

SNOWMOBILING DROWNINGS IN NEWFOUNDLAND & LABRADOR



A Special Report from The Lifesaving Society 2003 Edition



Fifteen people died in preventable ice-related Snowmobiling incidents in Newfoundland and Labrador during the five-year period between 1997 and 2001. These were all "immersion" incidents, in which the victims were riding on the ice and either broke through thin/soft but intact ice (8) or drove into open holes (7). The victims died as a result of their immersion, with cause of death usually due to drowning (15) and or exposure to cold/hypothermia (3)¹.

Thirteen (13) ice-related snowmobiling fatalities involved recreational activities while 2 involved daily living activities². ■

of Preventable Ice-Related Snowmobiling Deaths in Newfoundland and Labrador: 1997 - 2001

Year	Recreational	Daily Living	Total
1997	4	1	5
1998	4	0	4
1999	0	0	0
2000	2	1	3
2001	3	0	3
Total	13	2	15

A recent study of Newfoundland snowmobiling fatalities found that ice-related "immersion" incidents account for a high portion 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. Don't drink and drive your snowmobile.**
Alcohol beverage consumption, along with riding after dark are the leading factors contributing to ice-related snowmobiling deaths.
- 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 so that you have time to react to surprises. Don't ride after dark, in blowing snow or heavy rain, and guard against snow blindness with UV-protective sunglasses.
- 4. Wear a Buoyant Snowmobile Suit.**
This will combat submersion and help protect against the numbing effects of hypothermia.
- 5. Always Ride With a Buddy.**
40% of snowmobiling immersion fatalities occurred when the victim was riding alone. ■

Notes:

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

Profile of Ice-Related Snowmobiling Fatalities

Who are the victims: Primary men 18-49 years old.

When fatal incidents occur: Mostly between January and April, on the weekend for recreational snowmobiling incidents and mostly during the week for daily living activities.

Time of day: Most ice-related snowmobiling fatalities occur between 6:00pm and 5:00am.

Where: 9 occurred on the Ocean, 5 on Rivers/Streams, while 1 occurred on Lakes/Ponds.

Key Risk Factors:

53% of Newfoundland and Labrador ice-related snowmobiling deaths involved alcohol - higher than any other recreational or daily living activity in the province.

67% of ice-related snowmobiling fatalities occurred during the hours of darkness.

47% of ice-related snowmobiling deaths can be attributed to driving into open holes, while 53% were caused by thin/soft ice.

33% of snowmobile victims who drowned were not wearing any form of floatation, while in 67% of the cases it was unknown if the victim had a floatation device. ■

Newfoundland & Labrador Water-Related Snowmobiling Deaths: 1997-2001 Five-year Totals

	Rec.	D.L.	Total
Totals	13	2	15
<u>I. WHO</u>			
Age			
<18			1
18-34			7
35-49			5
50+			2
Sex			
Male			12
Female			3
<u>II. WHEN</u>			
Month			
Nov-Dec			2
Jan-Apr			13
May-June			0
Day			
Mon-Thurs			7
Fri-Sun			8
Time			
5am-6pm			3
6pm-Midnight			5
Midnight-5am			5
Unknown			2
<u>III. WHERE</u>			
Setting			
Ocean			9
Lake/Pond			1
River/Stream			5
Region			
Newfoundland			8
Labrador			7

IV. WHY

Cause		
Drowning		15
Hypothermia		3
Risk Factors		
Alcohol		8
Reduced Visibility Due to:		
Darkness		13
Snow		2
Cloud/Overcast		2

(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, NL A1B 3M9
Telephone: (709) 576-1953
Fax: (709) 738-1475
E-mail: lifeguard@seascape.com

The Lifesaving Society acknowledges assistance in preparing the Snowmobile Drowning 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