



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

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November 1997

The Crime of Stalking: How Big Is the Problem?

Summary of a Presentation by Patricia Tjaden, Ph.D., Center for Policy Research

Scientific information on stalking in the United States has been limited, despite unprecedented media, legal, and legislative attention to the subject over the past decade. To better understand the broader context of violence in which stalking occurs, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) collaborated in a comprehensive survey of violence against women. The National Violence Against Women Survey, conducted by the Center for Policy Research, collected data from 8,000 women and 8,000 men 18 years of age or older on a broad range of issues related to violence.

This Research Preview discusses the stalking aspects of the study. Further findings from the survey are anticipated by spring 1998. With regard to stalking, the survey collected data on:

- The prevalence of stalking.
- The characteristics of offenders, victims, and stalking behaviors.
- Victims' perceptions of why they are stalked.
- The co-occurrence of stalking and domestic violence.
- Victims' responses to stalking, including their involvement with the justice system.
- The psychological and social consequences of stalking.

Survey findings indicated that stalking is a bigger problem than previously thought, affecting about 1.4 million victims annually. The survey showed that stalking was strongly linked to the controlling behavior and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse perpetrated against women by intimate partners. About half of all female stalking victims reported their victimization to the police and about 25 percent obtained a restraining order.

To screen for stalking victimization, the survey asked about specific harassing and threatening behaviors

respondents had experienced repeatedly from marital and cohabitating partners, friends, acquaintances, relatives, and strangers. The word "stalking" was not used in the survey. Researchers defined stalking conservatively—as "a course of conduct directed at a specific person that involves repeated physical or visual proximity, nonconsensual communication, or verbal, written, or implied threats" sufficient to cause fear in a reasonable person.¹

The survey was fielded between November 1995 and May 1996. The national sample of households was generated through random-digit dialing; interviews averaged 25 minutes and were conducted using a computer-assisted telephone interviewing system. Of those who started the interview, 97 percent of women and 98 percent of men completed it.

Survey results

Incidence and prevalence. Of those surveyed, 8 percent of women and 2 percent of men said they had been stalked at some point in their lives. When the raw figures were extrapolated to 1995 estimates of the adult population, the results projected 8.2 million female and 2 million male lifetime stalking victims, most of whom were stalked by only one stalker. In most cases, stalking episodes lasted 1 year or less, but, in a few cases, stalking continued for 5 or more years. Researchers estimate that approximately 1 million women and 400,000 men are stalked each year in the United States.

Offender characteristics. Most victims knew their stalker. Women were significantly more likely to be stalked by an intimate partner—whether that partner was a current spouse, a former spouse or cohabiting partner, or a date. Only 21 percent of stalkers identified by female victims were strangers. On the other hand, men were

significantly more likely to be stalked by a stranger or an acquaintance. About 87 percent of stalkers were men. Women tended to be victimized by lone stalkers, but in 50 percent of male victimizations the stalker had an accomplice—usually a friend or girlfriend.

Victim characteristics. Most victims were between the ages of 18 and 29 when the stalking started. About 80 percent were women. When information on specific categories of minority women was combined, the data showed no difference between the proportion of minority women who were stalked and the proportion of white women who were stalked. However, a comparison of stalking prevalence among minority women showed that Native American women are at significantly greater risk of being stalked.

Stalking behaviors. Both men and women reported that stalkers behaved in ways that induced fear, although they did not always make credible threats against their victims.

- Stalkers made overt threats to about 45 percent of victims.
- Stalkers spied on or followed about 75 percent of victims.
- Stalkers vandalized the property of about 30 percent of victims.
- Stalkers threatened to kill or killed the pet(s) of about 10 percent of victims.

Victims' perceptions. The typical female victim thought she had been stalked because her assailant wanted to control her, scare her, or keep her in a relationship. About 60 percent of stalking by intimate partners started *before* a relationship ended. Men reported intimidation and control as possible stalker motivations.

Links to partner abuse. A clear relationship existed between stalking and other emotionally controlling and physically abusive behavior. About half of the female stalking victims had been stalked by a current or former marital or cohabiting partner. About 80 percent of these women were, at some point in the relationship, physically assaulted by that partner, and 31 percent were sexually assaulted.

Justice system involvement. Half of all victims reported their stalking to the police. About one-quarter of the women obtained a restraining order—a far greater proportion than men. Eighty percent of all restraining orders were violated by the assailant. About 24 percent of female victims who reported stalking to the police (compared to 19 percent of male victims) said their cases were prosecuted. Of the cases where criminal charges were filed, 54 percent resulted in a conviction. About 63 percent of convictions resulted in jail time.

About half of the victims who had reported to the police were satisfied with the response they received. Victims rated courts slightly higher—with 60 percent satisfaction.

When asked how their situation changed after they reported to the police, about half noted improvement. When asked what the police could have done better, 42 percent said the police should have put their assailant in jail, 16 percent indicated a need to be better protected by the police, and 20 percent said the police should have taken their situation more seriously.

Stalking's aftermath

Although the stalking usually stopped within 1 to 2 years, victims experienced its social and psychological consequences long after. About one-third reported they had sought psychological treatment. In addition, one-fifth lost time from work, and 7 percent of those said they never returned to work. When asked why the stalking stopped, about 20 percent of the victims said it was because they moved away. Another 15 percent said it was because of police involvement. Also, stalking of women victims often stopped when the assailant got a new girlfriend or wife.

The authors concluded that findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey lend credence to the need for address-confidentiality programs that encourage victims who are challenged with continued pursuit and unusual safety risks to develop personal safety plans. Such plans usually include relocating as far away from the offender as possible and securing a confidential mailing address that provides mail forwarding service but does not divulge the new location. While extreme, such measures may be the most effective way to ensure freedom from harassment and violence to victims of stalking.

1. This definition reflects the one provided by the congressionally mandated *Project to Develop a Model Anti-Stalking Code for States*, a research report developed by the National Criminal Justice Association and published by NIJ, October 1993 (NCJ 144477).

This summary is based on a presentation by Patricia Tjaden, Ph.D., Senior Researcher, Center for Policy Research in Denver, Colorado, at an NIJ Research in Progress Seminar where she discussed the stalking findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey. The seminar, *Stalking in America: Findings From the National Violence Against Women Survey*, is available as a 60-minute videotape for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and other countries). Use the order form on the next page to obtain this videotape, NCJ 163921, and any of the others available in NIJ's Research in Progress Seminar Series.

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