

SMART PROSECUTION

The Crime Strategies Unit: The San Francisco Smart Prosecution Initiative

A 'Big Picture' Approach to Public Safety

I. Overview

Neighborhood prosecution (also known as “community-based prosecution”) emerged in the 1990s as a model for improving public safety by bringing prosecutors out of their offices and into neighborhoods, where they learn first-hand about communities’ unique concerns and public safety challenges—and thus better serve the public.

The San Francisco District Attorney’s Office created its neighborhood prosecution program in 2011, originally focused on low-level quality-of-life crimes. But when the San Francisco District Attorney decided to adopt the Crime Strategies Unit model, a new data-driven approach to prosecution being tested by the New York County (Manhattan) District Attorney, the focus of the neighborhood prosecutors shifted to more serious crimes.

In the spring of 2014, the District Attorney sent staff to New York to study Vance’s model, which sought to combine the know-how of neighborhood prosecutors with crime data to identify hotspots of criminal activity, as well as the small set of individuals and groups that are major drivers of crime in the county.

Later that year, the San Francisco Crime Strategies Unit was launched, with support from the Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance Smart Prosecution Initiative. The goal of the program is to apply the data-driven approach pioneered by New York County to San Francisco, allowing prosecutors to apply a targeted approach to crime prevention and prosecution.

II. The Problem

San Francisco is a compact 47-square-mile coterminous city and county with a population of approximately 865,000.

With a diverse population spread out over five official districts and dozens of neighborhoods, San Francisco has complex public safety needs. Different neighborhoods experience different forms and patterns of crime, which poses a challenge for prosecutors seeking to most efficiently and effectively leverage resources.

Traditionally, the San Francisco District Attorney’s Office operated primarily as a reactive force. Prosecutors would wait for law enforcement to bring in individual cases and respond to those cases one by one. They lacked the resources to analyze data about the cases they were handling, and lacked access to data from other agencies like the police department. This limited prosecutors’ ability to map out the connections between cases and identify patterns and major crime drivers, and thus made it difficult for the District Attorney’s Office to develop proactive strategies for solving problems in the community.

III. The San Francisco Smart Prosecution Initiative and the Crime Strategies Unit

The San Francisco Smart Prosecution Initiative seeks to improve the city’s prosecutorial capacity by:

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- Embedding prosecutors in the city’s five districts, enabling them to build relationships with local stakeholders and develop a deep knowledge base about the communities they serve and the unique public safety challenges these communities face;
- Using data analysis to create a macro picture of crime trends, hot spots, crime drivers, and criminal networks;
- Connecting the results of data analysis with forensic information and prosecutor know-how to develop complex cases and strategies that address the root causes of criminal activity, as well as to support law enforcement investigations.

The Crime Strategies Unit is a dedicated division of the San Francisco District Attorney’s Office. This group of five neighborhood prosecutors, five data analysts, and two investigators is structured around San Francisco’s police district station system, which breaks the city up into 10 police districts. Each district has a police station. Crime Strategies Unit prosecutors have offices at the district stations, where they spend most of their time. This enables them to attend pre-patrol briefings (known as “roll call”) and post-patrol debriefings and accompany police on ride-alongs.

Because the prosecutors are embedded in districts, they are able to communicate and strategize with police about public safety needs on an ongoing basis. Assistant District Attorney Frank Carrubba, a veteran prosecutor who spent 25 years at the Santa Clara County District Attorney’s Office and now manages the team, says this collaboration has made both police and prosecutors more effective.

In keeping with the traditional neighborhood prosecution approach, the Crime Strategies Unit’s prosecutors work to learn about the specific needs, characteristics, and concerns of neighborhoods, as well as specific public safety issues, such as crime hotspots or the identities of local chronic offenders. They meet frequently with residents, merchant and community-based groups, and clergy, and attend monthly Community Police Advisory Board meetings—open to the public—that are hosted by district police captains.

Maria McKee, who oversees the analysts in the Crime Strategies Unit, says that the meetings also serve to build trust with the community. She also says that trust is particularly key to the unit’s work because its neighborhood prosecutors are focused on serious and violent crimes, not the low-level quality-of-life crimes associated with traditional neighborhood prosecution.

Each district faces its own challenges in terms of public safety. For example, the Central District, which includes tourist attractions such as Fisherman’s Wharf and Little Italy, has high rates of crime associated with tourism, including rental car theft and pickpocketing. In the Bayview, a high-poverty neighborhood at the southern edge of the city with large concentrations of densely populated public housing, street gangs are active and violent crime is a major issue.

The neighborhood prosecutors work hand-in-hand with the Crime Strategies Unit analysis team, which is split between strategic and tactical analysts. Strategic analysts draw upon the Crime Strategies Unit’s vast library of cross-agency datasets, a major component of its arsenal. These data sets include all case bookings and filings, all police reports, information from jail

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calls, and qualitative data, such as names of individuals suspected of gang activity, that neighborhood prosecutors collect through their ties in the community.

Tactical analysts take this information to the operational level, developing a detailed picture of criminal activity and a precise understanding of the individuals engaged in that activity. They also perform forensic analysis. For example, analysts can draw upon a wide range of data from cell phones, which can show where an individual was at a specific time, or whom that individual was messaging. (Accessing cell phone data requires a search warrant, so the extent of data available in a given case depends on the scope of the warrant.) Analysts can also use messaging data for link analysis, identifying connections between individuals and larger groups. They also have access to ShotSpotter, a system of sensors deployed across the city to pinpoint the location of gunfire. This data can be matched with arrest and recovered-firearm data, as well as ballistics information, to build connections between incidents involving gun violence.

Neighborhood prosecutors' local knowledge and on-the-ground experience adds context and dimensionality to the analysts' data analysis. This collaborative, multi-disciplinary approach is designed to help the prosecutors develop complex cases and strategies that address the root causes of criminal activity, as well as to support law enforcement investigations.

The Crime Strategies Unit is currently working with a research partner to develop its capacity to perform social network analysis.

IV. Examples

- A recent investigation of armed robbers demonstrates how the Crime Strategies Unit collaborates with prosecutors outside the unit to identify patterns and connections in criminal activity. The case originated with the investigation of two armed robberies on the city's Muni bus lines. An assistant district attorney assigned to the robberies suspected that they were not isolated incidents, and asked the Crime Strategies Unit to search the city's crime data for similar robberies. Analysts filtered information in the database and found there were 17 similar incidents that had occurred within a short time period.
- Based on the data provided by the unit, the police pulled surveillance videos of several of these robberies from Muni cameras. The video showed that the robberies involved a core group of individuals (and a rotating cast of accomplices), enabling prosecutors to see that the crimes were connected. From these two cases, the unit was able to build a larger case, drawing in further individuals who might otherwise have escaped the scope of an investigation.
- In areas that struggle with gang violence, the Crime Strategies Unit plays a key role in developing large-scale gang indictments. In another recent case, the unit assisted a police investigation of a drug ring in the Northern District, using hot spot and crime trend analysis to map out links between suspects. The police had identified this chronic crime problem, which they brought to the neighborhood prosecutor. Police and prosecutors were then able to collaboratively develop a strategy for the investigation, which ultimately investigation yielded seven indictments of high-level level members of the ring and additional arrests of accomplices.

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V. Key partnerships

The Crime Strategies Unit works closely with other law enforcement agencies, including the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the BART Police Force, Alameda and San Mateo County law enforcement, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of California, the San Francisco City Attorney, and the Drug Enforcement Agency. The unit also partners with other organizations and agencies, ranging from local business improvement districts to the Central City SRO Collaborative, which organizes single-room occupancy tenants in the city.

VI. Challenges

In order to operate effectively, the Crime Strategies Unit needs access to good data from a range of city agencies. The major challenges facing the Crime Strategies Unit relate to its ability to access data. Information in San Francisco has traditionally been siloed among agencies, and the process of solidifying and expanding information-sharing procedures and protocols is ongoing.

VII. Evaluation and Methodology

The research partner, Justice and Security Strategies, assists the Crime Strategies Unit with data collection from external sources, and examining and validating appropriate databases. Using statistical tools, the Crime Strategies Unit identifies and maps hot spots (crime locations), individuals convicted of multiple offenses, and victims of crime. Further, researchers will develop and validate a predictive tool for use by the Crime Strategies Unit. They will also conduct a process evaluation describing the establishment of the Crime Strategies Unit, the office's use of data for decision-making, the use of predictive analytics and resulting organizational change for a final report.

VIII. Results to date

Results of the San Francisco Crime Strategies Unit include:

- Vertical prosecution and grand jury indictments of serial crime drivers.
- Problem-solving prosecutions for individuals who have repeatedly offended.
- Development of major investigations involving prolific criminal street gangs; extensive narcotics operations; and large-scale commercial burglary rings, among others.
- Comprehensive cell phone forensic analytics for major investigations and prosecutions of serious crimes, including homicides.
- Developed citywide security camera interactive map.
- Compiled human trafficker database of more than 500 suspected or known traffickers.