

Trends in Felony Crime in Washington State and Related Taxpayer Costs

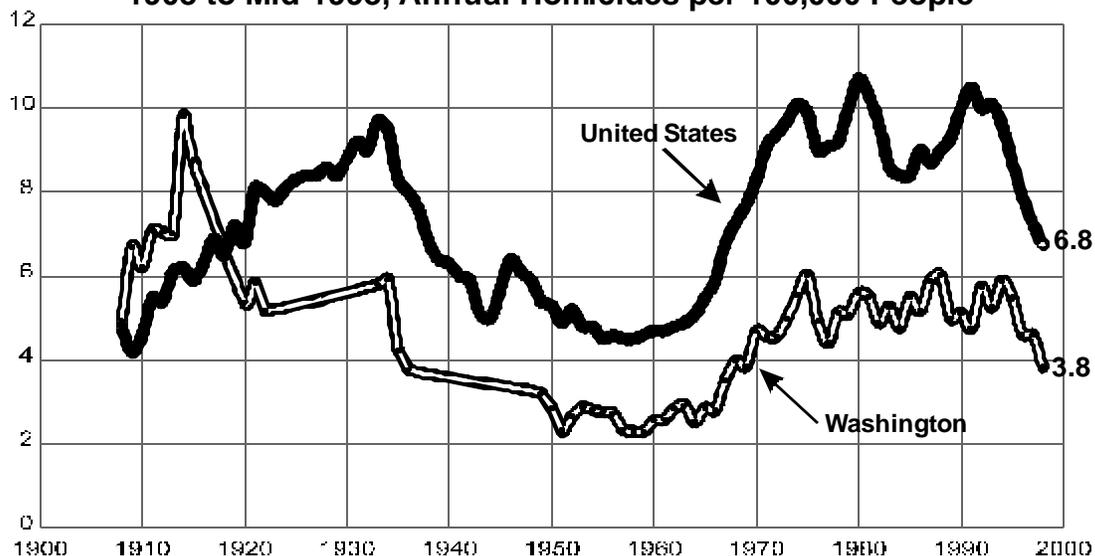
The Washington State legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to evaluate the costs and benefits of certain criminal justice policies and violence-prevention programs. As part of this activity, the Institute analyzes the overall level of crime in Washington. This report highlights those “big picture” trends.

Murder Rates in the 20th Century

Figure 1 compares the long-term trends in deaths by homicide in Washington and the United States. Three findings emerge from this history:

1. **The murder rate has declined in Washington and the United States.** Based on data through mid-1998, Washington’s current murder rate is 35 percent below the 1994 rate. The national rate fell 30 percent during the same period.¹
2. **Washington’s murder rate is lower than the national average.** For most of this century, Washington has been a safer place than the nation as a whole. Washington’s current homicide rate is 44 percent lower than national average.
3. **Murder rates were higher early this century.** Murder rates have fluctuated considerably over the course of the 20th century. While the earlier data are less reliable, it appears that homicide rates were higher in the first few decades of the century than they are today. The 1950s and early 1960s had the lowest homicide rates.

**Figure 1: Murder Rates in the United States and Washington:
1908 to Mid-1998, Annual Homicides per 100,000 People**



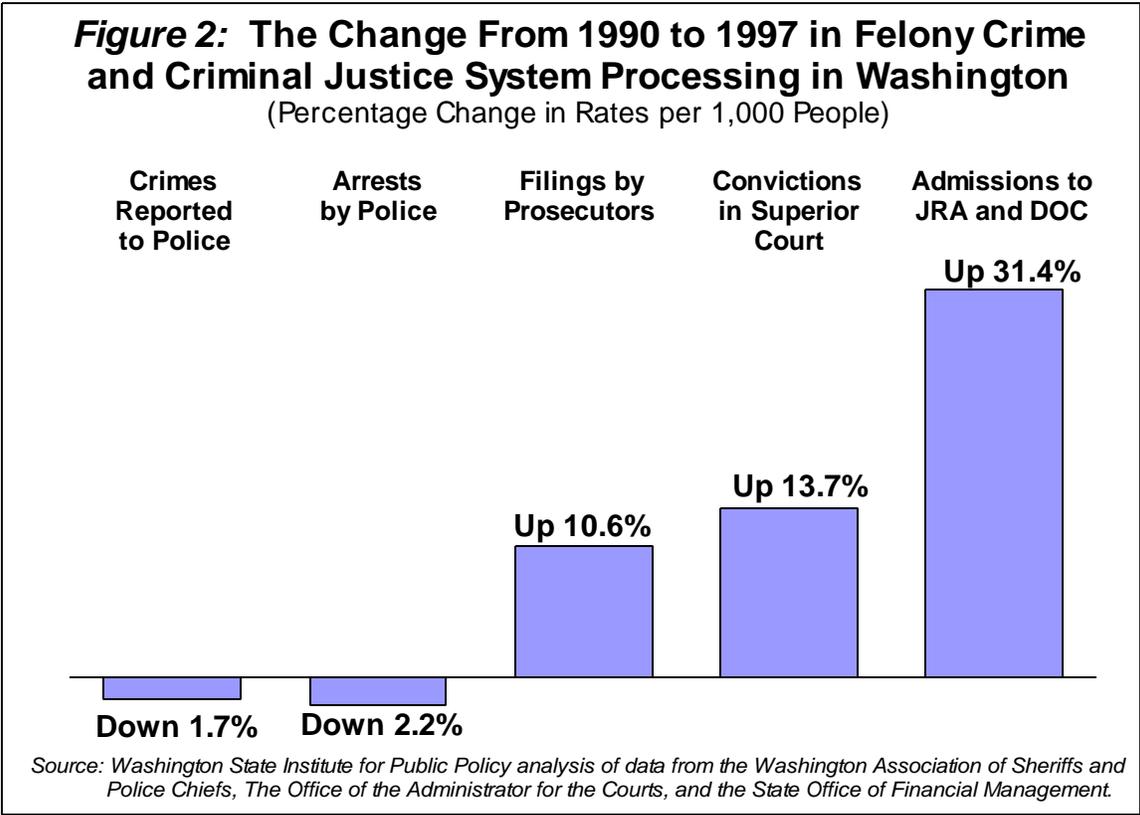
Source: United States and Washington Vital Statistics. Some of the data for Washington between 1916 and 1948 are interpolated estimates made by the Institute. Annualized US and WA 1998 data are also estimates made by the Institute.

¹ Trends in murder are commonly expressed as rates per 100,000 people. For example, in 1994 there were 314 homicides in Washington—about 5.9 for every 100,000 people in the state. Based on half-year estimates for 1998, the current annual rate is 3.8 per 100,000 people. Thus, Washington’s current murder rate is 35 percent below the 1994 rate.

Felony Crime and Conviction Rates in Washington Since 1990

Figure 1 provided information on the most serious of all crimes, murder. This section describes trends in Washington for **all** felony crimes and covers juvenile and adult felony crime combined. Figure 2 shows the change in total felony crime at different stages in the criminal justice system from 1990 to 1997, the latest year for which comparable data are available.²

1. **Overall, felony crime and arrest rates have declined this decade.** Since 1990 in Washington, the rate of total reported felony crime has declined 1.7 percent. Similarly, the arrest rate for felony crimes per 1,000 people is down 2.2 percent.
2. **Felony filing and conviction rates have increased.** While total felony crime and arrest rates in Washington have declined since 1990, the rates of felony prosecutions and felony convictions have increased. From 1990 to 1997, the felony conviction rate per 1,000 people increased 13.7 percent.
3. **Admission rates to state correctional facilities have increased.** The increase in the rate of felony convictions, when combined with changed sentencing laws, caused the admission rate to state juvenile and adult facilities to increase by 31.4 percent from 1990 to 1997.



² Felony offenses in Washington include the violent crimes of murder, sex offenses, robbery, and aggravated assault; the property crimes of burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft; and drug crimes that include a variety of controlled-substance offenses. Reported crime and arrest data come from the police; filing and conviction data come from the superior courts; and data on the admissions to state correctional facilities come from the Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration and the Department of Corrections. To make the reported crime and arrest data more closely reflect the *felony* filing, conviction, and admission data, the Institute adjusted the reported crime and arrest data by including arrests for other sex offenses and drug offenses and excluding a portion of larceny property crimes that are misdemeanors, not felonies.

Adult and Juvenile Felony Arrests Since 1983, by Type of Crime

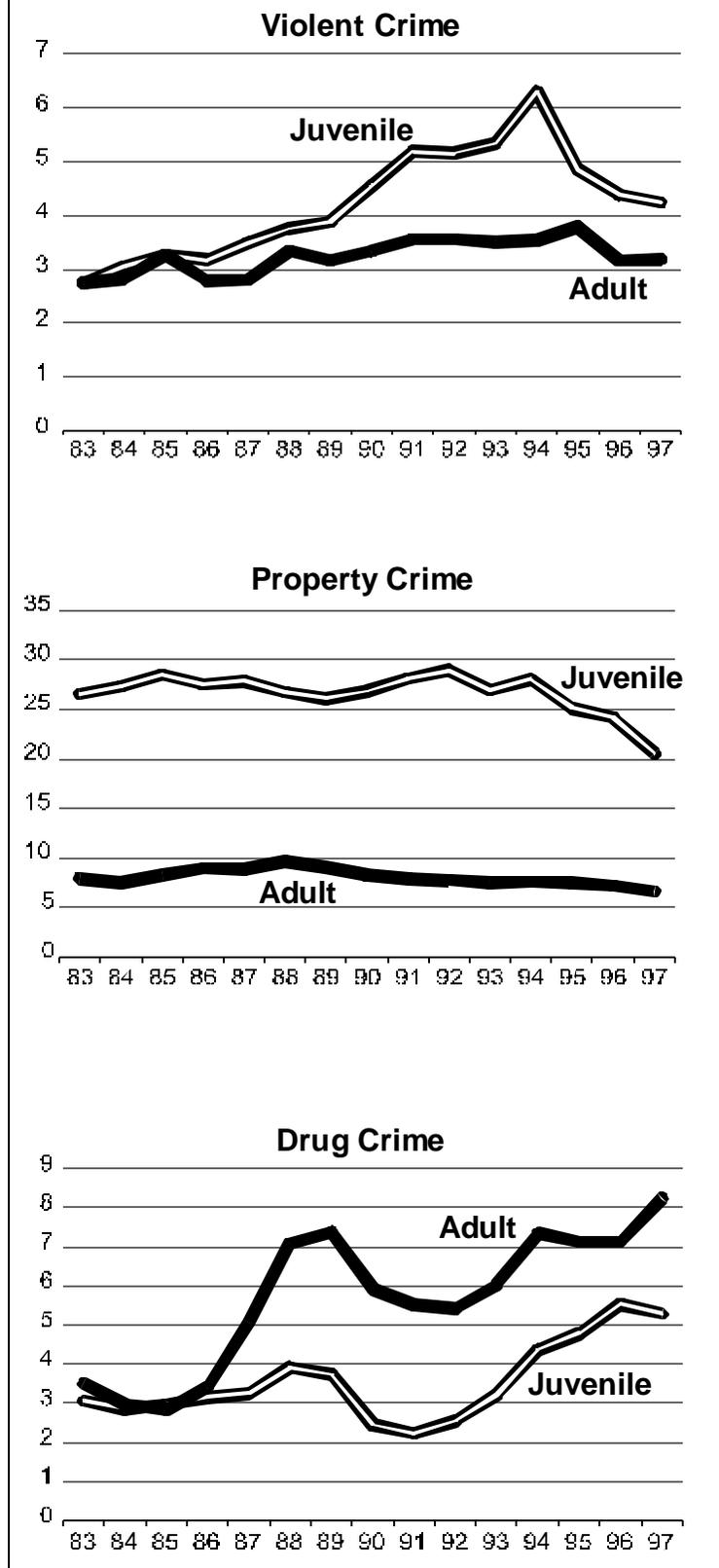
Figure 2 described the overall trends in Washington for all felony crimes for both juveniles and adults combined. This section discusses trends in three particular classes of felony crime: violent crime, property crime, and drug crime. Arrest data are used for each class of crime to isolate long-term differences between juveniles and adults.

Violent Crime Is Down. The first panel of Figure 3 shows that the arrest rate for violent offenses (murder, sex offenses, robbery, and aggravated assault) has dropped substantially for juveniles since 1994. The rate in 1997—about 4.2 arrests per 1,000 juveniles 10 to 17 years old—hasn't been as low since 1989. Adult violent crime arrest rates are down too but, because they did not increase as sharply in the early 1990s, their fall has not been as dramatic as juvenile rates.

Property Crime Is Down. The second panel of Figure 3 indicates that arrests for property offenses (burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft) have also been declining in the last few years. Juvenile property crime arrest rates have always been much higher than adult rates. Since 1990, however, the difference has been reduced as the juvenile property crime arrest rate fell 23 percent.

Drug Crime Is Up. The third panel of Figure 3 shows that the arrest rate for drug offending, unlike those for violent and property crimes, has been increasing. The juvenile rate fell slightly in 1997 but the adult rate continued its upward trend. Overall, between 1990 and 1997, adult rates increased 39 percent while juvenile rates rose 116 percent, more than doubling in the 1990s.

Figure 3: Juvenile and Adult Felony Arrest Rates: 1983 to 1997
(Number of Arrests in Washington per 1,000 10- to 17-Year-Old Juveniles, or 18- to 49-Year-Old Adults)

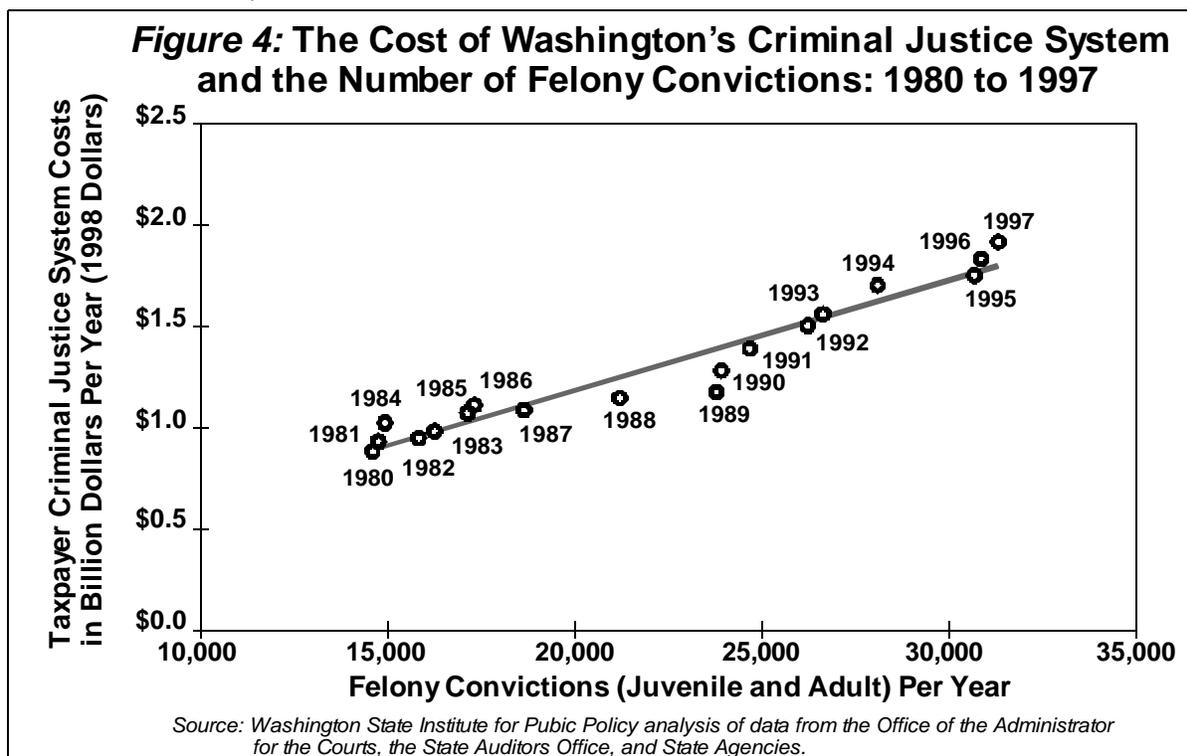


Taxpayer Costs for the Criminal Justice System in Washington

Crime and the criminal justice system impose costs on the people of Washington. In addition to the pain, suffering, and out-of-pocket costs incurred by the victims of crime, taxpayers fund a criminal justice system that includes police, criminal courts, prosecutors, public defenders, local juvenile detention facilities and probation, local adult jails and probation, and state juvenile and adult institutions and community programs.

Criminal Justice Costs Increased Substantially in the 1990s. In 1997, the criminal justice system in Washington cost taxpayers about 1.9 billion dollars. For the average household in Washington, expressed in today's dollars, the cost of the criminal justice system grew from \$683 per household in 1990 to \$885 in 1997. This change represents an average "real" increase of 3.8 percent per year during the 1990s (that is, 3.8 percent per year *above* the general rate of inflation). By way of contrast, during the 1980s, real per household criminal justice costs increased half as fast, at 1.8 percent per year.

The Increase in Convictions and Related Sentencing Determinations Have Driven Criminal Justice Costs Higher. The growth in criminal justice costs in the 1990s reflects, to a significant degree, the increased rate at which felony offenders are prosecuted, convicted, and sentenced. *Figure 2* showed that while felony crime and arrest rates have fallen this decade, conviction rates and admission rates to state correctional facilities have increased. *Figure 4* indicates how criminal justice costs are related to the number of felony convictions in the state. Each point on the chart represents a given year's combination of the taxpayer cost of the criminal justice system and the number of felony convictions. There is a strong historical relationship: as convictions increase, so do costs.



For information, contact Steve Aos: phone (360) 586-2740; e-mail: saos@wsipp.wa.gov

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Washington State Institute for Public Policy

The Washington Legislature created the Washington State Institute for Public Policy in 1983. A Board of Directors—representing the legislature, the governor, and public universities—governs the Institute and guides the development of all activities. The Institute's mission is to carry out practical research, at legislative direction, on issues of importance to Washington State.

