

Prosecutors often bend laws, study concludes

Associated Press

PTTSBURG — Federal Agents and prosecutors around the country have repeatedly broken the law over the past decade in pursuit of convictions, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette said it found as the result of a two-year investigation.

The newspaper, in a 10-part series that begins Sunday, said it found examples of prosecutors lying, hiding evidence, distorting the facts, engaging in cover-ups, paying for perjury and setting up innocent people to win indictments, guilty pleas and convictions.

Federal officials rarely were punished for their misconduct, despite the fact that they caused some victims to lose their jobs, assets and even families, the newspaper said. It also reported that some victims went to prison because prosecutors withheld favorable evidence or allowed fabricated testimony, while some criminals walked free as a reward for conspiring with the government.

"It's a result-oriented process today, fairness be damned," said Robert Merkle, who served as a U.S. attorney in Florida from 1982 to 1988 and is now a defense lawyer in Tampa.

"The philosophy of the past 10 to 15 years (is) that whatever works is what's right," he told the Post-Gazette.

The U.S. Justice Department, which oversees federal prosecutors, denied the newspaper's allegations.

"Our prosecutors live by strict, comprehensive and effective ethics rules," Myron Marlin, a department spokesman in Washington, told the Associated Press. "They are governed by the rules in the states where they are licensed, the courts where the case is tried and by federal regulation as well.

"Our office that oversees prosecutorial conduct (Office of Professional Responsibility) reviews every complaint and vigorously pursues prosecutors who cross the line."

During the newspaper's investigation, the Justice Department did not respond to questions it posed in writing, nor would it return phone calls requesting comment.