

Vietnamese-American Fishers in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama:
Results of a Face-to-Face Survey on Communication and Trust with Fisheries Management
Agencies of the Gulf Coast

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March 2021

Executive Summary

This report discusses the main findings from our fieldwork with Vietnamese-American fishers in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana conducted between 2016 and 2019. This study intended to provide an updated, in-depth, and fisher-driven analysis of communication effectiveness between fisheries management organizations and Vietnamese-American fishing populations. Communication challenges between coastal and fisheries agencies (such as the U.S. Coast Guard, NOAA Fisheries, and relevant state-level management agencies) and Vietnamese-American fishers, primarily driven by language, ethnic and cultural divides, have been documented in prior studies and agencies are generally aware that such challenges exacerbate problems in effective communication and may lead to further difficulties in regulation implementation and enforcement. This study thus intended to update Gulf fisheries stakeholders on the current state of the issue while also improving on past work by systematically assessing communication effectiveness from the perspective of the Vietnamese-American fishers themselves. The intent was to gain a deeper understanding of current communication practices, issues and preferences of the Vietnamese-American fishers so that all parties could improve the transfer of information. In addition, we sought to understand the role that community and non-government organizations played in communicating fisheries information to fishers. Thus, not only did this work seek to understand current communications dynamics, it also intended to help foster improved resource management outcomes by demonstrating what issues continue to exist for this often-marginalized population. Ultimately, successful fisheries management is based upon the trusting relationships developed between all actors in the system. Our work sought to understand how and whether existing communication strategies were producing trust and confidence among resource users.

The analysis of dockside surveys with 334 Vietnamese-American fishers in MS, AL, and LA produced several key findings, namely:

1. This fishery continues to be characterized by an aging population of fishers that are primarily immigrants or first-generation Americans.
2. Our survey demonstrates that a large majority of fishers feel they speak (70%) or read (69%) very little or no English. As a result, it is not surprising that across all three states, language was the biggest communication barrier cited by our informants. Cultural differences and trust were rarely, if ever, selected as barriers to communication. Fishers had a clear preference that face-to-face and written communication be conducted in Vietnamese.
3. In terms of modality of communication, our sample demonstrates that fishers generally preferred dockside visits or visits to their boat. In addition, letters and public meetings were also among the preferred communication modes. Electronic communications such as phone calls, texts, email, social media posts and radio communications were not among the preferred modes.
4. A significant portion of respondents indicate that the Coast Guard is the agency they interact with most frequently. Additionally, state departments of fisheries or equivalent were named by our informants as the agencies with which they had the second most frequent interactions.

5. For all three states, the agency with the highest level of reported trust was the Coast Guard, followed by state departments of fisheries (or equivalent).
6. A substantial proportion of respondents report that they do not interact with non-government community organizations.

In sum, our findings demonstrate that, from the perspective of Vietnamese-American fishers, there is continued need for fisheries agencies to improve upon their strategies for targeted communication with resource users. Agencies are well aware of the need to bridge the language gap in particular, but our research suggests that further efforts by agencies are needed. In particular, our informants' assessment of trust seems to correlate closely with frequent face-to-face interactions, and yet these higher levels of trust did not necessarily signal improved communication effectiveness. For example, the Coast Guard and state departments of fisheries or equivalent frequently came out as the most trusted agencies in our surveys, partially because representatives from these agencies frequently interact with fishers on their boats and at docks. Yet, in focus-group interviews we conducted in preparation for the survey, fishers pointed out that these same agencies were often severely lacking in their ability to communicate in Vietnamese. Thus, the message from the fishers is clear. Federal and state agencies managing, enhancing, or enforcing laws pertaining to the fisheries of the U.S. Gulf coast need to improve efforts for face-to-face interactions and written communication in Vietnamese.

Survey Methods

Between 2016 and 2019, research included face-to-face surveys with 334 fishers in coastal Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Surveys were conducted during dockside visits, with the exception of approximately 25 surveys administered in the Coastal Community Consulting's office in Gretna, Louisiana, as they assisted fishers in filing taxes. Teams of bilingual interviewers and members of the research team administered surveys (no one entered the field alone for safety and data reliability). Potential respondents were read and given a bilingual consent form, all potential respondents received a \$10 gas card incentive, and the survey was conducted using Qualtrics survey software on tablet computers connected to a mobile hotspot. Questions were read aloud in either English or Vietnamese, based on respondent preference. Respondents were not required to provide answers to all questions; therefore, the total number of responses in the Survey Results section may be less than the total number of respondents.

All survey interviewers received eight hours (minimum) of survey methods and research ethics training¹. The survey was written and translated in Qualtrics online survey software, with measures and translation validated by industry experts, agency workers, and community partners during pilot testing. The survey was developed by investigators in consultation with agency staff and community groups. Pilot testing was conducted with fishers and with agency staff and staff from community groups to validate questions and translation. The survey used quota sampling with a target number of respondents for each location based on the number of Asian-owned fishery businesses in that locale (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015). The quota sample involved dockside sampling; researchers approached every vessel at a dock for potential respondents and limited the respondents per vessel to one captain and three additional workers to avoid over-representation.

Before engaging in dock-side surveys, this research project also included several qualitative data collection steps intended to shape our research questions, identify key community contacts and research sites, and refine our survey instrument. First, we conducted several semi-structured interviews with agency and community organization representatives. These interviews, conducted face-to-face or over the telephone, allowed us to learn directly from key representatives with direct experience related to fisheries management and challenges in coordinating with Vietnamese-American shrimpers. Second, members of the research team also travelled to coastal communities in the study area and attended public gatherings and festivals related to local fishing culture (such as the Blessing of the Fleet in Bayou La Batre, Alabama). This helped us to build rapport with community members and to identify the locations and seasons that would likely present the greatest number of survey respondents. Finally, we conducted three focus groups with Vietnamese-American fishers in Louisiana and Mississippi (a planned Alabama focus group did not attract enough participants to provide useful data). These focus groups also followed semi-structured interview questions, interpreted directly in Vietnamese by one of our research assistants. Focus group discussions were also

¹ The interviewer-training manual is available upon request.

recorded, transcribed, and translated (as needed) by professional translators. Each of these steps helped to ensure that our final survey instrument was appropriate and applicable to our research goals.

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Survey Results

Table 1: Respondents by state

	Respondents
Alabama	58
Louisiana	138
Mississippi	138
Total	334

Table 2: Fisheries participation

	Percent Respondents
Shrimp only	83
Finfish or longline only	4
Crab only	4
Crab and shrimp	2
Crab, finfish or longline, and shrimp	3
Finfish or longline and shrimp	3

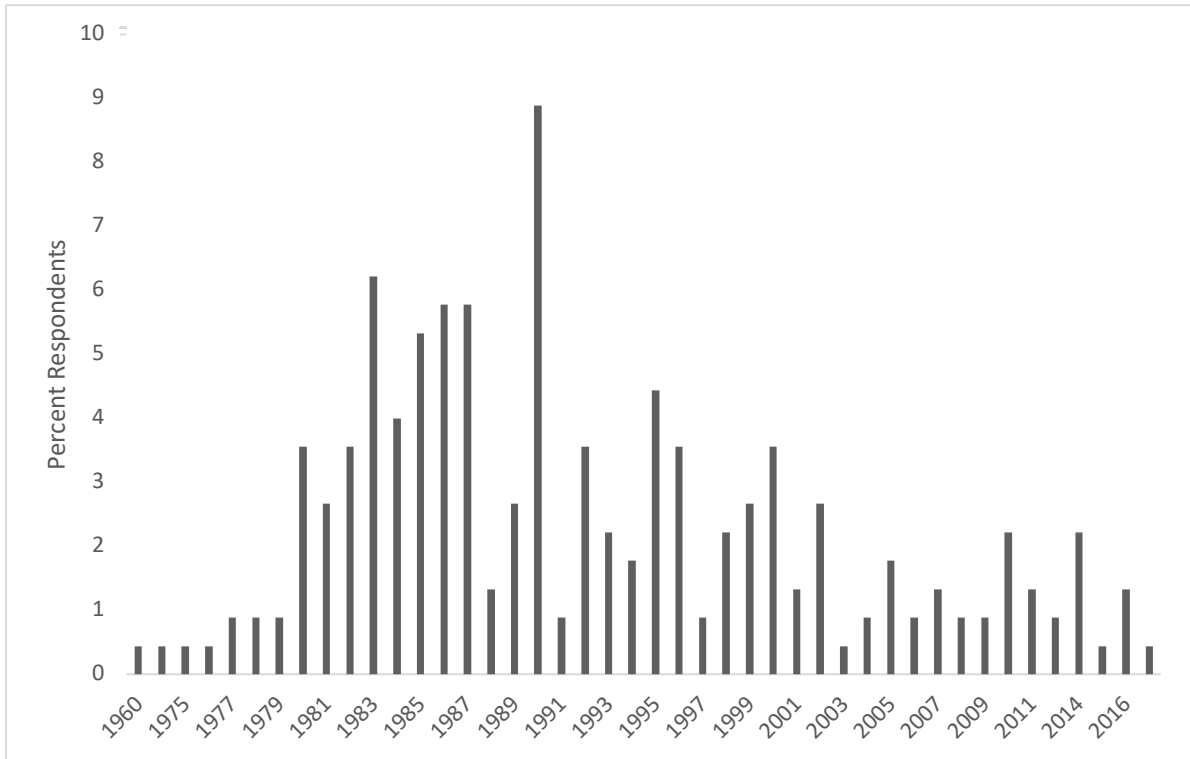
91% of respondents are engaged in varying degrees with the shrimp fishery.

Table 3: Work role

	Percent Respondents
Owner	8
Captain	8
Owner and captain	48
Deckhand	35
Other	1

48% of respondents are both the owner as well as the captain of a vessel. 16% of respondents are engaged solely as owner or captain.

Figure 1: Year began working in commercial fishing in the US



The majority of respondents began commercial fishing in the U.S. in the 1980s, followed by the 1990s. The distribution shows considerably fewer Vietnamese-American entrants into the commercial fishing sector in recent years. This data is consistent with respondents who indicated a strong preference for children and grandchildren to find employment in different sectors.

Table 4: Vessel primarily fish in state or federal waters

	Percent Respondents
State waters	47
Federal waters	13
Both	41

Less than 13% of respondents work on a vessel that solely fishes in federal waters. The remaining respondents are relatively close to an even split between working solely in state waters or working in both state and federal waters.

Table 5: Length of Vessel

Mean	66 feet
Min	20 feet
Max	120 feet

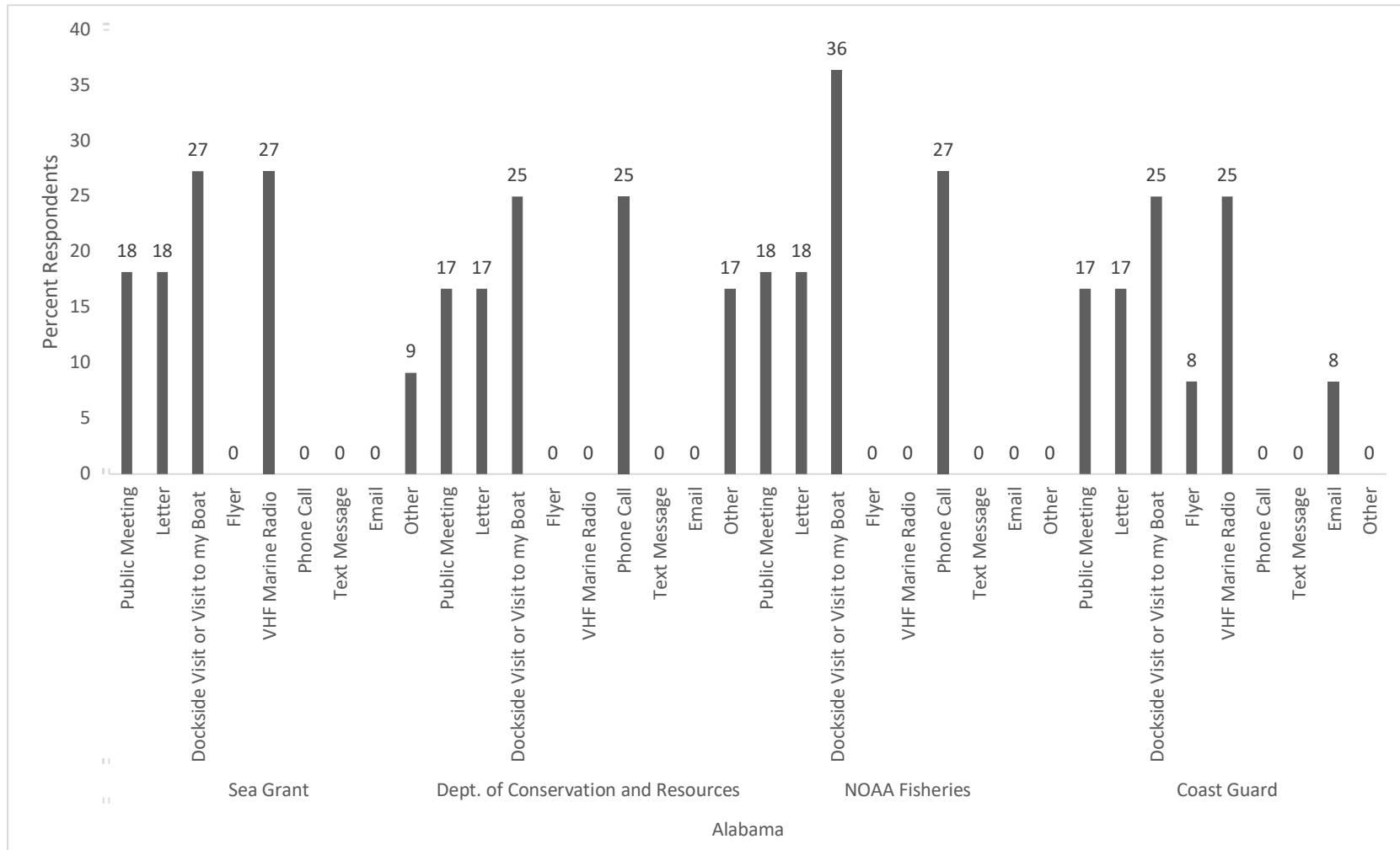
The mean boat length of respondents is 66 feet, with a minimum of 20 feet and maximum of 120 feet. Respondents working on vessels that fish in federal waters or in both state and federal waters reported longer vessel lengths.

Table 6: Which agency do you interact with most often?

		Percent Respondents
Alabama	Sea Grant	0
	Dept. of Conservation and Resources	21
	NOAA Fisheries	21
	Coast Guard	57
	Other	0
Louisiana	Sea Grant	10
	Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries	44
	NOAA Fisheries	6
	Coast Guard	32
	Other	9
Mississippi	Sea Grant	2
	Dept. of Marine Resources	35
	NOAA Fisheries	8
	Coast Guard	35
	Other	20

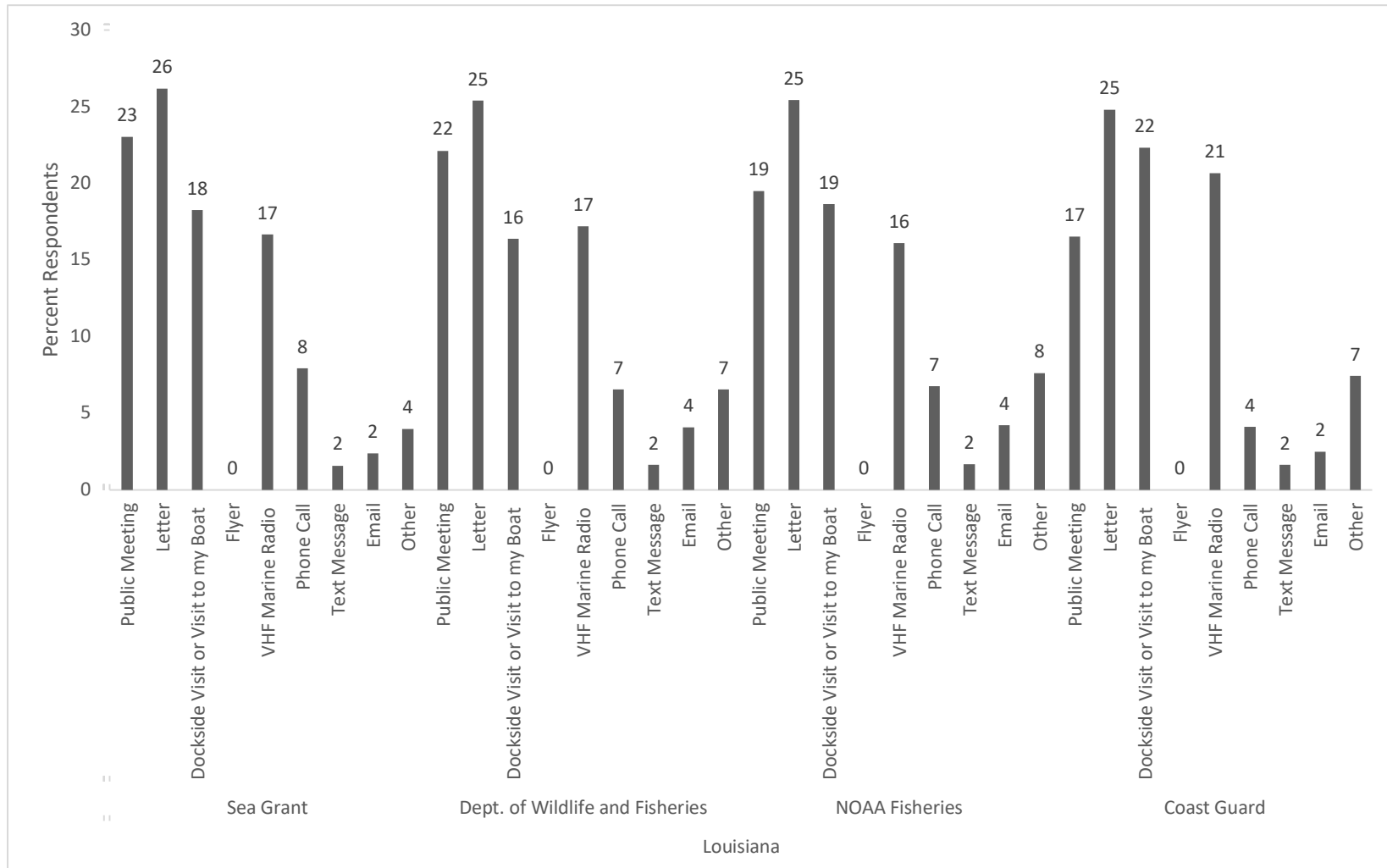
Across all three states, a significant portion of respondents indicate that the Coast Guard is the agency they interact with most frequently. Additionally, the state department of fisheries or equivalent is commonly indicated as the agency with which respondents interact frequently.

Figure 2: What is your preferred mode of interaction with these agencies? Alabama



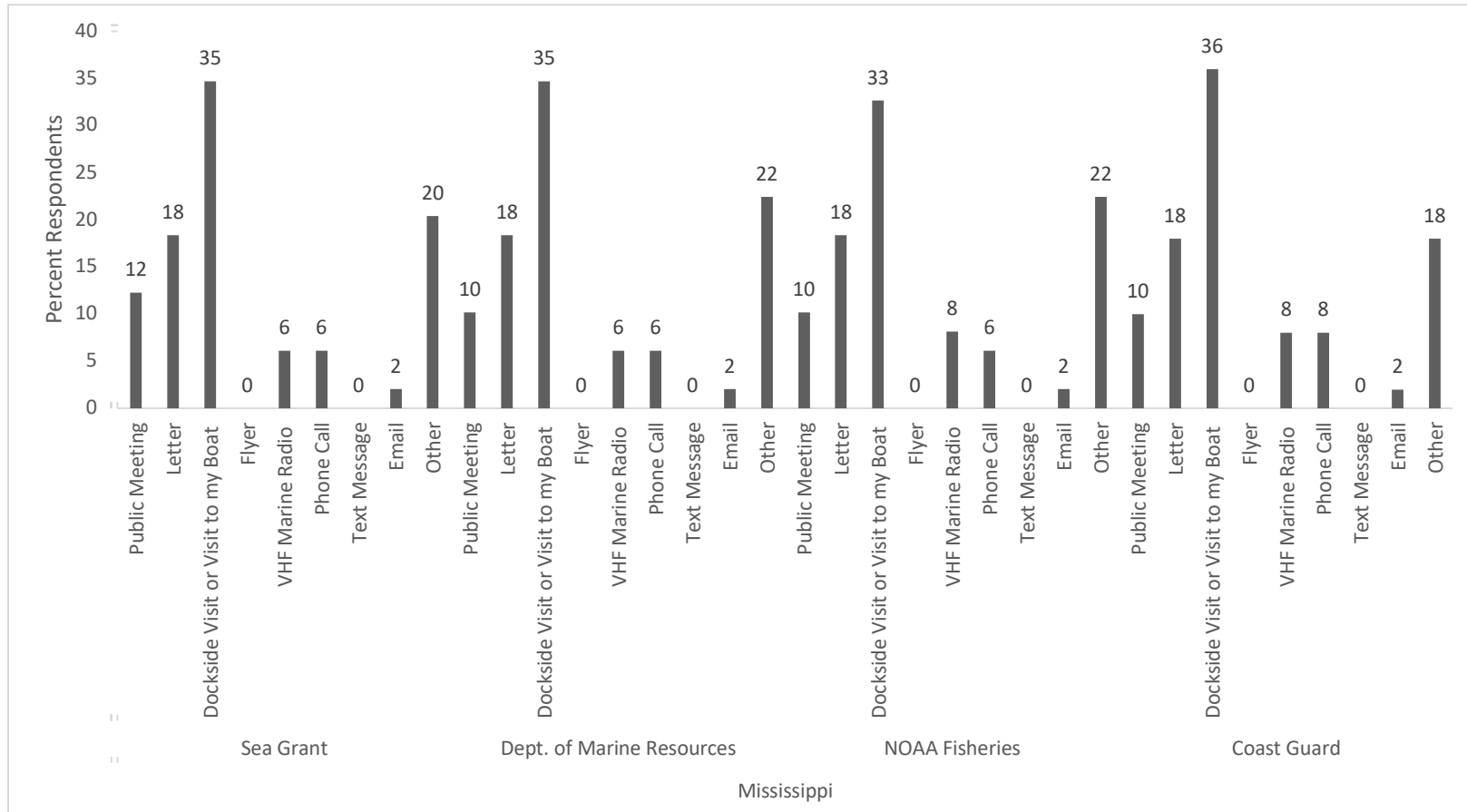
For respondents in Alabama, the most consistent preferred mode of interaction with all agencies is a docksideside visit or visit to boat. Public meetings and letters are also consistently preferred modes of interaction. Across all agencies, no respondents prefer to be contacted via text message, and few by phone call or email.

Figure 3: What is your preferred mode of interaction with these agencies? Louisiana



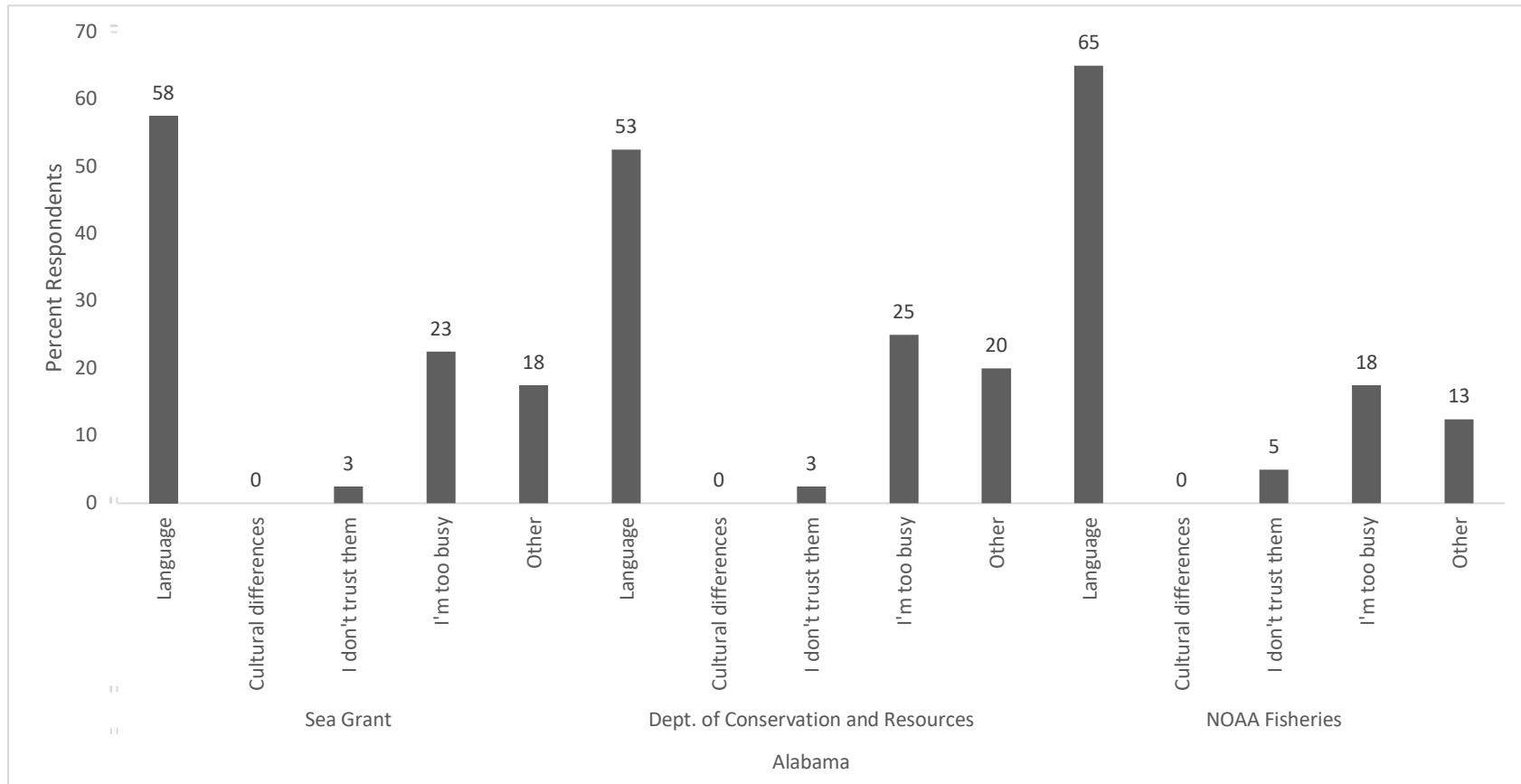
For respondents in Louisiana, the most consistently preferred modes of interaction with all agencies are letters, public meetings, and dockside visits or visits to boat. Very few respondents prefer to interact via phone call, text message, or email.

Figure 4: What is your preferred mode of interaction with these agencies? Mississippi



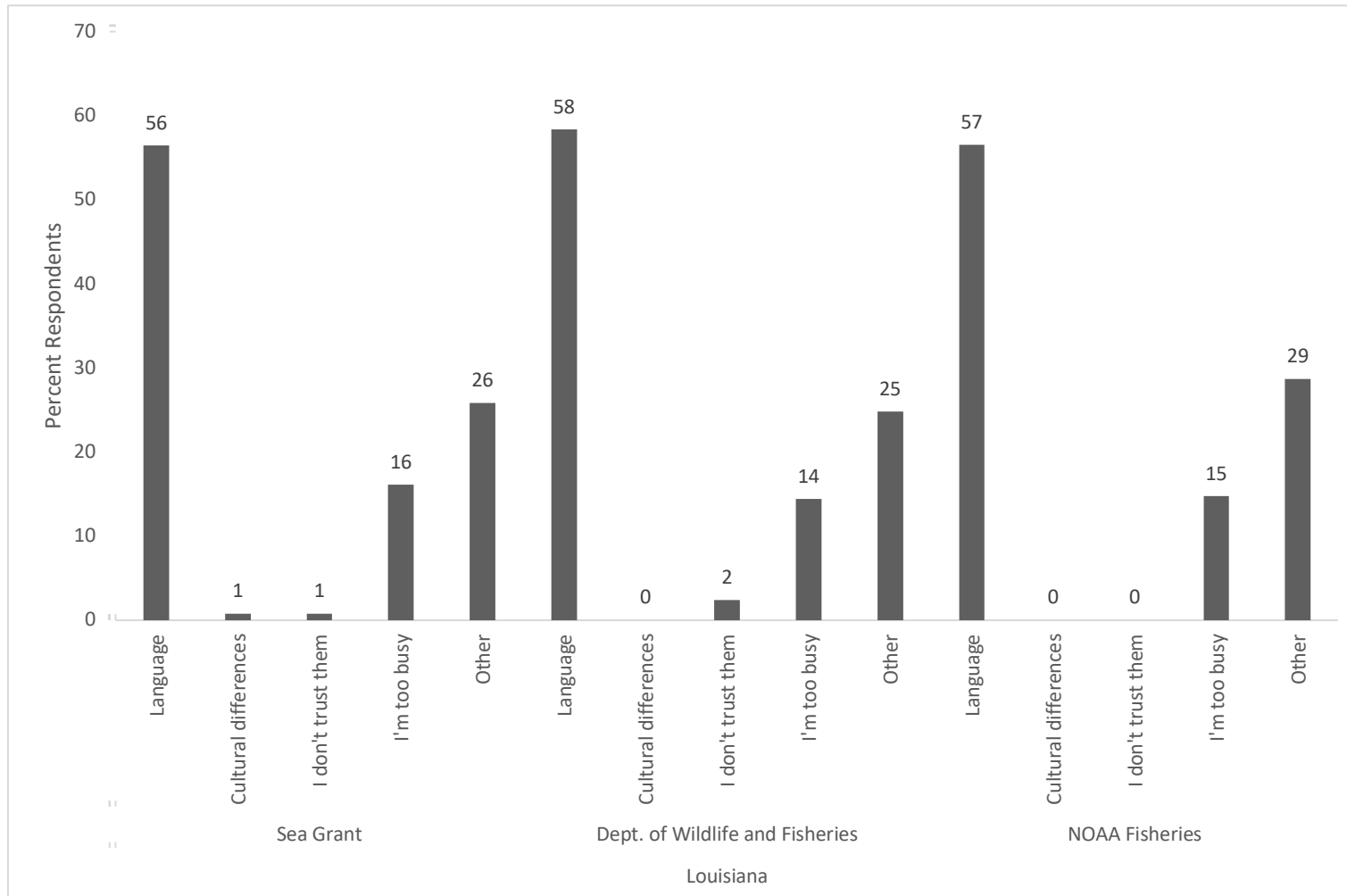
For respondents in Mississippi, the most consistently preferred mode of interaction with all agencies is a dockside visit or visit to boat. Also, consistently preferred are letters and public meetings. Across all agencies, no respondents prefer to be contacted via text message, and few by phone call or email.

Figure 5: What is the biggest barrier to communication with these agencies? Alabama



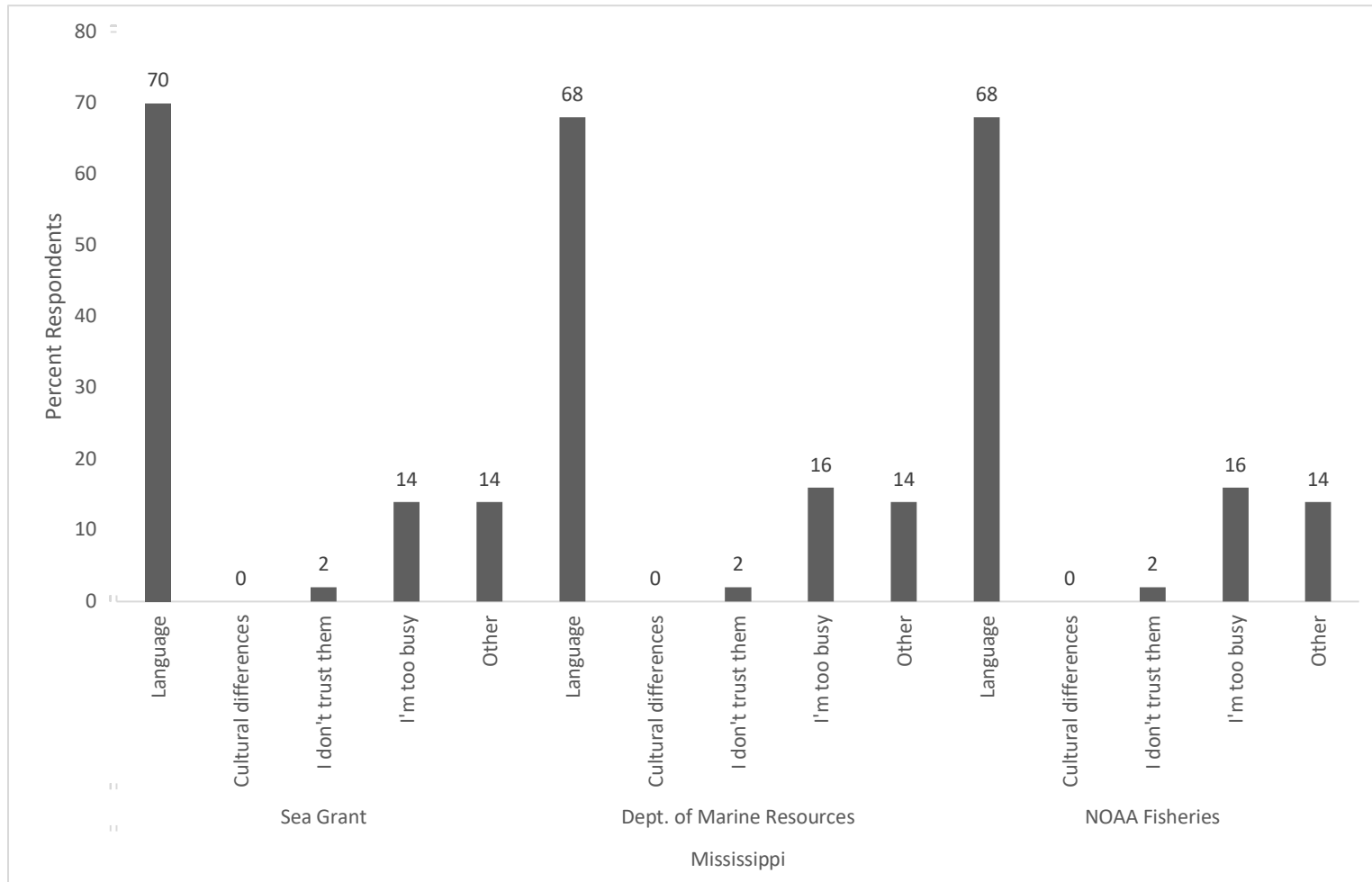
For respondents in Alabama, across all three agencies, the majority of respondents consistently view language as the biggest barrier to communication with agencies. Respondents being too busy to communicate with agencies was ranked as the second largest barrier to communication. Cultural differences and trust were rarely, if ever, selected as barriers to communication.

Figure 6: What is the biggest barrier to communication with these agencies? Louisiana



For respondents in Louisiana, across all three agencies, the majority of respondents consistently view language as the biggest barrier to communication with agencies. Cultural differences and trust were rarely, if ever, selected as barriers to communication.

Figure 7: What is the biggest barrier to communication with these agencies? Mississippi



Similarly, for respondents in Mississippi, across all three agencies, the majority of respondents consistently view language as the biggest barrier to communication with agencies. Across all three states, Mississippi had the highest percentage of respondents that chose language as the biggest communication barrier for all three agencies. Cultural differences and trust were rarely, if ever, selected as barriers to communication.

Table 7: For each of the agencies, please indicate how much you trust that agency.

		Percent Respondents		
		Alabama	Louisiana	Mississippi
Sea Grant	No trust	2	0	0
	Some trust	23	22	0
	A high amount of trust	29	23	20
	N/A, don't interact	46	55	80
Dept. of Conservation/Wildlife/Marine	No trust	5	2	0
	Some trust	28	30	0
	A high amount of trust	37	59	50
	N/A, don't interact	30	10	50
NOAA Fisheries	No trust	4	1	0
	Some trust	29	23	0
	A high amount of trust	31	24	33
	N/A, don't interact	36	52	67
Coast Guard	No trust	1	3	0
	Some trust	34	23	17
	A high amount of trust	46	62	67
	N/A, don't interact	18	11	17

Across all three states, a substantial percentage of respondents indicate that they do not interact with these agencies. This could be due to the inclusion of deckhands in the sample, who may be less likely to interact with any agency than a captain and/or owner.

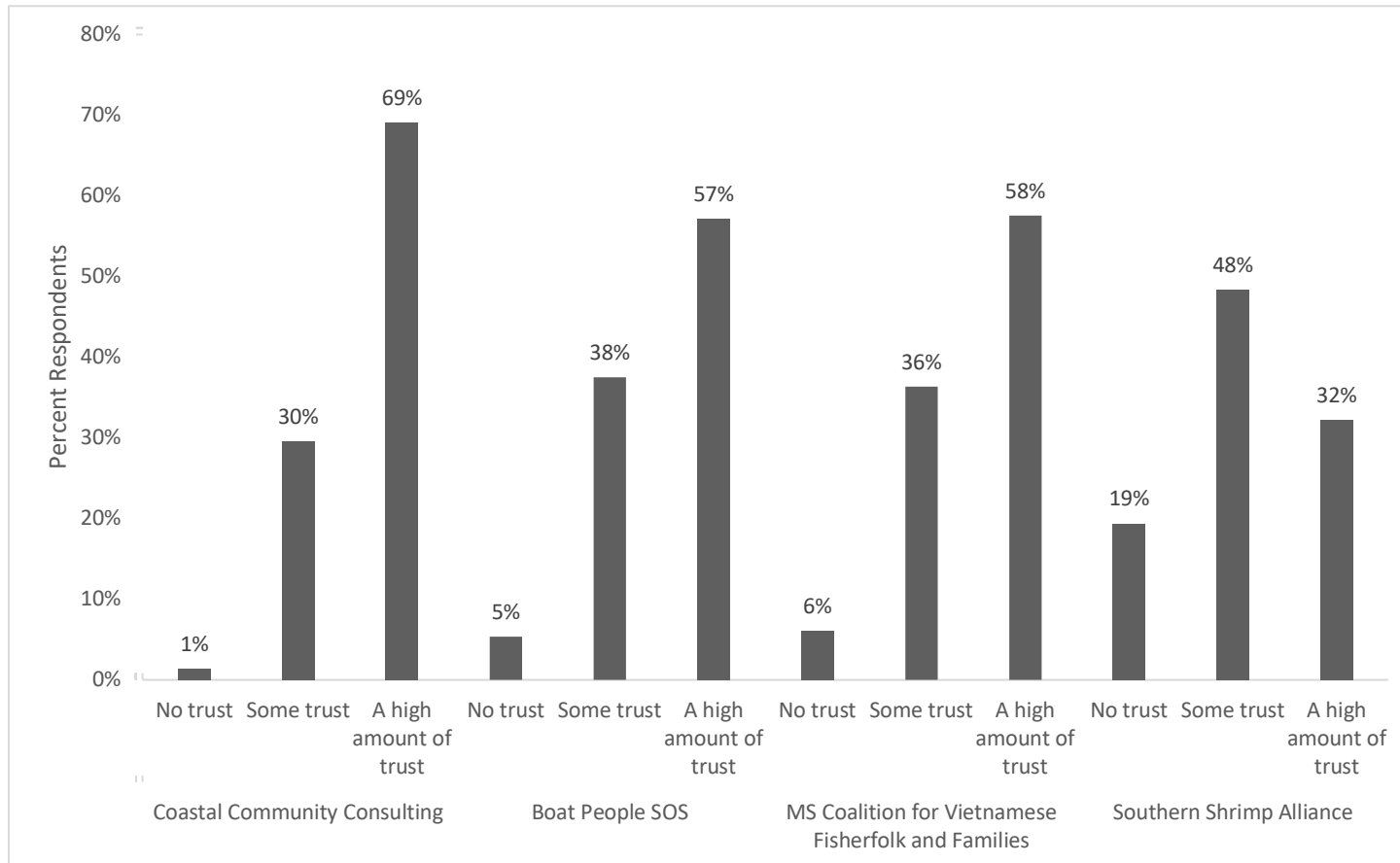
A substantial proportion of respondents indicated that they have a high amount of trust or some trust for each agency, consistently across all three states. For all three states, the agency with the highest level of reported trust was the Coast Guard, followed by the state department of fisheries (or equivalent). These findings parallel the findings uncovered regarding fishers' perception of the agencies with which they interact the most, which suggests an important and unsurprising dynamic between frequency of interaction and level of trust.

Table 8: Please indicate how much you trust that group for information regarding fishing.

		Percent Respondents
Coastal Community Consulting	No trust	0
	Some trust	10
	A high amount of trust	24
	N/A, don't interact	65
Boat People SOS	No trust	1
	Some trust	10
	A high amount of trust	16
	N/A, don't interact	72
MS Coalition for Vietnamese Fisherfolk and Families	No trust	1
	Some trust	6
	A high amount of trust	9
	N/A, don't interact	84
Southern Shrimp Alliance	No trust	3
	Some trust	7
	A high amount of trust	5
	N/A, don't interact	85

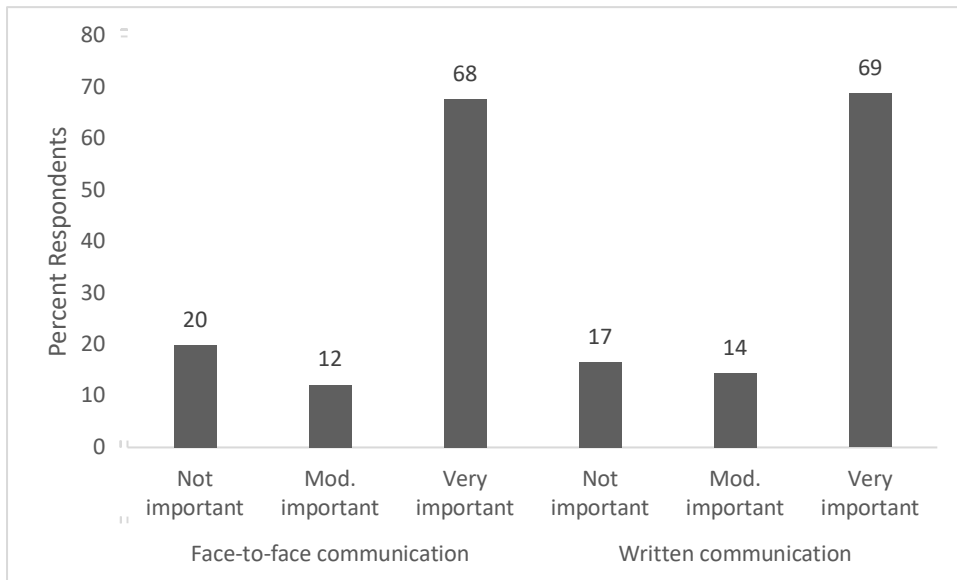
A substantial proportion of respondents report that they do not interact with these community organizations. This could be due to the inclusion of deckhands in the sample, who may be less likely to interact with organizations than a captain and/or owner.

Figure 8: Please indicate how much you trust that group for information regarding fishing (excluding those who don't interact).



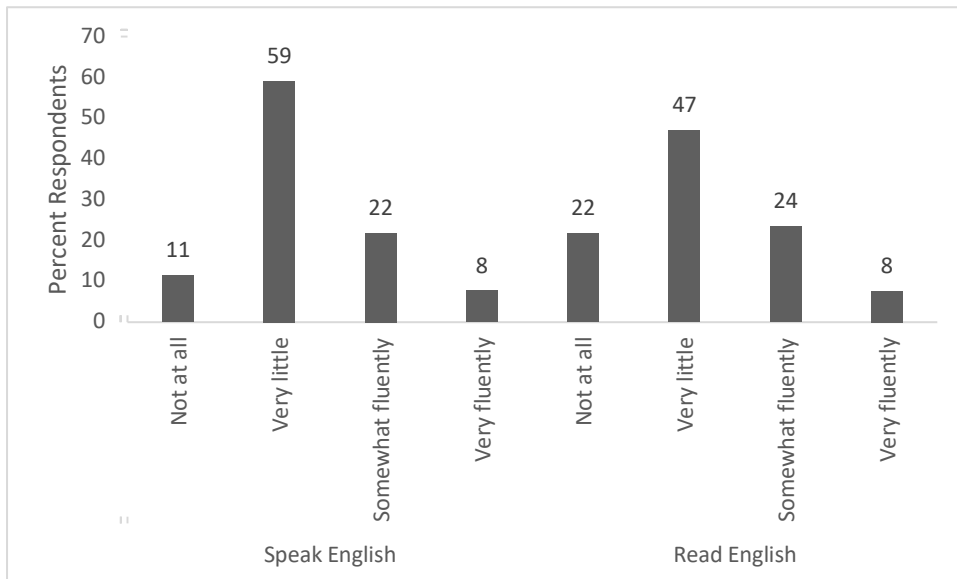
Amongst those respondents who DO interact with community organizations, 69% of respondents who interact with Coastal Community Consulting (CCC) report a high amount of trust for the group for information regarding fishing, 57% for Boat People SOS, and 58% for Mississippi Coalition for Vietnamese Fisherfolk and Families. A significant minority (19%) report no trust for the Southern Shrimp Alliance.

Figure 9: How important is it that communication take place in Vietnamese?



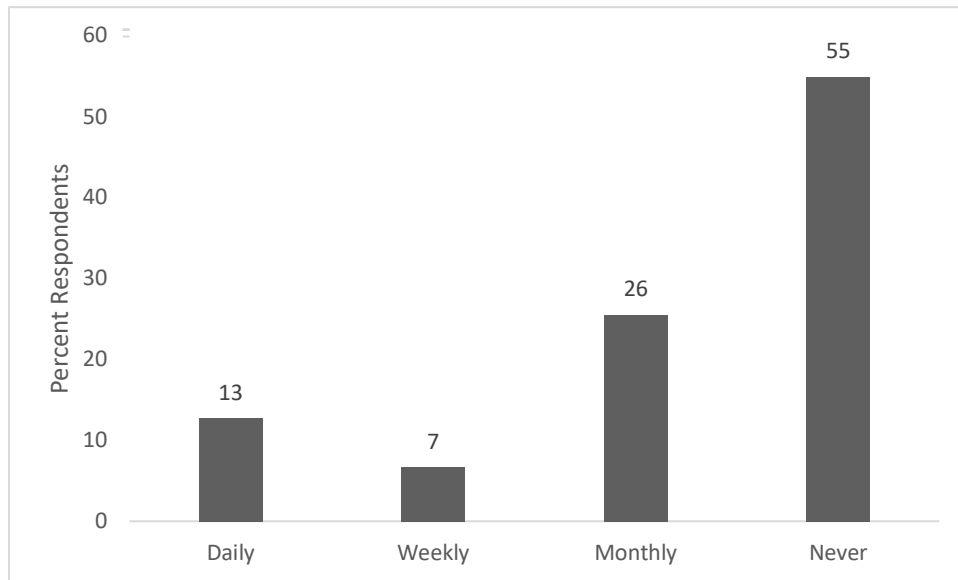
Almost 70% of respondents view it as very important that communication occur in Vietnamese, regardless of whether written or face-to-face. This is critical for agencies to recognize, in terms of the mode of communicating information with Gulf Vietnamese fishermen.

Figure 10: What is your English fluency?



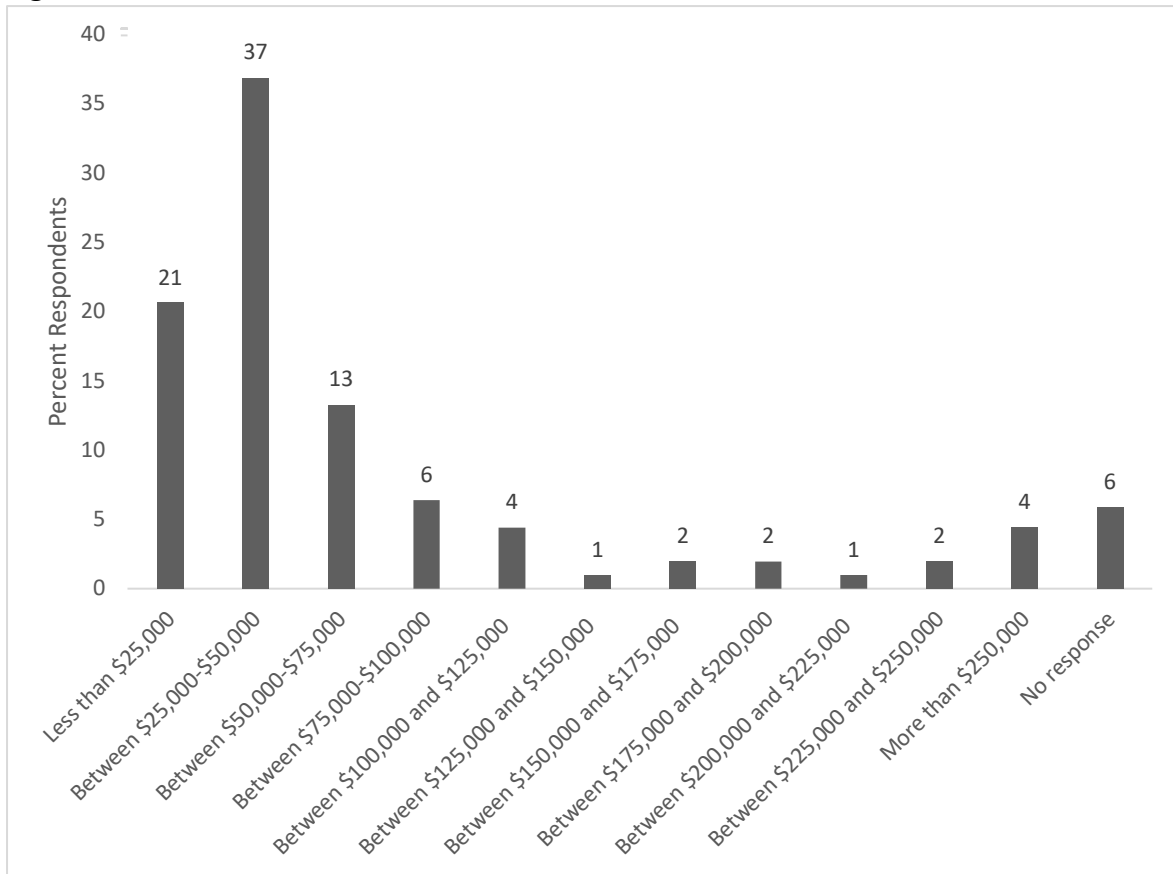
Close to 69% of respondents self-reported that they either have no or very little fluency in speaking English as well as in reading English, which confirms the respondents' view that it is very important that written and face-to-face communication occur in Vietnamese.

Figure 11: How often do your children help you translate important documents?



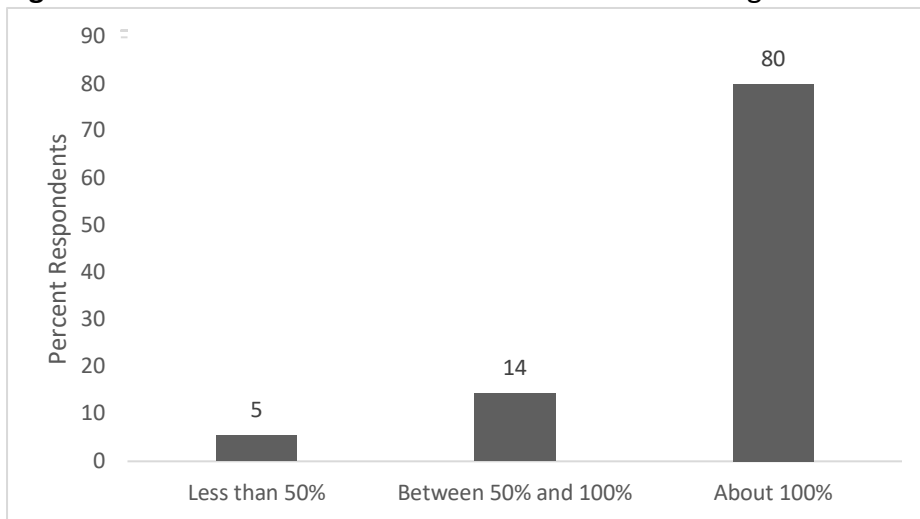
Slightly over half of the respondents with children never have their children translate important documents. Given previous responses on respondents' fluency in English, researchers may only speculate as to the reasons, such as relying on community organizations to assist with translations, accessing documents in Vietnamese, or children being too young to assist with translations.

Figure 12: Gross household income, 2016



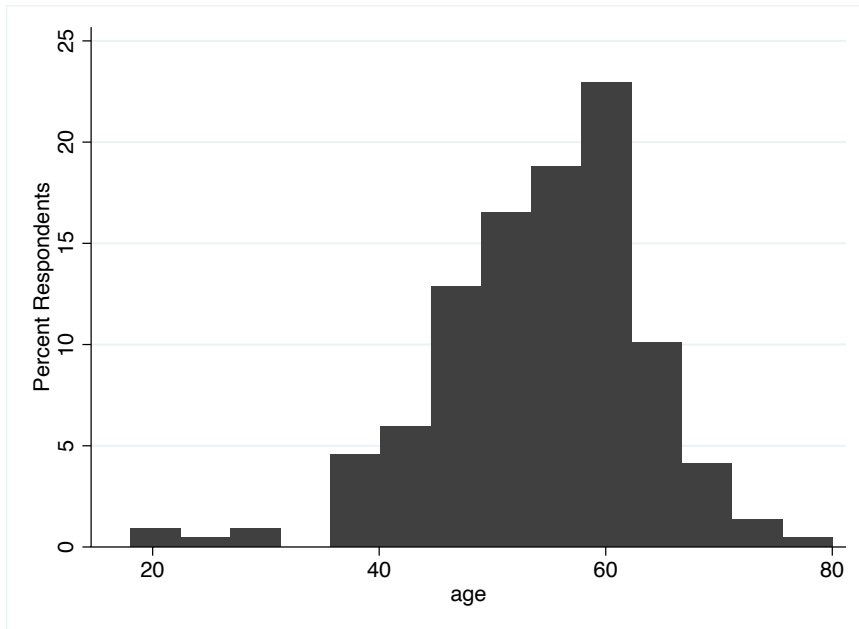
58% of respondents report a gross household income in 2016 of less than \$50,000.

Figure 13: Percent of 2016 household income from fishing



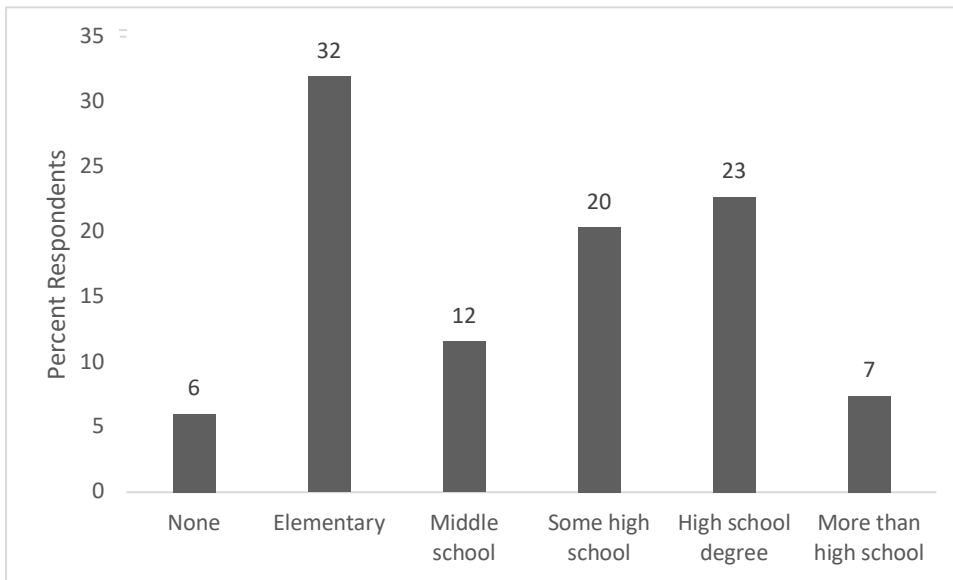
Approximately 80% of respondents derive their entire household income from fishing.

Figure 14: Age of respondents



The majority of respondents are between 50 and 65 years old, with a mean age of 54 years.

Figure 15: Educational level



Approximately 50% of respondents have less than a 9th grade education, with approximately 6% reporting no formal schooling at all.