

# Adolescent study results are alarming

by Sen. John Binkley  
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — Though it received little public attention, a report came out this summer bearing news that parents — and anyone else concerned about Alaska's children — ought to find alarming, if not heart-breaking.

The Department of Health and Social Services, in a report entitled, "The State of Adolescent Health in Alaska," reported the findings from its 1989 survey of 5,548 young Alaskans.

The survey was the largest and most comprehensive study of its type ever done in our state, posing 162 questions to these youngsters about their behavior and attitudes; the findings aren't encouraging.

The study found that:

- 14 percent of the children surveyed have risk factors that may lead to chronic illness later in life, including cancer and cardiovascular diseases.

- While the number of overweight young people in Alaska exceeds the national average, 30 percent of the girls and 10 percent of the boys here have a different problem — they're convinced they are fat when they aren't.

Having such a distorted self-image often leads young people to engage in chronic dieting, which in turn can cause serious and even life-threatening health problems, such as bulimia or anorexia.

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- Most teenagers in Alaska see themselves as emotionally healthy, but about 5 percent described themselves as severely stressed. About a third of these children say they have been physically abused, and half have attempted suicide.

- In all, one in six Alaska youths say they have attempted suicide — 23 percent of the girls surveyed and 13 percent of the boys.

A majority reported having made multiple attempts and a third said they told no one of their efforts. The survey also found a strong connection between suicidal behavior and other risk factors, such as eating disorders, pregnancy and abuse.

- The tragedy of physical and sexual abuse of children appears to continue unabated in Alaska. Of those surveyed, 23 percent of the girls and 8 percent of the boys said they've been physically abused. The numbers for both sexes appear to be significantly higher than the statistical national average.

## OPINION

- By the 12th grade, more than 25 percent of females and 20 percent of males are smoking cigarettes each day; an additional 18 percent of males and 7 percent of females said they use smokeless tobacco daily.

- A quarter of the 12th graders in larger communities and 16 percent of those living in smaller towns or villages said they use alcohol on either a daily or weekly basis.

According to the department's analysis, 17 percent of these kids already are abusing alcohol at a rate that indicates high potential for serious drinking problems. And nearly half of the 10th to 12th grade students reported having driven a vehicle while drinking, an activity that annually accounts for more than half of all deaths among young people nationally.

- The third major drug young people are abusing is marijuana, with

nearly half of the 12th graders reported having used it. About 10 percent of high school seniors said they smoke pot on a daily or weekly basis.

The department's summation of the findings indicates that many of our young people are happy, physically healthy and emotionally stable. We ought to be happy about that, but we can't be comforted by the clear evidence that a sizable minority of our children are suffering in one way or another.

It seems to me that we must do a better job in two areas, the school and the home. Schools need adequate resources and perhaps more important, the involvement of parents and the community at large, to ensure they are indeed providing a meaningful learning environment for young people.

And at home, children must have the attention of loving and caring parents if they are to grow into adulthood with a sense of worth and respect for themselves and others.

These problems and their solutions largely cannot be affected by govern-



ment action, but instead require the commitment of Alaska's citizens on both an individual and community basis, to show more concern for our young people. And if we don't make such a commitment, we'll have no one but ourselves to blame the next time a heart-breaking report like this comes out.