

Disability, Crime and Hate Crime in the News



December 2022

Inclusion London

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Content Warning

This report contains non-explicit discussions of and details about a range of violent and criminal acts, including murder, abuse, manslaughter, rape, and domestic violence.

Many of the cases which made the news involved the death of a Disabled person or people, including children and babies. Others involved violent harm.

Therefore, we recommend that each person reading this report make their own personal assessment before and while reading this report, considering their own experiences, mental health, and boundaries.

Crimes against disabled people in the news

Introduction

It can surprise people to learn about the prevalence of disability hate crime, or how Disabled people are disproportionately affected by crime¹. There is often this assumption that few people would harm or commit crimes against Disabled people. However, Disabled people are targeted for and experience greater rates of crime than their non-Disabled peers, and there are many examples throughout our national news of just that. Inclusion London set out to explore the portrayals of disability in the media reports on these crimes.

For this report, we reviewed the news coverage of 300 crimes against Disabled people reported throughout the United Kingdom. We used reports from multiple sources online for details about:

- the crime
- the outcomes
- the media coverage
- whether any of the reports highlighted or discussed the case as a disability hate crime

¹ Burch, L. (2022). Understanding Disability and Everyday Hate; Targeted: The Truth about Disability Hate Crime (2020). Butchins, R. BBC Two; Inclusion London (2020). 'Still Getting Away with Murder' <https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/FINAL-Still-Getting-Away-with-Murder-Sept-2020-FINAL.pdf>

- how any Disabled people involved, or their impairments and/or conditions were written about

While there are limitations to using sources like news articles — which sell based on their capacity to draw in readers, often with attention-grabbing headlines — their role in the public perception of disability and crimes against Disabled people cannot be under-estimated.

Public understandings of hate crimes are already inconsistent, in part due to how the news reports on hate crime and how it is discussed, particularly on social media. In the Law Commission's recent 'Hate crime laws: final report'², one author made the following observation:

"A large number of consultees who responded negatively misunderstood that for hate crime laws to operate, there must be an existing criminal offence."

There is a widespread misunderstanding of what hate crimes are. Some responses to the consultation seemed to believe that hate crimes were solely online acts of hatred; this misconception may have arisen from the fact that the use of abusive language and slurs used during a crime can provide clear evidence of bigotry and these are often easier documented in

² Law Commission. (2021) Hate crime laws: Final report (<https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/lawcom-prod-storage-11jsxou24uy7q/uploads/2021/12/Hate-crime-report-accessible.pdf>).

online harm. Some people did not seem to know that hate crimes must involve a crime, or that those crimes can be, and often are, violent³.

Hate crimes often cause an impact beyond the individual target of the crime; the attack being rooted in biases and prejudices against an aspect of someone's identity can have repercussions for others in the same community as the victim.

The way people write about Disabled people can contribute to the societal and systemic disablism which influences how society sees Disabled people. When the media uses disablist language in reporting crimes against Disabled people, even if it is unintentional, it perpetuates the same disablism that often played a part in the crimes.

There were examples of positive reporting, some of which we use in the sections below to show alternative ways of reporting, and over the years there was a decrease in the frequency of disablist language and phrases used. However, we still found multiple examples of how societal stigma seeps into language from reports as recent as this year.

There were few instances where the choice of language or portrayal of disability seemed malicious or chosen specifically for the shock factor; though there were examples of this rooted in racism, transphobia, and homophobia. Most of the examples in this report are of the sorts of

³ Law Commission. (2021) Hate crime laws: Final report, 3.57 (page 71) (<https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/lawcom-prod-storage-11jsxou24uy7q/uploads/2021/12/Hate-crime-report-accessible.pdf>).

unconscious biases and perceptions prevalent within society, resulting from historic and cultural values and beliefs built up over the years.

The aim of this report is to summarise a selection of crimes against Disabled people reported in British news outlets, and to provide a deeper understanding of how the ways in which Disabled people are written about could affect public attitudes towards Disabled people — especially Disabled victims of crime. In doing so, we provide a tool for anyone who writes about Disabled people to consider what stigmas they may unconsciously continue to perpetrate in their writing.

The report is split into two main sections:

- A summary of the quantitative data from our research into reports of crimes against Disabled people.
- What disablist language and framings we found within the reports, the impact this can have, and what to do instead.

We hope the overall data and findings are useful to others, especially those writing about Disabled people, and can be used as a basis for further work.

A note on including cases where the Disabled person died by suicide

During our research, we found 14 news reports which focused on a Disabled victim who had died by suicide following a period of harassment or abuse. We have included these cases in our report — and will discuss them in more detail later — because, while there was little discussion of the cases in terms of a crime being committed, there was evidence of harassment and abuse that would fulfil the criteria of a hate incident, if not a hate crime.

As has been repeatedly discussed in cases such as the murder of Lee Irving and the murder-suicide of Fiona Pilkington and Francesca Hardwick, the murders of Disabled people are often preceded by warning signs; missed or ignored by others. Patterns of harassment and criminal behaviour have been present in many deaths — murder or otherwise — of Disabled people at the hands of others. The same patterns are true in the suicides included in this report.

Contents

Content Warning	2
Crimes again disabled people in the news	3
Introduction	3
A note on including cases where the Disabled person died by suicide	7
With Thanks to	10
Ableism and Disablism	11
Ableism	11
Disablism	11
Looking at the numbers: an overview of the cases	13
The pressures journalists are under and missing information in crime reports	13
The problem with Google	14
Location	15
Year Crime Occurred	15
Types of Acts and / or Crimes	17
Other Crime Details	19
Victims and relationship to their perpetrators	21
Demographics	21
Media Coverage	31
Media sources used	31
Media Coverage	32
Outcomes	34
Charged	34
Convicted	35
Legally Identified or Uplifted as Disability Hate Crimes	36

Evidence of Disability Hate Crimes	38
Why is identifying and successfully prosecuting a disability hate crime so difficult?	40
Language used in news reports	46
Overview of language and how it can perpetrate disablism	46
Quotes and summaries.....	48
Outright disablist language and insults	52
Diminishing the harm perpetuated by shifting blaming onto the victim and downplaying the impact	55
Empathy for the perpetrator, demonising or ignoring the victim.	59
Disablist and other bigoted language and phrasing in discussing the perpetrators	64
Accidental implications	68
Emphasising vulnerability	70
Victim is a “foot note” in their own story.....	73
Cases involving Disabled victims, harassment, and suicide	79
Conclusion	85
Next Steps	86

With Thanks to

During the research for this report, the existing resources below were invaluable in locating news reports and additional information, and Inclusion London is grateful to those who set-up and continue to maintain these websites. Their content can be of a deeply upsetting nature, and it is no small task that these continue to be updated.

The Disability Day of Mourning Memorial - <https://disability-memorial.org/>

A memorial to the people with disabilities who were victims of filicide. Active cataloging of cases started in mid-2014; this site contains cases from 1980 to the present.

Autism Memorial - <https://autismmemorial.wordpress.com/>

A website dedicated to remembering those autistic people who died because of malpractice, lack of resources or support, or outright murder. Occasionally, a news story will be widely covered, but most cases receive very little memorial. This site is here because everyone should be valued, and everyone should be remembered.

Memorial Annex - <https://memorialannex.wordpress.com/>

A partner site to Autism Memorial, creating a memorial of Disabled victims of murder, malpractice, lack of resources or support.

Ableism and Disablism

We use these terms throughout this report and would like to take this page to briefly explain them. Some people use these terms interchangeably; others are reducing the use of the word ableism in favour of disablism, as they believe the former inadvertently implies that oppression is caused by or linked to ability.

Other people and organisations have suggested there are subtle differences between the two, which we will explain below.

Ableism

Ableism can describe when discrimination favours non-Disabled people over Disabled people.

Disablism

Disablism can describe discrimination and/or prejudice against Disabled people.

The differences are slight, and often ableism and disablism are both present when we talk about disability discrimination as “two sides of the

same coin". Think of it as the subtle difference between choosing between two potential candidates, one with a learning disability and one without.

Ableism is favouring the candidate without a learning disability because "they'll pick up the job faster".

Disablism is discriminating against the candidate with a learning disability because "they'll take longer to train".

Throughout the report, we will primarily use the word **disablism** as much of the context is around discrimination or prejudice against Disabled people as opposed to examples of favouring non-Disabled people.

Looking at the numbers: an overview of the cases

The pressures journalists are under and missing information in crime reports

While information is more readily available than it was years ago, journalists and the media can still face obstacles in getting the facts of crimes, particularly from the police.

There have been examples over the years of police refusing to discuss 'low level crimes' with journalists⁴, journalists being removed from crimes scenes or threatened⁵, a general lack of disclosure even upon request⁶, examples of police sources perpetrating institutional bigotries and biases⁷, and the growing tensions in the relationships between policing and journalism⁸.

Also, journalism is a fast-moving field of work and there can be a lot of pressure to produce stories quickly, written in a certain way, or including certain pieces of information and not others⁹; when this happens there is a risk of mistakes being made, the story missing key information, or

⁴ <https://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2021/news/journalists-slam-police-policy-of-refusing-details-on-lower-level-crimes/>

⁵ <https://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2022/news/journalist-wins-plaudits-after-crime-scene-stand-off-with-police/>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/aug/07/police-journalists-crime-research>

⁷ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/metropolitan-police_uk_603fa18ec5b617a7e411ffc5
https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/racism-in-police-media_uk_6049f3d6c5b6cf72d0945115

⁸ Colbran, M. (2022) Crime and Investigative Reporting in the UK.

⁹ https://www.thenewsmanual.net/Manuals%20Volume%203/volume3_58.htm

interviews being done to a standard below what journalists might do without external pressures¹⁰.

We were mindful of this context while exploring reports and suspect that it contributes to the lack of information in some areas; however, this context applies to the facts of the crimes and not to the language chosen to discuss Disabled people in the media. This means the latter half of this report is unaffected by these issues.

The problem with Google

Google.com is the main “go to” for searching online, and this comes with its own issues. There is growing research into the biases which exist within the algorithms used by Google, and this affects which websites they prioritise in search results and which ones they de-prioritise¹¹.

This can make finding information about topics frustrating and favours some websites over others. However, as with many of the points in this report, this would be the primary tool an average member of the public would use to locate information online.

Therefore, Inclusion London acknowledge the algorithmic biases embedded in Google search results, but, for this report, that they exist is a part of the problem.

¹⁰ <http://www.mediacrimevictimguide.com/breaking.html>

¹¹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-google-interferes-with-its-search-algorithms-and-changes-your-results-11573823753>; <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/16/google-autocomplete-rightwing-bias-algorithm-political-propaganda>; Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) Algorithms of Oppression

Location

With a sample of 300, in consideration of which areas might get more media attention than others, meaningful pattern analysis for location is unreliable.

Areas with 5 or more cases were:

- 33 (11%) cases in London, though these were across multiple boroughs.
- 11 (3.7%) cases in Manchester.
- 6 (2%) cases in Liverpool.
- 5 (1.7%) cases in Cardiff, Fife, and Leeds.

Locations across the UK were included, as were 2 online crimes.

Year Crime Occurred

While journalists have undoubtedly reported on crimes against Disabled people since reporting began, we had to choose a cut-off date.

Disability hate crime formally came into law with the Criminal Justice Act of 2003, so we included crimes reported from 2005 onwards. As our interest was both in crimes against Disabled people generally, and Disabled hate crimes specifically, it made sense to choose a date after disability hate crime was recognised in law.

Of the 300 cases, 48 (16%) occurred before 2012 and 252 (84%) occurred during or after 2012, with 134 (45%) of the cases happening in the last 5 years.

This may be surprising at first, especially as it might not seem many cases in recent years received the widespread coverage that those in the past did. There are some cases of Disability hate crimes which have remained, rightly and understandably, in the public consciousness over many years. By comparison, recalling recent examples of disability hate crime which received national attention can be more difficult.

However, this interpretation may actually be down to the increased access to news coverage, the volume of news available online, and the ever-increasing turnover of news stories within those online spaces.

Estimates of where people access their news suggest that 'Television Only' remains only slightly ahead of "Any Internet"¹², with social media growing to the third most frequently used source of news¹³ across all age groups. Younger consumers of news are more likely to get most of their news from social media or other internet sources, but the internet has become a primary source for all age groups, albeit sometimes alongside television.

¹² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278519/platforms-used-for-news-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>

¹³ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0025/222478/news-consumption-in-the-uk-overview-of-findings-2021.pdf

Internet engagement hinges on engagement — clicks, video watches, shares, and likes — and this has altered the way we report news and how we engage with it¹⁴.

Even as someone working in disability hate crime, there were cases with significant coverage which I had not heard of before I specifically searched. The changing nature of news reporting and how we access it can, unfortunately, lead to even horrific crimes getting missed.

Types of Acts and / or Crimes

As discussed in the introduction, we included reports of a wide range of acts and crimes across the 300 cases.

We have not labelled this section specifically as “crimes” because we used general, non-legal terms to categorise cases. There are different criminal offenses within each category which a crime could be charged as, and the exact offense prosecuted was not always reported. Neither could court transcripts or summary judgments regularly be located.

We felt that leaving out categorisation entirely would have omitted information of importance to the report; for this reason, we chose to

¹⁴ <https://theconversation.com/how-engagement-makes-you-vulnerable-to-manipulation-and-misinformation-on-social-media-145375>
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14614448211027174>

categorise acts and crimes more generally. Some cases involved multiple acts.

The five most common categories tagged were:

1. Murder.
2. Physical Assault.
3. Harassment.
4. Abuse and Neglect.
5. Sexual Assault and Rape.

Even from those five categories, it is apparent that violent acts are involved in a large proportion of crimes against Disabled people reported in the media. Cyber-harm, by comparison, was reported in 2 out of 300 cases from our sample.

Of the 300 cases, 263 had details of physical violence against the victim reported in one or more news articles. 37 did not detail any specific physical violence against the victim.

This is not to downplay the impact that non-physically violent crime can have on victims, as those crimes can cause considerable and long-term harm. It is simply to reinforce that when we are considering the cases later in the report which have evidence of being a hate crime, this is the context from which we are drawing the cases.

Of course, some stories make the news while others do not. The old saying in journalism of “if it bleeds, it leads”¹⁵ refers to the fact that news stories which are violent, disturbing, or involve conflict or death will sell more copies (or in the modern day, get more clicks) than those which are not. This skews the stories which make the news; the violent crimes are more likely to be reported.

So, that more than 4 out of 5 of the cases reported in the news involved physical violence is not a surprise, nor is it an accurate representation of crimes against Disabled people overall. There will be thousands of crimes against Disabled people each year which are never reported, let alone make the news.

This does not mean the information is not meaningful, particularly for Inclusion London’s purposes.

The topics of how crimes are reported, the language used to write about Disabled victims, whether the crimes are identified as hate crimes, and the media coverage in general, are not affected by the skew.

Other Crime Details

184 cases involved a single perpetrator, and 116 involved multiple perpetrators. 41 of the 147 murders were carried out by multiple perpetrators, making up 28% of murders reviewed.

¹⁵ <https://newsliteracymatters.com/2019/11/11/q-what-does-if-it-bleeds-it-leads-mean/>

193 of the cases involved single criminal acts, while 107 involved multiple criminal acts.

Considering these in combination, the following were the breakdowns of perpetrator numbers and incident numbers:

- 133 (44%) were a single act committed by a single person.
- 51 (17%) were multiple acts committed by a single person.
- 60 (20%) were a single act committed by multiple people.
- 56 (19%) were multiple acts committed by multiple people.

There are, again, limits to the information which journalists would receive for cases; a murder that seemed to come out of nowhere could have been pre-dated by abuse, assault, or other acts which no-one outside of the victim and perpetrator knew about, especially if no physical evidence remained.

Victims and relationship to their perpetrators

Demographics

This information below should not be taken as evidence of which demographics of Disabled people are more frequently victims of crime. As previously discussed, there are a variety of factors which can make it more or less likely for a crime to be reported by the media, particularly institutional and societal bias.¹⁶

Additionally, due to some cases involving multiple victims and others lacking information regarding the victims demographics, some of the numbers below do not add up to 300.

Age

We categorised the victims in the cases into six broad age categories. As can be seen elsewhere in this report, not all information was available, particularly down to months of age, and so a few individuals may be in the incorrect age category according to standardised usage of the terms.

- 7 (2.3%) of victims were infants.
- 7 (2.3%) were toddlers.
- 24 (8.0%) were children.

¹⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/black-people-missing-b1827530.html>
<https://www.port.ac.uk/news-events-and-blogs/blogs/democratic-citizenship/why-racial-bias-dominates-coverage-of-missing-person-cases>

- 40 (13.4%) were teenagers.
- 163 (54.5%) were adults.
- 58 (19.4%) were elderly.

Gender

In this section, there were no reports of victims identified (by themselves or a third-party) as non-binary, agender, genderfluid or otherwise outside of the binary of male and female. It is possible, given our growing understanding of the spectrum of gender, that some victims did not identify as male or female, but we do not have this information.

- 152 (50.8%) of victims were identified as female in reports.
- 140 (46.8%) were identified as male in reports.
- 5 (1.7%) were crimes involving multiple victims, both male and female.
- 2 (0.7%) had no gender information reported.

Race

Again, the victim's racial identity was not always identified in the reports and so this section has a large proportion of "Unknown".

- 12 (4.0%) victims were Asian.
 - 8 (2.7%) Asian and male
 - 4 (1.3%) Asian and female
- 8 (2.7%) victims were Black.

- 6 (2.0%) Black and male
- 2 (0.7%) Black and female
- 5 (1.7%) were mixed race.
 - 2 (0.7%) mixed race and male
 - 3 (1.0%) mixed race and female
- 200 (66.9%) were white.
 - 92 (30.8%) white and male
 - 106 (35.5%) white and female
 - 2 (0.7%) involved multiple victims, male and female, who were white
- In 74 (24.7%) cases, victims' racial demographics were unknown.
 - 32 were unknown and male
 - 37 were unknown and female
 - 3 cases involved multiple victims, male and female, of unknown racial demographics

Perpetrator

The cross-section of crimes committed, their victims, and their perpetrators revealed some patterns of significance, particularly when reviewed alongside how the victim and perpetrator were described in the media.

To avoid making this section excessively complicated, we used the closest relationship for categorisation when multiple perpetrators were involved who did not have the same relationship with the victim. For example, if the

perpetrators included a parent and a cousin, we would record it under 'Parent' and not 'Other Family'.

41 (13.7%) cases included a parent or someone in a parental role to the victim as the perpetrator. We did not differentiate between biological, step-parent, or adoptive parent for this category. In considering the age demographics of the victims of parental perpetrators:

- 7 were infants; this was all the infant victims.
- 7 were toddlers; this was all the toddler victims.
- 16 were children; this was over half of the child victims.
- 4 were teenagers.
- 9 were adults.

There were 21 male victims and 22 female victims, as one case involved the murders of three siblings.

Given who infants, toddlers and children are most likely to come into contact with daily, that most perpetrators of crimes against Disabled children, toddlers, and babies were their parents was not unexpected.

Sometimes, a parent and other non-parental family members were involved in perpetrating the crime. For example, Julie Burdett was 61 when she died because of neglect perpetrated by her father, 93, and her brother, 59¹⁷. As neglect resulted from a lack of actions, including those deemed to be within

¹⁷ <https://news.sky.com/story/julie-burdett-woman-left-to-die-surrounded-by-filth-after-her-father-and-brother-failed-to-care-for-her-court-told-12578859>

the capacity of her father considering his own impairments, both parties were charged with manslaughter by gross negligence.

11 (3.7%) cases included a perpetrator who was the child of their victim(s). In considering the age demographics of the victims of child perpetrators:

- 2 were adults.
- 9 were elderly.

There were 2 male victims and 9 female victims.

As with the parental perpetrators, there were cases where a child and another individual, often a partner or another family member, were both involved in the crime. For example, Betty Guy was murdered in 2011 by her daughter and her grandson¹⁸.

11 (3.7%) cases were categorised under 'Other Family'; that is, perpetrators who were family members other than parents, partners, or children. In considering the age demographics of the victims of other family perpetrators:

- 2 were children.
- 3 were teenagers.
- 2 were adults.

¹⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-south-west-wales-42985957>

- 4 were elderly.

There were 3 male victims and 8 female victims.

49 (16.4%) cases involved perpetrators who were current or ex-partners of the victim. In considering the age demographics of the victims of partner perpetrators:

- 1 was a teenager.
- 23 were adults.
- 25 were elderly.

There was also a clear skew in the gender of the victims within this category, with 4 male victims and 45 female victims.

18 (6.0%) cases were categorised under 'Friend', meaning perpetrators that the victim or their family believed were friends of the victim. As many of these instances involved deliberate manipulation and exploitation, it is often clear in hindsight that many were not actually friends, though some instances of tragic outcomes from disputes between friends were reported.

In considering the age demographics of the victims of perceived-friend perpetrators:

- 3 were teenagers.
- 14 were adults.

- 1 was elderly.

This category also had notable gender skew amongst the victims, as 15 victims were male and 3 victims were female.

58 (19.4%) cases had perpetrators from within in the victim's wider social circle. This included neighbours, people they came into contact within their local community, or people they worked with. In considering the age demographics of the victims of perpetrators from their wider social circle:

- 4 were children.
- 14 were teenagers.
- 37 were adults.
- 3 were elderly.

There were 37 male victims and 21 female victims.

23 (7.7%) cases involved perpetrators who were professionals working in a paid capacity for the victim, most frequently in a Personal Assistant/Carer role. The age and gender demographics for the victims of professionals who perpetrated the crime were:

- 1 was a child.
- 5 were teenagers.
- 11 were adults.
- 6 were elderly.

There were 12 male victims, 9 female victims, a case where no details of the victim were released, and a case involving multiple victims who were both male and female but where the total numbers were not reported.

80 (26.8%) of cases involved perpetrators who were strangers to their victims. Compared to overall crime statistics, and depending on the type of crime, crimes committed by strangers can make up anywhere between 10% and 38% of crimes, with the rest being committed by people known to the victim. These figures fall in the middle of those estimates.

The age and gender demographics for the victims of stranger perpetrated crimes were:

- 3 were children.
- 9 were teenagers.
- 58 were adults.
- 10 were elderly.

There were 43 male victims, 33 female victims, one victim where no details were released, and 3 cases where multiple victims of each gender, with final numbers not reported, were victims.

Finally, the remaining 8 (3.0%) were cases where we could not conclude whether the perpetrator was a stranger or known to the victim. Most of these were cases where trials were pending and the perpetrator's relationship to the victim had either not been determined or had not been

made public, so we did not want to presume they were strangers to the victim. In the time between writing this report and publishing it, some of these may have become public knowledge.

The age and gender demographics for the victims in this category were:

- 1 was a teenager.
- 7 were adults.

There were 5 male victims and 4 female victims.

As an overview, below is the list of each victim age category and what the victim-perpetrator relationship was most likely to be in the reported news stories. The most common victim-perpetrator relationship for male and female victims follows this.

Victim age	Perpetrator most likely to be
Infant	Parent
Toddler	Parent
Child	Parent
Teenager	Wider Social Circle
Adult	Stranger
Elderly	Partner or Ex-Partner

Victim Gender	Perpetrator most likely to be
Male	Stranger
Female	Partner or Ex-partner

Again, this demographic information should not be taken as a statement about crimes occurring, because of the complicating factors discussed

elsewhere in this report about which crimes make the news and which do not. However, information here is relevant in examining the language used by the media in the second half of this report.

Media Coverage

Media sources used

When considering media coverage, we did not count personal blogs, individual run websites, or automated journalism. These can influence public perception, but the decision to exclude them was based on a few reasons.

As we were considering how people write about Disabled people and how this can perpetrate disablist ideas within society, automated journalism — which uses Artificial Intelligence (AI) for web-scraping and article generation — were not what we were most interested in.

While bigotry is often embedded within AI, systems, software, and hardware because of the biases of the creators¹⁹, AI-generated articles are often the product of multiple different news articles and many ended up being nonsensical or lacking detail.

Blogs and personal websites certainly have value, as shown by our use of them as starting points for research. However, it would not be fair to claim that someone's personal website or blog about crime and Disabled people has the same public presence or reach as international, national, or even local news stations and sites.

To demonstrate this in numbers for **July 2022**:

¹⁹ <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/2/18/21121286/algorithms-bias-discrimination-facial-recognition-transparency>

- **The BBC** had approximately 641,400,000 visits.
- **The Lancashire Evening Post** had approximately 1,200,000 visits.
- **Disability Memorial** had approximately 12,600 visits.
- **Autism Memorial** had under 5,000 visits.

Finally, they are not media companies with a wide reach, so are perhaps not expected to have the same level of journalistic responsibilities which formal news sites and networks do²⁰.

Media Coverage

As with other aspects of this report, the below numbers were at the time of research and many months will have passed between data collection and analysis, and this report being released, so some cases may have received more coverage in the meantime.

126 cases received what we termed “Significant Coverage”, defined by there being 10+ unique and easily located news articles on formal news sites available through internet search engines.

79 had “Moderate Coverage”, which was defined as there being 5-9 unique and easily located news articles on formal news sites available through internet search engines

²⁰ <https://www.nuj.org.uk/about-us/rules-and-guidance/code-of-conduct.html>

93 had “Minimal Coverage”, where there were less than 5 unique and easily located news articles on formal news sites available through internet search engines.

2 cases did not have an individual article written about them and only showed up either as part of a “round-up” article about the number of arrests made that month or within a Serious Adult Review, we marked this as receiving “No Coverage”.

Given the significant overlap of acts within these crimes (for example, murder often involved assault), breaking down the coverage for categories would portray an inaccurate picture of media coverage.

Some assaults received more media attention because it was as part of ongoing abuse which escalated to murder, such as in the case of Louis Spires who was murdered by his wife after years of abuse²¹, or because there were multiple acts carried out by different perpetrators, such as the case of Steven Simpson, who was assaulted by multiple people at a party but was ultimately murdered by one individual²².

All that we will broach in this area is that even some cases which involved serious crimes such as murder received minimal coverage, although the general trend was that the more violent the crime, the more media coverage it received.

²¹ <https://www.itv.com/news/calendar/update/2015-10-16/pensioner-sentenced-to-life-for-murder-of-disabled-partner/>

²² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-21887535>

These findings are not surprising, as discussed previously, and others have previously written about how certain types of crimes receive more media attention than others based on a variety of factors²³.

Outcomes

As with above, please note that some outcomes may have changed between the time of this report being written and final publication, especially for the cases in 2021 and 2022.

Charged

In 218 of 300 cases reported in the news, someone was charged for the crime(s). 9 additional cases were pending information, with indications that suspects had been identified and charges were pending.

In 73 cases, there was nothing in the media to suggest anyone was charged. The perpetrators were unlocated in 32 of the cases at the time of researching. In the remaining 41, reports indicated that the perpetrator was known (sometimes by name) and either no action was taken or action taken was not within the remit of the Criminal Justice System (CJS). For example:

²³ 'What makes a homicide newsworthy? UK National Tabloid Newspaper Journalists Tell All' (2012)

Gekoski, A., Gray, J.M., & Adler, J.R. The British Journal of Criminology, 52 (6), 1212-1232.

<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/10/28/when-does-murder-make-the-news-it-depends-on-the-victim-s-race> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/disability-and-the-media.html>
<https://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/MTAN/More%20Than%20A%20Number%20-%20GLAAD.pdf>

two police officers were dismissed from post for verbally abusing and intimidating an autistic man but were not charged²⁴, and a teacher was fired after assaulting a disabled student, but no charges were brought after police investigation²⁵.

It is possible that perpetrators were located and charged once the initial media interest in the case diminished, especially in the context of the previously discussed issues regarding information sharing and communication between policing and journalism. However, it is very unlikely that the average member of the public reading about a case where news reports show that no-one had been charged would then research whether there was an outcome further down the line, which Inclusion London made efforts to do. Therefore, the impact on the reader would be the same; the appearance of no perpetrator being located.

Convicted

Of the 218 cases charged, there were 202 convictions, meaning that of the cases which were reported in the media, a high proportion of them went through the CJS to conviction.

This is probably unsurprising, as the cases which received media attention are those where journalists could access information and refer to evidence

²⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-35987385>

²⁵ <https://www.guardian-series.co.uk/news/17994148.walthamstow-teacher-kicked-pupil-avoids-ban-profession/>

— otherwise, the news story would be very short — and those tend to be the cases that make it to court.

Of the remaining 16, 9 cases were pending as the crimes were still progressing through the CJS (we should note that the impact of cuts to the CJS and the impact of Covid-19 has led to significant delays). A further 3 cases saw the perpetrator die before conviction, 2 cases were dropped by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) before trial, and 2 saw 'Not Proven' verdicts returned.

Legally Identified or Uplifted as Disability Hate Crimes

There were only 5 cases where the articles specifically identified that there was a disability hate crime uplift. There were a further 30 cases where either the court case or sentencing was pending with reference to the victim's disability as a reason for them being targeted in the media (8), or there was wording in the article which suggested that a recognition of "vulnerability" of the victim(s) was acknowledged within the CJS, but this wasn't explicitly named "disability hate crime" (22). There was no mention at all of hate crime or references to vulnerability directly from the CJS in the remaining cases.

This should not be taken to mean that there were no other cases apart from the 5 listed that were uplifted under hate crime legislation, simply that there were only 5 which were specified in reporting as being legally

identified as Disability hate crimes. Given the widespread misunderstandings of hate crime and the difficulties in defining disability hate crime, perhaps even more so than other hate crimes²⁶, it is possible that information about hate crime uplifts were missed in reporting.

²⁶ <https://eachother.org.uk/why-is-disability-hate-crime-so-hard-to-prove/>; Roulstone, A., Thomas, P., and Balderstone, S. (2011). 'Between hate and vulnerability: unpacking the British criminal justice system's construction of disablist hate crime', *Disability & Society*, 26(3)

Evidence of Disability Hate Crimes

Considering only 5 reports specifically mentioned disability hate crime, and a further 22 may have had uplifts based on information and quotes from the CJS, how many cases, in Inclusion London's opinion, have potential evidence of being disability hate crimes?

In 63 (21%) of the 300 cases, Inclusion London found sufficient details reported in one or more articles to feel confident identifying it as a strong case for being a disability hate crime. We made this decision based on quotes in the articles where disablist language and intent from the perpetrator was present, or the victim or a third-party was quoted as stating they felt the victim was targeted specifically for their disability.

For example, the sentencing remarks in the trial of Daniel Boulton for the murder of 9-year-old Darren Henson and his mother, Bethany Vincent acknowledged that there was evidence for Boulton's hostility towards Darren Henson's disability and took this into consideration during sentencing²⁷. There was, however, no mention of a disability hate crime uplift specifically.

There were a further 111 (37%) cases where there were indications that a crime could have been disability hate crime, particularly if changes to

²⁷ <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/R-v-Boulton-sentencing-020222.pdf>

disability hate crime law as suggested by other researchers and legal proponents were accepted into law²⁸.

These numbers included crimes such as:

- Those involving 'cuckooing', where Disabled victims are almost always selected because of the societal and situational vulnerabilities created that disadvantage Disabled people.
- Those where victims were murdered by family members who perceived their disability or impairments to be a burden or fundamentally negative.

There were 91 (30.3%) cases where there was no evidence either way to suggest or disprove disability hate crime, and 35 (11.7%) where there were conclusive reasons given for the crime that had nothing to do with disability. For example, in one case an autistic man, Chad Gordon, was murdered in a gang dispute after two men attempting retribution for action taken against their gang, knocked on the wrong door and murdered him²⁹. While no less tragic, this murder was a case of mistaken identity and there was no suggestion that hostility for Disabled people was the motive.

²⁸ <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=final-report--hate-crime-and-the-legal-process.pdf&site=539>

²⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-57396725>

Even if we only consider the 63 cases which had the most evidence of being motivated by disablism, this is a significant proportion of cases and considerably more than 5.

While there is a possibility that all 63 of these cases did receive a hate crime uplift that just wasn't reported, it is unlikely. We know there are significant difficulties in successfully prosecuting a disability hate crime uplift³⁰, so it is not an unreasonable assumption to make that at least some of these cases were not identified as disability hate crimes.

Why is identifying and successfully prosecuting a disability hate crime so difficult?

Beyond the difficulties with defining any hate crime, identifying and prosecuting a disability hate crime has long been a challenge within the criminal justice system.

A key aspect of proving a hate crime is in evidencing the hostility beyond reasonable doubt. Hostility as a concept, even, can be difficult to accurately define³¹ as there is no standard legal definition and the decision over

³⁰ <https://eachother.org.uk/why-is-disability-hate-crime-so-hard-to-prove/>;

³¹ Walters, M.A. (2014) 'Conceptualizing 'Hostility' for Hate Crime Law: Minding 'the Minutiae' when Interpreting Section 28(1)(a) of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998', Oxford Journal of Legal Studies, 34(1), 47-74;

whether hostility has been proven, is left to the courts for each individual case³².

Evidencing this can be particularly difficult in disability hate crimes³³. Due to the evolving nature of language, many disablist terms are used regularly, without consideration for their origins being in the discrimination or oppression of Disabled people³⁴. There were even cases amongst those we researched where the prosecution successfully argued that the language used was of a disablist nature, but the courts ruled that the defendant was not “necessarily motivated” by hostility towards Disabled people³⁵. Even with in-depth and well-evidence cases, disability hate crime uplifts are rarely secured³⁶.

Further complicating matters, many Disability hate crimes lack verbal or written demonstrations of hostility. Other factors which may prove hostility towards Disabled people are more difficult to evidence. A complex relationship exists between the concept and perception of vulnerability, the creation of situational vulnerability, and the motivations for victim

³² Walters, M.A., Wiedlitzka, S., Owusu-Bempah, A., and Goodall, K. (2017). Hate Crime and the Legal Process: Options for Law Reform (<https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=final-report--hate-crime-and-the-legal-process.pdf&site=539>); Law Commission. (2021) Hate crime laws: Final report (<https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/lawcom-prod-storage-11jsxou24uy7q/uploads/2021/12/Hate-crime-report-accessible.pdf>).

³³ Walters, M.A., Wiedlitzka, S., Owusu-Bempah, A., and Goodall, K. (2017). Hate Crime and the Legal Process: Options for Law Reform

³⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewpulang/2021/02/20/its-time-to-stop-even-casually-misusing-disability-words/?sh=5ed851fa7d4e>

³⁵ <https://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/news/stoke-on-trent-news/stoke-city-worker-25-pushed-5223555>

³⁶ <https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/head-of-judiciary-said-brexit-delays-will-rule-out-vital-hate-crime-law-change/>

selection³⁷. Trying to navigate this to prove hostility while avoiding falsely representing Disabled people as inherently vulnerable, is a difficult task. Even when argued carefully, judges often decide that even if the perpetrator targeted someone because they considered them an “easy target” based on the perpetrator’s perception of disability, this does not demonstrate hostility.

When there are details that suggest contempt for Disabled people or a complete devaluation and disregard for the value of Disabled lives, it is difficult to call that anything other than hostility, if we consider it outside of a legal framework. If you took away the Disabled identity, this would often remove the perpetrator’s decision to target that individual. So, disability and the perpetrator’s perception of disability are often intrinsically tied up in motivation.

Yet, in legal terms, this is typically not enough to consider a crime a hate crime. These reasons are why arguing successfully for a disability hate crime uplift is so challenging and, since the ability to evidence the use of disablist language does not come close to guaranteeing an uplift, it also affects which cases the CPS will try to get a hate crime uplift for.

What are assumptions of inherent vulnerability?

³⁷https://www.researchgate.net/publication/44652354_To_empower_or_to_protect_Constructing_the_'vulnerable_adult'_in_English_law_and_public_policy

The concept of inherent vulnerability is based on the presumption that if you are Disabled, you are more vulnerable than a non-Disabled person. Therefore, Disabled people as a group are at greater risk of being targeted for abuse, harassment, and exploitation, because they are 'easy targets'.

Disabled activists and campaigners strongly challenge this assumption. While many prosecutors will try to avoid arguing a case around vulnerability, with research suggesting that many are cognizant of the stereotype³⁸, the rulings made when hate crime uplifts fail often include the recognition of aggravating factors such as "deliberate targeting of a vulnerable victim". This is the compromise that the CJS sometimes falls back on when the threshold for hostility required to prove hate crime cannot be achieved; they use the legislation around 'vulnerable adults' to get successful convictions. This compromise comes from how legislation is worded and the burden of proof; with societal perceptions of disability being as they are, it is often easier to prove that a Disabled person was vulnerable than it is to prove hostility towards disability.

The concept of inherent vulnerability ignores the fact that many Disabled people are pushed into being *situationally* vulnerable by the barriers in society and the removal and inaccessibility of services and support.

When we position Disabled people as vulnerable by default, this continues to perpetuate patronizing and infantilising concepts, even when this is not

³⁸ Walters, M.A., Wiedlitzka, S., Owusu-Bempah, A., and Goodall, K. (2017). Hate Crime and the Legal Process: Options for Law Reform

the intention. It can also lead to a lack of action, precipitated by the idea of 'Well, what can we do? They'll always be Disabled so they'll always be at risk'. One consequence of this that likely has an impact on the reported numbers of disability hate crime, is that when hate crimes do happen, they may be referred to safeguarding teams rather than to the police.

How situational vulnerability is created.

For Disabled people, situational vulnerability is often the result of continuing austerity measures by the UK Government, policies and practices that compound a devaluation of Disabled life, and historical norms based on disablism³⁹. These combined mean Disabled people are more frequently placed into situations where they are made vulnerable than they would be if society removed barriers and prejudices, and services and support were readily available and adequately funded.

Anyone can become vulnerable depending on the circumstances; even something as simple as being distracted at a cash machine, late at night in an unfamiliar part of the city, can create situational vulnerability.

When someone is isolated, on a low income or not in work, without social and/or family support, in poor health and living in inadequate housing, for

³⁹ Macdonald, K., and Morgan, H.M. (2020). 'The impact of austerity on disabled, elderly, and immigrants in the United Kingdom: a literature review', *Disability & Society*, 36(7), 1125-1147; Ryan, F. (2019) *Crippled*. Brooklyn: Verso.

example, these circumstances will impact on their resilience and reliance on others.

Not all Disabled people experience these circumstances; however, Disabled people experience these at disproportionate rates compared to their non-Disabled peers. Because of these circumstances, a perpetrator is more likely to be able to take advantage of someone. If that same person has access to a good income, a fulfilling social life, and lives in adequate housing with good social networks, it is less likely they will be targeted.

Even when they have had these things, a Disabled person may be made situationally vulnerable because support or resources are withdrawn or the accessibility of services which are there to support people is inadequate; a situation that has become increasingly common over the years⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ Inclusion London (2022). 'Austerity kills – Policy Briefing' (<https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/campaigns-and-policy/act-now/austerity-kills-policy-briefing/>)

Language used in news reports

Overview of language and how it can perpetrate disablism

Having summarised the issues at hand, the cases, and other information such as media coverage, disability hate crime uplifts, and the contextual issues around those, we now move onto the second part of this report: the language used to report on crimes against Disabled people.

Throughout our work, we found news articles about crimes against Disabled people as recently as this year which contained disablist language, assumptions, infantilization, and the same attitudes which lead to societal discrimination against Disabled people. This was seen in multiple ways, such as in descriptions of the victim, the perpetrator and their motives, or the events.

Writers may believe that by portraying Disabled victims as particularly vulnerable and highlighting that vulnerability through language choices, they are increasing empathy towards the victims, but this is not always what happens. There is an example within one news story of how disablist assumptions rooted in a Disabled person “not understanding due to their vulnerability” led to a defense lawyer arguing that a rape was less traumatic for a victim with a learning disability than it would be for a non-Disabled victim⁴¹.

⁴¹ <https://www.echo-news.co.uk/news/16444909.ilie-ciubotaru-jailed-attacking-vulnerable-man-southend-care-home/>

There are other dehumanising assumptions and misconceptions discussed below which show what disablist language and attitudes can feed into, and it is why the language used in the media matters. Disabled people have longed argued that a key part of addressing disability hate crimes comes from education and how society discusses disability. Ableism and disablism are deeply rooted throughout society, to the point that — much like with other forms of bigotry — even outside of overt discrimination, people perpetuate these ideas without realizing they are doing it, and other times people accept these concepts as facts and never challenge their own thinking. The media plays a key role in improving this. The language used in one part of the media is often reflected in and reflects the language of other parts of society, including the criminal justice system, as we will see in some examples below.

Below we discuss examples of disablism under broad headings, using direct quotes and summaries of the cases to provide context, as well as offering commentary on the impact these language choices have, and what writing choices could be made instead.

Quotes and summaries

Overview

Even when the quote comes from a family member or a professional in the CJS, the person writing or editing the article made the final decision about whether to include it. Summaries of multiple quotes, such as during a court case, are also the result of multiple decisions over what to include and what to exclude.

Journalists decide what to include in their work, and sometimes the quotes they choose to include about Disabled victims and perpetrators seem to offer little in the way of information about the crime and a lot in the way of disablist implications.

These issues will appear throughout all the categories below, but we felt their inclusion as a standalone topic at the top was important to frame the examples we use later.

Example

The articles with the most prominent examples of this are often those where the Disabled victim, who has usually been murdered, is framed as a 'burden' to the family member(s) who killed them, using direct or summarised quotes about how 'difficult' they were from living relatives.

One such case was the murder of Glen Freaney, an autistic 11-year-old murdered by his mother, Yvonne Freaney, who was ultimately acquitted⁴².

Quotes from Yvonne emphasizing Glen's support needs — including details of his intimate personal care needs — and justifying his murder were included in most articles about the case. One article even ran with the following quote as a part of the headline: *"He was laughing when I strangled him. Then I knew he was happy"*. The article then went on to state in the opening paragraph that Yvonne had murdered her son to "end his suffering", despite there being no further information in the article suggesting that Glen was suffering, other than reporting on his disability. The implication is that Disabled people are 'suffering' from their conditions and/or impairments and this becomes tied up with the concept of 'being put out of their misery', even with no evidence that the individual felt this way.

Why it matters

While the content of the quotes will vary, and we will discuss these in other places throughout this report, quotes have a certain power to them that makes decisions about their inclusion even more important. As summarised

⁴² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-13549363>

by van Krieken (2019), journalists are encouraged to include quotes because of their value in improving engagement and credibility⁴³.

So, when these direct quotes are weighted more towards perpetrating disablist concepts and ideas, and less towards providing information, their inclusion will engage people at the expense of Disabled people. Too often, Disabled people will have heard similar sentiments to those quoted in those articles from people in their own lives.

The direct quotes might also alter the entire tone and interpretation of an article, such as with Glen Freaney above. No information given, nor any quotes from anyone other than Yvonne, suggested that Glen suffered living his life as a Disabled child. Societal barriers and the need for lifelong support were included, but no evidence of suffering. In fact, information from the rest of his family and school staff suggested the opposite, that Glen lived a happy life. However, because the article opens with that quote from his mother, the point is framed as true, even without evidence.

What could journalists do instead?

Decisions about which quotes to use should be considered in the context of what they add to the article. If the quote demeans, dehumanises, or 'others' the Disabled person it is written about, and adds very little or nothing in the

⁴³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1632735>

way of information, then its inclusion only really serves to reinforce disablism.

Sometimes the quotes, if used, could be included alongside an opposing perspective or rebuttal. For example, in one article's write-up of the rape committed by Ilie Ciubortaru against a man in his 50s with a learning disability, the defense lawyer stated in his mitigation, *"While the victim is particularly vulnerable and that does make the offence worse, it is quite clear it appears from the record that it has not impacted on him as much as it would on someone without his vulnerabilities."* Alongside this quote was a summary of the judge's response, dismissing the efforts to mitigate and describing the attempt to use such an argument in starkly unfavourable terms⁴⁴.

In doing this, the author of the piece did not put forward their own opinion, but they framed the profoundly disablist suggestion that a Disabled man was less impacted by his rape than a non-Disabled person would be, against a rebuttal in another quote which highlighted the offensiveness of the quote.

⁴⁴ <https://www.echo-news.co.uk/news/16444909.ilie-ciubotaru-jailed-attacking-vulnerable-man-southend-care-home/>

Outright disablist language and insults

Overview

Some news articles, though mercifully fewer as the years went on, were not subtle in the language choices used in their articles and included words commonly known to be disablist insults⁴⁵.

Other language choices may not have fallen into the category of outright insults, but were certainly words rejected by the wider Disabled community as disablist, such as 'wheelchair bound' or 'special needs'.

Examples

In multiple write-ups of the murder of Michael Mairs by Daniel Sharples, there were examples of disablist language in describing both Michael and Daniel. Michael was described in some articles as "helpless and wheelchair bound"⁴⁶, while Daniel was described as a "lunatic" and a "nutcase"⁴⁷. Both lunatic and nutcase are disablist insults commonly aimed at people with mental distress and trauma.

⁴⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_disability-related_terms_with_negative_connotations

⁴⁶ <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/kick-boxing-coward-who-murdered-19173395>

⁴⁷ <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/boozed-up-nutcase-beat-vulnerable-19104180>

In an article written about Carolyn Hyatt's murder, she was described as David Dunstan's "special needs girlfriend"⁴⁸. The Disabled community have frequently discussed how this phrase is already an issue within the education system, but that its use outside of education is even worse⁴⁹. A person is not "special needs". In an ideal world, the use of this phrase would be phased out even from writing about education, but at the very least, it should not be used in articles not pertaining to education.

Why it matters

Many of the outright disablist language includes words commonly used in relation to people who have mental distress or trauma, or mental health conditions, and have historically been used this way. In the current day, they are often used in a more informal and colloquial manner, but remain undeniably linked to their origins when you consider the concepts being portrayed.

While people may defend the language choices as not meaning to refer to mental health on a wider scale, and that the language was 'only' to highlight the severity or horrific nature of the crimes, there are wider impacts of

⁴⁸ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3586908/Boyfriend-42-murdered-special-needs-girlfriend-beating-walking-stick-dousing-white-spirit-setting-fire-jailed-life.html>

⁴⁹ <https://www.meriahnichols.com/3-reasons-say-disability-instead-special-needs/>; <https://johndabell.com/2020/11/16/why-special-needs-needs-to-go/>; <https://hellomichelleswan.com/my-needs-are-not-special/>

these language choices⁵⁰. These statements can imply that anyone who does these things must not “think like the rest of us”, and then the reverse of that comes to settle as a possibility in people’s minds via association activation: that people who think differently are more likely to be dangerous and commit violent crimes⁵¹.

Phrases such as being “special needs” or “wheelchair bound”, have also long been criticized by the Disabled community for implying that having different support needs is “special” or suggesting that wheelchair users are “stuck” in their chairs as a restriction, when in fact mobility devices are far more often liberating⁵².

What could journalists do instead?

There is simply no need to use the words in question when there are plenty other words to describe the horrific nature of a crime without resorting to ‘shock value’ insults that are rooted in disablism. Likewise, phrases such as “special needs” or “wheelchair bound” can easily be replaced by “Disabled” or “wheelchair user”.

Here, there truly is only one alternative to avoid disablism, which we found most journalists did: do not use the words and find alternative words to

⁵⁰ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/blogs/why-language-we-use-describe-mental-health-matters>

⁵¹ Naraharisetty, R. (2021). ‘Appropriate Language can Reduce Mental Health Stigma, Improve Access to Treatment’ <https://theswaddle.com/appropriate-language-can-reduce-mental-health-stigma-improve-access-to-treatment-experts/>

⁵² <https://canbc.org/blog/proper-terminology-dont-use-confined-to-or-wheelchair-bound/>

use. Language is rich in vocabulary that can portray how tragic, violent, awful, or devastating a crime is without resorting to dehumanising language.

Diminishing the harm perpetuated by shifting blaming onto the victim and downplaying the impact

Overview

There were multiple articles where language choices, quotes used from professionals involved in the case, or the general write-up of the case shifted some or most of the blame for the crime onto the victim or downplayed the impact of the crime. This differs slightly from the concept of burden, though it is in the same broad category.

Examples

With David Cox's death, the CPS decided not to bring charges against the perpetrators, who argued they had acted in self-defense⁵³. In some articles, repeated claims that "his (David's) judgment and actions were affected by his Aspergers" and multiple direct quotes from the assailants minimizing or denying the events were included — "it was just a brush of his jaw, if

⁵³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20191220203753/https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/latest-news/coroner-criticises-witnesses-in-case-of-punched-youth-s-death-1-3246627>

anything”, “just flicked my arm out”, “he tripped and fell” — while very few quotes from David’s friends and family were included.

There was criticism of the handling of the case by the coroner and Cox’s family have voiced their views that it should be revisited, however the case has remained closed. There were other disablist framings in this case as well, including repeated use of “mental age” and referring to David as “suffering” from autism.

Some articles also referred to the assailants as ‘boys’ when they were the same age as David (18) or older. This decision to portray assailants as ‘boys’ when they would be legally considered adults, and vice versa in referring to Disabled teenage victims as young as 15 as “young men” or “young women”, is something that is seen in other research Inclusion London is doing.

For example, in our work on the Independent Office of Police Conduct’s investigations, a 15-year-old boy with ADHD and learning disabilities was repeatedly referred to as a “man” or a “young man” in one of the IOPC’s Learning the Lessons bulletins.

There is also a tendency for Black children to be subject to this type of adultification bias⁵⁴ which can have a profound and negative impact on children’s wellbeing, and directly affect how children are perceived and responded to, including by the police and other services. The choices of framing around age like this when writing about crimes or police

⁵⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jul/05/they-saw-me-as-calculating-not-a-child-how-adultification-leads-to-black-children-being-treated-as-criminals>

misconduct, can shift the narrative regarding who is portrayed as sympathetic and who is portrayed as a threat. One area of further research leading on from this report would be to look closer at how Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Disabled victims are portrayed in the media.

The positioning of the Disabled victim as being responsible for the harm done to them was also seen when police assaulted Jody McIntyre at a protest⁵⁵, pushing him out of his wheelchair and claiming he was a “threat”, “that he was rolling at the police in his wheelchair”, and that they “accidentally hit him with their batons”. Many news stories printed these quotes from the police and others framed their news stories around them; Ben Brown of the BBC interviewed Jody McIntyre shortly after the incident and presented the attack by the police as a legitimate and understandable response to Jody’s “provocation”⁵⁶.

The consequences of this media framing were quite apparent; rumours spread on social media downplaying Jody’s disability, claiming he was faking being Disabled, or suggesting he deserved to be dragged and pushed out of his wheelchair by being at the protest⁵⁷.

Why it matters

⁵⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/aug/24/ipcc-upholds-protester-complaint-police>

⁵⁶ <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2010/12/mcin-d22.html>

⁵⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/dec/15/jody-mcintyre-protester-dragged-from-wheelchair>

Victim-blaming in crimes has been discussed widely⁵⁸, including directly in relation to disability hate crime⁵⁹, so the consequences of victim blaming have also been well-researched. When media framing leans towards blaming the victim for the crime committed against them, the victim or survivor of the crime is further marginalised; victims can internalise the blame, are more likely to become mentally distressed and traumatised, and it can have a far-reaching effect of discouraging others within the same community to report crimes or seek help and support⁶⁰.

Victim-blaming also shifts the focus away from not only the perpetrator's responsibility for committing the crime, but often also avoids how the structures of society play a role in the crime happening in the first place; this in turn reduces the focus on societal-wide solutions that should be considered⁶¹.

What could journalists do instead?

⁵⁸ <https://encompass.eku.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=kjus>;
<https://spssi.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/josi.12248>;

⁵⁹ 'Disability, Hate Crime and Violence' (2012) Roulstone, A., and Mason-Bish, H; 'Scapegoat: Why we are Failing Disabled People' (2011) Katharine Quarmby.

⁶⁰ Parti K and Robinson RA (2021) What hinders victims from reporting sexual violence: A qualitative study with police officers, prosecutors, and judges in Hungary. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*. 10(3): 158-176. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.1851>; Schoellkopf, Julia Churchill, "Victim-Blaming: A New Term for an Old Trend" (2012). Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Center. Paper 33;

⁶¹ Ghidina, Marcia (2019). Deconstructing Victim-Blaming, Dehumanization, and Othering: Using Empathy to Develop a Sociological Imagination. *Teaching Sociology*, 47(3), 231–242.

doi:10.1177/0092055X19843978

Given how prevalent victim-blaming is, additional considerations should be given during the writing and editing process to look for inadvertent victim-blaming that may have seeped into writing. There are deep-rooted societal tendencies to blame the victim, and this may manifest even in the writing of people who did not intend to write from that angle.

Of course, there are indeed cases where the victim of a crime may have played some role in the lead-up — such as a murder case resulting from a fight where both parties escalated the fight — care should be taken here about where biases are impacting the writer’s decision-making. As described above, whether a perpetrator or victim is framed as older or younger than their age, more or less threatening, is something influenced by many societal biases and bigotries and being aware of this is important when reporting.

Empathy for the perpetrator, demonising or ignoring the victim

Overview

This is a particularly sensitive topic for the Disabled community, given the tendency for news reports to be empathetic towards parents (or other family members) who commit filicide (murder of their family members) against their Disabled relatives. This empathizing is often to the point of ignoring the victim unless it is to highlight how significant their “difficulties” were or to portray them as a burden to their family.

All of which creates a narrative that wavers varyingly between ‘the Disabled person is better off dead’ and ‘the perpetrator shouldn’t really be blamed because providing care for a Disabled person is hard enough that it is a reason for murdering that Disabled people’.

This happens so frequently, with the same type of media response, that the **Disability Day of Mourning**⁶² was established to remember these victims and to draw attention to the act of filicide, and how it is often downplayed when the victim was Disabled.

Examples

As demonstrated by the presence of the Disability Day of Mourning and the associated Anti-Filicide Toolkit described below, there are far too many examples of this.

Elderly women with dementia and Disabled children were the two groups in our research where this portrayal of being a ‘burden’ or ‘difficult’ was most likely to occur. However, they were not the sole groups.

What is often of particular importance is not only how the Disabled victim is described, but how their perpetrator is described by comparison.

⁶² <https://disability-memorial.org/>

Betty Lyons, an elderly woman with Alzheimer's, was described in articles as "aggressive" and "forceful" while her husband, George, who completed suicide after murdering his wife, was described as "devoted" and "loving"⁶³.

Olivia Kray, a teenage girl with mental health conditions, was described as "reliant on her father", having "severe needs", and that her father was "at the end of his tether with her", while her father, Richard, was described as being "under pressure", "a loving father", and someone who "gave up his time to help Disabled children"⁶⁴.

The murder of Patrick Markcrow, a 36-year-old man with Downs Syndrome, was also described in similar framings. Patrick's support needs were emphasised in summaries and quotes from people in the neighbourhood he lived in. He was described as "autism-afflicted", "violent", "out of control", and "beyond reasoning with", while his mother, Wendolyn, was described again as "at the end of her tether", "devoted", and "loving"⁶⁵.

Why it matters

We have found the media all too often frame Disabled people as burdens to their families, even when a Disabled person has been murdered by a family member.

⁶³ <https://metro.co.uk/2018/09/25/man-killed-wife-then-himself-fearing-he-would-get-dementia-like-her-7978395/>

⁶⁴ <https://www.kentlive.news/news/kent-news/father-strangled-daughter-death-herne-1159450;>
<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/father-strangled-daughter-couldnt-suffer-11961396>

⁶⁵ [https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-367460/Mother-killed-Downs-son-allowed-free.html;](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-367460/Mother-killed-Downs-son-allowed-free.html)
<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/sep/24/patrickbarkham.uknews2>

From the 2022 Anti-Filicide Toolkit by ASAN, this line succinctly summarises the pattern and why this framing has far-reaching impacts:

“We see the same pattern repeating over and over again. A parent kills their disabled child. The media portrays these murders as justifiable and inevitable due to the “burden” of having a disabled person in the family. If the parent stands trial, they are given sympathy and comparatively lighter sentences, if they are sentenced at all. The victims are disregarded, blamed for their own murder at the hands of the person they should have been able to trust the most, and ultimately forgotten. And then the cycle repeats.”

- ASAN's 2022 Anti-Filicide Toolkit⁶⁶

In these stories, the Disabled victims are essentially being blamed for their own murders; with the implication being that their impairments and/or disability caused their family member to murder them. Which is a profoundly offensive suggestion and, in some case, may originate from the same hostility and contempt that underpins disability hate crimes.

While news articles may seek to include motives for why a person committed a crime, in this category, it goes far beyond describing a motive and into the territory of excusing the crime. Worse still, it takes away empathy from the victim — who in most of these cases has been murdered — and instead places it on the person who killed them. Coupled with

⁶⁶ <https://autisticadvocacy.org/projects/community/mourning/anti-filicide/>

patterns of perpetrators receiving lighter sentences than the murders of victims who were not Disabled, it is not surprising that the Disabled community find this form of disablist reporting particularly unpleasant.

What could journalists do instead

Care must be taken to make sure articles are not framed in a way that suggests Disabled people are in any way responsible for someone abusing, harming, or killing them. As these framings are often alongside the language of burden discussed earlier, it implies that Disabled people deserve to be harmed or killed because people might find their support needs “too difficult” and their lives are of less value than their non-Disabled peers. Taking it out is the best approach to removing disablist implications.

If the journalist’s intentions are to emphasise the lack of or cuts to services which may have contributed to a situation, there are ways to include this context without claiming that their absence also excuses murder or abuse. Cuts to services create the situational vulnerability discussed earlier in this report, isolating the victim and putting them at risk, so this is where focus could be placed instead of in excusing the harm.

It should also be noted, though, that in some cases which fit under this category, the victim was already in a form of residential care where the perpetrator was not responsible for the support needs; yet the language of the Disabled victim being a burden to the perpetrator was still utilised.

Above all, the victims should be centred in these cases and their murder or harm should not be justified or minimised in the way it so often is in writing. The value of individual life should always be maintained, and there were articles, including some about the cases above and in the earlier example of Glen Freaney, which emphasised the joy that the victims had for life and their involvement in the community, which countered other portrayals of burden and negativity.

Disablist and other bigoted language and phrasing in discussing the perpetrators

Overview

Bigoted language and framing were used in writing about the perpetrators of crimes. As touched upon earlier, disablist language in discussing those who have committed crimes is commonplace. This has become a topic of conversation in an increasing number of social media spaces, and how avoiding this bigoted and 'othering' language is important, regardless of who or what is being discussed⁶⁷.

There were also several cases where transphobic, homophobic, and racist language and implications were used in describing the perpetrators of crimes. For example, there were less than 5 cases out of the 300 where the

⁶⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewpulrang/2021/02/20/its-time-to-stop-even-casually-misusing-disability-words/?sh=40bde34f7d4e>

perpetrators were identified as LGBTQA+, yet all those cases had articles that focused on their sexual orientation or gender identity, including in the headlines. One case, one of the few cases where the victim was identified as white and the perpetrator as Black, saw some articles use racist language or framing in condemning the perpetrator.

Examples

The case of Michael Mairs and Daniel Sharples has been previously discussed, and similar language choices were seen in articles about Alex Proctor's assault on Karl Dean⁶⁸, the murder of Phyllis Grant by Donovan Miller⁶⁹, and Priscilla Edward's murder by Regina Edwards⁷⁰. Words such as "deranged", "psychotic killer", "not a right-thinking member of the public", "unable to deal with their demons", and "not facing up to reality", are just a few examples of how disablism slipped into news articles repeatedly.

In the case of Liam Fee's murder in 2014 at the hands of his mothers, Rachel and Nyomi Fee, some headlines and opening paragraphs included lines like 'evil lesbian killer monsters' and otherwise emphasised their sexuality. There were no headlines about 'evil heterosexual killer monsters', even

⁶⁸ <https://www.hulldailymail.co.uk/news/hull-east-yorkshire-news/disturbed-thug-attacked-disabled-man-4875820>

⁶⁹ <https://www.londonworld.com/news/crime/psychotic-man-who-beat-his-grandmother-76-to-death-before-raping-her-corpse-given-hospital-order-3634022>

⁷⁰ <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1369396/mentally-ill-woman-killed-her-elderly-mother-because-she-thought-she-looked-like-a-witch/>

though there were multiple examples of straight couples murdering their children.

Likewise, in some write-ups about Brian Darbyshire's murder by his daughter, Claire, the focus of the article moved away from the crime or the victim and focused instead on Claire being a trans woman, including details on the operations she had undergone as part of her transition, despite those details having no relevance to the case. There were no articles involving a cis gender perpetrator where their gender identity was a focus of the article.

Finally, some articles about Andrew Young's murder by Lewis Gill included descriptions of Lewis Gill as a "savage" and made reference to finding a photograph on his social media where he "may have been smoking a cannabis joint"⁷¹. The same language and searching of social media was not observed for any of the white perpetrators of crimes against Disabled people in the sample used.

Why it matters

Disablism, racism, transphobia, and homophobia are wrong, regardless of who you are discussing; bigotry does not suddenly become acceptable because you are talking about someone who has committed a murder or crime of another sort.

⁷¹ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2570570/Savage-past-one-punch-killer-calls-Capone-gang-robbed-teenager-bus.html>

Furthermore, and particularly in the case of disablist language being used that is associated with mental distress and trauma, when language that dehumanises a marginalised group of people is used to describe people who have committed awful crimes, it draws a direct parallel between the two through association. This is part of what has perpetuated the ongoing stigma of mental health conditions⁷².

What could journalists do instead

As with the outright disablist insults mentioned earlier, the best solution is simply to not include bigoted language. If the only way a writer can portray how awful a crime was is to use language rooted in bigotry, then there are greater issues at play.

Using short-hand phrases which reinforce discrimination and biases or trying to prompt shock through headline choices that emphasise a connection between crime and marginalised identities should not be the alternative to well-written articles which make use of the abundance of vocabulary available.

As repeatedly discussed, the media plays a role in dismantling the biases and bigotry held towards marginalised groups of people, and responsible

⁷² <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/blogs/why-language-we-use-describe-mental-health-matters>

⁷² Naraharisetty, R. (2021). 'Appropriate Language can Reduce Mental Health Stigma, Improve Access to Treatment' <https://theswaddle.com/appropriate-language-can-reduce-mental-health-stigma-improve-access-to-treatment-experts/>

reporting would ensure that no bigoted language of the sort discussed here is used.

Accidental implications

Overview

Sometimes, the implications made by a sentence could be completely missed even by an author being meticulous in their approach to avoiding disablist commentary. The hope here would be that an editor would then catch the implications, reading from a position removed from authorship, and this is where editors are just as important in making sure disablist implications do not make it into print.

Examples

In the case of four-year-old Alexa-Marie Quinn's murder, the following sentence was written about her murderer, her father Carl Wheatley (all punctuation as in text):

“Although Wheatley had ‘intimidated’ a psychiatrist, and had ADHD and autism, he was able to convince social workers and the court he was fit and able”⁷³

Other articles included more details about Wheatley’s escalating violence, and his admissions of losing his temper and reacting with physical violence when he did so, yet this was not chosen to sit alongside the act of intimidating a psychiatrist as suggestion for why he may not be fit or able to look after his daughter. His ADHD and autism diagnoses were instead; thereby suggesting the reason he was not fit and able were because he “is autistic and ADHD”.

Why it matters

Accidental implications can occur across a variety of topics, too many to even try to cover every eventuality, so we will use the example above to discuss the repercussions of this specific implication.

Given the existing negative stereotypes of whether Disabled people can be good parents or not, the implications of this might be far-reaching. This ties back to the point made earlier about why avoiding disablist implications matters whether it is regarding the victim or the perpetrator.

⁷³ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3585008/Four-year-old-girl-beaten-death-sadistic-father-courts-social-workers-repeatedly-missed-chances-save-awarded-custody.html>
<https://www.heart.co.uk/fourcounties/news/local/hatfield-dad-jailed-for-life/>

The more people see associations between disability or impairment and negative ideas and stereotypes, the more likely they are to perpetuate or absorb those harmful concepts. For example, the idea that people with mental distress or trauma are inherently more likely to be the perpetrators of violent crime rather than victims has persisted for decades, fuelled by the framing in the media⁷⁴. We can observe similar repercussions in how society has long-framed Disabled parents, and the role the media has played in this⁷⁵.

Emphasising vulnerability

Overview

In what often seems like an attempt to emphasise the awfulness of a crime, Disabled victims are portrayed as helpless, weak, vulnerable, and unable to do anything to defend themselves. As discussed earlier, there is a complicated overlap between this and the inherent vulnerability that is often presumed to be the default state for Disabled people.

This particular disablism can be difficult to unpick, because sometimes people — Disabled and non-Disabled alike — are physically weaker than others, sometimes they are situationally vulnerable, and sometimes they are unable to defend themselves. Children, for example, whether they are

⁷⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/reality-check/2013/oct/07/sun-people-killed-mental-health-true>

⁷⁵ <https://disabledparenting.com/library/disabled-parents-in-the-news/>

Disabled or not, will often be weaker than their perpetrators, unable to defend themselves against them, and reliant upon many perpetrators for their care, which means they are situationally vulnerable.

Examples

As with the category of being described as a burden, there are numerous examples within the news of this category.

Shaun Rossington, who was murdered by a group of people, was described as a “vulnerable and gullible Asperger’s Sufferer”⁷⁶; Amoe Stevens, who was raped and killed by Mohammed Yassin Yusuf, was frequently described as “frail”, “vulnerable”, “defenseless”⁷⁷; Barrie-John Horrell, killed by Lee and Brett Davies, was described as “vulnerable, timid, and wouldn’t say boo to a goose”⁷⁸.

Why it matters

This framing is being done, primarily, to do two things: emphasise compassion towards the victim and draw attention to how awful the crime was because of who was targeted.

⁷⁶ <https://news.sky.com/story/gang-of-four-jailed-for-sadistic-murder-10489798>

⁷⁷ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/man-who-murdered-mother-in-law-sexual-3657623>

⁷⁸ <https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/1378274.life-for-killer-cousins/>

As discussed above, the complexity of this category is that sometimes people, including Disabled people, can be weaker than the person perpetrating a crime against them or situationally vulnerable; the problem arises from the fact that this is often the most frequent way Disabled people are described.

Sometimes, this shorthand being used to describe a Disabled victim also means the causes of the situational vulnerability are completely missed out of the news story. As with the victim-blaming discussed earlier, it means that societal and structural issues — such as cuts to services or barriers to accessing support, as well as how the way our society is structured often excludes and isolates Disabled people — which contributed to the victim becoming situationally vulnerable are not included.

What could journalists do instead

There have been several articles written over the years, such as in the murders of Lee Irving⁷⁹ and Steve Hoskins⁸⁰, where the article included details on the how failings of multiple services, organisations and aspects of society all contributed to these Disabled people being put in more vulnerable situations than they would have been in if those services and other issues had been resolved or addressed sooner. These allowed for a

⁷⁹ <https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/agencies-should-have-been-aware-of-risks-faced-by-lee-irving-before-his-murder/>

⁸⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2007/dec/06/policy>

much more balanced perspective that did not just position a Disabled person as inherently vulnerable and maintained a respectful approach to writing about the victim and their life.

In most cases, victims are situationally vulnerable or are in a position of far less power than their perpetrators and it is not inherently disablist to acknowledge this, but care must be taken to ensure that the framing of the article does not start and stop with the concept of “Disabled people are vulnerable” without providing additional context when reporting.

Victim is a “foot note” in their own story.

Overview

Sometimes, the story becomes so much about the perpetrator or a related event — for example, if the crime happened at a certain event or time — that the victim can sometimes be barely mentioned in the news articles about their own death.

At other times, even if the victim has the capacity and desire to discuss their own experience — demonstrated using some quotes in the article — their family are prioritised in giving their perspective.

This can be seen in overlap with the category of being portrayed as a burden, where the only inclusion of the victim is to emphasise how “difficult” they made life for the perpetrator.

Examples

Some articles about Betty Guy's murder, for which her daughter and grandson were convicted of over four years after her death, were not focused at all on Betty. The focus was instead on her daughter and grandson, with many articles emphasising that her grandson was ex-military⁸¹ and how the pair had evaded arrest for so long because of a mistaken assumption that Betty had died of natural causes, only later refuted by her doctor. Other articles included a brief mention of Betty in relation to her surviving relatives, but very few included details of Betty as a person.

Another example of this, is how often the Disabled victim's words are not included in any write-up on the crime. Amongst the crimes which did not result in death, many did not include information or quotes from the Disabled victim; using only quotes from their family members, instead. There are, of course, reasons why this may be the case such as the victims did not want to be interviewed or did not want to be retraumatised by discussing what had happened to them. Some victims would not want to even be named or would not be named for their own safety.

Many of the write-ups about cases where there were multiple victims, such as Emma Haslett's burglaries throughout the Loughton area⁸²; Peter

⁸¹ <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/former-soldier-mother-jailed-life-14261774>

⁸² [https://www.theoldhamtimes.co.uk/news/16689245.amp/;](https://www.theoldhamtimes.co.uk/news/16689245.amp/)

Sargent's thefts and assaults on Disabled elderly women in Basildon⁸³, and cases that involved 'cuckooing'⁸⁴ had nothing in them about the impact on the Disabled victims, only commentary about 'vulnerable people being targeted'. The focus was on the perpetrator, sometimes to the extent that the Disabled victim was only referenced in a single line of the article⁸⁵.

Many Disabled people have experienced being spoken to indirectly; this is where the Disabled person is ignored and the presumed non-Disabled person or people accompany them are spoken to on their behalf, the unconscious assumption being that the Disabled person does not have the capacity or capability to answer themselves. In fact, it remains so commonplace, that it continues to come up in etiquette guides about talking to Disabled people⁸⁶.

There were also articles where very little was included about the crimes perpetuated against the Disabled victims, even when they were violent, because the perpetrators went on to commit even more serious crimes and they drew most of the media attention. For example, Ieuan Harley assaulted Samuel Taylor⁸⁷, who has muscular dystrophy, and tried to gouge out his eyes, but this assault is often little more than an additional note in news

⁸³ https://www.harwichandmanningtrestandard.co.uk/news/south_essex_news/17218576.peter-sargent-banned-shops-trolleys-preying-vulnerable-elderly-women/

⁸⁴ <https://www.eppingforestguardian.co.uk/news/19113905.harlow-drug-dealing-brothers-jailed-cuckooing-woman/>; <https://www.elystandard.co.uk/news/crime/22740353.drug-dealer-set-base-vulnerable-mans-home-cambridgeshire/>

⁸⁵ <https://www.echo-news.co.uk/news/16151477.clayton-bailey-cuckooed-vulnerable-adult-sell-drugs-jailed/>

⁸⁶ <https://disabilityhorizons.com/2015/09/10-things-to-avoid-when-meeting-someone-with-a-disability/>;
Ladau, E. (2021). Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to be an Ally.

⁸⁷ <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/terrible-story-abuse-drugs-neglect-8543762>

articles because Harley went on to murder a man previously convicted of killing a child.

Why it matters

This framing of focusing on others to tell a Disabled person's experience and/or excluding details about a victim who is Disabled can imply that the Disabled person does not matter enough to be included in their own story. When the articles about a Disabled murder victim barely spend any time on the victim, the perpetrator becomes the important party. If you consider that many Disabled people experience societal exclusion for many years, for any Disabled victims to then be largely excluded even from the reporting on their own death is harrowing.

When the Disabled person can and does want to speak to their own experience of a crime, but the perspective of a family member is prioritised, there is a risk of misinterpretation or misreporting. It also can accidentally reinforce the idea that when you want to know something about a Disabled person, you ask their non-Disabled relatives; or that the impact of the crime on the family member is more important than the impact on the Disabled victim themselves.

What could journalists do instead

Sometimes, it may make sense that one case would get less attention than another, such as when the crime against the Disabled person was assault and the same perpetrator committed a murder afterwards. Newspapers are going to focus more on the more serious crime, and this decision is not necessarily influenced by disablism.

However, when the article is just about a crime against a Disabled person, particularly when it is a murder, they should be written about with empathy and compassion, centred as a whole person and not just as a footnote in a story about their own murder.

There are many reasons why a Disabled victim may not want to discuss what happened to them and if someone does not want to be involved in any write-ups about their experiences, that should always be respected. Where possible, the writer should ask considerately whether the victim wants to add anything to the news article, instead of only asking family members or professionals.

If the Disabled victim has the capacity and desire to be quoted about their experience, anonymously or named, then their words should be prioritised over those of their parents or carers, especially when they were the only one present for the incident.

In some articles, such as those involving cuckooing or fraud where victims may not want to be named or have concerns about safety if they were quoted, references to wider commentary about the impact these crimes

have on Disabled victims — feeling unsafe in their own homes; becoming unable to trust other people because they have been exploited by people, especially those in care positions, who they once trusted — could offer a way of discussing the victim impact.

Finally, the matter of accessibility should be considered. Many Disabled people currently use or could benefit from alternative or augmentative communication⁸⁸ or experience barriers to communication⁸⁹. There are general ways to improve the accessibility of communication, meetings, interviews, and information gathering that could allow more Disabled victims to discuss their experiences in a way that meets their needs⁹⁰, as well as asking the individual what they might need.

⁸⁸ Creer, S., Enderby, P., Judge, S. orcid.org/0000-0001-5119-8094 et al. (1 more author) (2016) Prevalence of people who could benefit from augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) in the UK: determining the need. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 51 (6). pp. 639-653. ISSN 1368-2822

⁸⁹ <https://talk-kit.org/reporting-course/module-2/>; <https://epicassist.org/the-biggest-barrier-for-people-with-disability/>

⁹⁰ <https://www.sisofrida.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Sisters-of-Fridas-Guide-to-Accessible-Online-communication-a-Toolkit-final.pdf>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/accessible-communication-formats>; <https://www.england.nhs.uk/learning-disabilities/about/get-involved/involving-people/making-meetings-accessible/>

Cases involving Disabled victims, harassment, and suicide

There were only two cases where a professional within the CJS acknowledged that the actions of the perpetrators contributed directly to the victim's suicide. These were also some of the few cases where the perpetrators were prosecuted for anything because they committed additional crimes.

In 2016, Leah Ratheram and a friend of hers were attacked in Leah's flat by Lucy Regan and Omaid Christie. The pair ended their attack by throwing Leah's friend over her balcony to the ground below; he sustained substantial injuries and became Disabled as a result⁹¹.

Not long after this attack, Leah completed suicide in the woods near where she lived. Regan and Christie's role in her suicide became a point of public record when the judge brought up Leah's victim impact statement and suicide during sentencing.

Aaron Leafe, an autistic teenage boy with ADHD, completed suicide after being sexually assaulted repeatedly by a staff member, Anwar Ismail, at the residential home he lived at⁹². Ismail was charged and convicted after Aaron's death, receiving an 18-year sentence.

⁹¹ <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/woman-killed-herself-after-neighbour-12399545>

⁹² <https://metro.co.uk/2017/12/08/abused-boy-killed-himself-at-childrens-home-after-cries-for-help-were-ignored-7144244/>

Three cases out of the fourteen where the victim died by suicide following a period of harassment or assault, saw charges brought against the perpetrators.

Something observed in multiple cases were judgments from professionals, who had never met the victim, about the capacity of the Disabled victim to make the decision to complete suicide. 12-year-old Matthew Wooby and 13-year-old Gavin Mason's deaths were recorded as misadventure or left open rather than recorded as suicide.

In both cases, the professional's decisions hinged on the presumption that the children's disabilities or impairments meant they "may not have understood what they were doing". Matthew's own family believed that the bullying Matthew endured may have led to his decision to complete suicide, but the coroner made the final decision, claiming:

"he was unable to record a verdict of suicide as it was not clear Matthew, who was mildly autistic, knew his actions would result in his death."⁹³

In Gavin's case, he had spent time using his phone to Google topics such as self-harm and "how to kill yourself", and left a suicide note that talked about how he was bullied. Despite this, the police investigation deemed there was no serious bullying problems, as all the boys were "as bad as each other" and the coroner recorded an open verdict, not believing that a 13-year-old

⁹³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-suffolk-37186184>

Disabled boy would have the intention or “be of sound mind” to complete suicide⁹⁴. Again, language around “mental age” and “language age” were used to portray the victim as younger than their chronological age.

There is no way for us to know what any of the victims were thinking or feeling before their deaths, but we know from ONS data that between 2015 and 2022, 1,118 children between the ages of 10 and 19 were confirmed to have completed suicide, with 57 of them being between 10 and 14 years of age⁹⁵. The ONS does not report on data for children younger than 10, but global research in recent years shows that both suicidal ideation and suicide attempts in children and teenagers are increasing, including in the under-10s age group.

What feels particularly uncomfortable, is that even when a Disabled boy left a note outlining the reasons for completing suicide and had a verifiable history of researching how to kill himself, a coroner who had never met him dismissed the remaining evidence of his lived experience and decided he did not have the mental capacity to complete suicide.

While these examples were the result of direct quotes, there were mixed methods in how they were reported. Some articles chose to centre the perspective of the professionals and framed their articles around the concepts of the Disabled victims having a lower “mental or emotional age” than their chronological age; others framed the professional opinion

⁹⁴ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/autistic-schoolboy-who-hanged-himself-11162155>

⁹⁵ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/datasets/suicidesintheunitedkingdomreferencetables>

against the family's opinions, which meant that there was less of an outright conclusion of "they did not know what they are doing".

In all these cases, except for the use of 'mental age', 'emotional age', or 'language age', the articles were largely written respectfully and avoided further disablist language or intentions. However, a number did not adhere to both IPSO's⁹⁶ and the Samaritan's⁹⁷ guidance on reporting on suicides, including providing details of the ligature or point of suspension when they did not seem to be central to the coroner's conclusions (given that the coroners seemed to make their judgments primarily on the victim's disability), and reporting the method of suicide in the article headline.

In parallels to the Fiona Pilkington and Francesca Hardwick case, where failings in the police and other authorities led to disability hate crime being ignored and unidentified for years⁹⁸, none of the articles mentioned that the harassment the victims experienced before suicide could be a hate crime. Some suggested that "bullying" occurred, while others downplayed even this by framing it as "banter" or "fun that went too far".

This is a common occurrence when the harassment is carried out by teenagers or young people; in the repeated assault and harassment of Jeremiah Khan by his classmates, the school downplayed the attacks, even after a violent assault on Jeremiah saw him knocked unconscious⁹⁹.

⁹⁶ <https://www.ipso.co.uk/resources-and-guidance/reporting-suicide-guidance/>

⁹⁷ <https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/media-guidelines/media-guidelines-reporting-suicide/>

⁹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/may/24/fiona-pilkington-police-misconduct-proceedings>

⁹⁹ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/autistic-boy-says-teachers-ignored-24917971>

Jeremiah's mother removed him from the school before anything worse could happen to her son, but this is another example of how harm perpetuated against Disabled people is often not taken seriously.

In reading the details of the 14 cases involving suicide of the victim, it was clear that most of them contained details suggesting the suicides were precipitated by disability hate crimes and incidents. Reports of Disabled victims being harassed or assaulted for being different, behaving differently, or something relating to their disability were present in many of the write-ups, as was confirmation from family members that they believed their loved one was targeted for their disability. Yet the words disability hate incident or crime were not mentioned in a single article, presumably because no-one within the CJS identified the cases as involving ongoing hate crimes.

The attitudes and biases that underpinned disability hate crimes often start at a young age and, as demonstrated by cases such as the murder of Lee Irving, disability hate crimes often continue for prolonged periods of time, escalating over time, sometimes to murder¹⁰⁰.

Media acknowledgement of actions being motivated by bigotry or discrimination when there is evidence of it, or inclusion of how these patterns of harassment which lead to suicide can and are also present in a

¹⁰⁰ Getting away with Murder – Scope (<https://arcuk.org.uk/safetynet/files/2012/08/Getting-away-with-murder.pdf>) ; Inclusion London (2020). 'Still Getting Away with Murder' <https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/FINAL-Still-Getting-Away-with-Murder-Sept-2020-FINAL.pdf>

number of other disability hate crimes would emphasise the importance of wider society's role in reducing disability hate crime.

Hate crimes and patterns of hate incidences can and do lead to murder, suicide, and other forms of harm; if it can be identified earlier and more often, on a societal scale, then this harm and these deaths may be avoidable.

Conclusion

We all absorb ideas, concepts, preconceptions, and biases from the world around us and the media plays an exceptionally large role in this. Mass media has a heavy influence on individuals and society, even more so as people increasingly absorb what they hear and do not question whether it is true or not¹⁰¹. When this influence allows disablism to spread — unconsciously or consciously, accidentally or purposefully — the impact it has on how society perceives Disabled people can have real-world impacts¹⁰².

Of course, the news is not the only source of this. Others have written at length about the role entertainment media plays in either perpetuating bigotry and stereotypes or in improving inclusion and acceptance¹⁰³.

The debate over what is and is not a hate crime continues, and with reforms following the recommendations from the Law Commission still pending, these debates are likely to emerge again over the coming years¹⁰⁴. When hate crime itself is discussed in the media, sometimes the emphasis is on

¹⁰¹ Ullah, R., Khan, A. (2020). The Role of Mass Media in Shaping Public Opinion

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343392876_The_Role_of_Mass_Media_in_Shaping_Public_Opinion

¹⁰² Briant, E., Watson, N., and Philo, G. (2013). Reporting disability in the age of austerity: the changing face of media representation of disability and disabled people in the United Kingdom and the creation of new 'folk devils', *Disability & Society*, 28(6), 874-889; Briant, E., Watson, N., and Philo, G. (2011) Bad News for Disabled People: how the Newspapers are Reporting Disability (<https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/57499/1/57499.pdf>)

¹⁰³ <https://www.scholarsandstorytellers.com/blog-main/diversity-in-hollywood-the-case-for-authentic-disability-representation-in-film-and-tv>; <https://psyarxiv.com/bv2pq/>; <https://www.scholarsandstorytellers.com/air>

¹⁰⁴ Inclusion London (2020). 'Still Getting Away with Murder' <https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/FINAL-Still-Getting-Away-with-Murder-Sept-2020-FINAL.pdf>; Walters, M.A., Wiedlitzka, S., Owusu-Bempah, A., and Goodall, K. (2017). Hate Crime and the Legal Process: Options for Law Reform (<https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=final-report---hate-crime-and-the-legal-process.pdf&site=539>)

online harms; hateful content sent across social media, for example. This also plays a role in framing hate crimes in a certain way and, in doing so, fails to point out that hate crimes can be, as demonstrated throughout this report, violent crimes.

Disabled victims of crime deserve to be written about in respectful and considerate ways that do not perpetuate disablist ideas. We hope that this report gives writers of all public facing media, but particularly those within the criminal justice system and reporting on crimes against Disabled people, some material to review their own publications, what stories they decide to place value on, and how they choose to cover them. It is easier for disablism to slip into our work than it is to take the time to review and remove it; it is a work-in-progress for all of us, but an important one, nonetheless.

Next Steps

After reading this report, journalists or others involved in media writing about or otherwise portraying Disabled people, can pursue several routes for continued engagement with the Disabled community and dismantling unconscious disablism in their work.

Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations (DDPOs) exist throughout the UK and meaningful coproduction with these organisations and other Disabled

people could be pursued. Disability Cornwall have produced a DPO England map, which can be used to locate DPOs in your area¹⁰⁵.

How this engagement would look would differ greatly but work such as paying Disabled people to review media articles or reports as sensitivity readers on a 'spot check' basis could help to reduce bias. Another possibility is bespoke training could be discussed with a DDPO or Disabled consultant, to meet the needs of the media organisation or journalists in question.

Media Trust guidance is regularly updated, often after discussion with marginalised groups or other groups of people affected by reporting, and refreshing your understanding of that guidance can be helpful¹⁰⁶. There are also a variety of other resources on responsibly reporting on disability, many contained in the references of this report¹⁰⁷.

There are also many Disabled people writing books, blogs, and running social media pages which share an abundance of resources and information about disablism in everyday life, including representation in the media. Books such as Emily Ladau's 'Demystifying Disability'¹⁰⁸, essay collections such as those edited by Alice Wong — 'Disability Visibility'¹⁰⁹ and 'Resistance and Hope'¹¹⁰ — or memoirs about the lived experience of

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.disabilitycornwall.org.uk/about-us/research>

¹⁰⁶ <https://mediatrust.org/communications-support/resource-hub/>

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.ibt.org.uk/blog/why-language-matters-when-covering-disability/>

¹⁰⁸ Ladau, E. (2021). Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to be an Ally.

¹⁰⁹ Wong, A. (2020). Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century.

¹¹⁰ Wong, A. (2018). Resistance and Hope: Essays by Disabled People.

disability, such as Keah Brown's 'The Pretty One'¹¹¹ are just a few examples of books written from the lived experience of Disabled people and offer examples of not just how disablism disadvantages Disabled people, but of Disabled joy and community. This latter focus is almost always missed out of media representation, just as too many news articles framed Disabled victim's lives around suffering.

As well as books, many Disabled people run websites, Patreons, podcasts, and newsletters, filled with information that is not only applicable to media representation, but in general for the dismantling of societal ableism.

Finally, our own website continues to be updated regularly with training and resources which people may find useful in learning more about disability, Disabled people, and how to report responsibly about the Disabled community¹¹².

¹¹¹ Brown, K. (2019). The Pretty One: On Life, Pop Culture, Disability, and Other Reasons to Fall in Love with Me.

¹¹² <https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/>