



REPORTING DOMESTIC/ FAMILY VIOLENCE

**GUIDELINES FOR
JOURNALISTS**





REPORTING DOMESTIC/ FAMILY VIOLENCE

The media is the lens through which the general public views domestic/family violence.

Historically in New Zealand and internationally, media reports tend not to reflect the prevalence and severity of family violence. They can unintentionally perpetuate commonly held but untrue beliefs about domestic violence.

Yet statistics show that family violence is one of New Zealand's most significant social issues in terms of number of people affected, long term life effects and cost to the country.

The media has a responsibility to report this issue accurately. News stories need to inform New Zealanders about the true nature of family violence, how many people are affected and in what way, and what we can do about it.

This resource has been developed to assist journalists to report this topic more realistically.

We have included contact information for people who are experts on family violence and willing to give interviews to reporters.

This resource has been put together by Stephanie Edmond and Sheryl Hann. Stephanie has been a journalist since 1982, working as a reporter, journalism teacher and communications advisor in the family violence sector. Sheryl Hann has worked in the family violence sector in a range of roles since 1994.

For more information please email the It's not OK campaign at areyouok@msd.govt.nz.





INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

Poor reporting of domestic/family violence has been the subject of a number of international studies. Below are the results from two.

A Portland Press Herald study in 1998 showed:

- more in depth reporting for non-domestic violence murders measured by number of articles, word count, column inches and front page status
- domestic violence murders were rarely called domestic murders
- experts were not used as sources
- violence was blamed on depression, substance abuse, stress, a troubled life or a failed marriage
- far less coverage of victims lives than victims of non-domestic murders.

Washington researchers in 2002 found that:

- less than 22% of articles studied used the label domestic violence
- only 30% included mention of prior violence
- only 10% placed domestic violence murder in a larger context
- 48% suggested some sort of excuse (rejection, rage)
- 17% used victim-blaming language (such as quoting a relative who said the victim had a habit of getting involved with men who abused her)
- some focused on culture or class suggesting domestic violence is confined to some parts of the population
- many implied that it was surprising that the perpetrator seemed normal (well-rounded, upbeat person, clean cut very nice guy). However extensive literature shows that abusers usually function normally socially and at work and are not easily identifiable
- sources shaped the stories and domestic violence experts were seldom quoted.



IT'S NOT OK CAMPAIGN

It's not OK is a government funded campaign based at the Ministry of Social Development in Wellington. In 2007/08 the Campaign commissioned a media audit to measure the quantity and quality of news reporting in New Zealand on the topic of family violence. The campaign works with communities around New Zealand to change attitudes and behaviours towards family violence.

The media audit showed that historically family violence was minimised by the New Zealand news media and treated as a private matter happening behind closed doors.

Stories about family violence incidents were:

- shorter
- buried in newspapers and bulletins
- made excuses for the violence
- treated violence as a one-off
- reactive – 62% stemming from Police and Courts
- 40% contained a myth
- ignored the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim
- the term 'family violence' was rarely used
- used euphemisms such as
 - Police are not seeking anyone else in connection with the incident
 - there were relationship difficulties.

A major influence on the quality of stories was the sources used, these rarely included family violence experts.

Family violence was often portrayed as a 'poor Maori problem' and elder abuse was overlooked.



THE MYTHS

Media stories about domestic violence incidents can support commonly held beliefs (myths) about domestic violence.

These are listed below. Media reports often include one or more of these.

1. An unpredictable, private tragedy

This is not true. The victim will almost always have suffered violence for a long time.

Media reports frequently use phrases which support this myth such as:

- flew off the handle
- moment of rage
- lost control
- he snapped
- it came out of the blue
- we may never know what happened that caused this violence.

We know that domestic violence is almost never a one-off incident. It is a series of tactics used to gain and keep control, it is a pattern of behaviours which increase in frequency and severity over time. Murder is the extreme end of this continuum.

We know that the most dangerous time for a victim is following separation – most murders happen at this time.

Domestic deaths are planned. The killer has commonly obtained a weapon, made threats to kill previously, knows where the victim is and when to strike.

Most sexual violence is by a family member or a person known to the victim, not a stranger.

Domestic violence is a crime, like any other murder.

2. Caused by substance abuse, stress, poverty, failed marriage

This is not true. Many people who experience these do not hit, stalk or murder their partners or children.

It is true that substance abuse can make the violence worse, but it's not the reason for it. People use violence in the domestic setting because they believe they are entitled to use violence to get what they want.

3. The victim is to blame

Using phrases such as *why did she stay, they had relationship issues, she had a habit of getting involved with men like that*, imply the victim is to blame or “asked for it”.

People choose to use violence to control and dominate other family members. They usually don't use the same tactics on their bosses, friends and members of their community.

Victims are not to blame because they stay. They are often unable to leave due to isolation, fear, lack of funds and housing. Leaving can make the violence worse.

4. Violence and love go together

Headlines and phrases such as:

He loved her so much he had to take her with him

He couldn't face life without her

When she left him it tipped him over the edge

It's not normal behaviour to bash or murder someone if you love them. Jealous, threatening, intimidating behaviour is not love.

5. It's not as serious as other assaults/murders

Studies show that domestic assaults and murders still can receive less coverage than others, with little detail about the victim and her life.

But domestic violence murders make up half of all murders in New Zealand. Most child murders are committed by a family member. Many victims suffer serious and life-threatening injuries. A significant number of people are affected by family violence in New Zealand and violence in the home underpins many other social problems such as bullying, youth crime and suicide.

6. He was a lovely guy

It is not unusual for reporters to hear that the murderer/abuser was a model employee, that neighbours thought he was a sweet person – abusers show a different face to the world. Outside the home they are “well rounded” “upbeat” “clean cut” “very nice guy”.

This does not mean he wasn't violent and controlling at home. Can he still be a nice guy if it is now known he murdered his partner or child?

People who use domestic violence are not confined to any racial, cultural, age or socio-economic group. Reporters can expect them to have conducted themselves appropriately in the community and be liked and respected outside of the home.



GUIDELINES FOR REPORTING

Media reports can better reflect domestic/family violence in New Zealand by including facts about it, using recent statistics and using experts as sources.

What is domestic violence? A pattern of coercive tactics – emotional, physical, sexual and economic – used to gain and maintain power and control. Abusers do not use violence because they are out of control. Domestic violence is not a response to stress or an angry outburst and is not caused by outside circumstances. It is learned behaviour.

Who are victims? Victims of domestic violence cross all socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, sexual orientation, educational, age and religious lines.

Who are abusers? They come from all backgrounds but share some characteristics. They tend to justify their behaviour, have a heightened sense of entitlement, fail to take responsibility and present a different personality outside the home. They control their behaviour in non-domestic situations.

Why do victims stay? There are many reasons including fear (victims are most at danger in the 18 months following separation); lack of affordable housing, child care, employment or legal protection, religious or cultural beliefs, family pressures, immigration status and the desire to keep the family together.

Tips for reporting domestic violence incidents/murders/court cases

- identify the murder/incident as domestic violence
- place it in the context of local and national statistics and recent events
 - this was the fifth domestic murder this year
 - 10 children die in domestic incidents each year
 - half NZ's murders are domestic violence
 - the victim had a protection order
 - xxxx protection orders were granted in xxxx last year
- provide information about the nature of domestic violence
 - domestic violence is a pattern of behaviour
 - domestic violence is never an isolated incident
 - domestic violence intensifies in frequency and severity over time
 - the 18 months following separation is the most dangerous time for victims of domestic violence, most murders happen in this period
 - physical violence is usually accompanied by psychological, emotional, financial abuse and sexual abuse of women and girls is common.



- use experts as sources
 - domestic violence experts say this is a common scenario
 - perpetrators of domestic violence commonly present a charming and likeable face to the world
 - if you are worried about your safety or someone else's contact xxx
- name family violence as a crime
 - domestic/family violence is a crime
 - it's against the law
 - ask police if there was domestic violence
 - ask police if the victim had a protection order
 - ask police if there had been breaches of the protection order.

Reporting sexual violence

Recommendations for journalists on news reporting of sexual violence have been developed by the New Zealand Sexual Violence Network (TOAH-NNEST). They provide information on the best language to use, best sources to go to and latest statistics. View the recommendations here:

www.toah-nnest.org.nz/images/pdfs/Reporting_Sexual_Violence.pdf

www.toah-nnest.org.nz/images/pdfs/Media_Sexual_Violence_Factsheet.pdf

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ACT

Under the DVA 1995 domestic violence is violence against any person with whom that person is or has been in a domestic relationship. This can include living together, family relationships and dating.

In New Zealand the terms domestic violence and family violence are interchangeable.

Violence means physical, sexual, financial and psychological abuse. This includes intimidation, harassment, damage to property or threats or physical, sexual or psychological abuse.

It is also psychological abuse to cause or allow a child to see or hear violence.

A single act may amount to abuse or a number of acts forming a pattern of behaviour may amount to abuse.

Protection Orders

Under the DVA victims can apply for a protection order. This is a legal order granted by the Family Court that says the violence must stop.

Protection Orders have two parts:

- non-violence conditions say that the person who has been violent must not physically, sexually, financially or psychologically abuse or threaten anyone protected by the order, damage their property or encourage anyone else to abuse or threaten the victim.
- non-contact conditions say that the violent person cannot contact the victim (this includes visits, texts, phone calls or letters). Exceptions for emergencies apply.

The victim can suspend non-contact conditions, for example by living with the violent person, but the non-violence conditions stay in force all the time.

A breach of the Protection Order is a criminal offence.



SOURCES

NZ Family Violence Clearinghouse www.nzfvc.org.nz

National Organisations

National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges (04) 802 5078

Age Concern (04) 801 9338

Relationships Aotearoa (04) 472 8798

Unicef NZ (04) 815 9370

Children's Commissioner (04) 471 1410

Shine 0508 744 633

To contact spokespeople from local services search the Family Services Directory at www.familyservices.govt.nz/directory

Police

Police Commissioner's office (04) 474 9499

Police National Headquarters (04) 474 9499

Ask for

- the national family violence co-ordinator
- the manager of violence reduction

All local police stations have a family violence co-ordinator

Family Court Lawyers

Margaret Powell and Wendy Davis (04) 801 5156

Catriona MacLennan 09 378 0964 or catmac@orcon.net.nz.

Academics

Dr Neville Robertson, Waikato University

Associate Professor Janet Fanslow, Auckland University

Professor Jane Koziol-McLain, AUT (associate professor nursing)

Associate Professor Robyn Dixon, Auckland University

Sexual Abuse

Rape Prevention Education (09) 361 2721