business skills like typing, accounting, and computer applications. These preferences more or less follow traditional sex roles, of course, but note that they lead in different directions. Shop-class skills like small engine repair help out in the bush, but will not lead many boys to full-time jobs. Entry-level business skills, on the other hand, have limited importance in the bush. Mainly they prepare girls for white-collar urban careers. As Kleinfeld (13) shows:

Inupiat women have surged into the work force and have increasingly entered skilled work....Inupiat men, in contrast, have developed a culturally different pattern of economic activity...[they] are concentrated in intermittent blue-collar work [and] also participate substantially in the subsistence economy.

Table II. Courses Bristol Bay and Northwest Arctic Graduates Wish They Had Taken More of in High School (90 men, 109 women).

	men	women	all	χ^2 test
Math — e.g. algebra, calculus, trigonometry, geometry	19%	26%	23%	n.s.
Business — e.g. typing, accounting, computer applications	7%	28%	18%	$P < .001$
Science — e.g. chemistry, physics	14%	12%	13%	n.s.
More academic, college prep	12%	8%	10%	n.s.
Shop — e.g. small engine repair	11%	1%	6%	$P < .05$
English, writing	5%	6%	6%	n.s.

Data source: open-ended question on survey conducted spring 1992. No answer/more than one answer possible.

Analysis of the 1990 Census

If the outmigration of Native women from the bush were as substantial as survey results and anecdotal accounts suggest, it should have visible demographic consequences. To test this hypothesis we assembled data on the age-sex-race composition of every community in Alaska ($n = 352$), using the 1990 Census (8).

Figure 5 displays boxplots of the percent female among 20–39 year old Natives in 158 Alaskan places, grouped according to their total population. These 158 places are mostly discrete villages, towns, and cities, though they also include some rural areas with dispersed populations. The boxplots include all places in Alaska with 100 or more Native residents. Horizontal lines within each boxplot mark the median percent female for places of that size. Differences among these medians are statistically significant (Table III). We emphasize medians and a nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test here due to potential outlier problems;

robust analysis of variance indicates that the means significantly differ as well.

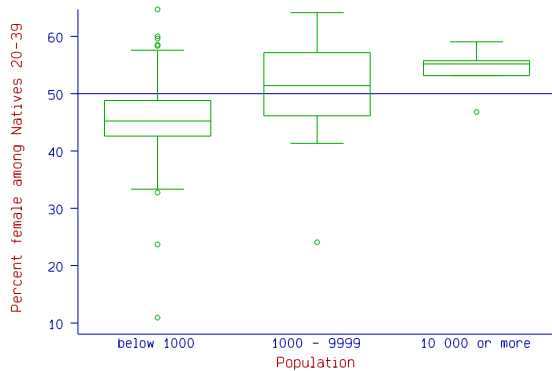


Figure 5: Boxplots showing percent female in 158 communities, by total population.

Table III: Median Percent Female Among Alaskan Natives 20 to 39 Years Old.

	Median % female	Kruskal-Wallis test
125 places with population < 1000	45.2%	$P < .001$
27 places with population 1000-9999	51.4%	
6 places with population \geq 10 000	55.2%	

Data source: 1990 Census. All Alaskan communities with 100 or more Natives included.

Boxes in Figure 5 indicate each group's interquartile range, with outliers plotted individually (14). The left boxplot in Figure 5 shows that over three-quarters of these villages have more young Native men than women, with several villages more than 60% male in this age group. All but one of the larger places have more young Native women than men. Towns of 1000 to 9999 people occupy an intermediate position (7).

Figure 5 and Table III establish a relation between young adult Native gender balance and community size. Small villages tend to have significantly more young Native men than women; the reverse holds true in cities. The statewide gender balance seen earlier in Figure 3 results from averaging these opposite trends.

Discussion

In summary, males predominate among both white and Native populations in rural Alaska. But whereas the white

male surplus largely reflects differential in-migration (male outsiders moving to the frontier), the pattern of Native gender imbalances in Figure 5 requires a different explanation. Female flight, the disproportionate outmigration of young Native women from bush villages, provides a plausible explanation that fits well with other lines of evidence including ethnographic accounts, survey data, college enrollments, and employment statistics.

We are not talking about a massive exodus. A net migration of about 1000 women from villages to larger towns and cities could account for the entire contrast seen in Figure 5/Table III. But 1000 women comprise roughly 7% of the state's total 20-39 year old Native female population. Furthermore we know that migration in general does not remove people randomly, but tends to select out more energetic individuals, so its qualitative effects on communities may exceed the quantitative impact. And Figure 5 suggests that the quantitative impact alone is substantial in many communities, though nonexistent in some others.

Where it occurs on a large scale, female flight could affect almost every aspect of village life. To speculate beyond our data, we might anticipate impacts in such areas as:

- (1) Increased attention focused on teenage girls by older men, perhaps exacerbating problems of abuse, teen pregnancy, early alcoholism and fetal exposure, high-risk (multiple partner) sexual activity, and self-destructive behavior. Unwanted attention would also add to the incentives for younger girls to leave the village themselves.
- (2) If some young men are unable to find partners in the village, they might experience an extended period of adolescent self-indulgence, with associated hazards of substance abuse, accidents, suicide, and illegal activities. Lacking the stabilizing effect of family responsibilities, they might perceive less reason to hold a steady job or behave as contributing members of the community.
- (3) If the villages contain fewer functional young families, this increases the difficulty raising healthy children and maintaining or passing on traditional language and culture. At the same time, it weakens prospects for constructive adaptation to modernization and social change.

Native women who leave the bush subsequently face a different set of dilemmas, not necessarily so bleak. (Although bleak alternatives certainly exist in cities, and befall many Native women and men (15).) Job opportunities for women are much more extensive in cities, as are other life choices. Furthermore, before or after moving to cities, Native women have greater likelihoods of meeting marriageable white men due to the statewide white gender imbalance. The role of intermarriage in migration decisions deserves further exploration.

This paper sought to establish the reality, and begin studying the scale, of female flight in Alaska. We are not ready to offer solutions to the daunting problems of Alaskan villages, nor to claim that the phenomenon of female flight is now well understood. More detailed tracking of births, marriages, mortality, and migration data will help further such understanding, and perhaps also suggest what if anything should be done. Whatever its exact magnitude, female flight does appear to be a real and widespread phenomenon with very broad implications.

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