

Teaching Every Child to Swim Saves Thousands of Lives from Needless Drownings and Taxpayers Millions

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INTRODUCTION

Drowning, a tragic and often preventable accident, is a leading cause of death for children 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 each year because of unintentional drowning each year, an average of 11 drowning deaths each day.¹

It is important to note that not all drownings are fatal. Non-fatal drowning has a wide range of outcomes, from no injury to serious injury such as brain damage or permanent disability. Each year, about 8,000 people are hospitalized as a result of non-fatal drowning, an average of 22 non-fatal drownings each day.²

This is the third in a series of Florida TaxWatch briefings on the importance of teaching children to swim at an early age and making them feel comfortable in and around the water. A 2021 Florida TaxWatch briefing titled *“Every Child A Swimmer”* displays data on unintentional drowning deaths among youth while urging the importance of swimming lessons as means to prevent children from drowning.

A 2024 Florida TaxWatch briefing titled *“Every Child A Swimmer: 2024 Update”* asserts “water competence” as the key to preventing drowning deaths and notes that learning how to swim can reduce the chance of drowning by 88 percent.

Florida TaxWatch undertakes this research project to take a closer look at legislative efforts to prevent children from drowning and to identify additional steps that can be taken to mitigate the risk of drowning among young children.

UNINTENTIONAL DROWNING DEATHS IN FLORIDA

Surrounded by water on three sides, Florida has a shoreline of 8,436 miles and 1.59 million residential swimming pools, highest in the nation.³ This equates to one swimming pool for every 14 Floridians. It is estimated that 15 percent of Florida’s housing market has inground pools. Among the 30 largest U.S. cities, Miami ranks second in terms of the percentage of homes with swimming pools (30.6 percent); Tampa ranks third (27.7 percent); and Orlando ranks fourth (25.9 percent).⁴

With so many accessible waterbodies, it comes as no surprise that Florida also has the highest number of unintentional drowning deaths in children ages 1 to 4 and ranks 5th in unintentional drowning deaths across all age groups.⁵

Over the past decade, the number of drownings among Florida children ages 1-4, and the rate per 100,000 population, have remained relatively constant. As shown in Figure 1, the number of unintentional drowning deaths among children ages 1-4 ranges from 47 to 72, with an average of 60 children ages 1-4 drowning in any given year.

¹ U.S. Centers for Disease Control, “Drowning Facts,” retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/data-research/facts/index.html>, December 4, 2024.

² Ibid.

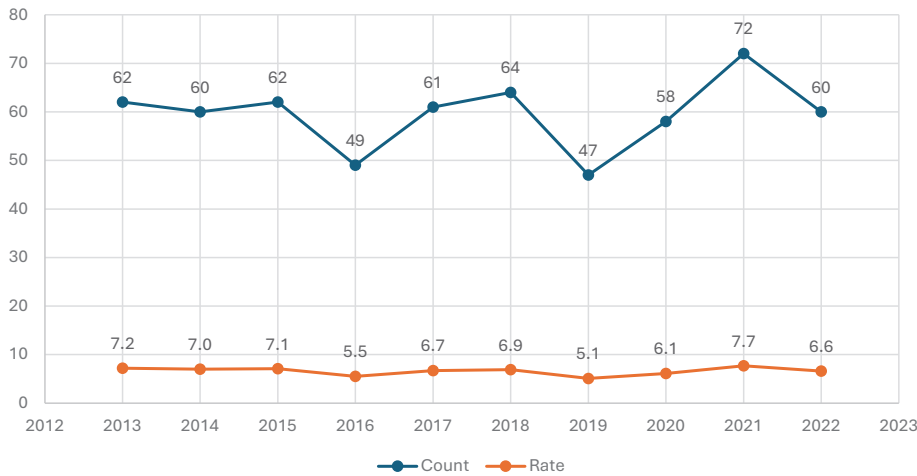
³ Alison Kasch, “Making a Splash: Here’s How Many Americans Have Pools,” *Angi*, March 10, 2023, retrieved from www.angi.com/articles/how-many-americans-have-pools.htm, December 4, 2024.

⁴ AQUA editors, “Which U.S. Cities Have the Most Homes With Swimming Pools?,” *AQUA*, retrieved from <https://www.aquamagazine.com/builder/article/15279816/which-us-cities-have-the-most-homes-with-swimming-pools#:~:text=Florida%20sweeps%20the%20next%20three,%25%20and%20Orlando%20at%2025.9%25>, December 4, 2024.

⁵ Florida Health, “Drowning Prevention / Water Safety,” retrieved from <https://orange.floridahealth.gov/programs-and-services/violence-and-injury-prevention/drowning-prevention-water-safety.html#:~:text=Florida%20is%202nd%20in,for%20unintentional%20drowning%20deaths1.>, December 4, 2024.

Figure 1.

An Average of 60 Children Ages 1-4 Drown in Florida Each Year



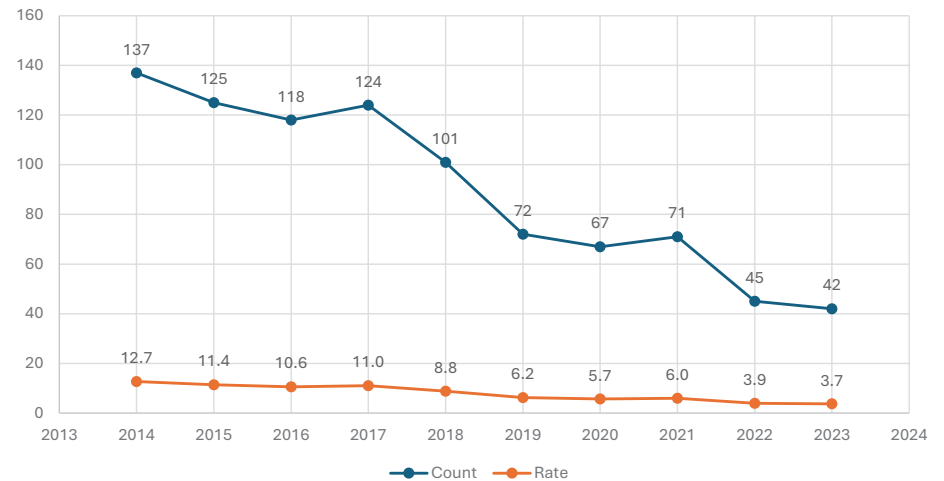
Source: flhealthcharts.gov

Although the number of drownings among Florida children ages 1-4 has remained relatively constant, the number of children ages 1-5, and the rate per 100,000 population, hospitalized from non-fatal, near drownings have decreased significantly (see figure 2).

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 stemmed the increase in child drownings and near drownings.

Figure 2.

Hospitalizations From Near Drownings Among Children Ages 1-5 Have Decreased Significantly From 2014 to 2013



Source: flhealthcharts.gov

WATER COMPETENCY

According to a water safety survey conducted by the American Red Cross:⁶

- 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."⁷
- 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.

⁶ American Red Cross, "Water Safety Poll," May 5, 2014.

⁷ 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).

- 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.

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.⁸ 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.⁹

In December of 2023, Mason Dixon Polling and Strategy repeated the telephone poll for Florida TaxWatch. A total of 625 Florida voters were interviewed across the state and asked the same questions as the July 2020 survey, with similar results.

DROWNING'S IMPACT

The sudden death of a child can be mentally shattering for a family, especially when it could have been prevented. 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.

Not only do drowning deaths have a personal impact, but they also pose an economic impact. 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ As shown in Figure 1, 595 children ages 1-4 drowned during the decade from 2013 to 2022. If all of these drowning deaths could have been avoided, the economic risk reduction would be in the range of \$6.2 billion - \$15.6 billion.

⁸ Mason-Dixon Polling & Strategy, “July 2020 Florida Poll.”

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Industrial Economics, Incorporated, “Valuing Reductions in Fatal Risks to Children Final Report,” January 3, 2018.

¹¹ Ibid.

WATER SAFETY LEGISLATION

As Florida leads the nation in child drowning deaths, introduction of legislative remedies is crucial.

2021 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Senate Bill (SB) 358, the “Edna Mae McGovern Act,” was passed into law. SB 358 created §1003.225, Fla. Stat., which defines the term “water safety” and requires each public school, beginning with the 2022-23 school year, to provide parents 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.

2024 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Four Senate bills and four similar House bills were filed regarding water safety. SB 544 was passed into law and created §514.073, Fla. Stat., which establishes the Swimming Lesson Voucher Program within the Florida Department of Health (FDOH). The program offers vouchers for swimming lessons to families with incomes not to exceed 200 percent of the federal poverty level, and with one or more children four years of age or younger. SB 544 also requires the FDOH to establish eligibility criteria and application procedures, and to contract with a network of swimming lesson vendors to ensure availability. The legislature appropriated \$500,000 in non-recurring General Revenue to fund the program.

SB 274 and its House companion HB 123 would have, if adopted, required any organization that takes a child in its care or supervision to a public bathing place or public swimming pool to 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, the organization would be required 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. HB 123 died in the House Children, Families, & Seniors Subcommittee, and SB 274 died in Messages.

SB 428 and HB 445 would have, if adopted, amended §1003.42(2), Fla. Stat., 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. HB 445 died in the House Education Quality Subcommittee, and SB 428 died in the Senate Education Pre-K-12 Committee.

SB 706 and its House companion HB 719 would have, if adopted, amended §515.27(1), Fla. Stat., to require swimming pools located on residential property, regardless of when it was built, that is transferred or sold on or after October 1, 2024, to include at least one of the listed pool safety requirements – such as a pool safety cover, a pool isolated by approved barrier. HB 719 died in the House Regulatory Reform & Economic Development Subcommittee, and SB 706 died in the Senate Regulated Industries Committee.

2025 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

As the 2025 legislative session approaches, it is important to look at other water safety measures that could be implemented to mitigate the risk of unintentional drownings. The New York State legislature passed a law in 2023 that requires hospitals to offer an informational video to new parents on the dangers of drowning for infants and young children.

Hospitals must offer to show new parents a brief, state-approved video during the mother’s maternity stay. The video will be required to highlight the dangers of drowning for infants and young children, alongside evidence-based prevention measures.¹²

¹² United States Swim School Association, “First of Its Kind Drowning Prevention Legislation Passes in New York,” Blog Posts, June 6, 2023, retrieved from <http://usswimschools.org/first-of-its-kind-drowning-prevention-legislation-passes-in-new-york/>, December 4, 2024.



Although not yet filed, Representative Gossett-Seidman (a former lifeguard) has expressed her intent to file two bills to address drowning. The first bill would require brightly colored life rings/buoys to be placed in strategic locations at public beaches for emergency use when no lifeguard is available.



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Many times, people are lost because there's not a flotation device handy... If we have an orange ring at each beach available to be thrown after hours, before hours or when someone's not looking, we'll save lives.

- Rep. Peggy Gossett-Seidman

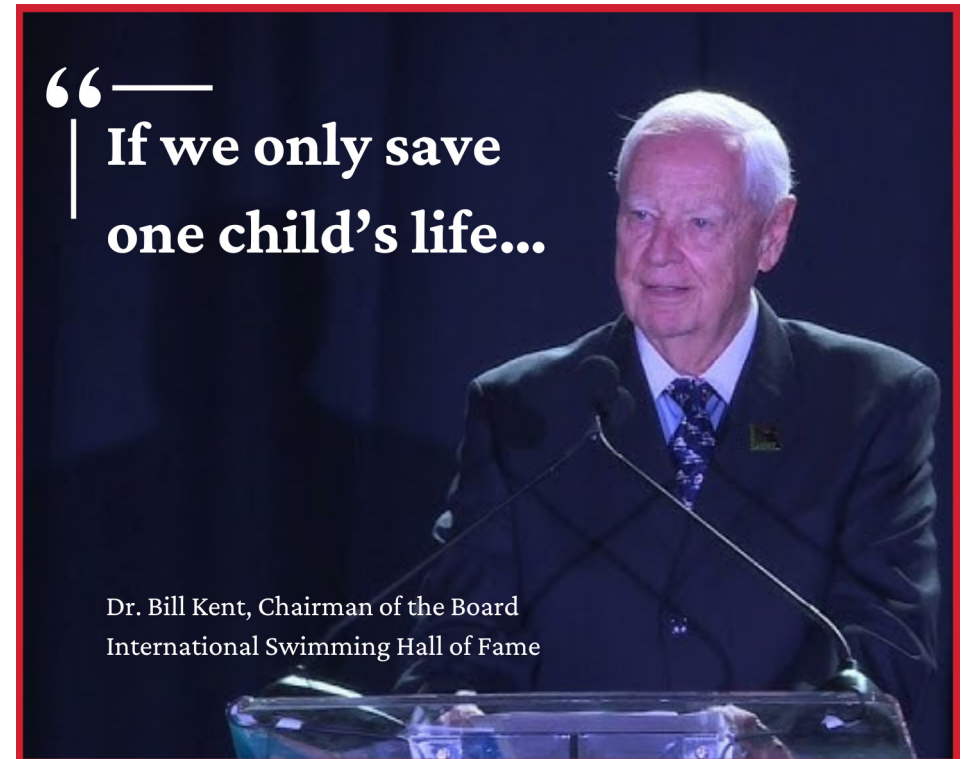
The second to-be-filed bill would focus on preventing drownings of children with autism spectrum disorder, who are 160 times more likely to drown than their neurotypical peers, according to the Autism Society of Florida.¹³

¹³ Autism Society of Florida, "The Crisis of Drowning in Kids with Autism," retrieved from <https://www.autismfl.org/drowning-prevention>, December 17, 2024.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Florida TaxWatch strongly believes that swimming should be considered a basic life skill and that children should be taught how to swim at an early age. Florida TaxWatch commends those legislators who have sponsored or supported legislation to ensure equal and accessible water safety in the state of Florida and for their efforts to prevent unintentional childhood drownings.

Although legislation passed during the 2021 and 2024 legislative sessions will go a long way toward ensuring proper water safety, more needs to be done. Passing legislation requiring hospitals to offer to show new parents a brief, state-approved video highlighting the dangers of drowning for infants and young children, alongside evidence-based prevention measures, seems to be a reasonable and responsible next step.



“ —
If we only save one child's life...

Dr. Bill Kent, Chairman of the Board
International Swimming Hall of Fame

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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 citizens and businesses.

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