

Every Child a Swimmer

MARCH 2021

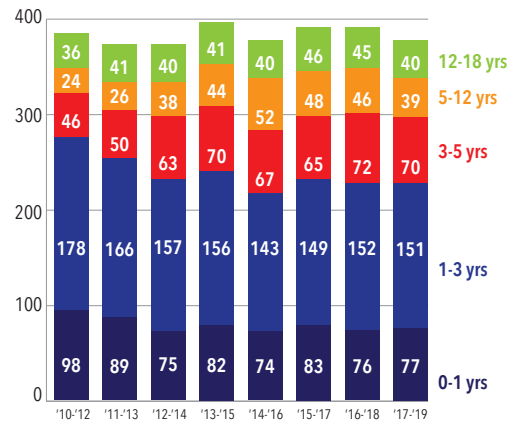
Water, water, everywhere! Florida has more than 8,436 miles of shoreline^{1,2} and an estimated 1.5 million residential swimming pools.³ It should come as no surprise then that Florida leads the U.S. in unintentional drowning deaths of children ages 1–4.⁴ Most of these drowning deaths occur in home swimming pools. In contrast, infants who drown are more likely to drown in sinks, bathtubs, buckets, etc., while children aged five years or older who drown are more likely to drown in rivers, lakes, and other natural bodies of water.

As shown in Figure 1, the number of drownings among Florida children aged 0-3 has decreased by about 17 percent over the past decade. State and local laws that require more fencing and security features around family swimming pools, and increased awareness of the dangers of allowing children to play unsupervised near family pools, have undoubtedly made a difference.

The number of drownings among children aged 3-5 years, however, has increased more than 50 percent in the past decade. For children aged 5-12, the number of drownings has increased by more than 62 percent.

1 NOAA Office for Coastal Management, "Shoreline Mileage of the United States," retrieved from <https://coast.noaa.gov/data/docs/states/shorelines.pdf>, January 4, 2021.
 2 NOAA defines shoreline mileage of the outer coast to include offshore islands, sounds, bays, rivers, and creeks to the head of tidewater or to a point where tidal waters narrow to a width of 100 feet.
 3 Source: Florida Swimming Pools Association.
 4 Florida Department of Health, "Drowning Prevention," retrieved from <http://www.floridahealth.gov/programs-and-services/prevention/drowning-prevention/index.html>, January 2, 2021.

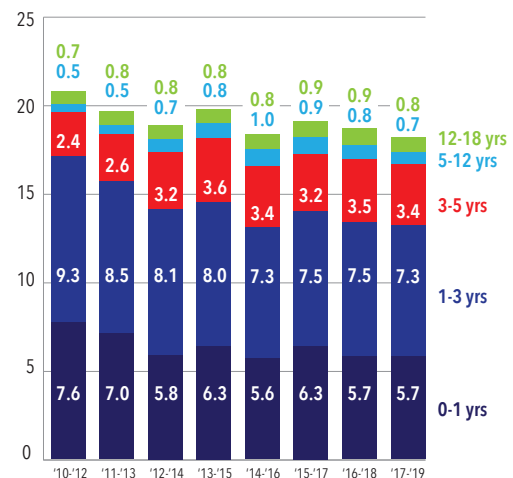
FIGURE 1. THE NUMBER OF UNINTENTIONAL DROWNINGS AMONG CHILDREN 3-12 HAS INCREASED STEADILY OVER THE PAST DECADE



Source: Florida Department of Health, FLHealthCHARTS Data Viewer (January 3, 2021).

Figure 2 shows the number of unintentional drownings per 100,000 population (rate). As shown in Figure 2, the rate of unintentional drownings among children aged 3-5 has increased more than 40 percent over the past decade.

FIGURE 2. THE RATE OF UNINTENTIONAL DROWNINGS AMONG CHILDREN 3-5 HAS INCREASED MORE THAN 40% OVER THE PAST DECADE



Source: Florida Department of Health, FLHealthCHARTS Data Viewer (January 3, 2021).

According to a water safety survey conducted by the American Red Cross:⁵

- While the majority of Americans say they can swim, one-in-five cannot swim. Almost one-third of those who cannot swim are African-Americans.
- More than half (56 percent) of all Americans “either can’t swim or don’t have all of the basic swimming skills.”⁶
- Six-in-ten Americans have not taken professional swimming lessons. More than one-third (37 percent) reported that they taught themselves to swim.
- For non-swimming adults, fear and access were reported as the main barriers to childhood swimming.
- Only 39 percent of parents of children aged 4-17 report that their child(ren) has all five of the basic water safety skills.
- Forty-six percent of the survey respondents reported that they have had an experience in the water when they thought they might drown.

It is hard to imagine the trauma a parent goes through in dealing with the drowning death of a child. The natural order of things reflects an expectation that a child will bury his/her parents, not the other way around. Childhood drownings induce a wide range of psychological and other problems, such as depression, anxiety, guilt, etc., which can be devastating to a family. The drowning death of a child has significant economic impacts as well.

Estimating the value of a lost child is difficult because a child has not completed his/her education and has not embarked on a career path. The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), an independent Federal agency that protects the public against unreasonable risk of injury or death from thousands of household and consumer products, uses estimates of the value per statistical life (VSL) to value risk reductions. The CPSC currently applies a VSL of \$8.7 million (2014 dollars) in its analyses.⁷

Studies generally suggest that the value of reducing risks to children may exceed the VSL for adults by a factor of 1.2 to 3.0, increasing the VSL for a child to \$10.4 million to \$26.2 million.⁸ As shown in Figure 1, in 2017-19 there were 298 unintentional drownings of children aged 5 years or less. If all of these drowning deaths could be avoided, the economic risk reduction would be in the range of \$3.1 billion - \$7.8 billion.

In a July 2020 random telephone poll conducted by Mason-Dixon Polling & Strategy for Florida TaxWatch, 625 registered voters statewide were asked the following questions: (1) Do you know how to swim? and (2) Do you think every child should or should not learn to swim as a basic life skill? Statewide, 90 percent of the respondents answered “yes” when asked if they knew how to swim, and 95 percent answered “yes” when asked if every child should learn to swim as a basic life skill.⁹

While there was little variation among respondents in terms of age, sex, and region of the state, there were considerable differences among respondents based upon their race. Although “yes” responses to both questions by Hispanic and White respondents exceeded the statewide averages, 59 percent of Black respondents answered that they knew how to swim, and 85 percent of Black respondents thought that every child should learn to swim as a basic life skill.¹⁰

“The members of our association share with all Floridians the goal of preventing childhood drowning and related accidents. We believe swimming lessons are the ultimate water safety feature, and FSPA is focused on sponsoring programs which will provide swimming instruction at little or no cost to the young children who need it most.”

– **Wendy Parker-Barsell**, Executive Director,
Florida Swimming Pool Association¹¹

5 American Red Cross, “Water Safety Poll,” May 5, 2014.

6 These include (1) Stepping or jumping into the water over your head; (2) returning to the surface and floating or treading water for one minute; (3) turning around in a full circle and finding an exit; (4) swimming 25 yards to the exit without stopping; and (5) exiting from the water (if in a pool, being able to exit without using the ladder).

7 Industrial Economics, Incorporated, “Valuing Reductions in Fatal Risks to Children Final Report,” January 3, 2018.

8 Industrial Economics, Incorporated, “Valuing Reductions in Fatal Risks to Children Final Report,” January 3, 2018.

9 Mason-Dixon Polling & Strategy, “July 2020 Florida Poll.”

10 Ibid.

11 Kevin Derby, “Lori Berman Champions Water and Pool Safety for Children Bill in the Florida Senate,” Florida Daily, December 30, 2020, retrieved from <https://www.floridadaily.com/lori-berman-champions-water-and-pool-safety-for-children-bill-in-the-florida-senate/>, December 30, 2020.

EVERY CHILD A SWIMMER

The real tragedy lies in the fact that most of these childhood drownings could be prevented by making sure everyone in the family knows how to swim. In furtherance of this, Senator Lori Berman has filed Senate Bill (SB) 358 which, if enacted into law, would require each child who is entitled to admittance to kindergarten, or who is entitled to any other initial entrance into a public or private school in Florida, to present a certificate showing they had successfully completed a nationally recognized water safety education course and nationally recognized age-appropriate swimming lessons within one year prior to enrollment in school. The State Board of Education is charged with adopting rules necessary to administer and enforce SB 358 by the beginning of the 2022-23 school year. These rules must prescribe the form of the certification and define "nationally recognized," "water safety education course," and "age-appropriate swimming lessons."

Responsibility for assuring that a child is in compliance with the requirements of SB 358 rests with the child's parents. This places the burden of finding a public or private instructor, signing up for the lessons, transporting the child to and from the lessons, as well as paying any costs associated with the swimming lessons, squarely on a child's parents. Free swimming lessons are available in many Florida communities through community organizations such as the American Red Cross and YMCA/YWCA; however, this would not relieve the additional burdens, which would disproportionately impact low-income and single-parent families.

It is important to note that a child may be exempted from the certification requirement if the child's parent submits a written objection, based on any grounds, to the school in which the child is enrolled or into which the child is entering.

"I am proud to sponsor this common-sense legislation that could potentially save lives. The benefits of healthy, happy water activities can lead to a lifelong love and joy of the water. Ensuring children learn water safety and swimming at an early age will lock in confidence in these children so they will have a love, and not fear, of water and water-related activities."

– State Senator Lori Berman (D-31)¹²

Similar legislation (HB 1119) has been filed in the House by Representatives Dan Daley and James Mooney, Jr. HB 1119 would, beginning with the 2022-23 school year, require district school boards and the governing authorities of private schools to ask the parent or guardians of children if the child has completed a water safety education course and age-appropriate swim lessons. If the child has not taken such course or lessons, the school must offer a document that states the importance of water safety education courses and swimming lessons and provides five options for free or reduced priced swimming lessons.

THE TAXWATCH TAKE

Florida TaxWatch believes it is essential that children are taught how to swim at an early age. Swimming is perhaps the only sport or physical activity that will save a life, so making sure children are comfortable in and around the water is paramount to their safety. Swimming also helps to build endurance, muscle strength and cardiovascular fitness. Like other forms of exercise, swimming has been linked to improved mental health by reducing stress, anxiety, and depression.¹³ Florida TaxWatch commends Senator Berman and Representatives Daley and Mooney for their efforts to prevent unintentional childhood drownings.

¹² Kevin Derby, "Lori Berman Champions Water and Pool Safety for Children Bill in the Florida Senate," Florida Daily, December 30, 2020, retrieved from <https://www.floridadaily.com/lori-berman-champions-water-and-pool-safety-for-children-bill-in-the-florida-senate/>, December 30, 2020.

¹³ See, e.g., Donaldson S.J., Ronan K.R. (2006), "The Effects of Sports Participation on Young Adolescents' Emotional Well-Being." *Adolescence*, 41(162), 369-89., and Steptoe A.S. Butler N. (1996), "Sports Participation and Emotional Wellbeing in Adolescents," *The Lancet*, 347(9018), 1789-1792.

ABOUT FLORIDA TAXWATCH

As an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit taxpayer research institute and government watchdog, it is the mission of Florida TaxWatch to provide the citizens of Florida and public officials with high quality, independent research and analysis of issues related to state and local government taxation, expenditures, policies, and programs. Florida TaxWatch works to improve the productivity and accountability of Florida government. Its research recommends productivity enhancements and explains the statewide impact of fiscal and economic policies and practices on citizens and businesses.

Florida TaxWatch is supported by voluntary, tax-deductible donations and private grants, and does not accept government funding. Donations provide a solid, lasting foundation that has enabled Florida TaxWatch to bring about a more effective, responsive government that is accountable to the citizens it serves since 1979.

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