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Abuse Victims Urged to Cover Online Tracks; Agencies, Groups Worry about Abusers' Use of Technology to Stalk

By Kim Horner, Staff Writer

Local domestic violence shelters have a warning for any abuse victim searching the Internet for help: your abuser may be watching your every online move.

Inexpensive, off-the-shelf technology allows abusive partners to install software that enables them to retrace their victims' online activity, including seeing which Web sites they've visited. "It's very much one of the newest topics the violence-against-women field is facing," said Cindy Southworth, director of Safety Net: the National Safe & Strategic Technology Project at the National Network to End Domestic Violence in Washington, D.C. "It's happening everywhere."

Stalking online and through other technology has become a growing concern in recent years among agencies that work with domestic violence victims. As a result, organizations in Texas and nationwide are labeling their Web sites with use warnings.

For example, the home page of the Texas Council on Family Violence warns visitors: "Safety alert: Computer use can be monitored and is impossible to completely clear." The Austin-based agency advises users to find a safe computer or call its toll-free hotline.

"We feel like our obligation is to let people know that if someone is very computer savvy or literate, they can track you and to be careful," said Sheryl Cates, executive director of the agency, which also runs a national domestic violence hotline.

Officials at area domestic violence programs decline to cite specific problems their agencies have faced, out of concern for the victims they serve. But they said they have been working to educate themselves and their clients about ways abusers may use technology to harm them.

"All these new tools are coming faster than we can keep up," said Jan Langbein, executive director of Genesis Women's Shelter in Dallas.

Tracking devices in cars, which use a network of satellites, can help abusers determine their victim's location. Software programs – originally designed to help parents protect their children by keeping an eye on their Web use – can also be used by abusers to monitor their victim's computer activities.

"If you're buying tickets on Greyhound it would show your entire escape plan," Ms. Southworth explained.

The Web sites of domestic violence programs, such as New Beginning Center in Garland and The Family Place in Dallas, even offer "click here" prompts that explain how visitors can erase from their computer the temporary Internet files that leave an electronic trail of Web sites visited.

Persistent Abusers

However, a technologically savvy cyberstalker can usually get the information he's seeking.

"It kind of depends how hard somebody may be looking for you," said Patrick Ball, director of Human Rights Programs at the Benetech Initiative, a nonprofit in Palo Alto, Calif., that uses technology to address social problems. He explained that a committed abuser could install spyware on a victim's computer that would allow him to track Internet activity even if cache files had been cleared.

"If you use computers you don't control, you have to assume everything you do is being monitored," Dr. Ball said. "If you think otherwise, you're just being naive."

Paige Flink, executive director of The Family Place, said Friday that she did not realize that an abuser could use software to track Web activity despite the "click here" function that her agency's Web site offers.

"It is scary," she said, adding that she planned to change the Web site. Ms. Morrison of New Beginning Center also said Friday that she would revisit the issue.

Tracking, Cameras

Domestic violence shelter officials also worry that auto-tracking devices such as OnStar can be used to harm women fleeing abuse. The equipment, which can be installed and also comes with some vehicles, "can be used as a tool to track her every movement," Ms. Langbein said.

For that reason, counselors at Genesis caution that women making plans to escape not to drive to the shelter if they have such devices on their cars.

"We talked to one woman about having her OnStar disconnected," Ms. Langbein said.

Hidden cameras also have been used by abusive spouses.

"Things like hidden cameras are advertised on TV to be able to watch a nanny at home with a child," Ms. Langbein said. "But those are now being used with this whole power-and-control behavior."

She added that abusers can employ technology to terrorize their victims regardless of whether they actually ever use it on them. Ms. Langbein said it matters only that the victim believes the technology could be used against her.

"The confusion he creates is really one of his best weapons," she said. "Whether he can do it or not is not the issue. ... We call it crazy-making and they get really good at it."

Concerns over Data

Computer security concerns are so great that the National Network to End Domestic Violence has warned shelters not to submit information that can identify clients in databases as requested by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Congress asked the federal housing agency in 2001 to collect data on homeless people nationwide and create a count of how many people are getting shelter, food and other care. HUD released guidelines in July requiring social services that help the homeless to include names, Social Security numbers and birth dates. Domestic violence shelters called the project invasive and said it could help abusers find victims.

In October, HUD agreed to modify both the type and manner in which it collected the information. But Ms. Southworth said the reporting requirements could still put abuse victims at risk, and her agency has asked HUD to change the guidelines.

"We don't believe HUD intended to put victims in harm's way," Ms. Southworth said. "We're not willing to sacrifice a single victim for better data collection."

'Use it more Safely'

About 1,200 women and children die each year in the United States because of domestic abuse. But Ms. Southworth, who runs the Safety Net program, said she did not believe domestic violence had increased because of technological misuse, even though no statistics exist on the use of technology in domestic violence.

"Technology itself is not evil. It's a fabulous tool that's helping victims. They're finding ways to get to safety but it's being misused by perpetrators," Ms. Southworth said. "We want them [victims of domestic violence] to use technology, just use it more safely."

Since 2002, the Safety Net has trained more than 9,500 domestic abuse workers, police officers and prosecutors in Texas and nationwide on how to identify and hold perpetrators accountable for misusing technology.

As a result of training through the national project, Brighter Tomorrows in Grand Prairie recommends its clients take the simple measure of doing an Internet search of their names to see what information an abuser may be able to find out about them, executive director Jana Barker said. The shelter itself takes the same precaution to make sure confidential information has not been posted, she said.

"We try to stay one step ahead," she said.

Ms. Southworth predicts the misuse of technology to aid in domestic violence will only increase as young people, who grew up on the Internet and with other technology, get older.

"I don't think we've come close to the peak of it yet," she said. "When the children of today grow up we're going to see unheard of numbers of domestic violence stalking that will have a tech component."

Brighter Tomorrows, Genesis Women's Shelter and New Beginning Center are among 21 charities funded by The Dallas Morning News Charities. Since 1986, The Dallas Morning News Charities has raised nearly $13 million for area nonprofit agencies. The 2004-05 fund-raising campaign runs through Monday, though donations are accepted year-round.

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