

# United States Maternal Mortality

## As Maternal Mortality Declines Globally, U.S. Deaths Rising

Despite a steady downward trend in maternal mortality around the world, maternal deaths in the United States have risen over the past two decades. The precise rate varies according to the sources and methodology used, but a 2016 study published in *The Lancet* found that since 1990, maternal mortality in the U.S. has risen from 16.9 deaths per 100,000 live births to 26.4 per 100,000 in 2015.

With around 700 women dying from pregnancy-related causes each year, the United States has the highest rate of maternal death of any developed country, more than three times the average for all of Western Europe (7.2) or Canada (7.3), and more in line with rates from countries like Uzbekistan (26.2) and Costa Rica (24.3). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the U.S. governmental body responsible for public health monitoring and research, estimates that nearly 60% of the deaths are preventable.

Within the United States, a woman's risk of death varies dramatically depending on where she lives. The state of California, where in 2010 researchers began heavily promoting a list of basic safety practices, saw its maternal death rate fall to 4 per 100,000 live births in 2016. In contrast, in Louisiana, with its persistent poverty and spotty public health infrastructure, women die at the rate of 58.1 per 100,000 live births.

## Many Contributing Factors

There is no clear consensus on the underlying cause of the rise in mortality rates. Experts point to the larger number of older mothers, who are more likely to have complications than younger women. Increasing rates of chronic health conditions like obesity, high blood

pressure, diabetes, and heart disease are probable contributing factors, along with continued high rates of medically unnecessary Caesarian sections.

The uneven nature of the American health care system likely also bears some part of the blame. Cuts to family planning funding have led to increased rates of unintended pregnancies in some states, and access to early and consistent prenatal care is still out of reach for many women.

Racial inequities, too, are an enormous part of the story. Black women in the United States die at three to four times the rate of white women. Moreover, these disparities persist even when controlling for education and income levels. One 2016 analysis of five years of data from New York City found that college educated black women giving birth in local hospitals were more likely to experience a life-threatening complication than white women who had never completed high school.

## Addressing the Crisis

A number of news stories and investigations over the past 18 months has brought new attention to the issue, and both state and federal authorities are responding. Congressional legislation is under consideration. Advocacy groups are leading campaigns designed to raise awareness. Over the past year, the number of maternity hospitals participating in a voluntary childbirth safety improvement program endorsed by leading medical societies has more than doubled.

There is a growing recognition in the United States that increasing maternal mortality is a very real crisis, created through neglect and continued by resistance to change. Fortunately, it's also an entirely solvable one with the tools we have, if only we will use them.