

January 11, 2021

Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics, Center for Journalism Ethics  
at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, School of Journalism and Mass Communication  
5115 Vilas Hall, 821 University Avenue  
Madison, WI 53706

Dear Shadid Award judges:

Alaska has the highest rate of sexual assault and child sex abuse in the U.S. Yet for generations it has been an unspoken epidemic. Predators assume, often correctly, that victims will keep their secrets.

The “Unheard” project shattered that silence with a new kind of collaborative journalism rooted in trust and respect for 29 Alaskans who have stepped forward to share their stories.

The series is a centerpiece of the ongoing investigation into sexual violence Alaska by ProPublica and the *Anchorage Daily News*.

**Please find the online version of Unheard here:**

<https://features.propublica.org/alaska-sexual-assault/unheard-survivor-stories/>

**And two front covers of the print edition, which bookended the stories published throughout June 2020, here:**

[https://www.dropbox.com/s/mlhiwdtq5xld82x/ADN\\_PP\\_Unheard\\_FrontPages.pdf?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/mlhiwdtq5xld82x/ADN_PP_Unheard_FrontPages.pdf?dl=0)

In 2018, after a string of particularly gut-wrenching sexual assault and murder cases, the *Anchorage Daily News* asked readers if they would be willing to share their stories of sexual violence to help us determine why the problem appeared to be getting worse and where the failure points exist within the criminal justice system. More than 200 people responded, most saying they would be willing to speak on the record to a reporter.

Often, they told of being sexually abused as children and again and again throughout adulthood. When they reported the crimes, police sometimes failed to investigate or prosecutors declined to file charges. After failing to see justice, some stopped reporting the rapes altogether.

The newspaper partnered with ProPublica to explore the issue, an effort that included talking to the initial group of callout respondents as well as hundreds more sexual assault survivors to identify recurring themes and specific, systemic problems in how Alaska police, prosecutors and courts handle sexual assault cases.

As we continued to talk to survivors throughout 2019, we published several stories about the lack of law enforcement in remote Alaska villages. While that reporting led the Department of Justice to declare a federal emergency, the heart of our project had always been the unheard stories shared with us by survivors.

We held a community meeting in the Inupiaq community of Kotzebue, in northwest Alaska, with law enforcement, tribal leaders and survivors to discuss the problems and possible solutions.

We were searching for a way to do justice to those stories, and share them with our readers in a way that honored the experiences of the sources while adhering to the highest journalistic standards.

In other words, it would be wrong to have heard the stories we heard from survivors and to ignore them. But we also faced a minefield of ethical concerns when considering how to proceed with the reporting and publication.

Among the questions we faced:

- **Do no harm:** Would asking a survivor to retell her or his story in great detail, and possibly to tell elements of the story multiple times, be retraumatizing? How much could and should we ask of the sources?
- **Journalistic standards:** In many of the cases, the abuser or rapist was never charged with a crime. The reasons for those failures were myriad and newsworthy, but how do we best report on and corroborate sexual assaults that had never been prosecuted or even investigated?

- **Protecting sources:** In some cases, our reporters would be the first person to confront the accused about the abuse. Would the survivor face reprisals? How would we ensure fairness to the accused while protecting the victim? What if the accused and accuser were relatives?
- **Stigmatization and stereotyping:** Statistically, Alaska Native women and men are especially at risk for sexual abuse. But the sexual violence epidemic here is a statewide problem that reaches every demographic in Alaska. How do we acknowledge and provide context for intergenerational trauma, the harm of colonization and other crucial context but avoid stigmatizing communities or perpetuating stereotypes?
- **Avoiding sensationalism:** How much detail to provide when describing a sexual assault, so that we do not shy away from the horrors of the abuse but do not exploit or sensationalize private pain?

Modern sexual assault response teams are designed to minimize the number of people a survivor must tell her or his story to. We thought about ensuring each survivor might only have to talk to a single reporter and photographer. Journalists who they felt comfortable with. We considered how to handle interviews conducted by male journalists, given some women said telling the stories of their assaults to male state troopers was embarrassing or stifling. We considered ways to ensure that the survivor knows she or he is free to decide against participating at any time for any reason.

Other options we considered included limiting the stories in Unheard to those cases that had been investigated and resolved in the court system. Or we could make all participants anonymous to avoid falsely accusing any identifiable person of a crime. Finally, we could commit to a full-fledged system of corroboration, fact-checking and backgrounding but potentially limit the number of people willing to participate.

When it came to offering the accused a chance to respond to the allegations, we considered making exceptions in cases where the survivor said they would be in danger if the accused knew they were talking to a reporter.

As for demographics, we could seek a pool of survivor stories that reflects the overall population of Alaska, or the overall ratio of reported victims in sexual assault cases, or put race and demographics aside completely.

On the question of how much detail to provide in the stories, we could leave out descriptions of the abuse altogether, let the survivor decide how much to say or commit to detailed descriptions in order to underscore the severity of the crimes.

In general, all of our decisions were guided by two simple principles. First, we could not compromise the reporting standards in any way; every story would have to be subject to the same rigorous corroboration and fact-checking as any other work we publish. Second, and most importantly, we would honor the wishes of the participants at every opportunity and without fail.

- **Do no harm:** Even the title of the series, “Unheard,” was meant to avoid shaming those survivors who were not ready to tell their stories. For example, one suggestion for the series title was, “Tell the Secrets,” but our team quickly realized that amounted to a directive to survivors, and didn’t acknowledge that not everyone was in a place where they were ready to talk about abuse or assault. Some might never feel ready to go public, and we needed to acknowledge what had happened to them without blame.

Perhaps the lasting image from the project was the [blank front page published on July 1, 2020](#). This empty canvas included only a few words, near the fold: “Talking about rape and sexual assault is difficult. Many survivors may not be in a position to do so right now. This space is dedicated to those not ready to share. We’re leaving this open for you.”

We had decided on a project that would err on the side of compassion for survivors, that we would speak with everyone who responded to our callouts, tell them about our reporting process and if they chose to move forward in sharing their story publicly, we could embark on the next steps. In some cases, participants engaged in interviews, had their portraits taken and, at some point, decided they simply weren’t ready to proceed. We honored those requests.

- **Journalistic standards:** There was really only one way to proceed. We could not compromise our reporting standards; the stories had to adhere to the same corroboration and fact-checking as any more traditional stories

published by our newsrooms. It could be incredibly damaging to survivors if false accounts were published, because it could lead to more people refusing to believe survivors.

The key to proceeding with this process ethically was to be completely transparent with the participants, telling them in detail what steps the reporters take when working on a story, whom we might call and what questions we would ask. We didn't soft-pedal or undersell the seriousness of the reporting process — we explained that a robust verification process was in the best interest of everyone involved.

Some participants became active investigators, working with us to request their own police records. In each case, we read the text of the stories back to the participants. If they felt uncomfortable about a detail, we listened.

- **Protecting sources:** In every case, even when we knew we would never name the accused in print, we reached out to the accused and gave them an opportunity to tell their side of the story. In some cases, survivors who we planned to include in the project declined to move forward at this point in the reporting process. In those cases, we halted reporting and did not alert the accused to the fact we'd been talking to the survivor.
- **Stigmatization and stereotyping:** From the many experiences we had heard from survivors, we knew that sometimes the most vulnerable people were the least likely to get justice when reporting a sexual assault. Women who had been abused as children, were experiencing homelessness or had lengthy criminal records were sometimes considered “bad victims” by prosecutors who didn't want to lose jury trials. To represent that experience, we knew we had to include survivors who were incarcerated in state prisons, and worked at length to set up a meeting with inmates at the Hiland women's prison outside of Anchorage.

We worked hard to find male survivors, a potentially under-counted group based on the number of cases reported, but clearly a significant population in Alaska given the high rate of abuse against children and the legacy of boarding school and priest abuse in remote villages.

While it might not be obvious to readers, the photography process in *Unheard* is unlike anything we had done before. *Anchorage Daily News* photojournalists asked the participants to tell us where they wanted to be photographed — what settings had meaning to them, who they wanted to appear in the portraits alongside them and what clothes, including traditional Alaska Native attire, they wanted to wear. In this way the images were meant to communicate the story the participants wanted to share.

- **Avoiding sensationalism:** This element amounted to a judgment call on a story-by-story basis, and as with every hard decision we found the best solution was to ask the survivors what they felt was best. In one case, for example, the survivor wanted people to know the details of what happened to her in order to show the dangers that her rapist posed to other women in Alaska.

But in general, we avoided gratuitous detail in favor of clear-eyed and simple language that didn't shy away from the horrors of these attacks but did not veer into over-description. Another way we sought to avoid sensationalism was to not share links to individual survivors' profiles so that they would not be the target of doxxing or other derogatory comments.

Additional notes: First, at the end of the project, we arranged a Zoom meeting in which the participants could meet one another. It was a moving and emotional session. Second, with the participants' support, we partnered with the Anchorage Museum on an outdoor display of survivor stories, and accompanying audio, so that they could tell their stories to the public. They were finally being heard.

David Hulen, editor of the Anchorage Daily News and adn.com, and Charles Ornstein, managing editor, local, of ProPublica, are both editors of the story. We are honored to nominate this work — and the team of reporters listed on the following page — for the Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Sincerely,  
Charles Ornstein, [Charles.Ornstein@propublica.org](mailto:Charles.Ornstein@propublica.org), 917-512-0222  
David Hulen, [dhulen@adn.com](mailto:dhulen@adn.com), 907-351-9015

## **“Unheard” Reporting & Visuals Team**

Agnes Chang, [agnes.chang@propublica.org](mailto:agnes.chang@propublica.org)

Adriana Gallardo, [adriana.gallardo@propublica.org](mailto:adriana.gallardo@propublica.org)

Loren Holmes, [loren@adn.com](mailto:loren@adn.com)

Kyle Hopkins, [khopkins@adn.com](mailto:khopkins@adn.com)

Marc Lester, [mlester@adn.com](mailto:mlester@adn.com)

Anne Raup, [araup@adn.com](mailto:araup@adn.com)

Nadia Sussman, [nadia.sussman@propublica.org](mailto:nadia.sussman@propublica.org)

Michelle Theriault Boots, [mtheriault@adn.com](mailto:mtheriault@adn.com)