

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

Occupational violence and aggression in public aquatic facilities



ROYAL LIFE SAVING
AUSTRALIA

➤ DATA SOURCE AND METHODS

Royal Life Saving Australia analysed incident reports from a statistically significant sample size of 250 aquatic facilities nationally dispersed across all states and territories of Australia across the 2024/25 financial year.

Facilities reported both:

- **Exposures to occupational violence and aggression (OVA)** – for example, each time a staff member is verbally abused in the course of an interaction, and
- **Discrete incidents** – single recorded events that may involve one or more staff members and one or more behaviours (e.g. verbal abuse plus threats).

Incidents were coded into three broad categories:

- **Verbal OVA**
(e.g. yelling, abuse, threats)
- **Physical OVA**
(e.g. pushing, striking, throwing objects)
- **Other harassment**
(including sexual harassment)

To provide an indicative national picture for council-run public pools, incident counts from the 250-facility sample were extrapolated to approximately 1,300 council-run facilities using simple proportional scaling ($1,300 \div 250 \approx 5.2$). This assumes, cautiously, that the sample is broadly similar to council-run facilities overall.

The same method can also be applied to all 2,103 known aquatic facilities across Australia, using a multiplier of approximately 8.4 ($2,103 \div 250 \approx 8.4$), to derive broader sector-wide estimates where required.

Given known under-reporting of OVA, variation in incident recording practices and the conservative nature of the scaling method, these figures should be interpreted as minimum (conservative) estimates, not upper bounds.

➤ KEY FINDINGS

- Across the 250-facility sample in 2024/25, there were 445 recorded incidents of verbal abuse, 50 physical OVA incidents and 185 harassment incidents (including sexual harassment).
- On average, each facility in the sample recorded around 1.8 verbal abuse incidents, 0.2 physical incidents and 0.7 harassment incidents in 2024/25 – noting these are discrete incidents, separate from the much higher number of individual staff “exposures”.
- When extrapolated to around 1,300 council-run public pools, Royal Life Saving research data suggests there were around 3,500 incidents of abuse and aggression from the public towards lifeguards, swim teachers and staff last year. Of these:
 - Around 2,300 incidents involved verbal abuse,
 - More than 250 incidents involved physical assault or aggression, and
 - Close to 1,000 incidents involved other forms of harassment, including sexual harassment.

This equates to more than 120 incidents of abuse or aggression every day, on average, in council-run public pools alone – almost certainly an underestimate of the true burden.

Preliminary data from July–October 2025 show similar patterns in the first four months of 2025/26, suggesting that without concerted action the burden on aquatic workers is likely to remain high.

➤ INCIDENT DATA TABLE (SAMPLE AND EXTRAPOLATED ESTIMATES)

Table 1. Occupational violence and aggression incidents in public aquatic facilities
(sample of 250 facilities and extrapolation to ~1,300 council-run pools)

OVA category	2024/25 incidents in sample (250 facilities)	Estimated 2024/25 incidents at 1,300 council-run pools*	2025/26 incidents (Jul–Oct) in sample (250 facilities)	Estimated 2025/26 incidents (Jul–Oct) at 1,300 council-run pools*
Verbal abuse	445	≈ 2,300	147	≈ 760
Physical assault/ aggression	50	≈ 260	23	≈ 120
Other harassment (incl. sexual)	185	≈ 1,000	70	≈ 360

*Estimates based on proportional scaling from 250 facilities to ~1,300 council-run public pools (multiplier ≈ 5.2).
Figures rounded to the nearest 10 for clarity. The same proportional method can be applied using a multiplier
of ≈ 8.4 to estimate incident numbers across all 2,103 known aquatic facilities nationwide.

Our staff are here for your safety,
please treat them with respect.

KEEP YOUR COOL AT THE POOL

Respect & listen
to our staff

Zero tolerance
for aggression

Respect
other users

Behave safe,
be safe

We stand with Royal Life Saving in calling for safe
and accessible aquatic spaces for all. **Violence and
aggression have no place in this aquatic facility.**

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Taken together, the data suggest that occupational violence and aggression towards aquatic workers is both widespread and persistent:

- Even under conservative assumptions, staff at council-run pools appear to face thousands of abusive or aggressive interactions every year, including hundreds of incidents involving physical aggression and around a thousand incidents of harassment, including sexual harassment.
- These incident counts sit alongside a much larger number of individual “exposures” captured in workforce surveys (for example, multiple staff affected in a single incident, or repeated low-level abuse that does not always generate a formal report).
- The snapshot likely underestimates the true scale of the problem due to under-reporting, differences in incident recording systems, and incomplete participation across the sector.

From a workforce safety perspective, the pattern is clear: OVA is not an isolated problem, but a systemic and recurring hazard for lifeguards, swim teachers and customer-facing staff. This supports the need for:

- Sector-wide behavioural campaigns such as Keep Your Cool at the Pool
- Stronger incident reporting and follow-up
- Integration of psychosocial safety into core work health and safety (WHS) frameworks and training.

“A single, recognisable platform makes it easier for the public to understand what is expected of them wherever they swim, and easier for lifeguards, swim teachers and managers to point to a shared standard of behaviour when they ask patrons to follow safety directions or intervene in unsafe conduct.”

Australians travel widely over the holiday period, moving between council pools, school and club pools, leisure centres, waterparks and tourist destinations. For many families, a typical summer may involve visits to multiple facilities across different local government areas and even different states. In this context, pool owners and operators have a shared opportunity to influence patron behaviour and support the aquatic workforce by presenting consistent expectations and policy settings wherever people swim.

Evidence from health promotion and risk communication indicates that clear, consistent and repeated messages are more likely to influence population behaviour than fragmented or competing messages. Large-scale reviews of mass media and social marketing campaigns in areas such as tobacco control, road safety, physical activity and nutrition show that campaigns can achieve measurable changes in behaviour when they are evidence-informed, sustained over time, and reinforced by supporting policies and environments.¹

Public health communication research further suggests that people respond better when information is aligned across trusted messengers and channels, rather than hearing differing or conflicting messages.² Reviews and experimental studies on conflicting health information find that when people are exposed to competing or contradictory messages, they are more likely to feel confused, to trust recommendations less, and to be less receptive to subsequent health messages.³⁻⁴ Advertising research points to a similar mechanism: in high “clutter” environments, where multiple competing messages vie for attention, recall and impact of any one message are reduced.⁵

For pool owners and operators, this evidence supports a collaborative approach. A unified national campaign such as **Keep Your Cool at the Pool** – adopted by major operators and councils, co-branded locally, and backed by aligned patron codes of conduct and staff protection policies – is consistent with the health promotion evidence base. A single, recognisable platform makes it easier for the public to understand what is expected of them wherever they swim, and easier for lifeguards, swim teachers and managers to point to a shared standard of behaviour when they ask patrons to follow safety directions or intervene in unsafe conduct.

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