



Birthing Babies

Maternal Mortality Rate Plunges Over 20th Century

Maternal Mortality Rates

Women may joke today that pregnancy is hazardous to their health, but at one time in our nation's history, expectant mothers had more to worry about than stretch marks and swollen ankles.

Childbearing in the early 1900's was no laughing matter. When a woman learned she was pregnant, she came face to face with the possibility of dying from complications. Fortunately, enormous strides have been made in medical science, thereby reducing the chances of death for expectant mothers and giving them all the more reason to welcome the birth of their children.

BLI's report, *Gaining Ground: A Profile of American Women in the Twentieth Century*, states, "The lowered risk of death during childbirth is nothing short of astonishing." Dr. Janice Crouse wrote, "Today, women prepare for childbirth by painting a nursery; in an earlier age they wrote heart wrenching goodbye letters to loved ones in case they did not survive childbirth."

According to the U.S. Department of Labor and the National Center for Health Statistics, in 1900, for every 100,000 live births, 850 women died. As **Figure 1** indicates, ten years later, the maternal mortality rate had dropped slightly to 690, but due to the flu epidemic of 1918, it soared to a record high of 916.

Drastic Decline

Since then, the maternal mortality rate has drastically declined, from 916 in 1918 to an all-time low of 7 in

1998. A large portion of this decline occurred during a time of economic and national upheaval. Maternal mortality dropped from 673 in 1930, the onset of the Great Depression, down to 157 by 1946, the year following the end of World War II. Although this time period began with rapidly escalating poverty, the maternal mortality rate fell almost 77 percent, giving credence to the theory that childbearing women were dying less frequently, not because of economic conditions, but rather because of advances in medical science.

Historically, the maternal mortality rate has always been higher for black women than for white women. For example, in 1920, the maternal mortality rate was 760 for white women, compared to 1,295 for black women.

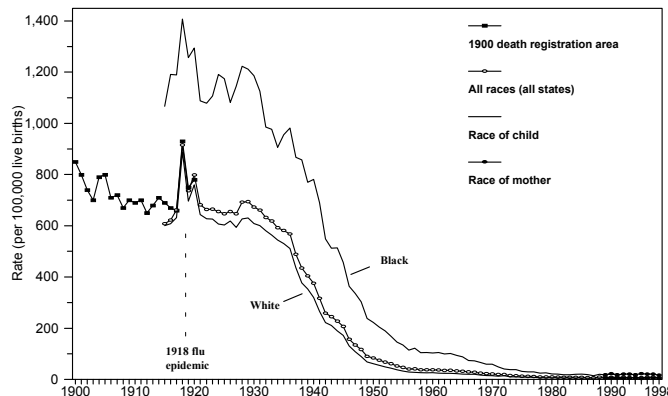
But black women also experienced an enormous decline in the number of maternal deaths. In 1928, the black maternal mortality rate was 1,210, (estimate based on non-White rate), compared to 114.3 in 1956, a decrease of 91 percent in almost 3 decades.

Conclusion

As long as women continue to have children, there will inevitably be pregnancy and childbirth complications. But since enormous

medical advances have drastically reduced the maternal mortality rate – perhaps one of the greatest miracles of the 20th century – history suggests that rate will continue to decrease.

Figure 1. –Maternal Mortality Rates by Race: 1900 – 1998



Note: Prior to 1940, Black maternal mortality rate is estimated based on non-White rate.
Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Children's Bureau Publications, R.M. Woodbury, *Maternal Mortality: the Risk of Death in Childbirth and from all the Diseases Caused by Pregnancy and Confinement*, 1926, reprinted in I. Loudon, *Death in Childbirth*, (New York, 1992); National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital Statistics of the United States*, annual and *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 48, No. 11, July 24, 2000