

LFC Requester:	
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**AGENCY BILL ANALYSIS
2025 REGULAR SESSION**

WITHIN 24 HOURS OF BILL POSTING, UPLOAD ANALYSIS TO:

AgencyAnalysis.nmlegis.gov

{Analysis must be uploaded as a PDF}

SECTION I: GENERAL INFORMATION

{Indicate if analysis is on an original bill, amendment, substitute or a correction of a previous bill}

Check all that apply:

Original **Amendment** _____
Correction _____ **Substitute** _____

Date Feb. 24, 2025
Bill No: HB 496-280

Sponsor: Joy Garratt
Short Title: Felon In Possession of Firearm
Penalty

Agency Name and Code LOPD - 280
Number: _____
Person Writing Kim Chavez Cook
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SECTION II: FISCAL IMPACT

APPROPRIATION (dollars in thousands)

Appropriation		Recurring or Nonrecurring	Fund Affected
FY25	FY26		

(Parenthesis () Indicate Expenditure Decreases)

REVENUE (dollars in thousands)

Estimated Revenue			Recurring or Nonrecurring	Fund Affected
FY25	FY26	FY27		

(Parenthesis () Indicate Expenditure Decreases)

ESTIMATED ADDITIONAL OPERATING BUDGET IMPACT (dollars in thousands)

	FY25	FY26	FY27	3 Year Total Cost	Recurring or Nonrecurring	Fund Affected
Total						

(Parenthesis () Indicate Expenditure Decreases)

Duplicates/Conflicts with/Companion to/Relates to: **HB 166** would also increase the penalty for this crime; **SB 253** would also increase the penalty for this crime; **SB 32** would create a different firearm possession crime

Duplicates/Relates to Appropriation in the General Appropriation Act

SECTION III: NARRATIVE

BILL SUMMARY

Synopsis: HB 496 is similar to many prior bills seeking to increase penalties for felons in possession of a firearm, including two other bills pending in the current session.

Current law punishes non-violent felons in possession of a firearm as a third-degree felony (up to three years in prison), and violent felons in possession of a firearm as a “special” third-degree felony carrying up to six years in prison.

HB 496’s approach would do away with the distinction between violent and non-violent felons, and would increase the penalty across the board to a second-degree felony (up to nine years) for a first offense and a first-degree felony (mandatory 18 years) for a second or subsequent offense.

In sum: HB 496 would **triple** the non-violent felon penalty for a first offense (from 3 to 9 years). For second offenses, the bill would increase the non-violent felon penalty **six-fold** (from 3 to 18 years) and make that penalty *mandatory*. For violent felons, the bill would increase the penalty for a first offense by 50% (from 6 to 9 years) and **triple** the penalty for a second offense (from 6 to 18 years), making that penalty *mandatory*.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS

Higher-penalties cases are more likely to go to trial. These felonies would be handled by, at a minimum, mid-level felony capable attorneys (Associate Trial Attorneys), but more likely higher-level attorneys (Trial Attorneys). A mid-level felony capable Associate Trial Attorney’s mid-point salary *including benefits* is \$136, 321.97 in Albuquerque/Santa Fe and \$144, 811.26 in the outlying areas. A senior-level Trial attorney’s mid-point salary *including benefits* is \$149, 063.13 in Albuquerque/Santa Fe and \$157, 552.44 in the outlying areas. Recurring statewide operational costs per attorney would be \$12, 909.00; additionally, average support staff (secretarial, investigator and social worker) costs per attorney would total \$123, 962.51.

Depending on the volume of cases in the geographic location there may be a significant recurring increase in needed FTEs for the office and contract counsel compensation.

Assessment of the impact on the LOPD upon enactment of this bill would be necessary after the implementation of the proposed higher-penalty scheme.

Any increase in trials would also increase litigation costs for the courts and District Attorneys' offices. Moreover, precluding earned meritorious deductions is certain to impact the housing budget for the Department of Corrections.

SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

Notably, the Legislature has consistently increased penalties for this crime three times in as many years. In 2020, the penalty for this crime was increased from a fourth degree felony to a third degree felony only for SVO felons, leaving the fourth-degree felony for non SVO felons. The next year, the Legislature removed the distinction, increasing the penalty for *all* felons to the third-degree felony carrying three years. In 2022, HB 68 increased the basic sentence for SVO felons to *six* years, leaving the non-SVO felon penalty at three years. HB 496 would thus constitute a *fourth* penalty increase to this crime in the span of as many years. Reviewer is unaware of any evidence showing that these previous penalty increases have had any deterrent effect or resulted in any reduction in gun crime. Reviewer is not aware of any research finding that increased criminal penalties have an increased deterrent effect on the commission of the crimes. The bill would, at most, lead to an increase in incarceration.

In addition, it is important to note that, unlike sentencing enhancements for using a firearm during the commission of another, *violent* crime, Section 30-7-16 punishes a felon for simply possessing a gun or destructive device, even if they never *use* it. The statute represents a policy determination that felons should never possess a firearm. However, doing so hardly presents the same level of risk or danger associated with violent felonies, like armed robbery or aggravated burglary. Felon in possession is a crime of *mere possession*. It includes storing a gun in one's closet and does not require having it on their person or using it in any way, nor the commission of any contemporaneous crime. It is at its foundation, a *regulatory* offense, and the current penalty, which reflects three increases in the last three years, is sufficient.

Analyst notes that the increased penalty provision for second offenses not only increases the penalty *dramatically*, but also designates a mandatory first-degree felony sentence, taking away any judicial discretion to suspend or defer some or all of that eighteen-year term in favor of probation.

It is also worth noting that people charged with this crime must have a prior felony conviction and are already likely subject to Habitual Offender Enhancements to the existing basic sentence, which involve a one, four, or eight-year enhancement depending on the number of prior felony cases. Thus, for the most egregious repeat offenders, the *existing* basic sentence could easily become either 11 years (for non-violent felons) or 14 years (for violent felons) even if this bill were not enacted.

PERFORMANCE IMPLICATIONS

In addition to an increased desire to defend against higher penalty charges at a jury trial, the need to heavily litigate pretrial motions and to prepare a defense presentation at sentencing is also more pressing. Furthermore, if charged alongside other charges, felon-in-possession charges are almost always "severed" from the other counts to avoid having to unnecessarily inform the jury of a defendant's "felon" status in considering the other allegations. Thus, cases including

this charge among others tend to require *two trials* and not just one. With the increased penalties and good time ineligibility, the need for more experienced attorneys and reliance on peripheral LOPD services such as investigators and social workers would make defending these charges more resource-intensive than they are currently.

ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS

CONFLICT, DUPLICATION, COMPANIONSHIP, RELATIONSHIP

This bill conflicts with several house bills, noted above, that would also amend Section 30-7-16.

TECHNICAL ISSUES

OTHER SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

ALTERNATIVES

WHAT WILL BE THE CONSEQUENCES OF NOT ENACTING THIS BILL

Status quo: felon in possession would be punished as a third degree felony carrying three years in prison for most felons, and carrying six years in prison for those whose “felon” status is premised on a SVO. Furthermore, *in addition to* the possession crime, *use* of a firearm to commit a new crime is punishable by whatever penalty attaches to that offense, plus, for most crimes, a firearm enhancement. Furthermore, that penalty for using a firearm can already be increased based on the person’s felon status under the Habitual Offender Act.

AMENDMENTS