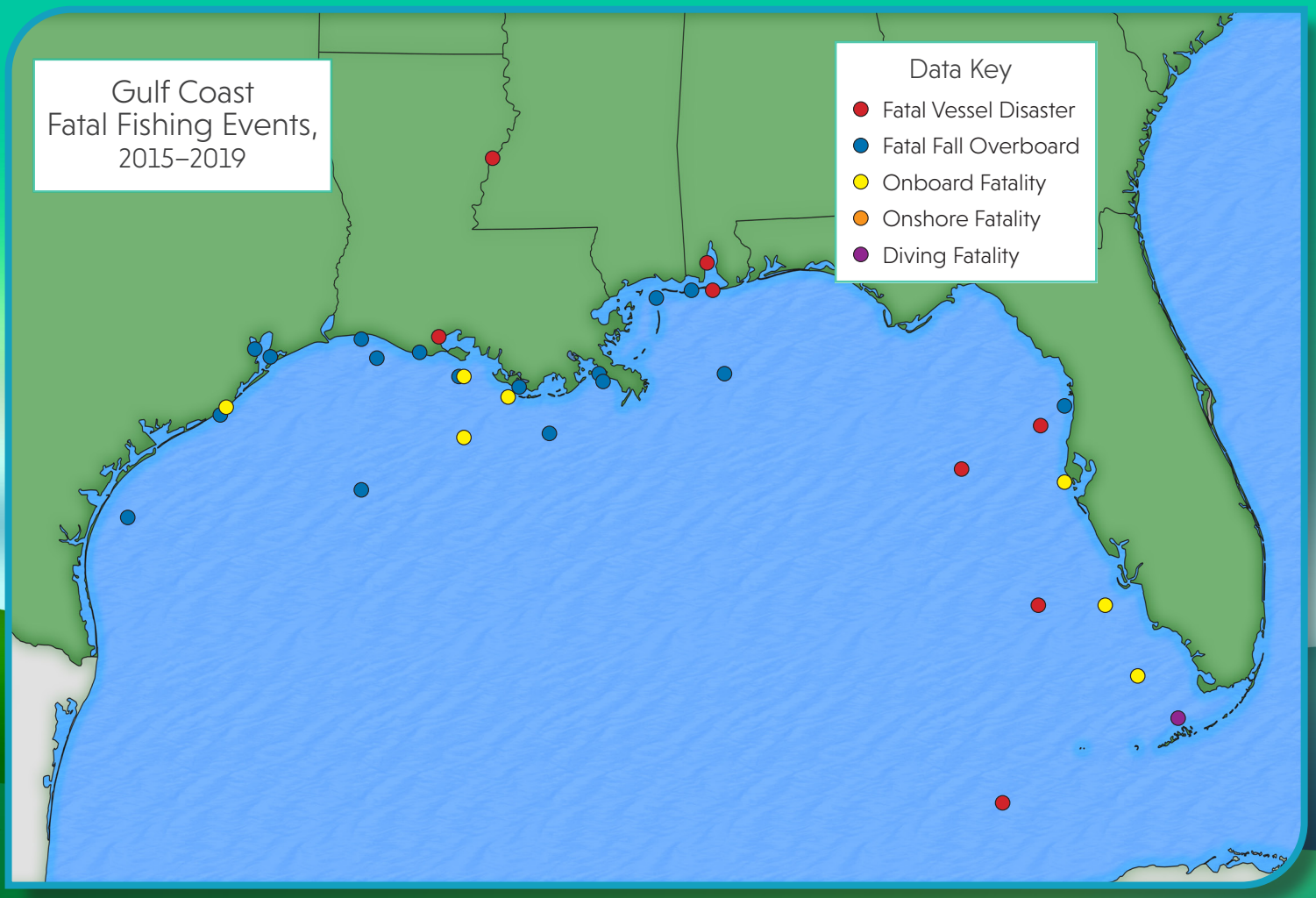
Commercial Fishing Fatality Summary

Gulf Coast Region



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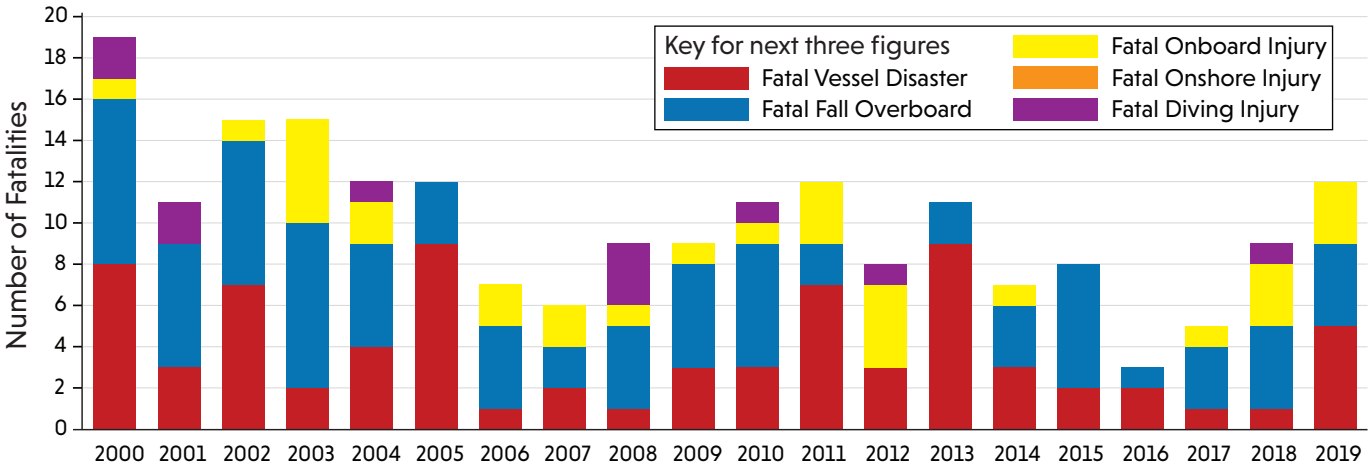
cdc.gov/niosh/fishing/data-research/regional-summaries/

About this Report

This report is a five-year update (2015-2019) on commercial fishing fatalities in the Gulf Coast. Two related reports were previously published on commercial fishing fatalities in the Gulf Coast during 2000-2009 and 2010-2014. They are available at cdc.gov/niosh/fishing/data-research/regional-summaries/commercial-fishing-safety.html and can be used for comparison with this current report. This updated report is one in a set of four summarizing the most recent fatality and vessel disaster data for US fishing regions: Alaska, West Coast, East Coast, and the Gulf Coast.

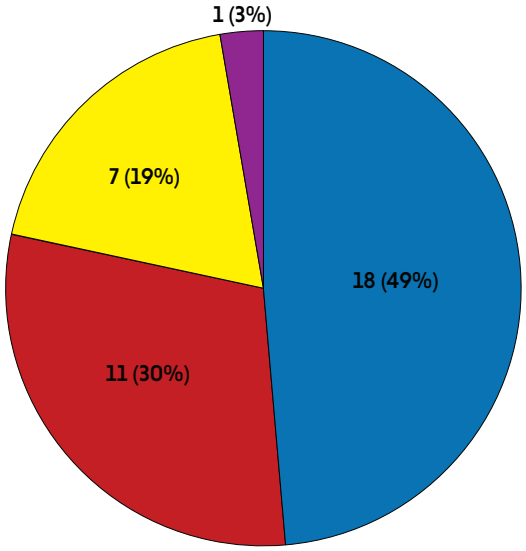
Overview of Commercial Fishing Fatalities

Figure 1. Commercial Fishing Fatalities by Year and Incident Type, Gulf Coast, 2000–2019 (201 Total)[1]



During the 20-year period 2000–2019, 201 deaths occurred in Gulf Coast fisheries, averaging about 10 fatalities annually (*Figure 1*). For the most recent five-year period (2015–2019), 37 commercial fishing fatalities were recorded, averaging about seven fatalities annually. This is a decrease over the preceding five-year period (2010-2014) (49 fatalities). There was also a significant decrease in the number of fatalities over the full 20 year period (2000-2019).

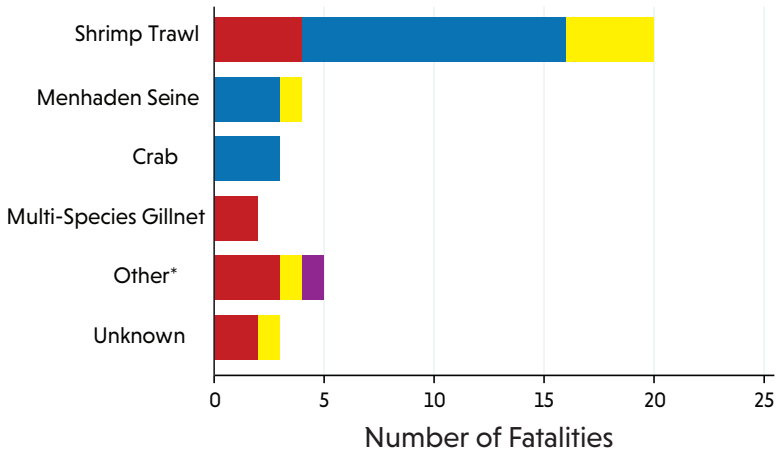
Figure 2. Commercial Fishing Fatalities by Incident Type, Gulf Coast, 2015–2019 (37 Total)[1]



Drowning following a fall overboard was the leading cause of death with 18 fatalities (49%) (*Figure 2*). Eight fatal vessel disasters resulted in the deaths of 11 crewmembers, accounting for 30% of all deaths during 2015–2019. Vessel disasters include sinkings or other events that force crews to abandon ship.

During the five-year period preceding this report (2010–2014), vessel disasters accounted for 51% of fatalities among crewmembers in the Gulf Coast, with falls overboard contributing to 27%. In the five-year period of this report (2015-2019), the proportion of fatalities due to vessel disasters decreased to 30% while fatal falls overboard increased to 49%. Onboard and diving fatalities remained about the same.

Figure 3. Commercial Fishing Fatalities by Fleet, Gulf Coast, 2015–2019 (37 Total)[1]



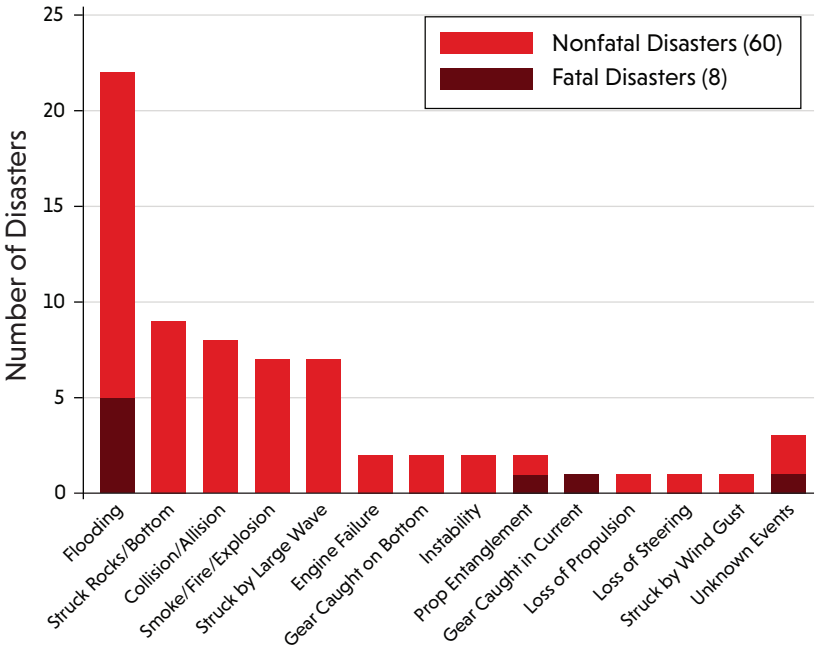
*Other fleets are those that had a single fatality during 2015-2019: Shrimp Skimming, Snapper/Grouper Longline, Snapper/Grouper Jig, Multi-Species Longline, Lobster Diving.

Four Gulf Coast fleets had at least two fatalities during 2015-2019 (*Figure 3*). The shrimp trawl fleet lost 20 crewmembers, with 12 deaths due to falls overboard.

The menhaden seine and crab fleets experienced the second highest number of fatalities with four and three deaths respectively, stemming mostly from falls overboard. Five other fleets had single fatalities during the five-year period.

Vessel Disasters

Figure 4. Causes of Vessel Disasters, Gulf Coast, 2015–2019 (68 Disasters Total; 60 Nonfatal, 8 Fatal)[1]

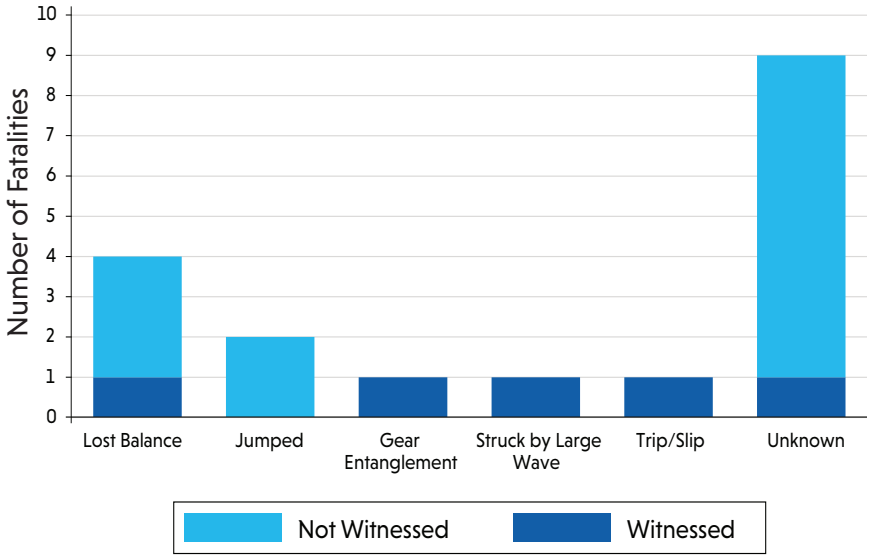


Vessel disasters are extremely hazardous due to the risk of immersion and drowning. Vessel disasters resulted in the second leading cause of fatalities during 2015–2019. A total of 68 vessel disasters occurred in Gulf Coast waters during this period (*Figure 4*), forcing 175 crewmembers to abandon ship and face serious risk of immersion and death. While 94% of crewmembers involved in vessel disasters survived, eight disasters resulted in 11 fatalities.

The leading cause of vessel disasters was flooding, with 22 vessel disasters, five of which resulted in six fatalities. Two of these disasters involved down-flooding in severe weather conditions. In most cases, initial flooding originated below the water line from damage to the hull and through-hull fittings. When flooding or other emergencies occur, don personal flotation devices (PFDs), and contact the Coast Guard early for assistance in case the situation worsens.

Falls Overboard

Figure 5. Causes of Fatal Falls Overboard, Gulf Coast, 2015–2019 (18 Total)[1]



During 2015–2019, 18 crewmembers died from drowning after falling overboard, which was the leading cause of death contributing to 49% of fatalities in the Gulf Coast (*Figure 5*). Most of the falls overboard were not witnessed by other crewmembers (13, 72%), and none of the crewmembers were wearing PFDs or man-overboard alarms when they drowned. Without an alarm to alert other crewmembers and a PFD to provide flotation, swimming failure and drowning occurred before their crewmates were able to rescue them from the water.

Drowning after falling overboard or off a dock remain persistent yet preventable problems in the industry. All crewmembers should wear a PFD anytime they are working around water, such as working on deck, dockside, and when boarding and disembarking a vessel. A variety of PFD styles that are comfortable and do not snag are available for crewmembers.

You Can Survive a Fall Overboard!

The number one thing you can do to survive a fall overboard is float. Even in warm water, a PFD buys your crew time to find you and get you back over the rail.

Other Hazards

Onboard

During 2015–2019, seven crewmembers died from traumatic injuries sustained onboard fishing vessels, contributing to 19% of fatalities in the Gulf Coast. These onboard fatalities resulted from two deck winch entanglements, two drug overdoses, one struck by falling equipment, one heat stroke, and one homicide.

Diving

During 2015–2019, one crewmember died from traumatic injuries sustained while dive harvesting lobsters, contributing to 3% of fatalities in the Gulf Coast.

A commercial shrimp boat on the Florida coast.
Image credit: Jason Cordell - iStock/ Getty Images Plus

Safety Solutions

Vessel Disasters

- **Take a marine safety class at least every five years.** Learning how to use basic lifesaving equipment like immersion suits, life rafts, EPIRBs*, and fire extinguishers improves chances of survival in an emergency.
- **Conduct monthly drills for abandon ship, fire, and flooding.** Drills reinforce the practical knowledge and skills learned in safety training.
- **Ensure watertight integrity of the vessel.** Inspect and maintain the hull and through-hull penetrations regularly. Maintain and test high water alarms and pumps before each trip. Check that doors and hatches are closed in rough seas.
- **Maintain proper watch.** Create fatigue management policies and use watch alarms to prevent groundings and collisions.
- **Take a vessel stability class and adhere to stability instructions.** Vessel stability training is beneficial for all crewmembers. Consult a naval architect periodically to review safe loading limits of the vessel. Always load vessels in compliance with their stability instructions.
- **Avoid crossing river bars during hazardous conditions.** If a bar crossing is unavoidable, it is important that all crewmembers don PFDs or immersion suits, and the Coast Guard should be contacted for assistance.

Falls Overboard

- **Wear a PFD on deck and in skiffs.** PFDs keep crewmembers afloat and give the crew time for rescue, even in cold water.
- **Use a man-overboard alarm system.** Unwitnessed falls overboard delay recovery time and reduce survival. A man-overboard alarm will alert others that a fall overboard occurred, assisting in rapid search and rescue.
- **Add effective recovery devices and re-boarding ladders.** A rescue sling or similar device is more effective than a life ring for bringing a crewmember back on the vessel. If you fish alone, use an engine kill switch and make a plan to re-board your vessel without help.
- **Conduct man-overboard drills monthly.** Practice man-overboard recovery procedures regularly to ensure all crewmembers are prepared to respond to a fall overboard.

Onboard Fatalities

- **Carry an opioid overdose reversal kit onboard.** Overdose reversal medicine is highly effective, inexpensive, and available without a prescription. Developing a substance-free policy on the vessel may also help reduce drug-and alcohol-related deaths.
- **Conduct hazard assessments on the vessel.** A hazard assessment helps identify potentially dangerous tasks and decreases the risk of injuries by correcting the hazards.
- **Take a Mental Health First Aid class.** Mental health first aid provides the skills needed to respond to mental health emergencies. If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text 988 to speak with a trained crisis counselor.

Diving Fatalities

- **Be prepared for a dive emergency.** Complete dive training and certification. Carry a bailout bottle while diving. Dive with an experienced, alert tender who is trained in diving first aid.

Onshore Fatalities

- **Wear a PFD when working around water.** At-the-dock drownings typically occur when the individual is alone. Wearing a PFD improves survival by keeping you afloat.
- **Avoid excessive drinking.** Alcohol can impair balance and coordination, increasing the risk of a fall and impeding self-rescue.

*Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon

[1]The data presented in this report come from the NIOSH Commercial Fishing Incident Database

NIOSH [2025]. Commercial Fishing Fatality Summary – Gulf Coast Region 2015-2019. By Lucas D, Teske T, Kloczko D. U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, DHHS (NIOSH) Publication No. 2025-115

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