Ten-year-old boy killed, three girls injured in separate US amusement park accidents

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The August 7 death of 10-year-old Caleb Schwab at the Kansas City, Kansas, Schlitterbahn waterpark, as well as the unrelated injuries of three young girls at a Tennessee theme park one day later, has shone a light on the dangerously under-regulated amusement park industry in the United States.

Schlitterbahn operates water parks throughout Texas in addition to the park in Kansas. Schwab was killed, in circumstances still unclear to the public at large, in an accident on its Kansas City Verruckt water slide on Sunday afternoon.

Verruckt, which means "insane" in German, is the world's highest water slide. It drops its riders, who are buckled into rubber rafts with Velcro straps, down a 168-foot incline at speeds of more than 60 miles per hour. Prior to Schwab's death, many visitors had voiced concerns to Schlitterbahn staff about the reliability of the Velcro straps. At least one Schlitterbahn visitor has reported that, just prior to Schwab's death on the ride, her safety strap had come undone.

A witness at the scene of Schwab's accident reported to NBC News and to CNN that he saw the boy's body floating, apparently decapitated, in the pool at the end of the ride. Autopsy reports released to the public cite the cause of his death as "an unspecified neck injury."

A day after Caleb Schwab's death, three girls were injured after falling from a Ferris wheel at the Greene County Fair in eastern Tennessee. The girls, ages 6, 10, and 16, fell at least 35 feet after the basket they were riding in overturned. They struck the steel railing of the ride before falling to the ground. The 10-year-old is reportedly in good condition. The 16-year-old, whose condition was initially reported as critical, is now in stable condition. The 6-year-old, though, suffered a traumatic brain injury; she had to be intubated at the scene before being flown to a trauma unit. As of publication, she remains unconscious in critical condition.

Schlitterbahn's Verruckt ride will remain closed until it is re-inspected, in accordance with Kansas's state laws. All mechanical rides at the Greene County Fair will be shut down pending investigation by an independent inspector.

Both instances highlight the perilously lax federal regulation of amusement parks, though. Schlitterbahn proudly boasts on its website that its rides are inspected daily, though these inspections are done by Schlitterbahn employees. Kansas law only requires that permanent rides like Verruckt be inspected annually—by a private inspector hired by the theme park.

The Ferris wheel in Tennessee was reportedly inspected in Indiana on June 21, and was set for another inspection on August 13. However, Family Attraction Amusements, which owns and operates the rides at the fair, was not subject to inspection after setting up for the fair in Tennessee.

Amusement parks have not been overseen by a federal regulatory body since 1981, when the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission was stripped of its jurisdiction over the parks. This came about on a wave of broader deregulation maneuvers as part of domestic budget cuts under President Ronald Reagan. This has left the states to regulate the rides, with varying degrees of stringency.

In many cases, the states have left theme park companies to oversee their own operations, with different standards for permanent rides such as Schlitterbahn's Verruckt and movable carnival rides such as Family Attraction Amusements' Ferris wheel in Tennessee.

Five states—Alabama, Mississippi, South Dakota,

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Nevada, and Utah—require absolutely no oversight for amusement parks. Three of the best-known and most profitable amusement parks, Walt Disney World, Universal Studios, and Busch Gardens, all located in the state of Florida, are completely exempt from any sort of investigation from the state, even in the case of accidents. They voluntarily submit a quarterly report on accidents and injuries, but the state has no power to investigate accidents that occur in those parks.

Amusement parks such as Schlitterbahn draw an estimated 300 million visitors a year. Thousands of people—as many as 3,000 a year—are injured on the rides at these parks. At least two people have died annually, on average, since the deregulation of amusement parks. It is difficult to gauge the rate of accidents and fatalities, though; combined with the absence of federal oversight is the corrosive and obfuscating effect of the amusement park lobby on the gathering and reporting of statistics.

The International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA), headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, spent over $1 million in 2015, lobbying congress against regulations for amusement parks.

The IAAPA is the sole body that gathers and aggregates statistics on theme park accidents, injuries and deaths, and it does so by commissioning the National Safety Commission to survey the association's members. Not all IAAPA member businesses are invited to participate in the survey, and not all who are invited elect to do so.

In 2014, the IAAPA asked 403 member organizations to share their data with the commission. Only 188 parks shared their statistics. Yet the IAAPA uses this unscientific method to proclaim that amusement parks in America are safe enough to remain exempt from federal oversight, and Congress has consistently subordinated the safety of American park-goers to industry profitability and federal budget concerns.

In cases like Schwab's, congressional indifference intersects fatally with the amusement park industry's drive for profit. Parks compete for the most extreme attractions, in which passengers are hurled at speeds of up to 80 miles an hour down ever-rising heights on rides that are not independently audited for safety. Agencies such as the IAPAA are left to oversee themselves, which leads to unreliable safety data for consumers. This is part and parcel of the logic of capitalism where workers' safety is left to the caprices of industrial bosses in the name of profits.

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