

## The intersection of journalism ethics and cases of violence against children

When reporting on cases of violence, including sexual violence, journalists weigh factors and make decisions.

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) has a code of ethics (<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>) that helps journalists ask pertinent questions as part of that process.

The code, a voluntary set of guidelines, is broken into four categories: Seek Truth and Report It, Minimize Harm, Act Independently, Be Accountable and Transparent.

Often, there is conflict between two or more categories, such as the quest for truth vs. the potential for harm. A balancing test is needed.

Reporting on crimes that have victims is an example of that conflict and balancing test. The crime might be newsworthy and something the community should know. At the same time, reporting certain details of the crime might cause harm for the victim or might interfere with an investigation or prosecution of the case. For instance, reports of gang violence in public places may help readers be more careful when going into that area, or choose to avoid it. On the other hand, sharing specific information about a gang-related crime might interfere with ongoing investigation efforts and later attempts to prosecute the case and have a fair trial.

Each of the four sections of the SPJ Code of Ethics contains several individual principles. They, too, are written to provide guidance, but are not rules.

For example, under "Seek Truth and Report It," journalists are encouraged to:

- Take responsibility for the accuracy of their work. Verify information before releasing it. Use original sources whenever possible.
- Gather, update and correct information throughout the life of a news story.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable. Give voice to the voiceless.

The principle on holding people in power accountable might be a prompt to find and report information about a criminal allegation against an authority figure, such as a school official, a sports coach, a child care provider or a parent. Reporting sometimes leads more people to come forward and talk about their own experiences, possibly helping authorities build a criminal case against the defendant or allowing victims to get help.

Under "Minimize Harm," journalists are encouraged to:

- Balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness.
- Show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage. Use heightened sensitivity when dealing with juveniles, victims of sex crimes, and sources or subjects who are inexperienced or unable to give consent. Consider cultural differences in approach and treatment.
- Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity, even if others do.

- Balance a suspect's right to a fair trial with the public's right to know. Consider the implications of identifying criminal suspects before they face legal charges.
- Consider the long-term implications of the extended reach and permanence of publication. Provide updated and more complete information as appropriate.

Reporting on crimes involving victims is not as simple as reporting every detail that can be found, even if it comes from official sources. Consider who might be affected by the information that is shared, either during an investigation or after a conviction. Suspects and victims both have rights.

There is not necessarily a right or wrong answer on what to report in a particular case. Two different news organizations might come to two different ethical conclusions. It's important, though, to go through the process of evaluating the available information and deciding the best course.

Whichever direction a news organization chooses, it should be open and clear with its audience. Include statements in a report explaining why information is included or omitted, such as "The Frederick News-Post generally does not name victims of sex crimes." Journalists should be ready to explain and defend decisions if asked about them. An editor's column or blog is a good way to share with the public what decisions are made and why.

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These guidelines for ethical reporting are the product of conversations between Andy Schotz, a city editor with *The Frederick News-Post*, and Lynn Davis, the director of the Child Advocacy Center of Frederick County. Schotz, who drafted them, is a member of the national board of the Society of Professional Journalists.