

## Washington State Sentencing Guidelines Commission

### Sentencing Reform Act: Historical Background

In 1981, the Washington State Legislature enacted the Sentencing Reform Act ("SRA"), which established the Sentencing Guidelines Commission and directed it to recommend to the Legislature a determinate sentencing system for adult felonies. The principal goal of the new sentencing guidelines system was to ensure that offenders who commit similar crimes and have similar criminal histories receive equivalent sentences. Sentences were to be determined by the seriousness of the offense and by the criminal record of the offender.

The Commission completed the original adult felony sentencing "grid" in 1982, and the Legislature enacted it into law in 1983. The Sentencing Reform Act took effect for crimes committed on and after July 1, 1984. Codified in chapter 9.94A RCW the SRA contains the guidelines and procedures used by the courts to impose sentences for adult felonies. The Commission continues to advise the Legislature on necessary adjustments to the sentencing structure

Prior to 1984, sentences imposed for adult felonies in Washington were indeterminate. Courts had wide discretion over whether or not to impose a prison sentence and the length of any sentence. The Board of Prison Terms and Paroles then decided when or whether to release an offender within the statutory maximum sentence period. Indeterminate sentencing is still in effect for more than 750 prison inmates who committed crimes before July 1, 1984. The Indeterminate Sentence Review Board sets the release dates for those offenders.

The Legislature has amended the Sentencing Reform Act in almost every legislative session, requiring longer periods of confinement for violent offenders, sex offenders and drug offenders. Statewide citizen initiatives have also resulted in the imposition of longer prison terms, including longer sentences for armed crime and also the nation's first "three strikes and you're out" measure. Where average prison terms have increased markedly in length, the state's prison population has more than doubled since 1984.

In 1996 the Legislature directed the Commission to assume the functions of the Juvenile Disposition Standards Commission, serving similar functions with regard to juvenile sentencing.