



# **REPORTING DOMESTIC/ FAMILY VIOLENCE**

**GUIDELINES FOR  
JOURNALISTS**



# **REPORTING OF DOMESTIC/FAMILY VIOLENCE**

The media is the lens through which the general public views domestic/family violence.

In New Zealand and internationally, media reports tend not to reflect the prevalence and severity of family violence. News stories are often small and buried in news pages and bulletins. They often perpetuate commonly held but untrue beliefs about domestic violence.

At times a family violence story will make big headlines and receive intense media coverage, but this tends not to be sustained beyond a short period of a month or six weeks.

Yet statistics show that family violence is one of New Zealand's most significant social issues in terms of number of people affected, long term life effects and cost to the country.

The media has a responsibility to report this issue accurately. News stories need to inform New Zealanders about the true nature of family violence, how many people are affected and in what way, and what we can do about it.

Reporters and the stories they write have a huge influence on the way people think and act – every journalist has a role to play in changing attitudes in New Zealand on the complex issue of family violence.

This resource has been developed to assist journalists to report this topic more realistically. We have included latest statistics and will update these as they are released.

We have included contact information for people who are experts on family violence and willing to give interviews to reporters.

This resource has been put together by Stephanie Edmond and Sheryl Hann. Stephanie has been a journalist for 27 years, working as a reporter, journalism teacher and communications advisor in the family violence sector. Sheryl Hann has worked in family violence prevention agencies for 14 years. They both work for the It's not OK campaign.



# INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

Poor reporting of domestic/family violence has been the subject of a number of international studies. Below are the results from two.

## **A Portland Press Herald study in 1998 showed:**

- more in depth reporting for non-domestic violence murders measured by number of articles, word count, column inches and front page status
- domestic violence murders were rarely called domestic murders
- experts were not used as sources
- violence was blamed on depression, substance abuse, stress, a troubled life or a failed marriage
- far less coverage of victims lives than victims of non-domestic murders.

## **Washington researchers in 2002 found that:**

- less than 22% of articles studied used the label domestic violence
- only 30% included mention of prior violence
- only 10% placed domestic violence murder in a larger context
- 48% suggested some sort of excuse (rejection, rage)
- 17% used victim-blaming language (such as quoting a relative who said the victim had a habit of getting involved with men who abused her)
- some focused on culture or class suggesting domestic violence is confined to some parts of the population
- many implied that it was surprising that the perpetrator seemed normal (well-rounded, upbeat person, clean cut very nice guy). However extensive literature shows that abusers usually function normally socially and at work and are not easily identifiable
- sources shaped the stories and domestic violence experts were seldom quoted.



# THE MYTHS

Media stories about domestic violence incidents often support commonly held beliefs (myths) about domestic violence.

These are listed below. Media reports often include one or more of these.

## **1 AN UNPREDICTABLE, PRIVATE TRAGEDY**

This is not true. The victim will almost always have suffered violence for a long time.

Media reports frequently use phrases which support this myth such as:

- *flew off the handle*
- *moment of rage*
- *lost control*
- *he snapped*
- *it came out of the blue*
- *we may never know what happened that caused this violence*

We know that domestic violence is almost never a one-off incident. It is a series of tactics used to gain and keep control. It is a pattern of behaviours which increase in frequency and severity over time. Murder is the extreme end of this continuum.

We know that the most dangerous time for a victim is following separation – most murders happen at this time.

Domestic deaths are planned. The killer has commonly obtained a weapon, made threats to kill previously, knows where the victim is and when to strike.

Domestic violence is a crime, like any other murder or assault.

## **2 CAUSED BY SUBSTANCE ABUSE, STRESS, POVERTY, FAILED MARRIAGE**

This is not true. Many people who experience these do not hit, stalk or murder their partners or children.

It is true that substance abuse can make the violence worse, but it's not the reason for it. People use violence in the domestic setting because they believe they are entitled to use violence to get what they want.

### **3 THE VICTIM IS TO BLAME**

Using phrases such as ‘why did she stay’, ‘they had relationship issues’, ‘she had a habit of getting involved with men like that’, imply the victim is to blame or “asked for it”.

People choose to use violence to control and dominate other family members. They usually don’t use the same tactics on their bosses, friends and members of their community.

Victims are not to blame because they stay. They are often unable to leave due to isolation, lack of funds and housing and fear. Leaving can often make the violence worse.

### **4 VIOLENCE AND LOVE GO TOGETHER**

Headlines and phrases such as

*He loved her so much he had to take her with him*

*He couldn’t face life without her*

*When she left him it tipped him over the edge*

It’s not normal behaviour to bash or murder someone if you love them. Jealous, threatening, intimidating behaviour is not love.

### **5 IT’S NOT AS SERIOUS AS OTHER ASSAULTS/MURDERS**

Studies show that domestic assaults and murders usually receive less coverage than others, are more likely to be a brief on an inside page with little detail about the victim and her life.

But domestic violence murders make up half of all murders in New Zealand. Most child murders are committed by a family member. Many victims suffer serious and life-threatening injuries. A significant number of people are affected by family violence in New Zealand and violence in the home underpins many other social problems such as bullying, youth crime and suicide.

### **6 HE WAS A LOVELY GUY**

It is not unusual for reporters to hear that the murderer/abuser was a model employee, that neighbours thought he was a sweet person – abusers show a different face to the world. Outside the home they are “well rounded” “upbeat” “clean cut” “very nice guy”.

This does not mean he wasn’t violent and controlling at home. Can he still be a nice guy if it is now known he murdered his partner or child?

People who use domestic violence are not confined to any racial, cultural, age or socio-economic group. Reporters can expect them to have conducted themselves appropriately in the community and be liked and respected outside of the home.

# GUIDELINES FOR REPORTING

Media reports can better reflect domestic/family violence in New Zealand by including facts about it, using recent statistics and using experts as sources.

**What is domestic violence?** A pattern of coercive tactics – emotional, physical, sexual and economic – used to gain and maintain power and control. Abusers do not use violence because they are out of control. Domestic violence is not a response to stress or an angry outburst and is not caused by outside circumstances. It is learned behaviour.

**Who are victims?** Victims of domestic violence cross all socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, sexual orientation, educational, age and religious lines.

**Who are abusers?** They come from all backgrounds but share some characteristics. They tend to justify their behaviour, have a heightened sense of entitlement, fail to take responsibility and present a different personality outside the home. They control their behaviour in non-domestic situations.

**Why do victims stay?** There are many reasons including fear (victims are most at danger in the 18 months following separation); lack of affordable housing, child care, employment or legal protection; religious or cultural beliefs; family pressures; immigration status; and the desire to keep the family together.

## **TIPS FOR REPORTING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INCIDENTS/ MURDERS/COURT CASES**

- identify the murder/incident as domestic violence
- place it in the context of local and national statistics and recent events
  - o this was the fifth domestic murder this year
  - o 10 children die in domestic incidents each year
  - o half NZ's murders are domestic violence
  - o the victim had a protection order
  - o xxxx protection orders were granted in xxxx last year
- provide information about the nature of domestic violence
  - o domestic violence is a pattern of behaviour
  - o domestic violence is never an isolated incident
  - o domestic violence intensifies in frequency and severity over time
  - o the 18 months following separation is the most dangerous time for victims of domestic violence, most murders happen in this period
  - o physical violence is usually accompanied by psychological, emotional, financial abuse and sexual abuse of women and girls is common.
- use experts as sources
  - o domestic violence experts say this is a common scenario
  - o perpetrators of domestic violence commonly present a charming and likeable face to the world
  - o if you are worried about your safety or someone else's contact xxx
- name family violence as a crime
  - o domestic/family violence is a crime
  - o it's against the law
  - o give the legal definition
  - o ask police if there was domestic violence
  - o ask police if the victim had a protection order
  - o ask police if there had been breaches of the protection order.



## **RECENT STATISTICS**

Nearly half of all homicides in New Zealand are family violence.

There were 44 family violence homicides in New Zealand in 2008 (includes murder, manslaughter and attempted murder).

On average 14 women, 6 men and 10 children are killed by a member of their family every year.

### **POLICE STATISTICS**

Police recorded 86,545 family violence incidents and offences in 2008.

Police are called to around 200 family violence situations a day - one every 7 minutes.

Police estimate only 18% of family violence incidents are reported.

Half of all violent crime in New Zealand is family violence. In 2008 this was:

- 42% of kidnappings and abductions
- 44% of grievous assaults
- 64% of serious assaults.

At least 74,785 children and young people aged under 17 were present at family violence situations attended by Police.

84% of those arrested for family violence are men; 16% are women.

### **CHILD ABUSE**

About 10 children are killed every year in New Zealand by a member(s) of their family.

Child Youth and Family received 49,063 reports of abuse that required further action in 2006.

Around 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 10 boys in New Zealand have experienced sexual abuse.

### **PARTNER ABUSE**

1 in 3 women experience physical or sexual violence from a partner in their lifetime (WHO study in Auckland and Waikato).

14% of men report being assaulted by a partner in their lifetime (NZ Crime and Safety Survey 2006).

Women's Refuge received around 50,000 crisis calls in 2007/08, and provided services to 11,295 women and 6,996 children.

85% of sexual violence is committed by someone known to the victim.

## **HOSPITAL STATISTICS**

523 women and 53 men were admitted to hospital in 2006 due to assault or abuse by their partner.

239 children under 15 were admitted to hospital in 2006 due to assault, abuse or neglect.

156 people over 65 years old were admitted to hospital in 2006 due to assault, abuse or neglect.

## **WHANAU VIOLENCE STATISTICS**

Half of all children killed by caregivers are Maori.

Seven times more young Maori women and four times more Maori children are hospitalised from an assault compared to Pakeha women and children.

49% of Maori women experienced partner abuse at some time in their life, compared with 24% of Pakeha and 23% of Pacifica women.

## **COURT STATISTICS**

There were 4,511 applications for protection orders in 2007.

Each day the Courts deal with around 21 prosecutions of assault on women by men.

There were 863 prosecutions for assault on a child and a further 96 prosecutions for cruelty to children in 2008.

## **ECONOMIC COST**

The economic cost of family violence was estimated at \$1.2 to \$5.8 billion per year by economist Suzanne Snively in 1994. In today's figures that would rise to \$8 billion.

### **Sources:**

- New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse fact sheets [www.nzfvc.org.nz](http://www.nzfvc.org.nz)
- Kruger, T., Pitman, M., Grennell, D., McDonald, T., Mariu, D., Pomare, A., et al. (2004). Transforming whanau violence – A conceptual framework. Wellington, New Zealand: Te Puni Kokiri.
- Family Violence Statistics Report (2009). Wellington, New Zealand: Families Commission.
- [www.rapecrisis.org.nz](http://www.rapecrisis.org.nz)
- [www.stats.govt.nz](http://www.stats.govt.nz)
- NZ Police statistics.



# **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ACT**

Under the DVA 1995 domestic violence is violence against any person with whom that person is or has been in a domestic relationship. This can include living together, family relationships and dating.

Violence means physical, sexual and psychological abuse. This includes intimidation, harassment, damage to property or threats of physical, sexual or psychological abuse.

It is also psychological abuse to cause or allow a child to see or hear violence.

A single act may amount to abuse or a number of acts forming a pattern of behaviour may amount to abuse.

## **PROTECTION ORDERS**

Under the DVA victims can apply for a protection order. This is a legal order granted by the Family Court that says the violence must stop.

Protection Orders have two parts:

- non-violence conditions say that the person who has been violent must not physically, sexually or psychologically abuse or threaten anyone protected by the order, damage their property or encourage anyone else to abuse or threaten the victim.
- non-contact conditions say that the violent person can not contact the victim (this includes visits, texts, phone calls or letters). Exceptions for emergencies apply.

The victim can suspend non-contact conditions, for example by living with the violent person, but the non-violence conditions stay in force all the time.

A breach of the Protection Order is a criminal offence.



New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse <http://www.nzfvc.org.nz/>

## **NATIONAL ORGANISATIONS**

National Network of Stopping Violence Services (04) 802 5402

National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges (04) 802 5078

Age Concern (04) 801 9338

Relationship Services (04) 472 8798

Jigsaw Family Services (04) 385 7983

Unicef domestic spokesperson (04) 496 9612

Families Commission (04) 917 7045

Children's Commissioner (04) 471 1410

## **LOCAL SERVICES**

Womens Refuge – under w in the white pages

Stopping violence services – listed on the National Network Stopping Violence Services website

Jigsaw – listed on the Jigsaw website

Age Concern – listed on the Age Concern website

Relationship Services – listed on their website

## **POLICE**

Police Commissioner's office (04) 474 9499

Ask for : the national family violence co-ordinator

: the manager of violence reduction

All local police stations have a family violence co-ordinator

## **JUSTICE**

Chief Family Court Judge Peter Boshier

Chief District Court Judge Russell Johnson

Family Court lawyers : Margaret Powell and Wendy Davis (04) 801 5156

: Catriona MacLennan (09) 378 0964

## **ACADEMICS**

Neville Robertson Waikato University

Janet Fanslow Auckland University

Jane Koziol-McLain AUT

## **SEXUAL ABUSE**

Dr Kim McGregor, Network of Sexual Abuse Agencies, (09) 360 4001

Georgina Wilkinson, SAFE Network (09) 377 9898

## **SPECIALIST MAORI SPOKESPEOPLE**

Mereana Pitman, Ngati Kahungunu Violence Free, (06) 876 2718

Di Grennell, Amokura Family Violence Intervention Project, (09) 459 6913

Pita Sharples (available through parliamentary website)

## **SPECIALIST PACIFIC SPOKESPEOPLE**

Betty Sio, Pacific Island Safety and Prevention Project (09) 832 2555