



What do referees think of Section 11's effect on Referee Harassment?

Previous research¹ by Hockey Winnipeg Referee Development has found about 33% of officials quit each year² with the number of officials in Hockey Winnipeg stable at about 430. Therefore, the number of officials quit was equal to the number of new officials.

Referee attrition is often attributed to referee harassment. While being yelled while work is a good reason to quit, a March 2021 article³ found that former referees said "finding something else to do" was a more likely reason to quit than harassment. However, a third article from October 2019⁴ suggests that active referees continue to believe that harassment is a main reason for refs quitting. Regardless of whether harassment is identified as the main reason for a referee quitting, maltreatment is not a good strategy to retain officials. Furthermore, there is argument to be made that "finding something else to do" is correlated with not wanting a job where people yell at you.

Given all of this, referee maltreatment is a regular topic among the hockey community. Our officials are an integral part of the game and referee abuse is not a good reputation make. Therefore, Section 11: Maltreatment was introduced to the Hockey Canada Rule book in fall 2021 to operationalize, organize, and centralize maltreatment rules. Hockey Canada identified this as one step in making hockey a safer place for everyone.

The current survey seeks to obtain the opinion of referees about the effect Section 11 has on referee harassment.

Methods: The Survey

The survey was posted on wpgrefs.com between October 2021 and December 2021. It was advertised using email blasts to the wpgrefs.com email list during this same time period. The items on the survey included experience and age questions. In addition items related to referee harassment, the perceived effect of Section 11 on referee harassment and strategies for dealing with harassment were included. The majority of items were agree-disagree with one multiple choice and one open field for other comments.

Results

There were 16 respondents: 2 first years, 2 with 1 to 3 years of experience, 2 with 4 to 6 years, and 10 with 7+ years. The ages of these respondents were: 13-15 years (2), 16-17 years (1), 18-24 years (4), and 25+ years (9).

There were four research questions explored in this survey. The results of each are here:

¹ You can find all HWRD's research results on www.wpgrefs.com/research

² See the "January 2021" article found on www.wpgrefs.com/research

³ See "March 2021" article found on www.wpgrefs.com/research

⁴ See "October 2019" article found on www.wpgrefs.com/research

Research Question 1: Was harassment perceived to be a problem before Section 11 was introduced? This first question was addressed with three items. 15 out of 16 respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “referee harassment was a problem before Section 11 was created.”

An effort to better understand different experiences was pursued by having respondents rate the following statement: “Referee harassment is a problem for less experienced officials more than experienced officials.” 8 of 16 agreed or strongly agreed, 4 were neutral, and 4 disagreed or strongly disagreed.

A third item was “Officials don't need section 11; they just need to have a thick skin.” No one agreed with this statement: 11 strongly disagreed, 4 disagreed, and 1 was neutral.

Research Question 2: *Is Section 11 perceived to have a potential positive effect on referee harassment?* 6 of 16 disagreed with “Section 11 will improve maltreatment in hockey in general” while 3 were neutral, 6 agreed and 2 strongly agreed.

The survey also looked into the perceived effect of Section 11 by using a statement related to referees: “Section 11 will improve maltreatment of officials, specifically”. In this case, 6 of 16 agreed, 2 were neutral, 5 disagreed and 3 strongly disagreed.

Research Question 3: *What evidence is there that referees support each other in managing harassment?* Two items explored this question:

- “Experienced referees have a responsibility to support younger officials by taking steps to reduce harassment.”
 - All responses were neutral or agree: neutral (1), agree (5) or strongly agree (10).
- “Referees have a responsibility to penalize harassment even if the harassment does not bother them.”
 - Responses were: Disagree (1), Neutral (2), Agree (6), Strongly Agree (7).

Research Question 4: *What strategies do officials feel can be used to reduce harassment?* This was explored with a multiple-choice question: “In your opinion, what is the best strategy to reduce maltreatment of officials.”

- Give a warning to those harassing you (2 respondents selected this)
 - This was selected by two adult respondents with more than 4 years of experience.
- Penalize maltreatment of Officials immediately (10)
- Politely ask the harasser to stop (2)
 - This was selected by the two 13-15 year old officials.
- Ignore it, it will go away (0)
- Other (2): here are the explanations of “other”:
 - A combination of the options is the best option to me. No one action will end maltreatment.

- Need stronger enforcement like suspensions of parents/fans...or entire teams (one bad apple ruins the bunch approach).

Finally, there was an open field for comments. Respondents provided the following comments:

- “Referees have a responsibility to penalize harassment even if the harassment does not bother them.’ this is a fine line, no? Like Comedy - isn't it a bit subjective? There's definitely obvious ones - like cussing, that even if it didn't bother you could still be called. But a "C'MON - TERRIBLE CALL" might be taken as harassing to some??”
- COACHES and PLAYERS need direct, straightforward, consistent and constant messaging about maltreatment of refs and the consequences. Most of them seem to know nothing about the maltreatment section of the rules, especially the players. The rules could also go further and if any profanities are used towards a ref, automatic three game suspension. If the same player or coach gets two such suspensions, they are done for the season. Start getting serious about protecting refs and let them know it!
- Since section 11 didn't really add any rules, I find it hard to believe anything will change. In addition, most people who are verbally abusive are not likely to read the rule book.
- Specific standards need to be established, with examples from Hockey provided for a national standard.
- I believe that there should be consequences to fans/parents who watch the games and are vocal. A lot of the time these people have no idea what is happening on the ice, but are very vocal towards the officials, and most of the time, they are harassing the officials without even knowing it.
- Continuing education for officials, especially those that are new - is something I think would help end maltreatment. But in addition to the officials, get better education for coaches, especially those in lower levels, more likely parent volunteers.
- The argument is a little like blaming someone who is raped for what she wore - but if we can continue to improve officials, present better trained officials at all levels of hockey, put more knowledge in to new officials - they will have better tools to deal with all situations. It would give them more confidence as well. For the flip side, getting those non-elite coaches more education would give them actual rule knowledge, give them a better respect for the position of the officials.
- None really, I feel as though HC has given us the tools to make hockey a safer space for anyone and everyone. We as officials now have to enforce and uphold a standard in order to not only make people interested in hockey/officiating but allow it to be. a place where people want to be involved. A sought after position perhaps.
- “Thick skin” should not be a requirement for refs. Let us do our jobs.

Discussion

Here are the answers to each research question:

- *Was harassment perceived to be a problem before Section 11 was introduced?*
 - Officials did see harassment as a problem and felt that having a thick skin was not the solution. However, whether there is a difference in harassment experience between new and experienced refs is less certain.

- *Is Section 11 perceived to have a potential positive effect on referee harassment?*
 - The respondents did feel that section 11 could improve maltreatment in general but were less certain it would correct maltreatment for officials.
- *What evidence is there that referees support each other in managing harassment?*
 - Respondents strongly felt that experienced officials were responsible for supporting younger officials.
 - Respondents agreed that one needed to penalize maltreatment even if the harassment did not bother them.
- *What strategies do officials feel can be used to reduce harassment?*
 - The majority of respondents said the most appropriate strategy was penalize harassment. However, a few said “politely ask to stop” or “give warning”.

The open-ended responses revealed three main ideas:

1. Referees need to be encouraged to enforce the rules around maltreatment. We need to penalize when it happens.
2. Furthermore, senior referees need to both lead by example and teach junior referees to focus on what they can control. Penalize the first case of harassment; you don’t have to ignore it or put up with it or “have a thick skin.”
3. National, provincial, and local governing bodies need to develop more specific policies and more stringent punishments for people the harass officials.

Conclusions

This survey showed respondents are skeptical that Section 11 will fix referee maltreatment by itself and that more needs to be done to stop referee harassment. In general, the respondents said that we (as officials) need to penalize harassment immediately and ensure we support our fellow officials.

This data shows us that referees feel that harassment is an issue for all, not just the young. However, young officials need more education to deal with harassment as both first year respondents said they would politely ask a person to stop rather than assessing a penalty.

Ultimately, the referee community needs to focus on what it can control.

1. There is no such thing as a warning. The first step is to assess a minor penalty.
2. After the minor we escalate to more severe penalties.
3. Penalizing maltreatment is not just about you; it is about supporting all officials. “It doesn’t bother me” cannot be a reason for ignoring maltreatment.
4. You are never at fault for being harassed. No matter what the call is, you do not deserve to be demeaned.

Research Limitations

There are two main limitations to this research.

- There were only 2 first year Referees. Therefore, this group was underrepresented.
- The sample was heavily focused on minor hockey Referees. What about junior and senior Referees where the culture of ‘putting up with’ harassment is different.