

# **THE INCIDENCE AND NATURE OF STALKING VICTIMISATION**

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In the last decade stalking has emerged as a significant social problem. It occurs when one individual repeatedly attempts to impose on another unwanted contacts and/or communications. Legislators have broadly defined the offence as 2 or more such intrusions that are intended to, or actually, render the recipient fearful. Clinical studies conducted in forensic mental health settings have helped elucidate the motivations and psychopathology of stalkers, as well as the long term impacts of this behaviour on the victim's psychological, social and interpersonal functioning. At a population level, however, insufficient is known about the prevalence and nature of stalking.

This study examines the incidence of stalking behaviours in the community, the association between stalking and other forms of violence and factors which mediate the type and duration of stalking.

### ***Methods***

Survey packages containing a 14-page questionnaire booklet, explanatory letter and reply-paid envelope were posted to a randomly selected sample of 3700 men and women whose names and addresses were obtained from the electoral roll in the Australian State of Victoria. Each respondent completed questions regarding social and educational status and the experience of harassment. Additionally, those respondents who acknowledged any incidents of unwanted behaviour were asked to complete questions examining the duration of harassment, characteristics of the perpetrator, associated violence, and responses to victimisation.

### ***Definition of Harassment***

Consistent with previous research, the study employed a behavioural definition of harassment. Respondents were asked to indicate "whether any person, male or female, has ever: (a) followed you, (b) spied on you or kept you under surveillance, (c) loitered around your home, workplace or some other place you frequent, (d) made unwanted approaches to you, (e) made unwanted telephone calls to you, (f) sent you unwanted letters, faxes or e-mails, (g) sent you offensive material, (h) ordered things on your behalf that you did not want, or (i) interfered with your property". Respondents who endorsed any of the behaviours were asked to indicate the frequency with which it occurred (once, twice, 3-9 times, 10 or more times), and whether the conduct produced fear (not at all, a little or somewhat fearful, moderately fearful, very fearful). For the purposes of the study, stalking was defined as 2 or more intrusions which induced fear in the respondent.

### **Results**

Of the 3700 surveys distributed, 74% could be accounted for, including completed surveys, known refusals and surveys not received (e.g. subject no longer at that address/ deceased/ overseas). Adjusting for surveys not received, the overall valid response rate was 61% (n=1844).

Survey responders were representative of the base electoral population in relation to gender distribution, marital status, education, employment and occupation status. However the sample contained fewer people aged 18-25 years (10% vs. 18%) and more individuals aged 56 years and over (39% vs. 31%).

### ***Incidence of Harassment***

The lifetime cumulative incidence of stalking was 23.4%, with 5.8% being stalked in the 12 months prior to the survey. Some 10.6% of respondents were subjected at some time to a protracted course of stalking involving multiple intrusions that persisted for a period of at least 4 weeks, with 2.9% reporting this level of harassment in the previous 12 months. Females were significantly more likely

than males to report having been stalked at some time during their life, though the rates of victimisation in the previous 12 months did not differ according to gender. Only 4.4% of victims indicated that the harassment was ongoing, the majority stating that the behaviour had ceased (87%), or that they were unsure whether it had ended (8%).

The reported rates of stalking varied according to the degree of fear the behaviour induced in the victim. When only minimal fear requirements were employed (at least 'a little or somewhat' fearful), the lifetime cumulative incidence was 23.4%. The requirement of a moderate degree of fear reduced the lifetime incidence to 12.3% and a significant degree of fear to 4.7%.

The experience of having been stalked was significantly more common among younger than older respondents. For those aged 18-35 years at the time of the survey, the lifetime cumulative incidence of stalking was 31.8%. The rate among those aged 36-55 was 27.6%, with only 14.6% of respondents aged over 56 years reporting stalking victimisation.

### ***Victim Characteristics***

The majority of those reporting stalking were female (75%). Some 43% were aged between 16-30 when the behaviour commenced, though all age groups were vulnerable to pursuit. Over half were currently partnered. Subjects reporting stalking were more likely than non-harassed respondents to be female (75% vs. 49%) and separated or divorced (11% vs. 5%).

### ***Perpetrator Characteristics***

Perpetrators of stalking behaviours were overwhelmingly male (84%). Females accounted for 11% and in 5% the victim was unaware of the assailant's gender. Most were believed by their victims to be aged in their early thirties when they commenced the harassment. Where the perpetrator's employment and marital status was known to the victim, 22% were unemployed, with 45% single, 34% partnered and 20% separated or divorced.

### ***Same Gender Harassment***

In 24% of cases stalking victims were pursued by a person of the same gender, with males significantly more likely to experience such harassment than females (76% vs. 8%).

### ***Prior Relationship***

The majority of those reporting stalking were pursued by someone previously known to them (57%), being a prior intimate partner in 13%, casual acquaintance in 15%, or an individual encountered in a work context (16%). Harassment by neighbours (5%), family members (4%), estranged friends (3%) and casual dates (1%) was also reported. In 42% the perpetrator was a stranger to the victim, or someone whose identity, though suspected, was yet to be revealed.

### ***Duration and Methods of Harassment***

The duration of harassment ranged from 1 day to 40 years (mean=7.8 months). The most common methods of harassment involved unwanted telephone calls (56%), intrusive approaches (56%) and following (49%). Loitering nearby (35%), maintaining surveillance (31%) and unwanted letters, faxes or email (19%) were frequently reported, though fewer victims acknowledged the receipt of offensive materials (5%) and unsolicited goods (5%). In most cases victims were subjected to 1 or 2 methods of harassment (53%), with 37% experiencing 3-5 methods, and 8% being subjected to 6 or more forms of intimidation.

### ***Threats and Assault***

For 29% of victims the stalking was accompanied by explicit threats. Threats were made in 16% to harm third parties, most often family members, intimate partners or friends of the victim. Assaults were reported by 18% of victims, half of whom sustained some form of injury. Sexual assaults were reported by 2%. Third parties were the target of assault in 10% and domestic pets were killed or injured in 3 instances. Property damage occurred in 23%, most commonly involving damage to homes, cars and gardens.

Fewer than half of the victims who were threatened were subsequently assaulted (44%), though 73% who were attacked had previously been threatened.

### ***Responses to Victimization***

In 63% of cases, victims altered their lifestyle in response to the stalking behaviours. Some 29% increased their home security, 14% changed telephone number and 7% relocated. Work security was increased by 16%, and 15% reported absenteeism. Social outings were restricted by 16% and 31% altered their daily routine in an attempt to minimise incursions.

The victims' interpersonal alliances were often tested by the stalking behaviours with 14% reporting a deterioration in intimate partner relationships and 12% a worsening of family relationships. Victims not infrequently attributed increased alcohol (10%) and increased cigarette consumption (13%) directly to the harassment. The majority of victims (69%) sought assistance to manage their pursuit, typically consulting family and friends (51%) and the police (35%) and to a lesser extent health (13%) and legal professionals (12%).

### ***Predictors of Type and Duration of Stalking Behaviours***

The number of harassment methods varied according to the prior relationship, with ex-intimate partners being subjected to the widest range of behaviours (mean: 4.7) and strangers the most restricted repertoire (mean: 2.0). Ex-partners were significantly more likely to be followed, loitered upon, kept under surveillance, approached and contacted by telephone or written messages. Female perpetrators of stalking behaviours used on average more harassment methods than their male counterparts, specifically sending more written materials and telephoning their victims.

The duration of harassment varied according to the prior relationship, with ex-intimate partners being subjected to the most persistent pursuit (mean: 16.6 months) and strangers the shortest duration (mean: 0.8 months). Associated violence was also related to the prior relationship, with ex-intimates significantly more likely than all other groups to be threatened, assaulted and subjected to property damage.

### **Discussion**

A significant proportion of people will fall victim to stalking at some time in their lives. Almost 25% of respondents met the legal criteria for stalking and 10% were subjected to multiple intrusions which spanned a period of at least 1 month. Women were more likely to report having been stalked over the course of their lifetime, though the 12-month incidence of stalking did not differ significantly between male and female victims.

The rates of victimisation in this study are generally higher than previous estimates. The study in the US by Tjaden and Thoennes (1998) quoted incidence rates for stalking according to the level of fear the behaviour induced, being either 'significant' or 'minimal'. Some 16% of subjects in the US

had been subjected to repeated intrusions that rendered them at least ‘somewhat or a little frightened’, compared to 23% of subjects in our sample. It is possible that the increase in reported rates of stalking reflects greater public awareness of this phenomena. Another, more parsimonious explanation, involves variations in survey methodology. Earlier studies relied upon telephone interviews to elicit information, an approach not ideally suited to the study of stalking victims, many of whom frequently avoid or screen incoming calls. It is likely that the use of a postal questionnaire in this study enabled not only better access to victims, but provided respondents with a greater opportunity to reflect on past experiences than would be available in the context of an unexpected telephone-based survey.

The legal definition of stalking has ensured that this term has come to encompass a wide range of unwelcome conduct, from frightening yet brief intrusions to protracted and often damaging pursuit. The results of this study bear out such diversity. For a significant proportion of respondents the stalking behaviours consisted of a brief burst of harassment, usually confined to instances of unwanted telephone calls or following, and in most cases perpetrated by strangers. In contrast, stalking by ex-partners often involved more protracted and intrusive harassment. Consistent with clinical observations, prior intimate partners were subjected to the longest duration of pursuit and the most extensive range of stalking behaviours, suggesting that the greater the emotional investment with the victim, the more likely the stalker will persist with his or her quest.

In our study 1 in 5 stalking victims were physically attacked. While the rate of assault in this sample is lower than that encountered in forensic and clinic-based samples, where average estimates range between 30-40%, it is nonetheless disconcerting. Early studies suggested reassuringly low rates of assault associated with stalking, however these were based on highly selective samples (e.g. celebrities and other public figures), many of whom by virtue of their fame could remain well protected from violent intrusions. It should be emphasised however that while victims are often at risk of being assaulted, stalking in itself is a form of violence. Irrespective of whether threats and assault accompanied the stalking behaviours, all victims in this study were rendered fearful by the conduct and the majority altered their lifestyle in response to the intrusions.

Assistance was frequently sought to manage the stalking, victims typically consulting loved ones or the police. Few consulted health professionals and those that did often reported dissatisfaction with therapeutic efforts. While victims were frequently sympathetic to the limited responses available to police or legal professionals (particularly as many were harassed prior to the introduction of antistalking legislation), they were less willing to tolerate inadequate assistance from “helping” professionals such as family physicians or mental health practitioners. Given the prevalence of stalking, it is imperative that health professionals are well versed in the psychological impacts of crime victimisation, as well as being familiar with specialised support organisations for victims, and the legal protections available for those who find themselves being stalked.

Since the instigation and passage of antistalking legislation in the US, stalking has generated in most English-speaking nations a growing discourse in legal, scientific and popular domains. This study confirms that such attention and concern is not misplaced. Stalking is a prevalent and damaging form of behaviour to which all members of society are susceptible. It is incumbent upon health practitioners to be aware of the extent, nature and impacts of this problem, given their unique placement to alleviate much of the victim’s distress.

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