

CONSIDERATIONS FOR VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS IN DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

The focus of media coverage is often on:

- Ideal/Non-ideal victims – “Ideal” victims include children, women and the elderly; however race, class and status play a role. In the media’s estimation, “ideal” victims are viewed as more innocent than “non-ideal” victims (sex trade workers, marginalized groups and visible minorities).
- Stranger Crime - Garner more attention than crimes committed by persons known to the victim and gives Canadians a false sense of security.
- Youth Crime - Obsessive reporting of youth crime leads to a misrepresentation of youths as offenders when in fact, they are much more likely to be victims of crime, for example, through child abuse/neglect.

Impact of media on victims/survivors:

- Possibility of positive and/or negative coverage;
 - Reporting may take a turn from positive to negative at any time.
- Loss of control;
 - Victims are not used to seeing their name or their loved one’s name in the headlines.
- Secondary victimization;
 - People may feel like they are a victim all over again when reporting is insensitive, inaccurate or sensationalized.
- Gaps in coverage / Intensity of coverage;
 - It is not possible to predict how one’s case will be covered, if at all.
- Reinforce inaccurate stereotypes;
 - The victim or their loved one may be blamed for their own victimization or various myths may be promoted.

Possible benefits of speaking to the media:

- Be a voice for change within the criminal justice system.
- Educate the public and to prevent similar victimizations.
- Reveal how crime affects victims and their loved ones – physically, emotionally, financially, socially, and spiritually.
- Humanize crime and its impact on individuals, families, and communities.
- Validate victims who want their perspectives heard.
- Empower victims who often feel that the criminal justice system lacks balance.
- Inspire others to report crimes and seek supportive services.
- Encourage the growth of victim services in Canada.
- Bring attention to current policies and public attitudes.
- Remind the public that crime can happen to anyone, anywhere.
- Increase public support for victim assistance initiatives.
- Gather support; advocate for change and raise awareness.
- When survivors are ready and well-prepared, speaking with the media can be a therapeutic experience for both victims and their families (this can also be a risk if individuals/family members are not ready).
- Expose the need for improvement and funding to victim services.

Possible risks:

- Technology has changed the way crime is reported and how quickly reporters must write/file their stories. Newspapers no longer have to wait for deadlines for the morning paper as they all have websites. Articles can be posted on the newspaper's website as soon as they are done. Less care may be taken in fact-checking than it once was.
- Mass media is only bound by publication bans, court orders and their employers' policies. Media outlets often fight for access to information restricted by the courts because it is the "public's right to know".
- Media may print false information or speculation just so they can get a story out.
- Media can be very intrusive and cause additional harm by requesting interviews at sensitive moments (immediately following the crime, funerals, trials, sentencing, parole hearings and anniversaries) when victims may feel numb, confused or most vulnerable.
- Media may dig and dig for information in order to fill time on 24-hour news networks which may include searching for the negatives about the victim or inappropriately delving into the victim's past.
- For some victims, the trauma of victimization can be compounded by speaking publicly about their experiences in the aftermath of a crime.
- The shame that some victims feel, as well as the blame they sometimes feel from others, can be increased by untimely, inappropriate, or intrusive reporting.
- Other family members may not be supportive of a loved one's need to speak out in the media.
- Privacy can be very difficult to guard, especially in high-profile cases where it is almost impossible to escape media coverage.
- Victims that do not fit the media's idea of "ideal" may not receive the desired amount of media attention.
- Tremendous let down when the media goes away.
 - In the immediate aftermath of the crime, the media are constantly present and the victim's story may be in the headlines. Eventually, other news begins to take precedence and victims may feel abandoned and alone.

Other concerns:

- Filming and photographing scenes with bodies and body bags.
- Insinuating that the victim contributed to his or her victimization;
- Printing a victim's name or address.
- Printing things said about the victim during the court process that a family may not believe is accurate.
- Victims may have their photos taken at the scene of a crime, a funeral or a courthouse without their knowledge. The media does not need permission to use these photos. Victims may feel this is an invasion of their privacy but the media may feel the image is dramatic and humanizes their story.
- Aggressive or insensitive reporters or journalists may impact a victim's ability to grieve with dignity and their personal safety.

Modern technology:

- Postings on blogs, personal websites and social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter can be considered media. Victims should consider this before posting their perspective on a case that is before the courts.
- Expectation that news will be delivered to us instantaneously through Twitter and other social networking sites like Facebook. Reporters can now provide the public with news live from a trial, as it is happening.
- Individuals can leave anonymous comments in online forums or online newspapers that are cruel and uninformed.
- Harmful posts and videos can be placed on the Internet at any time, even video where someone is being victimized.
- People tend to believe what is posted on the Internet, regardless of the source or reliability. Falsehoods can be made about both victims and offenders.
- Victims can learn devastating things about their loved ones or others who have been similarly victimized.

TIPS for victims/survivors:

- Choose one family spokesperson to speak to the media. Choose someone you all trust.
- Demand respect from media.
- Prepare statements in advance and avoid making statements in the heat of the moment.
- Be consistent with your information.
- It is ok to say “I cannot answer that at this moment.”
- When possible, ask a reporter to email questions to you and answer them by email. Remember you have more control over what you write than what you say. Read and re-read your statement before pressing send.
- When writing an obituary, remember that any names or places mentioned will attract media attention. Keep in mind that it is difficult to control or correct misinformation. Again, try to be consistent.
- If you are uncertain as to what you can say to the media, or whether you should talk to them, you may consider checking with the police, Crown, or victim services.
- Get the media on your side – they may have information you have not been told. Ask them what they know.
- If need be, make the media work for you – ensure they tell YOUR story. Consider alternative ways to get your story out, for example, through an in-depth radio show interview with a host who is sensitive and can spend a quality amount of time discussing your case.

High-profile crimes:

A case may become high-profile within a small community or large city, while other cases gain national and even international media attention. When this happens, media outlets and journalists can be relentless in their attempts to get the story. The following is a list of reasons why some cases may become high-profile:

- Attract media attention because of the unique/bizarre nature of the crime (victim or offender).
- The victim an attractive, white, middle class female.
- The offender is a “regular” guy.
- There are multiple victims.
- The violence was excessive or of a sexual nature.
- The offender was a stranger to the victim.
- The victim was missing for a while before being found.
- The offender or the victim, or someone closely associated with them, are previously known in the media.