

# RESEARCH

## BRIEF · REPORT

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### A Profile of Lifeguards

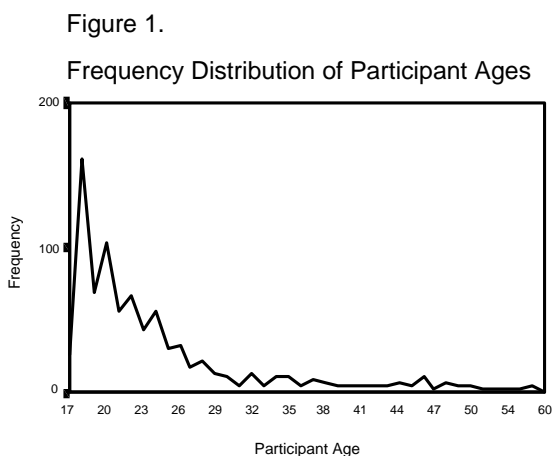
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#### Overview

This report describes the demographic and employment profiles of lifeguards in British Columbia and the Yukon. Findings are based on a survey of 903 National Lifeguard Service (NLS) award holders attending recertification clinics in British Columbia and the Yukon between October 1, 2006 and October 31, 2007.<sup>1</sup> This sample represents approximately 41% of all eligible recertification clinic participants during the survey period.<sup>2</sup>

#### Major Findings

**Demographic characteristics** □ Survey participants were primarily female (67.4%, n=609). Participant ages ranged from 17 to 60 years old. Most participants were less than 30 years old ( $M=24.6$ ,  $SD=8.5$ ), however, approximately one sixth of the sample (n=151) was 30 years of age or more (see Figure 1).



**NLS training** □ Approximately two thirds of the sample (67.9%, n=613) held a single NLS award option, but more than one quarter (28.3%, n=243) had two or more current NLS award options. Less than four percent (3.8%, n=34) did not possess a valid NLS award at the time of the survey. The Pool Option was the most frequently held NLS award followed, in descending order, by the Waterpark, Waterfront and Surf Options (see Table 1). The length of time participants held at least one valid NLS award option ranged from less than a year to as long as 40 years ( $M=6.7$ ,  $SD=6.8$ ).

Table 1.  
NLS award options held

Option	Currently % (n)	Ever % (n)
Pool	95.1 (859)	99.3 (897)
Waterpark	22.4 (202)	29.5 (266)
Waterfront	8.3 (75)	14.1 (127)
Surf	0.2 (2)	2.6 (24)

Note. N=903

**Lifeguard employment** □ Employment as a lifeguard was an almost universally shared experience (94.0%). The duration of employment for those participants who confirmed working at some point during their lifetime (n=820) varied considerably (range=less than 1 year to 40 years), but more than half (53.4%, n=438) had four or less years experience ( $M=6.1$ ,  $SD=6.3$ ). Only a small group of participants (13.8%, n=148) reported working as a lifeguard for 10 or more years.

Many participants (88.6%, n=800) reported working as a lifeguard during the 12

month period immediately prior to the survey. Of these respondents, only a relatively small minority (16.0%, n=128) were employed in fulltime lifeguard positions. Instead, most participants worked either part-time (66.7%, n=532) or seasonally (17.3%, n=138) as a lifeguard.<sup>3</sup>

*Lifeguard setting* □ Those respondents who reported lifeguard employment during the past year were also surveyed about the nature of the settings in which they worked. Most settings were characterized as aquatic facilities such as pools or waterslides (83.8%, n=661) as opposed to waterfront settings (4.7%, n=37). A small proportion of participants worked in both aquatic facility and waterfront settings (11.5%, n=91).<sup>4</sup>

**Table 2.**  
**Features of aquatic facilities**

Facility feature	% (n)
Hot tub	93.1 (700)
Pool with deep water*	93.0 (699)
Sauna or steam room	90.7 (682)
Exercise room	81.0 (608)
1 m diving board	79.9 (601)
Tot pool	78.7 (592)
Rope	74.2 (557)
Waterslide	65.7 (494)
3, 5 or 10 m board	57.2 (430)
Zero-depth entry	52.9 (398)
Pool without shallow access	41.6 (312)
Lazy river	40.3 (303)
Wave pool	27.8 (209)
Climbing wall	17.3 (130)
Zipline	5.7 (43)

Notes. N=752 with some variations due to missing data.

\*Defined as water greater than head height.

To gain insight into the physical nature of the aquatic facilities that lifeguards supervise and manage, participants were asked to indicate which of 15 different design features they encountered at any of the pools or waterparks they had worked at during the previous year. In general, the most frequently identified features are those that have a long association with aquatic facilities

including deep water, hot tubs, saunas or steam rooms, 1 m diving boards, and tot pools (see Table 2). Roughly half the lifeguards also reported the presence of other less conventional features such as waterslides, zero-depth entry pools, lazy rivers, or pools without access to shallow water.

Further analyses were carried out to examine the relationship between aquatic setting and NLS training. Of those lifeguards who reported working in waterfront settings (e.g., waterfront or surf environments) within the past 12 months (n=128), less than half (45.3%, n=58) indicated they held a valid NLS Waterfront or Surf Option. Similarly, of those participants who reported lifeguarding at an aquatic facility featuring a waterslide (n=494), only one third (33.6%, n=166) possessed a valid NLS Waterpark Option. Despite these findings, it is possible that some participants did obtain additional NLS training relevant to these particular aquatic settings, but their awards were simply no longer valid at the time of the survey. To investigate this possibility, the analyses were re-run to include everyone who “ever” held the award regardless of whether or not it was currently valid. The results of these subsequent analyses are not much different. The percentage of respondents working at waterfront locations who held the NLS Waterfront or Surf Options rose 2% to 47.7% (n=61) and the percentage of respondents at aquatic facilities with a waterslide who held the NLS Waterpark Option increased 6% to 39.9% (n=197).

## Discussion

*Implications* □ This report profiles the demographic and employment characteristics of NLS award holders in British Columbia and the Yukon. Most of these award holders were young females. Nearly all of the respondents lifeguarded at one time or another, although in most cases this employment was part-time and not sustained for more than 4 years. The temporary nature of this involvement in the field of lifeguarding means that developing

and maintaining a sufficient number of well-trained and experienced lifeguards is likely to be a persistent challenge. On a positive note, there is a small group of lifeguards who have 10 or more years of experience. One of the keys for the future may be to ensure effective mechanisms are in place for transferring the skills and knowledge possessed by this experienced group of lifeguards on to more recent entrants into the field.

In view of the climate in British Columbia and the Yukon, it is not surprising to find that most lifeguard employment is concentrated at swimming pools or other facilities with waterslides. Lifeguards employed at these facilities faced a wide range of design features that present unique supervision and management challenges. It is worth noting that 12 of the 15 different features listed in the survey were encountered by more than 40% of the lifeguards who worked the previous year. This finding highlights the importance of ensuring that lifeguards are appropriately trained to deal with the array of physical design features they are likely to confront in aquatic settings.

The current NLS program addresses this issue by offering four options so that lifeguard training may be tailored to particular settings and the associated aquatic features encountered there. Normally, the core elements of the training program are combined with the NLS Pool Option and lifeguards may then choose to obtain further training in one or more of the other options. As part of the Pool Option training, lifeguards are required to learn and demonstrate techniques adapted to facility specific features (Lifesaving Society, 2004).<sup>5</sup> The list of identified examples of specific pool features includes deep water, wading pools, whirlpools, slides, and diving boards or towers.<sup>6</sup> The results of this survey confirm the importance of familiarizing lifeguards with these features that were among the most commonly reported by survey participants. Based on the results, this reference list should be expanded to include sauna and

steam rooms, ropes, and zero-depth entries. The Waterpark Option specifies that lifeguard training will include dealing with river rides, slides and wave pools.<sup>7</sup> The survey results confirm that many lifeguards supervise and manage these features and therefore would benefit from this training too.

It is interesting to note that an appreciable proportion of lifeguards do not obtain or maintain NLS training in options that may be relevant to the location where they work. Indeed, only 45% of the lifeguards employed at waterfronts and only 34% employed at aquatic facilities with a waterslide held valid NLS award options specific to these settings. Facility operators need to identify the features specific to their facility and ensure their lifeguards are well versed on appropriate supervision and management techniques. This could be accomplished by requiring lifeguards to obtain additional NLS training where appropriate and by implementing a mandatory, comprehensive and regular program of in-service training.

*Limitations* □ The extent to which the results of this survey extend to all other NLS award holders in the B.C. and Yukon Branch depends on how closely the sample resembles the other NLS award holders who were not surveyed. The more closely the sample resembles (i.e., is representative of) the non-surveyed NLS award holders the more confident one can be that the results found here can be extended to all award holders.

A comparison of the sample with descriptive information contained in the records of the B.C. and Yukon Branch Office indicates the sample is representative of NLS Pool Option award *recertification* candidates.<sup>8</sup> It also appears the survey sample is reasonably representative of *all* NLS Pool Option award holders (newly certified and recertified award holders) although not to the same degree.<sup>9</sup> This result was expected because the survey was administered to recertification candidates only and therefore systematically excluded newly certified NLS

award holders. The exclusion of new award holders will influence some of the figures presented here, for example, increasing the average age, lengthening the average duration of lifeguard employment as well as the average number of years participants held a valid NLS award, etc. The results of

this report should be considered with this limitation in mind.

## **References**

Lifesaving Society. (2004). *National Lifeguard award guide*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Ottawa, ON: Author.

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### **Notes.**

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<sup>2</sup> A total of 2,269 candidates attended NLS recertification clinics that were run by Recertification Conductors trained in the survey administration protocol during the study period. Surveys were completed by 924 recertification candidates yielding a participation rate of 40.7%. Twenty-one surveys were eliminated because the participant had previously completed the survey leaving a final sample size of 903.

<sup>3</sup> Data was missing in 2 cases.

<sup>4</sup> Data was missing in 11 cases.

<sup>5</sup> See Item 4, Specialized techniques.

<sup>6</sup> The complete list of specific pool features identified as examples in Item 4 Specialized techniques includes: deep water, bulkheads, shallow steps, wading pool, whirlpool, heights, ramps, slides, diving boards or towers, wave action pools.

<sup>7</sup> See Items 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9 & 10.

<sup>8</sup> The mean age of the sample was 24.2 years and 67.4% were female. Participants were located in the following regions: 20.7% Island/Sunshine Coast; 55.1% Lower Mainland/Fraser Valley; 11.2% Thompson/Okanagan; 5.4% Kootenays; and, 7.6% North/Yukon. By comparison, the mean age of all NLS Pool Option recertification candidates during the period November 1, 2006 and October 31, 2007, was 24.4 years and 66.0% were female. The regional location of recertification candidates was as follows: 19.8% Island/Sunshine Coast; 59.8% Lower Mainland/Fraser Valley; 8.0% Thompson/Okanagan; 4.7% Kootenays; and, 7.7% North/Yukon.

<sup>9</sup> For the period November 1, 2006 and October 31, 2007, the mean age of all (newly certified and recertified) NLS Pool Option award holders in the B.C. & Yukon Branch was 22.8 years and 61.7% were female. The regional location of these award holders was as follows: 16.8% Island/Sunshine Coast; 60.6% Lower Mainland/Fraser Valley; 9.9% Thompson/Okanagan; 4.4% Kootenays; and, 11.0% North/Yukon.