

# **WASHINGTON AUTO THEFT PREVENTION AUTHORITY**

WASHINGTON ASSOCIATION OF SHERIFFS AND POLICE CHIEFS

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

*"preventing and reducing motor vehicle thefts in the State of Washington."*



January 29, 2021

Honorable Members of the Washington State Legislature

RE: Washington Auto Theft Prevention Authority (WATPA) 2020 Annual Report

Attached please find the 2020 annual report for the Washington Auto Theft Prevention Authority (the report can also be accessed online at <https://www.waautotheftpreventionauthority.org>). You will find that 2020 was a very active year for WATPA as we once again encouraged and provided tools and resources to local law enforcement and prosecution across Washington to make auto theft a priority in their communities. 2020 as a tough year for most communities with the challenges of the pandemic, but we were also challenged with almost a 14% increase in auto theft where 3,099 victims lost the use of their cars, trucks and equipment.

Auto crimes continue to plague our communities and Washington is ranked #4 nationally and number 1 in states with population between 5 million and 15 million in auto theft. This underscores the need to dedicate ongoing resources to enforcement, prevention and prosecution. WATPA continues to support and encourage local law enforcement and prosecutors to develop and execute creative enforcement, prosecution and public outreach strategies to ultimately eliminate auto theft in our communities. Funding has remained flat for WATPA over the past six years and we are asking that the WATPA account be fully funded and used exclusively for ongoing auto theft education, prevention, enforcement and prosecution in the next biennium.

Out of respect for the time of all elected officials, our 2020 annual report is concise and limited to two pages. The report provides only a snapshot of auto theft data and regional anecdotes that represent the good work, law enforcement efforts and public education across the state of Washington. We pledge to make the best use of state resources during the 2019-21 biennium by being one of the most effective and efficient auto theft authorities in America. Thank you for your continued support.

If you have questions regarding our annual report, I am happy to discuss with you at any time. Please call or email me at [mpainter@waspc.org](mailto:mpainter@waspc.org) or (360) 292-7959.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Painter".

**MICHAEL PAINTER, Executive Director**  
Washington Auto Theft Prevention Authority

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*Washington Auto Theft Prevention Authority*

**JOHN BATISTE**  
Chief – WA State Patrol

**JAMES SKOGMAN**  
Insurance Industry

**GARY SIMPSON**  
Sheriff – Kitsap County

**KEN HOHENBERG**  
Chief—Kennewick

**RICK SCOTT**  
Sheriff – Grays Harbor County

**JOHN MARTIN**  
General Public

**STEVE STRACHAN**  
Executive Director - WASPC

**VACANT**  
Prosecuting Attorney

**VACANT**  
Chief

**VACANT**  
Automobile Industry

**MICHAEL PAINTER**  
Executive Director - WATPA



# 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

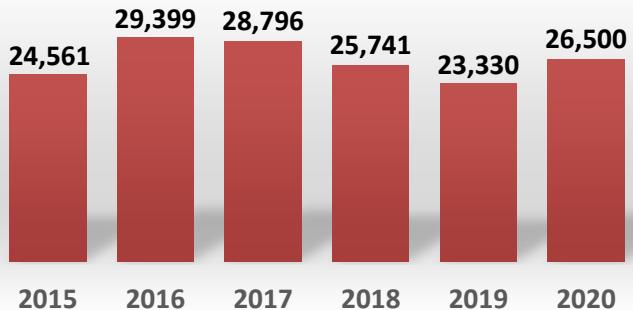
[www.WaAutoTheftPreventionAuthority.org](http://www.WaAutoTheftPreventionAuthority.org)

**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 remains at #4 nationally**

Each year we compare Washington's overall auto theft ranking, using total numbers of auto theft, against all other states. The data always runs one year behind because of variances in data submission by each state. Using the data from 2019, Washington continues to rank as having the 4<sup>th</sup> highest total numbers of auto theft compared to all other 50 states. We know that the auto theft numbers declined from 2018 to 2019, but using current (2020) data supplied by the Washington State Patrol, auto theft in 2020 **increased** by over 13% with 26,520 cars stolen in Washington.

### **Stolen Vehicles 2015-20**



As of 2019 (the most current year for FBI statistics) Washington remains one of the top states for auto theft. Washington's population is 7.65M and in states with population between 5m and 15m residents Washington remains ranked #1 in both total number and per capita auto theft. Even with the 2020 increases we believe Washington's numbers will not change our rankings in either category and there is little chance we will overtake the number three (3) ranked state (Florida) at 39,048.

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
1	CA	CA	CA	CA	CA	CA
2	TX	TX	TX	TX	TX	TX
3	FL	FL	FL	FL	FL	FL
4	WA	WA	WA	WA	WA	WA
5	GA	GA	GA	GA	GA	GA
6	MI	IL	MI	CO	CO	CO
7	OH	OH	IL	IL	TN	MO
8	AZ	MO	OH	OH	OH	TN
9	IL	AZ	CO	MO	MO	IL
10	MO	CO	AZ	MI	IL	OH

*Source: 2019 DOJ FBI Uniform Crime Reports*

**Funding History:** 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 2019-2021 grant period and awarded funding to three (3) task forces (see below) and the Clark County Prosecutors office. By comparison, funding during WATPA's inception (2007-2009) was **\$12,322,000** and funded ten (10) auto theft task forces and supplied smaller grants to 11 *individual* agencies ranging from \$7,000 to \$160,000. Funding has been diluted over the life of the program by funding other programs unrelated to auto theft, but has remained relatively stable since 2013, at approximately \$5,500,000 per biennium. However, periodic surcharge shortfalls and increased personnel costs has created a structural deficit where historic low numbers of FTE's, equipment and training were funded in 2019-2021 biennium while statewide auto theft increased by 13% in 2020.

## **2020 Accomplishments**

### **Snohomish County Auto Theft (SNOCAT) Task Force (Everett and North Puget Sound area):**

The goal of the Snohomish County Auto Theft Task Force (SnoCAT) is to reduce vehicle theft and other associated crimes in and around Snohomish County. SnoCAT continues to focus on auto theft investigations, proactive enforcement, decreasing victim impact and increasing public awareness. Snohomish County continues to experience the third highest rate of stolen vehicles among the 39 Counties in Washington State behind King and Pierce Counties.

SNOCAT continues to utilize Facebook and Twitter to interact with the community in which we serve. SNOCAT's Twitter page (@SnoCoAutoTheft) has 1,562 verified followers. SnoCAT utilizes @SnoCoAutoTheft for vehicle theft prevention, public outreach, and case investigation. SnoCAT continues to expand its use of Twitter and other social media platforms to identify auto theft suspects.

In May, the SnoCAT detectives initiated an investigation in the city of Arlington involving known female and unknown male suspects that were using a stolen vehicle. While driving the stolen vehicle to a nearby gas station, the suspects were arrested. SnoCAT detectives noted the male suspect had been arrested just ten (days) earlier in another stolen vehicle. The suspect stated he had eight "open" auto theft cases pending.

In October, SnoCAT detectives were called out to assist Snohomish County Sheriff's Office with a burglary of a local fire station by an unidentified male. A wallet and vehicle keys were stolen from the fire station Captain's personal belongs. The suspect fled the scene with the Captain's vehicle later abandoning it in the city of Marysville. The suspect was detained by Marysville PD, and turned over to detectives from SnoCAT. The suspect had past auto theft convictions resulting in prison time.

## **Puget Sound Auto Theft Task Force (PSATT) – King and Pierce Counties**

PSATT is assigned to the busiest auto theft region in the State of Washington, with an emphasis on South King County and Pierce County. The PSATT detectives are considered subject matter experts and are called upon to provide assistance by agencies within and outside their region of responsibility. Detectives provide investigative training on auto theft detection to investigators and patrol officers from their stakeholder departments.

PSATT continues to use the social media platform, Facebook, to interact with regional communities, provide public service messaging, solicit auto theft tips and showcase recoveries. PSATT's contract with KIRO radio allows for the airing of 15 to 30 second PSAs giving public tips to prevent auto theft and how to provide the task force with tips. The PSAs are regularly aired through the duration of the grant cycle.

In late 2019 to early 2020, PSATT detectives investigated a prolific career criminal residing in the city of Puyallup. The investigation culminated with search warrants being executed by task force detectives resulting in multiple arrests and convictions for auto theft and auto theft related crimes.

In October 2020, Puyallup PD and the Thurston County Sheriff's Office requested the assistance of PSATT regarding a prolific career criminal with ties to auto theft (vehicles, boat motors, trailers, firearms). Detectives developed probable cause, served 10 search warrants and recovered 11 firearms, thousands of rounds of ammunition, 3 fishing boats with trailers, 7 outboard motors and 3 motor vehicles (\$185,000 of recovered value).

Detectives assisted the Federal Way Police Department with a problem property with multiple stolen vehicles, drug activity and a near fatal shooting occurring on the property. The lead detective's ability to converse in Spanish was extremely helpful to the investigation, which resulted in four (4) individuals charged with multiple felony crimes and over 20 stolen vehicles recovered.

Detectives continue to work on heavy equipment rental thefts from Home Depots in Tacoma, Silverdale and Bothell. Working with Home Depot and local law enforcement, Detectives have learned that specialized equipment is frequently rented from these businesses then immediately offered for sale on OfferUp and Craigslist. The suspects that are from the Michigan area are doing similar crime across the U.S.

### **Spokane Police Department (Spokane metro area and northeast Washington):**

The majority of the auto thefts that continue to occur throughout Spokane County are a crime of opportunity, where vehicles are stolen and used as simple modes of transportation and/or to commit additional crimes. A significant number of these auto thefts can be attributed to the vehicles being left unattended while running or are left with the keys inside the vehicle.

In early November, Spokane City experienced a spike in auto thefts. The Spokane Police Department, in conjunction with the Spokane Regional Auto Theft Task Force, drafted a media release, which outlined WATPA's *Layered Approach* to help residents avoid becoming a victim of auto theft. The media release also encouraged residents to not leave their vehicle's unattended while warming up.

In November, a 2017 Passat, along with three key fobs to new Ford F150's, were stolen from a dealership in the Spokane Valley. Within hours of the theft, the vehicle was involved in a collision in Adams County and the driver was apprehended. Task force detectives adopted the investigation and was able to obtain video surveillance from the dealership that confirmed the driver was the same suspect who initially stole the Passat. A search warrant was executed for the subject's backpack and was able to locate the stolen key fobs. Multiple felony charges were filed in Spokane County.

### **Clark County Prosecutor's Office**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 calendar year was extremely abnormal. Jury trials were suspended in Clark County for the vast majority of the year, and very few defendants requested a bench trial. Law enforcement also cancelled non-essential trainings and there were fewer opportunities to meet investigating officers in person to discuss cases. Despite these setbacks, the auto theft prosecutor still had a number of higher profile auto theft defendants enter guilty pleas with agreed recommendations for prison sentences.

In January, the Ridgefield Police Department and the La Center Police Department invited the assigned Clark County prosecutor to conduct refresher trainings on stolen vehicle prosecutions. Both law enforcement partners expressed appreciation for the provided case law updates, as well as the provided suggestions about how to strengthen investigations overall.

### **Fall 2020 sentencing highlights:**

- In November, a serial car thief (with an offender score of 35) entered a guilty plea to Theft of a Motor Vehicle, Possession of a Stolen Motor Vehicle, PCS – Heroin, and Attempted Burglary 2. The defendant agreed to a 43-month sentence and nearly \$14,000 in restitution for the victims.
- In December, a defendant accepted an agreed recommendation for a 63-month prison sentence for Theft of a Motor Vehicle and Identity Theft 1. That defendant had purchased vehicles from auto dealerships in several counties under a stolen identity.

### **Value added support to Washington Criminal Justice agencies beyond task force and prosecutorial funding**

- **Puyallup PD** was issued a mini-grant in 2019 for the purchase of an Automated License Plate reader (ALPR). In 2020 operators of the ALPR have recovered seven (7) stolen vehicles, two (2) of which were occupied with suspects.