

**BALLOT
REVIEW**

Spokane's Proposition 1: The Community Safety Sales Tax

By Chris Cargill
President

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MOUNTAIN STATES
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Introduction

Like many cities across Washington state, the city of Spokane is facing a public safety crisis. Graffiti and garbage line many downtown streets, crime and homelessness have forced the closure of many city businesses, and citizens have complained of a lack of planning and enforcement by city officials. To make matters worse, lax state policies have hampered any efforts to enforce the law.

In 2023, a homeless camp was erected inside the city, on state property, and month by month grew larger than many small towns.¹ While the city tried to remove the site, the state of Washington drug its feet.² In the end, the camp cost taxpayers more than \$20 million.

Homelessness and crime in the city have only worsened. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting Program, Spokane has one of the highest total crime rates in the United States.³ Washington state, too, faces a serious crime problem.

Last fall, Spokane County voters rejected a regional sales tax hike that would have been dedicated to an array of public safety priorities, including a new jail. This year, Spokane city voters are being asked to approve their own sales tax hike, aimed at funneling more dollars to police, fire and what the city calls "community resilience."⁴

¹ After months and millions in taxpayer funds, Camp Hope is empty, by Timothy Schumann, The Center Square, June 9, 2023, available at https://www.thecentersquare.com/washington/article_29c21240-0725-11ee-87f4-974879bdccd5.html

² Threatening legal action against the state, city of Spokane sets deadline for removal of Camp Hope homeless encampment, by Greg Mason, The Spokesman Review, September 9, 2022, available at <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2022/sep/09/threatening-legal-action-against-the-state-city-of/>

³ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Crime Data Explorer, 2022, available at <https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend>

⁴ Mayor Brown proposes one-tenth of one percent for community safety, City of Spokane news release, July 8, 2024, available at <https://my.spokanecity.org/news/releases/2024/07/08/mayor-brown-proposes-one-tenth-of-1-percent-for-community-safety/>

**KEY INFORMATION
COLUMN**

If approved, Spokane's Proposition 1 would generate almost \$8 million per year.

Spokane's Proposition 1

The city of Spokane's Proposition 1 reads:⁵

“The Spokane City Council adopted Resolution No. 2024-0067 concerning a proposition for funding enhanced community safety and other public safety operations such as the Spokane Fire Department, Spokane Police Department, Municipal Court, and Office of the Police Ombudsman. If approved, this proposition would increase the sales and use tax rate by one-tenth of one percent (0.1 %) to provide ongoing funding for community safety, criminal justice and law enforcement purposes permitted under RCW 82.14.450.”

If approved, the measure would generate nearly \$8 million per year, with 15% going to Spokane County and the remaining staying in the city of Spokane. When initially placed on the ballot, the measure did not contain an expiration date, also known as a “sunset provision.” But city leaders in September said they intended to adopt a 10-year expiration date, meaning the measure would need to be renewed by voters in 2034 if it is to continue after a decade.⁵

How the funds will be used is a subject of dispute. While city leaders contend the money will be spent on fire and policing equipment, they also say priorities under the umbrella of “community resilience” could receive revenue. That could include climate change priorities, according to some city council members.⁶

The language of the measure gives the city broad authority on how the cash is spent:

“The Council reserves the right, in accordance with its biennial budget process, to determine the levels of service to be provided as permitted under applicable state law and within the available revenues collected from this increase. If revenues are sufficient, the Council reserves the right to use such additional funds to contract for, or pay personnel and related cost for recruiting, hiring, training, equipping and employing additional personnel in other capacities...”⁷

⁵ Resolution no 2024-0067, City of Spokane, available at

<https://www.spokanecounty.org/DocumentCenter/View/56016/City-of-Spokane---Proposition-1-November-PDF>

⁵ Mayor Brown, Council President Wilkerson propose sunset provision for Community Safety sales tax proposal, City of Spokane News Release, September 12, 2024, available at

<https://my.spokanecity.org/news/releases/2024/09/12/mayor-brown-council-president-wilkerson-propose-sunset-provision-for/>

⁶ Sales tax increase for public safety to appear on Spokane ballots this November, by Emry Dinman, The Spokesman-Review, September 4, 2024, available at <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2024/jul/22/sales-tax-proposal-to-appear-on-spokane-ballots-th/>

⁷ Resolution no 2024-0067, City of Spokane, available at

<https://www.spokanecounty.org/DocumentCenter/View/56016/City-of-Spokane---Proposition-1-November-PDF>

KEY INFORMATION COLUMN

In 2023, Spokane city voters overwhelmingly adopted a citizen ballot measure that made it illegal for homeless camping anywhere within one thousand feet of parks, schools or childcare facilities. But for months, the city refused to enforce the law.

Voters act, city stalls

In 2023, Spokane city voters overwhelmingly adopted a citizen ballot measure that made it illegal for homeless camping anywhere within one thousand feet of parks, schools or childcare facilities. But for months, the city refused to enforce the law.⁸ Until August of 2024, city leaders said it posed too many legal challenges.⁹

Instead, some city leaders sought to further protect the rights of the homeless, at one point introducing a law that was referred to as a “Homeless Bill of Rights.” That legislation has yet to be approved, after facing intense citizen backlash.

The homeless challenge and the Supreme Court decision

Thanks to the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Grants Pass v. Johnson*, communities are free to decide the best course for handling their homeless challenges.¹⁰

The case began when the City of Grants Pass, Oregon, enforced city ordinances that prevented camping and sleeping in public parks, by issuing civil citations and fines to violators. The plaintiffs in the case contested the citations received under these ordinances as ‘cruel and unusual punishment,’ claiming that no other option for sleeping existed for them.

Originally, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals found imposing civil penalties on homeless people for sleeping outside when they have nowhere else to go are unconstitutional. That ruling essentially handcuffed policymakers throughout the west. California Governor Gavin Newsom, for example, said:

“California has invested billions to address homelessness, but rulings from the bench have tied the hands of state and local governments to address this issue. The Supreme Court can now correct course and end the costly delays from lawsuits that have plagued our efforts to clear encampments and deliver services to those in need.”

The court agreed. Writing for a 6-3 majority, Justice Neil Gorsuch said:

⁸ Proposition 1, which outlaws camping in parts of Spokane, is now being enforced, KHQ Local News, August 15, 2024, available at https://www.khq.com/news/proposition-1-which-outlaws-camping-in-certain-parts-of-spokane-is-now-being-enforced/article_741e043c-5b68-11ef-92b4-2bda454f506f.html

⁹ A sweeping homeless camping ban that passed by 75% of voters in November isn’t being enforced, by Nate Sanford, The Inlander, February 22, 2024, available at <https://www.inlander.com/news/a-sweeping-homeless-camping-ban-that-passed-by-75-of-voters-in-november-isnt-being-enforced-city-leaders-say-it-poses-too-big-of-a-legal-r-27500730>

¹⁰ City of Grants Pass, Oregon v. Johnson, SCOTUS Blog, June 28, 2024, available at <https://www.scotusblog.com/case-files/cases/city-of-grants-pass-oregon-v-johnson/>

**KEY INFORMATION
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"Homelessness is complex. Its causes are many. So may be the public policy responses required to address it. At bottom, the question this case presents is whether the Eighth Amendment grants federal judges' primary responsibility for assessing those causes and devising those responses. It does not."

Immediately following the ruling, California began clearing illegal encampments. But other cities have been more reluctant. Spokane Mayor Lisa Brown said:

"I remain committed to community safety and the well-being of all our citizens, which requires a more robust approach than enforcement alone. We are committed to getting to the root causes of the unhoused crisis by making investments in mental and behavioral health care, expanding access to substance use treatment, and creating more transitional and permanent housing."¹¹

Washington state has experienced a surge in crime, and policymakers have passed legislation that only makes it more severe. In Spokane, the situation is even worse.

The crime problem

Crime is typically divided into two categories – violent crime, which includes offenses such as murder, rape, robbery and assault, and property crime, which most often includes burglary and theft. In both categories, Washington state has experienced a surge, and policymakers have passed legislation that only makes it more severe.

In Spokane, the situation is even worse. In the most recent FBI statistics from 2022, there were 1,541 violent offenses in the city, which is the equivalent of 672 per 100,000 residents.¹² The daily average of both violent and property crimes surpasses 40.

City of Spokane Crime Data

2022 – FBI Crime Database

	Violent Crime	Property Crime	Total
Reported Cases	1,541	13,153	14,694
Per 100,000 Residents	672	5,736	6,408
Daily Average	4.22	36.04	40.26

¹¹ Mayor Lisa Brown public statement on Grants Pass v. Johnson Supreme Court case, City of Spokane news release, June 2024, available at <https://my.spokanecity.org/news/statements/2024/06/28/mayor-brown-statement-on-grants-pass-v-johnson-ruling/>
¹² Federal Bureau of Investigation, Crime/Law Enforcement Stats, FBI Crime Data Explorer, City of Spokane, Washington state, 2022, available at <https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend>

KEY INFORMATION COLUMN

In many ways, Washington state leadership has only itself to blame for the state’s surging crime problem, as state policymakers have handcuffed efforts to enforce the law at the local level.

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In 2021, legislators passed House Bill 1054 which made it more difficult for police to pursue criminal suspects unless police had probable cause.¹³ Law enforcement around the state complained citizens were no longer stopping for police, and as a result, public safety was at risk.¹⁴ Voters had to step in via an initiative in 2024 to change the law.

Legislators also tried to take away qualified immunity for police, making it easier for people to sue officers for anything they deem misconduct or unconstitutional.¹⁵

Spokane, Washington state and National Crime Statistics
2022 – FBI Crime Database

Crime	Spokane (total cases)	Spokane (cases per 100,000)	Washington state (cases per 100,000)	National (cases per 100,000)
Murder	18	8	5	6
Rape	194	85	39	40
Robbery	309	135	87	66
Assault	1,020	445	245	268
Burglary	1,771	772	563	270
Theft	9,579	4,178	2,154	1,402
Vehicle Theft	1,803	786	639	283

Also in 2021, the state’s Supreme Court ruled that it was no longer constitutional to arrest people for drug possession in Washington.¹⁶ News reports said the justices “pulled at a thread woven into decades’ worth of verdicts, fines and sentences.”¹⁷ Following the decision, the state’s Attorney General suggested decriminalizing non-commercial amounts of drugs altogether.

¹³ Washington State Legislature, House Bill 1054, 2021-22 session, available at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/bills/summary?Year=2021&BillNumber=1054>

¹⁴ Chelan County Sheriff says new pursuit laws placing public at risk, KOHO 101, December 14, 2021, available at <https://koho101.com/2021/12/chelan-county-sheriff-says-new-pursuit-laws-placing-public-at-risk/>

¹⁵ Washington legislature looks to strengthen police accountability by barring qualified immunity, by Laurel Demkovich, The Spokesman-Review, February 28, 2023, available at https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2023/feb/28/washington-legislature-looks-to-strengthen-police-/?fbclid=IwY2xjawFefAtleHRuA2FibQIxMAABHV3fKvEmhVFTUebjJSLUu1RrGhn-Bmhvz7pSS481e3bEF49mnvf8vyWCGw_aem_jSzxikbHfmg1jDJatGMmkA#:~:text=In%20Washington%2C%20the%20courts%20recognize,law%20or%20by%20their%20superiors

¹⁶ By throwing out drug law, Washington Supreme Court creates massive fallout, KUOW, March 22, 2021, available at <https://www.kuow.org/stories/by-throwing-out-drug-law-washington-supreme-court-creates-massive-fallout>

¹⁷ Ibid

**KEY INFORMATION
COLUMN**

At just 313 for every 100,000 people, Washington state now has one of the lowest numbers of law enforcement officers per capita of any state in the union. The city of Spokane has 15.4 officers per 10,000 residents – slightly better than the national average.

The state’s largest city lost more than 600 officers in the years since COVID and the riots that followed the death of George Floyd.¹⁸ The calls to cut funding for police also were also heard in Spokane, with prominent members of the city council pushing for reduced spending.¹⁹

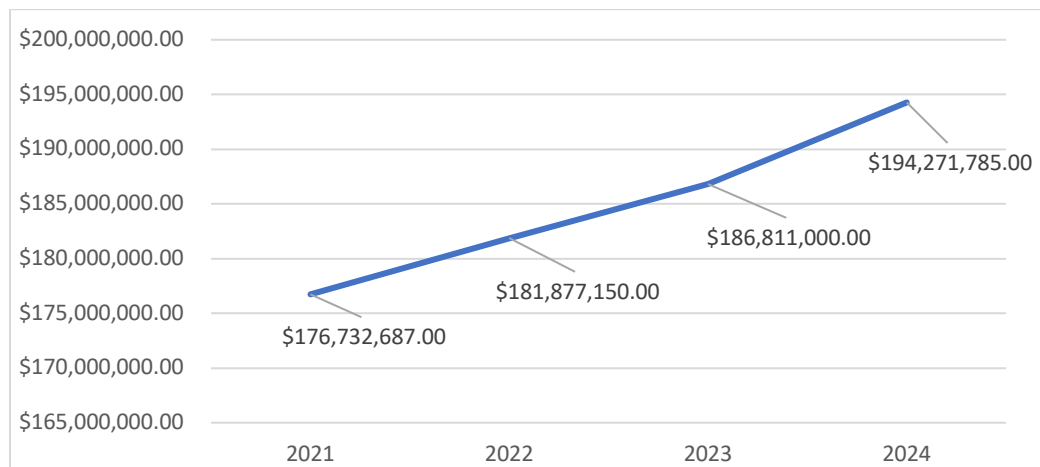
The Washington State Patrol lost 67 troopers, six sergeants and one captain because of the state’s COVID vaccine mandate.²⁰

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Spokane’s budget, taxes, and public safety resources

The sales tax in the city of Spokane currently sits at 9.0%. This includes a 6.5% state base and a 2.5% allocated to local government.²³ Roughly one-third of the city of Spokane’s tax revenue comes from the sales tax.²⁴

**General fund tax revenues – City of Spokane
2021-2024**



¹⁸ Off the charts: Did Seattle defund the police?, KUOW, April 4, 2024, available at <https://www.kuow.org/stories/did-seattle-defund-the-police#>

¹⁹ How the cuts to Spokane police budget would play out, by Adam Shanks, The Spokesman-Review, June 21, 2022, available at <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2020/jun/21/how-cuts-to-the-spokane-police-budget-would-play-o/>

²⁰ State Patrol announces final numbers on separations due to vaccine mandate, Washington State Patrol, October 19, 2021, available at <https://wsp.wa.gov/2021/10/19/washington-state-patrol-announces-final-numbers-on-separations-due-to-vaccine-mandate>

²¹ Police and Sheriffs Patrol Officers by state, World Population Review, 2024, available at <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/police-officers-by-state>

²² PoliceScorecard.org, Spokane Police Department data, available at <https://policescorecard.org/wa/police-department/spokane>

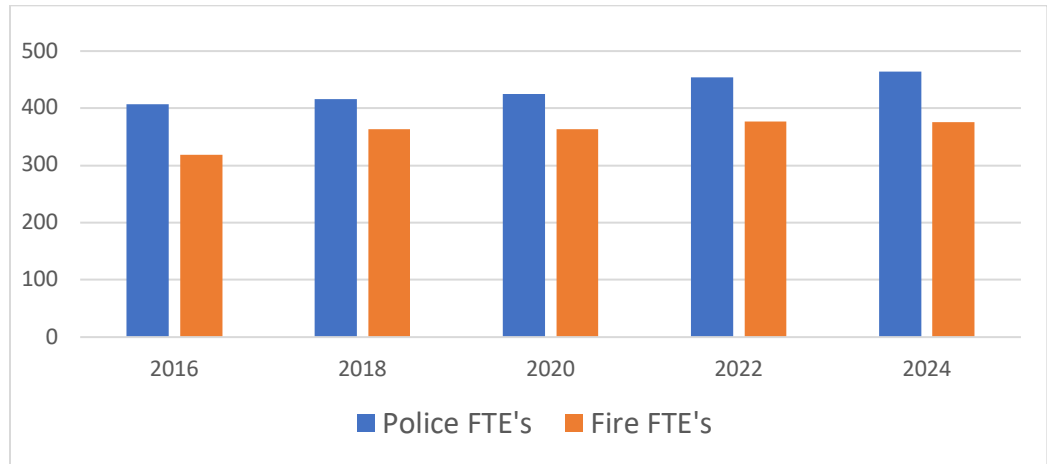
²³ Spokane County Sales Tax Rates, available at <https://www.spokanecounty.org/DocumentCenter/View/36341/Spokane-County-Sales-Tax-Rates>

²⁴ City of Spokane 2024 budget, available at <https://static.spokanecity.org/documents/budget/2024/2024-adopted-budget.pdf>

**KEY INFORMATION
COLUMN**

The city certainly does not have a tax collection problem. General fund tax revenues have increased nearly \$20 million over the past four years – a nearly 10 percent hike.

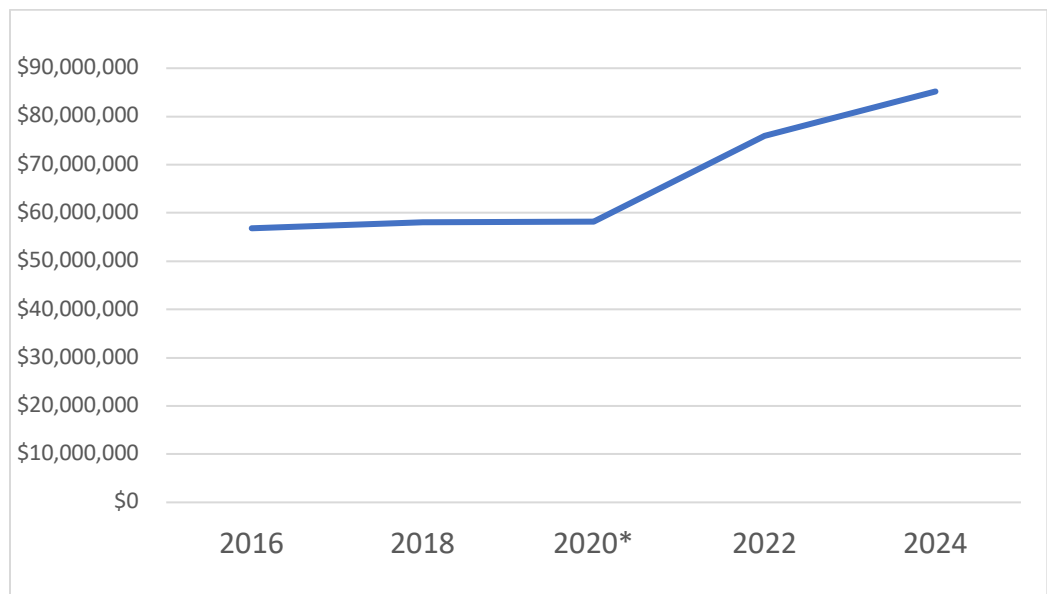
**City of Spokane Police and Fire Budgeted FTE's
2016-2024**



The number of full time employees working in the Spokane police department was 407 in 2016. In the most recent city budget (2024), 464 full time employees were funded.

As general fund revenues have increased, so too have the funds going to the city's police and fire. The number of full time employees working in the police department was 407 in 2016. In the most recent city budget (2024), 464 full time employees were funded.

**City of Spokane Police Budget
2016-2024**



**KEY INFORMATION
COLUMN**

The city of Spokane's fire resources have also increased, from 319 full time employees in 2016, to 376 today.

Nothing in this publication shall be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation.

The city's fire resources have also increased, from 319 full time employees in 2016, to 376 today.^{25,26}

Conclusion

Spokane's Proposition 1 would increase the city's already-high sales tax by more than seven million dollars per year, placing extra strain on working families still struggling with high inflation. The city has already increased its public safety spending, particularly on its police department, without much improvement in the city's startling crime rate.

It appears, then, that the real issue is not a lack of resources for public safety, but rather state and local policies that continually make crime more convenient. Many of those same policies make it difficult to hire more law enforcement to protect communities. Before taxpayers agree to increase public safety spending, they should demand city and state leaders change course and allow public safety professionals the ability to do their job.

At the very least, any increase in funding should come with oversight strings attached and sunset provisions to require review, ideally within the first five years.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ *Note: More recent Spokane budget documents will separate some police and fire positions from their budget category to the city's "Public Safety Personnel Fund." In 2020 alone, that fund totaled 50 FTE's at a cost of \$5,159,634. See: <https://static.spokanecity.org/documents/budget/2020/2020-adopted-budget-full-binder.pdf>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For more than 24 years, Chris Cargill has worked in communications and public policy. Chris has deep roots in our region and is a graduate of Gonzaga University with a degree in broadcast communications and political science. His experience includes a decade in television news as well as 13 years for another state based think tank.



Chris' work has been published in the Idaho Statesman, The Coeur d'Alene Press, The Helena Independent Record, the Spokesman-Review, The Seattle Times, the Tri-City Herald and Real Clear Policy, as well as many other regional newspapers. He is also a familiar voice on radio stations throughout the region.

Chris is a member of the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 Advisory Board, which is focused preparing comprehensive policy recommendations for the next conservative presidential administration. He is also an active participant in the American Enterprise Institute's Leadership Network.

Chris & his wife Lisa are the proud parents of two boys, including one who has special needs - one of the many reasons why he is so passionate about education choice options for families.

In his spare time, Chris spends time with family, serves on his local city council, and enjoys whatever down time he can in the great outdoors on his family property in North Idaho.

