THE UNITED STATES SENTENCING COMMISSION IN FOCUS

The United States Sentencing Commission is an independent agency in the judicial branch of the federal government.

OUR MISSION

Establish sound and equitable sentencing policies and practices for the federal courts.

Advise and assist Congress and the executive branch in the development of effective and efficient crime policy.

Collect, analyze, research, and distribute a broad array of information on federal crime.

The Preeminent Body for Federal Sentencing Data

The Commission serves as a clearinghouse and information center for the collection, preparation, and dissemination of information on federal sentencing practices.

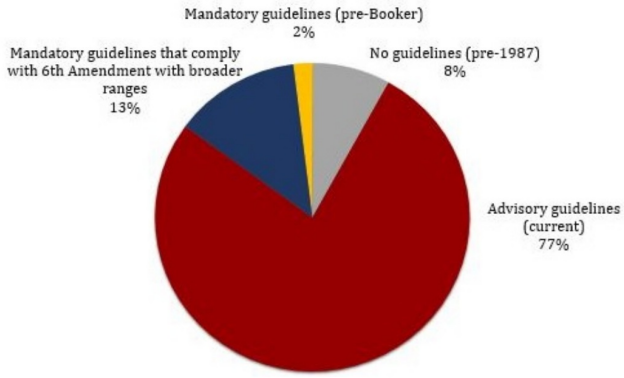
Every year, the Commission receives sentencing documents for tens of thousands of federal offenders. The Commission scrupulously records hundreds of pieces of information from each case. It uses this data to provide information to the public and to the Commissioners.

Committed To Public Access and Transparency

The Commission engages with the public through outreach and training. The Commission works to ensure that members of Congress have the Commission's best data and evidence to understand how legislative changes will impact sentences and are aware of the Commission's independent actions.

Each year, the Commission receives hundreds, thousands, or in some years tens of thousands of letters and other correspondence from the public. Each letter is carefully reviewed, and many of them are posted publicly on our website. The Commission also holds hearings and meetings that are open to members of the public. The Commission posts data, reports, and other information on its website and maintains a Twitter account to disseminate information in ways that members of the public may find helpful.

A 2014 USSC survey shows that more than 3/4 of district judges think the current advisory guidelines system best achieves the purposes of sentencing.



SOURCE: U.S. Sentencing Commission 2014 Survey of Federal District Judges

Leading on Sentencing Policy

The Commission occupies an important role in federal sentencing. The Commission works closely with Congress to provide data and support for legislative changes that it has determined will improve federal sentencing.

The Commission also acts independently, making changes to the sentencing guidelines that directly impact types of sentences available, sentence lengths, and periods of supervised release. Only Congress can change criminal code (including mandatory minimums and statutory maximums), and the Commission's changes are subject to congressional disapproval.

The Commission can make highly impactful changes, including taking the lead in recent years on reducing drug sentences. The Commission acted in 2014 to reduce sentences for more than 60% of federal drug offenders.

HISTORY

Disparity in sentencing, certainty of punishment, and crime control have long been issues of interest for Congress, the criminal justice community, and the public.

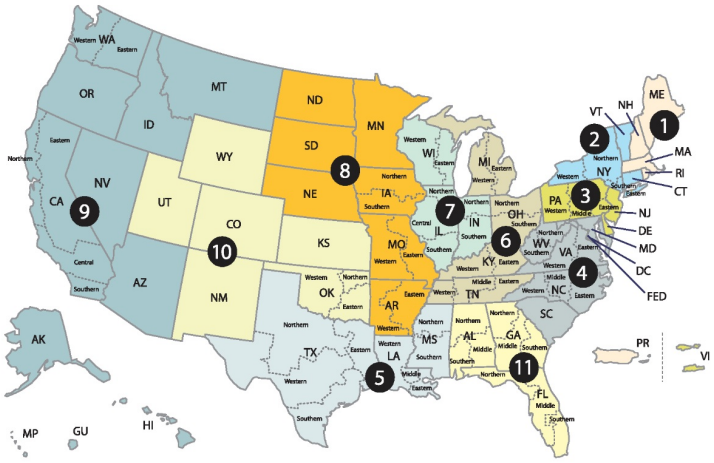
After more than a decade of research and debate, Congress decided in 1984 that:

- the previously unfettered sentencing discretion accorded federal trial judges needed to be structured;
- the administration of punishment needed to be more certain; and
- specific offenders (e.g., white collar and violent, repeat offenders) needed to be targeted for more serious penalties.

Consequently, as part of the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984, Congress created the Commission and charged it with formulating national sentencing guidelines to define the parameters for federal trial judges to apply in their sentencing decisions.

The sentencing guidelines are advisory, but they are, as the Supreme Court wrote in 2013, "the lodestone of sentencing," the place where judges begin their contemplation and find the evidence, research, and support they need to craft an equitable sentence.

The Federal Sentencing Guidelines



The federal sentencing guidelines are used across the country in every one of the 94 judicial districts and 12 circuit courts.

The guidelines are the starting point for sentencing in federal court. Judges are required to review and calculate the guidelines in each case before them.

The guidelines are designed to:

- provide certainty and fairness;
- ensure similarly situated offenders receive similar sentences; and
- reflect proven and effective strategies to ensure sentences are sufficient, but not greater than necessary to advance the purposes of punishment.

RESOURCES

Online Learning Center

Our Online Learning Center features training videos focusing on sentencing issues, hot topics, and recent Commission activities. The Office of General Counsel's legal primers on guideline issues as well as relevant case law are also available on the Online Learning Center.
Visit us at www.ussc.gov/training/online-learning-center.

Offender Datafiles

Researchers interested in studying federal sentencing practices through quantitative methods have access to the Commission's annual individual offender datafiles. These datafiles do not contain personal identifying information.
Download fiscal year datafiles at http://www.ussc.gov/research-and-publications/commission-datafiles. SAS or SPSS is required.

Interactive Sourcebook of Federal Sentencing Statistics

The Interactive Sourcebook (ISB) allows users to customize the tables and figures presented in the printed Sourcebook. The data can be tailored to any jurisdiction or group of jurisdictions, and year or multiple years. All analyses using the online tool can be saved in PDF or Excel format.
Create your own charts and tables at http://isb.ussc.gov/Login.

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