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Alcohol, drug use by Montana youth higher than national average

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NEWS RELEASE

Nov. 6, 2007

Contact: Daphne Herling, Montana Kids Count, 406-243-5113.

**ALCOHOL, DRUG USE BY MONTANA YOUTH
HIGHER THAN NATIONAL AVERAGE**

MISSOULA —

Substance abuse among Montana's youth has received much attention – and rightly so – because the state's young people are drinking, drinking and driving, using illegal drugs and smoking and chewing tobacco at rates above the rest of the nation. That's according to the 2007 Montana Kids Count Data Book published by The University of Montana's Bureau of Business and Economic Research.

In all indicators reporting alcohol consumption, Montana's annual rate is higher than the national rate, and the same holds true for illicit drug use, reports Daphne Herling, director of community research for Montana Kids Count and BBER.

Tobacco consumption indicators for youth smoking cigarettes show less dramatic differences between national and state rates, Herling said. However, the use of smokeless tobacco among all eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders is 7 percent higher than in the nation as a whole.

The two most prevalent substance-abuse activities among Montana's youth are binge drinking and smoking marijuana, she said. More than 18,000 ninth- through 12th-graders

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report binge drinking within the past 30 days, and almost 11,000 report smoking marijuana within the past 30 days.

Funded through the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Montana Kids Count program is a statewide effort to identify the status and well-being of Montana children by collecting data about them and publishing an annual data book.

The disparity in the rates of substance abuse between American Indian youth and other races (in Montana this is basically white youth) is important because it raises important policy and program questions, Herling said. Reservations are readily identified as places to focus prevention funding, but the focus for urban American Indians is somewhat less prevalent. Most prevention programs can be modified for Indian languages, but these programs do not take into account traditional ways of approaching and teaching Native people.

This year's data book includes a section on American Indian data. It shows that not only does median income differ greatly between the Indian and overall population, but there also are major differences between individual reservations in the state. The same holds true for employment and poverty. However educational attainment – one predictor of income – is similar across the reservations, indicating disparities among the reservations must involve a variety of factors.

The data book reports that one significant difference between American Indian and the overall Montana population is the high number of low-birth-weight babies being born to Native mothers. What is remarkable, however, is that despite these high rates of low-birth-weight babies, the American Indian infant mortality rates in Montana are not much higher than for the

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overall population (7.3 compared to 6.2 overall). Clearly, there is an excellent effort in place keeping these low-birth-weight babies alive, Herling said.

Overall, the number of children in Montana continues to decline, according to the data book. Between 2000 and 2006, Montana's population increased by 4.6 percent, reaching 944,632 people. However, the state's population of children under 18 saw further reductions in 2006. At close to 217,850, the number of children under 18 is down 4.6 percent from 2000. The number of children under 5 has actually increased since 2000 -- up 6 percent to 57,900 in 2006 -- though not enough to make up for declines in earlier age cohorts. Whites and American Indians made up the largest groups of children in the state in 2005, at 170,093 and 20,725 respectively. The number of American Indian children is down 1.7 percent since 2000.

Total K-12 school enrollment is down 6 percent since the 2000-01 academic year, totaling slightly more than 157,000 students in the 2006-07 academic year, Herling said. However, while public school enrollment is down 7 percent and private school enrollment is down 1 percent over that same period, home school enrollment is up 13 percent since the 2000-01 academic year.

The 2007 data book and other information on the Montana Kids Count program are available through BBER by calling 406-243-5113.

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