



The North Carolina Post-conviction Review Commission

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A News Media Guide for Victims and Survivors of Crime

How Crime Coverage Can Affect Victims

From the perspective of crime victims and advocates, the news media often wield a “double-edged sword” in covering crime and victimization. Victims and victim service providers should be aware of both the benefits, as well as risks, of media coverage of crime victims so together they can explore both the potentially positive and negative consequences of speaking to the media.

Benefits of Speaking to the Media:

- Coverage of individual victims can help other people understand what happens to crime victims and survivors and how it affects them and their loved ones—physically, emotionally, financially, socially, and spiritually.
- Media coverage can humanize crime and its impact on individuals, families, and communities.
- Speaking to the media can sometimes help validate victims who want their perspectives heard.
- Other victims and survivors who learn about victims’ experiences through the media may be inspired to report crimes and seek supportive services.
- Through victims speaking out, people learn that crime is not something that happens to “somebody else” but are reminded that crime can happen anywhere and to anybody.

Risks of Speaking to the Media:

- For some victims, the trauma of victimization can be compounded by speaking publicly about their experiences in the aftermath of a crime. It takes time to cope with the shock and trauma of being victimized and to participate in investigations and criminal justice processes.
- The detrimental mental health consequences of victimization are well documented. Media coverage in the wake of a crime can result in a “secondary victimization” that may exacerbate victims’ trauma and cause unnecessary additional harm.
- 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.

Guidelines for Media Interviews

Victims and survivors of crime can always refuse an interview request. The following guidelines can help victims who choose to speak to the media think about and plan for their interactions with the news media.

- You should always plan for media interviews. The most effective media interviews are those that are carefully considered in advance, with attention paid to the key points that victims want

to make. Advocates can help victims think about and outline what they want to say in order of priority to ensure that their key messages are conveyed concisely and to the point. When possible, advocates can role play with victims so that they understand the process and gain experience in fielding questions.

- You should expect to be treated with respect by the news media. While media interviews can be stressful to victims, they should always be conducted in a manner that is courteous and respectful. Victims and advocates should discuss strategies about how to respond if they are not. It may make sense to have a prearranged signal that victims can use to alert the advocate to end the interview if certain boundaries are crossed.
- You do not have to speak to the media and can say “no” to requests for interviews, even if you have previously granted interviews. Victims should never feel required to speak about their victimization, and advocates can explain to journalists how important it is for victims to regain control over their lives in the aftermath of crime. Victims should never feel pressured to grant an interview. Journalists should also be told that there may be specific times—such as during a trial, or when they are feeling trauma or stress—when victims can’t speak to the media. Advocates should advise victims that it is completely up to them to decide if and when they wish to speak to the media and they should not allow themselves to be pressed into an interview.
- You can select the date, time, and location for a media interview. Victims can take charge of the process by granting interviews that fit within their schedules and their lives. However, advocates should explain that the media often work on tight deadlines, so it’s a good idea to try and meet their scheduling needs to the degree possible.
- You can select a spokesperson or advocate of your choice to speak on your behalf to the media. Some victims choose to have a family member, friend, or victim service provider represent them with the media, either as their principal spokesperson or in cases where it is not possible to conduct an interview. Advocates can advise victims to choose somebody they trust and to establish clear guidelines for representation (such as key points they want to make and issues that they consider “off limits” for interviews).
- You can ask to have a support person present with you during any interview. Advocates should advise victims and journalists that the more comfortable they are in an interview setting, the better the interview will be. Sometimes it’s a good idea to have a family member, friend, or victim service provider with them to provide moral support and comfort.
- You can release a written or oral statement through a spokesperson instead of an interview. The benefits of a written or oral statement are that the media get at least part of the information they are seeking, the victim’s feelings and opinions are clearly conveyed, and there is no margin of error for inaccuracies.
- You can avoid a stressful atmosphere by speaking to only one reporter at a time. For some victims, a press conference can be overwhelming. Victim service providers can help victims schedule individual interviews at the time and location of their choosing.
- You can establish “ground rules” or boundaries for all media interviews. Victim service providers can help victims consider “ground rules” that can facilitate a more effective interview and avoid discussing issues that are potentially traumatic. Examples include the victim’s desire for a support person to be present; topics that are “off limits;” any limitations on visual depictions of the victim’s face or visual image; and an agreement to take breaks during the interview or end it if needed.
- You can refrain from answering any question that makes you uncomfortable. Advocates should clearly advise victims that they do not need to answer a question just because it is asked. If a

question appears to be insensitive or makes a victim uncomfortable, the victim (or his/her support person) can simply state that he or she is unwilling to answer or ask that the question be rephrased.

- You can end the interview at any time. Advocates should remind victims that participating in a media interview is their choice. If an interview becomes too stressful, it is the victim's choice to end it.
- You can ask in advance what the story will be about. If victims have an idea about the scope of the story, they can better prepare for an interview. Most reporters will give victims or their advocates a general idea of what the story is about. However, victims need to know that editors almost always have the last say about what the story will ultimately say.
- You can request a specific reporter. In the course of a criminal investigation and trial, victims may identify a reporter with whom they are comfortable and, to the contrary, reporters with whom they are uncomfortable. They may also ask the advocate's advice about which reporter to talk to. Choosing a specific reporter is another element that can help victims regain control following a crime.
- You can demand a correction when inaccurate information is reported. If victims feel that information is not accurate or that they were misquoted or taken out of context, it's important to raise these concerns with reporters and their editors. Mistakes are usually unintentional and can be corrected.
- You can completely give your side of the story related to your victimization. Advocates can advise victims about the many sources that are available to reporters who are covering their cases and let them know that their insights and perspective are important.

Source: Justice Solutions
<http://www.justicesolutions.org/>

