

The Black–White Swimming Disparity in America: A Deadly Legacy of Swimming Pool Discrimination

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Abstract

This article offers a historically informed answer to the question why are Black Americans less likely to know how to swim than Whites. It contends that past discrimination in the provision of and access to swimming pools is largely responsible for this contemporary disparity. There were two times when swimming surged in popularity—at public swimming pools during the 1920s and 1930s and at suburban swim clubs during the 1950s and 1960s. In both cases, large numbers of White Americans had easy access to these pools, whereas racial discrimination severely restricted Black Americans' access. As a result, swimming never became integral to Black Americans' recreation and sports culture and was not passed down from generation to generation as commonly occurred with Whites.

Keywords

swimming disparity, drowning disparity, swimming pools, racial discrimination

Introduction

On August 2, 2010, several families gathered for a barbecue picnic along the banks of the Red River outside Shreveport, Louisiana. Upon arriving, some of the kids in the group entered the shallow water near the shoreline. Suddenly, 15-year-old DeKendrix Warner slipped off a ledge into much deeper water. He did not know how to swim and screamed for help. Instinctively, his siblings and cousins rushed out to save him. But they did not know how to swim either. One by one, JaTavious Warner, JaMarcus Warner, Takeitha Warner, Litrelle Stewart, LaDairus Stewart, and Latevin Stewart

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dropped off into the same deep water. Thrashing their arms, they screamed “help me, help me, somebody please help me.” Their parents watched helplessly from the shore, for none of them could swim either. A short distance away, Christopher Patlan was hanging out with friends and heard the screams. Patlan did know how to swim, having taken lessons as a child. He ran to the scene, plunged out into the water, and grabbed the nearest body, which turned out to be DeKendrix Warner. By the time Patlan had pulled him to safety, the six others had sunk beneath the surface and were drowning. Their bodies were found hours later at the bottom of the river. “Six Teens Drown in La. River: No One Knew How to Swim,” read one newspaper headline (Robertson, 2010; “Six Teens Drown in La. River,” 2010; Stengle, 2010).

The Red River tragedy was widely reported in the news media and focused public attention on the troubling disparity in swimming and drowning rates between Blacks and Whites in the United States. All six teens who drowned were African Americans, and no one among the several families at the picnic knew how to swim. In an effort to explain how that could be, major news outlets such as ABC World News, the BBC, NPR, and CNN highlighted two startling statistics: Black children are half as likely to know how to swim as White children and 3 times more likely to drown.¹ And, they posed the obvious questions: Why are Black Americans less likely to swim than Whites? Why are Black Americans so much more likely to drown? (Claiborne & Francis, 2010; James, 2010; Rohrer, 2010; “Six Teens Drown in Shreveport’s Red River,” 2010).

While it took the Red River deaths to bring all this to the public’s attention, these are not new questions. In fact, the perception that Blacks cannot swim is a longstanding racial stereotype. In the past, it was believed that Blacks had inherent physical characteristics that hindered them from swimming. A 1969 study titled “The Negro and Learning to Swim,” for example, concluded that Black men had low capacity for swimming because their bodies were “less buoyant than Caucasians” and their muscles functioned poorly in cold water (Allen & Nickel, 1969, pp. 408-409). More recently, scholars have mostly abandoned genetic and physical explanations for swimming disparities and pointed to social and cultural factors instead.² In a study funded by USA Swimming, researchers at the University of Memphis concluded that low swimming rates among Black Americans result from the lack of parental encouragement, widespread fear of drowning, concerns about damaging one’s hair, and the perception that swimming is something White people do (Irwin, Irwin, Martin, & Ross, 2010a).

The second question—why Black Americans are more likely to drown than Whites—has not been thoroughly researched. Many scholars and doctors surmise that Black children suffer from comparatively high drowning rates in part because they are less likely to know how to swim, but no published studies have conclusively established the connection.³ An unpublished article by Samuel L. Myers, Jr. and Ana Cuesta suggests a correlation between the relatively low number of competitive Black swimmers and the high drowning rates among Black Americans generally, but the findings have not been scrutinized by outside reviewers (Myers & Cuesta, 2012). A report

published by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2010 encapsulated the current state of research knowledge this way:

The reasons that black children and teenagers are more likely to drown are not clear, but poor parental swimming skills, lack of early training, poor swimming ability, and lack of lifeguards at motel/hotel pools [where black children swim more commonly] may be important factors. (Weiss, 2010)

The Red River deaths anecdotally corroborate this set of explanations. The six deaths resulted because none of the teens could swim, their parents did not know how to swim and thus could not rescue them, and they were playing in water not supervised by a lifeguard.

This article does not propose to offer a definitive answer to the second question; that would require a major, well-funded study. Rather, it accepts the general premise that lack of swimming ability contributes to drowning deaths and then attempts to provide a more historically informed answer to the first question—why Black Americans are so much less likely to know how to swim than White Americans. This article contends that past discrimination in the provision of and access to swimming pools is largely responsible for the current swimming disparity and thus indirectly responsible, at least in part, for the current drowning disparity.

During much of the 20th century, Black Americans faced widespread discrimination that severely limited their access to swimming pools and swim lessons. The most consequential discrimination occurred at public swimming pools and took three basic forms. Public officials and White swimmers denied Black Americans access to pools earmarked for Whites. Cities provided relatively few pools for Black residents, and the pools they did provide were typically small and dilapidated. And, third, cities closed many public pools in the wake of desegregation, just as they became accessible to Black Americans. Black Americans also faced restricted access to Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) pools and YMCA swim lessons—especially during the critical period of 1920 to 1940, when swimming first became popularized in the United States. Finally, Black Americans were systematically denied access to the tens of thousands of suburban swim clubs opened during the 1950s and 1960s. These pools spurred a second great leap forward in the popularity of swimming, but only for the millions of White families that were able to join.

This past discrimination casts a long shadow. As a result of limited access to swimming facilities and swim lessons and the unappealing design of most pools earmarked for Blacks, swimming did not become integral to the recreation and sports culture within African American communities. Some Black Americans learned to swim but relatively few. By contrast, swimming became broadly popular among Whites and developed into a self-perpetuating recreational and sports culture precisely because they generally had convenient access to appealing swimming pools. Successive generations of White parents took their children to swimming pools and taught them to swim, because that is what they did as children. No such broad, self-perpetuating swim culture developed among Black Americans, however, because they were largely

denied access to the pools at which swimming became popularized during the 20th century. In this way, the swimming disparity created by past discrimination persists into the present.

The same blatant forms of racial discrimination do not exist today, but Americans nonetheless still have unequal access to swimming pools.⁴ The inequality now, however, cuts primarily along class lines. Over the past several decades, cities have opened comparatively few new public pools and closed many existing ones. At the same time, the number of private club and backyard pools has increased rapidly. As a result, poor and working-class Americans—who rely more on public recreation facilities—have generally less access to swimming facilities and swim lessons than middle- and upper-class Americans, who can afford to swim at private pools. Studies have already shown the emergence of a class-based swimming gap in the United States, and that gap will likely widen unless the current trend toward privatization is reversed (Irwin, Drayer, Irwin, Ryan, & Southall, 2008).

Racial Discrimination in the “Swimming Pool Age”

A significant swimming disparity between Blacks and Whites first developed during the 1920s and 1930s, the period when swimming pools became widely accessible in the United States. Before that time, cities and towns provided few public pools—by one count there were only 176 municipal pools in the United States in 1916—and relatively few Americans knew how to swim (“Swimming Pools and Other Bathing Places,” 1931). Furthermore, the swimming disparities that existed prior to 1920 split primarily along gender and generational lines, not racial lines. As the work of Kevin Dawson has shown, people of African descent in the United States were generally more accomplished swimmers “up through the nineteenth century” than people of European descent (Dawson, 2006). And, the municipal pools of the late 19th and early 20th centuries—the vast majority of which were located in northern cities—were gender segregated but not racially segregated (Wiltse, 2007). This meant that Black Americans were not significantly more restricted in their access to swimming facilities than were most Whites at the time.

All this changed during the 1920s and 1930s, a period appropriately labeled the “swimming pool age” by one periodical. Cities and towns throughout the country opened thousands of public swimming pools and allowed males and females to use them together. Many of these gender-integrated pools were leisure resorts—larger than football fields and surrounded by sun decks, grassy lawns, and artificial sand beaches (Wiltse, 2007). The building spree occurred in two waves. During the 1920s, local governments built pools to meet the increasing demand for outdoor recreation and leisure activities. The 1920s building spree came to an end when the stock market crashed in 1929 and the nation slowly descended into the Great Depression (“Swimming Pools and Other Bathing Places,” 1931). Beginning in 1934, however, the federal government initiated a second wave of pool building, funding the construction of nearly a thousand swimming pools across the country through the Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration (“2,419 Swimming and

Wading Pools Built by WPA-PWA,” 1938). A small sampling of the pools completed just in 1936 included 10 in Connecticut, 7 in Alabama, 9 in Indiana, 14 in Kansas, 13 in Washington state, and 27 in Texas (“Nationwide Survey of WPA Pool and Beach Development,” 1937). This tidal wave of federally funded pool construction was so comprehensive that the WPA guidebook for Kansas proclaimed in 1939 that “there is scarcely a town with a population more than 1,500 that lacks . . . a [public] swimming pool” (Federal Writers Project, 1939/1984, p. 120).

The thousands of public pools opened between 1920 and 1940 popularized swimming in America. They were immensely popular, attracting tens of millions of swimmers each year. In 1937, for example, Philadelphia counted 4.3 million swims in its municipal pools and St. Louis 1.4 million (“1937 Attendance Reports,” 1938). Individual pools amassed astonishing single-day attendance totals. Pittsburgh officials counted 25,000 swimmers and spectators one day in 1932 at Highland Park Pool (“Bathers Flock to Park Pool,” 1932). Packard Park Pool in Warren, Ohio, attracted 2,500 swimmers one Saturday in 1934 and more than 2,000 the following Saturday (“Mercury Here Hits 96,” 1934). In a 1934 article titled “Swimming . . . the New Great American Sport,” *Fortune* magazine estimated that more than 30 million Americans swam in pools a total of 350 million times each year (pp. 81, 85). A survey conducted by the National Recreation Association in 1933 found that swimming had become, by far, the most popular form of outdoor recreation in the country and that almost as many people swam frequently as went to the movies regularly (National Recreation Association, 1934).

The public pools opened during the interwar years also enabled an historic leap forward in swimming proficiency. As far back as the late 19th century, some public schools and the YMCA had offered swimming instruction, but these efforts were sporadic and limited by the paucity of pools at the time.⁵ The thousands of public pools built during the interwar years spurred a national “learn-to-swim” movement, in which cities and towns throughout the country offered free swim lessons at their public pools. There is no way to know how many people learned to swim through these annual campaigns, but it certainly numbered in the millions. More than 20,000 children participated in Chicago’s 1935 learn-to-swim campaign, and New York City Parks Commissioner Robert Moses reported in 1938 that 10,000 children and adults had “learned how to swim” in the city’s pools that year (“10,000 Here Taught to Swim,” 1938; “20,000 Children Learning to Swim in Park Campaign,” 1935). Americans first learned to swim in large numbers during the interwar years, and public pools provided most of the lessons.

In some cases, Black Americans participated in the swimming boom of the interwar years. The federal government opened two public swimming pools for Black residents of Washington, D.C., during this period—Francis Pool in 1928 and Banneker Pool in 1934. Both were state-of-the-art facilities. Francis Pool contained two outdoor pools, broad concrete decks, modern sanitation equipment, and viewing bleachers. The main tank measured 65 by 150 ft and ranged in depth from 3 ½ to 11 ft (“Swimming Pool is Opened Today,” 1928). According to an early manager, it was one of the finest pools in the country “exclusively for black swimmers” (Tyson, 1939, p. 2). If anything,

Banneker Pool was an even better facility. The *Washington Tribune*, the capitol's leading Black newspaper, described it as "one of the most elaborate [recreation] centers in the city" ("Fatty, Skinny, and All the Gang Were There," 1934). Just as was the case generally, these two large and appealing pools popularized swimming within Washington's Black community. Children and adults, males and females, middle class and poor all flocked to the pools ("Fatty, Skinny, and All the Gang Were There," 1934; "Society Views Splash Events at Swim Meet," 1928). During its first summer of operation, Francis Pool recorded nearly 28,000 swims. On weekend days, the pool often attracted more than 1,000 swimmers ("Pool for Negroes Attended by 27,915," 1928). By 1936, nearly 1,500 Black Washingtonians were swimming at Francis and Banneker pools on average each day (Eenten, 1936).

Active swim programs also developed at both pools. Each summer, the city and the Red Cross offered lessons for beginning swimmers, both children and adults ("District Pools Get Behind Learn-to-Swim Campaign," 1932; "Mothers Invited to Learn to Swim," 1938). And, both pools organized swim teams. As a result of the lessons and competitive swim programs, swimming quickly developed into a popular sport. By 1937, swimming had become so prevalent among Black children in the district that local schools formed their own swim teams and competed against one another at meets held at the two pools. The 1937 meet at Banneker Pool involved teams from 19 local schools, and the meet that year at Francis Pool involved swimmers from 10 schools ("2,000 Swimmers Enter In Recreation Events," 1937). During the late 1930s, James G. Tyson, an early manager, wrote a brief, unpublished history of Francis Pool, in which he proudly touted the pool's swimming program. Not only had it spurred a generation of Black Washingtonians to become enthusiastic swimmers, it had also given them, according to Tyson, "a sense of pride that has ever remained" (1939, p. 6). When provided access to appealing pools, swimming could and did become a centerpiece of Black Americans' summertime recreational life.

Unfortunately, Francis and Banneker pools are historical anomalies. They are the exception, not the rule, during the "swimming pool age." Most Black Americans faced systematic discrimination that severely limited their access to public swimming pools and the swim lessons offered at public pools. This discrimination was a response, in large part, to the gender integration of swimming pools. Most Whites objected to Black men having the opportunity to interact with White women at such intimate public spaces (Wiltse, 2007). The pattern of discrimination varied with the size and culture of the city. Large metropolises, which operated many pools, generally segregated Black swimmers at Jim Crow pools. In southern and border-state cities, segregation was officially mandated. Public officials relegated Black residents to one, typically small and dilapidated, pool, while Whites had access to many large resort-like pools. In northern cities, public officials encouraged de facto segregation by locating pools within racially homogenous neighborhoods. They might locate one pool within a Black residential neighborhood and the rest in thoroughly White neighborhoods. When Blacks sought admission to pools earmarked for Whites, White swimmers harassed and assaulted them. In this way, de facto segregation in northern cities such as Pittsburgh and Chicago was achieved through violence. In smaller communities

with only one pool, racial discrimination took the form of outright exclusion because there was no second pool to which Black residents could be relegated. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapters in some cities and towns challenged this racial discrimination through protests and lawsuits, but they were not successful during the 1920s and 1930s (Wiltse, 2007).

This discrimination severely limited Black Americans' opportunities to swim. St. Louis provides a telling example. Between 1913 and 1935, St. Louis opened seven new municipal pools. Two of them—Fairgrounds Park Pool and Marquette Park Pool—were giant leisure resorts, with circular pools measuring several hundred feet in diameter (Bartholomew, 1917). All seven of the pools opened in St. Louis between 1913 and 1935 were for Whites only. Throughout this entire period, the city's large Black population had no municipal pool in which to swim or take lessons (St. Louis Division of Parks and Recreation, 1935). Finally, in 1936, the city opened a pool for Black residents. Unlike the ones available to Whites, the Jim Crow pool was small and lacked leisure space (1937). Not surprisingly, it attracted comparatively few swimmers. Of the 1.5 million swims recorded at the city's pools in 1938, only 34,000 occurred at the Jim Crow pool (1939). Black Americans constituted more than 13% of the city's population at the time (108,000 of 816,000) but accounted for only 2% of the swimmers in its municipal pools (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1943). Blacks in St. Louis were not simply segregated from Whites—they were largely denied the opportunity to swim during this period when swimming first became popularized in the United States.

The story was almost precisely the same at YMCA pools. The YMCA increased its number of pools and significantly expanded its swimming programs during the interwar years. In the fiscal year ending April 30, 1919, the American branches of the YMCA operated 448 pools and administered 50,983 swim lessons (YMCA, 1919). By 1938, the American branches operated 684 pools and administered 476,509 swim lessons (1938, 1939). But, just as at public pools, Black Americans had access to very few of these pools and took relatively few swim lessons in comparison to Whites. In 1928, for example, there were 53 "Colored" YMCA branches throughout the country, only 18 of which (one third) contained a swimming pool. By contrast, there were 831 YMCA branches earmarked for Whites, 606 of which (nearly three fourths) contained a swimming pool (1928). The same year, 163,369 swim lessons were administered at YMCA branches located in the United States. Of those, only 3,193 (less than 2%) were taken by Blacks. The specific statistics for Chicago show more precisely the degree to which Black Americans were more limited in accessing swim lessons at YMCA pools than Whites. The 1928 YMCA yearbook shows that 105 lessons were administered at the one YMCA pool open to Black Chicagoans. This represents one lesson for every 2,230 Black residents at the time. By contrast, 4,047 swim lessons were administered at the twelve YMCA pools open to White Chicagoans. This represents one lesson for every 765 White residents at the time. When adjusted for population size, White Chicagoans took three times as many swim lessons at YMCA pools as did Black Chicagoans (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1932). The YMCA afforded some Black Americans access to pools and swim lessons, but, overall, Blacks had far less access than Whites.

The Paradox of Postwar Desegregation

Public swimming pools were racially desegregated in the United States after World War II. Desegregation occurred first in the North and West, where social protests and court orders broke down segregation during the late 1940s and early 1950s (Wiltse, 2007). Desegregation took longer in the South, where many public pools remained officially segregated well into the 1960s (Kuettner, 1963). Desegregation might have significantly narrowed the swimming gap between Blacks and Whites by giving Black Americans equal access to all public pools, but that is not what happened. Blacks did gain access to some additional pools, but their opportunities to swim remained limited due to a wave of pool closures that followed desegregation and by the racially segregated geography of northern cities.

Southern cities generally shut down their public pools in response to desegregation. When a federal judge ordered Montgomery, West Virginia, to open its municipal pool to Black residents in 1948, city officials drained the pool and locked the gates. For 14 years, the empty pool stood as a conspicuous reminder that racial prejudice was preventing Blacks and Whites in Montgomery from being able to swim (Wiltse, 2007). Birmingham, Alabama, closed all eight of its municipal pools in 1962 after a federal judge ordered them desegregated (“Birmingham Keeps Parks Closed,” 1962). Canton, Mississippi, closed its two public swimming pools in 1965 in response to integration efforts by local Black residents. For the next 23 years, Canton operated no public pools. It finally reopened one of the pools in 1988. “It was a long time coming,” commented Alderman Jewel Williams. “It was something we had to do and was needed. We had pools, and they were closed. That should never have happened” (“Pool Reopened After 23 Years,” 1988). But it did happen, and it happened in cities throughout the South (“Close 4 Fla. Pools Over Race Issue,” 1961; “Close Pool to Avoid Integration,” 1961; “Jackson Case Ruling,” 1971; Kuettner, 1963). And so, even after desegregation, the large number of African Americans living in the South had access to few swimming pools.

The response to racial desegregation in more northern cities was not as blunt, but the effects were similar. For one, residential segregation limited Black Americans’ access to public swimming pools, even after the pools were desegregated. In most northern cities, Blacks lived clustered in segregated neighborhoods, commonly referred to as “black belts” (Hirsch, 1983; Sugrue, 1996). Dating all the way back to the late 19th century, public officials had purposefully located most public pools in thoroughly White neighborhoods (Wiltse, 2007). During the postwar period, the existing pools were still located mostly in these neighborhoods far removed from concentrated areas of Black settlement. For Blacks living in most northern cities to take advantage of desegregation and access pools previously off-limits to them, they had to travel into a White neighborhood and swim with the locals. Prospective Black swimmers typically faced varying degrees of hostility that intimidated them from using these pools. Desegregation enabled northern Blacks to gain access to some additional pools, but, as the examples of Pittsburgh and Baltimore show, many pools located in thoroughly White sections of cities remained inaccessible.

At the start of the postwar period in 1945, Black residents of Pittsburgh had access to one small outdoor pool, whereas Whites could swim in more than 20 pools scattered throughout the city, including a giant resort pool in Highland Park ("Need for Democracy Cited Here," 1945). After a 6-year struggle, the local NAACP finally desegregated Highland Park Pool in 1951 ("5,000 Negroes Used Highland Park Pool This Year," 1952). A year later, after additional protests, the city promised to ensure Black swimmers safe access to a second public pool located near an African American neighborhood ("Minor Incidents at Paulson Pool to be Stopped," 1953). It seemed that the city's history of racially segregated pool-use was coming to an end. But that was not to be the case. For many years after 1952, most city pools remained the exclusive domain of Whites precisely because they were located within thoroughly White neighborhoods, and residents of those neighborhoods did not welcome Black swimmers. In 1962, for example, a sign placed outside West Penn Swimming Pool read, "No dogs or niggers allowed" ("Bigots Hurl Insults at Race Swimmer," 1962).

The story of desegregation in Baltimore was much the same. In 1953, the city operated seven outdoor pools—six for Whites and one for Blacks. The Whites-only facilities were distributed throughout the city and offered large pools, concrete sun decks, and grassy lawns. The city's only pool for Blacks, by contrast, was "quite small," according to the Baltimore Department of Recreation, and provided virtually no leisure space (Pangburn & Allen, 1943, p. 97; "Six Outdoor Pools for Whites Only," 1953). A federal appeals court forced the city to end segregation at its pools starting in 1956 (*Dawson v. Mayor and City Council of Baltimore*, 1955). The city obeyed the court order and stopped enforcing official segregation, but Black residents did not gain access to all the city pools. Three pools that had previously been for Whites only (but were located near Black residential neighborhoods) became accessible to Black swimmers: Druid Hill Park Pool no. 1, Clifton Park Pool, and Gwynn's Falls Park Pool. As a result of having access to these additional pools, Black residents' use of city pools increased 39% the first summer after desegregation ("1 Druid Hill Park City Pool Closed," 1956). And yet, just as was the case in Pittsburgh, Blacks in Baltimore still had less access to public pools than did Whites. For many years after 1956, the three pools located within predominately White neighborhoods—Riverside Park, Roosevelt Park, and Patterson Park—remained off-limits to Black swimmers ("Attendance Relatively Small as City's Public Pools Open," 1956; "Baltimore Arrests 13 in Racial Dispute," 1962). In 1963, for example, Floyd Stevens, director of the Clyburn Home for Orphans, brought a group of parentless children to swim at Roosevelt Park Pool. As the group approached, swimmers began to shout, "Nigger, get out of here." Two of the children—a 10-year-old boy and a 13-year-old girl—were Blacks. Stevens let the White orphans enter the pool but took the Black boy and girl back to the orphanage. As a newspaper account of the incident explained, "municipal pools in Baltimore have been declared integrated, but the one visited by the orphans has been used only by whites" ("2 Negro Orphans Jeered Out of Baltimore Pool," 1963).

While desegregation enabled northern Blacks to gain access to some public pools that had previously been off-limits, their use of these pools set off a chain of events that eventually led to many of them being closed. When Blacks began using pools that

had previously been earmarked for Whites, White swimmers often abandoned them en masse. In the summer of 1948, prior to the desegregation of St. Louis's Fairgrounds Pool, the city recorded 313,000 swims, all by Whites. In the years after desegregation, the number of swims per year plummeted to 20,000 and almost all the swimmers were now Blacks (St. Louis Division of Parks and Recreation, 1949, 1954). "It appears likely," the city's parks and recreation division explained with considerable understatement, "that the failure of the large outdoor pools to draw the huge number of swimmers that were attracted in the past may be a reflection of passive resistance to inter-racial swimming" (p. 18). In Baltimore, the total number of swims by Whites in city pools dropped by 62% after desegregation, but that figure actually understates White resistance to mixed-race swimming. Almost all the swims recorded by Whites took place at the three pools that remained off-limits to Blacks: Riverside, Roosevelt, and Patterson. At the previously Whites-only pools that Black Americans began using after desegregation, White attendance dropped by over 95%. "The white people in Druid Hill Park and Clifton Park areas have deserted [these pools]," noted Director of Parks and Recreation R. Brooke Maxwell, "because of the integration policy" ("Baltimore Reports Attendance Drop at Integrated Pools," 1956; "Integrated Baltimore Pool Shut," 1956).

When White attendance dwindled, public swimming pools became much less a priority than they had been previously. For one, cities opened few new pools during the period of desegregation. New York City and Washington, D.C., for example, opened a combined 19 new pools during the 1930s, but no new pools between 1945 and 1960 (Wiltse, 2007). Kansas City likewise built no new pools between 1945 and 1957, even though it operated only three at the time ("Grove Pool Is Closed," 1957). In addition to not building new pools, many cities closed existing pools—especially those serving minority swimmers—rather than pay for costly maintenance and repairs. St. Louis closed Fairgrounds Park Pool in 1956, 6 years after it was desegregated and abandoned by White swimmers (St. Louis Division of Parks and Recreation, 1958). In Washington, D.C., local officials let McKinley Pool fall into disrepair after it was desegregated in 1950 and its use changed from exclusively White to "predominately" Black. By 1960, the "pipes were corroded," the drainage system backed up, and the filtration system did not work properly. Rather than repair it, which is what local Black residents wanted, the federal government decided to close it ("McKinley Pool in Bad Condition," 1962; "Pickets Ask Reopening of Closed Pool," 1963). Public officials in Kansas City closed one of its pools in 1957 for similar reasons. After Grove Pool was desegregated in 1954, attendance plummeted because most Whites stopped using it. City officials then began to view the pool as a financial burden. Rather than pay the yearly operating deficit of US\$6,000, the city closed the facility even though it operated only two other pools ("Adieu to Grove Pool," 1957; "Grove Pool Is Closed," 1957). Swimming pools were no longer the high public priority they had been during the period of segregation.

Suburban Pools and the Postwar Swimming Boom

The decline of municipal pools during the postwar period did not affect all Americans equally. At the same time that cities built few new pools and closed many existing

pools, private swim clubs sprouted in the nation's suburbs like crabgrass during a wet spring. In 1950, there were approximately 1,200 private swim clubs nationally, whereas the National Swimming Pool Institute counted 10,550 such pools in 1959 and more than 23,000 in 1962 ("Data on Swimming Pools," 1952; "Large Splash Being Made by Pool Clubs," 1962). These suburban club pools sparked another massive surge in the popularity of swimming. They attracted millions of families as members and served as the center of summertime social life in the nation's burgeoning suburbs. The clubs offered regular swimming lessons and formed swim teams, which propelled competitive swimming to new heights of popularity. And yet, in a repetition of the past, racial minorities were almost entirely excluded from these pools where the post-war swimming boom occurred. They could not access the swim lessons, they could not join the swim teams, and they could not spend their summer days swimming and socializing at these suburban oases. This time, though, Black Americans were not alone. The suburban location of the swim clubs and the relatively high cost of membership effectively excluded poor and working-class Whites as well.

Suburban Washington, D.C., exemplifies the rapid growth of private swim clubs during the 1950s and 1960s. As tens of thousands of people moved into the D.C. suburbs following World War II, they found an inadequate supply of swimming pools. A small number of country club pools existed, but the many new subdivisions lacked pools. Beginning in the early 1950s, neighborhood families joined together to organize private swim clubs. Each family typically contributed between US\$150 and US\$200 for an ownership share, which covered the initial construction cost, and then paid yearly dues of US\$40 to US\$75 for upkeep and operating expenses ("The Cooperative Family Swim Club," 1959; Murray, 1959). By 1958, 125 club pools were operating in the Washington, D.C. area with a combined membership of 40,000, and several dozen more swim clubs were under construction ("Use of District Pools Cut in Half Since '48," 1959). The building spree continued unabated during the 1960s, with new clubs being built in Fort Washington, College Park, Calverton, London Towne, and many more Washington suburbs ("Calverton Will Have New Pool," 1965; "Community Pool Opens," 1960; "New Pool Group Lets Contract," 1962; "Pool Under Way at London Towne," 1969).

The tens of thousands of private swim clubs opened throughout the country further expanded the popularity of swimming. In many suburbs, swim clubs became the center of summertime social and recreational life. Kids in particular frequented the clubs day-after-day, often for hours at a time. They swam in the pools, sunbathed on the concrete decks, and played games on the grassy lawns. Families gathered at the clubs for evening barbecues and weekend recreation (Donihi, 1963). Swim clubs also offered swimming lessons, which meant that new members and young children had ample opportunity to learn ("How a Swim Club Was Born This Year," 1964). Some clubs even required children to demonstrate the ability to swim two lengths of the pool before they were allowed to use the diving board or enter the deep end (Harvey, 1962). Suburban swim clubs also became the seedbeds for the explosion of swimming as a participatory sport. Most clubs had swim teams that practiced several days a week and then competed against other area clubs. Just in the Washington, D.C., area, more than 200 swim club teams—involving 15,000 swimmers—participated in various suburban

leagues in 1972. "Area swim teams are being deluged with applicants and are expanding to . . . unimaginable numbers," reported the *Washington Post* (Attner, 1972).

In addition to the many club pools opened during the 1950s and 1960s, suburbanites also built hundreds of thousands of backyard pools. By one count, there were only 2,500 residential pools nationwide in 1950 ("Data on Swimming Pools," 1952). Ten years later that number had grown to more than 150,000, and, by 1970, there were approximately 800,000 ("Buyers Plunge to Get Into Swim as Installation of Pools Widens," 1960; "Swimming Pool Sales Making a Bigger Splash," 1971). Nearly all these residential pools were located in suburbs and satisfied several desires that were common among the nation's burgeoning suburban middle class. They advertised financial success and upward mobility, enabled owners to control their social environment, and provided an ideal setting for family recreation and at-home entertaining (Wiltse, 2007). Backyard pools and swim clubs became so ubiquitous during this period that swimming and pool play became a common, almost every day, part of suburban life.

This was a life, however, that few Black Americans could access. For one, few Black Americans lived in suburbs at the time, which meant that most were physically (and financially) cut off from backyard pools and private swim clubs (on the racial composition of postwar suburbs, see Jackson, 1985; Wiese, 2005). But even in cases where Blacks lived in or near suburbs and could afford the cost of membership at a private club, they were still excluded. The Washington, D.C., area had an unusually large Black middle class at the time and therefore provides a useful example of the racial discrimination at suburban swim clubs. The swim clubs located close to downtown Washington, including those in Chevy Chase and Bethesda, passed bylaws when they first opened in the 1950s that explicitly limited membership to White persons ("Chevy Chase Club Explains Stand on Membership," 1962; "Fairfax Club Affirms Barring of Negro Family," 1965; "Integration Vote Fails at Bethesda Swim Club," 1966). Swim clubs further removed from downtown relied, at least initially, on the racial exclusivity of their neighborhood to prevent Black families from joining. One club in suburban Maryland, for example, passed a residency requirement in 1958 mandating that members live within three fourths of a mile of the pool. The club did not receive a membership application from a Black family until 1968. When that first Black family applied, the club rejected its application, and members quickly voted not to allow any Black members. As the club could no longer rely on residential segregation to protect the racial composition of its membership, it now needed an explicit policy (*Tillman v. Wheaton-Haven Recreation Association*, 1973). Many other swim clubs in suburban Washington similarly passed explicit bylaws in the mid-to-late 1960s that barred Blacks from becoming members ("Club in New Carrollton Excludes Negro Family," 1968; "Integration Effort Fails at Virginia City Pool," 1966).

As a result of residential segregation and discriminatory membership policies, Black Americans simply did not have access to private swim clubs during this period. In 1968, for example, the Montgomery County (Maryland) Swimming League organized swim meets between 42 different swim clubs. Not one of the participating clubs had a single identifiably Black member (Feinberg, 1968). Noting the pervasive

discrimination against Black Americans at club pools generally, a Washington, D.C., judge lamented,

I suppose like many people I really didn't believe when the issue had to be faced that intelligent, well-educated, financially secure suburban middle-class people would effectively exclude a neighbor from a community [swimming pool] solely on the basis of race. ("Club in New Carrollton Excludes Negro Family," 1968)

And yet they did. Once again, swimming boomed in popularity at pools that were inaccessible to Black Americans.

"Giant-Sized Urinals"

During the late 1960s, there was a short burst of municipal-pool building, in which public officials suddenly prioritized providing swimming pools for urban Black Americans. The spark that ignited the pool-building spree was Chicago's 1966 race riot. The riot began on a hot mid-July day after police attempted to arrest Donald Henry for defiantly opening a fire hydrant located in the heart of the city's West Side Black belt. As the officers moved to detain Henry, onlookers began throwing rocks at them. Fifteen more police cars quickly rushed to the scene, and the angry crowd greeted them with a barrage of rocks, bottles, and bricks. The fire-hydrant dispute sparked 3 days of intense rioting on Chicago's West Side. In the end, three people were killed, countless injured, and 300 were arrested. The property damage was extensive ("1500 Troops Go to Area Ready to Shoot," 1966; "Police Get 12-Hour Duty in Westside Uproar," 1966).

The fire-hydrant confrontation did not merely precipitate the riot—it hinted at an underlying cause of it as well. Black Chicagoans seethed with anger in part because they lacked summertime recreation opportunities, especially swimming pools. "Hell, it's so God Damn hot," explained one man. "I'll cool my ass anywhere I want to. They ought to take some of that poverty money and put a swimmin' pool over here." The *Chicago Defender* agreed, noting that "a swimming pool may be the most immediate need the community faces" ("Police Get 12-Hour Duty in Westside Uproar," 1966). There were three municipal pools located within a mile of the riot flashpoint, but they were inaccessible to Black residents. The pools were located within White enclaves, where, according to one Westside resident, Blacks "can't go there without being beaten" ("Here's How a Westsider Explains the Outbreak," 1966). Even city officials acknowledged that the pools were not "readily available to Negroes because of hostility in the white community" ("The Pools Inadequate? The West Side Picture," 1966). A few years earlier, for example, 750 Whites attacked a group of Black swimmers with bricks and stones as they left the South Side's Bessemer Park Pool ("Race Riot in Chicago," 1960).

The 1966 Chicago riot prompted public officials to redress the historically inadequate provision of public pools for Black Americans. During the riot, Martin Luther King, Jr., met with Chicago mayor Richard Daley and advised him that swimming

pools would help alleviate some of the tensions that caused the riot. Three days later, the city purchased 10 small, pre-fabricated pools and quickly set them up in the “troubled neighborhoods” (“Guard Patrol Is Cut in Chicago Ghetto,” 1966). Daly then announced a long-range plan to build more than 100 “neighborhood” pools in Chicago (“Goal: A Pool for Every Neighborhood,” 1967). The federal government also became concerned about the lack of swimming pools for urban Blacks. Four days after the Chicago riot ended, President Lyndon Johnson announced that federal “anti-poverty” grants would be used to fund swimming pools for “disadvantaged youth” across the country. Within a month, the federal government had disbursed pool money to 40 metropolitan areas, including Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, and Atlanta (“Program Rushed for Slum Youth,” 1966). Providing summer recreation for urban Blacks had suddenly become a national priority.

Most of the municipal pools opened during this late-1960s building spree, however, did not provide viable recreation or encourage actual swimming. Overall, 70 of the 84 pools opened in New York, and all but 2 of the 32 pools eventually opened in Chicago were “mini-pools,” measuring only 20 by 40 ft and uniformly 3 ft deep. The pools were usually too crowded for swimming, so youngsters mostly stood in the water splashing. Nor did the mini-pools provide any leisure space. The tanks were surrounded by a narrow concrete perimeter and enclosed by a chain-link fence. Most did not have changing rooms either, so swimmers traveled to the pools in their swimsuits. Children in one New York neighborhood dubbed them “giant-sized urinals” (“32 New Pools to Help Chicago Keep Its Cool,” 1968; “Cool Minipools for the Hot Summer,” 1968; “Lindsay Smiles His Way Through City,” 1971). Such pools were not the type of facilities that would help popularize swimming among Black Americans. Nor did cities typically offer swimming instruction at the mini-pools (Brozan, 1976; “Feelings Vary on Swim Lessons,” 1976).

Pool Closings in Recent Times

The “mini-pool” building spree of the late 1960s was short lived. Whereas urban public pools had briefly been a national priority, pool building stalled in the 1970s. The primary reasons were economic. Ballooning budget deficits and the threat of bankruptcy forced many cities to abandon plans for future pools and put off costly maintenance and repairs on the existing pools. As a result, municipal pools deteriorated and came to reflect the poverty of urban America at the time. “Boards have replaced broken windows. The water fountain is broken. Walls are smeared with graffiti. The ground is littered and a burned car sits in the parking lot” (“Troubled Waters,” 1989). Although a bit extreme, this description of an abandoned Detroit swimming pool captures the general state of municipal pools during the 1970s and 1980s, especially in northern cities.

The fate of municipal pools in Youngstown, Ohio, exemplifies the general decline of public pools in the urban north. Youngstown operated eight public pools as of the early 1980s. Historically, the city’s pools had registered more than 200,000 swims per summer, but, by 1984, the pools recorded only 43,000 swims. The breakdown of de

facto racial segregation and the deteriorating condition of the pools largely account for the decline. Beginning in 1985, city officials began closing pools, citing the low attendance and the city's financial woes as the reasons. The city closed four pools between 1985 and 1988 and two more in 1991. Thereafter, Youngstown operated only two municipal pools and the annual attendance plummeted all the way down to 10,000 (Wiltse, 2007). The story in other cities was much the same. Between 1996 and 2004, Pittsburgh permanently closed 20 of its 32 pools in an effort to reduce its ballooning budget deficit. Some members of the city council complained that pools should be one of the last city services suspended, but most did not agree. As a result of the closings, Pittsburgh offered residents fewer municipal pools in 2005 than it had in 1925 (Wiltse, 2007). Even rapidly growing metropolitan areas reduced their provision of public pools during this period. The city and county of Los Angeles operated 87 public pools in 1975, when their combined population was 7.1 million ("City Pools Open," 1974; "County Swimming Pools to Be Free," 1975; "Los Angeles County Population Growth," 2000). By 2005, when the population had grown to 9.8 million, the city and county operated 81 pools (City of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation, 2006; County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation, 2005-2006; "Estimated Population of Los Angeles County," 2005).

The economic recession that began in 2008 caused a new wave of pool closures. As Jeffrey Collins explained in a 2011 Associated Press article, "From New York City to Sacramento, Calif., pools now considered costly extravagances are being shuttered, taking away a rite of summer for millions" (Collins, 2011). Sacramento closed 9 of its 12 public pools during the recession. Cincinnati closed 11 of its 39 pools. Phoenix shuttered almost one third of its pools but did reopen them in 2012. Residents of Tucson were not so lucky. The city "temporarily" closed 17 of its 27 pools in 2010, but 11 never reopened (Collins, 2011; O'Dowd, 2010; Sexton, 2012). Other cities—including Atlanta, Baltimore, Houston, and Philadelphia—closed some pools and struggled to keep others open by reducing hours, shortening the summer season, and relying on last-minute corporate donations (McKinley, 2011; Skwine, 2009). In assessing the provision of public swimming pools nationwide in 2011, Bill Beckner, the research manager for the National Park and Recreation Association, concluded, "There's some [cities] treading water, and some [that] are sinking" (McKinley, 2011).

These waves of pool closures have affected poor and working-class Americans most severely. Whereas middle- and upper-class Americans—especially those living in suburbs—have ample access to private swimming pools, the urban poor rely primarily on public recreation facilities. When a public pool closes in their neighborhood, they often have no alternative place to swim. During the midst of the pool closures in Youngstown, for example, city officials considered closing North Side Pool, one of the few pools that remained open. Local councilwoman Darlene Rogers objected, pointing out that it was one of the only recreation spaces available to children in the area. "My concern is that it is the only pool left on the North Side. If we close the pool, there won't be any place for those kids to swim. And we don't have many other recreation activities for them" ("Youngstown May Close Second Pool," 1989). Ed Gonzalez, a city councilman in Houston, expressed the same point in 2009 after the city closed

Independence Heights pool, which was located in a historically Black neighborhood with many poor and working-class residents. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Gonzalez emphasized that the loss of a public pool in this neighborhood was much more consequential than the loss of a pool in a well-to-do neighborhood. “There are no other true community assets out there. Your neighborhood park and your pools are the only real amenities that some of these communities have” (McKinley, 2011). The more municipal pools close, the less opportunity the urban poor has to swim. As Collins points out in his AP article on the recent pool closings, the poor “can’t afford a membership to [a] private pool or fitness club and don’t live in a neighborhood where they can befriend someone with a backyard pool” (Collins, 2011).

To the extent to which Black Americans are over-represented among the urban poor, public pool closings reinforce the longstanding swimming disparity between Blacks and Whites. But the decline of public pools has also created a class-based swimming disparity. In recent times, middle- and upper-class Americans have learned to swim in high proportion to their overall numbers because they have easy access to swimming pools and can afford to pay for swim lessons. Access to swimming pools and swim lessons for poor and working-class Americans is far more variable. Some are fortunate to live near an affordable pool, which enables them to swim regularly. Many others, however, are not so fortunate. They do not have easy access to an appealing and affordable pool or to swim lessons. As a result, poor and working-class Americans of all racial identities are less likely to know how to swim than middle-and-upper-class Americans (Irwin et al., 2008). Whereas the current racial disparity in swimming and drowning is largely a product of what happened in the past, this class-based disparity is largely a product of what is happening now and will likely widen in the future unless the nation reprioritizes the funding of public swimming pools.

Conclusion

The primary contention of this article—that past discrimination in the provision of and access to swimming pools is largely responsible for the current disparity in swimming rates between Blacks and Whites—seems to conflict with the conclusions of a major study on minority swimming released in 2010. In a report titled “Constraints Impacting Minority Swimming Participation, Phase II,” researchers at the University of Memphis concluded that “When tested against other variables under investigation swim facility proximity and access . . . were not found to be significant contributors to swim ability” (Irwin et al., 2010a, p. 10). This is a dubious conclusion. For one, the study suffers from a severe sample bias in its sources, especially related to this conclusion. The study was organized through the YMCA and is based on interviews of YMCA members conducted at local branches in six metropolitan areas—Atlanta, Boston, Denver, Memphis, Minneapolis/St. Paul, and San Diego. The published report does not indicate at which branches the interviews took place, but it would have been difficult for the researchers to avoid ones that contained a swimming pool. Eighty percent of the YMCA branches in those six metropolitan areas have swimming pools.⁶ It is not surprising, therefore, that among this subject set “swim facility proximity and access” did not play a significant role in determining whether they could swim or not.

But even setting this sample bias aside, the social and cultural factors identified in the study as responsible for the swimming disparity between Blacks and Whites seem to be legacies of the past discrimination detailed in this article. The study determined that parental involvement and encouragement were “critical to [a] child’s swimming ability.” The report quoted one parent who explained, “A lot of African American and Latinos don’t swim because their parents don’t swim, they don’t encourage it” (Irwin et al., 2010a, p. 8). A second primary cause of the swimming disparity, according to the study, was widespread fear of water and drowning among Black Americans. Finally, the report pointed to “cultural expectations”—especially the popular perception that swimming is something White people do—to explain the low rates of swimming among Black children (Irwin, Irwin, Martin, & Ross, 2010b, p. 7).

These explanations beg the question why. Why are Black parents less likely to swim and less likely to take their children swimming than White parents? Why are Black Americans more likely to fear water and drowning than Whites? Why is swimming assumed to be a White recreational activity?

The history presented in this article provides the answers. There were two periods in American history when swimming surged in popularity—during the 1920s and 1930s and again during the 1950s and 1960s. In both periods, the growing number of swimming pools enabled the swimming boom. Large numbers of Whites had easy access to the public pools of the interwar period and the suburban pools of the postwar period, whereas Black Americans did not. The swimming disparity that exists today dates back to these two periods. Some Black Americans learned to swim during the interwar period and postwar period, but a much smaller percentage than Whites. As a result, swimming never became a significant part of Black Americans’ recreation and sport culture as it did for Whites. The swimming disparity thus passed down from one generation to the next. With some exceptions, it never became common for Black families to spend their summers at a swimming pool, as was the case for millions of White families. And, swimming—both as a life-saving skill and competitive sport—has not, in general, been passed down from parents to children within Black families as it has among Whites. This is precisely what the “Constraints Impacting Minority Swimming Participation” study found, but the researchers did not connect these explanations for the current swimming disparity with their historical roots. They dismissed the importance of “swim facility proximity and access,” because they did not look into the past, to the periods in which the swimming disparity was created.

Current efforts at addressing the race-based swimming disparity—motivated in part by the belief that it is largely responsible for the race-based drowning disparity—deserve much praise. USA Swimming’s “Make a Splash” initiative has raised awareness about both disparities and taught many children to swim. Begun in 2007, the program has granted more than US\$2.5 million “to provide free or low cost swimming lessons to children who may not otherwise have a chance.” In total, 1.4 million children have received instruction (“Make a Splash,” 2013). “Make a Splash” will certainly save lives, but history suggests that more is needed to close the swimming and drowning gap between Blacks and Whites and, just as importantly, counteract the growing class-based disparity. Rates of swimming increased drastically when Americans had access to desirable pools that caused swimming to become a frequent

and popular activity, integral to the social and recreational life of the community. Affordable, accessible, and, most importantly, appealing swimming pools are needed to popularize swimming among Black Americans and expand access for poor and working-class Americans more generally. It worked during the 1920s and 1930s, when public money funded thousands of resort-like outdoor pools. Recall, in particular, the vibrant swimming culture that developed within Washington DC's Black community. It would also work today. The problem, of course, is that many new public pools would cost much more than US\$2.5 million dollars and, despite the nation's phenomenal wealth, Americans are reluctant to fund public recreation. Today is a far cry from the Great Depression, a time when the nation spent lavishly on public swimming pools despite the historic economic hardships.

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Notes

1. A study funded by USA Swimming found that 58.2% of White children and adolescents were "skilled" swimmers as compared to 31.2% of Black children and adolescents (Irwin, Irwin, Martin, & Ross, 2010a, p. 20). Another study calculated the annual drowning rate among Black children at 1.34 deaths per 100,000 population and the rate among White children at 0.48 deaths per 100,000 (Laosee, Gilchrist, & Rudd, 2012).
2. One exception is a 2010 article published in the *International Journal of Design and Nature and Ecodynamics* that contends there are physical explanations (different centers of gravity) for why the fastest runners in the world are Black and the fastest swimmers are White (Bejan, Jones, & Charles, 2010). For a critique of this argument, see Myers (2011).
3. The relationship between swimming ability and the risk of drowning is complicated and requires more thorough study (Brenner, Saluja, & Smith, 2003). The general consensus among scholars, doctors, and concerned organizations, however, is that swim lessons and swimming proficiency lower the risk of drowning deaths and that Black Americans are more likely to drown than Whites in part because they are less likely to know how to swim. In a 2011 article published in the *Journal of Black Studies*, a group of researchers who had undertaken a major study on minority swimming noted that "adequate swimming skills are considered a protective agent toward the prevention of drowning" and identified swimming ability as a "possible cause" for the drowning disparity between Blacks and Whites (Irwin, Irwin, Ryan, & Drayer, 2011). A 2010 technical report published by the American

Academy of Pediatrics identified “poor swimming ability” as one of the “important factors” that may account for the drowning disparity between Blacks and Whites (Weiss, 2010). A 2009 study funded by the National Institute of Health found that swim lessons reduced the risk of drowning among children 1 to 4 years old by 88% and reduced the risk of drowning among children five to nineteen, although the reduction for the older age group was not “statistically significant.” The researchers who conducted the study concluded that the results for the older group were inconclusive because of the small sample size. They studied only 27 incidents of drowning for that group, of which seven knew how to swim (Brenner et al., 2009; “Swimming Lessons Do Not Increase Drowning Risk in Young Children,” 2009). Finally, the explicit rationale behind USA Swimming’s “Make a Splash” initiative and the “Constraints Impacting Minority Swimming Participation” study is that the higher drowning rate among Black Americans is caused in large part by their lower rates of swimming proficiency (Irwin et al., 2010a, p. 3). None of this is conclusive, but it is the current consensus.

4. Although much less blatant and pervasive than in the past, Black Americans do still face potential racial discrimination in accessing swimming pools, as exemplified by the 2009 Valley Club incident in which a private swim club in suburban Philadelphia cancelled a lease agreement with an inner-city day camp after club members encountered Black and Latino campers in the pool. When pressed to explain
5. why the club would not permit the campers back, club president John Duesler stated, “there was concern that a lot of kids would change the complexion . . . and the atmosphere of the club” (Gerhart, 2009; Tillman & Stendahl, 2009).
6. The Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) was the most consistent provider of swimming instruction during the early 20th century, but it served only a fraction of the population. Between May 1909 and April 1910, for example, the YMCA operated 293 swimming pools at which 15,778 lessons were given, which meant that approximately 2,600 individuals actually learned to swim in YMCA pools during that 12-month period. I base the 2,600 figure on later reports issued by the YMCA, indicating that approximately one person passed the beginner’s swim test for every six swim lessons given (see YMCA, 1910, 1935).
7. By my count, there are 54 YMCA branches in the six metropolitan areas and 43 of them have swimming pools. This information is based on YMCA webpages as of August 7, 2013.

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