

Covering Homicide

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

When covering homicide, a reporter must approach the incident with caution, sensitivity and tact.

Reporting on homicide is difficult no matter what stage you are at in your journalistic career. A homicide may result from a mass shooting, a murder, intimate partner violence that led to death or an accident that led to a death.

Family, friends, and colleagues of victims of homicide will be in a fragile state so it's important to handle the news gathering process professionally and sensitively. Covering homicide also requires significant knowledge of the case at hand, and of crime and legal terms.

College newspaper editors and advisors should have a protocol or plan in place for mobilizing staff in the event that a homicide occurs on campus. If you don't have a plan in place now, create one. Identify how your staff will gather information, what should be covered, and how to encourage self-care practices and coping mechanisms throughout the process. Student journalists will be better prepared for how to report on these situations if they follow the tips outlined below.

NEWSGATHERING AND REPORTING STAGE

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

Get details on the case. Check police records and find out as much as you can about the situation from police. Has the crime been classified a homicide or something else? Keep in mind that police records may not always be accurate. Misinformation is possible and common. Always corroborate your information with other sources. Don't rush to publish, especially in a breaking news moment, unless you have fully vetted the information.

Be familiar with terminology. With any crime, there are several important terms to be aware of. Every state will have different laws and terms related to crime. Be sure you know the meaning of the terms you are using in your story before you publish.

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

Add context/history. Look at the context of this homicide in relation to others that have occurred in the community, on campus or off campus. Have homicides been increasing or decreasing? Have local programs helped or hindered prevention efforts? Identify local statistics that places the event in better context for the reader.

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.

Let your subjects 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.

The story will be complex. Keep in mind that victims and survivors often may have complicated past experiences; regardless they should never be blamed for what happened.

Reporter Dave Cullen, who covered the Columbine shootings and wrote a book on the subject, suggests some key points:

- **Be aware of the kind of sources you interview.** When it comes to witnesses, find out exactly how they knew the suspect(s). Did they know them for a long time or only during a certain period of life (as a child, teenager, adult, etc.). Their knowledge of the suspect and their interaction with them may be frequent or not and can impact what information and the kind you can obtain from the source.
- **Don't fall victim to assumptions, false conclusions or stereotypes.** Gather information from all sources but be careful to not take witnesses assumptions or conclusions about the suspect as fact – as it is all speculation. Don't try to predict or assume motives or the character of the suspect. Don't characterize the suspect, victims or survivors to stereotypes – there is no general profile. Every case and situation is different.
- **Don't present the suspect as a loner or outcast.** As Cullen states, this perception is often a myth.

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. Instead, supplant the information from your source with context about the bigger picture. For example:

Instead of simply quoting a friend of an alleged abuser saying “He is so gentle and mellow. I do not think he is capable of hurting anyone,” begin with:

“As is often the case when domestic violence strikes a community, people close to [name of abuser] could not believe that the person they knew so well was capable of committing a crime. ‘He is so gentle and mellow. I do not think he is capable of hurting anyone,’ said [abuser’s friend.] However, it is not unusual for men who offend at home to show a different, kinder face to the public, says domestic violence expert [name.]”

Instead of just quoting a family member of an abuser who killed both his wife and children as saying: “He took them with him because he loved them so very much.”

Put the quote in context by adding that abusive relationships are often romanticized by victims, family and close friends; and that friends and family may see early warning signs as indicators of a close and loving relationship.

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 victim unless authorized by the victim.

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.

If you have experienced trauma yourself, acknowledge your own trauma history; don't ignore it. If you are covering a homicide and it triggers memories of a personal trauma, some difficult emotions may surface. Don't ignore them. Find an outlet such as a friend or advisor to talk to or a journal to write in to help with coping.

Provide resources. Are there warning signs that the general public can be aware of to prevent something like this from occurring again? For those directly/indirectly impacted by the event, what kind of help could they seek?

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.

Prepare sources for publication of story.

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.

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 expose the victim(s).

Talk with your friends, family, advisor or editor. Don't bottle up your emotions. Don't forget that covering traumatic events can have an impact on you, the reporter, as well. It is important to find ways to talk about the experience with your friends, family, advisor or editor. They may have gone through something similar and/or can just be a listening ear of comfort. You should not bottle up your feelings but instead share your experience as a way of coping with covering such a difficult event.

More resources:

- [Homicide](#)
- [A Reporter's Lessons from Past Shootings](#)
- [The Legwork: Where to Look, What Questions to Ask](#)
- [The Product: Writing With Insight, Accuracy and Context](#)
- [Campus Tragedy Hits Close To Home](#)
- [Video: Homicide on Campus: Student Journalists Reflect](#)
- [Video: Covering a Tragedy: NIU](#)