

Hunting in the United States

An HRC Research Primer



Report in Brief

This primer summarizes the available quantitative research relating to public attitudes toward the hunting of land animals for sport, subsistence, or other reasons, including wildlife management.

The Bottom Line

The number of hunters in the U.S. has declined over the past few decades due to a variety of factors. The most recent estimate provided by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service says that about 5% of the U.S. adult population (12.5 million people age 16 and older) engaged in hunting in 2006.

Despite the decline in hunting activity, the majority of U.S. adults are at least somewhat supportive of legalized hunting. The primary reasons for this support include the perception of hunting as “an American tradition” and a personal right. Also, hunting is considered by many to be a viable method of managing wildlife, ostensibly for human concerns (prevention of property, pet, or farm animal loss, or prevention of animal-vehicle collisions, etc.) or animal welfare reasons (to mitigate disease, to prevent destruction of wildlife habitat, etc.).

How to Use this Information

Understanding support for and opposition to hunting will give animal advocates the opportunity to create effective messages and influence others in their perceptions of hunting-related activities. This research can help advocates develop strategies to continue the declining interest in hunting and potentially mitigate the number of animals killed by hunters.

HRC Information

HRC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to maximizing the effectiveness of animal advocates by applying professional, cost-efficient, and informative consumer and market research methods.

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Introduction and Overview

Hunting involves the killing of land animals by various means and for different reasons. Some people consider hunting land animals to be a recreational outdoor activity, or “sport,” while others view it as a method of controlling animal populations to address wildlife population and animal welfare issues. Still others hunt for subsistence reasons or to supplement other sources of food. However, in recent decades, there is evidence that the popularity of hunting has been on the decline across the United States.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, approximately 5% of the U.S. population age 16 years and older hunted land animals in 2006. The total number of hunters declined by 4% from 2001 to 2006, which contributed to an overall drop in hunting-related expenditures by 3% during the same period. This change in behavior may in part reflect a shift in ethics and social values toward a growing concern and respect for animals as living creatures.

However, in many instances people remain supportive of hunting. There is public support for hunting as a method of population control to protect other environmental or wildlife interests (ostensibly). There is also some interest in hunting as a sport, which few people engage in but many more support as a personal right. In addition, state and local government agencies generate significant revenue from issuing hunting permits and licenses and they sponsor programs to increase interest in hunting for these reasons.

Number of Hunters in the U.S.

Every five years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) conducts a national survey of hunting practices in the United States. The latest survey was conducted in 2006 and provides the most recent and comprehensive data available on hunting-related activities. According to the FWS report, approximately 12.5 million people, or 5% of the U.S. population (age 16+) participated in hunting during the year. Overall, the number of hunters declined by about 4% from 2001 to 2006, with the biggest drops noted in migratory bird hunters (down 22%) and small animal hunters (down 12%). The number of large animal hunters remained stable over this period.

POPULATION ESTIMATES OF HUNTERS *

Year	Source	Region	Findings
2007	Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department	Vermont	41% of Vermont residents have hunted at some time; 23% have hunted within the past 5 years, and 18% have hunted within the last year.
2006	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	United States	12,500,000 people age 16 and older went hunting at least once during the year.
2006	Arizona Game and Fish Department	Arizona	Among qualified hunters, 57-58% of respondents hunt “frequently” while 33-37% of respondents hunt “occasionally.”
2001	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	United States	13,020,000 people age 16 and older went hunting at least once during the year.

POPULATION ESTIMATES OF HUNTERS (CONTINUED) *

Year	Source	Region	Findings
1975	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	United States	19,100,000 people age 16 and older went hunting at least once during the year.

* Source: Details for all of the research studies cited in this primer are available to registered users of HRC's HumaneSpot.org.

Animals Killed by Hunters

Research sponsored by the Fund for Animals (2003) found that 84% of hunters hunt for big game, 4% hunt for small game, 23% hunt for migratory birds, and 8% hunt other animals (responses may overlap and do not total 100%). Specifically, the most widely hunted type of animal is the white tail deer, which is stalked by twice as many hunters as other animals. However, the animal most frequently killed by hunters is the mourning dove, which accounted for about one out of every five animals hunted in the United States in 2003. The decline in small animal and bird hunting may be particularly important because it could indicate a future decline in overall hunting participation. The hunt for these smaller creatures is the vehicle by which some young children become introduced to hunting. If youths are less inclined to begin hunting small animals, then hunting in general is likely to continue declining over time.

Public Support for Hunting

Support for hunting can vary considerably by region, purpose, and the species of animal being hunted. In general, a majority of people in the U.S. support hunting, but it appears that overall support has been in decline over the past few decades. There is also evidence that the U.S. public considers hunting-related legislation to be a low priority for government action. The most recent public opinion surveys show that about eight in ten U.S. adults approve of legal and regulated hunting. In 2006, the pro-hunting research company Responsive Management conducted a survey of U.S. adults and found that 78% approve of hunting (up slightly from 73% approval in 1995). In 2008, this question was asked of Washington state residents, with 82% of respondents approving of hunting.

Some surveys have examined the attitudes of youths, specifically. In 2003, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service found that 91% of U.S. youths thought that it was acceptable for boys to hunt; nearly as many (88%) thought it was okay for girls to hunt. Slightly more than half of youths (55%) considered hunting to be "a little cool," or "very cool." Young people were also asked about their exposure to hunting. A small portion (15%) heard about hunting from teachers or other adults in school; of these students, 61% said what they heard about hunting was positive rather than negative.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR HUNTING

Year	Source	Region	Findings
2008	Responsive Management	Washington State	82% of Washington residents approve of legal, regulated hunting.
2006	Responsive Management	United States	78% of U.S. adults approve of hunting.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR HUNTING (CONTINUED)

Year	Source	Region	Findings
2003	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	United States	91% of U.S. youths think it is okay for boys to hunt and 88% think it is okay for girls to hunt. 55% of youths think hunting is "a little cool," or "very cool." 56% agreed that hunting animals for food is ok, while 37% disagreed.
1995	Responsive Management	United States	73% of U.S. adults approve of hunting.
1993	Charleston Daily Mail	West Virginia	79% of West Virginians approve of hunting.
1993	Los Angeles Times	Unknown	54% are opposed to sport hunting
1993	Minneapolis Star Tribune	Minnesota	72% of Minnesota residents agree that hunting is a "natural activity for people."
1990	Gallup	United States	77% of U.S. adults would oppose a total ban on hunting.

Rationales in Support of Hunting

Based on various research studies conducted over the past couple of decades, the clear majority of people in the U.S. who support legal hunting do so for several different reasons. The primary reasons that contribute to this support include the following:

Hunting is a source of revenue for state wildlife agencies and related businesses. One of the major reasons some people and groups (including government agencies) support hunting is because of the economic activity generated by hunting-related industries. Revenue from issuing hunting licenses is substantial and some state wildlife agencies use these funds to maintain public land. In 2001, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that hunters spent approximately \$20.6 billion on hunting-related activities, which also creates tax revenue for the government. The same analysis projects that businesses could lose up to \$206 million per year for every 1% decline in the number of hunters.

The revenue generated by hunting licenses coupled with the decline in hunting across the U.S. over the past three decades has led many states to encourage hunting. In particular, there are efforts in some states to pique the interest of youths to generate new hunters. In West Virginia, for example, the state legislature approved a bill that allows hunting education classes to be held in all schools where at least 20 students express interest. This action was implemented to reverse a 20% drop in hunting permits, which the state says has led to a drop of \$1.5 million in state revenue. Furthermore, 17 states have passed laws to create hunting apprentice licenses to attract younger individuals, and several other states have passed legislation of some sort to encourage hunting among youths.

Hunting is an activity individuals engage in for recreational purposes. Many individuals engage in hunting because they consider it a sport, although this reason is often combined with others listed here. A 2003 survey of *Field and Stream Magazine* readers found that 87% considered themselves to be trophy hunters. However, nearly two-thirds (65%) were opposed to hunting animals in enclosures (i.e., "canned hunts"). In addition, 62% of the survey respondents were opposed to baiting deer for hunting and 47% felt

similarly about baiting bears. Four in ten respondents (40%) felt that more modern and high-tech hunting aids violate the “fair chase” ethic, although an equal proportion (41%) disagreed.

Hunting is considered a viable method of managing animal populations. Some people believe that hunting is necessary to help control wild animal populations and even improve animal welfare. A 2008 survey of Washington state residents conducted by Responsive Management found that reasons for hunting that are related to animal welfare elicited far higher levels of support than hunting for other reasons, including human welfare. In fact, hunting for animal welfare reasons (such as the need to prevent the spread of animal disease or to prevent damage to animal habitats due to wildlife population) was approved by more than 7 out of every 10 individuals surveyed.

Hunting is also considered a viable method of managing wildlife for human concerns. Another primary rationale for supporting hunting includes wildlife management as it relates to human conflicts and issues. These can include wildlife as a nuisance within residential areas, wildlife involved in vehicle collisions, and the loss of companion animals or farmed animals to predators.

Black bears are an example of one species under constant scrutiny regarding its contact with humans in and around residential neighborhoods. They have been the subject of several public opinion surveys addressing the management of black bears as they relate to human issues. For example, Maryland residents were asked about the extent of contact with black bears and the resulting problems. Contact seemed to occur mostly in the outlying wilderness areas as opposed to within the neighborhoods and around homes. About a fourth of Maryland residents (23%) agree that black bears will kill farm animals and pets, although a slight majority (52%) disagreed that black bears pose a danger to humans.

About 9 out of 10 Maryland residents believe that problems with black bears could be prevented by taking a few simple precautions. However, 20% of Maryland residents support killing bears that are causing damage to property without obtaining a permit from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Even more residents (65%) support regulated hunting as a way of controlling the black bear population in Maryland. In a separate study conducted around the same time, 35% of Maryland residents were in favor of hunting black bears, while 57% were opposed. The vast majority (73%) preferred that state officials address bear conflicts using non-lethal methods such as public education, trash management, rubber pellets, or loud noises to frighten bears away rather than hunting them.

RATIONALES FOR SUPPORTING HUNTING

Year	Source	Region	Findings
2008	Responsive Management	Washington	79% support hunting to prevent the spread of animal disease. 71% support hunting to prevent damage to habitat. 65% support predator management for threatened or endangered species. 62% support predator management for human safety. 54% support hunting of nuisance animals. 50% support predator management to protect domestic animals. 41% support hunting to reduce animal-vehicle collisions.

RATIONALES FOR SUPPORTING HUNTING (CONTINUED)

Year	Source	Region	Findings
2007	Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department	Vermont	32% of Vermont residents would like to see an increase in the deer population (for increased hunting opportunities or to improve chances of seeing a deer); 5% would like a decrease (to reduce human-wildlife conflicts). For these same reasons, 19% would like an increase in moose population, while 10% prefer a decrease. For black bears, 16% prefer an increase in population, while 7% prefer a decrease. For turkeys, 15% prefer an increase while 10% prefer a decrease.
2006	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources	Wisconsin	65% of Wisconsin residents support predator management for the health of threatened or endangered species. 62% support hunting for human safety and 50% support it for the protection of pets and domestic animals.
2004	Maryland Department of Natural Resources	Maryland	92% of respondents "have never encountered a black bear in the wild in Maryland." 91% agree that "most problems with black bears in Maryland can be prevented by taking a few simple precautions." 52% disagree that black bears are dangerous to humans. 92% support requiring people visiting or living in black bear habitat to practice good sanitation practices and trash management. 57% support depredation permits for black bears that cause damage to livestock or pets. 44% support them for black bears that cause damage to personal property or crops. 20% support allowing private citizens to kill bears that damage personal property or crops, without first obtaining a permit; 65% support regulated hunting as a way to control black bear populations.
2004	Fund for Animals	Maryland	35% are in favor of hunting black bears in Maryland, 57% are opposed, while 8% have no opinion. 73% prefer that state officials address bear conflicts using non-lethal measures such as public education, trash management, rubber pellets, and loud noises to frighten bears away rather than hunting.
2003	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	United States	56% believe that hunting for food is acceptable; 21% disagree.

Hunter Characteristics

Research studies have also addressed the demographics and related attributes of people who support or oppose hunting. A 1975 study conducted by the University of Wisconsin found that those who oppose hunting are more likely to live in larger communities or to be renters. Those who were opposed to hunting were found to be less knowledgeable about hunting issues in general, but more knowledgeable than hunting supporters when it comes to environmental issues. Additionally, people without hunters in their immediate family were more likely to oppose sport hunting by a ratio of 7 to 1 over those people who have an active hunter in their family.