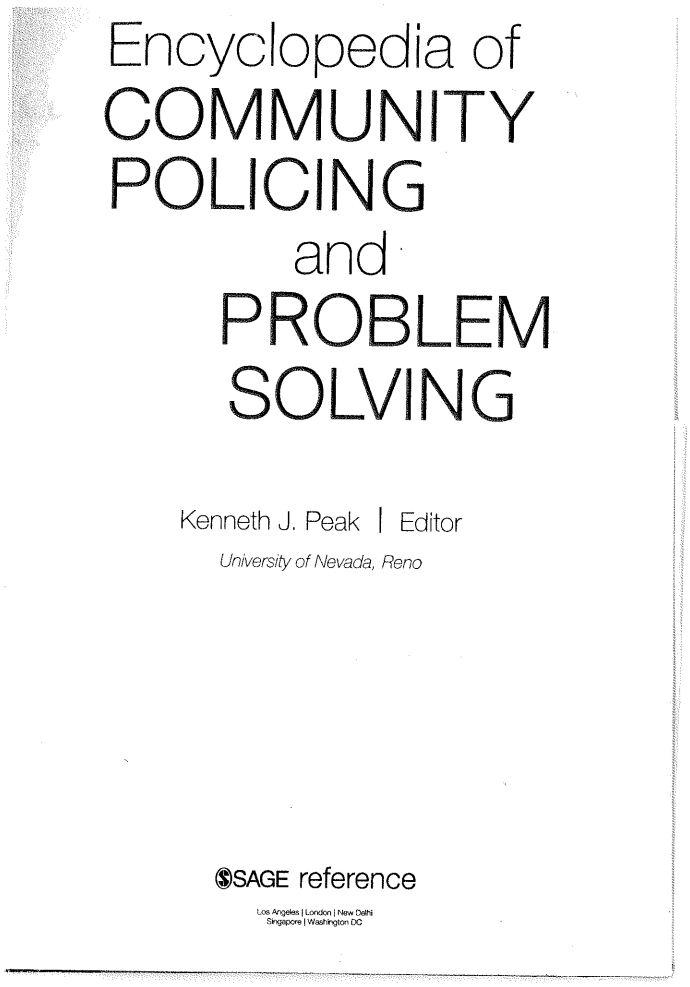

Community Prosecution

Inspired by the popularity and success of community policing strategies, prosecutors in the early 1990s began experimenting with an approach to addressing crime that came to be known as *community prosecution*. Because community prosecution was inspired by and built upon community policing, the approaches share characteristics—most significantly, perhaps, an emphasis on making centralized, anonymous agencies more neighborhood specific and personal. This entry describes community prosecution's components, history, and impact on community policing as well as presenting Denver's (Colorado) community prosecution initiative as an example.

Components

The definition of community prosecution continues to evolve. In some respects its definition changes with every office that practices it. Still, researchers and practitioners have identified components that distinguish it from traditional prosecution: community engagement, partnership, and problem solving.

Community Engagement

Community prosecution seeks to engage communities in various ways. The purpose of community engagement is to build bridges between prosecutors' offices and their constituents in pursuit of safer communities and improved public confidence in justice. Through community engagement, prosecutors tap public knowledge and resources, try to identify the most pressing crime and safety problems, and enlist local resources in fashioning effective responses. Tools of community engagement include conducting surveys, hosting and attending public meetings, creating community advisory boards, and establishing storefront offices that encourage community members to walk in off the streets with complaints, concerns, and questions.

Partnership

Community prosecution emphasizes going beyond the prosecutor's office in search of information, know-how, and resources to address office priorities. Through partnerships with other government agencies, community-based organizations and individuals, community prosecutors seek to build better cases and solve community problems. A number of community prosecution programs are characterized by closer working relationships with police departments. In Indianapolis, Indiana, for example, community prosecutors were assigned offices in stationhouses to answer officers' questions, help

officers build better cases, and develop collaborative crime-control and prevention strategies.

Problem Solving

Community prosecution uses varied and innovative approaches to address crime and public safety issues. The idea is not just to prosecute cases but to use data and local knowledge to craft new crime prevention strategies and to address problems that are not overtly crime related—for example, a community's lack of constructive after-school activities.

History

Two of the earliest advocates of community prosecution were Multnomah County (Oregon) District Attorney Michael Schrunk and Kings County (New York) District Attorney Charles J. Hynes. They were inspired, in part, by frustration with rising caseloads. Despite putting more and more people behind bars, especially at the peak of the crack epidemic during the mid-1980s, many prosecutors felt they were having little impact on crime. The overwhelming amount of work, and the fact that many offenders were returning to criminal activity as soon as they were released, fostered a desire for new responses, and many, like Schrunk and Hynes, turned to community policing as a model.

Schrunk launched his Neighborhood D.A. Program in 1990 by assigning a single prosecutor to a commercial district in Portland, Oregon, where low-level offending was felt to be harming economic revitalization efforts. The prosecutor's first focus was illegal camping, which local businesses considered a public nuisance, an impediment to neighborhood development, and a source of petty criminal activity. Since arresting transients hadn't solved the problem, the community prosecutor addressed the issue by engaging multiple city agencies in cleanup efforts, forming a volunteer citizen patrol to alert authorities to the presence of illegal campers, and supporting initiatives to link transients to housing and other services.

The effort contained many of the elements common to community prosecution programs: a geographic focus, an interest in low-level offending, and an attempt to harness a wide range of local resources to not only mitigate a current problem but to prevent future offending.

In 1991, Hynes similarly adopted a geographic approach, organizing many of the more than 400 prosecutors in his office into five zones. He also adopted a "vertical" prosecution strategy—that is, he required prosecutors to follow felony cases from grand jury presentation through sentencing rather than handing cases off to colleagues at every stage of the court process.

Hynes has supported numerous initiatives with a neighborhood problem-solving focus. For example, in 2000 he helped establish the Red Hook Community Justice Center to improve public safety in a crime-ridden neighborhood in southwest Brooklyn, New York. Hynes has also developed programs that offer alternatives to incarceration and treatment-based diversion, which have been cited as examples of community prosecution.

Part of the interest in community prosecution can be traced to the support of the U.S. Department of Justice, which, beginning under Attorney General Janet Reno in the 1990s and continuing through successive administrations, invested millions of grant dollars in community prosecution programming across the country. By 2004, an American Prosecutors Research Institute survey found that 37.8% of offices self-reported practicing community prosecution. In recent years, national community prosecution conferences have drawn participants from virtually every corner of the United States, from offices large and small, urban and rural.

A number of elected district attorneys in high-profile jurisdictions, such as Cook County (Chicago), Illinois; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and New York, New York, have successfully run for office promising to implement (or restore) community prosecution approaches.

The nature of community prosecution has evolved over the years. In its early stages, community prosecution was frequently promoted as a tool to address low-level offending. In recent years, however, advocates of community prosecution have emphasized the strategy's capacity to tackle more serious crime—such as gang violence, large-scale drug dealing, and armed robbery.

Impacts

Despite the growing use of the term *community prosecution,* most of the evidence of its success is anecdotal and formal research measuring program

impacts is limited. Two studies—one of the Multnomah County Prosecutor's Office published in 2007 and another of the U.S. Attorney's Office in Washington, D.C., published in 2001—claim reductions in crime associated with community prosecution initiatives. Both studies found that crime reductions were greater in the neighborhoods studied than in comparison neighborhoods, although they acknowledge that other factors, such as economic development, may have also played a role.

An Example: Denver's Initiatives

Denver's district attorney's office—through the use of community justice councils, accountability boards (using community volunteers to determine restorative sanctions for offenders), and a community court—has encouraged the community to take an active leadership role in helping to identify crime and quality-of-life problems and to develop strategies for addressing them. One tool is a "connect the dots" exercise, where community prosecution staff meet with neighborhood residents and ask them to discuss local concerns. Using large posters listing all the issues raised, citizens place green dots next to any issues they feel are neighborhood problems and place red dots next to the issues they deem the most important. This affords the group a concrete measure of which issues are of greatest collective concern.

Denver prosecutors also worked to create a community court that hears youth offenses in a high-crime neighborhood, holding offenders accountable for their behavior while also providing services to them to lessen the likelihood of their reoffending. Many such courts utilize the "youth jury model," where the offender admits having committed the offense, the police officer involved in the youth's detention indicates that such a disposition is appropriate, and the offender and parent or guardian give consent to such a disposition; the members of the panel then question the offender, deliberate, and assign appropriate consequences, which always include some form of community service.

Community prosecutors also survey residents to decide where to focus their efforts; one such survey resulted in addressing problems of family violence, drug sales, and alcohol-related crimes.

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See also Broken Windows Theory; Building Partnerships and Stakeholders; Citizen Surveys; Community, Definition of; Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design; Hot Spots; Involving Local Businesses; Problem-Solving Courts; Problem-Solving Process (SARA)

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