

Royal Life Saving National Drowning Report 2021

294 people drowned
in Australian waterways



ROYAL LIFE SAVING
AUSTRALIA

SUPPORTED BY



Australian Government

CONTENTS

4	National Drowning Report 2021 snapshot	48	2020/21 Research and Policy Highlights
6	Fatal and non-fatal drowning in Australia	50	Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030
7	Who drowns?	52	National Swimming and Water Safety Framework
8	Drowning deaths by life stages	54	Drowning deaths among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: A 10-year analysis 2008/09 to 2017/18
16	When do drowning deaths occur?	56	Comparing rivers to lakes: Implications for drowning prevention
17	In focus: Summer drowning deaths	57	Epidemiology of unintentional fatal drowning among migrants in Australia
18	Where and how do drowning deaths occur?	58	Reducing inequities among adult female migrants at higher risk for drowning in Australia: The value of swimming and water safety programs
20	Drowning deaths by key locations	60	United Nations Resolution on Global Drowning Prevention
25	In focus: Multiple fatality events	61	World Drowning Prevention Day
26	Fatal drowning risk factors	62	Summer Drowning Toll Media analysis
28	State and Territory drowning deaths		
46	Methods		

> OUR VISION

**A water-loving nation
free from drowning.**



FOREWORD

As we present the National Drowning Report for 2021, we remain ever mindful of the people whose lives have been lost or impacted by drowning, including the many families affected by the loss or long-term injury of a loved one.

This past year has been difficult for so many. The ongoing fear and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic has left a mark on families, workplaces, and communities. Lockdowns and restrictions have changed our routines and impacted our lifestyles. These changes will contribute to drowning risk over the coming months and potentially, years. Swim school closures and falling learn to swim enrolments may have generational impacts on swimming and lifesaving skills. Restrictions are forcing more Australians to recreate in unfamiliar waterways, often without lifeguard services.

This report highlights our research and analysis of fatal and non-fatal drowning across Australia between 1st July 2020 and 30th June 2021. During this time, 294 people lost their lives to drowning and we estimate a further 674 people experienced a non-fatal drowning incident.

This year's findings show that:

- Drowning deaths increased by 20% on the previous year
- People aged 25 to 34 years accounted for 17% of the total number of deaths, the most of any age group
- Rivers remain the leading location for drowning with deaths increasing by 3% compared with the 10-year average
- Tragically, deaths among children aged 0-4 years increased by 9% compared with the 10-year average and 108% compared with last year

Young children

The increase in drowning among children under five years is devastating. Young children are at high risk of drowning, particularly as they become more mobile and curious about their surroundings. Prolonged periods of stay-at-home directives while working and schooling from home is challenging for parents and carers, increasing the likelihood of distractions around the home environment and lapses in child supervision. Keep Watch encourages parents to follow four simple actions to prevent child drowning; Supervise, Restrict, Teach and Respond.

Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030

The Australian Water Safety Strategy (AWSS) plays an essential role in National, State and Territory, and community approaches to preventing drowning and promoting safe use of the nation's waterways and swimming pools. It outlines priority areas where Australia's peak water safety bodies Royal Life Saving and Surf Life Saving, and Australian Water Safety Council (AWSC) Members can work together to prevent drowning.

The AWSS 2030 commits to an aspirational goal of reducing drowning by 50% by 2030. Royal Life Saving will be working with our partners on the AWSC to reduce drowning across the five priority areas.

The Social, Health and Economic Value of the Australian National Aquatic Industry

Public swimming pools are part of our national identity. Australia has more than 2,000 aquatic facilities and employs more than 67,000 workers. In addition to providing exercise and recreation opportunities, they are vital for swimming and lifesaving education. The social, health and economic benefits of the aquatic industry to Australia are worth more than \$9 billion.

Beyond the numbers, the value of public spaces has been highlighted in a very personal way for many Australians over the past year. The loss of exercise, recreation and learning provided by aquatic facilities has impacted people across the nation. While the future is uncertain, we remain committed to working with our partners in the aquatic sector to ensure all Australians are able to access, enjoy and benefit from aquatic facilities.

Our vision is a water-loving nation free from drowning.

As always, this report serves as an important reminder that drowning can affect everyone. Our job at Royal Life Saving is to ensure that all Australians can continue to enjoy our beautiful rivers, beaches, and community and backyard swimming pools, while staying safe and mindful of the risks.

Justin Scarr

Chief Executive Officer
Royal Life Saving Society – Australia

294

PEOPLE DROWNED IN AUSTRALIAN WATERWAYS

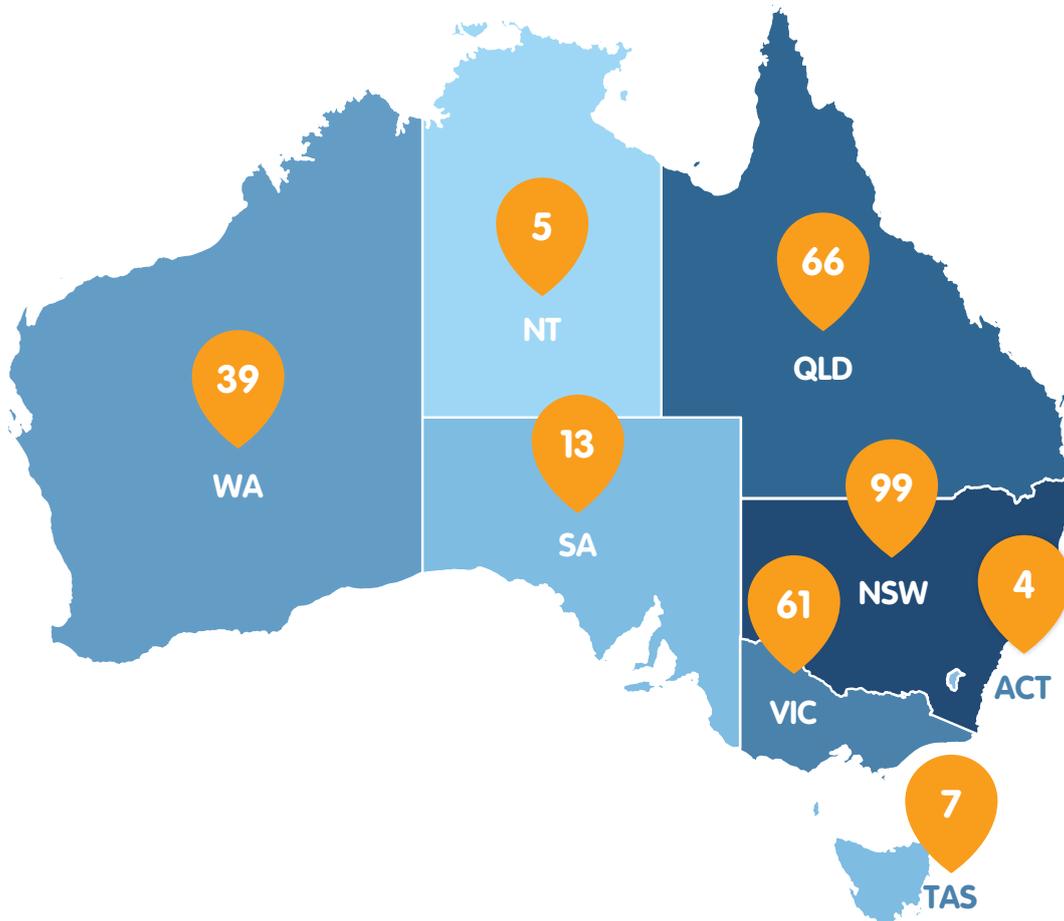
1 July 2020 to 30 June 2021

Sex

80% of all drowning deaths were males



State and Territory breakdown



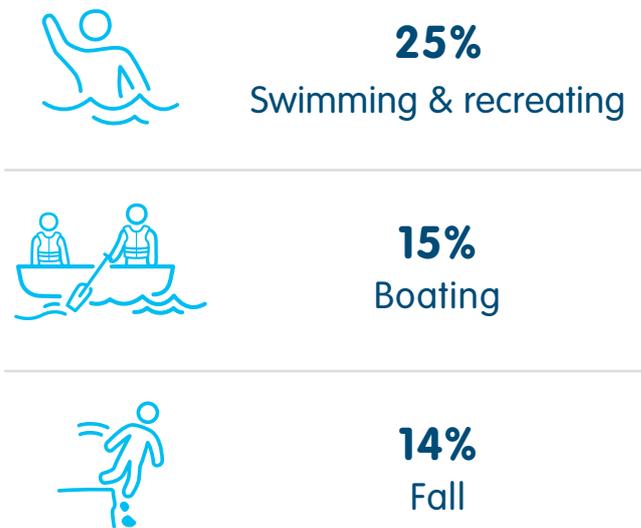
Top 3 age groups



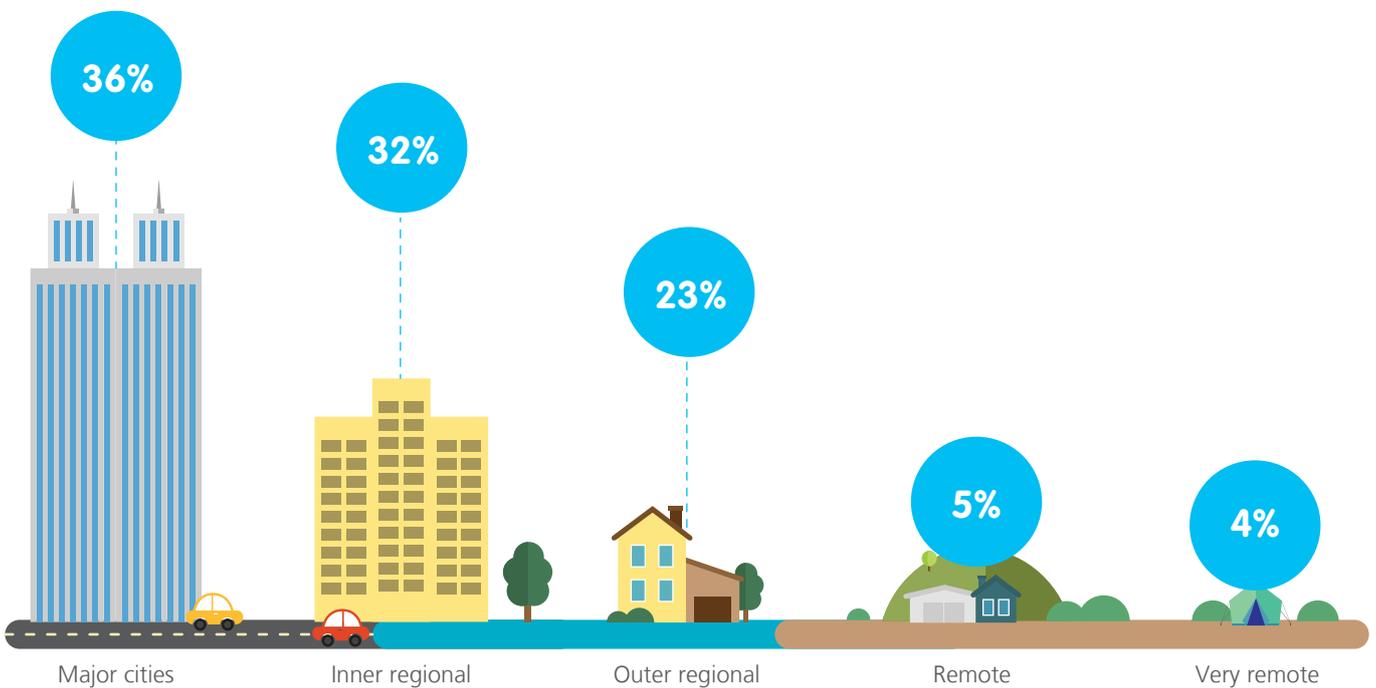
Top 3 locations



Top 3 activities



Remoteness of drowning location



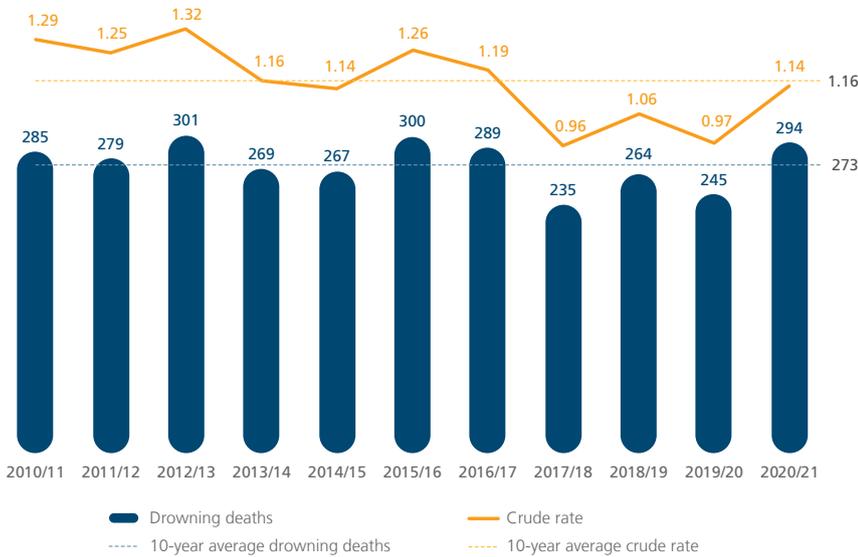
FATAL AND NON-FATAL DROWNING IN AUSTRALIA

294 people drowned in Australian waterways in 2020/21

This is a **20% increase** on 2019/20

and an **8% increase** on the 10-year average

Unintentional drowning deaths and death rates from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average

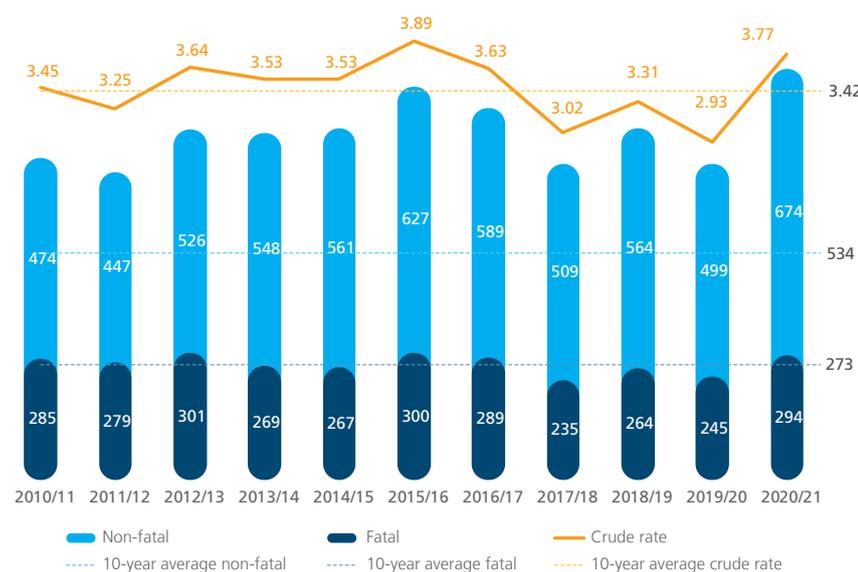


When fatal and non-fatal drowning incidents are combined, a total of 968 drowning incidents occurred in Australia, representing a crude drowning rate of 3.77 drowning incidents per 100,000 population.

294 fatal

674 non-fatal

Comparison of fatal and non-fatal incidents and crude rate of drowning incidents from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average



968 total drowning incidents

WHO DROWNS?



of drowning deaths were male

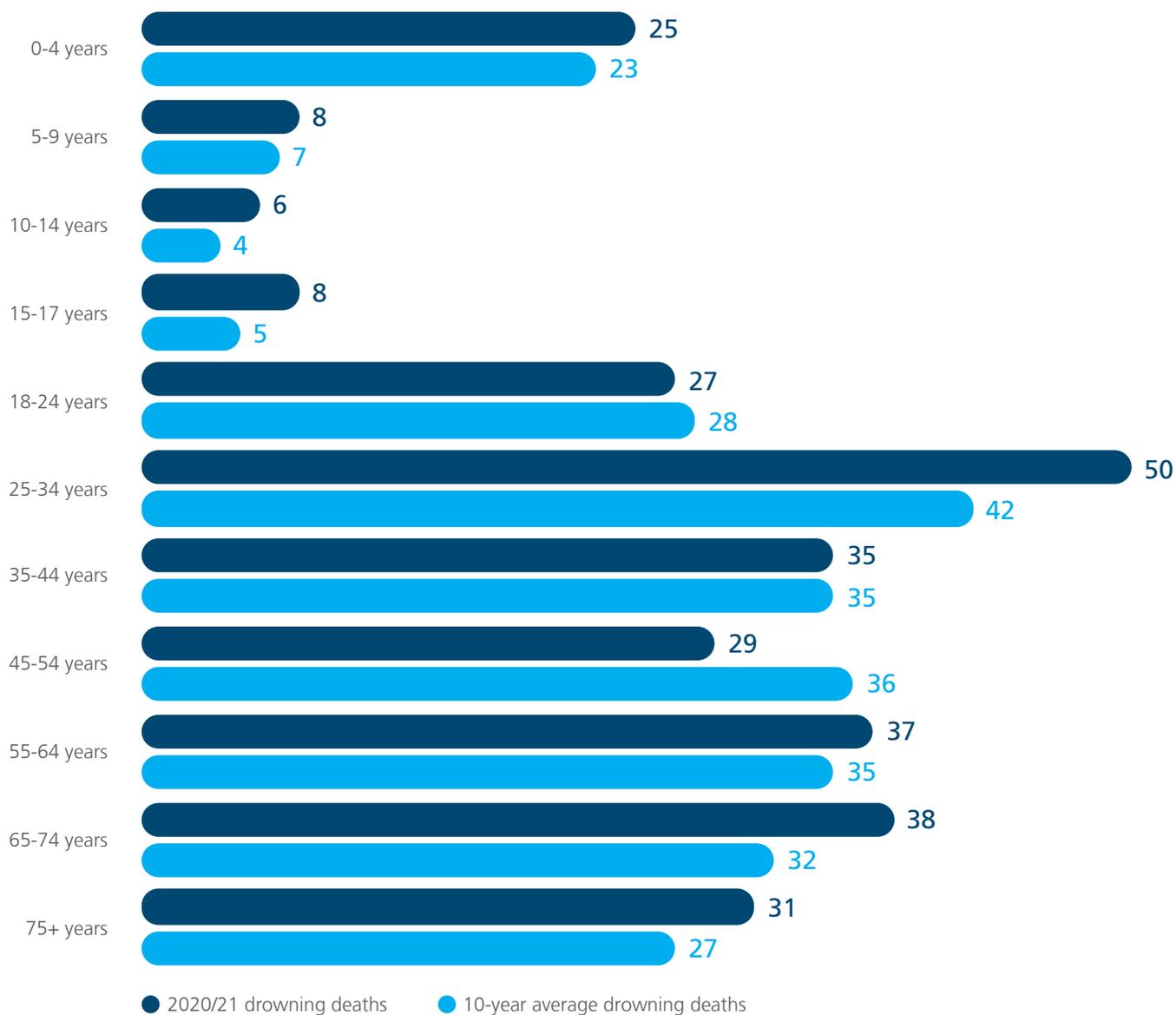


age group recorded the largest number of drowning deaths



increase in 0-4 years age group compared with the 10-year average

Drowning deaths by age group in 2020/21 compared with the 10-year average

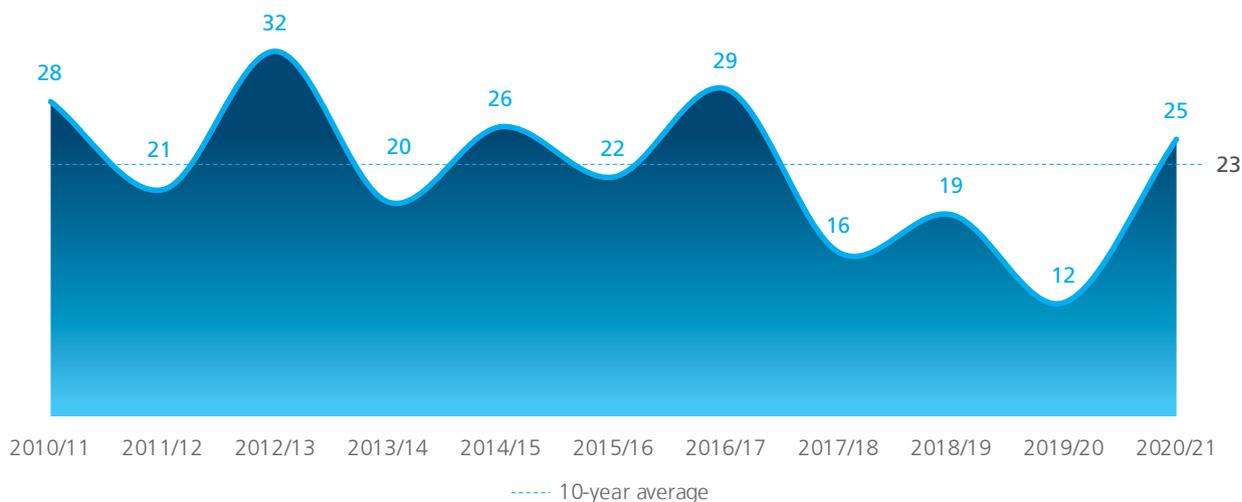


DROWNING DEATHS BY LIFE STAGES: CHILDREN AGED 0-4 YEARS

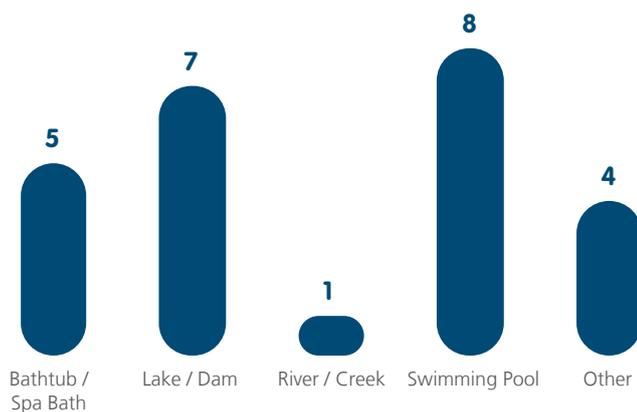


36% of all drowning deaths in this age group were males

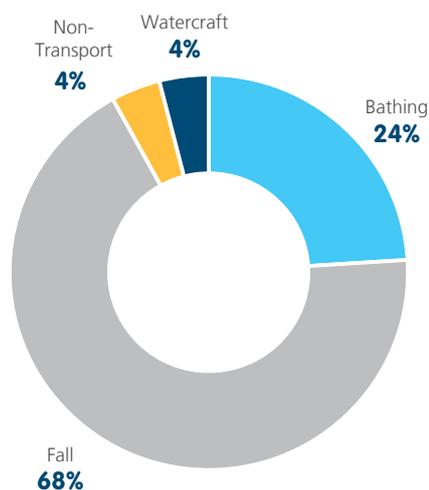
Drowning deaths of children aged 0-4 years from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average



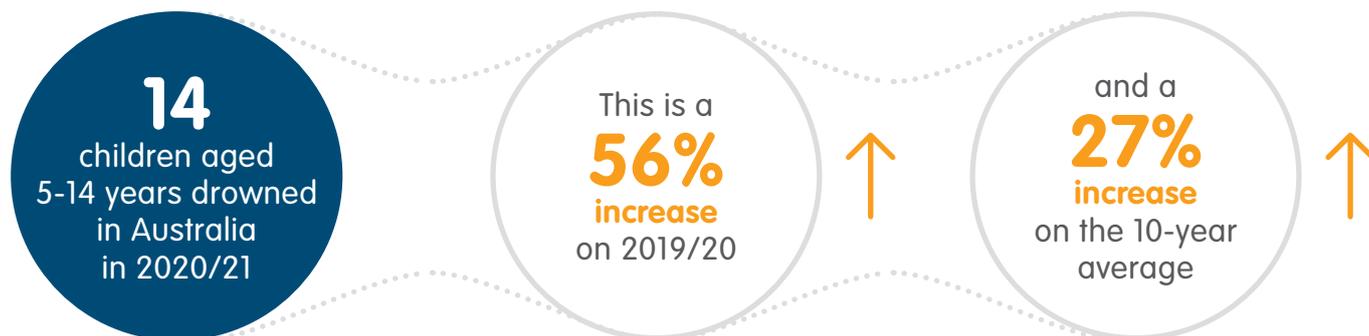
Drowning deaths of children aged 0-4 years by location, 2020/21



Drowning deaths of children aged 0-4 years by activity, 2020/21

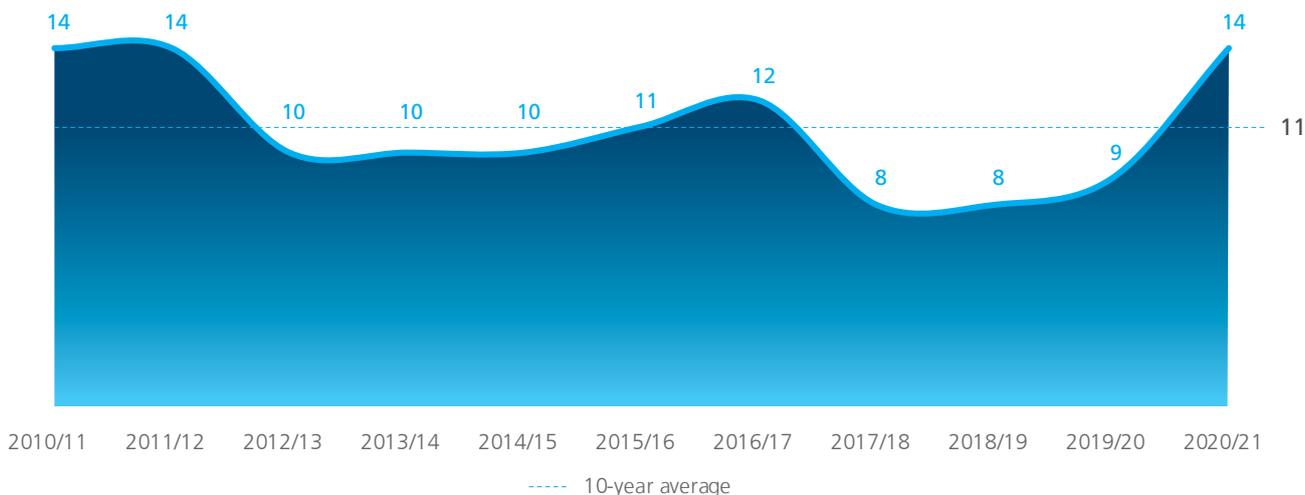


DROWNING DEATHS BY LIFE STAGES: CHILDREN AGED 5-14 YEARS

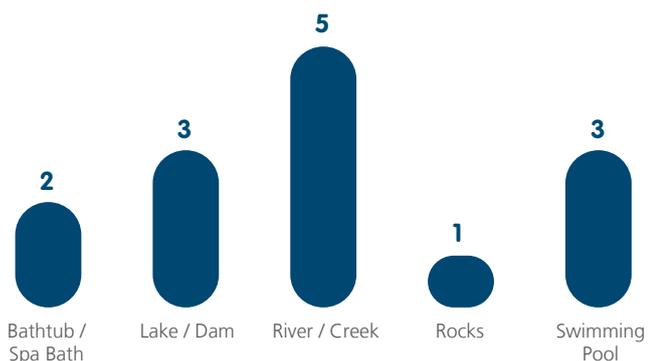


71% of all drowning deaths in this age group were males 

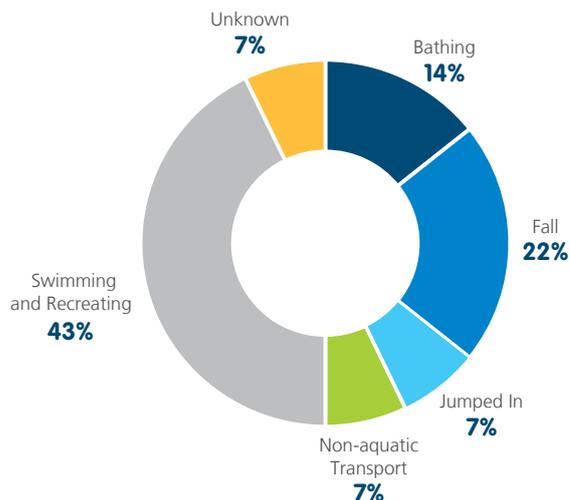
Drowning deaths of children aged 5-14 years from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average



Drowning deaths of children aged 5-14 years by location, 2020/21



Drowning deaths of children aged 5-14 years by activity, 2020/21



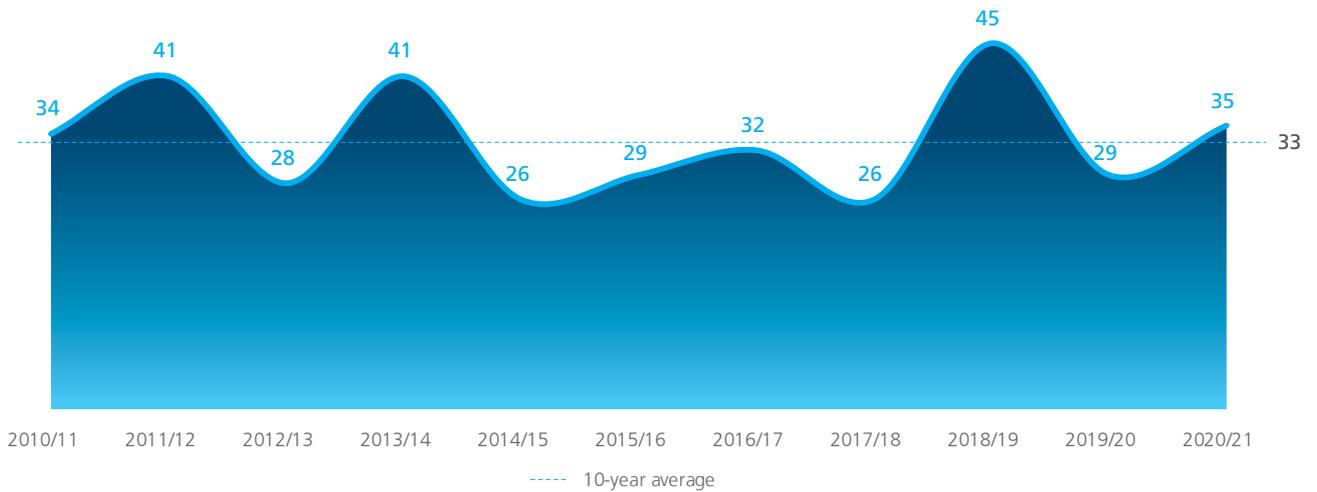


DROWNING DEATHS BY LIFE STAGES: YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 15-24 YEARS

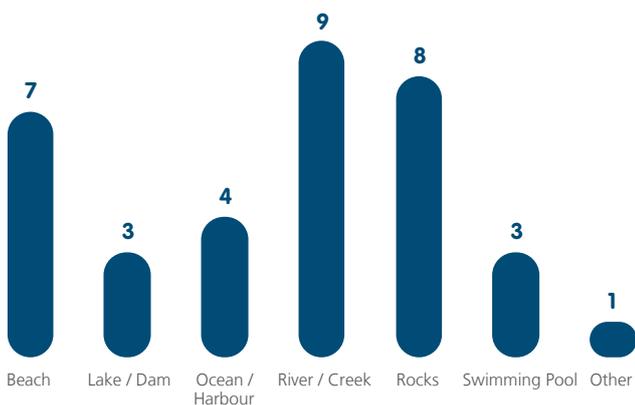


77% of all drowning deaths in this age group were males 

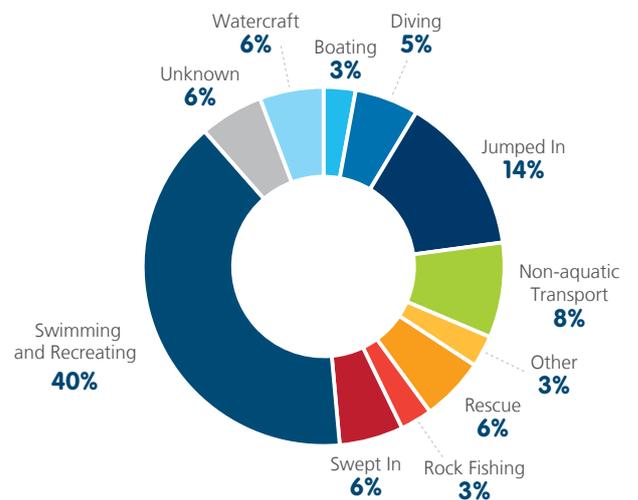
Drowning deaths of young people aged 15-24 years from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average



Drowning deaths of young people aged 15-24 years by location, 2020/21



Drowning deaths of young people aged 15-24 years by activity, 2020/21



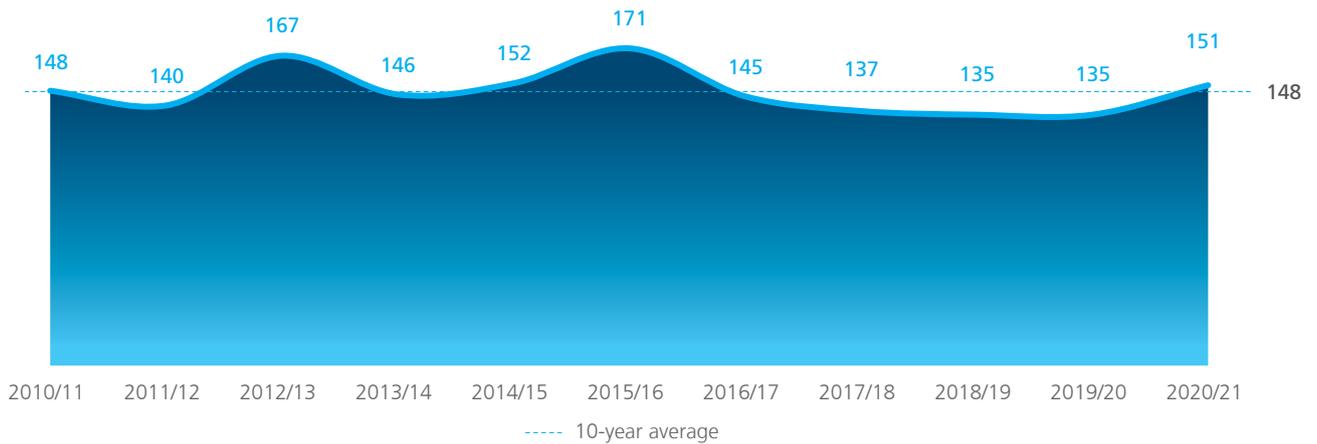
DROWNING DEATHS BY LIFE STAGES: ADULTS AGED 25-64 YEARS



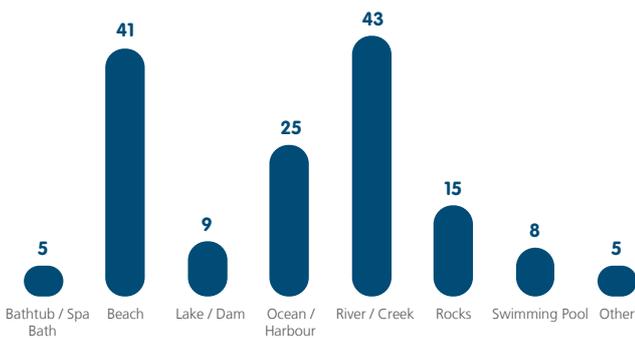
87% of all drowning deaths in this age group were males



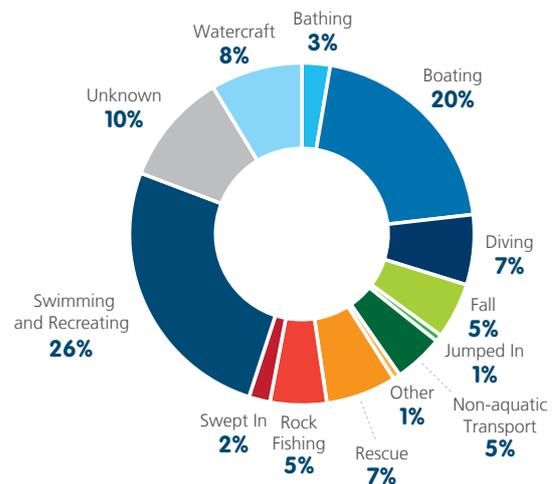
Drowning deaths of adults aged 25-64 years from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average



Drowning deaths of adults aged 25-64 years by location, 2020/21



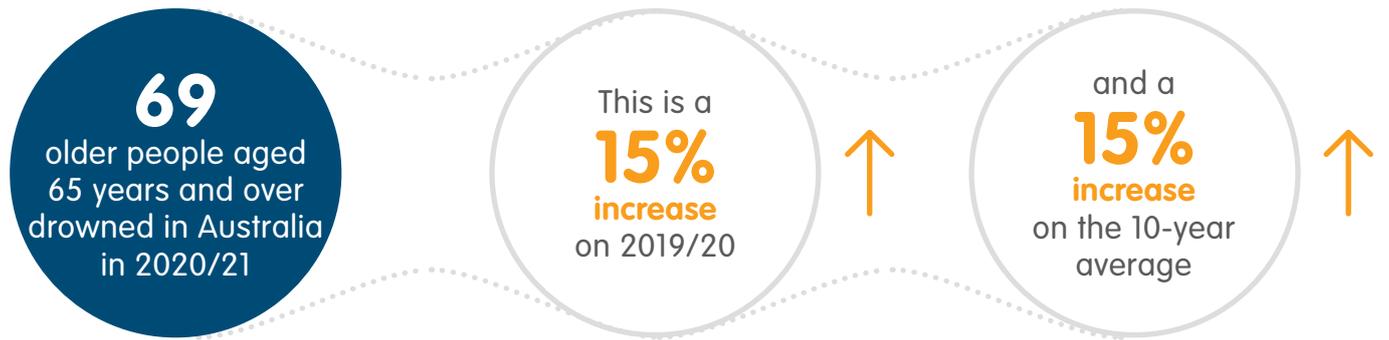
Drowning deaths of adults aged 25-64 years by activity, 2020/21





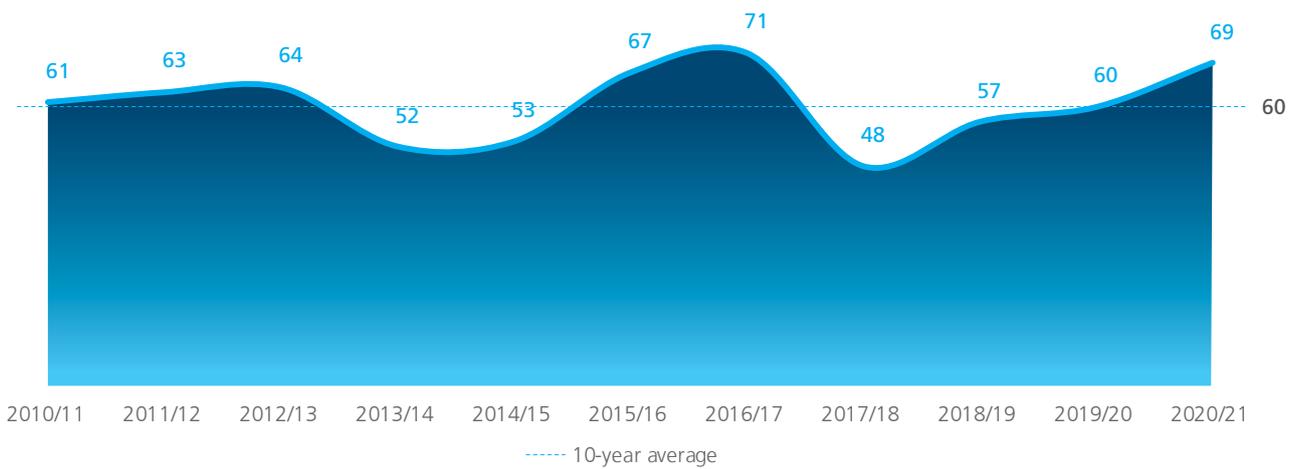


DROWNING DEATHS BY LIFE STAGES: OLDER PEOPLE AGED 65 YEARS AND OVER

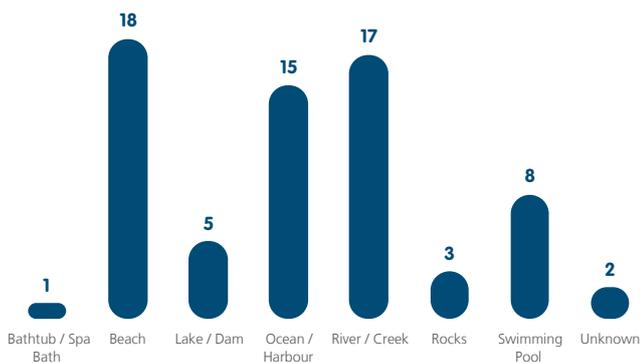


84% of all drowning deaths in this age group were males 

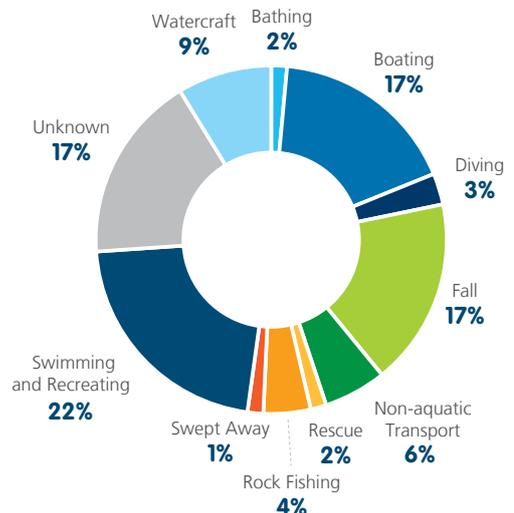
Drowning deaths of older people aged 65 years and over from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average



Drowning deaths of older people aged 65 years and over by location, 2020/21



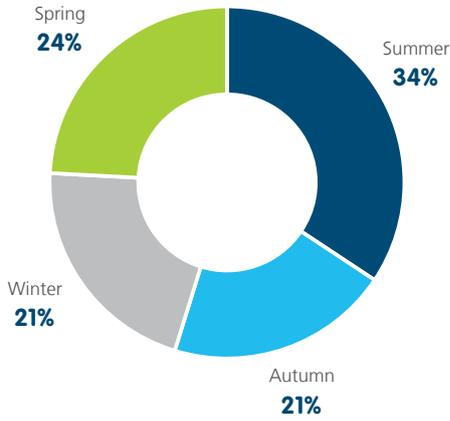
Drowning deaths of older people aged 65 years and over by activity, 2020/21



WHEN DO DROWNING DEATHS OCCUR?

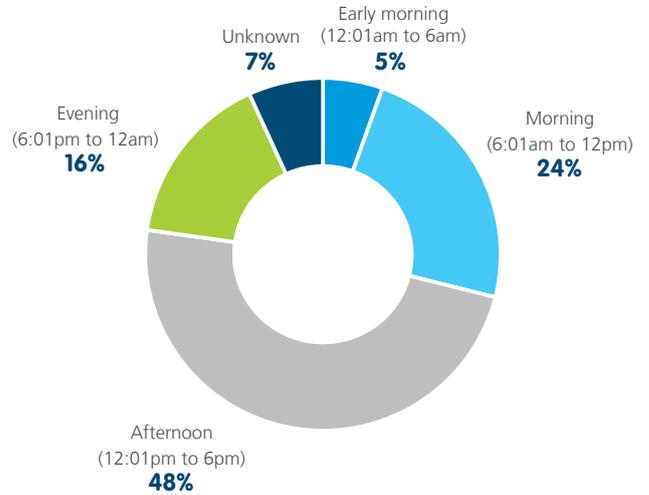
Season

Drowning deaths occur in all seasons, with the largest number occurring in the summer months (34%).



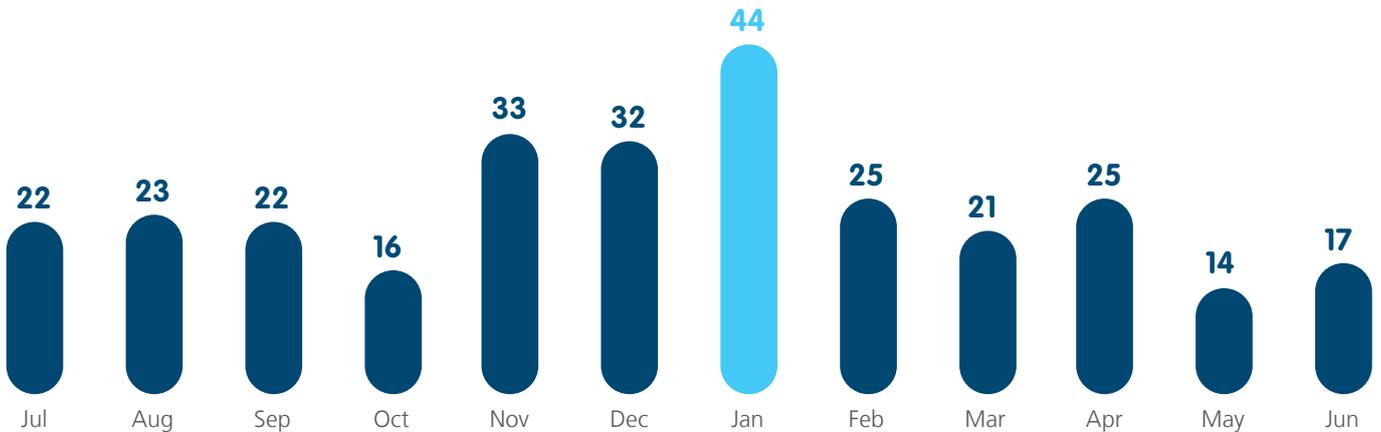
Time of the day

Almost half (48%) of all drowning deaths occurred during the afternoon.



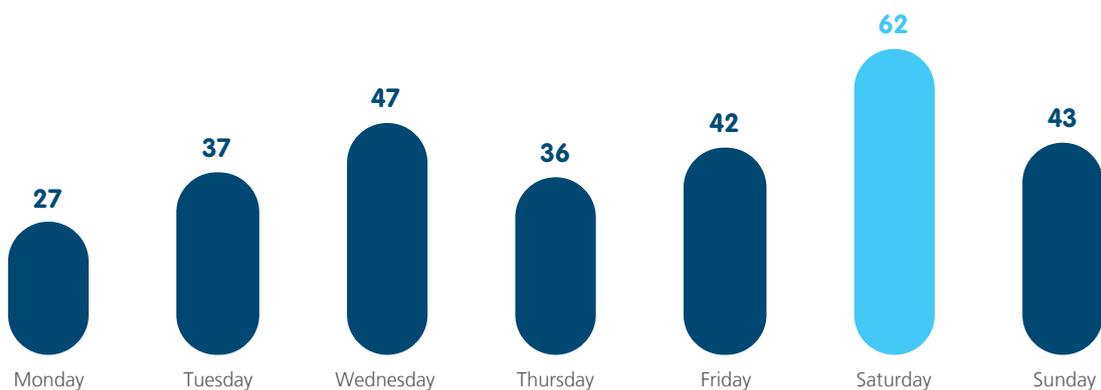
Month

Drowning peaked in January with 44 deaths, followed by November with 33 deaths.



Day of the week

Saturday was the most common day of the week for drowning, accounting for 21% of deaths.





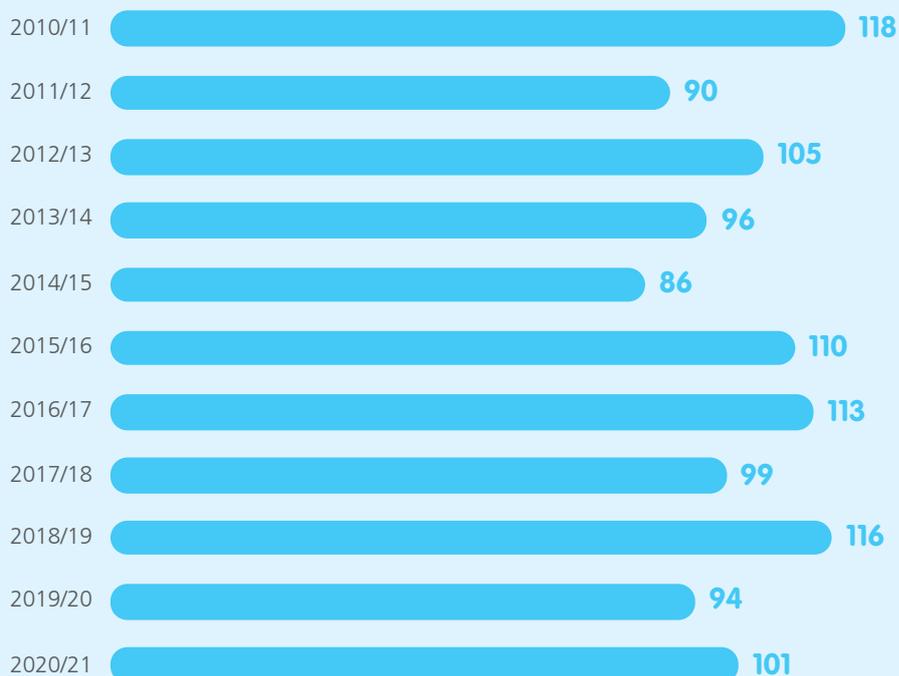
Summer drowning deaths

There were 101 drowning deaths over summer in 2020/21. This is a 2% decrease on the 10-year average of 103 deaths.

In 2020/21, more than half of all rock-related drowning deaths occurred during summer (52%). Similarly, 50% of all deaths while diving or rock fishing occurred during the summer months.

Royal Life Saving research has shown an increased risk of drowning during public holidays and school holidays. During summer there are three national public holidays (Christmas Day, Boxing Day and Australia Day), as well as individual State/Territory public holidays and school holiday periods.

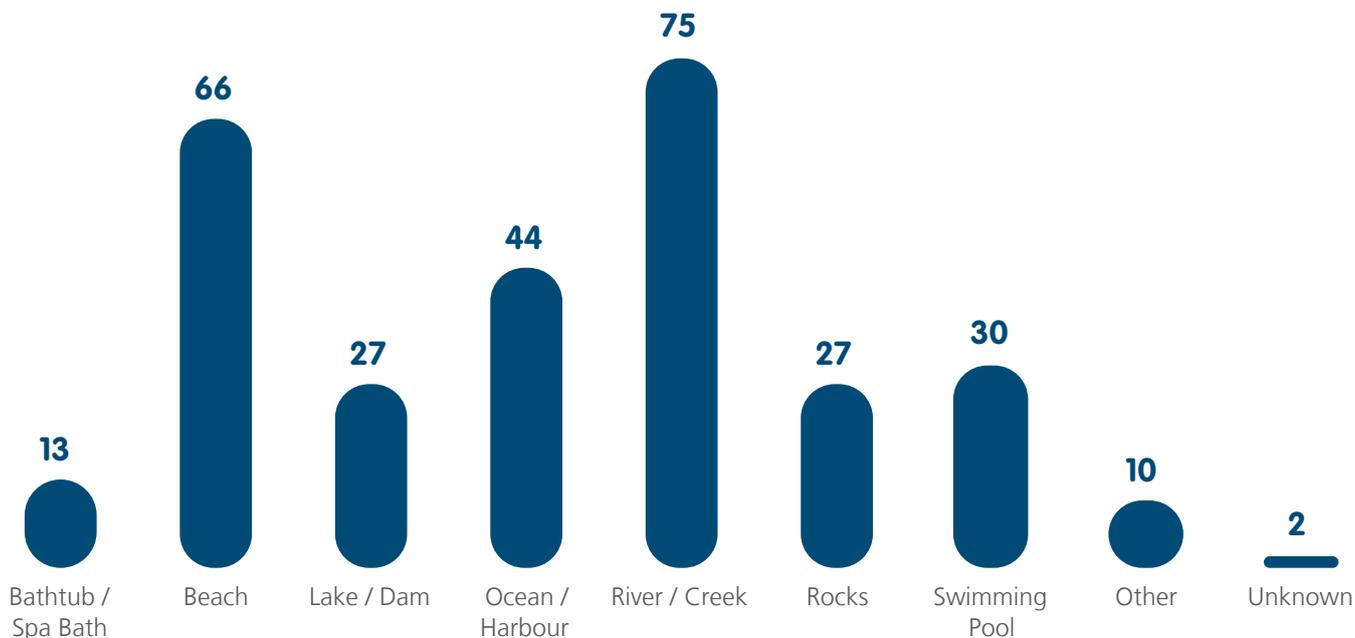
Drowning deaths in summer from 2010/11 to 2020/21



WHERE AND HOW DO DROWNING DEATHS OCCUR?

Location

Rivers and creeks continue to be the location with the largest number of drowning deaths, accounting for 26% of all deaths. Swimming pools recorded a 17% decrease compared with the 10-year average, while beaches recorded a 25% increase and rocks recorded a 29% increase.



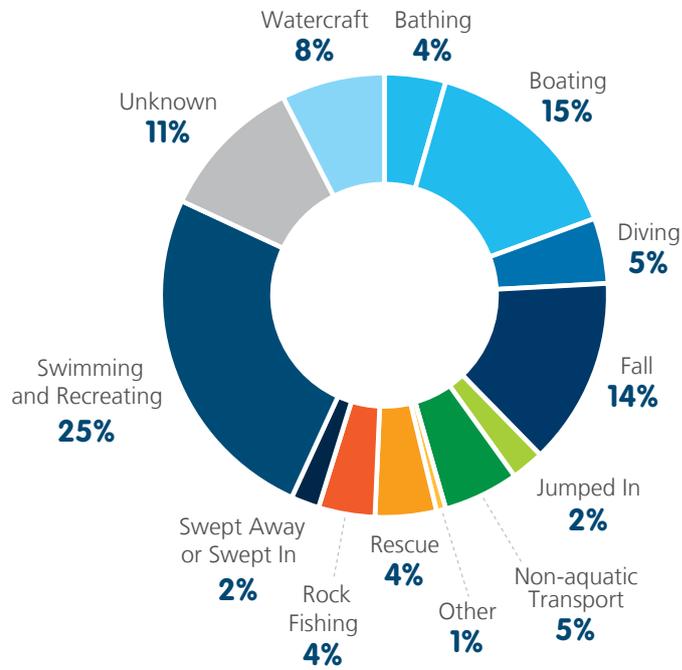
Remoteness

The largest proportion of drowning deaths occurred in areas classified as major cities (36%), with the number of deaths decreasing as remoteness increases. The remoteness classification was unknown for one drowning death.



Activity

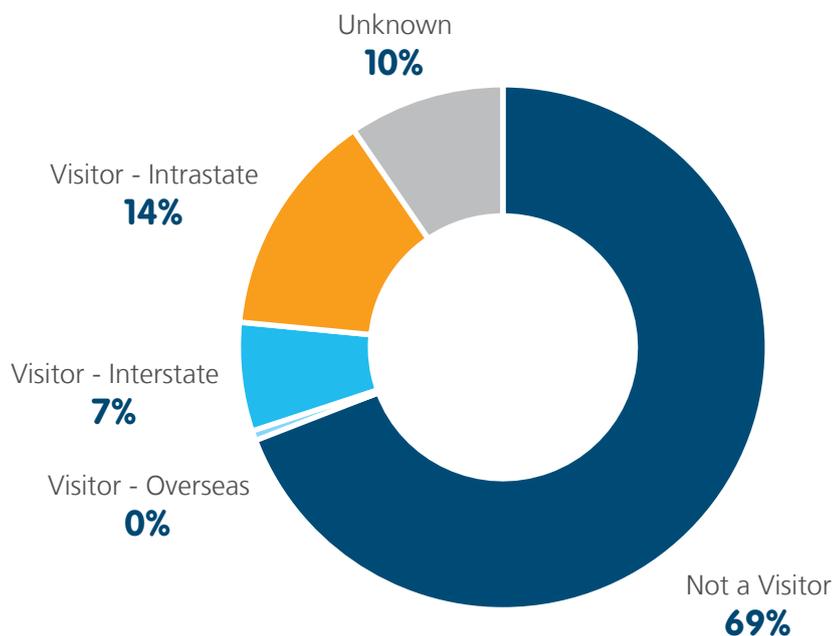
Swimming and recreating was the leading activity being undertaken immediately prior to drowning (25%), followed by boating (15%) and a fall into water (14%).



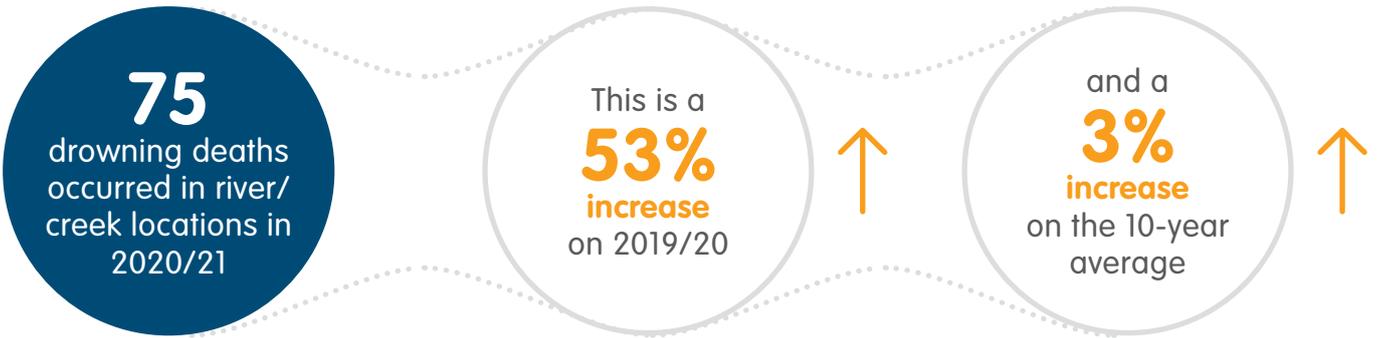
Visitor status

Most of those who drowned were not visitors (69%), that is, they drowned within 100km of where they lived.

In 62 cases (21%) the person who drowned was known to be a visitor to the location of the incident. Of those who were known to be visitors, 41 people (14%) drowned within their own State or Territory in a postcode that was 100km or further from their residential postcode. A further 20 people (7%) were visiting a different State or Territory when they drowned.

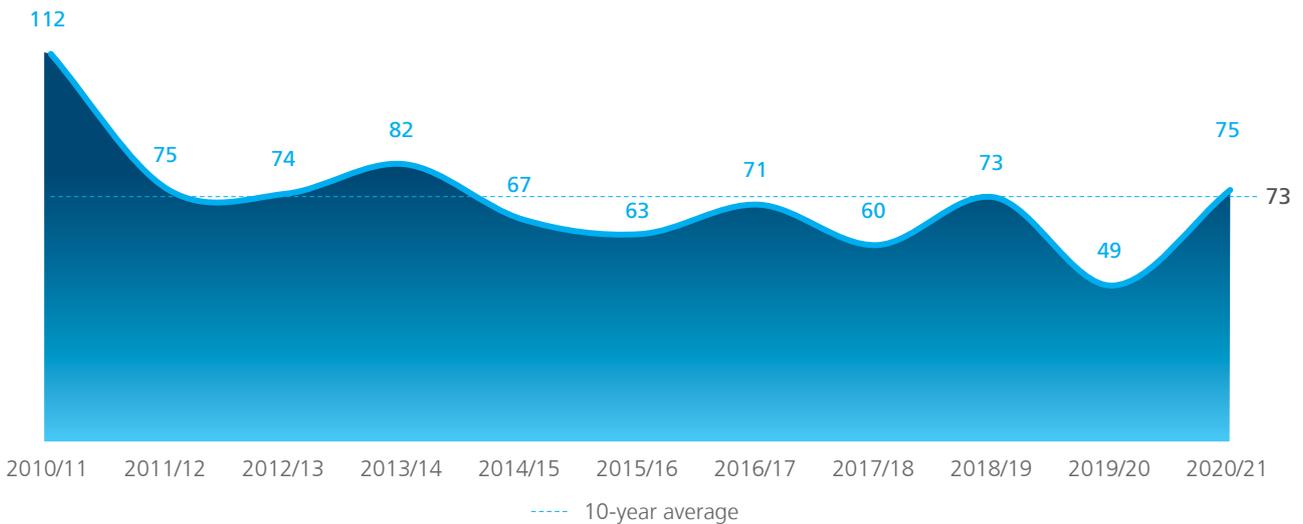


DROWNING DEATHS BY KEY LOCATIONS: RIVER/CREEK

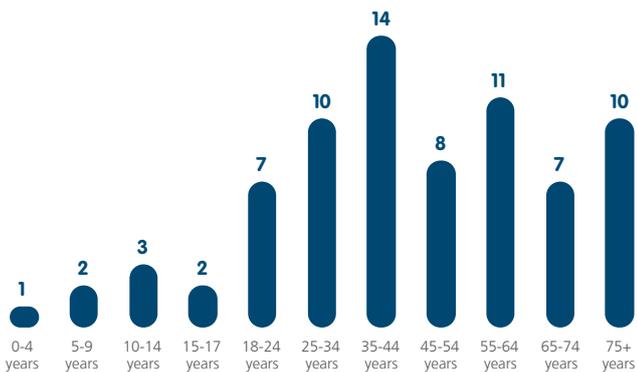


69% of all drowning deaths in this location were males 

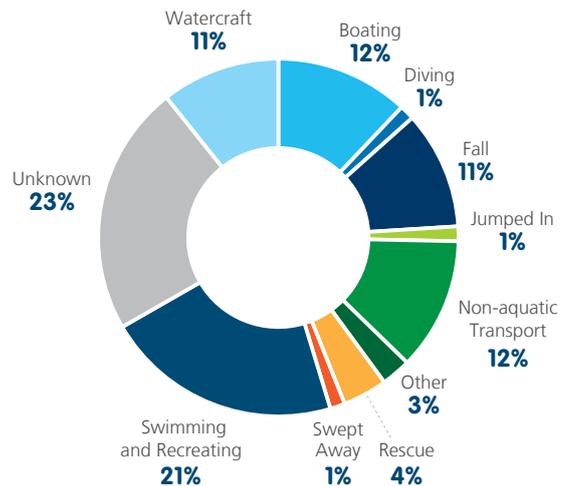
Drowning deaths in river/creek locations from 2010/11 to 2020/21



Drowning deaths in river/creek locations by age, 2020/21

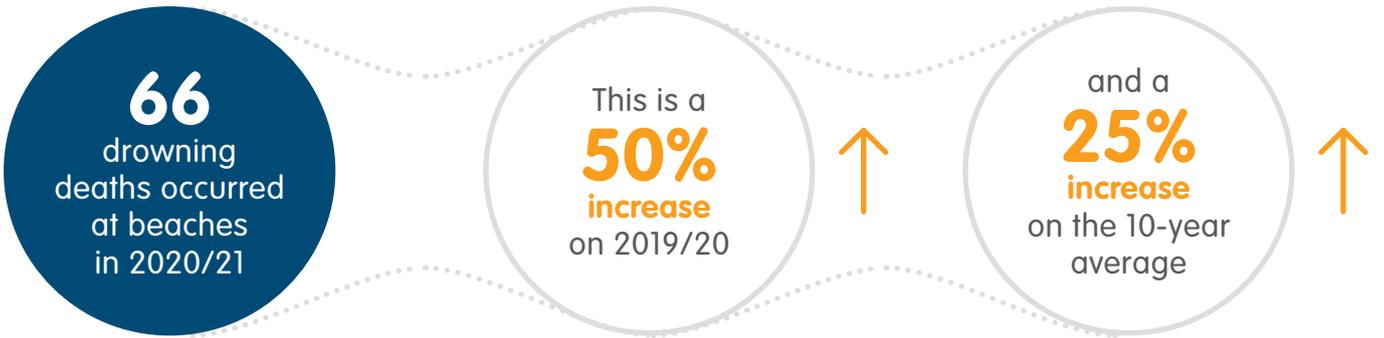


Drowning deaths in river/creek locations by activity, 2020/21



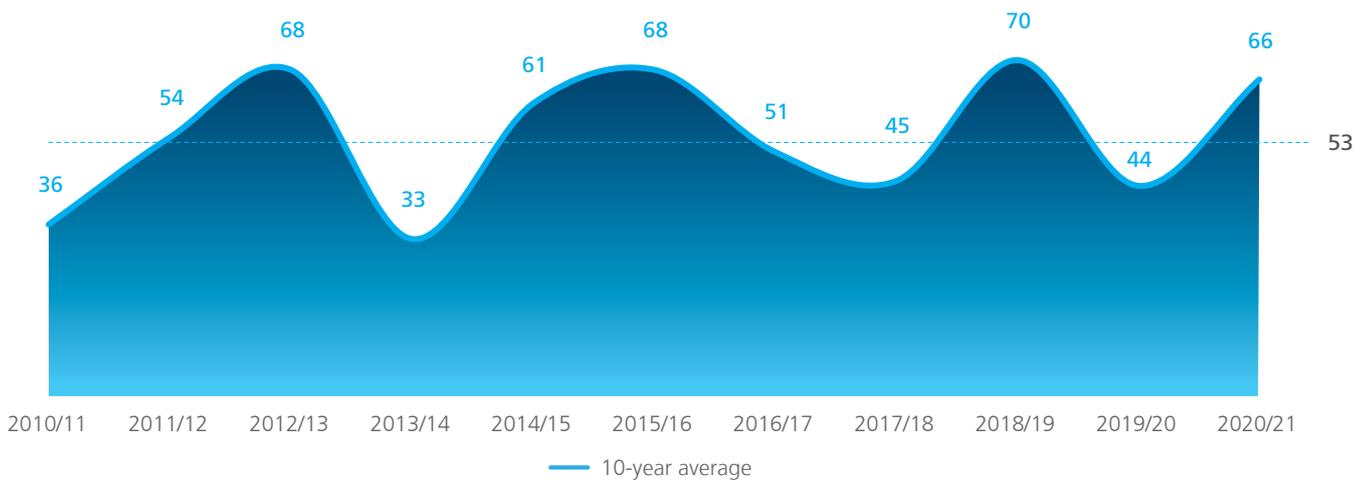


DROWNING DEATHS BY KEY LOCATIONS: BEACH

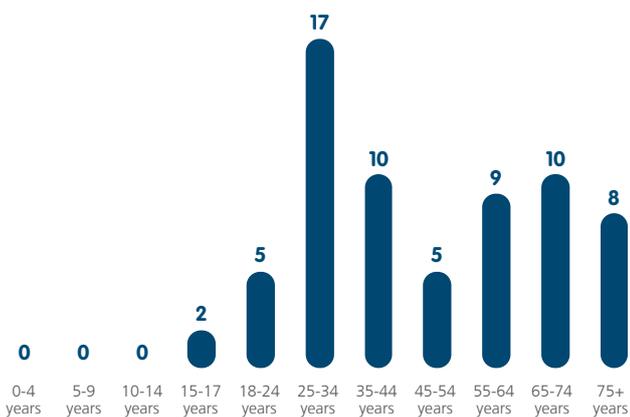


88% of all drowning deaths in this location were males 

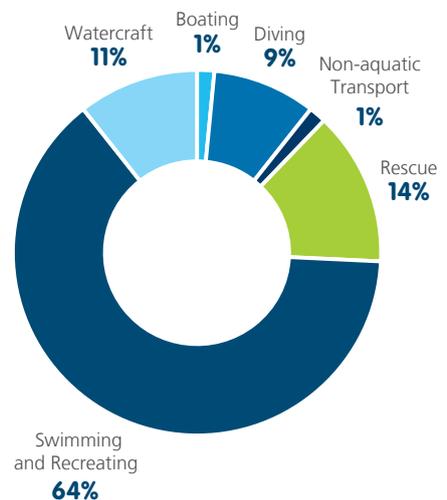
Drowning deaths at beaches from 2010/11 to 2020/21



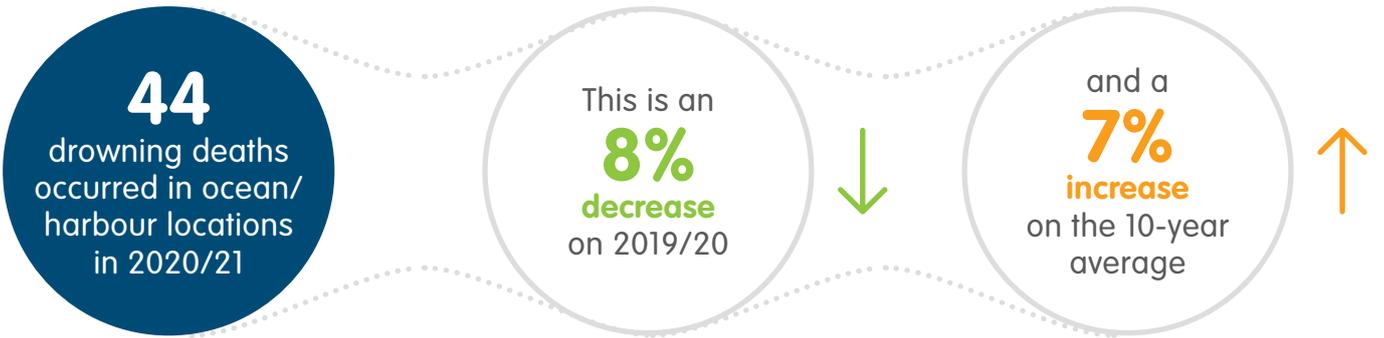
Drowning deaths at beaches by age, 2020/21



Drowning deaths at beaches by activity, 2020/21

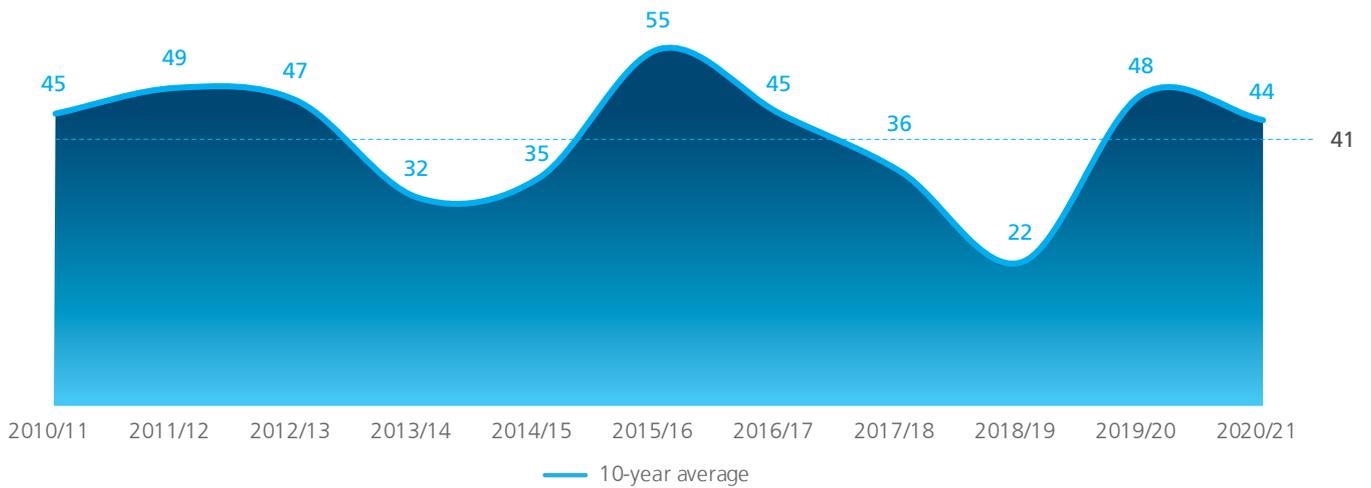


DROWNING DEATHS BY KEY LOCATIONS: OCEAN/HARBOUR

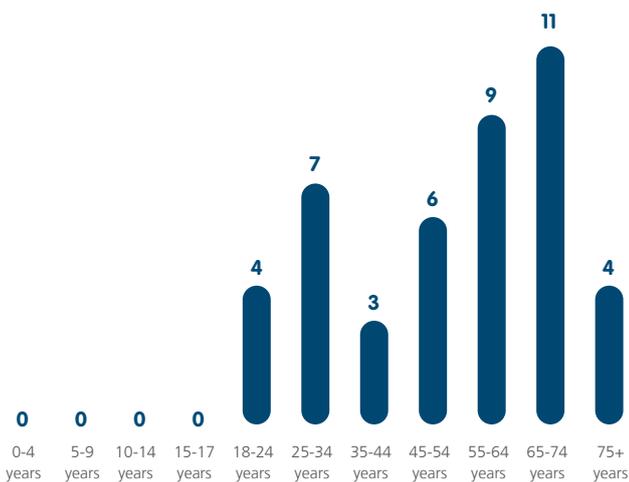


96% of all drowning deaths in this location were males 

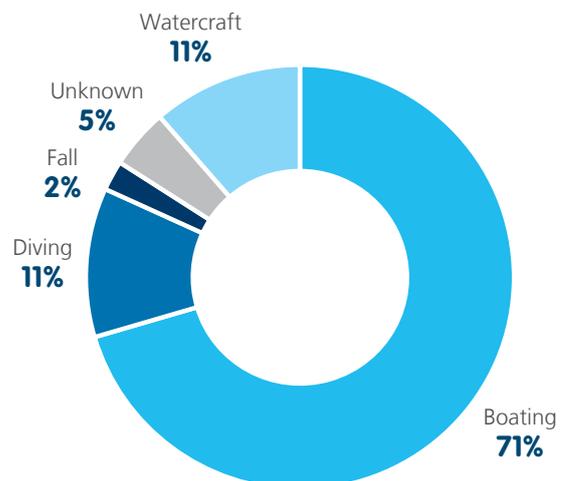
Drowning deaths in ocean/harbour locations from 2010/11 to 2020/21



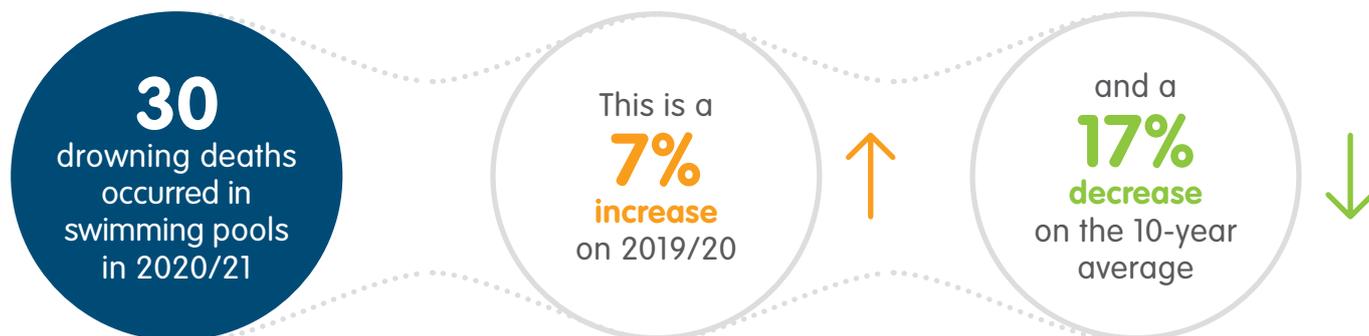
Drowning deaths in ocean/harbour locations by age, 2020/21



Drowning deaths in ocean/harbour locations by activity, 2020/21

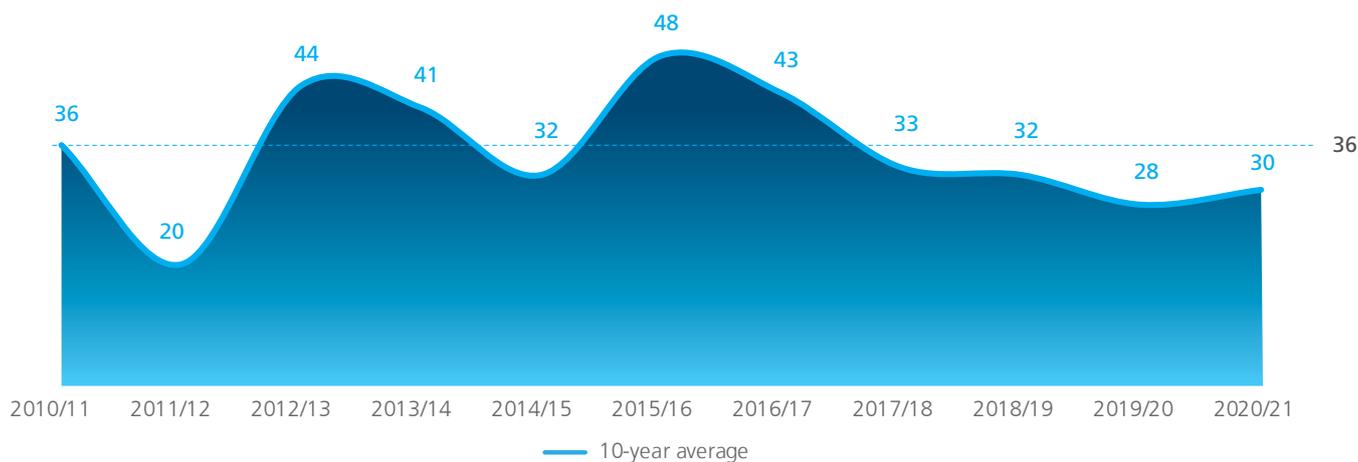


DROWNING DEATHS BY KEY LOCATIONS: **SWIMMING POOL**

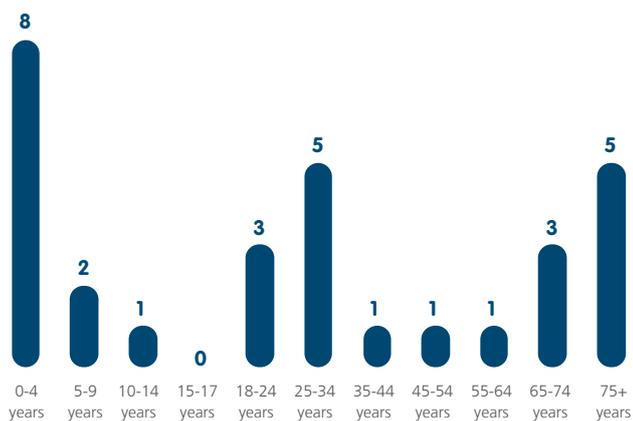


77% of all drowning deaths in this location were males 

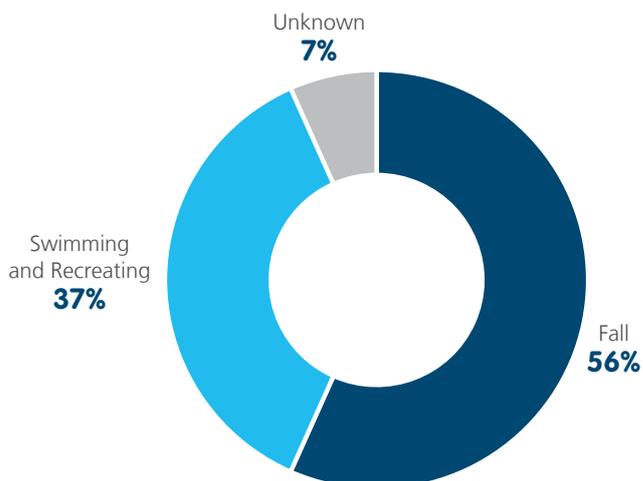
Drowning deaths in swimming pools from 2010/11 to 2020/21



Drowning deaths in swimming pools by age, 2020/21



Drowning deaths in swimming pools by activity, 2020/21





Multiple fatality events

There were 12 multiple fatality events in 2020/21 that claimed the lives of 27 people. This is a 4% increase on the 10-year average.

A detailed analysis of these events found:

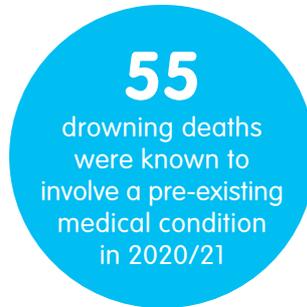
- › Males accounted for 82% of all multiple fatality events
- › Almost a third of deaths occurred in ocean/harbour locations (30%), with beaches accounting for a further 22%
- › The leading activity related to deaths was boating (30%), followed by rock fishing (19%) and swimming and recreating (19%)
- › New South Wales recorded 12 deaths as a result of a multiple fatality event, while Queensland recorded 11

Multiple fatality events are tragic with far-reaching effects on the victims' families, communities and rescue personnel. In order to reduce the number of multiple fatality events each year, as well as reduce the number of lives lost, a number of drowning prevention strategies can be undertaken.

These include ensuring lifejackets are worn when boating or rock fishing, ensuring boats are seaworthy and fitted with appropriate safety equipment and monitoring weather reports and water conditions before and during activity.

FATAL DROWNING RISK FACTORS

Sex, age and socioeconomic status can increase a person's risk of drowning, as well as the presence of pre-existing medical conditions and consumption of alcohol and/or drugs.



Those with known pre-existing medical conditions were mostly **male (89%)** and more than half were **aged 65 years and over (51%)**.

The most common pre-existing medical conditions among those who drowned were **cardiac conditions**, such as ischaemic heart disease and coronary artery atherosclerosis. Cardiac conditions were recorded in **67%** of cases where a pre-existing medical condition was known to be present.

Other commonly occurring medical conditions included **mental health conditions (11%)** and **respiratory conditions (11%)**.

25

drowning deaths were known to involve alcohol in 2020/21



32

drowning deaths were known to involve drugs in 2020/21



Alcohol was deemed to be a contributory factor in **64%** of these cases

At the time of publication, presence of alcohol was unknown in **81%** of all cases

Alcohol consumption can increase the risk of drowning by impairing judgement and reaction time, increasing risk-taking behaviour and reducing coordination.

63%

Legal
(prescription or over the counter medication)

16%

Illegal
(commonly cannabis and methamphetamine)

16%

Both
(legal and illegal drugs)

6%

Unknown

At the time of publication, presence of drugs was unknown in **83%** of all cases

Medications can cause drowsiness, affect alertness and impair reaction time. Illegal drugs can numb the senses, reduce inhibitions and distort the perception of risk. There is also the potential for additive effects when alcohol consumption is combined with drug use.

STATE AND TERRITORY DROWNING DEATHS



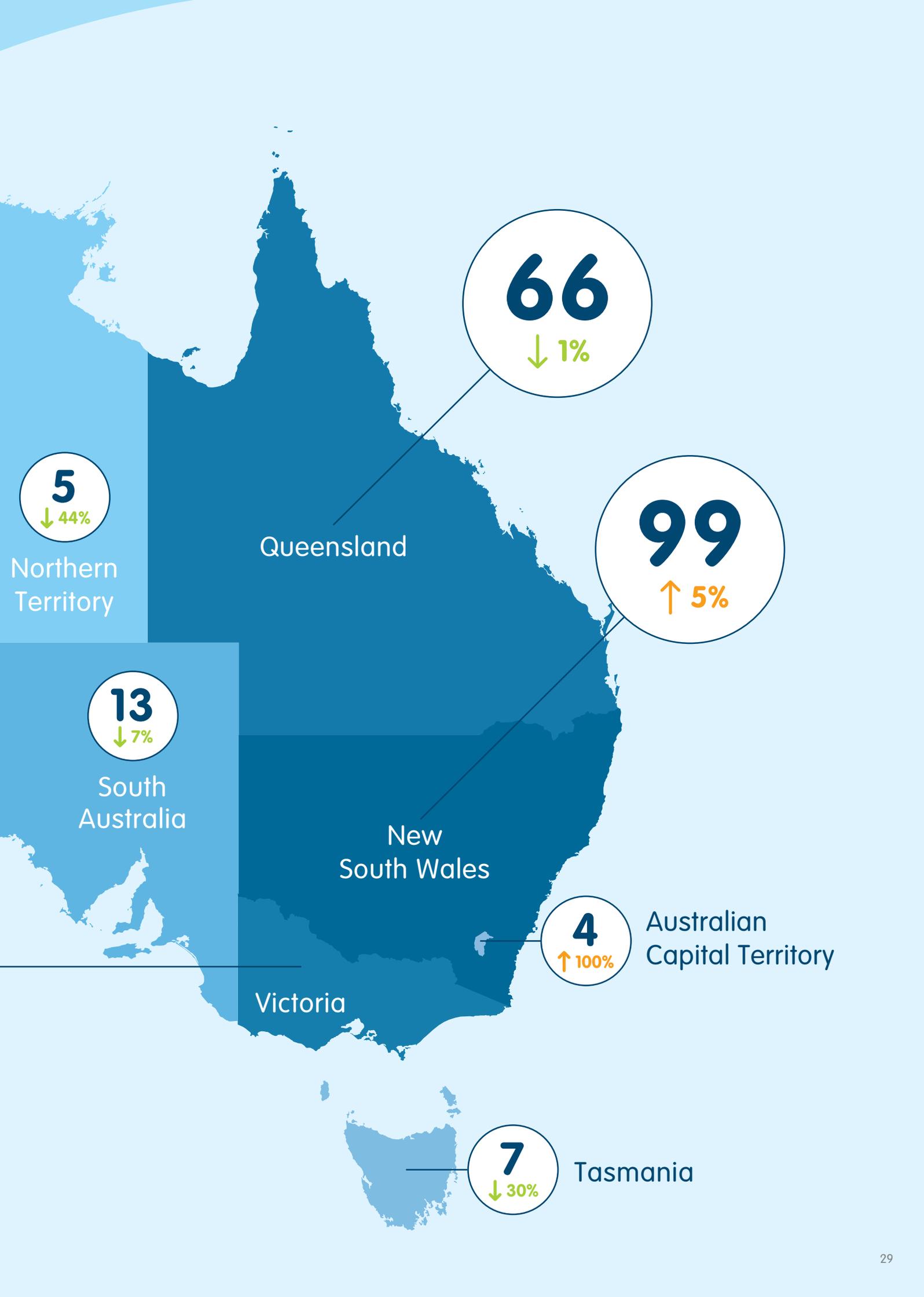
Western
Australia



New South Wales recorded the largest number of drowning deaths (99), followed by Queensland (66). Victoria recorded a 42% increase against the 10-year average, while the Northern Territory recorded a 44% decrease.

The Northern Territory recorded the highest fatal drowning rate at 2.03 per 100,000 population. South Australia recorded the lowest fatal drowning rate at 0.73 per 100,000 population.

↓ ↑ Arrows reflect 2020/21 changes against the 10-year average



5
↓ 44%

Northern Territory

66
↓ 1%

Queensland

99
↑ 5%

New South Wales

4
↑ 100%

Australian Capital Territory

13
↓ 7%

South Australia

Victoria

7
↓ 30%

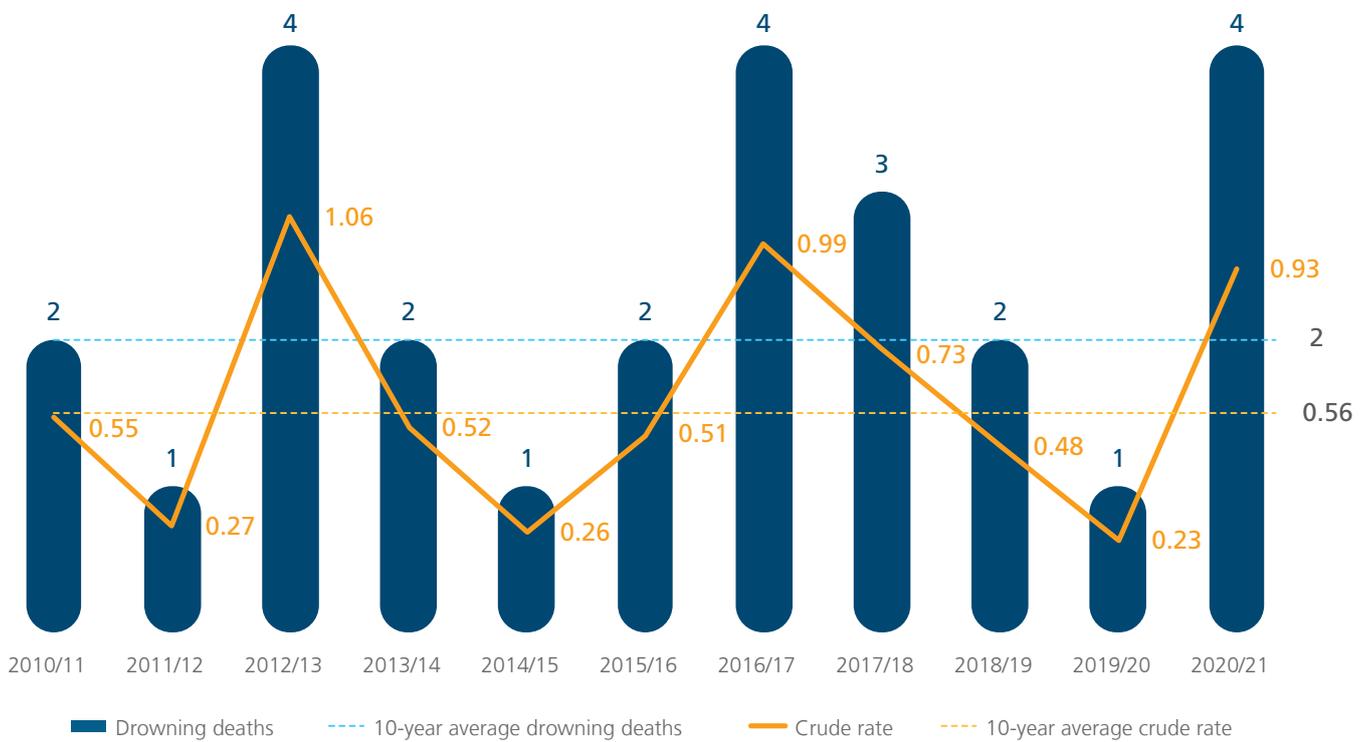
Tasmania

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY



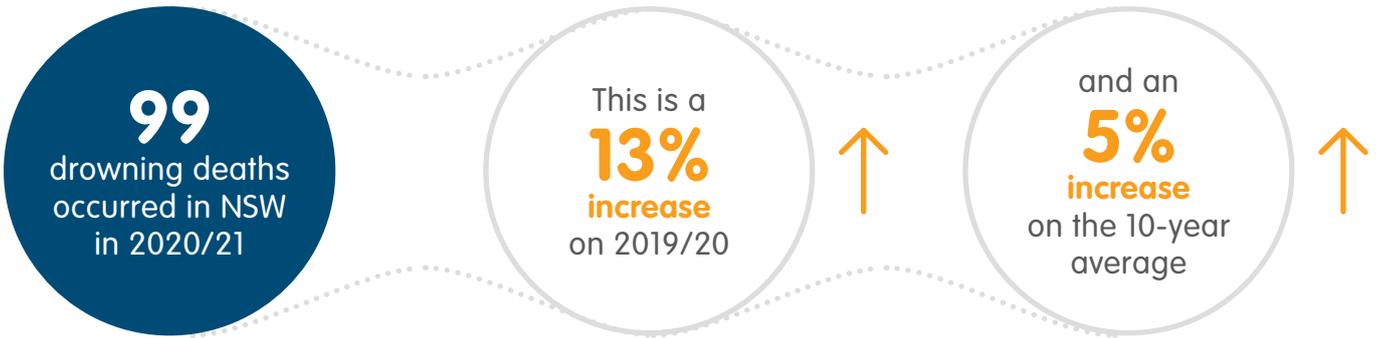
75% of those who drowned in Australian Capital Territory were male 

Drowning deaths and death rates in the Australian Capital Territory from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average



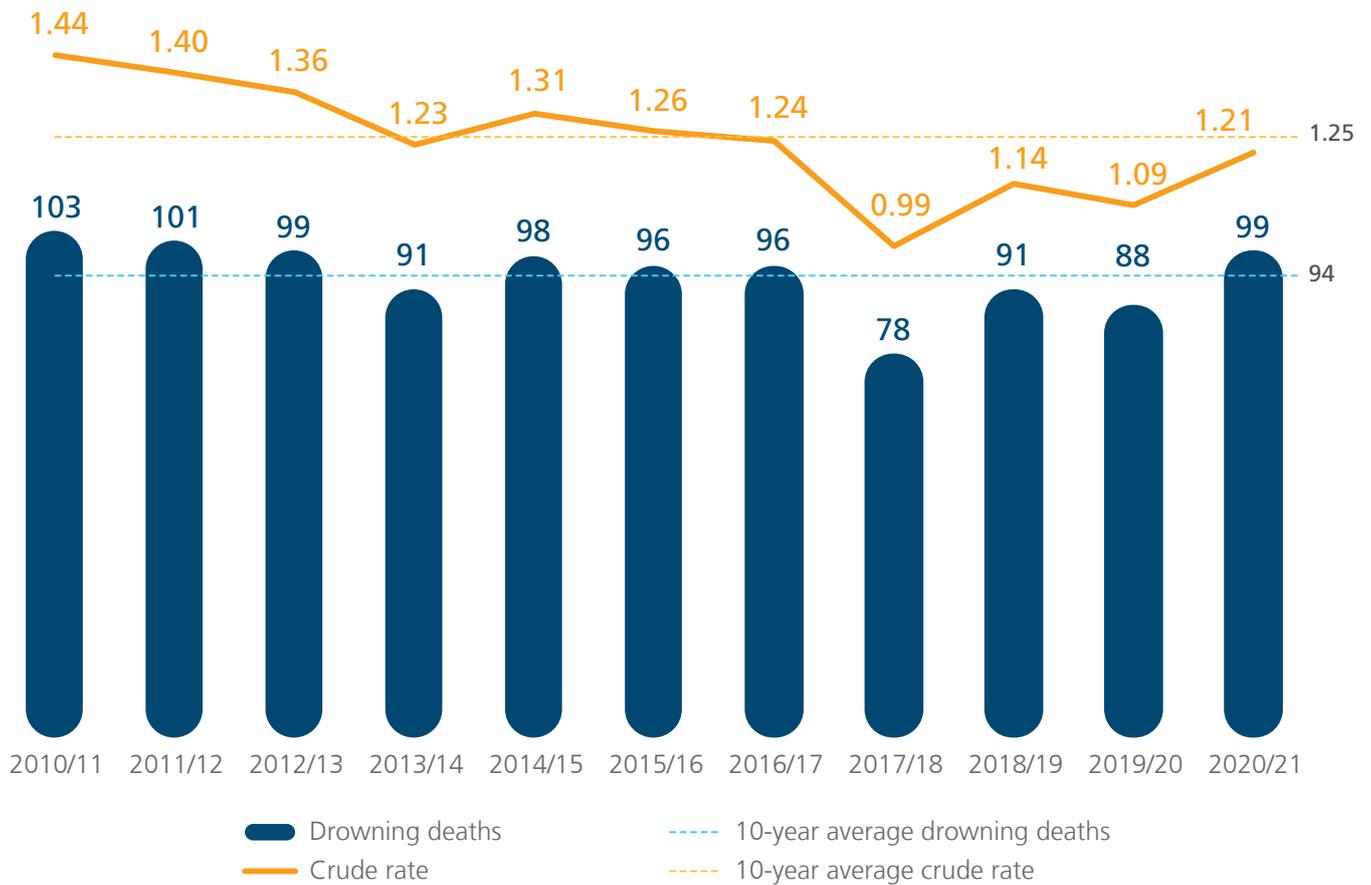


NEW SOUTH WALES

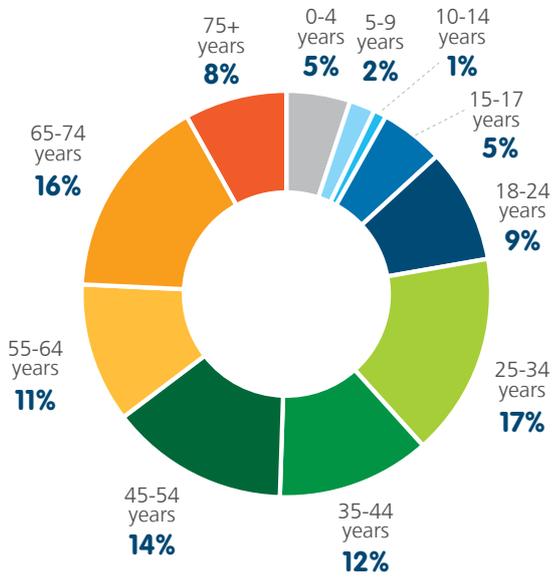


84% of those who drowned in New South Wales were male 

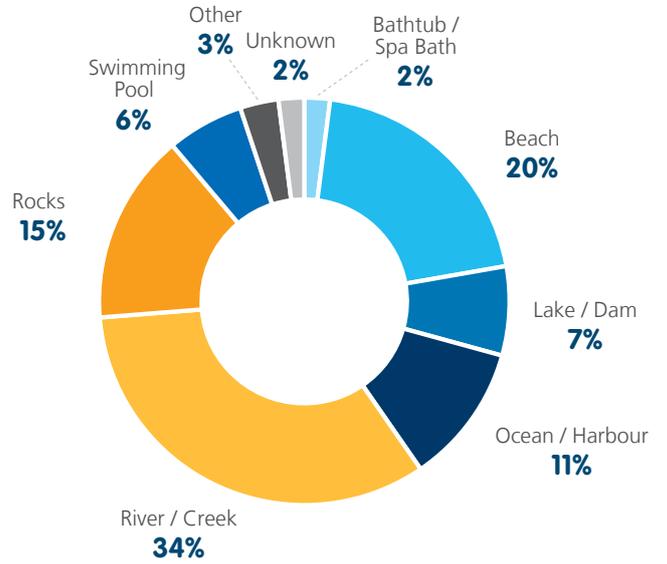
Drowning deaths and death rates in New South Wales from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average



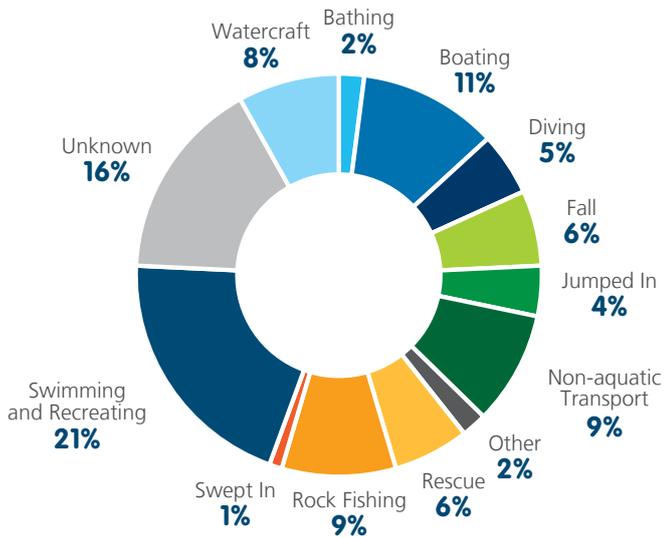
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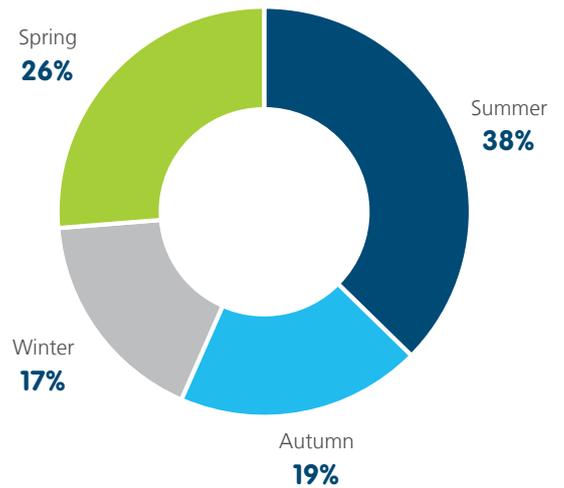
Location



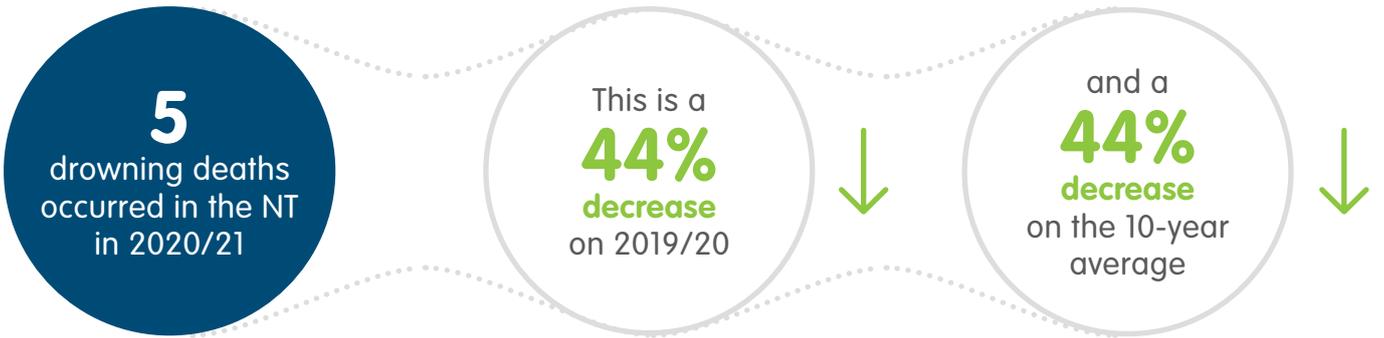
Activity



Season

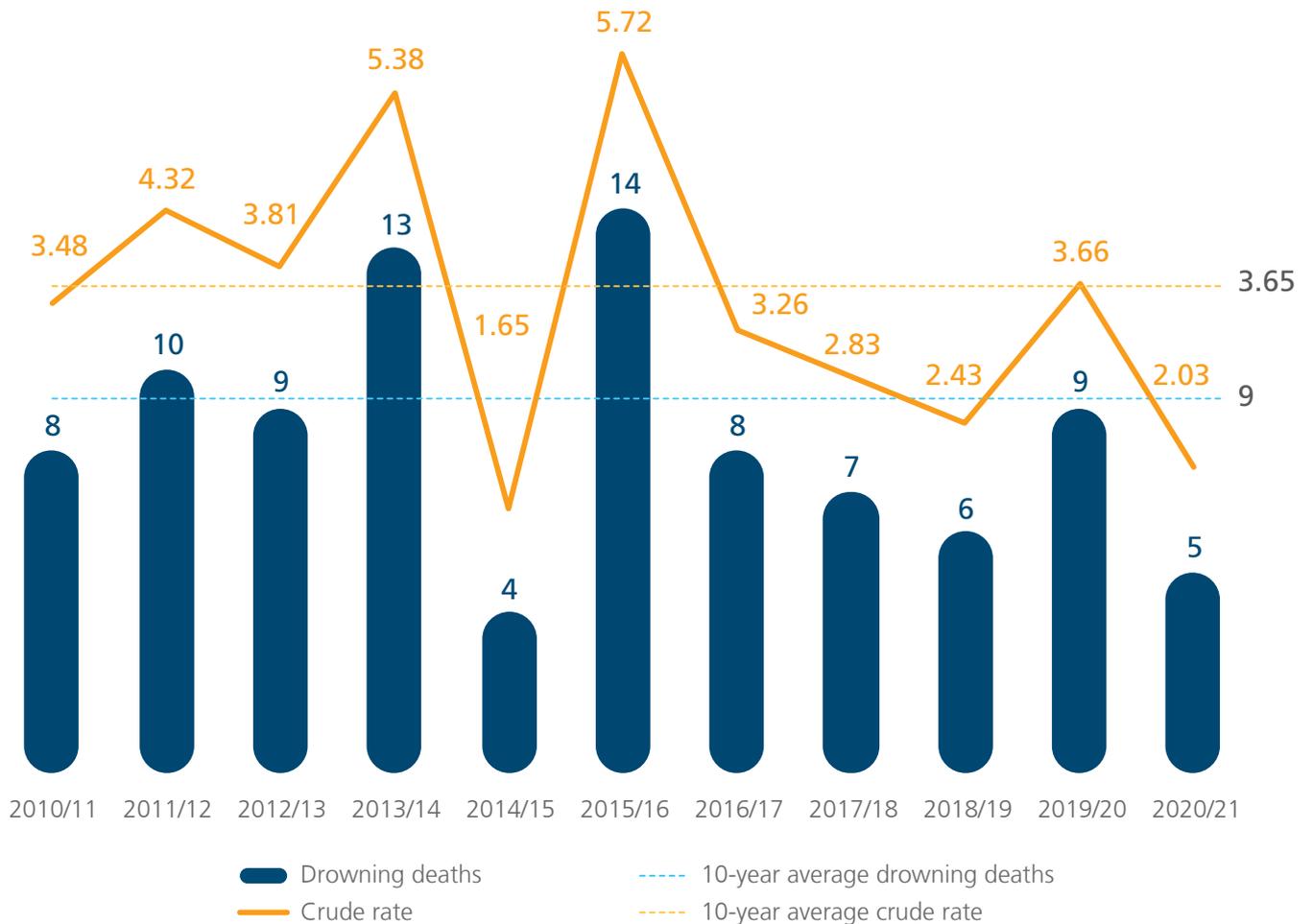


NORTHERN TERRITORY

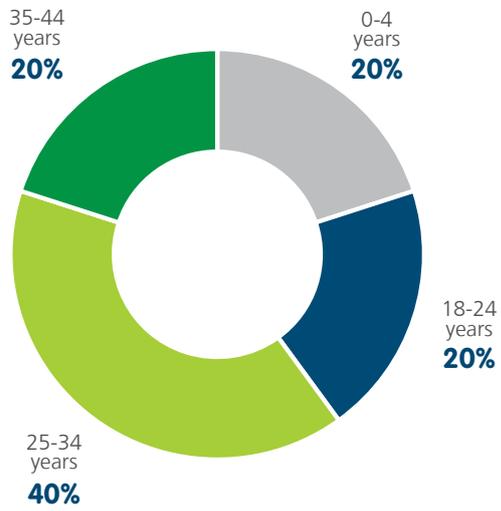


100% of those who drowned in the Northern Territory were male 

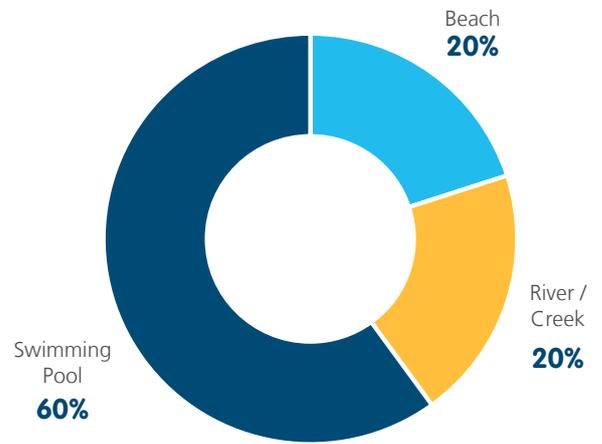
Drowning deaths and death rates in the Northern Territory from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average



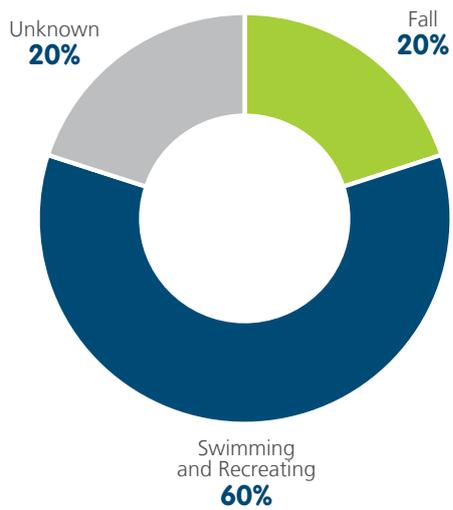
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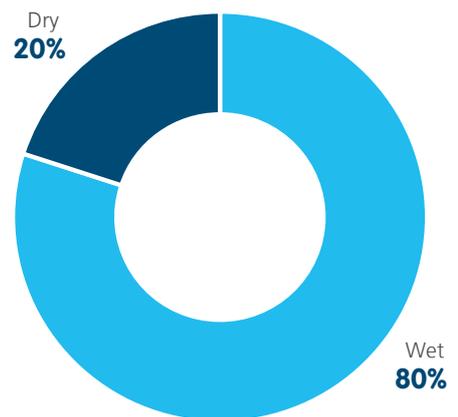
Location

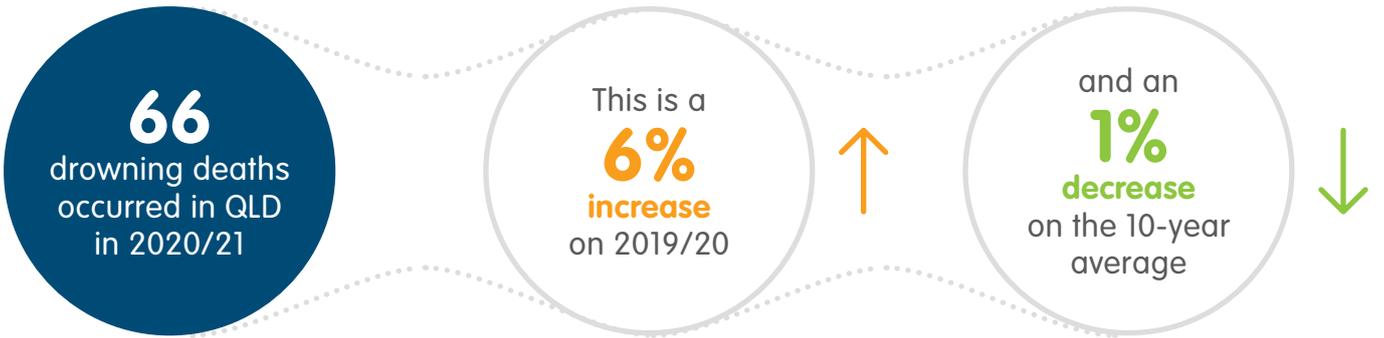


Activity



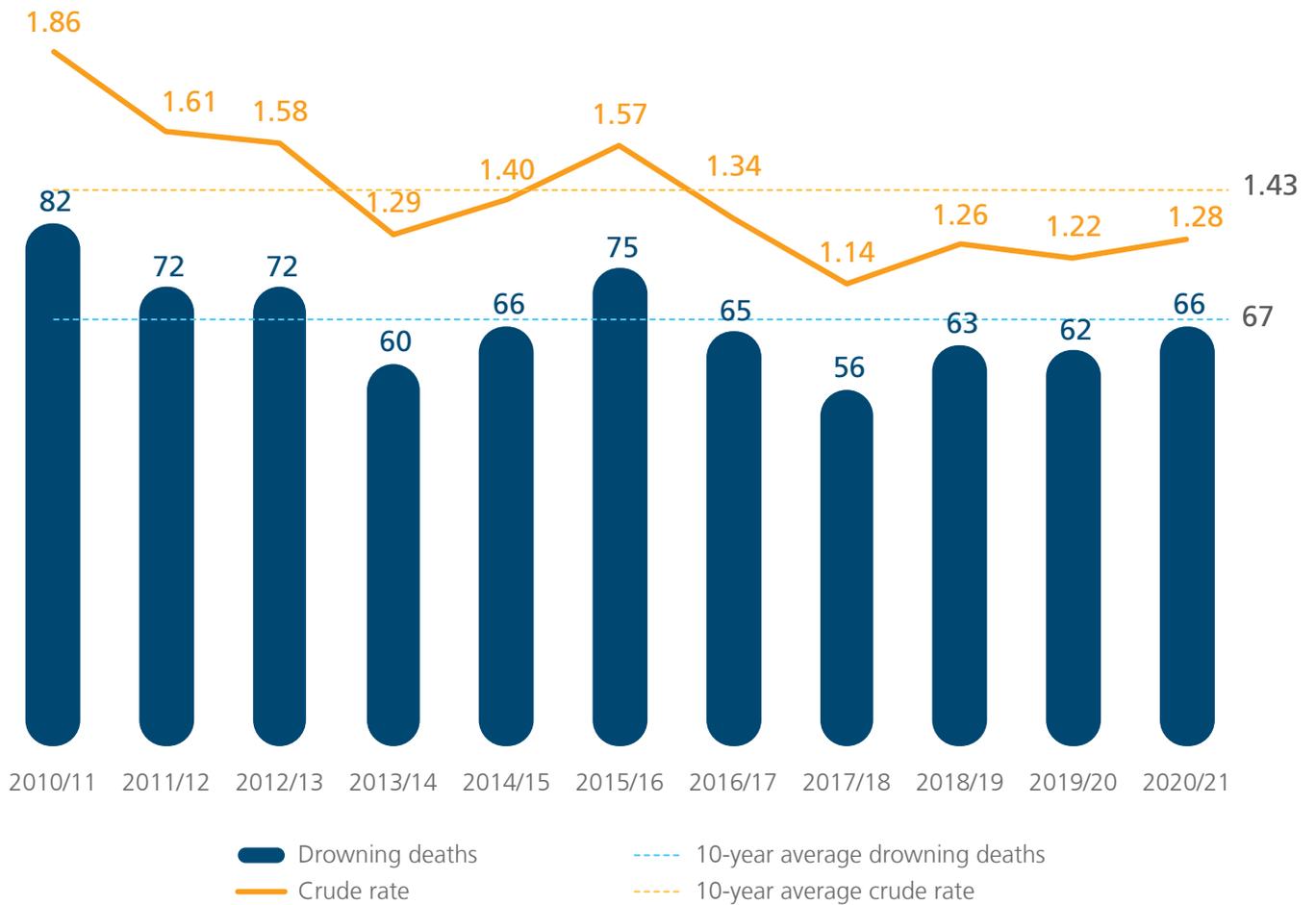
Season



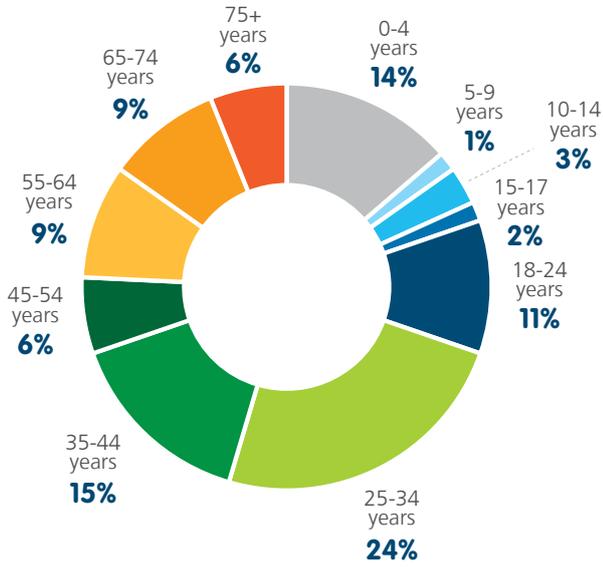


79% of those who drowned in Queensland were male 

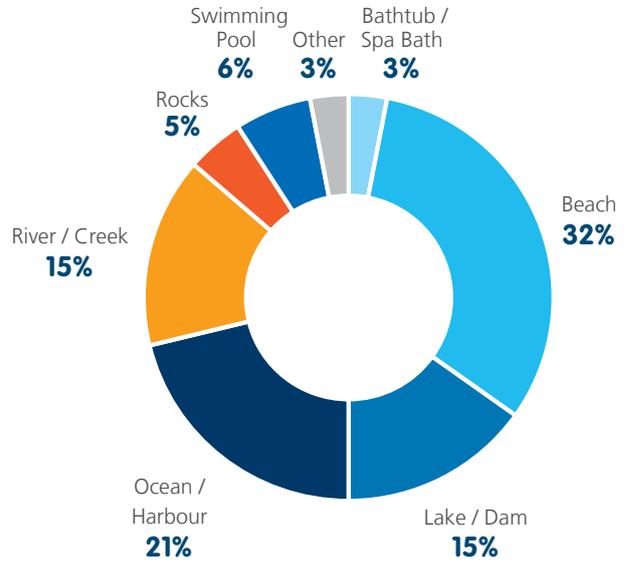
Drowning deaths and death rates in Queensland from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average



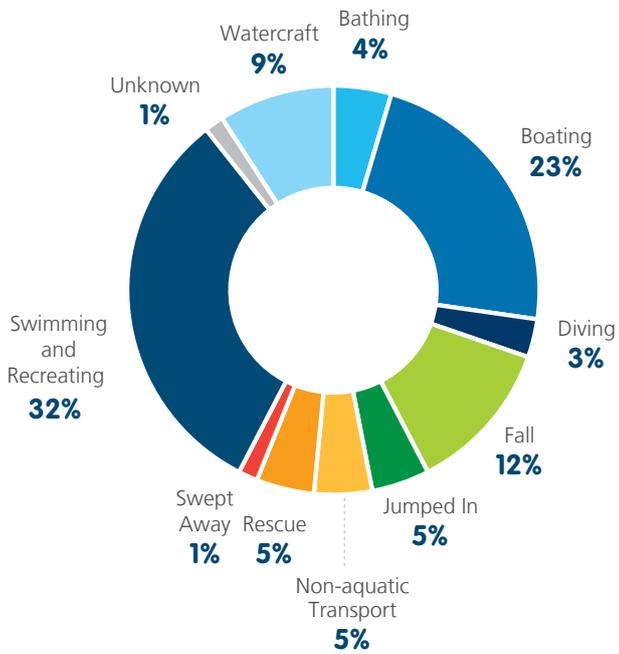
Age



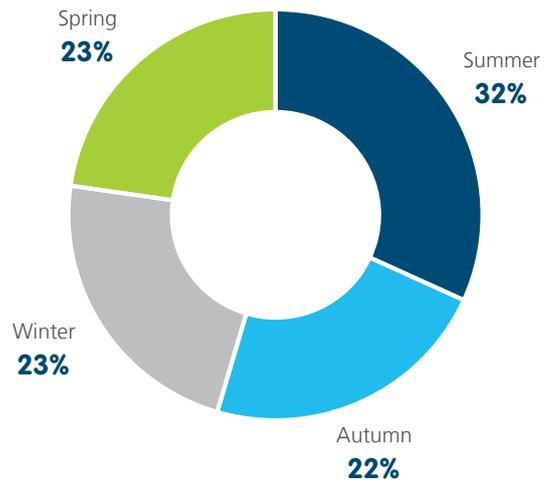
Location



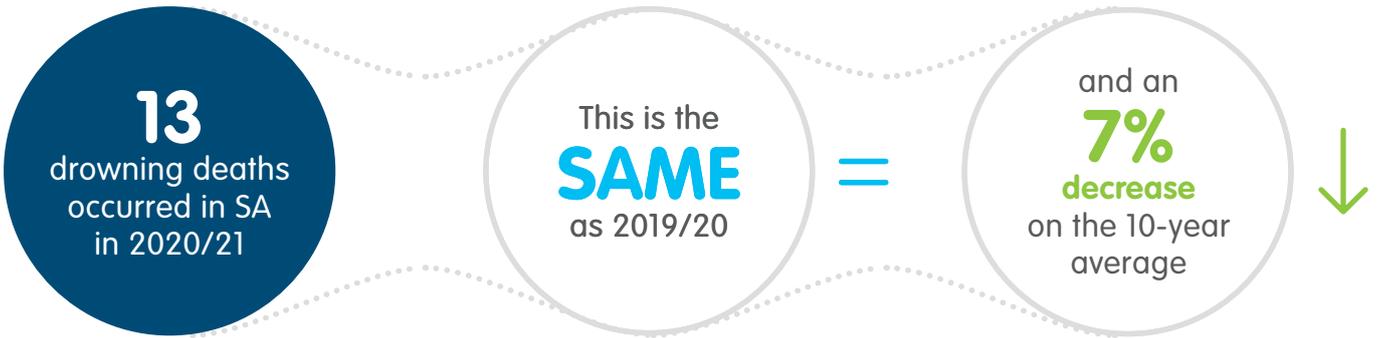
Activity



Season

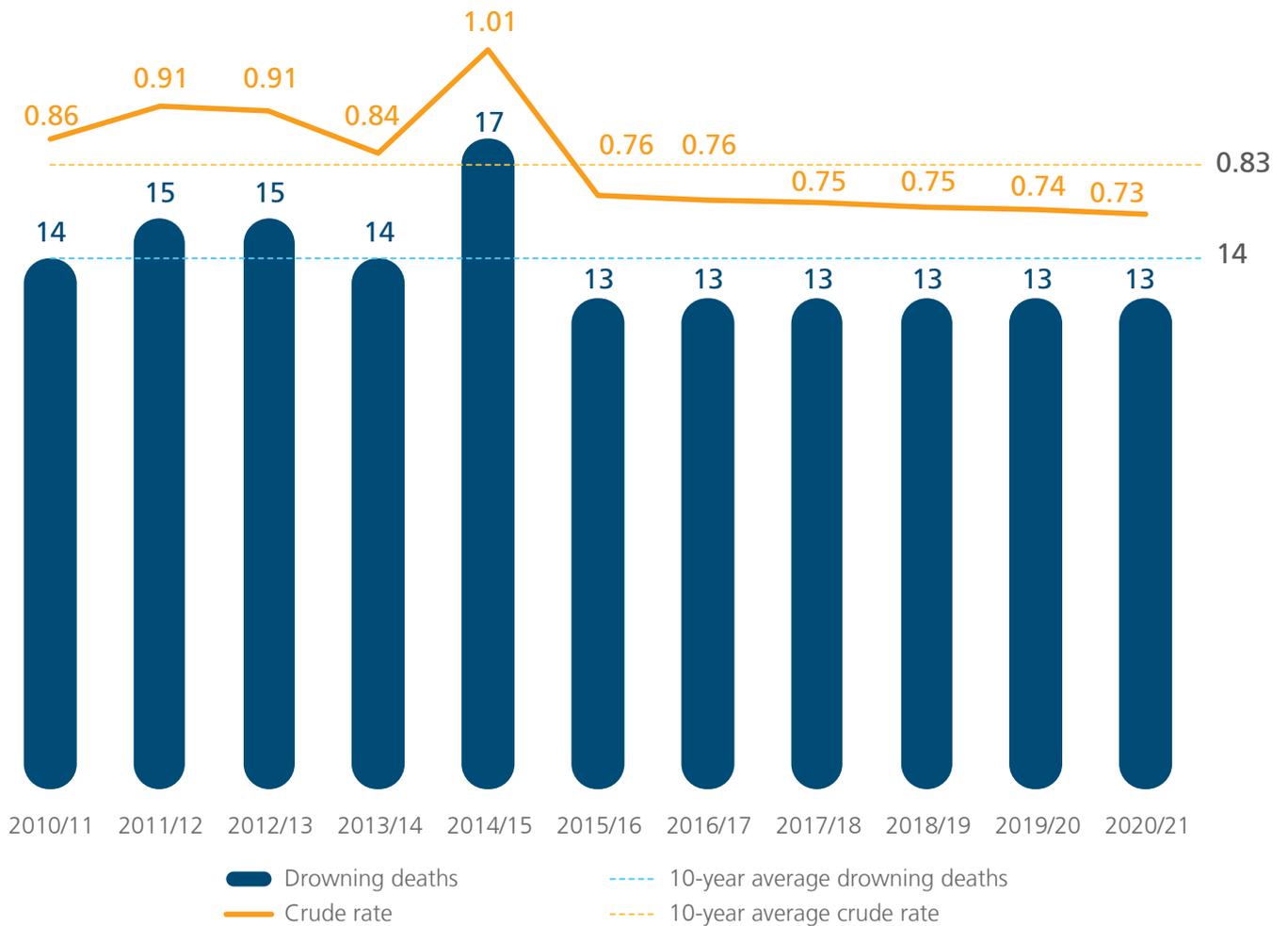


SOUTH AUSTRALIA

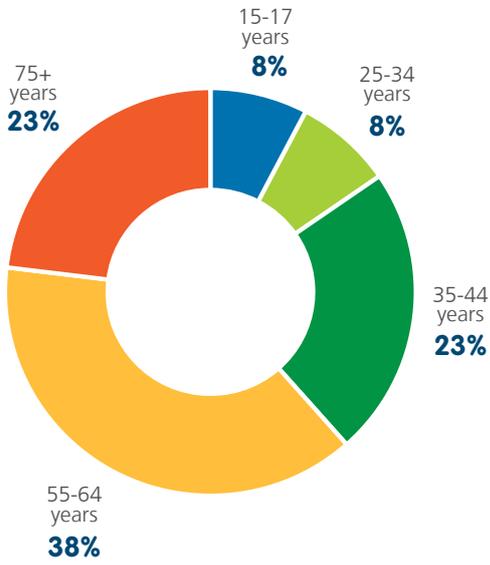


100% of those who drowned in South Australia were male 

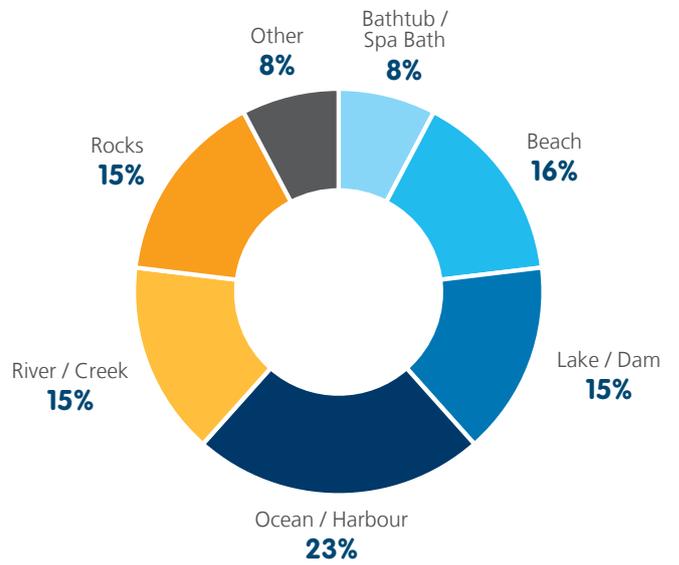
Drowning deaths and death rates in South Australia from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average



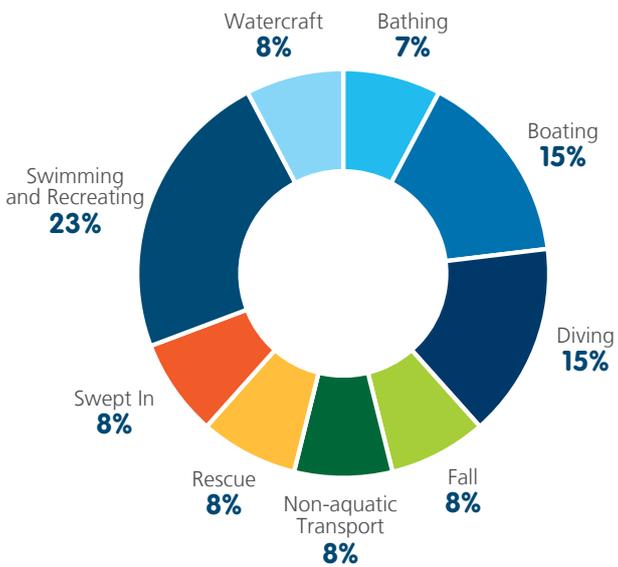
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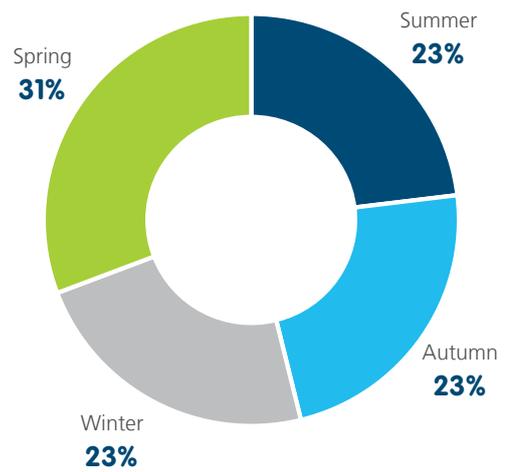
Location



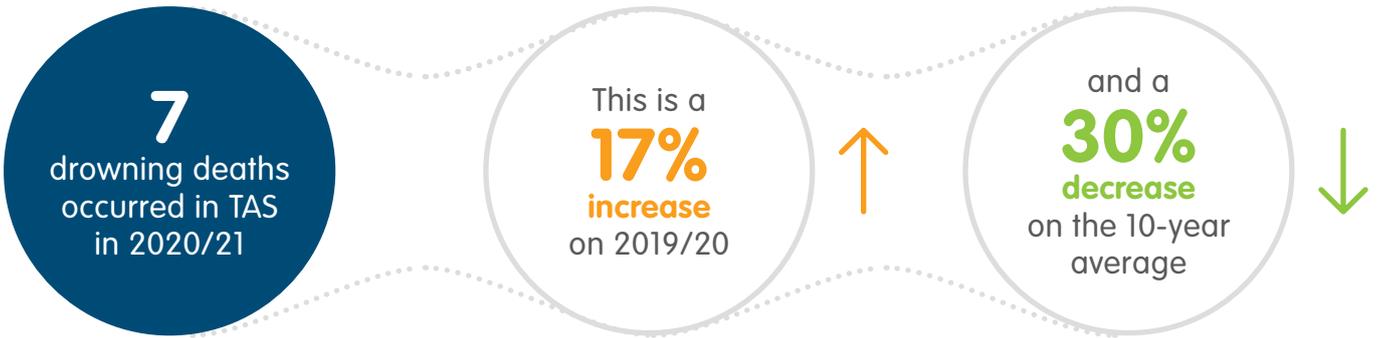
Activity



Season

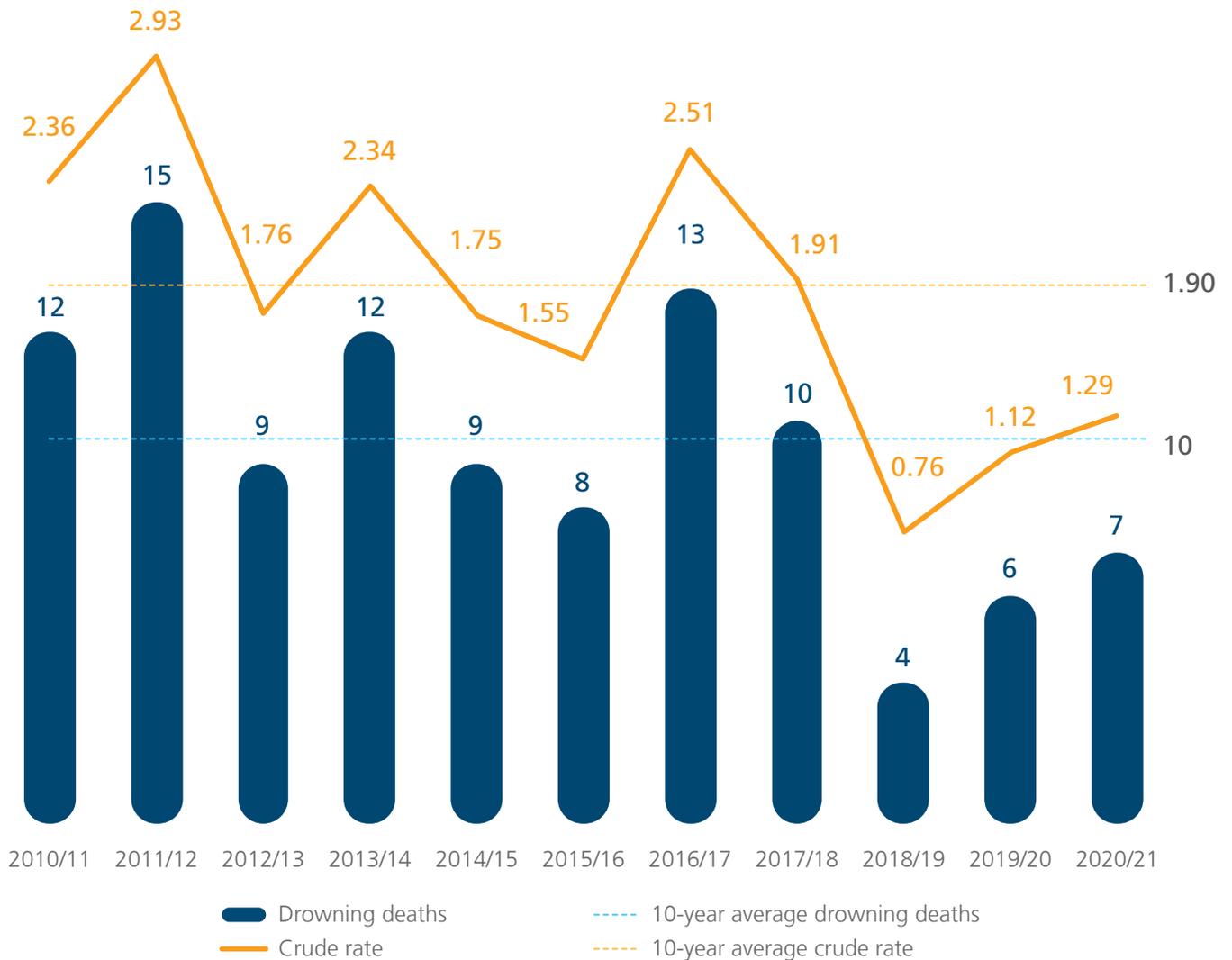


TASMANIA

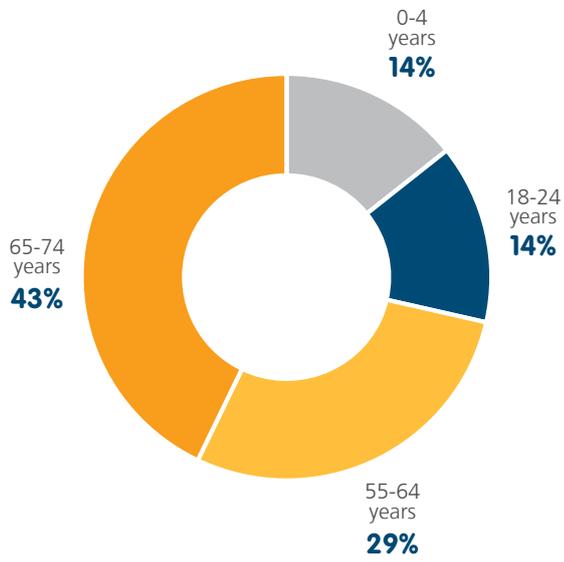


86% of those who drowned in Tasmania were male 

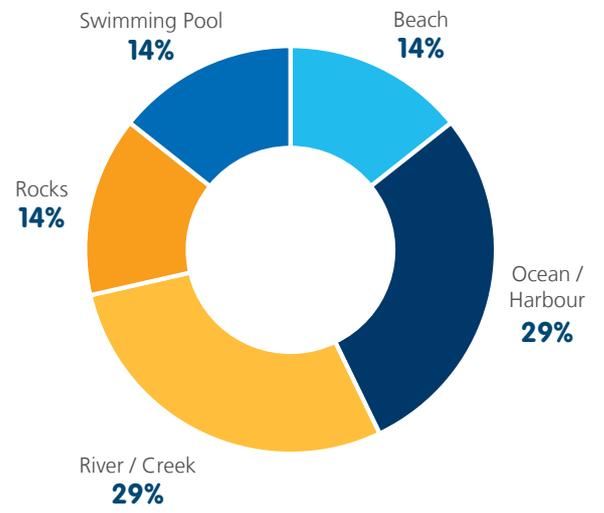
Drowning deaths and death rates in Tasmania from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average



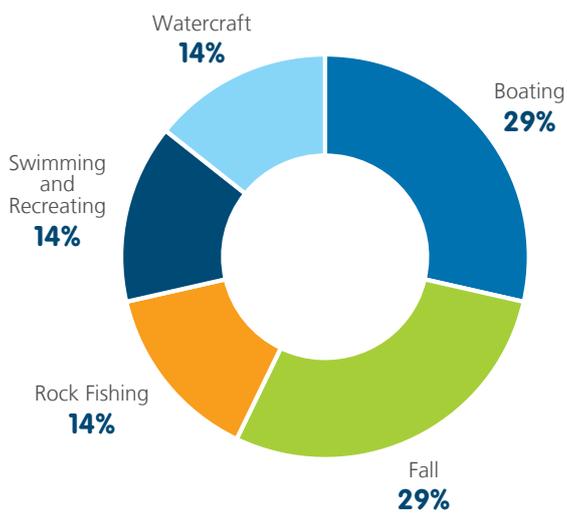
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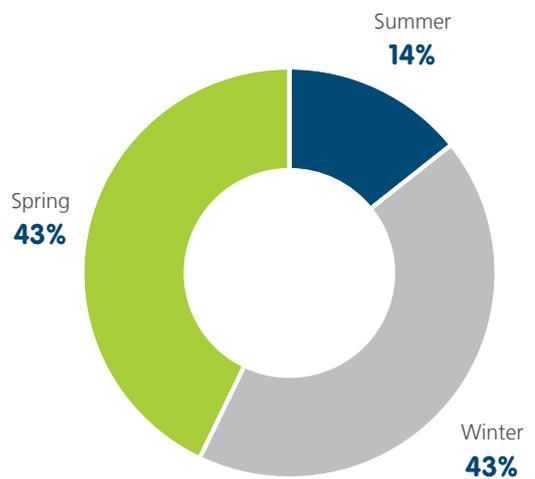
Location



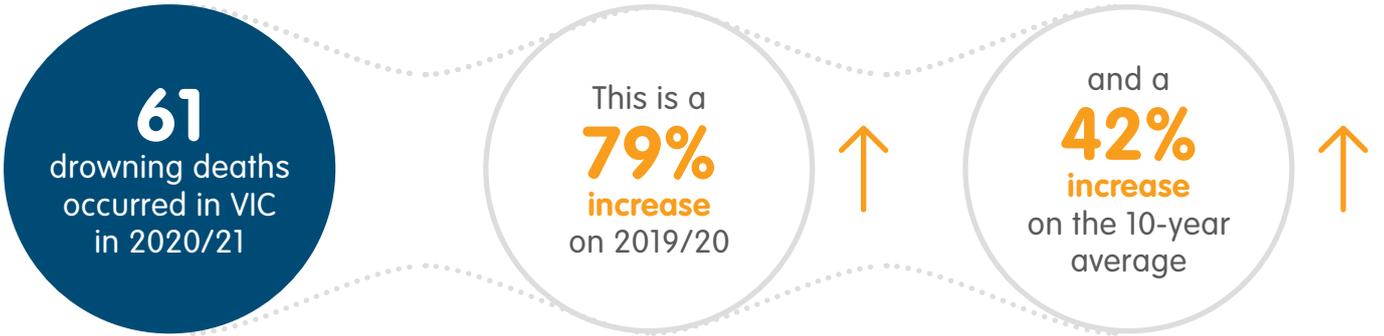
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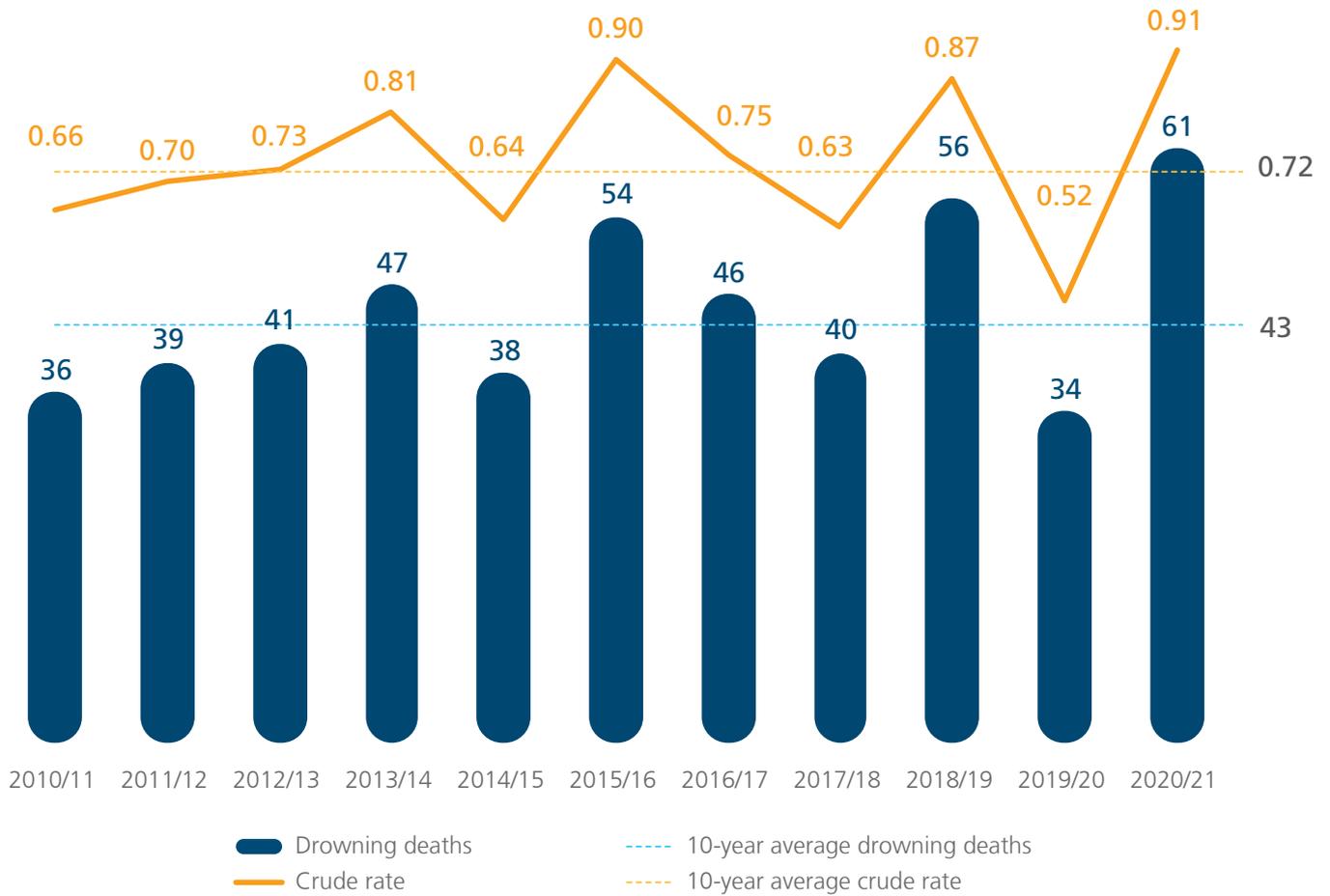
Season



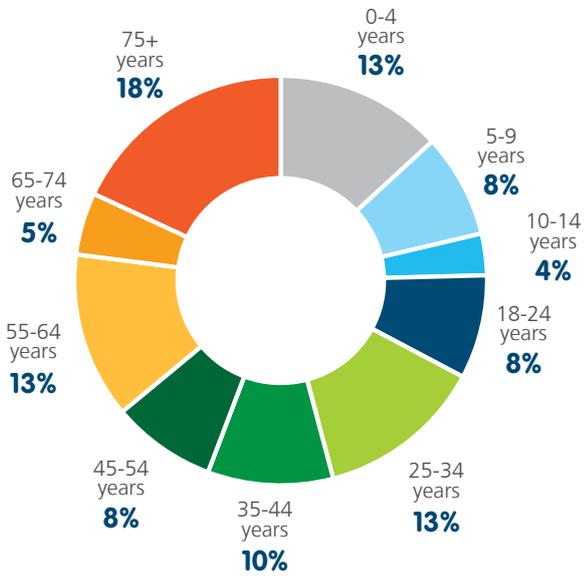
VICTORIA



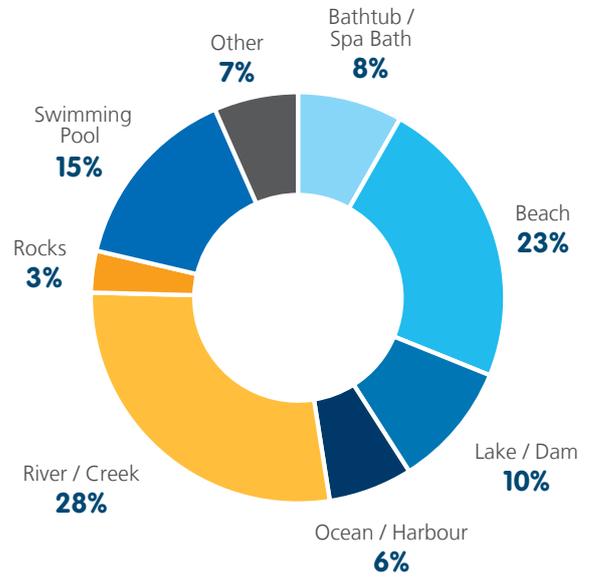
Drowning deaths and death rates in Victoria from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average



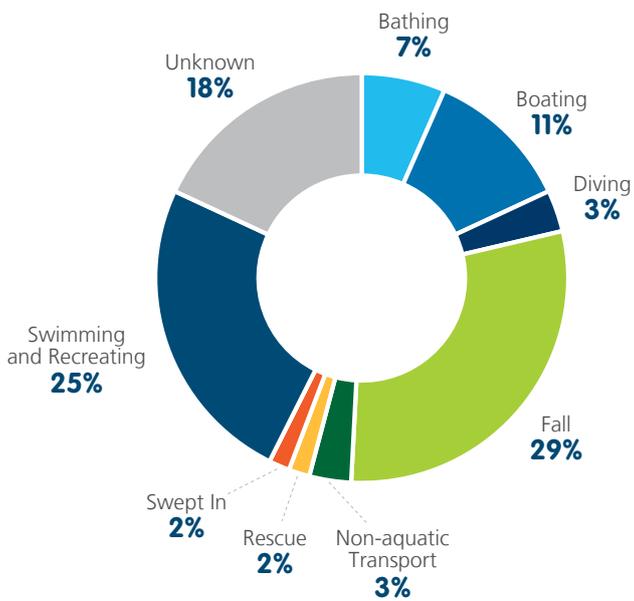
Age



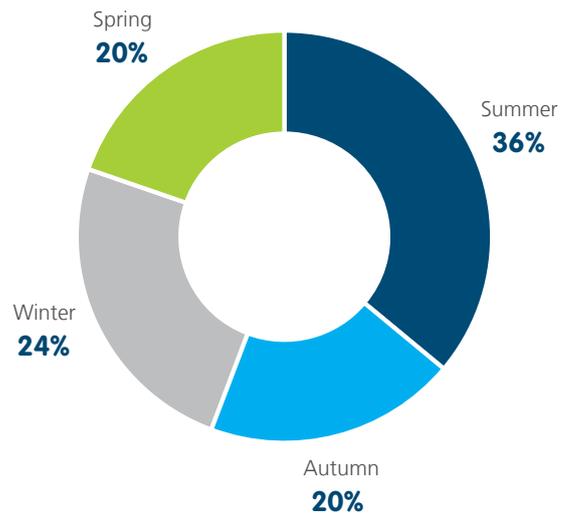
Location



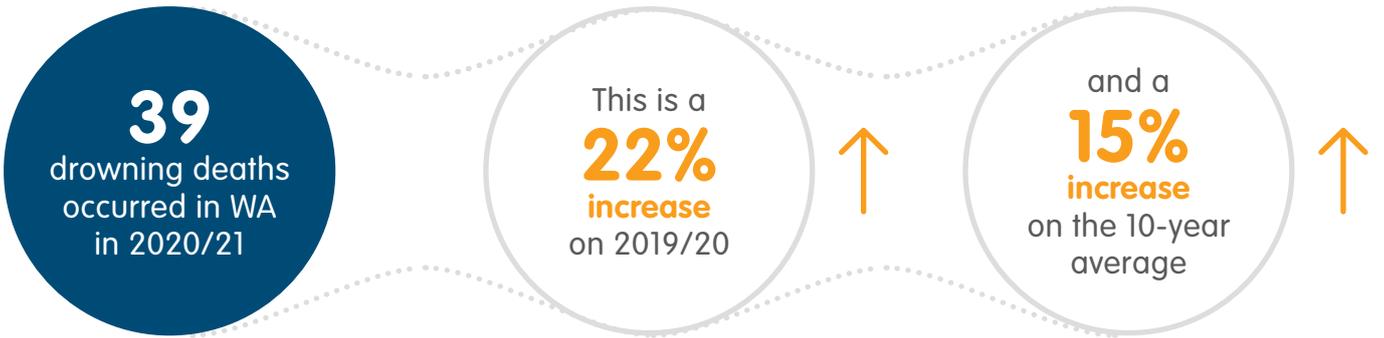
Activity



Season

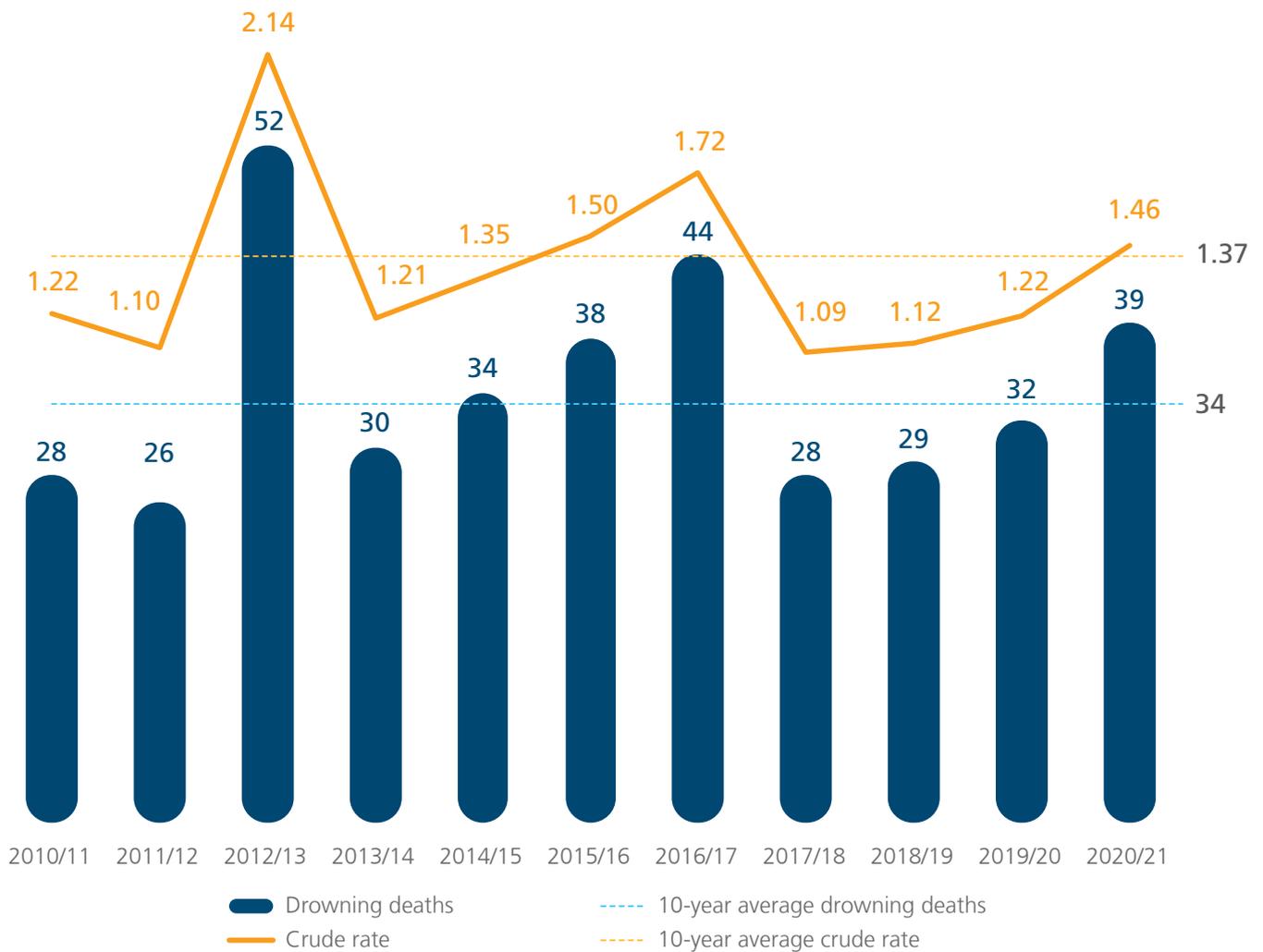


WESTERN AUSTRALIA

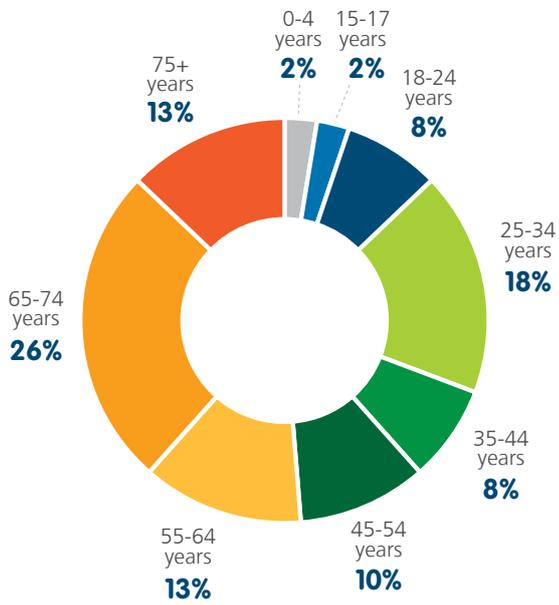


90% of those who drowned in Western Australia were male 

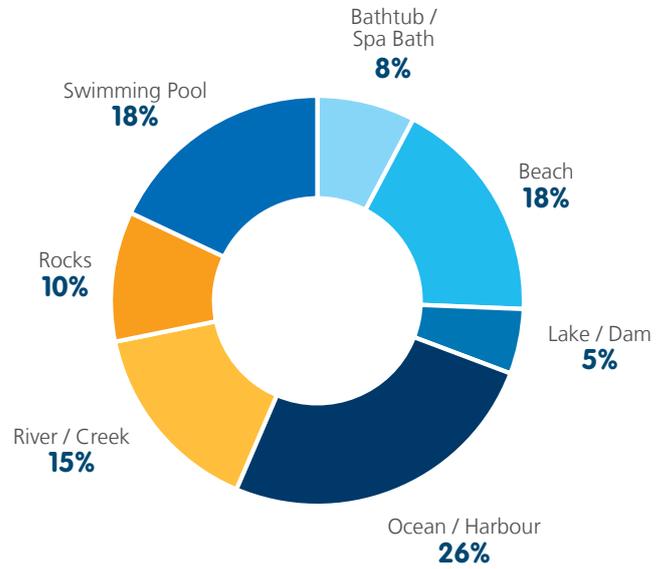
Drowning deaths and death rates in Western Australia from 2010/11 to 2020/21 and the 10-year average



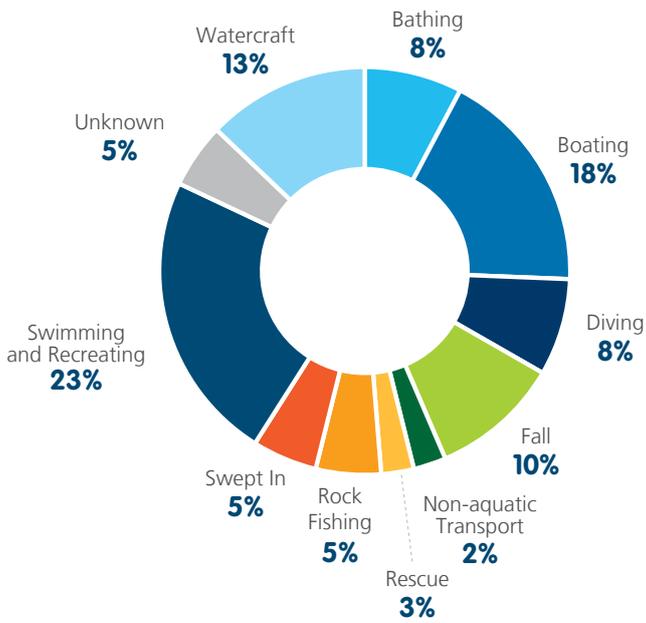
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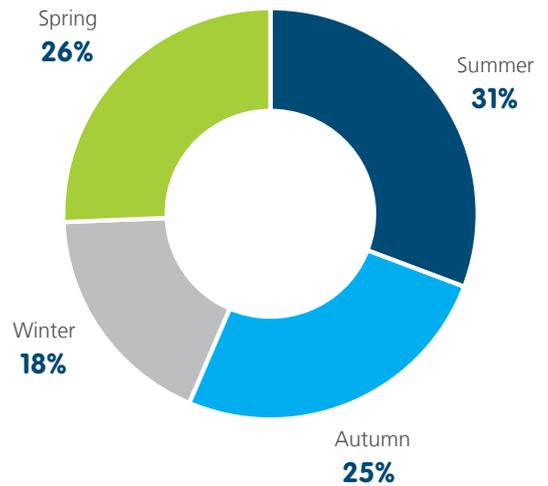
Location



Activity



Season



> Fatal drowning

The information presented in the Royal Life Saving National Drowning Report 2021 has been collated from the National Coronial Information System (NCIS), State and Territory Coronial offices and year-round media monitoring. Cases are collated in partnership with Royal Life Saving State and Territory Member Organisations (STMOs) and Surf Life Saving Australia and analysed by Royal Life Saving Society – Australia.

Royal Life Saving uses a media monitoring service for broadcast, print and online all year round to identify drowning deaths reported in the media. This information is then corroborated with information from the NCIS, police reports and Royal Life Saving STMOs before being included in the National Drowning Report.

Great care is taken to ensure that the information in this report is as accurate as possible. Figures may change depending on ongoing coronial investigations and findings, as 82% of cases are still under investigation (i.e. open) as this report went to press. Royal Life Saving regularly publishes ongoing studies, which provide detailed information on long-term data trends.

Information on drowning cases is correct as of 5 August 2021. Historical drowning data are correct as of 1 July 2021 in accordance with Royal Life Saving's ongoing data quality assurance policy. All cases in the Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database are checked against those in the NCIS on a regular basis and figures are updated in annual National Drowning Reports as cases close. The 10-year averages in this report are calculated from drowning death data from 2010/2011 to 2019/2020 inclusive.

Drowning rates per 100,000 population are calculated using population data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) publication 'Australian Demographic Statistics' (Cat 3101.0). Percentages and averages are presented as whole numbers and have been rounded up or down accordingly.

> Exclusions and categorisations

Drowning deaths as a result of suicide or homicide, deaths from natural causes, shark and crocodile attacks, or hypothermia have been excluded from this report. All information presented in this report relates to drowning deaths or deaths where drowning is a contributory cause of death.

'Non-aquatic transport' relates to drowning deaths involving a means of transport that is not primarily designed or intended for aquatic use such as cars, motorbikes, bicycles and aeroplanes among others.

Means of transport primarily used for aquatic purposes are categorised under 'boating' (water-based wind or motor-powered vessels, boats, ships and personal watercraft, such as boats, jet skis, sail boats and yachts). 'Watercraft' refer to water-based non-powered recreational equipment such as those that are rowed or paddled (e.g., rowboats, surfboats, kayaks, canoes, boogie boards).

Within this report, 'swimming pool' includes home swimming pools, public swimming pools, hotel and motel pools, and portable swimming pools among others.

> Non-fatal drowning

In the absence of up-to-date data on non-fatal drowning, non-fatal drowning incidents in 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20 were estimated using the observed ratios of fatal to non-fatal incidents for each age group and sex between 2002/03 and 2014/15. The applicable average ratio of fatal to non-fatal incidents over that period was then used to project the likely number of non-fatal incidents based on the number of fatal incidents for that age group and sex in 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20.

Since available counts of non-fatal incidents do not include all drowning incidents, the proportion of missing incidents was estimated based on a four-year sample of fatal incident data which compared incident counts using both broad and restrictive definitions of 'drowning'.

The estimated proportion of drowning incidents not captured in existing non-fatal data for each age group was then used to scale-up estimates of non-fatal incidents to arrive at a projection comparable with the broad definition of drowning used to count fatal drowning incidents in this report.

> Acknowledgments

Royal Life Saving would like to thank the following people and organisations for their assistance in producing the Royal Life Saving National Drowning Report 2021:

- Royal Life Saving State and Territory Member Organisations (STMOs)
- The National Coronial Information System (NCIS)
- Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA)
- The Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC)
- Shane Daw (SLSA)
- Jaz Lawes (SLSA)
- Jessica Ledger (SLSA)
- Leanne Daking (NCIS)
- Bernadette Matthews (LSV)
- Lauren Nimmo (RLSSWA)
- Rick Carter (Studio One Another)

The drowning prevention research of the Royal Life Saving Society – Australia is supported by the Australian Government.

This report was compiled and written by Alison Mahony, National Manager – Research and Policy and Stacey Pidgeon, National Manager – Research and Policy, Royal Life Saving Society – Australia.

2020/21 RESEARCH AND POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

Royal Life Saving's research and policy contribution in 2020/21 has been diverse and continues to impact drowning prevention policy and programs.





Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030

Background

The Australian Water Safety Council (AWSC) released its first National Water Safety Plan in 1998. This evolved into the Australian Water Safety Strategy (AWSS) in 2008, which established an aspirational target of reducing drowning by 50% by 2020 and launched a structure that reinforced a focus on a life stages approach, identified high-risk locations and key drowning challenges.

AWSS 2008 brought new energy to areas including strategies to reduce drowning in multicultural communities, at unpatrolled beach locations, while boating and in inland waterways. Perhaps the most significant achievement was the continued reduction of drowning in children 0-4 years, and 5-9 years, both exceeding the targeted 50% reduction by 2020. It also expanded recognition of the impacts of non-fatal drowning.

Consultation

The new AWSS 2030 is the product of ongoing collaboration and extensive consultation that started with reflection on the successes and challenges of the AWSS 2008 – 2020 period. The AWSC then convened a workshop of over forty researchers, policy makers and practitioners, including representatives of the World Health Organization, as well as colleagues from the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Thailand. This workshop resulted in two separate consultation drafts, and more than seventy separate feedback submissions. This was the most robust and detailed drafting and consultation yet.

AWSS 2030 Targets

The AWSS 2030 commits to an aspirational goal of reducing drowning by 50% by 2030. This is expressed in the targets replicated throughout most of the areas of focus. The AWSC stresses that progress must be measured on a population rate basis, and where appropriate, reflect incremental changes in visitation at places, or participation in activities, and in population demographics. A baseline, based on the three financial years 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20 will be established. It is stressed that these targets are aspirational, and accountability difficult to assign. In any case, we urge all to join this approach.

Partnerships

Widespread adoption, adaptation, and implementation of the AWSS 2030 by many including State, Territory, and Local Governments, organisations and communities is critical to its success. The AWSS 2030 calls for meaningful partnerships at all levels, and especially with those sectors who may not yet play a direct role in drowning prevention but have the potential to share resources, reach new audiences and help us create change.

Monitoring Progress, Measuring Success

The Implementation of the AWSS 2030 relies on the resources and support of many. Monitoring, evaluation and review are essential components and must be resourced appropriately.

Progress will be monitored across:

- **Partnerships** – Are Government(s), organisations, communities supporting the AWSS 2030?
- **Progress** – Are key activities being implemented and having the intended impact?
- **Change** – Is there evidence that the medium-term changes are being achieved?
- **Targets** – Are we on track to achieve the 2030 targets?

The AWSS 2030 will implement a Deliver, Track and Plan model, with the expectation that data and insights collected will be used to adjust actions and contribute to a mid-term adjustment to the strategy in the form of AWSS 2030 2.0 (2025 – 2030).

Key Themes

The AWSS 2030 identifies many key activities, across seven enablers: research, policy, advocacy, collaboration, education, safe environments, and workforce. Among these activities key themes emerge:

- › **Drowning and other injuries**
The AWSS 2030 encourages a continued focus on the full impacts of drowning, including non-fatal drowning and water-related injury and death
- › **Community based action**
The AWSS 2030 encourages local water safety plans, whether they are land and water management plans, Local Government plans, or regional water safety plans
- › **Swimming and water safety skills across the community**
The AWSS 2030 promotes the need for equity in the renewal of swimming, water safety and lifesaving skills across the community
- › **Frontline services**
The AWSS 2030 encourages support for volunteer lifesavers, lifeguards on beaches and in aquatic centres, and swimming and water safety instructors
- › **Infrastructure**
The AWSS 2030 encourages investments in aquatic centres, surf lifesaving clubs, and innovative developments that increase safe recreational access to waterways

Source: Australian Water Safety Council (2021) Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030. Australian Water Safety Council, Sydney.

Inclusion

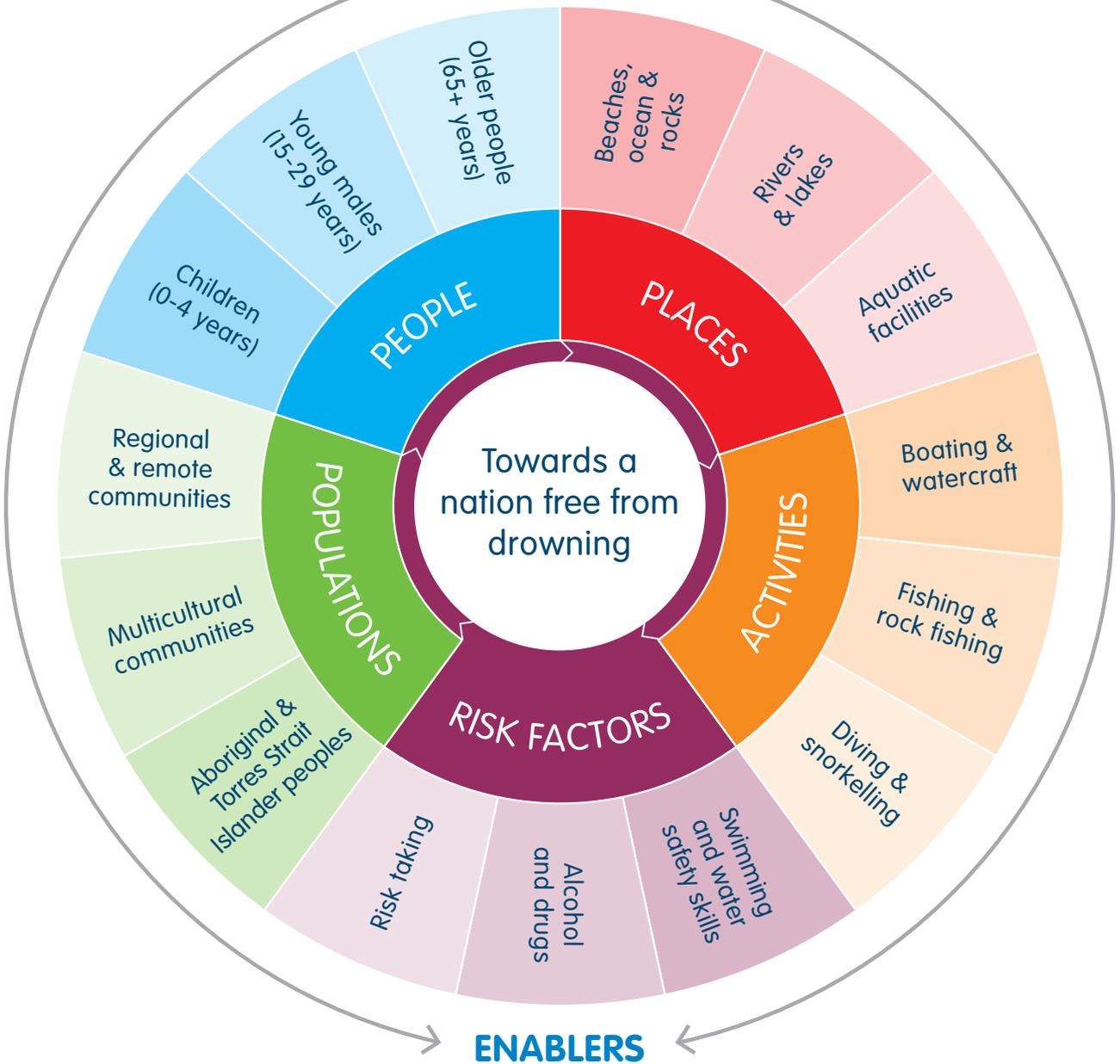
Safe participation

Targeted advocacy

Empowering communities

Taking action

GUIDING PRINCIPLES



Research

Policy

Advocacy

Collaboration

Education

Safe environments

Workforce

National Swimming and Water Safety Framework

Royal Life Saving Society – Australia published the new National Swimming and Water Safety Framework in August 2020, along with new National Benchmarks for swimming and water safety.

The goal of the National Swimming and Water Safety Framework is to increase the swimming and water safety skills of all Australians for lifelong safe and active participation in physical aquatic activities and recreation. It sets out a core structure to enable people to develop the skills, knowledge, understanding, attitudes and behaviours they need to enjoy a range of aquatic environments safely.

The Framework provides a consistent understanding of what constitutes a quality swimming and water safety education. It reinforces that a holistic curriculum balances a range of skills and knowledge from key learning strands; that means equal attention should be given to learning the traditional competitive strokes such as freestyle and backstroke and water safety skills such as survival strokes, treading water and rescue techniques to keep children safe in water.

The Framework consists of three stages that allows people to progress through to develop skills: Fundamental, Acquisition and Application Stage. The Framework has been underpinned by Royal Life Saving research over the years. Research shows that 75% of children stop swimming lessons before the age of 9 years and that 40% of 12-year-olds are not achieving the National Benchmark.

The Australian Water Safety Council has identified three National Benchmarks as the minimum standards of swimming and water safety that every Australian should have the opportunity to acquire and maintain. These National Benchmarks have been set for children at ages 6, 12 and 17 years and these can be achieved through progressing through the development milestones of the National Swimming and Water Safety Framework.

This Framework has been re-developed in partnership with experts from the following industry organisations: AUSTSWIM, Surf Life Saving Australia, Swimming Australia, Australian Swim Coaches and Teachers Association (ASCTA), Belgravia Leisure, YMCA (the Y), Australian Swim Schools Association (ASSA), Kids Alive Do the Five, along with representatives from State and Territory Departments of Education.

While it aims to inform Government policy makers and swim schools, the Framework is an important resource for parents to understand the lifelong benefits that learning to swim provides.

More information about the National Swimming and Water Safety Framework can be found the Royal Life Saving website at www.royallifesaving.com.au/educate-participate/swimming/national-swimming-and-water-safety-framework



Every Australian at the age of 6 years should be able to:



Identify rules for safe behaviour at aquatic environments at or near the home



Submerge the body and move through an obstacle



Enter and exit shallow water unassisted



Identify people and actions to help in an aquatic emergency



Float and recover to a standing or secure position



Perform a survival sequence to simulate an accidental entry



Move continuously for 5 metres

Every Australian at the age of 12 years should be able to:



Understand and respect safety rules for a range of aquatic environments



Surface dive, swim underwater and search to recover an object from deep water



Enter and exit the water for a range of environments



Respond to an emergency and perform a primary assessment



Float, scull or tread water for 2 minutes and signal for help



Rescue a person using a non-swimming rescue technique with non-rigid aids



Swim continuously for 50 metres



Perform a survival sequence wearing light clothing

50% of all Australians at the age of 17 years should be able to:



Understand behaviours that affect personal safety in aquatic environments and activities



Search in a deep water environment and recover a person



Assist others to exit deep water using bystanders



Respond to an emergency and provide first aid



Float, scull or tread water for 5 minutes and signal for help



Rescue an unconscious person in deep water



Swim continuously for 400 metres



Perform a survival sequence wearing heavy clothing

Drowning deaths among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: A 10-year analysis 2008/09 to 2017/18

Key Findings

- › 47% reduction in drowning deaths in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- › 75% were males
- › 68% occurred in outer regional, remote and very remote locations
- › People aged 45-54 years were most at risk of drowning, followed by young children aged 0-4 years
- › Rivers were the leading location for drowning among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, except for young children who most commonly drowned in swimming pools



Recommendations

- Programs or strategies should be aligned to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health strategies or plans e.g. Closing the Gap objectives
- Continue with programs that take a holistic approach and are providing multiple benefits
- Strengthen partnerships and engage with communities at a local level to ensure strategies are developed and implemented in a culturally appropriate, locally relevant manner
- Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and community engaged research in line with National Guidelines
- Develop policies and promote pathways for training, employment, and leadership roles within the aquatic industry to reflect the local community and increase community participation
- Take a holistic health and well-being approach and promote swimming and water safety in a fun and positive manner
- Increase access to culturally appropriate drowning prevention and water safety programs and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Identify community champions for drowning prevention and water safety

As a result of this research, several actions have been progressed at Royal Life Saving:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations are recognised as a priority population in the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030, with short, medium and long-term goals identified to reduce drowning by 2030
- Royal Life Saving has started the process of developing a Reconciliation Action Plan

Conclusion

This study highlights that drowning prevention and water safety programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities need to be continued, especially for families with young children.

Gaps exist in relation to national non-fatal drowning data and qualitative research. Further research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research partners is required to better understand the full burden of drowning among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia, and to identify the most appropriate, effective and successful solutions.

Water safety and drowning prevention programs provide opportunities to build upon and contribute to broader health outcomes, and address social disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Future drowning prevention and water safety strategies need to be developed and implemented in partnership with community-based organisations to ensure effective and marked progress in the next 10 years.

Age group	Location	Activity
0-4 Years	 50% Swimming pool	 81% Fall
5-14 Years	 53% River/creek	 71% Swimming & recreating
15-24 Years	 46% River/creek	 18% Swimming & recreating
25-34 Years	 55% River/creek	 33% Swimming & recreating
35-44 Years	 48% River/creek	 30% Swimming & recreating
45-54 Years	 50% River/creek	 23% Swimming & recreating
55+ Years	 59% River/creek	 35% Non-aquatic transport



Comparing rivers to lakes: Implications for drowning prevention

Researchers from Royal Life Saving, UNSW Sydney and James Cook University compared drowning deaths in lakes with rivers nationally, over a five-year period between 1 July 2013 and 30 June 2018, to inform targeted water safety measures.

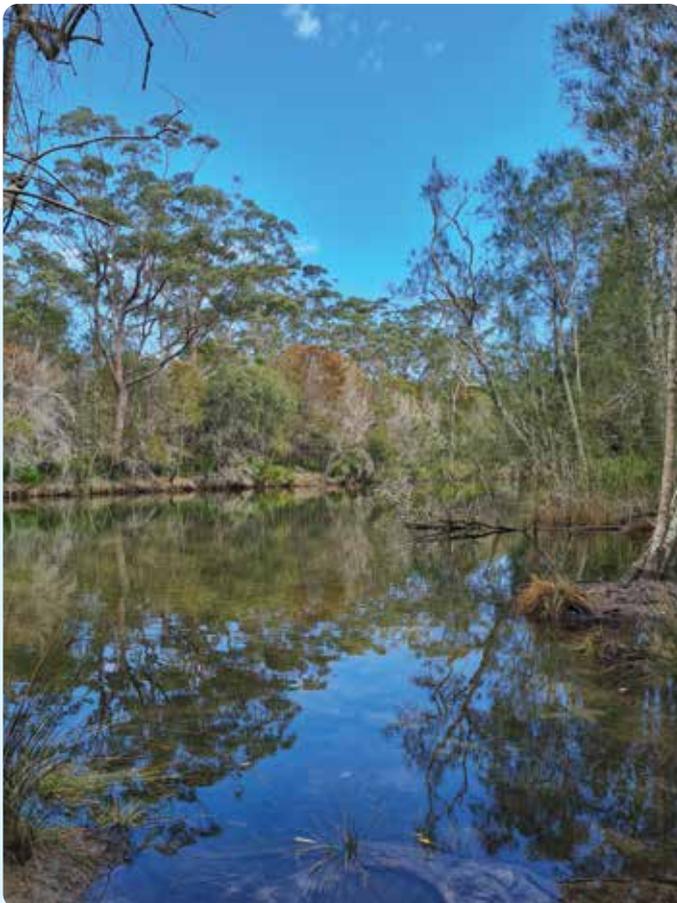
The study found that 342 children and adults drowned in a river or lake during the study period. One in five (n=61) people drowned in a lake, 90% were males. Children under 18 years and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were more likely to drown in lakes than in rivers, and when swimming or boating. In comparison, adults were more likely to drown at rivers, and drowning in a river was more likely to occur after a fall into water and involve alcohol.

The study found that swimming and boating at lakes represent significant dangers. The recreational nature of lakes where multiple activities are taking place like swimming, powered boats and unpowered watercraft means that people need to be cautious, especially with children about.

These findings tell us that drowning prevention programs for lakes and rivers need to be different. For river safety, a specific focus on adults and alcohol should be considered, whereas lake safety interventions should focus on children aged 0 to 17 years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and recreational users.

This study highlighted that water authorities, tourism operators, local councils and parks and wildlife authorities all have a role to play in promoting water safety around lakes and rivers.

Source: Peden AE, Willcox-Pidgeon SM, Franklin RC, Scarr, JP (2020) Comparing rivers to lakes: Implications for drowning prevention. Australian Journal of Rural Health <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ajr.12679>



Epidemiology of unintentional fatal drowning among migrants in Australia

Drowning in multicultural communities is a priority area in the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030, however data has been lacking to fully understand the burden of drowning among populations considered to be at higher risk of drowning in Australia.

Recent research from the Royal Life Saving Society – Australia and James Cook University exploring drowning among migrants in Australia produced some surprising findings. The study explored unintentional fatal drowning among migrants – that is people who were born overseas and are now living in Australia. This study did not include international students or overseas tourists.

Between 1 July 2009 and 30 June 2019, there were 572 migrant deaths, accounting for 29% of total drowning deaths in Australia during this period. The majority (83%) were male, 21% were aged 25-34 years and 41% had lived in Australia for 20 years or more. Drowning deaths most frequently occurred in summer (43%) and on a Sunday (22%). Almost half (49%) occurred in the afternoon.

Overall, the highest proportion of migrant deaths occurred in NSW (41%), followed by Queensland (20%) and WA (16%), however the rates of migrant deaths were highest in Tasmania and Northern Territory (2.5 and 2.3/ 100,000 overseas-born population).

Migrant adults (18+ years) most frequently drowned at rivers (22%) or beaches (22%). Swimming was the most common activity being undertaken immediately prior to drowning (29%). More than one-quarter (27%) of adults recorded alcohol present, of which 60% recorded a BAC $\geq 0.05\%$. A pre-existing medical condition was recorded in 40% of cases, most commonly cardiac conditions.

This study found consistent trends for drowning among both migrants and Australian-born people, including over-representation of males, alcohol, drowning in the summer months and in the afternoon. Migrants were more likely to drown when swimming or rock fishing at beaches and around rocks, in comparison with those born in Australia, who were more likely to drown while boating or diving at river or ocean locations.

Unique trends for drowning were found among migrants based on time in Australia and country of birth. Beaches were the most common location of drowning for residents who had been in Australia for ≤ 5 years and for 6-10 years. In comparison, over 60% of those who had lived in Australia for between 15-20 years drowned at rock locations. Long-term residents for 20+ years were equally likely to drown at beaches and rivers. Migrants from the UK, China, New Zealand, India and South Korea recorded the highest numbers of drowning deaths. However, the highest rates of drowning by population in Australia were recorded among those born in South Korea (2.63/100,000 population), Taiwan (2.29/100,000 population) and Nepal (2.15/100,000 population).

These results suggest that both recent and long-term migrants may be at higher risk of drowning. Longer-term migrants were more likely to be aged 55 years and over and from English-speaking countries and are more likely to have been exposed to water safety messages and campaigns since living in Australia. In contrast, new arrivals were more likely to be younger and come from non-English-speaking countries.

This study found that, on average, 57 migrants drown in Australia each year, with nearly one-quarter having lived in Australia for less than five years. Additionally, certain sub-populations recorded a greater drowning rate than the Australian-born population. These findings provide new insights that may reduce the impact of drowning among Australia's migrant communities. This study builds on our understanding of who is drowning in Australia and acknowledges that not all migrant populations may experience the same risk factors. These findings support the need for tailored drowning prevention strategies and health promotion programs for populations identified as being at higher risk.

Source: Willcox-Pidgeon, S., Franklin, R.C., Leggat, P.A. and Devine, S. (2021), Epidemiology of unintentional fatal drowning among migrants in Australia. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 45: 255-262. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.13102>

Reducing inequities among adult female migrants at higher risk for drowning in Australia: The value of swimming and water safety programs

Research published by Royal Life Saving and James Cook University found that the impact of swimming programs for adult migrants goes beyond just learning to swim.

This qualitative study was conducted in November-December 2019 among female participants of swimming and water safety programs targeted to adult migrants in Sydney, NSW. All were aged 25 years or over, were first generation and most had lived in Australia for at least 10 years. Most were non-swimmers and were fearful of water prior to the program. Focus groups and interviews were conducted, with four main themes being reported.

Key Findings

> Program outcomes for the participants:

- Enjoyed the programs and expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to attend
- Gained a sense of achievement in being able to perform skills, such as floating, and the ability to move through water independently
- Increased confidence in the water
- However, participants felt that the duration of the swimming programs was too short to learn the full range of skills and to be considered “good swimmers”

> Health and well-being benefits for the participants:

- Positive health and well-being outcomes on their physical, mental and social health and well-being
- Associated the program with being happy and relaxed
- Increased fitness and exercise
- Enjoyed doing the swimming lessons in a group; being in a supportive and encouraging environment, social interaction



> Enablers to participation:

- Learning to swim was something many had wanted to do for a long time
- Motivation to join often came from their children and not being able to participate with their families in the water
- Female-only programs were greatly appreciated as a barrier to participating was sometimes due to cultural and religious reasons
- Having a program coordinator to organise enrolment and navigate language barriers
- Having family support was important in encouraging the participants in learning to swim

> Barriers to future participation:

- Cost was the most commonly identified barrier preventing participants from continuing their swimming journey
- Participants were willing to pay subsidised rates as the full price was considered too expensive; especially if their children were also attending lessons
- A lack of information was cited as a barrier for those who were interested in continuing lessons

Recommendations

Swimming and water safety program providers should consider:

- Using a trusted 'cultural broker' to encourage participation, build relationships in the community and support participants with organising enrolment, transport and navigating language barriers
- Involving community organisations or community leaders in the program development to ensure programs incorporate cultural worldviews
- Promoting the multiple benefits of swimming to encourage people to participate for reasons other than just learning to swim
- Providing cultural competency training for program instructors to ensure cultural appropriateness and sensitivity
- Delivering face-to-face information sessions alongside practical programs, to raise awareness and to inform communities about program availability, which may help to alleviate the fear of drowning and encourage participation

Conclusion

The participants in this study highly valued the opportunity to learn swimming and water safety skills in a supportive and enjoyable environment, from the enrolment process to the instructors and pool environment. While males are considered to be at higher risk of drowning, females from migrant communities may act as conduits for water safety among their families and wider community.

This study reported that female migrants who participated in funded learn to swim programs developed positive social networks and friendships, resulting in improved overall physical and mental well-being, as well as gaining vital swimming and water safety skills and knowledge.

Source: Willcox-Pidgeon, S.M; Franklin, R.C; Devine, S; Leggat, P & Scarr, J. 2021. Reducing inequities among adult female migrants at higher risk for drowning in Australia: The value of swimming and water safety programs. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia* 32 (S1). DOI: 10.1002/hpja.407

United Nations Resolution on Global Drowning Prevention

The United Nations passed its first ever Resolution on Global Drowning Prevention (A/75/L.76) during the seventy-fifth session of the UN General Assembly on Wednesday 28th April 2021.

The Resolution was brought to the United Nations by Ireland and Bangladesh, and co-sponsored by 79 countries including Australia. UK charity Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RLNI) have provided tireless support to the process. The Resolution has been warmly welcomed by the Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, and the hundreds of thousands of people who work or volunteer as lifeguards, lifesavers, and swimming instructors in communities across Australia. We thank the Australian Government for its support.

We are most proud of

- › Hosting the World Conference on Drowning Prevention a decade ago in Vietnam, bringing together more than 435 individuals from 52 countries under the theme of building a global platform to reduce drowning. Supported by the Australian Government, the conference shone light on a previously hidden public health threat. The conference helped the Government of Vietnam build capacity including through SwimSafe Danang and published a declaration.
- › Supporting the establishment of the International Drowning Research Centre – Bangladesh and working together to research and develop key interventions.
- › Supporting WHO in various projects including advising on the publication Global Report on Drowning (2014), producing a launch video, and advising on the publication Preventing Drowning: An Implementation Guide (2017).

The Resolution

- Is in response to deep concern that drowning has been the cause of over 2.5 million preventable deaths in the past decade but has been largely under-recognised relative to its impact
- Notes that more than 90% of deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries, with Asia carrying the highest burden of drowning deaths by number
- Notes that drowning disproportionately affects children and adolescents in rural areas, with many countries reporting drowning as the leading cause of childhood mortality
- Clarifies that the official global estimate of 235,000 deaths per annum excludes drownings attributable to flood-related climatic events and water transport incidents, resulting in drowning deaths being underestimated by up to 50% in some countries
- Declares that the 25th July every year will be World Drowning Prevention Day and calls on all nations to develop drowning prevention plans

Australia is well placed to achieve all (and more) of the voluntary actions that the Resolution encourages Members States to adopt.

- Australia has well-developed national peak bodies for lifesaving and drowning prevention.
- The Resolution aligns almost perfectly to the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 which was launched in Canberra in March 2021.
- All the key WHO recommended interventions are well-addressed across Australia.
- Our academic institutions and their approaches to global themes in drowning research are world leading, including teams at The George Institute for Global Health, the School of Population Health, UNSW, and James Cook University.

Australia is well placed to support international cooperation by sharing lessons learned, and best practices, within and among regions. In fact, our leadership has already contributed through partnerships with the WHO, International Life Saving Federation, and in Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia.



Drowning prevention and lifesaving is well recognised and supported by the Australian community. Our nearest neighbours will likely benefit most from a UN elevation of this issue.

World Drowning Prevention Day

Following the United Nations adoption of the historic first Resolution on Global Drowning Prevention, the inaugural World Drowning Prevention Day was announced. The World Health Organization (WHO) invited all stakeholders to commemorate the day by highlighting the need for urgent, coordinated and multi-sectorial action to reduce drowning.

On 25 July 2021, people across the world marked the first World Drowning Prevention Day. In addition to resources developed and shared by the WHO, Royal Life Saving created additional resources and promoted the importance of the day across the Australian media landscape.

Royal Life Saving helped facilitate a WHO webinar 'Global, national and local reflections on World Drowning Prevention Day 2021' with speakers from around the globe representing researchers, policymakers and practitioners from a range of high, middle and low income countries. These panelists reflected on the day and discussed future challenges and opportunities to maximise the impacts of the UN Resolution on Global Drowning Prevention.

References: Meddings DR, Scarr J-P, Larson K, Vaughan J, Krug EG. Drowning prevention: turning the tide on a leading killer. *Lancet Public Health*. 2021. doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(21)00165-1

Jagnoor J, Kobusingye O, Scarr J-P. Drowning prevention: priorities to accelerate multisectoral action. *Lancet*. 2021. doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)01601-9

On World Drowning Prevention Day, we encouraged people to join us in taking action to end drowning.

- › Give your child the skills to enjoy the water safely.
- › Keep Watch to keep your child safe around water.
- › Check your pool fence and make sure the latch closes.
- › Make the right call and avoid alcohol and drugs around water.
- › Wear a lifejacket when you are fishing or boating.
- › Check the weather forecast and water conditions before boating.
- › Challenge yourself to do your Bronze Medallion.
- › Start a career as a pool lifeguard or swimming and water safety teacher.
- › Enrol in a First Aid course and learn CPR skills.
- › Avoid driving through floodwaters.

Every small step we individually take can help save lives.



Summer Drowning Toll Media analysis

An analysis of media stories over the 2020/21 summer period was conducted by UNSW Masters student Dr Megha Yalamanchili during a placement with Royal Life Saving.

Dr Yalamanchili analysed more than 160 separate media articles and television news reports on drowning deaths over the summer months. Her research found that the media stories reporting drowning largely focused on the rescue and search response, and the way individuals and communities tried to assist.

Beyond getting an overall picture of the way drowning deaths were discussed in the media, Dr Yalamanchili also sought out specific contextual factors. These included cultural background, alcohol involvement, lifejacket wear, swimming ability, whether the person was alone at the time, and whether more than one person perished.

Key findings from the analysis of media stories over the summer found that:

- Around one quarter of people were reported to be from a multicultural background.
- Alcohol involvement was rarely mentioned.
- Only two media stories reported that the person was wearing a lifejacket when boating or fishing.
- Very few stories included messages about staying safe around water and preventing drowning.

As a result of this research, Dr Yalamanchili had two key recommendations:

1. Community targeted programs and safety messages for multicultural / migrant populations about water awareness and risks around water, including:
 - Be aware of your own abilities and skills
 - Know how to get help
 - Learn basic water safety and life saving skills
 - Read the safety signs before going into the water
2. Media should incorporate drowning prevention messages when reporting on drowning incidents.

Child in council pool among 11 to drown in first fortnight of summer

TWO MEN DEAD AFTER THREE FISHERMAN SWEEP INTO THE OCEAN AT POPULAR NSW FISHING SPOT

Drowning numbers soar, prompting plea for water safety

Search for missing man a 'recovery mission' after woman drowns

Search resumes for spearfisherman swept from rocks

VICTORIA'S WORST DROWNING YEAR ON RECORD AS TOLL CLIMBS WITH TWO MORE DEATHS

THREE LIVES LOST due to dangerous conditions on Gold Coast beaches

› **Suggested citation**

Royal Life Saving Society – Australia (2021)
Royal Life Saving National Drowning
Report 2021, Sydney Australia.



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