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Press Release

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Alaska's fetal alcohol syndrome rate fell 32 percent between 1996-2002

During that time, the rate among Alaska Native births dropped by half

(Anchorage, AK) — Alaska Native babies were born with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) half as often around the year 2000 as they were five to seven years earlier, Department of Health and Social Services researchers found in an analysis of Alaska Birth Defects Registry data. That change brought the state's overall rate from 1996 to 2002 down by a third, researchers reported in the State of Alaska Epidemiology Bulletin released yesterday.

"This reduction is what we've been striving for, and continue to strive for," said Health and Social Services Commissioner Bill Hogan. "FAS and other conditions collectively known as fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) are one of the most common causes of developmental disabilities and the only cause that is entirely preventable."

In 1998, Alaska and three other states with high rates of maternal alcohol consumption were selected for a four-year project through the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The project developed a system to track birth defects caused by maternal drinking, and established by 2002 that Alaska's rate was far higher than the other three states; the highest in the nation.

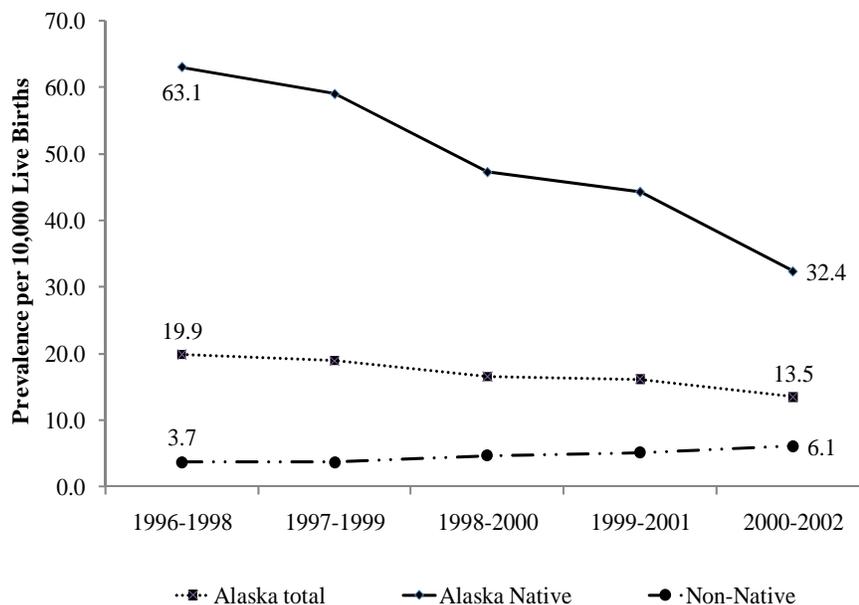
The analysis found the rate among Alaska Native births decreased to 32.4 children with FAS per 10,000 live births from 63.1 (down 49 percent); the rate increased from 3.7 to 6.1 among non-Native births (not a statistically significant change.) Alaska's overall rate dropped to 13.5 from 20.0. The analysis ends with births in 2002 in order to incorporate doctors' reports of suspected birth defects caused by maternal drinking. Doctors have until children are 6 to make that mandatory report.

A major joint federal-state prevention and education effort ran from 1991 to 1996, with a second running from 1998 to 2006, said L. Diane Casto, manager of Prevention and Early Intervention Services for the Division of Behavioral Health.

"We can't absolutely link the decrease to our prevention efforts, but the timing strongly suggests that it was a major factor," Casto said. "This is clear encouragement that we can change these statistics which represent so much lost potential and needless heartbreak."

(more)

FAS prevalence by three-year moving averages, Alaska Birth Defects Registry, birth years 1996-1998 to 2000-2002.



Janine Schoellhorn, the state public health epidemiologist who led the analysis, said the Alaska Native rate was 17 times higher than the non-Native rate in the first group of children, those born in 1996 through 1998; for those born in 2000 through 2002, the Native rate was down to five times higher.

“That’s really, really impressive,” Schoellhorn said.

An analysis of data from 2003 forward is underway.

The State of Alaska Epidemiology Bulletin is posted online at [http://www.epi.alaska.gov/bulletins/catlist.jsp?cattype=Fetal+Alcohol+Syndrome+\(FAS\)](http://www.epi.alaska.gov/bulletins/catlist.jsp?cattype=Fetal+Alcohol+Syndrome+(FAS))

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