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# Opinion

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April 09, 2009 6:59AM

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## Rape prosecutions came up short in YWCA's review

VIEWPOINT

By LINDA BAECHLE

You may have seen something quite unusual last weekend in downtown South Bend: men walking in women's red high-heeled shoes.

Former Indiana Gov. Joe Kernan led the YWCA's Men's March to End Violence Against Women at Coveleski Stadium. The men "walked a mile in her shoes" to raise awareness about the very serious problem of violence against women and to raise money for the YWCA's domestic violence and sexual assault programs.

By taking part in the walk, the men of Michiana showed their willingness to be partners in the effort to end violence against women in our community. Thank you to every single man who walked last weekend. Violence against women is a grim reality and a problem that will take both men and women working together to resolve.

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month and as part of its Court Watch program the YWCA wants to raise awareness of how cases of rape are dealt with in our community. In 2007, the



most recent year with complete statistics available, there were 102 reports of forcible rape to South Bend, Mishawaka and the St. Joseph County police departments, according to the FBI Uniform Crime Report.

This represents a dramatic increase over previous years when our community averaged 78 reports of forcible rape a year on the UCR. The reported rapes are only the tip of the iceberg. Typically between a third and a half of all rapes go unreported.

One would think that with this many rapes reported in our community, there would be

many rape and criminal deviate conduct cases in the courts. According to the Rape Abuse Incest National Network, nationally 50 percent of all reports of rape result in an arrest, 80 percent of those arrested are prosecuted and 58 percent of the cases prosecuted result in a conviction. That does not appear to be the case here in our community.

With 102 rapes reported, following the formula above one would expect to see 40 cases charged and prosecuted and 23 convictions.

How many rape cases were charged, prosecuted and resulted in a conviction in 2007 in St. Joseph County? A review of records revealed that four individuals were charged and convicted of criminal deviate conduct. There were no convictions of the charge of rape. Four other cases were filed that the prosecutor's office termed "related to rape." These cases were not forcible rape cases, and the YWCA is not including them in our count.

We understand that the prosecutor's office handles thousands of cases a year, and that the caseload is staggering. Of course we also know that rape cases are often difficult to prosecute, but what kind of message are we sending to rapists when so few of them have any consequences for their behavior? Is it a deterrent to crime when cases are not prosecuted? Do you feel safe knowing that nearly all of the 102 subjects of those rape reports are still on the streets with you, in the restaurant with you, sitting in the movie theater next to you?

The prosecutor's office has sole discretion concerning which cases are prosecuted, and which are not. No one reviews the decision. This is public information and as a concerned public it is our job to be aware of how these important cases are being handled. This is a difficult assignment with no publicly accessible central database for prosecutorial data concerning how many cases are charged, what charges are brought and how many cases are won or lost.

Not in St. Joseph County. Not in the state of Indiana. The data concerning prosecution of cases is not readily available to the YWCA, or to the community. We would urge the prosecutor's office to release this information to the community twice a year.

As an agency concerned about violence against women, the YWCA encourages victims of rape to fully cooperate in the prosecution of their attackers. The YWCA wants to work with the prosecutor's office and other agencies to meet the needs of rape victims in our community and see that justice is served.

For all victims of rape, please know that we are here for you and we will continue to fight for what is right.

**Linda Baechle is executive director of the YWCA of St. Joseph County.**

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