

CHAPTER SIX - SENTENCING PROCEDURES AND PLEA AGREEMENTS

PART A - SENTENCING PROCEDURES

Introductory Commentary

This Part addresses sentencing procedures that are applicable in all cases, including those in which guilty or nolo contendere pleas are entered with or without a plea agreement between the parties, and convictions based upon judicial findings or verdicts. It sets forth the procedures for establishing the facts upon which the sentence will be based. Reliable fact-finding is essential to procedural due process and to the accuracy and uniformity of sentencing.

§6A1.1. Presentence Report

A probation officer shall conduct a presentence investigation and report to the court before the imposition of sentence unless the court finds that there is information in the record sufficient to enable the meaningful exercise of sentencing authority pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 3553, and the court explains this finding on the record. Rule 32(c)(1), Fed. R. Crim. P. The defendant may not waive preparation of the presentence report.

Commentary

A thorough presentence investigation is essential in determining the facts relevant to sentencing. In order to ensure that the sentencing judge will have information sufficient to determine the appropriate sentence, Congress deleted provisions of Rule 32(c), Fed. R. Crim. P., which previously permitted the defendant to waive the presentence report. Rule 32(c)(1) permits the judge to dispense with a presentence report, but only after explaining, on the record, why sufficient information is already available.

§6A1.2. Disclosure of Presentence Report; Issues in Dispute (Policy Statement)

Courts should adopt procedures to provide for the timely disclosure of the presentence report; the narrowing and resolution, where feasible, of issues in dispute in advance of the sentencing hearing; and the identification for the court of issues remaining in dispute. See Model Local Rule for Guideline Sentencing prepared by the Probation Committee of the Judicial Conference (August 1987).

Commentary

In order to focus the issues prior to sentencing, the parties are required to respond to the presentence report and to identify any issues in dispute. The potential complexity of factors important to the sentencing determination normally requires that the position of the parties be presented in writing. However, because courts differ greatly with respect to their reliance on written plea agreements and with respect to the feasibility of written statements

under guidelines, district courts are encouraged to consider the approach that is most appropriate under local conditions. The Commission intends to reexamine this issue in light of experience under the guidelines.

§6A1.3. Resolution of Disputed Factors

- (a) When any factor important to the sentencing determination is reasonably in dispute, the parties shall be given an adequate opportunity to present information to the court regarding that factor. In resolving any reasonable dispute concerning a factor important to the sentencing determination, the court may consider relevant information without regard to its admissibility under the rules of evidence applicable at trial, provided that the information has sufficient indicia of reliability to support its probable accuracy.
- (b) The court shall resolve disputed sentencing factors in accordance with Rule 32(a)(1), Fed. R. Crim. P. (effective Nov. 1, 1987), notify the parties of its tentative findings and provide a reasonable opportunity for the submission of oral or written objections before imposition of sentence.

Commentary

In current practice, factors relevant to sentencing are often determined in an informal fashion. The informality is to some extent explained by the fact that particular offense and offender characteristics rarely have a highly specific or required sentencing consequence. This situation will no longer exist under sentencing guidelines. The court's resolution of disputed sentencing factors will usually have a measurable effect on the applicable punishment. More formality is therefore unavoidable if the sentencing process is to be accurate and fair. Although lengthy sentencing hearings should seldom be necessary, disputes about sentencing factors must be resolved with care. When a reasonable dispute exists about any factor important to the sentencing determination, the court must ensure that the parties have an adequate opportunity to present relevant information. Written statements of counsel or affidavits of witnesses may be adequate under many circumstances. An evidentiary hearing may sometimes be the only reliable way to resolve disputed issues. See United States v. Fatico, 603 F.2d 1053, 1057 n.9 (2d Cir. 1979). The sentencing court must determine the appropriate procedure in light of the nature of the dispute, its relevance to the sentencing determination, and applicable case law.

*In determining the relevant facts, sentencing judges are not restricted to information that would be admissible at trial. 18 U.S.C. § 3661. Any information may be considered, so long as it has "sufficient indicia of reliability to support its probable accuracy." United States v. Marshall, 519 F.Supp. 751 (D.C. Wis. 1981), *aff'd*, 719 F.2d 887 (7th Cir. 1983); United States v. Fatico, 579 F.2d 707 (2d Cir. 1978). Reliable hearsay evidence may be considered. Out-of-court declarations by an unidentified informant may be considered "where there is good cause for the nondisclosure of his identity and there is sufficient corroboration by other means." United States v. Fatico, 579 F.2d at 713. Unreliable allegations shall not be considered. United States v. Weston, 448 F.2d 626 (9th Cir. 1971).*

If sentencing factors are the subject of reasonable dispute, the court should, where appropriate, notify the parties of its tentative findings and afford an opportunity for correction of oversight or error before sentence is imposed.

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PART B - PLEA AGREEMENTS

Introductory Commentary

Policy statements governing the acceptance of plea agreements under Rule 11(e)(1), Fed.R.Crim.P., are intended to ensure that plea negotiation practices:

- (1) promote the statutory purposes of sentencing prescribed in 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a); and*
- (2) do not perpetuate unwarranted sentencing disparity.*

These policy statements are a first step toward implementing 28 U.S.C. § 994(a)(2)(E). Congress indicated that it expects judges "to examine plea agreements to make certain that prosecutors have not used plea bargaining to undermine the sentencing guidelines." S.Rep. 98-225, 98th Cong., 1st Sess. 63, 167 (1983). In pursuit of this goal, the Commission shall study plea agreement practice under the guidelines and ultimately develop standards for judges to use in determining whether to accept plea agreements. Because of the difficulty in anticipating problems in this area, and because the sentencing guidelines are themselves to some degree experimental, substantive restrictions on judicial discretion would be premature at this stage of the Commission's work.

The present policy statements move in the desired direction in two ways. First, the policy statements make clear that sentencing is a judicial function and that the appropriate sentence in a guilty plea case is to be determined by the judge. This is a reaffirmation of current practice. Second, the policy statements ensure that the basis for any judicial decision to depart from the guidelines will be explained on the record. Explanations will be carefully analyzed by the Commission and will pave the way for more detailed policy statements presenting substantive criteria to achieve consistency in this aspect of the sentencing process.

§6B1.1. Plea Agreement Procedure (Policy Statement)

- (a)** If the parties have reached a plea agreement, the court shall, on the record, require disclosure of the agreement in open court or, on a showing of good cause, in camera. Rule 11(e)(2), Fed.R.Crim.P.
- (b)** If the plea agreement includes a nonbinding recommendation pursuant to Rule 11(e)(1)(B), the court shall advise the defendant that the court is not bound by the sentencing recommendation, and that the defendant has no right to withdraw the defendant's guilty plea if the court decides not to accept the sentencing recommendation set forth in the plea agreement.
- (c)** The court shall defer its decision to accept or reject any nonbinding recommendation pursuant to Rule 11(e)(1)(B), and the court's decision to accept or reject any plea agreement pursuant to Rules 11(e)(1)(A) and 11(e)(1)(C) until there has been an opportunity to consider the presentence report, unless a report is not required under §6A1.1.

Commentary

This provision parallels the procedural requirements of Rule 11(e), Fed.R.Crim.P. Plea agreements must be fully disclosed and a defendant whose plea agreement includes a nonbinding recommendation must be advised that the court's refusal to accept the sentencing recommendation will not entitle the defendant to withdraw the plea.

Section 6B1.1(c) deals with the timing of the court's decision whether to accept the plea agreement. Rule 11(e)(2) gives the court discretion to accept the plea agreement immediately or defer acceptance pending consideration of the presentence report. Prior to the guidelines, an immediate decision was permissible because, under Rule 32(c), Fed.R.Crim.P., the defendant could waive preparation of the presentence report. Section 6B1.1(c) reflects the changes in practice required by §6A1.1 and amended Rule 32(c)(1). Since a presentence report normally will be prepared, the court must defer acceptance of the plea agreement until the court has had an opportunity to consider the presentence report.

§6B1.2. Standards for Acceptance of Plea Agreements (Policy Statement)

- (a) In the case of a plea agreement that includes the dismissal of any charges or an agreement not to pursue potential charges [Rule 11(e)(1)(A)], the court may accept the agreement if the court determines, for reasons stated on the record, that the remaining charges adequately reflect the seriousness of the actual offense behavior and that accepting the agreement will not undermine the statutory purposes of sentencing.
- (b) In the case of a plea agreement that includes a nonbinding recommendation [Rule 11(e)(1)(B)], the court may accept the recommendation if the court is satisfied either that:
 - (1) the recommended sentence is within the applicable guideline range; or
 - (2) the recommended sentence departs from the applicable guideline range for justifiable reasons.
- (c) In the case of a plea agreement that includes a specific sentence [Rule 11(e)(1)(C)], the court may accept the agreement if the court is satisfied either that:
 - (1) the agreed sentence is within the applicable guideline range; or
 - (2) the agreed sentence departs from the applicable guideline range for justifiable reasons.

Commentary

This section makes clear that a court may accept a plea agreement provided that the judge complies with the obligations imposed by Rule 11(e), Fed.R.Crim.P. A judge may accept an agreement calling for dismissal of charges or an agreement not to pursue potential charges if the remaining charges reflect the seriousness of the actual offense behavior. This requirement does not authorize judges to intrude upon the charging discretion of the

prosecutor. If the government's motion to dismiss charges or statement that potential charges will not be pursued is not contingent on the disposition of the remaining charges, the judge should defer to the government's position except under extraordinary circumstances. Rule 48(a), Fed.R.Crim.P. However, when the dismissal of charges or agreement not to pursue potential charges is contingent on acceptance of a plea agreement, the court's authority to adjudicate guilt and impose sentence is implicated, and the court is to determine whether or not dismissal of charges will undermine the sentencing guidelines.

Similarly, the court will accept a recommended sentence or a plea agreement requiring imposition of a specific sentence only if the court is satisfied either that the contemplated sentence is within the guidelines or, if not, that the recommended sentence or agreement departs from the applicable guideline range for justifiable reasons and does not undermine the basic purposes of sentencing.

§6B1.3. Procedure Upon Rejection of a Plea Agreement (Policy Statement)

If a plea agreement pursuant to Rule 11(e)(1)(A) or Rule 11(e)(1)(C) is rejected, the court shall afford the defendant an opportunity to withdraw the defendant's guilty plea. Rule 11(e)(4), Fed.R.Crim.P.

Commentary

This provision implements the requirements of Rule 11(e)(4). It assures the defendant an opportunity to withdraw his plea when the court has rejected a plea agreement that would require dismissal of charges or imposition of a specific sentence.

§6B1.4. Stipulations (Policy Statement)

- (a) A plea agreement may be accompanied by a written stipulation of facts relevant to sentencing. Except to the extent that a party may be privileged not to disclose certain information, stipulations shall:
 - (1) set forth the relevant facts and circumstances of the actual offense conduct and offender characteristics;
 - (2) not contain misleading facts; and
 - (3) set forth with meaningful specificity the reasons why the sentencing range resulting from the proposed agreement is appropriate.
- (b) To the extent that the parties disagree about any facts relevant to sentencing, the stipulation shall identify the facts that are in dispute.
- (c) A district court may, by local rule, identify categories of cases for which the parties are authorized to make the required stipulation orally, on the record, at the time the plea agreement is offered.
- (d) The court is not bound by the stipulation, but may with the aid of the presentence report, determine the facts relevant to sentencing.

Commentary

This provision requires that when a plea agreement includes a stipulation of fact, the stipulation must fully and accurately disclose all factors relevant to the determination of sentence. This provision does not obligate the parties to reach agreement on issues that remain in dispute or to present the court with an appearance of agreement in areas where agreement does not exist. Rather, the overriding principle is full disclosure of the circumstances of the actual offense and the agreement of the parties. The stipulation should identify all areas of agreement, disagreement and uncertainty that may be relevant to the determination of sentence. Similarly, it is not appropriate for the parties to stipulate to misleading or non-existent facts, even when both parties are willing to assume the existence of such "facts" for purposes of the litigation. Rather, the parties should fully disclose the actual facts and then explain to the court the reasons why the disposition of the case should differ from that which such facts ordinarily would require under the guidelines.

Because of the importance of the stipulations and the potential complexity of the factors that can affect the determination of sentences, stipulations ordinarily should be in writing. However, exceptions to this practice may be allowed by local rule. The Commission intends to pay particular attention to this aspect of the plea agreement procedure as experience under the guidelines develops. See Commentary to §6A1.2.

Section 6B1.4(d) makes clear that the court is not obliged to accept the stipulation of the parties. Even though stipulations are expected to be accurate and complete, the court cannot rely exclusively upon stipulations in ascertaining the factors relevant to the determination of sentence. Rather, in determining the factual basis for the sentence, the court will consider the stipulation, together with the results of the presentence investigation, and any other relevant information.