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What sets Texas floods apart: Kids died in heart-wrenching numbers

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The Central Texas flash flooding that killed at least 104 people is among the deadliest flood events in the past 50 years. But it's the disproportionate number of children who perished that sets it apart from others in recent history.

As of Monday, at least 27 children were among the dead, about a third of the total casualties, a number made more jarring in an era of modern forecasting and communication meant to prevent such disasters.

Angry river water, engorged by historic levels of rain, attacked the most wholesome of American institutions: summer camps for kids. Unlike the "Children's Blizzard" believed to have killed hundreds of young people in the Midwest in 1888, or the Galveston, Texas, hurricane that collapsed an orphanage and claimed 90 kids in 1900, the scenes of innocence lost unfolded almost immediately on social media and television for a global audience.

The 10 girls from venerable Camp Mystic who remained missing amid the threat of more floods. The father desperately searching for his 8-year-old among twisted trees and waterlogged stuffed animals near the banks of the Guadalupe River. Twin sisters killed are granddaughters of a former Miami Herald publisher — who founded and chairs an organization that advocates for early-childhood education.

The Texas tragedy comes as experts worry that children around the globe are increasingly at risk from extreme weather events because they are smaller physically, less developed psychologically and dependent on adults for support and protection. An estimated 710 million young people around the world, most in developing countries, are at particular risk because of climate change, the advocacy group [Save The Children \(javascript:void\(0\);\)](#) estimated in 2021.

In the United States, research on how natural disasters affect young people remains limited. Almost two decades ago, U.S. researchers analyzed mortality data and concluded that among young victims, children between ages 5 and 14 are most likely to die as a result of cataclysmal storms and flood events — but such fatalities are few and far between.

"Overall, child death in disaster is very rare in the United States," said Lori Peek, sociologist and director of the Natural Hazards Center at the [University of Colorado \(javascript:void\(0\);\)](#), who co-authored that study. "That is what makes a tragedy of this scale all the more disconcerting and makes it feel all the more urgent that we come together to prepare for future weather extremes."

In Texas, the larger toll won't be clear immediately. Child survivors — such as those displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 — will suffer psychological trauma long after the spotlight has receded. That could include separation anxiety, nightmares, depression, engaging in risky behaviors or withdrawing from activities, said Alice Fothergill, professor of sociology at the [University of Vermont \(javascript:void\(0\);\)](#), who — along with Peek — studied the long-term effects of Katrina on kids.

"Disasters last a very long time in the lives of children," Fothergill said. "They are incredibly vulnerable in so many ways."

Taking stock of historyTallying the number of children killed in natural disasters is difficult, particularly for events that happened decades ago when recordkeeping was less precise.

Even declaring them natural disasters can be complicated. Scholars point out that the impacts of floods, fires, storms and earthquakes are exacerbated by human-produced vulnerabilities.

Earthquakes in Pakistan (2005) and Sichuan, China (2008) claimed thousands of young people who were crushed when their shoddily constructed schools collapsed. In 1988, more than 8,000 children in Colombia are thought to have died when a volcanic eruption caused mud slides in a town near the volcano, a tragedy marked by searing images of a 13-year-old girl who succumbed after she was trapped in the rubble for days.

How we define children is different, too. The flood of 1899 in Johnstown, Pennsylvania — in which a hellacious storm caused a neglected dam to burst — killed more than 2,200 people, most certainly an undercount. Officials recorded almost 400 children among the dead.

Working teenagers in the late 1800s, who today might be considered children, were often counted as adults, said Amy Regan, historian at Heritage Johnstown, a historic preservation organization. In Johnstown, it could have been worse — most children were at home, not congregated at schools, when the dam burst. Still, 99 entire families died. "It was a matter of what the water picked up, what debris hit what area, what building you were in," Regan said.

Nearly a century later, in 1977, another dam failure and flash flooding again devastated Johnstown, killing 84 people, including 19 children dead or missing.

More recent U.S. natural disasters have inflicted high death tolls with fewer child deaths, but they are no less heartbreaking.

Estimates vary, but Katrina killed at least a dozen children in Louisiana alone, according to state death data. A tornado in Joplin, Missouri, killed 13 high school students in 2011. Two years later, a tornado in Moore, Oklahoma, collapsed a concrete wall at an elementary school, killing seven students.

Last week's floods stand out because so many children were gathered in the Texas Hill Country, where about two dozen camps offer cooling refuge for students on summer vacation. For generations, young people have come to Hill Country to canoe, swim, fish, hike, practice archery — and taste freedom away from their households.

The region had experienced similar tragedy before: In 1987, 10 teenagers from a Christian camp died when their bus and van were swamped by a deluge of floodwater from the Guadalupe River and its tributaries.

The camper deaths underscore every parent's worst fear: tragedy striking when you have entrusted your kids to the care of others, vulnerable and far from home.

"It's similar to how we think about school shootings — schools are supposed to be particularly safe places," said Jacob Remes, professor of disaster studies at [New York University \(javascript:void\(0\);\)](#). "These deaths are not supposed to happen."

The Children's Blizzard of 1888 happened when what had been a mild sunny day suddenly morphed into a maelstrom of wind and freezing weather across Minnesota, Nebraska, Iowa and the Dakotas. At least 200 people died — many students were caught while walking home from school — because the Army Signal Corps failed to

issue a cold warning the previous night. At the time, newspaper accounts revealed more outrage about damaged crops than dead children, said David Laskin, author of "The Children's Blizzard."

Almost a century later, students and staff from Oregon Episcopal School found themselves in a similarly freak snowstorm on Mount Hood, marring what was supposed to be an easy day hike to the summit. Nine people died in the 1986 tragedy, prompting an investigation, legal settlements and a wrongful-death lawsuit.

Now in 2025, with forecasters using state-of-the-art satellite technology and the ubiquity of smartphones, children aren't supposed to die like they did in Central Texas. Officials have vowed to investigate whether warning systems were sufficient — or will ever be sufficient — in a region dubbed "flash flood alley" for its history of dangerous inundations.

"There is something particularly frightening about flash floods," NYU's Remes said. "They move so quickly. It's so hard to predict where it's going to happen. It's coming in the middle of an incredible downpour — it feels very biblical."

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