

INTRODUCTION

Bystanders who drown during a rescue attempt in aquatic waterways are becoming an increasingly important issue within drowning prevention.

In the Australian context, the majority of these incidents occur in coastal water ways.

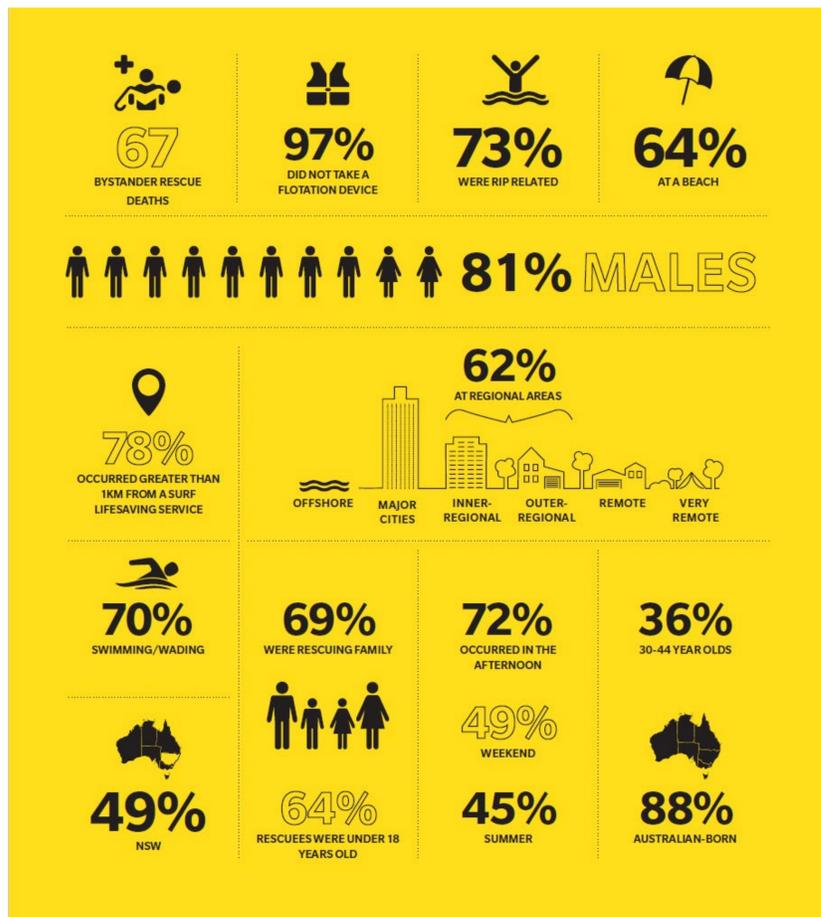
This study documents and characterizes bystander rescuer fatalities within Australian coastal waterways that occurred between 1 July 2004 and 30 June 2019 in order to provide suggestions for future public safety interventions involving bystander rescuers.

METHODS

SLSA's National Fatality Database

Surf Life Saving Australia curate a National Fatality Database which collates information on all deaths that have occurred around the Australian coast since July 1st 2004. The primary data source is the National Coronial Information System (NCIS) is an electronic database of deaths notified to Australian and New Zealand Coroners for which the Department of Justice and Community Safety is the source organisation of the data.

Data on decedent and proximate circumstances were collated from the NCIS (including coroner's findings, police narrative of circumstances, autopsy and toxicology reports), media reports and Surf Life Saving Australia's SurfGuard Incident Report Database.



RESULTS

Sixty-seven bystander rescuer fatalities in coastal waterways were reported during the 15-year period, an average of 4.5 per year, which is a significant proportion of the five fatalities previously reported across all Australian waterways.

The majority of coastal bystander rescuer fatality incidents occurred in the state of New South Wales (49%), at beaches (64%), in regional or remote areas (71%), more than 1 km from the nearest lifesaving service (78%), during summer (45%), in the afternoon (72%), in the presence of rip currents (73%), and did not involve the use of flotation devices to assist rescue (97%).

Most coastal bystander rescuer decedents were Australian residents (88%) born in Australia/Oceania (68%), males (81%), aged between 30–44 years old (36%), visitors to the location (55%), either family (69%) or friends (15%) of the rescuee(s), and were attempting to rescue someone younger than 18 years old (64%).



Nobody plans to get into trouble, however too many people drown while enjoying our coast each year. SLSA are asking everyone to adopt a STOP, LOOK, and PLAN approach, as understanding the situation around you could save your life.

If you find yourself in a situation where you may be a bystander rescuer, don't rush in. Take a moment to STOP, LOOK and PLAN what you should do. Depending on the situation you could:

- Call for help (000)
- Seek assistance from others, such as surfers
- Avoid a contact rescue where possible – try a 'non-contact' rescue if you can and throw them something that floats or give them calm instructions how to get back to safety
- If you must enter the water, always take a flotation device with you (e.g. boogieboard, angel ring, esky lid)
- Learn how to provide CPR
- Supervise children on, in and around water
- Keep young children within arms reach
- Where possible, swim between the red and yellow flags

WHAT TO DO:

- 1) Call for help
- 2) Seek assistance from others
- 3) Try non-contact rescue or take a flotation device
- 4) Learn CPR
- 5) Supervise children
- 6) Swim between the red and yellow flags

DISCUSSION

- Bystander rescues are highly emotive, often involving family intervention, which makes them complex to prevent.
- They are particularly important as 'anyone' can be a rescuer.
- There are no targeted safety interventions or education campaigns that address bystander rescues in Australia.
- This study has provided a valuable profiles of bystander rescue fatalities in Australian coastal waterways that allow specific recommendations to reduce these incidents.
- Future interventions should target beach locations, especially at popular regional holiday locations, where surf lifesaving services are not present.
- Bystander rescue safety messaging must emphasise the importance of a flotation device (e.g. a boogie board) while visiting a beach.
- Rip currents play a significant role in bystander rescuer fatalities on Australian beaches and future interventions should aim to improve beachgoer awareness and recognition of this hazard.
- Education that trains bystanders how to conduct a safe rescue (preferably non-contact) with regular refresher courses to maintain skills has been highlighted as a key strategy to reduce the number of fatal bystander rescues in Australia.
- Future focus on the psychology of the bystander rescuer needed to engage community in effective future safety interventions.



Draw the line on Rips.

Stop. Look. Plan.

Thousands of people are caught in rips every year, and too many of them drown. Before you cross the line, STOP to check for rips. LOOK for other dangers. PLAN how to stay safe.

Draw the line at beachsafe.org.au

