

Rational Steps #7: Call to Bipartisan Action on Five Critical Issues

Welcome to the seventh installment of this series, which identifies and explores important issues facing our state and recommends workable policy solutions.

- **Issue:** The public expects elected officials to work together to address the most important issues facing the state. While some public-policy issues have a stark partisan divide, five issues are ripe for bipartisan work that would greatly improve the lives of Washingtonians.
- **Rational Step Toward a Better Washington:** The Legislature should not end the 2023 session without collaboratively addressing these critical areas:
 - Decline in homeownership & affordability
 - The growing drug overdose epidemic
 - Too much crime, not enough police
 - Chronic homelessness
 - Fall of K-12 student performance

Legislators don't see eye-to-eye on some of the pressing issues our state faces. Political beliefs cause them to disagree about the severity, the causes, and the solution. Other issues, however, are non-partisan at their core. They cry out for the collaboration that tends to produce the best, most enduring policy solutions.

The following five issues present opportunities to engage and benefit from the full scope of the legislative body's combined wisdom and experiences. For the sake of the people we serve, legislators should not pass them up.

I. Address the declining dream of homeownership

Washington has sunk to 7th lowest in the nation, as of 2021, in the percentage of residents who are homeowners.¹ The state's standing has declined significantly in this measure since the turn of the century, and the reason is clear: not enough housing is being built. This affects renters as well – while homeowners' monthly mortgage costs are essentially fixed, rents go up when the supply is insufficient. **We must do better.**

- a. **Fewer Washingtonians achieve the American dream of homeownership** - At the end of 2005 (as far back as census homeownership quarterly data is collected), 69% of Washingtonians lived in owner-occupied housing. By the end of 2021, that figure had dropped to under 63%, ranking Washington 7th lowest in the country.²
- b. **Significant racial disparities in homeownership** - Minority home ownership is even more scarce. In the Puget Sound region, only 28% of African-Americans own vs. rent, and 37% of Hispanics.³
- c. **Bottom 10 ranking for housing affordability** - Washington ranks 6th worst in the country in housing affordability, a metric that compares median incomes to the mortgage for a median-priced house.⁴
- d. **Bottom 10 ranking for housing underproduction** - Fewer housing units are being produced here than in prior decades. Reportedly at 225,000 fewer housing units were produced from 2000-15 than what was needed, ranking Washington 8th worst in the country.⁵
- e. **Housing underproduction impacts renters as well** – Besides affecting prospective homebuyers, housing underproduction also leads to escalating rents. Washington renters spent the 7th highest percent of income on median rent in the nation, significantly up from 2005.⁶

II. Stem the tragic rise in “deaths of despair”

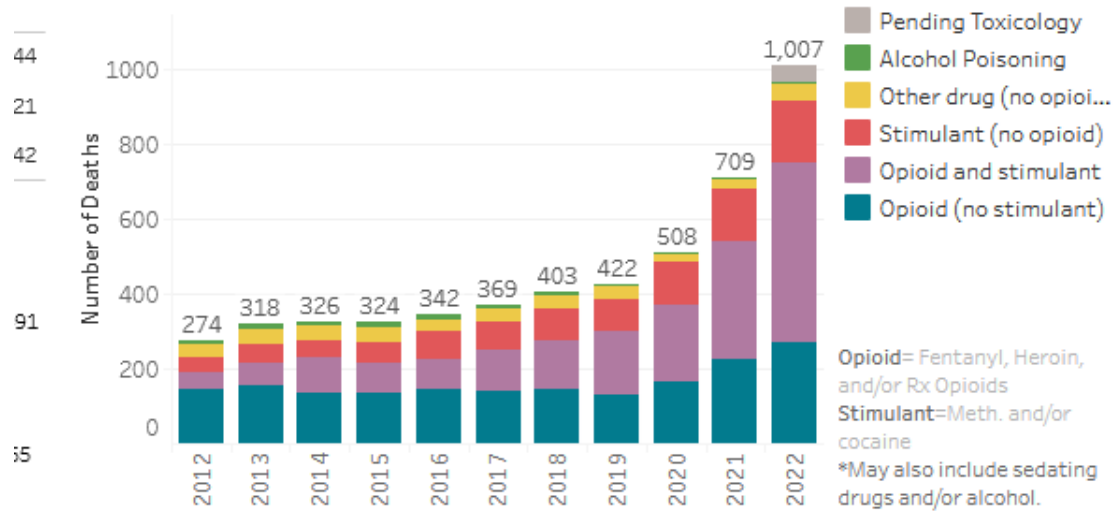
There is no denying Washington has an overdose epidemic. King County just surpassed 1,000 overdose deaths for 2022.⁷ A decade ago, it was a quarter of that number. Just two years ago it was half.



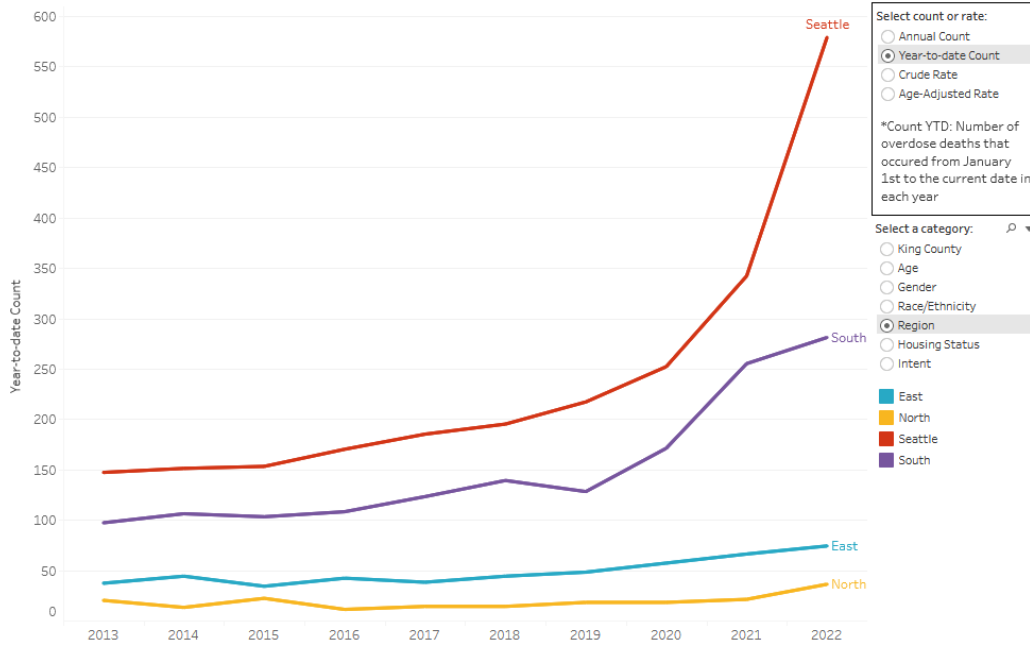
Drug & Alcohol Poisoning Deaths, King County

(Note: Bar chart can be viewed in terms of counts or rates; each decedent with an overdose death is represented once.)

Count



Trends in overdose deaths that occurred in King County in 2013 - 2022 from Medical Examiner's Office data



Note: Gaps in trend lines are for data that are suppressed to protect confidentiality, counts under 10 are suppressed
 Data source: King County Medical Examiner's Office (KCMEO); these data represent deaths that occurred in King County and were investigated by the KCMEO.

King County is not alone – OD deaths are spiraling around the state. The CDC found the OD death rate in Washington is growing at several times the national average.⁸ **It is the leading cause of death in our state for people under age 60.**⁹

That bears repeating: in Washington, the #1 cause of death for those under age 60 is an overdose of drugs or alcohol.

This is a human tragedy. ***We must do better.***

III. Bring in more law-enforcement officers to help curtail the historic rise in crime.

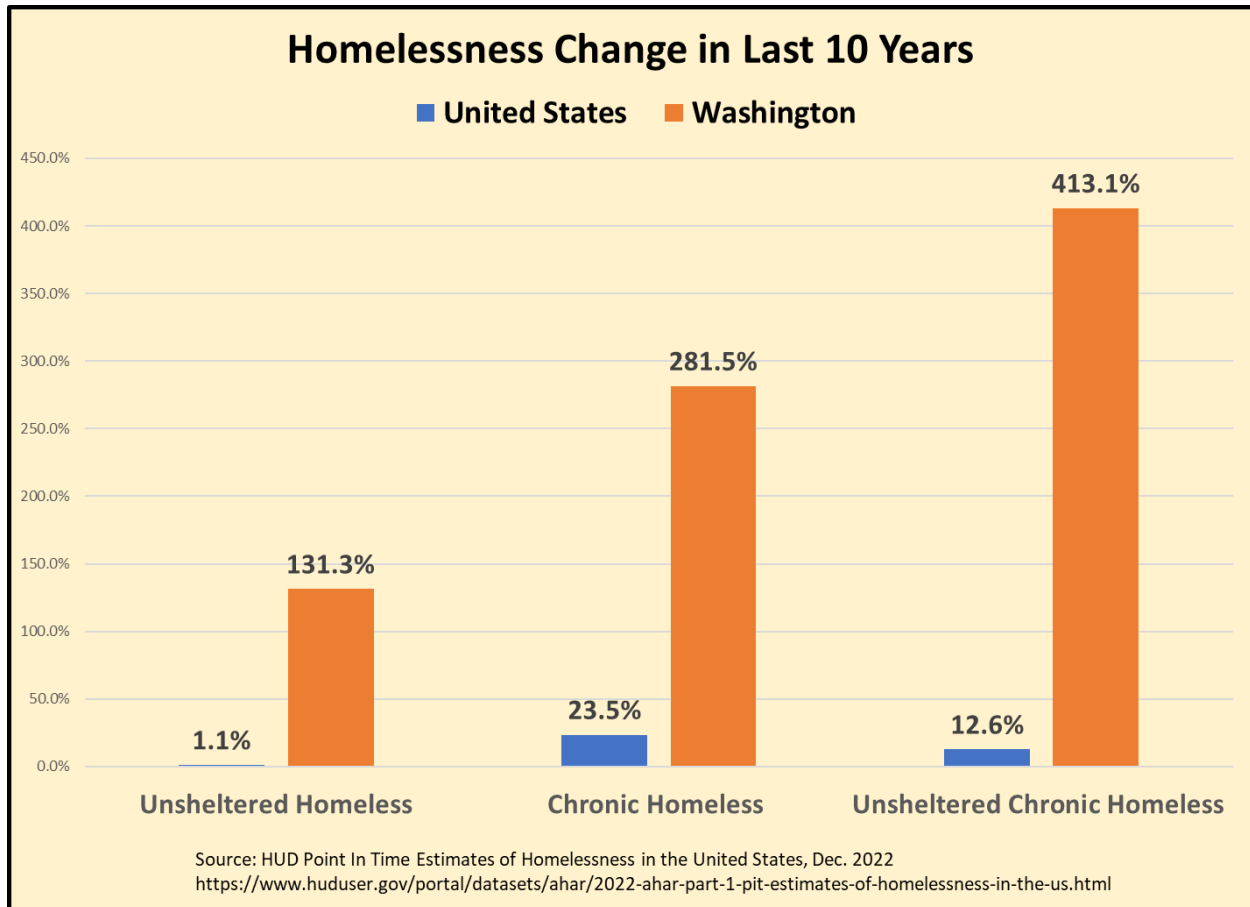
Violent crime in our state is at a 25-year high.¹⁰ Murders in 2022 surpassed the previous year, which itself was an all-time Washington record – yet in much of our nation, murders declined.¹¹ Property crime is on the rise, and our state ranks 4th worst in the country by that metric.¹²

Crime in Washington, 2021 Report								
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Change Since 2015
Violent Crimes	16,311	19,150	20,677	22,445	22,348	22,949	26,139	60.3%
- Murder	166	177	202	220	201	302	325	95.8%
- Rape	1,702	2,223	2,499	2,852	2,879	2,376	2,572	51.1%
- Robbery	4,392	4,987	5,002	5,476	5,235	5,261	5,802	32.1%
- Aggravated Assault	10,051	11,763	12,974	13,897	14,033	15,010	17,440	73.5%

We must act to keep people safe in our communities. That begins with reversing the erosion of people keeping our streets safe: our law enforcement officers. Washington ranks dead last in the number of law enforcement officers per capita – as in 51st in the nation. **We must do better.**

IV. Recognize Washington is a huge outlier in the rise of homelessness

According to the federal department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington is a huge outlier: unsheltered homeless, the chronically homeless, and unsheltered chronically homeless have all increased at roughly 20 times the nation as a whole over the past decade.¹³



Billions of dollars have already been spent on addressing homelessness, yet the data are clear: what government is doing is not working. ***We must do better.***

V. Reverse the steep decline in K-12 student performance

The most recent state and national assessments paint a picture that should concern us all.

- State assessment data shows only 1 in 3 children are at grade level in both English and math, down significantly from the pre-pandemic level.¹⁴
- National assessment data reported Washington students are “not significantly different from the national average”.¹⁵ This is significant considering our state historically ranked among the top 10 states in student performance.¹⁶ The latter trend predates the pandemic: after peaking in 2013, our students’ relative performance has declined every cycle since.

To give a visualization,¹⁷ here’s a comparison of Washington and Idaho scores, in national terms. Our state sank in all four categories, while Idaho is up across the board, and has shot past Washington when it comes to the reading scores of students poised to enter high school:

	2013		2022	
<i>4th Grade</i>	WA ★	ID	WA	ID ★
Math	#10	#31	#27	#24
Reading	#15	#31	#23	#29
<i>8th Grade</i>				
Math	#7	#21	#18	#3
Reading	#8	#13	#14	#6

We must do better.

Conclusion

The people elect all of us to work on and address the critical issues before the state. These five areas are critical to the well-being of Washington. The Legislature needs to address them in a collaborative manner in the 2023 session.

That is how we do better.

Footnotes

1. U.S. Census Bureau, Housing Vacancies and Homeownership (at end of 2021, Washington’s 63.3% home ownership trailed only NY, CA, HI, Mass, NV and NJ) <https://www.census.gov/housing/hvs/data/rates.html>
2. Id.
3. <https://seattlebusinessmag.com/real-estate/minority-home-ownership-gap-bad-us-and-worse-seattle>
4. Economic & Revenue Forecast Council, Dec. 2022 Economic Climate Study, p 73-74 <https://erfc.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/documents/publications/Climate2022.pdf>
5. <https://www.upforgrowth.org/washington-state-has-severe-housing-shortage-new-report-growth-shows-how-solve-it>
6. Economic & Revenue Forecast Council, Dec. 2022 Economic Climate Study, p 74-75 <https://erfc.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/documents/publications/Climate2022.pdf>
7. <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/health/examiner/services/reports-data/overdose.aspx>
8. CDC Provisional Drug Overdose Deaths by Jurisdiction (July 2021-July 2022) (Wa grew at 5 times the rate of the country) <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>
9. DOH May 2022 Analysis – Found that in 2021 Overdose Deaths were leading cause of death in state for those under age 50 (1,180 deaths, with unintentional injuries 2nd at

746, suicide 3rd at 672, cancer 4th at 634, and COVID 5th at 501.) For 60 & under, OD deaths ranked 2nd at 1,634 deaths, trailing only cancer at 1,848. While DOH hasn't produced a 2022 year-end analysis, based on steep rise in OD deaths in 2022, it is almost certain that OD deaths will replace cancer as leading cause of death in 2022 for those 60 and under.

10. "Crime in Washington 2021 Annual Report", Washington Association of Sheriffs & Police Chiefs. <https://www.waspc.org/assets/CJIS/2021%20CIW.pdf> There were 26,139 violent crimes (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault) in 2021. The last year with more incidents of violent crimes was in 1994.
11. 2022 murders estimated to exceed 370, according to WaStateHomicide. This exceeds last year's record of 325. Meanwhile, the NY Times reports that murders in large U.S. cities declined by 5% in 2022 from the prior year, although that data set found that Seattle was an outlier, with murders up 20% in 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/30/briefing/crime-murders-us-decline.html#:~:text=violence%20has%20eased.-,Murders%20in%20large%20U.S.%20cities%20are%20down%20more%20than%205,are%20also%20down%20this%20year.>
12. Economic & Revenue Forecast Council, Dec. 2022 Economic Climate Study, p 95 <https://erfc.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/documents/publications/Climate2022.pdf>
13. 2022 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, U.S. Dept. of Housing & Urban Development <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/ahar/2022-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of-homelessness-in-the-us.html>
14. OSPI, 10/19/22 email (32.6% passed both ELA & Math in Spring 2022 assessment)
15. The Nation's Report Card, NAEP 2022 Scores – Washington Profile https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/overview/WA?cti=PgTab_OT&chort=2&sub=MAT&sj=WA&fs=Grade&st=MN&year=2022R3&sg=Gender%3A%20Male%20vs.%20Female&sgv=Difference&ts=Single%20Year&tss=2022R3&sfj=NP
16. Id., See State Comparison tab.
17. Id.