



## **Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities**

### **June Priority Focus Area Feature Article**

#### ***Infant Mortality***

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Infant mortality is a health issue where racial/ethnic health disparities have been profound and persistent in both Maryland and the nation. Black infant mortality rates in Maryland have been persistently 2.5 to 3.0 times as high as the rates for Whites, and this matches the ratio of rates seen nationally. In fact, Black rates in Maryland are similar to Black rates nationally, and White rates in Maryland are similar to White rates nationally.

For other racial/ethnic groups in Maryland, Asian infant mortality rates are similar to White rates, and Hispanic rates are at or slightly above White rates, depending on the year. American Indian rates vary considerably from year to year due to the small size of that group, and range from as low as White rates to as high as Black rates. On average, American Indian rates are about halfway between Black and White rates in Maryland. These patterns also match the patterns seen nationally.

The [Vital Statistics Administration \(VSA\) of the Maryland Department of Health](#) produces an [annual report on Infant Mortality](#) each summer which provides information on infant deaths by race/ethnicity, cause of death, geographic distribution, and infant mortality rate trends over time. Additional data on infant and fetal mortality are provided in the [VSA Annual Report](#) released at the end of the calendar year.

Comparing 2007-2009 to 2012-2016 shows a sustained reduction of the Black infant mortality rate (a 21% reduction). The White rate also declined during this time, such that the Black to White rate difference has been reduced (by 24%) but the Black to White rate ratio has been unchanged in the range of 2.5 to 3.0 times as high for Blacks. There remains a large Black to White gap (6.5 excess Black infant deaths per 1000 Black live births, down from 8.5 excess 10 years ago). After the reduction from 2007-2009 period, the Black infant mortality rate Statewide has been relatively unchanged during the 2012 to 2016 interval, averaging about 10.5 infant deaths per 1000 live births during that time.

Rural regions accounted for about 20% of infant deaths statewide in 2016; these regions accounted for about 33% of White infant deaths and about 17% of minority infant deaths. The declines in Black infant mortality discussed above between 2007 and 2016 were seen in non-rural areas, while Black rates did not improve for rural areas combined over that time period (and are still at a rate of

13.2 infant deaths per 1000 live births). Pooling data from 2005 to 2016 shows that 13 of 18 rural counties had Black infant mortality rates that were higher than the Maryland Statewide Black rate during that period.

In response to these findings, the General Assembly has passed, and the Governor has signed into law, [Senate Bill 266 of the 2018 legislative session](#). This bill instructs The Maryland Health Care Commission (MHCC), in consultation with the Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities (MHHD), the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, the Vital Statistics Administration, and interested stakeholders, to conduct a study regarding the mortality rates of African American infants and infants in rural areas, and to make recommendations to improve these outcomes. MHHD is working with MHCC in organizing and executing this study.

MHHD's program in [Minority Outreach and Technical Assistance \(MOTA\)](#) funds local community-based and community-serving organizations to improve minority health outcomes. Some MOTA grantees each year choose to target infant mortality, providing general educational programs as well as home visiting interventions to minority pregnant women.

MHHD and the Department's [Maternal and Child Health Bureau](#) (MCHB) are working together on several cross-cutting initiatives including a Department charter project on the Babies Born Healthy Initiative which is a \$1.9 million dollar allocation to local health departments and community partners in jurisdictions identified with high infant mortality rates when the program was initiated. This partnership will result in the request for applications to having a greater emphasis on outcome based and health equity metrics.

Infant mortality has been identified as one of three priority areas for the Maryland Department of Health over the next several years, and as a result additional Department-wide initiatives in infant mortality and birth/maternal outcomes more generally can be expected in the near future.

Reach out to MHHD for more information on our efforts to reduce infant mortality rates in Maryland at [MDH.HealthDisparities@Maryland.gov](mailto:MDH.HealthDisparities@Maryland.gov) or 410-767-7117.