



Voices of Child Health in Chicago REPORT

Volume 3 Number 5
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REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Forty-six percent of Chicago children had not had swim lessons in the past.

Cost was the number one reason parents said their children had not had swim lessons (35%), followed by not enough time (22%) and nowhere to go for swim lessons (21%).

Parents who had learned how to swim themselves were almost twice as likely to have a child who had taken swimming lessons than parents who had never learned to swim themselves (60% vs 33%).

Swimming and Water Safety for Chicago Families

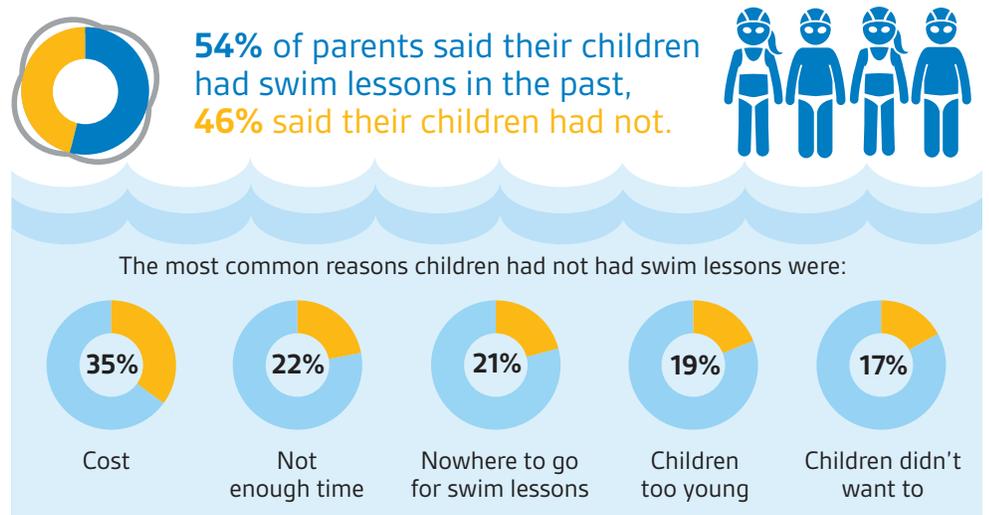
At the start of summer, many families look forward to enjoying the pool or beach. Tragically, water proves deadly for more than 925 children in the United States each year (CDC WISQARS) and Black (non-Latinx) youth experience drowning at rates five times higher than White (non-Latinx) youth.¹ In addition, with the COVID-19 pandemic, drownings in the Great Lakes have spiked compared with prior years.²

Water safety is particularly important for Chicagoans given the 125-year history of public pools and free public beaches along 26 miles of Lake Michigan's shoreline. The history of Chicago's pools and beaches has been marred by gender, economic, racial and ethnic barriers to learning to swim. In this month's *Voices of Child Health in Chicago Report*, we look at swimming experiences and water competency among Chicago parents and their children. We asked 1,505 Chicago parents from all 77 community areas in the city about learning to swim and their comfort with different skills as well as other family demographic and health questions.

Chicago children and swimming

We asked Chicago parents if their children had ever had swimming lessons in the past. Fifty-four percent of parents said their children had swim lessons in the past, 46% said their children had not. The most common reasons children had not had swim lessons were cost (35%), not enough time (22%), nowhere to go for swim lessons (21%), children too young (19%) and children didn't want to (17%). Other parents indicated that they had taught their children to swim on their own or did not do swim lessons because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

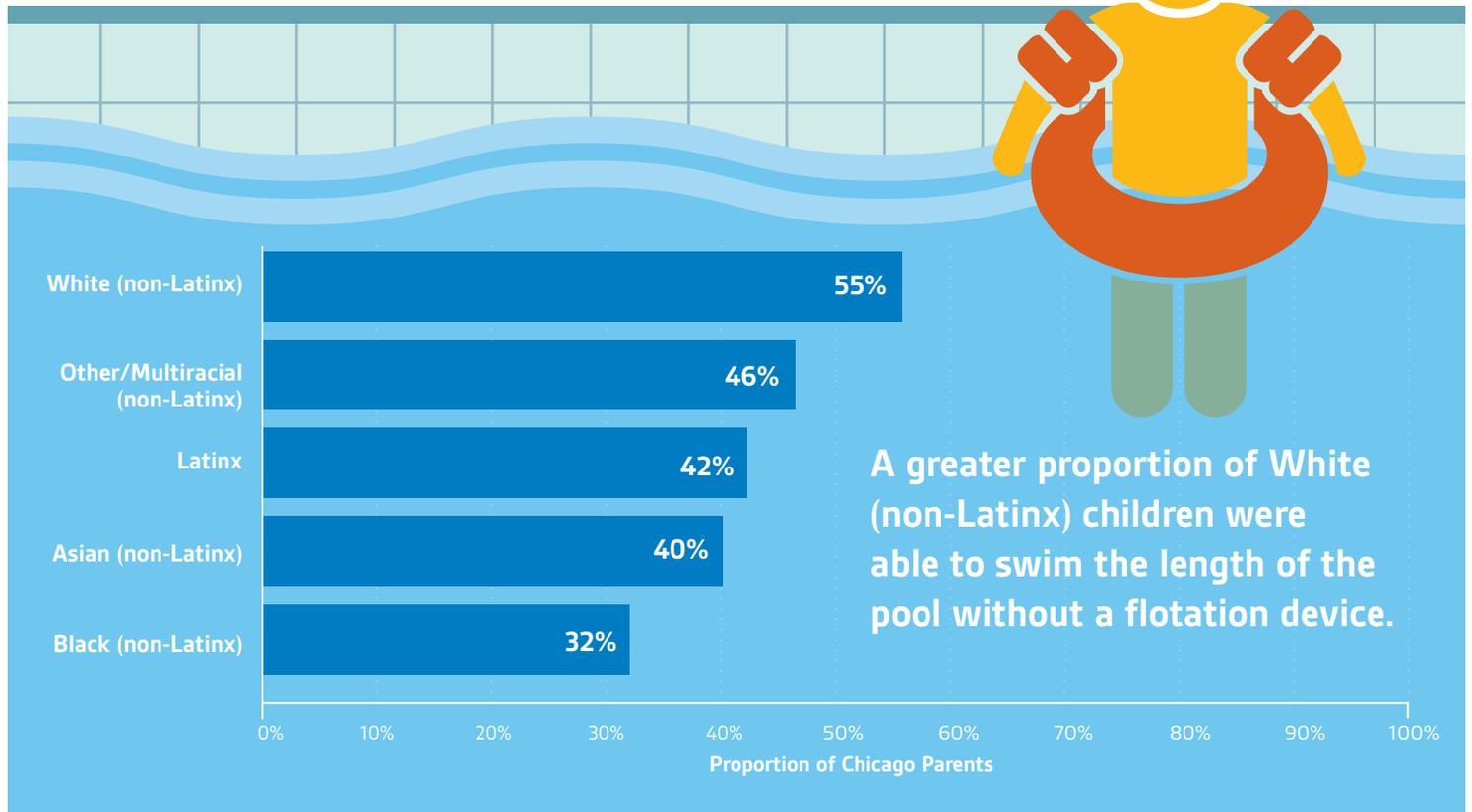
Figure 1. Reasons children had not had swimming lessons



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Figure 2. Proportion of Chicago children who can swim the length of a pool without a flotation device, by race/ethnicity



In terms of Chicago children’s swimming abilities, 52% of the children in surveyed households can float on their backs for 30 seconds without help, 42% can swim the length of a pool without a flotation device and 44% use a life jacket when swimming. For 59% of the children in our sample, parents felt safe with their child around water.

In general, children’s swimming ability increased with child age. For instance, only 10% of children 1–4 years old could swim the length of a swimming pool without a flotation device, whereas 42% of 5- to 11-year-old children and 65% of children 12 years old or older could do this. The use of life jackets fluctuated with child age as well: 13% of infants under 12 months old used a life jacket (23% did not and 65% were not applicable), 58% of 1- to 4-year-old children used a life jacket (22% did not, 20% were not applicable), 51% of 5- to 11-year-old children used a life jacket (38% did not, 11% were not applicable) and 31% of children 12 years or older used a life jacket (59% did not, 10% were not applicable).

Parents who lived in a community area that was on the lakefront were more likely to report their children had swim lessons in the past (65%) compared with parents who lived in community areas that were further from the lakefront (49–50%).

Demographic differences in swimming history

We also asked parents about their own swimming skills. White (non-Latinx) parents were more likely to know how to swim themselves (96%), followed by Asian/other (non-Latinx) parents (83%), Black (non-Latinx) parents (73%) and Latinx parents (68%). A similar pattern emerged for whether parents’ children had taken swimming lessons: 70% of White (non-Latinx) parents said their child/children had taken swimming lessons, followed by Asian/other (non-Latinx) parents (63%), Black (non-Latinx) parents (45%) and Latinx parents (45%).

Additionally, a greater proportion of White (non-Latinx) children were able to swim the length of a pool without a flotation device (55%), followed by other/multiracial (non-Latinx) children (46%), Latinx children (42%), Asian (non-Latinx) children (40%) and Black (non-Latinx) children (32%) (Figure 2).

Children’s swimming ability was also associated with their family’s household income. Among children whose household income was below the federal poverty level (FPL) only 38% were able to float on their back for 30 seconds without help, compared with 51% of children with middle household income (100–399 FPL) and 64% of children with high household income (400 FPL or above).³ This aligns with the finding above that cost was the leading reason that children had not had swimming lessons.

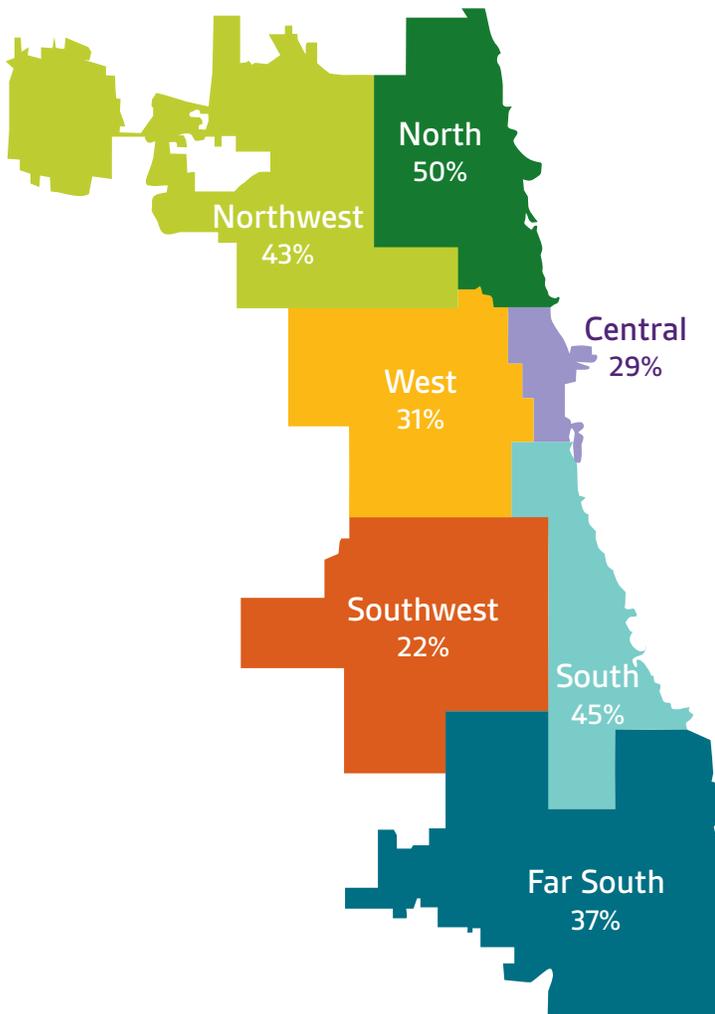
Chicago parents and swimming

Overall, 79% of parents had learned how to swim and 21% had not. Among parents who had learned how to swim, 38% of parents learned to swim on their own, 27% learned from a family member, 30% in swim lessons and 11% at camp.

The majority of Chicago parents reported feeling comfortable with their own swimming skills. For instance, 77% of parents felt very or somewhat comfortable floating on their back; 74% felt very or somewhat comfortable swimming with their face down in the water. Parents felt least comfortable swimming where they could not touch the bottom — 65% felt very or somewhat comfortable and 35% did not feel comfortable.

Parent swimming history also varied by city region. For instance, 50% of parents in the North region learned to swim through formal methods such as swim classes or camp, compared with 22% of parents in the Southwest region (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Proportion of parents in each city region who learned how to swim through swim classes or camp



How is parent swimming connected with child swimming?

Parents who had learned how to swim themselves were almost twice as likely to have a child who had taken swimming lessons than parents who had never learned to swim themselves (60% vs 33%). Furthermore, among parents who knew how to swim, those who learned how to swim in swimming lessons or at camp were more likely to have a child who had taken swimming lessons than parents who learned to swim from a family member or by teaching themselves (72% vs. 50%).

What can parents do to promote water safety?

There are many steps that parents can take to promote water safety for their families. Below is a list of steps parents can take wherever families swim, at beaches and at home to keep their families safe.⁴

Every time your family goes for a swim:^{5,6}

- Drowning happens quickly and quietly. Learn the signs of drowning, which include: head low in the water, head tilted back with mouth open, hair hanging over forehead or eyes and body in a near-vertical position with no leg movement.
- Always stay within arm's reach of young children and weak swimmers.
- Designate a "water watcher" when your children are near water. A water watcher is an adult whose one job is to keep watch. While on duty, the water watcher avoids distracting activities like playing cards, reading books or talking on the phone. Like designated drivers, water watchers stay free of alcohol or drugs, too.
- Learn CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation), first aid and the basics of swimming (getting to the surface, floating, moving through the water).

Before you head to the beach:^{7,8}

- Check the weather. Up-to-date beach hazard forecasts are available through the National Weather Service at <https://www.weather.gov/greatlakes/>.
- Look for warning flags, signs, lifeguards and beach patrol. They are there to keep you safe.
- Swim in areas with lifeguards.
- Know that structural and rip currents are common in Lake Michigan and along Chicago's shoreline.
- Keep an eye out for rip currents. You can recognize rip currents by looking for spots where waves are not breaking in between stretches where crashing waves are making whitewater.⁹
- Stay dry when waves are high. High, rapidly approaching waves leave little time to resurface if you're knocked over. Two-foot waves are all it takes to knock down a toddler. And dangerous currents are also likely to spring up when waves are higher than three feet.

- Make sure kids wear U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets in and around natural bodies of water such as lakes or the ocean, even if they know how to swim. Life jackets can be used in and around pools for added safety too.
- Be prepared. Pack plenty of sunscreen, insect repellent, bandages and drinking water. Be sure to also have your medical insurance card, cell phone and emergency contact information handy.

In your home or backyard:¹⁰

- Fence and secure all swimming pools. If a child is missing, look in the pool first.
- Remove or fence other backyard water hazards like fountains, ponds and drainage areas.
- Empty water containers like buckets, coolers, water tables, and kiddie pools after each use.
- Block unsupervised access to the bathroom for young children since they can topple headfirst into toilets and filled bathtubs.

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HOW THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED

This report is based on data from the Voices of Child Health in Chicago Parent Panel Survey. The survey is administered to a sample of Chicago parents by Lurie Children's and NORC at the University of Chicago via internet and telephone. The survey is administered to the same panel of parents three times each year. The data in this report was collected from November 2020 through February 2021. The sample consisted of 1,505 Chicago parents, step-parents, or guardians who had at least one child under 18 years of age in the household (referred to as "parents" in this report). Parents were from all 77 community areas in Chicago. The survey completion rate was 56% and the cumulative survey response rate was 1.5%. All analyses were conducted with statistical weighting so that the results are representative of the parent population in the City of Chicago during the time period of data collection. For more information about the VOCHIC Parent Panel Survey, visit luriechildrens.org/ParentPanel and our page on Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/cjz82/>.

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