

Victimized by the Media

Kate Mulley argues that there is a need to protect victims from undue harassment and intrusion on the part of the media.

A great deal of concern has been expressed about the way in which the media reports crime. It has been argued that sensational reporting of the most unusual and horrific crimes reinforces common misconceptions and stereotypes, as well as increasing the fear of crime, particularly amongst those sections of the population who are statistically least likely to become victims. For example, attacks on elderly people are rare but are likely to attract significant media interest. Concentration on certain types of offender, such as so-called 'stranger-danger' in relation to crimes against children, may deflect from more common types of risk such as abuse within the family. However, in this article, I would like to focus on the impact that media attention can have on individual victims of crime and their families and friends.

Contrary to popular opinion, some crime victims and witnesses will derive great comfort from receiving media attention. Talking to the media can be beneficial for a number of reasons, in addition to a general desire to help with the police investigation and the detection of the offenders. Some individuals need to express their feelings and convey the hurt and anguish they have suffered. Others will want to tell their side of the story (rather than all the attention necessarily being focused on the offender), or they may believe that the record needs to be set straight. This can be particularly important for people who have been bereaved through violent crime, who may wish to exert some control over what is being reported about a loved one. Another strong motivation for cooperating with media interest is altruistic: to help and give strength to others who may have suffered a similar experience.

Unwanted intrusion

However, for many other crime victims, media attention is an unwanted intrusion at a very stressful time. Media interest is often experienced as a form of secondary victimisation and can make individuals feel harassed, vulnerable, lacking control and that

their privacy has been violated. All of these feelings may well have been experienced when the crime was originally committed, and they are then compounded by the response of others to that crime.

Victim Support, through offering its services to over one million individuals each year, has unique access to the concerns and common problems experienced by crime victims and witnesses. Unwanted and invasive media attention is one such problem. For example, when researching the treatment of the families of murder victims, 50 of the 80 families interviewed for the research had complaints about the media. Only one reported a positive experience.

Victims of crime (whether or not they want publicity) are of intrinsic interest to the media, and often at a time when they are least able to cope with it. This is particularly true for victims of the most serious crimes. When people are suffering from shock or trauma or grief, either soon after an incident or at a significant event such as the trial, they may find it extremely difficult to cope with assertive and persistent journalists. At Victim Support, we have heard of extreme cases of intrusion and harassment, for example of journalists repeatedly shouting through the letterbox, climbing into the back garden or refusing to leave the pavement outside the house.

Many victims simply do not want their names or photographs to be published with details of the crime. Victim Support is aware of several cases where victims have been subjected to intimidation from the friends of the offender following newspaper reports which have printed their names and addresses. At the moment anonymity is only legally guaranteed for child witnesses, or when the person is a victim of rape or sexual assault. However, in cases where the witness is likely to suffer fear or distress the judge can now impose reporting restrictions.

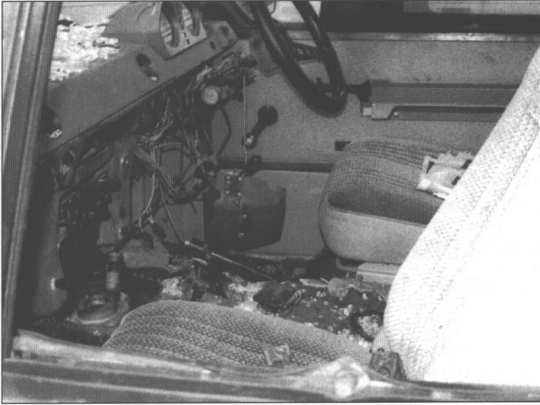
A life sentence

For victims of the most serious crimes, media interest may be a life sentence. Certain crimes enter the public consciousness almost becoming public property, the personal anguish of the individuals directly concerned forgotten. Ten and twenty years after the event journalists will still be asking questions, making reconstructions and writing books. A device that can be particularly painful is the use of library footage of previous crimes and disasters to illustrate a current news story.

Another common problem is a lack of respect for the individual's dignity, as well as their privacy. In some cases newspapers print personal details which are not relevant to the crime, but make for interesting copy. The speed at which the news media report a case can also cause distress. People have complained either that the media have been given information before all the family has been reached, or even that newspapers or television have been given details in a case of which the family was not aware.

Inaccuracy can also be experienced as an invasion

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of an individual's integrity. Getting someone's age or name wrong may seem insignificant to the journalist, but can be very hurtful, especially for example to the family of a murder victim. Among the complaints that have been brought to our attention is the case of a local newspaper, which printed photographs of a murder victim and of the offender, but transposed the captions. As you can imagine this caused the family enormous distress. The misquoting and editing of comments made by victims also causes problems. Often people do not understand that quotes do not have to be verbatim, but can be edited or changed as long as they convey the meaning of what was said.

Again, once a story has appeared in the media, individuals have very limited comeback. They can make a complaint, for example to the Press Complaints Commission, but the process is little known and confusing. We believe that the complaints process should be straight forward, speedy and widely publicised. However, it is also true that most people are more likely to remember the original headline than an apology printed at a later date. In addition, we do have libel laws, but there is no Legal Aid to

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pursue these cases, which are likely to be extremely expensive and so fall outside the reach of most people.

Obviously, it is only natural that the media is much preoccupied by crime, as it is a subject of great public interest. But the interests of the media, and the public, need to be balanced against the needs of the individuals directly concerned. It is important to remember that crime victims are individuals, they will be affected very differently by events they have experienced, and they will have very different views on speaking to the media. Victim Support believes that these individual needs and interests should be respected, with effective safeguards put in place to protect people from unwanted intrusion and harassment from the media, as well as protecting vulnerable witnesses from identification and intimidation. Individuals may not have a choice about whether or not the media is interested in a particular case, but they should have the necessary information and control to enable them to make an informed choice about how to respond to that interest.

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