



Washington State Auditor's Office Performance Audit Description

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Assessing the Completeness and Accuracy of Criminal Records

Background

A criminal record contains an individual's arrests and related dispositions – the result of the arrest such as no charge filed, a conviction, or dismissal. A record is only considered complete when all arrests have a disposition. Criminal records are used for many purposes, including determining sentences for crimes and conducting pre-employment and other background checks. State criminal records are also shared with the FBI, so other states and the federal government can use them for these purposes as well.

In Washington, the State Patrol (WSP) is statutorily responsible for maintaining official criminal records which are linked to an individual's fingerprints and include arrest and disposition information provided by law enforcement entities and individual courts.

Inaccurate or incomplete criminal records may result in unfit individuals passing background checks and authorities granting them access to vulnerable citizens or sensitive information, or law enforcement entities missing key information when investigating a potential suspect. Our previous audit work and reports by other state agencies indicate Washington's criminal database contains some inaccurate or incomplete records. Our audit could identify and address the root causes of this issue.

Scope and objectives

The audit will review Washington's criminal records for accuracy and completeness by comparing individuals' official criminal records, maintained by WSP, to independent data and source documents available through the Administrative Office of the Courts, the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs, and/or local criminal justice agencies and courts. We will also evaluate the processes used to update criminal records and compare these processes to national leading practices. The audit will seek to answer the following questions:

1. Are criminal records in Washington accurate and complete, and if not, why not?
2. How well does Washington use best practices to help ensure accurate and complete criminal records?

Timing

We estimate audit results will be released in spring of 2015.