

## What's Behind Maternal Death Disparities?

White women are much less likely to die during or after pregnancy than black and Native American women in the U.S., and a new report suggests racism plays a role.

By Gaby Galvin, Staff Writer Sept. 5, 2019



At least 60% of pregnancy-related deaths are thought to be preventable, the CDC says.  (JOSE LUIS PELAEZ/GETTY IMAGES)

**COLLEGE-EDUCATED BLACK** women are about five times as likely to die from a pregnancy-related complication as their white counterparts, according to a federal analysis of 10 years of data across the U.S.

From 2007 to 2016, the U.S. saw 6,765 pregnancy-related deaths, which occur during or within one year of pregnancy, according to the new report from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). Over the decade studied, black women and Native Americans and Alaska Natives

were significantly more likely to die than whites and Hispanics, with gaps persisting across age and education levels.

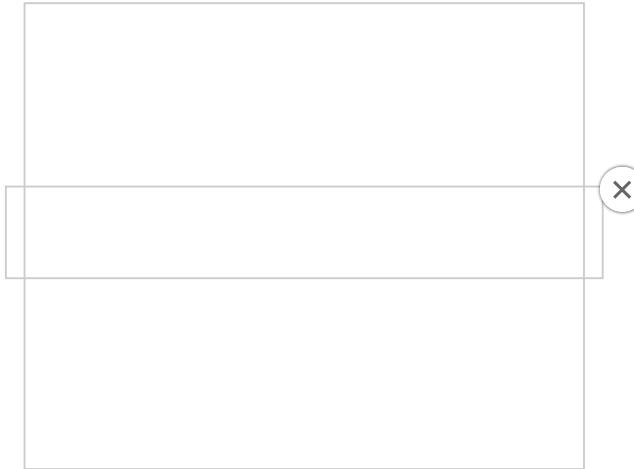
"Socioeconomic status is not protective in the way that it is for many other situations," says Martine Hackett, a public health researcher at [Hofstra University](#) and an advocate for black maternal health in [Nassau County, New York](#). She reviewed the CDC's findings but was not involved with the research.

Overall, cardiovascular issues, other medical conditions like endocrine or renal issues, and infections accounted for the greatest shares of maternal deaths, according to the study, but there were differences by race. Compared with white women, cardiomyopathy, blood clots and pregnancy-related blood pressure issues such as preeclampsia contributed to more deaths among black women, while Native American and Alaska Native women saw more deaths tied to hemorrhage and blood pressure problems.

### **Worst States for Infant Mortality**



The findings underscore that racial disparities in maternal mortality are "a complex national problem," the report says. Access to health care and chronic disease prevalence may cause some of these disparities, it says, and coordination between hospital, provider, community and individual levels is required to combat them.



Structural racism in health care and "[weathering](#)" – the idea that black women's health suffers as a result of psychosocial, economic and environmental stressors – also may contribute to the problem, the new report notes. Identifying and addressing these issues at the community level "would likely improve patient-provider interactions, health communication, and health outcomes," the study says.

"A lot of this has to do with the way people are treated – not just during the prenatal and birthing process, it's the way black women are treated throughout our lives that really takes a toll physically," Hackett says. "Seeing this from a larger societal perspective is useful, because that's where the action is going to happen."

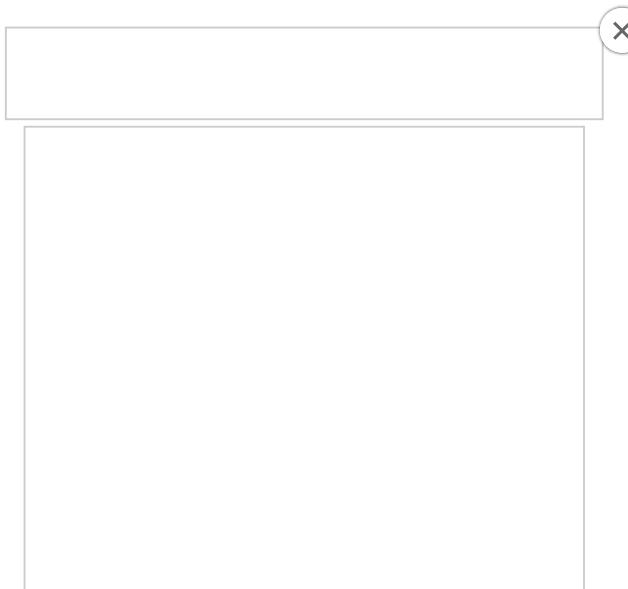
[ [READ: Better Pregnancies for Black Women in Alabama](#) ]

Overall, black women and Native Americans and Alaska Natives saw pregnancy-related mortality rates of 40.8 and 29.7 deaths per 100,000 births, respectively. White women saw a rate of just 12.7, while Hispanic women had a rate of 11.5. The total pregnancy-related mortality rate increased from 15 to 17 per 100,000 births between 2007-2008 and 2015-2016.

Such deaths are relatively rare, as the CDC says about 700 women die every year due to pregnancy or a related complication. Yet the new analysis also comes after the agency [published a report](#) indicating [at least 60%](#) of maternal deaths may have been preventable in recent years.

Maternal mortality has received more attention and resources as more detailed data have become available. Multiple Democratic presidential hopefuls have [rolled out plans to combat it](#) through efforts such as implicit bias training for health care providers and paying for doula services.

Nearly every state also now has a maternal mortality review committee charged with studying which women are dying – or nearly dying – in connection with pregnancy and why. The CDC recently awarded [a first round of grants](#) ranging from \$150,000 to \$600,000 to support 25 states' review committees, and the agency is expected to award about \$45 million over five years for their work.



Gathering information is key to curbing maternal mortality and morbidity in the U.S., Hackett says, but it's not enough to close the racial gap in maternal health.

"When you look at data – the rates and the statistics – it's easy to divorce that from human beings," she says. "This makes me think of the human toll. This woman could have been a colleague, it could be somebody who was a neighbor."



**Gaby Galvin, Staff Writer**

Gaby Galvin is a staff writer at U.S. News & World Report. You can follow her on [Twitter](#) and ... [READ MORE »](#)



Tags: **pregnancy, women's health, racism, public health, CDC**

---

**RECOMMENDED**

**Marijuana Use by US College Students Up, Highest in 35 Years**

**BRANDFUSE**

ad content by **Deloitte**

**See How Deloitte Is Serving Up Digital Transformation In Tennis**



**Schools Double Down on Drug Testing**

**SNAP Changes Will Affect States Unevenly**



**Mortality Rates Highest in Southern U.S.**

**Trump Administration Announcing Nearly \$2B in Opioid Grants**

**Nearly \$2B to Combat the Opioid Crisis**

**Asthma Rates Highest in Industrial Areas**

**How America Fails to Feed Its Aging**

**Commentary: Helping to End Tobacco Use****China Says Trump's Claims About Fentanyl Deaths Are False****Load More**

X

**HEALTHIEST COMMUNITIES  
IN COLLABORATION WITH**

Healthiest Communities is an interactive destination for consumers and policymakers, developed by U.S. News & World Report in collaboration with the Aetna Foundation, an independent charitable and philanthropic affiliate of CVS Health. Backed by in-depth research and accompanied by news and analysis, the site features comprehensive rankings drawn from an examination of nearly 3,000 counties and county equivalents on 81 metrics across 10 categories, informing residents, health care leaders and officials about local policies and practices that drive better health outcomes for all. Data were gathered and analyzed by the University of Missouri Center for Applied Research and Engagement Systems (CARES).

**BEST COUNTRIES****BEST STATES****HEALTHIEST COMMUNITIES****NEWS****CITIES**

**LEADERS****THE CIVIC REPORT****PHOTOS**

About   Contact   Press   Advertise   Newsletters   Jobs    Site Map  
Store

Copyright 2019 © U.S. News & World Report L.P.

[Terms & Conditions/Privacy Policy](#)