



Alaskan Natives: Location and Health Vulnerability

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Background

Vulnerable populations are those lacking accessibility to basic needs including quality healthcare, nutrient-dense food, and education.¹ Alaskan Natives represent an example of a vulnerable population.¹

This population faces several vulnerabilities including higher rates of chronic disease and struggle for food access. Since Alaskan Natives make up smaller numbers of the U.S. population, their vulnerabilities are not widely understood.²

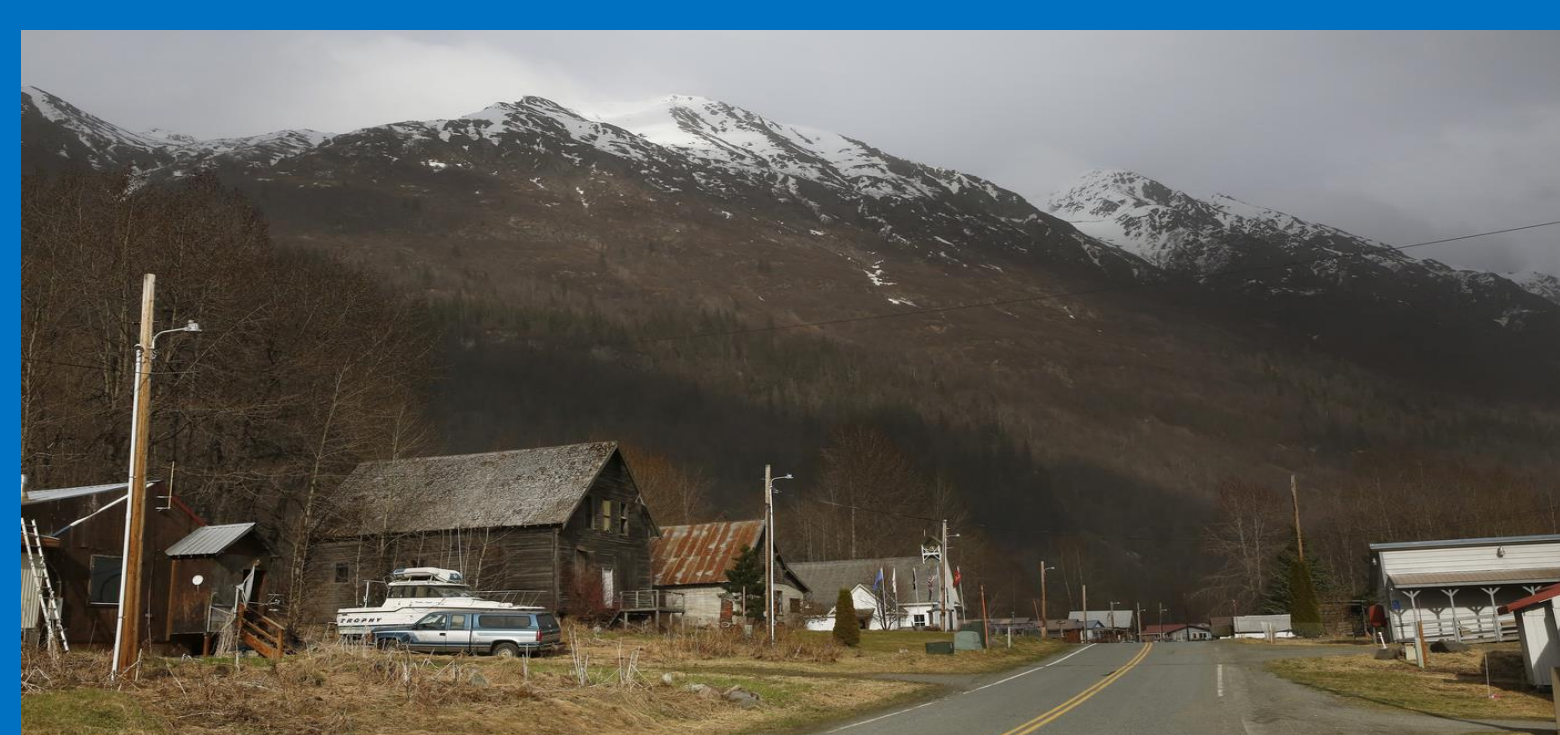
Purpose

The purpose of this research is to examine the Alaskan Native community and how they represent a vulnerable population. This research will discuss chronic disease prevalence, food insecurity, and providing cultural competency among Alaskan Natives.

Methods

Methods used to conduct research on this topic included:

- Summarizing articles on the following databases: PubMed and Google Scholar
- Inclusion criteria for finding appropriate articles: Alaskan Natives, Food Insecurity, Traditional Food Consumption, Chronic Disease, Cultural Competence
- Exclusion Criteria for finding appropriate articles: Articles older than 10 years, Articles only including information on American Indian Populations
- Methodologies used in research articles included food frequency questionnaire, focus group, mailed survey, phone interview, and collecting blood samples



Results

Chronic Disease

Research reported that Alaskan Natives have disproportionately higher rates of diabetes and obesity.³ These rates occurred due to food insecurity, lack of healthcare, and more expenses.

Furthermore, Alaskan Natives experience 12% instances of coronary heart disease (CHD). However, it was estimated that results of CHD were underreported for this population by 21%.⁴ Researchers stated that diseases for this population increased after forced removal from their land, decreasing quality healthcare. This population also reports higher rates of smoking and lower rates of physical activity which may have caused higher chronic disease results.⁴

Food Insecurity and Traditional Food Consumption

Alaskan Natives are 20% more likely to experience food insecurity than whites.⁵ Common reasons for food insecurity include geographical location, transportation, and access to traditional native foods. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported that only 25.6% of tribes lived within 1 mile of a grocery store with most of the U.S. population living closer to these stores.⁵

Interviews with Alaskan Native elders reported potential causes of the shift away from traditional foods.⁶ Reasons included shipping cost, short shelf life, and government assistance programs. Elders discussed about how government assistance programs encouraged consumption of cheap processed foods since limited benefits were provided.⁶ Upon the increased consumption of processed foods, chronic disease occurrence increased. One of the elders mentioned how chronic diseases did not occur when a traditional diet was followed.⁶



Providing Cultural Competency Among Alaskan Natives

According to Pérez & Luquis⁷ Cultural competence is defined as “a developmental process defined as a set of values, principals, behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable health professionals to work effectively across racial, ethnic, and linguistically diverse groups.”⁷ Delivering this idea to other diverse groups would positively impact their physical and emotional well-being along within the healthcare process.⁷

A study conducted by Noe et al.⁸ examined the importance of providing cultural competency for Alaskan Native veterans.⁸ The authors reported that about 40% of Alaskan Native veterans live in discrete tibial lands, making healthcare delivery more challenging. It was also established, delivering cultural competence is important to build the relationship between the professional and patient.⁸ By conducting this study, many Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities were able to learn how to provide proper cultural competence.⁸

Conclusion

Alaskan Natives deal with more health disparities than several other populations. This population has higher prevalence of chronic disease and food insecurity.² Due to the rural areas in which most of this population resides, Alaskan Natives typically have transportation challenges, higher cost of living, and lack of healthcare access.² Providing cultural competence for this population is important to build trust between the professional and patient.⁸ Further research should compare rural and urban areas of Alaska and their rates of chronic disease and dietary habits. Increasing awareness for this population could potentially decrease their vulnerabilities.

References

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