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## Public Safety and Quality of Life: Alaska Perceptions

A statewide public opinion poll conducted by the Justice Center in late 1994 reveals that the majority of Alaskans are satisfied with the quality of life in their communities and believe that their communities are good environments in which to raise children. Moreover, most Alaskans consider their communities to be safe and are willing to become involved in police and public safety efforts. (A previous article, "Community Problems in Alaska: Public Perceptions," *Alaska Justice Forum* 12(2), Summer 1995, discussed other data from the same survey).

The telephone survey was part of a larger research project undertaken with the Alaska Department of Public Safety and was funded by a federal grant from the Office of Justice Programs. Interviewers contacted a statewide sample of 603 residents. In an effort to avoid bias, interviewers explained only that the survey was being conducted for the University of Alaska; the Department of Public Safety was not mentioned.

### Quality of Life

As part of the survey, respondents were asked several questions on the quality of life in their community. When asked how they felt about their communities as places to live, Alaskans from all areas of the state expressed satisfaction (Table 1). Statewide, 45.8 per cent said they were "very satisfied" with their communities, and 39.9 per cent, "somewhat satisfied." When responses are examined by the area of Alaska in which respondents resided, satisfaction levels are not conspicuously different.

### HIGHLIGHTS INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- The Bureau of Justice Statistics examines defendants in spouse murder cases (page 2).

**Table 1. Satisfaction with Community**

*How do you feel about your community as a place to live?*

|                       | Valdez/Kenai/        |                   |                      |                      |                         | Statewide<br>N = 605 |
|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
|                       | Southeast<br>N = 121 | Mat-Su<br>N = 120 | Anchorage<br>N = 120 | Fairbanks<br>N = 122 | Rural Alaska<br>N = 122 |                      |
| Very dissatisfied     | 0.0%                 | 2.1%              | 3.2%                 | 1.0%                 | 2.6%                    | 2.2%                 |
| Somewhat dissatisfied | 7.9                  | 11.8              | 9.7                  | 4.5                  | 9.1                     | 9.1                  |
| Neutral/don't know    | 0.7                  | 3.9               | 3.8                  | 0.7                  | 3.3                     | 3.0                  |
| Somewhat satisfied    | 38.4                 | 36.5              | 39.2                 | 42.0                 | 45.0                    | 39.9                 |
| Very satisfied        | 52.9                 | 45.7              | 44.1                 | 51.8                 | 40.0                    | 45.8                 |

*Note: Totals reflect weighting.*

Respondents were also asked how much they felt they could affect what happens in their communities. As the data in Table 2 indicate, 77.2 per cent reported believing that they themselves or their families could make "some" or "a lot of" difference in improving their communities (54.9 per cent believe they and their families can make "some" difference; another 22.3 per cent believe they can make "a lot of" difference). On the negative side, however, roughly 20 per cent of Alaskans believe they can make "very little" or "no" difference in improving their communities. Looking at responses by area of residence again shows some minor differences between residents of the five areas; however, the differences are not statistically significant.

Yet another quality of life question elicited respondents' opinions on their communities as child-raising environments (Table 3). The question was designed to prompt respondents to think about any number of things associated with a child-raising environment, including schools, safety, day care and other services, familial support, even crime and delinquency. Large majorities in all areas of the state reported a belief that their communities are good places to raise children. The strongest agreement with the statement came from the Valdez/Kenai/Mat-Su region, while rural Alaska respondents and those from Anchorage are slightly less likely than respondents in other

*Please see Public Safety, page 6*

**Table 2. Ability to Make a Difference in the Community**

*In your opinion, how much of a difference can you and your family make in what happens in your community?*

|                        | Valdez/Kenai/        |                   |                      |                      |                         | Statewide<br>N = 605 |
|------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
|                        | Southeast<br>N = 121 | Mat-Su<br>N = 120 | Anchorage<br>N = 120 | Fairbanks<br>N = 122 | Rural Alaska<br>N = 122 |                      |
| No difference          | 2.5%                 | 4.8%              | 5.7%                 | 3.3%                 | 5.8%                    | 4.8%                 |
| Very little difference | 14.6                 | 16.4              | 17.0                 | 19.1                 | 13.9                    | 16.4                 |
| Some difference        | 59.6                 | 50.2              | 57.2                 | 52.8                 | 52.0                    | 54.9                 |
| A lot of difference    | 21.8                 | 27.2              | 18.4                 | 22.1                 | 27.4                    | 22.3                 |
| Don't know             | 1.4                  | 1.3               | 1.7                  | 2.6                  | 0.9                     | 1.6                  |

*Note: Totals reflect weighting.*

## A BJS Report

## Spouse Murder Defendants in Large Urban Counties

## Recent BJS Reports

In addition to the report summarized in the accompanying article, the following recent studies and reports from the Bureau of Justice Statistics are available from the Alaska Justice Statistical Analysis Unit or on the World Wide Web at <http://ncjrs.aspensys.com:81>:

*"Prisoners in 1994," the annual BJS report on national figures on incarceration, NCJ-151634.*

*"Weapons Offenses and Offenders," national data on the criminal use of deadly weapons, NCJ-155284.*

*"HIV in Prisons and Jails, 1993," national data on state and federal prisoners known to be HIV-positive, NCJ-152765.*

Of an estimated 9,600 murder defendants in the nation's 75 most populous counties in 1988, six per cent—or an estimated 540 defendants—were persons charged with murdering their spouse.

Information on the 540 comes from a representative sample of murder cases disposed in 1988, which was assembled from state prosecutor files in 33 of the 75 counties. The counties were widely scattered, from Los Angeles and San Diego, Denver and Dallas, to Philadelphia and Dade County (Miami). A little over half of all murders in the nation occur in these 75 counties. Consequently, survey results summarized in this report have broad relevance because they are from the courts where the majority of the nation's murder trials are held.

This case processing study of spouse murder defendants is the most geographically comprehensive study on the topic. While the survey covers murder cases processed seven years ago, the Bureau of Justice Statistics knows from extensive experience with surveying courts that changes in case processing are quite gradual. The results are therefore likely to be applicable today.

## Demographic Characteristics

Husbands charged with killing their wife outnumbered wives charged with killing their husband. Of the 540 defendants in spouse murder cases, 318—or 59 per cent—were husband defendants and 222—or 41 per cent—were wife defendants.

Blacks comprised 55 per cent of the 540 defendants and whites comprised 43 per cent. Among husband defendants 51 per cent were black and 45 per cent were white. Among wife defendants 61 per cent were black and 39 per cent were white. In 97 per cent of the murders, both spouses were the same race.

Age of spouse murder defendants ranged from 18 to 87. The average age of husband defendants was 41; of wife defendants, 37 years.

## Arrest Charge

First-degree murder was the most frequent charge at arrest, accounting for 70 per cent of defendants. In descending order of seriousness, charges were distributed this way among the 540 spouse murder defendants:

## Not Prosecuted\*

*Notes taken on prosecutors' records*

**Dallas, case 79:** The wife (the victim) is 89 and has been married 65 years. A recent stroke leaves her in terrible pain. She pleads with the doctor to kill her. The doctor refuses. The 87-year-old husband goes to the hospital and shoots her. He is immediately arrested.

**New Orleans, case 54:** For years, the 43-year-old husband (the victim), a dry cleaner operator, has beaten his 35-year-old wife. At the time of the murder the two are fighting and the husband stabs her in the back. She grabs the knife and stabs him, causing him to bleed to death. She is arrested the same day. She claims self-defense and the victim's family voices no objection.

**New Orleans, case 95:** The 28-year-old husband (the victim) has a long history of assaulting his 25-year-old wife. At the time of the murder a witness sees the husband in the kitchen chasing the wife with a machete in his hand. The fight ends when the wife stabs the husband once. She is arrested the same day and claims self-defense.

**Los Angeles, case 21:** During an argument the 50-year-old wife (the victim) pulls out a gun and threatens to kill her 39-year-old unemployed husband. The two struggle. He flees the house and gets in his car. She moves in front of the car, raises the gun, and takes aim. He runs over her. He is arrested a day later.

**Columbus, OH, case 2:** The wife, age 75, has mental problems. One morning, while her husband (the victim), a 75-year-old retired welder, is still asleep, she stabs him to death. She says she heard a voice tell her to kill him.

**Orange County, CA, case 84:** When police arrive at the scene, they find the body of the wife (the victim) with fifteen stab wounds and the husband's body with five. Police believe there was an argument, the husband stabbed the wife in a struggle, and then sliced his own neck. Both have been dead for one or two days.

**San Diego, case 89:** Three weeks before the murder the 32-year-old husband beats his 35-year-old wife (the victim) severely. She tells others that next time he is going to kill her. She wants a divorce, but he wants a reconciliation. On the day of the murder, the two are at a bar, and he is drinking. Later a witness sees her outside a car in the middle of the street. The wife screams, then slumps to the ground, dying from multiple stab wounds in the chest. The husband flees the scene. Later he is found dead from a drug overdose.

**Orlando, FL, case 7:** The husband comes home drunk and demands money from his wife. She refuses and he attacks her with a metal pipe. She gets a butcher knife from the kitchen and stabs him once through the heart.

\* Case numbers are those assigned in the data set examined. The summaries reproduced here may not always contain all details.

## Guilty Pleas\*

Notes taken on prosecutors' records

**Philadelphia**, case 69: Both are retired. They have been married 47 years. The 65-year-old wife (the victim) has recently suffered a stroke. Her health and state of mind deteriorate rapidly. According to her 68-year-old husband, she had become "mentally disturbed." He feels he can no longer meet her health demands and decides to "put her out of her misery." He shoots her with a rifle. **Outcome:** He pleaded guilty to nonnegligent manslaughter and was sentenced to straight probation (no confinement in prison or jail).

**Queens, NY**, case 5: According to neighbors, the husband and his common-law wife (the victim) regularly get drunk and argue. On the day of the murder, they are arguing and the common-law husband places his 69-year-old wife in a sofa bed and closes it. He later says he tried but was unable to open it. She dies in the sofa bed. **Outcome:** He pleaded guilty to negligent manslaughter and was sentenced to straight probation (no confinement in prison or jail).

**San Diego**, case 1: The 23-year-old husband (the victim) is a construction worker and the 21-year-old wife is on welfare. The husband beats his wife and their 18-month-old daughter the night prior to the murder. On the night of the murder, the wife and her husband are asleep in their bedroom and the daughter is in another room. The child begins to cry, waking the husband. He orders the wife to stop the child's crying. The wife leaves the bedroom, returns with a gun, and shoots the husband. Evidence emerges that the wife and the daughter have been repeatedly physically abused by the victim. Hospital examination at the time of the murder finds multiple bruises on the child and the defendant in various stages of healing. **Outcome:** She pleaded guilty to nonnegligent manslaughter and was sentenced to 10 months in prison.

**New Haven, CT**, case 2: She, a 28-year-old secretary, suffers years of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her 30-year-old husband (the victim). Several times he tries to kill her. She stays with him at first because she thinks he will stop, then because she fears he will find her wherever she goes, and then because she fears losing her kids. At some point she buys a gun to defend herself. On the night of the murder she thinks he is

possibly going to kill her. In the middle of a beating she grabs the gun from under the mattress and shoots him. **Outcome:** She pleaded guilty to negligent manslaughter and was sentenced to straight probation (no confinement in prison or jail).

**Pittsburgh**, case 15: The husband (the victim) has a history of beating his wife. On the night of the murder, the husband comes home and begins ordering her around, as he frequently does. The wife leaves the room. When she returns she notices him looking through the closet for the gun. The wife earlier hid it under the bed. While he is searching, the wife retrieves the gun and shoots him repeatedly. She claims she was tired of the abuse. **Outcome:** She pleaded guilty to nonnegligent manslaughter and was sentenced to straight probation (no confinement in prison or jail).

**Ft. Lauderdale, FL**, case 62: Late one night the husband (the victim) and the wife, a mail carrier, are arguing. Police arrive and convince the husband to leave for the night. The wife locks the door, arms herself with a handgun, and sleeps in the hall. The husband returns the next morning, enters the apartment, and finds the wife locked in the bathroom. When the husband tries to get into the bathroom, the wife fires a shot through the door, striking the husband in the leg. The action moves into the bedroom, where the husband is shot in the head. **Outcome:** She pleaded guilty to nonnegligent manslaughter and was sentenced to straight probation (no confinement in prison or jail).

**Austin, TX**, case 4: The husband (the victim) and his common-law wife, a housekeeper, frequently drink and fight. On the day of the murder, both are intoxicated and begin fighting. The wife gets a gun and shoots her husband. She then calls the police. The wife has injuries she says she received from being beaten by her husband. **Outcome:** She pleaded guilty to negligent manslaughter and was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

**Dayton, OH**, case 3: The husband (the victim) and his common-law wife are arguing about a variety of things. Throughout the argument the husband beats her. When the husband comes after her in the kitchen, she grabs a knife. She stabs him in the back as he is walking away. **Outcome:** She pleaded guilty to negligent manslaughter and was sentenced to two years in prison.

\* Case numbers are those assigned in the data set examined. The summaries reproduced here may not always contain all details.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics

- 70% first-degree murder
- 24% second-degree murder
- 6% nonnegligent manslaughter

### Disposition of Cases

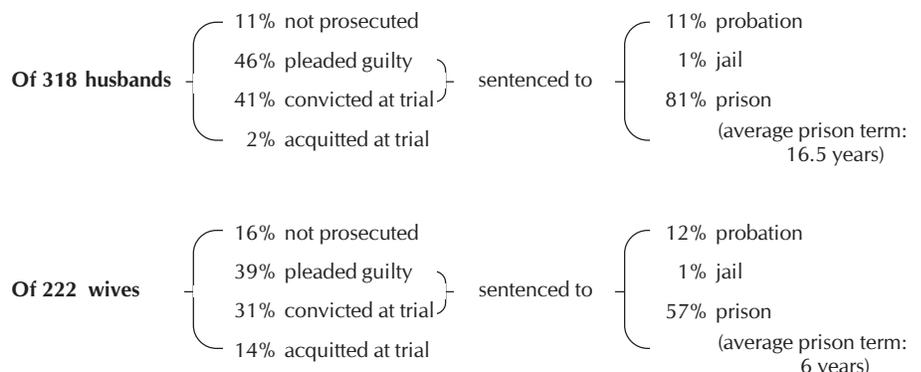
Cases were disposed in one of three ways:

- 1) the prosecutor declined to prosecute; or
- 2) the defendant pleaded not guilty, stood trial, and was either acquitted or convicted; or
- 3) the defendant pleaded guilty.

Of the 540 spouse murder defendants,

Please see *BJS*, page 4

Table 1. Defendants in Spouse Murder Cases



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics

## Trial Convictions\*

Notes taken on prosecutors' records

**Oklahoma City**, case 24: The 59-year-old husband (the victim) comes home intoxicated and continues drinking. His 52-year-old wife claims he became violent and began to beat her. She says she shot him in self-defense. The prosecution counters that there are no bruises or other signs of a beating. The prosecution contends she shot him while he lay in bed sleeping. **Outcome:** *The jury convicted her of first degree murder. She was sentenced to life imprisonment.*

**Rochester, NY**, case 26: Throughout their turbulent four-year marriage, the husband (the victim) verbally and physically abuses his wife. She never once leaves him, though. Prior to the night of the murder, the husband buys a gun and puts it in his dresser. The night of the murder, the husband is slapping the wife around, telling her to get out of the house. He calls the police to have her removed from the premises. While he is on the phone, telling police "she's a whore," the wife grabs his gun and shoots him four times. **Outcome:** *The jury convicted her of second-degree murder. She was sentenced to 15 years in prison.*

**Bakersfield, CA**, case 34: The husband (the victim) and wife jointly own a bar. She claims he showed up at the bar angry at her about something and slapped her. She says she became scared, saw a gun, and shot him. The prosecution disputes that, contending she murdered him so that she would gain sole ownership of the bar. **Outcome:** *The jury found her guilty of nonnegligent manslaughter. She was sentenced to eight years in prison.*

**Philadelphia**, case #169: They have been married 20 years. Both are heavy drinkers. During an argument, he, a longshoreman, hits his 53-year-old wife (the victim) on the head, and several days later she dies. Evidence is uncovered that she was a battered wife. The couple's children testify that he has beaten her for at least 15 years. She has been to hospitals throughout the city for cuts and bruises inflicted by him. He has a long history of arrests and convictions. **Outcome:** *The jury convicted him of negligent manslaughter. He was sentenced to three years in prison.*

**Oklahoma City**, case 1: The 35-year-old husband has threatened his 29-year-old wife (the victim) in the past. The threats cause her to leave him. On the day of the murder she is drinking and returns to his apartment with her mother to get clothes and food. He is there and also has been drinking. He stabs to death both her and her mother and flees. He has numerous prior arrests and convictions. **Outcome:** *The jury found him guilty of two counts of first-degree murder. He was sentenced to the death penalty.*

**San Diego**, case 15: He, age 41, has been sadistically abusing his 41-year-old wife (the victim) for about eight years. He

frequently binds, gags, and blindfolds her and forces her to perform sex acts on him. He sometimes cuts and burns her while she is bound. A year prior to the murder she calls the police following a beating. He is arrested and convicted and then thrown out of the Navy, terminating a 22-year career. Soon after, they separate. On the night of the murder, he has drunk about 20 beers and calls his estranged wife, ordering her to take off her clothes and await his arrival. When he enters her apartment, she is nude and holds out her wrists to him. He binds, gags and blindfolds her, cuts her with a knife, and wraps tape and rope around her neck, strangling her. Hours later he is arrested. He admits killing her and intending to do so for some time. He blames her for ruining his career, saying he was going to kill her sooner or later. **Outcome:** *The jury convicted him of first-degree murder. He was sentenced to 26 years in prison.*

**Seattle**, case 32: Two weeks before the murder, the 43-year-old husband, an aircraft worker, is jailed for assaulting his 31-year-old wife (the victim). She and the children then move out of the house. On the day of the murder the children are being watched by a babysitter in their new lodgings. The wife returns home and the husband appears out of hiding. He orders the babysitter to lie down and tells the wife that she is going to watch the babysitter die. He begins stabbing the babysitter in the back, but the babysitter breaks free. The husband turns his attack on the wife, who dies from multiple stab wounds. **Outcome:** *The jury convicted him of first-degree murder. He was sentenced to 45 years in prison.*

**Brooklyn**, case 54: The 52-year-old husband suspects his 45-year-old wife (the victim) is having an affair. While at home the two argue and she, a factory worker, admits to the affair. He bludgeons her with a hammer. **Outcome:** *The jury found him guilty of using a dangerous weapon (other than a firearm). He was sentenced to straight probation (no confinement in prison or jail).*

**Dallas**, case 178: The wife (the victim), a 24-year-old postal clerk, is having an affair with another man. The 26-year-old husband arrives at the other man's house and finds his wife in bed with the man. The husband shoots and kills them both. **Outcome:** *The jury convicted him of two counts of nonnegligent manslaughter. He was sentenced to 50 years in prison.*

**Riverside, CA**, case 1: The husband (the victim) beats and abuses his wife for many years. One night, after being abused, she gets up, grabs a rifle and shoots him while he is sleeping. She then takes her children and flees. **Outcome:** *The jury found her guilty of nonnegligent manslaughter. She was sentenced to eight years in prison.*

\* Case numbers are those assigned in the data set examined. The summaries reproduced here may not always contain all details.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics

### BJS

(continued from page 3)

232—or 43 per cent—pleaded guilty to killing their spouse and 238—or 44 per cent—pleaded not guilty and stood trial. The remaining 70 persons—or 13 per cent—were not prosecuted.

### Outcome for Defendants Standing Trial

Of the 238 spouse murder defendants

who pleaded not guilty, 63 per cent were tried by a jury and the remaining 37 per cent were tried by a judge. Together, judge and juries acquitted 16 per cent of the 238 spouse murder defendants and convicted 84 per cent—or 199 persons—of killing their spouse.

Bench trials (trials before a judge) had a higher acquittal rate than jury trials: 26 per cent of bench trials of spouse murder defendants ended in acquittal, versus 11 per cent of jury trials.

### Convictions

Of the 540 spouse murder defendants, 431 (80%) were ultimately convicted of killing their spouse. Their conviction was the result of either pleading guilty (232 persons) or being convicted at trial (199 persons).

While most persons arrested (70%) for spouse murder were charged with first-degree murder, most persons convicted (52%) of spouse murder had negligent or

nonnegligent manslaughter as their conviction offense.

### Sentences

Of the 431 defendants convicted of killing their spouse, 69 per cent were sentenced to a state prison, one per cent were sentenced to a county jail, and the remaining 10 per cent received a sentence of straight probation (no prison or jail confinement).

An estimated 12 per cent of the 431 convicted spouse murderers received a sentence to life imprisonment and one per cent received the death penalty.

Excluding life and death sentences, the average prison term imposed was 13 years.

### Differences in Convictions Rates

Wife defendants had a lower conviction rate than husband defendants:

- Of the 222 wife defendants, 70 per cent were convicted. By contrast, of the 318 husband defendants, 87 per cent were convicted.

- Of the 100 wife defendants tried by either a judge or jury, 31 per cent were acquitted, but of the 138 husbands tried, six per cent were acquitted.

- Of the 59 wife defendants tried by a jury, 27 per cent were acquitted, while of the estimated 91 husband defendants tried by a jury, none was acquitted.

### Sentencing Disparities

Convicted wives were less likely than convicted husbands to be sentenced to prison, and convicted wives received shorter prison sentences than their male counterparts:

- 81 per cent of convicted wives and 94 per cent of convicted husbands received a prison sentence.

- On average, convicted wives received prison sentences that were about 10 years shorter than what husbands received. Excluding life or death sentences, the average prison sentence for killing a spouse was six years for wives but 16.5 years for husbands.

- Among wives sentenced, 15 per cent received a sentence of 20 years or more (including life imprisonment and the death penalty); among husbands, it was 43 per cent.

### Victim Provocation

According to information contained in prosecutor files, more wife defendants (44%) than husband defendants (10%) had been assaulted by their spouse (threatened with a weapon or physically assaulted) at or around the time of the murder.

### Self-Defense

Certain extreme circumstances may provoke taking a life in self-defense. Such provocation was more often present in wife defendant cases, and wife defendants were less likely than husband defendants to be convicted, suggesting that the relatively high rate of victim provocation characteristic of

*Please see BJS, page 6*

## Trial Acquittals\*

*Notes taken on prosecutors' records*

**Miami**, case 84: The couple has an on-again, off-again relationship for 20 years. Several weeks prior to the murder, she sees her common-law husband (the victim) leave a motel with another woman. Subsequently, the couple has several violent confrontations until one day she shoots him. **Outcome:** *The jury acquitted her of all charges.*

**Chicago**, case 15: The couple is arguing when the 25-year-old wife finds a letter to her 25-year-old husband (the victim, a fast food-restaurant employee) from a co-worker. The wife gets a kitchen knife and stabs him. She claims she was a victim of battered wife syndrome and was only defending herself. **Outcome:** *At a bench trial the judge acquitted her.*

**Chicago**, case 28: The couple is arguing when the 64-year-old husband (the victim) swings a pipe at his 34-year-old wife. She gets a knife and stabs him to death. **Outcome:** *The jury acquitted her.*

**Chicago**, case 52: The 49-year-old husband (the victim) is drunk and gets into an argument with his 50-year-old wife. According to her, at some point he throws a fan at her. She gets a knife and lunges at him, cutting his abdomen. **Outcome:** *The jury acquitted her.*

**Philadelphia**, case 17: The 35-year-old husband (the victim) comes home drunk after work and begins fighting with his 31-year-old common-law wife over money he is missing. The husband is throwing things at the wife and her children until she gets a knife and stabs the husband once in the chest. **Outcome:** *At a bench trial the judge acquitted her.*

**Cambridge, MA**, case 16: The 38-year-old husband has been hospitalized several times for mental illness. He feels everyone is

out to get him. He comes home one evening and sees his 30-year-old wife (the victim) talking with a friend. He immediately thinks she is talking about him, and he later strangles her. **Outcome:** *At a bench trial the judge found him not guilty by reason of insanity.*

**Dallas**, case 65: The unemployed 58-year-old husband is released from a mental hospital two weeks before the murder. He fears his 56-year-old wife (the victim), a secretary, will leave him for another man and have him put back in the mental hospital. He stabs her to death. **Outcome:** *At a bench trial the judge found him not guilty by reason of insanity.*

**St. Louis**, case 9: The wife, now age 42, has grown increasingly depressed over the years. On the day of the murder she is so distraught she shoots her 51-year-old husband (the victim) several times in the head while he is napping. **Outcome:** *The jury found her not guilty by reason of insanity.*

**Detroit**, case 98: The two are out drinking. They return home and begin arguing. According to the wife, age 30, her 25-year-old husband (the victim) attacked her. She grabs a knife and stabs him. She claims he has beaten her before. No witnesses are present at the time of the murder. **Outcome:** *She was acquitted of second-degree murder at a bench trial.*

**Manhattan**, case 72: She, a 29-year-old artist, has lived with her 47-year-old common-law husband (the victim) a musician, for a few years. He frequently beats, starves, and tortures her. He repeatedly tells her he is going to kill her. For some time leading up to the murder, he has not let her eat or shower. On the day of the murder they are going to a bar when she asks him to let her go home because she is tired. He says "no" and begins hitting her and calling her names. The beating ends when she stabs him. He has numerous past arrests and convictions. **Outcome:** *The jury acquitted her.*

\* Case numbers are those assigned in the data set examined. The summaries reproduced here may not always contain all details.

**BJS**  
(continued from page 5)

wife defendant cases was one of the reasons wife defendants had a lower conviction rate than husband defendants. Consistent with that finding, of the provoked wife defendants, 56 per cent were convicted, significantly lower than either the 86 per cent conviction rate for unprovoked wife defendants or the 88 per cent conviction rate for unprovoked husbands.

Wives received shorter prison sentences than husbands (a 10-year difference, on average) even when the comparison is restricted to defendants who were alike in terms of whether or not they were provoked. The average prison sentence for unprovoked wife defendants was seven years, or ten years shorter than the average 17 years for unprovoked husband defendants.

**Victim's Race**

The victim was black in 55 per cent of cases and white in 43 per cent. The likelihood of a defendant being convicted of spouse murder was about the same whether the murder victim was white or black. Among spouse murder defendants whose victim was white, 81 per cent were convicted. Among those whose victim was black, 79 per cent were convicted.

Likewise, the sentence was unrelated to the victim's race. The likelihood of a con-

victed spouse murderer receiving a prison sentence was about the same whether the murder victim was white or black: the convicted spouse murderer was sentenced to prison in 93 per cent of cases where the victim was white—not significantly different from the 87 per cent of cases where the victim was black.

For conviction for first-degree murder, the average prison term (excluding the life and death sentences) was 29 years in white-victim cases—not significantly different from the 32-year average prison terms in black-victim cases.

For conviction for second-degree murder, the average prison term (excluding life sentences) was 19 years in white-victim cases, significantly longer than the 13 years in black-victim cases. However, 23 per cent of convicted second-degree murder defendants in black-victim cases received a sentence of life imprisonment, compared to eight per cent of defendants of white-victim cases.

For conviction for nonnegligent manslaughter, the average prison term (excluding life sentences) was eight years in white-victim cases, not significantly different from the average six years in black-victim cases.

**Defendant's Race**

The likelihood of being convicted and of receiving a prison sentence if convicted were

about the same whether the spouse murder defendant was white or black:

- 78 per cent of white defendants were convicted—not significantly different from the 80 per cent of black defendants.

- Among convicted spouse murderers, 93 per cent of white defendants were sentenced to prison—again, not significantly different from the 88 per cent of black defendants.

**Processing Time**

Three measures of processing time were taken from the day of the murder—to arrest, to indictment, and to final disposition. Most spouse murder defendants were arrested on the same day the killing occurred. Average time to indictment was four months. Average time to final disposition was almost exactly one year.

For husbands tried by a jury, 12.5 months was the average elapsed time from the day of the murder to the conclusion of the jury trial. For wives tried by a jury the average elapsed time was significantly longer—about 18.5 months.

*The preceding article has been adapted from the Bureau of Justice Statistics report "Spouse Murder Defendants in Large Urban Counties," NCJ-153256. Copies of the entire report may be obtained from the Alaska Justice Statistical Analysis Unit or on the World Wide Web at <http://ncjrs.aspensys.com:81>.*

**Public Safety**  
(continued from page 1)

areas to believe their communities are good child-rearing environments.

**Crime Trends**

Survey respondents were also asked several questions dealing directly with their perceptions of crime trends and community safety. Again, as with the quality-of-life measurements, the results to these questions indicate a general perception of Alaska communities as satisfactory environments.

Alaskans are split in their perceptions about crime trends; however, over half believe crime in their communities is staying the same or decreasing (Table 4). Four out of every ten Alaskans believe that crime in their communities has "stayed the same" (41.6%); 10.6 per cent think crime in their communities is decreasing. Forty-three and a half per cent perceive crime as either somewhat increasing or greatly increasing. Residents of Fairbanks are considerably more likely than those in other areas to believe that crime has either somewhat or

**Table 3. Child-Raising in the Community**

*How much do you agree or disagree with this statement:  
"My community is a good place to raise children?"*

|                    | Valdez/Kenai/        |                   |                      |                      |                         |                      |
|--------------------|----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
|                    | Southeast<br>N = 121 | Mat-Su<br>N = 120 | Anchorage<br>N = 120 | Fairbanks<br>N = 122 | Rural Alaska<br>N = 122 | Statewide<br>N = 605 |
| Strongly disagree  | 2.8%                 | 3.0%              | 2.4%                 | 0.9%                 | 7.3%                    | 3.1%                 |
| Somewhat disagree  | 5.1                  | 3.3               | 10.7                 | 5.0                  | 8.5                     | 7.6                  |
| Neutral/don't know | 2.3                  | 2.7               | 3.2                  | 2.4                  | 4.3                     | 3.1                  |
| Somewhat agree     | 33.0                 | 30.4              | 44.5                 | 37.1                 | 32.6                    | 37.7                 |
| Strongly agree     | 56.8                 | 60.6              | 39.3                 | 54.6                 | 47.4                    | 48.4                 |

**Note:** Totals reflect weighting.

**Table 4. Crime Rates in the Neighborhood**

*Would you say that crime in your neighborhood is decreasing, staying the same, or increasing?*

|                    | Valdez/Kenai/        |                   |                      |                      |                         |                      |
|--------------------|----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
|                    | Southeast<br>N = 121 | Mat-Su<br>N = 120 | Anchorage<br>N = 120 | Fairbanks<br>N = 122 | Rural Alaska<br>N = 122 | Statewide<br>N = 605 |
| Greatly decreased  | 1.1%                 | 0.0%              | 5.5%                 | 0.0%                 | 2.6%                    | 2.8%                 |
| Somewhat decreased | 7.8                  | 9.4               | 6.3                  | 2.9                  | 14.0                    | 7.8                  |
| Stayed the same    | 45.4                 | 39.1              | 41.4                 | 32.7                 | 48.8                    | 41.6                 |
| Somewhat increased | 32.4                 | 42.2              | 32.4                 | 44.8                 | 24.2                    | 34.3                 |
| Greatly increased  | 10.1                 | 5.5               | 10.3                 | 15.6                 | 5.0                     | 9.2                  |
| Don't know         | 3.3                  | 3.8               | 4.2                  | 4.1                  | 5.5                     | 4.2                  |

**Note:** Totals reflect weighting.

greatly increased. A higher proportion of rural Alaskans than residents of other areas believe crime has stayed the same, and fewer rural Alaskans than others believe that crime has increased to any extent in the past year.

When questioned about their level of worry about violent crime, fairly equal numbers of respondents statewide declare they never or infrequently worry—34.1 per cent and 32.1 per cent, respectively (Table 5). Close to one-quarter of adult Alaskans (23.7%) occasionally worry about becoming a victim of violent crime, while 6.9 per cent frequently worry and 3.2 per cent always worry.

**Willingness to Assist with Public Safety**

The degree to which residents are willing to become involved with police and public safety efforts also reflects, at least indirectly, their sense of community. When asked if they were willing to assist with public safety efforts, a strong majority throughout the state replied that they were willing (Table

*Please see Public Safety, page 8*

**Table 5. Level of Worry About Violent Crime**

*How often do you worry about becoming a victim of violent crime in your community?*

|                      | Valdez/Kenai/      |                 |                    |                    |                       |                    |
|----------------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
|                      | Southeast<br>N=121 | Mat-Su<br>N=120 | Anchorage<br>N=120 | Fairbanks<br>N=122 | Rural Alaska<br>N=122 | Statewide<br>N=605 |
| Never worried        | 43.9%              | 46.5%           | 19.8%              | 30.9%              | 52.7%                 | 34.1%              |
| Infrequently worried | 34.1               | 27.7            | 38.2               | 27.0               | 22.9                  | 32.1               |
| Occasionally worried | 15.9               | 18.8            | 29.2               | 26.5               | 19.0                  | 23.7               |
| Frequently worried   | 5.2                | 5.9             | 8.7                | 9.6                | 2.6                   | 6.9                |
| Always worried       | 0.9                | 1.2             | 4.1                | 6.0                | 2.7                   | 3.2                |

*Note: Totals reflect weighting.*

**Table 6. Willingness to Help with Public Safety Efforts**

*Given the problems in your community, to what degree are you willing to actively help with public safety efforts?*

|                    | Valdez/Kenai/      |                 |                    |                    |                       |                    |
|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
|                    | Southeast<br>N=121 | Mat-Su<br>N=120 | Anchorage<br>N=120 | Fairbanks<br>N=122 | Rural Alaska<br>N=122 | Statewide<br>N=605 |
| Unwilling          | 0.0%               | 2.1%            | 3.3%               | 3.4%               | 4.3%                  | 2.8%               |
| Neutral/don't know | 6.7                | 6.2             | 3.3                | 7.6                | 7.3                   | 5.4                |
| Willing            | 93.3               | 91.7            | 93.4               | 89.0               | 88.4                  | 91.8               |

*Note: Totals reflect weighting.*

**Table 7. Willingness to Help with Specific Public Safety Activities**

*In general, how willing are you to do any of the following?*

|   | Valdez/Kenai/      |                 |                    |                    |                       |                    |
|---|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
|   | Southeast<br>N=121 | Mat-Su<br>N=120 | Anchorage<br>N=120 | Fairbanks<br>N=122 | Rural Alaska<br>N=122 | Statewide<br>N=605 |
| <b>Report a crime you see to the police</b>         |                    |                 |                    |                    |                       |                    |
| Unwilling   | 1.1%               | 1.4%            | 0.9%               | 1.0%               | 2.6%                  | 1.3%               |
| Neutral/don't know                                  | 0.0                | 3.6             | 0.9                | 0.7                | 0.7                   | 1.2                |
| Willing   | 98.9               | 95.0            | 98.3               | 98.3               | 96.6                  | 97.5               |
| <b>Report suspicious activities you see</b>         |                    |                 |                    |                    |                       |                    |
| Unwilling   | 3.9%               | 6.5%            | 6.0%               | 4.6%               | 8.7%                  | 6.1%               |
| Neutral/don't know                                  | 1.8                | 2.4             | 1.1                | 1.9                | 2.5                   | 1.7                |
| Willing   | 94.3               | 91.0            | 92.9               | 93.6               | 88.8                  | 92.2               |
| <b>Tell police who you are when you see a crime</b> |                    |                 |                    |                    |                       |                    |
| Unwilling   | 2.5%               | 4.9%            | 8.9%               | 5.5%               | 10.0%                 | 7.1%               |
| Neutral/don't know                                  | 1.1                | 1.3             | 0.0                | 0.9                | 0.8                   | 0.6                |
| Willing   | 96.4               | 93.8            | 91.1               | 93.6               | 89.2                  | 92.3               |
| <b>Assist police officers needing help</b>          |                    |                 |                    |                    |                       |                    |
| Unwilling   | 2.8%               | 4.0%            | 5.3%               | 7.6%               | 9.5%                  | 5.7%               |
| Neutral/don't know                                  | 2.9                | 2.1             | 1.7                | 3.8                | 6.3                   | 2.9                |
| Willing   | 94.3               | 93.9            | 93.0               | 88.5               | 84.3                  | 91.4               |
| <b>Assist a victim needing help</b>                 |                    |                 |                    |                    |                       |                    |
| Unwilling   | 0.7%               | 2.1%            | 0.8%               | 3.1%               | 2.6%                  | 1.6%               |
| Neutral/don't know                                  | 1.8                | 1.4             | 1.4                | 0.7                | 1.8                   | 1.4                |
| Willing   | 97.5               | 96.5            | 97.8               | 96.2               | 95.5                  | 97.0               |
| <b>Testify in court</b>                             |                    |                 |                    |                    |                       |                    |
| Unwilling   | 3.4%               | 1.8%            | 3.2%               | 7.2%               | 5.1%                  | 3.8%               |
| Neutral/don't know                                  | 0.0                | 1.4             | 3.3                | 1.7                | 5.0                   | 2.6                |
| Willing   | 96.6               | 96.8            | 93.5               | 91.1               | 89.9                  | 93.6               |

*Note: Totals reflect weighting.*



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**Public Safety**  
(continued from page 7)

6). Interviewees were also asked several questions to gauge the extent and parameters of their willingness to actively support public safety. With rare exception, the adult Alaskans who were interviewed expressed a willingness to report crime and suspicious activities, to identify themselves to police, to assist police and victims, and to testify in court.

Table 7 displays responses to six specific questions on respondent willingness. The table shows no significant differences in willingness by respondents' area of residence. Of those tasks examined, Alaskans are least willing to identify themselves to police when they have witnessed a crime: Overall, 7.1 per cent are unwilling—to some extent—to identify

themselves. This unwillingness is strongest in Anchorage and in rural Alaska, where 8.9 per cent and 10.0 per cent are at least somewhat unwilling; but, when the sample margins of error are considered, even these variations from other areas cannot be considered substantive.

**Conclusion**

The data obtained from the survey questions discussed in this article reveal that Alaskans have, in general, a high level of satisfaction with their communities; fear of crime is not particularly strong; residents perceive their communities as safe; and they feel that it is within their powers to affect the life of the community.

While the perceptions are not necessarily related to the actual incidence of crime and other public safety problems, they

nevertheless indicate a moderately strong sense of community well-being. In addition, Alaskans reveal a strong willingness to contribute to the well-being of the community when called upon in situations involving public safety.



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