

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

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When the country goes to war, all Americans are expected to make sacrifices 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's rural Americans are making 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 most states, soldiers from rural areas<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> The higher rate of enlistment in the Armed Forces among rural youth is often linked to diminished opportunities there.<sup>3</sup> Transitioning from youth to adulthood is more problematic in the rural U.S. because there are fewer job opportunities. For example, the unemployment rate among 18–24-year-olds is 9 percent in rural America compared to 7 percent in urban areas. Among young adults with jobs, those in rural areas are much more likely to be working part-time or in temporary jobs.

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, which in both cases eliminates 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. 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.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Here, “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 metropolitan suburbs. We use the metro definitions in place as the time of the first casualty in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> National Priorities Project data on hometowns of active duty army recruits ([http://nationalpriorities.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=254](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>.

<sup>3</sup> For 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 4,000 military deaths since late 2001. Analysis of these casualties shows:

- 1,102 of the 4,197 deaths are accounted for by soldiers from rural areas.
- Rural areas account for only 19 percent of the adult population, but have suffered 26 percent of the casualties.
- The rural disadvantage is widespread. In 39 states, the rural death rate is higher than the urban death rate.
- The death rate for rural soldiers (31 per million adults aged 18 to 59) is 48 percent higher than the death rate for big cities and suburbs (21 per million)
- Looking only at rural areas, Vermont, Delaware, Nebraska, and Oregon have the highest death rates.

**TABLE 1. NUMBER OF DEATHS AND DEATH RATE\* OF U.S. SOLDIERS IN IRAQ AND AFGANISTAN 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	11	43	5	27	16	37
ALABAMA	24	27	47	24	71	25
ARKANSAS	28	33	29	35	57	34
ARIZONA	20	45	77	25	97	28
CALIFORNIA	24	32	431	20	455	20
COLORADO	19	35	43	18	62	21
CONNECTICUT	4	21	27	14	31	14
DC	0	NA	6	16	6	16
DELAWARE	6	60	9	21	15	29
FLORIDA	15	21	175	18	190	18
GEORGIA	46	28	78	19	124	22
HAWAII	4	18	15	27	19	24
IOWA	30	32	20	23	50	27
IDAHO	19	34	11	35	30	34
ILLINOIS	42	37	108	16	150	19
INDIANA	31	30	70	25	101	26
KANSAS	26	38	20	20	46	27
KENTUCKY	35	26	32	25	67	26
LOUISIANA	20	30	64	30	84	30
MASSACHUSETTS	0	0	80	20	80	20
MARYLAND	11	44	65	20	76	22
MAINE	15	30	14	41	29	35
MICHIGAN	41	37	110	21	151	24
MINNESOTA	22	24	35	15	57	18
MISSOURI	38	34	43	17	81	23
MISSISSIPPI	37	31	15	25	52	29
MONTANA	22	49	2	15	24	41
NORTH CAROLINA	33	20	73	20	106	20
NORTH DAKOTA	8	39	10	50	18	45
NEBRASKA	27	57	19	31	46	42
NEW HAMPSHIRE	11	35	12	23	23	28
NEW JERSEY	NA	NA	73	14	73	14
NEW MEXICO	13	27	22	31	35	30
NEVADA	8	49	34	26	42	29
NEW YORK	28	29	157	14	185	15
OHIO	36	27	142	25	178	25
OKLAHOMA	23	28	45	33	68	31
OREGON	35	56	40	24	75	33
PENNSYLVANIA	45	39	146	23	191	25
RHODE ISLAND	2	38	8	13	10	15
SOUTH CAROLINA	17	23	41	22	58	22
SOUTH DAKOTA	15	51	4	22	19	40
TENNESSEE	38	33	51	20	89	24
TEXAS	56	29	326	27	382	27
UTAH	4	11	23	20	27	18
VIRGINIA	21	21	96	25	117	24
VERMONT	16	61	3	22	19	47
WASHINGTON	16	25	70	21	86	21
WISCONSIN	38	35	48	20	86	25
WEST VIRGINIA	17	26	13	27	30	27
WYOMING	5	22	8	82	13	40
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,102</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>3,095</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>4,197</b>	<b>23</b>

\* 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: Data from the U.S. Department of Defense, 2001 through October 2007. <http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/castop.htm>