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Families of color experience high rates of mistreatment by providers during childbirth in the U.S.

Mothers of color experience less respect and autonomy and more mistreatment than white women during childbirth, according to new research from the University of British Columbia.

Vancouver, B.C.—In a study published today in [Reproductive Health](#), community members worked with researchers to survey 2,700 women across the United States on their experience of care during childbirth. While 17 per cent of all women reported experiencing one or more types of mistreatment, incidents of mistreatment were higher for women of color.

The study is the largest looking at mistreatment during childbirth. Mistreatment included verbal abuse, stigma and discrimination, failure to meet professional standards of care, delays and refusals of care, and poor rapport between women and health-care providers and health system conditions and constraints.

“Until now, most of the studies on respectful care in pregnancy and childbirth have been carried out in low-resource countries,” said lead author Saraswathi Vedam, a professor of midwifery in the UBC faculty of medicine. “This study shows that mistreatment is also a problem in high-resource countries, and that in the U.S., people of color face significantly higher rates of mistreatment. We know that there are more adverse maternal and newborn outcomes in Black and Indigenous communities, but until now we have not explored these factors as linked to quality of care.”

Researchers worked with a diverse group of women who had recently given birth, to develop the survey questions for the study. They identified areas that had not previously been studied such as non-consented care, responsiveness of healthcare providers, and access to options for care. After conducting the survey, the researchers quantified the prevalence of mistreatment by race, socioeconomic demographics and how and where women gave birth.

“The study findings are both disturbing and exciting,” said Monica McLemore, assistant professor at the University of California, San Francisco and co-author of the study. “They are disturbing because the findings provide one of the first community informed, engaged and designed analyses of their experiences of maternity care across the United States — which should be sobering for anyone currently providing health-care services. However, the findings are exciting because they also clearly define key areas that should be targeted for improvement



that come specifically from the communities who experience the greatest burden of poor maternity outcomes.”

Among mothers with low socioeconomic status, 18.7 per cent of white women reported mistreatment compared to 27.2 per cent of women of colour. Indigenous women were the most likely to report experiencing at least one form of mistreatment by health-care providers, followed by Black and Hispanic women. Being shouted at or scolded by a health-care provider was the most commonly reported type of mistreatment, followed by delaying or refusing requests for care. Delays and refusals are particularly significant given that Black birthing people and their babies have the highest rate of death from pregnancy-related complications.

The researchers found that women were less likely to experience mistreatment if they were white, had a vaginal birth, gave birth at home or in a freestanding birth center (not a hospital), had a midwife and/or were older than 30.

Quotes from birthing families that responded to the U.S. study can be found at the [Birth Place Lab website](#).

Vedam is currently examining experiences of pregnancy and birth care, particularly in disadvantaged populations, across Canada.

The study was co-authored by researchers from UBC, the University of California, Davis School of Medicine, the University of California, San Francisco, Oregon State University, Bastyr University, and Boston University, as well as from Every Mother Counts in New York City and Young Women United in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It was funded by the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation Transforming Birth Fund.

To request a copy of the study, “The Giving Voice to Mothers Study: inequity and mistreatment during pregnancy and childbirth in the United States,” interview Monica McLemore, or learn more about the project, please contact:

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