

High violent death rate in Alaska

Unlike other Americans, Alaskans usually die violent deaths which are behaviorally based.

These are the findings of a study by Dr. R. F. Kraus of the Psychology and Behavioral Science Department of the WAMI program (Washington, Alaska, Montana, Idaho medical school program), and Dr. Patricia Buffler, formerly with AMU's Health Sciences Center.

Their 25-year sample results were presented by Kraus on Friday, Aug. 6, at a final session of the 27th Annual Alaska Science Conference focusing on Socio-Cultural Impacts: Cultural Resources, Health and Communications.

Stating that he has been interested in cross-cultural behavioral research specifically in the area of deviant behavior and violent death where rapid change is occurring, Kraus also said his findings surprised him by showing that of the four major native populations in the state, the Athabascans rank above all others in number of violent deaths.

Using statistics provided by the State Bureau of Vital Statistics from 1950 to 1974, Kraus and Buffler define violent deaths as those due to suicide, homicide, accidents and alcohol and say that they define alcohol deaths conservatively. Their figures do not reflect deaths that are "alcohol-related," but those that are directly attri-

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butable to alcohol (acute alcoholism, DTs, alcohol poisoning, etc.). Deaths due to mental illness are also classified as violent although that category does not figure into the findings because of the difficulty of getting those statistics and lack of systematization.

Saying that there is a whole matrix of psychological, social and cultural factors that underlie their findings, Kraus reports that for natives and non-natives, chronic causes of death (heart disease, cancer, etc.) is lower than the national average and is remaining at about the same level. However, violent deaths for both groups are much higher than the national all-races pattern and are rapidly increasing.

Within the native population over the 25-year period, infectious diseases have gone down markedly due to better health

care. Violence used to account for the smallest number of Alaskan deaths. Today it is responsible for 32 per cent of Alaskan mortality which is atypical of the American pattern.

Since 1950, the divergence in death by suicide between the native and non-native population has quadrupled and native suicides are now three times more frequent than the national average. The non-native rate of death caused by accidents has also decreased while native accidental deaths have increased.

Native female deaths due to suicide have rapidly outnumbered male suicides. Kraus attributes this to changes in living areas from relatively safe villages to high-risk urban areas.

In terms of each of the four major native groups, Tlingit-Haida-Tsimpian, Athabascan, Northern Eskimo, and South-

western Eskimo, general trends show that homicide is decreasing in southeast Alaska while alcohol deaths there are the highest in the state.

With Athabascans leading in all other causes of violent death, Northern Eskimos usually are second, Tlingit-Haida-Tsimpian third, and Southwestern Eskimo fourth. Because the Aleut population is so small, Kraus prefers not to use those statistics as significant comparable data.

He feels that the accident rate is going up sharply for natives due to alcohol, and that the influence of alcohol on the other causes of violent death is pervasive although usually difficult to pinpoint.

One can only speculate on reasons why the Athabascans lead the native groups in violent deaths, says Kraus. He guesses it has something to do with heavy acculturation and

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exploitation of the Interior by white miners from 1890 on. He also cites the harshness of the climate, the fact that the Athabascans are a highly dispersed people lacking organized social structure, and the fact the violent deaths are mainly a village phenomenon related to the high number of villages in the Interior.

Although non-native suicide is decreasing overall, suicide among the non-native young is rising mainly due to drugs and transience. An increase in suicide among native youth is also occurring although it does not appear to be drug related.

Responding to the suggestion that high violent death rates in Alaska for natives may point out only that non-natives are used to being able to flee the state under stress, Kraus smiled and reminded the group that Alaska was supposed to be "an escape hatch."