

Every Child a Swimmer: 2024 Update

February 2024

Drowning, a tragic and often preventable accident, continues to be a significant public health concern in the United States. Drowning is the leading cause of death in children ages 1 to 4 and the second leading cause of unintentional injury death for children ages 5 to 12. Approximately 4,000 people die nationwide because of unintentional drowning each year and 8,000 are hospitalized.¹ Drowning is perhaps the most preventable cause of death, making it more essential to dig deep and ensure prevention.

Surrounded by water on three sides, Florida has a shoreline of 8,436 miles and a record 1.59 million residential swimming pools, highest in the nation.² With many very accessible waterbodies, Florida also has the highest number of unintentional drowning deaths in children ages 1 to 4, ranks 5th in unintentional drowning deaths across all age groups, and 3rd in youth aged 0 to 17.³ A 2021 Florida TaxWatch briefing titled “Every Child A Swimmer” displays data on unintentional drowning deaths amongst youth while urging the importance of swimming lessons as means to prevent children drowning.⁴

Unintentional Drowning Deaths in Florida

Over the past decade, the number of drownings among Florida children has remained relatively constant. State and local laws requiring more fencing around pools and overall awareness about the dangers of leaving children unsupervised by pools and water bodies have at least limited increase in child drownings.

As seen in Figure 1, the number of unintentional drowning deaths among children ages 0 to 18 has increased from 275 in 2012 to 306 in 2022. Drowning deaths among children ages 0 to 4 had decreased before the Covid-19 pandemic before increasing again to 202 in 2021, the highest portion of the total. For children ages 4 to 12, the number of drownings has almost doubled over the past decade.

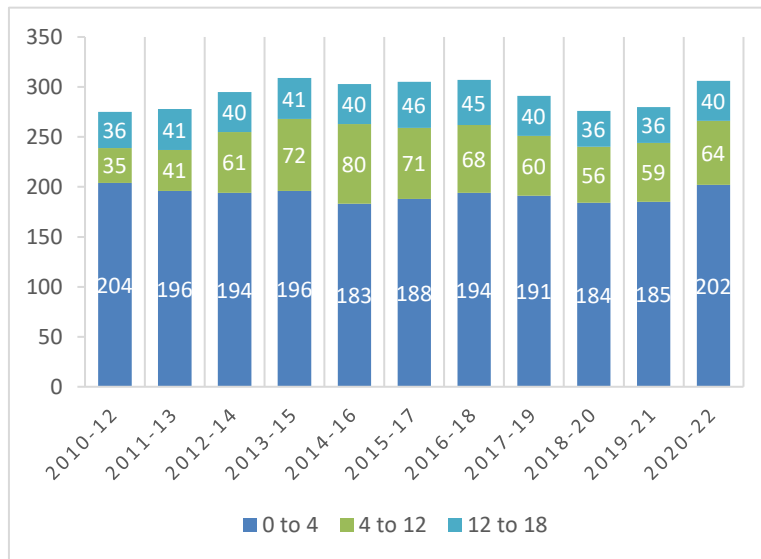
1 Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “Drowning Prevention: Facts,” retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/facts/index.html>, accessed on January 18, 2024.

2 Allison Kasch – Angi, “Making a Splash: Here’s How Many Americans Have Pools,” retrieved from <https://www.angi.com/articles/how-many-americans-have-pools.htm>, accessed on January 18, 2024.

3 Florida Department of Health, “Drowning Prevention,” retrieved from <https://www.floridahealth.gov/programs-and-services/prevention/drowning-prevention/index.html>, accessed on January 18, 2024.

4 Florida TaxWatch, “Every Child A Swimmer,” 2021.

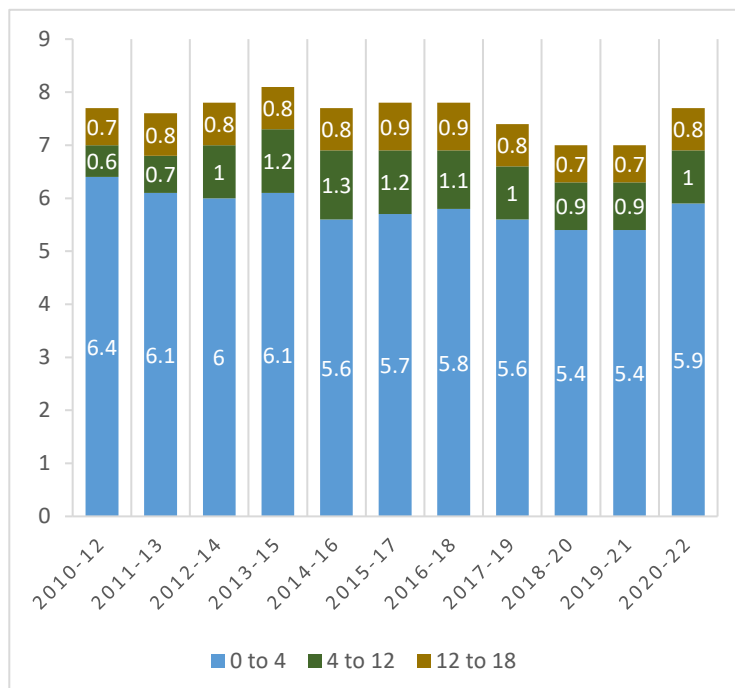
Figure 1.
The number of unintentional drowning deaths among children ages 0 to 18 has increased over the past decade



Source: Florida Department of Health, FLHealthCHARTS Data Viewer

Figure 2 shows the rate of unintentional drownings per 100,000 children. While the rate of drownings in children ages 0 to 4 has decreased slightly over the past decade, that of children ages 4 to 12 has almost doubled.

Figure 2.
The rate of unintentional drownings among children ages 4 to 12 has almost doubled over the past decade



Source: Florida Department of Health, FLHealthCHARTS Data Viewer

The sudden death of a child can be mentally shattering for a family, especially when it could have been prevented. Childhood drownings can bring on several mental health issues to the parents and siblings of those deceased. Even nonfatal drownings have a lasting effect on both the child and their families. Many children experience various kinds of brain damage in the long term, caused by a loss of oxygen to the brain.

Not only do drowning deaths have a personal impact, but they also pose an economic impact. The 2021 Florida TaxWatch briefing states that if these drowning deaths can be avoided, there is a possible economic risk reduction of \$3 billion to \$8 billion.⁵ According to Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data, in 2021, the drowning deaths in Florida added up to 11,469 years of potential life lost (YPLL).⁶

Prevention

For such a tragic cause of death, there is a simple preventative measure --- water competence. Learning how to swim can reduce the chance of drowning by 88 percent!⁷ Pools, beaches, rivers and streams, lakes, and even bathtubs, all have their own drowning risks. According to the American Red Cross, everyone should know the following five actions in every type of water environment:⁸

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).

Swimming should be considered a basic life skill and be accessible to everyone. In December of 2023, Mason Dixon Polling and Strategy conducted a telephone poll for Florida TaxWatch. A total of 625 Florida voters were interviewed across the state and 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? Of those surveyed, 89 percent answered “yes” to knowing how to swim and 95 percent of them believe every child should learn swimming as a basic life skill. While there was not much difference in answers by region, gender, and age, race did significantly affect one of the answers. Only 63 percent of Black respondents said they knew how to swim whereas White and Hispanic respondents passed the 90 percent mark.⁹

Not only does the knowledge of swimming prevent drowning, but it is also good for both a person’s physical and mental health. Research shows that just two-and-a-half hours a week of swimming can decrease the risk of chronic illness. Swimmers are also 50 percent less likely to risk death. It has also proven to improve mood for both men and women and decrease anxiety.¹⁰ To prevent drowning, one does not need to be an expert in swimming, rather simply knowing how to float or tread water for a longer period is equally beneficial. The former, however, does prove to be helpful when someone else may need assistance. To ensure equal and inexpensive access to swimming, effective legislation on the matter plays a vital role.

⁵ *Supra* 4.

⁶ CDC – WISQARS, “Leading Causes of Death Visualization Tool – Explore Years of Potential Life Lost,” retrieved from <https://wisqars.cdc.gov/lcd/?o=YPLL&y1=2021&y2=2021&ct=20&cc=UNI&g=12&s=0&r=0&ry=0&e=0&ypll=65>, accessed on January 22, 2024. YPLL- Years of potential life lost (YPLL) is a measure of premature mortality (early death) calculated by subtracting the age at death from the standard year, and then summing the individual YPLL across each cause of death.

⁷ Florida Swimming Pool Association, “Safety Matters – Rules,” retrieved from <https://fspa.com/safety/florida-swims-foundation/>, accessed on January 22, 2024.

⁸ American Red Cross, “Why Is Water Safety So Important?” retrieved from <https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/water-safety.html#:~:text=It%20only%20takes%20a%20moment,%2C%20bathtubs%2C%20and%20even%20buckets.>, accessed on January 23, 2024.

⁹ Mason Dixon Polling & Strategy, “December 2023 Florida Poll,” 2023.

¹⁰ Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “Healthy Swimming – Health Benefits of Swimming,” retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/swimming/swimmers/health_benefits_water_exercise.html#:~:text=Swimming%20can%20improve%20mood%20in%20both%20men%20and%20women.&text=For%20people%20with%20fibromyalgia%2C%20swimming,decrease%20depression%20and%20improve%20mood.&text=Water%2Dbased%20exercise%20can%20improve,the%20pregnant%20person's%20mental%20health., accessed on January 24, 2024.

Water Safety Legislation

Despite being a critical issue in the nation, the U.S. lags behind on prioritizing the fight against childhood drownings. A U.N General Assembly in April 2021 and a World Health Assembly in January 2023 decided to accelerate action on the matter and urged its member nations to catch up and fix this global problem.¹¹ After stated urgency, many local and state governments adopted their own interventions and the U.S government soon followed. In 2022, the National Institute of Health (NIH) issued a notice of special interest, stating research on drowning prevention will be conducted. Furthermore, as a guide to address the crisis, a U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan was put into place in June 2023 to close gaps in research, funding, surveillance, and education on the subject.¹²

As Florida leads the nation in child drowning deaths, introduction of legislation on the matter is crucial. In the 2021 legislative session, Senate Bill (SB) 358 was filed, whose amended version is now part of Florida Statutes as follows:

“Beginning with the 2022-2023 school year, each public school shall provide, to a parent who initially enrolls his or her child in the school, information on the important role water safety education courses and swimming lessons play in saving lives. The information must be provided electronically or in hard copy and must include local options for age-appropriate water safety courses and swimming lessons that result in a certificate indicating successful completion, including courses and lessons offered for free or at a reduced price. If the student is 18 years of age or older or is under the age of 21 and is enrolling in adult education classes, the information must be provided to the student.”¹³

As of the 2024 Florida legislative session, four senate bills and four similar house bills (HB) have been filed, regarding water safety.

1. SB 274/ HB 123 – filed by Senator Rodriguez/ Representative Chambliss

If adopted, any organization that takes a child in its care or supervision to a public bathing place or public swimming pool must first require the child’s legal guardian to attest in writing whether the child knows how to swim. For children who do not know how to swim, it requires the organization to keep the child within a fenced-in area or ensure listed safety equipment be with child when they are within 100 feet of public bathing place or public swimming pool.

2. SB 428/ HB 445 – filed by Senator Rodriguez/ Representative Robinson

If it passes, this bill will amend subsection 1003.42(2), Florida Statutes, to require public schools to impart age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate K-12 instruction and literature on importance of water safety, such as, formal swimming lessons, flotation devices, and awareness of water conditions among many others.

3. SB 544/ HB 581 – filed by Senators Hutson, Berman, and Book/ Representative Busatta Cabrera

If adopted, this would create a program within the Department of Health to incorporate the Swimming Lesson Voucher Program, which would provide vouchers for swimming lessons at no cost to families with a certain level of income and with one or more children under the age of four by partnering with at least one vendor in each county.

4. SB 706/ HB 719 – filed by Senator Rodriguez/ Representative Lopez

If passed, this bill would amend subsection 515.27(1), Florida Statutes, to include residential swimming pool requirements. A swimming pool, regardless of when it was built, if on a residential property transferred or sold on or after October 1, 2024, must include at least one of the listed pool safety requirements – such as a pool safety cover, a pool isolated by approved barrier.

¹¹ World Health Organization, “Executive Board, 152nd Session, Agenda Item 16: Accelerating Action on Global Drowning Prevention,” January 2023.

¹² Emily Baumgaertner – NYTimes, “Drowning Is No. 1 Killer of Young Children. U.S. Efforts to Fix It Are Lagging,” retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/08/health/children-drowning-deaths.html>, accessed on January 18, 2024.

¹³ Section 1003.225, Fla. Stat. (2021).

Conclusion

In a state like Florida, where beaches and pools hold great popularity for all ages, proper water safety is a necessity. An easy solution like swimming is a must for children at an early age if it means a life can be saved. Proper swimming instruction and supportive legislature to prevent unintentional drowning deaths will be a successful path. Florida TaxWatch commends and supports all senators and representatives taking a step forward to ensure equal and accessible water safety in the state of Florida.

ABOUT FLORIDA TAXWATCH

As an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit taxpayer research institute and government watchdog, it is the mission of Florida TaxWatch to provide the taxpayers 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 taxpayers and businesses.

Florida TaxWatch is supported by voluntary, tax-deductible donations and private grants. Donations provide a solid, lasting foundation that has enabled Florida TaxWatch to bring about a more effective, responsive government that is accountable to the taxpayers it serves since 1979.

FLORIDA TAXWATCH RESEARCH LEADERSHIP

Dominic M. Calabro	President & CEO
The Hon. Jeff Kottkamp	Executive VP & General Counsel
Bob Nave	Sr. VP of Research
Kurt Wenner	Sr. VP of Research
Steve Evans	Senior Advisor

FLORIDA TAXWATCH VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP

Piyush Patel	Chairman
James Repp	Chairman-Elect
Marva Brown Johnson	Treasurer
David Casey	Secretary
US Senator George LeMieux	Imm. Past Chairman

RESEARCH PROJECT TEAM

Jui Shah	Research Economist		<i>Lead Researcher & Author</i>
George Kantelis	Communications Specialist		<i>Layout & Design</i>

All Florida TaxWatch research is done under the direction of Dominic M. Calabro, President, CEO, Publisher & Editor.

The findings in this Report are based on the data and sources referenced. Florida TaxWatch research is conducted with every reasonable attempt to verify the accuracy and reliability of the data, and the calculations and assumptions made herein. Please feel free to contact us if you feel that this paper is factually inaccurate.

The research findings and recommendations of Florida TaxWatch do not necessarily reflect the view of its members, staff, Executive Committee, or Board of Trustees; and are not influenced by the individuals or organizations who may have sponsored the research.



Florida TaxWatch

Stay Informed

 FloridaTaxWatch.org

 Florida TaxWatch

 @FloridaTaxWatch

 @FloridaTaxWatch

 FloridaTaxWatch

106 N. Bronough St
Tallahassee, FL 32301

o: 850.222.5052

Copyright © 2024
Florida TaxWatch
Research Institute, Inc.
All Rights Reserved

