14-year-old boy dies after falling from amusement park ride in Orlando, Florida

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Follow-up: "Death of 14-year-old Tyre Sampson on Orlando, Florida, amusement park ride highlights consequences of deregulation, lax oversight"

Update: "State investigation reveals new details about death of 14-year-old boy who fell from amusement park ride in Orlando, Florida"

A 14-year-old boy fell to his death Thursday night at the ICON Park in Orlando, Florida, while riding on a drop tower ride. Cell phone footage, capturing the tragic incident went viral on Friday morning, shows that Tyre Sampson took a fatal dive from the park's "Orlando FreeFall" ride, plummeting from the 430-foot ride at about halfway up the air. Sampson was rushed to a local hospital, where he was pronounced dead from his injuries.

Videos of the incident showed riders being slowly lifted up the drop tower attraction before quickly descending down. Some 10 minutes after taking off and as the ride was slowing down, Sampson was seen dislodged from his seat. Witnesses on the ride and in the surrounding area can be heard crying with terror as the boy flew out of his chair and fell flat on the ground. One woman yelled for an ambulance to be called, while other passengers screamed with demands that they be let off the ride.

Local fire rescue operators released several 911 calls of witnesses recounting the gruesome incident. One person told the dispatcher he saw the teen fall right out of his seat and fall through a chair, flopping on the ground. He described it as "the biggest smack I ever heard in my life." Another dispatcher gave instructions to a different caller for CPR after seeing Sampson on the ground, but the caller said the youth was "not breathing," while a pool of blood covered the area.

Law enforcement officials said the investigation into the killing is underway. Sampson was a Missouri resident visiting a friend's family. Orange County Sheriff John Mina said "absolutely no criminal charges" have been filed, though the agency is assessing whether the incident was an accident or intentional.

John Stine, sales director with the Slingshot Group of Companies, which owns the Orlando FreeFall, said in a statement: "We are devastated that this happened, and our hearts go out to the family." Stine said the company was "cooperating with all other investigations at this time to get to the bottom of what happened."

The horrific death of Sampson points to the dangerous negligence and criminal recklessness that characterizes the super-profitable amusement park industry nationwide and globally.

The Orlando FreeFall, which just began operations in December, was designed by a company named Funtime, whose rides are operated all over Florida through another company, Slingshot Group of Companies. The Slingshot Group also operates three other rides at ICON Park aside from Orlando Free Fall: Orlando Slingshot and StarFlyer. All three have suspended their operations.

ICON Park, where the rides operate, opened in 2015 and was developed as a joint venture of property developers Flag Luxury, Unicorp National Development and Torino Companies.

This is not the first fatal incident that occurred at ICON Park. In September last year, Jacob David Kaminsky, a 21-year-old worker fell to his death while conducting a daily safety check on the StarFlyer attraction. The Orange County Sheriff's Office said Kaminsky was climbing the tower when he fell from about halfway up the 450-foot ride to the bottom platform.

While the investigation into the death of Sampson is in its early stages, there is no doubt as to rider safety at amusement parks like ICON Park being largely subordinated to profit interests.

Thursday's tragedy coincides with the spring break season, as millions of vacationers and young people flood to Florida, providing millions of dollars in revenue for the state's lucrative tourist and theme park industries. As public health restrictions from the coronavirus pandemic are being abandoned nationwide, there is a mad dash on the part of corporations to open up their operations full-bore to reap massive profits.

Financial data on Florida's theme parks showed the state posted revenues higher than expected by the end of 2021 and far greater than a year prior. Universal Studios theme parks generated $1.4 billion in revenue in the third quarter of 2021, more than three times what the parks performed during the same time a year ago.

Evidence has emerged demonstrating an absence of critical safety equipment and oversight on the FreeFall attraction. The ride was designed without a belt connecting the horn on the seat to the shoulder restraint. While over-the-shoulder harnesses are the "generally accepted practice" for most drop tower rides, companies often install a secondary safety mechanism like a seatbelt that attaches the harness to the seat. If the harness system fails, the safety latch or seatbelt would prevent it from rising.

The only thing stopping FreeFall riders from falling out of their seats are plastic, pull-down harnesses which are supposed to buckle in place, in between the rider's legs. One woman was heard on video before the ride took off expressing concern that there was nothing more to keep them in the seats and asked if there was a

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seatbelt to clip them in. The ride attendant, however, replied, “There ain’t no seatbelts.”

The incident also begs the question why Sampson, who was 6’5” and about 340 pounds, was even allowed to get on the ride despite his large size. Friends of the deceased teen revealed he was prevented from riding on other rides on ICON Park because his physique raised major safety concerns.

A photo captured moments before the ride went into the air showed Sampson sitting in his seat with his shoulder harness not buckled in, as it appeared too small to fit him. It is unclear whether Sampson had fastened it before the ride began.

Video footage also showed a park worker running over to the ride attendant after ride-goers landed, asking: “You didn’t check it!?,” to which the attendant insisted that he had. The child’s father, Yarnell Sampson, told FOX 35 that Tyre felt unsafe as soon as FreeFall began going up. “When the ride took off, that’s when he was feeling uncomfortable. He was like ‘this thing is moving,’ you know what I’m saying. And he was like ‘what’s going on? And that’s when he started freaking out.’”

Touted as the “tallest drop top tower in the world,” the construction of Orlando FreeFall was announced by Slingshot Group in May of 2019. Plans for the ride were delayed due to the pandemic along with other factors, with the opening date being pushed back several times until it finally opened in December. Following the fatal incident on Thursday, all promotional references to the tower were deleted from ICON Park’s website.

Thursday’s tragedy exposes the notoriously inadequate regulation of amusement rides, which are not federally regulated but instead regulated through state agencies. In 1981, the Consumer Product Safety Commission was forced to end its oversight of theme parks as part of the Ronald Reagan administration’s deregulation efforts and other domestic cost-cutting aimed at increasing corporate profits.

Since the deregulation of the attractions industry took effect, park visitors have had to rely on state fire marshals, public safety officials, or even agriculture officials, such as in Florida, to inspect facilities and rides. According to Safety Park USA, only 20 states have “comprehensive government oversight.” Nine states—Alabama, Arizona, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming—have no state oversight agency at all.

In states that do authorize safety oversight for amusement parks, sufficient funding and resources for oversight amount to little, ensuring that nothing hampers the billions of dollars generated from the profit-driven operations of these companies.

Although tourist attractions make up one of the largest industries in Central Florida, little to no oversight is conducted to ensure safety. Larger attractions like Walt Disney World and Universal Studios are not bound by any state-mandated investigations or inspections.

Representatives of Slingshot Group have claimed the ride was subjected to daily inspections, but these are performed by park employees, who often do not receive proper training. The archaic and underfunded Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), which inspects rides at smaller amusement parks statewide, only conducted one, initial inspection of FreeFall around the time of its opening in December. The FDACS’s “About us” page lists various services from protecting livestock to fighting wildfires, with nothing even said on theme park safety.

Reviews of the Orlando FreeFall on Google Maps profoundly undermine the claim that proper inspections and safety oversight was enforced on the newly opened ride. Google was inundated with comments after Thursday night’s tragedy from angry former riders who condemned the drop tower.

One reviewer who visited the ICON Park only a few days before the incident said “the teenagers working there did not do a safety check on any of us. No seat belt. Just a harness that is unsafe. Do not ride this attraction.” Another reviewer said: “Close this. Obviously no training or proper safety based on actual video showing the operator talking with the people and not checking anything before they went up.”

A furious commentator said: “The workers of this ride did not properly inspect the seat harness before operating this ride. This park is dangerous, and I pray the negligent workers and owners of this park are all held responsible. How do you not put a seatbelt on this kind of attraction?”

Another reviewer wrote: “the videos clearly show the employees lacked any sort of emergency training whatsoever. Just the fact that the company was completely clueless about what to do is an indicator that safety wasn’t taken seriously. That said, there is no excuse for this company operating a NEW attraction with so little care. Regardless of fault, regardless of whatever massive settlement they pay the family, this attraction should be permanently closed.”

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