

The role of recreational boaters in drowning prevention in New Zealand

Anaïs Lefevre

Co-designed with:



Overview

- Drowning: a silent disaster
- Methodology
- Results
- Discussion & Conclusion

Drowning: a silent disaster



Overview

- Drowning = over 300,000 recorded fatalities annually or 2.5M in the past decade
- Data from WHO is incomplete
- Approaches and tools to prevent drowning: Bystanders training in safe rescue techniques
- Definition of recreational boaters
- Main causes of drowning amongst boaties in NZ
 - PFD
 - Inexperience
 - Alcohol and substance abuse
 - Communication devices

Methodology

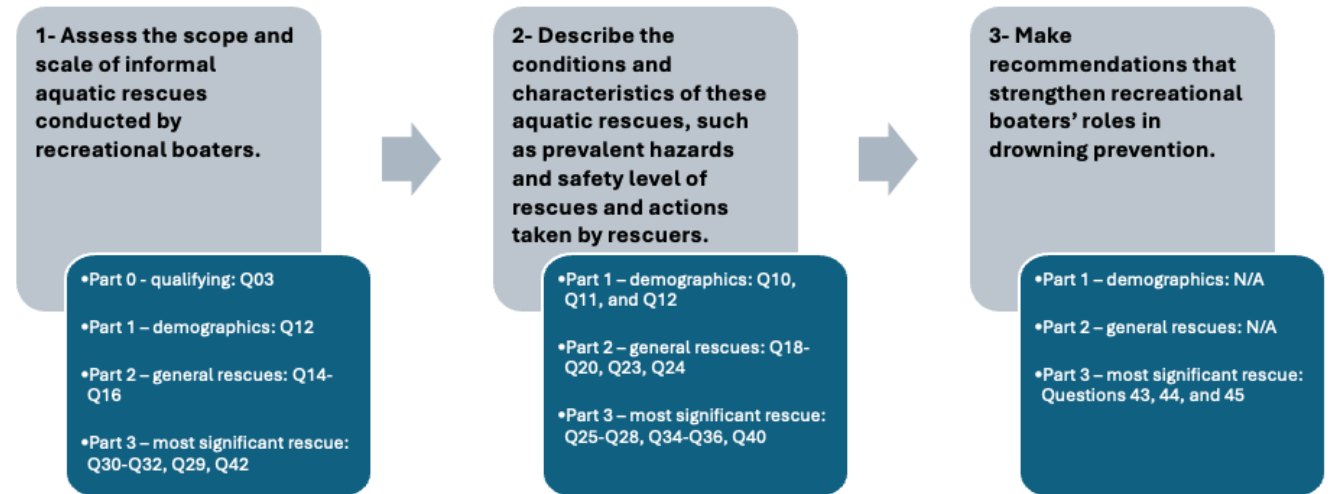


Research methodology & methods

- Research objectives
 - Assess the scope and scale of informal aquatic rescues conducted by recreational boaters
 - Describe the conditions and characteristics of these aquatic rescues, such as prevalent hazards and safety level of rescues and actions taken by rescuers
 - Make recommendations that strengthen recreational boaters' roles in drowning prevention

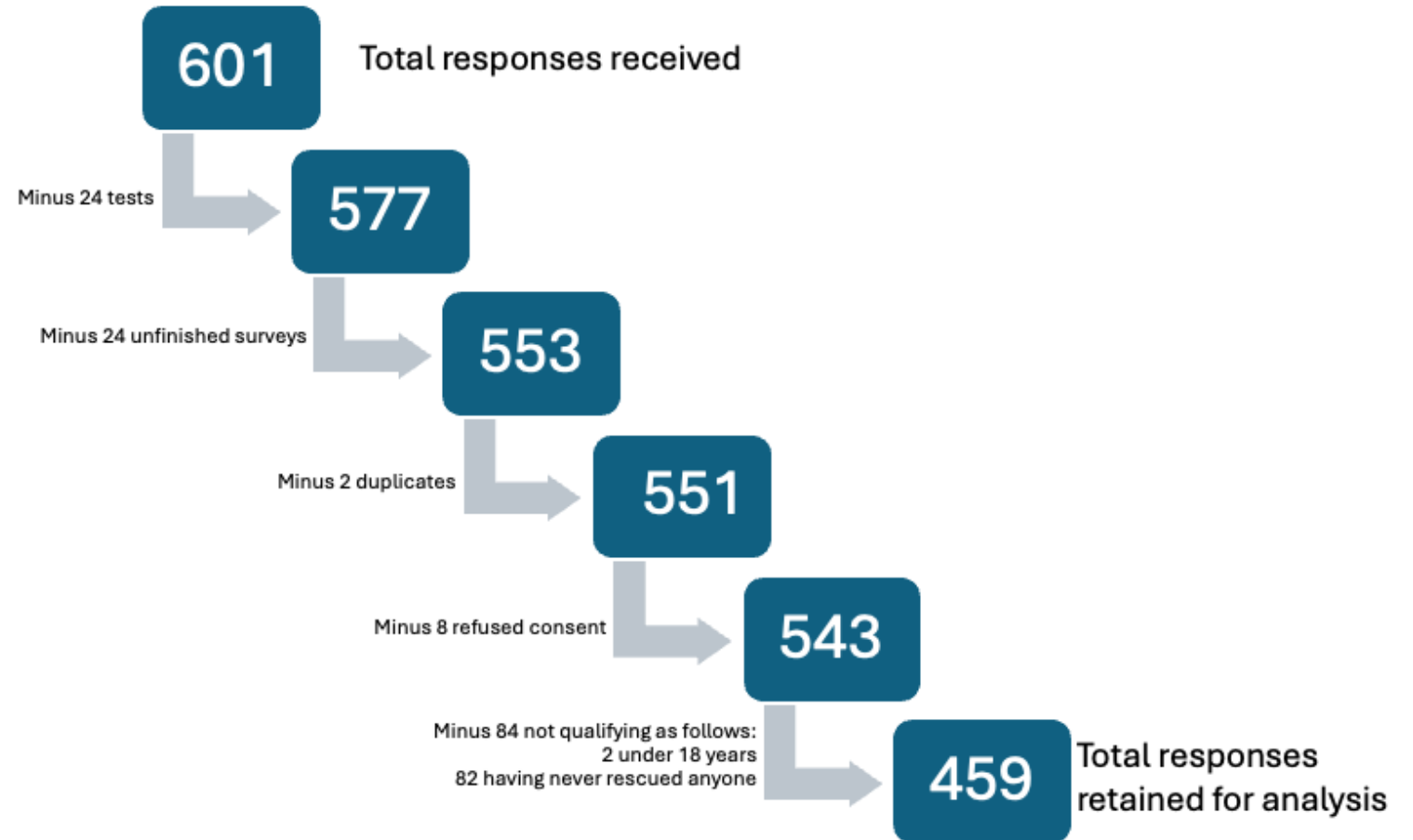
Survey

- 10-15 minutes to complete
- 47 questions
 - Section 1: Consent and Qualifying questions (4 Qs)
 - Section 2: Demographics questions (11 Qs)
 - Section 3: General questions on provided assistance (11 Qs)
 - Section 4: Questions on the most significant experience providing assistance (21 Qs)



Data analysis

From 601 responses received to 459 responses retained for analysis



Results



Respondents' characteristics

Table 1

Descriptive statistics. Respondents' demographics at the time of completion of the survey

Characteristics	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	39	8.5
Male	416	90.6
Non-Binary / Other	1	0.2
Prefer not to say	3	0.7
Age at the time of survey (years)		
18-19	3	0.7
20-29	16	3.5
30-39	42	9.2
40-49	49	10.7
50-59	108	23.5
60+	241	52.5
Ethnicity		
Māori	11	2.4
Pacific peoples	4	0.9
NZ / European	400	87.1
African	2	0.4
Asian	1	0.2
Other	41	8.9

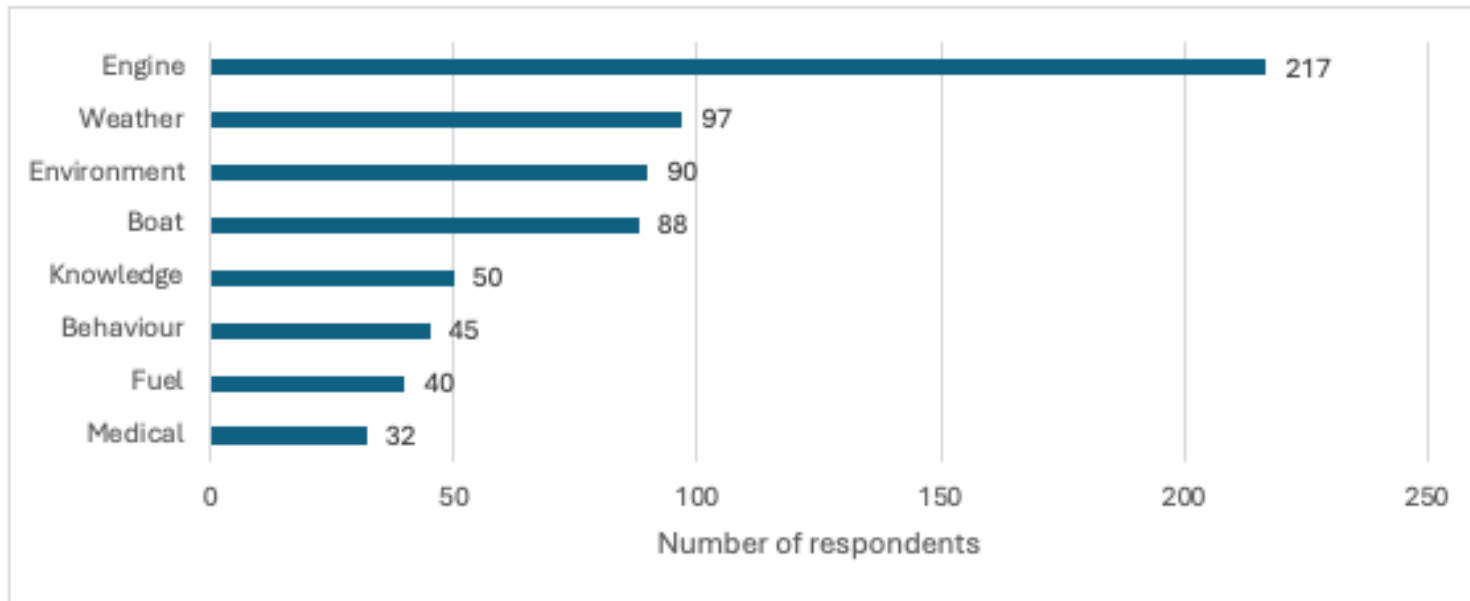
Note. Data collected by author between 11 September and 31 October 2025 (n= 459).

General circumstances

- Rescues' profile
 - Male (59%)
 - Between 30 and 59 years of age (63%)
 - NZ / European origin (53%)
- Main reasons
 - a lack of knowledge, experience, and/or preparation (58.4%)
 - engine or mechanical issues (40.7%)
 - fuel-related problems (10%)
 - weather conditions contributed to the incident (14.4%)
- Of note
 - Not intoxicated (78.9%)
 - Wearing a PFD (78,2%)

Most significant rescue

Distribution of the main reasons for trouble cited by respondents



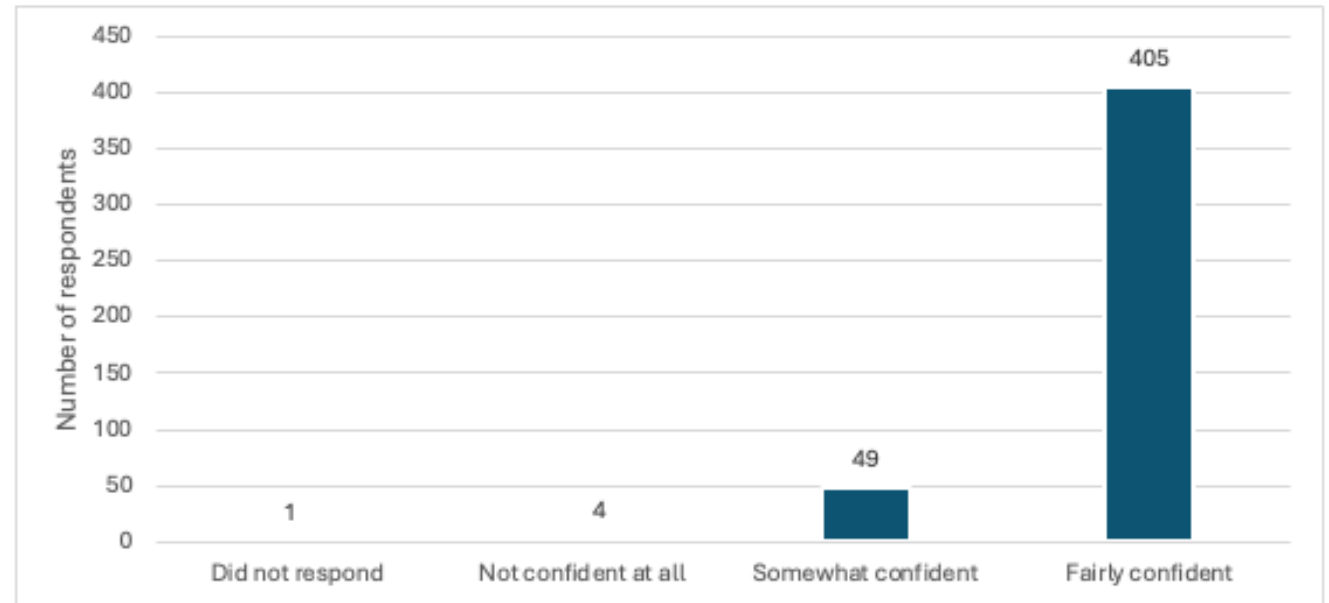
Note. Data collected by author between 11 September and 31 October 2025 (n= 459).

- 57.5% saw the event unfold and 22.4% got a VHF call
- 72% reported that emergency services were not called.

Most significant rescue

- Rescuers' profile:
 - Male
 - Between 40 and 49 years of age
 - Unknown to the respondents
 - No major injuries (81.9%)
- Risk assessment in over 80% of the cases
- Equipment used to assist in 69%

Distribution of respondents' confidence in their ability to assist individuals in their most significant experience providing assistance



Note. Data collected by author between 11 September and 31 October 2025 (n= 459).

Number of persons assisted

Descriptive statistics detailing how many people respondents have assisted in their lifetime

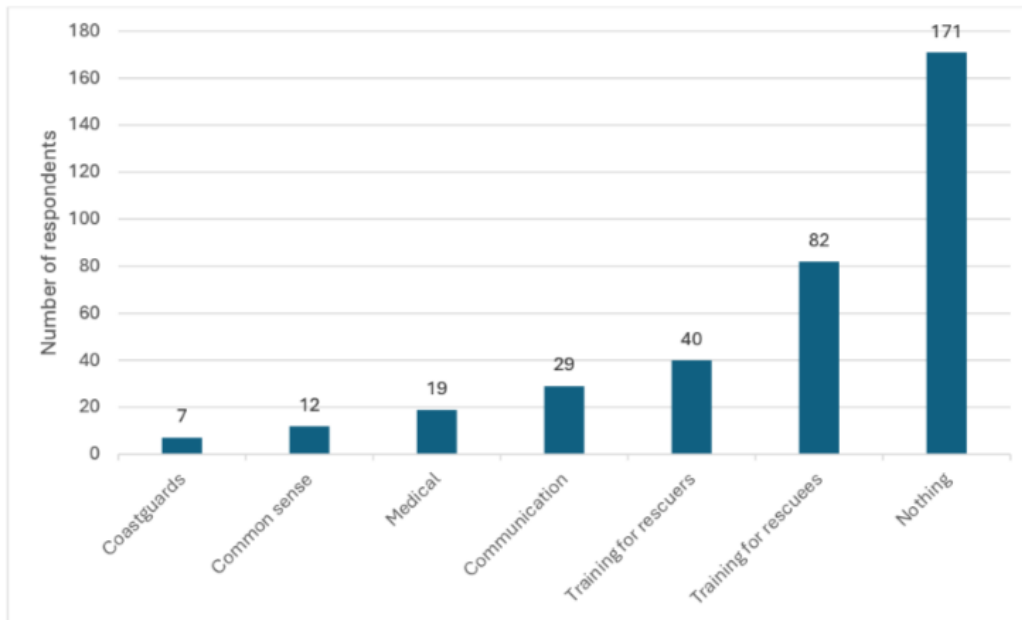
	Number of persons assisted			
	1 person	2-5 persons	6-10 persons	
Number of respondents	30	229	93	
Estimated number of persons helped	1	4	8	
Total estimate	30	802	744	
Total estimate per respondent				5

Note. Data collected by author between 11 September and 31 October 2025 (n= 352).

VOSL = 12.5M NZD per life or 5 billion NZD financial savings realised by boaties

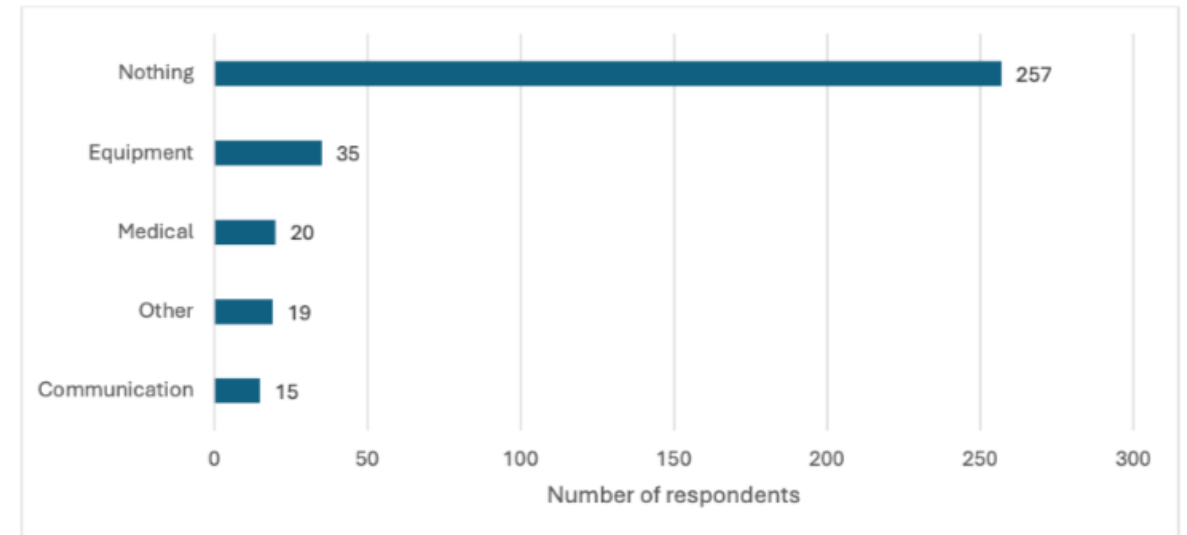
Rescuers' perspectives on safety

Distribution of training or resources most frequently desired by respondents during their most significant rescue



Note. Respondents could select more than one answer. Data collected by author between 11 September and 31 October 2025 (n= 317).

Distribution of equipment most frequently desired by respondents for their most significant rescue



Note. Respondents could select more than one answer. Data collected by author between 11 September and 31 October 2025 (n= 332).

Discussion & Conclusion



Discussion & Conclusion

- The component of chance in bystander rescues
- The emotional component in bystander rescues

Recreational boaters often are the only responders on the waters

Recreational boaters play a critical role in drowning prevention:

- Through a range of preventative and responsive actions.
- They do not place themselves in danger while assisting individuals in trouble.
- They form a close-knit and well-connected community

Thank you!
Questions?

