

BBC NEWS**US & CANADA**

3 September 2010 Last updated at 02:41 ET

Why don't black Americans swim?

By Finlo Rohrer
BBC News, Washington

A month ago, six African-American teenagers drowned in a single incident in Louisiana, prompting soul-searching about why so many young black Americans can't swim.

When 15-year-old DeKendrix Warner accidentally stepped into deeper water while wading in the Red River in Shreveport, he panicked.

JaTavious Warner, 17, Takeitha Warner, 13, JaMarcus Warner, 14, Litrelle Stewart, 18, Latevin Stewart, 15, and LaDarius Stewart, 17, rushed to help him and each other.

None of them could swim. All six drowned. DeKendrix was rescued by a passer-by.

Maude Warner, mother of three of the victims, and the other adults present also couldn't swim.

The US has almost 3,500 accidental drownings every year, almost 10 a day.

But according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the fatal drowning rate of African-American children aged five-14 is three times that of white children.

A recent study sponsored by USA Swimming uncovered equally stark statistics.

Just under 70% of African-American children surveyed said they had no or low ability to swim. Low ability merely meant they were able to splash around in the shallow end. A further 12% said they could swim but had "taught themselves".

The study found 58% of Hispanic children had no or low swimming ability. For white children, the figure was only 42%.

"It is an epidemic that is almost going unnoticed," says Sue Anderson, director of programmes and services at USA Swimming.

The swimming body would like all children to be taught to swim.

Parents' responsibility

"We would like it to be like seatbelts and bicycle helmets," says Ms Anderson.

But the situation in the US can vary hugely even within a single state.

Unlike the UK, where learning to swim is enshrined in the national curriculum except in Scotland, the ultimate responsibility in the US often lies with parents.

"I would love to make it a rule like they have in the UK," says Cullen Jones, a gold medallist in the freestyle 100m relay in Beijing, and a spokesman for USA Swimming's Make a Splash campaign.

"It isn't a requirement, it isn't a priority in the US."

Jones's mother took him to swimming lessons after he nearly drowned at a theme park aged five. By eight he was swimming competitively.

The Make a Splash campaign is targeting all non-swimmers and their parents but there is a particular focus on ethnic minority families.

Fear factor

Many black parents are not teaching their children to swim.

Some might assume the fundamental reasons would be lack of money for swimming lessons or living in areas where there were no pools, but the reality is more complex.

"Fear of drowning or fear of injury was really the major variable," says Prof Carol Irwin, a sociologist from the University of Memphis, who led the study for USA Swimming.

Typically, those children who could not swim also had parents who could not swim.

"Parents who don't know how to swim are very likely to pass on not knowing how to swim to their children," says Ms Anderson.

In focus groups for the study, Prof Irwin said many black parents who could not swim evinced sentiments like: "My children are never going to learn to swim because I'm scared they would drown."

The parents' very fear of their children drowning was making that fate more likely.

The major reason behind the problem could lie in the era of segregation says Prof Jeff Wiltse, author of *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*.

"The history of discrimination... has contributed to the drowning and swimming rates," says Prof Wiltse.

In his work he identified two periods of a boom in swimming rates in the US - in the 1920s and 1930s when recreational swimming became popular and the 1950s and 1960s when the idea of swimming as a sport really took off.

The first boom was marked by the construction of about 2,000 new municipal pools across the nation.

"Black Americans were largely and systematically denied access to those pools," he notes.

"Swimming never became a part of African- American recreational culture."

In the northern US that segregation in pools ended in the 1940s and early 1950s, but many white swimmers responded by abandoning the municipal pools and heading off to private clubs in the suburbs where segregation continued to be enforced.

"Municipal pools became a low public priority," he notes.

After the race riots of the 1960s, many cities did start building pools in predominantly black areas, says Prof Wiltse, but there was still a problem. Many of the new pools were small - often only 20 by 40ft (six by 12m) and 3.5ft (1m) deep.

"They didn't really accommodate swimming. They attracted young kids who would stand in them and splash about. There really wasn't an effort to teach African-American children to swim in these pools."

Although there are many poor or working class white children who cannot swim for similar reasons, swimming has gained an image as a "white sport".

"It is [seen as] a country club sport that only very rich kids get to participate in. The swimming pool is [seen as] a very elitist thing to have in your backyard," says Prof Irwin.

Bishop Larry Brandon, of the Praise Temple Full Gospel Baptist Cathedral, knew the Warner family, and is now persuading other pastors and ministers to use their pulpits to promote swimming.

Shreveport has quickly established a new swimming programme in the victims names and there is a drive to challenge misconceptions about swimming.

As well as the fear factor, Prof Irwin's study found that appearance was also a reason for African-Americans avoiding swimming.

Black respondents, far more than white or Hispanic respondents, were sometimes concerned about the effect chlorinated water would have on their hair.

"African-American women, many of them if they go the beauty shop and get their hair fixed they are not going to swim," says Bishop Brandon.

Perhaps the most alarming thing is that the studies suggest that those who cannot swim - like the Warners and Stewarts - often spend time in pools and other swimming sites.

"Kids are going to be by the water, they love being by the water, and that's something that we really need to make a priority," says Jones.

"Here everybody knows how to drive a car. It should also be a rite of passage to learn how to swim."

Please add your comments using the form below.

I am a 57-year-old black woman who doesn't swim well enough to save myself and certainly not a frightened, struggling non-swimmer. My reasons for not having learned to swim as a child are the same as those listed in the article, i.e. segregated public pool, concerns about hair, a mother who didn't swim, fear. When my daughter was born, swimming was the first sport she learned. I was determined that she would not be like her mom. She was seven or eight years old when she learned why mommy couldn't join her in the deep end of the pool. Her incredulous response? "It's easy, mommy! I can teach you!" This is one of the fears parents must push through, for the sake of their babies.

Paula Penebaker, Milwaukee, WI, US

My wife and I cannot swim but all our kids can. We paid for their swimming lessons and it took less than three month for them to start diving and swimming in deep pools of water. We are glad we did that for the kids. Our next step is to take some swimming lessons too so that the whole family can enjoy thrills of swimming. We may save someone's life or our own lives. Yes, I am scared of water but that phobia can be overcome.

Abe Mbony, Washington, US

I am glad you pointed out that white kids also have less chance to swim. I have lived here 23 years and unless you live in an apartment complex with a pool or you have a lot of money for

your own pool, there are no public pools like we had in the UK. Memphis has maybe 10 pools that are only open in the summer and are mainly in urban areas, so are almost exclusively used by black children. Most white kids don't go to them but aren't part of a club either so also miss out on swimming. The City of Memphis has done a good job recently of helping kids to swim, and YMCA etc have lessons but there isn't anywhere you can just "drop in" any time or day like the old "baths" we used to have school lessons in in England

Alasdair Halleron, Memphis, Tennessee

It will not surprize you that in the water-rich Netherlands parents are well aware of the dangers of water, and its attractions for small children especially. Children learn to swim here from an early age. My own children were about the age of 4 to 5 years when they first started. They were rewarded in a ceremonies with a first and later a second swimming diploma.

JP Ward, Vlaardingen, the Netherlands

I am a black American and I know how to swim (back stroke, crawl, butterfly). At my school it was required for all children to know how to swim before they graduated from the 8th grade. Prof Wiltse may want to look into other reasons besides black people being denied access in the 1970s. It's 2010 now. I think the major problems are income and access issue. Most poor people can't afford the leisure of taking their kid to a pool let alone buy swimming lessons. And some places do not have public pools. Well they do, but you may not want to swim in them. It shouldn't come as a surprise that black people are afraid of drowning since many black Americans have witnessed or have been themselves almost a victim of drowning. I will agree that as a black woman hair can be an issue. We pay between \$150-\$300 for certain hairstyles, but that isn't a major issue because black women can pay that same price and get their hair braided and not have to worry about the consequences of chlorine. There are ways to get chlorine out of your hair. I think the major problem is that a lot of black parents can't swim so they don't teach their children. My husband (he is also a black American) and I both learned to swim as children so we taught our children to swim.

Adrienne Garr, Buffalo, NY, US

This phenomenon is not only African American. Believe it or not, we have the same problem in the Caribbean. Although we are surrounded by sea, many children of African descent in the

Caribbean just cannot swim. There is some initiative lately, especially in Antigua and Barbuda, but it is not ingrained in black culture.

Ernest Merrill, Antigua and Barbuda

Another lesson for everyone from this sad incident is that you should never attempt to rescue anyone from drowning unless you are fully and safely able to do so. One of the biggest problems facing those genuinely able to rescue someone is that there are often two or three other people in difficulty because they have tried to "rescue" the first person. They have then got to decide who they can save and who they can't. Often the original person is saved but those trying to help drown. Never make a bad situation worse.

Ian Boardman, London

I am an African American who did not learn how to swim due to racism and discrimination in my era. We must not lose our focus because in some areas, this type of behavior is still going on today where they don't want to build a public swimming pool down town because they do not want the black children there and they don't want to spend money to build a community swimming pool in the black neighborhood.

Cassandra Richards, Lake Wales, FL, US

I grew up in Dublin, Ireland in the 1950s and '60s and never learned to swim - no pools anywhere close by, no encouragement whatsoever. In the US for decades now, all my children swim - as does my American wife - but I am still a paddler in the shallow end. My attempts to take swimming lessons have been a disaster. I have no natural buoyancy, water flows into my ears and nose, I can't breathe and move my arms and legs at the same time, I am terrified of being in water that I can't stand up in. I can perfectly understand why someone, black or white, wouldn't or couldn't learn to swim. "You'll float - the water will keep you up - everyone floats - you won't drown" - all of these are simply not true to my experience. I really envy people who can swim, but I know that I am probably never going to be a swimmer, now that I am pushing towards the end of my sixth decade of life.

Denis Cotter, Middleburg, VA, US

I am African American and I learned to swim at an early age through involvement in a summer recreation program. My ex-husband learned in his teen years because early in his youth he almost drowned in a public pool. He and I taught our children to swim at ages four and five. We had moved into a residence that had a pool 4ft on one end that extended to 12ft with a diving board. We knew they would be in the water on their own no matter how hard we stayed on them about not doing so. Therefore, it was a priority to teach them to at least "tread water" and/or "dog paddle" before we unpacked our boxes! I live on the California coast and I think it should be mandatory that children with access to pools and beaches learn to swim.

Jennifer Wells, Oceanside, CA, US

I am African American and I come from a family of swimmers, with my brother swimming competitively in high school. I never thought about those that couldn't swim until I married my husband (also African American), who does not swim and was not encouraged to learn to do so. His mother was afraid he and his siblings would drown when they were younger. Now we have a son (who's five) who I am taking to lessons so that he will be able to swim and be comfortable around water. He loves it! I met several of the other mothers in the class who don't swim, are afraid of the water or don't want to mess up their hair and their children pick up on these emotions and don't do well.

Diann Carroll Joiner, Portage, IN, US

Growing up in Minnesota, like the description of the Netherlands, had major advantages over other states like Alabama. The land of 10,000 lakes, has even more swimming beaches. We learned early because of our proximity to water at all times. My daughter is four and already swims farther than her seven-year-old brother who grew up in the metro area. We moved from metro to country, so I think there are some geographical differences in this study. In Minnesota, black or white, most kids know how to swim. I even see a large population of the Somali immigrants learning to swim quickly upon arrival.

James Yuenger, Minneapolis, MN, US

I am a black American woman and to be honest I don't think that the issue of hair is an important one at all. There is no need to go out and spend \$150 on a hairstyle yet not know how to swim, especially when there are natural threats such as flooding and hurricanes that

could threaten our lives. I also don't think that being black or Hispanic or white has anything to do with it. People are putting too much emphasis on what colour or what race a person is and if this keeps happening then we will never be able to move on because everyone keeps referring to the past and segregating their own ethnic groups. It is a parent's responsibility to teach their child to swim and when that child turns into an adult and can't swim then it is their responsibility as an adult to learn - no more pathetic excuses!

Earnest, Texas, US

I suppose I am fortunate as are most people in the UK who went through the UK Schools system. Swimming was never a choice subject for anyone, it was taught and certificates and awards were given to every child as they reached each level. I will never be an Olympic Swimmer or even close to being in anyway competitive, but I did my personal survival certificate, and a life saving course. Yes I would be confident enough to help someone in difficulty, and so would most people in the UK.

Stewart, Keighley, West Yorkshire, UK

I remember when visiting Goa, India, most of the young white westerners were swimming in the warm sea, going well out of their depth, swimming out to rocks etc. It took a while to realise why the Indian tourists stayed sitting and splashing in the surf. It wasn't because of modesty. Many of them just couldn't swim. I'm probably naive, but being from the UK I see non-swimmers very much as the exception. My daughter often joins me in the big (50m) pool and although I hold her she's learning to go through the motions. She's just turned two.

Tim, Manchester, UK

I was a lifeguard at a public pool in my town, about an hour away from where the Red River drownings occurred, two summers ago and it's true. I watched as many moms would place their small children in the pool with life vest padded swimwear, water wings, and small inner tubes around their waists. Sometimes I wondered if the kids could even touch the water. The parents would seldom get in the water at all and would freak out if the slightest thing happened simply because they didn't know how to swim and were afraid to go near the water. The older kids were more daring. They would crawl along the wall to the deep end and hold on for their lives just to be by the "big kids". One day I had to do a reaching assist to a

teenage guy who's friend had pulled him off the edge jokingly and watched as he struggled to stay above the water. I could go on for hours, but my point is, as a former lifeguard, I wholeheartedly agree that this issue needs to be addressed. Many of the kids who go to pools, lakes, or rivers go because they have nothing else to do or their friends are going, and they often don't know how to swim. There are many places in this area where there are no lifeguards watching.

Kelli, Ruston, LA, US

In Zimbabwe, many children drown, especially in the rainy season. Boys herding cattle only splash in the river but are never formally taught how to swim in a strong current to cross a river, or in deep water. They are actually discouraged from swimming since they are likely to be killed by crocodiles and hippos. Those children who swim in the river do it behind their parents' back. In the cities, swimming is a rich man's sport. There are hardly any swimming pools in the townships. With so many rivers in criss-crossing the country, Zimbabwe has one of the highest drowning rates for children in southern Africa.

Chenjerai Hove, Zimbabwean living in Miami, FL, US

I'm absolutely shocked and saddened to learn about this, and this is coming from someone who finds little surprising. When forced to learn how to swim before I could pass Phy Ed in high school at the age of 13, I was quite reluctant originally, but very grateful immediately afterward. I thought all US high schools had this compulsory obligation, but now realise I may have been in a privileged situation. If this isn't compulsory, it needs to be universal. By coincidence, Radio 4 had a program on Hurricane Katrina, 5 years on. This story adds a whole new dimension to the casualty figures there and, in particular, why so many people stuck in the Superdome may not have sought alternative shelter.

Bruce, US expat now in Epsom, UK

I am a white male in America. My white mother never learned how to swim, but she loves the beach/pool. She will get in up to her waist or so to cool off, but she never learned to swim. Her hair was a big thing for her. However, when I was about five years old, my mother took me to the local YMCA and signed me up for swimming lessons, even though she couldn't really afford it. Why? Because she understood it was a life saving skill to have, whether I

enjoyed swimming or not. Now, I love to swim - I just don't get to do it much.

Sean, Virginia, US

It's interesting to note that swimming doesn't seem to be integrated into black American culture. I am a British-born Pakistani, and I fear the same can be said of Pakistani culture. The trend or the need or the infrastructure is just not in place for swimming or learning to swim to be a priority.

Sadia Yasin, Egypt

I agree with Ernest's comment above. It is a Caribbean and African problem too - I am in Barbados and many of the blacks on the island (including myself) like to be where our feet can touch the ground. While I can do most strokes, I have a fear of being really far out - this is something I have tried working on with many swimming classes but I haven't gotten there yet - I will not give up, I'm not yet 30 and I don't think you are ever too old to learn. I noted the same phenomena in West Africa when I was there earlier this year, all the people swimming in the ocean were the white tourists and visitors, the blacks stayed close to the shore, and one of my friends noted it is the same in East Africa - while the comments noted above issues such as segregation etc. I am really fascinated about this widespread trend across the globe amongst blacks. I jokingly tell my friends our fear of the ocean is ingrained in the "boat trip" our ancestors faced during the slave trade. I am not one to harp on slavery and its impacts but I honestly really wonder sometimes.

Liesl Harewood, Barbados

In India there is no rule or even a directive to ensure young school children learn the basics of swimming. Many children die annually from drowning cases, particularly during the monsoon rains when the rivers swell. India has two programmes for youth leadership known as the National Cadet Corps and the Scouts and Guides programme which teaches children to be prepared for any eventuality and mould one to be leaders. Sadly, swimming is not a major part of its curriculum.

Cosmos Sangma, Garo Hills, Meghalay, India

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