

## WASHINGTON AUTO THEFT PREVENTION AUTHORITY

WASHINGTON ASSOCIATION OF SHERIFFS AND POLICE CHIEFS  
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*"preventing and reducing motor vehicle thefts in the State of Washington."*



January 21, 2022

Honorable Members of the Washington State Legislature

RE: Washington Auto Theft Prevention Authority (WATPA) 2021 Annual Report

Attached please find the 2021 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 2021 was an 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 reduction a priority in their communities. Auto theft, and auto theft related crimes including catalytic converter thefts, increased remarkably over the last 5 months of 2021. Auto theft increased by over 100% during these months (over the previous seven months) and on average increased over 50% per month when compared to 2020. In many cases these crimes invited crime victimization to disadvantaged groups that rely on their cars for transportation to work and other critical appointments. Auto theft in Washington, per capita, is ranked #5 nationally and #1 in states with population between 7 million and 15 million. 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. Unfortunately, WATPA funding has remained flat and expenses have increased which creates a structural deficit where we are able to fund incrementally fewer resources each biennium.

Out of respect for the time of all elected officials, our 2021 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 2021-23 biennium by being one of the most effective and efficient auto theft authorities in America.

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,

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*

**JOHN GESE**  
*Sheriff – Kitsap County*

**KEN HOHENBERG**  
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**VACANT**  
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**MICHAEL PAINTER**  
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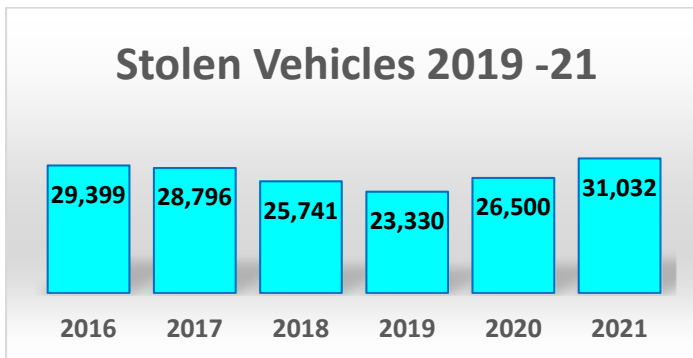
# 2021 ANNUAL REPORT

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 on July 1, 2007.

### Washington ranks at #5 nationally

Each year we compare Washington’s progress toward reducing auto theft by comparing data over the previous 5 years. Using current (2021) data supplied by the Washington State Patrol, auto theft **increased 17%** in 2021 with 31,032 cars stolen vs. 26,520 in 2020.



When examining the data more closely, Washington auto theft has exploded during the last 5 months of 2021. From August through December, auto theft increased from 2,141 cars stolen per month to 3,209 cars stolen per month. This change represents a 50% increase in stolen cars per month from the previous 7-month averages. This change is unprecedented and leads to the highest (annual) number of stolen cars in Washington since WATPA started work in 2007.

From a national perspective Washington dropped one place to #5 for the most cars stolen. **For states with population between 7.5m and 15m residents, Washington ranks #1 per capita with 368 cars stolen per 100,000 residents.**<sup>1</sup> Amplified by the increases during the last five months of 2021, and unless abated in 2022, Washington will easily return to #4 and will threaten Florida for the #3 national stolen car ranking.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
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	CO
5	GA	GA	GA	GA	GA	WA
6	IL	MI	CO	CO	CO	GA
7	OH	IL	IL	TN	MO	MO
8	MO	OH	OH	OH	TN	IL
9	AZ	CO	MO	MO	IL	TN
10	CO	AZ	MI	IL	OH	NC

**Source: 2020 DOJ FBI Uniform Crime Reports**

<sup>1</sup> 2020 National Insurance Crime Bureau “Hot Spots” report

**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 biennial grant period and ultimately awarded funding to three (3) task forces (see below) and the Clark County Prosecutors office. By comparison, funding during WATPA’s first biennium (2007) 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 re-appropriated over the life of the program and has been flat at \$5.5m/biennium since 2013. Conversely, personnel and operating costs have increased and have functionally created a structural deficit where historic low numbers of FTE’s, equipment, and training were funded in the 2021-23 biennium while auto theft increased dramatically in the last 5 months of 2021.

### 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. The population of Snohomish County continues to increase annually and so does the density of criminals and potential victims. SnoCAT receives WATPA funding for one (1) supervisor, three (3) detectives and reduced funding to a .50 FTE prosecutor.

SnoCAT actively works to improve the unit’s social media presence. Twitter is the primary social media platform (@SnoCoAutoTheft) and has 1,613 verified followers. Twitter is used to supply vehicle theft prevention information, public outreach and promotion, and case investigation. SnoCAT recently began utilizing Facebook and currently has 1,557 followers and 1,469 likes. SnoCAT also exercised two (15 to 30) second advertisements that ran in May. The total audience for the campaign was 389,095.

An example of the exceptional work of SnoCAT detectives is a case where they initiated an organized identity theft investigation with three main suspects. The suspects created high quality fake identifications and stole motor vehicles by means of fraudulently renting vehicles under the fake identities. The suspects were also associated with the fraudulent purchase of more than 15 iPhones and other high-end retail thefts. Detectives identified a principal suspect who was interviewed and provided an audio/video recorded confession. The suspect is cooperating by providing information on the sophisticated crime enterprise.

### 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. King and Pierce counties lead the state in auto theft cases. Over the four-day 2021 Thanksgiving weekend, Pierce County experienced 43 stolen cars with 19 of those cars

stolen in an isolated incident from one (1) dealership in Frederickson.

PSATT enjoys WATPA funding for one (1) agency supervisor and six (6) detectives. Task force supervisors select the most dedicated and innovative investigators who are considered subject matter experts and are often called upon for assistance by agencies within and outside of King and Pierce counties. In 2021, Detectives recovered 35 vehicles with a combined value of \$715,000.

Examples of superior investigative teamwork include a case where PSATT detectives followed up with a tip line lead that reported a brand-new semi-tractor poorly parked near an apartment complex. Detectives contacted the registered owner (a local business) who was unaware the truck was stolen. The prime suspect was arrested in another stolen vehicle that fled from law enforcement and fired shots at pursuing officers. Detectives filed multiple charges on the prolific suspect in Pierce County who had continuously victimized community members.

Puyallup PD consulted PSATT detectives after a truck, trailer and high valued classic car were stolen from their city. Detectives quickly tracked down information that led to Milton where the classic car was seen being pushed into a wooded area with suspects still on scene. Detectives developed information that led to the recovery of the truck and trailer as well as two other vehicles and obtained several search warrants. Ultimately, five vehicles and two stolen firearms were recovered by detectives.

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

The Spokane Regional Auto Theft Task Force (SRATTF) includes one Washington State Patrol (WSP) Sergeant, one WSP Detective, and one (1) WATPA funded Detective from the Spokane Police Department (SPD). SRATTF remains a resource available to law enforcement agencies throughout eastern Washington with emphasis in the Spokane region.

The task force continues to operate with just two detectives, which is far from the six detectives the task force had assigned in 2019. Regrettably, these vacancies will most likely not be filled in the foreseeable future due to staffing reductions across law enforcement in the region. The number of cases and physical arrests are down considerably, however, the task force has still been able to focus on some of the region's most active auto theft suspects.

Examples of the superior work of this task force involves both public outreach and prevention and superior investigative work. Detectives continue to supply anti-theft devices to residents that own vehicles that are classified as "high risk" cars that are frequently targeted by auto thieves. Notices are published throughout the year encouraging owners of these vehicles to contact task force members, supply proof of ownership, and receive one of the devices.

Superior case work includes a case where a victim received notification that his residence was being burglarized. While driving home he passed his work truck being driven by the

criminal. Detectives adopted the case, recovered the vehicle and charged the suspect.

Several other cases were adopted by task force detectives involving fraud, auto theft or auto theft related crimes. Many of these cases involved multiple separate incidents that were ultimately referred to the task force for investigation and charging of suspects.

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

Clark County Prosecutor's office is the only prosecution position fully funded by WATPA. The position is dedicated solely to auto theft and screens every auto theft referral that comes through the office. The position is value added and not only routinely handles auto theft prosecutions but reaches out to local law enforcement to conduct auto theft training that assists agencies with case development and ultimately successful prosecution of prolific auto theft suspects.

In January 2021, vehicle theft investigation training was conducted for all new detectives at the Clark County Sheriff's Office. The training highlighted recurring problems that we face in prosecuting vehicle felonies, as well as a current case law update. This training was repeated for the Cowlitz Tribal Police Department in June 2021. Since completing these trainings, there has been a noticeable increase in the quality of investigations from these agencies. Additional training will be offered across Clark County in 2022.

In 2021, the Clark County Prosecutor's office received 276 cases for review and filed criminal charges in 148 of those cases. This resulted in 94 plea bargains, 1 guilty verdict, 36 prison terms, and 54 jail terms.

### **Other WATPA related information of note:**

**Puyallup Police Department** – One WATPA funded license plate reader (LPR) was issued to Puyallup PD in 2019 through a WATPA mini-grant. In 2021 officers recovered five (5) stolen vehicles where three (3) of the vehicles were unoccupied and to (2) were occupied and two (2) stolen license plates were recovered where the vehicle owners were not aware their plates were stolen, The LPR also hit on a vehicle wanted in a murder investigation and both occupants were detained for investigators.

**ATTACK** – Over the past 15 years, the Redmond Police Department has funded a crime analyst that worked on auto theft known and was assigned to the Auto Theft Tactical Analysis Center (ATTACK). This analyst also supported WATPA funded task forces in Snohomish County (SnoCAT) and King/Pierce County (PSATT). This function and position was invaluable to auto theft enforcement efforts in the three counties (and across Washington) but was eliminated due to other budget priorities at Redmond PD.

This is a significant loss to auto theft reduction efforts in Washington. WATPA is hopeful that funding could be increased so that innovative crime analysis methods, such as ATTACK, could be employed in both western and eastern Washington. These efforts identify criminals, trends and behavior that guide enforcement efforts and can reduce crime victimization across the state.