

Covering Campus Rape and Sexual Assault

A DART CENTER TIP SHEET FOR COLLEGE MEDIA ADVISORS/EDITORS
AND STUDENT JOURNALISTS

When covering a rape on campus or any type of sexual assault, a reporter must approach the incident with caution and handle it with sensitivity and tact. Survivors, and those who are connected to the survivor, must be approached with thought and care because of the level of trauma and distress they have gone through.

As a college newspaper editor/advisor or student journalist, it's important to know that how you report on this kind of story can have short and long-term impacts on the survivor and the greater campus community, so it is essential that you minimize harm in the process. Being thoughtful and empathetic throughout the whole reporting process is key. Student journalists will be better prepared for how to report on these situations if they follow some of the tips outlined below.

NEWSGATHERING AND REPORTING STAGE

Do your research. Be aware of terminology for different types of sexual violence. Rape or sexual assault is in no way associated with normal sexual activity; trafficking in women is not to be confused with prostitution. People who have suffered sexual violence may not wish to be described as a “victim” unless they choose the word themselves. Many prefer the word “survivor.”

As a reporter for your campus publication, you should be familiar with the Clery Act and your rights to information about incidents of sexual violence that happen on college campuses. The Clery Act states:

“The federal Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act (Clery Act), [20 USC § 1092\(f\)](#), requires colleges and universities, both public and private, participating in federal student aid programs to disclose campus safety information, and imposes certain basic requirements for handling incidents of sexual violence and emergency situations. Disclosures about crime statistics and summaries of security policies are made once a year in an Annual Security Report (ASR), and information about specific crimes and emergencies is made publicly available on an ongoing basis throughout the year.”

Source: <http://www.cleryact.info/clery-act.html>

Remember this situation is about a person. When covering sexual violence, remember that the event is not just another crime statistic; it's about a human being – someone who is a friend, a daughter or son, a mother, or a colleague to someone. It's important to tell the story from a human perspective.

For sources – go beyond the typical. Contact counselors, support groups, advocacy groups, and legal experts. They can provide different perspectives on or dimensions to the situation.

Be careful when you approach your sources – be transparent, calm and soft-spoken.

Identify who you are, what organization you represent, what will happen with the information you collect from the interview, how it might be used in the story and when it will appear in publication. Tell them why you want to talk with them. If they are open to an interview, then proceed. If not, then leave your contact information with them and ask them to contact you anytime if they would like to talk. If they are not interested in talking, or willing to speak on the record, there will be another opportunity to find a different source.

Source identification. Find out how your source would like to be identified. The survivor will have undergone a lot and may want privacy and anonymity. Be ready to discuss with your editor or advisor how you will handle this in your story. Do you incorporate their information into the story as an anonymous source or do you leave the information out? Survivors or those connected to survivors of sexual violence may want to keep their identities private. This should be respected.

Let your sources have some control. People who have undergone a traumatic situation often seek ways to regain control in their lives after they have lost control. One way to assist with this is to provide them an opportunity to make some decisions in the interview process – for example, where they would like to sit, what photos or images they would prefer you use, when they would like to stop or take a break, etc. These small accommodations can go a long way.

Sexual violence is associated with high degrees of self-blame, guilt and shame. For this reason, avoid any language that might imply that the interviewee is responsible in any way. Be careful not to ask too many “why” questions.

Listening is important. Make sure to allow ample time for the source to tell you their story. Don’t rush them. Don’t press for details if they are not willing. Allow them to tell you what they feel comfortable talking about. Practice empathy.

Corroborate information. Be aware that accounts of what happened may not be entirely accurate as trauma can impact a person’s memory. A person may forget details or misremember due to the psychological effects of the trauma. Be sure to corroborate your information with other sources to the extent possible.

WRITING THE STORY

Watch what you write. Sources may have biased views on a situation or person. Be careful not to perpetuate biases or replicate biased tones into your story. Also, when describing an assault, try to strike the right balance when deciding how much graphic detail to include. Too much can be gratuitous; too little can weaken the survivor’s case.

Be careful about who you identify in your story. Remember that it is never OK to share information that can reveal the location or identity of a survivor unless authorized by the survivor.

Remember your audience. Remember who will be reading your story. If you are publishing in a campus publication and your audience is students, faculty and staff, keep this in mind as you write. The makeup of your audience will always inform your approach to an extent and help shape the story.

Prepare sources for publication of the story. Consider whether or not to allow your source to read the story before it is published. They may have factual corrections and/or additional details that did not come up in the original interview. It may also help your source if he or she is permitted to read the story first. You should have a discussion with your editor/advisor on the ethical challenges with this. It is not customary for journalists to allow sources to read or correct stories prior to publication. In the case of sensitive material though, the ethical considerations may change.

Also, when you find out when your story will be published, inform your sources so they can be emotionally prepared when it comes out. You don’t want them to be taken by surprise.

Provide resources. Be sure to offer helpful information in a sidebar or bulleted list. This information might include hotlines, warning signs, names of support groups or other entities that can provide help, etc. See the list of resources on the right that might be helpful to you both in your reporting and in a sidebar for your story.

Be ready for feedback. Consider the online feedback you may receive after the story is published and the possible backlash that can occur. If you are using an online commenting system, have a procedure in place for how you and your editor/advisor will handle comments that may reveal the identity or otherwise expose the victim(s).

Talk with your friends, family, advisor or editor. Don't bottle up your feelings. Don't forget that covering a rape or sexual assault on your campus can impact you – find ways to talk about the experience with your friends, family, advisor or editor. They may have covered something similar and/or can just be a listening ear. You should not bottle up your feelings but instead share your experience as a way of coping with reporting on such a difficult situation.

More resources:

- [Reporting on Sexual Violence](#)
- [Ethics and Practice: Interviewing Victims](#)
- [Three Questions for Kristen Lombardi: Covering Campus Sexual Assault \(video\)](#)
- [Campus Sexual Violence Resource List](#)
- [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#)
- [National Sexual Violence Resource Center](#)
- [Rape Prevention and Education \(RPE\) Program](#)
- [The Campus Sexual Violence Elimination \(SaVE\) Act](#)
- [The Clery Act](#)
- [White House Issues University Sexual Assault Recommendations](#)