

How do we talk about this?

Names

To discourage copycats, **don't** use the full name of the murderer. **Do** use the name of the victim.

Use respectful language

To find out about the most respectful language, talk to people with disabilities. For example, the autistic community prefers to say that someone *is autistic*, not that they *have autism*, but self-advocates with intellectual disabilities often prefer person-first language. **Don't** connect disability with suffering.

Sympathy

As with any other murder, **do** humanize the victim. **Do** unequivocally condemn the murder. **Do** mourn the victim. **Don't** sympathize with the murderer.

Be mindful of anti-disability bias

Don't imply that it is better to be dead than disabled, that disabled people experience a lower quality of life, or that we cause other people to suffer. **Do** consult with people with disabilities when writing articles. **Don't** present disabled people as “burdens” or our existence as “stressors” that cause crime.

Say “murder,” not “mercy killing”

When a disabled person is killed by a relative or caregiver, **don't** call it a “mercy killing” - by using that term, you are saying that the murder was a good thing. **Do** use the terms “murder” or “homicide” as you would in other cases. In cases where the killer claims that the victim wanted to die, or asked to die, but there is no evidence of this, you should likewise report the case as a homicide, not an “assisted suicide” or “suicide pact.”

Center the victim

Do use the victim's name. **Do** talk to people who knew and cared about the victim, and can describe their personality, likes and dislikes. **Do** include details, and **don't** limit them to the clinical. What did the victim enjoy doing? What were they struggling with? What are some fond memories from the people in their life? The reader should get the sense that the victim was a real human being.

Don't give the murderer a platform

Do follow established journalistic best practices which are used to avoid encouraging copycat crimes. Focusing on the victim is one of these best practices. Additionally, avoid grisly sensationalism and in-depth descriptions of the method of murder. If possible, avoid using the full name of the murderer in news coverage. Crucially, **don't** use coverage of a murder to give the murderer a platform. If they have left notes, blog posts, or other writings which describe their life or their intention to commit murder, avoid printing direct quotes from these, and especially **do not** reproduce them in full. Make sure that your coverage **does not** focus on communicating the worldview of the murderer.

Don't take the murderer's word for it

In disability-motivated filicide cases, statements from the murderer about the life of the victim, or about the murderer's motivations, are often reported uncritically. This can include arguments that the victim wanted (or "would have wanted") to die, that the murderer killed out of love or concern for the victim's future, or even details about what level of disability services a family was receiving. When covering a murder, the murderer **should not** be the sole source of information for any fact that you report.

Don't present murder as a natural outcome of the situation

In the wake of these murders, we often see articles with headlines such as "Tragic Incident Highlights Struggles of Parents Caring For Children with Autism" or "Killing Draws Attention to Lack of Services for Family Caregivers." These articles first describe the murder and then include quotes from other family caregivers, or people working with caregivers, in the same local area.¹¹ These people detail the struggles of family members trying to care for disabled relatives with inadequate services to help them. They often explicitly excuse the murder ("I understand why he did it.") or normalize homicidal urges toward disabled relatives ("Any parent caring for an autistic child has had those dark moments."). Without meaning to, journalists writing these stories portray murder as the inevitable result of caring for a disabled person.

Don't make the conversation about services

It's absolutely true that people with disabilities and our families don't get enough services, and this is worthy of news coverage in its own right. But there are thousands of families across the country with insufficient or nonexistent services who refrain from murdering their disabled family members. In addition, most high-profile cases have occurred in upper middle-class communities and have been committed by parents who either refused services, or had more family services than is typical - and the same "lack of services" articles were written about those cases in spite of the facts.

Other people to interview & other questions to ask

Again, make sure to talk to people who can speak to who the victim was as a person. These people may be the victim's friends, teachers, coworkers, faith leaders, or other relatives. Local or national disability rights advocates, or representatives of your state's Protection & Advocacy agency, can provide context on the issue of violence against people with disabilities. If it appears that the victim may have been killed because of their disability, and your state has hate crime laws that include disability, find out if this will be prosecuted as a hate crime. Report the answer either way

Write about filicide against a disabled victim the same way you write about any other filicide.

11 David Perry et. al., "Media Coverage of the Murder of People with Disabilities by Their Caretakers."