



Drowning Among Multicultural Communities in Australia

AN UPDATE:
2013/14 TO 2022/23



ROYAL LIFE SAVING
AUSTRALIA



> ABOUT ROYAL LIFE SAVING

Royal Life Saving is focused on reducing drowning and promoting healthy, active and skilled communities through innovative, reliable, evidence-based advocacy; strong and effective partnerships; quality programs, products and services; underpinned by a cohesive and sustainable national organisation.

Royal Life Saving is a public benevolent institution (PBI) dedicated to reducing drowning and turning everyday people into everyday community lifesavers. We achieve this through: advocacy, education, training, health promotion, aquatic risk management, community development, research, sport, leadership and participation and international networks.

About this Report

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The drowning prevention research of the Royal Life Saving Society – Australia is proudly supported by the Australian Government.

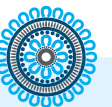


Australian Government

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Royal Life Saving Society - Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continued connection to land, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures; Elders past and present.



> WHO IS DROWNING IN AUSTRALIA?

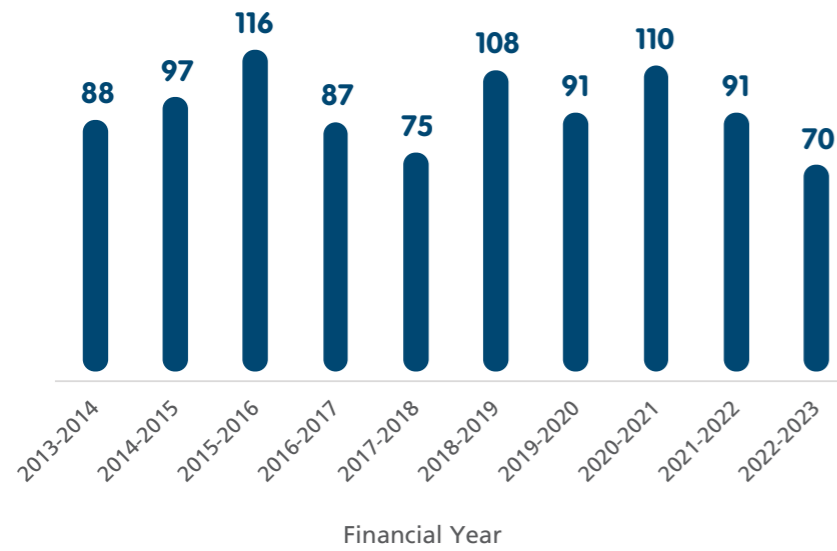
2,762

people drowned in Australian waterways
Between 2013/14 and 2022/23

933

people drowned in Australia waterways were born overseas

Drowning deaths among people born overseas



34%

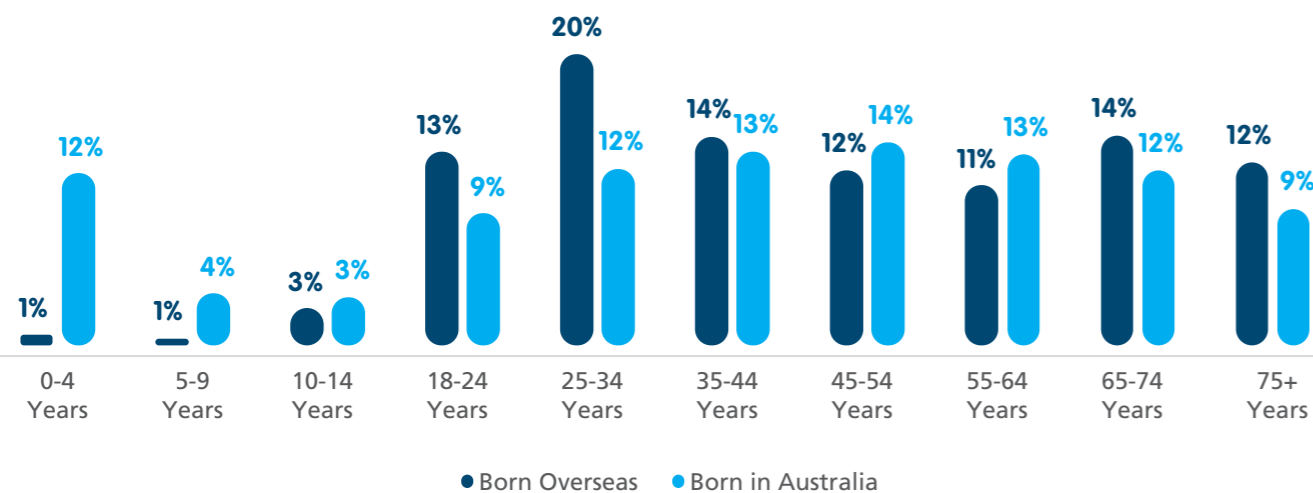
of all drowning deaths were people born overseas



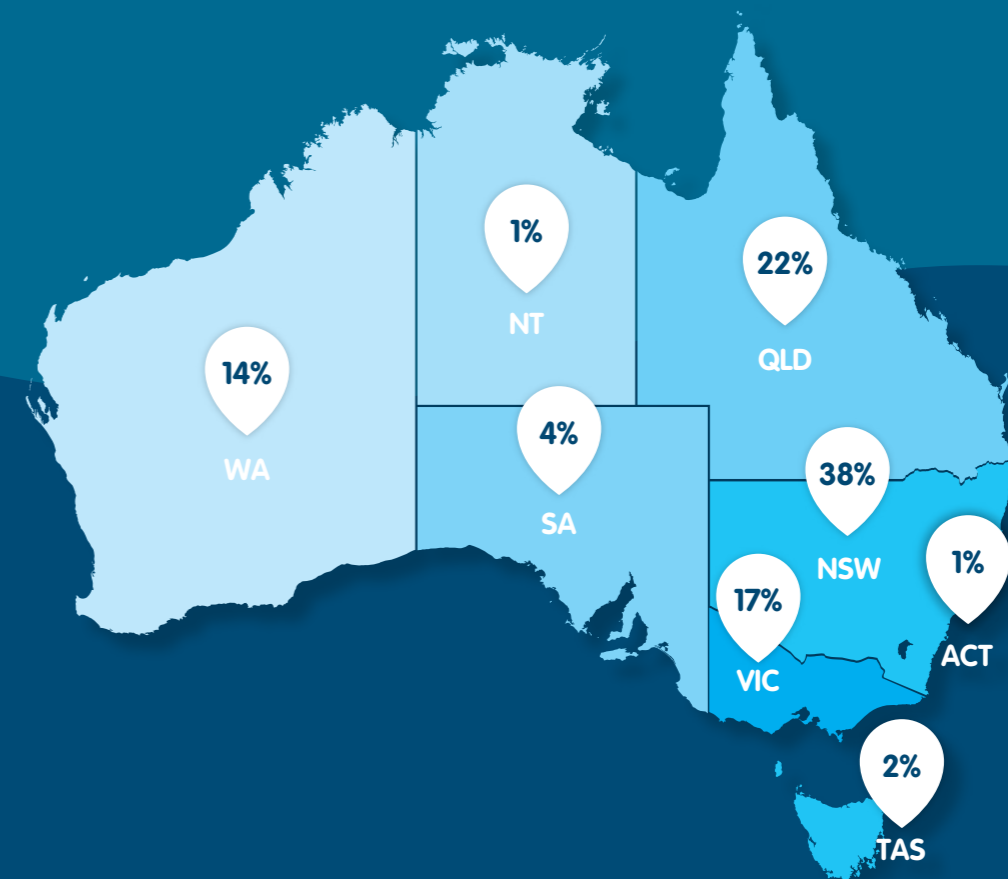
81%

of all drowning deaths were males

Drowning by Age 2013/14 to 2022/23



State and Territory breakdown



Top locations



Top activities being undertaken prior to drowning



> BACKGROUND

Drowning in Australia

On average, 285 people fatally drown and many more non-fatal drowning incidents occur in Australia each year. Males and those aged 25 – 34 years record the highest numbers for drowning overall (1).

Approximately 34% drowning deaths in Australia are of people born overseas. Overall, 6% of total drowning deaths are of international visitors (2, 3). For every 1 fatal drowning, it is estimated that there are 3 non-fatal drowning incidents. This increases for children aged 0-4 years to 8 non-fatal drowning incidents for every fatal drowning among this age group (4).

Over the past 20 years, there has been an overall reduction of 26% in drowning deaths in Australia, most notably among young children (0-4 years) (1).

More is needed to reduce drowning in other vulnerable populations.

The Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030

The Australian Water Safety Strategy (5) is the guiding document for drowning prevention in Australia. This Strategy identifies priority areas for reducing drowning by 50% by 2030. *Multicultural communities* and *Increasing swimming and water safety skills* are identified as two of 15 focus areas to target drowning prevention efforts.

Australia's changing population

As of June 2023, Australia's population now comprises of over 8 million people were born overseas, approximately 31% of the total Australian population (6). The most common countries of birth are: England, India, China and New Zealand (6).

The countries of birth with the largest increases in Australia's population between 2013 and 2023 were:

- > India
- > China
- > Nepal
- > The Philippines

Changes in migration patterns to Australia over the past decade are now reflective in the drowning data.



> DROWNING AMONG MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITIES

In the 10-year period 2013/14 to 2022/23

933 people drowned in Australia who were born overseas, an average of 93 people per year. The majority were residents, with international students, working holiday makers and overseas visitors making up the remainder. Consistent with overall drowning trends, males aged 25 – 34 years account for highest number of drowning deaths among people born overseas,

When calculating crude drowning rates based on 100,000 residential population (7), people born overseas drowned at a higher rate than those born in Australia (1.28 compared to 0.93).

Drowning deaths among people born overseas country of birth (2013/14 – 2022/23):

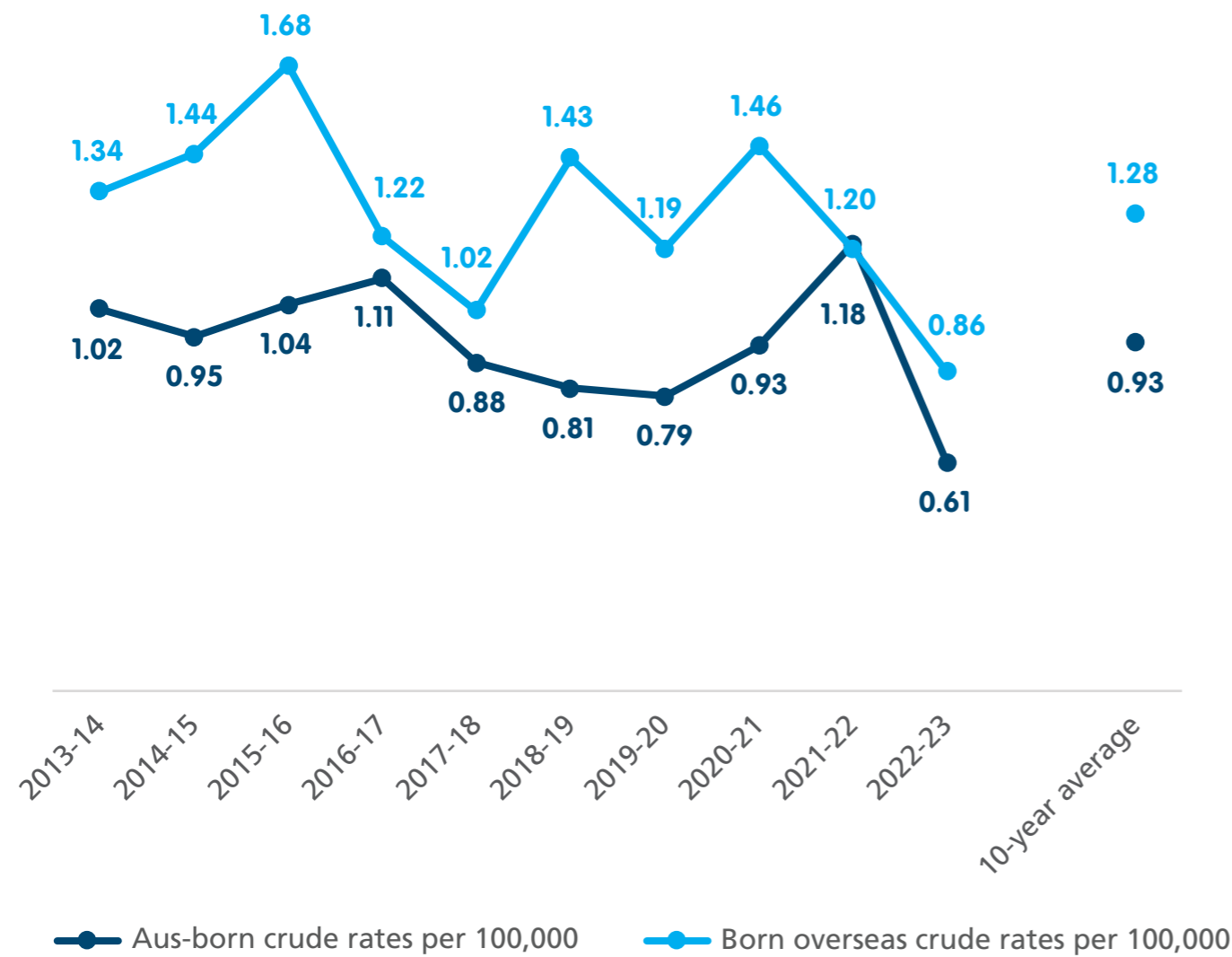
While not in the top countries overall, in the most recent five years (2018/19 – 2022/23), increases in drowning deaths have been recorded among people from

- > Afghanistan
- > Iran
- > Sri Lanka

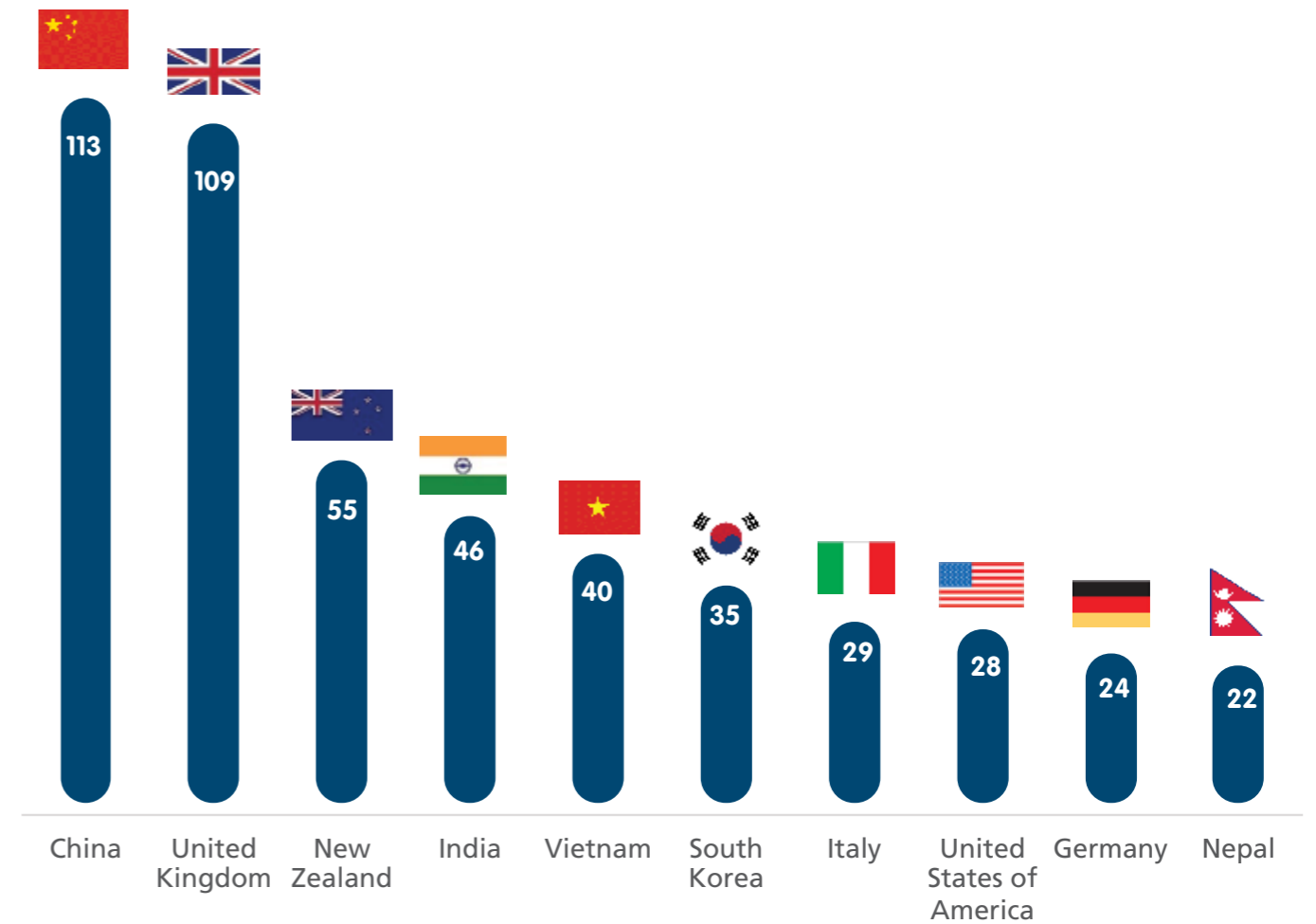
Decreases in drowning have been seen among people from

- > Taiwan
- > Vietnam
- > USA
- > Canada
- > Hong Kong

Crude drowning rates between people born overseas and Australian-born based on 100,000 residential population in Australia (2013/14 to 2022/23)



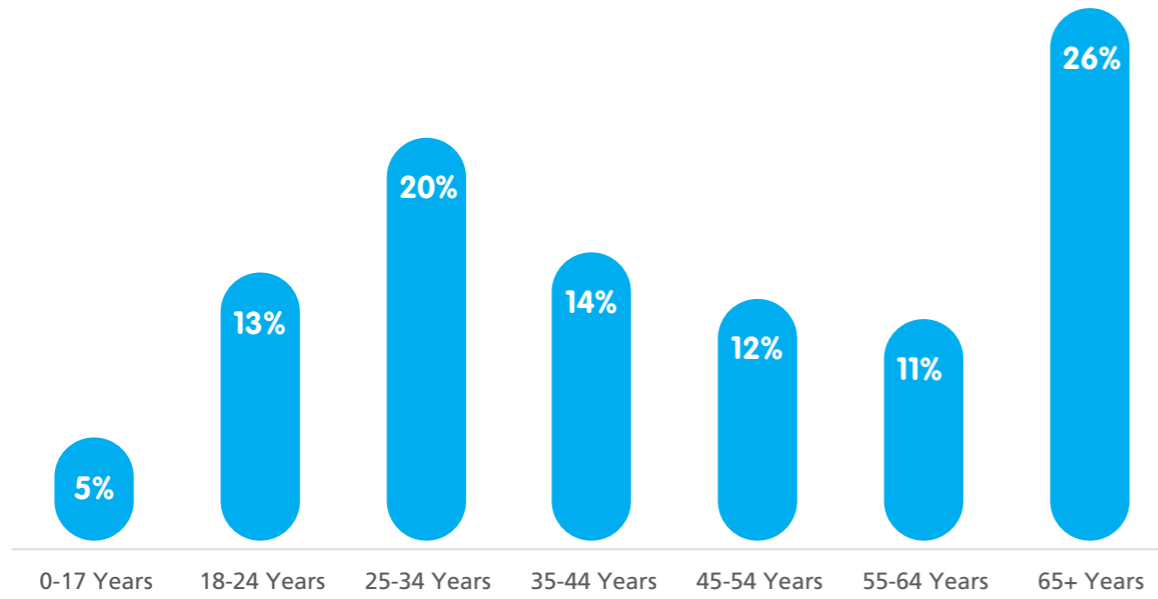
Drowning deaths among people born overseas by country of birth 2013/14 to 2022/23



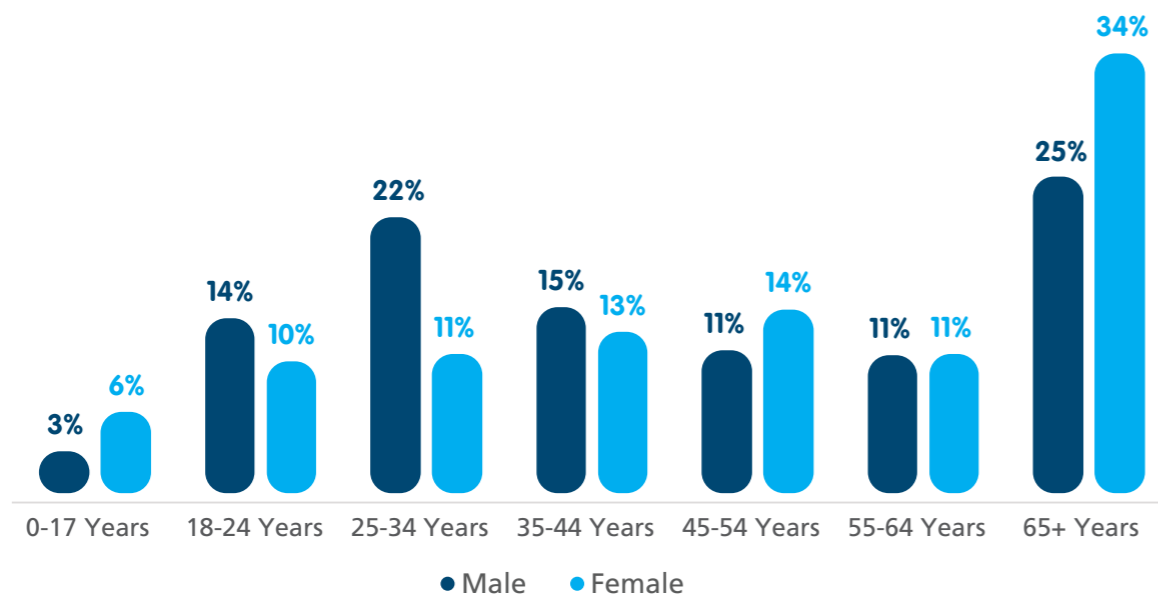
*Note that these are crude drowning rates only and have not been adjusted for age.

> WHO IS DROWNING?

Drowning deaths among people Born Overseas by age group



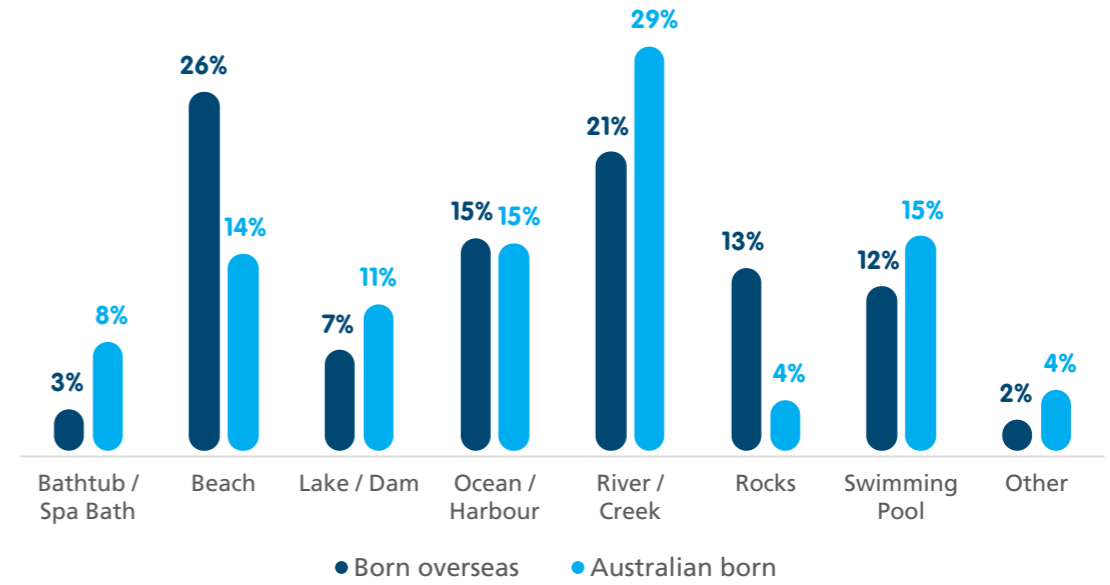
Drowning among people Born Overseas by sex



> WHERE AND HOW ARE PEOPLE DROWNING?

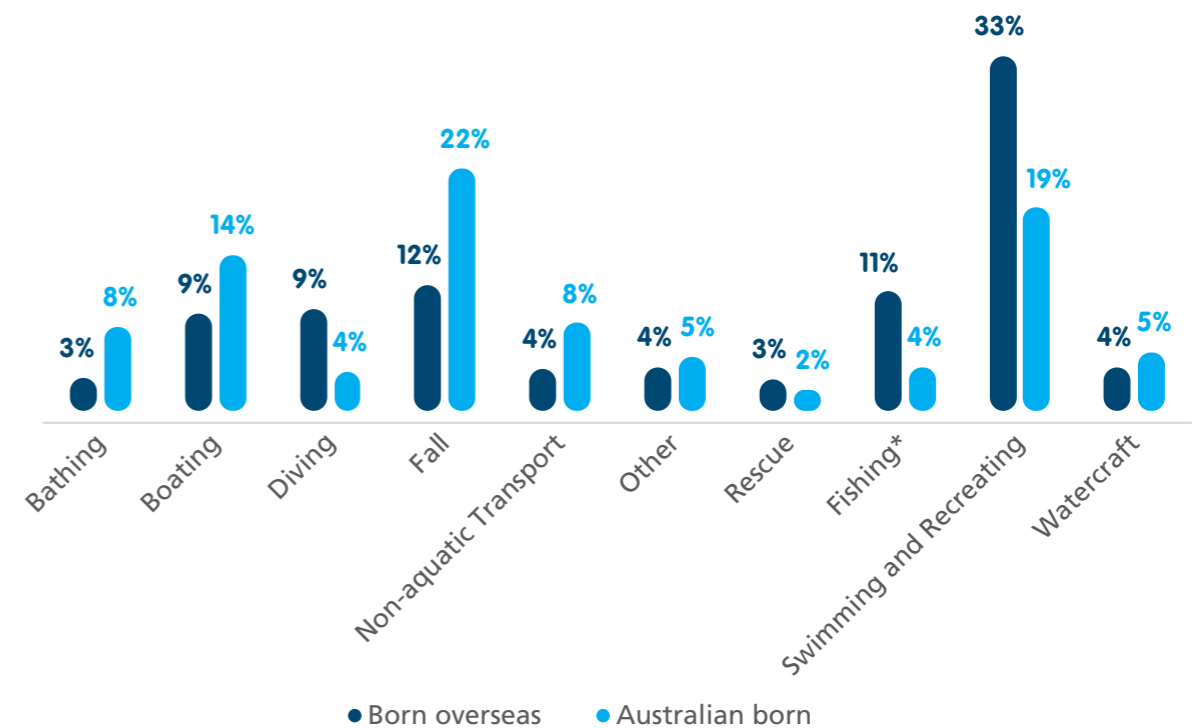
People born overseas were more likely to drown at a beach or around rocks compared to Australian-born, who were more likely to drown at a river/creek or a lake/dam.

Location of drowning



Activity priority to drowning also differed, with more people born overseas drowning when swimming and recreating, fishing or diving compared to Australian-born.


Activity being undertaken prior to drowning



> RISK FACTORS

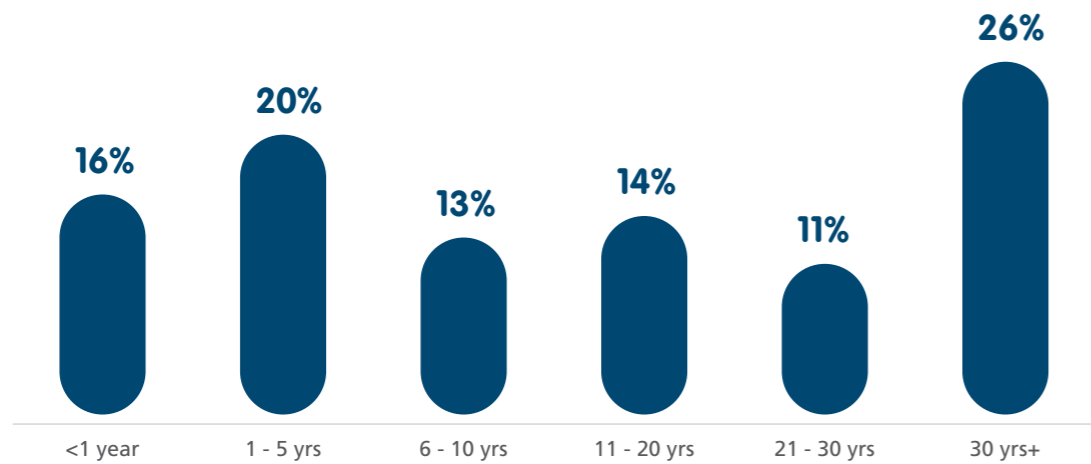
Length of time in Australia

Where time in Australia was known, 36% were new arrivals, who had been in Australia for five years or less, and 26% had lived in Australia for 30+ years.



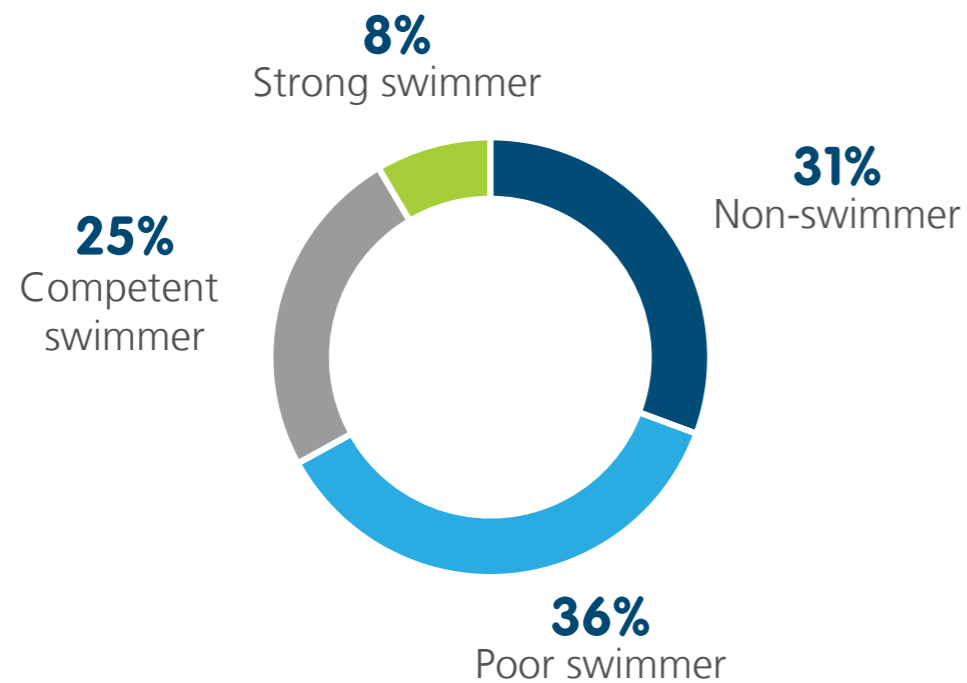

36%
were new arrivals,
who had been in Australia
for five years or less

Time in Australia



Swimming ability


Swimming ability was recorded in 25% of all drowning deaths. Of those, two-thirds were thought to be a non-swimmer or poor swimmer.


29%
of drowning deaths
had a **pre-existing
medical condition**

Of those, older people aged 65+ years were most likely to record a pre-existing medical condition.

The most common medical conditions recorded were cardiac related.



18%
of drowning deaths
involved **drugs**
Majority were legal prescription
drugs (medication)

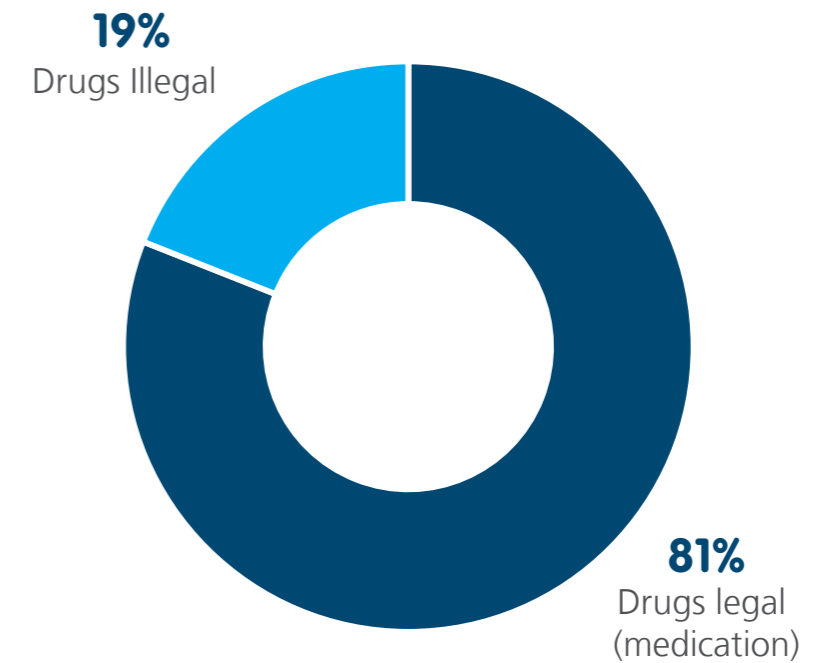


18%
of drowning deaths
involved **alcohol**

The age groups most likely to record alcohol in their system at the time of drowning:

- > 25 – 34 years
- > 18 – 24 years
- > 35 – 44 years

Legal and Illegal Drugs



> SNAPSHOT: OVERSEAS VISITORS

6%

of drowning deaths in Australia over the 10-year period were Overseas Visitors

This includes people in Australia for holiday purposes, short-term business trips, and working holiday makers.

The age groups of Overseas visitors who drown



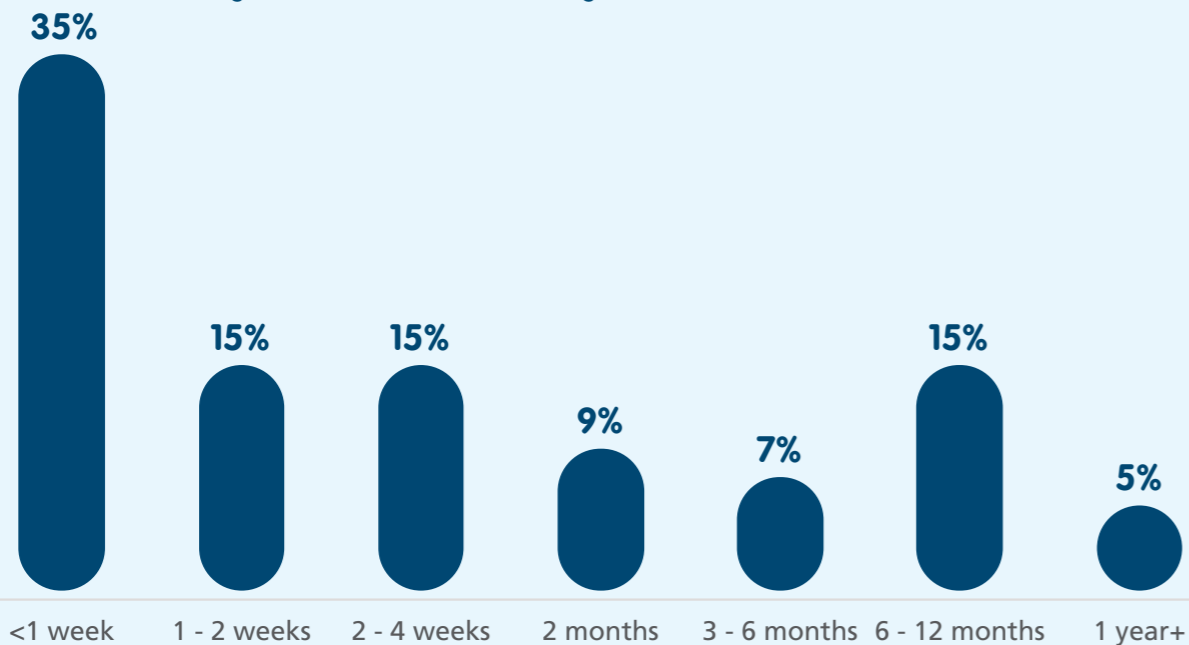
However, people aged 55 years+ totalled 41% of all drowning deaths among Overseas visitors.

The highest number of overseas visitors who drowned were from:



Where time in Australia was recorded, **50% of Overseas visitors** had been in Australia for 2 weeks or less when they drowned.

Length of Time in Australia among Overseas visitors who drowned



› KEY INSIGHTS

The overall number and rates of drowning among people born overseas has increased since the first 10-year analysis was produced (covering the decade between 2005/05 to 2014/15), from 29% to 34%.

This data snapshot from the most recent 10-year highlights increased knowledge of the risk factors and specific needs of multicultural communities, particularly among the following groups:

- › **New arrivals:** Findings highlighted that many people are relatively new to Australia when they drown. This emphasises urgency of getting information to people earlier rather than later.
- › **International students:** Australia is a popular destination for international students, in the last five years, the highest number of international students have been from China, India and Nepal and are generally in Australia between 2 and 5 years. Water safety education programs for International Students are ad-hoc across universities, states/territories, currently there is no national strategy.
- › **Overseas visitors:** Different strategies are needed given the transient population, most people in Australia for a short period of time, the age of visitors and what activities they are undertaking and locations they are visiting. Messages need to be delivered with a balance of safety and enjoyment.
- › **Males 25 – 34 years:** This report found similar drowning trends among young males to the national trend. Reducing drowning among young males is a priority area in the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030, more research is needed to understand the specific factors contributing to drowning among young males from Multicultural communities and tailored solutions.
- › **Older people 65 years+:** Interestingly, the only age group where more females drowned than males was in this age group. Medical conditions are also associated with increased drowning risk among older people more generally. More awareness of the role of medication conditions and medication is required for this age group.

This increase in drowning among people born overseas could be due to several factors:

- › Improved drowning data on country of birth and length of time in Australia
- › Australia's changing demographics (6)
 - 50% of the population were born overseas or have at least one parent who was
 - Australia's overseas born population has been steadily increasing, and now exceeds 30% of the population
 - The top 10 countries of birth in Australia are different to those a decade or two ago: the fastest growing populations being from South East Asia and the Middle East
- › Impact of Covid-19:
 - Travel restrictions on both migration and overseas visitors to Australia have eased, with migration and international student numbers are back to pre-pandemic levels
 - Closure of public aquatic facilities and social distancing requirements, restricting safe places to swim and access to swimming lessons for children and adults
 - More people visiting remote and isolated locations
- › People's experiences and prior knowledge
 - Some people may have some swimming ability and knowledge and have had exposure to water in their country of origin
 - However, lack of familiarity of Australian waterways, including river and beaches, may be very different to what people are used to, including swimming pools.
 - Some people may only associate being around water with everyday living or working rather than for leisure and recreational purposes
 - Peer influence once in Australia, wanting to participate in the water despite lack of knowledge and skills
- › Tourism agencies promote Australia's aquatic lifestyle as a key attraction with limited safety information provided, more research is needed in this area.

This report provides a high-level snapshot at the national level and does not provide a detailed breakdown at the state/territory level which is likely to be different at the state and community level. This reinforces the need for community partnerships and localised strategies that are tailored and delivered at the community level, alongside national level policies and strategies.

› NEXT STEPS

- › Utilise this data to inform high-level policies and strategies that influence systems level changes that can make a difference in addressing systemic barriers and increase opportunities for accessing swimming and water safety education programs.
- › Identify and develop tailored strategies for each sub-group highlighted in partnership with key agencies and communities.
- › Develop innovative strategies to reach people and communities e.g. through migration agencies, migrant resource centres, language schools, tourism agencies and accommodation providers.
- › Create regular opportunities to share knowledge and learning relating to drowning prevention and water safety aimed at multicultural communities.

› METHODS

This data is derived by Royal Life Saving Society – Australia from the Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database. Data from the RLSSA Database have been collated from the National Coronial Information System (NCIS), State/Territory Coronial offices and media monitoring. Information contained within the NCIS is made available by the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety.

Drowning deaths as a result of suicide or homicide, deaths from natural causes, shark and crocodile attacks, or hypothermia are excluded. All data in this report relates to drowning as a contributory cause of death. Figures may change depending on ongoing coronial investigations and findings. Numbers of drowning where there are less than 5 cases cannot be reported due to ethical constraints and potential of identification of the person/s. Definitions for location and activities are coded as per the Royal Life Saving Drowning Database Definitions manual.

This report covers the 10-year financial year period 2013/14 to 2022/23 and excludes drowning for the most current financial year (2023/24) due to incomplete information available in the NCIS. Updated information will be available after September 2024. Data is correct as of 01 July 2024.

Crude drowning rates have been calculated based on by country of birth per 100,000 residential population in Australia sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) country of birth population by country of birth 2023.

A limitation in this data is that the overall number of people of all ages from multicultural communities who drown may be under-reported. This is due to country of birth being recorded in coronial documents and used as a proxy for cultural status, as there is limited information provided on cultural background of individuals in coronial information. Furthermore, as most people migrate to Australia as adults, and when migrants have their children in Australia, they are included as those born in Australia.

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