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Pregnancy risks are even higher for Black moms now, thanks to climate change



Maressa Brown

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The recent murders of George Floyd, Ahmad Arbery and Breonna Taylor, among countless other Black Americans, is requiring the U.S. to take a hard look at its centuries-old spiderweb of racial injustices. One that continues to haunt Black women through pregnancy, childbirth and beyond is the [maternal mortality and health care crisis](#).

According to the Centers For Disease Control (CDC), Black women are two to three times [more likely to die in childbirth](#) than white women. The CDC also notes that Black mothers are twice as likely to have [an infant who dies](#) before their first birthday. Meanwhile, women of color are [more frequently mistreated](#) in childbirth than white women. And now, climate change might be serving to make a horrible situation even worse.

New research published in [JAMA Network Open](#), part of the Journal of the American Medical Association, presents evidence that pregnant women exposed to high temperatures or air pollution are more likely to have children who are premature, underweight or stillborn, and Black mothers and babies are harmed at a much higher rate than the population at large.

Here's what you need to know about the research and its findings.

What researchers examined

The project looked at 57 studies published since 2007, that found a connection between heat or air pollution (two types, both of which are getting worse with [climate change](#): ozone, also known as smog, and tiny particles called PM 2.5) and birth outcomes in the U.S. The studies collectively covered 32 million births.

What the project findings revealed

Upon reviewing the studies, researchers concluded that higher temperatures, which occur when climate change spurs more frequent and intense heat waves, were associated with more [premature births](#). Four studies linked high temperatures to an increased risk of premature birth, with increased risk levels ranging from 8.6% to 21%. Low birth weights were also more common as temperatures rose.

Researchers assert that heat exposure can contribute to premature or stillbirths by causing dehydration, reduced uterine blood flow, lowered amniotic fluid volume, placental damage or abruption.

How pregnant Black mothers are disproportionately affected

The racial disparities were clear. The studies included in the review that looked at preterm birth or low birth weight and air pollution found that Black mothers were at the highest risk.

The authors also pointed out that systemic problems make Black moms even more vulnerable to this growing issue. They note that living in urban areas with higher exposure to air pollutants and long-term high levels of stress is known to contribute to adverse pregnancy and birth outcomes.

Black Americans are more likely to have to contend with the following, according to Rupa Basu, one of the paper's authors and the chief of the air and climate epidemiological section for the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment in California, as quoted by [The New York Times](#):

- Closer living proximity to power plants and other sources of air pollution.
- Lower likelihood of having air conditioning.
- Lower ability to afford the higher electrical bills or to live in neighborhoods with green spaces that can help keep temperatures down.

What needs to change

These findings show that climate change is making an already distressing burden worse for Black mothers, who are now at even greater risk for preterm

birth and low birth weight. Researchers called on physicians to step up as patient advocates and educate and push elected officials to take effective action to stop the climate crisis.

Beyond climate change, health care providers and politicians must both work to improve practices and pass policies that bolster Black maternal health nationwide.

As Bruce Bekkar, a retired gynecologist and obstetrician and one of the co-authors, as well as a board member with the Climate Action Campaign, an advocacy group in San Diego, told the Times, “Black moms matter. It’s time to really be paying attention to the groups that are especially vulnerable.”

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