

# Alaskan Foster Youth and Independent Living Skills

An Examination of the Skills Necessary for Alaskan Youth Transitioning from Office of Children's Services Custody to Independent Living



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University of Alaska Anchorage School of Social Work





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# **Alaska Foster Youth and Independent Living Skills**

## **An Examination of the Skills Necessary for Alaskan Youth Transitioning from Office of Children’s Services Custody to Independent Living**

Conducted by

**THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA ANCHORAGE**

**School of Social Work**

**Child Welfare Evaluation Program**

### **Executive Summary**

This report is comprised of three parts: 1) a qualitative study of independent living skills for Alaskan youth; 2) a compilation of Ansell-Casey Living Skills Assessment (ACLSA) scores for Alaskan youth; and 3) recommendations derived from Parts 1 and 2 regarding transitional services for Alaskan youth in out-of-home care. Part 2 provides the context for the focus group discussion contained in Part 1 and the recommendations in Part 3.

What skills do Alaskan adolescents in State custody think they need to live as independent adults? Does the ACLSA adequately reflect these skills? What are the best ways to acquire the skills the youth say they need as they “age out” of protective state custody? The State of Alaska, in conjunction with the University of Alaska Anchorage School of Social Work, Casey Family Programs, and the Tribal State Collaboration Group, sought to answer these questions by posing them to foster youth ages 14-19 in a series of focus groups conducted around the state. Three themes emerged from analysis of the focus group responses: a) the life skills quantified in the ACLSA are important to Alaskan youth in becoming independent adults; b) depending on where the youth live, these skills may not be enough to provide them with the competencies needed for success in their communities; and c) the youth best learn independent living skills from practice, but need help and mentoring from adults along the way. Beyond the life skills contained in the ACLSA, Alaskan youth identified four other areas of competency they felt they needed to become successful adults: parenting, operating vehicles, attitudes and values, and subsistence and survival.

In addition to composite ACLSA scores for Alaskan youth, Part 2 also provides comparisons of these ratings to benchmark national samples. Scores among the Alaska sample indicated strengths in the areas of Daily Living Tasks and Social Development, and revealed weaknesses in Housing & Community Resources and Money Management. Participants confirmed these findings during their focus group feedback, providing rationales for both strengths and weaknesses in their peers who are in foster care and those who are not.

Conclusions based on findings from Parts 1 and 2 indicate several steps that should be taken to better prepare Alaskan youth in care to live as successful adults: specific instruction and skill-building in budgeting, money management, and obtaining adequate housing; targeted support and training for pregnant and parenting youth; and adult mentoring and coaching in all skill areas, particularly in the areas of survival and subsistence skills for rural youth. Caregivers need to acknowledge the difficulty foster youth face in navigating across geographic, economic, and social systems as they are placed, without their consent, in multiple living situations, often far way from where they once and may again call “home.” Finally, as the youth in this study have shown, adults serve an essential role as active teachers and guides in helping these young people practice the skills they will need to become successful adults. Systems to support and encourage such interactions are necessary to prepare Alaska’s youth for thriving adulthoods.

## **PART 1: THE ANSELL-CASEY LIFE SKILLS ASSESSMENT AND THE SKILLS YOUTH NEED IN ALASKA**

### **Introduction**

#### Background

When a child welfare authority takes a youth into care, responsibility for raising the youth resides with that organization. Like any good parent, that organization should desire to know how it is doing in terms of assuring the proper development of that youth, and should desire to improve in those areas of development in which the youth is struggling.

The proportion of adolescents in the child welfare population is growing, and many of these youth will not exit to adoption, guardianship, or even reunification, but rather will emancipate to “independence” (Barth, 1986). Unfortunately, without focused preparation before emancipation, these young adults may fare worse than their peers in education, employment, housing, mental and physical health, health insurance, and other important aspects of adult life (Barth, 1986, 1990; Collins, 2001; Downs & Caldwell, 2003; McDonald, Allen, Westerfelt, & Piliavin, 1996; Mech, 1994). As a result, they often end up less than independent, instead relying on welfare or being incarcerated (Barth, 1986; Downs & Caldwell, 2003). Results may be little better for youth who are discharged to homes that continue to experience deprivation and in which the parents do not model productive interactions with the economic infrastructure or with resources, and who have little social support that in turn could help the adolescent moving towards independence. Calls for more preparation for all adolescents in foster care are frequent (e.g., Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Downs & Caldwell, 2003; Mech, 2003).

#### *Emancipating youth in Alaska*

Like the term “foster care,” “emancipation” has both general and specific meanings. “Emancipating youth” may refer to all youth leaving foster care, or only to those older youth, most of whom have spent a substantial amount of time in protective custody, leaving not to a family, but to an independence for which they may have little preparation. This report focuses on youth in the custody of the Alaska Office of Children’s Services (OCS; previously the Division of Family and Youth Services), with particular attention to those older youth who may need transition services from OCS, but who also experience more of the limitations and turmoil of a longer stay in foster care (Collins, 2001; Downs & Caldwell, 2003; Mech, 2003).

Direct information about numbers of adolescents leaving care after long stays in custody is difficult to find. Of the 844 children who left State foster care during 2002, nearly 40% had been in care for two years or longer (in their most recent foster care spell), with more than half of these (22% of the total) leaving after three or more years in the state’s custody (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 2004). Those with longer spells in care are more likely to be older.

While many of these youth may have exited to the relative stability of adoption or guardianship, most did not. Older youth are less likely to exit to the stability of adoption or guardianship than younger children. Of those leaving care in Alaska in 2002, 31% left via adoption or guardianship (CWLA, 2004). Less than two percent of those leaving by adoption, however, were 16 or older (AFCARS, 2002, table 3). Thus, adolescents in foster care are less likely to find a permanent placement that can help them transition to adulthood, leaving the State with the task of preparing these youth to be contributing members of society.

Of those exiting in 2002, 19 (2.3%) had long-term foster care or emancipation as their last case goal, but at least 26 adolescents or young adults (3.1%) officially emancipated (CWLA, 2004),

indicating that there were a number of other youth who had other case goals—perhaps adoption or reunification—who ended up on their own. The State (DFYS, 2003) reported that in an 11-month period ending 1 June 2003 (before the end of the school year, after which more emancipations occur) 66 young adults ages 18 and older left care, a 29% increase over the entire previous fiscal year. Many youth return to their families, who may or may not offer the levels of stability and preparation for functioning adulthood these young people need. Some go to school or join the military. Many try to face the world alone with little structure. What happens as these youth grow older is largely an untold story (one the separate CWEP foster care alumni study will be illuminating).

#### *National data on youth leaving care*

Youth in foster care are more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Kortenkamp & Ehrle, 2002; Wertheimer, 2002), to repeat a grade and score lower on standardized educational tests (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Courtney et al., 2001), and to have a physical health problem (Kortenkamp & Ehrle, 2002; Wertheimer, 2002) than youth not involved with the child welfare system. They are more likely to engage in risky sexual activities at an earlier age (Wertheimer, 2002). When they turn 18, they are more likely to be sent off to live on their own with little or no family support (Blome, 1997, as cited in Burley & Halpern, 2001; Kools, 1997; Wertheimer, 2002). These nominal adults face the world often without a high school diploma (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Courtney et al., 2001; Downs & Caldwell, 2003; McDonald et al., 1996; Mech, 1994; Wertheimer, 2002) and with little real-world experience.

Factors preceding foster care account for much (but not all) of these difficulties. “Many children in the child welfare system not only come from but are placed in high-risk home environments characterized by poverty, instability, and parents or caregivers with poor psychological well-being” (Kortenkamp & Ehrle, 2002, p. 1). Socioeconomic status “contributes to a youth’s success in adulthood more than education, skill level, or personal initiative” (Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 7). The maltreatment (for most) and family disruption (for all) experienced by youth in foster care have far-reaching ramifications (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Downs & Williams, 2003). In addition, foster youth have reported feeling stigmatized by their experiences, “which results in low self-confidence and a lack of future orientation” (Kools, 1997, p. 268).

In 1999 in the US, over 56,000 youth ages 16 and older left foster care, including nearly 19,000 who emancipated to independence. A large proportion of these exits occurred in three relatively urban states, California, New York, and Illinois (Wertheimer, 2002). Follow-up research has demonstrated that many of these young adults experience a number of difficulties. Even two to four years after leaving care, they are less likely to have completed high school or a GED and to be employed full-time, and more likely to have experienced homelessness, to have been arrested and incarcerated, and to have relied on public assistance (Barth, 1986, 1990; Burley & Halpern, 2001; Courtney et al., 2001; Downs & Caldwell, 2003; McDonald et al., 1996; Mech, 1994; Wertheimer, 2002). “In short, if one intent of the out-of-[home]care system is to prepare foster youth to compete with their more traditionally domiciled peers in the complex society faced by young people in the United States today, that intent is far short of realization” (Courtney et al., 2001, p. 714).

## Reason for project

### *National efforts to help emancipating youth*

While the State, pursuant to Federal laws such as the Independent Living Initiative of 1986 and the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (establishing the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program), has been providing services to help youth prepare for adulthood, it has had little feedback on the effectiveness of these services and areas of need. Targeted independent living services have shown some success elsewhere in better preparing youth to make the transition to independent adulthood (Downs & Caldwell, 2003; Mech, 1994).

The national Westat study of young adults formerly in foster care (Cook, 1991, as cited in Wertheimer, 2002) found evidence that independent living training promoted future job retention, health care access, and social network development, and decreased welfare use and imprisonment.

*Youth who had received skill training in all of five key areas—money management, credit management, consumer skills, education, and employment—had significantly improved outcomes in their ability to live independently, when compared with those receiving no skill training in those areas (Wertheimer, 2002, p. 6).*

Courtney and colleagues (2001) similarly advocate for supplying concrete assistance, including psychological and medical services and an emergency safety net to supply food and housing when needed, “rather than merely information” (p. 714). A multitude of resources are available for training and practice in life skills, from such sources as the National Resource Center for Youth Services ([www.nrcys.ou.edu](http://www.nrcys.ou.edu)), [Caseylifeskills.org](http://Caseylifeskills.org), and the Children, Youth, and Families Education and Research Network ([cyfernet.org](http://cyfernet.org)). To help in planning for the learning of needed life skills, various methods for assessing need and developing a lesson or training plan are available, including the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment and the Daniel Independent Living Skills Assessment. All of these authors and resources support the development of healthy young people as they move towards productive adulthood.

### *The concept of adulthood*

But what is adulthood? While many authors advocate for the very capitalist ideal of an employed adult contributing to the economy (McDonald et al., 1996), this goal may not be for everyone. It may well be that “adulthood” is different in Alaska than it is in Tulsa, Seattle, or Washington DC. The current project was developed to investigate the applicability of national ideals of “adulthood” and “independence,” as embodied in the widely-used Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment, to the youth of Alaska.

Assessment is key to remedying skill weaknesses and preparing youth for adulthood, and foster parents and caseworkers have been urging youth in care to complete the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment. The State, however, has had little information regarding the relevance of this instrument to Alaskan youth. Would a youth who exhibits mastery on the ACLSA truly be able to master adulthood in Alaska? In an attempt to find out from the youth themselves about the relevance of this tool, and their perceptions of their own readiness to live independently, the University of Alaska Child Welfare Evaluation Program conducted focus groups with foster youth from around the state.

## Methodology

### Focus groups

Four focus groups comprised of youth aged 14-19 in out-of-home care were conducted across the state: Anchorage, Bethel, Juneau, and Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Mat-Su). Many of the focus groups were held in conjunction with existing events, such as a joint foster care youth and alumni and state transition resource specialist meeting. Youth in state custody were recruited via word-of-mouth through caseworkers and foster parents and via the mailings sent for the existing host event, if applicable. The focus groups lasted approximately one-hour each. The youth received lunch. A small incentive was added to the fourth focus group (restaurant gift certificates) due to lower than expected turnout in the previous focus groups.

The number of participants in each group is displayed in Table 1. Overall, there were 12 males and 8 females. One Bethel-area youth, who was not able to travel due to weather but who very much wanted to participate, was involved via an individual conference call with the researchers after the focus group had ended. The low turnout for the Juneau group was due to a number of promised youth not attending, some due to a flu epidemic that hit the area that week.

**Table 1: Focus group participants**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Youth who grew up in</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
Anchorage	Anchorage, Juneau, Kodiak	6
Bethel	Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta	3 plus 1
Juneau	Juneau	1
Anchorage	Anchorage, Kenai Peninsula, Y-K Delta, Bristol Bay, Kodiak	9

Major themes or concepts were recorded on flipcharts, with more detailed note-taking occurring immediately after the conclusion of the focus group so as to not provide a distraction. Proceedings were audio-taped to ensure recording of all pertinent data.

In order to assure some basic level of understanding of the topics discussed in the focus groups, youth were asked to complete the ACLSA before attending, if they had not already done so. In addition, posters mounted in the room displayed the ACLSA domains with sample items (listed in Figure 1) and illustrated results from a preliminary analysis of all youth level III ACLSAs taken by Alaskan youth (an example appears in Figure 2, and a more complete analysis with a larger population appears in Part 2 of this report).

## **Figure 1: Ansell-Casey Life-Skills Assessment (ACLSA) domains and sample items**

### **Daily Living Tasks**

- I know how to wash my clothes according to the label (for example, hand wash, dry clean, cold water)
- I store food so it doesn't spoil or go bad
- I prevent or minimize roaches, ants, mice, mold, mildew, etc.
- I plan healthy meals each week

### **Housing & Community Resources**

- I can calculate the start-up costs for new living arrangements (for instance, rental deposits, rent, utilities, furnishings)
- I can explain how to get and renew a driver's license
- I am aware of local social service agencies (like employment and counseling services)
- I can complete a rental agreement or lease

### **Money Management**

- I can explain how to write checks, make deposits, and ATM transactions, and balance a checking/savings account
- I understand billing information (such as a phone bill)
- I know how many grocery items I can buy for \$10
- I can name two ways to save money on things I buy

### **Self-Care**

- I can explain two ways to prevent sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) such as HIV/AIDS and syphilis
- I can explain what happens to your body if you smoke or chew tobacco, drink alcohol, or use illegal drugs
- I can explain how to prevent pregnancy
- I understand which medicines to take when signs of illness are present

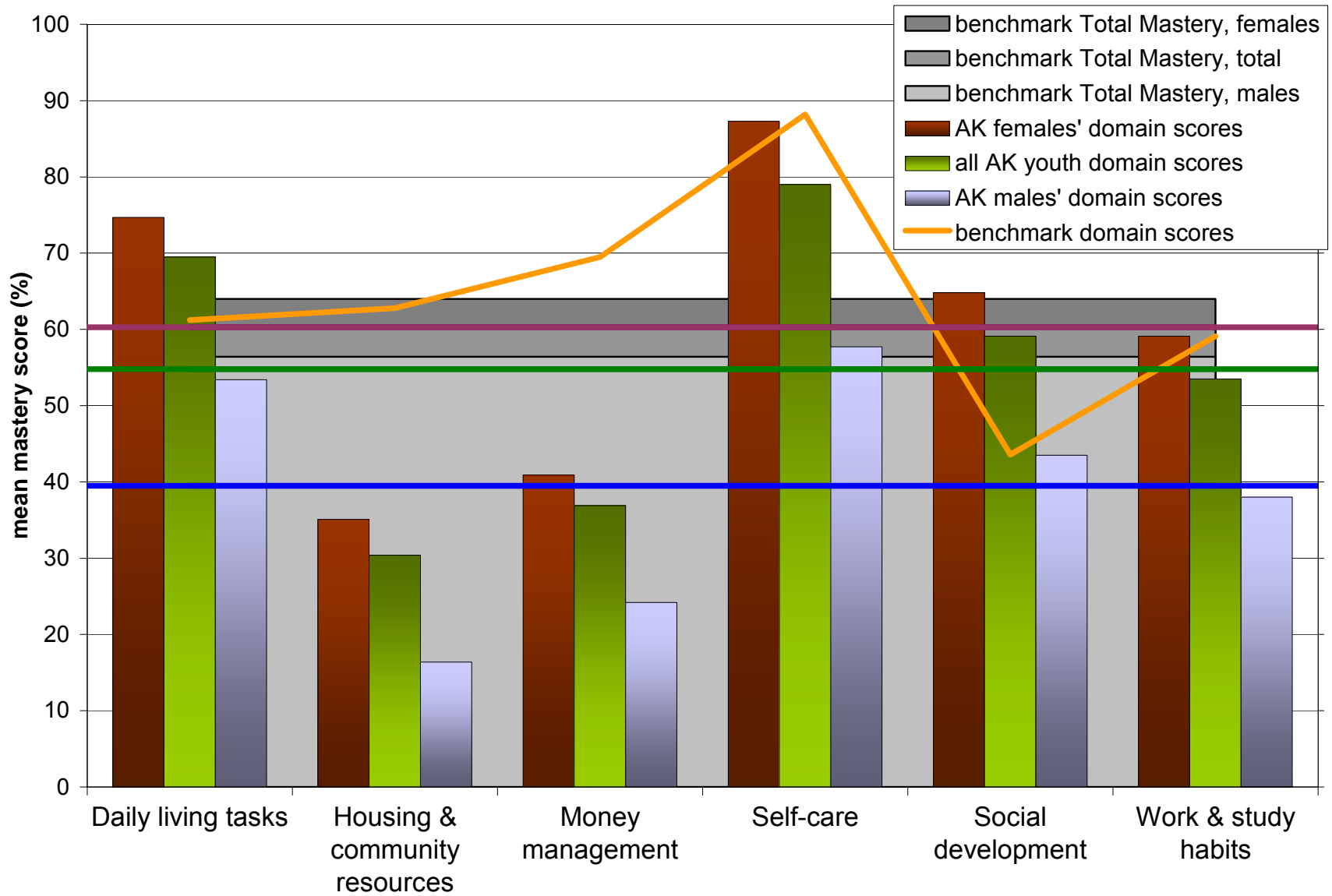
### **Social Development**

- I ask questions to make sure I understand something someone has said
- I can explain how I am feeling (like angry, happy, worried or depressed)
- I respect other people's ways of looking at things, their lifestyles, and their attitudes
- During my free time, I find something to do that doesn't get me into trouble

### **Work & Study Habits**

- I can explain the education or training needed for my career options
- I can prepare for a job interview (prepare for questions, arrive on time, wear appropriate clothes, etc.)
- I get to school or work on time
- I look over my work for mistakes

**Figure 2: Preliminary analysis of Alaskan ACLSA Youth Level III scores (through 9 July 2003; N = 89) used to promote conversation in focus groups**



After introductions, the results of this preliminary ACLSA analysis were briefly presented to the youth. Discussion then turned to thoughts on these results and the rest of the focus group questions:

- What do you think these results show?
- Looking at these six areas of the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment, are these the life skills you think you need to know? If not, what do you think is important? Is it different where you live?
- Do you know youth who are good at some of these skills but not good at others? Why do you think that is?
- How do you think youth best learn each of these skills?
- What does it mean to you to be “an adult”?
- Where do you intend to live?

### Analysis

Audio recordings of the groups and researcher notes (including flip chart notes) were transcribed into word processing files. These files, along with the research questions and the ACLSA domains and sample items, were imported into a computer-aided qualitative data analysis program called “N6.” This program allows the researchers to code individual text units to any number of user-created categories or “nodes.” Coding occurred over several days, with multiple readings of each document. These multiple coding passes were strengthened by text searches for particular key words, such as “PFD,” “computer,” or “Native.” Then nodes were compared and contrasted to further refine the coding and develop main themes. These node searches allowed for testing and disproving hypotheses by assessing, for example, the extent to which ‘learning skills by practice’ was associated with ‘learning from elders.’

All data and coding were shared between analysts to help ensure broad coding of relevant information, with several iterations of coding, review, combination, and interpretation. Preliminary results were then presented to the research advisory team for input. Finally, results were reviewed by representatives of Facing Foster Care in Alaska, a leadership and advocacy group for foster youth. Suggestions from both of these groups are reflected in this report.

### Limitations of the study

This report offers one way to examine the question of the life skills needed to be an adult in Alaska. As with any qualitative study, it is not possible to generalize these findings to all Alaskan youth in foster care. With greater resources, more focus groups could have been conducted in more (especially remote and/or northern) communities and certainly a wider diversity of input could have been collected. In addition, although the facilitators required that youth complete the ACSLA before attending the focus group, it was discovered at the close of one of the groups that two participants had not completed the assessment. The “refresher” materials may have been enough to provide an overview of the domains and the scores of Alaskan youth, however, they did not offer the in-depth experience that completing the assessment would give. Finally, two youth, although living in a residential facility with other teens in the custody of the Office of Children’s Services, were actually in the custody of Juvenile Probation. This may or may not have contributed to a different perception of living independently than the youth in the custody of child protective services.

### **Results**

Child welfare stakeholders sought to answer three basic questions with this study. They were: a) what skills do Alaskan youth in care think they need to become independent adults? b) does the Ansell-Casey

Life Skills Assessment adequately represent these skills? and c) how do the youth think they can best learn these skills?

In this section we will present and discuss the themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the participants' responses to these and other related questions. We have grouped these themes under three headings:

- Casey Life Skills and More
- It Depends on Where you Live
- We Learn From Practice But Need Help

In the sections below we will elaborate on each of the themes, discuss what issues the youth identified in each area, provide examples, and discuss the implications of the findings in relationship to the research questions.

### Casey Life Skills and More

The Alaskan youth who participated in this study agreed that the skills contained in the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment are important to acquire in becoming an independent adult. At the same time, they acknowledged that the unique geographic, cultural, and social contexts in Alaska sometimes demand additional skills, or at least qualitatively different ways of demonstrating those skills, than the urban-centered tasks upon which the ACLSA was developed. Both the meaning of adulthood and how adult skills are acquired varied depending upon whether a youth lived in a village, rural, or urban environment.

In the words of one focus group participant,

*It really depends on where you live in Alaska. If you live in Anchorage you need more on driving, on money management, but if you live in the village, you just need to be able to cook, clean, hunt and work when needed...fish. Commercial fishing is a big thing in the villages.*

The youth generally agreed with the need to be competent in each ACLSA domain:

*Money management is something that definitely needs to be worked on. A lot of kids don't know how to manage their money.*

*Yes. I think community resources should be studied more in Alaska, and money management skills.*

In discussing what it means to be an adult, there was frequent mention of skills included in the ACLSA domains, from budgeting and paying bills to avoiding drugs to researching education and career options.

*You have to know how to save money so you can budget, be responsible, go to college.*

*I would go to school, learn how to manage money, learn how to keep a job.*

*[You need to know] how to manage a house and keep it clean—the hygiene stuff.*

*And there might be a culture or a religion that might offend you, but you have to accept it because you can't go off like when you were a little kid and get mad.*

Although the youth acknowledged that the basic skill areas outlined in the ACLSA are important in Alaska, the specific presentation of these skills may be very different.

Getting a job, shopping for groceries, cooking and storing food, buying a car, washing one's clothes—completing these general tasks can look very different in Alaska, particularly rural Alaska, than they do

in Washington or Kansas. Official jobs may be difficult to come by in a small town with high unemployment in which many adults get by on some combination of seasonal hunting and fishing, selling of animal pelts, government checks, and sharing. As one youth noted,

*In my hometown, you're adult as soon as you could provide for someone—hunt, clean.*

Even in the larger communities of Alaska, young people often work at seasonal jobs that may take them away from home to fish or drive a tour bus. Cooking may involve a basic wood-burning stove, with nary a microwave in sight. Food might be safely stored in a cache in the ground or an icebox. Purchasing a vehicle may involve arranging for it to be barged up the river to your village.

For many of the items on the ACLSA, then, the behavioral presentation will differ qualitatively in rural Alaska versus most areas of the lower 48. For example, groceries might be sporadically available at the local village general store that may not take coupons but might allow for some bartering and haggling, making for different behaviors involved in the learning goal of “I can name two ways to save money on things I buy.” The wording used is general enough to apply, even though two different youth or caregivers may be thinking of different behaviors when they rate the youth’s mastery of the task. Further examples of this include such items as “I store food so it doesn’t spoil or go bad,” “During my free time, I find something to do that doesn’t get me into trouble,” and “I can explain the education or training needed for my career options.”

**“If you live in Anchorage you need more on driving, on money management, but if you live in the village, you just need to be able to cook, clean, hunt and work when needed...fish.”**

In contrast, there are some ACLSA items that are categorically different and may be considered lower 48- or urban-centric. Explaining “how to write checks, make deposits, and ATM transactions, and balance a checking/savings account” can be difficult if not impossible for a youth living in a village without a “traditional” economic infrastructure. “I know how to wash my clothes according to the label (for example, hand wash, dry clean, cold water)” makes little sense when washing clothes means a basin and a washboard, if that. “I can explain how to get and renew a driver’s license,” which the participants noted was difficult enough for foster youth in urban areas, may be impossible or irrelevant in an area that has little enforcement of licensing and is hundreds of miles from the nearest licensing agency. While aiding a youth in completing an ACLSA, one of the authors noted that the youth, from a rural village, did not understand a number of the terms used in the assessment, such as “microwave” and “electric mixer.” Thus, while the participants endorsed the ACLSA as measuring important life skills, particularly at the more abstract level of the domain names, many individual skills, and accordingly individual ACLSA items, may not translate well to all parts of Alaska.

Whereas the Casey Life Skills domains provide a foundation for independent living, the Alaskan youth identified additional areas they felt were important to master on the road to adulthood, each of which may, as discussed above, take on a different presentation in rural Alaska compared to the lower 48. They included:

- parenting
- operating vehicles
- attitudes and values
- subsistence and survival.

## *Parenting*

The participants provided many examples of being aware of responsibilities of parenting. This could be because several of them already have their own children (who may be living with them in residential or foster care, or living in other foster or relative care), or have friends who are already parents. Caring for siblings was another way in which the youth saw themselves assuming parenting responsibilities. They recognized that being responsible for a child added another level of difficulty to the tasks of independent living. As one young woman said,

*If you are a single parent and you need to pay for childcare, it's really hard to be independent when you have another person dependent on you.*

They recognized that there is more to taking care of a child than feeding and changing diapers. According to one male participant,

*I'm right about knowing how to take care of a baby but not how to pay for baby food.*

In addition, one young woman expressed the inevitable clash of parenting with her social needs:

*Peer pressure is a big thing, you know. "Let's get out while you're still young," you have a kid, but you have to learn to say "No," and I have a hard time doing that.*

## *Operating vehicles*

The ACLSA assesses driving indirectly, taking advantage of a societal construction—the driver's license—to simplify assessment of a complex skill set. There is more to driving, even in urban areas, than simply having a license. Operating vehicles in Alaska multiplies the complexity.

The ability to drive a vehicle was seen by the youth as a significant sign of independence. Urban youth felt thwarted in becoming independent because of barriers to their obtaining a license and getting car insurance while in foster care, as this exchange illustrated:

*Driver's license—it's so frustrating.*

*Especially for foster kids. We go through major...*

*Well, you have to have it, but there's so much red tape to cut through. It's almost not worth it.*

*You've got that right!*

*Well, because people—they don't want us to get into a car accident, regardless of if it's our fault. They'll go after the State. I know that, they know that, but still...*

This, of course, makes it difficult to get a job, earn money, and learn marketable skills. Driving skills are just as important for rural and village youth, but take different forms:

*You definitely don't need to learn about the rules of the road because down in my hometown people drive four-wheelers, ride bikes in the middle of the road...they just treat them like a car...*

This provides another example of a competency not translating well across the variety that is Alaska. A youth who moves from a village to a rural or hub community or to an urban center may not have had the opportunity learn to drive a car and navigate roadways, having instead gained proficiency in operating a four-wheeler and/or snow machine. With no roads to link many rural communities in Alaska, the skills to travel long distance by snow machine in winter or a boat in summer are essential to living as an independent adult. Yet, if a village youth moves to Anchorage due to placement in a new home or

facility, the inability to drive a car may be a major obstacle to employment and other basic aspects of living independently in an urban area.

#### *Attitudes and values*

Participants readily identified that taking responsibility for themselves and their children was an essential component of independence, but learning the necessary skills involved developing some underlying attitudes and values along the way. Being perceived as trustworthy and honest was seen as a sign of maturity:

*...if you say you're going to do something, do something...Like when I was a kid, my mother said to honor my word and stick by it. If I say I'm going to do something, I have to do it.*

Similarly, 'responsibility' was mentioned frequently in discussions of what it means to be an adult. The participants described being labeled by others as 'responsible' as a goal that required honesty, follow-through, being on time, and "*obey[ing] the basic rules of life*" to attain:

*I was 14 and I still wanted to go do what I wanted, and my Grandma always told me you have to take on responsibility. It's not just you. You have to learn to accept [that] the world doesn't revolve around you any more...*

*[Being an adult means] having a job, staying out of trouble.*

*[Responsibility means] spending money wisely, knowing how to keep a job, paying bills and taxes.*

### **“My mother said to honor my word and stick by it.”**

Although the ACLSA addresses peer pressure indirectly, with items about avoiding pregnancy and “relationships that hurt” as well as items covering knowledge of the effects of alcohol and drugs, participants discussed the ability to withstand peer pressure more directly as a necessary attitude. Often this was related to staying out of trouble:

*I'd been drinking and stuff—a long time ago—a year ago. I just turned myself in because I couldn't say no and I couldn't do much about it. It's a hard thing.*

*[Being responsible means] not going out and getting wasted and not going to work.*

#### *Subsistence and survival*

Independent living in a rural or village community in Alaska means mastering a complex set of skills related to hunting, fishing, and surviving in the natural environment. For example, several young people from small villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim area were flying into the hub city of Bethel to participate in one of the focus groups. A commercial bush plane flew to each village to pick them up. The weather changed after take-off and Bethel became fog-bound. The plane circled for a couple of hours waiting for the visibility to improve. Finally, the pilot decided to return the youth to their home villages. This is a common occurrence when flying by small (and sometimes large) plane in variable weather. Traveling in rural Alaska means having the skills to know what to do when you become “weathered in” or “out” of your targeted location.

One village youth, who *was* able to fly in from a remote coastal village, revealed that he had just returned from a hunting trip with his foster father. During this “teaching moment” the boy piloted his father's skiff through shallow bays and out into the open ocean, completed a successful hunt, and returned to his village. The unique hunting, navigational, and survival skills required for such a trip are

not assessed in the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment. Yet, the same young man needed to successfully demonstrate a very different set of travel and transportation skills required to travel to the much larger community of Bethel, and would need a third, more urban set of skills if he were to fly to the (comparatively) large city of Anchorage for medical treatment, education, or any of the other services available only in an urban environment.

### It Depends on Where You Live

Figure 3 (an update of Figure 2) illustrates that ACLSA domain scores for Alaskan youth in foster care in Money Management and Housing and Community resources fell below those of their lower 48 counterparts. In contrast, Alaskan youth scores were high in Self-Care, although not as high as in the benchmark sample, and in Social Development and Daily Living Tasks (see the ACLSA analysis in Part 2 for further discussion of Figure 3 and Alaskan youth ACLSA scores). How did our participants explain these scores? Did they perceive differences between urban and rural and Alaskan youth? Two sub-themes, concerning the differential emphasis put on skills by different communities and the economic realities of Alaska, emerged as the participants offered reasons for these scores.

#### *Community Emphasis on Certain Skills*

Differences in urban versus rural communities were a common theme in the discussions. Discussions of skill differences, as noted above, involved both differing presentation of like-named skills and qualitatively different skills. There was frequent mention of varying need for and training in life skills across distinct areas in Alaska, but also discussion of commonality. Both urban and rural youth explained that self-care is emphasized much more in their schools, communities, and independent living training than how to manage money. This may take the form of specific classes at school, rural experiential learning, or public awareness campaigns.

For example, two female participants stated:

*Maybe because they don't teach us about it [money management] in school as much as they do in the Lower 48.*

*It's [self-care] higher because in Alaska they teach a lot of health and they have a lot of, like, HIV and STD groups, and have a lot of people who go around and tell us about it.*

The participants readily acknowledged that there was not enough emphasis on learning money management skills. One participant illustrated the problem of this lack of community emphasis in an exchange with a focus group facilitator:

*P: I think that kids in Alaska need to know how to save our money and stuff more because we tend to just spend it as we get it.*

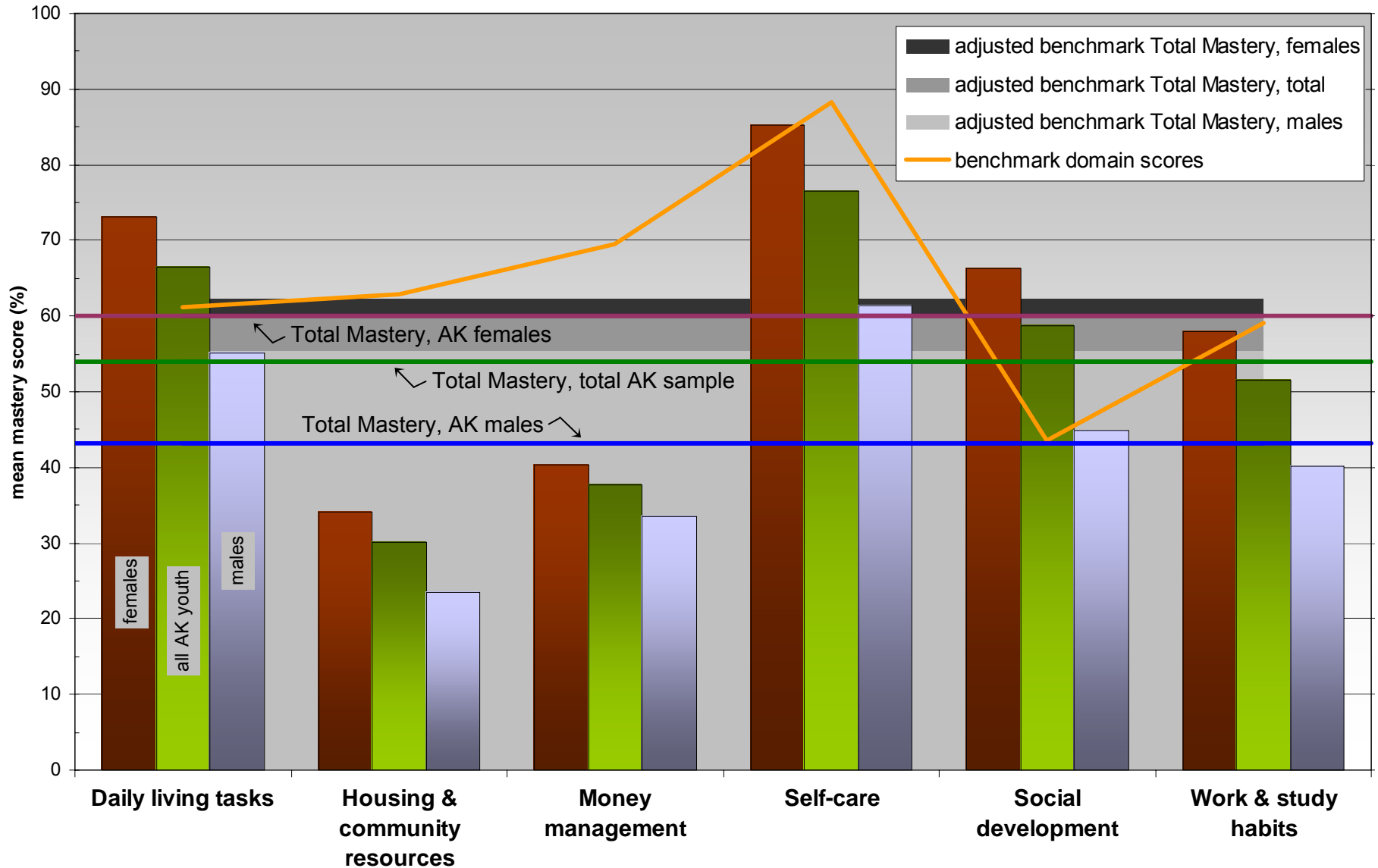
*F: Where do you think is the best place to get that?*

*P: I have no idea. I think that's the problem.*

There was also the perception that money management might be simpler in a small community, not requiring the level of detail and effort as it does in larger cities, while self-care requires more skill. According to a male participant:

*What I think is that self-care is [higher] because a lot of the villages, you just get to hunt and take care of yourself if you are out in the wild, and well, trapped or something—lost, and you better learn to take care of yourself and then you don't have to rely on all these fancier equipment...*

**Figure 3: ACLSA mastery scores by gender, with benchmark comparisons (update of Figure 2, with youth level III assessments through 18 August 2004; N = 206)**



## *Economics in Alaska*

The kind of work one does and the process of job-finding were readily identified as different depending on where one lives:

*In my hometown we've got about 20 policemen in the summer and about three in the winter, and then last time I remember there were 18 graduates from high school in villages under 500 people. I don't think that's [finding a job] going to be a problem.*

In a small community where people know each other, finding and obtaining a job often occurs through a social network, rather than through a more formal job-seeking process. Jobs may be fewer, but may be easier to find. In addition, while there are relatively few year-round jobs available in some communities, “work” is defined more in terms of subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering activities.

Beyond the lack of emphasis on money management training, the youth frequently noted that Alaska provides unique challenges to good money management. Many youth noted that “*everything costs more up here.*” One youth discussed having to spend \$3,000 to arrange for his recently purchased automobile to be barged up the river to Bethel. Even in urban areas, seasonal employment is high in the summer and low in the winter, meaning that income made in a few short months must be managed for the whole year. In addition, large lump sum distributions, either from tribal corporations or from the state oil Permanent Fund Dividend (PFD), sometimes overwhelm a youth’s ability to manage money for the long-term. As one youth remarked,

*When they get their PFDs after they get out of state's custody is a perfect example [of not managing their money].*

### We Learn From Practice But Need Help

What did these Alaskan youth in care think are the best ways to learn independent living skills? Overwhelmingly, they cited “practice” as the primary mode for mastering independent living skills. Whether working and learning side-by-side with a relative or foster parent or in a formal apprenticeship or classroom, the key is having adults guiding and mentoring them:

*It's easier if someone helps you out instead of just...jumping in right away and not getting what you're doing.*

Teachers, foster or adoptive parents, and other family members were nearly equally important in these roles.

One young woman described this interaction as,

*A teacher telling you things and then someone showing you also and you doing it yourself.*

Some youth mentioned current or past experiences with foster parents playing a key role in helping them practice skills:

*We went over things like that. He made a point, almost every day... Always doing stuff like that. Writing checkbooks, stuff like that. You know, I was fixing things around the house and everything.*

*My foster parent right now is making me be in charge of keeping myself clean and my room too... Pretty soon he says he's going to force me to get a job.*

Other family members were also important, according to a youth from a small town:

*The areas where we lived, [you learned from] people around you. People learn from other people. I know I learned from my grandpa...he was working, but I didn't get paid, I just worked with him...*

To a lesser extent, but also seen as important to the participants, the youth acquired independent living skills through more traditional classroom or workshop strategies. These included classroom assignments, such as exploring post-graduation career opportunities, or becoming more proficient with technology by attending a summer independent living “technology camp.” The value of an independent living workshop was described by a female participant as,

*They teach us how to be organized, how to learn different things on computers. Like how things are different—things outside that we need to learn.*

The youth discussed going to school as being important for both classroom learning and the opportunity to practice skills, such as those in the social development domain. As a corollary, participants noted that youth compelled to stay at home caring for their siblings missed out on the opportunities for skill acquisition and practice afforded by school. Sometimes friends missed school to watch younger siblings because “*their parents go to work and they don't have enough money to pay for a babysitter*”—if one is available. Although they were able to practice child care and home management skills this way, these early responsibilities robbed young people of other valuable learning opportunities in work and study skills.

Repeatedly, the participants described the importance of supportive adult role models in helping them practice skills as varied as writing checks, finding a job, or keeping a room clean. While teachers, foster parents and family members were most often mentioned as helpful mentors, one young woman also cited her probation officer as helping her develop job skills. Many of the youth who participated in the study were living outside of their home communities, away from their natural family and community network. This makes it essential to ensure that youth in care, wherever they are placed, have access to mentors with the knowledge and commitment to provide them with opportunities to practice skills they will need wherever they live. This is complicated by the issue of the youth's possibly unstable plans regarding where he or she is planning to live after leaving care. Village youth placed outside of their home communities will somehow need adults with ties to their home communities to mentor them in the cultural and subsistence skills they will need when and if they return.

### **Conclusions from the Independent Living Focus Groups**

The analysis of the focus group discussions illustrates the kinds of skills Alaskan youth described as important in their journeys to independent living. Youth agreed that *some* skills in *all* of the Ansell-

**“They teach us...how things are different—things outside that we need to learn.”**

Casey Life Skills domains have value in their lives. Yet, for many youth the ACSLA skills did not provide the full picture. The circumstances and geography of living in Alaska create another layer of needed skills on top of those articulated by the ACSLA. Also, Alaskan youth face some unique issues not routinely encountered by the population of youth for which the ACSLA was originally designed. These include the challenges of navigating across vast terrains of landscape,

weather, culture, and economies while frequently being forced to live apart from familiar family and community. Alaskan foster youth are frequently called upon to know how to function successfully in village, rural, and urban systems.

In their discussions regarding the skills they need and what it means to be an adult, there were frequent mentions of skills not included on the ACLSA Youth Level III. These included parenting, operating vehicles, attitudes and values, and subsistence and survival skills. It should be noted that Casey Family Programs has recently published supplements for the ACLSA assessing parenting-related skills. On the contrary, attitudes and values can be thought of as underlying skills and behaviors. The ACLSA is designed to measure the latter, asking how often a youth is able to *do* things. It can assess beliefs only to the extent that they manifest themselves in common behaviors.

**“If you are a single parent and you need to pay for childcare, it’s really hard to be independent when you have another person dependent on you.”**

This is something of a conundrum for the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment: It aims to be broadly applicable while concentrating on easily noted behaviors that may not themselves be broadly applicable. Casey Family Programs has to some extent attempted to deal with this difficulty on an individual basis, creating supplements for specific populations or behavior constellations (pregnant youth, those parenting infants, those parenting young children, Native American youth, and homeless youth). Operating vehicles might seem like a good candidate for a supplement, but it is also a good example of this conundrum: Traveling from point A to point B looks very different in New York, Anchorage, Bethel, and the village of Lower Kalskag on the Yukon River.

Although doing the actual grouping of items is beyond the scope of this report, it would seem that ACLSA items can be divided into those applicable in urban and rural areas and those only applicable in larger communities. To be truly “universal” (or at least applicable to a broader spectrum of youth in North America), it might be beneficial to boil down the ACLSA into a core group of items whose wording can apply in all communities, placing all other items into various supplements: urban, Arctic rural, Interior rural or bush, Southern US rural, etc. Without this universal core assessment, ACLSA scores of rural youth will *always* be lower on some domains than those of their urban counterparts, even if there were no differences in the actual abilities of the youth to live in their chosen communities.

While ACLSA scores can be useful within subject, providing a source for discussing and addressing perceived strengths and weaknesses and the ability to assess change in a youth’s abilities over time, the great benefit of any assessment is to allow comparisons to a benchmark group of interest.

One alternative is to compare a particular youth’s ACLSA scores only with those of others from the same state. This may attenuate the urban-rural bias. It should also be noted that Casey Family Programs is working with states to offer state-specific supplements as well. This may be what the State of Alaska should pursue.

When asked to reflect on the scores of Alaskan youth in relation to the benchmark scores of youth in other states (see the ACLSA analysis section later in this report), participants mostly expressed agreement with the compiled results. While some youth claimed that their own individual scores were above the composite scores for Alaskan youth, they could describe why *other* foster youth might have achieved the scores presented during the focus group or interview. Urban/rural differences were evident in discussions of community emphasis (often on self-care but not money management) and the economic realities of Alaska. The scarcity of job opportunities can make learning job skills difficult. The absence of affordable, livable housing in many rural Alaskan communities often prohibits youth from achieving what has become a benchmark of adulthood in the rest of the United States: living on one’s own. This definition of independent living may not be realistic goal in villages that emphasize

interrelationships and mutual support, in which young adults might be expected to continue living with their parents.

What are the ways in which the foster youth in this study feel they can best learn how to become independent adults? Whether in the context of school, independent living workshops, in their foster homes, or in a skiff on the way to an autumn caribou hunt, the youth provided examples of adults in their lives who served as positive mentors and role models in developing skills. As the young people watched, practiced, made mistakes, and experimented, they benefited from adults who were not only present during the process, but in some cases, prodding them to tackle tasks they did not want to take on, such as getting a job or cleaning their rooms. For most of the participants in this study, placed in settings far away from their home communities, helping them connect with adults who can “coach” them through the process of acquiring skills they need in adulthood may be the biggest challenge for professionals and caregivers. It is not enough to make sure that a young person has taken the ACLSA, or has a guidebook to help practice skills, or takes an independent living workshop, though all these things are helpful. They really need adults who can make the commitment to sticking with them as they practice the skills. The different skills needed in different areas, however, complicate assessment and preparation. Youth and caregivers completing an ACLSA may need to rate the youth’s abilities as related to where he or she wants to live at age 19 or 20, not where they are living now. Thus, a high rating on job-finding skills or household activities, made in reference to living in Anchorage, may do the youth little good upon moving to a remote village.

The final question posed to the youth in this study was, “Where do you intend to live?” Responses to these questions were as varied as the foster youth themselves, ranging from “the village” to New Mexico and California to Russia to “travel the world and come back.” Exploring the world outside of Alaska seemed attractive to most of the youth, even though for some, that prospect was scary. Wherever they ultimately live, the youth believe that they can benefit from most of the skills contained in the ACLSA domains, as well as the additional skills required to navigate across the vast geographic and cultural distances of Alaska. Above all, they recognized the need for independent living skills training and practice.

## **PART 2: SUMMARY OF ANSELL-CASEY LIFE SKILLS ASSESSMENT SCORES FOR ALASKAN YOUTH IN STATE CUSTODY**

### Background

The Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) is a measure of life skills acquisition and preparedness for independent or interdependent adult living. There are four developmentally-based assessment levels: Level I (8-10 years), Level II (11-14 years), Level III (15-18 years), and Level IV (young adult). In addition, there is a 20-question Short Form for 11-18 year olds. Each assessment is available in youth self-report and caregiver report formats.

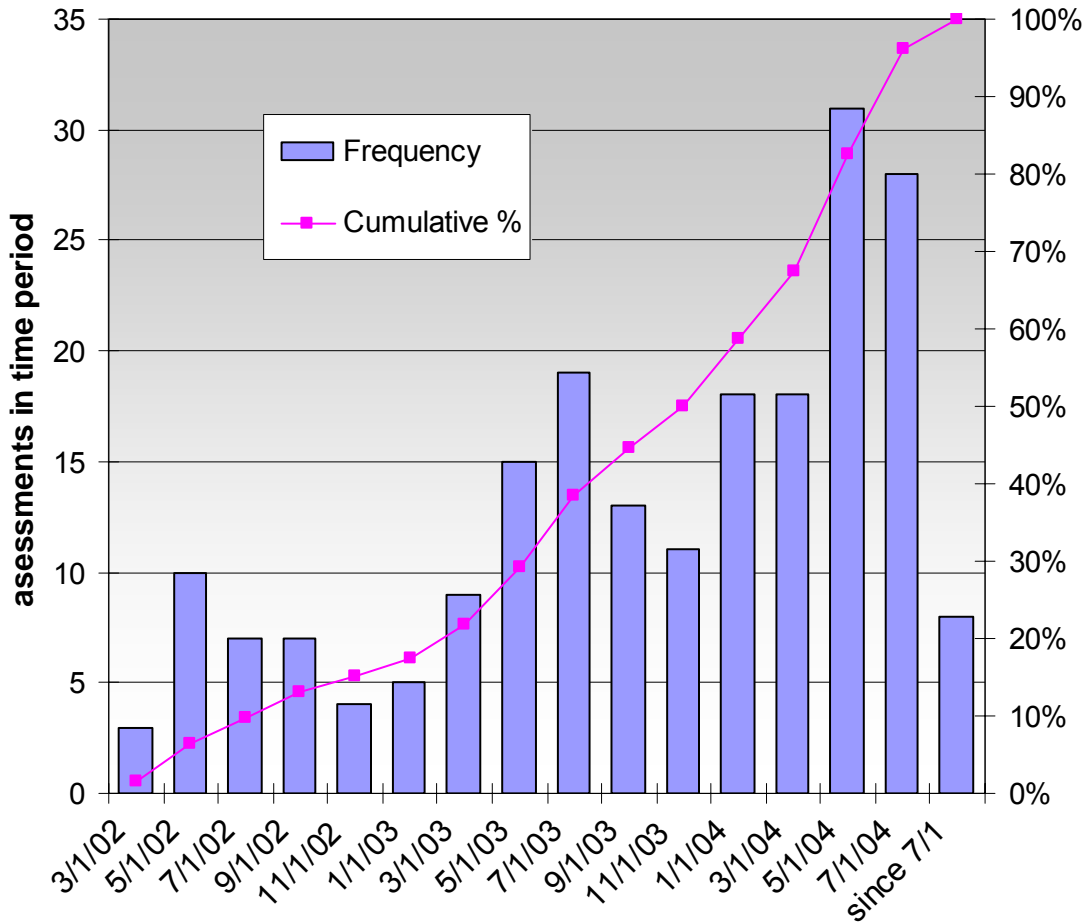
The ACLSA assesses youth abilities in four to six domains depending on the assessment level (Daily Living Tasks, Self-Care, Social Development, Work & Study Skills, Money Management, and Housing & Community Resources). The questions within each domain assess a variety of behavioral skills and practical knowledge. (Sample items for each domain are presented in Figure 1 in Part 1 of this report. Note that a recent revision of the ACLSA changed the recommended age ranges for the levels, added some new items, and modified the domains. This report refers to the ACLSA versions implemented on-line through 2004.)

#### *ACLSAs completed by Alaskan youth in state custody*

The ACLSA is available for free on the Internet ([www.caseylifeskills.org](http://www.caseylifeskills.org)). When completing an assessment, the completer enters an organizational identification code and a youth identification code, each generated by the agency, for those involved with an agency. The person completing the ACLSA is also asked to supply at least one email address, to which the score report is sent instantly. Organizational identifiers can be used to compile data for an entire agency or a program within an agency.

As of 18 August 2004, there were 206 valid, unduplicated Youth Level III assessments with the Office of Children's Services (OCS) organizational identification codes. (Please note that because some of the ACLSA questions may have not been completed, including demographic questions, the total number of assessments may not correspond with the totals in the tables below.) The earliest of these was completed 29 August 2001. As shown in Figure 4, although there is a seasonal pattern, use has increased steadily.

**Figure 4: Number of completed ACLSA youth level III assessments over time through 18 August 2004 (N = 206)**



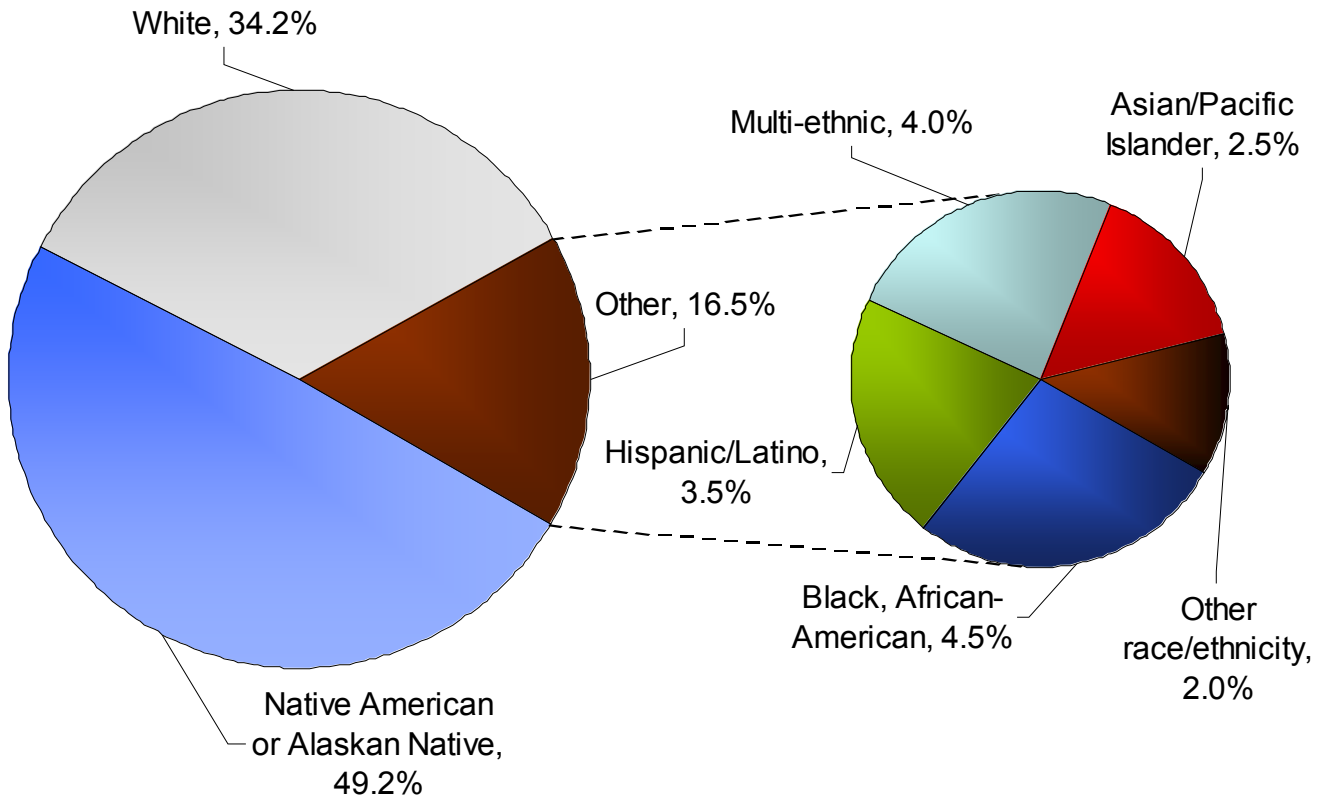
The average age of this group of youth and young adults taking the ACLSA in association with OCS was just over 16 years of age (16.25). The ages were collapsed into four categories (14 & 15, 16, 17, 18 & above). The distributions of the sample across these ages and by gender are presented in Table 2. A large majority of these young people was female (68.4%). Over half (53.5% of the 198 completing this item) identified themselves as being at least part Alaskan Native or American Indian, with 7.1% identifying themselves as African American, 3.5% Hispanic or Latino, and 2.5% Pacific Islander. The primary ethnic background with which the respondents identified is displayed in Figure 5. Nearly half (49.2%) identified themselves as primarily Alaskan Native or American Indian, and over a third (34.2%) as primarily Caucasian.

**Table 2: Age and gender of the Alaskan youth and young adults completing the ACLSA youth level III (N = 206)**

Youth age	Youth gender		Total
	Female	Male	
14-15	44 (22.6% of total)	17 (8.7%)	65 (31.9%)
16	45 (23.1%)	25 (12.8%)	71 (34.8%)
17	29 (14.9%)	10 (5.1%)	43 (21.1%)
18+	16 (8.2%)	9 (4.6%)	25 (12.3%)
Total	134 (68.4%)	62 (31.6%)	

Note: Totals are given for all assessments with gender and/or age information, such that the Total column or row will not necessarily equal the sum of the age X gender cells due to missing data.

**Figure 5: Primary ethnicity identified by youth and young adults completing the ACLSA youth level III (N = 206)**



*ACLSA scoring*

On Ansell-Casey youth assessments, there are two types of questions: self-ratings and performance items. The latter are multiple choice knowledge items with a single correct answer. The Performance items serve as a short assessment of whether the respondent actually has the ability he or she self-rated as having. The performance items are different before and after the March 2003 revisions to the ACLSA, so interpretations of the performance item scores should be made with caution.

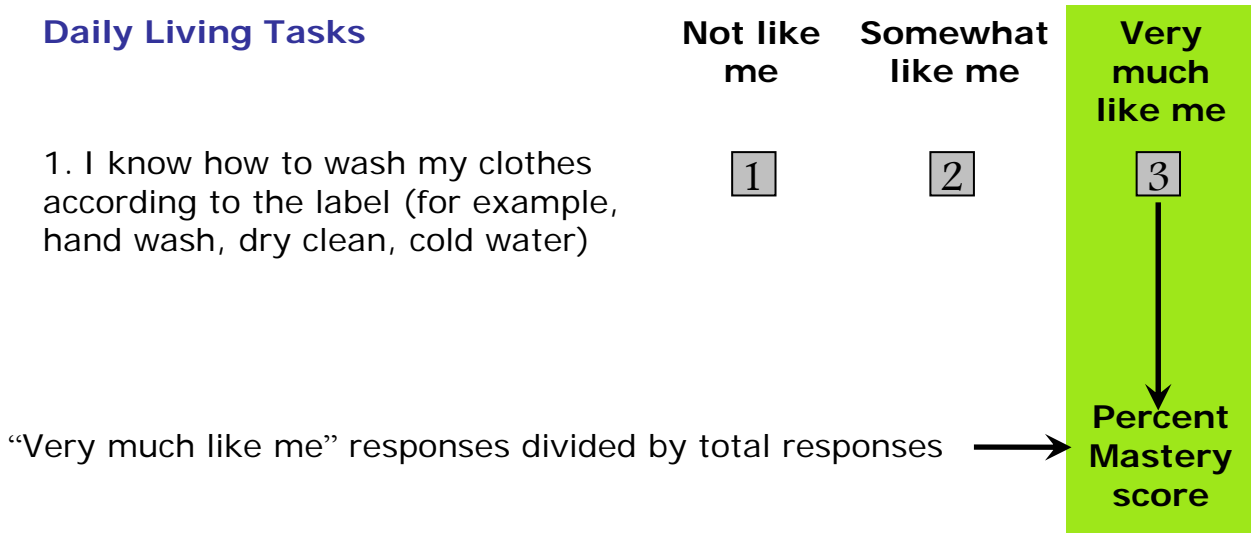
In the self-rating items, which make up the bulk of the ACLSA, the young person indicates his or her subjective perceptions of his or her ability to do, understand, or manage certain tasks. Figure 6 displays a

sample self-rating item and demonstrates how each item is scored. Responses are combined to develop aggregate scores in two different ways:

1. Raw score: Responses are scored 1, 2, and 3, and added over the domain or the whole assessment.
2. Percent Mastery: The proportion of “very much like me” responses within the domain or the total assessment.

The Ansell-Casey Life-Skills Assessment defines “mastery” as items endorsed at the highest level. Thus, an item rated “somewhat like me,” indicating some mastery of the task but not complete and consistent ability, would not count towards the Percent Mastery score. A youth who rates all items at the first or second level, indicating no or only partial mastery of all tasks, would therefore have a Percent Mastery score of 0.

**Figure 6: Scoring the ACLSA**



Most users focus on the Percent Mastery scores because they have inherent meaning: A score of 80% means the same thing across assessments (the youth indicated mastery on 80% of completed items), and across domains, mastery scores of 80% on the Housing and Community Resources and Daily Living Tasks domains indicates that 80% of the items in each domain were endorsed at the highest level. (However, each domain is not equally difficult, as will be discussed later.) The raw scores vary from domain to domain, as the maximum possible number of points is equal to the number of items multiplied by three while the minimum possible score is equal to the number of items in the domain or the entire assessment. Thus, on Youth Level III, raw scores on Money Management can range from 7 to 21, while raw scores on Social Development range from 16 to 48. While the Percent Mastery scores are calculated based on the actual number of items endorsed, with a certain minimum number of completed items per domain necessary, raw scores do not account for items not completed: A raw score of 12 could be from 12 items endorsed “not like me” or 4 items endorsed “very much like me.” This report concentrates on the Percent Mastery scores.

*Analysis of ACLSA scores for Alaskan youth in care*

Mastery scores are a percentage, ranging from 0 to 100. One way to examine scores is to break this range into five groups of 20% each, called quintiles. For each of the six ACLSA domains, the overall assessment, and the Performance score, Figure 7 illustrates the life-skills preparation of the entire sample. For Percent Mastery and Performance scores, the figure indicates the percentage of youth that

scored within the defined quintile of scores. The average score for each is indicated as well. As a general assessment of overall preparedness for independent living, the Alaska sample had an average Total Mastery score of 53.9%. The average Performance score was over 20 points higher than the Total Mastery score (76.5%), providing evidence that the youth did not overstate their life skills in the self-rating items and that the mastery scores are thus a valid reflection of their skills.

When an individual receives a score report from the ACLSA, one method of interpretation is to look within the assessment at relative strengths and weaknesses as reported by the youth (or caregiver, depending on the version of the ACLSA). This can be done at a group level as well. In Figure 7, we see that the lowest scores were in the domains of Housing & Community Resources (Percent Mastery score of 30.2%) and Money Management (37.7%), indicating relative weaknesses in these areas. The domains of Self-Care (76.5%) and Daily Living Tasks (66.4%), on the other hand, had scores well above the Total Mastery score, indicating relative strengths in these areas for the Alaska sample.

As one might expect, scores on the ACLSA, indicating readiness to live as an independent (or interdependent) adult, generally increase with age. Except for Daily Living Tasks, mastery scores in this sample exhibited small to moderate correlations with age, ranging from .19 to .33. In a statistical analysis<sup>1</sup>, only Daily Living Tasks did not significantly differ by age grouping<sup>2</sup>. Figure 8 illustrates this relationship, displaying mastery scores by age for the Alaska sample. Note that the oldest age group, the portion of the sample closest to or already past emancipation and independence, had higher scores, often much higher. Housing & Community Resources and Money Management Percent Mastery scores, for example, appear to be much higher for the oldest group (55.0% and 63.9%, respectively) than the rest of the sample. Statistical analysis<sup>3</sup> found that the 18 and older group did indeed score significantly higher than the 15 and under and 16-year-old groups on Money Management and Housing & Community Resources. While still low, these areas may not be as much of a weakness for the older group, many of whom may have had more opportunity to practice these skills than a 15-year-old might, and thus report more confidence in those abilities.

ACLSA scores also vary by gender. Figure 9 illustrates the gender differences in the Alaska sample. Males consistently scored below females. This difference was statistically significant for all but the two lowest scores, the Housing and Money domains<sup>4</sup>. Together, age and gender accounted for approximately 20% of the variation in Total Mastery<sup>5</sup>. Ethnicity, in contrast, did not significantly predict scores: Adding ethnicity to a regression model containing age and gender resulted in a slightly weaker model<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) follow-up tests to a significant multivariate ANOVA (Wilk's Lambda[21, 508.8] = .832,  $p = .045$ )

<sup>2</sup>  $F(3) = 2.360$ ,  $p = .073$ , all others:  $F(3) \geq 3.483$ ,  $p \leq .017$

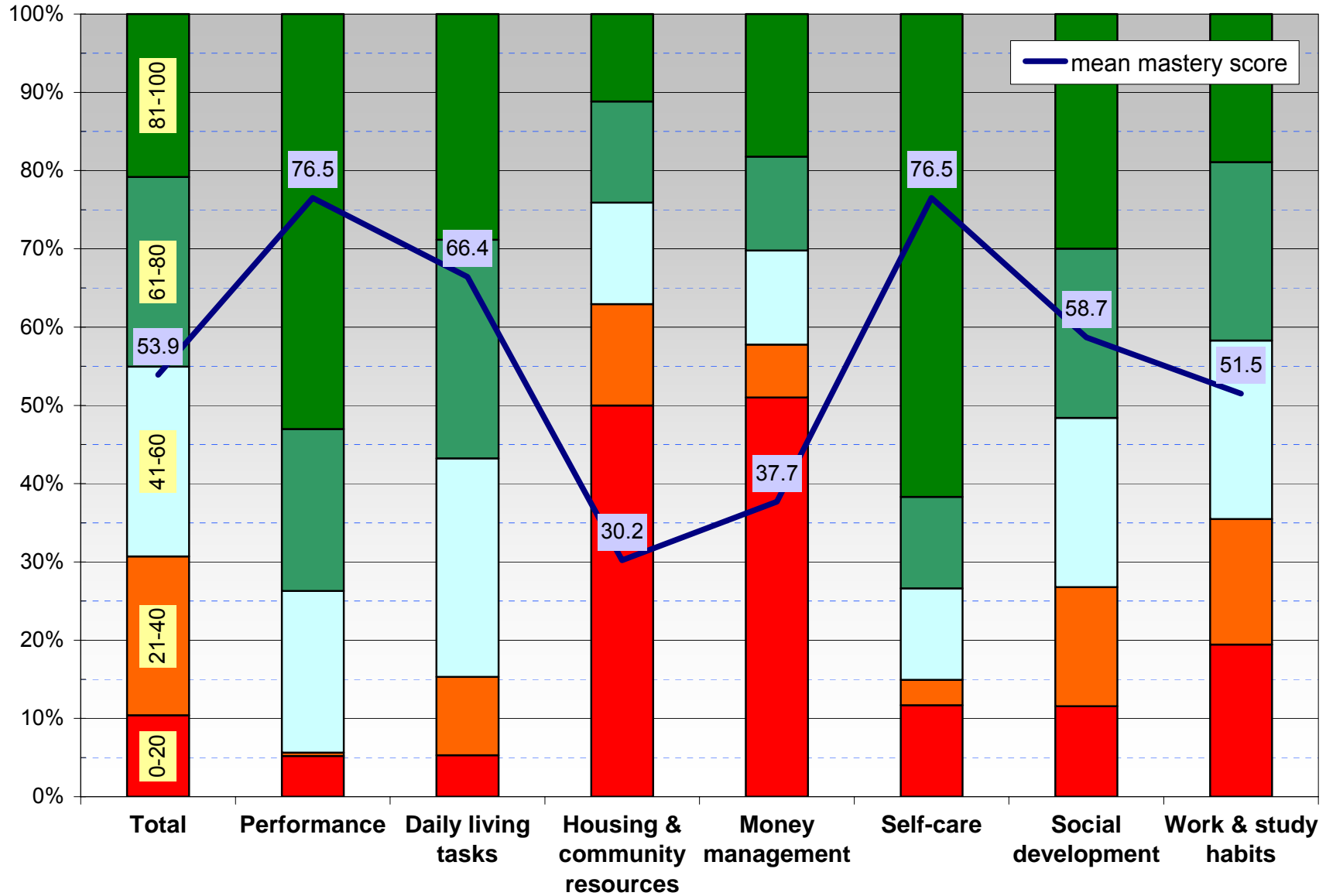
<sup>3</sup> Scheffé post-hoc tests to the earlier follow-up ANOVAs, comparing 18 and older group to other age groups: versus 15 and under,  $p = .000$  for Money Management and  $p = .001$  for Housing & Community Resources; versus 16-year-olds,  $p = .002$  for Money Management and for Housing & Community Resources; versus 17-year-olds, no significant differences

<sup>4</sup> Overall MANOVA: Wilk's Lambda(7, 177) = .811,  $p = .000$ . Follow-up ANOVAs:  $F(1) = 2.378$ ,  $p = .125$ , and  $F(1) = 3.543$ ,  $p = .061$ , for Money Management and Housing & Community Resources, respectively;  $F(1) \geq 13.217$  and  $p = .000$  for all others, including Total Mastery

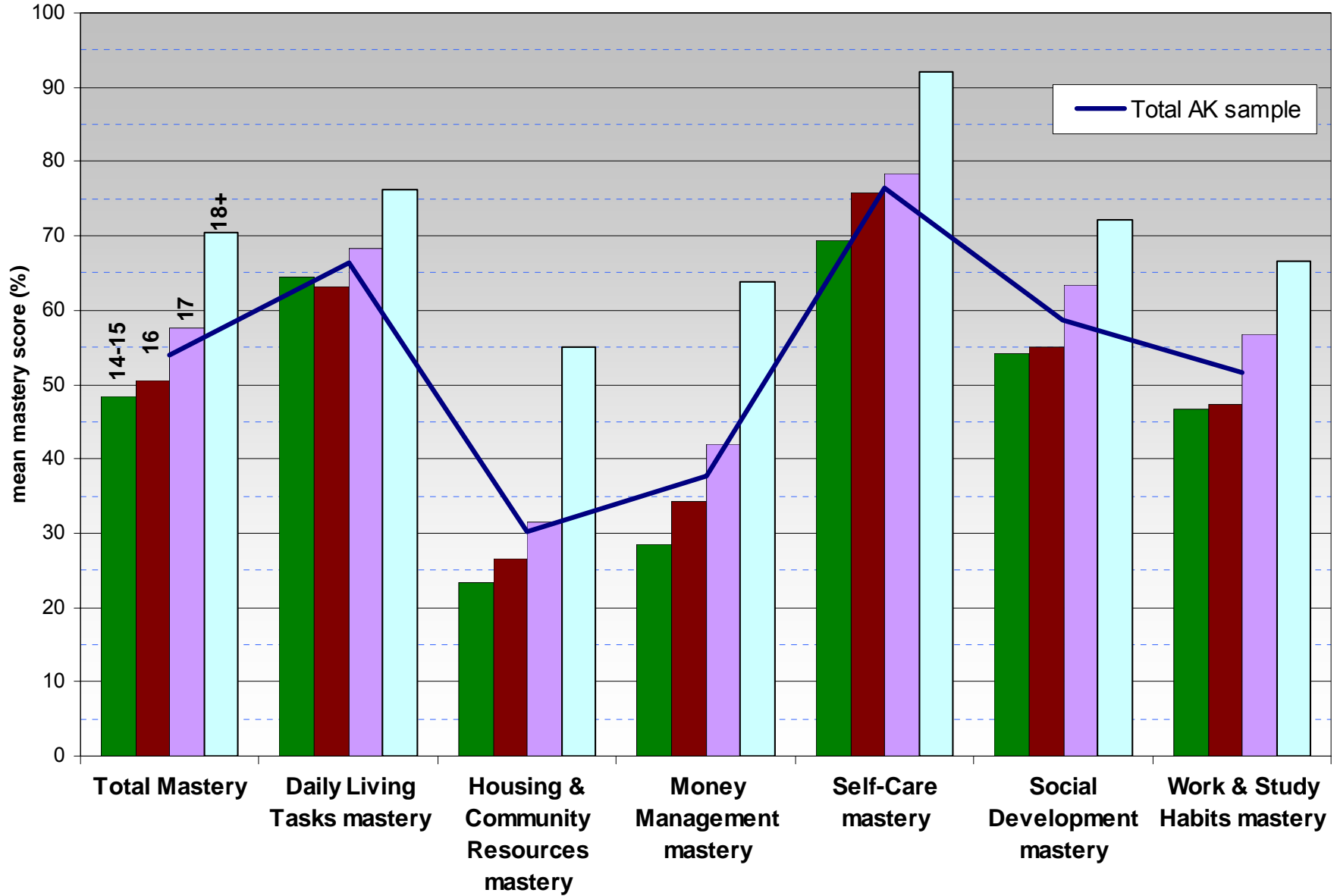
<sup>5</sup> Multiple regression model: multiple  $R = .459$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .201$ ,  $F(2, 157) = 20.997$ ,  $p = .000$

<sup>6</sup> Adding ethnicity to multiple regression model containing age and gender: multiple  $R = .460$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .196$ , change  $F(1, 156) = .026$ ,  $p = .873$

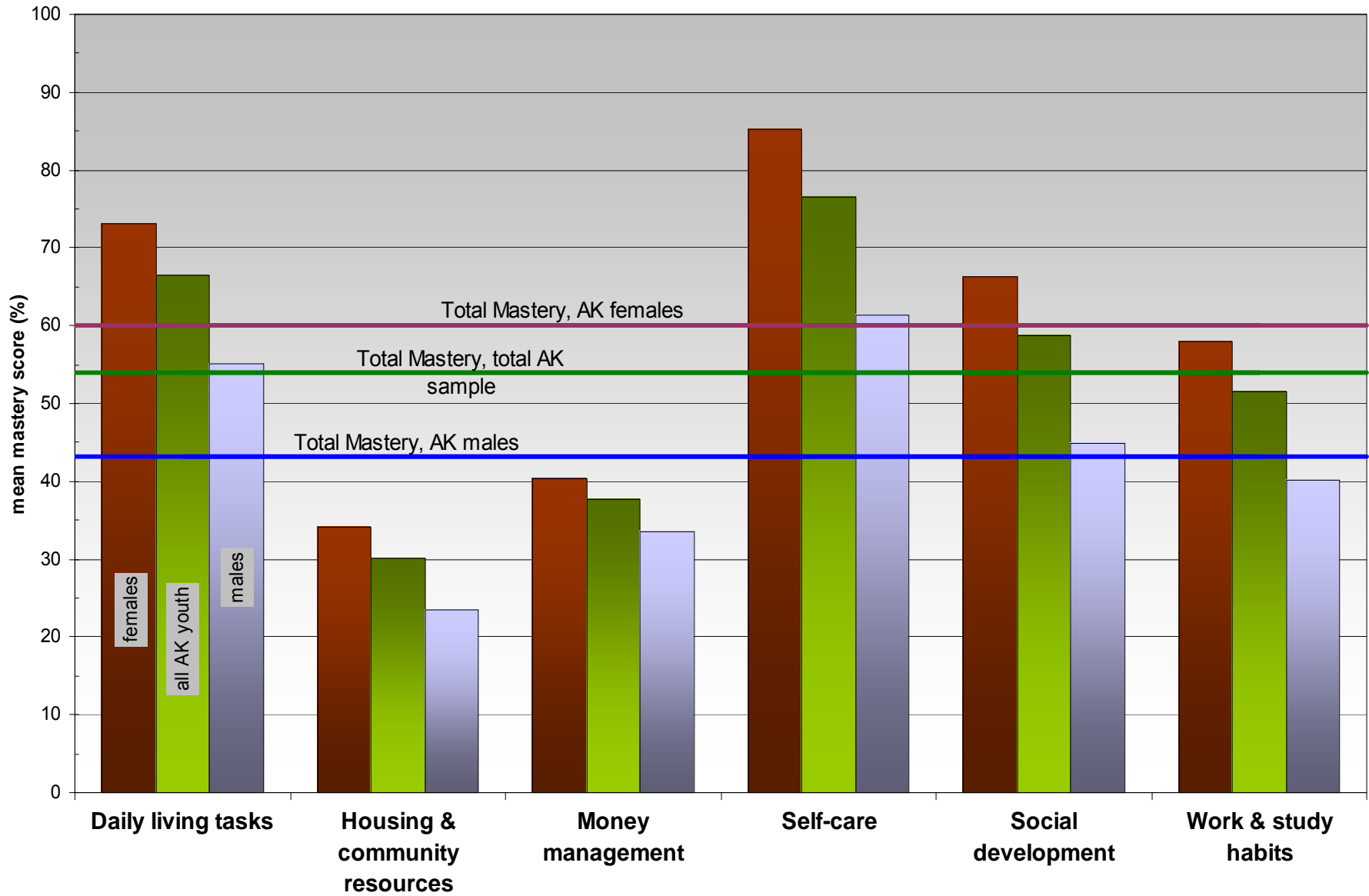
Figure 7: Alaskan youth ACLSA mastery scores (youth level III; N = 206), with proportion in percent ranges (quintiles)



**Figure 8: Alaskan ACLSA mastery scores by age (youth level III; N = 206)**



**Figure 9: ACLSA mastery scores by gender (youth level III; N = 206)**



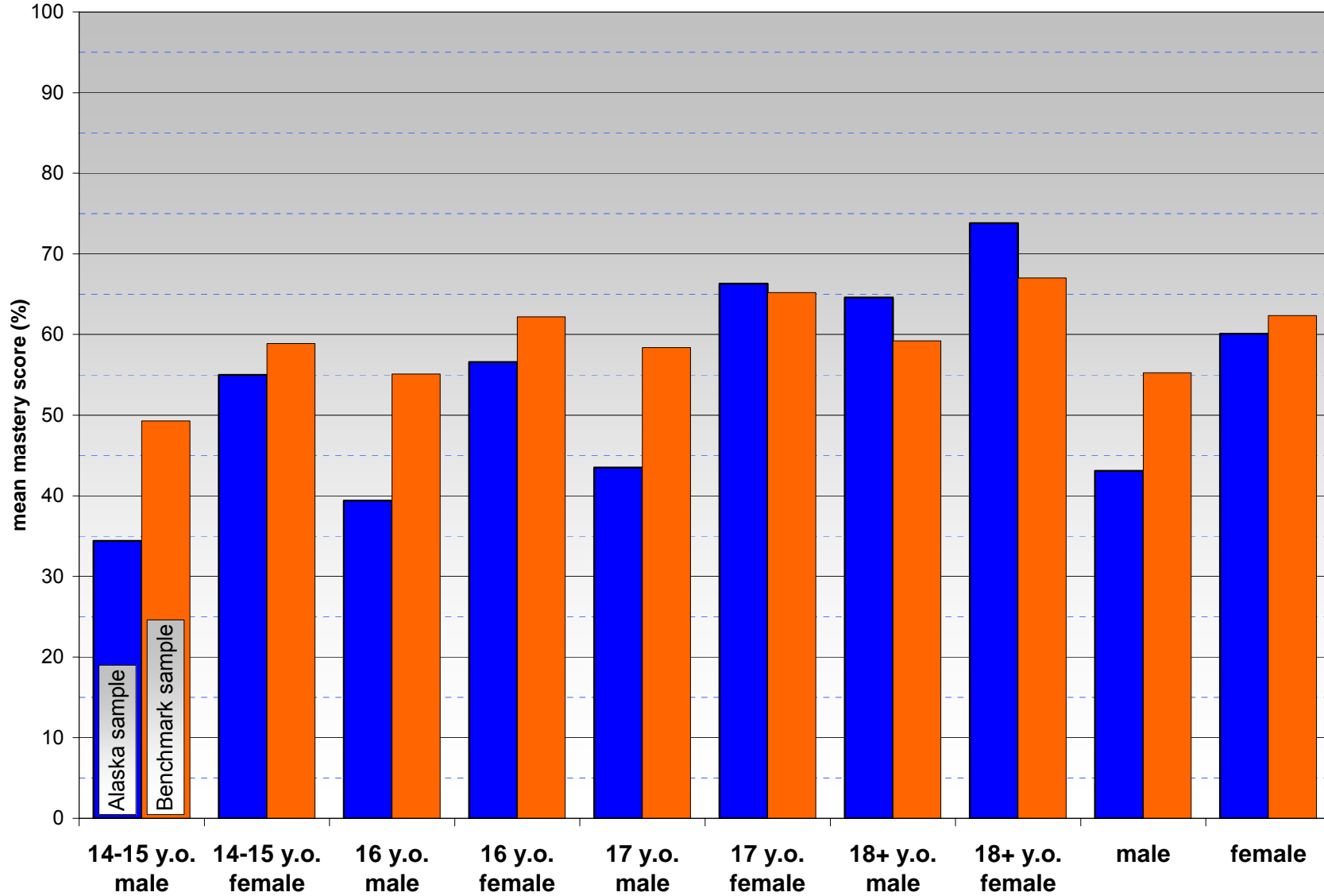
Another way to interpret an individual's or group's scores on the ACLSA is to compare them with scores of other youth. The ACLSA manual, available at [www.caseylifeskills.org](http://www.caseylifeskills.org), provides mastery scores for national (though not representative) samples who completed the ACLSA between 1997 and 1999, including over 1,000 youth in the Youth Level III sample.

While the Youth Level III form discussed in this report (version 3.1) has been somewhat modified since then, the modifications were accomplished with equivalence between versions as a goal. This sample thus provides a rudimentary benchmark against which to compare our sample. Total Mastery scores are provided by gender and age group (15, 16, 17, and 18 years-old), which allows us to create adjusted Total Mastery benchmarks matched by age and gender to the sample of interest. Figure 10 presents Total Mastery scores for the Alaska sample by age and gender compared with matched benchmark scores. The comparison scores indicate that scores nationally tend to vary by age and gender, thus underlying the importance of matching the benchmark sample to reflect the gender and age composition of the sample in question. For example, the male and female comparisons at the right side of Figure 10 include benchmark samples weighted to match the age groupings of the Alaska sample. The oldest group in the Alaskan sample appears to have outperformed the benchmark sample, although there were members of the Alaska group who were over 19 years old. This caveat does not apply to the performance of the 17 year-old females, whose average Total Mastery score was slightly higher than the benchmark sample.

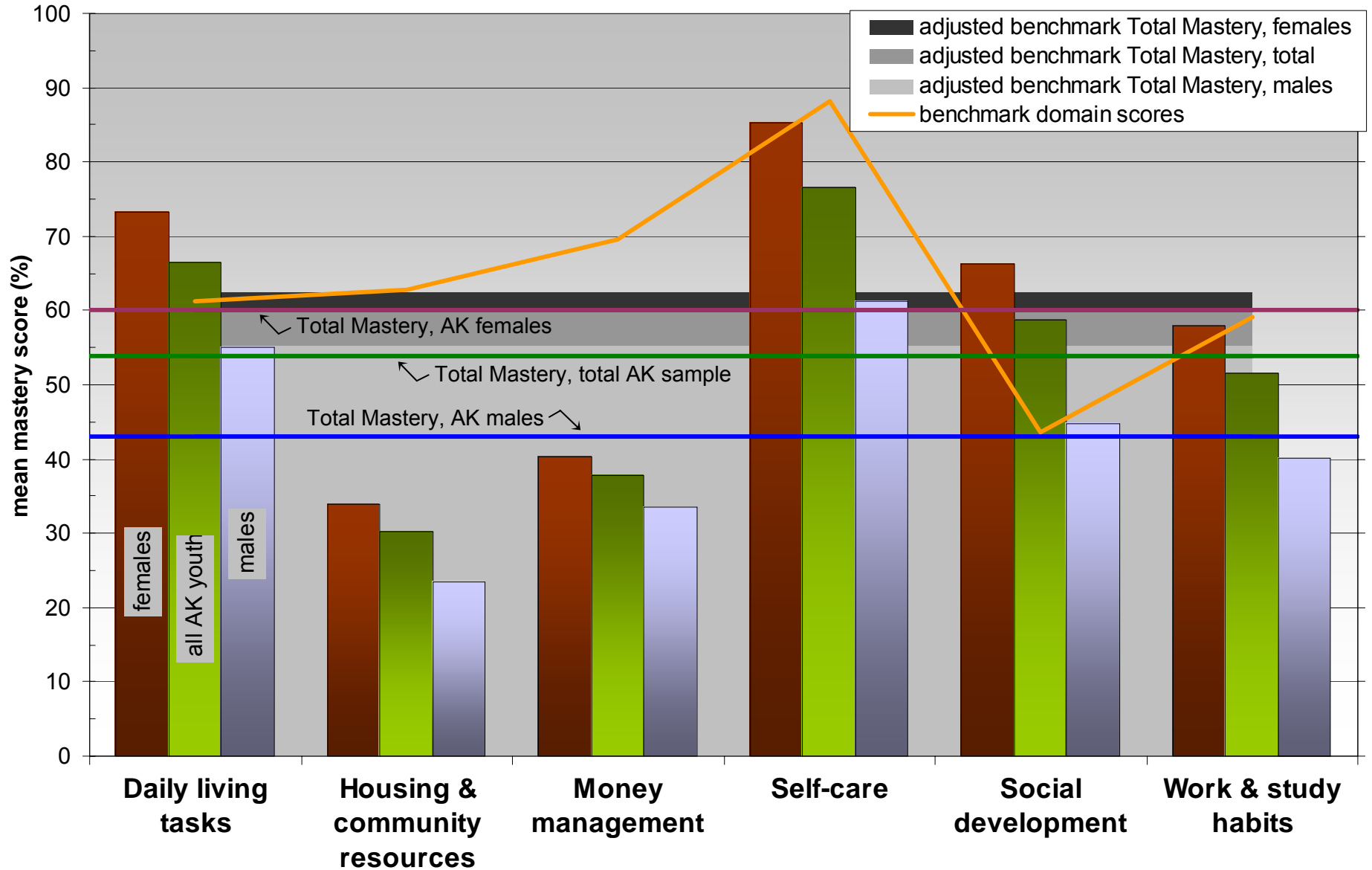
In Figure 11, these matched benchmark Total Mastery scores, indicated by grey shaded areas behind the domain scores, are added to Figure 9, along with benchmark domain scores. The ACLSA manual unfortunately supplies domain mastery scores only for the whole benchmark sample, not by age or gender. While these benchmark domain scores provide a useful comparison, it should be noted that the benchmark sample was more male (45.1% versus 31.7% in the Alaska sample) and older (57.8% were 17 or older versus 33.4% of the Alaska sample), factors which, as demonstrated, affect scores in opposing directions.

Benchmark comparisons confirm that Housing & Community Resources and Money Management are two areas of concern for Alaskan youth as represented by this sample. In fact, the benchmarks indicate that Money and Housing are usually, on the average, the second and third highest domain scores, respectively. The benchmarks also confirm that Daily Living Tasks is a strength for the Alaska sample, with the total sample score (66.4%) exceeding the benchmark average (61.2%). While this difference might be at least partially explained by the Alaska sample having more females (note also that Daily Living Tasks did not vary with age significantly in the Alaska sample), it still indicates performance at least on par with national standards. The benchmarks also illustrate that most youth score high on Self-Care, such that this domain may not be a strength for Alaskan youth (total sample score of 76.5% versus the benchmark average of 88.2%). Similarly, most youth appear to score lowest on Social Development, which is the third highest score in the Alaska sample, far exceeding the benchmark average (58.7% versus 43.6%). Thus, when compared to the scores of other youth, ACLSA scores among the Alaska sample indicate strengths in the areas of Daily Living Tasks and Social Development, and confirm relative weaknesses in Housing & Community Resources and Money Management.

**Figure 10: Total Mastery by age and gender, with matched benchmark sample average scores**



**Figure 11: ACLSA mastery scores by gender, with benchmark comparisons (update of Figure 2, with youth level III assessments through 18 August 2004; N = 206)**



### PART 3: TYING IT TOGETHER: THE CASE FOR IMPROVED TRANSITION SERVICES

Assessment involves more than just completing a test. One must keep in mind the context of the test and the person being tested. This includes consideration of what the test is measuring and how that interacts with the person's particular skills, environment, goals, etc. As a measure of life skills necessary to navigate modern America, particularly urban and suburban America, the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment appears to be a valuable instrument. In an ideal situation, the abilities needed to be a competent and self-sufficient adult are the same where the youth or young adult lives currently and where he or she will live in 5, 10, or 20 years. In Alaska, this situation sometimes does not apply.

**“I wish I had been more prepared. I wish I had been taught how to file my taxes, and lots of stuff like that. But mostly I wish I had been taught to act like an adult in adult situations...”**

For a youth who will spend his or her entire life in Anchorage or Juneau (or another American city), skills such as using public transportation and microwaves, disease prevention, and ATM operation can be judged now and will serve the youth well throughout adulthood. For many youth in Alaska, however, some items on the ACLSA do not apply to their life now or, if they remain in rural Alaska, in the future. In addition, youth will have need of the many different skills required to navigate through the variety that is Alaska, from bush to hub to city. Mastery of certain living skills in the context of Anchorage may do a youth little good in a small village or miles away from the nearest village.

To the extent that ACLSA items apply to the lives of Alaskan youth in OCS custody and to the extent that they will live in or visit more urbanized areas, scores on the ACLSA are a valid indicator of strengths and weaknesses in life skills. There are some apparent weaknesses. The ACLSA score analysis found that the areas of housing and community resources and money management are relative weaknesses for youth in OCS custody. This was confirmed by youth in the focus groups, who often discussed difficulties with spending versus saving, making their PFD money last through the year, and knowing where to find information about money management training and employment. Preparation for adulthood that is less than optimal has long-term ramifications, as shown in the Child Welfare Evaluation Program's follow-up study of alumni of OCS care (Williams, Pope, & Sirles, 2005) and other such studies nationally (see Collins [2001], Downs & Caldwell [2003], and McDonald et al. [1996] for reviews of previous studies). Results in the Alaska alumni study, such as high rates of homelessness and young pregnancy and low rates of college attendance and employment, describe a population that is not functioning in a way this society hopes for its children and expects of its adults. Responses to open-ended questions from the adults in the alumni study echo those of the youth in the focus groups: Many discussed a lack of preparation for finding and keeping a job, handling finances, finding housing, and how to be an adult in general, as illustrated by one alumnus:

*I wish I had been more prepared. I wish I had been taught how to file my taxes, and lots of stuff like that. But mostly I wish I had been taught to act like an adult in adult situations....They never gave me examples of what would be hard, like renting an apartment.*

Most of the participants in the alumni study left before the recent increased attention to independent living skills at OCS. The alumni reported little concrete training for independent living. The youth in the focus groups appeared to report more training, both formal and informal, but recognized numerous weaknesses in themselves and other youth. While ACLSA scores reveal relative strengths in day-to-day

tasks (such as hygiene and food storage) and social development, weaknesses in the areas of housing, community resource knowledge, and money management would appear to leave these youth at risk of suffering the same suboptimal rates of homelessness, school completion, and financial distress as their forebears in the Alaska alumni study.

Foster youth face difficulties in navigating across the varied geographic, economic, and social systems within Alaska as they are placed, without their consent, in multiple living situations, often far way from where they once and may again call “home.” Conclusions based on findings from both the focus groups in Part 1 and the ACLSA analysis in Part 2 indicate several steps that should be taken to better prepare Alaskan youth in care to live as successful adults:

- specific instruction and skill-building in budgeting, money management, and obtaining adequate housing, and in survival and subsistence skills for rural youth
- targeted support and training for pregnant and parenting youth
- adult mentoring and coaching in all skill areas, with particular attention to involving adults from a rural youth’s home community

Youth and their caregivers need encouragement and support—both formal and informal—to facilitate interactions that provide learning opportunities. There is research showing that modeling, mentorship, and life skills training—including money management, credit management, consumer skills, education, and employment skills—can effectively prepare youth for facing the world when they leave foster care (Mech, 2003; Wertheimer, 2002). Without such preparation, as one youth noted, “*you can’t send out people – it’s [not going to] work.*”

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