

Commutes Across Alaska Are Common

Alaska has more intrastate commuters than most states

By ROB KREIGER

Like a lot of things in Alaska, our work commutes can be extreme. More than 2,500 people who live in the Matanuska-Susitna borough, for example, “commute” about 500 miles to work in the North Slope Borough for shifts lasting a week or more. More similar to Lower 48 commuters are the nearly 13,000 Mat-Su residents who drive to Anchorage to work every day.

Setting aside all the nonresidents who work in Alaska — about 20 percent of all workers in Alaska — this article focuses on intrastate commuting by Alaska residents. Much of that commuting occurs because of the combination of high-wage industries and remote work sites, such as the North Slope oil fields or the hard rock mining that takes place far from population centers. Other industries with highly seasonal work, such as seafood processing and tourism, also depend on other parts of the state to provide at least some of their workers during peak months.

Most do live where they work

In nearly all of Alaska’s boroughs and census areas, the vast majority of those who live there also work there. This is particularly true in larger cities not associated with highly seasonal industries and in smaller areas without much fishing or tourism. (See Exhibit 1.)

Of the 322,134 resident workers in 2017, 85 percent lived in the area where they worked. Kodiak, Sitka, and Prince of Wales-Hyder had the highest percentages of local workers. Working Alaskans in these areas as well as in Kenai, Juneau, and Wrangell were all over 90 percent local.

Sitka and Prince of Wales-Hyder both have high percentages of locals working in local government, and employ few Alaskans from elsewhere. Kodiak is somewhat unusual in that its seafood processing, an industry that typically draws in workers from around the state,

1 Percent of Alaskan Workers Who Are Locals, By Area

ALASKA, 2017

Borough or Census Area	Resident Workers Who Are Local
Kodiak Island Borough	93.1%
Sitka, City and Borough	92.8%
Prince of Wales-Hyder Census Area	92.8%
Kenai Peninsula Borough	92.3%
Juneau, City and Borough	91.5%
Wrangell, City and Borough	90.2%
Kusilvak Census Area	89.8%
Matanuska-Susitna Borough	89.5%
Petersburg Borough	88.9%
Ketchikan Gateway Borough	87.9%
Nome Census Area	87.9%
Hoonah-Angoon Census Area	87.5%
Anchorage, Municipality	87.5%
Haines Borough	86.9%
Bethel Census Area	86.9%
Fairbanks North Star Borough	86.4%
Skagway, Municipality	84.5%
Yakutat, City and Borough	83.7%
Dillingham Census Area	83.5%
Aleutians West Census Area	82.6%
Northwest Arctic Borough	79.3%
Valdez-Cordova Census Area	78.8%
Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area	77.8%
Lake and Peninsula Borough	74.1%
Aleutians East Borough	69.2%
Southeast Fairbanks Census Area	68.9%
Denali Borough	47.7%
Bristol Bay Borough	42.6%
North Slope Borough	29.1%

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

employs mostly locals and provides year-round jobs. About a quarter of all Kodiak residents work in seafood processing there, and few Alaskans commute in from elsewhere.

2

Where People Work, by Area of Residence

ALASKA, 2018

Place of Residence	Place of Work												
	Aleutians East	Aleutians West	Anchorage	Bethel	Bristol Bay	Denali	Dillingham	Fbks N Star	Haines	Hoonah-Angoon	Juneau	Kenai Pen	
Aleutians E	780	4	14	0	4	0	1	1	0	0	1	2	
Aleutians W	42	1,950	37	0	5	1	1	3	1	0	0	1	
Anchorage	173	203	121,879	390	225	253	155	2,455	26	9	341	923	
Bethel	4	1	184	7,935	37	5	63	31	0	0	7	19	
Bristol Bay	0	1	19	2	353	0	16	0	0	0	2	2	
Denali	1	3	21	1	0	624	0	73	1	0	3	1	
Dillingham	0	0	72	8	14	0	2,034	10	2	0	1	4	
Fbks N Star	7	12	1,627	50	19	181	11	33,687	5	4	88	113	
Haines	0	0	15	0	0	2	0	8	832	23	95	4	
Hoonah-Angoon	0	0	12	2	0	2	0	8	18	727	92	1	
Juneau	14	15	335	8	6	4	6	323	23	43	15,021	23	
Kenai Pen	21	28	1,340	56	22	29	19	487	6	1	143	19,997	
Ketchikan	2	4	58	5	6	1	1	15	1	2	159	13	
Kodiak	8	21	135	10	45	3	4	13	3	2	31	37	
Kusilvak	2	3	111	424	4	7	33	19	2	1	3	14	
Lake and Pen	17	3	39	0	17	1	25	1	1	0	1	13	
Mat-Su	35	93	12,757	172	54	153	56	1,140	11	2	159	384	
Nome	2	2	68	8	0	1	1	19	0	0	1	13	
N Slope	1	1	34	15	0	1	0	22	0	0	2	4	
NW Arctic	1	1	69	6	0	0	0	13	0	0	3	9	
Petersburg	1	2	10	0	1	0	1	10	2	1	40	0	
POW-Hyder	1	1	37	6	4	0	1	8	5	5	66	3	
Sitka	1	1	44	4	2	2	1	19	4	7	81	11	
Skagway	0	1	7	1	5	3	0	3	4	0	14	1	
SE Fairbanks	1	3	120	4	1	10	0	313	1	2	9	4	
Valdez-Cordova	10	2	223	5	1	3	5	112	4	0	22	64	
Wrangell	2	2	8	0	2	2	2	6	4	2	30	3	
Yakutat	0	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	5	0	
Yukon-Koyukuk	1	3	61	20	1	21	1	210	0	0	3	10	
Total	1,127	2,361	139,340	9,132	828	1,309	2,437	39,009	957	831	16,423	21,673	

Notes: We determined Alaska residency by matching the Alaska Department of Revenue Permanent Fund Dividend applicant file with the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development wage file, which has information on workers covered by unemployment insurance in Alaska. Workers in the wage file were considered Alaska residents if they applied for a 2017 or 2018 PFD. "Place of work" is as reported by employers on their quarterly unemployment insurance contribution reports. "Place of residence" is based on the address applicants provided on their PFD applications.

Locals the minority in North Slope, Bristol Bay, and Kenai

Areas with more people commuting in than local workers aren't the norm, but a few places are notable. (See Exhibit 2.) In the North Slope Borough, 70 percent of the Alaskans working there come from another borough or census area. This is due to the oil and gas industry, which attracts Alaskans from all over the state to its high-paying jobs on the Slope.

Most Alaskans who work on the North Slope come from Anchorage (25 percent), followed by Mat-Su (22 percent). Kenai and Fairbanks combined account for another 20 percent. In contrast, only 3 percent of North Slope Borough residents travel outside the borough for work, although few work in the local oil and gas industry.

Although many Slope workers are from Anchorage, they represent just a small portion of Anchorage's working

residents at 2.2 percent. Mat-Su and Kenai both send about 6 percent of their workers to the North Slope.

Workers from other places in Alaska also make up the majority of the Bristol Bay and Denali boroughs' resident workforces. Highly seasonal seafood processing and tourism, combined with small pools of local workers that can't meet demand, drive the need for nonlocal labor. These two areas also have the highest percentages of workers who come from outside the state.

Mat-Su residents most likely to leave borough for work

The Anchorage/Mat-Su commute is probably the closest thing to a traditional commute in Alaska. Nearly a third of Mat-Su residents drive to Anchorage each day (see Exhibit 3), about an hour-and-a-half round trip for most, to make higher wages in the city while benefitting from

Place of Work

Ktn	Kodiak	Kusilvak	Lake and Pen	Mat-Su	Nome	North Slope	NW Arctic	Peter-sburg	POW-Hyder	Sitka	Skagwy	SE Fbks	Valdez-Cordova	Wrangell	Yakutat	Y-K	Total
1	3	1	0	1	0	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	822
1	2	0	0	12	1	5	0	0	2	4	0	0	9	0	0	1	2,078
93	195	102	87	2,133	205	2,976	326	14	32	75	15	78	433	7	19	132	133,954
1	5	69	2	15	4	17	9	0	1	6	1	0	1	0	0	19	8,436
0	2	1	20	2	1	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	425
0	0	1	0	32	1	12	1	0	0	1	0	1	4	0	0	25	806
1	0	3	12	5	5	25	4	0	0	2	0	1	3	0	0	11	2,217
10	31	26	13	167	45	739	59	3	7	10	7	578	120	5	1	289	37,914
6	1	0	0	3	0	5	0	4	6	6	13	1	1	1	0	1	1,027
5	0	0	0	2	0	4	1	3	1	21	2	1	0	3	1	1	907
76	11	4	4	29	4	34	7	14	17	58	18	8	15	11	9	5	16,145
14	57	27	30	211	25	1,528	65	4	10	10	5	15	121	0	5	32	24,308
6,025	2	1	1	27	123	13	6	8	65	14	4	1	11	10	0	0	6,578
1	5,400	0	13	16	5	15	3	1	1	10	0	2	19	3	3	1	5,805
0	3	3,110	2	4	10	6	3	0	0	1	0	3	2	0	1	16	3,784
0	1	1	669	7	0	24	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	824
198	65	65	42	24,315	90	2,568	195	5	8	13	12	61	224	2	3	78	42,960
0	1	13	0	13	4,378	15	18	0	1	4	0	3	1	1	0	8	4,571
0	2	5	1	0	7	3,412	13	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	3,522
0	1	0	1	3	36	74	2,848	0	0	2	0	1	1	0	0	16	3,085
13	3	0	0	2	1	3	0	1,120	4	8	2	0	6	23	1	0	1,254
203	4	3	1	5	21	18	3	63	2,228	25	8	1	1	7	1	1	2,730
12	2	3	0	9	3	9	5	11	2	3,695	2	0	4	4	1	2	3,941
1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	502	0	1	0	0	0	544
4	1	2	0	94	3	51	4	1	2	0	1	1,821	14	0	0	22	2,488
162	6	7	1	48	6	64	12	2	1	2	1	31	3,758	3	2	6	4,563
23	1	1	1	6	2	11	6	6	11	8	1	0	6	749	0	0	895
1	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	3	0	0	1	0	241	0	261
1	2	17	3	14	2	70	5	0	0	0	0	36	7	0	0	2,338	2,826
6,852	5,801	3,462	903	27,175	4,981	11,705	3,593	1,260	2,401	3,980	594	2,643	4,769	830	288	3,006	319,670

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

lower living costs locally. Only 56 percent of Mat-Su workers work in Mat-Su, by far the lowest percentage in the state. The next lowest is 73 percent in the Southeast Fairbanks Census Area, where many workers commute to Fairbanks.

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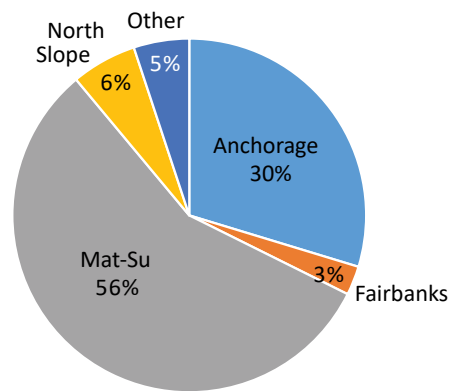
About the data

All workers in this article are Alaska residents. While nonresidents make up a significant and important percentage of Alaska's workforce, they are not part of this analysis.

We identified Alaska residents using a combination of wage records and Permanent Fund Dividend applications. If a worker earned wages and applied for a Permanent Fund Dividend in 2017 or 2018, we considered that person a resident for this analysis.

3 Where Mat-Su Residents Work

ALASKA, 2017



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section