



## Impact Analysis on Proposed Legislation

### *Virginia Criminal Sentencing Commission*

#### **House Bill No. 1756** **As Engrossed** **(Patron Prior to Engrossment – Janis)**

**Date Submitted:** 2/1/2005

**LD #:** 05-4367348

**Topic:** Manslaughter caused by operation of watercraft

#### **Proposed Change:**

This proposal amends § 18.2-36.1 to expand the definition of involuntary manslaughter under this statute to include the unintentional killing of another while operating a watercraft or motorboat under the influence of alcohol or drugs (in violation of subdivisions (ii), (iii), or (iv) of subsection B of § 29.1-738).

Currently, § 18.2-36.1 specifies that the unintentional killing of another as a result of driving under the influence in violation of § 18.2-266 is involuntary manslaughter. While involuntary manslaughter is punishable as a Class 5 felony (1 to 10 years), § 18.2-36.1 provides for enhanced punishment of 1 to 20 years (with a mandatory, minimum term of 1 year) in cases in which the conduct was so gross, wanton, and culpable as to show a reckless disregard for human life. Under § 29.1-738, it is a Class 1 misdemeanor to operate a watercraft while under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Under § 29.1-740, failure to stop and render assistance when a watercraft has been involved in a collision is a Class 1 misdemeanor; the penalty is raised to a Class 6 felony in cases of serious injury or death.

#### **Analysis:**

According to fiscal year (FY) 2002 and FY2003 Pre/Post-Sentence Investigation (PSI) data, one offender was convicted of a felony for involuntary manslaughter under § 18.2-36 with an additional boating offense. The additional offense was a felony for a hit and run while boating that resulted in serious injury or death (§ 29.1-740). This offender was sentenced to nine years in prison. For this case, the data do not indicate that the offender was also convicted of boating under the influence (in violation of § 29.1-738). As a Class 1 misdemeanor, the boating under the influence charge could have been resolved in general district court, prior to trial in circuit court for involuntary manslaughter; however, there is no case information on this offender in the general district court data.

Overall, 71% of offenders convicted of involuntary manslaughter under § 18.2-36.1 receive a state-responsible (prison) sentence (median sentence of just over two years). When the enhanced felony punishment is applied for cases in which the offender showed a reckless disregard for human life, the portion of offenders receiving a prison term reaches 80% and the median prison sentence increases to 7.5 years.

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The Commission provides analyses of the impact on prison and jail bed space and community corrections placement needs in accordance with § 30-19.1:4. Impact analyses do not comment on the merits of the bill under review.

**Background Sentencing Information**

| Felony Crimes  | Number of Cases | % No Incarceration | % Local Responsible | % State Responsible | Median State-Responsible Sentence |
|--|-----------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Involuntary manslaughter (vehicular) - § 18.2-36.1                                   | 55              | 10.9%              | 18.2%               | 70.9%               | 2.1 yrs.                          |
| Involuntary manslaughter (vehicular) – reckless disregard for human life § 18.2-36.1 | 30              | 16.7%              | 3.3%                | 80.0%               | 7.5 yrs.                          |

Data Source: Virginia Criminal Sentencing Commission analysis of FY2002 and FY2003 Pre/Post-Sentence Investigation (PSI) database

**Impact of Proposed Legislation:**

The proposed legislation may increase the state-responsible (prison) bed space needs of the Commonwealth. Currently, individuals who unintentionally cause the death of another while boating under influence of alcohol or drugs can be prosecuted for involuntary manslaughter under § 18.2-36 (a Class 5 felony); however, the enhanced penalty of up to 20 years for reckless disregard of human life provided in § 18.2-36.1 is not available. By expanding § 18.2-36.1 to include unintentional death resulting from boating under the influence, the proposal makes this enhanced penalty available in boating as well as drunk driving cases. While the number of cases affected by the proposal and its effect on judicial sentencing practices cannot be determined, the impact on state-responsible (prison) bed space is expected to be small.

Virginia's sentencing guidelines cover convictions under § 18.2-36.1. However, no adjustment to the guidelines would be necessary under the proposal.

**Pursuant to § 30-19.1:4, the estimated amount of the necessary appropriation cannot be determined for periods of imprisonment in state adult correctional facilities and cannot be determined for periods of commitment to the custody of the Department of Juvenile Justice.**

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