

In the Aftermath of Mass Violence Incidents: Crime Victims and the News Media

Overview

As a tragic mass violence incident (MVI) is occurring, it becomes not only *breaking news*; it often becomes the dominant story covered by broadcast, print and online news media. There is painful and personal interest in news about MVIs from people whose loved ones and friends may be involved, and who rely on the news media for any information. There is also interest from the surrounding community and broader public who want to know facts about the impact of the MVI.

Journalists and media organizations play an important role in the aftermath of an MVI, gathering and reporting accurate information and communicating the status and needs of victims and survivors. Interviews or other interactions with media professionals can, at times, be rewarding experiences. But encounters with journalists can also be stressful or challenging for victims. These guidelines are designed to help victims and survivors of and witnesses to MVIs in the short- and long-term aftermath of a MVI make informed choices about the media. *For the purpose of these guidelines, the term “media” refers to news and educational print and broadcast medium but not entertainment, direct mail, telephone, or fax; and the term “victim” incorporates victims and survivors of MVIs; witnesses to these mass crimes; and their loved ones.*

In the immediate aftermath of an MVI, media mobilize and gather on the scene along with first responders. Many of the traditional guidelines for crime victims and survivors about how to deal with the news media – including autonomy, personal choice, and protection of their privacy may compete with the demands of news gathering when an MVI occurs and in its immediate aftermath:

- The MVI may be an active crisis event with protective perimeters still being established when the media converge on the site, which allows for access to victims and witnesses that may be unwanted or intrusive.
- People who are directly affected and highly distressed may be compromised in their abilities to give informed consent to media interviews, yet are often thrust into this position because the media are physically present asking questions.
- Photographic and film images of highly distressed victims who flee the MVI may be immediately published and broadcast, sometimes with inadequate consideration of their privacy or safety concerns.
- The physical scene surrounding an MVI is often a chaotic atmosphere, offering few safeguards to survivors and witnesses until the emergency Response Center with privacy and safety protections is established.
- The sheer volume of news media outlets, journalists, trucks and equipment that swarm the area around which the MVI occurs can be overwhelming and further traumatizing to people who have just experienced an MVI, and their loved ones who show up to try and locate them.

Emergency response professionals, including agencies’ public information officers, are well aware of the news media’s need for timely, accurate information during and following an MVI. They are also increasingly aware of the need to protect the privacy of victims, survivors and witnesses without jeopardizing the media’s goal of reporting about the MVI. Support for MVI victims, who wish to speak to the media is often provided by personnel at the Response Center, Family Assistance Center and/or

Resiliency Center to help coordinate media relations in the immediate-, short- and long-term aftermath of a MVI.

Responsible Reporting and Informed Consent After MVIs

Even in the high-stress environment of an MVI, it is possible to distinguish between responsible, ethical news gathering and irresponsible or exploitative practices. Responsible media professionals will always:

- Identify themselves
- Prioritize the safety of victims ahead of news gathering
- Check the accuracy of victims' names and other information when circumstances permit
- Seek permission for an interview beyond gathering basic facts
- Accept a victim's refusal to be interviewed
- Respect a victim's request to not be identified by name
- Confirm the accuracy of rumors or evolving information before publishing, broadcasting or sharing on social media

While journalists facing deadline pressure may make errors of fact or judgement, responsible news organizations will promptly correct errors.

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