



Domestic & Sexual Violence Language Guide

A guide for fairly and accurately reporting on domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, stalking, and human trafficking

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Why Language Matters

Stories about violence and abuse can uplift the voices of survivors and let victims know they are not alone. They can challenge misconceptions about violence and encourage empathy for survivors. They can inspire communities to create change and prevent future abuse.

On the other hand, when not handled carefully, stories about violence and abuse can put the safety of victims and their loved ones at risk. They can promote harmful stereotypes about the causes of these crimes. They can wrongly blame or shame victims for the abuse they experienced. They can sensationalize or minimize violent crimes.

You have the power to shape these stories for the better, to support survivors who have experienced the unimaginable. The tips and guidelines in this document will help ensure your reporting promotes survivor safety and accurately portrays violence and abuse. For more information on responsible reporting, visit nddsvc.org/media.

Have a question, comment, or need some guidance?

The North Dakota Domestic & Sexual Violence Coalition (NDD SVC) is available to:

- Answer questions about reporting on domestic and sexual violence
- Connect you with domestic and sexual violence experts
- Help you understand state laws relating to domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and related crimes

[Contact our Communications Coordinator](#) for more information.

The Children's Advocacy Centers of North Dakota (CACND) is available to:

- Answer questions about reporting on child abuse and neglect
- Connect you with child abuse experts
- Help you understand state laws relating to child abuse and neglect

Contact us at cacnd.org/contact-us/ for more information.

Key Terms

<p>Victim vs. Survivor</p>	<p>The terms “victim” and “survivor” are used to describe someone who has experienced a form of violence or abuse. For the most part, the terms are interchangeable and mean the same thing, but there are a few considerations to make before using one term or the other.</p> <p>Some people prefer the term “victim” because it conveys that a crime was committed against them. “Victim” may also be the more appropriate term to use in cases of domestic violence homicide, as not everyone survives domestic violence. NDD SVC and CACND use both “victim” and “survivor,” but we typically use “victim” whenever referencing a specific crime, legal information, or the legal system.</p> <p>Some people prefer the term “survivor” because it conveys strength and healing beyond the violence they experienced. “Survivor” can be more empowering and communicate that while a person experienced a crime, they overcame that crime in some way.</p> <p>If you’re working with a victim/survivor, use whichever term they use to describe themselves, or respectfully ask their preference if they do not say one or the other.</p>
<p>Domestic Violence vs. Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) vs. Dating Violence</p>	<p>“Domestic violence” is sometimes referred to as “intimate partner violence” or “IPV.” The terms can be used interchangeably to describe a pattern of behaviors and abusive tactics used by an intimate partner or ex-partner to gain complete power and control over a person’s life.</p> <p>Some people prefer to use the term “intimate partner violence” or “IPV” as it can feel more inclusive and more clearly communicates that violence can happen in any romantic relationship, regardless of age, gender, sexuality, or “formal” relationship status. Others prefer the term “domestic violence” as it is more commonly used and understood. “Domestic violence” is typically used across the legal system, so it can also be beneficial to use “domestic violence” to remain consistent with other systems and agencies.</p> <p>“Dating violence” can also be used to describe a pattern of behaviors and abusive tactics used to exert power and control over a dating partner. NDD SVC typically uses “dating violence” to refer to teen or youth relationships and “domestic violence” when referring to adult relationships.</p>

Sexual Violence vs. Sexual Assault vs. Rape

“**Sexual violence**” is an umbrella term used to describe any type of unwanted, forced, or coerced sexual contact or behavior that happens without consent. Sexual violence includes any kind of sexual assault, abuse, or harassment.

Sexual assault is a form of sexual violence. “Sexual assault” is similar to “sexual violence” in that it refers to sexual contact or behavior that happens without consent. However, sexual assault is more specific in that it refers to physical acts and sexual contact that happens without consent. “Sexual violence” encompasses both physical and nonphysical sexual contact that happens without consent, like sexual harassment and nonconsensual intimate image sharing.

Forms of sexual assault include:

- Rape or attempted rape
- Unwanted touching (groping, forced kissing, etc.)
- Forcing a victim to engage in sexual acts, such as forced oral and genital contact or forced penetration of the perpetrator’s body

NDDSVS typically uses “sexual violence” to talk about the topic broadly and “sexual assault” when referring to a specific crime.

“**Rape**” and “sexual assault” are sometimes used interchangeably. Rape is a form of sexual assault, but not all sexual assault is rape. The term “rape” is most often used refer to sexual penetration without consent. The FBI defines rape as “penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.”¹ We say that not all sexual assault is rape because sexual assault can occur without penetration (e.g. unwanted touching).

Terms to Avoid & Recommended Alternatives

This chart outlines terms and phrases that should be avoided in media reporting because they misrepresent or incorrectly describe domestic violence, sexual violence, child abuse, stalking, or human trafficking. These are all serious and violent crimes. It's important to use accurate language that describes them as such. The middle column provides alternate terms to use so that your reporting is accurate and does not minimize or sensationalize abuse.

Disclaimer: If you are describing a legal charge against a person, we recommend using the same language the court document, police report, etc. uses to describe the legal charge.

But when you are paraphrasing, summarizing, or describing the crime outside of naming the specific legal charge, use the following chart as a reference. For example, your story may state that, "John Doe was charged with depicting the sexual exploitation of minors," and may go on to describe the crime as, "John Doe was creating and distributing child sexual abuse materials."



If you have questions or need further guidance, contact the [North Dakota Domestic & Sexual Violence Coalition](#) or [Children's Advocacy Centers of North Dakota](#) for assistance.

Terms to Avoid	Recommended Alternative(s)	Why It Matters
Nonconsensual sex	Sexual assault; rape	Any sexual contact or behavior that happens without consent is sexual violence. Therefore, "nonconsensual sex" is really sexual assault. It's important to accurately name sexual assault and not use euphemisms like "nonconsensual sex" that minimize the crime that occurred.

Terms to Avoid	Recommended Alternative(s)	Why It Matters
Sex or intercourse (used as a euphemism for rape or sexual assault)	Sexual assault; rape	These terms blur the line between what is a consensual sex act and what is a crime. Using “intercourse” or “sex” instead of “sexual assault” or “rape” prevents the public from fully understanding that the act was one of violence and not a mutually consensual act.
Alleged rape; alleged sexual assault; alleged abuse; alleged domestic violence Claimed to be raped; claimed to be sexually assaulted; claimed to be abused	Reported rape; reported sexual assault; reported abuse; reported domestic violence	Excessive use of “alleged” or “claimed” implies some disbelief in what the victim is reporting. “Reported” is a more neutral word and can be used in place of these terms. ² Many victims and survivors choose not to report abuse because they fear not being believed. Language that takes reports of violence seriously can empower more victims to make a report and reach out for help.
Perform oral sex	Forced oral and genital contact	Forced oral and genital contact is an act of sexual violence and is not the same as consensual “oral sex.” The word “perform” also 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).
Sex scandal (when used to describe a form of sexual violence)	Sexual violence; sexual assault; sexual abuse; rape	“Sex scandal” diminishes and sensationalizes the crime that occurred. It removes the distinction between a normal, consensual act and a violent crime.

Terms to Avoid	Recommended Alternative(s)	Why It Matters
<p>Sex with minor(s); Sex with children; Sex with underage girl(s)/boy(s); sex with adolescent girl(s)/boy(s)</p> <p>Sexual relationship with minor, teen, underage girl(s)/boy(s), adolescent girl(s)/boy(s)</p> <p>Sexual contact with minor, teen, underage girl(s)/boy(s), adolescent girl(s)/boy(s)</p>	<p>Sexually abuse a minor; sexually abuse children; sexually abuse underage girl(s)/boy(s); sexually abuse adolescent girl(s)/boy(s); sexually abuse minor/teen;</p> <p>Child sexual abuse</p>	<p>Consent cannot be given by anyone who is underage, and without consent, sexual activity is sexual violence. Therefore, adults cannot “have sex with” minors. They cannot have a “sexual relationship” or “sexual contact” with minors. They can only sexually abuse minors.</p> <p>It’s important to describe sexual abuse and exploitation of minors as the crimes they are. Do not minimize the seriousness of these crimes or imply consent with phrases like “had sex with.”</p> <p>Always avoid the language of consensual “sex” when age and power differentials negate the ability to consent.</p>
<p>Child sex crime</p>	<p>Child sexual abuse</p>	<p>As a general rule, “child” and “sex” should not be paired together. And further, “child sex crime” is an unclear term. It could refer to a child sexually abusing another child, or it could refer to an adult sexually abusing a child.</p> <p>“Child sexual abuse” is a more clear term to use when referring to an adult sexually abusing a minor, and it avoids “sex,” which implies consent.</p>

Terms to Avoid	Recommended Alternative(s)	Why It Matters
Child porn; child pornography	Child sexually abusive materials; child sexual abuse materials (CSAM)	<p>“Porn” or “pornography” minimizes the crime and may imply consent to the creation of these materials. Children cannot consent to sexual activity and therefore cannot consent to being depicted in sexually explicit images, videos, or audio.</p> <p>Any sexual activity involving children is sexual abuse. Therefore it is best to describe images, videos, or audio that depict children in sexual acts as child sexual abuse materials.</p> <p>Although federal statutes use “child pornography,” avoid it whenever possible. Use it only in direct quotations or legal documents. When possible, describe the material precisely, such as “photos depicting the sexual abuse of children,” “videos showing the sexual exploitation of a minor,” or “sexually explicit photos and videos of children.”³</p>

Terms to Avoid	Recommended Alternative(s)	Why It Matters
Revenge porn; revenge pornography	Nonconsensual intimate image sharing; Image-based sexual assault; tech-enabled sexual abuse	<p><i>From the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN):</i> Tech-enabled sexual abuse is not “pornography.” Informed, capable adults may legally choose to participate in the creation and distribution of consensual pornographic media. But when explicit sexual content is created or shared without the subject’s legal consent, it is abuse.⁴</p> <p><i>From Cyber Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI):</i> “Revenge” suggests that the victim-survivor did something to cause the violation of their intimate privacy. This inappropriately places blame on the victim instead of the offender. Further, the phrase “revenge porn” erases situations where the offender is motivated not by personal grievance, but instead seeks financial gain, social status, gratification of voyeuristic impulses, entertainment, or simply fails to consider the victim-survivor’s humanity at all. Many perpetrators are not motivated by revenge or by any personal feelings toward the victim.⁵</p>
Fondle	Sexually assaulted; forcibly touched; unwanted touching	“Fondle” means to stroke or caress lovingly or erotically and should not be used to describe a crime. This term suggests the perpetrated act was gentle, which may undermine a reader’s ability to see the seriousness of what occurred.

Terms to Avoid	Recommended Alternative(s)	Why It Matters
<p>Domestic dispute; domestic incident; domestic situation</p> <p>(when used to describe an assault or abusive tactics used by an intimate partner against their current or former partner)</p>	<p>Domestic violence; domestic violence incident</p>	<p>A “dispute” or “incident” can be a disagreement or argument between two people and does not accurately describe the seriousness and lethality of domestic violence.⁶</p> <p>Similarly, using “situation” to describe a violent act minimizes the seriousness of the crime.</p>
<p>Choked; choking</p>	<p>Strangled; strangling; strangulation</p>	<p>“Strangled” is a more accurate term for describing when a person squeezes or constricts the throat of another person. By definition, “choke” means to have difficulty breathing because of a lack of air or obstruction in the throat. However, “choking” is not always an act of violence. A person can choke if they swallow food wrong. Using “strangled” is more accurate, and it also helps place accountability for the act on the offender rather than the victim. So instead of saying, “The victim was choked by the offender,” we say, “The offender strangled the victim.”</p>
<p>Engaged in</p>	<p>Was forced to</p>	<p>The term “engaged in” assumes that the victim was an active participant in the abuse, negating that she/he may have been forced or coerced into participating.</p>

Terms to Avoid	Recommended Alternative(s)	Why It Matters
Victim admits; victim confesses	Victim reports; victim says; victim shares; victim tells	Both “admits” and “confesses” imply responsibility and shame on the part of the victim. These terms imply the victim has done something wrong, even though they are the victim of a crime. The recommended alternatives offer more neutral terms for when a victims shares what happened to them.
Accuser; victim accused perpetrator	Victim; victim reported perpetrator	Referring to a victim as the “accuser” means they are no longer the victim of the 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 perpetrator of domestic or sexual violence to being a victim of an accusation.
The accused	Perpetrator; offender	Similar to why “accuser” should be avoided, “the accused” now makes the perpetrator of a crime the victim of an accusation. “The accused” places the burden on the victim who did the “accusing,” instead of calling attention to the actions of the perpetrator.
Prostitution; sex work	Human trafficking	Activities described as “sex work” or “prostitution,” can involve coercion, exploitation, trafficking, or slavery. The individuals involved in these activities may not be freely choosing to be involved. “Human trafficking” more accurately describes how these individuals may be forced into these activities through violence, deception, or coercion.

Terms to Avoid	Recommended Alternative(s)	Why It Matters
Prostitute; child prostitute; prostituted person; sex worker; underage sex worker	Survivor of human trafficking; child survivor of human trafficking; survivor of childhood human trafficking	<p>Similar to how “human trafficking” is a preferred term over “sex work” or “prostitution,” describing an individual as a “survivor of human trafficking” is preferred over calling them a “prostitute” or a “sex worker.”</p> <p>Furthermore, minors cannot legally consent to sexual activity. Avoid terms like “child prostitute” or “underage sex worker” that can suggest a child is voluntarily trading sex for money. Though some underage people seek out “sex work” for financial support, they are in most cases not legally able to consent to sex. Instead, use specific phrasing that conveys context and relevance.³</p>
He/She sold sex	He/She was sold for sex; He/She was bought for sex	<p>“She sold sex” implies the person selling sex has chosen to do so, while “She was bought for sex” suggests that this person may be in a human trafficking situation.⁷</p> <p>This context helps readers understand that human trafficking is crime that is committed against a person, not something that a person is freely choosing to take part in.</p>
Sex sting; prostitution sting	Sexual abuse sting operation; Human trafficking sting operation	<p>The consensual term “sex” should not be used to describe the sexual abuse or exploitation of an individual.</p> <p>Similarly, “prostitution” should not be used to describe the trafficking of individuals.</p>

This chart was adapted from [“Reporting on Sexual Violence: A Media Guide for Maine Journalists”](#) with permission from the Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault.⁸ A full list of sources can be found at the end of this document.

Sharing Identifying Information

The following are best practices for how and when to share a victim's identifying information when reporting on domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, stalking, and human trafficking:

- Do not identify victims, in text or through images, unless they have voluntarily and publicly identified themselves. If a victim voluntarily and publicly identifies themselves, use cautious discretion when sharing personal details about them.³ Consider how sharing their information could affect their safety and well-being.
- For child victims, avoid publishing any details that could possibly identify them, including age, gender, or relationship to the alleged perpetrator. If the victim is under age 18 and voluntarily and publicly identifies themselves, consider whether the child may be speaking under pressure from adults, and use your discretion before sharing any identifying information.
- Do not identify anyone under 18 who is a witness to a crime.
- When describing the alleged crimes, provide enough detail to make clear what happened, while avoiding a level of detail that could be perceived as gratuitous.³

Listing Resources at the End of Your Story

Every story about domestic or sexual violence should include information on where victims and survivors can get help, and we strongly encourage media professionals to make this a standard practice. Most often, this information is included at the beginning or end of an article or segment.

It's best to list local resources and crisis hotlines whenever possible. While national domestic violence and sexual assault hotlines are great resources, they often end up referring victims to local resources and hotlines anyway. You can save victims time and energy by referring them to local resources from the start.

For stories about domestic and sexual violence, NDDSVSVC recommends including either of the following options in your story:

List a statewide resource

If you or someone you know has experienced domestic or sexual violence, free and confidential help is available 24/7. Visit the [North Dakota Domestic & Sexual Violence Coalition \(NDDSVSVC\) website](#) to find a domestic violence/sexual assault victim advocacy center near you.

List a local resource

If you or someone you know has experienced domestic or sexual violence, contact *[insert local advocacy center name, hyperlink their name to their website, and list their crisis line number]* for free and confidential support.

To find a local advocacy center to list, visit nddsvs.org/find-help. A full list can also be found on the following page of this document.

For stories about child abuse and child sexual abuse, CACND recommends including the following in your story:

If you suspect child abuse or neglect, contact local law enforcement or the North Dakota Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Line at 1-833-958-3500.

North Dakota Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Victim Advocacy Centers

- 1. Hearts of Hope**
Belcourt - Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa
Crisis Line: 701.477.0002
Office: 701.477.0002
Email: gourneau@utma.com
- 2. Women's Action & Resource Center**
Beulah
Crisis Line: 701.873.2274
Office: 701.873.2274
mercerwarc.com
- 3. Abused Adult Resource Center**
Bismarck
Crisis Line: 866.341.7009
Office: 701.222.8370
abusedadultresourcecenter.com
- 4. Family Crisis Center**
Bottineau
Crisis Line: 800.398.1098
Office: 701.228.2028
famcrisiscenter.org
- 5. Domestic Violence & Rape Crisis Center**
Dickinson
Crisis Line: 888.225.4506
Office: 701.225.4506
dvrccnd.com
- 6. Kedish House**
Ellendale
Crisis Line: 877.349.5118
Office: 701.349.4729
kedish-house.com
- 7. Rape & Abuse Crisis Center**
Fargo
Crisis Line: 800.344.7273
Office: 701.293.7273
raccfm.com
- 8. Spirit Lake Victim Assistance**
Fort Totten - Spirit Lake Nation
Crisis Line: 701.766.1816
Office: 701.766.1816
spiritlakenation.com/programs/spirit-lake-victim-assistance/
- 9. Domestic Violence & Abuse Center**
Grafton
Crisis Line: 866.435.7490
Office: 701.331.0466
dvacnd.org
- 10. Community Violence Intervention Center**
Grand Forks
Crisis Line: 866.746.8900
Office: 701.746.0405
cviconline.org
- 11. Safe Shelter**
Jamestown
Crisis Line: 888.353.7233
Office: 701.251.2300
safeshelterjamestown.org
- 12. Abuse Resource Network**
Lisbon
Crisis Line: 701.683.5061
Office: 701.683.5061
abuseresourcenetwork.org
- 13. Domestic Violence Crisis Center**
Minot
Crisis Line: 701.852.2258
Office: 701.852.2258
courage4change.org
- 14. Domestic Violence Program**
NW ND
Stanley
Crisis Line: 800.273.8232
Office: 701.628.3233
dvpnwnd.weebly.com
- 15. Abused Persons Outreach Center**
Valley City
Crisis Line: 701.845.0072
Office: 701.845.0078
apocnd.org
- 16. Three Rivers Crisis Center**
Wahpeton
Crisis Line: 701.642.2115
Office: 701.642.2115
threeriverscrisiscenter.com
- 17. McLean Family Resource Center**
Washburn
Crisis Line: 701.462.8643
Office: 701.462.8643
mcleanfrc.weebly.com
- 18. Family Crisis Shelter**
Williston
Crisis Line: 701.770.5180
Office: 701.572.0757
familycrisisshelter.com

View this directory online at nddsvc.org/find-help

North Dakota Children's Advocacy Centers

1. Northern Plains Children's Advocacy Center

Minot, Bottineau, Stanley

701.852.0836

northernplainscac.org

2. Dakota Children's Advocacy Center

Bismarck, Dickinson, Jamestown, Watford City, Standing Rock

701.323.5626

dakotacac.org

3. Red River Children's Advocacy Center

Fargo, Grand Forks, Devils Lake

701.478.2322

rrcac.org

4. ConnectUs Children's Advocacy Center

Williston

701.572.3335

connectustherapy.org

View this directory online at www.cacnd.org/about-cacs/find-a-cac

Interview Sources

The North Dakota Domestic & Sexual Violence Coalition can provide information on

- How domestic and sexual violence affect North Dakota as a state
- State laws relating to domestic and sexual violence
- Where victims and survivors can find local supportive services
- State funding for domestic and sexual violence victim services
- How communities can work together to support victims and prevent violence

Find local sources

NDDSVSVC supports 18 domestic violence and sexual assault victim advocacy centers across the state. Each center is staffed with certified domestic violence and sexual assault victim advocates.

Local domestic and sexual violence advocates can provide information on:

- What supportive services are available for victims and survivors
- The complex dynamics of domestic violence, sexual violence, dating violence, and stalking
- How domestic and sexual violence impact victims, families, and communities
- How they work alongside law enforcement, legal professionals, health care professionals, and other community partners to respond to domestic and sexual violence
- How to support local efforts to end domestic and sexual violence
- How community members can support victims and prevent violence

A list of domestic and sexual violence advocacy centers can be found on page 17 of this guide.

The Children's Advocacy Centers of North Dakota can provide information on

- How child abuse affects North Dakota
- State and national statistics related to child abuse
- State laws related to child abuse
- Specialized services for victims of child abuse
- Mental health services for children dealing with trauma
- Understanding the signs of child abuse
- How communities can respond to and prevent child abuse

Sources

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4. *Tech-Enabled Sexual Abuse*. (2025). Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN). <https://rainn.org/education/online-sexual-abuse>
5. *CCRI Safety Center*. Cyber Civil Rights Initiative. <https://cybercivilrights.org/ccri-safety-center/#glossary>
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North Dakota
Domestic & Sexual
Violence Coalition

521 E Main Avenue, Suite 320
Bismarck, ND 58501

Phone: 701.255.6240
Toll Free: 888.255.6240

nddsvc.org
contact@nddsvc.org



CHILDREN'S
ADVOCACY
CENTERS
OF NORTH DAKOTA

1515 Burnt Boat Drive, Suite C
Bismarck, ND 58503

Phone: 701.587.1229

cacnd.org
info@cacnd.org

