

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2021 Budget

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- **Recommendation:** That the government invest \$15M over five years to support the collection and analysis of non-fatal drowning data focused on groups at greatest risk of drowning, including: new Canadians; Indigenous peoples – First Nations, Inuit, and Métis; children 1 to 4 years of age; and, young adult males.

Drowning is a tragic preventable public health issue.

Drowning cost the Government of Canada and Canadians \$362 million in 2010. This includes direct costs of \$187 million⁴ (369 deaths, 247 hospitalizations, 1,251 emergency room visits, 37 permanent partial disabilities, 4 total disabilities); and, over \$175 million dollars in indirect costs⁴.

Drowning is the third leading cause of unintentional injury death worldwide. Drowning (i.e., *the process of experiencing respiratory impairment from submersion / immersion in liquid*)¹ has resulted in the death of more than 10,000 Canadians and more than 50,000 non-fatal drownings (i.e., *the process of respiratory impairment stopped before death*)² in the past 20 years. This translates to approximately 500 people fatally drowning in Canada each year, and more suffering a non-fatal drowning incident often resulting in long-term consequences. These morbidity and mortality burdens **have devastating effects on families, communities, and the economy.**³

Drowning mortality in Canada has declined over the past 20 years, as evidenced by **fatality data** collected by Lifesaving Society Canada and the Canadian Red Cross over two decades. Data also **indicates that drowning has not declined in all sectors and not in all regions.**

Drowning highlights existing inequities.

There remains a disproportionate burden among Canada's Indigenous peoples, new Canadians, rural/northern Canadians, children 1 to 4-years of age, and young adult males, for both intentional and unintentional water entries in various settings such as: the Canadian North, cold water, rural communities, supervised settings, and in situations involving water transport.^{3,5} There is currently no data available on non-fatal drownings in Canada.

Restarting the Canadian economy with public safety continuing to be top of mind now and in the future, as it recovers from the pandemic and moves forward to create a safer, more accepting, and cooperative society must include the removal of inequities.

Canada needs a multisectoral drowning prevention plan to facilitate drowning burden reduction. The Canadian Drowning Prevention Plan (Plan) needs effective implementation within communities at risk and outcome data that enables evaluation and learning. The Canadian Drowning Prevention Coalition (Coalition) creates recommendations and actions that aim to **reduce fatal and non-fatal drowning.** The Coalition will be a facilitator for action and impact. The Plan serves as the tool outlining the effort and expectations.

Background

In 2014, the World Health Organization released the *Global report on drowning: preventing a leading killer.*⁶ The goal of that report was to galvanize attention for the drowning issue by highlighting how preventable drowning is and how collaboration across sectors can save lives. The report includes 10 actions to prevent drowning. Two of these are especially relevant to the Coalition – *coordinate drowning prevention efforts with those of other sectors and agendas* (p.35); and, *develop a national water safety plan* (p.36). The report makes 4 recommendations. One of particular importance to the Coalition and Canada is – *all countries should aim to develop a national water safety plan* (p.43).

The Coalition was formed in response to the call to action from the WHO's report. Drowning is a multisectoral issue that requires collaboration among all stakeholders that shape drowning risk.

The Canadian Drowning Prevention Coalition provides national leadership, coordination, and action planning to reduce drowning in Canada. The Coalition's leadership, technical exchange, research interpretation, and prevention strategic planning ensures that the progress made to reduce drowning is evidence-based, effective and sustainable.⁵

To accomplish this task, the Coalition brings together many stakeholders in the Canadian drowning prevention effort, including government, NGO's, academics, industry, citizen engagement groups, media, and others to provide broad multi-sectoral input and leadership. Coalition participants are varied and diverse in mandates, missions, and goals; represent many geographic areas, populations, and service providers; and, bring varying perspectives and experiences to the Coalition.^{3,5}

The first edition of the Canadian Drowning Prevention Plan was presented at the World Conference on Drowning Prevention 2017 in Vancouver in October 2017. There were 806 participants from 60 nations. They heard about the multi-sectoral Canadian Drowning Prevention Coalition and the Plan as the Canadian response to the WHO Global Report on Drowning. They learned that the Plan is dynamic and will change as often as every six months to reflect the progress of data, actions, and outcomes. The 6th edition of the Plan was launched in May 2020.

This initiative represents a national collaborative effort that is innovative in terms of its multisectoral framework, public health perspective, and evidence-informed decision-making, which includes distilling and disseminating the best available evidence from research, practice and experience and using that evidence to inform and improve policy and action.³ Using this approach, knowledge regarding programs, best practices, and interventions will inform action steps to reduce **fatal and non-fatal** drowning in each key focus area with **an emphasis on eliminating drowning among those at greatest risk,** including:

New Canadians

People who are new to Canada are four times more likely to be unable to swim than those who were born in Canada.⁷ Risk of drowning was highest in recent immigrants who had lived in Canada for fewer than five years.⁸ Youth aged 11 to 14 who were new to Canada were five times more likely to be unable to swim than their Canadian born classmates. Despite this, 93% of new Canadians of this age indicated that they participate in activities in, on, or around water. Results suggested that risk is higher for new Canadians aged 11 to 14 who have lived in Canada for less than five years.^{9,10}

In 2017, Canada welcomed more than 86,000 permanent residents¹¹. That same year, the Government approved a multi-year plan to increase annual immigration levels to 340,000 by the year 2020¹². An increased number of new Canadians is likely to result in an increased number of fatal and non-fatal drownings over the coming years threatening new Canadians' health, the well-being of their families and communities, and increasing the strain on Canada's healthcare system.

Indigenous peoples – First Nations, Inuit, and Métis

Drowning in the Indigenous population has been reported to be **6 times higher than the Canadian average**, and as much as **15 times higher in Indigenous children**.^{13,14} Indigenous peoples comprise about 4% of the Canadian population, but they account for approximately 26% of drowning cases that involve a snowmobile, 16% of drowning cases after a fall into water, 10% of recreational drowning fatalities, and 9% of boating related drowning deaths.¹³ Increased risk of drowning in Indigenous populations has been attributed to: proximity to open water, low use of personal flotation devices, and alcohol use.¹⁵

Drowning rates are highest in Canada's Territories.¹⁶ **Drowning risk in Northern Canada is increased by exposure to water and lower water temperatures.**¹⁵ Rural residence has been associated with a higher risk of drowning.¹³ More drowning fatalities have been occurring in rural areas in recent years than in the past.¹⁷ Canada has an abundance of natural bodies of water, many of which sustain very cold temperatures year-round. Immersion death in cold water is frequent in northern countries such as Canada. On average, 200 people die because of cold water immersion each year.¹⁸

Children one to four years of age

In Canada, **drowning is a leading cause of unintentional injury death among children 1 to 4 years of age.**¹⁹ The burden of non-fatal drowning is among the highest in this age group; children under five are more likely to suffer a non-fatal drowning requiring an emergency department visit and/or hospitalization than a fatal drowning.²⁰ Private backyard pools are the most common setting where children 1 to 4 years of age fatally drown in Canada.¹⁶ Over a 20-year period (1991-2010), 1951 people drowned in Canada as the result of an unexpected fall into water.²¹ **Children and young men were at the highest risk of death from unintentional water entry.**²² Children 1 to 4 years of age accounted for approximately 21% of fatalities related to unexpected falls into water.²¹

Young adult males

In Canada, **young adults 20 to 34 years of age consistently have high unintentional water-related fatality rates relative to other age groups**, (an annual average of 1.5 per 100,000 in 2010-2014). Within this age group 20 to 24-year-olds have the highest death rate (1.9 per 100,000).¹⁶ Approximately 1 of every 2 young adults who fatally drowned had consumed alcohol.²² Over 80% of drowning fatalities occur among men and the greatest proportion of male drowning deaths occurs among young adults 20 to 34 years of age (9 out of 10 drowning victims are male in this age group).¹⁶

Most *boating related drowning* deaths occur among males between 15 and 74 years of age.²³ The most common factor associated with boating deaths in the last two decades has been the non-wearing of personal flotation devices.²³ Among individuals 15 and over, alcohol consumption was a contributing factor in at least 38% of deaths from *unintentional water entry*.²⁴

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Restart the economy with a fresh perspective. Invest in drowning research. Save lives. Lower Government and Canadians' costs associated with drowning in Canada.