

Infant Death Haunts Grim 'Babyland' on ABC's '20/20' special

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By David Hinckley

In most situations, "Babyland" would sound like a store that sells soft, colorful plush toys in the local mall.

But in Elizabeth Vargas' chilling report on Friday night's "20/20," "Babyland" is the corner of a Memphis public cemetery where the county buries infants whose parents can't afford to pay for a funeral.

Buries way too many.

If you're looking for a TV image that will haunt you for a good long time, you won't have to look much further than a dozen pine boxes, not much bigger than shoeboxes, lined up in a muddy trench, crooked and ragged and just waiting for the backhoe to cover them over before it starts digging the next trench.

Vargas' report starts by noting the U.S. has the highest infant mortality rate of the world's 23 richest nations, and that within the U.S., there are even higher spikes.

Black babies die at three times the rate of white babies, for instance, and the U.S. city with the highest infant mortality rate is Memphis.

So that's where she goes, focusing on a black teenage mother named Precious and several adults who are trying to help.

The problem is largely solvable, they argue – and, at least on paper, not that difficult. Many infant deaths could be prevented if mothers simply received standard medical care and followed proper medical advice during pregnancy.

That's routine procedure for comfortable suburban parents. It's something else for mostly unwed, mostly poor and often not very well-educated teenagers.

Vargas talks to several persons in the system who argue that this is a classic case of money running out before it helps everybody, that collectively we just don't think poor black teens matter enough to ensure they get the proper care and help.

With race an inevitable part of the discussion, Vargas next takes the difficult but necessary step of noting that the adult who is helping this pregnant teenage subject, Precious, is a white woman from the suburbs.

The question is not the woman's sincerity or commitment, but whether solving the problem ultimately requires more such involvement from the community where the teenage mothers have grown up.

Whatever the answer, Vargas shows what happens to too many other babies when their mothers got little or no prenatal care. By having someone who is aware of the need for proper care and can steer her to receive it, Precious is far less likely to have her child end up in one of those tiny pine boxes.

Perhaps what we really need to ask, Vargas suggests, is why a Precious should have to depend on a private volunteer. Why she would not automatically have access to basic medical resources, or perhaps not even know about them.

The word "crisis" may arguably be overused in America these days. It's hard to look at the footage of Babyland and say it doesn't apply here.