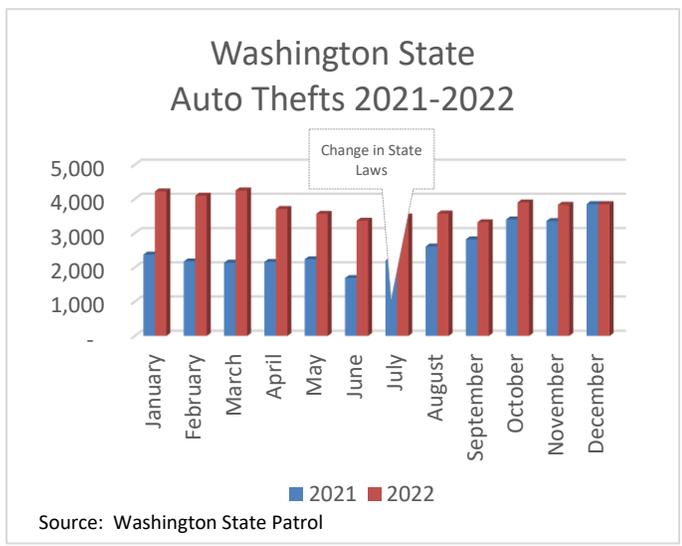




**Background:** The Washington Auto Theft Prevention Authority (WATPA) was established when the Elizabeth Novak-Washington Auto Theft Prevention Act ([E3SHB 1001](#)) was signed into law and became effective July 1, 2007.

## Washington ranks #6 nationally per capita

Normally the WATPA annual report to the Governor and Legislature is pedestrian. Over the past 18 months our state has been shaken by an auto theft crisis. Since July 2021 auto theft has increased per month, on average, by 61%. Overall, 2022 auto theft has increased by **45%** over 2021 and by **70%** over 2020. These increases are underscored by the dramatic increase in victimization to populations most vulnerable and reliant on their vehicles for family survival.



Auto theft rates per capita are arguably the most meaningful statistical metric when comparing where Washington stands on the national stage, because it measures thefts to population which creates a clearer picture of *opportunity*. Using data through 2021, Washington has risen from number **nine** to number **six** over the past three years. WATPA projects that Washington will move to number **four nationally**, per capita, using **2022** data trends.

| Per Capita Auto Thefts Per 100,000 Population |                 |                 |                 |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Ranking                                       | 2019            | 2020            | 2021            |
| 1   | NM - 448        | DC - 563        | CO - 661        |
| 2   | CA - 406        | CO - 502        | DC - 651        |
| 3   | DC - 405        | CA - 475        | CA - 511        |
| 4   | MO - 404        | MO - 454        | NM - 476        |
| 5   | NV - 395        | NM - 426        | OR - 471        |
| 6   | CO - 370        | OR - 385        | <b>WA - 462</b> |
| 7   | OR - 362        | OK - 371        | MO - 428        |
| 8   | OK - 340        | <b>WA - 368</b> | NV - 427        |
| 9   | <b>WA - 331</b> | NV - 366        | OK - 359        |
| 10  | AK - 326        | KS - 325        | TX - 320        |

Source: 2022 NICB Hotspot Report

## Factors influencing the auto theft crisis

In addition to raw data, there are other factors that have fueled the dramatic increase in auto theft over the past 18 months. Those include:

- Sentencing reform, including current proposed additional reductions in prison time for offenders. Any sentencing reduction effectively neutralizes accountability for criminal behavior.
- An exodus by police officers from Washington law enforcement, which has resulted in:
  - Police departments operating shorthanded and recalling their task force detectives to handle 911 calls in their home jurisdiction.
  - A dramatic decline in traffic infraction revenue which has resulted in two state budget infusions.
  - The Washington State Patrol re-assignment of all dedicated auto theft detectives.
- An awareness by criminals, amplified by social media, that law enforcement cannot pursue them for property crimes, which emboldens lawless behavior.
  - 2022 traffic fatalities are at a 25 year high<sup>1</sup>.
- The relaxation of drug laws and the relationship between illicit drug use and stolen vehicles by criminals feeding their addiction.

**Funding challenges:** The WATPA account is funded through a surcharge on traffic infractions where WATPA receives \$2.58 from every \$10 surcharge collected. WATPA was budgeted **\$5,551,000** for the 2021-2023 biennial grant period and ultimately awarded funding to three (3) task forces (see below) and the Clark County Prosecutors office. Because of a dramatic dip in traffic infraction revenue, the state allocated supplemental funding of \$4.5M over the past two years for WATPA to balance through the end of each biennium. Personnel and operating costs continue to increase and WATPA struggles to maintain existing levels of service across Washington while funding stays flat. We are proud of all WATPA funded resources. They have stayed the course and continue to do all they can to ensure auto theft investigation and prosecution is a priority in their regions despite ongoing challenges with staffing and competing criminal justice priorities.

**Puget Sound Auto Theft Task Force (PSATT):** WATPA funds one sergeant and six detectives for this task force that covers south King and Pierce counties. This is one task force that has been ravaged by agencies recalling their detectives. Currently four of the six detective positions are filled, and Puyallup PD has filled one of the vacancies on January 1, 2023. This task force has

<sup>1</sup> Washington State Traffic Safety Commission, 2022 projections.



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[www.WaAutoTheftPreventionAuthority.org](http://www.WaAutoTheftPreventionAuthority.org)

done amazing work with investigation, enforcement, and public outreach in 2022. Despite staffing shortages, the PSATT leadership team does a great job of keeping their team trained and motivated. Both sergeants report working with detectives that are creative and highly motivated to make an impact on the regional auto theft problem, which is significant in King and Pierce counties. This task force works well together and have executed two very successful auto theft emphasis in 2022. These emphases covered two shifts and resulted in 31 stolen vehicle recoveries and 13 arrests. Among the other significant cases was an operation in December where a 45-year-old Federal Way man stole heavy equipment and trailers from Eastern Washington and brought them back to Western Washington for use and sale. The year-long investigation resulted in the recovery of 18 vehicles, trailers, and pieces of heavy equipment from properties in Parkland, Kent, Federal Way, and Bellevue.

PSATT developed an updated theft prevention brochure, theft prevention posters and acquired anti-theft devices to give to the public at no charge. They increased social media exposure by bringing on a Pierce County Sheriff's Department's Social Media Specialist part time. PSATT participated in the International Association of Auto Theft Investigators "Theft Prevention Month" in July by providing brochures as well as NICB brochures at the WSP and the PCSD booths at the Washington State Fair in September. They ran additional theft prevention radio ads when the weather turned colder and initiated a "We Got Your Tow" campaign for stolen vehicles recovered and the owner had a financial hardship to pay the tow bill. PSATT has also facilitated static ads on Pierce Transit buses and participated in Renton's Battle of the Badge community event in December where they supplied brochures, stickers and steering wheel locking devices.

**Clark County Prosecutor:** This office has proved to be an excellent use of WATPA funds. The office was funded for one (1) prosecutor during the 2021-23 biennium, and we were able to fund a second prosecutor that started in September. Both prosecutors work exclusively on auto theft cases. This auto theft team does excellent work and out of 282 cases referred during the second half of 2022, they filed charges in 180 cases. Senior DPA Gregger Highberg states, "Despite ongoing efforts to manage the amount of vehicle crime cases I receive, law enforcement continues to refer more and more cases. This is where the second felony grant position has already made a noticeable difference on how we manage the caseload. With Christopher Glinski coming on board recently in the second position, I've felt an immediate impact these past few weeks: preparing more cases for trial; more frequently communicating with victims of these crimes; and trainings with our law enforcement agencies going forward."

**Snohomish County Auto Theft Task Force (SNOCAT):** SNOCAT is another agency hit hard with staffing challenges and was recently notified that WSP is recalling their sergeant for other work. Historically, SNOCAT has been staffed with one WSP sergeant, two Snohomish County detectives and one Marysville detective. The Marysville detective was recalled over one year ago and there are no short terms plans to fill this vacancy by another agency in Snohomish County. WATPA also funds one full-time prosecutor dedicated to auto theft. This position was

moved from .5 FTE to 1.0 FTE with supplemental funding in July of 2022.

SNOCAT reports that despite the unit being down staff, the team developed a major case earlier this year, in concert with the local drug task force, that resulted in seizure of 36 firearms (some stolen and some that were full auto), multiple stolen cars and motorcycles, and multiple pounds of narcotics packaged for sale. Detectives have actively worked auto theft cases that have extended into violent acts including homicide(s) and armed robbery and VUCSA cases involving methamphetamine and fentanyl trafficking.

**Spokane ATTF:** Spokane ATTF has also been hit hard by staffing challenges. At the start of the biennium, WATPA funded one detective and WSP assigned one sergeant and one detective to round out the task force. The WATPA Board added a second detective as part of July 2022 supplemental funding when the Stevens County Sheriff supplied a deputy to the operation. This is a significant reduction from where the task force once operated with five detectives, one crime analyst, and one sergeant. The WSP sergeant will retire in January and the lone remaining WSP detective has been recalled as part of a reassignment of auto theft detectives across Washington. This leaves the Spokane and Stevens County detectives as the last two task force members. These individuals are still working exclusively on auto theft but are supervised out of their home agency.

With limited resources, the number of cases the task force has developed is down substantially. Despite the lower-than-average case numbers, the task force was still able to develop several high-profile investigations. One case involved an organized theft ring responsible for multiple vehicle thefts from an auto dealership and also linked to the thefts of multiple vehicles from a local importer. Detectives also developed a case involving a suspect linked to at least four heavy equipment thefts throughout several eastern Washington counties. Throughout 2022 the Spokane ATTF has also provided investigative support to multiple local agencies, including, the Airway Heights Police Department, Pend Oreille County Sheriff's Office, Spokane County Sheriff's Office, and the Spokane Police Department.

**Supplemental Funding:** The proliferation of COVID and changes to state law has resulted in a significant decline in traffic infraction revenue. Consequently, the state contributed supplemental funding to the WATPA account at the end of the 2020 fiscal year (\$1m) and at the end of the 2021 fiscal year (\$3.5m). These supplements were primarily intended to maintain operations and potentially expand into several innovative programs. Approximately \$1.65m of the \$4.5m supplements have been earmarked for personnel (\$399,585), innovative programs (\$157,237), public outreach (\$610,000), and equipment/technology (\$478,356) to agencies across Washington. An excellent use of the supplemental funding is WATPA contracting with a local media relations company specializing in public outreach. We are hopeful that public outreach will act as a future force multiplier while working with local task forces and ultimately resolve that auto theft crisis in Washington.