

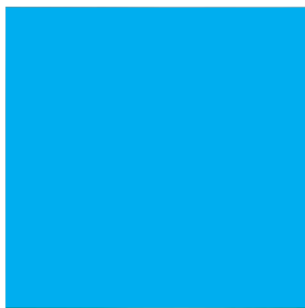
Drowning Report 2010



**Royal Life Saving**  
THE ROYAL LIFE SAVING SOCIETY WESTERN AUSTRALIA INC.



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## Quick Facts

23 people drowned in Western Australia in 2010

- 78% were male
- 74% of incidents occurred in the Perth metropolitan area
- 43% involved adults aged 30-59 years
- 61% occurred at coastal locations
- 35% were swimming, 13% were fishing, 13% were diving
- 35% were contributed to by medical conditions
- 102 people were hospitalised following a near-drowning incident

### Infants and Toddlers (0-5 years)

Four children under five years of age drowned in 2010

- All were male and under two years of age
- All incidents occurred in and around the home (none in swimming pools)
- Contributing factors: Lack of supervision and poorly maintained barriers
- 40 near-drowning hospitalisations recorded, significantly higher than any other age group

### Children (6-14 years)

No drowning deaths were recorded in this age group in 2010. Nine children were hospitalised following a near-drowning incident.

### Young Adults (15-29 years)

Two young adults drowned in 2010.

- Significant decrease from 2009
- Both were male
- Contributing factors: risky behaviour and inexperience
- 17 near-drowning hospitalisations recorded

### Adults (30-59 years)

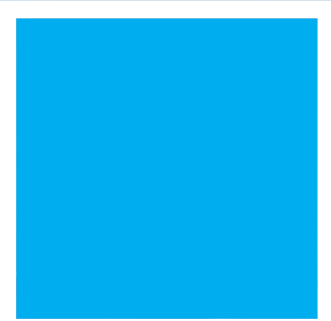
Ten adults drowned in 2010.

- 70% were male
- 80% occurred in Perth metropolitan area
- 70% occurred at coastal locations
- 30% involved diving; 20% fishing and 20% swimming
- Contributing factors: medical conditions, drug use, inexperience and poor knowledge of local conditions and areas
- 29 near-drowning hospitalisations recorded

### Older Adults 60+ years

Seven older adults drowned in 2010.

- 71.4% were male
- 42.9% occurred in regional and remote areas
- 71.4% occurred at coastal locations
- Contributing factors: medical conditions and lack of knowledge of local conditions and areas
- 7 near-drowning hospitalisations recorded



# Introduction

While many Western Australians enjoy participating in a range of activities in, on and around our beautiful waterways, each year too many people drown. This report provides an overview of the drowning deaths and near-drowning hospitalisations that occurred in Western Australia from January to December 2010.

This data is collected from the Coroner's Court of Western Australia and the Epidemiology Branch of the Department of Health. This information gives us a better understanding of who, how and why people drown in Western Australia and highlights hazardous locations and priority groups and activities for targeted interventions.

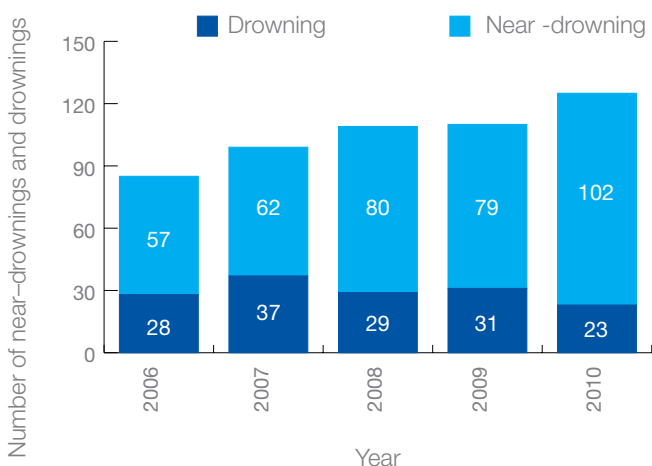
Between 1st January and 31st December 2010, 63 drowning deaths were recorded in Western Australia. Of these, 23 cases were identified as unintentional and have been included in this report at an estimated cost of \$36.8million to the broader community.

30 cases involved the drowning deaths of asylum seekers off Christmas Island and have not been included in this report. The remaining 10 cases were omitted from the report as they were classified as intentional (suicide) or had an open finding. All cases included in this report have been closed by the Coroner to ensure that the information is as reliable and accurate as possible.

## Drowning and Near-Drowning Trends in WA

This year's drowning figures show a decrease from the 2009 figures and bring the 5-year average down to 29.6 drowning deaths/year. This is a 7% decrease. However, hospitalisations as a result of a near-drowning or immersion incident continued to increase and have almost doubled over the past five years.

Like previous years, males were 3.5 times more likely to be involved in a drowning incident and twice as likely to be hospitalised as a result of a near-drowning incident.



## Rates of Drowning in WA

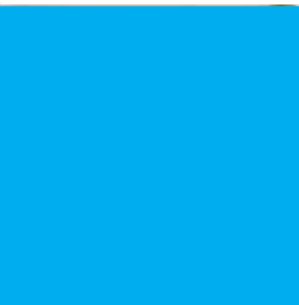
The Western Australian population was 2,317,100 at December 2010 which represented a 2.1% increase from the previous year. This means that the rate of drowning in WA in 2010 was 0.99 deaths per 100,000 persons.

## Our Environment

Making our waterways safe is a major drowning prevention challenge, particularly when you consider the vast nature of Western Australia and the differing environments throughout the state. Western Australia has the greatest area of all the States and Territories covering 2,529,875 km<sup>2</sup> and accounts for 33% of the continent.

The following information provides an overview of the scope and complexity of our environment in Western Australia that needs to be considered when planning drowning prevention strategies and interventions.

- Western Australia has a coastline length of 20,871km
- There are 29 surf life saving clubs in Western Australia who performed 844 rescues, 3,874 first aid cases and 2,659 preventative actions in 2009.2010 (Surf Life Saving WA Annual Report)
- Over 3,000,000 people visited our beaches in 2009.2010 (Surf Life Saving WA Annual Report)
- There are 120 public swimming pool facilities in Western Australia with over 10,000,000 visitations in 2010 (Leisure Institute of WA)
- There are 58 rivers stretching over 9,587km and 640 intermittent and perennial lakes throughout the state
- In 2010, 34% of the population was involved in recreational fishing activities and there were 55 commercial fisheries throughout the state (RecFishWest)
- There are 72,000 registered vessels in Western Australia and it is estimated that ¼ million people enjoy boating each year (Department of Transport)
- In 2009.2010 participation in swimming and water activities ranked 6th highest for males and 3rd highest for females (ABS)
- There are over 260 remote Aboriginal communities throughout the state (Department of Indigenous Affairs)



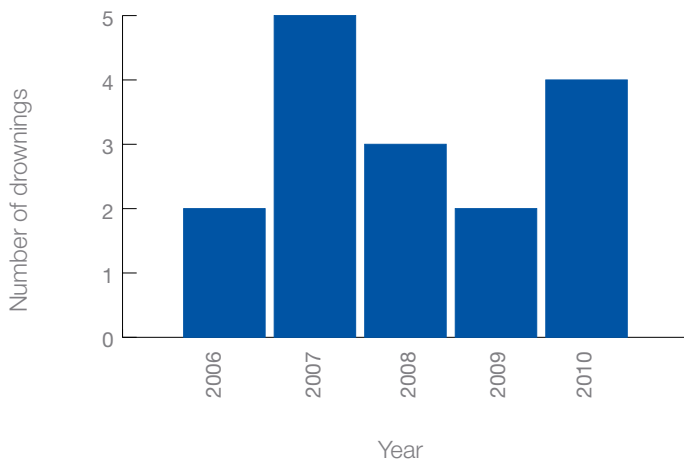


## Infants and Toddlers (0-5yrs)

In 2010 there were four drowning deaths recorded amongst children under five years of age in WA, double that seen in 2009. The 5 year average for this age group is now 3.2 deaths per year.

In a continuing trend, all incidents involved males under two years of age. 50% of the incidents occurred in regional and remote areas of the state and while all of the incidents occurred at locations in and around the home, none were in the home swimming pool. In fact, the last death occurring in a home swimming pool amongst this age group was in 2009.

All of the incidents were contributed to lapses in supervision due to distraction and interruptions. Barriers to water locations were also a contributing factor in all of the incidents.

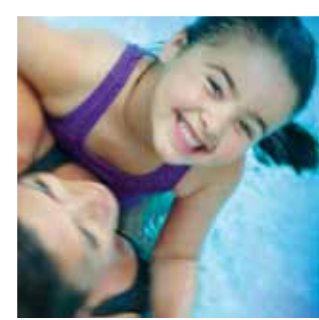
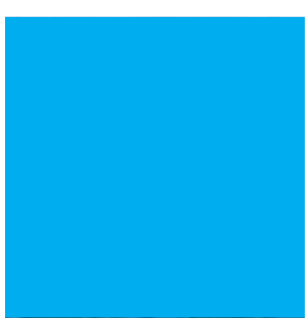


While we are seeing low toddler drowning death numbers, the hospitalisation rate of near-drowning is significantly higher than any other age group in Western Australia. In 2010, 40 toddlers were hospitalised after a near-drowning incident which is double that recorded in 2005. This means that in 2010 for every child that drowned in WA, 10 were admitted to hospital following a near-drowning incident.

This may be as a result of higher levels of supervision which have allowed the child to be rescued in a more timely manner, therefore preventing a death from occurring.

### Recommendations

1. Strategies to target new parents should be developed as children under 2 years are most at-risk of drowning death
2. Supervision should continue to be highlighted as the most effective way to prevent toddler drowning death with a particular focus on giving parents and carers strategies to reduce and manage distractions and interruptions to supervision
3. Continue and expand the promotion and enforcement of home pool barrier legislative requirements with a focus on maintaining adequate barriers at all times around all water bodies including swimming pools, spas and inflatable pools
4. Expand current messages and programs to highlight the risk of both fatal and non-fatal drowning to parents, carers and grandparents



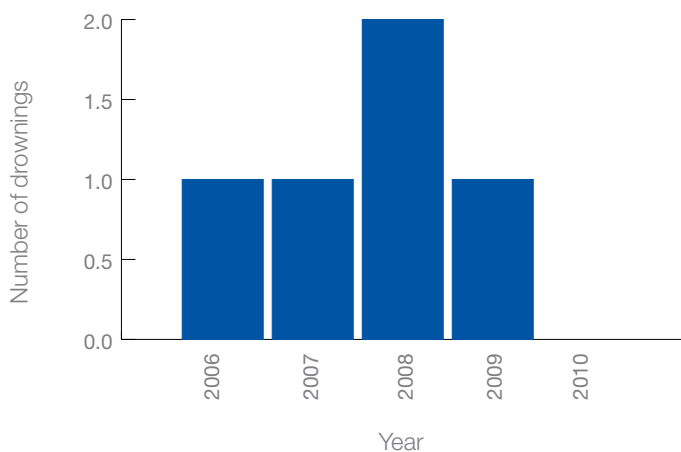
## Children (6-14yrs)

This year there were no drowning deaths recorded amongst children aged 6-14 years in Western Australia.

This builds on the low number of drowning deaths that we have seen in this age group over the past five years and is a fantastic achievement.

The Royal Life Saving Society believes that increasing the number of children that learn to swim and survive over the past decade has contributed significantly to this achievement; with over 300,000 children participating in learn to swim programs in 2010.

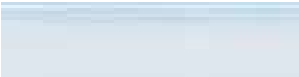
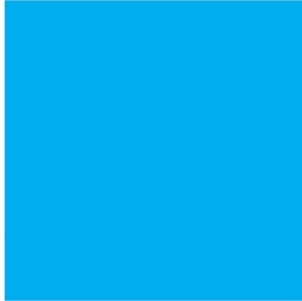
Continuing to facilitate access to these programs to provide children with the skills and knowledge to participate safely in aquatic activities is the key to long-term sustainable drowning prevention achievements.



Similarly, we have continued to see a low number of hospitalisations as a result of near-drowning throughout the state over the past five years, with only 9 cases recorded in 2010 and a five year average of 6.6 hospitalisations per year.

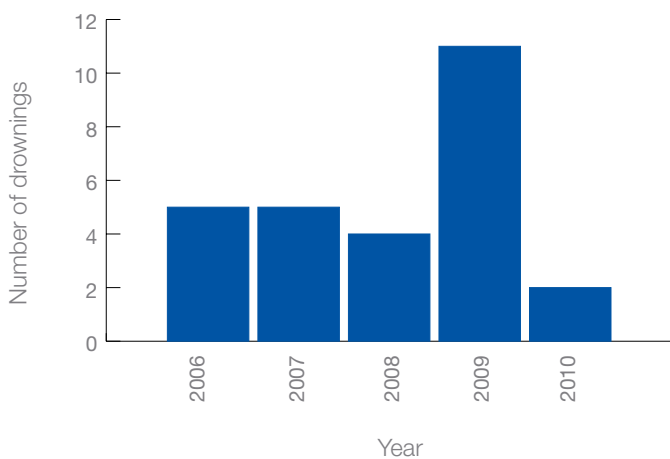
### Recommendations

1. Continue to promote the importance of learn-to-swim programs that provide children with swimming, water safety and survival skills as an effective drowning prevention strategy



## Young Adults (15-29yrs)

Overall, there were two drowning deaths recorded amongst young adults in 2010. This is a significant decrease from the 11 deaths seen in this age group in 2009 and has resulted in a 20% decrease in the five year average to 5.4 deaths per year.



The incidents in this age group were contributed to by risky behaviour and inexperience with the activity being undertaken. Alcohol was a factor in one of the incidents.

While this reduction in drowning deaths is promising, efforts to continue education and programs targeted at providing young people with the information and skills to make safe choices when participating in, on or around the water is required to ensure these low numbers are maintained.

In addition, in 2010 there were 17 near-drowning hospitalisations recorded amongst young adults and this figure has increased almost 3-fold over the past five years.

### Recommendations

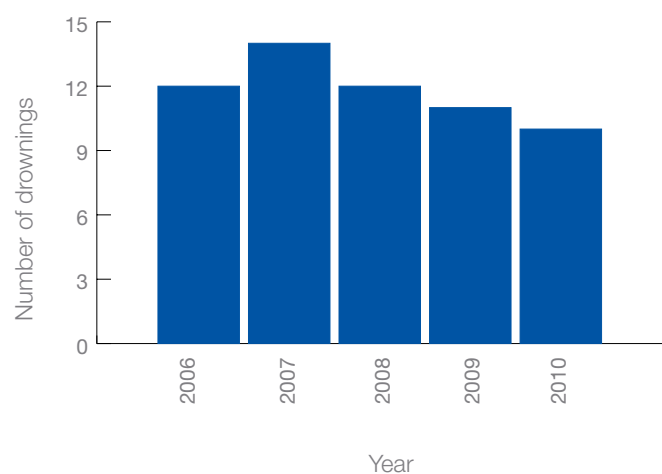
1. Education and awareness strategies of the risks and dangers associated with aquatic activity (particularly alcohol consumption and high risk activities) should be continued
2. The risk of serious injury and hospitalisation should be promoted in addition to the risk of drowning death to young adults as a consequence of behaving unsafe while in, on and around the water



## Adults (30-59yrs)

In 2010, 10 adults aged 30-59 years drowned in Western Australia which is similar to numbers seen over the past few years. This group continues to record a high number of drowning deaths and remains a priority area for drowning prevention intervention.

In a continuing trend 70% of these incidents involved males.



### By Activity

The majority of incidents (30%) occurred while diving (Scuba and free diving), with 20% of the incidents occurring while fishing and 20% while swimming.

### By Location

In contrast to previous years, the majority (80%) of incidents amongst this age group occurred in the metropolitan Perth area. Overall, 70% of all incidents occurred at coastal locations. Other locations included hotel spa, harbour and an inflatable swimming pool. Unlike previous years, no incidents were recorded in home swimming pools.

### Contributing factors

There were a number of factors that contributed to drowning deaths amongst adults aged 30-59 years. Similar to previous years medical conditions were a contributing factor in 40% of incidents and drug use contributed to 30% of incidents. Interestingly, the trend of increasing alcohol related drowning deaths in this age group was reversed this year with only one incident recorded.

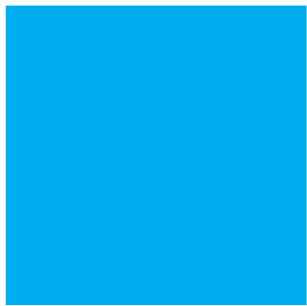
Inexperience in the activity being undertaken and a lack of knowledge about the location and conditions were a contributing factor in 50% of all incidents recorded in this age group.

### Near-Drowning Hospitalisations

Data shows that the rate of hospitalisation due to near-drowning amongst adults aged 30-59 years is significantly lower than any other age group, with 16 hospitalisations recorded in 2010. This has remained stable over the past five years. This may be due to many people in this age group participating alone (which has been reported in previous reports) reducing the chance of a rescue being performed or due to pre-existing medical conditions placing them at a higher risk of drowning death.

### Recommendations

1. Strategies to improve awareness and knowledge of hazardous and high risk locations (including local conditions) such as localised education programs, information resources, advertising and signage involving local community groups should be investigated
2. Educate adults on the impact that pre-existing medical conditions can have on their ability to undertake activities in and around the water and encourage them to participate with others
3. Promote the importance of undertaking first aid and resuscitation training and maintaining appropriate and up-to date qualifications

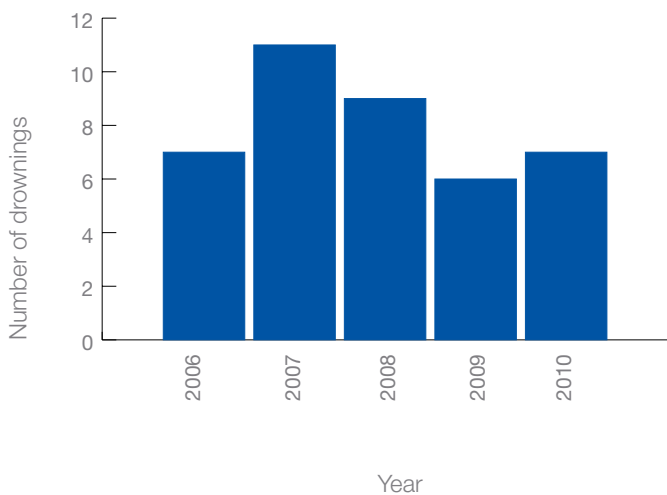




## Older Adults (60+yrs)

In 2010, seven older adults aged over 60 years drowned in WA, continuing the downward trend of incidents in this age group. The 5 year average for this age group has remained stable at 8 deaths per year.

The majority of these incidents (71.4%) involved males which is consistent with previous data.



### By Activity

71.4% of incidents occurred while swimming and 28.6% of incidents occurred while fishing amongst this age group. All of the fishing incidents occurred while fishing from a boat, continuing the increasing trend of boating related incidents amongst this age group.

### By Location

42.9% of incidents occurred in regional and remote areas of the state, the highest of any other age group in 2010. This may be due to many people in this age group migrating to regional coastal areas once they retire.

Overall, 71.4% of incidents occurred at coastal locations. Other locations included the home swimming pool and hotel swimming pools.

### Contributing Factors

Almost all of the incidents recorded amongst this age group in 2010 were contributed to by pre-existing medical conditions (particularly heart disease). Medical conditions restrict a person's ability to undertake aquatic activity and therefore places them at an increased risk of drowning and near-drowning.

Inexperience and a lack of knowledge about local conditions and weather were contributing factors in 42.9% of incidents and alcohol was a contributing factor in 14% of incidents.

### Near-Drowning Hospitalisations

In 2010, seven hospitalisations as a result of a near-drowning incident were recorded in Western Australia. This number remains low and similar to adults could be a result of many people in this age group participating alone (which has been reported in previous reports) reducing the chance of a rescue being performed or due to pre-existing medical conditions placing them at a higher risk of drowning death.

### Recommendations

1. Strategies to improve awareness and knowledge of hazardous and high risk locations (including local conditions) such as education programs, information resources, advertising and signage should be investigated
2. Educate adults on the impact that pre-existing medical conditions can have on their ability to undertake activities in and around the water and encourage them to participate with others and encourage them to seek medical clearance before participation
3. Develop strategies to promote participation in regular aquatic activity to limit the deterioration of skills with age and create awareness of changing body abilities and provide them with the opportunity to develop skills to ensure that they undertake the activities in a safe manner
4. Promote the importance of undertaking first aid and resuscitation training and maintaining appropriate and up-to-date qualifications
5. Boating remains a high risk activity for this age group. Further investigation and research into these incidents is required to determine how the issue can be addressed



## Royal Life Saving Initiatives

The Royal Life Saving Society Western Australia Inc. believes that everyone can be a lifesaver and has developed a number of water safety and drowning prevention initiatives to turn everyday people into everyday lifesavers and prevent drowning tragedies from occurring.

- Keep Watch Toddler Drowning Prevention Program
- Don't Drink and Drown
- Watch Around Water
- Remote Aboriginal Swimming Pools Project
- Infant Aquatics
- Swim & Survive
- Junior Lifeguard Club
- Home Pool Inspection Program
- Rescue and Revive – event safety program
- Aquatic Injury Surveillance Program
- First aid and water safety training programs
- Event management
- Great Australia Day Duck Pluck Fundraising Event
- Sport and Recreation Management Singapore programs



**Don't Drink  
and DROWN**



For further information or to obtain additional copies of the 2010 Drowning Report, please contact:



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The Royal Life Saving Society would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by the WA Coroners Court for allowing us to access drowning death case files and the Epidemiology Branch of the Department of Health WA for compiling the near-drowning hospitalisation data included in this report.