

CONTEMPORARY RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION IN ALASKA

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ABSTRACT

As economic conditions in Alaska's rural communities worsen, residents face difficult choices about remaining in home communities and what they should do to prepare the next generation for a possibly different future. A survey of new families in the Anchorage School District demonstrates movement to Anchorage from both on the road system and off the road system for employment, educational opportunities, and because of a rising cost of living. Flexible migration strategies that involve return or circular movement mitigate the socioeconomic challenges rural families face in finding employment, adequate housing, and educational opportunities and in negotiating lifestyle changes. The data suggest a complex and evolving relationship between rural and urban Alaska as families and particularly young people struggle with the cultural transitions this relationship entails.

KEYWORDS: youth, mobility, education

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, an unforeseen and sudden increase in the Anchorage School District's enrollment prompted the superintendent and the Anchorage mayor to send a letter to Governor Sarah Palin, requesting attention to a possible population influx from Alaska's rural communities. This enrollment coincided with the global financial crisis of 2008 and soaring energy costs, which had instigated a one-time energy rebate distributed in concert with the largest ever Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend payout. As economic conditions in Alaska's rural communities worsen because of economic crisis, diminishing local access to natural resources, and a rising cost of living, rural residents are faced with difficult choices about remaining in their home communities and preparing the next generation for a possibly different future reality. Current demographic studies demonstrate that Alaska's rural population has declined since 2000 (Williams 2010; Windisch-Cole 2009).

Drawing from research conducted with families in Anchorage that have school-aged children, this article ad-

resses contemporary rural-to-urban migration in Alaska and its cultural implications. Findings from a survey of Alaska families enrolling new students in the Anchorage School District in 2007–2008 demonstrate a gradual migration trend among families rather than a sudden movement to Anchorage triggered by economic crisis, children moving independently of families, and return or circular migration patterns. This article describes where Alaskans are moving from, why they are moving, and who is moving and examines rural-urban migration patterns as both economic and cultural strategies employed to mitigate the effects of rapid socioeconomic change.

WHERE ARE PEOPLE MOVING FROM?

Alaska has a small population for a big place. With 1,518,800 sq km in total land mass, only 692,314 people live in the state, and over 50% of the population resides in the municipality of Anchorage and the nearby Mat-Su

Borough (Mercer 2010). The next largest communities are semiurban, including Fairbanks at approximately 35,000 residents and Juneau at slightly more than 30,000 residents. Alaska has few roads connecting its communities. Anchorage, the Mat-Su Borough, Fairbanks, and the majority of the rest of the state's population centers are accessible by road, whereas the capital in Southeast Alaska, Juneau, is only accessible by air and sea. Slightly more survey respondents moved to Anchorage from road system communities than from off-road system areas between 2007 and 2008. Families are also moving from rural, regional hub communities in off-road systems throughout the state, such as Barrow on the North Slope (pop. est. 4,000), Nome in the northwest (pop. est. 3,500), Bethel to the west (pop. est. 5,800), and Kodiak to the south in the Gulf of Alaska (pop. est. 6,600). In addition, migrants come from small towns and villages across the state. Of Alaska's 149 communities, approximately 80% have populations with less than 1,000 residents; many are also remote and off the road system.

WHY ARE PEOPLE MOVING?

Families and children are moving to Anchorage for multiple reasons. In neoclassical economic theory, the traditional explanation for internal migration is a desire for better employment opportunities. In Alaska, families *are* moving primarily for employment opportunities and because of an attendant rising cost of living in rural areas. However, access to education for both children and adults was also a reason to move. Many respondents reported dissatisfaction with rural schools and a desire to provide their children with access to broader educational and life opportunities. Families are also moving because of existing family connections in the city or because of family troubles, for a life change, and because of rural housing shortages.

WHO IS MOVING?

Families are moving to Anchorage, but a considerable number of children are moving independently to the city from rural areas, a trend particularly noticeable among Alaska Native families. Migratory chains established through kin and other close social relations appear to play a major role in facilitating the movement of both families and children. However, rural to urban migration in Alaska is complex and demonstrates return and/or circular migration patterns as well: repeated movement between

Anchorage and rural communities whereby some families and children appear to be living a dual existence between their home communities and the city for many years.

MIGRATION AS STRATEGY

Anchorage is playing an increasingly central role in Alaska's response to changing economic times, particularly as a springboard to better employment and educational opportunities. Yet rural families face considerable challenges in Anchorage in transitioning children to urban life and schools and finding affordable housing in the city. Alaska Native and older, high-school-aged children appear to experience the most difficulties in overcoming cultural transitions and often move back to their home communities, or back and forth between them and Anchorage. This circular movement represents a combination of economic and cultural strategies for families and children attempting to negotiate two worlds. The data suggest a complex and evolving relationship between rural and urban Alaska as families and particularly young people struggle with the cultural transitions this relationship entails.

METHODOLOGY

The increased enrollment in the Anchorage School District presented an opportunity to better understand whether rural Alaskans are indeed moving to Anchorage, where they are coming from, and why they are moving, at a time when rural communities are faced with both economic challenges and potentially considerable concomitant and rapid social change. The Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Alaska Anchorage conducted a survey with the parents/guardians of 881 new students in the Anchorage School District enrolling in the 2007–2008 or 2008–2009 school years who were transferring in from other Alaska school districts. The purpose of the survey was to provide information to the Anchorage School District and the Municipality of Anchorage about what they could do to best help new students and new migrants to the city.

Prior in-state transfer enrollment data were not available for comparison to understand whether 2008 was unique in the number of people moving to Anchorage from other parts of the state. However, concurrent studies conducted by the State of Alaska Division of Community and Regional Affairs and its Department of Labor and Workforce Development demonstrate that Alaska's ru-

ral population has been declining since at least 2000 (Windisch-Cole 2009) and movement into Anchorage increasing since 2004 (Williams 2010).

Because of the difficulties in expediently conducting research with 881 minors, the parents and/or guardians of newly enrolled students were identified as survey respondents rather than the students themselves. In October and November of 2008, the Anchorage School District provided contact and point of origin information for students newly enrolled in the 2007–2008 and 2008–2009 school years who transferred into the Anchorage School District from another district in Alaska.¹ Using a simple, cross-sectional survey research design, three sets of survey questions were developed to address (1) ISER’s continuing interest in the causes and patterns of migration in Alaska and the Arctic, (2) how the Anchorage School District can best address the needs of new students, and (3) the extent to which the Municipality of Anchorage will need to address a potential influx of families. The survey was a one-page form with seventeen questions (mixed forced response and open-ended) and an open-ended comment area provided on the back of the form (see Appendix A).

From the data the school district provided, 791 potential survey families were identified. Since the number of potential respondents from the Mat-Su Valley was high, a random sample (20%) of this population was drawn. A total of 681 surveys were mailed and followed up by phone calls for nonresponders.² We obtained an average 67% response rate from respondents who allowed the school district directory access (86% of total) and an 18% response rate from respondents who did not allow directory access (14% of total). Military families and respondents who did not fit the survey criteria of having recently enrolled a new student in the district³ were removed from the sample, resulting in 349 surveys deemed eligible for inclusion in data analysis.

Mixed methods approaches were employed in data analysis. Survey data were entered into an SPSS data file and frequencies and crosstab analyses were performed on largely nominal data. Respondent comments provided on the back of the survey in the open-ended

comment area were recorded by respondent ID number in word processing documents and analyzed for thematic content in ATLAS.TI qualitative data analysis software. A preliminary network analysis on migration paths and community relationships with Anchorage was performed using UCINET and NETDRAW social network analysis software.

WHERE ARE ALASKANS MOVING FROM?

Data analysis indicates that during the 2007–2008 and 2008–2009 school years, 881 Alaska students originating from outside Anchorage enrolled in the Anchorage School District; 56% came from road system districts and 44% from off-road system districts. From the information the school district provided, 490 students from road system communities accounted for the majority of the new enrollees, hailing primarily from the Mat-Su Borough communities of Wasilla and Palmer. Although a greater number of new students came from road system communities and school districts, 391 new students represented moves from off-road system districts. A substantial number of new students arrived from the Bethel and Nome census areas (Figs. 1 and 2).

A preliminary network analysis was conducted on the survey data collected about parent/guardian point of origin and the previous communities in Alaska in which parents/guardians of new students had lived. Fig. 3 illustrates the complex movement of respondents around Alaska. Each line represents the moves by a respondent or group of respondents who now live in Anchorage. Arrows indicate direction of the move. Finer analysis shows many respondents have moved between Anchorage and other communities more than once; i.e., for this sample, the line between Nome and Anchorage has an arrow at each end and the line represents twenty-four moves from Nome to Anchorage and seven moves back to Nome in the data matrix imported into UCINET.

The thickness of the line connecting the communities indicates number of moves between communities and, for this sample, a range of 1 to 90 moves total be-

1. The school district identified such students by using three criteria from student records: (1) students whose IDs started with “08” and whose previous state was Alaska but previous city was not Anchorage, (2) students whose entry code said “transfer from another Alaska school district,” or (3) students whose parents had authorized the school district to ask the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development for their state test records.

2. Those respondents who gave the school district permission to provide directory access to their contact information.

3. Military families (primarily moving between the Fairbanks North Star Borough and Anchorage bases) were not included in this study because their moves are often not their decision. They also face different constraints than the rural families this study targeted.

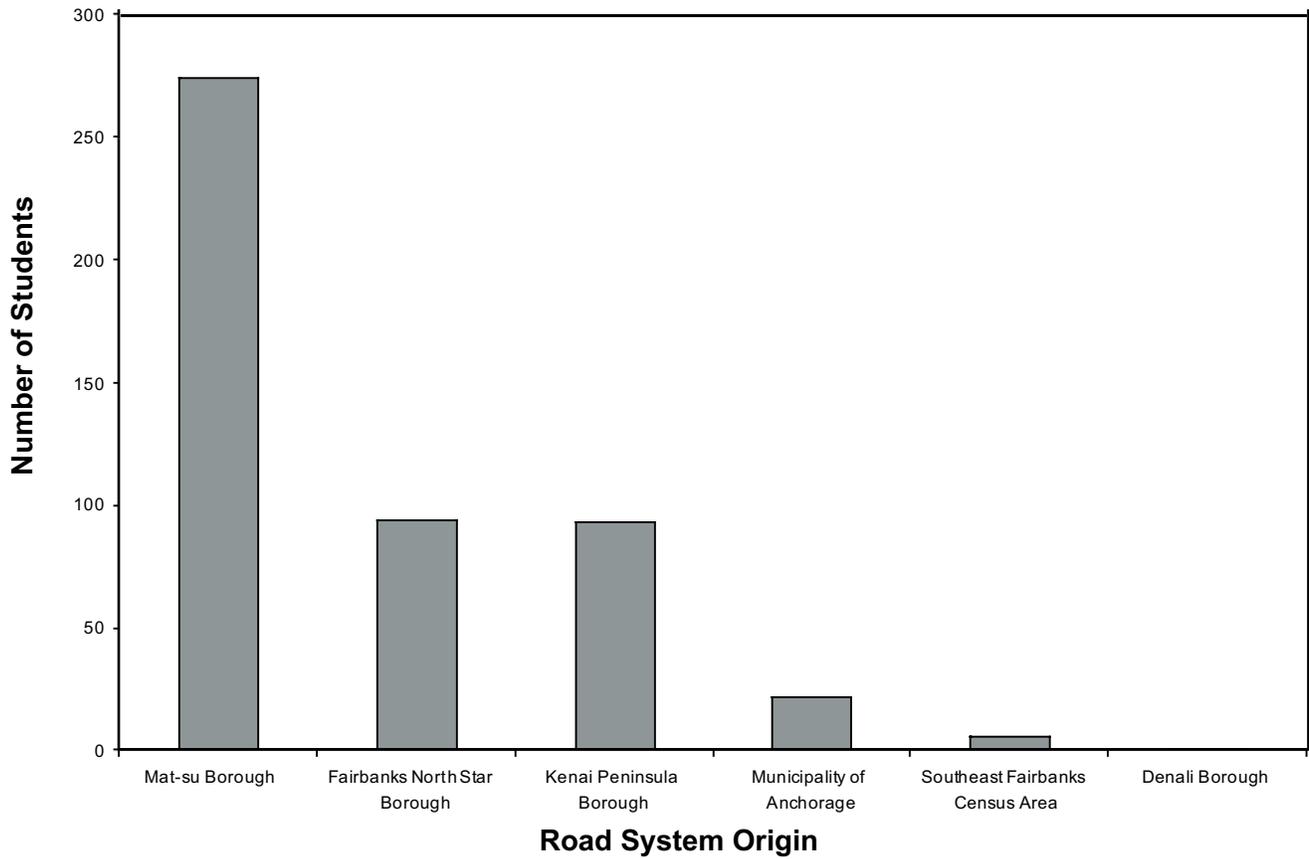


Figure 1: Road system borough/census area origin, number of students $n = 490$

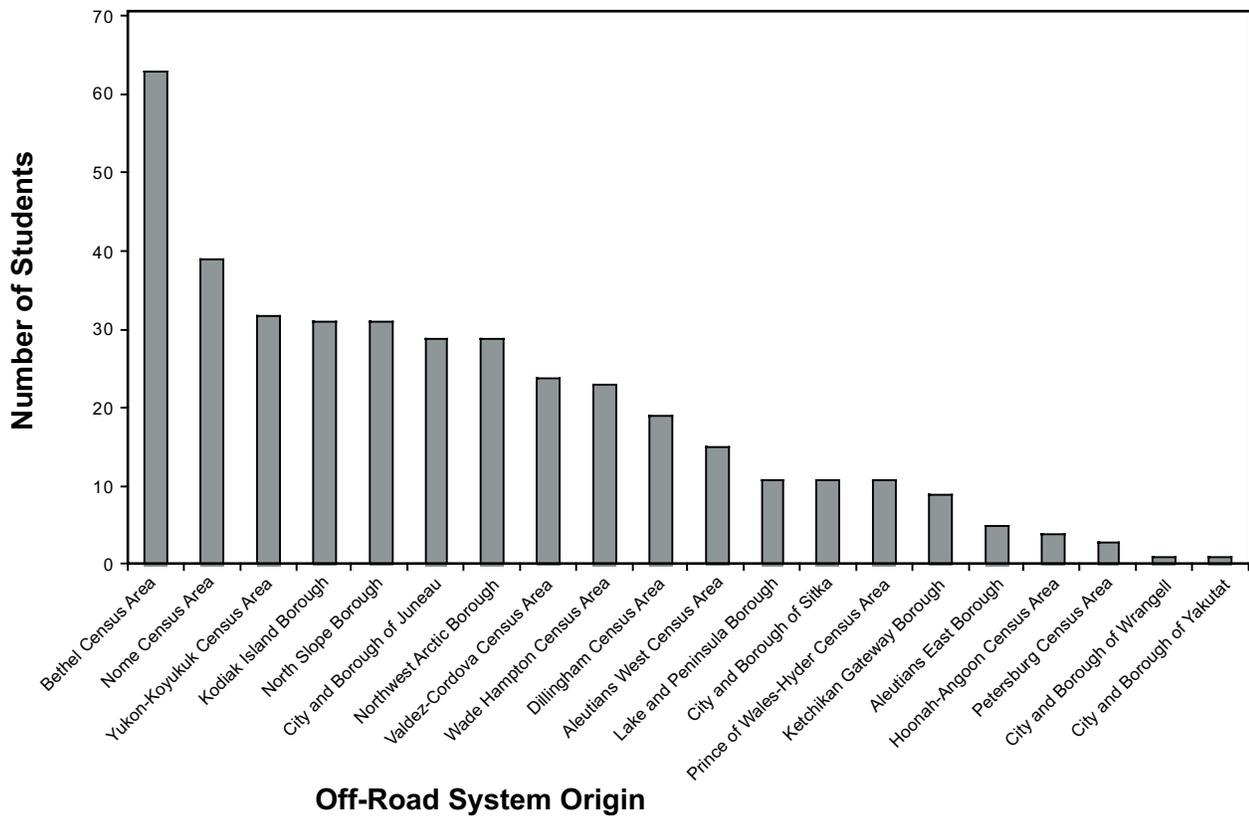


Figure 2: Off-road system borough/census area origin, number of students $n = 391$

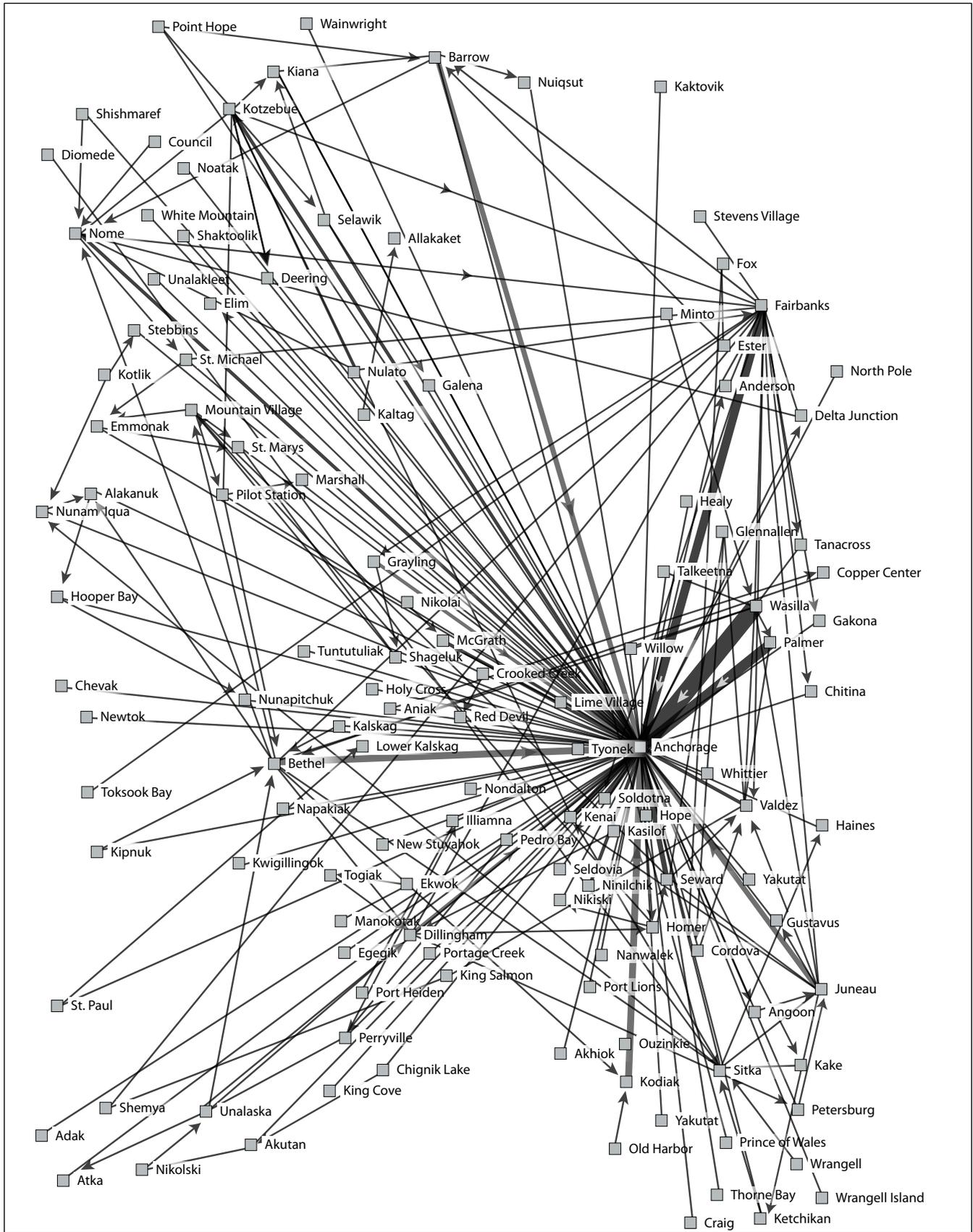


Figure 3: Alaska community network, ASD migration survey

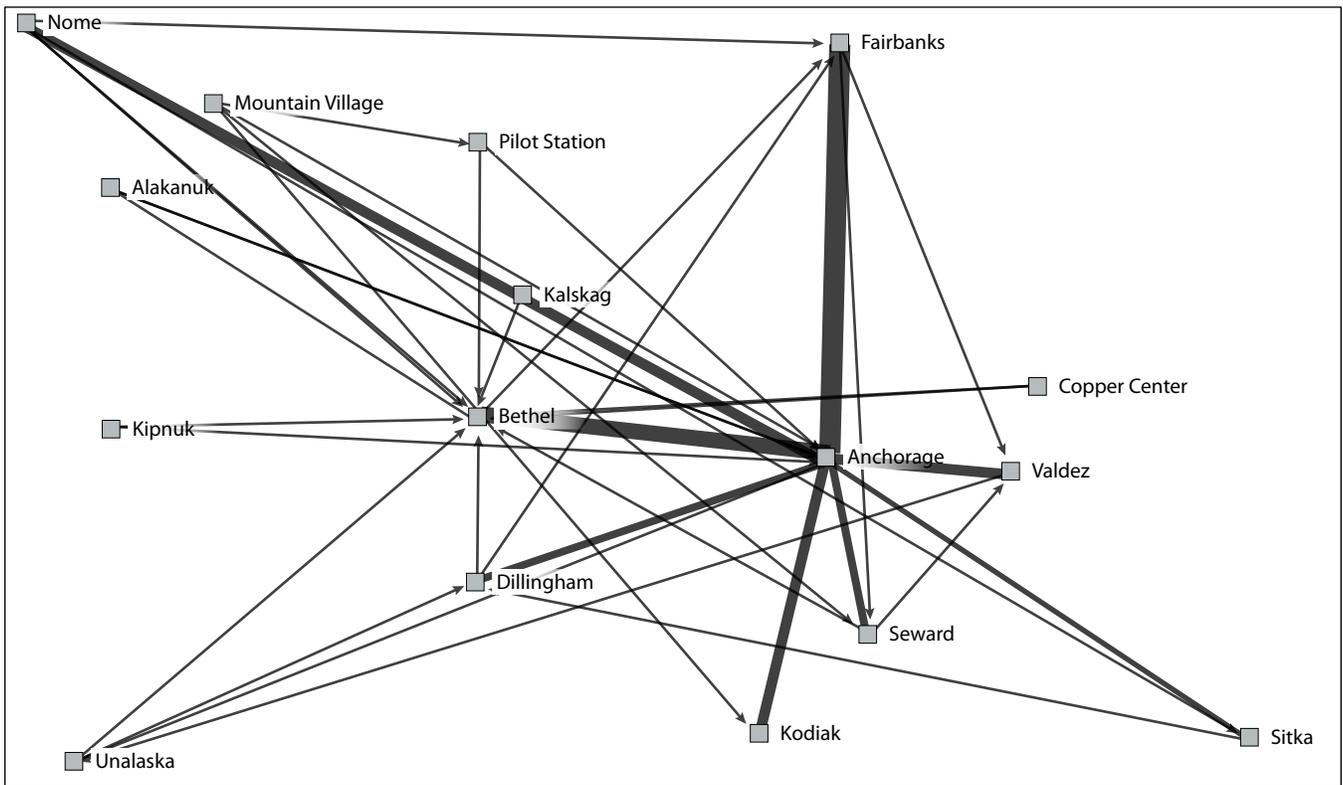


Figure 4: Ego network for the community of Bethel, Alaska, ISER migration survey

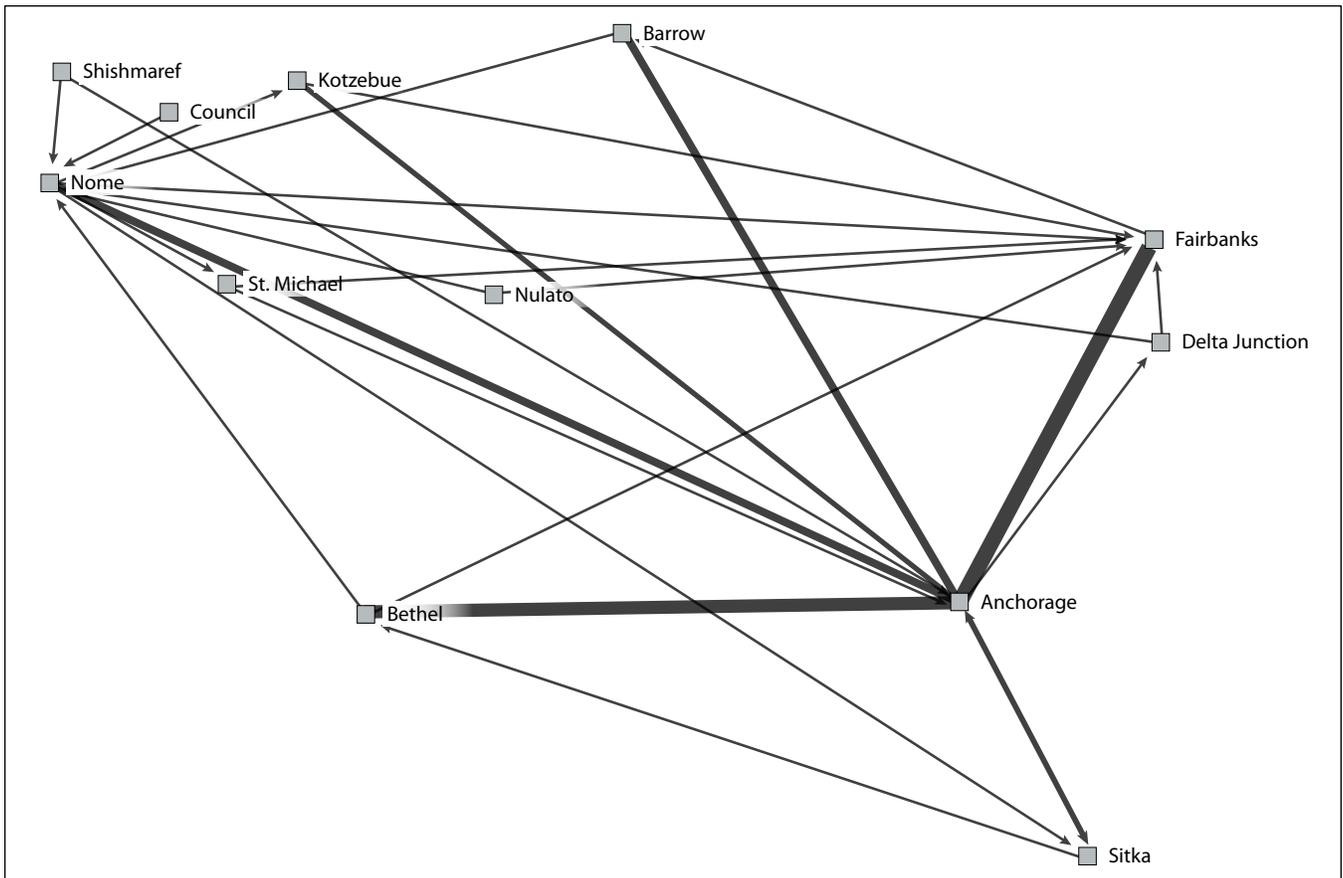


Figure 5: Ego network for the community of Nome, Alaska, ISER migration survey

tween communities. These data demonstrate strong ties between Anchorage and the Mat-Su Borough communities of Wasilla and Palmer, and other semiurban areas such as Fairbanks and Juneau. There is also significant movement from Alaska's regional hubs, such as Bethel, Nome, Barrow, and Kodiak. As elsewhere, migration in Alaska is complex, and enrollment counts and census data alone do not track return and/or circular migration effectively.

The strong relationship and movement between Anchorage and regional hub communities initiate further questions about conditions in these hub communities:

- (1) Do the data demonstrate more people moving from regional hubs as a function of higher populations in those communities?
- (2) Do people in regional hubs have more resources at their disposal that enable them to move?
- (3) Have resources and services reached maximum consumption in regional hubs?

The survey data generate a further hypothesis to examine in the context of possible population "tipping points" (i.e., number of jobs, available housing, and access to health care) for rural Alaska communities—that eventually rural communities with limited resources cannot sustain growing populations and people will be forced to move.

Figs. 4 and 5 illustrate "ego" (focal node) networks for the communities of Bethel and Nome, the moves of survey respondents in and out of these communities during their lifetimes. Because there are more small villages in the census areas of these hubs than visible here, these diagrams and associated data do not necessarily demonstrate a "step-wise" pattern of migration otherwise observable in historical census data, i.e., people using a hub community as a regional stepping stone to get to Anchorage (Howe 2009) or regional hubs acting as "way-stations" for Anchorage (Hamilton and Seyfrit 1993). Although the network data from the current study is limited in scope, Windisch-Cole (2009) did not find evidence of step-wise migration in her analysis of Alaska's rural population and school population trends.

In addition, considerably fewer respondents in the 2008 Alaska Native Policy Center survey of 1,051 attendees of the annual Alaska Federation of Natives conference reported recent moves to regional hubs than

moves to Anchorage (Alaska Native Policy Center 2009). In his study of migration using Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend data, the Alaska state demographer notes: "Anchorage was by far the primary destination from the Majority Native Areas⁴ over the 2000–2009 period" (Williams 2010:7).

As already discussed, there are regional differences to be considered as well as the economic and structural differences between communities in the same region. Further study could examine if the eventual move to Anchorage might be accelerating as the cost of living increases in hubs and as services and resources become limited. The study of migration in Alaska would benefit from further regional analysis because Alaska regions differ widely culturally, geographically, in access to resources, and in economic development. Demographic studies (Hamilton and Mitiguy 2009; Windisch-Cole 2009) demonstrate current outmigration exceeding natural increase (birth rate minus death rate) in many areas of rural Alaska. However, in some regions current birth rates are above average, such as in the Northwest Arctic Borough and the Wade Hampton Census Area, in the northern portion of the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta (Windisch-Cole 2009). Recent studies on the population dynamics of arctic communities demonstrate place-to-place variation in migration trends within the same region. The authors suggest possible differences in social networks, educational opportunities, or economic circumstances that require further elucidation through ethnographic work on the community and family levels (Hamilton and Mitiguy 2009:395).

Further regional-level or community-level studies could also illuminate how population trends interact with local social structures. For example, in their study of First Nations mobility, Cooke and Belanger (2006) draw attention to the political structure of Canadian rural communities in which powerful families often dominate local access to resources such as jobs and housing, forcing other families to move when resources are limited. The "super-household" theory (Magdanz et al. 2002; Wolfe 1987), by which certain families in Alaska Native communities lead subsistence production, is an analogous construct demonstrating local variation in political economy.

4. As defined by the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the state's "Majority Native Areas" include the North Slope Borough; the Northwest Arctic Borough; the Nome, Yukon-Koyukuk, Wade Hampton, Bethel, and Dillingham census areas; and the Lake and Peninsula Borough (southwest of Anchorage).

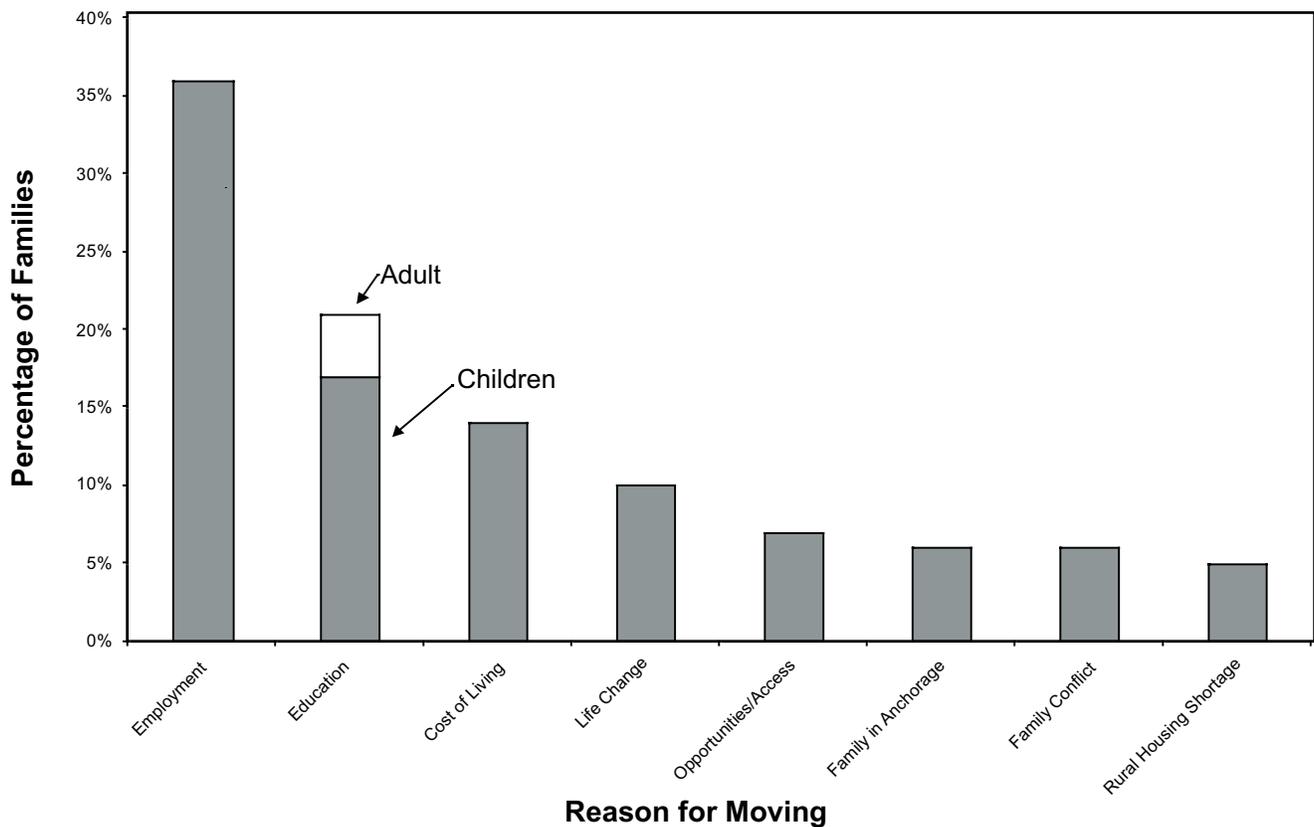


Figure 6: Reason for family move to Anchorage

WHY ARE PEOPLE MOVING?

Survey respondents most often cited the following reasons for moving to Anchorage: employment (36%), education (21%), and the rising cost of living in communities outside Anchorage (14%) (Fig. 6). Note these categories are not mutually exclusive and that respondents often offered more than one reason for moving to Anchorage.

When respondents were asked if they knew of other people from their home communities who considered moving for the same reasons, 31% indicated yes. When respondents were asked if they knew of people who were moving for different reasons, 18% said yes and provided a list of reasons, in many cases related to those already presented: commute, fuel prices, housing, kids' future, most have already moved, professional turnover, retirement, school closing, shopping, trouble with the law, and weather. The search for employment is the traditionally defined impetus for migration, but as the data in Figure 6 show, employment is only one factor in the decision to move.

For many, the reasons for and causes of migration are multiple and often noneconomic (Domina 2006; Huskey

et al. 2004; White 2009; Wilson 1994). When these multiple reasons are combined with the continuing relationship many migrants have with their home communities, migration is also necessarily complex. Martin et al. (2008) note that for Alaska, "Migration is not a one-time event." In arctic Alaska, Huskey found the number of out-migrants equaled 60–80% of in-migrants between 1995 and 2000 and therefore concurred: "migration is not one way" (Huskey 2009). Martin (2009) further stresses how the "Survey of Living Conditions in the Arctic" of 2003 found rural arctic residents returning home primarily to live near family. Particularly for men, subsistence activities and way of life in rural areas was a reason for return.

Using Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend data, the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development reports movement from Alaska's most rural or "Majority Native" areas (which include approximately 30% non-Alaska Native residents) has increased since 2004 and averaged 1,400 people in both 2008 and 2009 (Williams 2010:6). Williams qualifies these figures with others, however, which suggest there are an average of 800 return migrants per year moving back to Majority Native Areas.

Even so, Williams' study estimates a 10% net population loss between 2000 and 2009 from Majority Native Areas. Though limited in scope, the survey data from the present study demonstrate migration paradigms reflecting migratory chains (Haug 2008; Hendrix 1975; Wilson 1994) and circular migration (Howe 2009; Vertovec 2007), discussed below. Migratory chains link networks of migrants through kin or other close relationships. Circular migration implies bidirectional movement between point of origin and destination.

The Alaska Native Policy Center in Anchorage is also examining rural to urban migration among their populations, preferring to use the term "movement" rather than migration (Alaska Native Policy Center 2009), and links current trends to discourses of a historical continuum of movement among Alaska's indigenous people. This construction could have the effect of diminishing concern for the very real socioeconomic problems rural Alaskans face today, and the case for a connection between Alaska Natives' former seminomadic settlement patterns generations past seems rather tenuous at best. However, this discourse also calls attention to the cultural features of the current movement. Its circular qualities may represent a dual existence for many migrants, in effect "linking rural and urban spaces into a single formation" (Mills 2001:178), and a strategy that mitigates the effects of culture change in an urban setting.

This study demonstrates that migration is fluid in Alaska; there is a potentially evolving duality between rural and urban areas, but at present the characteristics of this duality remain largely unexplored in northern studies. While studies have focused on the reasons for the outmigration of women (Hamilton and Seyfrit 1994a, 1994b; Martin 2009) and youth aspirations (Hamilton and Seyfrit 1993; Seyfrit and Hamilton 1997), more attention could be devoted to understanding the features of migration chains and circular migration in Alaska—that is, how rural-urban connections in Alaska affect economic and cultural institutions such as livelihood strategies, localized impacts on rural development and stresses to urban areas, kinship and social networks, and, particularly

for this study, the enculturation and life-making practices of the next generation.

WHO IS MOVING?

This study includes larger communities such as Juneau in the off-road system category because of a focus here on how access to urban resources and opportunities impacts families and children. Communities like Juneau have a more ethnically heterogeneous population than those rural communities that Goldsmith et al. (2004:31; see also Huskey 2009) identify as "remote-off road system," meaning that 82% of the residents are Alaska Native or the Alaska state demographer denotes them as "Majority Native Areas" (Williams 2010), in which the average percentage of Alaska Native residents is more than 77%. Anchorage School District survey respondents for the current study (parents/guardians) self-reported 49% White/Caucasian ethnicity, 35% Alaska Native, and 4% Alaska Native and other ethnicity. The remaining 12% of respondents reported African-American (2%), Asian-American (4%), Pacific Islander (1%), Latino (3%), or Multi-Ethnic (2%) ethnicities. Although it is an oversimplification, the majority of road system families self-report a White/Caucasian ethnicity while the majority of off-road families self-report Alaska Native ethnicity.

Survey results indicate not all families surveyed were new migrants to Anchorage. The 349 respondents enrolled 407 students in Anchorage schools. Of those students, 43% moved but their families did not; 57% moved together with their families. Student movement independent of families was unanticipated in the survey design but the level of its occurrence is a key finding (Table 1). Windisch-Cole (2009) also notes that the rural school population is declining more rapidly than the overall rural population. Alaska students from study families moving alone in the 2007–2008 and 2008–2009 school years were (1) sent to Anchorage from another community in Alaska to live with family, (2) moving because of custody arrangements, (3) moving to live with Anchorage foster families, (4) previously homeschooled, or (5) transferring

Table 1: Numbers of students moving alone and reasons for new enrollment, n = 177

	Sent in to Family	Custody Arrangement	Foster Child	Previously Homeschooled	Within District Transfer	Other	Total
Number of Students	69	30	14	22	39	3	177

between schools but had originally come from an Alaska school district outside Anchorage.

The survey also revealed both children and families moving back and forth between rural communities and Anchorage, a finding also apparent in the network data in Figure 4, although the survey questions did not directly measure the characteristics of this movement. The qualitative data collected from the open-ended comment area at the end of the survey are rich in detail on this subject.

Students moving back and forth between Anchorage and a rural community are often moving between parents who are separated. One mother, for example, described how she and her son moved to Anchorage from a small Aleutians East Borough village in 2005 while the father stayed behind. The son only stayed with the mother for a short time and then returned to the Aleutians to finish the school year. In September 2006 the son again came to Anchorage and attended school in the Anchorage School District for the 2006–2007 school year. He returned to the Aleutians to attend school for 2007–2008. He again returned to Anchorage to attend middle school for the 2008–2009 school year. The mother says the son may continue spending a year with his father and then a year with her until he reaches high school, but they have not really reached a final decision yet.

The highest number of independent migrants was in the category of students being sent from another Alaska community to Anchorage to live with family (Table 1). These relatives include parents working in Anchorage, grandparents, uncles and aunts, and adult siblings. Of the 349 total parent/guardian respondents, Alaska Native respondents accounted for the most independent migrants; forty-one families reported these independent migrants as having been sent to Anchorage to live with them.

One uncle described how his niece came from a southwestern Alaska community in August of 2008 to try to go to school in Anchorage. She had previously tried attending Mount Edgecumbe, a boarding school in Sitka, but had difficulties there so she returned to her parent’s home in southwest Alaska. In September 2008 she started at Dimond High School in Anchorage, but about a month later she left because she was not able to get the academic help she needed. She has since returned to southwest Alaska to live with her parents and is attending school there.

The relatively higher numbers of Alaska Native families reporting their students in the category of “sent to family” suggests this type of movement could be prevalent among this group. Table 2 also demonstrates the highest number of independent migrants associated with self-reported White/Caucasian parents/guardians were students who were previously homeschooled. These numbers are included here should further discussion on this issue be warranted, because no comparative data exist on annual homeschoolers entering the district. Whether the numbers of previously homeschooled children represent a new trend is unknown. In many cases, however, it appears it was the child’s decision to go to public school because of the desire for more activities and opportunities, a finding that mirrors comments collected from parents and children moving to Anchorage from rural areas for the same reasons.

Ten percent of families surveyed have a student who transferred schools. These families were flagged for inclusion in this study because their children had school records transferred from other districts in the state at some time in the recent past. One eighteen-year-old student, for example, described how her mother had moved to Anchorage from a southeast Alaska community in 2002 and how she,

Table 2: Number of families reporting student movement alone, n = 160

Ethnicity of Parent or Guardian	Sent in to Family	Custody Arrangement	Foster Child	Previously Homeschooled	Within District Transfer	Other	Total
Alaska Native	41	9	7	0	15	1	73
White/Caucasian	11	12	5	20	15	1	64
African-American	0	0	0	1	2	0	3
Asian-American	2	1	0	0	1	0	4
Pacific Islander	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
Multi	4	2	1	0	3	1	11
Native American	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Latino	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
Total # Families	62	24	14	21	36	3	160

the daughter, followed her mother in 2003 while she was in middle school. The daughter started using drugs and because of resulting behavioral problems was sent to a rehabilitation center outside the state. After four months at the center, she was sent back to southeast Alaska where she lived with grandparents. She returned to Anchorage in 2005 to begin high school. She started at Service High but then transferred to East High. After 11th grade, she was again sent to drug rehabilitation for several months. She returned to East High in 2008, transferred to West High after four months, and then dropped out. She has tried the Nine Star and I Grad programs and is attempting to complete a GED while she is living on her own in “hotels” with the help of public assistance.

These within-district transfers were also included in the sample because they are important in demonstrating overall student movement; the instability of economic, home, or social life that many children appear to be facing once in the city; and the gradual movement of families to Anchorage over the last several years. The open-ended comment area of the survey reveals some new migrants moving to Anchorage and then within the city until they stabilize employment and living arrangements.

The literature on student mobility demonstrates a correlation between mobility and poverty (Kerbow 1996) and that this correlation is prevalent among certain ethnic groups and disadvantaged populations, such as African-Americans (Kerbow 1996), Native Americans and Alaska Natives (Zehr 2007), and Aboriginal Australians (Prout 2009). Research also demonstrates the numerous negative effects of high student mobility on education outcomes.

Several Alaska studies demonstrate a greater tendency in Alaska for children and young adults to move away from their home communities than other age groups (Huskey 1994, 2009; Kruse and Foster 1986; Hamilton and Seyfrit 1993, 1994a; Seyfrit and Hamilton 1997). Hamilton and Seyfrit (1993) found a greater expectation of moving among “town” children than among “village” children in Alaska, and greater expectation among town children to go to college. These findings may help explain the high level of movement from regional hubs. Studies outside of Alaska cite a positive relationship between the parents’ level of education and the likelihood a child will move (Domina 2006; Elder et al. 1996). Conger and Elder (1994) stress the lack of local jobs as the primary impetus for youth to leave their home communities. Jones (2000) suggests a culture of migration forms part of the cultural capital of families.

MIGRATION AS AN ECONOMIC STRATEGY

Results from the Anchorage School District survey suggest respondents are using migration or movement to and from Anchorage as a strategy for mitigating socioeconomic challenges they face in their home communities and in transitioning to urban life. In addition, they are providing their children with new forms of cultural capital. While the subject of internal rural-to-urban migration held sway in anthropological studies in 1960s and 1970s postcolonial contexts, it has been largely replaced by investigations of transnational migration. However, as globalized transportation and communication systems enable frequent return or circular migration in both transnational and national contexts, new social configurations and cultural interpretations arise for international and intranational migrants alike. In her study of rural-to-urban migration in Russia, White (2009:569) notes: “with regard to internal migration, transregional identity develops which is equivalent to transnational identities observable among international migrants.”

Older studies of internal migration demonstrated that (1) rural-to-urban movement was not necessarily unidirectional; (2) it did not necessarily result in “detrimentalization” in the urban setting (Kearney 1986; Ross and Weisner 1977); and (3) social networks were both created and maintained in the city and between city and home communities. These studies now undergird contemporary anthropological understandings of migration/movement as an adaptive strategy with a focus on migrant agency employed in mitigating the effects of rapid social change (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003; Goldscheider 1987; Mills 2001; White 2009). The following section addresses how the Anchorage School District survey respondents negotiate uncertainties and challenges associated with employment and housing, find adequate educational opportunities for their children, deal with the cultural transitioning issues that youth in particular face today, and maintain connections to home communities and ways of life.

URBAN HOUSING

Survey respondents moved to Anchorage for opportunities in employment and education in addition to a lower cost of living. However, a lack of affordable housing in Anchorage complicates the move for many and was survey respondents’ primary concern in response to the question,

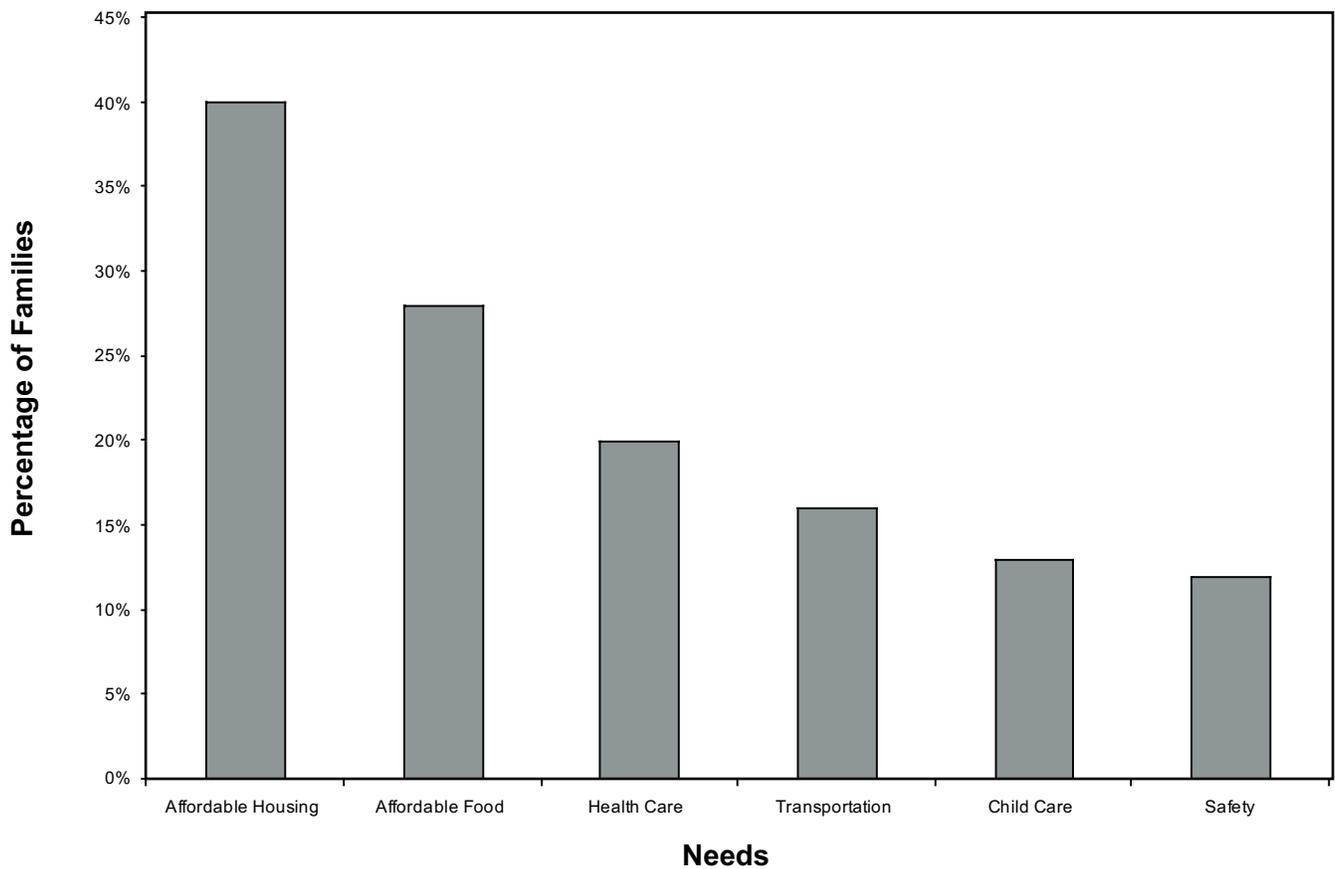


Figure 7: Families' needs in Anchorage, n = 349

“In Anchorage, I need...” with the choices employment, affordable housing, affordable food, child care, health care, transportation, or to feel safer (Fig. 7; see Appendix A).⁵ As discussed previously, some families and students continue to move around Anchorage and Anchorage schools in an effort to find the most favorable living conditions. Research demonstrates a relationship between housing instability and student mobility, low achievement scores, high dropout rates, and school instability (Crowley 2003; Hartman 2002; Nichols and Gault 2003). One Anchorage School District survey respondent who had formerly lived on the Kenai Peninsula noted:

Affordable rental housing near schools that are performing above district was very difficult to find. We are renting a house (near an excellent school) that belongs to acquaintances living elsewhere. If we need to seek another rental in the future, I expect to have a challenging search.

Many survey respondents are living in the lower income areas of Anchorage, many in trailers, and some families are

living in motels. One mother, for example, has been moving back and forth between a Northwest Arctic Borough village and Anchorage since 1993 because of the high cost of living in the village, particularly for oil and food. She noted that the village store often ran out of essential food items. She lives in a motel in Anchorage and finds work as a front desk clerk. She has been trying to save money to buy a trailer. She wanted to move out of the motel as soon as possible because she doesn't feel safe there and characterized it as “a freaky place to stay long term. The month-long people are okay but the nightly guests are scary.”

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

In conjunction with data reflecting more students moving independently and families reporting education as a reason for their move, many survey respondents voiced concern about the inadequacy of rural schools to prepare their children for the future. The following comments reflect this concern:

5. The choices here were not mutually exclusive and respondents gave multiple answers for this question.

Kids struggle to their grade level because they had poor education in [western Alaska village]. We had moved to Anchorage August 2007 for a better education for my kids. During the summer times we go back for subsistence fishing, hunting, and harvesting! Our struggle here in Anchorage is keeping our traditional values.

Schools in [Interior village] did not prepare kids for anything. In fact, the school in [Interior village] didn't even have grades. Kids in [Interior village] are not doing well. There is also a very high teacher turnover rate out there and this creates many problems. There is a general lack of education in the bush communities.

CULTURAL TRANSITIONS

Families encounter difficulties in transitioning to urban life, particularly its fast pace, and many commented on their own or their children's homesickness. Respondent comments addressing family transitions concerned finding affordable housing, traffic, loss of social networks, and lack of orientation resources for either living in the city or for children starting in a new school. The school district posed a question on the survey to measure how students were adjusting to new schools on a Likert Scale and the results were mixed: 47% of parents/guardians noted their children were adjusting "very well," 22% "well," 18% "OK," 10% "poorly," and 3% "not at all."

Students' difficulties in transitioning to new schools will be compounded by instability at home. Difficulties in transition were the most-mentioned topic in the open-ended comment area of the survey (sixty-two comments regarding children's difficulties), particularly for Alaska Native respondents and for those families with high-school-aged children. These respondents reported their children leaving Anchorage to go back to their communities after only a short time because of the hardship in transitioning due to cultural differences. The problems older students face in adjusting to the new setting are logical, because their enculturation experiences are more firmly rooted than those of younger children, added to the problem of leaving their established social networks behind (Elder et al. 1996). The following comments reflect the concerns of several different respondents about adjusting to life in Anchorage:

With more families moving here they face larger challenges. Most do not understand paying rent plus utilities. When you live in a village, people support one another and know that the family next

door will share what they have. You will not go without shelter, heat. Classrooms have friends/family that you grow up with. A peer pressure support group. When something happens to one, it happens to all. When in the city you get evicted, families don't know about food bank or are too ashamed to go. People are moving because there are no jobs, they want better education for their children. Price of travel is outrageous. The price of food is like going to a 7-11 on steroids! But what families don't see is the hardship it is on the children to take out of their environment leads to trouble with the law, drinking, smoking, using drugs and suicide.

Took 2-3 years to feel safe; older ones were scared; younger were easier, difficult with older. Coming from small schools, difficult for kids to "stick their neck out" in bigger school. Wish there were jobs in the village so I could move back.

I think all the young native kids have a chance in the city. Expect some live harder here because they miss out on the tradition and life style the elders teach them, no more native get-togethers like Eskimo dances, Christmas potlucks, native Christmas games, no more hard core basketball for students that like sports; some young girls and boys can't even join sports because it costs too much money; in the villages it's free to join sports, we can't even go to open gym evening time not like the villages. Our Eskimo food subsistence food we can't even eat them here. Most of the families end up moving back to the village due to the different living style. I even wish they had a High School here for young native boys & girls only, they would feel more comfortable and play sports like everyone else in the city and have the confidence for sports. Maybe even better education if they had High School for Natives that move from the village, they wouldn't be scared.

Culture is very exclusive and high-pressure. No one really cares about my kid or my family. She wishes she felt more welcome and more included. Wish she had more friends. School is not about helping kids just holding them to "white" standards.

My daughter couldn't adjust and didn't get help in school. She is leaving to go back to [small Bethel census area community]. East [High] is too big, too many students, not enough personal attention from teachers.

Child in school not only challenged by transition, but also limitations due to unequal education

(rural vs. urban), sociocultural changes, and unrealistic expectations. Choices do not stabilize (as an adult may have opportunity) and self-identity and worth degrade, creating emotional dysfunction and relational instabilities.

Respondent comments indicate that lack of employment and education opportunities in their home communities are driving movement to Anchorage but that transitioning to city life is difficult for many. Parents/guardians highlight challenges for both children and families involving the loss of social support and connectedness, difficulties in adjusting to bigger schools, accommodating a different lifestyle while missing cultural activities associated with home communities, and inequalities that are at once economic and cultural. They recognize that these pressures can and do result in social problems for children and their families.

Some respondents noted that a number of the new students, and particularly older students, who enrolled in 2008 had already left Anchorage to return to their communities. School district enrollments (both rural and urban) do not reflect the movement between two worlds in which Alaska children and families currently often find themselves. Migration data derived from census, vital statistics, and enrollment records do not usually account for strategic movement between rural and urban spaces that people employ to alleviate economic and cultural pressures they face during these times of economic uncertainty. Particularly compromised by the lack of affordable housing in Anchorage and difficult cultural transitions, some rural Alaskans feel trapped between a life of few opportunities in their home communities and living on the margins in the city.

CONCLUSION

Parents/guardians of students newly enrolled in the Anchorage School District were surveyed to find out whether rural Alaskans are moving to Anchorage, where they come from, and why. New students enrolling in the Anchorage School District in the 2007–2008 and 2008–2009 school years transferred in at a high rate from other state school districts that were in close proximity to Anchorage (i.e., Palmer and Wasilla) and from a wide range of off-road system communities, particularly regional hubs (i.e., Bethel and Nome).

Families are moving to Anchorage primarily for the associated reasons of employment and educational oppor-

tunities and because of the high cost of living in communities outside of Anchorage. Families are also moving to Anchorage for a general life change and for more access to the resources urban life offers, because they have family in Anchorage or have experienced family conflict in their home communities, for better health care, and because of a lack of housing in their home communities.

Considerable numbers of children are moving independently to Anchorage or around Anchorage schools. Some of this movement appears to be related to family conflict, such as divorce or separation or behavioral problems with children. Children are also being sent to family living in Anchorage for access to opportunities and a more well-rounded education. Many respondents report dissatisfaction with rural schools and worry about their children's preparation for the future.

Flexible migration strategies that often involve return or circular movement between Anchorage and home communities mitigate socioeconomic challenges rural Alaska families currently face in finding employment, adequate housing, educational opportunities, and making cultural transitions in the urban context. Older, high school-aged and Alaska Native children appear to experience the most difficulties in overcoming culture shock and fitting in with their peers at Anchorage's large schools, and parents worry about their children being academically behind their urban peers. Many of the older students do not succeed in this transition and move back to their home communities. Many children and families appear to live a dual existence between their home communities and Anchorage for many years.

Further study should include the seemingly substantial migration from regional hub communities despite those communities having developed economies, and whether the eventual move to Anchorage might be accelerating as the cost of living increases in hubs and services and resources become limited. The study of migration in Alaska would also benefit from more in-depth regional- or community-level analyses, because Alaska regions differ widely. Finally, more attention could be devoted to understanding the features of migration chains and circular migration in Alaska; that is, how rural-urban connections in Alaska affect economic and cultural institutions such as livelihood strategies, localized impacts on rural development and stresses to urban areas, kinship and social networks, and, particularly for this study, the opportunities and constraints migration places on the next generation.

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY



UAA Institute of Social and Economic Research Survey Note: \$20 Gift for Participating

1. Age _____ 2. Sex: Male Female 3. Ethnicity _____
- 4 a) Where did you live before you moved to Anchorage? 4b) What years did you live there?

5. Please list any other communities in Alaska you've lived in and the years you lived in each:

- 6 a) Your move to the Anchorage area is (check one): Permanent Temporary. 6 b) If "Temporary", how long will you stay? _____
7. Where I live right now in Anchorage, I (check one) Rent Own Stay with Family
 Stay with Friends Other _____
8. Why did you move? _____
9. Are other people planning to leave the community you moved from for the same reasons? (check one)
 Yes No I Don't Know
- 10 a) Are there other people are planning to leave for different/other reasons? Yes No I Don't Know
- 10 b) If yes, please write the reasons _____
11. Are you working in Anchorage? (check one) Yes No Looking for work
12. What is your job? _____
13. What kind of transportation are you using the most? (check one)
 My own vehicle Bus Sharing rides Walking/Bicycle Other _____
14. In Anchorage, I need (please check all that apply):
 Employment Affordable Housing Affordable Food Child Care Health Care Better Transportation
 To feel safer Other _____ None of the Above
15. a) Does/do your child(ren) feel welcome at school? Yes No I Don't Know
b) Do you feel welcome in your child's school? Yes No I Don't Know
- c) If "No" to either 15 a) or 15 b), please explain: _____
- 16 a) Please rate how your child (ren) is/are adjusting to the new school? (please circle one)
 Very well Well OK Poorly Not at all
- 16 b) If "Poorly" or "Not at All", please explain _____
- 17 a) Do you think your child (ren) is/are receiving the help he/she needs to be successful in school?
 Yes No I Don't Know. 17 b) If "No", please tell us
why _____

Over Please

