

Fetal mortality at historic low, but gaps remain

Black women twice as likely to lose pregnancy

Eduardo Cuevas

USA TODAY

Despite a historic drop in fetal deaths in the U.S., Black mothers are still twice as likely as white mothers to lose a pregnancy after 20 weeks, according to a new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report.

The CDC report published Thursday found the national fetal mortality rate in 2022 declined 4% from 2021, with an overall 27% drop in fetal deaths since 1990.

In 2022, there were 20,202 fetal deaths, translating to a rate of 5.48 fetal deaths for every 1,000 live births. The year prior, the rate was 5.73.

The findings show that maternal and prenatal care are getting back on track since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted

health care on a broad scale, said Dr. Deirdre Lyell, co-chair of the California Maternal Quality Care Collaborative. "But babies and moms – pregnant people – are still dying from preventable reasons, so we have lifesaving work to do," she said in an email.

The report looked at fetal deaths or stillbirths at 20 weeks' gestation or more.

It did not include abortions or miscarriages, which the CDC typically defines as the loss of a pregnancy before 20 weeks' gestation.

Black mothers saw a slight uptick in fetal death rates, from 9.89 in 2021 to 10.05 in 2022.

The 2022 fetal mortality rates among Black and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander mothers remained higher than the national rate in 1990.

White mothers experienced the most fetal deaths but also saw the largest decline in fetal mortality rates – 8% – from

4.85 deaths to 4.48, lower than most other racial or ethnic groups.

The CDC report didn't delve into drivers of the high fetal death rates for Black mothers, but experts have suggested that racial health disparities, preexisting conditions, structural discrimination and access to quality care may be factors.

The large disparities in fetal deaths for Black mothers, said Usha Ranji, associate director for women's health policy at the research nonprofit KFF, "really mirror what we see with other maternal and infant health outcomes."

Stillbirths have been understudied compared to infant mortality, and targeted efforts to address them are needed, said Dr. Andreea Creanga, a professor at the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, in an email.

This includes higher-quality data on fetal deaths, research on risk factors and improved care initiatives.

Research indicates that about a quarter of fetal deaths may be preventable, Creanga said.

Fetal mortality rates were highest among pregnant women 40 and older, those who smoked during pregnancy and those pregnant with multiples.

The CDC report breaks down fetal mortality rates in the early stage, 20-27 weeks, and late, 28 weeks or more. A majority of fetal deaths occurred in the early stage and the total declined 5% from the previous year.

The late-stage fetal mortality rate also declined for the first time since 2014, the report states.

Fetal death rates were highest in Mississippi, Alabama and Arkansas. Often, Ranji said, the highest rates came in states that have worse infant and maternal health outcomes.

States with lower fetal death rates included New Mexico, Texas, Connecticut, Montana, Nebraska and Massachusetts.