The borough of Brooklyn in New York City is one of the most violent jurisdictions in the United States, a place where prosecutors and courts process more than 70,000 cases a year. With statistics so overwhelming, the only realistic way to think about the challenge of crime in our major cities is to break them down into smaller and more manageable units, the neighborhoods.

Recognizing the importance of the community is the emphasis of Police Commissioner Lee Brown's Community Patrol Officer Program (CPOP), the department's Community Policing approach. Yet the police are only one element in the criminal justice system, and there is growing interest in matching the lessons learned from Community Policing to the rest of the criminal justice system.

"It became very clear that the entire New York City Police Department was turning its face in another direction," says Albert Teichman, an Executive Assistant District Attorney in Brooklyn. "If the police department is going one way and we're going another, it wouldn't really make sense."

The new arrangement

In response, the Brooklyn Community Prosecution Program, which has been up and running since September 19 of last year, divides the borough into five judicial zones based on precinct and community boundaries. Although still operating out of the central courthouse, the program had decentralized its approach to case assignment and management. Each zone encompasses four to six police precincts and has seven judges assigned. Each judge has three assistant district attorneys working with him or her.
There are five trial teams, one for each judicial zone, and each consists of a chief, two deputies, and a number of assistants. By working together in the community, these teams can take a more active role in helping to identify and solve crimes in their areas.

Among the many benefits of this new organization is that the members of the prosecution team get to know the neighborhood and the police officers who work there. They also become familiar with the kinds of problems that people in the community face and with the kinds of crimes committed there. Another plus with the new system is that the prosecution deals with fewer judges, an advantage because they have a chance to learn how each judge operates and what each cares about.

**Knowing the community**

The benefit of the trial teams is that they develop a sense of the geography of their neighborhood, get to know the police officers that serve the community, and become familiar with the types of crime that are plaguing their area. In fact, the primary duty of one of the two deputies in each trial team is to assess crime patterns and community crime problems, and keep in close contact with the police precincts and captains.

"The opportunity for any one trial assistant in the past to become familiar with a neighborhood was nonexistent," explains Teichman. "You became familiar with your complaining witness, your cop on that case, you learned a couple of streets around the nexus of the case, and that was it." With the assistant DA's trying cases that only occur in their trial zone, Teichman feels that over a period of time they'll get to know the officers, the crime problems, and the names of the streets in their area. He expects that they'll go to community meetings to gain a sense of responsibility for their area. "It's not that they were irresponsible before and now they'll be responsible," he says. "But there'll be a much closer connection with the way they deliver service."

**The role of specialization**

Specialty bureaux remain in place, such as homicide, sex crimes, rackets, and arson. The chiefs of those bureaux will review each case and make a decision as to whether they will take the case themselves or assign it to a trial zone prosecutor (the trial zones now handle 85% of the cases).

Teichman feels that breaking the tradition of relying heavily on the specialty bureaux to try cases will have good results. He believes that the trial teams will become better able to handle their own cases under the new system, and the overall experience of attorneys will increase. By taking experienced lawyers from each of the specialty units and putting them on a trial team, the level of expertise in the zone is increased, and they become more self-contained. New attorneys now work side by side with veterans, and they have the opportunity to try a wider variety of cases. "The more you get involved in specialization," says Teichman, "the more you bleed away from the general felony area any kind of expertise, and then you're very strong in your specialized area, but your inner core gets weak."

**Effectiveness and efficiency**

Justice Ronald Aiello, chief administrative judge for Brooklyn and Staten Island, told Bill Farrell of the Daily News that the new system will be more effective and give them greater trial capacity. "As it works now," he said, "assistants can be dealing with as many as 10 different judges," leading to scheduling conflicts and other inefficiencies that cause the system to bog down.

Farrell also describes the "Fire Sale" held by the DA's office just prior to the kickoff of the Community Prosecution Program, where approximately 2,100 outstanding cases were cleared. Conferences were held on these cases and plea bargain deals were made. "They said, 'This is your last best offer - you can take this or it's over,'" Farrell reports.
To further increase trial efficiency, the conferences held among judges, prosecutors, and defense lawyers to evaluate a case and make plea offers will be held immediately after arraignment. Under the current system, these conferences are usually held three weeks later. Aiello tells Farrell that this "will cut 21 days off the process without batting an eyelash." The other benefit of this system is that a prisoner only has to be transported once, rather than twice, by the Department of Corrections.

Farrell states that according to sources in the DA's office and Brooklyn Supreme Court, there is a backlog of between 4,000 to 5,000 cases. Trial Accommodation Parts (TAP) will be set up in each zone (a "Part" is what they call a court in New York City). The TAP judge's duty is to evaluate backlogged cases and assign them to judges who may have room for a trial on their calendar. The TAP judge also could accept a plea and close the case. Aiello also plans to assign six justices above and beyond the zone justices to hear high-profile, more complex cases.

Instituting the new system in such a large office was a massive undertaking, according to Teichman, and the courts and police department helped by being positive and cooperative. "We had to make sure that they understood the philosophy behind it, that they were on board with us, and that it made sense to them also," he recalls.

Teichman explains that without cooperation of the judiciary, the Community Prosecution Program could topple. "We have to make sure that an assistant DA in one trial zone won't be sent out by a judge to try a case in another trial zone. This would completely change the system."

Teichman describes the Community Prosecution Program as trying to replicate in an urban setting what people do in small towns. He feels that prosecutors have the authority to use the law to create order and justice and neighborhoods. "If we do not do anything different tomorrow than today, then nothing the police will do in any version of policing will have much more of an effect than what they are doing now."