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Government Moving to Ban Drop-Side Cribs

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WASHINGTON — They've been a fixture in millions of American homes since the 1940s, used by parents, then passed down to friends and relatives. But the federal government is moving to ban drop-side cribs, saying the nursery furniture with a movable side poses lethal dangers to children.

By the end of this year, it will no longer be legal to sell a drop-side crib. And places of public accommodation — day-care centers and hotels — will be prohibited from using them, federal officials said. Under rules now being developed, violators would face a range of penalties, from an order to stop use to criminal sanctions for repeat offenders.

Drop-side cribs — which have one side that lowers to allow caregivers easy access to a baby or a toddler — have caused at least 32 infant deaths in this country since 2000, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Fourteen other fatalities could be related to drop-side cribs, but investigators lacked information to make a clear link, according to agency officials.

"There have been few too many recalls and far too many deaths from defective cribs in recent years,"

said Inez Tenenbaum, chairman of the safety commission.

A crib is the one place meant to be safe enough to leave a child unattended; when it malfunctions, the infant is usually alone.

Since 2005, more than 7 million drop-side cribs have been recalled by manufacturers because of suffocation and strangulation

hazards, including one last year involving 2 million StorkCraft cribs that amounted to the largest single product recall in the safety commission's history.

It is unclear whether manufacturing changes have made the cribs more dangerous or whether the government has gotten better at pinpointing the cause of infant deaths.

Many deaths associated with drop-side cribs occurred when the movable side partially detached, trapping the infant between the mattress and wooden slats of the crib. In some cases, caregivers unwittingly installed the drop side incorrectly. In other cases, the crib hardware apparently failed and the side detached.

The crib industry maintains that drop-side cribs are not inherently hazardous.

"When these products are used correctly, they're perfectly safe," said Mike Dwyer, executive director of the Juvenile Products Manufacturers Association, which represents about 90 percent of crib manufacturers. "Many of these incidents involved improper assembly. There are a lot of secondhand cribs sold through garage sales, thrift stores — and that's a problem. They have missing hardware or missing instructions. "... Some parents and

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caregivers are using baling wire and duct tape."

Nancy Cowles, executive director of Kids in Danger, a nonprofit organization that works to improve the safety of children's products, said the fact that a crib can be assembled incorrectly is a design flaw, not the fault of the caregiver. And problems with drop-side cribs have grown as manufacturers switched to lighter, less-expensive materials, she said.

"I had all three of my kids in a drop-side crib," said Cowles, whose youngest child is now 16. "But they were different then. I think with the efforts to make cribs sleeker and switch to more plastic, we've ended up with more drop sides that can't hold up to the use."

Federal officials do not know how many drop-side cribs are in use in this country. They once made up about half the market of new cribs purchased, Cowles said. By early 2009, after a spate of recalls, drop sides fell to about 18 percent of 2.5 million new cribs sold annually, Dwyer said.

But because cribs can cost as much as \$1,000, they are often used repeatedly in a family, handed down to friends or sold again, making it difficult to estimate what percentage of the total marketplace they currently represent.

Cowles and other consumer advocates have been talking with federal regulators and crib manufacturers for nearly 10 years about ways to make drop-side cribs safer, with little action. Federal safety standards for cribs were last updated in 1982.

But in 2008, Congress ordered the safety commission to set new standards for cribs, baby bathtubs and other durable products for children. When Tenenbaum became agency chairman last

year, she put crib safety on a fast track and told her staff to craft a ban on drop-side cribs.

At the same time, Tenenbaum urged ASTM International — the organization that sets voluntary standards for materials, products, systems and services — to prohibit drop-side cribs. "I got them on the phone, and said, 'You need to work with us right now to have the best voluntary standard possible,'" Tenenbaum told a congressional committee in January. ASTM International agreed to ban drop-side models; those voluntary standards for crib makers take effect next month.

Most of the cribs recalled in recent years met the voluntary ASTM International standards, however, leading consumer advocates to argue that new federal requirements should be tougher than voluntary standards.

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