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What's missing from the news on sexual violence?

An analysis of coverage, 2011-2013

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What's missing from the news on sexual violence?

An analysis of coverage, 2011–2013

Man convicted in rape case sentenced.

Alleged child predator indicted.

Sexual harassment endemic in medical work environment.

We see the headlines every day: Sexual violence often makes front-page news. But in the flood of articles that inundate us, it can be challenging to see the larger patterns in the coverage and even harder to see how those patterns may limit our understanding of sexual violence and how to prevent it.

What will it take to prevent sexual violence? Sexual violence prevention advocates* are still grappling with the answer, though most agree it requires a comprehensive approach that involves policy, practice, norms change at every level of society, and coordination between prevention advocates, people who have experienced sexual violence, and those who work with people who have committed sexual violence. Advocates and practitioners working to end sexual violence across the lifespan have identified a range of promising practices to stop sexual violence before it happens: Some of these practices include policy reform in institutions like schools and churches,^{1-3, 4} public education and outreach,^{1, 2} strategies to prevent individuals from committing the first act of sexual violence,⁴ and changes in cultural norms around sex and power,⁴ among many others.

Experts believe preventing sexual violence is crucial and attainable, but advocates are worried that the general public may have a limited and limiting view of what sexual violence prevention entails.⁵ In 2014, Berkeley Media Studies Group began a multi-year collaboration with the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) to explore the framing of sexual violence and implications for prevention efforts across the country. We consulted with advocates and other practitioners nationwide to learn more about how they define prevention, and we explored the public conversation about sexual violence and prevention through the window of news coverage.

* In this document we define sexual violence prevention advocates broadly as practitioners, researchers and others who work to end sexual violence through education, legislation, counseling, community organizing and a range of other activities and services.

News coverage is important because it sets the agenda for public policy debates.⁶⁻⁹ Journalists' decisions about which of the day's many pressing problems to cover can raise the profile of an issue, whereas topics not covered by news media can more easily be neglected because they remain largely outside public discourse and policy debate.^{8, 10}

How issues are portrayed in news coverage also has an important impact on how those issues are understood by the public and policymakers. Many news stories are framed like portraits — they emphasize an individual's role in causing or fixing problems.¹¹ Stories that are framed this way leave little room to talk about the context of the problem and potential solutions.^{12, 13} Far less frequently, the news frames stories like landscapes — these stories show the larger social conditions behind the issue.¹³⁻¹⁵ When people see “landscape” stories, they are more likely to view businesses, the government or other institutions as having a role to play in solving the problem.^{13, 16}

When it comes to sexual violence in particular, news coverage is important in shaping people's perceptions of the issue and what to do about it,^{17, 18} especially when they don't have personal experience with it. In some cases, news coverage can dramatically increase the visibility of sexual violence, as with the 2012 rape trials in Marysville, Missouri, and Steubenville, Ohio, both of which were further amplified by social media.^{19, 20, 21, 22} Still, the way journalists report on sexual violence is just as important as the volume of coverage they dedicate to it. Patterns of coverage can reinforce misconceptions and perpetuate stereotypical, harmful views of those impacted by or involved in sexual violence and the nature of sexual violence itself,²³⁻²⁵ which in turn hinder effective policy solutions.^{26, 27}

Because news coverage can shape attitudes about prevention policy, we wanted to know: How does sexual violence appear in the news? How do solutions appear? Is prevention discussed? Does the news reinforce problematic stereotypes about who experiences sexual violence and who perpetrates it? In this Issue we explore how sexual violence is portrayed in the news and consider the implications of these portrayals for prevention advocates and journalists interested in discussing not just the details of sexual violence, but also how to end it.



What we did

Using circulation data,²⁸ expert guidance from our colleagues at NSVRC, and our previous research, we compiled a list of newspapers to search. The final list included several outlets with national reach, such as The New York Times, as well as prominent regional papers from each of the nine census districts defined by the United States Census Bureau.²⁹ We examined newspapers because they continue to drive the agenda for national and local policy debates^{30, 31} and remain a key source of information for the majority of news consumers.³² We also analyzed prominent blogs and online magazines that focus on policy and culture issues, such as Slate. All told, we reviewed articles from 17 major sources.

We developed a search string that captured articles about all types of sexual violence based on a modified version of the National Sexual Violence Resource Center's comprehensive definition:

*Sexual violence is a broad term and includes rape, incest, child sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, unwanted sexual contact, sexual harassment, exposure and voyeurism.*³³

To ensure that our sample was representative, we selected chronological random samples, called constructed weeks,³⁴ for 2011, 2012 and 2013. This way, the sample included proportional representation from thin Monday to fat Sunday papers. Research suggests that sampling a minimum of six constructed weeks results in the most accurate picture of trends in news coverage:³⁵ To that end, we constructed two sample weeks for each of the three years of the study, for a total of 42 days of news coverage.

We designed a coding protocol that drew on multiple sources, including existing literature^{23, 36-38} and our previous analyses of violence in the news,³⁹⁻⁴¹ to document the persistent themes in news coverage of sexual violence. We also incorporated insights, questions and suggestions from our ongoing conversations with practitioners, advocates and other experts in sexual violence across the life span. We paid particular attention to how the news characterized solutions to sexual violence, especially preventive solutions.

Before coding the full sample, we used an iterative process and statistical test (Krippendorff's alpha⁴²) to ensure that coders' agreement was not occurring by chance. We achieved an acceptable reliability measure of $>.8$ for each coding variable.



What we found

We identified 308 articles on sexual violence that were published on our sample days in U.S. newspapers from 2011 to 2013. The majority of these (82%) were straight news stories; the rest were opinion pieces, such as columns, letters to the editor, op-eds, blogs or editorials. After we eliminated articles that mentioned sexual violence only in passing, we had 247 articles to analyze that substantively discussed the issue.

How is sexual violence characterized?

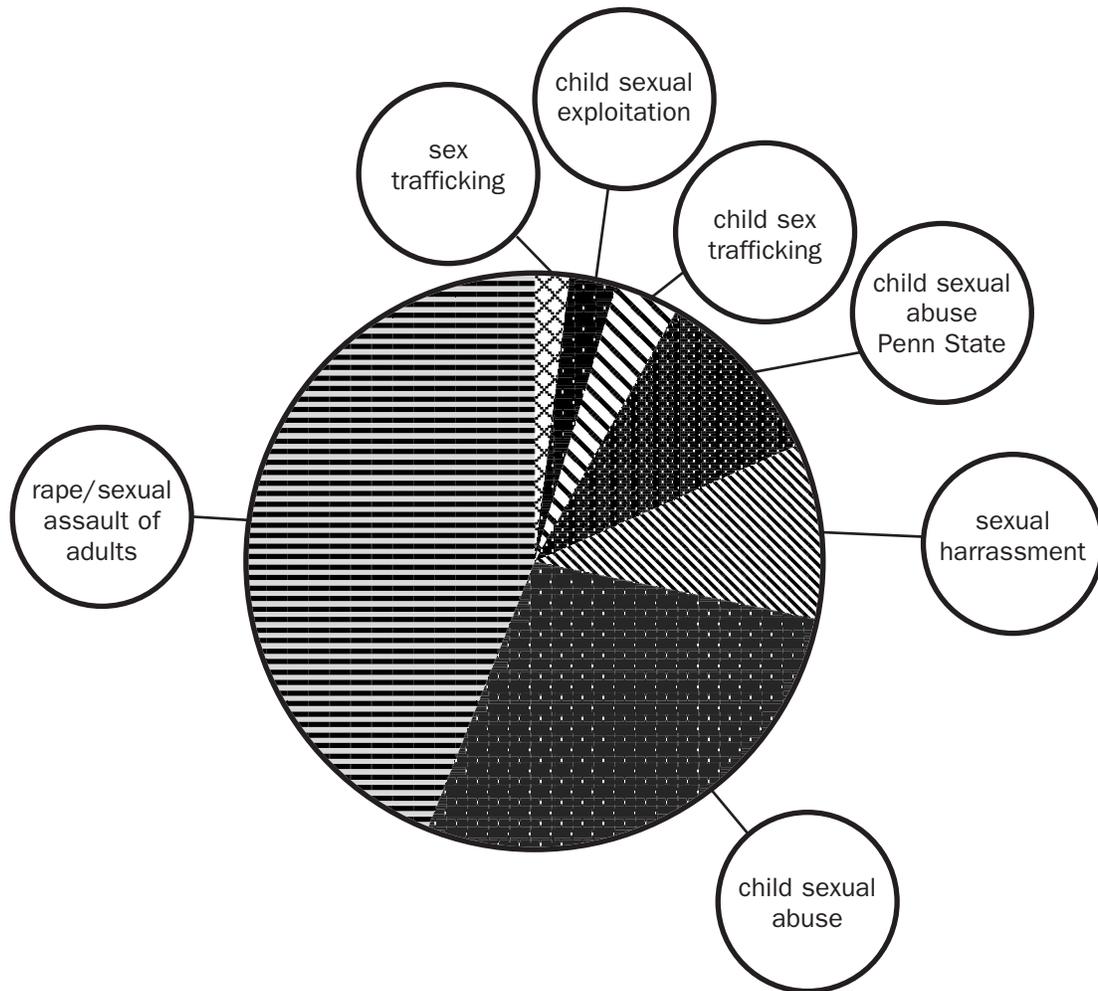
Sexual violence in the news was most often about rape or sexual assault of adults or older teens (44%), followed by child sexual abuse (38%). The prevalence of child-related violence can be partially attributed to the charges against Pennsylvania State University's former defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky, who was indicted in 2011, and coverage related to public outcry and additional charges against former high-profile employees of Pennsylvania State University.

Other forms of violence, including sexual harassment (10%), sex trafficking (6%) and child sexual exploitation (3%) were largely absent from the news.

Sexual violence in the news was most often about rape or sexual assault of adults or older teens.

What types of sexual violence appeared in U.S. newspapers and blogs, 2011–2013?

Figure 1



Criminal justice milestones drive the news.

When sexual violence is covered in the news, why? Why that story, and why that day? Reporters commonly refer to the catalyst for a story as a “news hook.” Many factors can influence why reporters and editors select some stories and not others, from the details of a specific incident to what else competes for attention during the news cycle. We identified the news hook for each article by answering the question, “Why was this article published today?”

As we found in a previous study of child sexual abuse in the news,⁴³ the majority of stories about sexual violence were in the news because of criminal justice milestones, like a trial or an arrest (51%). These stories only rarely included context about sexual violence or references to possible solutions. Stories that focused on a celebrity or a pop culture event, which accounted for 9% of stories, also tended to be tightly focused on an individual case.

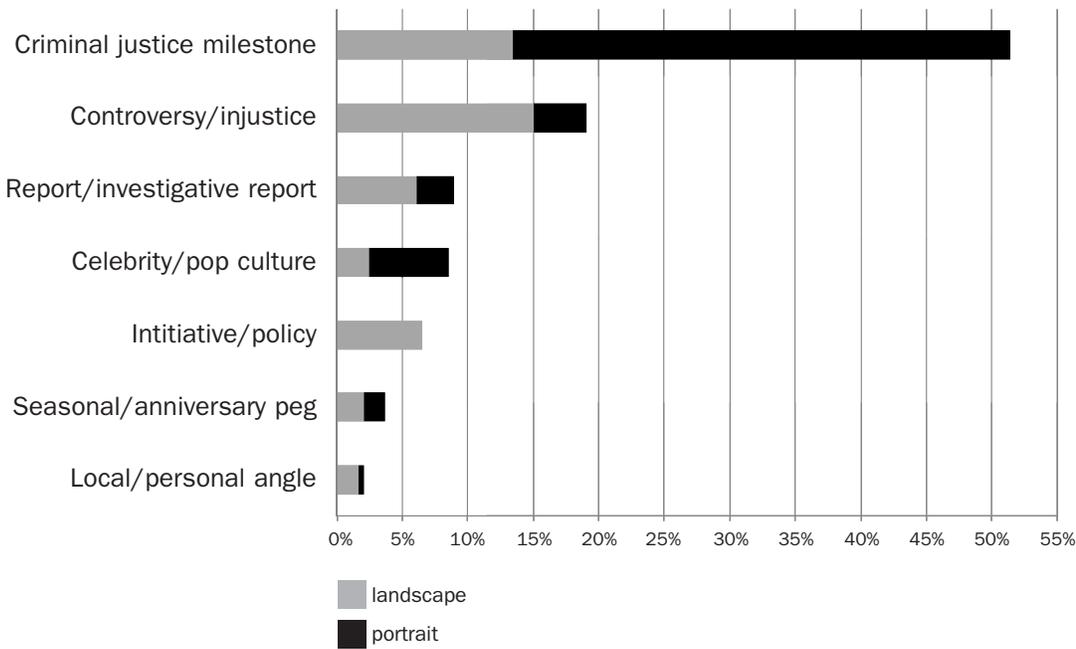
Coverage driven by other news hooks was much more likely to include context about the issue of sexual violence as a whole. Policies or other initiatives, like the federal government’s decision to expand its definition of sexual assault, were the news hook for only 6% of stories. However, while rare, policy-driven articles tended to include more context and connections to solutions than did stories driven by a criminal justice event — in other words, they were more likely to have a “landscape” frame. For example, an article reporting on calls for reform of Texas’ child trafficking laws included important context (such as the fact that 20% of child trafficking cases in the United States originate in Texas) and raised questions about the humanity and legality of how the juvenile court system deals with children who are trafficked.⁴⁴

While rare, policy-driven articles tended to include more context and connections to solutions than did stories driven by a criminal justice event.

Coverage of controversies (19% of stories), such as Twitter’s muted response to a flood of sexually harassing Tweets against women,⁴⁵ were also more likely to include context, such as statistics and other information about sexual violence as an issue. Other news hooks included stories about the release of new data (9%), seasonal events like Sexual Assault Awareness Month (4%), or local issues relating to sexual violence, such as an announcement about a training for local prevention advocates (2%).⁴⁶

How were stories about sexual violence framed in U.S. newspapers and blogs, 2011–2013?

Figure 2



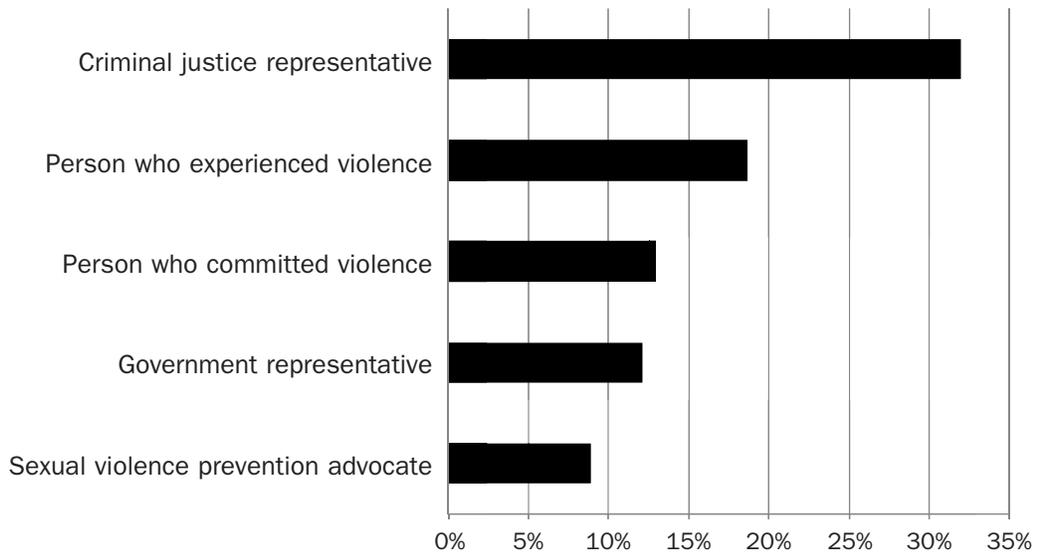
Who speaks in the news?

Criminal justice representatives dominate news coverage.

As we expected, given the topics and news hooks of the stories, the speakers quoted most often in the news about sexual violence were criminal justice professionals, including police officers, detectives and others associated with law enforcement (32%). People who experienced sexual violence (or, less frequently, their representatives, like family members or lawyers) were the second most commonly quoted speakers but appeared in fewer than one out of five articles.

Sexual violence prevention advocates — who ranged from representatives of local rape crisis centers to speakers for national and international organizations like Save the Children — rarely appeared in the news (9% of articles). When they were quoted, advocates often provided broader context about the realities of sexual violence or pushed for solutions, as when one advocate in Illinois denounced child sexual abuse as a “silent epidemic” and called for the passage of a sexual abuse education bill for all elementary and middle schools in the state.⁴⁷

Figure 3 Who speaks about sexual violence in U.S. newspapers and blogs, 2011–2013?



How does the news characterize responsibility and solutions?

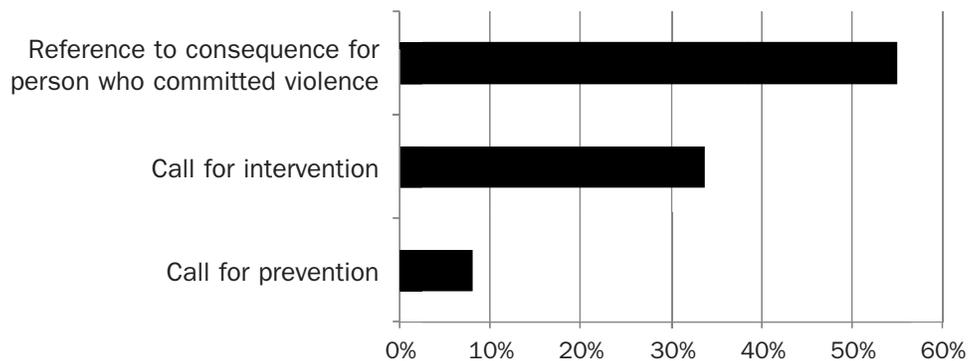
Articles focus on criminal justice interventions but few other solutions.

The news about crime and violence tends to focus on problems, rather than how to solve them.^{48, 49} An important step toward ending sexual violence is putting solutions, especially prevention, on the public's and policymakers' agendas.⁶ To determine if news coverage addressed solutions to sexual violence, we identified all references to prevention (defined here as solutions to stop sexual violence before it happens) and interventions (solutions to address or mitigate sexual violence after it occurs).

We found that more than half of articles (54%) merely mentioned consequences of sexual violence for the person accused — usually arrest, detainment or loss of employment. We rarely saw references to services (like therapy) for the person accused or settlements for those who experienced sexual violence (in civil cases).

How do solutions or consequences about sexual violence appear in U.S. newspapers and blogs, 2011-2013?

Figure 4



Fewer articles included substantive discussion of solutions for sexual violence. When they did appear, calls for solutions mostly focused on responses to past incidents of sexual violence (34% of articles). Among the most commonly proposed interventions were sanctions for institutions where sexual violence occurred or criminal justice responses at the societal level, such as longer sentences or more and better prisons to house people who committed sexual violence.

These calls for punitive solutions after the fact dwarfed any discussion in the news of treatment or therapeutic interventions for either those who committed or those who experienced violence. Only 6% of articles referenced treatment for those who had experienced violence: Overwhelmingly, those articles focused on services for victims of child sexual abuse and child sex trafficking. A rare article that focused on services for adult victims described the experiences of male survivors of sexual assault and their experiences with rape crisis centers and online counseling.⁵⁰ Only one article discussed the possibility of treatment or rehabilitation for someone who had committed an act of sexual violence.

Prevention rarely appears in the news — and when preventive measures do appear, they are often vaguely or broadly defined.

Calls for prevention rarely appeared in the news (8%). When they did appear, they most often included systemic strategies to stop sexual violence before it occurs in schools, the military and other institutions. For example, one article described a district-wide agreement that would “offer mandatory training for students, administrators and faculty members”⁵¹ to prevent sexual and gender-based violence.

Such specificity was rare in the news about sexual violence prevention. More commonly, specific policies or programs were not clearly described. One article about assault in the military included a quote from an advocacy group representative who argued that “ending the widespread issue of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the military starts by ending it at the service academies”⁵² — but the specifics of that norms change or the policy it would require were never clarified. Similarly ambiguous language appeared in a story about the rape of a teenage girl in Steubenville, Ohio, which concluded “beyond ... punishment after the fact, more needs to happen in homes and schools to keep teenagers on the right track.”⁵³

A small number of articles (3%) included risk reduction strategies for potential victims — that is, techniques that individuals or families can use to reduce the risk of harm to themselves or their children.^{54, 55} While risk reduction measures are important for personal safety and are a key piece of any holistic effort to end sexual violence, they focus on the behavior of victims or potential victims, in contrast to prevention strategies that place the onus of responsibility for preventing sexual violence on the people who may cause harm, other individuals who can influence them, and on institutions.

Risk reduction can also refer to strategies that make a person less likely to commit violence against someone else.⁵⁶ We found no references to these types of preventive approaches in the coverage.

How does the news illustrate the context surrounding sexual violence?

Making prevention part of the public conversation about sexual violence depends in part on drawing attention to the broader context in which such violence occurs, including the risk and protective factors, actors with responsibility and power to change environments, and social norms that shape how we understand violence and our behaviors. When that broader context of sexual violence is part of the public dialogue, it will be easier to illustrate how to stop sexual violence before it happens. How, if at all, does the news portray the context in which sexual violence occurs?

Social or community-level risk factors rarely appear in the news.

Unfortunately, we found few depictions or discussions of community-level risk factors for sexual violence in the coverage. For example, social disorganization, broadly defined by breakdowns in community connectedness, is one framework for understanding why and where sexual violence occurs.^{57, 58, 59} Indicators of social disorganization, like poverty,⁶⁰ appeared in only one opinion article, in which author Diana Lind, the former editor of the magazine *Next City*, described an under-resourced Philadelphia neighborhood where multiple sexual assaults had occurred: “If only these deserted places could be charged as accomplices to ... the sexual assaults,” Lind wrote.⁶¹

The news contains few references to alcohol or its possible connections with sexual violence perpetration.

Researchers have identified policies that reduce alcohol consumption or access at a community level as a promising strategy to reduce the likelihood of sexual violence perpetration.^{59, 60} Though alcohol does not cause violence, alcohol access and use, together with societal expectations about it, may contribute to social norms around sex, power and control that may reinforce a climate that is conducive to sexual violence.^{62, 63} Less than 1% of articles made any reference to alcohol or alcohol policy.

The news perpetuates rape myths and rarely connects with themes of resiliency or reintegration for those who commit or experience violence.

Other researchers have documented troubling patterns in the language used to describe sexual violence in the news. For example, coverage tends to lack clear and coherent descriptions of rape and sexual abuse, or uses language that implies consent and minimizes the violence and violation of the acts described.⁴³ Other studies have found that news tends to reinforce what many researchers have termed “rape myths,” which can include doubting the person who experienced sexual violence or the misconception that men and women who commit sexual offenses are deviants who are somehow completely different from “normal” people.^{23, 25, 38}

Our analysis confirmed that rape myths are still present in news coverage. For example, 18% of articles included language that could distance the person who committed sexual violence from others. Some articles used descriptions such as “beasts”⁶⁴ or “perverts [who] took deranged pleasure”⁶⁵ in committing violence. Coverage doubting the accounts of people who experienced sexual violence was relatively rare (5%), but 15% of articles used language that minimized the act of sexual violence or implied consent, as when an article described a disgraced football player’s “sex romp with a 16-year-old girl.”⁶⁶

During the conversations that guided our work, a number of advocates expressed frustration with the failure of the news to address resiliency among those who have experienced violence, or the possibility of reintegration and rehabilitation for those who commit sexual offenses. Our analysis verified that, while news coverage regularly (18% of stories) mentions sympathy or sadness for those who experienced sexual violence, few stories address resiliency or healing. A rare example described a woman who survived sexual violence who “is determined to turn her ordeal into a positive situation and help others.”⁶⁷ Discussion of reintegration for people who have committed sexual violence was entirely absent from the coverage. Occasionally the news did include statements of remorse from those who committed acts of sexual violence, usually in the context of a court case.

News coverage may paint a distorted picture of who experiences — and commits — sexual violence.

Two-thirds of the articles in our sample mentioned a specific incident of sexual violence. More than a third of these stories involved multiple victims, which confirms prior research showing that journalists tend to report on the most sensational cases of sexual violence.^{36, 40}

In some important respects, the news media paint an accurate picture of the characteristics of child sexual abuse, based on what’s known from national data. For example, the news rarely reinforces the myth that child sexual abuse is perpetrated by strangers (the “stranger danger” myth). In this study, we found that only 1% of stories characterized the person who commits violence as a stranger to the child.

However, perhaps due to privacy concerns, news coverage did not always accurately reflect the realities of child sexual abuse. For example, according to the Department of Criminal Justice, 29% of people who experience sexual abuse are abused by someone under age 17,⁶⁸ but only 3% of stories about child sexual abuse characterized the person who committed abuse as a minor.

Men who have experienced sexual violence have pointed out that the news often minimizes and inaccurately represents their experiences,^{69, 70} and our findings bear this out to some extent. We found that articles about male children who experienced sexual abuse were much more likely to include language that minimized the abuse or implied consent than were articles about female children (22% of articles with male victims vs. 4% of articles with female victims).

On the other hand, we found that stories about child sexual abuse cases tended to focus on cases with male victims (60% of child sex abuse stories), in part due to the high profile cases involving Jerry Sandusky and former Syracuse basketball coach Bernie Fine that were unfolding during our study period. However, only 8% of stories about adult rape or other types of sexual violence referenced a male victim.

Many news stories discuss the role of institutions — most often the criminal justice system — in addressing sexual violence.

Any debate about ending sexual violence is rooted in a fundamental question about responsibility, namely: Who is responsible for addressing sexual violence? Therefore, we wanted to know, when responsibility appears in news coverage, how is it characterized? Is addressing sexual violence depicted as a matter of individual responsibility, or does it require action from institutions, like the government?

**Table 1:
Which institutions are implicated in news about sexual violence in U.S. newspapers and blogs, 2011-2013?**

(in order of frequency)

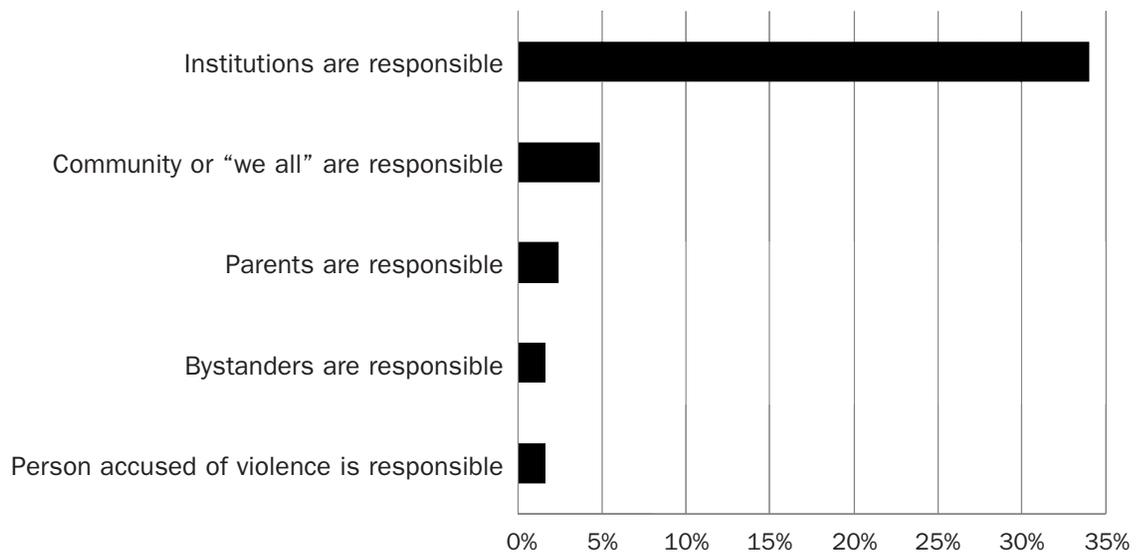
Criminal justice system
Pennsylvania State University
Churches
Elementary and high schools
Military



About half of articles (53%) had some mention of responsibility for sexual violence. More than one-third of those articles, in turn, focused on the role of various institutions or organizations in addressing sexual violence. The criminal justice system was invoked in about one-third of articles that discussed institutional responsibility, as when then-U.S. Attorney Joseph Hogsett responded to a child pornography case with the assertion that “protecting the most vulnerable of our citizens remains one of the highest priorities of my office.”⁷¹

To a lesser extent, the news framed addressing sexual violence as a matter of general community or collective responsibility, as when the director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement declared “online child exploitation is a very real part of our lives and absolutely demands our full attention as a nation.”⁷² We also saw only a few stories in which the news placed the onus of responsibility with bystanders or those who commit sexual violence.

Figure 5 Which actors are implicated in addressing sexual violence in U.S. newspapers and blogs, 2011–2013?^{**}



^{**}Other actors, such as the person who experienced sexual violence, were assigned responsibility in <2% of articles.

Summary

As we found in our previous study of child sexual abuse coverage, criminal justice perspectives dominate the news about sexual violence. Articles are most often in the news because of a milestone in a criminal justice case, and discussion of solutions is largely limited to criminal justice responses. Criminal justice responses are a vital component of any effort to comprehensively address sexual violence, but news coverage that focuses exclusively on criminal justice can be misleading in a number of ways. Since 63% of sexual assaults are never reported to law enforcement,⁷³ crime coverage leaves out the majority of incidents. Moreover, if sexual violence is depicted only as a series of crimes for which criminal justice is the most appropriate response, it will be harder for the audience to see that sexual violence is also a public health and social justice issue. Complete news coverage would help create spaces to talk about prevention, what it means, and why it matters.

Criminal justice framing also affects who has a voice in the news about sexual violence — and who doesn't. Criminal justice speakers are most frequently quoted in the coverage, while advocates seldom appear. That's problematic because only when they are included in the frame can sexual violence prevention advocates address the policies and social norms that need to be shifted if prevention is ever to become a reality.

Our analysis also suggests reasons for optimism. Institutions such as universities and the military are a large part of the news conversation. In fact, when responsibility for addressing sexual violence appears in the news, it's most often laid at the feet of institutions, rather than individuals. Solutions are a prominent part of the news conversation, as well. Although those solutions are often limited to criminal justice, the fact that ending sexual violence is reported at all suggests exciting new opportunities for building on that groundswell of attention and shifting the focus toward prevention.

Our findings lay the foundation for ongoing work to uncover the messages about sexual violence that can support prevention policies. With an eye toward filling the gaps in the public discourse — and building on its strengths — we present recommendations below for advocates and journalists to aid them in creating and sustaining a future in which preventing sexual violence is headline news.

Complete news coverage would help create spaces to talk about prevention, what it means, and why it matters.

Recommendations for advocates

In 2014, inspired by advocacy to bring campus sexual assault to the forefront of the national consciousness, President Barack Obama established a task force that focused on protecting college students from sexual assault⁷⁴ and launched the nationwide “It’s On Us” initiative.⁷⁵ This kind of high-profile publicity is an indication that prevention advocates and others in the field are making tremendous strides not only toward addressing sexual violence, but also toward making it part of the national discourse. The challenge now is to keep prevention strategies a regular part of the conversation. Expanding the news about sexual violence to include prevention can help.

To do that, advocates will have to find ways to tell timely, compelling stories about sexual violence through a prevention lens. This includes helping reporters to ask different questions and find new sources and angles for approaching the issue. For example, instead of only featuring sources who have experienced or perpetrated sexual violence, stories can highlight the people who are working to prevent it; instead of reporting primarily from criminal courtrooms, the news can explore schools, the military or other sites where the environments need to change so that prevention can flourish; and instead of focusing mostly on actions designed to punish those who have committed violence, articles can explore what is happening at the local, state and national levels to foster — or stymie — efforts to stop sexual violence before it starts.

Our analysis of the news about sexual violence suggests several ways for advocates to craft and tell a different story about sexual violence. Advocates can:

Create news that makes prevention part of the conversation.

Advocates can work to expand the range of stories on sexual violence so it is not represented solely as a criminal justice issue. To do that, they need to create news about other aspects of the issue. Advocates can pitch stories to reporters that focus on actions, initiatives and policies designed to prevent sexual violence.⁷⁷ For example, budget issues are one way to consistently create news about prevention: How could local or state budget decisions affect prevention programs and, in turn, the community as a whole? Prevention advocates can also release studies, create community events, give awards, or find other newsworthy ways to bring attention to the issue — and what should be done to prevent it — apart from an incident of sexual violence. If prevention efforts are working, advocates need to make sure journalists know about it.

Even when the news is focused on the criminal justice aspects of a high-profile case, advocates can take advantage of the groundswell of media attention to bring prevention into the frame. They must be ready to “piggyback” off of the attention. That is, advocates must respond quickly to current and notable stories with strong, timely comments and actions that move the conversation toward prevention. For example, in 2014 when Rolling Stone was excoriated for inaccurate reporting on a purported gang rape on the University of Virginia campus, advocates took advantage of the wave of media coverage to shift the conversation to harmful media portrayals of sexual violence⁷⁸ and the broader impact of those portrayals on social norms.⁷⁹

The effort to create news will pay off for prevention coverage: Our analysis found that stories with news hooks beyond criminal justice were more likely to include information about the context of sexual violence.

Shape the conversation by contributing opinion pieces.

We found very little opinion coverage in our analysis, which means advocates are missing opportunities to shape the public and policy agendas around sexual violence and policies to prevent it. Advocates can regularly contribute opinion pieces to newspapers and blogs. To do that effectively, advocates should monitor the news and be poised to respond with timely opinion pieces and letters to the editor. Online news outlets and social media are other important spaces where advocates and those who have experienced violence can share stories and shape dialogues about sexual violence.

Opinion pieces can be proactive or reactive. One proactive strategy is to meet with editorial boards and request editorials supporting prevention; a well-timed editorial can be very persuasive during policy debates. A reactive strategy is to write a letter to the editor to tactfully address problematic or inaccurate news coverage on sexual violence — or to compliment a reporter for effective reporting on sexual violence that discusses prevention. Both proactive and reactive strategies give advocates opportunities to bring solutions to the fore.

Prepare for the long term by building relationships with journalists.

Journalists can include prevention information in stories about sexual assault only if prevention advocates, their resources and their networks are known to journalists. If advocates become trusted sources, reporters have somewhere to go for data and information when they have a story to tell. Otherwise, most journalists will rely on their traditional contacts in criminal justice.

If journalists are to add new sources to their mix, those sources have to be ready and willing to talk and share resources — and to do it on a tight deadline when journalists are covering breaking news. Advocates can work with their organizations and networks to develop their media skills, including their readiness to talk about what causes sexual violence and how to prevent it. Advocates can also work with people who have experienced or committed violence so they are comfortable becoming sources for reporters.

Illustrate the context around sexual violence and the specifics of sexual violence prevention.

Making the case for prevention in news about an incident of sexual violence requires going beyond the simple criminal justice details of a case. It's important to illustrate the context in which violence happens and how that context can be reshaped to promote prevention and safety. Though time constraints and editing may limit how much context is included in the final story, advocates can improve the chances that it will be included if they have statistics, media bites, visuals and other story elements at the ready for reporters to use.

Talking about prevention in abstract or general terms can leave readers with more questions than answers about what prevention means and whether it is possible to achieve. Advocates must illustrate what prevention means using concrete and context-specific examples of programs, policies and other preventive measures^{4, 80, 81} that need to be established, supported and maintained to end sexual violence for good.

Recommendations for reporters

Reporting on sexual violence presents unique challenges.⁸² In many newsrooms, reporters, including those assigned to cover crimes, lack sufficient training in the sensitivities of reporting on sexual violence. To meet that need, a number of organizations have outlined general recommendations that focus on interviewing techniques, confidentiality concerns, language considerations and other specifics.⁸²⁻⁸⁸ These guidelines can help reporters craft responsible and complete articles about sexual violence. Our focus here is on how journalists can bring a prevention perspective to their articles. Our analysis of the news about sexual violence suggests several ways for journalists to tell a different story about sexual violence. Journalists can:

Report on the spectrum of sexual violence and the range of people affected.

Sexual offenses portrayed in the news are often the most extreme cases, and are limited primarily to sexual assault and abuse. Reporters covering sexual violence should think about how to cover the full range of sexual violence so the public and policymakers understand the magnitude of the problem our society must address.

Do stories reflect the complete spectrum of sexual violence? The full spectrum, which can include sex trafficking, harassment and voyeurism, is not represented in mainstream coverage. Therefore, it may be misunderstood by the public and the policymakers poised to address sexual violence in all its forms.

Reporting on the complete spectrum of sexual violence means including not only the types of sexual assault, but also the range of people who are assaulted or commit acts of sexual violence. For example, elderly and disabled adults are highly vulnerable to sexual assault,⁸⁹⁻⁹¹ but we found few stories about sexual violence in these populations. News coverage should include the range of individuals affected by sexual violence, what prevention could look like for the communities those individuals belong to, and how those communities could benefit from prevention.

Include prevention in stories about sexual violence.

The prevention perspective, which focuses on root causes and ways to change societal and community norms to reduce the incidence of sexual violence,⁸³ is not routinely taught in journalism school or in newsrooms. Therefore, it is not surprising that we found little discussion of prevention in the news about sexual violence. That means reporters will have to actively seek out such information as they cover the news on sexual violence. Reporters should press sources and ask questions about preventing sexual violence.

Framing the news about sexual violence in the context of prevention can help shift the public's and policymakers' perception of sexual violence from a sense of risky, random inevitabilities to a focus on specific rates, causes of violence and prevention strategies.^{84, 92} But prevention in the abstract can be difficult to understand. To help make it concrete, reporters could ask questions like: What is happening in the community to prevent violence? Is it working? What do advocates, practitioners, or government officials think should be done? What would make those strategies workable in this community? These types of questions can help make prevention concrete by illustrating specific policies and programs.

Interview sources beyond the criminal justice system.

Sexual violence occurs in various settings across our society, so a wide range of stakeholders have a role in preventing sexual violence. Yet the news about sexual violence is dominated by criminal justice representatives who, not surprisingly, tend to focus on solutions to sexual violence based on punishment after the fact. These sources and their perspectives are undoubtedly valuable. However, preventing sexual violence requires comprehensive solutions that involve people who have experienced sexual violence, as well as people who have committed sexual offenses, community members, institutional representatives, prevention advocates, medical and mental health practitioners, and others. Reporters should query these and other stakeholders when they write about sexual violence. Expanding sources is especially important since most incidents of sexual violence are never even reported to police.⁷³

Logistical considerations (such as time constraints) can make it challenging to connect with sources outside of criminal justice. One solution is to reach out to advocacy groups in advance. These groups can often quickly connect reporters with diverse sources, such as people who experienced sexual violence and are willing to talk about it, or people from institutions working to prevent violence.

Ask questions about the context for sexual violence.

Doing so will illuminate the “landscape” beyond portraits of single-event stories. Just like reporters have begun to ask about access to guns in stories about gun violence, reporters should ask questions about risk factors in the environment that can contribute to sexual violence. Including information about environments and societal conditions such as poverty, alcohol access, or high levels of other forms of violence in stories about sexual violence will make it easier to explain population-level prevention.

Institutions such as schools, faith communities and businesses play an important role in sexual violence prevention — and more information about those institutions and their role is needed. For example, stories about sex trafficking could look to institutions like hotel chains, airport security firms or the transportation authority for information about how they are working to address this form of violence. This might mean interviewing sources who represent those institutions or highlighting data and reports about organizations’ prevention strategies.



Report on both the consequences of sexual assault and the resilience of those who experience it.

The news focus on criminal justice consequences for people who commit sexual violence minimizes the impact of sexual violence for those who experience it firsthand, as well as on families, institutions and our broader communities. When we don't see how sexual violence affects everyone, it also makes it harder to illustrate why prevention matters for everyone.

What does that mean in practice? Reporters should pursue and follow up on stories that explore the consequences of sexual violence for those who experience it, their communities and their families. What happens to a family when sexual violence happens? What happens a year later? What happens to schools, religious congregations or other community institutions? What do these consequences help us understand about sexual violence and what to do about it?

From these questions, stories of hope, healing and resilience will likely emerge. For example, in 2013, Elizabeth Smart, who was kidnapped and sexually assaulted as a child and now works as a prevention advocate, reminded others who have experienced violence that "we don't have to walk around the rest of our lives with a Scarlet Letter on us ... we can go on, we can make a difference."⁹³ Ms. Smart's powerful words reflect the experiences of many. However, the resiliency and hope Ms. Smart evokes seldom appear in the news. Journalists should report on that, too. Including a range of experiences and responses to assault will help reporters — and their readers — avoid perpetuating the myth that sexual violence irrevocably ruins the lives of those who experience it.



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