

WHAMglobal

Women's Health Activist Movement

WHAMglobal Brief: Maternal Mortality

The Women's Health Activist Movement (WHAMglobal) is on a mission to identify the root causes of maternal mortality and better understand how we as a region support and care for moms and families through the entirety of their care.

Maternal mortality is a public health crisis with serious disparities. The maternal mortality rate in the U.S. is nearly three times higher than in any other developed country, and is rising at a time when other countries are reducing maternal deaths.ⁱ In the U.S., maternal mortality rates are **nearly four times higher** for black women than for white women.ⁱⁱ

Maternal deaths are often attributed to the U.S. high rate of untreated chronic disease and a decline in access to obstetrical care, particularly in rural areas.

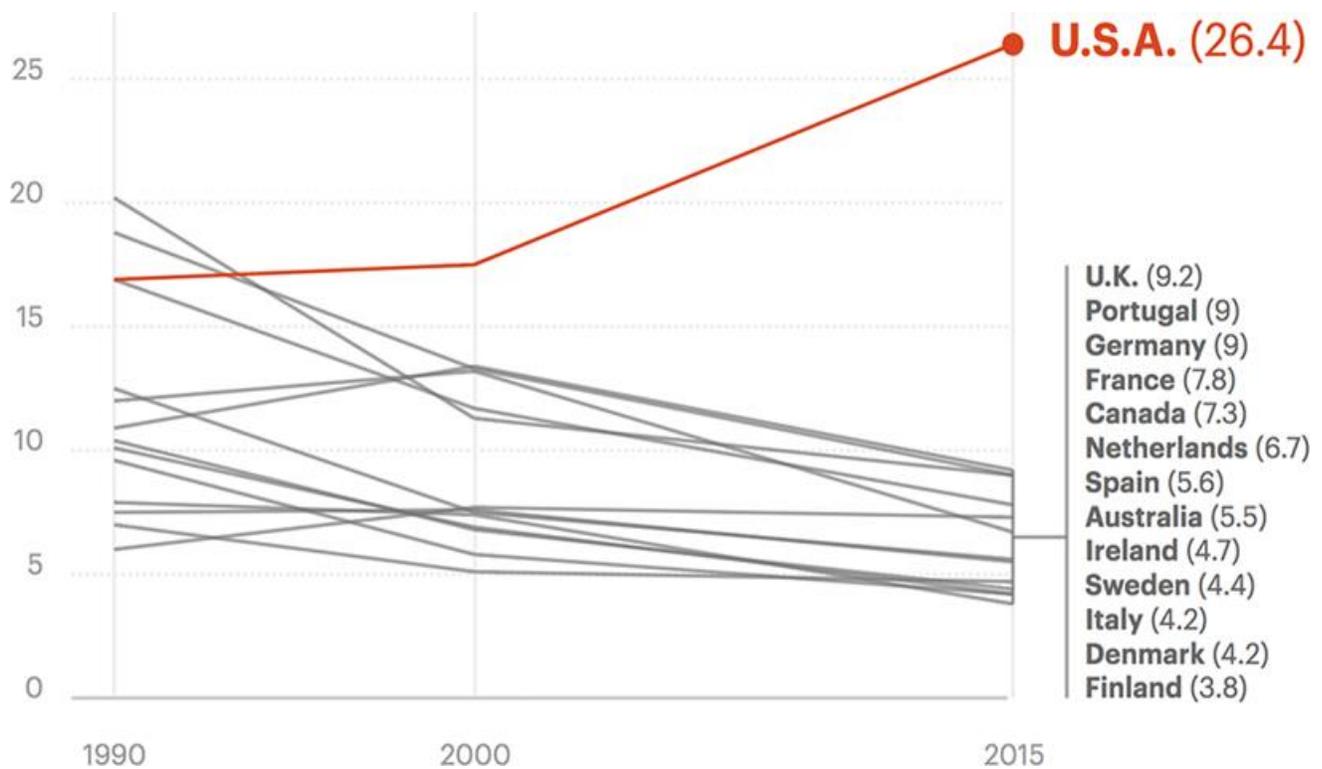


Figure 1: The Lancet: Global, regional, and national levels of maternal mortality 1990-2015

Until recently, much of the discussion about maternal mortality has focused on pregnancy and childbirth. But according to the most recent CDC data, more than half of maternal deaths occur in the postpartum period, and one-third happen seven or more days after delivery.ⁱⁱⁱ

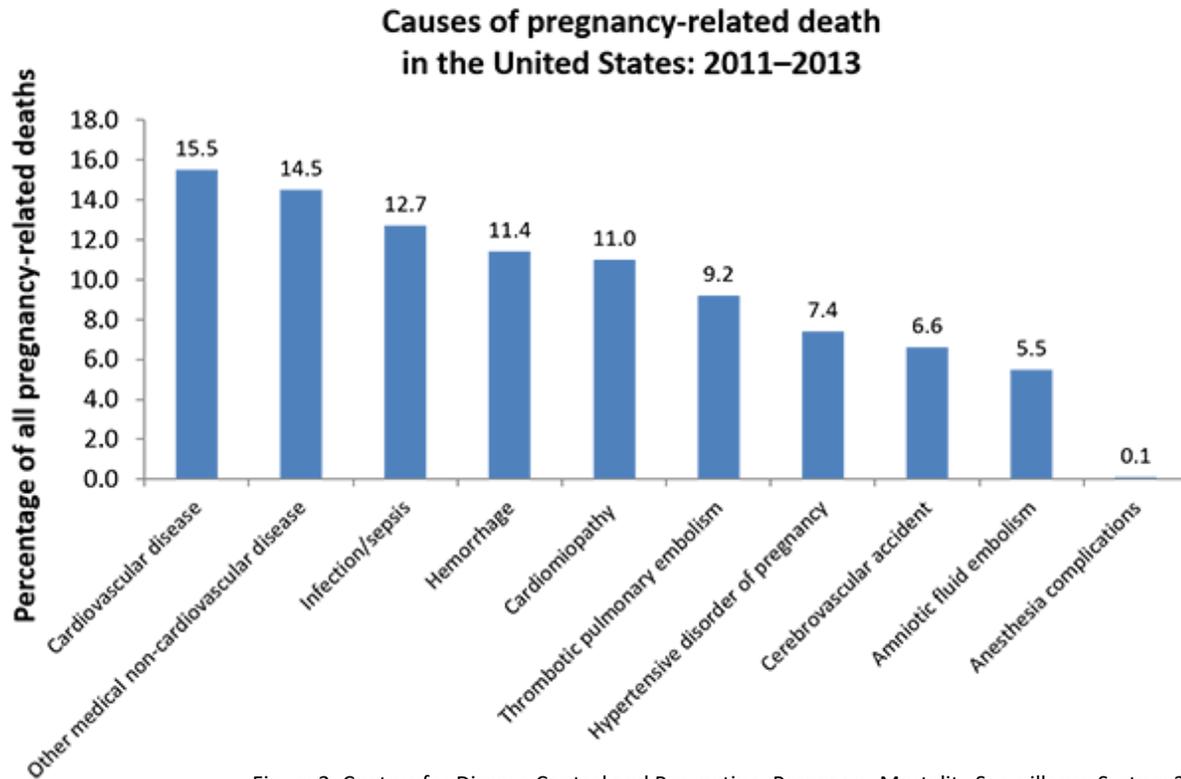


Figure 2: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Pregnancy Mortality Surveillance System 2015

Maternal Mortality in Pennsylvania and Allegheny County

According to the 2016 United Health Foundations’ Health of Women and Children Report, Pennsylvania ranks 21st in terms of maternal mortality.^{iv} In Allegheny County, from 2012-2015, there were 18 maternal deaths, which is a rate of 34 per 100,000 live births. As is true with national trends, the rate of black women dying is **3.7 times higher** than white women. The rate for black women was 87.6 per 100,000 and was 23.9 for white women.^v While there are some tracking efforts happening, better data and a protocol for analyzing and activating around the data is needed.

The CDC recommends that maternal and pregnancy-related deaths are reviewed through state-level, multidisciplinary committees. Yet, about half of the states in the U.S., **including Pennsylvania**, do not have a formal statewide maternal mortality review committee. The Pennsylvania Department of Health tracks data at a regional level using the World Health Organization’s definition of pregnancy-related death, which is “the death of a woman while pregnant or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy, irrespective of the cause of death.”^{vi} This definition conflicts with the CDC recommendation to measure maternal deaths for a year post birth.^{vii} Philadelphia has an established review committee but in order to have an impact, it needs to be at the state level.

The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette recently reported:

“In 2015, “the community maternal mortality review committee in Philadelphia looked at maternal deaths that occurred within a year of the end of a woman’s pregnancy in the city between 2010 and 2012. The study found 19 pregnancy-related deaths during that time. The state’s data found just 14—nearly a 30 percent undercount.”^{xi}

This is a missed opportunity to systematically identify maternal mortality trends and disparities, and develop recommendations and processes that can prevent avoidable maternal deaths in the future. In addition to tracking maternal deaths, it is important to track quality and patient safety metrics for perinatal care in order to identify useful interventions and important clinical pathways.

There is pending legislation in Pennsylvania to establish a Maternal Mortality Review Committee (HB 1869, Maternal Mortality Review Act). This bill would create a formalized, multidisciplinary committee to review maternal deaths and develop prevention strategies.^{viii} There has also been legislation introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives (HR 1318, Preventing Maternal Deaths Act of 2017).^{ix} This bill would create a grant program to establish and sustain state maternal mortality review committees.

Recent reports, such as the NPR and ProPublica “Lost Mothers” series, highlight other factors that contribute to unnecessary maternal deaths. This includes bias in care, stress related to pervasive racism, the transition from birthing being focused on the mom to focusing on the baby, and older mothers giving birth. There are many non-clinical and social determinant of health factors that are deserving of attention and need to be better understood in order to fully address the problem.^x

Want to continue to learn more? Join the movement!

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ⁱ The Lancet: Global, regional, and national levels of maternal mortality, 1990–2015: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2015 [http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(16\)31470-2.pdf](http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(16)31470-2.pdf)

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Pregnancy Mortality Surveillance System. Updated 11/9/2017. Accessed here: <https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/maternalinfanthealth/pmss.html>

^{iv} America’s Health Rankings: United Health Foundation: Pennsylvania. Accessed here: https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/2016-health-of-women-and-children-report/measure/maternal_mortality/state/PA

^v These data were provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Health. The Department specifically disclaims responsibility for any analyses, interpretations, or conclusions.

^{vi} World Health Organization: Health statistics and information systems. Definition. Accessed here: <http://www.who.int/healthinfo/statistics/indmaternalmortality/en/>

^{vii} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Pregnancy Mortality Surveillance System. Updated 11/9/2017. Accessed here: <https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/maternalinfanthealth/pmss.html>

^{viii} Pennsylvania General Assembly: Regular Session 2017-2018: House Bill 1869. Accessed here: <http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/billinfo/billinfo.cfm?year=2017&sInd=0&body=H&type=B&bn=1869>

^{ix} Congress.gov. H.R. 1318 – Preventing Maternal Deaths Act of 2017. 115th Congress (2017-2018) Accessed here: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1318/text>

^x NPR Special Series: lost mothers: maternal mortality in the u.s. Accessed here: <https://www.npr.org/series/543928389/lost-mothers>

^{xi} Hamill, Sean. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. State committee would study rising maternal mortality rate in Pennsylvania. 12/12/2017. Accessed here: <http://www.post-gazette.com/news/health/2017/12/12/State-committee-would-study-rising-maternal-mortality-rate-in-Pennsylvania/stories/201712120181>

