

# Reporting on Sexual Violence

## A Media Guide for Maine Journalists



**mecasa**  
MAINE COALITION AGAINST  
SEXUAL ASSAULT  
[mecasa.org](http://mecasa.org)

Reporting on rape and sexual violence is a valuable public service provided by journalists and news organizations across Maine. Media's focus on objectivity and facts in reporting helps Maine communities and policy makers process complex crimes and make informed decisions with regard to safety and security.

Reporting also shapes public debate and discourse about victims/survivors, offenders, and about sexual violence as a societal issue. Maine media plays a pivotal role in how we talk about these issues as a state.

The Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MECASA) has designed this media packet to be a quick and easy reference guide for Maine journalists to access information about local community resources, the most up-to-date statistics and basic information, and straightforward, neutral language, which will help clarify reporting and better inform readers and the local community.



## Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault

For over 35 years, the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MECASA) has represented and served Maine's sexual violence service providers. MECASA works toward ending sexual violence by providing public policy advocacy, assistance to Maine's sexual violence service providers, public awareness and prevention activities, and statewide training.

MECASA works toward ending sexual violence through the following efforts:

- Initiating and advocating for victim-centered public policy;
- Providing expert training, technical assistance, and resources for providers and partners;
- Funding sexual assault service providers; and
- Informing conversations about sexual violence.

## Contact MECASA

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## Statistics

When appropriate, using statistics can educate the audience about rates of sexual violence. Statistics help readers understand that sexual violence is not an isolated incident, which is especially important in articles about a specific case within a community.

### Maine-Based Statistics

- Approximately 14,000 Maine residents may be the victim of rape or unwanted sexual activity during any 12 month period.<sup>1</sup>
- One in five adult Maine residents have been the victim of rape or attempted rape during their lifetime. 35.7% of females surveyed and 10.1% of males surveyed have experienced this devastating crime at some point in their lives.<sup>2</sup>

### Impact

- 48.6 percent of adult Maine sexual assault survivors report that they have ever been diagnosed as depressed, as opposed to 17.5 percent of individuals who have never been sexually assaulted.<sup>3</sup>
- 38.3 percent of adult Maine sexual assault survivors report that they have ever been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, as opposed to 14.2 percent of individuals who have never been sexually assaulted.<sup>4</sup>

### National Statistics

- One in five women have been the victim of attempted or completed rape in their lifetime. Nearly one in two women have experienced sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime.<sup>5</sup>
- One in five men have experienced a form of sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime.<sup>6</sup>

## Reporting & Prosecution

- Only 2-8 percent of all sexual assault accusations reported to law enforcement turn out to be false. This is the same rate as other violent crimes.<sup>7</sup>
- Rape is the most underreported violent crime in the United States and in Maine.<sup>8</sup>

## What is Sexual Violence?

The following issues are considered part of the spectrum of sexual violence. MECASA is able to answer questions you may have when writing articles pertaining to any of the following:

- Sexual harassment and gender bullying
- Sexual coercion
- Commercial sexual exploitation
- Human/Sex trafficking
- Child sexual abuse
- Elder sexual abuse
- Unwanted sexual contact
- Sexual abuse by a caregiver
- Mandated reporting
- Stalking
- Drug- and alcohol-facilitated sexual assault
- A power differential which makes sexual contact illegal (e.g. teacher-student, doctor-patient)
- Sexual assault
- Sexual violence in the context of an intimate partner relationship

1. Dumont, R & Shaler, G. (2015). *Maine Crime Victimization Report: Informing public policy for safer communities*. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine.
2. Ibid.
3. Maine Centers for Disease Control (2006). *Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System*.
4. Ibid.
5. Black, M.C., et al. (2011). *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
6. Ibid.
7. Lonsway, K., Archambault, J., & Lisak, D. (2009). False reports: Moving beyond the issue to successfully investigate and prosecute non-stranger sexual assault. *American Prosecutors Research Institute*, 3(1).
8. Morgan, R. & Truman, J. (2018). Criminal victimization, 2017. Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved from: <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv17.pdf> & Dumont, R & Shaler, G. (2015). *Maine Crime Victimization Report: Informing public policy for safer communities*. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine.

Much of the information contained in this media packet is the result of the work of Claudia Bayliff of the National Judicial Education Program at Legal Momentum.

# Helpful Hints

## Language

In the interest of balance, journalists may use language that unwittingly implies that the victim was an equal actor. In fact, in order to portray sexual violence accurately, it is important to use language that puts the burden of action on the reported perpetrator.\* It is also important for journalists to use the most accurate name(s) for the act(s), rather than using euphemisms (see below).

MECASA is available to train staff, answer questions, and review reporting guidelines and protocols with any news organization. More neutral language will result in clearer and more sensitive reporting. Below is a list of examples of words or phrases to avoid, accompanied by alternative language and reasoning.<sup>9</sup>

Instead of...	Use...	Because...
Sex scandal	Sexual assault; sexual abuse; rape, etc.	“Sex scandal” <b>diminishes the crime and sensationalizes it.</b> It removes the distinction between a normal, consensual act and violence/a potential crime.
Sex or intercourse as a euphemism for rape or sexual assault	Call it what it is: rape, sexual assault, etc.	This again <b>blurs the line</b> between what is a consensual sex act and what is a crime. “Intercourse” instead of “rape” <b>prevents the public from fully understanding</b> that the act was one of violence and not a mutually consensual act.
Perform oral sex	Forced oral and genital contact	The use of the word “performed” <b>wrongly assumes that the victim is the primary actor</b> and was not forced. When in doubt, use actual body parts and describe the act perpetrated.
Fondle	Grope; unwanted sexual contact	Fondle conveys the idea that the perpetrated act is gentle, which may <b>undermine a reader’s ability to see unwanted sexual contact as a harmful</b> and potentially criminal activity.
Engaged in	Was forced to	The term “engaged in” <b>assumes that the victim was an active participant</b> , negating the fact that she/he was <i>forced</i> to participate.
Victim admits Victim confesses	Victim reports; victim reveals	Both “admits” and “confesses” <b>imply responsibility and shame on the part of the victim</b> and does not hold the perpetrator responsible.
Accuser	Alleged victim; victim (if perpetrator convicted)	“Referring to the victim as the ‘accuser’ (means) she is no longer the victim of (the perpetrator’s) alleged attack. She is the one doing something - to him. In other words, she is now the perpetrator of the accusation against him... <b>(H)e is transformed from the alleged perpetrator of sexual assault to the actual victim of her accusation. The public is thus positioned to identify sympathetically with him – to feel sorry for him – as the true victim.</b> ” <sup>10</sup>

9. The following information was used with permission from: Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Women and Girls. (2012). *Reporting on rape and sexual violence: A media toolkit for local and national journalists to better media coverage.* Retrieved from [www.chitaskforce.org/wp/.../Chicago-Taskforce-Media-Toolkit.pdf](http://www.chitaskforce.org/wp/.../Chicago-Taskforce-Media-Toolkit.pdf)  
 10. Katz, J. (2011, August 20). DSK’s alleged victim should not be called his “accuser”. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jackson-katz/dks-alleged-victim-should\\_b\\_930996.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jackson-katz/dks-alleged-victim-should_b_930996.html)

\*Perpetrator is used throughout this document with the understanding that journalists and news organizations do not refer to perpetrators as such until they are convicted of a crime.

## Shirttail

Survivors and their families will read articles about sexual violence in newspapers, hear them on the radio, and read them on online platforms. These stories may result in retraumatization, or may “trigger” other kinds of post-traumatic stress. It is important to include a shirttail at the end of each story pertaining to sexual violence:

*To reach a sexual assault advocate, call the Statewide Sexual Assault Crisis and Support Line at 800-871-7741. This free and confidential 24-hour service is accessible from anywhere in Maine. Calls are automatically routed to the closest sexual violence service provider.*

## Naming the Victim

As most news organizations agree, every attempt to conceal the victim’s identity should be made out of respect for the victim unless the victim wishes to be identified. This includes information that may identify her/him in a small community.

## Additional Resources

These resources can help inform guidelines and protocols for reporting on sexual violence. MECASA is also available to provide technical assistance in the form of staff training and answering questions.

### [Poynter Institute](#)

A one-stop website for what you need to know with regard to reporting on all types of sexual violence – not just the sexual abuse of children.

### [The Dart Center – Reporting on Sexual Violence](#)

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, a project of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, is dedicated to informed, innovative and ethical news reporting on violence, conflict and tragedy. This page provides quick tips for journalists – from preparation to writing the story.

### [Center for Sex Offender Management](#)

The Center for Sex Offender Management (CSOM) is a national clearinghouse and technical assistance center that supports state and local jurisdictions in the effective management of sex offenders.

### [National Sexual Violence Resource Center](#)

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center serves as the nation’s principle information and resource center regarding all aspects of sexual violence. It provides national leadership, consultation and technical assistance by generating and facilitating the development and flow of information on sexual violence intervention and prevention strategies.

### [Centers for Disease Control & Prevention – The National Intimate Partner & Sexual Violence Survey \(NISVS\)](#)

The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) is the most up-to-date and comprehensive survey regarding sexual violence and intimate partner violence.

### [Maine Crime Victimization Survey](#)

The purpose of the Maine Crime Victimization Survey (MCVS) is to better understand the nature and extent of crime in Maine.

### [Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault](#)

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