

PRIMER



DEPARTURES AND VARIANCES

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I. INTRODUCTION

This primer contains a summary of guideline provisions and annotations to judicial opinions addressing some of the most commonly applied grounds for departure. It also addresses issues relating to variances outside the guideline range. The document was developed to help judges, lawyers, and probation officers locate relevant authorities when applying the federal sentencing guidelines. It does not include all authorities needed to correctly apply the guidelines, and is not a substitute for reading and interpreting the *Guidelines Manual*, statutes, and case law.

II. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Unless otherwise prohibited by law, a sentencing court may consider without limitation any information concerning the background, character, and conduct of a defendant.¹ Such information may be considered when imposing a sentence within the applicable guideline range, and when determining whether, and to what extent, to sentence outside the guideline range.² A court may impose a sentence outside the properly calculated guideline range through either a “departure” or a “variance.”

A departure is: (i) the imposition of a sentence outside the guideline range, (ii) a sentence that is otherwise different from the guideline sentence or, (iii) for purposes of §4A1.3 (Departures Based on Inadequacy of Criminal History Category), assignment of a criminal history category other than the otherwise applicable criminal history category, in order to effect a sentence outside the applicable guideline range.³

A variance is a sentence imposed outside the applicable guideline range based upon the statutory sentencing factors found at 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a). As explained by the Ninth Circuit:

A “departure” is typically a change from the final sentencing range computed by examining the provisions of the Guidelines themselves. It is frequently triggered by a prosecution request to reward cooperation . . . or by other factors that take the case “outside the heartland” contemplated by the Sentencing Commission when it drafted the Guidelines for a typical offense. A “variance,” by contrast, occurs when a judge imposes a sentence above or

¹ See §1B1.4 (Information to be Used in Imposing Sentence (Selecting a Point Within the Guideline Range or Departing from the Guidelines)); see also 18 U.S.C. § 3661 (Use of Information for Sentencing). One limitation on the information used is where the defendant agrees to cooperate with the government and the government agrees that self-incriminating evidence will not be used against the defendant. See §1B1.8 (Use of Certain Information).

² See §1B1.4, comment. (backg’d.).

³ See §1B1.1 (Application Instructions), comment. (n.1(E)).

below the otherwise properly calculated final sentencing range based on application of the other statutory factors in 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a).⁴

A. PROCEDURE OF THE SENTENCING COURT

A sentencing court must follow the three-step process set forth by the Supreme Court in *Gall v. United States*.⁵ First, the court must properly determine the guideline range.⁶ Second, the court must determine whether to apply any of the guidelines' departure policy statements to adjust the guideline range.⁷ Third, the court must consider all the factors set forth in 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a) as a whole, including whether a variance—a sentence outside the advisory guideline system—is warranted.⁸

⁴ *United States v. Rangel*, 697 F.3d 795, 801 (9th Cir. 2012) (citing *United States v. Cruz-Perez*, 567 F.3d 1142, 1146 (9th Cir. 2009)).

⁵ 552 U.S. 38 (2007) (the district court should begin all sentencing proceedings by correctly calculating the applicable guideline range, and “to secure nationwide consistency, the Guidelines should be the starting point and the initial benchmark”); *see also* USSG §1B1.1(a)-(c) (Application Instructions).

⁶ *Id.*; 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a)(4).

⁷ *Id.*; 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a)(5); *see also* *United States v. Lofink*, 564 F.3d 232 (3d Cir. 2009) (district court's failure to rule on the defendant's departure arguments constitutes procedural error); *United States v. McBride*, 434 F.3d 470, 477 (6th Cir. 2006) (guideline departures are still a relevant consideration for determining the appropriate guideline sentence); *United States v. Jordi*, 418 F.3d 1212, 1215 (11th Cir. 2005) (“[T]he application of the guidelines is not complete until the departures, if any, that are warranted are appropriately considered.”); *United States v. Selioutsky*, 409 F.3d 114, 117–18 (2nd Cir. 2005) (pursuant to *Booker*, a “sentencing judge must consider the factors set forth in 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a), including the applicable Guideline range and available departure authority. The sentencing judge may then impose either a Guidelines sentence or a non-Guidelines sentence.”) (internal citations omitted). *But see* *United States v. Diosdado-Star*, 630 F.3d 359, 362–66 (4th Cir. 2011) (holding that district court did not procedurally err in varying upward without first considering departure provisions); *United States v. Gutierrez*, 635 F.3d 148, 151–53 (5th Cir. 2011) (reaffirming holding of *United States v. Mejia-Huerta*, 480 F.3d 713, 723 (5th Cir. 2007) that where a sentence is a variance and not a departure, the court is not required to comply with or consult the methodology established in §4A1.3); *United States v. Mohamed*, 459 F.3d 979 (9th Cir. 2006) (in light of *Booker*, circuit would “treat such so-called departures as an exercise of post-*Booker* discretion to sentence a defendant outside of the applicable guidelines range” and subject it to a “unitary review for reasonableness, no matter how the district court styles its sentencing decision”); *United States v. Arnaout*, 431 F.3d 994, 1003 (7th Cir. 2005) (“[T]he concept of ‘departures’ has been rendered obsolete in the post-*Booker* world.”); *cf.* *United States v. Miller*, 479 F.3d 984 (8th Cir. 2007) (conflating departure considerations and the variance analysis can be harmless error where the ultimate sentence is not unreasonable); *United States v. Wallace*, 461 F.3d 15, 32–33 (1st Cir. 2006) (finding that it was required to review the district court's upward departure analysis but noting that it “might agree with the government's focus on the reasonableness of the sentence, irrespective of the district court's error in the sequence of its analysis, if the government was correct that the defendant had not received a conventional pre-*Booker* upward departure [analysis]”).

⁸ *See* §1B1.1(c); *see also* *United States v. Hughes*, 401 F.3d 540, 546 (4th Cir. 2005); *United States v. Stone*, 432 F.3d 651, 655 (6th Cir. 2005).

B. NOTICE REQUIREMENTS

Before departing from the standard guideline range, the court must give reasonable notice to the parties of the nature of that departure unless the grounds are identified in the presentence report or a party's prehearing submission.⁹ Advance notice of a variance is not required by rule.¹⁰ However,

[s]ound practice dictates that judges in all cases should make sure that the information provided to the parties in advance of the hearing, and in the hearing itself, has given them an adequate opportunity to confront and debate the relevant issues. We recognize that there will be some cases in which the factual basis for a particular sentence will come as a surprise to a defendant or the Government. The more appropriate response to such a problem is not to extend the reach of Rule 32(h)'s notice requirement categorically, but rather for a district judge to consider granting a continuance when a party has a legitimate basis for claiming that the surprise was prejudicial.¹¹

C. REVIEW OF SENTENCES ON APPEAL

Appellate courts use a 2-step process to review federal sentences.¹² First, they ensure that the district court committed no significant procedural error, such as failing to calculate (or improperly calculating) the guideline range. Second, they consider the substantive reasonableness of the sentence imposed under an abuse-of-discretion standard, taking into account the totality of the circumstances, including the extent of any variance from the guideline range. The appellate court's role, therefore, is to determine whether the sentence is procedurally sound and falls within a broad range of reasonable sentences.¹³

As in pre-*Booker* appeals, the district court's decision to deny a guideline departure is not reviewable so long as the district court "was aware of and understood its discretion to make such a [g]uideline-based departure."¹⁴ After *Booker*, however, calculation of the

⁹ FED. R. CRIM. P. 32(h); *see also* §6A1.4 (Notice of Possible Departure (Policy Statement)); *Burns v. United States*, 501 U.S. 129 (1991); *United States v. Dozier*, 444 F.3d 1215 (10th Cir. 2006). *But see* *United States v. Walker*, 447 F.3d 999 (7th Cir. 2006) (because Seventh Circuit precedent has declared the concept of departures "obsolete" and "beside the point," Rule 32(h) no longer has "continuing application").

¹⁰ *See* *Irizarry v. United States*, 553 U.S. 708 (2008).

¹¹ *Id.* at 715–16.

¹² *See* *Gall v. United States*, 552 U.S. 38 (2007).

¹³ *See, e.g.*, *United States v. Treadwell*, 593 F.3d 990, 1015 (9th Cir. 2010) (broad range of sentences would be reasonable under facts of case); *United States v. Tomko*, 562 F.3d 558, 568 (3d Cir. 2009).

¹⁴ *McBride*, 434 F.3d at 476; *see also* *United States v. Kornegay*, 410 F.3d 89 (1st Cir. 2005); *United States v.*

guideline sentence, including any decisions regarding guideline-based departures, “is only the first step in sentencing decisions under *Booker*, for the court must also consider the § 3553(a) factors before making its ultimate decision” that the defendant’s sentence is reasonable.¹⁵ While district courts must continue to base departures on guideline factors, “many of the very factors that used to be grounds for a departure under the Guidelines are now considered by the district court—with greater latitude—under section 3553(a).”¹⁶

According to the Supreme Court, courts of appeals may, but are not required to, apply a presumption of reasonableness to a within-guideline sentence that reflects a proper application of the sentencing guidelines.¹⁷ Some circuits have adopted an explicit presumption of reasonableness for within-guideline sentences while other circuits.¹⁸ have rejected this presumption.¹⁹

Frokjer, 415 F.3d 865 (8th Cir. 2005).

¹⁵ *United States v. Mickelson*, 433 F.3d 1050, 1055 (8th Cir. 2006).

¹⁶ *McBride*, 434 F.3d at 476; *see also* *United States v. Andrews*, 447 F.3d 806, 812 (10th Cir. 2006) (“While the guidelines discourage consideration of certain factors for downward departures, *Booker* frees courts to consider those factors as part of their analysis under § 3553(a).”); *United States v. Martin*, 520 F.3d 87, 93 (1st Cir. 2008) (collecting cases) (while “[p]olicy statements issued by the Sentencing Commission are, of course, pertinent to sentencing determinations even under the now-advisory guidelines, . . . such policy statements normally are not decisive as to what may constitute a permissible ground for a variant sentence in a given case”).

¹⁷ *Rita v. United States*, 551 U.S. 338 (2007). *But see* *Nelson v. United States*, 555 U.S. 350 (2009) (*sentencing court* may not presume a guideline sentence is reasonable); *Spears v. United States*, 555 U.S. 261 (2009) (district courts may vary categorically based on well-reasoned policy disagreements with the guidelines which are grounded in 3553(a) factors).

¹⁸ The Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Tenth, and District of Columbia Circuits have adopted the presumption. *See, e.g.*, *United States v. Green*, 436 F.3d 449, 457 (4th Cir. 2005); *United States v. Alonzo*, 435 F.3d 551, 554 (5th Cir. 2006); *United States v. Smith*, 881 F.3d 954, 960 (6th Cir. 2018); *United States v. Mykytiuk*, 415 F.3d 606, 608 (7th Cir. 2005); *United States v. Lincoln*, 413 F.3d 716, 717 (8th Cir. 2005); *United States v. Kristl*, 437 F.3d 1050, 1053–54 (10th Cir. 2006); *United States v. Dorcelly*, 454 F.3d 366, 376 (D.C. Cir. 2006).

¹⁹ The First, Second, Third, Ninth, and Eleventh Circuits have not adopted the presumption. *See, e.g.*, *United States v. Carty*, 520 F.3d 984, 988 (9th Cir. 2008) (en banc) (declining to adopt an appellate presumption of reasonableness for sentences imposed within the guideline range while recognizing that “a correctly calculated [g]uidelines sentence will normally not be found unreasonable on appeal”); *United States v. Ayala-Vazquez*, 751 F.3d 1, 33 (1st Cir. 2014) (same); *United States v. Cavera*, 550 F.3d 180, 190 (2d Cir. 2008) (same); *United States v. Merced*, 603 F.3d 203, 213 n.4 (3d Cir. 2010); *United States v. Talley*, 431 F.3d 784 (11th Cir. 2005) (per curiam), *abrogated on other grounds by* *Rita*, 551 U.S. 338 (2008) (same). *But see* *United States v. Anguiano-Guerro*, 714 F. App’x 148, 150 (3d Cir. 2017) (“Our court presumes a sentence within the Guidelines range is reasonable.”)

III. DEPARTURES

Departures provide authorized adjustments to a sentencing range within the guideline system.²⁰ As Congress acknowledged in the Sentencing Reform Act, and as the *Guidelines Manual* itself explicitly states, “it is difficult to prescribe a single set of guidelines that encompasses the broad range of human conduct potentially relevant to a sentencing decision.”²¹ Departures, therefore, perform “an integral function in the sentencing guideline system.”²² Departures help provide courts with a way to impose an appropriate sentence in exceptional circumstances. They also maintain the statutorily mandated “flexibility to permit individualized sentences when warranted by mitigating or aggravating factors not taken into account in the establishment of general sentencing practices.”²³ Running against this flexibility are admonishments, such as in the PROTECT Act,²⁴ that departures should be rare.²⁵ The *Guidelines Manual* cautions they should apply only in the “atypical” case lying outside the “heartland” of conduct covered by the guidelines.²⁶

A. CHAPTER FOUR, PART A - CRIMINAL HISTORY

§4A1.3. Departures Based on Inadequacy of Criminal History Category (Policy Statement)

In recognition that “the criminal history score is unlikely to take into account all the variations in the seriousness of criminal history that may occur,”²⁷ §4A1.3 provides for

²⁰ As an aid to understanding the role of departures in the guidelines, see USSG, Chapter One, Part A, Subpart 1(4)(b) (Departures). Additionally, the *Guidelines Manual* includes a List of Departure Provisions located after the Index. Finally, the Commission publishes a *Compilation of Departure Provisions*. This expanded list of departure provisions is available on the Commission’s webpage at https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/guidelines-manual/2016/Departure_Provisions.pdf.

²¹ Ch. 1 Pt. A(1)(4)(b); §5K2.0 comment. (backg’d); 18 U.S.C. § 3553(b).

²² §5K2.0 comment. (backg’d).

²³ *Id.*; 28 U.S.C. § 991(b)(1)(B).

²⁴ Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today Act of 2003, Pub. L. No. 108–21 (the “PROTECT Act”).

²⁵ *Id.* at § 401(m)(2)(A) (the Commission should “ensure that the incidence of downward departures is substantially reduced”) (enacted as part of the so-called “Feeney Amendment,” whose *de novo* standard of review for departures in section 401(d)(1) was held unconstitutional by *Booker*, 543 U.S. at 260).

²⁶ Ch. 1 Pt. A(1)(4)(b).

²⁷ §4A1.3, comment. (backg’d.).

both upward and downward departures based on the inadequacy of the otherwise applicable criminal history category.²⁸

1. Upward Departures

An upward departure may be warranted “[i]f reliable information indicates that the defendant’s criminal history category substantially under-represents the seriousness of the defendant’s criminal history or the likelihood that the defendant will commit other crimes.”²⁹

The court may use the following information as the basis for an upward departure regarding the defendant’s criminal history:

- (A) Prior sentence(s) not used in computing the criminal history category (for example, sentences for foreign and tribal offenses).³⁰
- (B) Prior sentence(s) of substantially more than one year imposed as a result of independent crimes committed on different occasions.³¹
- (C) Prior similar misconduct established by a civil adjudication or by a failure to comply with an administrative order.³²

²⁸ See also §5H1.8. (Criminal History (Policy Statement)).

²⁹ §4A1.3(a)(1); see also *United States v. Brewster*, 127 F.3d 22, 27 (1st Cir. 1997) (a departure based on the inadequacy of a defendant’s criminal history score can be based on prior similar conduct that the defendant was not charged with or convicted of, if the conduct is so serious that, unless it is considered, the criminal history category will be manifestly deficient as a measure of the defendant’s past criminal behavior or likely recidivism).

³⁰ §4A1.3(a)(2)(A); see also *United States v. Simmons*, 343 F.3d 72, 78 (2d Cir. 2003) (affirming the district court’s decision to depart where defendant had numerous Canadian convictions); *United States v. Chesborough*, 333 F.3d 872, 874 (8th Cir. 2003) (affirming district court’s decision to upwardly depart based in part on the large number of criminal convictions too old to be counted as part of the defendant’s criminal history).

³¹ §4A1.3(a)(2)(B); see also §4A1.3, comment. (n.2(A)(ii)) (listing as an example a case in which the defendant received “a prior consolidated sentence of ten years for a series of serious assaults”).

³² §4A1.3(a)(2)(C); see also §4A1.3, comment. (n.2(A)(iii)) (listing as an example a case in which the defendant committed a “similar instance of large scale fraudulent misconduct established by an adjudication in a Securities and Exchange Commission enforcement proceeding”); *United States v. Hernandez*, 160 F.3d 661, 670 (11th Cir. 1998) (affirming the district court’s decision to depart based in part on the defendant’s failure to abide by an administrative settlement agreement arising out of claims that he failed to pay his employees minimum wage and overtime in violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act).

- (D) Whether the defendant was pending trial or sentencing on another charge at the time of the instant offense.³³
- (E) Prior *similar* adult criminal conduct not resulting in a criminal conviction.³⁴

However, “[a] prior arrest record itself shall not be considered for purposes of an upward departure under this policy statement.”³⁵

Section 4A1.3 also provides guidance for the extent of an upward departure. In general, the court should use, as a reference, “the criminal history category applicable to defendants whose criminal history or likelihood to recidivate most closely resembles that of the defendant’s.”³⁶

When applying an upward departure from Category VI, “the court should structure the departure by moving incrementally down the sentencing table to the next higher offense level in Criminal History Category VI until it finds a guideline range appropriate to the case.” When determining whether an upward departure from Criminal History Category VI is warranted, the court should “consider that the nature of the prior offenses rather than simply their number is often more indicative of the seriousness of the defendant’s criminal record.”³⁷

³³ §4A1.3(a)(2)(D); *see also* §4A1.3, comment. (n.2(A)(iv)) (listing as an example a case in which the defendant committed the instant offense “while on bail or pretrial release for another serious offense”).

³⁴ §4A1.3(a)(2)(E); *see also* *United States v. Allen*, 488 F.3d 1244, 1258 (10th Cir. 2007) (sentencing court cannot depart upward based on uncharged, unrelated misconduct); *United States v. Rice*, 358 F.3d 1268, 1276–77 (10th Cir. 2004) (district court cannot use similar uncharged conduct to increase both the defendant’s offense level and as a basis for a departure under §4A1.3), *cert. granted, judgment vacated on other grounds by Rice v. United States*, 543 U.S. 1103 (2005); *United States v. Hunerlach*, 258 F.3d 1282, 1286–87 (11th Cir. 2001) (same).

³⁵ §4A1.3(a)(3).

³⁶ §4A1.2(a)(4)(A); *see also* *United States v. Sullivan*, 853 F.3d 475, 480 (8th Cir. Apr. 5, 2016) (error to depart from Criminal History Category II to Criminal History Category VI without adequate explanation as to why VI was appropriate and why categories in between were not sufficient); *United States v. Azure*, 536 F.3d 922, 932 (8th Cir. 2008) (finding that the district court abused its discretion when it upwardly departed from Criminal History Category I to Category VI without attempting “to assign hypothetical criminal history points to the conduct that did not result in convictions,” and not discussing “intermediary categories II, III, IV, or V before deciding on category VI”); *United States v. Valdes*, 500 F.3d 1291, 1292 (11th Cir. 2007) (per curiam) (under §4A1.3, if a sentencing judge wishes to depart upwards due to a defendant’s criminal history, the court must “explicitly consider” the next criminal history category up and make a determination as to whether that range is appropriate).

³⁷ *See* §4A1.3, comment. (n.2(B)); *see also* *United States v. Walker*, 284 F.3d 1169 (10th Cir. 2002) (district court erred by relying solely on the number of criminal history points exceeding the requirement of Criminal History Category VI for the degree of upward departure).

2. Downward Departures

The policy statement provides that a downward departure may be warranted “[i]f reliable information indicates that the defendant’s criminal history category substantially over-represents the seriousness of the defendant’s criminal history or the likelihood that the defendant will commit other crimes.”³⁸ Such a departure may be warranted “if, for example, the defendant had two minor misdemeanor convictions close to ten years prior to the instant offense and no other evidence of prior criminal behavior in the intervening period.”³⁹

Section 4A1.3 prohibits “[a] departure below the lower limit of the applicable guideline range for Criminal History Category I.”⁴⁰ The guideline also prohibits a downward departure of any amount for “(i) an armed career criminal within the meaning of §4B1.4 (Armed Career Criminal); and (ii) a repeat and dangerous sex offender against minors within the meaning of §4B1.5 (Repeat and Dangerous Sex Offender Against Minors).”⁴¹

For career offenders within the meaning of §4B1.1 (Career Offender), the guideline limits the extent of a downward departure to one criminal history category.⁴²

Section 4A1.3 also provides that a “defendant whose criminal history category is Category I after receipt of a downward departure under this subsection does not meet the criterion of subsection (a)(1) of §5C1.2 (Limitation on Applicability of Statutory Maximum Sentences in Certain Cases) if, before receipt of the downward departure, the defendant had more than one criminal history point under §4A1.1 (Criminal History Category).”⁴³

3. Written Reasons

If the court departs from the otherwise applicable criminal history category, it is required to specify in writing the reasons as described below. Remand is appropriate when the district court fails to adequately explain the basis for its departure.⁴⁴

³⁸ §4A1.3(b)(1).

³⁹ See §4A1.3, comment. (n.3).

⁴⁰ §4A1.3(b)(2)(A). See also *e.g.*, *United States v. Atondo-Santos*, 385 F.3d 1199, 1200 & n.1 (9th Cir. 2004) (downward departure for first-time offender not warranted as guidelines already take that factor into account).

⁴¹ §4A1.3(b)(2)(B).

⁴² §4A1.3(b)(3)(A).

⁴³ §4A1.3(b)(3)(B).

⁴⁴ *United States v. Wallace*, 461 F.3d 15, 42–43 (1st Cir. 2006); see also *United States v. Pujayasa*, 654 F. App’x 976, 978 (11th Cir. 2016) (remanding where court did not identify extent of upward departure or post-departure guideline range).

- (1) For an upward departure: the court must specify the reasons why the applicable criminal history category substantially under-represents the seriousness of the defendant’s criminal history or the likelihood that the defendant will commit other crimes.⁴⁵
- (2) For a downward departure: the court must specify the reasons why the applicable criminal history category substantially over-represents the seriousness of the defendant’s criminal history or the likelihood that the defendant will commit other crimes.⁴⁶

The circuits differ on the requirements of a court’s specific approach to, and explanation of, criminal history departures. For example, the Second Circuit has held that where the reasons for departure are fully explained, “a mechanistic, step-by-step procedure is not required.”⁴⁷ The Eighth Circuit allows the sentencing court to choose any method as long as it is not inconsistent with the guidelines, while the Tenth Circuit requires a “reasonable methodology hitched to the Sentencing Guidelines”⁴⁸

4. Criminal History Departures Post-Booker

Courts may vary from the guidelines to avoid the strict requirements of §4A1.3 and impose an outside-the-guidelines sentence based on the inadequacy of the defendant’s criminal history category.⁴⁹

B. CHAPTER FIVE, PART K - DEPARTURES: SUBSTANTIAL ASSISTANCE TO AUTHORITIES

§5K1.1. Substantial Assistance to Authorities (Policy Statement)

A defendant’s assistance to authorities in the investigation of criminal activities has long been recognized, in practice and by statute, as a mitigating sentencing factor.⁵⁰ Section 5K1.1 provides for a downward departure from the guidelines if the government files a

⁴⁵ §4A1.3(c)(1).

⁴⁶ §4A1.3(c)(2).

⁴⁷ *United States v. Simmons*, 343 F.3d 72, 78 (2d Cir. 2003).

⁴⁸ *United States v. Gonzales-Ortega*, 346 F.3d 800, 803–04 (8th Cir. 2003); *United States v. Hurlich*, 348 F.3d 1219, 1222 (10th Cir. 2003).

⁴⁹ *See, e.g., United States v. Mejia-Huerta*, 480 F.3d 713, 723 (5th Cir. 2007) (“We reiterate for emphasis that §4A1.3 applies only to *departures*—based on unrepresentative criminal history—not to *variances*.”); *see also* Variances at §IV.B.1.a. *infra*.

⁵⁰ §5K1.1, comment. (backg’d.).

motion “stating that the defendant has provided substantial assistance in the investigation or prosecution of another person who has committed an offense.” The amount of the reduction “shall be determined by the court for reasons stated that may include, but are not limited to, consideration of the following”:

- (1) the court’s evaluation of the significance and usefulness of the defendant’s assistance, taking into consideration the government’s evaluation of the assistance rendered;⁵¹
- (2) the truthfulness, completeness, and reliability of any information or testimony provided by the defendant;⁵²
- (3) the extent of the defendant’s assistance;⁵³
- (4) any injury suffered, or any danger or risk of injury to the defendant or his family resulting from his assistance;⁵⁴
- (5) the timeliness of the defendant’s assistance.⁵⁵

Under circumstances set forth in 18 U.S.C. § 3553(e) and 28 U.S.C. § 994(n), as amended, substantial assistance in the investigation or prosecution of another person who has committed an offense may justify a sentence below a statutory mandatory minimum.⁵⁶

A reduction under this policy statement must “be considered independently of any reduction for acceptance of responsibility.”⁵⁷

1. Statement of Reasons

While the court is afforded “latitude” in reducing a defendant’s sentence based upon “variable relevant factors,” the court must “state the reasons for reducing a sentence” for

⁵¹ §5K1.1(a)(1) and comment. (n.3) (district court should give “substantial weight” to the government’s evaluation of the extent of the defendant’s assistance, “particularly where the extent and value of the assistance are difficult to ascertain”). *But see United States v. Pizano*, 403 F.3d 991, 996 (8th Cir. 2005) (court not bound by the government’s recommendation as to how far to depart); *United States v. Milo*, 506 F.3d 71, 77 (1st Cir. 2007) (same); *United States v. Grant*, 493 F.3d 464, 467 (5th Cir. 2007) (same).

⁵² §5K1.1(a)(2).

⁵³ §5K1.1(a)(3).

⁵⁴ §5K1.1(a)(4).

⁵⁵ §5K1.1(a)(5).

⁵⁶ *See* §5K1.1, comment. (n.1).

⁵⁷ *See* §5K1.1, comment. (n.2).

substantial assistance under §5K1.1.⁵⁸ This can be done *in camera* or under seal to protect the safety of the defendant or to avoid disclosure of an ongoing investigation.⁵⁹

2. Motion Requirement

If the government wishes to sponsor a departure from the guideline range based on the defendant's cooperation, it must make a motion under §5K1.1. A departure from a statutory mandatory minimum penalty for cooperation requires a motion under 18 U.S.C. § 3553(e).⁶⁰ The motion can be made after remand for resentencing.⁶¹ Where the mandatory minimum exceeds the guidelines range, courts have unanimously found that the statutory mandatory minimum is the required starting point for a §5K1.1 departure.⁶²

3. District Court Review

The Supreme Court explained in *Wade v. United States* that the government has the power, but not the duty, to file a motion under section 3553(e) or §5K1.1 when the defendant has provided substantial assistance.⁶³ Although the district court's authority to grant a departure for substantial assistance is conditioned on the government's motion, a district court may review the government's refusal to make a substantial assistance motion, if such refusal was (1) prompted by an unconstitutional motive, such as the defendant's race or religion; or (2) not rationally related to a legitimate government interest.⁶⁴ To obtain an evidentiary hearing, the defendant must make a " 'substantial threshold showing' that the government's refusal to make a substantial assistance motion was premised on an improper motive."⁶⁵ Some circuits have held that it is unconstitutional for the government to withhold a substantial assistance motion to penalize a cooperating defendant for taking his own case to trial.⁶⁶ Other decisions hold that substantial assistance plea agreements

⁵⁸ 18 U.S.C. § 3553(c); §5K1.1, comment. (backg'd).

⁵⁹ See §5K1.1, comment. (backg'd).

⁶⁰ *Melendez v. United States*, 518 U.S. 120 (1996).

⁶¹ *United States v. Mills*, 491 F.3d 738, 742 (8th Cir. 2007) (18 U.S.C. § 3742(g) does not bar the government's motion; however, absent unconstitutional motive, government was free to withhold the motion).

⁶² See, e.g., *United States v. Diaz*, 546 F.3d 566, 568 (8th Cir. 2008) (noting stance of First, Third, Fourth, Sixth, Seventh, and Eleventh Circuits).

⁶³ 504 U.S. 181 (1992); see also *United States v. Mullins*, 399 F.3d 888, 889–90 (8th Cir. 2005) (government has no duty to make a substantial assistance motion unless it has entered into a plea agreement with the defendant that creates such a duty).

⁶⁴ *Wade*, 504 U.S. at 185–86; *United States v. Perez*, 526 F.3d 1135, 1138 (8th Cir. 2008).

⁶⁵ *Perez*, 526 F.3d at 1138 (quoting *Mullins*, 399 F.3d at 889–90).

⁶⁶ See *United States v. Paramo*, 998 F.2d 1212, 1218–21 (3d Cir. 1993); *United States v. Khoury*, 62 F.3d 1138 (9th Cir. 1995); see also *United States v. Easter*, 981 F.2d 1549, 1555 (10th Cir. 1992) (dicta); cf. *United States v. Murphy*, 591 F. App'x 377, 387 (6th Cir. 2014) (noting that "prosecutors should exercise caution in

create a quasi-contractual obligation for the government to act in good faith, even in circumstances that would not meet *Wade* requirements.⁶⁷

4. Post-Booker Issues

Since *Booker*, the procedure for granting a substantial assistance motion has remained largely unchanged. The Sentencing Reform Act and the guidelines still require a government motion as a precondition for a departure based on substantial assistance. A departure under §5K1.1 and 18 U.S.C. § 3553(e) can be based only on substantial assistance, not on other § 3553(a) factors.⁶⁸ Although a district court's decision not to depart is not reviewable on appeal unless the court was unaware of its power to do so, the sentence as a whole is reviewed for reasonableness.⁶⁹

§5K1.2. Refusal to Assist (Policy Statement)

A defendant's refusal to assist authorities in the investigation of other persons may not be considered as an aggravating sentencing factor. However, a defendant's refusal to assist authorities may be considered in sentencing *within* the guideline range.⁷⁰

declining to file substantial-assistance motions in connection with a defendant's decision to go to trial". A panel of the Eleventh Circuit issued an opinion joining the Third and Ninth Circuits; however, the court vacated that *sua sponte*, holding that the posture of the case did not require them to reach the issue of whether the government can withhold a motion based upon the defendant exercising his jury trial right. *United States v. Dorsey*, 554 F.3d 958, 960-61 (11th Cir. 2009) vacating and superseding 512 F.3d 1321.

⁶⁷ See, e.g., *United States v. Doe*, 233 F.3d 642, 644 n.2 (1st Cir. 2000); *United States v. Roe*, 445 F.3d 202, 207 (2d Cir. 2006). But see, e.g., *United States v. Aderholt*, 87 F.3d 740, 742 (5th Cir. 1996); *United States v. Gates*, 461 F.3d 703, 710 (6th Cir. 2006).

⁶⁸ See, e.g., *United States v. Desselle*, 450 F.3d 179 (5th Cir. 2006) (joining the majority of circuits in holding that the extent of a §5K1.1 or § 3553(e) departure must be based solely on assistance-related concerns); *United States v. Pepper*, 412 F.3d 995, 998-99 (8th Cir. 2005) (collecting cases); *United States v. A.B.*, 529 F.3d 1275 (10th Cir. 2008) (district court had authority under § 3553(e) to depart below the mandatory minimum, but "was without authority to go further below the statutory minimum based upon § 3553(a) factors" after granting the substantial assistance departure); *United States v. Livesay*, 525 F.3d 1081 (11th Cir. 2008) (sentencing court committed "procedural *Gall* error" when it based the extent of a §5K1.1 departure on an impermissible consideration that did not pertain to cooperation).

⁶⁹ See, e.g., *United States v. Berni*, 439 F.3d 990, 992 (8th Cir. 2006) ("The fact that an advisory Guidelines determination involves a section 5K1.1 departure does not shield the overall sentence from our review for reasonableness.").

⁷⁰ *United States v. Gaynor*, 167 F. App'x 346 (4th Cir. 2006) (discussing circuit disagreement on this issue); *United States v. Klotz*, 943 F.2d 707 (7th Cir. 1991); *United States v. Burgos*, 276 F.3d 1284 (11th Cir. 2001).

C. CHAPTER FIVE, PART K - DEPARTURES: OTHER GROUNDS FOR DEPARTURE

§5K2.0. Grounds for Departure (Policy Statement)

1. Introduction

A court may depart from the applicable guideline range if it finds an aggravating or mitigating circumstance “of a kind, or to a degree, not adequately taken into consideration by the Sentencing Commission in formulating the guidelines that ... should result in a sentence different from that described.” As discussed in Chapter 1, Part A of the *Guidelines Manual*:

The Commission intends the sentencing courts to treat each guideline as carving out a “heartland,” a set of typical cases embodying the conduct that each guideline describes. When a court finds an atypical case, one to which a particular guideline linguistically applies but where conduct significantly differs from the norm, the court may consider whether a departure is warranted.

In cases other than child crimes and sex offenses (discussed below), the court may depart (either up or down) from the guideline range in the following situations:

- (1) If there exists in a case circumstances of a *kind* not adequately taken into consideration in determining the applicable guideline range.

This includes the **encouraged departures** (discussed below)-some of which are found in Chapter Five, Part K, Subpart 2 (Other Grounds for Departure), and some of which are found in specific guideline provisions.

This also includes the **exceptional case** in which there is present a circumstance that the Commission has not identified in the guidelines but that nevertheless is relevant to determining the appropriate sentence. Such circumstances are intended to be rare.

- (2) If there exists in a case circumstances present to a *degree* not adequately taken into consideration in determining the applicable guideline range.

This includes the exceptional case in which the court determines that a circumstance already taken into account in the guideline is present in the offense to a degree substantially in excess of, or substantially below, that which ordinarily is involved in that kind of offense.

- (3) If there exists in a case offender characteristics or other circumstances that are not ordinarily relevant, but are present in an exceptional degree.

This includes the discouraged departures (discussed below), which are found in Chapter Five, Part H (Specific Offender Characteristics).

2. Prohibited Grounds for Departure

The guidelines also include several factors (discussed below) that the court cannot take into account as grounds for departure: any circumstance specifically prohibited as a ground for departure in §§5H1.10 (Race, Sex, National Origin, Creed, Religion, and Socio-Economic Status), 5H1.12 (Lack of Guidance as a Youth and Similar Circumstances), the last sentence of 5H1.4 (Physical Condition, Including Drug or Alcohol Dependence or Abuse; Gambling Addiction), the last sentence of 5K2.12 (Coercion and Duress).⁷¹

§5H1.10. Race, Sex, National Origin, Creed, Religion, and Socio-Economic Status (Policy Statement)

The policy statement provides that the factors listed in the title are not relevant in the determination of a sentence.⁷²

§5H1.12. Lack of Guidance as a Youth and Similar Circumstances (Policy Statement)

⁷¹ §5K2.0(d)(1).

⁷² See, e.g., *United States v. Hall*, 677 F. App'x 554 (11th Cir. 2017) (district court plainly erred when it considered religion at sentencing, demonstrated by the fact that “[r]eligion was a focal point of the colloquy” and the court twice called defendant a “demon”); *United States v. Adebimpe*, 649 F. App'x 449, 453 (9th Cir. 2016) (court did not improperly consider status as immigrant where it credited defendant for overcoming struggles associated with immigrating but found that he had committed significant fraud); *United States v. Cavallo*, 790 F.3d 1202, 1238 (11th Cir. 2015) (district court did not impermissibly consider defendant’s sex when imposing sentence for mortgage fraud, notwithstanding judge’s comment that defendant came “from old school, where man took hit so that lady in his life did not”; remark was gesture of kindness, not act of sex discrimination); *United States v. Guzman*, 236 F.3d 830, 833 (7th Cir. 2001) (district court erred by departing downward based on the defendant’s cultural heritage: finding that the defendant was more likely to participate in her boyfriend’s criminal activities because, as a Mexican woman, she was expected to submit to his will was really the joinder of gender and national origin, both prohibited grounds for consideration in sentencing); *United States v. Floyd*, 458 F.3d 844 (8th Cir. 2006) (rejecting defendant’s argument that she was entitled to a downward departure because she was a law-abiding and God-fearing citizen).

Section 5H1.12 provides that “[l]ack of guidance as a youth and similar circumstances indicating a disadvantaged upbringing are not relevant grounds in determining whether a departure is warranted.”⁷³

§5H1.4. Physical Condition, Including Drug or Alcohol Dependence or Abuse; Gambling Addiction (Policy Statement)

Section 5H1.4 provides that drug or alcohol dependence or abuse is not *ordinarily* a reason for downward departure.⁷⁴ Further, the policy statement explains that substance abuse is “highly correlated to an increased propensity to commit crime,” and recommends “that a defendant who is incarcerated also be sentenced to supervised release with a requirement that the defendant participate in an appropriate substance abuse program (*see* §5D1.3(d)(4)).” Similarly, “where a defendant who is a substance abuser is sentenced to probation,” the policy statement “strongly recommend[s] that the conditions of probation contain a requirement that the defendant participate in an appropriate substance abuse program (*see* §5B1.3(d)(4)).” In cases where §5C1.1, Application Note 6, is applicable,⁷⁵ “a downward departure [from Zone C to Zone B] may be appropriate to accomplish a specific treatment purpose.” However, a court may not impose a *longer* sentence solely to make the defendant eligible for drug treatment programs in prison.⁷⁶

§5K2.12. Coercion and Duress (Policy Statement)

Section 5K2.12 provides that “personal financial difficulties and economic pressures upon a trade or business do not warrant a downward departure.”

⁷³ *See* United States v. Godinez, 474 F.3d 1039, 1043 (8th Cir. 2007) (upholding denial of a downward departure sought because the defendant “lost his father at the age of twelve, was unable to attend school, and remained illiterate until late adolescence”); United States v. Dyck, 334 F.3d 736, 738 (8th Cir. 2003) (reversing a downward departure given because the defendant’s “Mennonite upbringing left him ignorant and uneducated to the ‘ways of the world’ ” as inconsistent with §§5H1.10 and 5H1.12). *But see* United States v. Rivera, 192 F.3d 81, 84–85 (2d Cir. 1999) (while “the Guidelines foreclose any downward departure for lack of youthful guidance . . . a downward departure may be appropriate in cases of extreme childhood abuse”).

⁷⁴ *See, e.g.*, United States v. Williams, 891 F.2d 962, 965 (1st Cir. 1989) (reversing a downward departure based on defendant’s addiction to drugs).

⁷⁵ §5C1.1 comment. (n.6) describes circumstances in which a departure from the sentencing options available for Zone C to the sentencing options available for Zone B may be appropriate to achieve substance abuse or mental health treatment in a community setting.

⁷⁶ *See* Tapia v. United States, 564 U.S. 319 (2011).

§5K2.22. Specific Offender Characteristics as Grounds for Downward Departure in Child Crimes and Sexual Offenses (Policy Statement)

Section 5K2.22 provides special rules for offenses involving a minor victim under section 1201 (Kidnapping), an offense under section 1591 (Sex trafficking of children or by force, fraud, or coercion), an offense under chapter 71 (Obscenity), 109A (Sexual abuse), 110 (Sexual exploitation and other abuse of children), or 117 (Transportation for illegal sexual activity and related crimes), of title 18, United States Code.

Relevant Factors

- (1) Age may be a reason to depart downward only if and to the extent permitted by §5H1.1.
- (2) An extraordinary physical impairment may be a reason to depart downward only if and to the extent permitted by §5H1.4.
- (3) Drug, alcohol, or gambling dependence or abuse is not a reason to depart downward.

Prohibited Grounds

- (1) The defendant's acceptance of responsibility for the offense, which may be taken into account only under §3E1.1 (Acceptance of Responsibility) cannot support a departure.
- (2) The defendant's aggravating or mitigating role in the offense, which may be taken into account only under §3B1.1 (Aggravating Role) or §3B1.2 (Mitigating Role), respectively.⁷⁷
- (3) The defendant's decision, in and of itself, to plead guilty to the offense or to enter a plea agreement with respect to the offense (*i.e.*, a departure may not be based merely on fact that the defendant decided to plead guilty or to enter into a plea agreement, but a departure may be based on justifiable, non-prohibited reasons as part of a sentence that is recommended, or agreed to, in the plea agreement and accepted by the court).

⁷⁷ See also §5H1.7 (Role in the Offense (Policy Statement)) (defendant's role in the offense is relevant in determining the applicable guideline range, but is not a basis for departing from that range).

- (4) The defendant’s fulfillment of restitution obligations only to the extent required by law including the guidelines (*i.e.*, a departure may not be based on unexceptional efforts to remedy the harm caused by the offense).⁷⁸
- (5) Any other circumstance specifically prohibited as a ground for departure in the guidelines.

3. Encouraged Grounds for Departure

If a special factor is encouraged, the court may use it as a basis for a departure, but only if the applicable guideline does not already take the factor into account, or if the factor is present to an exceptional degree.

§5H1.9. Dependence upon Criminal Activity for a Livelihood (Policy Statement)

Section 5H1.9 states that “the degree to which a defendant depends upon criminal activity for a livelihood is relevant in determining the appropriate sentence.”

§5K2.1. Death (Policy Statement)

Under §5K2.1, “[i]f death resulted, the court may increase the sentence above the authorized guideline range.”⁷⁹ The policy statement provides a number of factors the court should take into consideration when determining the extent of such a departure. The court, for example, “must give consideration to matters that would normally distinguish among

⁷⁸ Compare *United States v. O’Malley*, 364 F.3d 974, 981 (8th Cir. 2004) (reversing the district court’s departure because the defendant’s efforts did not constitute “extraordinary restitution,” even though he “must have gone to great lengths to have a cashier’s check for \$459,047.02 readily available for tender at the sentencing hearing”) with *United States v. Oligmueller*, 198 F.3d 669, 672 (8th Cir. 1999) (upholding departure for extraordinary restitution where defendant made voluntary payments a year prior to indictment, often worked sixteen-hour days on his farm to raise the money, took on a second job, turned over his life insurance policy and his wife’s certificate of deposit, and gave up his home).

⁷⁹ See, *e.g.*, *United States v. Mousseau*, 517 F.3d 1044, 1048–49 (8th Cir. 2008) (affirming an upward departure under §5K2.1 where the victim died one day after the defendant provided the victim with methamphetamine, and finding that even though the defendant did not intend to harm the victim, it was “clear that her actions were very dangerous and that she disregarded a known risk by giving an unknown substance, suspected to be a narcotic, to a minor to ingest”); *United States v. Montgomery*, 550 F.3d 1229, 1235 (10th Cir. 2008) (defendant’s emotional and physical abuse of his wife, his knowledge that she had previously attempted suicide, his attempt to keep her from taking antidepressants, and his threat to take their son from her, “all indicate that her suicide by his [illegally possessed] weapon was reasonably foreseeable” to him); see also *United States v. Moreno-Ruiz*, 671 F. App’x 250 (5th Cir. 2016) (district court did not err in applying §2L1.1(b)(6) enhancement for creating a substantial risk of death or bodily injury and also departing upward under §5K2.1).

levels of homicide, such as the defendant’s state of mind and the degree of planning or preparation.”⁸⁰

The policy statement also encourages consideration of both the number of fatalities and manner of death. The extent of the increase should depend on “the dangerousness of the defendant’s conduct, the extent to which death or serious injury was intended or knowingly risked, and the extent to which the offense level for the offense of conviction, as determined by the other Chapter Two guidelines, already reflects the risk of personal injury.”⁸¹

§5K2.2. Physical Injury (Policy Statement)

Section 5K2.2 provides for an increase above the authorized guideline range if *significant* physical injury resulted.⁸² The extent of the increase ordinarily should depend on “the extent of the injury, the degree to which it may prove permanent, and the extent to which the injury was intended or knowingly risked.” In general, the same considerations apply to this policy statement as in §5K2.1.⁸³ Section 5K2.2 does not preclude an enhancement under §2A2.2(b)(3)(C) based upon the victim’s injury.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ See, e.g., *United States v. Terry*, 142 F.3d 702, 709–10 (4th Cir. 1998) (district court erred by failing to consider the factors listed in §5K2.1, and not making any finding as to the defendant’s state of mind); *United States v. Davis*, 30 F.3d 613, 615–16 (5th Cir. 1994) (the “only ‘mandatory’ language in the section is that the judge ‘must’ consider matters that ‘normally distinguish among levels of homicide,’ such as state of mind”).

⁸¹ See *United States v. Rodriguez*, 553 F.3d 380, 396–97 (5th Cir. 2008) (affirming an upward departure, in addition to enhancements for number of aliens and a single death, where 18 additional migrants killed during alien smuggling conspiracy); *United States v. Van Metre*, 150 F.3d 339, 356 (4th Cir. 1998) (kidnapping guideline does not take into account scenario where victim was kidnapped for the purpose of sexual assault and defendant only later formed intent to murder her).

⁸² See *United States v. Singleton*, 917 F.2d 411, 414 (9th Cir. 1990) (district court must make specific findings that the injury is “something more than the ordinary scratches, scrapes, and bruises that a person would suffer in almost any minor scuffle”). *But see* *United States v. Baker*, 339 F.3d 400, 405–06 (6th Cir. 2003) (facts did not support an upward departure for physical injury because “[a]ppalling as the defendants’ conduct and its consequences were by the standards of any civilized person, it is no extreme outlier within the universe of robberies resulting in permanent or life-threatening injuries, for surely every such robbery is appalling”).

⁸³ See *United States v. Jones*, 30 F.3d 276, 288 (2d Cir. 1994) (affirming the district court’s decision to depart upward in a drug trafficking conspiracy case in which the defendant planned for days the shooting of an undercover police officer which resulted in massive internal injuries; sentencing guidelines did not adequately take into consideration the intentional and indifferent nature of the defendant’s acts).

⁸⁴ See *United States v. Reyes*, 557 F.3d 84, 86–87 (2d Cir. 2009) (per curiam) (enhancement under §2A2.2(b)(3)(C) and an upward departure under §5K2.2 were warranted: nothing in the guidelines or in statutory law preclude the application of both provisions in the same case).

§5K2.3. Extreme Psychological Injury (Policy Statement)

If a victim or victims “suffered psychological injury much more serious than that normally resulting from commission of the offense,” §5K2.3 allows the court to increase the sentence above the authorized guideline range.⁸⁵ The extent of the increase ordinarily should depend on “the severity of the psychological injury and the extent to which the injury was intended or knowingly risked.” Section 5K2.3 states that under normal circumstances, psychological injury would be sufficiently severe to warrant application of this adjustment only “when there is a substantial impairment of the intellectual, psychological, emotional, or behavioral functioning of a victim, when the impairment is likely to be of an extended or continuous duration, and when the impairment manifests itself by physical or psychological symptoms or by changes in behavior patterns.”

§5K2.4. Abduction or Unlawful Restraint (Policy Statement)

The court may upwardly depart if a person was “abducted, taken hostage, or unlawfully restrained to facilitate commission of the offense or to facilitate the escape from the scene of the crime.”⁸⁶

§5K2.5. Property Damage or Loss (Policy Statement)

Section 5K2.5 provides for an upward departure if the “offense caused property damage or loss not taken into account within the guidelines.”⁸⁷ The extent of increase

⁸⁵ See, e.g., *United States v. Bond*, 22 F.3d 662, 671–72 (6th Cir. 1994) (reversing the district court’s decision to depart because, as a result of the bank robbery, “the tellers suffered anxiety for several weeks after the robbery; but this would not be unusual for any victim of an armed bank robbery”); *United States v. Lasaga*, 328 F.3d 61, 64–67 (2d Cir. 2003) (reversing a departure under this policy statement where the district court did not make the additional finding that the victim suffered much more serious harm than would normally be the case); *United States v. Yellow*, 18 F.3d 1438, 1442–43 (8th Cir. 1994) (affirming a departure where the defendant was convicted of raping his younger brother, who suffers from cerebral palsy, and younger sister, and the record included expert testimony regarding the severity and likely duration of psychological harm suffered by the victims); *United States v. Hefferon*, 314 F.3d 211, 228 (5th Cir. 2002) (affirming a departure in a child sex offense where the victim’s doctor testified that the victim will suffer long-term psychological effects, such as lack of trust—especially of adults—that are excessively severe, and where the doctor indicated that the victim’s trauma was the most severe of anybody she had ever worked with); *United States v. Begaye*, 635 F.3d 456, 464–65 (10th Cir. 2011) (holding that comparative evidence (*i.e.*, evidence of the psychological injury actually suffered by the victim and the psychological injury normally resulting from the commission of the same offense) is unnecessary in every case to support a departure under §5K2.3).

⁸⁶ See *United States v. Barragan-Espinoza*, 350 F.3d 978, 983 (9th Cir. 2003) (in drug distribution conspiracy, 3-level upward adjustment under §5K2.4 was not erroneous where district court found defendant held victim against her will and forced her to carry drugs in her bra, conduct which was not alleged in or directly related to charges in the indictment).

⁸⁷ See *United States v. Dayea*, 32 F.3d 1377, 1382 (9th Cir. 1994) (§5K2.5 provides for departures based on property damage or loss, not other harms, such as consequential financial damages to a victim’s widow);

ordinarily should depend on “the extent to which the harm was intended or knowingly risked and on the extent to which the harm to property is more serious than other harm caused or risked by the conduct relevant to the offense of conviction.”

§5K2.6. Weapons and Dangerous Instrumentalities (Policy Statement)

Section 5K2.6 provides for an upward departure if “a weapon or dangerous instrumentality was used or possessed in the commission of the offense.”⁸⁸ The increase ordinarily should depend on “the dangerousness of the weapon, the manner in which it was used, and the extent to which its use endangered others.”

§5K2.7. Disruption of Governmental Function (Policy Statement)

If the defendant’s conduct resulted in a “significant disruption of a governmental function,” the court may increase the sentence above the authorized guideline range “to reflect the nature and extent of the disruption and the importance of the governmental function affected.”⁸⁹ Departure from the guidelines, however, “ordinarily would not be justified when the offense of conviction is an offense such as bribery or obstruction of justice; in such cases interference with a governmental function is inherent in the offense, and unless the circumstances are unusual the guidelines will reflect the appropriate punishment for such interference.”⁹⁰

United States v. Thomas, 62 F.3d 1332 (11th Cir. 1995) (same).

⁸⁸ See, e.g., United States v. Peebles, 879 F.3d 282 (8th Cir. 2018) (affirming upward departure where defendant fired shot into floor of home and into apartment below); United States v. Bond, 22 F.3d 662, 672 (6th Cir. 1994) (“[R]obbers discharge firearms during robberies specifically to frighten the victims, to ensure cooperation with their demands, and to facilitate escape; the factors articulated by the district court do not deviate substantially from that norm.”).

⁸⁹ See, e.g., United States v. Archambault, 344 F.3d 732, 736 (8th Cir. 2003) (Native American Tribal District was a recognized governing authority of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe—a sovereign entity under federal law—and, because the defendant’s arson caused many of the members of the community to lose their source of transportation for three months, affirmed the district court’s decision to depart). See also United States v. Saani, 650 F.3d 761, 775–76 (DC Cir. 2011) (holding that the government is not required to establish a direct link between the defendant’s misconduct and the alleged disruption; it does not require that the disruption be of any particular type or consequence).

⁹⁰ See, e.g., United States v. Cole, 357 F.3d 780, 783–84 (8th Cir. 2004) (reversing the district court’s decision to depart in a case in which the defendant transmitted a threat in interstate commerce by making a bogus threat of an anthrax attack on a school because the specific offense characteristics of §2A6.1 already provided for an increase in the base offense level if governmental functions are substantially disrupted). *But see* United States v. Regueiro, 240 F.3d 1321, 1325 (11th Cir. 2001) (per curiam) (affirming the district court’s decision to depart in a case involving conspiracy to defraud the United States, conspiracy to commit money laundering, and money laundering because every time one of the nurses from the 100 groups the defendant organized fraudulently billed Medicare, the government lost funds that it otherwise could have used to provide care to eligible patients).

§5K2.8. Extreme Conduct (Policy Statement)

Under §5K2.8, if the defendant’s conduct was “unusually heinous, cruel, brutal, or degrading to the victim,” the court may increase the sentence above the guideline range to reflect the nature of the conduct. Examples of such conduct include “torture of a victim, gratuitous infliction of injury, or prolonging of pain or humiliation.”⁹¹ Section 2A3.1 (Criminal Sexual Abuse; Attempt to Commit Criminal Sexual Abuse) encourages an upward departure under §5K2.8 if a victim was sexually abused by more than one participant.⁹²

§5K2.9. Criminal Purpose (Policy Statement)

If the defendant committed the offense in order to “facilitate or conceal the commission of another offense,” under §5K2.9, the court may increase the sentence above the guideline range “to reflect the actual seriousness of the defendant’s conduct.”⁹³

⁹¹ See, e.g., *United States v. Wallace*, 605 F.3d 477, 479 (8th Cir. 2010) (affirming an upward departure where the defendant imprisoned and prostituted a mentally disabled young woman and committed such acts as inflicting injuries upon the victim with knives and cigarettes, forcing the victim to drink urine, and forcing the victim to perform acts of bestiality); *United States v. Bonetti*, 277 F.3d 441, 449–50 (4th Cir. 2002) (affirming an upward departure where the defendant, convicted of harboring an illegal alien, brought the victim to the United States, and for 15 years kept control of her visa and passport, kept her in virtually slave-like conditions, did not pay her, forced her to work as many as 15 or more hours a day, and the defendant’s wife regularly abused her); *United States v. Baker*, 339 F.3d 400, 406 (6th Cir. 2003) (affirming an upward departure in a bank robbery case where the defendant shot a bank security guard after he had raised his arms to surrender, kicked his wounded body until he passed out, and shot him again when he came to); *United States v. Clark*, 45 F.3d 1247, 1253 (8th Cir. 1995) (affirming an upward departure in a carjacking case in which the defendant held a gun to the victim’s head, traveled around with the victim still in the car, robbed him, and repeatedly told him that he was going to die); *United States v. Johnson*, 144 F.3d 1149, 1150 (8th Cir. 1998) (affirming an upward departure based on extreme conduct where the defendant threatened the victim and a male co-worker with a sawed off shotgun and forced them to disrobe, unsuccessfully attempted to penetrate the female victim, repeatedly forced her to perform oral sex, penetrated her digitally and with his penis, left her lying naked on the floor, and threatened to return and kill her if she called the police); *United States v. Haggard*, 41 F.3d 1320, 1327 (9th Cir. 1994) (affirming an upward departure where the defendant deliberately provided false statements that he knew the whereabouts of the body of a missing eight-year-old girl and the identity of her assailant); see also *United States v. Begaye*, 635 F.3d 456 (10th Cir. 2011) (holding that comparative evidence (*i.e.*, evidence of the defendant’s conduct and the conduct of a “typical” perpetrator) is unnecessary to support a departure under §5K2.8); *United States v. Hanson*, 264 F.3d 988, 998–99 (10th Cir. 2001) (upward departure for extreme conduct may be imposed even when the victim is dead or unconscious when the conduct occurs).

⁹² See, e.g., *United States v. Queensborough*, 227 F.3d 149, 159 (3d Cir. 2000) (affirming an upward departure where the defendant and a codefendant accosted a man and a woman, raped and assaulted the woman, assaulted the man, and forced the two victims to have sex as they watched), *abrogation on other grounds as recognized by United States v. Dahmen*, 675 F.3d 244, 247–48 (3d Cir. 2012).

⁹³ See, e.g., *United States v. Hanson*, 264 F.3d 988, 997 (10th Cir. 2001) (affirming district court’s refusal to depart based on the defendant’s commission of a robbery in the course of a murder for which he was convicted because robbery is one of the issues that distinguishes first and second degree murder under the guidelines, and an upward departure based on a factor that distinguishes the crime in such a fashion is

§5K2.10. Victim's Conduct (Policy Statement)

Section 5K2.10 allows the court to reduce the sentence below the guideline range “to reflect the nature and circumstances of the offense” if the victim’s wrongful conduct *contributed significantly* to provoking the offense behavior.⁹⁴ To determine whether to depart and by how much, the court should consider the following:

- (1) The size and strength of the victim, or other relevant physical characteristics, in comparison with those of the defendant.
- (2) The persistence of the victim’s conduct and any efforts by the defendant to prevent confrontation.
- (3) The danger reasonably perceived by the defendant, including the victim’s reputation for violence.⁹⁵
- (4) The danger actually presented to the defendant by the victim.
- (5) Any other relevant conduct by the victim that substantially contributed to the danger presented.
- (6) The proportionality and reasonableness of the defendant’s response to the victim’s provocation.⁹⁶

The policy statement provides that victim misconduct is generally not sufficient to depart under this provision in the context of criminal sexual abuse cases (found in Chapter Two, Part A, Subpart 3). Further, the provision does not generally permit a departure in the context of non-violent offenses. One example of an exception, however, is if the victim engaged in “an extended course of provocation and harassment” that led the defendant to steal or destroy property in retaliation.

inappropriate).

⁹⁴ See, e.g., *United States v. Mussayek*, 338 F.3d 245, 253 (3d Cir. 2003) (for a downward departure under this policy statement victim’s misconduct must have significantly contributed to provoking the defendant’s offense behavior, and the provoked offense must be proportional to the provoking conduct).

⁹⁵ See *United States v. Paster*, 173 F.3d 206, 211 (3d Cir. 1999) (conduct of the victim—admitting to the defendant that she had between 40 and 50 affairs—is not the type of violent, wrongful conduct that warrants a departure).

⁹⁶ *Id.* (conduct of the victim did not warrant the response by the defendant—stabbing her 16 times).

§5K2.11. Lesser Harms (Policy Statement)

Section 5K2.11 allows for a reduced sentence if the defendant committed a crime to avoid a perceived greater harm, “provided that the circumstances significantly diminish society’s interest in punishing the conduct, for example, in the case of a mercy killing.”

Similarly, if the defendant’s conduct does “not cause or threaten the harm or evil sought to be prevented by the law proscribing the offense at issue,” a departure may be warranted. The policy statement lists as examples the following behavior: “a war veteran possessed a machine gun or grenade as a trophy, or a school teacher possessed controlled substances for display in a drug education program.”⁹⁷

§5K2.12. Coercion and Duress (Policy Statement)

Section 5K2.12 allows the court to depart downward if the defendant committed the offense because of “serious coercion, blackmail or duress, under circumstances not amounting to a complete defense.”⁹⁸ The extent of the “imperfect duress” departure should depend on “the reasonableness of the defendant’s actions, on the proportionality of the defendant’s actions to the seriousness of coercion, blackmail, or duress involved, and on the extent to which the conduct would have been less harmful under the circumstances as the defendant believed them to be.” Courts generally look for a threat of physical injury,

⁹⁷ See, e.g., *United States v. Carvell*, 74 F.3d 8 (1st Cir. 1996) (reduced sentence under §5K2.11 was warranted because the defendant was using marijuana to avoid the greater possible harm of suicide); *United States v. Lewis*, 249 F.3d 793 (8th Cir. 2001) (lesser harms rationale of §5K2.11 permits a sentencing court to depart for violations of the statute barring the making of a false statement in connection with the acquisition of a firearm where the firearm at issue was an heirloom that the defendant inherited from his father). *But see* *United States v. Carrasco*, 313 F.3d 750 (2d Cir. 2002) (defendant was not entitled to a lesser harm departure because a deported alien reentering the country illegally, even without intent to commit a crime, has committed the act the statute prohibits); *United States v. Rojas*, 47 F.3d 1078 (11th Cir. 1995) (district court erred by granting a downward departure under §5K2.11 to a defendant convicted of knowing possession of unregistered firearms based upon his claims that he was transporting the weapons to Cuba in order to avoid the greater harm of the total destruction of a country and the annihilation of its citizens, a motive dissimilar to the “traditional” departure categories for §5K2.11, such as hunting, sport shooting, and protecting the home); *United States v. Riley*, 376 F.3d 1160 (D.C. Cir. 2004) (the mere absence of an unlawful purpose does not warrant a departure under §5K2.11).

⁹⁸ See, e.g., *United States v. McKeever*, 824 F.3d 1113 (D.C. Cir. 2016) (remanding case where district court failed to consider defendants’ entrapment claim that police introduced guns into conspiracy to trigger 5-level enhancement under §2B3.1(b)(2)); *United States v. Bala*, 236 F.3d 87 (2d Cir. 2000) (agreeing with the Ninth, Eighth, and Fourth Circuits that “‘imperfect entrapment,’ described as ‘aggressive encouragement of wrongdoing, although not amounting to a complete defense,’ is a proper ground for downward departure at sentencing pursuant to U.S.S.G. § 5K2.12”); *United States v. Amor*, 24 F.3d 432 (2d Cir. 1994) (affirming a departure where the district court found that the defendant would not have purchased and altered the firearm but for the threats he received and the shots fired at his vehicle).

substantial damage to property, or similar unlawful acts of a third party or from natural emergency.⁹⁹

§5K2.13. Diminished Capacity (Policy Statement)

Section 5K2.13 provides for a downward departure if: (1) the defendant committed the offense while suffering from a *significantly reduced* mental capacity; and (2) the significantly reduced mental capacity *contributed substantially* to the commission of the offense.¹⁰⁰

The extent of the departure “should reflect the extent to which the reduced mental capacity contributed to the commission of the offense.” Significantly reduced mental capacity means “the defendant, although convicted, has a significantly impaired ability to (A) understand the wrongfulness of the behavior comprising the offense or to exercise the power of reason; or (B) control behavior that the defendant knows is wrongful.”¹⁰¹

A departure for diminished capacity is prohibited where:

- (1) the significantly reduced mental capacity was caused by the voluntary use of drugs or other intoxicants;
- (2) the facts and circumstances of the defendant’s offense indicate a need to protect the public because the offense involved actual violence or a serious threat of violence;¹⁰²

⁹⁹ See, e.g., *United States v. Cotto*, 347 F.3d 441 (2d Cir. 2003) (generalized fear of a third party, based solely on knowledge of that third party’s violent conduct toward others rather than on any explicit or implicit threat, was insufficient to constitute the unusual or exceptional circumstances warranting a departure under §5K2.12); *United States v. Sachdev*, 279 F.3d 25 (1st Cir. 2002) (affirming district court’s decision not to depart where defendant claimed that he committed the offense—cashing bad checks—because he had felt threatened to repay money invested by a former friend in his business; §5K2.12 departure ordinarily requires a threat of physical harm, either explicit or implicit).

¹⁰⁰ See, e.g., *United States v. Smith*, 289 F.3d 696 (11th Cir. 2002) (insufficient evidence showing that defendant suffered from “significantly reduced mental capacity” where district court found that defendant’s judgment was impaired by several factors: drug abuse, a low aptitude or learning disability leading to classification as a special education student, and early treatment for an emotional or mental disorder).

¹⁰¹ §5K2.13 comment. (n.1).

¹⁰² See, e.g., *United States v. Woods*, 364 F.3d 1000 (8th Cir. 2004) (bank robbery committed by intimidation but no weapon is still a “serious threat of violence”); *United States v. Dela Cruz*, 358 F.3d 623 (9th Cir. 2004) (defendant convicted of making telephonic bomb threats was ineligible for a departure under §5K2.13 because the crime involved a serious threat of violence); *United States v. Bowe*, 257 F.3d 336 (4th Cir. 2001) (defendant did not satisfy the criteria set forth in §5K2.13, which states that if the offense involved actual violence or a serious threat of violence, then the court may not depart below the applicable guideline range).

- (3) the defendant’s criminal history indicates a need to incarcerate the defendant to protect the public;¹⁰³ or
- (4) the defendant has been convicted of an offense under chapter 71, 109A, 110, or 117, of title 18, United States Code.

§5K2.14. Public Welfare (Policy Statement)

Section 5K2.14 provides for an upward departure if “national security, public health, or safety was significantly endangered.” The extent of the departure should “reflect the nature and circumstances of the offense.”¹⁰⁴

§5K2.16. Voluntary Disclosure of Offense (Policy Statement)

Section 5K2.16 allows for a downward departure if “the defendant voluntarily discloses to authorities the existence of, and accepts responsibility for, the offense prior to the discovery of such offense, and if such offense was unlikely to have been discovered otherwise.”¹⁰⁵ The policy statement lists as an example of such conduct an offense where a “defendant, motivated by remorse, discloses an offense that otherwise would have remained undiscovered.”¹⁰⁶

A departure under this policy statement is not warranted, however, “where the motivating factor is the defendant’s knowledge that discovery of the offense is likely or imminent, or where the defendant’s disclosure occurs in connection with the investigation or prosecution of the defendant for related conduct.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ See *United States v. Davis*, 264 F.3d 813 (9th Cir. 2001) (although defendant suffered from an extraordinary mental disease, his substantial criminal history demonstrated a need for incarceration to protect the public and therefore precluded a §5K2.13 departure).

¹⁰⁴ See, e.g., *United States v. Singer*, 825 F.3d 1151, 1157–58 (10th Cir. 2016) (§5K2.14 enhancement was proper and not double counting where defendant convicted of involuntary manslaughter had extremely high blood alcohol level and entered into chase with police after hit and run); *United States v. Bell*, 303 F.3d 1187, 1193 (9th Cir. 2002) (possession of deadly chemicals and nerve agents); *United States v. Cole*, 357 F.3d 780, 784 (8th Cir.2004) (a real, as opposed to an empty, threat must be present); *United States v. Leahy*, 169 F.3d 433, 444 (7th Cir.1999) (defendant’s possession of ricin qualified for departure under §5K2.14 given that substance’s high toxicity, undetectable nature, incurable effects, and instability).

¹⁰⁵ See *United States v. Besler*, 86 F.3d 745 (7th Cir. 1996) (error to grant departure without finding that offense of conviction would not have been discovered absent defendant’s disclosure).

¹⁰⁶ See *United States v. Lovaas*, 241 F.3d 900 (7th Cir. 2001) (departure under §5K2.16 only applies when a defendant is motivated by guilt and discovery is unlikely).

¹⁰⁷ See *United States v. Aerts*, 121 F.3d 277, 281 (7th Cir. 1997) (an additional, perhaps primary, goal served by §5K1.16 is alerting the authorities to offenses unlikely to be otherwise discovered); *United States v. Brownstein*, 79 F.3d 121, 123 (9th Cir. 1996) (plain language thus does not support defendant’s contention that the policy statement should apply to individuals who simply confess their involvement in a crime already known to the authorities).

§5K2.17. Semiautomatic Firearms Capable of Accepting Large Capacity Magazine (Policy Statement)

An upward departure may be warranted if the defendant possessed a semiautomatic firearm capable of accepting a large capacity magazine in connection with a crime of violence or controlled substance offense. The extent of the departure should depend upon the degree to which the nature of the weapon increased the likelihood of death or injury in the circumstances of the particular case.¹⁰⁸

Section 5K2.17 defines “semiautomatic firearm capable of accepting a large capacity magazine” as “a semiautomatic firearm that has the ability to fire many rounds without reloading because at the time of the offense (A) the firearm had attached to it a magazine or similar device that could accept more than 15 rounds of ammunition; or (B) a magazine or similar device that could accept more than 15 rounds of ammunition was in close proximity to the firearm.”

§5K2.18. Violent Street Gangs (Policy Statement)

If the defendant is subject to an enhanced sentence under 18 U.S.C. § 521 (pertaining to criminal street gangs), an upward departure may be warranted. This departure provision is intended “to enhance the sentences of defendants who participate in groups, clubs, organizations, or associations that use violence to further their ends.” The provision does not apply, however, in a case “in which 18 U.S.C. § 521 applies, but no violence is established.”

§5K2.20. Aberrant Behavior (Policy Statement)

Section 5K2.20 allows for a downward departure in an “exceptional case if (1) the defendant’s criminal conduct meets the requirements of subsection (b); and (2) the departure is not prohibited under subsection (c).”¹⁰⁹

Section 5K2.20 is only available if the defendant committed *a single criminal occurrence or single criminal transaction* that:

- (1) was committed without significant planning;

¹⁰⁸ See *United States v. Philiposian*, 267 F.3d 214, 218 (3d Cir. 2001) (§5K2.17 applies to a defendant who merely possesses a high-capacity, semiautomatic weapon; amount of the increase depends on the degree to which the nature of the weapon increased the likelihood of death or injury).

¹⁰⁹ See, e.g., *United States v. Smith*, 387 F.3d 826 (9th Cir. 2004) (district court’s belief that it could not depart based on aberrant behavior was clearly erroneous where the crime lasted for only five or ten minutes and many letters of support were submitted on behalf of defendant indicating that the defendant had lived an exemplary life prior to the crime, and that the crime represented a departure from her normal way of life).

- (2) was of limited duration; and
- (3) represents a marked deviation by the defendant from an otherwise law-abiding life, and does not include an offense that involved “[r]epetitious or significant, planned behavior.”¹¹⁰

The court may consider the defendant’s

- (1) mental and emotional conditions;
- (2) employment record;
- (3) record of prior good works;
- (4) motivation for committing the offense; and
- (5) efforts to mitigate the effects of the offense.¹¹¹

Pursuant to subsection (c), the court may not depart if:

- (1) The offense involved serious bodily injury or death.
- (2) The defendant discharged a firearm or otherwise used a firearm or a dangerous weapon.
- (3) The instant offense of conviction is a serious drug trafficking offense.
- (4) The defendant has either of the following:
 - (A) more than one criminal history point, as determined under Chapter Four (Criminal History and Criminal Livelihood) before application of subsection (b) of §4A1.3 (Departures Based on Inadequacy of Criminal History Category); or
 - (B) a prior federal or state felony conviction, or any other significant prior criminal behavior, regardless of whether the conviction or

¹¹⁰ See §5K2.20, comment. (n.2); *see also* United States v. Castellanos, 355 F.3d 56 (2d Cir. 2003) (spontaneity not determinative, but is a relevant and permissible consideration when treated as one factor in evaluating whether the three-pronged test of §5K2.20 has been met). *But see* United States v. Gonzalez, 281 F.3d 38 (2d Cir. 2002) (sentencing court should not consider spontaneity in connection with the decision whether to depart based on aberrant behavior; Sentencing Commission expressly intended to relax the requirements for aberrant behavior).

¹¹¹ See §5K2.20, comment. (n.3).

significant prior criminal behavior is countable under Chapter Four.

Further, a defendant convicted “of an offense involving a minor victim under section 1201, an offense under section 1591, or an offense under chapter 71, 109A, 110, or 117, of title 18, United States Code” is prohibited from receiving a departure under this policy statement.

§5K2.21. Dismissed and Uncharged Conduct (Policy Statement)

A court may depart upward “to reflect the actual seriousness of the offense.” The departure may be based on “conduct (1) underlying a charge dismissed as part of a plea agreement in the case, or underlying a potential charge not pursued in the case as part of a plea agreement or for any other reason; and (2) that did not enter into the determination of the applicable guideline range.”¹¹² The government must prove the charge by a preponderance of the evidence.¹¹³

§5K2.23. Discharged Terms of Imprisonment (Policy Statement)

A downward departure may be appropriate if the defendant (1) has completed serving a term of imprisonment; and (2) subsection (b) of §5G1.3 (Imposition of a Sentence on a Defendant Subject to Undischarged Term of Imprisonment) would have provided an adjustment had that completed term of imprisonment been undischarged at the time of sentencing for the instant offense. The departure “should be fashioned to achieve a reasonable punishment for the instant offense.”¹¹⁴

¹¹² *United States v. White Twin*, 682 F.3d 773, 777 (8th Cir. 2012) (district court may impose an upward departure for dismissed or uncharged conduct, in order to reflect the actual seriousness of the offense based on conduct underlying a charge dismissed as part of a plea agreement which did not otherwise enter into the determination of the guideline range). *But see United States v. Stephens*, 373 F. App'x 457 (5th Cir. 2010) (district court did not properly compute upward departure under §5K2.21 to account for uncharged § 924(c) conduct).

¹¹³ *See United States v. Smith*, 681 F.3d 932, 936 (8th Cir. 2012) (*Booker* only prevents a judge from using judicially found facts to sentence a defendant outside of the statutory maximums; upward departure for uncharged conduct under §5K2.21 found by preponderance of the evidence not error); *United States v. Azure*, 536 F.3d 922, 933 (8th Cir. 2008) (“[A]lthough the quantum of proof is less than the beyond-a-reasonable-doubt formulation used at trial, the burden of proof remains unchanged at sentencing: the government bears the burden.”).

¹¹⁴ *United States v. Hilario*, 449 F.3d 500, 501 (2d Cir. 2006) (district court did not abuse its discretion in denying an additional downward departure for time served in a foreign prison on the basis of defendant’s “speculative assertion that he would have earned good time credit in a BOP prison had he served his time in such a facility”).

*§5K2.24. Commission of Offense While Wearing or Displaying
Unauthorized or Counterfeit Insignia or Uniform (Policy Statement)*

Section 5K2.24 allows for an upward departure “[i]f, during the commission of the offense, the defendant wore or displayed an official, or counterfeit official, insignia or uniform received in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 716.”

§5K3.1. Early Disposition Programs (Policy Statement)

“Upon motion of the Government, the court may depart downward not more than 4 levels pursuant to an early disposition program authorized by the Attorney General of the United States and the United States Attorney for the district in which the court resides.”

Early disposition, or fast-track, programs, were previously available in only certain districts. On September 22, 2003, the Attorney General issued a memorandum outlining the criteria for authorization of early disposition, or fast-track, programs, stating that fast-track programs were “properly reserved for exceptional circumstances, such as where the resources of a district would otherwise be significantly strained by the large volume of a particular category of cases.”

The existence of fast-track programs in some, but not all, districts, generated a significant circuit conflict about whether a district court may vary based on this disparity.¹¹⁵ On January 31, 2012, the Deputy Attorney General issued a memorandum in which all districts were authorized to create fast-track programs for illegal reentry. The creation of fast-track programs for illegal reentry in all districts appears to preclude a district court’s grant of a variance on the basis of disparity between districts with fast-track programs for illegal reentry and those without. However, fast-track programs have been authorized in certain districts for felonies other than illegal reentry and those programs were not within the ambit of the Deputy Attorney General’s January 31, 2012, memorandum. The memorandum made note of the existence of fast-track programs for offenses other than illegal reentry in certain districts and indicated that these programs

¹¹⁵ Compare *United States v. Arrelucea-Zamudio*, 581 F.3d 142, 149 (3d Cir. 2009) (a sentencing judge has the discretion to consider a variance under the totality of the § 3553(a) factors, rather than one factor in isolation, on the basis of a defendant’s fast-track argument; such a variance would be reasonable in an appropriate case) with *United States v. Gomez-Herrera*, 523 F.3d 554 (5th Cir. 2008) (“because any disparity that results from fast-track programs is intended by Congress, it is not ‘unwarranted’ within the meaning of § 3553(a)(6)”). See also *United States v. Ramirez*, 675 F.3d 634 (7th Cir. 2011) (setting forth the circumstances in which a district court would need to explain why it was rejecting a fast-track disparity argument). Additional discussion of related topics is included in the section “Variances Based on Policy Disagreements with the Guidelines,” below.

will continue through March 1, 2012, allowing for “a substantive review of these programs in due course.” Fast-track disparity continues to be a subject of sentencing litigation.¹¹⁶

a. Encouraged departures within individual guidelines

The following is a non-exhaustive list of places within individual guidelines where departures are encouraged:

App. Note 20 to §2B1.1 Larceny, Embezzlement, and Other Forms of Theft; Offenses Involving Stolen Property; Property Damage or Destruction; Fraud and Deceit; Forgery; Offenses Involving Altered or Counterfeit Instruments Other than Counterfeit Bearer Obligations of the United States

Application Note 20 to §2B1.1 states that in cases “in which the offense level determined under this guideline substantially understates the seriousness of the offense,” an upward departure may be warranted. The Note lists a non-exhaustive list of factors the court may consider in determining whether a departure is warranted.

App. Note 27 to §2D1.1. Unlawful Manufacturing, Importing, Exporting, or Trafficking (Including Possession with Intent to Commit These Offenses); Attempt or Conspiracy

Application Note 27 to §2D1.1 provides for three potential departure bases. First, Note 27(A) states that a downward departure may be warranted “[i]f, in a reverse sting (an operation in which a government agent sells or negotiates to sell a controlled substance to a defendant), the court finds that the government agent set a price for the controlled substance that was substantially below the market value of the controlled substance, thereby leading to the defendant’s purchase of a significantly greater quantity of the controlled substance than his available resources would have allowed him to purchase except for the artificially low price set by the government agent.”

Second, Application Note 27(B) provides there may be “an extraordinary case” in which an offense’s drug quantity is so high that it merits a departure above a base offense level 38—the highest quantity-oriented base offense level. The note explains that, for example, an offense involving a quantity ten times higher than a level-38-triggering quantity might justify a departure. The note likewise extends its applicability to those substances with a maximum base offense level below 38.

Third, Application Note 27(C) provides that an upward departure may be appropriate if a trafficked controlled substance had an “unusually high purity.” The departure is intended to be utilized when an unusual purity level may be “probative of the

¹¹⁶ *E.g.*, *United States v. Anaya-Aguirre*, 704 F.3d 514 (7th Cir. 2013) (reviewing landscape of fast-track disparity).

defendant’s role or position in the chain of distribution.”¹¹⁷ The departure is not available for PCP, amphetamine, methamphetamine, hydrocodone, or oxycodone because the guideline itself already addresses those substances’ purities.

App. Note 11 to §2K2.1. Unlawful Receipt, Possession, or Transportation of Firearms or Ammunition; Prohibited Transactions Involving Firearms or Ammunition

Application Note 11 to §2K2.1 states that an “upward departure may be warranted in any of the following circumstances: (1) the number of firearms substantially exceeded 200; (2) the offense involved multiple National Firearms Act weapons (*e.g.*, machine guns, destructive devices), military type assault rifles, non-detectable (“plastic”) firearms (defined at 18 U.S.C. § 922(p)); (3) the offense involved large quantities of armor-piercing ammunition (defined at 18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(17)(B)); or (4) the offense posed a substantial risk of death or bodily injury to multiple individuals.”

App. Notes 5, 6, and 7 to §2L1.2. Unlawfully Entering or Remaining in the United States

Application Note 5 to §2L1.2 provides for upward or downward departure in cases in which the offense level “substantially understates or overstates the seriousness of the conduct underlying the prior offense.”

Application Note 6 provides for a downward departure to reflect all or part of the time the defendant served while in state custody. Such departure should be considered only where it is not likely to increase the risk to the public from further crimes of the defendant. When considering whether such departure is appropriate, the court should consider, among other things, (A) whether the defendant engaged in additional criminal activity after illegally reentering the United States; (B) the seriousness of any such additional criminal activity, including (1) whether the defendant used violence or credible threats of violence or possessed a firearm or other dangerous weapon (or induced another person to do so) in connection with the criminal activity, (2) whether the criminal activity resulted in death or serious bodily injury to any person, and (3) whether the defendant was an organizer, leader, manager, or supervisor of others in the criminal activity; and (C) the seriousness of the defendant’s other criminal history.

Application Note 7 provides that a downward departure based on cultural assimilation in an illegal reentry case may be appropriate where (A) the defendant formed cultural ties to the United States from having continuously resided in the United States from childhood, (B) the reentry was motivated by cultural ties, and (C) a departure is unlikely to increase the risk of further crimes of the defendant. The application note

¹¹⁷ See, *e.g.*, *United States v. Cones*, 195 F.3d 941, 944 (7th Cir. 1999) (“The Note makes a different point: that higher purity is often associated with a higher position in the distribution network, which may justify a higher sentence.”); *United States v. Iguaran-Palmer*, 926 F.2d 7, 10 (1st Cir. 1991) (basing affirmance of purity departure because other factors bolstered finding of higher role in conspiracy).

provides a nonexclusive list of seven factors that the court is to consider in determining whether a departure is warranted.

App. Note 2 to §3B1.1. Aggravating Role

Pursuant to §3B1.1, an offender’s offense level may be increased by 2, 3, or 4 levels where the defendant was an organizer, leader, manager, or supervisor of one or more other criminally responsible participants. Application Note 2 of §3B1.1, provides for a potential upward departure where an individual “did not organize, lead, manage, or supervise another participant, but who nevertheless exercised management responsibility over the property, assets, or activities of a criminal organization.”

App. Note 6 to §5C1.1 Imposition of a Term of Imprisonment

Application Note 6 to §5C1.1 states that a departure from the sentencing options authorized by the guidelines for Zone C downward to the sentencing options for Zone B118 may be appropriate to accomplish a specific treatment purpose in cases where the court finds (A) the defendant is an abuser of controlled substances or alcohol, or suffers from a significant mental illness, and (B) the defendant’s criminality is related to the treatment problem to be addressed.

App. Note 1 to §5D1.1. Imposition of a Term of Supervised Release

Application Note 1 to §5D1.1 allows the court to depart from this guideline and not impose a term of supervised release if it determines that supervised release is neither required by statute nor required for any of the following reasons: (1) to protect the public welfare; (2) to enforce a financial condition; (3) to provide drug or alcohol treatment or testing; (4) to assist the reintegration of the defendant into the community; or (5) to accomplish any other sentencing purpose authorized by statute.

4. Discouraged Grounds for Departures

The Commission has determined that a defendant’s guideline sentence is to be based on the offense the defendant committed, not the character of the defendant. The Commission has identified certain circumstances that are either potentially relevant or not ordinarily relevant to the determination of whether a sentence should be outside the applicable guideline range.

Chapter Five, Part H lists those factors that the Commission has deemed either potentially relevant or not ordinarily relevant to the determination of whether to depart from the guideline range. Unless stated, however, this does not mean that these factors are

118 Zone C provides that at least half of the minimum term must be satisfied by imprisonment whereas Zone B allows for all or most of incarceration to be handled by intermittent confinement such as home detention.

necessarily inappropriate to the determination of the sentence within the applicable guideline range or to the determination of appropriate conditions of probation or supervised release. If the special factor is discouraged under the guidelines, it can only be a basis for departure if the factor is present in the case to an “exceptional degree.”

§5H1.1. Age (Policy Statement)

Section 5H1.1 provides that age (including youth) “may be relevant in determining whether a departure is warranted, if considerations based on age, individually or in combination with other offender characteristics, are present to an unusual degree and distinguish the case from the typical case covered by the guidelines.” If the defendant is elderly and infirm, however, and “where a form of punishment such as home confinement might be equally efficient as and less costly than incarceration,” age may be a reason to depart downward.¹¹⁹

§5H1.2. Education and Vocational Skills (Policy Statement)

Education and vocational skills “are not ordinarily relevant in determining whether a departure is warranted.” Courts have rejected arguments for an upward departure based on finding that defendant held public office or was a “gifted, talented, individual.”¹²⁰ Courts have also rejected downward departures based on the defendant’s high intelligence or hardship caused to the defendant’s community or employees.¹²¹ Education and vocational skills may, however, “be relevant in determining the conditions of probation or supervised release for rehabilitative purposes, for public protection by restricting activities that allow

¹¹⁹ See, e.g., *United States v. Bullion*, 466 F.3d 574 (7th Cir. 2006) (affirming sentence of 24 months where guideline range was 87–108 months because defendant was 61 and was unlikely to commit further crimes); *United States v. Brooke*, 308 F.3d 17 (D.C. Cir. 2002) (affirming denial of departure based on defendant’s age (82) and physical condition, concluding that home confinement would not be effective punishment because defendant had a history of drug dealing in his home, and that his impairment was not extraordinary); *United States v. Crickon*, 240 F.3d 652 (7th Cir. 2001) (affirming the district court’s decision not to depart based on age in a case involving a 60-year-old man; without medical evidence to support it, defendant’s assertion that he would die in prison was not persuasive); *United States v. Tocco*, 200 F.3d 401 (6th Cir. 2000) (noting that “it is possible ‘that an aged defendant with a multitude of health problems may qualify for a downward departure... [but] such downward departures are rare,’” and requiring, on resentencing that the district court “obtain independent and competent medical evidence to determine the extent of [the defendant’s] infirmities and the prison system’s ability or inability to accommodate them”).

¹²⁰ *United States v. Burch*, 873 F.2d 765 (5th Cir. 1989); see also *United States v. Barone*, 913 F.2d 46 (2d Cir. 1990) (defendant did not use his public office or profession as a lawyer to facilitate his crimes).

¹²¹ See, e.g., *United States v. Drew*, 131 F.3d 1269 (8th Cir. 1997) (reversing a downward departure in a child pornography case based on the defendant’s high intelligence and candidacy for a PhD in chemistry); *United States v. Sharapan*, 13 F.3d 781 (3d Cir. 1994) (reversing a downward departure where incarceration would cause the defendant’s business to fail and result in the loss of 30 jobs in the community); *United States v. Groene*, 998 F.2d 604 (8th Cir. 1993) (rejecting a downward departure based on hardship caused by a chiropractor’s absence from a rural community);

for the utilization of a certain skill, or in determining the appropriate type of community service.”

§5H1.3. Mental and Emotional Conditions (Policy Statement)

Mental and emotional conditions “may be relevant in determining whether a departure is warranted, if such conditions, individually or in combination with other offender characteristics, are present to an unusual degree and distinguish the case from the typical case covered by the guidelines.” In extreme circumstances, a court may depart downward where extreme childhood abuse caused mental and emotional conditions that contributed to the commission of the offense.¹²² However, there must be a causal connection between the defendant’s impaired emotional or mental condition and the criminal conduct.¹²³

Section 5H1.3 further provides that where §5C1.1, Application Note 6 (downward departure to allow for non-custodial treatment options) is applicable “a downward departure may be appropriate to accomplish a specific treatment purpose.” Mental and emotional considerations may also be relevant in determining the conditions of probation or supervised release; *e.g.*, participation in a mental health program.¹²⁴

§5H1.4. Physical Condition, Including Drug or Alcohol Dependence or Abuse; Gambling Addiction (Policy Statement)

Physical condition or appearance, including physique, “may be relevant in determining whether a departure is warranted, if the condition or appearance, individually or in combination with other offender characteristics, is present to an unusual degree and distinguishes the case from the typical case covered by the guidelines.”¹²⁵ If the defendant can be properly cared for by the prison system, the district court should not depart.¹²⁶ The

¹²² See, *e.g.*, *United States v. Walter*, 256 F.3d 891 (9th Cir. 2001).

¹²³ See *United States v. Brady*, 417 F.3d 326 (2d Cir. 2005).

¹²⁴ See §§5B1.3(d)(5) and 5D1.3(d)(5)).

¹²⁵ See *United States v. Parish*, 308 F.3d 1025 (9th Cir. 2002) (affirming, in a child pornography case, a departure where defendant was susceptible to abuse in prison based on his stature, naiveté, and the nature of the offense); *United States v. Graham*, 83 F.3d 1466 (D.C. Cir. 1996) (extreme vulnerability to abuse in prison may justify a downward departure). *But see* *United States v. Carr*, 271 F.3d 172 (4th Cir. 2001) (declining to review the district court’s refusal to depart based on the defendant’s physical impairment, AIDS); *United States v. Castillo*, 430 F.3d 230 (5th Cir. 2005) (“[A] defendant’s HIV-positive status alone does not constitute an extraordinary medical condition warranting a downward departure under §5H1.4.”).

¹²⁶ See *United States v. Coughlin*, 500 F.3d 813 (8th Cir. 2007) (reversing a downward departure despite the defendant’s poor health where the record did not show that “imprisonment would subject [the defendant] to more than the normal inconvenience or danger”); *United States v. Krich*, 257 F.3d 689 (7th Cir. 2001) (“older criminals do not receive sentencing discounts” unless the medical problem is extraordinary in the sense that prison medical facilities cannot cope with it); *United States v. Albarran*, 233 F.3d 972 (7th Cir. 2000) (reversing the district court’s decision to grant a downward departure because the defendant did not

court must make specific findings if it wants to depart based on extraordinary physical impairment.¹²⁷

The policy statement further provides that drug or alcohol dependence *ordinarily* is not a reason for a downward departure. Additionally, where §5C1.1, Application Note 6 (departure to allow for community treatment options) is applicable, “a downward departure may be appropriate to accomplish a specific treatment purpose.”

§5H1.5. Employment Record (Policy Statement)

Section 5H1.5 provides that the defendant’s employment record is “not ordinarily relevant in determining whether a departure is warranted,” but that the record “may be relevant in determining the conditions of probation or supervised release (*e.g.*, the appropriate hours of home detention).” Courts have affirmed downward departures based on the defendant’s employment record in extraordinary cases.¹²⁸

§5H1.6. Family Ties and Responsibilities (Policy Statement)

Family ties and responsibilities are not ordinarily relevant in determining whether a departure may be warranted. Such factors are only a basis for departure in extraordinary cases.¹²⁹

present any evidence regarding why his physical condition would preclude him from being incarcerated and cared for properly by the prison).

¹²⁷ See, *e.g.*, *United States v. Persico*, 164 F.3d 796 (2d Cir. 1999).

¹²⁸ See, *e.g.*, *United States v. Jones*, 158 F.3d 492 (10th Cir. 1998) (taking into account the effect the defendant’s incarceration would have on his prospects for future employment in a very economically depressed community).

¹²⁹ See, *e.g.*, *United States v. Bueno*, 549 F.3d 1176 (8th Cir. 2008) (affirming a departure down to a term of probation based on finding that defendant’s wife’s lupus and rheumatoid arthritis constituted extraordinary family circumstances, but that the extent of the departure “stretches the allowable downward departure under §5H1.6 to its very limits”); *United States v. Spero*, 382 F.3d 803 (8th Cir. 2004) (a situation in which one parent is critical to a child’s well-being qualifies as an exceptional circumstance justifying a downward departure); *United States v. Leon*, 341 F.3d 928 (9th Cir. 2003) (affirming the district court’s departure based on defendant’s indispensable role in caring for his wife, who recently had her kidney removed due to renal cancer and who had been diagnosed as being at risk of committing suicide if she were to lose her husband to death or incarceration); *United States v. Reyes-Rodriguez*, 344 F.3d 1071 (10th Cir. 2003) (to qualify for a departure based on family ties and responsibilities, defendant must be the only individual able to provide the assistance the family member needs); *United States v. Louis*, 300 F.3d 78 (1st Cir. 2002) (district court did not err in refusing to grant a departure based on the defendant’s family ties and responsibilities in a case in which the defendant argued that because his son was biracial, it was important for the parent of color to be present and involved in the son’s life); *United States v. Pereira*, 272 F.3d 76 (1st Cir. 2001) (“As long as there are feasible alternatives of care that are relatively comparable to what the defendant provides, the defendant cannot be irreplaceable.”); *United States v. King*, 201 F. Supp. 3d 167 (D.D.C. 2016) (downward departure to three years’ probation with condition of evening home confinement with location monitoring was appropriate where defendant was sole caretaker of seven-year-old daughter who would otherwise become

Family responsibilities that are complied with, however, “may be relevant to the determination of the amount of restitution or fine.” In determining whether a departure is warranted under this policy statement, the court shall consider the following non-exhaustive list of circumstances:

- (i) The seriousness of the offense.
- (ii) The involvement in the offense, if any, of members of the defendant’s family.
- (iii) The danger, if any, to members of the defendant’s family as a result of the offense.¹³⁰

The commentary limits the court’s ability to depart based on the loss of caretaking or financial support of the defendant’s family. In addition to the factors listed above, the departure requires the presence of the following circumstances:

- (i) The defendant’s service of a sentence within the applicable guideline range will cause a substantial, direct, and specific loss of essential caretaking, or essential financial support, to the defendant’s family.
- (ii) The loss of caretaking or financial support substantially exceeds the harm ordinarily incident to incarceration for a similarly situated defendant. For example, the fact that the defendant’s family might incur some degree of financial hardship or suffer to some extent from the absence of a parent through incarceration is not in itself sufficient as a basis for departure because such hardship or suffering is of a sort ordinarily incident to incarceration.
- (iii) The loss of caretaking or financial support is one for which no effective remedial or ameliorative programs reasonably are available, making the defendant’s caretaking or financial support irreplaceable to the defendant’s family.
- (iv) The departure effectively will address the loss of caretaking or financial support.

Family ties and responsibilities and community ties are not relevant, however, in determining whether a sentence should be below the applicable guideline range if the

ward of the state).

¹³⁰ §5H1.6 comment. (n.1).

defendant was convicted of an offense involving a minor victim under section 1201, an offense under section 1591, or an offense under chapter 71, 109A, 110, or 117, of title 18, United States Code.

§5H1.11. Military, Civic, Charitable, or Public Service; Employment-Related Contributions; Record of Prior Good Works (Policy Statement)

Military service may be relevant in determining whether a departure is warranted, if the military service, individually or in combination with other offender characteristics, is “present to an unusual degree and distinguishes the case from the typical case covered by the guidelines.”¹³¹

Section 5H1.11 further provides that “civic, charitable, or public service; employment-related contributions; and similar prior good works are not ordinarily relevant in determining whether a departure is warranted.” Courts have allowed such departures when the defendant’s community service was extraordinary.¹³²

5. §5K2.0 Departure Due to Characteristic Not Adequately Taken Into Account by the Commission

The following are examples of departures in cases involving either a factor not mentioned by the guidelines or “present to an exceptional degree or in some other way makes the case different from the ordinary case where the factor is present.”¹³³

a. Upward departures

United States v. Holmes, 193 F.3d 200 (3d Cir. 1999) (affirming an upward departure based on extraordinary abuse of position of trust and rejecting the defendant’s argument that §3B1.3 adequately covers abuse of position of trust because nothing in the guidelines suggests that the Sentencing Commission “envisioned multiple acts of abuse of trust to the degree that was present in this case”).

¹³¹ See *Porter v. McCollum*, 558 U.S. 30 (2009) (“Our Nation has a long tradition of according leniency to veterans in recognition of their service, especially for those who fought on the front lines . . .”). However, such departures are not automatic. See, e.g., *United States v. Theunick*, 651 F.3d 578 (6th Cir. 2011).

¹³² See, e.g., *United States v. Huber*, 462 F.3d 945 (8th Cir. 2006) (affirming a downward departure for a defendant who had loaned money to neighbors and fellow farmers in need, saving farms from foreclosure); *United States v. Canova*, 412 F.3d 331 (2d Cir. 2005) (affirming a downward departure for an ex-Marine who, as a volunteer firefighter, had rescued a three-year-old from a burning building, delivered three babies, and administered CPR to persons in distress); *United States v. Cooper*, 394 F.3d 172 (3d Cir. 2005) (allowing a downward departure for community service that was “hands-on” and likely had a dramatic and positive impact on the lives of others).

¹³³ *Koon v. United States*, 518 U.S. 81, 96 (1996).

United States v. Pitts, 176 F.3d 239 (4th Cir. 1999) (in case of FBI agent sentenced on espionage charges, upward departure based upon an extraordinary abuse of trust was warranted where the combination of the level of trust violated and the level of harm created solely by the violation of that trust falls outside the heartland of conduct; when sentencing court departs based on a factor upon which an enhancement rests, the departure is warranted only if the enhancement is inadequate).

United States v. Twitty, 104 F.3d 1 (1st Cir. 1997) (upholding an upward departure based on the large number of guns involved in the case, and the endangerment to public safety, and rejecting a double-counting argument).

United States v. Fan, 36 F.3d 240 (2d Cir. 1994) (affirming an upward departure in a case in which an alien smuggler kept the aliens—who were indebted to the smuggler in amounts ranging from \$10,000 to \$30,000—in “inhumane” conditions).

United States v. Kaye, 23 F.3d 50 (2d Cir. 1994) (affirming an upward departure based on the extent of the victim’s loss, and concluding that the extent of the consequences of the defendant’s conduct on his victim was not captured by the applicable Chapter Three adjustments).

b. Downward departures

United States v. Barrera-Saucedo, 385 F.3d 533 (5th Cir. 2004) (permissible for sentencing court to downwardly depart for all or part of time served by illegal alien defendant in state custody from the time immigration authorities located him until he is taken into federal custody).

United States v. Chapman, 356 F.3d 843 (8th Cir. 2004) (“truly exceptional rehabilitation alone can, in rare cases, support a downward departure even when the defendant does not accept responsibility”); *United States v. DeShon*, 183 F.3d 888 (8th Cir. 1999) (same).

United States v. Los Santos, 283 F.3d 422 (2d Cir. 2002) (sentencing court may not depart under §5K2.0 based on prosecutorial delay that resulted in a missed opportunity for concurrent sentencing unless the delay was “in bad faith” or “longer than a reasonable amount of time for the government to have diligently investigated the crime”).

United States v. Sheridan, 270 F.3d 669 (8th Cir. 2001) (reversing downward departure based on victim’s promiscuity: this was an impermissible ground because §2A3.2 adequately accounts for a victim’s willingness to engage in the act).

United States v. Basalo, 258 F.3d 945 (9th Cir. 2001) (prosecutorial policy choices are not mitigating circumstances).

United States v. Armenta-Castro, 227 F.3d 1255 (10th Cir. 2000) (a district court may not grant a downward departure from an otherwise applicable guideline sentencing range on the ground that, had the defendant been prosecuted in another federal district, the defendant may have benefitted from the charging or plea-bargaining policies of the United States Attorney in that district).

United States v. Searcy, 132 F.3d 1421 (11th Cir. 1998) (affirming the district court's conclusion that it could not depart to reflect the theoretical sentence the defendant might have received had prosecution occurred in state court).

United States v. Weinberger, 91 F.3d 642 (4th Cir. 1996) (exposure to civil forfeiture is not a basis for a downward departure; forfeiture was considered by the Sentencing Commission and was intended to be in addition to, and not in lieu, of imprisonment).

Courts have generally held that when a government refuses to file a substantial assistance motion under §5K1.1, the defendant cannot recast his claim as a request for a departure under §5K2.0 because the Commission has already taken a defendant's substantial assistance into consideration.¹³⁴ In some circuits, however, assistance to local or state law enforcement agencies—if not taken into account under §5K1.1—may provide a basis for a downward departure pursuant to §5K2.0.¹³⁵

Courts have also held that the Commission took into account not only the immigration status of prospective offenders, “but also the collateral consequences that would flow from that status within the federal prison system” when it promulgated §2L1.2. Thus, those consequences—such as ineligibility for prison boot camp and certain rehabilitation programs—do not remove convicted alien cases from the heartland of cases.¹³⁶

c. Child Crimes and Sex Offenses

Downward departures under §5K2.0 are limited in cases of child crimes and sex offenses. Downward departures are only allowed in those cases where the court finds that there exists a mitigating circumstance of a kind, or to a degree, that:

¹³⁴ See, e.g., *United States v. Cruz-Guerrero*, 194 F.3d 1029, 1030-31 (9th Cir. 1999); *United States v. Alegria*, 192 F.3d 179 (1st Cir. 1999); *In re Sealed Case*, 181 F.3d 128 (D.C. Cir. 1999) (*en banc*); *United States v. Solis*, 169 F.3d 224, 227 (5th Cir. 1999); *United States v. Abuhoura*, 161 F.3d 206 (3d Cir. 1998).

¹³⁵ See, e.g., *United States v. Kaye*, 140 F.3d 86 (2d Cir. 1998).

¹³⁶ *United States v. Vasquez*, 279 F.3d 77 (1st Cir. 2002). *But see* *United States v. Lopez-Salas*, 266 F.3d 842 (8th Cir. 2001) (deportable-alien status and the collateral consequences flowing from that status may serve as a basis for departure in an exceptional case).

- (1) is listed in Part K of Chapter Five as a permissible ground of downward departure in these sentencing guidelines and policy statements;
- (2) has not adequately been taken into consideration by the Sentencing Commission in formulating the guidelines; and
- (3) should result in a sentence different from that described.

Thus, downward departures based on grounds not listed in Part K of Chapter Five are prohibited in child crimes and sex offenses. Upward departures are allowed in these cases even if the departure basis is not mentioned in the guidelines or is found somewhere other than Chapter Five, Part K.

d. Multiple grounds for departure

A court may depart from the applicable guideline range based on a combination of two or more offender characteristics or other circumstances, none of which otherwise independently suffice to provide a basis for departure, only if:

- (1) such offender characteristics or other circumstances, taken together, make the case *exceptional*; and
- (2) each such offender characteristic or other circumstance is—
 - (A) present to a *substantial degree*; and
 - (B) *identified in the guidelines as a permissible ground for departure*, even if such offender characteristic or other circumstance is not ordinarily relevant to a determination of whether a departure is warranted.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ See, e.g., *United States v. Bogdan*, 284 F.3d 324 (1st Cir. 2002) (reversing a downward departure where all the factors the district court relied on were either discouraged or already taken into account by the guidelines and where none of the factors were present, either individually or in combination, in some exceptional degree); *United States v. Iannone*, 184 F.3d 214 (3d Cir. 1999) (affirming an upward departure based on five factors that, alone, would not justify a departure, but in combination, the factors made the case very unusual and justified a 2-level departure); *United States v. Decora*, 177 F.3d 676 (8th Cir. 1999) (although court relied for downward departure on factors not ordinarily relevant—education, employment record, family and community responsibility—these factors were present in an unusual degree not adequately taken into consideration by the Sentencing Commission); *United States v. Moskal*, 211 F.3d 1070 (8th Cir. 2000) (affirming an upward departure where: embezzlement involved a large number of vulnerable victims; defendant manipulated these victims to gain their trust; defendant employed a number of methods to defraud his victims; defendant’s conduct damaged the law firm’s goodwill and standing in the legal community; and defendant’s conduct adversely impacted the legal profession and justice system).

e. Requirement of Specific Reasons for Departure

Section 5K2.0 requires a sentencing court that departs from the applicable guideline range to state, pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 3553(c), its specific reasons for departure in open court at the time of sentencing and, with limited exception in the case of statements received *in camera*, state those reasons with specificity in the written judgment and commitment order.¹³⁸

IV. VARIANCES

A. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

A “variance” outside the guideline range provided for in the *Guidelines Manual* should occur after consideration of all relevant departure provisions.¹³⁹ Courts have held that variances are not subject to the guideline analysis for departures.¹⁴⁰ In some situations, a prohibited ground for departure may be a valid basis for a variance.¹⁴¹ Variances are not subject to notice requirements applicable to departures (see discussion above). A court may grant a departure and a variance in the same sentence (*e.g.*, a departure for substantial assistance and a variance for the defendant’s history and characteristics).

The following are a selection of cases in which the sentencing court varied from the guidelines based on § 3553(a) factors.

¹³⁸ See *United States v. Nuzzo*, 385 F.3d 109 (2d Cir. 2004) (on remand, district court must adhere to the requirements of the PROTECT Act to state in open court, “with specificity in the written order and judgment,” reasons for imposing a sentence outside the guidelines).

¹³⁹ *Gall*, 552 U.S. at 49.

¹⁴⁰ See, *e.g.*, *United States v. Fumo*, 655 F.3d 288, 317 (3d Cir. 2011), as amended (Sept. 15, 2011).

¹⁴¹ See, *e.g.*, *United States v. Chase*, 560 F.3d 828 (8th Cir. 2009) (departure precedents do not bind district courts with respect to variance decisions, but may be considered “persuasive authority”).

B. SECTION 3553(a) FACTORS.

1. Section 3553(a)(1)

The nature and circumstances of the offense and the history and characteristics of the defendant

a. Defendant's criminal history

United States v. Thompson, 681 F. App'x 1, (1st Cir. Mar. 3, 2017) (affirming upward variance to 48 months from a guideline range of 30 to 37 months because defendant's "four convictions and sentences for 'drug involved' crimes over the course of nine years indicated that he was engaged in the drug trade essentially continuously, with no time off suggesting that he had reformed or was deterred by the law.").

United States v. Ruvalcava-Perez, 561 F.3d 883 (8th Cir. 2009) (affirming an upward variance of 48 months [to 210 months] in a drug and illegal reentry case in which the district court found that the defendant had a history of violence against women, had a long and extensive violent history, and exhibited a "total disregard for the law").

United States v. Hilgers, 560 F.3d 944 (9th Cir. 2009) (affirming an upward variance from a guideline range of 12 to 18 months to 60 months based on the defendant's extensive criminal history, his similar conduct in the past, and that he was essentially a "con man" who had cheated his own mother).

United States v. Williams, 526 F.3d 1312 (11th Cir. 2008) (holding that, although defendant's previous offenses were part of the guidelines calculation, those offenses fit squarely into the history and characteristics factor of § 3553(a)(1) and could properly be considered by the court).

b. Characteristics of the defendant

United States v. Santiago-Gonzalez, 825 F.3d 41 (1st Cir. 2016) (affirming upward variance of 30 months where defendant had "extensive criminal history" that was not counted in his criminal history score and did not qualify as a career offender due to a technicality).

United States v. McIntyre, 531 F.3d 481 (7th Cir. 2008) (post-*Booker*, district courts need not follow §4A1.3 when imposing an above-guideline sentence, but must provide a statement of reasons consistent with section 3553(a)).

United States v. Sprague, 370 F. App'x 638 (6th Cir. 2010) (affirming a sentence twice as long as the advisory guideline sentence, based in part on the defendant's likelihood of re-offending. The court noted that the defendant was a child sexual predator "who has been actively seeking additional victims" and who had a high risk of recidivism).

United States v. Autery, 555 F.3d 864 (9th Cir. 2009) (affirming downward variance from a guideline range of 41–51 months to 5 years’ probation in possession of child pornography case based in part on finding that the defendant did not fit the profile of a pedophile, had no history of substance abuse, no interpersonal instability, was motivated and intelligent, and had the continuing support of his family).

United States v. Howe, 543 F.3d 128 (3d Cir. 2008) (affirming downward variance based on defendant’s twenty years of military service, honorable discharge, and remorse).

United States v. Huckins, 529 F.3d 1312 (10th Cir. 2008) (affirming downward variance in possession of child pornography and criminal forfeiture case based on defendant’s lack of significant criminal history, depression at the time of the offense, short time period in which the offense took place, lack of repeat offending by the defendant after his arrest, significant self-improvement efforts during the year and a half in which he waited to be prosecuted, and that the defendant was 20 years old when he committed the crime).

United States v. Davis, 537 F.3d 611 (6th Cir. 2008) (sentencing court “may account for a defendant’s age at sentencing,” but remanding for resentencing in this case because the defendant’s age (70) compared to the age at which he committed the crime (56) did not warrant downward variance to a sentence of one day of imprisonment).

United States v. McBride, 511 F.3d 1293 (11th Cir. 2007) (affirming a downward variance from 151 to 188 months in prison to 84 months in prison in a child pornography case in which the district court found the defendant’s history of abuse and abandonment to be one of the worst ever seen by the court).

Some circuits have stated that the defendant’s deportability may be considered as a variance factor. *See, e.g., United States v. Thavaraja*, 740 F.3d 253 (2d Cir. 2014) (holding that “a district court may take into account the uncertainties presented by the prospect of removal proceedings and the impact deportation will have on the defendant and his family”); *United States v. Flores-Olague*, 717 F.3d 526 (7th Cir. 2013) (stating a “sentencing court is well within its prerogatives and responsibilities in discussing a defendant’s status as a deportable alien”); *United States v. Morales-Uribe*, 470 F.3d 1282 (8th Cir. 2006) (observing “the need to protect the public from a defendant may be reduced in a case where, upon immediate release from incarceration, the Government will deport the defendant”).

c. Defendant’s health problems

United States v. Almenas, 553 F.3d 27 (1st Cir. 2009) (affirming downward variance of 43 months below the bottom of the guideline range based on defendant’s combination of physical and mental disabilities).

United States v. Myers, 503 F.3d 676 (8th Cir. 2007) (“The district court did not abuse its discretion in finding that a shorter period of incarceration, with mental health treatment and supervised release, is the most effective sentence”).

d. Family circumstances

United States v. Martin, 520 F.3d 87 (1st Cir. 2008) (affirming a 91-month variance down from the guideline range based in part on “the support that the defendant stood to receive from his family [and] personal qualities indicating his potential for rehabilitation;” post-*Booker*, “policy statements normally are not decisive as to what may constitute a permissible ground for a variant sentence in a given case”).

United States v. Carter, 510 F.3d 593 (6th Cir. 2007) (district court did not abuse its discretion by deciding not to vary from the guideline range based on exceptional family circumstances: district court reasonably concluded that defendant’s absence from his family would be mitigated by his wife’s continued presence at home and the family’s continued receipt of substantial healthcare, housing, and sustenance benefits).

United States v. Muñoz-Nava, 524 F.3d 1137 (10th Cir. 2008) (*Gall* “indicates that factors disfavored by the Sentencing Commission may be relied on by the district court in fashioning an appropriate sentence,” and holding that the sentencing court’s finding that the defendant’s family circumstances were extraordinary—the defendant cared for his eight-year-old son as a single parent and had elderly parents with serious medical problems—was supported by the record).

United States v. Lehmann, 513 F.3d 805 (8th Cir. 2008) (affirming a downward variance to probation where the district court found that a prison sentence would negatively affect the defendant’s disabled young son).

e. The nature of the offense

United States v. Martinez-Armestica, 846 F.3d 436 (1st Cir. 2017) (affirming 25-month variance where defendant’s conduct “went beyond the ordinary conduct proscribed by the statute” to include “repeated, threatening use of firearms” and “[r]ather than simply brandishing a weapon, [defendant] pointed the gun directly at one of the carjacking victims, holding it against her head”).

United States v. Lente, 759 F.3d 1149 (10th Cir. 2014) (affirming a sentence 236.8% above the high end of the advisory guideline range based on several factors, including the district court’s conclusion that the advisory range 1) did not adequately account for the multiple deaths caused by the defendant’s conduct; 2) did not reflect the defendant’s extreme recklessness by driving with a blood/alcohol level almost three times the local

legal limit; 3) underrepresented the defendant’s criminal history; and 4) failed to address the defendant’s continued post-conviction substance abuse and criminal conduct).

United States v. Whitehead, 532 F.3d 991 (9th Cir. 2008) (affirming a downward variance to probation in a case involving the sale of counterfeit access cards in violation of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act based in part on the district court’s finding that the defendant’s crime “[di]d not pose the same danger to the community as many other crimes”).

United States v. Dehghani, 550 F.3d 716 (8th Cir. 2008) (affirming upward variance to 432 months, substantially higher than the advisory guideline range, because the seriousness of the defendant’s conduct-obsession with child pornography; exposing his children to such pornography; physical sexual contact with a minor; threatening the judge, jail personnel, and others; and attempting to manipulate and obstruct the criminal justice system-outweighed any mitigating factors).

United States v. Pauley, 511 F.3d 468 (4th Cir. 2007) (affirming a downward variance that was 36 months lower than the low-end of the guideline range based in part on findings that the defendant was less culpable than an individual who approaches a minor victim and asks her to take nude photographs of herself, the defendant was less culpable because the victim’s face did not appear in any of the photographs, there were few pornographic photographs taken, the Polaroid photos were not readily transmittable over the internet, and no other child pornography was found in the defendant’s house).

f. Cooperation with the government

United States v. Robinson, 741 F.3d 588 (5th Cir. 2014) (“[A] sentencing court has the power to consider a defendant’s cooperation under §3553(a), irrespective of whether the Government files a §5K1.1 motion”).¹⁴²

2. Section 3553(a)(2)

The need for the sentence imposed to reflect the seriousness of the offense, to promote respect for the law, and to provide just punishment for the offense; to afford adequate deterrence to criminal conduct; to protect the public from further crimes of the defendant; and to provide the defendant with needed educational or vocational training, medical care, or other correctional treatment in the most effective manner

¹⁴² See also *United States v. Landrón-Class*, 696 F.3d 62 (1st Cir. 2012); *United States v. Massey*, 663 F.3d 852 (6th Cir. 2011); *United States v. Leiskunas*, 656 F.3d 732 (7th Cir. 2011); *United States v. Doe*, 398 F.3d 1254 (10th Cir. 2005).

a. Need to protect the public from further crimes

United States v. Tristan-Madrigal, 601 F.3d 629 (6th Cir. 2010) (affirming an upward variance for deterrence to protect the public in view of defendant’s “persistent” illegal reentries and DUI convictions).

United States v. Seay, 553 F.3d 732 (4th Cir. 2009) (affirming upward variance from 46 to 57 months, the high end of a 5-level upward variance, 96 months, based in part on the need to protect the public from further crimes of the defendant, and referencing the district court’s finding that the defendant “had become increasingly dangerous over the years, progressing from possessing a knife to possessing a gun in connection with his stalking practices”).

United States v. Grossman, 513 F.3d 592 (6th Cir. 2008) (affirming a downward variance from 120 months in prison to 66 months with 10 years’ supervised release, and observing that the sentencing court “accounted for § 3553(a)’s concerns that the sentence protect society and deter future criminal conduct,” but that “it opted to pursue those goals, not through a longer term of imprisonment, but through extensive counseling and treatment and an extensive period of supervised release”).

United States v. Gillmore, 497 F.3d 853 (8th Cir. 2007) (affirming upward variance from a range of 151 to 188 months to 396 months based on defendant’s danger to herself and the public in light of her personal characteristics and brutal nature of her crime). *United States v. Clay*, 579 F.3d 919 (8th Cir. 2009) recognizes that *Gillmore* was partially abrogated by *Gall v. United States*,¹⁴³ in that sentencing courts need not justify sentences outside the guideline range through “extraordinary” circumstances: the district court need only “take into account the § 3553(a) factors and recognize that the guidelines are not mandatory.”

b. Need to provide just punishment for the offense

United States v. Anderson, 533 F.3d 623 (8th Cir. 2008) (affirming a downward variance based on “other ways in which the defendant had suffered atypical punishment such as the loss of his reputation and his company, the ongoing case against him from the Securities and Exchange Commission and the harm visited upon him as a result of the fact that his actions brought his wife and friend into the criminal justice system”).

c. Need to reflect the seriousness of the offense

United States v. Kane, 552 F.3d 748 (8th Cir. 2009) (reversing a downward variance to 120 months based in part on the seriousness of the defendant’s offense in a case in which the defendant repeatedly restrained and compelled her nine-year-old daughter to

¹⁴³ 552 U.S. 38 (2007).

submit to the sexual gratification of a pedophile in exchange for the defendant's receipt of \$20), *cert. granted, judgment vacated* by 131 S. Ct. 1597 (2011), *adhered to in part on reconsideration* by 639 F.3d 1121 (2011).

United States v. Cavera, 550 F.3d 180 (2d Cir. 2008) (en banc) (affirming an upward variance six months above the high-end of the guideline range based on finding that firearm smuggling is more serious and more harmful when done in New York City than in rural or suburban areas, and on the greater-than-average need in this case to achieve strong deterrence).

United States v. Ofray-Campos, 534 F.3d 1 (1st Cir. 2008) (reversing and remanding upward variance of twenty-four years longer than the high end of the recommended guideline range-to the statutory maximum of forty years-where court's stated grounds, that defendant possessed "powerful weapons" as a "triggerman" and was involved with violence in connection with the narcotics conspiracy, were not compelling enough to support the extraordinary variance).

3. Section 3553(a)(3)

The kinds of sentences available

Tapia v. United States, 131 S. Ct. 2382, 2391 (2011) ("Section 3582(a) precludes sentencing courts from imposing or lengthening a prison term to promote an offender's rehabilitation."). Sentencing courts may, however, discuss "opportunities for rehabilitation within prison or the benefits of specific treatment or training programs." *Id.* at 2391-92; *see also United States v. Gilliard*, 671 F.3d 255, 259 (2d Cir. 2012) ("[N]otwithstanding discussion of rehabilitation in the record, there was no error where the sentence length was based on permissible considerations, such as criminal history, deterrence, and public protection."); *c.f.*, *United States v. Garza*, 706 F.3d 655, 662 (5th Cir. 2013) (vacating substantially above-guideline revocation sentence where "rehabilitative needs were the dominant factor in the court's mind").

United States v. Ruff, 535 F.3d 999 (9th Cir. 2008) (affirming a variance to one day of imprisonment plus three years' supervised release with a condition of twelve months and one day served at a corrections center that would permit the defendant to participate in work release, receive counseling, and make visits to his young son).

4. Section 3553(a)(4), (5)

The guideline sentence and any pertinent policy statement issued by the Sentencing Commission

United States v. Hammons, 558 F.3d 1100 (9th Cir. 2009) (district court must consider, but is not bound by, the applicable guideline sentencing range).

United States v. Ruelas-Mendez, 556 F.3d 655 (8th Cir. 2009) (district court not “forbidden to consider the guidelines and the need to avoid unwarranted sentence disparities when exercising its discretion;” to the contrary, “the governing statute directs the sentencing court to consider these matters as two factors among several in the sentencing process”).

United States v. Almenas, 553 F.3d 27 (1st Cir. 2009) (appropriate for district court to consider severe guideline penalties for crack cocaine offenses against competing mitigation concerns when imposing 192-month sentence, which was 43-months below the bottom of the guideline range).

United States v. Williams, 524 F.3d 209 (2d Cir. 2008) (“The displacement of the Sentencing Guidelines at the threshold, because of a ‘personal policy’ to conform the sentence to one that would have been imposed in a proceeding in the City of Yonkers, cannot be reconciled with 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a), which provides that ‘[t]he court, in determining the particular sentence to be imposed, shall consider’ the Sentencing Guidelines.” Under the three-step procedure set forth in *Gall*, “‘district courts must begin their analysis with the guidelines and remain cognizant of them through the sentencing process.’”).

United States v. Scott, 529 F.3d 1290 (10th Cir. 2008) (affirming upward variance from a guideline range of 70 to 87 months to 120 months where the district court stated that “it would have imposed an even higher sentence absent the benchmark provided by the Guidelines, thereby satisfying its obligation to give weight to the Guidelines”).

5. Section 3553(a)(6)

The need to avoid unwarranted disparity among defendants with similar records who have been found guilty of similar conduct

Following *Booker*, most courts hold that this factor looks to “national disparities, not differences among co-conspirators.”¹⁴⁴ However, in the proper case, the sentencing court may look to codefendant disparity when fashioning a reasonable sentence.¹⁴⁵ The following cases address issues relating to unwarranted sentencing disparity. Disparity among codefendants, according to courts, can be reasonable for a number of reasons, such as “differences in criminal histories, the offenses of conviction, or one coconspirator’s decision to plead guilty and cooperate with the government.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ *United States v. Fry*, 792 F.3d 884, 892 (8th Cir. 2015) (collecting cases for same).

¹⁴⁵ *See id.* at 892–93; *United States v. Frias*, 521 F.3d 229 (2d Cir. 2008) (Second Circuit does not, “as a general matter, object to district courts’ consideration of similarities and differences among co-defendants when imposing a sentence”) (quoting *United States v. Wills*, 476 F.3d 103, 110 (2d Cir. 2007), *abrogated on other grounds*).

¹⁴⁶ *United States v. Conatser*, 514 F.3d 508, 522 (6th Cir. 2008).

Gall v. United States, 552 U.S. 38 (2007) (district court “considered the need to avoid unwarranted disparities, but also considered the need to avoid unwarranted similarities among other co-conspirators who were not similarly situated”).

United States v. Reyes-Santiago, 804 F.3d 453 (1st Cir. 2015) (remanded as unreasonable because “the rationale offered by the district court for the substantial disparity”—by a wide margin—between the defendant’s sentence and those of the higher ranking co-conspirators, including the conspiracy leader and the career offender, was not supported by the record).

United States v. Hayes, 762 F.3d 1300 (11th Cir. 2014) (vacating, as substantively unreasonable, a downward variance to three concurrent probationary terms where other participants were sentenced to terms of imprisonment).

United States v. Statham, 581 F.3d 548, 556 (7th Cir. 2009) (Following *Gall*, the Seventh Circuit is “open in all cases to an argument that a defendant’s sentence is unreasonable because of a disparity with the sentence of a co-defendant, but such an argument will have more force when a judge departs from a correctly calculated Guidelines range to impose the sentence.”)

United States v. Martin, 520 F.3d 87 (1st Cir. 2008) (“[D]istrict courts have discretion, in appropriate cases, to align codefendants’ sentences somewhat in order to reflect comparable degrees of culpability—at least in those cases where disparities are conspicuous and threaten to undermine confidence in the criminal justice system”).

United States v. Smart, 518 F.3d 800 (10th Cir. 2008) (after *Gall*, “it is clear that codefendant disparity is not a per se ‘improper’ factor”).

United States v. Phinazee, 515 F.3d 511 (6th Cir. 2008) (sentencing disparities justified by differences in criminal histories and departures for substantial assistance).

United States v. Zapata, 546 F.3d 1179 (10th Cir. 2008) (“[A] disparity among co-defendants is justified ‘when sentences are dissimilar because of a plea bargain.’”).

United States v. Bras, 483 F.3d 103 (D.C. Cir. 2007) (disparity between the defendant’s sentence and that of his codefendant were warranted because the defendant and his codefendants “did not hold comparable positions” in the conspiracy, and defendant did not provide substantial assistance in the investigation).

United States v. Parker, 462 F.3d 273, 278 (3d Cir. 2006) (“§ 3553(a)(6) by its terms plainly applies only where co-defendants are similarly situated.”).

United States v. Parker, 462 F.3d 273 (3d Cir. 2006) (“Although § 3553(a)(6) does not require district courts to consider sentencing disparity among co-defendants, it also does not prohibit them from doing so.”).

6. Section 3553(a)(7)

The need to provide restitution to any victims of the offense

United States v. Orlando, 553 F.3d 1235, 1240 (9th Cir. 2009) (approving district court’s finding that “a fine was particularly appropriate for a tax evasion crime where restitution is not ordered”).

7. Totality of the § 3553(a) Factors

Certain statutes require that a sentence for an offense run consecutive to the predicate offense. For example, 18 U.S.C. § 924(c) requires a consecutive term of imprisonment for using a firearm in connection with a violent or drug trafficking crime. In *Dean v. United States*, 137 S. Ct. 1170 (2017), the Supreme Court held that, in determining the appropriate sentence on a predicate count, sentencing courts may also account for the mandatory consecutive term in determining a predicate sentence. In essence, a sentence that might be unreasonable if the conviction were solely for the predicate offense may be justified if the court holds that the combination of the predicate and mandatory terms suffices under section 3553(a).

United States v. Arrelucea-Zamudio, 581 F.3d 142, 149 (3d Cir. 2009) (“[A] sentencing judge has the discretion to consider a variance under the totality of the § 3553(a) factors (rather than one factor in isolation) on the basis of a defendant’s fast-track argument, and [] such a variance would be reasonable in an appropriate case.”).

United States v. Nesbeth, 188 F. Supp. 3d 179 (E.D.N.Y. 2016) (sentencing defendant to a 1-year probationary sentence, holding that consideration of collateral consequences of conviction and sentence is appropriate section 3553(a) factor, and discussing divergent circuit case law on that issue).

C. VARIANCES BASED ON POLICY DISAGREEMENT WITH THE GUIDELINES

In *Kimbrough v. United States*, 552 U.S. 85 (2007), the Supreme Court held that it is not “an abuse of discretion for a district court to conclude when sentencing a particular defendant that the crack/powder disparity yields a sentence ‘greater than necessary’ to achieve § 3553(a)’s purposes, even in a mine-run case.” The Court found that when it created the drug guideline, the Commission varied from its usual practice of employing “an empirical approach based on data about past sentencing practices,” instead adopting the

“weight-driven scheme” used in the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, and maintaining the 100-to-1 quantity ratio throughout the drug table. The Court observed that the Commission had subsequently criticized the ratio, quoted from the various Commission reports to Congress on the issue, and discussed Congress’s previous responses to Commission actions and recommendations.

The Court then discussed the Commission’s ongoing role in determining sentencing ranges, noting that “while the Guidelines are no longer binding, closer review may be in order when the sentencing judge varies from the Guidelines based solely on the judge’s view that the Guidelines range ‘fails properly to reflect § 3553(a) considerations’ even in a mine-run case.” The Court held that the crack cocaine guidelines, however, “do not exemplify the Commission’s exercise of its characteristic institutional role” and noted the Commission’s opinion that the crack cocaine guidelines produce “disproportionately harsh sanctions.” In light of this, “it would not be an abuse of discretion for a district court to conclude when sentencing a particular defendant that the crack/powder disparity yields a sentence ‘greater than necessary’ to achieve § 3553(a)’s purposes, even in a mine-run case.”

The Court discussed this issue again in *Spears v. United States*, 555 U.S. 261 (2009) (per curiam), reaffirming its holding in *Kimbrough*, and stating that “with respect to the crack cocaine Guidelines, a categorical disagreement with and variance from the Guidelines is not suspect.” According to the Court, the point of *Kimbrough* was “a recognition of district courts’ authority to vary from the crack cocaine guidelines based on *policy* disagreement with them, and not simply based on an individualized determination that they yield an excessive sentence in a particular case.”

The Court recognized that the Eighth Circuit’s holding in *Spears II* was based, in part, on language from *Kimbrough*, that stated:

The [district] court did not purport to establish a ratio of its own. Rather, it appropriately framed its final determination in line with § 3553(a)’s overarching instruction to “impose a sentence sufficient, but not greater than necessary” to accomplish the sentencing goals advanced in § 3553(a)(2).

The Court held that “[t]o the extent the above quoted language has obscured *Kimbrough*’s holding, we now clarify that district courts are entitled to reject and vary categorically from the crack-cocaine Guidelines based on policy disagreements with those Guidelines.” According to the Court, “[a]s a logical matter, ... rejection of the 100:1 ratio necessarily implies adoption of [a replacement] ratio.”

Courts of appeals have expanded the rationale of *Kimbrough* to include variances based on policy disagreements with the child pornography, career offender, firearms, offender characteristics and immigration guidelines. While courts may choose to vary based on a policy disagreement, they do not have to and can choose to agree with a

guideline on policy grounds.¹⁴⁷ The following cases involve variances from the child pornography guidelines:

United States v. Collins, 828 F.3d 386 (6th Cir. 2016) (affirming downward variance to 60 months [from guideline range of 262 to 327 months] where district court polled jury as to what they believed to be appropriate sentence; responses varied between zero and 60 months, and district court emphasized that poll was but one factor in granting variance).

United States v. Brown, 808 F.3d 865, 874–75 (D.C. Cir. 2016) (district court committed plain error in varying upward to 144 months [23 months above high end of guideline range and 47 months above sentence recommended by government] without explaining why guideline sentence did not fully account for the defendant’s conduct).

United States v. Dorvee, 616 F.3d 174, 188 (2d Cir. 2010) (a district court may vary on the basis of disagreement with the child pornography guideline because the Commission did not use an empirical approach based on past sentencing practices to develop the guideline).

United States v. Grober, 624 F.3d 592, 600 (3d Cir. 2010) (a district court may vary on the basis of disagreement with the child pornography guidelines because “the Commission did not do what ‘an exercise of its characteristic institutional role’ required - develop §2G2.2 based on research and study rather than reacting to changes adopted or directed by Congress”); *but see United States v. Bistline*, 665 F.3d 758 (6th Cir. 2012) (although district courts may disagree with §2G2.2 on policy grounds, “the fact of Congress’ role in amending a guideline is not itself a valid reason to disagree with the guideline”).

United States v. Vanvliet, 542 F.3d 259, 271 (1st Cir. 2008) (remanding for resentencing because the district court erroneously believed that it could not vary based on its policy disagreements with the child pornography guideline).

The following cases involve variances from the career offender guideline:

United States v. Clay, 787 F.3d 328, 332 (5th Cir. 2015) (“a district court’s sentencing discretion [to grant variance] is no more burdened when a defendant is characterized as a career offender under § 4B1.1 than it would be in other sentencing decisions”).

United States v. Corner, 598 F.3d 411, 415 (7th Cir. 2010) (en banc) (“Because § 4B1.1 [the career offender guideline] is just a Guideline, judges are as free to disagree with it as they are with § 2D1.1(c) (which sets the crack/powder ratio). No judge is *required* to sentence at variance with a Guideline, but every judge is at liberty to do so.”); *but see United*

¹⁴⁷ See, e.g., *United States v. Fry*, --- F.3d ---, 2017 WL 1192910 (D.C. Cir. 2017) (collecting cases for same); *United States v. Huffstatler*, 571 F.3d 620, 624 (7th Cir. 2009) (per curiam) (a district court “perhaps” has the freedom to sentence below the child pornography guidelines, but it is “certainly not required to do so”).

States v. Jimenez, 512 F.3d 1, 8–9 (1st Cir. 2007) (“As we have explained, the crack/powder dichotomy is irrelevant to the career offender sentence actually imposed in this case. Consequently, the decision in *Kimbrough*—though doubtless important for some cases—is of only academic interest here.”).

United States v. Boardman, 528 F.3d 86, 87 (1st Cir. 2008) (remanding for reconsideration post-*Kimbrough* because the district court mistakenly believed it did not have discretion to vary downward based on policy disagreements with what constitutes a crime of violence under the career offender guideline).

United States v. Sanchez, 517 F.3d 651, 666 (2d Cir. 2008) (a district court may vary on the basis of the career offender guideline because the statute creating the career offender designation is a direction to the Sentencing Commission, not the courts).

The following cases involve the guidelines’ policy statements about offender characteristics:

Pepper v. United States, 131 S. Ct. 1229 (2011) (remanding for resentencing because the court of appeals erred in “categorically precluding” the district court from exercising its discretion based upon policy disagreements, thereby failing to grant a downward variance based upon extensive evidence of the defendant’s postsentencing rehabilitation).

United States v. Simmons, 568 F.3d 564 (5th Cir. 2009) (remanding for reconsideration because the district court erroneously believed that it could not disagree with the guideline policy statement regarding age because “*Kimbrough* does not limit the relevance of a district court’s policy disagreement with the Guidelines to the situations such as the cocaine disparity and whatever might be considered similar”).

Few circuit courts have addressed variances from the firearms guidelines.¹⁴⁸

The circuits are divided on the issue of whether a district court may vary on the basis of fast-track sentencing disparities. See discussion of §5K3.1 at §III.C.a., *supra*.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ See *United States v. Cavera*, 550 F.3d 180, 197 (2d Cir. 2008) (en banc) (affirming an upward variance in a firearms trafficking case based on the district court’s view that the “Guidelines failed to take into account the need to punish more severely those who illegally transport guns into areas like New York City”); see also *United States v. Pedroza-Orengo*, 817 F.3d 829, 834 (1st Cir. 2016) (affirming an upward variance where “the district court linked Puerto Rico’s problem with gun violence to ‘individuals like [Pedroza] with guns of this nature’”). *But see* *United States v. Ortiz-Rodriguez*, 789 F.3d 15, 20 (1st Cir. 2015) (remanding case where district court varied upward to 48 months (from guideline range of 10 to 16 months) because “[g]iven the nature of this drug offense, and the fact that the District Court did not explain how the enhancing conduct involving firearms falls outside the heartland of the guideline enhancement that had already been imposed, the District Court’s explanation of the defendant’s conduct was not sufficiently compelling to explain this upward variance”).

¹⁴⁹ Compare *United States v. Jimenez-Perez*, 659 F.3d 704, 711 (8th Cir. 2011) (stating disparity resulting from absence of fast-track program not excluded as sentencing factor); *United States v. Lopez-Macias*, 661

Even where variances on the basis of policy disagreements are authorized, a sentence based on a policy disagreement “is permissible only if a District Court provides sufficiently compelling reasons to justify it.”¹⁵⁰ Although district courts have the authority to vary based on policy disagreements, they are not required to do so.¹⁵¹ Finally,

F.3d 485, 491 (10th Cir. 2011) (concluding that *Kimbrough*'s holding extends to a policy disagreement with the fast-track guideline and that district courts can consider fast-track disparity “as a sentence-evaluating datum within the overall ambit of § 3553(a)”; *United States v. Camacho-Arellano*, 614 F.3d 244, 245 (6th Cir. 2010) (district courts may vary on the basis of fast-track disparity because *Kimbrough* “permits district court judges to impose a variance based on disagreement with the policy underlying a guideline”); *United States v. Reyes-Hernandez*, 624 F.3d 405, 422 (7th Cir. 2010) (“We hold that §5K3.1 should be treated as any other guideline, thereby affording district court judges the ability to consider the absence of a fast-track program in crafting an individual sentence.”); *United States v. Arrelucea-Zamudio*, 581 F.3d 142, 149 (3d Cir. 2009) (“[A] sentencing judge has the discretion to consider a variance under the totality of the § 3553(a) factors (rather than one factor in isolation) on the basis of a defendant's fast-track argument, and . . . such a variance would be reasonable in an appropriate case.”); *United States v. Rodriguez*, 527 F.3d 221, 227 (1st Cir. 2008) (district courts may vary based on fast-track disparity because “[l]ike the crack/powder ratio, the fast-track departure scheme does not exemplify the [Sentencing] Commission's exercise of its characteristic institutional role”); *with United States v. Gonzalez-Zotelo*, 556 F.3d 736, 740 (9th Cir. 2009) (“We now join the Fifth and Eleventh Circuits in holding that *Kimbrough* did not undercut our precedent holding that fast-track disparities are not ‘unwarranted’ so as to permit their consideration under § 3553(a)(6).”); *United States v. Gomez-Herrera*, 523 F.3d 554, 562 (5th Cir. 2008) (“[B]ecause any disparity that results from fast-track programs is intended by Congress, it is not ‘unwarranted’ within the meaning of § 3553(a)(6).”); *United States v. Vega-Castillo*, 540 F.3d 1235, 1238 (11th Cir. 2008) (per curiam) (“[A]ny disparity created by section 5K3.1, the fast-track guideline, does not fall within the scope of section 3553(a)(6).”) (quotations and alterations omitted); *United States v. Perez-Pena*, 453 F.3d 236, 244 (4th Cir. 2006) (holding that district court erred in departing downward to account for lower sentences received by defendants who qualified for fast-track program in other districts) *see also United States v. Mejia*, 461 F.3d 158, 164 (2d Cir. 2006) (district court’s refusal to vary based on fast-track disparity is not necessarily unreasonable, without deciding whether district court has the authority to so vary if it deems such a reduced sentence warranted); *United States v. Ramirez*, 652 F.3d 751, 753 (7th Cir. 2011), *opinion amended and superseded on denial of reh’g by*, 675 F.3d 634 (7th Cir. 2011) (“[A] district court need not address a fast-track argument unless the defendant has shown that he is similarly situated to persons who actually would receive a benefit in a fast-track district.”)..

¹⁵⁰ *United States v. Lychock*, 578 F.3d 214, 219 (3d Cir. 2009) (internal quotation omitted) (reversing a downward variance to probation in a child pornography case because “the District Court failed to consider all of the relevant factors and appears to have made a determination based solely on a policy disagreement with the Guidelines.... making the sentence procedurally unreasonable”); *see also United States v. Engle*, 592 F.3d 495, 502 (4th Cir. 2010) (reversing a downward variance to probation in a “mine run” tax evasion case because the record was insufficient to review the reasonableness of the sentence which was based, in large part, on district court’s disagreement with the Commission’s policy statements regarding the seriousness of tax evasion offenses).

¹⁵¹ *See United States v. Lopez-Reyes*, 589 F.3d 667, 671 (3d Cir. 2009) (“As this Court has made clear, however, *Kimbrough* does not require a district court to reject a particular Guidelines range where that court does not, in fact, have disagreement with the Guideline at issue”); *United States v. Huffstatler*, 571 F.3d 620, 624 (7th Cir. 2009) (per curiam) (“[W]hile district courts perhaps have the freedom to sentence below the child-pornography guidelines based on disagreement with the guidelines, as with the crack guidelines, they are certainly not required to do so.”).

“*Kimbrough* does not force district or appellate courts into a piece-by-piece analysis of the empirical grounding behind each part of the sentencing guidelines.”¹⁵²

¹⁵² *United States v. Duarte*, 569 F.3d 528, 530 (5th Cir. 2009); *see also United States v. Aguilar-Huerta*, 576 F.3d 365, 367–68 (7th Cir. 2009) (while a judge is required to consider a nonfrivolous argument that a guideline produces an unsound sentence in a particular case, the judge is not required to consider “an argument that a guideline is unworthy of application in any case because it was promulgated without adequate deliberation.... [and] should not have to delve into the history of a guideline so that he can satisfy himself that the process that produced it was adequate to produce a good guideline”).