



Public Law and Legal Theory Research Paper Series
Research Paper No. 15-41

Conviction Review Units: A National Perspective

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CONVICTION REVIEW UNITS: A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE



WORKING PAPER #2015-001

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December 23, 2015

Acknowledgements

The author greatly appreciates the assistance of Stephanos Bibas, Dr. Steven Raper, Kristyn Rose, Barry Scheck, Allison Shames, and Eric Stahl, the Innocence Project and the Innocence Network in defining the topics for this report, creating and conducting the surveys, coding the results, and commenting on prior drafts of this Working Paper. Of course, we are also indebted to each District Attorney and Assistant District Attorney or other criminal justice professional who contributed to this research.

Table of Contents

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONVICTION REVIEW UNIT (CRU) POLICIES AND PRACTICES	5
CRU CHECKLIST	9
Introduction	12
Creation of the Conviction Review Unit	15
Models of Conviction Review	19
CRU Independence	22
<i>CRU Chain of Command</i>	22
<i>Separating the CRU from the Appellate or Habeas Unit</i>	23
<i>Selecting CRU Leadership</i>	26
<i>Participation of Personnel from Underlying Case in Case Review</i>	30
<i>Staffing and Resources Necessary for the CRU</i>	31
CRU Flexibility	35
<i>The Conviction Review Case Funnel</i>	35
<i>Standards for Acceptance of Petitions for Review</i>	37
<i>Legal Standards for Case Review</i>	40
<i>Procedural vs. Substantive Case Reviews</i>	41
<i>Cases Resolved by Guilty Plea</i>	43
<i>Cases Alleging Both Factual Innocence and Due Process Violations.</i>	44
<i>Ineffective Assistance of Counsel Claims for Factual Innocence.</i>	46
<i>“Conviction Integrity” and Cases That Lack Conclusive Evidence of Guilt.</i>	46
<i>Collaborative Case Review</i>	48
<i>CRU Requirements for Waiver of Petitioner’s Rights Under Appeal</i>	49
<i>Petitioner/CRU Collaboration Agreements.</i>	52
<i>Training for CRU Personnel</i>	53
<i>Revisiting “Completed” CRU Reviews</i>	55
<i>CRUs and Forensic Science</i>	55
<i>Allegations of Prosecutorial or Law Enforcement Misconduct</i>	56
CRU Transparency	57
<i>Publishing CRU Policies and Procedures</i>	58
<i>Transparency to Victims of Crime</i>	61
<i>Transparency of Case Review Process, Decision and Rationale</i>	62

<i>Collection and Publication of Metrics and Accomplishments</i>	63
<i>North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission: A Case Study of Independence and Transparency</i>	64
Measuring the Impact of CRUs	66
Role of CRU in Prevention of Future Errors	68
Conclusion	70
APPENDIX A. METHODOLOGY	73
APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CONVICTION REVIEW UNIT INTERVIEWS	74
APPENDIX C. NATIONAL COMMISSION ON FORENSIC SCIENCE DIRECTIVE RECOMMENDATION ON ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS	80
APPENDIX D. ADDITIONAL WRITINGS ON CONVICTION REVIEW UNITS	94

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONVICTION REVIEW UNIT (CRU) POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Definition. A Conviction Review Unit (CRU) conducts extrajudicial, fact-based review of secured convictions to investigate plausible allegations of actual innocence. Typically the CRU is contained within a local prosecutor's office.

Best Practices. A CRU dedicated to collaborative, good-faith case reviews designed to ensure the factual integrity of a conviction should be **independent, flexible, and transparent** in its work. More specifically, a high-quality CRU should:

INDEPENDENCE

1. Report directly to the District Attorney (DA) or prosecuting attorney, or head of the prosecutor's office, and should not be contained within the Office's appellate or post-conviction/habeas unit.
2. Be led by an experienced criminal attorney with both substantial prosecutorial and firsthand criminal defense litigation experience, who is widely respected by attorneys both within the DA's Office and throughout the jurisdiction's criminal justice community.
3. Guard against cognitive or confirmatory biases by including the perspective of at least one external criminal defense attorney in the CRU's policy definition, case screening, case investigation, and recommendations for action.
4. Be staffed by appropriate personnel, including investigators and staff, that are fully dedicated to the CRU, or for whom CRU cases have clear priority above other office matters, with sufficient resources (personnel and budget) to enable timely and thorough investigations and recommendations.
5. Train CRU personnel on specific topics including:
 - a. Errors in criminal justice known to be factors in inaccurate convictions;
 - b. "Human factors" and emerging issues in forensic science that may impact past convictions using older scientific methods; and
 - c. Specific investigative techniques useful for "cold cases;"
6. Not allow personnel involved in the underlying case investigation or adjudication to participate in the CRU review, except to provide historical information;
7. Establish a clear policy on when and how to refer to appropriate authorities any credible allegations of official (e.g., prosecutorial or law enforcement) misconduct identified in the course of a case review, including the identification of specific individuals in the DA's Office, the relevant police department(s) and the State Bar Association who should receive the allegations

FLEXIBILITY

8. Accept any and all cases for review that have a plausible or colorable claim of factual innocence for the conviction obtained;
9. Provide procedural support for fact-based case reviews, tolling any ongoing appellate litigation during active CRU review and minimizing barriers to the Petitioner's collaborative participation in case review process;
10. Review all petitions on their factual merits, and not on non-substantive grounds:
 - a. Permit review of petitions in which the Petitioner plead guilty to the charges;
 - b. Permit review of petitions where the sentence has been completed;
 - c. Evaluate claims based on a current understanding of the totality of the circumstances now known, rather than what could have been presented or known by defense counsel during the pendency of the original case;
 - d. Review cases where due process claims (ineffective assistance of counsel, newly discovered evidence, official misconduct, etc.) support underlying allegations of innocence, and cases where testimonial evidence is the sole assertion of innocence.
11. Allow for resubmission of a petition whenever additional credible evidence is brought to light;

12. Agree to vacate each conviction where there is clear and convincing evidence of actual innocence, or where the CRU no longer has reasonable certainty in the accuracy of the conviction after the case review;
13. Refile charges only in cases where there is substantial evidence of guilt notwithstanding evidence gathered during the investigation of the petition;
14. Consider time served when deciding whether to refile charges, even in instances where evidence of guilt remains;
15. Communicate to Petitioner or Petitioner’s counsel in an ongoing and timely fashion regarding case review, including sharing any evidence gathered, and explaining the actions taken and conclusions drawn from the review.
16. Encourage an open exchange of information and ideas regarding the case review between Petitioner and CRU, including open file discovery and contemporaneous disclosure of information discovered in the CRU investigation (other than CRU work product information and information that could endanger third parties);
17. Outline any information withheld from the petitioner during the review and establish a process for third-party review of such withheld information;
18. Make all physical evidence available for testing by either party, including re-testing of a previously tested object if the proposed method of testing can provide additional information;
19. Pay for testing of evidence that may provide conclusive evidence of innocence, and permit other testing at Petitioner’s cost;
20. Publish clear CRU policies and procedures designed to ensure flexibility of operations and encourage the submission of petitions for review. Suggested areas for published policies and procedures include:
 - i. How to submit a claim
 - ii. Types of cases accepted for review
 - iii. Standard of review for initial case acceptance (screening), case review, and vacating a conviction
 - iv. Role of Petitioner/Petitioner’s counsel in case review
 - v. Role of original prosecutor/ investigator in case review
 - vi. Requirements on waiver of attorney/client privilege, or use of a collaboration agreement
 - vii. Sharing of information learned/evidence discovered during case review
 - viii. Conduct and payment for requested forensic testing
 - ix. Procedures for handling allegations of prosecutorial or law enforcement misconduct
 - x. Disclosure of final decision after case review and supporting rationale
 - xi. Ability of Petitioner to revisit process after final decision

19. Engage a victim’s advocate to liaise with victims or their kin during the CRU investigation phase, once the CRU determines that there is a reasonable possibility that the underlying conviction was inaccurate;
20. Track and report on CRU activity at least annually, including but not limited to: number of petitions received, number reviewed, number accepted for additional review, reasons for rejecting reviews, number acted upon, types of issues in cases, final conclusions, etc.

PREVENTION

21. Conduct a root cause analysis or “Just Culture Event Review,” separate and apart from the CRU case review, on each case where a recommendation is made to alter a conviction, to understand and address the circumstances and environments that allowed an error to occur in the administration of justice;
22. Identify improved policies and procedures for each stakeholder that might prevent the recurrence of the error that permitted the flawed conviction to occur;
23. Construct a process to implement, publicize and evaluate those modifications throughout the jurisdiction.

CRU CHECKLIST

As Conviction Review Units have emerged across the United States, community and other observers have sought to evaluate their impact and to identify those CRUs that are sincere about investigating and resolving credible allegations of factual innocence among closed convictions. A skepticism prevails that some CRUs are units conducting “Conviction Review In Name Only,” or “CRINOs,” and this skepticism is fueled by CRUs that lack the independence, flexibility, and transparency that is described above.

There is no single data point that can prove whether a particular unit is a sincere CRU or a callow CRINO – including the number of exonerated individuals whose convictions were vacated by the Unit. Observers should not point to any individual “best practice” recommended in this paper as definitive proof that any particular CRU is or is not engaged in the good faith review of cases of error that is at the core of the CRU’s potential to change criminal justice for the better. **In fact, none of the CRUs we interviewed answered all of these questions as we suggest below, and in the opinion of the authors, many (in fact, most) of them are sincere CRUs.** By asking the following questions as a group, however, we believe that an overall profile of sincere CRUs will emerge that can distinguish them from CRINOs, or that will prompt a conversation in offices that have not yet embraced the precepts of other established CRUs.

	Sincere CRU	CRINO
Does the CRU report to the DA/Head of Office?	Yes	No
Does the CRU exist within the appellate/habeas/post-conviction unit of the Office?	No	Yes
How many attorneys are dedicated to the CRU full-time?	More	Fewer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the leader of the CRU a senior attorney widely respected in the Office? 	Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the leader of the CRU have defense experience? 	Yes	No
Does the CRU include external participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In policy creation? In case selection? In case investigation/review? In recommendations for action? 	Yes	No
Does the CRU have its own budget?	Yes	No
Is the CRU sufficiently funded to thoroughly review and investigate all credible petitions within a reasonable period of time?	Faster	Slower
Does the Office provide training to office personnel conducting CRU case reviews?	Yes	No
Does the CRU provide training to office personnel concerning learnings from case reviews?	Yes	No
Does the CRU have written policies and procedures describing its work? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are the CRU’s policies and procedures posted on its web site? Are the CRU’s policies and procedures available upon request? 	Yes	No
Does the CRU permit individuals in the underlying petitions to participate in case reviews?	No	Yes

Does the CRU have a policy on when and how to report exculpatory information gathered during a case review?	Yes	No
Does the CRU provide any new evidence gathered during a case review to Petitioner in a timely fashion?	Yes	No
Does the CRU have a policy on when and how to report credible allegations of official misconduct, either related to the petition or during the case review, from law enforcement, the prosecutors' office, or other sources?	Yes	No
Does the CRU reject petitions on the basis of procedural grounds: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guilty pleas • Exhausted appeals • Sentence status • Due process claims 	No	Yes
Does the CRU make physical evidence available to Petitioner or Petitioner's counsel for testing?	Yes	No
Does the CRU voluntarily toll appellate proceedings while conducting a case review?	Yes	No
Does the CRU permit resubmission of a petition if credible factual information supporting innocence is found <i>after</i> a prior CRU review?	Yes	No
Does the CRU communicate with the Petitioner or Petitioner's counsel throughout the assessment and investigation stages of case review?	Yes	No
Does the CRU allow Petitioner or Petitioner's counsel to participate in case investigation?	Yes	No
When making recommendations about a specific petition, does the CRU evaluate the totality of the circumstances as now understood, rather than assessing the reasonableness of the Office's actions at the time of the underlying case?	Yes	No
Does the CRU communicate the rationale for its decisions to Petitioner or Petitioner's counsel before that decision is final? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the rationale provided in writing? 	Yes	No
Does the CRU provide annual reporting on its activities and impact?	Yes	No

Conviction Review Units In The United States, December 2015

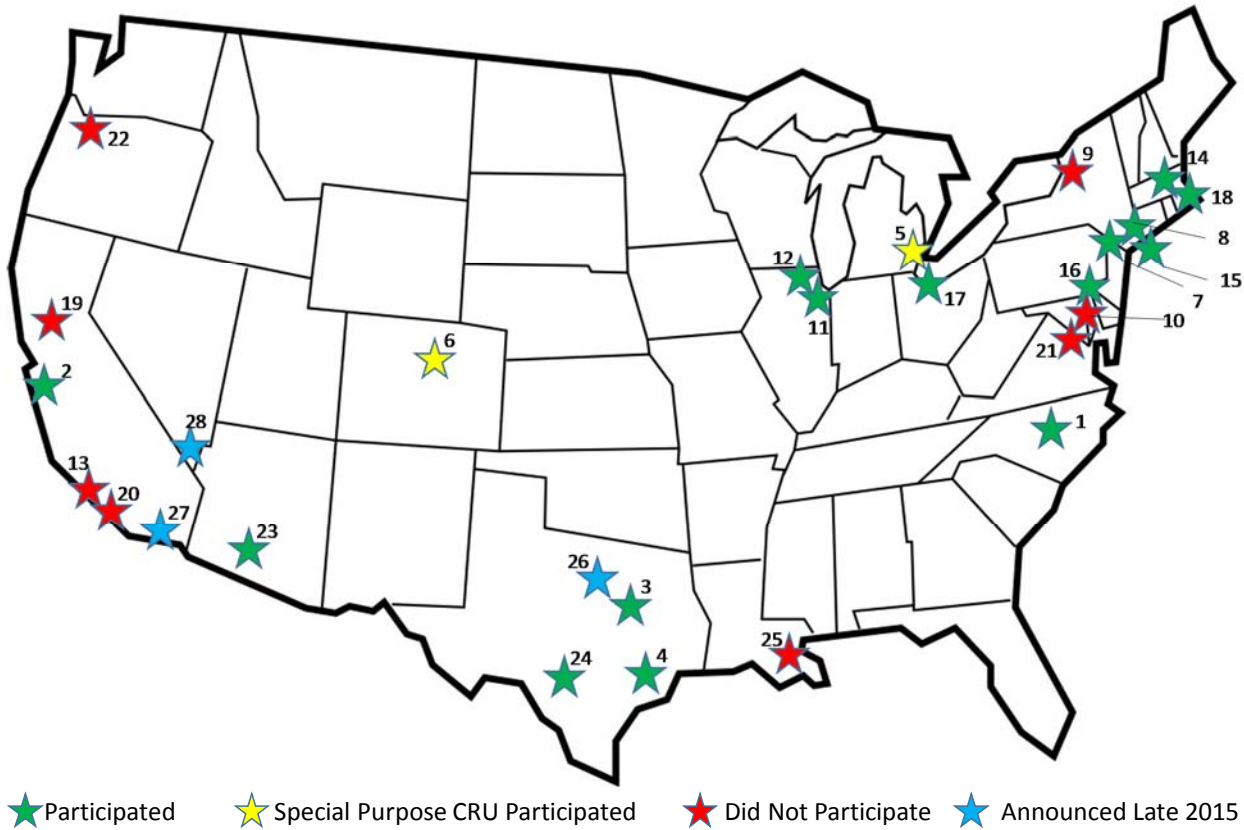


Figure xx. Map of Existing Conviction Review Units.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. North Carolina Inn. Inq. Comm. 2. Santa Clara County, CA 3. Dallas County, TX 4. Harris County, TX 5. Wayne County, MI 6. Colorado JRP 7. New York County, NY 8. Kings County, NY 9. Oneida County, NY 10. Baltimore County, MD 11. Cook County, IL 12. Lake County, IL 13. Ventura County, CA 14. Sussex County, MA | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 15. Nassau County, NY 16. Philadelphia County, PA 17. Cuyahoga County, OH 18. Middlesex County, MA 19. Yolo County, CA 20. Los Angeles County, CA 21. Washington, DC 22. Multnomah County, OR 23. Pima County, AZ 24. Bexar County, TX 25. Orleans Parish, LA (<i>pending</i>) 26. Tarrant County, TX (<i>pending</i>) 27. San Diego County, CA (<i>announced 12/15</i>) 28. Clark County, NV (<i>announced 12/15</i>) |
|--|---|

Offices in **BLUE** were initiated after January 2014.

Introduction

It should be the bedrock that . . . you're trying to do the correct thing, the just thing and not necessarily doing the thing that just favors your side. This is very contraindicated to people who get in to trial work on both sides, because people who get into trial work are highly competitive people. . . . We're not just doing this just to correct past mistakes. We're doing this to try to get something out that can be a road map [explaining] here is where you did something wrong and perhaps correct it so that there are not wrongful convictions in the future.

--Mark Hale, Co-Lead, Conviction Review Unit, Kings County NY (Brooklyn)

Over the past two decades, Americans have grown more and more aware of the number of individuals incarcerated in our nation's prisons and jails who have been convicted of crimes they did not commit. As of November 1, 2015, there were 1,700 such individuals across the United States who have been exonerated of their crimes.¹ While it is typically defense attorneys or prisoners themselves who first bring these exoneration cases to light, the fate of individuals claiming innocence from behind bars rests (for the most part) with state and local prosecutors employed in the very offices that secured the individual's conviction in the first place.

Many prosecutors, mindful of the fact that "[t]he prosecutor has more control over life, liberty, and reputation than any other person in America,"² and their ethical duty "to seek justice, not merely to convict,"³ have responded to the rise of exonerations by acknowledging the potential for mistakes in the criminal justice system, and working to establish an objective process to (a) review cases, even cases that have been adjudicated, where mistakes may have been made regarding guilt or innocence, and (b) take any and all appropriate actions to ensure that justice is done.

While all prosecutors' offices have a procedure for handling appeals, including habeas corpus or post-conviction appeals, the most prevalent institutional response by prosecutors to address post-conviction fact-based claims of actual innocence is the Conviction Review Unit (CRU), sometimes called the

¹ National Registry of Exonerations, <http://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Pages/about.aspx>.

² Jackson, Robert H., "The Federal Prosecutor," Address at the Second Annual Conference of United States Attorneys, Washington, DC, April 1, 1940, p. 1.

³ ABA Model Rule 3.8(a)

Conviction Integrity Unit.⁴ Since the first CRU was created in the mid-2000s,⁵ roughly 25 such units have been announced across the country. [See Figure xx \[MAP\].](#)

The creation of a CRU is a publicly stated ongoing commitment by the DA⁶ to ensure the accuracy, and therefore the legitimacy – that is, the integrity – of all criminal convictions secured by the Office. As Los Angeles (CA) County District Attorney Jackie Lacey said when announcing her Conviction Review Unit in June, 2015:

Just as we are expected to keep pace with advances in forensic science, technology and investigative methods, prosecutorial agencies also must update and formalize the way in which post-conviction claims of innocence are handled. We must respond whenever we receive new substantial and credible information that the evidence used to imprison someone for a serious or violent felony is not trustworthy. We must review that information and determine if we remain confident in the conviction. As prosecutors, we have a legal obligation and an ethical mandate to ensure that the right person is convicted for the crime charged.⁷

The philosophy of a CRU is straightforward, but the implementation of such a unit in a highly charged political environment and an adversarial appellate environment can be complex and challenging. Furthermore, while CRUs have been launched in jurisdictions across the country, each jurisdiction has independently defined the structure, scope, and operations of its CRU, often in reaction to a limited number of specific cases with unique circumstances. Very few CRUs have written protocols, policies, or procedures, and many of those have not been made public. No one has conducted a national survey of CRUs practices or their impact to assist prosecutors tasked with leading CRUs on how best to fulfill their role and ensure the accuracy of guilt and innocence. The result has been a wide range of views on how CRUs can and should operate, and varying amounts of enthusiasm or skepticism for the role of the CRU.

There are too few CRUs, and they have been operating for too short a time to provide statistically significant or conclusive assessments of the utility of different policies or procedures or to measure their impact on criminal justice outcomes or perceptions. Still, there is value in an empirical attempt to draw observational theories or lessons learned by the first wave of CRUs across the country. Commentary on

⁴ Although the first units called themselves “Conviction Integrity Units,” more units over time have come to favor the label “Conviction Review Units.” The word “Review” is often preferred as a more accurate representation of what the Unit does. In addition, some prosecutors feel that reviewing cases for “integrity” might cause an inference that “integrity” does not exist in all convictions. Because we use the term “conviction integrity” in this paper to refer to an evaluation of a conviction in a case where neither guilt nor innocence have been proven to a certainty, we use the term “Conviction Review Unit” throughout.

⁵ Two offices, Santa Clara (CA) and Dallas (TX), vie for the title of “First CRU.” Santa Clara set up a nascent CRU in 2004, but it took a one-term hiatus under a new DA before being reinstated in 2008. Craig Watkins became the DA in Dallas County (TX) in 2007 and started the longest continuously operating CRU at that time; it is the publicity this office garnered that gets most of the credit for leading the wave of CRUs that has followed.

⁶ We use the term “District Attorney” and associated abbreviations, etc. herein as a global term for non-federal prosecutors, including jurisdictions where the local prosecutors are referred to as “State’s Attorney.”

⁷ “Why A Conviction Review Unit is Needed: Jackie Lacey,” Los Angeles Daily News, June 24, 2015, accessed at <http://www.dailynews.com/opinion/20150625/why-a-conviction-review-unit-is-needed-jackie-lacey>, last visited September 9, 2015.

CRUs has been limited, and for the most part anecdotal, consisting mainly of media accounts of the inception of individual CRUs. The concept of conviction integrity has been discussed with a focus on prosecutorial “best practices” that could prevent errors,⁸ while discussions of CRUs have focused on either their roles in the exoneration of innocent individuals or theoretical suggestions for their application.⁹ Given the rapid increase in the number of CRUs nationwide (twelve new CRUs have been announced since the start of 2014) and the lack of standardization or evaluation of policies, procedures, and impact of CRUs, a more detailed evaluation of the actual policies and practices of operating CRUs may be helpful to a variety of audiences.

This paper seeks to help:

- (a) Prosecutors in offices with established CRUs, to understand how their peers have approached common challenges that arise in the fact-based, extrajudicial review of convictions to ensure conviction accuracy and integrity;
- (b) Prosecutors in offices without CRUs, to accelerate the creation of units with maximum positive impact; and
- (c) Communities that have or want CRUs, to evaluate the units and ensure that CRUs are living up to their aspirations for improvement of the criminal justice system over time.

CRUs to date have focused on identifying and correcting past errors in convictions. Some are beginning to perceive the additional potential of the CRU to serve as a self-policing mechanism of quality improvement, learning from errors to propose procedural or environmental reforms to prevent future errors. But the potential value of a CRU extends even beyond these important goals.

CRUs capable of collaborative, non-litigious case reviews of actual innocence even after a conviction has been secured stand as a triumph of truth and justice over procedural legal formality, and of collaboration over adversarialism, competitiveness, or bias. Thus, a sincere and functional Conviction Review Unit may restore faith in our criminal justice system by practicing the highest ideals of truth and justice that are often preached, and often doubted.

⁸ Barkow et al., Center of the Administration of Criminal Law, New York University School of Law, “Establishing Conviction Integrity Programs in Prosecutors’ Offices”

⁹ Gross, Samuel, et al., “The National Registry of Exonerations: Exonerations in 2014,” Published January 27, 2015, available at <http://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Pages/about.aspx>; Scheck, Barry, “Professional and Conviction Integrity Programs: Why We Need Them, Why They Will Work, and Models for Creating Them,” *Cardozo L. Rev.* 31:6 (2010), 2216-56.

Creation of the Conviction Review Unit

The very creation of a Conviction Review Unit should be seen as a promising development in the administration of justice, as it highlights a prosecutorial role in ensuring the legitimacy of criminal convictions that continues unabated after a conviction is secured. Such an ongoing obligation might seem to some to be contrary to the mission or motives of a District Attorney, since the Unit will review, and potentially reverse, convictions already secured by the DA's Office.

The prosecutors who took part in our research believe that investigating cases where errors may have occurred is not only desirable, but essential. Our requirement that the criminal justice system function flawlessly does not ensure its perfection; errors in criminal justice, as in any human system, persist despite the best efforts of our police, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, and juries. Each allegation of error undermines the legitimacy of the prosecutorial role, and an office that refuses to address such allegations openly and honestly adds self-inflicted damage to its reputation. If such errors cannot be eliminated by the system, its actors must work to minimize their occurrence and severity. This can be done most effectively by identifying, evaluating and learning from every error in a system in a culture of relentless and objective self-improvement.¹⁰

Besides these lofty ideals, there is a more pragmatic reason that has led prosecutors to create CRUs: votes. Most District Attorneys are elected officials, politicians as well as prosecutors, and many jurisdictions that have created CRUs have received positive coverage in the media for placing accuracy in justice on a higher pedestal than conviction or case closure rates.¹¹ As in other industries, errors or

¹⁰ See Generally, *An Organisation With a Memory: Report of an Expert Group on Learning from Adverse Events in the NHS, Chaired by the Chief Medical Officer* (The Stationery Office 2000), freely available [here](#) (a major study undertaken by the National Health Service in the United Kingdom, exploring the causes of failure or adverse events, drawing on lessons from other industries, proposing a shift in organizational culture from a culture of blame to open reporting and balanced analysis, and arguing for a systems-centered approach to failure analysis rather than a person-centered approach of "blaming, naming and shaming"); M. V. Williams, *Improving Patient Safety in Radiotherapy by Learning from Near Misses, Incidents and Errors*, 80 BRIT. J. RADIOLOG. 297 (2007), freely available [here](#) (arguing for the implementation of widespread open reporting of near misses, incidents, and errors, with web archiving of the information on publicly available databases in order to insure widespread learning); Qing Yan, Michelle C. Bligh & Jeffrey C. Kohles, *Absence Makes the Errors Go Longer: How Leaders Inhibit Learning from Errors*, 222 ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR PSYCHOLOGIE 233 (2014), freely available [here](#) (original research study exploring the effects of five different leadership styles, both positive and negative, on learning from errors); Michael Frese & Nina Keith, *Action Errors, Error Management, and Learning in Organizations*, 66 ANN. REV. PSYCHOL. 661 (2015), freely available [here](#) (review of research on error prevention and error management, explaining the difference between the two approaches, and discussing the empirical evidence for the positive effects of error management, emphasizing the importance for successful learning outcomes of a mindset of acceptance of human error); Suzanne M. Wright, *Patient Safety in Anesthesia: Learning from the Culture of High-Reliability Organizations*, 27 CRIT. CARE NURS. CLIN. N. AM. 1 (2015), freely available [here](#) ("In this article the most current understanding of human factors, complex systems, and safety principles borrowed from high-reliability organizations (HRO) is provided as a foundation to examine the dynamic and vulnerable nature of anesthesia practice. HROs—industries that deliver reliable performances in the face of complex working environments—can serve as models of safety for our health care system until plausible explanations for patient harm are better understood.")

¹¹ See, e.g., Emily, J., "Dallas County conviction integrity unit turns focus to non-DNA cases," Dallas Morning News, March 24, 2010, accessible online at <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/community-news/dallas/headlines/20100522-Dallas-County-conviction-integrity-unit-turns-6750.ece>; Barber, E., "Dallas targets wrongful convictions, and revolution starts to spread," Christian Science Monitor, May 25, 2014, accessible online at <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2014/0525/Dallas-targets-wrongful-convictions-and-revolution->

misconduct provide powerful incentives for procedural change. Wrongful convictions, and the calls for reform they create, are often used by challengers to a sitting District Attorney, and high-profile cases of error are held up as proof of a DA's lack of competence (if not lack of morals). The creation of a CRU, then, can help a sitting DA respond to allegations of error or incompetence, or a new DA follow through on a campaign promise to improve the Office, each in furtherance of community relations:

It was one of the things I had campaigned on, and this issue was a hot topic during our campaign because [cases of wrongful conviction] were getting a lot of media attention. . . It was a big issue in terms of wrongful convictions and what's the next [chief prosecutor] going to do to address it.

Such factors led to the creation of the first CRUs, in Santa Clara County (CA) and Dallas County (TX). In Santa Clara, DA George Kennedy was confronted by a small number of exonerations in sexual assault cases. Working with Assistant DAs David Angel and Karen Sununu, Kennedy envisioned a unit within the DA's Office that would identify and implement "best practices" to improve the quality of the Office's prosecutions, and ensure the accuracy and legitimacy of its convictions.

Not long after, in 2006, Craig Watkins became the first African-American District Attorney of Dallas County, supported by a voter base separate from, and disenchanted with, the existing Dallas political establishment. Watkins campaigned on a platform of reform, bolstered by the fact that Dallas had had more post-conviction DNA exonerations (12) in the prior five years than any county in the nation. When another DNA-based exoneration was announced shortly after his inauguration, Watkins met the man at the courthouse and offered a public apology to the man. Watkins had no role in the exoneration itself, and has since described his act simply as common courtesy.¹² The media, however, viewed it as something more, and the story quickly found its way into the national press.¹³

Not long after, Watkins was informed of a substantial number of untested rape kits. Again, taking what he has described as a common sense approach to the problem, he ordered the testing of all untested kits.¹⁴ An increase in cases that needed review resulted, and the combination of increased cases and public support both within the electoral base and on a national level led Watkins to formally create a Conviction Review Unit in 2007 as a resource to address these and other such cases that might arise.¹⁵ Watkins hired Mike Ware, a law professor at Texas Wesleyan University School of Law and a board member of the Innocence Project of Texas, to oversee the unit and engaged law students to conduct the

starts-to-spread; Meminger, D., "Some DA's Make Effort to Help People Wrongfully Convicted of Crimes," Time Warner NY1 Cable News, July 13, 2015, available online at <http://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/criminal-justice/2015/07/13/some-das-make-effort-to-help-people-wrongfully-convicted-of-crimes.html>; Gerber, M., "D.A. creates unit to review claims of innocence," LA Times, June 29, 2015, available online at <http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-0630-conviction-integrity-20150630-story.html>.

¹² 2015 Quattrone Center Spring Symposium, "A Systems Approach to Conviction Integrity," University of Pennsylvania Law School, April 4, 2014, Presentation of Craig Watkins.

¹³ See, e.g., "New Prosecutor Revisits Justice in Dallas," Sylvia Moreno, Washington Post, March 5, 2007.

¹⁴ Watkins, see footnote 12 above.

¹⁵ Moore, Terri, "Prosecutors Reinvestigate Questionable Evidence: Dallas Establishes a `Conviction Integrity Unit,'" *Criminal Justice*, Volume 26, Number 3, Fall 2011

case screenings to determine eligibility.¹⁶ Importantly, Ware had substantial experience as a defense attorney, and was also respected by the attorneys at the DA’s Office for being fair and trustworthy.¹⁷

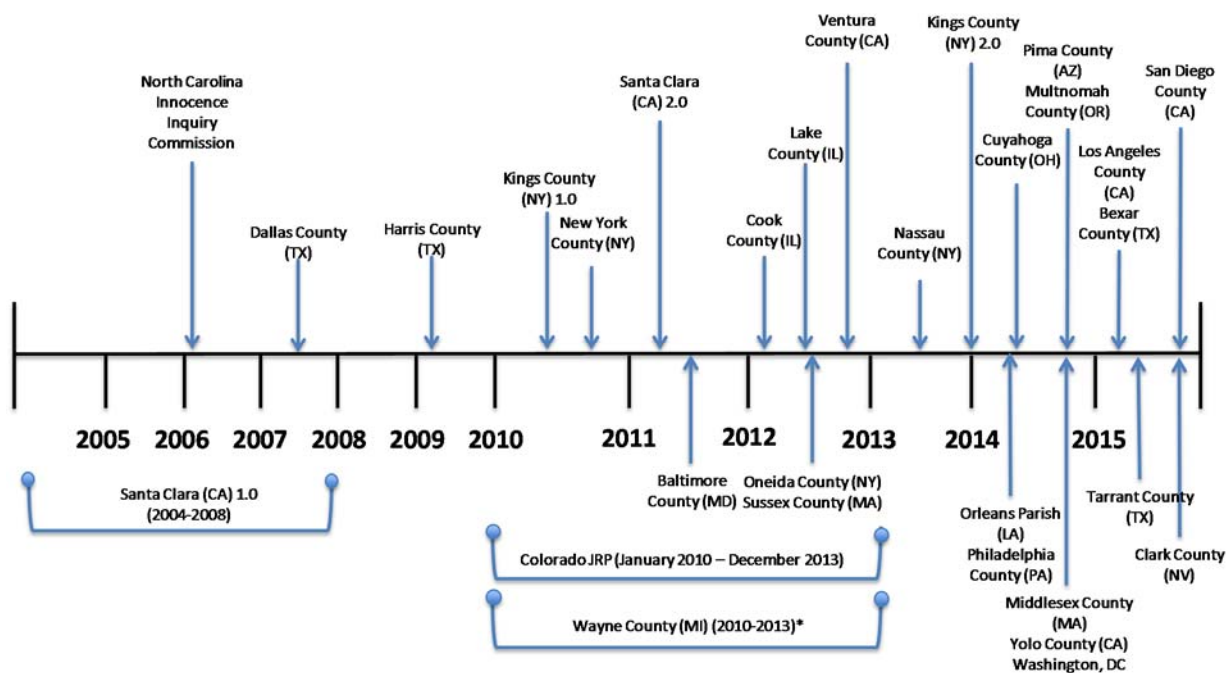


Figure XX. Creation of Conviction Review Units Over Time.

The factors that led to the creation of CRUs in Dallas and Santa Clara are not unique to these jurisdictions, and as public awareness of errors in the administration of justice has grown, DAs in other jurisdictions have adopted the CRU model in their jurisdictions, at an accelerating pace (see Figure XX):

I studied the different models throughout the country. I know there's the Dallas, Texas model which is the Conviction Review Unit. Then some other communities . . . have adapted those types of models.

Often the impetus for starting a CRU has been one or more specific cases in the jurisdiction, covered in the media and raising concern about the local administration of justice:¹⁸

¹⁶ “New Prosecutor Revisits Justice in Dallas,” Sylvia Moreno, Washington Post, March 5, 2007.

¹⁷ Scheck, Barry, Professional and Conviction Integrity Programs: Why We Need Them, Why They Will Work, and Models For Creating Them. Cardozo L. Rev. 31:6, 2010, pp. 2215 – 2256, at 2251.

¹⁸ See, e.g., DC Prosecutors Create Unit to Find Wrongful Convictions,” Washington Post, September 11, 2014, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/crime/dc-prosecutors-create-unit-to-find-wrongful-convictions/2014/09/11/91a3722c-39da-11e4-bdfb-de4104544a37_story.html. The Jesse Friedman case in the Second Circuit, and the exoneration of Daryl Hunt in North Carolina, provided motivation for the creation of the Nassau County Conviction Review Project and the North Carolina Innocence Commission, respectively; in addition, the Wayne County (MI) ballistics review was created to review a group of cases with questionable forensic conclusions.

We had had an exoneration in this county. . . . I would say it was part of the genesis of the idea of a conviction integrity program. I would say it inspired the idea that we wanted . . . procedures to come up with a way of dealing with it that was a little bit more formalized.

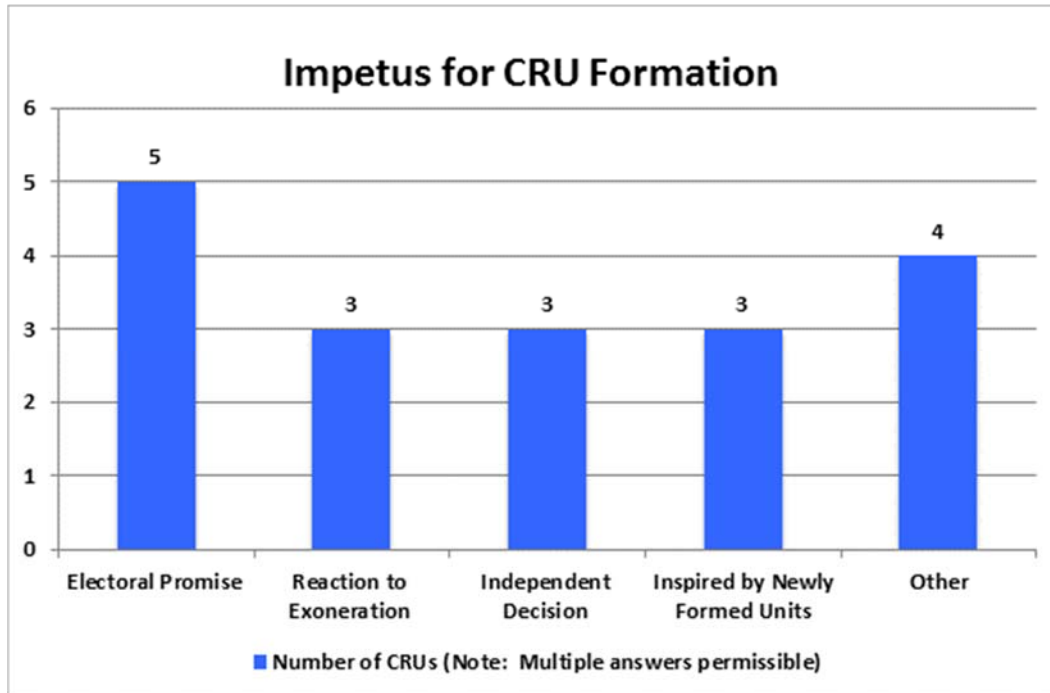


Figure xx. Impetus for Conviction Review Unit Formation.

Many DAs, in offices with and without established CRUs, have noted that reviews of cases where actual innocence has been alleged have always been a part of a prosecutor’s job. Still, DAs have seen actual and promotional value in the creation of a formal unit within their office publicly tasked with conducting such case reviews:

We got a new district attorney who came in . . . and started the unit. It was very much done on the heels of Dallas. Dallas County's Conviction Review Unit was getting quite a lot of attention, they were doing a lot of good work out there and there was a decision to do a separate and distinct unit in our office. Claims of innocence and post-conviction DNA testing cases had been previously handled by the post-conviction writs division. So it's not that we weren't doing the work, but we did not have a standalone section that had 100% of its time and resources dedicated to that type of work.

There are a number of these units bringing up across the country . . . They're . . . being publicized. So there is a ground swell of support for these kinds of things. But if you dig a little deeper I think it's a direct response and a result of the Innocence Project. . . . [Our DA] was interested in it. He's been asked to do it by people in and out of the office. . . . We needed to be able to have a unit in our office that would deal with them directly.

Models of Conviction Review

There is a great deal of variety among CRUs in their structure, funding, participants, procedures, cases eligible for review, etc. One area of near-unanimous agreement, however, is the CRU's overarching purpose: to correct injustices done against individuals in the community by the criminal justice system itself, providing an environment to resolve cases that were wrongly decided on the basis of fact. In short, **CRUs exist to conduct fact-based reviews of plausible claims of actual innocence**¹⁹ without regard to the type of error or mindset of the participants involved.

This focus on fact-based case review pushes the CRU away from standard habeas or post-conviction litigation and into an extrajudicial role, distanced from post-conviction, or habeas corpus proceedings, which expressly avoid assessing facts and focus solely on legal and due process concerns. Without reducing the need for those structures in our criminal justice system, CRUs seek to avoid decisions based on “technicalities” and focus instead on the injustice that matters most to the typical American – did the convicted individual actually commit the crime?

CRUs are important beyond their role in historical cases whose convictions are being questioned. A CRU's fact-based review process can and should be identical in philosophy to the process of all investigations handled by the DA's Office. The sincere CRU stands as a specific acknowledgement of the perpetual and ongoing role of a prosecutor as a minister of justice, with a continuing obligation to ensure the accuracy and legitimacy of convictions that subsumes the procedural elements of appellate review.

There are several models of conviction review that were discussed and considered in our survey:

“Standard” CRUs. While no two CRUs are identical, 23 of the 26 units we reviewed share a similar high-level structure: one or more experienced Assistant District Attorneys²⁰ are given special responsibility within a prosecutor's office to review cases where (a) a conviction has been achieved (b) after direct appeals have been rejected and (c) in which actual innocence is claimed by the convicted individual. As we will see, Units vary in size and structure, policies and procedures, the amount of separation from the post-conviction appellate or habeas processes, and the extent to which external personnel are engaged as advisors or reviewers of case-specific information, but this basic structure describes what we will call the “standard” Conviction Review Unit.

“Special Project” CRUs. In several instances, DA's Offices have established case review teams as a targeted response to a specific and identifiable group of cases potentially subject to the same or similar repeatable errors, typically in forensic science. These teams have been enabled by specific (federal) funding grants permitting the deployment of resources to conduct new DNA or ballistic investigations. Such “Special Project CRUs” include the CRU in Wayne County (MI), the Colorado Justice Review Project,

¹⁹ This paper describes the initial communication to a CRU regarding a case for potential review as a “petition,” and describes the individual claiming innocence as the “Petitioner.” In reality, a “petition” may be a letter from the convicted individual him/herself, or a telephone call to the CRU from the individual, his/her family member, etc. Our use of “petition” or “Petitioner” should therefore be distinguished from any formal, court-required petition for appellate review.

²⁰ To date, the United States Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia is the only federal prosecutor's office to publicly announce the formation of a CRU. This may be in part because of the unique caseload of the USAO in Washington, DC, which handles all manner of violent crimes and “blue collar” misdemeanors and felonies that are more typically handled by state or local officials in non-federal jurisdictions.

and the St. Louis DNA Review Project. In Wayne County, for example, laboratory mistakes in handling gun cases were brought to the attention of the DA by a defense attorney and a crime lab analyst. A resulting audit suggested a potential error rate of 10% in firearms cases, causing the closure of Detroit crime lab in 2008, and the DA's initiation of a process to review firearms cases that might have been affected by the errors. A similar story supported the creation of the state-wide Colorado Justice Review Project (JRP), which began as a joint project of the Colorado Attorney General and the Denver District Attorney to review convictions of certain violent crimes in which post-conviction DNA testing might be used to exonerate an innocent inmate. The JRP received federal funds in 2010 for this purpose, and those funds were renewed and extended to other types of crimes. The initiative is still open, though its activities have been significantly curtailed since the expiration of that funding in 2013.

Innocence Commissions. An alternative to the standard CRU is the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission (NCIIC). Created and funded by the North Carolina state legislature in 2006 "to investigate and evaluate post-conviction claims of factual innocence" throughout the state,²¹ the goals of the NCIIC are the same as the standard CRU, though it acts as a statewide independent clearing house for the investigation of actual innocence claims rather than leaving the administration of actual innocence claims to each local jurisdiction. This potentially expands the cases eligible for fact-based conviction review, particularly in the > 75% of jurisdictions that have fewer than 5 prosecutors. In such jurisdictions, which account for roughly three-fourths of all prosecutor's offices,²² resource constraints are likely to limit the ability of the office to staff a formal CRU.

On the other hand, the NCIIC has no ties to any prosecutor's office, and its investigation into cases may be received less than enthusiastically from prosecutors in the jurisdictions where the cases originated. Furthermore, while the NCIIC has subpoena power to aid in its investigations, its recommendations themselves lack the power of law. Instead, the NCIIC presents its findings, along with the participation of the relevant DA's Office, in a hearing to a judge. Thus, the NCIIC is a step removed from traditional CRUs in its ability to affect change in individual cases, and it has no authority to implement reforms that might prevent such errors from reoccurring.

North Carolina's use of the term "Innocence Commission" should be differentiated from other states, including New York, Pennsylvania, California, and most recently Texas, where legislatures have appointed Innocence Commissions staffed by criminal justice experts to review issues related to wrongful convictions and generate recommendations to minimize their occurrence. These organizations share the title of "Innocence Commission" with the NCIIC, but for a different purpose. While they may review past cases of wrongful conviction, only North Carolina's Innocence Commission participates in the review of active cases currently under appeal. Instead, they assemble a broad group of stakeholders including prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, victims' advocates, exonerees, and others, and review confirmed exoneration cases from the jurisdiction and elsewhere, with the goal being a set of recommendations for reform intended to reduce wrongful conviction throughout the state. In some states (e.g., California, Pennsylvania), the authoring of the report completes the work of the commission, while in others (e.g., New York State Justice Task Force), the group's agenda and recommendations are ongoing. While such commissions are engaged in a valuable inquiry, their observations are inherently limited by time and cases reviewed, and they miss the opportunity created

²¹ North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission website, available at <http://www.innocencecommission-nc.gov/statute.html>, downloaded August 17, 2015; North Carolina G.S. §§ 15A-1460 - 1475.

²² Prosecutors in State Courts, 2007, United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 2011.

by the traditional CRU model to implement an ongoing and increasingly sophisticated culture of learning from error that matures over time.

“Course of Business” Offices – No CRU. Of the roughly 3,000 counties, 50 states and 94 federal jurisdictions in the U.S. criminal justice system, fewer than 30 have established CRUs. One reason for this is the belief held by many conscientious DAs that the cases suitable for CRU review are being handled already, within the office’s existing caseload, and there is no need to create a separate structure for them. As one DA who has not created a CRU in her district explained,

It’s not as formal as what I think people do in what they call their Conviction Review Units, but I think our office has always done that. . . . We always have an open mind and we’ll look at it. And I can’t give you statistical information on anything like that, but it’s been a part of the culture of the office since the day I started.

A number of prosecutors in offices with newer CRUs have also hastened to make this point. For them, the CRU is an explicit effort to address community skepticism about prosecutorial motives, and to make plain to laymen what the prosecutors have believed their whole careers: that no prosecutor wants to convict an innocent person, and that if a mistake has been made, or is being made, it is the role of the prosecutor to be open and objective about the information available, and work hard to ensure that a fair and just result is achieved at any and all times. As Clackamas County (OR) DA John Foote said, “I think every lawyer in our office is responsible for conviction integrity . . . It’s not some specialty. To me, it goes with the job.”²³

Whether the CRU is local or state-wide, the specific model of the CRU (including for offices that do not have CRUs) is less relevant than how the office chooses to embrace and communicate the philosophy of conviction integrity over time. The sincere CRU’s philosophy of objective and open investigation should be our aspiration in every criminal case. At the same time, the CRU is re-investigating cases that are already seen as “victories” for the prosecutors that secured them, and for the Office as a whole. Thus, a new CRU can often start with a “headwind” of suspicion, both from within (e.g., other prosecutors in the Office) and without (e.g., defense attorneys). Those supporting the initiative point out that the creation of a CRU is entirely voluntary on the part of the District Attorney, and ask for the benefit of the doubt; skeptics reply that DAs are motivated to appease both the general population and the line prosecutors within the office, and worry that the unit conducts “Conviction Review In Name Only (CRINO),”²⁴ while making no real provision for the sort of extrajudicial analysis described above. Such a unit not only retards the progress of criminal justice accuracy and reform, it makes the operation of sincere CRUs more difficult in other jurisdictions.

To address these concerns, and to signify to all stakeholders that the CRU is a good faith attempt to accomplish the wide variety of system benefits described above, **sincere CRUs should emphasize:**

²³ Multnomah County DA assigns veteran prosecutor to guard against wrongful convictions, *The Oregonian*, Oct. 26, 2014, available at http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2014/10/multnomah_county_da_assigns_ve.html.

²⁴ The authors are indebted to Professor Ron Sullivan of Harvard Law School for this acronym. Others have referred to similar organizations that pay lip service to conviction review but act solely to affirm existing convictions as “conviction *preservation* units.”

- (1) the independence of the CRU and actively support its broad-based mission that elevates truth and accuracy above judicial decisions and procedure;**
- (2) the flexibility and freedom of the CRU to investigate broadly and deeply across allegations of actual innocence in its own discretion; and**
- (3) efforts by the CRU to provide transparency with regard to its activities and impact.**

These concepts of independence, flexibility and transparency are part of any high-quality public agency, and should already be the foundation of daily operations throughout a DA's Office. Applying them specifically to the operations of the CRU, however, will allow it to engage more collaboratively and effectively with others in the system, to the benefit of all.

CRU Independence

Without exception, every office we spoke to reserved for the District Attorney the right to make final decisions about CRU petitions,²⁵ an unsurprising fact given the potential political ramifications of moving to vacate a secured conviction. At the same time, in order for the CRU to be effective, the CRU must convey an ability to make difficult decisions that may seem contradictory to the Office or its line attorneys, without penalty or second-guessing. The CRU must be open to the possibility that mistakes have been made in the Office over time, and supported by the DA and Office leadership to conduct full investigations that may dredge up unpleasant facts for the DA or his or her colleagues. In short, the CRU must be independent in its decision making, focused only on the assessment of guilt or innocence and supported in full by the DA without thought to the political ramifications of its actions.

A CRU's independence can be measured in multiple ways. We can look to its place within the organizational structure, the ability of resources to conduct its work, or the number of people who can influence or approve its recommendations or actions on specific cases, for example. These issues can and should be viewed in aggregation to evaluate the extent to which the CRU is operating free from the control or bias of others, and is empowered to conduct and act upon the extrajudicial, fact-based case review that should be the CRU's main objective.

CRU Chain of Command

The ultimate question facing a CRU is whether the DA's Office should act to vacate a conviction. While offices we interviewed had multiple different processes, all agreed that the role of the CRU is to advise the DA on *how* to answer this important question, and not to actually answer the question itself. The CRU is expected to conduct a thorough investigation and give a recommendation to the District Attorney, who retains the sole discretion on whether to vacate or reverse a conviction.²⁶

The district attorney of course is free to do whatever he pleases on these cases despite what recommendation the CRU may have and what recommendation the [external committee] may have. It is always going to be ultimately his decision.

²⁵ One office permitted the CRU head to make independent decisions about lower-level or nonviolent cases, but reserved the DA's ability to decide on all violent felonies.

²⁶ Presumably, a DA who repeatedly overturns or ignores recommendations from his CRU to vacate convictions will be subject to public skepticism about, if not accountability for, his or her sincerity in the conviction review process.

In part because the DA has the final word on all CRU activities, it is important that the DA signify strong support for the undertaking. This reduces efforts to circumvent or ignore the CRU's requests for information or assistance.

While CRUs have found various ways to communicate the DA's support, one common method is to have the CRU report directly to the DA. The DA's personal involvement and awareness of day-to-day activities speaks volumes for his commitment to the unit, and provides more freedom to the CRU to conduct investigations free of potential conflicts while minimizing the impact of others who may be less enthusiastic about the work of the CRU. Most CRUs have been implemented as direct reports to the DA him/herself; those that have not typically report to the First Assistant DA or to the Chief of the Appellate Unit, who then reports to the DA.

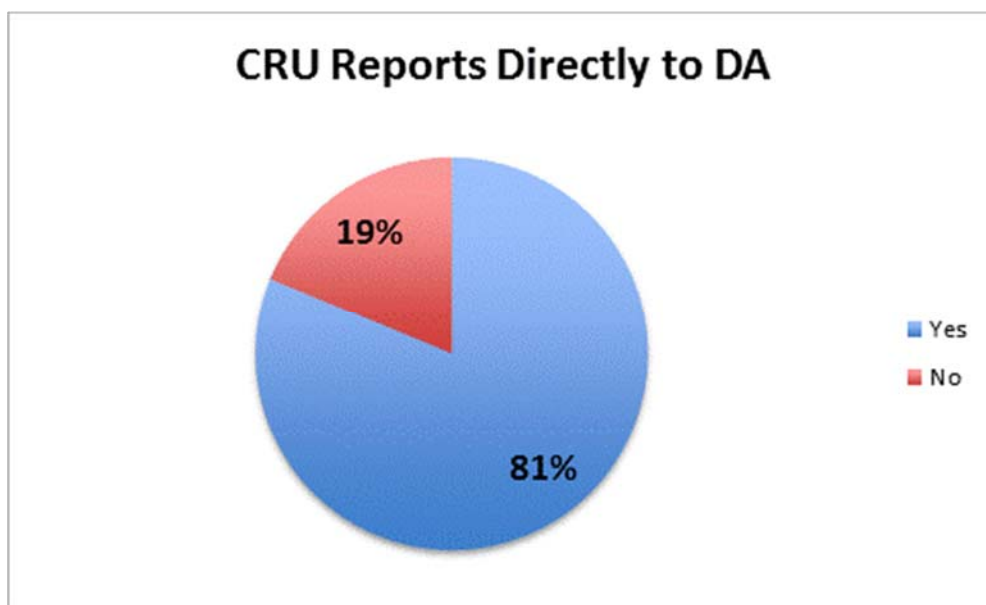


Fig. xx. CRU Reports Directly to DA (n=16)

[Separating the CRU from the Appellate or Habeas Unit](#)

A more subtle, but very important reason to have the CRU report directly to the DA involves the interplay between the CRU and an office's existing structure for handling appeals, including post-conviction appeals.

In organizations where no CRU exists, questions of inaccurate convictions typically arise as part of the appellate process, whether the basis for the appeal is legal or factual. Placing a CRU in the office's appellate or habeas unit therefore makes intuitive sense. Appellate attorneys within the DA's Office will have considerable experience with the different types of arguments made by individuals protesting their convictions, and many, if not most, of the challenges are already, or will soon be proceeding through the post-conviction appeals process in the court. Placing the CRU within the appellate unit makes for an efficient use of resources, providing a pool of attorneys who can be deployed as necessary to handle credible allegations of factual innocence, and does not require a restructuring of the senior management team in the office.

On the other hand, many attorneys – both defense and prosecutors – view the role of an appellate attorney within a DA’s Office as fundamentally different from the underlying goal of a CRU. As one veteran prosecutor stated,

[The Office Appeals Bureau] has a different interest than what we have. . . . *They, beginning with the appeal through the post-conviction process, are trained and tasked to defend the conviction.*

(Emphasis added). These observers worry that the core purpose of a typical appeals unit within a DA’s Office is the preservation, rather than the review of properly achieved convictions. Put differently, the prosecutorial mindset of an appellate lawyer presupposes guilt, and relies on the appellate court to review the conviction and identify any potential errors. Where it exists, this mindset undermines the ability of the appellate prosecutor to consider innocence objectively.

Well, here's a good example. We had a rape case that had been sitting in the office for a year or two where I got it. Arrested in 1992. Convicted in 1994. It was a gang rape case and evidence not revealed to the defense at the time of trial showed that the complaining witness, a 13-year old girl, had all kinds of psychological disorders and an IQ of 71. A defense expert now says that would lead to confabulation, that she would perceive injustice where none existed, and try to get even for it. Which is exactly what she said she had done after the trial. After the trial back in 1994 she immediately recanted and said she had done exactly that, that she was mad at two of these defendants because she thought they were friends of hers and they hadn't helped her. And she made up their involvement. For some reason the trial judge didn't believe her recantation and some years went by. And here's [where the mindset comes in.] A couple of lawyers in our appeals section said, maybe we can make a claim on latches because they could have brought this title, they could have brought this claim years ago. And I said, it's called conviction integrity. I'm not gonna use some technical defense to keep from addressing the merits of this case. And I'm afraid that's what would have happened if someone in [the CRU leadership] job had that sort of prosecutorial mindset of how can we defend this?

Prosecutors who make this observation are not criticizing their appellate colleagues. In the vast majority of cases, the DA’s Office has no reason to believe that a mistake has been made, and every reason to believe that an individual has been properly convicted of criminal conduct. Litigating such cases in the appellate courts with the goal of maintaining the conviction is exactly what prosecutors are supposed to do in our adversarial system in such cases. At the same time, a review process based on a pre-established and unreviewable definition of fact, except in cases based on allegations of “newly discovered evidence” that was “not available to the defendant at the time of trial” as those terms are legally defined is not the same as the extrajudicial, outcome-neutral review of factual innocence that is at the core of the CRU’s mission, and asking Assistant District Attorneys inculcated in the former to suddenly start engaging in the latter may not always be immediately successful.

Structurally and philosophically, sincere CRUs define their mission as separate and apart from the mission of the Office’s appellate unit. In fact, as many have commented, a case of actual innocence may actually be suffocated by formalized due process or habeas corpus rules, which are focused more on the need for judicial efficiency and finality, and speculative discourse on what “could” have been available

to a defendant at time of trial as opposed to a candid and open review of whether the individual actually committed the crime charged.²⁷

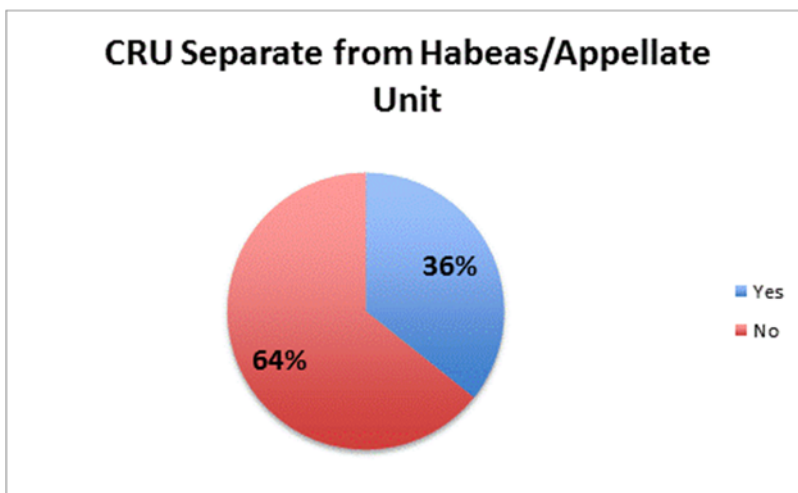


Fig. xx. CRU Separate From Habeas/Appellate Unit (n=14)

It is for this reason that several DAs separate their CRU and its fact-based assessments from their appellate/post-conviction review unit and its due process-driven advocacy (see sample organizational structure in Figure XX, below).

The belief that a CRU and an appellate unit should not coexist is not a universal view. Some actively encourage the use of appellate attorneys for case reviews:

I almost invariably pull out of our [appellate] unit, since they're used to doing the post-conviction type of inquiries. And this is work that is analogous to a habeas petition. So it's a pretty [important] skill set.

Others believe that adding the fact-based reviews of a CRU is actually a benefit to the appellate unit, precisely because it shows the appellate attorneys a different mindset and approach to appellate litigation. Philadelphia's Conviction Review Unit, for example, consciously placed its CRU within the Appellate Unit, in part because the DA wanted the CRU head to educate the appellate attorneys on how fact-based reviews might lead to different appellate reviews.²⁸ Under this view, CRUs might have a liberating effect on appellate units that view their job as "conviction preservation," rather than muffling the independence of the CRU's fact-based investigations. Similarly, the Washington, D.C. CRU has been created as part of its Special Proceedings Division, the unit that handles post-conviction appeals. Further evaluation of these structures and the impact of the CRUs in offices that take each view will be useful.

²⁷ See, e.g., Seaman, Julie, "When Innocence is No Defense," New York Times, August 12, 2015, Bookman, Marc, "Does an Innocent Man Have the Right to Be Exonerated?," The Atlantic, December 6, 2014.

²⁸ Personal Communication with Mark Gilson, Philadelphia DA's Office, December 11, 2014.

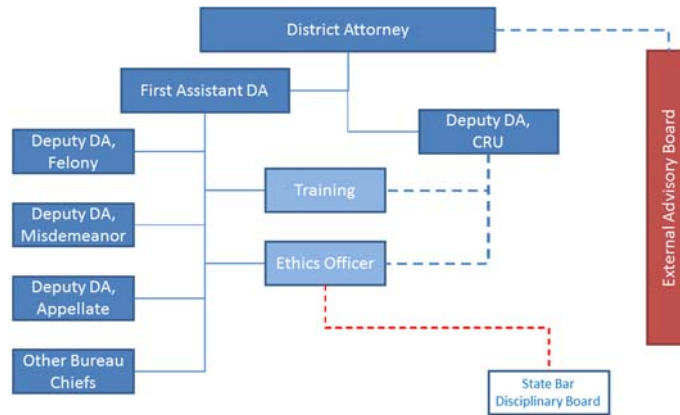


Figure xx. Potential Organizational Chart Including a Conviction Review Unit

Selecting CRU Leadership

DAs who have established CRUs are mindful that the individual in charge of the CRU will have a significant impact not just on the Unit’s effectiveness, but on its perception among other attorneys within the office. One DA put it this way:

We all know the people in any group that are not “yes men,” so to speak. I hire people that are going to keep an open mind, that are always saying “yeah, but what about this?” Those are the type of people that I look for. You need people that are going to be strong willed, especially for a Conviction Review Unit model because they may be in a situation where their co-worker’s case is going to be dismissed. That [co-worker] may not agree with the decision, so you certainly can’t be a pushover. It takes a certain personality, I think, to be in these units.

The choice of who should lead a CRU sends a variety of important messages to all stakeholders and external observers. DAs, sensitive to this, have without exception appointed experienced, veteran prosecutors to lead the “traditional” CRU.²⁹ First and foremost, this is sensible in terms of the highly technical work that needs to be done. Appointing a CRU head with a wide range of trial experiences ensures that the CRU can identify the hallmarks of a questionable conviction, and can successfully review an emotionally charged case where the facts may have happened decades prior.

For internal stakeholders within the office, the appointment of a veteran prosecutor who has risen through the ranks in the DA’s Office over years, and perhaps decades, signifies the DA’s commitment to the Unit, and provides it with the credibility to advocate for overturning a conviction where appropriate, even when such advocacy could result in the criticism (perceived or real) of a valued colleague.

Finally, the choice of a leader for the CRU conveys volumes to external observers about the likely approach that the CRU will take. Installing an individual as the head of the CRU who has broad experience in, and respect for prosecuting “tough cases” within the office suggests that the purpose of the CRU is not to second-guess prior convictions. In addition, the appointment signifies a belief that conviction reviews are important enough to warrant the focus of a seasoned trial attorney, whose skills

²⁹ See [PAGE XX] for the view of the NCIC, which uses a different model.

could be effectively used on important contemporary felony prosecutions. But a strong CRU head should not simply be a talented prosecutor. Appointing an individual who is not a “yes man,” who can listen to opposing viewpoints with objectivity, and who is capable of building relationships with defense counsel can convey to the community that the CRU – and by extension, the DA – has intellectual independence, and both the ability and the will to review cases on their substantive merits even if the ultimate result may not favor the DA’s Office. Both the perception and the reality of this independence will be important to the CRU’s effectiveness going forward.

Participation of External Stakeholders.

Executive support and strong leadership are universally acknowledged by DAs and CRU heads as important, and perhaps essential, to the Unit’s success within the DA’s Office. An important question about CRUs operations that has less universal support is whether and how to involve external voices in the CRU’s planning or day-to-day activities. Some DAs expressed concern about the potential for confirmation³⁰ or cognitive³¹ biases to arise within a prosecutor’s office (or, of course, in any criminal justice agency, including defense offices or courts) given the repetition of the cases and the need for constant advocacy for criminal accountability. Believing that CRU independence means intellectual freedom from such biases, DAs have designed various structures to ensure that an independent, defense-oriented perspective is available to assist and inform the CRU’s views, either case by case or by influencing the unit’s policies and procedures.

The CRU that has most aggressively embraced third-party participation in the activities of its CRU is in Brooklyn, NY, where Kings County District Attorney DA Kenneth Thompson asked Ron Sullivan, a Harvard Law Professor and former Federal Public Defender and Director of the Public Defender Service for Washington, D.C., to co-lead the office’s CRU with veteran prosecutor Mark Hale. Hale explains:

[What] we are trying to create, Professor Sullivan likes to call it an ethos, but it's an attitude, it's a perception. It should be the bedrock that . . . you're trying to do the correct thing, the just thing and not necessarily doing the thing just that just favors your side. Now this is very contraindicated to people who get in to trial work on both sides, because people who get into trial work are highly competitive people. . . . That is a sea change that we’re trying to get in terms of attitude among prosecutors. We're not just doing this just to correct past mistakes. We're doing this to try to get something out that can be a road map about here is where you did something wrong and perhaps correct it so that there are not wrongful convictions in the future.

External participation may be integrated in the CRU’s process as individuals or by committee, and throughout the case review process. Third parties sometimes assist in developing policy and procedures, helping to think through operational hurdles and generate more widespread political support for the unit within the office and across the jurisdiction. They may also participate in or review

³⁰ Confirmation bias is a type of cognitive bias defined as “the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one's existing beliefs or theories.” Oxford English Dictionary Online, accessed Nov. 27, 2015.

³¹ Cognitive bias is “the common tendency to acquire and process information by filtering it through one's own likes, dislikes, and experiences.” Businessdictionary.com, accessed Nov. 27, 2015. Subtypes of cognitive bias include confirmation bias, fundamental attribution error (FAE), belief bias, framing, or hindsight bias, among others. Wikipedia, “cognitive bias,” accessed Nov. 27, 2015.

the work and recommendations of the CRU, to minimize the risk of unintentional or unobserved confirmation bias or other cognitive bias on the part of the case reviewers.

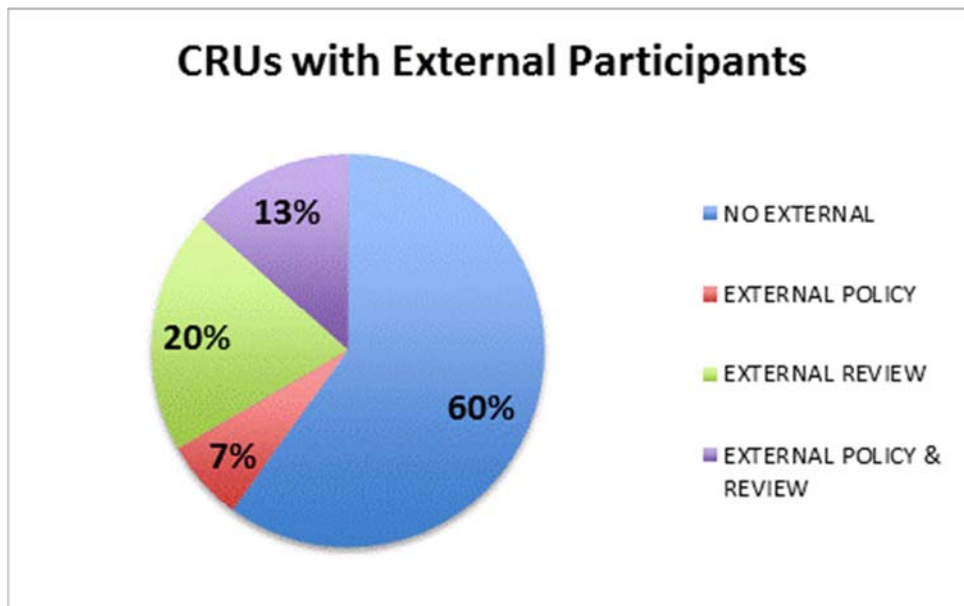


Figure xx. CRUs with External participants (n=15)

Not all offices have embraced third-party participation in their CRUs. Some view the CRU case review process as identical to the review of any other criminal prosecution; since a typical case review is handled entirely within the DA's Office, the thinking goes, so should the CRU case review. For others, the exclusion of third parties is more political in nature. The mere creation of a CRU can be viewed by some as revolutionary. To add to that the ability of external individuals to second-guess the office's decisions would simply be too much change at once, and several prosecutors have decided to assess this carefully before adding external participants:

It's all within the office. We've discussed some and I'm interested in these outside panels that some of the units have around the country. We're not real sure what we want to do with that right now. . . . We're looking at potentially outside panels working more in the training aspect than an oversight sort of outside folks.

As will be discussed at more length in the "transparency" section of this paper, CRU skeptics point to a lack of external involvement as proof that the inherent conflict of a CRU reviewing its own office's cases is not being conducted in good faith.

Where third-party participation is permitted, CRUs deploy them in a variety of ways:

- External Advisors in Policy, Not in Case Review. The CRU established by New York County (NY) includes a Policy Advisory Panel "comprised of leading criminal justice experts, including legal scholars and former prosecutors, who advise the Office on national best practices and evolving issues in the area of wrongful convictions."³² These advisors assist the DA and CRU in structural

³²<http://manhattanda.org/preventing-wrongful-convictions>, accessed August 18, 2015.

and procedural issues, but participation in the investigation of specific cases or their resulting recommendations is limited to individuals within the DA's Office.

- Blend of External and Internal Personnel for Case Review. In Oneida County (NY), a panel called the Conviction Integrity Program (CIP) Committee is convened to review the CRU's recommendation to initiate a formal investigation into a case.³³ The panel consists of the CRU coordinator, three Assistant DAs, three forensic experts, and one community representative. A second seven-member committee – four assistant prosecutors, two police officers and one civilian – receives and reviews the final recommendation for action from the CRU before it is sent to the District Attorney.

The US Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia has announced a similar approach, and plans to send completed case review recommendations to a review panel that includes two attorneys, one a career prosecutor and one a former attorney with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.³⁴

Another approach has been taken by Middlesex County (MA), which hired a veteran of the Pennsylvania Innocence Project as the screening attorney for its CRU, to ensure that the initial review of petitions for review are at once internal and informed by a defense-oriented and potentially innocence-oriented perspective.

- External Case Review Committee. The CRU in Lake County (IL) is staffed with volunteers of varied criminal justice backgrounds, each of whom lives and works *outside of* Lake County. The goal is to ensure that no case reviewer has any particular history with, pre-existing opinion about, or stake in the outcome of an individual case, and to separate the panel's advice from other political influences related to the potential for civil settlements, etc.

In Kings County (NY) the CRU meets regularly with an independent panel consisting of external participants as a way of shaping case reviews in process. ADA Mark Hale, who co-leads the Brooklyn CRU, explains the benefits he sees in engaging with external participants as follows:

We have this independent review panel which looks over everything we've done, looks at our recommendation and gives us a direction, or asks for additional materials so that they can continue to investigate the cases and then make their recommendation to the district attorney. . . . The independent review panel is a check on the good faith that . . . hopefully can be ratified by these distinguished attorneys in the community who have no connection to district attorney's office, aren't paid by the district attorney, are doing this completely voluntarily and frankly they don't have a dog in the fight. I think that is a very important perceptual element about what we're doing, that everything that we do as prosecutors is being reviewed by this independent review panel and that they make their own recommendation independent of what we do. . . . The independent review panel makes its own rules. They discuss it among

³³ Oneida County District Attorney's Office Conviction Integrity Program.

³⁴ United States Department of Justice Press Release, "U.S. Attorney Machen Announces Selection of Consultants To Work With Office's New Conviction Integrity Unit," Jan. 12, 2015, available at https://www.bja.gov/Publications/ConvictionIntegrityUnit_PR.pdf.

themselves, [and] make various requests if they find it necessary for more information. . . . Ultimately, they come back and say thumbs up or thumbs down on the case. Again, that is a recommendation that goes to the district attorney, along with our recommendation. The DA makes the ultimate decision.

As with any cross-disciplinary group, these external advisory or review boards can run into challenges; one CRU chose to disband its external review board after the group, which consisted of a former federal prosecutor, an experienced former police officer, and representatives from the defense bar and civil rights groups, could not reach a consensus on the merits of a particular case. Whether this sort of action reflects a “CRINO” or is simply a failure of consensus-building will be a case by case determination.

The impact of external participants in the establishment, activity, or recommendations of CRUs is impossible to measure at this time – and of course, no structure guarantees the optimal process. An objective, unbiased, thoughtful case review may occur in a closed, internal-only process just as a subjective, biased, shallow review may occur in a process that involves only external reviewers. What is more clear is that many DAs and CRU heads see value in enlisting the views of thoughtful individuals who bring open minds to the idea of what a CRU ought to do, how it should operate, the mechanics of case reviews, and the validity of its conclusions and recommendations. These advantages are both substantive, in that they minimize opportunities for bias, and perceptual, in that they respond to concerns of bias or favoritism towards the DA’s Office in the review.

Participation of Personnel from Underlying Case in Case Review

Another aspect of CRU independence is ensuring that the CRU’s case investigations are not being led by the same prosecutors who participated in the underlying conviction that is currently being called into question. CRUs are unanimous that prosecutor(s) or investigator(s) who participated in the original case and conviction may not lead the CRU’s case review. Most offices go further, requiring the recusal of the original prosecutor from panels or committees reviewing CRU recommendations.

I personally don't tell [the original prosecutors] much. . . First of all, I don't really care what they have to say because they are going to have opinions and I don't want opinions, I want facts. I also don't want to get them involved in it because I have to keep a clear mind myself.

Part of the concern is a sensitivity to the emotions of the original prosecutor, who is likely to suffer from substantial regret or guilt if he prosecuted and convicted someone of a crime in error.³⁵

I'll come in and they'll be like, "[o]hh, what did I do?" Certain officers do the same thing. . . . And you know what? Sometimes they want to know. They are like, "Did I make a mistake?" They really want to know, did I do something wrong, because nobody I've talked to, wants the wrong person.

³⁵ In this sense, the prosecutor or investigator in a conviction that ultimately is proven to be mistaken can be termed a “second victim,” with the first victim being the individual who has been exonerated. See Dekker, Sydney, *Second Victim: Error, Guilt, Trauma, and Resilience*, CRC Press, 2013. See also Stroud, Marty, Keynote Address, “Defining Quality in Criminal Justice,” Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice Spring Symposium, May, 2015, available at <https://www.law.upenn.edu/institutes/quattronecenter/conference/springsymposium2015/videos.php>.

While the sensitivity of prosecutors to having their work criticized is a potential barrier to gathering accurate information about the case, it must also be recognized that the original prosecutor or investigator is likely to be the individual in the office most familiar not only with the facts of the case, but with surrounding circumstances that add context and meaning to the investigation and the actions taken by the DA's Office in the underlying case. Of course, the prosecutor will have added experiences in the intervening period from trial to case review as well; while he/she may still be a prosecutor, he/she may no longer be with the DA's Office, may have a different perspective on the case, or may not be available in any way to participate, even as an interviewee.

Staffing and Resources Necessary for the CRU

Another key factor in the independence of the CRU is the amount of dedicated resources available to it. As Vice President Joseph Biden is fond of saying, "Don't show me your values. Show me your budget, and I will tell you what you value."³⁶ A CRU without dedicated resources must compete with other units within the DA's Office that are conducting more traditional prosecutorial work, enabling supervisors and managers who may not appreciate the goals of the CRU to exert negative pressure on the Unit. Even managers who support the CRU may find it difficult and counterproductive to volunteer prosecutor/investigator resources to the CRU if that means creating an additional burden on the entire office.

DAs, and in some instances, the federal government, have provided widely varying amounts of manpower and money to CRUs. The "Special Project" CRUs in Colorado/Denver and Wayne County (MI) were supported by federal grants providing additive external support for forensic testing. These groups conducted testing as permitted by the funding, then largely stopped working upon the expiration of the federal funds.

Occasionally, a CRU will be funded through an additional line item in a DA's budget, supported by a Mayor or county executive with control over the DA's budget.³⁷ More frequently, however, DAs who wish to establish and maintain CRUs are forced to operate within the existing budget for the office.

Most DAs seem to view this as a wholly appropriate state of affairs. Whether the office has specifically created a CRU or not, many prosecutors take the position that identifying and resolving inaccurate convictions is an important part of the prosecutorial role, and thus should be part of the day to day operations of the office. It is the responsibility of the DA to secure necessary funds to investigate cases with alleged errors fully, without compromising the ability to process new criminal cases. This can be a challenge:

[Erroneous convictions are] a problem [my county executives don't] see the benefit of. [My] belief in its utility is strong, but hard to translate to those who control the county budget. . . . [My] in-house attorneys do work on this above their caseload, since there can be no reduction in caseload to handle CRU work, and our external board is all volunteer.

While it is easy to point out that CRUs must be appropriately staffed, budgeting in most DA's Offices is a zero-sum game. Every dollar committed to a CRU to review potentially erroneous convictions is a dollar not available to promote the DA's forward-looking goals and obligations, and while the office should

³⁶ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/10478-don-t-tell-me-what-you-value-show-me-your-budget>

receive a benefit from the transparency, accountability, and justice principles exemplified by the CRU, there is also some risk of the public perception that tax dollars are going to fix mistakes rather than to improve community safety and justice moving forward.³⁸ The decision of how to staff the CRU, then, occurs as part of the prioritization of all of the Office's other goals and obligations, and depends upon the availability of resources as well as the expected funnel of petitions for case review and the number of actual investigations that will need to be conducted in the coming year – inquiries that require data collection and analysis for accuracy.³⁹ Such data, which is rarely collected by CRUs, could also be used to secure additional funding for the DA's Office, but will still be competing with other policy initiatives for a limited "pot" of county resources.

³⁸ Some enterprising DAs use their civil forfeiture fund to pay for the additional costs of their CRUs, though recent public focus on the potential for conflict of interest when a DA's annual budget is supplemented through forfeiture may limit this option in the future.

³⁹ Some DAs, when defending their decision not to create a CRU, state that the number of cases ripe for review in the jurisdiction are minimal, simultaneously underscoring the Office's quality and deferring the case review process. Whether such a belief is accurate or merely politically expedient can be difficult to prove in most jurisdictions.

CRU Jurisdiction	Full-Time CRU Attorneys ^a	Part-Time CRU Attorneys ^a	CRU Investigators	CRU Staff	Jurisdiction Population (in millions) ⁴⁰
Los Angeles County (CA)	3		1	1	10
N. Carolina Inn. Inquiry Comm.	3			8	10
Cook County (IL)	1	5	1	5	5.2
Harris County (TX)	2		1	1	4.3
Dallas County (TX)					2.5
Santa Clara County (CA)		5	1		1.9
Bexar County (TX)	3	0	As needed	0	1.8
Wayne County (MI)	3		1	2	1.8
New York County (NY)	1				1.6
Philadelphia County (PA)		1			1.6
Nassau County (NY)	1				1.4
Cuyahoga County (OH)				1	1.3
Pima County (AZ)		1			1.0
Ventura County (CA)	1				0.84
Middlesex County (MA)	1	2 per case	As needed	1	0.83
Suffolk County (MA)		1	>1	>1	0.77
Lake County (IL)		3	1		0.70
Oneida County (NY)	3		3	1	0.23

Table __. Dedicated Resources for Conviction Review Units.

^a Case Review only; does not include review committees or policy committees

The amount of funding needed to properly staff a CRU varies both office to office and year to year. Los Angeles County's announcement of its new CRU was accompanied by an ongoing budget allotment of \$1

⁴⁰ U.S. Census figures, 2010.

million. The Dallas CRU, on the other hand, was created after a public hearing with County Commissioners in 2007, and secured almost \$400,000 in additional funding to dedicate two assistant district attorneys, the chief prosecutor, an additional investigator, and a paralegal; presumably these individuals have continued to work on the County payroll in these capacities.⁴¹ Bexar County (TX), whose CRU was started in 2015, has assigned three FTEs to its CRU; while these are currently funded by existing operations funds, the DA hopes to change this to line item support in the next fiscal year.

The North Carolina State legislature, in creating the NCIC for a state with roughly the same population (~10 million people) as Los Angeles County, budgeted \$550,000 per year to the NCIC, a sum almost completely expended on the six full-time staff of the Commission that are needed to keep up with incoming petitions and ongoing case investigations. The Commission's state-funded budget also provides \$8,500 per year for DNA and forensic testing and \$6,421 per year for consulting with experts. This budget leaves the Commission without sufficient funding to conduct all of the DNA or other forensic testing necessary to thoroughly investigate the cases in its pipeline. The Commission spends an average of \$85,000 on DNA testing and an additional \$7,750 on scientific experts each year, which does not include the costs of prosecutors or judges who participate in hearings to adjudicate cases where the NCIC believes there is sufficient evidence to overturn a conviction.

Grant money designed to help law enforcement deal with testing backlogs can ameliorate funding pressures somewhat, and have been helpful in Cook County (IL), North Carolina, and other jurisdictions, providing human resources and money for evidence testing. For example, the NCIC has in the past secured funding from the National Institute of Justice, the research arm of the Department of Justice. The money, in the form of a "Bloodsworth Grant" from NIJ (three years at \$250,000 per year), provided an additional 2 FTEs and funds to be used for DNA testing, other forensic testing, and expert witnesses in cases where DNA could be used to provide conclusive evidence of the innocence or guilt of the petitioner. Even with this additional funding, however, the Commission has found it impossible to pay for all the testing it seeks. A request was made to the North Carolina Legislature for an additional \$100,000, but this request was denied.

A Note for Jurisdictions with Fewer Attorneys. The majority of jurisdictions with CRUs are large, urban or suburban jurisdictions with more than 50 prosecutors, and most of the observations in this paper come from offices with greater than 30 attorneys. That does not mean that the philosophies and practices of a strong CRU don't apply to smaller prosecutors' offices. Errors may occur in jurisdictions large or small, and there is no data to suggest that a rural DA in a 1-2 attorney office is any more or less able to avoid, detect, or remedy error than prosecutors working in the larger offices.

It should be noted, though, that many smaller state or local prosecutors' offices may lack the resources to separately staff a CRU. To use an extreme (but not fictional) example to make the point, it would be impossible to create a formal independent CRU in a DA's Office that has one prosecutor. This does not mean that smaller DA's Offices are free from an obligation to conduct a good faith independent review of colorable post-conviction claims of actual innocence, and smaller offices should ensure that their communities are provided with a clear path to submit such claims. This could be done by sharing responsibility for case reviews with larger offices within the jurisdiction, by engaging a volunteer panel on an ad hoc basis and contracting out leadership of case reviews as needed, or through a statewide

⁴¹ Moore, Terri, "Prosecutors Reinvestigate Questionable Evidence: Dallas Establishes a `Conviction Integrity Unit,'" *Criminal Justice*, Volume 26, Number 3, Fall 2011.

organization like the NCIIC. The important thing is to ensure that size and resources not impose a limitation on the ability of the DA's Office to provide justice to all of its citizens.

CRU Flexibility

Prosecutors conducting the extrajudicial fact-based assessments of actual innocence at the core of the CRU's mission are confronted with a limitless variety of circumstances, rationales, and scenarios supporting allegations of actual innocence. Each case presents prosecutors with unique challenges in deciding which cases to accept for review, how those reviews should be conducted, and what actions to take at the conclusion of the review to ensure justice is done. The questions confronting CRUs include both the aspirational and the practical; attorneys we spoke to struggle with finding an optimal balance between the need for flexibility in case acceptance and the need to prioritize limited resources. Attorneys also struggle with a consistent definition of "conviction integrity." While some cases of guilt or innocence are clear, or can become clear with some investigation, many investigations conducted by CRUs result in the conclusion that while there are definite weaknesses in the state's case, there is also evidence linking the petitioner to the crime. In such cases, how can the CRU draw an acceptable balance between ensuring that all of its convictions have "integrity," as opposed to becoming, in the words of one CRU head, a "13th juror" overturning appropriate convictions?

CRUs are not uniform in their answers to these questions, but the Units that maximize their flexibility in case intake, investigation, review and recommendation, that minimize their restrictions on cases eligible for review, and that take advantage of external participants to the extent it is useful to the investigations more effectively realize the core mission of accurate evaluations of claims of actual innocence. Ensuring the flexibility necessary for the CRU to achieve its mission is the focus of our next section.

The Conviction Review Case Funnel

Leaders of CRUs agree that their willingness to vacate a previously secured conviction outside the existing appeals process is dependent on a finding of actual innocence – that is, either the petitioner did not commit the crime charged, or no crime was committed under the facts as now understood. None of the CRUs we spoke to felt that their role was to review a case where actual innocence was not the core of the rationale for why a petitioner's case should be reviewed.

From this agreed upon baseline, however, there is some deviation among offices regarding the cases a CRU will accept. The fundamental question that is asked by the CRU from its initial receipt of petitioner's request for review to the DA's ultimate decision on the case remains the same: are there sufficient facts reviewable by the CRU in support of the actual innocence of the petitioner to justify continuing an investigation? The answer varies by the stage of the process and is conducted differently by each CRU.

Each CRU has unique requirements or standards of proof for deciding which petitions will be accepted, reviewed, and investigated, but the process that a petition must go through within the CRU is uniform. A graphic representation of this "case funnel" from the submission to the CRU of a claim of innocence through the DA's action to vacate or reverse a conviction that is now believed to have been reached in error is shown in **Figure xx**, below.

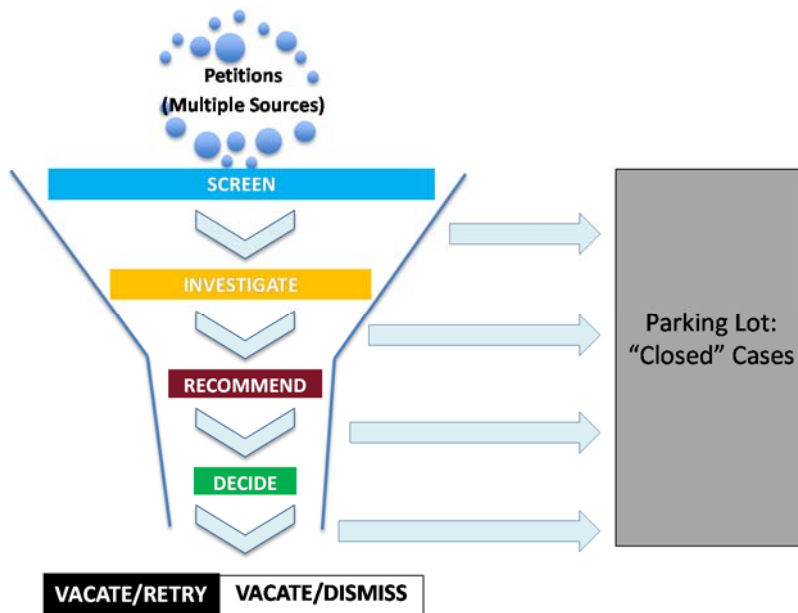


Figure xx. Case Funnel for CRU Review.

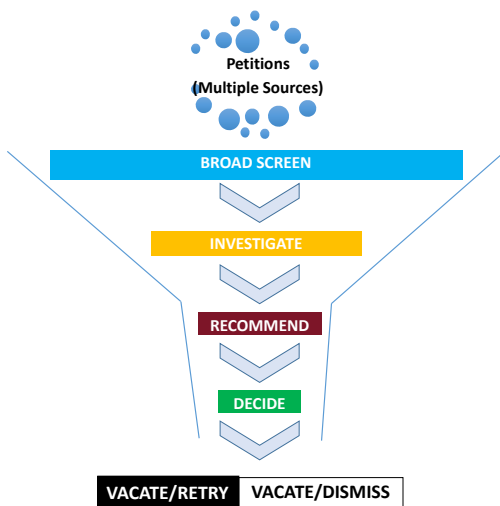
Petitions submitted to CRUs for review will proceed through the following stages:

- Intake. Intake policies or procedures are focused on the CRU’s response to the initial communication to the CRU about a case that may be suitable for review.
- Screening. If a case meets the baseline criteria for consideration by the office, it will be reviewed by an individual within the CRU for a minimum requisite level of credibility.
- Investigation. At this stage, the CRU devotes more substantial resources to the review, typically a lead prosecutor and perhaps an investigator at a minimum. The goal is to reach a definitive conclusion about the appropriate resolution of the case.
- Recommendation. The conclusions of the investigation are provided to the District Attorney with a recommendation for action. For many CRUs, the recommendation phase occurs in conjunction with a review board of one type or another.
- Action. The District Attorney decides what action should be taken in the case. If the petitioner’s assertions of innocence have prevailed, the DA approaches the court with a proposal to either exonerate and release the defendant or drop the charges and lay the groundwork for a new trial.

The precise shape of the funnel will vary office by office based on the CRU’s criteria for case advancement and on the way it conducts its reviews. Offices with broad policies for case intake and screening, and those perceived to conduct good-faith investigations, are more likely to receive a large number of petitions and thus a wide “top” of the funnel, with the funnel narrowing based on the amount of rigor applied at each downstream phase. Other offices that employ strict criteria or high standards of proof at the recommendation phase may find fewer petitions, but a higher percentage of completed investigations after case acceptance, and very few cases that proceed to the DA with a recommendation to set aside the conviction.

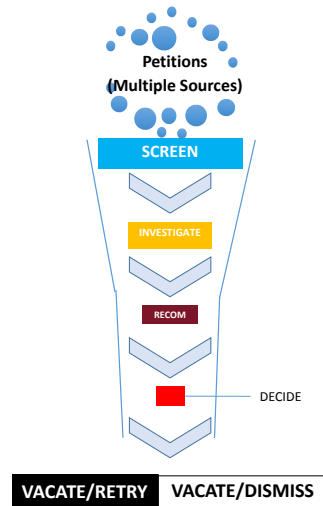
Flexible Screening

No Structural Limitations, Good Community Relations



Rigorous Screening

(No Guilty Pleas, No Due Process Claims, etc.)



While the shape of a CRU’s case funnel is not conclusive evidence of the sincerity of the CRU in the conviction review process, it is worth noting that the CRU case funnel is impacted not just by the facts of the cases submitted to the CRU, but by the fact that petitions are submitted at all. The funnel of cases available for CRU review is smaller than it could be in a number of jurisdictions with CRUs, as defense counsel who lack faith in the CRU (in other words, who believe that the CRU is a CRINO) simply do not submit their cases to the CRU for review. As one defense attorney put it, “Why would I provide the DA’s Office with an opportunity to learn more about my case outside of appellate litigation if the case review conducted by the CRU is not sincere? I’m just giving up leverage and not getting anything useful for my client.”

Thus, an underfunded CRU or a CRU not engaged in good faith case review may find it has fewer cases to review not because the cases of error do not exist in the jurisdiction, but because the CRU’s relationship with the defense bar (and vice versa) convinces innocent individuals to pursue litigation rather than trust in a collaborative process. In such situations, the CRU (or perhaps CRINO) actually is doing more harm than good on several levels: (1) it has created a false sense of security in the DA’s Office; (2) it does not assist in necessary case reviews; and (3) it adds to a cynicism and lack of trust between the DA’s Office and the community that limits opportunities for system improvement.

[Standards for Acceptance of Petitions for Review](#)

Decisions about the types of cases eligible for review (i.e., cases at the top of the funnel) reflect the CRU’s underlying philosophy toward its role, and have significant downstream implications on the operations of the CRU.

It seems reasonable to expect that the criteria for case acceptance for sincere CRUs will, on balance, favor the claims of petitioners at early stages of the process, trusting in case investigations to make clear

the best result and wanting to err on the side of catching an error rather than excluding it. This appears to be the philosophy in most, but not all CRUs.

The standard for initial review is similar for virtually all CRUs: the petitioner must assert a claim of innocence, supported by something testable or objectively credible in the eyes of the CRU personnel. As one prosecutor put it, “We don’t just review closed cases – we need the petitioner to tell us why he’s innocent.” (Emphasis added.)

Other offices used words ranging from “obvious evidence” of innocence to “plausible” or “reasonable” evidence. “You have to show me something,” said one prosecutor:

The initial review, there has to be a plausible claim. There has to essentially be a logical nexus between the claim and what the requested action is. If it's meritless on its face then it might be summarily denied. There has to be a reasonable nexus between the claim . . . of innocence and the requested action that they're asking for.

The amount and types of evidence necessary to pass this threshold can vary from office to office. Testable physical evidence tends to be the most persuasive, though some CRUs refuse to test items that have been previously tested, while others will retest material that has been previously tested if the method of testing has gotten more advanced or sensitive and thus might yield more informative data. In any event, summarizes one prosecutor, “[i]t needs to be enough that I believe that at trial, with this information, we’d probably get a different result.”

For some, the credibility of the petition comes in part from the source of the initial inquiry, which can originate not just from inmates, but from petitioner’s family members or counsel, other prisoners, confidential informants, the media, and others, often without the petitioner’s involvement and sometimes even against his or her wishes.

Many with experience in screening cases include the source of the referral in assessing the underlying credibility of the petition. Most believe that petitions from an attorney have more credibility than those that come from other sources. On the other hand, prosecutors tend to view referrals from the media with skepticism, feeling that some other agenda may be in play. Some prosecutors noted that claims from family members are often misguided, and caused by more gullible family members accepting baseless assertions of innocence made by the perpetrator of the crime.

A number of CRU heads specifically praised requests for review coming from innocence organizations across the country as having strong reliability and credibility, and one CRU stated that it will only review cases that have been vetted in advance by the Innocence Project in its jurisdiction. The Innocence Network has shared principles of conducting fact-based investigations into cases, and provides a great deal of information along with their request for review.⁴² Most CRUs find the IP’s case review process

⁴² In fact, the philosophical goal and role of the Innocence Project and Innocence Network Member Organizations is very similar to the stated purpose of a Conviction Review Unit. To the extent there is a difference, it would seem to stem from the historical mindset of the typical attorney participant, since most lawyers within the Innocence Network tend to be defense-oriented while employees of CRUs are obviously more experienced in the prosecutorial role. We have not attempted to compare and contrast case acceptance policies and procedures used by Innocence Network Member Organizations with those of CRUs, though we note that the standards and techniques for a fact-based inquiry into actual innocence should not differ based on the pro-prosecutor or pro-defense advocacy label attached to the individual conducting the inquiry.

informative and useful; while there is not always agreement with the IP's conclusions about a specific case, the cases referred by members of the Innocence Network generally pass the "straight face" test and are initially reviewable.

[The excellence of the Innocence Project] is something I didn't realize until I worked with some of ours and I appreciate it. I think more prosecutors should know that that's the case. I get letters all the time from angry defendants or from family members where their cases have been denied review from innocence groups. I do know that they screen those cases and it does mean a lot. I don't know that that's common knowledge among prosecutors, but it should be.

CRUs differ in terms of the "degree" of innocence that must be alleged by the petitioner to warrant further review by the CRU. Some offices look not to an absolute standard of "actual innocence" but rather to a more subjective standard about whether a reasonable person might have a reasonable doubt that the conviction is accurate and legitimate. For those offices that have a strict "actual innocence" view, a letter from a petitioner that simply says that the conviction was inappropriate, as opposed to stating that the petitioner did not commit the crime, is likely insufficient to warrant further review. This can be a subjective inquiry; as one prosecutor said, "[T]he concept between actual innocence and reasonable doubt gets muddled" in a lot of the rejected petitions.

Other CRUs adopt a more restrictive standard that is linked to their jurisdiction's post-conviction review rules, based on a two-pronged belief that (a) the DA cannot simply remove charges without judicial approval and (b) the judge will require a showing of proof that would satisfy the post-conviction rules. As one jurisdiction, which requires "strong indicia of actual innocence" to deploy investigators on a more thorough case review, stated:

Ultimately there's a criminal conviction in place that in the case of a trial the jury has put in place. We have to have a legal footing that is recognized by the state . . . in order to undo that conviction. We can't just undo that conviction because we feel a person may be innocent. We have to [meet] the appropriate legal standard.

Other offices concur:

We won't take a case where the defense is "I'm innocent," without something more, something objective. We have to abide by the Court of Appeals standard, which is clear and convincing, because that's what we're going to go up against.

Still, not all offices adhere to a rigid legal standard. The NCIIC, for example, says:

It was specifically on purpose when they created the Commission, the framers . . . wanted it not to be a legal standard because the Commission is not about technicalities and about much of the things that people think of with lawyers. It's really about facts and evidence and new evidence. And purposefully not everyone is a lawyer on the Commission.

Many offices have declined to create an express standard for accepting cases, preferring instead what one called an "I know it when I see it" approach to colorable claims of actual innocence: "If there's anything credible that looks like we should review it, we review it," said one. "It's a case by case

decision; I'm less likely to review a case that appears that it has been fairly litigated. This is not supposed to be a second bite at the apple."

CRUs without an articulated standard for case acceptance often argue that the lack of a standard is actually a benefit for petitioners, providing necessary freedom and flexibility for CRUs to work in good faith to review a wide variety of cases. On the other hand, members of the defense bar have pointed out the opportunity for abuse of discretion (or, more precisely, for an anti-review philosophy) to lurk undetected behind the unstructured "I know it when I see it" standard, and CRUs operating without externally announced standards are subject to criticism that their acceptance criteria are subjective and limited to the (potentially arbitrary) perspective of the individual case screener. Some level of definition regarding which cases should proceed will likely be needed to convince all stakeholders that a clear and fair process is taking place.

Prosecutors in our survey provided two responses to this concern. First, because CRUs are inherently voluntary and extrajudicial, CRUs pointed out that any review by the CRU exceeds the review to which the petitioner is legally entitled; accordingly, the petitioner can hardly be expected to be reasonably upset if the review does not agree with his/her claims. While technically true, this does little to mollify observers who perceive a CRINO in their jurisdiction. The other, more substantive response is that the flexibility of the "I know it when I see it" standard is necessary given the inherent complexity and uncertainty of the process of reviewing older cases with a variety of fact patterns and justifications for innocence:

You can't really have [strict rules] on something like this. If . . . in your heart it meets it, in your head it doesn't, sometimes you have to go with that. I know it sounds terrible because we are lawyers and we have rules and protocols. [This is] too dangerous an area to have too many rules, because rules then define each one.

[Legal Standards for Case Review](#)

Newly Discovered Evidence. Where precisely to draw the line between the desire to review cases where errors may have led to the misidentification of a guilty person, and the need to avoid simply rehearing closed criminal cases, is a challenging and non-scientific inquiry for most CRUs. Virtually all CRUs require some new evidence that has not been previously disclosed to accept a case for further review:

Some new evidence is needed so we aren't just rehashing cases that have already been decided closer in time and with more manpower.

We want to be respectful of the jury, their verdict, and generally we're not going to look at a case where there's nothing new.

In a departure from appellate litigation requirements, however, many CRUs take a more flexible and pragmatic view of what it means for the newly discovered evidence to have been "available" at the original trial. This is a key difference. A sincere CRU focuses on actual innocence, unencumbered by the availability of potentially successful due process legal/procedural arguments that could preserve the conviction without addressing the underlying factual allegation(s) of innocence. Thus, from the outset, sincere CRUs will review the petition in light of what *could have been* used by defense counsel, effectively putting

themselves in the role of defense counsel as part of their validation of the merits of petitioner's claim:

We look [at original defense counsel's actions] and say, "Well, you have all this stuff and you did this poor job of utilizing it." If you take all of those circumstances . . . and you say, "Well, because these were exploited or not revealed to the jury or revealed in such a fashion that was ineffective to the jury," and you look and you say, "well, the jury's fact-finding process was so corrupted by that that you can't consider that verdict or you can't have confidence in that verdict," therefore it should be a nullity.

One way the balancing can be done is by sidestepping the question of whether "newly discovered evidence" is needed at all to justify CRU review. Rather than discussing when the evidence was discovered, for example, the NCIC can hear cases with "[c]redible, verifiable evidence of the applicant's innocence" so long as the evidence was not previously heard in court. According to Kendra Montgomery-Blinn, Executive Director of the NCIC, this philosophy

was specifically on purpose when they created the commission. The framers . . . wanted it not to be a legal standard [for review] because the commission is not about technicalities and about much of the things that people think of with lawyers. It's really about facts and evidence and new evidence. And purposefully not everyone is a lawyer on the Commission.

Charging Errors. Another question for CRUs is whether they will review cases in which the petitioner acknowledges a role in the events in question, but argues that the wrong assessment of criminal accountability was reached. Most CRUs view the reassessment of certain charges to be a usurpation of the role of the original trier of fact. Those original participants made conducted their own assessments of appropriate assessments of guilt, innocence, and charges, and most CRUs are hesitant to circumvent the will of a jury or a judge-approved plea bargain.

We look for cases where it's the wrong person, where the petitioner wasn't even there and has a claim focused on absolute vindication. The only other kind of vindication is when there wasn't a crime committed.

One CRU in our survey, however, consciously reviews cases for "count by count" innocence, meaning that the Unit will agree to vacate a single charge that is inaccurate even if other charges related to the same set of facts were accurately charged and should be sustained. For example, a woman convicted of armed robbery in a situation where she was unarmed and the facts of the case did not allege robbery would be eligible for review in such a scenario, even if the woman could have been convicted of a lesser offense for her conduct in the situation. This is a minority view.

[Procedural vs. Substantive Case Reviews](#)

The criteria for when a CRU will conduct a thorough case investigation varies across different CRUs. Whether the CRU's policies on case acceptance are stated in written protocols or closely held by the leader of the CRU and the DA in question, CRUs can embrace all sorts of claims so long as actual innocence is at their foundation, or they can adopt procedural or structural requirements that limit the cases eligible for review.

It is not surprising that the more restrictive a CRU is in agreeing to investigate cases, the more the unit will be viewed as a CRINO by external observers. One CRU in our survey, for example, has unpublished criteria refusing cases where any of the following questions is answered in the negative:

- Is there a “qualifying conviction” (for specific violent felonies)?
- Is the defendant still incarcerated?
- Is the primary defense not predicated on defendant’s factual involvement (e.g., not guilty by reason of insanity or another voluntary affirmative defense)?
- Did the inmate maintain his innocence continually throughout all proceedings?
- Is identity an issue in the case?
- Is there valid, testable biological evidence?
- Has the biological evidence not previously been tested in the modern era of DNA testing?
- Would a finding excluding the inmate as the source of DNA be material to the guilty party?
- Did the inmate decline or not want to participate?

Such restrictions on cases available for review seem more focused on the exclusion of cases for review than the sincere identification and remediation of cases where errors have occurred. Refusing to review cases where actual innocence is alleged because the sentence has been completed, or where an individual has plead guilty to the crime, for example, convey the Unit’s focus on procedural form over the substance of actual innocence. While seizing upon procedural grounds may be necessary for the CRU to prioritize limited resources, such a lack of resources for the review of cases with plausible claims of actual innocence is, of course, its own problem.

Other offices, including the NCIC, have established more explicit criteria for case acceptance:⁴³

- The conviction must be for a felony imposed in a North Carolina state court;
- The applicant must be a living person;
- The applicant must be claiming complete factual innocence for any criminal responsibility for the crime;
- Credible, verifiable evidence of the applicant’s innocence must exist;
- The basis of petitioner’s claim must not have been previously heard at trial or in a post-conviction hearing;
- The applicant must sign an agreement in which he waives his procedural safeguards and privileges, agrees to cooperate with the Commission, and agrees to provide full disclosure regarding all inquiry requirements of the Commission.⁴⁴

Whatever one may think about the lines drawn by the North Carolina legislature, these requirements make clear the purview of the NCIC as an agency dedicated to hearing substantial claims of complete factual innocence that were not previously heard in a North Carolina court. While some of the NCIC’s requirements, most notably the requirement for petitioner to waive all procedural safeguards, are not embraced by all CRUs (see section ____ below), the core philosophy is shared by the majority of jurisdictions with CRUs.

⁴³ N.C. G.S. 15A-1460(1)

⁴⁴ N.C. G.S. §15A-1467.

Cases Resolved by Guilty Plea

Another instance where form may be prized above substance is in cases where the individual pleaded guilty to the original offense. There is a wealth of scientific literature, as well as common sense reasoning, indicating that individuals sometimes plead guilty to crimes they have not committed, for rational and irrational reasons. Some pleas are knowing and free, while others may be given under compulsion or trickery – but there can be no doubt that pleading guilty to a crime and actually committing the crime are not the same thing.

Most CRUs are aware that a formal admission of guilt to a court and an actual admission “in one’s heart” about committing the crime charged are not necessarily the same thing. Accordingly, most CRUs are willing to review cases in which the petitioner had entered a guilty plea. Those who use the guilty plea as a tool to exclude cases from the CRU typically do so as a matter of prioritization of scarce case review resources, rather than attempting to justify the procedural rejection of such cases on grounds of factual accuracy.

Rejecting petitions for innocence in cases resolved by guilty plea is particularly ill-advised in cases where DNA evidence is available for testing that could (a) conclusively exclude the petitioner and/or (b) conclusively identify one or more participants in the underlying crime. At the same time, many prosecutors view a guilty plea as a knowing decision of the petitioner to “cut a deal” during the adjudication of the underlying case, and are loath to revisit that agreement. Accordingly, some CRUs require a “heightened showing” of innocence before agreeing to review guilty pleas. The Manhattan DA’s policy, for example, “will agree to DNA testing in cases in which the results will be informative as to any question strongly related to the issue of guilt or innocence,” while acknowledging that “claims made on behalf of defendants who pleaded guilty . . . will require a higher standard to garner [CRU] review.”⁴⁵

The precise nature of this “heightened showing” varies from office to office. One prosecutor noted that a compelling factor in deciding whether to pursue a case resolved by a guilty plea was the acceptance of a sentence far lower than the crime charged would otherwise have been. This, to her, suggested that the guilty plea was a strategic move by defendant as opposed to one driven by prosecutorial coercion. Other prosecutors might say that such a plea means that the petitioner got the benefit of his bargain, and there is no further need to review the case, while defense attorneys point out that to the extent the question of innocence and guilt is affected at all by this assessment of the plea bargain, a large disparity between crimes charged and the crimes to which the petitioner plead might suggest that the prosecutor’s claims were weak and/or outlandish to begin with.

Other offices (e.g., the NCIIC) ignore the question of whether the plea deal was coercive, and simply require a higher standard of evidence if the petitioner’s position that he is innocent has ever wavered. The NCIIC requires credible, verifiable evidence of innocence to outweigh a guilty plea and initiate an investigation. In addition, cases decided originally by a guilty plea can only move from the Commission

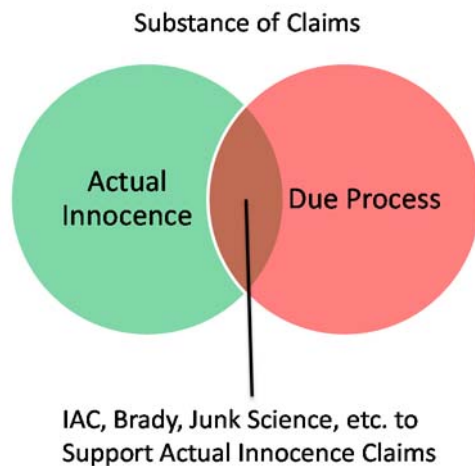
⁴⁵ See New York County “Post-Conviction Case Review and Re-Investigation of Cases,” attached as **Appendix ___**. This is similar to the requirements of the Innocence Project at Cardozo Law School in New York, NY. The Innocence Project does provide advocacy assistance in cases where DNA may not be an available tool to prove innocence: “The Innocence Project represents clients seeking post-conviction DNA testing to prove their innocence. We also consult on a number of cases on appeal in which the defendant is represented by primary counsel and we provide information and background on DNA testing litigation.” <http://www.innocenceproject.org/free-innocent/exonerating-the-innocent>, accessed August 24, 2015.

to a court hearing upon the unanimous agreement of the Commission members, whereas cases with other resolutions can advance to a hearing on a majority vote.

If the goal is to find cases of actual innocence and address them, the fact that an individual pleaded guilty should not bar the case from review. At the same time, a CRU looking to maximize efficiency and impact is entitled to understand why someone who at one time stood before a judge and admitted his or her participation in a crime is now offering a different, and far more self-interested view.

Cases Alleging Both Factual Innocence and Due Process Violations.

CRUs embracing a “totality of the circumstances” standard must often evaluate claims of factual innocence that are justified by, or overlap with, claims of violations of due process. An ineffective assistance of counsel claim, for example, does not necessarily incorporate a claim of actual innocence, though the two are often interconnected. Another area where due process claims are the vehicle for discussing a claim of factual innocence is in convictions based on scientific testimony where the scientific literature has evolved since the underlying conviction (e.g., arson, shaken baby syndrome, bite mark or hair follicle comparisons). In cases like these, it has not been uncommon for appellate attorneys within DA’s Offices to point to one or more scientific papers published prior to the trial. Such papers, whether or not they were actually known to petitioner’s defense counsel (or, for that matter to the prosecutors) at the time of trial, can be used to argue against the admission of any new fire science knowledge on the grounds that it *could* have been used by defense counsel at trial. This is a perfectly legitimate legal defense of the conviction, but it is not an independent, fact-based assessment of actual innocence.⁴⁶



Consider a conviction for arson in which the allegation is that the fire was not deliberately set, but the conviction was obtained based on forensic testimony regarding the fire that, according to expert

⁴⁶ Of course, the claim that science has evolved over time does not automatically mean that a fact-based assessment would find the individual innocent either; there may well be other fact-based indicia of guilt. The point is merely to showcase the difference between a fact-based analysis and a legitimate defense based on legal grounds.

testimony, proved that it was intentionally set. A petitioner to a CRU may claim actual innocence (“I did not set the fire”). He may also claim that forensic arguments supporting his innocence should have been presented in his defense, and the fact that none were is evidence of a viable ineffective assistance of counsel claim. Or he may not claim innocence, instead remaining silent on the point and asserting solely the ineffective assistance of counsel claim. Similar situations arise in other due process claims, such as illegal search/seizure, police or prosecutorial misconduct, etc.

CRUs vary in their reactions to these three types of claims. More restrictive CRUs simply refer the latter two categories – what we will call here due process claims – to the standard post-conviction appellate review process, feeling that the claims are fundamentally legal in nature and are not true claims of actual innocence. More often, however, sincere CRUs take the position that they will review cases that may implicate due process concerns, so long as the underlying allegation is one of actual innocence. In part this is based on the recognition that a judicial declaration of actual innocence may actually be harder to secure than a judicial declaration of a procedural violation that achieves the higher purpose of vacating the conviction:

In a perfect world what we are searching for is some objectively, some objective evidence of innocence. . . . But if you can't reach the actual innocence legal standard, it's where you see those kind of “default” due process standards, [then] that's where you get the new trial. Then we just dismiss it. You may not get that actual innocence binding effect because we can't reach that standard, but we will find a way to get relief on some other ground. [In our jurisdiction,] it's a lot easier to get relief on a due process ground than it is actual innocence because the standard is higher.

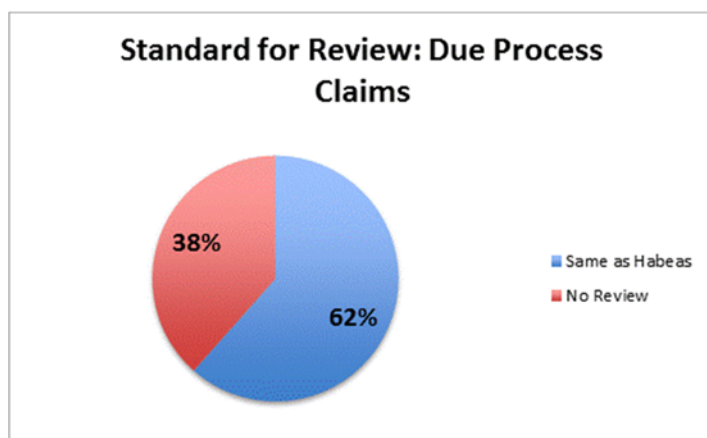


Figure xx. Standard for Review: Due Process Claims (n=13)

The assessment of how to address primarily legal claims that may bear on innocence is an important and emerging area for most CRUs:

There's two classes of cases. One is there's a case where there's actual innocence. Where there's evidence that you have the wrong person. That's obviously the worst case scenario. The second type of cases though is where there's new evidence . . . or new information that has come forward that may or may not show that this person is innocent or we may never know. I think the days of DNA coming back saying you have

the wrong person, those days are over. From now on we're going to see cases where it's not going to be that black and white. That's fine, it doesn't mean we shouldn't look at these cases. In fact, we should look at them more because these are cases where there's a lot more to look at.

Ineffective Assistance of Counsel Claims for Factual Innocence.

Most CRUs deploy a slightly different standard for handling blended actual innocence/due process claims based on ineffective assistance of counsel claims reviewed by CRUs. The real question for the CRUs to evaluate is whether legal standards of “acceptable” defense ineptitude should be used to justify not investigating petitioner’s otherwise credible claim of innocence.

We're looking at new evidence, and we're trying to figure out, well did the defense attorney know about it and choose not to present it, or did they not even know about it? And so it helps us understand why it wasn't presented and hence its credibility and reliability.

If the goal is the truth, if the defense attorney could have figured it out and didn't, I'm not sure the defendant should have to pay for that.

At the same time, many offices are unwilling to reverse a conviction that was otherwise fairly attained simply because the defense attorney may not have been operating at the height of the profession:

If I'm looking at a case and I'm reading a transcript and like, oh my gosh. This guy fell asleep at the wheel . . . it certainly plays in but I'm not going to be in a position where I'm going to be conceding or rolling over on ineffective assistance. Unless the claim is right, I'm going to try to find something else. . . .

Ultimately, CRUs viewed as sincere will be willing to review due process claims using a “totality of the circumstances” standard for case review, focusing on what actually happened to end in a just result. This is true even if, or perhaps *especially* if, a rigid judicial process might have led to a different result.

“Conviction Integrity” and Cases That Lack Conclusive Evidence of Guilt.

Perhaps the truest measure distinguishing a sincere CRU from a CRINO is the approach the Unit takes to cases that lack conclusive evidence of guilt, but likewise lack clear-cut evidence of innocence. In such cases, the CRU finds itself in an uncomfortable middle ground, with the prosecutor conducting the review conceding that the conviction lacks strength and may not add up to conclusive guilt, while also recognizing that the facts are far from establishing actual innocence. In such a situation, should the CRU move to vacate the conviction?

While many CRUs refused to comment on such a scenario in the absence of case specifics, most appear to agree on two important points. First, they agree that it is possible to lose faith in a conviction’s accuracy without being convinced of an individual’s innocence. Second, and perhaps more controversially, they agree that in such instances, the appropriate action for the CRU is to seek to vacate the conviction and work with petitioner or petitioner’s counsel to renegotiate, or potentially retry the case.

Cases where . . . you're going to have new evidence that may not point to actual innocence, but there's so many problems with the conviction. I guess the best way to put it is I don't want to put the good name of my office on that conviction. We may agree to just say look, we're not necessarily saying this person's innocent, but we're going to set aside the conviction in the interest of justice because X, Y, and Z. . . . As we look in the future as these cases are going to come forward, we're not going to necessarily see those black and white "oh my gosh we thought it was him, but it was actually him" [cases]. It's going to be a lot more muddy than that, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't act. If there's a case where it's not black and white and this person's actually innocent, but the water's so muddy so to speak that we wouldn't want to put our name on that case, we would still act.

A prosecutor from another large CRU agrees:

Other cases are not necessarily going to get to that actual innocence finally, but you've now learned enough that it just undermines your confidence in the outcome. What happens in those cases, most of the time, you may not get an actual innocence finding, but relief is going to be granted and so the case is going to come back for retrial and it's going to get dismissed because nobody wants to touch it with a 10 foot pole.

Jackie Lacey, District Attorney for Los Angeles County, espoused a similar view during her announcement of the Los Angeles CRU, suggesting the potential emergence of this view as a majority view: "[i]f the committee decides the office has lost faith in the conviction, my office will seek to have the conviction vacated."

The decision of when to dismiss all charges and when to retry the petitioner is challenging, and is made on a potentially confusing, case-by-case basis:

Sometimes, we are sorry, we just don't have the answers. We are going to have old cases, old memories, old files, different times, different everything. . . . It's not as easy as you think to say, this person is innocent. It's so difficult. . . .

Let's say we've got some pretty strong evidence that this person is entitled to a new trial, just based on retesting; we retested the evidence and . . . it's enough reasonable doubt that . . . this [conviction] should have been prevented. It's newly discovered and should have been presented at trial, because it could be outcome-determinative. That's when we send back for a new trial. We can't tell. It's not clear enough for us to say total vindication, but it's clear enough for us to say, it's entitled to a trial. . . . [But] in some cases, we looked at it and said it was just so screwed up that justice demands we release them.

It is reasonable to expect that prosecutors and defense attorneys may not agree on the appropriate resolution to be reached in cases where neither guilt nor innocence has been proven conclusively. It is precisely for this reason that these cases are the true marks of "conviction integrity." CRU heads and DAs should know that the way in which they assess and act upon these cases will be a deciding factor in how their CRU, and their approach to conviction integrity is ultimately judged by thoughtful observers. A CRINO will be seen in offices that reflexively upholds convictions in all but the most extreme cases of innocence, while a sincere CRU will examine the case with fresh eyes, consider (a) the likelihood of guilt

and (b) the likely sentence for the case if tried today along with (c) the sentence already served by the convicted individual, and will decide which of the three options above is the best course of action, communicating his or her decision to defense counsel along with its rationale. Such decision-making need not result in a decision to vacate the conviction, but must treat the defendant as part of the very community the prosecutor is trying to protect.

Collaborative Case Review

CRUs have reached widely varying conclusions about whether to include petitioner or petitioner's counsel in the conduct of a case review. On one extreme are the jurisdictions that simply take a petition and conduct an internal investigation, reach a conclusion, and inform petitioner of the result. On the other a few CRUs will conduct joint witness interviews with petitioner's counsel under certain circumstances. Most CRUs fall somewhere between these two extremes.

Criminal prosecutions are inherently adversarial, and the collaborative navigation of a post-conviction review is tricky, particularly while the petitioner to the CRU has ongoing appeals. Given this, it is no surprise that a CRU might give the petitioner no role other than initiating a request for the CRU's review. As one CRU head put it:

We would absolutely follow the rules of discovery. [Petitioners] want more of a collaborative effort. I'm not so sure we're ready for that. And I'm not so sure that that's necessarily the best way to go.

Offices that have not embraced petitioner's participation in the CRU's review of the case point out that the role of investigating a case to determine actual innocence is no different than what prosecutors typically do at the start of criminal cases, and the CRU can conduct its investigation in the same way. If so, it is no more necessary to engage external participation or petitioner's input than it would be to engage external participation during the investigational phase of any other case, and there can be objectivity without the specific addition of a defense-oriented voice. These CRUs often also point out that engaging outsiders in the process might waive privileges, etc. that could affect pending appeals:

[Our] process of review was a confidential one, in which [the CRU] did not share information with anyone but initiated the gathering of information. In particular, [the CRU] did not reach out to prosecutors [of the underlying cases], because they did not want to risk tainting any pending appeals. Few defense attorneys were interested or involved; most had moved on to other cases and didn't even share information about their former clients' cases.

More flexible CRUs will permit petitioner's counsel to act as a participant in the case investigation, due to a perceived potential benefit in having petitioner's counsel locate, interview, and/or discuss issues around evidence presented by potential witnesses or items of evidence:

[W]hen we do open a full investigation . . . what we're trying to do is establish a proper investigation where they tell us what they have or we tell them what we have. If they are part of it, everything that we have, we will do interviews jointly with them. We will give them the substance of whatever interview that we've done. We will disclose to them all of the paper that we're able to garner to make comparisons to see whether trial counsel got all the same paperwork that we now have in our possession. We are

obligated if we find anything that is exculpatory in nature during our investigations to report it immediately to the court and we will give it to them simultaneously.

Other CRUs are willing to hear from the petitioner, but do not allow an external voice in the CRU's deliberations or assessments of the case. Both the Manhattan DA and the Middlesex County (MA) DA permit petitioner's counsel to present to the CRU's investigation team, and encourage petitioner's communication with the investigators throughout their process. The petitioner may assist the investigation team in responding to follow-up questions from that committee, and may present multiple times to the review committee. Their review committees, however, are made up entirely of internal members of the DA's Office and makes the final recommendation for action by the DA.

The willingness to include external participants in the case review is not limited to petitioner or petitioner's counsel, extending also to other agencies who may have information relevant to the CRU's investigation. CRUs all agree that they would consult external agencies or individuals as necessary to get information, though CRUs who spoke on the topic tended to view the need to engage with outside agencies in conviction review cases to be more administratively complex and challenging, and described the typical response as standoffish at best from the other agencies, who "hate" the process and see little potential upside in the time investment necessary to help investigate a possible error.

Many CRUs will conduct their own independent investigation, but will confer with petitioner or counsel before making a formal recommendation to the DA or an external panel. These CRUs see potential value that can be brought to an investigation by the petitioner, both in terms of identifying and securing useful pieces of evidence and in terms of interpreting potentially conflicting pieces of evidence so that an accurate and nuanced narrative is being constructed that is supported by all of the available evidence. In addition, involving petitioner's counsel often reduces any impulse they may otherwise have to tell petitioner's story to the media. In addition, the concern that an adversarial "mini trial" might result if petitioner's counsel is involved seems to be largely unfulfilled in practice:

That's something that I changed my mind on that. I went 180 [degrees]. Initially I had determined that I wasn't going to do that just because I thought I'd be opening up the flood gates. All these attorneys coming in and putting on mini trials, but that hasn't happened. We've done it a couple of times where I think it's actually been healthy. I'm certainly open to that. If it got to the point where it was becoming ... The people were coming in putting on mini trials, then we'd have to revisit it. Right now, it seems to work well so I'm open to doing that.

[CRU Requirements for Waiver of Petitioner's Rights Under Appeal](#)

Tolling Agreements. Whether one views the CRU's investigative role as collaborative or independent, it would be counterintuitive and counterproductive for CRU review to penalize the legitimate claims of a petitioner in any way. Accordingly, the CRU's case review should be separate and apart from any ongoing habeas petition activities, and CRUs should be willing to appear before the appropriate courts of record and request a tolling order from the judge that will ensure that the petitioner's participation in the CRU process will not jeopardize any other rights he or she might have in a habeas/post-conviction review process.

Attorney-Client Privilege.

One of the more contentious policies adopted by a small group of CRUs (see figure xx) is the requirement that petitioner waive his or her attorney/client privilege as a prerequisite to CRU review.

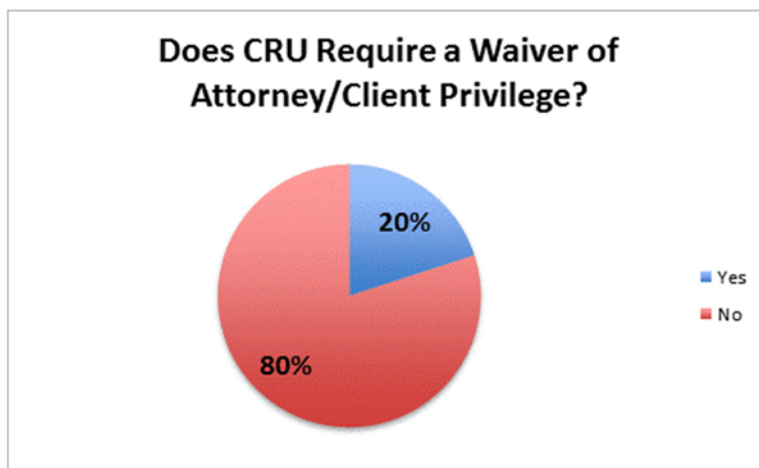


Figure xx: Waiver of Attorney/Client Privilege (n)15)

Offices requiring a waiver see a fundamental fairness directed to ascertaining the truth that corresponds well to the stated goal of the CRU, since the waiver is in the service of allowing the CRU investigators to speak to anyone, including petitioner’s attorneys, who can help in the search for the truth – which may be different than a search to prove the petitioner’s innocence.

One CRU head whose jurisdiction requires a waiver of attorney/client privilege explained their position this way:

We [ask for] a waiver to make it easier for us to look into it, because it would be unlikely that a trial defense attorney would talk to us unless the attorney-client privilege is waived. . . . The waiver is not for the purpose of investigating more crimes. The purpose is to help us look into the claim presented by that person. So it's a combination. I think it works well. . . . [to get] a notarized document from [petitioner] consenting to the waiver of privilege.”

Other offices frame the question as one of equality and objectivity. If prosecutors are going to put resources to bear on a fact-based investigation of a closed conviction, and if they are required to share all exculpatory information, the logic goes, isn’t it reasonable to ensure that the petitioner is operating in good faith too, and is not hiding *inculpatory* information behind attorney/client privilege?

I mean, I think if we're gonna, I think if we're truly undertaking a fact finding effort to find out the truth about something, it should be open on both sides. And I know the law doesn't mandate that, but I would expect sort of fairness on the other side. I would hope that somebody would not be bringing me a particular piece of evidence to try to suggest that somebody is innocent but then hiding other evidence.

Not surprisingly, requiring a petitioner claiming actual innocence to waive a constitutional protection as an entry fee for a factual review of his case does not please defense counsel, who are hesitant to waive

privilege beyond the CRU review and who worry that the petitioners' waiver might lead to the disclosure of incriminatory information regarding other, unrelated criminal acts.

These concerns are valid, and some CRUs have shown a willingness to meet defense counsel halfway on the issue. The protocols of Oneida County (NY), for example, state:

Where the need arises, a defendant may be required by the Committee to waive attorney/client privilege in writing in order that the defense attorney(s) who originally represented the defendant may be interviewed as to any admissions or other disclosures made by the defendant during the pendency of the original case. Failure of a defendant to consent to such a waiver may result in a discontinuation of the re-investigation where such information is reasonably necessary to resolve the claim.

With this language, Oneida effectively limits the extent of the waiver to specific instances where it may be useful to the petitioner's case review.

Other offices take a more aggressive approach. The NCIIC, for example, requires "[t]he waiver of procedural safeguards and privileges . . . for all matters relating to the claimant's innocence claim," though the Commission notes that petitioner's waiver "does not create an affirmative duty on the part of the attorney to disclose." The situation is more pronounced when the full Commission meets to review a recommendation from the investigators:

The Commission may compel the testimony of any witness. If a witness asserts his or her privilege against self-incrimination in a proceeding under this Article, the Commission chair . . . may order the witness to testify or produce other information if the chair first determines that the witness's testimony will likely be material to reach a correct factual determination in the case at hand.

This language may be helpful in getting information from witnesses to the underlying case, it can easily run afoul of petitioner's 5th Amendment rights. On the other hand, the NCIIC's compulsion is limited only to the case at hand, and is not intended to punish the petitioner in other (or previous) settings. It includes a limited grant of immunity for the individual taking part in the Commission's proceedings:

The order shall prevent a prosecutor from using the compelled testimony, or evidence derived therefrom, to prosecute the witness for previous false statements made under oath by the witness in prior proceedings. Once granted, the immunity shall apply throughout all proceedings conducted pursuant to this Article.

A third approach, embraced by multiple CRUs, is to request but not require a waiver of attorney/client privilege, while noting that the petitioner's refusal to waive the privilege may be viewed by the CRU as a negative factor when reviewing petitioner's case for actual innocence.

Whatever the rationale, requiring a waiver of attorney/client privilege is likely to have a chilling effect on the willingness of some petitioners to engage with the CRU. Defense attorneys in jurisdictions requiring the waivers will often actively counsel potential petitioners *not* to apply to his jurisdiction's CRU, proceeding via post-conviction appeal rather than waiving attorney/client privilege. Thus, the practical effect of requiring petitioners to waive attorney/client privilege as a condition of conducting a case

review is a return to the adversarial system, undercutting the value of the CRU as a force for a collaborative search for truth.

Petitioner/CRU Collaboration Agreements.

Given the new challenges created – for all parties – by the extrajudicial CRU investigatory process, some CRUs have begun experimenting with collaborative confidentiality agreements that outline the roles and limitations of various stakeholders in the CRU process. Such agreements could address areas of potential conflict (such as the waiver of privilege described above), and provide other mutual assurances of good faith that can enhance the CRU process. For example, some offices use written agreements with defense counsel to restrict the ability of either party to discuss the case with CRU investigators or the media or other external participants. Such agreements are far from the norm to date, having been considered by only a few of the offices we interviewed, but they are promising:

I have had cases where the defense attorney would call and ask me to look at a case. I'd agree to look at it and at the same time he would call the newspaper who would then write an article about our review and put it on the front page of the paper. They have a victim calling me screaming what's going on, before I've even had a chance to look at the case. That's a problem. I think the [confidentiality agreement] is a better way to handle it.

Confidentiality agreements are not necessarily without their concerns in a CRU context. Some DAs worry that a written contract between the parties on the conduct of a CRU investigation would simply create a new obligation between the DA's Office and the petitioner that could conceivably lead to a new course of action, this time in civil court, between the parties, while defense counsel may react with astonishment that their request for moral justice and an honest case review CRU is greeted by a legal document seeking to put further limitations on their ability to advocate for their client. Done properly, however, collaboration agreements may act to provide the parties with a framework for building a mutual trust that allows the case review to flourish, to the benefit of all.

The CRU that has given the most thought to the use of confidentiality agreements with petitioner's counsel is the Kings County (NY) District Attorney's Office, which covers Brooklyn. Like other offices, the Brooklyn CRU is cognizant of the potential imbalance that can result in an investigation when petitioner refuses to allow the CRU to speak with his original defense counsel; at the same time, Brooklyn does not believe that it is appropriate to ask a petitioner who is claiming actual innocence to waive constitutional protections as an "entry fee" to search for the truth.

Their solution is a thoughtful example of the benefit of flexibility that the CRU enables. Rather than adopt a strict rule requiring waiver of privilege, or allowing a withholding of privilege to interfere with a full investigation where warranted, Brooklyn presents a "cooperation agreement" to the petitioner as a choice. As CRU Co-Lead Mark Hale explains it:

When we do open a full investigation . . . we seek a cooperative agreement with defense counsel. That includes a limited waiver as to the defendant's privilege with their former attorneys, which they have no reason not to sign – particularly if they're accusing their former defense attorney of misconduct. . . . What we're trying to do is establish a proper investigation where they tell us what they have or we tell them what we have. Now, they don't have to enter into that. If they don't enter into that, it doesn't

mean that we're not going to do a full investigation on the case. It just means that they won't be part of it. . . . If they are part of it, everything that we have, we will do interviews jointly with them. We will give them the substance of whatever interview that we've done. We will disclose to them all of the paper that we're able to garner to make comparisons to see whether trial counsel got all the same paperwork that we now have in our possession. We are obligated if we find anything that is exculpatory in nature during our investigations to report it immediately to the court and we will give it to them simultaneously. There's all kinds of advantages for them to do that. We hope that everybody plays by the rules. We tell them that if they withhold things or if they go . . . to the press about the progress of our investigation, that all bets are off and then they're out, but we want it to be as open as we can with them and let them know every stage of the game. One caveat to that is, and it happens on occasion, that we won't share with them things that will endanger a particular individual's life. That situation does arise on occasion, but for all other purposes, we want them to be a partner in the investigation as opposed to an adversary.

(Emphasis added). The conditional cooperative agreement model used in Brooklyn elegantly underscores the advantages to both sides of articulating a relationship structure that might feel unfamiliar to two historically adversarial parties, but is essential to changing the search for the truth into a collaborative process. The CRU gets additional information to aid in its totality of the circumstances review, as well as freedom from headline-driven advocacy and media involvement. On the other side, petitioner gets improved and active participation in the investigation, which may provide a material benefit to the search, and any investigational information generated is given to the petitioner for use in a later appeals process.

[Training for CRU Personnel](#)

Most CRUs handle the re-investigation of cases in the same fashion that they handle the investigation of cases pre-indictment. The CRU appoints a lead prosecutor to direct the investigation, and provides access to one or more investigators to assist with the process. A CRU case review can be meaningfully different from a pre-indictment or pre-trial case investigation. First, cases under CRU review are inherently cases where errors are being alleged. Thus, it is useful for the individuals participating in the case review to be familiar with the types of errors that have been known to occur in criminal cases, and to receive training on the situations in which those errors have occurred, to help them identify potential “weak spots” in the underlying case that might have contributed to a mistaken finding of guilt.

A second difference between a case review conducted by a CRU and an open case investigation is one of contemporaneousness. The CRU review can be thought of as the inverse of a “cold case,” often occurring years, and perhaps even decades after conviction. Thus, an essential preliminary hurdle of CRU investigations is the identification and location of all case-related information, including documents, potential witnesses, biological materials or information, etc. Interestingly, it is the non-prosecutorial NCIC that sees this most clearly:

We have a whole process by which we ask an agency to search now. That has developed over time. We begin with asking them, just simply asking them to search themselves and having them report back the details of the search. And along with that, we need their evidence storage policies and we need to know if they have any unaccounted-for

evidence, and that's what we're really looking for. So if an agency, for example, searches and we can see how their evidence is stored and how their evidence logs are, (and we might tour the facility to find that out), and they have no unaccounted-for evidence, then we have to trust that search. But if they search and then we find out that they have evidence that's just unaccounted for, you know, unlabeled boxes, or things that they don't know where they are, or missing evidence, then we're going to have to search ourselves. So we're asking them to do affidavits throughout that process. We're asking them to put under oath how they searched, where they searched. What are their policies now, what were their policies at the time of the crime, and do they have any unaccounted for evidence? If they can't give us complete confirmation of all of those things, we'll ask them to go back. We start with them, but if they ultimately can't do that, we're going to do our request to search ourselves. But we're going to do it very nicely, and we're going to send them proposed procedures to search, work with them on how that want that to be changed or how they want that to be done. Whoever they want to be there with us. If they don't want us touching evidence. . . . All of those things, we'll iron out those proposed procedures with them. And if they won't allow it, then we'll have to go to a court. But we haven't had to so far. We've had people say no. But then once we get the proposed procedures there, and we talk with them, and they see what we're looking for, and they understand why we need to do it, they understand they have unaccounted for evidence, and they have always let us come in.

Gathering such information can be quite challenging, and training its members on techniques to locate the information has had a substantial impact on many investigations:

The [NCIIC] has successfully located physical evidence and/or files in 18 cases when previous efforts by other agencies had resulted in conclusions that the evidence or files had been destroyed or lost. In some of those cases, the prior searches had been court ordered with findings of fact made regarding the missing evidence. In 2014, the Commission successfully located missing evidence in four cases. Of those cases, two resulted in exonerations, one is pending as a federal habeas corpus motion, and another case continues to be actively investigated.⁴⁷

While several of the employees of the NCIIC have graduated from law school, none has prosecutorial or investigational experience, suggesting that the skills necessary to fully investigate CRU cases are (a) trainable and (b) not typically taught by DA's Offices to the attorneys participating in CRU reviews. Providing the training necessary to ensure that a person knowledgeable about the precise type of investigation that is necessary in a CRU setting, is something that each CRU should consider for every investigation.

None of the CRUs we spoke to have a formal training program to assist prosecutors or investigators participating in the CRU with the conduct of case reviews. This information would likely be helpful for *all* attorneys within an office, but it should be mandatory for individuals involved in CRU case reviews.

⁴⁷ This paragraph provides an excellent example of the value of tracking and reporting on a CRU's activities to enable optimization of the CRU process.

Revisiting “Completed” CRU Reviews

Another area of flexibility in CRUs is the standard to be used to “reopen” a CRU case that the Unit has previously reviewed. Those CRUs that have considered the question are uniform that a decision not to proceed with a specific petition is not a one-time, permanent refusal “with prejudice” that bars a future review. Rather, rejection places the petition into a “parking lot” of sorts. If at any later date the petitioner were to gather additional evidence sufficient to meet the CRU’s investigational standard, the petition could be reopened.

Some CRUs mentioned a slight caveat to this policy, designed to minimize repeated requests for unproductive additional reviews: while the Unit’s standard for its first acceptance of the case for review is very broad, permitting the review of facts known but not used by petitioner’s counsel at the time of trial, subsequent reviews would require a more traditional definition of “newly discovered” that requires evidence not previously known to the petitioner as of the time of the most recent CRU review. So long as the totality of the circumstances standard is employed by the CRU, such a rule should not materially damage a good faith petitioner.

CRUs and Forensic Science

For the most part, questions regarding the scientific testing of biological or other evidence in a CRU context is handled in the same manner as cases outside the CRU. Prosecutors will test evidence that they feel will conclusively resolve questions of guilt or innocence, while defense attorneys and petitioners often seek to test much more broadly. In addition, the parties often disagree about the probative value of the evidence yielded by one test or another. Budget and utilization constraints are as real in the CRU setting as in day-to-day practice, making policies for the use of forensic science in CRU investigations a very subjective one for the CRU as well as for the petitioner.

Sincere CRUs are typically willing to test evidence if (a) the evidence has been newly discovered; (b) the evidence has not previously been tested; and/or (c) the testing technique proposed is a material advance in specificity or sensitivity to prior testing methods used. Beyond that, the decision whether, and how to test specific pieces of evidence is a more subjective inquiry. Some CRUs are very willing to conduct tests requested by the petitioner:

I know there's financial concerns there and the people out at the crime lab probably don't like me, but my position is if somebody wants to have something tested or re-tested, we're going to do it. We have done the testing] on every single occasion because it's either going to tell you nothing, or it'll confirm the conviction, or God forbid it tells you you have the wrong person. Either way, you want to know.

Another CRU leader also explained why the office might not test forensic evidence:

The only time we don't test is (a) there is nothing to test. . . . if the evidence that is destroyed, sorry we can't test it. We'd love to, we can't. Or (b) where it's really not giving you this positive, like in a rape allegation where he didn't actually physically penetrate her, he just held her wrist. He's still guilty of rape. He doesn't like that because he didn't do it, if you will. Well, okay, I'm not going to do DNA testing. . . . There is nothing to test that's going to be probative. We are going to object only in situations like that. Otherwise, we are testing.

In another example of the potential benefit to involving external participants to provide great independence and flexibility, at least one CRU has a process in place that allows its investigators to discuss the benefits of various tests with an independent (i.e., external) forensic expert; if the expert suggests that testing would be valuable, then the CRU approves the test.

Several offices take an economically pragmatic view: the DA's Office will pay for testing that meets the prosecutor's bar of bearing on innocence; they will permit additional testing at the request of the petitioner, at petitioner's expense. As one prosecutor succinctly stated, "I'll let the defendant test anything he/she wants, if he pays for it."

Allegations of Prosecutorial or Law Enforcement Misconduct

One concern often raised in the context of a CRU investigation is whether allegations of official misconduct will be reviewed fairly and in good faith by the DA's Office. It is difficult to know whether the "epidemic of Brady violations" seen by some observers of the criminal justice system⁴⁸ is caused by an increase in prosecutorial misconduct, an increase in allegations of prosecutorial misconduct, and/or, an improvement in our ability to detect such violations. It is also difficult to tell in many contexts whether the failure of the prosecution to turn over material exculpatory evidence is a failure of record-keeping, a failure of interpretation of the subjective "materiality" standard, or an attempt to gain advantage in a criminal case, though all of these situations are currently lumped together as "prosecutorial misconduct."

Cases progressing through the post-conviction appeals process often involve newly discovered evidence, and the defense by necessity focuses on what was "known" by police or prosecutors during the underlying investigation and prosecution.⁴⁹ Thus, it is predictable that a CRU will be confronted with questions and allegations regarding the actions of the original investigator(s) and prosecutor(s). DAs and CRU leaders can be sure that petitioners and the defense bar, as well as the media, will watch carefully to see how such situations are handled, and will use these situations as a benchmark for the independence and transparency of the CRU and the Office as a whole.

While very few CRUs admitted to identifying an intentional case of prosecutorial misconduct in any of their investigations to date, all CRUs were uniform in how they proposed to handle such an issue: the CRUs stated that they would step away from an investigation of whether a prosecutor's conduct in a CRU case was inappropriate. The CRU would refer information about the potential misconduct to an appropriate official as set forth by the DA's policies on misconduct, and would continue its fact-based review of the case in question. None, however, have a written policy supporting this process, or any process for handling cases involving official misconduct.⁵⁰

Despite rampant public skepticism, prosecutors were uniformly confident that their objectivity in case review would be unaffected in a case where, for example, a prosecutorial violation of the requirement

⁴⁸ CITE to Kozinsky

⁴⁹ In some sense, this is the reverse of the inquiry conducted by many CRUs in looking at ineffective assistance of counsel claims – the question is not whether the information was available to law enforcement or the prosecutor, but whether the individual was actually aware of and influenced by the information in the adjudication of the case.

⁵⁰ The NCIC enabling statute does provide that the underlying case may be removed from its original jurisdiction as a court reviews how best to address the error identified in the case. North Carolina General Statutes §15A-1469(a1).

of Brady by one of their current co-workers was alleged. Many also referenced an ethical obligation to disclose any Brady information to petitioner:

If there was a claim that Brady material had been withheld, we would certainly investigate that to know whether or not that was in fact that case. If it were in fact the case, we would divulge the Brady material. We would involve the judiciary and determine what the next appropriate step was.

While the CRU may identify instances of prosecutorial or police misconduct, the ability to administer discipline for such actions does not rest within the CRU. Rather, the CRU is limited to communicating the evidence of misconduct to the DA, or the appropriate executive committee or the office's General Counsel appointed by the DA, for review and further action. This is true even within the NCIIC, which is required to disclose information about potential prosecutorial misconduct to "the appropriate authority" for such matters (without defining which authority that might be).

For offices that only review cases for factual accuracy (as opposed to cases where actual innocence is predicated on the due process argument of withholding evidence known at the time of trial), Brady presents an interesting conundrum. While the conviction may have been secured in part because of the office's own error or misconduct, the later CRU review may still conclude that the conviction is factually accurate. A few offices went a step farther, suggesting that evidence of Brady violations might increase their willingness to vacate convictions with prejudice given the Office's more direct role in depriving the defendant of rights.

While some view the CRU's inability to enforce disciplinary action for official misconduct as evidence of a CRINO, it should be pointed out that the separation of discipline for reckless or intentional misconduct from the fact-based event review is actually a best practice in many industries, including healthcare and aviation,⁵¹ and is expressly recommended in the "Just Culture Event Review" procedures recommended to the U.S. Attorney General by the National Commission on Forensic Science.⁵² Separating issues of discipline and blame from the investigation of what actually happened during the commission of a crime encourages the participation of knowledgeable participants in the events. Conversely, prosecutors, police officers and witnesses with knowledge of the case might be more reticent if their participation would cause another to be punished. In this way, ensuring that the CRU is not a disciplinary body actually helps the petitioner and his/her case review,⁵³ without limiting the ability of appropriate entities (e.g., the DA or State Bar for prosecutors, or an internal affairs or disciplinary board, for police) to ensure accountability for intentional misconduct.

CRU Transparency

The evaluation of a CRU has both a direct and an indirect component. The direct evaluation looks at the freedom that a CRU is given by the DA to review cases previously adjudicated by the DA's Office where errors are alleged, and the policies and procedures that it has developed to conduct and act upon those

⁵¹ See footnote 10 above.

⁵² National Commission on Forensic Science, Directive Recommendation: Root Cause Analysis (RCA) In Forensic Science, referred to United States Attorney General on August 11, 2015. Available freely [here](#), and attached as Appendix ___.

⁵³ Cite to NCFS and other publications.

case reviews. The indirect evaluation takes a wider lens, and considers the inherent skepticism of the CRU enterprise from the defense bar, the political currency of the CRU to the current DA and his/her potential challengers, and the utility of the CRU to the community as a whole.

Independence and flexibility are important factors in each of these assessments, providing insight into how the CRU conducts its activities, and how those activities are perceived by external stakeholders. The third category on which governmental actors reviewing their own past actions for error can and will be judged is transparency. The ability to see what actions a CRU is taking, and to understand the rationales behind those actions, is how communities can verify their CRU's good faith, or validate their worst suspicions. The CRU's decisions on what to publicize and what to shield from the public eye impact the willingness of petitioners to use the CRU, and inform the public's judgment of whether the CRU is engaging in good faith reviews of allegations of error, or is simply an effort to curry public favor lacking in legitimacy and integrity. Assuming that the CRU is sincere, transparency should also allow DAs to make more powerful and thoughtful arguments to their County Commissioners about the need to prioritize funds to the CRU over time.

For all of these reasons, while due deference should be given to the need for confidentiality of case records, safety for potential witnesses, and the emotional needs of victims of crime and their families and friends, it is also important for DAs and CRU leaders to maximize the reasonable transparency of CRU activity and to publicize the CRU's impact within the Office and within the larger community.

[Publishing CRU Policies and Procedures](#)

Jurisdictions with CRUs have wrestled with a threshold question regarding transparency: should the policies and practices of the CRU be in writing, and publicly available? Several of the most active and established CRUs (e.g., Brooklyn, Dallas, Santa Clara) have very few, if any written policies and procedures. Other offices (e.g., Cuyahoga, Manhattan, Oneida) have detailed and public protocols and procedures available for all to review.

Having policies and procedures makes it easy for the public and potential petitioners and defense attorneys to know what to expect in the process and provide observers with concrete information for CRU assessment and accountability. On the other hand, written policies and procedures create two potential downsides for a CRU.

First, prosecutors express concern that written policies and procedures might limit their ability to act effectively on cases where errors are identified. Even a brief analysis of the 1,700+ exonerations catalogued in the National Registry of Exonerations makes clear that each case presents a unique fact pattern and underlying scenario that led to the erroneous conviction. It is reasonable to assume that written policies, no matter how well written, will not account for every situation that arises, and poorly written protocols or procedures may paradoxically serve to *constrain* the prosecutor's ability to use his or her full discretion to advocate for the best result based on a totality of the circumstances at the time of the review.

The post-conviction courts and the appeals courts have to set standards in an adversarial [setting]. You cross this line or you're below this line and it's either good or it's not good. That, to us, limits tremendously our flexibility, because what we talk about is not really the legalities of things, we're talking about the use of prosecutorial discretion. . . . That takes us outside the realm of what . . . the judicial process does, why

in an extrajudicial fashion we can form our own standards, which again are not bright line standards. . . . It has to be to the extent where this is all going to be subjective.

[We are] in the process of making written goals, directives and policies. Necessarily, those have to be somewhat amorphous because the second you put in bright line stuff then you create another layer of litigation which is something that we just don't want to get into because it doesn't help us. Sure, it's great for defense litigants but we don't want [petitioners] to be defense litigants, we want them to be investigatory partners.

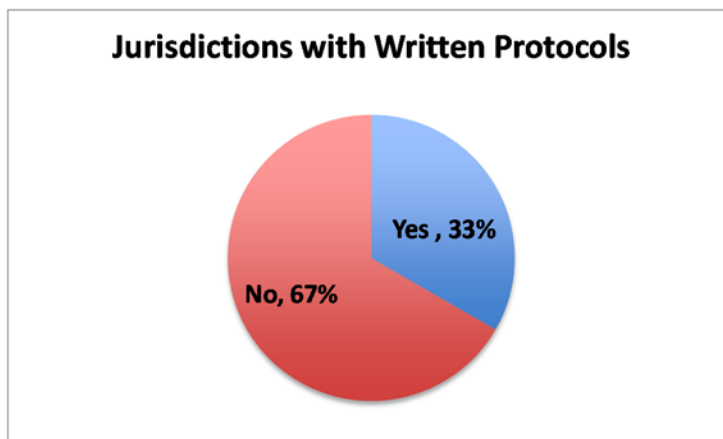


Figure xx. CRUs with Written Protocols (n=15)

Written policies and procedures can be used to hold a CRU to its statements, but their existence in an adversarial atmosphere can create a concern on even well-intentioned prosecutors that any deviation from the written policies or procedures – substantive or clerical, real or imagined – may be the foundation for further litigation from the petitioner for review.

It seems clear that CRUs in offices like Brooklyn (14 exonerations), or Dallas (35 exonerations), are serious about conviction review. At the same time, for experienced prosecutors and legal writers to claim that written protocols constrain their activities seems disingenuous to some. Drafting protocols with non-absolute language and exception clauses for special circumstances that protect the flexibility of the CRU is easily done, and would provide myriad benefits to the CRU.

One example of this drafting can be seen in the written policies of Oneida County (NY) with regard to the scope of the CRU's review. The protocol is clear without limiting the flexibility of the DA or the Unit:

While the scope of the review of the CIP⁵⁴ is ordinarily limited to claims of actual innocence, the CIP reserves the right in extraordinary circumstances, to conduct its review in cases where it is claimed that the level of offense for which the defendant stands convicted is overwhelmingly disproportionate to the criminal conduct that actually occurred. The Committee serving under the District Attorney, shall have complete discretion as to whether, and in what instances, any such non-innocence claims of over-conviction shall be reviewed.

The transparency and accountability inherent in publishing written policies and procedures for conviction reviews should help a DA convince petitioners, defense counsel, judges, and the community

⁵⁴ Oneida County calls its unit a Conviction Integrity Program, or CIP.

that the CRU is an honest, good faith endeavor. Written policies and procedures also provide an opportunity for feedback from external stakeholders and the community, which will both improve the policies and increase the goodwill generated by the CRU while bringing some who were skeptical over to support the CRU.

While Brooklyn, Dallas and Santa Clara stand for the proposition that a CRU may have credibility without written protocols, the benefit of transparency may be most beneficial to newer CRUs, which are likely to be more vulnerable in the court of public opinion. One of the CRUs that participated in this review lacks a direct reporting line to the DA, lacks dedicated personnel (including the head of the CRU, whose responsibilities exist on top of an active and high-profile caseload), and has not yet recommended any exonerations, including for individuals who have subsequently been exonerated in habeas proceedings. This office may be articulating a sincerely held view supporting conviction review for cases of actual innocence, but without more, the growing claims that have begun throughout the jurisdiction and elsewhere that the unit is actually a CRINO will continue unabated, reducing the unit's utility for the DA's Office in question.

The publication of written policies and procedures also extends a benefit to offices that have not established CRUs, which can review and evaluate the policies and their utility.

What Protocols Should be Committed to Writing? In general, offices should commit protocols to writing that will assist participants in the process of case submission and review with understanding how to interact efficiently, and what to expect in terms of the activities and response of the CRU and the DA's Office. While different offices have handled this in different ways, examples of areas that could benefit from written policies and procedures include:

- Process for claim submission
- Types of cases CRU will/will not accept for review
- Standard of review for initial case acceptance (screening)
- Standard of review for case review
- Standard of review for vacating a conviction
- Who will/will not conduct a case review
- Role of petitioner and petitioner's counsel in case review
- Role of original prosecutor and/or investigator in case review
- Requirements on waiver of attorney/client privilege, or use of a collaboration agreement
- Sharing of information learned/evidence discovered during case review
- Conduct, payment for forensic testing
- Procedures for allegations of government misconduct
- Disclosure of final decision after case review and supporting rationale
- Ability of petitioner to revisit process after final decision

The NCIIC has developed a more extensive set of policies and procedures, going beyond case-related issues into structural and operational concerns:

The human resources policies, all of those that you think of you need for an office, we have all of those. We have office policies on interviews, and that includes safety on an interview. . . . How do we check in? We're going out in the field to lots of different places and we have rules that I need staff to follow when they're doing that. What are the things you can and can't say when you're doing an interview? How are you going to

record it? Who are you going to bring with you? We have a policy on evidence collection that everyone has to follow, all the forms that they have to fill out, the things that they have to do. We have policies we've adopted like the hazardous workplace policies for when we are collecting evidence and things like that. We have what are then, what we call sort of more "go-bys," less formal, these are the best practices that we've seen [in certain situations]. Those types of things, and that's a lot that, again, has been just developed over time and those are things that we're eager to share.

The NCIIC's policies, procedures and protocols – many of which are not published – make clear that while drafting protocols can be a tedious and time-consuming task, carefully written protocols can give clarity, transparency, and legitimacy to the CRU effort, while protecting flexibility and prosecutorial discretion at all times.

[Transparency to Victims of Crime](#)

One of the most challenging and difficult parts of a prosecutor's job is managing each criminal case in a way that considers the complex emotional needs of victims of crime and their families. In the CRU context, the victims' emotions are even more sympathetic. The CRU case review re-examines a tragedy – often a violent trauma – that befell the victims and their families. Opening the case for re-investigation due to a potential error of guilt or innocence forces victims to relive this trauma while reducing the victim's trust in the system. In some cases it may even add to the anguish of a victim or witnesses, who may have unwittingly aided in a mistaken identification or bolstered a shaky (and ultimately inaccurate) case.

At the same time, victims' sense of ownership over the crime – that it is *their* crime, it happened to *them* – and the need to provide justice to them can convey some emotional entitlement to participate in decisions regarding the outcome, especially in a situation where it now appears that the DA's Office may have mishandled it from the start.

In an effort to be mindful of and sensitive to these emotional complexities, many CRUs wait to inform victims of their work until there is something substantial to discuss:

We try to keep [victims] informed. . . . The problem is that when you engage them at an early point of our investigation, they invariably become advocates to not release the person, and sometimes engage counsel to press that. If they have information that is germane in terms of the guilt or innocence of the defendant, as opposed to their belief or what they've been told or what the jury had, we generally will not contact them until we are at the end part of our investigation, where pretty much we know which direction we're going. There again, we don't want them tampering with the process. . . . [T]his isn't about victim impact. This is about whether the person has done it or not.

Other CRUs find their obligations with regard to victims controlled by statute. In California, the issue is governed by the California Victims' Bill of Rights Act of 2008, also known as Marsy's Law. Marsy's Law requires prosecutors' offices to give victims reasonable notice of any court proceeding involving the case(s) in which they were victims, and the opportunity for the victim to reasonably confer with the prosecuting attorney and to be heard at any proceedings related to the case.

The NCIIC has a policy of informing victims upon entry into the "formal inquiry" phase, and permitting the victim (or his/her next of kin if the victim is deceased) the ability to share his/her views throughout

the formal inquiry process. In addition, the Commission will notify victims 30 days prior to the official hearing on the case. Victims are invited to attend with 10 days' notice, and they are immediately informed of the result of the hearing in any event.

The Middlesex County DA has constructed a middle ground between the emotional response of the victim of the underlying crime, and the reality that victims and their emotions matter in addressing errors in the system. Middlesex CRU protocols state that the prosecutor leading the investigation should confer with a Victim Witness Advocate prior to presenting the case to the Committee to determine if, and when, any victim(s) should be notified of review. It is then the responsibility of the Victim Witness Advocate to discuss the case to the specific victims involved in the underlying crime, and give the victims their opportunity to present their views and concerns to the Committee. In this way, the risk that the victims of the underlying crime will have undue influence on the CRU process is minimized, and the presentation of a very difficult emotional issue for the victims is done compassionately by an expert in such conversations.

Transparency of Case Review Process, Decision and Rationale

Even a well-resourced CRU must balance realities of limited resources and the likelihood of success with the unquenchable thirst of a petitioner, almost always incarcerated, to keep pushing for additional testing, investigation, etc. to prove his/her innocence and secure his freedom. Add to that the challenges of finding evidence and witnesses from a case that may be years or decades old, individuals who may not want to acknowledge that the case could have been decided in error, and general skepticism surrounding the fact that the DA is investigating a closed conviction, and the challenge of how, and when, to end an investigation where the conclusion is not to reverse or vacate the conviction becomes clear. The decision to stop reviewing a petition for actual innocence presents a somewhat paradoxical, but important question: in a situation where a petitioner steadfastly maintains his innocence despite some evidence to the contrary, how does a good faith CRU dedicated to ensuring accurate convictions decide when to stop an investigation?

CRUs differ in their answers to this question, from the linear “[w]hen facts deviate from allegations, you stop” to the circular “[w]hen you’re done, you’re done.” Others compared it to the decision of whether to charge or to go to trial, saying that the decision to stop an investigation was based on a multitude of factors that were difficult to define in total:

It's hard to tell. If we get something definitive, certainly in the meantime, then we can act. . . . If they give us their theory of the case and we look at some of the leads and we look at some of the theories that they're putting forward and it's not going anywhere, then we may get to the point at some point where we're just going to decide that there's nothing new here and we're not going to do anything with regard to the conviction.

The best practice for sincere CRUs here may borrow from concepts of procedural justice, which seek to improve judicial listening, respect and empathy for the individuals on their dockets. Similarly, CRUs that truly engage in a collaborative process are likely to get better (i.e., less contentious) outcomes among petitioners or counsel who (a) feel that the CRU has honestly and openly discussed the allegations of error, (b) have been involved in the CRU's process and know what resources have been expended and

what steps have been taken in the service of the investigation, and (c) have received substantive rather than bureaucratic or administrative reasons for not conducting certain testing, etc.

Once a decision not to proceed is made, some CRUs have a practice of providing notification to petitioners in writing, while others communicate more informally, particularly if petitioner is represented by counsel. As in other settings, some CRUs are comfortable sharing the rationale for the cessation of the review: “we’re happy to communicate our findings to defense counsel and listen to their reactions, but more often than not, you’ve made your mind up,” while others choose to be more vague, feeling that a reason is not required for the rejection of a claim, and providing one simply leaves an opening for a persistent petitioner to continue to keep an actual innocence conversation alive longer than is minimally necessary.

Collection and Publication of Metrics and Accomplishments

As stewards of taxpayer funds, it is the responsibility of the DA and CRU head as responsible managers to understand the impact of the CRU. Such information should generally be made available to the public for evaluation and comment.⁵⁵ Such disclosures should benefit the Office and the Unit as well as the community, as they will dispel concerns that the CRU is merely a PR stunt and allow for thoughtful discussion regarding appropriate modifications and agreement among stakeholders over time. The word “should” in the previous sentence, however, looms large. DAs who provide such information are subject to different interpretations of the information from political opponents, the media, and others, and thus it is incumbent upon the defense bar, judges, and the media to understand and support such voluntary steps towards fact-based case review, giving more transparent jurisdictions the benefit of the doubt when evaluating the results.

Tracking the CRU’s activity and determining metrics for its utility can, and should go beyond the number of exonerations that the CRU recommends. While some CRUs have exonerated dozens of individuals and created impressive goodwill in their jurisdictions, a lack of exonerations should not necessarily be viewed as evidence of CRINO. Generating large numbers of exonerations may be more challenging than it seems. Most jurisdictions are smaller and less populated than jurisdictions like Dallas, Santa Clara, and Brooklyn, and thus can be expected to have fewer allegations and instances of error to review. A more reliable approach is to reassure external observers in the jurisdiction of the true intentions of the CRU while making a case to legislators and others about its utility, would be the dissemination of data about the CRU’s activities; examples of what activities might be useful to measure the CRU’s impact are suggested by the annual report of the NCIIC, discussed elsewhere in this paper. The data presented in the NCIIC’s Annual report provides an excellent template that no other CRU that we spoke with has followed, though the data could easily be gathered and provided by each CRU without any danger or injury to specific case investigations, witnesses, victims or next of kin, or other issues around confidentiality.

⁵⁵ As with other disclosures involving criminal cases, individually identifying information should be disclosed with care, if at all, to protect victims and witnesses.

North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission: A Case Study of Independence and Transparency

The CRU with the most independent and transparent structure (though not the most flexible one) is not a “traditional” CRU at all, but rather the state-funded North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission (NCIIC), which effectively serves as a clearinghouse for all post-conviction claims of actual innocence throughout the state, conducting investigations independent of the prosecutors’ offices involved, and making recommendations regarding the claims to a review board and ultimately to a judicial tribunal at which the prosecutors and victims may participate.

The NCIIC has no prosecutors involved in its case reviews, which simultaneously underscores its independence from allegations of prosecutorial bias and makes a strong argument that there is nothing inherently prosecutorial about the skills needed to thoroughly investigate past cases where inaccurate convictions are alleged. Rather, the membership of the NCIIC consists *entirely* of outside perspectives, including:

- One victims’ advocate;
- One criminal defense attorney;
- One member of the public (currently a Commissioner on Urban Planning and Community Economic Development);
- One Sheriff; and
- Two discretionary members appointed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

The staff of the Commission is similarly devoid of prosecutors, consisting of:

- Executive Director
- Associate Director
- Associate Counsel
- Paralegal
- Legal Investigator
- Grant Staff Attorney (paid for by federal grant money for DNA case review)
- Grant Investigator (paid for by federal grant money for DNA case review)

While some members of the NCIIC have law degrees, all view their roles as primarily investigational; they will present their findings to a Judge, and ultimately are requesting a judicial hearing at which the DA’s Office may speak and/or present.

Prior to moving for a judicial hearing, however, the NCIIC consults with its Advisory Board, which is required by law to consist of the following:

- Superior Court Judge
- Sheriff
- Criminal Defense Attorney
- Prosecuting Attorney
- Victim’s Advocate
- Public Member (non-attorney, non-judge)
- Three (3) Discretionary Appointments by the Chief Justice.

The statewide Innocence Commission model should, in theory, allow for centralized (and therefore more plentiful and experienced) case reviews, and those reviews should be at least as objective as reviews conducted by “traditional” CRUs, who are investigating activities within their own offices. But the strategy is not without its potential downsides. First, where traditional CRUs are voluntary activities sponsored by DAs, the NCIIC is a legislative mandate that is being imposed on all prosecutors in North Carolina. It would be surprising if some of those prosecutors did *not* feel that the NCIIC is an undesired intrusion on their work, a Monday morning quarterback intent on exposing the office’s mistakes. Without any ownership of the review, these prosecutors are more likely to bristle at the NCIIC’s requests, and as elected officials outside of a reporting chain linked to the NCIIC, they are more able to oppose a recommendation of dismissal or vacation of charges than other CRUs.

Another potential weakness of the NCIIC is its inability to implement any of its recommendations, including its findings of actual innocence. Rather, an NCIIC makes a recommendation regarding each specific case to the Commission as a whole. “If five or more of the eight voting members of the Commission conclude there is sufficient evidence of factual innocence to merit judicial review, the case shall be referred to the senior resident superior court judge in the district of original jurisdiction by filing with the clerk of court the opinion of the Commission with supporting findings of fact, as well as the record in support of such opinion . . .” From here, the court appoints a panel of three judges, none of whom have been previously involved in the case, and a hearing is held for the NCIIC, the DA in question and petitioner’s counsel (who may be court-appointed if the petition to the CRU was filed *pro se*). Only if the three-judge panel unanimously feels that the convicted person is innocent by clear and convincing evidence can the petitioner be released with the dismissal of all or any charge. There are multiple opportunities among the many steps between the NCIIC’s initial recommendation and an actual finding of exoneration for a savvy DA to delay or disrupt the case review process.

The transparency of the NCIIC, however, provides a way to judge whether the cynical view in the preceding paragraph is occurring. The NCIIC posts on its web site an annual report prescribed by the North Carolina legislature.⁵⁶ The report, which includes the Commission’s case filter, allows the general public to review the size and scope of the actual innocence problem in North Carolina. The top of the filter may be seen as a reasonable proxy for the number of people incarcerated in the state who believe they should be exonerated; the middle can be a proxy for the percentage of the believers who have articulated colorable claims of innocence; and the bottom, the exonerations, shows the actual impact of the NCIIC and provides a group of cases ripe for careful root cause analysis and dissemination of recommendations for improvements throughout the criminal justice system in the jurisdiction.

The Annual Report also provides the following key information about the Commission:

- Commission members and staff;
- A description of activities, including four cases that led to judicial hearings exonerating individuals based on actual innocence. In these cases, which are matters of public record, all documents used in the Commission’s exoneration hearing are posted on the NCIIC website;
- Annual case statistics:
 - New claims of actual innocence: 180
 - Average number of new claims of actual Innocence per year: 205
 - Number of claims of actual innocence since inception of NCIIC: 1642
 - Number of claims reviewed and closed: 1482
 - Number of exonerations: 8
- Specific case statistics:

⁵⁶ <http://www.innocencecommission-nc.gov/gar.html>, accessed August 31, 2015.

- Types of crime at issue
- Basis of the innocence claims submitted
- Reasons for rejection.
- Results of investigations (a useful metric for the NCIIC specifically, which has been granted subpoena power and thus wants to show its ability to conduct thorough investigations)
 - Number of cases where the NCIIC found physical evidence or files reported missing by other agencies: 18
- Presentations made to other agencies

This information suggests an active case filter statewide; with a little more research, it can easily be broken down by case and by jurisdiction to evaluate how various counties within the state are participating in terms of number of cases, average duration of reviews, etc. The average time for a case from petition to resolution across the various parts of the funnel, can inform policy makers can identify appropriate levels of staffing to handle a reasonable flow of additional claims in the future, which may be useful as cases do not always appear in regular time intervals.

The NCIIC is an admirable experiment, creating a top-down model for cultural change and a thoughtful model of a safety net for the criminal justice system to identify and review potential errors in the administration of justice. It remains to be seen whether the model operates more effectively and efficiently than the “traditional” CRU model, and its inability to implement “best practices” that might be identified in the course of conducting case reviews may limit its ability to help prevent the recurrence of errors in the future. Still, the NCIIC’s emphasis on independence and transparency and its willingness to investigate cases openly and objectively bode well for its future, and provide a useful counterpoint for CRUs operating within DA’s Offices.

[END SIDEBAR ON NCIIC]

Measuring the Impact of CRUs

As CRUs proliferate across the country, and as we evaluate the programs established under this label, it is important to realize that the lack of a CRU does not indicate an unwillingness to conduct fact-based, extrajudicial reviews to establish the truth and legitimacy of established convictions, just as the existence of a CRU is not in itself proof of the willingness to conduct them.

The sort of data collection contemplated here is not to publicize case-specific information that is not already part of the public record, or to reveal information that could jeopardize witnesses, victims, or next of kin. Rather, it is aggregated information about the activities undertaken by the CRU to convey quantitative and qualitative information about inaccuracies in the criminal justice system and thoughts about how to reduce them over time. This could easily be reflected in a “case filter” that show the process from the CRU’s receipt of a request for assistance through to the decision to vacate a conviction. Such a filter might have the following stages:

Office	Year Established	Petitions Received	Petitions Investigated	Petitions Pending	Exonerations	Rejections	Investigations	NRE Exonerations**
Pima County, AZ	2014	35	17	15	0	0	17	
Middlesex County, MA	2014							
Cuyahoga County, OH	2014	70	15		0			
Philadelphia County, PA	2014	101	6	89	0			
Nassau County, NY	2013	3	2	0	0	0	2	
Ventura County, CA	2012	17	15	2	1	11	5	1
Cook County, IL	2012	435	435		12	238	222	13
Lake County, IL	2012	16	5	1	2	1	2	2
Oneida County, NY	2012							
Kings County, NY	2011							16
New York, NY	2010	175	17	0	5		1	4
Colorado Justice Review Program	2010 - 2013	4976			1			
Wayne County, MI	2010 - 2013							
Harris County, TX	2009							53
Dallas County, TX	2007							25
North Carolina Inn. Inq. Comm.	2006	1,768	1,549		8*		9	
Santa Clara County, CA	2004 - 2008, 2010	1,447	6	0	5	1	0	4
TOTALS		3,215	1,555	0	5	1	9	82

* NCIC reports 8 exonerations at hearing and one additional exoneration due to its investigations.
** Includes data reported by National Registry of Exonerations

Table xx. Case Funnels for Conviction Review Units.

A unified case funnel of all CRUs that submitted data upon request is above. Fields in gray were not reported by the CRUs, and data provided by the CRUs was supplemented by information posted on the National Registry of Exonerations.⁵⁷ Of the nineteen (19) CRUs that participated in our survey and interviews, only **ten (10)** published or provided their case funnel information.⁵⁸ The information was not provided for a variety of reasons, either because the statistics were not kept, the individual was too busy, or the office decided not to release the data publicly.

It's important to recognize that case funnels are not static, and that the "top" of the funnel, the number of petitions received by an office, is likely to be at its largest within the first 6-24 months after announcing the CRU, to account for some time for the news to spread to potential petitioners, but assuming that new petitioners will be fewer than the current population of petitioners that has presumably built up over time. So it was in Santa Clara, as described above, as well as in Philadelphia, where in the months immediately following the CRU's announcement, the office received over 100 letters (including some who petitioned multiple times), carefully reviewed "at least a dozen" of these petitions, and became actively involved in six.

The information we have suggested here should not be burdensome to collect or to publish. Understanding the flow of cases through the "case filter" and gathering deidentified information about the underlying issues in these cases will go a long way towards establishing the value of the CRU within a jurisdiction's criminal justice "ecosystem," and will support requests for additional funding as well as chart a course towards creating a culture of sustained self-evaluation and self-improvement that is crucial to the reduction of inaccurate convictions over time.

⁵⁷ The National Registry of Exonerations, <http://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Pages/about.aspx>, last accessed October 8, 2015. Individual exonerees whose profiles included the "CIU" tag were counted and distributed by county.

⁵⁸ <http://www.innocencecommission-nc.gov/stats.html>, last accessed October 8, 2015.

Role of CRU in Prevention of Future Errors

As currently practiced, the CRU model is a model of error remediation, as opposed to one of error prevention. CRUs work to identify cases where errors may have been committed, and they take steps to correct that error. This is a valuable and important service, adding tremendous legitimacy to our criminal justice system. To the extent that the process deployed by the CRU is a collaborative process with reduced adversarial posturing driven solely to find the truth, the CRU process has the ability to transcend both the administrative limitations of post-conviction appellate litigation and our cynicism about the adversarial process and truly improve the functioning of the criminal justice system.

At the same time, a CRU that merely contents itself with resolving or redressing errors in the adjudication of guilt or innocence is missing out on a far larger and more important opportunity to improve the system. As the focal point for analysis of cases where errors are alleged, CRUs are well positioned to be the leading advocate of training and implementation of “best practices” that will assist not just prosecutors or investigators in DA’s Offices, but law enforcement, defense attorneys, judges, and juries to *prevent* such errors in the future.

Recent conferences or symposia discussing CRUs⁵⁹ suggest that DAs understand this potential, but that the CRUs have not translated this potential into reality. The gap between observing this opportunity and implementing effective reform, however, can be vast, and most individuals running CRUs tell a story very different than their District Attorneys regarding their ability to conduct effective analyses of *why* a mistake was made in the adjudication of a case, much less have the time or the resources to actually advocate for, design, or implement preventative reforms to such errors. While some CRUs have conducted training on, for example, optimized procedures for conducting photographic lineups to minimize eyewitness identification mistakes, or rewritten policies for the handling of Brady material in criminal cases, such actions are more likely a response to news articles or conversations with other prosecutors than they are an actual feedback loop generated by CRU case review. What's more, such activity regularly occurs in offices without CRUs as well, making it difficult to suggest that CRUs have somehow “raised the bar” on best practices and training.

The opportunity for preventative change through the implementation of a culture of “learning from error” in cases where the CRU has recommended that a conviction cannot be supported has been embraced by most DAs who have CRUs.

Part of the challenge is administrative; CRUs have an almost complete lack of data collection regarding either the cases they review, or their own activity. Almost none gather data about the cases reviewed in any systematic way, and what data has been gathered is predominantly administrative, rather than the disciplined “Just Culture Event Review” recommended in other industries and in, for example, a crime lab setting.⁶⁰ It is important to realize that Just Culture Event Reviews, or root cause analyses, are different than the investigation of factual innocence that the CRU undertakes. Just Culture Event Reviews are non-disciplinary reviews of unintended outcomes – which might include errors, mistakes, adverse events, or misconduct – to understand the environmental, procedural, supervisory, or other circumstances that enabled, incited, or failed to prevent the unintended outcome. Put simply, the

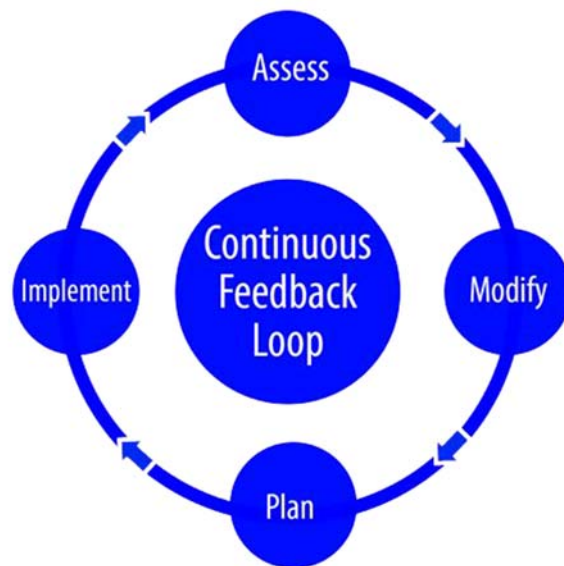
⁵⁹ Northern California Innocence Project Symposium on Conviction Integrity Units, Oct. 28, 2015; Kings County (NY) District Attorney’s Office Summit on Wrongful Convictions, Nov. 5, 2015.

⁶⁰ CITE AGAIN TO NCFS Document.

CRU investigation is to decide what happened. The Just Culture Event Review is a careful, thorough review to determine *why* and *how* it happened, and to recommend changes to prevent its recurrence.

None of the offices we spoke to have implemented such a review. Nor have they looked at their case filters as potential databases for aggregated analysis, useful for purposes of cataloging the types of errors in the cases they review for potential use in trend-spotting or contextual learning.⁶¹

Even if CRUs were to be used for such lofty purposes, there is a simple but undeniable structural limitation on the ability of a CRU to implement procedural improvements to reduce errors. As a creation within the DA's Office, the authority of the CRU to mandate changes to law enforcement activity to prevent future errors extends only as far as the DA's Office. Certainly, many of the errors that can lead to inaccurate convictions are committed by prosecutors, but many – perhaps the majority – are committed in other parts of the criminal justice system as well. Inaccurate eyewitness identifications and false confessions, for example, are typically committed during the investigation phase when a police department is in charge of the case. Ineffective assistance of counsel is based on the activity of defense counsel. A CRU might rightfully identify a need for modified practices to address these problems, but it lacks the ability to force the implementation of the solutions.



Still, CRUs persist in the attempt to learn from the cases they review, and to implement improvements to the adjudication process that are designed to reduce errors in the future. “We do spend time talking about not just specific cases, but are there policies, are there procedures, are there things we can put into place to prevent some of these cases from happening in the first place.” All agree in theory that some sense of learning from these errors is useful, but too few offices are conducting such work in practice:

Is it the role of the CRU to identify, communicate, or implement changes as a result of lessons learned in the cases that you're reviewing? I'm hoping that it will be. It hasn't historically been that. The unit was created with the notion of making sure that the

⁶¹ One challenge that individual prosecutors' offices face here is that the number of cases reviewed in a single jurisdiction, particularly in smaller offices, is unlikely to be sufficiently large to drawing accurate systemic conclusions from the cases. A state-wide or nationwide data gathering model is needed for such aggregated analysis.

claims of people, innocence claims are properly addressed, and they're addressed without some of the procedural hurdles that exist under [post-conviction review statutes]. If along the way as we go on in time we see things that are procedurally not correct or need improvement then we'll certainly react to that, and train on that.

Another question unresolved by CRUs to date is how to address situations in which there could be multiple instances of the same error. No CRUs were eager to embrace the conduct of an “audit” that would expand a case review to review a large group of related cases to ensure that all potential incidences of the error were identified and addressed. In such situations, most people interviewed suggested that they would conduct broader reviews “when they feel it necessary” but were not able to describe what those conditions might be. For whatever reason, such audits appear to be more easily embraced when pertaining to a crime lab, and less clear when pertaining to a colleague in a DA’s Office or a police officer; Brooklyn and Harris County, however, have conducted or are in the process of conducting such reviews, and their work may serve as tutorials for such reviews moving forward.

Several CRUs indicated a history of, or a philosophy supportive of conducting audits in instances where prosecutorial or police misconduct have been alleged. The publicity surrounding Detective Louis Scarcella in Brooklyn is one example of this; the CRU is in the process of reviewing 150 cases involving the Detective to determine whether any of those cases should be reinvestigated. In another jurisdiction, the DA conducted an audit based on an intentional act of bad faith taken by a prosecutor. The theory in that office was that a discovery of intentional misconduct was something likely to have been repeated, and so delving into additional cases for that prosecutor was necessary to rule out other potential affected cases.

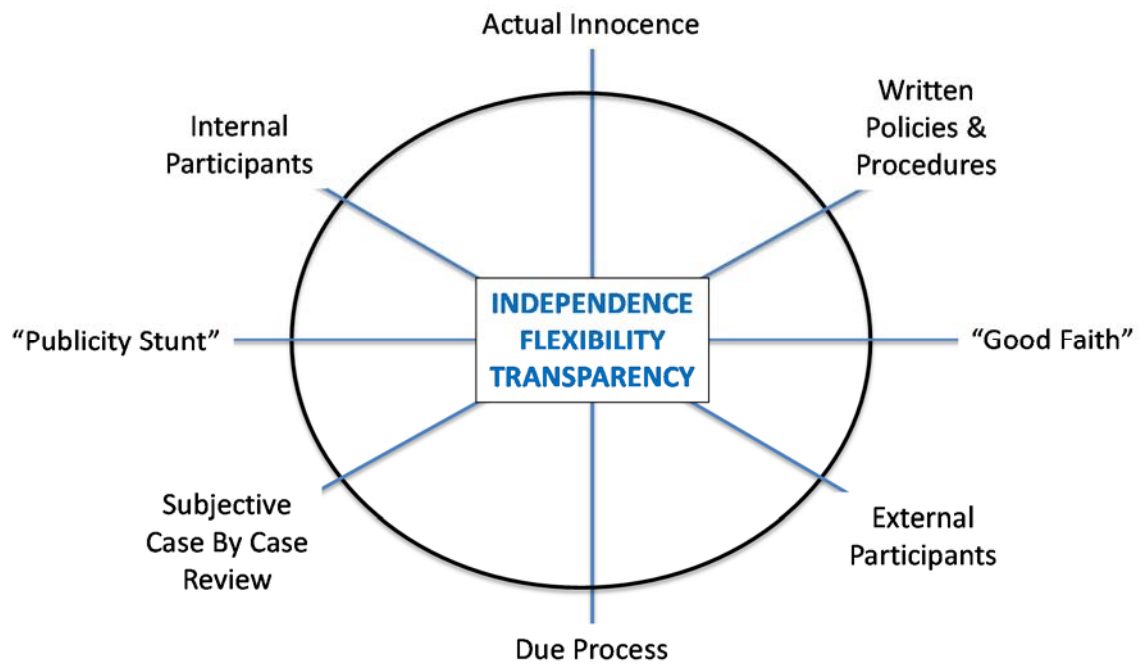
In truth, the creation of a “cycle of improvement” that will analyze errors found by CRUs and implement reforms to prevent future errors throughout the criminal justice system is not something that a CRU can reasonably be expected to do alone. It requires the participation of law enforcement, the defense bar, and the judiciary on a jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction based. As such, this may be an area where an outside organization, along the lines of an Innocence Commission, could add value to CRUs across a broader jurisdiction (for example, a state). The Texas Innocence Commission, or the Pennsylvania or California commissions that reviewed wrongful convictions, could be used to receive data from prosecutors’ offices on a variety of activities, including data on cases that are reversed. This data could be analyzed and discussed with a cross-disciplinary group and discussions had on how to implement best practices throughout the state. The Commission could also have authority to order a broader review of cases in situations where the possibility of multiple instances of the same or similar errors existed.

Conclusion

The variety of philosophies, policies, and practices within the 19 CRUs that participated in this project is no surprise. In fact, it may be surprising how many areas the DAs and leaders of CRUs did agree on. And a complete evaluation of the utility of the different approaches employed by the CRUs is clearly premature. Still, the promise of Convictions Review Units is clear.

CRUs have the potential to showcase the criminal justice system working at its best. Done well, a CRU can be a force of good in the criminal justice community, a model that operates with objectivity and a focus on real-world truth to integrate adversarial viewpoints and analyze conflicting and complex information and address claims for individuals who may be suffering from a State-imposed injustice. Whether the model extends and realizes its potential as a force for education and improvement of

techniques to investigate and adjudicate criminal charges or not, good faith CRUs that operate with independence, flexibility, and transparency can build bridges across what is too often a bitter ideological divide between prosecutors and defense counsel, and between law enforcement and the communities they serve, and restore the community's faith that each part of the system is operating to ensure that perpetrators of crime – and only perpetrators of crime – are held accountable for their acts in ways that preserve the constitutional freedoms of all. Institutions with such great potential should be observed carefully, as their impact can be enormously positive.



APPENDIX A. METHODOLOGY

This paper consists of quotes and synthesized observations gathered from semi-structured interviews with the leaders of 19 CRUs throughout the country, as well as with prosecutors in offices who did not have formal Conviction Review Units, but who believed that their offices conducted the analogous work if and when cases of actual innocence were alleged in their jurisdictions. (A copy of our questionnaire is included in the appendix to this paper.) We also spoke to a group of defense attorneys in the same jurisdictions as the CRUs to understand how people might perceive the activities of CRUs with different stated philosophies, policies, or practices.

Conviction Review Units throughout the United States were identified through internet and other media research. The Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice, with the assistance of Barry Scheck of the Innocence Project, created an interview questionnaire (attached below as [Appendix B](#)) to be administered to at least one individual in each office in a leadership or supervisory role with the CRU in question.

Twenty-four offices were contacted by phone or email with interview requests, including twenty-three offices with active CRUs and one office that does not have a CRU but was known through personal communication with the authors to have actively considered starting a CRU. Of the twenty-three offices with a CRU that were contacted, seventeen agreed to participate, with other opting not to participate or not responding to repeated requests. Of offices that affirmatively elected not to participate, the reason given for not participating was a belief on the part of the CRU representative that the CRU had not been in existence long enough to provide useful information to the project.

Participation in interviews was voluntary. Interviews were conducted in person where possible and by phone where necessary. All interviews were recorded using the Voice Base recording and human transcription system unless recording was declined by the interviewee. If the interviewee declined to be recorded, notes of the interview were taken contemporaneously. Transcripts or notes of interviews were logged, coded and organized in NVivo 10 for Windows. No review of comments or quotes was permitted unless quotes were sought for attribution, in which case the quotes have been reviewed and approved by the individual given attribution. Where statements were made by an interviewee about the perspective of external participants, an individual outside the CRU who was familiar with the CRU's operations (e.g., a defense attorney who had communicated with the CRU in question) was contacted and his/her opinion requested. Such communications were memorialized through contemporaneous notes, but were not recorded.

APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CONVICTION REVIEW UNIT INTERVIEWS



A. Office/Unit Demographics

1. Office
 - i. Size of office
 - ii. Number of prosecutors
 1. Is there an appeals unit?
 2. Is there a post-conviction unit?
 3. Does state attorney general handle state habeas? If yes, what is relationship with state AG?
 - iii. Is there a police or investigator department that is part of the office?
 1. If so, how many investigators?
 - iv. Nature of caseload (homicides, robberies, burglaries, narcotics, etc.)
 - v. Demographics of jurisdiction
2. How many different police departments are there within your jurisdiction?
3. CRU characteristics
 - i. When was the CRU first formed?
 - ii. Why – what was the occurrence or factor that prompted its creation?
 - iii. Size of CRU
 1. Number/type of prosecutors?
 - a. Do they have other duties in the office? If so, please describe.
 2. Other members who are non-prosecutors, such as investigators or clerical support?
 - a. Who do those investigators work for?
 - i. Police or prosecutor, and are they
 - ii. ex-police detailed or are they independent?
 - iv. How is CRU funded?
 - v. Is there training for CRU staff?
 1. What does the training consist of?

2. Who does it?

B. Protocols and Procedures

1. Does the CRU have written protocols and procedures?
2. If so, what do they cover?
3. Can we have a copy?

C. Case Acceptance Criteria

1. What are the sources of your cases/from where will you accept cases?
 - i. Public Defender
 - ii. Police
 - iii. Court
 - iv. Family member
 - v. Innocence Project/non-profit
 - vi. Other
2. What standard do you use before deciding to investigate or review a claim?
 - i. Is factual innocence required? What does factual innocence mean?
 - ii. A “colorable” claim of factual innocence?
 - iii. A “plausible” claim of factual innocence?
 - iv. A “reasonable possibility” of factual innocence?
 - v. If none of these adequately describes the standard, how would you define it?
3. Do you restrict your review to matters involving only “newly discovered evidence,” i.e., evidence that could not have been discovered with exercise of due diligence by counsel?
4. Do you consider “due process” claims while conducting a CRU review such as
 - i. Undisclosed Brady/Impeachment material
 - ii. Ineffective assistance of counsel
 - iii. Other “fair trial” claims
 - iv. If you do not, is there another unit in the DA’s Office that would consider such a case?
5. Would you accept a case where the motion for a new trial is outside the statute of limitations?
6. Do you cumulate or combine in any way evidence pointing toward factual innocence and evidence supporting a due process claim
 - i. In your decision to investigate or review a claim?
 - ii. In your decision to grant relief?

- iii. If so, please describe in your own words that process works?
7. If the CRU discovers at any point in its review of a case that there is a “substantial claim” of misconduct against a prosecutor, how would that be handled?
- i. By the CRU?
 - ii. Referred elsewhere in the office?
 - iii. Referred to an independent entity or party?
 - iv. Is “substantial claim” the standard you would use, or is it another standard?
 - v. How severe would the misconduct need to be?
 - 1. Legal error but honest mistake
 - 2. Ethical
 - 3. Criminal
 - vi. Is there a statutory procedure for such a referral in your jurisdiction? If so, how does it work?
 - vii. Are you free to follow a different procedure – appoint your own independent entity or party?
Do you think it’s a good or bad practice?
8. Same question as 6, except for police misconduct? What triggers an independent person to come in and run the process or make decisions?
9. What is your ability to discipline or fire an underperforming prosecutor/investigator, or one who commits intentional misconduct?
10. Does the CRU consider guilty plea cases?
- i. If so, is there a higher standard that must be met before deciding to review or investigate?
What is that standard?
11. Are there cases where the CRU is more likely to conduct an investigation or review than others?
- i. An application for DNA testing?
 - ii. An application for a review of fingerprints?
 - iii. An application for other scientific testing?
 - iv. An application involving allegations of prior unreliable forensic science?
 - v. An application involving allegations against a police officer or prosecutor with a prior history of misconduct?
 - vi. An application involving allegations against a jailhouse informant?
 - vii. An application involving allegations of eyewitness identification?
 - viii. An application involving allegations of a false confession?
 - ix. Other?

D. Conduct of Review

1. How many applications received?
2. How many accepted for investigation or review?
3. In how many cases did you consent to relief?
4. In how many cases did courts grant relief where no agreement could be reached?
5. What is the breakdown on grounds for relief:
 - i. Innocence;
 1. Based on DNA
 2. Based on other scientific evidence
 3. Recantation
 - ii. Due process violation
 1. Brady
 2. Ineffective assistance
 3. Other grounds
 - iii. Both Innocence and due process violations
6. What is your practice on post-conviction disclosure of your file and/or police files?
7. What documents do you make available to petitioner's counsel in a review?
 - i. Open file
 - ii. Open file but for safety concerns
 - iii. Non-privileged
 - iv. Originally discoverable
 - v. Other standard
8. Do you reach out to other agencies that might have documents about the case that are not in your physical possession?
 - i. Would you make these documents available to the defense?
9. What is your practice on requests for disclosure from the petitioner seeking relief?
 - i. Request petitioner's file except for attorney-client communications?
 - ii. Request only documents relating to petitioner's proffer?
10. Would you consent to greater disclosure of your file or police files if there were an agreement with petitioner's counsel not to disclose the information until the Conviction Integrity review process is complete?
11. Will you share documents with opposing counsel and allow them to use those documents in a subsequent appeal if you find no need to grant relief?

- i. Would that make you more or less likely to share information?
12. What is the role of the prosecutors who tried the underlying case in the review process
- i. Witness?
 - ii. Any role in the decision making process
13. Does petitioner's counsel get an opportunity to:
- i. Make a presentation?
 - ii. Participate in the investigation?
 - iii. Respond to evidence discovered in the course of the investigation?
 - iv. Any other role?
14. Under what circumstances would you do a PCRA test of forensic data/DNA?
- i. Under what circumstances would you:
 - 1. Conduct that review voluntarily
 - 2. Agree if asked
 - 3. Fight the request?
 - ii. What if inmate turned down a testing request at trial?
 - iii. What lab would conduct that testing?
15. Do you reach out to other agencies that might have documents about the case that are not in your physical possession?
- i. E.g., medical examiner in Philadelphia
 - ii. Would you make these documents available to the defense?
16. What discovery, if anything, do you require the defendant or the source of the allegations for review to turn over to the CRU?
- i. PAIP suggestion: New, credible, and ideally corroborative evidence
 - ii. Example: we will turn over all information except _____; important to fill in all the blanks there.
 - iii. Do you have agreements for data sharing to control or limit disclosure to the review, and/or to ensure no media leaking, etc.?
 - iv. Would an information sharing agreement be useful?
 - v. If so, what would it need to include?
17. What information would cause you to feel that you had investigated enough?
18. Is the person who brought the case to your attention given a chance to refute your conclusions before they are announced?

- i. *Example: Brooklyn has independent 3 atty interim review panel – they are supposed to come in and critique the CRU’s review.*
- ii. *Example: Lake County (IL) has a special paralegal/investigator position, and a 10-person review team made up of people outside Lake County*

19. How are your conclusions announced? Do you explain why you have made a decision and if so, to whom?

E. Criteria for Granting Relief

1. What is the standard for consenting to relief on innocence grounds?
 - i. Clear or convincing evidence of innocence?
 - ii. A reasonable probability of a different outcome?
 - iii. Application involving claim of self-defense or claim of mens rea?
 - iv. Interests of justice?
2. How is that standard different from what PCRA requires in your jurisdiction?
3. In consenting to relief on a due process claim, do you consider new factual evidence of innocence unrelated to the due process claim and not part of the original trial record?
4. What other factors might you consider in terms of accepting or rejecting factors?

F. Audits

1. When a case is reversed for failure to disclose exculpatory evidence, have you ever conducted an audit of prior cases of the prosecutor involved?
2. The police officers?
3. The prosecutor’s supervisors?
4. Do you think such an audit is a good idea? If not, why not?
5. Learning from error – what they have learned, what is important, what they would advise people to do or worry about or whatever . . . political/real limitations in various places.

G. Learning from Error

1. Does the CRU catalog errors that might have occurred in cases it reviews?
2. Does it communicate those errors to anyone inside or outside the Office?
3. It is a role of the CRU to identify, communicate or implement changes as a result of lessons learned in cases reviewed?
 - i. If so, how does the CRU do this?
 1. For internal changes
 2. For external changes (e.g., new eyewitness ID procedures that would need to be implemented by police)

APPENDIX C. NATIONAL COMMISSION ON FORENSIC SCIENCE DIRECTIVE
RECOMMENDATION ON ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS



**NATIONAL COMMISSION ON
FORENSIC SCIENCE**
Directive Recommendation:
Root Cause Analysis (RCA) in Forensic Science



Subcommittee
Interim Solutions

Commission Action

On August 11, 2015, the Commission voted to adopt this recommendation with a more than two-thirds majority (93% affirmative) vote.

Type of Work Product

Policy Recommendation.

Recommendation

The U.S. Attorney General should direct the adoption of appropriate root cause analysis protocols for all forensic science service providers (FSSPs) or forensic science medical providers (FSMPs) who are part of the federal government or are receiving federal funds, and to establish policy for restoration procedures that comply with the recommended root cause analysis process.

RECOMMENDATION: The US Attorney General should direct the adoption of appropriate root cause analysis protocols for all forensic science service providers (FSSPs) or forensic science medical providers (FSMPs) that are part of the federal government or are receiving federal funds, and to establish policy for restoration procedures that comply with the recommended root cause analysis process.

BACKGROUND

Forensic laboratories accredited under programs that adhere to the ISO/IEC 17025, *General requirements for the competence of testing and calibration laboratories*, are required to “establish a policy and a procedure and shall designate appropriate authorities for implementing corrective action when nonconforming work or departures from the policies and procedures in the management system or technical operations have been identified.” A problem or nonconformity may be identified through a number of different techniques, including internal and external audits, reviews of the management system, customer feedback, or staff observations.

Corrective Actions are potential solutions that address a nonconformity and eliminate or minimize the risk of repeating the nonconforming work or departure from policies and procedures. A Corrective Action is a requirement when any error or nonconformity is identified. ISO 17025 (4.9.1) states that “The laboratory **shall** have a policy and procedures that shall be implemented when **any aspect** of its testing and/or calibration work, or the results of this work, do not conform to its own procedures or the agreed requirements of the customer.” (Emphasis added.) ISO 17025 (4.9.2) states that “Where the evaluation indicates that the nonconforming work could recur or that there is doubt about the compliance of the laboratory's operations with its own policies and procedures, the corrective action procedures given in 4.11 shall be promptly followed”. In addition, “The laboratory shall establish a policy and a procedure and shall designate appropriate authorities for implementing corrective action when nonconforming work or departures from the policies and procedures in the management system or technical operations have been identified.” ISO 17025 (4.11.1). To establish the best corrective actions, and as required by ISO 17025 (4.11.2), an investigation is initiated to determine the root cause(s) of the situation or condition: “The procedure for corrective action shall start with an investigation to determine the root cause(s) of the problem.” Root Cause Analysis (RCA) is a critical step of determining corrective actions for substantive errors, and may be the most important part of establishing *proper* corrective actions.

IMPLEMENTATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Understanding that all human systems are fallible, and that risks in a system can be minimized, the Department of Justice should encourage federal Forensic Science Service Providers (FSSPs) and Forensic Science Medical Providers (FSMPs) to consistently strive to be “high reliability organizations” and ensure a culture of constant self-monitoring and self-improvement by incorporating established practices of “just culture”¹ and learning from error. To this end, the Department of Justice shall require its FSSPs and FSMPs to create and maintain protocols around the conduct of Root Cause Analysis (RCA) to address nonconforming work or departures from policies or procedures.² The Department or its designee will periodically review those RCA policies to ensure they include the following:

- Objective guidance as to when a RCA should be conducted;

¹ A “just culture” can be defined as “a culture that recognizes that competent professionals make mistakes and acknowledges that even competent professionals will develop unhealthy norms (shortcuts, “routine rule violations”), but has zero tolerance for reckless behavior.” Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality Glossary, available at http://psnet.ahrq.gov/popup_glossary.aspx?name=justculture.

² Different terms may be used for unplanned and/or unintended occurrences in human systems, including adverse events, errors/omissions, mistakes, nonconformities, etc. We have selected the terms “nonconforming work” or “nonconformity” to include each of these various unplanned and/or unintended occurrences as well as departures from policies or procedures, and note that any of the above may include good faith or malfeasant behavior. Furthermore, “nonconformity” is broadly defined herein to include “near misses,” or unplanned occurrences or events that had the potential to result in a nonconformity but did not do so due to a fortunate turn of events, as opposed to a deliberate system design. Near misses should be addressed with the same diligence and vigor as actual nonconformities.

- The regular provision of appropriate training to key personnel on how a RCA should be conducted;
- Training to all employees within the FSSP and FSMP on RCA principles and processes, to enhance the quality of the RCA and its acceptance within the laboratory environment;
- Proper construction of the investigative team conducting a RCA;
- Definition of and procedures for an investigation that identifies the extent of nonconforming work and its causal factor(s) in a blame-free environment, prioritizing continuous improvement of laboratory quality, safety and reliability by learning from nonconformities;
- Recommendations that identify corrective actions to minimize the chance of future recurrence of nonconformities identified in the RCA;
- Guidelines that define when and how to identify other cases that may have also been affected by an identical or similar nonconformity, and the obligation to conduct a retrospective re-analysis of and address such cases;
- Communication of the existence of the nonconformity to internal and external individuals impacted by the nonconformity;
- Provision of Safe Harbor to employees who report nonconformities or near misses, including use immunity for participation in an RCA and limitations on the disclosure of materials generated in the course of an RCA;
- Implementation of actions designed to minimize the chance of future similar nonconformities and to appropriately redress injury caused by the nonconformity; and
- Documentation of each nonconformity as well as the proposed corrective action in a manner that does not publicly identify confidential information regarding specific individuals or cases, but that makes the learnings from the RCA publicly available for the review and benefit of other FSSPs and FSMPs.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

The US Attorney General should collaborate with FSSPs and FSMPs as well as experts in the field of RCA to establish guidelines in compliance with the above for the design, implementation, and review of RCAs, and for the periodic review of protocols and procedures regarding RCAs that may be updated over time. In addition, the Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) should be tasked with further exploration and periodic definition of best practices in RCA as applied to FSSPs and FSMPs.

Appendix A:

Supporting Information and Examples of Root Cause Analysis

Despite the best intentions and best efforts of forensic science professionals, supervisors, and managers, nonconformities will occur in forensic laboratories, as in any complex organization. It is the position of the National Commission on Forensic Science that all responsible forensic science providers should embrace and implement a just culture³ of “learning from error” and continuous improvement to minimize the occurrence of nonconformities and/or misconduct in the performance of forensic science services over time. This is true regardless of an organization’s history of error, since “[a]dverse events, like the number of adverse events, are poor indicators of the general safety of a system. . . . Safe organizations can still have bad adverse events, whereas unsafe systems can escape them for long periods. Furthermore, progress creates new risk that is difficult to anticipate but is a feature of new procedures and technologies.”⁴

Forensic laboratories accredited under programs that adhere to the ISO/IEC 17025 General requirements for the competence of testing and calibration laboratories are required to “establish a policy and a procedure and shall designate appropriate authorities for implementing corrective action when nonconforming work or departures from the policies and procedures in the management system or technical operations have been identified.” A problem may be identified through a number of different techniques, including internal and external audits, reviews of the management system, customer feedback, or staff observations.

“Corrective actions” are potential solutions that eliminate or minimize the risk of repeating the nonconforming work or departure from policies and procedures. Corrective action is a requirement when any error or nonconformity is identified. To identify the best corrective actions, and as required by ISO 17025,⁵ an investigation is initiated to determine the root cause(s) of the situation or condition. Root Cause Analysis (RCA) is a critical step and may be the most important part of identifying and implementing appropriate corrective actions.

³ A “just culture” can be defined as “a culture that recognizes that competent professionals make mistakes and acknowledges that even competent professionals will develop unhealthy norms (shortcuts, “routine rule violations”), but has zero tolerance for reckless behavior.” Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality Glossary, available at http://psnet.ahrq.gov/popup_glossary.aspx?name=justculture.

⁴ Barach P, Berwick DM. Patient Safety and the reliability of health care systems. *Ann Intern Med* 2003, 138(12):997-8. Barach uses the health care term “adverse event” to define an unintended outcome; in the forensic science context we use the ISO 9000-defined term “nonconformity,” which encompasses any deviation from a policy or procedure regardless of its impact.

⁵ ISO/IEC 17025:2005(E) (hereafter, ISO 17025), General requirements for the competence of testing and calibration laboratories, Section 4.11.2 Cause Analysis. “The procedure for corrective action shall start with an investigation to determine the root cause(s) of the problem.”

ISO/IEC 17025 also requires laboratories to establish procedures to identify needed improvements and potential sources of nonconformities.⁶⁷ This proactive process is termed “preventative action” and follows a similar process of Root Cause Analysis to identify the best solutions to prevent or minimize the chance of nonconformity from occurring.

RCA has been used productively not only throughout the healthcare industry but also in aviation, manufacturing and other quality-minded industries to conduct event reviews that lead to actionable change of policies and procedures to reduce the occurrence of nonconformities. The goal of RCA is to learn from nonconformities and to implement corrective actions in order to reduce further similar events that might compromise lab report or opinion integrity. An important feature of the RCA is that it is a blame-free analysis: “[b]laming and punishing for adverse events that are made by well-intentioned people . . . drives the problem of iatrogenic harm underground and alienates people who are best placed to prevent such problems from recurring.”⁶⁸

A subset of nonconformity is the “near miss,” a nonconformity or unplanned event that had the potential to affect the accuracy or reliability of the laboratory results or work product, but did not do so through a fortuitous intervention. Only a fortunate break in the chain of events prevented a potentially systemic nonconformity.. Near misses are nonconformities and must be evaluated as such. Further, they should be evaluated in the same way they would be if the nonconformity had actually occurred. To do otherwise would suggest that because this near miss did not result in a nonconformity, the contributing factors that caused the near miss have been resolved.

This document sets forth recommendations for the standardized use of RCA to identify why an error has occurred in a forensic laboratory setting and make recommendations for the prevention of the future occurrence of similar nonconformities.

Types of Nonconformities Suitable for Root Cause Analysis and A Structure for Analyzing Causes.

It is common for a RCA to identify multiple factors that combined to cause the nonconformity. Indeed, the purpose of the RCA is to identify any and all contributing factors. While no framework can specifically identify and catalog all factors that could contribute to a nonconformity, one framework for evaluating nonconformities has been provided by British researcher Dr. James Reasons. Dr. Reasons describes three different types of error:

1. *Decision error*: One made because information, knowledge, or experience is lacking
2. *Skill-based error*: One made while engaged in a familiar task

⁶⁷ ISO 17025, Section 4.12.” 4.12.1 Needed improvements and potential sources of nonconformities, either technical or concerning the management system, shall be identified. When improvement opportunities are identified or if preventive action is required, action plans shall be developed, implemented and monitored to reduce the likelihood of the occurrence of such nonconformities and to take advantage of the opportunities for improvement.

⁶⁸ Rinciman WB, Merry AF, *Error, blame, and the law in health care – an antipodean perspective.* Ann Intern Med. 2003 Jun 17; 138(12):974-9.

3. *Perceptual error*: One made because input to one of the five senses is degraded or incomplete.

These errors typically fall into one of four categories:

1. *Unsafe Acts*: those performed by the operator
2. *Preconditions for Unsafe Acts*: environmental factors contributing to the error
3. *Supervision*: management actions affecting the operator
4. *Organizational Influences*: culture, policies, or procedures of the organization that affect the operator.

Dr. Reason describes some nonconformities as “errors” and others as “violations,” distinct from errors in that they are “intentional departure[s] from accepted practice.” Violations may be:

1. Routine violation: habitual, repeat departures, enabled by “bending of the rules.”
2. Exceptional violation: a willful departure outside norms, not condoned by management.

A structure for categorizing different causes of many common unintentional or intentional nonconformities follows.

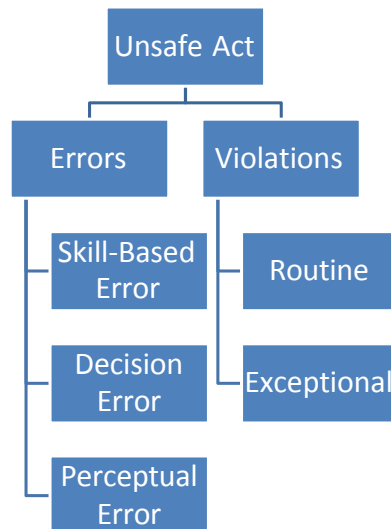


Figure 1: Types of Unsafe Acts.

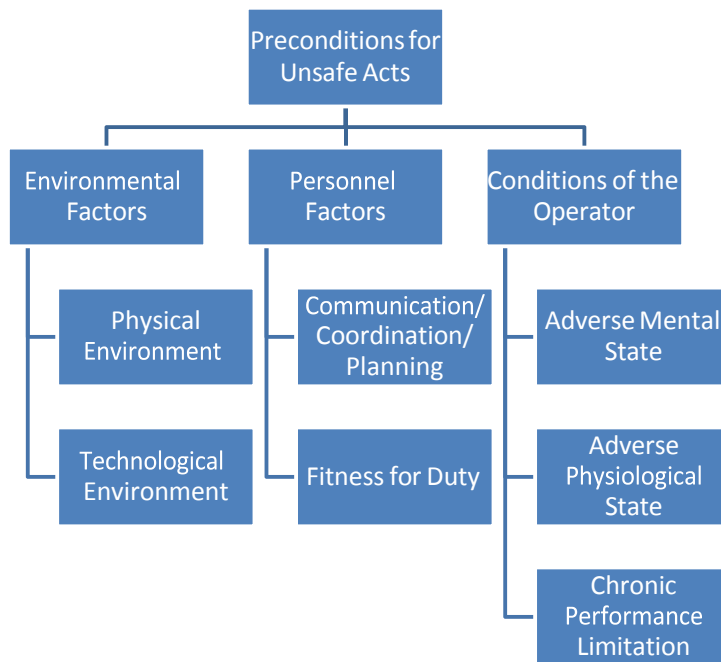


Figure 2.
Causes of Preconditions for Unsafe Acts.

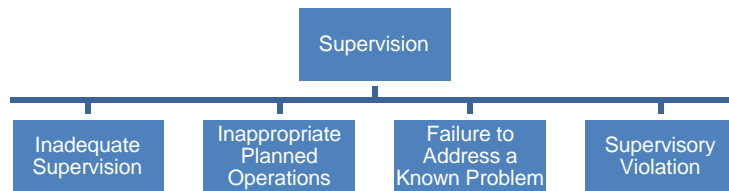


Figure 3. Causes for Nonconformities of Supervision.

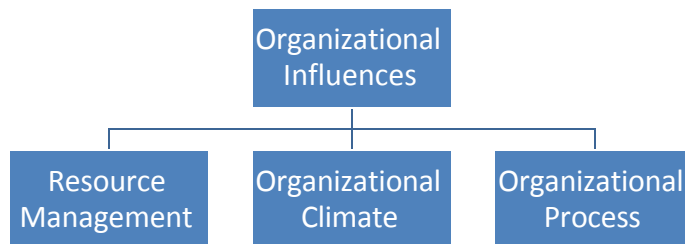


Figure 4. Causes of Undue Organizations Influences.

How should an RCA be conducted?

It cannot be emphasized enough that **RCAs are not performance evaluations, and their purpose is learning, not punishment.** Accordingly, personnel and discipline issues should be handled through a separate process from RCA. In many contexts, including transportation and healthcare, the activities and output of an RCA are inadmissible as evidence and excluded from discovery in litigation to ensure this purity of purpose. The “just culture” focus of the RCA creates shared accountability: the system is responsible for providing an environment that is optimally designed for safe care and staff is responsible for their choices of behavior and for reporting system vulnerabilities.⁶⁹

While specific recommendations for the conduct of RCAs may differ, a few themes emerge from review of RCAs across industries:

- Construction. RCAs should be performed by a team. There is a benefit to engaging multiple perspectives and multidisciplinary personnel whose backgrounds encompass the various parts of the technical analysis and management systems, and reporting process to ensure a holistic review of factors that contributed to the nonconformity that might otherwise be overlooked.
 - The number of participants conducting the RCA can vary depending on the nature of the nonconformity. For more substantial nonconformities, RCAs often work best when performed by multidisciplinary teams, from all levels of staff, with fundamental knowledge of the specific area involved.
 - The team should have people who were not involved with the specific incident to ensure objectivity in the review.
 - A facilitator should be appointed who was not directly implicated in the incident.

- Investigation. The nonconformity should be analyzed for its causal factors.
 - Detailed review of the event by the team
 - Identify problems – *what* went wrong. Is this a one-time event or a recurring error?
 - Identify Root Causes/Contributing Factors – *why* it went wrong. Focus on objective causes and minimize causation conclusions that focus solely on blaming an individual or individuals, rather than evaluating environmental, organizational, supervisory, and other factors where possible
 - Prioritize the factors that contributed to the nonconformity, evaluating both their severity and the probability that these factors

⁶⁹ Agrawal, A, *Patient Safety: A Case-based Comprehensive Guide*, 2014.

- will cause harm in the future
 - Develop interventions that conform with the prioritization and likelihood of repetition of the various factors
- Recommendation. The team should make specific, prioritized recommendations for corrective actions that are intended to prevent occurrences of similar events. The recommendations may incorporate input from primary operators who will be affected by the recommendations to enhance their ability to be implemented efficiently. These recommendations should be made in writing and stored for future review as needed.
- Implementation. Implement those corrective actions, considering the quality of analysis, the cost of the suggested interventions, and their likely real-world impact on safety and reliability.
- Evaluation. Evaluate the corrective actions and take subsequent additional action as needed.
- Professional Standards and a “Just Culture.” A “Just Culture” is one that balances blame-free event reviews with the need for professionals, including FSSP/FSMPs, to be personally accountable for adherence to reasonable standards of professional conduct. Typically, this involves the creation of a separate disciplinary process, managed outside the RCA process, in the event that the RCA uncovers evidence of intentional wrongdoing by any individual. A sample tool to assess the necessity of such a parallel disciplinary process used in a hospital setting is attached.

To preserve the integrity of the RCA as a blame-free event review, it is important that any disciplinary process be additional to, and separate from, the RCA, and that the individual in charge of making determinations about disciplinary action be informed by, but not reporting to or involved in, the RCA itself.

Documentation/Implementation of Improvement.

ISO/IEC 17025 4.11.3 and 4.11.4 requires all selected changes resulting from corrective action investigations be documented and implemented. In addition, laboratories are required to monitor the results of the corrective actions to ensure the effectiveness of the solutions; this monitoring should similarly be documented.

In the criminal justice context, documentation and implementation of corrective action

should include the obligation on the part of the panel conducting the RCA to communicate the nonconformity to individuals or agencies involved in casework that may have been affected by the nonconformity.⁷⁰ This duty extends to other individuals who may be similarly situated to those directly affected by the nonconformity that has been discovered. For example, an RCA could be performed on a nonconformity regarding the miscalibration of an instrument used to assess blood tests in a single DUI case. If an error is discovered, it would lead to an obligation to identify all others who might be affected by the miscalibration and inform them about the re-evaluation of their cases. Not all nonconformities affect casework, but when they do, it is important to note that the life and liberty of a human being may be (or may not be) affected.

For this reason, forensic science service providers have a duty to inform others of the nonconformity, which should include a new, amended, or supplemental report with the correct results and an explanation of the initiating nonconformity distributed to the various parties in a case. The FSSP/FSMP must work with the proper legal authority to identify and notify all individuals whose cases were affected by the nonconformity/error, and should participate in the suitable remedy as appropriate.

Training of Personnel to Conduct RCAs.

Root cause analysis may be the most difficult part of establishing proper corrective actions following a nonconformity. By becoming proficient at investigating and solving problems of nonconformity in their work, a laboratory will ultimately need to conduct fewer investigations. But if done inappropriately, a root cause analysis investigation may lead to the inadvertent blame of individuals instead of identifying where a work process has broken down. Such blame will be detrimental to encouraging participation in the root cause analysis process.

A study that evaluated an aggregated group of RCAs in the healthcare setting identified lack of time (55%), unwilling colleagues (34%) and inter-professional differences (31%) as the top three barriers to RCAs.⁷¹ Each of these barriers can be addressed, at least in part, by experienced facilitation and support from senior management within the organization.

Accordingly, a recommendation is made to establish key individuals within a forensic laboratory to serve as facilitators of root cause panels. Characteristics of successful

⁷⁰ Note that corrective action may correct errors from which inferences of guilt or innocence may be drawn.

⁷¹ Bowie, Paul, Skinner, J. and de Wet, C. *Training health care professionals in root cause analysis: a cross-sectional study of post-training experiences, benefits, and attitudes.* BMC Health Services Research 2013, 13:50.

RCA facilitators will likely include, but may not be limited to:

- Interested in facilitating and documenting problems
- Excellent listening skills
- Naturally inquisitive
- Comfortable speaking in front of a group
- Detail-oriented
- Relatively calm disposition
- Good rapport with front-line personnel and management

Once selected, these individuals should be required to receive annual specialized training on the topic of root cause analysis to include practice in running group facilitations.

When Should an RCA Be Conducted?

ISO 17025 (4.9.2) states, “Where the evaluation indicates that the nonconforming work could recur or that there is doubt about the compliance of the laboratory’s operations with its own policies and procedures, the corrective action procedures given in 4.11 shall be promptly followed.” ISO 17025 (4.11.2) continues, “The procedure for corrective action shall start with an investigation to determine the root cause(s) of the problem.” Properly done, RCAs include: *investigation* of facts and circumstances that caused or contributed to the nonconformity; *development* of interventions that should minimize the chance of future similar nonconformities, *implementation* of those interventions, and *evaluation* of the impact of the interventions. As such, they should be deployed with an eye towards the severity and risk of the problem.

Some laboratories, including the FBI Laboratory, categorize nonconformities in their work product as Level 1 or Level 2. Level 1 nonconformities are situations or conditions that directly affect and have a fundamental impact on the quality of the work product or the integrity of evidence. Level 2 nonconformities are situations or conditions that may affect the quality of the work, but does not, to any significant degree, affect the fundamental reliability of the work product or the integrity of the evidence.

Another approach, modeled after that of the Veterans’ Health Administration (VHA), evaluates whether a full RCA is needed based on the severity of the nonconformity and the likelihood of its reoccurrence.⁷²

⁷² A “near miss” should be included for RCA review if its score qualifies when viewed as if the event had actually occurred.

		Severity			
Probability		Catastrophic Systemic errors in procedure that affect several outcomes or reported results; intentional misconduct or recklessness in execution of role	Major Casework or proficiency test error that affects outcome or reported result. Potential problems that may affect the reliability, accuracy or performance of a test procedure or policy; serious negligence in execution of role	Moderate Clerical nonconformity affecting result but corrected during the review process prior to reporting; nonconformity that does not affect outcome or reported result	Minor Clerical nonconformity that does not affect outcome or reported result
	Frequent Likely to occur multiple times in 1 year	3	3	2	1
	Occasional May occur several times in 1-2 years	3	3	2	1
	Uncommon May happen once in 2-5 years	3	2	1	1
	Remote May happen once in 5+ years	3	2	1	1

RCA Required for 3, Recommended for 2, Optional for 1

Table 1. Potential RCA Initiation Matrix.

When an RCA is required or recommended, it should be conducted both on actual nonconformities and on nonconformities that *could* have occurred but for a fortuitous intervention or timely discovery. Such interventions are called “near misses,” and they should be scored in the SAC Matrix as if they were an event that actually occurred. Such reviews of near misses or “close calls” are valuable “because they occur much more frequently than adverse or reviewable sentinel events and do not require harm to a patient before learning can occur.”⁷³ Indeed, “the absence of safety, like poor health, is clearly signaled by near misses, injuries, and fatalities, which lend themselves to close analysis and quantification.”⁷⁴

It is also important that the RCA process include steps designed to understand whether or not the error has been repeated, and if so, the extent of the nonconformities. An example would be the use of an improper reagent in a chemical test – appropriate auditing should be conducted to ensure what other tests, if any, might have been similarly compromised by the improper reagent. Another example might be the calibration of lab equipment, which would likely require a review of all tests conducted between the dates of the last calibration

⁷³ Bagian, James et al., *The Veterans Affairs Root Cause Analysis System in Action*. Journal on Quality Improvement, 2002, Vol. 28 No. 10, 531 – 545, at 531.

⁷⁴ *Making Sense of Root Cause Analysis Investigations of Surgery-Related Adverse Events*, Cassin, Bryce R., Barach, Paul R., Surg Clin N Am. 92 (2012) 101-115.

and the discovery of the error.

Creating a “Safe Harbor” to Encourage Transparency and Reporting of Error

It has been shown in numerous settings that providing a “safe” environment – that is, an environment that encourages and prevents negative use of important quality and/or reliability information – enhances participation in RCAs, and thus improves both their frequency and their substance.

The key characteristics of such a Safe Harbor include:

1. Qualified Immunity for Participants.
 - a. An individual should not be disciplined in any way for participating in a RCA, or offering a candid and good faith assessment of the role of others in an incident under review.
 - b. In addition, an individual who reports an error should receive positive consideration from any disciplinary body if the individual self-reports an error within a reasonable time after the incident (e.g., 10 days). Note that this does not protect the individual from any liability that may accrue for the individual’s role in the error, though the FSSP/FSMPs should consider the positive impact of the self-reported information in its assessment of any necessary punishment.
2. Protection from discovery for Notes, Minutes, Correspondence, and/or Reports generated as part of an RCA. In order to ensure that the RCA is an event review only, designed to learn from error and improve upstream processes, materials generated as part of an RCA should not, generally speaking, be discoverable in civil or criminal litigation related to the incident. This is in keeping with Peer Review Protection Acts that hold healthcare event reviews as undiscoverable in 46 states throughout the United States.⁷⁵
3. Nothing in this safe harbor should be viewed as limiting the discovery rights of individuals to information about the underlying facts related to a nonconformity (i.e., facts or documents pertaining to the actual nonconformity, as opposed to documents generated by the RCA process).

⁷⁵ To the extent an error justifying a RCA occurs in a criminal case, the defendant may have enhanced rights to learn about the results of the RCA as part of his/her criminal defense. Such an issue can be managed by the court of relevant jurisdiction on a case-by-case basis, with the information that the Attorney General views the protection of RCA work product to be an important public interest that does not preclude any discovery sought by the defendant on the underlying facts at issue.

The purpose of the safe harbor is merely to ensure that no one is penalized as a result of his or her participation in a valuable event review designed to improve the technical and management system process, the quality of the laboratory work product, and the fair administration of justice.

APPENDIX D. ADDITIONAL WRITINGS ON CONVICTION REVIEW UNITS.

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“Conviction Integrity Units: Vanguard of Criminal Justice Reform,” Center for Prosecutorial Integrity White Paper, released Dec. 4, 2014

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