



**Swimming Upstream:  
Investigating the Barriers to  
Aquatic Equity for Québec's  
English-speaking BIPOC  
Youth Communities**



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## CONTEXT

Swimming is a valuable life skill that can improve a person's health, safety, and overall well-being. Swimming as physical activity benefits both one's mental and physical health. The skill is also transferable to a wide range of other activities, such as canoeing and kayaking.

Water related activities are key to various aspects of Québec's economy, environment, and cultural heritage. A recent survey from the province's Ministry of Education and Higher Studies estimates that 3 783 000 people aged 6 to 74 swim at least once a year and more than a third (34.8%) swim regularly. <sup>[1]</sup> As a powerful force of nature, it must also be respected as the risk of drowning, while largely preventable, has not yet been eradicated with an estimated 1.3 deaths per 100,000 Canadians. <sup>[2, 3]</sup> In Québec, an average of 80 people lose their lives to water, primarily by drowning. <sup>[1]</sup>

Interventions (such as water safety training during swimming lessons) serving to reduce the number of drowning deaths among 0–4-year-olds (at highest risk) has led to a 51% reduction in Canada. <sup>[4]</sup> This highlights the value of sustained investment in public awareness, education, legislation, and water safety enforcement. In Québec in 2015, however, the decision was made to halt funding for drowning prevention "Swim to Survive" strategies in elementary schools, despite recommendations from coroners and pleas from the provincial Lifesaving Society. <sup>[5]</sup>

## SWIMMING PROGRAMS IN QUÉBEC

Today, Québec's Lifesaving Society offers funding or reimbursement for the "Swim to Survive" program amongst children in grades 3 to 6. In the latest report from the Ministry of Education (2020), the provincial government invested 2.5M\$ for the "Swim to Survive" (Lifesaving Society) and "Swim to Survive Plus" (Raphaël-Bernier Funds) programs. <sup>[6]</sup> However, the provincial Lifesaving Society does not have its own research programme, which may hamstring its ability to advocate for further investment with policymakers. Strong research programs around the risk of drowning are essential given the "Iceberg Phenomenon" of reported morbidity statistics, whereby only fatal or close to fatal drownings are reported. <sup>[7]</sup> The literature also refers to the lack of available information on accidents around water such as rescue statistics, and life-threatening submersion experiences, all of which further inhibit aquatic participation amongst youth downstream. <sup>[7]</sup>

## THE YOUNG ENGLISH-SPEAKING BIPOC COMMUNITY OF QUÉBEC

A gap exists in drowning statistics <sup>[7,8]</sup> and injury prevention strategies <sup>[9]</sup> amongst young Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities across Québec. These communities face increased risk of drowning and lower participation in swimming instruction. The following literature review aims to uncover the reasons (upstream) why these communities are less present in swimming lessons and water safety trainings (midstream), which in turn create the increased drowning risk for BIPOC communities (downstream).

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A recent review of the literature on the gap in drowning prevention <sup>[9]</sup> identified three sub-themes of the factors associated with drowning among high-risk populations (i.e., populations at elevated risk for drowning) <sup>[9]</sup>: 1) social determinants; 2) attitudes and behaviours; and 3) swimming ability and water safety knowledge. Social determinants include ethnicity or race, socioeconomic status (SES), cultural beliefs, and practices around water. Most of the older literature focuses on the lingering impact, myths, and stereotypes of colonisation, as well as the oppression of visible minorities, <sup>[11]</sup> further solidifying the perception of swimming as a rich, white sport involving fewer Black role models. <sup>[12]</sup> For example, there is a 60% chance of reduced participation in swimming just for being Black (adjusting for age, sex, and household income). <sup>[13]</sup> Interestingly, participants of lower SES reported lower rates of family members swimming or learning to swim, yet parental encouragement to swim was prominent amongst both high and low SES, <sup>[13]</sup> highlighting the modern social importance of swimming and water safety knowledge.

Another element investigated in the literature is the attitudes and behaviours of drowning victims. Mirroring the findings of the National Drowning report, <sup>[2]</sup> current research points towards reduced supervision, alcohol consumption, failing to wear a personal flotation device (PFD) while boating/fishing, low level of perception towards drowning risk, parental influence, and fear of water as significant factors linked to fatal and non-fatal drownings. <sup>[9]</sup> Parental fear of drowning, their own swimming ability, and encouragement towards learning to swim largely impacted children's participation in swimming activities. <sup>[9]</sup> These factors are of great importance because they integrate the parent's past experiences and social determinants into intergenerational barriers to swimming, further excluding individuals and communities from participation in aquatic leisure, recreation, and safety training. Their roles as fundamental gatekeepers and models of knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs is even more important amongst Black youth. <sup>[14]</sup> The latest edition of safety guidelines for groups of children in aquatic environments (a coalition between the Canadian Red Cross, The Lifesaving Society of Québec, the Camp Association of Québec, and the Ministry of Education) explores the different interventions and prevention strategies to maximise water safety for managers, companions, lifeguards and parents. <sup>[15]</sup> The guidelines frame swimming abilities as including safe water entry, treading water (swimming in place) for 30 seconds, and displacement for 25 metres. However, the guidelines assume that parents are comfortable with water and have the necessary swimming skills themselves to provide safety for their children. This undermines the inquiry that water safety instructors should keep in mind when working with communities that did not have previous instruction in swimming during their upbringing. Therefore, to enable a greater understanding of attitudes and behaviour concerning aquatic participation and perception of drowning risk, future interventions should require individualised inquiry and experiential learning to prepare the swimmer to recognize dangerous situations.

Standardised swimming programmes often fail to grasp or include in their curricula the different connections to water that various BIPOC communities possess. For example, the Indigenous Canadian legend of a female sea monster 'Qallupilluit' is told to children so as to prevent them from going near dangerous waters. <sup>[9]</sup> In many cultures, water holds significant importance as a food source and place of gathering. Contemporary swimming programs, however, are considered Eurocentric by the literature, which discourages participation, driving people to swim in more hazardous, unsuper-



vised, and often wild waterways. <sup>[9]</sup> The latter poses the greatest risk as 63% of drownings happen in lakes and rivers. <sup>[2]</sup> Hence, a careful study of the social practices and constraints that influence an individual to partake in swimming is critical to identifying gaps in water safety provision.

Additionally, swimming ability and water safety knowledge are well-established protective factors against drowning. <sup>[10]</sup> However, high-risk populations present little to no swimming abilities, as well as limited knowledge of water safety or drowning prevention strategies. <sup>[9]</sup> This is particularly dangerous later in adulthood and linked to low levels of perception towards risk, especially amongst males in wild waterways, which encompasses an important risk of drowning with reckless behaviour around water. <sup>[2,16]</sup> The literature surrounding swimming barriers amongst minority children has previously debunked motivational and personal appearance limitations, such as not being interested in swimming, or what the water can do to their appearance, but has consistently reported the importance of financial and accessibility restraints. <sup>[13]</sup> Additionally, theoretical models have been constructed to frame leisure constraints amongst people of colour, <sup>[17]</sup> and some general models of health promotion have been adopted in certain water safety interventions. <sup>[18,19,20]</sup> Nevertheless, there is a lack of implementation, guidance, or leadership surrounding these health promotion models in a manner that goes beyond theoretical justifications for pilot studies and debunked myths about participation from visible minorities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Québec's Lifesaving Society creates a research task force centred on drownings and spearheads demographic-based data so as to spotlight areas of improvement in water safety training across underserved communities.
- Future interventions and pilot programs that recognize the importance of culture adaptations and parent/guardian participation not only in water safety training, but also in experiential learning, so as to further appease cultural and parental barriers to childrens' swimming development.
- Further provincial investment in water safety and outreach strategies so as to include and attract young BIPOC community members to swim and prevent needless drownings.

## CONCLUSION

The downstream evidence is clear: young BIPOC community members are underserved in water safety instruction, which in turn decreases their participation and increases their drowning risk compared to the general Québec and Canadian population. This reflects the lack of current support and training for interventions upstream in water safety education for instructors with BIPOC groups. The research on the subject reveals, however, that avenues exist to circumvent the lack of exposure to safe swimming from a very young age by tackling social and cultural determinants to catch up on water safety and swimming ability skills. By targeting intergenerational and culturally appropriate barriers for BIPOC communities, interventions and further research could ensure a greater understanding of safe attitudes and behaviours, as well as preventing another person from losing their life to water.

## **NOTE ON THE CONTRIBUTOR**

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