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Prosecutors looking beyond courtroom amid reform, scrutiny

By Lindsay Whitehurst|AP

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SALT LAKE CITY — Prosecutors are traditionally focused on courtrooms and guilty verdicts, but their roles are changing amid criminal-justice reforms, a changing crime rate and increased public scrutiny.

District attorneys from around the U.S. who gathered in Salt Lake City on Thursday and Friday say they're being pressed on issues such as Black Lives Matter, mass incarceration and police shootings. They're also facing more election challenges, often from reform-minded candidates.

"In the past, I don't think people really paid much attention," said Denver District Attorney Beth McCann. "I think as prosecutors we have got to respond and get ahead of some of this."

McCann and other top prosecutors said in a panel discussion Thursday they're taking a broader approach to the job, crunching data, working on crime prevention programs and increasing access to mental-health treatment.

"You must know, not just what your jury trial success rate is, but what your recidivism rate is," said Los Angeles County District Attorney Jackie Lacey, who said a loved one's struggles with mental illness inspired her to start a program to get more defendants into mental health programs.

In Denver, prosecutors are trying new ways to deal with teenagers carrying guns.

"I really struggle with what is the appropriate thing to do with a 14-year-old who shoots and either kills someone, or permanently maims that child for life," McCann said.

In Phoenix, Maricopa County District Attorney Bill Montgomery said his office is also sending people to diversion programs and working with community and victims groups to stop crime.

But Montgomery, who has been criticized in TV ads linked to liberal billionaire George Soros, also said that criminal-justice work should be free of political divisions.

“I don’t believe there is such a thing as progressive justice or conservative justice,” he said.

Crime is also increasingly untethered from geographic divisions, said Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance. As violent crime has decreased, particularly in New York City, cybercrime has filled the gap and he’s got a new team of people dedicated to combatting it.

“I simply don’t think we have a clue how to deal with cybercrime on a national level,” he said. “This is just going to roll us.”

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