

Media Guide: Reporting on Domestic Violence Related Homicides

This brief media guide was drafted because news consumers need more information to help them understand the reality of domestic violence, specifically related homicides. The guide aims to help

reporters, copywriters, headline writers and editors understand the dynamics of domestic violence in relation to a murder or other crime involving intimate partners. Many comments are applicable to general coverage of domestic violence, stalking and sexual assault. The media has increasingly gotten out the message that domestic violence is a crime and that help is available for victims. Putting domestic violence homicide in context rather than reporting on it only as an individual tragedy will underscore the public health and public safety aspects of these crimes. We'd like to acknowledge the input of journalists, law enforcement, advocates and survivors in drafting this resource.



As every journalist knows, one of the key pieces of information when covering a homicide is **what the** relationship was between the victim and the alleged perpetrator.

When the common link involves an intimate partner or dating relationship (either their own or a third party), the **lens of domestic violence** ensures accurate and thorough reporting of these crimes.

Without this **context**, media reports of these murders perpetuate the mythology that domestic violence homicides are unpredictable, isolated and private tragedies. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth: women are much more likely to be killed by a current or former spouse than by a stranger.¹ By providing factual context about domestic violence and reporting on identified risk factors that preceded a homicide (such as any history of controlling and abusive behaviors), journalists can arm consumers with information to understand that these homicides can be predicted and therefore prevented.

In our media coverage analysis, among the most common **sources** for stories after law enforcement are neighbors and co-workers. While these sources can help personalize the story, we caution that they may never have seen the side of the batterer that the victim saw. Their comments such as expressing "surprise this happened in our quiet neighborhood" tend to reinforce other misconceptions and stereotypes about domestic violence and abuse as well. On the contrary, reporters can dig for the warning signs that everyone else might have missed and talk with domestic violence experts and law enforcement for insight.² By being aware of the traps set by the public's tendency to minimize or dismiss domestic violence, journalists can help the news consumers avoid arriving at false conclusions.

We know that **information about these cases evolves** with time. We're not talking about sensationalizing details of a grisly crime. Relevant information about any history of domestic violence or existing risk factors may not be available to journalists immediately after the homicide. Follow-up stories provide an opportunity to present a more robust and accurate portrayal of the case.

The media plays an important role in breaking the silence about social issues. Domestic violence, as well as sexual assault and stalking, thrive on silence, making them that much more difficult for reporters to investigate. By ensuring that the coverage accurately reflects the experience of victims and the dynamics of domestic violence, the media helps educate people about the steps they or someone they know can take to stop domestic violence on a personal, organizational, policy and community level.

¹ Research is available only to draw conclusion for women as domestic violence homicide victims. Our analysis also shows that most male domestic violence homicide victims in MA were killed by men. They were friends, family members or new partners of the domestic violence victims. In the majority of cases where the homicide perpetrator is a woman, evidence suggests that she was the victim of domestic violence who acted in a self-defense. Additional research is necessary to determine if LGBT victims are also more likely to be killed by an abusive partner than by a stranger.

² Adapted from "A Handbook for Journalists," Rhode Island Coalition Against domestic Violence, June 2000.

DEFINITION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOMICIDE

Jane Doe Inc. defines a domestic violence homicide to have occurred when:

- the homicide victim and perpetrator were current or former spouses or intimate partners, adults or teens with a child in common, or adults or teens in a current or former dating relationship
- the homicide victim was a bystander or intervened in an attempted domestic violence homicide and was killed (including friends, family members, new intimate partners, law enforcement officers or other professionals attempting to assist the victim of domestic violence, roommates and co-workers)
- the motive for the murder was reported to have included jealousy, in the context of an intimate partner or dating relationship, or
- a relationship existed between the homicide perpetrator and adult or teen victim that could be defined as exhibiting a pattern of power and control (including family or household members and caregivers).

JDI acknowledges that not everyone or every institution in Massachusetts or beyond uses the same definition of domestic violence homicide. The Coalition adopted this definition in order to capture the full picture and context of domestic violence homicides. JDI's tracking of domestic violence homicides in Massachusetts has used this definition since 2003.

Myths to Avoid & How:

- Placing partial responsibility on the victims. Instead of asking "why did she stay/go with him/let him take her kids?," reporters can explore what were the possible barriers to her leaving or staying safe after she left. Include information about recurring patterns of abuse, threats, violated restraining orders, court-ordered visitation, etc.
- Painting domestic violence homicide as unpredictable, isolated acts. Instead of suggesting that the alleged perpetrator "just snapped," reporters can gather information that shows a pattern of control, intimidation and other escalating violence leading up to the homicide. Ask questions such as whether the perpetrator was acting jealous or protective of the victim? Did the victim seem isolated from family and friends? Had there been threats to kill or did the victim seem fearful?
- Misrepresenting the psychology of battering. Instead of suggesting that alcohol and substance abuse, economic stress, mental illness or jealousy was the cause or motive, reporters can help disentangle these contributing factors from the violence itself. Beware of how skillfully batterers put forth a positive public image to relatives, friends and co-workers as well as neighbors and distant acquaintances. If the source does not know the victim or the perpetrator well, consider not using information they provide.

Facts to Investigate & Ways to Broaden Storyline:

- Look for the warning signs and risk factors leading up to the homicide. This means going beyond questions about whether the victim had taken out or vacated a restraining order to consider the behavior of the alleged domestic violence homicide perpetrator. Questions about whether there were guns in the house, previous police intervention/response, threats to hurt victim, self, children or pets, history of strangulation, stalking or sexual abuse and relationship to children in the household might reveal known risk factors associated with increased risk of domestic violence homicides.
- **Provide comparison to local state and national trends**. Reporters can include data that help establish the scope and dimension of domestic violence and domestic violence homicide.
- **Explore policy implications**. While victim advocates as well as law enforcement might not be able to speak to the specifics of a case, they can answer questions about policy and practice.

Language & Choices

- Refrain from using minimizing terms such as "dispute," "quarrel," or "love triangle," which detract from the violence and criminal nature of the behavior." Name it for what it is: domestic violence.
- Affect on Children: qualify statements such as "the children were unharmed" with "the children were physically unharmed in this incident" to avoid minimizing the psychological impact on children.

Sources to consider: A variety of sources are needed to help frame homicide as both domestic violence and crimes.

- Family, friends, neighbors and co-workers can provide useful information about past domestic violence, controlling behavior and other risk factors. Their perspective, however, may be compromised by the perpetrator's expert disguise of their violent behavior with a positive public image. While quotes from these stories provide a human dimension and document their experience of the victim and perpetrator, it is also likely that their reaction to this trauma will be one of denial or disbelief. Over-reliance on these sources also puts the emphasis on the individual, personal tragedy rather than the larger social problem. Consider putting comments from these sources in context by referencing data or expert comment on this phenomenon.
- Police and prosecutors .may be reluctant to name or discuss these crimes as domestic violence as they gather evidence and build their case. Even when law enforcement is not ready to characterize the murder as domestic violence related, reporters can ask and report on whether a domestic violence angle is being considered and what information is or is not leading them to this conclusion.
- **Domestic violence advocates** can assist journalists to identify how domestic violence contributed to the homicide.

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³ "A Handbook for Journalists," Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence, June 2000.

RESOURCES & NATIONAL EXPERTS:

Massachusetts:

- Jane Doe Inc., the Massachusetts Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence statistics, analysis and comment (617)557-1807; www.janedoe.org
- Jane Doe Inc. membership local perspective; <u>www.janedoe.org/membership</u>
- MA Registry of Civil Restraining Orders, Office of the Commissioner on Probation cumulative data on temporary and permanent 209As, reports; (617)727-2300 x254

National:

- National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) national experts on policy and practice; (202) 543-5566; www.nnedv.org
- National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL) leader on program development, policy and technical assistance and training that addresses the nexus between domestic violence, sexual assault and elder abuse/neglect; (608) 255-0539; http://www.ncall.us/
- Dr. Jacqueline Campbell national expert on domestic violence risk assessment and ; (410)955- 2778 (Mirla Martin, assistant)
- Jon Tiplady national trainer on police response to domestic violence, former Lieutenant Danvers Police Department, MA (978) 265-4127

MATERIAL TO PUBLISH:

For information, services and help for yourself or someone you care about:

- Safelink: 1-877-785-2020 is a 24-hour, free and confidential multi-lingual domestic violence hotline in Massachusetts
- To find the domestic violence program nearest you outside of Massachusetts, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-799-SAFE (800-799-7233).
- To learn more about domestic violence and sexual assault, visit www.JaneDoe.org.
- LLamanos y Hablemos: 800-223-5001 (TTY: 1-800-688-4889) is the statewide toll free, confidential Spanish language sexual assault helpline.

In Spanish:

Linea ayuda para sobrevivientes de abuso sexual Llamanos y hablemos a 800-223-5001 TTY: 1-800-688-4889 (Pida por una conexion directa)

Línea segura de teléfono gratis para las víctimas de la violencia doméstica a 800-799-SAFE (800-799-7233).

• To find programs that help people who abuse/control their partners, visit http://www.janedoe.org/know/know_resources.htm.

Note that JDI can also provide material (such as statistics, common warning signs, etc.) to be used as sidebars and supplementary materials (in print or online). These items can also be downloaded from our website at www.laneDoe.org.