

Maternal death in childbirth up 50 percent in America

Mortality rate higher than China and Saudi Arabia

Andre Damon
6 May 2014

The incidence of maternal death in childbirth in the US has soared by 50 percent since 1990, according to an international study published Friday in the British medical journal *Lancet*.

The report found that, on average, 18.5 mothers died for every 100,000 live births in the US in 2013, more than double the maternal mortality rate in Saudi Arabia, at 7.0, and more than triple that in the United Kingdom, at 6.1.

This one statistic expresses in concentrated form the horrific decay of social infrastructure and the conditions of life for broad masses of people in the United States, in the course of a quarter century that has seen an immense increase in wealth at the very top of the economic ladder. There is a direct connection between the near-collapse of basic elements of civilized life and the obscene fortunes piled up by the financial parasites who dominate American society. That connection is lodged in the workings of the capitalist system itself.

The *Lancet* study findings point to the fact that, in what is called the “richest country in the world,” there exist levels of social deprivation comparable to, or worse than, what is to be found in “Third World” countries.

The US was one of only eight countries to see their rates of maternal mortality increase between 1990 and 2013. The others were Afghanistan, Greece, El Salvador, South Sudan and the tiny statelets of Belize, Guinea-Bissau and Seychelles.

Afghanistan was bombed, invaded and occupied by the US beginning in 2001, while South Sudan has been ravaged by ethnic fighting since its secession from Sudan in 2011. Greece has seen its economy shrink by

nearly a third as a result of the 2008 crash and the austerity measures imposed at the behest of the International Monetary Fund and the European Union.

The study, entitled “Global, regional, and national levels and causes of maternal mortality during 1990-2013: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2013,” was conducted by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington.

“There’s no reason that a country with the resources and the medical expertise that the US has should see maternal deaths going up,” said Dr. Christopher Murray, Director of IHME.

The study found that the US has the 60th lowest maternal mortality rate, down from 22nd in 1990. Maternal mortality in the US was higher than that of Iran, with a rate of 13.5 per 100,000 live births, Kuwait, at 9.5, and Palestine, at 9.0, as well as China, at 17.2, and Russia, at 16.8.

The US is in an entirely different statistical category than the rest of the developed world. It has triple the rate of death in childbirth as Western Europe, which has a rate of 6.3 maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births. While America’s rate of death in childbirth has shot up by 50 percent since 1990, the rate for Western Europe has been cut in half, from 12.7 in 1990. Germany has seen its maternal mortality rate fall from 18 in 1990 to 6.5 in 2013.

The incidence of death in childbirth in the US is even higher than the average of 17.6 deaths per 100,000 live births in Eastern Europe, ravaged by the restoration of capitalism following the breakup of the Soviet Union.

“For American women, high-risk pregnancies and the number of women with inadequate access to preventive

and maternal health care are just two potential causes of this trend,” said Dr. Nicholas Kassebaum, one of the study’s authors.

The IHME said in a statement that the study’s authors attributed the high rate of maternal mortality in the US to “lack of access to prenatal care and other health services, high rates of caesarian section deliveries, and pregnancies complicated by obesity, diabetes, and other conditions.”

According to the World Health Organization, the incidence of maternal mortality expresses “inequities in access to health services, and highlights the gap between rich and poor.”

The enormous rise in maternal mortality has paralleled the growth of social inequality in the US. Since 1990, the top 0.1 percent of US income earners has more than doubled its share of the national wealth, while the share of the bottom 90 percent has plunged. The wealthiest 1 percent takes in a higher share of income in the United States than in any of the other 33 member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

The rise in economic inequality has paralleled the growth of hunger and poverty. The percentage of US households that are “food insecure” rose from 11.1 percent in 2007 to 16.0 percent in 2012. The poverty rate, meanwhile, has jumped from under 12 percent in 2000 to over 17.4 percent, according to figures reported by the OECD.

According to an OECD study released last year, US life expectancy in 2011 ranked below that of every Western European country, as well as Greece, Portugal, South Korea and Slovenia.

There is a direct correlation between the growth of social inequality and the decline in the rate of increase of life expectancy. A study published last month by the Brookings Institution found that the top 10 percent of male income earners in the US have a life expectancy ten years higher than that of the bottom 10 percent. The study’s author told the *Atlantic* magazine last month that, “where the [per-earner] income goes up by about \$4,000, that was generally associated with living another year.”

The increase in maternal mortality in the US is bound up with the attack on the social position of the working class carried out by the ruling elite and its political representatives. Even as workers’ wages have

stagnated and declined in the period covered by the survey, employers have cut health benefits for millions of workers.

During the period covered by the survey, successive presidencies and Congresses—Democratic and Republican alike—have slashed programs that benefit the most vulnerable sections of society while enabling the financial aristocracy to pile up even greater wealth.

This includes the ending of the federal welfare program and the complete deregulation of the financial markets during the Clinton Administration, Bush’s tax cuts for the rich, implemented with the support of the Democratic Party, and ruthless austerity measures enacted under Obama, including the cut-off of extended unemployment benefits, cuts in food stamps and home heating assistance, and sharp cuts in Medicare, Medicaid and retirement benefits.

The enormous social retrogression expressed in the maternal mortality figures directly poses political issues before the working class—the need to break with the two big business parties and build a mass socialist movement in opposition to the capitalist system.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact