



**Of the drownings this year:**

- 76% were males
- 16% were children under the age of five years
- 48% occurred in rural or remote areas
- 40% occurred at the beach/ocean
- 12% occurred in bathtubs

# 2002

## Western Australian Drowning Report



Produced by

**Royal Life Saving**

THE ROYAL LIFE SAVING SOCIETY AUSTRALIA

## Royal Life Saving Toddler Drowning Initiatives ...

### Keep Watch

Throughout Australia, drowning is the major cause of preventable death in children under the age of five. For this age group, home swimming pools are the most common site for drowning to occur. As a result, the prevention of drowning and near drowning remains a national priority area for immediate action.



KEEP WATCH is a health promotion program that aims to prevent toddler drowning through increased knowledge and awareness of parents, pool owners, health professionals, community and child care workers and industry personnel. The KEEP WATCH message promotes four key toddler drowning prevention strategies which include:

- **Supervise your child**
- **Fence your pool**
- **Familiarise your child with the water**
- **Learn resuscitation**

One of the components of KEEP WATCH is a media awareness campaign. The campaign's main focus is the importance of close and constant supervision and it is based on the four key prevention messages. Other components of the campaign include community education programs through RLSSA Endorsed Swim Schools, Heart Beat Clubs and the Home Pool Inspection program.

### Infant Aquatics

The infant aquatics program is an education and skill development program aimed at encouraging infants and toddlers to explore and practice aquatic skills at their own pace in a safe aquatic environment.



The Key Components of the program are:

- Water familiarisation
- Water safety
- Early buoyancy and swimming development

The lessons are child-centric, allowing for the child to develop at their own time and pace. Based on early childhood principles of growth and development, the environment is non-competitive and is designed to reinforce the bonding relationship between child and parent or carer.

### Heart Beat Club

The Heart Beat Club is an informal resuscitation training program which aims to develop life-saving resuscitation skills in our community. The target group for the course is parents of toddlers and young children, although RLSSA promotes that all members of the community should be able to resuscitate someone who has stopped breathing. The Heart Beat Club promotes the KEEP WATCH message and specifically works towards the fourth key strategy – Learn Resuscitation.



### Home Pool Inspection Program

The Royal Life Saving Society conducts a home swimming pool inspection program on behalf of a number of Local Government organisations. The Royal Life Saving service extends beyond the effective barrier inspections with all RLSSA inspectors trained and armed with knowledge and information to assist pool owners in providing a safe pool environment and specifically address the four "KEEP WATCH" drowning prevention strategies. Royal Life Saving has been instrumental in lobbying for changes to legislation which will see all pools complying to appropriate barriers standards by December 17th 2006. To find out if your pool complies with state legislation checkout our website [www.lifesavingwa.com.au](http://www.lifesavingwa.com.au).



For information on other Royal Life Saving initiatives, see the inside back cover of the 2002 Western Australian Drowning Report.



Western Australia's population as per ABS records was 1,940,500 in December 2002 making the drowning death rate for 2002 1.29/100,000. This is significantly less than the average annual drowning death rate for 1995–2000 of 1.7/100,000.

### The Western Australian Drowning Report

Between January 1 and December 31 of 2002, a total of 32 people drowned in Western Australia. Twenty-five of these drowning deaths were unintentional, four were intentional and three were recorded as undetermined. When comparing the total unintentional drowning deaths the total for 2002 is six less than 2001 which recorded 31.

Of the 25 unintentional drowning victims:

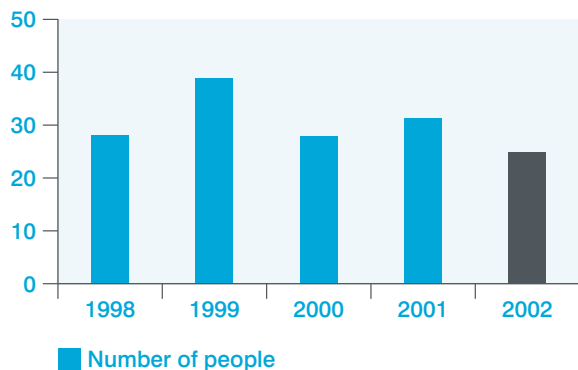
- 76% were males
- 16% were children under the age of five years
- 48% occurred in rural or remote areas
- 40% occurred at the beach/ocean
- 12% occurred in bathtubs

As a result of these alarming statistics, the Commonwealth Government of Australia has identified drowning as a priority area for immediate action.

### drowning over the past five years ...

The average number of unintentional drowning deaths per year between 1998 and 2002 is 31.5. The 2002 figure of 25 unintentional drownings is the lowest figure in the last five years. This can partly be attributed to the water safety information and skills training education and other initiatives conducted by The Royal Life Saving Society of Western Australia.

### Unintentional Drowning in Western Australia



NB: Unintentional drowning statistics will be used throughout this report unless otherwise stated. In the five year averages for age groups, only drowning deaths with specified ages in the drowning records have been included.

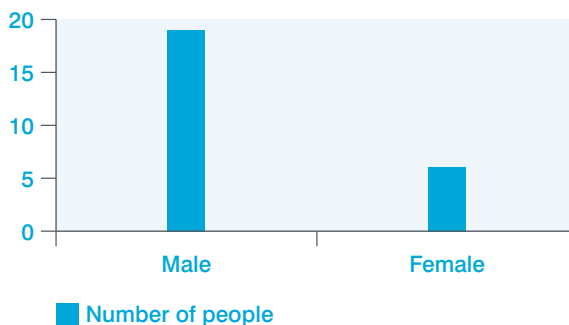
### Population

The international standard for recording drowning deaths is as a rate per 100,000 of the total population. Western Australia's population as per ABS records was 1,940,500 in December 2002 making the drowning death rate for 2002 1.29/100,000. This is significantly less than the average annual drowning death rate for 1995–2000 of 1.7/100,000.

### Gender

Of the 25 unintentional drowning deaths in Western Australia, six were female and 19 were male. This represents a male dominance of 76%.

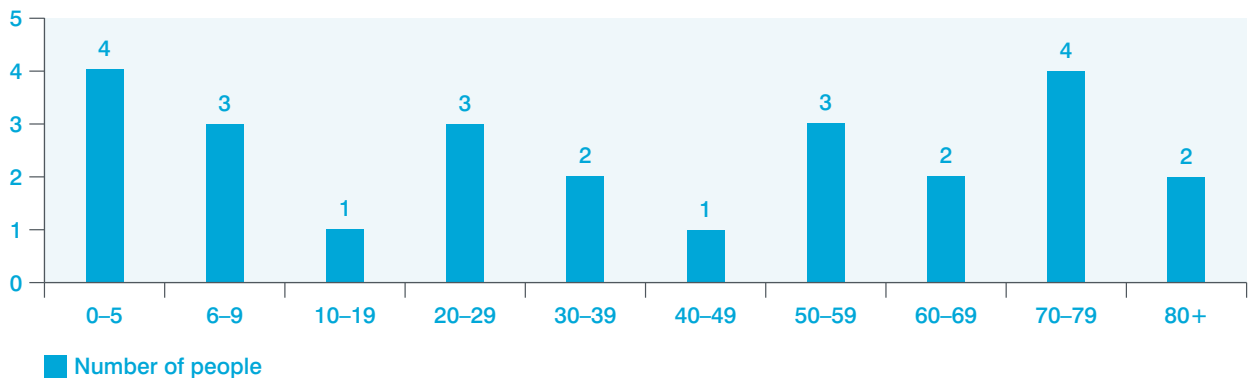
### Drowning by Gender





### drowning by age group ...

Drowning remains the major cause of preventable death in children under five years of age. In Australia between 1997 and 2002, the average number of drowning deaths was 50 and for every death it is estimated that four to ten children are admitted to hospital as a result of an immersion incident. There has been an increase this year in the 70–79 year old age group with this age group and the 0–5's both having the highest rate of 4 drowning related deaths.



### Toddlers (0- 4 Age Group)

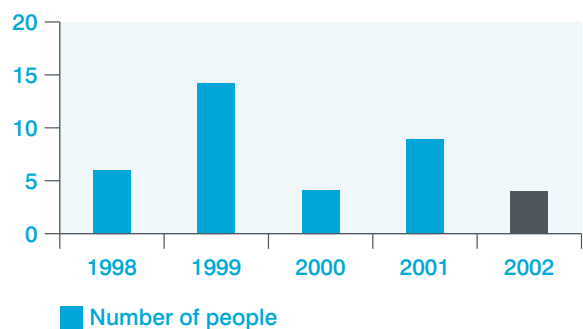
This age group has historically represented a large proportion of total drowning deaths in Western Australia. For this reason, toddlers have been identified as a focus for drowning prevention strategies within Royal Life Saving's programs.

**Four toddlers drowned in Western Australia in 2002 representing 16% of total drownings in Western Australia for 2002.**

The locations of these drownings included a spa, swimming pool, dam and a bathtub. In the spa, swimming pool and dam cases, the children had wandered away from supervision towards water. This emphasises the need for constant adult supervision of toddlers at all times. Fences and gates surrounding pools and spas need to be regularly maintained in accordance with pool safety standards to prevent toddler drownings in home pools and spas.

There were five less toddler drownings recorded in 2002 compared to 2001 when nine toddlers drowned.

### Drowning 0-4 Age Group



Following a recent inquest for a drowning in this age group, the Western Australian Coroner highlighted the need for adults in the community to understand that while lifeguards on duty watch groups of people, they are not watching every person all the time. It was also emphasised that adult supervision of children in the water must be direct, competent and alert.

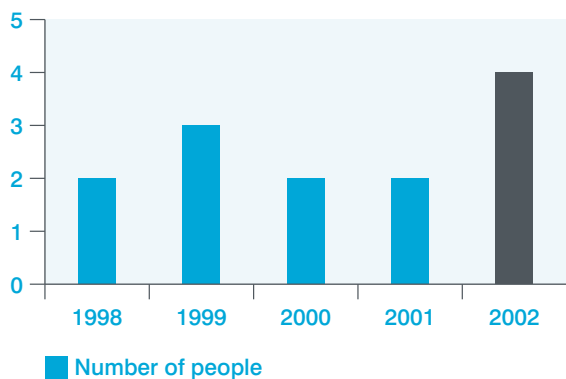
### Children (5–14 Age Group)

Four children aged five to fourteen years drowned in Western Australia in 2002. This represents 16% of the total drownings in Western Australia. One drowning occurred in a public swimming pool, two occurred in rivers and one occurred in a dam.

The 2002 figure doubled last year in this age group. Royal Life Saving recognises the importance of targeting 5–14 year olds and the majority of water safety skill development and education programs are aimed towards them. Three of the four children who drowned in this age group were from Indigenous backgrounds and all three drownings occurred in remote areas. It is vital that programs targeting this age group reach these remote communities and are culturally appropriate.

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### Drowning 5–14 Age Group

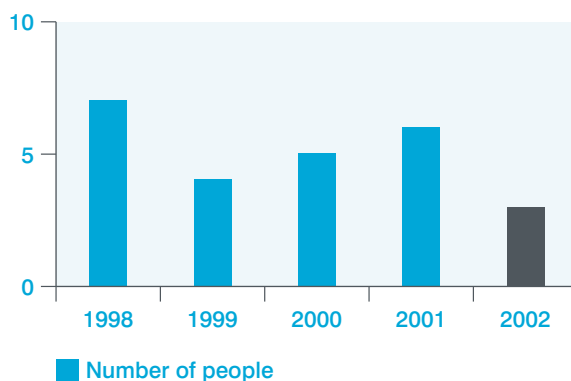


### Young Adults (15–29 Age Group)

In this age group males represent two of the three drownings in Western Australia for 2002. Young adults accounted for 12% of total drowning deaths in Western Australia this year. All drownings occurred in the ocean and two occurred during scuba diving activities. **Alcohol was a factor** in one of these drownings, but blood alcohol concentration (BAC) was not recorded.

In comparison with 2001 figures, there were three fewer deaths this year in this age group. It is typical for young adults in this age group to regularly undertake aquatic activities and these activities can often be risky. Therefore, the challenge remains to provide water safety education and information to this group.

### Drowning 15–29 Age Group

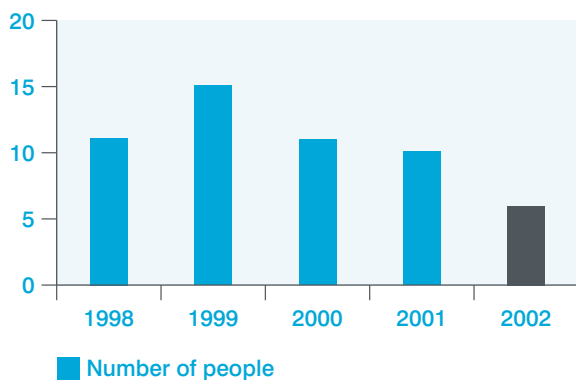


Of total drownings in 2002, 48% occurred in rural locations throughout Western Australia. Fifty two percent occurred within the Perth Metropolitan area. This is an alarming statistic considering that only around 15% of Western Australians live in rural and remote areas.

**Adults (30–59 Age Group)**

There has been a downward trend over the last five years in this age group with adults accounting for six of the total drowning deaths in Western Australia for 2002. Two adults in this age group drowned at the beach/ocean and both were fishing at the time. Two adults drowned in swimming pools, one drowned while swimming and another drowned in a bath after falling in under the influence of alcohol. The other two deaths in this age group occurred in a spa and a bathtub.

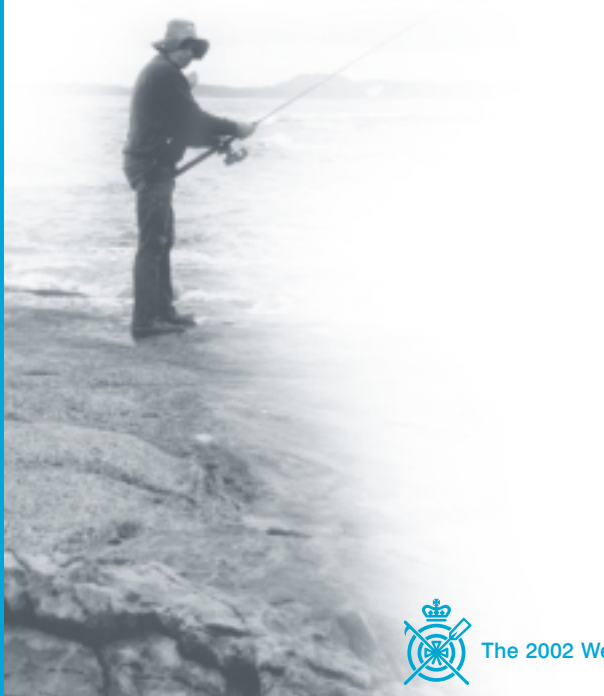
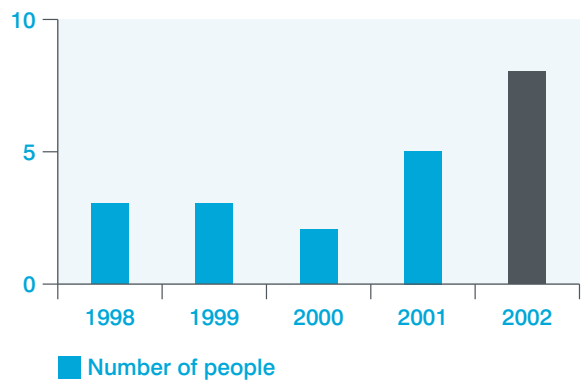
**Drowning 30–59 Age Group**



**Older Australians (60+ Age Group)**

Nine people drowned in this age group in 2002. Five of these occurred at the beach/ocean, one in a river, one in a canal, one in a lake and a one in bathtub. Activities that older Australians in this age group were participating in prior to drowning include boating, scuba diving, snorkelling, swimming, bathing. Three people fell into the water. Although there seems to be an upward trend in the 60+ age group, this may be attributable to other factors such as an ageing population in Western Australia and health conditions associated with older people. Of the drownings in this age group, six had health complications including heart disease and pneumonia.

**Drowning 60+ Age Group**





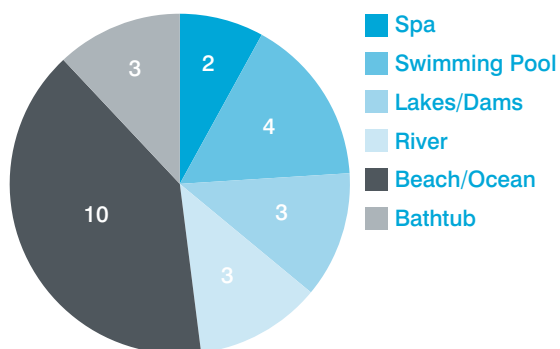
### drowning by location...

The beach and ocean were the major locations for drowning deaths in Western Australia in 2002 representing 40% of all drownings deaths. Six drowning deaths occurred in swimming pools and spas which accounts for 24% of drowning deaths. One toddler drowned in a spa and one drowned in a pool after wandering from adult supervision.

Drownings in rivers, lakes and dams accounted for 24% of drownings this year. The flat, still appearance of rivers, lakes and dams may create a false impression of safety. Extra care should be taken when participating in activities in or around these bodies of water.

Drownings in bathtubs accounted for 12% of the total drownings in Western Australia for 2002 with one toddler and two adults drowning in bathtubs.

Drowning by location



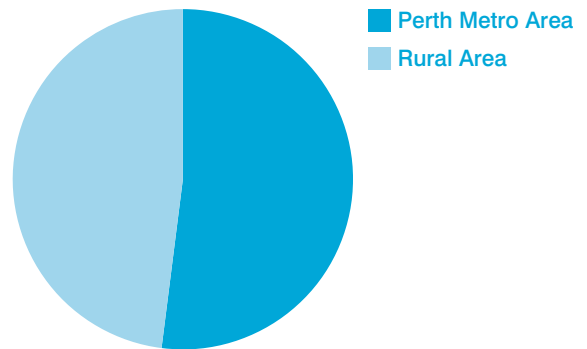


**Rural Locations vs Perth Metropolitan Locations**

Of total drownings in 2002, 48% occurred in rural locations throughout Western Australia. Fifty two percent occurred within the Perth Metropolitan area. This is an alarming statistic considering that only around 15% of Western Australians live in rural and remote areas. Considering the States population for 2002 of 1940500, Western Australians were 5 times more likely to drown in rural locations per head of population compared with metropolitan locations (rural rate=4.12, metro rate=0.78).

With increasing access to bodies of water in these regions, it is important that efforts continue to be made to extend the reach of programs to rural and remote areas of Western Australia and that they are geographically and culturally appropriate.

**Drowning in Rural vs Perth Metropolitan Areas**



**Beach/Ocean**

Nearly half of all drowning deaths in Western Australia in 2002 occurred at the beach or ocean. Of significance, all people who drowned at the beach or ocean were 25 years or above. Activities undertaken at the time of drowning include scuba diving, snorkelling, swimming and fishing. One person fell into the water.



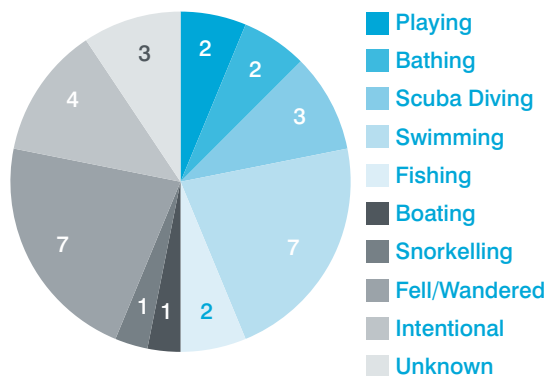


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**drowning by activity ...**

A significant number of people drowned after wandering and/or falling into water. The number of people who fell/wandered is equal to last years figure of seven. Seven people also drowned while swimming this year in Western Australia, which is a reduction of three in comparison to 2001 figures. Three people drowned while scuba diving and one drowned while snorkelling. Two people drowned while fishing and one person drowned while boating. Two children drowned while playing in water and two adults drowned while bathing in a bathtub. Four of the total drowning deaths in Western Australia were intentional and three drowning deaths were deemed undetermined.

**Drowning by Activity**

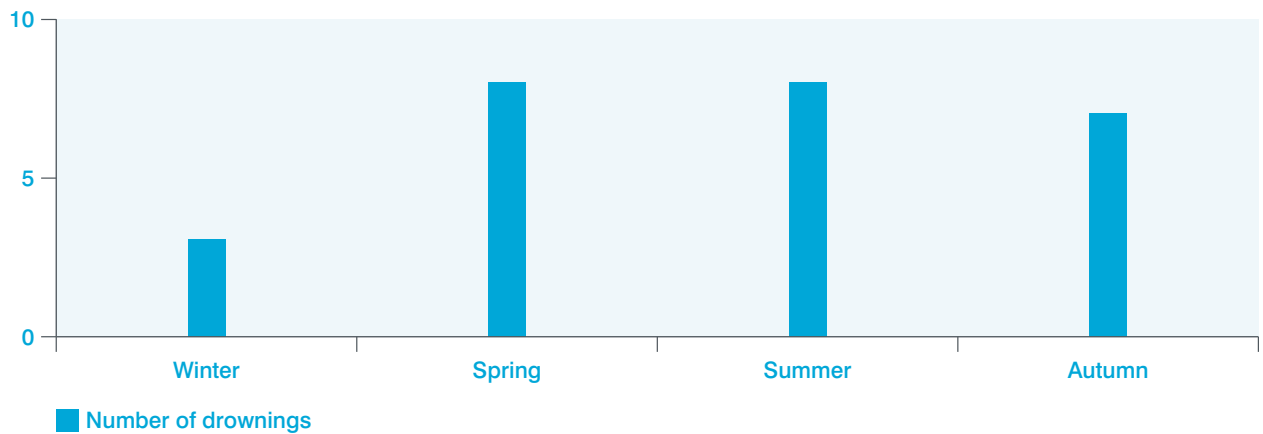


Leisure time of Western Australian's is increasingly spreading over the week and therefore may be producing an increase in drowning deaths on days in the middle of the week, such as the high numbers shown on Tuesdays and Wednesdays this year.

**drowning by season ...**

As expected, more people drowned in the warmer months. The same number of people drowned in Spring as in Summer and one less person drowned in Autumn than in Summer. This emphasises the need for vigilance in and around water at all times of the year, not just the summer months.

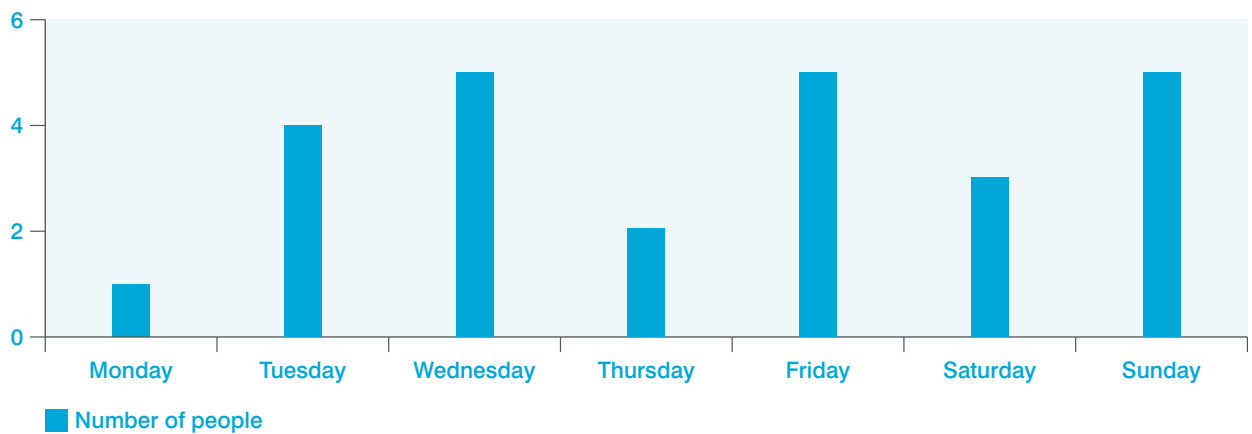
**Drowning by Season**



**drowning by day of the week ...**

This year, 50% of drownings occurred on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday. Of the total drownings in Western Australia this year, six drownings occurred during school holidays and one of these drownings also occurred on a public holiday. Leisure time of Western Australian's is increasingly spreading over the week and therefore may be producing an increase in drowning deaths on days in the middle of the week, such as the high numbers shown on Tuesdays and Wednesdays this year.

**Drowning by Day of the Week**



other royal life saving initiatives ...



The Swim & Survive Program undertakes three key roles to facilitate the delivery of swimming & water safety in Western Australia.

1. Advocacy and community awareness of the value of undertaking swimming & water safety programs.
2. Assistance for swimming & water safety providers in the delivery of a safe and well-balanced aquatic programs.
3. Program research and development



Wet'n'Wise is an education-focused initiative that aims to save lives through the teaching of responsible fun in our many aquatic environments. As the name suggests, Wet'n'Wise has a dual focus: 'wet' programs to promote water safety 'in pool' practice, and 'wise' programs to promote water safety knowledge 'in school'.

The program provides resources to teach general water safety principles, lifesaving and personal survival skills while promoting responsible fun around water.

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The Bronze Rescue lifesaving strand builds on from the Swim and Survive program. The Bronze Rescue

program gives young people the knowledge and skills to be able to make the right survival decisions, instinctive decisions that may help themselves and those around them survive in an aquatic emergency.



The Junior Lifeguard Club keeps kids interested and active in aquatics, especially quick learners and those caught between levels or programs. It is perfect for those who thrive in an energetic learning environment and would like to develop further their swimming and lifesaving skills. The Junior Lifeguard Club enables kids to become involved as lifesaving as a sport.

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RISE is Royal Life Saving's new initiative for people in the recreation industry. RISE stands for Recreation Industry Skills Education and offers a range of swimming, first aid, instruction and workplace training courses for people who want to learn new skills, gain employment and

further their career in the Sport and Recreation Industry. Our affordable training programs compliment our many other community activities that are responsible for preventing drowning and injury water-related activities.

other royal life saving community health initiatives ...



RASPP

The RASP project, standing for Remote Aboriginal Swimming Pool Project is a joint initiative between Royal Life Saving and the Department of Housing and Workings to manage aquatic facilities for three remote Aboriginal communities.

The aim of RASPP is to provide well maintained, well supervised aquatic facilities and programs that promote regular participation in aquatic activity. The pool managers have become integral members of the community, conducting a number of social and recreational programs including Intern Swim and Survive programs for all school children.

Access to suitable swimming and water safety programs is a barrier to reducing drowning and the number one issue in prevention. Using three remote community pools in Yandeyarra, Burrigurrrah and Jigalong as pilot centres the RLSSA has developed culturally appropriate programs and resources to begin reducing the incidence of drowning.



The Alcohol and Drowning Project

The Alcohol and Drowning Project, is a joint initiative between The Royal Life Saving Society Australia – WA Branch and Surf Life Saving Western Australia supported by the Alcohol Education

Rehabilitation Fund. The project aims to raise awareness of alcohol and its impact on aquatic accidents. The project message and resources are currently being developed, and it is anticipated that the program will include a state-wide media campaign and educational component. Some additional strategies will be piloted in the City of Stirling, chosen due to its size, large coastline and heavy involvement in aquatic activity.

The primary target group for this project is 15–29 year olds in Western Australia. For this age group, 32% of drownings are attributable to alcohol. As males are more at risk of drowning and more likely to participate in high-risk activities, many of the project's strategies will focus on males. However, it will not exclude females. The secondary target group will be members and staff from surf clubs, sport clubs and hotels near aquatic environments.



## western australian drowning facts...

- **Toddlers drownings continue to fall** – drownings in the 0–5 year age group in 2002 were the lowest in 8 years.
- **Rural vs Metro** – only 15% of Western Australian's live in Rural WA, but they account for 48% of drowning deaths in 2002. This may be due in part to increasing access to bodies of water in rural WA.
- **Drink, Drunk, Sunk** – studies have found that 30%–40% of drownings are attributable to alcohol. One study found that 32% of drownings in 15–29 year age group were attributable to alcohol.
- **Males consistently take more risks** – 19 males drowned in 2002 compared to 6 females.
- **Dive with a buddy** – Four people drowned while scuba diving or snorkelling in WA in 2002.
- **Even adults drown in the bath** – two adults and one toddler drowned in bathtubs in 2002.
- **Western Australian Children Swim and Survive** – In 2002/2003 more than 220,000 school aged children learned vital swimming and lifesaving skills through the Royal Life Saving Swim and Survive program.



**Royal Life Saving**  
THE ROYAL LIFE SAVING SOCIETY AUSTRALIA

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## acknowledgements

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