

## Tips for Covering Sexual Assault

Social stigma and discomfort combined with shame or reluctance in the part of a survivor make rape and sexual assault difficult topics to cover, even for the most seasoned reporter. Below are five tips chosen by STSM staff from *Reporting Sexual Assault: A Guide for Journalists*, published by the Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence.

1. **Provide information** about local resources and where survivors can go for help.
2. **Balance** the victim's right to privacy with the public's right to know.
3. **Judge** when details are needed for public safety and when they only serve to re-traumatize the victim or reinforce myths about the victim's role in the attack.
  - a. **Details about the attacker are relevant**; physical description, how access was gained, whether a weapon or another form of coercion was used, and if additional physical violence was involved.
  - b. **Details about the victim's private life are NOT relevant**; habits, sexual history, or physical appearance, for example, do not contribute to the public's safety and usually lead to victim blaming.
4. **Carefully choose words and phrases** to avoid furthering the notion that the victim is culpable for the crime. Consider using alternative terms like:
  - a. "victim" instead of "innocent victim" – all crime victims are innocent.
  - b. "reported rape" instead of "rape allegation." The word "allegation" is not a neutral term and strongly implies doubt.
  - c. "acquaintance rape" instead of "date rape." "Acquaintance rape" is often broadly used in cases where the victim knew the perpetrator, not just when the assault occurred "on a date."
5. **Reflect trends and realities** of sexual assault, including the frequency with which it occurs and the frequency with which it is committed by an acquaintance as opposed to a stranger. Please see [www.stsm/mediakit/stats.html](http://www.stsm/mediakit/stats.html) for up-to-date statistics.