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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE FOR RURAL AMERICA'S FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Alcohol Abuse Remains the Leading Substance Abuse Problem in Rural America

*New report shows that use of methamphetamine
is higher in rural areas but is less prevalent than alcohol abuse*

Report calls for expanded alcohol abuse assistance in rural areas and new approaches to reduce methamphetamine abuse

DURHAM, N.H. – Although media reports have declared that rural America is facing a methamphetamine crisis, alcohol abuse remains a far more prevalent problem in small towns and rural areas of the country.

A new report from The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire shows that alcohol abuse in rural America exceeds illicit drug abuse and that excessive drinking is a serious problem among rural youth, particularly in homes where parents are absent.

The report also confirms that the abuse of stimulants, including methamphetamine (or “meth”) is high among certain rural populations, particularly among the rural unemployed.

“Alcohol abuse remains the most serious substance abuse issue in rural America, particularly among youths and young adults,” says Karen Van Gundy, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire, who wrote the report. “But we are also seeing some troubling patterns of methamphetamine and other stimulant abuse. Policymakers should find ways to provide comprehensive treatment – for alcohol as well as meth and other drug abuse.”

The report is based on several national studies, including the 2003 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, which was sponsored by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The report finds that in small towns and rural areas:

- Young adults show the highest rates of alcohol and illicit drug abuse. Twenty-two percent of young adult men have an alcohol abuse problem compared to 12 percent of young adult women. Nine percent of young adult men have a drug abuse problem compared to 6 percent of young adult women.
- Substance abuse rates for African Americans are consistently low and Native American rates are consistently high.
- Less educated young adults are more likely to have an illicit drug abuse problem.
- Native American youth are the only group in rural America that are equally as likely to abuse drugs as alcohol.

While only tentative conclusions can be drawn about meth abuse specifically, data about the abuse of all stimulants, including meth, suggest that there might be a unique pattern of meth abuse in rural and small town America.

The report shows that adults ages 26 and older in rural areas abuse stimulants at higher rates than adults in urban areas. And stimulant abuse among the unemployed in rural America is seven times that of the urban unemployed.

The report finds that it is critical to increase alcohol abuse treatment services, especially among rural youth, noting that states with the highest rates of youth alcohol abuse have the greatest unmet need for alcohol treatment. Rural residents frequently must travel great distances and wait for months to be treated at the few, widely-spaced and under-staffed hospitals and health facilities available to them.

The report also calls for new approaches to deal with the unique meth problem in rural America. Because the drug is inexpensive and simple to make, rural America has become vulnerable to meth abuse problems, especially in chronically poor areas. New interventions geared to rural areas must be implemented, the report finds.

The report, "Substance Abuse in Rural and Small Town America," is part of a series of Carsey Institute policy reports on topics concerning rural America. Hard copies are available by contacting Amy Seif at The Carsey Institute, 603-862-4650 or by visiting www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu.

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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 through a generous gift from UNH alumna and noted television producer Marcy Carsey.