



# FACT SHEET

## Life Expectancy, Morbidity, and Health Practices of Native Hawaiian Elders

**Hā Kūpuna: National Resource Center for Native Hawaiian Elders**

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### Who Are the Native Hawaiians?

The Polynesian ancestors of *Kānaka Maoli* (Native Hawaiians) were seafaring voyagers from the South Pacific who sailed from their home around A.D. 100 and settled in Hawai'i. They were a self-sufficient and self-governed population with lifestyles and social structures in harmony with their environment. Their population was estimated at 800,000+, and they lived in relative isolation until the arrival of Captain James Cook in 1778.



Visiting sailors brought diseases against which Hawaiians had little immunity, and the Native Hawaiian population soon was reduced by half. American interests began to dominate. Hawaiian land ownership was discouraged, and many traditions were outlawed. The US military overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893.

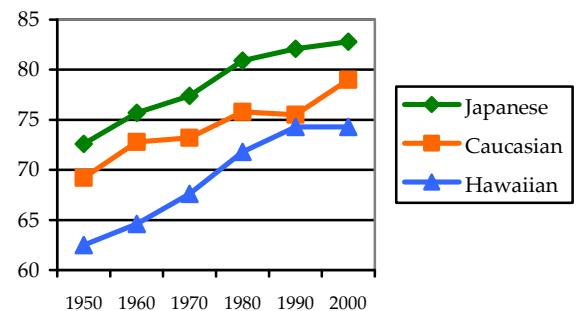
### Native Hawaiians Today

In 2000, 401,000 (0.1%) Americans were Native Hawaiian. About 60% reside in Hawai'i. Within the state, Native Hawaiians comprise about 24% of the population. But, in 2000, only 8.8% of the Hawaiian population was age 60 and older, compared to 17.1% of the total Hawai'i population.

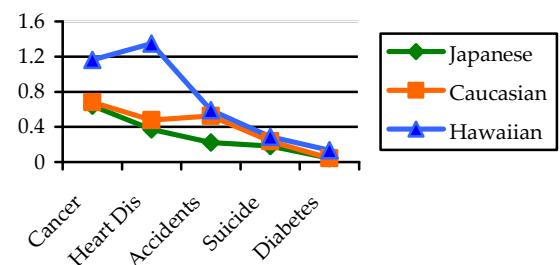
**Purpose.** Why are Native Hawaiians under-represented among Hawai'i's elderly? In this **Fact Sheet**, we examine this question using data from Hawai'i vital records, the Hawai'i Health Survey (HHS), and the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS).

**Findings.** Findings help specify health disparities faced by Native Hawaiians.

**Life Expectancy.** Among to the 3 largest ethnic groups in Hawai'i, Native Hawaiians had the shortest life expectancies in 2000. Although life expectancies for all ethnic groups, including Hawaiians, have increased since 1950, the longest living groups (Chinese and Japanese) continue to live 10 years longer than Native Hawaiians.

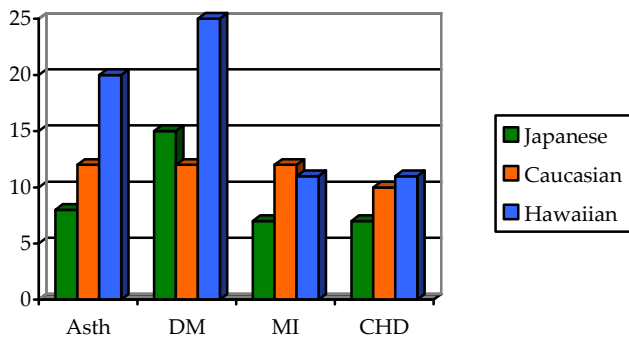


**Total Years of Potential Life Lost.** TPLL is an estimate of the total years of potential life lost, assuming that everyone should live until age 70. TPLL can be compared across ethnic groups, and number of years lost can be estimated overall and by causes of death.

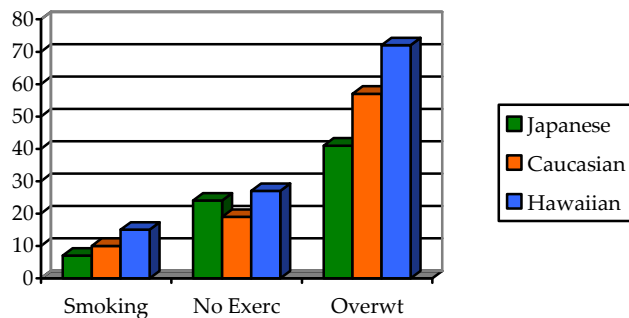


Among the state's 3 largest groups, Hawaiians lose an average of 5.3 years of potential life, compared to 3.4 years for Caucasians and 2.6 years for Japanese. Of the 3 largest ethnic groups, Hawaiians lose the most years of life to heart disease, cancer, accidents, suicide, and diabetes.

**Chronic Conditions.** Native Hawaiian elders experience a higher prevalence of asthma, diabetes, and congestive heart failure than Japanese and Caucasian elders in Hawai'i.



Additionally, greater percentages of Native Hawaiian elders smoke cigarettes, do not exercise, and are overweight or obese.



**Good News.** Also, among the 3 largest ethnic groups in the state, Native Hawaiians elders are most likely to report feeling calm, peaceful, and energetic, and The HHS and BRFSS data also that 95% of Hawaiian elders are satisfied or very satisfied with life, 95% have health insurance, and 81% had a routine check-up in the past year (on par with Caucasians).

## Discussion

Scholars have offered a number of reasons for these findings, including the impact of historical cultural trauma, poverty, inadequate access to culturally responsive care, institutional and internalized racism, and discrimination.

These factors can result in elders of different ethnicities experiencing different levels of advantage and adversity over the life courses. A life with greater adversity could explain lower levels of educational attainment among Native Hawaiians (compared to Caucasian and Japanese), which reduces options for housing, employment, health care, and time for physical activity. For more detail, see Browne et al. Resiliency and adversity in the lives of Native Hawaiian elders. *Social Work, 2009;54: 253-261.*

Clearly, more research is needed to understand differential health outcomes seen in Hawai'i's elders. Programs and policies are need that support efforts to extend quality life expectancy for Native Hawaiians.

## Goal of Hā Kūpuna

The goal of Hā Kūpuna National Resource Center for Native Hawaiian Elders is to "assure the transmission of *hā* (breathe of life; wisdom) from older to younger generations by improving access to and delivery of services to Native Hawaiian elders and their caregivers through the development and dissemination of knowledge around health and long-term care patterns and preferences.



Information on this Fact Sheet was excerpted from Braun et al. *Life expectancy, morbidity, and health practice of Native Hawaiian Elders: A Review of Hawaii Surveillance Data*. Honolulu, HI: Ha Kupuna, 2010. Funding for this project is provided, in part, by a grant (No. 90O10002/01) from the US Administration on Aging, Department of Health and Human Services. The information in this report does not reflect the opinion of the US Administration on Aging.