

EDITORIAL POLICY GUIDANCE NOTE

REPORTING CRIME

(Last updated: October 2010)

EDITORIAL GUIDELINES ISSUES

This guidance note should be considered in conjunction with the following Editorial Guidelines:

- Reporting Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour
See Editorial Guidelines Section 8 Reporting Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour
- Accuracy
See Editorial Guidelines Section 3 Accuracy: Reporting Statistics and Risk.

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- We can avoid stoking unwarranted fear of crime if, over time, our news and factual programme outlets provide context to crime reporting – including not just individual events, but also the relevant trends that lie behind them.
- Avoiding unnecessary fear of crime may require us to be aware of the overall proportion of time spent on covering crime and sensitive to the cumulative effects.
- We should think carefully about the accuracy and suitability of language when reporting crimes. The factual description of crime is often sufficient to convey the reality, tragedy or horror of events, without the addition of colourful language, clichés and unnecessary adjectives
- Providing context to the reporting of crime may require us to be cautious when using experts, make use of the BBC's own specialist advice, and take care in the use of statistics.
- When reconstructing crime for factual programmes we should take care only to reconstruct what we actually know, and avoid speculation or unfounded significant detail.

GUIDANCE IN FULL

- Introduction
- News Reporting of Crime
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Introduction

We should be aware that crime reporting has the potential to add to people's fear of becoming victims of crime even if statistics suggest it is very unlikely. This doesn't mean we should 'explain crime away' but we do need to pay due attention to whether we are stoking an unwarranted fear of crime.

It is helpful if, over time, all our news and factual programme outlets provide context to crime reporting – including not just individual events, but also the relevant trends that lie behind them.

(See Editorial Guidelines Section 8 Reporting Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: 8.4.8 – 8.4.11)

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.

We can help avoid unnecessary fears by thinking about how and why we are reporting crime stories, and their context. In practice, this might involve some or all of the following:

- being 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 output
- being aware of audience sensitivities when covering crimes that involve violence

(See Guidance: Violence in News and Current Affairs Output)

- using legitimate criteria to select a crime story and taking care not to suggest trends where none exist. For example, we should not report one stabbing just because it has happened following another more newsworthy one. We should also avoid using language that falsely implies a link between crimes – for example, "Tonight's attack comes just two days after, etc."

- handling running crime stories with care. These are often properly reported over a number of days, but require careful thought before reporting them on days when there are no significant developments. The fact that we have deployed journalists or resources on a running crime story is not a sufficient reason in itself for reporting it
- judging the editorial significance of a crime story when placing it in a running order. We should be wary of freshening up regular summaries by including crime stories which, although fresh, fail other editorial tests
- thinking carefully about the accuracy and suitability of language when reporting crimes. The factual description of crime is often sufficient to convey the reality, tragedy or horror of events, without the addition of colourful language, clichés and unnecessary adjectives.

Context

While news programmes will often simply report crimes as events, we also aim – over time – to offer our audiences an understanding of the issues and trends that lie behind crime. We can achieve this by putting crime in general, and some crimes in particular, into context that helps audiences understand the wider picture. In practice providing context may require us to:

- avoid relying 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 those with vested interests may sometimes 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.

(See Editorial Guidelines Section 3 Accuracy: 3.4.21 and Editorial Guidelines Section 4 Impartiality: 4.4.14)

Crime Reconstructions

When reconstructing crime for factual programmes we should take care only to reconstruct what we actually know, and avoid speculation or unfounded significant detail.

We do not normally reconstruct detail, including dialogue, which we do not have reason to believe occurred, unless there is a clear and specific editorial reason 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 there is no verifiable evidence.

In addition, we should think carefully about the appropriate use of camera angles – particularly point-of-view shots. Although it will sometimes be necessary to show a scene from a victim's viewpoint, we should take care to avoid frightening audiences by using shots that make them feel they are the victim. The camera will usually appear as an observer of events rather than as a participant.

We do not normally use close-ups of weapons or shots of blood simply for dramatic impact and the inflicting of wounds is only reconstructed where editorially justified.

Post-production techniques, such as slow motion, may sometimes have an editorial purpose – but they are not normally used simply for dramatic effect. And we do not normally use incidental music or irrelevant sound effects.

We should take care in reconstructions to avoid revealing detail that could be used to make a criminal activity more effective.

(See Editorial Guidelines Section 8 Reporting Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: 8.4.13 – 8.4.14)