



Transport
Canada

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Public opinion research study on boating safety in Canada

Executive Summary

Prepared for Transport Canada

Supplier Name: Environics Research
Contract Number: T8053-210136/001/CY
Contract Value: \$127,524.99 (including HST)
Award Date: 2021-12-03
Delivery Date: 2022-03-16

Registration Number: POR 056-21

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March 2022

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Cat. No. T29-172/2022E-PDF

ISBN 978-0-660-42724-9

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre *Recherche sur l'opinion publique portant sur la sécurité nautique au Canada*.

Executive summary

1. Background and objectives

Transport Canada (TC) wants to better understand what Canadians know and do regarding five key issues: lifejacket and Personal Flotation Device (PFD) use; the risks of falling into cold water; the dangers of boating under the influence; ensuring vessels have all required safety equipment; and the importance of pleasure craft licensing.

Research on recreational boaters will allow TC to:

- Better understand the profiles of recreational boaters and how to target communications efforts effectively.
- Examine and gain insight into how on water safety is understood.
- Identify opportunities to deliver and improve messaging, educational tools, educational material to Canadians on the five main areas of focus.

The results of the research will establish a baseline of data from which comparative information can be drawn in future studies on Canadians' understanding of water safety. The data will also help inform the Office of Boating Safety (OBS)'s communications, awareness and safety education efforts for 2022 and beyond.

2. Methodology

Environics Research conducted a dual mode (online and telephone) survey of 2,237 adult Canadians who operated or were guests on boats in the past year or who intend to in the coming year. In the ten provinces, the survey was conducted online. Because the extremely small population in the three Northern territories has insufficient presence on online panels to be surveyed using an online methodology, Environics also conducted a companion telephone survey, targeting 50 completions in each of Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut. The results of these two methodologies were merged for this report.

The online survey was conducted with Canadians who are members of an online panel, from January 17-February 5, 2022. The sampling method was designed to complete interviews with Canadians age 18 and over; hard quotas were set by region (including targets for urban and rural respondents to ensure there would be sufficient responses for analysis by key points; flexible quotas were set for age and gender. The data were statistically weighted to ensure the sample is representative of this population according to the most recently available Census information (region and gender). The sample was not weighted by age, because boat users in the survey were younger than the general population, and age weighting would have skewed the data.

Target group	Total	BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	QC	Atl	Terr
# of completed interviews	2,237	260	259	133	135	500	350	450	150
% of completed interviews	100%	12%	12%	6%	6%	22%	16%	20%	7%

Recreational boat/watercraft operator or guest status - unweighted

Watercraft use	Operator (net)	Operator only	Both operator and guest	Guest only	Neither
Past 12 months (N=2,237)	30%	16%	15%	39%	31%
Next 12 months (N=691)	23%	8%	15%	77%	n/a

As an online survey is a non-probability sample, no margin of sampling error is reported. Although opt-in panels are not random probability samples, online surveys can be used for general population surveys provided they are well-designed and employ a large, well-maintained panel. This survey's large and carefully designed sample provides robust data for understanding the attitudes of the Canadian boater population and subgroups of interest. The telephone survey was a probability sample and the margin of sampling error on the total of n=150 telephone interviews is ± 8.0 at the 95% confidence interval. ***More information about the methodology for this survey is included in Appendix A.***

Notes on differences between online and telephone survey methodologies

This report provides the results of a dual-mode survey. There are well-documented differences in response patterns between online self-completion surveys and telephone surveys with a live interviewer. In general, respondents can be more emphatic or enthusiastic when speaking to an interviewer, due in part to social desirability bias, in which some respondents may answer in a way they (consciously or unconsciously) think will appear more acceptable to the interviewer. With a change to an online methodology, there will often be a decrease in the strong opinion options (i.e., fewer will say "very"), with a corresponding move to the somewhat/moderate options. In these cases, it is useful to see whether the net measures have fundamentally changed or remained stable. As well, for some questions with longer response lists, the telephone respondents were not read the options that were shown to the online respondents, which results in lower mentions among the telephone respondents.

3. Cost of research

The cost of this research was \$127,524.99 (HST included).

4. Key findings

General summary

Canadian boaters generally have moderate levels of knowledge and awareness about key boating safety issues. Understandably, operators are more likely to consider themselves at least somewhat knowledgeable about these issues than are guests. There is good awareness about the dangers of cold water boating and of boating while intoxicated, noting a six in ten majority say they have never experienced boating with someone under the influence. About six in ten say they always use a life jacket or PFD, and over eight in ten say they definitely would wear one if asked to do so by an operator - while this is fairly high, there is clearly room for improvement in compliance. Boaters are not especially knowledgeable about three official boating documents (the *Pleasure Craft Operator Card* or PCOC, the *Pleasure Craft Licence* or PCL, and the *Pleasure Craft Registration*) or the differences between them (for example, over three-quarters think there is a fee to get a pleasure craft licence) which may require additional communications. Boaters also appear to need more information about how to ensure vessels have all required safety equipment and are well prepared for a voyage.

The following are specific findings by topic:

Boating characteristics

- Canadians are about twice as likely to be a guest (64%) on a recreational vehicle as an operator (17%).
- Two-thirds (68%) report use of a motorized craft; four in ten (41%) use kayaks and one-third (34%) use canoes. Fewer report using other types of pleasure craft: paddleboards (22%), personal watercraft (like WaveRunners/Sea-Doos/Jet Skis – 15%), sailboats (13%) and rowboats or dinghies (12%).
- The bulk of powerboats are under 10 metres, with the average being 6.8 metres, while houseboats cover a range of lengths with the average being 11.4 metres. Many boaters cannot estimate the length of motorized vessels.
- Personal watercraft are the types of recreational watercraft most likely to be used often, with one in ten (11%) reporting daily use or intended use. Close to half or more say they use each type of watercraft less often than monthly.
- Two-thirds of boaters have been cruising/touring in the past year (66%) or intend to in the coming year (64%); just under half (45%) have gone (49%) or will go (37%) fishing in a boat; fewer indicate other recreational boating activities.
- From a list of seven potential locations, Canadian boaters are most likely to indicate they typically use recreational watercraft while visiting friends' or family members' cottages (41%) or while camping (27%). Around one quarter say they use watercraft at the home of a friend or family member (23%) or on vacation within Canada or other northern/colder locations (23%). Two in ten indicate they have a home on or near the water (21%), or at a cottage or recreational property they own (20%).
- Recreational boating is most likely to take place on a lake (82%). Three in ten have gone or will go boating on rivers (30%), and two in ten have gone, or will go, boating in an ocean (19%).
- One-quarter (24%) of boaters have rented a motorized boat. Four in ten (40%) have not but may in the future, and one-third (35%) have not and do not intend to.

Awareness of regulations

- Three-quarters indicate being either very (22%) or somewhat (54%) knowledgeable about how to keep safe while boating; one-quarter feel they are less knowledgeable (19% not very knowledgeable, 5% not at all knowledgeable.)
- Six in ten boaters say they are either very (16%) or somewhat (43%) familiar with the formal regulations about recreational boating, and four in ten (41%) are less familiar.
- Nine in ten (89%) say they are at least somewhat familiar when it comes to the regulations around lifejackets in boats, and close to this (85%) are familiar with boating impairment regulations. Somewhat less, but still a strong majority of three-quarters (74%), are familiar with safe boat operation regulations.
- Seven in ten possess (23%), or are aware of (45%), the *Pleasure Craft Operator Card (PCOC)*, and two-thirds each have heard of the *Pleasure Craft Licence (PCL)* (17% have, 49% heard of) or the *Pleasure Craft Registration* (14% have, 51% heard of). Around one-quarter have not heard of each of the three, and just under one in ten each are uncertain.
- Those aware of at least one of the three boating documents were asked to indicate what the difference is between the three. The top mentions are that the PCOC is for operators and allows them to drive any craft (27%) and that the PCR is required for registering a boat you own (23%). Fewer say the PCL is required to operate your own watercraft legally (14%).
- Four in ten Canadian boaters (39%) have taken a boating safety course. Over one-quarter (27%) say it was to obtain the PCOC and about one in ten (12%) say it was another type of course.
- Majorities know it is true to some extent that those operating a pleasure craft with a motor over 1 HP are required to carry proof of competency on board (73%), and that a Pleasure Craft Operator Card is not needed if the craft has no motor (59%). Fewer know that if someone on board a vessel is being paid to operate it or pays to ride it, it is not a pleasure craft (43% think this is true, 34% think it is false, and 24% are not sure).
- Only small proportions of Canadian boaters think people who have been operating recreational boats for a long time don't need to prove their competency (11% true), or that you don't need to bring a pleasure craft licence on board with you (14%). However, a strong majority (77%) think it is true there is a fee to get a pleasure craft licence.
- Close to seven in ten (68%) can select at least one correct acceptable proofs of competency operators of motorized pleasure craft can show. The proof most selected is the Pleasure Craft Operator Card (61%), distantly followed by proof of having passed a recreational boating safety course in Canada before April 1, 1999 (29%). Close to one-quarter (23%) indicate a marine certificate from Transport Canada, and just under two in ten (18%) indicate completion of a rental-boat safety checklist obtained for a specific rental period from the rental agency. Half (49%) also indicate an incorrect "proof."
- The most used sources for boating information are friends and family (45%), followed by books and manuals online (32%), websites (23%), books and manuals in print (20%), and social media (18%).

Preparing vessels for excursions

- Just over four in ten feel very (10%) or somewhat (33%) knowledgeable about what is required to prepare a recreational watercraft for a trip, while a slim majority feel less knowledgeable (33%) or not at all (19%) knowledgeable.

- Over eight in ten recognize each of three legal requirements for a boating excursion: access to lifejackets or PFDs for all (89%), ensuring equipment is on board and working (87%), and checking the vessel and lights (85%); six in ten (62%) also think reviewing a safety checklist is a legal requirement. Minorities indicate reviewing a safety checklist (41%) or making sure everyone on board is hydrated (13%) are legal requirements when they are in fact optional.

Lifejackets and PFDs

- Close to half (46%) of boaters say the terms “lifejacket” and “Personal Flotation Device” or PFD refer to different things, higher than when this question was asked in 2001 (36%)¹. Just over four in ten (44%) say they are the same, and one in ten (10%) are not sure.
- Those saying lifejackets and PFDs are different things are most likely to say lifejackets are something you wear (18%) or that PFDs are non-wearables like cushions or floater boards (15%). One in ten (11%) say PFDs are only for flotation. Fewer than one in ten mention other specific distinctions.
- Eight in ten say they wear a lifejacket always (59%) or sometimes (22%); one in ten say they rarely (7%) or never (2%) wear one, and another one in ten (11%) say it varies depending on the circumstances (for example, type of boat or if children are on board).
- Virtually all boaters say they would definitely (84%) or probably (14%) wear a lifejacket or PFD if they were a guest on someone else’s boat and the operator requested they wear one.
- Over six in ten (63%) say a lifejacket or Personal Flotation Device (PFD) of the proper size has always been available to them when they have been out in a small boat or watercraft (under 6 meters or 20 feet), and an additional three in ten (29%) say it usually was. Only very small proportions say an appropriate lifejacket or PFD was not usually (4%) or never available (<1%) or are not sure (4%).
- Of a series of statements about lifejackets, boaters are most likely to agree to some extent that if the operator is wearing a lifejacket they will always wear one too (76% net agreement, 52% strongly) or that people who do not wear lifejackets are irresponsible (73% net agreement, 37% strongly). Half also agree to some extent that lifejackets are uncomfortable because they are too bulky (49%). Minorities agree with three other statements; that they feel uncomfortable wearing a lifejacket when no one else is (32%), that they only wear lifejackets when there are children on the boat (15%), or that only weak swimmers need lifejackets (8%).
- Nine in ten agree (92%, 63% strongly) wearing a lifejacket is a normal part of boating. Opinion is divided about whether or not it is true there is no law that says you must wear a lifejacket, just that you need one available (41% agree, 45% disagree). Only small minorities agree with two false statements: that it is only important to wear lifejacket if the water is cold (12% agree, 87% disagree) or that people don’t need to wear a lifejacket when they believe the boat is safe (12% agree, 86% disagree).

Cold water safety

- Over six in ten (63%) correctly indicate cold water (below 15 degrees Celsius/50 degrees Fahrenheit) can pose a danger in any season. Three in ten (29%) indicate winter, and two in ten each choose fall (22%) or spring (21%).

¹ 2001 results are from “Canadian Boater Attitudes Toward Personal Flotation Devices,” conducted by Environics Research for the Office of Boating Safety, Canadian Coast Guard, and Fisheries and Oceans Canada

- Close to eight in ten provide at least one top-of-mind preventive measure boaters should take when the weather is cold. The most common measures are wearing life jackets (20%) and dressing warmly (15%). One in ten cite each of three other measures, including having thermal/heating supplies on board (11%), wearing a wet suit (11%), or keeping warm in general (11%). Two in ten (22%) could not provide any measure.
- A majority say it is definitely true exposure to cold air and wind while in water-soaked clothing causes hypothermia (58%); around four in ten each say it is definitely true people will lose the effective use of their fingers, arms and legs within 10 minutes of cold water immersion (41%), or that hypothermia sets in when core body temperature drops below 35.0° C (39%). Just under four in ten also think it is definitely true that cold water immersion can paralyze the muscles instantly (37%). One-quarter (23%) also think the one false statement, that immersion in cold water always causes hypothermia, is definitely true.

Impaired boating

- Over six in ten boaters (63%) say they have never gone boating with someone who appeared to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Of those who have, this has mainly been a rare occurrence (21%); 14 percent have had this happen frequently (2%) or occasionally (12%).
- Those who witnessed impaired boating even rarely are most likely to say the substance involved was alcohol (85%), followed by cannabis (35%); under one in ten say it was prescription (7%) or illegal drugs (6%).
- Close to half of those who have witnessed impaired boating indicate the person involved as the operator (10% witnessed operator only, 37% have seen both operator and guests be impaired). Four in ten (42%) have only seen impaired guests.
- The top reasons given for why someone might operate a boat while impaired are that such people think they can get away with it, due to there being a lack of enforcement (19%), or that they think it is safe to do so because there is less traffic, more open space and lower speeds than is the case with motor vehicles (18%). One in ten (11%) also think they may not be aware of the dangers involved. Fewer than one in ten give other individual reasons, including people being foolish (8%) or irresponsible (7%).
- Two-thirds (64%) think impaired boating is a serious issue in Canada, one in six (17%) think it isn't, and two in ten (20%) are not sure.

5. Political neutrality statement and contact information

I hereby certify as senior officer of Environics that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada, and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.



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Supplier name: Environics Research Group

PWGSC contract number: T8053-210136/001/CY

Original contract date: 2021-12-03

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