

Department of Legislative Services  
Maryland General Assembly  
2024 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE  
First Reader

Senate Bill 179

(Senator Watson, *et al.*)

Judicial Proceedings

---

Crimes and Corrections - Penalties and Procedures (Violent Firearms Offender  
Act of 2024)

---

This bill (1) alters provisions and penalties pertaining to several firearms-related offenses; (2) expands the definition of a “crime of violence” under § 14-101 of the Criminal Law Article; (3) requires the Commissioner of Correction to provide to each incarcerated individual a reentry kit containing specified items and information prior to release from a State correctional facility; and (4) specifies that a violation of a condition of probation, parole, or mandatory supervision involving the use or possession of a firearm is not a technical violation.

---

Fiscal Summary

**State Effect:** General fund expenditures for the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) increase by approximately \$1.2 million in FY 2025 and by approximately \$1.6 million annually thereafter for reentry kits; potential significant *additional* increase in *cumulative* general fund expenditures in the out-years due to the bill’s penalty provisions, as discussed below. The bill is not expected to materially affect State revenues.

**Local Effect:** The bill is not expected to materially affect local finances.

**Small Business Effect:** None.

---

## Analysis

### Bill Summary/Current Law:

#### *Offense-related Provisions*

Section 4-204 of the Criminal Law Article prohibits the use of a firearm in the commission of a crime of violence (as defined under § 5-101 of the Public Safety Article) or a felony. The bill (1) specifies that the term “use a firearm” does not include the mere possession of a firearm and (2) reclassifies the offense from a misdemeanor to a felony.

Section 4-306 of the Criminal Law Article prohibits the use of an assault weapon, rapid fire trigger activator, or a magazine that has a capacity of more than 10 rounds of ammunition in the commission of a felony or crime of violence (as defined under § 5-101 of the Public Safety Article). The bill (1) specifies that “uses” related to a firearm does not include the mere possession of a firearm and (2) reclassifies the offense from a misdemeanor to a felony.

Section 4-404 of the Criminal Law Article prohibits a person from using or possessing a machine gun in the commission or attempted commission of a crime of violence (as defined under § 14-101 of the Criminal Law Article). The bill expands the application of this prohibition to the commission or attempted commission of a felony.

Section 5-133(b) of the Public Safety Article prohibits the possession of a regulated firearm by specified individuals. The bill increases the maximum incarceration penalty for a second or subsequent violation of this prohibition from 5 to 10 years. A person convicted under this provision is not prohibited from participating in specified drug treatment due to length of sentence. A court may not impose the subsequent offender penalty unless the State’s Attorney serves notice on the defendant or the defendant’s counsel before the acceptance of a plea of guilty or *nolo contendere* or at least 15 days before trial that (1) the State will seek the subsequent offender penalty and (2) lists the alleged prior convictions.

#### *Technical Violations of Probation, Parole, or Mandatory Supervision*

Under current law, a “technical violation” of a condition of probation, parole, or mandatory supervision is a violation that does not involve (1) an arrest or a summons issued by a District Court commissioner on a statement of charges filed by a law enforcement officer; (2) a violation of a criminal prohibition other than a minor traffic offense; (3) a violation of a no-contact or stay-away order; or (4) absconding. The bill specifies that a violation involving the use or possession of a firearm is not a technical violation.

### *Reentry Kits*

The bill requires the Commissioner of Correction to provide an incarcerated individual, before release from a State correctional facility, with a reentry kit including:

- at least one week of supplies for basic human needs, including toiletries and clothing;
- the identification card required to be issued under § 9-609.1 of the Correctional Services Article;
- contact information for entities that specialize in providing reentry services, housing assistance, substance use disorder treatment, and mental health services;
- contact information for the Maryland Health Benefit Exchange (MHBE), if the incarcerated individual is not eligible for Medicaid benefits; and
- public transportation information.

If the incarcerated individual is eligible for Medicaid benefits, the Commissioner of Correction must provide assistance in obtaining Medicaid benefits.

### *Crimes of Violence under § 14-101 of the Criminal Law Article*

Individuals convicted of a crime of violence under § 14-101 of the Criminal Law Article are eligible for various additional criminal penalties and earn diminution credits at a lower rate than other offenders.

Section 14-101(a) of the Criminal Law Article defines a “crime of violence” as (1) abduction; (2) arson in the first degree; (3) kidnapping; (4) manslaughter, except involuntary manslaughter; (5) mayhem; (6) maiming; (7) murder; (8) rape; (9) robbery; (10) carjacking (including armed carjacking); (11) first- and second-degree sexual offenses; (12) use of a firearm in the commission of a felony or other crime of violence, except possession with intent to distribute a controlled dangerous substance (CDS); (13) child abuse in the first degree; (14) sexual abuse of a minor under specified circumstances; (15) home invasion; (16) felony sex trafficking and forced marriage; (17) an attempt to commit crimes (1) through (16); (18) continuing course of certain sexual conduct with a child; (19) assault in the first degree; and (20) assault with intent to murder, rape, rob, or commit a sexual offense in the first or second degree.

Prior to October 1, 2018, using a handgun in the commission of a crime of violence or felony was a crime a violence. Chapter 143 of 2018 altered the definition of a “crime of violence” by (1) replacing use of a “handgun” in the commission of a crime of violence or felony with use of a “firearm” in the commission of a crime of violence or felony and (2) creating an exception for using a firearm in the commission of possession with intent

to distribute a CDS under § 5-602(2) of the Criminal Law Article. By removing this exception, the bill adds use of a firearm in the commission of possession with the intent to distribute a CDS to the definition of a crime of violence. Chapter 26 of 2022 reclassified possession with intent to distribute cannabis as a misdemeanor.

**State Expenditures:** General fund expenditures for DPSCS increase by approximately \$1.2 million in fiscal 2025 and by approximately \$1.6 million each year thereafter for reentry kits. General fund incarceration expenditures increase in the out-years, perhaps significantly *when considered cumulatively*, due to the bill's penalty provisions, as discussed below. MHBE can handle additional call volume and correspondence generated by the bill with existing budgeted resources.

### *Reentry Kits*

DPSCS advises that the department released 3,509 individuals (3,299 male and 210 females) back into the community during fiscal 2023. Based on these release statistics and estimated costs for kits for male and female incarcerated individuals (which differ in contents), the annual cost associated with reentry kits is approximately \$1.2 million in fiscal 2025 (reflecting nine months of costs due to the bill's October 1, 2024 effective date) and approximately \$1.6 million each fiscal year thereafter, assuming that the department's annual release statistics remain constant. DPSCS advises that estimated costs associated with reentry kits do not include the standing inventory of release clothing and toiletries that must be established at each facility. In addition, DPSCS advises the need for one reentry specialist to handle distribution, inventory, packaging, and transportation of the reentry kits; however, the Department of Legislative Services (DLS) disagrees and advises that DPSCS currently inventories and provides items for incarcerated individuals as part of the reentry process. In addition, the average daily populations within DPSCS facilities have declined over the past eight years. To the extent that an additional employee is needed to handle the increase in workload resulting from the bill, DPSCS may request the additional position through the annual budget process.

### *Offense-related Provisions*

General fund incarceration expenditures increase in the out-years, perhaps significantly, *when considered cumulatively*, due to the bill's penalty provisions.

**Exhibit 1** contains information on the number of violations filed in the courts, the number of sentences imposed in the circuit courts, and the number of intakes in State correctional facilities during fiscal 2023 for offenses whose penalties are altered under the bill.

**Exhibit 1**  
**Offenses Altered under the Bill**  
**Fiscal 2023**

<b><u>Charge</u></b>	<b><u>District Court Violations Filed/Guilty Dispositions<sup>1</sup></u></b>	<b><u>Circuit Court Violations Filed/Guilty Dispositions<sup>1</sup></u></b>	<b><u>MSCCSP Circuit Court Convictions (Individuals/Counts)<sup>2</sup></u></b>
Criminal Law Article, § 4-204 (Use of a Firearm in the Commission of a Crime)	2,846/0	3,021/551	n/a
Criminal Law Article, § 4-306 (Assault Weapons and Detachable Magazines)	210/0	62/4	2 indiv./2 counts
Criminal Law Article, § 4-404 (Using a Machine Gun to Commit Specified Crimes)	5/0	4/0	0
Public Safety Article, § 5-133(b) (Possession of Regulated Firearms by Specified Persons)	5,778/64 <sup>3</sup>	7,388/1,740	680 indiv./703 counts

MSCCSP: Maryland State Commission on Criminal Sentencing Policy

n/a: not applicable

<sup>1</sup> A violation is a charge filed with the court. It is not a conviction, and one person may be associated with multiple violations.

<sup>2</sup> Reflects data from the Maryland State Sentencing Guidelines Database for sentencing information received by MSCCSP for individuals sentenced in the State's circuit courts.

<sup>3</sup> Violation data appear to apply to violations filed under all provisions of § 5-133, not just § 5-133(b).

Sources: Maryland Judiciary; Maryland State Commission on Criminal Sentencing Policy

The bill reclassifies specified offenses and activities from misdemeanors to felonies. 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. Excluding overhead, the average cost of housing a new State incarcerated individual (including health care costs) is about \$1,244 per month.

Excluding all health care (which is a fixed cost under the current contract), the average variable costs total \$336 per month.

### *Increased Incarceration Penalties*

*Section 5-133(b) of the Public Safety Article (Prohibited Possession of a Firearm):* The bill increases the maximum incarceration penalty for a subsequent offender from 5 to 10 years. DPSCS was not able to provide recent information on how many individuals entered Division of Correction (DOC) facilities for subsequent convictions under § 5-133(b) of the Public Safety Article. However, the impact of this provision depends on the sentences imposed and actual time served by offenders sentenced under this provision of the bill.

*For illustrative purposes,* assuming that 50 individuals are sentenced as repeat offenders for this offense, the bill may add as much as 250 years of additional time to this group of offenders. Assuming the variable incarcerated individual costs of \$336 per month excluding health care, State costs could increase by as much as \$1.0 million for each annual cohort of defendants sentenced for this crime. Any impact from these extended incarcerations will likely be realized in the out-years, as individuals conclude sentences that may have been imposed under existing statute and commence serving sentences imposed under the bill.

### *Crimes of Violence – Use of a Firearm in the Commission of Possession with Intent to Distribute a Controlled Dangerous Substance*

The bill's addition of a use of a firearm in the commission of possession with intent to distribute a CDS may result in a minimal increase in general fund expenditures in the out-years. DPSCS was not able to provide recent information on how many individuals entered DOC facilities for convictions under § 4-204 of the Criminal Law Article (use of a firearm in the commission of a felony or a crime of violence (as defined under § 5 101 of the Public Safety Article)) and possession with the intent to distribute a CDS under § 5-602 of the Criminal Law Article. It is also unknown how many incarcerated individuals recently benefitted from the exception repealed by the bill.

### *Office of the Public Defender*

The Office of the Public Defender (OPD) advises that the bill increases litigation, resulting in the need to hire five additional attorneys and two additional clerks, with costs totaling more than \$650,000 annually; however, DLS advises that the increase in workload for OPD directly resulting from the bill and the corresponding need for additional staff cannot be reliably estimated at this time and can only be determined with actual experience under the bill.

## **Additional Information**

**Recent Prior Introductions:** Similar legislation has been introduced within the last three years. See SB 744 of 2023 and SB 852 of 2021.

**Designated Cross File:** None.

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

**Fiscal Note History:** First Reader - January 24, 2024  
km/aad

---

Analysis by: Shirleen M. E. Pilgrim

Direct Inquiries to:  
(410) 946-5510  
(301) 970-5510