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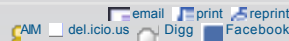
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TELEVISION REVIEW

A look at lives way too short

Posted on Fri, Aug. 22, 2008



BY GLENN GARVIN
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• 20/20: **Babyland**, 10-11 p.m. Friday, WPLG-ABC 10

Don't expect a lot of apple cheeks and broad smiles from the infants in *Babyland*. The luckiest of them are tiny and gaunt, strapped into incubators that are -- barely -- keeping them alive. Others are withered, gray and lying in pine boxes: the show's title refers not to a nursery or boutique, but a city cemetery in Memphis where most of the occupants are premature babies.



CURT HART / ABC

ABC's 20/20 questions why some babies never make it to childhood.

This hourlong report on infant mortality on ABC's newsmagazine *20/20*, is profoundly disturbing, even if it's somewhat overhyped. The United States, far from suffering the epidemic of dying babies that ABC suggests, has actually cut its infant mortality rate by nearly 80 percent since 1950.

And the statistic that *Babyland* uses to most menacing effect -- that the United States has the highest infant mortality rate among the world's 23 richest counties -- is less meaningful than it might appear, since not all countries define live births the same way. The fact is that of every 1,000 babies born in the United States, 994 will still be alive a year later, according to U.S. government statistics.

Of course, math is little comfort if your child is one of the six who don't make it. And in Memphis, America's Ground Zero for infant mortality, the death rate is more than double that of the rest of the country. Watching city workers lower miniature coffins into the parched earth of *Babyland*, it's hard to argue with reporter Elizabeth Vargas's terse verdict: "Too many babies are dying."

What to do about that is less certain. Infant mortality is closely linked to premature birth, which in turn is linked to poverty and teenage pregnancy. To put it another way, when babies have babies, a lot of them die. Is that a medical problem? Social? Economic? Political?

Vargas, to her credit, doesn't pretend to know, casting a wide net in interviews with doctors, social workers, and the mothers themselves, some as young as 12. Inevitably, many see a simple solution: more government spending, especially on doctors and clinics. Others, noting that Memphis has the second-highest homicide rate in America, see infant mortality as part of a wider community dysfunction.

The most tantalizing clue emerges from an interview with a teenager named Precious, whose pregnancy provides the narrative thread that holds *Babyland* together. She hasn't heard from the baby's father, she admits, since the day she told him she was pregnant: "He's the typical thug. You know, got a lot of girlfriends, all this. He don't care about nothing but his car, rims, money." Unspoken is the question, why would you even sleep with somebody like that, much less get pregnant by him?

Watching *Babyland*, you get the feeling that until we have the answer to that, everything else is a Band-Aid.

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