

FACTSHEET MURDER-SUICIDES

MEDIA GUIDELINES for Reporting Suicide

SAMARITANS

Background

Murder-suicides are extremely rare yet they tend to receive a disproportionate amount of media coverage. A murder-suicide is when a person kills members of their family before taking their own life, 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 difficult.

It is inevitable that such shocking events are reported and it is arguably in the public interest to examine the circumstances surrounding these types of deaths. Murder-suicides may be uncommon but their impact can be widespread. Family, neighbours, friends and witnesses may be traumatised in the aftermath. There may be ‘blanket’ reporting of such events that lasts for days or weeks. It is vital therefore for journalists to take extra care when reporting these stories.

Be aware

- As with other suicides, there is evidence that reporting of murder-suicides can lead to ‘copycat’ incidents.
- The reasons why someone chooses to murder others and to then take their own life are extremely complex. The academic literature available suggests that risk factors can include serious mental health problems and substance misuse.
- The sudden and shocking nature of murder-suicides can have a profound impact on the communities in which they take place and the traumatic effects may last for a long time.

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. There is a risk of triggering copycat behaviour by other vulnerable individuals.
- ◉ Think carefully before approaching potentially traumatised witnesses, victims or others affected by a murder-suicide. 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, double check they understand that what they say will be broadcast or printed.
- ◉ 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 may be in shock and distressed.
- ◉ Be extremely careful when reporting live on an alleged murder-suicide not to fuel panic. Publicising premature estimates of the number of people killed or injured may cause undue stress to families and communities.
- ◉ Exercise extra caution if reporting on rapidly unfolding events in order to guard against misrepresentation or exaggeration of a situation. Make it clear that witness and survivor statements are the perspectives of individuals and not a conclusive account of events.
- ◉ Avoid speculation about the motives behind the perpetrator's behaviour. Unfounded conjecture may unduly influence vulnerable people.

**For general tips on best practice consult *Samaritans and IAS'* *Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide* at:
www.samaritans.ie/mediaguidelines**

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