

BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB'S

POACH AND PAY PROJECT

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POACH & PAY 2.0: DETECTION AND REPORTING OF WILDLIFE POACHING

Managing wildlife through the rule of law is one of the seven tenets of the North American Model for Wildlife Conservation. Addressing wildlife crime in the United States, specifically the illegal take of iconic big game species, is one of the most significant and complex conservation problems facing natural resource agencies today. This, coupled with the widening disconnect between the hunters and non-hunters, has resulted in the public increasingly equating legal, recreational hunting with the illegal take, or poaching, of wildlife. In addition to the social concerns brought on by the mistaken confusion of equating hunters and poachers, illegal take of wildlife often can have significant deleterious impacts on wildlife populations, quality of animals, and access to hunting lands.

Currently, there is little empirical data on detection rates for the illegal take of wildlife. The few studies available indicate that only a small portion (<5%) are detected, with actual detection rates reported to range from 0.67% to 3.33%. Likewise, little research has been done on the motivational factors that influence individuals to take wildlife illegally, with existing research

focusing primarily on typologies of poachers and occupational reactions of conservation officers. In 2019, the Boone and Crockett Club and Wildlife Management Institute initiated this study to comprehensively review the issue of illegal take in the U.S. and to accomplish the following: 1) Assess the levels of detection and conservation impacts associated with wildlife crime, 2) Describe the motivational factors and potential deterrents that influence poachers, 3) Reduce judicial and prosecutorial barriers to wildlife crime, and 4) Provide solutions to improving prosecution and conviction rates of poachers, including an objective, defensible, and proportional framework for poaching penalties and restitution. The focus of the study reported here is based on survey responses from approximately

12,000 hunters, 4,000 landowners, and 1,200 conservation officers in eight states.

All three groups surveyed (hunters, landowners, and conservation officers) share a significant degree of avidity for hunting, with 55% of hunters indicating that they hunt on state public land and 46.7% indicating they hunt on private lands. For landowners, 21% indicated they hunt on state public lands, and 19.6% hunt on private lands. Of the conservation officers surveyed, 78.8% indicated that they hunt on state public land, and 80.7% hunt on private lands. Around 39% of hunters, 40.1% of officers, and 13.4% of landowners indicated that they also hunt on federal public lands. Finally, the survey results indicated that 62.7% of hunters, 28.4% of landowners, and 84.8% of officers pursue big game.

PERCEIVED IMPACTS TO CONSERVATION

There is little debate about the biological and social impacts associated with the illegal take of wildlife. Agencies manage populations based on harvest models that are used to establish tag numbers, seasons, and bag limits. Poaching is a direct deficit to these models and, in some cases, may cause agencies to make recommendations that are more liberal than can be sustained. Likewise, access to lands for hunting and public perceptions of hunting are also adversely impacted by poachers and their activities.

When asked their opinion on the seriousness of illegal take of wildlife within their state of residence, 63.3% of landowners, 65.8% of hunters, and 80.0% of conservation officers indicated that they considered the crime to be “extremely serious” or

TABLE 1
Perception of biological and social impacts that result from the illegal take of big game.

Biological & Social Factors	Hunters	Landowners	Officers
Wildlife Populations	73.7%	68.3%	77.4%
Hunt Quality – Size of Animals	77.4%	69.0%	81.5%
Hunt Opportunity – Number of Animals	77.5%	69.2%	76.3%
Access to Lands	76.4%	68.2%	82.7%
Respondent Perceptions	59.8%	62.5%	54.9%
Public Perception	83.3%	73.9%	85.4%
Overall Average	74.7%	68.5%	76.4%

“very serious.” When asked the same question about the U.S. in general, 66.1% of landowners, 68.8% of hunters, and 82.3% of officers rated the illegal take of wildlife as “extremely serious” or “very serious.” When asked about the impacts of big game poaching on legal hunting and the wildlife resource, most hunters (74.7%), landowners (68.5%), and conservation officers (76.4%) indicated that the illegal take of wildlife significantly impacted six major factors spanning biological and social parameters (TABLE 1).

DETERRENCE THEORY

Wildlife crimes are often cryptic, occurring in remote, inaccessible, and sparsely populated areas that make detection difficult. The relative certainty of being detected in the commission of a crime is one of the three factors associated with deterrence theory, which is a criminological theory that suggests individuals may be discouraged from committing crimes based on the certainty, severity, and swiftness of punishment. Empirical research on this theory has shown that swiftness of punishment is less important, but individuals may be less likely to commit crimes if they believe they are likely to be caught and receive severe

punishment for their actions. For illegal take of wildlife, the severity of punishment might not be judged by potential offenders based on purely legal sanctions; severity might be based on factors such as the loss of hunting privileges (including the Wildlife Violator Compact) or other punishments.

At its core, deterrence theory is based on a decision model where criminals weigh risk vs. reward. If the risks significantly outweigh the reward, then the crime rate should go down, and vice versa if the rewards outweigh the risks. Only by improving the low detection rates of illegal take of wildlife, while also establishing and maintaining punishments that are commensurate with the crime, will we be able to significantly impact the social and biological impacts associated with poaching wildlife.

THE DARK FIGURE: A BOONE AND CROCKETT-SIZED PROBLEM

One of the greatest challenges to understanding and reducing crime is determining the number of criminal acts that go undetected by law enforcement. This undetected rate is described by criminologists as the “dark figure,” and is influenced by many factors, including personal

injury, financial loss, fear, embarrassment, distrust of law enforcement, and locational or situational factors. These factors make calculating the dark figure a difficult proposition, even for violent person-on-person crimes. Understanding that the dark figure (non-detected) rates for violent crimes against a person are also relatively low (auto theft = 32%; rape = 63%; larceny = 82%) provides a foundation for investigating so-called victimless crimes like poaching.

Detection of wildlife crimes often is not considered a priority by those who witness them. Working under the assumption that those most likely to detect wildlife crimes are people that commonly recreate or work in remote locations (hunters, landowners, and officers) and at times where the crimes occur. When we surveyed hunters and landowners about their awareness of poaching activity over the past five years and where those acts took place, we found that the number of detections was low, ranging from 0.5 to 3.8 incidents over the five-year period. When asked about how they responded to cases for which they became aware, they indicated a reporting rate of roughly 50% of those cases detected (TABLE 2).

Although the detection and reporting rates by hunters and landowners were quite low, conservation officers still reported being made aware of, and investigating as necessary, an average of around 50 poaching-related incidents per officer per year. Real or perceived impacts to the victim frequently influence the rates of reported crimes. For example, crimes involving significant personal property loss but little personal embarrassment, such as auto theft, have some of the lowest non-reporting rates, whereas crimes that may cause embarrassment or fear (rape, assault) have much higher non-reporting rates. The crime of larceny (theft) is the crime we identified as the most similar to wildlife theft. With a non-detection rate of 82%, larceny is often unwitnessed and may not even be discovered by the victim for a significant period of time, if at all. Similarly, the illegal take of wildlife frequently goes unwitnessed and may not be discovered until much later. Another complication is that the illegal take of wildlife is often perceived by witnesses, judges, and prosecutors as a victimless crime, even though it is clearly theft of public property—meaning that the collective public is the victim.

TABLE 2 How many incidents of illegal take of wildlife in your state of residence are you aware of that occurred within the past 5 years (Detections/5-year period)?		
Location	Hunters	Landowners
On your land	0.8	2.3
On other private lands	3.2	3.5
On state public land	2.1	3.0
On federal public land	1.4	2.2
Action	Hunters	Landowners
Reported and detected by you	1.3	1.5
Detected by you but reported by others	0.9	0.7
Detected by others but reported by you	0.7	0.6
Detected by you but not reported	1.5	1.7

ADDRESSING WILDLIFE CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES, SPECIFICALLY THE ILLEGAL TAKE OF ICONIC BIG GAME SPECIES, IS ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT AND COMPLEX CONSERVATION PROBLEMS FACING NATURAL RESOURCE AGENCIES TODAY.

When we asked the three groups about what percentage of wildlife crimes they thought go undetected, unreported, and unresolved, the data across all three groups indicate that all have high levels of uncertainty about poaching rates.

In **Figure 1**, the combined responses of the groups indicated a normal distribution centered around the 50% rate, with significant peaks at 25% and 75%. This response is typical of surveys where many respondents have a high degree of uncertainty about their responses.

When we asked officers their opinions on why hunters, landowners, and the public fail to report wildlife crimes of which they become aware, the officers indicated that revenge by the offender, worried about getting the offender in trouble, and lack of a “victim” (i.e., not important to me) were the most significant factors (**FIGURE 2**).

FIGURE 1: For your state of residence, indicate the level of illegal take of wildlife that you believe goes undetected, unreported, or unresolved.

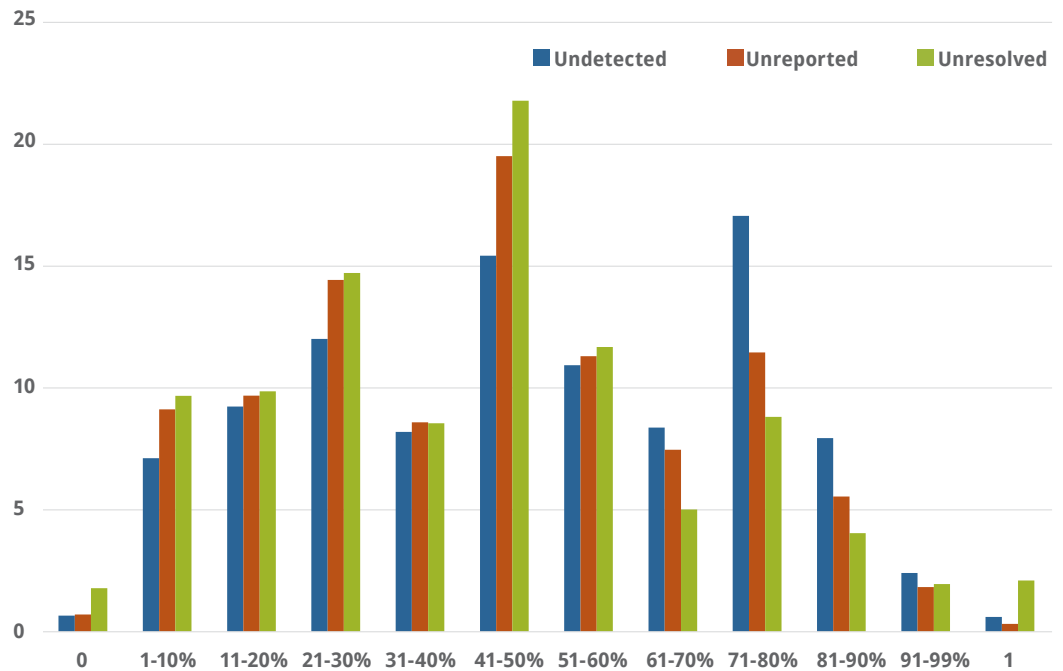
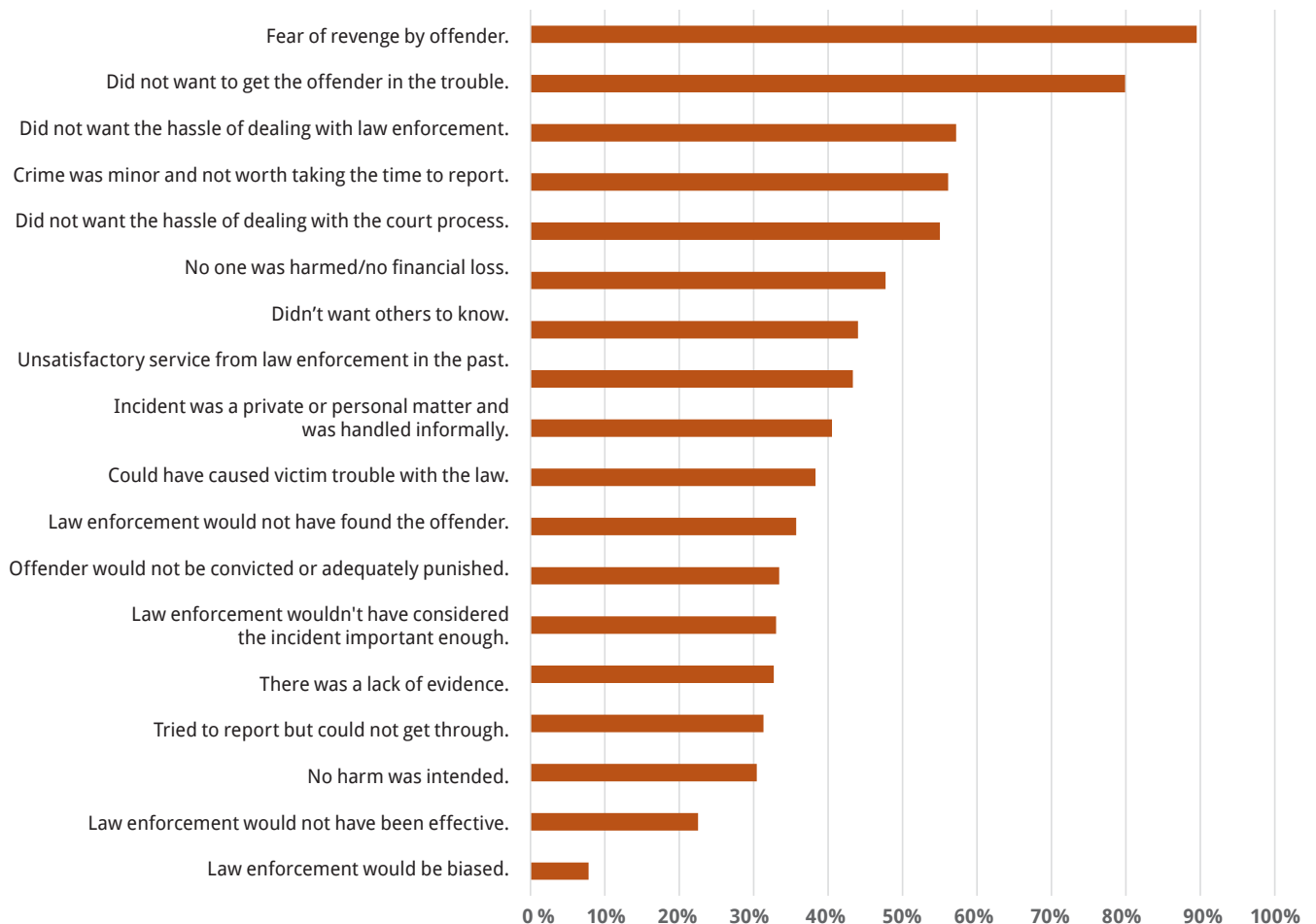


FIGURE 2: Please select all the reasons that you think cause people to fail to report incidences of illegal take to law enforcement (n=1,107).



POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Officers were also asked about what approaches, techniques or unmet needs should be addressed that would increase detection and reporting rates and allow them to improve prosecution rates for persons committing wildlife crimes. Their highest priorities indicated were increasing the complement of officers on the ground, followed by anonymous TIP lines, financial rewards, and public education campaigns (FIGURE 3). They ranked the Wildlife Violators Compact, internet searches, and surveillance cameras as the lowest priority techniques.

CONCLUSIONS

Landowners, hunters, and officers consider the illegal take of big game to be a serious threat to the future of hunting, both from biological and social perspectives, with all three groups indicating that the illegal take of big

game results in a significant negative impact to wildlife populations, hunt quality, hunt opportunity, access to hunting lands, and public perception.

This study confirms that illegal take of wildlife is cryptic. Even people who spend significant amounts of time in places where these crimes frequently occur, they witness very few illegal take incidents. When they do detect or are made aware of an illegal take, fewer than half report them to law enforcement. Improving detection and reporting rates of illegal take will largely be educational in nature, which may include educating those who witness wildlife crimes about the need to report them to the proper authorities.

The combination of improving our understanding of detectability rates, determining the motivational factors that compel people to poach, and the developing

of objective, consistent, and proportional criminal penalties and criminal restitution costs, along with reducing the prosecutorial barriers to wildlife crimes, is the clearest path forward for our community to take on the problems associated with the illegal take of big game and other wildlife. Furthermore, only by raising awareness of the seriousness of wildlife crimes in this country and developing a societal culture of intolerance for the abuse of our precious natural resources, will we be able to address this issue head-on.

We are currently engaged in the next round of research within the Poach and Pay project to review citation data and conduct interviews with convicted poachers. As we compile all the data, we will develop a more targeted communications and education campaign in the coming year. ■



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FIGURE 3: Conservation Officers: Based on your experience, please rank the following (from most effective to least effective) that you believe indicates their potential to increase - Detection/Reporting/Citation rates on the illegal take of big game.

