



Fear Free Childbirth

EPISODE 04 · TEN YEARS ON

What happened to *birth*?

The maternal mortality statistic that sent me down a rabbit hole

Episode data pack · fearfreechildbirth.com

MATERNAL MORTALITY · ENGLAND · 2022–24

2.72×

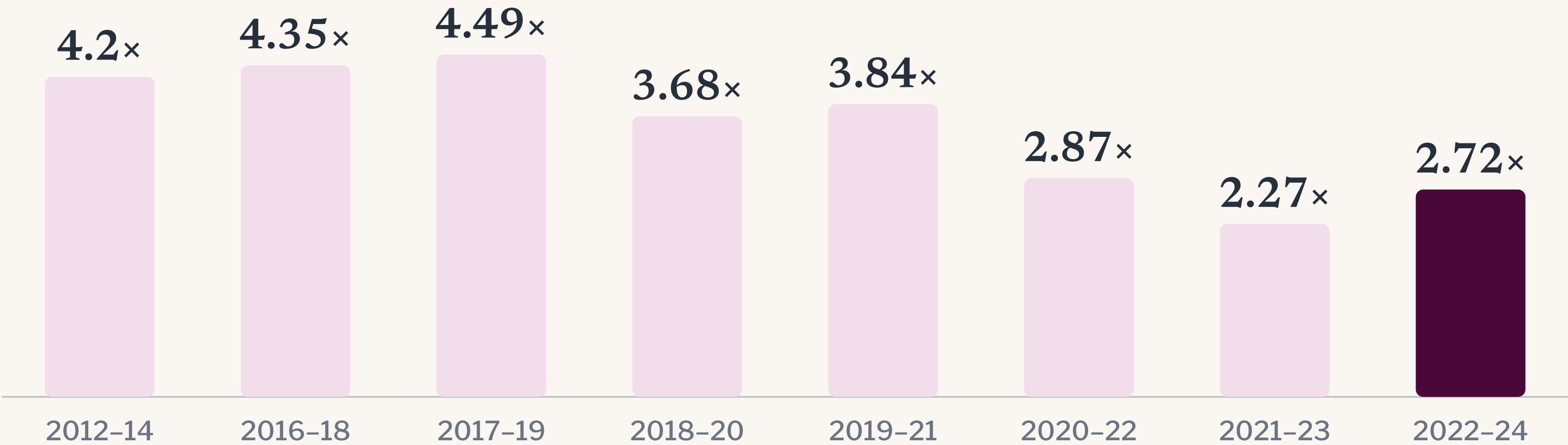
*The maternal mortality rate for Black women was **2.72 times** the rate for White women.*

Down from a gap often quoted as around five times. So what does that number mean?

Source: MBRRACE-UK, Maternal mortality 2022–2024

The headline gap *has narrowed*

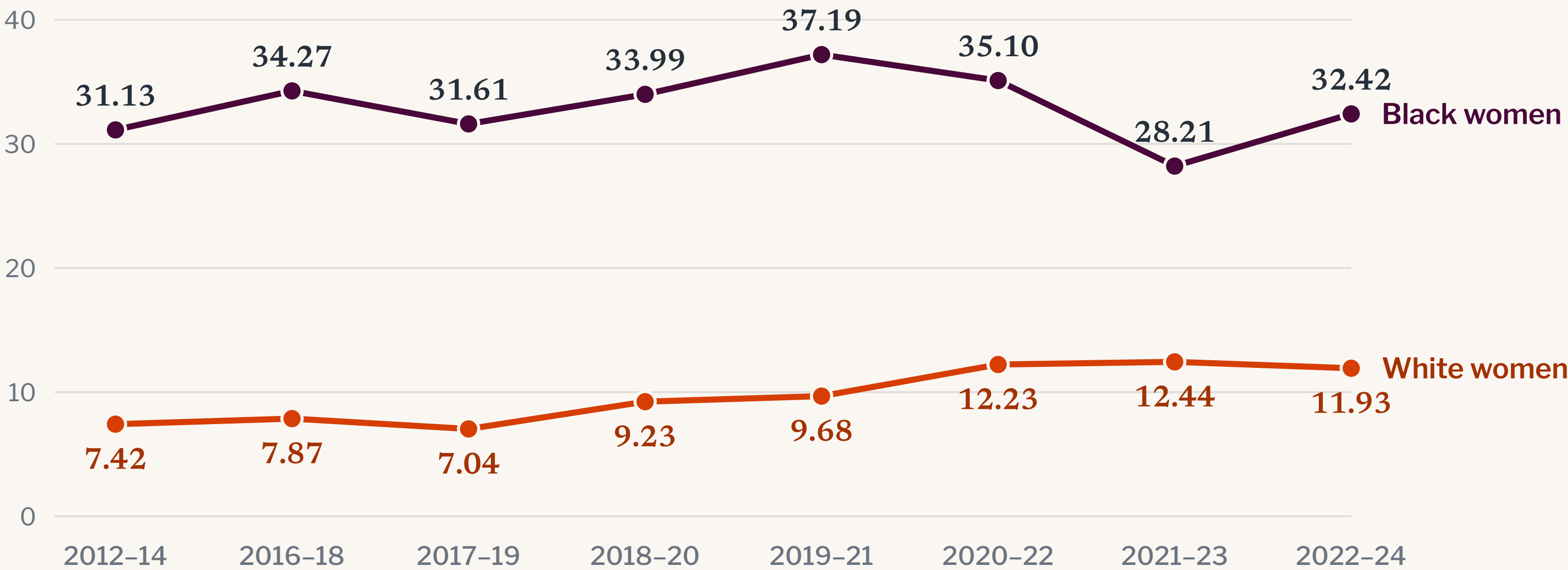
How many times higher the Black maternal mortality rate is than the White rate, England, rolling three-year periods



A ratio compares two rates. It can move because either one of them changes.

Source: MBRRACE-UK reports, 2014-2025

Behind the ratio: *the actual rates*



Rolling three-year periods overlap, so they aren't independent annual figures.

Source: MBRRACE-UK reports, 2014-2025

The gap narrowed mostly because *White mortality rose*

BLACK : WHITE RATIO

3.84_x → 2.87_x

The headline “improvement”

BLACK WOMEN

37.19 → 35.10

Deaths per 100,000 maternities

WHITE WOMEN

9.68 → 12.23

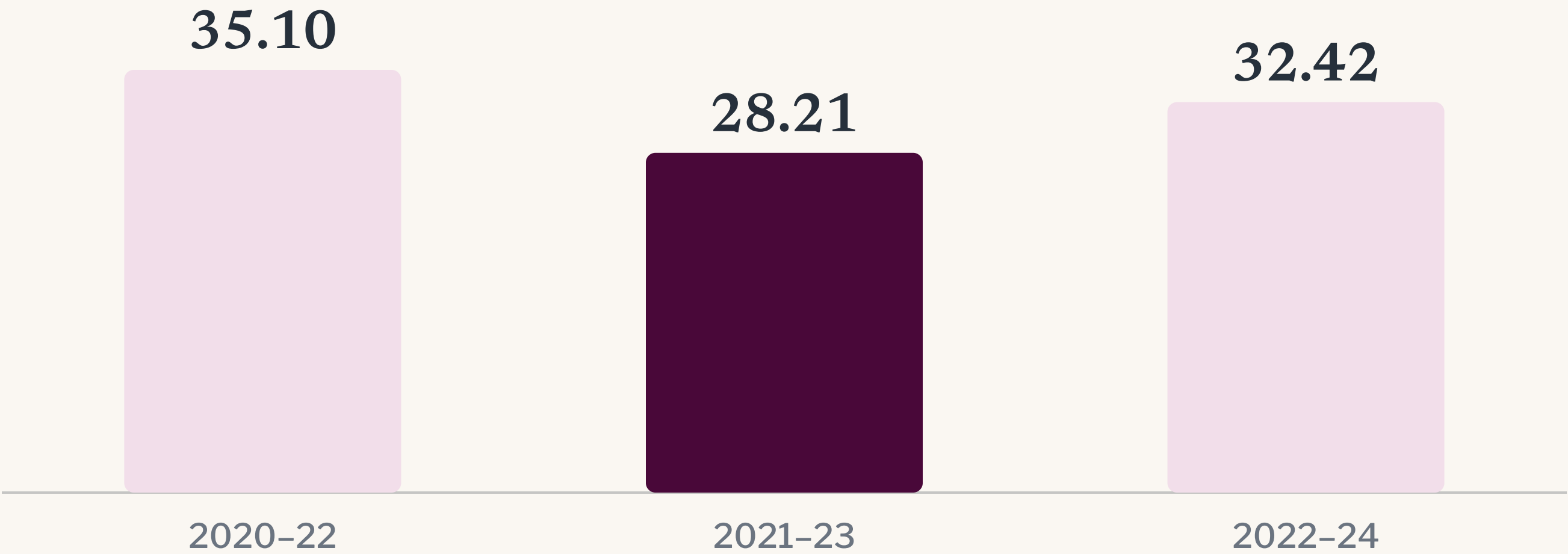
Deaths per 100,000 maternities

MBRRACE-UK cautioned that the apparent reduction in disparity largely reflected an increase in mortality among White women.

Source: MBRRACE-UK 2023 and 2024 reports

A real fall in 2021–23, *not sustained*

Deaths per 100,000 maternities, Black women, England



In 2021–23 the ratio fell to 2.27 $\times$ because Black mortality fell. By 2022–24 it had risen again, and the ratio was back to 2.72 $\times$.

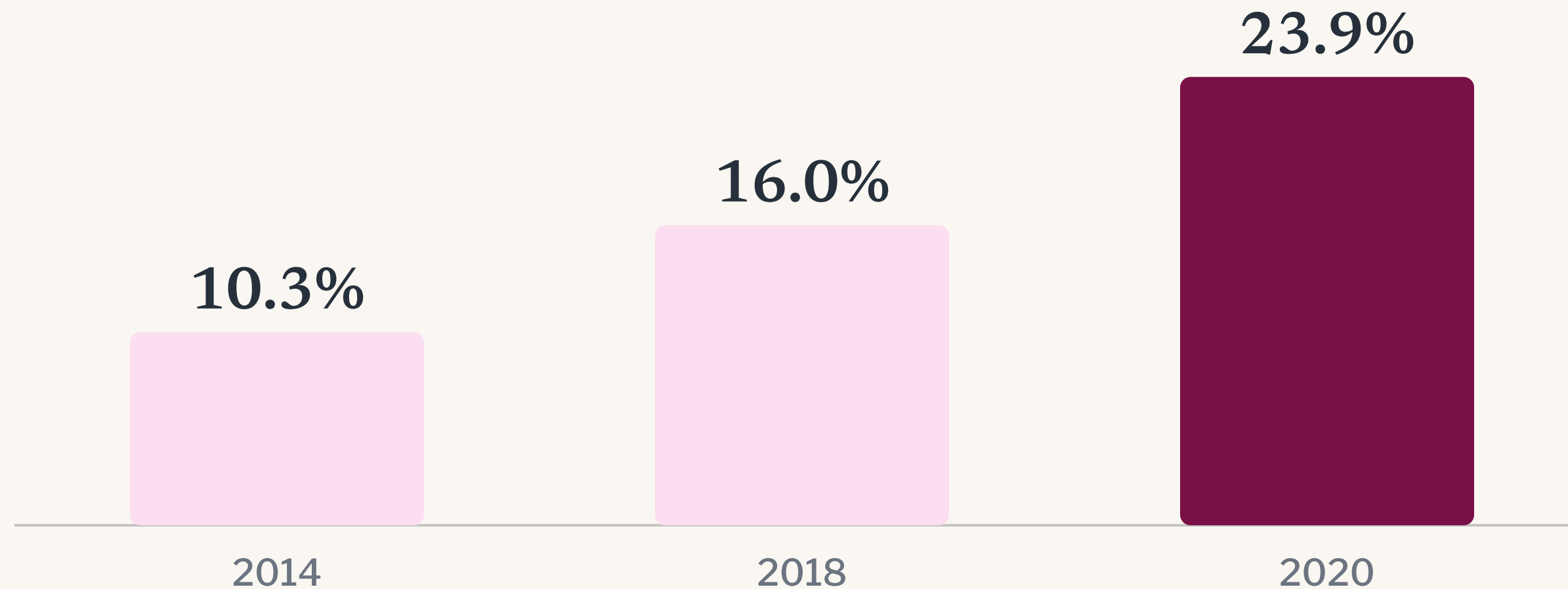
Source: MBRRACE-UK 2024 and 2025 reports; Maternal mortality 2022–2024

A NOTE BEFORE WE GO ON

These are population rates. They are *not a prediction* of your birth.

Maternal death in England remains rare. Population statistics describe a system, not what will happen to you.

Probable postnatal depression *more than doubled*

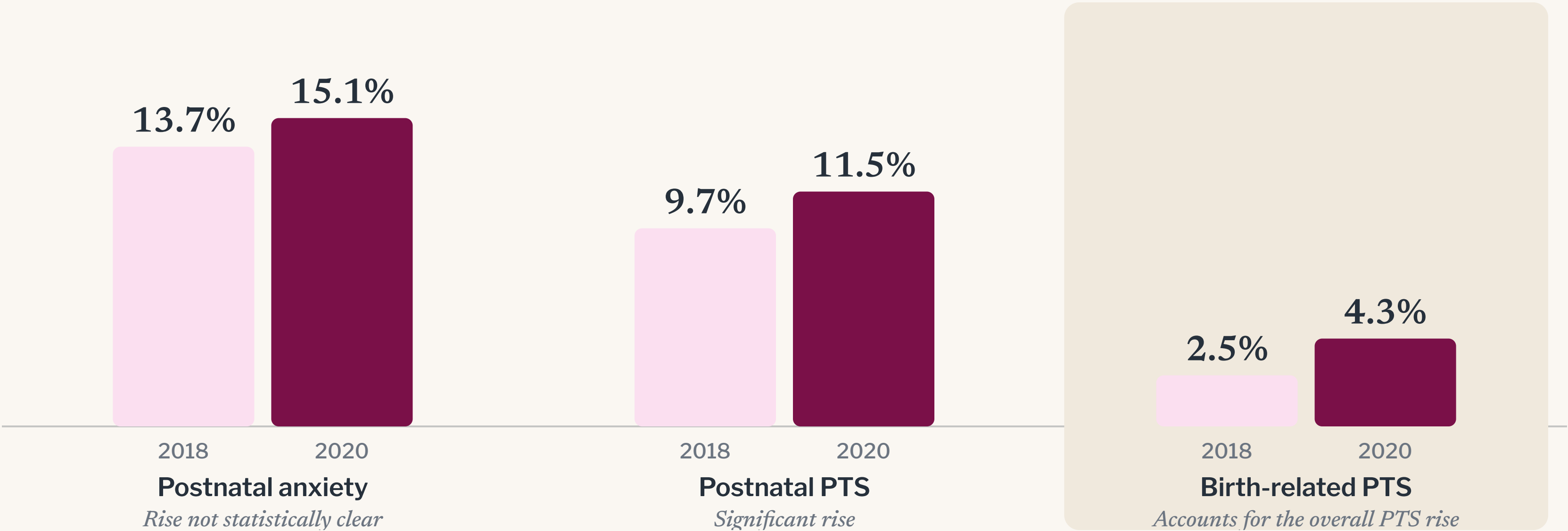


The rise from 2014 to 2018 happened before Covid. Same EPDS threshold (13 or above) in every survey.

Source: Harrison et al., 2023 (National Maternity Surveys, England)

The standout rise: *birth-related* PTS

PTS = post-traumatic stress. Prevalence after birth, National Maternity Surveys, England



Source: Harrison et al., 2024 (National Maternity Surveys, England)

1 in 10

*women had symptoms of post-traumatic stress six months after giving birth in 2024, **higher than in any previous** National Maternity Survey.*

3 in 10 had symptoms of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress. Postnatal depression (2 in 10) dipped slightly from the pandemic peak but is still above pre-pandemic levels.

Source: NPEU, You and Your Baby 2024: a national survey of maternal health and wellbeing (March 2026)

WHAT CONNECTS THEM

Before, during and after birth *are connected*

LINKED TO HIGHER RISK

Antenatal anxiety was associated with greater risk of later postnatal depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress.

PROTECTIVE

Higher satisfaction with the birth experience.

Stronger social support.

Associations across the national survey analyses. They don't show that anxious women cause difficult births.

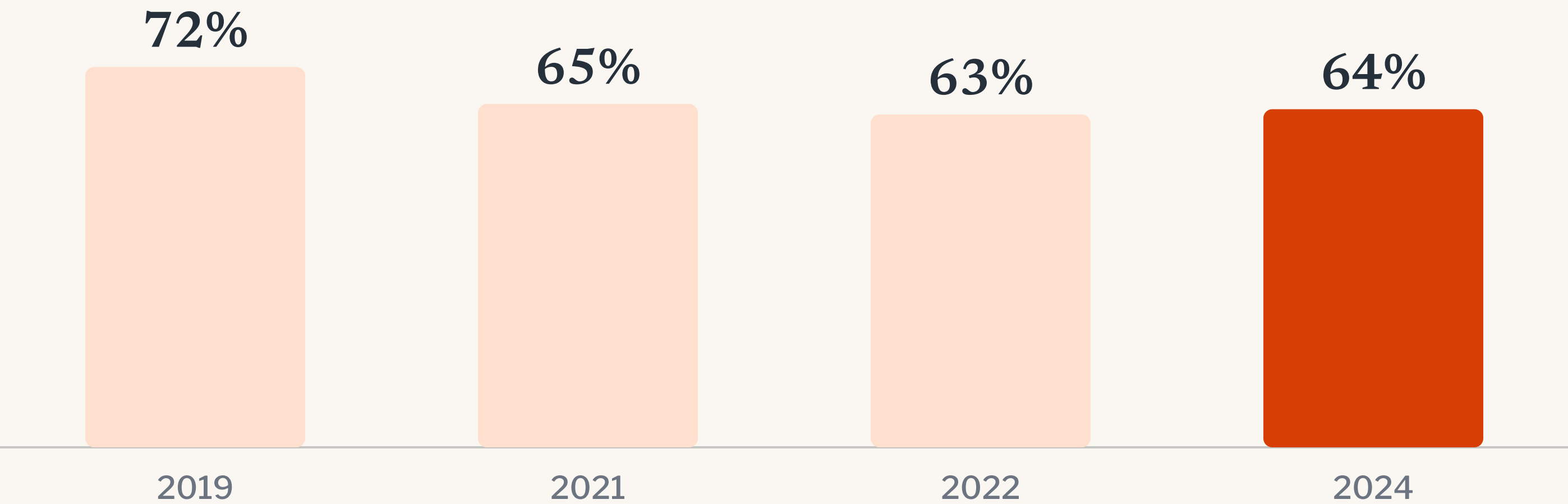
Source: Harrison et al., 2023 and 2024

Where's the *tokophobia* trend line?

There is no clean annual UK tokophobia time series to lay over these charts. Studies use different definitions and thresholds for fear of childbirth, severe fear and diagnosable tokophobia, so the figures can't be stitched into one trend.

Fewer women could *always* get help from staff in labour

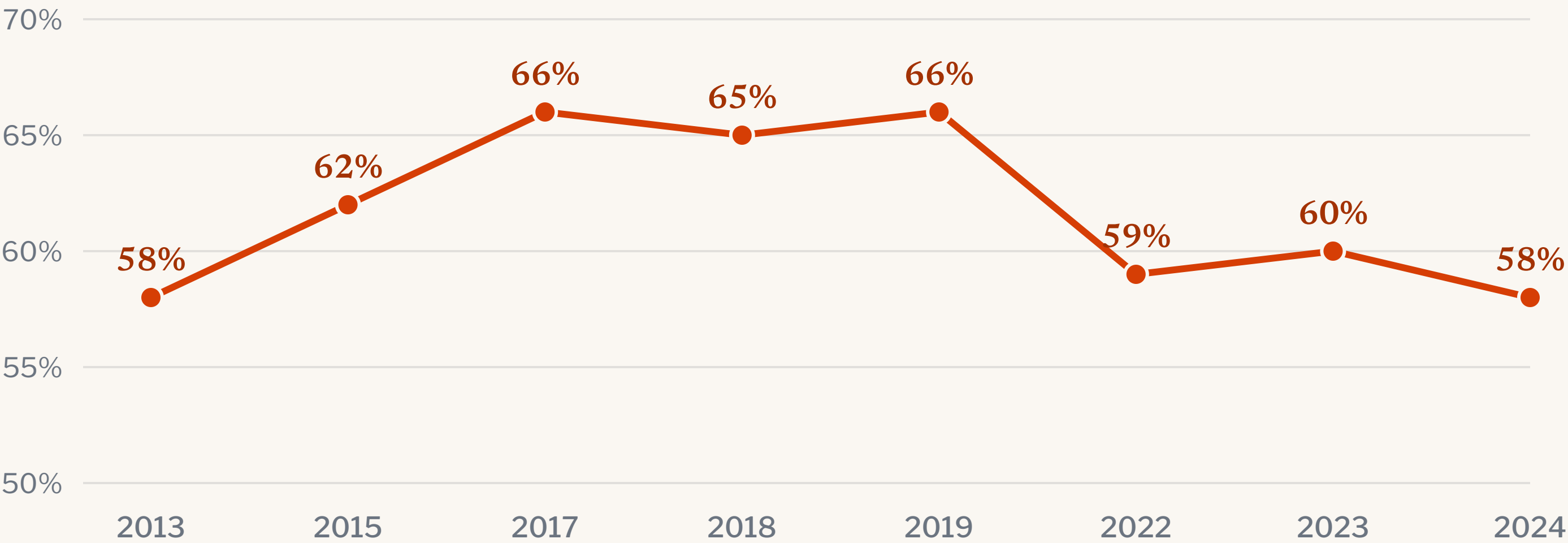
Women who said they were “always” able to get help from staff when they needed it during labour and birth



Source: CQC Maternity Survey 2019–2024

Information after birth: *back to 2013 levels*

Women “always” given the information and explanations they needed while in hospital after the birth



It climbed to 66% by 2017, held to 2019, then fell back. Survey years shown where a comparable figure was published.

Source: CQC Maternity Survey statistical releases 2018 and 2023; Picker Institute summary of the 2024 survey

Other signals from women's *experience of care*

54%

could always get help from staff in hospital after the birth

2024 · down from 62% in 2019

50%

felt they completely had the chance to ask questions about labour and birth

2021 · down from 56% in 2019

19%

were not offered any choice about where to have their baby

2022

60%

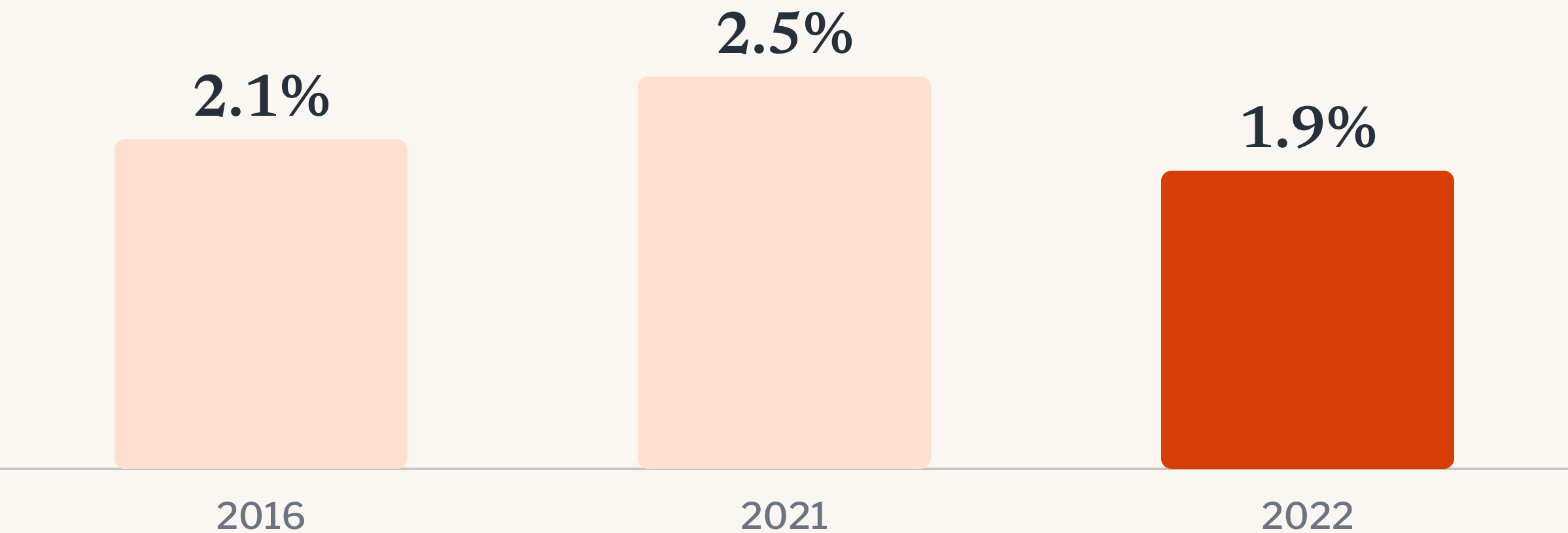
got help and advice about their baby's health when they needed it

2021 · down from 71% in 2019

Source: CQC Maternity Survey 2021, 2022 and 2024; Picker Institute

Home birth rose briefly, then *fell back*

Maternities at home, England

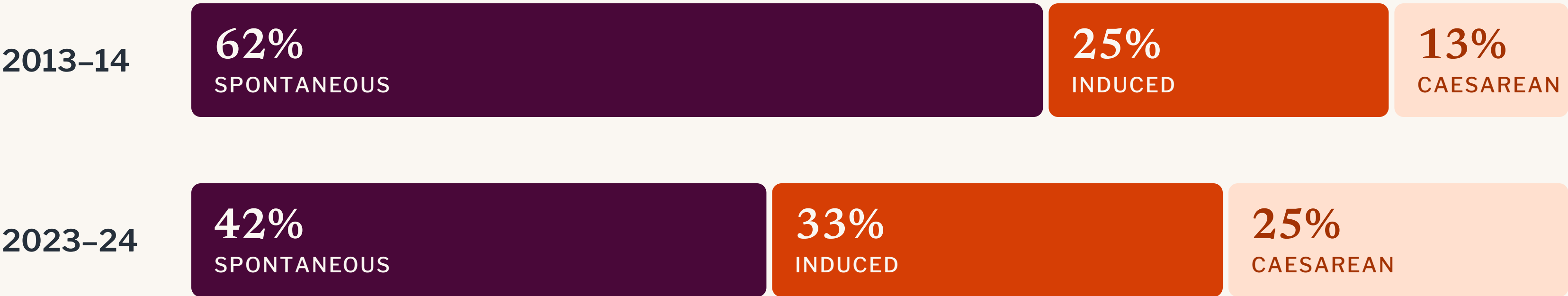


Across England and Wales, 2.3% of maternities were at home each year from 2012 to 2015. The 2021 rise may partly reflect women avoiding healthcare settings during the pandemic.

Source: ONS, Birth characteristics in England and Wales 2016 and 2022

Labour starting on its own fell *from 62% to 42%*

Method of onset of labour



Spontaneous onset means labour began without pharmacological, mechanical or operative intervention. The chart says nothing about whether any individual induction or caesarean was needed or wanted.

Source: NHS England, NHS Maternity Statistics 2023-24 (time series)

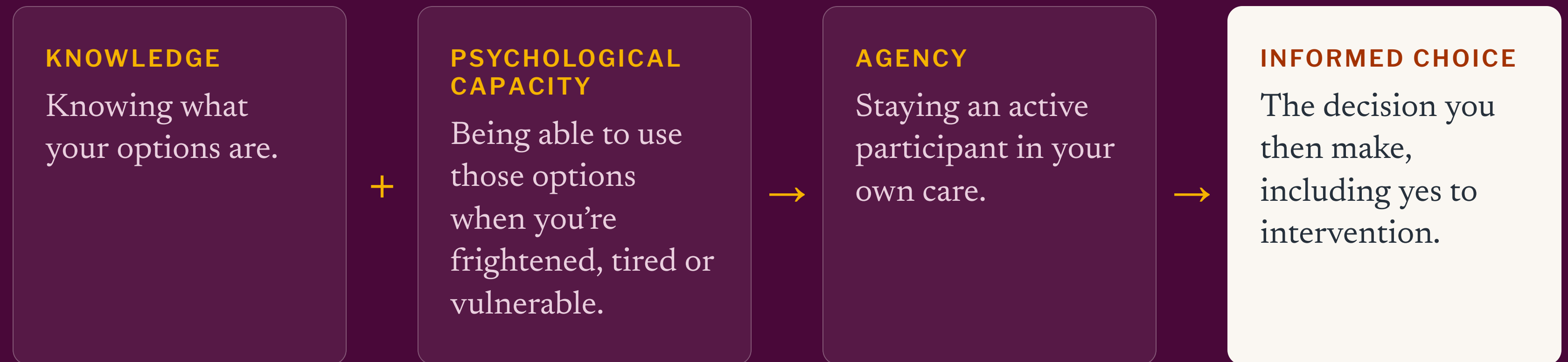
What the data *support*

- Maternal mortality in England worsened over the broad period, though rates fluctuate.
- For part of the period, the narrowing Black : White gap came mainly from rising White mortality.
- Probable postnatal depression rose substantially between 2014, 2018 and 2020.
- Birth-related post-traumatic stress rose between 2018 and 2020.
- Women's reported experience of several parts of maternity care got worse.
- Fewer labours started spontaneously; induction and caesarean onset rose.
- Antenatal anxiety is linked to poorer postnatal mental health. Birth satisfaction and social support protect.

What the data *don't* show

- That anxiety causes maternal death.
- That intervention caused the rise in maternal mortality.
- That hospital birth is inherently unsafe, or home birth inherently safe.
- That women with poor outcomes failed to advocate for themselves.
- That the whole shift from around 5× to 2.7× is an illusion. There was a real fall in 2021–23.
- That English trends apply automatically to every other country.

Where agency *comes from*



Questions worth *having ready*

For working things out together with your midwife or doctor

1 *Why are you recommending this?*

2 *What's the absolute risk, not just the relative risk?*

3 *What are my alternatives?*

4 *What happens if we wait?*

5 *Is this hospital policy or a clinical necessity?*

6 *What evidence is this recommendation based on?*

7 *Do we have time for me to think or talk this through?*

8 *I understand the recommendation. I do / do not consent.*

CONTEXT · UNITED STATES · 2024

44.8

BLACK WOMEN

14.2

WHITE WOMEN

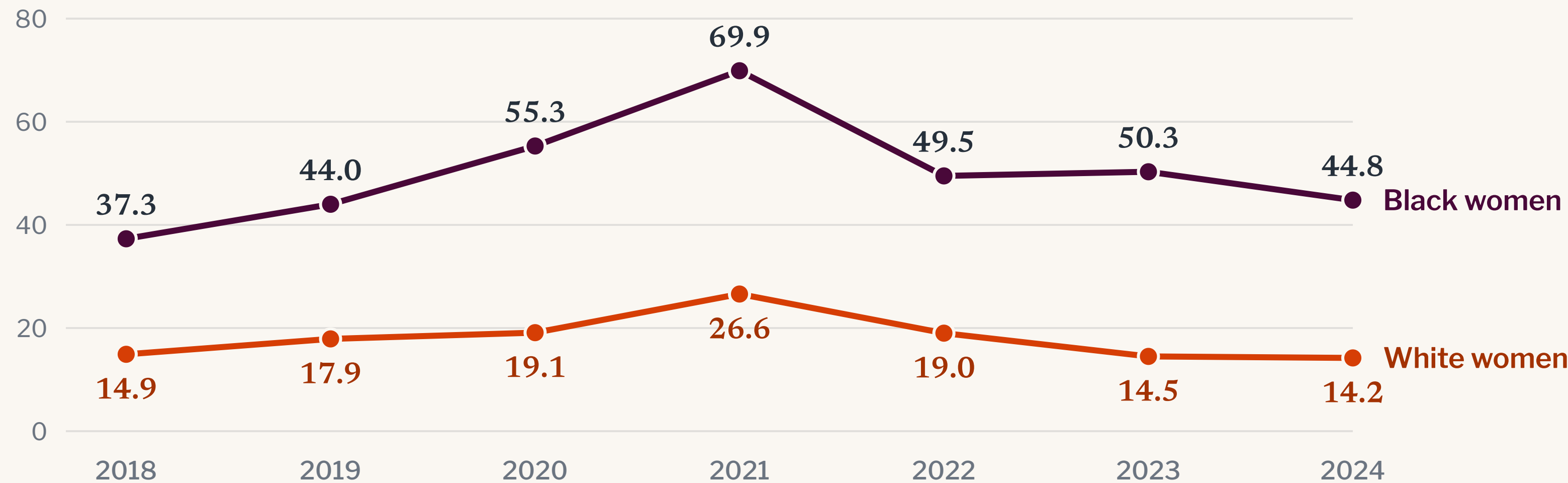
*Maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. The rate for Black women was **around three times** the rate for White women.*

Non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic White women. Overall US rate: 17.9. Different definitions and denominator from MBRRACE, so not directly comparable with the England figures.

Source: CDC / NCHS, Maternal mortality rates in the United States, 2024

A pandemic spike, and *a gap that persists*

Maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic White women



CDC’s comparable national series starts in 2018. Both rates peaked in 2021. The rate for White women has since fallen below its 2018 level; the rate for Black women hasn’t.

Source: CDC / NCHS Health E-Stats, Maternal mortality rates in the United States, 2019-2024 editions

TO CLOSE

Fear says something is going to happen to me. *Agency says I am participating in what happens next.*

Next time · Episode 05 · What happened to having babies?

SOURCES

Where the numbers *come from*

MBRRACE-UK – Maternal mortality 2022–2024

npeu.ox.ac.uk/mbrrace-uk/data-brief/maternal-mortality-2022-2024

Harrison et al., 2023

Postnatal depression, National Maternity Surveys ·
pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37363795

CQC Maternity Survey 2022

cqc.org.uk – national survey shows decline in positive maternity experiences

NHS England – NHS Maternity Statistics 2023–24

digital.nhs.uk – deliveries time series

CDC / NCHS – Maternal mortality rates 2018–2024

cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat

CQC Maternity Survey 2017, 2018, 2023, 2024

cqc.org.uk · picker.org (2024 summary)

MBRRACE-UK 2024 and 2025 reports

npeu.ox.ac.uk/mbrrace-uk

Harrison et al., 2024

Postnatal anxiety and PTS, 2018 vs 2020 ·
pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38574867

CQC Maternity Survey 2021

cqc.org.uk – pandemic impacted choice

ONS – Birth characteristics in England and Wales 2022

ons.gov.uk

NPEU – You and Your Baby 2024 (National Maternity Survey)

npeu.ox.ac.uk/maternity-surveys

ONS – Birth characteristics in England and Wales 2016

ons.gov.uk