

SNOWMOBILING DROWNINGS IN NEWFOUNDLAND & LABRADOR

A Special Report from The Lifesaving Society
2002 Edition



Seventeen people died in preventable ice-related Snowmobiling incidents in Newfoundland and Labrador during a five-year period between 1996 and 2000. These were all “immersion” incidents, in which the victims were riding on the ice and either broke through thin/soft but intact ice (9) or drove into open holes (6). The victims died as a result of their immersion, with cause of death usually due to drowning (14) and or exposure to cold/hypothermia (5)¹.

Fourteen (14) ice-related snowmobiling fatalities involved recreational activities while 3 involved daily living activities².§

of Preventable Ice-Related Snowmobiling Deaths in Newfoundland & Labrador: 1996-2000

Year	Recreational	Daily Living	Total
1996	2	0	2
1997	5	1	6
1998	4	0	4
1999	0	1	1
2000	3	1	4
Total	14	3	17

Snowmobiling Drowning Risk Higher in Newfoundland and Labrador

Snowmobiling accounts for a much higher proportion of all water-related deaths in Newfoundland and Labrador (16%) than the rest of Canada (4%).

Although Newfoundland & Labrador account for only 2% of the Canadian population, and 4% of total Canada water-related deaths, the province is the site of 11% of Canadian ice-related recreational snowmobiling deaths and 37% of all Canadian ice-related daily living snowmobiling travel fatalities. As, well, another recent study of Newfoundland snowmobiling fatalities found that ice-related “immersion” incidents account for a high proportion of all snowmobiling deaths in the

province. Between 1988 and 1992, more than half (55%) of all snowmobiling deaths were due to drowning and/or hypothermia³. By comparison, a recent study in Ontario found that drowning and hypothermia accounted for 33 % of all Ontario snowmobiling fatalities⁴.

The higher proportion of ice-related snowmobiling deaths in Newfoundland at least partially reflects higher usage of snowmobiles in the province. Best estimates are that there are about 45,000 active operating snowmobiles in Newfoundland and Labrador⁵.

This translates to 7,700 snowmobiles per 100,000 population. By comparison, in Ontario, where snowmobiling is also popular, there are about 1,650 snowmobiles per 100,000 population⁴.§

Be SledSmart and Avoid Ice-Related Snowmobiling Risk Factors

1. *Always Ride Sober. Never drink and drive your snowmobile.*

- Alcohol beverage consumption, along with riding after dark are the leading factors contributing to ice-related snowmobiling deaths.
- Excessive drinking is especially fatal – of the 10 victims for whom blood alcohol data were available, 9 had blood alcohol levels over the legal limit, with one equal to or below the legal limit.

2. *. Ride in Daylight*

- If driving after dark, drive with extreme caution, proper lights and stay off ice.

3. *Don't ride on ice when your visibility is impaired.*

- Ride at slow enough speeds that so you have time to react to surprises.
- Don't ride after dark. *Continued on back*

Notes:

- This does not include other fatal snowmobiling incidents on land, which usually collisions or ejection incidents where the victims were thrown from their sleds.
- “Daily Living” includes incidents, which are neither recreational nor vocational in nature.
- Source: “Snowmobile Fatalities”, S.P. Avis, Journal for of Forensic Sciences, JFSCA, Vol. 39, No. 5, Sept. 1994, pp. 1161-1167.
- Source: “Ontario Snowmobiling Injuries”, Ontario Safe Snowmobiling Committee and the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs, November 1995.
- Best estimate by the Lifesaving Society and Blaicher Marketing International.

Profile of Ice-Related Snowmobiling Fatalities

- Who are the Victims: Primarily men 18-49 years old.
- When fatal incidents occur: Mostly between January and April, half on the weekend for recreational snowmobiling incidents and mostly during the week for daily living activities.
- Time of Day: Most snowmobiling ice-related fatalities occur between 6:00pm and 5:00am. In 2000, 2 occurred between 10:00pm and midnight.
- Where: 10 occurred on the Ocean, 4 on Rivers/Streams, while 3 occurred on Lakes/Ponds.

Key Risk Factors:

- 53% of Newfoundland and Labrador ice-related snowmobiling deaths involved alcohol– higher than the rest of Canada (50%) and higher than any other recreational or daily living activity in the province.
- 88% of Ice-Related snowmobiling fatalities occurred during the hours of darkness.
- 40% of ice-related snowmobiling deaths can be attributed to driving into open holes, while 60 % were caused by thin/soft ice.
- 44% of snowmobile victims who drowned were not wearing any form of floatation, while in 56 % of the cases it was unknown if the victim had a floatation device.§

Continued from front

- blowing snow or heavy rain, and guard against snow blindness with UV-protective sunglasses.
- 4. Wear A Buoyant Snowmobile Suit** to combat submersion and help protect against the numbing effects of hypothermia.
- 5. Always Ride With a Buddy.**
 - 43% of snowmobiling immersion fatalities occurred when the victim was riding alone.§

Newfoundland & Labrador Snowmobiling Water-Related Deaths: 1996-2000 Five-year Totals

	Rec.	D.L.	Total
Total	14	3	17
I. WHO			
Age			
<18	0	0	0
18-34	8	2	10
35-49	5	1	6
50+	1	0	1
Sex			
Male	12	3	15
Female	2	0	2
II WHEN			
Month			
Nov-Dec	3	0	3
Jan-Apr	11	2	13
May-June	0	1	1
Day			
Mon-Thurs	7	3	10
Fri-Sun	7	0	7
Time			

5am-6pm	3	1	4
6pm midnight	3	1	4
Midnight-5am	7	0	7
Unknown	1	1	2
III WHERE			
Setting			
Ocean	7	3	10
Lake/Pond	3	0	3
River/Stream	4	0	4
Region			
Newfoundland	9	0	9
Labrador	5	3	8
IV WHY			
Cause			
Drowning	13	1	14
Hypothermia	3	2	5
Risk Factors			
Alcohol	9	0	9
Reduced Visibility Due to:			
Darkness	13	1	14
Snow	1	0	1
Cloud/overcast	2	1	3

(based on past 5 year statistics from the Lifesaving Society)

For more information contact:
 Lifesaving Society
 Newfoundland and Labrador Branch
 P.O. Box 8065, Station "A"
 St. John's, NF A1B 3M9
 Telephone: (709) 576-1953
 Fax: (709) 738-1475
 E-mail: lifeguard@seascape.com

The Lifesaving Society acknowledges assistance in preparing the Snowmobile Drownings Report from:

- Office of the Chief Forensic Pathologist, Newfoundland Department of Justice
- Canadian Red Cross Society (CRCS)
- Lifesaving Society and CRCS volunteers and staff
- Royal Newfoundland Constabulary
- Royal Canadian Mounted Police
- Canadian Coast Guard
- Environment Canada

Newfoundland and Labrador Snowmobiling Report