

Study finds homicide is a leading cause of pregnancy-associated death in Louisiana

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Photo of Dr. Maeve E. Wallace

By using data from the Louisiana Department of Health and U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention database, researchers from Tulane University and Louisiana State University found that homicide is a leading cause of death among pregnant and postpartum women in Louisiana.

The research team was led by Dr. Maeve E. Wallace, assistant professor in the Department of Global Community Health and Behavioral Sciences at Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.

“We found that pregnancy and the postpartum periods are times when women may be at increased risk for being murdered,” said Wallace, who also a faculty member based in the [Mary Amelia Douglas-Whited Women’s Community Health Education Center](#). “These results are not unique to Louisiana but have been documented, sadly, across a number of jurisdictions and going back a number of years.”

The study, appearing as a research letter in [JAMA Pediatrics](#), was funded by the [Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development \(NICHD\)](#), part of the NIH. The study was undertaken because few studies had looked at causes of death during pregnancy and the year after birth that weren’t related to complications during or from childbirth.

Of the 119 pregnancy-associated deaths for 2016 and 2017 in the state of Louisiana, 13.4% or 16 were homicides. The authors estimated that, for every 100,000 women who were pregnant or postpartum, there were 12.9 homicide deaths, which outnumbered deaths from any single obstetric cause, including hypertensive disorders and amniotic fluid entering the bloodstream. The risk of homicide death was twice as high for women and girls during pregnancy and the postpartum period, compared to women and girls who were not pregnant. Pregnancy and postpartum deaths were highest for women and girls ages 10 to 29.

The study found that women's increased contact with the health care system during pregnancy provides clinicians with an opportunity to offer violence prevention services and interventions. Overall, it underscored the need for violence prevention services for pregnant women and new mothers.

“We hope to shed light on these victims of violent maternal death in order to encourage state maternal mortality review boards and other stakeholders to consider policy- and systems-level recommendations and interventions that might ultimately prevent both violent and obstetric deaths,” Said Wallace.