



## CDC Newsroom

# Drowning Deaths Rise in the United States

Making swimming lessons more accessible can save lives

### Media Statement

For Immediate Release

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Drowning deaths are on the rise in the United States, following decades of decline, according to a new CDC *Vital Signs* [study](#) released today. Over 4,500 people died due to drowning each year from 2020–2022, 500 more per year compared to 2019.

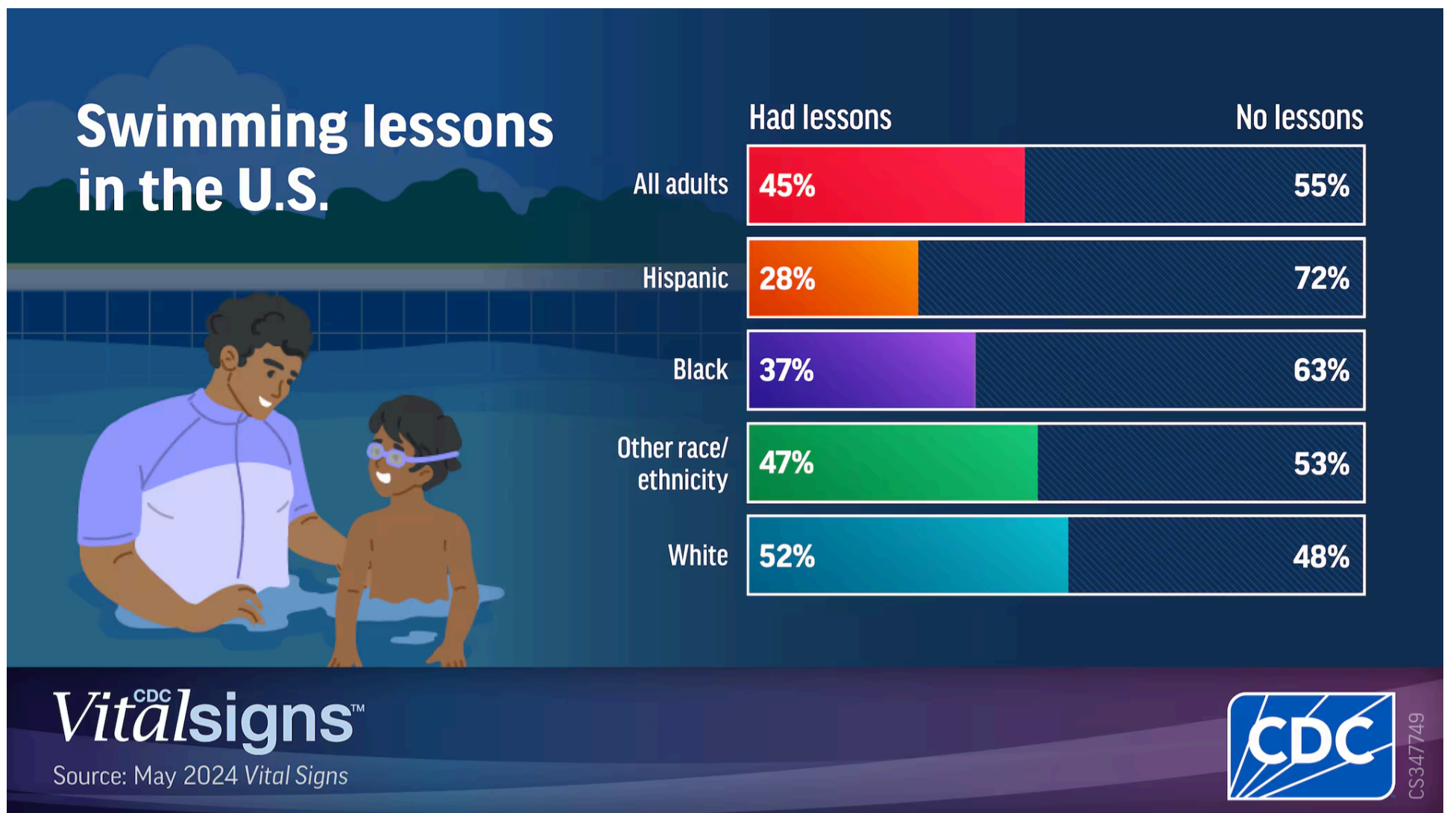
CDC experts looked at drowning deaths, self-reported swimming skills, participation in swimming lessons, and exposure to recreational water for this latest *Vital Signs* report. The report explores how increased access to basic swimming and water safety skills training can save lives.

*"I've seen firsthand the effects of drowning: families forced to say goodbye to their loved ones too soon," said Debra Houry, M.D., M.P.H., CDC's chief medical officer. "CDC's drowning prevention experts collected high-quality drowning data to better understand how we can protect people in communities across the United States. Understanding the barriers people face to accessing basic swimming and water safety skills training can help us better understand how to address those barriers, decrease drowning rates, and save lives."*

Groups already at higher risk saw the greatest increases in drowning deaths: children 1-4 years old and adults 65 years and older of all races and ethnicities, as well as Black people of all ages.

Drowning is the number one cause of death for children 1-4 years old in the United States. Today's study shows that drowning rates were highest among this age group. By race and ethnicity, the highest drowning rates were among non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native and non-Hispanic Black persons.

Making swimming lessons accessible can save lives. **Almost 40 million adults (15.4%) in the United States do not know how to swim and over half (54.7%) have never taken a swimming lesson.** More than 1 in 3 (36.8%) Black adults reported they do not know how to swim compared to 15% of all adults. Additionally, 2 in 3 Black adults (63%) and 3 in 4 Hispanic adults (72%) reported never taking a swimming lesson. Research suggests the difference in self-reported swimming ability may be linked to differences in access to swimming lessons or other historical and social factors. For example, swimming lessons may be too expensive or not available in some communities, some may fear water, or others may feel uncomfortable wearing traditional swimwear.





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Only 28% of Hispanic people and 37% of Black people have taken swimming lessons.

“No one should have to lose a loved one to drowning. Improving access to effective prevention strategies, like basic swimming and water safety skills training, can reduce drowning risk,” said Tessa Clemens, Ph.D., health scientist in CDC’s Division of Injury Prevention and lead author of the report. “CDC provides expertise, support, and resources to increase drowning prevention efforts among communities and individuals at highest risk of drowning.”

The CDC *Vital Signs* findings can guide solutions at the local, state, and federal level to protect communities and prevent drowning tragedies. CDC continues to share information to increase understanding of the importance of accessible basic swimming and water safety skills training, a proven and effective way to prevent drowning. CDC also actively works with organizations across the country and around the world to conduct research to better understand barriers to basic swimming and water safety skills training and develop resources that protect everyone’s health and safety and decrease drowning risk. Policy makers, public health professionals, and communities can focus on building inclusive programs that best meet the needs of their communities. Some proven recommendations include:

- Building and revitalizing public pools to increase access to swimming for all people. All public pools should also be made accessible for people with disabilities.
- Promoting affordable swimming and water safety lessons available through participating partners, such as the American Red Cross, YMCA, and other community-based organizations.
  - [Swimming | Swim Classes & Training | Red Cross](#) [↗](#)
  - [Find Your Y | YMCA of the USA](#) [↗](#)
  - [Home - USSSA \(usswimschools.org\)](#) [↗](#)
  - <https://www.usaswimming.org/parents/learn-to-swim> [↗](#)
- Swimming and water safety skills training professionals reaching out to communities to better understand what barriers people face to participate in lessons, then building partnerships to connect with and engage people at highest risk of drowning.

- Hiring diverse aquatic staff that look like the communities they serve and adapting aquatic programs to meet specific community needs in order to decrease some reported barriers.
- Communities, public health professionals, and policy makers implementing the [U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan](#).  
 

Everyone can prevent drowning by:

- Learning basic swimming and water safety skills. Children who have had swimming lessons still need close and constant supervision when in or around water.
- Building fences that fully enclose and separate the pool from the house. Fences should be at least four feet high with self-closing and self-latching gates.
- Wearing a life jacket while boating for people of all ages and swimming abilities.
- Not drinking alcohol before or during swimming, boating, or other water activities. Alcohol impairs judgment, balance, and coordination. Do not drink alcohol while supervising children.
- Learning CPR skills. Performing CPR could save someone's life in the time it takes for paramedics to arrive.

For more information about this report, go to [www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns](http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns).

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Last Reviewed: May 14, 2024