

Firearm Arrests in Washington

Firearms pose a risk to the safety of Washington residents. This report focuses on arrests with a firearm enhancement from the Washington State Patrol (WSP) and aims to explore the demographics of those being arrested with a firearm enhancement.

Data Parameters

The WSP maintains a database of Washington criminal history information, or background checks, consisting of fingerprint-based records and disposition information from law enforcement agencies and courts throughout the state. Data is retrieved from the Washington State Identification System (WASIS) for criminal history information and the Washington Crime Information Center (WACIC) for non-fingerprint hot file information. In conjunction with the WSP's Automated Biometric Identification System (ABIS), this database connects all arrests based on fingerprints, not merely by name. The following parameters were used for this brief:

- Firearm usage and presence is defined by RCW 9.41, and in terms of the present data, involves having a firearm enhancement noted on the arrest record, designating a crime involving a firearm. The most common firearm-related arrests in the present data include unlawful possession of a firearm (RCW 9.41.040), assault (RCW 9A.36), and theft of a firearm (RCW 9A.56.300).
- Only individuals who were 18 years or older at the time of arrest were included.
- Due to conflicting records associated to one arrest, any arrests with multiple demographics (i.e., race, sex, birth dates) were excluded to avoid any potential incorrect assumptions and to maintain data integrity. As such, data might be underreported.
- The data is provided as arrest based, not individual based, therefore, an individual would be represented as many times as they were arrested from 1996 to 2024.

Demographics

Between January 1, 1996, to December 31, 2024, there were 5,484 arrests with a firearm enhancement. The average age of an arrestee was 34 years old ($M = 33.7$, $SD = 12.6$). Arrests with a firearm enhancement were more likely to be associated with males as compared to females (Table 1). Arrests with a firearm enhancement were more likely to be associated with white arrestees than the rest of race categories. In terms of age category, those younger than the average age were more likely to be associated to an arrest with a firearm enhancement.

Washington's population is almost evenly distributed in terms of sex, and the majority of the population were white (81.0%), while the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color community) presented slightly less than one-fifth of the Washington population.

Limitations

This brief identifies a few major limitations that could impact any work that utilizes this data. These limitations include but are not limited to:

- Analyses are descriptive and non-generalizable. Any inferences and implications are limited, and results are modest. Further analyses must be completed for causal relationships to be determined.
- Administrative data and the lack of detail or richness significantly limits any conclusions yielded from this work.
- In terms of demographic assessment, these results must be interpreted cautiously. Race data can be misclassified, which impacts any analysis of race across criminal justice decision points. 0.6% of arrests were excluded in the demographic analysis due to race data being unknown. Race data provided by WSP are defined by NCIC and are required to be utilized by all agencies reporting CHRI to the FBI.
- Any longitudinal analyses must be carefully evaluated due to potential policy changes in firearm laws that could impact trends and interpretations.
- Due to the impacts of COVID-19, trends might be skewed and underreported.
- There are many factors that contribute to the reluctance of a victim reporting abuse, and the data might not accurately represent the true picture of firearm-related arrests.

Table 1. Firearm enhancement arrests demographics

	N	%
Sex		
Female	523	9.5
Male	4,961	90.5
Race		
American Indian or Alaskan Native	89	1.6
Asian or Pacific Islander	96	1.8
Black	625	11.5
White	4,639	85.1
Age Category		
18 to 25	1,733	31.6
26 to 35	1,616	29.5
36 to 45	1,093	19.9
> = 46	1,042	19.0

Notes: Percentages are based on column totals. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100%. Due to unknown values demographic totals may not be equal.

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Outcomes

Most felony arrests with a firearm enhancement were classified as either a Class B felony (36.2%) or a Class C felony (24.9%) (Figure 1). Class A felony is the most severe classification, and these made up about a fourth of the classified felony arrests. It is important to note that not all arrests were classified, leading to an unspecified felony arrest (19.3%); there are many reasons for nonclassification, including the potential of a fast-paced environment during the arrests. Among all arrests with a firearm enhancement, 82.8% were classified as felony offenses, while the rest were associated with a less severe classifications: gross misdemeanor (9.2%) or misdemeanor (7.9%).

Majority of firearm enhancement arrests were classified as felony across all demographic breakdowns (Table 2). Additionally, across the sex, race, and age breakdowns, less than a tenth of arrests with a firearm enhancement were classified as a misdemeanor. However, when evaluating felonies across sex, about 84.6% of female arrests with a firearm enhancement were classified as felonies, while 82.6% of male arrests. Note that these classifications reflect the charge at time of arrest, which may be modified by the court prior to disposition.

On average, there were about 189 arrests annually with a firearm enhancement from 1996 to 2024. The years 2000–06, 2009–14, and 2009–19, were all above average. Additionally, Figure 2 shows the number of arrests with a firearm enhancement from 2010 to 2024. From the peak in 2015, there was a 59.4% decrease to the low point in 2024, which likely reflects reductions in arrests during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, there was a general decrease in firearm enhancements over time.

Figure 1. Distribution of ranked felony classifications for firearm enhancement arrests

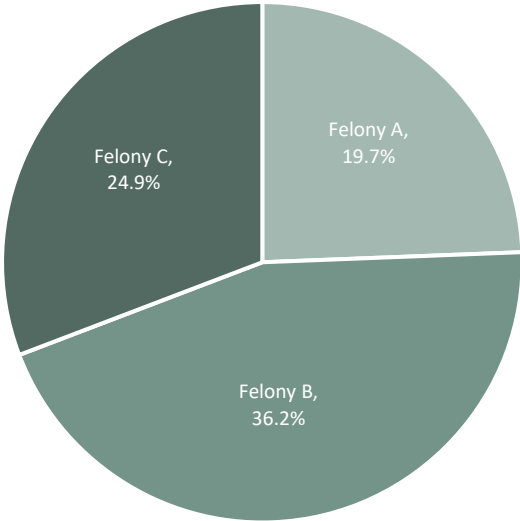
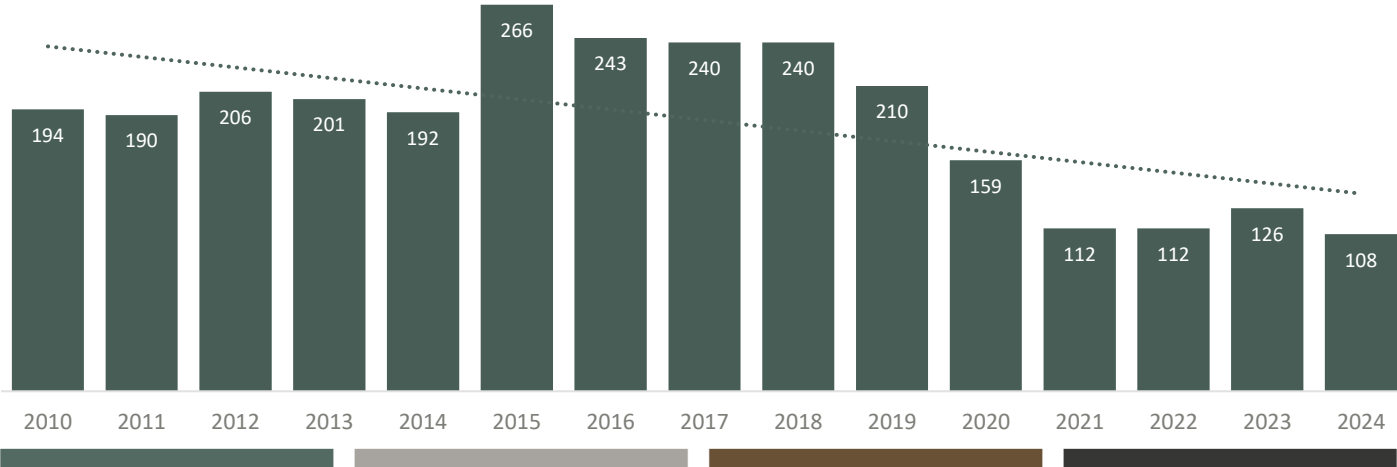


Table 2. Distribution of offense classification by demographics for firearm enhancement arrests

	Classification N (%)		
	Felony	Gross Misdemeanor	Misdemeanor
Sex			
Female	411 (84.6)	41 (8.4)	34 (7.0)
Male	3,740 (82.6)	425 (9.4)	361 (8.0)
Race			
American Indian or Alaskan Native	66 (86.8)	--	--
Asian or Pacific Islander	68 (76.4)	--	--
Black	496 (91.5)	--	--
White	3,496 (82.5)	408 (9.6)	333 (7.9)
Age Category			
18 to 25	1,314 (82.2)	128 (8.0)	157 (9.8)
26 to 35	1,257 (85.2)	111 (7.5)	107 (7.3)
36 to 45	837 (84.9)	85 (8.6)	64 (6.5)
> = 46	743 (78.0)	142 (14.9)	67 (7.0)

Notes: Percentages are based on row totals. Due to rounding totals may not equal 100%. "Felony" includes unspecified felonies, felony class A, felony class B, and felony class C.

Figure 2. Frequency of arrests with a firearm enhancement by year



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