

Violence is about  
power and control.



# REFLECTIONS ON MEDIA

HOW MEDIA BOTH CONTRIBUTES TO & CHALLENGES  
THE CRIMINALIZATION OF VICTIM/SURVIVORS



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# Who We Are



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## The Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault

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Founded in 1978, MNCASA is a statewide coalition driving transformative culture change to address sexual violence through advocacy, prevention, racial justice, and systems change and policy.

### VISION

To build a world free of sexual violence in which all human beings are treated with dignity and respect and communities are transformed through safety, healing, and partnerships.



## Violence Free Minnesota

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Founded in 1978, Violence Free Minnesota is a statewide coalition of over 90 member programs working to end relationship abuse.

### VISION

To end relationship abuse, create safety, and achieve social justice for all.



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# Myth

**Domestic/intimate partner  
violence is about love.**

**Sexual violence is about sex.**

**Victims of violence look and  
act a certain way.**

# Fact

**All violence is about entitlement,  
dominance, power, control, and humiliation.**

**Violence is rooted in power imbalances and  
systemic oppressions like patriarchy, white  
supremacy, and bi/homo/transphobia.**

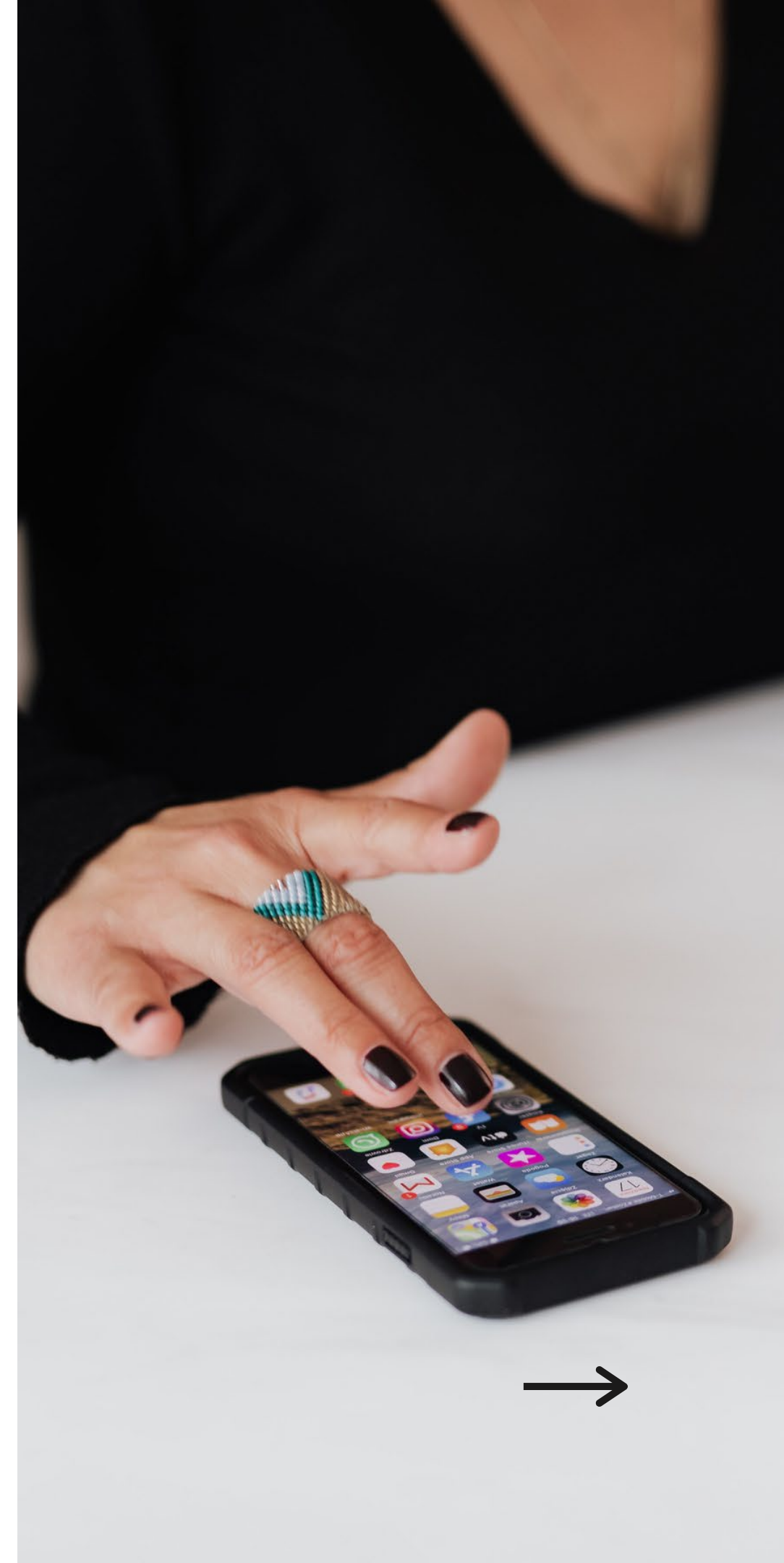
**There is no right way to respond to violence.  
There is no such thing as a “perfect victim.”**



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# Who experiences violence?

- People of all genders and identities experience violence, and people of all genders and identities can cause harm.
- But people who identify in oppressed social categories experience higher rates of violence with more barriers to accessing resources.
- People who commit violence frequently use their power and privilege to do harm.
- Our social identities influence how and if we decide to report or seek help.
- Understanding the intersection of violence and social privilege is essential for survivor -centered storytelling.



# A Punitive Framework

## Does

Look exclusively for fault

Seek to punish/control

Lack empathy and humanity

Target oppressed communities

Ignore power dynamics

Deepen existing disparities

## Does not

Create safety

Promote accountability

Center those harmed



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# Media as a Tool to Challenge Criminalization



- Respectful content **shapes the general public's knowledge of violence**, and can help dispel biases and stereotypes about victim/survivors.
- People causing harm are consuming media, too. Their perceptions and understandings of their own behavior are **shaped and challenged by this content**.
- Victims/survivors may **recognize their own experiences and begin understanding the meaning of these experiences** as well as how to reach out for help.



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# Media as a Contributor to Criminalization



- Problematic content may reinforce overcriminalization of BIPOC survivors through promotion of racialized stereotypes about “anger” and “aggression.”
- Frameworks that equate sex work with criminal activity result in media content that often **minimizes and implicitly justifies violence experienced by sex workers.**
- “Dual” language that promotes notions of “mutual abuse” implicitly **provide support for harmful policies like “dual arrest,”** which criminalizes survivors of violence and exacerbates risk for future victimization.
- Failure to understand and note abusive power dynamics leads to a lack of context in media for a victim’s “criminal actions.”





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# Criminalization and the Myth of the “Perfect Survivor”



- Victims/survivors should look and act a certain way.
- If they meet society’s standards, they are worthy of belief, support, empathy, and resources.
- If victims/survivors deviate from this standard, they can be blamed, maligned, and dismissed.



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## The “perfect survivor” is typically:

- white
- cis
- straight
- thin
- neuro-typical

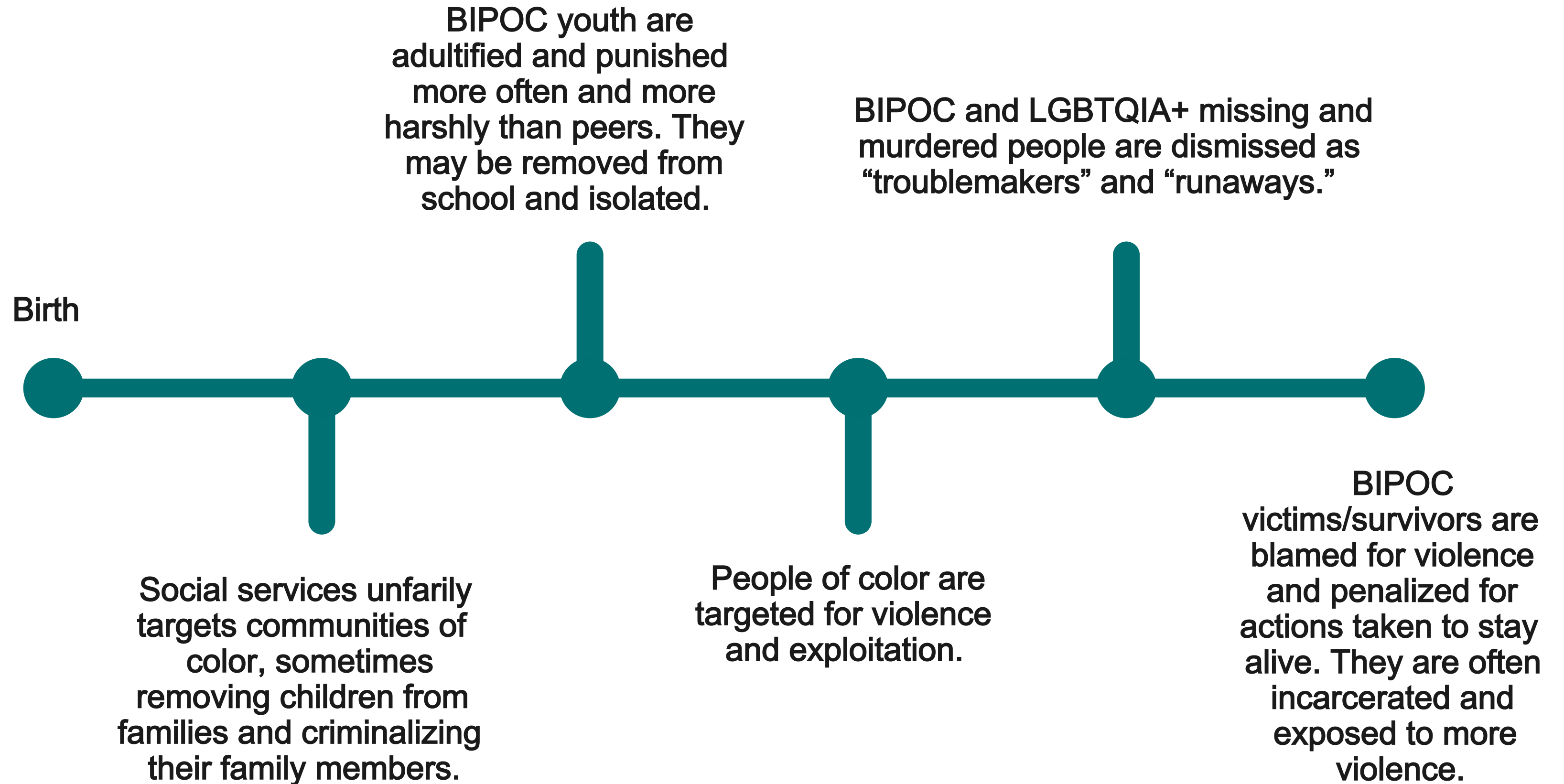


## The “perfect survivor:”

- does not use substances
- does not have a criminal history
- is viewed as innocent and not “promiscuous”
- is viewed as “cooperative” by police
- reports right away
- displays the emotions society expects
- is viewed as “fighting back” but not too aggressively



# Criminalization Timeline



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# Language Contributing to Criminalization: Domestic Violence

- emotional
- hysterical
- crazy
- bossy/bitchy

This language is **pejorative and often operates in a sexist context to frame women as aggressors and obscure the controlling dynamics they may be experiencing.**

- they snapped
- spat/tiff
- in a rage
- crime of passion

This language is frequently used to minimize and implicitly excuse abusive behavior, particularly men's, yet echoes the language on the left that is contradictorily used to discredit women's resistive behaviors.

- violence between the couple
- volatile/toxic relationship

This terminology implies both or all parties in an abusive relationship contribute to the abuse equally, and echoes and **implicitly supports problematic "dual arrest" laws** that often lead to victim/survivors being arrested alongside their abusers.

- language that references a survivor's criminal history without context

Media that includes details of a victim/survivor's criminal history before they were in an abusive relationship is irrelevant.



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# Language Contributing to Criminalization: Sexual Violence

- arrested for prostitution
- arrested on solicitation charges

Outdated language like this paints the trafficking victim/survivor as a criminal and effectively discredits them. Sharing this information is unnecessary and harmful to survivors.

- doctor “had sex” with patient
- pastor had “inappropriate relationship” with congregant

In cases with a victim/survivor of color, we often see language that minimizes sexual crimes and sexual violence. This language serves to adultify young girls of color and paint them as more sexual or promiscuous than their peers.

- “illegal” immigrant
- undocumented immigrant

Many people who are trafficked for sex or labor may not have status in the US. They may fear that they will be arrested or deported if they report what is happening to them. Many have nowhere else to go. Traffickers and abusers know how to leverage that fear for control.

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# Imagery

Keep the focus on the dignity and humanity of survivors.

- Ensure that whatever images you do share don't sensationalize or stereotype abuse
- Do not use booking photos of survivors for any reason
- Don't include photos of survivors entering or exiting courthouses for any legal proceedings pertaining to the abuse
- Ask for informed consent to use images of the victim/survivor. Consider the possible privacy & safety implications.
- If there are no safety risks in sharing photos of a victim/survivor, consider how it will impact loved ones



**This image (without the blur) of a survivor leaving a courthouse is dehumanizing and violates her privacy and dignity.**

# Case Study: Criminalization of Women

**A woman stole a memory card from a truck. The gruesome footage is now key to an Alaska murder trial**

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — A woman with a lengthy criminal history including theft, assault and prostitution got into a truck with a man who had picked her up for a “date” near downtown Anchorage. When he left her alone in the vehicle, she stole a digital memory card from the center console.

The woman is positioned in the headline as the subject and as a criminal, while the passive headline entirely omits mention of the perpetrator/serial killer. Readers might erroneously assume the woman was the murderer.

Use of the term “prostitution” in the first line is outdated and pejorative, and is likely to reinforce misconceptions about dynamics of power and exploitation, as well as misconceptions about sex work.

The use of the word “stole” rather than “took” in the headline automatically primes the audience to view the woman in a negative light.

The woman’s criminal history is irrelevant to the article, and placing it both in the headline and in the first line takes the focus of the article away from the perpetrator, a serial killer who targeted Alaska Native women.



Rena Sapp shows a photo of her sister, Veronica Abouchuk, whom Brian Smith killed.



# Case Study: Criminalization of Trafficking Victims

## FOR PRINT: Chrystul Kizer sentenced for killing Kenosha man in 2018

The Milwaukee woman who killed a Kenosha man six years ago before setting fire to his home was sentenced Monday to 11 years in prison plus five years of extended supervision.

Chrystul D. Kizer, now 24, pleaded guilty on May 9 in Kenosha County Circuit Court to second-degree reckless homicide.

She killed 34-year-old Randall Volar, who prosecutors said met Kizer on an online marketplace and frequently paid her for sex when she was a teenager. Kizer's defense had argued Volar had been abusing her and exploiting her as a child prostitute over the year leading up to his death.

"This crime was brutal, opportunistic and placed the entire community in danger," Wilk said. "These are not the actions of a victim but the actions of a perpetrator."

Delivering the sentence on Monday, Judge David Wilk of Kenosha County Court told Ms. Kizer that he was "well aware of your circumstances surrounding your relationship with Mr. Volar," The [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#) reported.

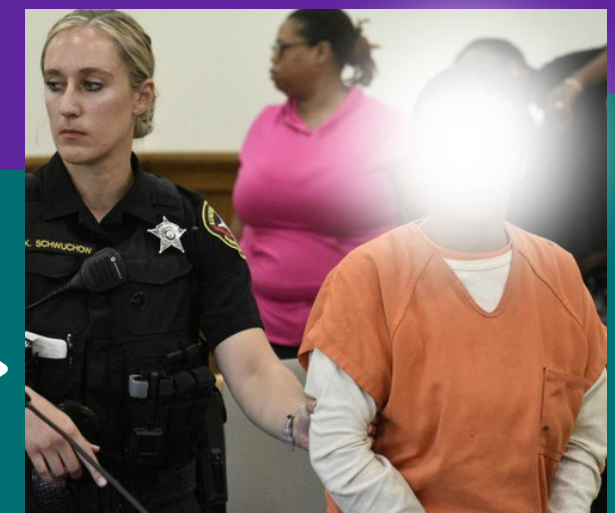
This headline omits that Kizer was trafficked and abused by the man she killed to protect herself. She is painted here as the perpetrator/criminal and her abuser as the victim.

Background about Kizer's motivations as a victim of violence is not mentioned until the third paragraph, situating Kizer as the perpetrator. Saying they met in an online marketplace and that the perpetrator paid Kizer for sex implies a consensual, mutual exchange rather than abuse. The term "child prostitute" instead of victim of sex trafficking reinforces misconceptions about power dynamics and consent.

This language disregards the harm to Kizer and explicitly calls her a perpetrator and not a victim. These two lines illustrate how powerful the myth of the perfect victim is. Because Kizer's actions did not meet the standards, her status as a victim is erased and she is villainized and ultimately criminalized.

Relationships are mutual, abuse is not.

Problematic imagery portrays Kizer as a criminal to readers.





# Case Study: Transphobia

One recent homicide has received widespread media coverage. On December 1, the county coroner named the victim of a Nov. 29 homicide as Miguel Reed Sunday, a 38-year-old male from St. Paul. Sunday died of a gunshot wound on 4th Avenue near Lake St. in south Minneapolis.

A search of Sunday's name in the judicial database tells an interesting story. Sunday was convicted in 2019 of felony aggravated robbery under the name Savannah Ryan Williams for a crime committed in June 2018. The complaint in that case indicates that Williams changed her name from Monday in August 2018.

A September 2018 police report (p. 2) notes the following:

Upon receiving the footage from the Handy Stop Gas Station, the video was shown to Minneapolis Police Officers who positively identified the suspect as Monday, DOB 12/26/81, Defendant herein, who is actually a male. Defendant has a unique tattoo on file with the Minnesota Department of Corrections on his upper arm that says, "Much Love Yolanda," with a pair of feathers underneath it. The Defendant has several documented aliases, and investigators learned that he legally changed his name to SAVANNA RYAN WILLIAMS, DOB 12/26/84, in August of this year.

That same report (p. 3) also notes that Monday had four aggravated robbery convictions and other felony convictions in Minnesota.

Savannah Ryan Williams, a trans woman, was shot and killed by a man in Minneapolis in 2023 in an act of transphobic hate. The media content on the left repeatedly deadnames Savannah, misgenders her, and goes into extensive detail on her criminal history, which has no bearing on her murder. These choices reinforce transphobic stereotypes of "deviance" and criminality, which primes readers to sympathize less with trans victim/survivors of violence.

Savannah  
Ryan  
Williams



# Case Study: Daisy Coleman

## Release of documents, video raise more questions in Daisy Coleman case

KANSAS CITY, Mo. –Documents and video just released in a controversial Maryville court case uncover new details and questions. You may remember the victim in this case, Daisy Coleman, was 14 years old when she accused a then 17-year-old Matthew Barnett of rape after a night of drinking.

Nodaway County Prosecutor Robert Rice initially filed felony sex and child endangerment charges against Barnett. Those were dropped with Rice saying the Coleman's refused to cooperate.

And in Daisy's interview, the teenager admitted it was possible that she's indicated in text to Barnett that night she'd provide Barnett with some type of sexual favors if he brought over alcohol.

But more unusual according to Langston is that Rice read Daisy her rights before the deposition began. "That is highly unusual. I've never been in a deposition where that's happened," Langston said.

This headline does not identify Daisy Coleman as the victim. Without context, the reader could assume Coleman is a criminal on trial.

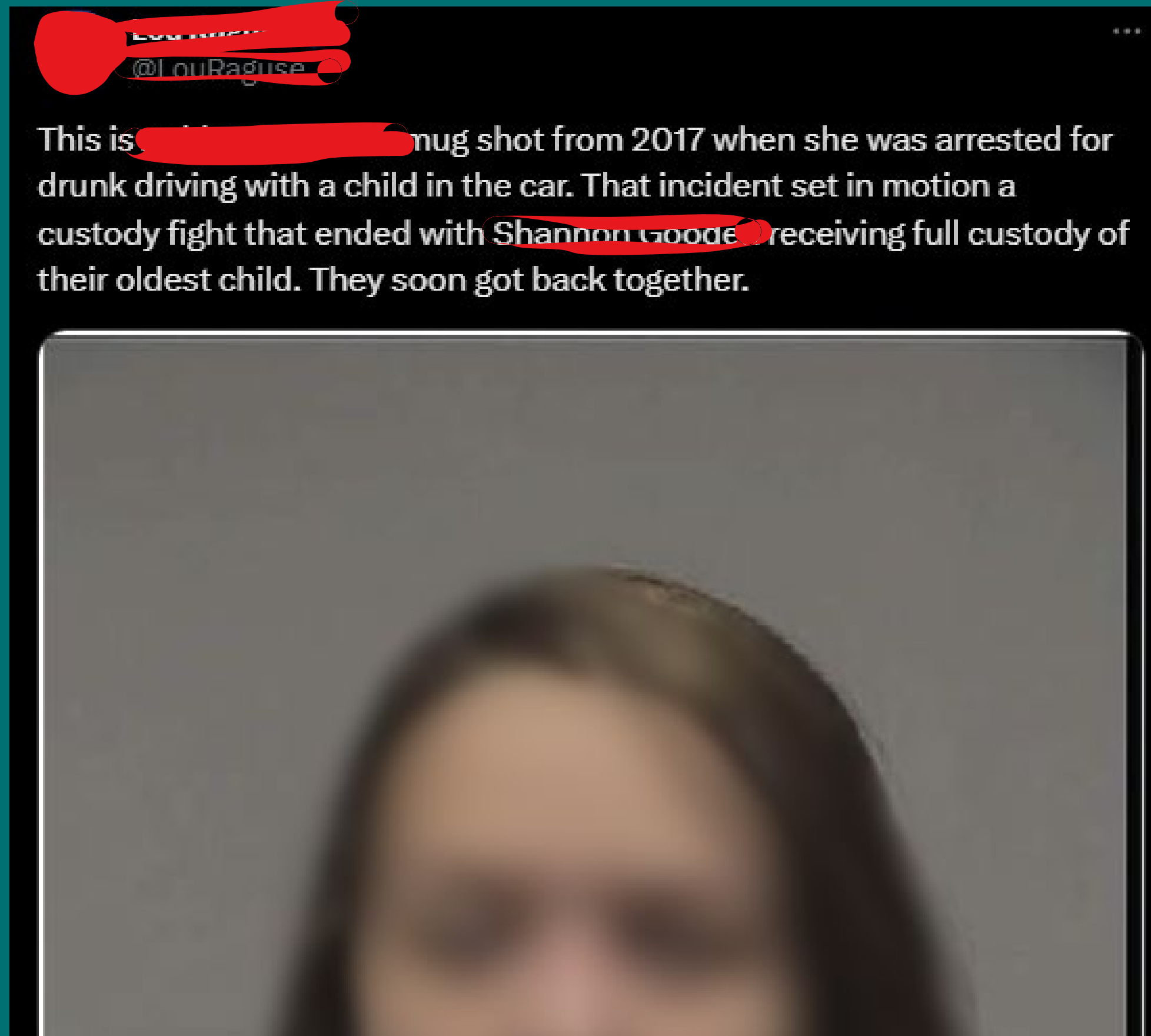
Using the language "accused" instead of "said" undermines Coleman's credibility. The article also states that the rape happened after a night of drinking. This detail is irrelevant except to again undermine Coleman.

This article blames the prosecutor's failure to file charges on the victim and family's "refusal to cooperate." This language, while not technically criminalizing the victim, paints the victim as a foil to the criminal legal process. By doing so, the article feeds a perception of Coleman as a "problem" because she isn't behaving the way they want her to.

The article also shares text messages between the victim and perpetrator indicating Barnett agreed to sexual activity despite Coleman not being conscious to consent, painting Coleman as promiscuous and opportunistic. The article uses words "the teenager admitted" as if the victim is the one on trial and not the person who harmed her.

The article notes that Daisy was read her rights before giving a deposition, meaning she was being treated as a criminal and not a victim. Although the article notes that this is unusual, they do not condemn the police action.

# Case Study: Obscuring Dynamics of Control



The text and image on the left (without the blur) were posted by a journalist after a domestic violence hostage situation in Minnesota committed by a man with a long history of violence against women, including the woman whose “mug shot” and criminal history are detailed on the left.

Her substance use history is irrelevant to this story, which frames the woman as an irresponsible, erratic mother and her abusive partner as a responsible parent.

Her abusive partner shot and killed 3 people and she was indicted for supplying him with the gun. Not a single news outlet in Minnesota thought to question or contextualize why someone who had been violently abused for years might not have a free choice to say “no.”



# Case Study: Immigrant Survivors, Shefa and Birru

Three weeks after Birru arrived in the U.S. on a green card on April 1, 2014, she and D'Aloisio became verbally abusive toward each other. That summer, she said D'Aloisio became physically abusive. That October, D'Aloisio purchased a handgun; he kept it in their bedroom closet, taking it out and looking at it when fights got especially bad, Birru claimed.

verbal insults were introduced at sentencing. But Judge Eugene Gini did not agree that Birru's actions were necessary to prevent a domestic assault and sentenced her to prison on Sept. 25, 2015.

The Placer County district attorney's office told The Appeal its prosecution of Birru was based on evidence that the shooting was an act of jealousy. "The only evidence that the defendant was a victim of domestic violence was that from the defendant," Jeffrey Wilson, the chief deputy district attorney, wrote in an email. "If the defendant had credible evidence that would have justified her conduct, I am sure her counsel would have pursued a trial by jury and would not have allowed her

Members of Tesema's family came to the hearing to argue against granting clemency. Ahmed Tesema said Shefa concocted stories of domestic abuse, and that she could still harm others.

"She's dangerous to this community. She's [a] danger for our family," Ahmed Tesema said.

"I don't support the pardon," Gildea said. "As the district court said at sentencing, and I'll just quote, 'You had alternatives to you that night. You were aware of what the alternatives were that you could have taken but you chose not to.'"

This language implies the abuse was mutual, undermining Birru's experience as a victim of intimate partner violence.

In both case examples, we see language questioning the victim's fear for their life and whether or not their actions were necessary to keep themselves safe. By including these as well as comments on the victim's truthfulness and danger posed to the community, readers are biased against the victim/survivor and encouraged to question their character and honesty. Despite the fact that there is no evidence given that the victim is a danger to the community, this opinion is given a platform.

# Resources

## 24/7 Minnesota Day One Hotline

A program of the nonprofit Cornerstone, Minnesota Day One® provides help and resources for victims of general crime, domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, or those concerned about their relationships anywhere in Minnesota and Fargo, ND.

- Call 1.866.223.1111
- Text 612.399.9995
- Email [safety@dayoneservices.org](mailto:safety@dayoneservices.org)

## Violence Free Minnesota Member Program Directory

A directory of agencies across the state that serve victim/survivors of domestic violence.

- [https://www.vfmn.org/find\\_a-program](https://www.vfmn.org/find_a-program)

## MNCASA Medical and Advocacy Support Map Tool

- [https://mncasa.org/find\\_help/](https://mncasa.org/find_help/)

## Violence Free Minnesota DATP (Domestic Abuse Transformation Programming) Directory

A directory of agencies across the state that serve people using harm in their relationships.

- [https://www.vfmn.org/find\\_a-datp-program](https://www.vfmn.org/find_a-datp-program)



# Resources

## [Innocent Until Proven Guilty](#)

A look at media coverage of criminal defendants in the U.S

## [Defense Campaign Toolkit](#)

A downloadable toolkit for organizing defense campaigns for criminalized survivors of violence.

## [Criminalizing Survivor Curricula](#)

Curriculum units and activities focused on the intersections between racialized gender -based violence and criminalization.

## [Supporting Sex Workers and Survivors](#)

Supporting Sex Workers & Survivors: Lessons for Defense Campaigns

## [Black Women & Girls, Gender -Based Violence, and Pathways to Criminalization & Incarceration](#)

A fact sheet exploring the intersection of gender-based violence and incarceration of Black women and girls.

## [Black Girls' Pushout & Criminalization in Schools Data Hub](#)

The premier home for comprehensive research, analysis, & data about school pushout and the factors that lead to the criminalization of Black girls & gender-expansive youth.



Thank you!



# Contact Us

## Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault

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