



# EVERYONE CAN BE A LIFESAVER



Government of Western Australia  
Department of Health



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

**DROWNING AND  
NEAR DROWNING  
REPORT 2012**

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**Royal Life Saving**

THE ROYAL LIFE SAVING SOCIETY WESTERN AUSTRALIA INC.

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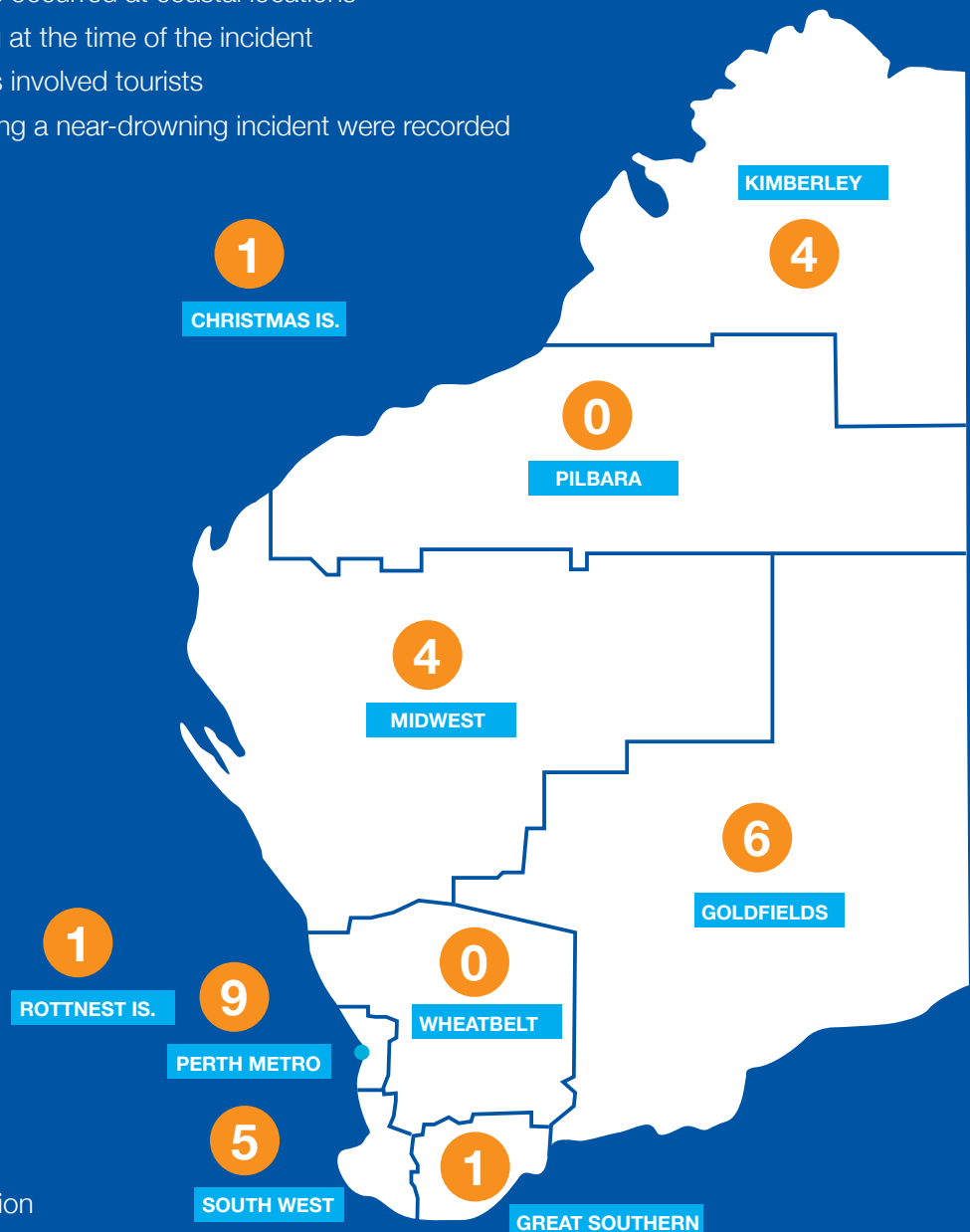




## 26 MALES DROWNED 5 FEMALES DROWNED

### SNAPSHOT OF 2012 FINDINGS

- 31 people drowned in Western Australia in 2012
- This is a 41% increase from 2011
- 84% of all drowning deaths were male
- 65% of all drowning deaths occurred in regional and remote areas
- Toddlers under five years were most at risk of drowning and hospitalisation
- 52% of all drowning deaths occurred at coastal locations
- 29% of people were fishing at the time of the incident
- 38% of all drowning deaths involved tourists
- 108 hospitalisations following a near-drowning incident were recorded



9 Drowning Deaths by Region



**2012  
DROWNING  
REPORT  
FINDINGS**

RESEARCH AND  
EVALUATION IDENTIFIES  
PRIORITY AREAS AND  
DRIVES ONGOING  
DEVELOPMENT OF THE  
SOCIETY'S PROGRAMS.

### **CHILDREN 0-14 YEARS**

- 8 drowning deaths recorded
- Children 0-4 years were at the highest risk of drowning and hospitalisation of all age groups
- 75% of drowning deaths involved males
- 63% of drowning deaths occurred at home pools
- All drowning deaths were contributed to by a lack of appropriate adult supervision
- 41 hospitalisations following a near-drowning incident were recorded

### **YOUNG ADULTS 15-24 YEARS**

- 4 drowning deaths recorded
- All drowning deaths involved males
- All drowning deaths occurred in regional and remote areas
- 75% occurred at coastal locations
- 25% were contributed to by alcohol consumption
- 16 hospitalisations following a near-drowning incident were recorded

### **ADULTS 25-54 YEARS**

- 10 drowning deaths recorded
- 90% of drowning deaths involved males
- 80% of drowning deaths occurred in regional and remote areas
- 70% of drowning deaths occurred at coastal locations
- 50% of people were rock fishing at the time of the incident
- 80% of drowning deaths involved tourists
- 38 hospitalisations following a near-drowning incident were recorded

### **OLDER ADULTS 55+ YEARS**

- 9 drowning deaths recorded
- 78% of drowning deaths involved males
- 67% of drowning deaths occurred at coastal locations
- 33% of people were fishing at the time of the incident
- 67% of drowning deaths occurred in regional and remote areas
- 56% were contributed to by medical conditions
- 44% of drowning deaths involved tourists
- 13 hospitalisations following a near-drowning incident were recorded

# INTRODUCTION

WE HAVE SEEN  
A SIGNIFICANT  
INCREASE IN  
DROWNING  
DEATHS IN 2012.



Water related sport and recreation are an important part of the Western Australian culture and lifestyle with a reported 1.4 million people over the age of 15 years reported to participate in swimming for recreation and exercise. However, each year too many Western Australians drown or are hospitalised following a near-drowning incident at our beaches, in our rivers and at their homes. This report provides an overview of the drowning deaths and hospitalisations following a near-drowning that occurred in Western Australia from 1 January to 31 December 2012.

## METHODS

Drowning death data was collected from the WA Coroner's Office and collated by the Royal Life Saving Society WA Inc. Only case files closed by the Coroner at the time of the report have been included to ensure that data is as reliable and accurate as possible. Only unintentional drowning deaths have been included in this report. Exclusions from this report include: suicide, homicide, deaths from natural causes, deaths where the cause of deaths was undetermined (open finding), drowning deaths involving asylum seekers (boat people) and shark attack deaths. The data has been analysed by age, gender, activity, location, region and contributing factors.

Hospitalisation data was collected and collated by the Department of Health WA Epidemiology Branch. The data has been analysed by age, gender, location, race and region.

Drowning and hospitalisation rates per 100,000 population have been based on the ABS publication Population by Age, Sex, and Regions of Australia 2012 (Cat No 3235.0). Percentages and averages are presented as whole numbers and have been rounded up or down accordingly.

While all care has been taken to ensure that the information presented in this report is as accurate as possible, data is subject to change following ongoing coronial investigations.

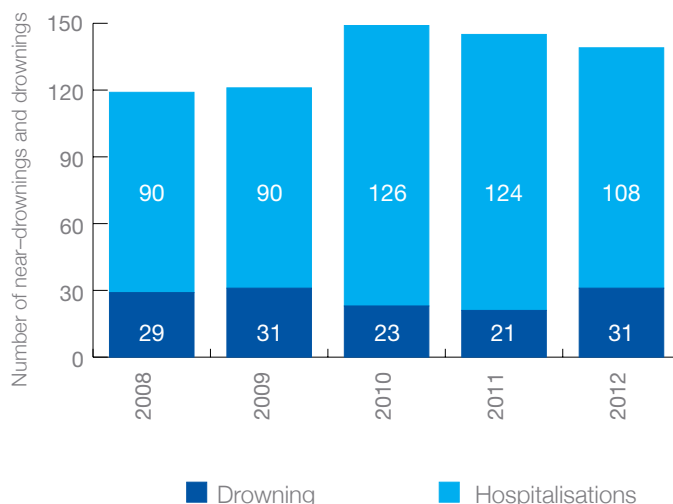
## DROWNING DEATHS AND HOSPITALISATIONS IN WA, 2012

In 2012, there were 68 drowning deaths recorded in Western Australian waterways. Of these, 31 were identified as unintentional drowning deaths and have been included within this report. This figure is the highest number of drowning deaths recorded in Western Australia since 2009 and is a 48% increase from 2011. It also remains above the five-year average of 27 drowning deaths each year in Western Australia.

Western Australia had the fastest population growth of any state, growing by 3.4% (79,300 people) in 2012. The rate of drowning even when taking into account the significant population growth in Western Australia is continuing to increase with a crude death rate of 1.3 deaths per 100,000 population, a 41% increase from 2011.

While we have seen a significant increase in the number of drowning deaths recorded in 2012, the number of people hospitalised following a near-drowning incident has remained similar to previous years. In 2012, 108 people were hospitalised in Western Australia following a near-drowning incident at a rate of 4.4 hospitalisations per 100,000 population (15% decrease from 2011). This figure is on par with the five year average of 107.6 hospitalisations each year.

## Drowning and Near Drowning in WA (2008-2012)





# AUSTRALIAN WATER SAFETY STRATEGY 2012-2015

## WORKING TOWARDS A 50% REDUCTION IN DROWNING DEATHS BY 2020.

The Australian Water Safety Strategy 2012-15 continues to align the industry toward achieving a 50% reduction in drowning deaths by the year 2020 by focusing efforts on the key priority areas outlined below.

In Western Australia, progress has been made in a number of key priority areas, however the 2012 figures highlight that more work is needed to reduce drowning deaths amongst toddlers aged 0-4 years, people aged 55+ years, drowning deaths occurring at inland waterways, those involving watercraft and recreational activities (particularly rock fishing) and high risk populations (particularly culturally and linguistically diverse groups).





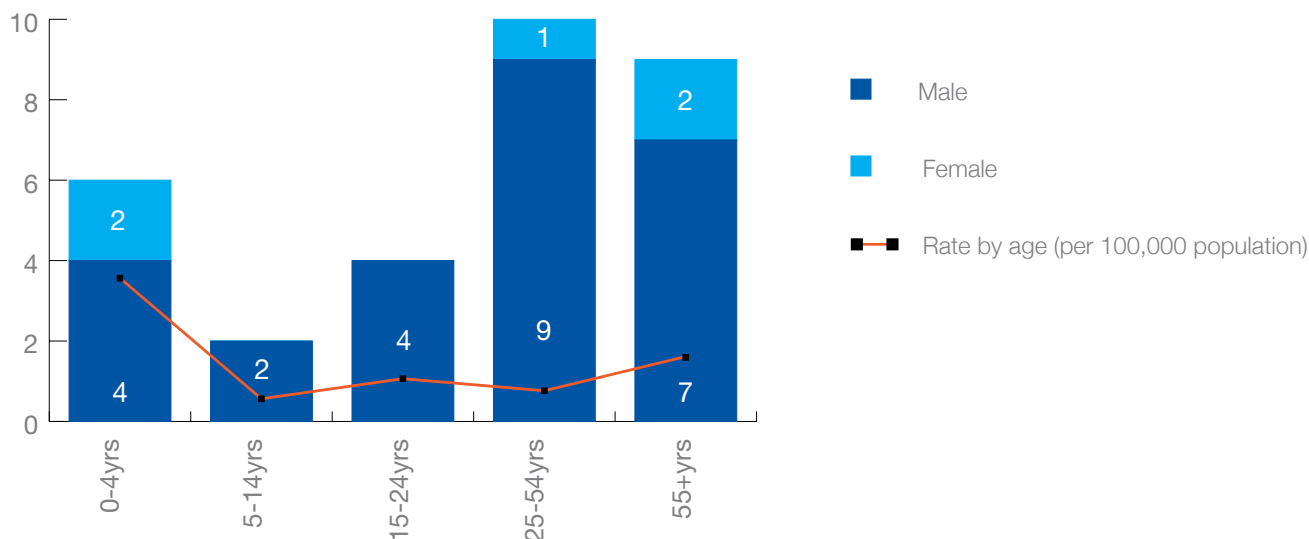
## WHO DROWNS?

In 2012, males were five times more likely to be involved in a drowning death and almost twice as likely to be hospitalised following a near-drowning when compared to females. Overall, 84% of drowning deaths and 65% of hospitalisations involved males. When adjusted for gender, the rate of drowning was 2.1 deaths per 100,000 population for males and 0.4 deaths per 100,000 population for females. The rate of hospitalisations was much higher with 5.7 hospitalisations per 100,000 population for males and 3.2 hospitalisations per 100,000 population for females.

The age of persons involved in a drowning ranged from 10 months to 83 years with the average age of 34.4 years which was slightly lower than previous years and is 8.8 years (20%) lower than the national drowning death figures. Toddlers aged 0-4 years recorded the highest rate of drowning in 2012 followed by older adults aged 55+ years. (1.6 deaths per 100,000 population).

### Drowning deaths by age and gender, 2012

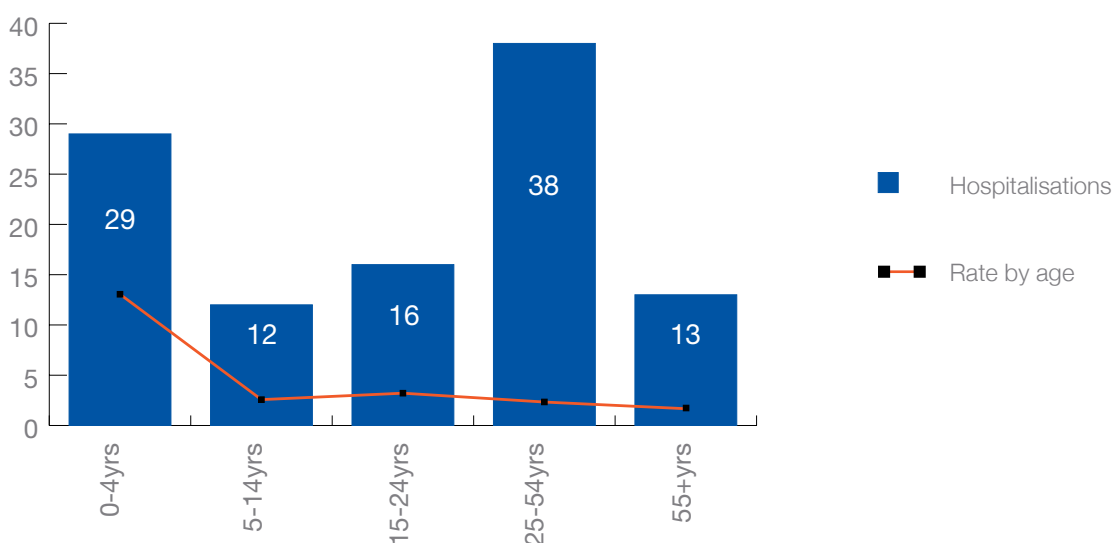
#### Drowning death rates by age, 2012



Hospitalisations following near-drowning increased amongst most age groups in 2012 with the exception of toddlers 0-4 years of age and people over 55 years of age. None of these variations were significant. The risk of hospitalisation following near-drowning decreased with age in 2012 with toddlers aged 0-4 years at the highest risk of hospitalisation following a near-drowning with a rate of 17.9 hospitalisations per 100,000 population followed by young people aged 15-24 years (4.7 hospitalisations per 100,000 population) and children 5-14 years (3.9 hospitalisation per 100,000 population).

### Hospitalisations by age and gender, 2012

#### Hospitalisation rates by age, 2012

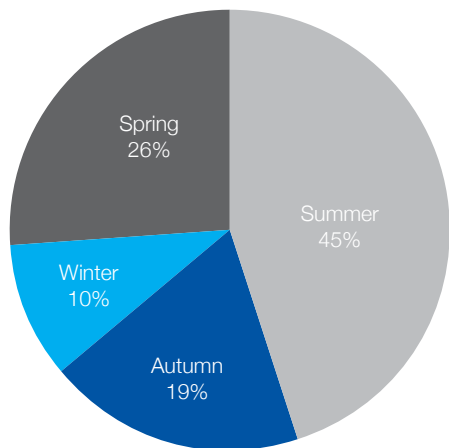


In 2012 38% of drowning deaths involved tourists or visitors to Western Australia. Of these, 42% were international tourists, 25% were interstate tourists and the remaining 33% were people travelling within the state. In addition, 38% of drowning deaths involved people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) backgrounds. Half of these involved people from the United Kingdom and Europe.

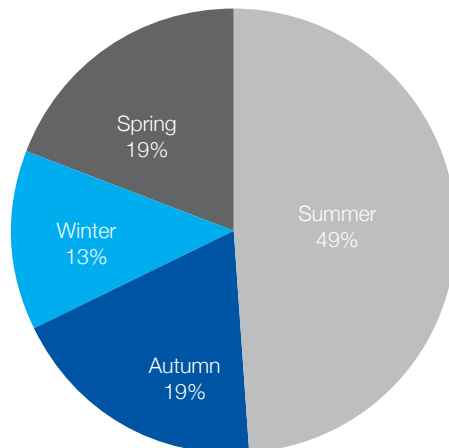
### WHEN DO PEOPLE DROWN?

Drowning deaths and hospitalisation from near-drowning can occur at any time of year, however the majority occur in the warmer months when people are more likely to participate in activities in, on or around aquatic environments. Summer was the most common time of year for drowning (45%) and near-drowning (49%) followed by Spring and Autumn.

**Drowning deaths by Season, 2012**

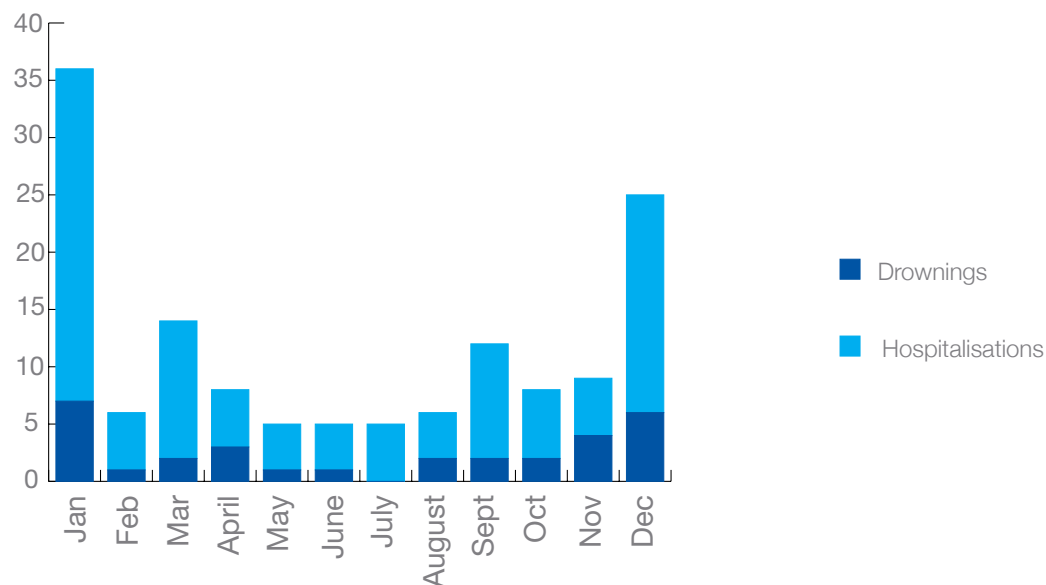


**Hospitalisations by Season, 2012**



January was the month with the highest number of drowning deaths (7) and hospitalisations (29) followed by December with 6 drowning deaths and 19 hospitalisations recorded.

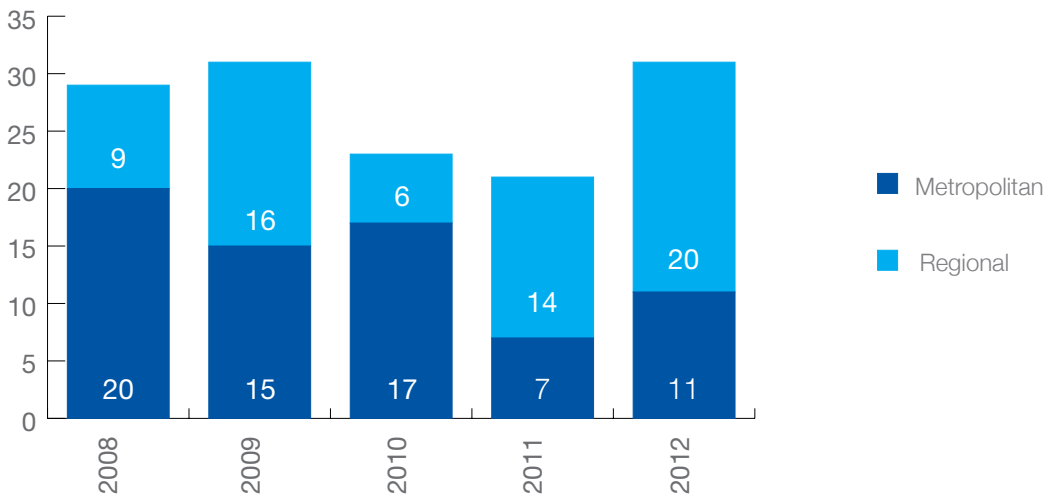
**Drowning deaths and hospitalisations by Month, 2012**



**WHERE AND HOW DO PEOPLE DROWN?**

In 2012, people were twice as likely to drown in regional and remote areas of the state with 65% of deaths occurring in regional Western Australia. This is 26% above the five year average for drowning deaths in these areas.

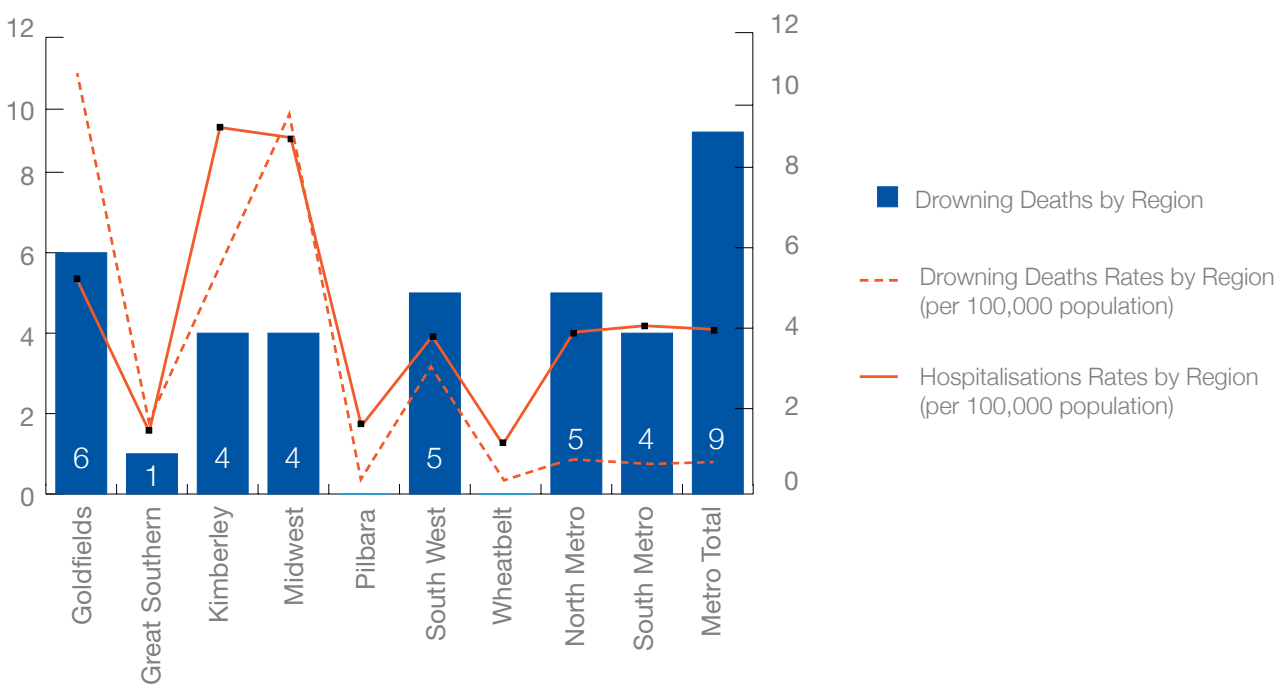
**Drowning Deaths – Regional vs. Metropolitan, 2012**



The Perth metropolitan area recorded the highest number of drowning deaths in 2012 (9) followed by the Goldfields region (6) and the South West region (5). However, the rate of drowning was highest in the Goldfields region (10.4 deaths per 100,000 population), Midwest region (9.1 deaths per 100,000 population) and the Kimberley region (5.9 deaths per 100,000 population).

The rate of hospitalisation following a near-drowning was the highest in the Kimberley region (9.1 hospitalisations per 100,000 population) and Midwest region (8.8 hospitalisations per 100,000 population).

**Drowning Deaths by Region, 2012  
Drowning Death Rates by Region, 2012  
Hospitalisation Rates by Region, 2012**

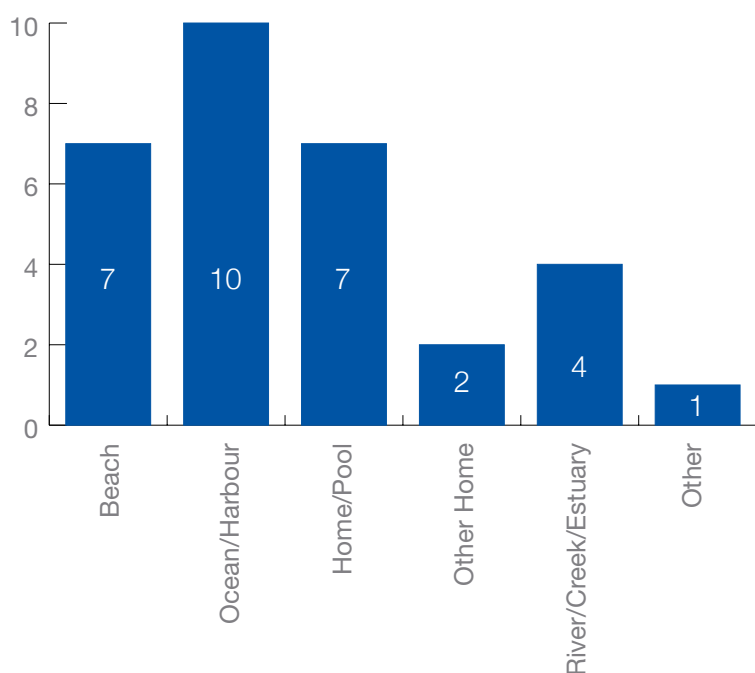


In 2012, there was a significant increase in the number of drowning deaths that occurred at water locations in and around the home. Overall 29% of drowning deaths occurred at locations in and around the home in 2012, almost double that recorded the previous year. Of these, 78% occurred in home swimming pools. Interestingly, the home swimming pool was also the most common location for hospitalisations following a near-drowning.

The number of drowning deaths occurring at inland waterway locations including rivers, dams, creeks and estuaries increased by 51% in 2012 with 19% of all drowning deaths occurring at these locations.

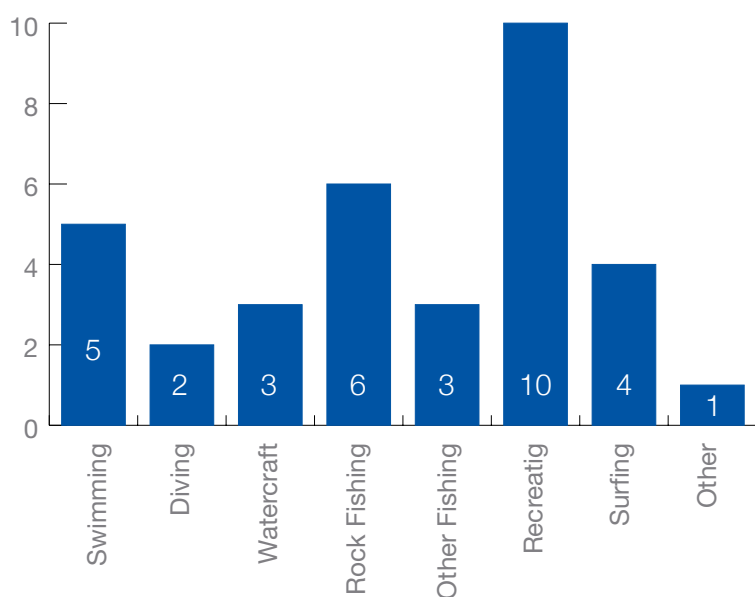
Overall, 52% of drowning deaths occurred at coastal locations in Western Australia (ocean and beach). This is a 38% decrease from the figures recorded in 2011.

### Drowning Deaths by Location, 2012



Almost one third of all drowning deaths recorded in 2012 occurred while the person was recreating around an aquatic environment. Again, fishing-related drowning deaths increased with 29% of drowning deaths occurring while the person was fishing. In particular, rock fishing emerged as a high risk activity with 6 drowning deaths recorded in Western Australia in 2012. Surfing and swimming were also common activities being undertaken at the time of the incident.

### Drowning Deaths by Activity, 2012





ROCK FISHING  
CONTINUES TO  
BE A HIGH RISK  
ACTIVITY WITH  
SIX DROWNING  
DEATHS IN 2012.

A young boy with light brown hair and a wide smile is swimming in a pool. He is wearing blue swimming goggles. The water is clear blue, and there are red and white lane markers in the background. The boy is holding onto a blue and white striped pool edge.

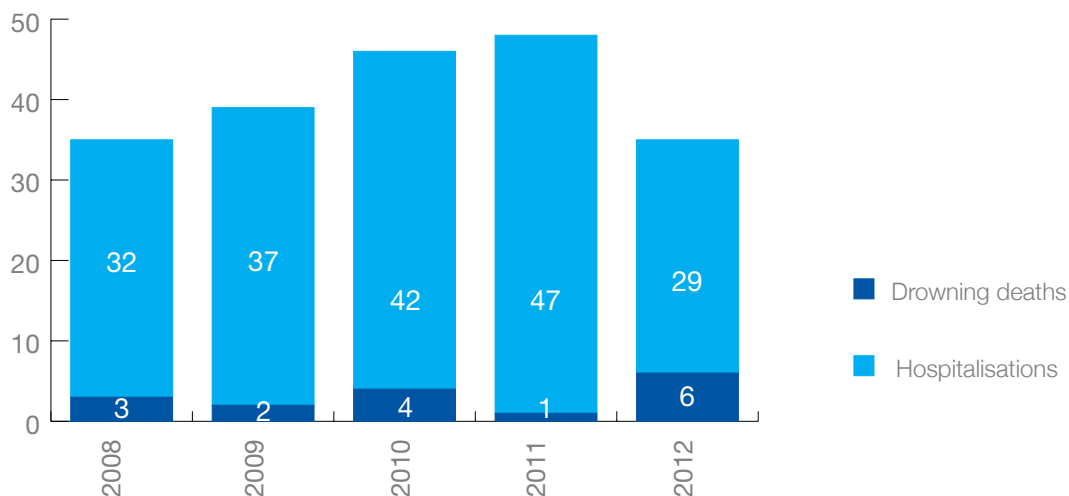
## CHILDREN 0-4 YEARS

SIX TODDLERS  
DROWNED IN  
2012 THE  
LARGEST NUMBER  
RECORDED  
SINCE 2005.

## 0-4 YEARS

Of all age groups, toddlers under five years of age were at the highest risk of drowning and near-drowning in Western Australia in 2012. Despite significant decreases in the rate of toddler drowning over the past decade in Western Australia, six toddlers drowned in 2012 (rate 3.7 deaths per 100,000 population). This is the largest number recorded in Western Australia since 2005 and almost double the five year average for this age group.

### Drowning Deaths and Hospitalisations of toddlers 0-4 years, 2012



The average age of those who drowned in this age group was 20 months. Males were twice as likely to be involved in a drowning death as females and the majority of incidents (83%) occurred in the Perth metropolitan area. All incidents in this age group occurred when the child was recreating around the water and fell in.

Since 1997 there has been a significant decrease in the number of toddler drowning deaths recorded at home swimming pools in Western Australia. Unfortunately in 2012, this trend was reversed with 83% of drowning deaths amongst this age group occurring in the home swimming pool.

Similar to previous years a lack of appropriate adult supervision was a contributing factor in all drowning deaths in this age group. Supervision was reportedly absent for periods ranging from 2 to 45 minutes with the majority having supervision absent for 2-5 minutes.

*The first step in reducing the likelihood of another death would be to bring to the attention of parents and others who are responsible for the safety of young children that even a brief breakdown in supervision around swimming pools can have tragic consequences. NSW Coroner (quoted by WA Coroner in toddler drowning finding).*

Another common contributing factor to drowning deaths in this age group was faulty or absent barriers including: absent fencing of newly installed pools and pool gates left propped open.

While the drowning deaths increased amongst this age group, hospitalisations following near-drowning decreased by 38% with 29 toddlers hospitalised in 2012. Despite this decrease, toddlers aged 0-4 had the highest rate of hospitalisation (17.9 hospitalisations per 100,00 population) of any other age group in Western Australia in 2012. Based on data collected over the past five years it is estimated that for every drowning death, 10 children under five are hospitalised following a near-drowning incident in Western Australia.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Promote the importance of supervision – parents and carers of young children need to be made aware that even short lapses in supervision around swimming pools can have tragic consequences

Focus messages on home pool safety – this is the location where incidents are most likely to occur and parents and pool owners need to be aware of the potential dangers pools pose to young children

Ensure that toddler drowning prevention information is relevant to high risk groups including Indigenous populations, people from CaLD backgrounds and people residing in regional and remote areas.

Work closely with local government authorities to implement regular public awareness campaigns to raise awareness of important water safety and drowning prevention messages including the need for proper and regularly maintained pool safety barriers

Continue to promote, monitor and enforce pool barrier legislative requirements for home pools, spas and inflatable pools, including regular barrier inspection programs

Promote the importance of CPR and resuscitation skills –parents are often the first people to respond in the event of a toddler drowning event so it is important that they have the skills to perform CPR until further assistance arrives



**CHILDREN  
5-14 YEARS**

THE NUMBER OF  
CHILDREN AGED  
5-14 YEARS  
WHO DROWNED  
REMAINED LOW  
WITH THE LOWEST  
RATE OF ANY GROUP.

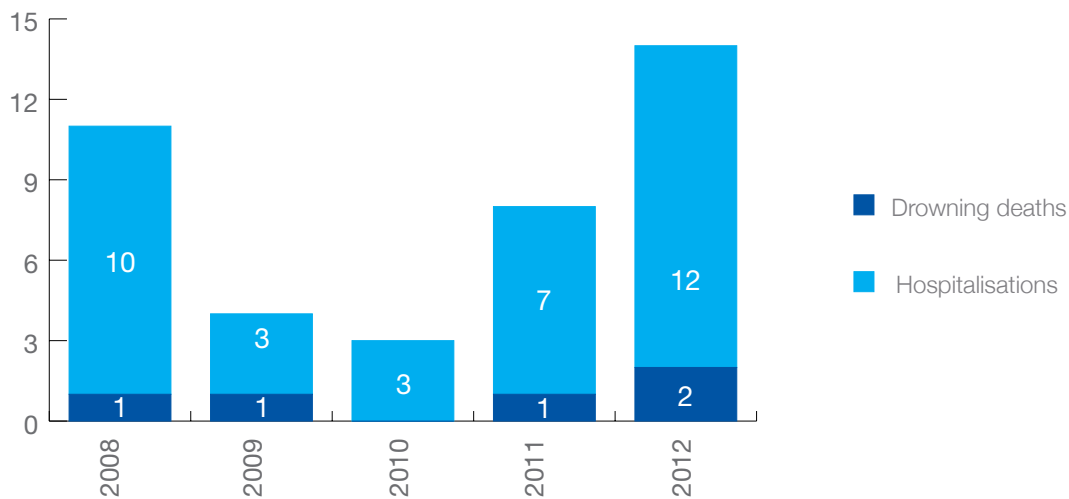


### 5-14 years

The number of children aged 5-14 years in Western Australia who drowned remained low in 2012 recording, the lowest rate of drowning of any age group. There were two drowning deaths recorded amongst this age group in 2012. Both of these incidents occurred at inland waterway locations in regional Western Australia and involved males participating in aquatic activities. Lack of appropriate adult supervision and environmental factors contributed to the deaths.

In addition, 12 children aged 5-14 years were hospitalised following a near-drowning incident in 2012. This was a slight increase from 2011, but was not significant.

#### Drowning Deaths and Hospitalisations of children 5-14 years, 2012



### RECOMMENDATIONS

Continue to promote the importance of enrolling children in ongoing swimming and water safety lessons as a drowning prevention measure

Ensure that high risk groups including people living in regional and remote areas of Western Australia, people from CaLD backgrounds and children in low socio-economic areas have access to appropriately trained instructors and culturally relevant swimming and safety programs

Implement strategies to educate children on important water safety and drowning prevention issues, particularly the risks and dangers associated with participation in aquatic activities at inland waterway locations

Ensure that all children have access to interm swimming lessons including all state, private and catholic education schools

Further research is requested to determine appropriate levels of swimming and water safety benchmarks for all children leaving primary school

**Don't Drink and DROWN**

Principal Community Partner

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**YOUNG PEOPLE  
15-24 YEARS**

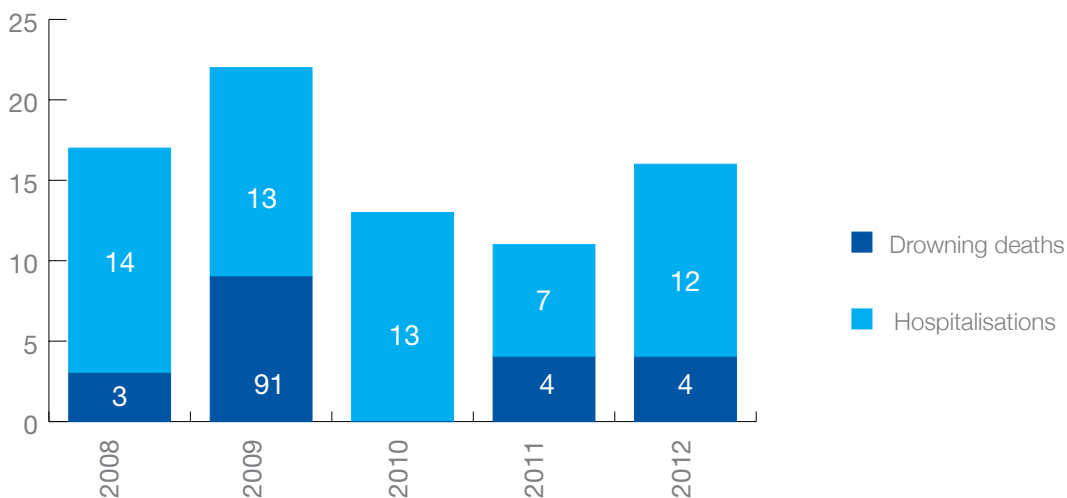
25% OF DEATHS  
AMONGST  
YOUNG ADULTS  
INVOLVED  
ALCOHOL.



## 15-24 YEARS

There were four drowning deaths recorded involving young people aged 15-24 years in 2012, the same as the previous year. Young people recorded the third highest rate of drowning in 2012 with 1.2 deaths per 100,000 population.

### Drowning Deaths and Hospitalisations of young people 15-24 years, 2012



The average age of people involved in a drowning death in this age group was 22.5 years and in a continuing trend all drowning deaths involved males and occurred in regional and remote areas of Western Australia. Three quarters of the incidents occurred at coastal locations and almost all of the incidents occurred while the person was already in the water. Common activities being undertaken at the time of the incident included swimming, surfing and fishing.

Alcohol consumption was a contributing factor in 25% of incidents amongst this age group. Other contributing factors included inexperience with the activity being undertaken and lack of familiarity of the location.

Young people also recorded the second highest rate of hospitalisation following a near-drowning incident behind toddlers aged 0-4 years with 4.7 hospitalisations per 100,000 population. This is an increase from previous years.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

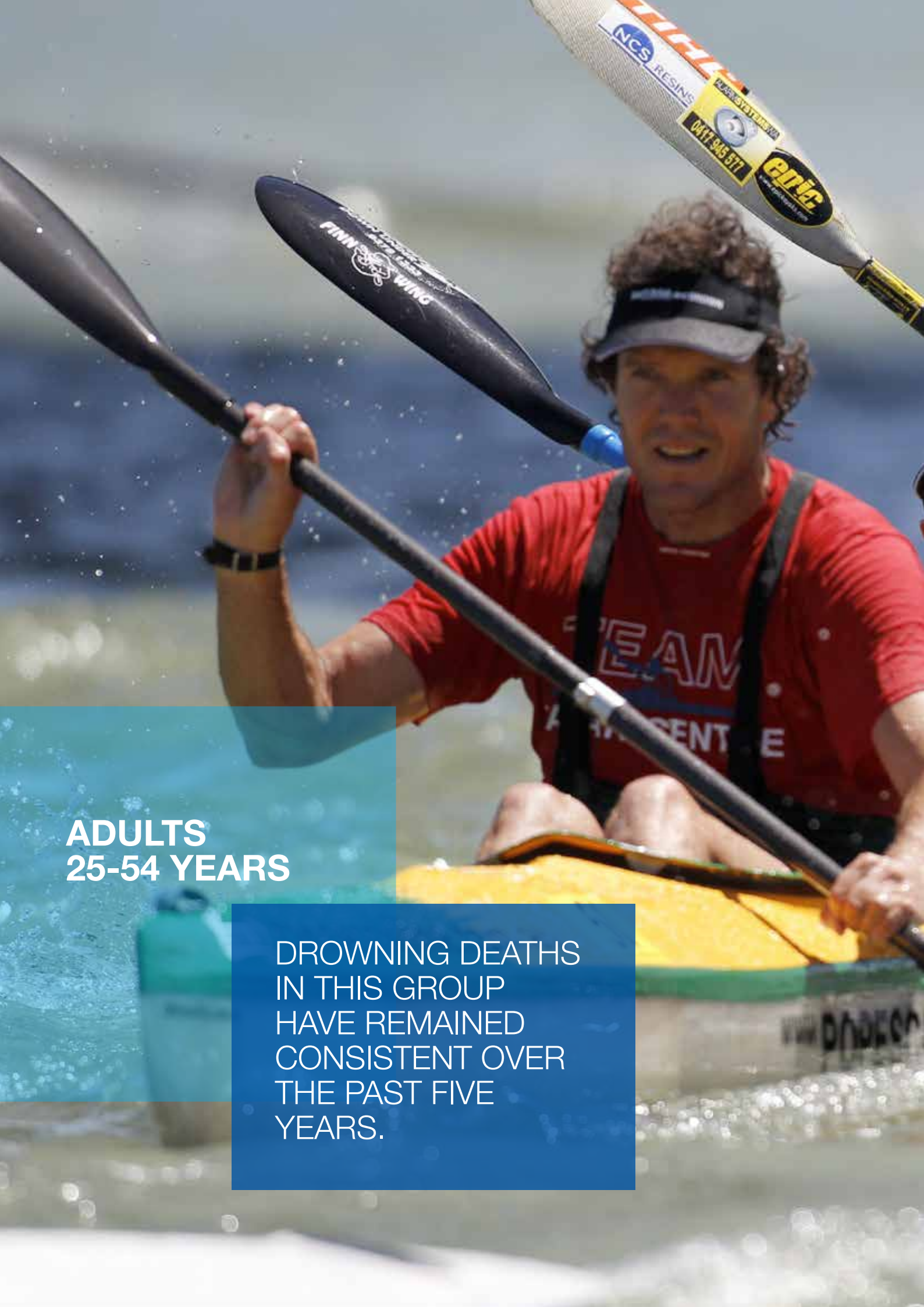
Ensure that water safety and drowning prevention information, programs and services are available in regional and remote areas of Western Australia and target region specific aquatic risks and dangers

Target education and awareness messages at reducing risky behaviours such as alcohol consumption amongst young males and highlighting the consequences of near-drowning incidents

Ensure that messages taught in childhood and are reinforced to young people in a relevant format through appropriate channels including schools, social media and community events

Improve water safety skills and knowledge through education and training

Engage with relevant industry organisations and representatives to advocate for changes to social norms and community behaviours regarding alcohol consumption particularly around water



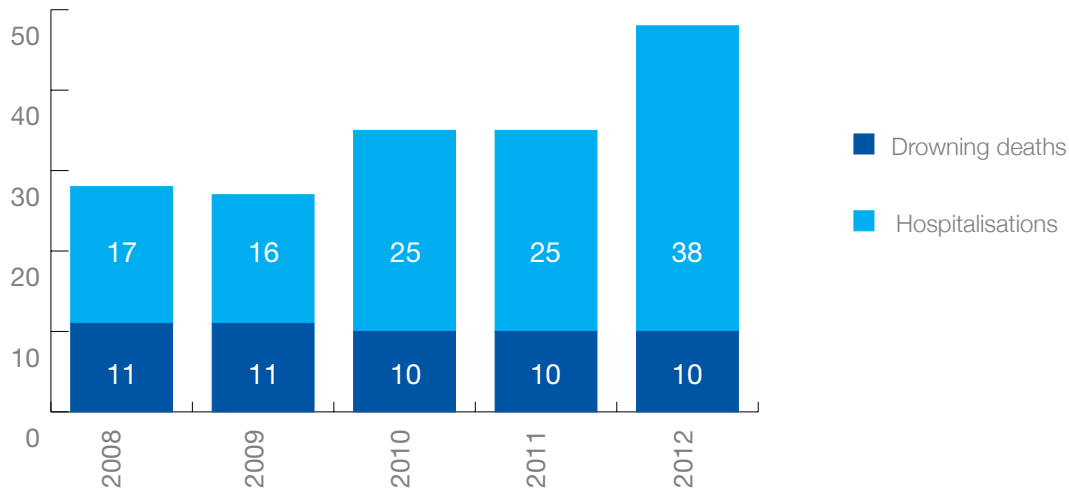
**ADULTS  
25-54 YEARS**

DROWNING DEATHS  
IN THIS GROUP  
HAVE REMAINED  
CONSISTENT OVER  
THE PAST FIVE  
YEARS.

## 25-54 YEARS

Drowning deaths amongst adults aged 25-54 years in Western Australia have remained consistent over the past five years with 10 drowning deaths recorded in 2012. The rate of drowning amongst this age group in 2012 was 0.9 deaths per 100,000 population. The average age of adults involved in drowning deaths was 35.9 years and 90% of drowning deaths recorded in this age group were aged 25-44 years.

### Drowning Deaths and Hospitalisations of adults 25-54 years, 2012



Males were nine times more likely to be involved in a drowning death than females and 80% of drowning deaths occurred in regional and remote areas of Western Australia. The majority of incidents occurred at coastal locations with 40% occurring in the ocean and 30% at beaches. In addition, 20% of incidents occurred at inland waterway locations.

Rock fishing emerged as a high risk activity for this age group with five drowning deaths (50%) recorded in 2012. This was a 20% increase from 2011, making it a priority area for drowning prevention in Western Australia. Other common activities being undertaken at the time of the incident included: recreating around the water, swimming and surfing.

Overall, 80% of drowning deaths amongst this age group involved tourists or visitors to Western Australia. Of these, 30% were international tourists, 20% interstate tourists and the final 30% were people travelling within the state. Many of these people had limited experience and skill in aquatic activities and were unfamiliar with local water bodies and the risks that exist.

In a continuing trend, 30% of drowning deaths amongst this age group were contributing to by pre-existing medical conditions including heart conditions and epilepsy. Other common contributing factors included: environmental factors such as large swell and rip currents (60%), inexperience in the activity (30%) and poor swimming ability (20%).

While drowning deaths have remained consistent, hospitalisations following a near-drowning have continued to increase amongst this age group over the past five years. In 2012, 38 adults aged 25-54 years were admitted to hospital following a near-drowning. This figure has doubled since 2008 and is significantly higher than the five year average for this age group.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

With increasing numbers of people visiting Western Australia each year, it is important that they are provided with appropriate information regarding water safety, drowning prevention and specific high risk locations to ensure that they stay safe when visiting Western Australia. This includes having information available in a range of languages

Continue to work with relevant government and non-government agencies to promote rock fishing safety messages and improve skills amongst the fishing community

Further research is required to better understand the issue of rock fishing and to determine effective interventions and messages

Promote the importance of having up-to-date CPR, resuscitation and first aid skills

Conduct safety audits and assessments at identified black spots



## OLDER ADULTS 55+ YEARS

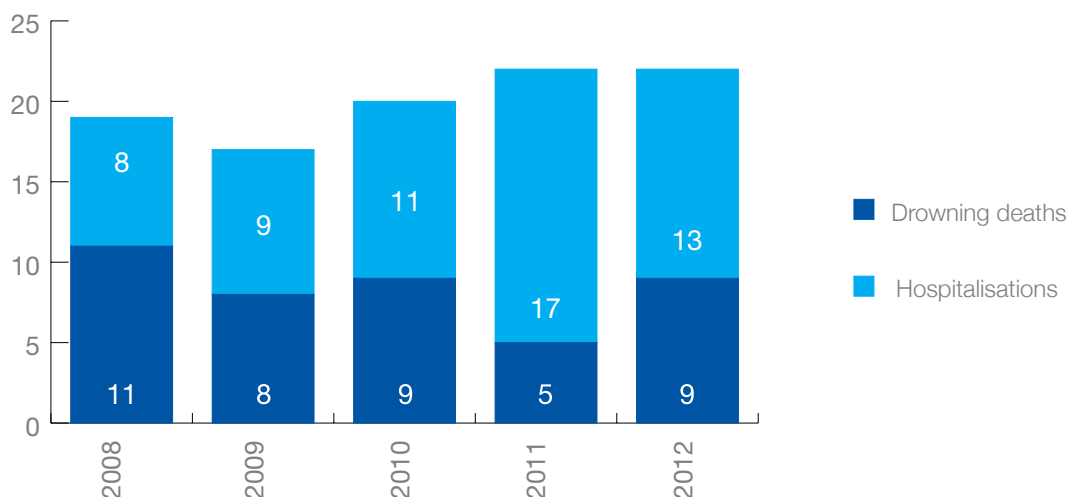
ADULTS OVER 55  
YEARS HAVE THE  
SECOND HIGHEST  
DROWNING RATE IN  
WESTERN  
AUSTRALIA.

## 55+ YEARS

Over the next several decades, population ageing is projected to have significant implications for Australia. In 2012, the number of people aged over 65 years in Western Australia increased by 3.8% from the previous year. In addition, older adults reaching retirement age are getting more involved with water activities which has a range of benefits, however also results in greater risk of drowning and near-drowning.

Older adults over 55 years of age had the second highest rate of drowning (1.6 deaths per 100,000 population) in Western Australia in 2012 with nine drowning deaths recorded, almost double the number that was recorded in 2011. The five year average for this age group is 8.4 deaths per year and has decreased by 12% over the past year.

### Drowning Deaths and Hospitalisations of older adults 55+ years, 2012



The average age of older adults involved in drowning deaths was 65.9 years. Males were 3.5 times more likely to be involved in a drowning death than females in this age group with 78% of incidents involving males. People were also twice as likely to drown in a regional or remote area with 67% of incidents occurring at locations in regional Western Australia.

Two thirds of the incidents occurred at coastal locations. A further 20% occurred at locations in and around the home and the remaining 10% at inland waterway locations. Fishing emerged as the most common activity being undertaken at the time of the incident, with 34% of deaths being fishing-related in 2012. Other common activities included: surfing, swimming and recreating around aquatic locations (22% each).

Medical conditions were factors in 56% of drowning deaths in this age group and continued to be the most common contributing cause amongst older adults. An emerging trend amongst this age group was that 44% of drowning deaths involved tourists, half of whom were international tourists. In addition, 44% of people involved in drowning deaths were from a CaLD background who had limited experience in the activity that they were undertaking and a lack of local knowledge about the location.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

With increasing numbers of people visiting Western Australia each year, it is important that they are provided with appropriate information regarding water safety, drowning prevention and specific high risk locations to ensure that they stay safe when visiting Western Australia. This includes having information available in a range of languages

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Ensure that water safety and drowning prevention information, programs and services are available in regional and remote areas of Western Australia and target region specific aquatic risks and dangers

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Further research is required to better understand the role that underlying and pre-existing medical conditions play in drowning and near-drowning

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Encourage older adults to regularly seek medical advice and clearance before participating in aquatic activities

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- WA Coroner's Office
- Department of Health
- Department of Health, Epidemiology Department
- The National Coronial Information System (NCIS)

Citation:

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Government of **Western Australia**  
Department of **Health**