



# Drowning prevention in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

Facts from the first  
Global status report  
on drowning prevention  
**2024**



World Health  
Organization

Eastern Mediterranean Region



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# 1. Introduction

Globally, at least 3 million people have lost their lives to drowning over the past decade. An estimated 300 000 of these drowning deaths occurred in 2021 alone and 43% of these were children aged 14 years or younger (1).

In 2021, drowning prevention became more prominent on the global agenda when the United Nations General Assembly adopted its first ever resolution on drowning prevention, A/75/L.76 (2), setting a global framework for related efforts in all countries. The resolution reinforced the linkage of drowning prevention with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular with target 3.2, to “By 2023, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age”. An important contribution can be made by ensuring safe child access to day care and preschool services in communities near waterbodies, which relates to SDG target 4.2 on equal access to quality pre-primary education and SDG target 5.4 on unpaid care work.

The Global Health Estimates 2021 reveal that in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, drowning is the second leading cause of death among children aged 5–14 years, accounting for 7.6% of deaths in this age group (after road traffic injuries and before collective violence and legal intervention) (3).

To this end, the first *Global status report on drowning prevention 2024* was developed in response to the 2023 World Health Assembly (WHA) resolution on Accelerating action on global drowning prevention (WHA76.18). It aims to summarize available data to:

- help understand the drowning burden both globally and at the country level;
- present findings on the global status of drowning-prevention governance efforts and legislation addressing drowning-prevention risk factors;

- provide an overview of the status of key actions and interventions to prevent drowning;
- highlight gaps in knowledge to inform further research on drowning prevention;
- strengthen the network of individuals working on drowning prevention around the world; and
- provide a benchmark to assess progress in drowning prevention.

The current regional report presents an analysis of the findings of the first *Global status report on drowning prevention* from participating countries in the Region in order to inform related policy and practice; and to strengthen dialogue and action towards the prevention of drowning.

**"In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, drowning is the third leading cause of death among children aged 5–14 years, accounting for 7.6% of deaths in this age group."**

## 2. Methods

The current document analyses the findings of the *Global status report on drowning prevention, 2024*, in which 12 of the 22 Region's countries and territories took part. These countries and territories represent 63.3% of the Region's population and comprise four high-income, seven middle-income and one low-income countries.<sup>1</sup>

The *Global status report* was developed through an iterative and consultative process with participating countries and territories. All WHO Member States, in the Region and worldwide, were invited to participate. In the first phase, requests for data were sent out in 2023, through a questionnaire administered by WHO headquarters, to the regional and national

data focal persons appointed in each WHO region and country. These requests contained questions relating to the status of five domains<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 1) and 25 subdomains (Annex 1). A multisectoral consensus meeting engaging experts from different sectors within each country discussed the responses to the survey questions and came to an agreement on each of them. It is important to note that the mortality estimates for all causes of death used in the global report and in this regional analysis are updated periodically by the WHO Division of Data, Analytics and Delivery for Impact, and that WHO mortality estimates for drowning are based on International Classification of Diseases (ICD) categories W65–W74.



**Fig. 1. Action in five domains to strengthen drowning prevention efforts**

<sup>1</sup> The participating countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region were Bahrain, Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and Tunisia.

<sup>2</sup> Central governance and cross-sectoral coordination for drowning prevention at the national level, development of cross-sectoral policies and legislation to address the broad scope of drowning risks, implementation of evidence-based, community-level interventions for drowning prevention, awareness-raising and strategic communications to increase understanding of the drowning burden and risks and data-system capacity to capture high-quality data on drowning events and research sector involvement in drowning prevention efforts.



### 3. Current regional drowning burden

In 2021, there were an estimated global 300 000 drowning deaths. Of these, 12% occurred in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (35 000 deaths). Despite having the lowest contribution to drowning deaths after the European Region and the Region of the Americas, the Eastern Mediterranean Region has the second highest death rate per 100 000 population among WHO regions at 4.4 per 100 000, which is higher than the global rate (Fig. 2).

The proportion of drowning deaths that occur in low-, lower middle- and upper middle-income countries in the Region are higher than the global proportions (98% compared with 92% globally). Moreover, the Region has the highest drowning death rates in low- and lower middle-income countries (Table 1).

Analysis of the change over time for drowning death rates per 100 000 population by WHO regions

"The Eastern Mediterranean Region has the second highest death rate per 100 000 population among WHO regions at 4.4 per 100 000, which is higher than the global rate."

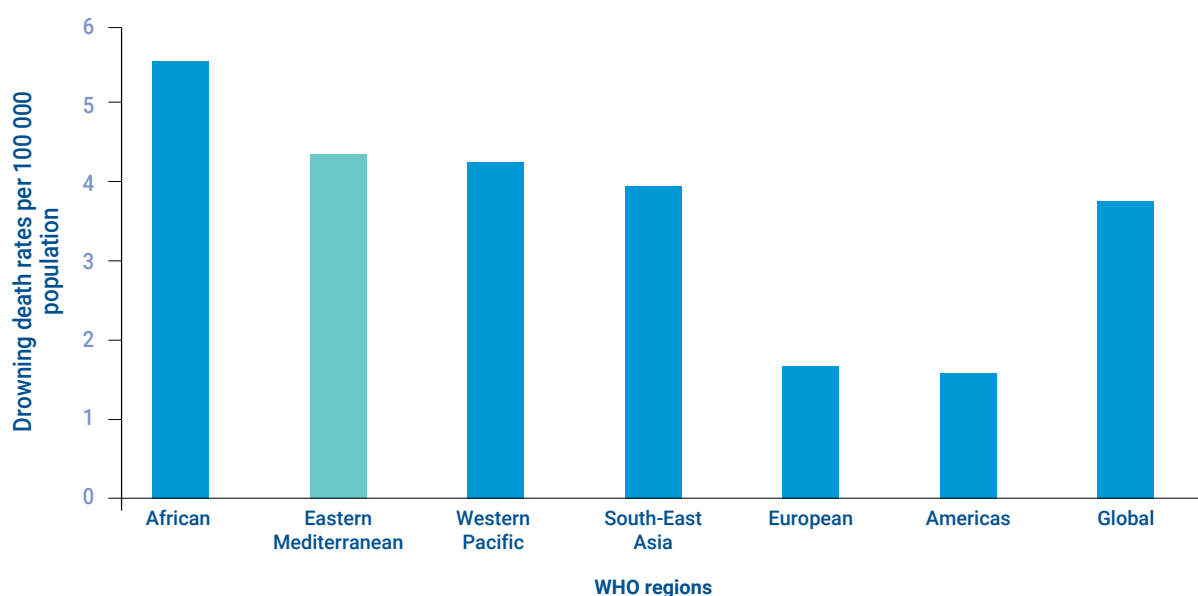


Fig. 2. Drowning death rates per 100 000 population, WHO regions and globally, 2021

**Table 1. Drowning death rates per 100 000 population, WHO regions by income group, 2021**

Low income	Lower middle income	Middle to high income	High income
Eastern Mediterranean Region (11.1)	Eastern Mediterranean Region (8.05)	African Region (4.43)	Western Pacific Region (3.87)
African Region (5.56)	Western Pacific Region (6.85)	Western Pacific Region (3.98)	Eastern Mediterranean Region (1.37)
	African Region (5.18)	South-East Asia Region (3.55)	Region of the Americas (1.29)
	South-East Asia Region (4.12)	European Region (2.82)	European Region (1.07)
	European Region (3.47)	Region of the Americas (1.69)	
	Region of the Americas (2)	Eastern Mediterranean Region (1.1)	

revealed that overall all regions showed a slow decline between 2000 and 2021, as did the global trend. However, the Eastern Mediterranean Region shows the second smallest decline, after the African Region, of 21%, indicating the need for more efforts to prevent drowning.

Several participating countries in the Region have shown success above the global average, with a higher decline in drowning death rates than that of

the regional rate. Examples are Bahrain (from 2.54 in 2000 to 1.03 in 2021), Jordan (from 2.21 in 2000 to 0.6 in 2021), Islamic Republic of Iran (from 2.8 in 2000 to 0.82 in 2021), Iraq (from 3.45 in 2000 to 1.77 in 2021), Qatar (from 5.17 in 2000 to 1.41 in 2021), Morocco (from 2.37 in 2000 to 1.06 in 2021), Oman (from 5.3 in 2000 to 1.61 in 2021) and Saudi Arabia (from 4.19 in 2000 to 1.5 in 2021).



## 4. Key risk factors

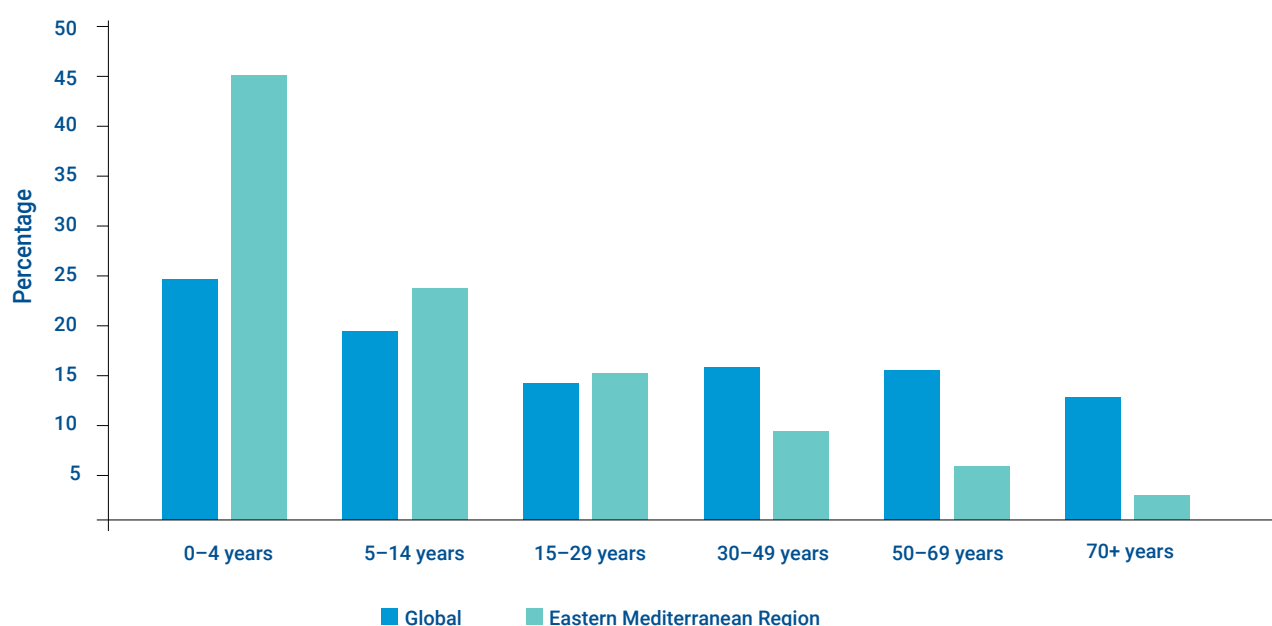
Key risk factors for drowning in the Eastern Mediterranean Region include young age (particularly children aged 1–4), male sex, migration and poverty and inequality.

**Age:** Due to the inability of children and young adults to assess risk and due to the lack of swimming and water safety skills among them, 57% of drowning deaths at the global level in 2021 occurred in this vulnerable group. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, this figure is much more exaggerated, with children and youth (ages 0–29 years) representing 83% of drowning deaths while older age groups are less affected (Fig. 3). In terms of rates, the Eastern Mediterranean Region has the highest drowning death rate among children aged 0–4 of all WHO regions (16.8 per 100 000 population). Rates among children aged 5–14 and young adults aged 15–29 in the Region are higher than the global rates.

**Sex:** As in the global figures, male drowning death rates are at least double those of female drowning death rates.

**Migration:** Studies show that there is a higher danger of drowning among migrants in the Region (4). According to the Missing Migrant project, drowning is a major cause of mortality while travelling migratory routes, hence migration is likely a major factor in the Region's drowning death rate (5).

**Poverty and inequality:** Despite the lack of related research in the Region, global literature suggests that drowning disproportionately affects poor and marginalized people, with the rate of drowning being 3.2 times higher in low-income countries than in high-income countries.



**Fig. 3. Proportion of drowning deaths by age group, globally and in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, 2021**

## 4.1 Stakeholder perceptions of drowning risks

To better understand the drowning context, the global report examines the views of drowning risks held by stakeholders who contributed to the data collection.<sup>1</sup>

- **Age:** More than two thirds of stakeholders believe that the highest rates of drowning are experienced by children followed by adolescents and youth and the lowest are among older people.
- **Location:** The majority of countries reported that drowning occurs in inland bodies of water such as lakes, rivers and pools and swimming pools (Table 2). A third of countries reported the sea as a location and one country reported wells as a risk factor.
- **Activity:** 72% of countries reported recreational activities increased the risk for drowning in their countries. Other reported activities increasing the risks for drowning include: overcrowding in boats; fishing; entering restricted bodies of water; flash floods and torrents; illegal migration; falling into open water sources; lack of supervision while swimming in unsupervised areas; bathing; and washing household items.
- **Simple acts of daily living:** Drowning deaths often occur as a result of simple acts of daily living in 82% of countries while 36% are due to floods and torrents. This is followed by illegal migration, bad weather and low supervision.
- **Other risk factors** two countries reported that the summer season is a risk factor and seasonal risk factors needed to be further investigated in the Region and another two countries reported that workers are at risk of drowning.

“The majority of countries reported that drowning occurs in inland bodies of water, such as lakes, rivers and pools and swimming pools.”

<sup>1</sup> All multisectoral respondents who contributed to the data collection of the questionnaire were asked to discuss their perspectives on drowning within their country. Prompts were provided to illicit discussion on drowning risks for specific life stages, locations, activities and events in the national context. The outcomes of these discussions were summarized in one sentence of open text against each prompt. This text underwent qualitative analysis (thematic coding) to investigate trends. Due to a general dearth of quantitative data providing detail on the context of drowning deaths, these open-text responses have been used as a proxy to better understand national circumstances in which drownings occur.



**Table 2. Stakeholder perceptions of drowning risks as reported by number of surveyed countries**

Risk factor	Number of countries
Inland bodies of water, such as lakes, rivers and pools and swimming pools	10
Simple acts of daily living	9
Recreational activities	8
Children	7
Adolescents and youth	4
Flash floods, torrents	4
Fishing	3
Illegal migration	3
Bathing	2
Washing household items	2
Wells	1
Overcrowding in boats	1
Entering restricted bodies of water	1
Falling into open water sources	1
Lack of supervision while swimming in unsupervised areas	1
Bad weather	1





## 5. Governance and coordination

Effective prevention strategies for drowning necessitate the collaboration of several sectors. Each sector can assist others in achieving their objectives where their goals meet and each has its own jurisdiction, expertise and resources to provide. It is essential to set up systems and plans to coordinate and lead drowning prevention.

- **National focal point for drowning prevention:** 67% of participating countries have a national focal point (Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and Tunisia), which is a higher proportion than the global rate as only half of participating countries across the world reported having a national focal point. The ministry of health coordinates national efforts in three countries, the ministry of the interior is the coordinating entity in another three countries and a designated committee or council is in place in two countries.
- **National drowning prevention strategies:** A quarter of participating countries have a governmental national strategy, policy or plan specific to drowning prevention (Bahrain, Morocco and Saudi Arabia), 17% have a broader governmental national strategy, policy or plan that specifies drowning prevention (Jordan and Tunisia) and 8% have a nongovernmental national strategy, policy or plan specific to drowning prevention (Bahrain).
- Although half the countries do not have a publicly available strategy, a further quarter of them (Kuwait, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia) have already developed their strategies and they were under government endorsement in 2024.
- **Targets set in strategies:** Only 17% of participating countries (Morocco and Saudi

Arabia) in the Region set quantifiable targets for drowning prevention (Table 3).

- **Evaluation of strategies:** 25% of participating countries (Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia) had had their strategies policies or plans evaluated.

Content analysis performed on the reported coordination mechanisms revealed that:

- 88% of the mechanisms have the clear purpose of reducing drowning deaths (Bahrain, Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia);

"67% of participating countries have a national focal point... which is a higher proportion than the global rate as only half of participating countries across the world reported having a national focal point."

**Table 3. Quantifiable targets for drowning prevention identified from submitted national drowning prevention strategies of the participating countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region**

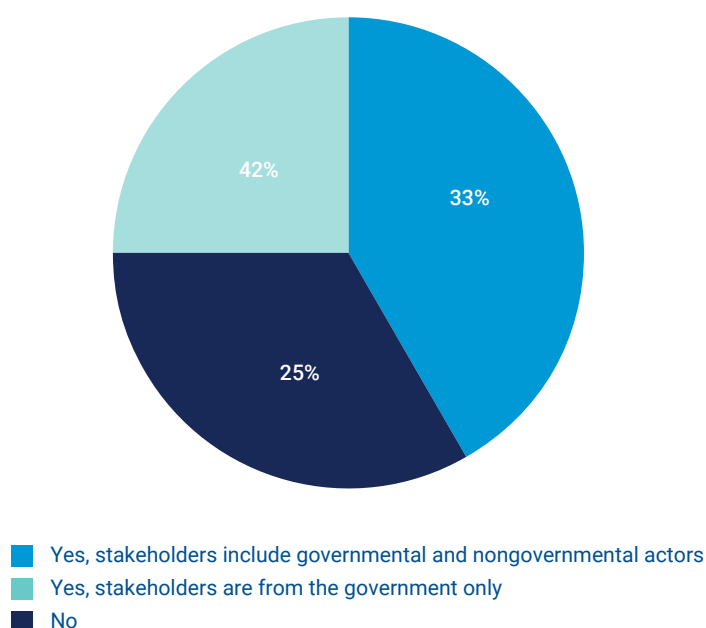
Country	National target	Time frame
Morocco	Saving 98% of drowning people on the high seas	2020–2030
Saudi Arabia	Decrease drowning deaths by 35% by 2025	2 years
	Decrease drowning deaths by 70% by 2030	7 years

- in 75% of countries, coordination mechanism is either led or supported by the government (Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia);
- 50% of countries clearly specified evidence for delivering or supporting specific initiatives relevant to drowning prevention (Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia);
- 25% of countries have a document outlining its mode of operation (Bahrain and Iraq);
- in all participating countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, two or more sectors and/

or organizations convene on a regular basis for the planning of activities relevant to drowning prevention and water safety.

**National coordination mechanisms:** 42% of participating countries have a mechanism of coordination that includes governmental and non-government actors (Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia). This is the second highest proportion among all WHO regions after the South-East Asia Region (Fig. 4)

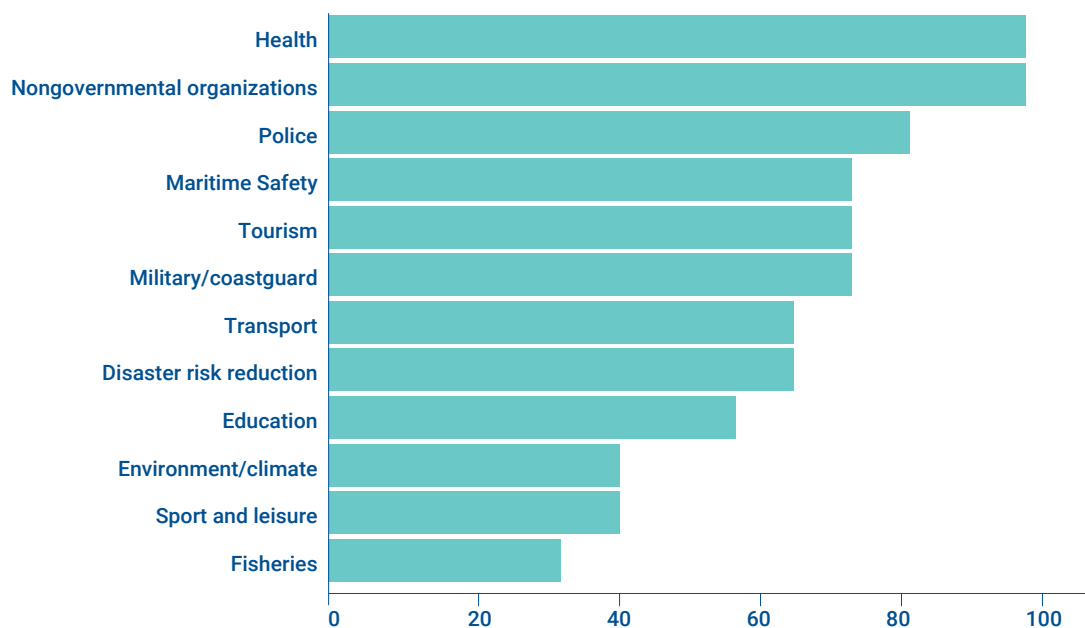
**Sectoral engagement:** Sectoral engagement around drowning is broad and includes governmental and



**Fig. 4. Percentage of countries with a coordination mechanism to reduce drowning, by type of participant, in countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region**

nongovernmental stakeholders. All countries reported the involvement of health and nongovernmental stakeholders and most of them have the engagement of police, maritime safety, tourism, and military or coastguard. The engagement of other sectors is

demonstrated in Fig. 5. Among the nongovernmental organizations involved in drowning prevention, 83% are preventative life-saving interventions, 50% are swimming, research and search and rescue while 33% are fisheries.



**Fig. 5. Government sectors involved in drowning prevention, Eastern Mediterranean Region**



## 6. Policy and legislation

The presence of national laws and policies is critical to support the system-level approach for drowning prevention. The following section summarizes the status of the national laws on drowning prevention in the 12 participating countries in the Region (Fig. 6)

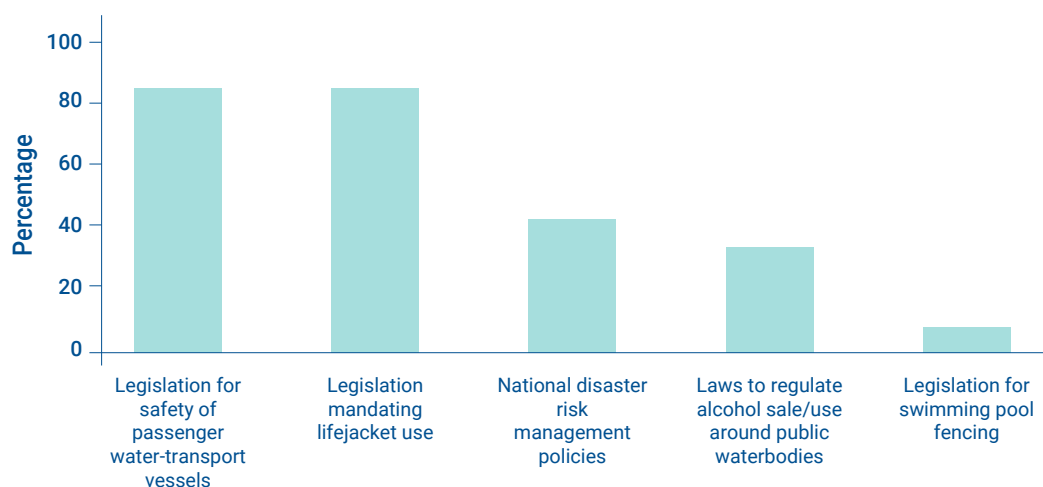
**National disaster risk management policies:** The Region has the highest proportion of participating countries with a national disaster risk management policy that addresses drowning risk among all WHO regions. It is also higher than the global proportion (42% of countries in the Region (Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia) compared with 24% globally).

**Legislation for safety of passenger water-transport vessels:** The Region has the second highest proportion of participating countries with national laws setting minimum safety requirements for domestic passenger vessels after the Region of Americas (83% of countries (Bahrain, Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia), which is higher than the global proportion of 78%).

**Legislation mandating lifejacket use:** The Region has the highest proportion of participating countries with a national law mandating lifejacket use among all WHO regions. It is also higher than the global proportion (83% of countries in the Region (Bahrain, Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia) compared with 65% globally).

**Legislation for swimming pool fencing:** The Region has the second lowest proportion of participating countries (only Saudi Arabia, 8%) after the African Region with a national law on swimming pool fencing to prevent unsupervised child access.

**Alcohol regulations:** The Region has the highest proportion of participating countries with a law to regulate alcohol sale and use around public waterbodies among all WHO regions. It is also higher than the global proportion (33% of countries in the Region compared with 26% globally (Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia)).

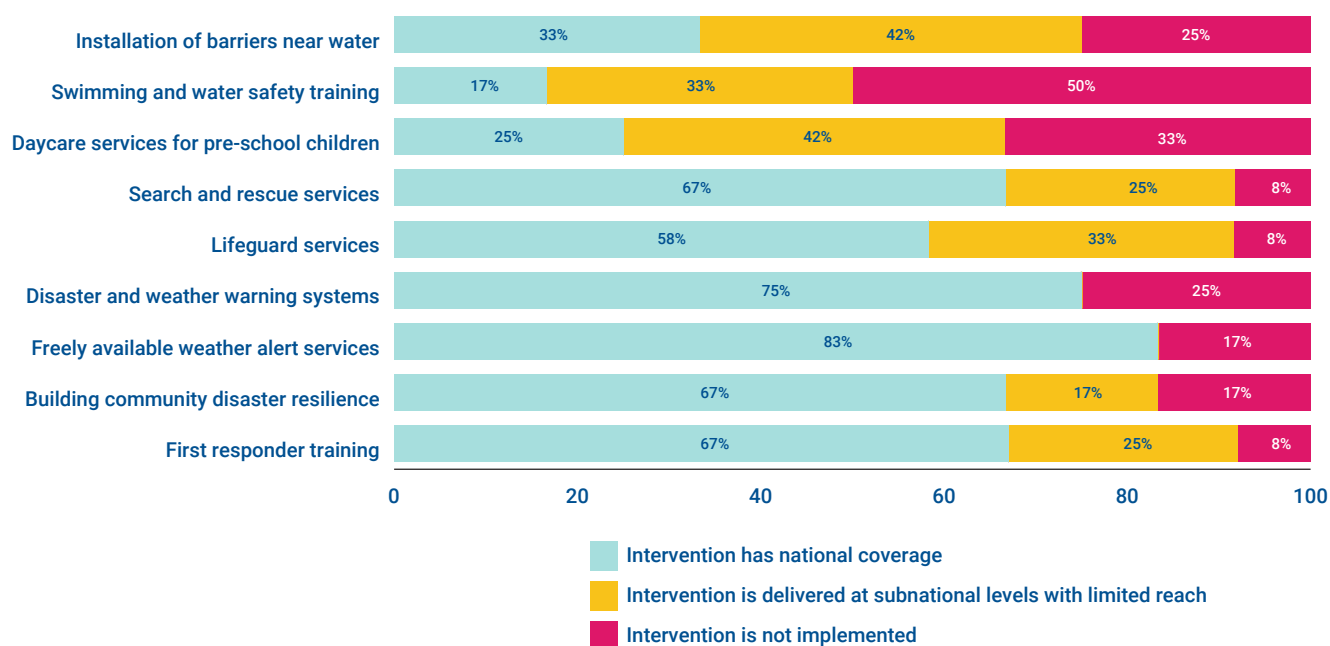


**Fig. 6. Percentage of countries with national laws on drowning prevention, Eastern Mediterranean Region**

## 7. Community-level interventions

The Global report examined a number of recommended interventions for drowning prevention. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, it was found that the intervention that has the highest proportion of countries with national coverage is the existence of freely available weather alert services. This is followed by disaster and weather warning systems, building

community disaster resilience and search and rescue services. Except for first responder training, interventions applied to public safety such as day to day preschool services, water safety training and physical barriers have been implemented to a lesser extent in the Region (Fig. 7).



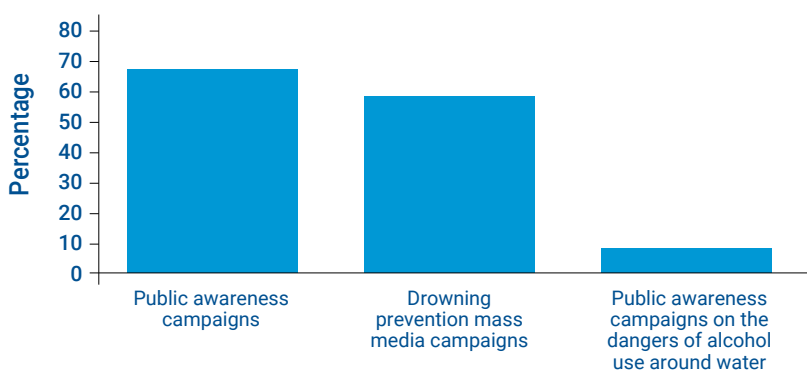
**Fig. 7. Percentage of countries implementing key drowning prevention interventions to varying levels of coverage, Eastern Mediterranean Region**

## 8. Awareness-raising programmes

Participating countries were asked about the following three key aspects of their public awareness programmes:

- **Drowning-prevention mass media campaigns:** The Region has the highest proportion of running national mass media campaigns on drowning prevention (58% of participating countries (Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Somalia)). This proportion is also higher than the global proportion (46%).
- **Mass media campaigns:** Similarly, the Region has the highest proportion of countries running national mass media campaigns on drowning prevention (67% of participating countries (Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Somalia)). The global proportion is 38%.

- **Public awareness campaigns on the dangers of alcohol use around water:** Despite the high proportion of mass media and public awareness campaigns, the Region has the least proportion of participating countries with a national public awareness campaign on the dangers of alcohol use around water (8% of countries (Saudi Arabia)). It is important to note that 75% of participating countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (Bahrain, Jordan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Somalia) prohibit the sale and consumption of alcohol in general, particularly in public areas, which could explain this low proportion (Fig. 8).



**Fig. 8. Percentage of countries with awareness-raising programmes on drowning prevention, Eastern Mediterranean Region**



## 9. Data and research

**Capture of drowning deaths through different sectors:** The highest proportion of participating countries report drowning data through the health system followed by police and civil registration and vital statistics. Data are also available from other sources in some countries, such as from the transport sector, disaster risk management, sport and leisure, occupational safety and community surveys.

No drowning data are reported by the tourism sector in any of the countries (Table 4).

**Research on drowning prevention:** The Eastern Mediterranean Region has the second highest proportion of countries (50%) reporting academic engagement in drowning prevention after the South-East Asia Region (56%) compared with 38% at the global level.

**Table 4. Proportion of countries by sectors capturing data on drowning deaths in the Eastern Mediterranean Region**

	Civil registration and vital statistics	Health sector	Police	Transport sector	Disaster risk management	Sport and leisure sector	Tourism sector	Occupational safety sector	Community surveys
Drowning data are collected	58.3	91.7	66.7	16.7	33.3	8.3	—	8.3	25.0
Data are collected in an ongoing permanent manner	58.3	91.7	66.7	8.3	25.0	8.3	—	8.3	16.7
Data are compiled and reported at the national level	41.7	75.0	50.0	8.3	25.0	8.3	—	8.3	16.7
Data are disaggregated by:									
Age	58.3	83.3	58.3	33.3	33.3	8.3	—	8.3	25.0
Sex	58.3	83.3	58.3	33.3	33.3	8.3	—	8.3	25.0
Activity at time of drowning	25.0	50.0	50.0	25.0	25.0	8.3	—	8.3	25.0
Type of water body	33.3	50.0	50.0	25.0	33.3	8.3	—	8.3	25.0

# 10. Suggested way forward

When the regional profile was mapped against the five domains and 25 subdomains (Annex 1) that reflect Member State commitments set out in the United Nations General Assembly and WHA resolutions, it was found that the Region has achieved several successes to the extent that in the participating countries, 64% of these indicators had better values than those achieved globally. Building on this success, greater effort is needed in the following domains:

- 1c. National drowning-prevention strategy
- 2d. Legislation for swimming pool fencing
- 3b. Swimming and water safety training
- 3c. Day care services for preschool children

- 3d. Search and rescue services
- 4c. Awareness campaigns on alcohol use near water
- 5a. Capture of drowning deaths through civil registration systems
- 5b. Availability of sufficiently detailed drowning data.

Additionally, the following areas would also need to be considered in the Region based on the key priority areas for future progress indicated in the Global status report and shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Priority areas for future progress indicated in the *Global status report on drowning prevention 2024*

Priority area	Regional context	Suggested actions
Strengthening multisectoral action to address the broad range of drowning risks	Despite the broad sectoral engagement around drowning in the Region, it was reported that health, police, transport, maritime safety, tourism and military/coastguard and nongovernmental stakeholders are more involved.	More policy dialogues could support the involvement of other sectors such as education, environment, sport and leisure and fisheries.
Increasing understanding of scale of problem as a public health, development and equity issue	The global literature suggests that drowning disproportionately affects poor and marginalized people, with the rate of drowning being 3.2 times higher in low-income countries than in high-income countries. However, there is no available regional research on such knowledge.	More research is needed to develop a better understanding of drowning from a development and equity perspective.

**Table 5. Priority areas for future progress indicated in the *Global status report on drowning prevention 2024* (concluded)**

Priority area	Regional context	Suggested actions
<b>Expanding the focus to include more at-risk population groups</b>	The analysis revealed that children and young adults, inner water locations, recreative activities, illegal migration, flash floods, fishing and lack of supervision are of particular concern in the Region.	Targeted interventions to address the groups more at risk and environments/factors are needed. It is critical to create an evidence base to inform the development of effective, scalable interventions to address these concerns with more focus on collaboration across partners working on related areas and initiatives such as occupational safety, migration, child and youth safety, etc. to drive forward cross-cutting and mutually beneficial solutions.
<b>Matching research more closely to gaps in knowledge</b>	Despite the fact that the Region is among those conducting the most research on drowning prevention, there is still some areas that need more understanding such as the developmental and equity issues, funding and evaluation of existing initiatives.	Strengthen the regional evidence on the effectiveness of drowning prevention interventions across different settings and support the design and adaptation of drowning-prevention interventions.
<b>Increasing public awareness of the problem and solutions</b>	There is a high proportion of mass media and public awareness campaigns conducted in the Region. However, the Region has the least proportion of countries with a national public awareness campaign on the dangers of alcohol use around water.	Creating public awareness campaigns that are specially directed at specific risk factors coordinated with practical interventions, such as community child care and basic swimming lessons, and linked to strengthened enforcement of regulations.



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# Annex 1. Regional profile

Table A1 shows the percentage of countries surveyed meeting the indicator covered by the five domains and 25 subdomains that reflect the commitments of

Member States set out in the United Nations General Assembly and WHA resolutions.

**Table A1. Percentage of countries meeting indicator, regionally and globally**

Indicator	Regional (%)	Global (%)
1a. National focal point	67	53
1b. National coordination mechanism	42	40
1c. National drowning-prevention strategy	25	26
2a. Disaster risk management policy	42	27
2b. Legislation for safety of passenger vessels	83	79
2c. Legislation mandating lifejacket use	83	65
2d. Legislation for swimming pool fencing	8	14
2e. Alcohol regulations	33	26
3a. Installation of barriers near water	33	20
3b. Swimming and water safety training	17	22
3c. Day care services for preschool children	25	28
3d. Search and rescue services	67	73
3e. Lifeguard services	58	38
3f. First responder training	67	33
3g. Disaster and weather warning systems	75	71
3h. Weather warning systems	83	81
3i. Building community disaster resilience	67	42
3j. Community flood risk management	66	73
4a. Drowning prevention mass media campaigns	58	46
4b. Awareness campaigns on child drowning prevention	67	38
4c. Awareness campaigns on alcohol use near water	8	29

**Table A1. Percentage of countries meeting indicator, regionally and globally** *(concluded)*

Indicator	Regional (%)	Global (%)
5a. Capture of drowning deaths through civil registration systems	58	65
5b. Availability of sufficiently detailed drowning data	33	72
5c. Capture of drowning deaths through cross-sectoral data collection	90	50
5d. Research on drowning	50	38
Percentage of regional indicators that achieved a value greater than the global figure	64	





