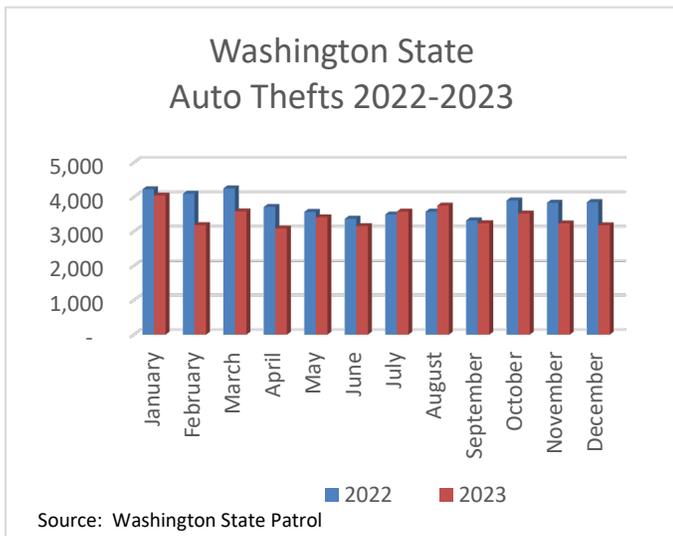


**Background:** The Washington Auto Theft Prevention Authority (WATPA) was established when the Elizabeth Novak-Washington Auto Theft Prevention Act ([E3SHB 1001](#)) was signed into law and became effective July 1, 2007.

### Washington ranks #3 nationally per capita

Between July of 2021 and December of 2023 Washington has been shaken by an auto theft crisis. Fortunately, the crisis in Washington experienced a 9% decline in 2023, over 2022, but are still unacceptably high compared to prior years. The [Kia Boyz](#) social media epidemic shook auto theft and other violent crimes in 2023 and are hopeful that several key arrests will abate the problem. Sadly, almost every Washingtonian has experienced dramatic increases in insurance premiums due to the rise in auto thefts and in some cases owners of certain vehicles (Kia/Hyundai) have been denied coverage by their insurance carrier.



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 2022, Washington has risen from number **nine** to number **three** over the past four years.

Ranking	2019	2020	2021	2022
1	NM - 448	DC - 563	CO - 661	CO - 731
2	CA - 406	CO - 502	DC - 651	DC - 700
3	DC - 405	CA - 475	CA - 511	<b>WA - 603</b>
4	MO - 404	MO - 454	NM - 476	OR - 540
5	NV - 395	NM - 426	OR - 471	NM - 540
6	CO - 370	OR - 385	<b>WA - 462</b>	CA - 520
7	OR - 362	OK - 371	MO - 428	MS - 482
8	OK - 340	<b>WA - 368</b>	NV - 427	NV - 480
9	<b>WA - 331</b>	NV - 366	OK - 359	TX - 350
10	AK - 326	KS - 325	TX - 320	TN - 337

Source: 2022 NICB Hotspot Report

**Funding challenges:** The WATPA account was funded through a surcharge on traffic infractions where WATPA receives \$2.58 from every \$10 surcharge collected. Our funding mechanism changed in the 2023 legislature where WATPA is now funded through proceeds from the Insurance Commissioner’s office. Unfortunately, even though the funding change was signed by the governor the state did not allocate a budget to support this change. WATPA has been budgeted **\$5,551,000** for the last several biennia, which when coupled with increased programmatic costs has resulted in a significant shortfall in the FY 2023-2024 WATPA budget. We are hopeful that this shortfall will be supported by a strong budget, authorized in the 2024 legislative session, that will allow us to restore FTE’s, advance emerging technologies, and grow our public education programs which provide the public with tools to avoid becoming an auto theft victim.

The following are anecdotes from many of our auto theft grant recipients that received WATPA monies in 2023. These events are a very small snapshot of the good work supported by WATPA resources in 2023.

**Puget Sound Auto Theft Task Force (PSATT):** WATPA funds one sergeant and five detectives for this task force that covers south King and Pierce counties. An additional detective was frozen during the first year of the biennium because of the shortfall referenced previously. Currently all five authorized positions are filled, and a sixth position is authorized starting on July 1, 2024. This task force continues to execute amazing work with investigation, multiple enforcement emphasis’, and creative public outreach and education campaigns in 2023.

Throughout 2023 PSATT has partnered with local cities and WSP in Pierce and King counties to conduct auto theft emphasis patrols on a quarterly, and often monthly, basis. These emphasis patrols have been hugely successful and result in numerous stolen auto recoveries and related arrests. The emphasis patrols underscore the problem with drivers of stolen cars fleeing from police when signaled to stop. In most of these emphasis patrols over 50% of all suspects contacted flee and further endanger the community during their flight from police. Numerous other instances of great auto theft investigation and enforcement work was submitted for consideration, but due to space limitations these incidents were not published.

PSATT continues to use Facebook/Instagram to interact with the community with public service announcements, prevention tips and soliciting tips to solve cases. PSATT has maintained a contract with KIRO Radio to air 15 second and 30 second PSA’s for the months of November & December, focusing on holiday shopping venues. PSATT distributed steering wheel locks that were donated by Hyundai and Kia Motors to owners of vulnerable Kia & Hyundai models, at no charge to the owners. PSATT paid tow bills for 5 victim vehicle owners under the “We Got Your Tow” program. PSATT participated in Renton’s Battle of the Badge Holiday event passing out stickers, theft prevention tip brochures and steering wheel locks.



**Clark County Prosecutor:** This office was funded for two prosecutors in 2023 that work exclusively on auto theft cases. This auto theft team does excellent work and during the 2023 calendar year they screened 683 referrals and filed charges in 506 cases. Clark County DPA's also provided approximately 8 hours of law enforcement training that covered patrol shift briefings taking place in August and September that focused on common evidentiary issues and promoted a collaborative dialogue to enable prosecutors to hold more offenders accountable.

**Snohomish County Auto Theft Task Force (SNOCAT):** The Snohomish County Auto Theft Task Force (SNOCAT) focuses on the geographical boundaries of Snohomish County, consisting of 2,090 square miles with a population of 862,343 and growing. During the second half of 2023 SNOCAT has been very limited with only one detective and one prosecutor who was out on leave for much of the second half of the year.

In spite of being a shorthanded, and a very small task force, the two detectives were involved in several noteworthy cases. In one case the task force worked with the Everett Anti-Crime Team and Gang unit investigating a "Kia Boyz" ring from Everett. A Kia boyz member was arrested after they stole a local vehicle and drove it to Seattle where they recorded themselves attempting to strike pedestrians while laughing prior to and follow their occurrence.

**Spokane ATTF:** The Spokane ATTF has been reduced to one detective from Spokane PD and one detective from Stevens County. This is a very challenging environment to monitor given that each detective is responsible to their respective agency and communication is very limited between the two agencies. Detective Betts (Spokane PD) was an integral part in the investigation where a 13- and 14-year-old were arrested for numerous stolen Kia/Hyundai vehicles and Ring Camera thefts. In just one 2-day crime spree the juveniles were in possession of 4 stolen vehicles, theft of 10 Ring cameras, and multiple car prowling incidents. Both were booked and held in custody and then placed on electronic home monitoring. KIA and Hyundai thefts have almost completely stopped since their arrests.

**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 2021 fiscal year (\$3.5m). This supplement was primarily intended to maintain operations, broaden public outreach, and potentially expand into several innovative programs using emerging technologies to combat auto theft.

**Public Outreach** WATPA launched an RFP and selected JayRay (Tacoma, WA) to develop and launch a "drive down auto theft" campaign across Washington through social media that ran from early March through the end of May 2023. The campaign ads were shown over 17 million times and experienced 71,900 clicks, where consumers actually clicked on the ads. Over 25% of viewers watched the entire YouTube video on auto theft prevention.

## Technology

**PSATT -** WATPA funds were used to purchase Flock technology, which is a stationary surveillance system that tracks vehicles and license plate information. Several officers/detectives have utilized this technology for very complex/high-profile investigations. During this reporting period, examples of cases where Flock has been successful include a home invasion robbery, a vulnerable adult/missing person case, a pedestrian fatality hit and run, and a double homicide case.

**Kent PD -** June 2023, the Flock technology system was searched for a vehicle and suspect involved in a double murder. A green sedan was located in the Flock system traveling in the vicinity around the time the murders occurred. Des Moines PD located the suspect inside of the green sedan less than a week later, and the suspect was arrested. In a separate case, Kent PD received a Flock notification for a missing person and responded to the area where the person's car was located. KPD contacted the driver, who was the missing person, and they were returned to family.

**Tri Cities -** For this reporting period the Flock technology continues to be utilized on almost a daily basis, region wide, in many circumstances, during multiple events. From January through October the City of Kennewick has experienced a 38% drop in reported auto thefts. Flock cameras are allowing us to track stolen vehicles and patrol staff and detectives utilize Flock more actively with almost all high priority investigation and most auto theft/recovery investigations.

**Redmond PD and Cowlitz County SO -** received pilot grant funding for Starchase technology. This technology allows officers to safely deploy a GPS tag which allows them to safely surveil suspect vehicles, using GPS technology, at a safe distance negating many vehicle pursuits. Both agencies report many successful applications of this technology that have led to arrests of dangerous criminals that had initially fled from police. Both agencies report that the initial pilot funding led to the agency purchasing additional Starchase units for their agency.

## Conclusion

Although Washington experienced a modest decline in auto theft during 2023, over 2022, auto crimes remain a significant threat to public and community safety. Theft of Kia and Hyundai vehicles, glamorized by the social media darlings "Kia Boyz", has resulted in some insurance companies beginning to issue blanket decline of insurance coverages on these vehicles. The citizens who suffer most from these actions are families struggling to survive under Washington's difficult economic conditions. This underscores the need for and importance of WATPA moving forward. During the 2023 legislative session we were authorized a new funding stream that still needs an approved budget. If provided a budget during the 2024 session we will commit to amplified deployment of innovative technologies, enhanced public outreach and education, aggressive prosecution, and effective investigation and enforcement of auto crime laws. We invite support for WATPA funding through and approved budget from all elected officials during the 2024 legislative session.