

# Survey shows concern about villages and the justice system

One hundred and seventy-five residents in 28 villages located in 11 Alaska Native Regional Corporation areas were interviewed in a survey designed to obtain information for assessing and improving public safety operations and services in rural villages of Alaska. It was conducted on-site and examined local attitudes toward issues of public safety in predominantly Native communities throughout the state.

Although the majority of residents and officials who participated in the public safety survey conducted by the University of Alaska Anchorage Justice Center reported viewing their communities as normally safe places to live, they expressed concerns about the quantity and quality of services they receive from the Alaska criminal justice system.

The researchers found that throughout the communities surveyed, prosecution, court, and correctional officials, in particular, were viewed as being unconcerned about local governance arrangements, practices, and problems, and insensitive to values, feelings, and priorities of village residents and officials. Few interviewees could recall a visit to their village by a local prosecutor or court or correctional official. Village officials frequently reported a nearly total absence of communication with justice system personnel who are assigned to serve their communities. Among other areas of expressed concern were the lack of knowledge on the part of Alaska justice officials of Native culture and lifestyles, tribal and Indian law, and decision-making practices of local communities; failure by justice officials to communicate with local offi-

cials about processing and charging decisions; arbitrarily developed and imposed policies and rules related to the administration of local justice; and inadequate legal consultation or advice from Alaska justice agencies.

While most village officials indicated a preference for their own police or public safety officers, they also expressed a need for more Alaska State Troopers to work with them on community social and crime problems.

Many of the villages surveyed were found to have established, without sup-

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port from the Alaska justice system, their own policies and methods for dealing with most crime and social control problems in the communities. Despite the importance of these extralegal local practices to villages, in general they seem to be unrecognized or ignored by justice system employees who are assigned to serve communities.

The following are among other findings of the study:

- Nearly all interviewees (90 percent) reported satisfaction with living in their communities and with their lifestyle. Over 85 percent reported viewing the community as a good place to raise children.

- Over half the respondents reported a belief that crime in their community has remained unchanged or decreased both during their lifetimes and in the past five years.

- Although nearly all of the respon-

dents reported viewing their villages as normally safe, their greatest fear is the possibility of an incident involving an intoxicated, armed, or rowdy person.

- Interviewees identified the major problems in their communities as alcohol, drugs, lack of local paying jobs, and inadequate sanitation systems. Alcohol is seen as causing nearly all crimes; drugs contribute.

- Communities differ widely on the extent of crime, characteristics of living conditions, community priorities, and decision-making arrangements for dealing with community affairs and problems.

- Most respondents indicated a preference for having crime and social control problems handled by people in the community with support from the troopers. (i.e. Thirty-seven percent indicated village police or public safety officers should play a leading role in controlling crime as compared to 17 percent who believed the lead should be the responsibility of the Alaska State Troopers.)

- Most communities have either established or are in the process of developing new community methods, including adjudication methods, for dealing with social control.

- Over 80 percent of the respondents felt that families and local organizations are more effective in stopping drug and alcohol abuse than are courts and police. Eight times as many people identified tribal courts as identified state courts as the most effective group to stop drug and alcohol abuse.

The Justice Center report includes quantified summaries of respondent answers to survey questions as well as transcripts of the explanatory comments from interviewees. The survey was part of a larger project conducted for the Department of Public Safety under a grant from the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Copies of the report *Public Safety and Policing in Alaska Native Villages* are available for reproduction cost through the Justice Center at (907) 786-1810.