

U.S. Rural Soldiers Account for a Disproportionately High Share of Casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan

WILLIAM O'HARE AND BILL BISHOP

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. However, as the data presented here attests, today rural Americans are paying the ultimate sacrifice in disproportionately high numbers. Examination of deaths based on hometown in the Department of Defense records shows soldiers from rural America are dying at a higher rate than soldiers from big cities and suburbs. In all but eight states, soldiers from rural areas¹ make up a disproportionately high share of casualties.

The high death rate for soldiers from rural areas is linked to the higher rate of enlistment of young adults from rural America.² The higher rates of enlistment in the Armed Forces among rural youth are possibly linked to diminished opportunities there.³ Transitioning from youth to adulthood is more problematic in rural U.S. because there are fewer job opportunities. Young adults in rural areas are less able to secure a foothold in the economy. Among employed young adults (age 18 to 24) only 24 percent of those in rural areas are working full-time year-round, compared to 29 percent of those in cities and suburbs.

Industries that have traditionally sustained rural people and places—farming, timber, mining, fishing and manufacturing—are employing fewer workers than they have in the past. Communities distant from urban areas and with few scenic amenities are struggling with low incomes, a low skill labor force, limited access to services, and weak infrastructure. Competition accompanying globalization increasingly moves jobs overseas or stimulates increased productivity—in both cases, eliminating the “good jobs” that sustain communities and historically promised young people a future.

For decades, rural communities have lamented the loss of young people to urban areas where education and employment opportunities seem brighter. Many who stay, especially in poor areas, are those whose low level of education and skills give them little reason to anticipate better opportunities elsewhere as well. Enlistment in the Armed Forces can provide rural youth with a path to greater future opportunities that includes gaining new skills and learning about other places and cultures.

As we observe Veteran's Day this year, it is important for Americans to recognize that rural families are paying a disproportionately high price for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

AUTHORS

DR. WILLIAM P. O'HARE is a visiting senior fellow at the Carsey Institute. (bbohare@comcast.net)

BILL BISHOP is a journalist living in Austin, Texas, who is writing a book on political segregation. (bbish@austin.rr.com)

ENDNOTES

¹Here, “rural” refers to nonmetropolitan counties as classified by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. “Urban” here means “metropolitan,” which includes both central cities and their surrounding suburbs.

²National Priorities Project data on hometowns of active duty army recruits (http://nationalpriorities.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=254) show a distribution between metro and non-metro counties that is similar to the distribution of the hometowns of soldiers who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan. Also, see Kane, Tim. 2005. *Who Bears the Burden? Demographic Characteristics of U.S. Military Recruits Before and After 9/11*. Heritage Foundation, Center for Data Analysis Report #05-08. <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/cda05-08.cfm>.

³For example, Bachman, Jerald, David Segal, Peter Freedman-Doan, and Patrick O'Malley. 2000. Who Chooses Military Service? Correlates of Propensity and Enlistment in the U.S. Armed Forces. *Military Psychology* 12 (1): 1–30.

Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) and Operation Iraqi Freedom have resulted in more than 3,000 military deaths since late 2001. Analysis of these casualties shows:

- 825 of the 3,095 war casualties (data through October 28, 2006) are accounted for by soldiers from rural areas.
- Rural areas account for only 19 percent of the adult population in the United States, but have suffered 27 percent of the casualties.
- The death rate for rural soldiers (24 per million adults aged 18 to 59) is 60 percent higher than the death rate for those soldiers from cities and suburbs (15 deaths per million).
- Looking only at rural areas, Vermont has the highest death rate of any state, followed by Delaware, South Dakota, and Arizona.
- Only eight states have urban death rates higher than rural death rates (HI, ID, IN, OH, OK, ND, UT, WY).

Table 1. Number of Deaths and Death Rate* of U.S. Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan Conflicts Based on Whether Their Hometown Was Inside or Outside Metro Areas, by State

	Outside Metropolitan Areas (Rural)		Inside Metropolitan Areas (Urban)		Total	
	Number of Deaths	Death Rate	Number of Deaths	Death Rate	Number of Deaths	Death Rate
Alaska	6	24	4	22	10	23
Alabama	18	20	31	16	49	17
Arkansas	19	22	17	21	36	21
Arizona	18	41	55	18	73	21
California	18	24	301	14	319	14
Colorado	13	24	28	11	41	14
Connecticut	3	16	21	11	24	11
DC	NA	NA	4	11	4	11
Delaware	6	60	7	17	13	25
Florida	11	16	133	14	144	14
Georgia	34	21	56	14	90	16
Hawaii	1	4	11	20	12	15
Iowa	21	22	15	17	36	20
Idaho	10	18	6	19	16	18
Illinois	33	29	88	13	121	15
Indiana	19	18	53	19	72	19
Kansas	21	30	13	13	34	20
Kentucky	26	20	24	19	50	19
Louisiana	20	30	50	23	70	25
Massachusetts	NA	NA	59	15	59	15
Maryland	8	32	51	16	59	17
Maine	11	22	7	21	18	22
Michigan	28	25	71	14	99	16
Minnesota	17	19	23	10	40	12
Missouri	30	27	32	13	62	17
Mississippi	27	23	14	23	41	23
Montana	15	33	1	8	16	27
Nebraska	19	40	12	20	31	29
New Hampshire	9	29	9	17	18	22
New Jersey	NA	NA	54	10	54	10
New Mexico	11	23	12	17	23	19
Nevada	4	25	28	22	32	22
New York	23	24	127	11	150	12
North Carolina	23	14	54	14	77	14
North Dakota	5	25	10	50	15	37
Ohio	25	19	113	20	138	19
Oklahoma	18	22	34	25	52	24
Oregon	25	40	30	18	55	24
Pennsylvania	39	33	110	17	149	20
Rhode Island	1	19	8	13	9	13
South Carolina	15	20	32	17	47	18
South Dakota	14	48	4	22	18	38
Tennessee	26	22	39	15	65	17
Texas	38	20	228	19	266	19
Utah	3	9	14	12	17	11
Virginia	19	19	72	19	91	19
Vermont	16	61	3	22	19	47
Washington	11	17	48	14	59	15
Wisconsin	29	27	39	16	68	20
West Virginia	15	23	10	21	25	22
Wyoming	4	18	5	51	9	28
Total	825	24	2,270	15	3,095	17

*Death rate is the number killed per million population aged 18 to 59

NA means no counties in state are located Outside Metropolitan Areas, except in regards to MA, which has no casualties from any of its non-metro counties.

Source: Department of Defense database, <http://siadapp.dior.whs.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/castop.htm> [October 28, 2006]