



Race and sex, not region, predict death risk in Alabama

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CONTACT: Kathryn Chapman
 (334) 206-5429
kchapman@adph.state.al.us

Race and sex are more important factors than region in predicting an Alabamian's cause of death. The Alabama Department of Public Health studied causes of death in four regions of the state: the Black Belt, north rural, south rural and metropolitan.

Only for a few causes of death, such as homicide, motor vehicle accidents and HIV disease, is region an important predictor of risk. Even for those causes, the differences are primarily urban areas versus rural areas. With few exceptions, race or sex are far more important than region when studying death disparities in Alabama.

Race is a factor that makes comparing regions very complicated, explains Kathryn Chapman, co-author of the study. In Alabama, northern rural areas are predominantly white while other areas, particularly the Black Belt, have higher percentages of black Alabamians.

Chapman said, "The important aspect of this study is that each region was studied for blacks alone, and whites alone. When death rates are compared for blacks or whites only, no region of the state has predominantly higher rates."

"We are not saying that a particular region does not need advocacy and health interventions, but that the region has higher death rates because it has a higher proportion of people at greater risk," states Chapman.

For instance, this study shows that among regions, the lowest infant mortality rate for blacks or whites is in the Black Belt. More important, though, in the Black Belt the infant mortality rate is strikingly higher for black Alabamians (12.9) than for white Alabamians (4.0). "Thus, to address this large disparity health programs still need to be located where people live," says Chapman.

The study compared death rates for blacks, whites, males and females within regions. Blacks have a significantly higher heart disease rate than whites in all regions. In addition, the black female diabetes rate is significantly higher than the white female rate in all regions. Black males have a higher prostate and overall cancer rate than white males in all regions. In contrast, whites have a higher suicide death rate than blacks in all regions.

Co-author David Kemp states that gender is also important. Regardless of race or region, males have significantly higher death rates than females for heart disease, all cancer, lung cancer and accidents. While deaths were few in some cases, males also have higher rates in all regions for suicide, certain respiratory illnesses, and HIV disease. In fact, diabetes is the only cause where females have a significantly higher death rate than males for any race or region. "Some of the sex disparities may be the result of higher risk behaviors, such as smoking, in males," says Kemp.

Copies of this regional study may be found at the Web site, www.adph.org by selecting "fastfind" and then "health statistics" or by contacting the authors at the Center for Health Statistics.

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