

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/why-has-topeka-accepted-domestic-violence>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

When the City Council of Topeka, Kansas, voted on October 11 to repeal an ordinance banning domestic violence because prosecuting those cases is too costly, domestic violence advocates and service providers nationwide expressed outrage and disbelief.

Citing cost, the city had stopped prosecuting domestic violence cases in early September, turning back dozens of cases turning a blind eye to the victims. The budget battle was a real one: the City of Topeka blamed the county government for failure to prosecute at the county level and handing the cases to the city without the city's agreement. According to a report in the [New York Times](#), the county district attorney blamed the county commission for slashing the budget. And county leaders turned it back on the city, which it claimed was using this issue to play chicken, as one victim said, and to negotiate fewer cuts to the municipal budget. Both sides agreed that they couldn't afford to prosecute these cases. Despite the fact that domestic violence is still a crime at the statewide level, the *Times* reports that no agency is accepting new cases, resulting in no new prosecutions since early September.

If there is any silver lining here, it's that years ago, this action would have gone unnoticed, ignored, and overlooked. Many people would not have cared if they did hear about it. The fact that this action by the Topeka City Council sparked a backlash across social media and locally shows how far we've come in this movement. Yet the fact that the repeal passed demonstrates how far we still have to go to change the nation's consciousness.

The other obvious silver lining is that the district attorney reversed his stance the very next day and agreed to prosecute these cases. In this game of chicken, someone finally caved [but at what cost?](#)

What message did this send other communities that are likely to be facing tight budgets? What made this particular crime expendable and attractive as a pawn? I would ask the members of that council to consider what was it about this crime that makes it so costly to prosecute. If it's the sheer volume of victims, they should look hard at how they fulfill their duty to the public trust.

The lingering message the elected officials sent to victims, and the community at large, about the city's beliefs about domestic violence, holding offenders accountable, and keeping victims and children safe is a monument to muddled policymaking.

Topeka's government took this regressive step in October, which is [Domestic Violence Awareness Month](#). Every year, domestic violence service providers and advocates raise awareness about the violence that permeates many homes across the country. As professionals committed to seeing people live lives free of violence, we've been bringing the discussion out of the shadows so that it's no longer behind closed doors; we freely discuss the issues we know to be true and the statistics that show the epidemic of violence in our homes. According to the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges: - About one in four women will experience physical domestic violence at some point in her life; - About 85 percent of the victims of domestic violence are women; - Homicide is the second leading cause of injury-related death among pregnant women.

There's been real progress in reducing the shame that many victims feel in being victimized by their life partners while honoring their journey of healing and their desire to live a violence-free life. As a community, the focus has shifted from why does she stay to why does he abuse her? Community awareness and concerted education have spurred this shift.

Perhaps one day the people serving on the Topeka City Council will recognize that domestic violence awareness isn't wearing a purple ribbon and agreeing that domestic violence shouldn't happen. With awareness comes a responsibility. Awareness is about educating yourself, especially if you're in a position of power, so that you do the right thing.

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