

Low Birthweight Infants

Each year nearly thirty-five hundred Oklahoma babies (3,457 average annual) are born too small (weighing less than 5½ pounds).

A disquieting and increasing number of these low-weight infants (586 average annual) are born very, very tiny (weighing less than 3 pounds, 5 ounces).

During the most recent three-year period (1996 - 1998) the proportion of Oklahoma babies born too small slowly and steadily continued to worsen (increasing from 7.1% to 7.2% of all births) when compared to the three year period just one year earlier (1995 - 1997). Comparable rates also worsened during the year in most (44 of 77) of Oklahoma's counties.

This trend has continued for years. A higher proportion of Oklahoma babies (7.2% of all births) are born too small today as compared to the population born in the mid-1980's (6.4% of all births), with such rates also worsening in the majority (43 of 77) of Oklahoma's counties during the same period.

The rates of low birthweight births in the majority of Oklahoma counties (40 of 77) were worse than the average county rate (6.8% of all county births). The highest and worst low birthweight rate (10.4% of all county births) is found in Cimarron County; the lowest and best (2.2% of all county births) is in Grant County during this most recent period.

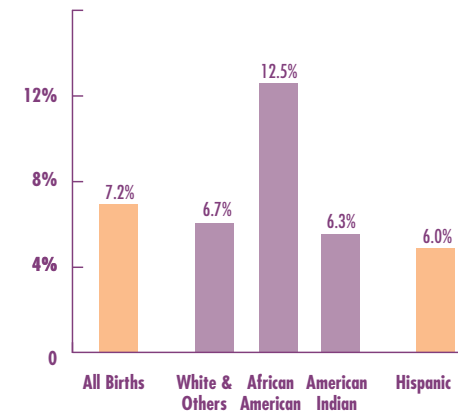
The low birthweight rate for African American infants (12.5% of all African American births) continues to nearly double the rate for White infants (6.7% of all White births). By race, the best low birthweight rate is recorded for American Indian infants (6.3% of all American Indian births). Hispanic mothers, who may be of any race, have an even lower rate of babies born too small (6.0% of all Hispanic births).

While early prenatal care is known to improve these rates, over one-third (35.8%) of Oklahoma's babies were born to mothers who failed to receive the recommended level of prenatal care during the most recent three-year period reported.

Ranking near the middle of all the states, Oklahoma's rate of low birthweight infants is average relative to other parts of the country. Oklahoma's rank among the fifty states improved from 24th to 21st during the most recent year (1997) measured.

Impact on early childhood and Oklahoma's future

- » *Low birthweight is a predictor of early childhood problems. Some die.* Almost 60 percent of the infant deaths each year result directly from low birthweight. In Oklahoma seven out of 10 infants who die in the first month of life are low-weight babies. Of those who live, one in four will experience serious health and developmental problems — dyslexia, hyperactivity, blindness, deafness, chronic respiratory problems, mental retardation, mental illness, cerebral palsy, and more.



Babies Weighing Under 5½ Pounds

Oklahoma, 1998,
By Race and Ethnicity

- » *Low birthweight is expensive and preventable.* The health costs over the lifetime of one low birthweight infant can reach more than \$500,000, while prenatal care (which is likely to prevent low birthweight) can cost as little as \$750.
- » *The lower the birthweight, the greater the harm.* Twenty percent of *very tiny* (less than 3 pounds, 5 ounces) babies experience cerebral palsy or other forms of brain injury. Fifty percent of *very tiny* (less than 3 pounds, 5 ounces) babies later enroll in special education.

- » *The first and most important period of infant brain development occurs during pregnancy, requiring a focus on prenatal care and education.* Infants are at risk of being born too small if their mothers are poor, are adolescents, smoke during pregnancy, drink alcohol or take drugs during pregnancy, or fail to receive adequate prenatal care. Caring about young children requires caring about their mothers by providing them with education and adequate nutrition, reducing teen births, ensuring appropriate health care, reducing poverty, changing behavior during pregnancy to reduce

smoking, drinking and drug use, and providing a greater number of expectant mothers with adequate prenatal care.

Low Birthweight Infants

Three-Year Percent of Infants Born Weighing Less Than Five and One-half Pounds; Oklahoma & Counties: 1996-1998, State Rate: 7.2%, Average of County Rates: 6.8%

More than forty-three percent (1,498 per year or 43.3%) of the infants weighing less than five and one-half pounds at birth were born to mothers who live in one of the state's two large metropolitan counties (Oklahoma or Tulsa County) which together account for about forty percent (40.3%) of Oklahoma's births.

