



Curtin University

# 2021 IMPACT EVALUATION YOUTH WATER SAFETY PROGRAM

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# KEY FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

## Background

Young people continue to be over-represented in drowning events in Western Australia (WA), despite careful design and implementation of youth-focused drowning prevention programs. This report presents the third phase (T3) evaluation findings of the WA Youth Water Safety Program (YWSP) commencing in 2019. The YWSP focuses on young people aged 15-24 with the specific aim to increase knowledge and skills regarding the prevention of drowning in and around water, including awareness about the risks associated with consuming alcohol and other drugs in and around water. One key strategy is the 'Be a Mermate' campaign (the Campaign). The Campaign incorporates state-wide television (TV) streaming service, social media, and a recently launched suite of door-back posters in specific WA regions (Pilbara, Mid West, and South West).

## Evaluation approach

The evaluation was conducted for the period July 2020 – June 2021 using a population level, cross-sectional online survey, and intercept surveys. For reference throughout the report, we refer to time point one (T1) (Baseline) (November-December 2019) before the first wave of the Campaign (n=516) and time point three (T3) (March-May 2021) following the Campaign media wave (n=429). The small T2 sample size (n=63) in 2019/20 meant comparisons were not feasible. Collection protocols required an equal proportion of males and females; an 80%/20% metropolitan/regional split; and a 40%/60% split of age categories (15 – 19years/20 – 24 years). After cleaning, the final samples were n=425 (T1) and n=334 (T3). Descriptive statistics summarised: demographic; water-based activity; factors influencing behaviour; drowning and water safety; and campaign recall. Independent t-tests analysed: alcohol consumption, sensation-seeking and peer influence. The report summarises current campaign recall and recognition and key messages, advertising diagnostics, and behavioural intent from T3 participants. Comparisons are made by time point (T1 and T3) as well as by age (15 – 19 years and 20 - 24 years) and gender (male and female); however, reports only comparisons of interest. Finally, while COVID-19 restrictions during 2020-2021 did not appear to affect online data collection, it reduced the potential to collect intercept data due to smaller numbers in settings such as universities.

## Key findings and implications

Overall T3 results reinforce T1 findings. The evaluation highlights areas for further examination in some cases, specifically by gender and age group for the program and the Campaign strategies. Recent literature provides context to key findings summarised below and implications regarding RLSSWA future practice and research endeavours.

### *Demographics*

Data collected for age were consistent with prescribed sampling protocols. It was also very pleasing to see the sample size quota achieved in T3 as it provides findings that can confidently inform RLSSWA decision making and the Campaign direction. Compared with T1, in T3, more participants were older (20-24 years), studying full-time, and at university. However, consistent with T1 findings and previous evaluation reports, females and participants in the metropolitan area were over-represented and demographic diversity was lacking. These demographic insights should inform future formative work. Participants from the *community and personal services industry* were over-represented, specifically those who identify as lifeguards and pool managers; this demographic is likely to have an existing relationship with RLSSWA.

Consequently, responses may not be consistent with or representative of the broader young adult population. Previous reports have highlighted the need to broaden the socio-demographic composition of the sample and examine recruitment processes to include those from culturally diverse backgrounds and other regional locations. This recommendation remains consistent. Investing in additional formative work to segment the target group by gender, age and education would refine future campaign refinement.

### *Attitudes and behaviours relating to water safety*

#### Water-based activity

Participants were confident swimmers; this remains unchanged from T1. For the first time, at T3, participants reported relaxing in water as a top-three water-based activity while pool and ocean swimming stayed popular across T1 and T3. More than half of the participants took part in fishing and kayaking, canoeing or stand-up paddleboarding. These findings reflect the WA coastal, geographic and demographic context. The popularity of ocean swimming is consistent with 'blue spaces' research that suggests the ocean can shape identity, sense of belonging and place, and influence physical, mental, and spiritual health (1). Findings also reflect the popularity of recreational fishing in Australia (2). The majority of participants reside in metropolitan Perth, and data collection methods<sup>1</sup> potentially attract those more likely to swim in the ocean and engage in activities around pools. We reiterate the need to explore perceived and actual swimming confidence and ability

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in this evaluation, a large proportion of participants had an aquatic background.

amongst the target population and include objective measures of swimming competence (3) in future evaluation and research.

### ***Factors influencing behaviour***

#### Alcohol, sensation seeking and peers

The Campaign focuses on factors with the potential to influence behaviours, specifically alcohol consumption (4, 5), sensation-seeking (6-8), and peer influences (9). Findings demonstrated no change in alcohol consumption between T1 and T3. At T3, there were no significant differences in drinking risk by age or gender. Australian drinking practice appears to reflect a global shift in drinking patterns. Countries with similar drinking cultures to Australia (e.g. the United Kingdom and Canada) have seen a steady decline in drinking amongst young people. Some research suggests that abstinence rates have more than doubled among those aged 16 to 17 over the last decade (10). It will be beneficial to continue to monitor this trend over the next 3 – 5 years.

At T3, sensation-seeking scores were high. In contrast, peer susceptibility scores were low; these findings were similar to T1. These findings are significant given the social norms focus of the Campaign materials. There were differences by age (younger) and gender (males) at T3 for both sensation-seeking and peer influence, which was different to T1, where gender was the only significant variable. Drowning statistics (11, 12) reflect the over-representation of males; however, it does not explain the significance of age. Those aged 25 to 34 accounted for most drowning deaths of any age group in Australia (12). The present finding suggests that younger males push the boundaries of sensation-seeking behaviours, and the influence of peers is critical. It also reflects late adolescence as a period of experimentation and trialist behaviours, where risk-taking contributes to physical and social development (13, 14). Identifying risk motivation, patterns of risk-taking and perceived level of control over risk-taking is critical.

Risk-taking is complex, dynamic and based on situated rationalities (15) where risk is normalised or routinised in particular contexts to particular ends (16). It may be that through their risk practices, younger males seek to protect a valued self or social identity, which contributes to their sense of self-worth. Self and social identities are influenced by the views of others, by personal comparisons with others, groups that individuals belong to, and the audiences individuals have. Understanding the relationship between social influence and social identity may provide further insight into risk practices and account for diverging risk trajectories amongst segments of the target group (17). Exploring how messages align with target group self-identity and represent their interests and values is worthy of further investigation. Notably, investment in understanding peer and social influence within and between youth social networks would identify levers of change, including the role of influential individuals. Social network analysis is one method that RLSSWA could consider.

Previously, we noted that young males who scored highly on sensation-seeking tended to mix with peers who drink more frequently (9, 18) and may have lower self-efficacy around decision making and social norms (9). Compared with their older peers, they may not have had the opportunity to

build their skills to minimise risk. YWSP should continue to target peer group norms (e.g., peer education), skills and self-efficacy (e.g., assertiveness training) as part of the suite of strategies delivered to younger people aged 15–19.

### Social Norms, Attitudes and Beliefs

Advertisement (ad) execution mainly depicts male actors in the explicit modelling of *looking out for mates* and *calling out your mates' risky behaviours* in and around the water. T3 explored approval from partners and friends *only*. At T3, significantly more participants than at T1 thought their partner and friends would approve of calling out mates. Females felt friends were very likely to approve of protective behaviours; however, males remained neutral. These findings are noteworthy as the ads feature a mermate (male representation of a mermaid) calling out mates. It would appear that the actors, messaging and cues to action resonate more with a female audience. It may be that messages alone are not enough to prompt males to speak up when their mates are unsafe in and around waterways. The exploration of strategies and messaging with a peer focus should be part of the next phase of refining existing and designing new intervention opportunities for the target audience.

Compared with T1, fewer T3 participants believed that *jumping from rocks* was safe; however, males thought it would be beneficial and pleasant. Males also reported *drinking alcohol around waterways* as beneficial and pleasant; however, younger people were more likely to call this behaviour dangerous. *Calling out mates* was beneficial but still unpleasant, consistent with T1. This finding contrasted to *looking out for mates*, which participants reported as beneficial and pleasant; also unchanged from T1. The revelation that younger participants considered calling out mates as harmful highlights the fragility of friendships, the importance of reputational management to self and social identity and the effect of highly complex social environments that young people must navigate to feel included and supported. Careful messaging that serves to strengthen highly-valued friendship bonds and social norms requires further exploration.

### Knowledge

Water safety knowledge was high, consistent with T1. There were no differences by gender at T3. Findings at T3 contrast with those at T1, where understanding amongst females was higher than knowledge amongst males. The evaluation highlights the importance of a well-funded, consistent and sustained health promotion program targeting young people to prevent alcohol use and misuse in and around waterways. However, scaling up advocacy and partnership or coalition-building to affect policy change efforts may be more valuable in the mid to long term than over-reliance on traditional promotional and educational strategies. Previous evaluation has recommended exploring the demographic of participants who scored low on the knowledge scale to allow for better segmentation of the target group and the design and delivery of tailored educational resources and skills workshops for these groups, which remains valid. To better explore some of these factors, Group Model Building is one method that may be of value to RLSSWA.

## ***Perception of Risk***

Participants perceived *drinking alcohol around water* was a low-risk activity for themselves and their peers and that generally, the benefits of drinking around water outweighed the risks. It was a behaviour admired by peers. All perceptions were consistent with T1. At T3, participants valued information about the negative consequences of drinking alcohol around water, recognised the seriousness of a resulting adverse event and thought it was an avoidable practice. There were significant differences by time, gender and age for *personal risk and risk to peers*. At both T1 and T3, males had significantly higher personal control and rated peer influence higher than females and placed less value on the negative consequences of drinking around water. This result is consistent with recent findings from WA research with males who dismissed media messages that emphasise the negative aspects of drinking alcohol (19) and supports shifts towards 'gain' framing in the Campaign. Peers did not influence younger adults who perceived the risk of drinking around water as low and without serious effects. These findings are not consistent with the 'Be a Mermate' key messages and were not evident at T1. Ideally, exploring the role of peer influence on perceptions of risk by demographic profiles may afford unique insights into the relationships between media consumption environment, social context, exposure, recall, uptake of the Campaign messages and behavioural change.

## ***Behaviour***

Swimming outside of patrolled areas at the beach, swimming alone and swimming cold or tired were the most commonly reported risk practices. At T3, significantly more females and younger people never swim alone. This outcome is consistent with previous YWSP evaluation findings and the broader Australian literature (9, 20), suggesting that males are more likely to engage in sensation-seeking behaviour. Of significance, two-thirds of younger people never swim after drinking alcohol or taking drugs. By contrast, almost half of older peers never swim after drinking or taking drugs. Eight out of ten T3 participants reported having friends who swim outside patrolled areas and friends who do not wear a life jacket. There is a need for sustained work to reinforce the importance of environmental cues such as obvious safety directions and purchasing and wearing protective equipment. Of interest, ignoring safety advice, encouraging others to take risks and diving headfirst into the water all decreased between T1 and T3, indicating some cut-through of the Campaign messages. However, at T3, the younger cohort reported they were more likely to see their friends swim in prohibited areas and use alcohol or drugs while swimming, which was not evident in T1. The most recent evaluation report recommended exploring the social and situational conditions in which younger people engage in more risky behaviours (9, 20, 21). One year on, this remains an appropriate recommendation.

## Media Campaign

### Recall, recognition and awareness

Just under half of the participants recalled advertising focused on water safety and young people, with around two-thirds of participants identifying the Don't Drink and Drown (DDD) campaign. This finding is not surprising as DDD was a long-standing, well-recognised WA brand often associated with Leavers' festivals (22). Continuous exposure has translated into sustained awareness over time (23). Positively almost one-third of participants specifically recalled the current Campaign (at a similar time point recall of the previous campaign was almost double).

One in five participants were aware of the Campaign at T3 (the first time point the evaluation calculated a total awareness score because of the minimal numbers at T2). For continuing media campaigns, awareness at the first wave is usually around 60% (24, 25). However, the Campaign is a new iteration of a youth-focused drowning prevention campaign using a novel creative considerably different from previous DDD advertising. Accordingly, it would be reasonable to suggest that given overall awareness of drowning prevention has increased, a growing awareness of the new product 'Be a Mermate' has also resulted. Findings point to a solid base from which to build the new brand.

### Main Messages and Campaign Diagnostics

Most participants reported that the Campaign's main messages were well represented. This finding is noteworthy in light of significant investment in the design and testing of the creative concepts and suggests they are the right messages for the right audience at this time. However, wear-out of the messages is a consideration. Nine out of ten participants agreed the ads were attention-grabbing, easy to understand, and made them think about water safety. Only around half thought the ad told them something new or indicated they would talk about the ad with their friends. These results may contribute to expedited wear out (26) and may require a refresh of the intended messages and creative execution in the medium term to consolidate existing trends. Over half of the participants had seen the ads via multiple media sites, including mainstream TV, streaming and Facebook, reinforcing the importance of a multi-channel distribution strategy. Almost one-quarter of participants viewed the ad on Facebook. This finding contradicts commentary suggesting that young people use Facebook less than Twitter and Instagram (27). Additional social media categories are recommended in subsequent evaluation to refine the online placement of the Campaign materials.

### Campaign Posters

The YWSP team introduced conventional posters at T3. They were also featured online. The use of social media platforms by community-based organisations as low cost, environmentally friendly channels to disseminate health messages has rapidly expanded (28). Resource allocation, environmental footprint, placement and reach are important considerations that will influence decisions regarding hard or soft copy materials. One in five participants had seen the posters either

at Leavers' events or online, suggesting a role for both formats, though there may also be sampling bias. Three-quarters of participants thought the Campaign conveyed the main messages very well.

### Action and Intention

Around one in five participants considered paying more attention to their mates' behaviour and intended to call out mates' risky behaviour, practices aligned with the Campaign messaging and materials. Messages resonated most with females and younger participants. Females were more likely than males to pay attention to their mates' behaviour and drink less alcohol around water. Younger participants were more likely to call out their mates' risky behaviour compared with the older participants. It would seem the Campaign materials, including traditional door-back posters, positively influenced participants. This activity should continue as a key component of a multi-strategy approach to galvanise young people to move from awareness to intention and potentially behaviour change.

### Youth Water Safety Program

'Be a Mermate' is growing in brand recognition, with almost a quarter of participants recognising the slogan and recalling the logo. We anticipate this will continue to build. Popular summer events for the younger cohort (15-19 years) were most likely to be where they had seen or heard the logo, such as Leavers and music festivals. One in 10 participants had seen the slogan/logo on posters which is a positive finding for this strategy, with Dunsborough and Busselton the most recalled locations, also consistent with Leavers and summer music festivals.



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