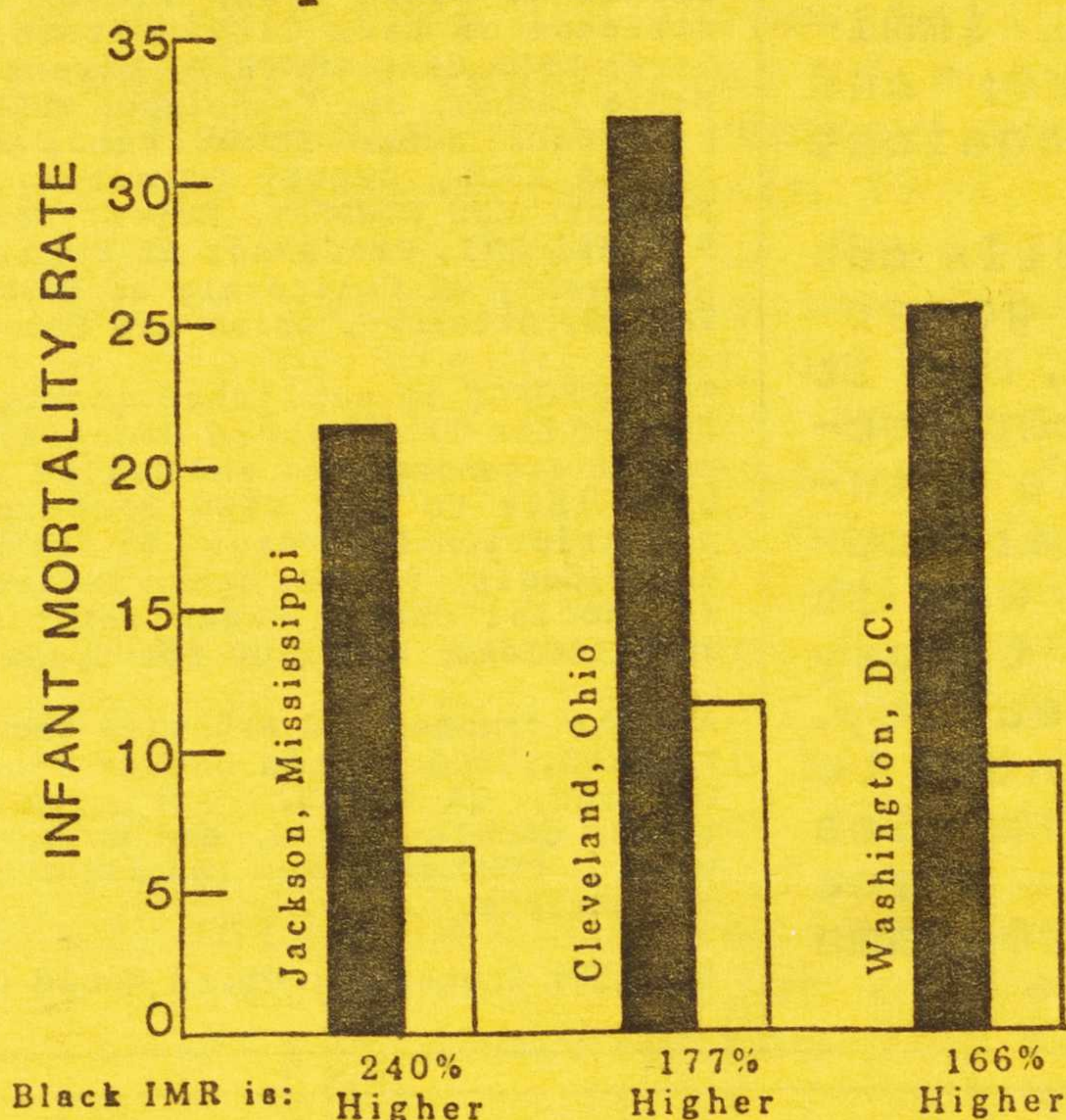


THIRD FORCE

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Struggles Against Infant Mortality

by Melia Franklin



BLACK AND WHITE IMRs IN THREE AMERICAN CITIES

Why is it that Black communities in Cleveland, Ohio and Oakland, California have infant mortality rates* as high or higher than many Third World countries supposedly "less developed" than the U.S? Because a nation's infant mortality rate is more than just a measure of infant deaths. It is a measure of a government's priorities. A high infant mortality rate reflects a government's failure to provide affordable, comprehensive, and above all accessible health care for all its people.

The real issue is political: it concerns not the lack, but the allocation of available resources. In both the U.S. and the Third World, diversion of public funds to other "national priorities" (like the military) at the expense of public health and nutritional programs serving poor women of color produces one predictable result: unnecessary infant deaths.

Many Third World countries do face limited resources, but the U.S. has the medical, technical, and financial resources to virtually eliminate unnecessary infant deaths. However, the government's failure

to provide affordable and accessible public health services, coupled with the added pressure of recent cutbacks in social services by the Reagan Administration, has caused infant mortality in poor and minority communities to increase dramatically.

Recent disclosures of glaring disparities between the rates of infant death in Black communities and those in white communities has brought the issue national attention. A 1983 survey of infant mortality rates in 45 major cities confirmed the worst suspicions about the ever-widening "infant mortality gap," which has remained essentially unchanged over the last 20 years. In 32 of the 45 cities, Black IMRs (infant mortality rates) were more than 50% higher than the white rate. Fifteen of the cities surveyed showed a Black rate that was more than 200% the white rate. In Jackson, Mississippi, the Black IMR was 240% of the white rate.

While statistics documenting the IMRs for other people of color are often difficult to obtain, many Latino communities have been found to have IMRs similar to Black rates. The IMR for Native Americans living in California is higher than for any other reported group except Blacks. One can only imagine the rate of infant deaths among refugees and undocumented workers.

Turning the Tide on Infant Mortality: Communities Fight Back

Communities across the country are responding to the government's failure to act

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* The "infant mortality rate" is the number of babies per 1,000 who die before their first birthday.