

**Title:** *Baby Boxes: Reducing Infant Mortality In Tennessee*

**Thesis:** The state of Tennessee should implement a baby box program in order to reduce infant mortality, promote prenatal care, and close racial disparities.

**Background & Analysis:** In Tennessee, the infant mortality rate as of 2017 is 7.4 percent. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the state's infant mortality rate is higher than the national average of 5.8 percent.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, the infant mortality rate for black Tennesseans was 10.9 percent. Meanwhile, the infant mortality rate was 6.1 percent for white Tennesseans.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these dire statistics, the state of Tennessee has failed to pursue positive policy changes to reduce the infant mortality rate. As of 2018, around 46,000 Tennesseans were uninsured.<sup>3</sup> Rural hospitals continue to close.<sup>4</sup> Efforts to expand Medicaid in the Tennessee Legislature have been stonewalled.<sup>5</sup>

All of these facts paint a dire picture for healthcare in Tennessee and no doubt contribute to the high infant mortality rate in the state of Tennessee. However, there is one policy solution to reduce infant mortality, close racial disparities, and promote prenatal care: baby boxes. Baby boxes are cardboard boxes containing items crucial for childhood development such as a mattress, sheets, baby clothes, diapers, wipes, breastfeeding supplies, children's books, and educational literature for mothers.<sup>6</sup>

Baby boxes have been shown to reduce infant mortality rates. Programs providing mothers with baby boxes have already been implemented in states such as Alabama, New Jersey, Ohio, and Texas.<sup>7</sup> The concept of baby boxes has its roots in Finland which implemented a baby box program for low income families in 1938 that was then universalized in 1949.<sup>8</sup> Finland's infant mortality rate is 5.1 percent lower than Tennessee's infant mortality rate at 2.3 percent as of 2017.<sup>9</sup> Baby boxes are low cost and are crucial for reducing the state of Tennessee's infant mortality rate.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/states/tennessee/tennessee.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/health-of-women-and-children/measure/IMR\\_MCH/population/IMR-Black\\_MCH/state/TN](https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/health-of-women-and-children/measure/IMR_MCH/population/IMR-Black_MCH/state/TN)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/health/2019/09/11/tennessee-uninsured-residents-tenn-care-census-report/2276127001/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/health/2019/05/16/tennessee-rural-hospitals-closing-medicare-expansion-ballad-health/3245179002/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/2020/03/11/tennessee-medicare-expansion-bill-halted-year-ron-travis/5024454002/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://whnt.com/2017/04/12/the-baby-box-program-is-here-to-stay-in-alabama-still-in-high-demand/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/projects/family-fun-pack/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22751415>

<sup>9</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/country/fin/>

## Talking Points & Facts:

- According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), Tennessee's infant mortality rate (measured as deaths per 1,000 live births) in 2017 was 7.4 percent. The national average is 5.8 percent.<sup>10</sup>
- In 2019, the infant mortality rate for black Tennesseans was 10.9 percent. Meanwhile, the infant mortality rate for white Tennesseans was 6.1 percent.<sup>11</sup>
- Finland, which universalized their baby box program in 1948 and is considered one of the countries with the lowest infant mortality rates, has an infant mortality rate of 2.3 as of 2017.<sup>12</sup>
- Four states currently distribute baby boxes to new mothers: Alabama, New Jersey, Ohio, and Texas.<sup>13</sup>
- The cardboard baby boxes would include essential items like a mattress, sheets, baby clothes, diapers, wipes, breastfeeding supplies, children's books, and educational literature for mothers.<sup>14</sup> The cardboard baby box would also double as a bassinet/crib for the child.<sup>15</sup>
- The process is simple: mothers complete a course through the public-private Baby Box University program and then receive a free baby box distributed by the state of Tennessee.<sup>16</sup>
- The baby boxes would be distributed through Tennessee's Department of Health (DOH) and would cost around \$2 million to implement.<sup>17</sup>

**Policy Idea:** Under the Tennessee Department of Health (DOH), the baby box program would provide expecting mothers a baby box after the completion of an online education program offered through the Baby Box Company's Baby Box University program.

**Policy Analysis:** Tennessee's baby box program would involve a public-private partnership with the Baby Box Company's free online parenting class program.<sup>18 19</sup> The statewide program would be a scaled up version of a program already available in Tennessee's Johnson City area. The Johnson City area program involves a partnership between Ballard Health and the Baby Box Company. Through this partnership, mothers complete a Baby Box University program before receiving a baby box.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/states/tennessee/tennessee.htm>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/health-of-women-and-children/measure/IMR\\_MCH/population/IMR-Black\\_MCH/state/TN](https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/health-of-women-and-children/measure/IMR_MCH/population/IMR-Black_MCH/state/TN)

<sup>12</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/country/fin/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/projects/family-fun-pack/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://whnt.com/2017/04/12/the-baby-box-program-is-here-to-stay-in-alabama-still-in-high-demand/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22751415>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/03/26/521399385/states-give-new-parents-baby-boxes-to-encourage-safe-sleep-habits>

<sup>17</sup> <http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wpln/files/201802/HB1506.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.babyboxco.com/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.dallasnews.com/business/health-care/2017/05/03/baby-box-effort-texas-aims-curb-sids-infants>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.babyboxco.com/how-it-works/>

Ballad Health's current program is limited, however, to the East Tennessee area along with parts of Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky.<sup>21</sup> The program needs to be expanded and universalized throughout the entirety of the state of Tennessee so that all mothers have the opportunity to receive a baby box. Our proposal is that mothers who receive prenatal care will automatically be enrolled for the Baby Box University program unless they would like to opt out. Mothers would also have the option to complete the Baby Box University program at any time in the first few weeks after birth in order to receive their baby box.

One crucial issue to overcome is the fact that not all mothers have access to prenatal care. Additional funds would need to be allocated for outreach to rural and poor communities lacking prenatal care access so that all mothers can access the baby box program. Overall, the baby box program must be coupled with greater public investment in healthcare through the expansion of Medicaid, bringing back rural hospitals, and improving women's healthcare. All of these steps are crucial for Tennessee to reduce infant mortality, promote prenatal care, and close racial disparities in healthcare.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.balladhealth.org/about-us>