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TUNE IN TONIGHT: '20/20' special 'Babyland' views infant mortality rate in Memphis

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The whole purpose of news is to look for the truth, no matter how unpleasant. This is never easy on television, where the emphasis is always on glamour, distraction and selling deodorant.

So give ABC some credit for the "20/20" (10 p.m., ABC) special "Babyland," hosted by Elizabeth Vargas.

Vargas travels to a place where infant mortality has been an epidemic for decades, where a black baby is three times less likely to reach his or her first birthday than a white baby. The place is not in Haiti or Africa, but in Memphis, Tenn., where a graveyard formerly known as a potter's field has become the resting place for the infants of the poor, a forlorn scrap of sacred ground known as "Babyland."

Vargas teams up with a pregnant black teenager and her mentor, a middle-class white lady from the richer side of town. Inspired by her religion, the woman encourages the girl to take her baby to term, to make weekly visits to a clinic, to eat well and to avoid the stress of the streets where she lives.

While the main focus of "Babyland" is on infant mortality, it opens a window on the effects of poverty. Like the recent CNN series "Black in America," it does a fine job of showing the daily grind of living in abandoned neighborhoods where transportation is spotty and the streets dangerous.

Every trip to work, to a health clinic or to a market requires a patchwork of bus routes. A chore that would require a five-minute car ride becomes an hours-long ordeal. No wonder so many young mothers-to-be don't seek prenatal care.

Vargas interviews nurses and doctors who have been fighting infant mortality for decades. They tell her of official and popular indifference. Our white Christian volunteer confesses that many of her suburban neighbors think her efforts are not only in vain, but morally wrong. They say she is rewarding bad behavior that could have been avoided with abstinence.

Again, give Vargas and ABC credit for broadcasting a report that begins and ends with the sight of tiny wooden coffins being lowered into the ground and buried five or six at a time. Memphis has more annual infant deaths than murders.

Homicides, even in bad neighborhoods, often get reported in the news. The early, avoidable deaths of babies generally do not.