

Doctors Urge Congress to Improve Black Maternal Mortality Rates

Black women in the United States have disproportionately high rates of maternal mortality.

May 21, 2024 By Laura Schmidt

Earlier this month, doctors testified before Congress to address high rates of maternal [mortality](#) throughout the United States and its disproportionate impact on Black women.

At the U.S. Senate's Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, five medical professionals discussed [racial disparities](#) in maternal mortality and barriers that discourage people of color from entering the medical profession, according to the [Idaho Capital Sun](#).

"Research consistently demonstrates that patients from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds experience better outcomes when treated by health care providers who share their racial and ethnic backgrounds," said Texas-based ob-gyn Yolanda Lawson, MD, president of the National Medical Association. "In short, patients can have better health outcomes when their doctors look like them."

Black folks make up almost 13.6% of the U.S. population but only about 8% of physicians, according to Senator Bill Cassidy (R-La.), a physician and ranking member on the committee.

Although the U.S. maternal mortality rate has improved after a spike during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is still the [highest among high-income nations](#), Senator Laphonza Butler (D-Calif.) testified.

In 2022, there were 22.3 deaths per 100,000 births overall compared with 32.9 deaths in 2021, [according to NPR](#). Black women experienced 49.5 deaths per 100,000 births in 2022 compared with 19 deaths for white women.

Butler emphasized the need to approve the [Black Maternal Health Omnibus Act](#) introduced last

year.

“This legislation is not just about the life and death of Black women—its enactment will improve birthing outcomes for all women,” Butler said.

During the hearing, Samuel Cook, MD, a resident at Morehouse School of Medicine, a historically Black college in Atlanta, urged medical students of color to “be the change in the medical field we so desperately seek.”

Cook advocated for the reintroduction of legislation that would fund and protect historically Black medical schools. With nearly \$400,000 in student loans himself, Cook said the cost of medical school is “the greatest impediment in recruiting Black and brown doctors to our workforce.”

Increasing representation in the medical field may help improve Black maternal mortality rates. In fact, research has shown that Black people overall live longer in areas with more Black doctors.

[One study found that](#) for every 10% increase in Black [primary care](#) physicians, life expectancy increased by about one month. What’s more, every 10% increase in Black primary care physicians resulted in a 1.2% lower disparity in all-cause mortality between Black and white people.

To read more, click [#Mortality](#) or [#Diversity](#). There, you’ll find headlines such as [“\\$260K Award to Address Health Disparities in Expecting Black Mothers,”](#) [“New Graduate Program Focuses on Black Health”](#) and [“New Group Aims to Increase Black Men in Medicine.”](#)