



Advisory Guideline : Family and Domestic Violence Reporting

Introduction

Family violence is a serious cause of public concern and debate. Reporting on family violence once reflected an earlier social view that family violence was essentially a private, family matter that did not merit significant media coverage or the intervention of police and the criminal law, except perhaps in the most extreme cases. However, social attitudes have shifted dramatically and there is now community acceptance across Australia that family violence is unacceptable and against the law.

Most news coverage is now more responsible and assists with raising awareness. Nevertheless, concerns remain over some media coverage. The Australian Press Council's Standards of Practice, particularly the Statement of General Principles, provide the standards to which publications must adhere, and which the Council refers to when considering complaints. This Advisory Guideline has been developed in consultation with editors, journalists, police, survivors, family violence service providers and others to suggest a "best practice" approach and should be supported by high quality education and training.

The Advisory Guideline is not intended to constrain or discourage news coverage or forthright debate about family violence. However, editors and journalists routinely exercise judgment about which events to cover; what information to collect and from whom; what material to include and what may be excluded in the interests of space and concision; and how to frame the story. The purpose of this Advisory Guideline is to help guide those considerations.

Definition and Scope

The Council uses the term "family violence" throughout this Advisory Guideline for the sake of simplicity. However, that term is commonly interchanged with "domestic violence" by the public, the media, the service sector and in academic and political discussion.

The relationship between the alleged offender and the victim is the key. Violence inflicted by a stranger would rarely be conceptualised as "family violence". The coverage of a breaking story may need to respond adeptly to subsequent information from police or other sources when what first appeared to be an "ordinary crime" or a "tragic accident" might now be viewed through the lens of family violence.

The crime statistics indicate most physical violence in the family context is inflicted by men against their female partners (or former partners), but this is by no means the inevitable pattern. Women sometimes use violence against men or children; people in LGBTI relationships may use violence against their same-sex partner; the abuse of elders may be perpetrated by their children or carers; and the abuse of people with an intellectual disability or other vulnerabilities may involve carers or others.

The Council notes that family violence can occur in a variety of forms and may include, but is not limited to, physical assault; sexual violence; emotional abuse; stalking or other types of harassment (in person, by phone or online); and other controlling or intimidating behaviour aimed at making the victim feel frightened or powerless.

Legal restrictions

Reporting of family violence is already heavily regulated and restricted by (often inconsistent) State, Territory and Commonwealth laws. Media organisations are subject to at least 40 different laws in this area, the breach of which may amount to an offence or contempt of court, or open up potential liability for damages under defamation law. These issues are considered in [more detail](#) on the Press Council's website.

Safety

The safety and well-being of those affected by family violence must be the primary consideration. Publications should not publish information that could cause or contribute to the risk of harm, offence or distress. Survivors of family violence often comment that their pain and suffering was exacerbated by media coverage. In some circumstances, it may not be safe, appropriate or legal to use real names or other identifying information.

When interviewing a person affected by family violence, journalists should consider whether the person has the necessary support. Publications should consider the unintended consequences that interviews and published material might have on those affected by family violence, especially children, in the immediate short term and the longer term.

Responsibility

Reporting of family violence should try not to blame a person affected by the violence or suggest that the person somehow enabled the violence or could have avoided it. Publications should also avoid placing undue emphasis on the characteristics or surroundings of the victim, or implying that such things contributed to the family violence, unless doing so is essential to the narrative and sufficiently in the public interest. Use of the active voice in relation to the perpetrator will help avoid placing undue emphasis on the person affected by family violence. For example: "Police charged a 38-year-old Melbourne man with the murder of a 36-year-old woman", as opposed to, e.g. "A 36-year-old woman was murdered and a 38-year-old Melbourne man has been charged".

Cultural sensitivities

When reporting on matters that have occurred within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, there are cultural practices and sensitivities around releasing names or images of deceased persons from these communities that should be considered. Similarly, publications should endeavour to be aware of such sensitivities in other Australian communities.

Context and content

The context and complexities of family violence should also be key considerations, such as when an alleged perpetrator may have a mental illness. Publications should note any such factors when it is warranted in a particular case and in the public interest. Care also should be taken to avoid casual stigmatisation, such as by stating or implying that the violence was "caused" by a person's mental illness or culture.

Words matter. Publications should be mindful of the language they use and try to avoid terms that tend to trivialise, demean or inadvertently excuse family violence, such as "a domestic", "a domestic dispute" or "a troubled marriage". Where it is lawful to do so, the relationships of the people involved should be described as accurately and precisely as possible.

In addition to reporting particular incidents, journalists can play a critical role in deepening readers' understanding about family violence by referring to [resources](#) such as official statistics, peer-reviewed research, and experts, such as domestic violence counsellors and survivors.

Publications should also be aware of the potential impact of story layout, headlines and surrounding material (such as advertisements) that may be insensitive or jarring in the circumstances.

Sources of assistance

Where lawful and appropriate, it is strongly recommended that published material relating to family violence that could be distressing should be accompanied by information about sources of assistance. Neutral phrasing should be used, such as: "If you are affected by this story and want to seek assistance, contact ...". When dealing with specific communities or circumstances, other useful sources of information should be included, such as the contact details of local or specialised sources of assistance. The Press Council's website contains suggested [sources of assistance](#) and will be updated periodically.