

Domestic Violence: A Guide for Media Coverage



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Iowa Domestic Abuse Death Review Team

INTRODUCTION ●

Domestic violence is a difficult issue to investigate and a complicated one to report. Following more than eight years of reviewing domestic abuse deaths in Iowa, the members of the Iowa Domestic Abuse Death Review Team decided to produce a guide to assist journalists in accurately covering domestic violence homicides and other related stories. As those who work in the field of mass communication know, language is critical to shaping a story – and the team members believe that the media can play an important role in not only reporting these crimes, but in educating the public about domestic violence.

Murder is on the extreme end of a continuum of tactics that abusers may use to exert power and control over their intimate partners. Abusers use a pattern of coercive behaviors that tend to increase in frequency and severity over time. It is not unusual, however, for reporters to hear that an abuser was “a model employee,” that neighbors thought the abuser was “a sweet person,” and that the abuser volunteered at the local school. Abusers often show a different face to the world than they do to their intimate partners. Understanding the dynamics of domestic violence, and talking to domestic violence experts to put the crime into its social context, will clarify that this apparent inconsistency is not unusual, atypical or shocking.

Our hope is that the information in this guide will also help link journalists to domestic violence advocates in their community, who can be utilized as sources to improve coverage. By accurately covering domestic violence homicides and avoiding sources, questions and language that perpetuate myths, journalists can make a significant difference in helping the community understand how domestic violence can go unchecked to the point of murder.

The content of this guide was shaped by similar work done by the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence and the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence. The team wishes to acknowledge their work and thank them for permission to use the material.

If not for the tragedy of those lives that have been taken through domestic violence, and the family members and children left behind to grieve their loved ones – this work would not be necessary. We honor their lives, and share the lessons learned from their stories.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE OVERVIEW ●

What is domestic violence? Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive tactics—including emotional, physical, sexual and/or economic abuse—that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners to gain or maintain power and control over them. Abusers do not batter because they are out of control. Domestic violence is not an angry outburst, it is a learned behavior. This learned behavior is further reinforced when abusers are not arrested, prosecuted or otherwise held accountable for their actions. Abusers often receive the message from society at large that violence against their intimate partners is acceptable.

Who are victims? Victims of domestic violence cross all socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, sexual orientation, educational, age and religious lines. Studies have shown no characteristic link between personality type and being a victim in an abusive relationship.

Who are abusers? Like victims, domestic violence abusers come from all backgrounds. However, abusers do share some characteristics in that they tend to justify their abusive behaviors, fail to take responsibility for the abuse and use similar tactics to gain and maintain power and control over their partners. Abusers typically present a different personality outside of their relationship than they do to their intimate partner, which complicates victims' ability to describe their experience, be believed, and seek assistance.

People commonly ask: “Why do victims stay in abusive relationships?” There are a variety of reasons victims of domestic violence do not leave their abusers. These include fear (a majority of women murdered by their partners are either estranged, separated or in the process of leaving the relationship), and a lack of affordable housing, child care, employment opportunities and effective legal protection from the abuser. Religious and cultural beliefs, family or community pressures, immigration status and the desire to keep a family together may also make leaving an abusive relationship difficult. Despite multiple barriers, many victims of domestic violence do leave their abusers. Leaving is a process that takes place over time. The victims' choices around staying or leaving, however, are not the issue. The responsibility for domestic violence (as it is for other crimes) belongs solely to the abuser.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE FATALITIES ●

Researchers have studied news coverage of domestic violence fatalities in several states. In 2002, a study of news coverage in Washington was published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (1). The findings of this study and a study of Rhode Island newspaper coverage (2) are highlighted below.

Overview of the two studies

In the Washington study, researchers from the University of Washington School of Communications examined all news coverage of domestic violence fatalities by all community and daily papers in Washington state in 1998. This included news coverage of 44 domestic violence fatality cases in 40 newspapers, a total of 230 individual newspaper articles.

The Boston College Media Research Action Project, in collaboration with the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence, focused on 88 news articles reporting on 12 domestic violence murders in the years 1996 to 1999.

Generally, the studies found that reports of domestic violence fatalities did not accurately cover these incidents because of failures to:

- identify the act as a domestic violence crime and place the murder in the larger context of domestic violence murders locally and nationally;
- provide accurate information about the nature of domestic violence; and
- utilize experts as sources for stories.

Moreover, news stories regarding domestic violence murders often reinforced myths and inaccuracies about domestic violence by implying victim-blaming or abuser-excusing attitudes, blaming the act on cultural or class differences, and reinforcing the idea that the fatal violence came out of the blue as opposed to being the culmination of a history of violence and controlling behaviors.

Domestic violence murders were rarely labeled as domestic violence or placed in a broader context.

The Washington researchers found that while all 230 articles they studied were focused on coverage of domestic violence-related deaths, less than 22 percent of the articles specifically labeled the incident as domestic violence. Only 30 percent of the articles included mention of evidence of prior domestic violence, such as a protection order or prior police response to the address. Only 10 percent of the articles placed the domestic violence murder in the larger context of domestic violence. The authors of the Washington study noted that almost without exception “the coverage tends to portray the incident as a lone murder rather than as part of a larger social problem.”

The Rhode Island study found a similar pattern. Less than 20 percent of the articles made clear links to the concept of domestic violence; a minority of the Rhode Island reporters discussed murders in relationship to local domestic violence crime statistics, community resources or the dynamics of abuse. In cases of homicide-suicides, in which the abuser killed themselves as well, reporters often labeled the case a “family tragedy” and were less likely to frame the case in terms of domestic violence, even when evidence of prior domestic violence existed.

Coverage provided an inaccurate view of domestic violence and reinforced myths.

A significant portion of the Washington articles (48%) suggested some sort of excuse for the violence by the abuser (e.g., “rejection, rage may have led to murder”). A smaller percentage (17%) included victim-blaming language (e.g., quoting a relative who noted that the victim “had a habit of getting involved with men who abused her”).

Some articles focused on culture or class differences when reporting on individual murders (e.g., “Cambodian man kills wife”), leaving the reader with the false impression that intimate partner homicides may be confined to only parts of the population.

Many of the Washington articles seemed to imply that generally, domestic violence abusers are easily identifiable, and therefore it was surprising and newsworthy that in the particular case covered, the perpetrator of the murder seemed normal. However, the extensive literature on intimate partner violence clearly indicates that abusers often function normally socially and within their work environments, and that they are not easily identifiable. To imply otherwise (e.g., quoting a neighbor emphasizing that the murderer was a “well-rounded, upbeat person” or a “clean-cut, very nice guy”) conveys a distorted view of the reality of domestic violence.

The Rhode Island study found that journalists portrayed domestic violence murders as “unpredictable private tragedies” instead of as an extension of a pattern of abuse, or as part of a widespread crime. This theme dominated even when journalists cited evidence of warning signs of lethality, including histories of abuse, protection orders, recent separations and even murders of prior intimate partners.

Researchers in Rhode Island also found stories which inaccurately depicted the dynamics of domestic violence, or reinforced common myths, such as: it doesn’t happen around here, substance abuse causes violence, or violence was part of a tragic love (e.g., quoting a sister of an abuser who said, “He loved them [wife and children] so much he took them with him”).

Sources shaped the stories and were often limited or poorly chosen.

The Washington study found that domestic violence experts were rarely quoted in stories covering domestic violence fatalities. Only eleven articles quoted a domestic violence expert; ten of these quotes were clustered in coverage of three particular deaths which received extensive news coverage. The majority of cases (40 out of 44) were covered with no expert input at all.

It seemed that reporters relied heavily upon police reports and police comments for articles on domestic violence homicides, perhaps assuming that these were a neutral source of information. However, reporters should be aware that law enforcement officers may vary in their understanding about the dynamics of abuse and may each frame the incident differently.

Researchers in the Rhode Island study also noted that reporters’ sources shaped their stories. Friends, family, and neighbors tended to be reluctant to “speak ill of the dead” and often initially denied knowledge of prior abuse, or gave positive descriptions of the perpetrators of the murders. Police focused on describing who was involved and the evidence, but seldom could place the crime in a community context. Co-workers tended to place blame on the partner of the person they worked with, whether they worked with the victim or the abuser. Most importantly, the study found that when domestic violence experts were quoted, they were able to place the murder in a larger context and bring forward information about community response and prevention.

A research team in Massachusetts reviewed domestic homicides between the years 2003-2008 and also did a media analysis of the death coverage. They reported that the media identified only 11 percent of the deaths as domestic abuse related when, in fact, all of them were. (3)

TIPS FOR ACCURATELY COVERING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CRIMES ●

Place the crime in the context of domestic violence.

Include interviews with local experts to explain the crime as one means for the abuser to maintain power and control over their partner. Use the term “domestic violence” when reporting on homicides between intimate partners, as this terminology sets the context for the crime. The following is a good example:

A trail of domestic violence has ended in murder charges for a Waterloo man. (*WCF Courier*, 11/28/07)

The following example is one in which the case was clearly intimate partner homicide, however there was never any mention of it being domestic violence or of the fact that she was most at risk during the time she attempted to separate:

But after Sally Kennedy broke off the relationship and moved to fire him, Gunther responded by killing her, authorities allege. (*Omaha World-Herald*, 5/25/04)

Acknowledge that domestic violence is not a private matter.

The crime of domestic violence impacts our community as a whole in terms of neighborhood and workplace safety, medical costs, lower economic productivity, and effects on children. Include resources that are available for victims and abusers in coverage, as well as how community members can help (see “Information and Resources” section in this guide). The following is a good example of how to incorporate this information into a story:

Jackie Moser is head of the Family Resource Center that assists women with housing, gas money, clothes, rent, job finding, emotional support with classes and get togethers to share experiences and they also try to provide anything else that victims may need by way of support when trying to escape a situation of abuse. The Family Resource Center is always looking for donations and operates a 24 hour telephone emergency service. (*Associated Press*, 1/07)

Look into prior history of domestic violence and let the story evolve.

Ask the police if the crime matches the legal definition of domestic violence. Look for patterns of controlling behavior in the relationship, and place the crime in this context. These may or may not include a prior documented history of domestic violence—talk to police, check criminal history and check court records for protection, no contact, restraining or anti-harassment orders. Talk to domestic violence advocates from local agencies for relevant statistics. Avoid treating domestic violence homicides and homicide-suicides as inexplicable, unpredictable tragedies. They are not. In most cases, a little digging will uncover this truth. The following are some good examples:

"This didn't have to happen," Jim Murray said, shaking his head. "The system failed this family." (*U. of Iowa, Wild Bill's Coffeeshop Newsletters*, 4/16/04)

Wendy Peck and Lovetinsky had a relationship dating about 12 years, Richard Peck said. Court records indicate the couple had experienced problems, including domestic violence, in recent

years. In 2001, Lovetinsky was charged with domestic assault, false imprisonment and criminal mischief after an altercation with Wendy Peck, according to online court records. Lovetinsky was convicted of domestic abuse assault and sentenced to 60 days in jail, with 50 days suspended and credit for time served. (*Des Moines Register*, 2/4/08)

Convey that domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that often escalates when a victim is trying to leave, or has left, the relationship.

The following examples are good illustrations:

Neighbors said Smith previously had a relationship with the home's current resident, Massey, and that the two had a son. Deneese Brown of Wapello was baby-sitting Friday afternoon at the house next door. She said the couple split up about two weeks ago. Brown said Smith told her she was afraid of Massey and that he had threatened to harm her in recent weeks. (*Quad-City Times*, 4/5/07)

Illustrate the warning signs of an abusive relationship.

Ask: Were there any warning signs of domestic violence? Ask family/friends/co-workers: Was the abuser a jealous person? Had the abuser and victim gotten involved quickly? Did the victim ever have bruises or marks that were explained away? Did the victim seem withdrawn or depressed? If the victim ended the relationship, what was the abuser's reaction to this?

Because abusers tend to isolate their partners from the outside world, ask: How did the abuser feel about his partner working? Was the victim allowed to see family and friends? Did the abuser call or drop by the victim's workplace frequently? Was the couple always together? Was the victim able to see friends, family or co-workers without the abuser?

Some of these signs may be viewed positively by friends and family, indicative of a close and loving relationship, and not recognized as controlling tactics that are warning signs of potential abuse. The following is a good example of incorporating warning signs of an abusive relationship into the story:

She had tried to leave him but would always end up taking him back, friends and relatives said. Arends said this type of behavior isn't uncommon in domestic abuse situations. "I told my sister one day he'd end up hurting her real bad," Bell said. "I think she just loved him in some kind of way." The fact they had children together cemented the relationship, and Todd put herself in peril to do what she thought was right, said Anika Anderson, a friend of Todd's and Bell's girlfriend. "Shayla wanted the kids to be around their father," Anderson said. "He knew that. That gave him an advantage." (*WCF Courier*, 11/28/07)

Numerous orders were filed starting in May 2003 in an effort to keep him away from Debra Vander Linden, but she had never called the police to report abuse. "I never called the cops, because he said he would get me for it and I believed him," she wrote to the court seeking one no-contact order. (*Des Moines Register*, 3/15/05)

When interviewing a domestic violence survivor, consider the safety and confidentiality needs of the interviewee.

Ask the survivor if it is safe to use their real name or if a fictitious name would protect them and their family more effectively. Ask the survivor if they would like to speak to an advocate from the local domestic violence program prior to being interviewed to discuss the potential safety and confidentiality concerns of sharing their story with the media.

WHAT TO AVOID WHEN COVERING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CRIMES ●

Media coverage is inaccurate when it perpetuates myths and stereotypes about domestic violence.

Avoid calling domestic violence a “relationship problem.”

Avoid statements that describe an abusive relationship as a “violent relationship” or “troubled marriage.” These phrases inaccurately describe abuse as an issue between two people and obscure the fact that the abuser bears the responsibility for the violence.

Accurate coverage describes domestic violence as an abuser committing a crime against another person. Refrain from using words like “domestic dispute,” “quarrel” or “argument,” as they detract from the violent and criminal nature of the behavior. Here are some problematic examples:

Police, neighbors and relatives spent Thursday trying to determine how an apparent lover’s quarrel led to a fatal car accident that left a Des Moines woman dead and her boyfriend in jail. (*Des Moines Register*, 8/5/05)

Authorities said a domestic situation may have led to a murder-suicide in Muscatine this week. (*Des Moines Register*, 4/7/05)

Johnson County sheriff Lonny Pulkrabek said the two were “on again-off again, boyfriend-girlfriend, for quite some time.” (*Record Herald and Indianola Tribune*, 2/3/08)

Do not focus on the victim’s behavior or use victim-blaming language.

The victim in an abusive relationship is not responsible for the crime of domestic violence. Questions that imply that a victim could have done something to prevent the violence are misleading and imply that the abuser was somehow justified in committing the violent crime. It is more accurate to focus on the abuser and address how our communities can hold abusers accountable for their crimes, and improve the safe options available to victims of domestic violence. Be aware that questions or comments can be phrased in such a way as to imply blame, and that this is not unbiased, non-judgmental coverage. For example, don’t ask: “Why did she stay?”, but rather: “What were the barriers she faced in leaving the abusive relationship?” or “In what ways did the community try, or fail, to hold the abuser accountable for prior abuse?” The following quote implies that the murder was the victim’s fault, and appeared in a story without any balancing perspective or information from experts:

Outside of court, defense attorney James Egan said the shooting was a “terrible, terrible tragedy,” but he defended his client as an otherwise law-abiding citizen who became embroiled in a rocky marriage. The problems started, Egan said, when the couple moved to the Tri-Cities and Tara Jensen began receiving letters from Justin Matyas, an inmate at the Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla...Egan says the letters from Matyas coerced Tara Jensen into witchcraft, putting a strain on the Jensens’ marriage. “It drove him crazy,” Egan said. “That and [her] drinking.” (*Tri-City Herald*, 9/27/00)

Do not assume some cultures or classes are violent, and others are not.

Focusing on the economic status or ethnicity of the victim or abuser confuses the point that domestic violence crosses all lines of race, class and culture. These factors may influence the specific tactics an abuser uses in order to maintain power and control in the relationship; however, blaming class, race or culture when an abuser kills their partner reinforces myths that some groups are more violent than others.

He [Sam Lau] planned, acted, and executed—in the end rounding up the family in an upstairs room of the home they bought seven years ago and shooting them in front of each other. The experts guess it could have been a cultural instinct—a disgrace to kill only himself and leave his family to bear the onus of his suicide and possible financial ruin. (*Eastside Week*, 6/25/97)

The following example perpetuates a myth that economically stable neighborhoods are immune:

A neighbor, Sara Winkel, shares a house with her husband directly across the alley from the home where the shooting occurred. Late Thursday, Winkel said she did not hear any commotion. Winkel said the neighborhood is safe and prosperous, with many families. (*Des Moines Register*, 7/29/05)

Avoid using sources emotionally connected to the abuser or sources that do not have significant information about the crime or those involved.

Consider the sources when covering a domestic violence homicide and be aware of how source selection shapes the story. While it is important to interview family, friends and co-workers, keep in mind that they may be reluctant to speak negatively about the abuser and may not present an accurate picture of a history of violence. Sources may also be hesitant to speak negatively of the dead. Almost a third of domestic violence homicides are homicide-suicides. In these cases, neighbors, family and friends may comment on how nice the abuser was. Often people know about the abuse, but do not want to say anything negative about a person who has just committed suicide.

In these examples, acquaintances and friends speak well of the murderer or deny their capacity for violence, in one case in spite of knowledge of a prior domestic violence assault:

Louisa County Sheriff Curt Braby said shortly after the killings that Massey had been in good spirits and did not exhibit signs of depression or agitation at any time prior to the murders. Massey worked as a jailer and dispatcher for the sheriff’s office. “He was in the best humor I had seen him in quite awhile,” Braby said... (*Quad City Times*, 4/5/07)

Many words describe Trevor Saunders. His friends use words like sweet, accepting, joking, mentor, brother... “Maybe he just had a bad moment, a mistake [when he shot and killed his ex-girlfriend, her co-worker and himself],” said a close friend of Saunders. “We’ve all made mistakes we wish we could take back...I want people to know Trevor was the kindest guy. It wasn’t like Trevor to do anything to hurt anyone.” (*The Moscow-Pullman News*, 12/14/05)

“They were great people. Doug was the type of guy who would give you the shirt off his back,” said a friend. (*Tri-City Herald*, 8/27/06)

Interviewing neighbors at the crime scene often results in shocked responses that imply that domestic violence homicides are isolated, unpredictable acts that do not occur in “this neighborhood.” Talk to neighbors to see if they may have heard shouting or cries for help, or seen the police make visits to the home in the past. However, recognize that the natural response at a crime scene is shock and disbelief, and that neighbors often feel the need to say something if questioned. If it is clear that a neighbor does not really know anything about the situation, do not use them as a source, as was done in these examples:

Miller “seemed like he was all right at the time. It’s hard to know someone when you only talk to them for 10 or 15 minutes,” Scott said. (*Des Moines Register*, 8/5/05)

“I never thought it would come to this,” said carnival employee Kari Peterson. “I never thought this would happen while I’m working.” She said Gunther and Zawodny were competitors at the carnival and have been fighting for two weeks. (*KETV Omaha*, 4/5/07)

Broadening sources to include domestic violence experts helps to balance coverage and provides information about domestic violence as a community problem.

Avoid treating domestic violence crimes as an inexplicable tragedy, beyond the reach of community action.

Coverage that conveys a sense of hopelessness and helplessness implies that there is nothing people can do, when in fact people can take steps to address domestic violence in their communities by learning about the warning signs, resources available, and how to support a friend or family member experiencing violence in their relationship (see “Information and Resources” section of this guide). Communities can also work together to address holding abusers accountable. The following examples are problematic in that they describe domestic violence as an issue that is hopeless or cannot be explained. They offer no information on how a community or individual can impact change. It is important for the public to know what actions they can take to assist in prevention.

Baughman, who made the 911 call, stood on her front step Friday and said the neighborhood would never be the same. “This kind of stuff doesn’t happen,” she said. “Not to you, not to your next-door neighbor, not to your baby sitter. “Not to the little boys who are in your front yard every night.” (*Des Moines Register*, 7/31/05)

...the neighborhood has recently taken a turn for the worse. “There’s a lot more violence,” he said. “Last year, we didn’t see any cops patrolling this road. Now, every day you look out, there is a cop turning up and around and coming back.” “I think it’s crazy,” said Thompson. “I live here with three kids myself. It was scary. We were trying to get people to come stay with us.” (*KCCI TV 8*, 4/30/09)

Information and Resources ●

The following resource information can be incorporated into coverage of domestic violence:

- Warning signs
- How to help
- Safety planning
- Crisis hotlines

Warning Signs of Domestic Violence

Jealousy, controlling behavior, quick involvement, unrealistic expectations, isolation, blames others for problems or feelings, hypersensitivity, cruelty to children, cruelty to animals, use of force during sex, verbal abuse, rigid sex roles, past battering, threats of violence, breaking or striking objects, using force during an argument, controlling the money in the relationship.

Suggestions for Helping Someone in an Abusive Relationship

- Approach the person in an understanding, non-blaming way.
- Acknowledge that it is scary and difficult to talk about abuse, and let them know that no one deserves to be treated this way. In no way does someone ‘cause’ the abuse to happen.
- Support the person as a friend. Be a good listener and do not tell them what to do. Allow them to make their own decisions, even if you do not agree with them. Avoid ultimatums that require someone to end the relationship or lose your friendship. This only results in further isolating the person.
- Leaving an abusive relationship is the most dangerous time for a woman and her children. A domestic violence advocate can assist in developing a safety plan. If the person being abused will not talk with an advocate, consider getting resource information for them.
- Provide information about where to go for help (call the Iowa Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-942-0333 for local resources).
- Above all, let the person know that they are not alone.

Safety Planning

A safety plan is a tool that helps victims of domestic violence have a plan for what they can do if/when their abuser’s violence escalates. Safety plans can be done confidentially, over the phone, 24 hours a day with a domestic violence advocate by calling the state domestic violence hotline at 1-800-942-0333 (voice/TTY).

Statewide and National Resources

Iowa Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-942-0333 (voice/TTY)

24 hour hotline that can assist victims of domestic violence with safety planning and link victims, reporters, friends/family, and community members to a local domestic violence agency for shelter, support groups, legal advocacy, and safety planning. The hotline can also provide information on state batterer's intervention programs. Their website provides additional information at [Iowa Domestic Violence Hotline](#).

Domestic Violence Agencies

Iowa is served by 30 agencies to assist victims of domestic violence. These organizations can provide or arrange for shelter, a hotline, assistance with protection orders, help with safety planning, individual counseling, and support groups. Call the state domestic violence hotline to be referred to your nearest agency or go to www.icadv.org.

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 (voice), 1-800-787-3224 (TTY)

This is a national 24-hour hotline that can assist victims of domestic violence with safety planning as well as link victims, friends/family, and community members to a local domestic violence agency for shelter, support groups, legal advocacy, and safety planning. Information is also available at <http://www.ndvh.org>.

References ●

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Endnotes:

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