

VID Team



Drowning... a leading cause of *unintentional injury* death.

Rationale

The latest WHO Global Health Estimates indicate that almost 39 000 people lost their lives due to drowning in 2019 in the Region. Over 30 000 (77%) of these deaths occurred among those aged under 15 years. Drowning prevention interventions range from community-based solutions, such as supervised day care for pre-school children and barriers controlling access to water, to effective national policies and legislation around water safety, including setting and enforcing boating, shipping and ferry regulations. Much more needs to be done to prevent drowning, and achieving commitments made under the Sustainable Development Goals will not be possible without addressing drowning prevention.

Drowning is the process of experiencing respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in liquid; outcomes are classified as death, morbidity and no morbidity.

Key messages

- Drowning was the third leading cause of unintentional injury death in 2019, accounting for 5% of all injury-related deaths.
- Drowning is one of the top 10 causes of death for people aged 0–14 years in many countries.
- There were an estimated 39 000 annual drowning deaths in 2019.
- Just over 50% of these deaths occurred among those aged under 5 years.
- Two thirds of people who drown are men (62%).
- Global estimates may significantly underestimate the actual public health problem posed by drowning.
- Children, males and individuals with increased access to water are most at risk of drowning

Scope of the problem

In 2019, an estimated 39 000 people died from drowning, making drowning a major public health problem in the African Region. In 2019, injuries accounted for almost 10% of total global mortality. Drowning is the third leading cause of unintentional injury death, accounting for 5% of all injury-related deaths.

Deaths

The WHO African Region had the second highest drowning death rate – crude death rate (CDR) - (3.6 per 100 000) after the WHO Western Pacific Region (3.8 per 100 000). Globally and in regions, crude death rates have declined since 2000, from 5.1 to 3.6 (per 100 000) in the African Region in 2019.

There is a wide range of uncertainty around the estimate of global drowning deaths. Official data categorization methods for drowning exclude intentional drowning deaths (suicide or homicide) and drowning deaths caused by flood disasters and water transport incidents, resulting in a significant underrepresentation of drowning deaths. Furthermore, non-fatal drowning statistics in many countries are either not readily available or unreliable.

- The number of people drowned (per 100 000 population) in the Region, although high, began to decline from about 5.09 in 2005 to about 3.56 in 2019, a reduction of approximately 30% over the period 2000–2019.
- Drowning was the third leading cause of unintentional injury death in the African Region in 2019, accounting for 7% of unintentional injuries and 5% of all injury-related deaths.

Figure 1: Crude death rates for drowning in the WHO African Region (WHO Global Health Estimates, 2019)

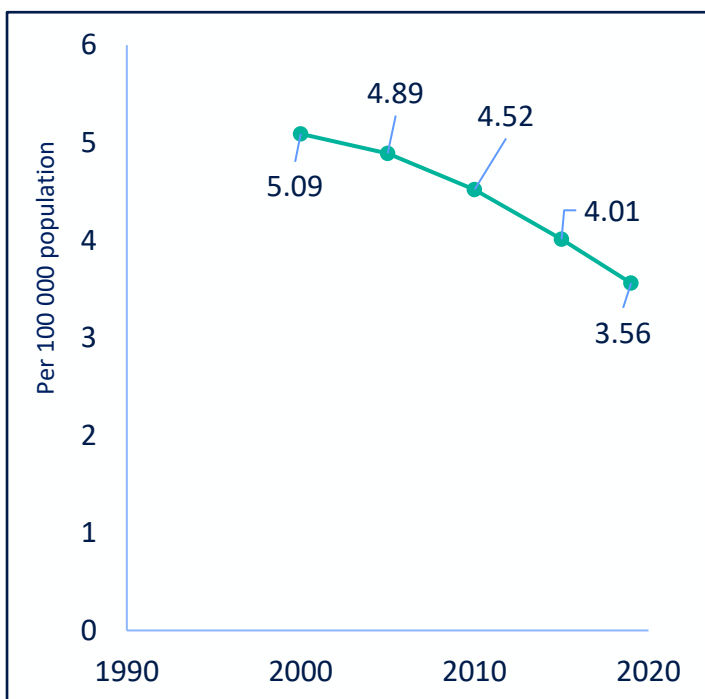


Figure 2: Causes of unintentional injury deaths in the WHO African Region (source: WHO Global Health Estimates, 2019)

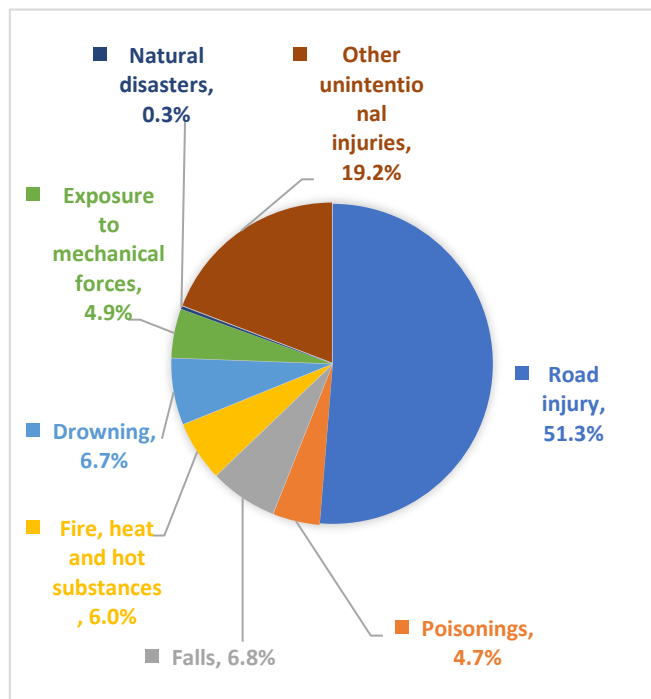
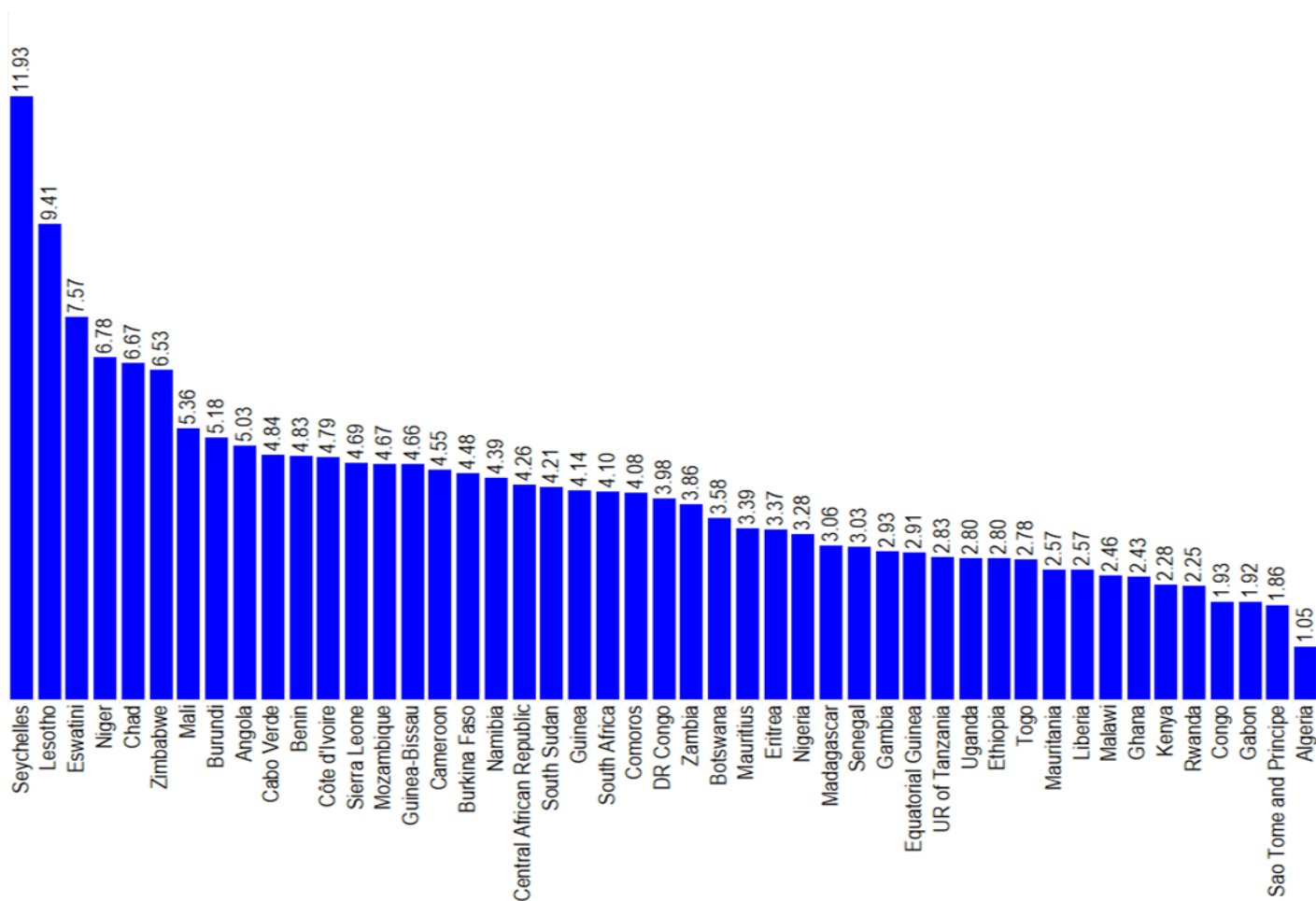


Figure 3: Drowning death rates in the WHO African Region (WHO Global Health Estimates, 2019)



- In 2019, in the WHO African Region, Seychelles had the highest mortality rate (11.93), followed by Lesotho (9.41) and Eswatini (7.57). Algeria (1.05), Sao Tome and Principe (1.86), Gabon (1.92) and Congo (1.93) had the lowest death rates.

**World
Drowning
Prevention
Day 25 July**

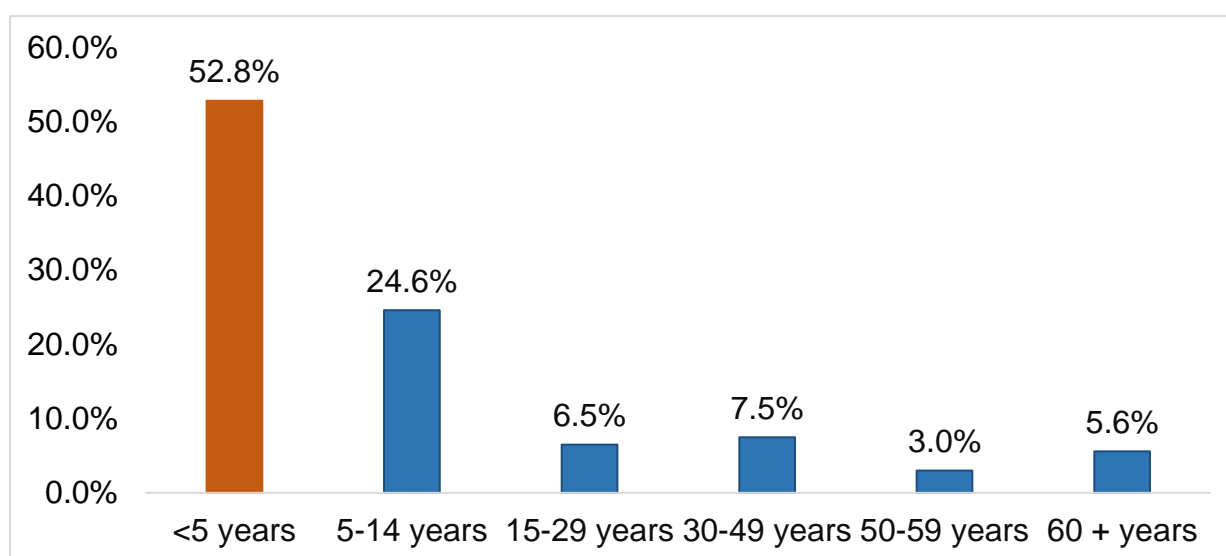
Anyone can drown,
no one should.

Risk factors

Age

Age is one of the major risk factors for drowning. This relationship is often associated with a lapse in supervision. In the Region, the highest drowning rates are among children under 5 years of age (52.8%), followed by children aged 5–14 years (24.6%).

Figure 4: Age distribution of drowning deaths in the WHO African Region (WHO Global Health Estimates, 2019)



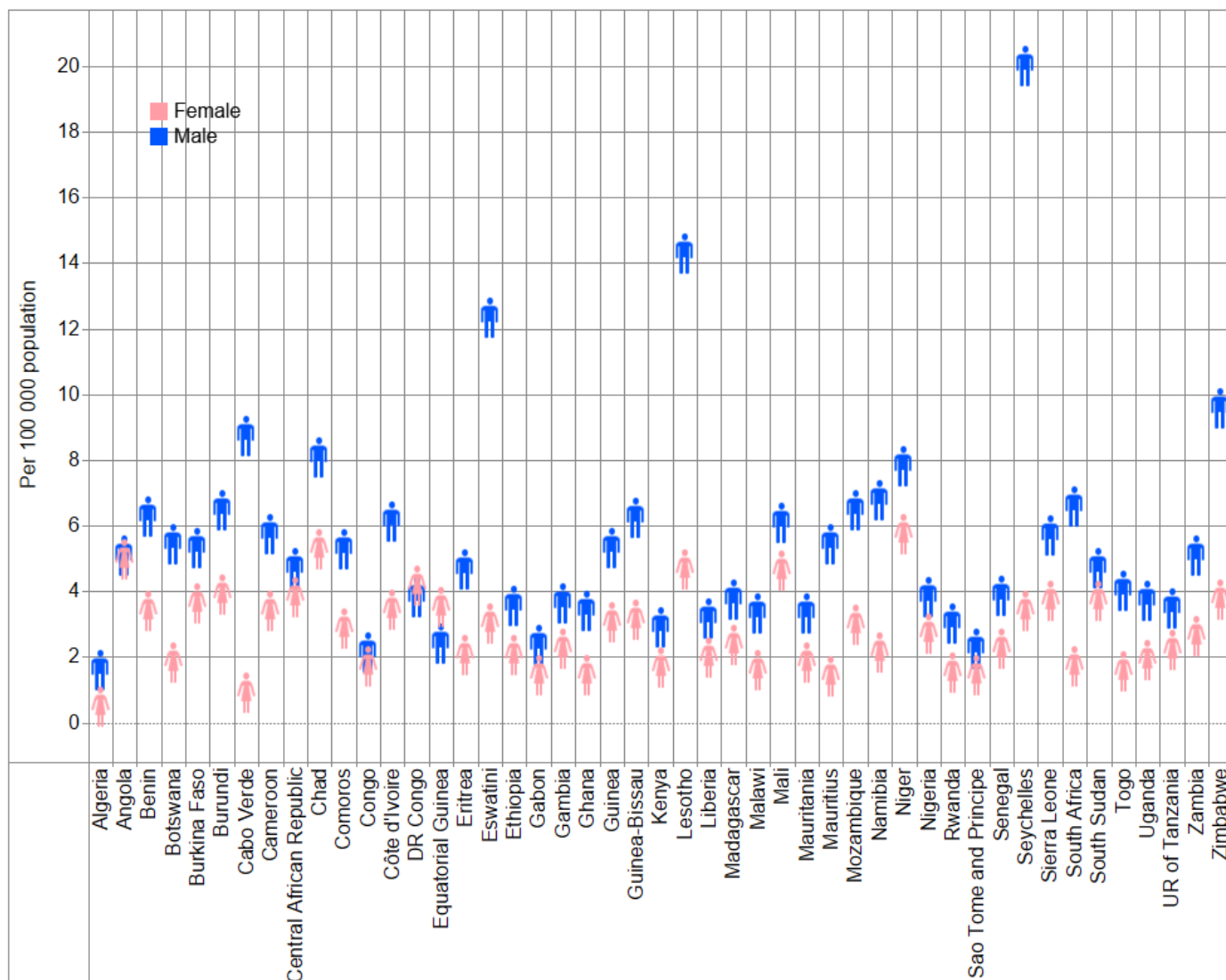
WHO estimates (2019) for drowning in the Region are particularly revealing:

- Drowning is one of the top 15 causes of death for people aged 5–14 years, representing 2% of total deaths in this age group, the highest percentage across all age groups.
- Drowning is the second leading cause of unintentional injury death in children aged 5–14 years.
- Drowning accounted for 77.4% of all deaths in children aged 0–14 years.

Gender

Males are especially at risk of drowning, with almost twice the overall mortality rate of females. Studies suggest that the higher drowning rates among males are due to increased exposure to water and riskier behaviour such as swimming alone, drinking alcohol before swimming alone and boating.

Figure 5: Drowning death rates in the WHO African Region (WHO Global Health Estimates, 2019)



- In 2019, the number of men who died by drowning (per 100 000) was higher than that of women across the Region, with strong dispersions observed in Cabo Verde, Eswatini, Lesotho and especially Seychelles (20 for men and 3.4 for women); except for Angola (5.1 for men and 5 for women) and Congo, where the death rate for men was almost equal to the rate for women.
- On the other hand, in DR Congo (3.8 men and 4.2 women) and in Equatorial Guinea (2.4 men and 3.5 women), the number of women who died by drowning was higher than that of men.

Access to water

Increased access to water is another risk factor for drowning. Individuals with occupations such as commercial fishing or subsistence fishing using small boats in low-income countries are more prone to drowning. Children who live near open water sources, such as ditches, ponds, irrigation channels or pools, are especially at risk.



Flood disasters

In some regions of the world, drowning accounts for 75% of deaths in flood disasters. Flood disasters are becoming both more frequent and more severe, and this trend is expected to continue due to climate change. Drowning risks increase with floods, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where people live in flood-prone areas and the ability to warn, evacuate, or protect communities from floods is weak or only just developing.

Travelling on water

Daily commuting and journeys made by migrants or asylum seekers often take place on overcrowded and unsafe vessels that lack safety equipment or are operated by personnel not trained to deal with transport incidents or navigation. Personnel under the influence of alcohol or drugs are also a risk.



Other risk factors

Other factors associated with an increased risk of drowning include:

- lower socioeconomic status, being a member of an ethnic minority, lack of higher education, and rural populations (which all tend to be associated, although this association can vary across countries).
- infants left unsupervised or alone with another child around water.
- alcohol use in or around water.
- medical conditions, such as epilepsy; and
- tourists unfamiliar with local water risks and features.



RISK FACTORS

YOUNG CHILDREN

The highest drowning rates are among children aged 1-4 years



FLOOD DISASTERS

Extreme rain fall, storm surges, tsunamis or cyclones



TRANSPORT ON WATER

Especially on overcrowded or poorly maintained vessels



Prevention







There are many actions to prevent drowning. Installing barriers (for example, covering wells, using doorway barriers and playpens, fencing swimming pools, etc.) to control access to water hazards, or removing water hazards entirely greatly reduces water hazard exposure and risk.

Community-based, supervised childcare for pre-school children can reduce drowning risk and has other proven health benefits. Teaching school-age children basic swimming, water safety and safe rescue skills is another approach. But these efforts must be undertaken with an emphasis on safety, and an overall risk management system that includes safety-tested curricula, a safe training area, screening and student selection, and student-instructor ratios established for safety.

Effective policies and legislation are also important for drowning prevention. Setting and enforcing safe boating, shipping and ferry regulations is an important part of improving safety on the water and preventing drowning. Building resilience to flooding and managing flood risks through better disaster preparedness planning, land use planning, and early warning systems can prevent drowning during flood disasters.

Developing a national water safety strategy can raise awareness about water safety, build consensus around solutions, provide strategic direction and a framework to guide multisectoral action, and allow for monitoring and evaluation of efforts.

6 KEY DROWNING PREVENTION INTERVENTIONS

<p>Provide safe places for pre-school children</p> 	<p>Install barriers controlling access to water</p> 	<p>Teach school-age children swimming and water skills</p> 	<p>Build resilience and manage flood risks</p> 	<p>Train bystanders in safe rescue and resuscitation</p> 	<p>Set and enforce safe boating, shipping and ferry regulations</p> 
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WHO response

WHO released the Global report on drowning in November 2014. This was the first time WHO had developed a report dedicated exclusively to drowning. The report points out that drowning has been highly overlooked to date, and that a great deal more should be done by governments and the research and policy communities to prioritize drowning prevention and its integration with other public health agendas.

The Global report on drowning provides recommendations to governments on how to tailor and implement effective drowning prevention programmes in their settings; improve data about drowning; and develop national water safety plans. The report also points out the multisectoral nature of drowning and calls for greater coordination and collaboration among UN agencies, governments, key NGOs and academic institutions to prevent drowning.

In May 2017, WHO released Preventing drowning: an implementation guide. The publication builds on the Global report on drowning and provides concrete guidance for drowning prevention practitioners on how to implement drowning prevention interventions.

Drowning prevention has gained accrued political attention as a public health issue affecting children and the poorest communities disproportionately. UN General Assembly Resolution 75/273 (2021) recognized the need to strengthen efforts to address drowning through a multisectoral approach and declared 25 July as World Drowning Prevention Day.

The World Health Assembly adopted resolution 76.18 (2023) on “Accelerating action on global drowning prevention”, which urges Member States to assess the burden of drowning and to develop and implement national multisectoral drowning prevention programmes, with a focus on community. The resolution also requests Member States to promote drowning prevention through community engagement and public awareness and capacity-building with the technical support of WHO and a network of partners.

WHO is currently coordinating the first ever global report on drowning prevention as requested by the World Health Assembly.

References

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Sources

Data on Drowning come from World Health Organization: WHO Global Health Estimates and [integrated African Health Observatory](#)

Production of the infographic was supported by the Integrated African Health Observatory.

Photography: <https://photos.hq.who.int/>, <https://photos.afro.who.int/>

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