

# Unveiling Disparities of Black Infant Mortality in the Midwest



By: Myah Lake

In [Wisconsin, infant mortality](#) for non-Hispanic African-American babies is 14.28%, meaning that black babies in Wisconsin are almost three times as likely to die before their first birthday than other races. [In 2020, Wisconsin reported 360 infants passed](#), with 70.8% occurring during the neonatal period (first four weeks of a child's life) and 29.2% in the postneonatal period. [According to the University of Wisconsin-Madison](#), "the number-one cause is complications of

prematurity."

Dr. Jasmine Zapata, a black mother and local Wisconsin pediatrician, got married to her high school sweetheart young. In her senior year of college, she began her journey into motherhood by welcoming her son into the world. As she continued through her passion for medical school, she became excited to become pregnant with her daughter and bring extreme joy to her family. However, Zapata's pregnancy was cut three months early from her due date; she delivered a beautiful baby girl who was only one and a half pounds.

Amid the complications she endured, Dr. Zapata stated, "I remember being so nervous and so devastated; I felt like my body betrayed me to give a premature birth so early. I found out all the statistics about how black women have higher rates of preterm birth compared to white women. It interested me in why this happened to me and why it is happening to other black women in our state and across the country."

In the U.S., where [approximately 10,000 babies are born each day](#), it's essential to confront the reality that black infants experience a higher rate of mortality at 5.4 per 1,000 births. This disparity is linked to systematic racism and its relation to the healthcare system. Black women experience the highest number of infant mortality compared to any other race, including maternal mortality.

Dr. Zapata's experience resembled the ordinary circumstances that frequently occur to a plethora of black women in the U.S. Considering the impact of intersectionality within U.S. hospitals has caused significant emotional distress to black mothers. Each year, the numbers of black infant mortality have yet to decrease, which has caused thousands of black infants to not reach their first birthday compared to other races. Zapata said, "I was so blessed that my daughter survived. I promised to myself that I was going to take this experience and use it. To research more into Black Infant mortality and bring awareness".

The common causes of infant mortality are birth defects, preterm birth, and SIDS (Sudden infant death). My grandmother, Stephanie Lake, and my aunt, Emma Adams (emphasizing their identities as Black women) both encountered premature births in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in

the 80s, with their babies only weighing from 1 - 1.6 pounds.

Despite their distressing complications, parallel to Dr. Zapata's, they felt gratitude that their babies were able to survive. Describing the care they received from healthcare workers as a positive experience, unfortunately, often, black women don't necessarily have these outcomes in childbirth. [Premature babies face more significant risks of mortality](#) based upon low body weight and the immune system not being fully developed, which can lead to death. In the U.S., [Black women are 50% more likely to have a premature birth than white women](#), which can lead to infant mortality.

In discourse surrounding black infant mortality, there is a tendency to focus solely on southern states due to their notably higher rates compared to other regions within the U.S. While these claims are valid. However, it is equally imperative to discuss black infant mortality within the Midwest. A common misconception about the Midwest is that the healthcare systems are better, which could be valid, but in terms of black infant mortality, there are disparities in the Midwest as well.

In a study, [70% of Midwesterners reported satisfaction of 6/10 or higher – compared to 56% of Northeastern and 47% of Southeastern](#) residents. Despite Dr. Zapata's experience in Wisconsin and the experiences my family endured in Minnesota, Black infant mortality is an issue in the Midwest as well, especially since black babies in [Wisconsin are almost three times](#) as likely to die before their first birthday than other races.

Based on scientific [studies, doulas can improve childbirth experience](#); doulas offer professionals who provide continuous physical, emotional, and informational support to their clients before, during, and after delivery to help them achieve the healthiest, most satisfying experience possible. Mothers assisted by doulas during childbirth are [two times less likely to experience birth complications involving the mother or baby](#).

Alexa Imani Spencer, a former doula and accomplished journalist with experience covering health, business, finance, and education, gained an interest in black maternal health while in college, studying journalism. During this time, she was surrounded by many midwives and doulas, so naturally, she began researching the current state of Black maternal health in

America. In college, she earned her doula certification, and launched her own business at the start of the pandemic in 2020, and returned to journalism in October 2021.

From Spencer's doula experience, she supported a high school friend with her first childbirth. She reflected, saying, "I was able to walk her through creating the birth as she desired and the birth that she felt comfortable with as a black woman. At this time, there was a lot of information coming out in the media about the disparities of black women dying in childbirth and being mistreated in hospitals. So, she veered away from giving birth in a hospital. Because she was low risk, she decided to pursue a home birth, a home water birth. And she achieved that; I felt it was important to support her in that moment". The support that doulas can provide during childbirth can be valuable; however, it's not the only solution to decreasing the Black infant mortality rate.

Regarding media coverage of Black infant and maternal mortality, Spencer recalled, "There has been a lot of media coverage concerning black maternal and infant mortality over the last several years. Unfortunately, having spoken with other journalists, the media often use black trauma and black struggle to get clicks as opposed to reporting closely on these issues and following up appropriately, you won't hear enough about the solutions." As a journalist to Spencer, it has been crucial for her work to highlight the issue and the solutions to be put in place to reduce these numbers.

[Racism-induced stress can be linked to black infant mortality rates](#); evidence suggests that years of discrimination, poverty, partnership, and unemployment lead to chronic stress in black women. Dr. Zapata said, "I believe that chronic stress over a lifetime, systemic racism, and discrimination all play a role. Implicit bias in the hospital systems, equal opportunities, and access to jobs also play a role in differentiating the wealth racial wealth gap, which is rooted in the history of inequities".

To address this crisis within our healthcare system, spreading awareness and working towards efficient solutions to combat this issue is essential. Although frequently, southern states are most talked about when it comes to black infant mortality, conditions in the Midwest are also experiencing these same effects. Spencer said, "In order to reduce the amount of black women and babies that are dying due to pregnancy and childbirth-related issues, the United States of

America needs to address the underlying issues of systemic racism. Our country must take a look at and commit to evolving out of the ways that it's harming black women and their families."As a society it's crucial to bring awareness to these disparities with our healthcare system.