

# CHAPTER ONE

## Commission Overview

### Introduction

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The United States Sentencing Commission is an independent agency in the judicial branch of government. Its principal purposes are (1) to establish sentencing policies and practices for the federal courts, including guidelines prescribing the appropriate form and severity of punishment for offenders convicted of federal crimes; (2) to advise and assist Congress and the executive branch in the development of effective and efficient crime policy; and (3) to collect, analyze, research, and distribute a broad array of information on federal crime and sentencing issues, serving as an information resource for Congress, the executive branch, the courts, criminal justice practitioners, the academic community, and the public.

The Sentencing Commission was created by the Sentencing Reform Act (SRA) provisions of the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984, and its authority and duties are specified in chapter 58 of title 28, United States Code. Procedures for implementing guideline sentencing are prescribed in chapter 227 of title 18.

The sentencing guidelines established by the Commission are designed to take into account the classic purposes of sentencing: just punishment, rehabilitation, deterrence, and incapacitation. Moreover, the guidelines provide certainty through the truth in sentencing provisions of the SRA and through the mandatory nature of the guidelines. Fairness, which is the establishment of sanctions proportionate to the severity of the crime and the avoidance of unwarranted disparity, is established by the guidelines' setting similar penalties for similarly situated offenders. At the same time, the guidelines permit judicial flexibility to account for relevant aggravating and mitigating factors. The guidelines are constructed to reflect, to the extent practicable, advancement in the knowledge of human behavior as it relates to the criminal justice process.

### A Brief History of Federal Sentencing Reform

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Disparity in sentencing has long been a concern for Congress, the criminal justice community, and the public. After decades of research and debate, Congress created the Commission as a permanent agency charged with formulating national sentencing standards to guide federal trial judges in their sentencing decisions.

Organized in October 1985, the Commission submitted to Congress on April 13, 1987, its original sentencing guidelines and policy statements. Prior to this submission, the Commission held 13 public hearings, published two drafts for public comment, and received more than 1,000 letters and position papers from hundreds of individuals and organizations. The guidelines became effective November 1, 1987, following the requisite period of congressional review, and apply to all offenses committed on or after that date.

Shortly after implementation of the guidelines, defendants throughout the country challenged the constitutionality of the Sentencing Reform Act and the Commission on the basis of improper legislative delegation and violation of the separation of powers doctrine. The U.S.

Supreme Court rejected these challenges January 18, 1989, in *Mistretta v. United States*, and upheld the constitutionality of the Commission as an independent judicial branch agency. This decision cleared the way for nationwide implementation of the guidelines. In keeping with the evolutionary notion of sentencing guidelines, the Commission has carefully monitored the guidelines and has amended them where necessary. Since January 1989, federal judges have sentenced approximately 400,000 defendants under the guidelines.

## **Agency Overview**

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### ***Commissioners***

The Sentencing Commission's seven voting members are appointed to staggered six-year terms by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate. At least three of the commissioners must be federal judges, and no more than four can be members of the same political party. By statute, the chair and vice chairs hold full-time positions, while other commissioners have part-time status. The Attorney General is an *ex-officio* member of the Commission, as is the chair of the U.S. Parole Commission.

### ***Organization***

In the fall of 1997, the Commission initiated a project to assess its organizational goals, structures, and processes in order to best serve the judiciary, other court professionals, and the public generally. The Commission enlisted the consulting firm Price Waterhouse to contribute its organizational expertise to this process.

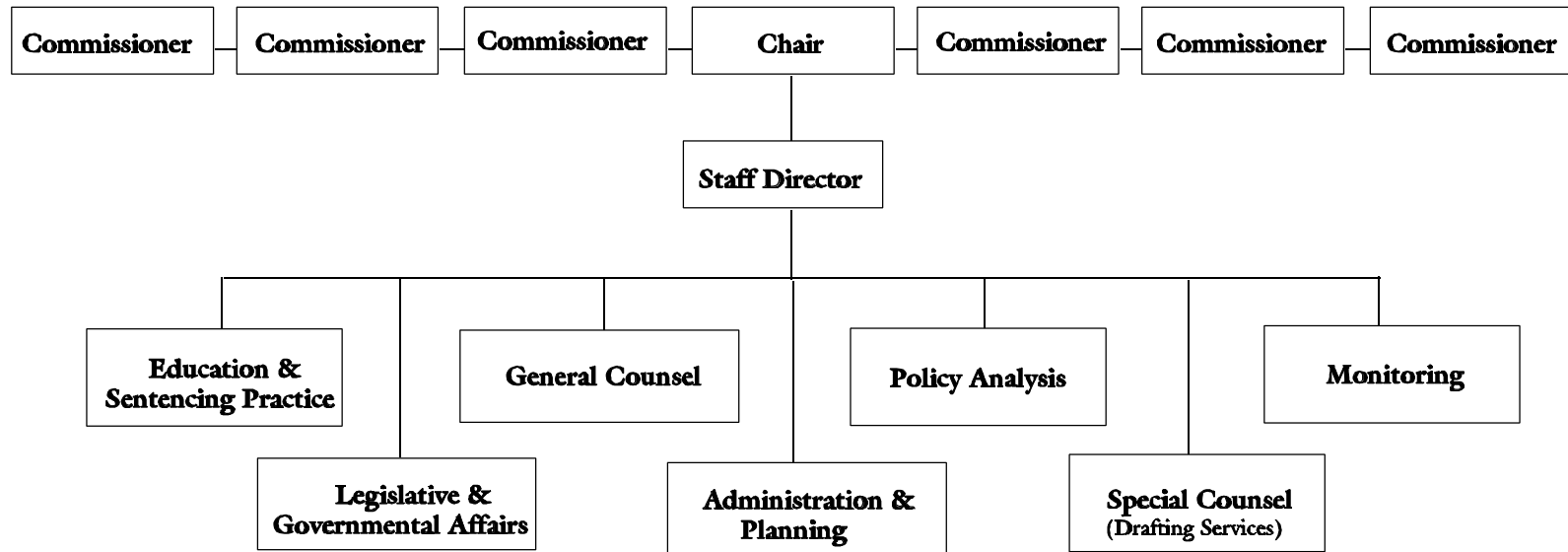
By December, a Commission interdisciplinary staff change team, working collaboratively with the consultants, had completed a review of current Commission operations. In January 1998, Price Waterhouse provided a comprehensive briefing to the chair, which included specific recommendations and improvement projects.

The Commission's next step was to establish four staff teams to examine these recommendations in the context of Commission priorities. In 1998, these teams designed plans to implement concrete improvements in the following areas: (1) policy development; (2) data, statistics, and research; (3) human resource development and financial management; and (4) the orientation of new commissioners. The teams concluded their work in late 1998, and the Commission plans a gradual implementation of specified improvements (*e.g.*, a new docketing system to enter and track requests for changes in sentencing policy).

The organizational structure (as depicted in Figure A and described below) was one result of this assessment and came about in an effort to improve the organization's efficiency and productivity.

Figure A

**ORGANIZATION OF THE  
UNITED STATES SENTENCING COMMISSION**



The Commission staff of approximately 100 employees was reorganized in late 1998 into seven offices with the director of each office reporting to the staff director who in turn reports to the chair and other commissioners. The four substantive policy offices are — General Counsel, Education and Sentencing Practice, Policy Analysis, and Monitoring. The three support offices are — Legislative and Governmental Affairs, Special Counsel, and Administration and Planning. The **staff director** supervises and coordinates all agency functions.

The **Office of General Counsel** provides support to the Commission on a variety of legal issues, including the formulation and application of guidelines and guideline amendments, legislative proposals, and statutory interpretations. Legal staff members monitor district and circuit court application and interpretation of the guidelines and advise commissioners about statutes and legislation affecting the Commission's work. The legal staff also provides training support in conjunction with the Office of Education and Sentencing Practice.

The **Office of Education and Sentencing Practice** performs the lead role in teaching guideline application to judges, probation officers, prosecuting and defense attorneys, and other criminal justice professionals. The staff develops training materials, participates in the sentencing guideline segments of training programs sponsored by other agencies, and helps inform the Commission of current guideline application practices. The office also operates a "HelpLine" to respond to guideline application questions from members of the court family.

The **Office of Policy Analysis**, working with the Commission's comprehensive sentencing database and other data sources, provides short- and long-term guideline and sentencing-related research and analyses. The office studies a variety of research topics including sentencing disparity, projections of the effect of proposed guideline amendments on the federal prison population, sentencing practices related to organizational (corporate) defendants, and appeals. In addition, the office provides data and analyses on specific criminal justice issues at the request of Congress, the courts, and others.

The **Office of Monitoring** maintains a comprehensive computerized data collection system to report on federal sentencing practices and to track application of the guidelines for individual cases. The staff receives and enters case data and produces periodic reports about guideline application, providing significant information for Commission review as it monitors use of the guidelines or considers amending them. In addition to information related to individual offenders, the Commission collects data on appeals, indictments, and organizational guideline sentences. The office maintains a master file of guideline sentencing data, available to the public through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan.

The **Office of Legislative and Governmental Affairs** serves as the Commission's liaison with Congress on sentencing and appropriations matters, monitors Congress's criminal law agenda, analyzes legislative proposals, and takes the lead role in responding to congressional inquiries.

The **Office of Special Counsel** performs all drafting services for the Commission, prepares the *Guidelines Manual* for printing, formally manages and maintains all papers and exhibits received by the Commission that constitute requests for Commission action on sentencing policy development, and regularly tracks the Commission's policy initiatives.

The **Office of Administration and Planning** provides general administrative support to commissioners and staff regarding budget and finance, contracting, personnel management, library

reference services, facilities, and a variety of other office activities. This office also contains the Information Systems Unit, which maintains and services the Commission's computer hardware and software, and the Office of Publishing and Public Affairs, which coordinates all public information and publication matters.

### ***Staffing***

During fiscal year 1998, the Commission used staff resources totaling 100 workyears. Approximately 32 percent of staff resources was devoted to the Commission's Office of Monitoring, 14 percent to the Office of Policy Analysis, nine percent to the Office of Education and Sentencing Practice, 16 percent to the Office of General Counsel, three percent to the Office of Legislative and Governmental Affairs, six percent to the commissioners' offices, and 20 percent to the Office of the Staff Director.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Budget and Expenditures***

For fiscal year 1998, Public Law 105-119 provided an appropriation of \$9,240,000 for the Commission's salaries and expenses. For fiscal year 1999, Public Law 105-277 granted the Commission an appropriation of \$9,487,000 (see Table 1).

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<sup>1</sup>This allocation of resources reflects the organizational structure prior to the agency's reorganization.

**Table 1**  
**BUDGET AUTHORITY AND OBLIGATIONS**  
**(dollar amounts in thousands)**

<b>Appropriation Amount</b>	<b><u>FY 1998</u></b> <b><u>\$9,240</u></b>	<b><u>FY 1999</u></b> <b><u>\$9,487</u></b>
Personnel Compensation	\$5,542	\$6,194
Personnel Benefits	1,211	1,747
Travel and Transportation	354	370
Communications, Utilities and Other Rent	162	175
Printing and Reproduction	162	150
Other Services	1,087	1,015
Supplies and Equipment	<u>675</u>	<u>471</u>
<b>Total Obligations*</b>	\$9,193	\$10,122

\*Total obligation amounts include funds carried forward from previous "no-year" appropriations.