

# Asian floods expose child drowning epidemic

By [Monique Ross](#)

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PHOTO: [Cambodian children ride over floodwaters in a boat](#) (Supplied: John MacGregor)

**The deadly floodwaters currently ravaging Asia are shining a light on the "silent epidemic" of child drownings in the region.**

Children account for almost a quarter of the estimated 800 deaths reported since July across Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and the Philippines, according to the United Nations.

There are fears the toll could actually be much higher, as many drowning deaths go unreported in Asia because no death certificate is needed for burial.

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Former Fairfax journalist John MacGregor works with an NGO in Cambodia that is bringing supplies and medical help to remote flood-affected villages.

He visited one village that knew first-hand the pain of losing a child to the floodwaters.

"The commune we went to [on Wednesday], that was Chreas commune, they told us that two kids drowned on Monday in the floodwaters," he said.

"A lot of them can't swim. They're not like Aussies. So if they get into water that's over their heads, they drown.

"These people are on little strips of land six or eight feet wide, perched above the floodwater, sleeping on the mud on bits of plastic – that's been going on for weeks."

Justin Scarr, the drowning prevention commissioner of the International Life Saving Federation, says the issue of child drowning in Asia did not begin with the floods sweeping the region.

"Most people would think that drowning is at its highest for children during flooding, but it's actually an issue in everyday life, particularly in rural communities across Asia," he said.

"We describe it as a silent epidemic. The numbers are a little bit debatable but anywhere between 200,000 and 300,000 children drown across Asia every year."

That compares to around 40 child drowning deaths in Australia last year.

## 'They drown silently'



**PHOTO:** [A young boy pushes his bicycle through floodwaters in Cambodia.](#) (Supplied: Keith Kelly)

Mr Scarr says many child drowning victims never appear on public health records, so many people do not realise how bad the problem is.

"Children don't drown in hospitals. So it's a long, long way from the health officials who are counting," he said.

"They drown silently, they drown quickly. The child who drowns is usually buried very, very quickly by their grieving family – as many as 70 per cent of drowning deaths go unrecorded."

Rob Cook from The Alliance for Safe Children (TASC), which is based in Bangkok, says child drownings constitute a public health problem in Asia.

"If it was chicken pox or measles you'd have had a vaccine a week ago," he said during an interview at the World Conference on Drowning Prevention.

"But drowning happens one, one, one. The spectacular drowning events happen when a boat sinks or something like that. But that's not where the big numbers are."

Mr Scarr says the biggest issue at play is a lack of supervision in areas where water is "literally everywhere".

"The proximity to water is extreme for young children. It's used in agricultural activities around the house - watering livestock, rice cultivation, fish farming," he said.

"Commonly they're left under the supervision of slightly older children, their brothers and sisters and cousins, but it's inappropriate to have a six-year-old supervise a two-year-old.

"When the children get a little bit older one of the major factors is that they simply don't know how to swim."

## Survival skills



**PHOTO:** A child participates in the SwimSafe program in Bangladesh. (Supplied: Royal Life Saving Society )

Mr Scarr is also the chief operating officer of the Royal Lifesaving Association in Australia, which partners with local organisations in a handful of countries to prevent children losing their lives in water.

"For the younger children, we're improving supervision strategies by creating crèches, or preschools, in the local community environment," he said.

"For the older children we're teaching them about swimming and water safety.

"In Vietnam and Thailand we're using portable swimming pools, because the fundamental issue with kids not being able to swim in Asia is they simply don't have access to programs.

"In the last Vietnamese summer we taught 6,000 kids to swim in the province of Da Nang. We have over 100 local instructors now that are highly skilled and do a fantastic job teaching kids to swim."

He says research coming out of the International Drowning Research Centre in Bangladesh shows the programs are having a "remarkable" effect.

"Drowning and drowning prevention is something that's very familiar across the Australian community," he said.

"We really can reduce the silent drowning epidemic across Asia with very simple measures."

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