

INTRODUCTION & METHODS

Community Needs Assessment



Finalized 2026

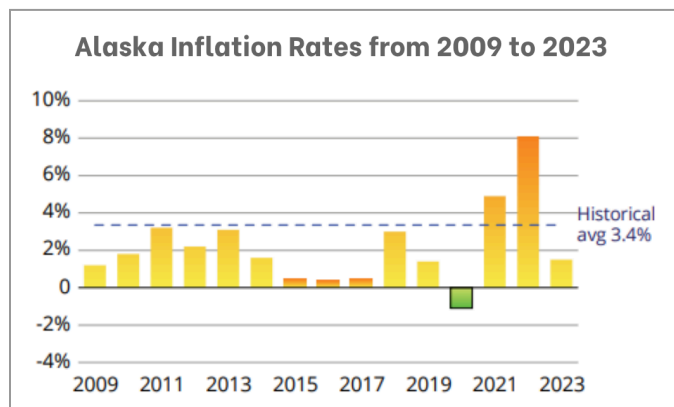
Sitka, Alaska

Introduction

The Pathways to a Safer Sitka Coalition is a group of local agencies and individuals working together to create a healthier, more equitable community. We aim to reduce negative health outcomes, such as domestic violence, substance use, and suicide by building equitable, accessible, and culturally-responsive services and systems. This Community Needs Assessment (CNA) was developed to compile current data regarding the health of the Sitka community to determine focus points for the Pathways Coalition moving forward within each of its goal areas: school environments, youth leadership, male engagement, family engagement, and community environments. The members of the Pathways Coalition who participated in the development of this CNA are: Center For Community/Early Learning Program (CFC/ELP), Sitkans Against Family Violence (SAFV), Sitka Counseling (SC), Sitka School District (SSD), Sitka Tribe of Alaska (STA), and Youth Advocates of Sitka (YAS). Additional Pathways partners are Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC), Sitka Conservation Society (SCS), and City of Sitka Parks and Recreation.



Sitka, traditionally known as Sheet'ká, is a small rural Southeast Alaskan community located on Shee (Baranof Island) which is home to around 8,400 residents and is only accessible by boat or plane. The main island that residents live on is a conjunction of two islands: Baranof and Japonski, which is connected by the O'Connell Bridge that was built in 1971. The town's population is around 48% female and 52% male. Sheet'ka is relatively racially diverse with 63.5% of residents being white, 10.3% American Indian or Alaska Native, 7.3% Asian, 17.4% reporting Mixed Race, 0.6% Black or African American, and 7.1% Hispanic or Latino (United States Census, 2021). Due to Sheet'ka's remote location, food and outside resources are scarce and expensive. With rising inflation rates, many residents are struggling to afford housing and food, let alone other necessary living expenses. As of 2022, Sheet'ká has the highest rental



rate out of any surveyor borough in Alaska, sitting at a whopping average of \$1,537/month¹ (Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, 2023). These astronomical rental costs are largely due to the increase of short-term rentals

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¹ Adjusted average rent for all Sitka units increased to \$1,648 per month in 2024.



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and seasonal housing like AirBnB and vacation homes. For the purposes of this assessment, we will be referring to Sheet'ka as Sitka from this point forward.

The City and Borough of Sitka is home to the Sitka School District (SSD) that includes Xóots Elementary, Keet Gooshi Heen Elementary School (KGH), Blatchley Middle School (BMS), Sitka High School (SHS), Pacific High School (PHS), and Respecting Educational Alternatives and Choices in Homeschooling (REACH). Mt. Edgecumbe High School (MEHS) is another school located on Japonski Island that is not part of the Sitka School District, but accepts locals as students along with students from across the state. Mt. Edgecumbe is a state-run boarding school and brings in students from various parts of Alaska, often from predominantly rural Alaska Native communities where students have little access to secondary education. According to Sitka School District data, 35.5% of the Sitka school population is eligible for either free or reduced lunch.² The racial demographic breakdown of SSD students are: 50% identify as white, 28% identify as Alaska Native/American Indian, 7% identify as Asian, 5% identify as Hispanic, 1% identify as Black, 1% identify as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 1% identify as two or more races (Sitka School District, 2023).

Sitka relies on a variety of economic sectors like seafood processing, healthcare, and tourism. Much like other industries, these sectors experienced a sharp drop in employment and dip in the market in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent reports have observed a complete return to pre-pandemic economic trends in the seafood industry, and predict the tourism sector will continue to increase. Wage, salary, and employment are still 3% below the 2019 rates, but are expected to grow (McKinley Research Group, 2023).

Education rates in Sitka are promising; around 95% of the 25+ population have a High School Degree or higher and 34% of the 25+ population have a Bachelor's degree or higher. The current median household income is \$82,083 in Sitka³, which is slightly above Alaska's average median household income that lands at \$80,287⁴ (United States Census, 2021). However, further understanding of Sitka's income and poverty levels are elaborated in the Key Findings section.

Sitka has a robust history of outside contact, from the Russians, Finnish, Americans, and the British. While cultural exchange and trading happened between the Lingít (Alaska Native people primarily inhabiting Southeast Alaska) and these groups, colonization also left deep

Sheldon Jackson Boarding School in Sitka



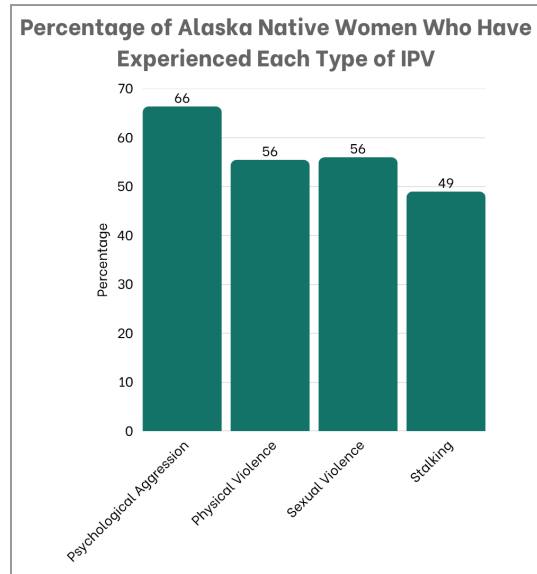
² In school year 2024/2025, 31% of students enrolled in the school district were eligible for free and reduced lunches, however, two-thirds of families did not apply; the percentage of families who are eligible is likely higher. SSD intends to do an outreach campaign to reach and enroll more eligible families. In school year 2025/2026, 34% of SSD students were eligible.

³ The U.S. census defines a household as any member of the household who is 15 or older.

⁴ As of 2024, Sitka's median household income has increased to \$95,261, and Alaska's to \$86,631.

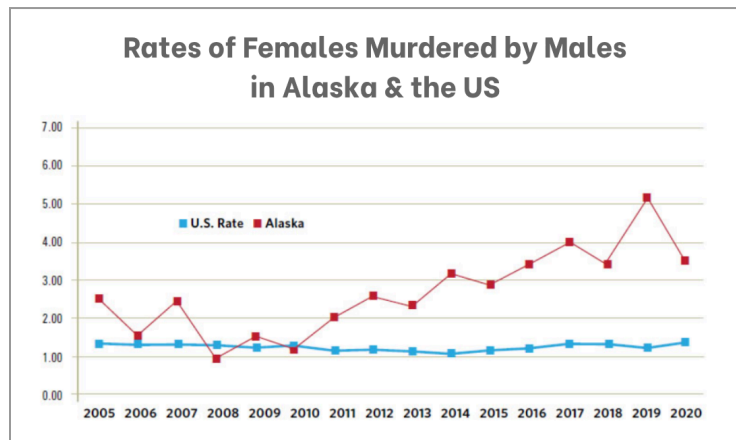
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scars in Indigenous communities across Alaska. Russians and Americans introduced diseases like Tuberculosis, Smallpox, respiratory illnesses, Influenza, and Syphilis which killed between 20-50% of the Alaska Native population (Haigh & Murphy, 2018). Residential boarding schools, systematic separation of families, criminalization of Indigenous culture, slavery, exploitation of resources, physical and sexual abuse that occurred during these times has been linked with poor health outcomes for Alaska Native communities today. Statistics show that Alaska Native people experience the highest rates of domestic violence, suicide, substance use, sexual assault, homicide,



and chronic illness than any other racial group in Alaska (Indian Health Service, 2019). In fact, some research suggests that Alaska Native women experience rates of domestic violence up to ten times higher than any other racial group in the United States (Indian Law Resource Center, 2022). The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) (2016) reports 66.4% of Alaska Native women have experienced psychological aggression by an intimate partner, 55.5% have experienced physical violence by an intimate partner, 56.1% have experienced sexual violence, and 48.8% have experienced stalking by an intimate partner. In addition, 70% of Alaska Native men report experiencing psychological aggression by an intimate partner, 43.2% have experienced physical violence by a partner, 27.5% have experienced sexual

violence, and 18.6% have experienced stalking. Alaska also has the highest homicide rate in the nation for women killed by men, for the seventh year in a row (Stremple, 2022). Women in Alaska are killed at more than twice the national average rate. In 2020, the rate of American Indian/Alaska Native women killed by men in Alaska was 12.63 per 100,000 women, which is more than three and a half times the rate for all women in Alaska, and 10 times the rate for white women in Alaska (Violence Policy Center, 2022). National rates of victimization for Native women are equally jarring; homicide is the third leading cause of death for Native women across the U.S (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, 2018). Additionally, this group is significantly more likely to experience rape in their lifetime compared to other women and are more likely to be killed by their intimate partners compared to other types of offenders. An astounding 81.6% of American



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Indian and Alaska Native men have experienced violence in their lifetime, compared to 64% of their white counterparts. Furthermore, the lifetime violence victimization rate is 1.2 times as high for American Indian and Alaska Native women as for white women; therefore, AI/AN women are more likely to need services, but less likely to have access to those services (National Institute of Justice, 2016).

Methods

The process for updating the Community Needs Assessment (CNA) involved several methods including focused conversations with members in the Pathways Steering Committee (community prevention coalition), the Sitka Youth Leadership Committee (youth coalition), and the Pathways Family Engagement Workgroup (subcommittee of the community coalition), as well as reviewing secondary data from various sources. Additionally, seven members from the coalition worked together in a subcommittee to determine the secondary data needed, sources to review, and divvy out roles for collecting, analyzing, and compiling this data.

Eleven members representing six partner organizations attended the annual Pathways Steering Committee meeting on June 7th, 2023. Time was allocated for reconnecting and reassessing. The steering committee meeting is typically held annually and brings together heads of agencies or departments to review the coalition's previous year's successes, set goals for the upcoming year, and map out a plan for going forward. The meeting in 2023 was dedicated to bringing everyone up to speed on the coalition, specifically new attendees, getting everyone oriented to the new Pathways website, and engaging in a process to update the community needs assessment. A consensus-building process and other facilitation tools were utilized to engage partners in reflective conversations about the coalition's initiatives over the years. This included discussing what has led to its successes, what has gotten in the way and/or remains a barrier, and finally, what needs are emerging that, if addressed, would alleviate the barriers and move the work forward. Participants were prompted to work on their own, in pairs, and small groups to discuss and identify potential strategies, and share ideas with the larger group for feedback and further discussion. Several needs statements came out of this process and serve as a reference point and guide for moving the work forward.

The Sitka Youth Leadership Committee (SYLC), a group of youth leaders in Sitka dedicated to changing harmful norms and promoting equity, engages in a needs assessment process each year to determine priorities and projects for the year. In the fall of 2023, six SYLC teens from Mt. Edgecumbe, Pacific, and Sitka High Schools participated in a workshop at the beginning of the year to discuss the issues their predecessors identified in past years. They determined how relevant these issues are for the current members, and discussed the messages they are getting around these issues, where they are seeing them, and what new messages they want their peers to be getting instead. Similarly, the Peer Education program, which consists of some of the same members as SYLC, but is also open to non-SYLC members, engaged in a similar assessment process at the beginning of the year about healthy and unhealthy relationships. Seven teens participated in the Peer Education conversation. Subsequent discussions occurred at meetings throughout the fall during both SYLC and Peer Education with additional members to ensure decisions made were reflective of the



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entire group. Discussions included an assessment of the current reality around issues in their community and how they want to address these issues. Additionally, five teens

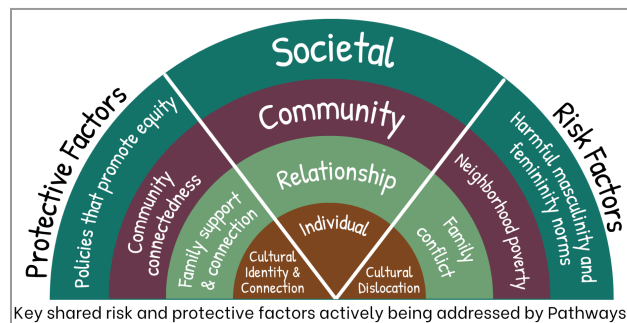


attended Lead On in 2023⁵, a statewide youth conference in Anchorage, where teens were given time in their community groups to identify needs and develop a vision and plan. Using a slightly different needs assessment tool, students were prompted to answer the following questions, “What do youth in your community see, hear, think, do, feel?” and “What do you want youth in your community to see, hear, think, do, be?” Approximately, 13 teens⁶ in total participated in the various processes which led to the identification of specific goals and projects to work on for the year, many of which are carried over from year to year as the issues remain relevant and resonant with each new group.

A third focused conversation took place with members of the Family Engagement Workgroup (FEW). FEW is a subcommittee of the Pathways Coalition which aims to increase family connectedness by improving collaboration and alignment of strategies across Pathways partners in order to better reach, engage, and support families in Sitka. Eight individuals representing five partner agencies (CFC/ELP, SAFV, SSD, UAS/4-H, YAS) engaged in a process in March of 2023 to determine the strengths and gaps in family engagement efforts in our community. Using the Strengthening Families Protective Factor Framework as a reference, members engaged in a process that revealed gaps in our collective efforts to support families. These areas have become the new focus of the workgroup.

In addition to the focused conversations with key stakeholders in the community, observations by staff through program implementation were collected and used as another source of data informing this needs assessment.

The Pathways [shared risk and protective factors](#) are used as a guide and framework informing the work of the collective. Seven members representing three partner agencies (SAFV, SC, STA) in the coalition worked together in a data subcommittee to identify secondary



data sources and collect and compile the data points most relevant to these shared risk and protective factors. These secondary data sources include national, statewide, and local data from sources such as the School Climate and Connectedness Survey (SCCS), the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), the Alaska Victimization Survey, the US Census Bureau, Alaska Kids Count, Centers for Disease Control, Alaska Office of

⁵ In 2024, 6 teens attended Lead On; in 2025, 5 teens attended Lead On.

⁶ In the 2024/2025 school year, approximately 14 teens total participated in the needs assessments processes; in 2025/2026 school year, 18 teens participated in a similar process.



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Children's Services, Sitkans Against Family Violence shelter database, Child Advocacy Center database, and the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development. Additional local data includes Sitka School District attendance, graduation, and matriculation rates, as well as the percentage of free and reduced lunches among the district's students, and Sitka Counseling's Sitka Substance Use Survey (SUSY).

While completing this CNA, there were various limitations that came up. Some of these limitations include outdated sources. For example, some of the 2023 CDC national YRBS data was released in the form of a trends report, but the actual database has not been released yet. As a result, the national data in this assessment is limited to either the 2023 trends report or 2021 CDC data. Hence, for certain data points such as sexual dating violence, the most recent national data available is from 2021. Further, Alaska did not conduct the statewide YRBS in 2021 (due to the pandemic), hence the gap in data, however, Alaska released its 2023 YRBS data in January 2025. It's important to note that the AK YRBS does not ask respondents to indicate gender identity, only sex; it also excludes LGBTQ+ data. Additionally, our information about victimization rates of Alaska Native women and men is limited to data from the Urban Indian Health Institute's 2018 report about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). This was the most recent data available relating to the MMIWG crisis because statistics on this topic is limited from lack of funding and research. It should be noted that some of the secondary data used was on the statewide or national level, as there was no local data available. We were not able to acquire specific numbers regarding partner agency services for adult mental health support or substance use treatment. We have, however, informally received information via conversations with mental health practitioners who have shared repeatedly they are overwhelmed with the demand for their services and do not have the capacity to meet the increasing need for mental health support.

A draft of the CNA was compiled and submitted to state funders for a grant deliverable in July 2023. Since then, revisions to the draft have been made to reflect the most updated data available (e.g., footnotes to reflect 2024 & 2025 data where available). Before finalizing the CNA, there were multiple feedback sessions on each of the five focus areas (e.g., family engagement, youth leadership, male engagement, schools, and community environments) to ensure accuracy and relevance to the community, as well as achieve collective buy-in for next steps amongst the coalition and additional key stakeholders. The Family Engagement Workgroup met in May 2024 to review the section on family engagement; the Peer Culture Workgroup met in June 2024 to review the section on youth leadership; the Pathways Steering Committee met in October 2024 to review the schools and community environments sections; and in December 2024, men who were formerly involved in male engagement efforts (e.g., coaches for BRITK, focus groups) along with several coalition members (SC, YAS, SAFV) met to discuss the findings in the male engagement section. Additionally, a special review session was scheduled with key SSD administrators in May 2025 to discuss the findings in the schools section as no representatives from SSD were available to attend the Pathways Steering Committee meeting in October 2024. All review sessions utilized a similar process, which included time to read through the specific CNA section, discuss and reflect on findings, and brainstorm how the data could be used to inform next steps. These steps have been incorporated into a map



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which outlines the focus area, the problems being addressed, needs statements, and potential strategies, and will serve as a guide for moving the collective work forward. See the Conclusion for the CNA Roadmap. Additionally, feedback and edits to the narrative were solicited at each review session and were incorporated into the narrative post-review sessions. The final CNA was completed in early 2026; a snapshot (one-pager with highlights from the CNA) was created and finalized by coalition members in the Pathways Communications Workgroup (SAFV, SC, STA). A data chart was created highlighting specific data points for each of the key findings listed in the snapshot (e.g., violence, mental health, substance use). This data chart is meant to be user-friendly (i.e., quick reference to find data points) as well as used as a tool for tracking trends over the long-term (data is updated each year as available). The CNA Snapshot, Roadmap, and Data Chart were shared at the Pathways Steering Committee meeting in February 2026 to guide the development of a dissemination plan in order to share the CNA findings with various pertinent audiences within the community. The data chart was also a helpful reference in guiding updates to the Pathways Strategic Plan, specifically the goals and outcomes. CNA data has already been shared with a number of audiences (e.g., SAFV Board, Pathways Steering Committee) and will continue to be shared by partners to audiences across Sitka.



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