

Aside from libel, the most important consideration when reporting on crime is showing sensitivity to the victims.

The guiding principle is: **Don't make things worse for the victim than they already are.**

In other words, don't compound the trauma they suffer by subjecting them to unnecessary publicity and certainly not to embarrassment or ridicule.

The most sensitive cases involve sexual assault. Like most reputable news organizations, Patch does not identify victims of sexual assault, domestic abuse or crimes against children. (There are exceptions we'll discuss later.)

But Patch policy goes farther. As is stated in the [Patch reference guide](#): **Victims of most crimes do not need to be identified by name in your article unless that knowledge is pertinent to the story.**

The ID is pertinent in the case of a murder victim, say, or the victim of kidnapping IF authorities are seeking public help in finding the victim. (Kidnapping cases often stem from child custody disputes, in which cases extra caution is necessary.) But for everyone else -- victims of robbery, burglary, fraud, and so on -- the default setting should be against identification.

This is not a matter merely of avoiding the use of names; we must also be careful not to provide other information that gives the victim's identity away.

For example: "Bill Smith is charged with rape in an assault on his 13-year-old daughter," identifies the victim without using her name. It is better to say, "Bill Smith is charged with raping a young girl." That way the victim's identity is at least somewhat obscured.

Note the relevant language from the reference guide:

"Be careful with cases involving sexual assault (including date rape), domestic abuse and crimes involving children (including molestation by a relative). Bring these to a manager's attention if you're unsure about any aspect. It's better to be safe than to post something that "victimizes a victim" or reveals too much information. **In cases where the victim is related to**

the accused, you usually can find a way to write about the crime and the person charged without revealing the identity of the victim.

(Note also from the reference guide: “While you sometimes may be contacting victims of crime or their relatives for stories, **do not contact the victims of sex assault**. Consult with your manager when in doubt.”)

Things get more complicated in cases where it's all but impossible to obscure the victim's identity. In cases of domestic violence, for instance, identifying an abusive husband is tantamount to identifying an abused wife.

In these cases, **it is more important to protect the privacy of the victim than to identify the accuser.**

Which means you should ask yourself, Should I be writing this story at all?

If you're writing a crime story merely because you got a press release and you need a post for Patchtown today, or because it's one of several items in a blotter, that is not a good enough reason to proceed.

We do not write things up just because we can. Nor do we write up borderline cases merely because other media with looser guidelines or worse taste have already done so.

Another important point from the reference guide:

“Never refer to “alleged” victims or “alleged” assaults in cases involving sex crimes. It is a needless insult to the victims. To get around the “victim” dilemma -- the word “victim” presumes a crime took place where none may be certain -- you may write: “The woman told police she was attacked”... You may also refer to the person who was attacked as “the accuser.”

Now for the special cases:

There are rare instances where we might identify the victims of sexual assault. It is increasingly common for women to come forward to accuse men who assaulted them, Harvey Weinstein being the obvious example. [Here's a Patch example.](#)

If a prominent person is charged with sexual assault or domestic violence, a story might be appropriate, perhaps required, even if it means identifying the victim.

[Here's a heinous example.](#)

The key point to remember is that NO reporting on crimes of a sexual or domestic nature should be done without careful thought, or without consulting a manager. Better to take time to get it right than to further victimize the victim. **If that means not being first on a story, so be it.**