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Drivers of Racial Differences in C-Sections

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WORKING PAPER 32891

DOI 10.3386/w32891

ISSUE DATE August 2024

Black mothers with unscheduled deliveries are 25 percent more likely to deliver by C-section than non-Hispanic white mothers. The gap is highest for mothers with the lowest risk and is reduced by only four percentage points when controlling for observed medical risk factors, sociodemographic characteristics, hospital, and doctor or medical practice group. Remarkably, the gap disappears when the costs of ordering an unscheduled C-section are higher due to the unscheduled delivery occurring at the same time as a scheduled C-section. This finding is consistent with provider discretion—rather than differences in unobserved medical risk—accounting for persistent racial disparities in delivery method. The additional C-sections that take place for low-risk

women when hospitals are unconstrained negatively impact maternal and infant health.

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