

Swim program cutbacks due to lifeguard shortage comes amid continuing racial disparities in drowning deaths among children

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The shutdown of NYC public swim programs due to a lifeguard shortage is threatening to reduce access for families who don't have access to private lessons — and worsen longstanding disparities in swimming ability and water safety.

Patrice Bryson, 41, of Hamilton Heights, had wanted her 13-year-old daughter to learn to swim for a while, so that she'd be safer on outings to pools and beaches. She thought this summer was time to take the plunge. But when Bryson looked online to register her, she saw the programs had been canceled.

"I've always wanted her to learn how to swim. So now I have to struggle to find another alternative for her to do," Bryson said. "... It's hard when you're a parent that really has a budget to try to keep their kids occupied."

The lifeguard shortage has been disrupting swim programming for the city's 53 outdoor public pools since the pandemic began. The Parks Department's ability to hire and train enough lifeguards has stalled, according to the department. They have hired just 529 of 1,500 lifeguards needed as of Tuesday, according to Meghan Lalor, Parks Department spokesperson.



The lifeguard shortage has been disrupting swim programming for the city's 53 outdoor public pools since the pandemic began. (Shutterstock)

The shortage, in part fueled by a lack of training opportunities during the pandemic, has forced the department to cut back on programming, which includes Learn to Swim and lap swim programs that usually serve around 20,000 children every summer.

"We are disappointed not to be able to offer swimming lessons this summer, but ultimately we have to move forward with the safest and most equitable option, providing open swim to all," Lalor said. "We look forward to once again providing indoor Learn to Swim lessons this fall, as we did last year."

The impact of those cutbacks isn't just about not having access to water in the summer. It could slow efforts to prevent drowning deaths among children of color.

While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports drowning death rates have dropped — by 32 percent in the past decade — enduring racial disparities in drowning deaths have not. Black Americans are 1.5 times more likely to drown than white Americans, according to a 2021 [report](#).

The disparity is starker for youngsters: Black children drown about three times more than white children, [according](#) to the CDC.

“I think that we’re going to see real progress get halted or maybe even start to go backward as kids just don’t have access to those lessons in that formal setting,” Dr. Jennifer Pharr, a co-author of the USA Swimming research and associate professor at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, said.

“My concern, being a public health professor, is that we’re going to see drowning incidents start to go up again ... It’s heartbreaking, because it’s preventable. ... It just seems like this is really going to further disadvantage kids who are already disadvantaged because of either income or race and ethnicity.”



People enjoy a hot afternoon at the Astoria Pool in Queens on July 2, 2018 in New York City. (Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

Research by the USA Swimming Foundation showed swimming ability among children actually improved from 2010 to 2017 — but researchers say that the reduced pool availability and canceled lessons may threaten that progress.

In 2010, research by the U.S.A. Swimming Foundation found that 69 percent of Black children, 58 percent of Latino children and 42 percent of white children said they had little to no swimming ability. Those numbers have slowly improved in the last decade: In 2017, 64 percent of Black children, 45 percent of Latino children and 40 percent of white children said they had little to no swimming ability.

This isn't just an inequity issue; it's an issue of public safety, said Shawn Slevin, founder and executive director of the Swim Strong Foundation, which teaches New Yorkers water safety education and teaching swimming skills.

Several recent drownings in the area, including [two recent drownings](#) in the Rockaways and the [drowning](#) of two 13-year-old boys in Jamaica Bay earlier this month, show the grave risks of swimming disparities, according to Slevin. The three victims who have been identified in those incidents are children of color.

“It’s time to do something differently, to address the elephant in the room,” Slevin said. We just can’t keep doing the same things over and over again and expect a different outcome.”



New York City public swimming pool, the Sheltering Arms Pool in the Harlem, is pictured closed on May 27, 2020. (ANTHONY BEHAR/SIPA USA/via AP)

The city's canceled programming has also already started to overflow other organizations.

Plus Pool, a nonprofit that partners with the New York City Housing Authority to teach kids to swim, has started to see the ripple effects of the canceled programs. The nonprofit had to close registration early after a sharp influx of interest.

“We’re trying to really offer opportunities to kids who otherwise wouldn’t have the opportunity to learn and it was always some of the city’s holes that we were filling before, but now I think there’s such a huge gap,” Kara Meyer, managing director of Plus Pool, said.

The city’s pools also help thousands stay cool in the summer, said Adam Ganser, Executive Director of New Yorkers for Parks.

“It was really, really detrimental to the public health of the city’s residents, particularly those lower on the socio-economic ladder that don’t have air conditioning in their homes or apartments,” he said.



People cool off in a public swimming pool on June 29, 2021 in Astoria, Queens.
(Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

Gov. Hochul announced this week a pay raise for state lifeguards at state-operated swimming facilities in an attempt to resolve the shortage, but the city has not yet taken action.

Swimmer Esneider Huasipungo, 54, has been a near life-long frequenter of the city’s public pools. He loves the sport as a low-impact way to stay healthy and used to swim several days a week at Flushing Meadows Aquatic Center, an indoor pool now closed indefinitely for repairs. With the pool’s closure and limited hours elsewhere, he’s had to scramble to find other options, sometimes trekking an hour and 20 minutes on his bike to fit in just an hour of swim time.

“I think it’s one of the best things we have in New York City,” Huasipungo, who works as a culinary tour guide, said. “I mean, we have public libraries, we have the parks, we have the pools. ... But all of a sudden, it’s just this constant struggle, looking at pool schedules, looking at my work schedule, trying to figure out how to do it. And I’m really adamant about doing it because I want to keep my physical health, especially post-pandemic where being in good health has come to the forefront.”