

Understanding Drowning Risk at Papanui Point: A Comprehensive Review

This report was written by Dr Chanel Meads and Chris Casey as part of a focused approach on wāhi tūpato, high-risk drowning areas in Aotearoa, New Zealand for Water Safety New Zealand

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Acknowledgements

To those whose lives were tragically lost at Papanui Point, your presence is felt throughout this report. It is your stories, experiences, and memories that guide this work. To your whānau and loved ones, we carry this kaupapa with deep respect and a continued commitment to protecting those who continue to fish, gather, and connect with this coastline.

Āpiti hono, tātai hono te hunga mate ki te hunga mate. Āpiti hono tātai hono, te hunga ora ki te hunga ora.

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Introduction

Water holds a place of deep significance in Aotearoa New Zealand, shaping identity, connection, and community. Yet, while this relationship endures, so too does the impact of drowning, carried through whānau, communities, and generations to come. In 2023, 90 preventable drowning fatalities were recorded nationwide, a figure that was well above the ten-year average of 82.7 deaths. Encouragingly, 2024 saw an improvement, with 72 preventable fatalities recorded. While this progress is a positive sign, it also serves as a reminder that sustained efforts are needed to further reduce risk and protect lives. Despite national improvements, certain locations continue to carry a heavier burden of loss, highlighting the importance of targeted, place-based prevention.

Papanui Point, located near Ruapuke Beach on the west coast of the Waikato region, is one such place. Known for its dramatic coastline, popular rock fishing opportunities, and cultural significance, it has also seen a history of tragic drowning incidents. Since 1989, at least 17 people are known to have drowned at Papanui Point, with local accounts suggesting the true number may be higher. These deaths are not isolated events, but part of a broader national challenge in which particular environments consistently present higher risks for preventable water-related fatalities. The conditions at Papanui Point can be unpredictable and unforgiving. A steep, sometimes slippery access track leads to exposed rocks, while large swells, sudden surges, and powerful currents create hazards even in seemingly calm weather. Despite these risks, Papanui Point remains a place of meaning and connection. People continue to visit to fish, gather, and experience the rugged beauty of the coastline. Many are familiar with the risks, yet few anticipate that their time there could end in tragedy.

This report, commissioned by Water Safety New Zealand, seeks to better understand the complex relationship between place, behaviour, and risk at Papanui Point. Drawing primarily on coronial and police reports from the past 35 years, alongside DrownBase™ data and supplementary visitor insights, the report identifies key patterns, behaviours, and environmental factors associated with drowning incidents at this site. It also examines the characteristics of those most at risk and explores how returning visitors, group dynamics, and conditions at the time of incident contribute to outcomes. Building on the Coroner's recommendations, this report strengthens and extends previous prevention strategies, offering a broader, evidence-informed framework for reducing future loss. The goal is to support practical, community-led, and culturally respectful actions that can make a meaningful difference. This report is intended as both a review and a call to action recognising the lives already lost, the families impacted, and the need to develop prevention responses that honour the significance of Papanui Point, reflect the wisdom of *toi whenua*, and centre the lived realities of those who fish, gather, and connect with this coastline.

This report is structured into five key sections: Introduction, Methodology, Results, Recommendations, and Conclusion. The Methodology section outlines the wider approach developed by Water Safety New Zealand to identify *wāhi tūpato* (sites of heightened drowning risk), from which this project stems. It details the quantitative analysis undertaken, drawing on coronial and police records, DrownBase™ data, and aggregated visitor location insights. The Results section presents key patterns grouped into three themes: demographic and activity trends, temporal and environmental patterns, and experience and safety behaviours. The Findings section distils the most significant insights to emerge from the data, providing the foundation for the expert recommendations that follow. The Recommendations section sets out seven strategic actions, each extending and strengthening the areas originally identified by the

coroner. Finally, the Conclusion draws these threads together, emphasising the importance of prevention strategies that are community-led, culturally grounded, and responsive to the lived realities at Papanui Point.

Methodology and Methods

This report draws on a detailed quantitative analysis of drowning fatalities at Papanui Point, using data from three key sources: Water Safety New Zealand’s national drowning database (DrownBase™), coronial and police records, and aggregated visitor location data. Together, these datasets offer a layered and evidence-informed view of what is happening at Papanui Point, who is most affected, and under what conditions fatal incidents are most likely to occur. By beginning with a structured analysis of the available data, this report aims to identify clear risk patterns and systemic vulnerabilities that can inform both immediate action and the next phase of research. Understanding these patterns is critical for designing interventions that are responsive, realistic, and grounded in what the evidence is showing us.

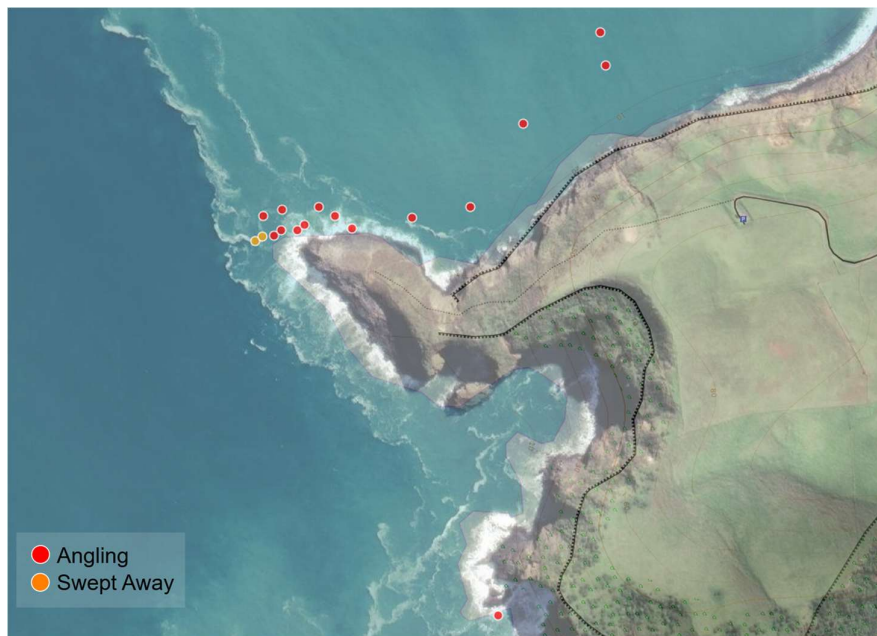


Figure 1 Locations and Activity for Fatal Drownings 1989-2024

Fatality Data: DrownBase

Papanui Point was first identified as a national drowning Black Spot, a place of heightened risk (hereafter referred to as wāhi tūpato), through Water Safety New Zealand’s spatial analysis of fatal incidents recorded in DrownBase™. Using geocoded location data from 1999 to 2023, a two-kilometre radius was applied to every recorded fatality site across Aotearoa to identify areas with high concentrations of drowning events. From this, ten high-risk locations were highlighted, with Papanui Point standing out due to the frequency and persistence of fatalities over several decades. This analytical approach allows decision-makers to move beyond generalised assumptions about drowning and instead focus resources and effort where the risks are most acute. In 2024 the methodology was further updated to take advantage of more robust geo-location data and precise areas (polygons) were built to capture Papanui Point in a more focused and realistic way.

To deepen this understanding, DrownBase™ was used to analyse key variables associated with the 17 fatalities (See Figure 1) recorded at Papanui Point since 1989. These variables include age, gender, ethnicity, activity type, experience level, group size, time of day, environmental conditions, and whether safety equipment such as lifejackets was used. While no dataset can fully capture the complexity of each loss, this analysis helps identify patterns that occur across incidents. These include repeated behaviours, common environmental factors, and consistent gaps in safety practices. Everyone represented in this data mattered deeply, and the purpose of examining these trends is to honour those lives by learning from what occurred and ensuring others are better protected in the future.

Police and Coronial File Analysis

This analysis was supported by a detailed review of coronial and police files relating to each of the 17 cases. These reports, alongside data from DrownBase™ provided critical insight into the conditions surrounding each drowning, including weather, sea state, terrain, and the broader environmental risks that were present. Each case was reviewed in full and coded across a consistent set of criteria to better understand the interplay between location, activity, and situational risk. While the reports vary in length and depth, they collectively provide a strong foundation for understanding what tends to go wrong at this site, and where there may be opportunities for targeted safety improvements.

Geo-Location Data Analysis and Modelling

In 2025, WSNZ added anonymised geo-location data to its data suite. For this report, this data is used to capture how frequently Papanui Point is visited, the duration of stay, the frequency that individuals visit and the origin of the visitors. These insights add a vital layer of context by identifying the communities most connected to this site and the frequency of their interaction with it. This supports the development of prevention strategies that are more targeted, regionally relevant, and responsive to the actual movement patterns of those most exposed to risk.

As part of this project, anonymised and aggregated visitor location data were provided by Data Consulting, a Canterbury-based firm specialising in spatial analysis and demographic insights. This data offers a valuable indication of visitation patterns across Aotearoa and was used to help identify where visitors to Papanui Point were travelling from. The data is drawn from device-based location activity across New Zealand, collected between January 2022 and March 2025. While coverage in early 2022 was relatively limited, it improved considerably from 2023 onward as usage increased across the general population. To ensure a more reliable sample, the two-year period from April 2023 to March 2025 was selected for analysis.

To produce meaningful insights, the raw data were cleaned to remove irrelevant or distorted entries, including records likely associated with flights or marine activity. Modern geospatial techniques were used to filter these outliers and retain only those records reflecting actual land-based visitation. Each point in the cleaned dataset represents a unique device detected in the vicinity of Papanui Point on a given day. Although devices often emit multiple location points over time, these were consolidated into a single representative location per day using a time-weighted median. This ensures each visitor is counted once per day, avoiding duplication and reflecting actual visitation more accurately.

The resulting dataset enables a more contextual understanding of how often the area is visited, the scale of visitation, and the primary regions people are travelling from. These insights support the development of prevention strategies that are better aligned with visitor behaviour and can help ensure that safety messages and interventions are reaching the right people, in the right places, at the right time. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of visit locations across the April 2023 to March 2025 period, showing where visitors spent the most time during each trip to Papanui Point.



Figure 2 Locations where most time was spent per visit April 2023-March 2025

While this report focuses on quantitative findings, it represents only the first stage of a wider research process. The next phase will involve deeper community engagement to understand the lived realities behind the patterns identified here. Speaking with those who visit, fish, live near, or respond to emergencies at Papanui Point will allow for a richer understanding of how risk is perceived and navigated in everyday life. These conversations will also help shape future interventions, ensuring that any proposed solutions are grounded in both evidence and lived experience. Starting with the data provides clarity and direction, but it is through listening to people that the most meaningful, durable, and human-centred change will be made.

Results

Before examining the patterns observed in coronial and police records alongside DrownBase™ data, it is helpful to understand how Papanui Point is used and who is most frequently visiting the site. This contextual overview draws on anonymised and aggregated geo-location data collected between April 2023 and March 2025 to provide insight into patterns of visitation, duration of stay, and visitor origin. These insights do not replace the core fatality data used throughout the report, but instead add an important layer of understanding by identifying where people are travelling from, how often they are visiting, and how long they remain on-site. This information helps clarify who is being most frequently exposed to potential risk, and when that risk is likely to be highest. The following section begins by outlining key patterns identified

through location data before moving into the three core themes derived from coronial and police records: demographics and activity, temporal and environmental patterns, and experience and safety behaviour.

Contextual Insights from Location Data: Visitation Patterns and Exposure

Between April 2023 and March 2025, the location data indicates that Papanui Point received approximately 498 visits from 155 unique individuals, averaging just over three visits per person per year. While this average provides a general picture, it masks significant variation in how often different people come to the site. As shown in Figure 3, just over half of all visitors (51.8 percent) came once or twice during the year, while nearly 20 percent visited six or more times. A very small group returned more than ten times annually, with the most frequent visitor returning on 14 separate occasions. These patterns highlight that while many people visit only occasionally, there is a smaller group who engage with this location regularly and may have higher exposure to its risks.

In addition to frequency, the duration of each visit is also important. Longer visits are more likely to involve fishing the activity associated with the vast majority of drowning incidents at Papanui Point. To explore this, the time spent at the location on any given day was estimated by comparing the earliest and latest points of location data. These estimates suggest that many visitors spend a sustained period of time at the site, increasing the likelihood of encountering sudden changes in sea or weather conditions, particularly for those unfamiliar with the risks.

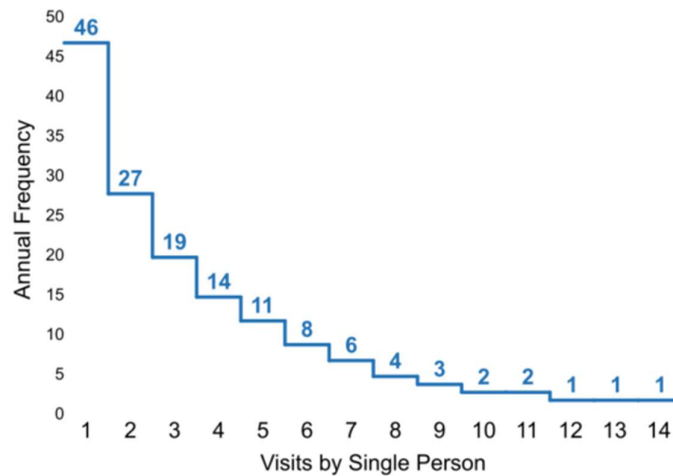


Figure 3 Visitor Frequency Per Annum

In addition to how often individuals visit Papanui Point, the amount of time they spend there plays a critical role in shaping their exposure to risk. Longer stays are more likely to involve rock fishing, which has been the activity linked to almost all drowning incidents at this location, increasing the chances of encountering changing sea conditions or hazardous terrain. For this reason, visit duration offers an important lens through which to consider safety.

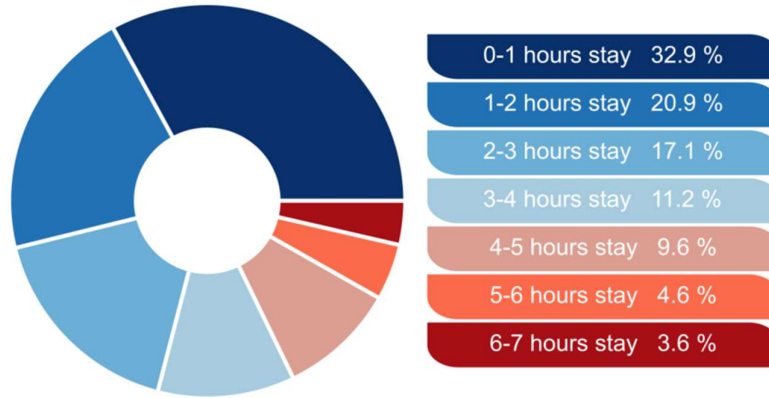


Figure 4 Dwell Time – The Percentage of Visitors by Hours

To estimate this, the time spent on-site (or ‘dwell time’) was calculated by comparing the first and last location points for each visitor on a given day. As shown in Figure 4, while just under a third of visitors remained for less than an hour, a significant proportion stayed for much longer. Over half of all visits were under two hours, but approximately 18 percent extended beyond four hours. This threshold is used in this analysis as a proxy for likely fishing activity. Across the dataset, 62 individuals recorded at least one visit lasting longer than four hours. These longer-stay visits occurred 178 times over the two-year period. On average, this means around 31 individuals each year engaged in extended visits to Papanui Point, with approximately 2.87 such visits per person. While this threshold is a working assumption, it helps to identify those most likely to be engaging in higher-risk activity and reinforces the importance of targeting safety interventions toward those visiting more frequently and for longer durations.

Understanding when people visit Papanui Point is just as important as knowing how often and for how long they stay. Temporal patterns across time of day, day of the week, and season offer valuable insight into how safety messages and interventions can be timed to have the greatest impact. Table 1 shows that visits are most common on weekends, with Saturday and Sunday seeing the highest number of longer stays over four hours. These days are highlighted pink to draw attention to the concentration of extended visits, which are more likely to involve fishing and therefore represent increased exposure to changing sea conditions and environmental risks. In terms of daily patterns, most visits occur during daylight hours, peaking around 1:00 p.m., with smaller increases at dawn and dusk. These times are commonly associated with fishing activity.

Table 1 Annual Visits by Day of the Week and Dwell Time

	0-1	1-2	2-3	3-4	4-5	5-6	6-7	
Mon	21	13	33	21	18	6	3	23.1%
Tue	5	3	2	1	1	0	0	2.4%
Wed	4	3	2	1	1	1	0	2.4%
Thu	7	3	3	2	2	0	0	3.4%
Fri	11	11	20	14	12	7	0	15.1%
Sat	63	41	10	6	5	5	7	27.5%
Sun	53	30	15	11	9	4	8	26.1%
	32.9%	20.9%	17.1%	11.2%	9.6%	4.6%	3.6%	

When compared with fatality data, some patterns align while others do not. Most drownings occurred in the morning, often before midday, which fits with typical arrival times for fishers and perceptions of calmer early-day conditions. Fatalities were also more frequent on weekends, consistent with higher visitation. However, seasonal trends show a divergence. While the location data highlights February and April as the busiest months, likely due to holiday periods (see Figure 5), the fatality data shows peaks in September, May, and August. These cooler months may involve fewer visitors overall, but the sea conditions are often rougher, increasing the risk for those who do go out.

This comparison suggests that while it remains important to target safety efforts during high-use periods, equal attention must be paid to times when sea state and environmental risk may be heightened, even with lower visitor numbers. Figure 10 and Table 1 provide a useful foundation for shaping safety strategies that are both behaviourally informed and environmentally aware.

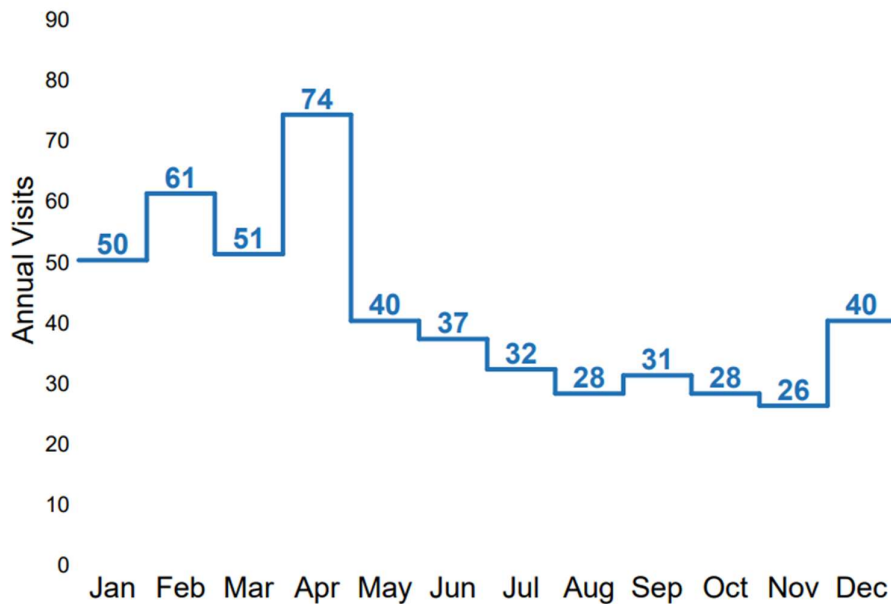


Figure 5 Monthly Visits

To better understand where visitors are travelling from, generalised location data was used to identify the main urban centres associated with visits to Papanui Point. Figure 6 shows a heatmap of the most common areas where visitors were recorded during the evening hours. This approach provides an indication of residential distribution across the region without identifying individuals.

The data shows that the majority of visitors come from Hamilton, with smaller clusters appearing in nearby towns such as Te Awamutu and Cambridge. This urban-to-coast connection aligns with the demographic patterns found in the fatality data and reinforces the importance of extending prevention strategies beyond the coastline. Interventions such as education campaigns, real-time safety information, and behavioural prompts should be made easily accessible in inland areas where key decisions about fishing trips are being made.

In summary, the location data highlights that a small number of individuals account for a significant portion of visits to Papanui Point. These visitors are often repeat users who tend to arrive during long weekends and stay for extended periods. Recognising these patterns is essential to ensuring that drowning prevention efforts are focused and responsive, both in terms of geography and visitor behaviour.

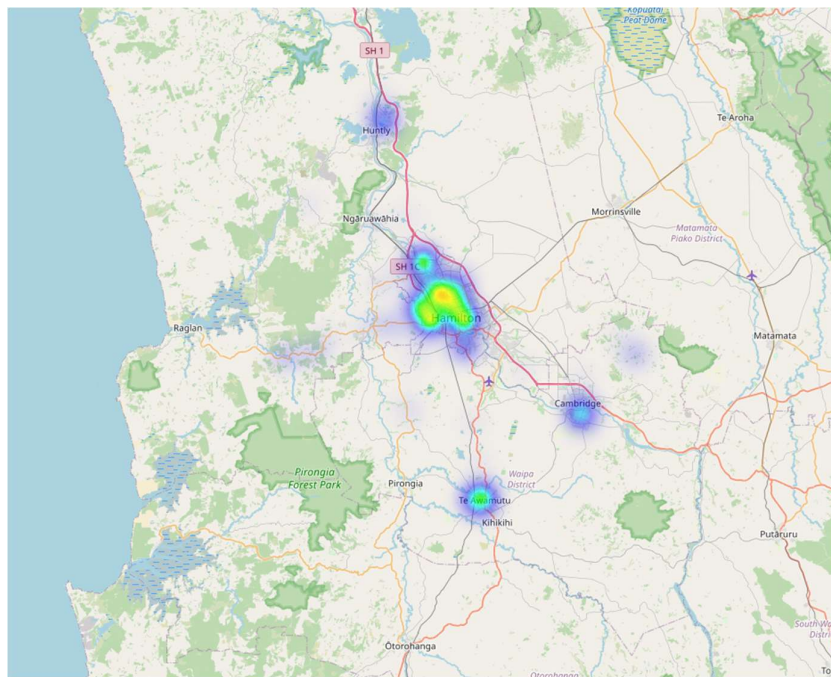


Figure 6 Evening Location Data for Visitors

Moving on to the coronial, police and DrownBase™ records, the following section presents the key results across three core themes: demographics and activity, temporal and environmental patterns, and experience and safety behaviours. Together, these findings provide a clearer picture of how drowning risk presents at Papanui Point and the factors that contribute to fatal outcomes.

Demographics and Activity

Rock-based fishing is the primary activity linked to drowning fatalities at Papanui Point. Of the 17 recorded deaths, 15 occurred while individuals were fishing from the rocks. The remaining two involved individuals who slipped and fell while walking along the shoreline, with both accompanying family who were fishing at the time. In every case, fishing was the reason they were at the site. Understanding the demographic patterns within this specific activity helps to identify where risk is showing up most often, and for whom. By examining age, gender, ethnicity, and place of residence, we gain insight into the groups most impacted, the communities most connected to this site, and where future prevention efforts may be most effectively focused.

One of the most consistent patterns in the data relates to age. Nearly half of those who drowned at Papanui Point were adults aged between 35 and 44 years, with eight of the 17 fatalities (47%) falling within this group. Other fatalities were spread across age groups, but smaller clusters were seen among young adults aged 15 to 24, adults aged 25 to 34, and older adults aged 55 to 64 each with two fatalities (12%). This concentration in the mid-life age bracket highlights the need to prioritise adults in their 30s and early 40s as a key risk group when developing public awareness campaigns and safety messaging for this site.

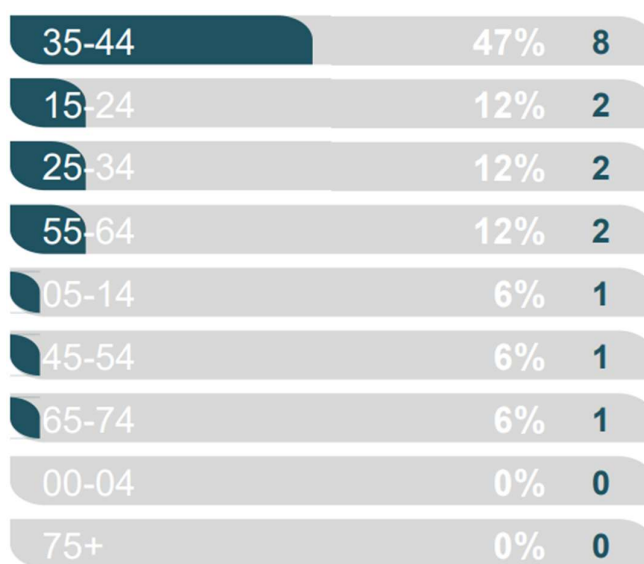


Figure 7 Fatalities by Age Groups

The gender profile is also striking. 16 of the 17 individuals (94%) who lost their lives were male. Only one female fatality was recorded (6%), and this single case likely occurred in the context of an attempted rescue rather than a high-risk recreational activity. This data reflects national drowning patterns in Aotearoa, where men are significantly overrepresented in fatal incidents. This trend appears to correspond with the nature of activity at Papanui Point, which often involves physically demanding or higher-risk conditions. The predominance of male fatalities reinforces the need for gender-responsive approaches to water safety that acknowledge the specific ways men are engaging with environments like Papanui Point.



Figure 8 Fatalities by Sex

Ethnicity is another critical factor in understanding who is most affected. Of the 17 fatalities, eight individuals (47%) were of Asian descent, five Filipino and three Chinese. The remaining cases included four New Zealand European (24%), two Māori (12%), two Pacific peoples (12%), and one recorded as other (6%). This pattern points to a disproportionate toll on Asian communities. More recently, the concern has deepened: between 2020 and 2024, six of the seven recorded fatalities at Papanui Point were of Asian descent. These figures indicate that current safety efforts are not adequately reaching this community. It is essential that we do better by working with Filipino and Chinese communities to develop approaches that reflect their cultural beliefs, practices, and attitudes toward water and safety. This includes recognising the role of fishing and coastal activity in many families' lives, and ensuring that safety messaging supports, rather than overlooks, these valued connections.

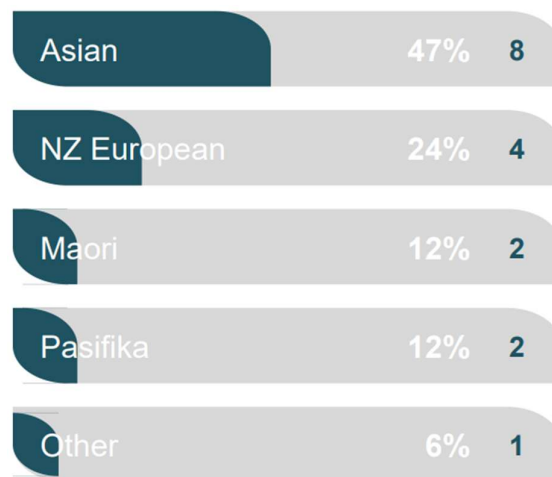


Figure 9 Fatalities by Ethnicity

Place of residence adds further weight to this picture. Of the 17 individuals, 16 (94%) were residents of Hamilton with the one case nearby in Te Awamutu (6%). Despite Papanui Point being located closer to Raglan, it is evident that the risk is most closely associated with people travelling from inland urban centres. This aligns with emerging mobile location data, which shows high visitation to the site from Hamilton-based communities. These patterns suggest that future prevention efforts should not be confined to the coast but instead include urban-based outreach in locations where people are making decisions about where and how they engage with the water.

Together, these findings reveal where risk has tended to emerge most frequently, while also challenging some of the common assumptions made about who is at risk and why. Often those drowning at Papanui Point are repeat visitors familiar with both the area, and their activities, and primarily based in Hamilton, which, while not coastal, is the closest major city to Papanui Point and a common departure point for visitors to the area. Familiarity and confidence, while

valuable, did not offer protection against the unpredictable and often dangerous conditions found at this site. A clear and recent pattern of loss among men of Asian descent living in Hamilton highlights where prevention efforts could be more effectively focused. Recognising who is most frequently engaging with this environment, and in what way, is key to ensuring future interventions are timely, relevant, and capable of reducing further loss of life.

Temporal and Environmental Patterns

In addition to understanding who is most affected by drowning fatalities at Papanui Point, it is critical to consider when these events are occurring and what environmental factors are present. This section examines patterns in time of day, day of the week, month, and season, as well as weather conditions and sea state where recorded. These insights offer important guidance for the timing and focus of intervention strategies and provide a clearer picture of how risk builds at this site across time.

Time of day was available in 14 of the 17 coronial and police reports. Of these, ten fatalities occurred in the morning hours, between 6:00 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. One fatality was recorded during the afternoon (between 12:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m.), and three occurred during the evening or overnight period (between 5:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m.). The remaining three cases are unknown. The high proportion of morning fatalities aligns with well-established fishing patterns, where individuals often arrive early to take advantage of calmer sea conditions, active fish movement near shore, and available daylight. While the data does not confirm the specific reasons in each case, these patterns are consistent with routine fishing practices, travel from inland regions, and perceptions that morning conditions are safe or more productive.

Patterns across the week and throughout the year reveal further insights into when risk at Papanui Point is highest. A strong concentration of drownings occurred during weekends, with 12 of the 17 incidents (71%) taking place on either a Saturday or Sunday. This aligns with the recreational nature of Papanui Point, where individuals and groups are more likely to visit on non-working days. It reinforces the importance of aligning prevention campaigns and any on-site presence with weekends, when both foot traffic and risk are highest. Seasonally, fatalities occurred throughout the year, with clear peaks in spring (particularly September), at the end of autumn (May), and at the end of winter (August). These patterns challenge the common assumption that summer is the peak risk period, showing instead that fatalities were more concentrated in spring, autumn and winter at this location.

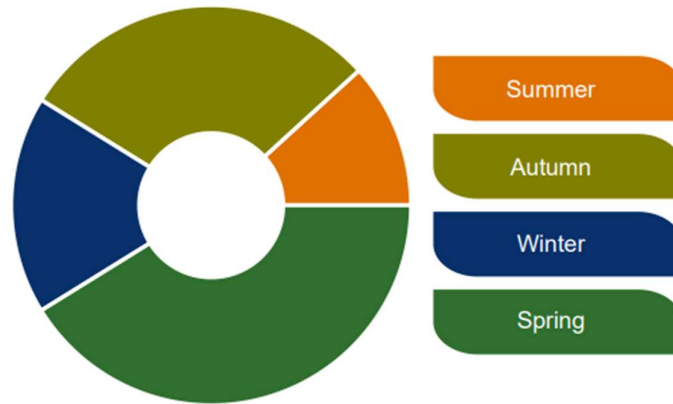


Figure 10 Fatalities by Season

Environmental conditions reported across the 17 fatalities at Papanui Point reveal that the majority of incidents involved hazardous or deteriorating sea states. In six cases (35%), the weather was reported to deteriorate over time, indicating that conditions may have appeared acceptable at the time of arrival but worsened during the person’s stay. A further six cases (35%) provided no weather description but offered clear evidence of rough, choppy, or unpredictable sea conditions. In two cases (12%), individuals entered the environment in fine or sunny weather, but sea conditions were already rough or dangerous, highlighting a disconnect between initial perceptions of safety and the underlying marine risk. Only one case (6%) clearly involved both clear skies and calm seas, although this occurred at 8pm in late August, meaning darkness or low visibility likely heightened the level of risk at the time. The remaining two incidents (12%) had no environmental conditions recorded. Taken together, these results show that 14 of the 17 fatalities (82%) occurred in rough or hazardous sea conditions at some point during the person’s visit, suggesting that many were exposed to escalating environmental risk after they had already arrived. This reinforces the idea that initial conditions can be misleading, and that relying on momentary visual cues may not reflect the true or emerging danger of the site. It also aligns with earlier dwell time data, which indicated that visitors who stay longer, especially more than four hours, are more likely to be exposed to changing conditions and therefore risk. A site-specific environmental and coastal hazard assessment, which could help identify common weather-sea change patterns, terrain risks, and wave exposure, is recommended to build a clearer picture of the conditions that contribute to fatalities at Papanui Point. Such insights are critical to informing more effective safety strategies and public risk communication at this high-risk location.

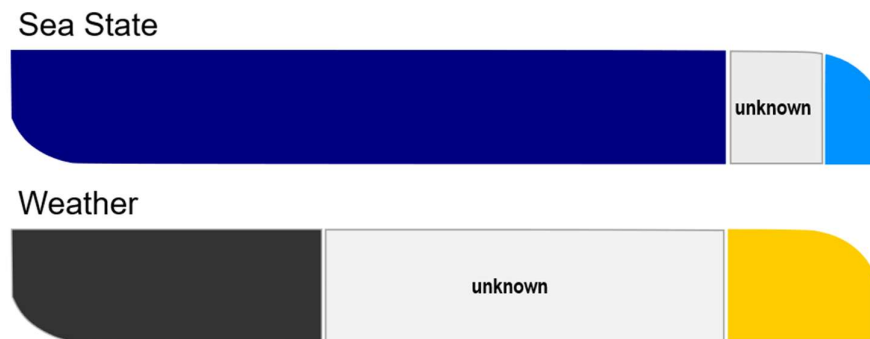


Figure 11 Fatalities by Environmental Conditions

These temporal and environmental findings highlight a critical misalignment between perceived and actual risk at Papanui Point. Fatalities most commonly occurred in the morning and on weekends, times generally associated with recreational or routine fishing activity. However, the majority of these incidents involved rough, choppy, or deteriorating sea conditions, not calm or settled environments. In several cases, conditions worsened during the person's stay, suggesting that what appeared safe on arrival did not remain so over time. Together, these insights reinforce the need to challenge assumptions about weather, timing, and familiarity as indicators of safety. Prevention strategies must focus on helping visitors understand how and when risk builds at this site and ensure that safety messaging reflects the real environmental patterns linked to previous incidents.

Experience and Safety Behaviour

Many of those who drowned at Papanui Point were experienced fishers who had visited the site before. Yet despite this, key safety behaviours were often missing. Understanding how experience intersects with decision-making, and what precautions were or were not taken, helps to build a clearer picture of how risk plays out in practice. 13 of the 17 cases (76%) had visited Papanui Point before and were regular visitors to the site, returning often to fish there. This challenges assumptions that those who drown are unfamiliar with the area. Instead, it suggests that confidence and local knowledge may not offer adequate protection when conditions change quickly or hazards are underestimated. For those who return often, there may be a need for fresh reminders and ongoing reinforcement of the risks present, even in places that feel familiar. Only two cases (12%) explicitly involved first-time visitors who were inexperienced fishers. In two other cases, site familiarity was not stated.

Alongside site familiarity, fishing experience was also common among those who drowned. Most individuals were described as experienced fishers. In several cases, they were considered capable and confident in their activity. The presence of experience did not necessarily translate into safer outcomes, which highlights the importance of supporting behaviour change even among those who feel well-practised. Safety campaigns that focus solely on beginners may miss an important opportunity to engage with experienced fishers who, despite their knowledge, remain exposed to significant risk at this site.

While individual experience is an important factor, who you are with and how prepared the group is can also shape the outcome. Encouragingly, a high number of people were fishing with others at the time of the incident, highlighting that many are not fishing alone. However, this also serves as an important reminder not to fall into the trap of believing that being in a group removes all risk. 14 of the 17 individuals (82%) were fishing with others when the incident occurred. In many of these cases, witnesses attempted to intervene, either by helping directly or by calling for emergency assistance. Fishing in groups remains a key safety recommendation, as it increases the likelihood of someone raising the alarm or attempting a rescue. But it is not a safeguard on its own. Rough conditions, fast-moving waves, unstable terrain, lack of phone coverage, and limited access to rescue equipment (including PFDs) often made successful rescues impossible. To strengthen group safety, it is important that fishers discuss safety plans in advance, wear lifejackets, actively monitor weather and sea conditions, and agree on how they would respond if someone gets into trouble.

Among these group safety measures, the consistent use of lifejackets stands out as one of the most critical yet most overlooked. None of the individuals were wearing lifejackets. In one

case, it was noted that a lifejacket had been considered but was ultimately not worn. The absence of lifejackets across all 17 cases highlights a major gap in safety behaviour. While discomfort, perceived inconvenience, and beliefs about interference with fishing are often cited reasons for not wearing lifejackets, it is important to acknowledge that deeper social, economic, and cultural factors may also play a role.

For some, access to lifejackets can be limited by cost, especially when fishing involves extended whānau or larger groups. In other cases, long-standing familiarity with local waters, intergenerational knowledge, or a sense of personal capability may reduce the perceived need for such equipment. Social norms, cultural values, and even perceptions of masculinity can also influence behaviour. Lifejackets were consistently left out of preparation at Papanui Point, suggesting a deliberate and patterned choice rather than isolated oversight. For migrant and ethnically diverse communities, including those of Asian backgrounds, safety decisions may be shaped by a complex interplay of lived experience, cultural practices, and collective beliefs. A more nuanced understanding of these influences is needed to ensure that future safety interventions are informed by meaningful community engagement and a culturally responsive approach.

One case in particular brings these wider safety themes into sharp focus. In an attempt to rescue two children who had fallen into the water, a parent ran to their vehicle to retrieve a rope and wetsuit before entering the sea. Although the rescue attempt was unsuccessful and the children tragically drowned, the parent was later retrieved alive by the rescue boat. This is the only recorded case at Papanui Point where someone entered the water and survived. While it is unclear exactly what contributed to his survival, the use of a wetsuit, which offers some buoyancy, likely helped him stay afloat until help arrived. This incident reinforces the potential life-saving value of flotation, and highlights how consistent lifejacket use could offer even greater protection for those fishing or responding to emergencies at this site.

Taken together, these findings challenge some of the most common assumptions about who is at risk and what behaviours offer protection. The data shows that familiarity, experience, and group presence did not consistently reduce the likelihood of fatality. In several cases, they were present, yet a fatal outcome still occurred. This reinforces the idea that safety cannot rely on confidence, routine, or the presence of others alone. Interventions must reach experienced fishers as well as newcomers, and they must promote behaviours that actively create margins for survival. Wearing a lifejacket, checking conditions in advance and throughout the day, and recognising the limits of even well-known locations need to become embedded norms. Reducing loss of life at Papanui Point will depend on shifting not only knowledge, but also habits, assumptions, and collective attitudes toward risk.

Findings

The Results section identified a number of clear and repeated patterns across the drowning fatalities at Papanui Point. While each incident was unique, the underlying risks were not. Shared behaviours, conditions, and decision-making dynamics consistently placed individuals at risk, despite prior knowledge or experience. Based on the data, ten key findings have been identified. Together, these findings provide a detailed picture of who is most at risk, when and how incidents occur, and which behaviours contribute most to vulnerability at this site.

Key Findings

1. **Drowning fatalities were overwhelmingly male, middle-aged, and Hamilton-based, with an overrepresentation of individuals of Asian descent.** Of the 17 fatalities, 94% were male, and just under half were aged between 35 and 44 years. 47% were of Asian descent. The majority lived in Hamilton, indicating a strong urban-to-coast connection that should inform targeted prevention strategies.
2. **Rock-based fishing was the primary activity associated with drowning incidents at Papanui Point.** Fifteen of the 17 fatalities occurred while individuals were fishing from the rocks. This reinforces the need to focus safety interventions specifically on rock fishers, rather than on general water users.
3. **Fatalities were concentrated on weekend days and at the end of autumn (May), end of winter (August) and in early spring (September) months.** The majority of incidents occurred between March and November, especially during weekends and morning hours. Prevention efforts should be aligned with these high-use periods.
4. **Rough sea conditions were a consistent feature of incidents, regardless of fine weather.** While the weather was often described as fine or partly cloudy at the time of incidents, sea conditions were frequently hazardous, with strong swells and wave surges common. This highlights the need to educate fishers about the difference between weather and sea state, and to recognise that surface conditions do not always reflect underlying danger.
5. **Fine weather at the start of visits often masked hazardous sea conditions.** Many individuals perceived the site as safe based on clear skies and initial observations, underestimating the risk posed by underlying sea conditions. Prevention strategies must address this behavioural gap by highlighting the limits of weather-based safety assumptions.
6. **Many fatalities involved individuals being swept off rocks or slipping on unstable surfaces.** Coronial and police records show that in most cases, individuals were being swept off rock platforms by surging waves or slipping on wet, unstable surfaces. Even when weather appeared fine, sudden wave action and treacherous footing created hazardous conditions. This highlights the need for greater awareness of both dynamic sea behaviour and the physical risks posed by the terrain itself.
7. **Environmental conditions frequently deteriorated during the time spent fishing.** Several incidents occurred shortly before groups planned to leave, suggesting that conditions worsened over the course of the visit. Prevention messaging must emphasise the importance of continual assessment of sea and weather conditions, not just initial checks on arrival.
8. **Familiarity with the site did not reduce risk.** 13 of the 17 cases (76%) noted that they were familiar with the risks at Papanui Point and had fished there before. Only two cases explicitly stated they were inexperienced fishers and first time visitors to the site. This suggests that previous experience with the location does not necessarily translate into safe outcomes, particularly when challenging conditions, routine behaviours, and decision-making habits intersect in ways that increase vulnerability.
9. **No individuals were wearing lifejackets at the time of the incident.** Lifejackets were absent in all 17 cases, despite being discussed in at least one group beforehand. This points to a critical behavioural gap in safety preparation, even among experienced fishers.
10. **Group presence did not consistently reduce risk.** Although 14 of the 17 individuals were fishing with others, group presence did not consistently prevent fatalities. Without shared planning or safety behaviours, risks remained high.

Together, these findings highlight that drowning risk at Papanui Point is shaped less by a lack of awareness and more by the complex interplay of behaviour, experience, environmental

conditions, and timing. Many of those involved were confident, familiar with the site, and accompanied by others and yet key safety behaviours were still absent. Lifejackets were not worn, conditions were not regularly reassessed, and there was little evidence of group-level planning for emergencies. Risk arises not from unfamiliarity, but from critical behaviours not being consistently put into practice. Effective prevention strategies must respond to these patterns, challenge false perceptions of safety, and help embed routine hazard checks into decision-making at Papanui Point.

Coronial Focus Areas for Drowning Prevention at Papanui Point

Over the years, the coroner has made a number of recommendations in response to drowning fatalities at Papanui Point. While these recommendations were made across multiple cases, they reveal consistent themes regarding the need for improved safety practices at the site. Through this review of coronial and police records, four primary areas of focus were identified as recurring recommendations. These areas form an important foundation for safety improvement and remain highly relevant today. However, as the findings of this report show, there are opportunities to strengthen, refine, and extend these focus areas to more directly address the specific behaviours, conditions, and risk dynamics observed at Papanui Point.

The main areas of focus most consistently recommended by the coroner were:

- 1 Greater collaboration between agencies to coordinate safety responses
- 2 Public education and outreach to improve risk awareness and promote safer behaviours

Improved signage and the provision of emergency equipment were mentioned as potential interventions, but in the absence of evidence, data, or robust evaluation, their effectiveness may be limited. The location and fatality data indicate that most drownings involve repeat visitors who are already familiar with the site. This familiarity may reduce the perceived relevance of warning signs, which aligns with broader research showing that signage alone often has minimal impact on behaviour. While signage can serve as a visible demonstration of action, its influence on reducing risk is likely to be modest without accompanying strategies that address deeper behavioural patterns.

The main two areas above provide a necessary platform for action. However, building on the evidence presented in this report, the following Recommendations section will explore how each of these areas can be strengthened to create a more targeted, prevention-first approach that reflects the realities of Papanui Point.

Recommendations

The coronial focus areas provide a necessary foundation for improving drowning prevention at Papanui Point. However, the findings of this report show that to meaningfully reduce risk, a stronger emphasis must be placed on behaviour change, community-led engagement, and collective responsibility. While signage and emergency equipment remain as possible supportive measures, they must be embedded within a broader prevention-first approach that addresses the social, behavioural, and environmental dynamics at play.

This section presents a set of targeted, evidence-informed strategies that WSNZ and relevant partners should consider when planning future safety initiatives. The recommendations are presented in a deliberate sequence, reflecting their relative importance for creating long-term, sustainable change. Early recommendations focus on empowering community leadership,

deepening the understanding of risk behaviours, and embedding prevention into local practice. Later recommendations address supportive infrastructure improvements, which should complement, but not replace, primary behavioural and community-driven strategies.

Advancing Drowning Prevention at Papanui Point: Strengthening and Extending the Coroner's Recommendations

Building on the coronial focus areas (agency collaboration, education), improved signage and emergency equipment), the following seven recommendations propose a strengthened and expanded framework for reducing future drowning fatalities at Papanui Point. These strategies are informed by the behavioural, environmental, and social factors identified through the coronial and police data, placing a stronger emphasis on prevention, community leadership, and lived-experience engagement. While signage and rescue equipment play important roles in communicating risk and supporting emergency response, they do not, on their own, constitute a prevention-first approach. True prevention focuses on building safer behaviours, stronger decision-making, and proactive hazard management before an incident occurs. Infrastructure measures must therefore be seen as complementary to, rather than substitutes for, behavioural and community-led strategies.

1. Strengthen collaboration through culturally grounded, community-led outreach

Strengthening community-led collaboration must be the first priority for sustainable drowning prevention at Papanui Point. While the Coroner recommended greater collaboration between agencies, the findings from this review suggest that genuine progress will only be made when those most affected are placed at the centre of prevention efforts. The data shows that the majority of those who drowned were Hamilton residents, with a significant number of recent fatalities involving middle-aged men of Filipino descent. Public safety campaigns aimed at the general population are unlikely to reach these groups effectively unless engagement is culturally grounded, relationship-based, and reflective of community realities. Future collaboration must focus on building deep, ongoing partnerships with the Hamilton-based fishing communities who most frequently engage with Papanui Point. Rather than relying on external messaging, prevention efforts should support trusted individuals within these communities to lead safety conversations and decision-making. Hamilton-based fishers represent a range of cultural backgrounds, including many with strong connections to Filipino and wider Asian communities, whose experiences and insights must be respected and included in prevention planning.

Strengthening these relationships requires more than information-sharing. It involves working alongside communities to listen, understand, and support their aspirations for safety. Empowering peer leadership, building cultural competence within agencies, and creating trusted, ongoing connections will ensure that drowning prevention efforts are rooted in the lived realities of those who use the site most often. Early investment in these relationships will provide the strongest foundation for more in-depth engagement and sustainable change. Ultimately, drowning prevention at Papanui Point must be built with those who fish there. Empowering community leadership, strengthening cross-cultural relationships, and embedding lived experience into prevention planning will provide the strongest foundation for long-term success.

2. Expand prevention efforts through qualitative research and lived-experience engagement

As the second priority, expanding qualitative research and lived-experience engagement is critical to deepening the understanding of risk at Papanui Point. While this report provides a strong quantitative evidence base through coronial and police data, the behavioural, cultural, and social drivers that shape risk require richer insight. Without listening closely to those who fish at this site, prevention strategies risk overlooking the deeper motivations, barriers, and beliefs that influence safety decisions. Future work should focus on a dedicated programme of community-led qualitative engagement with Hamilton-based fishing communities. Hui, interviews, and small group discussions should be used to explore how individuals make decisions about fishing at Papanui Point, how they assess conditions, their views on lifejacket use, their group dynamics, and the cultural and social significance of fishing. This engagement must be relationship-based, culturally grounded, and shaped in partnership with trusted voices within the community.

One important opportunity within this work is the development of a noho marae initiative specifically to engage with Hamilton's Filipino fishing community, who have been overrepresented in recent fatalities. A noho marae would offer a culturally safe space where toi whenua could share whakapapa, mātauranga, and tikanga of the moana, while Filipino fishers could bring forward their experiences, motivations, and connections to the sea. Importantly, these shared conversations would also create an opportunity to explore how perceptions of safety change throughout a fishing trip, and how confidence, weather conditions, and group decision-making interact over time. Understanding these dynamics is critical to addressing the observed mismatch between perceived safety and actual environmental risk. Embedding lived knowledge into prevention strategies will ensure that future initiatives are grounded in community strengths, cultural connection, and practical experience, leading to more meaningful and sustainable change at Papanui Point.

3. Realign education and outreach to reflect real risks

Improving education and outreach must be the next major focus for drowning prevention at Papanui Point. While the Coroner identified public education as a key area for improvement, findings from this review show that generic safety messaging has not been enough to shift the habits and assumptions contributing to risk at this site. Many of those who drowned were experienced fishers who knew the area well. Familiarity, skill, and group presence did not consistently translate into safer outcomes, revealing that greater awareness alone does not guarantee safer behaviour. Part of the challenge is that existing safety campaigns often feel too broad to resonate with the specific risks faced by rock fishers. For example, while lifejacket use is widely promoted in the context of boating, there has been far less consistent emphasis on the critical role of lifejackets for land-based fishing activities. Auckland's west coast has seen targeted lifejacket promotion campaigns for rock fishers, but surveys show that wearing rates have remained inconsistent over time. Elsewhere across Aotearoa, lifejacket messaging has largely focused on boating, with limited attention given to the specific risks faced by rock fishers. Given the high likelihood of sudden immersion when fishing from exposed rocks, greater emphasis on lifejacket use for rock-based fishers is urgently needed.

Future education efforts must directly address the real risks identified through coronial and police data. Campaigns should challenge the belief that experience guarantees safety, highlight how sudden changes in sea state can occur even on fine days, and reinforce that fishing in

groups does not eliminate danger. Lifejacket use must be promoted not as a general safety suggestion but as a non-negotiable part of preparation for rock fishing. Outreach should also be timed to align with peak-risk periods, such as late summer weekends, and should include practical initiatives such as lifejacket loan schemes at coastal sites, retailer subsidies for safety equipment, and community-led campaigns promoting lifejacket use. To reduce fatalities at Papanui Point, education must connect more powerfully with the lived experience of fishers, helping them to recognise risk earlier and make better-informed decisions before heading to the coast.

4. Undertake a site-specific environmental and coastal risk assessment of Papanui Point

Reducing drowning risk at Papanui Point will require a clearer understanding of the physical environment itself. While behavioural change is essential, findings from this review show that many fatalities occurred when individuals were swept off rocks by surging waves or slipped on wet, unstable surfaces, even in apparently calm weather. These incidents point to recurring hazards that are not well understood or consistently communicated. A site-specific environmental and coastal hazard assessment, which could help identify common weather–sea change patterns, terrain risks, and wave exposure, is recommended to build a clearer picture of the conditions that contribute to fatalities at Papanui Point. This assessment should involve oceanographers, coastal engineers, and land management specialists to evaluate wave height, swell patterns, tidal surges, wind direction, and rock stability across seasons. This is especially important for coastal environments like the West Coast, where rugged geography and rapidly changing sea states may produce hazardous conditions more frequently than assumed.

The term “freak wave” appears often in public narratives surrounding drowning events at this site. However, without sustained environmental monitoring, it is difficult to determine whether these surges are truly rare or simply characteristic of the conditions at Papanui Point. Building a robust body of evidence about what a typical day looks like at this location is critical to challenging assumptions and ensuring that prevention strategies are based on accurate, location-specific information. Such insights are critical to informing more effective safety strategies and public risk communication at Papanui Point. This work must also be carried out in collaboration with *toi whenua* and local communities to ensure that environmental knowledge is considered alongside cultural and lived understanding of the coastline. A dedicated environmental assessment will provide the data and insight needed to identify priority risk zones, highlight areas where fishing may be especially hazardous or comparatively safer, and support safety planning that is responsive to the realities of this coastline.

5. Promote group safety culture and pre-arrival planning

Strengthening group safety culture and pre-arrival planning is a critical next step for reducing risk at Papanui Point. Fishing alone in exposed environments like this is never a safe option, and while fishing with others is safer, the findings show that group presence by itself has not been enough to prevent fatalities. In several cases, multiple people were present at the time of the incident, yet few had discussed safety planning beforehand. Rescue attempts by bystanders, although well-intentioned, sometimes placed additional lives at risk, reinforcing that being in a group does not eliminate danger without deliberate preparation. Future prevention efforts should encourage groups to view safety as a shared responsibility, rather than something that individuals manage separately. Before arriving at sites like Papanui Point, groups should be

supported to have conversations about checking weather and swell conditions, carrying safety equipment, and agreeing on clear emergency plans. Assigning roles such as monitoring conditions or coordinating a response in case of an incident could help embed safety into the group's approach from the outset.

Providing practical tools such as pre-trip safety checklists, group planning conversation guides, and resources that reinforce collective responsibility could help shift group culture over time. Campaigns should move beyond focusing on individuals and emphasise that the strongest safety outcomes happen when groups prepare and act together. Rock fishing is often a social experience, and tapping into these existing relationships offers a powerful opportunity to strengthen safe behaviour. Building a culture of group safety will take sustained effort, but it is an essential part of reducing preventable loss of life at sites like Papanui Point. Promoting shared responsibility, normalising pre-trip planning, and encouraging group-level awareness can help create safer patterns of decision-making before anyone even reaches the rocks.

6. Maintain emergency equipment as supportive infrastructure, not a primary prevention tool

Maintaining emergency infrastructure remains an important safety support at Papanui Point, but it must always be positioned as a backup measure rather than a primary prevention strategy. As the fifth priority, the findings from this review make clear that while access to flotation devices, distress systems, and emergency communication points can save lives, preparation, planning, and early behaviour change must remain the first line of defence. Responsibility for maintaining public safety infrastructure typically sits with local authorities. At Papanui Point, this includes Waikato District Council, the Department of Conservation (DoC), and relevant private landowners, given that access crosses both DoC-administered and private land. Ongoing coordination between these parties is crucial to ensure that emergency equipment remains functional, visible, and accessible.

Given the remoteness of Papanui Point and the lack of reliable mobile coverage, maintaining robust emergency communication systems is particularly important. In several cases, individuals had to run considerable distances to find help, losing valuable time that could have influenced rescue outcomes. Where feasible, the installation or maintenance of fixed emergency call points should be prioritised. Addressing persistent issues such as vandalism is also essential, and additional strategies may be needed to better protect and sustain emergency equipment in such isolated coastal areas. However, it must be clearly reinforced that the promotion of lifejacket use remains the most effective measure for preventing drowning fatalities. Lifejackets provide immediate buoyancy and increase survivability during immersion events, reducing reliance on emergency response systems that may be difficult or delayed. Future safety strategies should continue to normalise and incentivise lifejacket use, particularly for rock fishers operating in exposed environments like Papanui Point. Emergency infrastructure remains a vital support system, but it cannot replace the critical need for early preparation, prevention, and deliberate decision-making before people reach the coastline.

7. Recognise the limitations of static signage and encourage safer preparation before arrival

Although improved signage was recommended by the Coroner and has been installed at Papanui Point, fatalities have continued, suggesting that static warnings alone are insufficient to meaningfully shift behaviour. Current signage clearly highlights key risks, including the

number of lives lost, the dangers of rogue waves, the need for lifejackets, and the absence of mobile coverage. Yet, the findings from this review show that familiarity with the site, confidence in fishing ability, group dynamics, and the long travel commitment from Hamilton often override caution. For many, the presence of warnings becomes part of the landscape, rather than a prompt to reconsider their safety approach. While signage remains important, it must be understood as a minor behavioural prompt, not a primary prevention strategy.

Existing signage should continue to be maintained at critical decision points, such as track entrances and fishing platforms, but a stronger focus must now be placed on influencing safer choices well before people even reach the coast. To achieve this, live condition updates need to be made more accessible across Hamilton, where fishing trips are often planned. Dynamic electronic signage at shopping centres, sports facilities, and key petrol stations should be trialled to provide up-to-date information on weather, tide, and swell conditions. Petrol stations are a particularly important opportunity for intervention, as location data shows they are commonly the last stop before travel to Papanui Point. Safety messaging should also be extended through partnerships with Hamilton-based fishing and community networks, particularly those connected to Asian communities, to ensure that communication reaches the groups most engaged with the site.

In addition to signage, QR codes linking to live marine conditions and trialling live-feed cameras showing sea states at Papanui Point would further support real-time decision-making. Lessons can be drawn from Auckland's coastal safety initiatives, where electronic warnings have been used successfully to prompt behavioural change before people enter hazardous environments. Ultimately, signage alone cannot create the shift needed. To meaningfully reduce risk at Papanui Point, prevention must start earlier, empowering individuals to assess conditions, plan more carefully, and make safer choices long before they arrive at the rocks.

Summary

Together, these recommendations provide a clear, sequenced pathway for reducing drowning fatalities at Papanui Point. The order reflects the principle that sustainable change must begin by empowering trusted community leadership and building a deep understanding of behavioural risks. Education and group planning must then align closely with these realities, supported by appropriate infrastructure tools such as emergency equipment and signage. By prioritising community-driven, prevention-first strategies, WSNZ and its partners can foster long-term safety improvements that are culturally grounded, behaviourally informed, and far more likely to succeed.

Conclusion

This report brought together coronial and police records, DrownBase™ data, and anonymised mobile location insights to build a clearer understanding of the conditions, behaviours, and decisions contributing to drowning incidents at Papanui Point. Across these sources, a consistent picture emerged: a coastline of deep meaning and connection that continues to present serious and often underestimated risks. In reviewing these patterns alongside the recommendations previously made by the Coroner, it became clear that further action was needed to fully address the drivers of risk identified at Papanui Point. While the recommendations made by the Coroner provided a critical starting point, this review expanded on those foundations through deeper analysis of demographic patterns, group behaviours,

environmental conditions, and the availability of safety infrastructure. It became clear that risk at Papanui Point is shaped not only by the physical environment, but also by familiarity with the location, social dynamics, routine fishing practices, and the absence of early planning systems.

The expert recommendations outlined in this report call for a prevention-first approach that is grounded in lived practice, strengthened by community leadership, and focused on influencing safety behaviours before people reach the coastline. Key actions include empowering trusted community voices, realigning education to make risk personally meaningful, strengthening group safety culture, maintaining effective emergency infrastructure, and reframing static interventions like signage as one small part of a much wider behavioural change framework. Equally important is the need to centre *toi whenua* and those who fish at Papanui Point in the design of future strategies. The *whakapapa*, *mātauranga*, and *tikanga* of this coastline must not only be acknowledged but woven into the way safety is understood and supported. A future phase of qualitative engagement, drawing on *hui*, interviews, and community-led research, will be critical to deepening understanding of risk drivers and ensuring that prevention efforts are culturally responsive, grounded, and enduring.

Through the strengthening and extension of the Coroner's initial recommendations, this report provides a pathway for real change. The next challenge lies in translating these insights into collective action. By building authentic partnerships, embedding cultural knowledge, and supporting safer decisions long before people reach the coastline, future prevention efforts can be strengthened. In closing, we acknowledge and honour all those who have lost their lives at Papanui Point. Their memory remains a guiding force in shaping a safer future for all who come here to fish, to seek solace, and to connect with the beauty of this coastline.