

# National Drowning Trends Report

## 1992–2001

### PROGRESS IN REDUCING DROWNINGS

The long-term trend towards fewer drownings in Canada continues. With 431 drownings and preventable water-related deaths, 2001 marked the fifth consecutive year that a record low was reached. During the past five years (1997–2001), Canadian water-related deaths have decreased by 20% from the previous five years (1992–1996).

Taking population growth into account, the Canadian preventable water-related death rate also continues to decrease. In 2001 (the most recent year for which national data is available), the death rate reached a new low of 1.4 deaths per 100,000 population (see chart #1). The average annual death rate for 1997–2001 (1.6) decreased by 27% from the average for 1992–1996 (2.2).

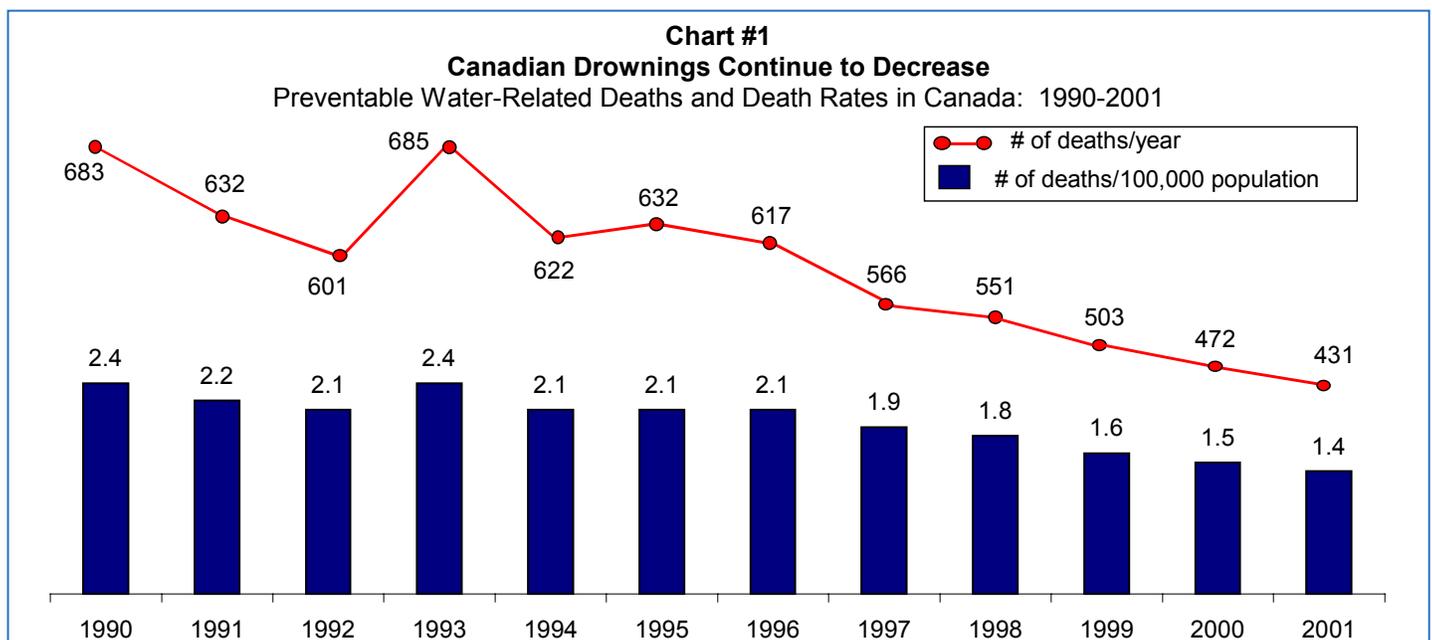
Fewer drownings occurred among all age groups during the past five years (1997–2001) versus the previous five years, except for 50 to 64-year-olds, for whom there was virtually no change. The largest decreases by age group were among young children under five years of age and young men 25 to 34 years of age (see chart #2). By activity group, recreational powerboaters, sport fishermen and young children playing in and near water have seen the largest decreases in the number of drownings (see chart #4). These high-risk groups have been key targets of the Lifesaving Society's Water Smart® public education campaign.

Unfortunately, drowning is still the third leading cause of unintentional death for Canadians under 60 years of age, surpassed only by motor vehicle collisions and poisoning. This makes drowning prevention a long-term commitment for the Lifesaving Society and its partners. To further reduce drownings in Canada, the Lifesaving Society recommends that Canadians:

- Always wear lifejackets or PFDs when boating. Wear a flotation suit when snowmobiling or ice fishing.
- Always boat sober and ride sober. Do not drink and drive a boat or snowmobile.
- Get trained in boating safety, get carded. Get the Pleasure Craft Operator card.
- Always supervise young children closely in, on, or around water, and always swim with a buddy.
- Learn to swim and learn lifesaving skills.

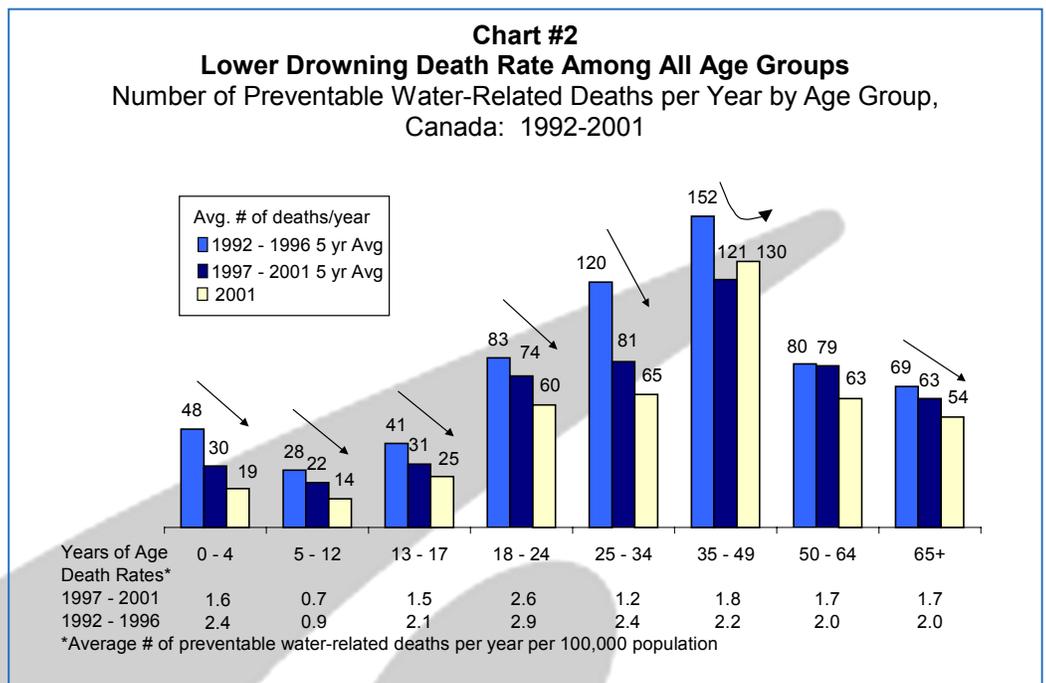
### IN THIS REPORT...

WHO IS DROWNING  
WHERE WERE THEY  
WHAT WERE THEY DOING  
RISK FACTORS FOR DROWNING  
UNATTENDED TODDLER PROFILE  
RISK TAKER PROFILE  
STATISTICS  
WATER SMART® TIPS  
CONTACT US



## WHO IS DROWNING?

- Men—83% of Canadian drowning victims are male. This makes men almost five times more likely to drown than women.
- All age groups, but especially young men and young children. The highest drowning death rate is among 18 to 24-year-olds (see chart #2).
- Trend toward lower drowning death rate among all age groups, but largest decrease is among children under 5 years (see chart #2).
- Both swimmers (71% of victims) and non-swimmers.



## WHERE WERE THEY?

- Usually on lakes and ponds (36% of 1997–2001 fatalities), or rivers and streams (29%) (see chart #3).
- Trend toward fewer drownings in all aquatic settings (see chart #3).
- Although the absolute number of drownings in backyard pools is fewer than for lakes or rivers, a backyard pool carries a similar degree of drowning risk as powerboats and canoes. The water-related death rate for Canadian backyard pools is 3.6 deaths per year per 100,000 pools, on average for 1997–2001; compared to 6 and 3 deaths per year per 100,000 boats for powerboats and canoes respectively.
- Across Canada, the largest decreases in the annual number of provincial drownings occurred in New Brunswick, Quebec and the northern territories, with decreases of 35%, 26% and 49% respectively in the last five years.

## WHAT WERE THEY DOING?

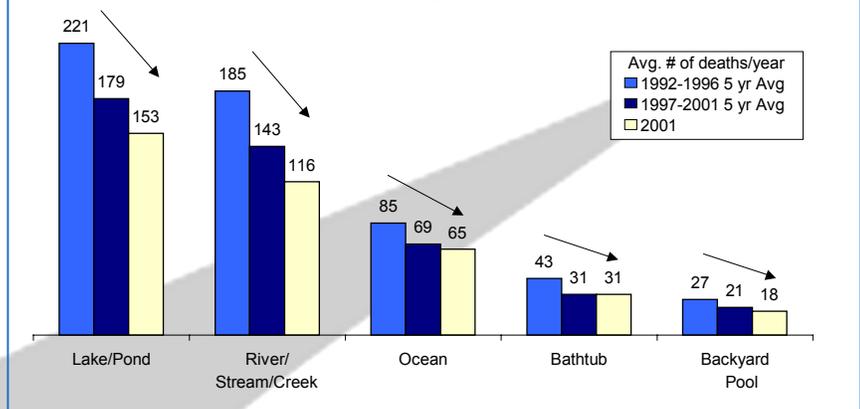
- The majority of drownings occur while victims have been engaged in recreational activities (63%), followed by daily living activities (22%), and occupational activities (6%).
- More drownings occur while swimming, sport fishing, and powerboating than during any other recreational activities. There is an encouraging trend toward fewer fatalities for each of these three activities from 1997–2001 compared to the previous 5 years (see chart #4). There is also a trend toward fewer drownings while playing in or near water, which often involve toddler victims. Walking near water (or on-ice) is the recreational activity that bucks the overall trend, with +32% more drownings in 1997-2001 than the previous five years. Most of these deaths occurred when the victim was alone (70%). Close to half of near-water fatalities occurred on rivers (49%) and involved alcohol (42%).
- Boating accounts for 33% of water-related fatalities. Most often, boating victims drowned while operating a small powerboat. There has been a 14% change increase in fatalities involving personal watercraft (PWC) during 1997-2001. Although the total number of PWC fatalities is still low, the water-related death rate for PWCs (10 deaths per year per 100,000 boats) is higher than the death rate for powerboats (6) or canoes (3). The number of fatalities involving non-powered inflatable craft has also increased sharply (+37% during 1997-2001 versus the previous five years), with an all-time high of 9 deaths involving inflatables in 2001, the most recent year measured. Most of the victims in these incidents were adults 18 to 34 years of age.
- In-water activities such as swimming, playing and wading account for 29% of all water-related fatalities.
- Near water activities account for another one-third (34%) of water-related deaths, including transportation incidents other than boating (15%; usually involving motor vehicles going off roads, bridges, or through ice), and other non-aquatic activities (18%) such as walking near water.

## THE RISK FACTORS

### 1. Not wearing a lifejacket or PFD is the number one problem contributing to recreational boating drownings

- Most boating victims were not wearing a PFD (84% of all boating victims for whom PFD information was available). Victim was usually not wearing a PFD in recreational powerboating (82%), sport fishing (85%), and canoeing (88%) incidents; which usually involved capsizing, swamping, or falling overboard.
- PFD not even present in one-quarter of total boating (29%), recreational powerboating (26%) and sport fishing (29%) deaths, and almost half (42%) of canoeing fatalities.

**Chart #3**  
Fewer Drownings in All Aquatic Settings  
Number of Preventable Water-Related Deaths/Year for Top Five Aquatic Settings, Canada: 1992-2001



### 2. Drinking alcoholic beverages continues to be a major problem with boaters and snowmobilers

- Alcoholic beverage consumption involved in 44% of preventable water-related deaths involving victims 18 to 49 years of age. Some progress made, as there were 24% fewer drownings involving alcohol consumption in the past five years compared to the previous five years.
- Alcoholic beverages involved in one-third (37%) of all boating deaths, 42% of recreational powerboating deaths, and half of canoeing (47%) and recreational snowmobiling (54%) drownings.

### 3. Lack of supervision of young children

- Young victims under 5 years of age were usually alone (65%) and playing near water (61%) when they fell into a backyard pool (29%), lake (17%), river (12%), or bathtub (15%) and drowned.

### 4. Rough water

- Rough water/waves cited in 27% of boating fatalities; capsizing or swamping involved in half of boating deaths.

### 5. Cold water

- 27% of all drownings known to involve water 10 degrees Celsius or colder.
- Hypothermia cited as a cause of death by Coroners and Medical Examiners in 11% of deaths.

### 6. Snowmobiling on ice after dark

- Half (55%) of snowmobiling drownings occurred after dark.

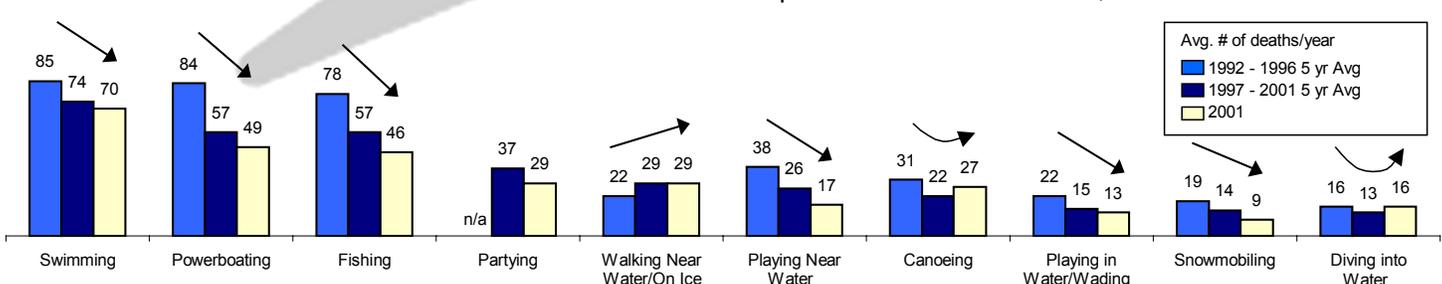
#### The "Unattended Toddler"

- 1 to 4 years old—can walk, but can't swim.
- Playing near water and falls in.
- Alone, or momentary lapse in parent or caregiver's attention.
- Not wearing a lifejacket.
- Drowns, or suffers near drowning brain damage.
- Backyard pools particularly dangerous; also unsupervised beaches, waterfronts, cottages, and bathtubs.

#### The "Risk Taker"

- Young men 18 to 34 years, active in outdoor recreational activities, especially fishing, powerboating, swimming, diving or jumping into water, canoeing, and snowmobiling; and put themselves into high risk situations.
- Often partying with friends, including drinking alcoholic beverages.
- Almost never wearing a lifejacket or PFD, and may be guilty of careless driving of a boat or snowmobile.
- Usually on lakes, rivers, and oceans.

**Chart #4**  
Recreational Drownings Down for Most Recreational Activities Except Walking Near Water  
Number of Preventable Water-Related Deaths/Year for Top 10 Recreational Activities, Canada: 1992-2001



# SUMMARY FACTS & FIGURES

## Canadian Preventable Water-Related Deaths: 1997 - 2001 Five-Year Totals

	% Change vs		WHEN Month of Year:	% Change vs		TYPE OF CRAFT	% Change vs		
	# (% of Total)	Prev. 5 yrs.		# (% of Total)	Prev. 5 yrs.		# (% of Boating)	Prev. 5 yrs.	
<b>Total WHO</b>	2523	(100)							
<b>Age of Victim:</b>									
0 - 4 years	150	(6)	May - June	599	(25)	Powerboat			
5 - 12	112	(5)	July - August	827	(34)	- small (5.5m and under)	257	(31)	
13 - 17	153	(6)	September - October	376	(15)	- large (over 5.5m)	134	(16)	
18 - 24	370	(15)	November - April	639	(26)	- size unknown	90	(11)	
25 - 34	404	(16)	<b>DOING WHAT</b>			- personal watercraft	25	(3)	
35 - 49	605	(24)	<b>Type of Activity:</b>			- Total Powerboats	506	(61)	
50 - 64	397	(16)	Recreational	1587	(63)	Canoe	148	(18)	
65 +	315	(13)	Occupational	153	(6)	Rowboat	28	(3)	
<b>Gender of Victim:</b>			Daily Living	542	(22)	Inflatable (non-powered)	26	(3)	
Male	2083	(83)	Boating	824	(33)	Sailboat	25	(3)	
Female	437	(17)	Aquatic & Bathing	721	(29)	Kayak	23	(3)	
<b>WHERE</b>			Non-Aquatic	851	(34)	<b>WHY</b>			
<b>Aquatic Setting:</b>			<b>Specific Recreational Activities:</b>			<b>Contributing Factors:</b>			
Lake/Pond	896	(36)	# (% of Recr. Deaths)			(% of Boating)	% Chge	(% of Total)	
River/Stream	717	(29)	Swimming	370	(23)	Alcohol Involved	(37)	-31%	(35)
Ocean	345	(14)	Powerboating	286	(18)	After Dark	(18)	-44%	(19)
Bathtub	153	(6)	Fishing	285	(18)	Alone	(25)	-10%	(42)
Backyard Pools	103	(4)	Partying	183	(11)	With Others	(75)	-25%	(56)
Public Pools	16	(<1)	Walking Near Water/On Ice	144	(9)	Cold Water			
<b>Province/Territory:</b>			Playing Near Water	130	(8)	<10 degrees Celsius	(33)	+16%	(27)
Nfld and Labrador	117	(5)	Canoeing	111	(7)	<b>PFD:</b>			
Nova Scotia	126	(5)	Playing in Water/Wading	76	(5)	Not worn (properly)	(72)	-7%	
Prince Edward Island	17	(1)	Snowmobiling	68	(4)	Not present	(25)	-24%	
New Brunswick	68	(3)	Diving/Jumping	63	(4)	Worn (properly)	(11)	-23%	
Quebec	485	(19)	Hunting	52	(3)	PFD info not available	(15)	-54%	
Ontario	706	(28)	<b>Occupational Activities: # (% of Occup. Deaths)</b>			Fell or thrown overboard	(24)	-30%	
Manitoba	136	(5)	Commercial Fishing	69	(45)	Capsized	(37)	-20%	
Saskatchewan	107	(4)	<b>Daily Living Activities: # (% of D.L. Deaths)</b>			Swamped	(14)	-28%	
Alberta	178	(7)	Automobile Travel	217	(40)	Rough Water	(27)	-33%	
British Columbia	531	(21)	Bathing	146	(27)	Standing up in craft	(9)	±0%	
N.W.T. & Nunavut	40	(2)	Walking/Travel on Foot	52	(10)	Overloaded craft	(8)	-15%	
Yukon	12	(1)	Boat Travel	29	(5)	Collisions	(8)	-10%	
						Abrupt turn	(7)	n/a	

## HOW TO BE WATER SMART® ...

### 1) CHOOSE IT. USE IT! ALWAYS WEAR A LIFEJACKET OR PFD!

Don't just have it in the boat. Pick one and WEAR it.

### 2) THINK ABOUT IT. BOAT SOBER & RIDE SOBER!

Don't drink and drive your boat or snowmobile.

### 3) GET CARDED. GET THE PLEASURE CRAFT OPERATOR CARD!

The Lifesaving Society's Boat Operator Accredited Training® course (BOAT) is available at participating recreation departments and other aquatic facilities... to help you know the boating "rules of the road," how to respond in a boating emergency and how to operate pleasure craft safely.

### 4) KNOW BEFORE YOU GO!

Check the weather forecast and complete a simple safety checklist.

### 5) DRIVE POWERBOATS, PWCS, & SNOWMOBILES RESPONSIBLY!

### 6) CLOSELY SUPERVISE YOUNG CHILDREN NEAR WATER!

If you're not within arms reach, you've gone too far.

### 7) ALWAYS SWIM WITH A BUDDY!

And play and swim in areas supervised by a lifeguard.

### 8) WEAR A FLOTATION SUIT & DON'T DRIVE YOUR SNOWMOBILE ON THIN ICE!

### 9) PROTECT YOUR NECK!

Feet first, first time. Never dive into shallow water.

### 10) LEARN TO SWIM & LEARN LIFESAVING SKILLS!

Go further... take a Lifesaving Society Canadian Swim Patrol, Bronze Star, Bronze Medallion, Bronze Cross, National Lifeguard Service, or other lifesaving program at your local pool or aquatic facility.



LIFESAVING SOCIETY

The Lifeguarding Experts

The Lifesaving Society, Canada's lifeguarding expert, is a national, charitable organization working to prevent drowning and water-related injury through its training programs, Water Smart® public education, and lifesaving competitions.

Published January 2005 by the Lifesaving Society. For more information, contact the:

LIFESAVING SOCIETY  
287 McArthur Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario K1L 6P3  
Telephone: (613)746-5694; Fax: (613)746-9929;  
E-Mail: [experts@lifesaving.ca](mailto:experts@lifesaving.ca); Web: [www.lifesaving.ca](http://www.lifesaving.ca)

Or contact the Lifesaving Society office in your province or territory. The Lifesaving Society and the Canadian Red Cross Society collaborate to collect drowning data from the offices of the Chief Coroners and Medical Examiners in each province and territory. The Lifesaving Society thanks the Canadian Coast Guard for data re: the number of boats in Canada; and Pool & Spa magazine for data re: the number of backyard swimming pools in Canada.