

Issue At A Glance:

Childhood Drowning in the US

Drowning often occurs suddenly without warning and in familiar settings like backyard pools. This brief examines the burdens and risks associated with childhood drowning and outlines urgent prevention strategies to turn the tide on the number one cause of death for young children in the US.

Introduction

Childhood drowning is a critical yet often overlooked and underestimated public health concern. It remains the leading cause of mortality for children ages 1-4 in the United States.¹

The sudden and often silent nature of drowning, coupled with a lack of consistent prevention infrastructure, has left many families across the country vulnerable to devastating loss—especially in under-resourced communities.

In 2022 alone, the 1-4-year-old age group saw a 28% increase in drowning fatalities compared to pre-pandemic levels.² This preventable epidemic reveals long-standing disparities among minority groups—with Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native children disproportionately affected.³

While many of the pediatric drowning deaths occur in private or residential settings, the broader issue reflects systemic challenges in education, regulation, and equity. The recent increases in childhood drowning rates underscore the urgent need for coordinated public health action.

Key Statistics on Drowning in the U.S.⁴

4,000	Estimated deaths annually nationwide
1 out of 4	Drowning victims is a child
The #1 cause	Of unintentional injury death in ages 1-4
11 deaths per day	On average due to drowning
\$50+ billion	What it costs the U.S. economy per year ⁵

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Epidemiology of Drowning

Approximately 4000 people drown each year, and about 1 out of 4 drowning victims is a child. Incidents tend to surge during the summer months when water-related activities are at their peak. Fatal events occur in a variety of settings: home pools and jacuzzies, bathtubs, natural bodies of water, and recreational facilities. For infants and toddlers, most incidents occur in residential pools. For older adolescents, open water poses a greater threat.⁵

Key risk factors for drowning injury and death include limited supervision, absence of physical barriers, inability to swim, and lack of timely rescue response. Gender-wise, boys are two times more likely to drown than girls.⁴ Social and racial disparities deepen the risks. Black children are more likely to drown in swimming pools than white children.⁵ One particular group that faces dramatically higher drowning rates than their peers is children with autism.^{6,12}

The consequences of nonfatal drowning are profound as well. Over half of survivors require emergency care or long-term health support, with high rates of neurological impairment.¹ The economic cost is staggering. Overall, drowning and its associated effects cost the U.S. economy over \$50 billion annually.⁵

At least 48 US states have statewide pool safety laws. In California, the Swimming Pool Safety Act (passed in 1996 and amended in 2017 with stricter conditions) requires at least two safety features, such as a fence, cover, or door alarm.^{7,8} However, enforcement is inconsistent, and the penalties are minor for those who fail to meet the requirements. In Riverside County, for example, violations like missing self-latching devices or a broken gate can result in fines as low as \$50.⁹ These regulatory weaknesses reduce the effectiveness of safety laws currently in place.

Steps to Improve Water Safety⁴

1. Remove water from tubs, buckets, and kiddie pools immediately after use and store them upside down.
2. Maintain at least a 4-foot-high, 4-sided pool fence with self-closing and self-latching gates.
3. Prioritize basic swim skills for children – start early.
4. Always supervise children around water – with close, constant, full attention.



Drowning Prevention Strategies

Despite the severity of this issue, federal momentum has slowed, and the national infrastructure for drowning prevention is shrinking. In mid-2025, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's primary program dedicated to tracking and preventing drownings was halted, with proposed elimination in 2026.¹⁰ In order to maintain the safety of our pediatric population and decrease drowning incidence, the following strategies must be considered.

Multilayered Protection

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) calls for the implementation of layered safety protections which include barrier fencing, active supervision, CPR readiness, and widespread access to affordable swim lessons.³ Additionally, the U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan (USNWSAP) provides a blueprint for action that includes public education, surveillance systems, and interagency coordination.¹¹ These recommendations may seem small in isolation, but together, their compounded benefits are life-changing.

Intentional Education for At-Risk Groups

Early swim education and water safety training may be the single most effective preventive measure in the effort to minimize drowning risk. These skills have the potential to greatly

decrease the number of drowning deaths, especially when offered to at-risk groups and communities. Prioritizing equity and inclusion by funding swimming classes for high-risk demographics can start a ripple of change and lead to better outcomes.

Stricter Regulation by States and Counties

States and counties overall need to increase the intensity with which they enforce pool safety regulations. This starts by raising the fines to meaningful levels. Implementing stricter forms of punishment for failure to meet pool safety codes communicates the seriousness and importance of existing pool safety guidelines.

The Importance of National Support

Having a nationally funded initiative like the CDC's drowning prevention program is crucial for supporting local jurisdictions with technical guidance and data infrastructure. Without the help of central coordination, prevention efforts fall to a scattered patchwork of local, state, and nonprofit organizations with variable resources, leading to variable results. As the leading cause of death in infants and young children nationwide, the issue of drowning deserves national attention and appropriate investment. Addressing the problem requires a coordinated effort, and the catalyst for this is consistent national support.

Conclusion

Drowning remains a preventable tragedy that claims the lives of hundreds of children each year, yet national attention and funding have declined even as disparities persist. The burden of drowning disproportionately falls on communities that often have poor access to resources and training.

Bridging prevention gaps requires intentional collaboration between communities, organizations, and state and national leadership. The solutions are not theoretical—they already exist and have proven effective when implemented equitably. What is needed now is a renewed commitment at all levels to prioritize water safety, modernize enforcement mechanisms, and ensure that every child—regardless of ZIP code or background—has the skills and protections to stay safe around water.

The path to achieving safety for our children can be challenging. However, each proactive step carries with it the immense opportunity to save lives and protect the future of our country.

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Did you know?

Children with autism are 160 times more likely to die from drowning compared to the general pediatric population.¹³



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