



FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION  
DIVISION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT  
BOATING AND WATERWAYS SECTION



## Florida's Boating Safety Education Program

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### HISTORY

Boating safety education efforts have been underway in the United States for many years. The U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, known as one of the premier providers of formal boater education, has been teaching boating education courses since its inception in 1939. Likewise, the U.S. Power Squadrons, also known as a leader in the boater education arena, has taught courses to over 3 million boaters in the past half-century.

In the early 1990s, the topic of mandatory boater education began to get national attention as a means of helping to reduce the number of boating accidents, injuries, and fatalities. The National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA), which began in 1958 and consists of boating safety officials from all U.S. states and territories working together to achieve seamless uniformity of boating laws from state-to-state, developed national standards for boating education courses. The NASBLA logo, shown at right, is displayed on boating safety course materials meeting these rigorous standards. NASBLA's standards have become the benchmark for boating safety course development, and most states now require NASBLA-approval for boating safety courses to meet their individual legal requirements.

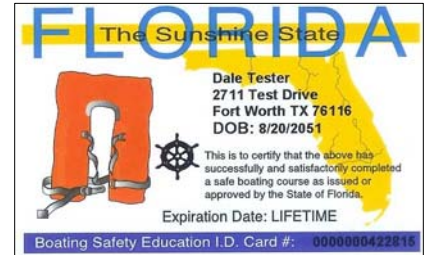


The State of Florida has historically held claim to the unfortunate distinction of having the highest number of annual boating accidents, injuries, and fatalities when compared to the rest of the nation. A year-round boating season, large resident and visitor populations, and almost limitless boating opportunities contribute significantly to this fact. In 1996, the Florida Legislature addressed the boating safety education issue in Florida by passing a law requiring all boat operators born after September 30, 1980, who operated a boat with 10 horsepower or more, to carry a Florida Boating Safety Education ID Card while operating. To obtain this card, a person was required to take and pass a NASBLA-approved boating safety education course and submit proof of completion to the Commission.

## CURRENT SITUATION

Florida's Boating Safety Education law took effect in October of 1996. The law was initially designed to "cap" in October of 2001, and from that point forward to only affect persons 21 and younger. Currently, any boat operator who is 21 or younger (has not yet turned 22) and operates a vessel with 10-horsepower or more must do the following:

- Take a state and NASBLA-approved boating safety course,
- Send proof of course completion to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and
- Carry their Commission-issued Boating Safety Education ID Card and a photo ID with them while operating the vessel.



*Exemptions include:*

- A person licensed by the US Coast Guard as a master of a vessel,
- A person operating only on a private lake or pond,
- A person accompanied by an individual who is either exempt from the requirement or is at least 18 years old and possesses the required ID card (provided that person is attendant to the safe operation of the vessel and is responsible for any violation that occurs).

Approved boating safety courses are taught in classroom settings by a multitude of organizations or may be taken either online or by completing a home study course. Boating Safety Education ID Cards are issued free of charge. Further information on course options is available at: [www.myfwc.com/boating/safety/ID\\_card.htm](http://www.myfwc.com/boating/safety/ID_card.htm).

## THE BOATER EDUCATION LAW – A COMPARISON TO OTHER STATES

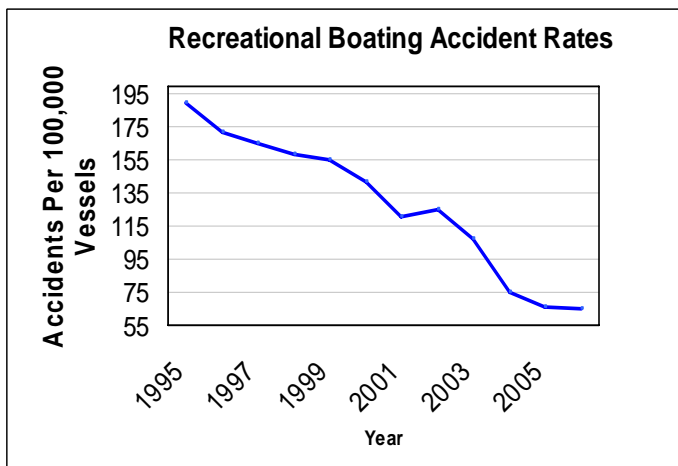
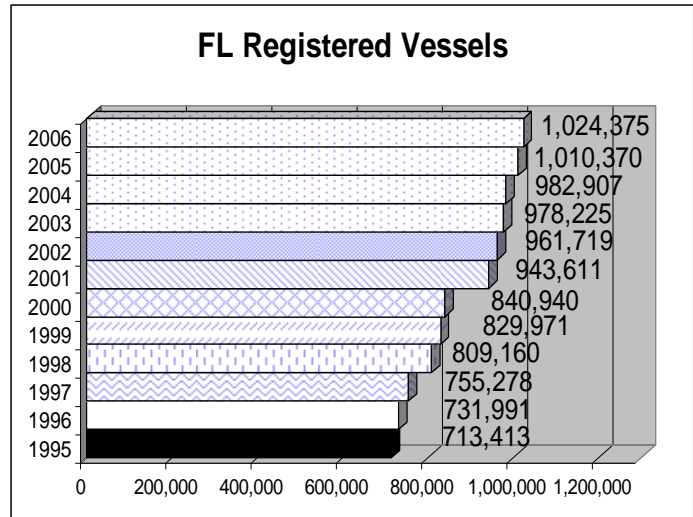
Most states have a legal requirement for certain boat operators to take a boating safety course. Florida's boating education law is similar in many respects with the laws of these other states. A list titled, "State Boating Safety Education Requirements," developed by NASBLA and available online at [www.nasbla.org/pdf/Education\\_Ref\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.nasbla.org/pdf/Education_Ref_Guide.pdf), provides detailed state-by-state comparison information. There are several variations in boating laws among the 55 states and U.S. territories, as depicted in the following chart:

# of States/ Territories	Education Requirement	Comments
10	No education law for anyone	
18	Born after a specific date	Over a period of time, states with these regulations will eventually require all vessel operators to complete a course. Born after dates range from 7/1/72 to 1/1/89.
13	Those younger than specified age	Range: 10 to young adult (includes Florida)
2	Personal watercraft operators only	Everyone regardless of age
6	Children on personal watercraft only	Ages vary
7	Phase-in to include all operators	Within 10 years the requirement reaches boat operators of all ages.

## BOATER EDUCATION EFFECTIVENESS

Boating safety education is generally considered to be an effective mechanism of increasing boater awareness and reducing accidents, injuries and fatalities. A boat operator who has completed a boating safety course should be more informed about safe boat operation and better prepared to avoid mishaps on the water.

National and state trends indicate that boat operators are doing a better job of avoiding boating accidents today than ever before, even though there are more boats using our waterways than ever in history. With an average increase of over 28,000 vessels each year since 1995 (as depicted in the chart at right), boat registration numbers have been steadily rising each year in Florida. And those figures do not take into consideration non-registered boats such as sailboats and the explosive increase in paddle craft (canoes and kayaks) throughout the state.



One might expect that higher numbers of boats would equate to higher numbers of boating accidents, but the statistics prove otherwise. In spite of the consistent increases in vessels registered in Florida, the boating accident rate (based on the number of accidents per 100,000 registered recreational vessels) has improved as depicted in the chart at left.

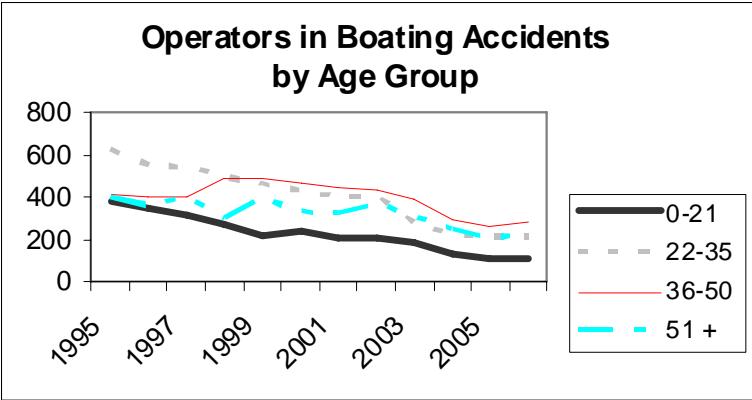
**Note:** The significant decline in the accident rate during 2003 is primarily attributed to a statutory change in the boating accident reporting criteria in July of 2003, when the

property damage threshold was changed from \$500 to \$2,000. This resulted in a substantial number of accidents involving property damage-only that were no longer considered "reportable" and, therefore, were not included in the statistics. The change in the reporting threshold reduced the number of reportable accidents in 2004 by approximately 30%, as anticipated.

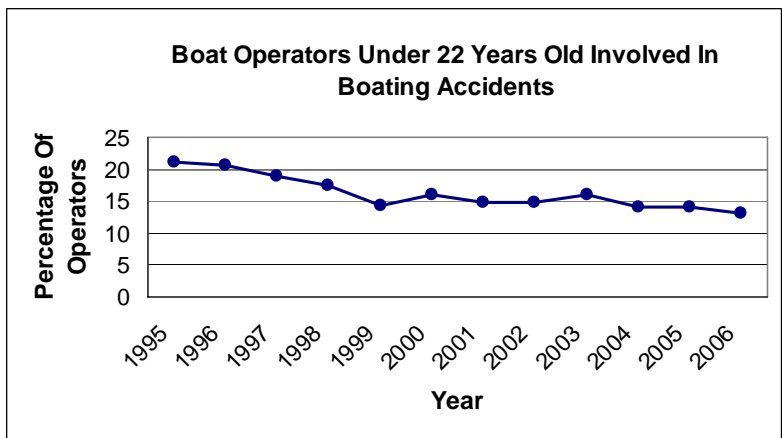
Correlating the potential effectiveness of boater education to a reduction in boating accidents requires us to first look at who is involved in boating accidents. Vessel operators involved in boating accidents are overwhelmingly male (usually nearly 90%). Based on data from Florida's Boating Accident Statistical Reports from 1995 to present, the next chart shows the number of boat operators in each age group involved in accidents each year. Operators in both the 0 to 21 and 22 to 35 age groups have shown significant

declines in accident involvement, while the other two age groups have remained much more constant over the time period.

Since Florida's boating safety education law took effect in 1996, boat operators who were affected by the law (those under the age of 22) have obviously become less involved in reportable boating accidents (as shown in the chart below). While



other efforts to increase boating safety awareness on both a state and national level may have played a part in this reduction, the only significant occurrence in Florida during this time period which was directed at making the 21 and younger boaters more safe has been the mandatory education provision in Florida law.



The number of boat operators in the 22 to 35 age group involved in boating accidents has shown a similar decline since Florida's boating education law took effect, and this decline is likely the result of required boating safety education for younger operators. Many of the young boat operators who took a course since 1995 have now reached the 22 to 35 age group. Although this age group is the group least involved in taking boating safety courses (slightly more

than 8-percent of total cards issued according to FWC records), it appears that the requirement for education at a younger age is translating into boat operators who are less likely to be involved in a boating accident as they get older.

**IDENTIFYING THE "PROBLEM" THROUGH STATISTICS**

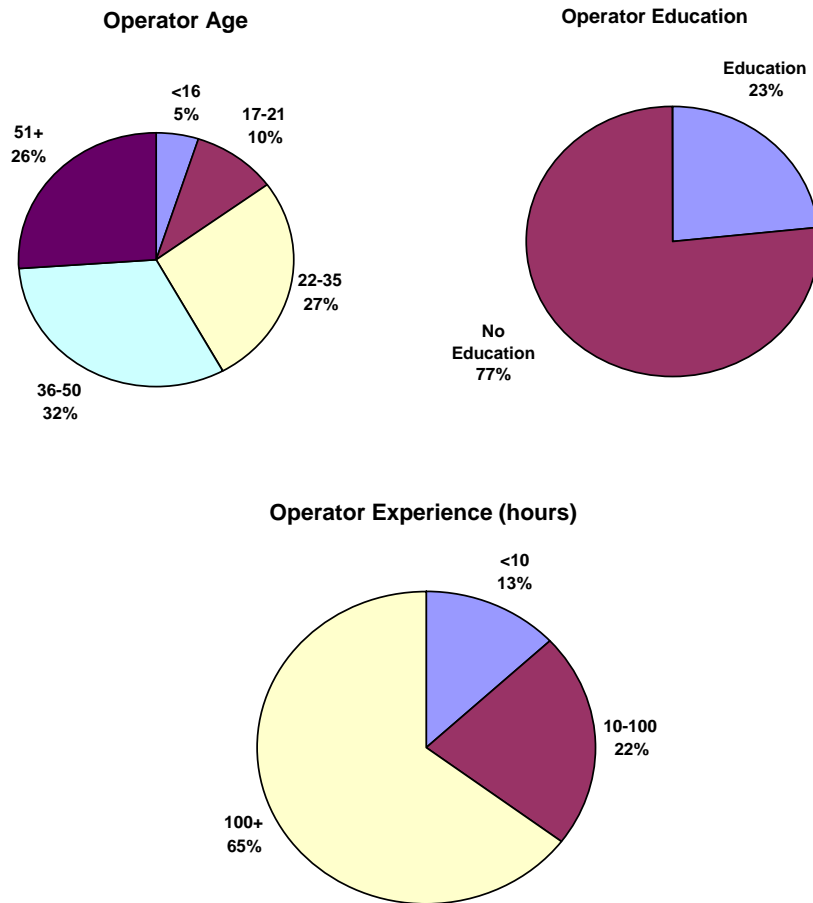
Overall, the question of whether or not a reduction in boating accidents can be attributed solely to boating safety education remains difficult to answer conclusively. Recent analyses of Florida's recreational boating accident data has, on the other hand, revealed a significant trend that needs to be considered during discussions about the future of boating safety education.

Boating fatalities in Florida have risen at a rate much greater than the rate of growth in registered boats. Between 2000 and 2005, fatalities rose 76.1% while the boat registration increase during this time period was 14.8%. Contrary to popular belief, the people involved in boating accidents and fatalities are not primarily young, inexperienced boat operators. Boating accidents usually involve operators who are older adults (males 36 years of age and older), have more than 100 hours of boat operation experience, and have no formal boating safety education. This fact is even more evident in Florida's boating accidents involving at

least one fatality. The statistics show that simply having more hours of boating "experience" does not equate to reduced risk of having an accident.

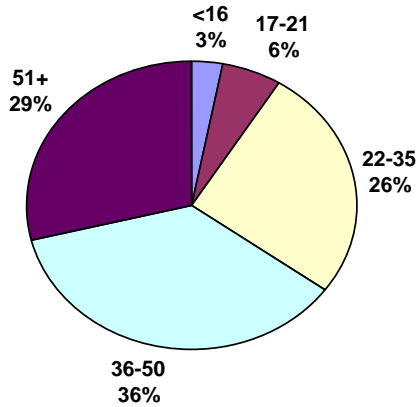
The following graphs depict ages, experience levels, and formal boating safety education for operators involved in both boating accidents in general and those resulting in at least one fatality during the period from 2001 through 2005.

### Operator Information Reportable Boating Accidents 2001-2005

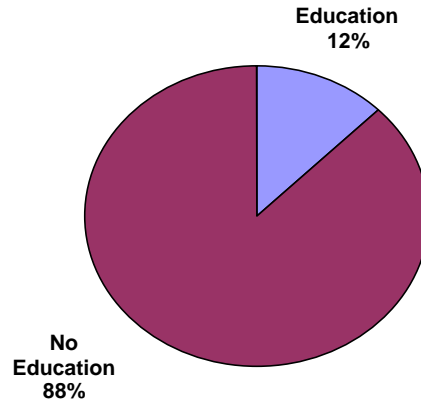


# Operator Information Fatal Boating Accidents 2001-2005

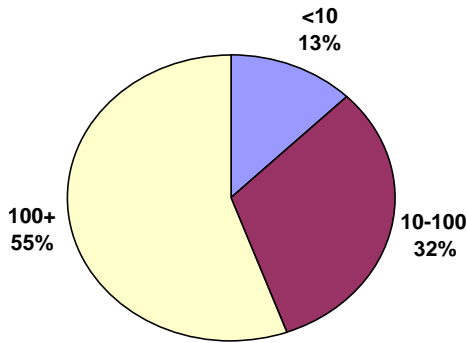
**Operator Age**



**Operator Education**



**Operator Experience (hours)**



These graphs show that from 2001 through 2005 a disproportionately larger number of boat operators who did not complete a boating education course were involved in fatal accidents. Of particular concern are those operators over 35 years of age who are involved in the vast majority of boating accidents and fatalities.

Boating accidents are most often caused by operator-controllable factors, such as carelessness, inattention, navigation rule violations, poor choices during bad weather, inexperience, and alcohol consumption. Boating safety education courses meeting state and national educational standards cover each of these topics in detail and require participants to pass a test to demonstrate their knowledge of safe boating practices, boating laws and the navigation rules. Unless there is a requirement for some form of boating safety education, older boat operators are unlikely to be exposed to the critical information necessary to properly identify areas of greatest risk and learn how to avoid potential problems on the water.

## THE FUTURE OF BOATER EDUCATION IN FLORIDA

Boating safety education has been identified as a high-level concern at the national, state, and local level for many years, but the concern over uneducated boaters does not end with government officials and boating safety-related organizations.

Several surveys of recreational boaters have indicated consistent support for requiring all boat operators to be educated. Supporting survey data is as follows:

*1998 Florida Boater Safety and Education Review.* This survey was conducted by the Survey Research Laboratory of Florida State University under contract for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection – Division of Law Enforcement. There were 1,057 eligible respondents representing a cross-section of Florida's registered boat owner population who participated in the survey (41 percent response rate). When asked to identify how important boating safety education was to them, 95.4% of the respondents indicated that it was important to them.

*2002 National Recreational Boating Survey.* This survey was conducted by the Strategic Research Group under contract with the U.S. Coast Guard's Office of Boating Safety. This national survey sampled boat owners around the nation, including over 500 individuals from Florida. Of the responding boat owners, 73.8% said that people who operate boats should be required to pass a test to demonstrate their knowledge of boating laws.

*2005-06 Florida Boating Safety Awareness Campaign Surveys.* Surveys were conducted to solicit registered boat owners in Broward, Lee, Miami-Dade, and Monroe counties to respond via the Internet to a series of questions as part of ongoing boating safety awareness campaigns. Over 680 responses were received. Although these surveys were not intended to address public opinion on boating safety education issues, one open-ended question offered respondents a forum through which they could identify any changes they would most like to see regarding boating regulations in their area. This was not a multiple choice question, but respondents were required to generate an answer and type it in. In the Lee County survey, 203 responses were received to this question. The leading desired change dealt with speed zones (52%). The second leading desired change was a requirement for boating safety education for boat operators (21%). In the Broward, Miami-Dade and Monroe survey, boating safety education and increased law enforcement tied for the most desired changes (24% each). In another question, respondents to both surveys identified inadequate boating safety education as one of the leading safety issues that concern them while boating (from 30.5% to 37%).

*2006 Florida Recreational Boating Survey.* The FWC's Boating and Waterways Section initiated a survey through VAI/Marketing Research Online to receive feedback from registered recreational boat owners about their opinions on boating-related topics. The survey was sent to 10,000 registered boat owners with county-by-county sample sizes proportional to each county's percentage of registered boats. The final response rate was just under 10 percent. When asked what would

most improve their enjoyment of recreational boating, almost three quarters of the respondents (72%) indicated that they want all boat operators to pass a test demonstrating their knowledge of safe boating practices, boating laws and the navigation rules.

The Commission's Boating and Waterways Section is working with a host of others to make Florida's waterways as safe as they can possibly be. Although the accident statistics indicate some generally positive trends in our state, we still face unnecessary accidents, injuries, and deaths each year. The vast majority of these accidents could be easily prevented, but a cultural change must occur within the recreational boating community for a dramatic reduction in accidents to take place. Some of the changes may require legislative action, but others can be accomplished through aggressive awareness campaigns and law enforcement action. Proposed efforts are as follows:

- **LIFT THE "CAP" ON THE BOATER EDUCATION LAW** – Legislative action will be required to expand Florida's requirement for basic boating safety education for boat operators of all ages. Florida's Boating Advisory Council has twice recommended such a change, and for two consecutive years the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has approved moving forward with proposed legislation to accomplish this statewide.
- **CONDUCT HIGH-PROFILE AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS** – Accident statistics reveal that approximately 75 percent of Florida's boating accidents occur within ten of our 67 counties. While statewide efforts have value, efforts directed specifically at these "problem areas" are more apt to generate significant results toward saving lives and reducing accidents. The Boating and Waterways Section will continue utilizing major media sources and partnerships to improve boating safety awareness in these areas of greatest need.
- **INCREASE VOLUNTARY LIFE JACKET WEAR RATES** – Life jacket wear, or the lack thereof, has been a growing concern among boating safety professionals across the nation. It is obvious that a large number of the annual boating-related deaths could easily be prevented if the victims had been wearing a life jacket at the time of the accident. Expecting to be able to find and put on a life jacket when the need arises has been compared to the thought that it might be reasonable to wait until just before an automobile accident to wear a seat belt. Increasing voluntary life jacket wear rates has been identified as a top priority at the national level, and FWC will soon be making boaters more aware of modern inflatable life jacket technology and the need to get in the habit of wearing a life jacket while on a boat through an innovative "Wear It Florida" campaign.
- **AGGRESSIVELY ENFORCE BOATING UNDER THE INFLUENCE LAWS** – Boat owners who responded to surveys have repeatedly identified boating safety and boating under the influence as the two top areas needing increased enforcement. Florida's boating fatalities are often associated with alcohol consumption. The FWC Division of Law Enforcement will continue to increase high visibility patrol efforts targeting boat operators who choose to put themselves, their passengers, and other boaters at risk by operating under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. This will be accomplished through expanded officer training on detection of impaired operators, the use of portable evidentiary breath testing instruments, and continued use of mobile breath testing units during high-traffic boating events throughout the state.