



# THE NATIONAL DROWNING REPORT 2004



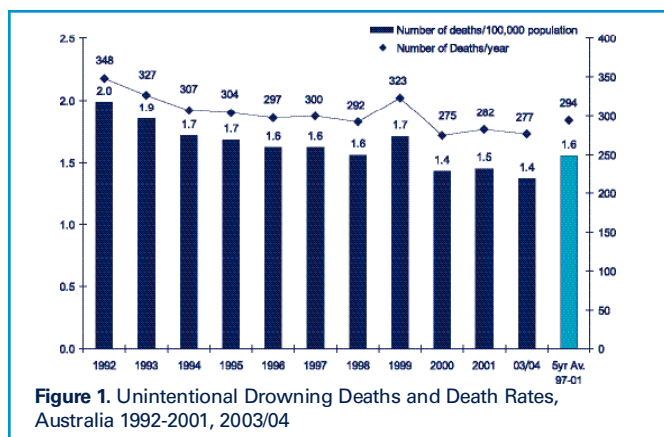
## 277 PEOPLE DROWNED LAST YEAR

Welcome to the 2004 National Drowning Report compiled by the Royal Life Saving Society Australia. This report is for the year 1 July 2003 to 30 June 2004. Information for this report has primarily been collected through the National Coroners Information System and supplemented with information from Coronial offices and media reports collected throughout the year. All care is taken to ensure that the results are as accurate as possible as of the 10 September 2004, however the numbers may change based on ongoing coronial investigations. It should be noted that these figures do not include non-drowning aquatic related deaths.

## HOW MANY PEOPLE DROWNED IN 2003/04?

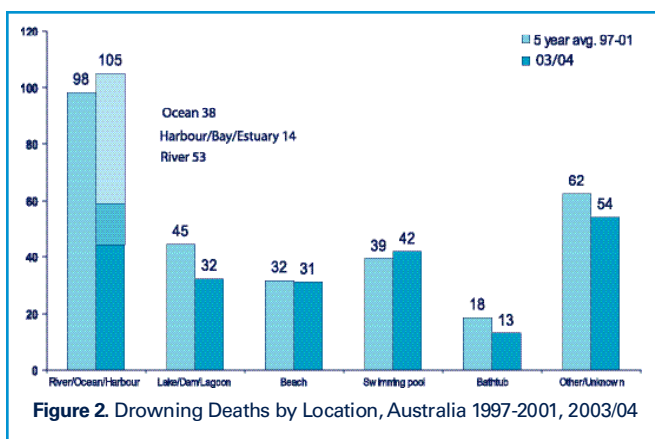
277 people drowned in Australia in the financial year 2003/04. The good news is that less people are drowning than five years ago and the drowning rate and numbers of people drowning are both down on the five-year average. The drowning rate per 100,000 people decreased from the five-year average of 1.56 to 1.39, a decrease of 11% (Figure 1). However, this figure is an increase of 27 on last years report.

## AUSTRALIAN DROWNING DEATHS DECREASING



people were undertaking before drowning in river/ocean/harbour locations were generally fishing, walking or playing near the water, boating, diving and swimming.

## OPEN AND MOVING WATER DOMINATE DROWNING DEATHS



The number of deaths in the category lake/dam/lagoon is down on the five-year average. This may reflect the reduction in available water in rural Australia due to drought, however drowning in rural waterways continues to be concerning. The flat, calm appearance of lakes and rivers often gives a false impression of tranquillity and safety. When swimming in these locations always swim with a friend and check for hidden hazards and the depth of the water before entering. Be aware – don't drink and drown. If you should not be driving a car you should not be on or in the water.

Drowning deaths at beach environments is similar to the five-year average. The main activities that people were undertaking prior to drowning were swimming, fishing, and walking or playing nearby. There were also a small number of diving deaths and instances where people were attempting to rescue someone else. When swimming at a beach always swim between the red and yellow flags, undertake all water related activities with a friend, and if fishing be sure that you use appropriate safety gear.

There was also an increase compared to the five-year average in the number of swimming pool drowning deaths with 42 recorded in 2003/04. Of all the people who drowned in swimming pools in 2003/04, 18 (43%) were aged 0-5 years. Children in this age group, even if only left briefly unsupervised can quickly and quietly find their way into the pool and drown. Remember to directly supervise (be within arms reach) your child at all times around water.

## THE ZERO DROWNING CHALLENGE

Royal Life Saving believes that all drowning deaths are preventable. By building a community that embraces a few simple water safety rules, possesses knowledge and skills that emphasise safe aquatic recreation, and is constantly alert when in, on or around water most water related deaths can be avoided. Remember to be aware of people around you and your environment and take care when in, on or around water.

## WHERE ARE PEOPLE DROWNING?

Drowning in rivers/oceans/harbours and swimming pools are up on the five-year average (Figure 2.). The activities

## METHODS

Information for the drowning report is collected by Royal Life Saving Society Branches and analysed by the National Office. Information is collected from State and Territory Coronial Offices, the National Coroner Information System (NCIS) and media reports.

Those using the NCIS apply four searches based on:

1. Mechanism –Threats to Breathing  
– Drowning and Immersion
2. Key Word “drown” searched for in Findings
3. Key Word “drown” searched for in Police Reports
4. Key Word “drown” searched for in Autopsy reports

To find drowning deaths reported to the media, Royal Life Saving uses a media monitoring service. This service uses the key words; drown, drowning, water safety, water rescue, Keep Watch, and Life Saving. The print media service runs all year and the electronic service during this period started on Tuesday 23 September 2003 and finished on Monday 3 May 2004.

Although all care is taken to ensure that the information is as accurate as possible, these figures are considered interim until the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures are released. These figures may change depending upon ongoing coronial investigations and findings. The report contains drowning deaths known at 10 September 2004. Any cases identified after this date are not included. The drowning figures are checked against media reported cases.

The five-year average figures are based on information provided by the ABS for the year 1997 to 2001 and include “Accidental Drowning”, “Water Transport Drowning” and “Drowning due to Cataclysmic Events”. Royal Life Saving and ABS information does not include suicide, homicide, or natural death (such as heart attack) where known.

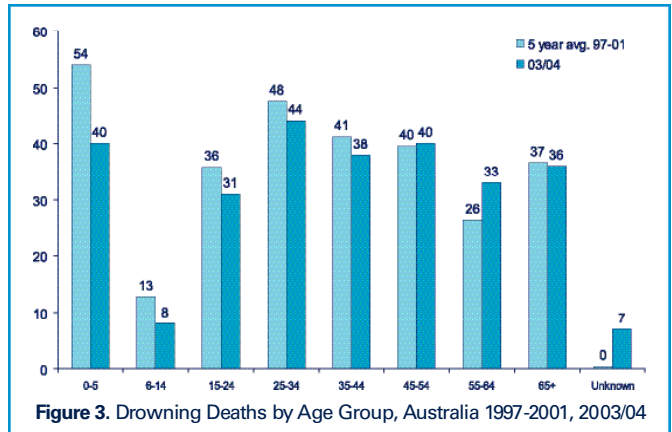
Due to the way the information is coded by the NCIS we have changed the “swimming” category to “swimming and leisure activity”.

## WHO DROWNS IN AUSTRALIA?

Last year there were 212 (77%) males, 59 (21%) females and 6 (2%) cases where the gender was unknown who drowned, making males about four times more likely to drown than females (Figure 4). This is consistent with the five-year average (79%). All age groups under 45 years are down compared to the five-year average. All age groups over 45 years are up compared to the five-year average, except the 65+ years age group which remains constant (Figure 3.)

The largest decrease from the five-year average was the 0-5 years age group, which is down to 40 from 54, a decrease of 26%. Improvement against the five-year average was also made in the 6-14, 15-24, 25-34 and 35-44 year age groups, which are down by 38%, 13%, 8%, and 8% respectively.

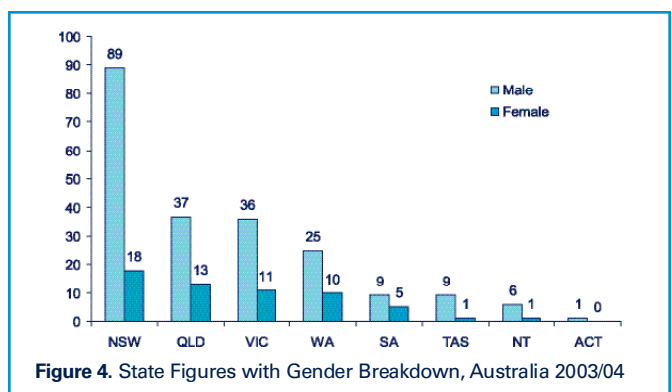
Of concern is the 25% increase, 26 to 33 drowning deaths in the 55-64 years age group compared to the five-year average. As the number of people in this age category increases due to ageing baby boomers, this category will continue to be a concern unless action is taken (Figure 3).



## HOW MANY PEOPLE DROWNED IN EACH STATE IN AUSTRALIA?

This is the 10th National Drowning Report produced by Royal Life Saving. NSW, Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia were the States in which the majority of drowning deaths occurred. Despite increased education, public awareness campaigns and water safety programs, many Australians underestimate or remain unaware of the dangers associated with aquatic recreation. It is alarming that the national trend remains high considering that most of these deaths are preventable (Figure 4).

## THE NATIONAL DROWNING BURDEN



## WHAT ACTIVITIES WERE PEOPLE UNDERTAKING PRIOR TO DROWNING?

Of the seven activities identified, drowning deaths resulting from diving, watercraft, falling into water and bathing were down compared to the five-year average. Drowning while undertaking swimming / leisure activities and attempting a rescue were up compared to the five-year average (Figure 5). The increase in the swimming / leisure activity group is related to the use of the National Coroners Information System and the lack of detail available; this is also reflected in the larger number of other / unknown cases. The number of fishing related deaths are the same as the five-year average reflecting the dangers of fishing, in particular rock fishing.

## DROWNING BY ACTIVITY

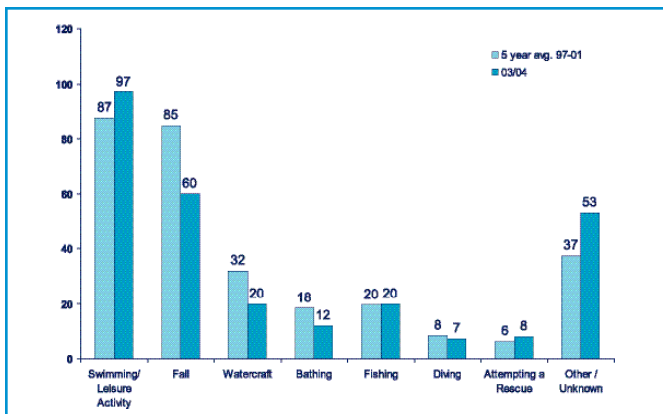


Figure 5. Drowning Deaths by Activity, Australia 1997-2001, 2003/04

## WHAT DID DROWNING COST AUSTRALIA LAST YEAR?

There have been three major studies in Australia examining the lifetime cost of a drowning death. The studies show the cost per person for drowning, ranges between \$370,000 and \$610,467. At 277 drowning deaths this year the cost to the Australian economy is between \$102.5 million and \$169.1 million dollars.

## WHERE CAN I GO TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT SWIMMING AND WATER SAFETY?

Since 1982 over 10 million Australians have participated in the Royal Life Saving Society's Swim and Survive Program. During this time there has been a 75% reduction in drowning deaths in the 6-14 year age group. Swim and Survive is more than swimming lessons.

Swim and Survive provides a broad, balanced program of swimming, water safety and survival skills in preparation for a lifetime of safe activity in, on or around the water.

Swim and Survive develops: swimming technique, water safety, water confidence, survival and rescue skills and endurance.

For more information, children, teachers and parents should visit the Swim and Survive Website ([www.swimandsurvive.com](http://www.swimandsurvive.com)).



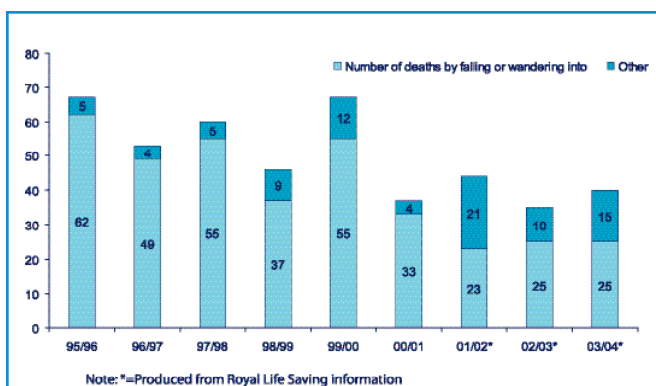
## THE 0-5 YEARS AGE GROUP

### HOW MANY TODDLERS DROWNED?

40 children aged 0-5 years drowned in 2003/04 (Figure 6). The good news is this figure is down by 26% (54 to 40) on the five-year average (Figure 3). However, 40 preventable drowning deaths are far too many.

Whilst pleased with this reduction overall, drowning deaths on a year-to-year basis appear to be saw-sawing, with five more deaths than the previous year. More work is needed to achieve a consistent year on year reduction in toddler drowning. The message from Royal Life Saving is that children need to be constantly supervised (within arms reach) and participate in water familiarisation activities, pool owners must fence their pools and parents should learn Resuscitation. Remember "Keep Watch" at all times.

## TODDLER DROWNING DEATHS



Note: \* = Produced from Royal Life Saving Information

Figure 6. Drowning Deaths by Location, Australia 1995/96 - 2003/04

## HOW DID THE TODDLERS ACCESS THE WATER?

The majority of toddler drowning deaths resulted from the child falling into or wandering into the water (Figure 6). This is often into swimming pools where access to the pool is not restricted (ie the play area and the pool are in the same space) or the gate has been left open. All children under the age of 5 years should be actively supervised (i.e. within arms reach) at all times when in, on or around water.

## WHERE DO TODDLERS DROWN?

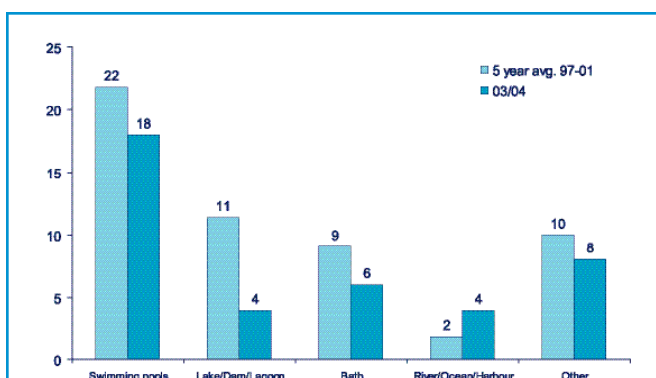


Figure 7. 0-5 Age Group Drowning Deaths by Location, Australia 1997-01, 2003/04

## QUICK FACTS 2003/04

### Children 0-5 Years

- 40 children 0-5 years drowned last year (14% of all drowning deaths)
- 27 (68%) were males
- 18 (45%) drowned in swimming pools
- 19 (62%) fell or wandered into water prior to drowning

### Children 6-14 Years

- 8 children 6-14 years drowned last year (3% of all drowning deaths)
- 4 (50%) were males
- 4 (50%) drowned in rivers
- 5 (63%) fell or wandered into water prior to drowning

### People 15-34 Years

- 75 people 15-34 years drowned last year (27% of all drowning deaths)
- 61 (81%) were males
- 32 (43%) drowned in River/Ocean/Harbour locations
- 44 (59%) were swimming or undertaking leisure activities, or fell into water prior to drowning

### People 35-54 Years

- 78 people 35-54 years drowned last year (28% of all drowning deaths)
- 63 (81%) were males
- 33 (42%) drowned in River/Ocean/Harbour locations
- 40 (51%) were swimming or undertaking leisure activities, or fell into water prior to drowning

### People 55+ Years

- 69 people 55+ years drowned last year (25% of all drowning deaths)
- 55 (80%) were males
- 28 (41%) drowned in River/Ocean/Harbour locations
- 50 (72%) were swimming or undertaking leisure activities, or fell into water, or involved with water craft prior to drowning

## EMERGING ISSUES?

### Kite Surfing

Kite Surfing is a new sport that uses a very large stunt kite to provide the power to waterski or surf across the water. Last financial year there were two identified deaths of kite surfers. In both cases, drowning was not the primary cause of death and as such, they have not been included in these statistics. Royal Life Saving will continue to monitor these deaths.

### Breath Holding and Hypoxic Blackout

Hypoxic Blackout while not a new issue, has been highlighted by the NSW Coroner who recently handed down a finding on a healthy teenage male who died while holding his breath and trying to swim as far underwater as possible. Hypoxic Blackout is the lack of oxygen to the brain and if this occurs while swimming the person slows down and then loses consciousness.

Royal Life Saving also found that two older males died as a result of holding their breaths for too long while training for the sport "free diving" and a male died in similar circumstances while training for underwater hockey. All of these deaths appear in this years statistics.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Royal Life Saving acknowledges the following organisations for their assistance;

- The Australian Bureau of Statistics
- National and State Injury Surveillance Units
- The National Coronial Information System
- State Coroners
- Media Monitors

The Royal Life Saving Society Australia is a National volunteer-based organisation that is dedicated to lifesaving and continually strives to prevent aquatic related injury and death through its training programs, public education, research, aquatic risk management services and international liaisons.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

**The Royal Life Saving Society Australia  
National Branch on 02 8217 3111 or go to**

**[www.royallifesaving.com.au](http://www.royallifesaving.com.au)**

**ACT 02 6260 5800**

**NSW 02 9879 4699**

**NT 08 8981 5036**

**QLD 07 3823 2823**

**SA 08 8234 9244**

**TAS 03 6243 7558**

**VIC 03 9567 0000**

**WA 08 9383 8200**

**The Royal Life Saving Society Australia would like to thank the following for their support over the last 12 months:**

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**LAERDAL**

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**NIVEA**

**QANTAS**