

Gov. Mike DeWine creates task force to combat infant mortality, racial disparities

Updated Dec 17, 2020; Posted Dec 17, 2020



A new national study from the organization Zero to Three found that racial disparities deny babies of color a healthy start in life. In this image, a Hillcrest Hospital registered nurse picks up a newborn in 2017.

By [Alexis Oatman, cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com)

CLEVELAND, Ohio-- Black infants in Ohio are 2.8 times more likely to die before their first birthday than white infants, according to the Ohio Department of Health's 2019 Infant Mortality Report.

Ohio had 356 Black infant deaths in 2019 --an increase of 17 from 2018.

Gov. Mike DeWine on Thursday announced a new task force, Eliminating Racial Disparities in Infant Mortality, to combat the issue and protect babies' lives.

"Since my first full day in office, when we created the Home Visiting Advisory Committee, we have been working to reduce infant mortality and the racial disparities that exist. The situation is unacceptable: Race and zip code should never dictate your health outcomes," says DeWine.

During his press briefing Thursday, DeWine called the findings "extremely, extremely troubling," says DeWine. "Two-point-eight times -- almost three times more likely to die as white infants, it's simply unacceptable."

The report also showed despite the widening gap between babies of different races, the number of Ohio infant deaths dropped last year to 929, the third straight year of decline.

Infant mortality is defined as the number of deaths in children under age 1 and is a key indicator of the overall health of a region, reported by the number of infant deaths per 1,000 live births.

The leading causes of infant mortality include:

- Prematurity-related conditions including pre-term birth (29%)
- Respiratory distress, and low birth weight (29%)
- Congenital abnormalities (19%)
- External injury (12%)
- Sudden infant death syndrome (6%).

DeWine says the task force will use data collection to "create actionable recommendations for interventions, performance, and quality improvement, and policies to advise our effort to improve Ohio's investments and strategies in addressing racial inequities."

"With the help of the legislature, we have invested new resources into proven programs, such as evidence-based home visiting programs, group prenatal programs, community navigators, and other programs designed to address infant mortality and racial disparities," says DeWine. "Since the report only goes through 2019, it does not show the full impact of these investments since funding began in late 2019. Yet, there is no doubt we must do more."

Access the full report at the Ohio Department of Health's [website](https://www.ohio.gov).