



Washington State Auditor's Office

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Improving the Completeness of Washington's Criminal History Records Database

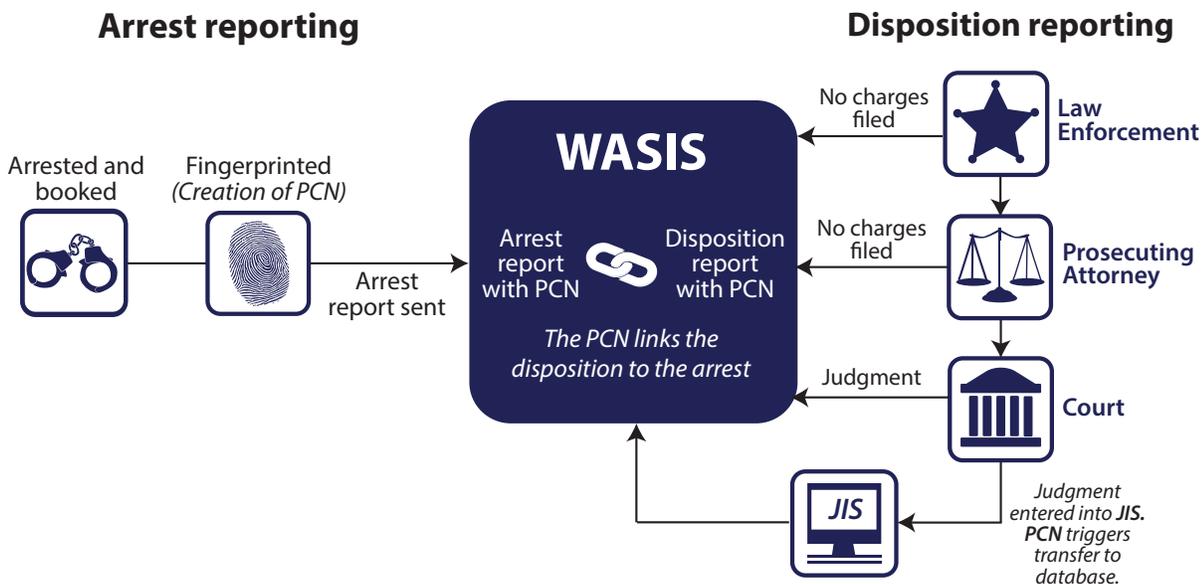
Criminal history records include information on arrests and the final results of those arrests. It is vital that the state's criminal history records database, the Washington State Identification System (WASIS), contains complete records because those records are used during criminal investigations, for charging and sentencing decisions, and to conduct background checks for jobs and volunteer positions. We designed this audit to determine if Washington's criminal records are complete, and if not, why not.

By comparing WASIS records to court records, we found a third of the records were missing or incomplete in WASIS. These omissions hinder the ability of law enforcement and other decision makers to perform their jobs properly.

State law makes the Washington State Patrol responsible for maintaining WASIS and for ensuring it is complete. It also requires local law enforcement agencies, county clerks and courts provide the Patrol with arrests and their dispositions, which are the results of arrests.

Process Control Numbers link dispositions to arrests

The criminal history database uses fingerprints to identify individuals and their criminal history record information. A unique Process Control Number (PCN) is assigned to every arrest when fingerprints are taken: it is essential in linking the disposition to the appropriate arrest record. The illustration shows how arrest and disposition information is reported to WASIS.



Washington’s criminal history records database is incomplete

To assess if the records in WASIS were complete, we matched 2012 disposition records in the Judicial Information System (JIS), the court records system maintained by the Administrative Office of the Courts, to records in WASIS. We found that 33 percent of the dispositions were missing. Of the 81,100 missing dispositions, 11 percent were for felony offenses, while 89 percent were for gross misdemeanors. As the criminal history database is used to conduct background checks, we further analyzed our results and found that more than half of the individuals with incomplete records had at least one missing disposition for an offense that would disqualify them from certain positions.

Missing fingerprints and PCNs contribute to incomplete criminal history records

Based on our analysis, we identified two primary reasons criminal history records are incomplete.

1. **Fingerprints are not taken, resulting in an arrest record and PCN not being created.** One reason for missing fingerprints is a state law that does not require law enforcement entities to fingerprint individuals arrested for gross misdemeanors if they are not taken into custody.
2. **Dispositions are not transferred from JIS to WASIS because PCNs are not included when disposition information is entered into JIS.** Court staff told us they only enter PCNs when they receive them from law enforcement, even if they know a particular charge should have one. We found some law enforcement officials and court clerks lack an understanding of the PCN, and have not received clear guidance from the Patrol on its use.

Patrol could do more to improve the completeness of WASIS

While the Patrol has taken steps to improve the completeness of WASIS, it could do more to ensure fingerprints are taken and PCNs are used to report dispositions. As an example, while the Patrol has developed guidelines on the purpose of PCNs, we found the guidelines lack specific direction and are not reaching the right people. Providing direction and guidance to the hundreds of law enforcement agencies, courts and county clerks involved in reporting criminal history record information is difficult. However, by taking a more targeted and direct approach, providing clear guidance to the right people and working with reporting entities to ensure they create and use PCNs properly, the Patrol could further reduce the chances of incomplete records.

Recommendations in brief

We recommend the Patrol:

 Seek changes to state laws and/or administrative rules to require that everyone arrested for gross misdemeanors be fingerprinted, and to require the use of PCNs when entering disposition information

 Clarify PCN guidance provided to law enforcement agencies, courts and county clerks and ensure it reaches the correct audience

 Develop a targeted approach for working with local law enforcement agencies, courts and county clerks

 Continue to regularly share information and ideas on ways to improve the completeness of criminal history records with the Administrative Office of the Courts

 Continue to improve its data reconciliation processes when matching JIS and WASIS disposition information
