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# 2020 IMPACT EVALUATION YOUTH WATER SAFETY PROGRAM

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# KEY FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

## Background

Young people remain at high risk of drowning in Western Australia. This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the new Western Australian (WA) state-wide Youth Water Safety Program (YWSP) commencing in 2019. The previous long-standing WA drowning prevention campaign for young people, Don't Drink and Drown, was introduced by the Royal Life Saving Society Western Australia (RLSSWA) in 2004 to address the growing number of young people drowning after consuming alcohol. The campaign aimed to raise awareness amongst young people aged 15 to 24 of the risks associated with consuming alcohol in aquatic environments. The new iteration YWSP continues to focus 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.

## Evaluation approach

Briefly, the evaluation used a population level, cross-sectional online survey conducted at two-time-points for the period July 2019 – June 2020. Specifically, time point one (T1) (Baseline) (November-December 2019) prior to the first wave of the 'Be a Mermate' campaign (n=510), and time point two (T2) (February - March 2020) following the 'Be a Mermate' campaign (n=97). Collection protocols required an equal proportion of males and females; an 80%/20% metropolitan/regional split; and representative age categories of 40% for those aged 15 – 19 and, 60% for those aged 20 – 24. After cleaning, the final samples were n=425 (T1) and n=63 (T2). Descriptive statistics were used to summarise: demographic; water-based activity; factors influencing behaviour; drowning and water safety; and campaign recall. Independent t-tests were used to analyse: alcohol consumption; sensation seeking; and peer influence. A summary of current campaign recall and recognition, as well as key messages, advertising diagnostics and behavioural intent from T2 participants is also provided.

## Key findings and implications

The evaluation yielded a range of important insights for the new program and campaign. Here, findings are summarised and used along with the literature to draw conclusions and present implications and recommendations for RLSSWA future practice and research endeavours.

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

### **Water based activity**

Mostly participants were confident swimmers. Engagement in water based activities was common and frequent. Risky activities such as rock fishing and rough water swimming were undertaken frequently. These are not unexpected findings in the WA context where the culture and climate,<sup>1,2</sup> the geographical location of the participants' residential postcode and the methods of data collection<sup>3</sup> potentially attract those more likely to swim and engage in activities in and around the water. These findings do however highlight a critical need to further explore perceived and actual swimming ability amongst the broader target population, and consider the opportunity to include objective measures of swimming competence<sup>4</sup> in future evaluation and research. Continuing to invest in prevention activities and environmental cues that emphasise the necessity for young people to be competent swimmers and/or CPR trained when participating in activities in and around the water are vital, particularly at locations where risky activities are undertaken.

### **Factors influencing behaviour**

In the planning for the new iteration of the YWSP emphasis was placed on factors that have the potential to influence behaviours: alcohol consumption,<sup>5,6</sup> sensation seeking,<sup>7,8,9</sup> and peer influences.<sup>2,10</sup> The current findings deviate from the recent Don't Drink and Drown report (2019)<sup>11</sup> which showed a reduction in the number who had consumed 10 standard drinks (D5 4.8%, D4 8.1%),<sup>11</sup> whilst this report found a mean alcohol consumption score in the higher risk category. This suggests that the influence, and consumption of alcohol continues to be a factor that needs to be at the forefront of campaign messaging. The 'Be a Mermate' campaign will compete with the sophisticated and pervasive advertising by the alcohol industry which continues to use fun and water-based activities to promote alcohol and normalise alcohol consumption in and around water based locations, now referred to in the literature as an 'aquatic alcogenic environment'.<sup>12</sup> Given the insidiousness of these strategies and their ongoing impact, it is vital that organisations increase

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<sup>1</sup> Drozdzewski, D., et al., *The experiences of weak and non-swimmers caught in rip currents at Australian beaches*. Australian Geographer, 2015. 46(1): p. 15-32.

<sup>2</sup> Sinkinson, M., *Having a good time: young people talk about risk and fun when combining alcohol consumption and water activities*. International Journal of Health Promotion and Education, 2014. 52(1): p. 47-55.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in this evaluation, a large proportion of participants had an aquatic background and/or qualification.

<sup>4</sup> Petrass, L.A. and J.D. Blitvich, *A lack of aquatic rescue competency: a drowning risk factor for young adults involved in aquatic emergencies*. Journal of community health, 2018. 43(4): p. 688-693.

<sup>5</sup> Hamilton, K., et al., *Alcohol use, aquatic injury, and unintentional drowning: A systematic literature review*. Drug and Alcohol Review, 2018. 37: p. 752-773.

<sup>6</sup> Peden, A.E., R.C. Franklin, and P.A. Leggat, *Alcohol and its contributory role in fatal drowning in Australian rivers, 2002-2012*. Accident Analysis and Prevention, 2017. 98: p. 259-265.

<sup>7</sup> Meil, W.M., et al., *Sensation seeking and executive deficits in relation to alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use frequency among university students: Value of ecologically based measures*. Addictive behaviors, 2016. 62: p. 135-144.

<sup>8</sup> Niland, P., et al., *"Everyone can loosen up and get a bit of a buzz on": Young adults, alcohol and friendship practices*. International Journal of Drug Policy, 2013. 24(6): p. 530-537.

<sup>9</sup> Lloyd, A. and A.K. Döring, *When do peers influence adolescent males' risk taking? Examining decision making under conditions of risk and ambiguity*. Journal of Behavioral Decision Making, 2019. 32(5): p. 613-626.

<sup>10</sup> Widman, L., et al., *Adolescent Susceptibility to Peer Influence in Sexual Situations*. Journal of Adolescent Health, 2016. 58(3): p. 323-329.

<sup>11</sup> Collaboration for Evidence Research and Impact in Public Health, *Don't Drink and Drown: 2019 Impact Evaluation*, CERIPH, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Abercromby, M., et al., *"Go hard or go home": exploring young people's knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of alcohol use and water safety in Western Australia using the Health Belief Model*. International Journal of Health Promotion and Education, 2020: p. 1-18.

action to counter industry influence. RLSSWA should continue to take action on harmful alcohol consumption in a timely way via short bursts of social media e.g. during peak social and festival seasons, and consider an investment in dedicated advocacy efforts.

Overall sensation seeking scores were high amongst all participants, in contrast the peer susceptibility scores were low. Interestingly, and consistent with the literature<sup>10</sup> females scored lower than the males for alcohol consumption, sensation seeking and peer influence.<sup>5, 10</sup> Generally, males are over-represented in the drowning statistics<sup>13</sup> and specifically in this age group.<sup>4, 14</sup> Sensation seeking describes the pursuit of exciting or novel experiences even if those situations are dangerous or risky.<sup>9, 15</sup> The literature has found young males who score high on sensation seeking tend to mix with peers who drink more frequently<sup>16, 17</sup> and may have lower self-efficacy to resist their pressures.<sup>16</sup> Targeting peer group norms (e.g., peer education), enhancing skills and self-efficacy (e.g., assertiveness training) paralleled with a focus on advocacy and alcohol policies are important individual and contextual factors to influence behaviour.

Consistent with the literature, focusing on friends, peer groups, social networks and organisations to identify collective intentions towards risk-taking is important to understand both individual and collective behaviour. This might include the diversity of peer groups and the processes which underpin how friendship groups and networks function in different contexts. Examining changes in experience as young people age, drinking patterns, or susceptibility to peer influence may facilitate insights as to how risk and protective factors are formed, are socially enacted, mediated and enforced.<sup>18</sup> Extending media messages and other program strategies to focus on the interaction between multiple members of social groups and which seek to change not just individual, but peer group understandings regarding risk and protective behaviours would be a valuable addition.

Going forward the need to use a more sophisticated segmentation of the intended audience (i.e., micro-targeting sensation seeking or peer influences) and a more in-depth exploring of the factors that drive these factors will ensure RLSSWA has the right message, for the right audience, using the right media.

### Social Norms and Attitudes

Findings suggest dissonance between perceived positive approval to 'look out for mates' and lower levels of perceived approval to 'call out mates and their risky behaviour'. This points to lower self-efficacy amongst the target group. This is an interesting finding, as the 'Be a Mermate' execution

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<sup>13</sup> World Health Organization, *Global report on drowning: preventing a leading killer*. 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Royal Life Saving Society Western Australia, *Western Australian Drowning Report 2017 -2018*. 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Jang, S.M., S. Sohn, and M. Yu, *Perceived stress, alcohol consumption, and Internet use among Korean college students: Does sensation-seeking matter?* Children and Youth Services Review, 2018. 88: p. 354-360.

<sup>16</sup> Cicognani, E. and B. Zani, *Alcohol use among Italian university students: The role of sensation seeking, peer group norms and self-efficacy*. Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education, 2011. 55(2): p. 17-36.

<sup>17</sup> Hamilton, K. and H. Schmidt, *Drinking and swimming: investigating young Australian males' intentions to engage in recreational swimming while under the influence of alcohol*. Journal of Community Health, 2014. 39(1): p. 139.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick, M.E., et al., *"I Got Your Back": Friends' Understandings Regarding College Student Spring Break Behavior*. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 2011. 40(1): p. 108-120.

includes explicit modelling of 'looking out for your mates', and also 'calling out risky behaviours' in and around the water. The results suggest whilst it is considered beneficial and pleasant to look out for your mates, calling out risky behaviour is unpleasant.

Drinking, particularly amongst young people can be considered a shared social practice that is positive, sociable and undertaken within friendships. This view is critical as it positions drinking within a highly complex social environment and within friendship and broader networks with a range of actors. Accordingly, identifying the range of actors within networks and examining their roles, influence and credibility may distinguish who is best positioned to 'call out mates'. Greater granularity may demonstrate that this might be a role for some more than others. It may also elicit a deeper appreciation of how challenging this practice is due to the expectations and norms within friendship drinking groups. This may in part be because such messages are effectively asking young people to break strong and highly-valued friendship bonds<sup>8</sup> and the friendship group may serve to dis-incentivise not drinking or stopping drinking or other risk activity.

The media messages aim to engage young people in a conversation about risk, however it is less clear that this modelling in media messages alone is enough for young people to speak up when their mates are being unsafe around the water. Research suggests pleasure from drinking outweighs negative experiences and friendship, caring and protection play a powerful role in minimising adverse drinking experiences.<sup>8</sup> Self-efficacy is complex, and requires consideration of an individual's personal motivation, behaviour and their social environment in order to have confidence to exert control over these factors. Accordingly, there would be utility in increased investment in peer-to-peer strategies beyond media. Such strategies could include a greater emphasis on '*giving practical tips for how to talk mates out of danger*'. This may create a more powerful strategy to turn messaging into peer support, and peer education into action. It may also reduce the likelihood for potentially disinterest or disengagement by the target group in an activity that makes them feel uncomfortable. Explicit social norms based messaging has been used effectively in social marketing campaigns targeting alcohol and could be explored further here.<sup>19</sup>

## Knowledge

Water safety knowledge was high, especially for females. This reflects the significant investment by RLSSWA over the last decade to distribute educational and promotional resources to young people in WA to prevent alcohol misuse in and around waterways especially at events such as Leavers.<sup>20</sup> However, the notion that knowledge is the antecedent to behavioural change is very much challenged in contemporary health promotion. Ubiquitous commercial advertising across all media platforms and the emerging aquatic alcogenic environment suggest that influencing behaviour through increased environmental supports, advocacy and partnerships may be of more value in the mid-long term than reliance on traditional promotional and educational strategies. However, a greater

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<sup>19</sup> Jones, S.C., K. Andrews, and K. Francis, *Combining social norms and social marketing to address underage drinking: Development and process evaluation of a whole-of-community intervention*. PLoS one, 2017. 12(1): p. e0169872.

<sup>20</sup> Enkel, S., et al., *Alcohol and injury risk at a Western Australian school leavers festival*. Health Promotion Journal of Australia, 2018. 29.

interrogation of the profile of the participant who scored low on the knowledge scale may be worthwhile to allow for better segmentation of the target group and the design and delivery of tailored educational resources and skills workshops for these groups.

### ***Awareness of drowning risks and prevention strategies***

#### **Perception of Risk**

When considering 'drinking alcohol around water' participants considered the risk to themselves and their peers to be low and for most, the benefits outweighed the risks. It was a behaviour admired by peers. The influence of peers extends beyond merely being present, peers exert social influence on risk taking which can be either positive or negative, and it has been suggested the highest levels of risk taking occur when young people receive positive encouragement from peers to engage in risky behaviours.<sup>2,9</sup> Consistent with suggestions regarding social norms and attitudes, greater exploration of social networks and peer influence may have utility, including the function and processes of core and peripheral networks and actors. There were significant differences by gender for *personal risk*, *risk to peers*, *information value* and *peer influence*. Ideally, exploring the role of peers and their potential to influence perception of risk by demographic profiles may afford greater insights into the relationships between exposure, recall, uptake of campaign messages and behavioural change. In the next evaluation phase, RLSSWA could consider including one or more of the identified '*high risk behaviours*' from T1 and together with the 'perception of risk' scale unpack these behaviours allowing for the design of more targeted strategies.

Participants valued testimonials from those who had been involved in the negative outcomes of drinking alcohol around water. This is a strategy worth pursuing as a form of awareness raising that resonates with the target group, and removes the fear approach often used in injury prevention messaging.<sup>17</sup> By way of contrast, the positive focus has been found to be an effective and particularly relevant strategy for this demographic, specifically males.<sup>17</sup> As a function of the long-term investment in evaluation by RLSSWA the use of humour and the mythical notion of a mermaid-mermate luring their mates away from danger and towards safety will be explored.

#### **Behaviour**

Swimming outside of patrolled areas at the beach and not wearing a life-jacket were the most reported high risk behaviours. RLSSWA should continue to work with other drowning and injury prevention agencies to ensure a multi-agency approach to reduce these behaviours. Consistent with the Australian literature,<sup>21,16</sup> males were more likely to take personal risks and not follow directions, swim alone, and dive into unknown depths of water; and encourage their peers to take risks and dive headfirst into water. It is acknowledged that 'youth' and 'risk' are often viewed as synonymous, and for today's young people risk can be a marker of social identity.<sup>2</sup> Going forward this provides some

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<sup>21</sup> Hamilton, K. and H. Schmidt, *Critical beliefs underlying young Australian males' intentions to engage in drinking and swimming*. Sage Open, 2013. 3(4): p. 2158244013508959.

perspective into the social and situational conditions in which they may engage in more risky behaviours.<sup>2, 16, 21</sup> Special attention should be given to the spatial and temporal influences on risk behaviour e.g. event based drinking and seasonality of activities in and around the water.

### ***Recall of the Don't Drink and Drown Key program messages***

Recall of the Don't Drink and Drown campaign materials was high amongst the participants. This is consistent with previous 2019 findings for Don't Drink and Drown with over three quarters of participants recognising the program (77.6%), with females being higher 81.3% than males 64.6%.<sup>11</sup> In health promotion it is not unusual for a long-standing campaign to have sustained awareness that may be attributed to a combination of factors including, but not limited to, execution and delivery mode e.g. Leavers festivals and social media.<sup>20</sup> This is a positive outcome for RLSSWA and an acknowledgment of the commitment to deliver a well-funded, long term program that embraces mass media, education programs embedded in schools, and dissemination through social, digital and physical environments (e.g. Leavers events). These synergies have translated into sustained awareness over time.<sup>22</sup>

We explored the newly created YWS program messages and of interest, most participants reported they were '*already aware of the key messages*' and/or had already changed their behaviour. This raises an interesting point observed in other long running health promotion campaigns<sup>23,24</sup> whereby those who were already aware of drowning prevention messages and strategies (possibly residual awareness from the Don't Drink Drown program) indicate their resonance with the new materials, suggesting message reinforcement, however, the intended target audience is not as attracted to the drowning prevention messages and/or execution of the key messages. There is an important consideration here for the results in 2020-2021. Specifically there is the potential for awareness to be high with only a small shift in behavioural change, indicating a reinforcing effect and not a true reflection of the impact of the new campaign execution. The need to segment the audience (and/or the message(s)) so that 'Be a Mermate' will act to engage some, whilst reinforce others, is key.<sup>19,23</sup>

### ***A note about T2***

This is a positive, post-campaign snapshot of the new media campaign 'Be a Mermate'. It provides a base for the program to build awareness and to move in the right trajectory, however we urge caution in interpretation and consideration of findings. Whilst recall and awareness is the first step in the change process encouraged by media campaigns, the very small sample (n=23) who saw 'Be a Mermate' were mostly younger, female and lived in metropolitan Perth; this is not representative of the intended target audience. Awareness in media campaigns at first wave for continuing campaigns

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<sup>22</sup> Bellew B, Bauman A., Leavy J., *The communication domain: mass media-based social marketing campaigns for physical activity*, in Bellew B, Nau T, Smith B, Bauman A (Eds.) *Getting Australia Active III. A systems approach to physical activity for policy makers*. 2020. The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre and The University of Sydney: Sydney.

<sup>23</sup> Leavy, J.E., et al., *Examining the communication effects of health campaigns: A case study using Find Thirty every day® in Western Australia*. Sage Open, 2014. 4(2): p. 2158244014533557.

<sup>24</sup> Wakefield, M.A., B. Loken, and R.C. Hornik, *Use of mass media campaigns to change health behaviour*. The Lancet, 2010. 376(9748): p. 1261-1271.

is usually around 60%.<sup>25,26</sup> Accordingly it is prudent not to draw any conclusions based on the low numbers who saw the media campaign over the summer period 2019-2020.

### ***Demographics***

Data collected in this report met prescribed sampling protocols (at T1). However, consistent with previous Don't Drink and Drown evaluation reports, females were over represented in the data collection and demographic diversity was lacking. Previous reports have highlighted the need to explore opportunities to broaden the socio-demographic composition of the sample and geographic recruitment processes to include those from culturally diverse backgrounds and recruitment from other aquatic locations. This recommendation remains consistent. Recruitment strategies need to be diverse and robust and take place outside of the aquatic industry and/or university setting to ensure results are comparable to the WA population. Sample size quotas must be achieved to provide evaluation findings that can reliably inform decision making and provide greater confidence in the small but positive findings about the new campaign direction and that program objectives are realised. Additional formative work segmented by gender would be worthwhile to interrogate: 1) digital/social media(s) consumption /patterns/usage (especially since the engagement and recognition of 'Be a Mermate' social media campaign was low); and 2) risk-taking and social networks and the drinking culture.

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<sup>25</sup> Grunseit, A.C., et al., *Getting the message across: Outcomes and risk profiles by awareness levels of the "measure-up" obesity prevention campaign in Australia*. PloS one, 2015. 10(4): p. e0121387.

<sup>26</sup> Richardson, A.K., et al., *Evidence for truth®: The Young Adult Response to a Youth-Focused Anti-Smoking Media Campaign*. American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 2010. 39(6): p. 500-506.



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