

## Optimizing Health and Well-Being for Women and Children

Priorities for 2021

Vital Directions for Health and Health Care:

Health Affairs

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### Overarching Challenges for Women's and Children's Health in the U.S.

Women and children in the U.S. experience higher rates of morbidity and mortality than women and children in almost all other industrialized countries, with racial and ethnic disparities even further exacerbated by COVID-19. Experts highlight current challenges for women's and children's health:

**Maternal health.** The high rate of maternal mortality in the U.S. is a national disgrace. Reducing maternal deaths will require improving the quality and safety of maternity care as well as women's health across the life course.

**Child health.** Stresses in early life, including adverse childhood experiences, affect health outcomes and are associated with morbidity and mortality during adulthood. Improving child health and development involves providing services across sectors, including health, education, child welfare, and justice.

**Access to care.** For women and children, access to medical care is one buffer against poor health. However, disadvantaged women and children experience limited access to care.

3. The National Institutes of Health and other funders should enhance support for studies to identify the mechanisms that link adverse events during early childhood to health outcomes across the life course and assess the relative effectiveness of prevention versus intervention strategies.
4. Public insurance (Medicaid/CHIP) for children should be strengthened through structural change. First, Medicaid should ensure universal coverage for all children from birth through age 21. Second, Medicaid for children and youth should be transformed to a fully federally financed program with physician payment rates comparable to those of Medicare.