

A Detailed Analysis of Lightning Deaths in the United States from 2006 through 2019

John S. Jensenius, Jr.
Lightning Safety Specialist
National Lightning Safety Council
February 2020

Executive Summary

From 2006 through 2019, 418 people were struck and killed by lightning in the United States. Almost two thirds of the deaths occurred to people who had been enjoying outdoor leisure activities. The common belief that golfers are responsible for the greatest number of lightning deaths was shown to be a myth. During this 14-year period fishermen accounted for four times as many fatalities as golfers, while beach activities and camping each accounted for about twice as many deaths as golf. From 2006 to 2019, there were 40 fishing deaths, 25 beach deaths, 20 camping deaths, and 18 boating deaths. Of the sports activities, soccer saw the greatest number of deaths with 12, as compared to golf with 10. Around the home, yard work (including mowing the lawn) accounted for 18 fatalities. For work-related activities, ranching/farming topped the list with 19 deaths.

Males accounted for 79% of all fatalities, and about 90% of the deaths in the fishing, sports, and work categories. Females had comparatively fewer deaths than men in every category, with their highest percentages in the boating-related activities (33%) and routine daily/weekly activities (32%).

June, July, and August are the peak months for lightning activity across the United States and the peak months for outdoor summer activities. As a result, more than 70% of the lightning deaths occurred in the months of June, July, and August, with Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays having slightly more deaths than other days of the week.

Ages of the victims varied from young children to older adults with the greatest number of fatalities between the ages of 10 and 60. Within that age range, there was a relative minimum in deaths for people in their 30s, possibly due to parents of young children being less involved in vulnerable activities.

Based on the media reports of the fatal incidents, many victims were either headed to safety at the time of the fatal strike or were just steps away from safety. Continued efforts are needed to convince people to move inside a safe place before the lightning threat becomes significant. For many outdoor activities, situational awareness and proper planning are essential to safety.

A Detailed Analysis of Lightning Deaths in the United States from 2006 through 2019

John S. Jensenius, Jr.
Lightning Safety Specialist
National Lightning Safety Council

Abstract

Lightning fatality data were examined from 2006 to 2019. While male victims dominated the fatality statistics, distinct patterns emerged in terms of the age, gender, and activity of the victims. The majority of victims were male aged 10 to 60. About two thirds of the victims were enjoying outdoor leisure activities prior to being struck, with water-related activities topping the list. Of the water-related activities, fishing ranked highest with boating and beach activities also significantly contributing to the water-related deaths. Among the sports activities, soccer ranked highest, followed by golf and running. Males dominated every category and sub-category of age and activity examined.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The National Lightning Safety Council (NLSC) and National Weather Service (NWS) document lightning deaths in the United States and make this information available in online databases. The information in these databases can be used to study lightning-related fatalities in order to understand how these deaths are occurring and to find ways to help reduce the number of lightning casualties. Detailed data is available since 2006; these data provide scientists, the media, and the public detailed, up-to-date information on lightning fatalities. For this study, the detailed information in these databases was used to study the demographics and activities of recent lightning fatalities in the U.S.

A similar study was conducted by Curran et al. (1997) for the period from 1959 through 1994 based on information in Storm Data. The current analysis provides an update to some of the information in the original study, but with the added benefit of having more detailed information about the activities of the lightning victims.

This study does not examine the geographic distribution of lightning fatalities. Geographic information for the most recent 10-year period is available for the actual number of deaths per state on the NLSC web site (Holle 2019).

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Lightning fatality data from 2006 to 2019 were examined and categorized based on gender, age, month, day-of-week, and activity. While the data were easily categorized by age, gender, month, and day-of-week, activity presented more of a challenge. To obtain the most pertinent results, the victims' activities were divided into a series of cascading categories, sub-categories, and tertiary categories. The category and sub-categories assigned to each victim were based on the activity that put the victim at risk, rather than what the victim was doing at the time of the fatal lightning strike. For example, if a person had been fishing, but was walking to a car when struck, the fatality was categorized as fishing, rather than walking.

For this study, the fatality data were stratified into four main categories: work-related activities, leisure activities, daily routine activities, and unknown.

2.1 Work-related Activities

A lightning fatality was categorized as work related if the victim was involved in an activity that provided a significant portion of his/her income. Examples include roofing, farming/ranching, lawn/garden care, construction, military duties, barge work, and other. Note that fatalities which occurred when traveling to or from work were categorized as daily/weekly routine, rather than work. Also, lawn care, landscaping and gardening activities were only included in this category if the victim was employed to do the work. Other lawn care and gardening victims were categorized as either daily/weekly routine or leisure, depending on the situation.

2.2 Daily or Weekly Routine

A lightning fatality was categorized as daily/weekly routine if the activity was done on a regular or intermittent basis and was not work or leisure related. Many of these activities might be considered daily or weekly chores. This category also included young victims who were working/doing chores for their parents. Activities might include yard work, taking out the trash, feeding or caring for domestic animals, traveling or walking to or from work, talking on the phone, taking laundry off a clothesline, etc.

2.3 Leisure

A lightning fatality was categorized as leisure if the victim had been involved with any sort of leisure activity. Sub-categories of leisure activities included water-related activities; sports-related activities; camping; riding (ATVs or bikes); social gatherings such as picnics; hiking; walking; playing; and relaxing outside the home. Also, the sub-category of water-related activities was further divided into fishing, boating, swimming, and beach activities. In addition, the sub-category of sports-related activities was further divided.

2.4 Unknown

In some cases, the victim's activity prior to the fatal strike could not be categorized from the available information. The activity of these victims fell into the unknown category.

3.0 RESULTS

Results from this study are presented in graphical and textual format. The number of cases that went into each category and subcategory are given in the graphic showing the results. No attempt was made to determine the statistical significance of any of the findings as the data samples were necessarily small.

3.1 Gender

Figure 3.1 shows the overall ratio of male to female deaths. About 80% of the victims during the study period were male. The predominance of male victims is fairly consistent from year to year. Male percentages for individual years within the study period ranged from 62% male in 2015 to 94% male in 2017.

3.2 Age

Figure 3.2a shows a summary of the age categories for the victims whose ages were known. The greatest number of fatalities occurred between the ages of 10 and 60, with a relative minimum in the 30-39 age category. While there is no conclusive evidence why this minimum should occur, possible hypotheses include that parents in this age category with young children are either more cautious when thunderstorms are in the area, or parental duties limit the amount of time they spend participating in vulnerable activities. Figure 3.2b is similar to 3.2a, except that the fatalities are given independently for both male and female victims.

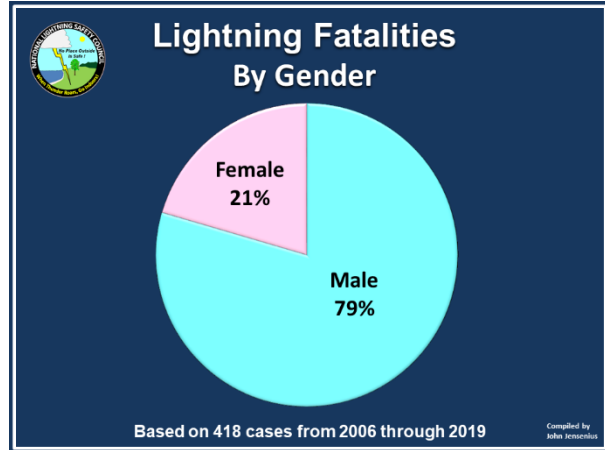


Figure 3.1 Ratio of male to female lightning fatalities 2006 through 2019.

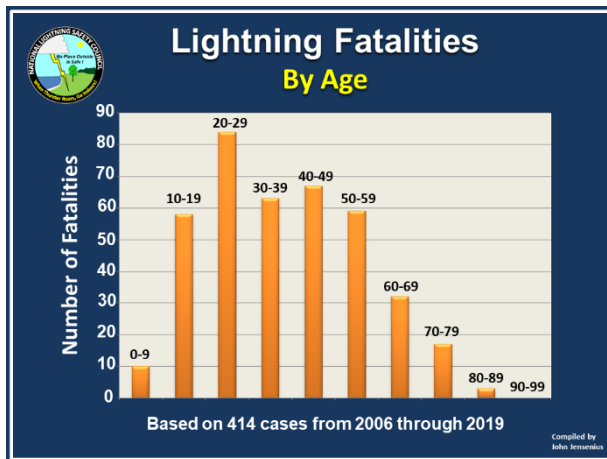


Figure 3.2a Number of lightning fatalities from 2006 through 2019 by age category.

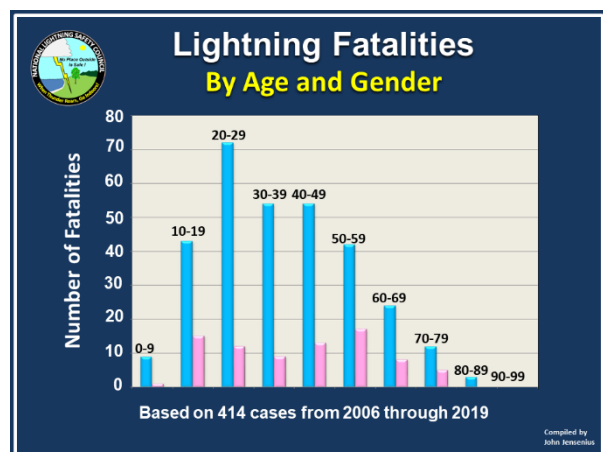


Figure 3.2b Number of lightning fatalities from 2006 through 2019 by age category and gender.

3.3 Month

Figure 3.3 shows a stratification of lightning fatalities by month. More than 70% of the lightning fatalities occur in June, July, or August. These months not only have the greatest amount of lightning activity in the U.S., but they are also the months when people spend more time outside enjoying a variety of recreational and leisure activities.

3.4 Day of the Week

Figure 3.4 shows a stratification of lightning fatalities by the day of the week. While all days of the week see a significant number of fatalities, the weekend days, particularly Saturday, have the

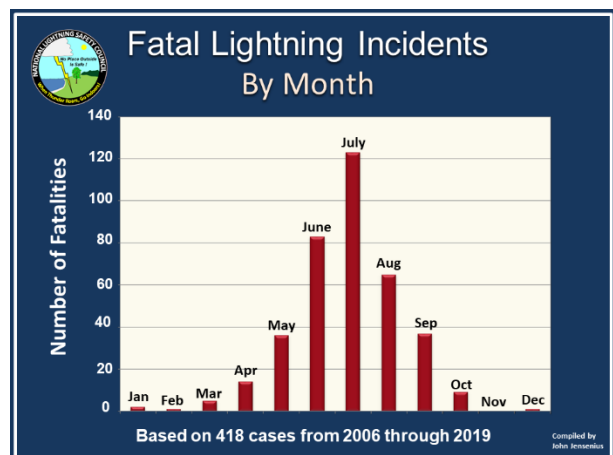


Figure 3.3 Number of lightning fatalities from 2006 through 2019 by month.

greatest number of fatalities. Presumably, this is because people spend more time outside and are involved in activities that make them more vulnerable to being struck.

3.5 Activities

Figure 3.5a shows the overall breakdown of lightning fatalities into the four primary categories. Of the 418 lightning deaths between 2006 and 2019, leisure activities were responsible for 257, almost two-thirds (62%) of the deaths. During the period, there were 68 fatalities (16%) related to routine daily or weekly activities, and 77 fatalities (18%) related to work. Figures 3.5b and 3.5c show similar charts for male (332 cases) and female (86 cases) victims, respectively. In both cases, leisure activities contributed to the majority of deaths. However, compared with males, females had a smaller percentage of deaths in the work category and a larger percentage of deaths in the daily routine category.

3.51 Leisure-related Deaths

Leisure activities contributed to 62% of the overall deaths from lightning. Figure 3.51a shows the overall breakdown of leisure-related deaths. Water-related activities contributed to 35% of leisure-related

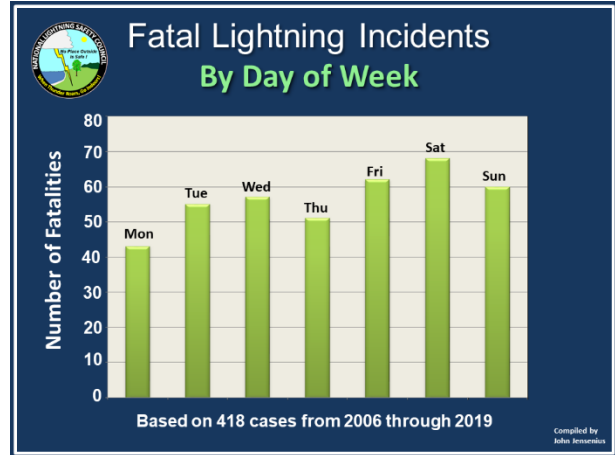


Figure 3.4 Number of lightning fatalities by day of week.

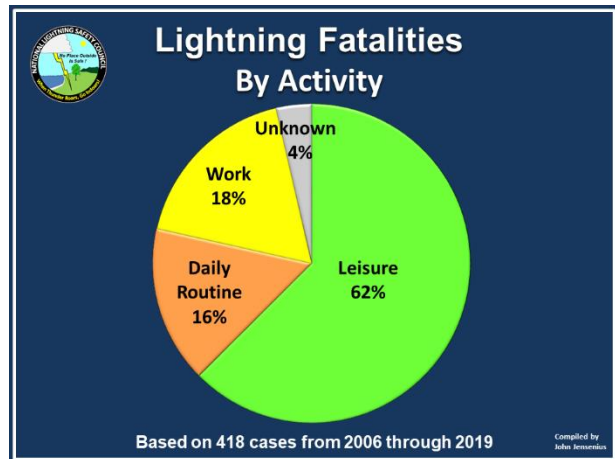


Figure 3.5a Percent of deaths by activity

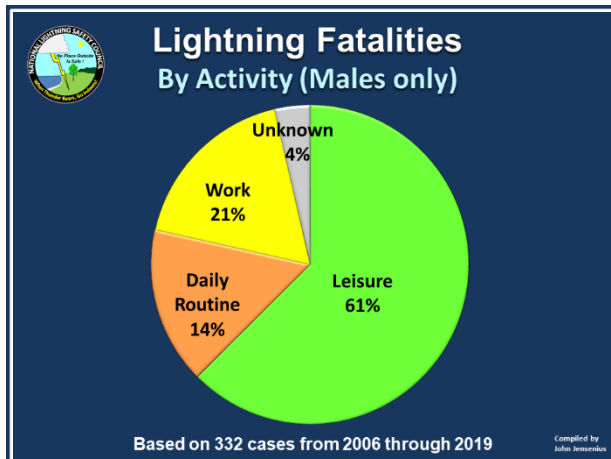


Figure 3.5b Percent of deaths by activity – males only

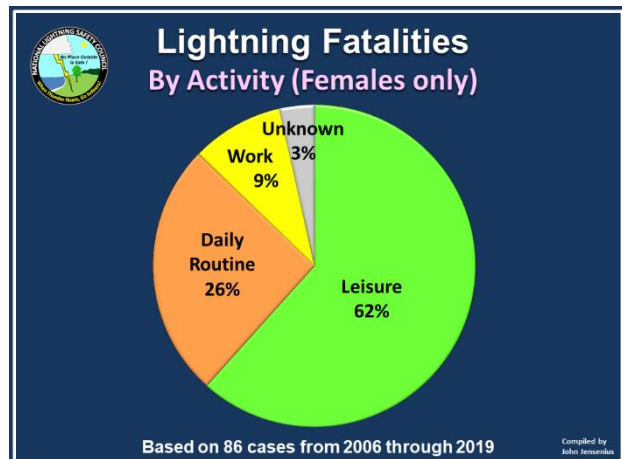


Figure 3.5c Percent of deaths by activity – females only

fatalities. The water-related activities include fishing, boating, swimming, or just relaxing at a beach or lake. Sports-related activities contributed another 14%. Sports-related fatalities include soccer, golf, running, baseball, and football. Other activities that contributed to the deaths in the leisure category included camping (8%); riding bikes, motorcycles and ATVs (7%); social gatherings (7%); hiking (4%); walking (4%); relaxing outside the home (3%); tourism (2%); children’s play (2%); horseback riding (2%); and "other" (10%). The "Other" category included: hunting, building a tree house, building a cabin, taking a work break, picking berries, watching a car race, watching the storm, watching a fire, watching a swollen river, getting a book out of a vehicle, waiting in a parking lot, walking to a car from a local park, attending a rock festival, searching for arrowheads, getting better cell phone reception, working on a trail, and visiting a college campus.

Figure 3.51b shows the gender breakdown for the leisure activities. About 80% of the victims involved in leisure activity fatalities were male.

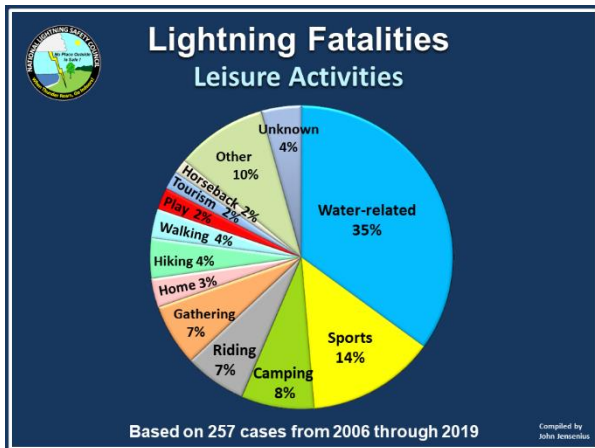


Figure 3.51a Percent of deaths by sub-category for leisure activities.

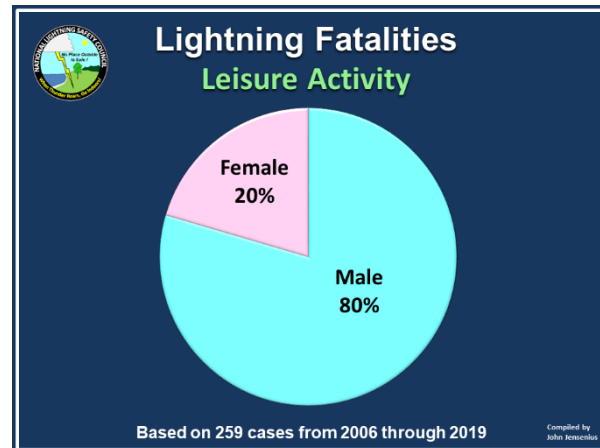


Figure 3.51b Ratio of male to female deaths for leisure-related activities.

3.511 Water-related Lightning Deaths

Figure 3.511a shows the breakdown of water-related fatalities. Fishing contributed most (44%) to the water-related deaths with boating (power boats, jet skis, canoes, sailboats, tubes) adding another 20%. About 28% of the victims were involved in beach-related activities, while about 8% of the victims had been swimming. The gender breakdown for water-related activities (not shown) was similar to the overall gender ratio with about 80% of the water-related fatalities being male.

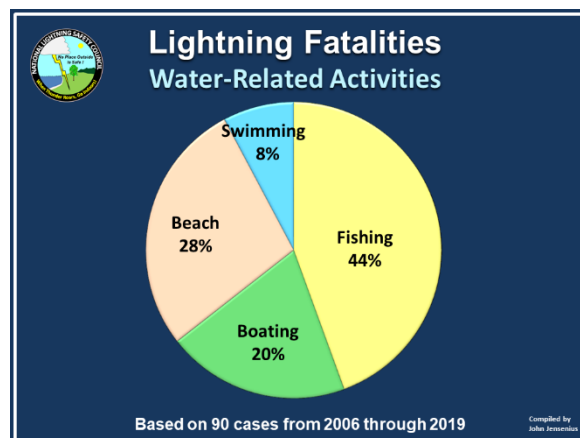


Figure 3.511a Percent of deaths by specific activity for water-related sub-category.

Figures 3.511b, 3.511c, and 3.511d show the gender ratios for the fishing, boating and beach categories.

While the overall number of cases in each category was relatively small, males dominated each of the water-related activities, especially fishing.

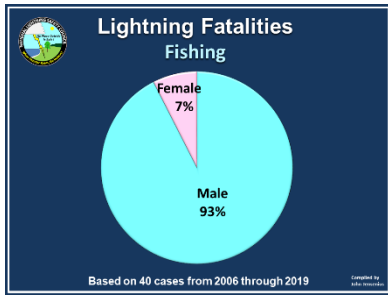


Figure 3.511b Ratio of male to female fishing deaths.

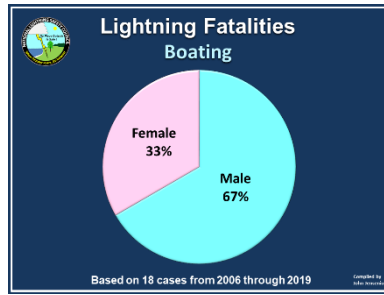


Figure 3.511c Ratio of male to female boating deaths.

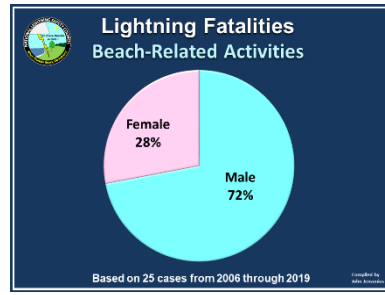


Figure 3.511d Ratio of male to female beach deaths.

3.512 Sports-related Lightning Deaths

Figure 3.512a shows the breakdown of sports-related lightning fatalities. Soccer contributed most to the sports-related deaths (34%), followed by golf (29%), running (23%), baseball (9%), football (3%), and disc golf (3%). Figure 3.512b shows that the vast majority of the victims involved in sports-related deaths were male (89%).

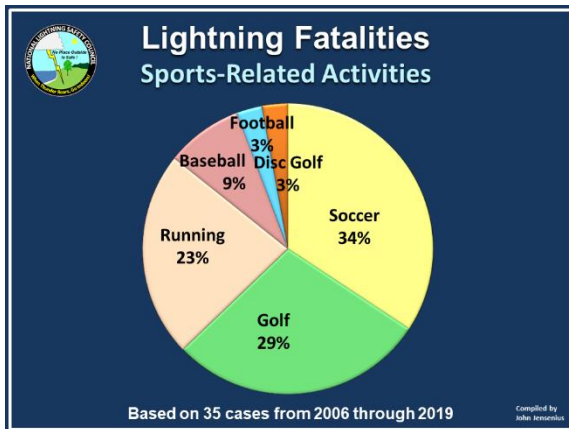


Figure 3.512a Percent of deaths by specific activity for the sports-related sub-category.

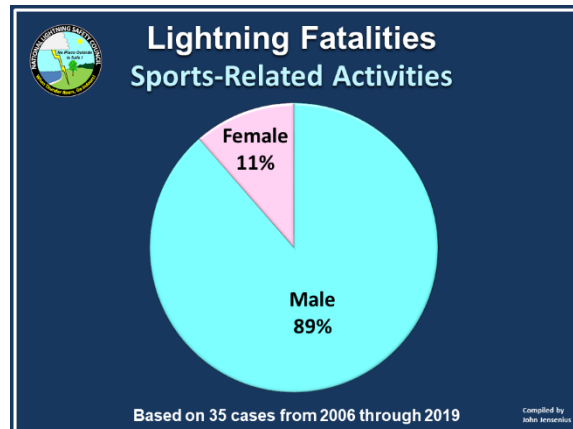


Figure 3.512a Ratio of male to female deaths for the sports-related sub-category.

3.52 Daily Routine-related Deaths

Activities that were considered to be part of the victim's daily or weekly routine contributed to 16% of the overall deaths from lightning. Figure 3.52a shows the breakdown of those deaths. Victims that were walking to, walking from, or waiting for a vehicle contributed to 15% of the daily routine-related fatalities; victims walking to or from a home accounted for 24% of the fatalities; and yard work (excluding mowing) accounted for another 18%. Other daily routine-related fatalities included checking/feeding animals (15), mowing the lawn (9%), taking out the trash (3%), farm chores (4%), and traveling to/from work on a motorcycle (3%). The "Other" category contributed 15% which included lowering the blinds on a window, talking on a corded phone, taking laundry off the clothes line, fixing windshield wipers, working on a vehicle, deplaning at an airport, walking in a salvage yard, repairing a roof, and being outside due to homelessness.

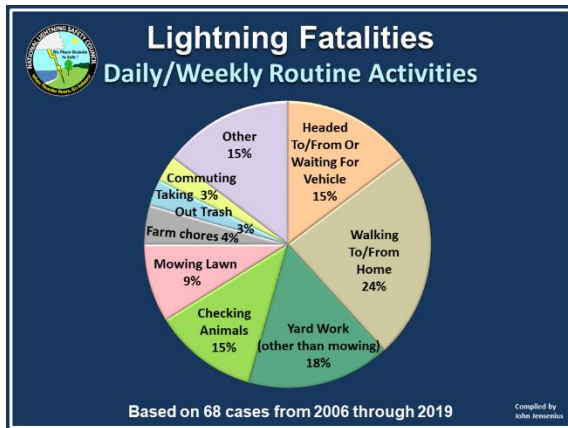


Figure 3.52a Percent of deaths by activity sub-category for routine daily or weekly activities.

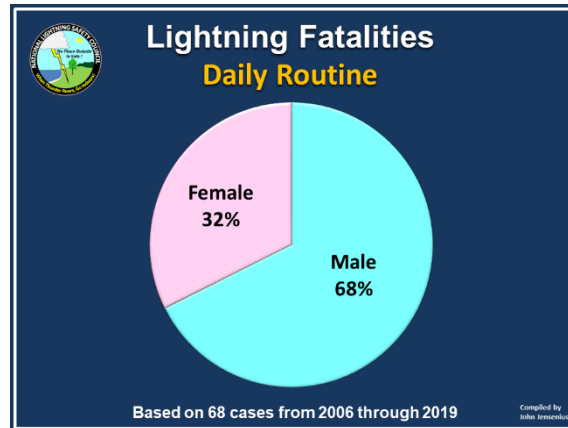


Figure 3.52b Ratio of male to female deaths for routine daily or weekly activities.

Figure 3.52b shows the ratio of male to female deaths for the daily-routine category. Overall, males contributed most of the daily routine-related deaths (68%); however, females had a much greater percentage contribution in this category than any other category.

3.53 Work-related Deaths

Work-related activities contributed to 18% of the total lightning fatalities. Figure 3.53a shows the breakdown of the work-related deaths. Farming/ranching-related activities contributed most (25%) to the work-related deaths. Other activities included construction (21%), roofing (17%), lawn care (9%), military work (4%), and other (25%). Included in the “Other” category were deaths related to barge work, loading and washing trucks, surveying, door-to-door sales, logging, mail delivery, tornado rescue, utility repair, building maintenance, pruning trees, inspecting seawalls, washing oil disposal tanks, working at an amusement park, working on a billboard, lifeguarding, and attending beach umbrellas.

Figure 3.53b shows the gender ratio for the work-related category. About 90% of the fatalities were male. Only the sub-category of the military had more female deaths (2) than male deaths (1).

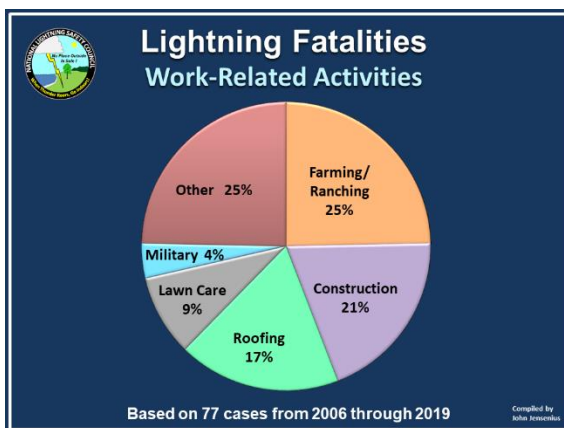


Figure 3.53a Percent of deaths by activity sub-category for work-related activities.

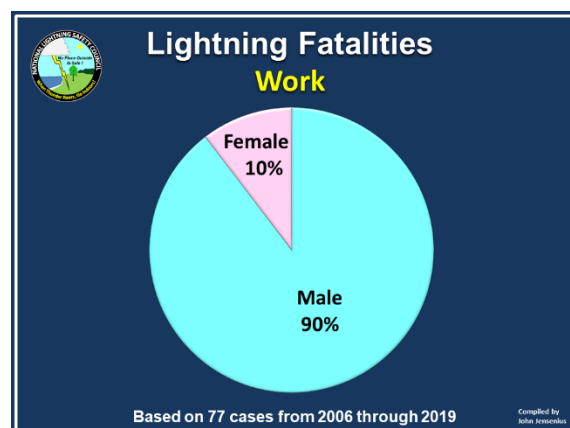


Figure 3.53b Ratio of male to female deaths for work-related activities.

3.6 Actual Number of Deaths by Activity

Table 3.6 lists the 12 activities that contributed most to lightning deaths in the U.S. These 12 activities accounted for 225 (54%) of the 418 lightning deaths from 2006 to 2019. Fishing was, by far, the most-deadly activity, accounting for about 10% of the lightning deaths. It was followed by beach activities, camping, farming/ranching, riding a bike/ motorcycle/ATV, boating, social gatherings, walking to or from the home, roofing, construction, soccer, and yard work.

<u>Activity</u>	<u># of Deaths (%)</u>
Fishing	40 (10%)
Beach	25 (6%)
Camping	21 (5%)
Farming or ranching	20 (5%)
Riding bike, motorcycle, or ATV	19 (5%)
Boating	18 (4%)
Social gathering	16 (4%)
Walking to/from home	16 (4%)
Roofing	15 (4%)
Construction	13 (3%)
Soccer	12 (3%)
<u>Yardwork</u>	<u>12 (3%)</u>
Total	225 (54%)

Table 3.6 The twelve activities that contribute most to lightning deaths.

4.0 FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO LIGHTNING FATALITIES

In order to understand why these deadly activities rank the way they do, the various factors that contribute to lightning fatalities need to be examined. These factors include the vulnerability of the actual activity, the willingness to cancel or postpone the activity, the ability to know when a storm is approaching or developing, and the ability to get to a safe place quickly.

4.1 Vulnerability of the activity.

Being outdoors any time a thunderstorm is in the area is dangerous. However, some activities cause people to be more vulnerable to a lightning strike, and, in particular, a direct lightning strike. Direct strikes are a greater threat to people in open areas such as sports fields or on the water.

4.2 Willingness to cancel or postpone activities

In the busy life schedules of today's society, very few people like to alter their plans. Although many outdoor activities are cancelled in advance due to a threat of steady rain, few are cancelled in advance due to the threat of a potentially deadly thunderstorm. For outdoor activities, there is a balance between safety and convenience. People who don't alter outdoor plans when thunderstorms are forecast (or occurring) are unnecessarily putting themselves at risk of being struck by lightning. For any activity where a safe shelter is not readily available, there is no safe alternative but to cancel or postpone the activity in advance if thunderstorms are forecast.

4.3 Being aware of approaching or developing storms

Certain activities limit a person's ability to monitor conditions. In particular, any background noise may limit a person's ability to hear distant thunder from an approaching or nearby storm. Mountains, trees, or buildings may impair a person's view of the horizon and limit the ability to watch for signs of developing storms. Recent advances in cell phone technology and the availability of lightning notification services may help provide advance warning in these situations.

4.4 Ability and willingness to get to a safe place quickly

Both the inability and unwillingness to get to a safe place in a timely manner contribute to many lightning fatalities. Many people wait far too long to start heading to safety, and that puts them in a dangerous and potentially deadly situation. In fact, a number of lightning victims in this study were seeking safety when they were struck – the problem is that they just didn't start soon enough. In some cases, people decided to wait to see if the conditions improved rather than heading toward safety immediately. It's important to note that some activities require a considerable amount of time to get to a safe place. In those instances, it is imperative that people in charge or involved in the activities monitor conditions so everyone involved can get to safety immediately at the first signs of a developing storm.

5.0 DISCUSSION

Based on the statistics for gender, the vast majority of lightning victims are male. Possible explanations for this finding are that males are unaware of all the dangers associated with lightning, are more likely to be in vulnerable situations, are unwilling to be inconvenienced by the threat of lightning, are in situations that make it difficult to get to a safe place in a timely manner, don't react quickly to the lightning threat, or any combination of these explanations. In short, because of their behavior, males are at a higher risk of being struck and, consequently, are struck and killed by lightning more often than females.

The data also shows that leisure-related activities are the greatest source of lightning fatalities. In particular, the combination of fishing and boating activities accounts for 14% of all lightning deaths. These activities are especially dangerous because fishermen and boaters are likely to be out in the open and more vulnerable to a direct lightning strike; the background noise from a motor or waves may limit their ability to hear thunder; and they may need extra time to get to a safe place. In these cases, the key is to monitor weather conditions closely and react quickly to any developing threat. While many of the fishing and boating victims realized that a dangerous situation was developing and were heading toward safety, they just didn't react soon enough to avoid being struck.

Beach-related activities were the second greatest contributor to lightning deaths. In some cases, the sounds of the surf may have masked the sound of thunder which could have provided an earlier awareness that thunderstorms were developing or approaching. In other cases, due to a lack of situational awareness, victims had walked or run along the beach and may have been far from safety when the storm approached.

Camping also contributed significantly to the lightning death toll. In many cases, the victims were only steps away from a vehicle that could have provided safety. In some of these cases, skies may have been obscured by mountains or trees, and the victims just didn't realize a storm was nearby. In other cases, though, the threat was likely ignored. In a few cases where the fatal incident was in a remote area far from a safe place, there may have been little or nothing the victim could do at that time to be safe. In these cases, canceling or postponing the activity may have been the only course of action that would have provided safety.

Sports-related activities contributed to about 8% of the total lightning deaths, with soccer contributing most to the death toll. For most incidents, safety was nearby in the form of a building or vehicle. Many victims failed to react quickly to the imminent danger. A few of the running victims were some distance from safety and could have reached a safe place sooner had they listened to the forecast and chosen a safer route.

For most farming or ranching victims, there was typically a vehicle or building nearby. In these cases, the victims either didn't recognize the warning signs soon enough or didn't act promptly to get to a safe place.

There also were a number of people killed while riding in open vehicles including bicycles, motorcycles, and all-terrain vehicles. As with many other activities, situational awareness, and not venturing too far from a safe shelter are key to staying safe. Some victims may have been a long distance from safety when the storm approached. Although most people are aware that the rubberized tires on these vehicles do not protect a person from lightning, there are likely some people that continue to believe this myth.

Finally, there were quite a few people killed around their home, business, or neighborhood. Most of these victims were only steps from safety. In fact, some even walked outside just before being struck. Others were doing outdoor chores or relaxing outside the home. In these cases, the key to safety is just to go inside and not take chances. It's important for people to remember that they should go inside immediately if they hear thunder or the sky looks threatening, and then wait at least 30 minutes after the last lightning or thunder before returning back outside.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined and analyzed lightning fatalities in the U.S. from 2006 through 2019. The common belief that golfers are responsible for the greatest number of lightning deaths was shown to be a myth. During this 14-year period, fishermen accounted for four times as many fatalities as golfers, while camping, boating, and beach activities each accounted for about twice as many deaths as golf did. The key to being safe in a thunderstorm is to get to a safe place before the lightning threat becomes significant. Activities such as fishing, boating, and camping may require that those involved in these activities be particularly wary of developing and approaching storms so that they can get to a safe place quickly. When planning an activity, if a safe shelter is not readily available and thunderstorms are forecast, the only safe alternative is to cancel or postpone the activity.

For many of the lightning victims, safe shelters were available; however, the victims simply did not act soon enough to get to safety before they were struck. In order to reduce the number of lightning deaths, it is important to continue to remind the public of the dangers of lightning, and also why it is so important to act quickly to avoid the lightning threat. To protect the public, the National Lightning Safety Council and the National Weather Service have an ongoing effort to reduce lightning deaths, highlighted by their respective lightning safety web sites and national and local Lightning Safety Awareness Weeks. The broadcast and print media continue to play an important role in getting information out to the public. The results of this study will hopefully provide updated material that will help reduce lightning casualties.

7.0 REFERENCES

Curran, E.B., R.L. Holle, and R.E. Lopez, 1997: Lightning Fatalities, Injuries and Damage Reports in the United States, 1959-1994, NOAA Tech. Memo. No. NWS SR-193, October 1997

Holle, R. L., 2019: Lightning Deaths by State, National Lightning Safety Council Web Site, <http://lightningsafetycouncil.org/Deaths%20by%20State%20Map.png>