

# Study provides first estimates of judicial costs of crime, from homicide to theft

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The judicial costs of crime can vary widely, from as little as \$200 to \$400 for a motor vehicle theft to as high as \$22,000 to \$44,000 for a homicide, according to a new RAND Corporation study that provides the first comprehensive effort to accurately estimate the judicial costs of specific reported crimes.

When considering the costs of crime, policymakers and the general public typically think about the tens of thousands of dollars spent annually to house a single prisoner. The outlays in judicial and legal services have received far less attention, depriving taxpayers of a broader picture of the dollar impact of major crimes and potential savings from crime reduction measures, according to researchers.

The RAND project calculated the national average costs to taxpayers of prosecuting, defending and adjudicating seven major types of crime.

Researchers found that every reported homicide, for example, cost the judicial system \$22,000 to \$44,000. In other categories the costs were estimated at \$2,000 to \$5,000 for a rape or other sexual assault, \$600 to \$1,300 for a robbery, \$800 to \$2,100 for an aggravated assault, \$200 to \$600 for a burglary, \$300 to \$600 for larceny/theft, and \$200 to \$400 for a motor vehicle theft.

The study, which expressed estimated costs in 2010 dollars, has been published online by the American Journal of Criminal Justice.

The study aims to illuminate not only the expenditures, but the potential public savings if more crimes can be prevented.

"Programs that prevent crime can be expensive, but benefit everyone by freeing up limited resources in our criminal justice system," said Priscillia Hunt, lead author of the study and an economist at RAND, a nonprofit research organization. "We hope this study will contribute to the dialogue over how to allocate scarce dollars, improve the efficiency of the [criminal justice](#) system, and pay for crime prevention programs."

The study notes that since 2007, U.S. taxpayers have provided more than \$50 billion annually for courts, prosecution and public defense of all types of criminal cases, but little was known about the average costs of those services for specific crimes.

Hunt and co-authors found that the costs can vary greatly by crime type. A felony, for example, generally requires more time and effort by attorneys, clerks and other staff than most misdemeanors.

Hunt cautions that the dollar estimates are not intended to be used as a gauge of how much the services should cost, and that figures showing that some crime categories cost the judicial system more than others do not mean that money is being wasted.

"With this study, the set of decisionmakers working within the courts and prosecutor and public defender offices know how much a particular crime is costing their system," Hunt said. "We hope it will get a dialogue going. Now they know that on average a murder is costing this much they can ask: Is it the right amount or should it be less? Or more? If so, how? Are we spending in the right places or should we be shifting our resources?"

The researchers relied on data from all 50 states collected by the federal

Bureau of Justice Statistics. A rich source of information on employment and expenditures, it allowed RAND researchers to analyze not only the amount of capital, but also the labor required for each type of [crime](#) examined.

Preventing one theft, for example, "is the equivalent of freeing up: 30 minutes of a judge's time, 3 hours of a prosecutor's time, 3 hours of a public defender's time, 5 hours of staff time (for court, prosecution, and public defense), and \$100 of capital, supplies, and equipment," the study states.

"Crime prevention or reduction may allow judges, attorneys, their staff and others to transfer their time to other cases to the benefit of taxpayers and society as a whole," Hunt said.

Support for the study was provided by the National Institute of Justice, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Justice. James Anderson and Jessica Saunders co-authored the study.

The project was conducted within the RAND Justice Policy Program, which conducts research across the criminal and civil justice system on issues such as public safety, effective policing, drug policy and enforcement, corrections policy, tort reform and insurance regulation.

Provided by RAND Corporation

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