

WHAT IS DRIVING JAIL POPULATIONS IN OKANOGAN COUNTY, WASHINGTON?

February 2022

TOP FINDINGS FROM OKANOGAN COUNTY

- The leading reason people went to jail pretrial (38 percent) was for **failure to navigate the local criminal legal system** (such as failure to appear in court), rather than charges against people or property.
- **Domestic violence-related charges** were the second most common reason for pretrial jail booking (14 percent). Most assault bookings included charges of **domestic violence** (73 percent of all assault charges). Most domestic violence assault charges were misdemeanors (95 percent for women and 85 percent for men).
- About 7 percent of pretrial jail admissions in Okanogan County Jail were for drug-related charges.
- **65 percent of people** arrested and booked into Okanogan County Jail **did not return on new charges** during the five-year period studied.

Okanogan County, in rural North Central Washington, is geographically the largest county in the state, spanning from Canada to the Columbia River (5,315 square miles). The county population is just over 42,000. The county is economically tied to agriculture and forest industries, with some ranching, orchards, retail, and dependence

on amenity-tourism. Just 30 percent of land area is in private ownership; nearly all the remaining land is under state or federal management. The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, which spans several counties, also occupies about 700,000 acres in Okanogan County, where about 5,000 people live.

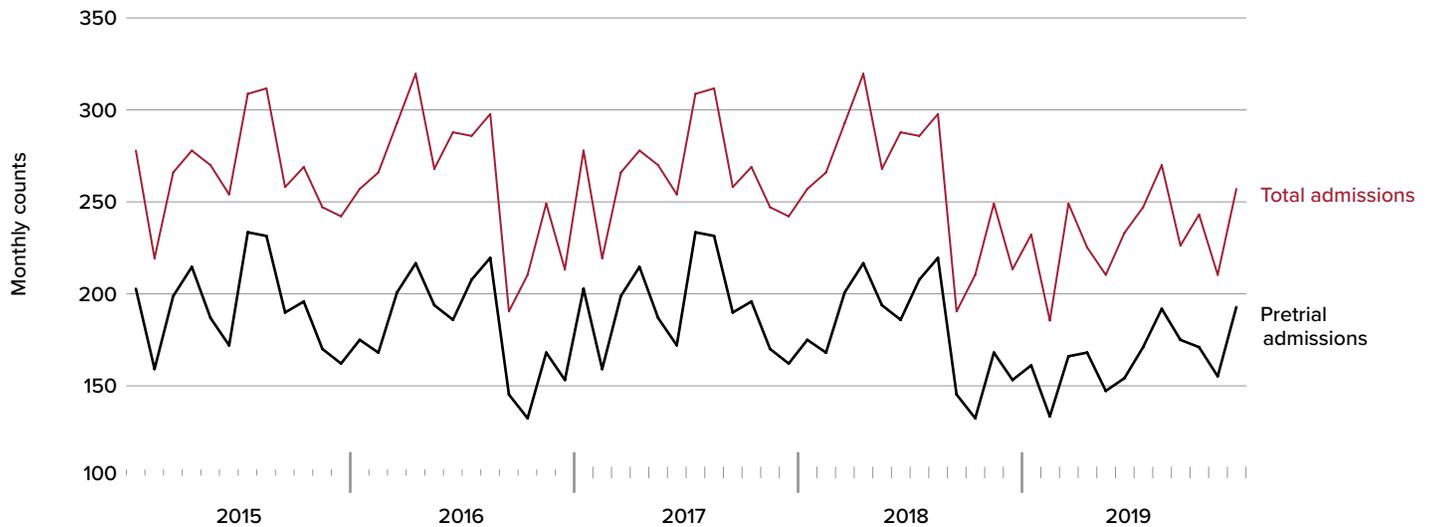
The Okanogan County Jail was built in 1983 to house 67 people, then expanded in 2000, 2002, and 2003 to what is now a 194-bed facility. The Colville Tribal Correctional Facility is also in Okanogan County (Nespelem) but is not included in the analysis in this fact sheet. This fact sheet presents some of the key trends in the Okanogan County jail population, based on research done by Washington State University faculty and graduate students and the Washington Rural Jails Network, using jail administrative records from January 2015 to December 2019 provided by the Okanogan County Sheriff's Office.

Monthly jail admissions in Okanogan County were steady over the five-year period studied. Most people (nearly 70 percent) were admitted to jail pretrial, while a smaller proportion of people entered the jail to serve time under a sentence.

From 2015 to 2019, admissions to the Okanogan County jail fluctuated between about 200 and 300 people per month. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in April 2020, this dropped sharply to 60 admissions to the Okanogan County jail (according to public rosters). This is a reduction of 73 percent in admissions compared to April 2019.



OKANOGAN COUNTY JAIL ADMISSIONS (TOTAL & PRETRIAL), 2015-2019



REASONS FOR JAIL ADMISSIONS

Nearly 40 percent of people booked into Okanogan County Jail pretrial were admitted for failure to appear (FTA) in court or for not meeting other system requirements (such as paying a fine or reinstating a driver's license), rather than on charges for an offense against persons or property.

- The most common reason for booking into Okanogan County Jail was for failure to appear in court. This was the top, or most serious, charge in 29 percent of all pretrial jail bookings.
 - Of *all* those with a failure to appear charge among their booking charges (making up 35 percent of pretrial bookings), failure to appear was the most serious charge for 85% of people.
 - Rural residents may fail to appear in court for various reasons: they don't receive legal notifications, they can't understand complex legal documents, their overburdened defense lawyers are unable to help ensure clients appear in court, they face housing instability, they have difficulty securing transportation, they don't trust the criminal legal system, and/or they can't take time off from work and/or arrange for childcare.

"I got, I think, maybe two FTAs. And that was my fault thinking it was on a different day or different time or something. So, yeah, I have been in trouble for that."

—46-year-old Native American woman



“I have only been in jail twice in my life. One of them was 30 days. It was an FTA and I was in jail for 30 days [in Okanogan] because when I got back here to Wenatchee [several hours away] they only had fine court—I guess is what you call it—probation court once a month, and I came back on the day that they had it, so I didn’t get to go to court [in Okanogan]. So I spent 30 days that time.”

—65-year-old white woman

- **The most common original charge in failure to appear cases was driving with a suspended license (DWLS)**, which itself can be the consequence for a series of unpaid fees, rather than a driving-related charge.¹ DWLS was the original charge for 25 percent of bookings that resulted from failure to appear in court; theft, drugs, and assault were the next most common original charges.
- Another 9 percent of people were booked into jail pretrial for *difficulties complying with system requirements* other than failure to appear. These included **driving with a suspended or invalidated license (DWLS)** (6 percent) and assorted other legal system requirements, such as failures to pay fines and fees, pay child support, obey criminal legal system officials’ orders, or properly register a car or transfer a title (3 percent).

“I had all of these warrants everywhere. I could never get my license [reinstated], so therefore I would never have insurance. And, you know, I would be driving to work and get pulled over and get a no insurance ticket and no license ticket and maybe lose my car. It just—it was a lot of traffic [infractions].”

—38-year-old white man

“I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and got arrested when I was driving and didn’t have a driver’s license, but I had a warrant and didn’t know it.”

—65-year-old white woman



Assault charges accounted for one out of every ten pretrial jail bookings in Okanogan County. Of these, 77 percent were misdemeanors and 73 percent involved domestic violence charges.

- Domestic violence assault was the second-most common top charge for women booked into jail pretrial (9 percent) and the fifth-most common top charge for men booked into jail pretrial (6 percent).
- Most bookings for domestic violence assault for both men and women were misdemeanor-level charges (95 percent for women and 85 percent for men). (Misdemeanor assaults do not result in severe bodily harm and do not involve a deadly weapon.)²

“I was already in a fight with [my mom] a while ago and I was like, okay, I’m going to give her another chance. And we started arguing really bad, a scream fight. And... my boyfriend walked out. And then I went to go walk out and I nudged my mom, and she turned around and ripped my hair, and then we got in a fist fight. And then we ran down the highway to his house. And then I got arrested. The cops found me there.”

—18-year-old Native American and white woman

Driving under the influence (DUI) charges were more common than drug-related charges as the reason for people being booked pretrial into the Okanogan County Jail.

- DUI was the top charge in 11 percent of bookings, whereas drug-related charges were the most serious in about 7 percent of pretrial bookings.

One out of every ten pretrial bookings was to hold someone on behalf of a federal, state, or other local entity.



LENGTH OF STAY AND FREQUENCY OF BOOKINGS

More than one-third (37 percent) of people booked into jail pretrial in Okanogan County were released within one day, yet the average length of stay was more than two weeks.

Some people who were in jail longer than one day had very long stays—including some more than a year—which significantly increased the average length of stay.

Length of pretrial stay in Okanogan County Jail varied by charge type. People booked for failure to appear or on drug-related charges tended to have lengthier jail stays of 2 ½ to 3 weeks, longer than the overall average.

A minority of people who were booked into jail on charges of failure to appear (32%) or related to drugs (26%) were released within 24 hours. By contrast, most people charged with driving under the influence (63%) or driving with a suspended license (49%) were released from jail within 24 hours.

Average pretrial stay length by charge category, number of days in jail

Percentage of people per charge category who spend 24 hours or less in jail (pretrial)

3.6 days	Driving under the influence (DUI)	63%
8.6 days	Driving with suspended license (DWLS)	49%
12.3 days	Holds	23%
15.1 days	Assaults	35%
17.6 days	Failure to appear (FTA)	32%
22.1 days	Drugs	26%
22.3 days	Theft	37%
15.9 days	Overall average (all charges)	37%
16.2 days	Overall average (all charges) w/o holds	39%

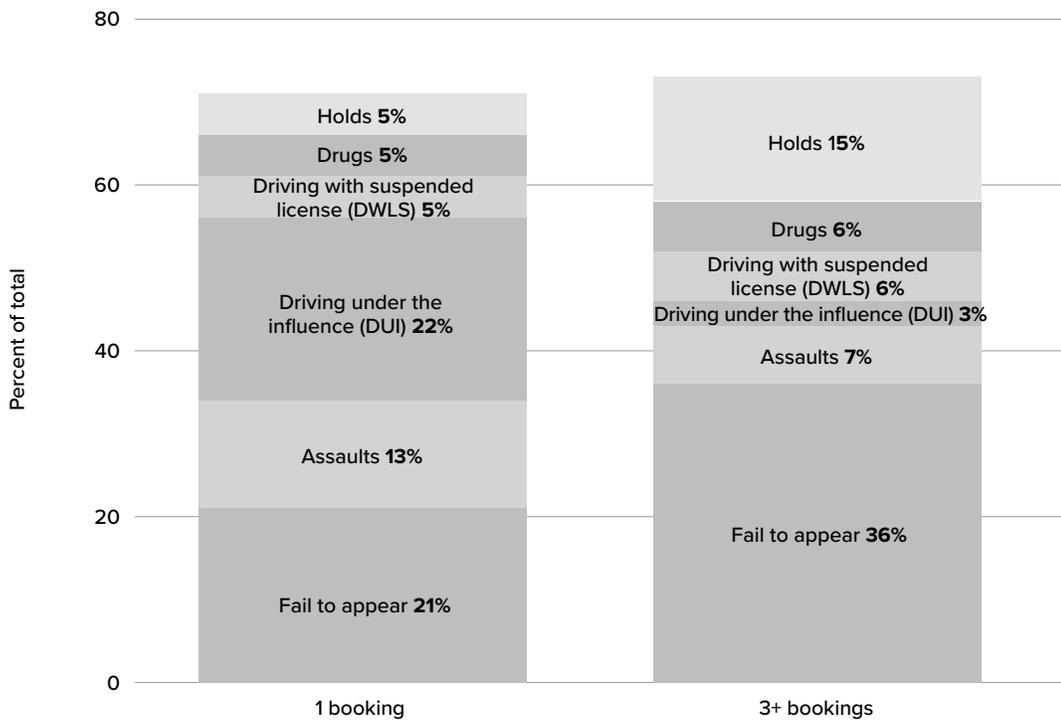
Note: LOS values were capped at 364 days, to reduce the effect of a small number of outliers with much longer stays.

Two out of three people (65 percent) who were arrested and booked into Okanogan County Jail did not return to the jail on new charges over the five-year period (2015 – 2019) the research team examined.



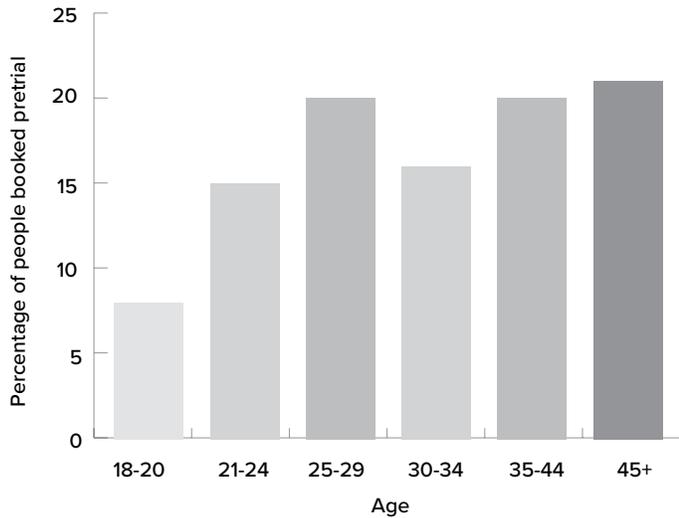
- More than one-third (36 percent) of all repeated pretrial jail admissions were due to failure to appear charges. **This demonstrates that many repeat bookings stem from the challenges of meeting legal requirements during the pretrial process** rather than new charges.
- **The 7 percent of people who were reincarcerated five or more times in Okanogan County Jail accounted for 20 percent of all pretrial bookings over five years.** This group—about 435 people—had a broad impact on jail trends in Okanogan County. People cycling in and out of jail are more likely to experience homelessness, substance use, lack of stable income, and mental and physical health problems than the general population.³ Increased social services and/or assistance meeting legal-system obligations could have an outsized impact by helping them stabilize and meet their day-to-day needs and ultimately end the cycle of incarceration.

Charge categories for people with single versus multiple pretrial bookings over five years



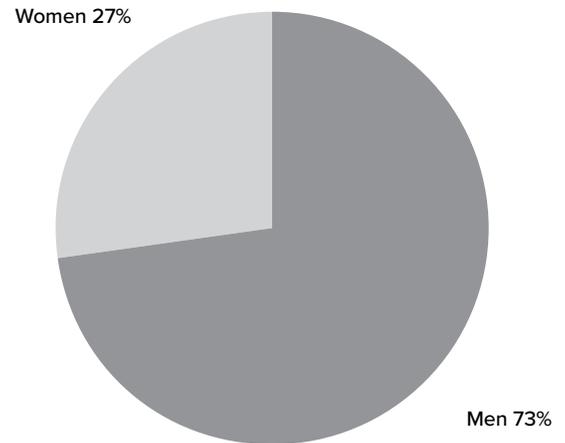
APPENDIX A – ADDITIONAL CHARTS

Figure 1. Age at booking



Age at booking. The average age at arrest/booking was 35. Four out of ten people were aged 35 or older when admitted to jail. Nearly one in ten people were ages 18-20 when booked.

Figure 2. Jail admissions by gender



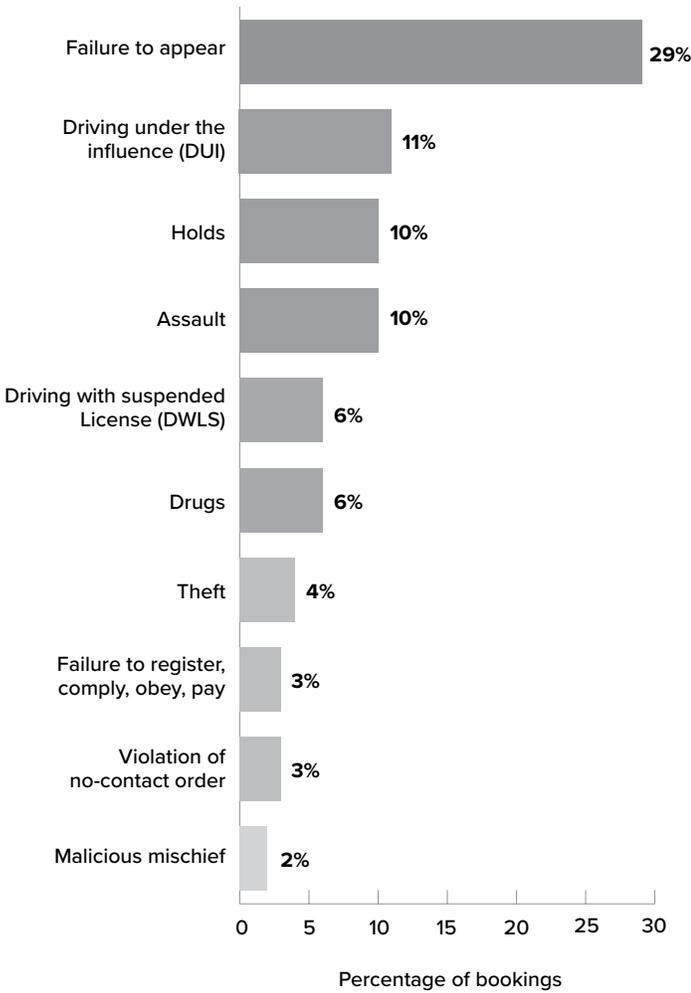
Jail admissions by gender. Women made up more than one-quarter of jail bookings into Okanogan County Jail. Nationally, women's presence in jails has been growing.

There are disparities in jail admissions by race and ethnicity. Similar to proportions in Okanogan County's population, most pretrial jail admissions were of white people. Hispanic/Latinx people made up 20 percent of pretrial jail admissions. Jail admissions of Hispanic/Latinx people, Native American people, and people with multi-racial/ethnic identities are likely underestimated because jail staff may misclassify some people as white at admission. This tendency to underestimate is common in jails across the country.⁴

- **Native American people were overrepresented in jail admissions** (19 percent) compared to the county population (13 percent). Black people were 2 percent of jail admissions, but 1 percent of the county population.

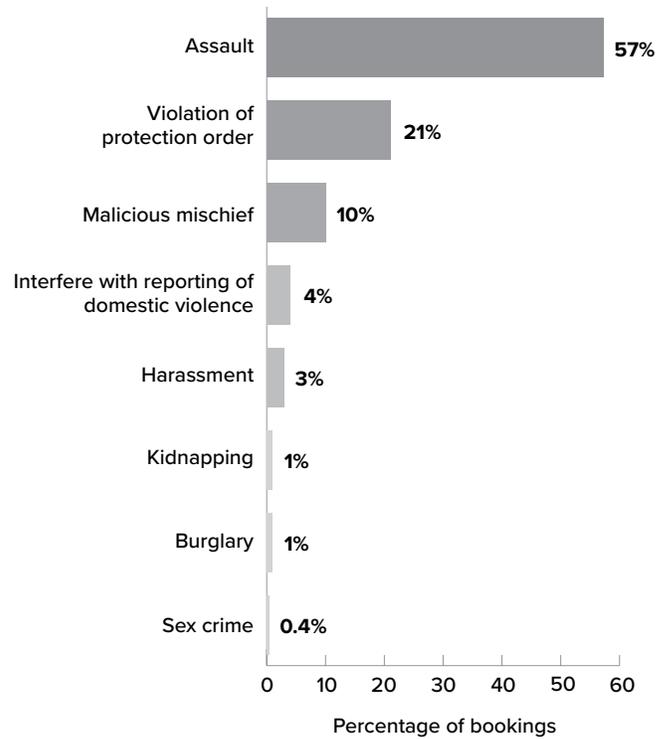


Figure 3. Percent of pretrial jail bookings by primary charge



Top charges for pretrial jail bookings: Failure to appear in court (29 percent), driving under the influence (11 percent), holds for federal, state, or other local entities (10 percent), and assault (10 percent, with 73 percent of those for domestic violence).

Figure 4. Most common domestic violence charge type, percentage distribution



Most common domestic violence charge types.

Assault (57 percent) was the most common top charge in cases involving domestic violence. Violating a protection order (21 percent) and malicious mischief (10 percent) were the next most common top charges in domestic violence cases.



Figure 5. Multiple pretrial bookings



Multiple pretrial bookings. Most people were arrested and booked into Okanogan County Jail only once during the observed period (65 percent). However, 18 percent experienced three or more pretrial jails stays over five years (2015-2019).



APPENDIX B – METHODOLOGY

The findings in this brief come from analysis conducted by WSU faculty and graduate students in the Rural Jails Research and Policy Network. The Okanogan County Sheriff's Department provided data on all jail bookings and releases initiated between January 1, 2015, and December 31, 2019. In total, the WSU team analyzed 15,536 bookings: in 4,773 booking incidents, people were committed to serve a sentence, and in 10,763 incidents (involving 5,808 individual people), they were booked pretrial (upon arrest).

The WSU team also conducted qualitative and ethnographic work; future reports will provide more detailed findings. Quotes come from qualitative interviews conducted from August 2020 to August 2021 with people who had been held in Okanogan County Jail at some point. In all, researchers interviewed 37 people for this project who had spent time in rural Washington jails; 12 had spent time in the Okanogan County Jail. Interviews lasted approximately one to two hours and were conducted by phone by WSU faculty. They were audio recorded and later transcribed and analyzed for thematic patterns.

Endnotes

1. A 2021 law (SB 5226) eliminated mandatory suspension of license as a consequence for unpaid fines and fees; courts now have the *option* to suspend or revoke a license and must assess ability to pay.
2. Washington state requires police officers to make an arrest when they respond to a domestic violence call and have probable cause to believe that an incident of domestic violence or a violation of a no-contact order occurred in the last four hours. When an officer believes that more than one party is at fault, they are not required to make more than one arrest—typically, they will arrest only the party who appears to be the “primary aggressor.”
3. Madeline Bailey, Erica Crew, and Madz Reeve, *No Access to Justice: Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness and Jail* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2020), <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/no-access-to-justice.pdf>; Jennifer Bronson, Jessica Stroop, Stephanie Zimmer, and Marcus Berzofsky, *Drug Use, Dependence, and Abuse Among State Prisoners and Jail Inmates, 2007-2009* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2017), <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/dudaspi0709.pdf>; and Urban Institute, “Five Charts that Explain the Homelessness-Jail Cycle – and How to Break It,” September 16, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/features/five-charts-explain-homelessness-jail-cycle-and-how-break-it>.

For more information

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For more information about this fact sheet, please contact the Washington Rural Jails Network at <https://labs.wsu.edu/wrjn> or Dr. Jennifer Schwartz, jennifer.schwartz@wsu.edu, WSU Department of Sociology, Pullman, WA 99164. The Washington Rural Jails Network is part of the Rural Jails Research and Policy Network, a project at the Vera Institute of Justice, with funding from Arnold Ventures.

