

Career criminals can expect a shift to harsher sentences

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Michael Constantine was facing less than six years in prison for stealing a television from a St. Paul apartment building. Instead, he got a 20-year sentence.

The Ramsey County attorney's office and local law enforcement agencies are hoping to duplicate that kind of outcome for other criminals who spend much of their time in a revolving door between jail and the streets.

County Attorney John Choi, Ramsey County Sheriff Matt Bostrom and police chiefs from St. Paul, Maplewood, New Brighton and White Bear Lake announced Friday at a news conference that they will step up efforts to identify people who may meet the legal definition of a dangerous or repeat offender and then seek harsher penalties. Judges then could issue longer sentences if a jury decides that the defendant is a career criminal.

That's what happened to Constantine, who had 12 felony convictions and was facing seven other felonies when he went to trial. In June, Ramsey County District Judge Teresa Warner gave

Constantine the maximum sentence.

"Now he's in jail for a really long time," Choi said. "Without question, he deserves it. The public is better off with him in jail."

Prosecutors have had the ability for years to ask that a defendant be declared a dangerous or repeat offender, but Choi said the number of those offenders in Ramsey County were not previously tracked. As part of this initiative, his office has assigned a veteran prosecutor to coordinate the cases.

"We all know, and studies have shown, that a small percentage of people commit a large part of the crime in Ramsey County," Choi said. "That is particularly frustrating for members of the public to see this pattern happen over and over again."

St. Paul Police Chief Tom Smith said he knows that feeling of frustration well after years in law enforcement.

"This is something stuck in my craw, especially dangerous career criminals," Smith said.

To illustrate his point, Smith looked to a wall displaying 29 of Constantine's mug shots taken between 1995 and 2009. That wasn't all of them.

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