Bethel

People and Place

Location

Bethel is located within the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, 40 miles inland from the Bering Sea on the Kuskokwim River. It is approximately 400 air miles west of Anchorage. The area encompasses 43.8 square miles of land and 5.1 square miles of water.

Demographic Profile

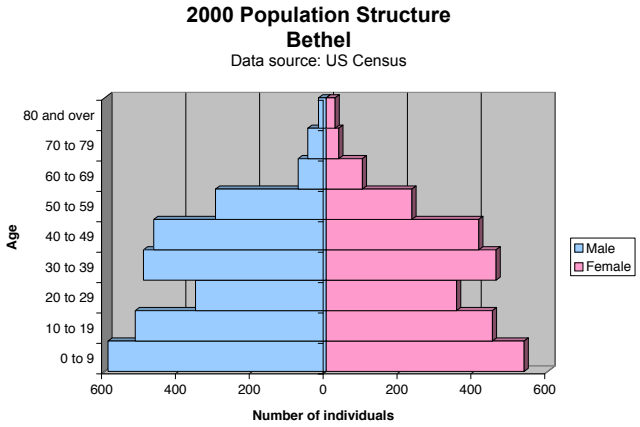
In 2000, Bethel had a population of 5,471 people in 1,741 households. Most of the population (95.6%) lived in households rather than group quarters. The racial breakdown of the community was as follows: White (26.8%), Alaska Native or American Indian (61.8%), Black (0.9%), Asian (2.9%), Hawaiian Native (0.2%), and other (0.5%). Residents of two or more races comprised 6.9% of the population. A total of 68% of the population recognized themselves as all or part Alaska Native or American Indian. Residents of Hispanic ethnicity comprised 1.7% of the population.

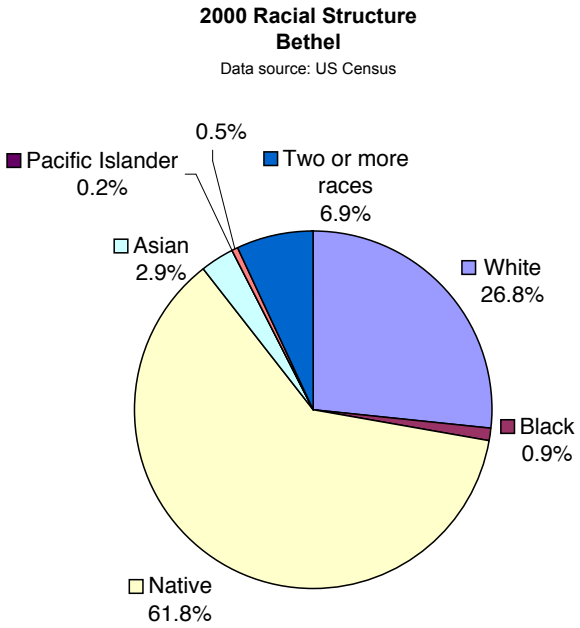
There were more men (52.5%) than women in Bethel in 2000. The median age was 29.1 years, significantly younger than the U.S. national average of 35.3 years, owing to Bethel's position as a regional employment hub that attracts working-age people. For the same reason, Bethel's population has grown steadily in recent years, more than doubling since 1970.

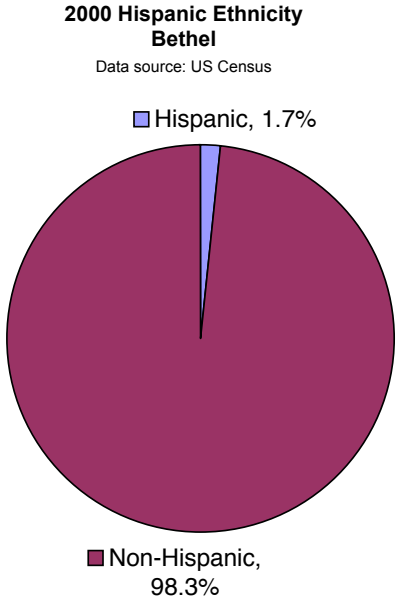
Approximately 84.2% of residents over 25 years of age have attained a high school degree or higher level of education.

History

Yup'ik Eskimos have inhabited the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta area for at least 2,000 years. Bethel was settled by Yup'ik people who called the village "Mumtrekhlogamute," meaning "people who smoke fish." By the late nineteenth century, the village was an Alaska Commercial Company Trading Post. The Moravian church established a mission in the area in 1884. Bethel was incorporated as a second-class city in 1957, and has since become a regional hub for the many small towns and villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region. Yup'ik culture is still a strong influence in Bethel; the Yup'iit Piciryarait Museum plays an active role in the preservation of the local cultural heritage.





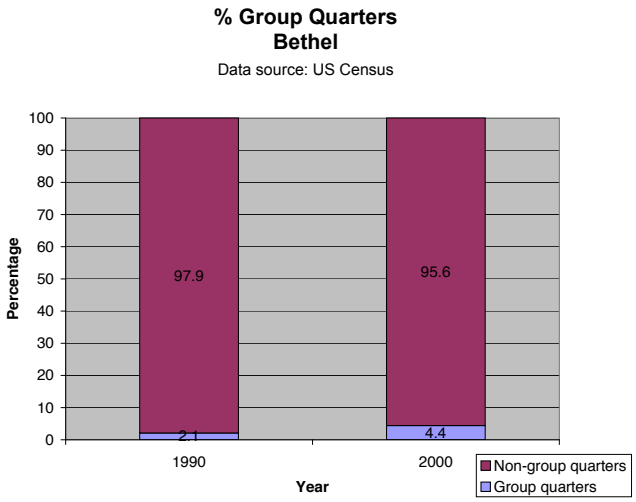


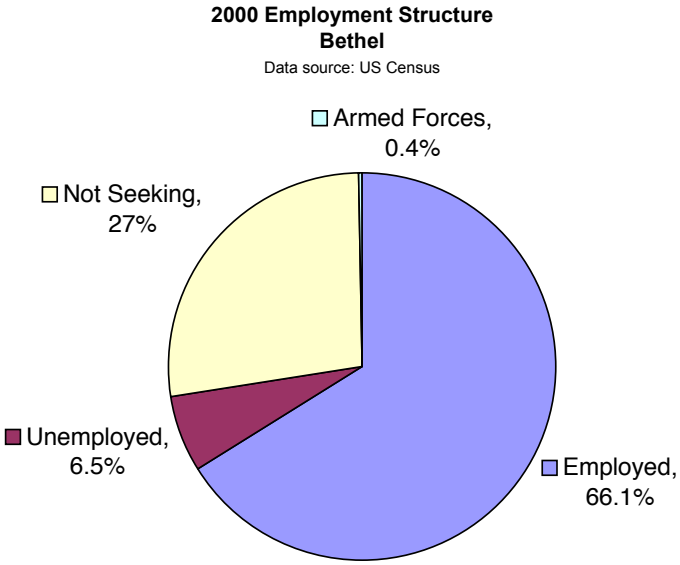
Infrastructure

Current Economy

Both subsistence and commercial fishing, particularly in the salmon and herring fisheries, are important parts of the Bethel economy. Because Bethel is the only town of substantial size in the region, it has become the regional hub for the many smaller villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. Many residents of small villages come to Bethel for employment and for major services such as medical care. The current economy of Bethel reflects this fact: about 50% of local jobs are in the government sector, and the service sector also accounts for a growing percentage of employment.

The median per capita income in Bethel is $20,267, and the median household income is $57,321. Approximately 6.5% of the population is unemployed, and 27% of residents aged 16 years and older were not in the labor force (i.e. not working and not seeking work). Approximately 11.2% of residents live below the poverty level.





Governance

Bethel was incorporated as a second-class city in 1957. It has a strong mayor form of government. A 5% sales tax is collected in Bethel as well as a 5% alcohol tax, 3% hotel/B&B tax, 6% gaming tax, a fuel tax, and a vehicle registration tax. The city is in the Bethel recording district and is not within an organized borough. A Native governing body, Orutsararmuit Native Council, is a federally recognized tribal group representing the two-thirds of Bethel residents who are of Native descent. The Bethel Native Corporation is the local for-profit Native governing body. The Coastal Villages Region Fund, a Community Development Quota (CDQ) group, is active in the community and promotes employment opportunities for residents as well as participation in the Bering Sea crab and groundfish fisheries. There is a National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) field office and an Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) office located in Bethel. The nearest office of the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS) is located in Anchorage.

Facilities

Facilities and infrastructure in Bethel are well developed in comparison to other cities and towns in the region. There is a 6,400 foot paved runway with propeller and jet plane service to the city from Anchorage and other cities. Roundtrip airfare from Bethel to Anchorage is approximately $206. There is also a 1,850 foot gravel runway, and two floatplane bases. The Port of Bethel, on the Kuskokwim River, is a busy shipping port that receives supplies for residents throughout the area. There are only 16 miles of local roads, and transportation in winter is generally by snow machines.

There is a central piped water and sewer system, operated by the city, but only some residences are connected to it. Many houses have their own wells and septic tanks. There is a city-operated landfill. Electricity comes from the Bethel Utilities Corporation and is produced by a diesel generator. Other public services include the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Regional Hospital, operated by the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health

Corporation, and police, fire and rescue services, operated by the city. There are six schools in Bethel, with a total of 87 teachers and 1,328 students.

Involvement in North Pacific Fisheries

Commercial Fishing

Commercial fishing, particularly in the salmon fisheries of Kuskokwim Bay and Bristol Bay, is an important part of the local economy of Bethel. In 2000 there were 201 registered crew members. There were two vessel owners with operations in federal fisheries and 22 vessel owners with operations in state fisheries who resided in the community. In 2000, 199 local residents held a total of 213 commercial fishing permits and 133 permits were actually fished. This section contains a detailed description of permits issued to Bethel residents.

Halibut: Three halibut longline permits were issued for vessels under 60 feet in statewide waters, and one permit was fished.

Herring: Twenty-one residents held a total of 21 permits for the herring fishery, and 6 permits were fished. A detailed breakdown of these permits is as follows: six herring roe gillnet permits for Nelson Island (one fished), two herring roe gillnet permits for Bristol Bay (none fished), two herring roe gillnet permits for Nunivak Island (one fished), four herring roe gillnet permits for Cape Avinof (one fished), five herring roe gillnet permits for Goodnews Bay (one fished), and two herring roe gillnet permits for Cape Romanzof (two fished).

Other Finfish: A total of two permits were issued for miscellaneous finfish, including one for set gillnet vessels in statewide waters and one for longline vessels under 60 feet in statewide waters. No permits were fished.

Salmon: One hundred eighty-six local residents held a total of 187 permits for the salmon fishery, and 126 permits were fished. A detailed breakdown of these permits is as follows: 11 salmon drift gillnet permits for Bristol Bay (11 fished), one salmon set gillnet permit for Bristol Bay (none fished), 161 salmon set gillnet permits for Kuskokwim Bay (105 fished), and 14 salmon set gillnet permits for the lower Yukon River (10 fished).

In 2000, there were five commercial fish processors in Bethel taking landings from federally managed fisheries, with a total of 123.4 tons in landings. These landings were comprised entirely of halibut, delivered by 167 vessels. In addition, 95 vessels delivered salmon landings to processors in Bethel; the specific tonnage of landings for salmon is confidential, however, in accordance with confidentiality requirements. In 2003, Bethel received $20,338 in federal salmon disaster funds to compensate the community for falling salmon prices.

Sport Fishing

Sport fishing, while less significant than commercial and subsistence fishing, is nevertheless an important part of Bethel's involvement in North Pacific fisheries. In 2000, a total of 570 sport fishing licenses were sold in Bethel, most of them (410) to Alaska residents. In 2002, there were two registered sport fishing guides for freshwater and no registered guides for saltwater sport fishing. Major sport fish species include salmon, rainbow trout, Dolly Varden, arctic grayling, and northern pike.

Subsistence Fishing

Subsistence hunting and fishing are practiced in Bethel. However, detailed data on subsistence resource uses from the ADF&G's Division of Subsistence is lacking. In 1999, 1,508 households in Bethel held subsistence salmon harvesting permits, and harvested Chinook, sockeye, Coho and chum salmon, mostly from the Kuskokwim Bay and Kuskokwim River. Bethel has a Subsistence Halibut Registration Certificate (SHARC) issued by NMFS, which allows residents to harvest halibut for subsistence uses. These allocations are based on recognized customary and traditional uses of halibut. Regulations to implement subsistence halibut fishing were published in the Federal Register in April 2003 and became effective May 2003.

Additional Information

The Camai festival, a three-day event celebrating Yup'ik dance and traditional culture, is held annually in Bethel.