

# The Copper River Basin

Communities tied to the river and roads

Surrounded by mountain ranges on all sides, the Copper River Basin, located in what was once the bottom of a massive ice-age glacial lake, carves out its own identity among Alaska regions.

One of Alaska's major waterways, the Copper River descends from the Wrangell Mountains and heads north before taking a counterclockwise turn through the basin, the Chugach Mountains, and finally empties into the Gulf of Alaska.

With about the same amount of land area as West Virginia, the region is dotted with houses and communities stretched mostly along the highway system. Most of the region's population lives on

the western bank of the Copper River.

On the eastern bank is the boundary of the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. The park, created in 1980, is the largest national park in the United States.

The Copper River Basin is the only region of the state that has neither a borough-level government nor any city-level governments. The state manages the Copper River School District. Seven villages have tribal councils (Chistochina, Chitina, Copper Center, Gakona, Gulkana, Mentasta, and Tazlina), and these are the region's only local governments.

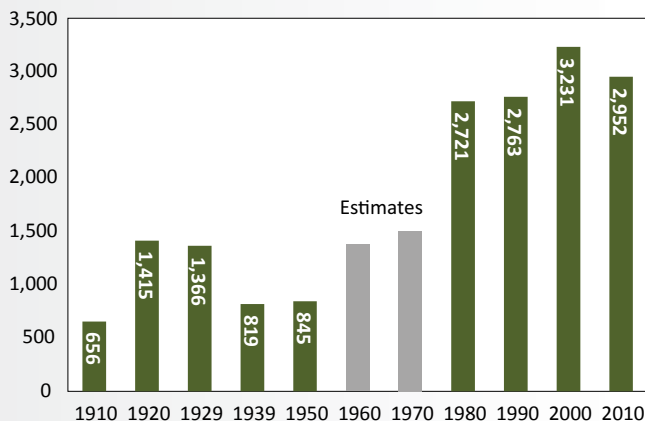
## River and passages populated the basin

The Copper River's original inhabitants, the Ahtna Athabascans, spoke a unique language and lived off the river's rich salmon runs as well the available game. There were multiple clans, each with its own fishing, hunting, and berry picking areas. Before contact with Europeans, the population was estimated at 1,000.

In the Klondike era, desire for a good overland passage between the Pacific Ocean and the gold fields of Interior Alaska and the Yukon brought the basin to the U.S. Army's attention. The army created a pack trail through the basin, connecting Valdez and Eagle to the north on the Yukon River.

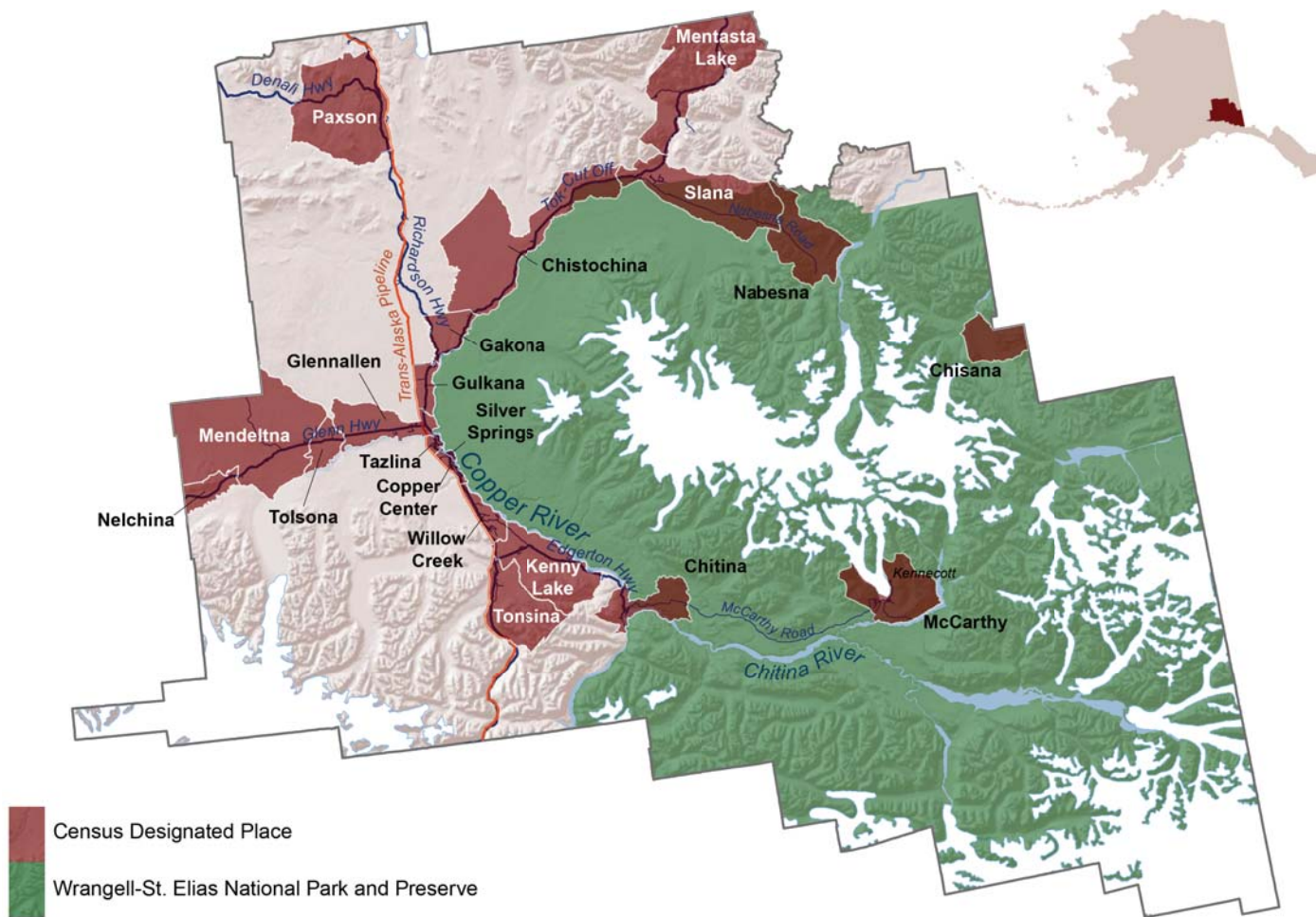
Roadhouses sprang up along the route to lodge travelers along the trail, and many of the basin's communities trace their origins to this era's roadhouses. Alaska's first major road, the Richardson

## 1 Copper River Basin Population 1910 to 2010



Note: In this article, the area that makes up "Copper River Basin" is equivalent to the Copper River Census Subarea (2010 Census geography).

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section



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Highway, was soon built along much of the pack trails’ route, though instead of Eagle it headed toward Fairbanks, by then the main Interior city.

**Copper brought a mining period**

Copper is a long-known resource in the basin, used by the Ahtna for tools and trading. In 1900, one of the richest concentrations of copper in the world was found in the Wrangell Mountains. With the backing of mining industrialist Daniel Guggenheim, the large Kennecott Copper Mine was developed along with the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad to bring the ore to the seaport of Cordova. From 1911 to the mine’s closure in 1938, the mine produced \$200 million worth of copper.

Today, Kennecott is a ghost town popular with

tourists, and though the railroad itself has faded into history, the route and bridges make up parts of the Copper River Highway and the McCarthy Road.

**Route development for population and oil**

During World War II, the desire for road links into and within Alaska led to the building of several additional highway links through the Copper River Basin.

With the new Alaska Highway to the north connecting the territory with the rest of the United States, the Glenn Highway was extended to Glennallen to establish a connection between Anchorage and the Richardson Highway. The Tok Cut-off, a shortcut between the Alaska Highway and

# 2 Copper River Basin Population and Demographics

## By town, 2000 and 2010

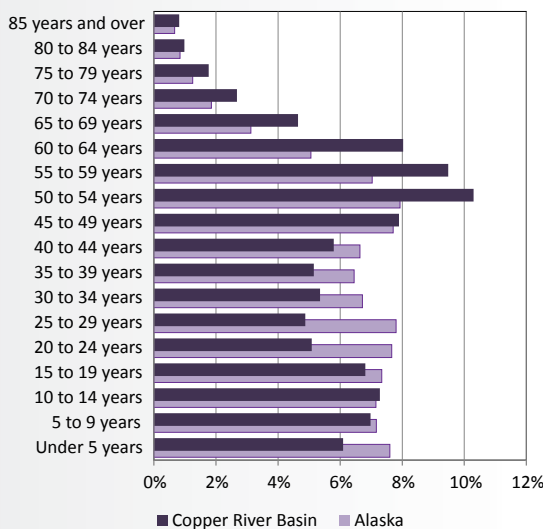
	2000 Population	2010 Population	Age and Sex, 2010					Race, 2010		
			Under 18	18 to 64	65+	Median age	Male-to-female ratio	Native alone	White alone	Another race or 2+ races
<b>Copper River Basin</b>	<b>3,231</b>	<b>2,952</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>42.2</b>	<b>1.13</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>8%</b>
Chistochina	93	93	22%	61%	17%	43.5	1.07	54%	37%	10%
Chitina	123	126	38%	57%	5%	28.0	0.94	20%	64%	16%
Copper Center	362	328	31%	62%	7%	35.3	1.07	48%	46%	6%
Gakona	215	218	26%	62%	12%	40.7	1.10	20%	79%	1%
Glennallen	554	483	24%	66%	10%	35.8	1.03	8%	77%	15%
Gulkana	88	119	39%	52%	9%	26.3	1.05	76%	24%	0%
Kenny Lake	410	355	25%	61%	13%	44.5	1.10	8%	83%	8%
McCarthy	42	28	7%	82%	11%	48.0	2.50	0%	96%	4%
Mendeltna	63	39	5%	92%	3%	54.8	1.44	0%	87%	13%
Mentasta Lake	142	112	28%	60%	13%	34.0	1.60	76%	23%	1%
Nabesna	16	5	0%	80%	20%	55.8	0.67	0%	100%	0%
Nelchina	71	59	12%	73%	15%	55.3	0.97	8%	86%	5%
Paxson	43	40	10%	85%	5%	54.0	2.08	0%	93%	8%
Silver Springs	130	114	26%	69%	4%	41.0	1.28	8%	87%	5%
Slana	124	147	20%	67%	13%	53.1	1.37	13%	83%	4%
Tazlina	328	297	27%	62%	12%	38.5	1.01	34%	55%	11%
Tolsona	27	30	7%	87%	7%	52.3	1.14	0%	97%	3%
Tonsina	92	78	15%	76%	9%	49.3	1.29	9%	87%	4%
Willow Creek	201	191	18%	65%	17%	49.3	1.15	10%	82%	8%
Balance of area	107	90	13%	68%	19%	54.3	1.37	0%	87%	13%
<b>Valdez</b>	<b>4,036</b>	<b>3,976</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>36.7</b>	<b>1.14</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>Anchorage</b>	<b>260,283</b>	<b>291,826</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>32.9</b>	<b>1.03</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>26%</b>
<b>Alaska</b>	<b>626,932</b>	<b>710,231</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>33.8</b>	<b>1.08</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>19%</b>

Notes: All listed areas in the Copper River Basin are census designated places. Chisana CDP, which had no population in the 2000 or 2010 Census, is not listed here.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 and 2010 censuses

### 3 An Older Population

#### Copper River vs. Alaska, 2010



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census; and Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

Anchorage, was also built during those years.

With the discovery of oil in Prudhoe Bay in 1968 and construction of the Trans-Alaska Oil Pipeline between 1974 and 1977, the Copper River Basin again became a key route from the Interior to the sea. Several pipeline construction camps sprang up in the basin along with many new housing subdivisions.

During the 1970s, the population of the Copper River Basin jumped to around its current level of 3,000, where it has more or less stayed. In the 30 years between the first post-pipeline census of 1980 and 2010, the population of the basin only grew by 231 people. (See Exhibit 1.)

### Many small communities

The Copper River Basin has no communities with legally defined boundaries. Instead it has census-designated places, or CDPs, which are

closely settled communities with boundaries delineated by the U.S. Census Bureau for statistical purposes.

The basin has 20 established CDPs that are home to around 97 percent of the area's population. Every CDP is on Alaska's road system — though some of the roads are seasonal — with the exception of Chisana, which hasn't had any population counted in the last two censuses. McCarthy and Nabesna are accessible by seasonally open roads. (See Exhibit 2.)

Glennallen, located around the junction of the Glenn and Richardson highways, is the largest community, with 483 people in 2010. It serves as the region's hub, and many of the larger businesses and services are located there.

Much of the basin's population is within easy driving distance of Glennallen. Seventy percent of the area's population lives between Kenny Lake and Gakona along the western bank of the Copper River, a roughly 55-mile stretch of road.

## Many residents are Alaska Native

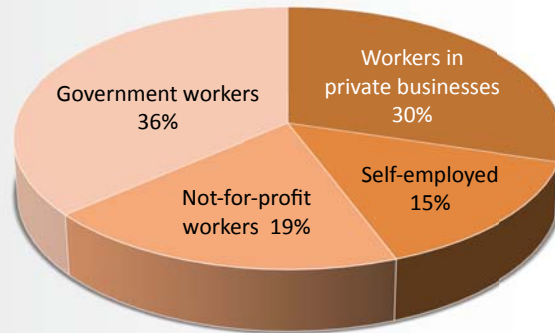
Nearly everyone within the Copper River Basin is white or Alaska Native. About 23 percent of the population is Alaska Native alone, and 30 percent is Native alone or in combination with another race. Four communities are majority Alaska Native: Gulkana, Mentasta Lake, Chistochina, and Copper Center. Tazlina is about 44 percent Alaska Native.

Many of the basin's Native people are shareholders in Ahtna Incorporated, an Alaska Native Regional Corporation. Ahtna Inc. was created under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act to manage Native-owned land and provide dividends to shareholders. Headquartered in Glennallen, the corporation manages about 1.7 million acres in the region.

## An aging population

Though the Copper River Basin's population

## 4 Classifications of Workers Copper River Basin, 2008 to 2012



Note: Includes civilian working population age 16 or older.  
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 to 2012 American Community Survey; and Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

## 5 Copper River Workers, by Industry 2008 to 2012

	Estimate	Margin of error
Total civilian employed population 16 years and older	1,244	±194
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining	5%	±3%
Construction	11%	±5%
Manufacturing	0%	0
Wholesale trade	1%	±1%
Retail trade	11%	±5%
Transportation and warehousing, and utilities	5%	±3%
Information	2%	±2%
Finance and insurance, and real estate and rental and leasing	5%	±3%
Professional, scientific, and management services*	5%	±4%
Educational services, and health care and social assistance	32%	±8%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services	8%	±4%
Other services, except public administration	4%	±2%
Public administration	11%	±3%

Notes: These industry classifications are from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, and differ from other sources.

\*Including administrative and waste management services.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 to 2012 American Community Survey; and Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

count hasn't changed much in recent decades, its residents have aged. As of the 2010 Census its median age was 42.2, considerably older than the statewide median of 33.8.

A large share of the residents who moved to the Copper River Basin in the 1970s were baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), and many of their children left after high school while the parents remained. (See Exhibit 3.) In 1980, the basin's median age was just 28.2.

## 6 How Earnings and Income Compare to Anchorage and Valdez

### Copper River Basin, 2008 to 2012

	Copper River Basin		Anchorage		Valdez	
	Estimate	Margin of error	Estimate	Margin of error	Estimate	Margin of error
Total households	1,189	±132	105,517	±758	1,458	±147
Households with earnings	84%	±5%	89%	±1%	94%	±5%
Mean earnings	\$51,814	±\$5,958	\$90,237	±\$2,032	\$86,357	±\$10,598
Households with Social Security	26%	±6%	17%	±1%	9%	±5%
Mean Social Security income	\$14,931	±\$2,862	\$15,439	±\$463	\$17,495	±\$6,556
Households with retirement income	21%	±5%	16%	±1%	13%	±6%
Mean retirement income	\$26,820	±\$6,893	\$30,200	±\$2,028	\$26,442	±\$6,786
Households with Supplemental Security Income	5%	±3%	4%	0	3%	±4%
Mean Supplemental Security Income	\$7,993	±\$1,670	\$9,083	±\$700	\$4,790	±\$180
Households with cash public assistance income	5%	±4%	6%	±1%	2%	±2%
Mean cash public assistance income	\$2,625	±\$1,112	\$3,832	±\$238	\$1,918	±\$1,763
Households with food stamp/SNAP* benefits	14%	±6%	8%	±1%	3%	±3%
Median household income	\$50,060	±\$8,242	\$76,495	±\$1,213	\$80,476	±\$20,152
Per capita income	\$24,540	±\$2,552	\$36,145	±\$756	\$36,609	±\$6,029

Note: All earnings and income are in 2012 dollars.

\*SNAP stands for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008-2012 American Community Survey; and Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

Six Copper River Basin communities had median ages over 50 in the 2010 Census, including Nabesna, Nelchina, Mendeltna, Paxson, Slana, and Tolsona. Two places, Chitina and Gulkana, had median ages below the state as a whole, and nearly 40 percent of those areas' populations were below age 18. Youth and population increase are generally associated, and Gulkana stands out for growing the most between 2000 and 2010, with a gain of 30 people.

### Decreasing male-to-female ratio

The region has 1.13 males for every female, which is a bit higher than the statewide ratio of 1.08. Remote areas and areas with younger populations tend to have higher male-to-female ratios, and with population aging, the basin's ratio has decreased steadily since 1980, when it was 1.25.

McCarthy and Paxson are outliers with particularly high male-to-female ratios in 2010 — more than two men for every woman — but both places had fewer than 50 residents.

### Government, nonprofit agencies

More than 50 percent of the area's workers report

working for government or a nonprofit organization, compared to 36 percent of the state as a whole, 32 percent for Anchorage, and 37 percent in nearby Valdez.

Though the basin has no city or borough governments, many residents work for the state in education and health services or for federal, tribal, or nonprofit agencies. Regions with smaller populations often have a larger share of government employment to provide basic services. (See Exhibits 4 and 5.)

Estimated self-employment is comparatively high as well, at 15 percent in contrast to 9 percent for Anchorage and 6 percent for Valdez. Many of these workers are in retail, hospitality, recreation/sport fishing, and other industries tied to seasonal tourism, which is an essential piece of the economy for most of the roadside communities.

### Large share not in labor force

With many residents over age 60 and subsistence a central part of life, labor force participation is relatively low. Based on the American Community Survey for 2008 through 2012, 63 percent of the population aged 16 or older was in the labor



The Glenn Highway descends into the Copper River Basin, with the Wrangell Mountains in the distance. Photo courtesy of Flickr user Jeremy Taylor

force — either working or seeking work — compared to 71 percent for the state, 76 percent for Anchorage, and 76 percent for Valdez.

The basin’s unemployment is relatively high at around 7 percent, compared to roughly 4 percent for Valdez and 5 percent for Anchorage.

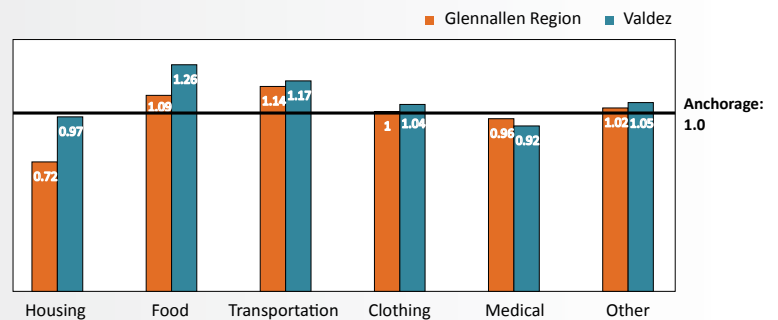
### Incomes are relatively low

Median household income in the Copper River Basin was low between 2008 and 2012 at just over \$50,000 compared to roughly \$70,000 for the state and more than \$75,000 for Anchorage. The median household income for Valdez was estimated at just over \$80,000, but that figure has a very large margin of error. (See Exhibit 6.) With an older population, household sizes in the Copper River Basin are smaller (2.4 people in 2010 and 2.7 for the state), and the gap in per capita income between the areas is somewhat less.

An estimated 26 percent of households in the basin receive Social Security income, compared to 17 percent for Anchorage and around 9 percent for Valdez. Social Security benefits are typically around \$15,000 per year, representing a large part of overall income for many households. About 21 percent of Copper River Basin households receive some form of retirement income, averaging roughly \$27,000 per year.

## 7 How the Area’s Cost of Living Compares

### Glennallen area, Valdez, and Anchorage, 2008



Notes: 2008 data are the most recent available for this area. For this study, the Glennallen region includes Glennallen, Chitina, Paxson, Slana, and Tazlina.

Sources: McDowell Group, “Alaska Geographic Differential Study” report for the Alaska Department of Administration

### Housing costs less, transportation costs more

Housing costs, including utilities, for selected communities were around 25 percent less than those in nearby Valdez in 2008 and 28 percent less than in Anchorage. (See Exhibit 7.)

Utility costs by themselves were just 1 percent higher than Valdez but 219 percent higher than

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## COPPER RIVER BASIN

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Anchorage. Communities on the Richardson and Glenn highways are generally on hydropower, and others are on diesel.

Transportation costs in the Glennallen Region were 14 percent higher than Anchorage and 3 percent lower than Valdez. Those higher costs are due to vehicle maintenance (40 percent higher than in Anchorage) as well as fuel prices (20 percent higher).

Medical costs for the region were slightly less than Anchorage as of 2008, and clothing costs were about the same. Food was 9 percent higher than in Anchorage but 17 percent less than at the end of the road in Valdez. It's important to note that, with a small population and few local providers of goods and services, relative costs for the area can change from year to year.