Infant Health Disparities

HEALTH CARE NUTS AND BOLTS with CHBRP

There were over 400,000 births in California in 2024—1 in 8 births nationally. In 2023, 1,632 infants in California died before their first birthday, an infant mortality rate of 4.08 per 1,000 live births.

KEY TERMS

Preterm Birth
Birth before 37 weeks of preganncy

Low Birthweight
Birthweight under 5lbs, 8 oz

Neonatal Mortality
Death within the first 27 days of life, typically from events during pregnancy and delivery

Post Neonatal Mortality
Death from 28 days to under one year, typically from events after delivery

Sudden Unexpected Infant Death (SUID)
Death that often occurs during sleep

Infant Mortality
Death of an infant after live birth, during the first year of life

INFANT MORTALITY IN CALIFORNIA

15% **Infant mortality** in California decreased by 15% from 2013, to 2023, compared with 6% nationally.

6th California had the **sixth-lowest infant mortality rate** of all states, meeting the Healthy People 2030 target of 5.0 per 1,000 or lower.

5% **SUID rates** increased by 5% from 2011-2013 to 2021-2023.

8% **Preterm births** increased by 8% and low birthweight births increased by over 10% from 2014 to 2024.

HOW GROUPS COMPARE

Category	Group	Compared with	Infant mortality	SUID	Low birthweight
Race and ethnicity	Racial minorities	White	4.1x NHPI · 3.0x Black	5.0x NHPI · 3.9x Black	2.2x Black
Prenatal care	No prenatal care	First trimester care	5.0x	7.3x	2.9x
Insurance	Medi-Cal	Private insurance	1.7x	3.0x	similar
Maternal age	20-40	Under 20 or over 40	2.0x under 20	6.0x under 20	1.5x over 40
Neighborhood poverty	Above 10% of the FPL	Under 10% of the FPL	1.8x	4.0x	similar
Education	High school diploma or less	College graduate	2.2x	6.2x	similar

FPL: Federal poverty line; NHPI: Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander

DRIVERS OF DISPARITIES

Social and Structural Factors

Racism and discrimination: Among Black families, self-reported experiences of racism are associated with low birthweight 3 times higher than other groups.

Historic policies: Odds of preterm birth are 41% higher in historically segregated neighborhoods.

Environmental exposures: Black families are more likely to live in neighborhoods with pollution, which increases preterm birth risk.

Educational attainment: Lower education is linked to higher infant mortality.

Quality of Care

Prenatal care: 26% of Black and Latina women surveyed in California reported difficulty accessing obstetric and gynecological care.

Language and culture: Spanish-speaking parents of infants in the NICU were 4 times more likely than English-speaking parents to incorrectly identify their child's diagnosis.

NICU quality: In a study of 134 California hospitals, Black and Hispanic very low birthweight infants scored lower than White infants on most measures of standard care and health outcomes.

Access to Family Leave

Federal unpaid leave: The Family and Medical Leave Act is associated with lower infant mortality among married, college-educated women.

Awareness of benefits: In San Francisco, 10% of low-income working mothers were aware of their paid parental leave benefits.

EFFORTS TO REDUCE DISPARITIES

National Programs

Women, Infants, and Children (WIC): Provides nutrition support, breastfeeding support, and food benefits to low-income pregnant and postpartum people, infants, and children

Title V Maternal and Child Health Block Grant: Federal funding for programs including the Black Infant Health Program, the SIDS Program, and Fetal and Infant Mortality Review

Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative: Accredits birthing facilities that meet infant feeding standards; 67 California facilities are accredited

State Legislation and Activities

Perinatal Equity Initiative (2018): Supports Black families through group prenatal care, fatherhood initiatives, and home visiting

Medi-Cal Doula Benefit (2023): Covers doula support during pregnancy, birth, and postpartum

Maternal and Infant Health Equity Programs (AB 904): Requires commercial health plans to develop programs that address racial disparities

Donor Human Milk (AB 3059): Establishes donor human milk as a basic health care service under state-regulated health plans

Infant mortality in California has declined over the past decade, though outcomes vary across key characteristics. Understanding these can inform how policymakers assess proposed legislation.

Want to learn more? Read the full explainer at chbrp.org!

Data sources linked in the explainer.

Last updated November 2026.