

DON'T BE A Copagandist! POLICE SEXUAL VIOLENCE EDITION

A Resource for Media Covering Police Sexual Violence

This is a resource for journalists covering the issue of sexual violence by law enforcement agents, including police, school “resource” officers, school “safety” officers, private security stationed in schools, probation, parole, and immigration authorities, and Customs and Border Patrol.

It was created in connection with *Safe, Not Sexualized: Protecting Black Girls, Trans, and Gender Expansive Youth from School Police Sexual Violence*, a virtual event focused on Black girls, trans, and gender-nonconforming youth’s experiences of police presence in and around schools. For more information, please visit the [#PoliceFreeSchools](#) site, [The Missing Story of #MeToo](#), and [Interrupting Criminalization’s police sexual violence resources](#).

When covering sexual harassment, assault, extortion, and violence by law enforcement, it is important to keep these things in mind:

1 *Don’t minimize the problem or exceptionalize the cops involved*

Often the issue of sexual violence by law enforcement is framed by mainstream media as a rare, one-time event, the product of a single “bad” or “rogue” cop who has somehow betrayed the “honor of the badge” – even as it continues to happen over and over and over. The *Buffalo News* found, based on a review of over 700 cases across the country over a ten-year period, that a cop is caught in an act of sexual violence **every five days** on average – and those are just the ones who are caught, who represent only the tip of the iceberg according to researchers. One study by a former cop found that **a quarter to a third of cops in the St. Louis police department** engaged in some form of sexual harassment or violence while on duty.



Police sexual violence is not a matter of “bad apples” – it is a pervasive, systemic, and structural problem present in departments across the country. Learn more in Interrupting Criminalization’s report *Shrouded in Silence: Police Sexual Violence: What We Know About It & What We Can Do About It.*

2 *Don’t use minimizing language*

Often, sexual harassment, assault, extortion, and violence is described by mainstream media as “sexual misconduct,” or “official misconduct.” “Misconduct” is a term used for everything from uniform violations and inaccuracies on time sheets to groping, propositioning, or extorting sex from a member of the public. It’s not “misconduct” for a cop to engage in sexual harassment, assault, or violence – in fact, under international law, it’s considered torture. **Call it what it is – sexual harassment, extortion, assault, rape – by police or other law enforcement agents, or police sexual violence.**

Scholars recognize that sexual violence by police takes many different forms – ranging from cat calling, asking for someone’s number or inviting them on a date while acting with the authority of the badge, groping during a frisk or search, strip searches and cavity searches, demanding sex in exchange for leniency, to forcible sexual assault. Each of these acts lies on a spectrum of police sexual violence, and should be named as such.

3 *Don’t insist on speaking to a survivor before covering the story*

Insisting that a survivor re-tell their story of sexual violation by law enforcement for your story can re-traumatize them and place them at increased risk of stigma, retaliation, and harm. Often, they have already told their story in their own words in the way they wanted to, in a space where they felt held and supported – for instance at a press conference, at a community event, or in a report or testimony gathered by community-based organizations. That should be enough – you can quote from existing sources.



4 *Don't contribute to sexualizing or blaming the survivor*

Police act on and enforce racially gendered stereotypes that frame Black, Indigenous, and Latine women, girls, and trans people as inherently promiscuous, sexually deviant, sexually available, and subject to surveillance, policing, criminalization, and control. This is even more true where young people, migrants, drug users, and people in the sex trades are concerned.

Do not contribute to sexualizing survivors when reporting on police sexual violence, and do not repeat and reenforce criminalizing narratives by referring to survivors using terms such as “prostitute,” “junkie,” or “illegal.”

5 *Systemic problems require systemic solutions*

It's not enough to encourage survivors to come forward to report or file complaints when police engage in sexual violence, whether on or off duty – particularly given that those complaints are often routed right back to the police, who have effectively blocked survivors of police sexual violence from being able to take their complaints to other agencies.

Reporting places survivors – who are often people who are vulnerable to criminalization, detention and deportation – at risk of retaliation, and comes with few benefits. Sexual assault survivors are often not believed, blamed, and blocked from accessing resources for healing – and this is even more true when people are sexually assaulted by police.

There are very few resources available to survivors that address the specific impacts of being violated by an agent of the state, and very little recourse – their complaints are often disbelieved, dismissed, or treated as minor infractions, and the cops responsible very rarely suffer any serious consequences, and are often simply moved to different departments.



Individual prosecutions may result in a cop being removed from the force, but they are extremely rare – because police deliberately target people who are unlikely to come forward, or to be believed when they do – and leave the system that created the conditions for police sexual violence in place. This is particularly true when young people and people from criminalized groups are targeted.

Police sexual violence is the product of broad police power and access to vulnerable populations, including youth and criminalized populations. **Any solution must strike at the root of the problem by reducing police power and contact with members of the public.** For instance, through the creation of [#PoliceFreeSchools](#), elimination of police-youth engagement programs, decriminalization, and divestment from policing.

For additional information:

- Andrea J. Ritchie, "[How Some Cops Use the Badge to Commit Sex Crimes](#)," *Washington Post*
- Andrea J. Ritchie, "[States are trying to tackle police sexual violence, but the solutions fall dangerously short](#)," *Think Progress*
- [#PoliceFreeSchools](#)
- [The Missing Story of #MeToo](#)
- [Shrouded in Silence: Police Sexual Violence: What We Know & What Can We Do About It](#)
- [Breaking the Silence: Supporting Survivors of Police Sexual Violence](#)

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