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Media Need To Do More To Protect Identities Of Child Victims, New Research Shows

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DURHAM, N.H. – More than half of all newspaper articles on crimes against children reveal identifying information about the victims, according to new research conducted by the University of New Hampshire’s Crimes against Children Research Center.

The research is presented in the June 2010 issue of the journal *Journalism* in the article “Protecting Victims’ Identities in Press Coverage of Child Victimization.”

“Many outlets have policies aimed at protecting child victims,” said study lead author Lisa Jones. “But when you look at the details, articles include facts and references that could clearly identify them, including the family name, address, and schools they attend. Much of the coverage of the abuse included personal and potentially very embarrassing details about the victimization, such as descriptive details of the physical acts committed during sexual victimizations.”

The researchers reviewed more than 500 newspaper articles published in 36 newspapers during a two-year period that reported non-fatal crimes against child victims. They found identifying information was more likely in cases involving family perpetrators and high-profile offenders. Sex crime cases had somewhat fewer revelations, but even so 37 percent contained identifying information.

The authors point out that juvenile victims actually have less protection in the United States than juvenile offenders, whose identities are often protected by state law. Victims have to rely on voluntary guidelines adopted by media outlets that are not systematically enforced.

In the article, the authors call for more comprehensive voluntary policies to protect the identities of child victims. For example, they argue that victims of all crimes, not just sex crimes, should be given protection.

“It certainly can be humiliating to be known because your parent beat you or you were the victim of a hate crime,” Jones said.

They also call for leaving out the names of offenders or quoted individuals who might be relatives. “It is not helpful for newspapers to say they are withholding the name of the victim, and then quote the child’s mother by name saying she thinks the offender deserved a longer sentence,” Jones said.

The authors hope that the research will spark the media industry to think through its practices in more detail and come up with better standards.

Created in 1998, the UNH Crimes against Children Research Center (CCRC) works to combat crimes against children by providing high-quality research and statistics to the public, policy makers, law enforcement personnel, and other child welfare practitioners. CCRC is concerned with research about the nature of crimes including child abduction, homicide, rape, assault, and physical and sexual abuse as well as their impact. Associated with the CCRC is an internationally recognized group of experts who have published numerous books and articles concerning the incidence and impact of violence against children. Visit the center online at [http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/index.html](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/index.html).

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T-hall

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