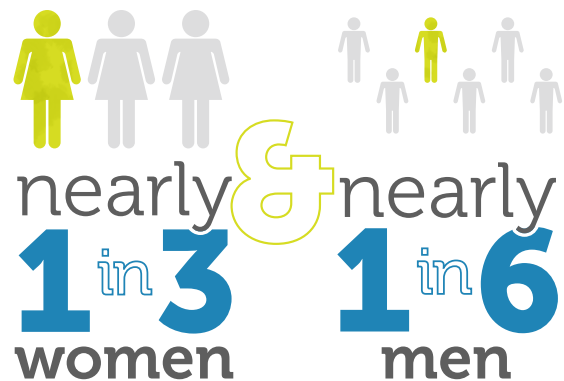


# Reporting on Sexual Violence

This media guide includes definitions and key terms, statistics, language considerations, and resources to aid in reporting about sexual violence.

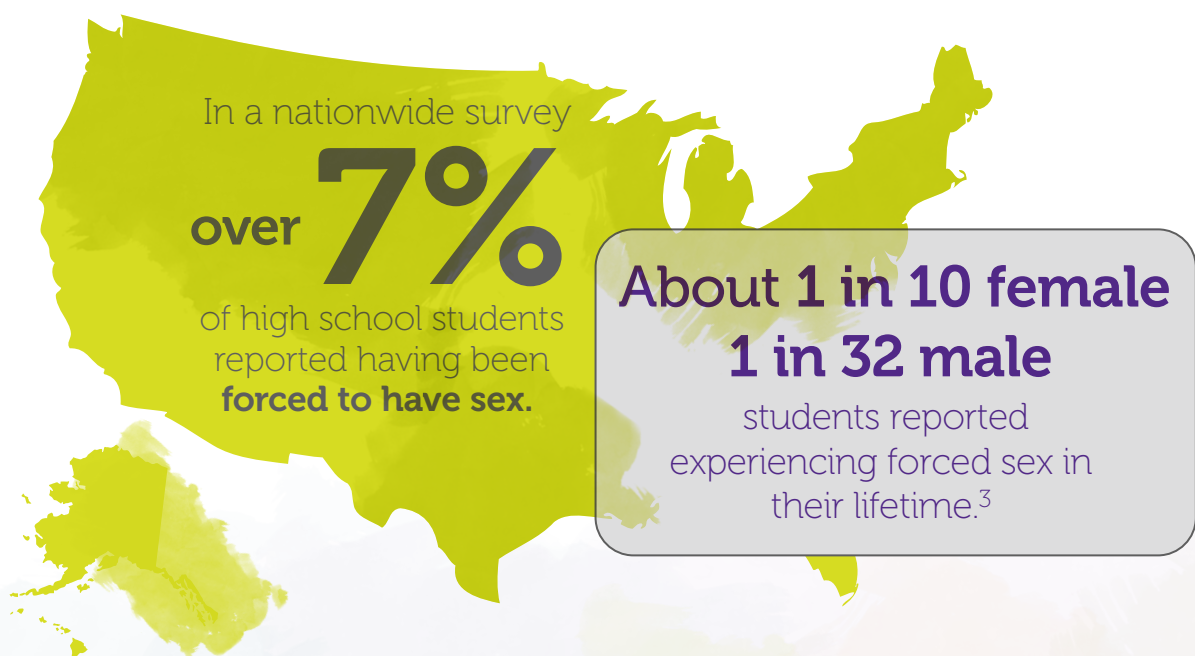
Everyone plays a role in preventing sexual violence. The news media can increase the public's understanding of what sexual violence is and how to prevent it. Journalists can impact prevention by:

- including up-to-date statistics,
- placing isolated events in the larger context of a broad public health issue,
- using non-biased, neutral language, and
- providing comprehensive coverage that highlights prevention approaches with the greatest potential to reduce sexual violence and its consequences.



**have experienced some form of sexual violence victimization involving physical contact at some point in their lives.<sup>1</sup>**

**Sexual Violence (SV)** refers to any sexual activity when consent is not obtained or given freely. Sexual violence impacts every community and affects people of all genders, sexual orientations, and ages—anyone can experience or perpetrate sexual violence. People who perpetrate are usually someone the victim knows such as a friend, current or former intimate partner, coworker, neighbor, or family member.<sup>2</sup>



## DEFINITIONS & KEY TERMS

**Sexual violence involves a lack of freely given consent as well as situations in which the victim is unable to consent or refuse:**

**Consent:** Words or overt actions by a person who is legally or functionally competent to give informed approval, indicating a freely given agreement to have sexual intercourse or sexual contact.

**Inability to Consent:** A freely given agreement to have sexual intercourse or sexual contact could not occur because of the victim's age, illness, mental or physical disability; being asleep or unconscious; or being too intoxicated (e.g., incapacitation, lack of consciousness, or lack of awareness) through their voluntary or involuntary use of alcohol or drugs.

**Inability to Refuse:** Disagreement to engage in a sexual act was precluded because of the use or possession of guns or other non-bodily weapons; or due to physical violence, threats of physical violence, intimidation or pressure; or misuse of authority.

Sexual violence includes a spectrum of behaviors that may be completed or attempted:

- forced penetration of a victim,
- alcohol/drug-facilitated penetration of a victim,
- forced acts in which a victim is made to penetrate a perpetrator or someone else,
- alcohol/drug-facilitated acts in which a victim is made to penetrate a perpetrator or someone else,
- non-physically forced penetration which occurs after a person is pressured verbally or through intimidation or misuse of authority to consent or acquiesce, and
- unwanted sexual contact that does not involve penetration (e.g., groping), and non-contact unwanted sexual experiences (e.g., verbal sexual harassment).

For more information on these behaviors, visit:  
[www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/definitions.html](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/definitions.html)

AN ESTIMATED  
**20% of women**  
and **6% of men**  
were **victims** of  
**ATTEMPTED OR COMPLETED**  
**sexual assault**  
during their college years.<sup>4</sup>



## LANGUAGE CONSIDERATIONS\*

To portray sexual violence accurately, it is important to use language that does not place blame on victims. It is also important for journalists to use the most accurate terms(s) for describing the act(s), rather than using euphemisms.

Suggested Language	Language to Avoid	Why it Matters
Sexual violence; sexual assault; sexual abuse; rape	Sex scandal	"Sex scandal" diminishes the crime and sensationalizes it. It removes the distinction between a normal, consensual act and violence/a potential crime.
Rape; sexual violence; sexual assault; unwanted sexual penetration; etc.	Sex or intercourse (used as euphemism for rape or sexual assault)	This blurs the line between what is a consensual sex act and what is a crime. "Intercourse" instead of "rape" prevents the public from fully understanding that the act was one of violence and not a mutually consensual act. Always avoid the language of consensual sex when age and power differentials negate the ability to consent.
Forced oral and genital contact	Perform oral sex	The use of the word "performed" wrongly assumes that the victim is the primary actor and was not forced. When in doubt, use actual body parts and describe the act perpetrated (e.g., the perpetrator forced their penis into the victim's mouth).
Grope; unwanted sexual contact; unwanted touching	Fondle	Fondle suggests the perpetrated act is gentle, which may undermine a reader's ability to see unwanted sexual contact as harmful.
Was forced to	Engaged in	The term "engaged in" assumes that the victim was an active participant, negating the fact that she/he was forced to participate.
Victim reports; victim says	Victim admits, victim confesses	Both "admits" and "confesses" imply responsibility and shame on the part of the victim
Alleged victim; victim, survivor (if perpetrator convicted)	Accuser	Referring to the victim as the 'accuser' means they are no longer the victim of the alleged perpetrator's attack. The victim becomes portrayed as the one doing something to the perpetrator. In other words, the victim is now the perpetrator of the accusation. The perpetrator is transformed from the alleged perpetrator of sexual violence to the actual victim of their accusation. Excessive use of the word "alleged" or "claimed" implies disbelief of the victim.
Alleged perpetrator; perpetrator (if convicted)	Accused	"The accused" places the burden on the victim/survivor, who did the "accusing," instead of calling attention to the alleged acts by the perpetrator. Similar to why "accuser" should be avoided, "accused" implies that someone accused them. Behaviorally specific language is clearer to the reader.

\* Provided with permission from the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault (2017). Reporting on Sexual Violence: A Media Guide for Maine Journalists. Retrieved from: <http://www.mecasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/MECASA-Media-Guide-2017.pdf>

## RESOURCES

The following resources address additional considerations for journalists when reporting on sexual violence:

- [Reporting on Sexual Violence: Tips for Journalists](#)
  - [Media Packet: Talking with Survivors](#)
  - [Reporting on Sexual Violence](#)
  - [Media Packet: Crime Reports of Sexual Violence](#)
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For more information on topics including child sexual abuse, campus sexual assault, and engaging bystanders, refer to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center's [Sexual Violence Media Packet](#).

For more on sexual violence prevention, please refer to the following resources:

- [STOP SV: A Technical Package to Prevent Sexual Violence](#) (CDC)
  - [Sexual Violence in Youth: NISVS Factsheet](#) (CDC)
  - [Sexual Violence on Campus: Strategies for Prevention](#) (CDC)
  - [Prevent Connect](#)
  - [National Sexual Violence Resource Center \(NSVRC\)](#)
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Additional, up-to-date statistics about sexual violence and prevention strategies in the U.S. can be found in the following resources:

- [National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey](#)
  - [STOP SV: A Technical Package to Prevent Sexual Violence](#) (CDC)
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## REFERENCES

1. Smith, S.G., Chen, J., Basile, K.C., Gilbert, L.K., Merrick, M.T., Patel, N., Walling, M., & Jain, A. (2017). *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010-2012 State Report*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
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3. Kann L, McManus T, Harris WA, et al. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance — United States, 2015. *MMWR Surveill Summ* 2016;65(No. SS-6):1–174.
4. Krebs, C.P., Lindquist, C.H., Warner, T.D., Fisher, B.S., & Martin, S.L. (2007). *The Campus Sexual Assault (CSA) Study*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice.



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