

Attitudes Toward Mandatory Hunter Education and Hunter Education Backgrounds of Mississippi Sportsmen

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Abstract: Although Mississippi currently has a hunter education program, there is no mandatory requirement. Therefore questions evaluating attitudes toward mandatory hunter education and hunter safety training backgrounds were included in a mail survey to a sample of 1981-82 Mississippi hunters. The majority (65.7%) of hunters would favor a mandatory hunter education program for new hunters. Graduates of a safety training course were significantly more in favor of mandatory training than non-graduates. Hunters with children had the same attitudes toward mandatory hunter education training as hunters without children. Approximately 18% of the 1981-82 Mississippi hunters had received hunter safety training.

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Mandatory hunter education (safety) training has become increasingly more popular among states since New York first required firearm safety for all hunters in 1949. However, the mandatory hunter education movement has been notably lacking in the southeast. Only 2 (12.5%) of the 16 member states in the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies have mandatory hunter education requirements (Anonymous 1982).¹ Of the non-member states, 27 (79.4%) have mandatory requirements.

The Mississippi Department of Wildlife Conservation has provided a hunter education (safety) program to students on a volunteer basis since 1972. By the end of 1981, 78,298 students had successfully completed the hunter safety training course. During 1981 9,000 students were certified. Due

¹ Anonymous (1982) incorrectly cited Louisiana as a state with mandatory requirements. As a result these figures exclude Louisiana from the mandatory southeastern states.

to the natural attrition of hunters (Applegate 1977) and the fact that many students take the course for other than hunter safety reasons (e.g. home fire-arm safety, to gain appreciation for the spouse's sport), the proportion of active hunters in any given season who have received hunter safety training is not known. Before imposing a costly and potentially controversial mandatory hunter education requirement, the efficacy of the volunteer program must be evaluated. Therefore as a precursor to any effort to require hunter education training for new hunters in Mississippi, the objectives of this study were to assess licensed hunter attitudes toward mandatory hunter education and to determine the current voluntary program's effectiveness in producing active hunters who have been safety trained.

Methods

Questions evaluating hunters' safety training backgrounds and attitudes toward mandatory hunter education training were included as part of a broader survey to estimate hunter harvest and effort for all game species in Mississippi during the 1981-82 hunting seasons (Steffen 1982). A sample of 3,325 resident hunting license holders to be mailed a survey questionnaire was randomly selected from the 1981-82 file of licenses sold. Each sampled hunter was mailed a questionnaire and postage-paid reply envelope on 19 March 1982. Nonrespondents were mailed a reminder postcard 3 weeks after the initial mailing. A final mailing consisting of another questionnaire and reply envelope was mailed 3 weeks after the postcard mailing to the remaining nonrespondents. Questionnaires returned 4 weeks after the final mailing (i.e. after 26 May 1982) were not considered in the analyses.

The χ^2 statistics and tests were from Siegel (1956). The Statistical Analysis System (Helwig and Council 1979) was used for all computer analyses.

Results

Based on all 3 mailings, 212 (6.4%) of the questionnaires were returned as non-deliverable. Of those that were assumed delivered, 1,786 (57.4%) were returned and usable for analysis, 1,298 (41.7%) were non-responses, and 29 (0.9%) were unusable.

A clear majority of the hunters indicated they would support mandatory hunter education in Mississippi. In response to the question "Would you favor requiring new hunters to complete a Hunter Education (Safety) training course before purchasing their first hunting license?", 62.1% checked yes, 20.4% checked no and 17.5% checked not sure (N = 1,743).

A significant difference ($\chi^2_4 = 13.91$, $P < 0.01$) in responses to the mandatory question was found among mailings. Generally a reduced accep-

Table 1. Comparison of the Relative Frequency Distributions (%) of Opinions About Mandatory Hunter Education in Mississippi Between Hunters Who Have Received Hunter Education Training and Hunters Who Had Not

Opinion Concerning Mandatory Hunter Education Training	Hunters with Hunter Education Training (N = 316)	Hunters without Hunter Education Training (N = 1,408)
Favor	86.4	56.5
Oppose	5.7	23.7
Not Sure	7.9	19.8

tance of mandatory hunter education training was found through the 3 mailings; 65.7%, 59.2%, and 57.4% respectively. Since all mailings still showed favoritism toward mandatory hunter safety training, the effect of this potential nonresponse bias will be ignored in the ensuing analyses.

An estimated $44,168 \pm 2,240$ (SE) resident licensed hunters during the 1981-82 hunting seasons had at some time completed a hunter training course. Positive responses were provided by 18.3% of the respondents (N = 1,735) to the question "Have you ever completed a Hunter Education (Safety) training course?". There was no apparent nonresponse bias due to the receipt (or lack) of hunter safety training ($\chi^2_2 = 1.20$, $P = 0.55$).

As might be expected, hunters who had been certified in a hunter education training course had different opinions concerning mandatory hunter education than non-certified hunters. Certified hunters were both significantly ($\chi^2_2 = 98.7$, $P < 0.01$) more decided about and supportive of mandatory hunter safety training than those hunters who had not completed a training course (Table 1).

Sampled hunters were also asked "Do you have any children who hunt, will hunt in the future, or have hunted in the past?" to evaluate the impact of

Table 2. Comparison of the Relative Frequency Distributions (%) of Opinions About Mandatory Hunter Education in Mississippi Between Hunters Who Had Hunting Children and Those Who Did Not^a

Opinion Concerning Mandatory Hunter Education Training	Hunters with Hunting Children (N = 1,041)	Hunters without Hunting Children (N = 541)
Favor	63.9	61.0
Oppose	20.4	19.6
Not Sure	15.8	19.4

^a Only hunters considered old enough to have children (≥ 20 years old) are included. "Hunting children" includes all children who currently hunt, will hunt in the future or have hunted in the past.

having children on a hunting parent's attitude toward mandatory hunter safety training. In those hunters ≥ 20 years old, no significant association ($\chi^2_2 = 3.37, P = 0.19$) was found between their attitudes toward mandatory hunter safety training and having children of their own who hunt or potentially will hunt (Table 2).

Discussion

Hunters apparently perceived a need for mandatory hunter safety training for new hunters in Mississippi. Although we felt that hunters with children (because of their vested interest) would be more in favor of mandatory hunter education training than those without children, no difference was found. Many comments were provided by parents, namely fathers, indicating that hunter safety training was the obligation of the father and not the state. Therefore any added parental interest, in mandatory hunter safety training for new hunters, may have been partially negated by those parents who felt the responsibility lies within the home.

There is little question that hunter education programs have had a positive impact on individual hunter's attitudes and safety habits (Chamberlain and Parker 1972, Kerrick et al. 1978, Mattingly 1980). Our study indicated that hunter safety students showed more concern by stronger support of a mandatory requirement than non-students. However the basic question remaining, as Chamberlain and Parker (1972) also noted, is whether mandatory hunter education is as cost effective as a volunteer program.

Our data indicated that, through a completely voluntary program, nearly 1 in 5 of the 241,120 hunters licensed in Mississippi during 1981-82 had been certified through a hunter safety training course. Undoubtedly these certified hunters also hunt with and influence other non-certified hunters. The opportunity is therefore present for certified hunters to transfer their learned ethics and safety awareness to these non-certified hunters possibly creating a result similar to a compulsory hunter education program.

To properly evaluate the "sphere of influence" of certified hunters, questions pertaining to the distribution and interspersion of these hunters among non-certified hunters must first be answered. Additional information regarding the completeness and types of knowledge transferred among hunters is also needed. Given the above information, combined with our findings, we may better evaluate the efficacy and support of a voluntary program versus a mandatory one.

Even though the hunting public perceived a need for and would generally favor mandatory hunter education in Mississippi, it is the agency's responsibility to determine if the benefits derived (beyond a voluntary program) would justify the costs. These benefits (and costs) must also be compared

with the opportunity lost from other agency functions as priorities are likely rearranged.

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