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# Stalking

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## Abstract

Stalking consists of repeated, unwanted behavior that causes a victim distress or fear, and can have severe impact upon a victim's life. This chapter highlights definitions and prevalence of stalking, and explores the behaviors that constitute stalking, as well as cyberstalking, the perpetration of stalking solely online. Typologies of stalking, which classify perpetrators to provide indication of the nature, duration, and severity of the stalking, and risk of future harm to the victim, are described. Risk factors for stalking and their use in the development of various risk assessment and screening tools are discussed, as are the validity of those tools. Finally, treatment of stalking perpetrators and the psychological, physical, and social impacts on victims are discussed.

## Introduction

Stalking is generally defined as repeated, unwanted behavior that causes distress or fear (Owens, 2016). Stalking is a prevalent and varied crime that can have considerable physical and psychological consequences, as well as practical impacts that permeate through a victim's life and the lives of those around them (Morgan and Truman, 2022; Storey et al., 2023). Existing research has explored the perpetration and victimization of stalking and this chapter provides an overview of this research, including definitions and prevalence; cyberstalking; stalking typologies; risk factors and risk assessment; treatment of perpetrators; and victim impact.

## Definitions, Prevalence, and Behaviors

There is a lack of consensus across research, policy, and practice regarding the definition of stalking (Tjaden, 2009). For example, United States (US) stalking legislation differs across the 50 states with respect to the inclusion of particular stalking behaviors, the requirement of victim fear, and presence of threat toward the victim (Fox et al., 2011). Legislation in the United Kingdom (UK) specifies that a stalking perpetrator must demonstrate a fixated and obsessive tendency toward a victim and engage in repeated, unwanted behavior that must cause distress and/or fear (Protection from Harassment Act, 1997; Protection of Freedoms Act, 2012). Although definitions differ, they require three key components: the behavior must be (i) repeated; (ii) unwanted by the victim; and (iii) cause the victim fear and/or distress (Owens, 2016).

National surveys identify that an estimated 15.2% of women and 5.7% of men in the US have experienced stalking victimization in their lifetime (Breiding et al., 2014). In the UK, prevalence is 23.3% for women and 9.5% for men (Office for National Statistics, 2022); and 20.3% for women and 6.8% for men in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Further studies have identified overall prevalence rates of 10.8% in Germany (Dressing et al., 2020); and 19.5% in Portugal (Matos et al., 2019). Research overwhelmingly indicates that stalking perpetrators are more likely to be male, and although rates of stalking victimization vary, they are consistently higher among women, sexual and gender minorities, university/college students, and healthcare professionals (Ashmore et al., 2006; Edwards et al., 2022; Fedina et al., 2020; Kropp et al., 2002; Matos et al., 2019; Mullen et al., 2000; Purcell et al., 2002; Ravensberg and Miller, 2003; Shorey et al., 2015; Spitzberg, 2002; Thoennes and Tjaden, 2000).

The behaviors that constitute a stalking campaign are highly varied and no single behavior must be present, instead it is the repetitive pattern of the behavior that defines the offense. Further, stalking can include behaviors that, alone, are not illegal such as

telephone calls, checking an individual's social media, or giving gifts (McEwan, 2021) but when these behaviors are conducted in a fixated, repeated, unwanted, and obsessive pattern they constitute stalking (Owens, 2016).

As outlined by Kropp et al. (2008) there are seven general categories of stalking behavior, namely *communicating about the victim*, for instance asking family/friends for information about the victim; *communicating with the victim*, such as sending repeated, unwanted text/social media messages or making phone calls; *approaching the victim*, including following or watching from a distance; and *direct contact with the victim*, for instance confronting the victim face-to-face, touching the victim. Stalking also includes *intimidating the victim*, for example communicating in a menacing manner or damaging property; and *threatening the victim*, such as making explicit threats or engaging in threatening behavior such as brandishing a weapon. Finally, stalking perpetrators may also exhibit physical or sexual violence toward the victim or use a weapon (Begotti and Maran, 2019; Canter and Ioannou, 2004; Kropp et al., 2008; March et al., 2022; Marcum and Higgins, 2021; Morgan and Truman, 2022; Purcell et al., 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2011).

## Cyberstalking

Online methods of stalking are becoming increasingly common (Nobles et al., 2014; Morgan and Truman, 2022), and when stalking behavior is conducted solely online, it is labeled cyberstalking. Cyberstalking is therefore generally defined as repeated monitoring, contacting, or pursuit of an individual exclusively using technology and/or the Internet (Becker et al., 2020; Marcum et al., 2017; Nobles et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2023).

In both general population and university student samples, reported prevalence rates of cyberstalking perpetration vary from 4.9% to 50.9%, and victimization rates vary from 3.4% to 40.8% (Berry and Bainbridge, 2017; DeKeseredy et al., 2019; Dressing et al., 2014; Fissel et al., 2021; Kraft and Wang, 2010; Lee and O'Sullivan, 2014; Lyndon et al., 2011; Navarro et al., 2016; Reyns et al., 2012, 2018). The variation in prevalence rates may be the result of the different definitions of cyberstalking used in the literature (Dressing et al., 2005). For instance some authors define the behavior as two or more incidents of unwanted contact, harassment, unwanted sexual advances, or threats (Reyns et al., 2012) and others rely on participant reports, asking if they had ever pursued someone online (Lyndon et al., 2011).

Research has attempted to identify gender differences in cyberstalking perpetration but has not reached a consensus on the ratio of male to female perpetrators. Some research has identified a higher prevalence of male perpetrators, e.g., 82% male in a university student sample and 94% male in a forensic sample (Cavezza and McEwan, 2014; Fernández-Cruz et al., 2021). However, women are more likely than men to perpetrate covert cyberstalking behaviors, such as monitoring the victim's emails or social media activity (March et al., 2020, 2021; Purcell et al., 2001; Smoker and March 2017).

Methods of cyberstalking vary and novel methods can develop quickly with new technology (Henry et al., 2020; Sambasivan et al., 2019). Factor analysis by De Fazio et al. (2020) identified six factors to categorize cyberstalking behaviors. Firstly, *disseminating private information and materials without permission* includes posting false information about the victim on social media; posting or sending private photos or videos; and using social media to spread rumors about the victim. Secondly, *physical and social threats, hacking and stealing identity* includes sending threats to physically harm the victim; sending viruses or spyware to the victim; hacking into the victim's accounts; and stealing the victim's identity, e.g., by creating a fake social media account in their name. Thirdly, *harassment* includes sending unwanted images, messages, or voicemails, which can be overly affectionate, needy, or sexual. Fourthly, *denigration and ordering goods* includes creating a defamatory Website or post about the victim; ordering goods or subscribing to services in the victim's name; and guiding others to contact the victim unwantedly. The penultimate factor is *unwanted emails and spying*, including sending repeated, unwanted emails; and using GPS or electronic devices to track the victim. The final factor, *impersonation*, includes using the victim's name to send messages or post on social media (Al-Mutawa et al., 2016; De Fazio et al., 2020; DeMatteo et al., 2017; Dressing et al., 2014; Every-Palmer et al., 2015; Lyndon et al., 2011).

## Typologies

A stalking typology provides an indication of how a stalking perpetrator may behave, as well as how their behavior can be prevented from continuing (McEwan et al., 2009a,b). More than 20 typologies exist for stalking and categorize perpetrators based on their relationship to the victim; motivation; and/or mental health (Mullen et al., 2009).

The most commonly used stalking typology was developed by Mullen et al. (1999) and outlines five categories of stalking perpetrator based on the authors' research and clinical experience involving stalkers and their victims. The typology is based primarily on the motivation for the stalking behavior as well as its context and the prior relationship between the victim and perpetrator. Perpetrators in the first category, *Rejected*, are responding to the breakdown of a close relationship, most often with an ex-intimate partner, however this type can also include a close acquaintance. These perpetrators engage in stalking for reconciliation or revenge or a mixture of both, following the victim's perceived rejection of them. The stalking behavior allows the perpetrator to continue to experience some semblance of a relationship, thereby compensating for the lost relationship with the victim. Perpetrators in the second category, *Intimacy Seeking*, engage in stalking due to loneliness or lack of loving relationships and target their behavior toward a stranger or acquaintance. Their goal is to establish an intimate relationship with the victim, and the fantasized relationship between perpetrator and victim provides gratification to them due to the sense of being in love. In the third category, *Incompetent*

*Suitor*, perpetrators experience lust and loneliness, and target a stranger or acquaintance. The initial motivation is establishing contact with the victim which they hope will lead to an intimate relationship. Perpetrators in this category do not understand typical courting rituals and their approaches to the victim tend to be crude and insistent. These perpetrators are indifferent to any signs of disinterest or distress that their behavior evokes in the victim and have poor interpersonal skills. Perpetrators who are completely insensitive to the lack of positive response from the victim may engage in extended pursuit. Perpetrators in the fourth category, *Resentful*, feel that they have been humiliated or are the victims of an injustice. Therefore, they target their stalking toward an individual whom they believe to be responsible for their victimization and so deserves to be targeted. These perpetrators desire revenge and are motivated by the sense of power and control that emerges from stalking the victim. These perpetrators believe their actions are justified and enjoy the feeling of dominance. Finally, *Predatory* perpetrators have deviant sexual interests and target strangers, usually a woman or child. The goal of their stalking behavior is to prepare for an attack and gain information about the victim. The pleasure obtained from the fantasy of the attack motivates the perpetrator, and they achieve a sense of power believing they are in control of the victim's fate (MacKenzie et al., 2009; Mullen et al., 1999).

Other stalking typologies include Mohandie et al. (2006) RECON typology, which proposed four distinct categories of stalking perpetrator based on the perpetrator-victim relationship and context of the behavior. An early typology by Zona et al. (1998) also identified three categories of stalking perpetrator, based on the perpetrator-victim relationship and motivation for the stalking behavior. MacKenzie et al. (2009) explain that a stalking typology, while useful in providing a description of common perpetrator characteristics, must also provide an evaluator with information that brings them closer to their goal in the management of a stalking case. This goal may be to develop a clinical treatment and management plan for a perpetrator; assess and identify the need for law enforcement intervention; or implement a safety plan for a victim. Stalking typologies also assist an evaluator to identify what risks can be expected from the perpetrators in each category. For example, perpetrators in the *Intimacy Seeking* group are unlikely to become violent, as they are aware that violence would not help them achieve a relationship with the victim. However, *Resentful* perpetrators are likely to be violent in their attempt to exact revenge upon the victim (MacKenzie et al., 2009). It is pertinent to understand what needs and desires are being satisfied for the perpetrator by their behavior, and *why* the perpetrator is motivated to continue their behavior. A stalking typology can also help an evaluator to predict the duration and severity of the stalking which can then help to direct a course of management or intervention (Mullen et al., 2000).

## Risk Factors

In the management of stalking cases, it is important to understand related risk factors that may impact the nature of the stalking and/or increase the risk of harm to the victim (McEwan et al., 2017). General categories of risk factors include the presence of threats; relationship between perpetrator and victim; the perpetrator's mental health and personality disorders, as reviewed in meta-analyses by Rosenfeld (2004) and Churcher and Nesca (2013).

Early research identified that cases of stalking involving assault are associated with previously expressed threats and this was found to be more strongly associated for male than female perpetrators than female (Morrison, 2001; Mullen et al., 1999; Purcell et al., 2001; Sheridan and Davies, 2001). Further, perpetrators who had previously been in an intimate relationship with the victim are significantly more likely to engage in violence in their stalking campaign (McEwan et al., 2017; Palarea et al., 1999). In a sample of self-identified stalking victims, 45% of victims who had a previous intimate relationship with the perpetrator were physically assaulted, compared to 14% of victims who had a non-intimate relationship, and ex-intimate partner perpetrators were the most likely to try to kill the victim, threaten third parties, or violate a legal protection order (Sheridan and Davies, 2001).

The mental health of a perpetrator and presence of a personality disorder are important risk factors in predicting the nature of stalking and risk of harm to a victim. The presence of psychosis; delusional beliefs; erotomanic delusions; substance use disorders; and mood/anxiety disorders has been shown to significantly predict persistent stalking in male and female perpetrators (Albrecht et al., 2022; Churcher and Nesca, 2013; McEwan et al., 2009a,b, 2017; Nijdam-Jones et al., 2018; Shorey et al., 2012). Stalking perpetrators who target public figures, including royalty, politicians, and celebrities, have an increased likelihood of mental illness (Every-Palmer et al., 2015; James et al., 2009; Mullen et al., 2009). Further, individuals with psychopathy who engage in stalking demonstrate escalation in the frequency, severity, and diversity of their stalking behavior (Churcher and Nesca, 2013; Storey et al., 2008).

## Risk Assessment

Stalking risk assessment tools support evaluators to identify the extent to which a perpetrator possesses risk factors that increase the risk of future stalking and violence, and can also assist in developing management plans to reduce those risks and prevent continued stalking (Kropp et al., 2002). Available stalking risk assessment tools generally consider the context of the victim-perpetrator relationship; the nature of stalking; risk factors related to the perpetrator; and vulnerability factors related to the victim of the stalking. Three key outcomes should be considered when conducting a comprehensive risk assessment of stalking: the risk of continued stalking (persistence); the risk of physical or sexual violence during the stalking; and the risk of future stalking (recurrence) (Mullen et al., 2006). Two risk assessment tools have been developed for stalking.

First, the Guidelines for Stalking Assessment and Management (SAM) was developed by Kropp et al. (2008). The SAM includes 30 risk factors in three domains: *Nature of Stalking*, which considers the pattern of stalking behavior; *Perpetrator Risk Factors*, which considers the perpetrator's history of social, interpersonal, and psychological adjustment problems; and *Victim Vulnerability Factors*, which considers barriers that could interfere with a victim's ability to engage in self-protective behavior based on their history of social, interpersonal and psychological adjustment. Risk factors are coded across both the current stalking period (Recent) and any stalking behavior prior to the current stalking period (Past). The presence of these risk factors and the development of risk scenarios informs an evaluator in assessing the risk of three outcomes as low, moderate or high: risk of *continued stalking*; risk of *serious physical harm*; and *case prioritization*. Research has supported the reliability and predictive validity of the SAM when considering the risk factors both individually and as a group (Coupland et al., 2023; Foellmi et al., 2016; Shea et al., 2018).

Second, the Stalking Risk Profile (SRP), developed by MacKenzie et al. (2009), includes 40 risk factors, grouped by perpetrator type based on Mullen et al. (1999) typology. Risk factors cover 5 domains: *the nature of the victim and perpetrator relationship*; *perpetrator motivation*; *psychological, psychopathological, and social characteristics of the perpetrator*; *psychological and social vulnerabilities of the victim*; and *legal and mental health context of the behavior*. All risk factors relate to the risk of one or more of three outcomes: *persistence of continued stalking*; *violence toward the victim or third parties*; and *recurrence of stalking*. Based on the presence of the risk factors identified, the evaluator makes a risk judgment of low, medium, or high for each outcome (MacKenzie et al., 2009). The reliability and validity of the SRP has been assessed in a study by McEwan et al. (2016), using a retrospective review of 241 stalking cases. The SRP demonstrated high interrater reliability for stalking motivational type, and moderate interrater reliability for risk judgments. Perpetrators rated as high risk on the SRP were more likely to reoffend than those rated low risk.

In addition to risk assessment tools, two stalking screening measures have been developed. Stalking screening tools are designed to prioritize resources, guide management responses, and identify the need for further assessment in a stalking case, for example using the SAM or SRP. The Screening Assessment for Stalking and Harassment (SASH) developed by McEwan et al. (2015) aims to provide guidance on decision-making for first responders to a stalking case. The SASH does not require specialist stalking knowledge (unlike the SRP and SAM) and is only based on observable behavior that would be readily available to authorities. The 16 SASH items include three dimensions: *stalking behavior*; *perpetrator history*; and *victim situation*. Based on the number and nature of items present, an evaluator reaches an overall level of concern of low, moderate, or high. The SASH has been assessed for reliability and predictive validity, and it was demonstrated that the level of concern identified by the SASH was effective at predicting stalking severity. Cases rated as low concern by evaluators using the SASH demonstrated lower severity stalking at 6-month follow-up, than medium or high concern cases (Hehemann et al., 2017).

Developed by Sheridan and Roberts (2009), the S-DASH stalking screening tool is a stalking specific update to the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment, and Honor-Based Violence (DASH) screening tool (Richards, 2009). 12 screening questions are presented to a stalking victim, identifying perpetrator's *previous stalking behavior*, *vandalism of the victim's property*, *current stalking of the victim*; *presence of threats*, *history of violence*, and *fear/distress felt by the victim*. A score is then calculated to inform an overall rating of standard, medium, or high risk of future violence/harm toward the victim, and to reach an ongoing management decision such as the requirement of a multi-agency response (Sheridan and Roberts, 2009). The S-DASH has not been the subject of empirical research regarding its validity or reliability. Research has demonstrated that, when used by police officers in domestic abuse cases, its predecessor the DASH did not significantly predict recidivism or violent outcomes (Turner et al., 2019).

## Treatment

A review by Rosenfeld (2000) reported a significant lack of research into the clinical management and treatment of stalking perpetrators, but noted that treatment of these individuals should target an underlying disorder, not the behavior itself. For example, where present and related to the stalking behavior, treatment should focus on primary delusional disorders which have been extensively linked to stalking perpetration and have been treated effectively with antipsychotic medications. Further, personality disorders that contribute to stalking perpetration can be targeted in individuals who are motivated to change (McEwan et al., 2017; Rosenfeld, 2000).

Only two published studies have assessed the impact of treatment on those who engage in stalking, both explored the use of dialectical behavior therapy (DBT). First, Rosenfeld et al. (2007) examined a group of 14 stalking perpetrators who completed DBT and identified that they were significantly less likely to reoffend post-treatment, compared to those who did not complete treatment. A second study by Rosenfeld et al. (2019) included a larger group of 109 stalking perpetrators who were randomly assigned to DBT or anger management treatment. No significant difference in the likelihood of reoffending was identified between the two treatment groups, or when comparing the treatment groups with perpetrators who did not complete treatment. Research into treatment of stalking perpetrators is limited by participant attrition and exclusion of perpetrators with severe clinical symptoms or high risk of violence, and so remains an important but under-developed area of study (Rosenfeld et al., 2019).

## Victim Impact

The impact of stalking on victims is extensive and varied. Existing research has identified types and prevalence of impact of stalking on victims, as well as predictors of impact (Storey et al., 2023). Psychological impact includes fear of physical harm or death; anxiety



and depression; panic attacks; intrusive thoughts; PTSD; and suicide attempts (Amar, 2006; Dressing et al., 2005, 2014; Morgan and Truman, 2022; Pathe and Mullen, 1997). In addition to mental illness, many victims report additional psychological consequences such as feeling helpless and powerless; experiencing aggressive thoughts; suspicion; mistrust toward others; and reluctance to enter a new relationship (Dressing et al., 2005, 2014; Pathe and Mullen, 1997; Stieger et al., 2008). Victims of stalking, when compared to victims of intimate partner violence without stalking, report higher rates of PTSD, depression, and anxiety (Logan et al., 2006). Stalking victimization also impacts physical health, with up to 74% of victims reporting sleep disturbances (Dressing et al., 2005; Pathe and Mullen, 1997; Stieger et al., 2008), as well as excessive weakness; weight fluctuations; appetite disturbances; headaches; and poorer overall health (Amar, 2006; Dressing et al., 2005, 2014; Pathe and Mullen, 1997; Stieger et al., 2008).

Up to 82% of stalking victims report going to great lengths to avoid their stalking perpetrator, meaning their daily life is impacted in various ways (Amar, 2006; Kamphuis et al., 2003; Pathe and Mullen, 1997; Stieger et al., 2008). Many victims specifically report having to decrease their work or school attendance or change their place of work/study (Dressing et al., 2005). Cyberstalking victims report reducing or ceasing their use of social media to avoid encountering the perpetrator online, and while this is useful at reducing the accessibility of the victim to the perpetrator it can also cut off essential social ties to family and friends for the victim (Worsley et al., 2017). Considering predictors of impact, stalking victims experience worse physical, psychological, and social outcomes when the stalking is of higher severity, higher diversity and when there is a pre-existing relationship between stalking victim and perpetrator (Johnson and Kercher, 2009; Kamphuis et al., 2003; Mechanic et al., 2000; Storey et al., 2023). Recent research has also identified that 35.3% of those known to the victim, including partners, family and children, also experience negative consequences from stalking behavior, highlighting a wider social circle of individuals experiencing stalking impact (Storey et al., 2023).

## Conclusion

Within the literature, there is a good understanding of the general prevalence of stalking and cyberstalking as well as how new stalking behaviors can emerge with technological advancements. Typologies of stalking are useful in providing evaluators with an indication of risk of stalking recidivism or violence. Future research should investigate how stalking typologies can be applied to cyberstalking cases, and whether new categories of stalking perpetrator emerge when behavior is conducted solely online. Risk factors for stalking are generally well-researched, however research into the reliability and validity of risk assessment and screening tools should be expanded. Additionally, perhaps the area of stalking most lacking in research is of treatment of stalking perpetrators. With the detrimental impact of stalking on victims' lives, it is imperative that future research explores treatment and interventions to reduce stalking recidivism, as well as how to reduce and treat the victim impact of stalking through trauma informed professional and social support.

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