



Voices of Child Health in Chicago REPORT

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REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Most Chicago families swim in Lake Michigan during hours when a lifeguard is likely to be on duty.

Chicago parents swim at beaches with different types of safety features; lifeguards were more commonly noticed by parents than safety equipment such as a rescue board or boat.

Enrolling children and adults in swim lessons; paying attention to safety flags, weather and water conditions; and closely supervising children around any water are ways to help keep everyone safer while at the beach.

Chicago Families and Safe Swimming in Lake Michigan

As the weather becomes warmer in Chicago, families spend more time outside and many take the opportunity to swim. Lake Michigan is a treasured natural resource that provides Chicago families with water recreation activities such as beach days, swimming, boating and sailing. However, enjoying the lake comes with a need to attend to water safety cautions. In 2022, there were 43 reported drownings in Lake Michigan, and there already have been five thus far in 2023.¹

In the United States, drowning takes the lives of more children ages 1–4 years than any other cause, and for children ages 5–14, drowning is the second leading cause of unintentional injury death after motor vehicle crashes.² Annually, about 4,000 Americans fatally drown and another 8,000 experience nonfatal drownings.¹ Water safety is critically important and there are many things that can be done to ensure children and adults are protected when enjoying time around natural water.

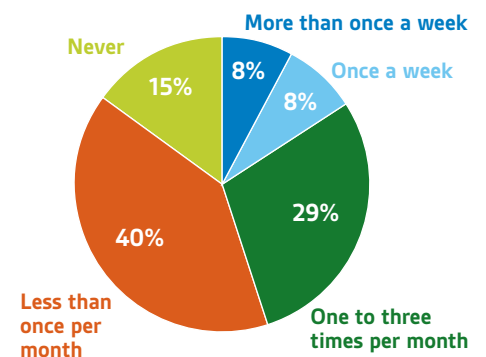
In this month's *Voices of Child Health in Chicago Report*, we explore families' swimming safety. We asked over 1,000 Chicago parents from all 77 community areas in the city about their swimming habits and safety features when swimming in Lake Michigan.

Where and when do Chicago families swim at the lake?

We found that 61% of parents say they swim at Lake Michigan beaches with their children, while 27% said they don't swim at Lake Michigan and 8% said they don't swim at all. Smaller proportions of parents swim in lake areas other than beaches, such as off a boat (4%) or unsafe areas including the rocks (5%) and piers (3%). Swimming in areas other than beaches was more common among families with high household income (19%), compared to families with low household income (8%). Recalling last summer, 85% of parents reported spending time at Lake Michigan; 16% of families did so at least once per week, 29% one to three times per month, 40% less than once per month and 15% never at all.

Most families (82%) swim at Lake Michigan between 11 a.m.–7 p.m., hours when Chicago lifeguards are on duty between Memorial Day and Labor Day. However, some parents reported swimming before 11 a.m. (18%), after 7 p.m. through sunset (13%), and after sunset (3%), which are less safe times without lifeguards on duty. The times that families swim at the lake did not differ by family demographic characteristics.

Figure 1. Frequency with which Chicago parents visit Lake Michigan beaches with their children



Safety features for swimming in Lake Michigan

Lifeguards and safety equipment are present at many Chicago beaches, but not at all places to swim in Lake Michigan. Chicago parents report that safety features are noticeable when they swim at the lake with their families: 69% said a lifeguard is on duty when they swim (Figure 2), 56% said they see flags about the water conditions (see Flag Warning System box on next page), 41% said there is a life ring or throw bag, and 35% said there is a rescue board or boat. Only 9% of parents said there are no lifeguards or safety equipment at the lakefront or beaches where they spend time.

The presence of safety features differed by parent demographic characteristics. For instance, Asian/other-race and white parents were more likely to report seeing flags about water conditions at the lakefront beaches where they spent time (66% and 65%, respectively), followed by 53% of Latinx parents and 44% of Black parents. We found that parents with higher household income were more

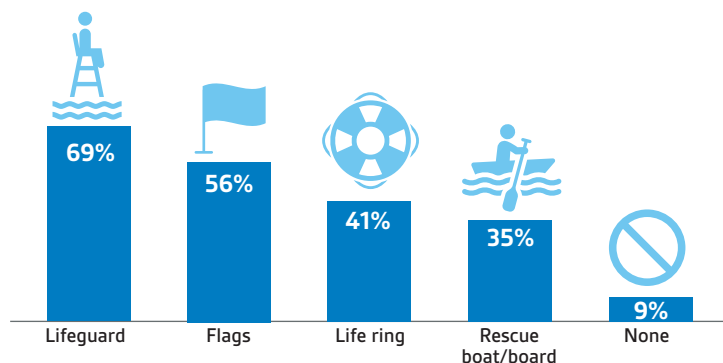
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likely to report seeing a life ring or throw bag on the beach (47%) compared with parents with middle income (35%). Parents who live in a lakefront region of the city were more likely to report seeing a lifeguard at the beach (41%) compared with parents who live in other city regions (32%).

It is also important to note that 59% of Chicago parents say their children never swim when there is not an adult or a lifeguard present. Despite this, 33% of parents say that their children do swim when there is not an adult or lifeguard some of the time or more, presenting a critically dangerous situation for any swimmer.

Figure 2. Proportion of parents who reported seeing each water safety feature when they swim at the lake with their family






Safety tips for swimming in Lake Michigan

Here are a few simple steps that families can follow to help keep everyone, especially infants and children, safe while swimming in lakes, rivers, pools and other bodies of water. The following information on swimming lessons, checking forecasts and lake conditions, and monitoring children while swimming are steps that families can take to promote water safety at the beach, lake or home.

- 1. Learn to Swim.** The Chicago Park District, Red Cross, and YMCA Chicago all have information on swim lessons for children and even adults. Families can learn together to encourage everyone to swim safely. The Chicago Park District also has community lakefront water safety trainings at beaches throughout the summer months (search for event category “aquatics”).
- 2. Be Alert.** Lake conditions can change quickly. Lifeguards, forecasts and beach warning flags are your friends. Plan ahead before swimming in Lake Michigan. Check the National Weather Service’s daily Lake Michigan beach forecast for the swim risk for the coming day: go to <https://www.weather.gov/lot/lake-michigan-buoy-conditions>. The Chicago Park District beaches use a flag warning system to communicate swim safety (see below).³ Similar warning systems are used at designated swim beaches across the Great Lakes.

FLAG WARNING SYSTEM

Swim status is communicated through a flag system at each beach.

-  A green flag means there are no swimming restrictions; swimming is permitted.
-  A yellow flag means that a swim advisory is in place; swimming is allowed but caution is advised.
-  A red flag means that a swim ban is in place; swimming is not allowed. Conditions do not meet safe swimming standards.

Swim bans and advisories may be implemented based on weather conditions such as lightening or high winds, surf conditions such as high waves, or water quality conditions. Please be aware of the current swim status when you go to the beach, and follow all instructions from lifeguards. Swim status may change throughout the day as water and weather conditions change.

- 3. Protect Children.** Drownings occur in open bodies of water, like Lake Michigan, and at pools, but also at home. It is important to learn best practices for keeping children safe around all types of water. Supervision

of children — by sober adults who are not distracted — is one important layer of safety for preventing drowning and water injury.

- **In open water,** join children in the water, directly supervise them and be within reach until they are confident swimmers. Swim in places with lifeguard supervision. Swim only in designated areas. Children should wear life jackets approved by the U.S. Coast Guard. Do not rely on puddle jumpers, arm floaties, air-filled or foam toys.
- **In pools,** join children in the water, directly supervise them and be within reach until they are confident swimmers. Follow lifeguard instructions and pool rules. Do not rely on puddle jumpers, arm floaties, air-filled or foam toys. Home pools are safer when surrounded on all sides by a fence with self-closing gates. Consider installing an alarm system to alert you of someone entering the pool area or water.
- **At home,** never leave a child unattended in the bath; do not use a bathtub seat or ring without adult supervision; do not leave buckets, tubs or other open containers that hold liquid unattended; empty kiddie pools after each use.

References

1. <https://qlsrp.org/statistics/>
2. <https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/facts/index.html>
3. <https://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/parks-facilities/beaches#:~:text=A%20green%20flag%20means%20that,not%20meet%20safe%20swimming%20standards>

HOW THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED

This report is based on data from the Voices of Child Health in Chicago Parent Panel Survey. The survey is administered to a sample of Chicago parents by Lurie Children’s and NORC at the University of Chicago via internet and telephone. The survey is administered to our panel of parents three times each year. The data in this report was collected from October through November 2022. The sample consisted of 1,140 Chicago parents, step-parents, or guardians who had at least one child under 18 years of age in the household (referred to as “parents” in this report). Parents were from all 77 community areas in Chicago. The survey completion rate was 34.4% and the cumulative survey response rate was 2.5%. All analyses were conducted with statistical weighting so that the results are representative of the parent population in the City of Chicago during the time period of data collection. For more information about the VOCHIC Parent Panel Survey, visit luriechildrens.org/ParentPanel and our page on Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/cjz82/>.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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