



POACH & PAY

The Dark Figure of Big Game Poaching in America

Findings from the most comprehensive study of big game poaching ever conducted in the United States



Boone and Crockett Club Poach & Pay Program · AFWA Multistate Conservation Grant F22AP00699

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Wildlife Management Institute • Eastern Kentucky University • Wildlife Management Institute



The wildlife on your ranch has a value.

Poachers know exactly what it is.

The courts probably don't.

Poaching is not a victimless crime. It steals from you, from every ethical hunter, and from the public trust that funds wildlife conservation across America.



The Most Comprehensive Big Game Poaching Study Ever Conducted in the U.S.

5 YEARS

Project Duration
2020 – 2024

8 STATES

Sampled: Demographically
& Geographically Representative

7 PHASES

Integrated
Research

The seven research phases:

- Stakeholder attitudes — hunters, landowners, and conservation officers (n = 22,750+)
- Poacher typologies, motivations, and deterrents
- Judicial and prosecutorial barriers to wildlife crime adjudication
- Detection rate estimation and quantification of the 'dark figure' of illegal take
- Conservation costs
- Deterrence strategies
- Best management practices

95%

of poaching incidents
go completely undetected



How Low Is Detection?

2-7% Estimated true detection rate
across all Bayesian models

3,479 Hunters per conservation officer
in sampled states

438 mi² Average officer coverage area

12.2% of collared big game animals
taken illegally (telemetry
studies)

For every 100 animals illegally taken in America,
approximately 95 result in no detection, no
citation, no prosecution, and no consequence.



Seven Independent Data Sources Pointed the Same Direction

1 National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)

Larceny/theft analog: 24.8% detected

2 Six published research reports on illegal take

Detection range: 1.1% to 4.2%

3 Poacher self-report survey

27% reported never being detected

4 Citation, manpower & population data — 8 states

3,479 hunters/officer; 438 mi² coverage

5 Stakeholder perception surveys (hunters, LO, COs)

~27% estimate detection

6 Stakeholder personal-experience survey

21.8% of known incidents detected

7 28 radiotelemetry studies — big game species

12.2% of collared animals illegally taken

All seven sources combined via Bayesian statistical modeling — prior and posterior probability analysis updating estimates as evidence accumulates.



Nine Types of Poachers — Not One Problem

TROPHY

Motivation: Ego

COMMERCIAL

Motivation: Financial Gain

SUBSISTENCE

Motivation: Food

BACKDOOR

Motivation: Temptation / Opportunity

RECREATIONAL

Motivation: Greed / FOMO

PROTECTIVE

Motivation: Defense / Damage

PROTEST

Motivation: Rebellion / Tradition

CHALLENGE

Motivation: Outsmarting detection

THRILL-KILL

Motivation: Excitement / Cruelty



Most commonly encountered on private lands



Which Poacher Types Are Most Common — and Which Are On Your Land

TROPHY POACHER

Motivation: Ego

57.6% *of officers report trophy incidents as 41–100% of their caseload*

The dominant type in officer caseloads. Targets high-value, managed animals. Your record bucks are exactly what they're after.

BACKDOOR POACHER

Motivation: Opportunity

Top 3 *most frequently cited type in all CO survey responses*

Takes animals visible from home or neighboring property. Trespass + a buck in the road = the most common private-land scenario.

RECREATIONAL / FOMO

Motivation: Greed

43.9% *of officers report recreational poachers as 41–100% of incidents*

Hunters who participate legally, then take illegally too. Leases, hunting parties, the extra buck — harder to detect.

CHALLENGE POACHER

Motivation: Outsmarting Detection

8.1% *of officers report challenge poachers at 61–100% of incidents*

Treats your cameras, fences, and patrols as the game. Private land security measures are the puzzle they want to beat.



Hunters, Landowners & Officers Are Aligned — and Alarmed

HUNTERS

n = 17,640 respondents

92.1%

concerned about illegal take nationally

77.5%

believe poaching harms huntable animal numbers

83.3%

cite negative impact on public perception of hunting

LANDOWNERS

n = 4,003 respondents

88.4%

concerned about illegal take statewide

60.9%

report concern on their own property

68.2%

believe poaching impacts access to hunting lands

OFFICERS

n = 1,107 respondents — 92% response rate

99.0%

concerned about illegal take nationally

81.5%

report negative impact on huntable animal quality

98.5%

believe low detection rates are the top barrier



The Courts Are Not Ready for Wildlife Crime

12.5%

of prosecutors believe wildlife crime is given correct priority in their jurisdiction

39.4%

cite lack of their own training or awareness as a primary barrier to effective prosecution

48.0%

agree illegal killing of big game should be classified as felony theft of a public resource

60.6%

identify license revocation or equipment confiscation as the strongest available deterrents



What Poaching Costs vs. What Courts Actually Collect

WHAT THE LAW ALLOWS

- Wildlife replacement costs assigned to every illegally taken big game animal
- Minimum fines layered on top of replacement costs
- Equipment confiscation for tools used in the illegal take
- License revocation in all 50 WVC member states
- Felony theft classification available in many states
- Mandatory restitution payable to the state wildlife agency

WHAT COURTS TYPICALLY ORDER

- Wildlife crime treated as low-priority — often plea-bargained or dismissed
- Replacement costs rarely ordered at full legal value
- Restitution frameworks vary widely and inconsistently by state
- Only 12.5% of prosecutors believe wildlife crime gets appropriate priority
- 39.4% cite lack of their own training as a barrier to full prosecution
- Equipment confiscation underutilized despite strong deterrent effect

The result: a poacher's expected penalty is a fraction of the legal maximum — and every poacher knows it. 48% of prosecutors agree illegal big game killing should be felony theft. Only 12.5% say it's being treated that way.



What Undetected Poaching Steals from Conservation Every Year

\$1.44

BILLION

per year — uncollected fines
& replacement costs at 5% detection

68%

of states: annual loss exceeds
total Pittman-Robertson
apportionment

78%

of states: loss exceeds gross
hunting license sales revenue

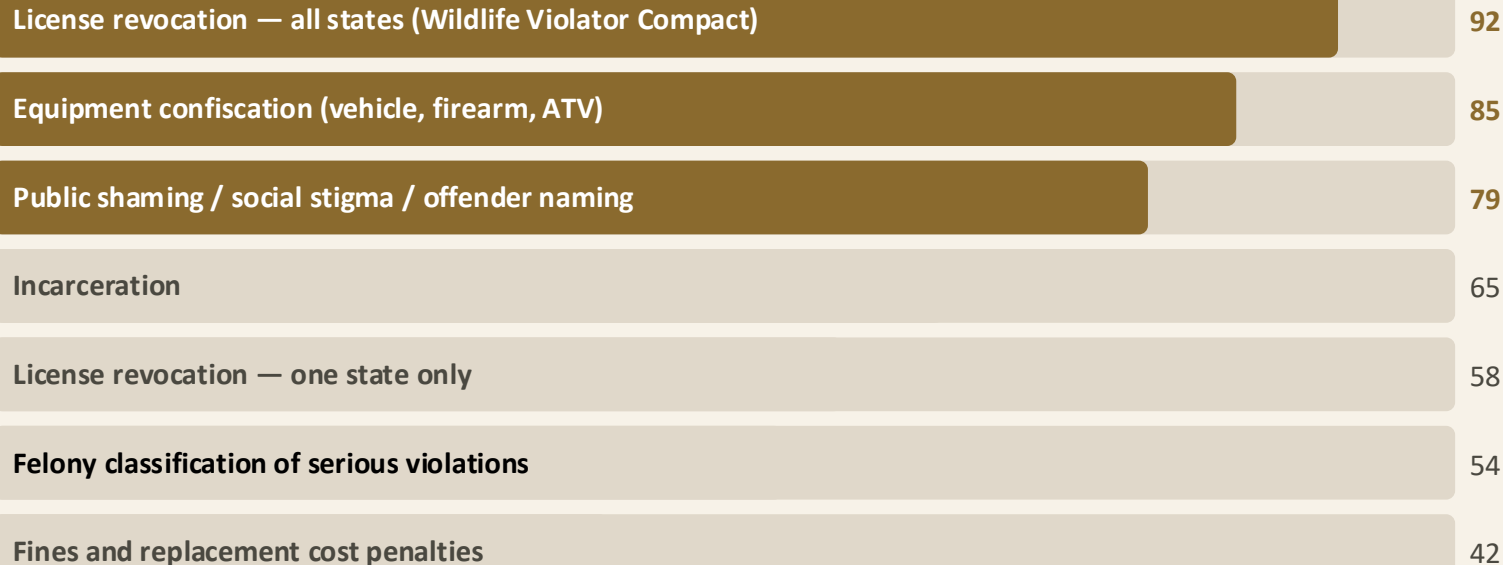
\$28.7M

average annual loss per state

Texas note: TPWD's scale means Texas does not appear in the top-exceeded benchmarks — but that reflects the agency's size, not the absence of loss. Undetected poaching still costs Texas tens of millions in uncollected restitution and removes wildlife that every Texan owns from the landscape.

The Hierarchy of Pain: What Deters Poachers More Than Fines

Key Finding: The certainty of being caught deters more illegal take incidents than the severity of punishment. Raising penalties means nothing when the risk of detection is near zero.



Relative effectiveness score (0–100) based on stakeholder and officer assessment across all nine poacher typologies.



Conservation Officers Cannot Do This Alone

3,479

Hunters per conservation officer
in the eight sampled states

438 mi²

Average officer coverage area —
larger than the Dallas metro

5.7

Citations issued per officer
per year on average

WHAT OFFICERS SAY WOULD MOST IMPROVE DETECTION

- 1 Tip hotlines with cash rewards for reporting
- 2 Increased officer manpower and patrol coverage
- 3 Trail cameras, drones, and surveillance technology
- 4 Directed enforcement using poacher typology profiling
- 5 Social media and internet monitoring for illegal take
- 6 Public education campaigns on costs of poaching



Detection Is the Deterrent — Six Actions You Can Take

01 Operation Game Thief

Call 1-800-792-GAME or use TPWD's Tip411 app (launched 2025). Anonymous reporting accepted. Rewards available. One tip can close a multi-year case.

02 Trail Camera Networks

LTE-enabled cameras give near-real-time trespass detection. They also generate the documented evidence officers need to make charges stick.

03 TSCRA Special Rangers

Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association Special Rangers investigate ag and wildlife crime alongside game wardens — a direct landowner ally.

04 Know Your Texas Penalties

Hunting without landowner consent is a Class A misdemeanor for most species and a state jail felony for deer, pronghorn, and bighorn. Civil restitution to \$50,000+. Demand enforcement.

05 Tighten Lease Agreements

Define zero-tolerance for violations. Require lessees to report any suspected activity they witness. Specify which management decisions require your approval.

06 Build Neighbor Networks

Coordinated landowner intelligence networks outperform any single technology. Know your adjacent landowners. Share suspicious-activity information. Coordinate with TPWD.

Five Ways Poachers Convince Themselves They're Not Criminals

1

Denial of Responsibility

"It was an accident. The deer ran onto my land."

Blames external circumstances or claims loss of control. Deflects personal accountability.

2

Denial of Injury

"There are plenty of deer. I didn't hurt anyone."

Frames the act as victimless. Wildlife is public property — every illegally taken animal hurts every Texan.

3

Denial of the Victim

"That buck was living on my side of the fence anyway."

Claims no true victim exists. Wildlife belongs to the state, regardless of where it stands.

4

Condemnation of the Condemners

"Game laws are government overreach. I have the right to hunt my land."

Attacks the legitimacy of regulation. Common among challenge and protest poachers.

5

Appeal to Higher Loyalties

"My family needed the meat. My grandfather always hunted this way."

Uses cultural tradition or family obligation to justify illegal take. Particularly common with subsistence types.



Poaching Doesn't Just Steal Animals. It Steals the Reputation of Every Ethical Hunter.

LEGAL, ETHICAL HUNTING

- + Funds conservation through Pittman-Robertson excise taxes
- + Supports wildlife management programs and habitat work
- + Provides economic value to private landowners
- + Builds the next generation of conservation stewards

POACHING

- Steals from the public wildlife trust
- Undermines agency funding and management capacity
- Degrades the value of your managed wildlife resource
- Hands the anti-hunting movement its strongest argument

The DWI shift: Drunk driving was once culturally normalized. A sustained public education campaign changed that. The same shift is possible — and necessary — for wildlife crime.

Six Strategic Priorities for Reducing the Illegal Take of Big Game

BMP 1: Enforcement Strategy

- Integrate poacher typologies into patrol priorities
- Apply deterrence and routine activity theories
- Deploy technology to enhance detection
- Foster community-based reporting networks

BMP 2: Policy & Regulation

- Simplify and strengthen statutory language
- Implement consistent, proportional penalties
- Enhance the Interstate Wildlife Violator Compact
- Standardize replacement cost frameworks

BMP 3: Prosecutorial Engagement

- Officer-to-prosecutor training and communication
- Support proportional, meaningful consequences
- Reduce the social acceptability of wildlife crime
- Pursue dedicated prosecution resources

BMP 4: Public Education

- Hunting vs. poaching campaigns
- Normalize public reporting of violations
- Utilize social norms and peer influence
- Reframe wildlife crime as a serious public offense

BMP 5: Community Engagement

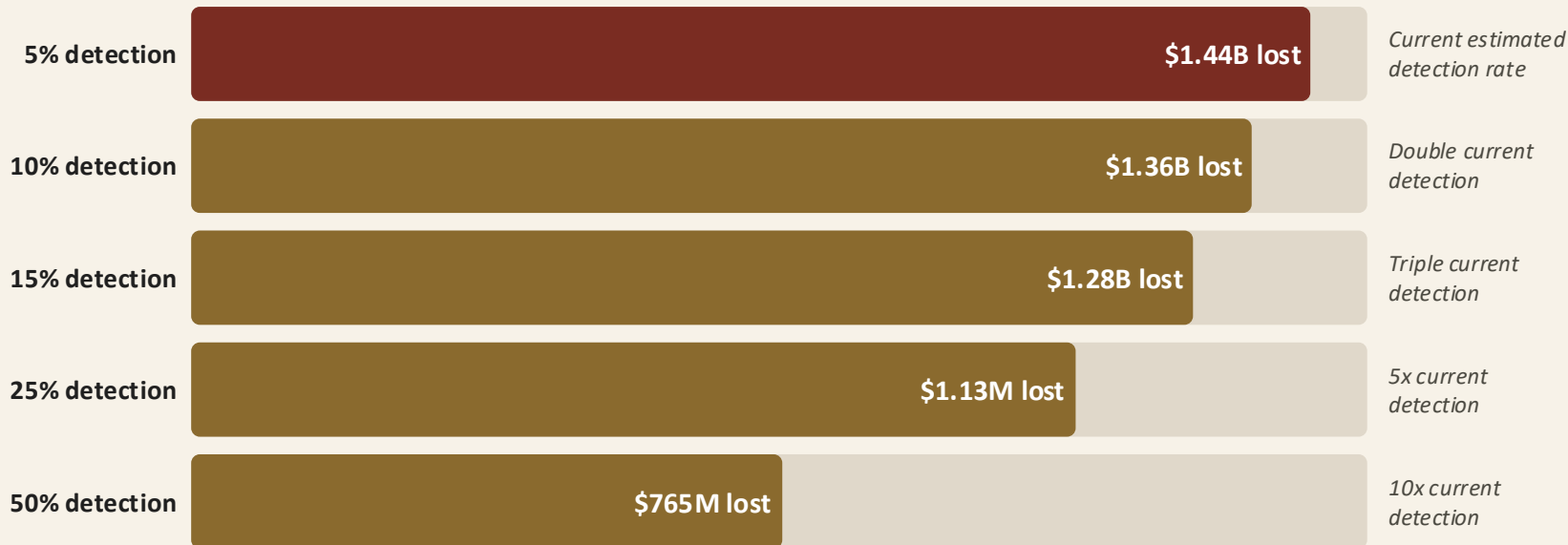
- Acknowledge local landowner perspectives
- Emphasize biological and financial consequences
- Promote shared stewardship responsibility
- Build effective cross-group communication

BMP 6: Law Enforcement Operations

- Enhance officer capacity and resources
- Standardize enforcement practices
- Typology-based detection and patrol
- Improve judicial collaboration and preparation



The ROI of Detection: Every Percentage Point Has a Dollar Value



Each 1% increase in detection saves **\$15.5M nationally** — roughly **\$302,000 per state per year**.
Game cameras, tip hotlines, and landowner cooperation are not just civic duty — they are measurable conservation investments.



This Research Is Just Getting Started

COMPLETED

Poach & Pay 2025 Final Report

Full report at wildlifemanagement.institute | Funded by Boone & Crockett Club and AFWA MSCG (F22AP00699)

FALL 2025

National Media Rollout

Coordinated release to hunting, conservation, and mainstream media — these findings will reach beyond the wildlife professional community

IN PROGRESS

State-Level Reports

Individual state reports under development — providing jurisdiction-specific findings, penalty analyses, and agency-level recommendations including Texas

FUTURE

Poach & Pay 3.0 — Adaptive Monitoring

Study replication after interventions; measuring real-world impact; incorporating additional state data; expanding to fish and non-game species



The wildlife on your land is worth fighting for.

Every acre you steward, every animal you manage, and every ethical hunt you enable is part of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. Poaching is a direct attack on all of it — and now we can prove exactly how deep that attack goes.

Detect more. Certainty of apprehension is the most powerful deterrent we have.

Prosecute better. Wildlife crime demands consequences that match the harm.

Tell the story. Hunters and poachers are not the same. Make that case.

Full Report: wildlifemanagement.institute | **B&C Poach & Pay:** boone-crockett.org/poach-and-pay
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