

NVAA LEARNING ACTIVITY

CHAPTER 18: THE NEWS MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF CRIME AND VICTIMIZATION

INSTRUCTOR GUIDELINES

Key Concepts/Objectives to Emphasize in Instruction and Learning Activities:

1. Impact of news media reporting on society. (18-1 to 18-4)
2. Major concerns of victims in dealing with the news media. (18-10 to 18-13)
3. Role and responsibilities of victim service providers in helping victims deal with the news media. (18-15 to 18-18)

Objectives:

1. Identify the major concerns of victims in dealing with the news media.
2. Develop proactive strategies to address these concerns.

Description of Activity and Faculty Guidelines:

The instructor will copy the fourteen “major concerns” (from NVAA Text, Chapter 18) and cut each one onto strips of paper. Students will be divided into fourteen groups, with each group taking a strip of paper from a hat.

Utilizing their own experiences as well as their review of the chapter, students will:

- Identify ways to remedy the effects of their “major concern.”
- Develop proactive strategies to address these concerns.
- Record their findings on the student worksheet.

The instructor will ask each group to identify *one proactive strategy* to address its “major concern,” and process their responses to the full group on blank overhead transparencies.

Can Be Utilized As:

Individual Activity Small Group Activity Large Group Activity

Anticipated Amount of Time Required: 15 Minutes

- 03 minutes for group divisions.
- 07 minutes to complete the small group activity.
- 05 minutes to report back to the full group.

RESOURCES NEEDED (*Please check all that apply:*)

- Tear sheets and felt pens
 - VCR/monitor
 - Overhead projector and screen/LCD and laptop
 - Blank overhead transparencies and overhead pens
 - Masking tape
 - Index cards
 - Individual or group worksheets
 - Timer
 - Other (*please describe*): Hat to hold strips of paper
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OVERHEAD TRANSPARENCY

STUDENT WORKSHEET

MAJOR CONCERN: _____

ISSUES RELATED TO THIS MAJOR CONCERN BASED UPON MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCES	PROACTIVE STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS THIS MAJOR CONCERN

SELECTING TOPIC FOR GROUP ACTIVITY

Make copies of this page, and cut each “major concern” into strips. Each group will pull *one strip* from a hat.

Interviewing at inappropriate times. “Inappropriate times” for interviewing victims include immediately following a crime, at funerals, in hospital settings, and during trials when the judge or prosecutor has issued a gag order to witnesses. It is during these periods that a victim’s trauma and distress tend to be extremely high. Dealing with the news media can create a secondary victimization that compounds the victim’s tragedy caused by the violent crime.

Using euphemisms to describe victims and offenders. Euphemisms are often utilized by journalists and, in particular, by newspaper headline writers to capture the essence of a violent act in a brief, memorable manner. In doing so, however, the identity of the victim can be demeaned and even lost. Most Americans remember the notorious “Preppie Murder” in Central Park in the 1980s, but how many people can recall the name of the victim, Jennifer Levin?

Glamorizing the offender. The following words were used at various times to describe a well-known criminal: “handsome,” “intelligent,” “rape crisis center volunteer,” and “law school student.” The man who was so described was Ted Bundy, one of our nation’s worst serial killers. While such descriptions may be essential to a news story, what often adds insult to the victim’s injury is the lack of such detail in describing the victims of such heinous criminals.

Exhibiting aggressive behavior toward victims, survivors, and their advocates. The pressure to obtain a news story, often under a tight deadline, can lead some journalists to be overly aggressive to victims, their loved ones, and victim service providers. Examples of this kind of harassment abound, such as when members of the media, seeking a quick soundbite or interview during trial, pursue a victim in front of his/her home, as s/he goes about his/her daily routine, etc.

Ignoring victims’ and survivors’ wishes. Since victims do not choose to be victimized, their ability to make decisions and have some degree of control over their lives following a violent crime is very important. Crime victims’ wishes relevant to the news media’s coverage of their cases should be respected and followed. When a victim clearly articulates that s/he does not want to speak to the media, members of the media should honor this and not pursue the victim with unwanted phone calls and requests for an interview.

Filming and photographing scenes with bodies, body bags, and blood. Many victim service professionals believe that the steady diet of gory crime scenes (often involving murdered victims, body bags, and blood) portrayed in broadcast and print media not only contributes to individual and collective desensitization to violence, but also may intensify the personal tragedy experienced by victims and survivors of crime.

Repeatedly using crime scene footage as a “lead-in” to newscasts. When a broadcast medium chooses to show crime footage as the “lead-in” prior to a newscast, it can re-victimize anybody who was involved in that specific crime.

Reporting hearsay. Victims, their loved ones, and law enforcement officials often refuse to be interviewed for reasons including the need for privacy, or to preserve the sanctity of the criminal investigation or case. In such cases, some media rely on interviews with third parties, including neighbors and people who may, or may not, have known the victim, to obtain details about the victim and/or the alleged perpetrator. Such hearsay interviews often cannot be relied upon for accuracy and can evoke additional trauma for victims.

Interfering in police investigations. The need for cooperation among law enforcement, other criminal justice officials, and the news media is essential to criminal investigations and prosecutions. Details that journalists consider key to a good story are also quite often the very details that must be kept confidential in order to successfully complete a criminal investigation.

Referring to drunk driving crashes as “accidents.” There is nothing “accidental” about a person who chooses to drink and drive, resulting in a crime that injures or kills another human being. Media references to drunken driving crashes as “accidents” are insulting to crime victims. Many journalists have begun referring to such tragedies as “crashes” or “crimes,” which more accurately describes the criminality of driving under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

Failing to cover a crime at all. Societal biases in America are sometimes reflected in news reporting. The length of news copy and scope of broadcast coverage tend to vary based upon the victims' race, where they live, their socioeconomic status, and other factors that have nothing to do with the crime committed against them. These issues were discussed in an article by the associate editor of a large metropolitan daily newspaper:

When city editors get calls from the crime reporter, often the first question asked is "Where did it happen?" The news team's reaction to the crime is often predicated on where the crime occurred. If it's at one of the projects in predominantly black and Hispanic West Dallas, we call in a brief; if it's in white, fashionable University Park, we roll a reporter or two. That attitude is unlikely to change (Sotomayer 1987).

Identifying child victims. The criminal justice system goes to great length to protect the privacy of child victims, recognizing that any public identification of their emotional, physical, or sexual assaults can have devastating consequences. The media should similarly respect the privacy rights of child victims and should avoid all reporting that in any way identifies (or leads to contact with) victims of child abuse. In cases of incest allegations or convictions, journalists should not identify perpetrators if the child victim is in any way at risk of also being identified.

Attempting to interview survivors of homicide victims prior to official death notifications by law enforcement. In homicide cases, the news media should always ascertain whether or not surviving family members of the victim have been notified of their loved one's murder. One victim recalled driving his car on a Florida freeway and hearing a radio report of his brother's brutal murder at the hands of a high-profile, and yet unidentified, killer. The shock and grief associated with the news media's reporting of violent deaths prior to sensitive death notification comprise a second tragic victimization that can easily be avoided with communication and cooperation between law enforcement and the media.

Inaccurate reporting. Accurate media coverage of details of a crime, however minute, are very important to crime victims and survivors. For example, inaccurately reporting the age of a homicide victim can have traumatic consequences on that victim's surviving family members. Factual reporting of all details associated with a crime is critical not only to the media's underlying philosophy of accuracy, but also to a victim's efforts to reconstruct his or her life following a crime.