

Trends in the school-age population

How Alaska's 5-to-17 age group has grown and changed over time

By ERIC SANDBERG

School-age children make up about 18 percent of Alaska today, down from a peak of 29.2 percent in 1970.

The growth pattern for the population ages 5 to 17 changed markedly at the turn of this century after 50 years of strong growth, stalling due to lower birth rates, smaller successive generations, and negative net migration. From 1950 to 2000, the age group grew by more than 500 percent as the state transformed from a small population that was disproportionately unmarried young men to a larger state with more families.

It's important to note that this analysis is based on age rather than school enrollment, and while this article refers to "kids" or "children" for simplicity, it does not include children younger than 5.

How Alaska's school-age population changed with time

In the first half of the 20th century, the total and school-age populations in Alaska were both

Children aren't always in school

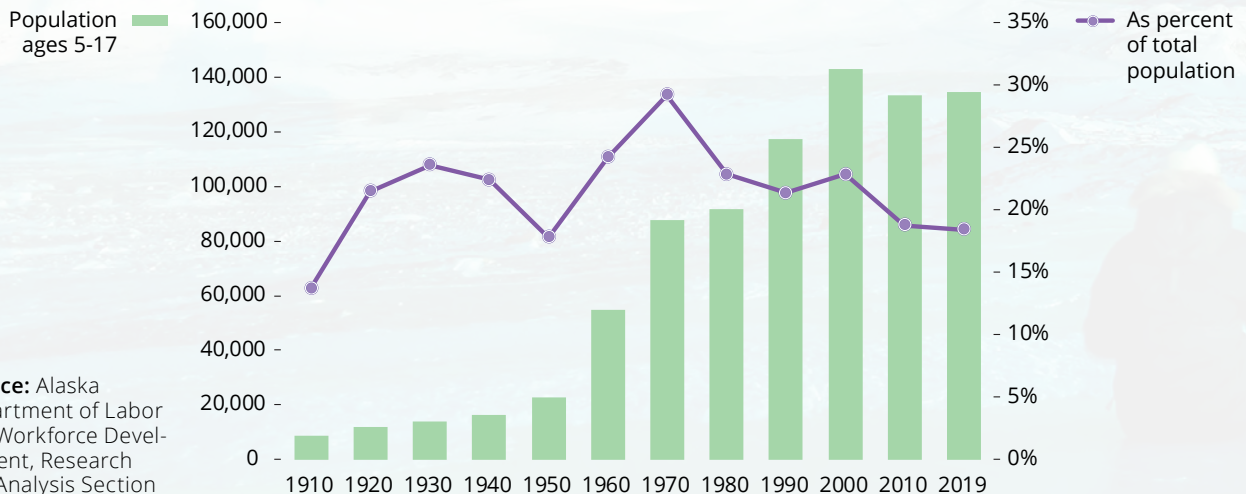
This article focuses on age, not school enrollment. While most kids between 5 and 17 are in school, this is not always the case — especially historically. In more remote parts of Alaska, educational access has at times been limited or restricted, and in the early 20th century, it was common even for those with access to education to discontinue after eighth grade. Today, some children in this age range are home-schooled or drop out before age 18.

relatively small. Before the 1950s, Alaska had fewer than 20,000 kids, although in 1930 that represented nearly a quarter of the population.

After World War II, the number of children began to climb as the baby boomers entered that age demographic. Between 1950 and 1970, the number of Alaskans between 5 and 17 rose from fewer than 23,000 to nearly 88,000, reaching a peak of just over 29 percent of the state's population.

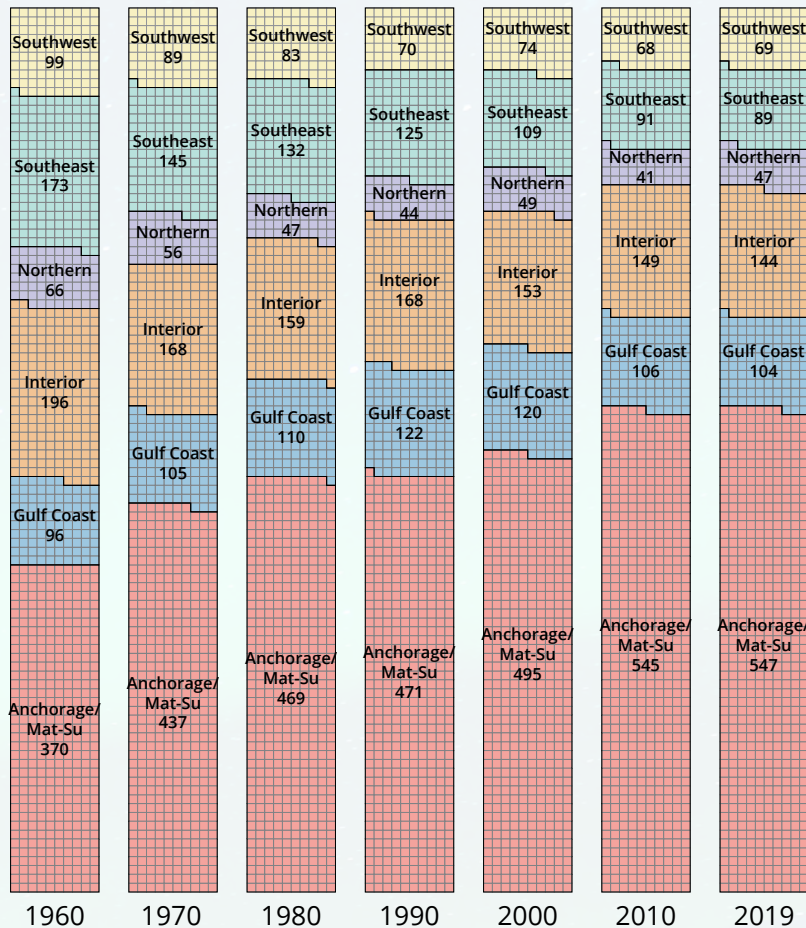
At that point, as the number of adults began to grow, the school-age group declined as a share of the total

School-age children have become a smaller share of the population



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

Where school-age children have lived, per 1,000, since 1960



The numbers show how many of every 1,000 school-age kids in Alaska that year lived in that region.

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

population but continued to increase in number through the 1980s and 1990s. Much of that growth was the large cohort of “echo boomers”: baby boomers’ children born during Alaska’s birth surge in the early-to-mid-1980s. Numerically, the school-age population peaked in 1998 at more than 143,000.

After 1998, the large group of echo boomers aged out of the bracket, and the subsequent group of children was smaller. The school-age population declined each successive year throughout the 2000s, bottoming out at around 133,000 in 2009.

While the group’s numbers ticked up slightly during the first half of the 2010s, peaking at 136,331 in 2017, they have been on the decline since, along with the total population. In 2019, the age group dropped below 135,000.

Regionally, Anchorage/Mat-Su’s share has been on a long rise

The geographic distribution of Alaska’s kids has

mirrored that of the rest of the population, with the Anchorage/Matanuska-Susitna Region growing disproportionately since statehood.

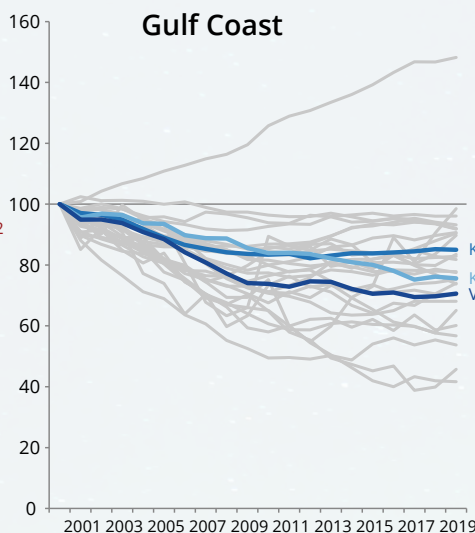
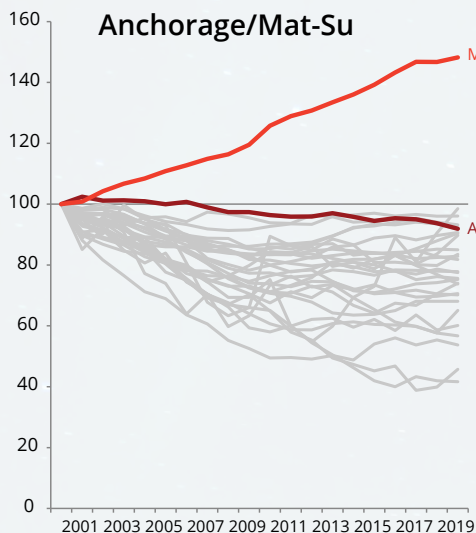
The chart above shows the regions where Alaska’s school-age kids have lived, per 1,000, since 1960. That year, 370 out of every 1,000 kids lived in Anchorage/Mat-Su, a number that shot up to 469 by 1980 and passed the 500 mark in the first decade of the 2000s.

During the second half of the 20th century, Anchorage/Mat-Su had a smaller share of the state’s school-age population than it did the total population, but that flipped during the 2000s. This was because the numbers of school-age kids declined in every part of the state while continuing to grow, albeit slowly, in Anchorage and Mat-Su.

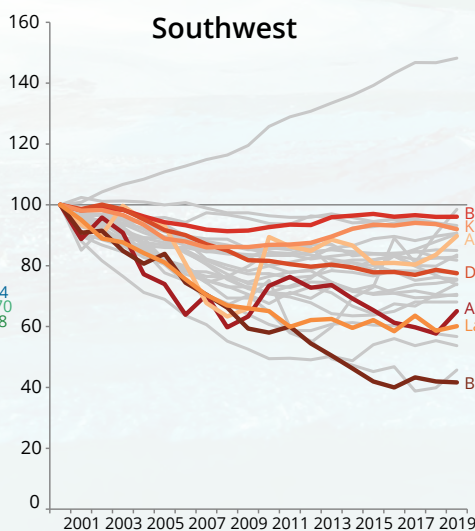
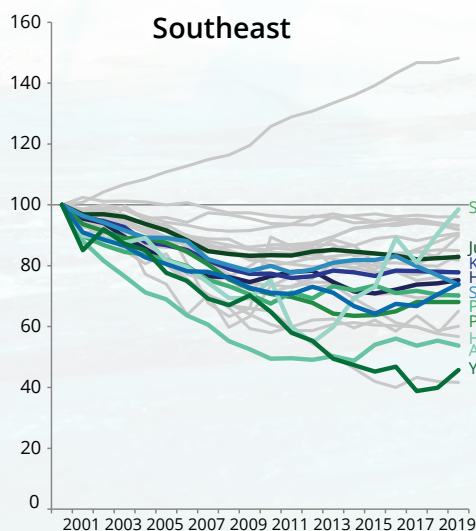
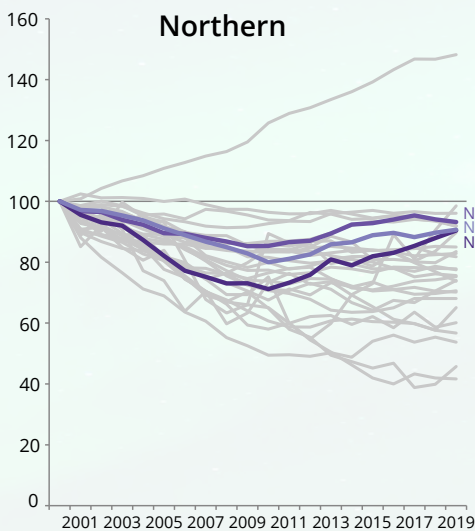
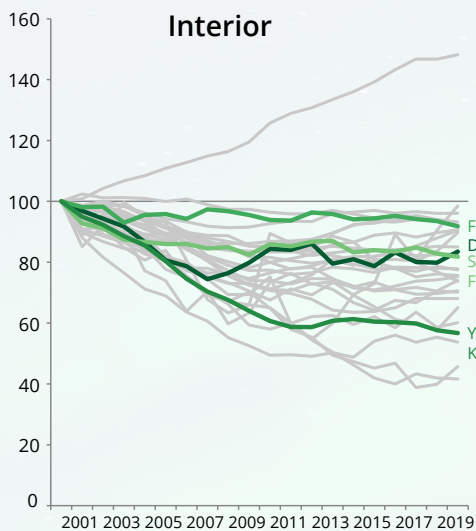
The other regions have shrunk proportionately, with the largest decline in Southeast. In 1960, 173 out of every 1,000 school-age kids in Alaska lived in Southeast. That has declined every decade since, to 89.

The decline in the Interior has been slower and less steady. The Interior’s share fell from 196 out of every

How school-age populations have changed by area since 2000

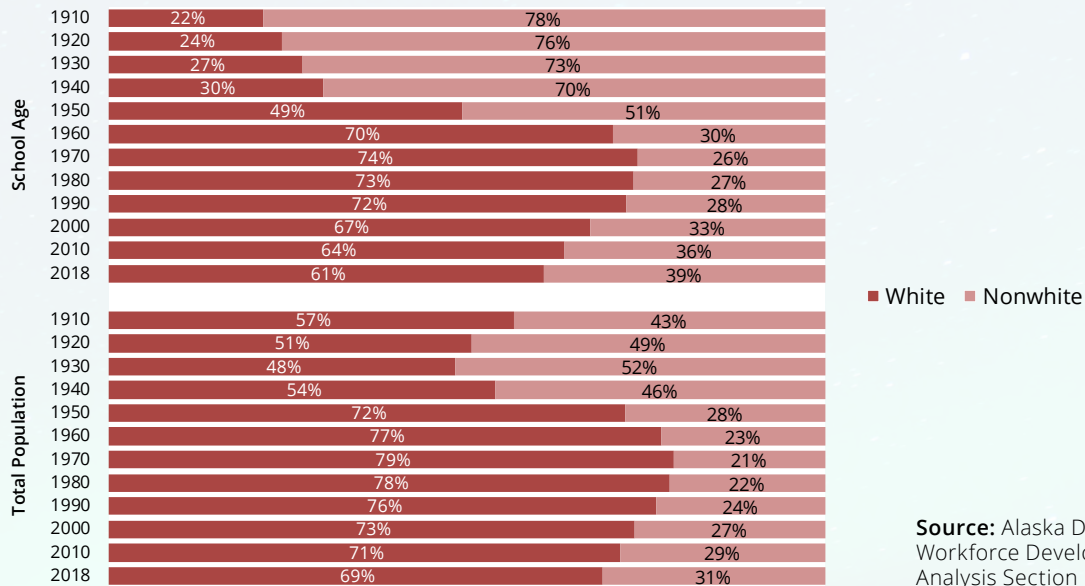


Each area's 2000 population is set at 100 to allow comparison, and the lines show their relative change.



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

The white/nonwhite gap in Alaska has been closing in recent decades



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

1,000 to 159 between 1960 and 1980, grew to 168 by 1990, then dropped below 150 in the past decade.

The Gulf Coast is the only region besides Mat-Su with a higher share of Alaska’s kids now than in 1960, but it too has seen declines since the 1990s, when it surpassed Southeast as the third-largest region.

The Southwest and Northern regions’ numbers have dropped steadily throughout the decades, but their higher birth rates and younger populations have kept these regions’ shares of children above the statewide percentage.

Nearly all boroughs or census areas have seen declines since 2000

Looking closer geographically shows most boroughs and census areas have lost school-age kids since 2000. The graphs on the previous page show borough-level change over time by setting each area’s 2000 population at 100, to allow comparison. Because the 2000 Census came soon after the peak in 1998, all but one area has seen loss since then.

Only the Matanuska-Susitna Borough had a larger school-age population in 2019 than in 2000, with 48 percent growth over that time.

In Anchorage, the child population grew slightly in the early 2000s before dropping below its 2000 level in 2007. After that, Anchorage’s school-age group hovered around 96 percent of its 2000 level until the last two years, when it dropped to 92 percent.

Within the Gulf Coast, the school age populations in the Kenai Peninsula Borough and Valdez-Cordova Census Area both dropped quickly in the early 2000s before leveling off at around 85 and 71 percent of their 2000 Census numbers, respectively. Kodiak’s decline was slower but continued through the 2010s, reaching a 2019 school-age population that was 76 percent of its 2000 level.

Fairbanks is the only part of the Interior whose school-age population remains over 90 percent of what it was in 2000. The Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area is at just 57 percent.

Seven out of 10 boroughs in Southeast have school-age populations that are 75 percent or less of their 2000 size. For several, the declines came in the first decade of the 2000s and the numbers have risen slightly since. The outlier is Skagway, where the child population has nearly recovered its 2000 level.

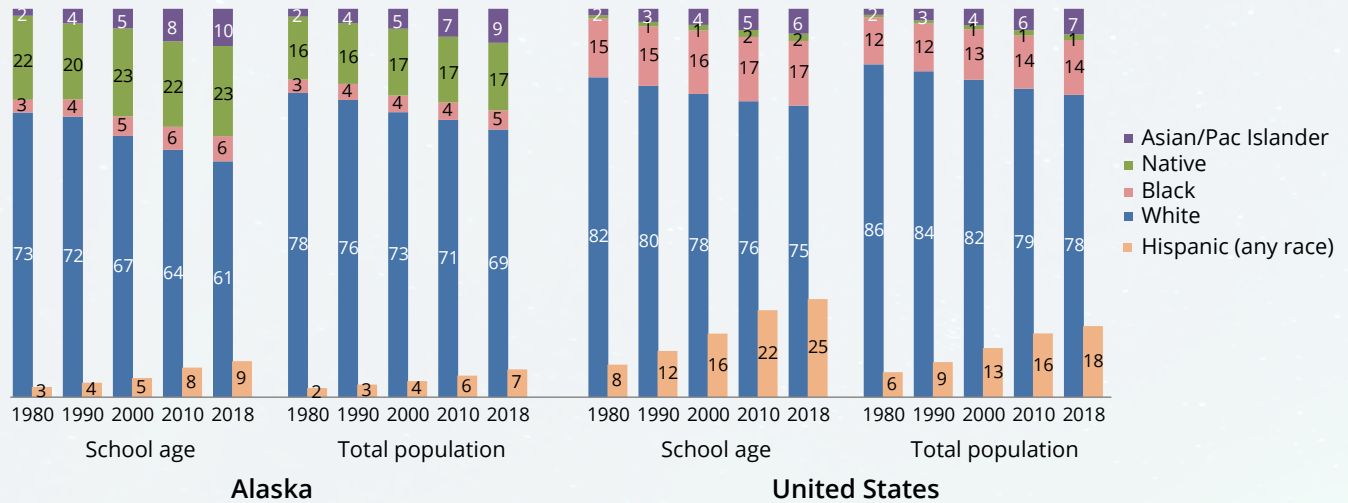
In Southwest, several areas have recovered to 90 percent or more of their 2000 levels, but other parts of the region are way down. Bristol Bay Borough’s loss has been steepest; it has just 42 percent of the kids it had 19 years ago.

All three northern boroughs now have growing school-age populations after dropping from 2000 to around 2010.

Diversity is increasing among kids

Race data clearly show increasing diversity among

How Alaska's racial makeup compares to the U.S., for kids and overall



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

school-age kids in Alaska and in the overall population, but the way people self-report their race and the available categories have changed over time, making the data harder to interpret. To make data more comparable, the graphs on the previous page show “bridged race estimates” of what people would have picked if they’d had only four categories to choose from. Before 2000, census forms only allowed respondents to pick one race.

During the first half of the 20th century, Alaska’s school-age population was over 70 percent non-white — mainly Alaska Native — although many weren’t enrolled in school because of a lack of opportunity or discrimination. Alaska’s non-Native population at that time was mainly adult men, so there was a large gap between the racial makeups of kids and adults.

World War II, the beginning of the Cold War, increased military spending, and the surrounding population growth reshaped the population. Many newcomers brought children or started families in Alaska, which reversed the ratio between 1940 and 1960 from 30 percent white to 70 percent white. In the 1970 Census, before the pipeline was built, Alaska’s total and school-age populations peaked at 74 percent and 79 percent white, respectively.

The white share has declined somewhat among children in recent decades after remaining about the same throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Between 1990 and 2018, the percentage of kids who were not white rose from 28 percent to 39 percent. That change was larger than for the total population, which shifted from 24 percent nonwhite to 31

percent. The racial gap between kids and adults, now 8 percent, is the largest it’s been since the 1950s.

The chart above shows more detailed race data, using bridged estimates, and comparable U.S. numbers to show how we compare. The Hispanic shares are shown separately because on census forms, Hispanic is an ethnicity rather than a race. People of any race can be Hispanic.

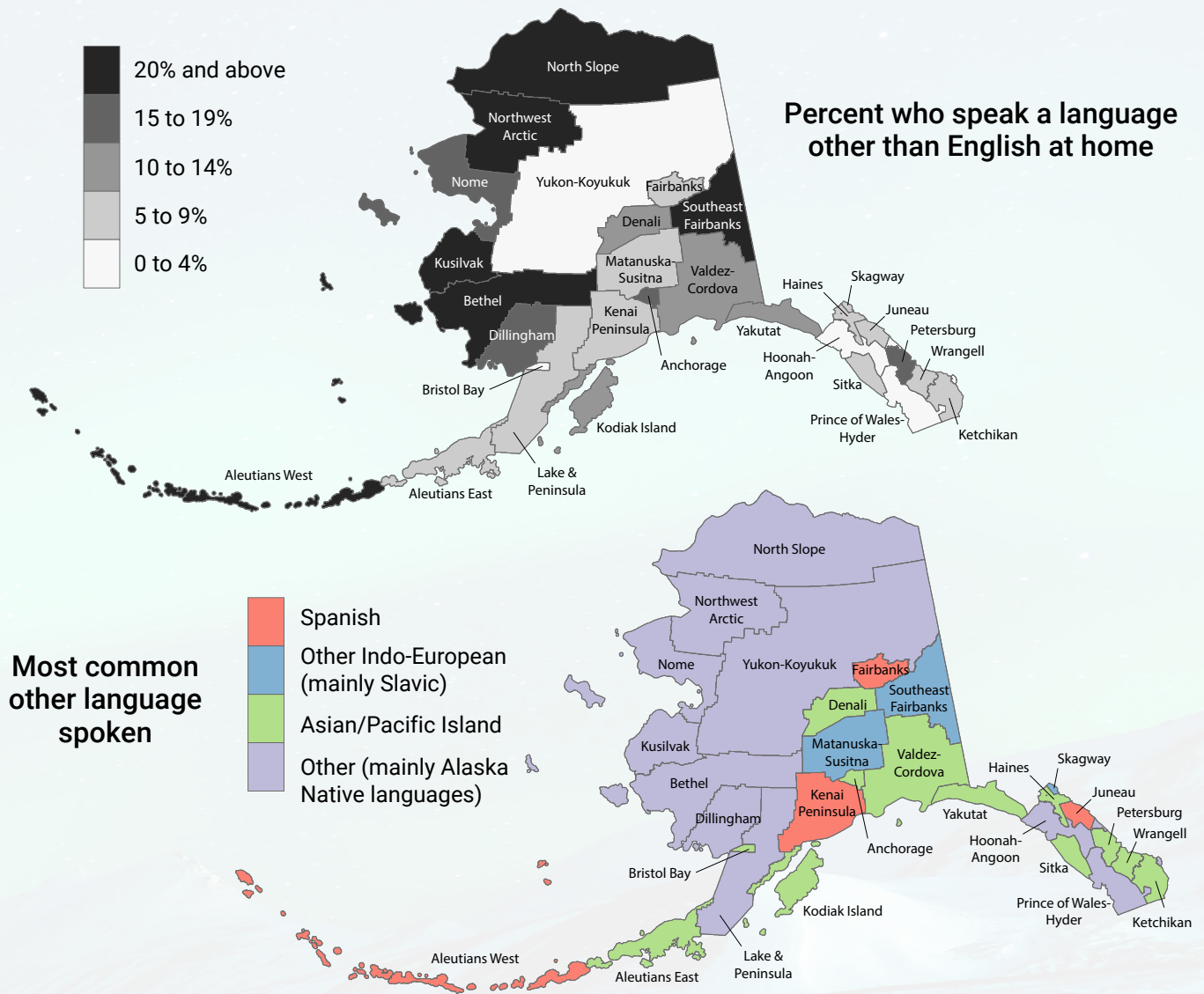
Alaska’s school-age population is considerably less white than that of the nation. As mentioned earlier, Alaska’s school age population is now about 61 percent white, and for the nation it’s 75 percent. The gap has grown over time, from 9 percent to 14 percent between 1980 and 2018.

The percentage of kids who are Alaska Native has remained about the same since 1980 (22 percent to 23 percent). Because Natives tend to be younger and have larger families than other racial groups, their percentage of the school-age population is higher than their total percentage of 17 percent. Nationally, Native Americans make up only about 2 percent of this age group.

The percentage of Asians/Pacific Islanders has grown the most in Alaska since 1980, from about 2 percent of school-age kids to 10 percent. Asians and Pacific Islanders make up a larger share in Alaska than they do nationwide (6 percent in 2018).

The percentage of children who are black has doubled in Alaska since 1980, from 3 to 6 percent, but is far smaller than it is nationally (17 percent). It’s a similar story with Hispanic kids in Alaska, whose

Where Alaska's children speak other languages at home



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

share has tripled from 3 to 9 percent, but they make up a quarter of school-age kids nationwide.

About 14 percent of Alaska kids speak a different language at home

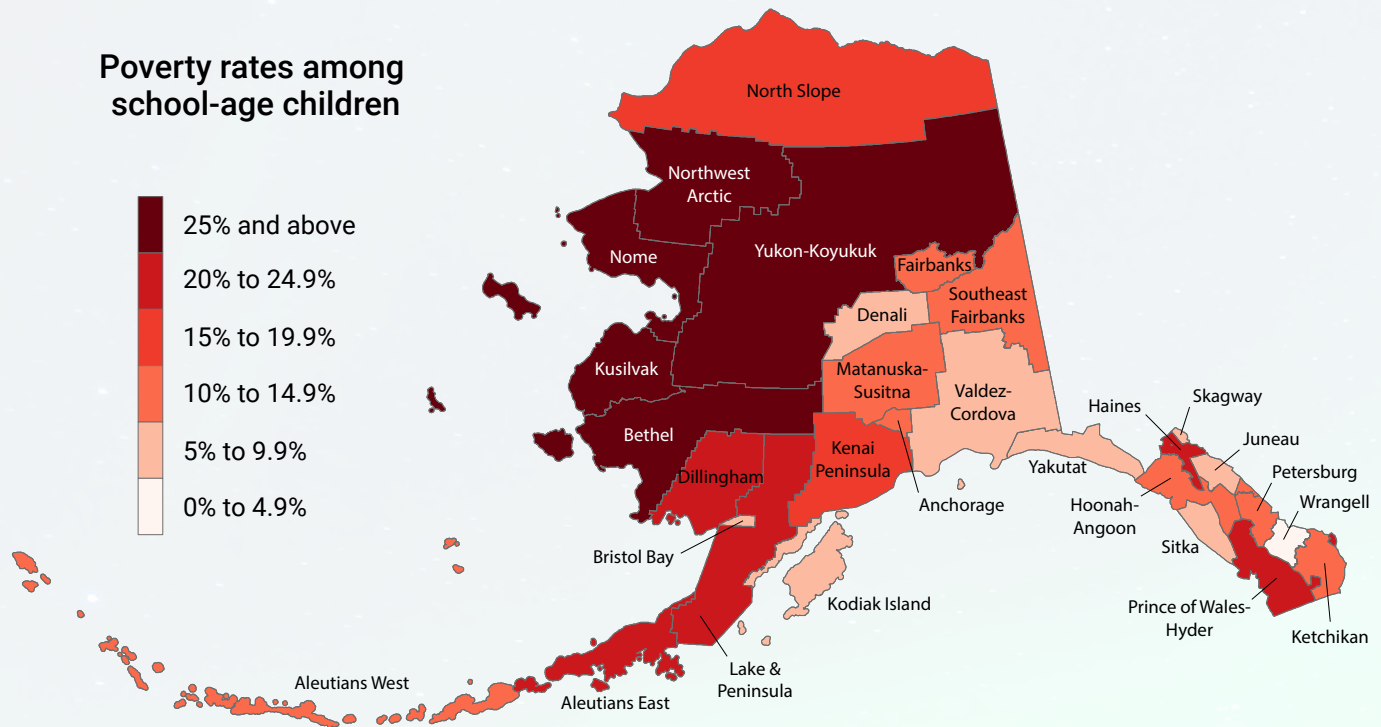
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Around 14 percent of school-age children speak a language other than English at home. The maps above show the percentages of kids in each borough and census area who mainly speak another language at home and their most common language family. Alaska Native languages are classified as "other" in the Census Bureau's four-category breakdown.

The highest rates are mostly in western Alaska, and only the Bethel Census Area has a majority who speak another language at home (53 percent). Other areas with high percentages include Aleutians West (42 percent), North Slope (25 percent), Northwest Arctic (25 percent), and Kusilvak (20 percent). Outside western Alaska, the Southeast Fairbanks Census Area has the highest rate, at 29 percent.

In areas that are majority Alaska Native, the "other" category is by far the largest, but it's mixed in the rest of the state. Spanish is most common in three of the five most populous boroughs and in Aleutians West. Asian or Pacific Island languages are most common in Anchorage and 11 other boroughs and

School-age children's poverty rates vary by Alaska area



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

census areas. In Southeast Fairbanks and Mat-Su, large Slavic populations account for “Other Indo-European” as the largest category.

Most of these children speak English, too, and at a much higher rate than the rest of the population. Of the kids who don't primarily speak English at home, 93 percent speak English “well” or “very well.” It's 91 percent for the comparable 18-to-64-year-old population and 74 percent for those 65 and older.

Just 0.5 percent of these kids don't speak any English, versus 1 percent for the corresponding working-age population and 7 percent for seniors.

Poverty rates vary widely, are highest in western Alaska

Measuring poverty among school-age children is tricky because the group typically isn't earning income. The U.S. Census Bureau releases poverty statistics for kids who are in families that fall below the poverty line. That determination is based on the family's total income, size, and number of children under 18.

Another limitation of poverty thresholds is they don't vary geographically, so they don't take living costs or other regional factors into account. This means the poverty line is the same in Alaska as in Missouri, for example, and poverty in higher-cost areas like Alaska is likely higher in reality than it appears.

In Alaska, about 15 percent of school-age children live in a home that falls below the federal poverty level, which is lower than the national average of 19 percent. However, kids' poverty levels are higher than for the total population, both in Alaska and nationwide.

Child poverty is highest in rural and western Alaska, as the map above shows. In the Kusilvak Census Area, 45 percent of school age children live below the poverty line. Bethel and Yukon-Koyukuk are at 33 and 31 percent, respectively, and Nome and the Northwest Arctic are also above 25 percent. Many of the lowest child poverty levels are in small boroughs. Wrangell and Skagway are both around 5 percent, and the Bristol Bay Borough is just under 7 percent.

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