



ISSUE BRIEF | Center for Law and Justice

THE DETRIMENTAL SPILLOVER EFFECT OF PROGRESSIVE PROSECUTORS ON PUBLIC SAFETY

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TOPLINE POINTS

- Progressive prosecutors undermine the rule of law, endangering all Americans' public safety.
- District attorneys who fail to uphold the rule of law risk lawlessness not only in their own communities but in neighboring jurisdictions.
- All Americans must be aware of the far-reaching effects that progressive prosecutors have on public safety.

Introduction

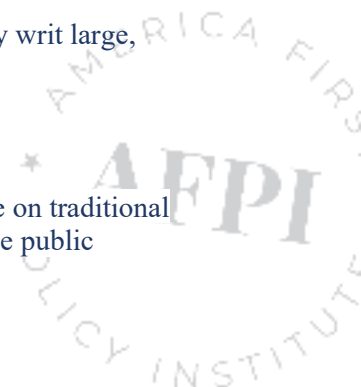
A district attorney's (DA's) primary responsibility is to uphold the law and ensure public safety within that DA's jurisdiction. Americans expect their prosecutors to prosecute crimes. After all, it's in their title.

In recent years, George Soros and progressive liberal groups have funded more than 75 DA races, promoting the election of progressive prosecutors to top positions within local criminal justice systems ([Law Enforcement Legal Defense Fund, 2022](#)). This is important because while most voters pay attention to presidential and congressional elections, they often pay less attention to local races such as the DA, despite the importance of such positions and their direct impact on people's lives.

Even more disturbing is the effect these progressive criminal justice policies have on society writ large, far beyond the confines of the jurisdiction in which they are directly applied.

Going Rogue

The priorities and policies a community's lead prosecutor promotes—whether focused more on traditional law-and-order measures or the pursuit of social justice remedies—can significantly influence public safety.



Philadelphia's DA, Larry Krasner, has been in office since 2018. Elected on a progressive platform emphasizing social justice, he has consistently pursued far-left criminal justice policies while in office. These policies have included ending cash bail and promoting catch-and-release, which involves the near-immediate release of arrested individuals back onto the streets ([Schultz, 2019](#)). Using a catch-and-release policy for a possession of marijuana charge for a first-time offender is vastly different from using it as liberally as DA Krasner's office does on many serious offenses that are often violent. Krasner's soft-on-crime approach does not just affect so-called low-level offenses but extends to some of Philadelphia's most dangerous criminals—those in unlawful possession of a gun. An analysis conducted after Krasner's first two years in office shows that he dropped or lost 47 percent of all illegal firearm cases—a rate 42 percent higher than that of his predecessor.

Unsurprisingly, Krasner's policies have concerned local law enforcement, as crime rates have steadily risen in the City of Brotherly Love ([Nutter, 2024](#)). Indeed, between 2021 and 2022, Philadelphia saw its highest annual homicide rates since the 1980s. Unfortunately, over time, the policies that have contributed to rising crime in Philadelphia have also likely bled into neighboring communities, many of which never elected or intended to pursue the same flawed progressive prescription for criminal justice.

Philadelphia criminals seem to feel emboldened by the knowledge that the likelihood of getting arrested is slim and that, *if* caught, the likelihood that they will be prosecuted and incarcerated may be minimal. After a six-month manhunt, two men were arrested in nearby Montgomery County for the murder of a pregnant teenager, Teryn Johnson, on September 11, 2022, in Philadelphia. Jamal King, one of the two men, had prior drug, gun, and aggravated assault convictions. Having spent only a couple of months in prison for these convictions, King took part in the murder of Johnson only five months after being released ([Johanson, 2023](#)).

According to the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office, a review showed that while only 30 percent of all offenses resulted in a dismissal or withdrawal in 2016, that number increased to 50 percent in 2019, 67 percent in 2021, and 60 percent in 2024 after Krasner assumed office ([2024](#)). "We are tired of arresting the same suspects over and over again, only to see them right back on the street to continue and sometimes escalate their criminal ways," said then-Philadelphia Police Commissioner Danielle Outlaw in a statement ([Fox 29, 2022](#)).

A Heritage Foundation study found that counties with high crime rates were predominantly led by progressive officials, who often couched their costly policies under the guise of "criminal justice reform" ([Stimson, Smith, & Dayaratna, 2022](#)). Genuine reform provides support to individuals who have been previously incarcerated and truly deserve a hand up, not a free pass, to commit more crimes. Most importantly, these reform measures accomplish this without compromising public safety. By contrast, progressive social justice policies contribute to elevated crime rates in their jurisdictions and elsewhere ([Swearer, 2023](#)).

Even if a county or municipality elects a traditional law-and-order DA, criminals from nearby jurisdictions where progressive prosecutors reign, such as Philadelphia, can cause major problems that bleed into the local community. For instance, crime rose by double-digit percentages in Delaware, Montgomery, and Bucks counties, all suburbs of Philadelphia, between 2021 and 2022, with the largest increases coming in property crimes such as burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft ([Pennsylvania UCR, 2024](#)). The data suggest that an urban crime spike in the summer of 2020 extended beyond the Philadelphia city limits, impacting smaller communities not normally affected by these crimes. Larceny



(generally defined as theft of personal property) and auto thefts, in particular, showed large increases in adjacent counties that matched large increases in Philadelphia.

Krasner's failed approach to public safety has given other prosecutors something to consider as they look within their own offices to implement policies. Philadelphia's neighboring counties of Chester, Bucks, York, and Montgomery are illustrations of that.

Chris de Barrena-Sarobe, nearby Chester County's newly elected DA, has taken a different approach than neighboring DA Krasner regarding prosecuting crimes. Having served as a prosecutor in the Chester County District Attorney's Office from 2001 to 2015, de Barrena-Sarobe saw first-hand the tangible effect that policy decisions had in the community. As DA, one of his top priorities has been to investigate firearm offenses, including gun trafficking and the accompanying drug dealing that often follows. This is an attempt to prevent guns from falling into the hands of violent criminals—something DA Krasner has let fall by the wayside in Philadelphia. De Barrena-Sarobe has also invested in technology and programs to enhance law enforcement's ability to investigate crimes. This programming will provide better access to timely crime data across Chester County, along with enhanced outreach to those suffering from addiction and mental illness ([Chester County, PA, n.d.](#)). When treatment for these conditions is successful, it protects the community by reducing recidivism and allowing law enforcement resources to proactively focus on protecting the community from other threats.

Jen Schorn, the newly elected DA of Bucks County, had two decades of experience working in the county DA's office alongside her predecessor, Matt Weintraub. Schorn earned a reputation as a hard-nosed prosecutor by taking on several high-profile cases against child predators and closing a 1991 cold case that resulted in a life-without-parole sentence for convicted killer Robert Atkins ([Bucks County DA Office, 2024](#)). DA Schorn's approach to criminal justice will likely trend more closely to the traditional law-and-order policies of her predecessor, Weintraub, whose leadership saw Bucks County elevate to the 91st percentile among Pennsylvania counties in public safety in 2019, a year in which the county also experienced zero murders ([CrimeGrade, n.d.](#); [BestPlaces, n.d.](#)).

York County DA Dave Sunday, first elected in 2018, has also advocated for a more law-and-order approach to public safety. This has resulted in a 30 percent decrease in crime during his first term, reductions in the prison population by almost 40 percent of its peak, and a reduced supervision caseload ([Sunday, 2019](#)).

Elected in 2016, Montgomery County DA Kevin Steele has largely followed suit, taking a more hands-on approach to policy implementation in his office. Occasionally leading cases himself in court, Steele prosecuted a third-degree murder charge against a defendant accused of killing a local firefighter and injuring several other first responders. The 64-year-old perpetrator, Jacqueline Walker, was sentenced to 12–24 years in prison, where she will most likely spend the rest of her life ([Melwert, 2023](#)).

Despite these more traditional law and order policies, plea decisions and sentencing recommendations are not bound by county lines. As the following examples illustrate, all of these offenders were Philadelphia residents with extensive criminal histories, but the lack of accountability for their past actions allowed them to commit heinous crimes in surrounding communities.

In Montgomery County, Rachel King was shot to death in April of 2023 with her young son in the car alongside her, allegedly by Zakkee Steven Alhakim and Julie Jean. Alhakim has a mile-long criminal rap sheet but had, for the most part, received only a slap on the wrist by DA Krasner ([Unified Judicial System of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2024](#)).



Another example was Darryl Warren, who, in September of 2023, was involved in a shooting in Delaware County, though he had past charges of illegally carrying firearms in Philadelphia ([Unified Judicial System of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2023](#)).

And lastly, Kenneth Lyles, who, as of this writing, was still at large for his part in the straw purchasing of firearms, intended to redistribute those firearms through an organizational ring in Montgomery County. “Criminals from Philadelphia who violate the law in the counties are going to find out the prosecutors in those counties aren’t the same as in Philly,” explained former assistant DA Carlos Vega ([Miller, 2024](#)).

Although several of the locally elected DAs in the areas surrounding Philadelphia have adopted more traditional approaches to holding criminals accountable for their actions, their communities have nonetheless been affected by the predations of criminals emboldened by the more lenient approach to public safety promoted by Philadelphia DA Krasner. This underscores a fundamental reality: Progressive criminal justice policies are not confined to the areas in which they are implemented.

The Effect of Bad Policy on Neighboring Communities

Philadelphia and its neighboring communities are not the only examples of where dangerous criminal justice policies transcend geographic borders. Sadly, this phenomenon is happening elsewhere throughout the country.

A stark example of this reality involved the Christmas parade tragedy in Waukesha, Wisconsin, in 2022, when Darrell Brooks drove his vehicle through a Christmas parade and killed six individuals between the ages of 8 and 81. Brooks’ case was a prime example that in prosecutorial discretion, the acknowledgment of the crime committed, and the alleged perpetrator’s history of criminal behavior are crucial. Brooks was in the criminal justice system multiple times since the 1990s, having been arrested for nearly a dozen offenses, some local and some crossing jurisdictions and state lines ([FOX6 News Digital Team, 2022](#)).

Only days before the Christmas parade massacre, Brooks was arrested for domestic violence in Milwaukee. Despite a bail amount that should have been closer to \$10,000, Milwaukee DA John Chisholm’s office released Brooks with only \$1,000 bail. Chisholm explained away this indiscretion as the result of a mistake by a young assistant DA overloaded with cases. It was Chisholm, however, who implemented the policies and culture by which others in the office abide.

Following the tragedy, Waukesha County DA Sue Opper was instrumental in convicting Brooks for the final time, ending Brooks’ turnstile relationship with the criminal justice system and sending him to prison on a 762.5-year sentence.

A criminal justice system governed by progressive policies has consistently compromised public safety. Failure to enforce laws, protect innocent citizens and victims, and punish violent criminals is not a recipe for stronger public safety outcomes. Unsurprisingly, these policies promote a culture of violence throughout the jurisdictions in which they are practiced and increase the likelihood that these policies will metastasize into neighboring jurisdictions.

On February 22nd of this year, twenty-two-year-old University of Georgia alumna Laken Riley, whose case made national news, was allegedly murdered by 26-year-old Jose Ibarra, an illegal immigrant who had several previous run-ins with the law. In late 2022, Customs and Border Protection officials encountered Ibarra after he had illegally crossed the southern border and entered the United States near El



Paso, Texas ([Shaw & Price, 2024](#)). He was subsequently “paroled and released for further processing,” Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials said ([Shaw & Price, 2024](#)). Following his release from custody, the New York Police Department arrested Ibarra on September 14, 2023, and he was “charged with acting in a manner to injure a child less than 17 and a motor vehicle license violation,” according to ICE. New York officials then released him “before a detainer could be issued,” ICE said ([Shaw & Price, 2024](#)).

The catch-and-release policies that led to Ibarra’s release in New York City were the result of Manhattan DA Alvin Bragg’s notoriously lax approach to criminal justice, outlined in his social justice-laden “Achieving Fairness and Safety” memo ([Bragg, Jr. 2022](#)). Immediately upon assuming office in early 2022, Bragg instructed his prosecutors to avoid the pursuit of jail sentences for perpetrators of robbery, assault, and gun possession, decimating the basic accountability measures needed to assure a community that where they live, work, and enjoy time with family and friends is safe.

Early in his tenure, Bragg’s approach to accountability appeared to have a tangible effect on crime. Gotham City’s crime spiked 44 percent during Bragg’s first quarter in office from the same period the year before. Violence also spiraled out of control, with homicides jumping by 35 percent from July 2021 to July 2022. Burglary (+25 percent), grand larceny (+40 percent), and robbery (+37 percent) also spiked over the same period ([Davenport, 2022](#)).

Criminals have been able to get away with dangerous, often violent, behavior because of a combination of reckless policies, such as the no-bail, no-prosecution policies of rogue DAs and the irresponsible leaders who allow these public servants to continue down this dangerous path.

While many factors go into why a certain jurisdiction may be worse or better than another, defense attorney Eric Korslund has spoken publicly to the press about certain misguided DA decisions, saying, “We’re all human, we all make mistakes. But when they’re repeated, it’s a pattern. And it’s a choice. And these mistakes have been repeated and repeated and repeated” ([Morrison, 2023](#)).

The Solutions

An America First approach to combating the ill effects of progressive criminal justice policies begins by demanding that elected officials uphold the basic tenets of their office and ensure that criminal perpetrators are held accountable for their actions. If public officeholders cannot or will not place the public safety interests of their communities above their desire to pursue perceived social justice remedies, then the people themselves should find recourse to remove these officials from office.

Each state in the union has established mechanisms for holding elected officials accountable. These mechanisms ensure that if the public believes an elected official is not upholding the obligations of the individual’s office, especially on matters of public safety, remedies are available. However, these remedies vary from one state to another.

If the state’s constitution does not provide authority or power for the governor or attorney general to act, state legislatures can sometimes be helpful in removing public officials from office. Finally, citizens in some states can be directly involved in holding their sitting DAs accountable with a recall petition.

Florida has been at the forefront of bringing rogue prosecutors to account. Florida law allows the governor to remove recalcitrant DAs for cause, such as incompetence or neglect of duty ([Fla. Stat. § 16.56, 2023](#)).



Tennessee has also ensured that progressive prosecutors are held accountable if they are unwilling to exercise the duties of their office. In the Volunteer State, if any DA makes public statements refusing to prosecute certain crimes, state law allows the attorney general to appoint a DA pro tem for that district ([SB 9008, 2021](#)).

If citizens believe their elected prosecutors are not prioritizing the greater public interest, they should have the democratic right to seek remedies. However, a little fewer than 30 states provide citizens with a way to petition a recall for a sitting DA. Even if citizens have that ability, each state that allows them to do so requires unique steps, as laid out on the respective secretary of state's website.

There are then states, such as Michigan, where citizens do have the ability to petition a recall to try to remove a prosecuting attorney. In Michigan, citizens must file a recall petition request, specifying the factual basis for the recall and the intended official, to be reviewed for factual accuracy and clarity by the Board of State Canvassers. Michigan election law states that a recall petition should not be filed in the first or last six months of an officer's term if the term is two years or in the first or last year of an officer's term if the term is four years. Once approved, the recall petition must be submitted to the secretary of state's office within 180 days. It must contain a requisite number of signatures from within the officer's district. Under Michigan election law, the number of signatures is equal to "25 percent of the votes cast in the officer's district for all candidates for the office of Governor in the last gubernatorial election" ([Michigan Bureau of Elections, 2021](#)). Signatures must be dated no later than 60 days from the filing of the petition. Michigan election law outlines additional details on collecting signatures and the manner and timeframe in which they must be submitted.

It's important to educate not only the public in what they can and cannot do but also the legislatures that were sworn to protect their communities. In the last couple of years, citizens in multiple states have expressed frustration about their lack of authority over their own officials ([Camacho, Goldrosen, Su & Roy, 2023](#)). This has led to the introduction of legislation that would either equip the governor with the authority to remove public officials or provide the citizens in the community a voice in removal.

DAs must preserve public safety and maintain the public's trust. When that does not happen, the public must be empowered to demand change and hold their elected officials accountable.

Conclusion

Liberal activists have leveraged the election of rogue progressive prosecutors to enact dangerous policies that have made our communities less safe with rising crime rates and social dysfunction. Along with misguided efforts to defund the police, progressive criminal justice policies have only harmed the very communities that so-called reformers claim to be helping. Even more nefarious, these policies are often felt in jurisdictions beyond where they are implemented due to the spillover effect. Conservatives must lead the way in advocating for policies that prioritize public safety and ensure American cities remain safe.

To learn more about progressive prosecutors or how you can be involved in your state, visit AFPI's [Center for Law and Justice](#) and become a part of the solution to a problem that affects us all.



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