

CARSEY INSTITUTE

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE TO SUPPORT RURAL COMMUNITIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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War Death Rate Higher Among Soldiers from Rural Areas

Durham, N.H. – Veterans Day will be an especially sad time for residents of many small towns across the nation this year as a result of a disproportionate loss of life in Iraq and Afghanistan among U.S. soldiers from rural areas.

According to the results of a study of U.S. Department of Defense data undertaken by the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire, the death rate of soldiers from rural areas has exceeded that of urban military recruits in the majority of states.

Vermont had the highest rural death toll at 61 killed per million adults. As a result, Vermont's combined rural and urban statewide death toll was 47 killed per million adults, the highest of any state in the nation. Delaware, home of Dover Air Force Base, where the military routinely ships bodies back from overseas, had the 2nd highest rural death rate.

“Higher rates of rural soldier casualties are occurring largely because of higher rates of rural military recruitment,” said Mil Duncan, director of the Carsey Institute. “Enlisting in the Armed Forces is a noble choice and can provide rural youth with a path to greater future opportunities, but rural youth shouldn't feel that it is their only choice. We've been losing young people to urban areas for decades because of a lack of good rural employment and education opportunities; strengthening rural America's economy and job options is key in order to provide youth with a range of choices, including staying home and building strong, resilient rural communities.”

A recent poll of rural voters in key states and districts conducted by the Center for Rural Strategies found that the war in Iraq is becoming a top issue in an increasing number of voter's minds, rising from 28 percent of respondents in September to 38 percent in October.

“In time of war, all Americans are expected to sacrifice and rural Americans have always stepped forward to do their part in past wars and national emergencies,” wrote William O'Hare and Bill Bishop, who conducted the study for Carsey. “However, as the data presented here attests, today rural Americans are paying the ultimate sacrifice in disproportionately high numbers.”

The elevated rural death rate reflects a higher enlistment rate among young adults in rural America, where private sector jobs are often scarce. Only 24 percent of employed young adults, ages 18 to

24, hold full-time jobs in rural communities. Traditional rural employment in farming, logging, mining, fishing and small manufacturing have been declining for many years.

As of October 28, 2006, a total of 825 rural recruits have died in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001, compared to 2,270 from metropolitan areas. That represents a death rate of 24 per million among rural men and women, compared to a death rate of 15 per million for urbanites. Rural areas account for only 19 percent of the American population but 27 percent of the dead.

In addition to Vermont and Delaware, Oregon, Nebraska and Arizona also lost a highly disproportionate number of service men and women from rural areas.

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The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire conducts research and analysis on the challenges facing rural families and communities in New Hampshire, New England, and the nation. The Carsey Institute sponsors independent, interdisciplinary research that documents trends and conditions affecting families and communities, providing valuable information and analysis to policymakers, practitioners, the media, and the general public. Through this work, the Carsey Institute contributes to public dialogue on policies that encourage social mobility and sustain healthy, equitable communities. The Carsey Institute was established in May 2002 with a generous gift from UNH alumna and noted television producer Marcy Carsey.