

# Chicago sudden infant death cases never make the news

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While news media reporting traffic crashes and fire-related deaths of infants and children is routine and often leads to preventative measures to reduce these deaths, there is little or no news coverage of sleep-related or sudden infant deaths, which contributes to the lack of efforts to prevent these deaths, according to a Rush physician.

Dr. Kyran Quinlan and colleagues at Rush University Medical Center found that the Chicago news media reported 59 percent of child traffic crash deaths and 38 percent of child fire deaths, while sleep-related [infant deaths](#) in Chicago were never reported in the five years they studied. The findings are published online in the editorial, "Differential Media Reporting of Unintentional Child Deaths in Chicago, 2011-2015" on Sept. 12 in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

"If sudden unexpected infant deaths were reported in the news as often as crash deaths and fire-related deaths, there would be better public awareness and parents would be driven to do what they can to protect their children from this threat," said Quinlan.

In Chicago, most sudden unexpected infant death cases occur in unsafe sleep environments. Parents may not feel the very real risk from this practice. Babies should sleep on their back, in a crib or bassinet and not come into the parent's bed to sleep. We think so much about children dying in fires because it's tragic and we hear or read about it all the time in news reports. We fear giving car keys to our teens because of the number of deaths in car crashes, but babies who are dying within the first year of life from sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and suffocation are almost invisible, but their number towers over the other causes," added Quinlan, associate professor and division director of general pediatrics at Rush.

**Parents don't hear about deaths, don't see**

Sudden unexpected infant death occurs during the first year of life, and 90 percent of them take place within the first six months. "It's this high-risk time when parents should pay close attention, but risk perception isn't there because parents never hear about these cases," Quinlan said.

While sudden unexpected infant death only occurs within the first year of life, it accounted for 212 deaths of Chicago infants between 2011 and 2015—more than those children of all ages who died from motor vehicle crashes and fires combined during the same period.

In Chicago from 2011 to 2015, there were 71 motor vehicle-related deaths, according to the Fatality Analysis Reporting System shared by the Illinois Department of Transportation. For the same timeframe in Chicago, there were 45 fire-related deaths among young persons, according to the Office of the Illinois State Fire Marshal.

**Racial disparities of deaths is greater in Chicago than U.S. overall**

The analysis of data from the Center for Health Statistics of the Illinois Department of Public Health showed there were a total of 221 sudden unexpected infant death cases. Non-Hispanic Black infants accounted for 77 percent of all cases, 14 percent of cases were Hispanic infants, and 8 percent were non-Hispanic White [infants](#). The six largest local media outlets in Chicago covered 42 (59 percent) of the motor vehicle-related deaths, 17 (38 percent) fire-related deaths of young people, but not one of the 221 sudden unexpected infant death cases.

"There is a far greater racial disparity among sudden unexpected infant [death](#) cases in Chicago than in the U.S. overall. Families may not realize these deaths aren't rare, and may be less

motivated to practice safe sleep, especially bringing their infant into their bed to sleep," said Quinlan.

"We know that Chicagoans learn a lot about health risks from the local news. If parents are not hearing about [sudden infant deaths](#) in the local news, they likely won't realize their infant sleep practices are risky, and therefore won't change. The lack of media reporting on these deaths may actually be putting Chicago's babies at risk," said Dr. Douglas Roehler, one of the authors on this study.

These infant deaths are devastating to families, but we believe that most are preventable. Further work is necessary to investigate the reasons behind these findings and the possible implications for prevention of cases in this high-risk group."

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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