Florida Child Drownings Increase 100 Percent as COVID-19 Pandemic Evolves

Introduction

COVID-19 and the resulting stay-at-home policies have many consequences including an increase in risk for unintentional child injuries. This memo discusses child drownings and focuses on Florida based on alerts that Safe Kids Worldwide received from its coalitions in the state.

School closures mean that children are spending more time than ever in the home, and parents working from home are challenged in their ability to provide active supervision throughout the day. As a warm-weather state with many home swimming pools, lakes, beaches and rivers, Florida may offer an early warning of emerging child drowning trends which could echo as summer approaches. As of 2015, there were an estimated 1.25 million home swimming pools in Florida.[1] Underlying this are two facts that stand out:

- Drownings are the number one cause of injury death for children ages 1-4;[2]
- Florida ranks number one for fatal child drownings, even before the pandemic.[3]
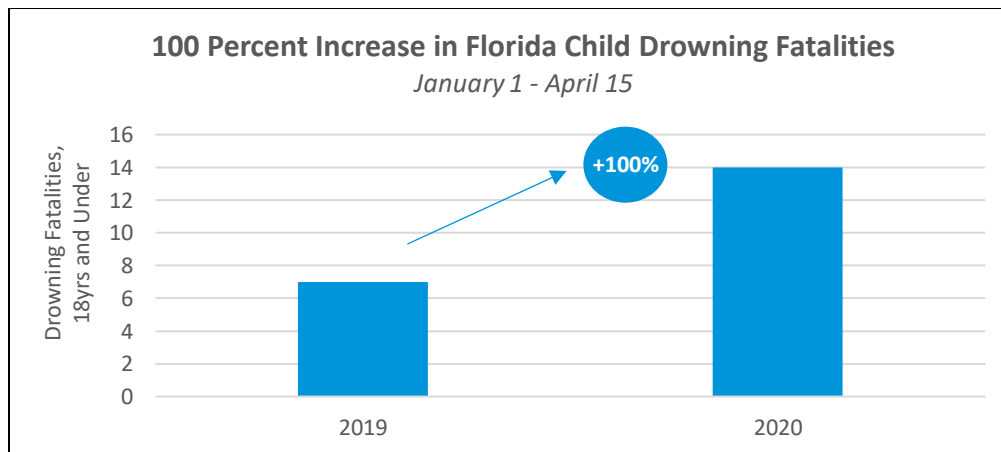
Make Water Safety a National Priority

Congress must devote more resources to prevent child drownings. We need:

- A National Action Plan to prevent child drowning;
- Enhanced drowning surveillance across the country;
- Resources to support water safety education and increase access to swimming lessons to jumpstart child survival swimming proficiency throughout the nation.

Trends in Child Drowning Statistics

We compared child drowning records by the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) covering the period from January 1 to April 15, 2020 against the corresponding period last year. The DCF Child Fatality Prevention website showed that fourteen children drowned in this time period in 2020 versus seven such fatalities in

> **From January 1 to April 15, 2020, Florida child drowning fatalities rose by 100 percent over the same period in 2019.**

2019, a 100 percent increase.[4][5] Of the fourteen 2020 fatalities, eleven occurred in home swimming pools, one in a home bathtub, one in a river adjacent to the family's home and one in a hotel swimming pool. The average age of victims was roughly 2 years and 6 months. In 85 percent of cases, available reporting narrative indicates the child exited the home without the parents' knowledge.[6][7]

100 Percent Increase in Florida Child Drowning Fatalities
January 1 - April 15

Other Drowning Reports

In addition to the DCF data, we have received a number of reported drowning incidents through our coalitions and other child injury organizations. Safe Kids Suncoast based at Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital in St. Petersburg reported that the coalition had seen eleven drowning-related cases in little more than three weeks, between March 16 and April 10, 2020. We also received several anecdotal reports from our coalitions in Tampa, Palm Beach County and Orange County. According to Katie Bahour, founder of Tampa-based drowning prevention group Water Smart Tots, "the majority of [pediatric drownings] actually were in March around the same time the stay at home order started happening."[8]

According to data maintained by Total Aquatic Programming, a consulting group serving U.S. aquatics facilities, there were 31 child drownings nationally between January and March 2020 compared to 19 in the same period last year, a 63 percent increase.[9]

The Face of Florida Child Drowning

The following cases are eerily close in terms of how the incidents happened. Importantly, they highlight the critical role of close supervision in preventing child drownings.

Lake County, January 18, 2020: A Lake County family was preparing to have company over to watch a UFC fight. According to the DCF Child Fatality Summary, the parents put on the television in their bedroom for their 2-year-old to watch while they got ready. While getting ready for the party, the parents were going in and out of their pool patio and at some point removed the pool fence. The parents noticed that the child's bedroom was dark and began searching for the child. The father found the child in the swimming pool, pulled the child out and administered CPR while first responders were called. The child was pronounced dead the next day at Arnold Palmer Children's Hospital in Orlando.[10]

Pinellas County, January 2020: This story involves a 2-year-old girl who came close to becoming another drowning fatality while her parents were getting the house ready for a pool party. The home pool was fitted out with a fence and door alarms, but the parents had taken the safety fence down for the party. The 2-year-old got into the pool and was found unresponsive by her

> **"[J]ust one little lapse and not paying attention can cost someone their life."— Lt. Jared Carlson, East Lake Fire Rescue**

father several minutes later. East Lake Fire Rescue responded and were fortunately able to revive the child, who was released from the hospital the following day. According to one of the responding paramedics, Lt. Jared Carlson, "This just goes to show when you prepare for everything just one little lapse and not paying attention can cost someone their life." [11] [12]

Contacts:

Katie Adamson, YMCA of the USA, 202.688.4730, C 703.927.4444, katie.adamson@ymca.net
Paul Bonta, Safe States, 202.679.8646, Paul.Bonta@safestates.org
Anthony Green, Safe Kids Worldwide, 202.615.4300, agreen@safekids.org

Citations:

[1] Association of Pool & Spa Professionals. (2015). *U.S. Swimming Pool and Hot Tub Market 2015.* Available at:
https://www.apsp.org/Portals/0/2016%20Website%20Changes/2015%20Industry%20Stats/2015%20Industry%20Stats.pdf

[2] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019, February 6). *Drowning Prevention*. Available at:
https://www.cdc.gov/safechild/drowning/index.html

[3] Violence and Injury Prevention Section. (2019, March 22). *Drowning Prevention.* Florida Department of Health. Available at: http://www.floridahealth.gov/programs-and-services/prevention/drowning-prevention/index.html

[4] Florida Department of Children and Families. (2020). Child Fatality Prevention [Website]. Available at: https://www.myflfamilies.com/childfatality/stateresults.shtml?minage=0&maxage=18&year=2020&cause=Drowning&prior12=&verified=

[5] Florida Department of Children and Families. (2019). Child Fatality Prevention [Website]. Available at: https://www.myflfamilies.com/childfatality/stateresults.shtml?minage=0&maxage=18&year=2019&cause=Drowning&prior12=&verified=

[6] Florida Department of Children and Families. (2020). Child Fatality Prevention [Website]. Available at: https://www.myflfamilies.com/childfatality/stateresults.shtml?minage=0&maxage=18&year=2020&cause=Drowning&prior12=&verified=

[7] Note that this data represents a probable underestimate of drownings as the DFS figures only capture incidents reported to the department as potential abuse/neglect cases and only list completed investigations.

[8] Dukes, A. (2020, April 14). *Central Florida Swim Instructors Petition to be Essential Business.* WESH-2. Available at: https://www.wesh.com/article/central-florida-swim-instructors-petition-to-be-essential-business/32149352

[9] Total Aquatic Programming (2020). *11 Year Month By Month Drowning Comparisons* [Data Set]. Available at: https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/86e62dc5-4c7c-4673-92e4-2f1fbfe9d97e/downloads/11%20year%20month%20by%20month%20Drowning%20comparisons.xlsx?ver=1586985535151

[10] Florida Department of Children and Families. (2020). *Child Fatality Summary* (Report Number: 2020-020011). Available at: https://www.myflfamilies.com/childfatality/reports/2020-020011.pdf

[11] Salomone, J. (2020, February 17). *Paramedics Save Child from Nearly Drowning at Family's Pool in Tarpon Springs*. WFTS Tampa Bay. Available at: https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/region-pinellas/paramedics-save-child-from-nearly-drowning-at-familys-pool-in-tarpon-springs

[12] WFLA. (2020, February 20). *East Lake Fire Rescue Lt. Saves Toddler From Near-Drowning.* Available at: https://www.wfla.com/mobile/east-lake-fire-rescue-lt-saves-toddler-from-near-drowning-2/