

Guidance for reporting on a murder-suicide

Background

A murder-suicide is when a person kills another individual, or individuals, before taking their own life. The murder victim may be someone known to them or a stranger. It includes cases where individuals kill members of their family before taking their own lives, or where an individual murders a number of people in a public place, such as a school, before taking their own life.

The generally accepted definition of murder-suicide is: 'murder followed by the suicide of the perpetrator(s) within one week.' However, different definitions have been used by researchers and this makes accurate like-for-like comparisons of murder-suicides difficult.

Murder-suicides are rare but tend to receive a disproportionate amount of media coverage. It is arguably in the public interest to examine the circumstances surrounding these types of deaths. Their impact can be widespread and family, friends, neighbours and witnesses are likely to be traumatised in the aftermath of an incident.

There may be blanket coverage of such events, including on social media, over an extended period of time. It is therefore important that journalists take extra care when reporting these stories.

Points for consideration

- As with other suicides, there is the potential that the reporting of murder-suicides could lead to imitational incidents.
 - The reasons why someone chooses to murder others and to then take their own life are extremely complex. Speculation about the 'trigger' or cause for suicidal behaviour can oversimplify the issue and should be avoided.
 - The sudden and shocking nature of murder-suicides can have a profound and traumatic impact on the families of victims and the communities in which they take place. The effects may last for a long time.
- We know from the wider evidence base around suicide coverage that sensational reporting can lead to imitational behaviour in others.
- Think carefully before approaching victims, witnesses or others affected by a murder-suicide as they may be traumatised by the event. While some people may be visibly emotional, others may not be. Please do not assume this means they are in a position to be interviewed. If a witness or victim volunteers to be interviewed, it is advisable to check they understand that what they say may be published.
 - Question if it is really necessary to report from the scene of a murder-suicide. For example, is it essential to have footage of the street or area where a familial murder-suicide occurred, when relatives and neighbours are likely to be in shock and distressed in the aftermath of such a traumatic event?
 - If reporting on rapidly unfolding events, care should be taken to avoid speculation and misrepresentation of a situation. It is important

Best practice for reporting on murder-suicides

- When reporting on the actions of the perpetrator leading up to or during an incident, be extremely careful not to sensationalise or dramatise events.

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to make clear that statements by witnesses and survivors are the perspectives of individuals and not a conclusive account of events.

- Speculation about the motives behind the perpetrator's behaviour should also be avoided – this can be extremely distressing for family members who have lost loved ones.

Unsubstantiated conjecture may also influence vulnerable people.

- Be extremely careful when reporting live on an alleged murder-suicide not to fuel panic. Publicising premature or potentially inaccurate estimates of the number of people killed or injured may cause undue stress to families and communities.



How Samaritans can help you

Samaritans' media advice team is available to support journalists and to answer questions relating to murder-suicides at mediaadvice@samaritans.org

For general advice and best practice consult [Samaritans' Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide](#) on our website.

When covering the topic of suicide or self-harm please encourage help-seeking by including sources of support, such as Samaritans' helpline:

When life is difficult, Samaritans are here – day or night, 365 days a year. You can call them for free on 116 123, email them at jo@samaritans.ie, or visit www.samaritans.ie to find your nearest branch.