



Covering Sexual Violence

A quick guide for Kentucky journalists

Accurate, trauma-informed reporting can help survivors, inform the public, and strengthen community response.

When interviewing a survivor

Let survivors tell their story. Explain how the interview and story may be used, respect boundaries, and allow survivors to skip questions or end the interview.

Avoid victim-blaming. A survivor's clothing, alcohol or drug use, sexual history, relationship, location, or other choices do not cause sexual violence. Avoid questions or language that imply otherwise.

Remember: trauma looks different for everyone. Survivors may freeze, have gaps in memory, delay reporting, remain in contact with the person who harmed them, appear calm, or choose not to report. Behavior is not proof or disproof of sexual violence.

Be precise

USE PRECISE LEGAL LANGUAGE

Use *reported*, *disclosed*, *alleged*, *accused*, *charged*, *convicted*, or other terms that accurately reflect what is known and legal status of the case. Attribute claims when possible: police said, prosecutors said, court records show. Don't call someone a "rapist" before conviction.

Terms to rethink

- "Date rape" → rape
- "Domestic dispute" → domestic violence / assault
- "Child pornography" → child sexual abuse material (CSAM)

Language matters

DON'T CALL SEXUAL VIOLENCE "SEX"

Rape and sexual assault are not sex or normal sexual activity. Avoid language that suggests mutual or consensual participation.

Instead of: *"the couple had sex," "engaged in sexual activity," "had intercourse"*

Be specific: *"sexually assaulted," "sexually abused," "groped," "forcibly touched," "forcibly penetrated," or another accurate description.*

AVOID EUPHEMISMS

Skip "inappropriate relationship," "affair," "became involved with," or "abusive relationship" when describing sexual abuse or exploitation.

Name the conduct and the person responsible when the facts support it: "A teacher was accused of sexually assaulting a student."

NAME THE PERSON RESPONSIBLE

Passive: "A Lexington woman was raped."
More direct: "A Lexington woman reported that a man raped her."

Active language makes clear that a person committed an act against another person rather than allowing the perpetrator to disappear from the sentence.



Kentucky sexual violence facts and statistics

Sources: KASAP; RAINN; CDC National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS). More statistics and full citations available at kasap.org

45% of Kentucky women experience contact sexual violence during their lifetimes.

30% of Kentucky men experience contact sexual violence during their lifetimes.

87% of sexual violence instances reported to Kentucky police were perpetrated by someone known to the victim.

28% of Kentucky women experienced contact sexual violence before age 18.

CONTRARY TO WHAT SOME MAY THINK

Sexual violence happens in homes, relationships, schools, workplaces, and communities. It is rarely a story about a stranger.

THE “WOULD WE DO THIS IN ANOTHER CRIME STORY?” TEST

Would we describe a robbery victim's clothing? Explain what a victim did wrong before being robbed? Focus on how devastating the arrest was for the accused person's family? If not, ask why those details belong in a sexual violence story.

Report the story, not just the incident

Ask more than “What happened?”

- How did schools, organizations, law enforcement, or other systems respond?
- Were policies followed?
- What barriers did the survivor face?
- What could have prevented the harm?
- What is being done now?
- What can the community learn?

Look for stories about prevention, accountability, systems, services, policy, and solutions, not only individual incidents.

Statewide & local perspective

Kentucky's **13 regional rape crisis centers** provide free, confidential support to survivors statewide, while KASAP strengthens this network through training, advocacy, resources, and coordination.



We are here as a resource.

KASAP can speak to statewide trends, policy, legislation, funding, prevention, training, and systems impacting survivors across Kentucky.

Regional rape crisis centers can speak to local trends, community needs, available services, and their direct work with survivors.

Not sure who to contact? KASAP can connect you with the right local or statewide expert.

