



COASTAL SAFETY BRIEF

UNPATROLLED BEACHES

SURF LIFE SAVING AUSTRALIA



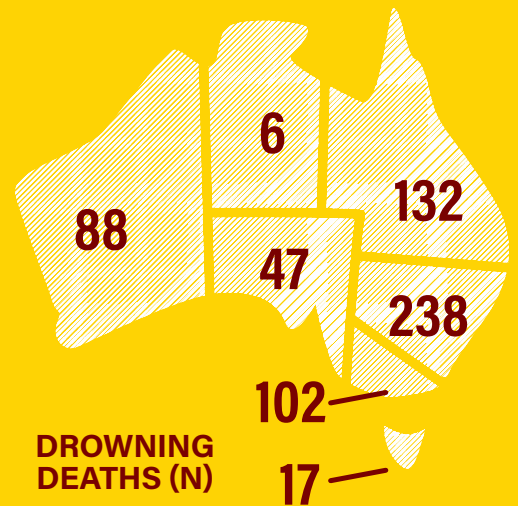
UNPATROLLED BEACH DROWNING SNAPSHOT

2014-24 : 10-YEAR REVIEW

ANALYSIS

630
UNPATROLLED BEACH
DROWNING DEATHS

85%
MALE



KEY DEMOGRAPHICS



59%
SWIMMING/WADING



12%
WATERCRAFT



11%
SNORKELLING



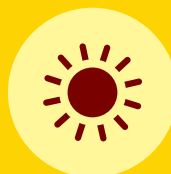
6%
ATTEMPTING A RESCUE



47%
REGIONAL AREAS



60%
>1KM FROM SLS SERVICE



49%
SUMMER



36%
RIP CURRENTS

INTRODUCTION

Beaches represent an integral part of Australia's cultural identity. While generally a safe space for recreating, injury and death at beach locations do occur. The provision of lifesaving services, signified in Australia by the iconic red and yellow flags, is recognised as the most effective strategy in ensuring beachgoer safety. However, with its near 11,000 mainland beaches, it is not feasible for these services to operate across all beach locations throughout the year.

Unpatrolled beaches represent a key area of concern for Surf Life Saving Australia. During the peak swimming season (summer months Dec-Feb) lifesaving services in Australia are provided at six percent of the country's beaches, with one percent of beaches patrolled year-round. During the 2023/24 financial year, a total of 618,285 operational service hours were provided by lifesaving personnel nationally, of which a notable proportion is provided by volunteer surf lifesavers.

Sadly, between 2014/15 and 2023/24, a total of 630 drowning deaths were recorded at unpatrolled beaches. The overwhelming majority of these deaths occurred among males (85%), during the summer months (Dec-Feb; 49%) and while swimming or wading (59%).

While consistent advice from Surf Life Saving Australia is that the safer place to swim is between the flags - the designated supervised zone - it is recognised that this is not always achievable, with varying reasons as to why individuals may choose to visit an unpatrolled beach instead. When surveyed, ~20% of Australians state they either exclusively or mostly visit unpatrolled beaches. The primary reasons given for visiting these locations are that individuals only plan to stay in shallow waters, that the areas they swim in are safe, and that they prefer quiet, secluded beaches.

Regardless of the degree to which an individual may perceive an unpatrolled beach to be safe, beachgoers should always be aware of how to keep themselves and their loved ones safe when entering the water.



When visiting an unpatrolled beach, always remember to:



Bring a buddy, never swim alone



Plan what to do in case of an emergency by checking for phone reception and public rescue equipment before entering the water



Check for rip currents and other hazards



Check and obey all safety signage, even if you are familiar with the beach location

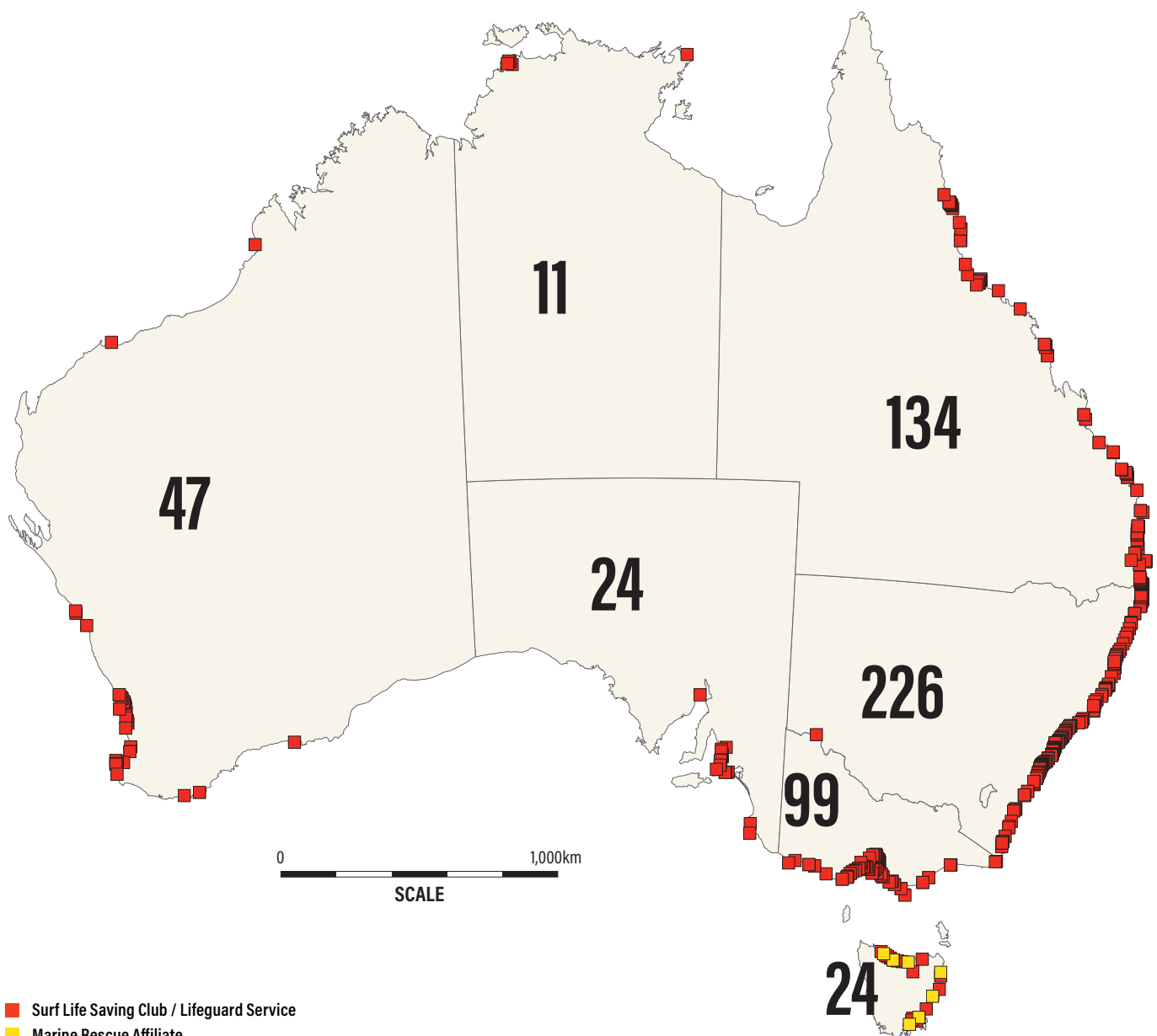
SURF LIFE SAVING SERVICES

2023/24 : SURF LIFE SAVING SERVICES

Figure 01

2023/24: SURF LIFE SAVING SERVICES

Over 2023/24, SLSA supported 565 services around Australia. There are 315 Surf Life Saving Clubs and seven affiliated marine rescue services, with 129 in New South Wales, 58 in Queensland, 57 in Victoria, 31 in Western Australia, 22 in South Australia, 22 in Tasmania and three in the Northern Territory. The Australian Lifeguard Service provides 243 lifeguard services around Australia, with 97 in New South Wales, 76 in Queensland, 42 in Victoria, 16 in Western Australia, eight in the Northern Territory, two in South Australia and two in Tasmania.



ASSET CAPABILITY

2023/24 : SLS MAJOR ASSET LOCATION & SERVICE RANGE

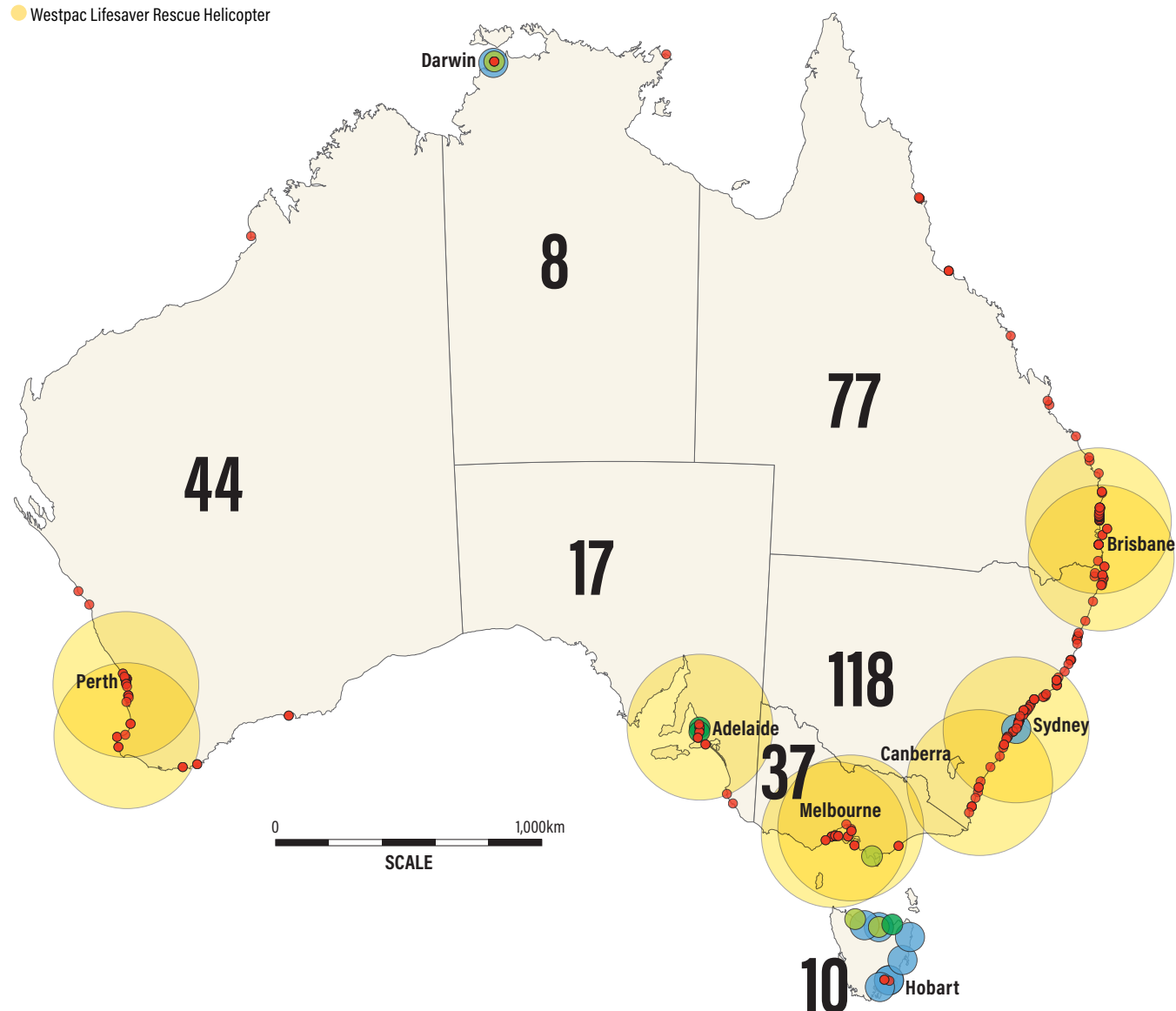
Figure 02

2023/24: SLS MAJOR ASSET LOCATION AND SERVICE RANGE

SLS maintains a fleet of 288 rescue watercraft (RWC), three jet rescue boats (JRB), two rigid-hull inflatable boats (RIB), nine offshore rescue boats (ORB), and nine rescue helicopters. Their locations and service ranges are depicted on this map.

Key to Asset Location

- Rescue Water Craft (RWC)
- Jet Rescue Boat (JRB)
- Rigid-hull Inflatable Boat (RIB)
- Offshore Rescue Boat (ORB)
- Westpac Lifesaver Rescue Helicopter



2023/24: LIFESAVING SERVICE OPERATIONS

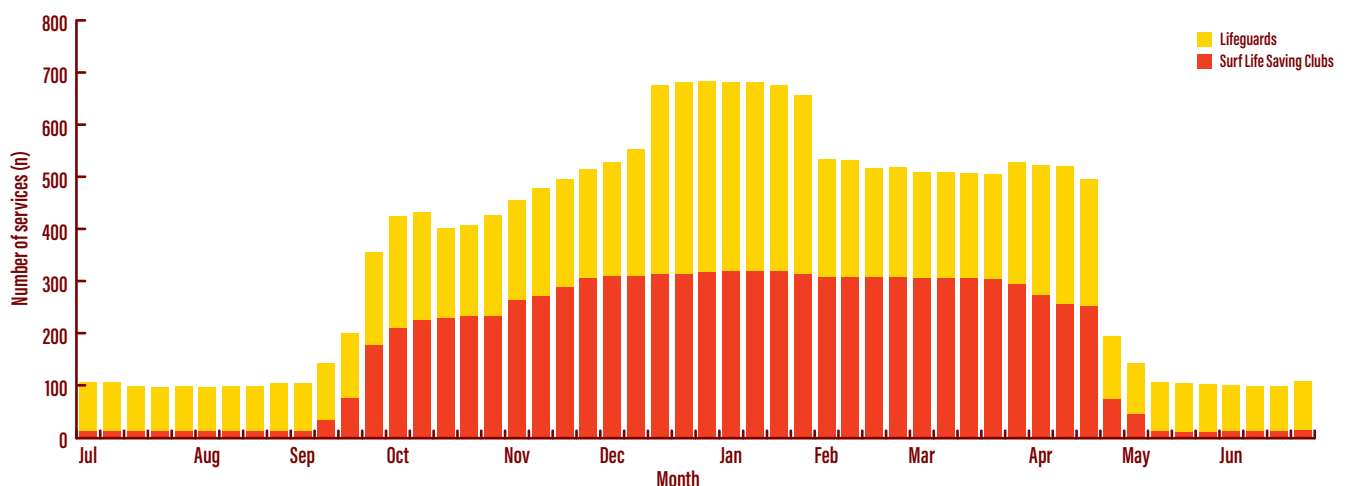
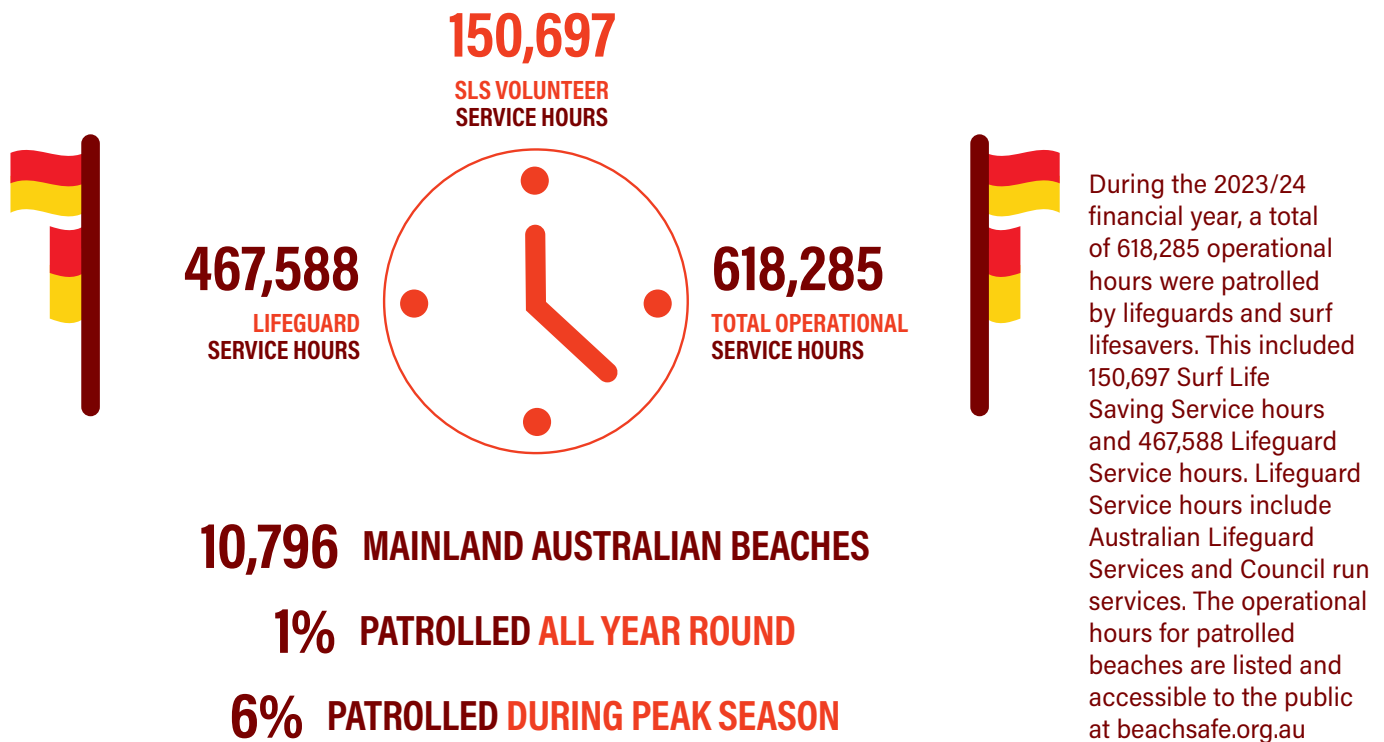


Figure 03

2023/24: OPERATIONAL SERVICES BY WEEK

Operational lifesaving services across Australian beaches vary throughout the year. During the peak summer season, nearly 700 services are working across 456 beach locations.

Figure 04

BEACH LIFESAVING SERVICE PROVISION BY STATE

This map shows the total number of beaches and the proportion of which are patrolled at some point in the year for each state.

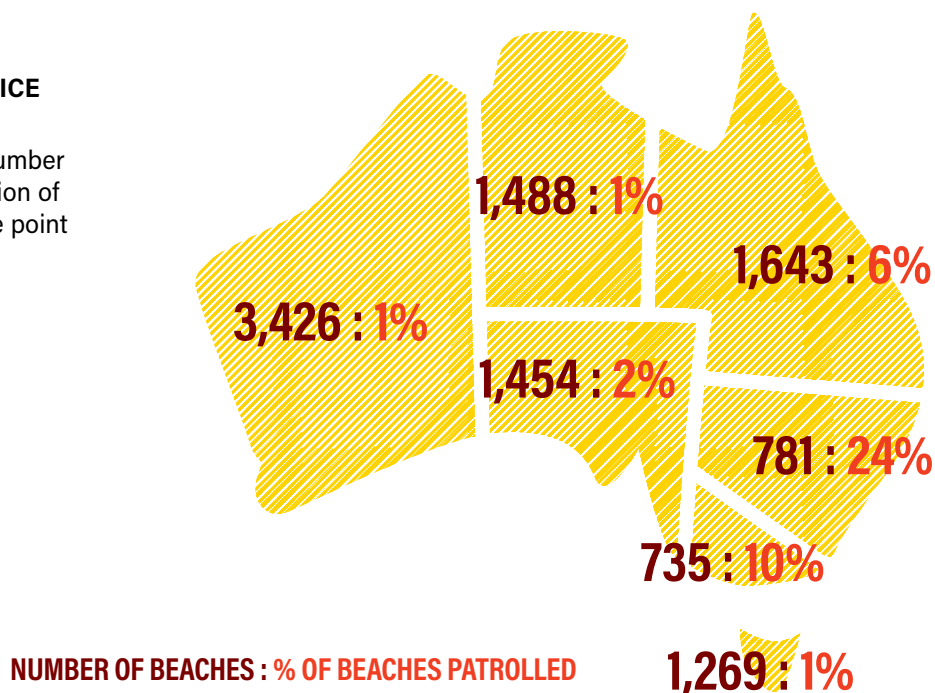
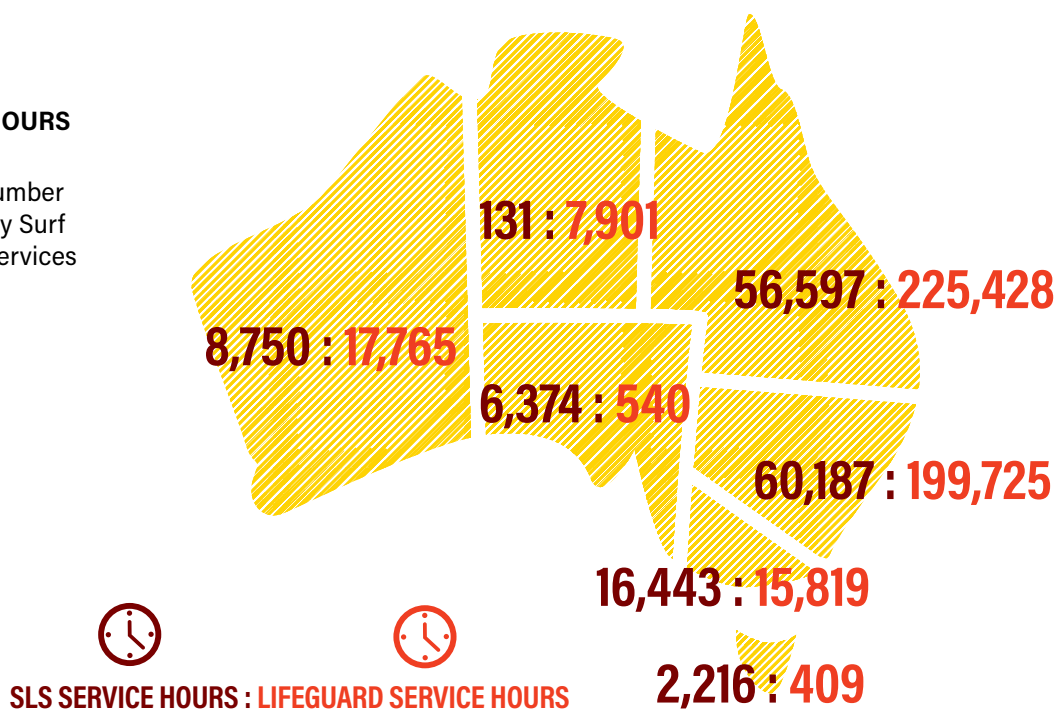


Figure 05

OPERATIONAL SERVICE HOURS BY STATE

This map shows the total number of patrol hours performed by Surf Life Saving and Lifeguard services annually by state.



UNPATROLLED BEACH DROWNING

2014-24: CAUSAL ANALYSIS



630

UNPATROLLED BEACH
DROWNING DEATHS



85%

MALE



36%

RIP CURRENTS



Figure 06

UNPATROLLED BEACH DROWNING BY STATE

New South Wales recorded the highest number of unpatrolled beach drowning deaths (38%, n=238), followed by Queensland (21%, n=132), then Victoria (16%, n=102).

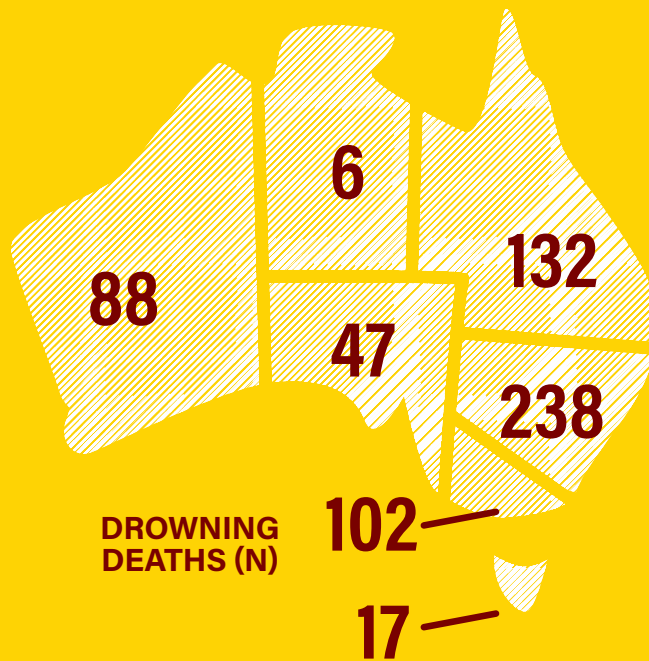
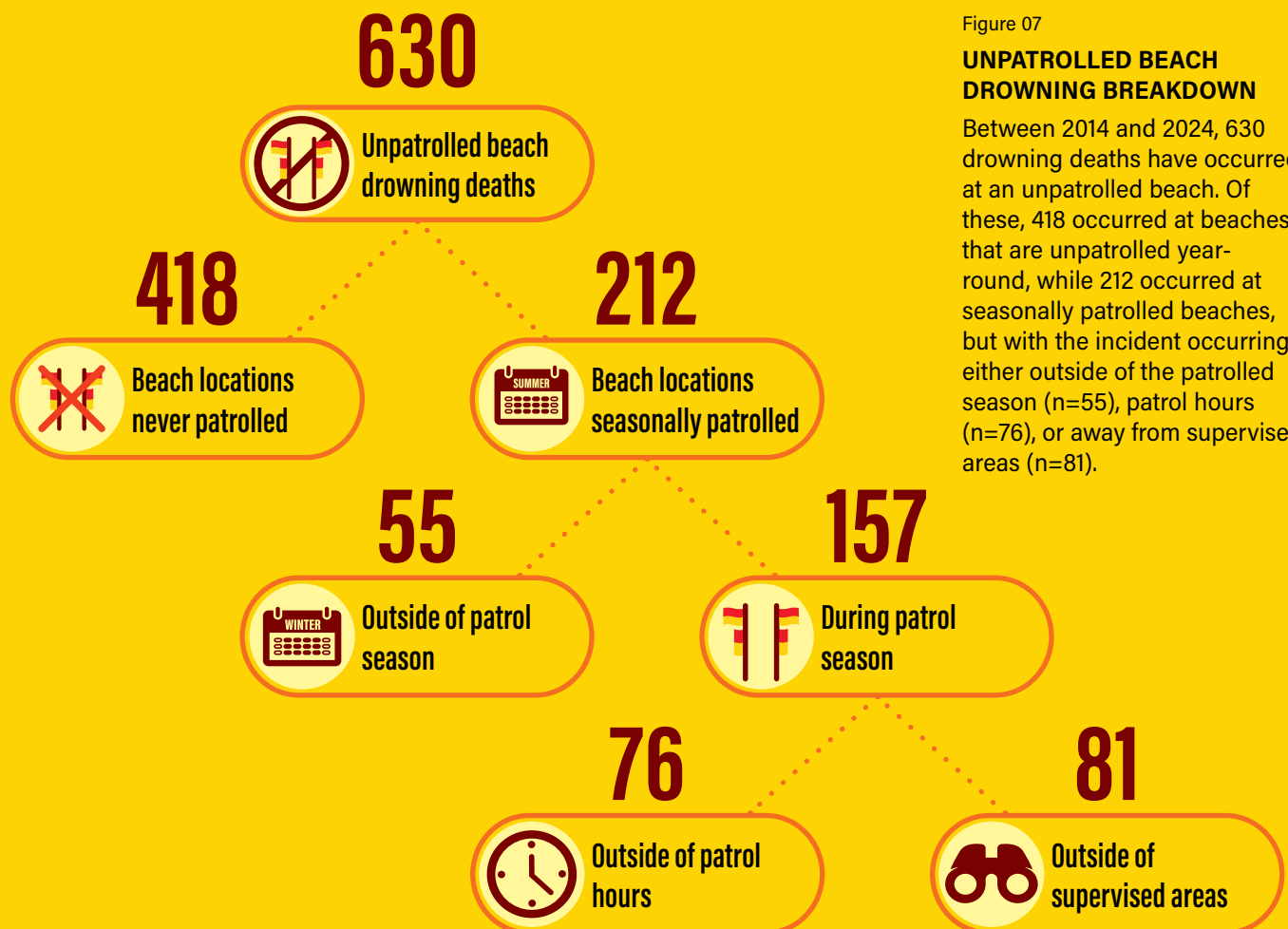


Figure 07

UNPATROLLED BEACH DROWNING BREAKDOWN

Between 2014 and 2024, 630 drowning deaths have occurred at an unpatrolled beach. Of these, 418 occurred at beaches that are unpatrolled year-round, while 212 occurred at seasonally patrolled beaches, but with the incident occurring either outside of the patrolled season (n=55), patrol hours (n=76), or away from supervised areas (n=81).



UNPATROLLED BEACH DROWNING

2014-24: CAUSAL ANALYSIS

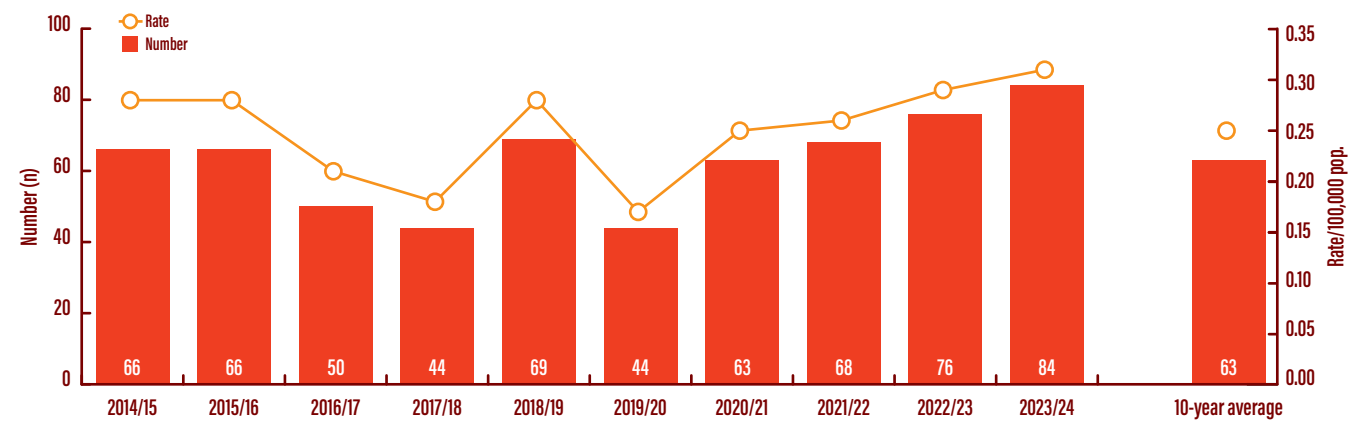


Figure 08

UNPATROLLED BEACH DROWNING TRENDS

A total of 630 drowning deaths have been recorded at unpatrolled beaches in Australia since 2014/15, an average of 63 drowning deaths per year (0.25/100,000 pop.). The highest number of drowning deaths was recorded in 2023/24 (n=84, 0.31/100,000 pop.).

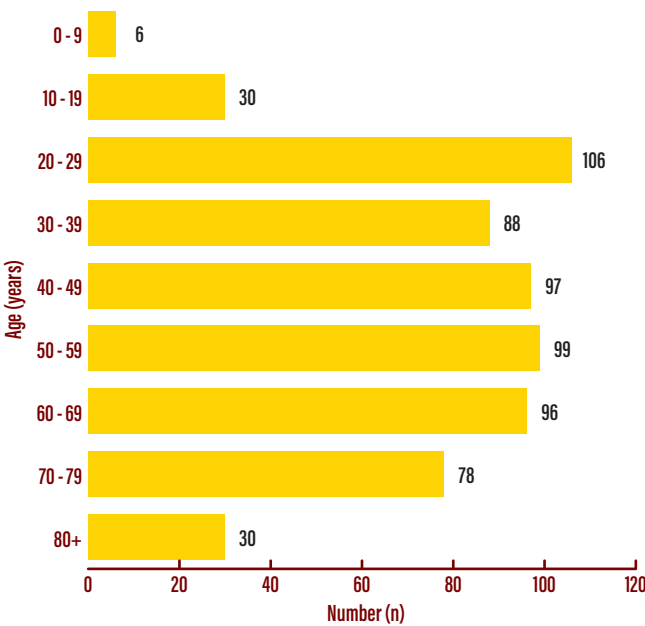


Figure 09

UNPATROLLED BEACH DROWNING BY AGE

Four in five unpatrolled beach drowning deaths occurred among those aged 20 to 69 (78%, n=486), with drowning prevalence relatively equal among those within this age range. The highest number of drowning deaths were recorded among 20-29 year olds (17%, n=106).

KEY DEMOGRAPHICS

630
UNPATROLLED BEACH
DROWNING DEATHS

0.25
DROWNING RATE/100,000 POP.

85%
MALE

15%
FEMALE

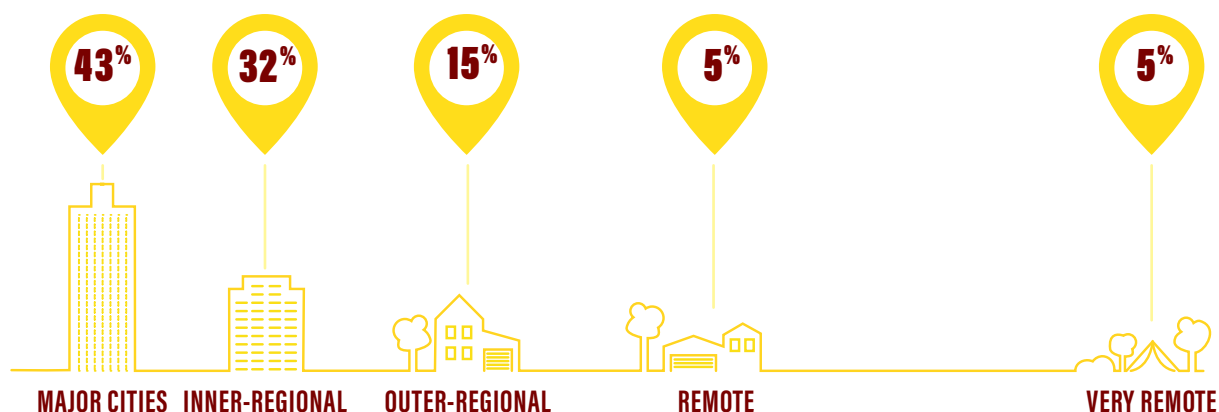


Figure 10

REMOTENESS CLASSIFICATION OF DROWNING LOCATIONS

One in two unpatrolled beach drowning deaths occurred in regional areas (47%, n=293), 43% in major cities, and 10% in remote areas. The remoteness classification of an incident location was coded to the Australian Statistical Geographical Standard of Remoteness.

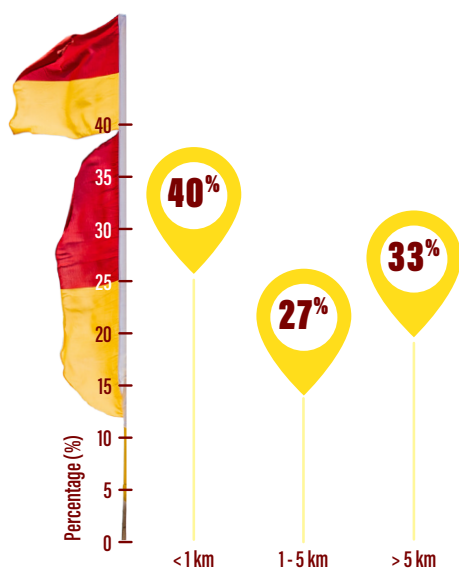


Figure 11

DROWNING DISTANCE FROM SURF LIFE SAVING SERVICE

Three in five unpatrolled beach drowning deaths occurred more than 1km away from a Surf Life Saving service (60%, n=378).

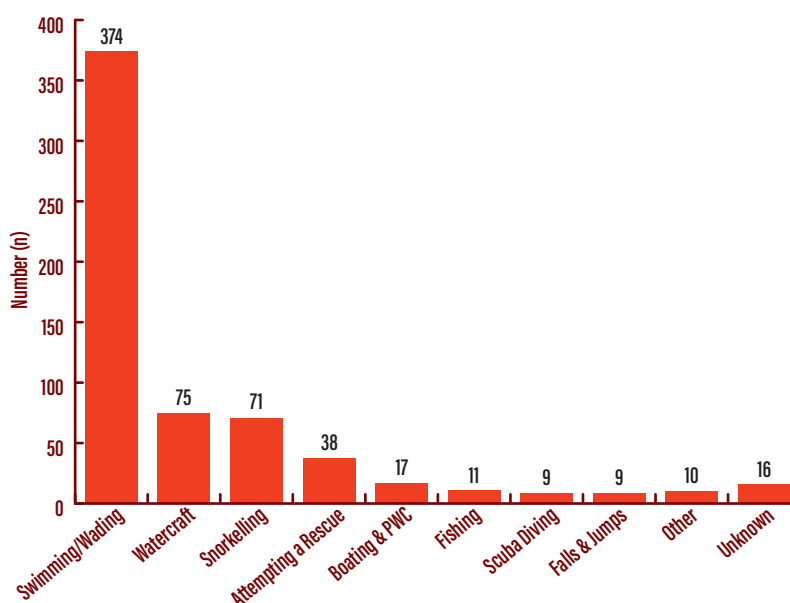


Figure 12

BEACH DROWNING BY ACTIVITY

Swimming and wading recorded the most unpatrolled beach drowning deaths (59%, n=374), followed by watercraft (12%, n=75) and snorkelling (11%, n=71).

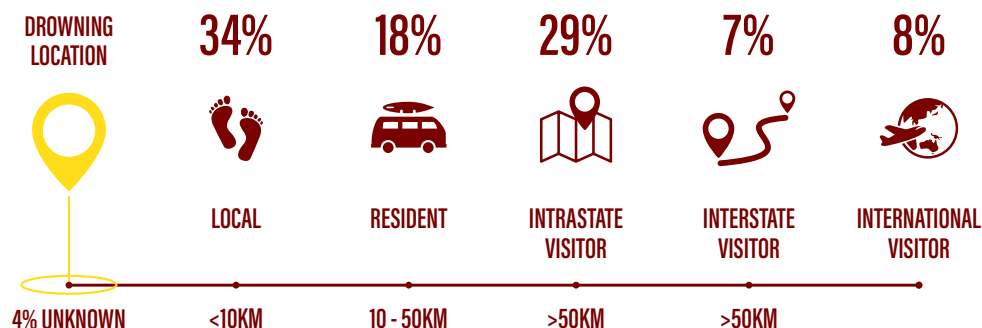


Figure 13

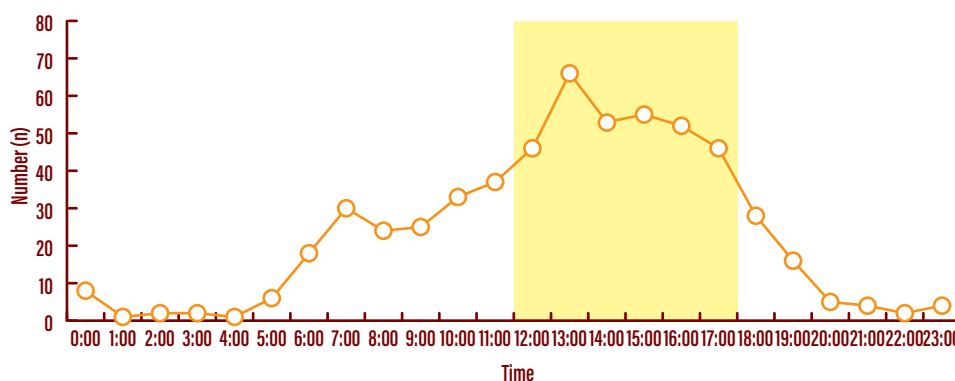
RESIDENCE DISTANCE TO DROWNING LOCATION

One in three decedents lived locally to the incident location (34%, n=206).

Figure 14

DROWNING BY TIME OF DAY

Three in five incidents occurred in the afternoon between 12pm and 6pm (57%, n=318). Incident time was unknown for 66 cases.



35% ON WEEKENDS

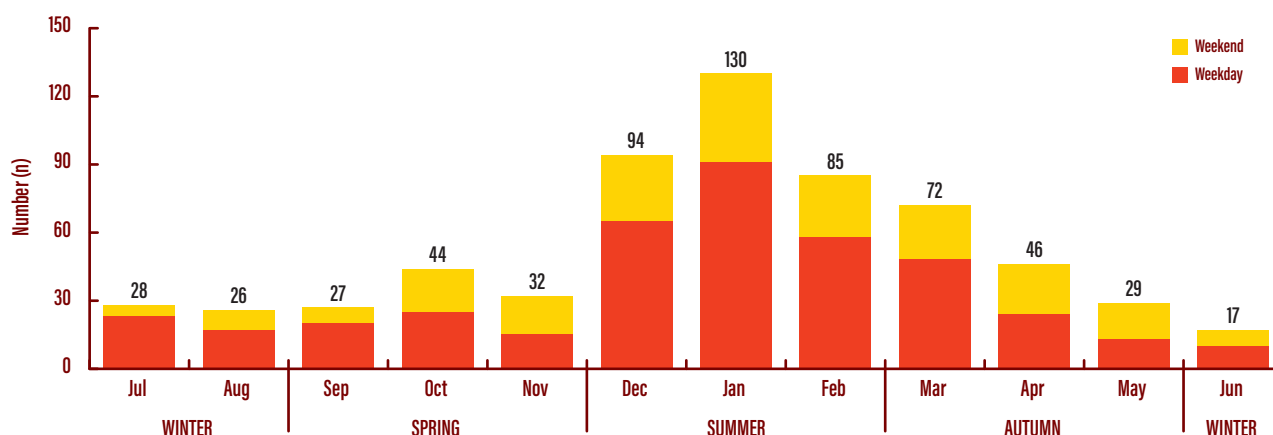


Figure 15

UNPATROLLED BEACH DROWNING BY MONTH

One in two unpatrolled beach drowning deaths occurred during the summer months (49%, n=308), with an additional 23% occurring during Autumn (n=147). One in three drowning deaths occurred on a weekend (35%, n=220).

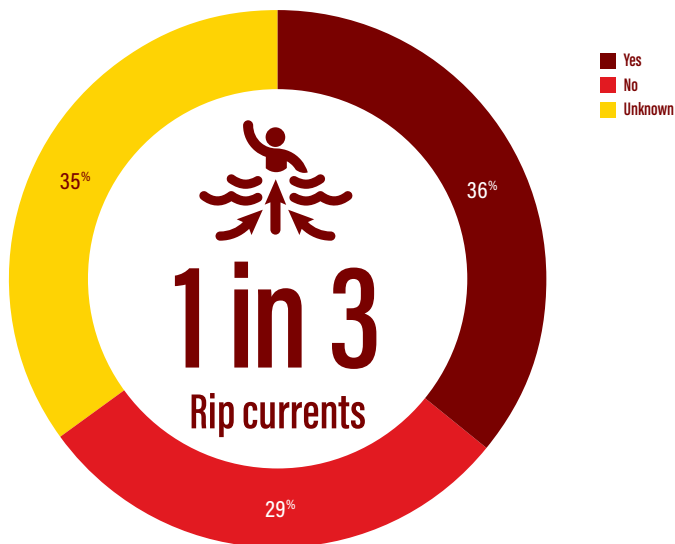


Figure 16

RIP CURRENTS

One in three unpatrolled beach drowning deaths were due to rip currents (36%, n=228), although this number could be higher with rip current involvement unknown for 35% of cases (n=220).

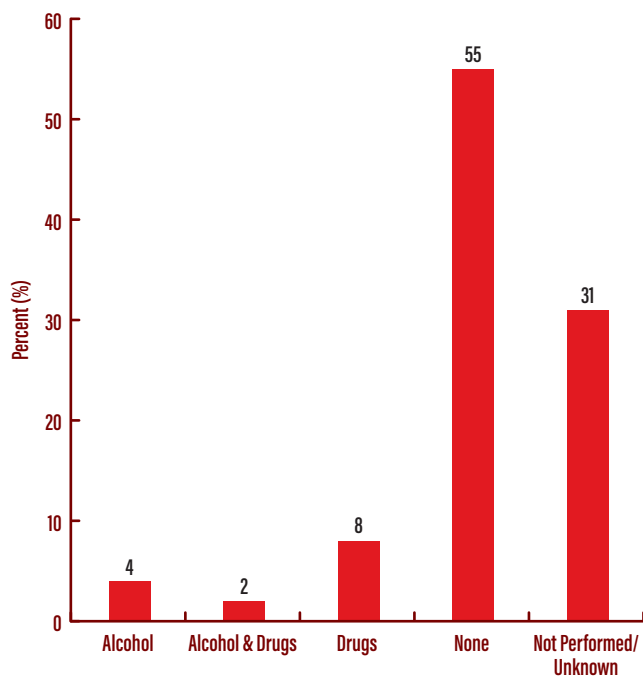


Figure 17

ALCOHOL & DRUGS

Alcohol and drugs are known to contribute to 14% of unpatrolled beach drowning deaths (n=85).

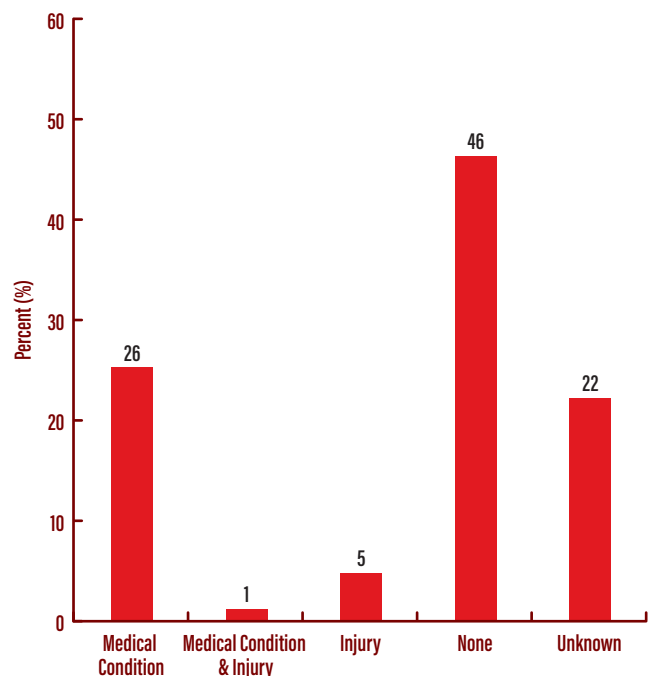


Figure 18

MEDICAL CONDITIONS & INJURY

Medical conditions and injuries are considered co-morbidities in one in three unpatrolled beach drowning deaths (32%, n=202).

VISITATION & BEACH SAFETY BEHAVIOURS

NATIONAL COASTAL SAFETY SURVEY 2024

Australians love the coast. To better understand how the coast is used, SLSA conducts the annual National Coastal Safety Survey to explore coastal visitation, activity participation, behaviours and risk perception. Here we describe statistics about unpatrolled beach use in Australia.

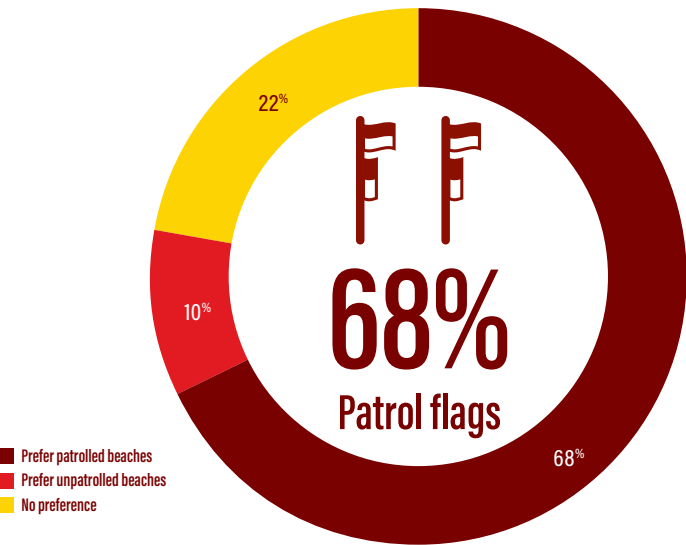


Figure 19

BEACH PREFERENCES

If given the choice, seven in ten Australian adults would prefer to visit a patrolled beach (68%) compared to 10% who prefer unpatrolled beaches. One in five adults have no preference.

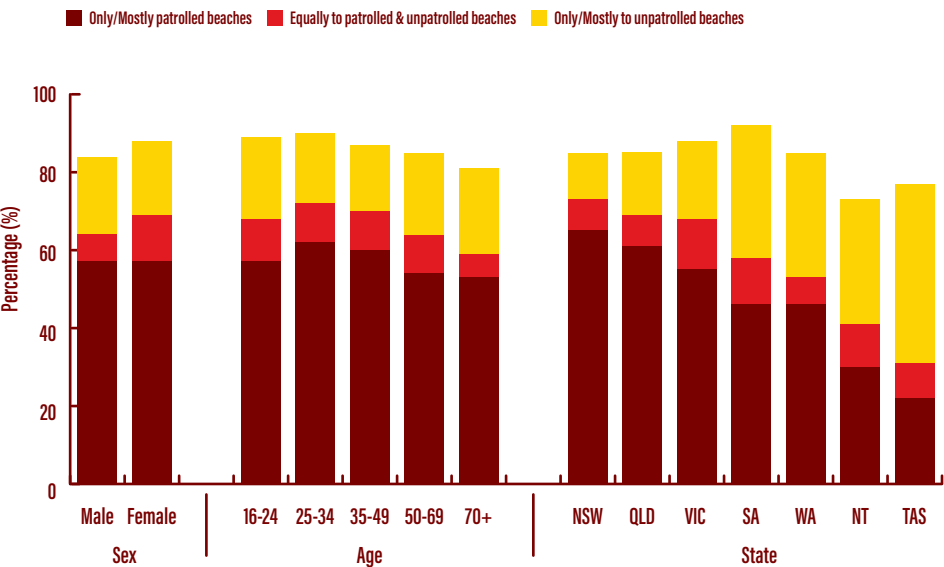


Figure 21

LOCATION OF COASTAL VISITS BY SEX, AGE & STATE

Frequency of visitation to unpatrolled beaches varies by state and is highest among those living in Tasmania, Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia. Unpatrolled beach visitation is equal across sex and age groups, with approximately 20% of coastal visits to an unpatrolled beach.

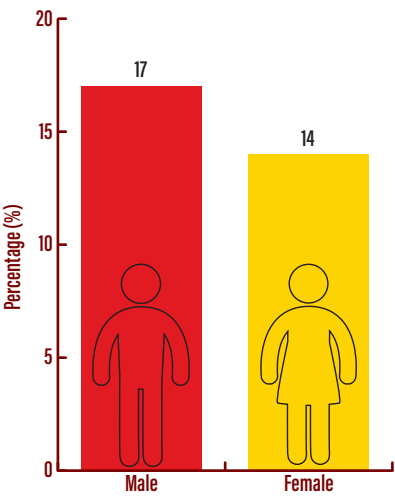


Figure 20

HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED ANY DIFFICULTY IN THE WATER AT AN UNPATROLLED LOCATION BY SEX

More males have reported experiencing difficulty in the water at an unpatrolled location (17%) compared to females (14%).

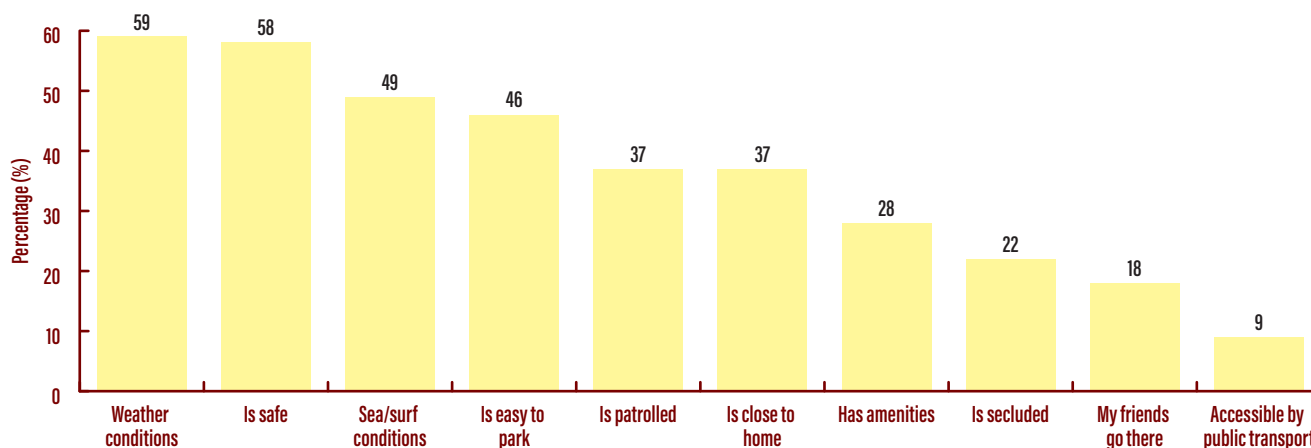


Figure 22

REASONS STATED AS IMPORTANT WHEN CHOOSING A LOCATION TO SWIM ON THE COAST

Three in five people state that weather conditions impact their decision when choosing a location to swim on the coast (59%), followed by is it safe (58%), then sea/surf conditions (49%).

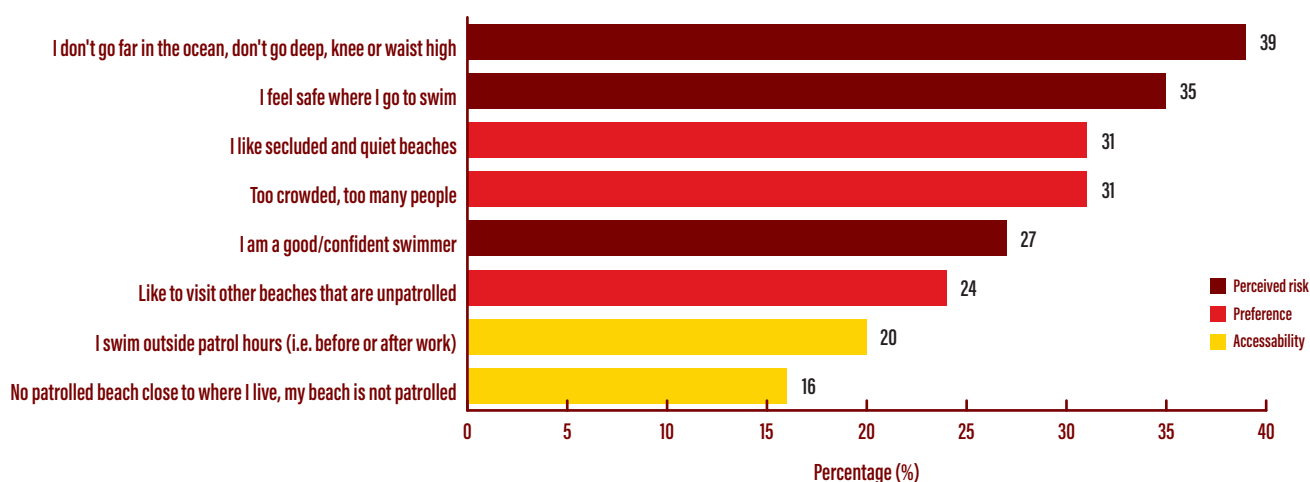


Figure 23

MAIN REASONS SWIMMERS VISIT UNPATROLLED BEACHES

The main reasons swimmers visit unpatrolled beaches relate to low level of perceived risk including that they do not go far into the water (39%) and that they feel safe where they swim (35%). Other reasons relate to preference, including that individuals like secluded areas and that patrolled beaches are too crowded (31% each). Accessibility is also important, but less so than preference and risk perception.

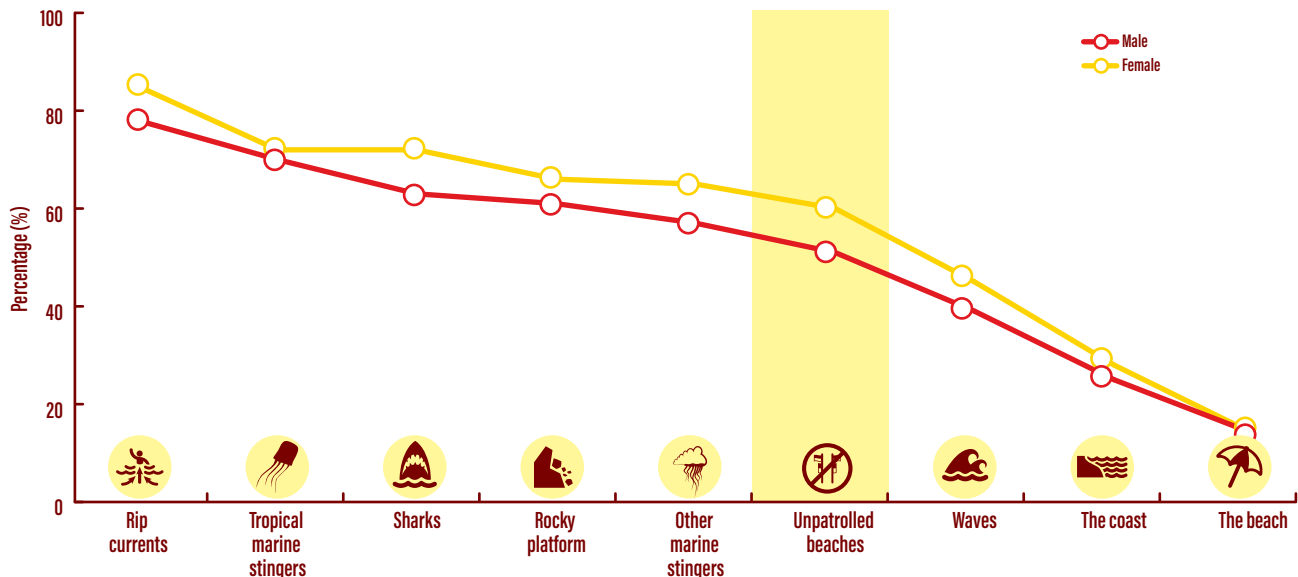


Figure 24

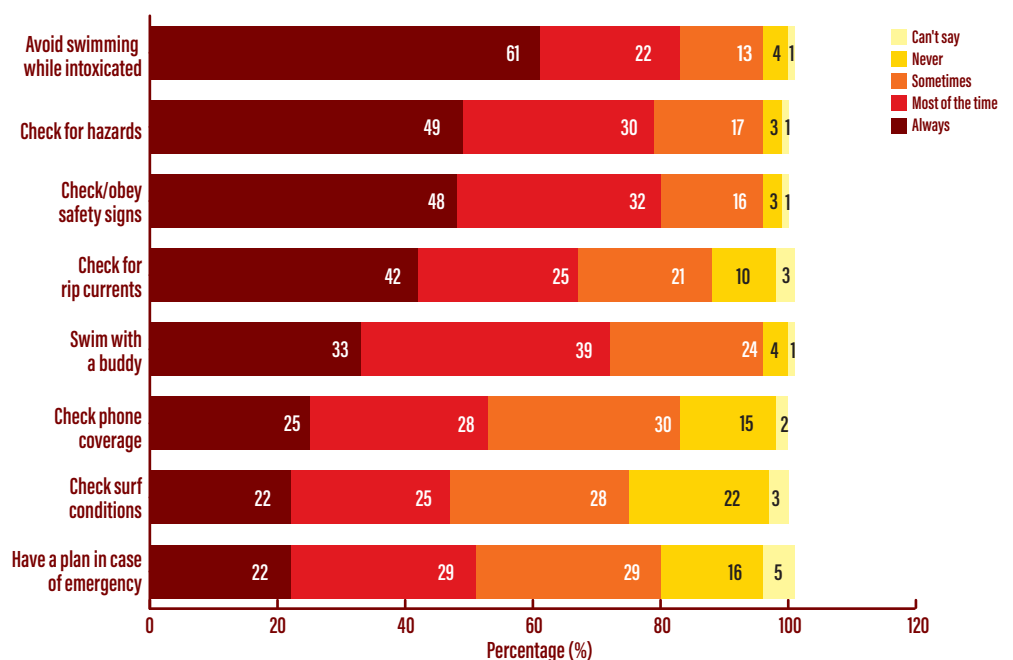
COASTAL HAZARDS RATED EXTREMELY/VERY HAZARDOUS BY SEX

Males perception of coastal hazards is consistently lower than that of females, including risk perceptions of unpatrolled beaches (yellow highlight). Rip currents are reported as the most hazardous along the coast, rated as extremely/very hazardous by 85% of females and 78% of males.

Figure 25

FOLLOWING OF SAFETY PRACTICES WHEN SWIMMING AT UNPATROLLED BEACHES

Swimmers vary with following of safety practices when at unpatrolled beaches. Three in five swimmers always avoid swimming while intoxicated (61%), yet only one in five always check the surf conditions before entering the water (22%) or have a plan in case of emergency (22%).





TARGET DEMOGRAPHICS & BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

TARGET DEMOGRAPHICS



MALES



20-29 & 40-69 YEAR OLDS



SWIMMERS/WADERS



LOCAL RESIDENTS

BEHAVIOURS OF CONCERN

2in3

DO NOT ALWAYS SWIM
WITH A BUDDY

50%

DO NOT ALWAYS CHECK OR
OBEY SAFETY SIGNAGE

3in5

DO NOT ALWAYS CHECK FOR RIP
CURRENTS OR OTHER HAZARDS

78%

DO NOT ALWAYS HAVE A PLAN
IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

DESIRED BEHAVIOUR CHANGE



BRING A BUDDY, NEVER
SWIM ALONE



CHECK & OBEY ALL SAFETY
SIGNAGE, EVEN IF YOU ARE
FAMILIAR WITH THE LOCATION



BEFORE ENTERING THE WATER,
CHECK FOR RIP CURRENTS &
OTHER HAZARDS



PLAN WHAT TO DO IN CASE OF
EMERGENCY (CHECK FOR MOBILE
PHONE RECEPTION, EMERGENCY
RESPONSE BEACONS, AND PUBLIC
RESCUE EQUIPMENT)

STOP LOOK STAY ALIVE

STOP

-  Before you enter the water

LOOK

-  For the beach safety signs and warnings
-  At the conditions and weather forecast
-  For a flotation device to support if yourself or someone in trouble, e.g., this could be a surfboard, bodyboard, pool noodle, inflatable or rescue ring
-  For rip current and other dangers

STAY ALIVE

-  Let someone know your planning to go and when you plan to be back
-  If it's unsafe, don't swim,
-  Never swim alone
-  Know what to do in an emergency
-  Never attempt a rescue without a flotation device
-  Complete the online Beach passport for basic training and education on water safety

Remember: when you swim between the red and yellow flags a lifeguard or lifesaver is looking out for you and help isn't far away.



**BEACH
PASSPORT**

In partnership with



30,727

TOTAL BEACH PASSPORTS COMPLETED



107,598

TOTAL UNIQUE WEBSITE USERS



9MILLION

CAMPAIGN TOTAL COMBINED REACH



**GET IT STAMPED BEFORE
YOU GO IN THE WATER**

beachpassport.org.au

GLOSSARY

Adult For the purpose of this report, adult refers to a person 16 years of age and over.

ALS Australian Lifeguard Service.

Apply First Aid A certification providing the skills and knowledge required to provide a first aid response to a casualty.

Attempting a rescue Trying to retrieve a person in distress and deliver them to a place of safety.

AWSS Australian Water Safety Strategy.

Beach A wave-deposited accumulation of sediment – usually sand, but ranging in size up to boulders, deposited between the upper swash limit and wave base.

Boating Using either a powered vessel or sailing boat for pleasure and/or fishing.

Bystander A person who is present at an incident but not part of it initially.

Coastal Describes the foreshore, seabed, coastal water, and air space above a large body of water (harbour/bay/inlet), including areas up to 3nm offshore and of which the landward boundary is the line of mean high water, except where that line crosses a river/inlet, the landward boundary at that point shall be the point upstream that is calculated by multiplying the width of the river/inlet mouth by five. (Adopted from the Resource Management Amendment Act 1993 New Zealand).

COD Cause of death.

Co-morbidity A term that refers to the occurrence of more than one disorder, disease, injury, or medical condition at the same time.

Decedent A deceased person.

Drowning The process of experiencing respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in liquid; outcomes are classified as death, morbidity, and no morbidity.

Drowning death A fatal drowning incident arising from the process of respiratory impairment as a result of submersion/immersion in liquid.

Drowning rate A comparative rate of drowning deaths to the size of the population for a given area or activity.

Drugs A medicine or other substance which has a physiological effect when ingested or otherwise introduced to the body. The category includes therapeutic, over-the-counter and illicit drugs.

Falls (trips/slips) Events that result in a person coming to rest inadvertently in the water, on the ground or other lower level.

First Aid Assessments and interventions that can be performed by a bystander (or by the patient) with minimal to no equipment.

Fishing The act of attempting to catch fish from anywhere.

Hazard A source of potential harm.

Incident Any unplanned event requiring lifesaving services intervention.

International Describes an individual who is confirmed to reside overseas and/or is a temporary visitor to Australia.

IRB Inflatable rescue boat.

IRD Incident report database. A web-based portal used by SLS services to electronically record incident reports.

JRB Jet rescue boat.

Jump(ing) The activity of launching off a cliff, rock platform, pier, jetty. Aka tombstoning (UK/Europe/North America).

Lifeguard An individual who undertakes patrols at a beach or another aquatic environment. He/she is typically a salaried member, qualified in public safety and aquatic rescue.

Lifeguard Service A paid lifesaving service provided privately, by local government, or contracted through the Australian Lifeguard Service.

Lifesaving Service A coordinated group that exists to provide aquatic safety services to the public. This includes Surf Life Saving Clubs, Lifeguards, SurfCom, RWCs, RIBs, JRBs, ORBs, Rescue Helicopters and 4WD units.

Local Government Area (LGA) Also known as local councils, LGAs include cities, towns, shires, municipalities, or boroughs.

Medical For the purpose of this report, medical refers to an aquatic incident that was caused by a medical episode, e.g., a heart attack or epileptic seizure.

NCIS National Coronial Information System.

NCSS The National Coastal Safety Survey conducted annually to gather information about Australian coastal participation, swimming ability, risk perception, behaviours, and attitudes to coastal safety.

Ocean The seabed, water, and air space above the water between 3nm and 12nm (the Australian Territorial Sea) offshore.

ORB Offshore rescue boat.

Patrol Service undertaken to monitor activities in/around an aquatic environment and respond accordingly through either preventative actions or rescue operations.

Patrol flags Red and yellow horizontally divided flags which are set after performing a risk assessment to determine the most suitable area for swimming. The flags identify a zone for

swimming and bodyboarding within a patrolled location.

Patrolled location A location supervised by a lifesaving service.

PWC Personal watercraft, also known as jet ski.

Rescue The retrieval of a person in distress, delivering them to a place of safety and the application of first aid and basic life support as may be required.

Resuscitation Prevention or restoration of life by establishing and maintaining a person's airway, breathing and circulation.

RIB Rigid-hull inflatable boat.

Rip current A seaward flowing current of water moving through a surf zone.

RWC Rescue watercraft.

Scuba diving Swimming underwater with the aid of scuba equipment for recreational or commercial purposes.

Seasonal patrol A location where the provision of patrol is provided for a period of the year. This patrol period varies between regions due to climatic factors, but typically occurs during the summer months.

Service season and hours Vary between states due to climatic factors, but in the context of this report, the season is for the period July 2023 to June 2024.

SLS Surf Life Saving

Snorkelling Swimming with a snorkel and face mask. Includes freediving and spearfishing.

SurfCom SLS radio communications centre that assists in managing the communications of lifesaving operations and data collection.

Surf lifesaver An individual who undertakes patrols at a beach or other aquatic environment. They are typically a nonsalaried member qualified in public safety and aquatic rescue.

Support Operations Rapid response rescue units not affiliated to any one Surf Life Saving Club.

Surf Life Saving Club A SLS affiliated not-for-profit organisation that has volunteer members who provide coastal safety services to the community.

Swimming Moving through water by moving the body or parts of the body.

Toxicology The measurement and analysis of potential toxins, intoxicating or banned substances, and prescription medications present in a person's body.

Unpatrolled beach A location without lifeguard surveillance or lifeguard on duty.

Wading Walking through water while partially immersed.

Watercraft A piece of non-powered recreational equipment used in water. Examples include surfboards, stand-up paddle boards, bodyboards, windsurfers or kayaks.



REFERENCES

METHODOLOGY

The Coastal Safety Brief – Unpatrolled Beaches contains information on lifesaving service provision, the community behaviours and attitudes towards recreating at unpatrolled beaches, and unpatrolled beach drowning deaths that have occurred along Australia's coastline over the 10-year period of 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2024. Data are from multiple sources and are correct as of 23 September 2024. All care is taken to ensure the statistical information included within this report is correct. However, pending the outcome of ongoing coronial investigations and as SLS state/territory entities update their operational information, this data may be amended. Data in figures may not always add up to 100% due to rounding. Mortality rates were calculated as the number of deaths divided by the population (per head of 100,000 people) from Australian Bureau of Statistics, or by the number of activity participants (per 100,000 activity participants 16-years+) estimated from Surf Life Saving Australia's National Coastal Safety Survey 2024. Service operation data (i.e., Lifeguard and Surf Life Saving service hours) were obtained from service hours listed on beachsafe.org.au.

National Coastal Safety Report 2024

The Surf Life Saving Australia National Coastal Safety Report (NCSR) is published annually and contains information on Australian community behaviours and attitudes to the coast; SLS capability and membership capacity; rescues and emergency response; and coastal drowning deaths. The NCSR2024 presents statistics from the period of 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2024. The data presented in the Coastal Safety Brief: Unpatrolled Beaches extends on this and includes longitudinal analyses from unpatrolled beach drowning deaths that have occurred between 1 July 2014 to 31 June 2024 to explore causal factors over time. The main source of mortality data are coroners cases accessed via the NCIS database. The limitations of the mortality data in this current report are not the final figures as 92% of 2023/24 coastal drowning deaths and 69% of 2023/24 coastal fatalities recorded remain open cases and 32% of 2023/24 cases do not yet have a cause of death (COD) listed.

National Coastal Safety Survey 2024

The annual Surf Life Saving Australia National Coastal Safety Survey (NCSS) collects Information about community swimming ability, behaviours and attitudes to coastal safety, risk perceptions, safety strategies and rescues. The survey is conducted by OmniPoll Market Research and is run online each April among a nationally representative sample of approximately 3,084 respondents aged 16 and older. The

study is carried out in compliance with ISO 20252 - Market, Social and Opinion Research. To reflect the population distribution, survey results are postweighted (on age, sex, geographic strata and education and projected to Australian Bureau of Statistics data. The data presented in the Coastal Safety Brief: Unpatrolled Beaches was derived from data extracted from NCSS2024. Data illustrated in figures may not always add up to 100% due to rounding.

REFERENCES

Australian Bureau of Statistics. National, state and territory population [Internet]. Canberra: ABS; 2024 March [cited 2024 September 23]. Available from: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population/latest-release>.

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