

# Reporting on Domestic Violence in Connecticut

## A Guide for Media



Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
90 Pitkin Street  
East Hartford, CT 06108  
(860) 282-7899  
[www.ctcadv.org](http://www.ctcadv.org)

## Contents

Please note: You can click on the title to directly take you right to that section.

Introduction.....	3
What is Domestic Violence?.....	3
Who are the victims and abusers of domestic violence? .....	4
What kinds of abuse does domestic violence entail? .....	4
Why don't victims just leave?.....	6
Domestic Violence in the United States .....	7
Domestic Violence in Connecticut .....	8
Tips on Writing Articles about Domestic Violence Incidents .....	12
Tips for Interviewing Survivors.....	17
Resources .....	19
Acknowledgements.....	21

The Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence is a statewide, non-profit membership organization that was founded in 1978 as the “Battered Women’s Task Force.” Incorporated in 1986, CCADV’s membership is composed of eighteen non-profit domestic violence agencies located throughout Connecticut; these agencies directly provide valuable services to victims and their children, including but not limited to safety planning, advocacy, counseling and emergency shelter.

Along with its member organizations, CCADV works toward the ultimate goal of ending all forms of domestic violence. As a means of doing so, the Coalition seeks to change the social conditions, beliefs, and social actions that perpetuate abuse against victims of domestic violence. Such change is realized through programs of policy advocacy, public awareness, technical assistance, and education.

## **Introduction**

Journalists go beyond the mere act of presenting simple facts and dates to the general public. They also collect interviews and frame facts in order to tell stories; in doing so, they create the very lens through which an audience sees and interprets those stories. Such is the power of reporters, and subsequently their writing about incidents of domestic violence is especially significant. Countless myths surrounding domestic violence prevail – myths that are all too often reflected in different forms of the media. Conversely, however, numerous reporters have utilized the opportunity to not only tell stories of abuse but to do so in a way that brings domestic violence as an important issue to light. They present not just facts but education, speak not only of victimization but of survival and prevention.

Our goal is to change the social conditions, beliefs, and social actions that perpetuate abuse against victims of domestic violence. As a result, our purpose in writing this guide is to create a resource that provides journalists with accurate information about intimate partner violence. This information will hopefully help them to write strengthened stories that impact how their readers understand this critical issue. We hope that this in turn fosters a heightened awareness and understanding of domestic violence.

## **What is Domestic Violence?**

Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior in an intimate relationship where one partner tries to control and dominate the other. The behavior may be verbally, psychologically, physically or sexually abusive with the victim left feeling scared, confused, dependent and insecure. Assaulting, threatening or stalking an intimate partner is a crime in the state of Connecticut. Throughout this guide, the term “intimate partner violence” will also be used as an occasional substitution for “domestic violence.”

We mean “intimate relationship,” in turn, to be a current or past relationship. It can also range from anywhere between casual dating and serious, long-term commitment (living together, marriage, civil union, etc.). A relationship can be considered intimate even when its members do not live together or have never lived together, as well as when its partners have a child in common.

## **Who are the victims and abusers of domestic violence?**

Domestic violence is pervasive and extends to *all* groups of people regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, etc. For instance, there are women who are abusers as well as others who are victims, and the same is true for men; battering takes place within LGBT relationships at about the same rate as in heterosexual ones.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to also note that the vast majority of the victims of domestic violence are women while the majority of abusers are men. Women comprise approximately 86 percent of domestic abuse victims while around three-fourths of perpetrators are men.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, even though women are less likely to be victims of violent crime overall, they are five to eight times more likely to suffer violence committed by an intimate partner.<sup>3</sup>

## **What kinds of abuse does domestic violence entail?**

There are many different types of abuse, all of them serving as one partner's mechanism of control over the other. Often, the initial abusive acts are minor and excused as trivial but then escalate to more frequent and serious attacks as the relationship progresses. It is important to note that all of these different shapes of abuse can structure a relationship, or only one might; either way, the relationship is still considered to be one in which domestic violence is present. Abuse can be:

### ***Physical***

Physical violence is aggressive contact that often results in some sort of bodily injury. Between 2001 and 2005, approximately two-thirds of U.S. victims of nonfatal intimate partner violence “reported that they were hit, slapped, or knocked down.”<sup>4</sup> Survivors of abusive relationships often sustain injuries ranging from minor bruises and cuts to incapacitating disabilities that follow them for the rest of their lives. Women are particularly susceptible to and experience physical abuse when they are pregnant.<sup>5</sup>

The culminating form of physical abuse is murder. Every year in the United States, numerous abusers claim the lives of their victims. From 2001 to 2005, intimate partners were responsible for the deaths of about thirty percent of murdered women and five percent of murdered men.<sup>6</sup> Abusers can and do commit homicide during the course of living with their intimate partners; nevertheless, many more do so when victims attempt to leave the abusive relationship.

## ***Sexual***

Physical violence frequently is accompanied by sexual violence. Sexual assault is an act of violence, power, and control in which abusers employ any manner of intimidation or manipulation to coerce any form of unwanted sexual activity. One example of sexual assault is rape, which in Connecticut is *actual or attempted* vaginal, oral, or anal penetration by an object or body part. Other examples of sexual assault include unwanted touching, painful/degrading acts during sexual intercourse, and refusing to allow the use of contraceptives or protections against STDs. In the United States overall, three quarters of women who report being sexually or physically abused since age 18 also report that the assault had been committed by an intimate partner.<sup>7</sup>

## ***Emotional/Psychological***

Abusers commonly inflict emotional or psychological violence on victims. Such violence can come in the form of verbal abuse and threats. Since 2001, in reference to nonfatal intimate partner violence, about two-thirds of victims on average are threatened with physical attack; in addition, “27% of female victims and 15% of male victims reported that the offender threatened to kill them.”<sup>8</sup>

Emotional abuse does not have to be directed solely at victims in order to negatively influence them; threats and physical aggression can also be aimed at victims’ children, pets or personal property as a technique of intimidation and demonstration of control. Abusers also frequently go to great lengths to exert psychological control over their victims by depriving them of economic resources (e.g. placing all assets in the abuser’s name and/or harassing the victim at work in order to get her/him fired) and isolating them from supportive networks of friends and family.

## ***Stalking***

Abusers who stalk do such things as make unwanted visits or calls and obsessively follow their victims. Stalking also occurs also in mediums like email, social networking websites and via texting. From 2005 to 2006, 3.4 million people in the United States reported that they were victims of stalking.<sup>9</sup> Stalking is often both a form of harassment and a threat that preludes further violence. Of those women who are stalked by former husbands, for example, eighty percent are physically assaulted and thirty percent are sexually assaulted by those partners.<sup>10</sup>

## ***Teen Dating Violence***

Patterns of abuse are especially and troublingly seen amongst teenagers. As with adults, dating violence occurs in both casual and serious teenage relationships. One in five of U.S. adolescents aged eleven to fourteen reported that their friends were victimized by those they were dating; in addition two out of five of eleven and twelve year olds stated that they had friends in verbally abusive relationships.<sup>11</sup> As with intimate partner violence overall, teen dating violence more

extensively affects young women; it is additionally estimated that about one in three teenaged girls in the United States is a victim of some sort of abuse from a dating partner.<sup>12</sup> Intimate partner violence has particularly serious consequences for adolescents because it has the ability to significantly hinder their abilities to develop self-worth and personal values, to succeed in school, and to develop healthy relationships (romantic and otherwise) in the future.

### **Why don't victims just leave?**

Most victims of domestic violence make multiple journeys to assisting programs and/or shelters before finally leaving their abusive relationship. Others may simply stay with abusive partners. The idea of staying in a volatile and potentially deadly relationship is inconceivable to many people, however, and in their speculation they might downplay the severity of the abuse or even place a certain level of blame on victims: *If the abuse was so bad, surely s/he should have known enough to leave?*

The answer is certainly not so simple. In fact, to even ask this question wrongly assumes that a measure of responsibility lies with the victim for not choosing the 'correct' option of leaving. However, victims often have a multitude of risks that they must consider about their relationships, and many have reasons to stay with their partners for any length of time. The physical, emotional and sexual injuries they might obtain within the relationship are only a few factors. Victims who are undocumented immigrants, for example, might not speak English well and/or fear the possibility of deportation. Others (especially those with little education/jobs skills, or who have not worked for many years in order to take care of children) realistically believe that leaving their partners will in turn leave them without a possible means of income, or with a drastically reduced income – which consequently means a much lower quality of life for themselves and their often accompanying children. Indeed, in the United States almost half of all homeless women and children are so because they are escaping domestic violence.<sup>13</sup> Countless victims also fear that if they leave, their partners could receive sole custody of or simply take their children and pets. This by no means is an exhaustive list; it must be taken into consideration that each victim of domestic violence has individual hazards and resources that s/he must evaluate when considering whether or not to leave an abusive relationship.

It is also critical to understand that abusers' violence often does not stop when their partners leave; indeed, the dangers that victims face considerably escalate after leaving abusive relationships, especially for women. Victims who go into hiding or place miles of distance between themselves and abusers can be and are often tracked and followed. Others frequently must continue to see their abusing partners even after divorce or separation, particularly if they share custody of their children. Abusers can and often do take this opportunity to stalk, harass,

and/or kill their former partners. In 2000, it was estimated that “73% of emergency room visits and up to 75% of calls to police for domestic violence incidents occur after separation.”<sup>14</sup>

## **Domestic Violence in the United States**

### ***A Brief History of the Emerging Advocacy Movement in the U.S.***<sup>15</sup>

There was a time in the United States when domestic violence was considered to be a private family matter, when the term itself was not even in the American conscious. Violence that husbands committed against their wives, including marital rape, was not largely considered to be a particularly noteworthy issue; victims were routinely accused of provoking violence and/or simply making everything up. Domestic violence was thought to be an individual issue, not one that is infused throughout society. Women started to actively articulate the reality of abuse in their lives around the 1970s, fueled especially by the feminist movement of the age whose message was that the personal is political. Conscious-raising and support groups helped victims to realize that they truly were not alone, and shelters began to be established for battered women.

The 1980s especially began a time where victims and their advocates demanded accountability from social systems and from the law. Many were successful in getting their states to pass laws that helped victims of domestic violence, including increased gun ownership restrictions, stronger sentencing for batterers, and sensitivity training for police officers and other legal personnel. The 1990s saw a continuation and expansion of the system reforms and legislative changes that were originally enacted in the 1980s. As the anti-domestic violence movement became mainstreamed, advocates focused on improving other social systems such as welfare and access to housing. Advocates continue among other things to fight to increase legislative protections for victims, maintain funding for services, and promote preventative knowledge and educational programs about domestic violence.

### ***Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)***

Perhaps one of the most important pieces of federal legislation that helps to combat domestic violence is the Violence Against Women Act. Originally passed by the U.S. Congress in 1994, it has since been amended and reauthorized twice (in 2000 and 2005). Since its inception, VAWA has strengthened anti-domestic violence laws as well as allocated grant money to anti-domestic violence programs. Just some of what VAWA has made possible:

- Any abuser who crosses state lines to commit violence against his/her partner (e.g. kidnapping the abused partner) now violates federal law and so faces heavier prison terms.



- The National Domestic Violence Hotline was created, taking 4,826 phone calls just in its first month of operation.<sup>16</sup>
- Grant money has been given, among other things, to state and tribal coalitions, to train law enforcement and other officials, and to provide low-income victims with legal aid and housing.

### ***Federal laws about firearms***

- Abusers convicted of felonies or misdemeanors in which domestic violence occurs cannot possess or buy a gun [18 USC 922 (g) (9)]. This law also applies to law enforcement officers and other government officials. If convicted of a domestic violence felony or misdemeanor, they cannot own or purchase guns even for their job [18 USC 925(a)(1)].
- Abusers who violate the federal law and continue to own or purchase guns could potentially face jail time for up to ten years, a fine, or both [18 USC 924 (a) (2)].
- Under federal law, if victims hold a restraining order that meets federal requirements, their abusers cannot possess or purchase guns [18 USC § 922 (g)(8)].

### **Domestic Violence in Connecticut**

Domestic violence has been and continues to be a serious problem in Connecticut. From 2010 to 2011, CCADV and its membership organizations provided services to 54,178 victims. Of these, 1,364 adults and 1,038 children spent time in emergency housing because they were in grave and immediate danger. In addition, 13,062 adult victims, 283 teens experiencing abuse and 908 children received other support services, including but not limited to individual counseling, access to support groups, and assistance with developing safety plans. Criminal court services, such as court advocacy, were utilized by 37,523 domestic violence victims.<sup>17</sup> These numbers, of course, only include those women served by these programs; they do not speak for the countless unspoken victims who do not come forward when they need help.

### ***Connecticut Domestic Violence Laws and Terms***

There are no specific domestic violence laws in Connecticut. However, there are laws that handle incidents of domestic violence, such as those that address assault, sexual assault, and kidnapping. Abusive partners can be charged with felonies or misdemeanors depending on the facts of the case.

The following terms<sup>18</sup> are defined as such in Connecticut law:

- **Family violence:** The Connecticut Judicial system expanded the phrase “domestic violence” beyond signifying abuse between intimate partners. Family violence “means an incident resulting in physical harm, bodily injury or assault, or an act of threatened violence that constitutes fear of imminent physical harm, bodily injury or assault between family or household members. Verbal abuse or argument shall not constitute family violence unless there is present danger and the likelihood that physical violence will occur.” [C.G.S. § 46b-38a (1) (2010)]
- **Family or household member:** “means (A) spouses, former spouses; (B) parents and their children; (C) persons eighteen years of age or older related by blood or marriage; (D) persons sixteen years of age or older other than those persons in subparagraph (C) presently residing together or who have resided together; (E) persons who have a child in common regardless of whether they are or have been married or have lived together at any time; and (F) persons in, or have recently been in, a dating relationship.” [C.G.S. § 46b-38a (2) (2010)]
- **Family violence crime:** “means a crime as defined in section 53a-24 which, in addition to its other elements, contains as an element thereof an act of family violence to a family member and shall not include acts by parents or guardians disciplining minor children unless such acts constitute abuse.” [C.G.S. § 46b-38a (3) (2010)]
- **Protection for animals:** “The court, in its discretion, may make such orders as it deems appropriate for the protection of any animal owned or kept by the applicant including, but not limited to, an order enjoining the respondent from injuring or threatening to injure such animal.”

### ***Police Approach to Family Violence***

Connecticut has a “mandatory arrest” policy, which seeks to ensure that police are not reluctant to make family violence arrests. They are legally bound to arrest abusers if they believe they have probable cause to do so, regardless of the victim’s wishes; police also are protected from legal action should they make a false family violence arrest. However, they do not have to make an arrest if they believe that self-defense was reasonably used. Police may not use the threat of arrest to deter victims from calling for help. They must also stay at the scene of the incident until all threats of imminent violence are eliminated.

### *State firearm laws*

- In addition to federal law, Connecticut law states that guns may not be owned by anyone who has been convicted of a felony as well as a serious juvenile offense [C.G.S.A. § 53a-217].
- Illegal possession or purchase of a gun is considered to be a Class D Felony and those convicted could face 2-5 years of imprisonment [C.G.S.A. § 53a-217; C.G.S.A. § 53a-35a].
- If they reasonably believe that an abuser might hurt another person or himself/herself, police officers and state attorneys have the ability to request in court that the abuser's guns be confiscated for up to one year [C.G.S.A. § 29-38c].
- If they reasonably believe that a family violence crime has occurred, police may also seize firearms or electronic weapons present at the scene, returning them no less than one week afterward (unless mandated otherwise by the court).

### *Restraining Orders vs. Protective Orders*

A **restraining order** is issued in *civil court* and mandates that the accuser not contact or harass his/her victim. If issued a restraining order, the accuser does not necessarily have to be arrested; however, if the accuser violates the terms of the restraining order, he or she could be arrested and prosecuted. In Connecticut, there are temporary (**ex parte**) restraining orders. These are meant to provide immediate protection for up to 14 days, until the court holds a hearing so victims can get a **permanent** restraining order. Permanent restraining orders last for six months. The judge who issues a restraining order can mandate that the accuser move out of a shared house and can grant the victim temporary custody of children.

In Connecticut, there also are **protective orders**. A protective order is issued in *criminal court* after the accuser is arrested for stalking or for a crime of domestic violence. With this order, the judge can potentially mandate that the accuser cannot contact or come near the victim or the victim's children; the judge can also change the terms of the order at any time. Protective orders last until the end of the accuser's criminal court case unless the judge sees fit to terminate it sooner.

As long as they meet federal requirements, restraining orders and protective orders are valid across the United States regardless of what state, territory or tribal county they were originally issued in.

### *Victims' Rights*

Victims of domestic violence in Connecticut all have rights that are protected by law.<sup>19</sup>

- At the scene of a domestic violence incident, victims have the right to assistance in obtaining any necessary medical treatment as well as the “notification of the right to file an affidavit or a warrant for arrest” and information about domestic violence services and/or the Office of Victim Services. [C.G.S. § 46b-38b]
- Victims have the right to request the police department to “return any personal property confiscated by it in the investigation or prosecution of the crime.” [C.G.S. §§ 54-36a(b)(2), 54-36a(d)]
- Victims have the right to apply for a restraining order should they be “subjected to a continuous threat of physical pain or physical injury by a family or household member.” [C.G.S. § 46b-15]
- Should they request notification and provide a current address, victims have the right to be notified of judicial proceedings relating to the case of their abusers. These proceedings include the accuser’s arrest, arraignment, release pending judicial proceedings, and plea. [C.G.S. § 51-286e]
- Any victim of domestic violence has the right to make a statement before the court or produce a written statement “concerning whether or not the sentence should be reduced, the defendant discharged or the defendant discharged on probation.” [C.G.S. § 53a-39]
- An employer may not fire or penalize an employee for obeying a legal subpoena to appear before the court as a witness, or if the employee “attends a court proceeding or participates in a police investigation related to a criminal case in which the employee is a crime victim.” [C.G.S. § 54-85b]
- Insurance companies are legally not allowed to limit or deny coverage to victims of domestic violence. [CGS § 38a-816]
- Victims have the right to keep confidential most any information passed between them and a battered women’s counselor or sexual assault counselor. This information will not be admitted as evidence unless the victim waives the right to do so. [C.G.S. § 52-146k]

## **Tips on Writing Articles about Domestic Violence Incidents**

In their 2002 study of news coverage of domestic violence fatalities in Washington, Bullock and Cubert state that “journalists can create different pictures of domestic violence and confirm or debunk the myths surrounding it” depending on their choice of sources, words, and placement/repetition of information<sup>20</sup>. Their research uncovered the following facts about Washington media:

- Journalists seldom labeled the crime as a domestic violence incident, choosing instead for their readers to draw their own conclusions. Only 22.6 percent of the articles elaborated on past abuse in the relationship (483).
- Coverage rarely illustrated past incidents of abuse in the relationship, which as a result portrayed the violence as an isolated incident. In addition, the crimes were very rarely placed in a broader context of domestic violence.
- Domestic violence overall was portrayed “overwhelmingly in terms of physical harm”; most coverage thus did not include descriptions of psychological or other forms of abuse (483).
- On average, 17 percent of the articles used language that suggested the victim was to blame for her or his own death (486).
- Domestic violence experts were rarely used as sources. Instead, journalists exclusively relied on victims’ and perpetrator’s friends, family and neighbors as well as police and legal personnel.

Domestic violence is often a complex issue to report as well as emotionally taxing; news reports that fall under this category frequently are of victims’ brutal assaults by intimate partners and/or their actual or attempted murders. Consequently, attention to language and sources is especially crucial in coverage of domestic violence issues. The following tips are meant to help journalists report in a way that is informative and accurate while also minimizing harm to victims and their families.

### ***Be aware of sources<sup>21</sup>***

Officials such as police and prosecutors often can provide important information about prior incidents. Even if they do not wish to discuss ongoing cases, ask if they are considering the crime through the lens of domestic violence. It is important to note, nevertheless, that not all police are necessarily neutral sources; they may be unaware of prior abuse within the relationship or simply misconstrue the situation because of personal preconceptions.

While they regrettably are not commonly used as sources, **domestic violence advocates** can provide a wealth of expert information about intimate partner violence in general; they may be able to provide statistical data as well as thorough explanations of domestic violence and how it added to the incident:

Valerie Stafford, executive director of Citizens Against Domestic and Sexual Abuse, said the case is a classic example of how domestic abuse can turn into murder. “He killed her during the process of her probably leaving him,” she said. “That’s what we try to teach people. That’s when it’s most violent and dangerous. When the victim is trying to leave and there’s no more cards to play.” (*Whidbey News-Times*, 12/9/01)<sup>22</sup>

Finally, **friends, family, and neighbors** are quite often quoted and heavily relied upon for information. People close to the victim might especially be able to provide details of prior abuse within the relationship – details that they personally observed and/or were told by the victim. Neighbors might have previously overheard altercations and called for police intervention. Nevertheless, journalists should treat these sources with a certain measure of caution. Witnesses may be reluctant to speak negatively of abusers, especially if the incident involved death. In addition, many perpetrators successfully portray themselves as pleasant individuals publically while they are privately abusive to their partners. Witnesses may simply have been fooled by this false portrayal:

Neighbors described the husband as a friendly person who kept an immaculate lawn. (*Kitsap Sun*, 11/7/05)

Sources that are close to the abuser should especially be treated skeptically, for they often keep quiet about abuse or positively describe the abuser, in effect obscuring his/her violence:

“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)

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)

***Clearly acknowledge crimes in which domestic violence is present.***

Again, in Connecticut intimate partners include spouses or former spouses, people who have a child together, and people in or recently in a dating relationship. Using the actual term “domestic violence” and labeling the crime as such in and of itself helps readers to identify single incidents within the larger societal problem; simply describing the incident in whatever strength of detail does not necessarily mean that readers will draw accurate conclusions. The following story clearly labels the crime as one of domestic violence:

“It is clear that Carolyn Durall experienced a life of coercive control by her husband, capped by the violent murder,” [King County Superior Court Judge Deborah] Fleck said. “This murder was the ultimate act of domestic violence.”  
(*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 10/7/00)

***Uncover past abusive behavior to help demonstrate the patterns of domestic violence.***

Reporters can look for legal action taken against perpetrators: were there past police responses? Were there restraining/protective orders ever in place – and if so, were they ever violated? Other factors to consider are patterns of control within the relationship. The perpetrator might have restricted the victim’s flow of money (e.g. denying access to bank accounts or work) and/or ability to see family and friends. Additional signs of controlling/intimidating behavior include threats to hurt him/herself, the victim or their children or pets; possession of and threat with guns or other weapons; jealousy and demands to constantly know the victim’s location; constant criticism of victim; and destruction of property:

Court records show that Collelo applied for, and received, a protective order in May, asking to keep Barber away from her, their residence and their children. In her petition, Colello said Barber had thrown kitchen chairs, breaking them and putting holes in the wall while screaming at her. In previous incidents, he pushed her often and gave her a black eye while she was pregnant, the petition said. In 1995, he threw her through a door and was arrested, but the case was thrown out because she told the judge everything was all right, the petition stated. (*South County Journal*, 8/8/01)

***Do not paint domestic violence as isolated incidents that are committed only by ‘abnormal’ people.***

Perhaps one of the most important messages that a journalist can send about domestic violence is not just its unacceptability but the fact that it is a pervasive, social issue. To effectively present this perspective, avoid language that suggests the incident is somehow beyond all realm of understanding. Stating that the motive for a murder is ‘without reason’ or that a perpetrator mysteriously ‘snapped,’ for example, obscures the perpetrator’s abusive and long-term desire for power and control.

Another way of mistakenly portraying domestic violence as isolated incidents is to suggest that it occurs only with certain types of people who can be singled out and easily identified. Journalists commonly use neighbors as exclusive sources although they are often not very knowledgeable about or close to the victim and abuser. According to Bullock and Cubert, several statements in the Washington media were used from neighbors who described couples as “weird” or “antisocial” – in effect implying that social deviance is a select marker of domestic violence (490). Other stories included testimony from neighbors who expressed surprise that the crime occurred, describing the perpetrator with words like “nice” “clean-cut” and “upbeat” (490). Such language implies that the perpetrator should in fact be easily identified, and that ‘normal’ people do not commit domestic violence when the opposite is true.

It thus is helpful to place the story within the broader context of domestic violence. As was mentioned, simply labeling the crime as one of domestic violence allows readers to have vocabulary that connects a single incident with the wider picture. Use local, state and/or national statistics to provide a point of comparison in addition to consulting domestic violence advocates for their perspective. Another way of expanding the story would be to include the costs of domestic abuse to society as a whole.

***Do not use victim-blaming language.***

Bullock and Cubert also note that one article quoted a victim’s ex-sister-in-law who said that the victim had a “habit of getting with men that abused her” – thus suggesting that the victim to some extent actively chose violent relationships and so shouldered part of the blame for the resulting abuse (491). Responsibility for abuse lies with the abuser and not with the victim, and this message should be clear throughout coverage of the incident. Simply posing the question of why a victim might have remained in the relationship (or quoting people who ask this question) also shifts blame to the victim. Journalists can inform readers of obstacles that forced her/him to stay, making sure that none of the victim’s reasons are portrayed as invalid; journalists should also make clear that none of the victim’s actions or choices justified any form of abuse. The following is a clear example of victim-blaming language:

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)



***Similarly, note that the abuser is always responsible for his/her actions.***

Do not focus on or validate excuses for batterers' behavior. Many abusers, especially those who are male, have grown up in abusive households. Including this history is relevant because it helps to demonstrate domestic abuse as a pattern of violence with far-reaching consequences. Nevertheless, when presenting such accounts it should be made clear that batterers are still responsible for their behavior and that abuse is a choice: there are countless people who have endured violent childhoods but choose not to engage in aggressive behavior. Similarly, domestic violence is not a substance abuse problem, nor is it an anger management problem. While drugs and alcohol may escalate abuse, they do not cause it. Battering is not a momentary loss of temper but rather a pattern of methodical and violent behavior that abusers especially direct at intimate partners. Abusers who complete substance abuse and anger management programs as a whole do not change their aggression.

***Do not excessively focus on characteristics such as ethnicity and socioeconomic class, especially as a means of explaining the crime.***

Domestic violence affects people of all backgrounds and is not the domain of only certain groups; overemphasizing select characteristics of the abuser and/or victim detracts from this message. Moreover, it wrongly assumes that all members of a certain group (working-class people, Latinos, Muslims, youth, etc.) act, think and feel the same way. There also is a danger that blame for the abuse will shift to that group rather than the individual who committed it. Abusers are responsible for their own actions and ultimately make their own decision to commit violence. The following story describes a Hong Kong man and blames culture for his act of homicide:

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)

***Strike a balance in description.***

Try to portray the crime accurately but without exceedingly graphic language. Respecting victims is important, so avoid sensationalizing the crime. At the same time, be very mindful of wording and language that minimizes the crime. Regardless of if it occurred between intimate partners, rape should never be worded as “sex” or “an affair,” for example. In addition, wording abuse as “relationship problems” suggests that both parties contributed in creating a negative environment, which obscures the reality that one intimate partner regularly committed violence against the other:

He [the police chief] said the couple's tempestuous relationship could be to blame for the slaying. (*Seattle Times*, 2/3/07)

Last month, Pheach moved out when years of marital difficulties came to a boiling point, Murray said. (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 11/10/97)

***Include preventative information about domestic violence and resources that readers can consult.***

Ultimately, domestic violence should not be treated as inevitable or unstoppable. Illustrating the warning signs and clarifying the myths of abusive relationships (those that pertain to the incident as well as others) can open up important conversations about domestic violence and help readers become more aware of the health of their own relationships. Include resources for victims of domestic violence, for media has the potential to reach countless of the victims who do not know that help is available. Information can be incorporated throughout the article or included in a sidebar. The following is a good example:

Kelly Abken, executive director of Domestic Violence Services...said it's important for the community to band together (and) support victims...Domestic Violence Services of Benton and Franklin Counties operates a confidential shelter for victims of domestic violence...Victims can reach the shelter 24 hours a day at 582-9841 or 1-800-648-1277. (*Tri-City Herald*, 6/4/05)

### **Tips for Interviewing Survivors<sup>23</sup>**

When covering a domestic violence incident, journalists might want to interview surviving victims themselves to give a more precise account of the incident. It is important to realize that the survivor to some extent will have to revisit an abusive, complex and emotionally painful relationship; journalists who want to obtain an accurate account of the incident should thus prioritize the survivor's well-being. The following tips are provided to help interview survivors without inducing further trauma.

Note: There are many contacts at domestic violence agencies who are more than willing to contribute to news articles. It is important to be aware, however, that it is not possible to simply call these agencies at the last minute and ask to interview survivors. Most agencies do not have lists at their disposal of survivors who would be willing to be interviewed, so it takes time to find somebody. It also might not be possible to be put in contact with specific survivors who have recently entered received services; as a whole, domestic violence advocates have confidentiality agreements and cannot disclose the names of clients.

- Respect survivors' right to decline being interviewed or photographed. If they agree to an interview, give them a say in when and where the interview will take place; also respect their right to have another person present if they wish.
- Be sure to take some time before the interview to help the survivor feel respected and secure. Explain the story you wish to write and exactly how the interview will be incorporated. Develop a set of ground rules and be sure to follow them. Ask which topics and questions are off-limits.
- The aforementioned tips for writing articles about domestic violence should also be used for structuring the language of the interview. Do not word questions in a way that implies that the survivor was to blame for her/his abuse, or focus too much on such things as her/his ethnicity. Do not push for the 'gory' details; especially if worded insensitively, questions about specific traumatic events can trigger intense, painful flashbacks for the survivor.
- Be aware of your own biases so as not to reflect them in your questions and demeanor. For instance, even a subtle hint of homophobia will likely create a hostile environment for an LGBT survivor.
- Do not attempt to coerce the survivor into answering questions (such as telling her/him that you will get the information elsewhere if s/he doesn't answer your questions). Do not rush the interview, even if you have a pressing deadline. Allow time for breaks, if necessary. If the survivor becomes overwhelmed, give enough time to allow her/him to compose herself/himself before asking more questions.
- Ask about the survivor's strengths as well as abusive experiences. How did s/he become a survivor rather than a victim – what obstacles did s/he overcome?
- Check the accuracy of facts such as dates, names, and places multiple times before printing the article. If possible, allow the survivor to read your work beforehand so that any misinformation can be corrected. Give the survivor your contact information in case s/he has further questions or would like to clarify any printed errors.
- *Keep the survivor safe.* Many survivors of domestic violence continue to face very real dangers from their former partners. Ask if the survivor would like to use an alias and avoid sharing sensitive information (such as the survivor's current location) in the article or with other people.
- Ask what else you can do to keep the survivor safe.

## Resources

### *Hotlines:*

24-hour CT Statewide Domestic Violence Hotline: (888) 774-2900

24-hour National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-3224),  
TTY 1-800-787-3224

*The National Domestic Violence Hotline offers over 170 different languages through interpreter services.*

24-hour CT Sexual Assault Crisis Services hotline: 1-888-999-5545 English  
1-888-568-8332 Español

### *Organizations:*

Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence

90 Pitkin Street  
East Hartford, CT 06108  
(860) 282-7899 Phone  
(860) 282-7893 Fax  
[www.ctcadv.org](http://www.ctcadv.org)

*Note: Hotlines and contact information for all of CCADV's member programs can be found on the website.*

Our **td411** teen dating violence app (which offers teens information on health relationships) can be downloaded onto iPhones and Androids. It can also be accessed through the website at [www.td411.org](http://www.td411.org).

CT State Office of Victim Services

225 Spring Street, Fourth Floor  
Wethersfield, Connecticut 06109  
(860) 263-2760  
Email: OVS@jud.ct.gov  
<http://www.jud.ct.gov/crimevictim>

CT Office of the Victim Advocate

505 Hudson Street, 5th Floor  
Hartford, CT 06106  
(860) 550-6632  
<http://www.ct.gov/ova/site/default.asp>

Greater Hartford Legal Services

999 Asylum Ave., 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor  
Hartford, CT 06106  
(860) 541-5000 Phone  
(860) 541-5050 Fax  
Email: [ghla@ghla.org](mailto:ghla@ghla.org)  
<http://www.ghla.org>

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

One Broadway, Suite B210  
Denver, CO 80203  
(303) 839-1852 Phone  
(303) 831-9251 Fax  
Email: [mainoffice@ncadv.org](mailto:mainoffice@ncadv.org)  
<http://www.ncadv.org>

National Network to End Domestic Violence

2001 S St NW, Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20009  
(202) 543-5566 Phone  
(202) 543-5626 Fax  
<http://www.nnedv.org/>

*Useful website from NNEDV that details federal and state domestic violence laws:*  
<http://www.womenslaw.org>

## Acknowledgements

The Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence would like to gratefully acknowledge the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence for allowing us the use of the newspaper examples in their media guide.

In addition, the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence generously gave us permission to incorporate tips from their group of survivors SOAR (Sisters Overcoming Abusive Relationships) into our interviewing guide. Their direct quotes can be found in RICADV's handbook for journalists, the link to which is listed below.

Very appreciative thanks also go to Jane Doe, Inc. for allowing us to adapt their excellent "Sources to Consider" section of their media guide into our own.

Overall, we would like to acknowledge the media guides that were helpful resources in structuring this one. We highly suggest that journalists look to them for further information and tips.

Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence:

[http://www.wscadv.org/docs/Media\\_Guide\\_2008.pdf](http://www.wscadv.org/docs/Media_Guide_2008.pdf)

Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence

<http://www.ricadv.org/en/media/handbook-for-journalists.html>

Jane Doe, Inc.

[http://www.janedoe.org/site/assets/docs/JDI\\_DVHomicide\\_MediaGuide.doc](http://www.janedoe.org/site/assets/docs/JDI_DVHomicide_MediaGuide.doc)

Nevada Network Against Domestic Violence

[http://www.nnadv.org/pdfs/Press\\_Room/Covering%20Domestic%20ViolenceMedia%20Guide.pdf](http://www.nnadv.org/pdfs/Press_Room/Covering%20Domestic%20ViolenceMedia%20Guide.pdf)

Interpersonal Violence Resource Guide for New Hampshire Media

<http://128.121.25.104:8080/awweb/awarchive?type=file&item=18752>

While the descriptions/adaptations of the Bullock and Cubert study and Dart Center interviewing tips are original, we initially found them in the NH, RI and WA media guides.

---

<sup>1</sup> Battering Victimization Among a Probability-Based Sample of Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM). American Journal of Public Health, 92, 1964-1968. National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (1998). Annual Report on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Domestic Violence.

- 
- <sup>2</sup> Family Violence Statistics: Including Statistics on Strangers and Acquaintances. (2005). U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Justice. (March 1998). "Violence by Intimates: Analysis of Data on Crimes by Current or Former Spouses, Boyfriends, and Girlfriends."
- <sup>4</sup> Catalano, S. (n.d.). Bureau of Justice Statistics Intimate Partner Violence in the U.S.: Victim Characteristics . Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) . Retrieved June 7, 2011, from <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/intimate/victims.cfm>
- <sup>5</sup> Expert: Domestic abuse leading cause of death in pregnant women." *The Washington Examiner* [District of Columbia] 27 June 2007: n. pag. *The Washington Examiner*. Web. 21 June 2011.
- <sup>6</sup> Expert: Domestic abuse leading cause of death in pregnant women." *The Washington Examiner* [District of Columbia] 27 June 2007: n. pag. *The Washington Examiner*. Web. 21 June 2011.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey (November 1998).
- <sup>8</sup> Expert: Domestic abuse leading cause of death in pregnant women." *The Washington Examiner* [District of Columbia] 27 June 2007: n. pag. *The Washington Examiner*. Web. 21 June 2011.
- <sup>9</sup> Baum, Katrina, Catalano, Shannan, Rand, Micheal and Rose, Kristina. (2009). Stalking Victimization in the United States. U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- <sup>10</sup> Center for Policy Research. (1997). "Stalking in America."
- <sup>11</sup> Tween and Teen Dating Violence and Abuse Study, Teenage Research Unlimited for Liz Claiborne Inc. and the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline. (2008).
- <sup>12</sup> Davis, Antoinette, MPH. (2008). Interpersonal and Physical Dating Violence among Teens. The National Council on Crime and Delinquency Focus.
- <sup>13</sup> Berry, D.B. (2000). *The Domestic Violence Source Book*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Lowell House, NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group, Los Angeles, p. 10.
- <sup>14</sup> Berry, D.B. (2000). *The Domestic Violence Source Book*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Lowell House, NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group, Los Angeles, p. 10.
- <sup>15</sup> History summarized from: PCADV. (1999). Justice, Autonomy, Restoration and Safety: A Training for Domestic Violence Advocates.
- <sup>16</sup> Office of Violence Against Women, (n.d.). The History of the Violence Against Women act. Retrieved from <http://www.ovw.usdoj.gov/docs/history-vawa.pdf>
- <sup>17</sup> (CCADV. (2010-2011). Domestic Violence Fact Sheet: A Connecticut Perspective.)
- <sup>18</sup> This is for the most part taken directly from: [Domestic Violence in Connecticut. (2010). Connecticut Judicial Law Libraries. Retrieved June 7, 2011, from <http://www.jud.ct.gov/lawlib/Notebooks/Pathfinders/DomesticViolence/DomesticViolence.pdf>]
- <sup>19</sup> Summaries of the descriptions of these rights as well as direct wording and statute numbers are all taken from: Connecticut Judicial Branch, Office of Victim Services. (2008). Rights of Crime Victims in Connecticut: Summary of State Statutes. Wethersfield, CT.
- <sup>20</sup> C.F. Bullock and J.Cubert, "Coverage of Domestic Violence Fatalities by Newspapers in Washington State," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, May 2002, vol. 17, no. 5, 475-499.
- <sup>21</sup> Adapted from "Sources to consider" from Jane Doe, Inc. (n.d.). Media guide: reporting on domestic violence related homicides. Retrieved from [http://www.janedoe.org/site/assets/docs/JDI\\_DVHomicide\\_MediaGuide.doc](http://www.janedoe.org/site/assets/docs/JDI_DVHomicide_MediaGuide.doc)
- <sup>22</sup> This example of news media and all following examples other than the Bullock and Cubert study are directly taken from: Starr, K. (2002). Covering Domestic Violence. Washington Coalition Against Domestic Violence.
- <sup>23</sup> Adapted from: Recommendations from Survivors. (n.d.). RICADV. Retrieved from <http://www.ricadv.org/en/media/handbook-for-journalists/178-recs-from-soar.html> and Working with Victims and Survivors. (2011, February 22). Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. Retrieved from <http://dartcenter.org/content/working-with-victims-and-survivors>