



# Quick Facts



## 29 people drowned in Western Australia in 2008

- 86% were male
- 69% occurred in the metropolitan Perth area
- 41% involved persons aged 30-59 years
- 38% occurred at coastal locations
- 28% occurred at inland waterway locations
- 45% had pre-existing medical conditions



## Infants and Toddlers (0-5 years)

Three children under five years of age drowned in 2008

- All were under two years of age
- 2/3 were male
- 100% occurred at locations in and around the home
- Common contributing factors – lack of supervision and inadequate barriers to water locations



## Children (6-14 years)

Only one drowning death was recorded amongst this age group in 2008. Inadequate supervision and a pre-existing medical condition contributed to the incident.



## Young Adults (15-29 years)

Four young adults drowned in 2008

- All were male
- 75% occurred in regional areas
- 50% were tourists
- Common contributing factors – alcohol consumption and participating in risky behaviours



## Adults (30-59 years)

12 adults drowned in 2008

- 83% were male
- 67% occurred in the metropolitan Perth area
- 50% occurred at coastal locations
- 33% were recreating around the water at the time of the incident
- Common contributing factors – poor weather conditions and pre-existing medical conditions



## Older Adults (60+ years)

Nine older adults drowned in 2008

- All were male
- 89% occurred in the metropolitan Perth area
- 44% occurred at coastal locations
- 33% occurred at river locations
- Common contributing factors – pre-existing medical conditions, poor conditions and participating alone



## Acknowledgements

Royal Life Saving would like to acknowledge the continued assistance and support of the Western Australian Coroner's Office and the Western Australian Police Service through the data collection process and compilation of this report.

# Introduction

The Royal Life Saving Society WA has been collecting drowning death statistics and information from the WA Coroner's Office for the past 10 years. This information is integral to investigating who, how and where people are drowning in Western Australia which directs our drowning prevention and water safety priority areas, messages and initiatives.

Between 1st January and 31st December 2008, a total of 37 drowning deaths were recorded in Western Australia. Of these, 29 were classified as unintentional and have been included within this report. The remaining eight cases were omitted due to insufficient information (open cases) or intentional deaths.

Accidental drowning deaths place a significant burden on the Western Australian community. Australian research into the cost of drowning death estimated each death costs the WA community \$1.6 million. Therefore means that the cost of drowning death to the Western Australian community in 2008 was \$46.4 million.

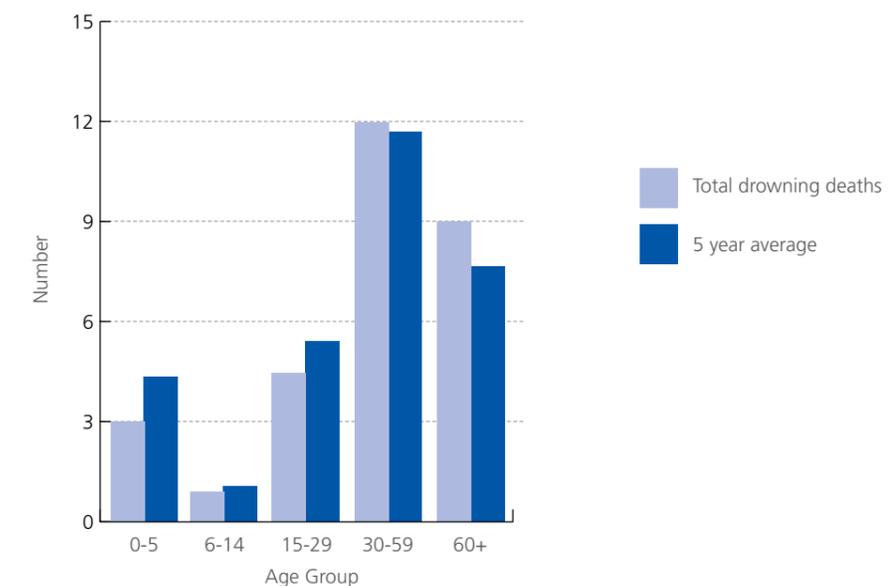
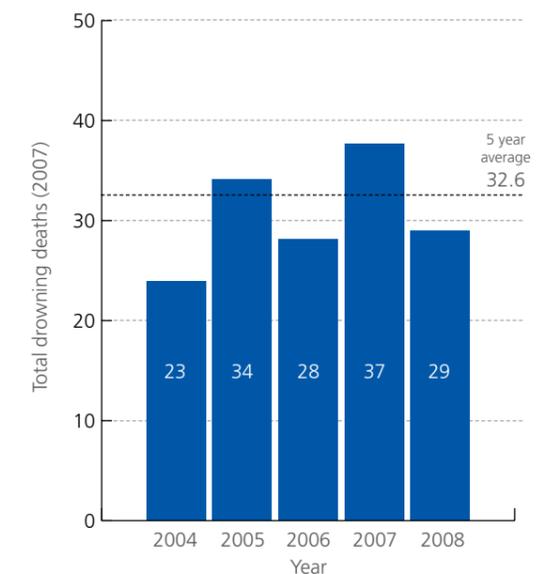
## Drowning Trends in Western Australia

Over the past five years we have seen drowning deaths fluctuate from year to year with an average of 30.2 deaths/year (2004-2008). The statistics for 2008 remain slightly below this average.

Evidence suggests that current water safety and drowning prevention initiatives of Royal Life Saving WA and other key organisations have been successful in reducing the number of drowning deaths in Western Australia.

## Drowning Rates in Western Australia

The Western Australian population was 2,204,000 at December 2008, which was an increase of 3.1% from the previous twelve months. Based on this, the rate of drowning death in Western Australia is 1.32 deaths per 100,000 persons.



# Infants and Toddlers

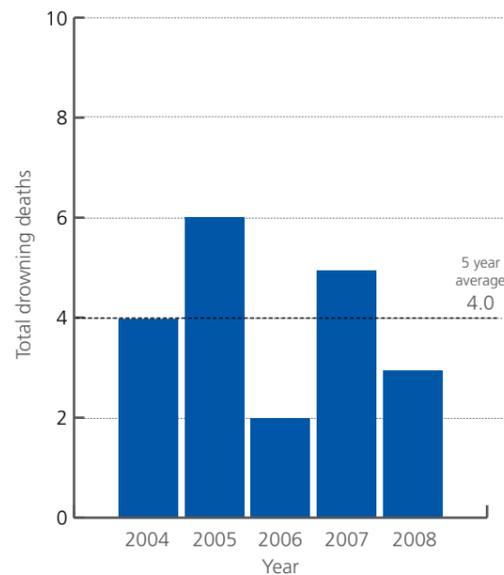


## 0-5 years

Drowning remains one of the leading causes of preventable death in children under five years of age in Australia. Water however should be seen as a fun and enjoyable environment for children to explore and learn.

In 2008, three drowning deaths were recorded within the 0-5 year age group in Western Australia, representing 10.3% of total drowning deaths. This figure remains under the five year average for this age group.

All deaths amongst this age group involved children under two years of age, continuing the trend seen in recent drowning statistics. In addition, two thirds of incidents involved males which support national research and evidence.



## Toddler Drowning Prevention – The WA Story

In Western Australia we have seen a significant decrease in the number of toddler drowning deaths over the past decade. Since 1999 Western Australia has achieved a 46% decrease in the average number of annual toddler drowning deaths. This reduction has out-performed the national average by almost 50% which is a huge achievement.

In addition, over the past decade we have seen a shift in the most at-risk location for toddler drowning deaths in Western Australia which has resulted in new water safety focus areas.

Western Australia has the third highest proportion of home swimming pools in the nation with 15.4% home pool ownership. This number has increased by 4.3% since 1994.

Despite the increase in home pool ownership in Western Australia, we have seen a significant decrease in the number of toddler drowning deaths occurring in home swimming pools.

## By Activity

All deaths recorded amongst this age group resulted from children wandering away from the house and falling into the water (child recreating around water).

## By Location

Two (67%) of the incidents involving children under five years of age in 2008 occurred at locations within the Perth metropolitan area.

All of the incidents occurred at locations in and around the home in 2008. The trends seen in 2007 have continued with incidents amongst this age group more likely to occur at other locations around the home such as fishponds rather than backyard swimming pools. This highlights the effectiveness of current programs (Keep Watch), legislation requirements, and regular pool barrier inspection programs.

Interestingly, two thirds of the incidents recorded amongst this age group occurred while the child was at a relative's place of residence. This shows that it is important to ensure education strategies not only target parents but grandparents and those who have backyard swimming pools.

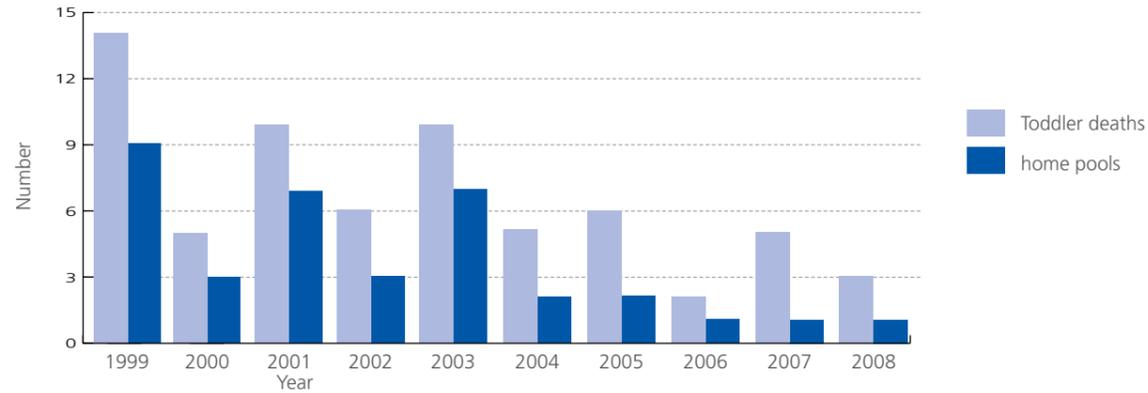
## Contributing Factors

All of the incidents were contributed to by a lack of constant parental supervision and inadequate barriers to water locations. Children are naturally curious when it comes to water. In addition, childhood drowning is a silent event as children usually don't cry out for help. This is why it is important that direct adult supervision is maintained at all times when children are around the water.

## Recommendations

1. Ensure that toddler drowning prevention education and awareness strategies are directed at parents, grandparents and home pool owners
2. With children under two years of age identified as the most at-risk group, it is recommended that additional strategies to educate new parents be developed and implemented
3. Continue to promote and enforce current pool barrier legislation to maintain low numbers of home swimming pool deaths amongst toddlers

# Infants and Toddlers



From 1999 we have seen almost a 30% decrease in the number of toddler drowning deaths occurring at home swimming pool locations in Western Australia, with figures almost half of those recorded nationally. Incidents involving toddlers are now more likely to occur at other locations in and around the home such as ponds, bathtubs and dams.

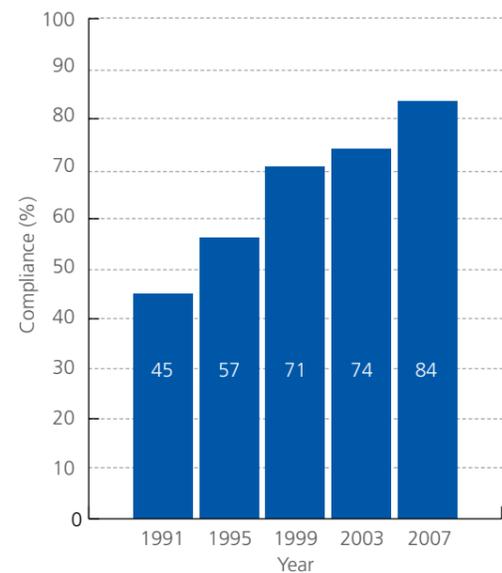
## Pool Barrier Legislation – How effective has it been?

Royal Life Saving Western Australia recently completed a research report examining the effectiveness of home pool barrier legislation and its impact on compliance and toddler drowning rates.

Home Pool Barrier Inspection Legislation was introduced by the Western Australian Government in 1991. This legislation outlined the requirements for effective pool barriers and also enforced mandatory home pool barrier inspections to be carried out at least once every four years.

Since these mandatory inspections were introduced in 1991, there has been an improvement of almost 50% in the first assessment compliance rates amongst home pool owners in Western Australia.

The introduction of this legislation and Royal Life Saving Society Western Australia's involvement in conducting routine home pool barrier inspections on behalf of local government has been integral in reducing the number of toddler drowning deaths in home swimming pools over the past decade.



# Children



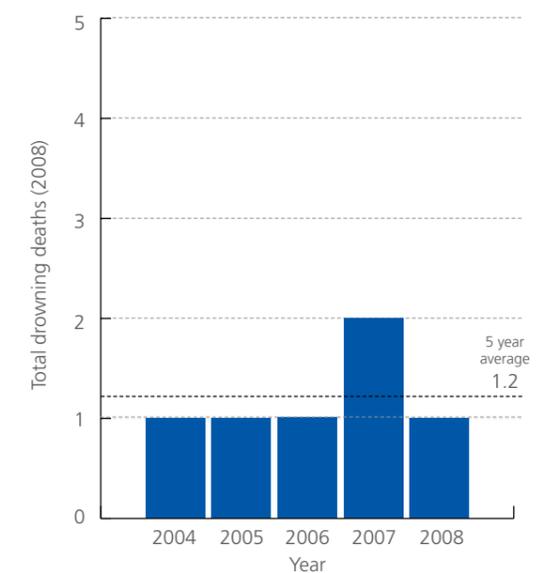
## (6-14 years)

There was only one drowning death recorded amongst children aged 6-14 years in 2008. The incident was contributed to by inadequate supervision and a pre-existing medical condition.

These statistics continue the low number of drowning deaths recorded amongst this age group as seen over the past five years. The Royal Life Saving Society believes that water safety skills are imperative to ensure our community continues to enjoy water activities safely and that targeting children is essential in achieving this.

The success of programs delivered through the Royal Life Saving Endorsed Swim Schools including Swim & Survive, Bronze Rescue and Junior Lifeguard Club have contributed significantly to maintaining low drowning rates amongst this age group in Western Australia.

In 2008, over 94,000 Western Australia children undertook Royal Life Saving swimming and water safety classes, giving them the essential knowledge and skills to learn how to swim and also when and where to do it safely.



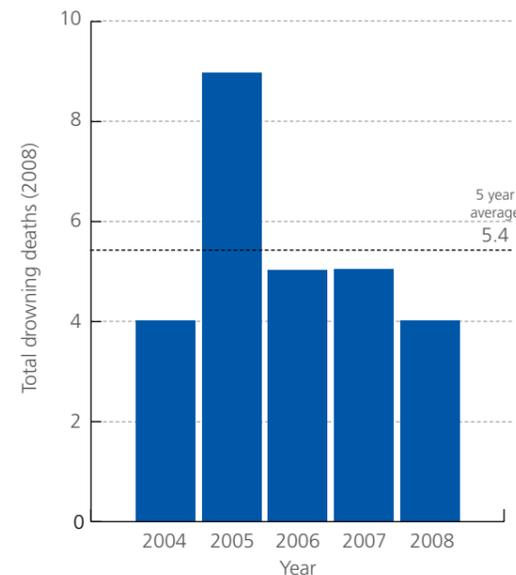
# Young Adults



## (15-29 years)

In 2008, four young adults drowned in Western Australia (13.8% of total drowning deaths recorded). This is a slight decrease from the past few years and remains under the five year average for this age group.

Similar to previous years, all incidents amongst young adults involved males. This trend has been consistently highlighted amongst this age group in drowning statistics and other injury areas. Males are more likely to over-estimate their abilities and undertake risky activities than their female counterparts.



## By Activity

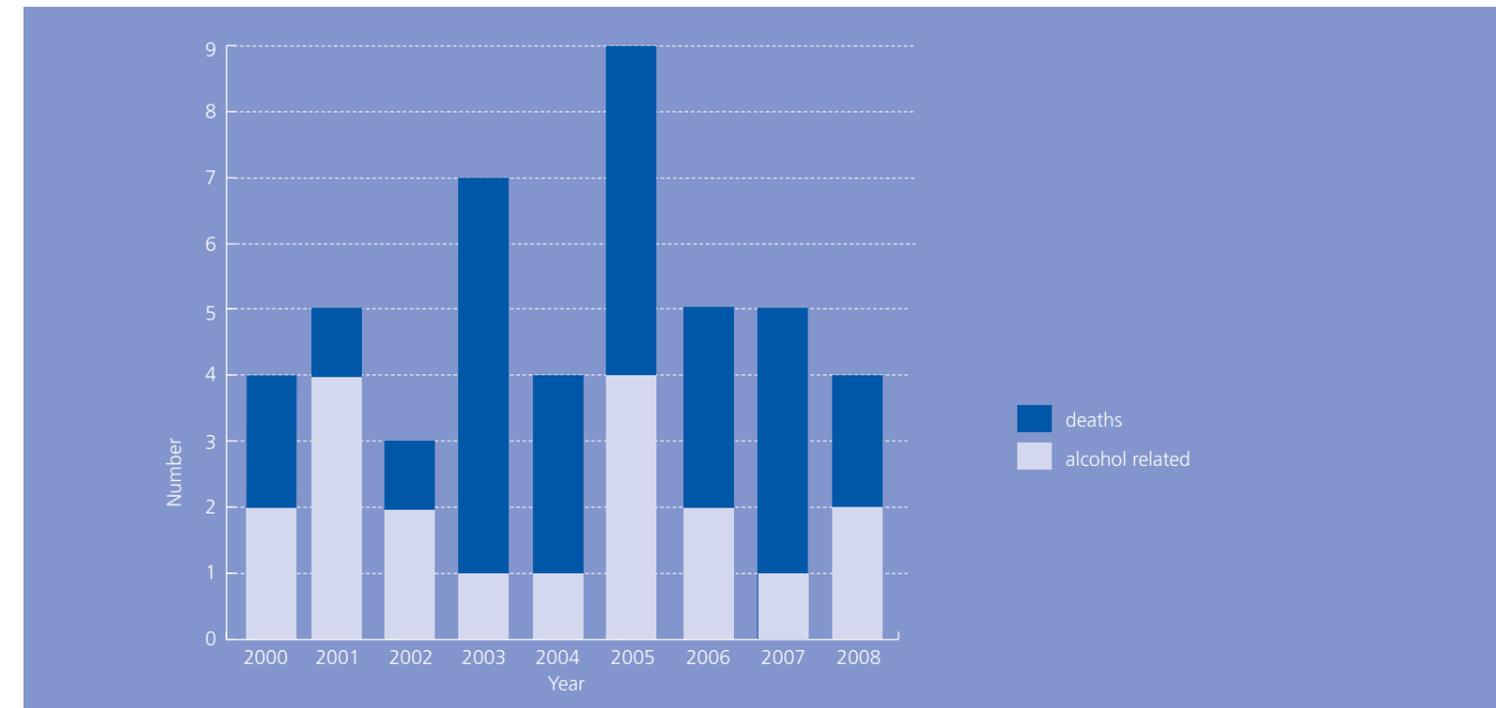
Young adults were most likely to be recreating around water prior to the incident (75% of incidents). This is different to what we have seen in previous years where majority of incidents occurred as a result of being in the water.

## By Location

Incident locations for this age group varied and included the home swimming pool, the ocean and inland waterway locations. Similar to 2007 statistics, the majority of incidents (75%) occurred in regional areas of Western Australia. This further highlights the importance of ensuring that education and awareness messages are promoted to regional areas.

## Contributing Factors

There were a number of factors that contributed to drowning death incidents in this age group. Alcohol and other drugs continued to be a major contributing factor. On average since 2000, 45.7% of drowning deaths amongst young adults in Western Australia have been contributed to by alcohol. This continues to be a priority water safety and drowning prevention issue.



All of the incidents amongst this age group involved risky behaviours such as participating in poor weather conditions. In addition, 50% of incidents involved tourists/visitors to the area who were unfamiliar with the location and conditions.

## Recommendations

1. Education and awareness strategies targeted at young adults focusing on the dangers and consequences of mixing alcohol and aquatic activity should be continued
2. To ensure that water safety and drowning prevention initiatives for young adults are available in regional areas of Western Australia

# Adults

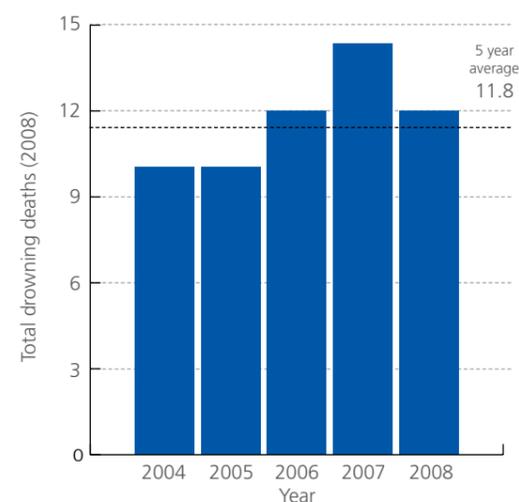


## (30-59 years)

Adults aged 30-59 again recorded the highest number of drowning deaths in Western Australia in 2008. 12 adults drowned in 2008 representing 41% of total drowning deaths. While this is a slight decrease from 2007, the number still remains higher than the five year average for this age group (11.8 deaths/year).

The majority (83%) involved males, a common trend in drowning and injury statistics.

This age group remains a priority target group for water safety and drowning prevention intervention in Western Australia.



## By Activity

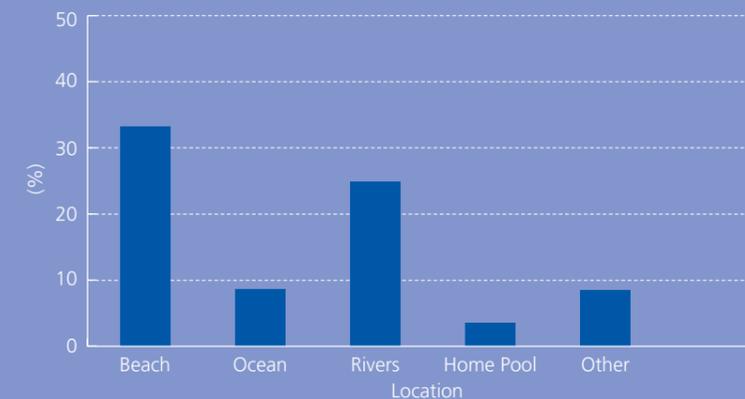
The majority of incidents amongst this age group resulted from adults recreating around the water (14%) and fishing (14%), particularly dive fishing and fishing from boats.

It is interesting to note that in many of the incidents, the deceased was reported to be very competent and experienced with the activities that they were undertaking.

## By Location

In contrast to previous years, two thirds of the incidents occurred at locations within the Perth metropolitan area. This will not effect our service delivery to regional and remote areas throughout the state as past trends indicate they are still a priority area for intervention.

The majority of incidents occurred at coastal (50%) and river locations (25%). Other common locations were home swimming pools and spas.



## Contributing Factors

There were a number of factors that contributed to drowning death incidents amongst this age group. Weather conditions were reportedly poor in 42% of incidents including strong currents, large swell and rips.

Medical conditions such as heart disease were also a contributing factor in 42% of incidents amongst this age group. Many of these were pre-existing, however there were some cases where medical conditions were undiagnosed at the time of the incident.

In a continuing trend, alcohol consumption was a contributing factor in 17% of incidents in this age group, a significant decrease from 2007. As drowning statistics tend to fluctuate, this will continue to be monitored over the coming years.

## Recommendations

1. Continue to monitor alcohol-related drowning deaths and develop educational and awareness strategies to target adults
2. Develop and implement water safety and drowning prevention strategies that target identified high risk activities (fishing, swimming) and locations (coastal and river locations)
3. Promote the importance of undertaking first aid/resuscitation training and maintaining appropriate qualification

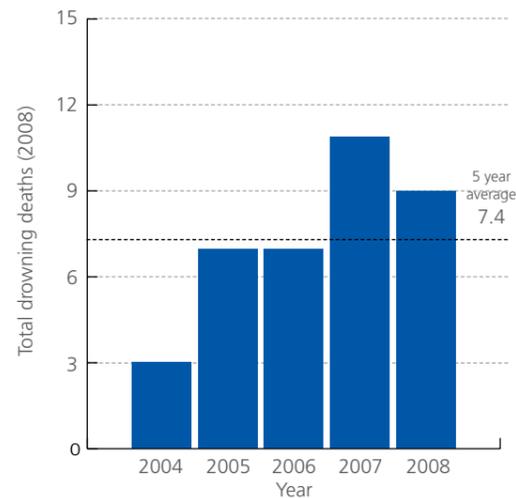
# Older Adults



## (60+ years)

Older adults remain a priority group for water safety and drowning prevention in Western Australia, despite recording a reduction in the number of drowning deaths from 2007. In 2008 nine deaths were recorded amongst older adults which remain higher than the five year average of 7.4 deaths per year.

All of the incidents amongst older adults were male.



## By Activity

The majority of incidents (33%) occurred while persons were recreating around aquatic environments, fallen into the water and been unable to get to safety.

Other common activities being undertaken at the time of the incident includes swimming, fishing, kayaking and boating.

At this stage of life older adults (particularly men) often have increased amounts of free time and take up interest in new aquatic activities such as kayaking which can result in new risks and dangers. This is reflected in the 2008 statistics.

## By Location

89% of incidents occurred within the Perth metropolitan area. Similar to the adults' age group, this result differs from previous years and will not affect service delivery to regional areas.

The majority of incidents (44%) occurred at coastal locations such as the beach and ocean. In addition, 33% of incident occurred at river locations.



## Contributing Factors

Following the trend from previous years, the presence of pre-existing medical conditions was the main contributing factor to incidents amongst this age group, involved in 78% of incidents.

In addition, 33% of these incidents occurred as a result of the person participating alone which heightens the risks and dangers associated with participation in aquatic activities.

In 33% of incidents the weather conditions were reportedly poor at the time of the incident – large and choppy swell, rips and strong currents.

## Recommendations

1. Continue to monitor and investigate drowning death patterns and trends amongst older adults to determine appropriate water safety and drowning prevention messages and strategies
2. Promote participation in regular aquatic activity to limit the deterioration of skills with age and create awareness of changing body abilities
3. Encourage older adults, particularly those with pre-existing medical conditions to always participate with others when in or around water environments
4. Encourage older adults to seek medical clearance and complete a comprehensive fitness test before participating in aquatic activities

# Royal Life Saving Initiatives



## Keep Watch

Keep Watch aims to increase awareness amongst parents and carers of young children of toddler drowning prevention strategies. The program has formed a partnership with other child injury organisations to deliver important child safety and injury prevention information to regional and remote areas.

As the partnership strengthens, the partnering organisations have been working towards developing a comprehensive set of resources that encompass key relevant areas of child injury prevention, which are relevant for Indigenous populations. These resources were complete and officially launched and distributed in the Pilbara in late 2009.



## Don't Drink and Drown

The Don't Drink & Drown campaign aims to create awareness and understanding amongst 15-29 year olds of the risks associated with combining alcohol and aquatic activities. The campaign will focus on the following new initiatives in Western Australia for 2009-2010;

- Indigenous communities within the Kimberley region
- Alcohol and water safety presentations within metropolitan and regional WA High schools
- Expanding the campaign message to licensed pubs and clubs adjacent to aquatic locations



## Remote Aboriginal Swimming Pools Project

Royal Life Saving manages swimming pool facilities within remote Aboriginal communities in the north-west. There are now five Aboriginal communities participating in the program, these include; Burringurrah, Jigalong, Yandeyarra and due to the success of the program the opening of two new facilities in October 2007 at Warmun and Bidyadanga.

The pools provide Aboriginal communities access to a range of swimming and lifesaving programs. In addition, the facilities provide a number of health and social benefits for the communities. There are plans to further expand this program over the next few years with Fitzroy Crossing opening in early 2010 and new communities coming onboard.

## Watch Around Water

The Watch Around Water campaign looks to address parental supervision of young children while visiting public aquatic facilities. The program is jointly owned with LIWA Aquatics and we are aiming to have all pools in Western Australia registered as Watch Around Water Centres in 2009/2010.



## Swim & Survive

The Swim & Survive program provides children 6-14 years with not only swimming skills, but also essential water safety knowledge and lifesaving skills. The program has recently been expanded to include access to programs and information for targeted community groups including:

- CaLD women and youth groups and
- Indigenous populations in Kwinana and the north-west

This will help ensure that drowning rates amongst children remain low in Western Australia.

This program has also initiated a number of Open Days run through aquatic facilities. These sessions aim to encourage participation in swimming and lifesaving and include free swim assessments for children to assist with skill development. These sessions are run throughout metropolitan, regional and remote areas of the state.

## Training

Royal Life Saving has continued to provide a range of training opportunities to the Western Australian community to ensure that qualified community lifesavers are readily available throughout the state to prevent drowning deaths.

In addition to providing first aid and vocational training courses, Royal Life Saving currently is working with BHP Billiton to increase traineeship opportunities within the aquatics and recreation industry for young Indigenous people in regional Western Australia.

**For more information visit [www.rise.com.au](http://www.rise.com.au)**



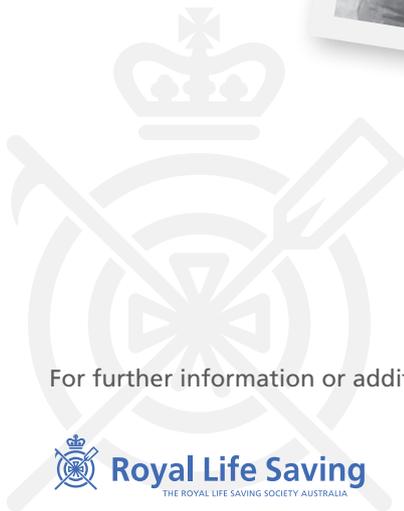
## Safety Risk Management

Royal Life Saving has developed a range of services that create safer aquatic environments.

The core services are:

- Provision of risk management services for operators of pools and managers of inland waterways (such as rivers, lakes and dams),
- Provision of home pool barrier assessment services on behalf of Local Government,
- Development and distribution of Inland Waterway and Pool Safety Guidelines,
- Collation and analysis of injury/accident data,
- Provision of qualified lifeguards and emergency care personnel at community events.





For further information or additional copies of the report, please contact:



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*Disclaimer – While all care is taken to ensure that the results presented in this report are as accurate as possible, they are only provisional and subject to change based on ongoing coronial investigations.*

