

March 2004

**SENTENCES FOR ADULT FELONS IN WASHINGTON:
OPTIONS TO ADDRESS PRISON OVERCROWDING
—PART I (HISTORICAL TRENDS)—
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The 2003 Washington State Legislature directed the Institute to determine if there are changes to Washington's sentencing structure that could reduce the growth in the prison population, and its associated costs, without endangering public safety. Washington's current sentencing structure was enacted by the Legislature in 1981. This Sentencing Reform Act (SRA) took effect in 1984.

Our findings will be published in two parts. In this report—Part I—we provide an overall context for the study by reviewing Washington's sentencing system and examining the growth trends of the prison population.

Part II, to be published by June 30, 2004, will estimate the impact that prison sentences have on subsequent felony crimes—recidivism.

In this report, we find that the Washington State prison population has increased considerably since 1986, and this growth has outpaced the growth of the adult population. We examine two legislative policy levers that have affected the prison population: the percentage of convicted offenders who go to prison and the length of time imprisoned. We analyze these two factors separately for violent, property, and drug offenders. We find that the SRA has affected these factors differentially. For example, since 1986 the length of stay in prison for property offenders has decreased but increased for sex offenders.

These changes in length of imprisonment and percentage of offenders imprisoned provide an opportunity to examine the impact of sentence lengths and imprisonment on recidivism. That is, do offenders sentenced to prison, or who receive longer prison sentences, recidivate more or less often than similar offenders who are not sentenced to prison or receive shorter sentences? Our findings on these questions will be addressed in Part II of the study.