

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Work in progress: Audit description

Fines Used to Deter Human Trafficking and Support Survivors

Human trafficking is a multibillion-dollar illegal trade whose perpetrators use force, fraud or coercion to compel a person into any form of work, whether sex or other labor. While Washington has long been considered a nationwide leader in the fight to eliminate human trafficking, the problem nonetheless persists.

State law imposes mandatory fines (called “fees” in statute) on those who commit human trafficking and related sexual exploitation crimes, such as commercial sexual abuse of a minor. These fines make those who exploit vulnerable people responsible for contributing financially to efforts to combat the crimes and support survivors. Some experts consider this to be one component of a sustainable funding model for states to use to address human trafficking.

Courts must assess and collect fines, but reports issued by the Department of Commerce suggest this may not be occurring as required by law. In 2023, just 25 percent of the 64 courts reporting sexual exploitation convictions assessed fines, and just over \$100,000 in fines was collected. Commerce estimated that, in the past ten years, more than \$2.5 million in such fines could have been assessed but was not.

Resulting revenues are then to be distributed to cities and counties, which must use these funds for prevention, enforcement and survivors’ services. For example, one city reported using this revenue to fund a human trafficking advocate position. However, it is not always clear how revenues are being used and whether the money is spent appropriately.

Preliminary scope and objectives

Senate Bill 6006, passed in 2024, required the Washington State Auditor’s Office to conduct a performance audit examining human trafficking fines. This audit will also examine fines for related sexual exploitation crimes. If fines are not being assessed or used as required, the audit will make recommendations that could increase the amount of funding that is directed to addressing these crimes and supporting survivors.

The audit seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Are selected courts assessing and collecting fines for human trafficking and sexual exploitation crimes as required by state law?
2. Are selected local governments (counties, cities or towns; law enforcement agencies) using the revenues from these fines as required by state law?



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