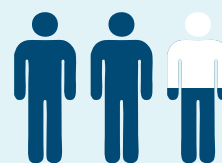


210

AUSTRALIAN RESIDENTS HAVE DROWNED ON PUBLIC HOLIDAYS



DRINK DROWNING IS TWICE AS LIKELY ON PUBLIC HOLIDAYS



INTERSTATE & INTRASTATE VISITORS WERE 2.5 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO DROWN



THE RISK OF DROWNING DOUBLES ON PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

Background

This study looked at all unintentional drowning deaths over the 15 financial years from 2002/03 to 2016/17 as per the Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database. A spike in fatal drowning on public holidays in 2016/17 – 24 incidents involving Australians, up from a low of 9 in 2012/13 – encouraged us to investigate whether the anecdotally suspected links between public holidays, aquatic recreation, drinking and travel were statistically valid.

Between 1 July 2002 and 30 June 2017, 210 Australians fatally drowned on days which were public holidays in their home State or Territory. This makes up 5% of all fatal drowning over this period, despite public holidays accounting for only 3% of the year.

Methods

Information on fatal drowning incidents and victims' State/Territory of residence has been sourced from the Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database, which collates data from the Australian National Coronial Information System (NCIS), State and Territory Coronial Offices and media reports. Royal Life Saving uses a media monitoring service (electronic and print media) throughout the year to identify all drowning cases reported in the media, against which cases in the NCIS are cross-referenced.

Public holidays by State and Territory over the fifteen years from July 2002 were identified using a range of publically available historical data.¹⁻³ The recorded date of the drowning incident (rather than the date of death, where these were different) was then compared to the list of public holidays in the victim's state of residence. We excluded 80 victims who had no recorded Australian State or Territory of residence, most of whom were likely to be short term overseas visitors.

Results

The relative risk (RR) of drowning on a public holiday compared to other days of the year is 1.73. This means that Australians are 1.73 times as likely to drown on a public holiday as on any other day of the year. It doesn't mean that most drowning happens on public holidays, since public holidays make up only 3% of the year – but it does show that the risk per day is much higher on public holidays. How much higher your risk of drowning gets on public holidays depends on your age, aquatic locations visited, aquatic activities undertaken and whether you have been drinking and/or are a visitor to the area.

Younger people – those aged 10 to 34 years – see their risk of drowning more than double on public holidays. For people between 10 and 14 years, the risk is particularly large, nearly four times as high (RR=3.78). At the younger end of this age range, some of this increase may be because school holidays tend to overlap with public holidays – as discussed below. Because of the link between public holidays and aquatic recreation, beaches (RR=2.22), swimming pools (RR=2.04) and rocks (RR=1.98) all get much more dangerous on public holidays, and drowning while swimming and recreating is 2.4 times as likely on public holidays than on other days of the year.

Mixing alcohol and aquatic recreation is always risky, and becomes even more so on public holidays – fatal drowning where the victim has a blood alcohol content (BAC) of 0.05% or higher is more than twice as likely to occur on a public holiday (RR=2.07).

Finally, travel and unfamiliar environments are another key driver of increased drowning risk on public holidays. Incidents involving visitors from another part of the state (RR=2.53) or interstate visitors (RR=2.28) are much more likely to occur on public holidays.

Policy implications

Holidays can be a dangerous time for Australians. Adults can end up drinking more,⁵ and children and younger people spend more time swimming and recreating in pools and other bodies of water, often in unfamiliar places.

This doesn't mean we can afford to ignore the everyday risks of drowning in the backyard, in the bath or while taking the boat out after work – the majority of drownings don't happen on holidays – but it does mean that we need to be aware of the elevated risks all Australians, and especially younger ones, face when they are away from school or out of the workplace.

The run up to public holidays is a good time to reach out to the community with a reminder that the kinds of things many of us like to do on holiday put us at a much higher risk of drowning – more than twice as high for Australians under 35 – and that too many Australians have already paid the price, turning what should be a happy occasion into a tragic one.

Messages we should focus on, and which particularly resonate as holidays approach, include calls for active adult supervision of children around water, warnings about unfamiliar locations and the importance of relying on local lifesavers and raising awareness about the risks of drinking and drowning.

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