

Journalist Tip Sheet

Reporting on Sexual Violence: Tips for Journalists

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month, a time when many journalists cover sexual violence from a variety of news angles. With the #MeToo movement shining an unprecedented spotlight on this complex societal issue, it is a critical opportunity for informed news coverage to advance the public conversation. Below are best practices and story ideas for writing about sexual violence, which impacts one in five women and one in 67 men in their lifetime (Smith et al., 2017).

Interview a Broad Range of Subjects

- A wide range of stakeholders has a role in preventing sexual violence. Seek out a diverse pool of sources, including law enforcement, community members, medical and mental health professionals, sexual violence prevention advocates, other survivors, families, and perpetrators. Expanding sources is important given most sexual violence incidents are never reported to the police.

Report on the Full Spectrum of Sexual Violence and Range of People Affected

- Thanks to #MeToo, more Americans than ever are aware that sexual violence is a broad term that encompasses more than intercourse without consent. In addition to featuring stories on workplace sexual harassment, explore stories involving all forms of sexual assault, including physically threatening or otherwise inappropriate verbal remarks, voyeurism, child sexual abuse, and human trafficking.
- Address diversity by including the range of people who are assaulted, who commit sexual violence, or who are otherwise affected by sexual violence. For example, think about survivors across the lifespan, survivors of color, male survivors, LGBT survivors, and other underrepresented voices.

Discuss Prevention Efforts to Underscore That Sexual Violence is Not Inevitable

- Writing about solutions, especially prevention strategies, can help shift perceptions of sexual violence from risky, random inevitabilities to a focus on rates, prevention, and causes of violence.
- Ask questions such as: How is the community working to prevent violence? Is it effective? What do local stakeholders think should be done? What would make those strategies work? Provide references to concrete and context-specific examples of programs, policies, and other measures.

Describe the Consequences of Sexual Assault and Resilience of Those who Live Through it

- Discuss the consequences of sexual violence on victims, families, perpetrators, and communities. Help the audience see beyond criminal justice and understand that sexual violence is also a public health and social justice issue.
- Highlight resilience and healing among survivors to avoid perpetuating the myth that sexual violence irrevocably ruins the lives of those who experience it. Explore the possibility of rehabilitation and reintegration for those who commit sexual offenses.

Provide Resources in Addition to News

- Provide readers with a call to action and resources to seek more information, such as hotlines, warning signs, and support groups.

Statistics about Sexual Violence in the U.S.

- One in five women and one in 67 men will be raped at some point in their lives (Smith et al., 2017).
- In eight out of 10 rape cases, the victim knew the person who sexually assaulted them (Black et al., 2011).
- Nearly one in two women and one in five men have experienced sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime (Miller, Cohen, & Wiersema, 1996).
- By the time people were 17 years old, 57 percent of women and 42 percent of men had experienced some form of sexual abuse (Kearl, 2018).
- Rape is the most under-reported crime; 63 percent of sexual assaults are not reported to police (Rennison, 2002).
- Despite misconceptions, the prevalence of false reporting for sexual assault crimes is low - between two percent and 10 percent (National Sexual Violence Resource Center [NSVRC], 2012).
- Forty-six percent of lesbians, 74 percent of bisexual women, 43 percent of heterosexual women, 40 percent of gay men, 47 percent of bisexual men, and 20 percent of heterosexual men reported experiencing sexual violence other than rape during their lifetimes (Black et al., 2011).
- Only 48 percent of men view verbal harassment as sexual assault, and only 67 percent of men say "sexual intercourse where one of the partners is pressured to give their consent" is sexual assault (NSVRC, 2017).

For more information, please contact the NSVRC media office at media@nsvrc.org. Learn more about Sexual Assault Awareness Month and national efforts to prevent sexual violence at www.nsvrc.org/saam. Use #SAAM to increase the reach of articles during April.

About NSVRC

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) is the leading nonprofit in providing information and tools to prevent and respond to sexual violence. NSVRC translates research and trends into best practices that help individuals, communities, and service providers to achieve real and lasting change. The center also works with the media to promote informed reporting. Every April, NSVRC leads Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM), a campaign to educate and engage the public in addressing this widespread issue. NSVRC is also one of the three founding organizations of RALIANCE, a national, collaborative initiative dedicated to ending sexual violence in one generation.

References

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