

Towards a Drowning-Free Nation

Australia 2025



Prepared by
AQUATOTS

Highest Toll
in more than
two Decades

357

Drowning Deaths in
2024-25

Drowning Rate

↑ 39%
increase

Since 2017-2018

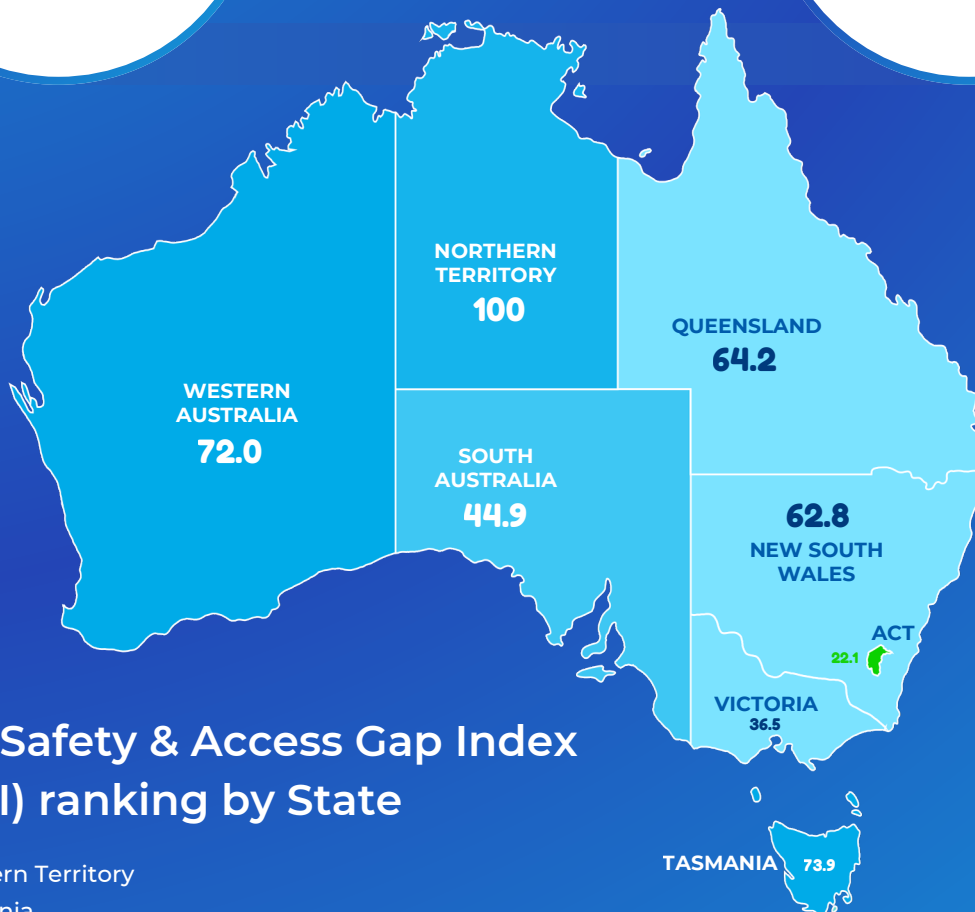
15.2%

Adults

Swimming is the only activity in the top
five for both adults and children

22.9%

Children



Swim Safety & Access Gap Index (SSAGI) ranking by State

- 1 Northern Territory
- 2 Tasmania
- 3 Western Australia
- 4 Queensland
- 5 New South Wales
- 6 South Australia
- 7 Victoria
- 8 Australian Capital Territory

Higher SSAGI score indicates larger gap between safety need and lesson capacity (includes risk, access shortage, and demand)

Data Source - AQUATOTS SSAGI 2025; Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database; AusPlay 2024; ABS; CABEE

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Executive Summary

- Australia's drowning rate has rebounded sharply after a historic low in 2017-18 (below 1.0 per 100,000). **357 people lost in 2024-25**, the highest toll in more than two decades.
- Swimming is the only activity in the top five for both adults and children (adult participation **15.2%**, child participation **22.9%**). Yet participation drops sharply after adolescence.
- Risk is no longer just a childhood issue, people aged **55-74** now account for a large share of deaths and 75+ cohort is the fastest-growing.
- To identify areas where safety needs exceed capacity, we created the Swim Safety & Access Gap Index (**SSAGI**). SSAGI combines three normalised indicators. **It is a unique national metric created by AQUATOTS. SSAGI measures where safety needs exceed lesson capacity.**
- Northern Territory shows the largest gap; Australian Capital Territory the smallest.
- Australia will not reach a “**drowning-free**” future (by 2030) by focusing on children alone. We need to keep teens in lessons, reactivate adults (especially **45+**), and grow capacity where SSAGI shows shortages. Embed water-safety skills like rips, currents, cold-water shock, and lifejackets with stroke development.

Foreword



Alena Sarri

SWIMMING ENTHUSIAST, EDUCATOR,
AND ADVOCATE FOR CHILD SAFETY

Swimming has always been more than a sport to me - it's a joy, a discipline, and most importantly, a life skill. At AQUATOTS, we've spent years helping kids feel safe in the water. But I sensed something was missing from the national discussion. Despite all the passion and effort within the industry, drownings in Australia have reached their highest toll in over **20 years**. Families are doing their best, yet the numbers tell us that something is deeply broken in the way we approach water safety. That is why I felt compelled to partner with the Otto Media Data Team. We aimed to reveal the tough truths in the statistics. Parents, communities, and decision-makers need to see them clearly.

What we found was both confronting and motivating:

- One in four water deaths happens while swimming and recreating.
- Children from low-income families often can't access lessons. This creates unfair inequality that should never affect survival.
- Adults face hidden dangers. Participation in lessons falls sharply after adolescence. Yet, drowning remains a risk throughout life.

For me, these are not just numbers. They are stories of families who should still be together. They are reminders that swimming must not be treated as a childhood milestone we leave behind, but as a lifelong practice that keeps us safe.

This report, 'Towards a Drowning Free Nation: Australia 2025', reflects my belief that transparency saves lives. If we can clearly see where the risks are highest, we can act decisively. **AQUATOTS'** mission is to give every child a strong foundation in the water. With these findings, we now have the chance (and duty) to go even further.

I hope that sharing this data openly inspires urgent action. We need to keep teens engaged in lessons, reactivate adults, support underprivileged families, and make water safety part of everyday life.

Because in a country surrounded by water, swimming is not optional. It's survival.

Acknowledgements

We sincerely acknowledge the high-quality work done by Royal Life Saving Australia, AusPlay and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

AusPlay survey data: This data shows an important need for participation among various age groups and demographics. The Australian Bureau of Statistics supplied the population data used for estimates and to generate key rates and breakdowns throughout the data.

The data helps us calculate rates accurately and analyse geographic influences.

Thanks to the Otto Media Data Team for their expertise and dedication to revealing the stories in the statistics. Their work transforms raw data into actionable intelligence that can save lives.

We thank the swimming instructors and organisations across Australia. They work hard to improve water skills and safety in their communities all year. They focus on discussion zones and farms, which are key for drowning prevention.

We appreciate the efforts of state and territory governments who recognise and engage emergency service personnel. They respond to incidents and promote prevention initiatives.

Most importantly, we acknowledge the families and communities affected by drowning. Your losses are not forgotten. They help to shape legislation and inform evidence-based strategies focused on improved water safety and to prevent future tragedies.

We thank the broader water safety community: researchers, lifesavers, and instructors throughout Australia's aquatic environments. Your efforts ensure safety for all.

National Trends

After two decades of progress, the crude drowning rate fell nearly 20%, from **1.63** deaths per 100,000 people in 2002–03 to **1.31** in 2024–25. In **2017–18**, the rate dipped below 1.0 for the first time on record. This suggests a turning point. **But since then, drownings have risen by almost 39%**, reaching **1.31** in **2024–25** (Chart 1.1, below).

Chart 1.1: Drowning rate per 100,000 (2002-03 to 2024-25)

Crude drowning rate has risen since 2017-18

Deaths per 100,000 population by financial year (2002-03 to 2024-25)

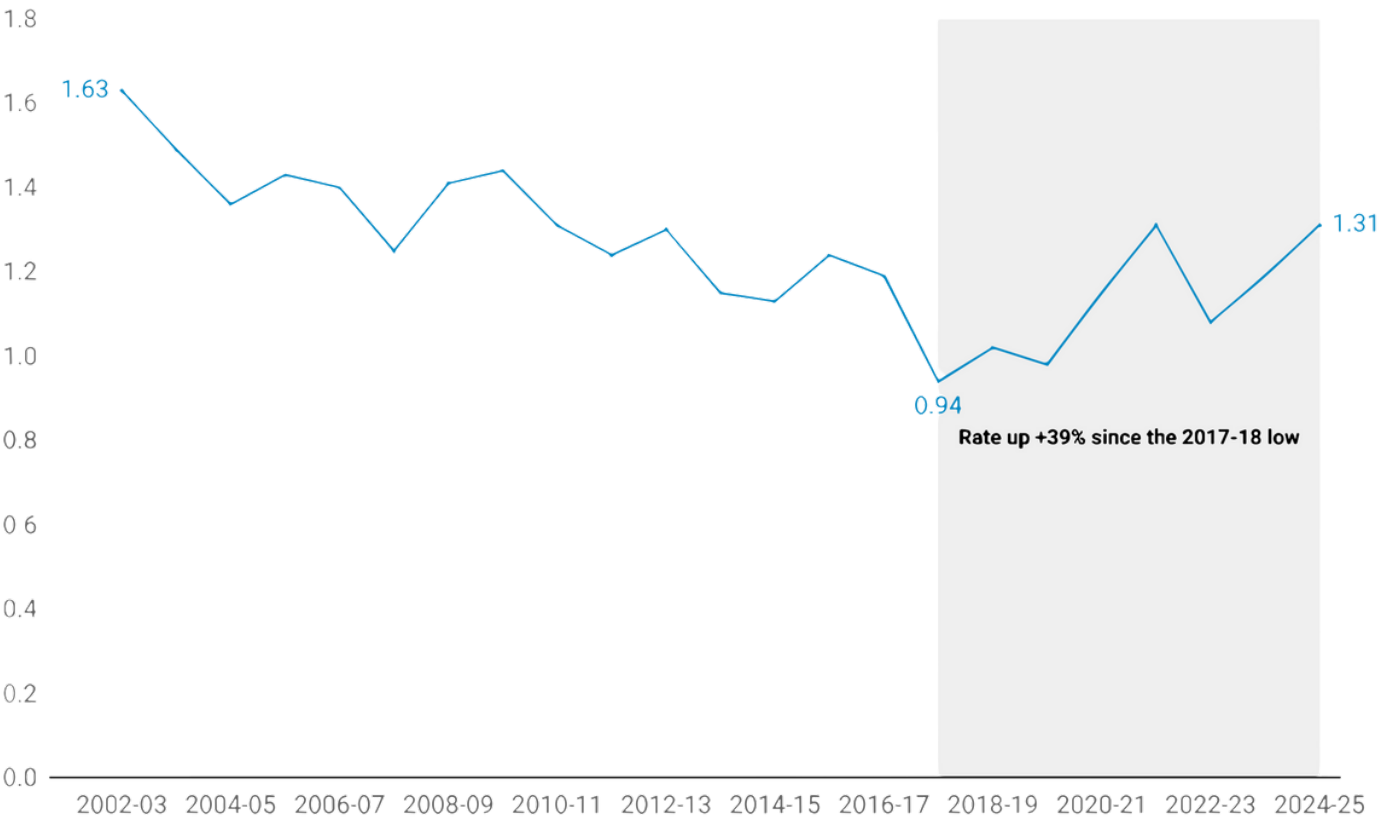


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: The Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database • Created with Datawrapper

The raw numbers are even more confronting: **357** people drowned in 2024–25, the highest annual toll in more than two decades.

Chart 1.2: Annual drowning deaths (2002-03 to 2024-25)

357 drowning deaths in 2024–25

Highest annual toll in 20+ years

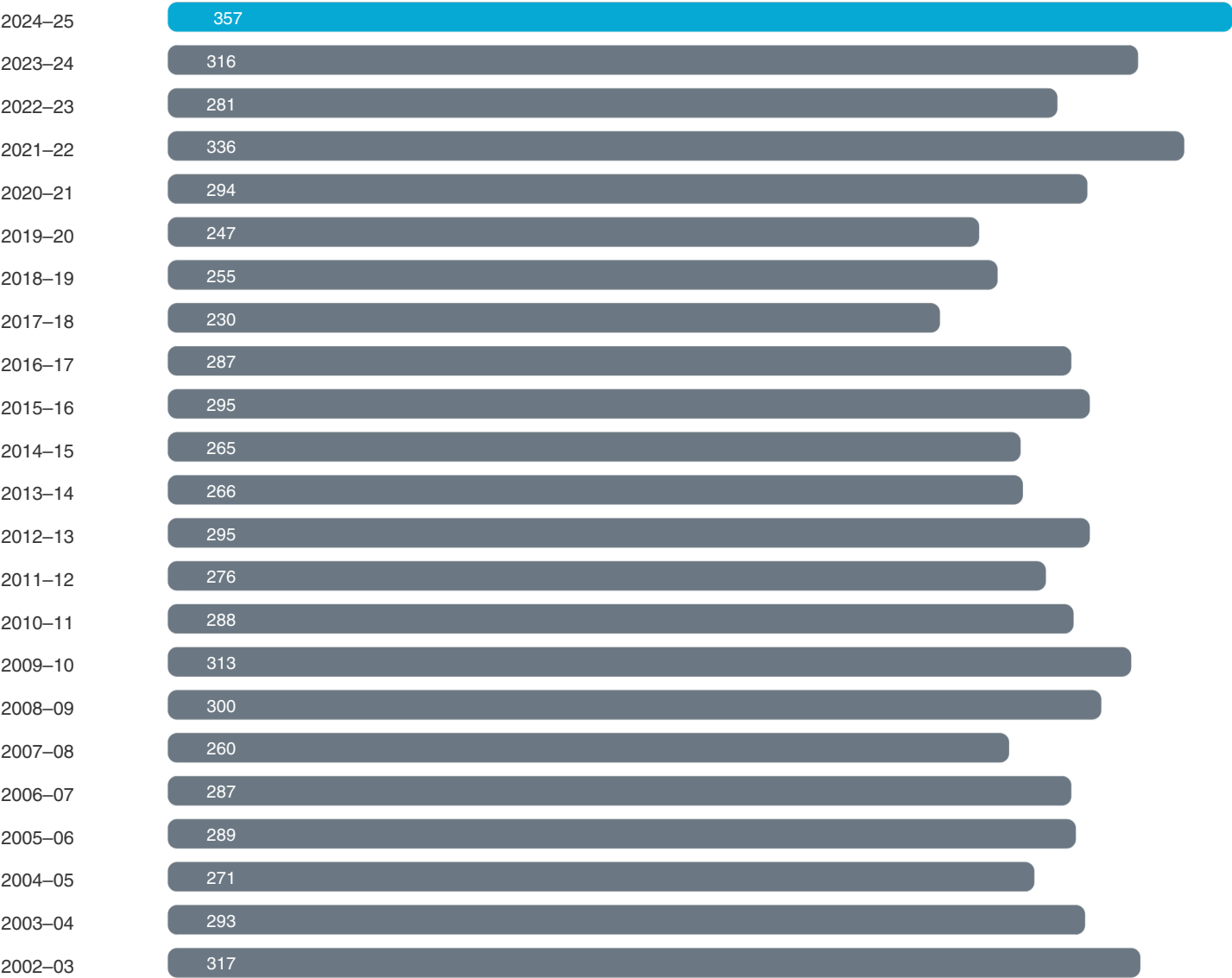


Chart: Otto Media Data Team · Source: The Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database

For over two decades, swimming and recreating has been the single leading cause of drowning in Australia. It has consistently been responsible for 1 in 4 water deaths. But there's a worrying new trend emerging. 'Unknown causes' have surged sharply in recent years, now matching swimming and recreating as the top category of drowning deaths (chart 1.3).



Chart 1.3: Share of drowning deaths by activity (%)

Unknown causes have surged in recent years, nearly equaling swimming

1 in 4 water deaths happen while swimming & recreating

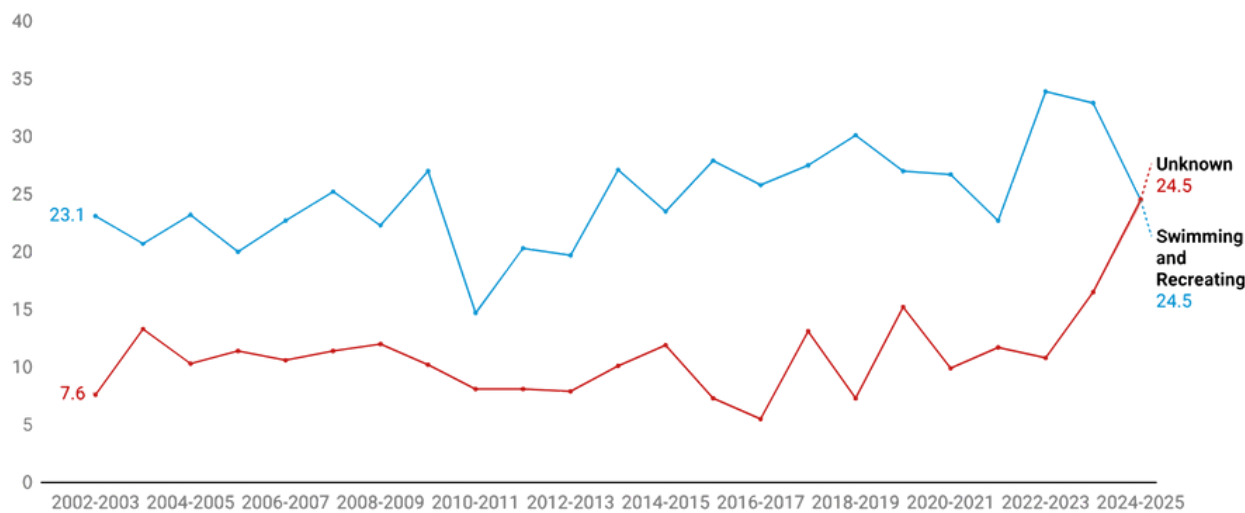


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: The Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database • Created with Datawrapper

The increase in ‘Unknown’ circumstances might be due to changes in reporting or classification. It could also relate to behavior. More analysis is needed.

The heatmap shows that boating, diving, and fishing have steady but smaller impacts. In contrast, swimming-related drownings are still high. There has been little progress, even with national awareness efforts.

Chart 1.4: Heatmap drowning deaths by activity over time

Drowning deaths (%) by activity, financial year 2002-03 to 2024-25

Darker shades indicate higher (%)

year	Swimming and Recreating	Unknown	Fall	Boating	Non-aquatic Transport	Diving	Fishing	Watercraft	Rescue	Bathing	Jumped In	Others
1 2024-25	24.5	24.5	9.6	8.7	7.0	6.8	4.5	4.5	2.8	1.7	1.4	4.0
2 2023-24	32.9	16.6	10.8	8.5	3.2	6.6	5.6	3.8	1.9	3.5	2.5	4.1
3 2022-23	33.9	10.8	16.6	8.3	6.1	5.4	2.2	6.5	5.1	6.1	0.0	0.0
4 2021-22	22.7	11.7	12.9	14.4	12.6	6.1	4.6	5.2	2.5	3.4	0.0	4.0
5 2020-21	26.7	9.9	13.0	15.1	6.5	4.8	4.1	7.5	3.4	4.8	2.4	1.7
6 2019-20	27.0	15.2	15.7	19.6	0.0	6.5	7.8	5.7	0.0	2.6	0.0	0.0
7 2018-19	30.1	7.3	15.9	10.2	8.9	6.5	4.1	4.5	3.3	6.9	2.4	0.0
8 2017-18	27.5	13.1	16.3	19.3	7.2	5.0	4.1	3.6	2.3	6.8	0.0	0.0
9 2016-17	25.8	5.5	17.5	12.7	8.4	8.4	3.3	5.8	0.0	8.0	4.7	0.0
10 2015-16	27.9	7.3	14.3	17.4	6.3	7.7	4.2	5.2	2.1	3.8	3.8	0.0
11 2014-15	23.5	11.9	17.3	12.3	2.7	6.9	8.1	6.9	0.0	6.9	0.0	3.5
12 2013-14	27.1	10.1	22.9	11.6	3.9	4.3	4.3	3.5	1.9	8.1	2.3	0.0
13 2012-13	19.7	7.9	19.7	13.8	6.6	7.2	9.3	5.5	2.4	4.5	3.4	0.0
14 2011-12	20.3	8.1	19.2	12.9	6.6	7.7	8.9	7.7	1.8	6.6	0.0	0.0
15 2010-11	14.7	8.1	19.3	9.1	13.7	5.3	4.2	6.3	3.2	7.0	1.8	7.4
16 2009-10	27.0	10.2	20.4	9.9	5.3	4.6	5.9	3.9	2.6	6.9	3.3	0.0
17 2008-09	22.3	12.0	21.3	12.4	7.6	5.5	3.4	5.2	2.1	6.5	1.7	0.0
18 2007-08	25.2	11.4	24.8	9.1	3.1	4.3	5.5	3.1	2.0	6.7	2.4	2.4
19 2006-07	22.7	10.6	23.1	19.0	7.0	2.9	0.0	2.9	0.0	9.2	2.6	0.0
20 2005-06	20.0	11.4	20.7	15.4	8.6	2.5	8.9	4.6	0.0	7.9	0.0	0.0
21 2004-05	23.2	10.3	22.8	13.7	6.1	4.2	5.7	4.2	3.0	6.8	0.0	0.0
22 2003-04	20.7	13.3	23.5	12.6	6.0	3.9	6.3	2.1	2.8	8.8	0.0	0.0
23 2002-03	23.1	7.6	23.4	18.5	5.9	5.3	3.6	5.0	0.0	7.6	0.0	0.0

Fishing includes both fishing and rock fishing. The categories Swept Away, Swept In, and Unlikely to be Known have been merged into Others.

Table: Otto Media Data Team • Source: The Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database • Created with Datawrapper



Chart 1.5 shows the raw number in drowning deaths of the latest financial year 2024-25 by activity.

Chart 1.5: Drowning deaths by activity, FY 2024-25

Swimming & ‘Unknown causes’ lead drowning deaths in Australia (FY 2024-25)

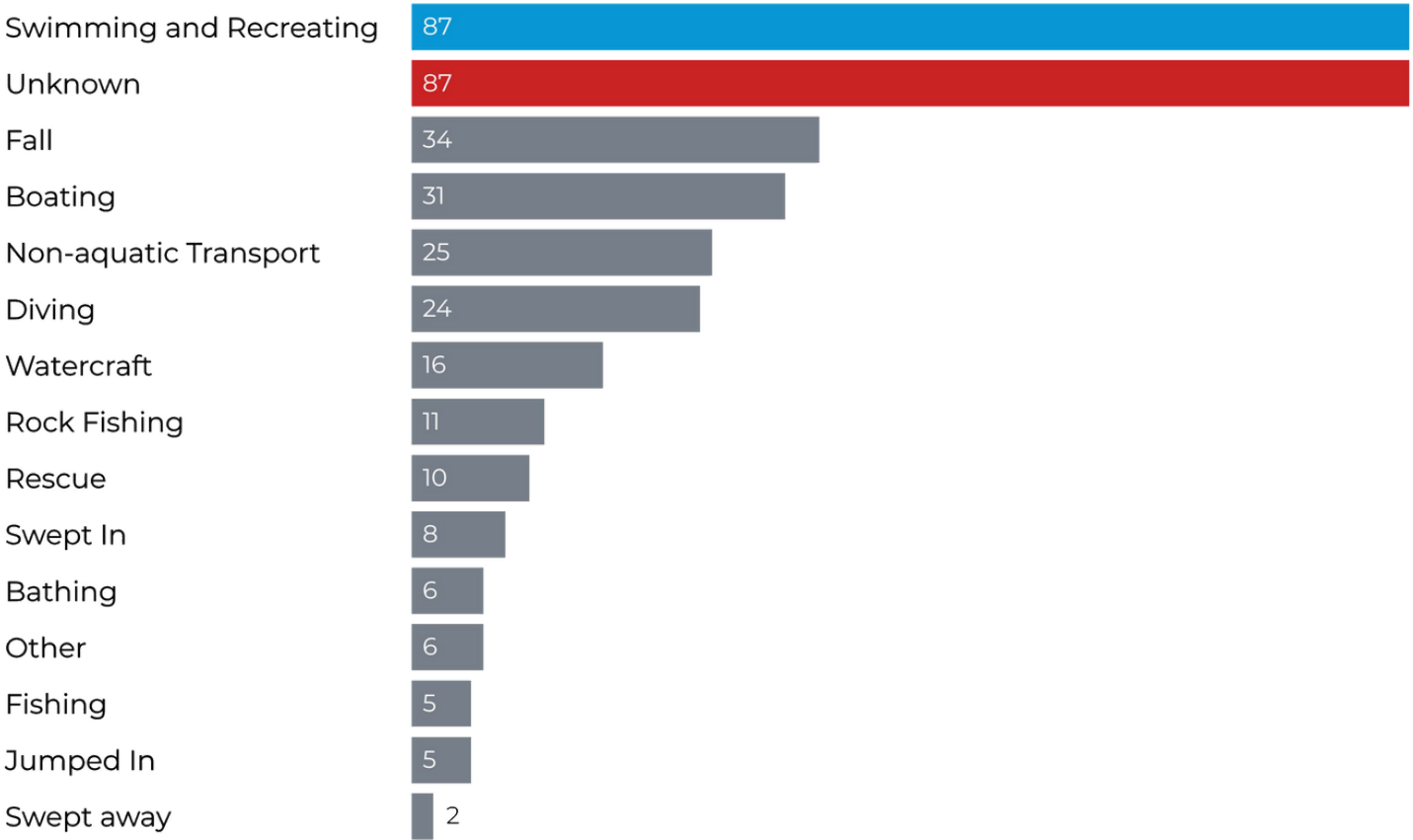


Chart: Otto Media Team • Source: The Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database • Created with Datawrapper

106 Baby Boomers (aged 55–74) lost their lives to drowning in 2024–25, driving national deaths to a 20-year high (chart 1.6). Back in 2017–18, all generations together hit a record low of just ~230 deaths. Since then, the trend has reversed. **Younger generations like Gen Alpha and Gen Z are still at risk. However, older Australians make up the majority now. This shows that water safety is important for everyone, not just for kids.**

Chart 1.6: Drowning deaths by generation (2002-03 to 2024-25)

Baby Boomers now lead Australia's drowning toll

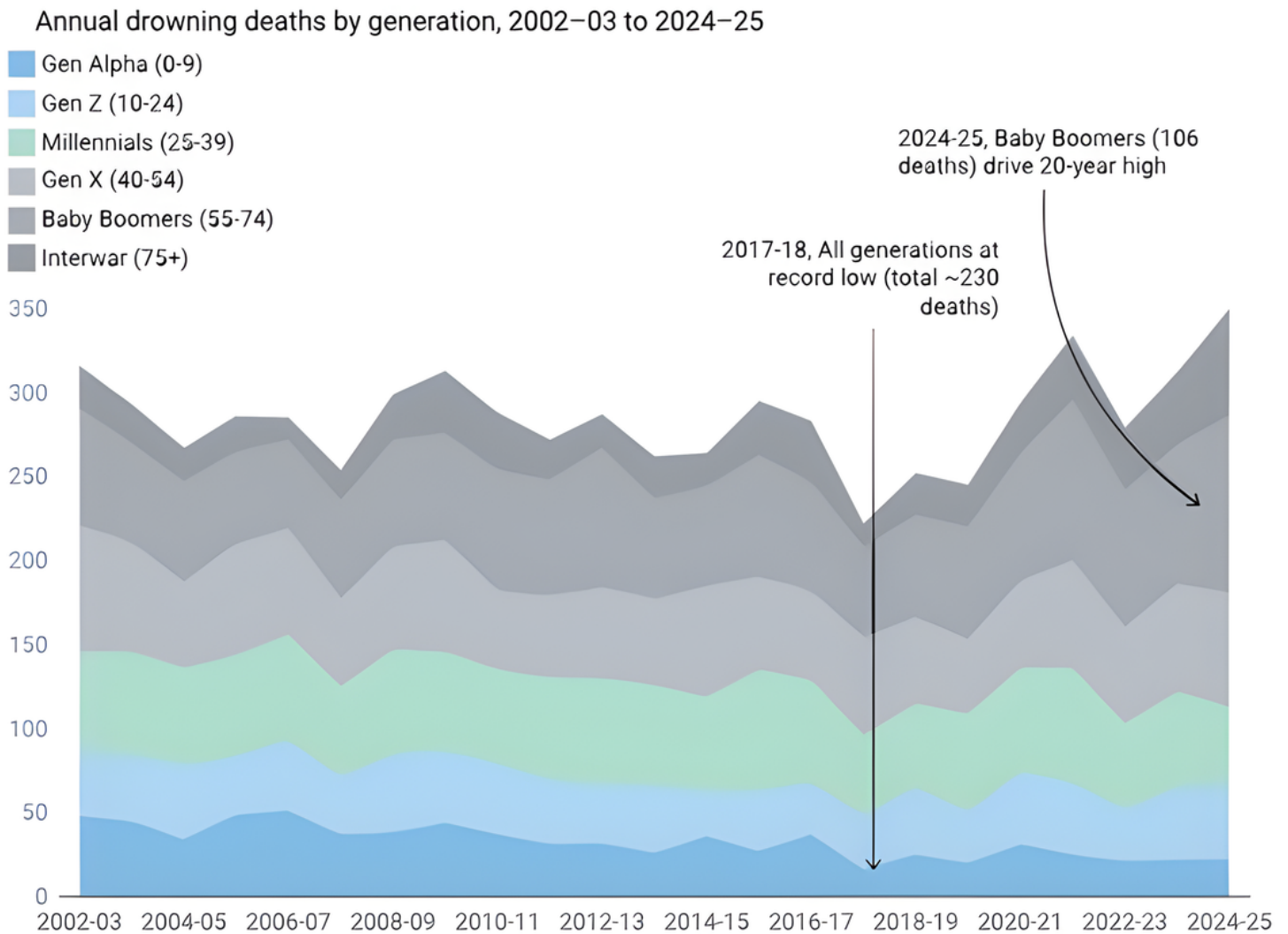


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: The Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database • Created with Datawrapper

But when the raw numbers are adjusted for population size, does the same story emerge? The chart (1.7) below indicates that children (0-9) and Millennials (25-39) show a long-term decline. Gen Z (10-24) and Gen X (40-54) have seen little improvement over 20 years. Baby Boomers show clear growth in drowning risk. While the absolute number of deaths is smaller (chart 1.6), the Interwar generation (75+) is the fastest-growing risk group. Drowning is no longer just a childhood risk, but a growing challenge of ageing. **These findings reinforce that drowning risk is shifting between generations. And that swimming skills are essential as the foundation of lifelong water safety.**

Chart 1.7: Population-adjusted drowning rates by age cohort

The very oldest Australians remain most at risk individually

Annual drowning death rates per 100,000 population by generation, 2002-03 to 2024-25

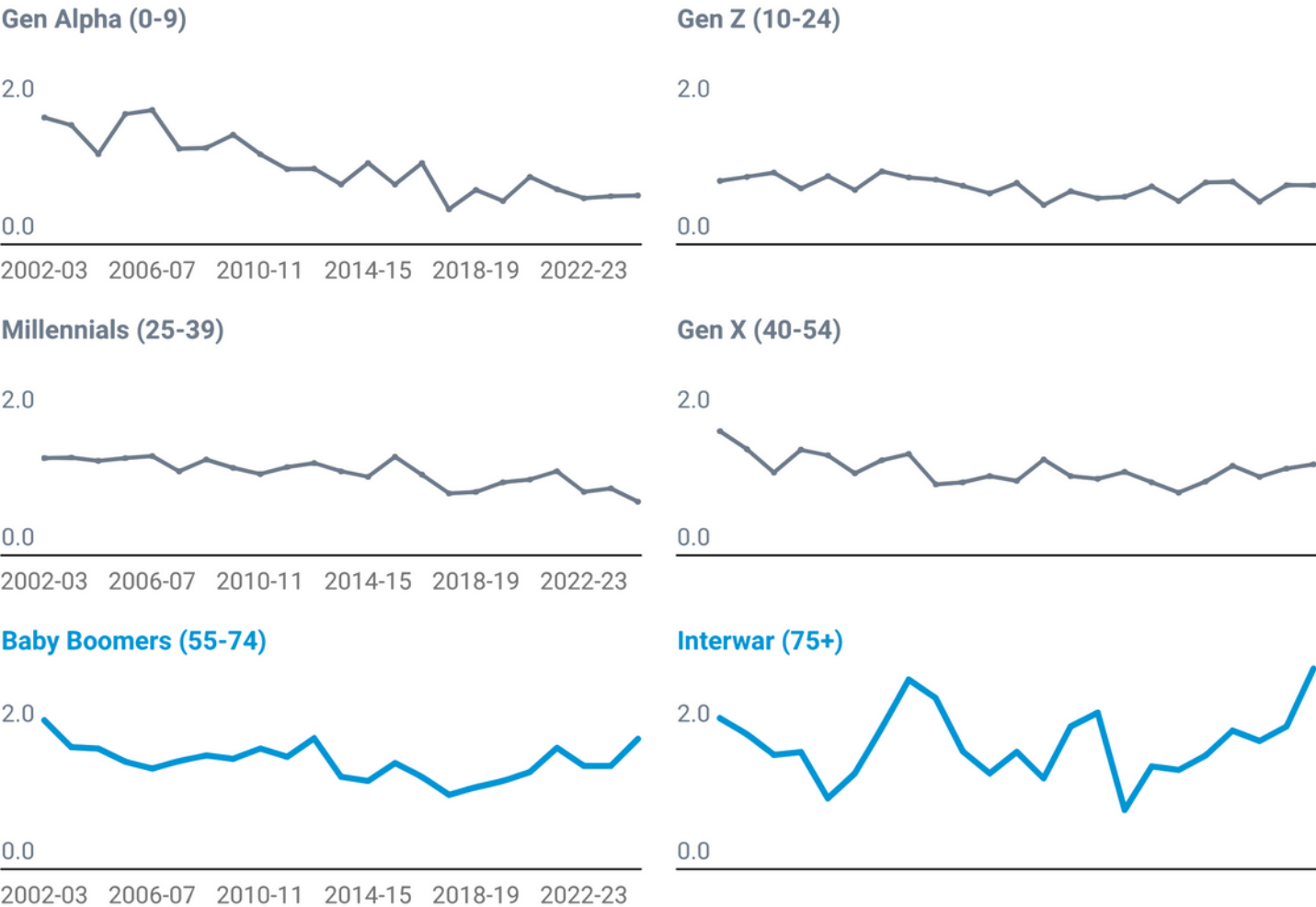


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: The Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database • Created with Datawrapper

The data tables below, which show compound annual growth rates (CAGR), confirm this shift

Table 1.1: CAGR of drowning rates by generation (2002–03 to 2024–25)

Generation	CAGR (%)
Gen Alpha (0–9)	(-) 3.5
Gen Z (10–24)	(+) 0.8
Millennials (25–39)	(-) 1.2
Gen X (40–54)	(-) 0.4
Baby Boomers (55–74)	(+) 1.9
Interwar (75+)	(+) 4.3

Children under age 9 have seen drowning risk fall by 3.5% per year, while Australians over 75 have experienced a 4.3% annual increase. Those aged 55-74 have also seen a 1.9% increase on average over the 20-year period. Gen Alpha’s declining rate paints a success story, but just across the age bracket, Gen Z’s near-1% rise is a concern. Why this is happening is something we unpack in the following sections.

Australia loves the water, and the numbers prove it. AusPlay, run by the Australian Sports Commission, is a large survey. It tracks how Australians stay active. It gives us the best view of our activity levels. On 30 May 2025, the Commission released its latest findings, based on data collected over 18 months (July 2023 to December 2024). The following analyses draw on this dataset, with a focus on the 2023–24 financial year.

Most of Australia’s favourite activities vary a lot between adults and children. For adults, walking, fitness, and bushwalking are popular (chart 2.1). Kids prefer football and basketball (Chart 2.2). However, swimming is a common interest for both groups (Chart 2.3).

Chart 2.1: Adults-top activities (%)

Top 5 sports/activities by Australian adults

AusPlay 2024 survey: adults (15+) by participation rate



Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: AusPlay Data Portal • Created with Datawrapper

For adults, swimming is important (15.2%). It ranks higher than most team sports and is the top organised sport.

For kids, swimming participation is higher (22.9%) than football, basketball, or gymnastics.

Chart 2.2: Children-top activities (%)

Top 5 sports/activities by Australian child

AusPlay 2024 survey: children (0-14) by participation rate



Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: AusPlay Data Portal • Created with Datawrapper

Chart 2.3: Swimming in the top five-adults vs children

Swimming is the only sport Australians share across generations

AusPlay 2024 survey: adult (15+) vs child (0-14) activities by participation rate

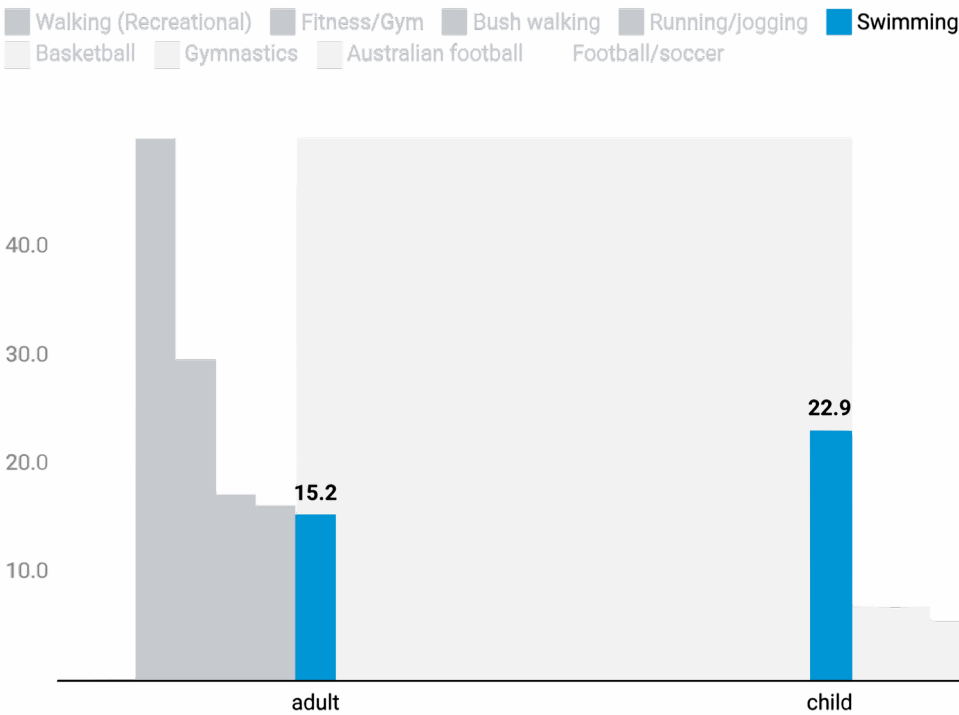


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: AusPlay Data Portal • Created with Datawrapper

Swimming is the only activity in the top five for both adults and children. Yet, Chart 2.4 shows that from adolescence (12-14) onwards, participation in swimming drops sharply. It is overtaken by sports like football and gymnastics.

Chart 2.4: Swimming participation by age (0-14)

Swimming peaks in early childhood, but declines through adolescence

AusPlay 2024 survey: Participation in top children's sports by age cohort (%)

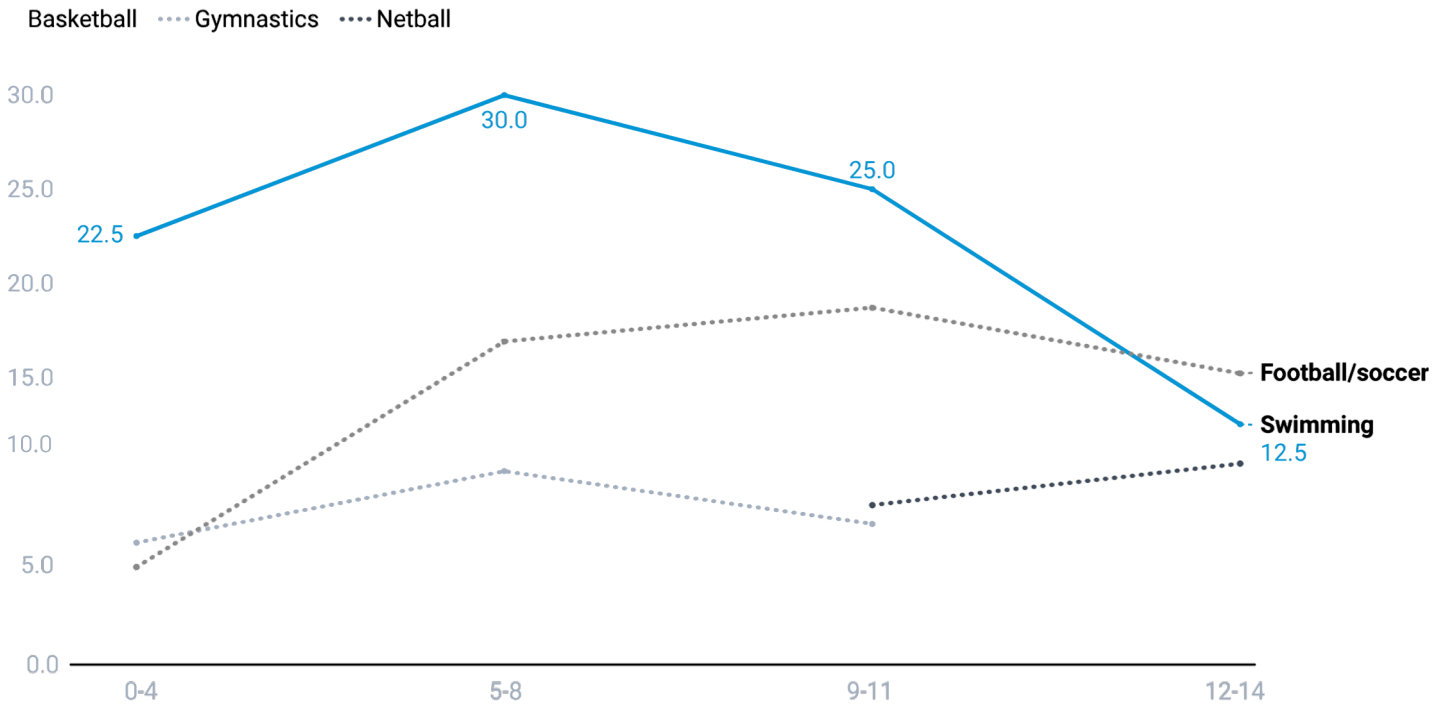


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: AusPlay Data Portal • Created with Datawrapper

Chart 2.5 below expands the story into adulthood. It shows swimming never regains its childhood dominance. The gap between early participation and decline in later life highlights a major water safety issue in Australia. This country, surrounded by water, sees swimming skills as essential for survival, not just fun.

Swimming must be treated as a lifelong habit, not just a childhood milestone.

Chart 2.5: Swimming participation throughout adulthood

Swimming starts strong, but other activities take over as Australians age

AusPlay 2024 survey Top sports and activities by participation rate (%)

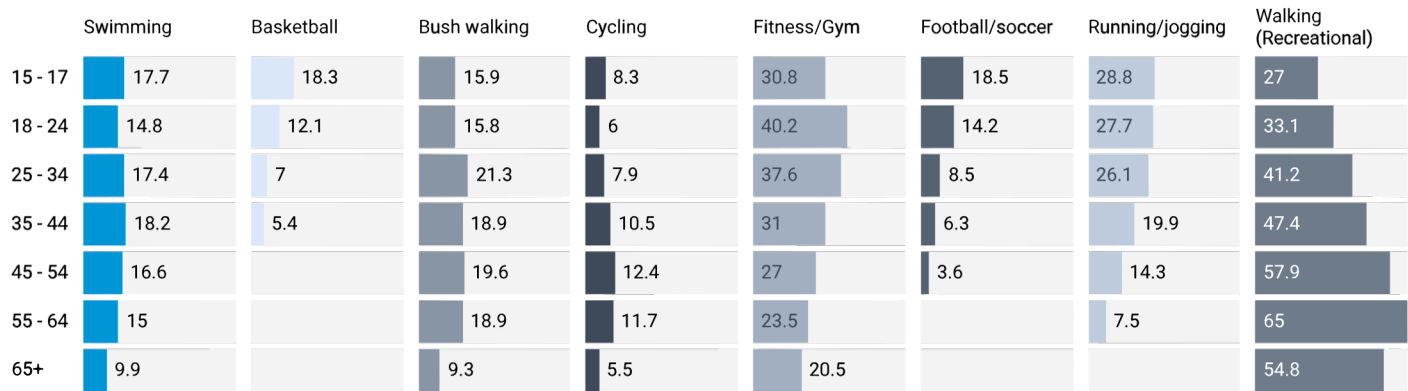


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: AusPlay Data Portal • Created with Datawrapper



What motivates Aussies to take part in physical activity or sports?

AusPlay data shows that among the 15–17-year-olds, 73.5% participate for fun or enjoyment. Among Australians aged 65+, 73.4% participate for physical health or fitness. These percentages (Table 2.1) show how motivations vary at different life stages.

Table 2.1: Participation motivations by age cohort (%)

Generation	Age Cohort (number represents %)						
	15–17	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+
Fun / enjoyment	73.5	65.6	62.3	59.2	57.9	56.2	50
Physical health or fitness	61.3	58.2	60.3	60.1	65.1	69.9	73.4
Hobby	54.9	46.7	39.8	29.9	21.1	16.5	12.2
To socialise with friends / other people	51.4	45.6	42	37.7	36.8	36.8	37.9
To lose weight / keep weight off / tone	41.6	50.1	54.4	54.3	58.6	57.4	44.7
Psychological / mental health / therapy	31.9	36.2	42.2	39.1	39.8	38.4	28.3

The chart below (2.6) translates these numbers into relative shares. It shows how the balance of motivations shifts as Australians age:

- Fun/enjoyment steadily shrinks in importance.
- Fitness and health progressively grow, becoming the dominant motivations in later life.

Taken together, the table (2.1) and chart (2.6) highlight a key life-stage transition. In adolescence, activity is largely about fun, but as people age, fitness becomes the main driver. Why does this transition matter for water safety? If young people see participation as just fun, they might ignore activities like swimming later. This is a problem when they need to build lifelong habits.

What are the ways Australians take part in swimming?

Chart 2.7 illustrates a distinct difference in participation. Children mostly take part in activities at places like gyms, leisure centers, or private businesses. In contrast, adults primarily swim informally, either alone or with family and friends.

Chart 2.6: Motivation mix by age (relative shares)

Why Australians exercise shifts with age

AusPlay 2024 survey: Fun drives youth, fitness drives adulthood (% share of motivations)

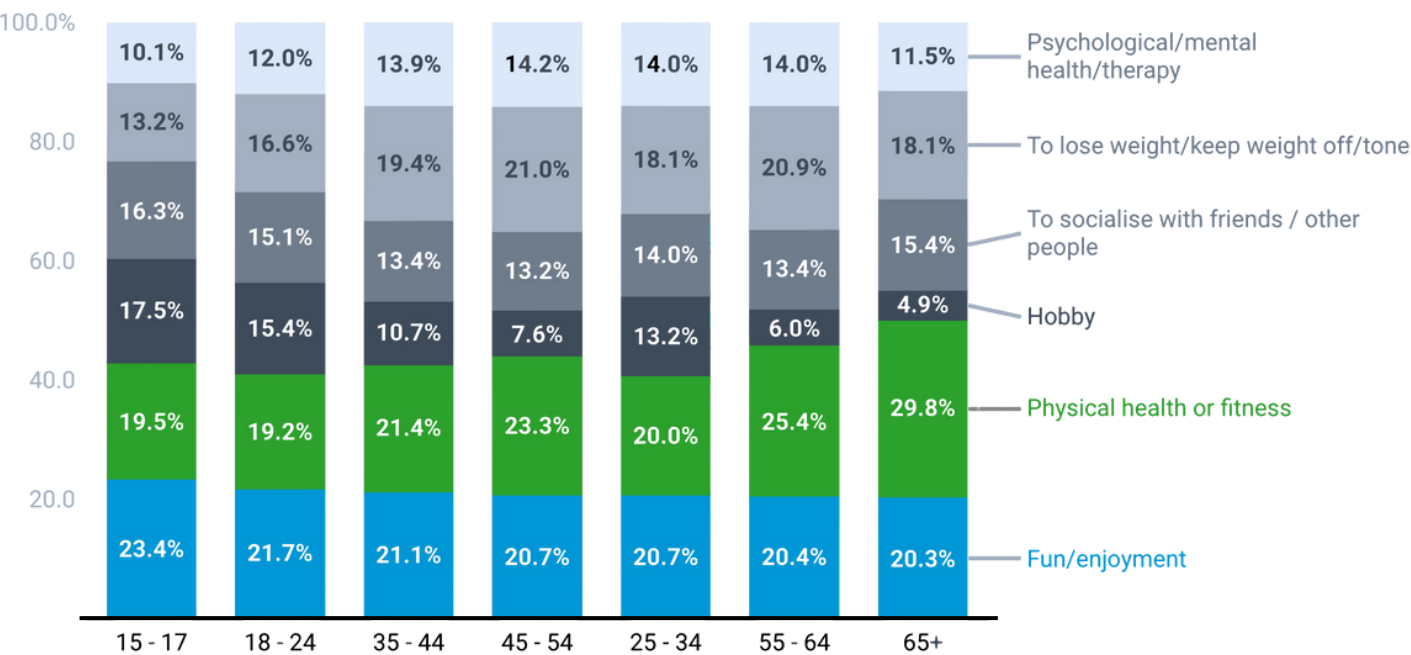


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: AusPlay Data Portal • Created with Datawrapper

Chart 2.7: Swimming setting, formal vs. informal (adult vs. child)

Children swim in structured settings, adults mostly informally

AusPlay 2024 survey: Ways Australians participate in swimming, Adult vs Child

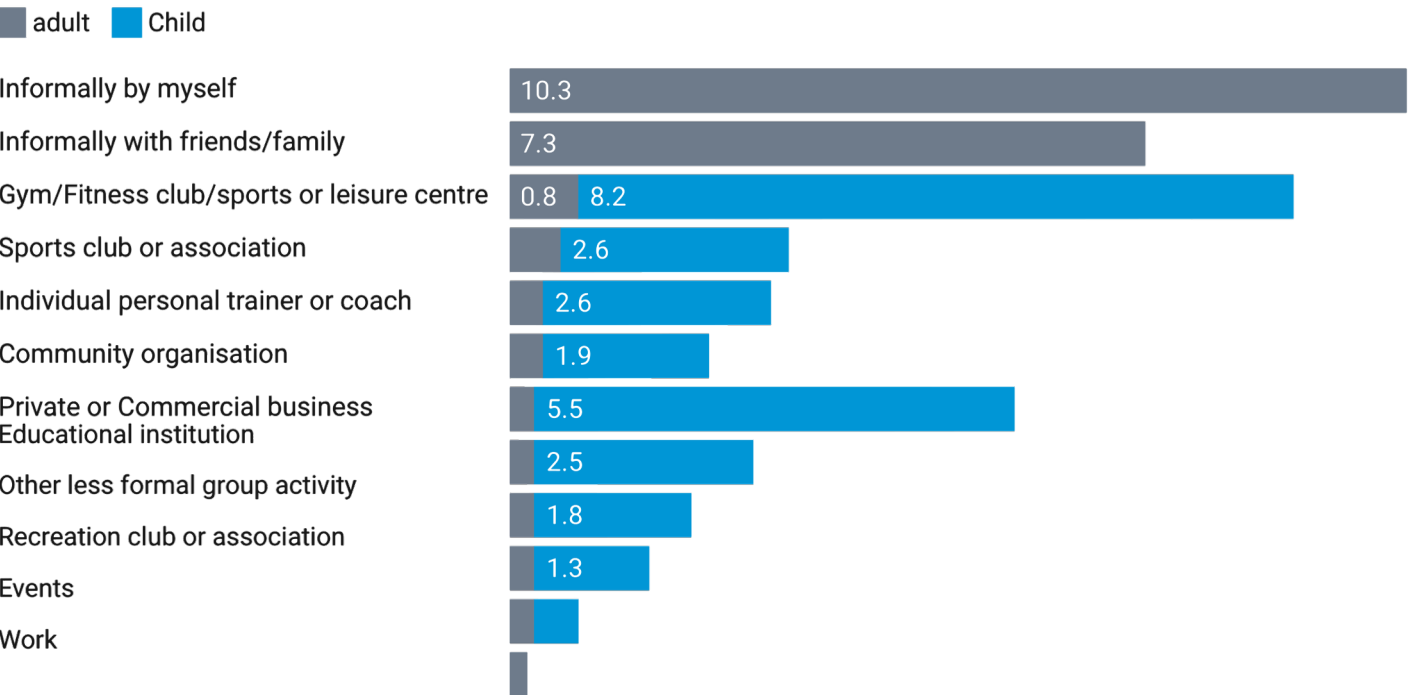


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: AusPlay Data Portal • Created with Datawrapper



Chart 2.8 (below) strengthens this story when broken down by age. Children (0–14) engage primarily in formal, organised settings. But by the time they reach 15–24, participation shifts heavily toward informal pathways. This early shift reinforces our earlier finding: swimming is too often treated as just a childhood activity. Instead, it must be nurtured as a lifelong habit.

A significant insight from the data is the limited role of educational institutions. Contrary to expectations, schools contribute only a small portion to participation. This highlights a gap where swimming could and should be integrated as a core life skill.

Chart 2.8: Swimming settings by age group

Australians move from structured to informal swimming as they age

AusPlay 2024 survey: Children mainly swim in gyms and commercial settings, with schools playing only a minor role

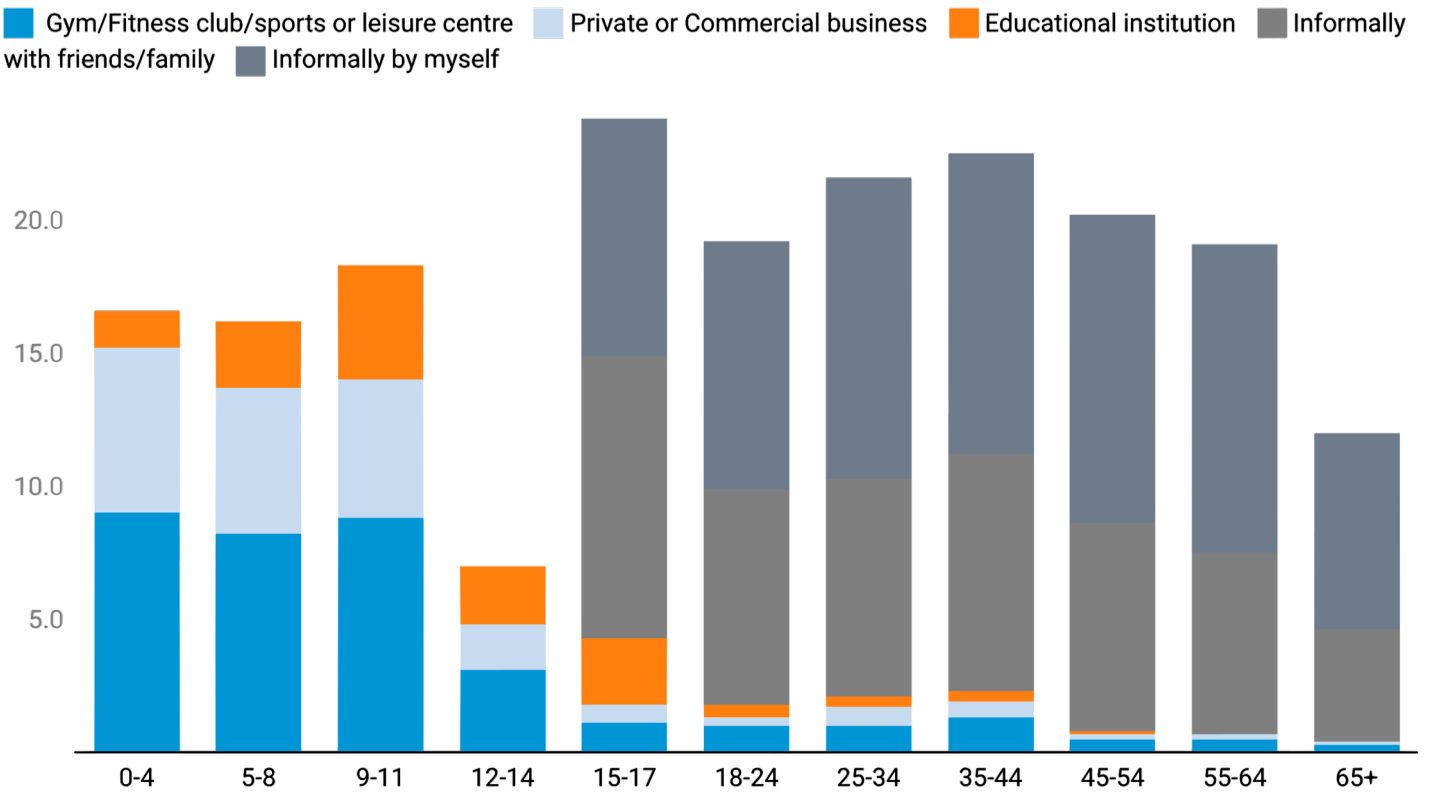


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: AusPlay Data Portal • Created with Datawrapper

Families are often inclined to invest in children’s activities. Chart 2.9 illustrates this trend clearly across various sports and activities. Children’s participation in paid programs significantly exceeds that of adults. Swimming, gymnastics, and netball are popular sports where kids often take paid lessons.

Chart 2.9: Paid programs, children vs. adults (selected sports)

Families pay for kids’ activities, adults go informal, swimming shows major drop

AusPlay 2024 survey: Share of participants who pay to take part (%), selected activities

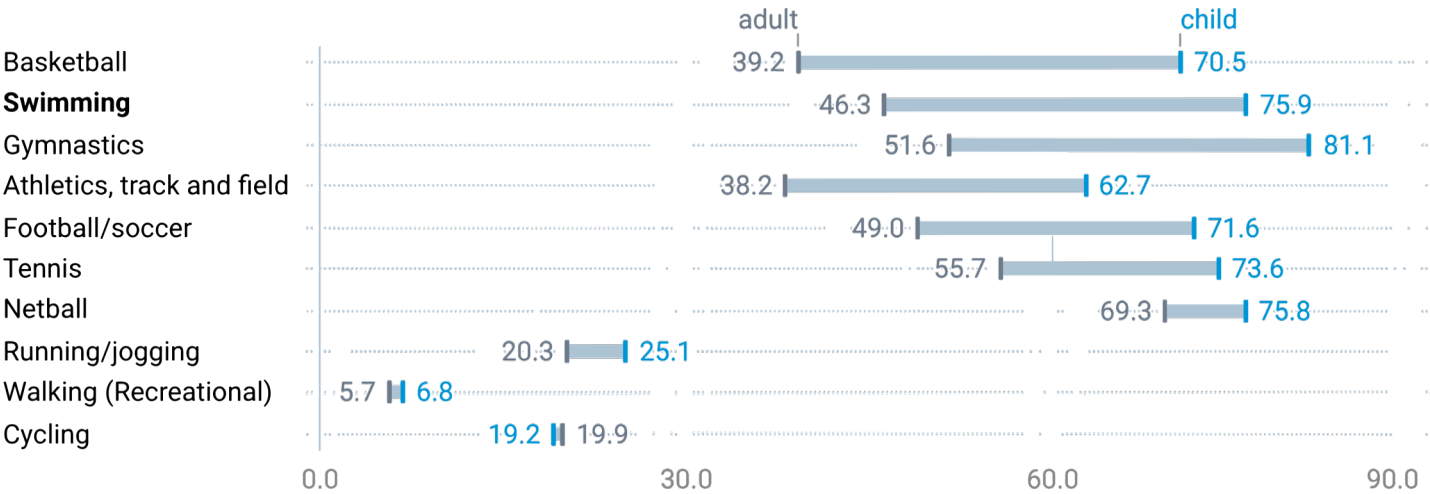


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: AusPlay Data Portal • Created with Datawrapper

But as kids grow older, something shifts. By adulthood, the willingness to pay for swimming lessons declines significantly, more so than for many other sports. Families stop paying for these lessons, so adults often turn to informal activities or quit swimming completely.

Chart 2.10 highlights a significant trend in swimming. Over three-quarters of children (ages 0–8) engage through paid lessons, whereas this figure drops to just 46% for adults. The most pronounced decline occurs at the transition into adulthood. It's a time when independence increases, but formal swimming education typically concludes.

Chart 2.10: Swimming, paid lessons: children vs. adults

Paid swimming participation drops steeply after childhood

AusPlay 2024 survey: Share of swimmers who pay to participate, by age cohort (%), highlighting risk of drop-off in lifelong water safety skills

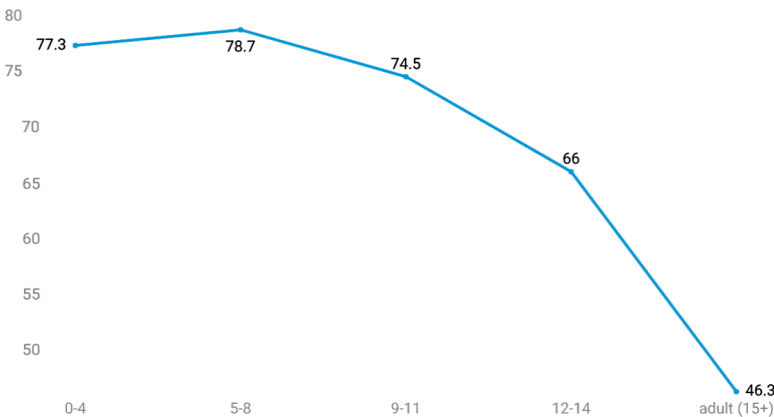


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: AusPlay Data Portal • Created with Datawrapper



Swimming participation is closely tied to family income.

The chart (2.11) below shows that in households earning less than \$40k per year, just 9.7% of adults and 14.2% of children take part in swimming. As incomes rise, participation steadily increases, but the biggest gaps appear above \$150k. In the wealthiest households, nearly 30% of children swim compared with only 21% of adults. This trend highlights two important challenges:

- Affordability matters most in childhood. Parents with higher incomes are more able to invest in lessons, driving up children’s participation.
- Even in high-income families, adults’ participation lags behind children’s. Water safety isn’t just for kids. It’s also about keeping swimming a lifelong activity.

Chart 2.11: Swimming participation by household annual income (adult vs. child)

Higher income buys pool time: biggest gaps appear at \$150k+

AusPlay 2024 survey: Swimming participation rises with household income, but the child - adult gap widens at higher incomes

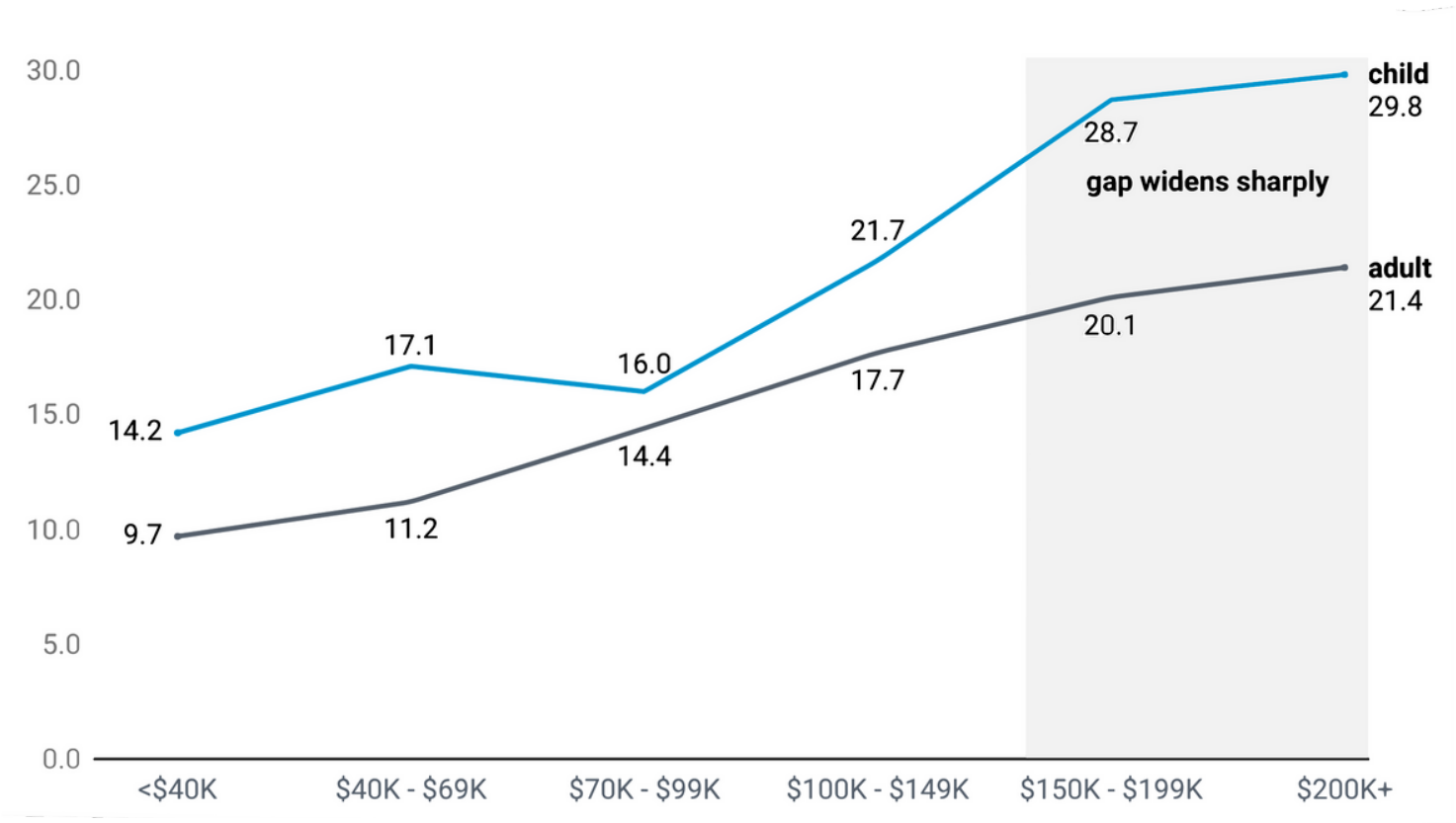


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: AusPlay Data Portal • Created with Datawrapper



Swim Safety & Access Gap Index

Australia loves the water. Swimming participation may drop with age, but it stays popular among Australians. Then the question remains: are there sufficient swimming instruction schools available?

There is no official data on swimming instruction schools in Australia. We use the Count of Australian Business Entries and Exits (CABEE) as a proxy instead. (Refer to the Methodology & Notes on Data section for more details.)

Below, Table 3.1 shows the current national status.

Table 3.1: National summary, providers, child population, access capacity

Australia	Total Swimming Instruction Schools at the end of the financial year 2023-24	0-14 year population	Access capacity per 10,000 children
	7526	3182528	23.65

To measure our current status and find ways to improve toward a nation free from drowning, we created the **Swim Safety & Access Gap Index (SSAGI)**. This index shows big differences between states. Check the Methodology and Notes on Data section for more details on SSAGI.

Table 3.2 shows the SSAGI components. It covers the number of swimming schools, the child population, and the swimming participation rates for both adults and children in each state.

Table 3.2: SSAGI inputs by state, providers, child population, participation

State & Territory	Total Swimming Instruction Schools at the end of the financial year 2023-24	Child Population	Swimming participation adult (%)	Swimming participation child (%)
New South Wales	2661	992069	16.7	22.8
Victoria	2056	805628	13.1	24.2
Queensland	1545	670392	16.6	23.6
Western Australia	638	356523	15.5	22.8
South Australia	355	207331	10.8	15.6
Tasmania	107	61749	16.6	23.5
Australian Capital Territory	121	54681	17.8	25.0
Northern Territory	43	34155	20.4	25.9



Below, Table 3.3 is derived from calculations based on the components of Table 3.2. The column labelled "Last 3-Year Mean Drowning Rate" represents drowning deaths per 100,000 population. Demand (composite) is the equal-weight mean of adult (15+) and child (0-14) participation rates. It is not a population-weighted average. It is a policy composite used inside SSAGI to balance child retention and adult re-activation as distinct drivers. "Access Shortage" represents the inverse of the number of swimming instruction schools per 10,000 children. Access Shortage = 1 / (providers per 10,000 children).

Table 3.3: Derived inputs, Last 3-year mean drowning rate, Demand, Access Shortage

State & Territory	Last 3-year mean drowning rate	Demand	Access shortage
Northern Territory	1.45	23.2	0.079
Tasmania	1.34	20.1	0.058
Western Australia	1.37	19.2	0.056
Queensland	1.35	20.1	0.043
New South Wales	1.44	19.8	0.037
Victoria	0.81	18.7	0.039
South Australia	0.95	13.2	0.058
Australian Capital Territory	0.21	21.4	0.045

Table 3.4 represents the normalisation of each column: risk, demand, access, and finally table 3.5 shows the index SSAGI, along with the state-wise rank. **To read the report correctly, remember this: a score of 0 indicates the safest/best performer, 100 indicates the largest gap/highest risk**

Table 3.4: Normalised indicators (Risk, Demand, Access) by state

State & Territory	Normalise Drowning Risk	Normalise Demand	Normalise Access
Northern Territory	100.0	100.0	100.0
Tasmania	91.1	68.8	48.5
Western Australia	93.5	59.8	44.1
Queensland	91.9	69.3	14.5
New South Wales	99.2	65.8	0.0
Victoria	48.4	54.8	4.5
South Australia	59.7	0.0	50.1
Australian Capital Territory	0.0	82.4	18.8

A separate state scorecard with priority actions is attached below.

Table 3.5: SSAGI Scores and Rankings of States and Territories

State & Territory	Swimming & Safety Gap Index (SSAGI) Score	Rank
Northern Territory	100.0	1
Tasmania	73.9	2
Western Australia	72.0	3
Queensland	64.2	4
New South Wales	62.8	5
South Australia	44.9	6
Victoria	36.5	7
Australian Capital Territory	22.1	8

Note: Higher SSAGI = larger gap between safety need and capacity

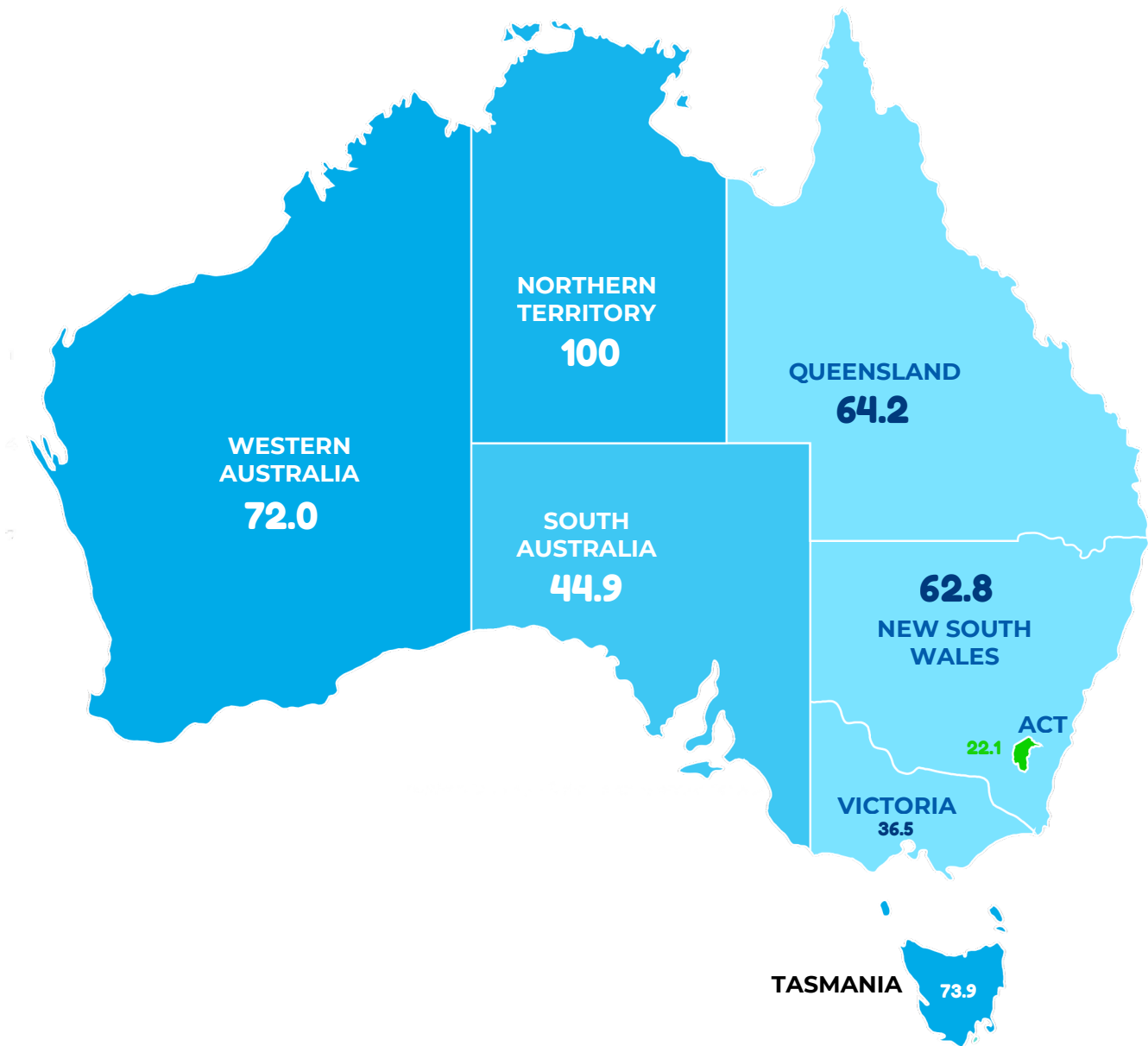
This index highlights the following key findings:

- The Northern Territory is the worst in the nation. It faces a high risk of drowning, limited lesson capacity, and strong demand. This creates a dangerous gap.
- Tasmania and Western Australia have clear gaps. This shows that smaller provider bases can make families more vulnerable.
- In contrast, the ACT is the safest, with the lowest drowning rate in the country and steady participation levels.
- This index shows where risk, demand, and capacity meet. It signals where urgent action is needed.

A separate state scorecard with priority actions is attached below.

SSAGI Ranking by State:

- 1 Northern Territory
- 2 Tasmania
- 3 Western Australia
- 4 Queensland
- 5 New South Wales
- 6 South Australia
- 7 Victoria
- 8 Australian Capital Territory



Higher SSAGI score indicates larger gap between safety, need and lesson capacity (includes risk, access shortage, and demand)

State Scorecard

Table 3.6: Northern Territory, Scorecard

Category	Detail	Value
Rank	1 of 8	1.45 per 100,000
Score	100.0	
Risk	Last 3-year mean drowning death rate	
Access	12.6 providers per 10k children	Access Shortage – 0.079
Demand	Adult 20.4%. Child 25.9%	Demand (composite) – 23.2% (equal-weight mean of adult & child participation rates)

Priority actions

- Expand lesson capacity in shortage areas.
- Target older adult refresher programs, especially pre-wet seasons.
- Strengthen water safety modules alongside stroke work (50/50 balance) across providers.

Chart 3.1 shows that, even with improvements, the drowning rate in the Northern Territory is 1.57. This is still much higher than the national average of 1.31 for 2024-25. Four drowning deaths occurred in the Northern Territory during this financial year.

Chart 3.1: NT, drowning rate vs. national average

NT drowning rate still among the highest, though the gap has narrowed

The Northern Territory once recorded rates more than four times the national average. While the gap has reduced in recent years, drowning risk remains significantly higher than the Australian baseline

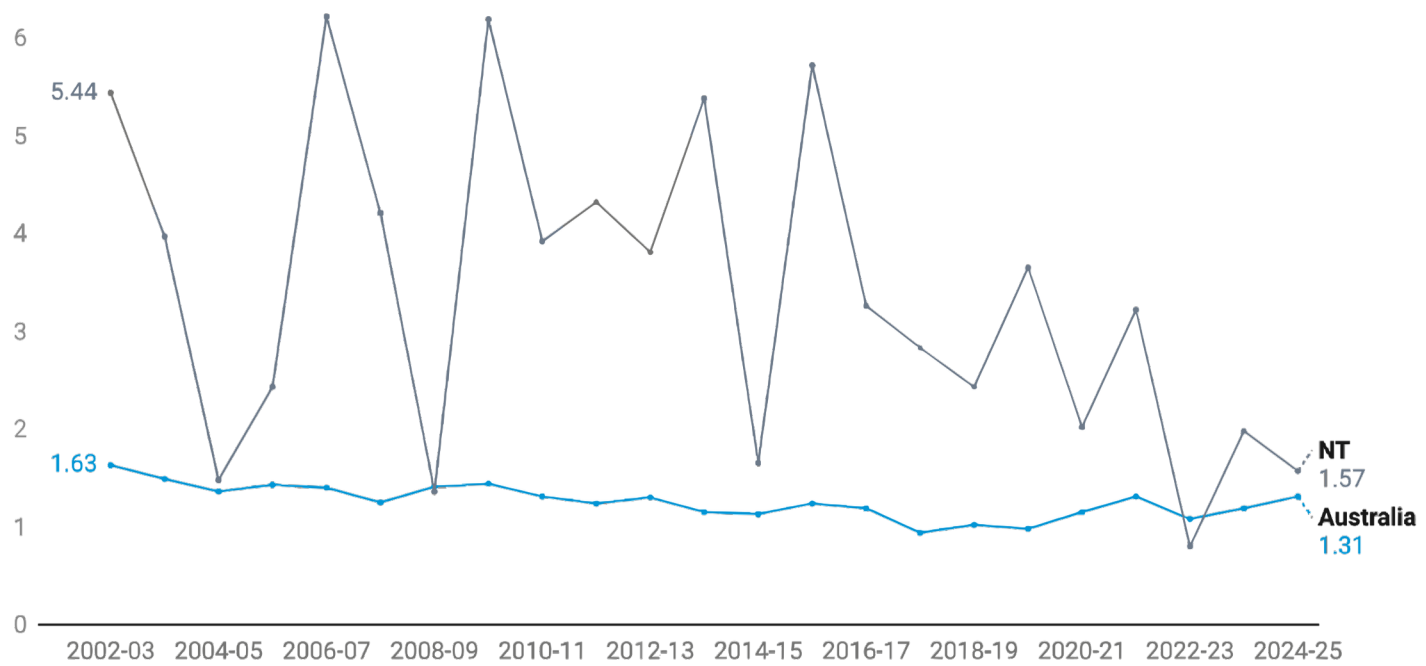


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: The data was calculated using The Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database, several years of the National Drowning Report by The Royal Life Saving Australia, and ERP by SA2 (ASGS Edition 3), Age and Sex, 2001 onwards, from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. • Created with Datawrapper



Table 3.7: Tasmania, Swim Safety and Access Scorecard

Tasmania - Swim Safety & Access Scoreboard		
Rank	2 of 8	
Score	73.9	
Risk	Last 3-year mean drowning death rate	1.34 per 100,000
Access	17.3 providers per 10k children	Access Shortage - 0.058
Demand	Adult 16.6%. Child 23.5%. Demand (composite) – 20.1% (equal-weight mean of adult & child participation rates)	

Priority actions

- Expand lesson capacity.
- Emphasise cold-water shock & lifejacket modules in all levels.
- Retain 10-14 years children through school terms and breaks; on - ramps adults to refresher blocks.

Chart 3.2 shows that Tasmania often has a higher drowning death rate than the national average, even with some dips. In the financial year 2024-25, there were a total of 8 deaths in Tasmania.

Chart 3.2: TAS, drowning rate vs. national average

Tasmania’s drowning risk remains among the highest in Australia

Despite occasional dips, Tasmania has consistently recorded higher drowning rates than the national average, underlining persistent vulnerability

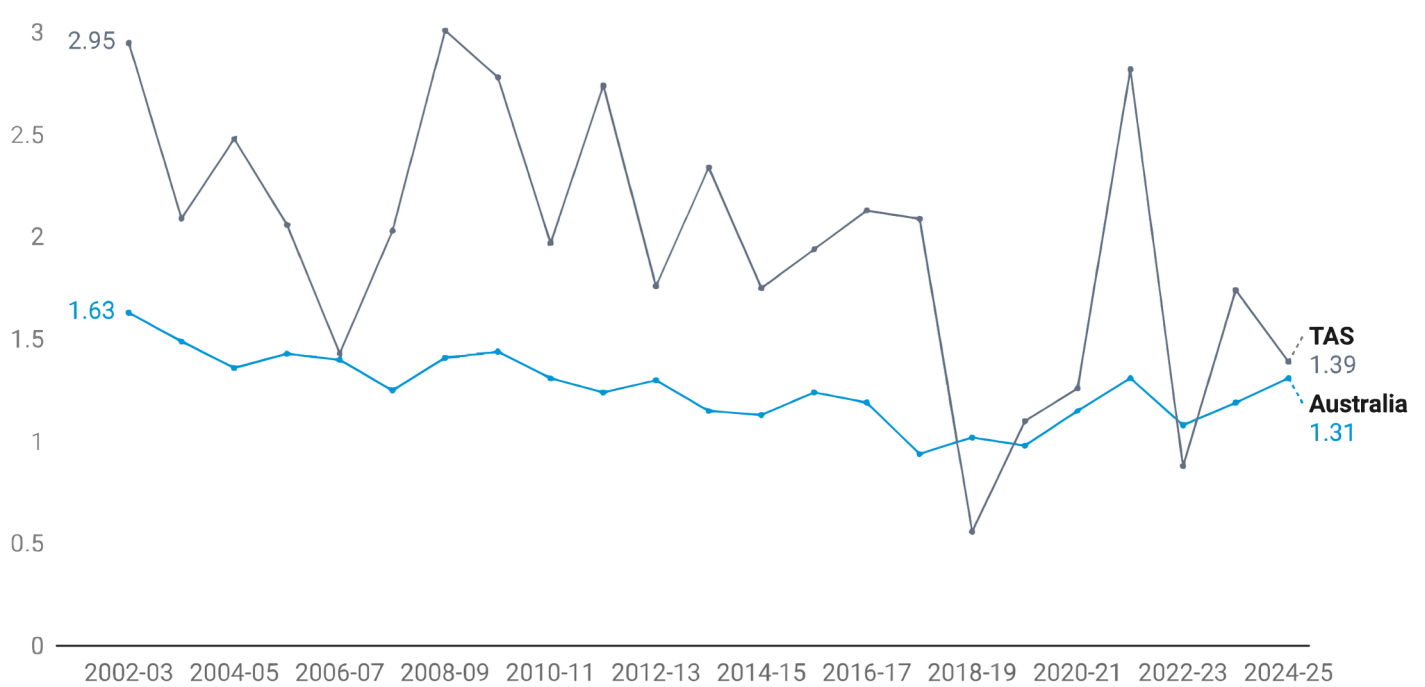


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: The data was calculated using The Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database, several years of the National Drowning Report by The Royal Life Saving Australia, and ERP by SA2 (ASGS Edition 3), Age and Sex, 2001 onwards, from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. • Created with Datawrapper



Table 3.8: Western Australia, Swim Safety and Access Scorecard

Western Australia: Swim Safety & Access Scorecard		
Rank	3 of 8	
Score	72.0	
Risk	Last 3-year mean drowning death rate	1.37 per 100,000
Access	17.9 providers per 10k children	Access Shortage - 0.056
Demand	Adult 15.5%. Child 22.8%. Demand (composite) – 19.2% (equal-weight mean of adult & child participation rates)	

Priority actions

- Increase capacity in regional/remote areas and high-growth suburbs.
- Expand open water safety content in the curriculum.
- Partner with councils for facility access to lift capacity where waitlists persist.

Chart 3.3 shows that Western Australia has a higher rate of drowning deaths than the national average. Also, this gap has grown in recent years. In the financial year 2024-25, there were 49 unintentional drowning deaths in Western Australia.

Chart 3.3: WA drowning rate vs. national average

WA drowning rate remains above national average

Despite improvements, Western Australia has failed to close the gap with Australia overall, in fact the margin has widened again in recent years

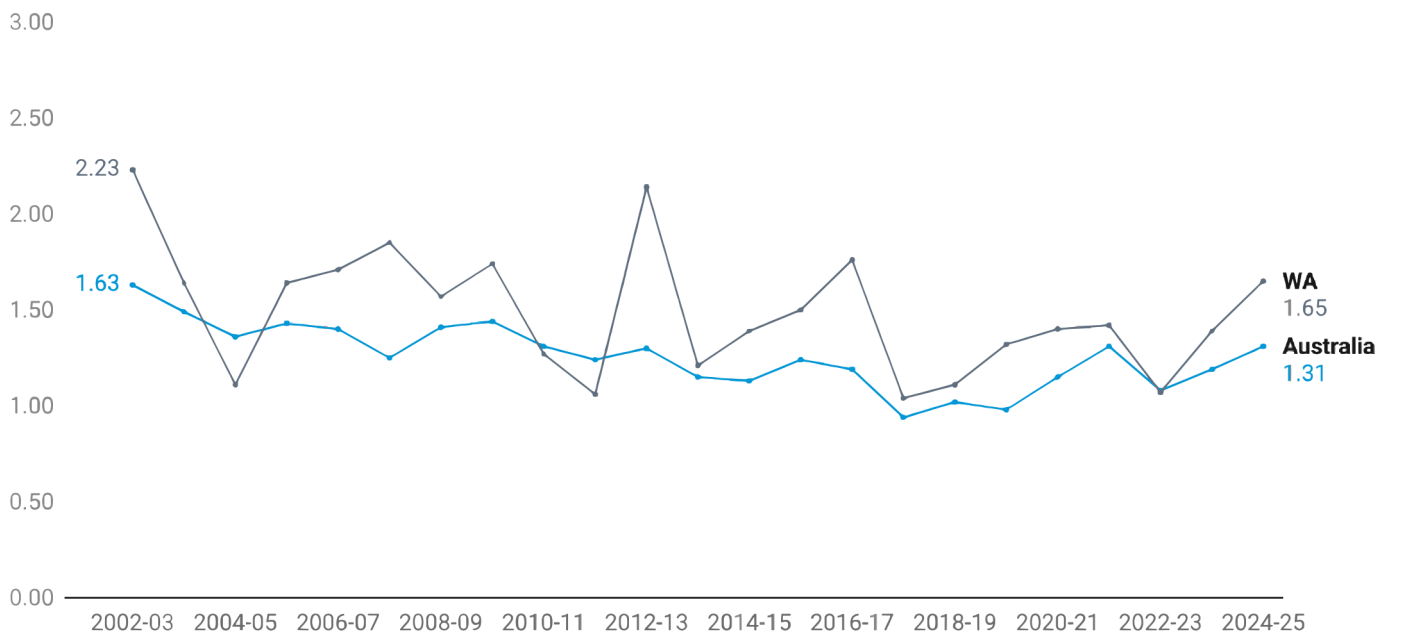


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: The data was calculated using The Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database, several years of the National Drowning Report by The Royal Life Saving Australia, and ERP by SA2 (ASGS Edition 3), Age and Sex, 2001 onwards, from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. • Created with Datawrapper



Table 3.9: Queensland, Swim Safety & Access Scorecard

Queensland: Swim Safety & Access Scorecard		
Rank	4 of 8	
Score	64.2	
Risk	Last 3-year mean drowning death rate	1.35 per 100,000
Access	23.0 providers per 10k children	Access Shortage - 0.043
Demand	Adult 16.6%. Child 23.6%. Demand (composite) – 20.1% (equal-weight mean of adult & child participation rates)	

Priority actions

- Expand lesson capacity in coastal/population growth belts.
- Emphasise beach & flood-water safety modules within lessons (50/50 stroke + safety).
- Launch older-adult refreshers (pre-storm season) in regional and coastal hubs.

Chart 3.4 shows that, for the last twenty years, Queensland's drowning death rate has always been higher than the national average. The gap widened further in 2024-25, with 90 deaths occurring in Queensland during this period.

Chart 3.4: QLD, drowning rate vs. national average

QLD drowning rates remain persistently above the national average

Queensland has consistently recorded higher drowning rates than the Australian average, with the gap widening again in 2024-25

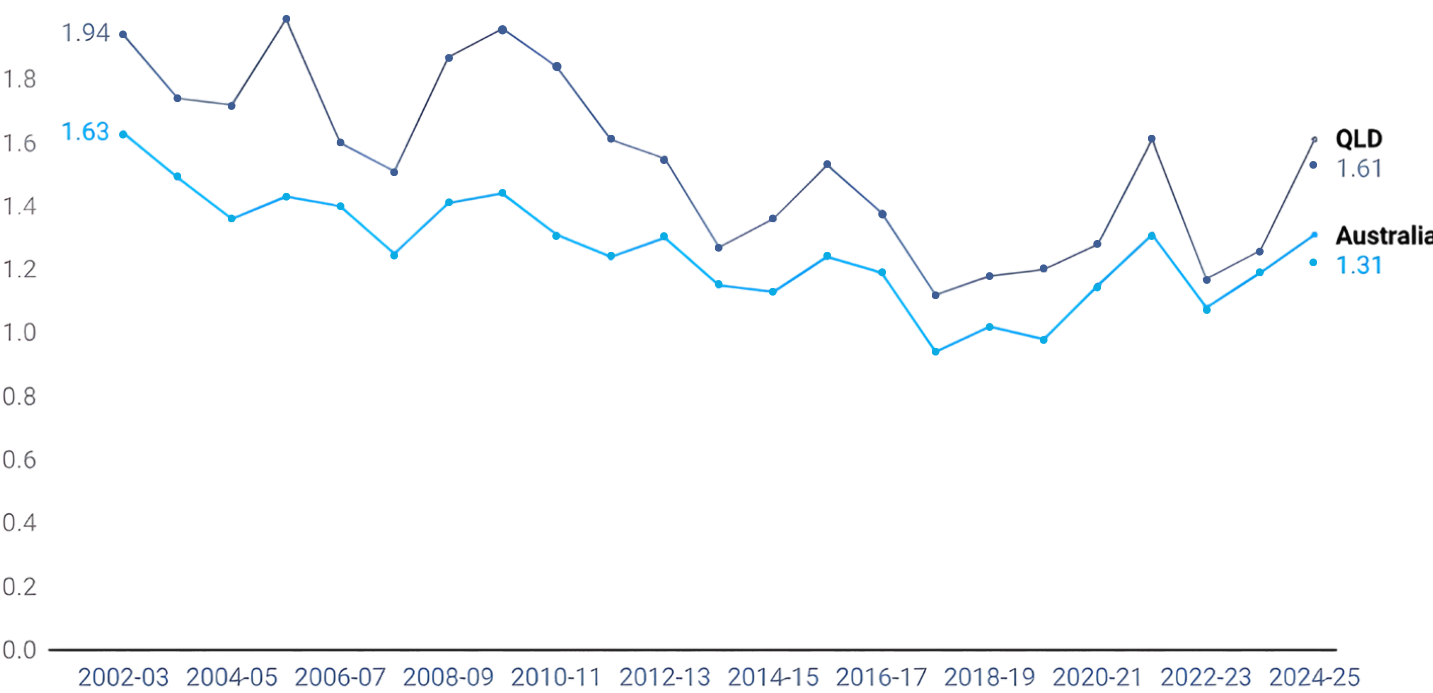


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: The data was calculated using The Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database, several years of the National Drowning Report by The Royal Life Saving Australia, and ERP by SA2 (ASGS Edition 3), Age and Sex, 2001 onwards, from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. • Created with Datawrapper



Table 3.10: New South Wales, Swim Safety and Access Scorecard

New South Wales: Swim Safety & Access Scorecard		
Rank	5 of 8	
Score	62.8	
Risk	Last 3-year mean drowning death rate	1.44 per 100,000
Access	26.8 providers per 10k children	Access Shortage - 0.037
Demand	Adult 16.7%. Child 22.8%. Demand (composite) – 19.8% (equal-weight mean of adult & child participation rates)	

Priority actions

- Older-adult refresher blocks each spring (shore, rock, and inland water safety).
- Maintain high lesson capacity; prioritise waitlist hotspots before summer.
- Improve incident classification and insights with partners to better target interventions.

Progress in New South Wales has stalled since 2017-18, with the drowning growth rate exceeding the national average. Chart 3.5 illustrates this trend. In 2024-25, there were a total of 129 drowning deaths in NSW. There has been a rise in drowning deaths labelled as 'unknown.' This increase, especially in New South Wales, was noted earlier in this report (chart 1.3). Almost 50% of these 'unknown' deaths occurred in NSW in the last two financial years.

Chart 3.5: NSW, drowning rate vs. national average

NSW drowning rate rising faster than national since 2017-18 low

NSW has widened the gap with the national rate since 2017-18, with progress stalling in recent years

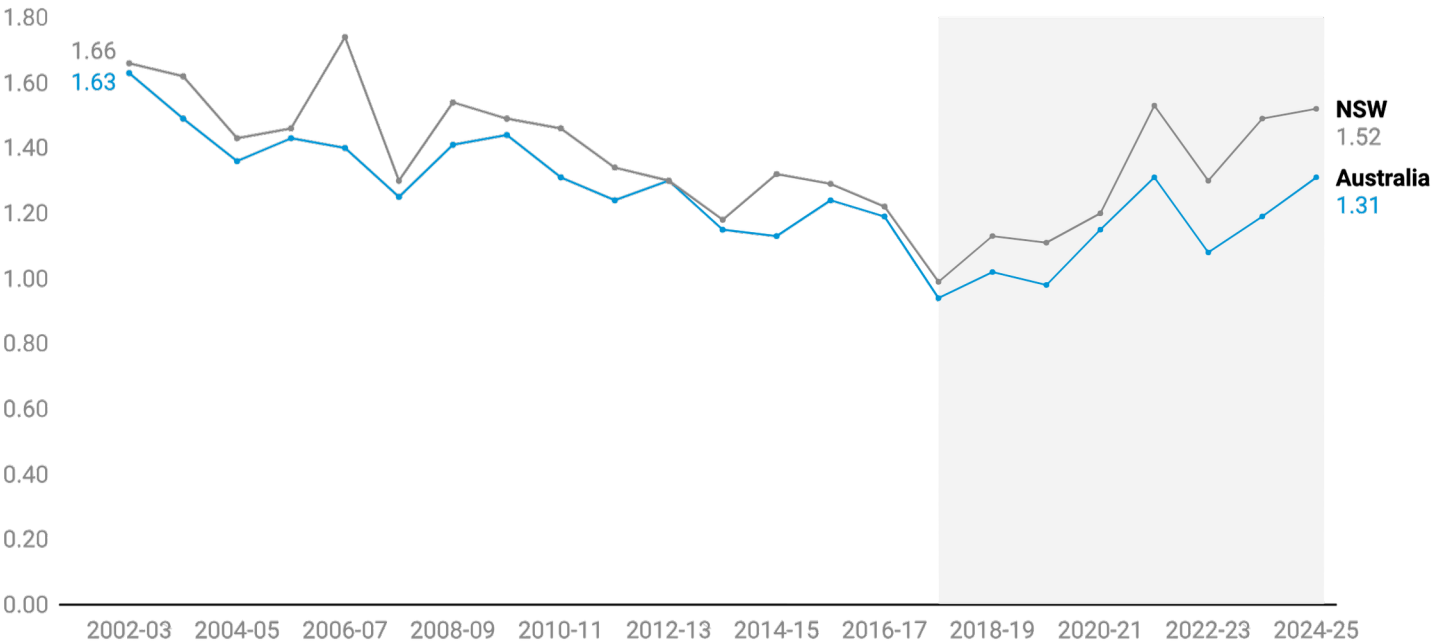


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: The data was calculated using The Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database, several years of the National Drowning Report by The Royal Life Saving Australia, and ERP by SA2 (ASGS Edition 3), Age and Sex, 2001 onwards, from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. • Created with Datawrapper



Table 3.11: South Australia, Swim Safety and Access Scorecard

South Australia: Swim Safety & Access Scorecard		
Rank	6 of 8	
Score	44.9	
Risk	Last 3-year mean drowning death rate	0.95 per 100,000
Access	17.1 providers per 10k children	Access Shortage - 0.058
Demand	Adult 10.8%. Child 15.6%. Demand (composite) – 13.2% (equal-weight mean of adult & child participation rates)	

Priority actions

- Stimulate participation (low-fee slots, community outreach) to build skills safely.
- Add capacity in undersupplied LGAs; prioritise school-term blocks.
- Year-round adult refresher pathway to maintain skills for boaters and coastal users.

Chart 3.6 shows that South Australia was safer than the national average during the decade. However, there are still some spikes that raise concerns. In South Australia, 24 people lost their lives due to drowning during the financial year 2024-25.

Chart 3.6: SA, drowning rate vs. national average

South Australia remains safer than the national average

Drowning rates in SA have consistently stayed below Australia’s average, but periodic spikes highlight the need to sustain progress.

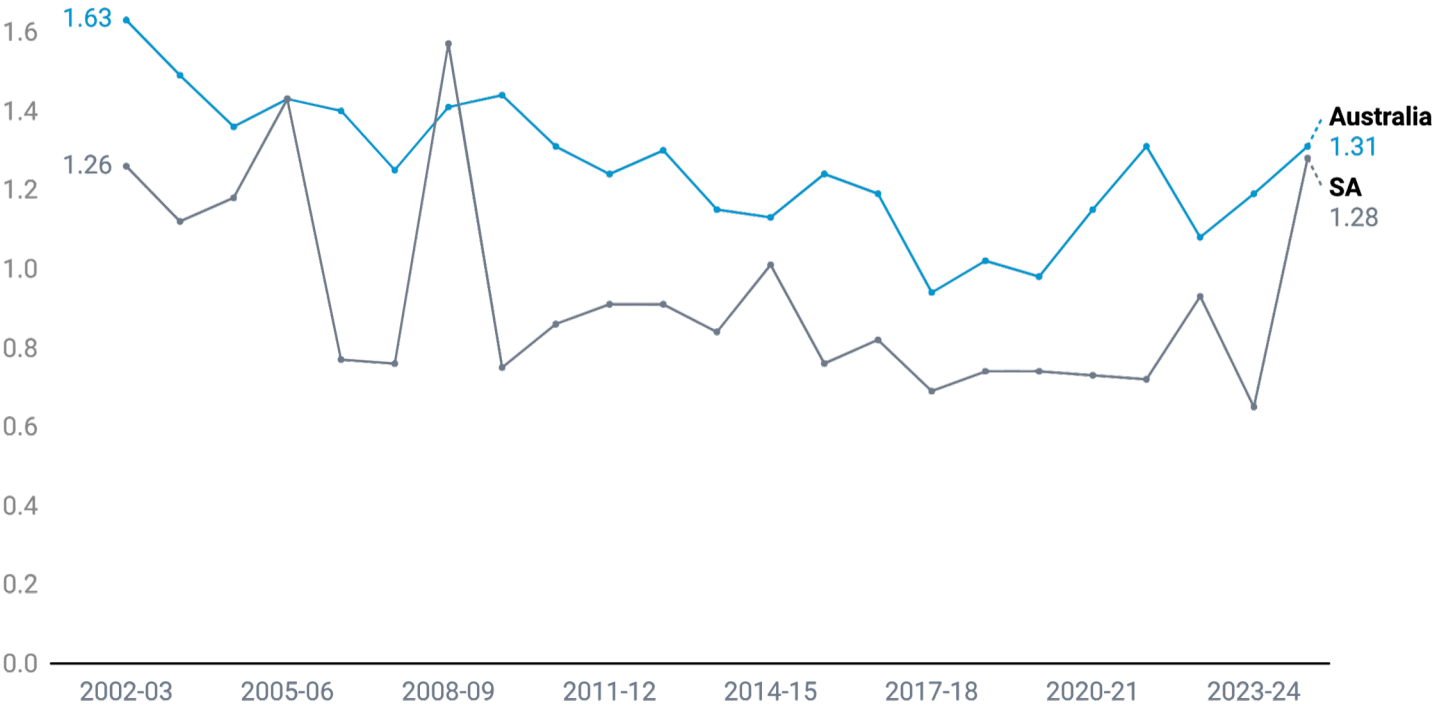


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: The data was calculated using The Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database, several years of the National Drowning Report by The Royal Life Saving Australia, and ERP by SA2 (ASGS Edition 3), Age and Sex, 2001 onwards, from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. • Created with Datawrapper



Table 3.12: Victoria, Swim Safety and Access Scorecard

Victoria: Swim Safety & Access Scorecard		
Rank	7 of 8	
Score	36.5	
Risk	Last 3-year mean drowning death rate	0.81 per 100,000
Access	25.5 providers per 10k children	Access Shortage - 0.039
Demand	Adult 13.1%. Child 24.2%. Demand (composite) – 18.7% (equal-weight mean of adult & child participation rates)	

Priority actions

- Target the 0–14-year-old child retention cliff (keep teens enrolled through term breaks).
- Seasonal adult refresher programs (rips, cold water shock) before peak beach season.
- Maintain provider capacity in growth corridors to prevent future shortages.

Chart 3.7 indicates that Victoria continues to be one of the safest states in Australia regarding drowning risk. In 2024-25, 52 drowning deaths occurred in Victoria.

Chart 3.7: VIC, drowning rate vs national average

Victoria remains safer than the national average, year after year

Victoria has steadily widened its safety margin compared with the national average, making it one of the safest large states

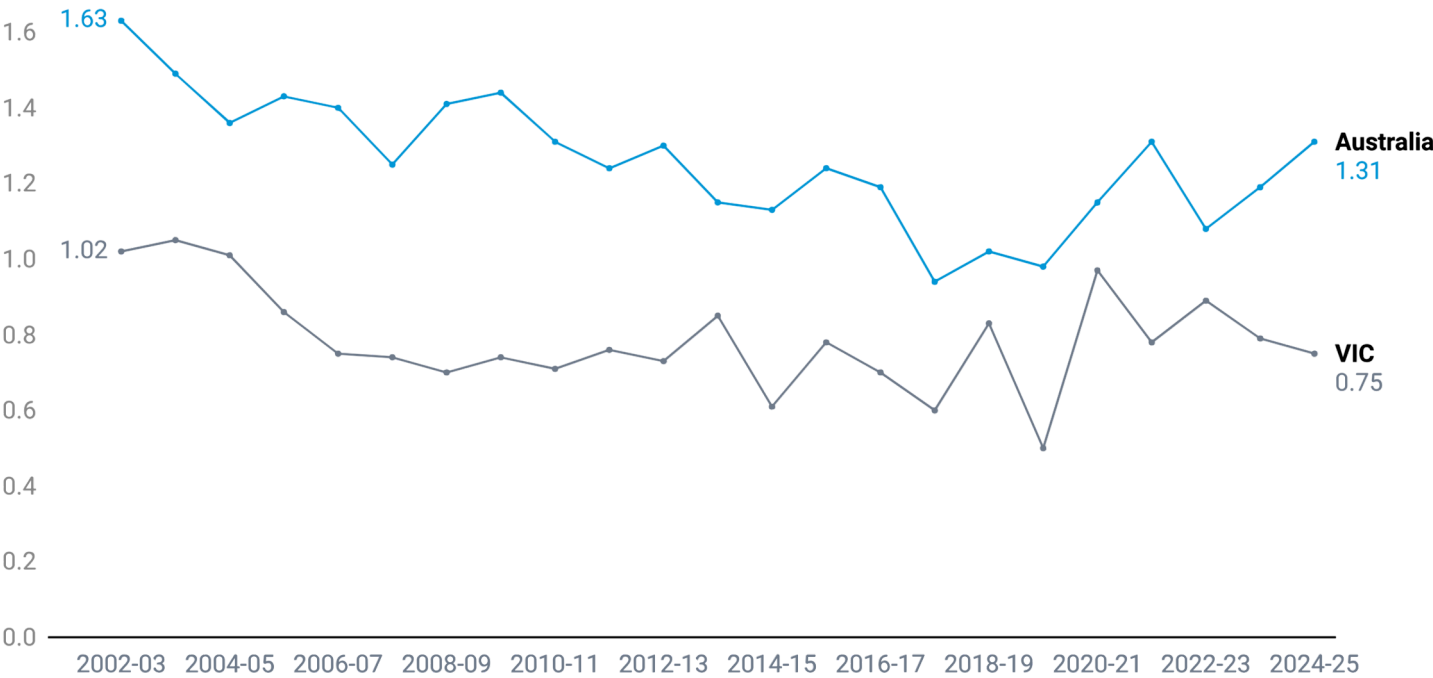


Chart: Otto Media Data Team • Source: The data was calculated using The Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database, several years of the National Drowning Report by The Royal Life Saving Australia, and ERP by SA2 (ASGS Edition 3), Age and Sex, 2001 onwards, from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. • Created with Datawrapper



Table 3.13: Australian Capital Territory, Swim Safety and Access Scorecard

Australian Capital Territory: Swim Safety & Access Scorecard		
Rank	8 of 8	
Score	22.1	
Risk	Last 3-year mean drowning death rate	0.21 per 100,000
Access	22.1 providers per 10k children	Access Shortage - 0.045
Demand	Adult 17.8%. Child 25.0%. Demand (composite) – 21.4% (equal-weight mean of adult & child participation rates)	

Priority actions

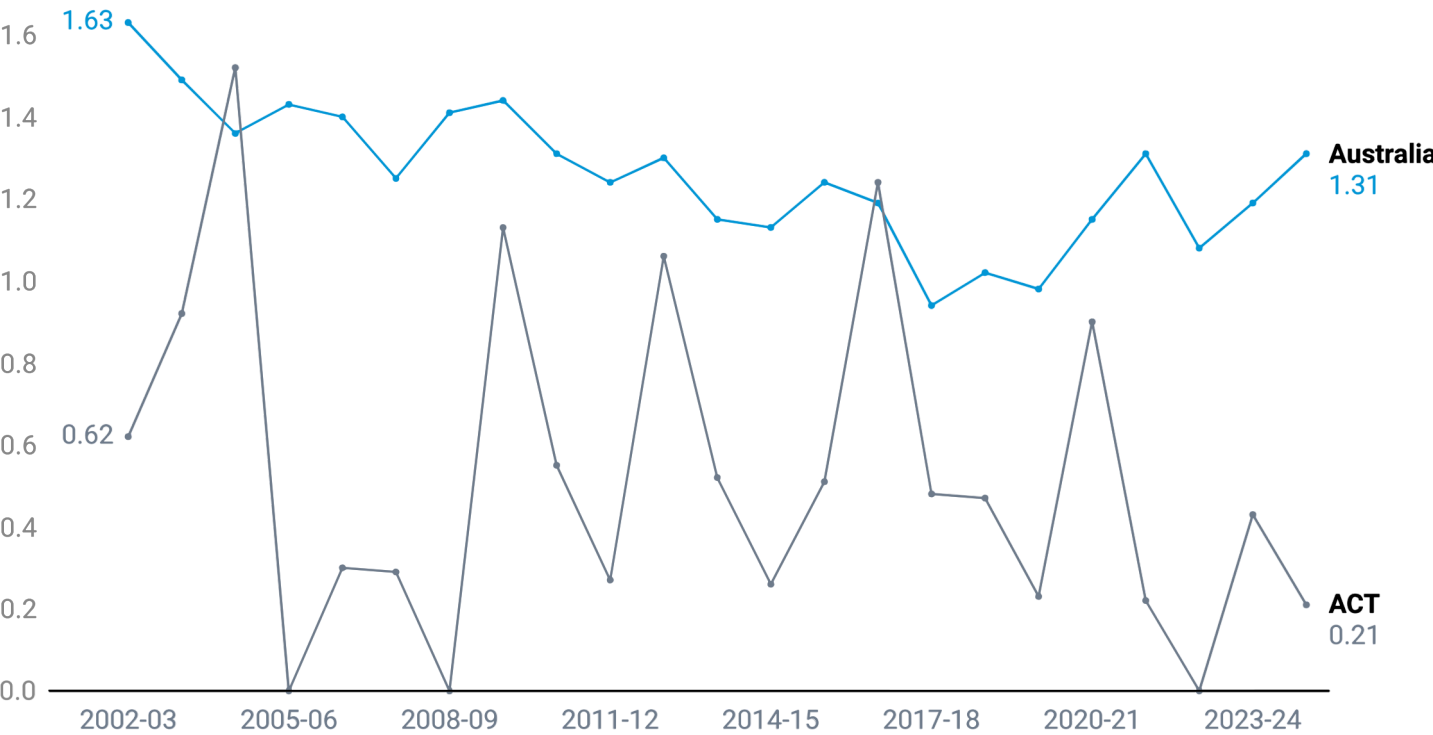
- Maintain low risk with term-break retention for 10–14-year-old children (post-primary drop-off).
- Offer adult refresher blocks each spring; promote rip current and cold water safety.
- Monitor capacity in fast growing suburbs; add slots if waitlists persist.

Chart 3.8 shows that the Australian Capital Territory has the lowest drowning death rates. This is true when compared to other states and the national average. One person died in the Australian Capital Territory due to drowning during the financial year 2024-25.

Chart 3.8: ACT, drowning rate vs. national average

ACT records the lowest drowning rate in Australia, but progress is uneven

Despite the low rate, periodic spikes show that water safety remains fragile



Towards a drowning-free Nation: Call-outs & Priority Actions

1) Make swimming a lifelong skill, not just a childhood milestone

- Create a continuous pathway by keeping the 10-14 age group engaged during term breaks.
- Also, provide adult refresher sessions each spring.
- Measure teen retention rates, adult refresher enrolments, change in SSAGI demand, and risk.

2) Teach 50/50: stroke + safety at every level

- Ensure practical water safety. This means rips, floodwater hazards, cold-water shock, and lifejackets alongside technique.
- Measure curriculum adoption, lesson minutes audited, and safety knowledge checks.

3) Expand lesson capacity where SSAGI shows shortages

- Add blocks/lanes and provider partnerships; target LGAs with low providers per 10,000 children.
- Measure providers per 10k children; waitlist days; capacity utilisation.

4) Keep older Australians safer for longer

- Seasonal refresher programs for 45+ include:
 - Confidence building
 - Breath control
 - Entries and exits

These also feature local open-water modules.

- Measure enrolments, completion, self-reported confidence, changes in older-age Risk.

5) Make equity a safety strategy

- Low-fee slots and community outreach where household income is a barrier; protect beginner access.
- Measure subsidised places delivered; new-entrant retention; local Demand gains.

6) Improve the data that saves lives

- Standardise incident reporting to reduce the 'Unknown' classification.
- Reduction in 'Unknown' share; yearly SSAGI updates.

Methodology & Notes on Data

1. We utilized the Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database (RLSNFDD). In some years, state-level raw counts are missing for certain states. The RLSNFDD omits between 1 and 4 cases for data de-identification purposes. In such instances, we referred to several years of the National Drowning Report published by Royal Life Saving, Australia.

2. Drowning Death Rate = (raw death count in the year/population of the year) * 100,000

3. CAGR = $((\text{End}/\text{Start})^{(1/n)} - 1) * 100$.

4. For sports and activity-related data, we used the AusPlay Survey data for the financial year 2023-24. AusPlay changed its methodology, making previous years' data incomparable with the current data. Consequently, no comparisons have been made.

5. We utilized the ERP by SA2 (ASGS Edition 3), Age and Sex, 2001 Onwards, for population data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

6. We use the 8165.0 Counts of Australian Businesses, including Entries and Exits (CABEE) datasets. They were published on December 17, 2024. This data helps us explore access. The ANZSIC code 8211 refers to 'Sports and Physical Recreation Instruction.' This includes units that provide non-vocational instruction in sports and physical activities. Primary activities include 'Swimming Instruction,' among others. We use these business counts as a proxy for the number of swimming instruction schools in each state and territory. We exclude the business category with over 200 employees, although the number is small (only three).

7. The Swim Safety & Access Gap Index (SSAGI) combines three critical dimensions:

- Drowning risk
- Lesson capacity (access)
- Swimming participation

These highlight where the gaps in safety and access are greatest across Australian states and territories. A higher SSAGI score indicates a larger gap between safety needs and capacity to meet them.

Indicator

A. Risk

- Measured as the 3-year average drowning death rate per 100,000 population.
- A 3-year mean reduces volatility from year-to-year fluctuation.

B. Access Shortage (Capacity)

- Providers per 10,000 children (0-14 years).
- Convert to a shortage measure using the inverse.
- Access Shortage = $1 / \text{Providers per 10,000 children}$.

C. Demand

- Equal-weight composite of adult and child swimming-participation rates. Used only as a component of SSAGI, not a population-weighted overall participation rate.

Note: AusPlay publishes participation rates and estimated participation numbers. This edition reports Demand as an equal-weight composite of adult and child rates. A true population-weighted overall participation rate would require raw cohort counts or survey weights, which are not uniformly available.

Normalisation

Since each indicator is on a different scale, all three were converted to a 0–100 index using min - max scaling.

$$X \text{ norm} = ((X - \min(X)) / (\max(X) - \min(X))) * 100$$

Index Formula

The SSAGI combines the three normalised indicators using weighted averages

$$SSAGI = (0.5 \times RISK_{norm}) + (0.3 \times ACCESS_{norm}) + (0.2 \times DEMAND_{norm})$$

0 = best performer (lowest risk, lowest shortage, lowest demand)

100 = worst performer (highest risk, highest shortage, highest demand)

Rationale of Weights

A.Risk

50% Drowning outcomes are the primary concern.

B.Access Shortage (Capacity)

30% Capacity gaps are the most actionable driver.

C. Demand

20% Ensure states with high participation are recognised.

A sensitivity test with equal weights ($\frac{1}{3}$ each) was also conducted. Results are robust, the top and bottom ranked states remain unchanged.