What the media tells us about sexual violence – and why it matters

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Overview

Introduction and background

Why the news?
Framing sexual violence

Sexual and domestic violence in the news

Implications for advocates

How do we get better at talking about prevention?

Conclusions and closing thoughts
Acknowledgments

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What concerns you about news coverage of interpersonal violence?
Berkeley Media Studies Group

- Research on news coverage of public health issues
- Media advocacy training and strategic consultation for community groups and public health advocates
- Professional education for journalists
Key Functions of the News

Setting the Agenda
- What we think about

Shaping the Debate
- How we think about it

Reaching Opinion Leaders
- What we do about it
News frames

Portrait

Landscape
The Need to Reframe
News about sexual violence . . .

. . . is driven by criminal justice events.

. . . is dominated by police and other criminal justice professionals.
How were the stories framed?

**Portrait**
- Criminal justice
- Celebrity cases

**Landscape**
- Report released
- Initiative or policy
- Controversy or injustice
News about sexual violence ... 

... is driven by criminal justice events.

... is dominated by police and other criminal justice professionals.

... often contains problematic language.
How does the news characterize people who commit violence?

18% distance the perpetrator
• “The **beast** Marvin Powell is out of prison.”

11% exonerate the perpetrator
• “I’ve known [him] for 45 years and there’s absolutely no way I believe any of this could possibly have happened.”
How does the news characterize people who experience violence?

Overt victim blaming is rare. . .

but 15% of articles use language that minimizes the act of sexual violence and implies consent: “his admitted sex romp with a 16-year old girl.”
News about sexual violence . . .

. . . is driven by criminal justice events.

. . . is dominated by police and other criminal justice professionals.

. . . often contains problematic language.

. . . focuses on criminal justice, but few other solutions.
The news focuses on criminal justice but few other solutions.

More than half of articles reference employment or criminal justice consequences for the person accused.

Fewer articles include substantive discussion of or calls for solutions.

• Most solutions referenced are criminal justice responses after the fact.
• Prevention rarely appears.
So, how do we get better at talking about solutions?
Tasks for reframing

• Make the landscape as vivid as the portrait.
• Illustrate the values.
• Connect values to solutions.
• Use communications to support action.
Other strategies . . .

• **Monitor the media.**

• **Shape the conversation by contributing opinion pieces.**

• **Prepare for the long term by building relationships with journalists.**

• **Be prepared with resources for reporters.**

• **Create news** beyond criminal justice.
What’s missing from the news on sexual violence?

An analysis of coverage, 2011–2013
Thank you!

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How does the news characterize men who experience violence?

• Articles about acts of child sexual abuse focus on abuse of boys.

• Stories about child sexual abuse against boys include more minimizing language.

• Male victims rarely appear in stories about other types of violence.
Methods

Sample of routine coverage, 2011-2013

- National and state papers
- Online news
- 308 articles identified

Coding instrument

Coder training
Child Sexual Abuse
Rape/Sexual Assault of Adults
Sexual Harassment
Child Sexual Abuse-Penn State
Sex trafficking of children
Sex trafficking
Child Sexual Exploitation
Sexual Harassment
Child Sexual Abuse
Rape/Sexual Assault of Adults
Sympathy, resilience and remorse in the news about sexual violence
Sympathy, resilience and remorse in the news about sexual violence

Sympathy or sadness for victims (18%):
“He ripped childhood away from people.”

Hope or healing for victims (6%):
“She is determined to turn her ordeal into a positive situation and help others recognize the signs of abuse.”

Repentance or remorse (2%):
“Reyes-Carbajal said he repents for everything he did that night. 'I wouldn't like that to happen to my family.”
What are sexual violence articles about?

- Criminal justice process: 60%
- Sexual violence in an institution: 20%
- Solutions (?)
- Statistics/Trends: 10%
- Causes of sexual violence: 0%
Which institutions are implicated in news about sexual violence?

- Criminal justice system
- Pennsylvania State University
- Churches and other faith communities
- Elementary and high schools
- The U.S. Military

Occasionally, the news also references community or collective responsibility.
Conclusions

• Despite many strengths, criminal justice perspectives dominate the news and prevention is largely absent.

• There are many opportunities for advocates to make prevention part of the news.

• More complete news coverage creates spaces to talk about prevention, what it means, and why it matters.