



WASPC has been consistent to advocate for balanced public safety policies, ranging from I-940 in 2018 all the way to opposing many of the reactive legislative changes that followed the death of George Floyd in 2020. Over the last several years, Washington laws were generally designed to discourage or forbid the police from policing. The legislative changes since 2021 have sometimes been to try to “fix” or amend these laws, but we are left in a place where we are still last in the nation in staffing (and only treading water), victims are frustrated and too many still do not feel comfortable and supported doing their jobs. Of course, hashing out the past is not worthwhile or constructive- the real issue is, where do we go from here and how do we best lead?

Public Safety: A Call for Balanced Policies

Few would argue that the public safety policies adopted in our state in the last few years have been a destructive overreaction that produced unintended adverse consequences [FBI Releases National Crime Data.pdf](#). In the wake of the George Floyd tragedy in 2020, public discourse has oscillated between vehement criticism of police practices and a rapid pivot to calls for law-and-order measures. This back-and-forth is not merely an abstract debate; it has tangible consequences for communities, particularly those already marginalized.

There is now some level of agreement that we need less extremism and more common sense in criminal justice. Governor-Elect Ferguson has made very clear he will follow through on a central campaign pledge to improve our state’s last place status in [staffing](#), saying a month after the election, “We are really going to do this,” and saying he’s told legislative leaders “it’s going to need to happen.” The question is: can our state stop the whipsawing of extreme changes and come together to find common ground?

Public safety is a fundamental responsibility of government. Communities cannot thrive without safety. However, the extreme policy shifts of recent years often overlooked the voices of victims and those seeking stability. Based on our legislative agenda and our “Principles for Community Trust”, WASPC will advocate for a more balanced, data-driven, and victim-centered approach to public safety. That means our policy makers need to get out of ideological corners and reject extreme and narrative-based policies. Here’s how: use data responsibly, pay more attention to victims, ensure policing is trusted and trustworthy, create meaningful consequences for criminals, and provide treatment and resources when people are ready to break the cycle.

Responsible Use of Data

Serving the Law Enforcement Community and the Citizens of Washington

The dialogue around public safety must be grounded in accurate data rather than narratives that serve political agendas. For instance, discussions about [police pursuits](#) and [use-of-force incidents](#) often hinge on discredited methodologies that focus solely on population-based comparisons rather than context. Relying on flawed data not only distorts the reality of policing but also undermines efforts to create effective policy.

A comprehensive understanding of crime data will recognize that what is sometimes viewed as 'minor' crime (such as vehicle theft) impacts lower-income individuals [disproportionately](#). These aren't merely statistics; they represent life-altering events for families struggling to make ends meet. Crime data over the past five years in our [state](#) are startling: murders, violent crime, and vehicle theft rates have far exceeded national trends. The data speaks for itself, and it is clear we are on the wrong track.

Prioritize Victims

Many express frustration at the legal system's focus on rehabilitation for perpetrators, often at the expense of those who have [suffered harm](#). Victims of crime, particularly in marginalized communities, deserve recognition and support. When crime is dismissed or minimized, it ignores the devastating ripple effects on victims' lives.

Restore Trust in Law Enforcement

The false narrative that [policing itself](#) is the problem has led to dangerous policy decisions, resulting in rising feelings of lawlessness and brazen criminality in some areas. Communities want to feel safe. A strong, well-resourced police presence is essential to restoring that sense of security. A recent article in the [Atlantic](#) examines the intersection of politics and public safety, and how California has seen many of the same dynamics as Washington State. As criminals become more brazen, here is an important excerpt by a person who considers themselves progressive:

"...he would try, like many...to think of crime as 'structural', flowing from societal forces such as poverty, inequality, and racism, rather than the product of bad choices freely made by individuals. But the window-smasher 'doing his thing in broad daylight', close enough to make eye contact with those too fearful to stop him, 'appears to have not just agency but a bubbling surplus of it'."

Criminologist Peter Moskos points out that people "want to, and even enjoy, playing by the rules, and expect things to go well if they do, so unshameful public rule-breaking bothers people viscerally..."

Finally, the author summarizes, "Outrage politics proved a poor foundation for lasting criminal justice reform. A movement powered by outrage turned out to be too unfocused to identify the most prudent reforms, and too radicalized to avoid overreach," and that it "fuels maladaptive responses."

Rather than defunding law enforcement, we should invest in evidence-based policing that emphasizes transparency and accountability. This means hiring more officers to enhance de-escalation, ensure adequate training, provide decompression time and improved wellness, provide proper supervision and, most importantly, provide justice for victims.

We have seen a significant decline in [traffic enforcement](#) during and after the pandemic, contributing to increased fatalities and reckless behavior on the roads. Reduced staffing has led to a greater sense that there are no guardrails to driving behavior, yet advocates in our state will continue their campaign to further [restrict policing](#) based on the idea that fewer police contacts creates greater safety, while data shows otherwise. Using the logic that people cannot afford to follow the rules, the advocates propose to eliminate the rules altogether. The same bill allows funds to help people pay for necessary repairs to their cars but prohibits the police from issuing the funds, under the same rationale of demonizing narratives about police.

Meaningful Consequences and Opportunities for Breaking the Cycle

Due to legislative decisions, our state has quietly reduced the number of people incarcerated in state prisons by about 25 percent in the last five years, while the state population has increased, with too few new programs to fill in the gap for re-entry and reduced recidivism. We have treated the criminal justice system as a binary choice: law and order vs. programs to help people change. Spoiler alert: they are not mutually exclusive, and in fact are dependent on each other for success. However, the point at which people are prepared and willing to move out of addiction, untreated behavioral health problems, and bad decisions does not always move on a timetable imposed by an institution. Systems should be based on leveraged consequences combined with offramps when people finally choose to resolve to improve and should recognize and reward those choices. Instead, we keep wavering between “lock them all up” and “let them all out with no plan at all.” There is good [data](#) that the severity of sentencing is not as important as the certainty of being caught. As economist Jennifer Doleac points out, “We need universal and proportional accountability; what we have now is randomized severity.” Our policy makers opened the doors to our corrections facilities while we saw simultaneous de facto defunding of the police- and now we have the worst of both worlds.

Moving Forward Together

Now is the time for leaders to move beyond outrage politics and embrace comprehensive solutions to public safety. We need to recognize that the safety of our communities requires both a commitment to address the root causes of crime and ensure that the rule of law is respected and upheld-- for everyone. Effective public safety policies must bridge the gap between communities and law enforcement. This means fostering a cooperative relationship where both parties are engaged in a dialogue aimed at mutual respect and understanding. Governor-Elect Ferguson has made specific and

forceful commitments to public safety, including improved [staffing](#), which the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs (WASPC) strongly supports.

As Sheriffs and Chiefs, we know what works - strong, stable leadership, focused and fair policing led by evidence, real consequences for offenders, helping offenders break the cycle when they're ready, and attention to [victims](#). Working together, we can create safer and more resilient communities with a public safety framework that truly serves the needs of our residents, one that balances enforcement with compassion and accountability.

When all is said and done, you can't fix inequities in the criminal justice system by making it easier to commit crime. No matter your political perspective, we need to stop the outrage politics, fueling bad policies, resulting in bad outcomes. People are rightly fed up with brazen criminals and they want more officers, providing good, fair, and transparent policing. Governor-Elect Ferguson has made clear he wants to improve staffing. Let's get it done.