



Drowning Prevention Day

July 25th was marked as Drowning Prevention Day by the UN General Assembly in 2021 to bring attention to a plight that is ultimately preventable. Lifesaving South Africa (LSA) drowning prevention director Mziwoxolo Mayedwa reports that about 1 500 people, mostly youth, drown every year in this country — an average of four individuals per day.¹ This number excludes those who survive but are incapacitated. Yet just one South African in seven knows how to swim. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), drowning is regarded as the third leading cause of unintentional injury worldwide, accounting for 7% of all injury-related deaths. Drowning is the second leading cause of accidental death in South Africa.

Drowning is a serious public health concern internationally. However, low-and-middle-income countries carry 90% of the global drowning burden – research found that there was an average drowning rate of 2.54 per 100 000 of the population for the period 2016 to 2021. In South Africa, KwaZulu-Natal province had the highest incidence of drowning. More males drown in South Africa than females and, alarmingly, the 0–4yr age group has the highest prevalence of drowning among all the age categories.² “This is a huge concern. What we are seeing is that one child drowns every day, under the age of 4 years old – and within 20m of their home.”³ According to LSA, statistics show that drowning was the second-largest cause of unnatural deaths in children under five years old, after road accidents.⁴ This mirrored the age demographic as reported in the World Health Organisation’s global drowning report in 2014.

Jill Fortuin, director of drowning prevention at the National Sea Rescue Institute (NSRI), notes that the death toll is rooted in historical inequalities. Most fatalities are Black South Africans. Under apartheid segregation, swimming pools and holiday beaches were limited to the white minority, providing little incentive for the majority to learn how to swim. Three decades after the advent of democracy, stark inequalities remain, with limited infrastructure and opportunities.

Both the NSRI and LSA emphasise that prevention is paramount. To help prevent drowning the NSRI has deployed 1 350 volunteer lifeguards across the country’s beaches, and installed 1 500 bright pink buoys on various water bodies to help rescuers aid people in distress. Since they launched their water-safety education programme in 2006, approximately 3 million people, 90% of whom are children, have been taught how to be safer around water and how to help a friend in trouble without endangering themselves.⁵

LSA President Dhaya Sewduth has called on all people “to do just one thing or do just one more thing” to reduce drownings. He explained that this could involve “home-owners ensuring their pools are fenced off or properly covered; that toddlers do not have unmonitored access to buckets and tubs of water; or that teachers taking classes on outings to the sea contact a beach manager to ensure they are directed to safe bathing areas under expert supervision”.⁶ He continued that “in water-scarce regions of our communities, [...] storing water in all manner of vessels puts young children at risk of falling head-first into containers and drowning... Climate change and the increased incidence of flooding have also exposed the lack of risk mitigation actions by communities and authorities”.⁷

Drowning is preventable and innovative programmes such as those of the NSRI and LSA are ground-breaking, effective and, with public support, can be further extended.

The links below provide further information on this topic.

<https://ewn.co.za/topic/drowning-incidents>

<https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2023-07-24-lifesaving-sa-plea-prevent-drowning-second-biggest-killer-of-young-children/>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9690020/>

<https://www.iol.co.za/capeargus/news/sa-in-midst-of-drowning-epidemic-as-new-stats-show-1-500-people-drown-every-year-e74332b9-37be-4db7-99c2-9d1eab625eee>

<https://www.voanews.com/a/south-africa-battles-drownings-with-survival-pools-/6937396.html>

Lois Law

Project Co-ordinator

lois@cpl.org.za

¹ <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2023-07-24-lifesaving-sa-plea-prevent-drowning-second-biggest-killer-of-young-children/>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9690020/>

³ <https://www.iol.co.za/capeargus/news/sa-in-midst-of-drowning-epidemic-as-new-stats-show-1-500-people-drown-every-year-e74332b9-37be-4db7-99c2-9d1eab625eee>

⁴ <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2023-07-24-lifesaving-sa-plea-prevent-drowning-second-biggest-killer-of-young-children/>

⁵ <https://www.nsri.org.za/water-safety/>

⁶ <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2023-07-24-lifesaving-sa-plea-prevent-drowning-second-biggest-killer-of-young-children/>

⁷ <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2023-07-24-lifesaving-sa-plea-prevent-drowning-second-biggest-killer-of-young-children/>