

Background

In the 1970 Census Fairbanks North Star Borough (a territorial administrative unit containing both urban and rural areas) contained 45,846 people. The region lies mostly just south of the Arctic Circle and the terrain ranges from the wide swampy river flats of the Tanana, a tributary of the Yukon River, to mountainous country. There are large areas of permafrost. The short summers are warm but winters are long and harsh with average December-January temperatures around 34 degrees celsius below zero, occasionally reaching 50 below. Ice fog conditions caused by temperature inversion in the Tanana Valley, are common in winter. The main urban centre is Fairbanks which contained 14,771 people in 1970 and functioned as a service and delivery centre for the scattered small communities of the vast interior and northern areas of Alaska. There was also a large military component in the Borough population - 15,246 people living on two military reservations outside the city of Fairbanks. The non-military population outside Fairbanks city in 1970 was 15,289, a figure which includes Eskimo and Indian villages as well as European populations. Among the civilian population the ratio of male to female was 113:100 in 1970; when military personnel are included this figure increases to 134:100.

Fairbanks in 1970 was a frontier community with a large number of unattached males, a lower than average proportion of old people and the very young. Crimes against property were few but assaults against the person were frequent. There was also a disproportionate number of bars and saloons in downtown Fairbanks. Alcoholism was already a problem, exacerbated by long hard winters and high unemployment rates, especially winter unemployment.

Alaskan economy has always been shaky and what can be loosely described as a "boom or bust mentality" can be identified in Fairbanks. Public agencies provided 52 percent of employment in 1970 but the military component was declining from the cold war peak, and the community was moving away from dependence on military spending. An infusion of Federal and State finance for reconstruction after a serious flood in 1967 helped, but the construction industry was described as "erratic". Housing was already in short supply and very expensive - twice the price of equivalent housing in Seattle for example. Many of the