

# Racial Disparities in Maternal Health

Rates of severe maternal morbidity<sup>1</sup> (SMM) have been increasing among all women in the U.S. But there are substantial racial disparities in SMM rates and their risk factors, such as bleeding disorders, diabetes and heart disease. A new report, “Racial Disparities in Maternal Health,” part of the Blue Cross Blue Shield, The Health of America Report® series, examines variations in these SMM rates and risk factors between majority white, Black and Hispanic communities. The Blue Cross Blue Shield Association (BCBSA) analyzed 2.2 million hospital births covered by Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS) commercial insurance from 2018 to 2020.

## KEY FINDINGS

### WIDE DISPARITIES IN CHILDBIRTH COMPLICATIONS

SMM rates were substantially higher for women in majority Black and majority Hispanic communities (63% and 32% respectively) than for women in majority white communities in 2020.



### YOUNGER BLACK MOTHERS ARE STILL AT HIGHER RISK

Black women under the age of 24 are more likely to experience severe childbirth complications than white women over the age of 35 – an age group usually considered high risk.

### DISPARITIES VARY IN SMM INDICATORS BETWEEN RACES/ETHNICITIES

Compared to majority white communities, women in majority Black and Hispanic communities have higher prevalence rates for nearly all SMM indicators, such as acute kidney failure, sepsis, shock and eclampsia.

### BLACK AND HISPANIC WOMEN ARE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE RISK FACTORS FOR SMM

Women in majority Black communities have up to twice the prevalence of risk factors, and women in majority Hispanic communities have prevalence rates up to a third higher for some risk factors, than women in majority white communities.

## DOING THE WORK

Many BCBS companies have started the work to reduce these disparities and prevent dangerous outcomes. That includes [identifying women at risk](#) and providing one-on-one coaching to manage their chronic conditions during pregnancy, [addressing underlying social needs](#) that have a significant impact on health and providing community support, [such as doulas](#), to mothers throughout their pre- and postnatal journeys.



## A BOLD NEW NATIONAL HEALTH EQUITY STRATEGY

BCBSA aims to reduce racial disparities in maternal health by 50% in five years. That is just one component of BCBSA's National Health Equity Strategy, which intends to change the trajectory of health disparities and reimagine a more equitable healthcare system by:

- Collecting data to measure disparities
- Scaling effective programs
- Leaning into partnerships at the community level
- Influencing policy decisions at the state and federal level
- Working with providers to improve outcomes and address unconscious bias

To learn more about BCBSA's National Health Equity Strategy, including BCBS' maternal health programs, visit [BlueHealthEquity.com](https://www.bluehealthequity.com).

1. Severe Maternal Morbidity, or SMM, measures unexpected outcomes from labor and delivery with significant short- or long-term consequences to a woman's health. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention categorizes SMM by 21 different adverse events, known as "indicators." In some cases, an SMM indicator can be associated with maternal death.