

# Ohio's infant mortality rate drops to 20-year low

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COLUMBUS, Ohio -- The number of Ohio babies dying before their first birthday has dropped to its lowest rate in 20 years.

Preliminary numbers from the Ohio Department of Children and Youth put the state's infant mortality rate at 6.5 per 1,000 live births for 2024.

"That's 80 fewer babies dying," Director Kara Wenthe said. "That's four full kindergarten classrooms we will have as a result of this work. That's tangible progress."

It's also the [first statistically significant drop](#) since Gov. Mike DeWine took office. Ohio's infant mortality rate has hovered around 7 per 1,000 live births since 2017. "Over the last six years we did a lot of work to set the foundation," Wenthe said. "We learned a lot we looked at the data. We learned what our communities are doing," and started pilot projects.

Now, as DeWine prepares to sign his final state budget, Wenthe and the governor want to take those best practices statewide.

"We know there is still much more work to be done," DeWine said.

## **The Cincinnati model**

Infant mortality is defined as the death of a baby before their first birthday, and the infant mortality rate is the number of deaths per 1,000 live births.

In 2022, Ohio had one of the highest infant mortality rates in the country, according to the most recent national data available from the [Centers for Disease Control](#). That year, seven out of every 1,000 babies born in Ohio died while the national average was 5.6.

White infants in Ohio have long had mortality rates in line with the national average. But deaths of Black children are driving up the rate.

In 2022 and 2023, [nearly 14 Black children died](#) for every 1,000 births in Ohio. And in Cuyahoga County, Black infants are [three times more likely](#) to die before their first birthday.

That's not the story in Cincinnati.

Hamilton County has [cut its infant mortality rate](#) to 5.5 in large part through the work of Cradle Cincinnati, a nonprofit that Wenthe wants to "scale and spread" across Ohio.

"We flipped how interventions have been done in the past," Cradle Cincinnati Director Meredith Smith said. "We're letting the people impacted by these problems lead."

Here's what that looks like: [Pre-term births](#) and co-sleeping accidents are the two main reasons babies don't make to their first birthdays. But rather than lecture about the risks of co-sleeping, Cradle volunteers started asking mothers why they did it. "Tiredness," Smith said. "They were exhausted."

The nonprofit then sent people to help new moms with basic household chores like cooking, cleaning or even just holding the baby so mom could take a shower.

They worked during pregnancy to help Black mothers "relax, rest and repower" because stress can cause early labor. They created Queens Village to connect parents to one another. They called local hospitals and asked them to reconsider certain protocols.

And to Smith's surprise, everyone got on board.

"Folks who didn't necessarily get it said they were willing to try," she said. "That was a gift from hospitals and other non-profits."

## **Paying for Progress**

Cradle Cincinnati isn't the only program the DeWine administration has studied.

Wenthe's team spent 18 months traveling the state and talking to local organizations and moms. They also did three rounds of family listening sessions in five different parts of the state.

“What we recognize at the state level is we can’t program our way out of this,” Wente said. “It really is supporting the infrastructure at the local level. Supporting our partners and help them fill the gaps where they see them.”

Some women need transportation to checkups while others want prenatal classes.

DeWine signed the Strong Foundations Act into law earlier this year. The bill expanded pre- and post-natal care--particularly for women on Medicaid. It even directed the state to build an app to help lower-income parent navigate the system. But funding to pay for these ideas was stripped from the final version.

A [legislative cost analysis](#) showed that implementation would cost about \$30 million in 2024 and 2025.

Neither bill sponsor could be reached for comment, but DeWine’s budget calls for \$16 million to “maintain fatherhood, parenting and pregnancy programs,” and \$36 million to expand Family Connects Ohio, a home visiting pilot program available to new parents, to all 88 counties.

“The life of every child is precious, and every family deserves the opportunity to celebrate their baby’s first birthday,” DeWine said. “If anything, this progress should drive us to work even harder.”