

Armondo Pavone, Mayor



MAYOR'S STATEMENT

September 23, 2024

A REGIONAL CALL TO ACTION: As Juvenile Crime Numbers Soar, Western Washington Needs a New Approach

A joint statement from the Mayors of Renton, Kent, Auburn and Federal Way

It is a rare occasion that calls for a public statement for change – yet the staggering rise in juvenile crime throughout our region over the past year has given us the opportunity to share the stark need for a change of course.

The frustration felt by residents is palpable, and we cannot sit idly by while we watch larger numbers of our young community move into violent crime. We are seeing crimes committed by 10-, 11- and 12-year-old children. It's unacceptable – and it's time to admit we can all approach this differently.

It isn't enough only to recognize the rise in juvenile crime – as leaders, we would be betraying our respective communities by not starting this conversation on a wider level. We need a return to accountability in our approaches for both social services and juvenile justice systems.

Statistics from the Renton Police Department show a marked increase in juvenile crime in 2023, with a 512.5% increase in juvenile motor vehicle thefts, assaults with firearms up 114%, and malicious mischief up 173% over 2022 numbers.

The Auburn Police Department also saw significant increases in juvenile related crimes. Aggravated Assault (including Assault with a Firearm) increased by 266.7%, Robbery increased by 53.8%, motor vehicle theft increased by 100%, and malicious mischief increased by 93.3%.

In Kent, overall, the number of juveniles involved in reported crime saw a 73% increase between 2021 to 2023. Between 2021 – 2022, juvenile crime increased 11%, but between 2022 – 2023, juveniles involved in crime increased another 55% year over year. Some of the highest increases were in Vehicle Theft (a 151% increase); Residential Burglary (175% increase); Assault with a Gun (a 221% increase) and Commercial Burglary (a 442% increase); with a 600% increase in weapons cases from 2021 to 2022, and a 350% increase between 2021 and 2023.

In Federal Way, there was a 126% overall increase in crimes involving juveniles from 2021 to 2023. This includes a 290% increase in Simple Assault; 800% increase in Shoplifting/Larceny, and a 233% increase in Motor Vehicle Thefts.

This is not a problem isolated to one city or town.

We can agree that the answer does not rest solely with punishment – no one wants to see kids incarcerated. We agree that this is a complex, layered problem with an incredible number of contributing factors such as background and challenging, lived experiences. However, when we remove accountability from within the system we have put into place and focus only on compassionate understanding, we reinforce a system that fails our kids and enables a system of impunity.

A victim is still a victim. There are real injuries, property damage, and lives disrupted as a result of these crimes regardless of the age of the offender. Kids who aren't facing consequences or accountability are returning to victimize the same people – most often, other very young children. This is a vicious cycle that harms our communities, and most importantly, harms our young people who will carry their issues into the future as our next generation of adult residents.

We need to be innovative. One of the primary purposes of law enforcement is to protect the public from offenders – we owe our residents this effort. We owe it to these kids to let them know each life is WORTH MORE than simply accepting repetitive criminal behavior in our communities. They are worth a future, and worth our effort.

The first step towards enhanced outcomes is for King County to establish concrete metrics to focus on measurable and compassionate accountability and establish expectations that all juvenile detention and reform programs gather and report these metrics.

Data transparency is crucial. This enables us to understand the full extent of this issue while offering a strategic look to most effectively intervene upstream – when children are at risk or struggling – before criminal behavior becomes part of their story. This includes partnerships with our school districts and social programs – for example in Renton, where we've partnered with the School District to create a Mental Health program in middle schools.

We have an obligation to truly care for the futures of these children. We believe in compassionate accountability — a principle to hold individuals accountable for their actions but also give proven, effective support that will allow them to integrate positively into society.

The King County Council recently voted against closing the King County Juvenile Detention Center. We believe this is a necessary part of accountability and progressive consequences for criminal activity. The long-term availability of this resource needs to be assured while we also divert offenders to rehabilitation and diversion programs that have proven success rates.

The rehabilitation programs that participate in this system must be held to reporting standards that show a positive outcome for this investment in our young people.

We want to see metrics and results including dropping rates of recidivism, growing high school graduations, increased enrollment in workforce training. These show kids a secure, healthy path exists. Our youth need more than second chances; they need realistic avenues to pursue education, employment, and personal growth.

On the state level, we need to invest in longer-term facilities to deliver this compassionate accountability. Many state-level facilities have closed, and those that remain are grossly understaffed. When youth with violent felony convictions can easily escape due to a lack of attention, we are not best serving our youth or community safety goals.

Good intentions alone will not safeguard our communities or offer a roadmap to course-correct. It takes courage and humility to recognize when an approach is not working, and collaborative and innovative effort from across all sectors – our colleagues, community leaders and stakeholders across the state need to collaborate on solutions that restore dignity and hope to our youth.

Every child deserves the opportunity to grow, to learn, and thrive. Our communities deserve the same, without fear of becoming a victim. Our future as a community and region depends on our ability to do the right thing today.

Signed,

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