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NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE **June 28, 2007**

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WHERE IS THE MOST DANGEROUS PLACE TO TRAVEL OVER THE HOLIDAY?

~ New U of M study identifies states with highest proportion of rural road deaths ~

MINNEAPOLIS / ST. PAUL -- Just in time for the most dangerous days of the year to drive – July 3 and 4 – the national Center for Excellence in Rural Safety (CERS) at the University of Minnesota today released a list of the states where Americans are more likely to die in a traffic crash on a rural road.

For most people, riding in a motor vehicle is one of the most dangerous things they ever do, and this is particularly true when traveling on rural roads. While U.S. Census figures show that about two out of ten (21 percent) Americans live in rural areas, the U.S. Department of Transportation has found that about six out of ten (57 percent) highway deaths happen on roads that it considers rural.

"Millions of Americans will be driving this holiday weekend, and they would be wise to carefully consider these findings before they do," said CERS Director Lee Munnich, Jr., of the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. "America's rural byways seem so tranquil and safe, but the reality is that they can be as lethal as they are lovely."

The states with the highest proportion of their total traffic fatalities occurring on rural roads are:

1) Maine (92%)	13) New Hampshire (75%)
2) North Dakota (90%)	13) Idaho (75%)
3) South Dakota (89%)	13) Kentucky (75%)
4) Iowa (88%)	14) Oklahoma (73%)
4) Vermont (88%)	15) Minnesota (72%)
5) Montana (86%)	15) Missouri (72%)
6) Wyoming (84%)	16) Oregon (72%)
7) South Carolina (83%)	17) Alaska (71%)
8) Mississippi (82%)	18) Wisconsin (68%)
9) Arkansas (81%)	18) North Carolina (68%)
10) West Virginia (80%)	19) Utah (66%)
11) Kansas (78%)	19) Louisiana (66%)
12) Nebraska (77%)	20) Alabama (65%)

The state-by-state rural fatalities data reflects deaths on rural roads in 2005 and was compiled by CERS researchers using information from the U.S. Department of Transportation. Rural roads are identified as those located outside of areas with a population of 5,000 or more. The entire list is available at www.ruralsafety.umn.edu.

Traveling America's roads is particularly dangerous this time of year. According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, the top two days of the year for motor vehicle fatalities over the years 1986-2002 have been July 3 and July 4.

There are many reasons for America's high rate of rural crash deaths. Head-on collisions and driving off the road crashes — both of which are disproportionately deadly — are common on the two-lane, undivided highways prevalent in rural areas. Rural roads, with lighter traffic and pleasant scenery, can easily lull drivers into a false sense of security. An over-relaxed comfort level can lead to motorists driving at unsafe speeds, distracted, fatigued, unbelted or impaired, all of which increase the likelihood of a crash. Additionally, emergency response time to a rural crash and hospital transport can be lengthy and thus jeopardize survival rate. Crash victims are five to seven times more likely to die from their injuries unless they arrive at a trauma center in the first half-hour following the crash.

"All states need to improve rural highway safety, but the issue is particularly pressing in these states," said Munnich. "Fortunately, there's much that can be done to prevent future deaths."

CERS works to raise awareness of the problem of rural road fatalities, and advocate policy changes impacting road design and driver behavior. For instance, CERS advocates state adoption of primary seat belt laws, which allow law enforcement officers to pull people over for not using their seat belts. States that enact primary seat belt laws have increased their seat belt usage rates dramatically, by an average of 14 percent, which in turn reduces the number of injuries and deaths.

"This is a public health issue we must take much more seriously," said Munnich. "In 2005, 23,549 Americans died on rural roadways. We are right to focus significant attention and resources on preventing things like AIDS, SARS, E. coli poisoning, and skin cancer, but we can't forget that this public health problem is even more deadly."

The Center for Excellence in Rural Safety provides citizen-centered research, training, and outreach to enhance rural safety and to meet the needs of rural transportation practitioners and policymakers. The U.S. Congress created the Center for Excellence in Rural Safety in July 2005 as part of a broader, multiyear, multimillion-dollar directive establishing four national centers for surface transportation excellence in the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) transportation funding legislation.

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