

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## For Reporting on Mass Shootings



### ABOUT THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations address how media covers an incident where a person (or a small group) shoots multiple others in a public setting. The tragedies at Columbine, Virginia Tech, Aurora and Orlando are examples of mass shootings. These recommendations are not intended to address gang violence or murder-suicide (i.e. intimate partner violence).

*This consensus project was led by SAVE and included national and international experts from AFSP, the CDC; Columbia University; IASP Media Task Force; JED; NAMI-NH; SPRC; and multiple media industry experts.*

### GENERAL INFORMATION FOR REPORTING

- How you report on violence (mass violence, domestic violence, suicide) may influence and impact others.
- Minimize reporting on the perpetrators as others might identify with or be inspired by them.
- Avoid putting photos of the perpetrator side by side with a victim.
- Use the perpetrator's photo sparingly, especially in follow-up stories, except if police are still looking for the perpetrator or for other victims.
- Avoid reporting that increases misunderstanding and prejudice of mental illness and include information about treatment and prevention. A mental health diagnosis is not necessarily or causally related to violence.
- Do not oversimplify or sensationalize the incident because it may encourage people who may seek notoriety. (e.g. do not say, "The deadliest incident since Columbine.")
- Report on victims and how communities and the nation can mobilize to support victims and prevent future shootings.
- Avoid stigmatizing the community where the incident occurred or the people targeted by the perpetrator.
- Remember that families, including those of the perpetrator, are deeply affected and traumatized by the incident. Be sensitive when conducting interviews.

### TOP 3 THINGS WE WANT YOU TO KNOW

1. Research shows that the manner in which media reports on mass shootings can contribute to contagion (copycat behavior). Responsible reporting can reduce risk.
2. The majority of people who live with a mental health condition are non-violent. Also, those who carry out mass shootings oftentimes have not been formally diagnosed with a mental health condition.
3. Responsible reporting on mass shootings can educate the public and reduce the risk of future violence.

### HARMFUL MEDIA COVERAGE CAN:

- Provoke copycat incidents by people who may see the perpetrators as models or heroes.
- Further traumatize survivors, families and communities.
- Increase prejudice and stigmatization against people living with a mental illness.
- Deter people who have a mental illness from seeking or accepting help.

### HELPFUL MEDIA COVERAGE CAN:

- Educate the public, helping them recognize and respond to individuals who may be considering a violent act.
- Comfort survivors, families and communities – including families of the perpetrators.
- Inform the public about warning signs of distress or potentially violent behaviors.
- Encourage people to seek help for themselves or others who might be at increased risk of harmful acts.

## INSTEAD OF THIS

- Reporting that a mental illness caused the shooting.
- Reporting that one problem led to the incident.
- Stating the perpetrator's name frequently.
- Portraying the shooter as heroic, romanticized, a victim, or a tortured soul.
- Including witness statements that the shooter acted "crazy" or "insane".
- Speculating or allowing sources to speculate on the mental health condition of the perpetrator.
- Showing graphic images of the crime scene.
- Speculating on a motive with law enforcement, family, co-workers, etc.
- Showing images of the shooter with weapons or dressed in military-style clothing.

## DO THIS

- Report that most who live with a mental health condition are non-violent.
- Explain that many factors contribute to a mass shooting.
- Present facts about the shooter and describe their behavior as illegal and harmful.
- Include witness statements describing what the shooter did in an objective manner.
- Consult experts to comment on mental illnesses.
- Explain that violence is complex and typically involves more than one motive.
- Be sensitive and cautious using visual images.
- Talk about the victims and their stories.
- If using photos of the perpetrator, show only the face and crop out weapons, uniforms and other visual elements that might inspire copycats.

## WARNING SIGNS OF MASS SHOOTINGS

- **Surveillance behaviors (casing a scene).**
- **Explicit verbal or written threats about plans to harm or kill others.**
- **Expressing admiration or identification with another perpetrator of violence.**
- **Online searches for weapons and obsessions with acquiring large quantities of guns and/or weapons.**
- **Expressed fantasies or thoughts of engaging in shootings and other violent behaviors.**

## REPORTING ON A MANIFESTO

- Does using it add to the story?
- Only quote a manifesto, social media or other writings when it adds important information to the story.
- Use drawings and graphic material sparingly. Avoid images that glorify violence.

## A NOTE ON SUICIDE BOMBERS AND MASS SHOOTINGS

- There is no such thing as a "suicide bomber" or "suicide attack."
- Suicide is defined as **self-directed** violence (CDC).
- So called suicide bombers are intent on murdering others; consider instead saying "terrorist," "homicide bomber" or "mass killer."

## PUBLIC SERVICE

- Include a tagline in your story: "For help with emotional distress and/or suicidal thoughts, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255)."
- Crisis Text Line: "Text HELLO to 741741."

## REFERENCES

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