

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2024 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

Senate Bill 378

(Senator West, *et al.*)

Judicial Proceedings

Criminal Law - Theft of a Handgun

This bill (1) excludes theft of a handgun from the general theft statute; (2) classifies theft of a handgun as a separate felony offense; and (3) establishes penalties for theft of a handgun.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: Potential minimal decrease in general fund revenues due to cases shifting from the District Court to the circuit courts, as discussed below. Potential minimal increase in general fund expenditures due to the bill's incarceration penalties and inmates shifting from local detention centers to State correctional facilities, as discussed below.

Local Effect: Potential minimal increase in revenues due to the bill's monetary penalties and cases shifting from the District Court to the circuit courts. Potential minimal decrease in expenditures due to the bill's incarceration penalties and inmates shifting from local detention centers to State correctional facilities.

Small Business Effect: Potential minimal.

Analysis

Bill Summary: A person convicted of theft of a handgun, as defined under § 5-101 of the Public Safety Article, is guilty of a felony and subject to the following penalties: (1) for a first conviction, a maximum penalty of 5 years imprisonment and/or a \$1,000 maximum fine; and (2) for a second or subsequent conviction, a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment and/or a \$2,500 maximum fine.

A sentence imposed for theft of a handgun under the bill must be separate from and consecutive to a sentence imposed for any other offense.

Current Law: Under § 5-101 of the Public Safety Article, a handgun is a firearm with a barrel less than 16 inches in length. Signal, starter, and blank pistols are also considered handguns.

Theft of a handgun is subject to the general theft statute, which imposes penalties based on the value of the stolen property or services.

Under the general theft statute, a person may not, under specified circumstances, (1) willfully or knowingly obtain or exert unauthorized control over property; (2) obtain control over property by willfully or knowingly using deception; (3) possess stolen property knowing that it has been stolen or believing that it probably has been stolen; (4) obtain control over property knowing that the property was lost, mislaid, or delivered under a mistake as to the identity of the recipient or nature or amount of the property; or (5) obtain the services of another that are available only by compensation by deception or with knowledge that the services are provided without the provider's consent. A violator is required to restore the owner's property or pay the owner the value of the property or services and is subject to the penalties in **Exhibit 1**.

**Exhibit 1
Penalties for Theft**

<u>Value of Property and/or Services</u>	<u>Maximum Penalty</u>
Less than \$100*	Misdemeanor – 90 days imprisonment and/or \$500 fine
At least \$100 but less than \$1,500*	Misdemeanor – 6 months imprisonment and/or \$500 fine (first conviction) or 1 year imprisonment and/or \$500 fine (second or subsequent conviction)
Less than \$1,500 (four or more prior theft convictions)**	Misdemeanor – 5 years imprisonment and/or \$5,000 fine
At least \$1,500 but less than \$25,000	Felony – 5 years imprisonment and/or \$10,000 fine
At least \$25,000 but less than \$100,000	Felony – 10 years imprisonment and/or \$15,000 fine
\$100,000 or more	Felony – 20 years imprisonment and/or \$25,000 fine

* Subject to two-year statute of limitations.

** Subject to specified notice requirements.

Source: Department of Legislative Services

Section 7-110 of the Criminal Law Article specifies presumptions and permitted and prohibited defenses to the crime of theft. The District Court has concurrent jurisdiction with the circuit courts over felony theft violations.

State Revenues: General fund revenues may decrease minimally from fines imposed in District Court cases that shift to the circuit courts under the bill.

State Expenditures: General fund expenditures may increase minimally as a result of the bill's incarceration penalties due to people being committed to State correctional facilities rather than local facilities as a result of the bill's increased penalty provisions and consecutive sentence requirement. This estimate assumes that the majority of stolen handguns have a value of less than \$1,500. The number of people convicted of this proposed crime is expected to be minimal.

Changing crimes from misdemeanors to felonies means that (1) such cases are likely to be filed in the circuit courts rather than the District Court and (2) some persons may eventually serve longer incarcerations due to more stringent penalty provisions, applicable to some offenses for prior felony convictions. Accordingly, it is assumed that this bill shifts an unknown number of cases from the District Court to the circuit courts. It is not known whether such a prospective shift may spur more plea bargains and affect actual sentencing practices for this offense.

Persons serving a sentence longer than 18 months are incarcerated in State correctional facilities. Currently, the average total cost per incarcerated individual, including overhead, is estimated at \$5,110 per month. Persons serving a sentence of one year or less in a jurisdiction other than Baltimore City are sentenced to local detention facilities. For persons sentenced to a term of between 12 and 18 months, the sentencing judge has the discretion to order that the sentence be served at a local facility or a State correctional facility. The State provides assistance to the counties for locally sentenced incarcerated individuals and for (1) incarcerated individuals who are sentenced to and awaiting transfer to the State correctional system; (2) sentenced incarcerated individuals confined in a local detention center between 12 and 18 months; and (3) incarcerated individuals who have been sentenced to the custody of the State but are confined in or who receive reentry or other prerelease programming and services from a local facility.

The State does not pay for pretrial detention time in a local correctional facility. Persons sentenced in Baltimore City are generally incarcerated in State correctional facilities. The Baltimore Pretrial Complex, a State-operated facility, is used primarily for pretrial detentions.

The Office of the Public Defender (OPD) advises that while the bill will not likely result in additional cases, it may result in an increased level of effort in cases for which OPD

would otherwise provide representation due to the more stringent penalties under the bill. OPD advises that such an increase in effort requires the addition of one attorney at a cost of approximately \$89,686 in fiscal 2025 and increasing to \$122,681 by fiscal 2029. The Department of Legislative Services advises that the bill likely applies in a limited number of cases and, thus, is unlikely to warrant the hiring of an additional attorney.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has been introduced within the last three years. See SB 564 of 2023, SB 533 of 2022, and SB 560 of 2021.

Designated Cross File: HB 659 (Delegate Munoz) - Judiciary.

Information Source(s): Baltimore, Frederick, and Montgomery counties; Maryland State Commission on Criminal Sentencing Policy; Judiciary (Administrative Office of the Courts); Office of the Public Defender; Maryland State's Attorneys' Association; Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services; Department of State Police; Department of Legislative Services

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