

Editorial Policy

BBC

Guidance Note

Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour

This guidance note relates to reporting crime and crime reconstructions. It should be read in conjunction with BBC Editorial Guidelines (www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines) Section 7: Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour which also contains Guidelines on Investigations into Crime and Serious Anti-Social Behaviour, Interviews with Prisoners, Payments, Paedophiles and Other Sex Offenders, Crime Library Material, Requests for Untransmitted Material and Requests for Transmitted Material).

It should be noted that the Editorial Guidelines on Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour contain 13 mandatory referrals to Controller Editorial Policy, which may be read at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edguide/crime/crimemandatoryr.shtml>

In cases of doubt, further assistance can be sought from the duty Editorial Policy Adviser by telephoning

All Guidance Notes can be found at edpol.gateway.bbc.co.uk/guidance_notes.shtml (BBC internal link) or www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/advice/.

Reporting Crime

General

Our output may add to people's fear of becoming crime victims even when, statistically, they are very unlikely to be so. It is against this background that we need to judge our crime reporting. This does not mean we should "explain crime away", but we do need to keep our crime coverage in proportion.

We must ensure that over time, all our principal news and factual programme outlets - network, regional and local - report the whole crime picture: the relevant trends as well as the individual events that lie behind, and sometimes contradict, them.

When we broadcast or publish material that concerns a real crime, some of those involved (offenders, suspects, witnesses or relatives) may have changed their names or addresses in order to re-establish their lives. Careful consideration should be given to the extent to which we identify them or their whereabouts. See BBC Editorial Guidelines Section 3 Accuracy: Anonymity.

News reporting of crime

Violent crime is a small percentage of total crime but it occupies a greater proportion of our crime coverage and we should be sensitive to the fears this may create.

When we handle crime stories we should think carefully about why and how we are reporting them, and their context.

In practice this means we should:

- be aware of the overall proportion of time spent on covering crime, in particular violent crime, and sensitive to the possible cumulative effect, particularly on rolling news channels.
- be aware of audience sensitivities when covering crimes that involve violence. See BBC Editorial Guidelines section 8 Harm and Offence: Violence.
- use legitimate criteria to select a crime story and take care not to suggest trends where none exist. For example, we should not report one stabbing just because it comes after another more newsworthy one. We should also avoid using language that falsely implies a link between crimes, such as "tonight's attack comes just two days after....."
- handle with care crime stories reported in breakfast bulletins which featured the previous day. The story may not merit reporting again unless there is a development overnight.
- handle with care running major crime stories. These are often properly reported over a number of days although we should think carefully before reporting them on days when there are no newsworthy developments. The fact that we have deployed journalists or resources on the story is never a sufficient reason in itself for reporting it.
- judge the editorial significance of a crime story when placing it in a running order. We should be wary of "ringing the changes" in regular summaries by the inclusion of crime stories which, though fresh, fail the editorial tests.
- think carefully about the accuracy and suitability of language when reporting crimes. The factual description of crime is dramatic enough. We should avoid colourful language, clichés and unnecessary adjectives
- be scrupulous when dealing with criminals. **Any proposal to interview a criminal active in or wanted in the UK must be referred to Controller Editorial Policy. See BBC Editorial Guidelines section 7 Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: dealing with criminals.** In some circumstances contacting escaped prisoners or people wanted by the police in the UK may constitute a criminal offence. **Any proposal to contact or interview such people must be referred to Controller Editorial Policy and Programme Legal Advice.**

- be scrupulous about our interviews with witnesses, both in the UK and overseas, to ensure that we do not interfere in the legal process. When conducting news interviews with people who have recently witnessed a crime we should be aware of the possibility of contempt of court. **Witnesses should not normally be interviewed about their evidence once proceedings are under way and until the verdict has been reached. Any proposal to do so must be referred through a senior editorial figure or for Independents through their commissioning editor to Programme Legal Advice and Editorial Policy.** Witnesses sometimes claim to have been coached by a journalist. To protect ourselves against any unfair accusation and with the knowledge of the interviewee we should record and keep the whole interview, including any pauses, interruptions, prompting, repeat questions, or re-takes. See BBC Editorial Guidelines section 7 Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: interviewing witnesses or potential witnesses and BBC Editorial Guidelines section 7 Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: Payments.

Context

While news programmes will often report crimes as events, over time we must offer our audiences an understanding of the issues and trends so that they can appreciate where events are exceptional. We can achieve this by putting crime in general, and some crimes in particular, into context – this does not mean explaining it away but it does mean helping audiences to recognise the wider picture. In practice this means we should:

- not rely on any one statistic. People use statistics in ways which are partisan. There is no foolproof method of measuring the actual incidence of crime. The British Crime Survey published by the Home Office is widely recognised as a non-partisan source, but people quote from its findings selectively
- make use of our own specialist advice. BBC correspondents have experience of the complex picture revealed (or sometimes obscured) by crime statistics and of the arguments that go with them
- be cautious when using experts. We should check their credentials and recognise there may be others with equivalent expertise but who interpret the facts differently.

Witnessing Illegal Activity

See Section 7: Crime and Anti-social Behaviour: Witnessing Illegal Activity.

Additionally, if sources have been promised anonymity we should take steps from the very start of the production process to ensure that we are in a position to honour it, including considering the implications of a court order. See BBC Editorial Guidelines section 3 Accuracy: anonymous sources and section 7 Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: disguising identities.

We must avoid obstructing the administration of justice against the criminals concerned through our research or programme production. We must consult Programme Legal Advice about any material that may risk prejudicing future criminal proceedings. This material may constitute contempt, particularly if broadcast close to the date of the trial.

Crime Reconstructions

News programmes may report crime reconstructions staged by the police for the purpose of gathering evidence. They should not normally commission crime reconstructions except for use at the conclusion of a trial. Revisiting the scene of a crime and/or interviewing a victim or witness do not in themselves constitute a reconstruction.

Factual programmes should restrict the use of reconstructions to the conveying of factual information. They should not be used simply to attract or entertain audiences. All reconstructions should be clearly labelled - it should be obvious to the audience where a reconstruction begins and ends.

When reconstructing crime for factual programmes we should:

- base the portrayal of real people and the detail of our reconstructions, including significant dialogue, on verifiable evidence. This means we should not reconstruct detail, including dialogue, which we do not have reason to believe occurred, unless there are clear and specific editorial reasons for doing so. We should not use an actor's portrayal of a character to create dramatic details or an overall tone for which we have no verifiable evidence.
- think carefully about the appropriate use of camera angles, particularly point-of-view shots. We should not frighten audiences with shots that make them feel they are the victim, although sometimes it will be necessary to show a scene from the victim's viewpoint. The camera will usually appear as an observer of events rather than as a participant
- avoid unnecessary close-ups of weapons.
- reconstruct wounds being inflicted or shots of blood only if they are editorially justified.

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- avoid revealing detail that could be used to make a criminal activity more effective. See BBC Editorial Guidelines section 7 Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: editorial principles.
- not normally use post-production techniques, like slow-motion, simply for dramatic effect. They must have a clear editorial purpose.
- not use incidental music or irrelevant sound effects.

When we examine, reconstruct or dramatise past events which could cause possible distress to crime victims and/or their families. We should try and minimise it by informing them about our plans. We should, as far as is reasonably practicable, contact surviving victims, and/or the immediate families of the deceased. If we contact people through an intermediary, such as the police or social services, it is our responsibility to check the victim and/or immediate family have been informed and have the necessary details to allow them to contact.