

Who's most likely to be swept away?

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If you think the person most likely to be involved in an avalanche this winter will be a young hot-dogger who doesn't know any better, think again.

Albi Sole, program co-ordinator for Public Avalanche Awareness Programs at the University of Calgary Outdoor Centre, has just completed his masters degree research profiling who's at the highest risk of being involved in an avalanche incident. According to Sole, the most likely subject is a male backcountry skier, 25-29 years old, with a bachelor's degree or higher and earning about \$10,000 over the provincial average. Being accompanied by a woman tends to reduce the risk, while having taken avalanche training does not.

"The risk was at least as high among those who had training as those who didn't," says Sole. "The message here isn't that avalanche training is the problem. It's just that training opens the door to a recreational activity that is very valuable to this group. For these people the risk they take is more than compensated by the rewards they get. It would obviously be far more dangerous to do these sports without proper training."

Sole also found that those who listed their primary motivation as "having fun" were seven times more likely to be involved in an avalanche incident than those with other motivations such as "social experiences," or "physical exercise."

Still, Sole feels the risk of being involved in an avalanche incident is generally overstated.

"The perception of risk is very high among the public because they have a fear of the wilderness and they tend to view avalanches as an 'Act of God.' In reality they are more often the result of unwise choices that people make."

The amount of media attention given to avalanches also may influence this perception, says Sole. "Drownings are actually far more common. Going out into the wilderness carries about the same risk as being a motorist, but that's a risk that society accepts."

Sole says the number of deaths in the Canadian Rockies has been relatively stable for many years and points out that with far more people pursuing winter sports in the backcountry these days, the numbers actually indicate a downward trend in the risk per capita.

Interestingly, American statistics show the number of fatalities south of the border is actually increasing – a contrast Sole credits to better access to training, avalanche bulletins and notices in Canada, as well as heightened media coverage.

A deadly start to the 2008 season saw several avalanche fatalities in the first 10 days of January. Sole says that despite the tragedies, the season ended not much above average. "It was a bad year for avalanches and it took people a week or so to wake up to that and start taking proper precautions. The average person, however, was not at increased risk," he said.

"People tend to focus on the risk, not the benefit," says Sole. "When you look at the big picture, the potential risk of being involved in an avalanche is much less than the risk to your health from physical inactivity."

Sole's study questioned 447 skiers about their socio-economic status, attitudes and experiences on the slopes during one season. Of the people

involved in the study, 35 had been involved in an avalanche incident. Only one had experienced injuries of any significance due to an avalanche.

Source: University of Calgary

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