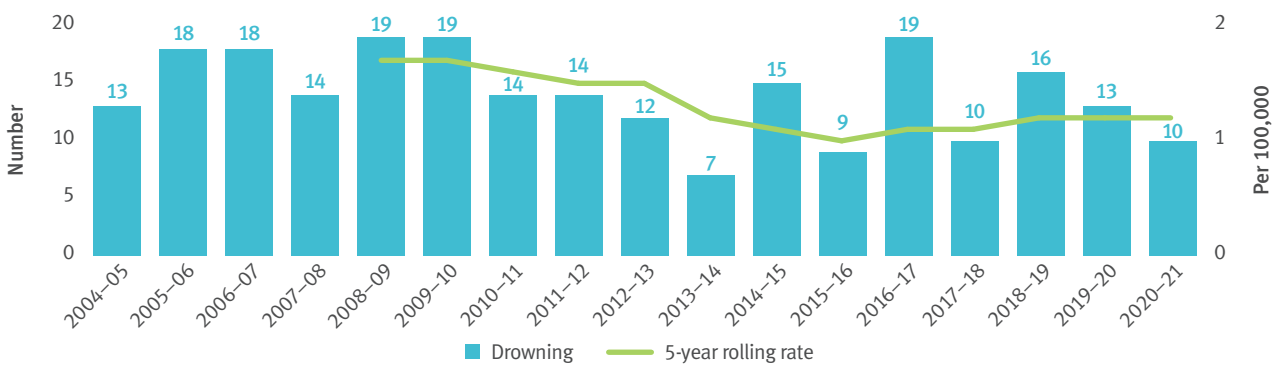


4 Drowning

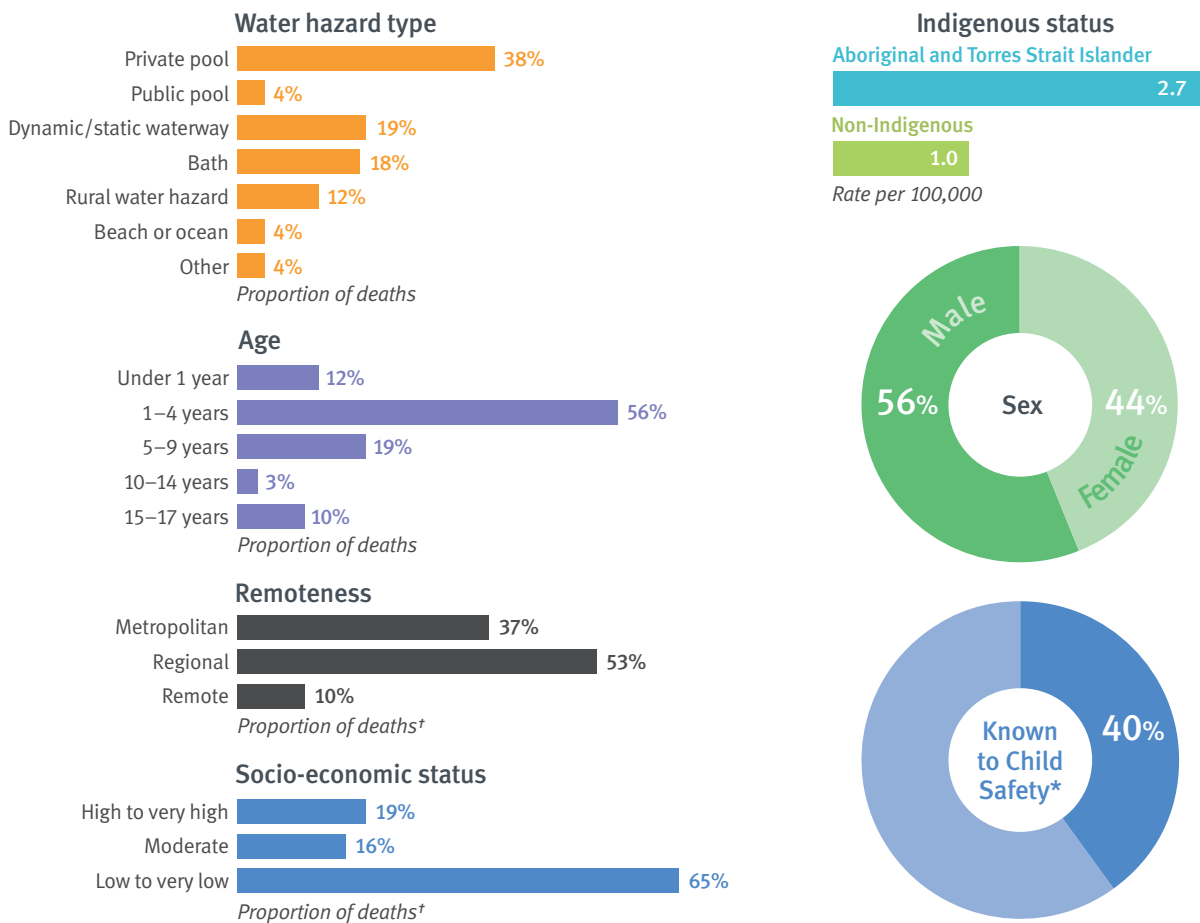
Overview

- 10 drowning deaths of children and young people in 2020–21.
- Children aged 1–4 years are most at risk of drowning, predominately in backyard swimming pools and rural water hazards.
- Other risk groups identified:
 - infants and young children if unsupervised while bathing
 - young children around pools at the homes of extended family, friends, or neighbours
 - young people who were international visitors or had recently moved to Australia.

Drowning deaths in Queensland



Five-year summary (2016–21)



Notes: Counting is by date of death registration. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

* in the 12 months prior to death † of Qld resident deaths only

Key findings

During 2020–21, the drowning deaths of 10 children and young people were registered in Queensland, at a rate of 1.2 deaths per 100,000 children aged 0–17 years over a 5-year period.

Table A.6 in **Appendix A** provides summary data and key characteristics for drowning deaths in the last 5 years.

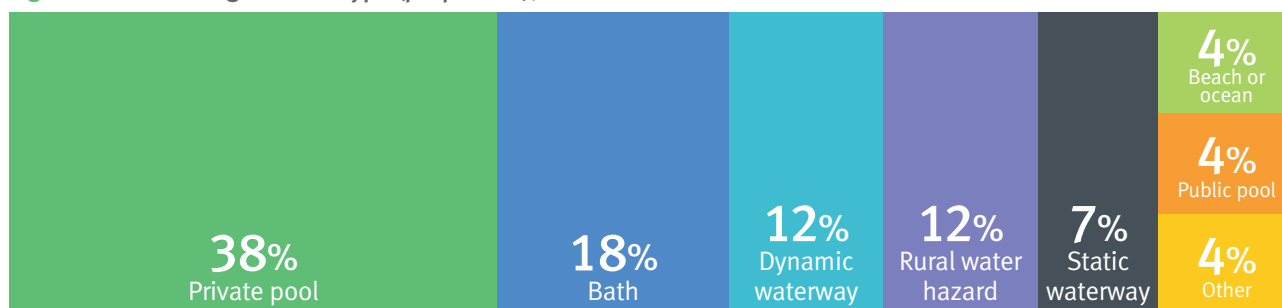
Types of drowning-related deaths

During 2020–21, 2 pool drownings and 8 non-pool related death incidents were recorded for the period.

As illustrated in Figure 4.1, over the last 5 years the most common incident locations from child drownings was in private pools (38%) followed by bathtubs (18%). Almost all of the 26 private pool incidents were residential (homes, townhouse or units), with 1 in a resort pool. Dynamic waterways (e.g. rivers, creeks) made up 12% of the incidents and static waterways (e.g. lakes, reservoirs) were 7%.

Rural water hazard incidents (e.g. rural dams) has risen to be 12% of drownings over the past 5 years with 75% of these occurring in the in the last 2 years.

Figure 4.1: Drowning incident type (proportion), 2016–17 to 2020–21



Notes: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Sex

During 2020–21, 4 male children and 6 female children died in drowning incidents. Over the last 5 years, however, males made up 56% of children who drowned, while 44% were female.

Age

During 2020–21, children aged 1–4 years made up the largest group of drowning deaths (5 deaths, 50%)—a pattern which has been found in all previous reporting periods, and an indication of the vulnerability of this age group. Drowning was the leading cause of death for children aged 1–4 years over the last 5 years.

Risk factors and age

Under 1 year

Eight children under the age of 1 year have drowned over the last 5 years, accounting for 12% of all child drowning deaths. All 8 deaths were bathing incidents, and in 4 of these the infant was co-bathing with other children at the time. All 8 infants were not being actively supervised by an adult at the time of the incident, with the adult supervisor aware of the infant's presence in the bath in 7 of the incidents.

1–4 years

Over the last 5 years, 38 children aged 1–4 years drowned, accounting for 56% of all drowning deaths over this period. Twenty-three of these deaths (61%) occurred in private pools, while 6 deaths occurred in rural water hazards (16%).

Pool fencing was non-compliant in 22 of the 23 incidents of private pool drownings. Non-compliant fencing includes the absence of fencing, fencing or gate defects or propping pool gates open. The circumstances of pool fencing and the number of drowning deaths for each is as follows:

- 17 with pool fencing believed to be non-compliant (including 6 where a gate was also propped open)
- 3 with the gate propped open and pool fencing which was otherwise compliant
- 1 where the pool fencing was compliant, and gate latched
- 2 with pool fencing absent—both were portable pools which were required to comply with pool fencing legislation.

Of the 23 private pool drowning deaths, 15 occurred at the child's usual place of residence, while 8 occurred at the homes of extended family, friends, or neighbours.

Non-pool locations also presented dangers to young children. Fifteen 1–4 year olds drowned in non-pool incidents including rural water hazards (6), bathtubs (3), and objects containing water (3).

Fifteen of the 38 1–4 year olds who drowned were known to be in, on or around water hazards (bathtubs, pools, dynamic and static waterways, beach or ocean, objects containing water and rural water hazards). None of those 15 children were within arm's reach, or being actively supervised by a capable supervisor, at the time of the incident.

5–9 years

Thirteen children aged 5–9 years drowned over the last 5 years, accounting for 19% of all drowning deaths. Six (46%) of those children were aged 5 years. The drownings involved a variety of water hazards, including pools, dynamic and static waterways, rural water hazards and baths.

In 10 of the 13 drownings (including 5 of the 5-year olds), the child was known to be in, on or around water. Of those 10, 9 were either unsupervised or not actively supervised.

10–17 years

Nine young people aged 10–17 years drowned over the 5 years (2 aged 10–14 years and 7 aged 15–17 years), accounting for 13% of all drowning deaths. The drownings occurred across a variety of water hazards, including pools, waterways (static and dynamic) and the beach/ocean.

Five of the young people were international visitors or had recently moved to Australia. Four of the young people were identified by their families as weak or non-swimmers.

Preventative factors

Supervision

Lapses in supervision of young children in, on or around water hazards has been found to be a factor in drowning deaths of young children. When a young child is known to be in, on or around water, the Royal Life Saving Society of Australia recommends the use of active supervision. Active supervision means a supervisor focusing all of their attention on the child/ren all of the time, when they are in, on or around the water. Parents need to be within arm's reach, interacting with the child/ren.³²

A level of supervision is still required even when a child is not known to be in, on or around water. Young children can be highly mobile and may circumvent barriers to access water features. Reliance only on pool fences and gates to prevent drowning is not recommended, as breakdowns in protections can occur, such as pool gates being propped open or becoming non-compliant due to wear and tear. Accordingly, it is essential children aged under 5 years are regularly checked on by an active supervisor.

Heightened supervision is advisable when away from the home environment, such as visiting other homes with pools, or in the period after moving to a new residence.

³² Royal Life Saving Australia (no date) *Keep Watch Actions*, RLSA website, accessed 19 August 2021.

Pool fencing

Pools in residential settings pose a considerable risk of drowning to young children. Graduated changes to Queensland pool fencing laws have increased the obligation on pool owners to enhance the safety of pool areas. In accordance with the requirements:

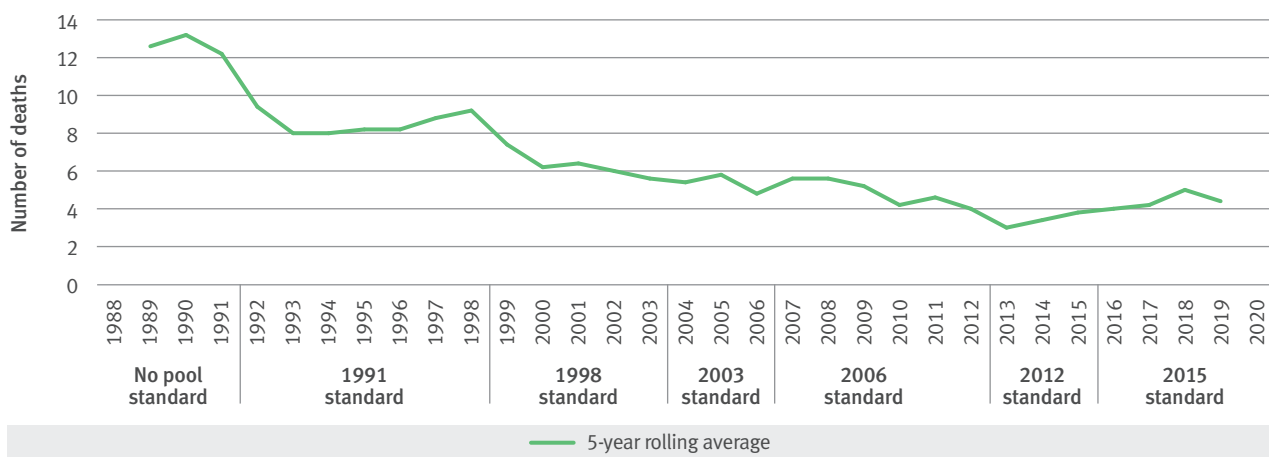
- compliant fencing is required of all pools and spas—including portable pools and spas capable of being filled with 300 millimetres or more of water
- the latest CPR sign must be displayed and be easily visible to people in or near the pool all pools must be registered on the Pools Safety Register, and
- a local government inspection is mandatory following any immersion incidents involving a child under the age of 5.

The effectiveness of swimming pool fencing is dependent upon fencing and gates being compliant with the regulation, in good working order and used correctly (such as not propping open a pool gate).

Figure 4.2 tracks the number of drowning deaths over time of children aged 0–4 years in Queensland private pools against changes to fencing requirements. A number of changes in pool fencing standards have occurred—from no standards in place prior to 1991, to requirements for new pools to have fencing, later extended to existing pools; changes in requirements such as fence height; and more recently in 2009, compliance requirements for registration and inspection. The 5-year rolling average shows a decline proceeding these changes in legislation with regulation seen to have possibly impacted on the number of drownings. However from 2015 the number of private pool drowning deaths in children aged 0–4 years has seen a gradual increase until the 2020 calendar year. This highlights the importance of age-appropriate supervision being used in conjunction with compliant physical barriers is critical to preventing drowning deaths in this age group.

The Royal Life Saving Society of Australia (RLSSA) promotes a life stages approach to drowning prevention, allowing for targeted strategies that recognise risk priorities for each age group, with ‘active supervision’ being a key preventative factor.

Figure 4.2: Drowning deaths of children 0–4 years in Queensland private pools by applicable pool standard (5-year rolling average), 1986–1990 to 2016–2020



Data sources: Queensland Injury Surveillance Unit 2008, *Injury Bulletin: Domestic pool immersion in Queensland children under 5 years of age*. No. 104; Queensland Child Death Register (2004–20)

Safe play areas to reduce rural drownings

Rural water hazards, such as dams and troughs, may not be recognised as presenting a drowning risk and are often at a distance from the family home. As children love water play and can travel significant distances to access water, any body of water should be considered a potential risk regardless of its location.

Easy access to water and lack of direct adult supervision are the main factors in child drowning deaths in rural settings.

There have been 26 deaths of children aged under 5 years in rural water hazards since 2004.

Drowning prevention is most effective when strategies are multi-faceted. Active supervision is the most effective strategy, but to maintain this continuously is not realistic. Children can also be taught from a young age about nearby dangers and 'no go' areas. Establishing a safe play area in or around the family home can act as a critical means of preventing access to water hazards.

A safe play area should be securely fenced, high enough and constructed of materials appropriate to make it difficult for a child to climb. The area should be fitted with a self-closing, self-latching gate that remains closed when not being attended to.

Royal Life Saving's **Keep Watch@The Farm** initiative is aimed at preventing children aged 0 to 4 years from drowning by getting parents and carers to undertake four simple **Keep Watch actions**: Supervise, Restrict, Teach and Respond.

Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030

A new national Water Safety Strategy was launched in May 2021, with an aim to significantly reduce the drowning rate in Australia.

Key findings of the Strategy include:

- for every fatal drowning, there are 3 non-fatal drowning incidents
- males drown at a rate 4 times that of females
- 1-year-old toddlers record the highest drowning rate of any age
- rivers and lakes account for 36% of drowning deaths
- coastal environments (beaches, ocean and rock) account for 41% of drowning deaths
- 23% of drowning deaths occur while swimming and recreating
- 61% of drowning deaths occur outside of major cities
- fatal drowning rate has reduced by 26% over the last 10 years
- child (0–4 years) fatal drowning rate has reduced by 50% over the last 10 years.

The new Strategy seeks to raise awareness around non-fatal drowning incidents, encourage communities to create localised water safety plans and promote access to swimming and water safety skills for all Australians including refugees, migrants and those living in regional areas.

To stay safe around water, the Australian Water Safety Council urges all Australians to:

- supervise children at all times in, on and around water
- learn swimming, water safety and lifesaving skills
- wear a lifejacket when boating, rock fishing or paddling
- swim at a patrolled beach between the red and yellow flags
- avoid alcohol and drugs around water.

More information can be found at [Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030](#).

Queensland Ambulance Service data

Table 4.1 presents data on ambulance responses for fatal and non-fatal immersion injuries of children in the last year. There were a total of 304 incidents. Almost half (46%) of all immersion incidents involving children occurred in swimming pools. Immersion incidents were most common in the 1–4 year age category, and in this age group, the majority (67%) of incidents occurred in swimming pools. For children under 1 year of age, bathtubs were the most commonly identified water hazard for immersion incidents.

Table 4.1: Queensland Ambulance Service responses to immersion incidents (number), 2020–21

Type of incident	Under 1 year	1–4 years	5–9 years	10–14 years	15–17 years	Total
Pool	*	93	19	19	5	136
Bath	25	15	*	*	*	40
Beach/ocean	0	5	6	19	14	44
Other immersion	7	25	12	20	12	76
Total	32	138	37	58	31	296

Source: Queensland Ambulance Service (Aug-2021)

* Not reported for numbers less than 5 and excluded from totals.

Notes: Numbers in table do not add to the total number of immersion incidents attended by Queensland Ambulance Service (n = 304) as cells with less than 5 are not shown, and were excluded from table totals.