

Black Infant Mortality:

Intolerable Example of National Oppression in USA

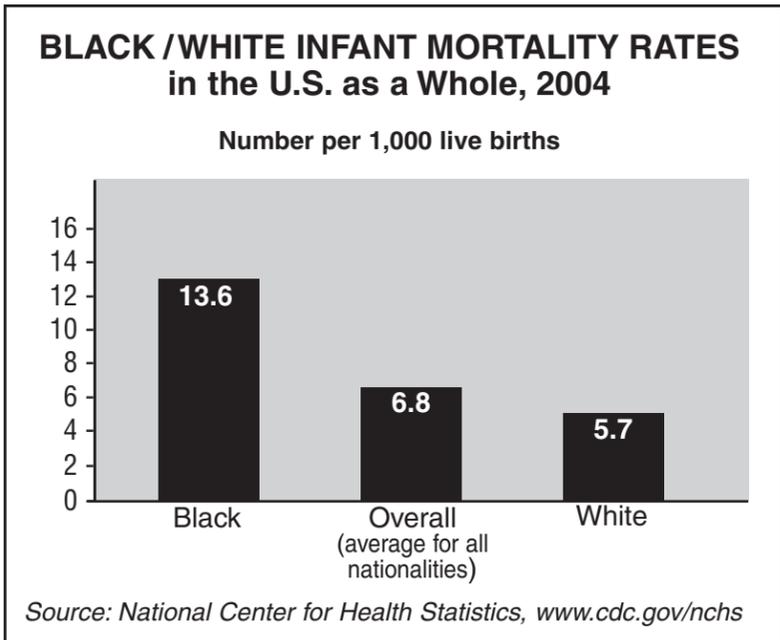


AP photo
Prisoners working as grave diggers bury dead infants in Shelby County Cemetery in Memphis. More than 14,000 bodies, mostly babies, lie beneath the earth in this cemetery. Memphis has the highest infant mortality rate — twice the national average — among the nation's 60 largest cities. In Memphis, a Black infant is almost three times more likely to die in the first year than a white infant under the age of one.

The "infant mortality rate" is the number of babies who die before their first birthday for every 1,000 live births. In the United States, the infant mortality rate among Black people in 2004 was 13.6—almost two and a half times higher than the rate of 5.7 for white people.

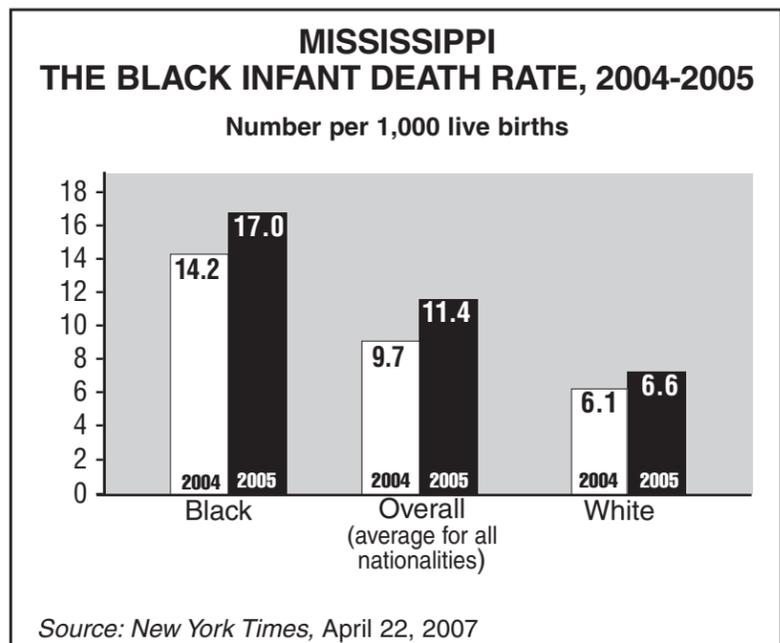
Out of every 1,000 Black babies born, 13-14 do not even make it through their first year. For every 1,000 white babies born, 5-6 die before they are a year old.

This high rate of Black infant mortality in the U.S. is outrageous—AND it is INCREASING, especially in Southern states with large Black populations.



In Mississippi, the infant mortality rate among all nationalities rose from 9.7 per 1,000 live births in 2004 to 11.4 in 2005. For Black babies, infant deaths rose from 14.2 per thousand in 2004 to 17 per thousand in 2005. This reflects the deadly effects of poverty, pollution, lack of education, access to health care, and safe, affordable housing—and cuts in Medicare, child health insurance, and other government programs.

High and rising Black infant mortality rates in the South are stamped with the ugly legacy of slavery and Jim Crow in the South. And this also says something about how deeply the oppression of Black people is embedded in this system—and the direction of things.



This problem affects Black people throughout the U.S.—and not just those who are poor. Professional and middle class Black women have two to three times higher risk than white women of having babies with low birth weight—the top cause of early infant deaths.

This is part of the overall "health gap" between African Americans and whites in the U.S. For example, Black people have a 25 percent higher rate of death from cancer than whites.

Some people say Black infant mortality is high because of individuals "acting irresponsibly." But this is a lie. This problem is tied in to the whole historical and present-day oppression weighing down on Black people as a whole. And that national oppression is in many ways intensifying today—with the increase in Black infant mortality rate in Mississippi and other areas as one glaring and intolerable example.