

Homelessness, Alcoholism, and Ethnic Discrimination among Alaska Natives

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ABSTRACT. Homelessness among Alaska Natives is a social problem that currently plagues Anchorage, probably owing especially to the rapid social changes in rural Alaska following World War II. This study suggests that some Alaska Natives may be predisposed to homelessness after they have experienced relocation or social disruption during their high school years or problem drinking in their family of origin. A culture of poverty now appears to be reproducing itself in greater numbers than during the 1970s, when Alaska Native urban migrants were first studied. This subcultural context also appears to be reinforced by alcoholism and to a certain extent by ethnic discrimination, particularly in high school during adolescence and in the workplace during adulthood. *Feeling discriminated against seems to foster anger, frustration, and self-blame among homeless Alaska Natives, who often come to see themselves as outcasts within the urban centers far from their homeland.*

Key words: homelessness, culture of poverty, alcoholism, discrimination, Alaska Natives

RÉSUMÉ. Dans la population autochtone de l'Alaska, les sans-abri constituent un problème social qui afflige actuellement Anchorage, et qui est probablement dû surtout à des changements sociaux rapides dans l'Alaska rural à la suite de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. Cette étude suggère que certains autochtones de l'Alaska pourraient avoir une prédisposition à l'itinérance, après avoir fait l'expérience d'un déplacement ou d'un changement social au cours de leurs années de secondaire deuxième cycle, ou bien après avoir vécu le problème de l'alcoolisme dans leur famille d'origine. Il semble qu'une « culture de la pauvreté » se reproduise maintenant d'elle-même et atteigne plus d'individus que durant les années 70, quand débuta l'étude portant sur les « immigrants urbains » autochtones de l'Alaska. Il semble aussi que l'alcoolisme et, dans une certaine mesure, la discrimination ethnique viennent renforcer ce contexte de sous-culture, en particulier au cours des années de secondaire deuxième cycle durant l'adolescence ainsi que dans le monde du travail au cours de la vie adulte. Il semble que la discrimination ressentie par les autochtones alaskiens sans-abri suscite leur colère, frustration et auto-culpabilité; dans les centres urbains situés loin de leur terre natale, ils en viennent souvent ainsi à se percevoir comme « rejetés ».

Mots clés: itinérance, culture de la pauvreté, alcoolisme, discrimination, autochtones alaskiens

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INTRODUCTION

Although earlier ethnographies on the homeless have focused on cycles of poverty, alcoholism, and incarceration among street people (Wiseman, 1970; Spradley, 1970), only a few sociologists have devoted their attention to the role ethnic discrimination plays on the thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and world views of the homeless (Blake and Abbott, 1989; La Gory *et al.*, 1990; Rossi, 1989). This study discusses the adverse effects of ethnic discrimination and its connection with being homeless and being a problem drinker among Alaska Natives in Anchorage.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Field work was conducted in Anchorage among homeless Alaska Natives in March 1990. Elaine Christian, a clinical social worker, and I were able to interview 76 homeless Alaska Natives who frequent Bean's Cafe, a soup kitchen in the poorer section of Anchorage. Using average number of meals served for lunch and surveys conducted at Bean's Cafe on the ethnic origin of the homeless, it is estimated that we interviewed about 60% of homeless Alaska Natives who frequent this soup kitchen.

Two social workers at Bean's Cafe, Barbara Bennett and Paul Schwartz, were asked to select interested homeless people for this study on the basis of four factors: 1) respondents must be Alaska Natives; 2) respondents must be sober on the day of the interview, or they would have to wait until they sobered up; 3) respondents must be between the ages of 18 and 54 years old; and 4) respondents must not be suffering from gross psychosis or severe mental illness. Respondents were paid \$5 for participating in the study and all were personally interviewed in a confidential setting at

Brother Francis Shelter during afternoons only. The author personally interviewed about 75% of the homeless himself.

The nonrespondents at Bean's Cafe were likely to be either unable to maintain sobriety during the two weeks that the interviews were conducted or to be seriously mentally ill or especially apathetic and unwilling to subject themselves to questions concerning their current life situation. Since we did not attempt to interview nonrespondents, there is no precise way of calculating the frequency of each type of nonrespondent in the general population of homeless Alaska Natives. But just from visiting Bean's Cafe and talking with social workers there, we doubt if the entire proportion of nonrespondents is composed only of the seriously mentally ill; instead, they may be more likely to be chronic alcoholics than the respondents in this study. If that is the case (and we believe it is), then respondents and nonrespondents may differ appreciably in personality characteristics, such as their sense of trust, sense of fatalistic attitudes, degree of primary anxiety, as well as their ability to maintain sobriety.

The screening process itself did not select on the basis of these kinds of personality characteristics but only on status characteristics. It appears unlikely, moreover, that the social workers at Bean's Cafe, both of whom are lay counselors and who interact with the respondents with a great deal of care and patience, selected on personality characteristics; but nonrespondents may have self-selected themselves out of the study on the basis of their feelings and attitudes.

Another potential bias in this study is that nonrespondents may be more likely to be developmentally disabled and therefore be the least confident in their abilities to engage in a lengthy face-to-face interview. Consequently, this study may, in fact, underreport the level of developmental disabilities among homeless Alaska Natives. We doubt, however,

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if veteran status is underreported because the social workers at Bean's Cafe, at our direction, went out of their way to especially encourage veterans to participate in this study so that we could estimate the level of social services veterans may need. So if anything, veteran status may be overreported.

METHODOLOGY

Measuring the accurate level of drinking of alcoholic beverages among any subculture is a difficult task (Bowman *et al.*, 1975). One of the chief difficulties sociologists encounter, apart from problems of external validity, sampling error, and the proper way to phrase questions, is measurement error resulting from social desirability effects, which simply refers to the respondent's desire to "look good" in the eyes of the interviewer, a specific reference group, or some combination of both.

To overcome social desirability effects, all drinkers were classified on the basis of three questions to form a quantitative measure of level of drinking: 1) how many drinks or bottles did respondents usually drink in a day; 2) how often did they drink that much in the last year; and 3) what kinds of alcoholic beverages did they drink in the last year. As a reanalysis of Bahr's (1969) data on problem-drinking indices shows, quantitative measures are superior to qualitative measures that simply ask the respondent to "describe or categorize" himself/herself as a drinker. This is usually the case because skid-row alcoholics tend to underreport their level of drinking more often on qualitative measures, apparently to save face, avoid social labels, or to conform to a specific reference group's "definition of the situation" or world view, whether that be the respondent's idealized reference group or the presumed point of view that the respondent may pick up from the interviewer ("interviewer effects").

To be sure, quantitative measures of level of drinking of alcoholic beverages may also suffer from social desirability effects; but these, it seems obvious, tend to preserve the relative rank order of drinking while suppressing the overall level of drinking in the group as a whole. If this tends to occur more with quantitative than with qualitative measures — since social desirability effects wash out or eliminate relative distinctions in the latter — then sociologists can successfully distinguish between problem drinkers and those who are not, using quantitative measures to greater advantage.

RESULTS

As Table 1 reveals, 83% of the homeless Alaska Natives we interviewed were males, which roughly compares to similar homeless populations in Portland, Oregon, during 1983 and Seattle, Washington, during 1989 (Blake and Abbott, 1989; King County Department of Housing and Economic Development, 1990). The median age among homeless Alaska Natives is about 37 years, also fairly similar to the homeless in Portland and Seattle. Moreover, the majority of homeless Alaska Natives had incomes of less than \$3000 in 1989, while 50% had incomes of less than \$2000 in Portland during 1983 and 44% had no income at all in Seattle during 1989. So homeless Alaska Natives are a very impoverished population and their level of poverty is similar to that of the homeless in other major cities in the Pacific Northwest.

TABLE 1. Social and economic characteristics of homeless Alaska Natives in Anchorage, compared to the homeless in Portland and Seattle, 1983-90

Social and economic characteristics	Homeless people by city		
	Alaska Natives in Anchorage (1990)	Portland (1983)	Seattle (1989)
Percent male	83%	85%	70%
Median age	37	38	35
Percent with incomes < \$3000	57%	50% ^a	44% ^b
Percent unemployed or discouraged worker	59%	90%	n.a.
Ethnicity			
Inupiat	39%		
Yupik	18		
Aleut	17		
Athabascan	13		
Tlingit-Haida	9		
American Indian	4	10%	9%
Non-Native white		77	42
Non-Native black		6	34
Non-Native Hispanic		4	11
Other minorities		3	4
Total	100%	100%	100%
Percent chronic alcoholics or binge drinkers	86%	35%	20% ^c
Percent developmental disabilities	24% ^d	19% ^e	19% ^f
Number of respondents/cases	(76)	(131)	(11,921)
Percent ever placed in jail or juvenile detention			
Misdemeanor/drinking	52%	n.a.	n.a.
Assault	15%	n.a.	n.a.
Felony	9%	n.a.	n.a.
Never been in jail	32%	n.a.	n.a.
Number of offenses	(88)	n.a.	n.a.

^a Percent with incomes < \$2000.

^b Includes only those individuals with no income.

^c Percent needing shelter because of alcohol or substance abuse.

^d Estimate derived from percent who were hard of hearing, had difficulty reading, or appeared to have confused thoughts.

^e Chronically mentally ill.

^f Percent with mental illness, developmental disabilities, and physical disabilities.

Sources: Travis, 1990; Blake and Abbott, 1989; King County Department of Planning and Economic Development, 1989.

Despite these demographic similarities, several other social and economic factors reveal that homeless Alaska Natives differ distinctly from the homeless in Portland and Seattle. For one thing, many more homeless Alaska Natives are either part of the working poor or totally outside the labor force — such as students who cannot afford campus housing, housewives who are separated from their spouses, or people who are temporarily out of work and seeking medical treatment at the Alaska Native Medical Center — than were, for instance, the homeless in Portland during the height of the recession in the early 1980s.

Another glaring social discrepancy between homelessness in Anchorage and that in the Pacific Northwest is the apparently higher proportion of problem drinkers or substance abusers among homeless Alaska Natives than among those in Portland (about 2.4 times as many) or among the homeless in Seattle (about 4.3 times as many). This may explain why over 50% of homeless Alaska Natives have been placed in jail or juvenile detention over the course of their

lifetime, mostly for drinking-related offenses, while only about a third have never been placed in jail or juvenile detention. Comparable figures for Portland and Seattle are not available. Nonetheless, there appears to be a "revolving door" in the Alaska criminal justice system through which many homeless Alaska Natives are routinely processed — apparently much like what Spradley (1970) found among skid-row alcoholics in Seattle in the 1960s.

Although the statistics for developmental disabilities seem to be greatly understated for homeless Alaska Natives (they are based mainly on the proportion with noticeable hearing disabilities, reading disabilities, and two apparent cases of gross psychosis), it appears, on the surface at least, that homeless Alaska Natives are as likely to suffer from developmental disabilities as the homeless in Portland and in Seattle. However, Washington State health care officials define developmental disabilities as including "mild to severe mental retardation, cerebral palsy, visual and hearing impairments, and autism" (King County Department of Housing and Economic Development, 1987:20). But because we lacked the medical skills to measure levels of retardation, cerebral palsy, or even autism (it is doubtful, though, that the latter two impairments are very evident among homeless Alaska Natives), it is possible that more than a fourth of homeless Alaska Natives suffer from developmental disabilities or, worse, "dual diagnosis." If such is the case, then these homeless Alaska Natives may actually suffer more from severe health problems than the homeless in Portland and Seattle.

Regarding the consumption of alcoholic beverages, I estimate that 86% of homeless Alaska Natives can be classified as either chronic alcoholics or binge drinkers. Of these, 54% reported growing up in families where the father, the mother, or both drank about as much or more than homeless Alaska Natives now drink. About 89% said they could recall the first time they took a drink, and most of these began drinking when they were teenagers.

Most homeless Alaska Natives report that they usually drink vodka or whiskey; only a few mentioned beer alone. Many also reported that their close friends drink as much as they do now, confirming the notion of the "drinking party" of skid-row alcoholics from earlier ethnographies by Spradley (1970) and Wiseman (1970). Quite a number, moreover, replied that they found little else to do but drink with their friends when the occasion arose.

Most homeless Alaska Natives are not drug abusers, however, since marijuana is usually the drug of choice and personal consumption of marijuana was legal in Alaska at the time the interviews were conducted. About 56% reported smoking marijuana in the last year. Nonetheless, compared to national data on alcohol and drug abuse collected by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan (Johnston *et al.*, 1990), homeless Alaska Natives were about 2.6 times more likely to abuse alcohol than young middle-class Americans, and about 1.9 times more likely to smoke marijuana than young middle-class Americans during 1989.

Compounding the level of alcohol abuse among homeless Alaska Natives are two key factors: 1) the level of ethnic discrimination within mainstream Alaskan society towards Alaska Natives and 2) the fact that many homeless Alaska Natives in Anchorage are underskilled, underemployed, and unable to maintain year-round employment. For instance, when asked whether or not they "often feel discriminated against," about two in five homeless Alaska Natives openly

identified that they had experienced discrimination. When asked why they felt that way, many usually responded "cause I'm Native" or "cause I'm a half-breed." Exactly what role ethnic discrimination plays in the mind-set of the chronic alcoholic or binge drinker is still unclear. It seems, however, that ethnic discrimination, even of the magnitude expressed on the individual level, has group effects that are often overlooked and go undetected in survey research. If every individual who has experienced ethnic discrimination were able to persuade at least one other homeless Alaska Native that his/her definition of the situation, or world-view, were the correct way to interpret the dominant mainstream Alaskan society, then sociologists should expect that on the group level ethnic discrimination might dampen self-esteem, lower occupational expectations, and create a stultifying sense of fatalism, which in actuality may be much greater than any one individual's experiences.

Thus, ethnic discrimination, whether on the individual or group level, is a serious social problem that homeless Alaska Natives have to contend with when they interact with the dominant white society in Alaska. Even if it can be proven conclusively that ethnic discrimination has very little effect on creating the conditions of chronic alcoholism or binge drinking, it still may be the case that once an Alaska Native becomes a problem drinker a failure mentality is set in place by the dominant society — that is, ethnic discrimination may fashion the social environment in such a way that certain Alaska Natives feel that they are destined to fail and that once they fail, they literally prove the dominant mind-set correct and act out the stereotypes that dominant Alaskan society expects them to fulfill, down to the last drop of alcohol.

Nearly all of the homeless Alaska Natives in this study have unskilled, low-wage jobs when they work. Typical jobs are cooks, dishwashers, janitors, and various odd jobs such as shovelling snow. They fit the pattern of "the drifters" described by Jones (1976) in her study of Alaska Native urban workers during the 1970s.

In contrast to the women, Native men's socialization did not prepare them for adapting to low-status jobs. The men were trained to be capable and skillful workers and to expect to be important members of their work group; they were socialized to believe that those qualities were the essence of masculinity. Jobs that deny them opportunities to demonstrate skill and ability and to feel important in their work constitute a fundamental assault on their manhood [Jones, 1976:33-34].

Jones also documents that anger and frustration often result from working in low-status, dead-end jobs among Alaska Natives, who quickly learn that Alaska non-Natives with less experience are often promoted at the expense of more experienced but less-educated Alaska Natives. Such encounters with dominant Alaskan society contribute to feelings of blocked opportunities and, asserts Jones, often lead to the status of "the drifter" — where Alaska Natives drift from job to job, from the villages to Alaskan cities, and from Anchorage to cities in the lower-48, predominantly in the Pacific Northwest.

The eruption of anger represents a rebellion against their situation. But the final rebellion, the one that characterizes the adaptation of most low-skilled workers is their refusal to submit to the job at all. They quit. In time, of course, they must find another job. Each time it becomes more difficult

because of their increasingly erratic job records. Increasingly they look for other ways to live apart from the world of work [Jones, 1976:34-35].

In the 1990s one way Alaska Natives "live apart from the world of work" is through drinking alcohol and living on the streets or in homeless shelters. Fully 59% of the homeless Alaska Natives we interviewed can be classified as chronically homeless, or homeless for more than one winter season. The average number of years of being homeless across winter seasons is 6.4 years for the chronically homeless. In the summers, of course, many of these people find whatever low-skilled jobs the market economy will bear. But, as winter approaches, they move into Brother Francis Shelter and, it may be the case that they begin to drink their meager earnings away. Consequently, a culture of poverty has apparently developed since Jones conducted her ground-breaking work in the 1970s. This culture of poverty not only includes the dispossessed, but also the alienated, those who are discriminated against even further, and the discouraged worker, who angrily retorts that he/she cannot find a job "cause who wants to hire a drunk anyway."

As Table 2 reveals, by far the most frequent social service and health care programs that homeless Alaska Natives have utilized over the last five years are Bean's Cafe (with 90% reporting they used Bean's Cafe very often or often in the last five years) and Brother Francis Shelter (with 81% reporting they used this shelter very often or often in the last five years). With the exception of a doctor's care for medical problems, most other social services and health care programs are generally underutilized by these Alaska Natives.

Table 3 demonstrates two basic findings: 1) that homeless Alaska Natives overwhelmingly continue to want the social services of Bean's Cafe and Brother Francis Shelter, but 2) once their immediate needs of food, clothing, and shelter are met, many homeless Alaska Natives want to enroll in job-training programs and also want help in finding a job. Twenty-five percent expressed a desire to enter into an alcohol abuse

TABLE 2. Social service and health care program utilization among homeless Alaska Natives in Anchorage, 1985-90

Social service and health care programs	Very often (%)	Often (%)	Seldom (%)	Never (%)	Total (%)	(Number)
Soup kitchen	68	22	10	—	100	(76)
Homeless shelter	57	24	17	2	100	(76)
Doctor's care for medical problems	13	16	39	47	100	(76)
Alcohol abuse treatment program	—	12	46	42	100	(76)
Food stamps	9	5	35	51	100	(76)
Unemployment benefits	3	9	24	64	100	(76)
Legal help	3	6	18	73	100	(76)
Mental health center	4	2	11	83	100	(75)
Job retraining program	1	4	12	83	100	(75)
Drug abuse treatment program	—	5	6	89	100	(76)
Low-income housing program	1	3	6	90	100	(76)
Other social service programs	4	3	4	89	100	(76)
Other health care programs	1	1	—	98	100	(76)

TABLE 3. Current social service and health care program needs among homeless Alaska Natives in Anchorage, 1990

Social service and health care programs	Percent saying they need social service and health care programs
Soup kitchen	87
Homeless shelter	84
Job retraining program	54
Help in finding a job	51
Food stamps	46
Low-income housing	45
Doctor's care for medical problems	41
Unemployment benefits	32
Alcohol abuse treatment program	25
Legal help	13
Help from a professional counselor to talk about mental health	12
Drug abuse treatment program	10
Other social service programs	4
Other health care programs	3
(Number of respondents)	(76)

treatment program. At the very bottom of their list of priorities, most homeless Alaska Natives (88%) do not want to talk about their mental health with a professional counselor and most (90%) do not want to enter a drug abuse treatment program.

Despite the fact that most homeless Alaska Natives do not want to talk about their mental health with a professional counselor, many of them do appear to be suffering from stress or anxiety. About 58% reported that they "felt very nervous or restless" in the last month (Table 4), and 42% reported that they experienced dreams that upset them or made them feel uneasy in the last month. Some of the reasons why homeless Alaska Natives may not want to talk to a professional counselor may be cultural differences in the ways of communicating feelings; some may be due to class differences between professionals and homeless Alaska Natives; and some may be due to ethnic differences between white professionals and homeless Alaska Natives. Also, differences in the power, prestige, and status of many white professionals versus homeless Alaska Natives may make many of these homeless people feel uncomfortable about talking about their mental health problems, despite the fact that a significant majority are clearly very nervous or restless.

Almost half of the homeless Alaska Natives we interviewed suffer from three or more stress or anxiety symptoms. Part

TABLE 4. Current levels of stress, anxiety, or physical symptoms among homeless Alaska Natives in Anchorage, 1990

Indicators of stress or anxiety	Percent saying they had physical symptoms in the last month
Felt very nervous or restless	58
Had dreams that upset me or made me feel uneasy	42
Had trouble sleeping	38
Had a lot of headaches	37
Felt short of breath a lot	30
Felt heart beating too hard a lot	28
Arms or legs shook so much that I couldn't stop them	12
Stress/anxiety index (3 or more symptoms)	46
(Number of respondents)	(76)

of this may be related to the high level of problem drinking among homeless Alaska Natives, but another part may be truly related to feelings of depression, such as the shame and guilt of having "sunk so low" or the restlessness that may accompany sleeping in a crowded homeless shelter with little room for privacy. La Gory *et al.* (1990) document that homeless people, especially the chronically homeless, tend to exhibit signs of depression whenever they lack social support or feel powerless to control their own destiny.

Homeless Alaska Natives may also feel anxious because they have, in a sense, gone through it before and may perceive that the social service system is unable to meet their special needs. For instance, while 86% of these Alaska Natives are currently chronic alcoholics or binge drinkers, 58% have actually attempted or completed an alcohol abuse treatment program in the last five years. This seems to indicate that many of these homeless Alaska Natives are not receptive to non-Native ways of treating alcohol abuse, such as AA meetings, residential treatment facilities, or even individual counseling. Such methods, however nobly conceived, may only serve to "detritalize," marginalize, or further stigmatize homeless Alaska Natives and may ultimately serve to solidify a sense of low self-esteem among them. Alternative treatment approaches are urgently needed to assist homeless Alaska Natives to regain, or even learn for the very first time, a sense of self-importance and dignity, as extensive interviews that the author conducted with five Alaskan social workers, both Native and non-Native, confirm with even greater clarity (Travis, 1990).

When asked to explain why they think they are currently living in a shelter rather than in their own home, many appeared to be evenly divided between structural reasons, such as lack of employment, lack of housing, and low wages (Table 5), and psychological reasons, such as alcohol abuse, difficulties with their relationships, or the fact that they feel they cannot manage on their own.

On a separate issue, Bahr (1969) raises an important question: Does institutional life increase the likelihood of

problem drinking and disaffiliation among skid-row alcoholics versus lower-income non-homeless people? Although this study was not originally designed to retest Bahr's hypothesis, Table 6 does shed some light on the level of institutional living among homeless Alaska Natives. Almost all Alaska Natives we interviewed have lived in a homeless shelter in the last five years, while 68% have been in jail or juvenile detention. The average number of years of institutional life within a homeless shelter was about four years, or more exactly four fall and winter seasons. Data on length of jail terms served were not available.

Almost half of the Alaska Natives we interviewed came from "adopted" families, and most of these appear to have been foster homes. Another striking indicator of institutional effects is the respondent's residency during his/her enrollment in high school. If the number of people who were educated outside their village or in the lower-48 are included, then about 50% of homeless Alaska Natives were educated outside their home village or community during their high school years. This is considerably higher than either the proportion who attended boarding school or had been in a home boarding school program. Further research is necessary, however, to determine the exact linkage between education outside one's home village or community and any predisposition toward either problem drinking or homelessness. Social researchers would also need to include in their studies a comparison control group of lower-income, non-homeless Alaska Natives to understand more fully what are the lingering effects of education outside one's home village or community.

Only 22% of homeless Alaska Native males in this study have served in the U.S. Armed Forces, and about half of these are Vietnam Veterans. Like most other institutional experiences, homeless Alaska Native veterans have served about four years in this institutional setting. Compared to other forms of institutional life though, veteran status does not appear to be a major factor in predisposing Alaska Natives to homelessness. It should be noted, moreover, that the effects of other institutional settings have been neglected in this study, such as the effects of group living quarters in labor camps or mental institutions.

TABLE 5. Reasons why Alaska Natives say they are currently homeless in Anchorage, 1990

	Percent of all reasons why they are currently homeless
Structural Reasons	50
Lack of employment	21
Lack of housing	10
Low wages	7
Living in a new community	6
Lack of social services	4
Other	2
Psychological reasons	44
Because of my drinking	10
Having trouble with my relationships	10
Can't manage on my own	10
It's my own fault	6
Have friends/like living at Brother Francis Shelter	6
Other	2
Health problems	4
Don't know	2
Total	100
(Number of responses)	(113)

TABLE 6. Ever having lived in an institutional setting and number of years having lived in an institutional setting among homeless Alaska Natives in Anchorage, 1990

Institutional settings	Percent living in an institution	Average number of years in an institution
Lived in a homeless shelter in the last five years	98	3.9
Ever been placed in jail or juvenile detention	68	n.a.
Ever taken in or adopted by another family	47 ^a	n.a.
Ever attended boarding school	25	3.7
Ever been in the U.S. Armed Forces	22 ^b	3.9
Ever been in a home boarding school program	8	2.5
(Number of respondents)	(76)	(76)

^aSystematic data was not collected on what was the relationship of guardians to respondents, but information the respondents volunteered shows that most "adoptions" appear to be foster home placements, rather than placements with grandparents or other relatives.

^bMales only.

DISCUSSION

Although this study was originally intended to assess the needs of homeless Alaska Natives in Anchorage, a number of important theoretical issues may be investigated on a preliminary basis, despite the exploratory nature of the research design. First, on the social/psychological level of everyday existence, ethnic discrimination towards homeless Alaska Natives appears to reinforce their economically dependent station in life, in the context of a mainstream ideology that the homeless often internalize as self-blame and personal defeat. Most of the social workers the author interviewed in Alaska confirm that many problem drinkers and homeless Alaska Natives seem to be burdened by this dominant belief system, or ethos, and that they frequently self-medicate their feelings of failure, frustration, guilt, and anger through substance abuse. Few whom we interviewed, however, attribute their drinking to ethnic discrimination; they attribute it rather to the way they learned how to drink in their family of origin.

Nonetheless, ethnic discrimination is a double-edged sword that cuts through the hearts of many homeless Alaska Natives and seems to reinforce their low level of self-esteem, which dysfunctional role models, whether it be fathers and mothers or brothers and sisters, taught them in their family of origin. Later, after reaching adulthood, these Alaska Natives often migrate to urban centers in Alaska but find out in a variety of ways that they lack the job skills to compete adequately in a market economy. These urban migrants tend to wind up in homeless shelters, penniless, hungry, and cold, thinking that their outward appearance reflects their internal self; and so they push on, refusing to commit suicide, but killing themselves slowly nonetheless with alcohol. Many, however, seem to believe that mainstream society will not accept them as people with a future, only as drunks with a stained past. Such beliefs seem to create even more distance between the homeless and mainstream society, reinforcing a failure mentality among homeless Alaska Natives and serving to defeat the very purpose of social intervention in their lives.

Patterson (1990) argues, moreover, that alienation is endemic to modern society's perception of the self within different ethnic groups and their relations to one another. In Alaska, for instance, the very term "non-Native" implies that the dominant ethnic group possesses separate human qualities that the subordinate ethnic group lacks — that is, it implies a power relationship favoring Alaska non-Natives, while at the same time it tends to devalue the status of being an Alaska Native. Sociologists should not argue that each and every ethnic interaction in Alaska fits this pattern, only that dominate power relations are currently the modal pattern in Alaskan inter-ethnic relations. One can trace the phenomenological analysis of similar power relations to such 19th-century social philosophers as Hegel (1967) and Marx and Engels (1947), all of whom basically argue that defining one's self as the opposite of a subordinate other not only adversely affects the "object" of one's resentment, but also dehumanizes the very "subject," or the carrier of such attitudes, as well.

Second, what is a reasonable solution to this web of entangled factors that create and then sustain homelessness among Alaska Natives? Lewis (1968) and Gans (1968) offer two conflicting views. Lewis (1968:193-198) contends that individual models of social change are inadequate to eliminate

the culture of poverty, because such a subculture is a whole way of life and tends to perpetuate itself once it comes into being. What is therefore needed, he argues, is for the impoverished to get caught up in social movements, whether of a religious, pacifist, or even revolutionary nature, much like the Illitquasiat, or "spirit movement," which currently occupies the hearts and minds of the Inupiat in northwest Alaska. To be sure, the Illitquasiat movement is not entirely Nativistic, but it seeks to incorporate the thoughts and feelings of what Inupiat elders want their children and grandchildren to retain while becoming productive members of modern society (Travis, 1990). In sum, Lewis asserts that only through community-wide activism can the social and psychological core of the culture of poverty be eradicated in the minds of the "outcasts." His social agenda fails, however, to account for ways to change dominant power relations, since he places more emphasis on changing the social/psychological definition of the self within the subordinate ethnic group, while leaving intact the social institutions in mainstream society that legitimize power relations and forestall the advent of authority relations.

Gans (1968), on the other hand, argues that some of the normative behavior of the poor arises from situational factors, while another significant portion is made up of internalized cultural norms that supersede one's current lifestyle or condition. These latter norms are the least resistant to change because they constitute the "core personality" of each human being and one's definition of the self. Gans (1968:206-209) further contends that normative existence consists of a "behavioral culture," which is situational in nature, and an "aspirational culture," which varies in intensity and tends to follow the ideology or ideals of those in power.

As such, Gans criticizes Lewis for overemphasizing the behavioral culture at the expense of the aspirational culture. For instance, homeless Alaska Natives may behave differently than "well-adjusted" non-Natives, or even Natives, but most homeless Alaska Natives do appear to possess the very same aspirational culture as Alaska non-Natives — that is, many of them want job retraining and help in finding a job once their immediate needs for food, clothing, and warm shelter are met. Thus, Gans's social agenda calls for a sociological analysis that separates out the situational from the cultural sources of poverty. Only in this way will social scientists be able to determine which norms will change or persist once social and economic opportunities, institutions, and relations are themselves altered.

In some cases, though, Lewis's approach has merit. In rural Alaska the Illitquasiat movement appears to have reduced the level of problem drinking, accidents, and violence within "alcoholic families" among the Inupiat (Travis, 1990). But it is still too early to tell what effect this will have on the high rate of suicide that the Inupiat have experienced since the pipeline era of 1974-78. Yet, it seems more probable that social movements of the kind Lewis calls for may prove beneficial in isolated areas, such as rural Alaska, but will not significantly change the lives of homeless Alaska Natives in Anchorage and other urban centers in Alaska. This seems evident sociologically because social movements can only go as far as those in power are willing to allow them to alter basic social institutions, ethnic relations, and the aspirational culture itself.

What is needed is for the social system to reconstitute itself in a way that preserves the social dignity and economic worth

of all its members. Anything less is tantamount to the perpetuation of homelessness, alcoholism, and ethnic discrimination among Alaska Natives. As Becker (1986) argues, societies must continually reconstitute themselves in the face of social change or lose their cohesiveness. Alienation and ethnic discrimination are not necessary consequences of social change, however, since social change may inspire individuals to "invent culture" and create new shared meanings within their communities. Becker maintains that when communities are confronted with social problems that their shared understanding, their cultural knowledge, does not cover, each community must first come to an agreement that they have a common problem, come to a new definition of the situation (or a new way of looking at the problem), and seek to develop a new consensus about how to resolve that social problem. Every people, asserts Becker (1986:11-24), must create culture continuously or wither away, for culture only provides for approximate solutions.

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