

By Liam Ford Chicago Tribune reporter

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For every man convicted in a Cook County court of beating his wife or girlfriend, five men brought in on similar charges walk away legally unscathed. And despite official promises to help women pursue abuse complaints, that conviction rate is only getting worse.

Prosecuting domestic violence has never been easy, mostly because women often choose to drop charges. But the odds of conviction rise when women get help navigating a complex court system and prosecutors provide early, intensive contact with victims.

Cook County's opening of a \$62 million courthouse in 2005 was aimed in part at making women feel more comfortable pursuing their cases. Yet, a Tribune analysis has found, one-sixth of the 19,000 domestic violence cases brought each year in Cook County now result in convictions.

That dismal record feeds a vicious cycle: With so few convictions, victims lose faith in the courts, and the violence continues unabated, advocates say.

"It looks like there isn't anyone holding abusers accountable," said Dawn Dalton of the Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women's Network.

The Tribune analysis found that nearly 14 percent of defendants countywide faced domestic violence charges multiple times over just a three-year period.

Nakia Adams, 29, said she endured two years of taunts from a former boyfriend as he harassed her despite a court order forbidding any contact.

"I started giving up on the court system," Adams said. But when she began working with victim advocates and attorneys from private support groups, her attitude about the process changed. Adams pushed prosecutors to pursue a conviction of the man.

Her lesson for other women: "Just don't be afraid to go to get help."

Help, however, can be hard to come by.

When the Domestic Violence Court was established in 1984, a key innovation was to create a pool of advocates, some employed by the county and others by private groups, to help guide victims through the court's complexities. The advocates provide emotional support, help find temporary housing and arrange counseling, health care and employment for the victims.

But heavy caseloads and chronic staff shortages have chipped away at those services. Frustrated by the bureaucracy and long delays between arrest and the start of trial, many women choose to drop cases, victims and advocates say.

Though problems are seen across Cook County, they are especially acute in Chicago itself: Convictions in city cases, which stood at 20 percent in 2003, dropped to less than 14 percent last year.

Chief Circuit Judge Timothy Evans moved in August to address the problems.

After two women who had sought protection through the court were killed—and after the Tribune began investigating conviction rates—Evans named a panel of judges, lawyers, advocates and civic leaders to find solutions.

"If we can put all of our resources together, meager as they are, we can have a broader safety net for victims . . . and get . . . perpetrators off the cycle of violence," Evans said in an interview in his Daley Center offices.

As it is, unless they are among a few hundred charged with felonies each year, most of the accused escape court with no jail time, no fines, not even alcohol or drug treatment, the Tribune analysis found.

"The message is sent to the abuser that you can get away with this," said Jody Raphael, who over the last five years has tracked the court's performance for the Schiller DuCanto & Fleck Family Law Center at DePaul University.

At the same time, when victims see so few convictions, they are less likely to go forward with their own cases, experts said.

Of course, some women drop charges, refuse to testify or fail to show up in court for personal reasons beyond the flaws of the court system. Most of the time, unless children or other family members have been injured by the defendant, prosecutors will not push the case without the victim's cooperation.

But not all women who drop cases are trying to protect their men, court veterans say. If the system gave victims better access to advocates and attorneys so they would be more comfortable in pursuing their cases, more women would go forward, according to victims and legal experts.

They often "don't get the information that they need to be able to make informed decisions, and that has a big [impact on] how effective the court system is," Dalton said.

Cook County State's Atty. Richard Devine said his office this year renewed its emphasis on moving more serious domestic violence charges to felony court. By doing so, those cases get more individual attention from prosecutors and investigators.

Still, judges and attorneys must juggle scores of cases each day, often giving prosecutors little time to meet with victims before they first face a judge.

Some strides were made three years ago when the court moved from a dilapidated building on South Michigan Avenue to its four-story home at 555 W. Harrison St. For one thing, broader hallways in the new building mean victims and abusers no longer gather in close proximity. Safety has gone up. Fear and intimidation have gone down. But the move has not cured staffing ills. Private advocates who work at the court say they have enough funding and staff to help only one of every 10 victims seeking legal protection.

Hayley Myers, 29, a hairstylist and mother of two, has sought several times over the last three years to have her estranged husband arrested on abuse allegations. Myers expressed anger at how prosecutors and judges sometimes treat victims "like they're a number."

"I would think that in a situation where the woman is adamant about pressing charges, and seriously wants to be done with this person, that they would take it more to heart . . . as if they were dealing with someone in their own family," Myers said. "But it's not. It's not like that at all."

Tribune reporter Darnell Little contributed to this report.