

# Crain's

## Most New Yorkers Wish They Knew More About Postpartum Mental Health Before Birth, Survey Shows

By: Amanda D'Ambrosio

More than 70% of New Yorkers wish they knew more about postpartum mental health challenges before giving birth, a survey from MetroPlusHealth found.

Over half of city residents said they know someone who experienced mental health challenges after giving birth, according to the survey, which included respondents in the city and across the country.

Nationally, people said they wanted to know more about pregnancy-related mental health conditions before going into labor, with 67% agreeing with the statement.

Across the country, there were racial disparities in knowledge around postpartum mental health. Of white people, 60% said they wish they had known about psychological challenges after pregnancy, compared with 81% of Black people and 76% of Hispanic people, the survey found.

The results, released last week, come from a survey conducted by MetroPlusHealth, a health insurance plan that is a part of the public hospital system New York City Health + Hospitals. Researchers conducted a nationwide questionnaire at the end of March about motherhood and health care, surveying a demographically representative sample of 1,000 adults and 503 people living in the city.

While the pandemic has drawn attention to mental health, a number of people are struggling to understand these challenges, said Dr. Julie Myers, deputy chief medical officer at MetroPlusHealth.

"I think it really points to an opportunity for public health or health plans like us to really close that knowledge gap," Myers told *Crain's*, adding that medical experts should give anticipatory guidance around psychological wellness to those who are expecting and alert them to mental health resources.

Dr. Ashanda Saint Jean, chair of the department of obstetrics and gynecology at Health Alliance Hospitals, a member of Westchester Medical Center Health Network, said screening for depression at all stages of pregnancy ensures that patients with mental health challenges do not slip through the cracks.

"Screening is really, really crucial," Saint Jean said. It has become common practice, she said, for providers to screen new mothers for anxiety or depression before they leave the hospital, offering more opportunities for them to offer resources such as mental health counseling.

But Saint Jean said that screening should not be a one-time occurrence. Providers should screen patients once in each trimester, including in the postpartum period, she said.

In addition to knowledge gaps around mental health, the survey pointed to a lack of awareness around racial disparities in maternal mortality.

Almost 50% of survey respondents nationwide said Black women and white women died of pregnancy-related causes at the same rate. Fewer people in the city held this belief, with 42% of people agreeing.

There are significant racial disparities in maternal mortality in the U.S., with Black people dying at three times the rate of white people, according to figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The disparities in the city are even starker—Black mothers are more than nine times more likely to die during pregnancy, according to city health department data.

The maternal death rate has decreased in the city in the past two decades, health department data shows. Between 2001 and 2019, the maternal mortality rate dropped from 25.6 to 21.3 deaths per 100,000 live births. Despite the decline, racial disparities have persisted.

Saint Jean said that increasing the availability of doulas might help address issues around both mental health and racial disparities. Doulas, who are nonclinical providers that offer emotional support, information and physical assistance to people giving birth, provide an extra layer of support during childbirth and after—a time where new parents can be especially vulnerable to mental and physical challenges. They also provide assistance in navigating the health system, which has implicit racial biases that can harm patients, Saint Jean said.

Some movement has occurred to increase access to doulas in New York state, primarily by making them eligible for Medicaid reimbursement. The only doula eligible for Medicaid reimbursement in New York are those who participated in a pilot program in Erie County.

Some lawmakers have called for increasing access to doula care to mitigate the state's maternal mortality crisis. The state Senate's one-house budget bill proposed a \$1,930 Medicaid reimbursement to doulas to cover four prenatal care visits, labor and delivery attendance, and four postpartum visits. The legislation setting the Medicaid rate did not make it into the final state budget.

"One of the key reasons why there is a discrepancy in care besides implicit bias is access to care because of costs," Myers of MetroPlusHealth said. "The median white household has a net worth 10 times that of the median Black household, so costs continue to be a barrier to care."

MetroPlusHealth covers 700,000 people in the city.