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Racial Residential Segregation and Infant Mortality in the United States

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Historical Background

- **Racial Residential Segregation** - refers to the occupancy of different neighborhood environments by race and it was created by federal policies such as the Jim Crow laws.
- Previous research studies have shown that racially segregated communities with high concentration of minorities tend to be places with limited opportunities and failing infrastructure, resulting from a lack of investment in social and economic development (1).
- The end result is a community that produces poor health outcomes.
Historical Background: Reproductive Injustice

- Many enslaved women were forced to work in the cotton fields contributing to the loss of their pregnancies right in the fields (2).
- On sugar plantations, pregnant women worked 60 to 70 hours a week while standing in 90 temps
- They suffered from insufficient blood supply to their placentas and from hypertension, had a high percentage of miscarriages and stillbirths, babies with a low birth weight, and high levels of infant mortality(2).
- This was a common occurrence since their slave owners also refused to allow the enslaved midwives or physicians to attend to or supervise the enslaved women (2).
Leading Causes of Infant Deaths

The five leading causes of all infant deaths were(3):

- Congenital malformations
- Disorders related to short gestation and low birthweight
- Maternal complications
- Sudden infant death syndrome
- Unintentional injuries.
Why do these disparities exist?

- High levels of exposure to environmental toxins
- Limited access to nutritious foods
- More access to harmful substances
- Limited access to quality health care
Disparities: Exposure to Environmental Toxins

- Environmental toxins such as lead and air pollution tend to be in areas where people of color live which is associated with preterm birth and low birth weight (5).
- Bus garages and toxic waste sites in neighborhoods has resulted in minorities exposed to physical environments that adversely affect their health (4).
- Study shown that predominantly black neighborhoods experience higher levels of exposure, increases the risks of lower birth weight and shorter gestation (5).
Disparities: Limited Access to Nutrition

• Supermarket redlining—term used to describe a phenomenon where major chain supermarkets are unwilling to locate their stores in inner cities or low-income neighborhoods (6).

• Low-income neighborhood residents usually do not have enough economic support for travelling to supermarkets in the suburbs, most have to settle for local stores where healthy food is limited (6).

• Poor access to quality, whole foods and adequate nutrition negatively affects infant mortality rates because optimal birth outcomes are dependent upon the intake of sufficient nutrients for both mother and child (7).
What are the solutions?

• One major intervention is the **expansion of health insurance**.

• The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act implemented in 2014, expanded Medicaid coverage for most low-income adults to 138% of the federal poverty level (8) and has increased access to coverage and comprehensive services associated with improved infant outcomes.

• A study examined the potential effect of Medicaid expansion on infant mortality rate by comparing trends in the states and Washington, DC, by whether they accepted or declined Medicaid expansion (9). They found that Medicaid expansion was associated with a greater decline in infant mortality rate, particularly in African American infants, than was seen in non–Medicaid expansion states.
References


