



Why we cover crime

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In the days since last Thursday's coverage of a junior arrested in Ohio, I've received questions about why The Daily Princetonian reports on crime. Instead of responding to specific concerns discussed in the article's online comments, I think it is more productive to outline broadly why we cover, and will continue to cover, crime related to Princeton.

Suspects, victims and readers alike often raise a similar criticism about our coverage of crime: Why, they ask, should we cover events that are so often traumatic and sensitive? Why should we cover stories that may reflect negatively on people in the community or on our community itself?

It is important to first note the newspaper's job: Our role is not always to project a positive image of Princeton but rather to present an accurate one. To that end, fair and honest journalism is the cornerstone of what we do. Crime that happens on campus or is related to campus is inherently newsworthy and reporting on it provides a vital public service.

We cover crime to be fair to our readers, who deserve to know what is happening in our community. At the same time, we take our approach to writing crime stories very seriously. We stick to the facts. We do not sensationalize. We presume innocence.

For example, unless a suspect pleads or is found guilty, any allegations made by the police are indicated as such. Words such as “allegedly,” “suspected” and “reported” are always used in our crime stories.

We cover crime like we do any other coverage area. We don’t cover all crime, the same way we don’t cover all announcements by Nassau Hall nor all the scientific research conducted on campus. There is no hard threshold for coverage. While an underage alcohol citation may not alone be newsworthy, who is involved, when and where the incident occurred and what happened all play into our judgment of whether to publish the story.

In most cases, we print the names of people suspected of or wanted in connection with crimes. It is true that suspects are innocent until proven guilty, and we are sensitive to the fact that students’ names may appear on Google searches long after an article is written. But our responsibility is to the overriding public interest. Given that issues surrounding crime are not only relevant to personal but also institutional safety and security, we publish the names of suspects.

As the University’s newspaper of record, we do not honor requests to remove people’s names from stories after publishing. But we do make an effort to follow cases as they are adjudicated, including reporting if the suspect is acquitted. These guidelines are built into our institutional code of ethics.

We make an effort to reach out to people implicated in cases. Often, suspects tell us they are not allowed to speak to reporters. In my experience, a suspect’s decision not to speak to a reporter is a choice

made with the advice of an attorney, not a mandate. A source declining to comment is often not reason enough to cancel a story.

While we print the names of suspects, we do not print the names of people who are the victims of crimes unless the circumstances are extraordinary — if, for example, they are a public figure. Depending on the case, we may reach out to victims to learn more about their side of the story.

I am happy to answer further questions from readers and continue a productive dialogue about what we cover. My email address is below; I look forward to hearing from you.

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