



# Protecting victims' identities in press coverage of child victimization

Journalism  
11(3) 347-367  
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co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1464884909360925  
<http://jou.sagepub.com>



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## Abstract

When the names of child victims and other identifying information appear in the media it can exacerbate trauma, complicate recovery, discourage future disclosures and inhibit cooperation with authorities for the children involved. In this study, we evaluated the amount of identifying information available in a systematic sample of 561 newspaper articles about non-fatal child victimizations published from 1 January 2003 to 31 December 2004. Identifying information about the victim (e.g. name of the child's street, school or a family member's full name) was published in 51 percent of articles covering child victimizations. For cases of sexual assault, victim identifiers were most likely to be included when the alleged offender was related to the victim or was a high-profile community member. Based on these findings, we examine the arguments for and against more restrictive policies regarding identifying information, and suggest some guidelines that would provide additional protections for child victims.

## Keywords

child abuse, children, content analysis, crime reporting, ethics, privacy, sexual abuse, victims

*'It was just really hard to hold your head up, even to walk outside with everyone almost in the world knowing what happened ... I shouldn't care what people think or say. It's just the fact that everyone knows I'm the kid.'* (Quote by David Ritcheson reported by *The Associated Press*, 2 July 2007)

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Since child abuse became a national issue about 40 years ago, the media have played a major role in directing public attention to it (Gough, 1996; Nelson, 1984; Wurtele and Miller-Perrin, 1993). However, media publicity about child abuse and child victimization runs the risk of adding to the substantial burden victims already carry. Theories about victimization trauma, research about recovery, developmental thinking about the self-conscious emotions, and modern practices in the fields of criminal justice and journalism all suggest that publicity about their ordeal may increase victims' feelings of shame and stigmatization. To minimize negative effects of publicity, it would be useful to know how much and what kinds of identifying information appear in typical publicity about crimes against juveniles. This article presents an analysis of the identifying information contained in such publicity, and makes suggestions about how child victims<sup>1</sup> might be better served.

## The impact of publicity

When bad things happen to them, it seems likely that most people would prefer to avoid the limelight, particularly in our media-saturated modern society. Perhaps because discomfort with such exposure is assumed, no research has actually been done to verify how child victims react under the glare of publicity. However, research from a number of related sources leads to the conclusion that the impact is primarily negative.

### *Victimization, stigmatization and shame*

Finkelhor and Browne (1985) identified stigmatization as one of four key dynamics explaining the link between sexual abuse victimization and negative emotional and social consequences for victims. Research has since documented that feelings of shame predict higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Feiring and Taska, 2005; Feiring et al., 2002b; Negrao et al., 2005), depression (Andrews, 1995; Andrews et al., 2000; Feiring et al., 1998, 2002a), psychological distress (Coffey et al., 1996), and social problems (Feiring et al., 2000). Shame is a stronger predictor of ongoing trauma and depression for victims than the severity of the abuse or the nature of the victim-offender relationship (Feiring et al., 2002a). The link between shame and traumatic symptoms can persist for years (Feiring and Taska, 2005) and has been established for children as well as adults and for both sexual and physical abuse victims (Deblinger and Runyon, 2005).

Publicity around a child's victimization heightens a child's risk of experiencing shame and stigmatization. One study found that the greater the number of people who were told about a rape, the greater the likelihood that the victim received messages of blame or hostility (Ullman and Filipas, 2001). A substantial body of research has documented that the public, including youth, often perceive rape victims as partially responsible for the assault (see for example, Bell et al., 1994; Burt, 1980; Cassidy and Hurrell, 1995; Feltey and Ainslie, 1991; Ford et al., 1998; Geiger et al., 2004; Janoff-Bulman et al., 1985; McCaul et al., 1990; Marciniak, 1998; Whatley and Riggio, 1993) and child sexual abuse victims can be the focus of blame as well, particularly adolescents (Rogers et al., 2007; Waterman and Foss-Goodman, 1984) and male victims (Rogers and Davies, 2007; Waterman and Foss-Goodman, 1984). Negative reactions (e.g. blaming and

patronizing comments, treating the victim differently) by those in victims' social and support systems substantially impair their ability to heal. Such reactions are highly and consistently predictive of problematic psychological adjustment for victims. The higher the number of unsympathetic reactions victims receive, the worse their recovery (Ullman and Filipas, 2001). One study found that victims who received no support at all were better off than those who experienced any negative reactions to their victimization (Campbell et al., 2001).

Apart from worrying about what others think, simply having frequent and unexpected reminders of the victimization is enough to delay recovery from traumatic symptoms. Research shows that recovery is more rapid when children can put their victimization behind them (Runyan et al., 1988). For example, when court cases drag on over an extended time, victims tend to recover more slowly. Public 'outings' of child abuse may result in more reminders from more people over a longer period of time.

### *Developmental considerations*

While media publicity is likely to have a negative effect on all victims, there is evidence to be particularly concerned about child victims. Children have the capacity for feelings of shame and embarrassment as early as 3 or 4 years old and research has demonstrated that by the age of 10, youth can experience shame just by guessing or assuming that others are evaluating them negatively (Abrams, 1988; Bennett, 1989; Bennett and Gillingham, 1991). Child abuse experts note that children may be more likely to develop shame in the wake of traumatic experiences because their views of themselves are still forming (Deblinger and Runyon, 2005).

The effects of the publicity of their victimization may also be particularly hard on children because their self-concept is so dependent upon others, peers in particular (see for example, Adler and Adler, 1998; McLellan and Pugh, 1999). By middle childhood, anxiety about peer relationships intensifies and reputation becomes very important to children (Hill and Pillow, 2006; Parker and Gottman, 1989). Children as young as 8 years old perceive that associating with a stigmatized person may affect their own reputation (Bennett et al., 1998). The stigma of abuse or victimization could lead to avoidance and rejection by a child's peers, which in turn is associated with isolation, loneliness, impaired school performance and the greater likelihood of future social problems that can persist into adulthood (Asher and Coie, 1990; Buhs and Ladd, 2001; Dodge et al., 2003). Furthermore, research on victimization and bullying suggests that a past history of victimization and a reputation as a victim sometimes causes children to be targeted for further hazing, exclusion and victimization (Schwartz et al., 1993).

The US justice system already recognizes the need for particular protections for children. A key element of juvenile justice systems in almost all states is an enhanced level of confidentiality for juvenile offenders beyond the protections afforded to adult offenders – for example, sealed records and closed hearings (Regoli and Hewitt, 2006). These provisions are based in part on an assumption that stigma is particularly detrimental to the development of youth, and that it inhibits opportunities to grow beyond the constraints of unfavorable childhood circumstances. These same arguments also apply to juvenile victims.

Child victims need to be able to trust that their privacy will be protected as much as possible by those whom they have turned to for help. The alternative means not only the risk of heightened distress, as the evidence presented above suggests, but also the possibility that fewer victims will come forward to get help at all. Victims are very concerned about the possibility that their private trauma may be broadcast publicly. In one study, over half the surveyed rape victims reported that they would be 'a lot' more likely to report an attack to the police if there was a law prohibiting the news media from disclosing their name and address (Kilpatrick et al., 1992). In another survey of parents in Boston, about half did not report their child's sexual abuse to the police, and among the non-reporting Boston parents, 45 percent said that a key factor was worry that friends or neighbors would find out (Finkelhor, 1984). While children are probably mostly unaware of the possibility of media attention, children's hesitation to disclose abuse is due, at least in part, to concern over who will find out and how others will react (Ullman, 2003).

### *Current practices*

The media community is clearly aware of the potential harm for victims in disclosing their identity when reporting on crime. Commentaries on the ethics of crime reporting and being sensitive to crime victims' needs and concerns have increased over recent decades (McBride, 2004; Steele, 2002). The issue of addressing victims' right to privacy has been the topic of books (e.g. Cote and Simpson, 2000), and ethical codes and guidelines have been written to increase journalists' sensitivity in these cases. There seems to be some consensus in the field that the privacy of certain types of victims in particular should be protected, such as sexual assault victims and children, at least in most circumstances. In a 1990 survey, for example, 10 percent of newspaper editors thought rape victims' names should never be printed, 40 percent thought names should be printed only with victims' permission, and 44 percent believed names should only be printed in exceptional cases (Winch, 1991).

Given that some efforts have been made in recent years to try and protect child victims' identities, the current study examined the degree that personal identifying information is revealed in current journalistic practice when reporting on child crimes. Through the sampling and coding of a large and representative sample of newspaper articles reporting on child victimization, we examined how often and under which circumstances potentially identifying information about victims was published.

## **Methods**

### *Sampling procedures*

LexisNexis Academic Universe was used to search for newspaper articles reporting on cases of child victimization within a two-year period: 1 January 2003 to 31 December 2004. Included newspapers were drawn from 36 US states (states with at least one newspaper participating in the database, in which the search resulted in at least 20 articles on child victimization over the 2-year period). The following Boolean search term was used

to search for child victimization articles: 'child\* and (abuse or rape or assault or crimes against persons or sex offenses or crime or victim or neglect)'. Articles were excluded if they did not clearly report on an offense against a child victim of abuse (e.g. descriptions of child abuse legislation) or the text was fewer than four sentences long. A final total of 885 articles were coded from 36 newspapers in 36 states.

In 21 percent of the articles ( $n = 184$ ), the same allegation or victimization incident was reported in multiple articles. Two articles were considered to cover the same case when any of the reported offenders or any of the reported victims (when named) were the same. Using this method we identified 701 unique cases out of the 885 articles. From articles covering the same case, we randomly selected one as primary.

Finally, a decision was made to exclude cases involving child fatalities ( $N = 140$ ). Our analyses indicated that articles on child fatalities almost always included information that identified victims, very frequently the victim's full name. An argument can be made that coverage of these cases should be handled sensitively as well. Many of the victims had siblings, some of whom were likely to be exposed to abuse and most of whom could be considered indirect victims (for more discussion of this issue see Newman et al., 1997). However, issues of privacy in media coverage of child homicide are different from those in which victims are affected. The analyses presented below were conducted on a final sample of 561 articles covering non-fatality child victimizations across 36 newspapers in the USA.

### *Coding*

For each newspaper article, we documented characteristics about the nature of the alleged victimization, and collected information about the alleged victims and offenders. We also documented whether identifying information about the victim was reported in the article. Victim identifiers were considered present if the article published: 1) the victim's name; 2) the street name or address of the victim; 3) the name of the child's school, church or daycare; 4) the full name of any non-offending relatives; or 5) the full name of a parent or family-member offender. We recognize that across and within each of these categories, there will be variation in how easily or widely a child's identity can be determined (e.g. some family members may not share children's last names). However, we believe these identifiers all hold the potential to 'out' a child as a victim to individuals within his or her social groups. Finally, information was collected including some statistics on the newspaper article (e.g. sentence length) and the newspaper itself (e.g. US geographical region and circulation size).

### *Sample*

Table 1 presents the types of child victimizations that were covered by the sample of newspapers. The majority of articles reported on cases of alleged child sexual abuse (66%), physical abuse (27%), and neglect (13%) with little coverage of other types of child victimization (e.g. theft, witnessing domestic violence, hate crimes, etc.). Most of the victimizations involved a single victim (70%) and single offender (85%). Victims were typically female (62%) and under 13 years of age (61%). Most of the alleged

**Table 1.** Case characteristics of child victimization newspaper coverage (2003–4) (N = 561)

Case characteristics	% (N)
<b>Victimization type<sup>1</sup></b>	
Sexual abuse	66 (369)
Physical abuse	27 (151)
Neglect	13 (74)
Other	2 (9)
<b>Number of victims</b>	
1 victim	70 (382)
2+ victims	30 (167)
<b>Victim sex<sup>2</sup></b>	
Male	38 (265)
Female	62 (432)
<b>Victim age at time of article<sup>2</sup></b>	
Child (< 13 years old)	61 (397)
Adolescent (13–17 years old)	32 (210)
Adult (18+ years old)	7 (43)
<b>Number of offenders</b>	
1 offender	85 (473)
2+ offenders	15 (83)
<b>Offender sex<sup>3</sup></b>	
Male	80 (523)
Female	20 (131)
<b>Offender age at time of article<sup>3</sup></b>	
1–17 years	3 (17)
18–25 years	22 (126)
26–40 years	43 (247)
41+ years	32 (179)
<b>Offenders' relationship to victims</b>	
Biological parent or parental role	43 (167)
Family members (no parent figures)	6 (22)
Known offenders (no family members)	45 (177)
Unknown offenders only	6 (24)
<b>Time between victimization and article</b>	
<1 year	66 (346)
1 or more years	34 (178)
<b>Victimization characteristics</b>	
Photography, pornography, videotaping involved	8 (42)
Internet involved	4 (20)
Offender claimed romantic relationship	3 (16)
Kidnappings or missing child reported	5 (29)
Offender was a high-profile community member	27 (153)
<b>Stage of criminal justice involvement</b>	
Police at scene, or looking for or questioning suspect	4 (23)
Suspect arrested, charged or indicted	58 (325)
Plea, trial, conviction or sentencing	29 (164)

**Table I.** (Continued)

Case characteristics	% (N)
Other	5 (26)
No criminal justice involvement	4 (23)
<b>Criminal justice outcomes<sup>4</sup></b>	
Offender plead guilty/no contest	51 (81)
Offender found guilty by judge/jury	38 (59)
Offender found not guilty, mistrial, dismissal or other	11 (18)

Notes: Missing data: Age of victims (15%); age of offenders (17%); and offenders' relationship to child (26%). For all other variables missing data < 10%

<sup>1</sup> Percentages add to more than 100% because article could report on multiple types of victimization

<sup>2</sup> Data reported on up to 3 victims per article (N = 799)

<sup>3</sup> Data reported on up to 3 offenders per article (N = 664)

<sup>4</sup> Only calculated for cases in plea, trial, or conviction phase (N = 164)

offenders were male (80%), between 26 and 40 years old (43%) and were either parent-figures (43%) or non-family members known to the child (45%).

The majority of articles involved incidents that occurred less than one year before the article was printed (66%). Few articles (less than 10%) reported child victimizations involving photography, pornography, videotaping, or the internet; a consensual sexual relationship between the victim and alleged offender; or kidnapping. However, 27 percent of articles involved allegations against a high-profile community member. Ninety-six percent of articles described some level of criminal justice involvement; most cases reported that the suspect was arrested or being charged (58%) or reported on a plea, trial or conviction of an offender (29%). For articles on cases that had reached the conviction stage (N = 164), 51 percent of offenders plead guilty, in 38 percent there was a guilty finding by a judge or jury, and in 11 percent there was no conviction.

The 561 articles were drawn from 36 newspapers in 36 states. The selected newspapers and states were evenly distributed across all US regions. The Sunday circulation of the included newspapers (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2007) ranged from 16,800 to 570,500, with an average circulation of 186,542. This compares to an average Sunday circulation size of roughly 60,000 for all US newspapers in 2007 (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008), reflecting the greater rates of participation of larger newspapers in the LexisNexis database. The median sentence length of the reviewed articles was 13, with a range from 4 to 128.

## Results

Our review found that newspaper articles on child victimization commonly included identifying information about the child. In 51 percent of the articles we reviewed, at least one type of identifying information about the child was included. Table 2 presents the frequency with which different types of identifying information about the child were included in newspaper coverage for all reviewed articles. Rates were also calculated separately for articles covering sexual and non-sexual victimizations. The most directly identifying source of information, the child's name, was included in 9 percent of the child victimization articles we reviewed. While it was rare for newspapers to publish the

**Table 2.** Percentage of child victimization articles reporting victim identifiers

	All victimizations (N = 561)	Sexual victimization (N = 369)	Non-sexual victimization (N = 192)
Victim identifiers	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
Child's name	9 (50)	3 (10)	21 (40)***
Child's street name or address	11 (63)	4 (13)	26 (50)***
Name of child's school, daycare or church	16 (89)	21 (78)	6 (11)***
Name of a non-offending caregiver	8 (44)	3 (12)	17 (32)***
Family member offender's name	29 (164)	12 (43)	63 (121)***
Any victim identifier included in article	51 (286)	37 (136)	78 (150)***

Note: \*\*\*p < .001

child's name in reports of child sexual assault, the name was printed in 21 percent of the articles covering non-sexual assaults against children.

In coverage of non-sexual victimizations (most typically physical abuse and neglect), we found that it was relatively common for newspapers to publish information about where the child lives, and to include the full name of either a non-offending caregiver or a family member offender. Overall, in newspaper coverage of non-sexual victimizations, at least one type of identifying information about children was included in 78 percent of the articles we reviewed.

While information about children seemed to be more protected in articles covering child sexual abuse, we nonetheless found that potentially identifying information was often included. In 4 percent of articles, the child's street name or address was included. In 21 percent of articles the name of the child's school, daycare or church was reported and in 3 percent of articles the name of a child's non-offending family member was mentioned. In 12 percent of articles, a family member offender's name was given along with information about his or her relationship to the child. At least one of the above victim identifiers was included in 37 percent of the articles covering child sexual victimization.

Below are some examples of the newspaper article text we reviewed that included identifying information about the victim:

A Vinton County judge found a former Columbus man guilty of two counts of sexual battery after the man pleaded no contest to sexually abusing two of his 10 children. James [*last name*], 37 ... Authorities arrested [*last name*] and his wife, Michelle, nearly a year ago after investigating allegations of sexual abuse. (*Columbus Dispatch*)

A former Pleasant Point police officer was sentenced ... for sexually abusing his 14-year-old babysitter ... who attends the [*school name*] in [*town name*]. (*Bangor Daily News*)

A former school bus driver is on trial, accused of molesting a student ... The 15-year old student testified that he missed his bus to [*school name*] ... [*cousin's full name*], the boy's



cousin, testified she was there when [offender's full name] arrived in his personal car to offer the boy a ride to school. (*The Herald-Sun*)

[Offender's full name] ... a City of Tonawanda man, was convicted ... for repeatedly beating his developmentally disabled daughter ... over an 18-month period ... the girl, now 14 and living with her mother in [town] ... The girl, whose name court officials asked the news media not to publish, testified ... (*Buffalo News*)

We compared the likelihood that victim identifiers were included in newspaper coverage across a number of different types of case characteristics (see Table 3). The number of victims did not affect the likelihood that identifying information would be printed but the odds of identifying information being included increased significantly for younger victims (under 13 years old) compared to adolescents. This finding is likely related to the greater rates of physical abuse among younger victims. Possibly for similar reasons, the odds that information about a victim would be published were 60 percent less when there was only one offender versus multiple offenders. Multiple offender articles often

**Table 3.** Odds ratios of victim identifiers in newspaper coverage of child victimization cases by case characteristics

Case characteristics	% of child victimization articles with victim identifiers	Odds ratio
<b>Number of victims</b>		.914
1 victim ( <i>n</i> = 382)	51	
2+ victims ( <i>n</i> = 167)	53	
<b>Victim age at time of article</b>		1.95***
Young child (any victim <13 years old) ( <i>n</i> = 303)	58	
Adolescent (all victims 13 years or older) ( <i>n</i> = 184)	42	
<b>Number of offenders</b>		.421**
1 offender ( <i>n</i> = 473)	48	
2+ offenders ( <i>n</i> = 83)	69	
<b>Offender age at time of article</b>		.419
Youth offender (any offender <18 years) ( <i>n</i> = 13)	31	
No youth offenders ( <i>n</i> = 548)	52	
<b>Offenders' relationship to victims</b>		8.75***
Parent or family member offender ( <i>n</i> = 189)	89	
No parent or family member offenders ( <i>n</i> = 201)	48	
<b>Time between victimization and article</b>		1.68**
<1 year ( <i>n</i> = 346)	57	
1 year or more ( <i>n</i> = 178)	44	

Note: \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001

involved reports of physical abuse in which two parent figures were implicated. When the alleged offender was a parent or a family member of the victim, the odds were almost nine times greater that identifying information about the victim would be included. Ninety percent of all of the articles we reviewed reported the full name of the alleged offender. Finally, there was a statistically greater likelihood that victim identifiers would be included when the reported victimization occurred within one year of the published article versus more than one year.

Because the type of victimization (sexual assault versus other victimizations) so significantly predicted the inclusion of victim identifiers, we were interested in examining whether certain case characteristics predicted the likelihood that victim identifiers would be published in sexual abuse cases specifically. Most of the case characteristics we examined were unrelated to whether information about the victim was included (see Table 4). There was no difference for cases involving photography, pornography, videotaping, or the internet. There were also no differences in published identifiers in cases in which the offender claimed a consensual relationship with the victim, or when a case involved a kidnapping.

However, there was a significantly greater likelihood (O.R. = 3.8) that information about the victim would be published if the article was reporting on an alleged sexual assault by a high-profile member of the community. It was also significantly more likely that identifying information about the victim was included when the offender was a

**Table 4.** Inclusion of victim identifiers in newspaper coverage of child sexual abuse cases ( $N = 369$ ) by case characteristic

Case characteristics	% of sexual abuse articles with victim identifiers	Odds ratio
<b>Video, photography, pornography involved</b>		.681
Yes ( $n = 41$ )	29	
No ( $n = 328$ )	38	
<b>Internet involvement reported</b>		.306
Yes ( $n = 19$ )	16	
No ( $n = 350$ )	38	
<b>Offender claimed there was a consensual relationship with alleged victim</b>		1.15
Yes ( $n = 15$ )	40	
No ( $n = 354$ )	37	
<b>Kidnapping/missing child reported</b>		.411
Yes ( $n = 20$ )	20	
No ( $n = 349$ )	38	
<b>Offender was a high-profile community member</b>		3.75***
Yes ( $n = 130$ )	57	
No ( $n = 238$ )	26	
<b>Offender was a parent figure/family member</b>		8.75***
Yes ( $n = 189$ )	89	
No ( $n = 201$ )	48	

Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$

parent figure or family member (O.R. = 8.8), probably the result of newspapers consistently reporting the full name of the accused.

Across all articles, the longer the article, the more likely it was that information about the victim had been included. The mean number of sentences for articles with identifiers was 17.9 versus 12.7 for articles without identifiers ( $p < .001$ ). We also examined whether victim identifiers were more likely to be included if coverage of the victimization was more intensive. We compared articles ( $n = 87$ ) that covered the same case as other articles selected through our search procedures (the duplicate articles were excluded from analyses, see above) to those in which we did not find any additional coverage ( $n = 474$ ). It is likely that the random selection process of our search missed cases that were in fact covered frequently, so this analysis was probably a weak test of the impact of intensive coverage on the publication of victim identifiers. Nonetheless, we found a significantly higher rate of victim identifiers in the sample of more intensively covered cases (64% versus 49%;  $p < .005$ ).

Additionally, although 51 percent of articles included identifying information on the victim, this rate varied widely across the 36 newspapers, from 21 percent to 83 percent. The variation across newspapers could be due to differences in the types of child victimization cases covered by the newspaper or from policy differences on publishing information about crime victims. We explored whether newspaper circulation size affected the likelihood that identifiers would be published and found no relationship. There were also no differences across US regions.

## Discussion

In our review of newspaper coverage of child victimization, we found that considerable quantities of identifying information were published despite stated policies by newspapers to conceal victims' identities in cases of sexual victimization and when victims are children (Putnam and Finkelhor, 2006). Victims' names were rarely used in reporting on child sexual assault but were published in almost one quarter of articles covering non-fatal physical assault or neglect against children. Furthermore, even without publication of the child's name, articles frequently included information that would readily permit members of the child's community to identify them. Information, such as the name of the child's school, street address, or the full name of a family member, was included in over half of the newspaper articles that we reviewed.

We identified several different types of cases in which the inclusion of identifying information about the victim was more likely. If the victimization occurred at the hands of a parent or family member, as was the case with almost all physical abuse victimizations and about one quarter of the sexual victimizations, the offender's name often provided a key piece of information about the victim. Our review found that newspapers regularly print the full name of the person accused of committing the offense as well as their relationship to the victim.

For cases of sexual victimization, victim identifiers also more frequently appeared in cases involving high-profile community members, such as teachers or clergy. These cases typically receive a high level of detailed coverage, and as a result more information is included about the victimization and the relationship between the offender and victim.

While it may take more effort to protect victims' identities in these cases, an argument can be made that the extra attention is warranted. These are often the cases that most divide communities and children and youth may experience a particularly high level of stress in being identified.

Most readers of city and local newspapers will not know the victims of these crimes and will not be able to identify them based on the inclusion of these types of identifying information. However, the reality is that unfortunately the very people who *will* be able to identify the victim are probably the people that youth worry most about finding out. Family associates, neighbors, school children and school personnel are the people who youth unavoidably come in contact with on a daily basis. It will be this very circle of individuals who will identify the youth when the information described above is included. Furthermore, much of the coverage of the abuse included personal and potentially very embarrassing details about the victimization, such as descriptive details of the physical acts committed during the sexual victimizations.

In several of the newspaper articles we reviewed, there was some acknowledgement that victims' identities could be revealed by information other than their names. For example, in one article in which the child's mother was quoted, the newspaper noted that they intentionally withheld her name in an effort to protect the identity of the child. In another article covering the rape of a 12 year old by her stepfather, the newspaper stated their decision not to name the parents in order to conceal the child's identity. These examples suggest that it is well within the purview of newspapers to attend very carefully to protecting child victims' identities while still providing detailed descriptions of crimes they consider important to cover.

## Recommendations

This study demonstrates that identifying information about child victims appears in media reports with considerable regularity. What we do not know and cannot say with authority, however, is how frequently or seriously this impacts on victims. Some research, discussed in the introduction, suggests that such coverage could add substantially to a victim's sense of shame and anxiety or inhibit their recovery. Personal quotes and individual anecdotes provide evidence that it happens in at least some cases (Haws and Ramsey, 1996; Riski and Grusin, 2003). In addition, fears of media disclosure may also play a role in the reluctance of some victims or their families to report crimes to authorities or cooperate in criminal cases, as at least one survey suggested (Kilpatrick et al., 1992). The appearance of identifying information in news accounts may add to this concern, making it harder to promote disclosure. But no research has yet been undertaken to determine how often and to what degree these negative consequences occur.

Such research is badly needed and could be easily incorporated into studies of child victimization. In follow-up studies of samples of victimized children and their families, for example, questions about the impact of media exposure need to be asked. In community surveys of victims, their concerns about the potential negative impact of being identified in the media need to be assessed, and its connection to reporting or non-reporting evaluated. Until such research is done, we need to be cautious, but there is substantial cause for concern.

Even without direct evidence of its negative impact, discussions about media practices are warranted. Media organizations and public policy in general already recognize and accept the potential for negative impact on victims from media exposure. This recognition is reflected in the policies observed by many media outlets to withhold the names of sexual assault victims (Thayer and Pasternack, 1994). It is also implicit in the laws and practices protecting juvenile offenders from media exposure (Davis, 2000).

Where the discussion currently needs to be advanced is in regard to two matters: first, the categories of victims who merit special identity protection and, second, the types of identity information that might be protected. There appears to be a fairly broad consensus that sexual assault victims merit some forms of special confidentiality, presumably because sexual victimization is particularly embarrassing (Thayer and Pasternack, 1994). But are other groups also deserving of protection under this logic? For example, do children in general, as a vulnerable group, merit special protection, even for non-sexual forms of victimization? One can certainly construct an argument that other kinds of child victimization can be highly embarrassing. To be known as a victim of physical abuse by a parent could be extremely humiliating for a child. To have been the target of an anti-gay crime by other youth could be extremely stigmatizing. The special vulnerability of youth is already recognized in the laws and policies that protect the identities of virtually all juvenile offenders. And, as we discussed earlier in the article, extending this protection to all child victims has a clear logic to it.

The types of information subject to withholding raise additional issues. Most media outlets confine their privacy policy to the name of the victim alone (Thayer and Pasternack, 1994). But as this study shows, very frequently the child can be identified because the child's parent is identified, when the parent is either quoted or involved in some way in the offense. In other cases the street address or school of the victim is cited. To fully protect the child in these instances, media outlets would need to modify their practices of always naming offenders or citing sources of quotes.

This raises the question of balancing various social and journalistic values, typically presented as the protection of the welfare of some vulnerable individuals versus the information needs of the public, which the media outlet serves (Thayer and Pasternack, 1994). It may help in the weighing of these values to identify better what exact information needs are served by the publication of identification information. Several needs are often cited as justification for publishing identities (Johnson, 1999). First, there is the need for detail and specificity to lend credibility to a story. Second, there is the need for information to help the public understand the nature of various crimes and their dynamics. Third, there is the need to protect public safety, by alerting the public to possibly dangerous environments and dangerous people.

With regard to the first two issues of credibility and public understanding, however, it is not clear that most types of identity information really make a difference. While understanding is furthered by knowing that a victim is 12 years old, how much of importance is added by knowing her last name or her address? There are some potential empirical issues here. One study found that it made no difference to readers' interest in or other perception about a news story when victims' names were omitted (Johnson, 1999). Additional such research is warranted.

With regard to the public safety needs, however, a more serious value conflict is posed that can indeed be very difficult to balance. In the case where a child is sexually assaulted by her father, who happens to be a teacher, one can certainly imagine that the need is considerable for the community to know that a local official, with access to other children, is a potential sex offender. It may be important to identify this official, even though it reveals the identity of the victim, although it should be said that in some instances in the USA and other countries, offender names have been withheld if they would have allowed victim identification (personal communications: V. Banks, 28 February 2002; R. Garavan, 1 March 2002; M. Marret, 20 March 2002; M. Mian, 25 March 2002). But there are also many cases of parent abuse where the parent is not an important public figure or a danger to the community, and in these cases the value of identifying the offender is surely not greater than the value of protecting the victim. While the dilemma is strongest in the case of offender names that may implicitly identify a child victim, it is hard to imagine the kind of case in which publishing the name of the victim adds to the protection of the community. Moreover, even when identifying information may be important to protect some community like a school, this may be just as well accomplished through law enforcement notification rather than through an indiscriminate vehicle like publishing the name of the school in a newspaper.

To the extent that protecting community safety needs to be weighed against the protection of child victim privacy, this suggests that the media should have a policy to evaluate matters on a case-by-case basis with the default being to preserve child privacy unless safety considerations prevail (Office for Victims of Crime, 1998). When information like the name of a school or the name of the offender would potentially identify victims, newspaper editors should be able to specify the particular public safety priority that is served by the inclusion of that information. Formal collaborative channels of communication could be developed between media and law enforcement that could help determine when community safety needs are an issue and the minimal amount of identifying information necessary to make public.

Another value that has been suggested by advocates of naming victims is the need to dispel the stigma attached to crime victimization. Some media professionals are openly critical of the policy of hiding names and identities, for the reason that they see such policies as perpetuating the idea that this is a shameful experience (Crystal, 2003; Eagan, 2001; Gartner, 1991; Gibbon, 2003; Lake, 1991; Riski and Grusin, 2003). Most commentators, and the majority of newspapers that preserve anonymity for sexual assault victims, have rejected such arguments (Riski and Grusin, 2003). While everyone decries the stigma surrounding victimization, it is doubtful that publishing names does much of anything to reduce such stigma. The publication of the names of criminal offenders does not reduce the stigma of being an offender; actually the opposite is true. The stigma of victimization emanates from public attitudes about victims, and perhaps to some extent from human nature itself, not from media policies.

A related argument for identifying victims has been that to grant them anonymity is unfair to offenders. The editor of the *Shelton-Mason County Journal* has been a vocal proponent of this argument (Gartner, 1991; Haws and Ramsey, 1996; Riski and Grusin, 2003). If offenders are identified at the time of arrest or in discussion of a court case, but victims are not, it creates a presumption of offender guilt, according to this argument. It

is true that having your name reported in conjunction with a crime is very stigmatizing. Whether this is justified under our system where accused individuals are presumed innocent is a separate question beyond the scope of this article. But being so identified is certainly stigmatizing whether or not the victims are also identified; and there is no evidence that protecting the victim's identity increases that stigma for the accused. Moreover, if victims' identities are protected primarily because they are juveniles, this practice seems less prejudicial toward offenders. In fact, when offenders are juveniles, typically their identities are protected as well.

Another situation often used to justify the use of a child victim's name is when the identity has been previously disclosed; for example, as part of an earlier investigation for a missing child or due to another series of circumstances (Kravetz, 1989; Steele, 2002). Thus, when a child has been abducted and publicly identified as part of the search, even after recovery the child will typically be identified in many subsequent stories. These stories may describe in great detail the terrible crimes that were committed against the child, including sexual crimes, as was the case with kidnap victims Sean Hornbeck of Missouri or Elizabeth Smart of Utah. Current journalistic practice appears to hold that once an identity has been disclosed, there is no benefit to the child from withholding identity in future stories, so the policy of total disclosure prevails.

However, this assumption – that once identified, there is no benefit or even ability to further conceal the identity – is not necessarily accurate. It is true that many readers would have previously seen the name of the victim or could find it out if they really wanted to be reminded. But additional public identification may indeed cause further harm that could be avoided. So by stopping the identification of the victim, the victim might be spared the discomfort of seeing their name in print in conjunction with the embarrassing crime details. In addition, there would very likely also be some readers who, depending on the notoriety of the case, had not learned the name earlier or who had forgotten the name. If after recovery the identity was no longer published, the child would be provided with a somewhat expanded, although certainly not complete, cushion of anonymity. Another possible practice might be to withhold details about the crimes committed, particularly sexual crimes, if a child victim's identity had been previously divulged.

A perhaps more ambiguous scenario occurs when youth want to go public themselves. There are certainly situations in which youth victims of crime and abuse are comfortable discussing their experiences publicly, often in the interest of aiding prevention efforts and improving the response to victims. In these cases, the media may be justified in including victims' identities in reporting about their efforts. If the evidence indicated that the media were otherwise fairly conscientious, which our results bring into some question, one might feel more comfortable in their judgment on this. However, there are also many situations in which youth or their family may feel pressure to agree to participate (e.g. Libow, 1992). Youth who agree to be identified may not be making that decision fully cognizant of the implications of their actions. Indeed, the tragic events in the case quoted in the beginning of the article suggest one example of a youth who, in an effort to stand publicly against hate crimes, could not anticipate the weight and consequences of being so widely identified as a victim. We recommend a presumption to always maintain the utmost privacy except in the most clear-cut and compelling situations of a public need for information.

Finally, another frequent scenario that results in the disclosure of victim identity is when a victim's parents or other relative are quoted by name in reference to the crime or the investigation. The main justification usually presented for such identification is simple consistency – quoted individuals are named in most media (Thayer and Pasternack, 1994). But, in fact, anonymous quotations are sometimes allowed, as in 'state department official who spoke on condition of anonymity'. Journalistic scandals have occurred on occasion when reporters used unnamed sources, typically situations in which editors could not verify the source (Thayer and Pasternack, 1994). But in child victim cases, the identities are known to editors but withheld. It is not at all clear that journalistic integrity or credibility is impaired if a reporter indicates that the name of the family spokesperson is not printed to protect the identity of the victim.

### **Guideline suggestions**

Clearly there is a need for more discussion among journalists, child welfare specialists, victim advocates, criminal justice authorities and ethicists. In fact, it might be useful for many communities to have independent media ethics panels made up of such authorities to discuss and offer opinions concerning just these issues in specific cases. While the content analysis was based on larger circulation newspapers, and the results may not represent smaller, more local papers, there is no reason to believe that there would be less of a problem at that level.

Based on this research and previous work on this topic, we would be inclined to propose the following guidelines:

1. A presumption of identity protection in news accounts should pertain to all crimes against children, not just sex crimes.
2. The identity protection guidelines should cover not simply the name of the child, but other information that could positively identify the child, including the names of parents and relatives and the street address. Consideration should also be given to the protection of less specific identity information about child victims, including the name of their school.
3. The main criteria for waiving identity protection would be situations in which the information would serve to better protect the child (e.g. missing child recovery) or protect the public. However, consideration should be given to the minimum amount of disclosure that would protect the public consistent with protecting the child.
4. Law enforcement and victim advocates should receive training in how to help child victims and their families minimize identity disclosure and its impact. This would include withholding such identity information when it is not required, and counseling victims and families about their rights. They might also counsel families about the potential impact of media exposure, and how to best shield children from its effects. Such training might also provide information about how to advocate with journalists and editors on behalf of victim identity protection. Research suggests that police are influential on the decisions of editors and reporters to publish names, and will often defer if asked by law enforcement officials (Davis, 2000).



## Conclusion

Great strides have been made in recent years in identifying the needs of child victims and in trying to provide appropriate services and remedies for them. These include improved forensic interviewing, more sensitive medical examinations, changes in courtroom procedures, and evidence-based crisis counseling and trauma-oriented psychotherapy. However, not enough discussion has occurred around victims' needs when it comes to media publicity, and what steps are feasible within the traditions of the US legal system and journalism community. This discussion needs to be undertaken in earnest, along with social science and communications research that can help inform and resolve some of the debate.

## Notes

- 1 To ease readability, we use the terms 'victim' and 'offender' when discussing newspaper coverage of reported child victimizations. However, readers should keep in mind that many of the victimizations reported by newspapers are suspected or alleged crimes and may not result in convictions.

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