



# Breaking news on child sexual abuse:

Early coverage of Penn State

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# Breaking news on child sexual abuse: Early coverage of Penn State

On Nov. 4, 2011, a grand jury indicted Jerry Sandusky, former Penn State assistant coach and founder of The Second Mile charity for disadvantaged youth, on 40 initial counts of child sexual abuse. He was arrested the following day.

By November 9, Penn State Athletic Director Timothy Curley, Senior Vice President Gary Schultz, University President Graham Spanier, and football coach Joe Paterno had all been placed on leave, fired or resigned. And on November 12, Penn State played its next scheduled home football game. Less than a month later, on December 7, a second grand jury presentment charged Sandusky with 12 additional counts of child sexual abuse, raising the total to 52 separate criminal counts.

Although the grand jury investigation into Sandusky's alleged sex crimes had been underway for years and Sara Ganim, a journalist at *The Patriot-News* in Harrisburg, Pa., had been reporting on the investigation since March 31,<sup>1</sup> it was not until Sandusky's initial indictment and subsequent arrest that national media pounced on the story. That week, there were more than 2,000 stories in newspapers across the nation, as well as online discussions among sports fans and children's advocates.

In this report, we examine the first nine days of news coverage of the Sandusky case.

Like the rest of the nation, BMSG was riveted by the horrific accusations coming from Penn State. But we were especially attuned to the news coverage because a few months prior, with support from the Ms. Foundation for Women, we had released a comprehensive study of how U.S. newspapers cover child sexual abuse.<sup>2</sup>

In that study we found that news coverage of child sexual abuse is infrequent, and when it does occur, it is usually tied to a "moment" in the criminal justice process, which means that there is very little coverage of prevention since most reports focus on an incident after the fact. We also found that language in news stories about child sexual abuse is often vague and imprecise, likely making it harder for readers to see what really happened.

The allegations against Sandusky prompted an extraordinary volume of news coverage, drawing in journalists who do not often report on child sexual abuse, such as reporters and columnists from the sports pages. And the headlines got the attention of organizations and advocates in the business of protecting children and ridding society of child sexual abuse. The news coverage provided an opportunity for those groups to bring attention to an important issue often hidden from view.

In this report, we examine news coverage generated during those first days after Sandusky's arrest, compare it to our earlier findings about how child sexual abuse is typically covered, and offer suggestions to reporters and advocates based on our observations.

## Child sexual abuse in the sports pages

We analyzed a nationally representative random sample of the newspaper coverage of the Sandusky allegations, as well as a random sample of the two most highly visited sports websites<sup>3</sup>, ESPN.com and Yahoo Sports (see appendix for details on our methods).

In dramatic fashion, the high-profile arrest of Jerry Sandusky pushed news coverage of child sexual abuse into the sports pages. Nearly half (48%) of the coverage in American newspapers appeared in sports sections.

However, when compared to general news (coverage appearing in local or national news sections), the sports pages primarily discussed the sports-related topics of coach

Paterno, the Penn State football program, and the consequences that the Sandusky case had on the team and coaches. While the sports articles maintained a narrow focus on the football program, the general coverage contained a significant number of articles on other topics, such as Penn State University's role as an institution, the broader social context surrounding child sexual abuse, and reactions from Penn State students and alumni. Articles both inside and outside of the sports section featured details about the case progressing through the criminal justice system, including the arrest of Sandusky or descriptions of the alleged abuse from the first grand jury report.

Story Topic	General News % (n=56)	Sports News % (n=75)
Joe Paterno	32	20
Penn State football	0	28
The case	9	12
Penn State officials	11	8
Penn State itself	13	4
Child sexual abuse	13	4
PSU students & alumni	11	3
Other topics*	13	21

\*Each other topic comprised 5% or less of the sample

## **Paterno dominates news coverage**

Although the Sandusky allegations brought child sexual abuse extensive attention in the news, critical aspects of the issue can remain in the background, even as a prominent story filled with graphic details gets propelled into the spotlight. During the first days of the Sandusky coverage, Penn State head football coach Joe Paterno was the main topic of all news coverage. Articles focusing on Paterno were even more common in general news (32%) than the sports pages (20%). The stories about “Joe Pa” included discussions of his record-setting coaching career, defenses of and attacks on his response to the Sandusky accusations, and his firing after 46 years coaching Penn State football.

## **Who speaks in the Sandusky coverage?**

Overall, those representing the criminal justice system or some action within it were quoted the most often, in almost one-third (32%) of the early Sandusky coverage. The majority of these were statements from the grand jury testimonies, or criminal justice figures such as police spokespeople. Other heavily quoted figures were the key members included in the grand jury report, including Joe Paterno (25%), Mike McQueary (18%), and Penn State University officials such as former President Graham Spanier (17%).

The sports coverage was far more likely than the general news to include quotes from Sandusky (15% vs. 2%), Paterno (31% vs. 18%), or current and former Penn State football players (29% vs. 14%). By contrast, the general news was far more likely than sports articles to quote other survivors of child sexual abuse, such as from the Catholic Church (11% vs. 4%).

Across all news coverage, child sexual abuse prevention advocates (4%) were quoted about as often as sports fans (5%). Similarly, survivors’\* voices were nearly absent, with direct quotes in only 2% of all articles. The survivors were indirectly represented, however, in the criminal justice statements, which quoted their grand jury testimony.

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\*In this report we use “survivor” to refer to the children Sandusky allegedly abused, unless we are referring to them in the act of being victimized by Sandusky. We recognize that many still use the term “victim”, including the grand jury report, journalists and quoted speakers in the coverage we examined.

## Where does sympathy lie in the Sandusky coverage?

Some prevention advocates and researchers worry that news coverage about violence blames the victim or, alternatively, exonerates the perpetrator. These concerns are not unfounded. Minimizing the harm done to survivors or sympathizing with alleged perpetrators may occur when reporters include details or extraneous information about the survivors that cast the crimes committed against them as understandable.<sup>4</sup> *The New York Times*, for example, placed a critical lens on a sex crime survivor in March 2011 when it described a young girl who had been gang-raped as dressing “older than her age, wearing makeup and fashions more appropriate to a woman in her 20s.”<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, when coverage includes details about alleged perpetrators but little information about those experiencing abuse, the story may inadvertently provide a sympathetic portrayal of the accused. Avoiding this is particularly challenging when children are abused, as details must often be withheld to shield their identity.

BMSG was interested in the way that these actors were portrayed in news reports of the Sandusky case since such coverage has the potential to affect how readers perceive the different people depicted. To investigate the details of the Penn State coverage, we assessed whether articles had at least one sympathetic, unfavorable, or neutral detail about key actors. Articles could have more than one such descriptive detail, and the same article could have details that fell into all three categories.

A sympathetic detail referred to descriptions that portrayed favorable characteristics, such as “iconic football coach”<sup>6</sup> or comments that evoked sympathy, such as when a football player described Paterno when he announced that he would retire: “I’ve never seen him break down and cry...he was crying the whole time and day.”<sup>7</sup>

Unfavorable characterizations often referred to strong statements holding an actor accountable, such as when an advocate reprimanded Penn State for its failure to act: “When an institution discovers abuse of a kid, their first reaction was to protect the reputation of the institution and the perpetrator.”<sup>8</sup> Other unfavorable details included descriptions of Sandusky as a predator who sexually abused children.

Neutral details refer to the presence of information about the actors that did not include their involvement in or reaction to the Sandusky case. For instance, many sports articles examined the football team’s unsuccessful strategy, and eventual loss, to Nebraska on November 12.

We analyzed how the news portrayed the main actors, including Paterno, Sandusky, university officials, survivors, and Penn State students and players. The vast majority of articles provided one or more details about Paterno (81%) and Sandusky (73%). Almost half of all articles also provided at least one detail about the university officials, survivors and Penn State as an institution. All of these actors received similar

treatments in the general and sports news coverage. Next we describe how these key figures were portrayed in the coverage.

### **Paterno as the fallen hero**

Almost all of the articles that discussed Paterno were in some way sympathetic to the former coach. For instance, writers described Paterno as “a beloved football coach”<sup>9</sup> or a “legendary coach”<sup>10</sup> whose career was now been tainted by the “scandal.”<sup>11</sup> Many sports fans and alums aggressively defended him. For instance, in a letter to the editor, a 2009 Penn State alum wrote, “Mr. Paterno witnessed nothing and has done everything he can to cooperate with the ongoing investigation. He is a pillar of strength, honesty and virtue in the State College community and has spent the last 46 years helping to make young people into honorable adults.”<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, almost two-thirds of the articles with depictions of Paterno included uncomplimentary details or descriptions of him. These were often statements about how Paterno had failed his moral responsibilities, though he fulfilled his legal obligation. For example, one sports columnist wrote, “By definition Paterno did not fail the law. But he failed every person who loves Penn State University and what they believed he and that school represented. He failed his former assistant and, more importantly, young boys that Sandusky subsequently abused, boys who like everyone else in that community grew up thinking Paterno could do no wrong.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Sandusky as the “monster in their midst”<sup>14</sup>**

While many writers also gave details about Sandusky, the way reporters portrayed him differed dramatically from their portrayal of Paterno. Almost all articles that described Sandusky gave accusatory descriptions, such as details of the alleged abuse. These ranged from declarations like “Sandusky has been charged with sexually abusing eight boys”<sup>15</sup> to more emotional expressions of shock and disappointment from individuals, as when a sports columnist described his reaction to watching the video of Sandusky’s arrest: “Watching the video of his arrest, it is obvious he has no remorse. No sorrow. No shame.”<sup>16</sup>

More than a third of the news coverage also provided sympathetic details about Sandusky. Most often, these were references to his work with The Second Mile Charity or his mentorship of Penn State football alums. A few articles were devoted to portraying him compassionately. One *New York Times* sports story gave a detailed profile of Sandusky’s mentorship of football players, ending with a very sympathetic quote from an earlier interview with Sandusky. “‘I saw so many kids come through there who never really had a family or anybody to care about them or give them any guidance at all,’ Sandusky told *Sports Illustrated* in 1982. ‘It always bothered me.’”<sup>17</sup>

## **University officials failed their responsibility**

Just over half of the articles provided some detail about university officials, most often in reference to the administrative actions against then-University President Graham Spanier, Athletic Director Timothy Curley and Senior Vice President Gary Schultz. The vast majority of these articles held them responsible and reprimanded them for not reporting the accusation of child sexual abuse to authorities or for covering up the alleged child sexual abuse. For instance, a *Fresno Bee* editorial critiqued Paterno's and other university officials' failure to act: "Paterno had company in evading responsibility—from the University President on down. Leaders of one of the top universities in the country had the knowledge and the ability to expose the abuse and to stop it. It was a stunning moral lapse at Penn State that should have been avoided."<sup>18</sup>

## **"Our hearts go out to the victims"<sup>19</sup>**

Approximately half of the coverage included one or more details about the survivors, but these references were often vague as the survivors' identities were shielded. When articles provided details about the survivors, 100% of these descriptions had a sympathetic tone. A portrait of the survivors emerged from other people's reactions to the case, Paterno's comments about the case, or details provided in the grand jury report. For instance, one article quoted Paterno's reaction to the survivors, "We owe it to [the victims] to say a prayer for them."<sup>20</sup> In another article, a child sexual abuse attorney commented that "What happened in that shower was a murder of that child's soul and the destruction of his innocence."<sup>21</sup> Other sympathetic comments came from alums, as when a former Penn State football player said, "You kind of feel for all the victims and the victims' families. Our thoughts and prayers go out to them,"<sup>22</sup> or when a former Penn State student said in a commentary piece: "My heart goes out to all of the victims involved in this ordeal."<sup>23</sup>

Occasionally the news included more direct comments about and from the survivors when people who knew them, like their lawyers, made direct references. For example, in one article a lawyer emphasized the damage done to the survivors by the students' reaction to the abrupt firing of Paterno: "These victims do not live in a bubble...They see the students' reaction to the termination, and to think this does not weigh on their minds would be naïve."<sup>24</sup>

## **Exonerating the team and student body**

Approximately half of the coverage described the local Penn State football team and another third described the students and alumni. Many of the articles were opinion pieces written by alumni and they almost always contained sympathetic details or statements that described students' emotional reactions about their school and team, or expressed sadness over losing Paterno as a coach. Other descriptions asserted the



team's innocence and claimed that they should therefore be exempt from potential boycotts. For example, one sports columnist described his sentiments towards the football team during the game against Nebraska: "A group of young men completely uninvolved with the scandal which has stained Penn State walked out of the tunnel and onto the Beaver Stadium field with their arms locked together. They were at that moment winners in our hearts regardless of the game's outcome."<sup>25</sup> Other Penn State alums expressed their unwavering loyalty to their school and team: "For now, I am a Penn State alum and will always be proud of that fact. I will be cheering for the Nittany Lions when they face Nebraska. I think every other Penn Stater out there should do the same."<sup>26</sup>

## Who is held accountable?

Overall, the news held a range of actors accountable in its coverage of the Penn State scandal and assigned these actors different types of blame. Overwhelmingly the coverage identified Sandusky as a culpable actor. Stories from sports media blamed him slightly more frequently than did general news articles. This reflected a trend in sports media toward keeping the discussion of accountability tightly focused on Sandusky, and at times even denying the possibility of institutional blame. One sports writer asserted that this is primarily a story of Sandusky's actions and their effects on others, because "Penn State didn't do these crimes. Sandusky did. Penn State didn't cover this up."<sup>27</sup>

Sandusky was not the only actor who was blamed, however. Most of the general and sports news coverage pointed to the institutional accountability of Penn State University and its football program. University officials, such as President Spanier, were identified as accountable actors in more than half of all stories, as was Joe Paterno. We found no significant differences between how the sports media and the general media talked about the accountability of these actors. The blame assigned to university officials was most often in terms of their legal responsibility to report to the police the allegation of sexual abuse. Discussions around Joe Paterno's accountability were more complex: Paterno was chastised for meeting his legal obligation but failing his moral responsibility because "sometimes what the law requires just isn't enough."<sup>28</sup>

The news did not often point to broader social conditions, such as the prevailing taboo or stigma surrounding child sexual abuse, as responsible for the events unfolding at Penn State. However, almost one-fifth of general news stories addressed social norms that may have contributed to the culture of secrecy around the accusations. For example, one frequently repeated quote from Pennsylvania state police commissioner Frank Noonan questioned "the moral requirements for a human being that knows of sexual things that are taking place with a child." Noonan added: "I think you have the moral responsibility, anyone. Not whether you're a football coach or a university

president or the guy sweeping the building. I think you have a moral responsibility to call us."<sup>29</sup>

## Who experiences consequences?

The news coverage primarily addressed the consequences of the Sandusky allegations in terms of how they would affect Paterno. Perhaps because the Penn State story had so many ramifications for the world of college sports, the sports media addressed the consequences of the Penn State scandal more often than did the general media. Consequences for Paterno appeared in more than two-thirds of sports pieces, compared to just over half of general news pieces. These sports articles mourned the abrupt end to Paterno's career and how the allegations might continue to damage his legacy.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the professional ramifications, we saw many descriptions of the emotional impact of the scandal on the former coach. Again and again, Paterno was described as "absolutely devastated"<sup>31</sup> by "one of the great sorrows of [his] life."<sup>32</sup> These emotionally charged references contributed to the sympathetic portrait of Joe Paterno that emerged from the coverage.

The consequences for Jerry Sandusky and university officials like Athletic Director Curley were discussed in over half of all articles. The consequences depicted for these men were legal or professional: For example, many articles described Sandusky's arrest, Curley's leave, and Spanier's firing. Very few pieces discussed the emotional or personal effect on

Consequences for actors, by source type

Actor	General News % (n=56)	Sports News % (n=75)
Paterno	55	68
Sandusky	46	61
PSU officials (Curley, Schultz, Spanier)	39	63
PSU as an Institution	34	32
PSU football team	7	33
PSU students & alumni	20	21
Survivors	23	16
Whistleblowers (McQueary, Janitor)	13	13
Sports fans	7	8
Other Institutions	7	3
Media	2	5
Sports or Sports Culture	2	5
None	9	0
Other	16	15

these actors; one rare example was a quote from Sandusky's lawyer describing Sandusky as "shaky" in the aftermath of his arrest.<sup>33</sup>

Less than one-fifth (19%) of all stories discussed the impact of the abuse and subsequent cover-up on the survivors, considerably less than the extensive coverage of the consequences faced by Paterno, Sandusky, university officials, the PSU football team, or even Penn State students. One sportswriter observed that Sandusky's young survivors would be "scarred for life"<sup>34</sup>, while other writers quoted Paterno's expression of sympathy for "the kids who are victims...[because] it's a tough life when people do certain things to you."<sup>35</sup>

## **The language of child sexual abuse**

Arthur Brisbane, public editor of *The New York Times*, has suggested that when reporting on incidents of sexual violence it is crucial to "call a rape a rape" and use the most precise language that is appropriate to the allegation.<sup>36</sup> Compared to our initial study, we found more specificity around the language used to describe child sexual abuse: Almost 80% of the news on Penn State used words like "rape" or "assault" that highlighted the criminal component of the behavior. Reporters may have used more precise language because they had access to the grand jury report, which included lengthy and highly specific testimony.

The vast majority of the news used language that explicitly communicated the criminal nature of Sandusky's alleged behavior. Thirteen percent of the articles included at least one reference to the word "rape" or statutory rape. Less often, they used the term "anal rape." More than two-thirds (69%) of the coverage did not use variants of rape, but included categorical terms to describe the Sandusky allegations, including "sexual abuse," "sexual assault," "sex crimes," and varieties of "molestation." Sexual abuse was the most commonly used categorical term, as in the often-repeated phrase "Sandusky sex abuse scandal."

In articles that included criminal language, as well as those that did not, we saw frequent references to the specific actions described in the grand jury report, such as testimony that Sandusky was "blowing on Victim 1's bare stomach," "put his hands down the boy's pants," or that Sandusky would "crack his back." Some accounts included references to the survivors resisting Sandusky, as when they were described as "squirming away" or having to be "pinned" to the shower wall. A few of the latter articles went beyond the grand jury statement, describing Sandusky as a "sexual predator"<sup>37</sup> who groomed the young boys, gaining their trust and making them susceptible to the eventual abuse.

Ten percent of the news did not use explicit or categorical terms for sexual abuse. These stories avoided direct description of the alleged abuse, using terms that minimized the allegations, like "horseplay", "inappropriate conduct", and "the alleged incident". At times this language use was extremely opaque. The Big Ten athletic

conference, for instance, referred to the “Penn State matter”<sup>38</sup>, and Penn State University mentioned the “troubling charges” facing Sandusky.<sup>39</sup> Finally, 8% of the Sandusky coverage did not refer to the alleged abuse whatsoever. One piece, for instance, mentioned the “Jerry Sandusky investigation”<sup>40</sup> in a larger profile of a current Penn State football player.

## **How is preventing child sexual abuse discussed?**

As we found in our earlier study, discussions of how to prevent child sexual abuse were virtually absent from news coverage. In the Sandusky coverage, nearly one-third of the general news included a mention of a potential solution or policy measures to reduce or prevent future abuse, and only 5% of sports news did so. The most frequently named solutions focused on individuals after the fact, such as reporting abuse. There was some discussion, though minimal, about broader societal prevention strategies such as changing cultural norms so we can talk about child sexual abuse and make it unacceptable.

The high-profile arrest prompted comments from national and local organizations devoted to preventing child sexual abuse as well. Unlike the news stories, these statements—many of which were not released until after our news data collection period—focused on child sexual abuse in general, including the nature and characteristics of abuse. They usually mentioned the Sandusky allegations but used them as a springboard to discuss the larger social and cultural issues surrounding child sexual abuse. These included the prevalence of abuse nationwide, the culture of silence that perpetuates abuse, and policies to help prevent future abuse.

Many of the statements from organizations focused on preventing child sexual assault. Unlike the news, these statements were usually far more direct in their plea for prevention, and called for different preventive measures. Stop It Now, an organization dedicated to preventing child sexual abuse, proposed one of the most comprehensive solution sets, ranging from an innovative child sexual abuse prevention hotline for callers to anonymously report suspected abuse, to offering trainings for organizations to improve their internal prevention policies.<sup>41</sup> Although child advocacy organizations did not consistently call for the same prevention policy, most encouraged institutions to implement basic prevention programs including helping every family talk to their children at a young age about the warning signs of abuse, ensuring that every child knows what to look out for, or that every organization should have reporting policies in place to support adults who suspect abuse.

## Conclusion

The circumstances of the case and how journalists responded meant the first nine days of news coverage of the Sandusky case differs in several distinct ways from how child sexual abuse is typically covered. We saw a new set of reporters—sports writers—discussing child sexual abuse. And we saw sports and general news reporters suggest an institutional story about child sexual abuse, in many cases using far more precise language than we have seen in the past.

### **Sports writers report on child sexual abuse...**

The news coverage of the Sandusky case attracted many sports writers to the issue, some who were likely covering the topic for the first time. We hope sports writers will continue to investigate child sexual abuse and help the public understand the magnitude of the problem. The sad fact is that child sexual abuse happens daily and most often in less high-profile settings; our society will benefit as reporters tell us more about it—in every section of the newspaper—so we can learn to prevent it. Sports writers should continue to ask coaches, administrators, and other authorities in sports programs what systems they have in place to prevent child sexual abuse.

### **to help tell an institutional story...**

The attention to Joe Paterno, in sports and general news, was also attention to what he—and what others with authority at Penn State—did *not* do. In addition to the intense focus on Sandusky and Paterno, however, the first week of coverage also introduced a story about institutional accountability. This is unusual and important. The personal failing of Sandusky for committing the alleged abuse and of Paterno for not doing enough once he learned of the accusation were consistently present in the coverage, so much so that the coverage often seemed to be more about the downfall of Paterno than about Sandusky or child sexual abuse. But the news also calls out the University for its failing as an institution. This broader perspective was all but absent in our earlier study of typical reporting on child sexual abuse.

As the question of institutional accountability continues to loom at Penn State, it has expanded to other schools. In the weeks after the Penn State story broke, Syracuse University faced questions regarding that school's role surrounding child sexual abuse allegations against men's basketball assistant coach Bernie Fine.<sup>42</sup> Not surprisingly, both cases have also inspired commentators and reporters to draw parallels to the Catholic Church and its role in covering up the decades-long record of abuse by its clergy. The news media in these instances are helping to demand institutional accountability for child sexual abuse.

### **...using precise language.**

The language used in this news coverage to describe the acts Sandusky was accused of committing was far more precise and descriptive than we have seen in typical news coverage of child sexual abuse. This may be because reporters had access to the survivors' grand jury testimony with its graphic details. Those details likely help the public understand that Sandusky was being accused of rape—an act that, by definition, means that power is employed to sexually assault a victim without consent. In this case, because the victims were children, it was not possible for them to give consent. Reporters must of course be careful to state clearly that the testimony contains accusations and not conclusions, but precision about what those accusations describe is necessary if the public is to comprehend the nature of the problem.

The importance of language continued to appear as events unfolded in the Penn State scandal beyond the timeframe of our study. Much controversy ensued over what exactly assistant coach Mike McQueary told Joe Paterno, and later Penn State officials, that he saw take place between Sandusky and Victim #2.<sup>43</sup> As university officials dispute the language McQueary used, we see the need for precision whenever child sexual abuse is discussed.

## **Recommendations**

News coverage is essential for bringing issues to light, especially those like child sexual abuse that seem to remain perpetually in the dark. Our analysis suggests several directions for reporters, and for advocates as their sources, that may help improve future coverage about child sexual abuse.

### **Recommendations for prevention advocates**

The statements released by prevention organizations almost uniformly sought to expand the story beyond the Sandusky allegations to the broader social issues surrounding child sexual abuse and included calls for policy actions that change environments to make abuse less likely to occur. Yet the initial Sandusky news coverage rarely quoted child advocates or their organizational statements. Therefore, we recommend that advocates:

#### **1. Release statements to the public and to the media quickly.**

Many of the statements we found were not released until after our nine-day data collection period and therefore could not be quoted by journalists as the story broke. If prevention advocates want to contribute to breaking news, they will need to respond faster and let reporters know what sorts of information and insights they can bring to bear on a story.

**2. *Develop relationships with journalists.***

Reporters will be more likely to seek out prevention advocates as sources when news breaks about child sexual abuse if they know who they are. Prevention advocates can establish relationships with reporters from every news beat before a big case breaks and have at the ready data, research findings, and examples of prevention.

**3. *Consider using specific language when discussing the issue.***

In all communication about child sexual abuse—reporting on cases of abuse, giving interviews with journalists, or talking with other advocates—consider language choices. The more specific advocates are, the more able they will be to help reduce confusion and possible misinterpretations on this issue.

**4. *Continue research on how to best talk about child sexual abuse.***

Precise language seems like an important component of helping people understand what happened when children are sexually abused. However, research is needed to establish how language choices affect listeners' interpretations. Such research will help the field standardize best practices for how to communicate about child sexual abuse.

## **Recommendations for reporters**

There are unavoidable challenges in reporting on child sexual abuse. The topic is inherently difficult to discuss, as most of it remains hidden from view. Eyewitness grand jury testimony that pointed to Sandusky is unusual; most abusers are not public figures but family members or guardians. The high profile of the alleged abuser in this case, and the role he played as a nurturer, attracted the news spotlight. Without this sort of attention, policy makers and the public can't see problem, feel the urgency, or craft meaningful solutions to child sexual abuse.

Coverage of the events unfolding at Penn State was marked by instances of thorough reporting, even as the story broke. Reporters consistently used precise language that captured the severity of the allegations, and discussed the accountability and consequences for multiple actors, including coach Joe Paterno and Penn State as an institution. To build and expand on this reporting, we recommend that reporters:

**1. *Keep the issue on the sports pages and elsewhere in the news.***

The Penn State scandal is just the most recent and public instance of a crime that happens every day, one that “flourishes in secrecy.”<sup>44</sup> To help end that secrecy, keep the spotlight on the issue beyond the current news cycle. Explore other sports stories on child sexual abuse: Investigate what coaches, teams, and schools are doing to make sure it doesn't happen in their institution.

**2. *Keep the language specific.***

The language used to describe child sexual abuse should be as unambiguous and accurate as possible. To that end, reporters need to limit the use of

minimizing terms that might leave room for misinterpretation of the severity of the incidents described or improperly imply consent. The grand jury report allowed those reporting on the Sandusky case to be more explicit than most, but even then some reporters neglected to describe the details of the accusations.

**3. *Don't lose sight of the survivors.***

Survivors were largely absent from much of the coverage of the first nine days of the Sandusky scandal. This is similar to what we found in our prior study, and it is an admittedly difficult problem for reporters given privacy concerns. Despite these concerns, reporters should not lose sight of the survivors of child sexual abuse and the long-term consequences they face, and should find other ways to include their perspective in stories. One way to keep a focus on the survivors is to work with child sexual abuse prevention advocates who can provide important perspective about survivors who may not be able to speak for themselves due to legal concerns. These advocates can also suggest policies and programs that can shift the focus to prevention.

**4. *Push for solutions.***

Prevention and other solutions were largely absent from the coverage. Reporters should ask: "What can we do to prevent another Penn State?" "What are communities already doing?" Reporters can query advocates, researchers, policy makers and others in authority and push them for answers to these and other important questions about how to prevent future abuse.



## Appendix: Methodology

We examined 155 pieces from nine days of news coverage and commentary, from the day of Sandusky's arrest, November 5, 2011, through November 13, 2011, the day after Penn State's first football game following the arrest. This timeframe allowed us to analyze the media's initial response to the allegations, as well as coverage of the first key actions taken after Sandusky's arrest, including the administrative actions against head coach Paterno, Penn State Athletic Director Curley, and University President Spanier. We also examined the official statements on the case from organizations dedicated to preventing child sexual abuse, from the university, and from organizations affiliated with collegiate sports.

### Study Sample

We examined four data sources:

1. The official statements on the Sandusky allegations made by relevant sports and university organizations, such as Penn State University, the Big Ten Conference, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association;
2. Official statements made by the child sexual assault prevention community, including nationally prominent organizations like Prevent Child Abuse America and the Ms. Foundation's child sexual abuse prevention grantees. Many statements were not released until after our news data collection period ended;
3. Reporting from news and sports sections of traditional news outlets from across the U.S., and additional coverage from the local newspaper that broke the story, *The Patriot-News* of Harrisburg, Pa., and the national paper of record, *The New York Times*;

Source	# of pieces
<b>Organizational Statements</b>	
• Child sexual abuse prevention advocates	18
• Penn State	4
• Sports organizations	2
<b>Statement Total</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>General &amp; Sports News</b>	
• News section, U.S. newspapers & wires	56
• Sports section, U.S. newspapers & wires	25
• Online sports media (ESPN & Yahoo Sports)	23
• <i>The Patriot-News</i>	22
• <i>The New York Times</i>	5
<b>News Total</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Total Sample</b>	<b>155</b>

and

4. Reporting from the two most prominent online sports news media sites, [www.espn.com](http://www.espn.com) and [sports.yahoo.com](http://sports.yahoo.com).<sup>45</sup>

Using the *Nexis* database, we assembled a scientific sample of 5% of all U.S. news coverage of the Sandusky allegations; 10% from two key newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Patriot-News*; and a 10% sample of the Sandusky coverage from each of the sports sources, ESPN.com and Yahoo Sports.

To compare sports stories with general news stories, we combined the stories that appeared in the sports section of newspapers with the stories that appeared in ESPN and Yahoo. This provided a total of 75 sports stories and 56 general news stories.

### **Coding development and testing**

After collecting the sample, we developed the coding protocol by (1) adapting relevant measures from our prior analysis of routine news coverage of child sexual abuse,<sup>46</sup> and (2) reading a sub-set of articles selected for this analysis. We read these pieces to gain a preliminary understanding of the current coverage and catalogue the news frames we expected to see in the broader sample. After establishing a preliminary set of codes, multiple coders read the same set of articles to ensure that the coders had an acceptable level of agreement (inter-coder reliability). Using Krippendorff's *alpha*, a statistical test specifically designed for 3 or more coders, we achieved an acceptable level of agreement on all measures, ranging from .703 to .906.

With intercoder reliability established, we coded the official sample and entered the coded information about each article into a customized database. We resolved any coding disagreements during this process by consensus discussion.

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