

Psychosocial Safety

Covering gun violence in your community

Reporting on gun violence takes a toll on all journalists. But there are unique pressures for those covering gun violence in their own communities. These journalists sometimes cover mass shootings that become national and international stories, but they often cover everyday gun violence: neighborhood shootings, gang violence, domestic violence, and suicide.

Covering one's own community can empower and motivate local journalists by allowing them to provide important and not necessarily obvious context and to see the immediate and long-term impact of their work. However, [emotional and geographic proximity](#) can also lead to increased stress and burnout, and can even increase one's likelihood of developing PTSD.

This guide aims to support local journalists' ability to care for their mental health as they cover gun violence. Aimed at newsroom managers and journalists covering the story, the guide is organized into three parts: before, during, and after an assignment.

Before the assignment

NEWSROOM MANAGERS:

- Provide staff with the support, tools, and knowledge needed to cover gun violence effectively. For example, ensure all your team members understand how exposure to trauma can impact both sources and journalists. Discuss the physical and emotional signs of trauma exposure and organize training sessions with outside experts.
- Regularly check in with staff. Ask them what resources would be useful to support their work. Also, make it easy for staff to find external support, such as therapy. In the United States, the Journalist Trauma Support Network (JTSN) offers a [directory](#) of trauma-informed therapists who have experience working with journalists.
- Consider the identity and backgrounds of team members. For example, ask yourself if a reporter assigned to cover a story has connections to that community or might know someone affected. This doesn't mean they shouldn't cover the story; in fact, this might make them better suited to do so. But it does mean they might need additional support. Remember (especially in a local newsroom) that your whole team can be affected through secondary stress—or vicarious trauma—not just journalists in the field. Keep an eye on those monitoring social media and working with graphic visuals or other disturbing content. Not only will they likely be exposed to graphic content, but the content may be related to people and places they know.
- Define a mission and articulate it to your team. If journalists believe they are making a difference in their community, their resilience will be enhanced. Be sure to convey that the harassment and threat they may face online is in no way reflective of the quality of their work.

JOURNALISTS:

- Learn how to spot your own signs of distress. Recognize what happens when you feel stressed or overwhelmed. Focus on techniques that could help mitigate this, including writing a list of strategies that previously have worked for quick reference.
- Seek professional help if you need it. JTSN connects U.S. journalists with therapists trained in journalism's unique culture and occupational challenges.

- Journalists' well-being is supported by the belief that their work has both purpose and potential for positive impact—that they do no harm to their sources. This is particularly important when working within your own community. Research and learn trauma-informed interviewing techniques before covering an event. For example, a [tip sheet](#) by Washington Post reporter John Woodrow Cox offers essential guidance on interviewing children.

During the assignment

NEWSROOM MANAGERS:

- Maintain regular contact with journalists during assignments.
- Debrief after each assignment or at the end of each day if the story is ongoing. Helpful debriefs often include discussing what has gone well, what challenges arose, and what could be done differently.

JOURNALISTS:

- Many journalists struggle to balance empathy and compassion with journalistic detachment. If you become overwhelmed while covering gun violence, don't be hard on yourself. However much you think you understand the situation, avoid telling sources during an interview that you understand how they feel—everyone experiences trauma differently.
- Journalists' resilience is enhanced by the belief that they've done a good job. Conducting sensitive, trauma-informed interviews is fundamental to this. (Read [CPJ's interview](#) with four journalists who cover gun violence for tips on how to conduct trauma-informed interviewing.) It's important to show humanity when covering the immediate aftermath of a tragedy. Don't try to speak with someone who does not seem equipped to handle an interview; or ask yourself what needs to be shown to your audience. For example, after a mass shooting, do you really need to interview families at the scene? In a shooting, don't just focus on the act of violence: Find out about the victims' lives and interests. A [guide](#) from the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma offers more information on interviewing victims and survivors of traumatic events.
- Photojournalists, social media teams, and those working with imagery are likely to be exposed to graphic content when covering gun violence—especially when it's in their own community. Some steps can be taken to mitigate the effects of this content: take regular breaks, regularly alter your viewing position, and consider blocking out the most distressing part of a screen or frame—for example, a place or person you are familiar with. If you start to feel anxious, practice breathing techniques. To learn more, refer to the [Dart Center guide](#) focused on handling graphic imagery.

After the assignment

NEWSROOM MANAGERS:

- Keep an eye on team members who have been covering difficult stories and consider offering opportunities for breaks or another reprieve like covering a lighter story. If they've conducted a tough interview in the morning, ask if they'd like to focus on something less intense in the afternoon. Be sure to offer time away from work, such as an afternoon or a long weekend. Minimize contact during off hours.
- Be mindful of your own mental health and follow the advice you give your team: recognize if you're starting to feel overwhelmed, set boundaries between work and your personal life, and seek professional help if you need it.

JOURNALISTS:

- Take careful, clear, time-stamped notes while listening to recordings or working with documents containing emotionally difficult content so you don't have to repeatedly listen or read back.

- Limit your exposure to graphic imagery. Research shows that repeated exposure to traumatic imagery can increase risk of vicarious trauma—this risk increases when the person handling the imagery has a personal connection to the events. There are several precautions you can take. Eliminate needless, repeated exposure by meticulously organizing your files; take frequent screen breaks; don't pass graphic imagery to colleagues without warning them of the content. To learn more, refer to the [Dart Center guide](#) focused on handling graphic imagery.
- Ensure that you take time away from work. Decompress through exercise, walking, or socializing. Try not to engage with graphic or disturbing content outside of work—instead engage in activities like reading books, listening to podcasts, playing sports, and other enjoyable activities that help take your mind elsewhere. Take all opportunities for paid time off.
- Generally, journalists who are closely affected by a local tragedy may find it useful to attend commemorations and services. Journalists are not just covering community tragedy; they are living in the community too.
- Develop supportive relationships with your colleagues. Research shows that peer support is one of the most important factors associated with journalists' resilience.

If you or your colleagues need additional support, please contact the Dart Center (DartWebsite@gmail.com) or Committee to Protect Journalists (emergencies@cpj.org).

CPJ and Dart Center resources:

- [‘Trauma makes its way back to you’: Four U.S. journalists on covering mass shootings](#)
- [Handling Traumatic Imagery: Developing a Standard Operating Procedure](#)
- [Tips for Interviewing Victims of Tragedy, Witnesses, and Survivors](#)
- [Essential Tips for Interviewing Children](#)
- [The JTSN Therapist Directory](#)



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