Redlining Continues to Harm Maternal Health

Black moms-to-be living in neighborhoods demarcated by the old racist housing policy known as redlining face worse pregnancy outcomes.

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Many social scientists agree that when it comes to health, place matters. Indeed, recent study findings published in the journal JAMA Open showed that African-American women who lived in redlined areas of the midsize city of Rochester, New York, experienced worse outcomes from pregnancy and childbirth compared with women who lived in other areas, reports a University of Rochester Medical Center (URMC) press release.

The racist housing practice known as redlining, which originated in the 1930s and '40s identified majority-minority neighborhoods as high-risk areas for mortgage insurance. The term "redlining" originated from the color used on maps created more than 80 years ago by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, a federal agency. Incorporated into housing guidelines by other government agencies, such as the Federal Housing Administration and the Department of Veterans Affairs, the strategy effectively created pockets of poverty that prevented residents of such areas from realizing homeownership.

Additionally, the effects of these policies negatively affected the health of people of color.

For the study, a research team targeted the area around Rochester and utilized a state database that recorded live births that occurred from 2005 to 2018. Scientists pinpointed preterm babies—those born in less than 37 weeks—by ZIP code and race. Scientists also collected data on individuals' income, poverty and education levels from U.S. Census Bureau community surveys.

Preterm births are linked with an elevated risk for the development of behavioral, social and emotional issues, learning problems, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder or ADHD, and sudden infant death syndrome.

Investigators noted that among almost 200,000 births, preterm births occurred at a rate of 12.38% in neighborhoods identified as "high risk" for mortgages according to the Home Owners' map, compared with 7.55% in areas classified as "best" or "still desirable." Additionally, researchers observed that pregnant women who lived in redlined areas experienced more health issues, such as pregnancy-related hypertension and newborn complications requiring admission of the child to

intensive care.

“This is further evidence of the influence of a legacy of structural racism on the disproportional burden of adverse pregnancy outcomes for Black women in the U.S.,” said Stefanie Hollenbach, MD, MS, an assistant professor in URMC’s department of obstetrics and gynecology and coauthor of the study. “The fact that racially discriminatory home lending patterns from the 1940s are associated with contemporary preterm birth rates can inform us that the legacy of government-sanctioned discrimination persists to this day.”

To learn more about the effects where people live have on health read, “When It Comes to Health, Place Matters.”

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