

VIRGINIA SEXUAL & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
ACTION ALLIANCE

MEDIA TIPS

FOR RESPONSIBLE REPORTING ON

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

DOMESTIC HOMICIDE

AND THE USE OF FIREARMS



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
FRAMING THE ISSUE: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE	4
• DOMESTIC HOMICIDE REPORTING TIPS	5
• COMMON ERRORS WHEN REPORTING ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE	6
FRAMING THE ISSUE: SEXUAL VIOLENCE	7
• COMMON ERRORS WHEN REPORTING ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE	8
HEADLINES: PITFALLS	10
GUN VIOLENCE REPORTING TIPS	13
USING IMAGES THOUGHTFULLY	14
RESOURCES FOR JOURNALISTS COVERING TRAUMA	15
ABOUT THE ACTION ALLIANCE	16



INTRODUCTION

Accurate, trauma-informed, and responsible reporting about sexual violence, domestic violence (also called intimate partner violence), gun violence, and domestic homicide helps prevent further harm, reduces victim-blaming, and supports survivors.

The words and images journalists choose and the way you frame this kind of violence shape the public understanding of how and why these disastrous events occur. Reporting should prioritize accountability, survivor dignity, and public safety.

This guide outlines media tips for responsible reporting and highlights common language mistakes journalists should avoid when reporting on these acts of violence.



FRAMING THE ISSUE: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Frame domestic violence as a choice to exert power and control

Domestic violence is about power and control, not poor anger management. Perpetrators of domestic violence are actually quite adept at managing their anger around their boss, police officers, and others who have authority over them. They choose to direct it toward those who hold less power than they have, such as their partner or children. In addition, stress and poverty do not cause domestic violence. They may play a role but pinning down a single cause undercuts the complexity and breadth of the problem.

Describe the hallmarks of domestic violence

Convey that domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that often escalates when a victim is trying to leave, or has left, the relationship. Illustrate the warning signs of an abusive relationship, including jealousy, isolation from friends and family, blaming others for mistakes or problems, emotional abuse, belittling one’s partner, and other controlling behaviors.

Include Support Resources in Your Area

Include at least a brief description of local services that are available for help and support.

- An interactive Virginia Shelters Map is featured at the bottom of every page of our website (vsdvalliance.org); use it to find domestic violence shelters, sexual assault crisis centers, and advocacy programs in your area and across Virginia.
- **Always include local hotline numbers as well as the Virginia Statewide Sexual and Domestic Violence Hotline:**
 - Call 1-800-838-8238
 - Text 804-793-9999
 - Chat <http://vadata.org/chat>



Provide Community Context

Domestic violence is neither rare nor isolated. It happens in the context of a community and the systems it has in place. Best reporting practices should include:

- Local domestic violence statistics.
- Interviews with local advocates and experts.
- Prevention efforts in your community.

Use Active Language

Passive language, such as a “a person was abused” takes the responsibility away from abusers. It does not make explicit that the victim is not at fault for what happened.

Instead of Passive Language	Use Accountable Language
“A person was abused” 	“[Name of person] abused their partner” 



DOMESTIC HOMICIDE REPORTING TIPS

Responsible reporting should humanize the victim instead of rehabilitating the perpetrator's reputation. As such, avoid stories from friends and neighbors recounting "what a nice person" the perpetrator seemed to be and how shocked they are by the homicide.

Instead, center the victim's life, relationships, community presence, and efforts to seek safety.

Place Full Responsibility on the Person Who Was Violent

Avoid:

- Phrases like "crime of passion" or "lost control" that excuse the violence.
- Romanticized cliches like "jilted lover" that imply partial responsibility of the homicide victim.

Use clear, accountable language that identifies who caused harm.

Example: *Accomplished dentist Dr. Cerina Fairfax was shot and killed by her husband, former Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax, before he shot and killed himself.*

Focus on the Victim's Life

- What made the victim special? Personality, beliefs, etc.
- Who and what did they love? People, hobbies, etc.
- What role did they play in their community?
- How did they seek safety from their abuser?

Example: *Dr. Cerina Fairfax is remembered as a devoted mother, accomplished dentist, and someone who loved reading, traveling, and running trails with her dogs.*

Avoid unnecessary gory details about the victims' deaths.

Ask yourself whether the descriptions and/or images are pertinent or will do unnecessary harm to certain members of your readership or broadcast audience.

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Credit: [Global Center for Journalism & Trauma](#)



COMMON ERRORS WHEN REPORTING ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

AVOID THIS	WHY IT'S HARMFUL	USE THIS INSTEAD
<p>“Domestic dispute”</p>	<p><i>Suggests a disagreement between equals instead of a pattern of abuse and control.</i></p>	<p>“Domestic violence incident”</p> <p>“Intimate partner violence incident”</p>
<p>“Messy divorce”</p> <p>“Contentious divorce”</p>	<p><i>Minimizes abuse and implies mutual blame.</i></p>	<p>Acknowledge separation as a major risk factor for escalating violence.</p>
<p>“Victim admits”</p> <p>“Victim confesses”</p>	<p><i>Implies shame, guilt, or responsibility on the survivor’s part when they bear no responsibility for the violence.</i></p>	<p>“Victim reports”</p> <p>“Victim shares”</p> <p>“Victim discloses”</p>
<p>“Children were unharmed”</p>	<p><i>Ignores emotional trauma from witnessing violence.</i></p>	<p>“Children were physically unharmed but will bear the weight of the emotional trauma of this incident”</p>
<p>“Choked”</p>	<p><i>Inaccurate terminology for intentional violence.</i></p>	<p>“Strangled”</p> <p>“Strangulation”</p> <p>“Obstructed breathing”</p>
<p>“Led to” (e.g. “Financial pressure led to murder” or “Husband murders wife after affair”)</p>	<p><i>Implies that violence is an obvious next step to stress or hardship.</i></p>	<p>Accurately frame domestic violence as a conscious choice to engage in a pattern of control and/or harm.</p>

Credit: [Global Center for Journalism and Trauma](#) and [Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls & Young Women](#)



FRAMING THE ISSUE: SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Avoid Victim-Blaming Details

Do not include:

- Clothing or makeup choices
- Dating or sexual history
- Comments like “she looked older than her age”

Providing subjective examples like this perpetuates the idea that the victim/survivor somehow asked for it or brought it on themselves, and unintentionally discredits the violence against them. What’s more, these details do not contribute at all to the story,

Minimize harm

Survivors of sexual violence may spend decades navigating ongoing physical and mental health repercussions. When a survivor’s story receives media coverage, they may also experience increased social stigma, safety risks, online harassment, and long-term professional or educational consequences.

- Avoid graphic descriptions that sensationalize the abuse.
- Omit details that could identify a survivor—especially minors.
- Consider whether naming the survivor is necessary, even when consent is given.

Focus on accuracy

Accuracy is particularly important in sexual violence reporting because errors can escalate harm, misinform the public, or create long-lasting digital footprints that cannot be undone.



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Use Active Language

Passive language, such as “a person was raped” takes the responsibility away from rapists. It does not make explicit that the victim is not at fault for what happened.

Instead of Passive Language	Use Accountable Language
“A person was raped” 	“[Name of person] raped the person” 



COMMON ERRORS WHEN REPORTING ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE



SEXUAL VIOLENCE

AVOID THIS	WHY IT'S HARMFUL	USE THIS INSTEAD
<p>“Nonconsensual sex”</p>	<p><i>Oxymoronic phrasing that unjustly softens the violence that occurred.</i></p>	<p>“Rape”</p> <p>“Sexual assault”</p> <p>“Sexual violence”</p>
<p>“Performed”</p> <p>“Engaged in”</p>	<p><i>Suggests willing participation on the survivor’s part.</i></p>	<p>Describe force, coercion, and lack of consent:</p> <p>“He forced his penis into her mouth.”</p>
<p>“Underage women”</p>	<p><i>Oxymoronic phrasing minimizing control and coercion.</i></p>	<p>When describing victims who are younger than 18, use “children,” “girls” or “boys,” “teenagers” or “minors.”</p>
<p>“Revenge porn”</p> <p>“Sextortion”</p>	<p><i>Suggests the victim has done something wrong.</i></p>	<p>“Image-based sexual abuse”</p> <p>“Tech-enabled sexual abuse”</p>
<p>“Sex”</p> <p>“Oral sex”</p> <p>“Anal intercourse”</p>	<p><i>Implies consent and mutual pleasure.</i></p>	<p>Use direct, accurate descriptions:</p> <p>“The offender penetrated the child’s anus with his penis.”</p>
<p>“Child prostitute”</p>	<p><i>Criminalizes children who are exploited and implies consent of the child who cannot legally give it.</i></p>	<p>“Sexually exploited child”</p> <p>“Child trafficking victim/survivor”</p>

Credit: [Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls & Young Women](#)



COMMON ERRORS WHEN REPORTING ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE



AVOID THIS	WHY IT'S HARMFUL	USE THIS INSTEAD
"Sex scandal"	<i>Sensationalizes abuse, minimizes violation.</i>	Use language that accurately describes the violence
"Victim admits" "Victim confesses"	<i>Implies shame or blame.</i>	"Victim reports" "Victim shares" "Victim discloses"
"Unharmful"	<i>Minimizes emotional trauma of violation.</i>	Describe the emotional, physical, and psychological harm.



SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Credit: [Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls & Young Women](#)



HEADLINE PITFALLS

Avoid writing headlines that lower perpetrator accountability, blame the victim, misidentify the main issue, and/or reinforce stigma. Here are several common errors with corrections.

PROVOCATION FRAMING & VICTIM-BLAMING

Why this is problematic:

Suggests the victim's actions led to the violence, using phrases like "flirty," "rejected," or implying a "lovers' quarrel".



WOMAN WAS 'FLIRTY AND VERY FRIENDLY' IN HOURS BEFORE ALLEGED ASSAULT



MAN CHARGED WITH SEXUAL ASSAULT AFTER TARGETING WOMAN AT EVENT

HUMANIZING THE PERPETRATOR

Why this is problematic:

Focuses on the abuser's positive traits or professional status, often framing the violence as an "out-of-character" tragedy rather than a crime.



MOTEL RAPIST FELT REJECTED



MAN SENTENCED FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT OF WOMAN AT LOCAL MOTEL



OLYMPIC SWIMMER'S CAREER DERAILED BY DOMESTIC INCIDENT



OLYMPIC SWIMMER CHARGED WITH DOMESTIC BATTERY



MAN ACCUSED OF MURDERING FAMILY DESCRIBED AS 'GENEROUS NEIGHBOR'



MAN ARRESTED FOR HOMICIDE IN DEATHS OF WIFE AND CHILDREN



PASSIVE LANGUAGE & MINIMIZATION

Why this is problematic:

Using passive voice hides the perpetrator's agency, making the violence sound like something that just "happened" rather than an intentional act of premeditated violence.



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RESULTS IN TRAGIC END



LAWYER KILLS PARTNER IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOMICIDE



WOMAN DIES IN DOMESTIC INCIDENT



POLICE INVESTIGATE BOYFRIEND FOR FATAL INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE



SENATOR EMBROILED IN A SEX SCANDAL



SENATOR FACING CHARGES OF SEXUAL ASSAULT



MEN CHARGED WITH FORCING TEEN GIRLS INTO PROSTITUTION



MEN ARRESTED FOR SEX TRAFFICKING CHILDREN



HEADLINES: PITFALLS

TRIVIALIZING VIOLENT ACTS

Why this is problematic:

Domestic violence is not the result of a “good guy” who “just snaps”. This ignores a history of controlling and abusive behavior. Sexual violence is not triggered by anything the victim says, does, or wears.



**TEACHER JAILED FOR SEDUCING
14-YEAR-OLD STUDENT**



**TEACHER JAILED FOR
SEXUAL ABUSE OF A MINOR**



**MAN BEFRIENDED CHILD
BEFORE THE INCIDENT**



PERPETRATOR TARGETED/GROOMED VICTIM



GUN VIOLENCE REPORTING TIPS



DO

Humanize victims by describing them as “daughter” or “friend” and tell their stories via their own accounts or those of their close family/community members.

Offer solutions relevant to the specific shooting, for example, “common sense gun control measures for people who have a history of committing violence.”

Use data in context to talk about trends or the effects of policy choices.

Interview domestic violence experts to provide context.

Make the connections (where appropriate) between mass shooters and men who commit/support violence against women.

Direct your audience to community resources.



DON'T

- ❌ ...focus on the scope of the problem without emphasizing that prevention is possible.
- ❌ ...discuss the disparate effects of gun violence without explaining the drivers of those disparities (e.g., structural racism).
- ❌ ...blame victims. Never report in a way that suggests a victim “deserved” to be shot because of what they were engaged in prior to the shooting.
- ❌ ...sensationalize language or dramatize a traumatic situation for a more visceral reaction from an audience.
- ❌ ...include the clinical condition of the victim(s), number of gunshot wounds, or the treating hospital, without first obtaining the consent of the victim(s).
- ❌ ...reduce victims to a number or a datapoint or use data to sensationalize the issue of gun violence.
- ❌ ...contextualize a mass shooting by referring to a “gun violence epidemic.” Use racist codewords like “gritty” or “urban.”
- ❌ ...rely exclusively on police reports and imagery.

Credit: [The Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting](#).



USING IMAGES THOUGHTFULLY



USE

Recent photos centered on the victim.

Images that preserve dignity and humanity.

Photos chosen by non-abusive family members and friends when possible.

Images that reflect the full reality of abuse instead of just physical violence.

Inclusive, representative images that reflect all survivors across age, race, and disability. Respectful images that honor survivors and victims.

Safe, ethical visuals that do not amplify abuse.



AVOID

- ✗ Smiling couple photos of the victim with their murderer.
- ✗ Murder weapon photos and graphic death imagery.
- ✗ Stock images of beaten and bruised women that reinforce myths that abuse is only physical.
- ✗ Stock images showing only white, non-disabled women that erase the experiences of older women, women of color, and disabled women.
- ✗ Sexualized images that dehumanize victims and/or cause additional harm to families and survivors.
- ✗ Reproducing abusive, threatening, or malicious posts, tweets, or images.



RESOURCES FOR JOURNALISTS

OTHER GREAT MEDIA TOOLKITS AND RESOURCES

- [“Reporting on Rape and Sexual Violence”](#) by the Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls and Young Women
- [Global Center for Journalism and Trauma](#)
- [The Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting](#)

WELL-BEING FOR JOURNALISTS COVERING TRAUMA

It is important to recognize the impact that covering trauma can have on the well-being of journalists. This Poynter article provides a self-care guide and resources for journalists: [How journalists can take care of themselves while covering trauma.](#)

UP-TO-DATE VIRGINIA DATA

Through the Action Alliance’s VAdata project, we provide statewide data on domestic violence and sexual assault in Virginia, including the impact on survivors, families, and communities. Explore statistics on:

- Economic and community impact
- Survivors served across Virginia
- Housing and shelter needs

by visiting <https://vsdvalliance.org/statistics-and-data>



VIRGINIA SEXUAL & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
ACTION ALLIANCE

GET TO KNOW US!



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Scan here to become a member of the Action Alliance.



NEWSLETTERS

Scan here to sign up for any or all of our 4 newsletters and action alerts.

FOLLOW US!



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Scan here to follow us on **Instagram.**



Scan here to follow us on **Facebook.**

VIRGINIA SEXUAL & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ACTION ALLIANCE

VIRGINIA'S LEADING VOICE ON SEXUAL AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

We believe a different future is not only possible—it is already unfolding.

We are a statewide coalition working to end **domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and harassment in Virginia**. Together with survivors, advocates, and community partners, we build a future where safety, dignity, and care are not rare, but expected—and where every person has the support they need to thrive.

Grounded in radical hope and collective action, we work across Virginia to strengthen **survivor support services, prevention strategies, public policy, and community-based solutions** that address the root causes of violence.



WHAT WE DO

We advance a comprehensive approach to ending violence by:

- **Supporting and training** Virginia's network of sexual and domestic violence programs.
- Expanding access to **confidential hotlines**, **shelters**, and crisis services.
- Leading **statewide prevention efforts** that promote consent, healthy relationships, and community accountability.
- **Advocating for policies** that increase safety, housing stability, and economic justice for survivors.
- **Building partnerships** that center racial justice, gender justice, and equity across systems.
- Leading **VAdata Project**, which collects and analyzes **statewide data** on services, survivor experiences, and unmet needs, which helps illuminate trends, strengthen funding and policy decisions, and ensure survivors across the Commonwealth have greater access to the support and resources they deserve.

Our work recognizes that violence does not happen in isolation. It is shaped by systems—and it can be prevented through coordinated, community-driven change.



OUR VISION FOR VIRGINIA

We are working toward a future where:

- Individuals and families are free from violence and have what they need to reach their full potential;
- Communities are safe, equitable, and rooted in connection and care;
- Systems and institutions are accountable, just, and centered on healing;
- Survivors are believed, supported, and able to choose their own paths toward safety and wholeness.

This vision reflects a broader commitment to equity, justice, and collective wellbeing where liberation and safety are shared by all.

WHY THIS WORK MATTERS

Domestic and sexual violence impact individuals, families, and communities across Virginia every day. Survivors often face barriers to safety, including lack of housing, economic instability, and inequitable access to resources.

That's why we focus not only on **responding to violence**, but on **preventing it**.

By investing in community-based prevention, **survivor-centered advocacy**, and systems change, we are building a Virginia where violence is no longer inevitable and where everyone can live with safety, autonomy, and dignity.





JOIN US

Ending violence takes all of us.

Whether you are a survivor, advocate, policymaker, or community member, you have a role to play in shaping a safer Virginia.

Join us in advancing solutions, supporting survivors, and creating the conditions where all people—and future generations—can thrive.

VIRGINIA SEXUAL & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ACTION ALLIANCE

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